

The Awakening of Helena Richie

Margaret Deland

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Title: The Awakening of Helena Richie

Author: Margaret Deland

Release Date: August, 2004 [EBook #6315]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on November 25, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HELENA RICHIE *****

Produced by Beth Constantine, Charles Aldarondo, Juliet Sutherland
Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

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[Illustration: He put his face close to hers, and stared into her eyes. _Frontispiece--Awakening of Helena Richie_]

THE AWAKENING OF HELENA RICHIE

By MARGARET DELAND

Author of "Dr Lavendar's People," "Old Cheater Tales," etc.

TO

LORIN DELAND

MAY 12, 1906

CHAPTER I

Dr. Lavendar and Goliath had toiled up the hill to call on old Mr. Benjamin Wright; when they jogged back in the late afternoon it was with the peculiar complacency which follows the doing of a disagreeable duty. Goliath had not liked climbing the hill, for a heavy rain in the morning had turned the clay to stiff mud, and Dr. Lavendar had not liked calling on Benjamin Wright.

"But, Daniel," said Dr. Lavendar, addressing a small old dog who took up a great deal more room on the seat of the buggy than he was entitled to, "Daniel, my boy, you don't consult your likings in pastoral calls." Then he looked out of the mud-spattered window of the buggy, at a house by the roadside--"The Stuffed Animal House," Old Chester children called it, because its previous owner had been a taxidermist of some little local renown. "That's another visit I ought to make," he reflected, "but it can wait until next week. G'long, Goliath!"

Goliath went along, and Mrs. Frederick Richie, who lived in the Stuffed Animal House, looking listlessly from an upper window, saw the hood of the buggy jogging by and smiled suddenly. "Thank Heaven!" she said.

Benjamin Wright had not thanked Heaven when Dr. Lavendar drove away. He had been as disagreeable as usual to his visitor, but being a very lonely old man he enjoyed having a visitor to whom to be disagreeable. He lived on his hilltop a mile out of Old Chester, with his "nigger" Simmons, his canary-birds, and his temper. More than thirty years before he had quarrelled with his only son Samuel, and the two men had not spoken to each other since. Old Chester never knew what this quarrel had been about; Dr. Lavendar, speculating upon it as he and Goliath went squashing through the mud that April afternoon, wondered

which was to blame. "Pot and kettle, probably," he decided. "Samuel's goodness is very irritating sometimes, and Benjamin's badness is--well, it's not as distressing as it should be. But what a forlorn old critter he is! And this Mrs. Richie is lonely too--a widow, with no children, poor woman! I must call next week. Goliath wouldn't like to turn round now and climb the hill again. Danny, I fear Goliath is very selfish."

Goliath's selfishness carried them home and landed Dr. Lavendar at his own fireside, rather tired and full of good intentions in regard to calls. He confided these intentions to Dr. William King who looked in after supper to inquire about his cold.

"Cold? I haven't any cold! You can't get a job here. Sit down and give me some advice. Hand me a match first; this ragamuffin Danny has gone to sleep with his head on my foot, and I can't budge."

The doctor produced the match; "I'll advise you not to go out in such weather. Promise me you won't go out to-morrow."

"To-morrow? Right after breakfast, sir! To make calls on the people I've neglected. Willy, how can I find a home for an orphan child? A parson up in the mountains has asked me to see if I can place a little seven-year-old boy. The child's sister who took care of him has just died. Do you know anybody who might take him?"

"Well," said Willy King, "there's Mrs. Richie."

Dr. Lavendar looked at him over his spectacles. "Mrs. Frederick Richie?--though I understand she calls herself Mrs. Helena Richie. I don't like a young female to use her own name, William, even if she is a widow! Still, she may be a nice woman I suppose. Do you think a little boy would have a good home with her?"

"Well," the doctor demurred, "of course, we know very little about her. She has only been here six months. But I should think she was just the person to take him. She is mighty good-looking, isn't she?"

"Yes," Dr. Lavendar said, "she is. And other things being equal I prefer a good-looking woman. But I don't know that her looks are a guarantee that she can train up a child in the way he should go. Can't you think of anybody else?"

"I don't see why you don't like Mrs. Richie?" "I never said I didn't like her," protested Dr. Lavendar; "but she's a widow."

"Unless she murdered the late Richie, that's not against her."

"Widows don't always stay widows, Willy."

"I don't believe she's the marrying kind," William said. "I have a sort of feeling that the deceased Richie was not the kind of husband who receives the compliment of a successor--"

"Hold on; you're mixing things up! It's the bad husband and the good wife that get compliments of that kind."

William laughed as he was expected to, but he stuck to his opinion that Mrs. Richie had had enough of husbands. "And anyway, she's

devoted to her brother--though he doesn't come to see her very often."

"There's another point," objected Dr. Lavendar; "what kind of a man is this Mr. Pryor? Danny growled at him once, which prejudiced me against him."

"I don't take to him much myself," William King confessed; "though I must say he seems a decent man enough. He doesn't cultivate acquaintances in Old Chester, but that only shows bad taste."

"She says he is not very well," Dr. Lavendar explained; "she says he likes to keep quiet when he comes down here."

"I don't see anything wrong with him."

"Hasn't taken any of your pills? Maybe he doesn't believe in doctors. I don't myself."

"Thank you," said William King.

"There's too much fuss anyway over our precious carcasses! And you fellows encourage it," Dr. Lavendar grumbled. Then he said he wished he knew more about Mrs. Richie. "I ask you for information and all you say is that she's good-looking, and her brother doesn't take your pills."

William laughed.

"She doesn't come to church very regularly, and she never stops afterwards to talk," Dr. Lavendar ruminated.

"Well, she lives 'way up there on the hill road--"

"Yes, she does live pretty far out of town," Dr. Lavendar admitted, "but that's not a reason for not being neighborly after church."

"She's shy," said William King, "that's all. Shyness isn't anything very wrong. And she's mighty pleasant when she does talk to you. I tell you Dr. Lavendar, pleasantness goes a good way in this world. I'd say it was better than goodness--only they are the same thing."

"No, they're not," said Dr. Lavendar.

"I grant she doesn't belong to the sewing society," William said grinning. "Martha says that some of the ladies say she doesn't show proper grief for her husband. She actually smiles sometimes! They say that if the Lord were to remove _their_ beloved husbands, they would never smile again."

"William," said Dr. Lavendar chuckling, "I begin to like your widow."

"She's not my widow, thank you! But she's a nice woman, and she must be pretty lonely up there all by herself."

"Wish I had gone in to see her this afternoon," the old man said thoughtfully. "As you say she may be a suitable person to take this little boy. I wonder if she's going to stay in Old Chester?"

"Sam Wright says she has spoken to him of buying the house. That looks as if she meant to settle down. Did you know that Sam's Sam is casting sheep's eyes at her?"

"Why, she's old enough to be his mother!" said Dr. Lavendar.

"Oh, no. Sam's Sam is twenty-three, and one of my patients says that Mrs. Richie will never see forty-five again. Which leads me to conclude that she's about thirty."

"Of course she doesn't encourage him?" Dr. Lavendar said anxiously.

"She lets him come to see her, and she took him out once in that wicker-work vehicle she has--looks like a clothes-basket on wheels. And she provides the clothes to put into it. I'm told they're beautiful; but that no truly pious female would be willing to decorate poor flesh and blood with such finery. I'm told--"

"William! Is this the way I've brought you up? To pander to my besetting sin? Hold your tongue!" Dr. Lavendar rose chuckling, and stood in front of the fireplace, gathering the tails of his flowered cashmere dressing-gown under his arms. "But Willy I hope Sam isn't really smitten? You never can tell what that boy will do."

"Yes, he's a hair-trigger," the doctor agreed, "a hair-trigger! And his father understands him about as well as--as Danny there understands Hebrew! I think it's a case of Samuel and his father over again. Dr. Lavendar, do you suppose anybody will ever know what those two quarrelled about?"

"Probably not."

"I suppose," William King ruminated, "that you'd call Sam a genius?"

"No, I wouldn't; he has no patience. You can't have genius without patience. Sam hasn't a particle."

"Well," the doctor explained, "he hasn't the slightest sense of responsibility; and I notice that when people have no sense of responsibility, you call them either criminals or geniuses."

"I don't," said Dr. Lavendar dryly, "I call 'em poor critters, either way. But Willy, about this little boy; the great point is who needs him? I expect he'll be here on Saturday."

"What! This week? But you haven't found anybody to take him."

"Oh, he'll stay with me for a while, Mary'll look after him. And I'll play marbles with him. Got any white alleys? Gimme six, and I'll give you an agate."

"But Dr. Lavendar, that will be a nuisance to you," William King protested. "Let me take him. Or, at least--I'll ask Martha; she's house-cleaning now, and she says she's very tired; so I'm not sure--" William ended weakly.

"No, no; I want him myself," said the old minister.

"Well," Dr. King said with evident relief, "shall I speak to Mrs.

Richie about him? I'm going up there to-morrow; she's got a sick cook, and she asked me to call. What's his name?"

"David Allison. You might sound her William, but don't be definite. Don't give her any chance to say yes or no. I want to know her a little better before I make up my mind. When the boy comes I'll happen along in my buggy with him, and then we'll see. And meantime Willy, keep your eye on Sam's Sam. He mustn't get too much interested up there. A little falling in love with an older woman doesn't hurt most boys; in fact, it's part of their growing up and likely as not it does 'em good. But Sam's Sam isn't like most boys."

"That's so," said William King, "he may not be a genius and he certainly isn't a criminal, but he has about as much stability as a sky-rocket."

CHAPTER II

"You can't think of anybody who might like to take this little David Allison, can you, my dear?" William King asked his wife at breakfast the next morning.

"I certainly cannot," Martha said decidedly. "I think it's a very dangerous thing to take unknown children into your family. I suppose you think I ought to offer to do it? But in the first place, I'm very tired, and in the second place, I don't like boys. If it was a girl it might be different."

"No doubt we could find a girl," William began, but she interrupted him.

"Girls are a great expense. And then, as I said--unknown children!--they might turn into anything. They might have evil tendencies; they probably have. If the parents die early, it's a sign of weakness of some sort. I've no doubt this boy's father drank. I don't want to seem unkind, but I must say flatly and frankly that considering how hard it is for us to make both ends meet--as you keep up a sort of free practice--I don't think it's prudent to suggest any new responsibilities and expenses."

"Oh, I wasn't making suggestions," William King said. "I guess we're not the people to bring up a child. I'd spoil him, I've no doubt."

"I'm sure you would!" Martha said, greatly relieved. "It would be the worst possible thing for him. But Willy, there's that Mrs. Richie?"

"You think his evil tendencies wouldn't hurt her?" the doctor said dryly.

"I think she's a rich woman, so why shouldn't she do a thing like that? I'll go and see her if you want me to--though she never makes you feel welcome; and tell her about the boy?"

"You needn't bother; Dr. Lavendar will see her himself."

"I don't understand that woman," Mrs. King said. "She keeps herself to herself too much. It almost looks as if she didn't think we were good enough to associate with her!"

William made no reply.

"Willy, does she use perfumery?"

"How in the world should I know!"

"Well, there's a sort of fragrance about her. It isn't like cologne, it's like--well, orris-root."

William made no comment.

"It's a kind of sachet, I guess; I'd like to know what it is. Willy, Sam Wright's Sam went out walking with her yesterday. I met them on the River Road. I believe the boy is in love with her!"

"He's got eyes," William agreed.

"_Tck!_" said Martha, "the idea of calling her good-looking! And I don't think it speaks well for a woman of her age--she's forty if she's a day--to let a boy trail round after her like that. And to fix herself up with sachet-powders and things. And her Sarah told the Draytons' Jean that she had her breakfast in bed every morning! I'd like to know how my housekeeping would go on if _I_ had breakfast in bed, though dear knows I'm very tired and it would be pleasant enough. But there's one thing about me: I may not be perfect, but I don't do lazy things just because they are pleasant."

The doctor made no defence of Mrs. Richie. Instead he asked for another cup of coffee and when told that it would not be good for him, got up, then paused patiently, his hand on the door-knob, to hear his Martha out.

"William, what do you suppose is the last thing Sam Wright's Sam has done?"

The doctor confessed his ignorance.

"Well, his father sent him to Mercer on Monday to buy supplies for the bank. He gave him seventy-five dollars. Back comes my young gentleman with--what do you suppose? A lot of pictures of actors and actresses! And no supplies."

"What! you don't mean he spent the money on the pictures?"

"Every bit of it! His mother came in and told me about it last night. She said his father was frantic. She was dreadfully upset herself. As for Sam, he kept saying that the 'prints,' as he called them, were very valuable. Though I'm sure I can't see why; they were only of actor people, and they had all died sixty or seventy years ago."

"Actors!" the doctor said. "Poor Samuel! he hates the theatre. I do believe he'd rather have pictures of the devil."

"Oh, but wait. You haven't heard the rest of it. It appears that when the boy looked at 'em yesterday morning he found they weren't as

valuable as he thought--I don't understand that part of it," Martha acknowledged--"so what does he do but march downstairs, and put 'em all in the kitchen stove! What do you think of that?"

"I think," said William King, "that he has always gone off at half-cock ever since he was born. But Martha, the serious thing is his spending money that didn't belong to him."

"I should think it was serious! If he'd been some poor little clerk in the bank, instead of Mr. Samuel Wright's only son, he would have found it was serious! Willy, what do you make of him?"

"He is queer," William said; "queer as Dick's hatband; but that's all. Sam wouldn't do a mean thing, or a dirty thing, any more than a girl would."

"And now he thinks he's in love with this Richie woman," Martha went on--but William made his escape. He had to go and hitch up, he said.

Before he took Jinny out of her stall he went into the harness-room and hunted about on a shelf until, behind a rusty currycomb and two empty oil-bottles, he found a small mirror. It was misty and flecked with clear spots where the quicksilver had dropped away, but when he propped it against the cobwebbed window he could see himself fairly well. Staring into its dim depths he retied his necktie; then he backed the buggy out of the carriage-house. But after he had put his mare between the shafts he hesitated.... The buggy was very shabby; it sagged badly on the right side and there was a rent in the faded cushion. The doctor looked at his watch.... Then, hurriedly, led Jinny back to her stall, got a bucket of water and a sponge, and washed off the dashboard and wheels. After that he fumbled along a dusty beam to find a bottle of oil with which he touched up the harness. But when all was done he shook his head. The buggy was hopeless. Nevertheless, when he climbed in and slapped Jinny's flank with the newly oiled rein he was careful to sit in the middle of the seat to make the springs truer, and he avoided the mud-puddles on the road up to the Stuffed Animal House. There were a good many puddles, for it had rained the day before. To-day the clouds had gathered up behind the hills into white domes, but the sky was that faint April blue that dims easily into warm mists. There was the smell of earth, the fainter scent of unopened buds, and from the garden borders of the Stuffed Animal House came the pungent odor of box.

Helena Richie, standing by a bed of crown-imperials, bareheaded, a trowel in her gloved hand, her smooth cheek flushed with the unwonted exertion of planting seeds, caught the exquisite breath of the box, and sighed; then, listlessly, she turned to walk back towards the house. Before she reached it the gate clicked and Dr. King came up the path. She saw him and looked hurriedly about, as if seeking a way of escape, but it was too late.

"Gardening?" he called to her.

"Yes," she said, and her smile like reluctant sunshine did not betray to the doctor that he was not welcome.

"Don't work too hard," he cautioned her. It seemed to William King, looking at her with wondering admiration, that she was too delicate a creature to handle a trowel. There was a certain soft indolence in the

way she moved that was a delight to his eye. It occurred to him that he would ask his Martha why she didn't wear gardening-gloves. Mrs. Richie wore them, and as she pulled one off he saw how soft and white her hand was....

"How's the patient?" he asked.

"Poor Maggie? Oh, she's pretty uncomfortable I'm afraid."

They had gone together to the front porch, and as she stood on the lower step looking up at him, the sunshine suddenly filled her eyes with limpid brown light. "Maggie is in her room in the ell--the first door on the left. Shall I show you the way?"

"I know the way," he said.

Mrs. Richie sat down on the porch step to wait for him. She had nothing else to do. She never had anything to do. She had tried to be interested in the garden, and bought a trowel and some seeds and wandered out into the borders; but a manufactured interest has no staying quality--especially if it involves any hard work. She was glad when William King came back and sat down beside her; sickness was not an agreeable topic, but it was a topic.

"Maggie will be all right in two or three days, but don't let her go into the kitchen before Monday. A bad throat pulls you down. And she's had a good deal of pain."

"Oh, poor Maggie!" she said wincing.

"A sore throat is nothing so very dreadful," William assured her with open amusement.

She drew a breath of relief. "Oh, I'm glad! I can't bear to think of pain." Then she looked at him anxiously. "Don't you think she can cook before Monday? I'm so tired of scrappy dinners.

"I'm afraid not," William King said. "I'm very sorry." But that his sorrow was not for Maggie was evident.

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Richie; and then her eyes crinkled with gayety at his concern. "I don't really mind, Dr. King."

"I shouldn't blame you if you did. Nobody likes scrappy dinners. I wish you would come down and have dinner with us?"

"Oh, thank you, no," she said. And the sudden shy retreat into her habitual reserve was followed by a silence that suggested departure to the doctor. As he got up he remembered Dr. Lavendar and the little boy, but he was at a loss how to introduce the subject. In his perplexity he frowned, and Mrs. Richie said quickly:

"Of course she sha'n't do any work. I'm not so bad-tempered as you think; I only meant that I don't like discomfort."

"_You_ bad-tempered?" he said. "No, indeed! You're just the opposite. That's why I suggested you when I heard about this boy."

"What boy?"

"Why, a little fellow of seven--David his name is--that Dr. Lavendar is trying to find a home for. And I thought perhaps you--"

--would take him?" cried Mrs. Richie in astonishment, and then she laughed. "_!_"

"Why, it occurred to me that perhaps you might be lonely, and--"

Helena Richie stopped laughing; she pulled off her other glove and looked down at her white hands. "Well, yes, I'm lonely. But--I don't like children, Dr. King."

"You don't?" he said blankly, and in his surprise he sat down again. "Oh, I'm sure that's only because you don't know them. If you had ever known a child--"

"I have," Mrs. Richie said, "one." Her voice was bleak; the gaiety had dropped out of it; for an instant she looked old. William King understood.

"It died?"

She nodded. She began to pull her gloves on again, smoothing down each finger carefully and not looking at him.

"A little girl?"

"Boy." She turned her face away, but he saw her chin tremble. There was a moment's silence; then the doctor said with curious harshness.

"Well, anyhow, you know what it means to have owned your own."

"Better not have known!"

"I can't feel that. But perhaps I don't understand."

"You don't understand." Her head, with its two soft braids wound around it like a wreath, was bent so that he could not see her face. "Dr. King, his father--hurt him. Yes; hurt a little baby, eight months and twelve days old. He died seven weeks later."

William drew in his breath; he found no words.

"That was twelve years ago, but I can't seem to--to get over it," she said with a sort of gasp.

"But how--" Dr. King began.

"Oh, he was not himself. He was--happy, I believe you call it 'happy'?"

"How did you bear it!"

"I didn't bear it I suppose. I never have borne it!"

"Did he repent before he died?" William King said passionately.

"Before he--?" Her voice suddenly shook; she made elaborate pretence

of calmness, fastening her gloves and looking at them critically; then she said: "Yes, Dr. King; he repented. He repented!"

"If there ever was excuse for divorce, you had it!"

"You don't think there ever is?" she asked absently.

"No," William said. "I suppose you'll think I'm very old-fashioned, but I don't, unless--" he stopped short; he could not have put his qualifying thought into words to any woman, especially not to this woman, so like a girl in spite of her thirty-odd years. "You see," he said, awkwardly, "it's such an unusual thing. It never happened in Old Chester; why, I don't believe I ever saw a--a divorced person in my life!"

"Well," she said, "anyhow, I didn't get a divorce."

"Mrs. Richie!" he said, blushing to his temples, "you didn't think I thought of such a thing?"

But it was plain that she regretted her confidence; she rose with the evident purpose of changing the subject. "I must go and put in some more seeds. Why doesn't Dr. Lavendar keep this little boy? After all, he's lonely himself."

"Well, he's an old man you know, and--"

"Dr. King," she broke in, "I don't mind having the child here for a week while Dr. Lavendar is looking for somebody to take him. Not longer. It wouldn't do. Really it wouldn't. But for a week, perhaps, or maybe two!"

"That would be a great help," William King said. "Then Dr. Lavendar can have plenty of time to find a home for him. I would have been glad to take him myself, but just at present it happens that it is not--I should say, Mrs. King is very tired, and--"

"It is perfectly convenient for me," Mrs. Richie said, "if you'll only cure Maggie! You must cure Maggie, so that she can make cookies for him."

"I'll cure Maggie," the doctor assured her smiling, and went away much pleased with himself. But when he got into his shabby old buggy he sighed.

"Poor soul!" he said. "Poor soul!"

CHAPTER III

William King reported the result of his call to Dr. Lavendar, and when he told the tragic story of the dead baby the old man blinked and shook his head.

"Do you wonder she doesn't call herself Mrs. Frederick Richie?" William demanded. "I don't!"

"No; that's natural, that's natural," Dr. Lavendar admitted.

"I suppose it was a dreadful thing to say," said William, "but I just burst out and said that if ever there was an excuse for divorce, she had it!"

"What did she say?"

"Oh, of course, that she hadn't been divorced. I was ashamed of myself the next minute for speaking of such a thing."

"Poor child," said Dr. Lavendar, "living up there alone, and with such memories! I guess you're right; I guess she'd like to have little David, if only for company. But I think I'll keep him for a week or two myself, and let her get sort of acquainted with him under my eye. That will give me a chance to get acquainted with her. But to think I haven't known about that baby until now! It must be my fault that she was not drawn to tell me. But I'm afraid I wasn't drawn to her just at first."

Yet Dr. Lavendar was not altogether at fault. This newcomer in Old Chester was still a stranger to everybody, except to Sam Wright's Sam and to William King. To be sure, as soon as she was settled in her house Old Chester had called and asked her to tea, and was confused and annoyed because its invitations were not accepted. Furthermore, she did not return the calls. She went to church, but not very regularly, and she never stopped to gossip in the vestibule or the church-yard. Even with Dr. Lavendar she was remote. The first time he went to see her he asked, with his usual directness, one or two questions: Did Mr. Pryor live in Mercer? No; he had business that brought him there occasionally. Where did he live? In Philadelphia. Had she any relatives in this part of the world--except her brother? No, none; none anywhere. Was Mr. Pryor married? Yes. Had he any family? One daughter; his wife was dead. "And you have lost your husband?" Dr. Lavendar said, gently. "This is a lonely life for you here, I am afraid."

But she said oh, no; not at all; she liked the quiet. Then, with faint impatience as if she did not care to talk about her own affairs, she added that she had always lived in the East; "but I find it very pleasant here," she ended vaguely.

Dr. Lavendar had gone away uneasy and puzzled. Why didn't she live with her brother? Family differences no doubt. Curious how families fall out! "You'd think they'd be glad to hang together," the solitary old man thought; "and they are not necessarily bad folk who quarrel. Look at Sam and his boy. Both of 'em good as gold. But it's in the blood there," he said to himself sighing.

Sam and his son were not bad folk. The boy had nothing bad about him; nothing worse than an unexpectedness that had provided Old Chester with smiles for many years. "No; he is not bad; I have seen to _that_," his father used to say. "He's hardly been out of my sight twenty-four hours at a time. And I put my foot down on college with all its temptations. He's good--if he's nothing else!" And certainly Samuel Wright was good too. Everybody in Old Chester said so. He said so himself. "I, my dear Eliza, have nothing with which to reproach myself," he used to tell his wife ponderously in moments of

conjugal unbending. "I have done my duty. I always do my duty; under all circumstances. I am doing my duty now by Sam."

This was when he and his son fell out on one point or another, as they had begun to do as soon as young Sam learned to talk; and all because the father insisted upon furnishing the boy with his own most excellent principles and theories, instead of letting the lad manufacture such things for himself. Now when Sam was twenty-three the falling-out had become chronic. No doubt it was in the blood, as Dr. Lavendar said. Some thirty years before, Sam senior, then a slim and dreamy youth, light-hearted and given to writing verses, had fallen out with his father, old Benjamin Wright; fallen out so finally that in all these years since, the two men, father and son, had not spoken one word to each other. If anybody might have been supposed to know the cause of that thirty-year-old feud it was Dr. Lavendar. He certainly saw the beginning of it....

One stormy March evening Samuel Wright, then twenty-four years old, knocked at the Rectory door; Dr. Lavendar, shielding his lamp from the wind with one hand, opened it himself.

"Why, Sam, my boy," he said and stopped abruptly. He led the way into his study and put the lamp down on the table. "Something is the matter?"

"Yes."

"What is it, Samuel?"

"I can't tell you, sir."

"Does your father know?"

"My father knows.... I will tell you this, Dr. Lavendar--that so help me God, I will never speak to my father again."

The young man lifted one hand; his face was dreadful to look upon. Then trying to speak in a natural voice he asked if he might stay at the Rectory for that night.

Dr. Lavendar took two turns about his study, then he said, "Of course you may, Samuel, but I shall feel it my duty to acquaint your father with the fact."

"Just as you please, sir."

"And Sam--I hope the night will bring wisdom."

Sam was silent.

"I shall see your father in the morning and try to clear this thing up."

"Just as you please, sir. I would like to go to my room now if you have no objection."

And that was all Dr. Lavendar got out of the son.

He lighted a lamp and silently preceded his guest up-stairs; then he

went back to his study and wrote a line to the father. He sent it out to the Wright house and sat up until midnight waiting for an answer. None came. "Well," said Dr. Lavendar at last trudging up to bed, "the boy comes by his obstinacy honestly." The next morning he went early to see Mr. Benjamin Wright. But as far as any straightening out of the trouble went or any enlightenment as to its cause, he might as well have stayed at home.

"Sam send you?"

"No; I came to see what I could do for you both. I take it for granted that Sam is at fault in some way? But he is a good boy, so I am sure he can be made to see his error."

"Did he tell you what was the trouble?"

"No; will you?"

"Let him come back and behave himself!" the older man said.

Dr. Lavendar thrust out his lower lip with a thoughtful frown. "It would expedite things, Wright, if you could tell me a little about the affair?"

Mr. Wright hesitated. He thrust his hand down into a blue ginger-jar for a piece of dried orange-skin and bit at it as if to steady his lips. "Sam can tell you if he wants to. He has perhaps informed you that he wishes to see the world? That he thinks life here very narrow? No? Well, I sha'n't quote him. All I shall say, is that I am doing my duty to him. I've always done my duty to him. If he sees fit to set up his own Ebenezer, and say he won't speak to me--I suppose he conveyed that filial sentiment to you?--he can do so. When he gets hungry he can speak. That's what other puppies do when they are hungry."

And that was all Dr. Lavendar got out of the father....

This was thirty-two years ago. Sain Wright may have been hungry, but he never spoke. Instead, he worked. Old Chester seethed with curiosity for a while--to see Benjamin Wright pass his son with a contemptuous stare, to see Sam pass his father without a glance was very exciting. But excitement ebbs in thirty-two years. For one thing, old Mr. Wright came less often into town--because he could not bear to meet his son, people said; and Samuel never took the hill road out of Old Chester for a corresponding reason. Furthermore, it was hard to connect Samuel with anything so irrational as a quarrel, for every year he grew in solemn common sense. Benjamin Wright's growth was all in the way of temper; at least so his boy Simmons, a freckled mulatto of sixty years, informed Old Chester.

"He 'ain't got no human feelin's, 'cept for them there canaries," Simmons used to say in an aggrieved voice; "he'll stand and look at 'em and chirp to 'em by the hour--an' 'en he'll turn round and swear at you 'nough to take your leg off," Simmons said, bitterly. Simmons did his best for the canaries which he detested, cleaning out the cages and scraping the perches and seeing that the seed-trays and bath-tubs were always full; he did his best conscientiously, and it was hard to be "swore at when you 'ain't done nothin'." Perhaps Benjamin Wright had some "human feelings" for his grandson, Sam; but certainly Simmons's opinion was justified by his treatment of his

granddaughters. When by their father's orders the little girls came up to the lonely house on the hill, the old man used to pitch small coins to them and tell them to go and look at the canaries,--"and then clear out. Simmons, give 'em some cake or something! Good-by. Good-by. Clear out." Long before he had settled into such dreary living, the son with whom he had quarrelled had made a life of his own. His slimness and gayety had disappeared as well as his dreaminess and versifying instincts. "Poetry?" he had been heard to say, "why, there isn't a poem that was ever written that I'd take five minutes out of my business to read!" It seemed as if the quarrel had wrenched him from the grooves, physical and spiritual, in which Nature had meant him to run and started him on lines of hard common sense. He was intensely positive; heavy and pompous and painfully literal; inclined to lay down the law to everybody; richer than most of us in Old Chester, and full of solemn responsibilities as burgess and senior warden and banker. His air of aggressive integrity used to make the honestest of us feel as if we had been picking pockets! Yes; a good man, as Old Chester said.

Years ago Dr. Lavendar had given up trying to reconcile the two Wrights; years ago Old Chester's speculations languished and died out. Once in a while some one remembered the quarrel and said, "What in the world could it have been about?" And once in a while Samuel's own children asked awkward questions. "Mother, what was father's row with grandfather?" And Mrs. Wright's answer was as direct as the question. "I don't know. He never told me."

When this reply was made to young Sam he dropped the subject. He had but faint interest in his father, and his grandfather with whom he took tea every Sunday night was too important a person to connect with so trivial an affair as a quarrel.

This matter of offspring is certainly very curious. Why should the solid Samuel Wright and his foolish, obedient Eliza have brought into the world a being of mist and fire? A beautiful youth, who laughed or wept or sung aloud, indifferent to all about him! Sometimes Sam senior used to look at his son and shake his head in bewildered astonishment; but often he was angry, and oftener still--though this he never admitted--hurt. The boy, always impersonally amiable, never thought it worth while to explain himself; partly because he was not interested in his father's opinion of his conduct, and partly because he knew he could not make himself understood.

"But who, my dear Eliza," Samuel would say to his wife--"who could understand such a boy? Look at this last performance of his! Purchasing pictures of _actors_! Where does he get such low tastes?--unless some of your family were interested in such things?"

"Oh no, Samuel; no, indeed," Mrs. Wright protested nervously.

"And to use money not his own! Do you know what that is called, my dear Eliza? It is called--"

"Oh don't, Samuel." whimpered the poor mother.

"And to think how carefully I have trained him! And all I have done for him. I let him buy that skiff he said he wanted. Absolute waste of money! Our old rowboat is good enough for the girls, so why isn't it good enough for him? And I never laid a hand on him in punishment

either; not many fathers can say that."

As for the bank supplies young Sam had explained to his mother that they had been ordered and charged, so what was the matter? And Mrs. Wright kneading her tear-soaked handkerchief into a ball, cried some more and said:

"Oh, Sam dear, why do you act so?"

Sam looked at her attentively, wondering why her little nose always reddened when she cried. But he waited patiently, until she finished her rambling reproaches. It occurred to him that he would tell Mrs. Richie all about this matter of the prints. "She will understand," he thought.

Sam's acquaintance with Mrs. Richie had begun when she was getting settled in her new house. Sam senior, having no desire to climb the hill road, sent his various communications to his tenant by his son, and afterwards Sam junior had communications of his own to make. He fell into the habit of stopping there on Sunday afternoons, quite oblivious of the fact that Mrs. Richie did not display any pleasure at seeing him. After one of these calls he was apt to be late in reaching "The Top," as his grandfather's place was called, and old Benjamin Wright, in his brown wig and moth-eaten beaver hat, would glare at him with melancholy dark eyes.

"Gad-a-mercy, what do you mean,--getting here at six-five! I have my tea at six, sir; at six sharp. Either get here on time or stay away. I don't care which. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," young Sam would murmur.

"Where have you been? Mooning after that female at the Stuffed Animal House?"

"I had to leave a message, sir, about the lease."

"How long does it take to leave a message about a lease?"

"She was not down-stairs and I had to wait--"

"I had to wait! That's more to the point. There, don't talk about it. You drive me crazy with your chatter."

Then they would sit down to supper in a black silence only broken by an occasional twitter from one of the many cages that hung about the room. But afterwards young Sam had his reward; the library, a toby, long before he was old enough to smoke, and his grandfather reading aloud in a wonderful voice, deep, sonorous, flexible--Shakespeare, Massinger, Beaumont and Fletcher. To be sure, there was nothing personal in such reading--it was not done to give pleasure to young Sam. Every night the old man rumbled out the stately lines, sitting by himself in this gloomy room walled to the ceiling with books, and warmed by a soft-coal fire that snapped and bubbled behind the iron bars of the grate. Sometimes he would burst into angry ecstasy at the beauty of what he read "There! What do you think of that?"

"Oh, it's splendid!"

"Hah! Much you know about it! There is about as much poetry in your family as there is in that coal scuttle."

It was when he was eighteen that once the old man let his grandson read The Tempest with him. It was a tremendous evening to Sam. In the first place, his grandfather swore at him with a fury that really attracted his attention. But that night the joy of the drama suddenly possessed him. The deed was done; the dreaming youth awoke to the passion of art. As Benjamin Wright gradually became aware of it delight struggled with his customary anger at anything unexpected. He longed to share his pleasure with somebody; once he mentioned to Dr. Lavendar that "that cub, Sam, really has something to him!" After that he took the boy's training seriously in hand, and his artless pride concealed itself in a severity that knew no bounds of words. When Sam confessed his wish to write a drama in blank verse, his grandfather swore at him eagerly and demanded every detail of what he called the "fool plot of the thing."

"What does that female at the Stuffed Animal House say to the idea of your writing a drama?" he asked contemptuously.

"She says I may read it to her."

"Knows as much about dramatic poetry as you do I suppose? When you finish the first act bring it to me. I'll tell you how bad it is."

His eager scoffing betrayed him, and every Sunday night, in spite of slaughtering criticism the boy took courage to talk of his poem. He had no criticism from Mrs. Richie.

When he first began to call at the Stuffed Animal House she had been coldly impatient, then uneasy then snubbing. But nothing can be so obtuse as a boy; it never occurs to him that he is not wanted. Sam continued to call and to tell her of his play and to look at her with beautiful, tragic eyes, that by and by openly adored. Inevitably the coldness to which he was so calmly impervious wore off; a boy's innocent devotion must touch any woman no matter how self-absorbed she may be. Mrs. Richie began to be glad to see him. As for his drama, it was beautiful, she said.

"No," Sam told her, "it isn't--yet. You don't know. But I like to read it to you, even if you don't." His candor made her laugh, and before she knew it in spite of the difference in their years they were friends. As William King said, she was lonely, and Sam's devotion was at least an interest. Besides, she really liked the boy; he amused her, and her empty days were so devoid of amusement! "I can't read novels all the time," she complained. In this very bread-and-butter sort of interest she had no thought of possible consequences to Sam. A certain pleasant indolence of mind made it easy not to think of consequences at all. But he had begun to love her--with that first passion of youth so divinely tender and ridiculous! After a while he talked less of his play and more of himself. He told her of his difficulties at home, how he hated the bank, and how stupid the girls were.

"Lydia is the nicest, but she has no more imagination than a turnip. They are very uninteresting--my family," he said meditatively. "I don't like any of them--except mother. Mother hasn't any sense, but she's good," Sam ended earnestly.

"Oh, but you mustn't say things like that!"

"Why not? They're true," he said with a surprised look.

"Well, but we don't always tell the truth right out," she reminded him.

"I do," said Sam, and then explained that he didn't include his grandfather in his generalization. "Grandfather's bully; you ought to hear him swear!"

"Oh, I don't want to!" she said horrified.

"I told him that I burned the prints up," Sam went on. "And he said, 'good riddance to bad rubbish.' That was just like grandfather! Of course he did say that I was a d--I mean, a fool, to buy them in the first place; and I knew I was. But having bought them, the only thing to do was to burn them. But father!--"

Mrs. Richie's eyes crinkled with mischievous gayety. "Poor Mr. Wright!"

Sam dropped his clasped hands between his knees. "It's queer how I always do the wrong thing. Though it never seems wrong to me. You know father would not let me go to college for fear I'd go to the devil?" he laughed joyously. "But I might just as well, for he thinks everything I do in Old Chester is wrong." Then he sighed. "Sometimes I get pretty tired of being disapproved of;--especially as I never can understand why it is. The fact is people are not reasonable," he complained. "I can bear anything but unreasonableness."

She nodded. "I know, I never could please my grandmother--she brought me up. My mother and father died when I was a baby. I think grandmother hated me; she thought everything I did was wrong. Oh, I was so miserable! And when I was eighteen I got married--and that was a mistake."

Sam gazed up at her in silent sympathy,

"I mean my--husband was so much older than I," she said. Then with an evident effort to change the subject she added that one would think it would be simple enough to be happy; "all my life I only wanted to be happy," she said.

"You're happy now, aren't you?" he asked,

She looked down at him--he was sitting on a stool before the fire near her feet--and laughed with a catching of the breath. "Oh, yes, yes; I'm happy."

And Sara caught his breath too, for there were tears in her eyes.

But instantly she veered away from personalities. "What is that scar on your wrist?"

Sam looked down at his hands clasped about his knees, and blushed faintly. "Oh, nothing; I was very young when that happened."

"How did it happen?" she asked absently. It was often possible to start Sam talking and then think her own thoughts without interruption.

"Why, I was about twelve, I believe," Sam said, "and Miss Ellen Bailey--she used to teach school here, then she got married and went out West;--she gave me a little gold image of Pasht, at least I thought it was gold. It was one of those things you ladies wear on your watch-chains, you know,"

"Yes?" she said indolently.

"Well, I took a tremendous fancy to it. But it seems it wasn't gold, it was brass, and somebody told me so; I think it was Miss Ellen herself. I was so disappointed, I didn't want to live--queer! I can remember now just how I felt; a sort of sinking, here;" Sam laid his hand on his breast, "So I decided to throw myself out of the window. I did; but unfortunately--"

"You threw yourself out of the window!" she is interrupted horrified.

Sam laughed. "Oh, well, I wasn't successful: I continued to live. Unfortunately my trousers caught on the grape trellis under the window, and there I hung! It must have been pretty funny--though I didn't think so at the time. First place, I tore my wrist on a nail--that's the scar; and then father caught me and sent me to bed for being a fool; so I didn't gain anything." His lip drooped. His feeling for his father was a candid mixture of amusement and contempt.

"But do you always act on the spur of the moment?" she said astonished.

Sam laughed and said he supposed so. "I am a good deal of a fool," he added simply.

"Well," she said sighing, "it's dangerous to be like that. I know, because I--I am a good deal of a fool myself." Then again, abruptly, she changed the subject. "What do you think? I'm going to have some company!"

Sam frowned. "Your brother?"

"No, oh no; not--Mr. Pryor." Then she told him that Dr. Lavendar had asked her if she would look after a little boy for him for a few weeks.

Sam was not responsive. Little boys were a great deal of trouble, he said.

"Come now; how long since--"

Sam's limpid deer's-eyes reproached her silently.

"How shall I amuse him?" she said.

And Sam eager to serve her promised to find a pair of rabbits for the child. "I used to like rabbits when I was young," he explained.

At last, after his hostess had swallowed many yawns, Sam reluctantly

said good night. He went bounding down the hill in the darkness, across the fields, through the woods. In the starlight, the great world lay dim and lovely before him--it belonged to him! He felt the joyous buffet of the night wind upon his face, the brush of boughs against his shoulder, the scent of young ferns, and the give of the spongy earth under his feet; he sprang in long leaps over the grass, the tears were wet upon his fresh cheeks, he sang aloud. But he did not know what he sang; in his young breast, Love, like some warm living thing, stirred, and lifted glorious wings and drove his voice throbbing and exultant to his lips! As he came down Main Street, the church clock struck eleven. But it might have struck twelve and he would not have been disturbed.

Standing in the doorway of the Wright house in thunderous silence the senior warden, lamp in hand awaited his son. As Sam entered, the silence broke into a flash of crackling and scathing contempt.

"It does not occur to you, sir, I suppose, that a lady may find your society tiresome? It is after eleven!"

Sam smiling to himself hung up his hat. He was reflecting that he must see about those rabbits at once.

"You will understand, sir, if you please, that while you do me the honor to live under my roof you will return to it at night at a respectable hour. I will not sit up for you in this way. You will be in at ten o'clock. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," said Sam; and added with sudden awakening of interest, "if you would let me have a key, father, I--"

"I will not let you have a key! I will have no boy entering my house at midnight with a key! Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Sam murmured falling back into his own thoughts.

Mr. Wright, still talking, stood at the foot of the stairs so that his son could not pass him. Sam yawned, then noticed how in oratorical denunciation his father's long upper lip curved like the beak of a bird of prey; behind his hand he tried to arch his own lip in the same manner. He really did not hear what was said to him; he only sighed with relief when it was over and he was allowed to go up-stairs and tumble sleepily into bed.

As for his long-suffering hostess, when she was alone Helena Richie rubbed her eyes and began to wake up. "That boy never knows when to go!" she said to herself with amused impatience. Then her mind turned to her own affairs. This little boy, David Allison, would be in Old Chester on Saturday; he was to stay with Dr. Lavendar for a while, and then come to her for a week or two. But she was beginning to regret the invitation she had sent through Dr. King. It, would be pleasant to have the little fellow, but "I can't keep him. so why should I take him even for a week? I might get fond of him! I'm afraid it's a mistake. I wonder what Lloyd would think? I don't believe he really loves children. And yet--he cared when the baby died."

She pulled a low chair up to the hearth and sat down, her elbows on her knees, her fingers ruffling the soft locks about her forehead.

"Oh, my baby! my little, little baby!" she said in a broken whisper.

The old passion of misery swept over her; she shrank lower in her chair, rocking herself to and fro, her fingers pressed against her eyes. It was thirteen years ago, and yet even now in these placid days in Old Chester, to think of that time brought the breathless smother of agony back again--the dying child, the foolish brute who had done him to death.... If the baby had lived he would be nearly fourteen years old now; a big boy! She wondered whether his hair would still have been curly? She knew in her heart that she never could have had the courage to cut those soft curls off--and yet, boys hated curls, she thought; and smiled proudly. He would have been so manly! If he had lived, how different everything would have been, how incredibly different! For of course, if he had lived she would have been happy in spite of Frederick. And happiness was all she wanted.

She brushed the tears from her flushed cheeks, and propping her chin in her hands stared into the fire, thinking--thinking.... Her childhood had been passed with her father's mother, a silent woman who with bitter expectation of success had set herself to discover in Helena traits of the poor, dead, foolish wife who had broken her son's heart. "Grandmamma hated me," Helena Richie reflected. "She begrudged me the least little bit of pleasure." Yet her feeling towards the hard old woman now was not resentment; it was only wonder. "_Why_ didn't she like me to be happy?" she thought. It never occurred to her that her grandmother who had guarded and distrusted her had also loved her. "Of course I never loved her," she reminded herself, "but I wouldn't have wanted her to be unhappy. She wanted me to be wretched. Curious!" Yet she realized that at that time she had not desired love; she had only desired happiness. Looking back, she pondered on her astounding immaturity; what a child she had been to imagine that merely to get away from that gray life with her grandmother would be happiness, and so had married Frederick. Frederick.... She was eighteen, and so pretty. She smiled remembering how pretty she was. And Frederick had made such promises! She was to have every kind of happiness. Of course she had married him. Thinking of it now, she did not in the least blame herself. If the dungeon doors open and the prisoner catches a glimpse of the green world of sunshine, what happens? Of course she had married Frederick! As for love, she never thought of it; it did not enter into the bargain--at least on her part. She married him because he wanted her to, and because he would make her happy. And, oh, how glad her grandmother had been! At the memory of that passionate satisfaction, Helena clasped her hands over the two brown braids that folded like a chaplet around her head and laughed aloud, the tears still glittering on her lashes. Her prayers, her grandmother said, had been answered; the girl was safe--an honest wife! "Now lettest Thou Thy servant--" the old woman murmured, with dreadful gratitude in her voice.

Thinking of that gratitude, the tears dried upon Helena's cheeks, hot with the firelight and with her thoughts. "Suppose she had lived just a little longer?--just three years longer? Where would her gratitude have been then?" Helena's face overflowed with sudden gay malice, but below the malice was weariness. "You are happy now--aren't you?" Sam Wright had said.... Why, yes, certainly. Frederick had "repented," as Dr. King expressed it; she had seen to his "_repentance_"! That in itself was something to have lived for--a searing flame of happiness. Enough one might think to satisfy her--if she could only have forgotten the baby. At first she had believed that she could forget him. Lloyd had told her she would. How young she had been at twenty-one to think that any one could forget! She smiled dryly at her

childish hope and at Lloyd's ignorance; but his tenderness had been so passionately convincing,--and how good he had been about the baby! He had let her talk of him all she wanted to. Of course, after a while he got a little tired of the subject, and naturally. It was Frederick's baby! And Lloyd hated Frederick as much as she did. How they used to talk about him in those first days of his "repentance!"... "Have you heard anything?" "Yes; running down-hill every day." "Is there any news?" "Yes, he'll drink himself into his grave in six months." Ah, that was happiness indeed!--"his _grave_, in six months!"... She flung herself back in her chair, her hands dropping listlessly into her lap. "Oh--my little, dead baby!"...

It was nearly midnight; the fire had burned quite out; the room had fallen into shadows. Oh, yes, as she told Sam Wright, she was happy. Her face fell into lines of dull indifference.

She got up, wearily, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles, as a child does; then suddenly remembered that she had reached no conclusion about this little boy Dr. Lavendar was interested in. Suppose she should get fond of him and want to keep him--how would Lloyd feel about it? Would he think the child might take her thoughts from him? But at that she smiled; he could not be so foolish! "I'll write and ask him, anyhow. Of course, if he objects, I wouldn't dream of it. I wonder what he will think?"

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Lloyd Pryor thought very deeply after he read Mrs. Richie's letter. He sat in his office and smoked and reflected. And as he reflected his face brightened. It was a handsome face, with a mouth that smiled easily. His heavy-lidded eyes behind astonishingly thick and curling lashes were blue; when he lifted them the observer felt a slight shock, for they were curiously motionless; generally, however, the heavy lids drooped, lazily good-humored. He read Mrs. Richie's letter and tapped the edge of his desk with strong, white fingers.

"Nothing could be better," he said.

Then suddenly he decided that he would go to Old Chester and say so in person. "I suppose I ought to go, anyhow; I haven't been there for six weeks. Yes; this child is just what she needs."

And that was how it came about that when he went home he pulled his daughter Alice's pretty ear and said he was going away that night. "I shall take the ten-o'clock train," he said.

His girl--a pleasant, flower-like young creature--scolded him affectionately. "I wish you wouldn't take so many journeys. Promise to be careful; I worry about you when I'm not with you to take care of you," she said, in her sweet, anxious young voice. Her father, smiling, promised prudence, and for the mere joy of watching her let her pack his bag, lecturing him as she did so about his health. "Now that you have undertaken all this extra business of the Pryor-Barr people, you owe it to your stockholders to be careful of your health," she told him, refusing to notice his smile when he solemnly agreed

with her.

"What would happen to the Company if anything happened to you?" she insisted, rubbing her soft cheek against his.

"Ruin, of course."

But she would not laugh. "And what would happen to _me_?"

"Ah, well, that's a different matter," he admitted, and kissed her and bade _her_ be careful. "What would happen to me if anything happened to you?" he teased.

She hung about him, brooding over him like a little mother dove with a hundred questions. "Are you going anywhere except to Mercer?"

"Well, yes; possibly."

"Where?"

"Oh, to a place called Old Chester."

"Who are you going to see there?"

"Nobody you know, Gas-bag! I never heard of such curiosity!"

"Ah, but I like to think about you when you are away, and know just where you are and what you are doing every minute of the time."

At which he laughed and kissed her, and was off to take the night train for Mercer, which made it possible for him to catch the morning stage for Old Chester.

There was one other passenger in the stage--a little boy with a soft thatch of straight, yellow hair that had been chopped short around the bowl of some domestic barber. He sat on the opposite seat and held a bundle in his arms, peering out over the top of it with serious blue eyes.

"Well, young man, where are you bound?" inquired Mr. Pryor. When the child said "Old Chester," Lloyd Pryor tossed a quarter out of the window to a hostler and bade him go into the stage-house and buy an apple. "Here, youngster," he said, when the man handed it up to him, "take that.--Keep the change, my man."

When it did not involve any personal inconvenience, Mr. Lloyd Pryor had a quick and cordial kindness which most people found very attractive. The child, however, did not seem much impressed; he took the apple gravely, and said, "Thank you, sir;" but he was not effusive. He looked out of the window and hugged his bundle. Half-way to Old Chester he began to nibble the apple, biting it very slowly, so that he might not make a noise, and thrusting it back into his pocket after each bite with an apprehensive glance at the gentleman in the corner. When he had finished it and swallowed the core, he said, suddenly:

"Mister, have you any little boys and girls?"

His companion, who had quite forgotten him, looked over the top of his

newspaper with a start. "What? What did you say? Oh--boys and girls? Yes; I have a girl." He smiled as he spoke.

"Is she as big as me?"

Lloyd Pryor put down his paper and twitched his glasses off. "About twice as big I should think," he said kindly.

"Twice as big! And twice as old?"

"How old are you?"

"I'm seven, going on eight."

"Well, then, let's see. Alice is--she is twice and five years more as old. What do you make of that?"

The child began to count on his fingers, and, after looking at him a minute or two with some amusement, Mr. Pryor returned to his paper. After a while the boy said, suddenly, "In the flood the ducks couldn't be drowned, could they?"

But Lloyd Pryor had become interested in what he was reading. "You talk too much, young man," he said coldly, and there was no further conversation. The old stage jogged along in the uncertain sunshine; sometimes Mr. Pryor smoked, once he took a nap. While he slept the little boy looked at him furtively, but by and by he turned to the window, absorbed in his own affairs.

As the stage pulled into Old Chester, Mr. Pryor roused himself. "Well, my boy, here we are," he said.

The child quivered and his hands tightened on his bundle, but he said nothing. When they drew up at the tavern, there was Danny and Goliath and Dr. Lavendar.

"Mary gave me some gingerbread for him," Dr. Lavendar was saying to Van Horn. "I've got it tied up in my handkerchief. Why," he interrupted himself, screwing up his eyes and peering into the dusk of the old coach--"why, I believe here's Mrs. Richie's brother too!"

As the horses came to a standstill, Dr. Lavendar was in quite a flutter of eagerness. But when the very little boy clambered out, the old minister only shook hands with him, man fashion, with no particular display of interest.

"I'm glad to see you, David. I am Dr. Lavendar." Then he turned to say "How do you do?" to Mr. Pryor. "Why, look here," he added in a cheerful after-thought, "I'm going up your way; get out and come along in my buggy. Hey! Danny! Stop your snarling. The scoundrel's temper is getting bad in his old age. Those snails Jonas drives can't keep up with my trotter."

"But you have one passenger already," Mr. Pryor protested. "I'll just go on up in the stage, thank you."

"Oh," Dr. Lavendar said, "David's bundle is the biggest part of him, isn't it, David? We'll leave it with Van Horn and get it as we come back. Come along, Mr. Pryor. There, David, tuck yourself down in

front; Danny can tag behind." There was a moment's hesitation, and then Mr. Pryor did as he was bid. Dr. Lavendar climbed in himself and off they jogged, while Jonas remarked to Van Horn that the old gentleman wasn't just the one to talk about snails, as he looked at it. But Mr. Pryor, watching the April sunshine chased over the hills by warm cloud shadows and bursting into joy again on the low meadows, reflected that he had done well for himself in exchanging the dark cavern of the stage for Dr. Lavendar's easy old buggy and the open air. They stopped a minute on the bridge to look at the creek swollen by spring rains; it was tugging and tearing at the branches that dipped into it, and heaping up rocking lines of yellow froth along the banks.

"In summer that's a fine place to wade," Dr. Lavendar observed. David glanced up at him and then down at the water in silence.

"Well, Goliath! at this rate Jonas could beat us," said Dr. Lavendar, and smacked a rein down on the shaggy old back. David looked around at Mr. Pryor with sudden interest.

"Is your name Goliath?" he asked.

Lloyd Pryor was greatly amused. "I hope you haven't such a thing as a sling with you, David?" he said.

The little boy grew very red, but made no reply.

"It's my horse's name," Dr. Lavendar told him, so kindly that David did not hear the chuckle in his voice. But the color was hot in the child's face for many minutes. He had nothing to say for the rest of the pull up the hill, except briefly, "Bye," when Mr. Pryor alighted at the green gate of a foot-path that led up to the Stuffed Animal House.

"I'm very much obliged for the lift, Dr. Lavendar," he said in his coldly courteous voice, and turned quickly at an exclamation behind him.

"Lloyd!"

"I've brought your brother home, Mrs. Richie," said Dr. Lavendar.

Helena Richie was standing inside the hedge, her face radiant.

"Oh, Lloyd!" she said again breathlessly.

Mr. Pryor laughed and shook hands with her in somewhat formal greeting.

"Do you see my other passenger?" Dr. Lavendar called out. "He came with your brother. David, suppose you shake hands with Mrs. Richie? I generally take my hat off, David, when I shake hands with a lady."

"I don't, sir," said David, gently, putting a hand out across the wheel. Mrs. Richie had not noticed the little boy; but when she took his hand her eyes lingered on his face, and suddenly she drew him forward and kissed him.

David bore it politely, but he looked over her head at Mr. Pryor.

"Mister, Alice is nineteen."

"_What?_" Mr. Pryor said, his heavy-lidded eyes opening with a blue gleam; then he laughed. "Oh yes, I'd forgotten our sum in arithmetic; yes, Alice is nineteen."

"Well," Dr. Lavendar said, "g'long, Goliath!" and the buggy went tugging on up the hill. "David, if you'll look in my pocket you'll find some gingerbread."

David thrust a hand down into the capacious pocket and brought up the gingerbread, wrapped in a red silk handkerchief. He offered it silently to Dr. Lavendar.

"I don't believe I'll take any. Suppose you eat it, David?"

"No, thank you, sir."

Dr. Lavendar shook his head in a puzzled way.

David swallowed nervously. "Please, sir," he said, "was that lady that gentleman's sister?"

"Yes," Dr. Lavendar told him cheerfully.

"But if she is his sister," the little boy reasoned, "why didn't she kiss him? Janey, she--she always gave me forty kisses."

"Just forty?" Dr. Lavendar inquired, looking at the child over his spectacles.

David was silent for a moment, then he said, earnestly: "I never counted. But Janey, she always said 'forty kisses.'" His whole face quivered. A very large tear gathered, trembled, then rolled over; he held his hands together under the lap-robe and looked the other way; then he raised one shoulder and rubbed his cheek against it.

"I guess Janey was a pretty nice sister," Dr. Lavendar said.

David's hands tightened; he looked up speechless, into the kind old face.

"David," said Dr. Lavendar in a business-like way, "would you mind driving for me? I want to look over my note-book."

"Driving?" said David. "Oh, _my!_" His cheeks were wet but his eyes shone. "I don't mind, sir. I'd just as lieves as not!"

CHAPTER V

"So that's the youngster we're going to adopt, is it?" Mr. Pryor said; then he looked at Helena through his curling brown lashes, with open amusement. Her eyes were full of tears.

"It has been--so long," she said faintly.

"I've been very busy," he explained.

She nodded and smiled. "Anyhow, you are here now. But, oh, Maggie has a sore throat. I don't know what we're going to have for dinner. Oh, how glad I am you're here!" Her face was glowing, but her chin trembled.

"Why, this is very flattering, I'm sure; I thought you were so taken up with your orphan that you wouldn't care whether I came or not."

"You know that isn't true," she said gayly, brushing her cheek against his arm; "but isn't he a dear little fellow?--though I'm sorry his hair isn't curly." Then her face changed. "What did he mean about Alice being nineteen?"

"Oh, Alice? Why, he asked me in the stage if I had any children, and I put Alice's age as a sum in mental arithmetic for him. And he asked me if my name was Goliath."

But she had forgotten David. "Lloyd! To think you are here!"

"Yes, I'm here, and a hamper is here, too. I hope the stage will bring it up pretty soon. I don't believe I could stand an Old Chester bill of fare. It's queer about women; they don't care what they eat. I don't believe you've got anything on hand but bread and jam and tea?"

"I care a great deal!" she assured him laughing, and then looked worried. "Yes, I really have been living on bread and jam." She was hanging on his arm, and once she kissed his hand. "Will you go upstairs? And I'll see what we can do about food. That dreadful Maggie! She's sick in bed."

Mr. Pryor looked annoyed. "Can't she get us something to eat? Ask her, Nelly; I don't believe it will hurt her. Here; give her that," and he took a crumpled bill out of his waistcoat pocket.

She did not take the money, but her eyes shone. "You are the most generous being!" she said. Then, sobering, she thought of Maggie's throat--hesitated--and Maggie was lost. For when she opened the woman's door, and in her sweet, appealing voice declared that Mr. Pryor had come unexpectedly, and was so hungry--what should they do?--Maggie, who adored her, insisted upon going down to the kitchen.

"Oh, Maggie, you oughtn't to! I oughtn't to let you. Maggie, look here: you will be careful, won't you?"

"Now, you go right along back to your brother," the woman commanded smiling. "I'm goin' to get into my clothes; t'won't do me a bit of harm."

And Helena, protesting and joyous, fled to her room and to her mirror. She flung off her cambric morning dress and ran to hunt in her wardrobe for something pretty. With girlish hurry she pulled her hair down, braided it afresh, and fastened the burnished plats around her head like a wreath; then she brushed the soft locks in the nape of her neck about her finger, and let them fall into loose curls. She dressed with breathless haste, and when she finished, stood for a minute, her lip between her teeth, staring at herself in the glass. And as she

stared her face fell; for as the color and sparkle faded a little, care suddenly looked out of the leaf-brown eyes--care and something like fright. But instantly drawing in her breath, she flung her head up as one who prepares for battle. When she went down-stairs and found Mr. Pryor waiting for her in the parlor, the sparkle had all come back. She had put on a striped silk dress, faint rose and green, made very full in the skirt; her flat lace collar was fastened by a little old pin--an oval of pearls holding a strand of hair like floss-silk.

"Why, Nelly," her visitor said, "you look younger every time I see you."

She swept him a great courtesy, making her dress balloon out about her; then she clasped her hands at her throat, her chin resting on the fluff of her white undersleeves, and looked up at him with a delighted laugh. "We are not very old, either of us; I am thirty-three and you are only forty-six--I call that young. Oh, Lloyd, I was so low-spirited this morning; and now--you are here!" She pirouetted about the room in a burst of gayety.

As he watched her through half-shut eyes, the bored good humor in his face sharpened into something keener; he caught her hand as she whirled past, drawing her close to him with a murmured caress. She, pausing in her joy, looked at him with sudden intentness.

"Have you heard anything of--_Frederick?_"

At which he let her go again and answered curtly: "No; nothing. Perfectly well, the last I heard. In Paris, and enjoying himself in his own peculiar fashion."

She drew in her breath and turned her face away; they were both silent. Then she said, dully, that she never heard any news. "Mr. Raynor sends me my accounts every three months, but he never says anything about--Frederick."

"I suppose there isn't anything to say. Look here, Nelly, hasn't that stage-driver brought the hamper yet? When are we going to have something to eat?"

"Oh, pretty soon," she said impatiently.

They were standing at one of the long windows in the parlor; through the tilted slats of the Venetian blinds the April sunshine fell in pale bars across her hair and dress, across the old Turkey carpet on the floor, across the high white wainscoting and half-way up the landscape-papered walls. The room was full of cheerful dignity; the heavy, old-fashioned furniture of the Stuffed Animal House was unchanged, even the pictures, hanging rather near the ceiling, had not been removed--steel-engravings of Landseer's dogs, and old and very good colored prints of Audubon's birds. The mantel-piece of black marble veined with yellow was supported by fluted columns; on it were two blown-glass vases of decalcomania decoration, then two gilt lustres with prisms, then two hand-screens of woolwork, and in the middle an ormolu clock--"Iphigenia in Aulis"--under a glass shade. In the recess at one side of the fireplace was a tall bookcase with closed doors, but a claw-footed sofa stood out from the wall at an angle that prevented any access to the books. "I can't read Stuffed Animal books," Helena had long ago confided to Lloyd Pryor. "The

British Classics, if you please! and Baxter's Saint's Rest, and The Lady of the Manor." So Mr. Pryor made a point of providing her with light literature. He pulled a paper-covered volume out of his pocket now, and handed it to her.

"Not improving, Nelly, I assure you; and there is a box of candy in the hamper."

She thanked him, but put the book down. "Talk to me, Lloyd. Tell me--everything! How are you? How is Alice? Are you very busy with politics and things? Talk to me."

"Well," he said good naturedly, "where am I to begin? Yes: I'm very well. And very busy. And unusually poor. Isn't that interesting?"

"Oh, Lloyd! Are you in earnest? Lloyd, you know I have a lot of money, and of course, if you want it, it is yours."

He was lounging lazily on the sofa, and drew her down beside him, smiling at her through his curling lashes. "It isn't as bad as that. It is only that I have shouldered the debts of the old Pryor-Barr Co., Limited. You know my grandfather organized it, and my father was president of it, and I served my 'prenticeship to business in it."

"But I thought," she said, puzzled, "you went out of it long ago, before--before--"

"The flood? Yes, my dear, I did. I've only been a silent partner for years--and that in a very small way. But I regret to say that the young asses who have been running it have got into trouble. And they propose going into bankruptcy, confound them! It is very annoying," Lloyd Pryor ended calmly,

"But I don't understand," she said; "what have you to do with it?"

"Well, I've got to turn to and pay their damned debts."

"Pay their debts? But why? Does the law make you?"

"The law?" he said, looking at her with cold eyes. "I suppose you mean statute law? No, my dear, it doesn't."

"Then I can't understand it," she declared laughing.

"It's nothing very abstruse. I can't have stockholders who trusted our old firm cheated by a couple of cousins of mine. I've assumed the liabilities--that's all."

"But you don't have to, by law?" she persisted, still bewildered.

"My dear Nelly, I don't do things because of the law," he said dryly. "But never mind; it is going to give me something to do. Tell me about yourself. How are you?"

"I'm--pretty lonely, Lloyd," she said.

And he answered, sympathetically, that he had been afraid of that. "You are too much by yourself. Of course, it's lonely for you. I am very much pleased with this idea of the little boy."

She shook her head. "I can't take him."

"Why not?" he protested, and broke off. "Nelly, look! You are going to have company."

He had caught sight of some one fumbling with the latch of the green gate in the hedge. Helena opened her lips in consternation.

"Lloyd! It's old Mr. Benjamin Wright. He lives in that big house with white columns on the top of the hill. Do you suppose he has come to _call_?"

"Tell your woman to say you are out."

But she shook her head, annoyed and helpless. "Don't you see how tired he is?--poor old man! Of course, he must come in. Go and help him, Lloyd." She put her hands on his arm. "Please!" she said.

"No, thank you; I have no desire to help old gentlemen." And as she left him and ran impetuously to open the door herself, he called after her, "Nelly, don't have dinner held back!"

Mr. Benjamin Wright stood, panting, at the foot of the porch steps; he could hardly lift his head to look up at the figure in the doorway. "You--Mrs. Richie?" he gasped.

"Yes, sir," she said. "May I help you? These steps are so steep."

"No," he snarled. "Do you think I'm so decrepit that I have to have a female help me up-stairs?" Then he began toiling up the steps. "My name is Wright. You know my grandson? Sam? Great fool! I've come to call on you." On the porch he drew a long breath, pulled off his mangy old beaver hat, and, with a very courtly bow, held out his hand. "Madam, permit me to pay my respects to you. I am your neighbor. In fact, your only neighbor; without me,

'Montium domina ut fores silvarumque virentium saltuumque reconditorum
amnumque sonantum.'

Understand that? No? Good. I don't like learned females."

She took his hand in a bewildered way, glancing back over her shoulder at Mr. Pryor, uncertain what she ought to do. Mr. Wright decided for her.

"I know this house," he said, pushing past her into the dusky hall; "friend of mine used to live here. Ho! This is the parlor. Well; who's this?" He stood chewing orange-skin and blinking up at Lloyd Pryor, who came forward reluctantly.

"My name is Pryor, sir, I--"

"Oh! Yes. _I_ know. _I_ know. The lady's brother. Here! Push that chair out for me."

And Mr. Lloyd Pryor found himself bringing a chair forward and taking the hat and stick from the trembling old hand. Helena had gone quickly into the dining-room, and came back with a decanter and glass on a

little tray. She gave a distressed glance at her other guest as though to say, "I can't help it!"

Benjamin Wright's old head in its brown wig was still shaking with fatigue, but under the prickle of white on his shaven jowl the purplish color came back in mottled streaks. He sipped the sherry breathlessly, the glass trembling in his veined and shrunken hand. "Well," he demanded, "how do you two like this God-forsaken place?"

Mr. Pryor, looking over their visitor's head at Helena, shrugged his shoulders.

"It is very nice," she said vaguely,

"It's a narrowing place," he demurred, "very narrowing; sit down, sit down, good people! I'll take some more sherry. My grandson," he went on, as Helena filled his glass, "is always talking about you, madam. He's a great jackass. I'm afraid he bothers you with his calls?"

"Oh, not at all," Helena said nervously. She sat down on the other side of the big rosewood centre-table, glancing with worried eyes at Lloyd Pryor.

"Move that lamp contraption," commanded Mr. Wright. "I like to see my hostess!"

And Helena pushed the astral lamp from the centre of the table so that his view was unobstructed.

"Is he a nuisance with his talk about his drama?"

Mr. Wright said, looking across at her with open eagerness in his melancholy eyes.

"Why, no indeed."

"Do you think it's so very bad, considering?"

"It is not bad at all," said Mrs. Richie.

His face lighted like a child's. "Young fool! As if he could write a drama! Well, madam, I came to ask you to do me the honor of taking supper with me to-morrow night, and then of listening to this wonderful production. Of course, sir, I include you. My nigger will provide you with a fairly good bottle. Then this grandson of mine will read his truck aloud. But we will fortify ourselves with supper first."

His artless pride in planning this distressing festivity was so ludicrous that Lloyd Pryor's disgust changed into involuntary mirth. But Helena was plainly nervous. "Thank you; you are very kind; but I am afraid I must say no."

Mr. Pryor was silently retreating towards the dining-room. As for the visitor, he only had eyes for the mistress of the house.

"Why should you say no?"

She tried to answer lightly. "Oh, I like to be quiet."

"Quiet?" cried Benjamin Wright, rapping the table with his wine-glass. "At your age? Nonsense!" He paused, cleared his throat, and then sonorously:

"Can you endure the livery of a nun, For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd, To live a barren sister all your life, Chanting faint hymns to the cold, fruitless moon?' Give me some more sherry. Of course you must come. No use being shy--a pretty creatur' like you! And you said you liked the play," he added with childlike reproach.

Helena, glad to change the subject, made haste to reassure him. "I do, I do!" she said, and for a few minutes she kept the old face beaming with her praise of Sam and his work. Unlike his grandson, Mr. Wright was not critical of her criticism. Nothing she could say seemed to him excessive. He contradicted every statement, but he believed it implicitly. Then with a sigh of satisfaction, he returned to his invitation. Helena shook her head decidedly.

"No; thank you very much. Mr. Pryor couldn't possibly come. He is only here over Sunday, and--" She looked towards the dining-room for protection, but the door had been gently closed.

"Hey?" Benjamin Wright said blankly. "Well, I won't insist; I won't insist. We'll wait till he goes. Come Monday night."

"Oh," she said, her voice fluttering, "I am sorry but I really can't."

"Why can't you?" he insisted. "Come, tell the truth! The advantage of telling the truth, young lady, is that neither God nor the devil can contradict you!" He laughed, eying her with high good humor.

"Oh, it's merely--" she hesitated, and he looked affronted.

"What! Some female airs about coming to an unmarried man's house?" Her involuntary mirth disarmed him. "No? Well, I'm glad you've got some sense. Then you'll come?"

"If I went to your house, it would seem unfriendly not to go to other houses."

"Why shouldn't you go to other houses? Done anything you're ashamed of?" He laughed uproariously at his own wit. "Come now; don't be finikin and ladylike!"

"I don't make visits," she explained, the color rising angrily in her cheeks.

"Gad-a-mercy! Why not?" he interrupted. "Do you think you're too good for us here in Old Chester?"

"Oh, Mr. Wright!"

"Or perhaps Old Chester is too good for you?"

His face had softened wonderfully; he was looking at her with the same quizzical delight with which he would look at one of his canaries when he caught it, and held it struggling in his hand. "Are we too good for you?" he jeered, "too--"

He stopped abruptly, his laugh breaking off in the middle. Then his mouth fell slowly open in blank amazement; he leaned forward in his chair and stared at her without a word.

"I don't care for society," she said, in a frightened way, and rose as if to bring the visit to an end.

But Benjamin Wright sat still, slowly nodding his head. "You don't care for society? I wonder why."

"Oh, because I am--a very quiet person," she stammered.

The dining-room door opened and Sarah came in, looked about, found the decanter, and withdrew.

"Where is--that gentleman?" the old man demanded.

"Mr. Pryor went in to dinner," she said faintly. "Please excuse him; he was tired."

The silence that fell between them was like a blow. ... Mr. Wright pulled himself to his feet, and with one shaking hand on the table felt his way around until he stood directly in front of her; he put his face close to hers and stared into her eyes, his lower lip opening and closing in silence. Then, without speaking, he began to grope about on the table for his hat and stick.

"I will bid you good day," he said.

Without another word he went shuffling out into the dark hall. At the front door he turned and looked back at her; then, slowly, shook his head.

CHAPTER VI

Poor Maggie paid for her good nature. On Sunday morning she was so decidedly worse that William King, to the disgust of his Martha, was summoned from his breakfast-table.

"Women who can't look after a simple sore throat without bothering their doctors are pretty inefficient creatures," she said coldly.

William thought of women who were so efficient that they did not hesitate to advise their doctors; but he only agreed with proper seriousness to Martha's declaration that it was too bad, for he would be late for church--"unless you hurry, William!" she called after him.

Perhaps he hurried when he was with Maggie, but certainly he displayed no haste when giving his directions to Mrs. Richie, nor even later when just as he was about to drive off, Mr. Pryor hailed him from the garden.

"How's your patient, doctor?"

"Pretty sick. She didn't obey your sister's orders and keep in bed yesterday. So, of course, she's worse to-day."

Mr. Pryor leaned a comfortable elbow on the green gate. "That's a nice prospect! What am I going to have to eat?" he said, good-humoredly.

Yet behind the good humor there was annoyance. It came into William King's mind that this fellow would not spare his sister his irritation, and with a sudden impulse of concern for her, he said, "Well now, look here, why don't you and Mrs. Richie come in this evening and take tea with us? I don't know what you'll get, but come and take pot-luck."

"Thank you," Lloyd Pryor said, "but--"

"Oh, come now," interrupted the doctor, gathering up his reins; "you good people are not neighborly enough. We'll expect you both at six."

"You are very kind, but I think--" But William would not listen. He was in great spirits. "It will be pot-luck, and my wife will be delighted--" then, his voice dragged--"I hope you'll come," he said uncertainly.

Mr. Pryor began to protest, but ended with a laugh. "Well, we'll come! Thank you very much."

"That's good," the doctor said a little less cordially, indeed, as he drove away he looked distinctly less cordial, and once he sighed.... Now, how should he put it? "Oh, Martha, by the way, Mr. Pryor and his sister will drop in to tea to-night. I suggested it, and--" No, that would not do.... "Martha, it occurred to me it would be neighborly--" No. "Confound it," William King muttered to himself, "what did I do it for, anyhow? 'Martha, my dear, I know you like to do a kindness, so I asked Mrs. Richie and her brother'"--that was better. "But I hate a circumbendibus!" William said, irritably, to himself. Then he drew a long breath, and set his lips as a man may who is about to face the domestic cannon's mouth.

After he had driven on, screwing up his courage, it appeared that Mr. Pryor also had a cannon to face. Helena Richie came out into the garden, and found him sitting on a bench built round a great silver poplar. Her face was worried. "I ought not to have made poor Maggie get up yesterday," she said, "but I was so distressed not to have a good dinner for you."

"Well, at least you need have no anxieties about supper; we've had an invitation,"

"An invitation! From Dr. King? Well, that's very nice in him. But, of course--"

"I told him we would come"

"You told him we would come!"

"I couldn't help it, Nelly. People who invite you face to face are perfect nuisances. But, really, it's no great matter--for once, And I knew it would be a convenience for you. Besides, I wanted a good supper."

"Well, we must make some excuse."

"There isn't any excuse to make," he explained, good-naturedly: "I tried to find one and couldn't. We've got to go."

"_I_ sha'n't go."

He looked at her from under his heavy eyelids; then blew two smoke wreaths slowly. "You're a queer creature."

She turned on him hotly. "Queer? Because I won't go out to supper with you? I'd be queer if I did! I'm entirely satisfied with myself, Lloyd; I consider that I have a perfect right to be happy in my own way. You know I don't care a copper for what you call 'morality'! it's nothing but cowardly conventionality. But I won't go out to supper with you."

"Please don't let us have a tirade," he said "I thought it would be more convenient for you. That's always the way with your sex, Helena, you do a thing to help them out, and they burst into tears."

"I haven't burst into tears," she said sullenly, "but I won't go."

"Come, now! don't be a goose. I wouldn't make a practice of accepting their invitations; but for once, what does it matter?"

"Can't you understand?" she said passionately; "_they are kind to me!_"

She turned quickly and ran into the garden, leaving him to call after her: "Well, you've got to go to-night, because I've accepted."

"I won't go to-night!" she flung back, her voice breaking.

Lloyd Pryor shook his head. "And she wonders I don't come oftener," he said to himself.

So the sleepy Sunday morning passed. Mr. Pryor roamed about the garden, looking furtively over his shoulder now and then--but Helena had disappeared. "Sulking in her room, I suppose," he thought.

He had come at some inconvenience, to spend Sunday and talk over this project of the child, "for I'd like to see her happier," he told himself; and now, instead of sitting down, sensibly, to discuss things, she flared out over this invitation to supper. Her intensity fatigued him. "I must be getting old," he ruminated, "and Helena will always be the age she was ten years ago. Ten? It's thirteen! How time flies; she was twenty. How interested I was in Frederick's health in those days!"

He stretched himself out on the bench under the poplar, and lit another cigar. "If _I'm_ willing to go, why is she so exercised? Women are all alike--except Alice." He smiled as he thought of his girl, and instantly the hardness in his face lifted, as a cloud shadow lifts and leaves sunshine behind it. Then some obscure sense of fitness made him pull himself together, and put his mind on affairs that had nothing in common with Helena; affairs in which he could include his girl without offending his taste.

After a while he got up and wandered about between the borders, where the clean, bitter scent of daffodils mingled with the box. Once he stood still, looking down over the orchard on the hill-side below him, at the bright sheen of the river edged with leafless maples; on its farther side were the meadows, and then the hills, smoky in their warm haze. Over all was the pale April sky with skeins of gray cloud in the west. He wondered what Alice was doing at this moment, and looked at his watch. She must be just coming back from church. When he was at home Mr. Pryor went to church himself, and watched her saying her little prayers. This assumption of the Pryor-Barr liabilities would be a serious check to the fortune he was building up for her; he set his jaw angrily at the thought, but of course it couldn't be helped. Furthermore, Alice took great pride in the almost quixotic sense of honor that had prompted the step; a pride which gave him a secret satisfaction, quite fatuous and childlike and entirely out of keeping with certain other characteristics, also secret.

There was a gleam of humor in his eyes, as he said to himself that he hoped Alice would not ask him how he had spent his Sunday morning. Alice had such a feeling about truth, that he did not like to tell her even little lies, little ones that she could not possibly find out. It was the sentiment of fibbing to his girl that offended him, not the fib; for Mr. Lloyd Pryor had no doubt that, in certain matters, Truth must be governed by the law of benefit.

Thinking of his daughter, and smiling to himself, he lounged aimlessly about the garden; then it occurred to him to go into the stable and look at Helena's pony. After that he strolled over to the carriage-house where were stored a number of cases containing stuffed creatures--birds and chipmunks and small furry things. Some larger animals were slung up under the beams of the loft to get them out of the way; there was a bear in one corner, and a great crocodile, and a shark; possessions of the previous owner of the Stuffed Animal House, stored here by her executor, pending the final settlement of the estate.

Lloyd Pryor stood at the doorway looking in. Through a grimed and cobwebbed window at the farther end of the room the light filtered down among the still figures; there was the smell of dead fur and feathers, and of some acrid preservative. One box had been broken in moving it from the house, and a beaver had slipped from his carefully bitten branch, and lay on the dusty boards, a burst of cotton pushing through the splitting belly-seam. Lloyd Pryor thrust it into its case with his stick, and started as he did so. Something moved, back in the dusk.

"It's I, Lloyd," Helena Richie said.

"You? My dear Nelly! Why are you sitting in this gloomy place?"

She smiled faintly, but her face was weary with tears. "Oh, I just--came in here," she said vaguely.

She had said to herself when, angry and wounded, she left him in the garden, that if she went back to the house he would find her. So she had come here to the dust and silence of the carriage-house, and sitting down on one of the cases had hidden her face in her hands. Little by little anger ebbed. Just misery remained. But still she sat there, looking absently at these dead creatures about her, or at a

thin line of sunshine falling through a heart-shaped opening in a shutter, and moving noiselessly across the floor. A mote dipped into this stream of light, zigzagged through it, then sank into the darkness. She followed it with dull eyes, thinking, if she thought at all, that she wished she did not have to sit opposite Lloyd at dinner. But, of course, she would have to, the servants would think it strange if she did not come to table with him. Suddenly the finger of sunshine vanished, and all the motes were gone. Raising her head with a long sigh she saw him in the doorway, his tall figure black against the smiling spring landscape outside. Her heart came up into her throat with a rush of delight. He was looking for her! Ah, this was the way it had been in those first days, when he could not bear to let her out of his sight!

He put his arm around her with careless friendliness and helped her to her feet. "What a place this will be for your boy to play. He can be cast away on a desert island and surrounded by wild animals every day in the week." His voice was so kind that her anger of two hours ago seemed impossible--a mistake, a misunderstanding! She tried in a bewildered way to get back to it in her own mind, but he was so matter of fact about the stuffed animals and the little boy and the desert island, that she could only say vaguely, "Yes, it would be nice, but of course I'm not going to take him."

"Well now, that's just what I want to talk to you about," he said, watching her through his long, curling eyelashes. "That's why I came down to Old Chester--"

"Oh, is it?"

He checked an impatient exclamation, and then went on: "When I got your letter about this boy, I was really delighted.--Let's go out into the sunshine; the smell of this place is very disagreeable.--I think you would find the child company; I really hope you will take him." His voice was sincere and she softened.

"It's kind of you, Lloyd, to urge it. But no, it won't do."

"My dear, of course it will do. You'll give him a good home, and--"

"No, no, I can't; you know I can't."

"My dear Nelly! What possible harm could you do the child?"

She drew away from him sharply. "_I_ do him any harm! Oh--you wouldn't have said such a thing, once!" She pressed the back of her hand against her lips, and Lloyd Pryor studiously looked in another direction.

"What have I said? That you wouldn't do him any harm? Is there anything unkind in that? Look here, Nell, you really mustn't be so unreasonable. There is nothing a man hates so much as a fool. I am merely urging something for your pleasure. He would be company for you; I thought him quite an attractive youngster."

"And you wouldn't have me so much on your mind? You wouldn't feel you had to come and see me so often!"

"Well, if you want to put it that way," he said coldly. "I'm a very

busy man. I can't get off whenever I feel like it."

"And you can't leave your beloved Alice."

He shot a blue gleam at her from under his heavy eyelids. "No; I can't."

She quivered. But he went on quietly: "I know you're lonely, Helena, and as I can't come and see you quite so often as I used to, I want you to take this little fellow, simply to amuse you."

She walked beside him silently. When they reached the bench under the poplar, she sat looking into the April distance without speaking. She was saying to herself, miserably, that she didn't want the child; she didn't want to lessen any sense of obligation that brought him to her;--and yet, she did not want him to come from a sense of obligation!

"You would get great fun out of him, Nelly," he insisted.

And looking up, she saw the kindness of his face and yielded. "Well, perhaps I will; that is, if Dr. Lavendar will let me have him. I'm afraid of Dr. Lavendar somehow."

"Good!" he said heartily; "that's a real weight off my mind." Her lip curled again, but she said nothing. Lloyd Pryor yawned; then he asked her whether she meant to buy the house.

"I don't know; sometimes I think there is less seclusion in the country than there is in town." She drew down a twig, and began to pull at the buds with aimless fingers. "I might like to come to Philadelphia and live near you, you know," she said. The sudden malice in her eyes was answered by the shock in his; his voice was disturbed when he spoke, though his words were commonplace:

"It's a pleasant enough house."

Then he looked at his watch, opening the case under the shelter of his hand--but she saw the photograph in the lid.

"Is that a good picture of Alice?" she said with an effort.

"Yes," he answered, hastily snapping the lid shut. "Helena, what are we going to have for dinner?"

"Oh, nothing very much, I'm afraid," she told him ruefully. Then rising, she held out her hand. "Come! We mustn't quarrel again. I don't know why we always squabble!"

"I'm sure I don't want to," he said. "Nelly, you are prettier every time I see you." He put a finger into one of the loose curls in the nape of her neck, and she looked up at him, her lip trembling.

"And do you love me?"

"Of course I do!" he declared, slipping his arm around her waist. And they walked thus between the box borders, back to the house.

CHAPTER VII

But she would not go to the Kings' to tea. "No," she said, her eyes crinkling with fun, "I'm not going; but you've got to; you promised! And remember, I have 'a very severe headache.'"

He laughed, with a droll look, and then explained that at home he was never allowed to tell tarradiddles. "Alice has a perfect mania about truth," he said ruefully; "it is sometimes very inconvenient. Yes; I'll enlarge upon your headache, my dear. But why in thunder did I say yes to that confounded doctor? I'd like to wring your cook's neck, Nelly!"

"You'll have a good supper," she consoled him, "and that's what you want. They say Mrs. King is a great housekeeper. And besides, if you stayed at home you would probably have to entertain Mr. Sam Wright."

"I'll be darned if I would," he assured her, amiably, and started off.

He had the good supper, although when the doctor broke to his wife that company was coming, Mrs. King had protested that there was nothing in the house to eat. "And there's one thing about me, I may not be perfect, but I am hospitable, and--"

"Just give them what we were going to have ourselves."

"Now, William! I must say, flatly and frankly--"

"There's the office bell," murmured the doctor, sidling away and hearing the reproachful voice lessening in the distance--"how hard I try--nothing fit--"

The office door closed; the worst was over. There would be a good supper--William had no misgivings on that point. Mrs. Richie would talk to him, and he would tease her and make her laugh, and laugh himself. The doctor did not laugh very much in his own house; domestic virtue does not necessarily add to the gayety of life. During the afternoon Willy tried on three different neckties, and twice put cologne on his handkerchief. Then appeared Mr. Pryor to say that Mrs. Richie had one of her headaches! He was so sorry, but Mrs. King knew what a bad headache was?

"Indeed I do," Martha said, "only too well. But I can't give way to them. That's what it is to be a doctor's wife; the patients get all the prescriptions," Martha said; and William, out of the corner of his eye, saw that she was smiling! Well, well; evidently Mrs. Richie's defection did not trouble her; the doctor was glad of that. "But I didn't bargain on entertaining the brother," he said to himself crossly; and after the manner of husbands, he left the entertaining to Martha.

Martha, however, did her duty. She thought Mr. Pryor a very agreeable gentleman; "far more agreeable than his sister," she told William afterwards. "I don't know why," said Martha, "but I sort of distrust that woman. But the brother is all right; you can see that--and a very intelligent man, too. We discussed a good many points, and I found we

agreed perfectly."

Mr. Pryor also had an opinion on that supper-table talk. He said to himself grimly, that Nelly's bread and jam would have been better. But probably bread and jam, followed by young Sam Wright, would have seemed less desirable than Mrs. King's excellent supper.

It was about seven when the boy appeared at the Stuffed Animal House. Had Mr. Pryor been at home, Helena would, no doubt, have found some way of dismissing him; as it was, she let him stay. He was bareheaded; he had seen a bird flapping painfully about in the road, and catching it in gentle hands had discovered that its wing was broken, so put it tenderly in his cap and brought it to Mrs. Richie's door.

"Poor little thing!" she cried, when he showed it to her. "I wish Mr. Pryor would come back; he would tell us what to do for it."

"Oh, is he here?" Sam asked blankly.

"Well, not at this moment. He has gone to take tea at Dr. King's." Sam's face lightened with relief.

"You mustn't tell anybody you saw me this evening," she charged him gayly. "I didn't go to Mrs. King's because--I had such a very bad headache!"

"Is it better?" he asked, so anxiously that she blushed.

"Oh, yes, yes. But before tea I--didn't want to go."

"I'm glad you didn't," he said, and forgot her in caring for the bird. He ordered a box and some cotton batting--"and give me your handkerchief." As he spoke, he took it from her surprised hand and tore it into strips; then, lifting the broken wing with exquisite gentleness, he bound it into place. She looked at the bandages ruefully, but Sam was perfectly matter-of-course. "It would have been better without lace," he said; "but it will do. Will you look at him sometimes? Just your touch will cure him, I think."

Mrs. Richie laughed.

"Well, you can laugh, but it's true. When I am near you I have no pain and no worry; nothing but happiness." He sat down beside her on the old claw-footed sofa near the fire, for it was cool enough these spring evenings to have a little fire. He leaned forward, resting his chin on his fist, and staring into the blaze. Once he put his hand out and touched her dress softly, and smiled to himself. Then abruptly, he came out of his reverie, and spoke with joyous excitement:

"Why! I forgot what I came to tell you about--something extraordinary has happened!"

"Oh, what?" she demanded, with a sweet eagerness that was as young as his own.

"You could never guess," he assured her. "Tonight, at supper, grandfather suddenly told me that he wanted me to travel for a while--he wanted me to go away from Old Chester. I was perfectly amazed. 'Go hunt up a publisher for your truck,' he said. He always calls the

drama my 'truck,'" Sam said snickering; "but the main thing, evidently, was to have me get away from home. To improve my mind, I suppose. He said all gentlemen ought to travel. To live in one place all the time was very narrowing, he said. I told him I hadn't any money, and he said he'd give me some. He said, 'anything to get you away.' It wasn't very flattering, was it?"

Helena's face flashed into suspicion. "Why did he want to get you away?" she asked coldly. There was an alarmed alertness in her voice that made the boy look at her.

"He said he wanted me to 'be able to know cakes and ale when I saw them,'" Sam quoted. "Isn't that just like grandfather?"

"Know cakes and ale!" she stammered, and then looked at him furtively. She took one of the little hand-screens from the mantel, and held it so that he could not see her face. For a minute the pleasant firelit silence fell between them.

"Oh, listen," Sam said in a whisper; "do you hear the sap singing in the log?" He bent forward with parted lips, intent upon the exquisite sound--a dream of summer leaves rustling and blowing in the wind. He turned his limpid stag's eyes to hers to feel her pleasure.

"I think," Mrs. Richie said with an effort that made her voice hard, "that it would be an excellent thing for you to go away."

"And leave you?"

"Please don't talk that way. Your grandfather is quite right."

The boy smiled. "I suppose you really can't understand? It's part of your loveliness that you can't. If you could, you would know that I can't go away. I told him I was much obliged, but I couldn't leave Old Chester."

"Oh, please! you mustn't be foolish. I don't like you when you are foolish. Will you please remember how much older I am than you? Let's talk of something else. Let's talk about the little boy who is coming to visit me--his name is David."

"I would rather talk about you, and what you mean to me--beauty and poetry and good--"

"Don't!" she said sharply,

"Beauty and poetry and goodness."

"I'm not beautiful, and I'm not--poetical."

"And so I worship you," the young man went on in a low happy voice.

"Do please be quiet! I won't be worshipped."

"I don't see how you are going to help it," he said calmly. "Mrs. Richie, I've got my skiff; it came yesterday. Will you go out on the river with me some afternoon?"

"Oh, I don't think I care about boating," she said.

"You don't!" he exclaimed blankly; "why, I only got it because I thought you would go out with me!"

"I don't like the water," she said firmly.

Sam was silent; then he sighed. "I wish I'd asked you before I bought it. Father is so unreasonable."

She looked puzzled, for the connection was not obvious.

"Father always wants things used," Sam explained. "Do you really dislike boating?"

"You absurd boy!" she said laughing; "of course you will use it; don't talk nonsense!"

Sam looked into the fire. "Do you ever have the feeling," he said in an empty voice, "that nothing is worth while? I mean, if you are disappointed in anything? A feeling as if you didn't care, at all, about anything? I have it often. A sort of loss of appetite in my mind. Do you know it?"

"Do I know it?" she said, and laughed so harshly that the boy drew back. "Yes, Sam; I know it."

Sam sighed; "I hate that skiff."

And at that she laughed again, but this time with pure gaiety. "Oh, you foolish boy!" she said. Then she glanced at the clock. "Sam, I have some letters to write to-night--will you think I am very ungracious if I ask you to excuse me?" Sam was instantly apologetic. "I've stayed too long! Grandfather told me I ought never to come and see you--"

"_What!_"

"He said I bothered you."

"You don't bother me," she protested; "I mean, when you talk about your play you don't bother me. But to-night--"

"Of course," said Sam simply, and took himself off after one or two directions about the bird.

When the front door closed behind him she went back to her seat by the lamp, and took up her novel; but her eyes did not see the printed page. Suddenly she threw the book down on the table. It was impossible to read; Sam's talk had disturbed her to the point of sharp discomfort. What did old Mr. Wright mean by "knowing cakes and ale"? And his leer yesterday had been an offence! Why had he looked at her like that? Did he--? Was it possible--! She wished she had spoken to Lloyd about it. But no; it couldn't be; it was only his queer way; he was half crazy, she believed. And it would do no good to speak to Lloyd. The one thing she must not do, was to let any annoyance of hers annoy him. Yet below her discomfort at Sam's sentimentality and his grandfather's strange manner lay a deeper discomfort--a disturbance at the very centres of her life.... _She was afraid._

She had been afraid for a long time. Even before she came to Old Chester she was a little afraid, but in Old Chester the fear was intensified by the consciousness of having made a mistake in coming. Old Chester was so far away. It had seemed desirable when she first thought of it; it was so near Mercer where business very often called him. Besides, New York, with its throngs of people, where she had lived for several years, had grown intolerable; in Old Chester she and Lloyd had agreed she would have so much more privacy. But how differently things had turned out! He did not have to come to Mercer nearly so often as he had expected. Those visions of hers--which he had not discouraged--of weekly or certainly fortnightly visits, had faded into lengthening periods of three weeks, four weeks--the last one was more than six weeks ago. "He can't leave his Alice!" she said angrily to herself; "_I_ remember the time when he did not mind leaving her." As for privacy, the great city, with its hurrying indifferent crowds, was more private than this village of insistent friendliness.

She leaned back in her chair and pressed her hands over her eyes; then sat up quickly--she must not cry! Lloyd hated red eyes. But oh, she was afraid!--afraid of what? She had no answer; as yet her fear was without a name. She picked up her book, hurriedly; "I'll read," she said to herself; "I won't think!" But for a long time she did not turn a page.

However, by the time Mr. Pryor came back from the tea-party she was outwardly tranquil, and looked up from her novel to welcome him and laugh at his stories of his hostess. But he was instant to detect the troubled background of her thoughts.

"You are lonely," he said, lounging on the sofa beside her; "when that little boy comes you'll have something to amuse you;" he put a caressing finger under her soft chin.

"I didn't have that little boy, but I had another," she said ruefully.

"Did your admirer call?"

She nodded.

"What!" he exclaimed, for her manner told him.

"He tried to be silly," she said. "Of course I snubbed him. But it makes me horribly uncomfortable somehow."

Lloyd Pryor got up and slowly scratched a match under the mantel-piece; he took a long time to light his cigar. Then he put his hands in his pockets, and standing with his back to the fire regarded his boots. Helena was staring straight ahead of her with melancholy eyes.--("Do you ever have the feeling," the boy had said, "that nothing is worth while?")

Lloyd Pryor looked at her furtively and coughed. "I suppose," he said--and knocked the ashes from his cigar with elaborate care--"I suppose your adorer is a good deal younger than you?"

She lifted her head sharply, "Well, yes;--what of it?"

"Oh, nothing; nothing at all. In the first place, the health of our

friend, Frederick, is excellent. But if this fellow were not younger; and if apoplexy or judgment should--well; why, perhaps--"

"Perhaps what?"

"Of course, Helena, my great desire is for your happiness; but in my position I--I am not as free as I once was to follow my own inclinations. And if--"

"Oh, my _God!_" she said violently.

She fled out of the room with flying feet. As he followed her up the stairs he heard her door slam viciously and the bolt slip. He came down, his face flushed and angry. He stood a long while with his back to the fire, staring at the lamp or the darkness of the uncurtained window. By and by he shook his head and set his jaw in sullen determination; then he went up-stairs and knocked softly at her door. There was no answer. Again, a little louder; silence.

"Nelly," he said; "Nelly, let me speak to you--just a minute?"

Silence.

"Nelly!"

Silence.

"Damn!" said Lloyd Pryor, and went stealthily back to the parlor where the fire was out and the lamp flickering into smoky darkness.

A quarter of an hour later he went up-stairs again.

"How _could_ you say it!" "I didn't mean it, Nelly; it was only a joke." "A joke! Oh, a cruel joke, a cruel joke!" "You know I didn't mean it. Nelly dearest, I didn't mean it!" "You do love me?" "I love you.... Kiss me...."

CHAPTER VIII

"Well, now," said Dr. Lavendar that Sunday evening when he and David came into the study after tea; "I suppose you'd like me to tell you a story before you go to bed?"

"A Bible story?"

"Why, yes," Dr. Lavendar admitted, a little taken aback.

"No, sir," said David.

"You don't want a Bible story!"

The little boy shook his head.

"David," said Dr. Lavendar chuckling, "I think I like you."

David made no response; his face was as blank as an Indian's. He sat down on a stool by the fire, and once he sighed. Danny had sniffed him, slowly, and turned away with a bored look; it was then that he sighed. After a while he got up and wandered about the room, his hands gripped in front of him, his lips shut tight. Dr. Lavendar watched him out of the tail of his eye, but neither of them spoke. Suddenly David climbed up on a chair and looked fixedly at a picture that hung between the windows.

"That is a Bible picture," Dr. Lavendar observed.

"Who," said David, "is the gentleman in the water?"

Dr. Lavendar blew his nose before answering. Then he said that that was meant to be our Saviour when He was being baptized. "Up in the sky," Dr. Lavendar added, "is His Heavenly Father."

There was silence until David asked gently, "Is it a good photograph of God?"

Dr. Lavendar puffed three times at his pipe; then he said, "If you think the picture looks like a kind Father, then it is. And David, I know some stories that are not Bible stories. Shall I tell you one?"

"If you want to, sir," David said. Dr. Lavendar began his tale rather doubtfully; but David fixed such interested eyes upon his face that he was flattered into enlarging upon his theme. The child listened breathlessly, his fascinated eyes travelling once or twice to the clock, then back to the kind old face.

"You were afraid bedtime would interrupt us?" said Dr. Lavendar, when the tale was done. "Well, well; you are a great boy for stories, aren't you?"

"You've talked seven minutes," said David, thoughtfully, "and you've not moved your upper jaw once."

Dr. Lavendar gasped; then he said, meekly, "Did you like the story?"

David made no reply,

"I think," said Dr. Lavendar, "I'll have another pipe."

He gave up trying to make conversation; instead, he watched the clock. Mary had said that David must go to bed at eight, and as the clock began to strike, Dr. Lavendar, with some eagerness, opened his lips to say good night--and closed them. "Guess he'd rather run his own rig," he thought. But to his relief, at the last stroke David got up.

"It's my bedtime, sir."

"So it is! Well, it will be mine after a while. Good night, my boy!" Dr. Lavendar blinked nervously. Young persons were generally kissed. "I should not wish to be kissed," he said to himself, and the two shook hands gravely.

Left alone, he felt so fatigued he had to have that other pipe. Before he had finished it his senior warden looked in at the study door.

"Come in, Samuel," said Dr. Lavendar. "Samuel, I feel as if I had driven ten miles on a corduroy road!"

Mr. Wright looked blank; sometimes he found it hard to follow Dr. Lavendar.

"Sam, young persons are very exciting."

"Some of them are, I can vouch for that," his caller assured him grimly.

"Come, come! They are good for us," said Dr. Lavendar. "I wish you'd take a pipe, Sam; it would cheer you up."

"I never smoke, sir," said Samuel reprovingly, "Well, you miss a lot of comfort in life. I've seen a good many troubles go up in smoke."

Mr. Wright sat down heavily and sighed.

"Sam been giving you something to think about?" Dr. Lavendar asked cheerfully.

"He always gives me something to think about. He is beyond my comprehension! I may say candidly, that I cannot understand him. What do you think he has done now?"

"Nothing wicked."

"I don't know how you look at it," Samuel said, "but from my point of view, buying prints with other people's money is dangerously near wickedness. This present matter, however, is just imbecility. I told him one day last week to write to a man in Troy, New York, about a bill of exchange. Well, he wrote. Oh, yes--he wrote. Back comes a letter from the man, enclosing my young gentleman's epistle, with a line added "--Mr. Wright fumbled in his breast pocket to find the document--" here it is: '_Above remarks about ships not understood by our House.'_ Will you look at that, sir, for the 'remarks about ships'?"

Dr. Lavendar took the sheet stamped "Bank of Pennsylvania," and hunted for his spectacles. When he settled them on his nose he turned the letter over and read in young Sam's sprawling hand:

"Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

"What's this? I don't understand."

"Certainly you do not; no sensible person would. I showed it to my young gentleman, and requested an explanation. 'Oh,' he said, 'when you told me to write to Troy, it made me think of those lines.' He added that not wishing to forget them, he wrote them down on a sheet of paper, and that probably he used the other side of the sheet for the Troy letter--'by mistake.' 'Mistake, sir!' I said, 'a sufficient number of _mistakes_ will send me out of business.'"

"Samuel," said Dr. Lavendar thoughtfully, "do you recall whose face it was that 'launched the thousand ships' on Troy?"

Samuel shook his head,

"Helen's" said Dr. Lavendar.

The senior warden frowned, then suddenly understood. "Oh, yes, I know all about that. Another evidence of his folly!"

"I've no doubt you feel like spanking him," Dr. Lavendar said sympathetically, "but--" he stopped short. Sam Wright was crimson.

"! _Spank_ him? I?" He got up, opening and shutting his hands, his face very red. The old minister looked at him in consternation.

"Sam! what on earth is the matter with you? Can't a man have his joke?"

Mr. Wright sat down. He put his hand to his mouth as though to hide some trembling betrayal; his very ears were purple.

Dr. Lavendar apologized profusely. "I was only in fun. I'm sure you know that I meant no disrespect to the boy. I only wanted to cheer you up."

"I understand, sir; it is of no consequence. I--I had something else on my mind. It is of no consequence." The color faded, and his face fell into its usual bleak lines, but his mouth twitched. A minute afterwards he began to speak with ponderous dignity. "This love-making business is, of course, most mortifying to me; and also, no doubt, annoying to Mrs. Richie. To begin with, she is eleven years older than he--he told his mother so. He added, if you please! that he hoped to marry her."

"Well! Well!" said Dr. Lavendar.

"I told him," Mr. Wright continued, "that in my very humble opinion it was contemptible for a man to marry and allow another man to support his wife."

Dr. Lavendar sat up in shocked dismay. "Samuel!"

"I, sir," the banker explained, "am his father, and I support him. If he marries, I shall have to support his wife. According to my poor theories of propriety, a man who lets another man support his wife had better not have one."

"But you ought not to have put it that way," Dr. Lavendar protested,

"I merely put the fact," said Samuel Wright "Furthermore, unless he stops dangling at her apron-strings, I shall stop his allowance, I shall so inform him."

"You surely won't do such a foolish thing!"

"Would you have me sit still? Not put up a single barrier to keep him in bounds?"

"Samuel, do you know what barriers mean to a colt?"

Mr. Wright made no response.

"They mean something to jump over."

"Possibly," said Mr. Wright with dignity, "you are, to some extent, correct. But a man cannot permit his only son to run wild and founder."

"Sam won't founder. But he may get a bad strain. You'd better look out. He is his father's son."

"I do not know, sir, to what you refer."

"Oh, yes, you do," Dr. Lavendar assured him easily; "and you know that no man can experience unforgiving anger, and not be crippled. You didn't founder, Sam, but you gave yourself a mighty ugly wrench. Hey? Isn't that so?"

The senior warden looked perfectly deaf; then he took up the tale again.

"If he goes on in his folly he will only be unhappy, and deservedly so. She will have nothing to do with him. In stopping him, I shall only be keeping him from future unhappiness."

"Samuel," said Dr. Lavendar, "I never begrudge unhappiness to the young."

But Mr., Wright was too absorbed in his own troubles to get any comfort out of that.

"By the way," said Dr. Lavendar, "speaking of Mrs. Richie--do you think she'd be a good person to take this little David Allison?"

"I don't know why she shouldn't be, sir," Samuel said. "I have no fault to find with her. She pays her rent and goes to church. Yes; a very good person to take the boy off your hands."

"The rent is important," Dr. Lavendar agreed nodding; "but going to church doesn't prove anything."

"All good people go to church," the senior warden reproved him.

"But all people who go to church are not good," Dr. Lavendar said dryly,

"I am afraid she lets Sam talk poetry to her," Sam's father broke out. "Stuff! absolute stuff! His mother sometimes tells me of it. Why," he ended piteously, "half the time I can't understand what it's about; it's just bosh!"

"What you don't understand generally is bosh, isn't it, Sam?" said Dr. Lavendar thoughtfully.

"I am a man of plain common sense, sir; I don't pretend to anything but common sense."

"I know you don't, Samuel, I know you don't," Dr. Lavendar said sadly; and the banker, mollified, accepted the apology.

"On top of everything else, he's been writing a drama. He told his mother so. Writing a drama, instead of writing up his ledgers!"

"Of course, he ought not to neglect his work," Dr. Lavendar agreed; "but play-writing isn't one of the seven deadly sins,"

"It is distasteful to me!" Sam senior said hotly; "most distasteful. I told his mother to tell him so, but he goes on writing--so she says." He sighed, and got up to put on his coat. "Well; I must go home. I suppose he has been inflicting himself upon Mrs. Richie this evening. If he stays late, I shall feel it my duty to speak plainly to him."

Dr. Lavendar gave him a hand with his coat. "Gently does it, Samuel, gently does it!"

His senior warden shook his head. The sense of paternal helplessness, felt more or less by all fathers of sons, was heavy upon him. He knew in a bewildered way, that he did not speak the boy's language. And yet he could not give up trying to communicate with him,--shouting at him, so to speak, as one shouts at a foreigner when trying to make oneself understood; for surely there must be some one word that would reach Sam's mind, some one touch that would stir his heart! Yet when he brought his perplexity to Dr. Lavendar, he was only told to hold his tongue and keep his hands off. The senior warden said to himself, miserably, that he was afraid Dr. Lavendar was getting old, "Well, I mustn't bother you," he said; "as for Sam, I suppose he will go his own gait! I don't know where he gets his stubbornness from. I myself am the most reasonable man in the world. All I ever ask is to be allowed to follow my own judgment. I asked his mother if obstinacy was a characteristic of her family, and she assured me it was not. Certainly Eliza herself has no will of her own. I don't think a good woman ever has. And, as I say, I never insisted upon my own way in my life--except, of course, in matters where I knew I was right."

"Of course," said Dr. Lavendar.

CHAPTER IX

The parting at the Stuffed Animal House the next morning was dreary enough. The day broke heavy with threatening rain. The man, after that brief flaming up of the embers of burned-out passion, had fallen into a weariness which he did not attempt to conceal. But the woman--being a woman--still tried to warm herself at the poor ashes, wasting her breath in a sobbing endeavor to blow them into some fitful ardor. There was a hurried breakfast, and while waiting for the stage the desultory talk that skims over dangerous topics for fear of getting into discussions for which there is no time. And with it the consciousness of things that burn to be said--at least on one side.

"I'm sorry I was cross last night," she murmured once, under her breath.

And he responded courteously, "Oh, not at all."

But she pressed him. "You know it was only because I--love you so? And

to make a joke of--"

"Of course! Helena, when is that stage due? You don't suppose the driver misunderstood, and expects to take me on at the Tavern?"

"No, he was told to call here.... Lloyd, it's just the same? You haven't--changed?"

"Certainly not! I do hope he hasn't forgotten me? It would be extremely inconvenient."

She turned away and stood looking out of the window into the rain-sodden garden. Mr. Pryor lighted a cigar. After a while she spoke again. "You'll come soon? I hope you will come soon! I'll try not to worry you."

"Of course," he assured her; "but I trust your cook will be well next time, my dear."

"Give me a day's notice, and I will have another cook if Maggie should be under the weather," she answered eagerly.

"Oh, that reminds me," he said, and thrusting his hand into his pocket he went out to the kitchen. When he came back he went at once to the window, "I'm afraid that stage-driver has forgotten me," he said, frowning. But she reassured him--it really wasn't time yet; then she leaned her cheek on his shoulder.

"Do you think you can come in a fortnight, Lloyd? Come the first of May, and everything shall be perfect. Will you?"

Laughing, he put a careless arm around her, then catching sight of the stage pulling up at the gate, turned away so quickly that she staggered a little.

"Ah!" he said in a relieved voice;--"beg your pardon, Nelly;--There's the stage!"

At the door he kissed her hurriedly; but she followed him, bareheaded, out into the mist, catching his hand as they went down the path.

"Good-by!" he called back from the hinged step of the stage. "Get along, driver, get along! I don't want to miss my train in Mercer. Good-by, my dear. Take care of yourself."

Helena standing at the gate, followed the stage with her eyes until the road turned at the foot of the hill. Then she went back to the bench under the silver poplar and sat down. She said to herself that she was glad he was gone. His easy indifference to the annoyance to her of all these furtive years, seemed just for a moment unbearable. He had not showed a glimmer of sympathy for her position; he had not betrayed the slightest impatience at Frederick's astonishing health, so contrary to every law of probability and justice; he had not even understood how she felt at taking the friendship of the Old Chester people on false pretences--oh, these stupid people! That dull, self-satisfied, commonplace doctor's wife, so secure, so comfortable, in her right to Old Chester friendships! Of course, it was a great thing to be free from the narrowness and prejudice in which Old Chester was absolutely hidebound. But Lloyd might at least have understood that in

spite of her freedom the years of delay had sometimes been a little hard for her; that it was cruel that Frederick should live, and live, and live, putting off the moment when she should be like--other people; like that complacent Mrs. King, even; (oh, how she detested the woman!) But Lloyd had shown no spark of sympathy or understanding; instead he had made a horrid joke.... Suddenly her eyes, sweet and kind and shallow as an animal's, clouded with pain, and she burst out crying--but only for one convulsive moment. She could not cry out here in the garden. She wished she could get into the house, but she was sure that her eyes were red, and the servants might notice them. She would have to wait a while. Then she shivered, for a sharp wind blew from across the hills where in the hollows the snow still lingered in grimy drifts, icy on the edges, and crumbling and settling and sinking away with every day of pale sunshine. The faint fragrance of wind-beaten daffodils reached her, and she saw two crocuses, long gold bubbles, over in the grass. She put the back of her hand against her cheek--it was hot still; she must wait a little longer. Her chilly discomfort made her angry at Lloyd, as well as hurt.... It was nearly half an hour before she felt sure that her eyes would not betray her and she could go into the house.

Somehow or other the empty day passed; she had Lloyd's novel and the candy. It was cold enough for a fire in the parlor, and she lay on the sofa in front of it, and read and nibbled her candy and drowsed. Once, lazily, she roused herself to throw some grains of incense on the hot coals. Gradually the silence and perfume and warm sloth pushed the pain of the last twenty-four hours into the background of her mind, where it lay a dull ache of discontent. By and by even that ceased in physical well-being. Her body had her in its grip, and her spirit sunk softly into the warm and satisfied flesh. She bade Sarah bring her dinner into the parlor; after she had eaten it she slept. When she awoke in the late afternoon, she wished she could sleep again. All her thoughts ran together in a lazy blur. Somewhere, back of the blur, she knew there was unhappiness, so this was best--to lie warm and quiet by the fire, eating candy and yawning over her book.

The next few days were given up to indolence and apathy. But at the end of the week the soul of her stirred. A letter from Lloyd came saying that he hoped she had the little boy with her, and this reminded her of her forgotten promise to Dr. Lavendar.

But it was not until the next Monday afternoon that she roused herself sufficiently to give much thought to the matter. Then she decided to go down to the Rectory and see the child. It was another dark day of clouds hanging low, bulging big and black with wind and ravelling into rain along the edges. She hesitated at the discomfort of going out, but she said to herself, dully, that she supposed she needed the walk. As she went down the hill her cheeks began to glow with the buffet of the wind, and her leaf-brown eyes shone crystal clear from under her soft hair, crinkling in the mist and blowing all about her smooth forehead. The mist had thickened to rain before she reached the Rectory, and her cloak was soaked, which made Dr. Lavendar reproach her for her imprudence.

"And where are your gums?" he demanded. When she confessed that she had forgotten them, he scolded her roundly.

"I'll see that the little boy wears them when he comes to visit me," she said, a comforted look coming into her face.

"David? David will look after himself like a man, and keep you in order, too. As for visiting you, my dear, you'd better visit him a little first. I tell you--stay and have supper with us to-night?"

But she protested that she had only come for a few minutes to ask about David. "I must go right home," she said nervously.

"No, no. You can't get away,--oh!" he broke off excitedly--"here he is!" Dr. Lavendar's eagerness at the sight of the little boy who came running up the garden path, his hurry to open the front door and bring him into the study to present him to Mrs. Richie, fussing and proud and a little tremulous, would have touched her, if she had noticed him. But she did not notice him,--the child absorbed her. She could not leave him. Before she knew it she found herself taking off her bonnet and saying she would stay to tea.

"David," said Dr. Lavendar, "I've got a bone in my leg; so you run and get me a clean pocket-handkerchief."

"Can I go up-stairs like a crocodile?" said David.

"Certainly, if it affords you the slightest personal satisfaction," Dr. Lavendar told him; and while the little boy crawled laboriously on his stomach all the way up-stairs, Dr. Lavendar talked about him. He said he thought the child had been homesick just at first; he had missed his sister Janey. "He told me 'Janey' gave him 'forty kisses' every night," said Dr. Lavendar; "I thought that told a story--" At that moment the crocodile, holding a handkerchief between his teeth, came rapidly, head foremost, down-stairs. Dr. Lavendar raised a cautioning hand;--"Mustn't talk about him, now!"

There was a quality in that evening that was new to Helena; it was dull, of course;--how very dull Lloyd would have found it! A childlike old man asking questions with serious simplicity of a little boy who was full of his own important interests and anxieties;--the feeding of Danny, and the regretful wonder that in heaven, the little dog would not be "let in."

"Who said he wouldn't?" Dr. Lavendar demanded, fiercely, while Danny yawned with embarrassment at hearing his own name.

"You read about heaven in the Bible," David said, suddenly shy; "an' it said outside were dogs;--an' some other animals I can't remember the names of."

Dr. Lavendar explained with a twinkle that shared with his visitor the humor of those "other animals" itemized in the Revelations. It was a very mild humor; everything was mild at the Rectory; the very air seemed gentle! There was no apprehension, no excitement, no antagonism; only the placid commonplace of goodness and affection. Helena could not remember such an evening in all her life. And the friendship between youth and age was something she had never dreamed of. She saw David slip from his chair at table, and run around to Dr. Lavendar's side to reach up and whisper in his ear,--oh, if he would but put his cheek against hers, and whisper in her ear!

The result of that secret colloquy was that David knelt down in front of the dining-room fire, and made a slice of smoky toast for Dr.

Lavendar.

"After supper you might roast an apple for Mrs. Richie," the old minister suggested. And David's eyes shone with silent joy. With anxious deliberation he picked out an apple from the silver wire basket on the sideboard; and when they went into the study, he presented a thread to Mrs. Richie.

"Tie it to the stem," he commanded. "You're pretty slow," he added gently, and indeed her white fingers blundered with the unaccustomed task. When she had accomplished it, David wound the other end of the thread round a pin stuck in the high black mantel-shelf. The apple dropped slowly into place before the bars of the grate, and began--as everybody who has been a child knows--to spin slowly round, and then, slowly back again. David, squatting on the rug, watched it in silence. But Mrs. Richie would not let him be silent. She leaned forward, eager to touch him--his shoulders, his hair, his cheek, hot with the fire.

"Won't you come and sit in my lap?"

David glanced at Dr. Lavendar as though for advice; then got up and climbed on to Mrs. Richie's knee, keeping an eye on the apple that bobbed against the grate and sizzled.

"Will you make me a little visit, dear?"

David sighed. "I seem to visit a good deal; I'd like to belong somewhere."

"Oh, you will, one of these days," Dr. Lavendar assured him.

"I'd like to belong to you," David said thoughtfully.

Dr. Lavendar beamed, and looked proudly at Mrs. Richie.

"Because," David explained, "I love Goliath."

"Oh," said Dr. Lavendar blankly.

"It's blackening on one side," David announced, and slid down from Mrs. Richie's knee to set the apple spinning again.

"The red cheek is beginning to crack," said Dr. Lavendar, deeply interested; "smells good, doesn't it, Mrs. Richie?"

"Have you any little boys and girls?" David asked, watching the apple.

"Come and climb on my knee and I'll tell you," she bribed him.

He came reluctantly; the apple was spinning briskly now under the impulse of a woolly burst of pulp through the red skin.

"Have you?" he demanded.

"No, David."

Here his interest in Mrs. Richie's affairs flagged, for the apple began to steam deliciously. Dr. Lavendar, watching her with his shrewd old eyes, asked her one or two questions; but, absorbed in the child,

she answered quite at random. She put her cheek against his hair, and whispered, softly: "Turn round, and I'll give you forty kisses." Instantly David moved his head away. The snub was so complete that she looked over at Dr. Lavendar, hoping he had not seen it. "I once knew a little baby," she said, trying to hide her embarrassment, "that had curly hair the color of yours."

"It has begun to drip," said David briefly. "Does Alice live at your house?"

"_Alice!_"

"The gentleman--your brother--said Alice was nineteen. I thought maybe she lived at your house."

"No, dear. Look at the apple!"

David looked. "Why not?"

"Why, she lives at her own house, dear little boy." "Does she pay you a visit?"

"No. David, I think the apple is done. Why didn't you roast one for Dr. Lavendar?"

"I had to do it for you because you're company. Why doesn't she pay you a visit?"

"Because--oh, for a good many reasons. I'm afraid must go home now."

The child slipped from her knee with unflattering haste. "You've got to eat your apple first," he said, and ran to get a saucer and spoon. With great care the thread was broken and the apple secured. Then David sat calmly down in front of her to watch her eat it; but after the first two or three mouthfuls, Dr. Lavendar had pity on her, and the smoky skin and the hard core were banished to the dining-room. While the little boy was carrying them off, she said eagerly, that she wanted him.

"You'll let me have him?"

"I'm going to keep him for a while."

"Oh, do give him to me!" she urged.

"Not yet. You come here and see him. I won't make ye eat a roast apple every time." He smiled at her as he spoke, for she was clasping her hands, and her eyes were eager and shining.

"I must have him! I _must_!"

"No use teasing--here comes Dr. King. He'll tell you I'm an obstinate old man. Hey, Willy, my boy! Ain't I an obstinate old man?"

"You are," said William. He had walked in unannounced, in good Old Chester fashion, and stood smiling in the doorway.

"Oh, plead my cause!" she said, turning to him.

"Of course I will. But it isn't much use; we are all under his heel."

They were standing, for Mrs. Richie had said she must go, when Dr. Lavendar had an idea: "Would you mind seeing her home, Willy?" he said, in an aside. "I was going to send Mary, but this is a chance to get better acquainted with her--if you're not too tired."

"Of course I'm not too tired," the doctor said eagerly, and went back to the fireside where Mrs. Richie had dropped on her knees before David. "I'm going to walk home with you," he announced. She looked up with a quick protest, but he only laughed. "If we let you go alone, your brother will think we have no manners in Old Chester. Besides I need the walk." And when she had fastened her cloak, and kissed David good night, and thrown Dr. Lavendar an appealing look, William gave her his hand down the two steps from the front door, and then made her take his arm. Dr. Lavendar had provided a lantern, and as its shifting beam ran back and forth across the path the doctor bade her be careful where she stepped. "These flag-stones are abominably rough," he said; "I never noticed it before. And one can't see in the dark."

But what with the lantern and the stars, there was light enough for William King to see the stray curl that blew across her forehead--brown, was it? And yet, William remembered that in daylight her hair was too bright to be called brown. He was solicitous lest he was making her walk too fast. "I don't want your brother to think we don't take care of you in Old Chester," he said; and in the starlight he could see that her face flushed a little. Then he repeated some Old Chester gossip, which amused her very much--and held his breath to listen to the delicious gayety of her laugh.

"There ought to be a better path for you up the hill," he said; "I must speak to Sam Wright about it." And carefully he flung the noiseless zigzag of light back and forth in front of her, and told some more stories that he might hear that laugh again.

When he left her at her own door she said with a sudden impetuous timidity, "Dr. King, _please_ make Dr. Lavendar give me the little boy!"

"I will!" he said, and laughed at her radiant face.

It seemed to the doctor as he went down the hill, that he had had a most delightful evening. He could not recollect what they had talked about, but he knew that they had agreed on every point. "A very intelligent lady," he said to himself.

"William," said Martha, looking up from her mending as he entered the sitting-room, "did you remember to tell Davis that the kitchen sink leaks?"

"Oh!" said the doctor blankly; "well--I'll tell him in the morning." Then, smiling vaguely, he dropped down into his shabby old easy-chair, and watched Martha's darning-needle plod in and out. "Martha," he said after a while, "what shade would you call your hair if it was--well, kind of brighter?"

"_What?_" said Martha, looking at him over her spectacles; she put up her hard capable hand and touched her hair softly, as if she had forgotten it. "My hair used to be a real chestnut. Do you mean

chestnut?"

"I guess I do. It's a pretty color."

Martha looked at him with a queer shyness in her married eyes, then tossed her head a little and thrust her darning-needle into the gray stocking with a jaunty air. "That's what you used to say," she said. After a while, noticing his tired lounge in the old chair, she said kindly, "Why did you stay so long at Dr. Lavendar's, Willy? You look tired. Do go to bed."

"Oh," William explained, "I didn't stay very long; he asked me to see Mrs. Richie home. She had taken tea with him."

Martha's face suddenly hardened. "Oh," she said coldly. Then, after a short silence: "Mrs. Richie's hair is too untidy for my taste."

When Dr. Lavendar went back into the study he found David curled up in an arm-chair in profound meditation.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" Dr. Lavendar said.

"Yesterday. After church."

"Thinking about yesterday?" Dr. Lavendar repeated puzzled. David offered no explanation, and the old minister searched his memory for any happening of interest after church ... but found none. He had come out of the vestry and in the church David had joined him, following him down the aisle to the door and waiting close behind him through the usual Sunday greetings: "Morning, Sam!" "Good morning, Dr. Lavendar." "How are you, Ezra? How many drops of water make the mighty ocean, Ezra?" "The amount of water might be estimated in tons, Dr. Lavendar, but I doubt whether the number of minims could be compu--" "Hullo! there's Horace; how d'ye do, Horace? How's Jim this morning?"--and so on; the old friendly greetings of all the friendly years.... Surely nothing in them to make the child thoughtful?

Suddenly David got up and came and stood beside him.

"What is your name?"

"N. or M.," Dr. Lavendar replied.

"What, sir?" said David, in a troubled voice; and Dr. Lavendar was abashed.

"My name is Edward Lavendar, sir. Why do you want to know?"

"Because, yesterday everybody said 'Dr. Lavendar.' I didn't think Doctor could be your front name. All the other people had front names."

"Well, I have a front name, David, but you see, there's nobody in Old Chester to call me by it." He sighed slightly, and then he smiled. "The last one who called me by my front name is dead, David. John was his name. I called him Johnny."

David looked at him with wide eyes, silent. Dr. Lavendar took his pipe out of his mouth, and stared for a minute at the fire.

"I should think," David said sadly, "God would be discouraged to have _everybody_ He makes, die."

At that Dr. Lavendar came quickly out of his reverie. "Oh, it's better that way," he said, cheerfully. "One of these days I'll tell you why. What do you say to a game of dominoes?"

David squeaked with pleasure. Then he paused to say: "Is that lady, Alice's aunt?" and Dr. Lavendar had to recall who "Alice" was before he could say "yes." Then a little table was pulled up, and the dominoes were poured out upon it, with a joyful clatter. For the next half hour they were both very happy. In the midst of it David remarked, thoughtfully: "There are two kinds of aunts. One is bugs. She is the other kind." And after Dr. Lavendar had stopped chuckling they discussed the relative merits of standing the dominoes upright, or putting them on their sides, and Dr. Lavendar built his fence in alternate positions, which was very effective. It was so exciting that bedtime was a real trial to them both. At the last stroke of eight David clenched both hands.

"Perhaps the clock is fast?"

Dr. Lavendar compared it with his watch, and shook his head sympathetically. "No; just right. Tumble 'em back into the box. Good night."

"Good night, sir," David said, and stood hesitating. The color came and went in his face, and he twisted the top button of his jacket with little nervous fingers.

"Good night," Dr. Lavendar repeated, significantly.

But still David hesitated. Then he came and stood close beside Dr. Lavendar. "Lookee here," he said tremulously, "_I'll_ call you Edward. I'd just as lieves as not."

There was a full minute's silence. Then Dr. Lavendar said, "I thank you, David. That is a kind thought. But no; I like Dr. Lavendar as a name. So many boys and girls have called me that, that I'm fond of it. And I like to have you use it. But I'm much obliged to you, David. Now I guess we'll say good night. Hey?"

The child's face cleared; he drew a deep breath as if he had accomplished something. Then he said good night, and trudged off to bed. Dr. Lavendar looked after him tenderly.

CHAPTER X

April brightened into May before David came to live at the Stuffed Animal House. Dr. Lavendar had his own reasons for the delay, which he did not share with anybody, but they resulted in a sort of intimacy, which Helena, eager for the child, could not refuse.

"He needs clothes," Dr. Lavendar put her off; "I can't let him visit

you till Mary gets his wardrobe to rights."

"Oh, let me get his little things."

--Now, who would have supposed that Dr. Lavendar was so deep! To begin with, he was a man, and an old man, at that; and with never a chick or a child of his own. How did he know what a child's little clothes are to a woman?--"Well," he said, "suppose you make him a set of night-drawers."

Helena's face fell. "I don't know how to sew. I thought I could buy what he needed."

"No; he has enough bought things, but if you will be so kind, my dear, as to make--"

"I will!" she promised, eagerly, and Dr. Lavendar said he would bring David up to be measured.

Her sewing was a pathetic blunder of haste and happiness; it brought Dr. Lavendar and David up to the Stuffed Animal House very often, "to try on." David's coming was always a delight, but the old man fretted her, somehow;--he was so good. She said so to William King, who laughed at the humor of a good woman's objection to goodness. The incongruity of such a remark from her lips was as amusing as a child's innocently base comment.

[Illustration: Her sewing was a pathetic blunder of haste and happiness. _Awakening of Helena Richie_]

William had fallen into the habit of drawing up and calling out "good morning" whenever he and his mare passed her gate. Mrs. Richie's lack of common sense seemed to delight the sensible William. When he was with her, he was in the frame of mind that finds everything a joke. It was a demand for the eternal child in her, to which, involuntarily, she responded. She laughed at him, and even teased him about his shabby buggy with a gayety that made him tingle with pleasure. She used to wonder at herself as she did it--conscious and uneasy, and resolving every time that she would not do it again. She had none of this lightness with any one else. With Dr. Lavendar she was reserved to the point of coldness, and with young Sam Wright, matter-of-fact to a discouraging degree.

But she did not see Sam often in the next month. It had occurred to Sam senior that Adam Smith might cure the boy's taste for 'bosh'; so, by his father's orders, his Sunday afternoons were devoted to _The Wealth of Nations_. As for his evenings, his grandfather took possession of them. Benjamin Wright's proposal that the young man should go away for a while, had fallen flat; Sam replying, frankly, that he did not care to leave Old Chester. As Mr. Wright was not prepared to give any reasons for urging his plan, he dropped it; and instead on Sunday nights detained his grandson to listen to this or that drama or poem until the boy could hardly hide his impatience. When he was free and could hurry down the hill road, as often as not the lights were out in the Stuffed Animal House, and he could only linger at the gate and wonder which was her window. But when he did find her, he had an evening of passionate delight, even though occasionally she snubbed him, lazily.

"Do you go out in your skiff much?" she asked once; and when he answered, "No; I filled it with stones and sunk it, because you didn't like rowing," she spoke to him with a sharpness that surprised herself, though it produced no effect whatever on Sam.

"You are a very foolish boy! What difference does it make whether I like rowing or not?"

Sam smiled placidly, and said he had had hard work to get stones enough to fill the skiff. "I put them in," he explained, "and then I sculled out in mid-stream, and scuttled her. I had to swim ashore. It was night, and the water was like flowing ink, and there was a star in every ripple," he ended dreamily.

"Sam," she said, "if you don't stop being so foolish, I won't let you come and see me,"

"Am I a nuisance about my drama?" he asked with alarm.

"Not about your drama," she said significantly; but Sam was too happy to draw any unflattering deductions.

When old Mr. Wright discovered that his stratagem of keeping his grandson late Sunday evenings had not checked the boy's acquaintance with Mrs. Richie, he tried a more direct method. "You young ass! Can't you keep away from that house? She thinks you are a nuisance!"

"No, grandfather," Sam assured him earnestly, "she doesn't. I asked her, and she said--"

"Asked her?" roared the old man, "Do you expect a female to tell the truth?" And then he swore steadily for a minute. "I'll have to see Lavendar," he said despairingly.

But Mr. Wright's cause was aided by some one stronger than Dr. Lavendar. Helena's attention was so fixed on the visitor who was coming to the Stuffed Animal House that Sam's conversation ceased to amuse her. Those little night-drawers on which she pricked her fingers interested her a thousand times more than did his dramatic visions. They interested her so much that sometimes she could almost forget that Lloyd Pryor's visit was delayed. For though it was the first of May, he had not come again. "I am so busy," he wrote; "it is impossible for me to get away. I suppose David will have his sling all ready for me when I do arrive?"

Helena was sitting on the porch with her clumsy needlework when Sarah brought her the letter, and after she had read it, she tore it up angrily. "He was in Mercer a week ago; I know he was, because there is always that directors' meeting on the last Thursday in April, so he must have been there. And he wouldn't come!" Down in the orchard the apple-trees were in blossom, and when the wind stirred, the petals fell in sudden warm white showers; across the sky, from west to east, was a path of mackerel clouds. It was a pastel of spring--a dappled sky, apple blossoms, clover, and the river's sheen of gray-blue. All about her were the beginnings of summer--the first exquisite green of young leaves; oaks, still white and crumpled from their furry sheaths; horse-chestnuts, each leaf drooping from its stem like a hand bending at the wrist; a thin flicker of elm buds, still distrustful of the sun. Later, this delicate dance of foliage would thicken so that the

house would be in shadow, and the grass under the locusts on either side of the front door fade into thin, mossy growth. But just now it was overflowing with May sunshine. "Oh, he _would_ enjoy it if he would only come," she thought. Well, anyhow, David would like it; and she began to fell her seam with painstaking unaccustomed fingers.

The child was to come that day. Half a dozen times she dropped her work to run to the gate, and shielding her eyes with her hand looked down the road to Old Chester, but there was no sign of the jogging hood of the buggy. Had anything happened? Was he sick? _Had Dr. Lavendar changed his mind?_ Her heart stood still at that. She debated whether or not she should go down to the Rectory and find out what the delay meant? Then she called to one of the servants who was crossing the hall, that she wondered why the little boy who was to visit her, did not come. Her face cleared at the reminder that the child went to school in the morning.

"Why, of course! I suppose he will have to go every morning?" she added ruefully.

"My," Maggie said smiling, "you're wan that ought to have six!"

Mrs. Richie smiled, too. Then she said to herself that she wouldn't let him go to school every day; she was sure he was not strong enough. She ventured something like this to Dr. Lavendar when, about four o'clock, Goliath and the buggy finally appeared.

"Strong enough?" said Dr. Lavendar. "He's strong enough to study a great deal harder than he does, the little rascal! I'm afraid Rose Knight will spoil him; she's almost as bad as Ellen Bailey. You didn't know our Ellen, did ye? No; she'd married Spangler and gone out West before you came to us. Ah, a dear woman, but wickedly unselfish. Rose Knight took the school when Spangler took Ellen." Then he added one or two straight directions: Every school-day David was to come to the Rectory for his dinner, and to Collect Class on Saturdays. "You will have to keep him at his catechism," said Dr. Lavendar; "he is weak on the long answers."

"Oh!" Helena said, rather startled; "you don't want me to teach him--things like that, do you?"

"Things like what?"

"The catechism, and--to pray, and--"

Dr. Lavendar smiled. "You can teach folks to say their prayers, my dear, but nobody can teach them to pray. Only life does that. But David's been taught his prayers; you just let him say 'em at your knee, that's all"

David, dismissed to the garden while his elders talked, had discovered the rabbit-hutch, and could hardly tear himself away from it to say good-by. But when Dr. Lavendar called out that he was going, the little boy's heart misgave him. He came and stood by the step of the buggy, and picked with nervous fingers at the dry mud on the wheel--for Dr. Lavendar's buggy was not as clean as it should have been.

"Well, David?" Dr. Lavendar said cheerfully. The child with his chin sunk on his breast said something. "What?" said Dr. Lavendar.

David mumbled a word or two in a voice that seemed to come from his stomach; it sounded like, "Like you best." But Dr. Lavendar did not hear it, and David ran swiftly back to the rabbits. There Helena found him, gazing through two large tears at the opal-eyed pair behind the wooden bars. Their white shell-like ears wavered at her step, and they paused in their nibbling; then went on again with timid, jewel-like glances in her direction.

Helena, at the sight of those two tears, knelt down beside the little boy, eager to be sympathetic. But he did not notice her, and by and by the tears dried up. After she had tried to make him talk;--of Dr. Lavendar, of school, of his old home;--without drawing anything more from him than "yes ma'am," or "no ma'am," she gave it up and waited until he should be tired of the rabbits. The sun was warm, the smell of the crushed dock leaves heavy in the sheltered corner behind the barn; it was so silent that they could hear the nibbling of the two prisoners, who kept glancing at them with apprehensive eyes that gleamed with pale red fires. David sighed with joy.

"What are their names?" he said at last in a low voice.

"They haven't any names; you can name them if you like."

"I shall call them Mr. and Mrs. Smith," he said with decision. And then fell silent again.

"You came to Old Chester in the stage with Mr. Pryor," she said after a while; "he told me you were a very nice little boy."

"How did he know?" demanded David.

"He is very nice himself," Helena said smiling.

David meditated. "Is that gentleman my enemy?"

"Of course not! he isn't anybody's enemy," she told him reprovingly.

David turned silently to his rabbits.

"Why did you think he was your enemy?" she persisted.

"I only just hoped he wasn't; I don't want to love him."

"What!"

"If he was my enemy, I'd have to love him, you know," David explained patiently.

Helena in her confused astonishment knew not what to reply. She stammered something about that being wrong; of course David must love Mr. Pryor!

"They ought to have fresh water," David interrupted thoughtfully; and Helena had to reach into the hutch for a battered tin pan.

She watched him run to the stable and come back, holding the pan in both hands and walking very slowly under the mottled branches of the button-woods; at every step the water splashed over the rusty brim,

and the sunshine, catching and flickering in it, was reflected in a rippling gleam across his serious face.

All that afternoon he permitted her to follow him about. He was gently polite when she spoke to him but he hardly noticed her until, as they went down through the orchard, his little hand tightened suddenly on hers, and he pressed against her skirts.

"Are there snakes in this grass?" he asked timorously. "A snake," he added, looking up at her confidingly, "is the only insect I am afraid of."

She stooped down and cuddled him reassuringly, and he rewarded her by snuggling up against her like a friendly puppy. She was very happy. As it grew dusk and cool, and all the sky was yellow behind the black line of the hills, she lured him into the house and watched him eat his supper, forgetting to eat her own.

When she took him up-stairs to bed, Dr. Lavendar's directions came back to her with a slight shock--she must hear him say his prayers. How was she to introduce the subject? The embarrassed color burned in her cheeks as she helped him undress and tried to decide on the proper moment to speak of--prayers. But David took the matter into his own hands. As he stepped into his little night-clothes, buttoning them around his waist with slow precision, he said:

"Now I'll say my prayers. Sit by the window; then I can see that star when I open my eyes. It's hard to keep your eyes shut so long, ain't it?" he added confidentially.

Helena sat down, her heart fluttering in her throat. David knelt beside her, shutting first one eye and then the other. "'Now I lay me--'" he began in a businesslike voice. At the Amen he opened his eyes and drew a long breath. Helena moved slightly and he shut his eyes again; "I've not done yet.

"'Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me, Bless Thy little lamb to-night--'"

He paused and looked up at Mrs. Richie. "Can I say colt?" Before she could reply he decided for himself. "No; colts don't have shepherds; it has to be lamb."

Her silent laughter did not disturb him. He finished with another satisfied Amen. Helena put her arms about him to raise him from the floor, but he looked up, aggrieved.

"Why, I've not done yet," he reproached her "You've forgot the blessings."

"The blessings?" she asked timidly.

"Why, of course," said David, trying to be patient; "but I'm most done," he encouraged her. "God bless everybody--Dr. Lavendar taught me the new blessings," he interrupted himself, his eyes snapping open, "because my old blessings were all gone to heaven. God bless everybody; Dr. Lavendar, an' Mary, an' Goliath--" Helena laughed. "He said I could," David defended himself doggedly--"an' Danny, an' Dr. King, an' Mrs. Richie. And make me a good boy. For Jesus' sake Amen. Now I'm done!" cried David, scrambling happily to his feet.

"And--Mr. Pryor, too? Won't you ask God to bless Mr. Pryor?"

"But," said David, frowning, "I'm done."

"After this, though, it would be nice--"

"Well," David answered coldly, "God can bless him if He wants to. But He needn't do it just to please me."

CHAPTER XI

When Dr. Lavendar left David at the Stuffed Animal House, he didn't feel, somehow, like going home; the Rectory would be so quiet. It occurred to him that, as he was on the hill, he might as well look in on Benjamin Wright.

He found the old gentleman in his beaver hat and green serge dressing-gown, tottering up and down the weedy driveway in front of his veranda, and repeating poetry.

"O great corrector of enormous times, Shaker of o'er rank states, thou grand decider Of dusty and old titles, that healest with blood--Hello! 'Bout time you came to see me. I suppose you want to get some money out of me for something?"

"Of course; I always want money out of somebody for something. There's a leak in the vestry roof. How are you?"

"How do you suppose I am? At eighty-one, with one foot in the grave! Ready to jump over a five-barred gate?"

"I'm seventy-two," said Dr. Lavendar, "and I played marbles yesterday."

"Come in and have a smoke," the older man said, hobbling on to the veranda, where four great white columns, blistered and flaked by time, supported a roof that darkened the shuttered windows of the second story.

He led the way indoors to the dining-room, growling that his nigger, Simmons, was a fool. "He _says_ he closes the shutters to keep the flies out; makes the room as dark as a pocket, and there ain't any flies this time of year, anyhow. He does it to stop my birds from singing; he can't fool me! To stop my birds!" He went over to one of the windows and pushed the shutters open with a clatter; instantly a twitter ran from cage to cage, and the fierce melancholy of his old face softened. "Hear that?" he said proudly.

"I ought to come oftener," Dr. Lavendar reproached himself; "he's lonely."

And, indeed, the room with its mammoth sideboard black with age and its solitary chair at one end of the long table, was lonely enough. On the walls, papered a generation ago with a drab paper sprinkled over

with occasional pale gilt medallions, were some time-stained engravings: "The Destruction of Nineveh"; "The Trial of Effie Deans"; "The Death-bed of Washington." A gloomy room at best; now, with the shutters of one window still bowed, and the faint twitter of the canaries, and that one chair at the head of the table, it was very melancholy.

"Sit down!" said Benjamin Wright. Still in his moth-eaten high hat, he shuffled about to fetch from the sideboard a fat decanter with a silver chain and label around its neck, and two tumblers.

"No," said Dr. Lavendar; "I'm obliged to you."

"What, temperance?" snarled the other.

"Well, I hope so," Dr. Lavendar said, "but not a teetotaler, if that's what you mean. Only I don't happen to want any whiskey at five o'clock in the afternoon."

At which his host swore softly, and lifting the decanter poured out two good fingers.

"Mr. Wright," said Dr. Lavendar, "I will be obliged if you will not swear in my presence."

"You needn't talk to me," cried Benjamin Wright, "I despise this damned profanity there is about; besides, I am always scrupulously particular in my language before females and parsons. Well;--I wanted to see you, because that jack-donkey, Sam, my grandson, is causing me some anxiety."

"Why, Sam is a good boy," Dr. Lavendar protested.

"Too good. I like a boy to be human at twenty-three. He doesn't know the wickedness of the world."

"Thank God," said Dr. Lavendar.

"Dominie, ignorance ain't virtue."

"No; but it's a fair substitute. I wouldn't want one of my boys to be able to pass an examination on wrong-doing."

"But you want him to recognize it when he sees it, don't you?"

"If he knows goodness, you can trust him to recognize the other thing. Teach 'em goodness. Badness will label itself,"

"Doesn't follow," Benjamin Wright said. "But you're a parson; parsons know about as much as females--good females. Look here! I have reasons for saying that the boy ought to get out of Old Chester. I want your assistance."

"Get out of Old Chester!--to see how wicked the world is?"

Mr. Wright shook his head. "No; he could see that here--only the puppy hasn't got his eyes open yet. A little knocking about the world, such as any boy ought to have, will open 'em. Living in Old Chester is narrowing; very narrowing. Besides, he's got--well, he's got some

truck he's written. It isn't entirely bad, Lavendar, and he might as well try to get it published, or, maybe, produced in some theatre. So let him go and hunt up a publisher or a manager. Now, very likely, his--his _mother_ won't approve. I want you to urge--her, to let him go."

"Travelling might be good for Sam," said Dr. Lavendar; "I admit that--though not to learn the wickedness of the world. But I don't know that it would be worth while to take a journey just on account of his writing. He could put it in an envelope and mail it to a publisher; he'd get it back just as soon," Dr. Lavendar said chuckling. "Look here, what's the matter? I can see you're concerned about the boy."

"Concerned?" cried Benjamin Wright, pounding the table with his tumbler and chewing orange-skin rapidly. "I'm damned concerned."

"I will ask, sir, that you will not swear in my presence."

Mr. Wright coughed. "I will endeavor to respect the cloth," he said stiffly.

"If you will respect yourself, it will be sufficient. As for Sam, if there's anything wrong, his father ought to know it."

"Well then, tell his--_mother_, that there is something wrong."

"What?"

Mr. Wright got up, and clasping his hands behind him, shuffled about the room. Instantly one of the canaries began to sing. "Stop that!" he said. The bird quivered with shrill music. "Stop! You! ... There's no such thing as conversation, with these creatures about," he added in a proud aside. "Did you ever hear such singing?"

Dr. Lavendar, unable to make himself heard, shook his head.

"If you don't stop," said Mr. Wright, "I'll wring your neck!" and as the bird continued, he opened the door. "Simmons! You freckled nigger! Bring me the apron." Then he stamped, and cursed the slowness of niggers. Simmons, however, came as fast as his old legs could carry him, bearing a blue gingham apron. This, thrown over the cage, produced silence.

"There! Now, perhaps, you'll hold your tongue? ... Lavendar, I prefer not to say what is wrong. Merely tell Sam's--_mother_, that he had better go. If she is too mean to provide the money, I will."

"Sam's father is not too mean to do anything for Sam's welfare; but of course, a general accusation is not convincing; should not be convincing--Why!" said Dr. Lavendar, interrupting himself, "bless my heart! I believe you mean that the boy is making sheep's-eyes at your neighbor here on the hill? Is that it? Why, Benjamin, the best way to cure that is to pay no attention to it."

"Sir," said Mr. Wright, sinking into his chair breathlessly, and tapping the table with one veined old finger; "when I was a young man, it was not thought proper to introduce the name of a female into a discussion between gentlemen."

"Well," Dr. Lavendar admitted, "maybe not--when you were young. But all of us young folks in Old Chester know perfectly well that Sam is smitten, and we are ignoring it."

"What! His--_mother_ knows it?"

"His father knows it perfectly well," said Dr. Lavendar smiling.

Mr. Wright got up again, his fingers twitching with impatience. "Lavendar," he began--another bird trilled, and snarling with annoyance, he pulled the blue apron from the first cage and threw it over the second. "These creatures drive me distracted! ... Lavendar, to get Sam out of Old Chester, I might almost consent to see his--_mother_, if there was no other way to accomplish it."

At that Dr. Lavendar stopped smiling. "Benjamin," he said solemnly, "if any foolishness on the part of the boy brings you to such wisdom, the hand of the Lord will be in it!"

"I don't want to see--his relations!" cried Benjamin Wright; "but Sam's got to get away from this place for a while, and if you won't persuade his--_mother_ to allow it, why I might be driven to seeing--her. But why shouldn't he try to get his truck published?"

Dr. Lavendar was very much moved. "If you'll only see your son," he said, "this other business will straighten itself out somehow. But--" he paused; "getting Sam's play published isn't a very good excuse for seeing him. I'd rather have him think you were worried because the boy had an attack of calf-love. No; I wouldn't want you to talk about theatrical things," Dr. Lavendar ended thoughtfully.

"Why not?"

"Well, the fact is, Samuel has no sympathy with dramas or playhouses. I do not myself approve of the theatre, but I am told respectable persons have adopted the profession. Samuel, however, can't find any good in it."

"He can't, can't he? Well, well; it was efficacious--it was efficacious!"

"What was efficacious?"

Benjamin Wright laughed loudly. "You--don't know? He never told you?"

"You mean what you and he quarrelled about? No; he never told me."

"He was a fool."

"Benjamin, if you were not a fool at twenty-four; you missed a good deal."

"And now he objects to theatrical things?"

"He objects so intensely," said Dr. Lavendar, "that, anxious as I am to have you meet and bring this foolish and wicked quarrel to an end, I should really hesitate to have you do so, if you insisted on discussing that subject."

Benjamin Wright lifted one trembling fist. "It was efficacious!"

"And you would give your right hand to undo it," said Dr. Lavendar.

The very old man lowered his shaking right hand and looked at it; then he said sullenly, "I only wanted his own good. You ought to see that-- a parson!"

"But you forget; I don't know what it was about."

Mr. Wright's face twitched. "Well," he said spasmodically, "I'll-tell you. I--"

"Yes?"

"I--" his voice broke, then he coughed, then he tried to laugh. "Simple enough; simple enough. I had occasion to send him to Mercer. He was to come back that night." Mr. Wright stopped; poured some whiskey into his glass, and forgetting to add any water, drank it at a gulp, "He didn't come back until the next afternoon."

"Yes. Well?"

"In those days I was of--of somewhat hasty temper."

"So I have heard," said Dr. Lavendar,

Benjamin Wright glared. "When I was young, listening to gossip was not thought becoming in the cloth. When he came, I learned that he had stayed over in Mercer--without my consent, mark you--_to go to the theatre!_"

"Well?" said Dr. Lavendar. "He was twenty-four. Why should he have your consent?"

Mr., Wright waved this question aside. "When he came home, I spoke with some severity,"

"This quarrel," said Dr. Lavendar, "is not built on such folly as that."

Benjamin Wright shook his head, and made a careless gesture with his trembling hand. "Not--entirely. I reprov'd him, as I say. And he was impertinent. Impertinent, mind you, to his father! And I--in those days my temper was somewhat quick--I--"

"Yes?"

But Mr. Wright seemed unable to proceed, except to say again, "I--reprov'd him,"

"But," Dr. Lavendar protested, "you don't mean to tell me that Samuel, just for a reproof, an unkind and unjust reproof, would--why, I cannot believe it!"

"It was not unjust!" Benjamin Wright's melancholy eyes flamed angrily.

"I know, Samuel," said Dr. Lavendar. "He is obstinate; I've told him so a hundred times. And he's conceited--so's everybody, more or less;

if in nothing else, we're conceited because we're not conceited. But he's not a fool. So, whether he is right or not, I am sure he thinks he had something more to complain of than a good blowing-up?"

"In a way," said the old man, examining his ridgy finger-nails and speaking with a gasp, "he had. Slightly."

Dr. Lavendar's stern lip trembled with anxiety. "What?"

"I--chastised him; a little."

"You--_what_?"

Benjamin Wright nodded; the wrinkled pouches under his eyes grew dully red. "My God!" he said plaintively; "think of that--a hasty moment! Thirty-two years; my God! I--spanked him."

Dr. Lavendar opened his lips to speak, but found no words.

"And he was offended! Offended? What right had he to be offended? _I_ was the offended party. He went to a low theatre. Apparently you see nothing wrong in that? Well, I've always said that every parson had the making of an actor in him. It's a toss-up--the stage or the pulpit. Same thing at bottom. But perhaps even you won't approve of his staying away all night? Smoking! Drinking! He'd been drunk. He confessed it. And there was a woman in it. He confessed that. Said they'd all 'gone to supper together.' Said that he was 'seeing the world'--which a man ('_man_', if you please!) of his years had a right to do. Well; I suppose you'd have had me smile at him, and tuck him up in bed to sleep off his headache, and give him a stick of candy? That wasn't my way. I reprov'd him. I--chastised him. Perfectly proper. Perhaps--unusual. He was twenty-four, and I laid him across my knee, and--well; I got over it in fifteen minutes. I was, perhaps, hasty My temper in those days was not what it is now. But I forgave him in fifteen minutes; and he had gone! He's been gone--for thirty-two years. My God!"

He poured out another finger of whiskey, but forgot to drink it. A canary-bird chirped loudly, then lapsed into a sleepy twitter.

"I was well rid of him! To make a quarrel out of a thing like that--a joke, as you might say. I laughed, myself, afterwards, at the thought of it. A fellow of twenty-four--spanked! Why didn't he swear and be done with it? I would have reprov'd him for his profanity, of course. Profanity in young persons is a thing I will not tolerate; Simmons will tell you so. But it would have cleared the air. If he had done that, we'd have been laughing about it, now;--he and I, together." The old man suddenly put both hands over his face, and a broken sound came from behind them.

Dr. Lavendar shook his head, speechlessly.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Benjamin Wright, pulling off his hat and banging it down on the table so fiercely that the crown collapsed on one side like an accordion. "Good God! Can't you see the tomfoolery of this business of thirty-two years of hurt feelings?"

Dr. Lavendar was silent.

"What! You excuse him? When I was young, parsons believed in the Ten Commandments; 'Honor thy father and thy mother--'"

"There is another scripture which saith, 'Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath.' And when it comes to the Commandments, I would commend the third to your attention. As for Samuel, you robbed him."

"Robbed him?"

"You took his self-respect. A young man's dignity, at twenty-four, is as precious to him as a woman's modesty. You stole it. Yes; you robbed him. Our Heavenly Father doesn't do that, when He punishes us. We lose our dignity ourselves; but He never robs us of it. Did ye ever notice that? Well; you robbed Samuel. My--my--_my!_" Dr. Lavendar sighed wearily. For, indeed, the matter looked very dark. Here was the moment he had prayed for--the readiness of one or the other of the two men to take the first step towards reconciliation. Such readiness, he had thought, would mean the healing of the dreadful wound, whatever it was; forgiveness on the father's part of some terrible wrong-doing, forgiveness on the son's part of equally terrible hardness of heart. Instead he found a cruel and ridiculous mortification, made permanent by thirty-two unpardoning years. Here was no sin to command the dreadful dignity of repentance, with its divine response of forgiveness. The very lack of seriousness in the cause made the effect more serious. He looked over at the older man, and shook his head.... How could they pay their debts to each other, this father and son? Could Benjamin Wright return the self-respect he had stolen away? Could Samuel offer that filial affection which should have blessed all these empty years? A wickedly ludicrous memory forbade the solemnity of a reconciliation: below any attempt the father might make, there would be a grin, somewhere; below any attempt the son might make, there would be a cringe, somewhere. The only possible hope was in absolute, flat commonplace. Play-writing, as a subject of conversation, was out of the question!

"Benjamin," he said with agitation, "I thank God that you are willing to see Samuel; but you must promise me not to refer to Sam's play. You must promise me this, or the last end of the quarrel will be worse than the first."

"I haven't said I was willing to see him," Mr. Wright broke out; "I'm not willing! Is it likely that I would hanker after an interview? All I want is to get the boy away from Old Chester; to 'see the world.' His--father ought to sympathize with that! Yes; to get him away, I would even--But if you will tell his--relatives, that in my judgment, he ought to go away, that is all that is necessary."

"No! You must urge it yourself," Dr. Lavendar said eagerly. "Put it on the ground of calf-love, if you want to. I'll tell Samuel you want to get Sam out of town because you're afraid he's falling in love with Mrs. Richie; and you'd like to consult him about it."

But the old man began a scrabbling retreat. "No! No!" he said, putting on his hat with shaking hands. "No, don't tell anybody anything. I'll find some other way out of it. Let it go. Seeing his--relatives is a last resource. If they are so virtuous as to object to plays, I'll try something else. Object?" he repeated, "Gad-a-mercy! My discipline was successful!" He grinned wickedly.

Dr. Lavendar made no reply. The interview had been a strain, and he got up a little feebly. Benjamin Wright, as he saw him to the door, swore again at some misdemeanor on the part of Simmons, but was not rebuked.

The old minister climbed into his buggy, and told Goliath to "g'long." As he passed the Stuffed Animal House, he peered through the little dusty window of the hood; but David was not in sight.

CHAPTER XII

"I think," said Dr. Lavendar, as he and Goliath came plodding into Old Chester in the May dusk, "I think I'll go and see Willy. He'll tell me how much Sam's love-making amounts to."

His mind was on the matter to such an extent that he hardly heard Mary's anxious scolding because he looked tired, but his preoccupation lifted at supper, in the consciousness of how lonely he was without David. He really wanted to get out of the house and leave the loneliness behind him. So after tea he put on his broad-brimmed felt hat and tied a blue muffler around his throat--Dr. Lavendar felt the cold a good deal; he said it was because the seasons were changing--and walked wearily over to Dr. King's house. That talk with Benjamin Wright had told on him.

"Well," he said, as the doctor's wife opened the door, "how are you, Martha?"

"Very tired," said Mrs. King. "And dear me, Dr. Lavendar, you look tired yourself. You're too old to do so much, sir. Come in and sit down."

"I'll sit down," said Dr. Lavendar, dropping into a chair in the parlor; "but don't flatter yourself, Martha, that you'll ever be as young as I am!" ("He is failing," Mrs. King told her husband afterwards. "He gets his words all mixed up. He says 'young' when he means 'old.' Isn't that a sign of something, William?" "It's a sign of grace," said the doctor shortly.)

"I want Willy to come over and give my Mary a pill," Dr. Lavendar explained. "She is as cross as a bear, and cross people are generally sick people--although I suppose that's Mary's temperament," he added sighing.

Martha shook her head. "In my judgment temperament is just another word for temper: I don't believe in making excuses for it. That's a great trick of William's, I'm sorry to say."

"I should have thought you'd have cured him of it by this time?" Dr. Lavendar murmured; and then he asked if the doctor was out.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. King, dryly; "Willy always manages to get out in the evening on one excuse or another. You'd think he'd be glad of a restful evening at home with me, sometimes. But no. William's patients need a surprising amount of attention, though his bills don't show it

When Mrs. Richie's cook was sick--just as an instance--he went six times to see her. I counted."

"Well; she got well?" said Dr. Lavendar.

"Got well? She'd have got well if he hadn't gone near her." Martha began to stroke the gathers on a bit of cambric with a precise needle that suddenly trembled. "The woman herself was not to blame it's only just to say that--And there's one thing about me, Dr, Lavendar; I may not be perfect, but I am always just. No, she was not to blame; it was Mrs. Richie who sent for William. She is the most helpless woman I ever saw, for her years;--she is at least forty, though she uses sachet-powders, and wears undersleeves all trimmed with lace, as if she were six teen! I don't want to find fault, Dr, Lavendar, but I must say that I wouldn't have trusted that little boy to her."

"Oh," said Dr, Lavendar, "I trusted her to the little boy! She'll be so busy looking after his sleeves, she'll forget her own."

Mrs. King sniffed, doubtfully. "I'm sure I hope you are right; but in my opinion, she's a very helpless and foolish woman;--if nothing worse. Though according to my ideas, the way she lets Sam Wright's Sam behave is worse!"

Dr. Lavendar was suddenly attentive, "How does she let him behave?"

"Well, he is so daft over--her that he neglects his work at the bank to write verses. Why doesn't she stop it?"

"Because," said William King, appearing in the doorway, smelling honestly of the barn and picking off a straw here and there from his sleeve; "she knows nothing about it,"

Dr. Lavendar and Martha both looked up, startled at his tone.

"Women," said the doctor, "would gossip about a--a clam!"

"I am not gossiping?" Martha defended herself; but Dr. Lavendar interrupted her, cheerfully,

"Well, I am, I came over to gossip with William on this very subject.--Martha, will you let him put a match to that grate? I declare, the seasons are changing. When I was your age it wasn't cold enough to have a fire in May.--Look here, Willy, what do you mean by saying Mrs. Richie doesn't know Sam's sentiments?"

"I mean that women like Mrs. Richie are so unconscious, they don't see things like that. She's as unconscious as a girl."

"Tck!" said Martha.

"A girl!" said Dr, Lavendar.--"Say a tree, or a boy but don't say a girl. Why, William, everybody sees it. Even Benjamin Wright. Of course she knows it."

"She doesn't; she isn't the kind that thinks of things like that. Of course, some women would have discovered it months ago; one of your strong-minded ladies, perhaps--only Sam wouldn't have been spooony on that kind."

"Well!" said Martha, "I must say, flat--"

But William interrupted her--"To prove what I say: she lets him come in and bore her to death, just out of kindness. Do you suppose she would do that if she knew he was such an idiot as to presume to--to--"

"Well," said Dr. Lavendar, "as there is so much ignorance about, perhaps Sam doesn't know he's lost his heart?"

But at that William laughed, "_He_ knows; Trust a young fellow! That's just the difference between a man and a woman, sir; the man always knows; the woman, if she's the right kind, doesn't--until she's told."

"Tck!" said Martha,

Dr. Lavendar looked down at the bowl of his pipe then he said meekly, "I was

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