

Viola Gwyn

George Barr McCutcheon

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Viola Gwyn, by George Barr McCutcheon
(#11 in our series by George Barr McCutcheon)

Copyright laws are changing all over the world. Be sure to check the copyright laws for your country before downloading or redistributing this or any other Project Gutenberg eBook.

This header should be the first thing seen when viewing this Project Gutenberg file. Please do not remove it. Do not change or edit the header without written permission.

Please read the "legal small print," and other information about the eBook and Project Gutenberg at the bottom of this file. Included is important information about your specific rights and restrictions in how the file may be used. You can also find out about how to make a donation to Project Gutenberg, and how to get involved.

****Welcome To The World of Free Plain Vanilla Electronic Texts****

****eBooks Readable By Both Humans and By Computers, Since 1971****

*******These eBooks Were Prepared By Thousands of Volunteers!*******

Title: Viola Gwyn

Author: George Barr McCutcheon

Release Date: July, 2004 [EBook #6013]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on October 16, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, VIOLA GWYN *****

Charles Aldarondo, Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

[Illustration: "I shall get married when and where I please,--and to whom I please, Mr. Gwynne."]

Livros Grátis

<http://www.livrosgratis.com.br>

Milhares de livros grátis para download.

VIOLA GWYN

BY George Barr McCutcheon

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE--THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER

- I SHELTER FOR THE NIGHT
- II THE STRANGE YOUNG WOMAN
- III SOMETHING ABOUT CLOTHES, AND MEN, AND CATS
- IV VIOLA GWYN
- V REFLECTIONS AND AN ENCOUNTER
- VI BARRY LAPELLE
- VII THE END OF THE LONG ROAD
- VIII RACHEL CARTER
- IX BROTHER AND SISTER
- X MOTHER AND DAUGHTER
- XI A ROADSIDE MEETING
- XII ISAAC STAIN APPEARS BY NIGHT
- XIII THE GRACIOUS ENEMY
- XIV A MAN FROM DOWN THE RIVER
- XV THE LANDING OF THE "PAUL REVERE"
- XVI CONCERNING TEMPESTS AND INDIANS
- XVII REVELATIONS
- XVIII RACHEL DELIVERS A MESSAGE
- XIX LAPELLE SHOWS HIS TEETH
- XX THE BLOW
- XXI THE AFFAIR AT HAWK'S CABIN
- XXII THE PRISONERS
- XXIII CHALLENGE AND RETORT
- XXIV IN AN UPSTAIRS ROOM
- XXV MINDA CARTER
- XXVI THE FLIGHT OF MARTIN HAWK
- XXVII THE TRIAL OF MOLL HAWK
- XXVIII THE TRYSTING PLACE OF THOUGHTS
- XXIX THE ENDING

PROLOGUE

THE BEGINNING

Kenneth Gwynne was five years old when his father ran away with Rachel Carter, a widow. This was in the spring of 1812, and in the fall his mother died. His grandparents brought him up to hate Rachel Carter, an evil woman.

She was his mother's friend and she had slain her with the viper's

tooth. From the day that his questioning intelligence seized upon the truth that had been so carefully withheld from him by his broken-hearted mother and those who spoke behind the hand when he was near,--from that day he hated Rachel Carter with all his hot and outraged heart. He came to think of her as the embodiment of all that was evil,--for those were the days when there was no middle-ground for sin and women were either white or scarlet.

He rejoiced in the belief that in good time Rachel Carter would come to roast in the everlasting fires of hell, grovelling and wailing at the feet of Satan, the while his lovely mother looked down upon her in pity,--even then he wondered if such a thing were possible,--from her seat beside God in His Heaven. He had no doubts about this. Hell and heaven were real to him, and all sinners went below. On the other hand, his father would be permitted to repent and would instantly go to heaven. It was inconceivable that his big, strong, well-beloved father should go to the bad place. But Mrs. Carter would! Nothing could save her! God would not pay any attention to her if she tried to repent; He would know it was only "make-believe" if she got down on her knees and prayed for forgiveness. He was convinced that Rachel Carter could not fool God. Besides, would not his mother be there to remind Him in case He could not exactly remember what Rachel Carter had done? And were there not dozens of good, honest people in the village who would probably be in Heaven by that time and ready to stand before the throne and bear witness that she was a bad woman?

No, Rachel Carter could never get into Heaven. He was glad. No matter if the Scriptures did say all that about the sinner who repents, he did not believe that God would let her in. He supported this belief by the profoundly childish contention that if God let EVERYBODY in, then there would be no use having a hell at all. What was the use of being good all your life if the bad people could get into Heaven at the last minute by telling God they were sorry and never would do anything bad again as long as they lived? And was not God the wisest Being in all the world? He knew EVERYTHING! He knew all about Rachel Carter. She would go to the bad place and stay there forever, even after the "resurrection" and the end of the world by fire in 1883, a calamity to which he looked forward with grave concern and no little trepidation at the thoughtful age of six.

At first they told him his father had gone off as a soldier to

fight against the Indians and the British. He knew that a war was going on. Men with guns were drilling in the pasture up beyond his grandfather's house, and there was talk of Indian "massacrees," and Simon Girty's warriors, and British red-coats, and the awful things that happened to little boys who disobeyed their elders and went swimming, or berrying, or told even the teeniest kind of fibs. He overheard his grandfather and the neighbours discussing a battle on Lake Erie, and rejoiced with them over the report of a great victory for "our side." Vaguely he had grasped the news of a horrible battle on the Tippecanoe River, far away in the wilderness to the north and west, in which millions of Indians were slain, and he wondered how many of them his father had killed with his rifle,--a weapon so big and long that he came less than half way up the barrel when he stood beside it.

His father was a great shot. Everybody said so. He could kill wild turkeys a million miles away as easy as rolling off a log, and deer, and catamounts, and squirrels, and herons, and everything. So his father must have killed heaps of Indians and red-coats and renegades.

He put this daily question to his mother: "How many do you s'pose Pa has killed by this time, Ma?"

And then, in the fall, his mother went away and left him. They did not tell him she had gone to the war. He would not have believed them if they had, for she was too sick to go. She had been in bed for a long, long time; the doctor came to see her every day, and finally the preacher. He hated both of them, especially the latter, who prayed so loudly and so vehemently that his mother must have been terribly disturbed. Why should every one caution him to be quiet and not make a noise because it disturbed mother, and yet say nothing when that old preacher went right into her room and yelled same as he always did in church? He was very bitter about it, and longed for his father to come home with his rifle and shoot everybody, including his grandfather who had "switched" him severely and unjustly because he threw stones at Parson Hook's saddle horse while the good man was offering up petitions from the sick room.

He went to the "burying," and was more impressed by the fact that nearly all of the men who rode or drove to the graveyard down in the "hollow" carried rifles and pistols than he was by the strange solemnity of the occasion, for, while he realized in a vague, mistrustful way that his mother was to be put under the ground, his trust clung resolutely to God's promise, accepted in its most literal sense, that the dead shall rise again and that "ye shall be born again." That was what the preacher said,--and he had cried a little when the streaming-eyed clergyman took him on his knee and whispered that all was well with his dear mother and that he would meet her one day in that beautiful land beyond the River.

He was very lonely after that. His "granny" tucked him in his big feather bed every night, and listened to his little prayer, but she was not the same as mother. She did not kiss him in the same way, nor did her hand feel like mother's when she smoothed his rumpled hair or buttoned his flannel nightgown about his neck or closed his eyes playfully with her fingers before she went away with the candle. Yet he adored her. She was sweet and gentle, she told such wonderful fairy tales to him, and she always smiled at him. He wondered a great deal. Why was it that she did not FEEL the same as mother? He was deeply puzzled. Was it because her hair was grey?

His grandfather lived in the biggest house in town. It had an "upstairs,"--a real "upstairs,"--not just an attic. And his grandfather was a very important person. Everybody called him "Squire"; sometimes they said "your honour"; most people touched their hats to him. When his father went off to the war, he and his mother came to live at "grandpa's house." The cabin in which he was born was at the other end of the street, fully half-a-mile away, out beyond the grist mill. It had but three rooms and no "upstairs" at all except the place under the roof where they kept the dried apples, and the walnuts and hickory nuts, some old saddle-bags and boxes, and his discarded cradle. You had to climb up a ladder and through a square hole in the ceiling to get into this place, and you would have to be very careful not to stand up straight or you

would bump your head,--unless you were exactly in the middle, where the ridge-pole was.

He remembered that it was a very long walk to "grandpa's house"; he used to get very tired and his father would lift him up and place him on his shoulder; from this lofty, even perilous, height he could look down upon the top of his mother's bonnet,--a most astonishing view and one that filled him with glee.

His father was the biggest man in all the world, there could be no doubt about that. Why, he was bigger even than grandpa, or Doctor Flint, or the parson, or Mr. Carter, who lived in the cabin next door and was Minda's father. For the matter of that, he was, himself, a great deal bigger than Minda, who was only two years old and could not say anywhere near as many words as he could say--and did not know her ABC's, or the Golden Rule, or who George Washington was.

And his father was ever so much taller than his mother. He was tall enough to be her father or her grandfather; why, she did not come up to his shoulder when she walked beside him. He was a million times bigger than she was. He was bigger than anybody else in all the world.

The little border town in Kentucky, despite its population of less than a thousand, was the biggest city in the world. There was no doubt about that either in Kenneth's loyal little mind. It was bigger than Philadelphia--(he called it Fil-LEF-ily),--where his mother used to live when she was a little girl, or Massashooshoo, where Minda's father and mother came from.

He was secretly distressed by the superior physical proportions of his "Auntie" Rachel. There was no denying the fact that she was a great deal taller than his mother. He had an abiding faith, however, that some day his mother would grow up and be lots taller than Minda's mother. He challenged his toddling playmate to deny that his mother would be as big as hers some day, a lofty taunt that left Minda quite unmoved.

Nevertheless, he was very fond of "Auntie" Rachel. She was good to him. She gave him cakes and crullers and spread maple sugar on many a surreptitious piece of bread and butter, and she had a jolly way of laughing, and she never told him to wash his hands or face, no matter how dirty they were. In that one respect, at least, she was much nicer than his mother. He liked Mr. Carter, too. In fact, he liked everybody except old Boose, the tin pedlar, who took little boys out into the woods and left them for the wolves to eat if they were not very, very good.

He was four when they brought Mr. Carter home in a wagon one day. Some men carried him into the house, and Aunt Rachel cried, and his mother went over and stayed a long, long time with her, and his father got on his horse and rode off as fast as he could go for Doctor Flint, and he was not allowed to go outside the house all day,--or old Boose would get him.

Then, one day, he saw "Auntie" Rachel all dressed in black, and he was frightened. He ran away crying. She looked so tall and scary,--like the witches Bidy Shay whispered about when his grandma was not around,--the witches and hags that flew up to the sky on broomsticks

and never came out except at night.

His father did the "chores" for "Auntie" Rachel for a long time, because Mr. Carter was not there to attend to them.

There came a day when the buds were fresh on the twigs, and the grass was very green, and the birds that had been gone for a long time were singing again in the trees, and it was not raining. So he went down the road to play in Minda's yard. He called to her, but she did not appear. No one appeared. The house was silent. "Auntie" Rachel was not there. Even the dogs were gone, and Mr. Carter's horses and his wagon. He could not understand. Only yesterday he had played in the barn with Minda.

Then his grandma came hurrying through the trees from his own home, where she had been with grandpa and Uncle Fred and Uncle Dan since breakfast time. She took him up in her arms and told him that Minda was gone. He had never seen his grandma look so stern and angry. Bidy Shay had been there all morning too, and several of the neighbours. He wondered if it could be the Sabbath, and yet that did not seem possible, because it was only two days since he went to Sunday school, and yesterday his mother had done the washing. She always washed on Monday and ironed on Tuesday. This must be Tuesday, but maybe he was wrong about that. She was not ironing, so it could not be Tuesday. He was very much bewildered.

His mother was in the bedroom with grandpa and Aunt Hettie, and he was not allowed to go in to see her. Uncle Fred and Uncle Dan were very solemn and scowling so terribly that he was afraid to go near them.

He remembered that his mother had cried while she was cooking breakfast, and sat down a great many times to rest her head on her arms. She had cried a good deal lately, because of the headache, she always said. And right after breakfast she had put on her bonnet and shawl, telling him to stay in the house till she came back from grandpa's. Then she had gone away, leaving him all alone until Bidy Shay came, all out of breath, and began to clear the table and wash the dishes, all the while talking to herself in a way that he was sure God would not like, and probably would send her to the bad place for it when she died.

After a while all of the men went out to the barn-lot, where their horses were tethered. Uncle Fred and Uncle Dan had their rifles. He stood at the kitchen window and watched them with wide, excited eyes. Were they going off to kill Indians, or bears, or cattymunks? They all talked at once, especially his uncles,--and they swore, too. Then his grandpa stood in front of them and spoke very loudly, pointing his finger at them. He heard him say, over and over again:

"Let them go, I say! I tell you, let them go!"

He wondered why his father was not there, if there was any fighting to be done. His father was a great fighter. He was the bestest shot in all the world. He could kill an Injin a million miles away, or a squirrel, or a groundhog. So he asked Bidy Shay.

"Ast me no questions and I'll tell ye no lies," was all the answer he got from Bidy.

The next day he went up to grandpa's with his mother to stay, and Uncle Fred told him that his pa had gone off to the war. He believed this, for were not the rifle, the powder horn and the shot flask missing from the pegs over the fireplace, and was not Bob, the very fastest horse in all the world, gone from the barn? He was vastly thrilled. His father would shoot millions and millions of Injins, and they would have a house full of scalps and tommyhawks and bows and arrers.

But he was troubled about Minda. Uncle Fred, driven to corner by persistent inquiry, finally confessed that Minda also had gone to the war, and at last report had killed several extremely ferocious redskins. Despite this very notable achievement, Kenneth was troubled. In the first place, Minda was a baby, and always screamed when she heard a gun go off; in the second place, she always fell down when she tried to run and squalled like everything if he did not wait for her; in the third place, Injins always beat little girls' heads off against a tree if they caught 'em.

Moreover, Uncle Dan, upon being consulted, declared that a good-sized Injin could swaller Minda in one gulp if he happened to be 'specially hungry,--or in a hurry. Uncle Dan also appeared to be very much surprised when he heard that she had gone off to the war. He said that Uncle Fred ought to be ashamed of himself; and the next time he asked Uncle Fred about Minda he was considerably relieved to hear that his little playmate had given up fighting altogether and was living quite peaceably in a house made of a pumpkin over yonder where the sun went down at night.

It was not until sometime after his mother went away,--after the long-to-be-remembered "foonerl," with its hymns, and weeping, and praying,--that he heard the grown-ups talking about the war being over. The redcoats were thrashed and there was much boasting and bragging among the men of the settlement. Strange men appeared on the street, and other men slapped their backs and shook hands with them and shouted loudly and happily at them. In time, he came to understand that these were the citizens who had gone off to fight in the war and were now home again, all safe and sound. He began to watch for his father. He would know him a million miles off, he was so big, and he had the biggest rifle in the world.

"Do you s'pose Pa will know how to find me, grandma?" he would inquire. "'Cause, you see, I don't live where I used to."

And his grandmother, beset with this and similar questions from one day's end to the other, would become very busy over what she was doing at the time and tell him not to pester her. He did not like to ask his grandfather. He was so stern,--even when he was sitting all alone on the porch and was not busy at all.

Then one day he saw his grandparents talking together on the porch. Aunt Hettie was with them, but she was not talking. She was just looking at him as he played down by the watering trough. He distinctly heard his grandma say:

"I think he ought to be told, Richard. It's a sin to let him go on thinking---" The rest of the sentence was lost to him when she suddenly lowered her voice. They were all looking at him.

Presently his grandfather called to him, and beckoned with his finger. He marched up to the porch with his little bow and arrow. Grandma turned to go into the house, and Aunt Hettie hurried away.

"Don't be afraid, Granny," he sang out. "I won't shoot you. 'Sides, I've only got one arrer, Aunt Hettie."

His grandfather took him on his knee, and then and there told him the truth about his father. He spoke very slowly and did not say any of those great big words that he always used when he was with grown-up people, or even with the darkies.

"Now, pay strict attention, Kenneth. You must understand everything I say to you. Do you hear? Your father is never coming home. We told you he had gone to the war. We thought it was best to let you think so. It is time for you to know the truth. You are always asking questions about him. After this, when you want to know about your father, you must come to me. I will tell you. Do not bother your grandma. You make her unhappy when you ask questions. You see, your Ma was once her little girl and mine. She used to be as little as you are. Your Pa was her husband. You know what a husband is, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Kenneth, wide-eyed. "It's a boy's father."

"You are nearly six years old. Quite a man, my lad." He paused to look searchingly into the child's face, his bushy eyebrows meeting in a frown.

"The devil of it is," he burst out, "you are the living image of your father. You are going to grow up to look like him." He groaned audibly, spat viciously over his shoulder, and went on in a strange, hard voice. "Do you know what it is to steal? It means taking something that belongs to somebody else."

"Yes, sir. 'Thou shalt not steal.' It's in the Bible."

"Well, you know that Indians and gipsies steal little boys, don't you? It is the very worst kind of stealing, because it breaks the boy's mother's heart. It sometimes kills them. Now, suppose that somebody stole a husband. A husband is a boy's father, as you say. Your father was a husband. He was your dear mother's husband. You loved your mother very, very much, didn't you? Don't cry, lad,--there, there, now! Be a little man. Now, listen. Somebody stole your mother's husband. She loved him better than anything in the world. She loved him, I guess, even better than she loved you, Kenneth. She just couldn't live without him. Do you see? That is why she died and went away. She is in Heaven now. Now, let me hear you say this after me: My mother died because somebody stole her husband away from her."

"My mother died because somebody stoled her husband away from her," repeated the boy, slowly.

"You will never forget that, will you?"

"No,--sir."

"Say this: My mother's heart was broken and so she died."

"My mother's heart was broken and she--and so she died."

"You will never forget that either, will you, Kenneth?"

"No, sir."

"Now, I am going to tell you who stole your mother's husband away from her. You know who your mother's husband was, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. My Pa."

"One night,--the night before you came up here to live--your Auntie Rachel,--that is what you called her, isn't it? Well, she was not your real aunt. She was your neighbour,--just as Mr. Collins over there is my neighbour,--and she was your mother's friend. Well, that night she stole your Pa from your Ma, and took him away with her,--far, far away, and she never let him come back again. She took him away in the night, away from your mother and you forever and forever. She---"

"But Pa was bigger'n she was," interrupted Kenneth, frowning. "Why didn't he kill her and get away?"

The old Squire was silent for a moment. "It is not fair for me to put all the blame on Rachel Carter. Your father was willing to go. He did not kill Rachel Carter. Together he and Rachel Carter killed your mother. But Rachel Carter was more guilty than he was. She was a woman and she stole what belonged in the sight of God to another woman. She was a bad woman. If she had been a good woman she would not have stolen your father away from your mother. So now you know that your Pa did not go to the war. He went away with Rachel Carter and left your mother to die of a broken heart. He went off into the wilderness with that bad, evil woman. Your mother was unhappy. She died. She is under the ground up in the graveyard, all alone. Rachel Carter put her there, Kenneth. I cannot ask you to hate your father. It would not be right. He is your father in spite of everything. You know what the Good Book says? 'Honour thy father and--' how does the rest of it go, my lad?"

"Honour thy father and thy mother that thou days may be long upon thou earth," murmured Kenneth, bravely.

"When you are a little older you will realize that your father did not honour his father and mother, and then you may understand more than you do now. But you may hate Rachel Carter. You MUST hate her. She killed your mother. She stole your father. She made an orphan of you. She destroyed the home where you used to live. As you grow older I will try to tell you how she did all these things. You would not understand now. There is one of the Ten Commandments that you do not understand,--I mean one in particular. It is enough for you to know the meaning of the one that says 'Thou shalt not steal.' You must not be unhappy over what I have told you. Everything will be all right with you. You will be safe here with granny and me. But you must no longer believe that your father went to the war like other men in the village. If he were MY son, I would---"

"Don't say it, Richard," cried Kenneth's grandma, from the doorway

behind them. "Don't ever say that to him."

CHAPTER I

SHELTER FOR THE NIGHT

Night was falling as two horsemen drew rein in front of a cabin at the edge of a clearing in the far-reaching sombre forest. Their approach across the stump-strewn tract had been heralded by the barking of dogs,--two bristling beasts that came out upon the muddy, deep-rutted road to greet them with furious inhospitality. A man stood partially revealed in the doorway. His left arm and shoulder were screened from view by the jamb, his head was bent forward as he peered intently through narrowed eyes at the strangers in the road.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he called out.

"Friends. How far is it to the tavern at Clark's Point?"

"Clark's Point is three miles back," replied the settler. "I guess you must have passed it without seein' it," he added drily. "If it happened to be rainin' when you come through you'd have missed seein' it fer the raindrops. Where you bound fer?"

"Lafayette. I guess we're off the right road. We took the left turn four or five miles back."

"You'd ought to have kept straight on. Come 'ere, Shep! You, Pete! Down with ye!"

The two dogs, still bristling, slunk off in the direction of the squat log barn. A woman appeared behind the man and stared out over his shoulder. From the tall stone chimney at the back of the cabin rose the blue smoke of the kitchen fire, to be whirled away on the wind that was guiding the storm out of the rumbling north. There was a dull, wavering glow in the room behind her. At one of the two small windows gleamed a candle-light.

"What's takin' you to Clark's Point? There ain't no tavern there. There ain't nothin' there but a hitch-post and a waterin'-trough. Oh, yes, I forgot. Right behind the hitch-post is Jake Stone's store and a couple of ash-hoppers and a town-hall, but you wouldn't notice 'em if you happened to be on the wrong side of the post. Mebby it's Middleton you're lookin' fer."

"I am looking for a place to put up for the night, friend. We met a man back yonder, half an hour ago, who said the nearest tavern was at Clark's Point."

"What fer sort of lookin' man was he?"

"Tall fellow with red whiskers, riding a grey horse."

"That was Jake Stone hisself. Beats all how that feller tries to

advertise his town. He says it beats Crawfordsville and Lafayette all to smash, an' it's only three or four months old. Which way was he goin'?"

"I suppose you'd call it south. I've lost my bearings, you see."

"That's it. He was on his way down to Attica to get drunk. They say Attica's goin' to be the biggest town on the Wabash. Did I ask you what your name was, stranger?"

"My name is Gwynne. I left Crawfordsville this morning, hoping to reach Lafayette before night. But the road is so heavy we couldn't---"

"Been rainin' steady for nearly two weeks," interrupted the settler. "Hub-deep everywhere. It's a good twenty-five or thirty mile from Crawfordsville to Lafayette. Looks like more rain, too. I think she'll be on us in about two minutes. I guess mebby we c'n find a place fer you to sleep to-night, and we c'n give you somethin' fer man an' beast. If you'll jest ride around here to the barn, we'll put the hosses up an' feed 'em, and--Eliza, set out a couple more plates, an' double the rations all around." His left arm and hand came into view. "Set this here gun back in the corner, Eliza. I guess I ain't goin' to need it. Gimme my hat, too, will ye?"

As the woman drew back from the door, a third figure came up behind the man and took her place. The horseman down at the roadside, fifty feet away, made out the figure of a woman. She touched the man's arm and he turned as he was in the act of stepping down from the door-log. She spoke to him in a low voice that failed to reach the ears of the travellers.

The man shook his head slowly, and then called out:

"I didn't jist ketch your name, mister. The wind's makin' such a noise I--Say it again, will ye?"

"My name is Kenneth Gwynne. Get it?" shouted the horseman. "And this is my servant, Zachariah."

The man in the door bent his head, without taking his eyes from the horseman, while the woman murmured something in his ear, something that caused him to straighten up suddenly.

"Where do you come from?" he inquired, after a moment's hesitation.

"My home is in Kentucky. I live at---"

"Kentucky, eh? Well, that's a good place to come from. I guess you're all right, stranger." He turned to speak to his companion. A few words passed between them, and then she drew back into the room. The woman called Eliza came up with the man's hat and a lighted lantern. She closed the door after him as he stepped out into the yard.

"Round this way," he called out, making off toward the corner of the cabin. "Don't mind the dogs. They won't bite, long as I'm here."

The wind was wailing through the stripped trees behind the house,--a sombre, limitless wall of trees that seemed to close in

with smothering relentlessness about the lonely cabin and its raw field of stumps. The angry, low-lying clouds and the hastening dusk of an early April day had by this time cast the gloom of semi-darkness over the scene. Spasmodic bursts of lightning laid thin dull, unearthly flares upon the desolate land, and the rumble of apple-carts filled the ear with promise of disaster. The chickens had gone to roost; several cows, confined in a pen surrounded by the customary stockade of poles driven deep into the earth and lashed together with the bark of the sturdy elm, were huddled in front of a rude shed; a number of squealing, grunting pigs nosed the cracks in the rail fence that formed still another pen; three or four pompous turkey gobblers strutted unhurriedly about the barnlot, while some of their less theatrical hens perched stiffly, watchfully on the sides of a clumsy wagon-bed over against the barn. Martins and chimney-swallows darted above the cabin and out-buildings, swirling in mad circles, dipping and careening with incredible swiftness.

The gaunt settler conducted the unexpected guests to the barn, where, after they had dismounted, he assisted in the removal of the well-filled saddle-bags and rolls from the backs of their jaded horses.

"Water?" he inquired briefly.

"No, suh," replied Zachariah, blinking as the other held the lantern up the better to look into his face. Zachariah was a young negro,--as black as night, with gleaming white teeth which he revealed in a broad and friendly grin. "Had all dey could drink, Marster, back yander at de crick."

"You couldn't have forded the Wea this time last week," said the host, addressing Gwynne. "She's gone down considerable the last four-five days. Out of the banks last week an' runnin' all over creation."

"Still pretty high," remarked the other. "Came near to sweeping Zack's mare downstream but--well, she made it and Zack has turned black again."

The settler raised his lantern again at the stable door and looked dubiously at the negro.

"You're from Kentucky, Mr. Gwynne," he said, frowning. "I got to tell you right here an' now that if this here boy is a slave, you can't stop here,--an' what's more, you can't stay in this county. We settled the slavery question in this state quite a spell back, an' we make it purty hot for people who try to smuggle niggers across the border. I got to ask you plain an' straight; is this boy a slave?"

"He is not," replied Gwynne. "He is a free man. If he elects to leave my service to-morrow, he is at liberty to go. My grandfather freed all of his slaves shortly before he died, and that was when Zachariah here was not more than fifteen years of age. He is as free as I am,--or you, sir. He is my servant, not my slave. I know the laws of this state, and I intend to abide by them. I expect to make my home here in Indiana,--in Lafayette, as a matter of fact. This boy's name is Zachariah Button. Ten years ago he was a

slave. He has with him, sir, the proper credentials to support my statement,--and his, if he chooses to make one. On at least a dozen occasions, first in Ohio and then in Indiana, I have been obliged to convince official and unofficial inquirers that my--"

"That's all right, Mr. Gwynne," cried the settler heartily. "I take your word for it. If you say he's not a slave, why, he ain't, so that's the end of it. And it ain't necessary for Zachariah to swear to it, neither. We can't offer you much in the way of entertainment, Mr. Gwynne, but what we've got you're welcome to. I came to this country from Ohio seven years ago, an' I learned a whole lot about hospitality durin' the journey. I learned how to treat a stranger in a strange land fer one thing, an' I learned that even a hoss-thief ain't an ongrateful cuss if you give him a night's lodgin' and a meal or two."

"I shall be greatly indebted to you, sir. The time will surely come when I may repay you,--not in money, but in friendship. Pray do not let us discommode you or your household. I will be satisfied to sleep on the floor or in the barn, and as for Zachariah, he--"

"The barn is for the hosses to sleep in," interrupted the host, "and the floor is for the cat. 'Tain't my idee of fairness to allow human bein's to squat on proppety that rightfully belongs to hosses an' cats,--so I guess you'll have to sleep in a bed, Mr. Gwynne." He spoke with a drawl. "Zachariah c'n spread his blankets on the kitchen floor an' make out somehow. Now, if you'll jist step over to the well yander, you'll find a wash pan. Eliza,--I mean Mrs. Striker,--will give you a towel when you're ready. Jest sing out to her. Here, you, Zachariah, carry this plunder over an' put it in the kitchen. Mrs. Striker will show you. Be careful of them rifles of your'n. They go off mighty sudden if you stub your toe. You'll find a comb and lookin' glass in the settin' room, Mr. Gwynne. You'll probably want to put a few extry touches on yourself when I tell you there's an all-fired purty girl spendin' the night with us. Go along, now. I'll put the feed down fer your hosses an' be with you in less'n no time."

"You are very kind, Mr.--Did you say Striker?"

"Phineas Striker, sir,--Phin fer short."

"I am prepared and amply able to pay for lodging and food, Mr. Striker, so do not hesitate to--"

"Save your breath, stranger. I'm as deaf as a post. The storm's goin' to bust in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail, so you'd better be a leetle spy if you want to git inside afore she comes."

With that he entered the barn door, leading the horses. Gwynne and his servant hurried through the darkness toward the light in the kitchen window. The former rapped politely on the door. It was opened by Mrs. Striker, a tall, comely woman well under thirty, who favoured the good-looking stranger with a direct and smileless stare. He removed his tall, sorry-looking beaver.

"Madam, your husband has instructed my servant to leave our belongings in your kitchen. I fear they are not overly clean, what with mud and rain, devil-needles and burrs. Your kitchen is as clean as a

pin. Shall I instruct him to return with them to the barn and--"

"Bring them in," she said, melting in spite of herself as she looked down from the doorstep into his dark, smiling eyes. His strong, tanned face was beardless, his teeth were white, his abundant brown hair tousled and boyishly awry,--and there were mud splashes on his cheek and chin. He was tall and straight and his figure was shapely, despite the thick blue cape that hung from his shoulders. "I guess they ain't any dirtier than Phin Striker's boots are this time o' the year. Put them over here, boy, 'longside o' that cupboard. Supper'll be ready in ten or fifteen minutes, Mr. Gwynne."

His smile broadened. He sniffed gratefully. A far more exacting woman than Eliza Striker would have forgiven this lack of dignity on his part.

"You will find me ready for it, Mrs. Striker. The smell of side-meat goes straight to my heart, and nothing in all this world could be more wonderful than the coffee you are making."

"Go 'long with you!" she cried, vastly pleased, and turned to her sizzling skillets.

Zachariah deposited the saddle-bags and rolls in the corner and then returned to the door where he received the long blue cape, gloves and the towering beaver from his master's hands. He also received instructions which sent him back to open a bulging saddle-bag and remove therefrom a pair of soft, almost satiny calf-skin boots. As he hurried past Mrs. Striker, he held them up for her inspection, grinning from ear to ear. She gazed in astonishment at the white and silver ornamented tops, such as were affected by only the most fastidious dandies of the day and were so rarely seen in this raw, new land that the beholder could scarce believe her eyes.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed, and then went to the sitting-room to whisper excitedly to the solitary occupant, who, it so chanced, was at the moment busily and hastily employed in rearranging her brown, wind-blown hair before the round-topped little looking-glass over the fireplace.

"I thought you said you wasn't goin' to see him," observed Mrs. Striker, after imparting her information. "If you ain't, what are you fixin' yourself up fer?"

"I have changed my mind, Eliza," said the young lady, loftily. "In the first place, I am hungry, and in the second place it would not be right for me to put you to any further trouble about supper. I shall have supper with the rest of you and not in the bedroom, after all. How does my hair look?"

"You've got the purtiest hair in all the--"

"How does it look?"

"It would look fine if you NEVER combed it. If I had hair like your'n, I'd be the proudest woman in--"

"Don't be silly. It's terrible, most of the time."

"Well, it's spick an' span now, if that's what you want to know," grumbled Eliza, and vanished, fingering her straight, straw-coloured hair somewhat resentfully.

Meanwhile, Kenneth Gwynne, having divested himself of his dark blue "swallow-tail," was washing his face and hands at the well. The settler approached with the lantern.

"She's comin'," he shouted above the howling wind. "I guess you'd better dry yourself in the kitchen. Hear her whizzin' through the trees? Gosh all hemlock! She's goin' to be a snorter, stranger. Hurry inside!"

They bolted for the door and dashed into the kitchen just as the deluge came. Phineas Striker, leaning his weight against the door, closed it and dropped the bolt.

"Whew! She's a reg'lar harricane, that's what she is. Mighty suddent, too. Been holdin' back fer ten minutes,--an' now she lets loose with all she's got. Gosh! Jest listen to her!"

The hiss of the torrent on the clapboard roof was deafening, the little window panes were streaming; a dark, glistening shadow crept out from the bottom of the door and began to spread; the howling wind shook the very walls of the staunch cabin, while all about them roared the ear-splitting cannonade, the crash of splintered skies, the crackling of musketry, the rending and tearing of all the garments that clothe the universe.

Eliza Striker, hardy frontierswoman though she was, put her fingers to her ears and shrank away from the stove,--for she had been taught that all metal "drew lightning." Her husband busied himself stemming the stream of water that seeped beneath the door with empty grain or coffee bags, snatched from the top of a cupboard where they were stored, evidently for the very purpose to which they were now being put.

Gwynne stood coatless in the centre of the kitchen, rolling down his white shirt-sleeves. Behind him cringed Zachariah, holding his master's boots and coat in his shaking hands, his eyes rolling with terror, his lips mumbling an unheard appeal for mercy.

The sitting-room door opened suddenly and the other guest of the house glided into the kitchen. Her eyes were crinkled up as if with an almost unendurable pain, her fingers were pressed to her temples, her red lips were parted.

"Goodness!" she gasped, with a hysterical laugh, not born of mirth, nor of courage, but of the sheerest dismay.

"Don't be skeered," cried Phineas, looking at her over his shoulder. "She'll soon be over. Long as the roof stays on, we're all right,--an' I guess she'll stay."

Kenneth Gwynne bowed very low to the newcomer. The dim candle-light afforded him a most unsatisfactory glimpse of her features. He took in at a glance, however, her tall, trim figure, the burnished crown of hair, and the surprisingly modish frock she wore. He had seen no other like it since leaving the older, more advanced towns

along the Ohio,--not even in the thriving settlements of Wayne and Madison Counties or in the boastful village of Crawfordsville. He was startled. In all his journeyings through the land he had seen no one arrayed like this. It was with difficulty that he overcame a quite natural impulse to stare at her as if she were some fantastic curiosity.

The contrast between this surprising creature and the gingham aproned Eliza was unbelievable. There was but one explanation: She was the mistress of the house, Eliza the servant. And yet, even so, how strangely out-of-place, out-of-keeping she was here in the wilderness.

In some confusion he strode over to lend a hand to Phineas Striker. The rustle of silk behind him and the quick clatter of heels, evidenced the fact that the girl had crossed swiftly to Eliza's side.

Later on he had the opportunity to take in all the details of her costume, and he did so with a practised, sophisticated eye. It was, after all, of a fashion two years old, evidence of the slowness with which the modes reached these outposts of civilization. Here was a perfect fitting blue frock of the then popular changeable gros de zane, the skirt very wide, set on the body in large plaits, one in front, one on each side and two behind. The sleeves also were wide from shoulder to elbow, where they were tightly fitted to the lower arm. The ruffles around the neck, which was open and rather low, and about the wrists were of plain bobinet quilling. Her slippers were black, with cross-straps. He had seen such frocks as this, he was reminded, in fashionable Richmond and New York only a year or so before, but nowhere in the west. Add a Dunstable straw bonnet with its strings of satin and the frilled pelerine, and this strange young woman might have just stepped from her carriage in the most fashionable avenue in the land.

Zachariah, lacking his master's good manners, gazed in open-mouthed wonder at the lady, forgetting for the moment his fear of the tempest's wrath. Only the most hair-raising crash of thunder broke the spell, causing him to close his eyes and resume his supplication.

"Now's your chance to get at the lookin' glass, Mr. Gwynne," said Striker. "Right there in the sittin'-room. Go ahead; I'll manage this."

Muttering a word of thanks, the young man turned to leave the room. He shot a glance at his fellow guest. Her back was toward him, she had her hands to her ears, and something told him that her eyes were tightly closed. A particularly loud crash caused her to draw her pretty shoulders up as if to receive the death-dealing bolt of lightning. He heard her murmur again:

"Goodness--gracious!"

Eliza suddenly put an arm about her waist and drew the slender, shivering figure close. As the girl buried her face upon the older woman's shoulder, the latter cried out:

"Land sakes, child, you'll never get over bein' a baby, will ye?"

To which Phineas Striker added in a great voice: "Nor you, neither, Eliza. Ef we didn't have company here you'd be crawlin' under the table or something. She ain't afraid of wild cats or rattlesnakes or Injins or even spiders," he went on, addressing Gwynne, "but she's skeered to death of lightnin'. An' as fer that young lady there, she wouldn't be afeared to walk from here to Lafayette all alone on the darkest night,--an' look at her now! Skeered out of her boots by a triflin' little thunderstorm. Why, I wouldn't give two--"

"My goodness, Phin Striker," broke in his wife, a new note of alarm in her voice, "I do hope them chickens an' turkeys have got sense enough to get under something in this downpour. If they ain't, the whole kit an' boodle of 'em will be drowned, sure as--"

"I never yet see a hen that liked water," interrupted Phineas. "Er a turkey either. Don't you worry about 'em. You better worry about that side-meat you're fryin'. Ef my nose is what it ort to be, I'd say that piece o' meat was bein' burnt to death,--an' that's a lot wuss than bein' drowned. They say drowndin' is the easiest death--"

"You men clear out o' this kitchen," snapped Eliza. "Out with ye! You too, Phin Striker. I'll call ye when the table's set. Now, you go an' set over there in the corner, away from the window, deary, where the lightnin' can't git at you, an'--You'll find a comb on the mantel-piece, Mr. Gwynne, an' Phineas will git you a boot-jack out o' the bedroom if that darkey is too weak to pull your boots off for you. Don't any of you go trampin' all over the room with your muddy boots. I've got work enough to do without scrubbin' floors after a pack of--My land! I do believe it's scorched. An' the corn-bread must be--"

Phineas, after a doubtful look at the stopped-up door-crack, led the way into the sitting-room. Zachariah came last with his master's boots and coat. He was mumbling with suppressed fervour:

"Oh, Lord, jes' lemme hab one mo' chaince,--jes' one mo' chaince. Good Lord! I been a wicked, ornery nigger,--only jes' gimme jes' one mo' chaince. I been a wicked,--Yassuh, Marster Kenneth, I got your boots. Yassuh. Right heah, suh. Oh, Lordy-Lordy! Yassuh, yassuh!"

Seated in a big wooden rocker before the fireplace, Gwynne stretched out his long legs one after the other; Zachariah tugged at the heavy, mud-caked riding-boots, grunting mightily over a task that gave him sufficient excuse for interjecting sundry irrelevant appeals for mercy and an occasional reference to his own unworthiness as a nigger.

The tempest continued with unabated violence. The big, raw-boned Striker, pulling nervously at his beard, stood near a window which looked out upon the barn and sheds, plainly revealed in the blinding, almost uninterrupted flashes of lightning. Such sentences as these fell from his lips as he turned his face from the bleaching flares before they ended in mighty crashes: "That struck powerful nigh,"--or "I seen that one runnin' along the ground like a ball of fire," or "There goes somethin' near," or "That was a tree jest back o' the barn, you'll see in the mornin'."

"Dere won't never be any mo'nin'," gulped the unhappy Zachariah, bending lower to his task, which now had to do with the boot-straps at the bottoms of his master's trouser-legs. Getting to his feet, he proceeded, with a well-trained dexterity that even his terror failed to divert, to draw on the immaculate calf-skin boots with the gorgeous tops. Then he pulled the trouser-legs down over the boots, obscuring their upper glory; after which he smoothed out the wrinkles and fastened the instep straps. Whereupon, Kenneth arose, stamped severely on the hearth several times to settle his feet in the snug-fitting boots, and turned to the looking-glass. He was wielding the comb with extreme care and precision when his host turned from the window and approached.

"Seems to me you're goin' to a heap o' trouble, friend," he remarked, surveying the tall, graceful figure with a rather disdainful eye. "We don't dress up much in these parts, 'cept on Sunday."

"Please do not consider me vain," said the young man, flushing. He smarted under the implied rebuke,—in fact, he was uncomfortably aware of ridicule. "My riding-boots were filthy. I—I—Yes, I know," he broke in upon himself as Phineas extended one of his own muddy boots for inspection. "I know, but, you see, I am the unbidden guest of yourself and Mrs. Striker. The least I can do in return for your hospitality is to make myself presentable—"

"You'll have to excuse my grinnin', Mr. Gwynne," interrupted the other. "I didn't mean any offence. It's jest that we ain't used to good clothes an' servants to pull our boots off an' on, an'—butternut pants an' so on. We're 'way out here on the edge of the wilderness where bluejeans is as good as broadcloth or doe-skin, an' a chaw of tobacco is as good as the state seal fer bindin' a bargain. Lord bless ye, I don't keer how much you dress up. I guess I might as well tell ye the only men up at Lafayette who wear as good clothes as you do are a couple of gamblers that work up an' down the river, an' Barry Lapelle. I reckon you've heerd of Barry Lapelle. He's known from one end of the state to the other, an' over in Ohio an' Kentucky too."

"I have never heard of him."

Striker looked surprised. He glanced at the closed sitting-room door before continuing.

"Well, he owns a couple steamboats that come up the river. Got 'em when his father died a couple o' years ago. His home used to be in Terry Hut, but he's been livin' at Bob Johnson's tavern for a matter of six months now, workin' up trade fer his boats, I understand. He's as wild as a hawk an'—but you'll run across him if you're goin' to live in Lafayette."

"By the way, what is the population of Lafayette?"

Phineas studied the board ceiling thoughtfully for a moment or two. "Well, 'cordin' to people who live in Attica she's got about five hundred. People who live in Crawfordsville give her seven hundred. Down at Covington an' Williamsport they say she's got about four hundred an' twelve. When you git to Lafayette Bob Johnson an' the rest of 'em will tell you she's over two thousand an' growin' so fast they cain't keep track of her. There's so much lyin' goin' on

about Lafayette that it's impossible to tell jest how big she is. Countin' in the dogs, I guess she must have a population of between six hundred and fifty an' three thousand. You see, everybody up there's got a dog, an' some of 'em two er three. One feller I know has got seven. But, on the whole, I guess you'll like the place. It's the head of navigation at high water, an' if they ever build the Wabash an' Erie Canal they're talkin' about she'll be a regular seaport, like New York er Boston. 'Pears to me the worst is over, don't you reckon so?"

Kenneth, having adjusted his stock and white roll-over collar to suit his most exacting eye, slipped his arms into the coat Zachariah was holding for him, settled the shoulders with a shrug or two and a pull at the flaring lapels, smoothed his yellow brocaded waist-coat carefully, and then, spreading his long, shapely legs and at the same time the tails of his coat, took a commanding position with his back to the blazing logs.

"Are you referring to my toilet, Mr. Striker?" he inquired amiably.

"I was talkin' about the storm," explained Phineas hastily. "Take the boots out to the kitchen, Zachariah. Eliza'll git into your wool if she ketches you leavin' 'em in here. Yes, sir, she's certainly lettin' up. Goin' down the river hell-bent. They'll be gettin' her at Attica 'fore long. Are you plannin' to work the farm yourself, Mr. Gwynne, or are you goin' to sell er rent on shares?"

Gwynne looked at him in surprise. "You appear to know who I am, after all, Mr. Striker."

Striker grinned. "I guess everybody in this neck o' the woods has heerd about you. Dan Bugher,--he's the county recorder,--an' Rube Kelsey, John Bishop, Larry Stockton, an' a lot more of the folks up in town, have been lookin' down the Crawfordsville road fer you ever since your father died last August. You 'pear to be a very important cuss fer one who ain't never set foot in Indianny before."

"I see," said the other reflectively. "Were you acquainted with my father, Mr. Striker?"

"Much so as anybody could be. He wasn't much of a hand fer makin' friends. Stuck purty close to the farm, an' made it about the best piece o' propetty in the whole valley. I was jest wonderin' whether you was plannin' to live on the farm er up in town."

"Well, you see, I am a lawyer by profession. I know little or nothing about farming. My plans are not actually made, however. A great deal depends on how I find things. Judge Wylie wishes me to enter into partnership with him, and Providence M. Curry says there is a splendid chance for me in his office at Crawfordsville. I shall do nothing until I have gone thoroughly into the matter. You know the farm, Mr. Striker?"

"Yes. It's not far from here,--five or six mile, I'd say, to the north an' east. Takes in some of the finest land on the Wea Plain,--mostly clear, some fine timber, plenty of water, an' about the best stocked farm anywheres around. Your father was one of the first to edge up this way ten er twelve year ago, an' he got the pick o' the new land. He came from some'eres down the river, 'bout

Vincennes er Montezuma er some such place. I reckon you know that he left another passel of land over this way, close to the Wabash, an' some propetty up in Lafayette an' some more down in Crawfordsville."

"I have been so informed," said his guest, rather shortly.

"I bought this sixty acre piece offen him two year ago. All timber when I took hold of it, 'cept seventeen acres out thataway," jerking his thumb, "along the Middleton road." He hesitated a moment. "You see, I worked for your father fer a considerable time, as a hand. That's how he came to sell to me. I got married an' wanted a place of my own. He said he'd sooner sell to me than let some other feller cheat the eye-teeth outen me, me bein' a good deal of fool when it comes to business an' all. Yep, I'd saved up a few dollars, so I sez what's the sense of me workin' my gizzard out fer somebody else an' all that, when land's so cheap an' life so doggoned short. 'Course, there's a small mortgage on the place, but I c'n take keer of that, I reckon."

"Ahem! The mortgage, I fancy, is held by--er--the other heirs to his property." "You're right. His widdler holds it, but she ain't the kind to press me. She's purty comfortable, what with this land along the edge o' the plain out here an' a whole section up in the Grand Prairie neighbourhood, besides half a dozen buildin' lots in town an' a two story house to live in up there. To say nothin' of--"

"Come to supper," called out Mrs. Striker from the doorway.

"That's somethin' I'm always ready fer," announced Mr. Striker. "Winter an' summer, spring an' fall. Step right ahead, Mr.--"

"Just a moment, if you please," said the young man, laying his hand on the settler's arm. "You will do me a great favour if you refrain from discussing these matters in the presence of your other guest to-night. My father, as you doubtless know, meant very little in my life. I prefer not to discuss him in the presence of strangers,--especially curious-minded young women."

Phineas looked at him narrowly for an instant, a queer expression lurking in his eyes.

"Jest as you say, Mr. Gwynne. Not a word in front of strangers. I don't know as you know it, but up to the time your father's will was perduced there wasn't a soul in these parts as knowed such a feller as you wuz on earth. He never spoke of a son, er havin' been married before, er bein' a widower, er anything like--"

"I am thoroughly convinced of that, Mr. Striker," said Kenneth, a trifle austerely, and passed on ahead of his host into the kitchen.

"Bring in them two candlesticks, Phin," ordered Mrs. Striker. "We got to be able to see what each other looks like, an' goodness knows we cain't with this taller dip I got out here to cook by. 'Tain't often we have people right out o' the fashion-plates to supper, so let's have all the light we kin."

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGE YOUNG WOMAN

The tempest by now had subsided to a distant, rumbling murmur, although the rain still beat against the window-panes in fitful gusts, the while it gently played the long roll on the clapboards a scant two feet above the tallest head. Far-off flashes of lightning cast ghastly reminders athwart the windows, fighting the yellow candle glow with a sickly, livid glare.

Kenneth's fellow-guest was standing near the stove, her back toward him as he entered the kitchen. The slant of the "ceiling" brought the crown of her head to within a foot or so of the round, peeled beams that supported the shed-like roof, giving her the appearance of abnormal height. As a matter of fact, she was not as tall as the gaunt Eliza, who, like her husband and the six-foot guest, was obliged to lower her head when passing through the kitchen door to the yard.

The table was set for four, in the middle of the little kitchen; rude hand-made stools, without backs, were in place. A figured red cloth covered the board, its fringe of green hanging down over the edges. The plates, saucers and coffee-cups were thick and clumsy and gaudily decorated with indescribable flowers and vines done entirely in green--a "set," no doubt, selected with great satisfaction in advance of the Striker nuptials. There were black-handled case-knives, huge four-tined forks, and pewter spoons. A blackened coffee-pot, a brass tea-kettle and a couple of shallow skillets stood on the square sheet-iron stove. "Come in and set down, Mr. Gwynne," said Mrs. Striker, pointing to a stool. With the other hand she deftly "flopped" an odorous corn-cake in one of the skillets. There was a far from unpleasant odor of grease.

"I can't help thanking my lucky stars, Mrs. Striker, that I got here ahead of that storm," said he, moving over to his appointed place, where he remained standing. "We were just in time, too. Ten minutes later and we would have been in the thick of it. And here we are, safe and sound and dry as toast, in the presence of a most inviting feast. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your kindness."

"Oh, it's--it's nothing," said she, diffidently. Then to Striker: "Put 'em here on the table, you big lummix. Set down, everybody."

The young lady sat opposite Gwynne. She lowered her head immediately as Phineas began to offer up his established form of grace. The unhappy host got himself into a dire state of confusion when he attempted to vary the habitual prayer by tacking on a few words appertaining to the recent hurricane and God's goodness in preserving them all from destruction as well as the hope that no serious damage had been done to other live-stock and fowls, or to the life and property of his neighbours,--amen!

To which Zachariah, seated on a roll of blankets in the corner, appended a heartfelt amen, and then sank back to watch his betters eat, much as a hungry dog feasts upon anticipation. He knew that he

was to have what was left over, and he offered up a silent prayer of his own while wistfully speculating on the prospects.

The two colonial candlesticks stood in the centre of the table, a foot or two apart. When Gwynne lifted his head after "grace," he looked directly between them at his vis-a-vis. For a few seconds he stared as if spell-bound. Then, realizing his rudeness and conscious of an unmistakable resentment in her eyes, he felt the blood rush to his face, and quickly turned to stammer something to his host,--he knew not what it was.

Never had he looked upon a face so beautiful, never had he seen any one so lovely as this strange young woman who shared with him the hospitality of the humble board. He had gazed for a moment full into her deep, violet eyes,--eyes in which there was no smile but rather a cool intentness not far removed from unfriendliness,--and in that moment he forgot himself, his manners and his composure.

The soft light fell upon warm, smooth cheeks; a broad, white brow; red, sensitive lips and a perfect mouth; a round firm chin; a delicate nose,--and the faint shadows of imperishable dimples that even her unsmiling expression failed to disturb.

Not even in his dreams had he conjured up a face so bewilderingly beautiful.

Her hair, which was puffed and waved over her ears, took on the shade of brown spun silk on which the light played in changing tones of bronze. It was worn high on her head, banded a la grecque, with a small knot on the crown from which depended a number of ringlets ornamented with bowknots. Her ears were completely hidden by the soft mass that came down over them in shapely knobs. She wore no earrings,--for which he was acutely grateful, although they were the fashion of the day and cumbersomely hideous,--and her shapely throat was barren of ornament. He judged her to be not more than twenty-two or -three. A second furtive glance caught her looking down at her plate. He marvelled at the long, dark eyelashes.

Who was she? What was she doing here in the humble cot of the Strikers? Certainly she was out of place here. She was a tender, radiant flower set down amongst gross, unlovely weeds. That she was a person of consequence, to whom the Strikers paid a rude sort of deference, softened by the familiarity of long association but in no way suggestive of relationship, he was in no manner of doubt.

He was not slow to remark their failure to present him to her. The omission may have been due to ignorance or uncertainty on their part, but that was not the construction he put upon it. Striker was the free-and-easy type who would have made these strangers known to each other in some bluff, awkward manner,--probably by their Christian names; he would never have overlooked this little formality, no matter how clumsily he may have gone about performing it. It was perfectly plain to Gwynne that it was not an oversight. It was deliberate.

His slight feeling of embarrassment, and perhaps annoyance, evidently was not shared by the young lady; so far as she was concerned the situation was by no means strained. She was as calm and serene and impervious as a princess royal.

She joined in the conversation, addressed herself to him without constraint, smiled amiably (and adorably) upon the busy Eliza and her jovial spouse, and even laughed aloud over the latter's account of Zachariah and the silver-top boots. Gwynne remarked that it was a soft, musical laugh, singularly free from the shrill, boisterous qualities so characteristic of the backwoods-woman. She possessed the poise of refinement. He had seen her counterpart,--barring her radiant beauty,--many a time during his years in the cultured east: in Richmond, in Philadelphia, and in New York, where he had attended college.

He was subtly aware of the lively but carefully guarded interest she was taking in him. He felt rather than knew that she was studying him closely, if furtively, when his face was turned toward the talkative host. Twice he caught her in the act of averting her gaze when he suddenly glanced in her direction, and once he surprised her in a very intense scrutiny,--which, he was gratified to observe, gave way to a swift flush of confusion and the hasty lowering of her eyes. No doubt, he surmised with some satisfaction, she was as vastly puzzled as himself, for he must have appeared equally out-of-place in these surroundings. His thoughts went delightedly to the old, well-beloved story of Cinderella. Was this a Cinderella in the flesh,--and in the morning would he find her in rags and tatters, slaving in the kitchen?

He noticed her hands. They were long and slim and, while browned by exposure to wind and sun, bore no evidence of the grinding toil to which the women and girls of the frontier were subjected. And they were strong, competent hands, at that.

The food was coarse, substantial, plentiful. (Even Zachariah could see that it was plentiful.) Solid food for sturdy people. There were potatoes fried in grease, wide strips of side meat, apple butter, corn-cakes piping hot, boiled turnips, coffee and dried apple pie. The smoky odor of frying grease arose from the skillets and, with the grateful smell of coffee, permeated the tight little kitchen. It was a savoury that consoled rather than offended the appetite of these hardy eaters.

Striker ate largely with his knife, and smacked his lips resoundingly; swigged coffee from his saucer through an overlapping moustache and afterwards hissingly strained the aforesaid obstruction with his nether lip; talked and laughed with his mouth full,--but all with such magnificent zest that his guests overlooked the shocking exhibition. Indeed, the girl seemed quite accustomed to Mr. Striker's table-habits, a circumstance which created in Kenneth's questing mind the conviction that she was not new to these parts, despite the garments and airs of the fastidious East.

They were vastly interested in the account of his journey through the wilderness.

"Nowadays," said Striker, "most people come up the river, 'cept them as hail from Ohio. You must ha' come by way of Wayne an' Madison Counties."

"I did," said his guest. "We found it fairly comfortable travelling through Wayne County. The roads are decent enough and the settlers

are numerous. It was after we left Madison County that we encountered hardships. We travelled for a while with a party of emigrants who were heading for the settlement at Strawtown. There were three families of them, including a dozen children. Our progress was slow, as they travelled by wagon. Rumours that the Indians were threatening to go on the warpath caused me to stay close by this slow-moving caravan for many miles, not only for my own safety but for the help I might be able to render them in case of an attack. At Strawtown we learned that the Indians were peaceable and that there was no truth in the stories. So Zachariah and I crossed the White River at that point and struck off alone. We followed the wilderness road,--the old Indian trace, you know,--and we travelled nearly thirty miles without seeing a house. At Brown's Wonder we met a party of men who had been out in this country looking things over. They were so full of enthusiasm about the prairies around here,--the Wea, the Wild Cat and Shawnee prairies,--that I was quite thrilled over the prospect ahead, and no longer regretted the journey which had been so full of privations and hardships and which I had been so loath to undertake in the beginning. Have you been at Thorntown recently?"

"Nope. Not sence I came through there some years ago. It was purty well deserted in those days. Nothin' there but Injin wigwams an' they was mostly run to seed. At that time, Crawfordsville was the only town to speak of between Terry Hut an' Fort Wayne, 'way up above here."

"Well, there are signs of a white settlement there now. Some of the old French settlers are still there and other whites are coming in. I had heard a great deal about the big Indian village at Thorntown, and was vastly disappointed in what I found. I am quite romantic, Miss--ahem!--quite romantic by nature, having read and listened to tales of thrilling adventures among the redskins, as we call them down my way, until I could scarce contain myself. I have always longed for the chance to rescue a beautiful white captive from the clutches of the cruel redskins. My valour--"

"And I suppose you always dreamed of marrying her as they always do in stories?" said she, smiling.

"Invariably," said he. "Alas, if I had rescued all the fair maidens my dreams have placed in jeopardy, I should by this time have as many wives as Solomon. Only, I must say in defence of my ambitions, I should not have had as great a variety. Strange as it may seem, I remained through all my adventures singularly constant to a certain idealistic captive. She looked, I may say, precisely alike in each and every case. Poor old Solomon could not say as much for his thousand wives. Mine, if I had them, would be so much alike in face and form that I could not tell one from the other,--and, now that I am older and wiser,--though not as wise as Solomon,--I am thankful that not one of these daring rescues was ever consummated, for I should be very much distressed now if I found myself married to even the most beautiful of the ladies my feeble imagination conceived."

This subtle touch of gallantry was over the heads of Mr. and Mrs. Striker. As for the girl, she looked momentarily startled, and then as the dimples deepened, a faint flush rose to her cheeks. An instant later, the colour faded, and into her lovely eyes came

a cold, unfriendly light. Realizing that he had offended her with this gay compliment,--although he had never before experienced rebuff in like circumstances,--he hastened to resume his narrative.

"We finally came to Sugar River and followed the road along the southern bank. You may know some of the settlers we found along the river. Wisheart and Kinworthy and Dewey? They were among the first to come to this part of the country, I am informed. Fine, brave men, all of them. In Crawfordsville I stopped at the tavern conducted by Major Ristine. While there I consulted with Mr. Elston and Mr. Wilson and others about the advisability of selling my land up here and my building lots in Lafayette. They earnestly advised me not to sell. In their opinion Lafayette is the most promising town on the Wabash, while the farming land in this section is not equalled anywhere else in the world. Of course, I realize that they are financially interested in the town of Lafayette, owning quite a lot of property there, so perhaps I should not be guided solely by their enthusiasm."

"They are the men who bought most of Sam Sargeant's lots some years back," said Striker, "when there wasn't much of anything in the way of a town,--them and Jonathan Powers, I think it was. They paid somethin' like a hundred an' fifty dollars for more'n half of the lots he owned, an' then they started right in to crow about the place. I was workin' down at Crawfordsville at the time. They had plenty of chance to talk, 'cause that town was full of emigrants, land-grabbers, travellers an' setch like. That was before the new county was laid out, you see. Up to that time all the land north of Montgomery County was what was called Wabash County. It run up as fer as Lake Michigan, with the jedges an' courts an' land offices fer the whole district all located in Crawfordsville. Maybe you don't know it, but Tippecanoe County is only about six years old. She was organized by the legislature in 1826. To show you how smart Elston and them other fellers was, they donated a lot of their property up in Lafayette to the county on condition that the commissioners located the county seat there. That's how she come to be the county seat, spite of the claims of Americus up on the east bank of the Wabash.

"Maybe you've heard of Bill Digby. He's the feller that started the town o' Lafayette. Well, a couple o' days after he laid out the town o' Lafayette,--named after a Frenchman you've most likely heerd about,--he up an' sold the whole place to Sam Sargeant fer a couple o' hundred dollars, they say. He kept enough ground fer a ferry landin' an' a twenty-acre piece up above the town fer specolatin' purposes, I understand. He afterwards sold this twenty-acre piece to Sam fer sixty dollars, an' thought he done mighty well. When I first come to the Wea, Lafayette didn't have more'n half a dozen cabins. I went through her once on my way up to the tradin' house at Longlois, couple a mile above. You wouldn't believe a town could grow as fast as Lafayette has in the last couple o' years. If she keeps on she'll be as big as all get-out, an' Crawfordsville won't be nowhere. Tim Horran laid out Fairfield two-three years back, over east o' here. Been a heap o' new towns laid out this summer, all around here. But I guess they won't amount to much. Josiah Halstead and Henry Ristine have jest laid out the town o' Columbia, down near the Montgomery line. Over on Lauramie Crick is a town called Cleveland, an' near that is Monroe, jest laid out by a feller named Major. There's another town called Concord over east

o' Columbia. There may be more of 'em, but I ain't heerd of 'em yet. They come up like mushrooms, an' 'fore you know it, why, there they are.

"This land o' yours, Mr. Gwynne, lays 'tween here an' this new settlement o' Columbia, an' I c'n tell you that it ain't to be beat anywheres in the country. I'd say it is the best land your fa--er--ahem!" The speaker was seized with a violent and obviously unnecessary spell of coughing. "Somethin' must ha' gone the wrong way," he explained, lamely. "Feller ort to have more sense'n to try to swaller when he's talkin'."

"Comes of eatin' like a pig," remarked his wife, glaring at him as she poured coffee into Gwynne's empty cup. "Mr. Gwynne'll think you don't know any better. He never eats like this on Sunday," she explained to their male guest.

"I got a week-day style of eatin' an' one strickly held back fer Sunday," said Phineas. "Same as clothes er havin' my boots greased."

Kenneth was watching the face of the girl opposite. She was looking down at her plate. He observed a little frown on her brow. When she raised her eyes to meet his, he saw that they were sullen, almost unpleasantly so. She did not turn away instantly, but continued to regard him with a rather disconcerting intensity. Suddenly she smiled. The cloud vanished from her brow, her eyes sparkled. He was bewildered. There was no mistaking the unfriendliness that had lurked in her eyes the instant before. But in heaven's name, what reason had she for disliking him?

"If you believe all that Phineas says, you will think you have come to Paradise," she said. At no time had she uttered his name, in addressing him, although it was frequently used by the Strikers. She seemed to be deliberately avoiding it.

"It is a present comfort, at least, to believe him," he returned. "I hope I may not see the day when I shall have to take him to task for misleading me in so vital a matter."

"I hope not," said she, quietly.

As he turned to Striker, he caught that worthy gazing at him with a fixed, inquisitive stare. He began to feel annoyed and uncomfortable. It was not the first time he had surprised a similar scrutiny on the part of one or the other of the Strikers. Phineas, on being detected, looked away abruptly and mumbled something about "God's country."

The young man decided it was time to speak. "By the way you all look at me, Mr. Striker, I am led to suspect that you do not believe I am all I represent myself to be. If you have any doubts, pray do not hesitate to express them."

Striker was boisterously reassuring. "I don't doubt you fer a second, Mr. Gwynne. As I said before, the whole county has been expectin' you to turn up. We heerd a few days back that you was in Crawfordsville. If me an' Eliza seem to act queer it's because we knowed your father an'--an', well, I can't help noticin' how much you look like him. When he was your age he must have looked enough

like you to be your twin brother. We don't mean no disrespect, an' I hope you'll overlook our nateral curiosity."

Kenneth was relieved. The furtive looks were explained.

"I am glad to hear that you do not look upon me as an outlaw or--"

"Lord bless you," cried Striker, "there ain't nobody as would take you fer an outlaw. You ain't cut out fer a renegade. We know 'em the minute we lay eyes on 'em. Same as we know a Pottawatomy Injin from a Shawnee, er a jack-knife from a Bowie. No, there ain't no doubt in my mind about you bein' your father's son--an' heir, as the sayin' goes. If you turn out to be a scalawag, I'll never trust my eyes ag'in."

The young man laughed. "In any case, you are very good to have taken me in for the night, and I shall not forget your trust or your hospitality. Wolves go about in sheep's clothing, you see, and the smartest of men are sometimes fooled." He turned abruptly to the girl. "Did you know my father, too?"

She started violently and for the moment was speechless, a curious expression in her eyes.

"Yes," she said, at last, looking straight at him: "Yes, I knew your father very well."

"Then, you must have lived in these parts longer than I have suspected," said he. "I should have said you were a newcomer."

Mrs. Striker made a great clatter of pans and skillets at the stove. The girl waited until this kindly noise subsided.

"I have lived in this neighbourhood since I was eight years old," she said, quietly.

Striker hastened to add: "Somethin' like ten or 'leven years,--'leven, I reckon, ain't it?"

"Eleven years," she replied.

Gwynne was secretly astonished and rather skeptical. He would have taken oath that she was twenty-two or -three years old, and not nineteen as computation made her.

"She ain't lived here all the time," volunteered Eliza, somewhat defensively. "She was to school in St. Louis fer two or three years an'--"

The young lady interrupted the speaker coldly. "Please, Eliza!"

Eliza, looking considerably crestfallen, accepted the rebuke meekly. "I jest thought he'd be interested," she murmured.

"She came up the Wabash when she was nothin' but a striplin'," began Striker, not profiting by his wife's experience. He might have gone on at considerable length if he had not met the reproving, violet eye. He changed the subject hastily. "As I was sayin', we've had a powerful lot o' rain lately. Why, by gosh, last week

you could have went fishin' in our pertato patch up yander an' got a mess o' sunfish in less'n no time. I never knowed the Wabash to be on setch a rampage. An' as fer the Wild Cat Crick and Tippecanoe River, why, they tell me there ain't been anything like--How's that?"

"Is Wabash an Indian name?" repeated Kenneth.

"That's what they say. Named after a tribe that used to hunt an' fish up an' down her, they say."

"There was once a tribe of Indians in this part of the country," broke in the girl, with sudden zest, "known as the Ouabachi. We know very little about them nowadays, however. They were absorbed by other and stronger tribes far back in the days of the French occupation, I suppose. French trappers and voyageurs are known to have traversed and explored the wilderness below here at least one hundred and fifty years ago. There is an old French fort quite near here,--Ouiatanon."

"She knows purty nigh everything," said Phineas, proudly. "Well, I guess we're about as full as it's safe to be, so now's your chance, Zachariah."

He pushed back his stool noisily and arose. Taking up the two candlesticks, he led the way to the sitting-room, stopping at the door for a word of instruction to the negro. "You c'n put your blankets down here on the kitchen floor when you're ready to go to bed. Mrs. Striker will kick you in the mornin' if you ain't awake when she comes out to start breakfast."

"Yassuh, yassuh," grinned the hungry darkey. "Missus won't need fo' to kick more'n once, suh,--'cause Ise gwine to be hungry all over ag'in 'long about breakfus time,--yas-SUH!"

"Zachariah will wash the dishes and--" began Kenneth, addressing Mrs. Striker, who was already preparing to cleanse and dry her pots and pans. She interrupted him.

"He won't do nothin' of the kind. I don't let nobody wash my dishes but myself. Set down here, Zachariah, an' help yourself. When you're done, you c'n go out an' carry me in a couple of buckets o' water from the well,--an, that's all you CAN do."

"I guess I'll go out an' take a look around the barn an' pens," said Phineas, depositing the candles on the mantelpiece. "See if everything's still there after the storm. No, Mr. Gwynne,--you set down. No need o' you goin' out there an' gettin' them boots o' your'n all muddy."

He took up the lantern and lighted the tallow wick from one of the candles. Then he fished a corncob pipe from his coattail pocket and stuffed it full of tobacco from a small buckskin bag hanging at the end of the mantel.

"He'p yourself to tobaccer if you keer to smoke. There's a couple o' fresh pipes up there,--jest made 'em yesterday,--an' it ain't ag'inst the law to smoke in the house on rainy nights. Used to be a time when we was first married that I had to go out an' git wet

to the skin jest because she wouldn't 'low no tobaccer smoke in the house. Many's the time I've sot on the doorstep here enjoyin' a smoke with the rain comin' down so hard it'd wash the tobaccer right out o' the pipe, an' twice er maybe it was three times it biled over an'--What's that you say?"

"I did not say anything, Phineas," said the girl, shaking her head mournfully. "I am wondering, though, where you will go when you die."

"Where I c'n smoke 'thout runnin' the risk o' takin' cold, more'n likely," replied Phineas, winking at the young man. Then he went out into the windy night, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER III

SOMETHING ABOUT CLOTHES, AND MEN, AND CATS

Smiling over the settler's whimsical humour, Gwynne turned to his companion, anticipating a responsive smile. Instead he was rewarded by an expression of acute dismay in her dark eyes. He recalled seeing just such a look in the eyes of a cornered deer. She met his gaze for a fleeting instant and then, turning away, walked rapidly over to the little window, where she peered out into the darkness. He waited a few moments for her to recover the composure so inexplicably lost, and then spoke,--not without a trace of coldness in his voice.

"Pray have this chair." He drew the rocking-chair up to the fireplace, setting it down rather sharply upon the strip of rag carpet that fronted the wide rock-made hearth. "You need not be afraid to be left alone with me. I am a most inoffensive person."

He saw her figure straighten. Then she faced him, her chin raised, a flash of indignation in her eyes.

"I am not afraid of you," she said haughtily. "Why should you presume to make such a remark to me?"

"I beg your pardon," he said, bowing. "I am sorry if I have offended you. No doubt, in my stupidity, I have been misled by your manner. Now, will you sit down--and be friendly?"

His smile was so engaging, his humility so genuine, that her manner underwent a swift and agreeable change. She advanced slowly to the fireplace, a shy, abashed smile playing about her lips.

"May I not stand up for a little while?" she pleaded, with mock submissiveness. "I do so want to grow tall."

"To that I can offer no objection," he returned; "although in my humble opinion you would do yourself a very grave injustice if you added so much as the eighth of an inch to your present height."

"I feel quite small beside you, sir," she said, taking her stand at the opposite end of the hearth, from which position she looked

up into his admiring eyes.

"I am an overgrown, awkward lummix," he said airily. "The boys called me 'beanpole' at college."

"You are not an awkward lummix, as you call yourself,--though what a lummix is I have not the slightest notion. Mayhap if you stood long enough you might grow shorter. They say men do,--as they become older." She ran a cool, amused eye over his long, well-proportioned figure, taking in the butter-nut coloured trousers, the foppish waistcoat, the high-collared blue coat, and the handsome brown-thatched head that topped the whole creation. He was almost a head taller than she, and yet she was well above medium height.

"How old are you?" she asked, abruptly. Again she was serious, unsmiling.

"Twenty-five," he replied, looking down into her dark, inquiring eyes with something like eagerness in his own. He was saying over and over again to himself that never had he seen any one so lovely as she. "I am six years older than you. Somehow, I feel that I am younger. Rather odd, is it not?"

"Six years," she mused, looking into the fire. The glow of the blazing logs cast changing, throbbing shadows across her face, now soft and dusky, like velvet, under the warm caress of the firelight. "Sometimes I feel much older than nineteen," she went on, shaking her head as if puzzled. "I remember that I was supposed to be very large for my age when I was a little girl. Everybody commented on my size. I used to be ashamed of my great, gawky self. But," she continued, shrugging her pretty shoulders, "that was ages ago."

He drew a step nearer and leaned an elbow on the mantel.

"You say you knew my father," he said, haltingly. "What was he like?"

She raised her eyes quickly and for an instant studied his face curiously, as if searching for something that baffled her understanding.

"He was very tall," she said in a low voice. "As tall as you are."

"I have only a dim recollection of him," he said. "You see, I made my home with my grandparents after I was five years old." He did not offer any further information. "As a tiny lad I remember wishing that I might grow up to be as big as my father. Did you know him well?"

If she heard, she gave no sign as she turned away again. This time she walked over to the cabin door, which she opened wide, letting in a rush of chill, damp air. He felt his choler rise. It was a deliberate, intentional act on her part. She desired to terminate the conversation and took this rude, insolent means of doing so. Never had he been so flagrantly insulted,--and for what reason? He had been courteous, deferential, friendly. What right had she,--this insufferable peacock,--to consider herself his superior? Hot words rushed to his lips, but he checked them. He contented himself with an angry contemplation of her slender, graceful figure as she poised in the open doorway, holding the latch in one hand while the other

was pressed against her bare throat for protection against the cold night air. Her ringlets, flouted by the wind, threshed merrily about the crown of her head. He noted the thick coil of hair that capped the shapely white neck. Despite his rancour and the glowering gaze he bent upon her, he was still lamentably conscious of her perfections. He had it in his heart to go over and shake her soundly. It would be a relief to see her break down and whimper. It would teach her not to be rude to gentlemen!

The two dogs came racing up to the threshold. She half-knelt and stroked their heads.

"No, no!" she cried out to them. "You cannot come in! Back with you, Shep! Pete! That's a good dog!"

Then she arose and quickly closed the door.

"The wind is veering to the south," she said calmly, as she advanced to the fireplace. She was shivering. "That means fair weather and warmer. We may even see the sun to-morrow."

She held out her hands to the blaze.

"Won't you have this chair now?" he said stiffly, formally. She was looking down into the fire, but he saw the dimple deepen in her cheek and an almost imperceptible twitching at the corner of her mouth. Confound her, was she laughing at him? Was he a source of amusement to her?

She turned her head and glanced up at him over her shoulder. He caught a strained, appealing gleam in her eyes.

"Please forgive me if I was rude," she said, quite humbly.

He melted a little. He no longer desired to shake her. "I feared I had in some way offended you," he said.

She shook her head and was silent for a moment or two, staring thoughtfully at the flames. A faint sigh escaped her, and then she faced him resolutely, frankly.

"You have succeeded fairly well in concealing your astonishment at seeing me here in this hut, dressed as I am," she said, somewhat hurriedly. "You have been greatly puzzled. I am about to confess something to you. You will see me again,--often perhaps,--if you remain long in this country. It is my wish that you should not know who I am to-night. You will gain nothing by asking questions, either of me or of the Strikers. You will know in the near future, so let that be sufficient. At first I--"

"You have my promise not to disregard your wishes in this or any other matter," he said, bowing gravely. "I shall ask no questions."

"Ah, but you have been asking questions all to yourself ever since you came into this cabin and saw me--in all this finery--and you will continue to ask them," she declared positively. "I do not blame you. I can at least account for my incomprehensible costume. That much you shall have, if no more. This frock is a new one. It has just come up the river from St. Louis. I have never had it on until

to-day. Another one, equally as startling, lies in that bedroom over there, and beside it on the bed is the dress I came here in this afternoon. It is a plain black dress, and there is a veil and a hideous black bonnet to go with it." She paused, a bright little gleam of mingled excitement and defiance in her eyes.

"You--you have lost--I mean, you are in mourning for some one?" he exclaimed. The thought rushed into his mind: Was she a widow? This radiantly beautiful girl a widow?

"For my father," she stated succinctly. "He died almost a year ago. I was in school at St. Louis when it happened. I had not seen him for two years. My mother sent for me to come home. Since that time I have worn nothing but black,--plain, horrible black. Do not misjudge me. I am not vain, nor am I as heartless as you may be thinking. I had and still have the greatest respect for my father. He was a good man, a fine man. But in all the years of my life he never spoke a loving word to me, he never caressed me, he never kissed me. He was kindness itself, but--he never looked at me with love in his eyes. I don't suppose you can understand. I was the flesh of his flesh, and yet he never looked at me with love in his eyes.

"As I grew older I began to think that he hated me. That is a terrible thing to say,--and you must think it vile of me to say it to you, a stranger. But I have said it, and I would not take it back. I have seen in his eyes,--they were brooding, thoughtful eyes,--I have seen in them at times a look--Oh, I cannot tell you what it seemed like to me. I can only say that it had something like despair in it,--sadness, unhappiness,--and I could not help feeling that I was the cause of it. When I was a tiny girl he never carried me in his arms. My mother always did that. When I was thirteen years old he hired me out as a servant in a farmer's family and I worked there until I was fourteen. It was not in this neighbourhood. I worked for my board and keep, a thing I could not understand and bitterly resented because he was prosperous. Then my mother fell ill. She was a strong woman, but she broke down in health. He came and got me and took me home. I was a big girl for my age,--as big as I am now,--and strong. I did all the work about the house until my mother was well again. He never gave me a word of appreciation or one of encouragement.

"He was never unkind, he never found fault with me, he never in all his life scolded or switched me when I was bad. Then, one day,--it was three years ago,--he told me to get ready to go down to St. Louis to school. He put me in charge of a trader and his wife who were going down the river by perogue. He gave them money to buy suitable clothes for me,--a large sum of money, it must have been,--and he provided me with some for my own personal use. All arrangements had been made in advance, without my knowing anything about it.

"I stayed there until I was called home by his death. I expected to return to school, but my mother refused to let me go back. She said my place was with her. That was last fall. She is still in the deepest mourning, and I believe will never dress otherwise. I have said all there is to say about my father. I did not love him, I was not grieved when he passed away. It was almost as if a stranger had died."

She paused. He took occasion to remark, sympathetically: "He must have been a strange man."

"He was," she said. "I hope I have made you understand what kind of a man he was, and what kind of a father he was to me. Now, I am coming to the point. This finery you see me in now was purchased without my mother's knowledge or consent,--with money of my own. The box was delivered to Phineas Striker day before yesterday up in Lafayette. I came here to spend the night, in order that I might try them on. I live in town, with my mother. She left the farm after my father's death. She adored him. She could not bear to live out there on the lonely--but, that is of no interest to you. A few weeks ago I asked her if I might not take off the black. She refused at first, but finally consented. I have her promise that I may put on colours sometime this spring. So I wrote to the woman who used to make my dresses in St. Louis,--my father was not stingy with me, so I always had pretty frocks,--and now they have come. My mother does not know about them. She will be shocked when I tell her I have them, but she will not be angry. She loves me. Is your curiosity satisfied? It will have to be, for this is all I care to divulge at present."

He smiled down into her earnest eyes. "My curiosity is appeased," he said. "I should not have slept tonight if you had not explained this tantalizing mystery. Therefore, I thank you. May I have your permission to say that you are very lovely in your new frock and that you are marvellously becoming to it?"

"As you have already said it, I must decline to give you the permission," she replied, naively.

He thought her adorable in this mood. "As a lawyer," he said, "I make a practice of never withdrawing a statement, unless I am convinced by incontrovertible evidence that I was wrong in the first place,--and you will have great difficulty in producing the proof."

"Wait till you see me in my black dress and bonnet,--and mittens," she challenged.

He bowed gallantly. "Only the addition of the veil,--it would have to be a very thick one,--I am sure,--could make me doubt my own eyes. They are witnesses whose testimony it will be very hard to shake."

Her manner underwent another transformation, as swift as it was unexpected. A troubled, harassed expression came into her eyes, driving out the sparkle that had filled them during that all too brief exchange. The smile died on her lips, which remained drawn and slightly parted as if frozen; she seemed for the moment to have stopped breathing. He was acutely alive to the old searching, penetrating look,--only now there was an added note of uneasiness. In another moment all this had vanished, and she was smiling again,--not warmly, frankly as before, but with a strange wistfulness that left him more deeply perplexed than ever.

"I wonder,--" she began, and then shook her head without completing the sentence. After a moment she went on: "Phineas is a long time. I hope all is well."

They heard the kitchen door open and close and Striker's voice loudly proclaiming the staunchness of his outbuildings, a speech cut short by Eliza's exasperation.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Phin Striker, not to come in this here kitchen without wipin' your feet? Might as well be the barn, fer as you're concerned. Go out an' scrape that mud offen your boots."

Deep mumbling and then the opening and shutting of the door again.

"Sometimes, I fear, poor Phineas finds matrimony very trying," said the girl, her eyes twinkling.

Eliza appeared in the doorway. She was rolling down her sleeves.

"How are you two gettin' along?" she inquired, looking from one to the other keenly. "I thought Phin was in here amusin' you the whole time with lies about him an' Dan'l Boone. He used to hunt with old Dan'l when he was a boy, an' if ever'thing happened to them two fellers that he sez happened, why, Phin'd have to be nearly two hundred years old by now an' there wouldn't be a live animal or Indian between here an' the Gulf of Mexico." She seemed a little uneasy. "I hope you two made out all right."

The girl spoke quickly, before her companion could reply. "We have had a most agreeable chat, Eliza. Are you through in the kitchen? If you are, would you mind coming into the bedroom with me? I want you to see the other dress on me, and besides I have a good many things I wish to talk over with you. Good night," she said to Gwynne. "No doubt we shall meet again."

He was dumbfounded. "Am I not to see you in the new dress?" he cried, visibly disappointed. "Surely you are not going to deny me the joy of beholding you in--"

She interrupted him almost cavalierly. "Pray save up some of your compliments against the day when you behold me in my sombre black, for I shall need them then. Again, good night."

"Good night," he returned, bowing stiffly and in high dudgeon.

Eliza, in hurrying past, had snatched one of the candlesticks from the mantel, and now stood holding the bedroom door open for the queenly young personage. A moment later the door closed behind them.

Gwynne was still scowling at the inoffensive door when Striker came blustering into the room.

"Where are the women?" he demanded, stopping short.

A jerk of the thumb was his answer.

"Gone to bed?" with something like an accusing gleam in his eye as his gaze returned to the young man.

"I believe so," replied Gwynne carelessly, as he sat down in the despised rocker and stretched his long legs out to the fire. "I

fancy we are safe to smoke now, Striker. We have the parlor all to ourselves. The ladies have deserted us."

Striker took the tobacco pouch from the peg on the mantel and handed it to his guest.

"Fill up," he said shortly, and then walked over to the bedroom door. He rapped timorously on one of the thick boards. "Want me fer anything?" he inquired softly, as his wife opened the door an inch or two.

"No. Go to bed when you're ready an' don't forget to smother that fire."

"Good night, Phineas," called out another voice merrily.

"Good night," responded Striker, with a dubious shake of his head. He returned to the fireplace.

"Women are funny things," said he, dragging up another chair. "Specially about boots. I go out 'long about sun-up an' work like a dog all day, an' then when I come in to supper what happens? First thing my wife does is to look at my boots. Then she tells me to go out an' scrape the mud off'm 'em. Then she looks up at my face to see if it's me. Sometimes I get so doggoned mad I wish it wasn't me, so's I could turn out to be the preacher er somebody like that an' learn her to be keerful who she's talkin' to. Supposin' I do track a little mud into her kitchen? It's OUR mud, ain't it? 'Tain't as if it was somebody else's land I'm bringin' into her kitchen. Between us we own every danged bit of land from here to the Middleton dirt-road an' it ain't my fault if it happens to be mud once in awhile. You'd think, the way she acts, I'd been out stealin' somebody else's mud just for the sake of bringin' it into her kitchen.

"An' what makes me madder'n anything else is the way she scolds them pore dogs when they come in with a little mud. As if a dog understood he had to scrape his feet off an' wash his paws an' everything 'fore he c'n step inside his master's cabin. Now you take cats, they're as smart as all get out. They're jist like women. Allus thinkin' about their pussonal appearance. Ever notice a cat walk across a muddy strip o' ground? Why, you'd think they was walkin' on a red hot stove, the way they step. I've seen a cat go fifty rods out of her way to get around a mud-puddle. I recollect seein' ole Maje,--he's our principal tom-cat,--seein' him creepin' along a rail fence nearly half a mile from the house so's he wouldn't have to cross a stretch o' wet ground jist outside the kitchen door. Now, a dog would have splashed right through it an' took the consequences. But ole Maje--NO, SIR! He goes miles out'n his way an' then when he gits home he sets down on the doorstep an' licks his feet fer half an hour er so before he begins to meow so's Eliza'll open the door an' let him in.

"Ever' so often I got to tie a litter of kittens up in a meal-bag an' take 'em over to the river an' drownd 'em, an' I want to tell you it's a pleasure to do it. You never in all your life heerd of anybody puttin' a litter of pups in a bag an' throwin' 'em in the river, did ye? No, sirree! Dogs is like men. They grow up to be useful citizens, mud er no mud. Why, if I had a dog what sat down on the doorstep an' licked his paws ever' time he got mud on 'em

I'd take him out an' shoot him, 'cause I'd know he wasn't no kind of a dog at all. Now, Eliza's tryin' to make me act like a cat, an' me hatin' cats wuss'n pison. There's setch a thing as bein' too danged clean, don't you think so? Sort o' takes the self-respect away from a man. Makes you feel as if you'd ort to have petticoats on in place o' pants. How do you like that terbaccer?"

Throughout the foregoing dissertation, Gwynne had sat with his moody gaze fixed upon the flaring logs, which Striker had kicked into renewed life with the heel of one of his ponderous boots, disdaining the stout charred poker that leaned against the chimney wall. He was pulling dreamily at the corncob pipe; the fragrant blue smoke, drifting toward the open fireplace, was suddenly caught by the draft and drawn stringily into the hot cavern where it was lost in the hickory volume that swept up the chimney.

He had taken in but a portion of his host's remarks; his thoughts were not of dogs and cats but of the perplexing girl who eagerly gave him her confidence in one moment and shrank into the iciest reticence the next. Her unreserved revelations concerning her own father, uttered with all the frankness of an intimate, and the childish ingenuousness with which she accounted for her raiment, followed so closely, so abruptly by the most insolent display of bad manners he had ever known, gave him ample excuse for reflection, and if he failed to obtain the full benefit of Striker's discourse it was because he had no power to command his addled thoughts. As a matter of fact, he was debating within himself the advisability of asking his host a few direct and pointed questions. A fine regard for Striker's position deterred him,--and to this regard was added the conviction that his host would probably tell him to mind his own business and not go prying into the affairs of others. He came out of his reverie in good time to avoid injury to his host's feelings.

"It is admirable," he assured him promptly. "Do you cure it yourself or does it come up the river from Kentucky?"

"Comes from Kentucky. We don't have much luck tryin' to raise terbaccer in these parts."

Whereupon Mr. Striker went into a long and intelligent lecture upon the products of the soil in that section of Indiana; what to avoid and what to cultivate; how to buy and how to sell; the traders one could trust and those who could not be trusted out of sight; the short corn crop of the year before and the way he lost half a dozen as fine shoats as you'd see in a lifetime on account of wild hogs coming out of the woods and enticin' 'em off. He interrupted himself at one stage in order to get up and close the door to the kitchen. Zachariah was snoring lustily.

"Whenever you feel like goin' to bed, jist say so," he said at last, as his guest drew his huge old silver watch from his pocket and glanced at it.

"I have been doing a little surmising, Mr. Striker," said the other. "You have only this sitting-room and one bedroom. The ladies are occupying the latter. My servant has gone to bed in the kitchen. I am wondering where you and I are to dispose ourselves."

"I could see you was doin' some figgerin', friend. Well, fer that

matter, so was I. 'Tain't often she comes to spend the night here, an' when she does me an' Eliza give her our room an' bed an' we pull an extry straw tick out here in the room an' make the best of it. Now, as I figger it out, Eliza is usin' that straw tick herself, 'cause she certainly wouldn't ever dream of gettin' into bed with--with--er--her. Not but what she's clean an' all that,--I mean Eliza,--but you see, she used to be a hired girl once upon a time, an'--an'--well, that sort of makes a--"

"My fellow-guest confided to me a little while ago that she too had been a hired girl, Mr. Striker, so I don't see--"

"Did she tell you that?" demanded Phineas sharply.

"She did," replied Gwynne, enjoying his host's consternation.

"Well, I'll be tee-totally danged," exploded the settler. He got up suddenly and turning his back to his guest, knocked the burnt tobacco from his pipe against the stone arch of the fireplace. "I guess I better rake the ashes over these here coals," said he, "'cause if I don't an' the cabin took fire an' burnt us all alive Eliza'd never git done jawin' me about it." Presently he stood off and critically surveyed his work. "I guess that'll fix her so's she won't spit any sparks out here an' set fire to the carpet. As I was sayin', I reckon I'll have to make up a bed here in front of the fireplace fer myself, an' let you go up to the attic. We got a--"

"I was afraid of this, Mr. Striker. You are putting yourselves out terribly on my account. I can't allow it, sir. It is too much to ask--"

"Now, don't you worry about us. You ain't puttin' us out at all. One night last winter,--the coldest night we had,--Eliza an' me slep' on the kitchen floor with nary a blanket er quilt, an' I had to git up every half hour to put wood on the fire so's we wouldn't freeze to death, all because Joe Wadley an' his wife an' her father an' mother an' his sister with her three children dropped in sort of unexpected on account of havin' their two wagons git stuck in a snow drift a mile er so from here. No, sirree, don't you worry. There's a spare tick up in the attic what we use fer strangers when they happen along, an' Zachariah has put your blankets right here by the door,--an' your pistols, too, I see,--so whenever you're ready, I'll lead the way up the ladder an' show you where you're to roost. There's a little winder at one end, so's you c'n have all the air you want,--an', my stars, there's a lot of it to-night, ain't there? Jist listen to her whistle. Sounds like winter. She's changed, though, an' I wouldn't be surprised if we'd find the moon is shinin'."

CHAPTER IV

VIOLA GWYN

They stepped outside the cabin, into the fresh, brisk gale that was blowing. A gibbous moon hung in the eastern star-specked sky.

Scurrying moonlit clouds off in the west sped northward on the sweep of the inconstant wind, which had shifted within the hour. A light shone dimly through the square little window of the bedroom. Kenneth's imagination penetrated to sacred precincts beyond the solid logs: he pictured her in the other frock, moving gracefully before the fascinated eyes of the settler's wife, proud as a peacock and yet as gay as the lark.

"Women like to talk," observed Striker, with a sidelong glance at the lighted window. He led the way to the opposite end of the cabin and pointed off into the night. "Lafayette's off in yan direction. There's a big stretch of open prairie in between, once you git out'n these woods, an' further on there's more timber. The town's down in a sort of valley, shaped somethin' like a saucer, with hills on all sides an' the river cuttin' straight through the middle. Considerable buildin' goin' on this spring. There's talk of the Baptists an' the Methodists puttin' up new churches an' havin' regular preachers instead of the circuit riders. But you'll see all this fer yourself when you git there. Plenty of licker to be had at Sol Hamer's grocery,--mostly Mononga-Durkee whisky,--in case you git the Wabash shakes or suddenly feel homesick."

"I drink very little," said Kenneth.

"Well, you'll soon git over that," prophesied his host. "Everybody does. A spell of aguer like we have along the river every fall an' winter an' spring will make you mighty thankful fer Sol Hamer's medicine, an' by the time summer comes you'll be able to stand more'n you ever thought you could stand. What worries me is how the women manage to git along without it. You see big strong men goin' around shakin' their teeth out an' docterin' day an' night at Sol's, but I'll be doggoned if you ever see a woman takin' it. Seems as if they'd ruther shake theirselves to death than tetch a drop o' whisky."

"You would not have them otherwise, would you?"

"Why, if I ever caught my wife takin' a swaller o' whisky, I'd--well, by gosh, I don't know what I would do. First place, I'd think the world was comin' to an end, and second place, I guess I'd be glad it was. No, sirree, I don't want to see whisky goin' down a woman's gullet. But that don't explain how they come to git along without it when they've got the aguer. They won't even take it when a rattlesnake bites 'em. Sooner die. An' in spite of all that, they bring he-children into the world that can't git over a skeeter bite unless they drink a pint or two of whisky. Well, I guess we better go to roost, Mr. Gwynne. Must be nine o'clock. Everything's all right out at the barn an' the chicken coops. Wolves an' foxes an' weasels visit us sometimes at night, but I got things fixed so's they go away hungry. In the day time, Eliza's got an ole musket o' mine standin' in the kitchen to skeer the hawks away, an' I got a rifle in the settin' room fer whatever varmint comes along at night,--includin' hoss-thieves an' setch-like."

"Horse-thieves?"

"Yep. Why, only last month a set of hoss-thieves from down the river went through the Wea plains an' stole sixteen yearlin' colts, drove 'em down to the river, loaded 'em on a flat-boat an' got away

without losin' a hair. Done it on a Sunday night, too."

It was a few minutes past nine when Kenneth followed his host up the ladder and through the trap-door into the stuffy attic. He carried his rough riding-boots, which Zachariah had cleaned and greased with a piece of bacon-rind.

"I'll leave the ladder here," said Striker, depositing the candlestick on the floor. "So's I c'n stick my head in here in the mornin' an' rouse you up. There's your straw-tick over yander, an' I'll fotch your blankets up in a minute or two. I reckon you'll have to crawl on your hands an' knees; this attic wasn't built fer full-size men."

"I will be all right," his guest assured him. "Beggars cannot be choosers. A place to lay my head, a roof to keep the rain off, and a generous host--what more can the wayfarer ask?"

The clapboard roof was a scant three feet above the dusty floor of the attic. Stooping, the young man made his way to the bed-tick near the little window. He did not sniff with scorn at his humble surroundings. He had travelled long and far and he had slept in worse places than this. He was drawing off his boots when Striker again stuck his head and shoulders through the opening and laid his roll of blankets on the floor.

"Eliza jist stuck her head out to tell me to shut this trap-door, so's my snorin' won't keep you awake. I fergot all about my snorin'. Like as not if I left this door open the whole danged roof would be lifted right off'm the cabin 'fore I'd been asleep five minutes. Well, good night. I'll call you in the mornin' bright an' early."

The trap-door was slowly lowered into place as the shaggy head and broad shoulders of the settler disappeared. The young man heard the scraping of the ladder as it was being removed to a place against the wall.

He pried open the tight little window, letting a draft of fresh air rush into the stifling attic. Then he sat on the edge of the tick for a few minutes, ruminating, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on the sputtering, imperilled candle. Finally he shook his head, sighed, and began to unstrap his roll of blankets. He had decided to remove only his coat and waistcoat. The sharp, staccato barking of a fox up in the woods fell upon his ears. He paused to listen. Then came the faraway, unmistakable howl of a wolf, the solemn, familiar hoot of the wilderness owl and the raucous call of the great night heron. But there was no sound from the farmyard. He said his prayers--he never forgot to say the prayer his mother had taught him--blew out the candle, pulled the blankets up to his chin, and was soon fast asleep.

He did not know what time it was when he was aroused by the barking of Striker's dogs, loud, furious barking and ugly growls, signifying the presence in the immediate neighbourhood of the house of some intruder, man or beast. Shaking off the sleep that held him, he crept to the window and looked out. The moon was gone and the stars had almost faded from the inky black dome. He guessed the hour with the acute instinct of one to whom the vagaries of night have become familiar through long understanding. It would now be about

three o'clock in the morning, with the creeping dawn an hour and a half away.

Suddenly his gaze fell upon a light moving among the trees some distance from the cabin. It appeared and disappeared, like a jack o' lantern, but always it moved southward, obscured every few feet by an intervening trunk or a clump of brush. As he watched the bobbing light, he heard some one stirring in the room below. Then the cabin door creaked on its rusty hinges and almost immediately a jumble of subdued hoarse voices came up to him. He felt for his pistols and realized with something of a shock that he had left them in the kitchen with Zachariah. For the first time in his travels he had neglected to place them beside his bed.

The dogs, admonished by a sharp word or two, ceased their barking. This reassured him, for they would obey no one except Phineas Striker. Whoever was at the cabin door, there was no longer any question in his mind as to the peaceful nature of the visit. He crept over to the trap-door and cautiously attempted to lift it an inch or so, the better to hear what was going on, but try as he would he could not budge the covering. The murmur of voices went on for a few minutes longer, and then he heard the soft, light pad of feet on the floor below; sibilant, penetrating whispers; a suppressed feminine ejaculation followed by the low laugh of a man, a laugh that might well have been described as a chuckle.

For a long time he lay there listening to the confused sound of whispers, the stealthy shuffling of feet, the quiet opening and closing of a door, and then there was silence.

Several minutes passed. He stole back to the window. The light in the forest had vanished. Just as he was on the point of crawling into bed again, another sound struck his ear: the unmistakable rattle of wagon wheels on their axles, the straining of harness, the rasp of tug chains,--quite near at hand. The clack-clack of the hubs gradually diminished as the heavy vehicle made its slow, tortuous way off through the ruts and mire of the road. Presently the front door of the cabin squealed on its hinges, the latch snapped and the bolt fell carefully into place.

He could not go to sleep again. His brain was awake and active, filled with unanswered questions, beset by endless speculation. The first faint sign of dawn, creeping through the window, found him watching eagerly, impatiently for its appearance. The presence of a wagon, even at that black hour of the night, while perhaps unusual, was readily to be accounted for in more ways than one, none of them possessing a sinister significance. A neighbouring farmer making an early start for town stopping to carry out some friendly commission for Phineas Striker; a settler calling for assistance in the case of illness at his home; hunters on their way to the marshes for wild ducks and geese; or even guardians of the law in search of malefactors. But the mysterious light in the woods,--that was something not so easily to be explained.

The square little aperture was clearly defined against the greying sky before he distinguished signs of activity in the room below. Striker was up and moving about. He could hear him stacking logs in the fireplace, and presently there came up to him the welcome crackle of kindling-wood ablaze. A door opened and a gruff voice

spoke. The settler was routing Zachariah out of his slumbers. Far off in some unknown, remote land a rooster crowed,--the day's champion, the first of all to greet the rising sun. Almost instantly, a cock in Striker's barnyard awoke in confusion and dismay, and sent up a hurried, raucous cock-a-doodle-doo,--too late by half a minute to claim the honours of the day, but still a valiant challenger. Then other chanticleers, big and little, sounded their clarion call,--and the day was born.

Kenneth, despite his longing for this very hour to come, now perversely wished to sleep. A belated but beatific drowsiness seized him. He was only half-conscious of the noise that attended the lifting of the trap-door.

"Wake up! Time to git up," a distant voice was calling, and he suddenly opened his eyes very wide and found himself staring at a shaggy, unkempt head sticking up out of the floor, rendered grim and terrifying by the fitful play of a ruddy light from the depths below. For a second he was bewildered.

"That you, Striker?" he mumbled.

"Yep,--it's me. Time to git up. Five o'clock. Breakfast'll soon be ready. You c'n wash up out at the well. Sleep well?"

"Passably. I was awakened some time in the night by your visitors."

He was sitting up on the edge of the tick, drawing on his boots. Striker was silent for a moment.

"Thought maybe you'd be disturbed, spite of all we could do to be as quiet as possible. People from a farm 'tother side of the plains."

The head disappeared, and in a very few minutes Gwynne, carrying his coat and waistcoat, descended the ladder into the presence of a roaring fire. He shot a glance at the closed bedroom door, and then hastily made his way out of the cabin and around to the well. Eliza was preparing breakfast. In the grey half-light he made out Striker and Zachariah moving about the barnlot. A rough but clean towel hung across the board wall of the well, while a fresh bucket of water stood on the shelf inside, its chain hanging limply from the towering end of the "h'isting pole."

As he completed his ablutions, the darkey boy approached.

"Good morning, Zachariah," he spluttered, over the edge of the towel. "Did you sleep well?"

"No, suh, Marse Kenneth, Ah slep' powerful porely. Ah don't reckon Ah had mah eyes close' more'n fifteen seconds all night long, suh."

His master peered at him. Zachariah's eyes were not yet thoroughly open.

"You mean you did not have them open more than fifteen seconds, you rascal. Why, you were asleep and snoring by nine o'clock."

"Yas, suh, yas, suh,--but Ah done got 'em wide open ag'in 'side o' no time. Ah jes' couldn't holp worryin', Marse Kenneth, 'bout you

all. Ah sez to mahself, ef Marse Kenneth he ain' got no fitten place to lay his weary haid--"

"Oh, then you were not kept awake by noises or--by the by, did you hear any noises?"

"Noises? No, SUH! Dis yere cabin hit was like a grave. Thass what kep' me awake, mos' likely. Ah reckon Ah is used to noises. Ah jes' couldn't go to sleep widdout 'em, Marse Kenneth. Wuzzen't even a cricket er a--"

His master's hearty laugh caused him to cut his speech short. A wary glance out of the corner of his eye satisfied him that it was now time to change the subject.

"Done fed de hosses, suh, an' mos' ready to packen up fo' de juhney, suh. Yas, SUH! Ev'thing all hunky-dory jes' soon as Marse Kenneth done had his breakfuss. YAS, suh! Yas, SUH!"

They ate breakfast by candle-light, Striker and Eliza and Kenneth. There was no sign of the beautiful and exasperating girl. Phineas was strangely glum and preoccupied, his wife too busy with her flap-jacks to take even the slightest interest in the desultory conversation.

"A little too early for my fellow-guest to be up and about, I see," ventured Kenneth at last, taking the bull by the horns. His curiosity had to be satisfied.

Striker did not look up from his plate. "She's gone. She ain't here."

"Gone?"

"Yep. Left jist a little while 'fore sun-up."

"Her ma sent for her," volunteered Eliza.

"Sent fer her to come in a hurry," added Striker, trying to be casual.

"Then it was she who went away in the wagon last night," said the young man, a note of disappointment in his voice.

"Airly this mornin'," corrected his host. "Jist half an hour or so 'fore sun-up."

"I trust her mother is not ill."

"No tellin'," was Striker's non-committal response.

It was quite apparent to Kenneth that they did not wish to discuss the matter. He waited a few moments before remarking:

"I saw a light moving through the woods above here,--a lantern, I took it to be,--just after I was awakened by the barking of the dogs. I thought at first it was that which set the dogs off on a rampage."

Striker was looking at him intently under his bushy eyebrows, his knife poised halfway to his lips. While he could not see Eliza, who was at the stove behind him, he was struck by the fact that there was a brief, significant suspension of activity on her part; the scrape of the "turnover" in the frying-pan ceased abruptly.

"A lantern up in the woods?" said Striker slowly, looking past Gwynne at Eliza.

"A light. It may not have been a lantern."

"Which way was it movin'?"

"In that direction," indicating the south.

The turning of the flap-jacks in the pan was resumed. Striker relaxed a little.

"Hunters, I reckon, goin' down stream for wild duck and geese this mornin'. There's a heap o' ducks an' geese passin' over--"

"See here, Phineas," broke in his wife suddenly, "what's the sense of sayin' that? You know it wasn't duck hunters. Nobody's out shooting ducks with the river as high as it is down this way, an' Mr. Gwynne knows it, if he's got half as much sense as I think he has."

"When I heard people out in front of the cabin shortly afterward, I naturally concluded that the lantern belonged to them," remarked the young man.

"Well, it didn't," said Striker, laying down his knife. "I guess it won't hurt you to know now somethin' that will be of considerable interest to you later on. I ain't betrayin' nobody's secret, 'cause I said I was goin' to tell you the whole story."

"Don't you think you'd better let it come from somebody else, Phin?" interposed his wife nervously.

"No, I don't, Eliza. 'Cause why? 'Cause I think he'd ort to know. Maybe he'll be able to put a stop to her foolishness. We didn't know until long after you went to bed that her real reason fer comin' here yesterday was to run off an' get married to Barry Lapelle. She didn't tell you no lies about her clothes an' all that, 'cause her ma had put her foot down on her takin' off black. They had it all planned out beforehand, her an' this Lapelle. He was to come fer her some time before daybreak with a couple of hosses an' they was to be off before the sun was up on their way to Attica where they was to be married, an' then go on down the river to his home in Terry Hut. Me an' Eliza set up all night in that bedroom, tryin' to coax her out of it. I don't like this Lapelle feller. He's a handsome cuss, but he's as wild as all get out,--drinks, gambles, an' all setch. Well, to make a long story short, that was prob'ly him up yander on the ole Injin trace, with his hosses, waitin' fer the time to come when they could be off. Her ma must have found out about their plans, 'cause she come here herself with two of her hired men an' old Cap'n Scott, a friend of the fam'ly, an' took her daughter right out from under Barry's nose. It was them you heard down here last night. I will say this fer the girl, she kinder

made up her mind 'long about midnight that it was a foolish thing to do, runnin' off like this with Barry, an' like as not when the time come she'd have backed out."

"She's a mighty headstrong girl," said Eliza. "Sot in her ways an' sp'iled a good deal by goin' to school down to St. Louis." "Her mother don't want her to marry Lapelle. She's dead sot ag'inst it. It's a mighty funny way fer the girl to act, when she's so fond of her mother. I can't understand it in her. All the more reason fer her to stick to her mother when it's a fact that the old woman ain't got what you'd call a friend in the whole deestrect. She's a queer sort of woman,--close an' stingy as all get out, an' as hard as a hickory log. Never been seen at a church meetin'. She makes her daughter go whenever there's a meetin', but as fer herself,--no, sirree. 'Course, I understand why she's so sot ag'inst Barry. She's purty well off an' the girl will be rich some day."

"Shucks!" exclaimed Eliza. "Barry Lapelle's after her 'cause she's the purtiest girl him or anybody else has ever seen. He ain't the only man that's in love with her. They ALL are,--clear from Lafayette to Terry Hut, an' maybe beyond. Don't you tell me it's her money he's after, Phin Striker. He's after HER. He's got plenty of money himself, so they say, so why--"

"I ain't so sure about that," broke in her husband. "There's a lot of talk about him gamblin' away most everything his father left him. Lost one of his boats last winter in a poker game up at Lafayette, an' had to borry money on some land he's got down the river to git it back. The packet Paul Revere it was. Used to run on the Mississippi. I guess she kinder lost her head over him," he went on musingly. "He's an awful feller with women, so good-lookin' an' all, an' so different from the farm boys aroun' here. Allus got good clothes on, an' they say he has fit a couple of duels down the river. Somehow that allus appeals to young girls. But I can't understand it in her. She's setch a level-headed girl,--but, then, I guess they're all alike when a good-lookin' man comes along. Look at Eliza here. The minute she sot eyes on me she--" "I didn't marry you, Phin Striker, because you was purty, let me tell you that," exclaimed Eliza, witheringly.

Gwynne, who had been listening to all this with a queer sinking of the heart, interrupted what promised to develop into an acrimonious wrangle over pre-connubial impressions. He was decidedly upset by the revelations; a vague dream, barely begun, came to a sharp and disagreeable end.

"She actually had planned to run away with this man Lapelle?" he exclaimed, frowning. "It was all arranged?"

"So I take it," said Striker. "She brought some of her personal trinkets with her, but Eliza never suspected anything queer about that."

"The fellow must be an arrant scoundrel," declared the young man angrily. "No gentleman would subject an innocent girl to such--"

"All's well that ends well, as the feller says," interrupted Striker, arising from the table. "At least fer the present. She seemed sort of willin' to go home with her ma, so I guess her heart

ain't everlastingly busted. I thought it was best to tell you all this, Mr. Gwynne, 'cause I got a sneakin' idee you're goin' to see a lot of that girl, an' maybe you'll turn out to be a source of help in time o' trouble to her."

"I fail to understand just what you mean, Striker. She is an absolute stranger to me."

"Well, we'll see what we shall see," said Striker, cryptically. He opened the kitchen door and called to Zachariah to hurry in and get his breakfast.

Half an hour later Kenneth and his servant mounted their horses in the barnyard and prepared to depart. The sun was shining and there was a taste and tang of spring in the breeze that flouted the faces of the horsemen.

"Follow this road back to the crossin' an' turn to your left," directed Striker, "an' 'fore you know it you'll be in Lay-flat, as they call it down in Crawfordsville. Remember, you're allus most welcome here. I reckon we'll see somethin' of each other as time goes on. It ain't difficult fer honest men to be friends as well as neighbours in this part of the world. I'm glad you happened my way last night."

He walked alongside Gwynne's stirrup as they moved down toward the road.

"Some day," said the young man, "I should like to have a long talk with you about my father. You knew him well and I--by the way, your love-lorn friend knew him also."

The other was silent for half a dozen paces, looking straight ahead.

"Yes," said he, with curious deliberation. "She was sayin' as how she told you a lot about him last night,--what sort of a man he was, an' all that."

"She told me nothing that--"

"Jist a minute, Mr. Gwynne," said Striker, laying his hand on the rider's knee. Kenneth drew rein. "I guess maybe you didn't know who she was talkin' about at the time, but it was your father she was describin'. We all three knowed somethin' that you didn't know, an' it's only fair fer me to tell you the truth, now that she's out of the way. That girl was Viola Gwyn, an' she's your half-sister."

CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS AND AN ENCOUNTER

The sun was barely above the eastward wall of trees when Kenneth and his man rode away from the home of Phineas Striker. Their progress was slow and arduous, for the black mud was well up to the fetlocks of the horses in this new road across the boggy clearing. He rode

ahead, as was the custom, followed a short distance behind by his servant on the strong, well-laden pack-horse.

The master was in a thoughtful, troubled mood. He paid little attention to the glories of the fresh spring day. What he had just heard from the lips of the settler disturbed him greatly. That beautiful girl his half-sister! The child of his own father and the hated Rachel Carter! Rachel Carter, the woman he had been brought up to despise, the harlot who had stolen his father away, the scarlet wanton at whose door the death of his mother was laid! That evil woman, Rachel Carter!

Could she, this foulest of thieves, be the mother of so lovely, so sensitive, so perfect a creature as Viola Gwyn?

As he rode frowningly along, oblivious to the low chant of the darkey and the song of the first spring warblers, he revisualized the woman he had known in his earliest childhood. Strangely enough, the face of Rachel Carter had always remained more firmly, more indelibly impressed upon his memory than that of his own mother.

This queer, unusual circumstance may be easily, reasonably accounted for: his grandfather's dogged, almost daily lessons in hate. He was not allowed to forget Rachel Carter,--not for one instant. Always she was kept before him by that bitter, vindictive old man who was his mother's father,--even up to the day that he lay on his deathbed. Small wonder, then, that his own mother's face had faded from his memory while that of Rachel Carter remained clear and vivid, as he had known it now for twenty years. The passing years might perforce bring about changes in the face and figure of Rachel Carter, but they could not, even in the smallest detail, alter the picture his mind's eye had carried so long and faithfully. He could think of her only as she was when he last saw her, twenty years ago: tall and straight, with laughing eyes and white teeth, and the colour of tan-bark in her cheeks.

Then there had been little Minda,--tiny Minda who existed vaguely as a name, nothing more. He had a dim recollection of hearing his elders say that the babe with the yellow curls had been drowned when a boat turned over far away in the big brown river. Some one had come to his grandfather's house with the news. He recalled hearing the talk about the accident, and his grandfather lifting his fist toward the sky and actually blaming God for something! He never forgot that. His grandfather had blamed God!

He had thought of asking Striker about his father's widow, after hearing the truth about Viola, but a stubborn pride prevented. It had been on his tongue to inquire when and where Robert Gwynne and Rachel Carter were married,--he did not doubt that they had been legally married,--but he realized in time that in all probability the settler, as well as every one else in the community, was totally uninformed as to the past life of Robert and Rachel Gwynne. Besides, the query would reveal an ignorance on his part that he was loath to expose to speculation.

Striker had explained the somewhat distasteful scrutiny to which he had been subjected the night before. All three of them, knowing him to be Viola's blood relation, were studying his features with interest, seeking for a trace of family resemblance, not alone

to his father but to the girl herself. This had set him thinking. There was not, so far as he could determine, the slightest likeness between him and his beautiful half-sister; there was absolutely nothing to indicate that their sire was one and the same man.

Pondering, he now understood what Striker meant in declaring that he ought to know the truth about the frustrated elopement. Even though the honest settler was aware of the strained relations existing between the widow and her husband's son by a former wife,--(the deceased in his will had declared in so many words that he owed more than mere reparation to the neglected but unforgotten son born to him and his beloved but long dead wife, Laura Gwynne),--even though Striker knew all this, it was evident that he looked upon this son as the natural protector of the wilful girl, notwithstanding the feud between step-mother and step-son.

And Kenneth, as he rode away, felt a new weight of responsibility as unwelcome to him as it was certain to be to Viola; for, when all was said and done, she was her mother's daughter and as such doubtless looked upon him through the mother's eyes, seeing a common enemy. Still, she was his half-sister, and whether he liked it or not he was morally bound to stand between her and disaster,--and if Striker was right, marriage with the wild Lapelle spelled disaster of the worst kind. He had only to recall, however, the unaccountable look of hostility with which she had favoured him more than once during the evening to realize that he was not likely to be called upon for either advice or protection.

He mused aloud, with the shrug of a philosopher: "Heigh-ho! I fear me I shall have small say as to the conduct of this newly found relation. The only tie that bound us is gone. She is not only the child of my father, whom she feared and perhaps hated, but of mine enemy, whom she loves,--so the case is clear. There is a wall between us, and I shall not attempt to surmount it. What a demnition mess it has turned out to be. I came prepared to find only the creature I have scorned and despised, and I discover that I have a sister so beautiful that, not knowing her at all, my eyes are dazzled and my heart goes to thumping like any silly school boy's. Aye, 'tis a very sorry pass. Were it not so demned upsetting, it would be amusing. Fate never played a wilder prank. What, ho, Zachariah! Where are we now? Whose farm is that upon the ridge?"

Zachariah, urging his horse forward, consulted his memory. Striker had mentioned the farms they were to pass en route, and the features by which they were to be identified. Far away on a rise in the sweep of prairie-land stood a lonely cabin, with a clump of trees behind it.

"Well, Marse Kenneth, ef hit ain' de Sherry place hit shorely am de Sheridan place, an' ef hit ain't nuther one o' dem hit mus' belong to Marse Dimmit er---"

"It is neither of these, you rascal. We are to the north of them, if I remember our directions rightly. Mr. Hollingsworth and the Kisers live hereabouts, according to Phineas Striker. A house with a clump of trees,--it is Mr. Huff's farm. Soon we will come to the Martin and Talbot places, and then the land that is mine, Zachariah. It lies for the most part on this side of the Crawfordsville road."

"Is yo' gwine to stop dere, Marse Kenneth?"

"No. I shall ride out from town some day soon to look the place over," said his master with a pardonable lordliness of mien, becoming to a landed gentleman. "Our affairs at present lie in the town, for there is much to be settled before I take charge. Striker tells me the man who is farming the place is an able, honest fellow. I shall not disturb him. From what he says, my property is more desirable in every way than the land that fell to my father's widow. Her farm lies off to our left, it seems, and reaches almost to the bottomlands of the river. We, Zachariah, are out here in the fertile prairie land. Our west line extends along the full length of her property. So, you see, the only thing that separates the two farms is an imaginary line no wider than your little finger, drawn by a surveyor and established by law. You will observe, my faithful fellow,--assuming that you are a faithful fellow,--that as we draw farther away from the woods along the river, the road becomes firmer, the soil less soggy, the--If you will cast your worthless eye about you, instead of at these mud-puddles, you will also observe the vast fields of stubble, the immense stretches of corn stalks and the signs of spring ploughing on all sides. Truly 'tis a wonderful country. See yon pasture, Zachariah, with the cows and calves,--a good score of them. And have you, by the way, noticed what a glorious day it is? This is life!"

"Yas, suh, Marse Kenneth, Ah done notice dat, an' Ah done notice somefin ailse. Ah done notice dem buzzards flyin' low over yan way. Dat means death, Marse Kenneth. Somefin sho' am daid over yan way."

"You are a melancholy croaker, Zachariah. You see naught but the buzzards, when all about you are the newly come birds of spring, the bluebird, the robin, and the thrush. Soon the meadow lark will be in the fields, and the young quail and the prairie-hen."

"Yas, suh," agreed Zachariah, brightening, "an' de yaller-hammer an' de blue-jay an' de--an' de rattlesnake," he concluded, with a roving, uneasy look along the roadside.

"Do not forget the saucy parroquets we saw yesterday as we came through the forest. You went so far in your excitement over those little green and golden birds, with their scarlet heads, that you declared they reminded you of the Garden of Eden. Look about you, Zachariah. Here is the Garden of Eden, right at your feet. Do you see those plum trees over yonder? Well, sir, old Adam and Eve used to sit under those very trees during the middle of the day, resting themselves in the shade. And right over there behind that big rock is where the serpent had his nest. He gave Eve a plum instead of an apple, because Eve was especially fond of plums and did not care at all for apples. She--"

"Scuse me, Marse Kenneth, but dem is hawthorn trees," said Zachariah, grinning.

"So they are, so they are. Now that I come to think of it, it was the red-haw that Eve fancied more than any other fruit in the garden."

"Yas, suh,--an' ole Adam he was powerful fond ob snappin'-turtles fo' breakfas'," said Zachariah, pointing to a tortoise creeping

slowly along the ditch. "An' lil Cain an' Abel,--my lan', how dem chillum used to gobble up de mud pies ole Mammy Eve used to make right out ob dish yere road we's ridin' on."

And so, in this sportive mood, master and man, warmed by the golden sun and cheered by the spring wind of an April morn, traversed this new-found realm of Cerus, forded the turbulent, swollen creek that later on ran through the heart of the Gwynne acres, and came at length to the main road leading into the town.

They passed log cabins and here and there pretentious frame houses standing back from the road in the shelter of oak and locust groves. Their passing was watched by curious women and children in dooryards and porches, while from the fields men waved greeting and farewell with the single sweep of a hat. On every barn door the pelts of foxes and raccoons were stretched and nailed.

Presently they drew near to a lane reaching off to the west, and apparently ending in a wooded knoll, a quarter of a mile away.

"There," said Kenneth, with a wave of his hand, "is where I shall some day erect a mansion, Zachariah, that will be the wonder and the envy of all the people in the country. For unless I am mistaken, that is the grove of oaks that Striker mentioned. Behold, Zachariah,--all that is mine. Four hundred acres of as fine farm-land as there is in all the world, and timber unparalleled. Yes, I am right. There is the house that Striker described, the place where my father lived he first came to the Wea. Egad, 'tis not a regal palace, is it, Zachariah? The most imposing thing about it is the chimney."

They were gazing at a cabin that squatted meekly over against the wall of oaks. Its roof was barely visible above the surrounding stockade, while the barn and styes and sheds were hidden entirely beyond the slope. It was, in truth, the most primitive and insignificant house they had seen that day.

"He was one of the first to build in this virgin waste," mused the young man aloud. "Rough and parlous were the days when he came to this land, Zachariah. There was no town of Lafayette, no neighbours save the rude, uncultured trappers. Now see how the times have changed. And, mark my guess, Zachariah, there will be still greater changes before we are laid away. There will be cities and--Ha! Look, Zachariah,--to the right of the grove. It is all as Striker said. There is the other house,--two miles or more to the westward. That is HER house. It is new, scarce two years old, built of lumber instead of logs, and quite spacious. There are, he tells me, two stories, containing four rooms, with a kitchen off the back, a smoke-house and a granary besides the barn,--yes, I see them all, just as he said we should see them after we rounded the grove."

He drew rein and gazed at the distant house, set on a ridge and backed by the seemingly endless forest that stretched off to the north and south. His face clouded, his jaw was set, and his eyes were hard.

"Yes, that would be Rachel Carter's house," he continued, harshly. "Her land and my land lying side by side, with only a fence between. Her grain and my grain growing out of the same soil. What an unholy trick for fate to play. Perhaps she is over there, even now. She

and Viola. It is not likely that they would have started for town at an earlier hour than this. And to think of the damnable situation I shall find in town. She will be my neighbour,--just as she was twenty years ago. We shall live within speaking distance of each other, we shall see each other perhaps a dozen times a day, and yet we may neither speak nor see. Egad, I wonder what I'll do if she even attempts to address me! Heigh-ho! 'Tis the mischief of Satan himself. Come, Zachariah,--you lazy rascal! As if you had not slept soundly all night long, you must now fall asleep sitting bolt upright in the saddle."

And so on they rode again, at times breaking into a smart canter where the road was solid, but for the most part proceeding with irksome slowness through the evil slough. Ahead lay the dense wood they were to traverse before coming to the town. Soon the broad, open prairie would be behind them, they would be plunged into the depths of a forest primeval, wending their way through five miles of solitude to the rim of the vale in which the town was situated. But the forest had no terrors for them. They were accustomed to the long silences, the sombre shades, the seemingly endless stretches of wildwood wherein no mortal dwelt. They had come from afar and they were young, and hardy, and fearless. Beyond that wide wall of trees lay journey's end; a new life awaited them on the other side of the barrier forest.

Suddenly Zachariah called his master's attention to a horseman who rode swiftly, even recklessly across the fields to their left and well ahead of them. They watched the rider with interest, struck by the furious pace he was holding, regardless of consequences either to himself or his steed.

"Mus' be somebody pow'ful sick, Marse Kenneth, fo' dat man to be ridin' so fas'," remarked Zachariah.

"Going for a doctor, I sup--Begad, he must have come from Rachel Carter's farm! There is no other house in sight over in that direction. I wonder if--" He did not complete the sentence, but frowned anxiously as he looked over his shoulder at the distant house.

Judging by the manner and the direction in which he was galloping, the rider would reach the main road a quarter of a mile ahead of them, about at the point where it entered the wood. Kenneth now made out an unfenced wagon-road through the field, evidently a short-cut from Rachel Carter's farm to the highway. He permitted himself a faint, sardonic smile. This, then, was to be her means of reaching the highway rather than to use the lane that ran past his house and no doubt crossed a section of his farm.

Sure enough the horseman turned into the road some distance ahead of them and rode straight for the forest. Then, for the first time, Gwynne observed a second rider, motionless at the roadside, and in the shadow of the towering, leafless trees that marked the portal through which they must enter the forest. The flying horseman slowed down as he neared this solitary figure, coming to a standstill when he reached his side. A moment later, both riders were cantering toward the wood, apparently in excited, earnest conversation. A few rods farther on, both turned to look over their shoulders at the slow-moving travellers. Then they stopped, wheeled about, and

stood still, awaiting their approach.

Kenneth experienced a poignant thrill of apprehension. What was he to expect: a friendly or a sanguinary encounter? He slipped his right hand into the saddle pocket and drew forth a pistol which he shoved hastily inside his waistcoat, covering the stock with the folds of his cape.

"Keep a little way behind me," he said to his servant, a trace of excitement in his voice.

"Yas, suh," said Zachariah, with more alacrity than valour, the whites of his eyes betraying something more than a readiness to obey this conservative order. It was a foregone conclusion that Zachariah would turn tail and flee the instant there was a sign of danger. "Slave hunters, Marse Kenneth, dat's what dey is," he announced with conviction. "Ah c'n smell 'em five miles away. Yas, suh,--dey's gwine a' make trouble fo' you, Marse Kenneth, sho' as you is--" But by this time he had dropped so far behind that his opinions were valueless.

When not more than fifty yards separated the two parties, one of the men, with a word and an imperative jerk of the head to his companion, advanced slowly to meet Kenneth. This man was the one who had waited for the other at the edge of the wood.

Gwynne beheld a tall, strongly built young man who rode his horse with the matchless grace of an Indian. Although his companion was roughly dressed and wore a coon-skin cap, this man was unmistakably a dandy. His high beaver hat observed a jaunty, rakish tilt; his brass-buttoned coat was the colour of wine and of the latest fashion, while his snug fitting pantaloons were the shade of the mouse. He wore no cumbersome cape, but fashioned about his neck and shoulders was a broad, sloping collar of mink. There were silver spurs on his stout riding boots, and the wide cuffs of his gauntlets were embroidered in silver.

He was a handsome fellow of the type described as dashing. Dark gleaming eyes peered out beneath thick black eyebrows which met in an unbroken line above his nose. Set in a face of unusual pallor, they were no doubt rendered superlatively brilliant by contrast. His skin was singularly white above the bluish, freshly shaven cheeks and chin. His hair was black and long and curling. The thin lips, set and unsmiling, were nevertheless drawn up slightly at one corner of the mouth in what appeared to be a permanent stamp of superiority and disdain,--or even contempt. Altogether, a most striking face, thought Gwynne,--and the man himself a person of importance. The very manner in which he jerked his head to his companion was proof enough of that.

"Good morning," said this lordly gentleman, bringing his horse to a standstill and raising his "gad" to the brim of his hat in a graceful salute.

Gwynne drew rein alongside. He had observed in a swift glance that the stranger was apparently unarmed, except for the short, leather gad.

"Good morning," he returned. "I am on the right road to Lafayette,

I take it." "You are," said the other. "From Crawfordsville way?"

"Yes. I left that place yesterday. I come from afar, however. This is a strange country to me."

"It is strange to most of us. Unless I am mistaken, sir, you are Mr. Kenneth Gwynne."

The other smiled. "My approach appears to be fairly well heralded. Were I a vain person I should feel highly complimented."

"Then you ARE Kenneth Gwynne?" said the stranger, rather curtly.

"Yes. That is my name."

"Permit me to make myself known to you. My name is Lapelle,--Barry Lapelle. While mine no doubt is unfamiliar to you, yours is well known to me. In fact, it is known to every one in these parts. You have long been expected. You will find the town anxiously awaiting your appearance." He smiled slightly. "If you could arrange to arrive after nightfall, I am sure you would find bonfires and perhaps a torchlight procession in your honour. As it is, I rather suspect our enterprising citizen, Mr. William Smith, will fire a salute when you appear in view."

"A salute?" exclaimed Kenneth blankly.

"A joyful habit of his, but rather neglected of late. It used to be his custom, I hear, to put a charge of powder in a stump and set it off whenever a steamboat drew up to the landing. That was his way of letting the farmers for miles around know that a fresh supply of goods had arrived and they were to hurry in and do the necessary trading at the store. He almost blew himself and his store to Hallelujah a year or two ago, and so he isn't quite so enterprising as he was. I am on my way to town, Mr. Gwynne, so if you do not mind, I shall give myself the pleasure of riding along with you for a short distance. I shall have to leave you soon, however, as I am due in the town by ten o'clock. You are too heavily laden, I see, to travel at top speed,--and that is the way I am obliged to ride, curse the luck. When I have set you straight at the branch of the roads a little way ahead, I shall use the spurs,--and see you later on."

"You are very kind. I will be pleased to have you jog along with me."

CHAPTER VI

BARRY LAPELLE

So this was Barry Lapelle. This was the wild rake who might yet become his brother-in-law, and whose sprightly enterprise had been frustrated by a woman who had, herself, stolen away in the dark of a far-off night.

As they rode slowly along, side by side, into the thick of the forest, Kenneth found himself studying the lover's face. He looked for the signs of the reckless dissipated life he was supposed to have led,--and found them not. Lapelle's eyes were bright and clear, his skin unblemished, his hand steady, his infrequent smile distinctly engaging. The slight, disdainful twist never left the corner of his mouth, however. It lurked there as a constant reminder to all the world that he, Barry Lapelle, was a devil of a fellow and was proud of it. While he was affable, there was no disguising the fact that he was also condescending. Unquestionably he was arrogant, domineering, even pompous at times, absolutely sure of himself.

He spoke with a slight drawl, in a mellow, agreeable voice, and with meticulous regard for the King's English,--an educated youth who had enjoyed advantages and associations uncommon to young men of the frontier. His untanned face testified to a life of ease and comfort, spent in sheltered places and not in the staining open, where sun and wind laid bronze upon the skin. A lordly fellow, decided Kenneth, and forthwith took a keen dislike for him. Nevertheless, it was not difficult to account for Viola's interest in him; nor, to a certain extent, the folly which led her to undertake the exploit of the night before. Barry Lapelle would have his way with women.

"You come from Kentucky, Mr. Gwynne," Lapelle was saying. "I am from Louisiana. My father came up to St. Louis a few years ago after establishing a line of steamboats between Terre Haute and the gulf. Two of our company's boats come as far north as Lafayette, so I spend considerable of my time there at this season of the year. You will find, sir, a number of Kentucky and Virginia people in this part of the state. Splendid stock, some of them. I understand you have spent several years in the East, at college and in pursuit of your study of the law."

"Principally in New York and Philadelphia," responded the other, subduing a smile. "My fame seems to have preceded me, Mr. Lapelle. Even in remote parts of the country I find my arrival anticipated. The farmer with whom I spent the night was thoroughly familiar with my affairs."

"You are an object of interest to every one in this section," said Lapelle, indifferently. "Where did you spend the night?"

"At the farm of a man named Striker,--Phineas Striker."

Lapelle started. His body appeared to stiffen in the saddle.

"Phineas Striker?" he exclaimed, with a swift, searching look into the speaker's eyes. Suddenly a flush mantled his cheek. "You were at Phineas Striker's last night?"

"Yes. We had lost our way and came to his place just before the storm," said Kenneth, watching his companion narrowly. Lapelle's face was a study. Doubt, indecision, even dismay, were expressed in swift succession.

"Then you must have met,--but no, it isn't likely," he said, in some confusion.

Kenneth hesitated a moment, enjoying the other's discomfiture. Then he said: "I met no one there except my sister, who also happened to be spending the night with the Strikers."

The colour faded from Lapelle's face, leaving it a sickly white. "Were you in any way responsible for--well, for her departure, Mr. Gwynne?" he demanded, his eyes flaming with swift, sudden anger.

"I was not aware of her departure until I arose this morning, Mr. Lapelle. Striker informed me that she went away before sunrise."

For a moment Lapelle glared at him suspiciously, and then gave vent to a short, contemptuous laugh.

"A thousand apologies," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I might have known you would not be consulted."

"I never laid eyes on my half-sister until last night," said Kenneth, determined to hold his temper. "It is not likely that she would have asked the advice of a total stranger, is it? Especially in so simple a matter as going home when she felt like it."

Lapelle shrugged his shoulders again. "I quite forgot that you are a lawyer, Mr. Gwynne," he said, drily. "Is it your purpose to hang out your shingle in the town of Lafayette?"

"My plans are indefinite."

"You could do worse, I assure you. The town is bound to grow. It will be an important town in a very few years." And so the subject uppermost in the minds of both was summarily dismissed.

They came at last to the point where a road branched off to the right. The stillness was intense. There was no sign of either human or animal life in the depths of this wide, primeval forest.

"Follow this road," said Lapelle, pointing straight ahead. "It will take you into the town. You will find the bridge over Durkee's Run somewhat shaky after the rain, but it is safe. I must leave you here. I shall no doubt see you at Johnson's Inn, in case you intend to stop there. Good morning, sir."

He lifted his hat and, touching the spirited mare with the gad, rode swiftly away. A few hundred feet ahead he overtook his mud-spattered friend and the two of them were soon lost to sight among the trees.

Kenneth fell into profound cogitation. Evidently Lapelle had waited at the edge of the forest for a report of some description from the farmhouse belonging to Rachel Carter. In all probability Viola was still at the farm with her mother, and either she had sent a message to her lover or had received one from him. Or, it was possible, Lapelle had despatched his man to the farmhouse to ascertain whether the girl was there, or had been hurried on into the town by her mother. In any case, the disgruntled lover was not content to acknowledge himself thwarted or even discouraged by the miscarriage of his plans of the night just ended. Kenneth found himself wondering if the incomprehensible Viola would prove herself to be equally determined. If so, they would triumph over opposition and be married, whether or no. He was conscious of an astounding,

almost unbelievable desire to stand with Rachel Carter in her hour of trouble.

His thoughts went back, as they had done more than once that morning, to Viola's artful account of his own father. He had felt sorry for her during and after the recital and now, with the truth revealed to him, he was even more concerned than before,--for he saw unhappiness ahead of her if she married this fellow Lapelle. He went even farther back and recalled his own caustic opinions of certain young rakes he had known in the East, wherein he had invariably asseverated that if he "had a sister he would sooner see her dead than married to that rascal." Well,--here he was with a sister,--and what was he to do about it?

Zachariah, observing the dark frown upon his master's face, and receiving no answer to a thrice repeated question, fell silent except for the almost inaudible hymn with which he invited consolation.

From afar in the thick wood now came the occasional report of a gun, proof that hunters were abroad. Many times Kenneth was roused from his reverie by the boom and whiz of pheasants, or the ring of a woodman's axe, or the lively scurrying of ground squirrels across his path. They forded three creeks before emerging upon a boggy, open space, covered with a mass of flattened, wind-broken reeds and swamp grass, in the centre of which lay a wide, still bayou partially fringed by willows with the first sickly signs of spring upon them in the shape of timid mole-ear leaves. Beyond the bridge over the canal-like stream which fed the bayou was a ridge of hills along whose base the road wound with tortuous indecision.

The first log cabin they had seen since entering the wood nestled among the scrub oaks of the hill hard by. The front wall of the hut was literally covered with the pegged-up skins of foxes, raccoons and what were described to Kenneth as the hides of "linxes," but which, in reality, were from the catamount. A tall, bewhiskered man, smoking a corncob pipe, leaned upon the rail fence, regarding the strangers with lazy interest.

Kenneth drew rein and inquired how far it was to Lafayette.

"'Bout two mile an' a half," replied the man. "My name is Stain, Isaac Stain. I reckon you must be Mister Kenneth Gwynne. I heerd you'd be along this way some time this mornin'."

"I suppose Mr. Lapelle informed you that I was coming along behind," said Kenneth, smiling.

"'Twuzn't Barry Lapelle as told me. I hain't seen him to-day."

"Didn't he pass here within the hour?"

"Nope," was the laconic response.

"I met him back along the road. He was coming this way."

"Must 'a' changed his mind."

"He probably took another road."

"There hain't no other road. I reckon he turned off into the wood an' 'lowed you to pass," said Mr. Stain slowly.

"But he was in great haste to reach town. He may have passed when you were not--"

"He didn't pass this place unless he was astraddle of an eagle er somethin' like that," declared the other, grinning. "An' even then he'd have to be flyin' purty doggone high ef I couldn't see him. Nope. I guess he took to the woods, Mr. Gwynne, for one reason er 'nother,--an' it must ha' been a mighty good reason, 'cause from what I know about Barry Lapelle he allus knows which way he's goin' to leap long before he leaps. He's sorter like a painter in that way."

Kenneth, knowing that he meant panther when he said painter, was properly impressed.

"It is very strange," he said, frowning. It was suddenly revealed to him that if Lapelle had tricked him it was because the messenger had brought word from Viola, at the farmhouse, and that the baffled lovers might even now be laying fresh plans to outwit the girl's mother. This fear was instantly dissipated by the next remark of Isaac Stain.

"Nope. It wuzn't him that told me about you, pardner. It wuz Violy Gwyn. She went by here with her ma, jes' as I wuz startin' off to look at my traps,--'long about seven o'clock, I reckon,--headed for town. She sez to me, sez she: 'Ike, there'll be a young man an' a darkey boy come ridin' this way some time this forenoon an' I want you to give him a message for me.' 'With pleasure,' sez I; 'anything you ask,' sez I. 'Well,' sez she, 'it's this. Fust you ask him ef his name is Kenneth Gwynne, an 'ef he sez it is, then you look an' see ef he is a tall feller an' very good-lookin', without a beard, an' wearin' a blue cape, an' when you see that he answers that description, why, you tell him to come an' see me as soon as he gits to town. Tell him it's very important.' 'All right,' sez I, 'I'll tell him.'"

"Where was her mother all this time?"

"Settin' right there in the buggy beside her, holdin' the reins. Where else would she be?"

"Did she say anything about my coming to see her daughter?"

"Nope. She never said anythin' 'cept 'Good mornin', Ike,' an' I sez 'Good mornin', Mrs. Gwyn.' She don't talk much, she don't. You see, she's in mournin' fer her husband. I guess he wuz your pa, wuzn't he?"

"Yes," said Kenneth briefly. "Was there anything else?"

"Nothin' to amount to anything. Violy sez, 'When did you get the linx skins, Ike?' an' I sez, 'Last Friday, Miss Violy,' an' she sez, 'Ain't they beautiful?' an' I sez--"

"She wants me to come to her house?" broke in Kenneth, his brow darkening.

"I reckon so."

"Well, I thank you, Mr. Stain. You are very kind to have waited so long for me to arrive. I--"

"Oh, I'd do a whole lot more'n that fer her," said the hunter quickly. "You see, I've knowed her ever since she wuz knee-high to a duck. She wuzn't more'n five or six when I brung her an' her folks up the Wabash in my perogue, all the way from Vincennes, an' it wuz me that took her down to St. Louis when she went off to school--her an' some friends of her pa's. Skinny, gangling sort of a young 'un she wuz, but let me tell you, as purty as a picter. I allus said she'd be the purtiest woman in all creation when she got her growth an' filled out, an', by hokey, I wuz right. Yes, sir, I used to run a boat on the river down below, but I give it up quite awhile ago an' come up here to live like a gentleman." He waved his hand proudly over his acre and a half estate. "I wuz talkin' to Bill Digby not long ago an' he sez this is a wonderful location for a town, right here at the fork of two o' the best fishin' cricks in the state. An' Bill he'd ort to know, 'cause he's laid out more towns than anybody I know of. The only trouble with Bill is that as soon as he lays 'em out somebody comes along an' offers him a hundred dollars er so fer 'em, er a team of hosses, er a good coon dog, an' he up an' sells. Now, with me, I--Got to be movin' along, have you? Well, good-bye, an' be a little keerful when you come to Durkee's Run bridge. It's kinder wobbly."

They were fording a creek some distance beyond Stain's cabin when Kenneth broke the silence that had followed the conversation with the hunter by exploding violently:

"Under no circumstances,--and that's all there is to it."

Zachariah, ever ready to seize an opportunity to raise his voice, either in expostulation or agreement, took this as a generous opening. He exclaimed with commendable feeling:

"Yas, suh! Undeh no suckemstances! No, suh!"

"It is not even to be thought of," declared his master, frowning heavily.

"No, suh! We can't even think about it, Marse Kenneth," said Zachariah, a trifle less decisively.

"So that is the end of it,--absolutely the end."

"Dat's what Ah say,--yas, suh, dat's what Ah say all along, suh!"

His master suddenly turned upon him. "I cannot go to that woman's house. It is unthinkable, Zachariah."

Zachariah began to see light. "Yo' all got to be mighty car'ful 'bout dese yere strange women, Marse Kenneth. Don' you forget what done happen in 'at ole Garden of Eden. Dis yere old Eve, she--"

"Still I am greatly relieved to know that she is in town and not out on the farm. It is a relief, isn't it, Zachariah?"

"Yas, suh,--hit sho'ly am."

They progressed slowly up a long hill and came to an extensive clearing, over which perhaps half a dozen farmhouses were scattered. Beyond this open space they entered a narrow strip of wood and, upon emerging, had their first glimpse of the Wabash River.

Stopping at the brow of the hill, they looked long and curiously over the valley into which they were about to descend. The panorama was magnificent. To the left flowed the swollen, turgid river, high among the willows and sycamores that guarded the low-lying bank. Far to the north it could be seen, a clayish, ugly monster, crawling down through the heart of the bowl-like depression. Mile after mile of sparsely wooded country lay revealed to the gaze of the travellers, sunken between densely covered ridges, one on either side of the river. Half a mile beyond where they stood feathery blue plumes of smoke rose out of the tree tops and, dispersing, floated away on the breeze,--and there lay the town of Lafayette, completely hidden from view.

The road wound down the hill and across a clumsily constructed bridge spanning the Run and thence along the flat shelf that rimmed the bottom-land, through a maze of wild plum and hazel brush squatting, as it were, at the feet of the towering forest giants that covered the hills.

Presently the travellers came upon widely separated cabins and gardens, and then, after passing through a lofty grove, found themselves entering the town itself. Signs of life and enterprise greeted them from all sides. Here, there and everywhere houses were in process of erection,--log-cabins, frame structures, and even an occasional brick dwelling-place. Turning into what appeared to be a well-travelled road,--(he afterwards found it to be Wabash Street), Kenneth came in the course of a few minutes to the centre of the town. Here was the little brick courthouse and the jail, standing in the middle of a square which still contained the stumps of many of the trees that originally had flourished there. At the southwest corner of the square was the tavern, a long story and a half log house,--and it was a welcome sight to Gwynne and his servant, both of whom were ravenously hungry by this time.

The former observed, with considerable satisfaction, that there were quite a number of substantial looking buildings about the square, mostly stores, all of them with hitching-racks along the edge of the dirt sidewalks. As far as the eye could reach, in every direction, the muddy streets were lined with trees.

Half a dozen men were standing in front of the tavern when the newcomers rode up. Kenneth dismounted and threw the reins to his servant. Landlord Johnson hurried out to greet him.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF THE LONG ROAD

"We've been expecting you, Mr. Gwynne," he said in his most genial manner. "Step right in. Dinner'll soon be ready, and I reckon you must be hungry. Take the hosses around to the stable, nigger, and put 'em up. I allowed you'd be delayed some by the bad roads, but I guess you must have got a late start this mornin' from Phin Striker's. Mrs.--er--ahem! I mean your step-mother sent word that you were on the way and to have accommodations ready for you. Say, I'd like to make you acquainted with--"

"My step-mother sent word to you?" demanded Kenneth, incredulously.

"She did. What would you expect her to do, long as she knew you were headed this way? I admit she isn't specially given to worryin' about other people's comforts, but, when you get right down to it, I guess she considers you a sort of connection of hers, spite of everything, and so she lays herself out a little. But I want to tell you one thing, Mr. Gwynne, you're not going to find her particularly cordial, as the sayin' is. She's about as stand-offish and unneighbourly as a Kickapoo Indian. But, as I was sayin', I'd like to make you acquainted with some of our leadin' citizens. This is Daniel Bugher, the recorder, and Doctor Davis, Matt Scudder, Tom Benbridge and John McCormick. It was moved and seconded, soon as you heaved in sight, that we repair at once to Sol Hamer's grocery for a little--"

"Excuse me," broke in Kenneth, laughing; "I have heard of that grocery, and I think it would be wise for me to become a little better acquainted with my surroundings before I begin trading there."

The landlord rubbed his chin and the other gentlemen laughed uproariously.

"Well," said the former, "I can see one thing mighty plain. You're going to be popular with my wife and all the other women in town. They'll point to you and say to practically nine-tenths of the married men in Lafayette: 'There's a man that don't drink, and goodness knows HE isn't a preacher!'"

"I am hardly what you would call a teetotaler, gentlemen," said Gwynne, still smiling.

"Wait till you get down with a spell of the Wabash shakes," said Mr. McCormick. "That'll make a new man of him, won't it, Doc?"

"Depends somewhat on his constitution and the way he was brought up," said the doctor, with a professional frown which slowly relaxed into an unprofessional smile.

"I was brought up by my grandmother," explained Kenneth, vastly amused.

"That settles it," groaned Mr. Johnson. "You're not long for this world. Before we go in I wish you'd take a look at the new courthouse. We're mighty proud of that building. There isn't a finer courthouse in the state of Indiana,--or maybe I'd better say there won't be if it's ever finished." "I noticed it as I came by," said the newcomer, dismissing the structure with a glance. "If you will conduct me to my room, Mr. Johnson, I--"

"Just a second," broke in the landlord, his gaze fixed on a horseman who had turned into the street some distance below. "Here comes Barry Lapelle,--down there by that clump of sugar trees. He's the most elegant fellow we've got in town, and you'll want to know him. Makes Lafayette his headquarters most of the--"

"I have met Mr. Lapelle," interrupted Kenneth. "This morning, out in the country."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Johnson. The citizens exchanged a general look of surprise.

"Thought you said he went down the river on yesterday's boat," said Scudder.

"That's just what he did," said Johnson, puzzled. "Packed some of his things and said he'd be gone a week or so. He must have got off at Attica,--but, no, he couldn't have got here this soon by road. By glory, I hope the boat didn't strike a snag or a rock, or run ashore somewhere. Looks kind of serious, boys."

"Couldn't he have landed almost anywhere in a skiff?" inquired Gwynne, his eyes on the approaching horseman.

"Certainly he could,--but why? He had business down at Covington, he said."

"He told me this morning he had very important business here. That is why he could not ride in with me," said Kenneth, affecting indifference. "By the way, is he riding his own horse?"

"Yes," said Benbridge. "That's his mare Fancy,--thoroughbred filly by King Philip out of Shawnee Belle. He sent her down to Joe Fell's to stud yesterday and--Say, that accounts for him being on her now. You made a good guess, Mr. Gwynne. He must have landed at La Grange, rowed across the river, and hoofed it up to Fell's farm. But what do you suppose made him change his mind so suddenly?"

"He'll probably tell you to go to thunder if you ask him," said the landlord.

"I'm not going to ask him anything," retorted Benbridge.

"He's working tooth and nail against the Wabash and Erie Canal that's projected to run from Lake Erie to the mouth of the Tippecanoe, Mr. Gwynne," said one of the citizens. "But it's coming through in spite of him and all the rest of the river hogs."

"I see," said the young man, a grim smile playing about his lips.

He knew that the mare Fancy had been in waiting for her master when he clambered ashore on the river bank opposite La Grange, and he also suspected that the little steamboat had remained tied up at the landing all night long and well into the morning, expecting two passengers who failed to come aboard. He could not suppress a chuckle of satisfaction.

Lapelle rode up at this instant and, throwing the bridle rein to

a boy who had come running up from the stable, dismounted quickly. He came straight to Gwynne, smiling cordially.

"I see you beat me in. After we parted I decided to cut through the woods to have a look at Jack Moxley's keel boat, stuck in the mud on this side of the river. You'd think the blame fool would have sense enough to keep well out in mid stream at a time like this. Happy to have you here with us, and I hope you will like us well enough to stay."

"Thank you. I shall like you all better after I have had something to eat," said Kenneth.

"And drink," added Lapelle. It was then that Kenneth noticed that his eyes were slightly blurred and his voice a trifle thick. He had been drinking.

"What turned you back, Barry?" inquired McCormick. "Thought you were to be gone a week or--"

"Changed my mind," said Lapelle curtly, and then, apparently on second thought, added: "I got off the boat at La Grange and crossed over to spend the night at Martin Hawk's, the man you saw with me this morning, Mr. Gwynne. He is a hunter down Middleton way. I fish and hunt with him a good deal. Well, I reckon I'd better go in and get out of these muddy boots and pants."

Without another word, he strode up the steps, across the porch and into the tavern, his head high, his gait noticeably unsteady.

"Martin Hawk!" growled the landlord. "The orneriest cuss this side of hell. Plain no-good scalawag. Barry'll find it out some day, and then maybe he'll wish he had paid some attention to what I've been tellin' him."

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit if Mart knows a whole lot more about what became of some mighty good yearlin' colts that used to belong to honest men down on the Wea," said one of the group, darkly.

"I wouldn't trust Mart Hawk as far as I could throw a thousand pound rock," observed Mr. Johnson, compressing his lips. "Well, come on in, Mr. Gwynne, and slick up a bit. The dinner bell will be ringin' in a few minutes, and I want you to meet the cook before you risk eatin' any of her victuals. My wife's the cook, so you needn't look scared. Governor Noble almost died of over-feedin' the last time he was here,--but that wasn't her fault. And my daughters, big and little, seem anxious to get acquainted with the celebrated Kenneth Gwynne. People have been talkin' so much about you for the last six months that nearly everybody calls you by your first name, and Jim Crouch's wife is so taken with it that she has made up her mind to call her baby Kenneth,--that is, providin' nature does the right thing. Next week some time, ain't it, Doc?"

"That's what most everybody in town says, Bob," replied the doctor solemnly, "so I guess it must be true."

"We begin counting the inhabitants of the town as far as a month ahead sometimes," explained Mr. McCormick drily. "I don't know as we've been out of the way more than a day or a day-and-a-half on

any baby that's been born here in the last two years. Hope to see you in my store down there, Mr. Gwynne--any time you're passing that way. You can't miss it. It's just across the street from that white frame building with the green stripes running criss-cross on the front door,--Joe Hanna's store."

"Robert Gwyn's son is always welcome at my store and my home," said another cordially. "We didn't know till last fall that he had a son, and--well, I hope you don't mind my saying we couldn't believe it at first."

"You spell the name different from the way he spelled it," answered Bugher, the recorder. "I noticed it in your letters, and it struck me as queer."

"My father appears to have reverted to the original way of spelling the name," said Kenneth, from the upper step. "My forebears were Welsh, you see. The manner of spelling it was changed when they came to America, over a hundred years ago."

His bedroom was in the small wing off the dining-room. Its one window looked out upon the courthouse, the view being somewhat restricted by the presence of a pair of low-branched oak trees in the side-yard, almost within arm's length of the wall,--they were so close, in fact, that their limbs stretched out over the rough shingle roof, producing in the wind an everlasting sound of scratching and scraping. There was a huge four-poster feather bed of mountainous proportions, leaving the occupant scant space in which to move about the room.

"Last people to occupy this room," said Mr. Johnson, standing in the doorway, "were George Ripley and Edna Cole, three weeks ago last night. They came in from the Grand Prairie and only stayed the one night. Had to get back to the farm next day on account of it bein' wash-day. I guess I forgot to say they were on their weddin'-trip. Generally speaking, it takes about three years for people to get over callin' a girl by her maiden name,--so you needn't think there was anything wrong about George and Edna stayin' here. I wish you could have been here to drive out to the infare at her pa's house two nights after the weddin'. It was the biggest ever held on that side of the river,--and as for the shiverree,--my Lord, it WAS something to talk about. Tin cans, cowbells, shot-guns, tenor-drums,--but I'm keeping you, Mr. Gwynne. You'll find water in that jug over there, and a towel by the lookin' glass. Come out when you're ready."

When Kenneth returned to the dining-room, he found Johnson waiting there with his wife and two of his comely daughters. They were presented to the new guest with due informality, and then the landlord went out upon the front porch to ring the dinner-bell.

"I guess you won't be stayin' here long, Mr. Gwynne," said Mrs. Johnson. "Your mother,--I should say, your step-mother,--has got your house all ready for you to move right in. Job Turner moved out last week, and she took some of the furniture and things over so's you could be sort of at home right away." Observing his start, and the sudden tightening of his lips, she went on complacently: "'Twasn't much trouble for her. Your house isn't more than fifty yards from hers,--just across lots, you might say. She--"

Kenneth, forgetting himself in his agitation, interrupted her with the startling question:

"Where does Rachel Carter live?"

"Rachel who?"

He collected his wits, stammering:

"I believe that was her name before she--before she married my father."

"Oh, I see. Her name is Rachel, of course. Well, her house is up Columbia street,--that's the one on the other side of the square,--almost to the hill where Isaac Edwards has his brickyard, just this side of the swamp."

After dinner, which was eaten at a long table in company with eight or ten "customers," to whom he was introduced by the genial host, he repaired to the office of Recorder Bugher.

"Everything's in good shape," announced Bugher. "There ain't a claim against the property, now that Mrs. Gwyn has given up her idea of contesting the will. The property is in your name now, Mr. Gwynne,--and that reminds me that your father, in his will, spells your name with a double n and an e, while he spells hers with only one n. He took into consideration the fact that you spelled your name in the new-fangled way, as you say he used to spell it in Kentucky. And that also accounts for his signing the will 'Robert Gwyn, formerly known as Robert Gwynne.' It's legal, all right, properly witnessed and attested by two reliable men of this county."

"I have seen a copy of the will."

"Another queer thing about it is that he bequeathed certain property to you as 'my son, Kenneth Gwynne,'--while he fails to mention his daughter Viola at all, except to say that he bequeaths so-and-so to 'Rachel Gwyn, to give, bequeath and devise as she sees fit.' Of course, Viola, by law, is entitled to a share of the estate and it should have been so designated. Judge Wylie says she can contest the will if she so desires, on the ground that she is entitled to as much as you, Mr. Gwynne. But she has decided to let it stand as it is, and I guess she's sensible. All that her mother now has will go to her when said Rachel dies, and as it will be a full half of the estate instead of what might have been only a third, I guess she's had pretty good advice from some one."

"The fact that my half-sister was not mentioned in the will naturally led me to conclude that no such person existed. I did not know till this morning, Mr. Bugher, that I had a half-sister."

"Well," began the recorder, pursing his lips, "for that matter she didn't know she had a half-brother till the will was read, so she was almost as ignorant as you."

"It's all very strange,--exceedingly strange."

"When did your own mother die, if it's a fair question?"

"In the year 1812. My father was away when she died."

"Off to the war, I suppose."

"Yes," said the young man steadily. "Off to the war," he lied, still staring out of the window. "I was left with my grandparents when he went off to make his fortune in this new country. It was not until I was fairly well grown that we heard that he was married to a woman named Rachel Carter."

"Well, I guess it's something you don't like to talk about," said Mr. Bugher, and turned his attention to the records they were consulting.

Later the young man called at the office of Mr. Cornell, the lawyer who had charge of his affairs. He had come to Lafayette prepared to denounce Rachel Carter, to drive her in shame and disgrace from the town, if necessary. Now he found himself confronted by a condition that distressed and perplexed him; his bitter resolve was rudely shaken and he was in a dire state of uncertainty. He was faced by a most unexpected and staggering situation.

To denounce Rachel Carter would be to deliberately strike a cruel, devastating blow at the happiness and peace of an innocent person,--Viola Gwyn, his own half-sister. A word from him, and that lovely girl, serene in her beliefs, would be crushed for life. The whole scheme of life had been changed for him in the twinkling of an eye, as it were. He could not wreak vengeance upon Rachel Carter without destroying Viola Gwyn,--and the mere thought of that caused him to turn cold with repugnance. How could he publish Rachel Carter's infamy to the world with that innocent girl standing beside her to receive and sustain the worst of the shock? Impossible! Viola must be spared,--and so with her, Rachel Carter!

Then there was the strange message he had received from Viola, through the hunter, Stain. What was back of the earnest request for him to come and see her at her mother's house? Was she in trouble? Was she in need of his help? Was she depending upon him, her blood relation, for counsel in an hour of duress? He was sadly beset by conflicting emotions.

In the course of his interview with the lawyer, from whom he had decided to withhold much that he had meant to divulge, he took occasion to inquire into the present attitude of Rachel Carter,--or Gwyn, as he reluctantly spoke of her,--toward him, an open and admitted antagonist.

"Well," said Cornell, shaking his head, "I don't believe you will catch her asking any favours of you. She has laid down her arms, so to speak, but that doesn't mean she intends to be friendly. As a matter of fact, she simply accepts the situation,--with very bad grace, of course,--but she'll never be able to alter her nature or her feelings. She considers herself cheated, and that's all there is to it. I doubt very much whether she will even speak to you, Mr. Gwynne. She is a strange woman, and a hard one to understand. She fought desperately against your coming here at all. One of her propositions was that she should be allowed to buy your share of the estate, if such a transaction could be arranged, you will

remember. You declined to consider it. This was after she withdrew her proposed contest of the will. Then she got certain Crawfordsville men interested in the purchase of your land, and they made you a bona fide offer,--I think they offered more than the property is worth, by the way. I think, back of everything, she could not bear the thought of you, the son of a former wife, living next door to her. Jealousy, I suppose,--but not unnatural, after all, in a second wife, is it? They're usually pretty cantankerous when it comes to the first wife's children. As regards her present attitude, I think she'll let you alone if you let her alone."

"My sister has asked me to come up to the house to see her this afternoon," said Kenneth.

The lawyer looked surprised. "Is that so? Well," with a puzzled frown, "I don't quite understand how she came to do that. I was under the impression that she felt about as bitterly toward you as her mother does. In fact, she has said some rather nasty things about you. Boasted to more than one of her friends that she would slap your face if you ever tried to speak to her."

Kenneth smiled, a reminiscent light in his eyes. "She has done so, figuratively speaking, Mr. Cornell. I am confident she hates me,--but if that's the case, why should she leave word for me to come and see her?"

"Experience has taught me that women have a very definite object in view when they let on as if they had changed their minds," was the judicial opinion of Mr. Cornell. "Maybe they don't realize it, but they are as wily as the devil when they think, and you think, and everybody else thinks, they're behaving like an angel. It's not for me to say whether you should go to see her or not, but I believe I would if I were in your place. Maybe she has made up her mind to be friendly, on the surface at least, and as you are bound to meet each other at people's houses, parties, and all such, perhaps it would be better to bury the hatchet. I think you will be quite safe in going up there to-day, so far as Mrs. Gwyn is concerned. She will not appear on the scene, I am confident. You will not come in contact with her. You say that she has put some of her furniture at your disposal, but she doubtless did so on the advice of her lawyer. You must not forget that your father, in his will, left half of his personal effects to you. She is just smart enough to select in advance the part that she is willing for you to have, feeling that you will not be captious about it."

"I have no desire to exact anything of--"

"Quite so, quite so," broke in the lawyer. "But she could not be expected to know that. She is a long-headed woman, Mr. Gwynne. I suspect she is considerably worried about Viola. Your half-sister is being rather assiduously courted by a young man named Lapelle. Mrs. Gwyn does not approve of him. She is strait-laced and--er--puritanical."

"Puritanical, eh?" said Kenneth, with a short laugh that Mr. Cornell totally misinterpreted.

"Barry isn't exactly what you would call sanctimonious," admitted the lawyer, with a dry smile. "The worst of it is, I'm afraid Viola is in love with him."

His client was silent for a moment, reflecting. Then he arose abruptly and announced:

"I agree with you, Mr. Cornell. I will go up to see her this afternoon. I bear her no grudge,--and after all, she is my sister. Good day, sir. I shall give myself the pleasure of calling in to see you to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII

RACHEL CARTER

Kenneth strolled about the town for awhile before returning to the tavern to shave, change his boots, and "smarten" himself up a bit in preparation for the ceremonious call he had dreaded to make. On all sides he encountered the friendliest interest and civility from the townspeople. The news of his arrival had spread over the place with incredible swiftness. Scores of absolute strangers turned to him and tendered to him the welcome to be found in a broad and friendly smile.

Shortly after three o'clock he set forth upon his new adventure. Assailed by a strange and unaccustomed timidity,--he would have called it bashfulness had Viola been other than his sister--he approached the young lady's home by the longest and most round-about way, a course which caused him to make the complete circuit of the three-acre pond situated a short distance above the public square--a shallow body of water dignified during the wet season of the year by the high-sounding title of "Lake Stansbury," but spoken of scornfully as the "slough" after the summer's sun had reduced its surface to a few scattered wallows, foul and green with scum. It was now full of water and presented quite an imposing appearance to the new citizen as he skirted its brush-covered banks; in his ignorance he was counting the probability of one day building a handsome home on the edge of this tiny lake.

A man working in a garden pointed out to him Mrs. Gwyn's house half-hidden among the trees at the foot of a small slope.

"That other house, a couple of hundred foot further on,--you can just see it from here,--well, that belonged to Robert Gwyn. I understand his long-lost son is comin' to live in it one of these days. They say this boy when he was a baby was stolen by the Injins and never heard of ag'in until a few months ago. Lived with the Injins right up to the time he was found and couldn't speak a word of English. I have heard that he--what are ye laughin' at, mister?"

"I was laughing at the thought of how surprised you are going to be some day, my friend. Thank you. The house with the green window blinds, you say?"

He proceeded first to the house that was to be his home. It was a good stone's throw from the pretentious two-story frame structure in which Rachel Carter and her daughter lived, but nearer the centre

of the town when approached by a more direct route than he had followed. This smaller house, an insignificant, weather-beaten story and a half frame, snuggling among the underbrush, was where his father had lived when he first came to Lafayette. Later on he had erected the larger house and moved into it with his family, renting the older place to a man named Turner.

It was faced by a crudely constructed picket fence, once white but now mottled with scales of dirty sun-blistered paint, and inside the fence rank weeds, burdocks and wild grass flourished without hindrance. He strode up the narrow path to the low front door. Finding it unlocked, he opened it and stepped into the low, roughly plastered sitting-room. The window blinds were open, permitting light and air to enter, and while the room was comparatively bare, there was ample evidence that it had been made ready for occupancy by a hand which, though niggardly, was well trained in the art of making a little go a long way. The bedroom and the kitchen were in order. There were rag carpets on the floors, and the place was immaculately clean. A narrow, enclosed stairway ran from the end of the sitting-room to the attic, where he discovered a bed for his servant. Out at the back was the stable and a wagonshed. These he did not inspect. A high rail fence stretched between the two yards.

As he walked up the path to the front door of the new house, he was wondering how Viola Gwyn would look in her garb of black,—the hated black she had cast aside for one night only. He was oppressed by a dull, cold fear, assuaged to some extent by the thrill of excitement which attended the adventure. What was he to do or say if the door was opened by Rachel Carter? His jaw was set, the palms of his hands were moist, and there was a strange, tight feeling about his chest, as if his lungs were full and could not be emptied. After a moment's hesitation, he rapped firmly on the door with his bare knuckles.

The door was opened by a young coloured woman who wore a blue sunbonnet and carried a red shawl over her arm.

"Is Miss Viola at home?" he inquired.

"Is dis Mistah Gwynne, suh?"

"Yes."

"Come right in, suh, an' set down."

He entered a small box of a hallway, opening upon a steep set of stairs.

"Right in heah, suh," said the girl, throwing open a door at his left.

As he walked into this room, he heard the servant shuffling up the staircase. He deposited his hat and gloves on a small marble-top table in the centre of the room and then sent a swift look of investigation about him. Logs were smouldering in the deep, wide fireplace at the far end of the room, giving out little spurts of flame occasionally from their charred, ash-grey skeletons. The floor was covered with a bright, new rag carpet, and there was a horse-hair sofa in the corner, and two or three stiff, round-backed

little chairs, the seats also covered with black horse-hair. A thick, gilt-decorated Holy Bible lay in the centre of the marble-top table, shamed now by contact with the crown of his unsaintly hat. On the mantel stood a large, flat mahogany clock with floral decorations and a broad, white face with vivid black numerals and long black hands. The walls were covered with a gaudy but expensive paper, in which huge, indescribable red flowers mingled regularly with glaring green leaves. Two "mottoes," worked in red and blue worsted and framed with narrow cross-pieces of oak, hung suspended in the corners beside the fireplace. One of them read "God Bless Our Home," the other a sombre line done in black: "Faith, Hope and Charity."

Three black oval oak frames, laden with stiff leaves that glistened under a coat of varnish, contained faded, unlovely portraits,--one

of a bewhiskered man wearing a tall beaver hat and a stiff black stock: another of a sloping-shouldered woman with a bonnet, from which a face, vague and indistinct, sought vainly to emerge. The third contained a mass of dry, brown leaves, some wisps of straw, and a few colourless pressed blossoms. On a table in front of one of the two windows stood a spindling Dutch lamp of white and delft blue, with a long, narrow chimney. There were two candlesticks on the mantel.

All these features of the room he took in while he stood beside the centre table, awaiting the entrance of Viola Gwyn. He heard a door open softly and close upstairs, and then some one descending the steps; a few words spoken in the subdued voice of a woman and the less gentle response of the darky servant, who mumbled "Yas'm," and an instant later went out by the front door. Through the window he saw her go down the walk, the red shawl drawn tightly about her shoulders.

He smiled. The clever Viola getting rid of the servant so that she could be alone with him, he thought, as he turned toward the door.

A tall woman in black appeared in the doorway, paused there for a second or two, and then advanced slowly into the room. He felt the blood rush to his head, almost blinding him. His hand went out for the support of the table, his body stiffened and suddenly turned cold. The smile with which he intended to greet Viola froze on his lips.

"God Al--" started to ooze from his stiff lips, but the words broke off sharply as the woman stopped a few steps away and regarded him steadily, silently, unsmilingly. He stood there like a statue staring into the dark, brilliant eyes, sunken deep under the straight black eyebrows. Even in the uncertain light from the curtained windows he could see that her face was absolutely colourless,--the pallor of death seemed to have been laid upon it. Swiftly she lifted a hand to her throat, her eyes closed for a second and then flew wide open again, now filled with an expression of utter bewilderment.

"Is it--is it you, Robert? Is it really you, or am I--" she murmured, scarcely above a whisper. Once more she closed her eyes, tightly; as if to shut out the vision of a ghost,--an unreal thing that would not be there when she looked again.

The sound of her voice released him from the brief spell of stupefaction.

"I know you. I remember you. You are Rachel Carter," he said hoarsely.

She was staring at him as if fascinated. Her lips moved, but no sound issued from them.

He hesitated for an instant and then turned to pick up his hat and gloves. "I came to see your daughter, madame,--as well you know. Permit me to take my departure."

"You are so like your--" she began with an effort, her voice deep and low with emotion. "So like him I--I was frightened. I thought he had--" She broke off abruptly, lowered her head in an attempt to hide from him the trembling lips and chin, and to regain, if possible, the composure that had been so desperately shaken. "Wait!" she cried, stridently. "Wait! Do not go away. Give me time to--to--"

"There is no need for us to prolong--" he began in a harsh voice.

"I will not keep you long," she interrupted, every trace of emotion vanishing like a shadow that has passed. She was facing him now, her head erect, her voice steady. Her dark, cavernous eyes were upon him; he experienced an odd, indescribable sensation,--as of shrinking,--and without being fully aware of what he was doing, replaced his hat upon the table, an act which signified involuntary surrender on his part.

"Where is Viola?" he demanded sternly. "She left word for me to come here. Where is she?"

"She is not here," said the woman.

He started. "You don't mean she has--has gone away with--"

"No. She has gone over to spend the afternoon with Effie Wardlow. I will be frank with you. This is not the time for misunderstanding. She asked Isaac Stain to give you that message at my request,--or command, if you want the truth. I sent her away because what I have to say to you must be said in private. There is no one in the house besides ourselves. Will you do me the favour to be seated? Very well; we will stand."

She turned away to close the hall door. Then she walked to one of the windows and, drawing the curtain aside, swept the yard and adjacent roadway with a long, searching look.

The strong light fell full upon her face; its warmth seemed suddenly to paint the glow of life upon her pallid skin. He gazed at her intently. Out of the past there came to him with startling vividness the face of the Rachel Carter he had known. Despite the fact that she was now an old woman,--he knew that she must be at least forty-six or -seven,--she was still remarkably handsome. She was very tall, deep-chested, and as straight as an arrow. Her smoothly brushed hair was as black as the raven's wing. Time and the toil of long, hard hours had brought deep furrows to her cheeks, like lines chiselled in a face of marble, but they had not broken

the magnificent body of the Rachel Carter who used to toss him joyously into the air with her strong young arms and sure hands. But there was left no sign of the broad, rollicking smile that always attended those gay rompings. Her lips were firm-set, straight and unyielding,--a hard mouth flanked by what seemed to be absolutely immovable lines. Her chin was square; her nose firm and noticeably "hawk-like" in shape; her eyes clear, brilliant and keenly penetrating.

She faced him, standing with her back to the light.

"Sooner or later we would have had to meet," she said. "It is best for both of us to have it over with at the very start."

"I suppose you are right," said he stiffly. "You know how I feel toward you, Rachel Carter. There is nothing either of us can say that will make the situation easier or harder, for that matter."

"Yes,--I understand," said she calmly. "You hate me. You have been brought up to hate me. I do not question the verdict of those who condemned me, but you may as well understand at once that I do not regret what I did twenty years ago. I have not repented. I shall never repent. We need not discuss that side of the question any farther. You know my history, Kenneth Gwynne. You are the only person in this part of the world who does know it. When the controversy first came up over the settlement of your father's estate, I feared that you would reveal the story of my--"

He held up his hand, interrupting her. "Permit me to observe, Rachel Carter, that for many months after being notified of my father's death and the fact that he had left me a portion of his estate, I was without positive proof as to the identity of the woman mentioned in the correspondence as his widow. It was not until a copy of the will was forwarded to me that I was sure. By that time I had made up my mind to keep my own counsel. I can say to you now, Rachel Carter, that I do not intend to rake up that ugly story. I do not make war on helpless women."

Her lips writhed slightly, and her eyes narrowed as if with pain. It was but a fleeting exposition of vulnerability, however, for in another instant she had recovered.

"You could not have struck harder than that if you had been warring against a strong man," she said gently.

A hot flush stained his cheek. "It is the way I feel, nevertheless, Rachel Carter," he said deliberately.

"You can think of me only as Rachel Carter," she said. "My name is Rachel Gwyn. Still it doesn't matter. I am past the point where I can be hurt. You may tell the story if it suits your purpose. I shall deny nothing. It may even give you some satisfaction to see me wrap my soiled robes about me and steal away, leaving the field to you. I can sell my lands to-morrow and disappear. It will matter little whether I am forgotten or not. The world is large and I am not without fortitude. I wanted you to come here to-day, to see me alone, to hear what I have to say,--not about myself,--but about another. I am a woman of quick decisions. When I learned early this morning that you would be in Lafayette to-day, I made up my mind to take a certain step,--and I have not changed it."

"If you are referring to your daughter--to my half-sister, if you will--I have only to remind you that my mind is already made up. You need have no fear that I shall do or say anything to hurt that innocent girl. I am assuming, of course, that she knows nothing of--well, of what happened back there in Kentucky."

"She knows nothing," said the woman, in a voice strangely low and tense. "If she ever knew, she has forgotten."

"Forgotten?" he cried. "Good God, how could she have forgotten a thing so--"

She moved a step nearer, her burning eyes fixed on his.

"You remember Rachel Carter well enough. Have you no recollection of the little girl you used to play with? Minda? The babe who could scarcely toddle when you--"

"Of course I remember her," he cried impatiently. "I remember everything. You took her away with you and--why did you not leave her behind as my father left me? Why could you not have been as fair to your child as he was to his?"

She was silent for a moment, pondering her answer. "I do not suppose it has ever occurred to you that I might have loved my child too deeply to abandon her," she said, a strange softness in her voice.

"My father loved me," he cried out, "and yet he left me behind."

"He loved you,--yes,--but he would not take you. He left you with some one who also loved you. Don't ever forget that, Kenneth Gwynne. I would not go without Minda. No more would your mother have gone without you. Stop! I did not mean to offend. So you DO remember little Minda?"

"Yes, I remember her. But she is dead. Why do you mention her--"

"Minda is not dead," said she slowly.

"Not--why, she was drowned in the--"

"No. Minda is alive. You saw her last night,--at Phineas Striker's house."

He started violently. "The girl I saw last night was--Minda?" he cried. "Why, Striker told me she was--"

"I know,--I know," she interrupted impatiently. "Striker told you what he believed to be true. He told you she was Robert Gwyn's daughter and your half-sister. But I tell you now that she is Minda Carter. There is not a drop of Gwyn blood in her body."

"Then, she is not my half-sister?" he exclaimed, utterly dazed, but aware of the exquisite sensation of relief that was taking hold of him.

"She is no blood relation of yours."

"But she is,--yes, now I understand,--she is my step-sister," he said, with a swift fall of spirits.

"I suppose that is what you might call her," said Rachel Gwyn, indifferently. "I have not given it much thought."

"Does she know that she is not my father's daughter?"

"No. She believes herself to be his own flesh and blood,--his own daughter," said she with the deliberateness of one weighing her words, that they might fall with full force upon her listener.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he demanded abruptly. "What is your object? If she does not know the truth, why should I? Good God, woman, you--you do not expect ME to tell her, do you? Was that your purpose in getting me here? You want me to tell her that--"

"No!" she cried out sharply. "I do not want you or any one else to do that. Listen to me. I sha'n't beat about the bush,--I will not waste words. So far as Viola and the world are concerned, she is Robert Gwyn's daughter. That is clear to you, is it not? She was less than two years old when we came away,--too young to remember anything. We were in the wilderness for two or three years, and she saw but one or two small children, so that it was a very simple matter to deceive her about her age. She is nearly twenty-two now, although she believes she is but nineteen. She does not remember any other father than Robert Gwyn. She has no recollection of her own father, nor does she remember you. She--"

"Last night she described her father to me," he interrupted. "Her supposed father, I mean. She made it quite plain that he did not love her as a father should love his own child."

"It was not that," she said. "He was afraid of her,--mortally afraid of her. He lived in dread of the day when she would learn the truth and turn upon him. He always meant to tell her himself, and yet he could not find the courage. Toward the end he could not bear to have her near him. It would not be honest in me to say that he loved her. I do not believe he would have loved a child if one had come to him and me,--no child of mine could take the place you had in his heart." She spoke with calm bitterness. "You say she told you about him last night. I am not surprised that she should have spoken of him as she did. It was not possible for her to love him as a father. Nature took good care of that. There was a barrier between them. She was not his child. The tie of blood was lacking. Nature cannot be deceived. She has never told me what her true feelings toward him were, but I have sensed them. I could understand. I think she is and always has been bewildered. It is possible that away back in her brain there is something too tiny to ever become a thought, and yet it binds her to a man she does not even remember. But we are wasting time. You are wondering why I have told you the truth about Viola. The secret was safe, so why should I reveal it to you,--my enemy,--isn't that what you are thinking?"

"Yes. I don't quite grasp your motive in telling me, especially as I am still to look upon Viola as my half-sister. I have already stated that under no circumstances will I hurt her by raking up that old, infamous story. I find myself in a most difficult position. She believes herself to be my sister while I know that she is not.

It must strike even you, Rachel Carter, as the ghastliest joke that fate ever played on a man,--or a woman, either."

"I have told you the truth, because I am as certain as I am that I stand here now that you would have found it all out some day,--some day soon, perhaps. In the first place your father did not mention her in his will. That alone is enough to cause you to wonder. You are not the only one who is puzzled by his failure to provide for her as well as for you. Before long you would have begun to doubt, then to speculate, and finally you would have made it your business to find out why she was ignored. In time you could have unearthed the truth. The truth will always out, as the saying goes. I preferred to tell it to you at once. You understand I cannot exact any promises from you. You will do as you see fit in the matter. There is one thing that you must realize, however. Viola has not robbed you of anything--not even a father's love. She does not profit by his death. He did not leave her a farthing, not even a spadeful of land. I am entitled to my share by law. The law would have given it to me if he had left no will. I am safe. That is clear to you, of course. I earned my share,--I worked as hard as he did to build up a fortune. When I die my lands and my money will go to my daughter. You need not hope to have any part of them. I do not ask you to keep silent on my account. I only ask you to spare her. If I have sinned,--and in the sight of man, I suppose I have,--I alone should be punished. But she has not sinned. I have thought it all out carefully. I have lain awake till all hours of the night, debating what was the best thing to do. To tell you or not to tell you, that was the question I had to settle. This morning I decided and this is the result. You know everything. There is no need for you to speculate. There is nothing for you to unravel. You know who Viola is, you know why she was left out of your father's will. The point is this, when all is said,--she must never know. She must always,--do you hear me?--she must always look upon you as her brother. She must never know the truth about me. I put her happiness, her pride, her faith, in your hands, Kenneth Gwynne."

He had listened with rigid attention, marvelling at the calm, dispassionate, unflinching manner in which she stated her case and Viola's,--indeed, she had stated his own case for him. Apparently she had not even speculated on the outcome of her revelations; she was sure of her ground before she took the first step.

"There is no other course open to me," he said, taking up his hat. He was very pale. "There is nothing more to say,--now or hereafter. We have had, I trust, our last conversation. I hate you. I could wish you all the unhappiness that life can give, but I am not such a beast as to tell your daughter what kind of a woman you are. So there's the end. Good-day, Rachel Carter."

He turned away, his hand was on the door-latch, before she spoke again.

"There is something more," she said, without moving from the spot where she had stood throughout the recital. The same calm, cold voice,--the same compelling manner. "It was my pleading, back in those other days, that finally persuaded Robert Gwyn to let me bring Minda up as his daughter. He was bitterly opposed to it at first. He never quite reconciled himself to the deception. He did not consider it being honest with her. He was as firm as a rock

on one point, however. He would bring her up as his daughter, but he would not give her his name. It was after he agreed to my plan that he changed the spelling of his own name. She was not to have his name,--the name he had given his own child. That was his real reason for changing his name, and not, as you may suspect, to avoid being traced to this strange land."

"A belated attempt to be fair to me, I suppose," he said, ironically.

"As you like," she said, without resentment. "In the beginning, as I have told you, he believed it to be his duty to tell her the truth about herself. He was sincere in that. But he did not have the heart to tell her after years had passed. Now let me tell you what he did a few weeks before he passed away,--and you will know what a strange man he was. He came home one day and said to me: 'I have put Viola's case in the hands of Providence. You may call it luck or chance if you like, but I call it Providence. I cannot go to her face to face and tell her the truth by word of mouth, but I have told her the whole story in writing.' I was shocked, and cried out to know if he had written to her in St. Louis. He smiled and shook his head. 'No, I have not done that. I have written it all out and I have hidden the paper in a place where she is not likely to ever find it,--where I am sure she will never look. I will not even tell you where it is hidden,--for I do not trust you,--no, not even you. You would seek it out and destroy it.' How well he knew me! Then he went on to say, and I shall never forget the solemn way in which he spoke: 'I leave it all with Providence. It is out of my hands. If she ever comes across the paper it will be a miracle,--and miracles are not the work of man. So it will be God Himself who reveals the truth to her.' Now you can see, Kenneth, that the secret is not entirely in our keeping. There is always the chance that she may stumble upon that paper. I live in great dread. My hope now is that you will find it some day and destroy it. I have searched in every place that I can think of. I confess to that. It is hidden on land that some day will belong to Viola,--that much he confided to me. It is not on the land belonging to you,--nor in your house over there."

"You are right," he said, deeply impressed. "There is always the chance that it will come to light. There is no telling how many times a day she may be within arm's length of that paper,--perhaps within inches of it. It is uncanny."

He cast a swift, searching look about the room, as if in the hope that his eyes might unexpectedly alight upon the secret hiding place.

"He could not have hidden it in this house without my knowing it," she said, divining his thought.

He was silent for a moment, frowning reflectively. "Are you sure that no one else knows that she is not his daughter?"

"I am sure of it," she replied with decision.

"And there is nothing more you have to tell me?"

"Nothing. You may go now."

Without another word he left her. He was not surprised by her failure to mention the early morning episode at Striker's cabin. His concluding question had opened the way; it was clear that she had no intention of discussing with him the personal affairs of her daughter. Nevertheless he was decidedly irritated. What right had she to ask him to accept Viola as a sister unless she was also willing to grant him the privileges and interests of a brother? Certainly if Viola was to be his sister he ought to have something to say about the way she conducted herself,--for the honour of the family if for no other reason.

As he walked rapidly away from the house in the direction of Main Street, he experienced a sudden sense of exaltation. Viola was not his sister! As suddenly came the reaction, and with it stark realization. Viola could never be anything to him except a sister.

CHAPTER IX

BROTHER AND SISTER

As he turned into Main Street he espied the figure of a woman coming toward him from the direction of the public Square. She was perhaps a hundred yards farther down the street and was picking her way gingerly, mincingly, along the narrow path at the roadside. His mind was so fully occupied with thoughts of a most disturbing character that he paid no attention to her, except to note that she was dressed in black and that in holding her voluminous skirt well off the ground to avoid the mud-puddles, she revealed the bottom of a white, beruffled petticoat.

His meditations were interrupted and his interest suddenly aroused when he observed that she had stopped stock-still in the path. After a moment, she turned and walked rapidly, with scant regard for the puddles, in the direction from which she had come. Fifteen or twenty paces down the road, she came to what was undoubtedly a path or "short cut" through the wood. Into this she turned hastily and was lost to view among the trees and hazel-brush.

He had recognized her,--or rather he had divined who she was. He quickened his pace, bent upon overtaking her. Then, with the thrill of the hunter, he abruptly whirled and retraced his steps. With the backwoodsman's cunning he hastened over the ground he had already traversed, chuckling in anticipation of her surprise when she found him waiting for her at the other end of the "short cut."

He had noticed a path opening into the woods at a point almost opposite his own house, and naturally assumed that it was the one she was now pursuing in order to avoid an encounter with him. His long legs carried him speedily to the outlet and there he posted himself. He could hear her coming through the brush, although her figure was still obscured by the tangle of wildwood; the snapping of dead twigs under her feet; the scuffling of last year's leaves on the path, now wet and plastered with mud and the slime of winter; the swish of branches as she thrust them aside.

She emerged, breathless, into a little open spot, not twenty feet away, and stopped to listen, looking back through the trees and underbrush to see if she was being followed. Her skirts were drawn up almost to the knees and pinched closely about her grey-stockinged legs. He gallantly turned away and pretended to be studying the house across the road. Presently he felt his ears burning; he turned to meet the onslaught of her scornful, convicting eyes.

She had not moved. Her hands, having released the petticoat, were clenched at her sides. Her cheeks were crimson, and her dark eyes, peering out from the shade of the close-fitting hood of her black bonnet, smouldered with wrath,--and, if he could have read them better, a very decided trace of maidenly dismay.

"Ah, there you are," he cried, lifting his hat. "I was wondering whether you would come out at this--"

"Can't you see I am trying to avoid you?" she demanded with extreme frigidity.

"I rather fancied you were," said he easily. "So I hurried back here to head you off. I trust you will not turn around and run the other way, now that I have almost trapped you. Because if you do, I shall catch up with you in ten jumps."

"I wish you would go away," she cried. "I don't want to see you,--or talk to you."

"Then why did you leave word for me to come to your house to see you?" he challenged. "I suspect you know by this time," she replied, significantly.

He hesitated, regarding her with some uneasiness. "What do you mean?" he fenced.

"Well, you surely know that it was my mother who wanted to see you, and not I," she said, almost insolently. "Are you going to keep me standing here in the mud and slush all day?"

"No, indeed," he said. "Please come out."

"Not until you go away."

"Why don't you want to talk to me? What have I done?"

"You know very well what you have done," she cried, hotly. "In the first place, I don't like you. You have made it very unpleasant for my mother,--who certainly has never done you any harm. In the second place, I resent your interference in my affairs. Wait! Do not interrupt me, please. Maybe you have not exactly interfered as yet, but you are determined to do so,--for the honour of the family, I suppose." She spoke scathingly. "I defy you,--and mother, too. I am not a child to be--"

"I must interrupt you," he exclaimed. "I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"Don't lie," she cried, stamping her foot. "Give me credit for a little intelligence. Don't you suppose I know what mother wanted

to see you about? There! I can see the guilty look in your eyes. You two have been putting your heads together, in spite of all the ill-will you bear each other, and there is no use in denying it. I am a naughty little girl and my big brother has been called in to put a stop to my foolishness. If you--What are you laughing at, Mr. Gwynne?" she broke off to demand furiously.

"I am laughing at you," he replied, succinctly. "You ARE like a little girl in a tantrum,--all over nothing at all. Little girls in tantrums are always amusing, but not always naughty. Permit me to assure you that your mother and I have not discussed your interesting affair with Mr. Lapelle. We talked of business mat--"

"Then," she cried, "how do you happen to know anything about Mr. Lapelle and me? Aha! You're not as clever as you think you are. That slipped out, didn't it? Now I know you were discussing my affairs and nothing else. Well, what is the verdict? What are you going to do to me? Lock me in my room, or tie me hand and foot, or--Please stay where you are. It is not necessary to come any nearer, Mr. Gwynne."

He continued his advance through the thicket, undeterred by the ominous light in her eyes. She stood her ground.

"I think we had better talk the matter over quietly,--Viola," he said, affecting sternness. "We can't stand here shouting at each other. It is possible we may never have another chance to converse freely. As a matter of fact, I do not intend to thrust myself upon you or your mother. That is understood, I hope. We have nothing in common and I daresay we can go our own ways without seriously inconveniencing one another. I want you to know, however, that I went to that house over there this afternoon because I thought you wanted to consult with me about something. I was prepared to help you, or to advise you, or to do anything you wanted me to do. You were not there. I felt at first that you had played me a rather shabby trick. Your mother,--my step-mother,--got me there under false pretences, solely for the purpose of straightening out a certain matter in connection with the--well, the future. She doubtless realized that I would not have come on her invitation, so she used you as a decoy. In any event, I am now glad that I saw her and talked matters over. It does not mean that we shall ever be friendly, but we at least understand each other. For your information I will state that your mother did not refer to the affair at Striker's, nor did I. I know all about it, however. I know that you went out there to meet Lapelle. You planned to run away with him and get married. I may add that it is a matter in which I have not the slightest interest. If you want to marry him, all well and good. Do so. I shall not offer any objection as a brother or as a counsellor. If you were to ask for my honest opinion, however, I should--"

"I am not asking for it," she cried, cuttingly.

"--I should advise you to get married in a more or less regular sort of way in your mother's home."

"Thank you for the advice," she said, curtly. "I shall get married when and where I please,--and to whom I please, Mr. Gwynne."

"In view of the fact that I am your brother, Viola, I would suggest

that you call me Kenneth."

"I have no desire to claim you as a brother, or to recognize you as one," said she.

He smiled. "With all my heart I deplore the evil fate that makes you a sister of mine."

She was startled. "That--that doesn't sound very--pretty," she said, a trifle dashed.

"The God's truth, nevertheless. At any rate, so long as you have to be my sister, I rejoice in the fact that you are an extremely pretty one. It is a great relief. You might have turned out to be a scarecrow. I don't mind confessing that last night I said to myself, 'There is the most beautiful girl in all the world,' and I can't begin to tell you how shocked I was this morning when Striker informed me that you were my half-sister. He knocked a romantic dream into a cocked hat,--and--But even so, sister or no sister, Viola, you still remain beyond compare the loveliest girl I have ever seen."

There was something in his eyes that caused her own to waver,--something that by no account could be described as brotherly. She looked away, suddenly timid and confused. It was something she had seen in Barry Lapelle's eyes, and in the eyes of other ardent men. She was flustered and a little distressed.

"I--I--if you mean that," she said, nervously, "I suppose I--ought to feel flattered."

"Of course, I mean it,--but you need not feel flattered. Truth is no form of flattery."

She had recovered herself. "Who told you about Barry Lapelle and me?" she demanded.

"You mean about last night's adventure?" he countered, a trifle maliciously.

She coloured. "I suppose some one has--Oh, well, it doesn't matter. I sha'n't ask you to betray the sneak who--"

"Tut, tut, my dear Viola! You must not--"

"Don't call me your dear Viola!"

"Well, then, my dear sister,--surely you cannot expect me to address you as Miss Gwyn?" in mild surprise.

"Just plain Viola, if you must have a name for me."

"That's better," said he, approvingly.

"Whoever told you was a sneak," she said, wrathfully. She turned her face away, but not quickly enough to prevent his seeing her chin quiver slightly.

"At any rate, it was not your mother," he said. "I have Striker's

permission to expose what you call his treachery. He thought it was his duty to tell me under the circumstances. And while I am about it, I may as well say that I think you conspired to take a pretty mean advantage of those good and faithful friends. You deceived them in a most outrageous manner. It wasn't very thoughtful or generous of you, Viola. You might have got them into very serious trouble with your mother,--who, I understand, holds the mortgage on their little farm and could make it extremely unpleasant for them if she felt so inclined."

She was staring at him in wide-eyed astonishment, her red lips slightly parted. She could not believe her ears. Why, he was actually scolding her! She was being reprimanded! He was calmly, deliberately reproving her, as if she were a mischievous child! Amazement deprived her momentarily of the power of speech.

"To be sure," he went on reflectively, "I can appreciate the extremities to which you were driven. The course of true love was not running very smoothly. No doubt your mother was behaving abominably. Mothers frequently do behave that way. This young man of yours may be,--and I devoutly hope he is,--a very worthy fellow, one to whom your mother ought to be proud and happy to see you married. In view of her stand in the matter, I will go so far as to say that you were probably doing the right thing in running away from home to be married. I think I mentioned to you last night that I am of a very romantic nature. Lord bless you, I have lain awake many a night envying the dauntless gentlemen of feudal days who bore their sweethearts away in gallant fashion pursued by ferocious fathers and a score or more of blood-thirsty henchmen. Ah, that was the way for me! With my lady fair seated in front of me upon the speeding palfrey, my body between her and the bullets and lances and bludgeons of countless pursuers! Zounds! Odds blood! Gadzooks! and so forth! Not any of this stealing away in the night for me! Ah, me! How different we are in these prosaic days! But, even so, if I were you, the next time I undertake to run away with the valiant Mr. Lapelle I should see to it that he does his part in the good old-fashioned way. And I should not drag such loyal, honest folk as Striker and his wife into the business and then ride merrily off, leaving them to pay the Piper."

His heart smote him as he saw her eyes fill with tears. He did not mistake them for tears of shame or contrition,--far from it, he knew they were born of speechless anger. He had hurt her sorely, even deliberately, and he was overcome by a sudden charge of compassion--and regret. He wanted to comfort her, he wanted to say something,--anything,--to take away the sting of chastisement.

He was not surprised when she swept by him, her head high, her cheeks white with anger, her stormy eyes denying him even so much as a look of scorn. He stood aside, allowing her to pass, and remained motionless, gazing after her until she turned in at her own gate and was lost to view. He shook his head dubiously and sighed.

"Little Minda," he mused, under his breath. "You were my playmate once upon a time,--and now! Now what are you? A rascal's sweetheart, if all they say is true. Gad, how beautiful you are!" He was walking slowly through the path, his head bent, his eyes clouded with trouble. "And how you are hating me at this moment. What a devil's mess it all is!"

His eye fell upon something white lying at the edge of the path a few feet ahead. It was a neatly folded sheet of note paper. He stood looking down at it for a moment. She must have dropped it as she came through. It was clean and unsoiled. A message, perhaps, from Barry Lapelle, smuggled to her through the connivance of a friendly go-between,—the girl she had gone to visit, what was her name? He stooped to pick it up, but before his fingers touched it he straightened up and deliberately moved it with the toe of his boot to a less exposed place among the bushes, where he would have failed to see it in passing. Then he strode resolutely away without so much as a glance over his shoulder, and, coming to the open road, stepped briskly off in the direction of the public Square. His conscience would have rejoiced had he betrayed it by secreting himself among the bushes for a matter of five minutes,—quaint paradox, indeed!--for he would have seen her steal warily, anxiously into the thicket in search of the lost missive,—and he would have been further exalted by the little cry of relief that fell from her lips as she snatched it up and sped incontinently homeward, as if pursued by all the eyes in Christendom.

As a matter of fact, it was not a letter from Barry to Viola. It was the other way round. She had written him a long letter absolving herself from blame in the contretemps of the night before, at the same time confessing that she was absolutely in the dark as to how her mother had found out about their plans. Suffice to say, she HAD found out early in the evening and, to employ her own words, "You know the result." Then she went on to say that, all things considered, she was now quite sure she could never, never consent to make another attempt.

"I am positive," she wrote, ingenuously, "that mother will relent in time, and then we can be married without going to so much trouble about it." Farther on she admitted that, "Mother is very firm about it now, but when she realizes that I am absolutely determined to marry you, I am sure she will give in and all will be well." At the end she said: "For the present, Barry dear, I think you had better not come to the house. She feels very bitter toward you after last night. We can see each other at Effie's and other places. After all, she has had a great sorrow and she is so very unhappy that I ought not to hurt her in any way if I can help it. I love you, but I also love her. Please be kind and reasonable, dear, and do not think I am losing heart. I am just as determined as ever. Nothing can change me. You believe that, don't you, Barry dear? I know how impulsive you are and how set in your ways. Sometimes you really frighten me but I know it is because you love me so much. You must not do anything rash. It would spoil everything. I do wish you would stay away from that awful place down by the river. Mother would feel differently toward you, I know, if you were not there so much. She knows the men play cards there for money and drink and swear. I believe you will keep your promise never to touch a drop of whiskey after we are married, but when I told her that she only laughed at me. By this time you must know that my brother has come to Lafayette. He arrived this morning. He knows nothing about what happened last night but I am afraid mother will tell him when she sees him to-day. It would not surprise me if they bury the hatchet and join hands and try to make a good little girl out of me. I think he is quite a prim young man. He spent the night at Striker's and I saw him there. I must say he is good-looking. He is so good-looking

that nobody would ever suspect that he is related to me." She signed herself, "Your loving and devoted and loyal Viola."

She had been unable to get the letter to him that day, and for a very good reason. Her messenger, Effie Wardlow's young brother, reached the tavern just in time to see Barry emerge, quite tipsy and in a vile temper, arguing loudly with Jack Trentman and Syd Budd, the town's most notorious gamblers.

The three men went off toward the ferry. The lad very sensibly decided this was no time to deliver a love letter to Mr. Lapelle, so forthwith returned it to the sender, who, after listening bleakly to a somewhat harrowing description of her lover's unsteady legs and the direction in which they carried him, departed for home fully convinced that something dreadful was going to happen to Barry and that she would be to blame for it.

Halfway home she decided that her mother was equally if not more to blame than she, and, upon catching sight of her lordly, self-satisfied brother, acquitted herself of ALL responsibility and charged everything to her meddling relatives. Her encounter with the exasperating Kenneth, however, served to throw a new and most unwelcome light upon the situation. It WAS a shabby trick to play upon the Strikers. She had not thought of it before. And how she hated him for making her think of it!

The first thing she did upon returning to the house with the recovered letter was to proceed to the kitchen, where, after reading it over again, she consigned it to the flames. She was very glad it had not been delivered to Barry. The part of it referring to the "place down by the river" would have to be treated with a great deal more firmness and decision. That was something she would have to speak very plainly about.

By this time she had reached the conclusion that Barry was to blame for THAT, and that nothing more terrible could happen to him than a severe headache,--an ailment to which he was accustomed and which he treated very lightly in excusing himself when she took him to task for his jolly lapses. "All red-blooded fellows take a little too much once in a while," he had said, more than once.

CHAPTER X

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Rachel Gwyn was seated at the parlor window when Viola entered the house. She was there ten or fifteen minutes later when her daughter came downstairs.

"May I have a word with you, mother?" said the girl, from the doorway, after waiting a moment for her mother to take some notice of her presence.

She spoke in a very stiff and formal manner, for there had been no attempt on the part of either to make peace since the trying

experiences of early morning. Viola had sulked all day, while her mother preserved a stony silence that remained unbroken up to the time she expressed a desire to be alone with Kenneth when he called.

Apparently Mrs. Gwyn did not hear Viola's question. The girl advanced a few steps into the room and stopped again to regard the motionless, unresponsive figure at the window. Mrs. Gwyn's elbow was on the sill, her chin resting in the hand. Apparently she was deaf to all sound inside the room.

A wave of pity swept over Viola. All in an instant her rancour took flight and in its place came a longing to steal over and throw her arms about those bent shoulders and whisper words of remorse. Desolation hung over that silent, thinking figure. Viola's heart swelled with renewed anger toward Kenneth Gwynne.

What had he said or done to wound this stony, indomitable mother of hers?

The room was cold. The fire had died down; only the huge backlog showed splotches of red against the charred black; in front of it were the faintly smoking ashes of a once sprightly blaze. She shivered, and then, moved by a sudden impulse, strode softly over and took down from its peg beside the fireplace the huge turkey wing used in blowing the embers to life. She was vigorously fanning the backlog when a sound from behind indicated that her mother had risen from the chair. She smiled as she glanced over her shoulder.

Her mother was standing with one of her hands pressed tightly to her eyes. Her lips were moving.

"He is Robert--Robert himself," she was murmuring. "As like as two peas. I was afraid he might be--would be--" The words trailed off into a mumble, for she had lowered her hand and was staring in dull surprise at Viola.

"What is it, mother?" cried the girl, alarmed by the other's expression. "What were you saying?"

After a moment her mother said, quite calmly: "Oh, it's you, is it? When did you get home?"

"A few minutes ago. How cold it is! The fire is almost out. Shall I get some kindling and start it up?"

"Yes. I don't know how I came to let it go down."

When Viola returned from the kitchen with the fagots and a bunch of shavings, the older woman was standing in front of the fireplace staring moodily down at the ashes. She moved to one side while her daughter laid the kindling and placed three or four sticks of firewood upon the heap. Not a word was spoken until after Viola had fanned a tiny flame out of the embers and lighted the shavings with a spill.

"I met my brother out there in the grove," said she, rising and brushing the wood dust from her hands.

"Yes?"

"I thought maybe you and he had been discussing Barry Lapelle and me and what happened last night, so I started to give him a piece of my mind," said Viola, crimsoning.

A faint smile played about the corners of Mrs. Gwyn's lips. "I can well imagine his astonishment," she said, drily.

"He knew all about it, even if he did not get it from you, mother," said the girl, darkly. "Phin Striker told him everything."

"Everybody in town will know about it before the week is out," said the mother, a touch of bitterness in her voice. "I would have given all I possess if it could have been kept from Kenneth Gwynne. Salt in an open sore, that's what it is, Viola. It smarts, oh, how it smarts."

Viola, ignorant of the true cause of her mother's pain, snapped her fingers disdainfully.

"That's how much I care for his opinion, one way or the other. I wouldn't let him worry me if I were you, mother. Let him think what he pleases. It's nothing to us. I guess we can get along very well without his good opinion or his good will or anything else. And I will not allow him to interfere in my affairs. I told him so in plain words out there awhile ago. He comes here and the very first thing he does is to--"

"He will think what he pleases, my child," broke in her mother; "so do not flatter yourself that he will be affected by your opinion of him. We will not discuss him, if you please. We have come to an understanding on certain matters, and that is all that is necessary to tell you about our interview. He will go his own way and we will go ours. There need be no conflict between us."

Viola frowned dubiously. "It is all very well for you to take that attitude, mother. But I am not in the same position. He is my half-brother. It is going to be very awkward. He is nothing to you,--and people will understand if you ignore him,--but it--it isn't quite the same with me. Can't you see?"

"Certainly," admitted Mrs. Gwyn without hesitation. "You and he have a perfect right to be friendly. It would not be right for me to stand between you if you decide to--"

"But I do not want to be friendly with him," cried the girl, adding, with a toss of her head,--"and I guess he realizes it by this time. But people know that we had the same father. They will think it strange if--if we have nothing to do with each other. Oh, it's terribly upsetting, isn't it?"

"What did he say to you out there?"

"He was abominable! Officious, sarcastic, insolent,--"

"In plain words, he gave you a good talking to," interrupted Mrs. Gwyn, rather grimly.

"He said some things I can never forgive."

"About you and Barry?"

"Well,--not so much about me and Barry as about the way I--Oh, you needn't smile, mother. He isn't going to make any fuss about Barry. He told me in plain words that he did not care whether I married him or not,--or ran away with him, for that matter. You will not get much support from him, let me tell you. And now I have something I want to say to you. We may as well have it out now as any other time. I am going to marry Barry Lapelle." There was a ring of defiance in her voice.

Rachel Gwyn looked at her steadily for a moment before responding to this out-and-out challenge.

"I think it would be only fair of you," she began, levelly, "to tell Mr. Lapelle just what he may expect in case he marries you. Tell him for me that you will never receive a penny or an inch of land when I die. I shall cut you off completely. Tell him that. It may make some difference in his calculations."

Viola flared. "You have no right to insinuate that he wants to marry me for your money or your lands. He wants me for myself,--he wants me because he loves me."

"I grant you that," said Mrs. Gwyn, nodding her head slowly, "He would be a fool not to want you--now. You are young and you are very pretty. But after he has been married a few years and you have become an old song to him, he will feel differently about money and lands. I know Mr. Lapelle and his stripe. He wants you now for yourself, but when you are thirty years old he will want you for something entirely different. At any rate, you should make it plain to him that he will get nothing but you,--absolutely nothing but you. Men of his kind do not love long. They love violently--but not long. Idle, improvident men, such as he is, are able to crowd a whole lot of love into a very short space of time. That is because they have nothing much else to do. They run through with love as they run through with money,--quickly. The man who wastes money will also waste love. And when he has wasted all his love, Barry Lapelle will still want money to waste. Be good enough to make him understand that he will never have a dollar of my money to waste,--never, my child, even though his wife were starving to death."

Viola stared at her mother incredulously, her face paling. "You mean--you mean you would let me starve,--your own daughter? I--why, mother, I can't believe you would be so--"

"I mean it," said Rachel Gwyn, compressing her lips.

"Then," cried Viola, hotly, "you are the most unnatural, cruel mother that ever--"

"Stop! You will not find me a cruel and inhuman mother when you come creeping back to my door after Barry Lapelle has cast you off. I am only asking you to tell him what he may expect from me. And I am trying hard to convince you of what you may expect from him. There's the end of it. I have nothing more to say."

"But I have something more to say," cried the girl. "I shall tell

him all you have said, and I shall marry him in spite of everything. I am not afraid of starving. I don't want a penny of father's money. He did not choose to give it to me; he gave half of all he possessed to his son by another woman, he ignored me, he cut me off as if I were a--"

"Be careful, my child," warned Rachel Gwyn, her eyes narrowing. "I cannot permit you to question his acts or his motives. He did what he thought was best,--and we--I mean you and I--must abide by his decision."

"I am not questioning your husband's act," said Viola, stubbornly. "I am questioning my FATHER'S act."

Mrs. Gwyn started. For a second or two her eyes wavered and then fell. One corner of her mouth worked curiously. Then, without a word, she turned away from the girl and left the room.

Viola, greatly offended, heard her ascend the stairs and close a door; then her slow, heavy tread on the boards above. Suddenly the girl's anger melted. The tears rushed to her eyes.

"Oh, what a beast I was to hurt her like that," she murmured, forgetting the harsh, unfeeling words that had aroused her ire, thinking only of the wonder and pain that had lurked in her mother's eyes,--the wonder and pain of a whipped dog. "The only person in all the world who has ever really loved me,--poor, poor old mother." She stared through her tears at the flames, a little pucker of uncertainty clouding her brow. "I am sure Barry never, never can love me as she does, or be as kind and good to me," she mused. "I wonder--I wonder if what she says is true about men. I wish he had not gone to drinking to-day. But I suppose the poor boy really couldn't help it. He hates so to be disappointed."

Later on, at supper, she abruptly asked:

"Mother, how old is Kenneth?"

They had spoken not more than a dozen words to each other since sitting down to table, which was set, as usual, in the kitchen. Both were thoughtful;--one of them was contrite.

Rachel Gwyn, started out of a profound reverie, gave her daughter a sharp, inquiring look before answering.

"I do not know. Twenty-five or six, I suppose."

"Did you know his mother?"

"Yes," after a perceptible pause.

"How long after she died were you and father married?"

"Your father had been a widower nearly two years when we were married," said Rachel, steadily.

"Why doesn't Kenneth spell his name as we do?"

"Gwyn is the way it was spelled a great many years ago, and it is

the correct way, according to your father. It was his father, I believe, who added the last two letters,--I do not know why, unless it was supposed to be more elegant."

"It seems strange that he should spell it one way and his own son another," ventured the girl, unsatisfied.

"Kenneth was brought up to spell it in the new-fangled way, I guess," was Rachel Gwyn's reply. "You need not ask me questions about the family, Viola. Your father never spoke of them. I am afraid he was not on good terms with them. He was a strange man. He kept things to himself. I do not recollect ever hearing him mention his first wife or his son or any other member of his family in,--well, in twenty years or more."

"I should think you would have been a little bit curious. I know I should."

"I knew all that was necessary for me to know," said Rachel, somewhat brusquely.

"Can't you tell me something more about father's people?" persisted the girl.

"I only know that they lived in Baltimore. They never came west. Your father was about twenty years old when he left home and came to Kentucky. That is all I know, so do not ask any more questions."

"He never acted like a backwoodsman," said Viola. "He did not talk like one or--"

"He was an educated man. He came of a good family."

"And you are different from the women we used to see down the river. Goodness, I was proud of you and father. There isn't a woman in this town who--"

"I was born in Salem, Massachusetts, and lived there till I was nearly twenty," interrupted Mrs. Gwyn, calmly. "I taught school for two years after my father died. My mother did not long survive him. After her death I came west with my brother and his wife and a dozen other men and women. We lived in a settlement on the Ohio River for several years. My brother was killed by the Indians. His widow took their two small children and went back to Salem to live. I have never heard from her. We did not like each other. I was glad to have her go."

"Where did you first meet father?"

She regretted the question the instant the words were out of her mouth. The look of pain,--almost of pleading,--in her mother's eyes caused her to reproach herself.

"Forgive me, mother," she cried. "I did not stop to think. I know how it hurts you to talk about him, and I should have--"

"Be good enough to remember in the future," said Rachel Gwyn, sternly, her eyes now cold and forbidding. She arose and stalked to the kitchen window, where she stood for a long time looking out

into the gathering darkness.

"Clear the table, Hattie," said Viola, presently. "We are through."

Then she walked over to her mother and timidly laid an arm across her shoulder.

"I am sorry, mother," she said.

To this Mrs. Gwyn did not reply. She merely observed: "We have had very little sleep in the last six and thirty hours. Come to bed, child."

As was her custom, Rachel Gwyn herself saw to the locking and bolting of the doors and window shutters at the front of the house. To-night Viola, instead of Hattie, followed the tall black figure from door to window, carrying the lighted candle. They stood together, side by side, in the open front door for a few moments, peering at the fence of trees across the road.

Off in the distance some one was whistling a doleful tune. The spring wind blowing in their faces was fresh and moist, a soft wind laden with the smell of earth. A clumsy hound came slouching around the corner of the little porch and, wagging his tail, stopped below them; the light shone down into his big, glistening eyes. Viola spoke to him softly. He wagged his tail more briskly.

Rachel had turned her head and was looking toward the house that was to be Kenneth's home. Its outlines could be made out among the trees to the right, squat and lonely in a setting less black than itself.

"Before long there will be lights in the windows again," she was saying, more to herself than to Viola. "A haunted house. Haunted by a living, mortal ghost. Eh?" she cried out, sharply, turning to Viola.

"I did not speak, mother."

A look of awe came to Rachel's eyes.

"I was sure I heard--" she began, and then, after a short pause, laughed throatily. "I guess it was the wind. Come in. I want to lock the door."

Viola was a long time in going to sleep. It seemed to her as she lay there, staring wide awake, that everything in the world was unsettled and topsy-turvy. Nothing could ever be right again. What with the fiasco of the night just gone, the appearance of the mysterious brother, the counterbalancing of resolve and remorse within her troubled self, the report of Barry's lapse from rectitude, her mother's astounding sophistry, her tired brain was in such a whirl as never was.

There was a new pain in her breast that was not of thwarted desires nor of rancour toward this smug, insolent brother who had come upon the scene. It hurt her to think that up to this night she had known so little, ay, almost nothing, about her own mother's life. For the first time, she heard of Salem, of her mother's people and

her occupation, of the journey westward, of the uncle who was killed by the Indians and the wife who turned back; of unknown cousins to whom she was also unknown. There was pain in the discovery that her mother was almost a stranger to her.

CHAPTER XI

A ROADSIDE MEETING

Kenneth remained at the tavern for a month. He did not go near the house of his step-mother. He saw her once walking along the main street, and followed her with his eyes until she disappeared into a store. A friendly citizen took occasion to inform him that it was the "fust time" he had seen her on the street in a coon's age.

"She ain't like most women," he vouchsafed. "Never comes down town unless she's got some reason to. Most of 'em never stay to home unless they've got a derved good reason to, setch as sickness, or the washin' and ironin', or it's rainin' pitchforks. She's a mighty queer woman, Rachel Gwyn is. How air you an' her makin' out these days, Kenneth?"

"Oh, fair to middlin'," replied the young man, dropping into the vernacular.

"I didn't know but what ye'd patched things up sorter," said the citizen, invitingly.

"There is nothing to patch up," said Kenneth.

"Well, I guess it ain't any of my business, anyhow," remarked the other, cheerfully.

The business of taking over the property, signing the necessary papers, renewing an agreement with the man who farmed his land on the Wea, taking account of all live-stock and other chattels, occupied his time for the better part of a fortnight. He spent two days and a night at the little farmhouse, listening with ever increasing satisfaction to the enthusiastic prophecies of the farmer, a stout individual named Jones whose faith in the new land was surpassed only by his ability to till it. Even out here on his own farm Kenneth was unable to escape the unwelcome influence of Rachel Carter. Mr. Jones magnanimously admitted that she was responsible for all of the latest conveniences about the place and characterized her as a "woman with a head on her shoulders, you bet."

He confessed: "Why, dodgast it, she stopped by here a couple o' weeks ago an' jest naturally raised hell with me because my wife's goin' to have another baby. She sez, sorter sharp-like, 'The only way to make a farm pay is to stock it with somethin' besides children.' That made me a leetle mad, so I up an' sez back to her: 'I wouldn't swap my seven children fer all the hogs an' cattle in the state o' Indianny.' So she sez, kind o' grinnin', 'Well, I'll bet your wife would jump at the chance to trade your NEXT seven

children, sight onseen, fer a new pair o' shoes er that bonnet she's been wantin' ever sence she got married.' That sorter mixed me up. I couldn't make out jest what she was drivin' at. Must ha' been nine o'clock that night when it come to me all of a sudden. So I woke Sue up an' told her what Rachel Gwyn said to me, an', by gosh, Sue saw through it quicker'n a flash. 'You bet I would,' sez she. 'I'd swap the next HUNDRED.' Then she kinder groaned an' said, 'I guess maybe I'd better make it the next ninety-nine.' Well, sir, that sot me to thinkin', an' the more I thought, the more I realized what a lot o' common sense that mother-in-law o' your'n has got. She--"

"You mean my step-mother, Jones."

"They say it amounts to the same thing in most families," said the ready Mr. Jones, and continued to expatiate upon the remarkable qualities of Rachel Gwyn.

Kenneth found it difficult to think of the woman as Rachel Gwyn. To him, she was unalterably Rachel Carter. Time and again he caught himself up barely in time to avoid using the unknown name in the presence of others. The possibility that he might some day inadvertently blurt it out in conversation with Viola caused him a great deal of uneasiness and concern. He realized that he would have to be on his guard all of the time.

There seemed to be no immediate prospect of such a calamity, however. Since the memorable encounter in the thicket he had not had an opportunity to speak to the girl. For reasons of her own she purposely avoided him, there could be no doubt about that. On more than one occasion she deliberately had crossed a street to escape meeting him face to face, and there was the one especially irritating instance when, finding herself hard put, she had been obliged to turn squarely in her tracks and hurry back in the direction from which she came. This would have been laughable to Kenneth but for the distressing fact that it was even more laughable to others. Several men and women, witnessing the manoeuvre, had sniggered gleefully,--one of the men going so far as to slap his leg and roar: "Well, by gosh, did you ever see anything like that?" His ejaculation, like that of a town-crier, being audible for a hundred feet or more, had one gratifying result. It caused Viola to turn and transfix the offender with a stare so haughty that he abruptly diverted his attention to the upper north-east corner of the court-house, where, fortunately for him, a pair of pigeons had just alighted and were engaged in the interesting pastime of bowing to each other.

A week or so after his return from the farm Kenneth saw her riding off on horseback with two other young women and a youth named Hayes. She passed within ten feet of him but did not deign to notice him, although her companions bowed somewhat eagerly. This was an occasion when he felt justified in swearing softly under his breath--and also to make a resolve--to write her a very polite and formal letter in which he would ask her pardon for presuming to suggest, as a brother, that she was making a perfect fool of herself, and that people were laughing "fit to kill" over her actions. It goes without saying that he thought better of it and never wrote the letter.

She was a graceful and accomplished horsewoman. He watched her out

of the corner of his eye as she cantered down the street, sitting the spirited sorrel mare with all the ease and confidence of a practised rider. Her habit was of very dark blue, with huge puffed sleeves and a high lace collar. She wore a top-hat of black, a long blue veil trailing down her back. He heartily agreed with the laconic bystander who remarked that she was "purtier than most pictures."

Later on, urged by a spirit of restlessness, he ordered Zachariah to saddle his horse and bring him around to the front of the tavern, where he mounted and set out for a ride up the Wild Cat road. Two or three miles above town he met Hayes and the two young women returning. The look of consternation that passed among them did not escape him. He smiled a trifle maliciously as he rode on, for now he knew what had become of the missing member of the party.

Half a mile farther on he came upon Viola and Barry Lapelle, riding slowly side by side through the narrow lane. He drew off to one side to allow them to pass, doffing his beaver ceremoniously.

Lapelle's friendly greeting did not surprise him, for the two had seen a great deal of each other, and at no time had there been anything in the lover's manner to indicate that Viola had confided to him the story of the meeting in the thicket. But he was profoundly astonished when the girl favoured him with a warm, gay smile and cried out a cheery "How do you do, Kenneth!"

More than that, she drew rein and added to his amazement by shaking her finger reproachfully at him, saying:

"Where on earth have you been keeping yourself? I have not laid eyes on you for more than a week."

Utterly confounded by this unexpected attack, Kenneth stammered: "Why, I--er--I have been very busy." Not laid eyes on him, indeed! What was her game? "Now that I come to think of it," he went on, recovering himself, "it is fully a week since I've seen you. Don't you ever come down town, Viola?"

"Every day," she said, coolly. "We just happen never to see each other, that's all. I am glad to have had this little glimpse of you, Kenneth, even though it is away out here in the woods."

There was no mistaking the underlying significance of these words. They contained the thinly veiled implication that he had followed for the purpose of spying upon her.

"Better turn around and ride back with us, Kenny," said Barry, politely but not graciously.

"I am on my way up to the Wild Cat to see a man on business," said Kenneth, lamely.

"Kenny?" repeated Viola, puckering her brow.

"Where have I heard that name before? I seem to remember--oh, as if it were a thousand years ago. Do they call you Kenny for short?"

"It grew up with me," he replied. "Ever since I can remember, my

folks--"

He broke off in the middle of the sentence, confronted by a disconcerting thought. Could it be possible that somewhere in Viola's brain,--or rather in Minda's baby brain,--that familiar name had stamped itself? Why not? If it had been impressed upon his own baby brain, why not in a less degree upon hers? He made a pretence of stooping far over to adjust a corner of his saddle blanket. Straightening up, he went on:

"Any name is better than what the boys used to call me at school. I was known by the elegant name of Piggy, due to an appetite over which I seemed to have no control. Well, I must be getting along. Good day to you."

He lifted his hat and rode off. He had gone not more than twenty rods when he heard a masculine shout from behind: turning, he discovered that the couple were still standing where he had left them. Lapelle called out:

"Your sister wants to have a word with you."

She rode swiftly up to where he was waiting.

"I just want to let you know that I intend to tell mother about meeting Barry out here to-day," she said, unsmilingly. "I shall not tell her that we planned it in advance, however. We did plan it, so if you want to run and tell her yourself, you may do so. It will make no--"

"Is that all you wanted to say to me, Viola?" he interrupted.

For a moment she faced him rebelliously, hot words on her lips. Then a surprising change came over her. Her eyes quailed under the justifiable scorn in his. She hung her head.

"No," she said, miserably. "I thought it was all, but it isn't. I want to say that I am sorry I said what I did."

He watched the scarlet flood sweep over her cheeks and then as swiftly fade. It was abject surrender, and yet he had no thrill of triumph.

"It's--it's all right, Viola," he stammered, awkwardly. "Don't think anything more about it. We will consider it unsaid."

"No, we'll not," she said, looking up. "We will just let it stand as another black mark against me. I am getting a lot of them lately. But I AM sorry, Kenneth. Will you try to forget it?"

He shook his head. "Never! Forgetting the bitter would mean that I would also have to give up the sweet," said he, gallantly. "And you have given me something very sweet to remember."

She received this with a wondering, hesitating little smile.

"I never dreamed that brothers could say such nice things to their sisters," she said, and he was aware of a deep, questioning look in her eyes. "They usually say them to other men's sisters."

"Ah, but no other fellow happens to have you as a sister," he returned, fatuously. She laughed aloud at this, perhaps a little uncertainly.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed. "It sounds good to hear you laugh like that,--such a jolly, friendly sort of laugh."

"I must be going now," she said, biting her lip. "Good-bye,--Kenny." A faint frown clouded her brow after she had uttered the name. "I must ask mother if she remembers hearing father speak of you as Kenny."

"Say, Viola," came an impatient shout from Barry Lapelle, "are you going to take all day?"

It was plain to be seen that the young man was out of temper. There was a sharp, domineering note of command in his voice. Viola straightened up in her saddle and sent a surprised, resentful look at the speaker. Kenneth could not repress a chuckle.

"Better hurry along," he said, grimly, "or he'll take your head off. Lord, we are going to have a storm. I see a thundercloud gathering just below the rim of Barry's hat. If you--"

"Please keep your precious wit to yourself," she flamed, but with all her show of righteous indignation she could not hide from him the chagrin and mortification that lurked in her tell-tale eyes.

She rode off in high dudgeon, and he was left to curse his ill-timed jest. What a blundering fool he had been! Her first, timid little advance,--and he had met it with boorish, clownish wit! A scurvy jest, indeed! She was justified in despising him.

If Viola had turned her proud head a few moments later, she would have beheld an amazing spectacle: her supposedly smug and impeccable brother riding away at break-neck speed down the soggy lane, regardless of overhanging branches and flying mud, fleeing in wrath from the scene of his discontent.

Dusk was falling when he rode slowly into the town again. He had reached a decision during that lonely ride. He would not remain in Lafayette. He foresaw misery and unhappiness for himself if he stayed there,--for, be it here declared, he was in love with Viola Gwyn. No, worse than that, he was in love with Minda Carter,--and therein lay all the bitterness that filled his soul. He could never have her. Even though she cast off the ardent Lapelle, still he could not have her for his own. The bars were up, and it was now beyond his power to lower them. And so, with this resolve firmly fixed in his mind, he gave himself up to a strange sort of despair.

After supper at the tavern, he set out for a solitary stroll about the town before going to bed. He took stock of himself. No later than that morning he had come to a decision to open an office and engage in the practice of Law in Lafayette. He had made many friends during his brief stay in the place, and from all sides he had been encouraged to "hang out his shingle" and "grow up with the town." He liked the people, he had faith in the town, he possessed all the confidence and courage of youth. The local members of the bar,

including the judge and justices, seriously urged him to establish himself there--there was room for him,--the town needed such men as he,--indeed, one of the leading lawyers had offered to take him into partnership, an opportunity not to be despised, in view of this man's state-wide reputation as a lawyer and orator, and who was already being spoken of for high honours in the councils of state and nation.

All this was very gratifying to the young stranger. He was flattered by the unmistakable sincerity of these new friends. And he was in a position to weather the customary paucity of clients for an indefinite period, a condition resulting to but few young men starting out for themselves in the practice of law. He was comfortably well-off in the matter of worldly goods, not only through his recently acquired possessions, but as the result of a substantial legacy that had come to him on the death of his grandmother. He had received his mother's full share of the Blythe estate, a no inconsiderable fortune in lands and money.

And now everything was changed. He would have to give up his plan to settle in Lafayette, and so, as he strolled gloomily about the illy-lighted town, he was casting about for the next best place to locate. The incomprehensible and incredible had come to pass. He had fallen in love with Viola Gwyn at first sight, that stormy night at Striker's. The discovery that she was his own half-sister had, of course, deluded his senses--temporarily, but now he realized that the strange, primitive instincts of man had not been deceived and would not be denied.

His blood had known the truth from the instant he first laid eyes upon the lovely stranger. Since that first night there had been revelations. First of all, Viola was the flesh and blood of an evil woman, and that woman his mortal foe. Notwithstanding her own innocence and purity, it was inconceivable that he should ever think of taking her to himself as wife. Secondly, he was charged with a double secret that must forever stand between him and her: the truth about her mother and the truth about herself.

There was but one thing left for him to do,--go away. He loved her. He would grow to love her a thousand-fold more if he remained near her, if he saw her day by day. These past few days had brought despair and jealousy to him, but what would the future bring? Misery! No, he would have to go. He would wind up his affairs at once and put longing and temptation as far behind him as possible. There was the town of Louisville. From all reports it was a prosperous, growing town, advantageously situated on the River Ohio. Crawfordsville was too near. He would have to go farther, much farther away than that,--perhaps back to the old home town.

"What cruel foul luck!" he groaned, aloud.

His wanderings had carried him through dark, winding cow-paths and lanes to within a stone's throw of Jack Trentman's shanty, standing alone like the pariah it was, on the steep bank of the river near the ferry. Back in a clump of sugar trees it seemed to hide, as if shrinking from the accusing eye of every good and honest man. Kenneth had stopped at the edge of the little grove and was gazing fiercely at the two lighted windows of the "shanty." He was thinking of Barry Lapelle as he muttered the words, thinking of the foul

luck that seemed almost certain to deliver Viola into his soiled and lawless hands. The fierceness of his gaze was due to the knowledge that Lapelle was now inside Trentman's notorious shanty and perhaps gambling.

This evening, as on two or three earlier occasions, he had been urged by Barry to come down to the shanty and try his luck at poker. He had steadfastly declined these invitations. Trentman's place was known far and wide as a haven into which "cleaned out" river gamblers sailed in the hope of recovering at least enough of their fortunes to enable them to return to more productive fields down the reaches of the big river. These whilom, undaunted rascals, like birds of passage, stayed but a short time in the new town of Lafayette. They came up the river with sadly depleted purses, confident of "easy pickings" among the vainglorious amateurs, and be it said in behalf of their astuteness, they seldom if ever boarded the south-bound boats as poor as when they came.

In due time they invariably returned again to what they called among themselves "the happy hunting-ground." The stories of big "winnings" and big "losings" were rife among the people of the town. More than one adventurous citizen or farmer had been "wiped out," with no possible chance of ever recovering from his losses. It was common talk that Barry Lapelle was "fresh fish" for these birds of prey. He possessed the gambling instinct but lacked the gambler's wiles. He was reckless where they were cool. They "stripped" him far oftener than he won from them, but it was these infrequent winnings that encouraged him. He believed that some day he would make a big "killing"; the thought of that was ever before him, beckoning him on like the dancing will-o'-the-wisp. He took no note of the fact that these bland gentlemen could pocket their losings as well as their winnings. It was part of their trade to suffer loss. They had everything to gain and nothing to lose, so they thrived on uncertainty.

Not so with Barry, or others of his kind. They could only afford to win. It was no uncommon experience for the skilled river gambler to be penniless; it was all in the day's work. It did not hurt him to lose, for the morrow was ahead. But it was different with his victims. The morrow was not and never could be the same; when they were "cleaned out" it meant desolation. They went down under the weight and never came up, while the real gambler, in similar case, scraped his sparse resources together and blithely began all over again,--a smiling loser and a smiling winner. Full purse or empty, he was always the same. Rich to-day, poor to-morrow,--all the same to him. Philosopher, rascal, soldier, knave,--but never the craven,--and you have the Mississippi gambler.

Barry, after coming in from his ride with Viola, had "tipped the jug" rather liberally. He kept a demi-john of whiskey in his room at the tavern, and to its contents all the "afflicted" were welcome. It could not be said of him that he was the principal consumer, for, except under unusual circumstances, he was a fairly abstemious man. As he himself declared, he drank sparingly except when his "soul was tried." The fact that he had taken several copious draughts of the fiery Mononga-Durkee immediately upon his return was an indication that his soul was tried, and what so reasonable as to assume that it had been tried by Viola.

In a different frame of mine, Kenneth might have accepted this as a most gratifying augury. But, being without hope himself, he took no comfort in Barry's gloom. What would he not give to be in the roisterer's boots instead of his own?

The spoken lament had barely passed his lips when the wheel of fate took a new and unexpected turn, bringing his dolorous meditations to a sudden halt and subsequently upsetting all his plans.

He thought he was alone in the gloom until he was startled by the sound of a man's voice almost at his elbow.

"Evenin', Mr. Gwynne."

CHAPTER XII

ISAAC STAIN APPEARS BY NIGHT

Whirling, he made out the lank shadow of a man leaning against a tree close by.

"Good evening," he muttered in some confusion, conscious of a sense of guilt in being caught in the act of spying.

"I've been follerin' you fer quite a ways," observed the unknown. "Guess you don't remember me. My name is Stain, Isaac Stain."

"I remember you quite well," said Kenneth, stiffly. "May I inquire why you have been following me, Mr. Stain?"

"Well, I jest didn't know of anybody else I could come to about a certain matter. It has to do with that feller, Lapelle, up yander in Trentman's place. Fust, I went up to Mrs. Gwyn's house, but it was all dark, an' nobody to home 'cept that dog o' her'n. He knowed me er else he'd have jumped me. I guess we'd better mosey away from this place. A good many trees have ears, you know."

They walked off together in the direction of town. Stain was silent until they had put a hundred paces or more between them and the grove.

"Seems that Violy is right smart taken with this Lapelle feller," he observed. "Well, I thought I'd oughter tell her ma what I heerd about him to-day. Course, everybody's heerd queer things about him, but this beats anything I've come acrosst yet. Martin Hawk's daughter, Moll, come hoofin' it up to my cabin this mornin' an' told me the derndest story you've ever heerd. She came to me, she sez, on account of me bein' an old friend of Rachel's, an' she claims to be a decent, honest girl in spite of what her dodgasted father is. Everybody believes Mart is a hoss thief an' sheep-stealer an' all that, but he hain't ever been caught at it. He's purty thick with Barry Lapelle. Moll Hawk sez her dad'll kill her if he ever finds out she come to me with this story. Seems that Barry an' Violy are calculatin' on gettin' married an' the old woman objects. Some time this past week, Violy told Barry she wouldn't marry him

anywheres 'cept in her own mother's house. Well, from what Moll sez, Barry has got other idees about it."

He paused to bite off a fresh chew of tobacco.

"Go on, Stain. What did the girl tell you?"

"Pears that Barry ain't willin' to take chances on gettin' married jest that way, an' besides he's sort of got used to havin' anything he wants without waitin' very long fer it. Now, I don't know whuther Violy's a party to the scheme or not,--maybe she is an' maybe she ain't. But from what Moll Hawk sez there's a scheme on foot to get the best of Rachel Gwyn by grabbin' Violy some night an' rushin' her to a hidin' place down the river where Barry figgers he c'n persuade her to marry him an' live happy ever afterwards, as the sayin' is. Seems that Barry figgers that you, bein' a sort o' brother to her, will put your foot down on them gettin' married, so he's goin' to get her away from here before it's too late. Moll sez it's all fixed up, 'cept the time fer doin' it. Martin Hawk an' a half dozen fellers from some'eres down the river is to do the job. All she knows is it's to be in the dark o' the moon, an' that's not fer off. Moll sez she believes Violy knows about the plan an' sort of agrees to--"

"I don't believe it, Stain," broke in Kenneth. "She would not lend herself to a low-down trick like that."

Stain shook his head. "They say she's terrible in love with Barry, an' gosh only knows what a woman'll stoop to in order to git the man she's set her heart on. Why, I could tell you somethin' about a woman that was after me some years back,--a widder down below Vincennes,--her husband used to run a flatboat,--an', by cracky, Mr. Gwynne, you wouldn't believe the things she done. Chased me clean down to Saint Louis an' back ag'in, an' then trailed me nearly fifty miles through the woods to an Injin village on the White River. I don't know what I'd have done if it hadn't been fer an Injin I'd befriended a little while back. He shot her in the leg an' she was laid up fer nearly six weeks, givin' me that much of a start. That was four years ago an' to this day I never go to sleep at night without fust lookin' under the bed. Some day I'll tell you all about that woman, but not now. I'm jest tellin' this to show you what a woman'll do when she once makes up her mind, an' maybe Violy ain't any different from the rest of 'em."

"Nevertheless, Viola is not that kind," asserted Kenneth, stubbornly. "She may be in love with Lapelle, but if she has made up her mind to be married at her mother's house, that's the end of it. See here, Stain, I've been thinking while you were talking. If there is really anything in this story, I doubt the wisdom of going to Mrs. Gwyn with it, and certainly it would be a bad plan to speak to Viola. We've got to handle this matter ourselves. I want to catch Barry Lapelle red-handed. That is the surest way to convince Viola that he is an unworthy scoundrel. It is my duty to protect my--my sister--and I shall find a way to do so, whether she likes it or not. You know, perhaps, that we are not on the friendliest of terms."

"Yep, I know," said Stain. "You might as well know that I am on their side, Mr. Gwynne. Whatever the trouble is between you an' them two women, I am for them an' ag'in you. That's understood,

ain't it?"

"It is," replied Kenneth, impressed by the hunter's frankness. "But all the more reason why in a case like this you and I should work hand in hand. I am glad you came to me with the Hawk girl's story. Hawk and his crew will find me waiting for them when they come. They will not find their job a simple one."

"I guess you'll need a little help, Mr. Gwynne," said Stain, drily. "What are you goin' to do? Call in a lot o' these dodgasted canary birds to fight the hawks? If you do, you'll get licked. What you want is a man er two that knows how to shoot an' is in the habit o' huntin' varmints. You c'n count on me, Mr. Gwynne, if you need me. If you feel that you don't need me, jest say so, an' I'll go it alone. I don't like Martin Hawk; we got a grudge to settle, him an' me. So make your choice. You an' me will work in cahoots with each other, or we'll go at it single-hand."

"We will work together, Stain," said Kenneth, promptly. "You know your man, you know the lay of the land, and you are smarter than I am when it comes to handling an affair of this kind. I will be guided by you. Shake hands."

The two men shook hands. Then the lawyer in Gwynne spoke.

"You should see this Hawk girl again and keep in touch with their plans. We must not let them catch us napping."

"She's comin' to see me in a day er so. Mart Hawk went down to Attica to-day, him an' a feller named Suggs who's been soberin' up at Mart's fer the past few days. The chances are he's gone down there on this very business."

"Will you keep in touch with me?"

"Yes, sir. If you ain't got anything to do to-morrow, you might ride out to my place, where we c'n talk a little more free-like."

"A good idea, Stain. You are sure nothing is likely to happen to-night?"

"Not till the dark o' the moon, she sez."

"By the way, why is she turning against her father like this?"

"Well, you remember what I was jest sayin' about women,--how sot they are in their ways concarnin' a man? Well, Moll is after Barry Lapelle,--no question about that. She's an uncommon good-lookin' girl, I might say, an' I guess Barry ain't blind. Course, she's an uneducated girl an' purty poor trash,--you couldn't expect much else of a daughter of Martin Hawk, I guess,--but that don't seem to make much difference when it comes to fallin' in love. You don't need to have much book learnin' fer that. I could tell ye about a girl I used to know,--but we'll save it fer some other time."

"I see," mused Kenneth, reflectively. "She wants Lapelle for herself. But doesn't she realize that if they attempt this outrage her own father stands a pretty good chance of being shot?"

"Lord love ye, that don't worry her none," explained the hunter. "She don't keer much what happens to him. Why, up to this day he licks the daylight out o' her, big as she is. You c'n hear her yell fer half a mile. That's how she comes to be a friend o' mine, I happened to be huntin' down nigh Mart's place last fall an' heerd her screamin',--you could hear the blows landin' on her back, too,--so I jest stepped sort o' spry to'ards his cabin an' ketched him layin' it on with a wilier branch as thick as your thumb, an' her a screechin' like a wild-cat in a trap. Well, what happened inside the next minute made a friend o' her fer life,--an' an enemy o' him. You'd have thought any dootiful an' loyal offspring would o' tried to pull me off'n him, but all she done was to stand back an' egg me on, 'specially when I took to tannin' him with the same stick he'd been usin' on her. Seems like Mart's never felt very friendly to'ards me sence that day."

"I shouldn't think he would."

"When I got kind o' wore out with wollopin' him, I sot down to rest on the edge o' the waterin' trough, an' she comes over to me an' sez she wished I'd stay an' help her bury the old man. She said if I'd wait there she'd go an' get a couple o' spades out'n the barn,--well, to make a long story short, soon as Mart begin to realize he was dead an' wasn't goin' to have a regular funeral, with mourners an' all that, he sot up an' begin to whine all over ag'in. So I up an' told him if I ever heerd of him lickin' his gal ag'in, I'd come down an' take off what little hide there was left on him. He said he'd never lick her ag'in as long as he lived. So I sez to Moll, sez I, 'If you ever got anything to complain of about this here white-livered weasel, you jest come straight to me, an' I'll make him sorry he didn't get into hell sooner.' Well, sir, after that he never licked her without fust tyin' somethin' over her mouth so's she couldn't yell, an' it wasn't till this afternoon that I found out he'd been at it all along, same as ever, 'cept when Barry Lapelle was there. Seems that Barry stopped him from lickin' her once, an' that made Moll foller him around like a dog tryin' to lick his hand. No, sir, she won't be heartbroke if somebody puts a rifle ball between Mart's eyes an' loses it some'eres back inside his skull. She'd do it herself if she wasn't so doggoned sure somebody else is goin' to do it, sooner or later."

"You say there was no one at home up at Mrs. Gwyn's?" observed Kenneth, apprehensively. "That's queer. Where do you suppose they are?"

"That's what I'm wonderin' about. Mrs. Gwyn never goes nowhere, 'cept out to the farm, an' I'm purty sure she didn't--Say, do you hear somebody comin' up the road behind us?"

He laid a hand on Kenneth's arm and they both stopped to listen.

"I hear no one," said the young man.

"Well, you ain't got a hunter's ears," said the other. "Some one's follerin' us,--a good ways back. I've got so's I c'n hear an acorn drop forty mile away."

They drew off into the shadows at the roadside and waited. Twenty yards or more ahead gleamed the lights in the windows of the nearest

store. A few seconds elapsed, and then Kenneth's ears caught the sound of footsteps in the soft dirt road, and presently the subdued murmur of voices.

"Women," observed Stain, laconically, lowering his voice. "Let 'em pass. If we show ourselves now, they'll think we're highwaymen or something, an' begin screechin' fer dear life."

Two vague, almost indistinguishable figures took shape in the darkness down the road and rapidly drew nearer. They passed within ten feet of the two men,--black voiceless shadows. Stain's hand still gripped his companion's arm. The women had almost reached the patches of light cast upon the road from the store windows, before the hunter spoke.

"Recognize 'em?" he whispered.

"No."

"Well, I guess I know now why there wasn't nobody to home up yander. That was Violy an' her ma."

Kenneth started. "You--you don't mean it!"

"Yep. An' if you was to ask me what they air doin' down here by the river I'd tell you. Mrs. Gwyn jest simply took Violy down there to Trentman's shanty an' SHOWED her Barry Lapelle playin' cards."

"Impossible! I would have seen them."

"Not from where you stood. The winders on the river side air open, an' you c'n see into the house. On the side facin' this way, Jack's got curtains hangin'. Well, Mrs. Gwyn took Violy 'round on t'other side where she could look inside. Maybe you didn't hear what they was sayin' when we fust beared 'em talkin'. Well, I did. I heard Violy say, plain as day, 'I don't keer what you say, mother, he swore to me he never plays except fer fun.' An' Rachel Gwyn, she sez, 'There ain't no setch thing as playin' fer fun in that place, so don't talk foolish.' That's all I heard 'em say,--an' they ain't spoke a word sence."

"Come along, Stain," said Kenneth, starting forward. "We must follow along behind, to see that they reach home safely."

The hunter gave vent to a deprecating grunt. "They won't thank us if they happen to turn around an' ketch us at it. 'Sides, I got to be startin' to'ards home. That ole hoss o' mine ain't used to bein' out nights. Like as not, he's sound asleep this minute, standin' over yander in front o' Curt Cole's blacksmith shop, an' whenever that hoss makes up his mind he's asleep there ain't nothin' that'll convince him he ain't. There they go, turnin' off Main street, so's they won't run across any curious-minded saints. Guess maybe we'd better trail along behind, after all."

Fifteen minutes later the two men, standing back among the trees, saw lights appear in the windows of Mrs. Gwyn's house. Then they turned and wended their way toward the public square. They had spoken but few words to each other while engaged in the stealthy enterprise, and then only in whispers. No one may know what was in

the mind of the hunter, but in Kenneth's there was a readjustment of plans. A certain determined enthusiasm had taken the place of his previous depression. The excitement of possible conflict, the thrill of adventure had wrought a complete change in him. His romantic soul was aflame.

"See here, Stain," he began, when they were down the slope; "I've been thinking this matter over and I have come to the conclusion that the best thing for me to do is to go straight to Lapelle and tell him I am aware of his--"

"Say, you're supposed to be a lawyer, ain't you?" drawled his companion, sarcastically.

"Yes, I am," retorted Kenneth.

"Well, all I got to say is you'd make a better wood-chopper. Barry'd jest tell you to go to hell, an' that'd be the end of it as fer as you're concerned. Course, he'd give up the plan, but he'd make it his business to find out how you got wind of it. Next thing we'd know, Moll Hawk would have her throat slit er somethin',--an' I reckon that wouldn't be jest what most people would call fair, Mr. Gwynne. I guess we'd better let things slide along as they air an' ketch Mart an' his crowd in the act. You don't reckon that Barry is goin' to take a active part in this here kidnappin' job, do you? Not much! He won't be anywheres near when it happens. He's too cute fer that. You won't be able to fasten anything on him till it's too late to do anything."

Kenneth was properly humbled. "You are right, Stain. If you hear of anybody who wants to have some wood chopped, free of charge, I wish you'd let me know."

"Well," began the laconic Mr. Stain, "it takes considerable practice to get to be even a fair to middlin' woodchopper."

CHAPTER XIII

THE GRACIOUS ENEMY

Bright and early the next morning Kenneth gave orders to have his new home put in order for immediate occupancy. Having made up his mind to remain in Lafayette and face the consequences that had seemed insurmountable the night before, he lost no time in committing himself to the final resolve. Zachariah was despatched with instructions to lay in the necessary supplies, while two women were engaged to sweep, scrub and furbish up the long uninhabited house. He had decided to move in that very afternoon.

Meanwhile he rented an "office" on the north side of the public square, a small room at the back of a furniture store, pending the completion of the two story brick block on the south side. With commendable enterprise he lost no time in outfitting the temporary office from the furniture dealer's stock. His scanty library of law books,--a half dozen volumes in all,--Coke, Kent and Chitty,

among them,--had been packed with other things in the cumbersome saddle bags, coming all the way from Kentucky with him.

Of necessity he had travelled light, but he had come well provided with the means to purchase all that was required in the event that he decided to make Lafayette his abiding place.

As he was hurrying away from the tavern shortly after breakfast, he encountered Lapelle coming up from the stable-yard. The young Louisianian appeared to be none the worse for his night's dissipation. In fact, he was in a singularly amiable frame of mind.

"Hello," he called out. Kenneth stopped and waited for him to come up. "I'm off pretty soon for my place below town. Would you care to come along? It's only about eight miles. I want to arrange with Martin Hawk for a duck shooting trip the end of the week. He looks after my lean-to down there, and he is the keenest duck hunter in these parts. Better come along."

"Sorry I can't make it," returned Kenneth. "I am moving into my house to-day and that's going to keep me pretty busy."

"Well, how would you like to go out with us a little later on for ducks?"

"I'd like to, very much. That is, after I've got thoroughly settled in my new office, shingles painted, and so forth. Mighty good of you to ask me."

Barry was regarding him somewhat narrowly.

"So you are moving up to your house to-day, are you? That will be news to Viola. She's got the whim that you don't intend to live there."

"I was rather undecided about it myself,--at least for the present. I am quite comfortable here at Mr. Johnson's."

"It isn't bad here,--and he certainly sets a good table. Say, I guess I owe you a sort of apology, Kenny. I hope you will overlook the way I spoke last night when you said you couldn't go to Jack Trentman's. I guess I was a--well, a little sarcastic, wasn't I?"

There was nothing apologetic in his voice or bearing. On the contrary, he spoke in a lofty, casual manner, quite as if this perfunctory concession to the civilities were a matter of form, and was to be so regarded by Gwynne.

"I make it a rule to overlook, if possible, anything a man may say when he is drinking," said Kenneth, smiling.

Barry's pallid cheeks took on a faint red tinge; his hard eyes seemed suddenly to become even harder than before.

"Meaning, I suppose, that you considered me a trifle tipsy, eh?" he said, the corner of his mouth going up in mirthless simulation of a grin.

"Well, you had taken something aboard, hadn't you?"

"A drink or two, that was all," said the other, shrugging his shoulders. "Anyhow, I have apologized for jeering at you, Gwynne, so I've done all that a sober man should be expected to do," he went on carelessly. "You missed it by not going down there with me last night. I cleaned 'em out."

"You did, eh?"

"A cool two thousand," said the other, with a satisfaction that bordered on exultation. "By the way, changing the subject, I'd like to ask you a question. Has a mother the legal right to disinherit a son in case said son marries contrary to her wishes?"

Kenneth looked at him sharply. Could it be possible that Lapelle's mother objected to his marriage with Viola, and was prepared to take drastic action in case he did so?

"Different states have different laws," he answered. "I should have to look it up in the statutes, Barry."

"Well, what is your own opinion?" insisted the other, impatiently. "You fellows always have to look things up in a book before you can say one thing or another."

"Well, it would depend largely on circumstances," said Kenneth, judicially. "A parent can disinherit a child if he so desires, provided there is satisfactory cause for doing so. I doubt whether a will would stand in case a parent attempted to deprive a child of his or her share of an estate descending from another parent who was deceased. For example, if your father left his estate to his widow in its entirety, I don't believe she would have the right to dispose of it in her will without leaving you your full and legal share under the statutes of this or any other state. Of course, you understand, there is nothing to prevent her making such a will. But you could contest it and break it, I am sure."

"That's all I want to know," said the other, drawing a deep breath as of relief. "A close friend of mine is likely to be mixed up in just that sort of unpleasantness, and I was a little curious to find out whether such a will would stand the test."

"Your friend should consult his own lawyer, if he has one, Lapelle. That is to say, he should go to some one who knows all the circumstances. If you want my advice, there it is. Don't take my word for it. It is too serious a matter to be settled off-hand,--and my opinion in the premises may be absolutely worthless."

"I was only asking for my own satisfaction, Gwynne. No doubt my friend has already consulted a lawyer and has been advised. I must be off. Sorry you can't come with me."

Kenneth would have been surprised and disturbed if he could have known all that lay behind these casual questions. But it was not for him to know that Viola had repeated Mrs. Gwyn's threat to her impatient, arrogant lover, nor was it for him to connect a simple question of law with the ugly plot that had been revealed to Isaac Stain by Moll Hawk.

After two nights of troubled thought, Barry Lapelle had hit upon an extraordinary means to circumvent Rachel Gwyn. With Machiavellian cunning he had devised a way to make Viola his wife without jeopardizing her or his own prospects for the future. No mother, he argued, could be so unreasonable as to disinherit a daughter who had been carried away by force and was compelled to wed her captor rather than submit to a more sinister alternative.

Shortly after the noon meal, Kenneth rode up to the old Gwyn house. He found Zachariah beaming on the front door step.

"Yas, suh,--yas, suh!" was the servant's greeting. "Right aroun' dis way, Marse Kenny. Watch out, suh, ailse yo' scrape yo' hat off on dem branches."

He grasped the bit, after his master had dismounted in the weed-covered little roadway at the side of the house, and ceremoniously waved his hand toward the open door.

"Step right in, suh,--yas, suh,--an' make yo'self to home, suh. Sit right down front of de fiah, Marse Kenny. Ah won't be more'n two shakes, suh, stablin'--yas, suh! Come on hyar, yo' Brandy Boy! Ise gwine show yo' whar yo's gwine to be de happies' hoss in--yas, suh,--yas, suh!"

The young man looked long and searchingly through the trees before entering the house, but saw no sign of his neighbours. He thought he detected a slight movement of a curtain in one of the windows,--the parlor window, if his memory served him right.

It was late in the afternoon before he saw either of his relatives. He had had occasional glimpses of the negro servant-girl and also of a gaunt stable-man, both of whom favoured his partially obscured abode with frank interest and curiosity. A clumsy, silent hound came up to the intervening fence several times during the afternoon and inspected the newcomers with seeming indifference, an attitude which misled Zachariah into making advances that were received with alarming ill-temper.

Kenneth was on his front doorstep, contemplating with secret despair the jungle of weeds and shrubbery that lay before him, completely obliterating the ancient path down to the gate. The whole place was overgrown with long, broken weeds, battered into tangled masses by the blasts of winter; at his feet were heaps of smitten burdocks and the dead, smothered stems of hollyhocks, geraniums and other garden plants set out and nurtured with tender care by Rachel Gwyn during her years of occupancy. The house needed painting, the roof required attention, the front gate was half open and immovably imbedded in the earth.

He was not aware of Viola's presence on the other side of the fence dividing the two yards until her voice fell upon his ears. It was clear and sweet and bantering.

"I suppose you are wondering why we haven't weeded the yard for you, brother Kenny."

As he made his way through the weeds to the fence, upon which she

rested her elbows while she gazed upon him with a mocking smile in the eyes that lay far back in the shovel-like hood of her black quaker bonnet, he experienced a sudden riotous tumult in the region of his heart. Shaded by the dark, extended wings of the bonnet, her face was like a dusky rose possessed of the human power to smile. The ribbon, drawn close under her chin, was tied in a huge bow-knot, while at the back of her head the soft, loose cap of the bonnet fitted snugly over hair that he knew would gleam with tints of bronze if exposed to the rays of the sinking sun.

"Not at all," he rejoined. "I am wondering just where I'd better begin."

"Did you find the house all right?"

"Yes. You have saved me a lot of trouble, Viola."

"Don't give me credit for it. Mother did everything. I suppose you know that the furniture and other things belong to you by rights. She didn't give them to you out of charity."

"The last thing in the world I should expect would be charity from your mother," he said, stung by the obvious jibe.

She smiled tolerantly. "She is more charitable than you imagine. It was only last night that she said she wished Barry Lapelle was half as good and upright as you are."

"That was very kind of her. But if such were the case, I dare say it never would have occurred to you to fall in love with him."

He had come up to the fence and was standing with his hand on the top rail. She met his ironic gaze for a moment and then lowered her eyes.

"I wish it were possible for us to be friends, Kenny," she surprised him by saying. "It doesn't seem right for us to hate each other," she went on, looking up at him again. "It's not our fault that we are who and what we are. I can understand mother's attitude toward you. You are the son of another woman, and I suppose it is only natural for her to be jealous. But you and I had the same father. It--it ought to be different with us, oughtn't it?"

"It ought to be,--and it shall be, Viola, if you are willing. It rests entirely with you."

"It is so hard to think of you as a brother. Somehow I wish you were not."

"It is pretty hard luck, isn't it? You may be sure of one thing. If I were not your brother I would be Barry Lapelle's most determined rival."

She did not laugh at this. On the contrary, her eyes clouded.

"The funny part of it is, Kenny, I have been wondering what would have happened if you had come here as a total stranger and not as my relation." Then she smiled whimsically. "Goodness knows poor Barry is having a hard enough time of it as it is, but what a time

he would be having if you were some one else. You see, you are very good-looking, Kenny, and I am a very silly, frivolous, susceptible little goose."

"You are nothing of the kind," he exclaimed warmly, adding in some embarrassment, "except when you say that I am good-looking."

"And I have also been wondering how many girls have been in love with you," she went on archly; "and whether you have a sweetheart now,--some one you are engaged to. You needn't be afraid to tell me. I can keep a secret. Is there some one back in Kentucky or in the east who--"

"No such luck," whispered simple, honest Kenneth. "No one will have me."

"Have you ever asked anybody?" she persisted.

"No,--I haven't."

"Then, how do you know that no one will have you?"

"Well, of course, I--I mean to say I can't imagine any one caring for me in that way."

"Don't you expect ever to get married?"

"Why,--er,--naturally I--" he stammered, bewildered at this astonishing attack.

"Because if you want to remain a bachelor, I would advise you not to ask any one of half a dozen girls in this town that I could mention. They would take you so quick your head would swim."

By this time he had recovered himself. Affecting grave solicitude, he inquired:

"Is there any one here that you would particularly desire as a sister-in-law?"

She shook her head, almost pensively. "I don't want you to bring any more trouble into the family than you've already brought, and goodness knows THAT would be doing it. But I shouldn't have said that, Kenny. There are lots of fine, lovely girls here. I wouldn't know which one to pick out for you if you were to ask me to do your choosing."

"I will leave it entirely in your hands," said he, grinning boyishly. "Pick me out a nice, amiable, rather docile young lady,--some one who will come the nearest to being a perfect sister-in-law, and I will begin sparking her at once. By the way, I hope matters are going more smoothly for you and Barry."

Her face clouded. She shot a suspicious, questioning look at him.

"I--I want to talk to you about Barry some day," she said seriously.

"You seemed to resent it most bitterly the last time I attempted to talk to you about him," said he, somewhat pointedly.

"You were horrid that day," said she. "I have a good deal to forgive. You said some very mean, nasty things to me that day over there," indicating the thicket with a jerk of her head.

"I am glad to see that you took them to heart and have profited," he ventured boldly.

She hesitated, and then spoke with a frankness that shamed him. "Yes, I did take them to heart, Kenny. I will not say that I have profited, but I'll never make the same kind of a fool of myself again. I hated you with all my soul that day,--and for a long time afterward,--but I guess you took the right way with me, after all. If I was fair and square, I would say that I am grateful to you. But, you see, I am not fair and square. I am as stubborn as a mule."

"The best thing about a mule is that he takes his whalings without complaining."

She sighed. "I often wonder what a mule thinks about when he stands there without budging while some angry, infuriated man beats him until his arm gets tired."

"That's very simple. He just goes on thinking what a fool the man is for licking a mule."

"Good! I hope you will remember that the next time you try to reason with me."

"What is it you want to say to me about Barry?" he asked, abruptly.

"Oh, there is plenty of time for that," she replied, frowning. "It will keep. How are you getting along with the house?"

"Splendidly. It was in very good order. I will be settled in a day or two and as comfortable as anything. To-night Zachariah and I are going to make a list of everything we need and to-morrow I shall start out on a purchasing tour. I intend to buy quite a lot of new furniture, things for the kitchen, carpets and--"

Viola interrupted him with an exclamation. Her eyes were shining, sparkling with eagerness.

"Oh, won't you take me along with you? Mr. Hanna has just received a wonderful lot of things from down the river, and at Benbridge & Foster's they have a new stock of--"

"Hurrah!" he broke in jubilantly. "It's just what I wanted, Viola. Now you are being a real sister to me. We will start early in the morning and--and buy out the town. Bless your heart, you've taken a great load off my mind. I haven't the intelligence of a snipe when it comes to fitting up a--why, say, I tell you what I'll do. I will let you choose everything I need, just as if you were setting up housekeeping for yourself. Curtains, table cloths, carpets, counterpanes, china, Queensware, chairs, chests--"

"Brooms, clothes-pins, rolling-pins, skillets, dough-bowls, cutlery--"

"Bureaus, looking-glasses, wardrobe, antimacassar tidies, bedspreads,

towels--"

"Oh, Kenny, what fun we'll have," she cried. "And, first of all, you must let me come over right now and help you with your list. I know much better than you do what you really need,--and what you don't need. We must not spend too much money, you see."

"Gad," he gulped, "you--you talk just as if you and I were a poor, struggling young couple planning to get married."

"No, it only proves how mean and selfish I am. I am depriving your future bride of the pleasure of furnishing her own house, and that's what all brides like better than anything. But I promise to pick out things that I know she will like. In the meantime, you will be happy in knowing that you have something handsome to tempt her with when the time comes. As soon as you are all fixed up, you must give a party. That will settle everything. They'll all want to marry you,--and they'll have something to remember me by when I'm gone. Come on, Kenny, let's go in and start making the list."

She started off toward her own gate, but stopped as he called out to her.

"Wait! Are you sure your mother will approve of your--"

"Of course she will!" she flung back at him. "She doesn't mind our being friendly. Only,"--and she came back a few steps, "I am afraid she will never be friends with you, Kenny. I am sorry."

He was silent. She waited for a moment before turning away, shaking her head slightly as if attempting to dismiss something that perplexed her sorely. There was a yearning in his eyes as they followed her down to the gate; then he shot a quick, accusing glance at the house in which his enemy lived. He saw the white curtains in the north parlor window drop into place, flutter for a second or two, and then hang perfectly still. Rachel Gwyn had been watching them. He made no effort to hide the scowl that darkened his brow as he continued to stare resentfully at the window.

He met Viola at his own disabled gate, which cracked and shivered precariously on its rusty hinges as he jerked it open.

"I lived for nearly three years in this house, Kenny," she said as she picked her way through the weeds. "I slept on a very hard straw tick up in the attic. It was dreadfully cold in the winter time. I used to shiver all night long curled up with my knees up to my chin. And in the summer time it was so hot I slept with absolutely nothing,--" She broke off in sudden confusion. "Our new house is only about a year old," she went after a moment. Pointing, she added: "That is my bedroom window up there. You can get a glimpse of it through the trees but when the leaves are out you can't see it at all from here."

"I shall keep an eye on that window," said he, with mock severity, "and if ever I catch you climbing down on a ladder to run away with--well, I'll wake the dead for miles around with my yells. See to it, my dear sister, that you attempt nothing rash at the dead hour of night."

She laughed. "Have you seen our dog? I pity the valiant knight who tries to put a ladder up to my window."

They spent the better part of an hour going over the house. She was in an adorable mood. Once she paused in the middle of a sentence to ask why he was so solemn.

"Goodness me, Kenny, you look as if you had lost your very best friend. Aren't you interested? Shall we stop?"

A feeling of utter desolation had stricken him. He was sick at heart. Every drop of blood in his body was crying out for her. Small wonder that despair filled his soul and lurked in his gloomy, disconsolate eyes. She had removed her bonnet. If he had thought her beautiful on that memorable night at Striker's he now realized that his first impression was hopelessly inadequate. Her eyes, dancing with eagerness, no longer reflected the disdain and suspicion with which she had regarded him on that former occasion. Her smile was frank and warm and joyous. He saw her now as she really was, incomparably sweet and charming--and so his heart was sick.

"I wouldn't stop for the world," he exclaimed, making a determined effort to banish the tell-tale misery from his eyes.

"I know!" she cried, after a searching look into his eyes. "You are in love with some one, Kenny, and you are wishing that she were here in my place, helping you to plan the--"

"Nonsense," he broke in gruffly. "Put that out of your head, Viola. I tell you there is no--er--no such girl."

"Then," she said darkly, "it must be the dreadful extravagance I am leading you into. Goodness, when I look at this list, I realize what a lot of money it is going to take to--"

"We're not half through," he said, "and I am not thinking of the expense. I am delighted with everything you have suggested. I shudder when I think how helpless I should have been without you. Didn't I tell you in the beginning that I wanted you to fix this house up just as if you were planning to live in it yourself? Put down all the things you would most like to have, Viola, and--and--well, confound the expense. Come along! We're losing time. Did you jot down that last thing we were talking about? That--er--that--" He paused, wrinkling his forehead.

"I don't believe you have been paying any attention to what--Now, tell me, what WAS the last thing we were talking about?"

He squinted hard at the little blank book in her hand. She closed it with a snap.

"Have you got it down?" he demanded severely.

"I have."

"Then, there's no use worrying about it," he said, with great satisfaction. "Now, let me see: don't you think I ought to have a clock for the mantelpiece?"

"I put that down half an hour ago," she said. "The big gold French clock I was telling you about."

"That's so. The one you like so well down at Currie's."

They proceeded. He had followed about, carrying the ink pot into which she frequently dipped the big quill pen. She overlooked nothing in the scantily furnished house. She even went so far as to timidly suggest that certain articles of furniture might well be replaced by more attractive ones, and he had promptly agreed. At last she announced that she must go home.

"If you buy all the things we have put down here, Kenny, you will have the loveliest house in Lafayette. My, how I shall envy you!"

"I have a feeling I shall be very lonely--amidst all this splendour," he said.

"Oh, no, you won't. I shall run in to see you every whipstitch. You will get awfully sick of having me around."

"I am thinking of the time when you are married, Viola, and--and have gone away from Lafayette."

"Well," she began, her brow clouding, "you seem to have got along without me for a good many years,--so I guess you won't miss me as much as you think. Besides, we are supposed to be enemies, aren't we?"

"It doesn't look much like it now, does it?"

"No," she said dubiously, "but I--I must not do anything that will make mother feel unhappy or--"

He broke in a little harshly. "Are you forgetting how unhappy it will make her if you marry Barry Lapelle?"

"Oh, that may be a long way off," she replied calmly. "You see, Barry and I quarrelled yesterday. We both have vile tempers,--perfectly detestable tempers. Of course, we will make up again--we always do--but there may come a time when he will say, 'Oh, what's the use trying to put up with you any longer?' and then it will all be over."

She was tying her bonnet strings as she made this astonishing statement. Her chin being tilted upward, she looked straight up into his eyes the while her long, shapely fingers busied themselves with the ribbons.

"I guess you have found out what kind of a temper I have, haven't you?" she added genially. As he said nothing (being unable to trust his voice): "I know I shall lead poor Barry a dog's life. If he knew what was good for him he would avoid me as he would the plague."

He swallowed hard. "You--you will not fail to come with me to-morrow morning on the purchasing tour," he said, rather gruffly. "I'll be helpless without you."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," she cried.

As they walked down to the gate she turned to him and abruptly said:

"Barry is going down the river next week. He expects to be away for nearly a fortnight. Has he said anything to you about it?"

Kenneth started. Next week? The dark of the moon.

"Not a word," he replied grimly.

CHAPTER XIV

A MAN FROM DOWN THE RIVER

Kenneth's first night in the old Gwyn house was an uneasy, restless one, filled with tormenting doubts as to his strength or even his willingness to continue the battle against the forces of nature.

Viola's night was also disturbed. Some strange, mysterious instinct was at work within her, although she was far from being aware of its significance. She lay awake for a long time thinking of him. She was puzzled. Over and over again she asked herself why she had blushed when he looked down at her as she was tying her bonnet-strings, and why had she felt that queer little thrill of alarm? And why did he look at her like that? She answered this question by attributing its curious intensity to a brotherly interest--which was quite natural--and the awakening of a dutiful affection--but that did not in any sense account for the blood rushing to her face, so that she must have reminded him of a "turkey gobbler." She announced to her mother at breakfast:

"I don't believe I can ever think of Kenny as a brother."

Rachel Gwyn looked up, startled. "What was that you called him?" she asked.

"Kenny. He has always been called that for short. And somehow, mother, it sounds familiar to me. Have I ever heard father speak of him by that name?"

"I--I am sure I do not know," replied her mother uneasily. "I doubt it. It must be a fancy, Viola."

"I can't get over feeling shy and embarrassed when he looks at me," mused the girl. "Don't you think it odd? It doesn't seem natural for a girl to feel that way about a brother."

"It is because you are not used to each other," interrupted Rachel. "You will get over it in time."

"I suppose so. You are sure you don't mind my going to the stores with him, mother?"

Her mother arose from the table. There was a suggestion of fatalism

in her reply. "I think I can understand your desire to be with him." She went to the kitchen window and looked over at the house next door. "He is out in his back yard now, Viola," she said, after a long pause, "all dressed and waiting for you. You had better get ready."

"It will not hurt him to wait awhile," said Viola perversely. "In fact, it will do him good. He thinks he is a very high and mighty person, mother." She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. "I shall keep him waiting for just an hour."

Rachel's strong, firm shoulders drooped a little as she passed into the sitting-room. She sat down abruptly in one of the stiff rocking-chairs, and one with sharp ears might have heard her whisper to herself:

"We cannot blindfold the eyes of nature. They see through everything."

It was nine o'clock when Viola stepped out into her front yard, reticule in hand, and sauntered slowly down the walk, stopping now and then to inspect some Maytime shoot. He was waiting for her outside his own gate.

"What a sleepy-head you are," was her greeting as she came up to him.

"I've been up since six o'clock," he said.

"Then, for goodness' sake, why have you kept me waiting all this time?"

"My dear Viola, I was not born yesterday, nor yet the day before," he announced, with aggravating calmness. "Long before you were out of short frocks and pantalettes I was a wise old gentleman."

"I don't know just what you mean by that."

"I learned a great many years ago that it is always best to admit you are in fault when a charming young lady says you are. If you had kept me waiting till noon I should still consider it my duty to apologize. Which I now do."

She laughed merrily. "Come along with you. We have much to do on this fine May day. First, we will go to the hardware store, saving the queensware store till the last,--like float at the end of a Sunday dinner."

And so they advanced upon the town, as fine a pair as you would find in a twelvemonth's search. First she conducted him to Jimmy Munn's feed and wagon-yard, where he contracted to spend the first half-dollar of the expedition by engaging Jimmy to haul his purchases up to the house.

"Put the sideboards on your biggest wagon, Jimmy," was Viola's order, "and meet us at Hinkle's."

She proved to be a very sweet and delightful autocrat. For three short and joyous hours she led him from store to store, graciously leaving to him the privilege of selection but in nine cases out of

ten demonstrating that he was entirely wrong in his choice, always with the naive remark after the purchase was completed and the money paid in hand: "Of course, Kenny, if you would rather have the other, don't for the world let me influence you."

"You know more about it than I do," he would invariably declare. "What do I know about carpets?"--or whatever they happened to be considering at the time.

She was greatly dismayed, even appalled, as they wended their way homeward, followed by the first wagonload of possessions, to find that he had spent the stupendous, unparalleled sum of two hundred and forty-two dollars and fifty cents.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "We must take a lot of it back, Kenny. Why didn't you keep track of what you were spending? Why, that's nearly a fourth of one thousand dollars."

He grinned cheerfully. "And we haven't begun to paint the house yet, or paper the walls, or set out the flower beds, or--"

"Goodness me!" she cried, aghast. "You are not going to do all that now, are you?"

"Every bit of it," he affirmed. "I am going to rebuild the barn, put in a new well, dig a cistern, build a smoke-house, lay a brick walk down to the front gate and put up a brand new picket fence--"

"You must be made of money," she cried, eyeing him with wonder in her big, violet eyes.

"I am richer now than when we started out this morning," said he, magnificently.

"When you say things like that, you almost make me wish you were not my brother," said she, after a moment, and to her annoyance she felt the blood mount to her face.

"And what would you do if I were not your brother?" he inquired, looking straight ahead.

Whereupon she laughed unrestrainedly. "You would be dreadfully shocked if I were to tell you,--but I can't help saying that Barry would be so jealous he wouldn't know what to do."

"You might find yourself playing with fire."

"Well," she said, flippantly, "I've got over wanting to play with dolls. Now don't scold me! I can see by your face that you'd like to shake me good and hard. My, what a frown! I am glad it isn't January. If your face was to freeze--There! That's better. I shouldn't mind at all if it froze now. You look much nicer when you smile, Kenny." Her voice dropped a little and a serious expression came into her eyes. "I don't believe I ever saw father smile. But I've seen him when he looked exactly as you did just then. I--I hope you don't mind my talking that way about your father, Kenny. I wouldn't if he were not mine as well."

"You knew him far better than I," he reminded her. Then he added

brightly: "I shall try to do better from now on. I'll smile--if it kills me."

"Don't do that," she protested, with a pretty grimace. "I've been in mourning for ages, it seems, and I'm sure I should hate you if you kept me in black for another year or two."

As they parted at Kenneth's gate,--it seemed to be mutely understood that he was to go no farther,--they observed a tall, black figure cross the little front porch of the house beyond and disappear through the door. Kenneth's eyes hardened. The girl, looking up into those eyes, shook her head and smiled wistfully.

"Will you come over and help me put all these things where they belong?" he asked, after a moment.

"This afternoon, Kenny?"

"If you haven't anything else you would rather--" he began.

"I can't wait to see how the house will look when we get everything in place. I will be over right after dinner,--unless mother needs me for something."

.

That evening Zachariah was noticeably perturbed. He had prepared a fine supper, and to his distress it was scarcely touched by his preoccupied master. Now, Zachariah was proud of his cooking. He was pleased to call himself, without fear of contradiction, "a natteral bo'n cook, from de bottom up." Moreover, his master was a gentleman whose appetite was known to be absolutely reliable; it could be depended upon at almost any hour of the day or night. Small wonder then that Zachariah was not only mystified but grieved as well. He eyed the solemn looking young man with anxiety.

"Ain't yo' all feelin' well, Marse Kenneth?" he inquired, with a justifiable trace of exasperation in his voice.

"What's that, Zachariah?" asked Kenneth, startled out of a profound reverie.

"Is dey anything wrong wid dat ham er--"

"It is wonderful, Zachariah. I don't believe I have ever tasted better ham,--and certainly none so well broiled."

"Ain't--ain't de co'n-bread fitten to eat, suh?"

"Delicious, Zachariah, delicious. You have performed wonders with the--er--new baking pan and--"

"What's de matteh wid dem b'iled pertaters, suh?"

"Matter with them? Nothing! They are fine."

"Well, den, suh, if dere ain't nothin' de matteh wid de vittels, dere suttinly mus' be somefin de matteh wid you, Marse Kenneth. Yo' all ain't etten enough fo' to fill a grassshoppeh."

"I am not hungry," apologized his master, quite humbly.

"Cause why? Yas, suh,--'cause why?" retorted Zachariah, exercising a privilege derived from long and faithful service. "'Cause Miss Viola she done got yo' all bewitched. Can't fool dis yere nigger. Wha' fo' is yo' all feelin' dis yere way 'bout yo' own sister? Yas, suh,--Ah done had my eyes open all de time, suh. Yo' all was goin' 'round lookin' like a hongry dog, 'spectin'--Yas, suh! Yas, SUH! Take plenty, suh, Marse Johnson he say to me, he say, 'Dis yere sap come right outen de finest maple tree in de State ob Indianny, day befo' yesterday,' he say. A leetle mo' coffee, suh? Yas, suh! Das right! Yo' suttinly gwine like dat ham soon as ever yo' get a piece in yo' mouth,--yas, SUH!"

Kenneth's abstraction was due to the never-vanishing picture of Viola, the sleeves of her work-dress rolled up to the elbows, her eyes aglow with enthusiasm, her bonny brown hair done up in careless coils, her throat bare, her spirits as gay as the song of a roistering gale. She had come over prepared for toil, an ample apron of blue gingham shielding her frock, her skirts caught up at the sides, revealing the bottom of her white petticoat and a glimpse of trim, shapely ankles.

She directed the placing of all the furniture carried in by the grunting Jimmy Munn and Zachariah; she put the china safe and pantry in order; she superintended the erection of the big four poster bed, measured the windows for the new curtains, issued irrevocable commands concerning the hanging of several gay English hunting prints (the actual hanging to be done by Kenneth and his servant in a less crowded hour,--after supper, she suggested); ordered Zachariah to remove to the attic such of the discarded articles of furniture as could be carried up the pole ladder, the remainder to go to the barn; left instructions not to touch the rolls of carpet until she could measure and cut them into sections, and then went away with the promise to return early in the morning not only with shears and needle but with Hattie as well, to sew and lay the carpets,--a "Brussels" of bewildering design and an "ingrain" for the bedroom.

"When you come home from the office at noon, Kenny, don't fail to bring tacks and a hammer with you," she instructed, as she fanned her flushed face with her apron.

"But I am not going to the office," he expostulated. "I have too much to see to here."

"It isn't customary for the man of the house to be anywhere around at a time like this," she informed him, firmly. "Besides you ought to be down town looking for customers. How do you know that some one may not be in a great hurry for a lawyer and you not there to--"

"There are plenty of other lawyers if one is needed in a hurry," he protested. "And what's more, I can't begin to practise law in this State without going through certain formalities. You don't understand all these things, Viola."

"Perhaps not," she admitted calmly; "but I do understand moving and house-cleaning, and I know that a man is generally in the way

at such times. Oh, don't look so hurt. You have been fine this afternoon. I don't know how I should have got along without you. But to-morrow it will be different. Hattie and I will be busy sewing carpets and--and--well, you really will not be of any use at all, Kenny. So please stay away."

He was sorely disgruntled at the time and so disconsolate later on that it required Zachariah's startling comment to lift him out of the slough of despond. Spurred by the desire to convince his servant that his speculations were groundless, he made a great to-do over the imposed task of hanging the pictures, jesting merrily about the possibility of their heads being snapped off by Mistress Viola if she popped in the next morning to find that they had bungled the job.

Four or five days passed, each with its measure of bitter and sweet. By the end of the week the carpets were down and the house in perfect order. He invited her over for Sunday dinner. A pained, embarrassed look came into her eyes.

"I was afraid you would ask me to come," she said gently. "I don't think it would be right or fair for me to accept your hospitality. Wait! I know what you are going to say. But it isn't quite the same, you see. Mother has been very kind and generous about letting me come over to help you with the house,--and I suppose she would not object if I were to come as your guest at dinner,--but I have a feeling in here somewhere that it would hurt her if I came here as your guest. So I sha'n't come. You understand, don't you?" "Yes," he said gravely,--and reluctantly. "I understand, Viola."

Earlier in the week he had ridden out to Isaac Stain's. The hunter had no additional news to give him, except that Barry, after spending a day with Martin Hawk, had gone down to Attica by flat-boat and was expected to return to Lafayette on the packet Paul Revere, due on Monday or Tuesday.

Lapelle's extended absence from the town was full of meaning. Stain advanced the opinion that he had gone down the river for the purpose of seeing a Williamsport justice of the peace whose record was none too good and who could be depended upon to perform the contemplated marriage ceremony without compunction if his "palm was satisfactorily greased."

"If we could only obtain some clear and definite idea as to their manner of carrying out this plan," said Kenneth, "I would be the happiest man on earth. But we will be compelled to work in the dark,--simply waiting for them to act."

"Well, Moll Hawk hain't been able to find out just yet when er how they're goin' to do it," said Stain. "All she knows is that two or three men air comin' up from Attica on the Paul Revere and air goin' to get off the boat when it reaches her pa's place. Like as not this scalawag of a justice will be one of 'em, but that's guesswork. That reminds me to ask, did you ever run acrosst a feller in the town you come from named Jasper Suggs?"

"Jasper Suggs? I don't recall the name."

"Well, she says this feller Suggs that's been stayin' at Martin's

cabin fer a week er two claims to have lived there some twenty odd years ago. Guess you must ha' been too small to recollect him. She says he sort of brags about bein' a renegade durin' the war an' fightin' on the side of the Injins up along the Lakes. He's a nasty customer, she says. Claims to be a relation of old Simon Girty's,--nephew er something like that."

"Does he claim to have known any of my family down there?" inquired Kenneth, apprehensively.

"From what Moll says he must have knowed your pa. Leastwise, he says the name's familiar. He was sayin' only a day or two ago that he'd like to see a picter of your pa. He'd know if it was the same feller he used to know soon as he laid eyes on it."

Kenneth pondered a moment and then said: "Do you suppose you could get a letter to Moll Hawk if I were to write it, Stain?"

"I could," said the other, "but it wouldn't do any good. She cain't read er write. Besides, if I was you, I wouldn't risk anything like that. It might fall into Hawk's hands, and the fust thing he would do would be to turn it over to Lapelle,--'cause Martin cain't read himself."

"I was only wondering if she could find out a little more about this man Suggs,--just when he lived there and--and all that."

"He's purty close-mouthed, she says. Got to be, I reckon. He fell in with Martin ten er twelve years ago, an' there was a price on his head then. Martin hid him for awhile an' helped him to git safe away. Like as not Suggs ain't his real name anyhow."

Kenneth was a long time in deciding to speak to Rachel Gwyn about the man Suggs. He found an opportunity to accost her on the day that the Paul Revere came puffing up to the little log-built landing near the ferry. Viola had left the house upon learning that the boat had turned the bend in the river two or three miles below town, and had made no secret of her intention to greet Lapelle when he came ashore. This was Gwynne's first intimation that she was aware of her lover's plan to return by the Paul Revere. He was distinctly annoyed by the discovery.

Rachel was in her back yard, feeding the chickens, when he came up to the fence and waited for her to look in his direction. All week,--in fact, ever since he had come up there to live,--he had been uncomfortably conscious of peering eyes behind the curtains in the parlor window. Time and again he had observed a slight flutter when he chanced to glance that way, as of a sudden release of the curtains held slightly apart by one who furtively watched from within. On the other hand, she never so much as looked toward his house when she was out in her own yard or while passing by on the road. Always she was the straight, stern, unfriendly figure in black, wrapped in her own thoughts, apparently ignorant of all that went on about her.

She turned at last and saw him standing there.

"May I have a word with you?" he said.

She did not move nor did she speak for many seconds, but stood staring hard at him from the shade of her deep black bonnet.

"What is it you want, Kenneth Gwynne?"

"No favour, you may be sure, Rachel Carter."

She seemed to wince a little. After a moment's hesitation, she walked slowly over to the fence and faced him.

"Well?" she said curtly.

"Do you remember a man at home named Jasper Suggs?"

"Are you speaking of my old home in Salem or of--of another place?"

"The place where I was born," he said, succinctly.

"I have never heard the name before," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"There is a man in this neighbourhood,--a rascal, I am told,--who says he lived there twenty years ago."

She eyed him narrowly. "Well,--go on! What has he to say about me?"

"Nothing, so far as I know. I have not talked with him. It came to me in a roundabout way. He is staying with a man named Hawk, down near the Wea." "He keeps pretty company," was all she said in response to this.

"I have been told that he would like to see a daguerreotype of my father some time, just to make sure whether he was the Gwynne he used to know."

"Has he ever seen you, Kenneth Gwynne?" She appeared to be absolutely unconcerned.

"No."

"One look at you would be sufficient," she said. "If you are both so curious, why not arrange a meeting?"

"I am in no way concerned," he retorted. "On the other hand, I should think you would be vitally interested, Rachel Carter. If he knew my father, he certainly must have known you."

"Very likely. What would you have me do?" she went on ironically. "Go to him and beg him to be merciful? Or, if it comes to the worst, hire some one to assassinate him?"

"I am not thinking of your peace of mind. I am thinking of Viola's. We have agreed, you and I, to spare her the knowledge of--"

"Quite true," she interrupted. "You and I have agreed upon that, but there it ends. We cannot include the rest of the world. Chance sends this man, whoever he may be, to this country. I must likewise depend upon Chance to escape the harm he may be in a position to do me. Is it not possible that he may have left before I came there to live? That chance remains, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he admitted. "It is possible. I can tell you something about him. He is related to Simon Girty, and he was a renegade who fought with the Indians up north during the war. Does that throw any light upon his identity?"

"He says his name is Suggs?" she inquired.

He was rewarded by a sharp catch in her breath and a passing flicker of her eyes.

"Jasper Suggs."

She was silent for a moment. "I know him," she said calmly. "His name is Simon Braley. At any rate, there was a connection of Girty's who went by that name and who lived down there on the river for a year or two. He killed the man he was working for and escaped. That was before I--before I left the place. I don't believe he ever dared to go back. So, you see, Chance favours us again, Kenneth Gwynne."

"You forget that he will no doubt remember you as Rachel Carter. He will also remember that you had a little girl."

"Let me remind you that I remember the cold-blooded murder of John Hendricks and that nobody has been hung for it yet," she said.

"My memory is as good as his if it should come to pass that we are forced to exchange compliments. Thank you for the information. The sheriff of this county is a friend of mine. He will be pleased to know that Simon Braley, murderer and renegade, is in his bailiwick. From what I know of Simon Girty's nephew, he is not the kind of man who will be taken alive."

He started. "You mean,--that you will send the sheriff out to arrest him?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly," she replied. "Did you not hear me say that Simon Braley would never be taken alive?"

With that, she turned and walked away, leaving him to stare after her until she entered the kitchen door. He was conscious of a sense of horror that began to send a chill through his veins.

CHAPTER XV

THE LANDING OF THE "PAUL REVERE"

The Paul Revere tied up at the landing shortly after two o'clock. The usual crowd of onlookers thronged the bank, attention being temporarily diverted from an important game of "horseshoes" that was taking place in the sugar grove below Trentman's shanty.

Pitching horseshoes was the daily fair-weather pastime of the male population of the town. At one time or another during the course of the day, practically every man in the place came down to the

grove to shy horseshoes at the stationary but amazingly elusive pegs. It was not an uncommon thing for a merchant to close his place of business for an hour or so in order to keep an engagement to pitch horseshoes with some time-honoured adversary.

On this occasion a very notable match was in progress between "Judge" Billings and Mr. Pennington Sawyer, the real estate agent. They were the recognized champions. Both were accredited with the astonishing feat of ringing eight out of ten casts at twenty paces; if either was more than six inches away from the stake on any try the crowd mutely attributed the miss to inhibitions of the night before. Not only was the betting lively when these two experts met but all other matches were abandoned during the classic clash.

The "Judge" did not owe his title to service on the bench nor even at the bar of justice. It had been bestowed upon him by a liberal-minded community because of his proficiency as a judge of horse races, foot races, shooting matches, dog or rooster fights, and other activities of a similar character. He was, above all things, a good judge of whiskey. When not engaged in judging one thing or another, he managed to eke out a comfortable though sometimes perilous living by trading horses,--a profession which made him an almost infallible judge of men, notwithstanding two or three instances where he had erred with painful results to his person. Notably, the prodigious thrashing Jake Miller had given him two days after a certain trade, and an almost identical experience with Bud Shanks who had given a perfectly sound mare and seventeen dollars to boot for a racehorse that almost blew up with the heavens before Bud was half-way home.

But, whatever his reputation may have been as a horse-trader, "Judge" Billings was unaffectedly noble when it came to judging a contest of any description. Far and wide he was known to be "as honest as the day is long," proof of which may be obtained from his publicly uttered contention that "nobody but a derved fool would do anything crooked while a crowd was lookin' on, with more'n half of 'em carryin' guns or some other weapon that can't be expected to listen to argument."

He was Kenneth Gwynne's first client. In employing the young man to defend a suit brought by Silas Kenwright, he ingenuously announced that the plaintiff had a perfectly good case and that his only object in fighting the claim was to see how near Silas could come to telling the truth under oath. Mr. Kenwright was demanding twenty-five dollars damages for slander. In the complaint Mr. Billings was charged with having held Mr. Kenwright up to ridicule and contumely by asseverating that said plaintiff was "a knock-kneed, cross-eyed, red-headed, white-livered liar."

"The only chance we've got," he explained to Gwynne, "is on the question of his liver. We can prove he's a liar,--in fact, he admits that,--but, doggone it, he's as bow-legged as a barrel hoop, he's wall-eyed, and what little hair he's got is as black as the ace o' spades. I don't suppose the Court would listen to a request to have him opened up to see what colour his liver is,--and that's where he's got us. It ain't so much being called a liar that riles him; he's used to that. It's being called knock-kneed and cross-eyed. He don't mind the white-livered part so much, or the way I spoke about his hair, 'cause one of 'em you can't see an' the other

could be dyed or sheared right down to the skin if the worst came to the worst. If I'd only called him a lousy, ornery, low-lived, sheep-stealing liar, this here suit never would have been brought. But what did I do but up and hurt his feelings by callin' him knock-kneed and cross-eyed. That comes of not stickin' to the truth, Mr. Gwynne,--and it's a derved good lesson for me. Honesty is the best policy, as the feller says. It'll probably cost me forty or fifty dollars for being so slack with my veracity."

Kenneth's suggestion that an effort be made to settle the controversy out of court had met with instant opposition.

"It ain't to be thought of," declared Mr. Billings firmly. "Why, dodgast it, you don't suppose I'm going to pay that feller any money, do you? Not much! I'm willing enough to let him get a judgment against me for any amount he wants, just fer the fun of it, but, by gosh, when you begin to talk about me giving him money, why, that's serious. I'm willing to pay you your ten dollars fee and the court costs, but the only way Si Kenwright can ever collect a penny from me will be after I'm dead and he sneaks in when nobody's around and steals the coppers off my eyes."

This digression serves a simple purpose. It introduces a sporty gentleman of unique integrity whose friendship for Kenneth Gwynne flowered as time went on and ultimately bore such fruits as only the most favoured of men may taste. In passing he may be described as a pudgy, middle-aged individual, with mild blue eyes, an engaging smile, cherubic cheeks, sandy hair, and a highly pitched, far-reaching voice. He also had a bulbous nose resembling a large, ripe strawberry.

Before coming to rest alongside the wharf, the Paul Revere indulged in a vast amount of noise. She whistled and coughed and sputtered and gasped with all the spasmodic energy of a choking monster; her bells kept up an incessant clangour; her wheel creaked and grovelled on the bed of the river, churning the water into a yellowish, foaming mass; her captain bellowed and barked, her crew yelped, her passengers shouted; the flat boats and perogues moored along the bank, aroused from their lassitude, began to romp gaily in the swirl of her crazy backwash; ropes whined and rasped and groaned, the deck rattled hollowly with the tread of heavy feet and the shifting of boxes and barrels and crates; the gangplank came down with a crash,--and so the mighty hundred and fifty ton leviathan of the Wabash came to the end of her voyage!

There were a score of passengers on board, among them Barry Lapelle. He kept well in the rear of the motley throng of voyagers, an elegant, lordly figure, approached only in sartorial distinction by the far-famed gambler, Sylvester Hornaday, who likewise held himself sardonically aloof from the common horde, occupying a position well forward where, it might aptly be said, he could count his sheep as they straggled ashore.

From afar Barry had recognized Viola standing among the people at the top of the bank, and his eager, hungry gaze had not left her. She, too, had caught sight of him long before the boat was near the landing. She waved her kerchief.

He lifted his hat and blew a kiss to her. A thrill of exultation

ran through him. He had not expected her to meet him at the landing. Her mere presence there was evidence of a determination to defy not only her mother but also to brave the storm of gossip that was bound to attend this public demonstration of loyalty on her part, for none knew so well as he how the townspeople looked upon their attachment. A most satisfying promise for the future, he gloated; here was the proof that she loved him, that her tantalizing outbursts of temper were not to be taken seriously, that his power over her was irresistible. There were times when he felt uncomfortably dubious as to his hold upon her affections. She was whimsical, perverse, maddening in her sudden transitions of mood. And she had threatened more than once to have nothing more to do with him unless he mended his ways! Now he smiled triumphantly as he gazed upon her. All that pother about nothing! Henceforth he would pay no attention to her whims; let her rail and fume and lecture as much as she liked, there was nothing for him to be worried about. She would always come round like a lamb,--and when she was his for keeps he would take a lot of the nonsense out of her!

With few exceptions the passengers on board the Revere were strangers,--fortune-seekers, rovers, land-buyers and prospectors from the east and south come to this well-heralded region of promise, perhaps to stay, perhaps to pass on. Three or four Lafayette men, home after a trip down the river, crowded their way ashore, to be greeted by anxious wives. The strangers were more leisurely in their movements. They straggled ashore with their nondescript possessions and ambled off between two batteries of frank, appraising eyes.

Judge Billings, shrewd calculator of human values, quite audibly disclosed his belief that at least three of the newcomers would have to be run out of town before they were a day older, possibly astraddle of a rail.

One of these marked individuals was a tall, swart, bearded fellow with black, shifty eyes and a scowling brow. His baggage consisted of a buckskin sack slung across his shoulder and a small bundle which he carried under his arm. He appeared to have no acquaintances among the voyagers.

"You don't know how happy this makes me, Viola," exclaimed Lapelle as he clasped the girl's hand in his. He was devouring her with a bold, consuming gaze.

She reddened. "I told mother I was coming down to meet you," she explained, visibly embarrassed by the stares of those nearby. "I--I wanted to see you the instant you arrived, Barry. Shall we walk along slowly behind the rest?"

"What's happened?" he demanded suspiciously, his brow darkening.

"Don't be impatient. Wait till they are a little ahead."

"Gad, it sounds ominous. I thought you came down to meet me because you love me and were--well, glad to see me."

"I am glad to see you. You didn't expect me to make an exhibition of myself before all those people, did you?"

His face brightened. "Well, THAT sounds better." His mouth went up

at the corner in its habitual curl. "I'd give all I possess if it was dark now, so that I could grab you and squeeze the--"

"Sh! They will hear you," she whispered, drawing away from him in confusion.

They held back until the throng had moved on a short distance. Then she turned upon him with a dangerous light in her eyes.

"And what's more," she said in a low voice, "I don't like to hear you say such things. They sound so cheap and low--and vulgar, Barry. I--" "Oh, you're always jumping on me for saying the things I really feel," he broke in. "You're my girl, aren't you? Why shouldn't I tell you how I feel? What's vulgar about my telling you I want to hold you in my arms and kiss you? Why, I don't think of anything else, day or night. And what do I get? You put me off,--yes, you do!--bringing up some silly notion about--about--what is it?--propriety! Good Lord, Viola, that's going back to the days of the Puritans,--whoever they were. They just sat around and held hands,--and that's about all I've been allowed to do with you. It's not right,--it's not natural, Viola. People who are really in love with each other just simply can't help kissing and--"

"I guess you were right when you said you were not expecting me down to meet the boat, Barry," she interrupted, looking straight before her.

"Well, didn't I tell you how happy it made me?"

"If you had thought there was any chance of me coming down to meet you, you wouldn't have taken so much to drink," she went on, a little catch in her voice.

Whereupon he protested vigorously that he had not tasted a drop,--except one small dram the captain had given him early that morning when he complained of a chill.

"Why, you're drunk right now," she said miserably. "Oh, Barry, won't you ever--"

"Drunk? I'm as sober as the day I was born," he retorted, squaring his shoulders. "Look at me,--look me in the eye, Viola. Oh, well, if you WON'T look you won't, that's all. And if I'm as drunk as you imagine I am I should think you'd be ashamed to be seen in my company." She did not respond to this, so, with a sneering laugh, he continued: "Suppose I have had a little too much,--who's the cause of it? You! You drive me to it, you do. The last couple of weeks you've been throwing up all my faults to me, tormenting me till I'm nearly crazy with uncertainty. First you say you'll have me, that you'll do anything I wish, and then, just as I begin to feel that everything's all right, you up and say you're not sure whether you care for me or not and you're going to obey your mother in every--And, say, that reminds me. Unless I am very much mistaken, I think I'll soon have a way to bring your mother to time. She won't--"

He brought himself up with a jerk, realizing that his loose tongue was running away with his wits. She was looking at him with startled, inquiring eyes.

"What do you mean by that, Barry Lapelle?" she asked, and he was quick to detect the uneasiness in her manner.

He affected a grin of derision. "I'm going to put my case in the hands of Kenny Gwynne, the rising young barrister. With him on our side, my dear, I guess we'll bring her to time. All he has to do is to stand up to her and say he isn't going to put up with any more nonsense, and she'll see the light of wisdom. If he thinks it's all right for you to marry me, I guess that will end the matter. He's the head of the family, isn't he?"

This hastily conceived explanation of his luckless remark succeeded in deceiving her. She stared at him in distress.

"Oh, Barry, you--you surely can't be thinking of asking Kenneth to intercede--"

"Why not? He doesn't see any reason why we shouldn't be married, my dear. In fact, he told me so a few days ago. He--"

"I don't believe it," she cried.

"You don't?" he exclaimed sharply.

"No, I don't," she repeated.

"Has he been talking to you about me?" he demanded, an ugly gleam flashing into his eyes.

"He has never said a word against you,--not one. But I don't believe you when you say he told you that we ought to get married." She felt her cheeks grow hot. She had turned her face away from him.

"I'm a liar, am I?" he snarled.

"I--I don't believe he ever said it," she said stubbornly.

"Well,--you're right," he admitted, after a moment's hesitation. "Not in so many words. But he did say to me that he had told you he saw no reason why you shouldn't marry me if you wanted to. Did he ever tell you that?"

She remembered only too well the aggravating encounter in the thicket path.

"Yes, he did," she replied, lifting her head defiantly. "And," she added, "I hated him for it. I hate him more and more every time I think of it. He--he was perfectly abominable."

"Well, you're--you're damned complimentary," he grated, his face expressing the utmost bewilderment.

She walked on for eight or ten paces before speaking again. Her head was lowered. She knew that he was glaring at the wing of the bonnet which shielded her whitening cheek. Suddenly she turned to him.

"Barry, let's sit down on that log over there for a few minutes. There is something I've got to say to you,--and I'm sorry. You

must not be angry with me. Won't you come over there with me,--and listen to what I have to tell you?"

He hung back for a moment, his intuition grasping at something vague and yet strangely definite.

"You--you are going to tell me it's all over between us, Viola?" he ventured, going white to the lips. He was as sober now as though he had never touched liquor in his life.

"Come and sit down," she said gently, even compassionately.

He followed her in silence to the log she had indicated, a few rods back from the roadside at the edge of the clearing. He sat down beside her and waited for her to speak, and as she remained speechless, evidently in distress, his lips curled in a smile of reviving confidence. He watched the quick rise and fall of her bosom, exulting in her difficulty. Birds were piping among the fresh green twigs overhead. The air was redolent of the soft fragrance of May: the smell of the soil, the subtle perfume of unborn flowers, the tang of the journeying breeze, the spice of sap-sweating trees. The radiance of a warm, gracious sun lay soft upon the land.

At last she spoke, not tremulously as he had expected but with a firmness that boded ill for his composure.

"Barry," she began, still staring straight ahead, "I don't know just how to begin. It is awfully hard to--to say what I feel I must say. Perhaps I should have waited till--well, till you were home for a little while,--before doing what I have made up my mind to do. But I thought it right to have it over with as soon as possible."

She paused for a moment and then resolutely faced him. He saw the pain in her dark, troubled eyes, and the shadow of an appealing smile on her lips. His face hardened.

"So," she went on unflinchingly, "I came down to the landing to meet you in case you were on the Paul Revere. I cannot marry you, Barry. I--I don't love you as I should. I thought I did but--but--well, that's all. I don't know what has happened to make me see things so differently, but whatever it is I know now that I was mistaken,--oh, so terribly mistaken. I know I am hurting you, Barry,--and you have a right to despise me. I--I somehow hope you will,--because I deserve it."

He smiled indulgently. "I hope you don't think I am taking this seriously. This isn't the first time I've heard you take on like--"

"But I mean it this time, Barry,--I do truly and honestly," she cried. "I know I've played hot and cold with you,--and that's just the point. It proves that I never really cared for you in--in that way--down in my soul, I mean. I am sure of it now. I have been dreadfully unhappy about it,--because, Barry dear, I can't bear to hurt you. We are not suited to each other. We think differently about a great many things. We--"

"Look here," he exclaimed roughly, no longer able to disguise his anger; "you've got to stop this everlasting--"

"Let go of my arm, Barry Lapelle!" she cried. "Don't you dare lay your hand on me like that!"

He loosened his grip on her arm and drew back sulkily. "Ah,--I didn't mean to hurt you and you know it. I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world. I'm sorry if I was rough with--"

"I don't blame you," she broke in, contritely. "I guess it would serve me right if you beat me black and blue."

"What I was going to say," he growled, controlling himself with difficulty, "is this: if you think I'm going to take this as final, you're very much mistaken. You'll get over this, just as you've gotten over your peevishness before. I've spoiled you, that's the truth of the matter. I always give in to you--"

"I tell you I am in earnest," she cried hotly. "This is for good and all,--and you make me furious when you talk like that. I am doing my best to be kind and considerate, so you'd better be careful, Barry Lapelle, not to say too much."

He looked into her flaming eyes for a moment and then muttered slowly, wonderingly: "By heaven, Viola, I believe you DO mean it. You--you are actually throwing me over,--giving me the mitten?"

"I can't help it, Barry," she insisted. "Something,--I don't know what,--has come over me. Nothing seems to be the same as it used to be. I only know that I cannot bear the thought of--why, Barry dear, for the past three or four nights I've lain awake for hours thinking of the awful consequences if we had succeeded in making our escape that night, and had been married as we planned. How terrible it would have been if I had found out too late that I did not love you,--and we were tied to each other for life. For your sake as well as my own, Barry. Can you imagine anything more horrible than to be married to a woman who--who didn't love you?"

"Yes," he snapped, "I can. It's worse a thousand times over not to be married to the girl you love,--and to see her married to some one else. That would be hell,--hell, do you understand?"

She drew a little away from him. "But not the hell it would be for me when I found out--too late. Won't you understand, Barry? Can't you see how terrible it would be?"

"Say, when did you get this idea into your head?" he demanded harshly. "What put it there? You were loving me hard enough a while ago,--couldn't get along without me, you claimed. Now you're singing another tune. Look here! Is--is there some one else?"

"You know there isn't," she cried indignantly. "Who else could there be? Don't be foolish, Barry."

"By God, if some one else has cut me out, I'll--I'll--"

"There is no one else, I tell you! I don't love anybody,--I swear it."

He eyed her narrowly. "Has Kenny Gwynne anything to do with all this?"

She started. "Kenny? Why,--no,--of course not. What on earth could he have to do with my loving or not loving you?"

"It would be just like him to turn you against me because he thinks I'm not fit to--Say, if I find out that he's been sticking his nose into my affairs, I'll make it so hot for him,--brother or no brother,--that he'll wish he'd never been born. Wait a minute! I'll tell you what I think of him while I'm about it--and you can run and tell him as quick as you please. He's a G-- d--- snake in the grass, that's what he is. He's a conceited, sanctimonious, white-livered--"

"Stop that!" she cried, springing to her feet, white with fury, her eyes blazing. "You are forgetting yourself, Barry Lapelle. Not another word! How dare you speak like that about my brother?"

He sat staring up at her in a sort of stupefaction.

"How dare you?" she repeated furiously.

He found his voice. "You weren't sticking up for him this time last week," he sneered. "You were hating him like poison. Has the old woman had a change of heart, too? Is she letting him sit in her lap so's she can feed him with a spoon when he's hungry and--"

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the only man in the world, Barry Lapelle," said she, her voice low with passion.

She whirled and walked rapidly away from him, her head in the air, her hands clenched. Leaping to his feet, he started after her, calling:

"Wait a minute, Viola! Can't you see I'm almost out of my head over what you've--Oh, well, go it! I'm not going to CRAWL after you! But let me tell you one thing, my girl. You'll be talking out of the other side of your mouth before you're much older. You'll be down on your knees--"

"Don't you follow me another step!" she cried over her shoulder.

He was not more than two yards behind her when she uttered this withering command. He stopped short in his tracks.

"Well, this is a hell of a way to treat a gentleman!" he shouted, hoarse with fury.

CHAPTER XVI

CONCERNING TEMPESTS AND INDIANS

Shortly after dark that evening, the tall, swarthy man who had come up on the Paul Revere sauntered slowly up and down that part of Main Street facing the Court House. Ostensibly he was inspecting store windows along the way, but in reality he was on the lookout

for a man he had agreed to meet at a point just above the tavern,--a casual meeting, it was to appear, and between two strangers. Barry Lapelle came out of the tavern at the stroke of eight and walked eastward a few paces, halting at the dark open lot between Johnson's place and Smith's store beyond. The swarthy man approached slowly, unconcernedly. He accosted Lapelle, inquiring:

"Is that the tavern, Mister?"

"Yes," replied Barry, needlessly pointing down the street. "Well?"

"It's her," said the stranger. "I had a good look at her 'long about five o'clock from the woods across from her house. She's a heap sight older but I knowed her all right."

"You are sure?"

"Sure as my name is--"

"Sh!"

"Course I'm sure. She was Owen Carter's widder. He was killt by a tree fallin' on him. Oh, I got a good memory. I can't afford to have a bad one. I remember her as plain as if it wuz yestiday." He pointed off in a westerly direction for the benefit of a passerby. "Thank ye, mister. You say it's not more'n six mile out yan way?" Lowering his voice, he went on: "A feller wouldn't be likely to fergit a woman like her. Gosh, I used to wish--but wishin' don't count fer much in this world."

"Get on with it. We can't stand here talking all night."

"Well, she's the woman that run off with Bob Gwynne. There ain't no doubt about it. Everybody knowed it. I wuz there at the time, workin' fer Ed Peters. He left his wife an' a little boy. His wife was a daughter of ole Squire Blythe,--damn his heart! He had me hoss-whipped in public fer--well, fer some triflin' thing I done. Seems to me Mrs. Carter had a little baby girl. Maybe not. I ain't much of a hand fer noticin' babies."

"You are sure,--absolutely positive about all this?" whispered Lapelle intensely.

"You bet yer boots I am."

"She ran off with a married man?"

"She did. A feller by the name o' Gwynne, as I said afore,--Bob Gwynne. An' I want to tell you, he got out o' that town jest in time or I'd have slit his gizzard fer him. He had me arrested fer stealin' a saddle an' bridle. He never WOULD have got away ef I hadn't been locked up in Jim Hatcher's smokehouse with two men settin' outside with guns fer a solid month, keepin' watch on me day an' night. I wuz--"

"That's all for to-night," snapped Barry impatiently. "You get out of town at once. Mart will be waiting for you down below Granny Neff's cabin,--this side of the tanyard,--as arranged."

"What about that other business? Mart'll want to know when we're to--"

"He knows. The Paul Revere goes south day after to-morrow morning. If the plans are changed before that time, I'll get word to him. It may not be necessary to do anything at all. You've given me information that may bring the old woman to her senses."

"Them two fellers that come up on the boat to-day. Air you sure you c'n--"

"That's all for to-night," interrupted Barry, and strode off up the street, leaving Jasper Suggs, sometime Simon Braley of the loathsome Girty stock, to wend his lonely way out into a silence as black as the depths of his own benighted soul.

The night was sultry. Up in the marshy fastnesses of Lake Stansbury all the frogs in the universe seemed to have congregated for a grand festival of song. The treble of baby frogs, the diapason of ancient frogs, the lusty alto of frogs in the prime of life, were united in an unbroken, penetrating chant to the starless sky. The melancholy hoot of the owl, the blithesome chirp of the cricket, even the hideous yawp of the roaming loon, were lost in the din and clatter of Lake Stansbury's mighty chorus.

There was promise of storm in the lifeless air. Zachariah, resting his elbows on the fence, confided this prognostication to an almost invisible Hattie on the opposite side of the barrier between two back yards.

"Ah allus covers my haid up wid de blanket--an' de bolster--an' de piller when hit's astormin'," said Hattie, in an awed undertone. "An' Ah squeals lak a pig ev' time hit claps."

"Shucks, gal!" scoffed Zachariah. "What yo' all so skeert o' lightnin' fo'? Why, good lan' o' Goshen, Ah hain't no mo' askeert o' storms dan Ah is ob--ob YOU!" He chuckled rather timorously after blurting out this inspired and (to him) audacious remark. To his relief and astonishment, Hattie was not offended.

"Ah bet yo' all hain't see no setch thunderstorms as we has 'round dis yere neck o' de woods," said she, with conviction. "Ah bet yo' be skeert ef you--"

"Don' yo' talk to me, gal," boasted Zachariah. "Wuzzin Ah in de wustest storm dis yere valley has seed sence dat ole Noah he climb up in dat ole ark an' sez, 'Lan' sakes, Ah wonder ef Ah done gone an' fergit anyt'ing.' Yes, MA'AM,--dat evenin' out to Marse Striker's--dat wuz a storm, gal. Wuz Ah skeert? No, SUH! Ah stup right out in de middle of it, lightnin' strikin' all 'round an' de thunder so turrible Marse Kenneth an' ever'body ailse wuz awonderin' ef de good Lord could hear 'em prayin' fo' mercy. Yas, suh--yas, SUH! Dat's de gospel trufe. An' me right out dere in dat ole barnyard doin' de chores fo' ole Mis' Striker. Marse Kenneth he stick his haid out'n de winder an' yell, 'Zachariah, yo' come right in heah dis minnit! Yo' heah me? Wha' yo' all doin' out dere in dat hell-fire an' brimstone? Ah knows yo' is de bravest nigger in all dis world, but fo' mah sake, Zachariah, won't yo' PLEASE come in?' Well, suh, jes' den Ah happens to look up from what Ah wuz doin' an' sees a

streak o' lightnin' comin' straight to'ards de cabin. So Ah yells fo' him to pull his haid in mighty quick, an' shore 'nuff he got it in jes' in de nick o' time. Dat streak o' lightnin' went right pass de winder an' hit de groun'. Den hit sort o' bounce up in de air an' lep right over mah haid an' hitten a tree--"

"Wuz hit rainin' all dis time?"

"Rainin'? Mah lan', gal, course hit wuz rainin'," replied Zachariah, somewhat testily. "Hitten a tree not more'n ten foot from where Ah wuz--"

"Hain't yo' all got no sense at all, nigger?" demanded Hattie, witheringly. "Don' yo' know 'nough to go in out'n de rain?"

Zachariah was flabbergasted. Here was a bolt from a supposedly clear and tranquil sky; it flattened him out as no stroke of lightning could ever have done. For once in his life he was rendered speechless.

Hattie, who had got religion on several unforgettable occasions and was at this very time on the point of returning to the spiritual fold which she had more or less secretly abandoned at the behest of the flesh, regarded this as an excellent opportunity to re-establish herself as a disciple of salvation.

"An' what's more, nigger," she went on severely, "ef de good Lord ever cotch setch a monst'ous liar as yo' is out in a hurricane lak what yo' all sez it wuz, dere wouldn't be no use buryin' what wuz lef' of yo'. 'Cause why, 'cause yo' jes' gwine to be a lil black cinder no bigger'n a chinkapin. I knows all about how brave yo' wuz out to Marse Striker's. Miss Violy she done tell how yo' all snuck under de table an' prayed an' carried on somefin' scan'lous."

Zachariah, though crushed, made a noble effort to extricate himself from the ruins. "Ah lak to know what Miss Violy knows about me on dat yere occasion. Yas, suh,--dat's what Ah lak to know. She never lay eyes on me dat night. 'Ca'se why? 'Ca'se I wuz out in de barnlot all de time. She done got me contwisted wid dat other fool nigger, dat's what she done."

"What other fool nigger?"

"Didden she tell yo' all about dat nigger we fotch along up from Craffordsville to--"

"Yas, suh, she done tole all about dat Craffordsville nigger, ef dat's de one yo' means."

Zachariah was staggered. "She--she tole yo' about--about dat Craffordsville nigger?"

"Yas, suh,--she did. Miss Violy she say he wuz de han'somest boy she ever did see,--great big strappin' boy wid de grandest eyes an'--"

"Dat's enough,--dat'll do," exclaimed Zachariah in considerable heat. "Marse Kenneth he got to change his tune, dat's all I got to say. He say Ah am de biggest liar in dis yere land,--but, by golly, he ain' ever heard about dis yere gal Hattie. No, SUH! When

Ah lies, Ah lies about SOMEFIN', but when yo' lies, yo' jes' lies about NUFFIN',--'ca'se why? 'Ca'se dat Craffordsville nigger he ain' nuffin'. Yo' ought to be 'shamed o' yo'self, nigger, makin' out Miss Violy to be a liar lak dat,--an' her bein' de fines' lady in--"

"Go on 'way wid yo', nigger," retorted Hattie airily. "Don' yo' come aroun' heah no mo' makin' out how brave yo' is,--'ca'se Ah knows a brave nigger when Ah sees one, lemme tell yo' dat, Mistah Zachariah Whatever-yo'-name is."

Silence followed this Parthian shot. Zachariah, being a true philosopher, rested his case without further argument. He appeared to have given himself up to reflection. Presently Hattie, tempering her voice with honey, remarked:

"Ah suttinly is mighty glad yo' is come up yere to live, Zachariah."

"Look here, gal,--don' yo' go countin' on me too much," said he, suspiciously. "Ah got all Ah c'n do 'tendin' to mah own wo'k 'thout comin' over yander an' hulpin' yo'--"

"Lan's sakes, man, 'tain't mah look-out ef yo' come over yere an' tote mah clo'se-basket an' ev'thing 'round fo' me,--no, suh! Ah ain' nev' ast yo', has Ah? All Ah does is to hole Cato so he won't chaw yo' laig off when yo' come botherin' me to please 'low yo' to hulp me,--das all Ah do. An' lemme tell yo', nigger, dat ain' no easy job. 'Ca'se ef dere's one t'ing Cato do enjoy hit's dark meat,--yas, suh, hit's come so he won't even look at light meat no mo', he so sick o' feedin' off'n dese yere white shin-bones."

"Well, den, why is yo' glad Ah come up yere to live?" demanded Zachariah defensively.

"'Ca'se o' dis yere ole Black Hawk."

"Ah don' know nuffin' 'bout no ole Black Hawk."

"Yo' all gwine to know 'bout him mighty quick," said she solemnly. "He's on de rampage. Scalpin' an' burnin' white folks at de stake an' des wallerin' in blood. Yas, suh,--Ah suttinly ain't gwine feel so skeert o' dat ole Black Hawk 'long as yo' is livin' right nex' do', Zachariah."

"Wha' yo' all talkin' about?"

"Marse Joe,--he de sheriff dis yere county,--he done tole ole Mis' Gwyn dis evenin' all de news 'bout dat ole Black Hawk. Yas, suh,--ole Black Hawk he on de warpath. All de Injuns in dis yere--"

"Injuns?" gulped Zachariah.

"Dey all got dere warpaint on an' dere tommyhawks--"

"How come Marse Kenneth he don' know nuffin' 'bout all dis?" demanded

Zachariah, taking a step or two backward and glancing anxiously over one shoulder, then the other. "He a lawyer. How come he don' know nuffin' 'bout--Say, how close dat ole sheriff say dem Injuns

is?"

"Dat's what I can't make out, Zachariah. He talk so kind o' low an' me lettin' de dishpan drop right in de middle--"

"Ah guess Ah better go right straight in de house an' tell Marse Kenneth 'bout dis," hastily announced Zachariah. Then he bethought himself to add: "'Ca'se me an' him got a lot to do ef dese here Injuns come 'roun' us lookin' fo' trouble, Yas, suh! Ah got to git de guns an' pistols an' huntin' knives all ready fo'--"

The words froze on his lips. A low, blood-curdling moan that seemed to end in a gasp,--or even a death-rattle,--fell upon the ears of the two negroes. It was close at hand,--not more than twenty feet away. This was succeeded, after a few seconds of intense stillness--(notwithstanding the uproarious frogs!)--by a hair-raising screech from Hattie. An instant later she was scuttling for her own kitchen door, emitting inarticulate cries of terror.

As for Zachariah? His course was a true one so far as direction was concerned. Blind instinct located the back door for him and he made a bee-line toward it regardless of all that lay between. First he encountered a tree-stump. This he succeeded in passing without the slightest deviation from the chosen route. Scrambling frantically to his feet after landing with a mighty grunt some two yards beyond the obstacle, he dashed onward, tearing his way through a patch of gooseberry bushes, coming almost immediately into contact with the wood-pile. Here he was momentarily retarded in his flight. There was a great scattering of stove-wood and chips, accompanied by suppressed howls, and then he was on his feet again. Almost simultaneously the heavy oak door received and withstood the impact of his flying body; a desperate clawing at the latch, the spasmodic squeak of rusty hinges, a resounding slam, the jar of a bolt being shot into place,--and Zachariah vociferously at prayer in a sanctuary behind the kitchen stove.

CHAPTER XVII

REVELATIONS

That sepulchral groan had issued not from a mortal in the agony of impending death but from the smiling red lips of Viola Gwyn. The grewsome "death-rattle" was the result of the means she took to suppress a shriek of laughter by frantically clapping both hands to her convulsed mouth.

For some time she had been standing at the fence, her elbows on the top rail, gazing pensively at the light in Kenny's window. A clump of honeysuckle bushes was between her and the unsuspecting servants. At first she had paid little or no attention to the gabble of the darkies, her thoughts being centred on her own serious affairs. She had been considerably shaken and distressed by the unpleasant experience of the early afternoon. Somehow she longed to take her troubles to Kenneth, to rid herself of them in the comfort of his approbation, to be reassured by his brotherly counsel. She

knew he was sitting beside the table in the cosy sitting-room, poring over one of his incomprehensible law books. How jolly, how consoling to her own agitated mind, if she could only be there in the same room with him, quiet as a mouse so as not to disturb his profound studies, and reposing in that comfortable new rocker on the opposite side of the table where she could watch the studious frown on his brow while she waited patiently for him to lay aside the book.

Indeed, she had come out of the house animated by a sudden impulse to pay him a brief, surreptitious visit; then to run back home before she was missed by her mother. This impulse was attended by a singularly delightful sensation of guilt. She had never been over to see him at night. In fact, it had never occurred to her to do such a thing before. But even as she started forth from the house, a strange timidity assailed her. It halted her impetuous footsteps, turned them irresolutely aside, and led her not to the gate but to the barrier fence. She could not explain, even to herself, the queer, half-frightened thumping of her heart, nor the amazing shyness, nor the ridiculous feeling that it would be improper for her to be alone with him at night.

But why, she argued,--why should it be improper? What could be wrong in going to see her own brother? What difference did it make whether it was night or day? Still the doubt persisted,--a nagging yet agreeable doubt that made her all the more eager to defy its feeble authority. First she sought to justify her inclination by reminding herself that her mother had never by word or look signified the slightest opposition to her intimacy with Kenneth. This attitude of resignation on her mother's part, however, was a constant thorn in her side, a prick to her conscience. It caused her many a pang.

Then she called to mind certain of her girl friends who had brothers, --one in particular who declared that she had slept in the same bed with her brother up to the time she was fourteen years old. She felt herself turn scarlet. That was really quite dreadful, even though the cabin in which her friend dwelt was very tiny and there were six children in the family. She had bitterly envied certain others, those who told of the jolly good times they had had with their brothers, the fun they had in quarrelling and the way they teased the boys when they first began "going out" with the girls.

What fun to have had a brother when she was little,--a brother to play with! Kenny was so unreal. He was not like a brother at all. He was no different from other men,--she did not believe she could ever get used to thinking of him as a brother,--even a half-brother. This very thought was in her mind,--perhaps it was an ever-present thought,--as she stood gazing shyly at his window.

She wanted to tell him about her break with Barry. Somehow,--although she was not quite conscious of it,--she longed to have him pat her on the shoulder, or clasp her hands in his, and tell her she had done the right thing and he was glad. The corners of her mouth were drooping a little.

But the pensive droop slowly disappeared as she harkened to the valiant words of Zachariah. It was not until Kenny's servant lifted his voice in praise of his own deeds at Phineas Striker's that

she became acutely aware of the close proximity of the speakers. Gradually she surrendered to the spirits of mirth and mischief. The result of her awesome moan,--even though it narrowly escaped ending in a shriek of laughter,--has already been revealed. The manner of Zachariah's flight sobered her instantly. Too late she regretted the experiment.

"Oh, goodness!" she murmured, blanching. "The poor fellow has hurt himself--"

The slamming of the door behind Zachariah was reassuring. At any rate he was alive and far too sprightly to have suffered a broken leg or a cracked skull. A few seconds later she saw Kenny's shadow flit hurriedly past the window as he dashed toward the kitchen. For some time she stood perfectly still, listening to the confused jumble of voices in the house across the way, debating whether she should hurry over to explain,--and perhaps to assist in dressing poor Zachariah's cuts and bruises. Suddenly she decided; and, without thought of her garments, she scrambled hastily over the fence. Just as her feet touched the ground, the front door of Kenneth's house flew open and a figure, briefly revealed by the light from within, rushed out into the yard and was swallowed up by the darkness. She whirled and started to climb back over into her own yard, giggling hysterically. She heard the rush of feet through the weeds and shrubbery. They halted abruptly, and then:

"Stop where you are, damn you! I've got you covered and, so help me God, I'll put a bullet through--"

"Kenny! Kenny!" she cried out. "It's I--Viola!"

There was a moment's silence.

"My God! You? Viola?" came in suppressed, horrified tones from the darkness. "Drop down,--drop to the ground! They may begin firing at me. You--"

"Firing at you?" she cried, shakily. "What on earth are you talking about? There's--there's no one here. I am all alone. I did it. I'm the ghost. It was all in fun. I didn't dream--"

"Do as I tell you!" he called out sharply. "There is a pack of ruffians--"

"Pack your granny!" she cried, with a shrill laugh. "I tell you I am all alone. My goodness, what on earth did Zachariah think was after him? A regiment of soldiers?"

As he came quickly toward her she shrank back, seized by a strange, inexplicable panic. He loomed above her in the darkness as she half-crouched against the fence. For a few seconds he stood looking down at her, breathing sharply. She heard something drop at his feet, and then both his hands gripped her shoulders, drawing her roughly up to him.

"Oh-h! Wh-what are you doing?" she gasped as his arm went around her. That arm of steel drew her so close and held her so tightly to his breast that she could feel the tremendous thumping of his heart. She felt herself trembling--trembling all over; the light

in the window up beyond seemed to draw nearer, swelling to vast proportions as it bore down upon her. She closed her eyes. What was happening to her,--what was causing this strange languor, this queer sensation as of falling?

As abruptly as he had clasped her to him, he released her, springing back with a muttered execration. She tottered dizzily, and involuntarily reached out to clutch his arm for support. He shook her hand off.

"What is the matter, Kenny?" she murmured, hazily.

He did not answer. He leaned heavily against the fence, his head on his arm. She did not move for many seconds. Then he heard her gasp,--a gasp of actual terror.

"Who are you?" she whispered tensely. "You are not my brother. You are not the real Kenneth Gwynne! Who are you?" She waited for the answer that did not come. Then as she drew farther away from him: "You are an impostor. You have deceived us. You have come here representing yourself to be--to be my brother,--and you are not--you are not! I know it--oh, I know it now. You are--"

This aroused him. "What is that you are saying?" he cried out, fighting to pull his disordered wits together. "Not your brother? Impostor? What are you saying, Viola?"

"I want the truth," she cried. "Are you what you claim to be?"

"Of course I am," he answered, stridently. "I am Kenneth Gwynne. Your brother. Have you lost your senses?"

"Then, why--" she began huskily. "Why did you--Oh, Kenny, I don't know what I am saying," she murmured piteously. "I--I don't know what has come over me. Something--something--Oh, I don't know what made me feel--I mean, what made me say that to you. You are Kenneth Gwynne. You are my half-brother. You are not--" "There, there!" he interrupted, his voice shaking a little. "You were frightened. I came so near to shooting--Yes, that is it. And I was so happy, so relieved that I--I almost ate you alive,--my little sister. God, what a horrible thing it would have been if I had--fired and the bullet had--"

She interrupted him, speaking rapidly, breathlessly in her effort to regain command of herself. "But you didn't--you didn't, you see,--so what is the use of worrying about it now?" She laughed jerkily. "But, my goodness, it is a good lesson for me! I'll never try to scare anybody else again as I did poor Zachariah."

He stooped and, feeling among the weeds, recovered not one but both of the long duelling pistols.

"I was after bigger game than you," he muttered. "Here are my pistols,--all primed and ready for business."

She stretched out her hand and touched one of the weapons. "Ready for what business?" she inquired. "What did you mean by a pack of ruffians?" As he did not answer at once, she went on to explain what had actually occurred, ending with, "I suppose Zachariah ran

in and told you that old Black Hawk and his warriors were attacking the town."

"I couldn't get much out of him, he was so excited. But I was mortally afraid they had stolen a march on us, and you were already in their hands. You see, Isaac Stain was to have kept me informed and we were to have laid a trap for them. Oh, Lord!" he exclaimed in sudden consternation. "I am letting the cat out of the bag."

"Will you please tell me what you are talking about, Kenneth Gwynne?" she said impatiently.

He came to a quick decision. "Yes, I will tell you everything. I guess I was a fool not to have told you before,--you and your mother. There is a plot afoot, Viola, to abduct you. Stain got wind of it, through--well, he got wind of it. He came to me with the story. I don't suppose you will believe me,--and you will probably despise me for what I am about to say,--but the man you love and expect to marry is behind the scheme. I mean Barry Lapelle. He--"

"When did you hear of this?" she interrupted quickly. "After the Revere came in?"

"More than a week ago. He came home on the Revere to-day. His plan is to--"

"I know. I saw him. We quarrelled. It is all over between us, Kenny. He was furious. I thought he may have--but you say you knew of this a week ago? I don't--I can't understand it. A week ago there was no heed of--of carrying me off against my will."

"It is all over between you?" he cried, and he could not disguise the joy in his voice. "You have ended it, Viola?"

"Yes,--it is all over," she said stiffly. "I am not going to marry him. I was coming over to tell you. But--go on. What is this cock-and-bull story about abducting me? Goodness, I am beginning to feel like a girl in a story-book."

"It is no laughing matter," he said, a little gruffly. "Does it look like it when I come rushing out here with two loaded pistols and come near to shooting you? Come up to the house. We will talk it all over, and then,--" he hesitated for a moment,--"then I'll go over and see your mother."

He took her arm and led her up to the house. As they entered the front door, Zachariah's groans fell upon their ears. She looked at Kenny in alarm, and for the first time realized that he was without coat or waistcoat. His hair was tousled in evidence of his studious application to the open law books that lay on the floor.

"He must be quite badly hurt," she cried miserably. "Oh, I'm SO sorry."

Kenny went to the kitchen door. "Zachariah! Stop that groaning. You're not hurt. Here! What are you doing with that rifle?"

"Ah was jes' co-comin' out, Marse Kenny, fo' to he'p yo' kill--yas, suh! Ah was--" The remainder was lost as Kenneth deliberately

closed the door behind him and walked over to the negro, who was squatting in a corner with a rifle in his hands. Viola, left alone, crossed to the window and looked out. She was pale and anxious. Her wide, alarmed eyes tried to pierce the darkness outside. Suddenly she started back, pressing her hands to her cheeks.

"Oh, my soul!" she murmured. "They could have shot him dead. He could not have seen them." She felt herself turn faint. Then a thrill of exaltation swept over her and she turned quickly toward the kitchen door, her eyes glowing. "And he was not afraid! He ran out to face them alone. He thought they were out there,--he risked being shot to save me from--"

The door opened and Kenneth came swiftly into the room. He stopped short, staring at her radiant face.

"Oh, Kenny, you--you really believed they were out there,--a crowd of them,--trying to carry me off? Why,--why, that was the bravest thing a man--"

"Shucks!" he scoffed. "My tragedy turns out to be the most uproarious farce. I've never seen a funnier one in the theatre. But there is a serious side to it, Viola. Sit down for a minute or two, and I'll tell you. Zachariah is all right. Barked his shins a little, that's all."

At the conclusion of his short, unembellished recital, he said:

"There is nothing for you to be worried about. They cannot carry out the plot. We are all forewarned now. I should have told you all this before, but I was afraid you would think I was trying to blacken Lapelle. I wanted to catch him red-handed, as the saying is. Isaac Stain is coming in to sleep here to-morrow night, and Zachariah, for all his fear of ghosts and lightning, is not afraid of men. We will be ready for them if they come,--so don't you worry."

There was a puzzled frown in her eyes. "I don't see why he should have planned this a week ago, Kenny. I had told him I would marry him. There must be something back of all this."

"Do you know anything about a friend of his who is going to be married soon? He spoke to me about it the other day, and asked if a parent could legally deprive a daughter of a share in her deceased father's--"

"Why,--that's me, Kenny," she cried excitedly. "I told him that mother would disinherit me entirely if I married him without her consent."

A light broke over him. "By jingo!" he cried. "I am beginning to see. Why, it's as plain as day to me now. The beastly scoundrel!"

"What do you mean?"

"Could your mother very well carry out her threat if he made off with you by force and compelled you to marry him, whether or no?"

She stiffened. "I would never,--never consent, Kenny. I would die first."

"I suppose you imagine there could be no worse fate than that?" he said, pity in his eyes.

She looked puzzled for a moment and then grasped his meaning. Her face blanched.

"I said I would die first," she repeated in a low, steady voice.

"Well," he cried, starting up briskly from his chair, "I guess we'd better hurry if we want to catch your mother before she goes to bed. And that reminds me, Viola,--I would like to speak with her alone. You see," he went on lamely, "you see, we're not friends and I don't know how she will receive me."

She nodded her head without speaking and together they left the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

RACHEL DELIVERS A MESSAGE

Rachel was standing on her porch as they came up the walk. The light through the open door at her back revealed her tall, motionless figure but not her face which was in shadow.

"Kenneth wants to talk to you about something very important," said Viola unevenly, as they drew near.

The woman on the porch did not speak until they paused at the bottom of the steps.

"Have you been over at his house, Viola?" she asked levelly.

"Yes, mother."

After a moment's hesitation: "Come in, Kenneth." She stood aside to let Viola pass. Kenneth, who had hastily donned his coat, followed the two women into the house. There was a light in the parlor.

"Will you sit down, or do you prefer to remain standing in my house, Kenneth Gwynne?"

He bowed stiffly, indicating a chair with a gesture. "Will you be seated first, madam?"

His sophomoric dignity drew a faint, ironic smile to her lips. "Thank you," she said calmly, and seated herself on the little horsehair sofa. If there was any uneasiness in the look she sent from one to the other of the young people it was not noticeable. "Hattie came in a little while ago," she said, "scared out of her wits. I suspected that you were up to one of your pranks, Viola. I do wish you would stop frightening the girl."

"Kenneth will tell you what happened," said the girl, hurriedly. "He wants to see you alone. I am going upstairs."

She left the room, closing the door behind her. Neither spoke until they heard her footsteps on the floor overhead.

"Well, what have you been telling her?" asked Rachel, leaning forward, her eyes narrowing.

He drew a chair up close to the sofa and sat down. "Nothing that she should not know," he answered. "I will first tell you what happened a little while ago, and then--the rest of it. There is evil afoot. I have been wrong, I realize, in not warning you and Viola."

She listened intently to the end; not once did she interrupt him, but as he proceeded to unfold the meagre details of the plot as presented to him by Isaac Stain, her brow darkened and her fingers began to work nervously, restlessly in her lap. His account of the frightening of Zachariah and its immediate results took up but little time. He was careful to avoid any mention of that stirring scene at the fence, its effect upon the startled girl, or how near he was to betraying the great secret.

Rachel Gwyn's eyes never left his face during the whole of the unbroken recital. Toward the end he had the disconcerting impression that she was reading his turbulent thoughts, that she was successfully searching his soul.

"That's the story as it came to me," he concluded. "I deserve your condemnation for not preparing Viola against a trick that might have resulted disastrously while we were marking time."

"Why did Isaac Stain go to you instead of coming to me?" was her first question.

"Because he believes I am her brother, and this happens to be a man's job," he said, lowering his voice. "It is only fair, however, to state that he wanted to come to you and I, in my folly, advised him not to do so."

She was silent for a moment. Then: "And why did you think it not advisable to tell me?"

"I will be frank with you," he replied, colouring under her steady gaze. "I wanted her to find out for herself just what kind of man Lapelle really is. I was prepared to let the plot go almost to the point of consummation. I--I wanted to be the one to save her." He lowered his eyes, afraid that she would discover the truth in them.

Again she hesitated, apparently weighing her words.

"You are in love with her, Kenneth."

He looked up, startled, almost aghast. Involuntarily he started to rise to his feet, his eyes still fixed on hers, vehement denial on his parted lips, only to sink back into the chair again, convicted. There was no use attempting to deceive this cold, clear-headed woman. She knew. No lie, no evasion could meet that direct statement. For a long time they looked straight into each other's eyes, and at length his fell in mute confession.

"God help me,--I am," he groaned.

"Oh, the pity of it!" she cried out. He looked up and saw that she was trembling, her ashen face working as in pain.

"No! The curse of it, Rachel Carter!"

She appeared not to have heard his words. "'God works in a mysterious way,'" she muttered, almost inaudibly. "The call of the blood is unfailing. The brain may be deceived, the heart never." With an effort, she regained control of herself. "She has broken off with Barry Lapelle. Do you know the reason why? Because, all unbeknownst to her, she has fallen in love with you. Yes! It is true. I know. I have seen it coming."

She arose and crossed to the door, which she cautiously opened. For a moment she remained there listening, then closing it gently, she came over and stood before him.

"Love is a wonderful thing, Kenneth," she said slowly. "It is the most powerful force in all the world. It overcomes reason, it crushes the conscience, it makes strong men weak and weak men strong. For love a woman will give her honour, for love a man will barter his chance for eternal salvation. It overlooks faults, it condones crime, it rises above every obstacle that the human mind can put before it. It knows no fear, it has no religion, it serves no God. You love my girl, Kenneth. She is the daughter of the woman you despise, the daughter of one you call evil. Is your love for her great enough,--or will it ever be great enough,--to overcome these obstacles? In plain words, would you take her unto yourself as your wife, to love and cherish and honour,--mind you, HONOUR,--to the end of your days on earth?"

He stood up, facing her, his face white.

"She has done nothing dishonourable," he said levelly.

"'The sins of the mother,'" she paraphrased, without taking her eyes from his.

"Was her mother any worse than my father? Has the sin been visited upon one of us and not upon the other?"

"Then, you WOULD be willing to take Viola as your wife?"

He seemed to wrench his gaze away. "Oh, what is the use of talking about the impossible?" he exclaimed. "I have confessed that I love her,--yes, in spite of everything,--and you--"

"You have not answered my question."

"No, I have not," he said deliberately,--"and I do not intend to answer it. You know as well as I that I cannot ask her to marry me, so why speak of it? Good God, could I ask my own sister to be my wife?"

"She is not your sister. She has not one drop of Gwynne blood in her veins."

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "But who is going to tell her that, may I ask, Rachel Carter?"

She turned away, took two or three turns up and down the room, her head bent, a heavy frown between her eyes, and then sank wearily into a chair.

"I will put it this way, Kenneth," she said. "Would you ask her to be your wife if the time should ever come when she knows the truth?"

He hesitated a long time. "Will you be kind enough to tell me what your object is in asking me these questions?"

"I want to know whether you are truly in love with her," she replied steadily.

"And if I say that I could not ask her to marry me, would that prove anything to you?"

"Yes. It would prove two things. It would prove that you do not love her with all your heart and soul, and it would prove that you are the same kind of man that your father was before you."

He started. It was the second reason that caused him to look at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

"When you have answered my question, I will answer yours, Kenneth."

"Well," he began, setting his jaw, "I DO love her enough to ask her to be my wife. But I would ask her as Owen Carter's daughter. And," he added, half closing his eyes as with pain, "she would refuse to have me. She could not look at the matter as I do. Her love,--if she should ever come to have such a feeling for me,--her love would revolt against--Oh, you know what I mean! Do you suppose it would survive the shock of realization? No! She has a clean heart. She would never marry the son of the man who--who--" He found himself unable to finish the sentence. A strange, sudden reluctance to hurt his enemy checked the words even as they were being framed on his lips,--reluctance due not to compassion nor to consideration but to a certain innate respect for an adversary whose back is to the wall and yet faces unequal odds without a sign of shrinking.

"Shall I say it for you?" she asked in a cold, level voice. But she had winced, despite her iron control.

"It is not necessary," said he, embarrassed.

"In any case," she said, with a sigh, "you have answered my question. If you could do this for my girl I am sure of your love for her. There could be no greater test. I shall take a little more time before answering your question. There are one or two more things I must say to you before I come to that,--and then, if you like, we will take up this story of Isaac Stain's. Kenneth, the time may come,--I feel that it is sure to come, when--" She stopped. A sound from above caught her ear,--a regular, rhythmic thumping on the floor. After a few seconds she remarked:

"It is all right. That is a rocking-chair. She is getting impatient."

Nevertheless she lowered her voice and leaned forward in her chair. "The time is sure to come when Viola will learn the truth about herself and me,--and you, as well. I feel it in my bones. It may not come till after I am dead. But no matter when it comes, I want to feel sure now,--to-night, Kenneth,--that you will never undertake to deprive her of the lands and money I shall leave to her."

He stared at her in astonishment. "What is this you are saying?" She slowly repeated the words. "Why, how could I dispossess her? It is yours to bequeath as you see fit, madam. Do you think I am a mercenary scoundrel,--that I would try to take it away from her? I know she is not my father's daughter, but--why, good heaven, I would never dream of fighting for what you--"

"Your love for her,--though unrequited,--aye, even though she became embittered toward you because of what happened years ago,--you love her enough to stand aside and allow her to hold what I shall leave to her?"

"You are talking in riddles. What on earth are you driving at?" "You will not fight her right, her claim to my estate?" she insisted, leaning still closer.

"Why, of course not!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"Even though the law might say she is not entitled to it?"

"The law can take no action unless I invoke its aid," said he. "And that is something I shall never do," he added, with finality.

"I wish I could be sure of that," she murmured, wistfully.

He came to his feet. "You may be sure of it," he said, with dignity. "Possess your soul in peace, if that is all that is troubling it."

"Sit down," she said, a strange huskiness in her voice. He obeyed her. "Your father left a certain part of his fortune to me. There was no provision made for Viola. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes. I know all about that," said he, plainly bewildered. "On the other hand, he did not impose any restrictions upon you. You are at liberty to dispose of your share by will, as you see fit, madam. I am not likely to deny my step-sister what is rightfully hers. And that reminds me. She is not my blood relation, it's true. But she is my step-sister. That settles another point. I could not ask my step-sister to be my wife. The law would--"

"Now we have come to the point where I shall answer the question you asked a while ago," she interrupted, straightening up in her chair and regarding him with a fixed, steady light in her eyes that somehow seemed to forewarn him of what was about to be revealed. "I said it would prove two things to me. One of them was that you are the same kind of man that your father was before you. I mean if you had said you could not ask Viola to be your wife." She paused, and then went on slowly, deliberately. "I lived with your father for nearly twenty years. In all that time he never asked me to be his wife."

At first he stared blankly at her, uncomprehending.

Then a slow, dark flush spread over his face. He half-started up from his chair.

"You--you mean--" he stammered.

"He never asked me to be his wife," she repeated without emotion.

He sank back, incredulous, dumbfounded. "My God! Am I to understand that you--that you were never married to my father?"

"Yes. I waited twenty years for him to ask me to marry him,--but he never did."

He was still somewhat stupefied. The disclosure was so unexpected, so utterly at odds with all his understanding that he could not wholly grasp its significance. Somewhat footlessly he burst out:

"But surely you must have demanded--I mean, did you never ask him to--to marry you?"

Her eyebrows went up slightly.

"How could I?" she inquired, as if surprised by the question. "I had not sunk so low in my own estimation as that, Kenneth Gwynne. My bed was made the day I went away with him. Some day you may realize that even such as I may possess the thing called pride. No! I would have died rather than ask him to marry me. I chose my course with my eyes open. It was not for me to demand more than I gave. He was not a free man when I went to him. He made no promises, nor did I exact any."

She spoke in the most matter-of-fact way. He regarded her in sheer wonder.

"But he SHOULD have made you his wife," he exclaimed, his sense of fairness rising above the bitter antipathy he felt toward her.

"That was for him to decide," said she, calmly. "I respected his feelings in the matter,--and still do. He had no right to marry me when we went away together. He did not take me as a wife, Kenneth Gwynne. He took me as a woman. He had a wife. Up to the day he died he looked upon her as his wife. I was his woman. I could never take her place. Not even after she had been in her grave for twenty years. He never forgot her. I see the scorn in your eyes. He does not quite deserve it, Kenneth. After all is said and done, he was fair to me. Not one man in a thousand would have done his part so well as he.

"I don't suppose you know what men do with their mistresses when they begin to feel that they are through with them and there is no legal bond to hold them. They desert them. They cast them off. And then they turn to some honest woman and marry her. That is the way with men. But he was not like that. I can tell what you are about to say. It is on your lips to say that he deserted an honest woman. Well, so he did. And therein lies the secret of his constancy to me,--even after he had ceased to love me and the passion that was in him died. He would never desert another woman who trusted him. He paid too dearly in his conscience for the first offence to

be guilty of a second.

"You see I am laying bare my innermost soul to you. It hurts me to say that through all these years he loved and honoured and revered his wife,--and the memory of her. He was never unkind to me,--he never spoke of her. But I knew, and he knew that I knew. He loved you, his little boy. I, too, loved you once, Kenneth. When you were a little shaver I adored you. But I came to hate you as the years went by. It is needless to tell you the reason why. When it came time for him to die he left you half of his fortune. The other half,--and a little over,--he gave to me." Her voice faltered a little as she added: "For good and faithful service, I suppose."

During this long speech Kenneth had succeeded in collecting his thoughts. He had been shocked by her confession, and now he was mentally examining the possibilities that might arise from the aspect it bared.

First of all, Viola was not even his step-sister. He experienced a thrill of joy over that,--notwithstanding the ugly truth that gave her the new standing; to his simple, straightforward mind, Viola's mother was nothing more than a prostitute. (In his thoughts he employed another word, for he lived in a day when prostitutes were called by another name.) Still, Viola was not to blame for that. That could never be held against her.

"Why have you told me all this?" he asked bluntly. "I had no means of learning that you were never married to my father. There was never a question about it in my mind, nor in anybody else's, so far as I know. You have put a very dangerous weapon in my hand in case I should choose to use it against you."

She was silent for a long time, struggling with herself. He could almost feel the battle that was going on within her. Somehow it appalled him.

The wind outside was rising. It moaned softly, plaintively through the trees. A shutter creaked somewhere at the back of the house and at intervals banged against the casement. The frogs down in the hollow had ceased their clamour and no doubt took to themselves credit for the storm that was on the way in answer to their exhortations. The even, steady thump of the rocking-chair in the room overhead stopped suddenly, and Viola's quick tread was heard crossing the floor. She closed a window. Then, after a moment, the sound of the rocking-chair again.

Rachel left her chair and walked over to the window to peer out into the night.

"It is coming from the west," she said, as if to test the steadiness of her voice.

A far-off flicker of lightning cast a faint, phosphorescent glow into the dimly lighted room, quivering for a second or two on the face of the woman at the window, then dying away with what seemed to be a weird suggestion of reluctance.

She stood before him, looking down. "I have at last obeyed a command imposed by Robert Gwynne when he was on his death-bed. Almost his

last words to me were in the nature of a threat. He told me that if I failed to carry out his request,--he did not call it a command,--he would haunt me to my dying day. You may laugh at me if you will, but he HAS been haunting me, Kenneth Gwynne. If I ever cherished the notion that I could ignore his command and go on living in the security of my own secret, I must have known from the beginning that it would be impossible. Day and night, ever since you came, some force that was not my own has been driving at my resistance. You will call it compunction, or conscience or an honest sense of duty. I do not call it by any of those names. Your father commanded me to tell you with my own lips,--not in writing or through the mouth of an agent,--he commanded me to say to you that your mother was the only wife he ever had. I have done this to-night. I have humbled myself,--but it was after a long, cruel fight."

She sat down, and it seemed to him that her very soul went out in the deep, long sigh that caused her bosom to flatten and her shoulders to droop forward.

"He was either an ingrate or a coward," said he harshly, after a short silence.

"It is not for you to pass judgment on my master," said she, simply. "May I beg you to refrain from putting your own judgment of him into words? Will you not spare me that?"

He stared at her in astonishment. He saw that she was in earnest, desperately in earnest. Choking back the words that had rushed to his lips, he got up from his chair and bent his head gravely.

"Yes, if it is any comfort to you, Rachel Carter," he said, acute pity in his eyes. "I cannot resist saying, however, that you have not spared yourself. It cost you a great deal to pay one of the debts he left for you to settle. I shall not forget it."

She arose and all the humility fell away from her. Once more she was the strong, indomitable,--even formidable,--figure he had come to know so well. Her bosom swelled, her shoulders straightened, and into her deep-set, sombre eyes came the unflinching light of determination.

"Then we are done with that," she said quietly. "I have asked no favours save this last one for myself,--but it is a greater one than you may think. You know everything now, Kenneth. You have called me Rachel Carter. Was it divination or was it stubborn memory? I wonder. So far as I know, you are the only person left in the world who knows that I was not his wife, the only one who knows that I am still Rachel Carter. No matter what this man Braley may know, or what he may tell, he--But we are wasting time. Viola must be wondering. Now as to this plan of Barry Lapelle's. I think I can safely assure you that nothing will come of it."

"Then, you knew about it before I told you?" he exclaimed.

"No. You brought me word of Jasper Suggs this morning. You said he was staying at Martin Hawk's cabin. You may have forgotten what I said to you at the time. Now you bring me word that Barry Lapelle's plot was hatched at Martin Hawk's. Well, this afternoon I went to the Court House and swore out a warrant charging Martin Hawk with

stealing some of my yearling calves and sheep. That warrant is now in the hands of the sheriff. It will be served before another day is gone."

"That's pretty sharp work," he said, but still a little puzzled. "Naturally it will upset Barry's plans, but Suggs is still to be accounted for. You mentioned something about charging him with a murder back in--"

"I guess that can wait till another day," said she, with a smile that he did not quite understand. "It would be rather stupid of me, don't you think, to have him arrested?"

"You said he was not the kind of a man to be taken alive," he remarked, knitting his brows.

"I think I said something of the kind. The name of Simon Braley is known from one end of this State to the other. It is a name to conjure fear with. Every Indian uprising in the past ten years has had Braley's name connected with it. It was he who led the band of Chippewas twelve years ago when they massacred some fifteen or eighteen women and children in a settlement on White River while their men were off in the fields at work. Isn't it rather significant that the renegade Simon Braley should turn up in these parts at a time when Black Hawk is--But that is neither here nor there. My warrant calls for the arrest of Martin Hawk. For more than two years Hawk has been suspected of stealing livestock down on the Wea, hut no one has ever been willing to make a specific charge against him. He is very cunning and he has always covered his tracks."

"Do you think he will resist the sheriff? I mean, is there likely to be fighting?"

"It all depends on whether Martin is caught napping," she replied in a most casual manner. "By the way, has Isaac Stain told you much about himself?"

Kenneth could not repress a smile. "He has mentioned one or two affairs of the heart."

"His sister was one of the women massacred by the Chippewas down on White River that time. She was the young wife of a settler. Isaac will be overjoyed when he finds out that Jasper Suggs and Simon Braley are one and the same person."

He was speechless for a moment, comprehension coming slowly to him. "By all that's holy!" he exclaimed, something like awe in his voice. "I am beginning to understand. Stain will be one of the sheriff's party?"

"We will stop at his cabin on the way to Hawk's," she replied. "If he chooses to join us after I have told him who I think this man Suggs really is, no one will object."

"You say 'we.' Do you mean to tell me that you are going along with the posse? Good God, woman, there will be shooting! You must not think of--"

She checked him with an imperious gesture. "I cannot send these men

to face a peril that I am not willing to face myself. That would be dastardly. I will take my chances with the rest of them. You seem to forget that I spent a good many years of my life in the wilderness. This will not be my first experience with renegades and outlaws. When I first came to this State, the women had to know how to shoot. Not only to shoot birds and beasts, but men as well. Those were hard days. I was not like the men who cut notches in their rifle stocks for every Indian they slew, and yet there is a gun in my room upstairs that could have two notches on it if I had cared to put them there."

"What time do you start?" he said, the fire of excitement in his eyes. "I insist on being one of the--"

"You will not be needed," she said succinctly. "I think you had better go now. The storm will soon be upon us. Thank you for coming here to-night, Kenneth."

CHAPTER XIX

LAPELLE SHOWS HIS TEETH

Kenneth went to bed that night firmly resolved to accompany the sheriff when he set out to arrest Martin Hawk. Zachariah had instructions to call him at daybreak and to have breakfast ready on the dot.

No doubt the posse would start about sunrise,--in any case, he would be up and prepared to take to his saddle the instant he saw his neighbour leaving her house.

The thunderstorm came rollicking down the valley, crashed and rolled and roared for half an hour or so, and then stole mumbling away in the night, leaving in its wake a sighing wind and the drip of forsaken raindrops.

He was astir at cockcrow. The first faint glow of red in the greying east found him at breakfast, with Zachariah sleepily serving him with hot corn-cakes, lean side-meat and coffee.

"Take plenty dis yere hot coffee, Marse Kenneth," urged Zachariah, at the end of a prodigious yawn. "Yo' all gwine need sumpin to keep yo' 'wake, suh, so's yo' won't fall out'n de saddle. Dis yere--"

"Speaking of saddles, have you fed Brandy Boy?"

"Yas, suh. Ah dunno as Ah evah see a hoss mo' took by 'stonishment dan he wuz when Ah step brisk-like into his stall an' sez 'Doggone yo', Brandy Boy, don't yo' know de sun's gwine to be up in less'n two hours? Wha' fo' is yo' keepin' me an' Marse Kenneth waitin' lak dis? Git ep dar, yo' lazy, good-fer-nuffin,--"

"And what did Brandy Boy say in response to that?" broke in his master, airily.

"How dat, suh?"

"Did he reply in courteous terms or was he testy and out of sorts?
Now, just what DID he say?"

Zachariah stared at the speaker in some uneasiness. "Ah reckon yo' all better go on back to bed, suh, an' lemme call yo' when yo' is wide awake. Ain' no sense in yo' startin' off on dis yere hossback ride when yo' is still enjoyin' setch a good night's sleep. No, SUH!"

"I will take another cup of your excellent coffee, Zachariah. That will make three, won't it?"

Zachariah shuffled over to the stove, muttering as he lifted the coffee pot: "Fust Ah is seein' things in de evenin' an' den Ah hears all dis yere talk 'bout a hoss SAYIN' things in de mornin',--Yas, suh,--yas, SUH! Comin' right along, suh. Little mo' side-meat, suh?"

"Take a peep out of the window and see if any one is stirring over at Mrs. Gwyn's."

"'Pears lak Ah c'n see a lady out in de front yard, suh," said Zachariah, at the window.

"You don't say so! Is it Mrs. Gwyn?" cried Kenneth, hastily gulping his coffee as he pushed his chair back from the table.

"Hit ain' light enough fo' to see--"

"Run out and saddle Brandy Boy at once, and be quick about it."

"No, suh, hit ain' Mrs. Gwyn. Hit's Miss Violy. 'Pears lak she comin' over here, suh. Leastwise she come out'n de gate kind o' fast-like,--gotten a shawl wrap aroun'--"

Kenneth waited for no more. He dashed from the house and down to the fence,--where stood Viola, pulling at the swollen, water-soaked gate peg. She was bareheaded, her brown hair hanging down her back in long, thick braids. It was apparent at a glance that she had dressed hastily and but partially at that. With one hand she pinched close about her throat the voluminous scarlet shawl of embroidered crepe in which the upper part of her body was wrapped.

Later he was to observe that her heavy shoes were unlaced and had been drawn on over her bare feet. Her eyes were filled with alarm.

"I don't know where mother is," she said, without other greeting. "She is not in the house, Kenny. I am worried almost sick."

He stared at her in dismay. "Oh, blast the luck! She must have--Say, are you sure she's gone?"

"I can't find her anywhere," cried she, in distress. "I've been out to the barn and--Why, what ails you, Kenneth?"

"She got away without my knowing it. But maybe it's not too late. I can catch up with them if I hurry. Hey, Zachariah!"

"Then, you know where she is?" cried the girl, grasping his arm as he turned to rush away. "For goodness' sake, tell me! Where has she gone?"

"Why, don't you--But of course you don't!" he exclaimed. "You poor girl! You must be almost beside yourself,--and here I go making matters worse by--"

"Where is she?" she broke in, all the colour going from her face as she shook his arm impatiently. "Come in the house," he said gently, consolingly. "I'll tell you all I know. There's nothing to be worried about. She will be home, safe and sound, almost before you know it. I will explain while Zachariah is saddling Brandy Boy." He laid his hand upon her shoulder. "Come along,--dear."

She held back. "If anything happens to her and you could have--" she began, a threat in her dark, harassed eyes.

"I had no idea she would start at such an unearthly hour. I had made up my mind to go with her, whether or not. Didn't she tell you she had made an affidavit against Martin Hawk?"

"No. The sheriff was up here last night, just after supper, but,--Oh, Kenny, what is it all about?"

His arm stole about her shoulders. She leaned heavily, wearily against him as they walked up the drenched path.

"Have you any idea at all what time she left the house?" he asked.

"I heard her go down the stairs. It was pitch dark, but the clock struck one quite a long time afterward. I did not think anything about it then, because she often gets up in the middle of the night and goes down to sit in the kitchen. Ever since father died. I must have gone to sleep again because I did not hear her come back upstairs. I awoke just at daybreak and got up to see if she needed me. She--she had not gone to bed at all, Kenny.--and I couldn't find her anywhere. Then I thought that Martin Hawk and the others had come and taken her away by mistake, thinking it was me in the darkness."

"Sit down, Viola. I'll light the fire. It's quite chilly and you are shaking like a--"

"I want to know where she has gone," she insisted.

Then he told her briefly as much as he thought she ought to know. She was vastly relieved. She even smiled.

"There's no use of your trying to catch up with her. Thank you for lighting the fire, Kenny. If you don't mind, I will sit here awhile, and I may go to sleep in this comfortable chair of yours. Goodness, I must look awful. My hair--"

"Don't touch it! It is beautiful as it is. I wish girls would always wear their hair in braids like that."

She yawned, stretched her legs out to the fire, and then suddenly realizing that her ankles were bare, drew them back again to the

shelter of her petticoat with a quick, shy glance to see if he had observed.

"I wish I could cut it off,--like a boy's. It is miles too long. You might as well head Zachariah off. She has been gone since one o'clock. I am sure I heard the front door close before I dropped off to sleep. Don't fidget, Kenny. They've probably got old Martin in the calaboose by this time. Mother never fails when she sets out to do a thing. That good-for-nothing sleepy-head, Hattie, never heard a sound last night. What a conscience she must have!"

He frowned at his big silver watch. "It's after five. See here, Viola, suppose you just curl up on the sofa there and get some sleep. You look tired. I'll put a quilt over you and--"

She half-started up from the chair, flushing in embarrassment.

"Oh, I ought not to stay here, Kenny. Suppose somebody were to come along and catch me here in your--"

"Shucks! You're my sister, aren't you?"

"I suppose it's all right," she said dubiously, sinking back into the chair again. "But somehow, Kenny, I don't believe I will ever be able to think of you as a brother; not if I live a thousand years. I'm sorry to hurt your feelings, but--well, I just can't help being a little bit afraid of you. I suppose it's silly of me, but I'm so ashamed to have you see me with my hair down like this, and no stockings on, and only half-dressed. I--I feel hot all over. I didn't think of it at first, I was so worried, but now I--"

"It is very silly of you," he said, rather thickly. "You did right in coming over, and I'm going to make you comfortable now that you are here. Lie down here and get some sleep, like a good little girl, and when you wake up Zachariah will have a nice hot breakfast for you."

"I'd rather not lie down," she stammered. "Let me just sit here awhile,--and don't bother about breakfast for me. Hattie will--"

"But he has to get breakfast anyhow," he argued.

She looked at him suspiciously. "Haven't you had your breakfast?"

"No," he lied. Then he hurried off to give guilty instructions to Zachariah.

"Fo' de lan's sake," the latter blurted out as he listened to his master's orders; "is yo' all gwine to eat another breakfast?"

"Yes, I am," snapped Kenneth. "I'll take care of Brandy Boy. You go in and clear the table,--and see to it that you don't make any noise. If you do, I'll skin you alive."

An hour later, Kenneth arose from his seat on the front doorstep and stole over to the sitting-room window.

She was asleep in the big rocking-chair, her head twisted limply toward her left shoulder, presenting a three-quarters view of her

face to him as he gazed long and ardently upon her. He could see the deep rise and fall of her bosom. The shawl, unclasped at the throat, had fallen away, revealing the white flannel nightgown over which she had hastily drawn a petticoat before sallying forth.

He went to the kitchen door and found Zachariah sitting grumpily on the step.

"She's still sound asleep," he announced.

"So's dat lazy Hattie over yander," lamented Zachariah, with a jerk of his head. "Ain' no smoke comin' out'n her chimbley, lemme tell yo'."

"Fill that wash-pan and get me a clean towel," ordered his master. He looked at his watch. "I'm going to awaken her,--in half an hour."

It was nearly seven o'clock when he stamped noisily into the sitting-room with towel and basin. He had thrice repeated his visit to the window, and with each succeeding visit had remained a little longer than before, notwithstanding the no uncertain sense of guilt that accused him of spying upon the lovely sleeper.

She awoke with a start, looked blankly about as if bewildered by her strange surroundings, and then fixed her wide, questioning eyes upon him, watching him in silence as he placed the basin of spring-water on a chair and draped the coarse towel over the back.

"Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes, Miss," he announced, bowing deeply. "If you desire to freshen yourself a bit after your profound slumbers, you will find here some of the finest water in the universe and a towel warranted to produce a blush upon the cheek of a graven image."

"Has mother come home?" she inquired anxiously, as she drew the shawl close about her throat again. "No sign of her. Hurry along, and as soon as we've had a bite to eat I'll ride down to the Court House and see if she's there."

He left her, and presently she came out into the kitchen, her skin glowing warmly, her braids loosely coiled on the crown of her head, her eyes like violet stars.

Zachariah marvelled at his master's appetite. Recollection of an already devoured meal of no small proportions caused him to doubt his senses. From time to time he shook his head in wonder and finally took to chuckling. The next time Marse Kenneth complained about having no appetite he would know what to say to him.

"I must run home now," said Viola at the close of the meal. "It's been awfully nice,--and so exciting, Kenny. I feel as if I had been doing something I ought not to do. Isn't it queer? Having breakfast with a man I never saw until six weeks ago!"

"It does my heart good to see you blush so prettily," said he warmly. Then his face darkened. "And it turns my blood cold to think that if you had succeeded in doing something you ought not to have done six weeks ago, you might now be having breakfast with somebody else instead of with me."

"I wish you would not speak of that, Kenneth," she said severely. "You will make me hate you if you bring it up again." Then she added with a plaintive little smile: "The Bible says, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' I am doing my best to live up to that, but sometimes you make it awfully hard for me."

He went to the door with her. She paused for a moment on the step to look searchingly up the road and through the trees. There was no sign of her mother. The anxious, worried expression deepened in her eyes.

"Don't come any farther with me," she said. "Go down to the Court House as fast as you can."

He watched her till she passed through the gate. As he was on the point of re-entering the house he saw her come to an abrupt stop and stare straight ahead. He shot a swift, apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

Barry Lapelle had just emerged from Rachel's yard, his gaze fixed on the girl who stood motionless in front of Gwynne's gate, a hundred feet away. Without taking his eyes from her, he slowly closed the gate and leaned against it, folding his arms as he did so.

Viola, after a moment's indecision and without a glance at Kenneth, lifted her chin and went forward to the encounter. Kenneth looked in all directions for Lapelle's rascals. He was relieved to find that the discarded suitor apparently had ventured alone upon this early morning mission. What did it portend?

Filled with sharp misgivings, he left his doorstep and walked slowly down to the gate, where he halted. It occurred to him that Barry, after a sleepless night, had come to make peace with his tempestuous sweetheart. If such was the case, his own sense of fairness and dignity would permit no interference on his part unless it was solicited by the girl herself. He was ready, however, to take instant action if she made the slightest sign of distress or alarm. While he had no intention of spying or eavesdropping, their voices reached him distinctly and he could not help hearing what passed between them.

"Have you been up to the house, Barry?" were Viola's first words as she stopped in front of the man who barred the way.

Lapelle did not change his position. His chin was lowered and he was looking at her through narrowed, unsmiling eyes.

"Yes, I have."

"Where was the dog?" she inquired cuttingly.

"He came and licked my hand. He's the only friend I've got up here, I reckon."

"I will have him shot to-day. What do you want?"

"I came to see your mother. Where is she?"

"She's away."

"Over night?"

"It will do you no good to see her, Barry. You might as well realize it first as last."

Lapelle glanced past her at the man beyond and lowered his voice. Kenneth could not hear what he said. "Well, I'm going to see her, and she will be down on her knees before I'm through with her, let me tell you. Oh, I'm sober, Viola! I had my lesson yesterday. I'm through with whiskey forever. So she was away all night, eh? Out to the farm, eh? That nigger girl of yours says she must have gone out to the farm last night, because her bed wasn't slept in. And you weren't expecting visitors as early as this or you would have got home a little sooner yourself, huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Soon as she is out of the house you scoot over to big brother Kenny's, eh? Afraid to sleep alone, I suppose. Well, all I've got to say is you ought to have taken a little more time to dress."

"Oh! Oh,--you--you low-lived dog!" she gasped, going white to the roots of her hair. "How dare you say--"

"That's right! Call me all the pretty names you can think of. And say, I didn't come up here to beg anything from you or your mother. I'm not in a begging humour. I'm through licking your boots, Viola. What time will the old woman be back?"

"Stand away from that gate!" she said in a voice low and hoarse with fury. "Don't you dare speak to me again. And if you follow me to the house I'll--I'll--"

"What'll you do?" he jeered. "Call brother Kenny? Well, go ahead and call him. There he is. I'll kick him from here to the pond,--and that won't be half so pleasant as rocking little sister to sleep in her cradle while mamma is out for the night."

"And I used to think I was in love with you!" she cried in sheer disgust. "I could spit in your face, Barry Lapelle. Will you let me pass?"

"Certainly. But I'm going into the house with you, understand that. I'd just as soon wait there for your mother as anywhere else."

"When my mother hears about this she will have you horsewhipped within an inch of your life," cried the girl furiously.

These words, rising on a wave of anger, came distinctly to Kenneth's ears. He left his place at the gate and walked swiftly along inside his fence until he came to the corner of the yard, where the bushes grew thickly. Here he stopped to await further developments. He heard Barry say, with a harsh laugh:

"Oh, she will, will she?"

"Yes, she will. She knows more about you than you think she does,--and so do I. Let me by! Do you hear me, Bar--"

"That's funny," he interrupted, lowering his voice to a half-whisper. "That's just what I came up to see her about. I want to tell her that I know more about her than she thinks I do. And when I get through telling her what I know she'll change her mind about letting us get married. And you'll marry me, too, my girl, without so much as a whimper. Oh, you needn't look around for big brother,--God, I bet you'd be happy if he wasn't your brother, wouldn't you? Well, he has sneaked into the house, just as I knew he would if it looked like a squall. He's a white-livered coward. How do you like that?"

He was not only astonished but distinctly confounded by the swift, incomprehensible smile that played about her disdainful lips.

"What the hellfire are you laughing at?" he exploded.

"Nothing much. I was only thinking about last night."

"Christ!" he exclaimed, the blood rushing to his face. "Why,--why, you--" The words failed him. He could only stare at her as if stunned by the most shocking confession.

"Please remember that you are speaking to--"

He broke in with a snarling laugh. "By thunder, I'm beginning to believe you're no better than she was. She wasn't anything but a common-----, and I'm blessed if I think it's sensible to marry into the family, after all."

"Oh!" she gasped, closing her eyes as she shrank away from him. The word he had used stood for the foulest thing on earth to her. It had never passed her clean, pure lips. For the moment she was petrified, speechless.

"It's about time you learned the truth about that damned old hypocrite,--if you don't know it already," he continued, raising his voice at the urge of the now reckless fury that consumed him. He stood over her shrinking figure, glaring mercilessly down into her horror-struck eyes. "You don't need to take my word for it. Ask Gwynne. He knows. He knows what happened back there in Kentucky. He knows she ran off with his father twenty years ago, taking him away from the woman he was married to. That's why he hates her. That's why he never had anything to do with his dog of a father. And, by God, he probably knows you were born out of wedlock,--that you're a love-child, a bas--"

CHAPTER XX

THE BLOW

He never finished the word. A whirlwind was upon him. Before he could raise a hand to defend himself, Kenneth Gwynne's brawny fist smote him squarely between the eyes. He went down as though struck by a sledge-hammer, crashing to the ground full six feet from where he stood. Behind that clumsy blow was the weight of a thirteen

stone body, hurled as from a mighty catapult.

He never knew how long afterward it was that he heard a voice speaking to him. The words, jumbled and unintelligible, seemed to come from a great distance. He attempted to rise, gave it up, and fell back dizzily. His vision was slow in clearing. What he finally saw, through blurred, uncertain eyes, was the face of Kenneth Gwynne, far above him,--and it was a long time before it stopped whirling and became fixed in one place. Then he realized that it was the voice of Gwynne that was speaking to him, and he made out the words. Something warm and wet crept along the sides of his mouth, over his chin, down his neck. His throat was full of a hot nauseous fluid. He raised himself on one elbow and spat.

"Get up! Get up, you filthy whelp! I'm not going to hit you again. Get up, I say!"

He struggled to his knees and then to his feet, sagging limply against the fence, to which he clung for support. He felt for his nose, filled with a horrid, sickening dread that it was no longer on his face.

"I ought to kill you," he heard Gwynne saying. "You black-hearted, lying scoundrel. Get out of my sight!"

He succeeded in straightening up and looked about him through a mist of tears. He tried to speak, but could only wheeze and sputter. He cleared his throat raucously and spat again.

"Where--where is she?" he managed to say at last.

"Shut up! You've dealt her the foulest--"

He broke off abruptly, struck by the other's expression: Lapelle was staring past him in the direction of the house and there was the look of a frightened, trapped animal in his glassy eyes.

"My God!" fell from his lips, and then suddenly he sprang forward, placing Kenneth's body between him and the object of his terror. "Stop her! For God's sake, Gwynne,--stop her!"

For the first time since Barry went crashing to earth and lay as one dead, Gwynne raised his eyes from the blood-smeared face. Vaguely he remembered the swift rush of Viola's feet as she sped past him,--but that was long ago and he had not looked to see whither she fled.

She was now coming down the steps of the porch, a half-raised rifle in her hands. He was never to forget her white, set face, nor the menacing look in her eyes as she advanced to the killing of Barry Lapelle,--for there was no mistaking her purpose.

"Drop down!" he shouted to Lapelle. As Barry sank cowering behind him, he cried out sharply to the girl: "Viola! Drop that gun! Do you hear me? Good God, have you lost your senses?"

She came on slowly, her head a little to one side the better to see the partially obscured figure of the crouching man.

"It won't do you any good to hide, Barry," she said, in a voice that neither of the men recognized.

"Don't be a fool, Viola!" cried Kenneth. "Leave him to me. Go back to the house. I will attend to him."

She stopped and lifted her eyes to stare at the speaker in sheer wonder and astonishment.

"Why,--you heard what he said. You heard what he called my

Livros Grátis

(<http://www.livrosgratis.com.br>)

Milhares de Livros para Download:

[Baixar livros de Administração](#)

[Baixar livros de Agronomia](#)

[Baixar livros de Arquitetura](#)

[Baixar livros de Artes](#)

[Baixar livros de Astronomia](#)

[Baixar livros de Biologia Geral](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciência da Computação](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciência da Informação](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciência Política](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciências da Saúde](#)

[Baixar livros de Comunicação](#)

[Baixar livros do Conselho Nacional de Educação - CNE](#)

[Baixar livros de Defesa civil](#)

[Baixar livros de Direito](#)

[Baixar livros de Direitos humanos](#)

[Baixar livros de Economia](#)

[Baixar livros de Economia Doméstica](#)

[Baixar livros de Educação](#)

[Baixar livros de Educação - Trânsito](#)

[Baixar livros de Educação Física](#)

[Baixar livros de Engenharia Aeroespacial](#)

[Baixar livros de Farmácia](#)

[Baixar livros de Filosofia](#)

[Baixar livros de Física](#)

[Baixar livros de Geociências](#)

[Baixar livros de Geografia](#)

[Baixar livros de História](#)

[Baixar livros de Línguas](#)

[Baixar livros de Literatura](#)
[Baixar livros de Literatura de Cordel](#)
[Baixar livros de Literatura Infantil](#)
[Baixar livros de Matemática](#)
[Baixar livros de Medicina](#)
[Baixar livros de Medicina Veterinária](#)
[Baixar livros de Meio Ambiente](#)
[Baixar livros de Meteorologia](#)
[Baixar Monografias e TCC](#)
[Baixar livros Multidisciplinar](#)
[Baixar livros de Música](#)
[Baixar livros de Psicologia](#)
[Baixar livros de Química](#)
[Baixar livros de Saúde Coletiva](#)
[Baixar livros de Serviço Social](#)
[Baixar livros de Sociologia](#)
[Baixar livros de Teologia](#)
[Baixar livros de Trabalho](#)
[Baixar livros de Turismo](#)