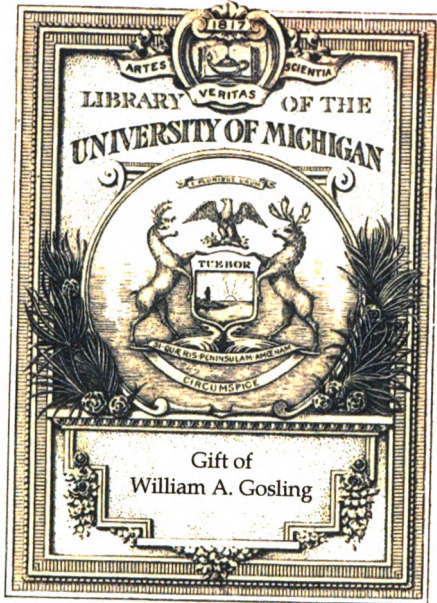


THE
PANSY
BOOKS

BY

"PANSY"

Pulsifer



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THE "GOLDEN AGE" TEMPLE.

AS IN A MIRROR

BY

MRS. G. R. ALDEN ("PANSY")

AUTHOR OF "ESTER RIED," "WANTED," "MAKING FATE,"
"OVERRULED," "THE OLDER BROTHER," ETC.

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AS IN A MIRROR.

CHAPTER I.

A SERMON THAT BORE FRUIT.

THE day was warm; so very warm that irregular Sabbath worshippers remained at home as a matter of course. And even those who were, as a rule, fairly regular in attendance found the weather sufficient excuse for making no exertion that could by any possibility be avoided. Yet two young men, who might be considered as of the latter class, were exceptions. Possibly they had gone to church because the great stone building where they ordinarily worshipped looked darker and cooler than their respective rooms. At least, they met in the pew which they owned together, and smiled upon each other a languid greeting.

The only person who did not seem languid was the pastor of the church. Apparently the heat had developed energy for him; at least, his voice rang among the half-empty pews, and echoed down the aisles, in a way that occasionally startled a sleepy member into sitting erect, and looking as

though he had not thought of such a thing as sleep.

Perhaps the pastor had to be vigorous and denunciatory in style to keep himself awake. Or perhaps something had occurred recently to set his heart a-throb with sympathy for a class of persons for whom, as a rule, little sympathy is felt.

The good man's text was: "I was a stranger and ye took me not in;" and his first sentence, "The negative form of that statement is true to the experiences of to-day." There followed a series of keen, incisive statements concerning the ordinary method of dealing with the modern tramp. The sermon could not be called a plea for the tramp exactly, for the speaker frankly acknowledged his general worthlessness, and deplored the habit that a "very few very lazy people" had of giving him money; but he declared that the average man of to-day used neither judgment nor charity in dealing with tramps. There were men, yes, and women, who would dive into filthy streets and alleys in search of the lost; who would give whole afternoons to seeking out and ministering to tenement-house sufferers; who would go, even on days when the thermometer stood as high as it does to-day, to jails and prisons and other poorly ventilated places to try to teach the depraved, — and these very same men and women would turn away from their doors a hungry man who asked for food, with a harsh refusal, and not



a word of inquiry as to what had brought him to that state, nor the slightest attempt to win him to a better life. To-morrow, or the next day, or the next week, when his desperate need had made a criminal of him, they would visit him in his cell, and do what they could towards his reformation ; but not one crumb of prevention were they willing to give to the poor tramp at their doors, whose worst crimes, as yet, might have been poverty and laziness !

He grew eloquent as he continued ; he cited some thrilling instances that had come to his recent knowledge. He affirmed that the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to save the lost, would be ashamed to meet in their own homes two-thirds of the people who bore his name, because of their treatment of his starving, tramping poor. He did not plead for indiscriminate giving ; he begged no one who was listening to him to be so foolish as to go away and say that he had urged the giving of money to tramps ; he would even be careful about giving clothing that could easily be exchanged for liquor,—but a bit of bread to be eaten on one's doorstep, followed, at least on such a day as this, by a draught of cool water offered in a decent cup, and a few words of inquiry, or of sympathy, or exhortation accompanying them, could not drag any poor tramp much lower than he was ; and who should say but the opportunity might be blessed of God, and the seed dropped bear such fruit

that bread-giver and bread-eater might rejoice together through eternity? Was it not at least worth while to stop and think about this army of hungry, half-clad opportunities that tramped annually past our doors? Were we ready to-day to give account to him who said, "I was hungry and ye gave me no bread," as to the manner in which we had treated even the least of these?

The two young men who had met in church were not sleepy, at least one of them was not. He sat erect and looked steadily at the speaker; his eyes kindling with deepened interest as the sermon grew more and more emphatic, and his entire attitude expressive of the deepest attention.

"How that man can get up so much energy on such a day as this is beyond me to understand." This was his companion's first sentence, as, following a very brief prayer and a single verse of a hymn, the organist roused himself and roared and thundered them out of church.

"It was the subject that energized him," said the young man who had listened intently; "upon my word he handled it well, and in an original fashion."

"Dr. Talbert is nothing if not original, you remember. What puzzles me is why he chose a regular broadside for such a melting day. I should have thought that something quiet and soothing in its nature would have been more in keeping."

“So that people need not have been disturbed in their slumbers, eh? I did not discover on looking around that there was need for special consideration on that ground; they slept very well. What a trial it must be to a man like the doctor to pour out eloquence and energy on a company of sleepers! Seriously, Fletcher, were you not a good deal impressed with his way of dealing with the problem? It seemed to me that he had — not so much found some new ideas, perhaps, as he had dared to speak out on an unpopular side, and tell the individual what was his duty. We deal with this matter by organizations nowadays, you know, — Associated Charities and the like, — until the average man and woman, who know these organizations only by name, and never lift a finger toward their work, feel, somehow, that their responsibility has been shouldered, and there is nothing left for them to do but moralize.”

“Oh, he talked well; Dr. Talbert always does. I told you last week he was better worth hearing than any man in town. You have heard so little of him, you see, that you haven't got used to the style, and it makes a deep impression. He didn't come until after you went abroad, did he?”

“He came the Sunday before, but I didn't hear him. I went with my mother to Dr. Pendleton's church that day. No, I have heard Dr. Talbert but a few times. Is he always so impressive?”

“He is always high pressure, if that is what you

mean. I haven't decided yet whether he is really more impressive than a quieter man would be. Doesn't some of it impress you as mere oratory?"

"What do you mean by that? He is an orator, certainly; but I should not think of using that word 'mere' in connection with him. Do you think he does not really feel what he says?"

"Oh, some of it he feels, undoubtedly; as much as circumstances will admit, probably; but — well, I should like to be a tramp to-morrow morning and call at his door, to see how he would make the application to his sermon."

"How do you think he would?"

"With his Monday morning shoes, very likely," Mr. Fletcher replied with an indolent laugh; then, seeing that his friend was waiting for something more serious, he added, "not so bad as that, of course; but I really should not expect any more consideration from him because of that sermon. You see, King, there is a certain amount of — what shall I call it? idealism? to be taken into consideration when one listens to a sermon, especially when the speaker is an enthusiast like Dr. Talbert. One cannot pin him down to actual hard fact, he must have a chance to soar, — to make statements which the next day, in cool blood, he would naturally tone down a little."

"I don't believe it," said Mr. King emphatically. "There is a great deal of surface talking done in this world, I know; but I like to think

that from the pulpit we get verities, not only in doctrine, but in the statements that belong to every-day life. I mean, I like to believe that the speaker is intensely in earnest. I may not think as he does, I may consider him utterly mistaken, but I want him to believe every word of every sentence that he utters, and believe it to the depths of his being. Nothing less than that could command my respect."

The young man Fletcher politely covered a yawn with his hand as he said, "It is too hot to argue, and there is no need, besides. Dr. Talbert is in earnest enough I have no doubt. I only mean that I don't believe he will set the next tramp that calls upon him a dinner of turkey and pound cake, and give him a solid silver fork to eat them with."

"Who is idealizing now?" laughed his friend. "I thought his views were held steadily within the line of common sense." As he spoke, he halted before the door of an apartment house where his own handsome rooms were situated, and with a cordial invitation to Mr. Fletcher to enter, which was declined, the two separated; Fletcher to saunter three squares farther and let himself into a fine house on the corner, where his father and sisters were already awaiting him; King to seat himself in the elevator to be taken to the fourth floor front, where he lived in luxurious apartments quite alone.

Speedily putting himself into the coolest possible dress, he drew an easy-chair in front of a window where a faint suspicion of a breeze occasionally hovered, and, contrary to his habit, without book or paper. The walls were lined with many rows of well-filled shelves, and a searcher among them would hardly have failed of finding every choice book of the season, as well as the standard volumes of the past. A bookcase devoted to standard magazines was crowded almost to discomfort, and the large study table was strewn with the very latest in newspaper and magazine. Evidently the present occupant of these rooms was an omnivorous reader, yet not one of his silent companions appealed to him. He did not look sleepy; on the contrary, that intent look which had impressed one in the church was still on his face. Some problem of life had confronted him, and insisted upon being thought about. It kept him steadily at work during that entire afternoon, with the thermometer among the nineties. He went out to his boarding-house to dinner as usual, but carried that thoughtful, preoccupied air with him, and came away again without lingering for music or conversation as he sometimes did. He lay down for his Sunday afternoon nap, but sleep did not come to him. Instead, he stared at the ceiling and continued his thought.

He had dropped into that same easy-chair again, and was still without book or paper, when there

came a tap at his door, and his friend Fletcher appeared in answer to his invitation.

"Awake, old fellow?" was his greeting. "I knocked very softly for fear of disturbing a nap; it was so hot earlier in the day that a fellow couldn't sleep. Don't you want to go around and hear Dr. Waymouth this evening?"

"Take a seat," said Mr. King, glancing about for another easy-chair, and motioning his friend toward it with the familiarity of long acquaintance.

"No, to be entirely frank, I don't. It seems to me that I have had sermon enough for one day. I cannot get away from the morning one; it has stayed with me persistently this entire afternoon."

Mr. Fletcher laughed genially. "Dr. Talbert is going to be too strong a tonic for you, I am afraid," he said. "You will have to change your church relations and go to Dr. Pendleton's. You are high pressure yourself, and need soothing, as I told you this morning."

"We are all too much in search of soothing potions at church, I am afraid. No, you mistake; I believe I need rousing. Wheel that chair up here and let me talk to you. I've done a tremendous amount of thinking this afternoon. I tell you, Fletcher, that sermon needs to be thought about; it dealt with a problem that demands solution. Do you know how many tramps there are in our country annually? I thought not; the figures are appalling! I was reading some statistics on the

subject only last night, but they did not impress me much until I heard Dr. Talbert. What do we know about the poor fellows? As the preacher said, we pass them by with a smile or a sneer, and go on our well-fed way and think no more about them. Who is trying to reach them in any way? We haven't the least notion how we should feel if we were put for a single week into their places, — homeless, moneyless, and without decent clothing."

"Many of them leave good homes to tramp about the country," said his friend oracularly.

Mr. King sat up straight and confronted him. "Don't you believe it," he said earnestly. "A certain percentage of them are scamps in search of adventure, no doubt; but I believe the great majority tramp from stern necessity. How is one going to learn how to help them in any way unless he can enter into their lives? I'm planning to write a book with a tramp in it; I have been gathering materials all the spring, and I thought I was nearly ready to begin work, before I heard that sermon. Now I am sure I know nothing about the fellow. I'll tell you what it is, Fletcher, I'm going to turn tramp."

Mr. Fletcher leaned himself back in his easy-chair and laughed; not loud laughter, but a succession of low, amused chuckles, that died down and then bubbled up again, as though he could not get away from the absurdity of the idea.

"Laugh as much as you please," said his friend

good humoredly, "but I'm in dead earnest; I've thought it all out. Since hearing Dr. Talbert this morning, I have decided that I have studied exactly one side of the problem, and that it would be an impertinence in me to try to write about it before studying the other side. Do you remember Charles Reade's old book, 'Put Yourself in His Place'?' There is a vast amount of common sense in that title. I am going to attempt just that thing. I have the summer before me; mother and Elizabeth are in Europe, and want to remain there until next spring. There is nothing to hinder my turning tramp to-morrow, and in all seriousness I mean to do it."

"Look here, King, have you forgotten that man Wyckoff and his two years of experience?"

"Certainly I have not forgotten him. I have no doubt that when he gets ready to give his experiences to the world he will materially help in solving some of its problems. But he tramped for himself, and will know what he is about when he begins to write; that is exactly what I mean to do. Moreover, it is a slightly different phase of the matter that I wish to consider, I think."

Mr. Fletcher ceased his laughter, and gave himself to the task of trying to dissuade his friend from taking such an erratic step; though, it must be confessed, with very little hope of succeeding. In all the years that he had known intimately John Stuart King, that young man had been noted

for carrying out his projects, many of them unreasonable enough in appearance, to the very letter. The subject was thoroughly canvassed that evening; the church bells tolled in vain; the hot day reached its ending, and darkness and a measure of coolness, as compared to noonday, fell upon them, and still the two sat and talked.

"Well," said Mr. Fletcher at last, "if you will, you *will*. I knew that before I commenced; but my word for it, you will be thoroughly tired of your bargain before the season is half over, and you will know no more about the 'true inwardness' of tramp life than you do now. It is all a farce, you see; you can't be a tramp. A man who knows that he has a fortune behind him that he can fall back upon at any moment, cannot feel as the poor tramp does, and it is folly to try."

"There is truth in that," the other said, so thoughtfully that his friend turned and looked at him anxiously, and was sorry he had said that last. John Stuart King was capable of willing away his entire fortune to the first charitable institution he thought of, once convinced that it was actually in the way of his plans.

"There is truth in that," he repeated; "I can only approximate the conditions. But it shall not be a farce; I will not use one penny of my money while I tramp over the country. I will be hungry and ragged if necessary, if I cannot find work enough to feed and clothe myself. It is the

honest tramp who is doing the best he can with his environment that interests me, and an honest tramp I am going to be. Anyway, I shall help myself to write my own book, and that is a great point."

CHAPTER II.

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH.

THE third day following that warm Sunday, a human being, unmistakably of the genus known as "tramp," might have been seen slowly making his way down one of the principal business streets of the city. He walked with the slouching gait common to that class of people, and avoided looking steadily into the eyes of any one he met, in a way that is also characteristic of the majority. His hair, which was brown and plentiful, was tossed about in wild disorder, and the slouch hat he wore pushed well down over his head was very "slouch" indeed. His dress was cleaner than that of many tramps; one noticing him carefully would have decided that he had made an almost painful effort to be clean, and would therefore have set him down at once as belonging to the better class of unfortunates. Still, the dress had many defects. The sleeves were much too short and badly frayed; they had been out at the elbow, but were decently patched with a different material. A calico shirt was buttoned high about the throat, and that also was clean, but

collarless. The shoes were decidedly the worst part of the outfit, unless the very shabby trousers that dangled above them were worse than the shoes.

On the whole, John Stuart King looked furtively at himself as he lounged along, uncertain whether to feel most elation or dismay at the success of his disguise. He had chosen a street with which he was least acquainted, yet he met from time to time people whom he knew well in society. For the most part they passed him without so much attention as a glance would have been. They recognized him afar off as of another world from theirs, and too common a world to awaken the interest of curiosity. As he grew bolder he ventured once or twice to speak to men whose name and position he knew, asking for work. They were men who knew his name perfectly, would have recognized it anywhere, but who did not know him very well by sight. Without exception they answered him curtly in the negative, without question or remark. They had no work for such as he. He might be very hungry, but it was doubtless his own fault, and in any case there were charities, breakfast missions and what not, for wretches of his stamp. If their faces expressed any thought of him at all, the tramp concluded that it took that form.

One young lady startled him and made him feel that his best course would be to strike out

into the country as soon as possible. He had met her several times at receptions and parties, and as she passed him she stared in a startled way, even turning her head to do so; and he heard her voice, —

“How much that fellow looks like” — the name dropped from his hearing, but he could not but be sure that it was his own.

“The idea!” laughed her louder voiced companion, and the tramp moved on more rapidly, his face flushing deeply under the laugh. It gave him strange sensations, this walk through the city of his birth, incognito. True, he was not exceedingly well known, except in certain circles; long absences from home during the years when people change the most rapidly had cut him off from the recognition of many; but to be able to pass those who would have been glad to call themselves his friends had they recognized him, and to receive no nod or glance of fellowship, had its startling side. Did the mere matter of clothes count for so much? Then his speculations were brought to a sudden conclusion. Yonder, approaching rapidly, was his most intimate friend, Arnold Fletcher. Now for the crucial test; if Fletcher passed him, then indeed he could not be himself. But he had not intended to test this on the public thoroughfare. How came Fletcher to be on this street, and at this hour? He was evidently in haste, for he came with long strides, looking neither to the right

nor the left. Yes, he was passing, without so much as a glance. Suddenly the tramp became courageous.

“Could you help me, sir, to find work of some sort, enough to earn my breakfast?” he said rapidly, in the desperate tone that he thought a fellow in his situation ought to use.

“Work?” repeated Fletcher, slackening his pace, and bringing his thoughts back from—the tramp could not decide where. “There is work enough in the world; too much to suit my taste! The trouble with you probably is that you cannot do any of it decently. What kind of work do you want?”

“Any kind,” said the tramp; but it was an unguarded moment. He felt such a thrill of satisfaction in the thought that his friend had not passed him with a frown and a coldly shaken head, that he looked full at him and smiled, his own rich smile.

“What!” said Mr. Fletcher, startled and apparently dazed. “Who in—upon my word! it can’t be possible! And yet— Well, if that isn’t complete! Why, John, your own mother wouldn’t recognize you!”

“Hush!” said John warningly, “you talk too loud for the public street, and you are too familiar. The question is, have you any work for me?”

“Yes,” said Fletcher, laughing now heartily. “What a scarecrow you have made of yourself,

to be sure. At first sight I did not dream it was you, and yet I was expecting to see you. I'll give you something to do; you go and call on Dr. Talbert, that's a good fellow. He'll have work for you; see if he doesn't; or a cup of coffee and a sandwich, or something of the sort, which is better. He is bound to, you know, according to your theories. Just try it. I'll give a thousand dollars to home missions if you will, when I earn it."

"Hush!" said John again, this time in really warning tones. Two men were approaching whom both knew. Fletcher took the hint, and as they passed was saying in dignified tones, "There is an Associated Charities station not more than a mile from here, you go down there — I don't know exactly where it is, but you can inquire."

One of the gentlemen glanced back with a superior smile, "Being victimized, Fletcher? Don't waste your time; the fellow needs the lockup more than he needs charity."

"You knew quite as much about the station as the most of them, I presume," said King, when they were alone again. "Never mind, I shall do without a breakfast. I'm going to leave town. I shall tramp as far as Circletown this very day, I presume; remember that one John Stuart will be looking there for letters. Good-by, thank you for your sympathy; it has done me good."

"John," said the other, detaining him with a hand, and looking anxious, "do be persuaded to

give up this absurdity. What would your mother say? Above all, what would Elizabeth think of you? At least, do not go away without any money. Have you really no money with you?"

"Not a cent," — with a genial smile, — "I am honest, you see, and I am doing nothing of which I have need to be ashamed. I am simply testing for myself a phase of life that is only too common. As for the anxiety of my mother and other friends, they are to know nothing about it, so they will not be troubled. If I come to downright grief, I'll remember you and your bank account."

"You will be back looking after your own, as usual, within the month."

"Possibly; in which case I shall have accomplished all I care to in this line. I make no professions of having become a tramp for the remainder of my natural life. Good-by, Fletcher. Wish me success, for you can't dissuade me."

Left to himself, our tramp considered for the first time the wisdom of following his friend's oft-repeated advice, and calling on Dr. Talbert. True he was a member of his church, but by no means well acquainted with the gentleman. He had but recently returned from an extended trip abroad, and had met his pastor but two or three times at crowded gatherings. The chances that he would be recognized in his present attire were very few. Why not test for himself the practical nature of the discourse that had moved him so signally?

Not that Dr. Talbert was pledged to devote himself to the interests of every tramp he saw because he had chosen to speak unusual words in their behalf, but a word of sympathy or of exhortation, possibly of advice, would be likely to be given him. How did such men as Dr. Talbert advise such men as he was representing himself to be? It was worth risking discovery to learn. Without more delay he turned his steps in the direction of Dr. Talbert's handsome residence.

He had chosen an unfortunate day. That evening would occur Dr. Talbert's regular mid-week lecture, for which he made as careful preparation as he did for the Sabbath services. He was late in reaching his study, and he was pre-eminently a man who did not like to be disturbed when he reached there. Be sure no one in his employ would be so rash as to call him down to see a tramp; but it so happened that an imperative summons had called him to the parlor, and compelled him to show his visitor out, and the visitor had come on church business that had an edge in it for the pastor. There is much such business that outsiders know not of. There was a frown on the good man's face as his eyes rested on the forlorn specimen of tramp-life who humbly asked for work, and his voice was harsh in reply.

"No, I haven't any work; and if I had I would not give it to a fellow who doesn't know enough to go to the back door."

The tramp's face reddened; he had not so much as remembered that there were back doors; he was not used to them. He tried to stammer an apology, and repeated his willingness to do any kind of work for the sake of a breakfast.

"Breakfast!" repeated Dr. Talbert with an irritable glance at his watch; "it is much nearer dinner than breakfast time! my whole morning frittered away; it is a shame! No, sir, I haven't any work, nor any breakfast for you; nor a moment's time to waste on you; my morning is gone already." And the door was literally slammed in his face. It was not Dr. Talbert's ordinary manner. He was a sincere man, and on almost any other occasion would have tried to live up, in a measure at least, to his Sunday morning eloquence. He would have been dismayed had he known with what an utterly disappointed heart the tramp turned from his door, saying to himself as he did so, "I believed in him, and he has spoiled it." John Stuart King, the scholar and author, was not wont to make sweeping deductions on slight proof; but with the dress of a tramp he had apparently taken on something of his surface character; at least, his heart felt very sore and sad at this rebuff.

He moved away slowly, moralizing as he went. Were Fletcher's cynical views of life the nearer right after all? Was there no such thing as downright sincerity in this world? He believed

himself to be a lover of truth to a marked degree. He had personified Truth, and admired her and worshipped her, and written about her in a way that others had well-nigh worshipped; and Fletcher had assured him that it was all very fine on paper, and important too, of course people must have ideals; but as for finding real flesh-and-blood specimens moving about, that was not to be expected. And he had contended that the world held many whose daily lives were as carefully patterned after Truth as were his ideals. Had he been mistaken? He looked down at himself and sighed; then, as he caught his own reflection in a plate-glass window he was passing, he laughed, — a laugh that already had in it a touch of bitterness. The very costume that he wore, and that he had been at such pains to secure, taught him the same hateful lesson. He had visited pawn-brokers' shops and second-hand clothing shops without number, and been almost in despair. The wardrobe of the decent poor was not apparently what he needed. Where was he to find his need? And then he had bethought himself of those furnishing shops for amateur theatrical entertainments, and hurrying thither had found exactly what he was searching for.

“Private entertainment?” the obsequious attendant had asked as he studied his customer; and then he had been complimented on his selection of character, and assured that his part would be

perfect. What a humiliating thought it was that to a degree everybody was playing a part; no one was strictly and solemnly and continually himself.

The bitterness went out of his laugh after a little. The matter had its comic side. Surely he should not be at war this morning against all shams, when he had for the first time in his life got himself up for as complete a sham as possible.

“But I have a purpose,” he told himself quickly; “and one that justifies the method. Neither am I planning to be a continuous sham. I shall lay all this aside very soon probably. I wonder if I am half tired of it already? John Stuart, what you need is to get away from the city. You have always contended that the truest people the world contained were to be found in the country. Now tramp out and prove it.”

Perhaps in all his cultured years that had been filled with opportunities, during no single day did John Stuart King learn more about human nature than on that first one of his new life. Men, women, and children all contributed to his education. Be sure it was a new experience to him to have young and pretty women look at him with curious, distrustful eyes, and cross the street to avoid too close contact. Before twelve o'clock he was genuinely hungry, and offered with some degree of anxiety to bring pails of water from the “wells”

that began to dot the country through which he travelled, or to do anything else that he could think of, for a dinner. Five times he was refused, — once with hesitation and a lingering regret in the eyes of a woman who “hadn’t anything to spare;” three times with cold indifference; and once with positive fire of tongue and slam of door. Being very hungry he tried again, though he began to admit to himself that it would be easier to steal something.

The sixth woman gave him two pieces of very stale bread in a not over-clean paper bag, and added a bone that had once had meat on it.

“I’m afraid to refuse ’em,” he heard her explain in a supposed undertone to some one inside, “for fear they’ll fire the buildings, or do something ugly. I’ve read of such things.”

So even this was not charity! But the receiver ate it with a relish that daintier fare had not always found. The woman evidently looked furtively at him occasionally from some loop-hole, and continued her remarks, —

“He ain’t bad looking; not as tramps go. He don’t look real mean, as some of ’em do; and his clothes is pretty clean, and patched up kind of decent. I shouldn’t wonder if he had a mother somewheres, who had done her best to make him look decent.”

Visions of his mother patching the clothes he wore were almost too much for the tramp’s risibles.

He ate the last mouthful hastily, and moved on, philosophizing the while over the power with which he could describe the value of stale bread, and bones where meat had been. For a full hour his sympathies were entirely on the side of the tramp. Then he met one so repulsive in appearance that he instantly justified the woman who had been afraid of him. It was a new experience to be accosted as he was, —

“Any luck that way, pal?” nodding in the direction from which he had come.

“I haven’t found any work yet, if that is what you mean,” spoken in the tone that in his former grade of life would have been called cold. The man gave a disagreeable sneer. “Oh, that’s your dodge, is it?” he said; “I can tell you I’ve had worse trials in life than not finding work. Did you spot any of the houses?”

“Did I what?”

“Mark the houses where they treated you decent, and gave you coffee, or lemonade, or something? You must be a green one! Don’t you carry no chalk nor nothin’ with you to mark the places? Then you’re a hard-hearted wretch. If you can’t do so much for your fellow-tramps as that, you ought to go to the lockup.” The healthy, clean young man found himself shrinking from this specimen with a kind of loathing. Would it be possible for him to fraternize with such as he, even to study human nature?

Then, curiously enough, at that moment, for almost the first time since he started out, he thought of the Lord Jesus Christ. What a lonely man he must have been!

CHAPTER III.

“FATHER’S TRAMP.”

THE Elliotts had just risen from the tea-table ; that is, the most of them had. Corliss, the son of the house, who had been late, was still lingering, helping himself bountifully to cream, that he poured over his sweet baked apple with an air that said he knew what a toothsome morsel he was preparing.

Elfrida, whose duty it was to gather the dishes and pass them out to Susan, the hired help, and who was always in a hurry, tried to hasten the laggard.

“Come, Corl, you’ve had supper enough ; or, if you haven’t, you should have been here when the rest of us began. I’m going to clear off the table.”

“All right,” was the good-natured reply, “so that you leave the apples and cream, I’m content. These apples are prime ; I’m glad there’s a big yield this year. Father?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Corliss in an absent-minded tone. He had the evening paper in his hand, and preparatory to sitting down to enjoy it at lei-

sure, his eye had been caught by a paragraph that he stood still to read.

“Speaking of the harvest apples,” said Corliss, “makes me think of Jim, and of whom we are to get to take his place. I called there coming out, and he won’t be ready for work again this season, if he ever is.”

“Is that so?” said his father, in a tone of deep concern, “I am very sorry to hear it; Jim was a faithful fellow, and did as well as he knew how, which is what can be said of few. As to filling his place, I am sure I don’t know; it is a bad time of year to be looking for extra help.”

“We ought to have some one right away,” said Corliss, with his mouth full of apple and cream. Then had come a knock at the side door, and the farmer, paper in hand, had stepped forward to respond. A man’s voice outside was heard asking something, and Mr. Elliott stepped out to him.

Elfrida, meantime, made rapid progress with the dishes, although she stopped from time to time to admire an illustration in the new magazine her sister Hildreth was examining. The summer dining-room of the Elliotts was also their family sitting-room, and Mrs. Elliott already had her sewing-basket at her side, waiting to establish herself at her end of the table. Hildreth glanced up once from her book and said, “Don’t hurry, Elfie, the only rest mother gets is while you are making the table ready.”

“ Elf is in too much haste for her finery to heed that hint,” laughed the brother. Then the door opened again, and the father returned. He went straight over to Mrs. Elliott, and spoke in a half-apologetic tone.

“ Mother, there is an unusually decent-looking fellow out there, hunting for work; he didn’t ask for supper, but I got out of him that he had had nothing since breakfast. You can manage something for him, can’t you?”

“ It is one of father’s unusual tramps!” exclaimed Corliss, “ I knew it was; I saw it in his face.” Both he and Elfrida laughed merrily, and the father’s face relaxed into the semblance of a laugh as he waited for Mrs. Elliott to speak.

“ Of course, Roger, if you say so; only you know you decided ” —

“ I know,” he interrupted quickly, “ but this man is —

“ This man is unusual,” said Corliss, taking the words from his father. “ Don’t you know that, mother?”

Mrs. Elliott joined in the laugh. Every one of “ father’s tramps ” were unusual, and must be made exceptions to the stern rule that provided only a ticket to the Associated Charities Bureau in the city, two miles away. No matter how emphatically he declared that he had agreed with the Board at their last meeting that it simply fostered vice to keep feeding tramps at one’s door, without

inquiring into their condition, and explained to Susan and to his immediate family that it really must not be done at his house any more, as surely as Mr. Elliott answered the call of one of them, just so surely was he fed, and if necessary clothed and made as comfortable as circumstances would admit. The young Elliotts invariably laughed at this trait in their father, and were always proud that it existed. Not one of them cared to turn deaf ears to the appeals of hunger.

Mr. Elliott turned back to his tramp, saying, as he did so, "I will have him go around to the kitchen door. Give him some of that stew, and a cup of coffee; he has had no dinner, remember."

Elfrida grumbled a little. "Dear me! Susan is in the milk-room at work, and I shall have to go and feed him myself."

"Perhaps Corliss will go out with you," suggested Mrs. Elliott a trifle anxiously; and then Hildreth closed her magazine and arose.

"I'll feed the tramp, mother," she said. She did not care to have her pretty young sister, who was sometimes inclined to be reckless, gazed on by the bold eyes of a tramp.

"Is he to have some of the ginger-cake and cheese?"

"Oh, yes," said Corliss, speaking for his mother, "and a napkin, Hildreth, and some of the choice grapes, and a finger-bowl. Remember, he isn't one of the common kind."

Hildreth went away laughing, and made ready a corner of the kitchen table for the stranger’s use. She laughed again as she got out a small square of linen and laid it across the end for a table-cloth. It probably was folly, just as Corliss thought, but she really had to make things neat and comfortable, when a human being was to sit down before them. From the window she could see the tramp washing his face vigorously at the pump-trough. He used the water as though it was a luxury, and tossed back his abundant hair, and bathed his head as well. Elfrida came out with a message from her mother, and stood looking and laughing.

“ He acts like a great Newfoundland dog who has been away from the water for a week ! ” she said. And then — “ Hildreth, he has fine eyes ; just look at them. I don’t wonder father was taken with him.”

Said Hildreth, “ Run back, dear, and finish fixing the table for mother. I know she is in a hurry to get to work ; and you can hem that ruffle I was at work at ; then I can baste it on your skirt when I come in.” She had no fancy for the child’s lingering to study a pair of fine eyes.

However, they need not have been anxious. Mr. Elliott had no mind to leave his tramp to the care of either daughter. He saw Susan stepping briskly about the milk-room, and came himself to the kitchen with the tramp. By this time the

table was neatly laid, and a generous portion of the appetizing stew, that had been warmed for the farmer's supper, dealt out to him. One swift glance the stranger had for the young woman in neat dress and with fair hair curling about her temples, then gave himself to the business of eating as though he greatly needed the food.

"What is your name?" asked farmer Elliott, when the first pangs of hunger had evidently been somewhat appeased.

"John Stuart," was the quick reply.

"A good name. Are you a Scotchman?"

"My great-grandfather was."

"And a good, honest, hard-working man, I dare say. How came his grandson to be reduced to such straits?"

"Well, sir, you know the times are very hard. I have been looking for work as faithfully as a man could for the last two months; and have found nothing but odd jobs here and there, enough to keep me alive."

"What can you do? What have you been brought up to do?"

The slow red mounted in the young man's face, reaching quite to his forehead. This question had been asked before, but had never so much embarrassed him. Was it because the young woman was looking at him at that moment with earnest, interested eyes? On John Stuart King's study table was a small easel containing a fancy picture

of a young woman with holy eyes, and an expression that had had a singular charm for the student. The sketch was named “Truth;” and its owner, studying it with his friend Fletcher, had once declared that the artist ought to have reached fame with that picture, for it was the very embodiment of truth.

“The embodiment of a fancy,” his friend had replied. “You will never find such a face as that in real life.”

Yet here was the face before him! a striking likeness. In its presence the tramp felt that he could speak only truth. He answered presently in lowered tones.

“Nothing.”

“That is frank, at least,” said Mr. Elliott with a little laugh. “I suspect that you have at some time in your life run away from a respectable home. Is that it?”

“No, sir. My home is broken up; my father is dead; and mother knows that I am out on a tramp.”

“Poor mother!” It was Hildreth’s voice, low and pitiful. She had hardly meant to speak the words aloud; they breathed themselves out of her sympathy, and reached his ear. Under the circumstances the tramp should have felt nothing but amusement. The woman who was least in need of pity of almost any person of his acquaintance was his mother. Yet he gave the speaker one

swift, respectful glance of gratitude. He was grateful for the womanliness of it, and for the effect that he felt sure it would have had upon him had he been in reality what he seemed. He took a sudden resolution to secure work at this house if possible; if not, as near it as was possible.

“How do you expect to get work if you are obliged to own that you don’t know how to do anything?” was the farmer’s next searching question; but he followed it with another. “Do you know anything about horses?”

John Stuart’s eyes brightened. Here at least he could speak truth. Almost since his babyhood he had had to do with horses. He owned two, a well-matched span, the admiration and envy of all his friends. He admired, yes, he loved almost any kind of a horse; and his success in dealing with refractory ones had been a matter of surprised comment even when he was a mere boy.

“Yes, sir, I do,” he said, his eyes kindling; “I know a good deal about them; I like them, and they like me. I can drive any kind of a horse.”

The supper, meantime, had been disappearing very rapidly. Despite the figure of Truth that had stepped out of its frame and was looking at him with human eyes, the tramp was hungry. Nothing so thoroughly good in the way of food had fallen to his lot for many days, and he was resolved upon making the most of the opportunity. Hildreth silently refilled his plate and replenished his cup;

then her father stepped to the dining-room door, called his son, and motioned him to stay in the kitchen while he went to hold a consultation. Hildreth followed him from the room.

“ I’ve a mind to try him, mother,” Mr. Elliott said, going over to the table where his wife was briskly sewing. “ We need help now ; and we’ll need it worse when Corliss begins school again. He says he understands horses, and there is something about the fellow that makes me feel he is telling the truth. How does he impress you, Hildreth ? ”

“ As a very hungry man,” said Hildreth, smiling ; but she added, “ he hasn’t a bad face, father ; I do not believe he is very wicked.”

“ But isn’t it rather risky, Roger, a perfect stranger, and a tramp at that ? You know the boy who drives the horses will have to take Hildreth back and forth, as well as Corliss and Elfrida.”

“ Oh, of course I shall not trust him in any such way until he has been thoroughly tested. He might drive the farm wagon, though, for a few days. I can tell in five minutes whether he really does know anything about horses. He is pretty tired, one can see that. I think we ought to give him some kind of a shelter for the night, at least ; and if he really wants work I don’t know how he is ever going to get it unless somebody trusts him. Will it be a great deal of trouble to get the wood-house chamber ready ? ”

“O father! you won't let a tramp sleep there, will you? He might set the house on fire, and burn us all up!”

It was his youngest daughter who looked up from her ruffles long enough to ask this in startled tones. Her father laughed.

“You must have been reading dime novels, Elfie,” he said pleasantly. “Tramps don't do that sort of thing much, outside of a certain class of books. I doubt if they ever did it when they were treated like human beings. If this fellow wants to get work, he will have every motive for behaving himself; and if he doesn't, it will be perfectly easy to slip away in the early morning, without setting any fires. Do you object, Sarah?”

“Oh, no,” said his wife quickly; “not if you think it is best. Susan can get the woodhouse chamber ready with very little trouble; or, if she doesn't get done in time, Hildreth will look after it. Can't you, dear?”

“Yes'm,” said Hildreth, with a quiet smile that she tried to hide from her giddy sister. These young people were often much amused with the deferential manner in which their father appealed to his wife, apparently leaving everything to her judgment; although they could not remember a time when she had not answered as now, “If you think it is best.”

“Your father thinks so,” had been the law of life by which they had been brought up.

"When I get married," Elfrida once remarked, "I mean to have a husband just like father, who will always say, 'What do you think, my dear?'"

"That will be all right," said her brother cheerfully, "provided you will see to it that you are a woman just like mother, who will always say, 'Just as you think best, my dear.'"

Yet there had been times in Farmer Elliott's life, unknown to these children, when the quiet-faced, gentle-voiced woman had set herself like granite against some plan of his, and had held herself firmly to the "No, Roger, I don't think that would be right," until she had won him to see with her eyes, and he had lived to thank her for clearer vision. There was no need, of course, for the mother to explain these things to her children.

Susan gave the woodhouse chamber the benefit of her strong red arms and executive ability, but before its new occupant was invited in, the daughter of the house visited the room. It was severely clean; that was a matter of course where Susan had been, and the bed was made up comfortably; but it was Hildreth who spread a white cloth over the small table, and laid a plainly bound, coarse-print Bible on the cloth; and fastened above it with pins a cheap print of a cheerful home-scene. Susan sneered at it all, with the familiarity of hired help in the country.

"Land sakes, Hildreth! them kind don't care for pictures; and as for the Bible, I don't s'pose

he can read a word. If he can, he'd rather have a weekly story-paper, or some such."

"We can't be sure, Susan. I think he can read; most young fellows who belong to this country learn to read and write in their childhood, you know. Perhaps his mother used to read the Bible to him. She may have sat in just such a chair as that mother does in the picture, and it may all speak to his heart. Who can tell?"

Susan sneered again. "I can," she said oracularly. "Them kind of things only happen in story-books. Look how you fixed up for that Joe Wilkins, and what did he do but run away with the horsewhip and hatchet the first good chance he had? They're all of a piece. If I was your father I wouldn't have no such truck around. But you'll get your reward for trying; you and him too; I make no manner of doubt of that."

Susan's pronouns were mixed; but her heart knew whom to honor.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM STUDYING TRUTH."

THE sensations of the "tramp" who finally took possession of that woodhouse chamber may be better imagined, I presume, than described. Susan had remarked, as she took a final survey, that he "probably never saw anything so nice and comfortable in his life as that room." What Susan would have said could she have had a peep into the bachelor apartments that he usually occupied beggars even imagination. There was a neat, old-fashioned, high-backed rocker in the room, the cushion stuffed with sweet-smelling hay that could be renewed as often as there was to be a new occupant, and a chintz cover that found its way to the wash-tub within an hour after the departure of the one who last sat on it. Into this chair John Stuart dropped himself, and looked about him with a curiosity in which there was more than a touch of tenderness. He had been a tramp quite long enough to appreciate the cleanliness, and the coolness, and the pleasant odors of this room. When he had occupied the "Sleepy Hollow chair" near the south window of his city home, and planned

this extraordinary outing, it had been early in July. Certain business matters had held him in town through June, and it had been his intention to start vacation-ward that next week; so he had started. Now the first days of September were upon them, and by ordinary calculations his vacation should be over; but he told himself complacently that it had just commenced, although the experiences through which he had passed were enough to fill a volume. All sorts and conditions of men he had seen and studied. He had been hungry, and had had nothing with which to satisfy hunger; he had been weary, with no resting-place in sight. For the first time in his life he had known what it was to actually suffer for the want of these common necessities. Some work he had found, though the fact that he had not been brought up to do any of it always told against him, and made it apparently impossible for him to continue in the same place more than a day or two. In truth, this part of the experience had not troubled him, for he had found no place where he felt willing to tarry. Each day as he tramped on he rejoiced in the thought that his plan did not include long stays anywhere. But this evening he felt differently; at the Elliott farm he was willing to stay.

He looked down at himself with complacent eyes. One of the hardest features of his self-imposed exile had been the difficulty of procuring

a bath. He had prepared for himself a change of clothing that he had tied in a bundle, and slung on a stick, as he had noticed that veritable tramps sometimes did. He assured himself that a self-respecting tramp, such as he meant to be, could do no less than that. But the difficulty of getting his clothing washed, and properly dried, and, above all, mended, became simply appalling as the weeks passed, and more than once had threatened the entire abandonment of the scheme. But for a certain dogged perseverance peculiar to his nature, he would have given up long before. Perhaps he would have done so in any case, had he not had days of exceeding interest, during which he felt that he learned more about that strange, troublesome "other half" than any amount of reading or any number of statistics could possibly give him. On this evening, for the first time since his new life began, he had been offered the use of a bath.

"There's a place in the stable," Farmer Elliott had said, "where you can wash up, and be all fresh and clean before you go to your room. My folks are particular about that room; they keep it as clean as they do the parlor, and they don't want anything ugly brought into it. Have you got clean clothes in your bundle? All right, then; I like that. When a fellow wants to be clean, and takes a little trouble to be so, it shows he hasn't lost his self-respect. There's a bundle of clothes in the stable closet; we keep them there

for times of need. If you need anything, while your clothes are being mended up, you know, why help yourself; you are welcome to anything you find there. I shall give you work enough to earn them for yourself, if you choose to do it."

John Stuart, as he listened, had felt his heart glow with a feeling deeper than gratitude. Here at last was a chance for a tramp to become a man. It was the first genuine effort at helpfulness that he had met. No, perhaps that was not quite fair; it was the first common-sense effort. Others had tried. Tracts had been given him, and advice, but not water and soap and towels. These he had found in abundance in the stable closet, and certain garments of which he stood much in need. He had been dismayed to discover that clothes wear out. He supposed he had had theories on that subject before; but to have theories and to realize them are two very different things. He sat in the sweet-scented chair and surveyed himself with satisfaction. He looked and felt better. Dr. Talbert had been right; tramps were horrid fellows; he wondered that anybody could endure them; but the treatment they received at the hands of the Christian public was calculated to drop them still lower in the social scale; however there was, it seemed, an occasional Farmer Elliott, and he thanked God for him.

He looked over at the white-covered table. Susan was wrong; he appreciated it. Perhaps no

table had ever looked to him more pure than that. Some of the places in which he had slept since July he did not think he was willing to describe even on paper. Tired as he was, he exerted himself and went over to the table, and studied the print pinned above it, with a smile on his face that Elfrida would have declared made him positively handsome. Then he lifted the large, coarse-print Bible, and took it back with him to the easy-chair. The root of the difference between this Christian home and certain other homes he knew of was undoubtedly sunken deep in this old-fashioned book. He opened it at random. He had not been reading in the Bible of late. It had not been remembered as part of the necessary furnishings of that bundle, and he had not come close enough to one to read. He was accustomed, not to daily Bible-reading, but to more or less regular reference to the book. Was he not a church member? He was not sure that two months of his grown-up life had ever before passed without his having had recourse to its teachings. He turned the leaves at random; it will have to be confessed that this was his habit; he was not one of those who have any fixed method of Bible-study. The book had seemed to open of itself to Ezekiel. He was not familiar with that part of the Bible; its imagery had been too dense for easy understanding, and the time had never seemed to come when he could study it; but he

paused this evening over a sentence: "And the word of the Lord came unto me again." He smiled over the fanciful appropriateness of the phrase. Probably Ezekiel had not been so long without that word as he had. What message had it for him? "Saying, Son of man set thy face toward Jerusalem." He read not a word farther. He was not a romantic young man, nor one given in the least to fanciful interpretations of any writings, yet he confessed to a slightly startled feeling. It was not altogether impossible, of course, that the Lord had him in mind that evening, and meant him to get his word from the book. Was it intended as a hint to him that while he had been very busy studying human nature in new forms, with a view to writing a book that should have in it at least some startling facts, he had all but forgotten Jerusalem? Not that he had been distinctly irreligious. He had rarely laid himself down to sleep at night, even with the most inconvenient and incongruous surroundings without going through the form of prayer; but more than once he had been conscious of its being a mere form, and had excused himself on the ground that a man in his strange circumstances could be pardoned for wandering thoughts. That sermon preached by Dr. Talbert on that first Sabbath in July had been the last that he had heard. Not that he had not on each succeeding Sabbath been within sound of the church bell, but the truth

was he could not get the consent of himself to appear in church in the costume he was wearing. He told himself that he should attract too much attention, and detract from the comfort of others by his presence. Moreover, as he thought of it this evening, he confessed to himself that the woods and the fields, and the sermons he found in stones, and the music of birds and brooks, had been more to his mind than he could imagine the services of the homely little churches being; so without much consideration of the subject, he had simply stayed away and enjoyed it. "Son of man, set thy face toward Jerusalem." Was it a message for him? Had he drifted away from the church not only, but from — "Nonsense!" he said, pulling himself up sharply; "you are growing altogether too fanciful. That would do for an interpretation of some of those dyspeptic divines of the past century." He closed the book and replaced it on its white table. He was too weary for Bible-reading that night, he said. But he got down on his knees, and tried to hold his thoughts to something like real prayer.

And in her fair room across the yard, inside the farmhouse, Hildreth Elliott, on her knees, was asking at that moment that the stranger within her father's gates might not go from them without having had in some way a reminder of the bread of life waiting for his hand to lay hold of. She had placed the plain, large-print Bible in his room

with a purpose, and she did not forget to ask that it might have a message for him.

Neither did Farmer Elliott forget the stranger who slept that night in his woodhouse chamber. Had the tramp heard himself prayed for when they knelt around the family altar, his heart would have warmed as it had not for many a day. The son of the house was impressed by the fervor of the prayer.

“That old fellow out there won’t fire the house to-night, Elf; you needn’t be afraid,” he said to his younger sister. “He can’t, after that prayer. He’d have to be good in spite of himself, if he had heard father.”

“Why?” said Elfrida, trying to cover the feeling that the prayer had awakened in her by a touch of brusqueness. “You have had father’s prayers all your life, and they don’t seem to have had that effect on you.”

“It’s different with you and me,” said Corliss, laughing. “We are not lost sheep, wandering about on the bleak mountains; we are supposed to be safely tucked up inside the fold, you see.” And he went away whistling sharply, —

“Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd’s care.”

It did seem strange, and at times very sad, that with such a father and mother, and such an

elder sister, neither Elfrida nor Corliss Elliott had learned how to pray for themselves.

"He takes hold of the horses as though he had been brought up with them; and Blixen took to him at once like a friend," said Farmer Elliott. "I never saw a stranger that could do much with Blixen before. He must be a kind-hearted fellow, at least; she held her nose still, and let him pat it, and turned her head to look after him. Jet likes him too. I told him Jet was inclined to be surly with strangers. He laughed, and said he never saw a dog yet who didn't like him; and sure enough, Jet walked right up, and let him pat her."

"Father has set out to make his tramp one of the perfect kind, you see," interposed Corliss; "so correct in his life that even the horses and the dog recognize it. Confess, father, that you think of keeping him all winter, and trusting him to go to the bank, and everywhere."

Mr. Elliott looked over at his son and laughed, a good-natured, companionable laugh. The family relations of this household were perhaps peculiar. Neither son nor daughters seemed to have the slightest hesitation about making merry over the little peculiarities of both father and mother, and the parents seemed always ready to meet them half-way, joining in the laugh at their own expense; yet it would have been hard to have found a family where genuine respect for both father's and mother's opinions was more marked. Perhaps

the very fact that the parents were not too dignified to laugh at their own weaknesses increased their power over their children, who were keen to observe not only weaknesses, but sterling worth.

“We must have some one to take your place, Corliss, when you go back to school; why not John?”

“The idea!” said Elfrida, with her pretty nose in an expressive curl; whereat they all laughed.

Yet as the days passed it became evident that every member of the family liked John, and that the farmer increasingly trusted him. Certainly no hired man had ever before given such entire satisfaction so far as the horses were concerned; and Farmer Elliott confessed that with him that went a great way. When they discussed the young man in the family circle, it was found that every member of the family had a word to say in his favor. Mrs. Elliott remarked that he seemed to have an excellent memory, that he had not forgotten a single commission that had been given him, though some of them were small and troublesome. Hildreth said it was a comfort to have a man who brought the horses to the door at the exact moment, and was always on hand to receive them when one reached home; and Elfrida said he was the only man they ever had who knew enough to say “Miss Elfrida.” The family laughed at this, but Elfrida stoutly affirmed that that was the way they always did in books, and she liked

it; she thought it would be very much nicer if Susan were directed to say "Miss Elfrida," instead of shouting out "Elf" as she actually sometimes did.

"My dear," said Mrs. Elliott, laughing, "remember that Susan is a farmer's daughter, like yourself, and only comes to accommodate us. I presume she would be willing to say 'Miss Elfrida' if you would agree to say 'Miss Susan,' but certainly not otherwise."

"Then," said Elfrida, "I wish we had a tramp for a girl in the kitchen; and I hope father will keep John always."

Even Susan contributed to the general verdict in his favor. Having discovered, as she passed back and forth, that he was the subject of conversation, she said, "He's more particular to clean his feet when he comes into the kitchen than any fellow we ever had about; I'll say that for him. I wish Corliss was as particular."

From all of which it will be gathered that John Stuart was trying to do his best. Just what his motive was in lingering in this farmhouse, and setting himself studiously to learn a daily routine of work that could not be other than distasteful to him, he might have found it difficult to have explained to the satisfaction of his friends, or even of himself.

He could hardly insist that he was studying human nature, for the sphere seemed too narrow.

Yet every day he admitted to himself that he was more and more interested in the phase of humanity now spread before him. "I am studying Truth," he said to himself with an amused smile; and the form his thought took justifies the capital letter. "I believe I have found Truth; the likeness to the ideal head increases, rather than lessens, as I see more of her. I believe she is the living embodiment of the idea, — Truth in its purity and simplicity. Such a life ought to be a power in the world. I wonder if it is? Yet how can it be in such a circumscribed circle? Is she superior to her environments? I would like her for the heroine of my next book. Rather, perhaps, I would like my conception of her. What could I make her accomplish I wonder that would tell for good? How much I should like to see the girl herself set where she could reach people! I wonder if she is satisfied with her present sphere? I wonder if she realizes that she has a sphere, or ought to have? How is one ever to learn? I profess to be studying her, yet an hour of conversation with her in the cosey dining-room, I properly introduced, would tell me more about her than weeks of this sort of life. Would it? I know hundreds of young women in that way; not one who looks like her I grant. But the home-life ought to tell in some directions, circumscribed though it is. Let me wait and see."

CHAPTER V.

TRUTH UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

JOHN STUART was in the farmhouse kitchen at work upon a door that wanted neither to open nor shut in a reasonable manner. Susan had called him peremptorily to the task quite as a matter of course. It seemed to be considered the duty of the hired man to be able to "fix things."

Fortunately for John, playing with tools had been one of the decided tastes of his boyhood, and he handled hammer and screw-driver and saw in a way to command the respect of even Susan, who was critical, and could wield all those implements herself. Others were in the kitchen also. It was Saturday, and Elfrida had a task that she hated, namely, the washing of the breakfast-dishes, while Susan did more important work elsewhere. Mrs. Elliott was giving personal attention to the bread, and Hildreth was hovering between kitchen and pantry intent upon a mixture that required eggs and flour and sugar, and—the observant John could not decide what else. There was also a caller, a young girl from a neighboring farm, who, with the pleasant unconventionality that belongs

to the country, had been allowed to come to the kitchen to chat with them all.

Her errand was with Hildreth.

“I am so sorry!” she was saying when John began to give attention. “Can’t you possibly plan to go, Hildreth? It will be such fun to be all together in that house. What engagement can you have that cannot be postponed?”

The freedom of country life has also its annoying side. Perhaps in no other place are distinctly personal questions so urged upon one. Hildreth’s face flushed a little over this one, and she hesitated, making a journey to the pantry before she replied.

“I have no engagement, Winnie. I simply do not think it is best for me to go.”

“How perfectly horrid!” exclaimed the young lady. “Do you really mean that you don’t want to go? I thought you would be the very one to help us carry it to perfection. Nannie Marvin is going, do you know that? And Rex Hartwell — that last doesn’t need saying, I suppose, after I have mentioned Nannie. O Hildreth, don’t be horrid, why won’t you join us? Oh, I just believe I know why you won’t; you don’t like the games they play at those gatherings. There! that is it, I know, for you blush like a peony. Now I must say I think that is being too particular, don’t you, Mrs. Elliott. If Nannie Marvin and Rex Hartwell can tolerate them, I think the rest of us might. You don’t have to play unless you choose.

Do please say you will go, Hildreth; it will just spoil things if people won't join heartily."

Hildreth found her voice at last.

"I am sorry to 'spoil things,' " she said with an attempt at playfulness, "and since I am only one, I do not look for any such disastrous result."

"But why won't you go? You haven't told me yet. Is it because Rob Sterrett is to be there?"

"Certainly not," said Hildreth with dignity. And then — "You said you had guessed a reason, why are you not satisfied with it? I believe it is well known that I do not enjoy those games that the young people are so fond of playing, and I do not care to go where I am sure to be urged to join in what I do not like, and argued with, and pressed for reasons. I have no desire to force my views upon others, and so, to be entirely frank, I have determined to stay at home."

"Dear me, how foolish! Isn't she, Mrs. Elliott? You will have to turn nun, I am afraid, you are growing so particular. What is the trouble with those poor little games, anyway? I am sure our grandmothers must have played some of them. They are better than dancing, I suppose; at least people of your sort always think so, though I confess that I could never see the least harm in dancing."

If Hildreth Elliott did, she was apparently resolved to keep her views to herself; much to the regret of the man who was mending the door.

"Did you ever hear me say that I considered the games better than dancing," she said at last, still making an evident effort to speak lightly; "but I did not mean to force you into a discussion. People have to agree to differ, you know. Does Jamie go back to college next week?"

"Yes, of course; life is an utter failure to people who are not in college; Elfie may come on Tuesday, anyway, may she not? Aunt Annie sent a special invitation for her, and Kate will be awfully disappointed if she doesn't come. Kate is to have a dozen or so of her young friends for her special benefit. You won't keep Elfie from joining them, I hope?"

The eyes of the dishwasher flashed their keen interest in the reply, and Hildreth looked with a troubled air at her mother, who, intent on her bread, said nothing. Hildreth was forced to speak.

"You must appeal to mother in such matters, Winnie; I do not pretend to manage my sister."

"Ah, but every one knows you do. Everything goes in this house just as Hildreth Elliott wants it to; doesn't it, Elf? Mrs. Elliott, Effie may come to the annual meeting, may she not? We want her particularly; there is to be special fun for the younger ones."

"Elfrida does not generally go out evenings without her sister," Mrs. Elliott said gently; "her father does not think it best for her."

“There!” said the caller triumphantly, “I told you it would be just as you said, Hildreth. I think you are horrid, and I shall tell the others so.”

She arose as she spoke, and to Hildreth’s evident relief very soon took her departure. This, however, was the signal for an outburst from Elfrida. She hardly waited for the doors to close after their caller before she began,—

“I don’t see, Hildreth, how you can bear to talk in that way before Winnie! You know she will go out and spread all over town everything you said, and a good deal that you didn’t say. What is the use of telling such people all you think? Why couldn’t you just have said that you couldn’t go to the meeting and were sorry, and let that end it?”

“Because, Elfie, I could go if I chose, and I am not sorry not to go. How could I have made statements that were not true?”

The girl gave an impatient fling to her drying-cloth as she said, “I think you have run wild about truth. Everybody says such things, and everybody understands them. For my part, I think it is only common courtesy to say you are sorry when you can’t do a thing that people want you to very much.”

“So do I, dear; but in this case there was no previous engagement, or any matter of that sort to plead; it was simply a decision on my part not

to go; as for the reasons, she forced them from me by her persistent questions."

"Yes, there was," said the girl, answering the first part of this statement. "You could have said that you were going to have company on Tuesday; then you could have sent for Hattie and Rick to come and spend the day. It is easy enough to get out of things politely if one cares to be polite."

"Elfie, do you really mean that that would have been getting out of things truthfully?"

"Yes, I do; it would have been true enough. An engagement that you plan in your own mind is just as much an engagement as though you had carried it out. Hattie and Rick are glad enough to come whenever they are sent for. Everybody does such things. Over at Marvins the other day, Nannie saw the Wilson boys driving in, and knew they were coming to call; and she ran away up to the meadow where her father was at work, and told Nell to say that she was not at home. I suppose you wouldn't have done it to save the entire farm; but it was true enough; Nannie's home isn't in the meadow lot."

"I am sorry," said Hildreth gravely, "that that is Nannie's idea of truth."

"It is everybody's idea but yours," persisted the excited girl. "I wouldn't be tied up to such notions as you have for a great deal; it is perfect slavery. And you don't always speak the truth,

either, for all your worship of it. You said you didn't pretend to manage me; but it would have been a good deal nearer true if you had owned that you managed me all the time as if I were a baby; and I must say I don't like it."

"Elfrida!" said Mrs. Elliott in warning tones; but the girl, whose eyes were now flashing indignation, set down the glass pitcher she was drying, with a thud, and said, —

"Well, mother, I can't help it; it is just as I say. Father would let me go on Tuesday night, if Hildreth wouldn't interfere. All the girls of my age are going. Kate has invited them, and is going to have a room especially for them while the club are having their reports and things; and she has a secret that is going to be told that night, and there is to be no end of fun; and everybody in it but me. I think it is too horrid mean! I don't see how Hildreth can bear to put her notions in the way of my fun all the time. If that is the way religion works, I'm sure I hope I shall never have any."

"John," said Mrs. Elliott suddenly, "will you get a stick of wood for the sitting-room fire, one of those large hickory chunks that are at the farther end of the woodhouse?"

And John, much to his regret, had to leave his unfinished door and do her bidding. Of course he knew why a "chunk" of wood was required just at that moment. As he selected it, he reflected

that Hildreth Elliott evidently had a sphere, and that it was a hard one to manage. It interested him to think that this encounter had been largely in the interest of truth. The girl would do still to compare with his ideal picture. Perhaps the artist who sketched it had understood what he was about, having studied to see what outlines a careful adherence to the soul of Truth would carve on the human face. Yet, as he chose an unusually fine log of wood, he confessed that he was in sympathy both with the elder and younger sister. He resolved to study up the club meeting, and learn if possible why it was such an objectionable place. He could fancy surroundings that would in no wise be in keeping with the tastes of that singularly pure-faced girl, but why should not the merry-eyed younger one be allowed to indulge the tastes that belonged to her unformed and rollicking years? Was Hildreth a bit prudish about it all, desiring to make a staid young woman, like herself, of a girl who could not be more than sixteen, and had eyes that danced with prospective fun, even at their quietest?

It was growing very interesting. He had theories, this young man, with regard to this very subject. On what subject had he not theories? He believed that young people in their unformed, kittenish years were often injured by being held too closely to occupations and interests that befitted only their elders. He should like to talk with

Hildreth on this subject; he believed he could convince her very soon that — and then he pulled himself up suddenly and sharply. Who was he that he should talk over education theories with Hildreth Elliott or with anybody else? How certainly people would stare if they heard him attempt it. He had deliberately put himself outside the pale of all such efforts. What efforts could he make in his present position for the betterment of the world? But that was nonsense. Did he mean to hint by such reasoning that the laboring man had no opportunity in his sphere for benefiting others? On the contrary, he had held, and he was sure that the position was a correct one, that nothing was more needed in the laboring world than men who were examples to their fellows in all the departments of moral life. “If we could persuade a few, even a very few, of our laboring men to be true to their higher instincts, to be clean and strong in every fibre of their being, we should see what a leaven would thereby be placed in that grade of life; we should recognize it very soon as the power that makes for righteousness.” This was the substance of a thought that he had expressed somewhat elaborately in a careful paper presented before the Citizens’ League, in a certain town in his own State. He had believed in it thoroughly, and had urged it as an argument in favor of hand-to-hand effort among the working classes. He believed in it still; but — and his

face flushed with something more than the effort of lifting the heavy logs out of his way—the trouble with him was that he was not a laboring man; he did not honestly belong to the sphere in which he had placed himself; in other words, he was not true to himself. Did the motive relieve the position from the shadow of falseness that rested upon it? He thought of “Nannie,” whoever she was, running to the meadow lot in order that it might be said that she was not at home. Did his ideas of truth lie parallel with hers, instead of with the ideal head that he had yet insisted was real?

He put all those thoughts away presently, and gave himself to the business in hand. It would not do for him to be too particular about truth; not just now; he must rather take Elfrida for his model. Poor little bright-eyed girl! Was it reasonable to suppose that a frolic in which apparently the best people were engaged was an objectionable place for her?

The kitchen had changed considerably during his temporary absence. The dishwasher had vanished, as had all traces of that work. The bread-maker was tucking the last loaf carefully away under blankets, and Hildreth was receiving at the side door a bright-faced maiden whom she called Nannie.

“I am receiving calls in the kitchen,” she was saying gayly; “I intend to hover about my cake

until it is baked ; Susan has a talent for burning cakes ; so come right in here. O John, I can't have that great stick put in now, the oven is just right for baking. I will have my cake out in a very little while, then you can build up the fire. Sit down, Nannie. What a pretty hat you have ! It is very becoming."

"Now don't begin on my new hat, and turn my head with compliments," laughed the caller. "You know very well I have come to scold you. I met Winnie Houston down by the lower gate. Not that I had not planned my campaign before I saw her ; I had a sort of instinct how it would be, and I am come to talk you into reason. Have you never heard, my dear, that when people are in Rome they must do a little as the Romans do ? We really must not hold ourselves aloof from these good people because we have had a few more advantages than they. Even Rex agrees to that, and he knows nothing about the country, never spent six consecutive months of his life in it."

"Now, Nannie ! promise to confine yourself to common sense, won't you ? The idea of my holding myself aloof from my neighbors ! you know I don't. You mean to talk about the club meeting, I suppose ; you will waste your breath. I told you two months ago that I had attended that club for the last time, I thought ; and I have seen nothing since to lead me to change my mind."

“Oh, I don’t blame you for not wanting to attend all the gatherings; but this is the annual meeting, you know; and Winnie Houston’s aunt has opened her house, which is unusual, remember. I think you might want to go this time, just to see that old house at its best; they will be very much disappointed, and I am afraid offended, if you do not honor them.”

John had not for the last fifteen or twenty minutes tried to work rapidly, but despite his slowness the door was done, and there was no pretext for lingering longer. He went away with reluctance. He had heard enough about this Nannie to want to study her. Besides, he was growing deeply interested in this prospective club-gathering; certainly he ought to be present; evidently it would afford unusual opportunities for studying the social conditions of life in this region. But how impossible it would probably be to bring such an event about.

CHAPTER VI.

VARNISH.

YET the opportunity was in process of preparation. John Stuart discovered early in his career as a "hired man" that schools formed a very important part of the family life to which he now belonged. Corliss Elliott was a sophomore in a small college about thirty miles from his home. He had to be driven to the station two miles distant on Monday mornings, and brought from it on Friday evenings. Elfrida was in the high school in the village, and must be taken each morning in time for the nine-o'clock bell; while Hildreth had nearly two miles to go in the opposite direction. It made what Farmer Elliott called "lively work" of a winter morning.

However it might be in winter, it was certainly pleasant enough work during the closing days of September. John Stuart found himself looking forward to the time when he might be trusted to take these drives.

It had given the hired man almost a shock to discover that "Truth," having stepped out of her frame, actually taught a country district school!

Having decided, however, that this was part of her "sphere," he began to have a consuming desire to see her in it. He smiled sometimes to think how safely he could have conveyed her to her work in the neat little pony phaeton that was kept for her use; occasionally he smiled almost cynically to think how readily he would probably be trusted to drive her thither, if he were in gentleman's dress, and about the work of a gentleman. Though in this he did not do Farmer Elliott justice.

He would not have intrusted his daughters to the care of strangers, no matter how well dressed they might have been. On Monday mornings when Corliss Elliott was at hand, the hired man was allowed to drive the double-seated carriage to the high school and to the station; on Friday afternoons he performed the same duty; other than that, the father himself drove into town, while Mrs. Elliott sometimes, and sometimes Susan, drove the pony phaeton out to the little white schoolhouse.

But on the Monday afternoon preceding the club meeting a difficulty arose. Elfrida must be brought from school, and a man was coming to see Mr. Elliott on important business, and neither Mrs. Elliott nor Susan drove the span of fine horses. John, passing in and out, intent on many duties, knew that an anxious consultation was in progress between husband and wife. He caught snatches of the talk.

"I have great confidence in him," the farmer said, whereat John's cheeks flushed, and he wondered if he fully deserved the confidence; "he does his work with a painstaking care that shows him to be thoroughly conscientious." Then his wife, —

"Susan might go along and do some errands; but that would seem sort of absurd." Then her face brightened, "Why, Roger, Laura Holcombe is coming out with Elfrida to-night to visit at the Houstons'. Winnie spoke to her about it yesterday. It will be all right for John to drive them out."

So John let the horses walk leisurely up the long hill, while the two girls, quite willing to have the drive prolonged indefinitely, chattered in the back seat, growing so interested in their theme that they talked louder than they knew.

"It is a perfect shame that you can't go to-morrow night! Everybody says it will be the nicest entertainment we shall have this winter. I tell you what it is, Elf Elliott, I would go if I were you! Everybody says it is queer that you allow Hildreth to manage you as you do. She couldn't do more if she were your mother. Why don't you insist upon going?"

"It isn't Hildreth!" said Elfrida with a touch of indignation in her voice; "father said I couldn't go."

"O your father! just as though everybody didn't know that it was your sister Hildreth behind your

father! He would let you go fast enough if it wasn't for her. People say you are a perfect slave to Hildreth."

"I should be obliged to people if they would mind their own business!" was the haughty answer; "it isn't any such thing."

"Then if I were you I should prove it. Why don't you plan to go, anyway? Come in and spend the night with me; you've been promising to come this long time; then we can go over to Mrs. Pierce's together, and come back again when we get ready, and Miss Hildreth need be none the wiser. Do come, Elf; there is going to be such fun! Kate Pierce says it is the only entertainment she expects to give this winter, and she means to make the most of it. There's a whole lot of college boys to be there too; Corliss isn't one of them, so you needn't be afraid of meeting him; he was invited, but he said he had another engagement. Will you do it, Elf? I can plan it beautifully, if you will."

The driver could not see the young girl's face, though he leaned over at that moment, ostensibly to take note of the action of a hind wheel, and tried to; her face was turned from him, but her voice quivered with eagerness as she said, —

"Oh, dear me! I should like to; nobody knows how I want to go; but I suppose it is quite out of the question."

"Well, now, why is it, I should like to know?"

It isn't as though it was a disreputable place, you see; why, Elf Elliott, all the young people from the country around are to be there. It isn't simply that silly club; and why you shouldn't be in the fun as well as the rest is more than I can understand. Don't you see it is just some notion of Hildreth's that keeps you at home? Your father and mother would not think of such a thing if it had not been for her. She doesn't like some of the games that the silly ones gather in a room by themselves and play, so she won't have anything to do with any of it! I call that silly, don't you? Suppose she doesn't like them? She isn't obliged to play them. I know what is the matter with her. Rob Sterritt caught her in a game of forfeits one night, and tried to kiss her; it was all in the game, you know, but Hildreth has been mad about it ever since; Winnie says so. Elf, I know your sister is as good as gold, but don't you think she has a few real old-maidish notions? What hurt would it do for Rob Sterritt to kiss her, just in fun? He worships the ground she treads on."

The spirited horses at that moment gave such a sudden start that even the preoccupied Elfrida turned her head to see what was the matter. The truth was the driver had flourished his whip without knowing it. His eyes were flashing indignation over the thought that such a woman as Truth, even though out of her frame, should be subjected to the humiliation of a kiss from Rob Sterritt, —

whoever he was, — in the name of fun. What a surprising country this must be into which he had dropped! His desire to be present at the meeting of the club was growing every moment stronger. Before they reached the farmhouse he decided that he must be there, if for nothing else but to protect Elfrida from the Rob Sterritts who might be present; for to his indignation and shame the young girl had been persuaded at last to help plan a system of deception that was expected to bring about the desired result. He could not hear all the talk, but he gathered from Elfrida's voice, and sometimes from her words, that she was not easy to persuade, and that more than once she was on the point of abandoning the idea; once she exclaimed indignantly, —

“I can't do it, Laura; you know I don't tell wholesale falsehoods.”

“Falsehoods!” repeated the other. “Who wants you to? I am sure I don't, either; and I don't think you are very polite to hint at such a thing. I should like to know what there is false about it! I invite you to spend the evening and the night with me. You've been promising me for a year that you would stay all night, sometime; then I invite you to go over to Kate's with me for a little while. I can't stay late; father says I must be home before twelve o'clock, so we'll come back together, and you'll be doing exactly what you said, — spending the night with me. And if they ask

you at home if I am not going to the club, you can say no; because I am not going regularly, not like the others; mother doesn't want me to go until late, because I have been sick, you know, and she is afraid I will get too tired, and I'm to come away early; so it is not like real going. I never saw anything better planned for you, Elf Elliott! even if your sister finds it out, she can't complain of such an innocent little thing as that."

"And the sister of 'Truth' was really deceived by such a film of truth as that thrown over a network of falsehood! The man on the front seat marvelled much, but was every moment more sure that he must in some way be one of the revellers. Also he speculated. Had the elder sister been wise? Was she not, perhaps, straining at a gnat? Would it not have been better to accompany this gay young sister of hers to the place of amusement, and so be at hand to shield her from anything not desirable, rather than by her fastidiousness to drive the girl to such straits as these? There was another line of thought that made his face flush a little. Was there anything that he could do? No, there was not. In his own sphere in life, as a boarder at the Elliott farmhouse, even with so slight an acquaintance with the family as two weeks would allow, he could imagine himself saying, "Have a care, Miss Elliott, for that young sister of yours; I have reason to think that a plan is forming of

which you would not approve." Or some words to that effect, which might put her on her guard. But he was learning to understand his present position well enough to realize that such a course now would probably be looked upon as an insult.

In the farmyard was some one waiting to see him. A young man from the neighboring farm, and a member of the committee of arrangements for the famous club meeting. He speedily made known his errand. They had been disappointed in some of their help. Especially, the "fellow" who was to look after their horses, or to help look after them, had failed them, sent word at the last minute that he had got to go to town that night; he wouldn't get a job from them again in a hurry; could John Stuart come in his stead? Mr. Elliott had agreed to spare him, if John was willing, and they would give him as good a supper as the club had, and fifty cents besides; and he could look on and see the games, and the fun generally, as much as he wanted to, when the horses were all cared for.

Never was "job" more promptly accepted. It was, of course, extremely probable that Elfrida's plans would in this way be suddenly overturned. The hired man reflected that if she wished to keep her evening's programme a profound secret from her family, she would hardly risk being seen by him; but in this case part of his object in going would be attained. If he could shield the girl in

this way, it might be the best he could do for her. But it chanced that Elfrida heard nothing about his engagement. It was not, of course, a matter of interest in the family circle, so no one mentioned it; and Elfrida, being engrossed with her own affairs, forgot to question what those boys from the Brooks' neighborhood wanted of John.

The next morning found Elfrida up unusually early, making skilful and silent preparations for her evening's sport. It was no easy matter to get all the things she needed for evening, smuggled into her small hand-bag; several times she gave up in despair, and declared to herself that it was not possible. Moreover, she was continually being made nervous by sisterly offers from Hildreth to pack her bag for her. Thus far her way had been made unusually easy. The invitation to spend the night with Laura Holcombe had been so frequently renewed in the past as to occasion no surprise when it came again. The Elliotts, being careful parents, had not encouraged the fashion of the neighborhood to exchange homes for a night, so that Elfrida's outings of this sort were limited; but the Elliotts knew that Laura Holcombe had been ill, and been forbidden the night air for several weeks. They therefore judged that she had begged for Elfrida's company as a consolation in her disappointment at not being able to attend the club party. Mrs. Elliott's only remark had been, "Laura is obliged to content herself with you

instead of the party, is she?" Elfrida had muttered some unintelligible reply, and congratulated herself on not being obliged to "even *look* any fibs."

In truth, the Elliotts were really glad for their young daughter that the invitation had come at this time. They proved the completeness of their trust in her by not even thinking of the club party in this connection, although the Holcombes lived nearly across the street from the house that had been thrown open for the party. Only John looked on with intelligent eyes at the unusual "nervousness" of the young girl, and wondered sagely how many embarrassing scenes, like that which he witnessed, she had been obliged to live through, and whether she had succeeded in escaping the falsehoods she had indignantly repudiated.

"Why, child!" Mrs. Elliott had exclaimed, "must you carry so large a package as that? What can you be taking?"

"O mother, it is some books that I have been promising Laura this age."

"Books! It doesn't look like a parcel of books. Why did you tie them so carefully? They would have been less burdensome just laid on the seat, and John could have left them for you at the door this morning."

Elfrida had hesitated, and John, who was waiting for her, saw the flush on her excited face deepen as she said, after a moment's thought, —

“To tell you the truth, mother, I have put my other dress into the package. I suppose you will think it silly, but I thought I should like to dress up a little after school.”

If the mother thought it “silly” she forebore to make any remark, and Elfrida kissed her three times, “for to-night and to-morrow morning,” and went away happy in the thought that she had told the truth. She had held a little struggle with herself about the package, having been tempted to hint at fancy work, or something of the sort, and she congratulated herself heartily on having escaped the temptation. “I won’t tell a downright falsehood,” she assured herself, “even if the whole plan falls through.”

Yet she knew perfectly that her mother believed and that she meant her to believe that the package contained besides the books the handsome brown suit known as her church dress, and would have been dismayed had she known that it contained, instead, the lovely pale-blue dress garnished with white lace that did duty on rare occasions! It was only the “hired man’s” face that looked grave. He understood the world and the dress of young people too well not to surmise the truth. It pained him more than seemed reasonable even to himself, to see how easily the sister of Truth could satisfy herself with its mere varnish.

CHAPTER VII.

LOOKING ON.

JOHN STUART KING, familiar as he was with the world and with what he had been pleased to call "society," made discoveries at the annual gathering of the Bennetville Club. He had not supposed that such conditions existed as he found there. In his position as a looker on there was abundant chance for the sort of study that he desired, and he made good use of it. The gathering was large, and he could not but think representative. From the country homes for miles around had come the young people — boys and girls; many of them being by no means old enough to be called ladies and gentlemen, even had their manners justified the terms.

Distinctly there were two classes of people present, the intelligent, refined, and reasonably cultured, and the "smart," handsome, slightly reckless young people whose advantages in the way of culture had been limited. There were almost none present who did not know to a certain extent how to dress. That is, they had given thought and care and some knowledge to the study of

making themselves look pretty, and to a degree had succeeded. Some of the material was flimsy enough, and, to the looker-on's skilled eye, lacked details that he had been in the habit of seeing, but the general effect as a rule was striking. Bright colors were in the ascendant, of course, but the wearers had some idea of harmony, and the blondes and brunettes had instinctively chosen their colors. On the whole, it was not with the style of dress that the critic could find most fault. When it came to the question of manner, there were startling innovations upon accepted ideas. The man who had been hired for fifty cents to take care of the horses, and allowed between times to look on, felt his pulses beating high with indignation, long before the evening was over. It was the position of the better of the two distinct classes that excited his wrath. Some of these evidently moved among the guests with an air of amused tolerance. He readily selected the young woman "Nannie" and her friend "Rex" from the others. They were evidently amused at many of the scenes. He overheard snatches of talk when they would meet at the end of a game, that ought instead to have been called a romp.

"I must say I don't wonder that Hildreth Elliott wanted to escape this!" the gentleman said, half laughing, yet shaking his head; "some of the boys are almost rough."

"Yes, but they mean only fun. What is the

use in trying to be so superior? It is their annual frolic, and a time-honored institution. I do not think they are ever quite so wild on other evenings. Elfie didn't escape it, you see; or rather she did escape, I presume, and is here in all her glory. How pretty the witch looks to-night! Did you see her when Rob Sterritt tried to kiss her? I should not have thought that Rob would have tried his skill in that family again; it was he who filled Hildreth with wrath. Elfie was too much for him; I really think the child bit him; I know she scratched."

The sentence ended in a burst of laughter. What would the two have thought if they could have known that just back of them shielded from view by a portière was the Elliotts' "hired man," his face dark with indignation? Games? He had wondered what they could be like to arouse a lady's indignation. Now he saw.

Very foolish games they seemed to be, for the most part, having the merest shred of the intellectual to commend them, and that so skilfully managed that the merest child in intellect might have joined in them heartily. But the distinctly objectionable features seemed to be connected with the system of forfeits attached to each game. These, almost without exception, involved much kissing. Of course the participants in this entertainment were young ladies and gentlemen. There seemed to be a certain amount of discrimination exercised

by the distributor of the forfeits, yet occasionally such guests as "Nannie" and "Rex" and others of their class would be drawn into the vortex, and seem to yield, as if to the inevitable, with what grace they could. John watched a laughing scramble between the said Nannie and an awkward country boy, who could not have been over fifteen. He came off victorious, for she rubbed her cheek violently with her handkerchief, and looked annoyed, even while she tried to laugh. But the college boys were far more annoying than the country youths without advantages. John Stuart, looking on, felt his face glow with indignation, as he saw with what abandon these young men, who supposed themselves to represent the very cream of modern culture, rushed into the rudest of the forfeits, and scrambled as if for college prizes. There was an immense amount of scrambling, and screaming, and apparent unwillingness on the part of the ladies, yet one could not but feel that after all, as they were invariably conquered they submitted with remarkable resignation. Occasionally there was an exception. Elfrida Elliott, for instance, announced distinctly early in the evening that no one need put her name on for one of those silly forfeits, for she would have nothing to do with them. As she might have known, had she been more familiar with such scenes, this was the signal for putting her name on continually. But the boys who came in contact with her, learned that,

unlike many of the maidens present, she had undoubtedly meant what she said. With the college boys she fared better than with the acquaintances of her lifetime. They speedily discovered that the "prettiest girl in the room" had a mind of her own, if she was so young. More than once her emphatic "No, indeed; I am not to be kissed on cheek or hair or hand, and you will be kind enough to understand it," held at a respectful distance a mustached youth, who had just distinguished himself by "subduing" one of her schoolmates. But the boys who had been brought up in the neighborhood did not understand it, and thought it was ridiculous for "Elf Elliott" to put on airs with them. To her encounter with the objectionable Rob Sterritt, John Stuart had been not only a listener but a participator. After the first scramble was over, and it had been an angry one on Elfrida's part, during which the "scratching" and possible biting referred to had taken place, most of the company supposed that Rob Sterritt had yielded the point and acknowledged himself worsted; but this was not his idea of valor. He followed the girl to the hall, and began again, —

"Come, now, Elf, don't be ridiculous; it's all in fun, you know; but I must pay my forfeit, upon my word, or I shall never hear the last of it. I won't be rough; I won't, honestly. I'll just give you a delicate little kiss such as the minister

might, if he was young enough, and let it go at that."

The young girl's eyes fairly blazed at him as she said, "Rob Sterritt, don't you *dare* to try to kiss me! If you had the first idea of what it is to be a gentleman, you would know better than to refer to it even, after what I have said."

He mistook her for an actress.

"I don't wonder you play the tigress, Elf, it becomes you vastly; you do it better than Hildreth. But then, of course you know I must pay my forfeit; it's a double forfeit if I fail, and a good deal at stake; upon my word, you must."

It was then that John Stuart had stepped from his station just behind the door and said, —

"I intend to protect this young lady from whatever is disagreeable to her."

He had certainly never spoken more quietly; but his low-pitched voice had reserve strength in it, and his whole manner was curiously unlike that of the young fellows about him, and curiously impressive. Rob Sterritt, a sort of accepted rough in the neighborhood, tall, strong-limbed, generally good-natured, priding himself on his strength and impudence, stood back and looked his unbounded astonishment, putting it into a single explosive question, —

"Who the dickens are you?"

"I am Mr. Elliott's hired man, and as such

consider that I have a right to protect his daughter."

"Oh, you do! Well, you insufferable idiot, there is nothing to protect her from; it is only a game. I understood you were here to look after horses. I advise you to attend to your own business."

But he had walked away at once and left Elfrida to the hired man's care. Nothing certainly had ever startled him so much as the strange sense of power held in check that the brief sentence had conveyed to him.

Elfrida's face blanched. It was the first she had seen of John; the first she had known of his presence.

"John," she said in a low whisper, "did they send you for me?"

"Oh, no, Miss Elfrida; I am here as your friend said, merely to look after the horses. Your father gave me permission to earn an extra half-dollar in this way; but I saw that the man was annoying you, and thought I ought to interfere."

The color flamed into the girl's cheeks. The strangeness of her situation impressed her. Her father's hired man trying to protect her from her "friend"!

"He did not mean any harm," she said quickly. "It is a way they have of playing games; that is, some of the young people have that way. It is horrid! I never realized how horrid until to-

night. Hildreth is right. John, you meant well, I am sure, so I thank you; but" —

She hesitated, and then said, looking up at him half appealingly, "They don't know at home that I am here."

He did not help her in the least. She half turned from him as if in impatience, then turned back to say haughtily, —

"There are reasons why I do not care to have them know it just now; I do not suppose you consider it a part of your duty to report that you saw me?"

"I do not see that it is; at least, not unless I am questioned. Of course, if a question should be asked me, the reply to which should involve the truth, I should have to speak it."

She was growing very angry with him; he could tell that by the flash in her eyes.

"Oh, indeed!" she said, "you are a worshipper of Truth, are you? A remarkable hired man, certainly. Don't be afraid; I am not going to ask you to tell any falsehoods in my behalf. I do not think my family will be likely to question you as to my whereabouts. Are you always so careful of your words? You would do for a disciple of — well, never mind."

She had whirled away from him, as she spoke. He knew that his face had flamed, and was vexed that it was so. Why should he fancy himself stabbed whenever the truth was mentioned? What

if he were acting a part for a little time? It was an innocent part, certainly, with a noble motive behind it, and with no possibility of harming any one by the venture. Had the girl meant that he would do for a disciple of her sister? Would he? Would those pure eyes of hers look with favor on even so laudable a simulation as his? In spite of himself there was a growing dissatisfaction within him whenever he thought of Hildreth Elliott, and the bar he had himself built between her and any possible friendship. And yet, there was a growing determination to remain in just the position he was, until he had demonstrated to his own satisfaction certain truths, which truths had nothing to do with tramps.

Some truths he demonstrated that night. One was, that certain country neighborhoods entertained themselves in ways that other country neighborhoods where education and culture had permeated society, did not suspect. Another was, that some of the cultured ones, either because of careless good nature, like "Nannie and Rex," or because of far worse motives, like some of the college boys, fostered by their presence this very condition of things.

Still another was, that Hildreth Elliott had begun none too early to shield her beautiful young sister from the dangerous world that surrounded her; and that the shield was all too inadequate. He watched with a feverish sense of responsibil-

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ity, as the girl paced up and down the wide, old-fashioned hall, beside a college youth, whose face, he assured himself, he liked less than any he had seen. Infinitely less than Rob Sterritt's even. It was refined and cold and cruel. They were talking earnestly, Elfrida excitedly; the watcher could distinctly hear every word she said; and as the music in the next room grew louder, and her companion raised his voice, his words, too, were distinct. The young man made not the slightest attempt to withdraw himself from hearing. He wanted to hear; he was there to learn. The tramp question was evidently not the most formidable one that threatened some grades of society.

Elfrida was still complaining of the games in school-girl superlatives. They were "awfully silly!" and "perfectly horrid!" and she was "utterly disgusted" with it all. Her companion agreed with her fully. He had been surprised; he used to hear his uncle tell of such goings on, but he had not known that the customs lingered anywhere. So bewildering to him that any one should think for a moment of preferring such obsolete entertainments to the refining and elevating amusement of dancing. She danced, of course? did she not? Now he was astonished; dancing was the very "poetry of motion," she must remember; not that she needed it; every motion of hers was grace; he had singled her out from the

first, for this reason among others, but she would enjoy dancing so much. Might he ask why she didn't indulge?

Was it possible that her parents could approve of such amusements as they had here to-night and yet object to the dance!

Elfrida winced over this; the watcher could see that she did, and struggled with herself to be truthful.

“No,” she burst forth at last; “they by no means approve of entertainments like these. I was never at one of their precious club meetings before.”

The young man laughed pleasantly. He assured her that he understood. She had escaped, like himself, from the pressure of constant study, for a little recreation, and had found more than she sought. But really she ought to give herself the pleasure of a single dance just to convince herself of the beauty of the movements and the real restfulness of the exercise, after such hoidenish experiences as they had been through that evening.

He knew that a few very good and rather secluded people had still some old-fashioned notions about the dance, growing out of certain abuses, he supposed, of the past; but really these were fast disappearing, and in cultured regions had disappeared entirely. If he might only be allowed to promenade with her to the time of that delicious music, he was sure he should remember it all win-

ter. Why, it made not the slightest difference, her not knowing how, he could teach her the necessary steps in five minutes. She would take to it naturally, he was sure, as a bird does to song.

John Stuart's face darkened as he saw the two, a few minutes afterwards, moving down the long parlor that had been cleared for dancing, to the "time of that delicious music." He knew young men fairly well; perhaps he knew college men and boys better than any other class. He did not need to overhear the talk of two, a moment afterwards, to assure him that he had not mistaken the character.

"Look at Saylor with that bright-eyed gypsy in tow. She belongs to a very exclusive family, Rex Hartwell says; the older sister will not attend these gatherings. If her father were here I could tell him that I would rather she should be kissed six times by every country bumpkin present, than dance fifteen minutes with a fellow like Saylor. Doesn't it make you shiver to think how he will go on about her to-morrow?"

This was what John Stuart overheard. He went out to the horses, wishing that he were John Stuart King, a certified protector of Elfrida Elliott.

CHAPTER VIII.

'SQUIRE HARTWELL.

A LITTLE more than a mile away from the Elliott farm stood an old-fashioned, substantial stone mansion that was an object of special interest not only to the villagers a mile away, but to the country people for miles around. John Stuart, on his first advent into the neighborhood, had had no difficulty in discovering its whereabouts; and he too regarded it with no common interest, inasmuch as it was remotely connected with his own family. In this house had lived, for more than a quarter of a century, quite alone, save for the hired attendants that he had gathered about him, a somewhat eccentric, and, if public gossip concerning him was to be trusted, a thoroughly disagreeable old man, who was familiarly called "Squire Hartwell." In the spring of the year in which our history opens, this man had died suddenly; and there were circumstances connected with the closing months of his life that had roused the neighborhood to keenest interest in his affairs.

Another name that had been familiarly used for him, as the younger man came to be known and

liked, was "Rex Hartwell's uncle." That young person had been closely connected with him during almost the entire period of his life. The country people had it that "'Squire Hartwell had brought him up." That simply meant, however, that he had paid the boy's bills as a child in his old nurse's family where he was boarded, and later, at boarding-school and college; this, evidently, because the boy was the son of his only sister, who had died when her child was but five years old, and not because of any affection that he seemed to have for him. He had held his nephew at arm's length during his boyhood, barely tolerating short visits from him in the long vacations, and omitting even those as the boy grew to an age in which he might be supposed to be companionable. Suddenly, however, almost immediately after Rex Hartwell's graduation from college, his uncle had decided to go abroad, taking the young fellow with him as attendant. For a young man who had come up, rather than been brought up, Rex Hartwell was a model in many respects. He had a very warm heart, by nature, and was so thoroughly grateful to one whom he had always looked upon as his benefactor, that during their two years of travel he devoted himself unsparingly to the old man's comfort, consulting his tastes in a way which it is fair to say had never been done before; for despite his money, 'Squire Hartwell had lived a lonely and loveless life.

When the old gentleman suddenly made up his mind to return home, he brought Rex Hartwell with him, introducing him for the first time to those whom he chose to honor with such ceremony, as his nephew and heir; and made no secret of the fact that he meant to leave his broad acres and railroad and bank stock to this young man.

“I have never told him so before,” he said to the family lawyer, with whom he was as nearly confidential as with any person. “I had no notion of bringing up a fellow to swagger around and live for the purpose of spending the money that I have worked hard for. I have kept him close, and taught him the value of money. I think he will know how to take care of what I leave him. He is a very decent sort of fellow, if I do say it, and I shall like to think of the property being held by one of the same name. If his mother had given him the full name, I should have settled it all before this, I dare say; but she had a soft streak in her, and would give him his worthless father’s silly name. ‘Reginald,’ indeed! just right for a fop. Oh, no, his father was a decent sort of man; soft-hearted enough to be a girl, and with no business ability. A country doctor heavily in debt, and dying of overwork before he was thirty; that is his history. His son takes after the Hartwells; if he hadn’t, I should never have tried to make anything of him. Well, now we are ready for business.”

So the will was drawn, and duly witnessed and

signed; it left not only the old stone house that was almost palatial in size, and the broad acres connected with it, but factory stock and railroad stock and bank stock, as well as whatever bank account there should be at his decease, to his nephew and namesake, Joshua Reginald Hartwell. The gossips had it that the old man had used all his influence to induce his nephew to drop his father's name entirely, in favor of the more sensible, Joshua; but Rex had firmly declared that the name his father had borne, and his mother had given him, should be his as long as he lived. Not that he had any objection whatever to the name, Joshua; and, yes, it might be placed first if his uncle wished; that would not matter in the least; he should be Rex, all the same.

To the simple country folk by whom they were surrounded, who counted their wealth by the very few thousands that slowly accumulated, the young man was looked up to as a prospective millionaire; and deep was the interest that they took, not only in him, but in the fortunate young woman who had won his especial regard. This was Annette Marvin, or "Nannie," as she was known in the entire neighborhood. Although there were some who perhaps envied her, it was, after all, a very good-natured, kindly sort of envy, for Nannie Marvin was a favorite with old and young. She was the daughter of a poor farmer, whose farm joined Mr. Elliott's, but was in every respect its

contrast. Farmer Marvin had never possessed what the people of the neighborhood spoke of as "knack." His wheat and oats and barley, even his potatoes, to say nothing of apples and other hardy fruits, seemed to grow reluctantly for him, and to hold themselves open to rot and rust and weevil and worm, and whatever other enemy of goodness hovered near to make advances; so that, as the slow years dragged on, the Marvin farm was never very well worked, because there were not means with which to work it; and the only thing that grew steadily larger was the debt that kept accumulating, to pay the interest on the mortgage. Years before his time, people spoke of Nannie's father as "Old Mr. Marvin." After a little, they began to say, "Poor old Mr. Marvin." He had such a large family to bring up and educate; and "most of them were girls, too, poor things!" Almost without exception they commended Nannie as a girl of good sense and unusual spirit, when she suddenly struck into an entirely new path, and presented herself at the door of the old Hartwell mansion in answer to its master's advertisement for a "Young woman to wait on the housekeeper."

Nannie Marvin had graduated at the high school six months before, the best scholar in her class, and had spent the six months in vainly looking for a chance to teach. Boldly she had declared that if there were no scholars for her to teach, she

would see if she could "wait on" a housekeeper; and the very girls who wouldn't have done such a thing for the world, had sense enough to commend her. Not that it was an unheard-of thing for the daughters of farmers to accommodate other farmers in the neighborhood during busy seasons, and go as "help." Susan Appleby, who reigned in the Elliott kitchen, had come for no other reason than to "accommodate," and held herself to be as "good as any of them;" but the truth was, the Marvin's were considered, even among their neighbors, as "a little above the common." Mr. Marvin, although a poor farmer, had been a good Greek scholar; it was failing health that had driven him reluctantly to the fields, and he liked now to read in his Greek testament much better than to hoe his corn. Mrs. Marvin had been a teacher in her youth in a famous Young Ladies' Institute; and they had kept Nannie in school long after some people said she ought to be doing something to help her poor father. For such a girl to become a common servant under 'Squire Hartwell's housekeeper, was certainly a matter for much comment. Almost without exception it had been settled that she might better have gone to the Elliotts', or some other well-to-do farmer's family, where there was a mother to look after things, and not a housekeeper to "set down on one." But Nannie Marvin had a mind of her own. She could not have worked in the Elliotts' kitchen,

where Hildreth was her best friend; but she believed that she could "wait on a housekeeper" who was a stranger, and would know how to treat her only as a servant; so to the stone house she went. It was prophesied that she wouldn't stay a month; that if she got along with the housekeeper, she wouldn't stand the old 'Squire, who was said to be disagreeable to his help.

But all these prophecies came to naught. By degrees it began to be understood that Nannie Marvin was almost a fixture at the stone house. 'Squire Marvin not only tolerated her presence, but, as the months passed, evidently liked to have her about; ordered the housekeeper to let Nannie fix his books and papers, dust his room, bring his tea, or his gruel, or whatever was wanted. By degrees he discovered that she could read, and had her read aloud to him by the hour; then, that she could write, and he dictated his business letters to her. Almost before anybody realized what was going on, Nannie Marvin was established in the library, of a morning, as a sort of secretary to 'Squire Hartwell, who had heretofore scorned all such help. By degrees she and the housekeeper changed places, in a sense. From being summoned from her dusting, or her egg-beating, with the word that the 'Squire wanted her to read the news, she rose to the dignity of delivering messages to the housekeeper. "'Squire Hartwell wishes me to tell you," etc.

Mrs. Hodges was a sensible woman and did not resent the changes. On the contrary there stole, almost imperceptibly to herself, a note of respect into her voice when she spoke to Nannie, and she oftener asked her help than ordered it. She even bore in silence one morning the curt statement from the 'Squire that she must "hunt up somebody else to trot around after her;" he wanted Nannie Marvin himself.

When 'Squire Hartwell suddenly went abroad for an indefinite period, people were still wondering what Nannie would do now, when they heard with surprise that she was still to be in his employ. She was to have charge of the library, and the conservatory, and garden, which were the 'Squire's special pets; she was to write letters to him concerning such and such interests, and to receive and execute his orders. She was also to have a general oversight of the house during the absence of the housekeeper. For all these services she was to receive a regular salary, with the privilege of staying at home. Those who questioned closely enough to find out all these details, were equally divided in opinion: part being assured that Nannie Marvin was in luck, and that they had never before known the 'Squire to do a generous thing like that; the other part affirming with equal assurance that no doubt he knew how to make the girl earn every cent of her money.

With the 'Squire's home-coming, Nannie was

promptly re-established in the stone house. Indeed, she was there even when the housekeeper arrived, and had an open letter in her hand from which she read directions for that good woman to follow. Everybody began to realize that Nannie Marvin was, as these country folk phrased it, "on the right side of the 'Squire."

Yet many prophesied a different state of things so soon as it was discovered that the nephew took kindly to the quasi secretary, and treated her with the deference that he would show to any lady. Surely the 'Squire, when he got his eyes open, would have none of that. They were mistaken. The 'Squire grumbled a little, it is true, when he saw that his nephew was unmistakably interested in Nannie Marvin. He said he didn't see why young people all had to be fools. Nevertheless, it became increasingly apparent that Nannie had won her place, if not in his heart, at least in his life. She had become necessary to him. Why should he complain if this was also the case with his nephew?

Once it was settled how matters stood, the old man carried things with a high hand. He dismissed without warning or character a stable boy who had dared to say "Nannie Marvin," and he told the housekeeper somewhat sternly that she must teach her servants to say, "Miss Marvin," if she had any who did not know enough without teaching

It took the good people of the neighborhood some months to get accustomed to this surprising state of things; and then, behold a new surprise. One morning all the neighborhood for miles around quivered with the news that Rex Hartwell and his uncle had quarrelled, and the 'Squire had changed his will, and cut Rex off without a penny! The neighbors gathered in knots at the leading produce store in the village, or in one another's sitting-rooms and kitchens, and discussed the details. The 'Squire's lawyer, the day after the quarrel, had been closeted with the 'Squire for two hours and more, and when he came out, had halted on the wide piazza and swept his eyes in all directions over the rich fields, and said, "Too bad! too bad!"

By degrees, all the particulars were gathered, in that mysterious way in which news scatter through country neighborhoods. It appeared that 'Squire Hartwell had set his heart upon his nephew and heir becoming a lawyer. He had said nothing about this during their stay abroad, nor indeed for the first five or six months after their return. He had even put his nephew off with a curt sentence to the effect that there was time enough to think of such things, when the young man tried to talk with him of his future.

Then suddenly, one morning when the summer was over, he began to talk about his plans for settling the young man as a student in the law office

of an eminent friend of his. He talked about them quite as a matter of course, as though the decree had gone forth from his birth that he was to become a lawyer. Then it was that two strong wills had clashed. Rex Hartwell, never having heard one word from his uncle on the subject of his profession, and having, as he supposed, excellent proof that it was not a matter of the slightest consequence to that gentleman what he did, had chosen for himself, and chosen early. All his ideas of success in life were connected with the medical profession. He may perhaps have been said to have inherited the taste, as well as fostered it in his early boyhood. Many of his vacations had been spent with a boy friend in the family of an eminent physician, where his leisure hours had been passed in poring over such medical works as he could understand. When he went abroad with his uncle, having at certain hours of the day leisure to do as he would, he had chosen to mark out for himself a course of study looking toward his chosen profession, and had made such good use of his time as to be eager, even impatient, for the hour to come when he could begin his medical studies in earnest. Perhaps it may be imagined what a blow it was to a young man of his temperament to be confronted with the announcement that now the time had come for him to begin his law studies, and that most advantageous arrangements had been made for him in town. To give

up his own plans, and force his mind to a course of study that had not a single attraction for him, he felt was utterly impossible, and courteously but firmly said so; and was met by a storm of indignation such as he had not supposed a gentleman could display. As the interview continued, the young man discovered that to have chosen the medical profession was evidently an even more heinous crime than to have refused the law. His uncle was absolutely bitter, not only against the profession itself, but against those who he declared had warped his nephew's mind in that direction. Was not the utter failure of his father to earn even a decent living by his pills and powders, sufficient reason why his mother should not have wanted her boy to follow in such foolish footsteps? Oh, he knew very well that the mother had wanted him to become a doctor; all women were fools where business was concerned, and his sister Alice had been one of the most sentimental fools of her sex; he should know her, he hoped, better than her boy who was five when she died. It was mere sentimental twaddle with her.

She wanted him to inherit his father's tastes! To inherit his father's failures, she might better have said, and his skill in leaving his family paupers! He despised the whole race of pill venders, and not a penny of his money should be turned into any such channel. He had himself intended from his babyhood to be a lawyer, and had been

thwarted, not by any fault of his, but because of the meanness of a certain doctor. He would give his nephew thirty-six hours to decide whether he would carry out the plans that had been formed for him, or go his own way, without a cent in the world.

'Squire Hartwell did not understand human nature very well. Perhaps no course that he could have taken, could have more firmly settled the young man in his purposes. He replied with outward calmness that he did not need thirty-six hours to consider. He had planned as a baby to be a doctor, like his father; and as a boy, and a young man, he had kept that determination steadily in view. He was sorry that his uncle was disappointed, but not to inherit millions would he sell himself to a life-work for which he was not fitted, and in which he was sure he would make only failure. And then he had gone out from his uncle's presence, sure that he would keep his threat and "cut him off without a penny."

CHAPTER IX.

OVERTURNED PLANS.

PUBLIC opinion, as represented by the little world that knew these people, was two-sided, as usual. There were those who were sure that Rex Hartwell would live to regret his folly and obstinacy. The idea of throwing away thousands just because his father had been a doctor! What was the promise of a *baby* to his mother? She must have been a silly mother to have thought that so young a child could be influenced. It will be perceived that in all this, logic was no better attended to than it generally is in public opinion. There were others who rejoiced in the spirit the young man showed. They said the 'Squire had ruled people all his life; for their part they were glad he had found his match. But it was pretty hard on Nannie. They wondered if she would stay in the 'Squire's employ? No, she did not. 'Squire Hartwell found it necessary to quarrel also with her, because he could not make her say that she thought his nephew was a simpleton, and that unless he complied with his uncle's wishes she would have nothing more to do with

him. Nannie was curtly dismissed from the house on the afternoon of the day that Rex had received his dismissal; the 'Squire only relenting sufficiently to say to her that if, in the course of a month, she got her common sense back, and was able to reason "that addle-pated follower" of hers into something like decency of behavior, he might be prevailed upon to change his mind. It made him angry that Nannie vouchsafed no reply to this beyond a very wise smile, that said as plainly as words could have done: "I think you know your nephew, and me also, well enough to expect no such thing." For days together, after that, 'Squire Hartwell was savage with everybody who had to come near him. The poor old man missed Nannie almost more than he did his nephew, and perhaps needed her more.

But it was certainly very hard upon the young people. All their well laid plans had been overturned. There had been a tacit understanding between them that near the Christmas time there would be a wedding, and then that Nannie should assume the management of the old stone house. Her husband could easily go back and forth to town every night and morning while he was studying; and both of them agreed that since 'Squire Hartwell evidently took it for granted that such arrangements would be made, it would not be fair to him to plan otherwise. This habit of his of taking things for granted was responsi-

ble for much of the trouble. Had there been a frank talk and a full understanding from the first, it is possible that much sorrow might have been avoided. But 'Squire Hartwell had all his life been in the habit of assuming that people could read so much of his plans as it was necessary for them to know without any help from him. When he had become reconciled to the marriage, as inevitable, he had, without any hint from the young people most concerned, spoken of the holiday season as the time when most foolish deeds were done, and then had begun to refer in a casual way to matters that he and Nannie would attend to while that husband of hers was away at his books. How were they to know that the older man meant law books, though the heart of the younger one was fixed upon medical books?

Hardly any other two people in the world could have been as much together as were uncle and nephew in those days, without a better understanding of each other's plans; but 'Squire Hartwell's lifelong habit of reticence, except in certain directions, was as strong upon him as ever; and the dislike he had to being questioned was well understood. His nephew had once, during one of these allusions to the future, when 'Squire Hartwell and Nannie should be left together, remarked that it took money to make daily journeys to town and spend one's time in study; and the Squire had answered sharply that he did not see any occasion

to worry about that. Hadn't there been money enough for him to spend his life, thus far, in study? It hadn't given out yet; when it did he should be duly notified. They took it, those poor young people, as a hint that they were not to worry about money; so they did not. And now they had been duly notified!

Among 'Squire Hartwell's closing sarcasms to Nannie on that last afternoon, had been the question whether she supposed that her excellent-brained Rex remembered that it took money to "spend one's days in study?" to say nothing of supporting a wife!

Nannie Marvin, during those very trying days, took refuge, so far as 'Squire Marvin was concerned, in almost total silence. She had begun to have a measure of affection for the lonely, crabbed old man; a feeling that was fast disappearing before his persistent unkindness to his nephew; but her memory of what had been, as well as her sense of self-respect, kept her silent, instead of allowing her to pour out the indignant truth upon him as she felt at times a keen desire to do.

They had gone out from the stone house, then, those two, to reconstruct their life plans as best they might. They were not crushed. Both had been brought up on too rigid an economic basis, until very recently, to feel keenly the loss of money, — at least, they thought they had. Of course it is one thing to be poor, and have a father, or

uncle, who is, after all, the responsible person, who will probably manage some way for one, and quite another to be one's self responsible, not only for one's own expenditures, but for others. But this they were as yet too young and care-free to realize. They talked it all over cheerfully between the bursts of righteous indignation.

"You don't blame me, do you dear, for not trying to have myself ground into a lawyer at his dictation?" Rex would ask wistfully, having asked the same in substance in every possible varying form. And Nannie would reply, as she had in substance a hundred times already, —

"Of course not, Rex! How can you ask such a question when I know that all your tastes and talents lie in another direction? I always hated their musty old law books, anyway; and it never seemed nice to me to make one's living by the quarrels of others. Your uncle is just the sort of man to like such a profession, though; I believe he enjoys quarrels. It is so much nobler to be planning to save lives. I dream of you, Rex, as coming to some home where they are all but distracted; where the attending physician has failed; and as a last resort, you, the great Dr. Hartwell, are called in council, and you save a life! Just think of it, Rex; a life! and then compare that with the work of a lawyer!"

He always laughed merrily over the tone of contempt with which she exploded that word lawyer;

and once he said gayly, "O Nannie! you are not logical. You forget that as a lawyer I might make so eloquent a plea as to convince judge and jury, and save a man from the gallows."

But she had logic for that.

"No, it isn't in the least the same thing. No doubt he would be a miserable wretch who ought to be hanged, and you would have to twist the truth and smirch the truth in order to save him; but a doctor is next to God in the way he holds life and death in his hand."

She grew grave and sweet with the close of her sentence. Whether logical or not, Rex Hartwell loved to hear her; and to have her add, "Besides, a promise is a *promise*, if it is made by a little child; and you know you promised your mother to be a physician, like your father."

So they re-planned their life, and looked bravely down the long stretch of years wherein they must be separated, and told each other that they were young and strong, and could endure it, and that it should not be so very long; they would both work so well and wisely that obstacles would be overcome almost before they knew it; and in spite of all, they were happy, and at times pitied the lonely old man who had banished them.

The young man speedily found a position in a doctor's office in the city, where for certain services rendered he was to receive board, and opportunity to study, and the privilege of asking what

questions he chose. It was not so easy to locate Nannie. Rex Hartwell was willing to drudge, but he found that he shrank from drudgery for her. In the abstract it was brave and beautiful in her to plan hard work; he liked to hear her; but when it came to a definite position he shrank from each one that offered with such manifest pain that Nannie hesitated, and remained at home. Meantime, her friend Hildreth Elliott was making such a beautiful success of the country school where she had taught for two seasons that Nannie all but envied her, and wished much for a like opening for herself. They interested themselves somewhat in the new heir to the Hartwell estate. They knew the name was King, and that there was a remote and almost forgotten family connection that made a show of justice in the new will. 'Squire Hartwell, it was said, at one time saw the young man when he was a child of seven or eight, and told him that if he grew up and became a lawyer perhaps he would leave him some money to buy law books. The boy had grown up, but he was not a lawyer. Opinion was divided among the country folk as to what he was. Nannie Marvin heard somewhere that he was an author, and asked Rex if he might possibly be connected with that Stuart King who wrote those articles in the Review that created such a sensation; but Rex thought not, because he knew that his uncle despised a mere writer of books, unless indeed they

were law books. Then they wondered whether the heir would come soon to visit his fine acres, and whether he would be an agreeable accession to the neighborhood; and naturally, how he would treat them, should they ever chance to meet. And both of them understood the uncle so well that they had not a thought of his relenting.

Matters were in this state, with Rex Hartwell studying hard in the physician's office in town, and snatching a few minutes each day to write a line to Nannie, who had that harder lot of waiting at home for work to come to her, when a new interest and excitement filled the neighborhood. Suddenly, unexpectedly, — as he had done everything else in his long life, — 'Squire Hartwell died. One morning driving about his grounds, giving orders in his most caustic style; the next, lying in state in his parlor, with the housekeeper wiping her eyes as she tried to give particulars.

Speculation ran high as to whether the new heir would honor the funeral with his presence; and great was the disappointment when the report was circulated that he was abroad, and must be represented by his lawyer.

The funeral was held, and all the village and country side, as well as not a few from the city who had known 'Squire Hartwell in a business way, honored his dust with their presence; but it was Rex Hartwell, the disinherited, who followed him to the grave as chief and indeed only mourner;

though Nannie Marvin cried a little, as seated in the Elliotts' family carriage she followed the body to the grave, and tried to remember only the days in which he had been almost kind to her, and had seemed to be planning for her and Rex.

Rex Hartwell had to be more than mourner. It had been so natural to associate him with his uncle of late years, that people fell into the habit of coming to him for directions as to what should or should not be done; and he gravely assumed the responsibility, and did his best. Why not, since he was the only one left who bore the name? Suppose the broad acres and bank stock had been left to some one else, he did not intend to forget that the dead man was his uncle, and that during all these years he had clothed and fed and educated him. No mark of respect possible to offer to his uncle's memory should be omitted. The people, looking on, said it was "real noble in the young man;" and Nannie Marvin, weeping and watching furtively his every movement, felt sure that this was true.

Following hard upon these excitements came another, so great as to throw all others into the background. Behold, the new will that had been talked about, and the visible results of which had already been so disastrous to two lives, could not be found! The family lawyer affirmed that it had been made and witnessed, and managed with all the forms of law; and then that the 'Squire had

taken it into his own keeping, rejecting almost haughtily his lawyer's offer to take care of it for him. He was by no means in his dotage, he had said, and was entirely capable of looking after his own papers. Apparently he had looked after his own so successfully that no human being could discover it. In vain they searched, and searched again, the 'Squire's private room, his library, his writing-desk and closets, his large old books, some of them not opened before for years; it was not found. In vain the lawyer's young clerk, who had read many books of a certain character, and heard several detectives talk, searched the old house curiously for some secret drawer, or panel like unto those in books; no trace of such mysteries could be discovered, and all were at last obliged to give up the search. The lawyer, who liked Rex Hartwell, and Nannie Marvin as well, but who liked, better still, to have everything connected with legal matters done decently and in order, was at first not a little disturbed. This seemed like playing with serious interests. Why should 'Squire Hartwell have taken hours of his valuable time, and resisted sturdily all his attempts at advice, if he meant simply to destroy the will when made? Or, supposing that he had, after so short a time, actually changed his mind, why had he not communicated the fact to his man of business, so that he might have been dignifiedly prepared for the change? Looked at from the standpoint of mere



HE SEARCHED THE OLD HOUSE CURIOUSLY.

friendship, it had a gratifying side. The old lawyer was entirely willing, nay glad, that Rex Hartwell should come into possession of what was rightly his own; but certainly the method of securing it was trying to a business man. However, after the lapse of weeks, during which no possible suggestion had been overlooked, and most skilful hands had assisted at the search, even the lawyer admitted that there was no good cause for further delay. The proper legal steps were taken, therefore, and Rex Hartwell came into formal possession of his fortune. Plans went forward briskly after that. There were people who thought that under the circumstances the marriage might take place immediately; but Nannie and Rex determined to show every outward mark of respect possible, and it was therefore Christmas again to which they and their neighbors were looking forward with an almost equal degree of eagerness. It would be such a wonderful thing to have the handsome old stone house presided over by Nannie Marvin! Quite different, they decided, from having her there under 'Squire Hartwell's orders, even though she was his nephew's wife. Didn't everybody know that the old 'Squire would have managed her and her husband as well? But now, there was reasonable hope that the house would be thrown open to company as it had not been for nearly a quarter of a century. They knew that Nannie and Rex would be the most delightful people to visit. In view of

all these experiences, it was not strange that Mr. Elliott's new hired man, by keeping his ears open, and occasionally asking a discreet question, came into possession of the whole story. He could even ask an inquisitive question without exciting any surprise. The various scenes in the drama lived out before them had such intense interest for many of the simple country folk, that they could well appreciate the interest of even a stranger. What they would have thought could they have discovered that the would-be heir was actually "Mr. Elliott's hired tramp," that individual often amused himself by wondering.

Concerning this same heir, there had been much wonderment as to how he bore the news of the lost will, and what he would do about it. The utmost that he had done was to institute through his lawyer as thorough a search for the missing property as it seemed possible to make, and then to rest content. He had money enough, and his tastes did not lie in the direction of accumulation. Why should he care because the people who ought to have the old man's fortune had secured it? It had been easy for him to put away all personal desires with this reasoning. But when he found himself in the very neighborhood where these curious experiences had been, he discovered that he had a keen personal interest in all the actors.

CHAPTER X.

"WHAT IS TRUTH?"

ONE could not long be a member of the Elliott household without discovering that the daughter, Hildreth, was not one of those teachers who work for the sake of the salary, and forget their scholars the moment the door closes upon them for the day, remembering them with reluctance the next morning when necessity compels. John Stuart, before he had been in the neighborhood a month, had heard incidentally enough about her school to have a desire to visit it. Yet an opportunity for doing so seemed improbable. Farmer Elliott, although his trust in his hired man grew daily more assured, seemed to have formed the habit of himself looking after his daughter. He had been overheard to say with great satisfaction that his man was so entirely trustworthy he could get away better than he had for years. The aspirant could only bide his time.

One evening, while the family were at supper, John and Susan, according to the fashion of the neighborhood, being seated with them, a discussion arose in which the former was deeply interested.

“You ought not to go out again to-night, Roger,” Mrs. Elliott said, with an anxious glance; “you are hoarser than you were an hour ago; it would be a pity to get a cold fastened upon you, for the winter perhaps.”

“Oh! there’s no danger of that,” the father said cheerily, though hoarsely; “it is a nice night for a ride; the air is crisp, but not disagreeable; it will be as clear as a bell this evening.”

Then Hildreth: “Father, Nannie and Rex would like to go out with us. Rex promised he would help me when he could this winter; and Nannie says this evening would be a good one to commence in, because it will be such lovely moonlight that she would rather be useful than not, with a ride at the end.”

They laughed over Nannie’s characteristic way of putting things, and then the mother had a sudden relieved thought that involved a glance toward John and a significant look at her husband.

She voiced it only with the tentative half-sentence, “If Nannie and Rex are along, why not” — spoken low, for her husband’s benefit, but loud enough for John’s quick ear to catch, and John’s quick brain to understand.

“All right,” said the farmer, and raised his voice.

“John, I believe I’ll let you drive the young people out to the schoolhouse this evening; not that it would hurt me, but Mrs. Elliott seems to think I need a little coddling.”

So John's opportunity had come. Not to visit the school, it is true; but one could tell a good deal by a visit to a schoolhouse. As to why it was to be visited that evening, he had not the least idea. No one seemed to remember that he was an entire stranger to the ways of the neighborhood. He must learn by watching and waiting.

The long, low, uninviting building known as the Hartwell schoolhouse was a revelation to him. All his experiences of school life had been connected with great four-story buildings, with fire-proof walls, and general massiveness. He told himself that he must certainly have known that there were other styles of school buildings, but he found that he had no associations with any other. He looked about with the deepest interest on the queer shaped seats and wooden desks marred by more than one generation of jack-knives. Yet if he had but known it, the little schoolroom was by no means typical; being a palace in its way compared with many that he might have visited. The floor was beautifully clean, and had a strip of cocoa matting down the main aisle. The lamps, set into home-made brackets fastened at regular intervals to the walls, shone with cleanliness, and were numerous enough to make a fairly well-lighted room. The teacher's platform was neatly covered with a square of cheerful red carpeting; and on the desk was a fern growing in a pot, and several other hardy plants, that by dint of being carefully cov-

ered every night and removed on Friday nights to the sheltered closet, managed to live and flourish through the long cold winter. There was also, besides the desk chair, a little red rocker. The white walls were adorned with pictures in great variety; not only the charts and maps common to the schoolroom, but several prints in colors, and cheap copies of certain famous pictures, and an open Bible in blue and gilt, with the text large enough to be distinctly read. Altogether, however uninviting the building might be from the outside, within, it was cheerful enough to call forth delighted exclamations from the guests who were privileged to speak.

Nannie Marvin, especially, was charmed.

“What a pretty place you have made of this ugly little room! I remember it used to be particularly ugly. I told 'Squire Hartwell once that I shouldn't think he would like such a horrid old building named for him. Isn't that wall pretty, Rex? The pictures are all so cheerful, and the coloring is in excellent taste. If there were only some comfortable seats for the scholars, and a carpet on the floor, it would really be quite a pretty parlor. I'll tell you, Rex, when” — she stopped suddenly, with a glance toward John Stuart, and flushed and laughed. He knew she had been about to indulge in a day-dream of what should be done when her name became Hartwell.

Further talk was interrupted by the arrival of

scholars, or guests, or audience; the most interested person there had not yet discovered what the evening's programme was to be. An incongruous company, apparently, with sharp contrasts in age, although evidently confined to young people. There were little boys of an age that John had supposed were always in bed at that hour; and there were tall men of six feet and over, well proportioned, and every grade between. Some of them he recognized as having seen at the Club gathering but a short time before; but others were unmistakably of a lower grade than the Club visitors. They shambled in awkwardly enough, seeming to be anxious chiefly to avoid observation. Yet there were distinctly two classes.

Quite a number came in briskly, eagerly, as though glad to be there. They greeted Miss Elliott with effusion, but politely, and bowed not ungracefully when she introduced her friends. This class, John presently discovered, were Miss Elliott's day pupils; the others were their brothers and sisters and friends, who knew her only through these evening gatherings.

The programme he presently found to be unique. Miss Elliott came over to him with a kindly explanation.

"John, I suppose you were never at quite such a gathering as this? I hardly know what name to give it myself. I have been in the habit of giving one evening a week to this neighborhood during

the winter season ever since I have taught here. This is the first meeting of the season. We have two sessions; from seven to eight, and from eight to nine. For the first hour we divide into classes, whenever we can find teachers or talkers, and take up some subject that the classes ask to have talked over. Then at eight we have a social religious meeting; we sing a good deal, and pray, and talk on some theme that we hope will help them. These are not all my scholars, by any means. In this neighborhood are some — quite a number, indeed — who are not able to come to school. They work in the woollen factory, and are busy all day. We use these evenings for helping them in any way that we can. To-night Mr. Hartwell is going to take the older boys and young men, and Miss Marvin and I will divide the girls between us for the first hour. But there are several boys here younger than have been in the habit of coming; they coaxed to come, and I could not deny them. Still, they can hardly be interested in what Mr. Hartwell will say. I have been wondering if — Did you ever try to teach little boys anything, or to talk to them for their good?"

Visions of a winter years ago, during which he taught in a mission Sunday-school, and became fascinated with certain street arabs, flashed before John; and he answered with animation, "I did once, a good while ago."

"Then, would you be willing to take those five

little boys over in that corner near my desk, and tell them something that you think may interest or help them? Usually we have subjects chosen the week before, but as this is our first session we decided to let them choose on the spot what they would like to learn about. I haven't the least idea what those little fellows will ask of you. Are you willing to attempt it?"

He was more than willing. The little boys, with their good, honest faces and remarkably grave behavior, were quite as new to him as anything in his strange surroundings. They did not look nor act in the least like street gamins, the type of boy to which his one experience in teaching had belonged. Yet they had intelligent, and in two or three instances, mischievous faces; he was eager to know what they thought, and how they expressed their thoughts. The alacrity with which he consented roused vague anxieties in the young manager's mind. She had expected him to demur, to be almost frightened over the idea, to feel sure that he was not competent to teach anybody. She had hoped to draw him out by the means; to awaken his interest in something besides his daily routine of work, and perhaps do him more good than he could do the boys. But he evidently needed no drawing out. She moved away slowly, more than doubtful as to the wisdom of her act. The doubt increased as the hour passed, and she watched the intent, eager faces of the little boys

as they bent forward to catch every word that was being said to them. The new teacher apparently held every faculty of their being; they had neither eyes nor ears for anything else that was going on in the room. Hildreth's own work suffered; she was distraught and anxious. What mischief she might have done by giving that strange young man an hour with those pure-hearted little boys! What could he be telling them that held their wrapt attention? She closed the hour abruptly ten minutes before its time, unable to do much herself except to regret her hasty attempt to benefit John, and resolved to learn more about him at the very first opportunity. It was not enough that a man was faithful in his daily work, and apparently conscientious in the performance of all his duties; his mind, despite this, might be filled with poison, which it gave him pleasure to impart. She had read of such men.

Turning away from his boys with keen disappointment that he had not opportunity to add those few last words that he had planned, the young man took a seat in the farthest corner of the room, where he could command an excellent view of all that transpired. The hour that followed was one of deep interest to him.

It had not been called a prayer-meeting, and in some respects it was different from any prayer-meeting with which this young man was familiar; yet that name fitted it as well as any.

Instead of reading a set portion from the Bible, Miss Elliott read from a collection of Bible verses that she held in her hand; the curious looker on could not be sure whether it was in print, or had been slipped inside the printed page for convenience. She announced at the opening of the reading that she had been asked by three of her pupils to take the words "What is truth?" for their talk that evening. The phase of the subject that they wanted to have considered was: How far away from the exact truth could one tread in the interest of himself, or another, without reaching the realm that was named falsehood.

"In other words," said Miss Elliott, "what is truth? and what does it demand of its adherents?" Then she read her Bible verses. Keen, incisive words, leaving no doubt upon the mind of the listeners as to the Bible's estimate of truth. Still the question remained, What is meant by truth? Or, as one of Miss Elliott's girls put it: "How far can one keep a piece of knowledge to one's self without earning the name of being false?" At the moment John Stuart happened to be looking in the direction of Nannie Marvin, and was interested by the sudden change in her expressive face. She flushed for an instant, and then paled, as she turned startled, half-frightened eyes first on the questioner, then on Hildreth, and listened to every word that the latter spoke with an eagerness born of intense feeling of some sort. The student of

human nature found himself wondering why she should be so keenly interested; wondering if, possibly, her besetment might be to run often to the "meadow lot," and have herself reported as "not at home."

Miss Elliott answered the question quickly, —

"That depends, Minnie. In the first place, does the piece of knowledge concern ourselves only? Will no human being be injured by our silence? Is there no reasonable probability of our silence being misinterpreted so that harm may come? Do we sincerely believe that good and not ill will result if we keep silence? If one can answer an unqualified 'yes' to all these questions, I think one may safely keep his knowledge to himself."

Nannie Marvin, who was not given to much outspoken testimony, suddenly added her thought.

"Sometimes great harm is done by speaking of what one may chance to have learned."

The leader turned troubled eyes upon her.

"Yes," she said slowly, "that is undoubtedly true. I have known a number of instances in which the truth of the old proverb that 'Silence is golden,' was emphasized; but I think that Minnie has in mind another phase of harm. Perhaps I am mistaken; but it seems to me that the danger of the present time, at least in our neighborhood, is to belittle the truth by what are called trivial departures from it. I am afraid that some persons are learning to pride themselves on the skill with

which they can evade the truth without telling what they call falsehoods. I read of a boy who boasted that when his father asked, 'My son, were you out late last night?' answered boldly that on the contrary he reached home very early. And he laughed as he explained to his companion that he told the truth for once; it was early, very early in the morning! Perhaps that story will illustrate my point as well as any; there are people who evade honesty in this way, and yet make themselves believe that they are speaking truth! It is difficult to understand how a person with ordinary common sense can so deceive himself; but I believe it is done. The present seems to be especially fruitful in devices for tempting young people to falseness. I heard a few days ago of a girl, a respectable girl, who had so far forgotten herself as to assume a false name and carry on a correspondence as another person! What can have become of a young woman's self-respect who will stoop to such an act?"

Quick, excited, half-frightened glances were exchanged between certain of her scholars as Miss Elliott said this. Their glances, interpreted, said, "Whom does she mean? How much does she know?" As for John Stuart, he felt the slow red mounting to his very temples. For the first time since he could remember, a sense of shame possessed him, against which he struggled angrily. Why should the opinions of this self-opinionated

country girl, who in her proscribed circle thought that she understood the world, have power to disturb him? Did he not know that his own motives were beyond reproach? and was he not sure that no possible harm could result from his act? Still, for a *girl* to pose in this way would be, he slowly admitted, not quite in accordance with his ideas of — He left the sentence unfinished; for Jack Sterrett, Rob's younger brother, was asking a question.

“Miss Elliott, couldn't a girl do a thing of that kind just for fun, and not mean anything in life but fun?”

Miss Elliott regarded him with stern eyes.

“I don't know, Jack,” she said at last. “We will try not to judge her; possibly she might, if she were very young and very ignorant, and had no one to guide her; but I should be sorry indeed to think that any of my girls could stoop so low.”

Then those quick, questioning glances were exchanged again; and this time John Stuart studied them.

The talk went on in this familiar way for some time, — question, answer, and comment. The young medical student took much higher ground on the question of truth than did most of those present. He seemed to be in hearty accord with Miss Elliott herself; affirming unhesitatingly that the infinite mischief which had

been done in the world by gossiping tongues, had been done chiefly because their love of talk led them to depart from the truth.

"Jack," said Miss Elliott suddenly, "will you pray?"

And then it was discovered that Jack, the awkward, blundering country boy, knew how to pray. Very simple sentences, without polish, but with the ring of unmistakable sincerity, voiced his desires and aspirations. John Stuart, listening with bowed head, felt again the slow color suffusing his face. This time it was caused by the thought, What would he have done, had he been called upon to pray? He had been a member of the church for more than thirteen years, yet he had never heard the sound of his own voice in prayer.

CHAPTER XI.

SEARCH LIGHTS.

OTHER prayers followed in quick succession. To one bewildered listener it was a matter of surprise that so many of Miss Elliott's pupils seemed to know how to pray. None of the prayers were long; all of them had a peculiar quality of directness, as though the petitioners felt that the Person addressed was present, and prepared to give them audience.

After a little, Rex Hartwell prayed; and again the one, who may perhaps be called an outsider, felt a thrill of something like astonishment. How very easy it seemed to be for that man to pray! For himself, he felt that he could have spoken to an audience numbered by thousands, easier than he could have arisen in that little room and asked of God the simplest thing.

But all these experiences were as nothing compared with what presently followed. John Stuart had never heard a woman's voice in prayer; and when Miss Elliott bowed her head and in as quiet tone and simple language as she would have spoken to any of the persons present, voiced not only her

needs but the needs of others, his sensations would have been hard to describe. No other person in the room evinced the slightest surprise; evidently it was an ordinary occurrence. Yet the prayer was unusual. It had about it a searching quality that seemed to force one to look into his own heart, and view it, for a moment at least, as it must look to God. More and more searching grew the sentences, more and more earnest the call for help, for light to see their temptations, for grace to overcome them. And then the little schoolroom was treated to a sensation the like of which it had not known before. Directly Miss Elliott's voice ceased, a young girl sprang to her feet. John Stuart had noticed her with interest several times during the evening. He had said to himself that she was probably the star pupil, and the leader among her set. She was not pretty, but her clear gray eyes and intelligent face were pleasant to look upon; and she impressed one as a girl of marked character, as well as ability in whatever direction she had opportunity to exercise it. She was evidently much excited, and her eyes showed plainly that she had been crying.

"Miss Elliott," she said quickly, "may I speak? There is something I ought to say. I knew I ought to before; at least, I thought about it, and felt that I must every time I looked at Miss Elliott; it seemed to me sometimes as though her face was just a looking-glass in which I could see

my own heart. All the time, though, I told myself that I couldn't do it; but after that prayer I *must*. Girls and boys, you know how I won the prize in that last history contest? Every question in the list was to be answered correctly, you know, and I was the only one. Now, I must tell you that there wasn't even one. That next to the last question I—" the girl hesitated, and caught her breath hard. It evidently required great courage to proceed. Suddenly she turned and looked at Miss Elliott; it was as if she gathered strength from the look; she went on quickly,—

"I stood very near to Miss Adams, who had the history cards in her hand; and that one was on top, and I—I saw the first words, two or three of them, enough to start me; I don't believe I should have thought of the answer but for that. I almost know I shouldn't; my mind seemed to be a perfect blank; but when I saw those words, it all flashed upon me. I didn't think about it then; about its being dishonest, I mean; not as I have since. I thought at the time that I had earned the prize. But I know now that I didn't; oh, I have known it ever so long; and I wanted to give the book back, but I couldn't bear to tell you that I had cheated! Oh Miss Elliott! do you think you can ever forgive me?"

With an outburst of bitter weeping she sat down. Miss Elliott's face was sweet to see.

"Satan has been outwitted to-night," she said,

“and the truth has triumphed gloriously. I am sure you all think so. I feel like closing this meeting with the Doxology.”

At its close she went swiftly over to the girl, who still sat with bowed head.

On the homeward ride, a lively discussion took place. On the trip out, the two ladies had occupied the back seat, and Rex Hartwell had sat with the driver. Miss Elliott, who had determined to take that opportunity to begin her better acquaintance with her father's hired man, changed the arrangements by a word.

“Rex, you may take care of Nannie going home; I'm going to sit with John.” Then she had sprung lightly to her seat, and directed the driver to give her the reins while he looked after the comfort of the others. However, her opportunity for growing acquainted was to be limited. Nannie Marvin was in full tide of talk, and it was not Rex Hartwell to whom she wanted chiefly to speak. Directly the horses were under way, she began:

“Hildreth, I think you were horrid to-night. I never heard you go on so, working up those ignorant young people to such a pitch of excitement that they did not know what they were about. I was never more sorry for anybody in my life than I was for that poor girl. The idea of her getting up such a scene as that, because she happened to see a word on a card! What did you say to her?”

I hope you told her that she was a simpleton, and that her poor little copy of Tennyson, or whatever it was, was honestly hers."

"I did not," said Hildreth quietly. "Instead, I rejoiced with her that she was able to overcome the temptation to silence, and be her own truthful self."

"Then I think you were cruel! I don't know how you can be so hard. It is enough to turn one away from religion entirely. Think what you have done for that girl! All those ignorant boys, and girls too, for that matter, making fun of her, looking down on her, and mouthing over her story until it is made into a public disgrace. And a word from you, to the effect that she was excited, and that no harm had been done, and there was really nothing for her to confess, would have smoothed everything over. Jesus Christ would not crush a girl in that way, I know."

"Why, Nannie dear!" said Rex Hartwell, in low and wondering tones; he had never seen her so excited about so slight a cause. Hildreth, too, turned wonderingly, and regarded her in the moonlight.

"You are mistaken, Nannie," she said earnestly; "entirely mistaken; those girls will rally about her, and the boys will stand up for her bravely, every one of them. Did you not see how they waited for her to-night, each eager to say what he thought? They will all be proud of her; for my-

self, I glory in her. When we have a generation of young people as true to their convictions of right as that, as unswerving in their truth, the world will be a better place."

"Oh, *'truth!'*" exclaimed the excited girl scornfully. "I am growing to hate the word. It is narrowness, not truth. All that you said there to-night was just as narrow and bigoted as it could be. Your very prayer was hard. Hildreth Elliott, I tell you you will drive people away from religion if you let it make you as severe and opinionated as that."

"My dear," said Rex Hartwell, drawing a wrap carefully about his charge, who shivered as she spoke, "you have overwearied yourself to-night. I do not think you can be well."

In truth, it was a strange exhibition from the usually genial, winsome girl. Hildreth studied over her manifest excitement in deep perplexity. Why was she so disturbed by what had occurred? unreasonably disturbed. Could she not suppose that the teacher knew her pupils better than an outsider could? Hildreth was sure that the avowal made that evening would work for good, not ill. She rejoiced in it as an evidence of growing depth of character. She tried to express her thought, repeating with more earnestness what she had already said; but Nannie Marvin had subsided into almost total silence. Even Rex could secure only the briefest responses from her. To his tender

inquiries she replied almost petulantly that her head ached, and added in what she tried to make a playful tone, that she believed she needed to be let alone. Hildreth let her alone after a while, and gave her attention to John.

“How did you get on with the little boys?” she asked kindly. “Had they a question for you?”

“Oh, yes, indeed!” he said, smiling over the memory of their earnest faces, “several questions. One of the little chaps has been puzzling all his life, he tells me, over the mysteries of his own shadow; sometimes long, sometimes short; sometimes racing ahead of him, and again lagging behind. He expressed his puzzle so well that the others became interested; and we were just getting from the actual shadows to their moral representatives, when you called us to order. I am afraid that I left their inquiring minds somewhat in fog, after all.”

For the moment he had forgotten himself. Those grave little boys puzzling over their shadows had taken him into his past. It was as if he were John Stuart King reporting to Fletcher or some other of his intimate friends. He was recalled to the present by the realization that Hildreth Elliott was looking steadily at him, a wondering, pained look. What could she think of the hired man who addressed such language to her, with a degree of familiarity which his position

did not warrant? How should he correct such a blunder? She did not wait for him.

“John,” she said earnestly, “it has occasionally seemed to me that—that there was something about you which we did not understand. I wish you felt that we—that my father was sufficiently your friend to confide in him, if there is anything you ought to tell.”

In the sphere to which John Stuart King belonged, he had never lacked for words. On this occasion there was absolutely nothing that he felt willing to say. Almost his chief thought was, How exactly like her eyes were in the moonlight to his picture of Truth! After a moment she began again. “That subject about which we talked to-night is so full of importance. I sometimes think if we could get all lives centred in absolute truthfulness, so that they would be true to their inner selves as well as to those with whom they come in contact, all moral problems would be solved. John, I hope you are not being false to anybody; to your mother, least of all. Does she know where you are?”

“Yes,” he said; “I write often to my mother.” He hurried his answer. What if the question had been extended? “Does she know what you are doing?” He had almost expected that.

“That is good,” she said, evidently relieved. Then, “Did you have a chance to go to school when you were a boy?”

The "honor man" of a distinguished university hesitated, and felt glad that just then the moon was in shadow. It was growing almost as difficult for him to speak the exact truth as it had been, at times, for Elfrida Elliott. At last he said, "I was always kept in school when I was a boy."

"I have thought from the language you use that you must have had opportunities. I have wondered, too, whether you were one of those boys for whom father and mother have sacrificed a great deal, and to whose manhood they have looked forward as the time of their reward. Your father has gone; but I hope, John, that you are doing your best not to disappoint your mother."

He had disappointed her in several ways. She was annoyed with him at this moment because he was not loitering through Europe with her and Elizabeth. She had been vexed with him for years because he would write for the press, and for "pay" when he had money enough to be a gentleman of elegant leisure.

"You might as well be a day laborer," she had said to him discontentedly once, when he was insisting upon regular and uninterrupted hours for study. Suppose he should tell all this to Hildreth Elliott! How was he to continue this conversation? He must generalize.

"Mothers and sons do not always think alike," he said, trying to speak stolidly; "and every one has to think for himself."

“Ah, but, John, mothers are so often right, and sons, at least occasionally, live long enough to find themselves mistaken. If I were an honest, well-intentioned young man, I would think very carefully before I took any steps contrary to my mother’s wishes.”

“That is true,” he said meekly. It was the only reply that under the circumstances he felt was allowable. Plainly his questioner was not satisfied. He felt that she was trying to study his face in the moonlight, which had become uncertain and fitful. At last she spoke again, hesitatingly, —

“John, I do not want to force your confidence, of course; but I would like to be your friend in the truest sense of the word. To that end I should like to help you to think of One who is the best friend a man can have. If you knew Jesus Christ intimately I feel sure that he would help you to a better life than you are living. I do not mean,” she went on hurriedly “that I have any reason to find fault with your life; only—there have been times when I have thought that perhaps you have fallen from some place that you once held, and that you are not now filling the place God intended for you. Am I right?”

Was she? Had he fallen? How was he to answer her? He felt his face burn over the thought of what he must seem to her, and he could find

no words at all. She did not wait long for them, but went on gently.

“Have you ever given thought to these things? I mean, have you never thought that you would like to be a real, earnest Christian, such an one as perhaps your mother is. Is she a Christian?”

“I believe so,” he said at last; and he found, poor fellow, that he hesitated even over that question! His fashionable mother, with her days spent in indolent luxury, and her evenings given to opera, or theatre, or kindred amusements, — how would her religion look to eyes like Hildreth Elliott’s? Yet she had been ever since he could remember a member of the church, and had been careful to let neither engagement nor fatigue prevent her being present at church on communion Sundays. Was she not, after all, as much of a Christian as he was himself? Their tastes lay in different directions, but perhaps in the sight of God his were no more religious than were hers. Evidently in the estimate of this girl he had no religious character. How sure she seemed to be that the whole matter was something which he had yet to settle. Should he tell her he was a church member?

“Hildreth,” said Rex Hartwell, speaking hurriedly, “may I ask you to let John drive as rapidly as he can? Nannie is cold. She seems to be in a chill; I am afraid she is going to be ill.”

“No, I am not!” said Nannie in a petulant

voice, very unlike her own, "Why do you persist in drawing attention to me? I don't know what is the matter with every one to-night."

But attention had been effectually drawn to her. Thenceforth Hildreth exerted herself to try to make her friend more comfortable, and gave the word that sent the horses skimming over the road with such speed that they were very soon drawn up before Mr. Marvin's gate.

CHAPTER XII.

INTERROGATION POINTS.

THE lamp in the woodhouse chamber belonging to the Elliott farm burned late that night, although the sheets of carefully written manuscript spread over the table did not increase in number. The occupant of the room was busy with thoughts that he did not care to commit to paper. He had made certain additions to the furniture since his occupancy. One was a strong box that locked with a padlock, wherein he kept certain books and all his papers during the day, safe from Susan's inquiring eyes. Another was a lamp of fair size that he had bought with his first earnings, explaining carefully to Susan that he had some copying to do evenings that required a strong light.

"He's got a girl somewhere that he writes to," commented Susan, after she had described the lamp. "I found sheets of paper thrown away the other day, filled full of stuff that I couldn't make head nor tail to. I got at him about it. I said I should have thought he would have throwed them away, and that if he couldn't write better sense than that

to his girl, she'd throw them away for him." After which criticism, it may be supposed that John Stuart was more careful what he did with rejected pages of manuscript.

But on this particular evening, as has been said, the story he was writing did not grow. Instead, he established himself in the rocking-chair, and stared out of his one window on the fields lying white in the moonlight, and considered. His face was grave even to perplexity. Certain words heard that evening seemed to repeat themselves in his brain with the persistency of a phonograph set to make a single statement. For instance, "What is truth?" said itself over and over again, always in Hildreth Elliott's voice, and with her searching eyes enforcing the words. If she understood his position fully, would she call him an embodied falsehood? Would he ever be able to explain to her his reasons for this false position? Would she consider the reasons adequate? Well, suppose she did not, was he bound to justify himself in her eyes? As often as the round of questions reached this one, he moved uneasily in his chair, and held his mind away from considering the answer. He would rather even take up that other question which was growing almost as persistent, whether he was himself satisfied with his false position. It was a false position, of course; he looked the moon boldly in the face, and told it gloomily that there was no use in mincing words. He had forgotten

himself for two minutes that evening, and talked in a strain common to his ordinary life, with what result? She had looked puzzled and pained. She had, more than once that evening, brought a flush of actual shame to his face by words which she had not imagined applied to him. When had John Stuart King had occasion to blush for acts of his? It was all questionable, a shading of the truth, an intent to deceive. "I sometimes think if we could get all lives centred in absolute truthfulness" — he seemed to hear again her singularly penetrative voice saying those words. He went on, mentally finishing the sentence. Had he committed to memory all words of hers? They seemed to cling to him. Would it be possible ever to make her understand? There he was, back again to that question, about which he did not intend to think!

Why not give it all up at once? He was not accomplishing that for which he had set out. Or rather, in a sense, that had been accomplished some time ago, and now he was simply, — not wasting time; he assured himself that he was learning every day, in an entirely new line, securing material that would serve him well for the future; but he was clearly not satisfied.

"I suppose," he said to himself, "if I should commit arson, and get committed to prison, I should learn a new lesson of life; but I doubt if the end would justify the means! But that is nonsense." Still, he knew that he was growing every day more

dissatisfied; not with the humble life, — that simply amused him. It was still a relief to feel no trammels of society upon him. To be bound by no engagements to call, or dine, or attend a friend to a reception. The plain homely fare, so much more excellent than he had supposed people of that class enjoyed, far from being a cross to him, had been eaten with a relish that he had not known for years. Moreover, the weary nights that he had spent tossing on his bed trying to woo sleep were things of the past. On his hard, clean bed in the woodhouse chamber he dropped to sleep the moment his head touched the pillow, and knew nothing more until the morning. Oh! there were blessings connected with this experience. What, then, was at fault? It could not certainly be the social position that chafed him. He laughed when he thought of the patronizing tone in which Rex Hartwell said: "Well, John, you keep your horses in first-class order I see. I wish I could find as careful a man as you to look after mine." Rex did not mean to be patronizing, he meant simply to be kind; and "John" was not in the least annoyed, only amused. He laughed with even more relish when he thought of Susan Appleby's honest attempts to civilize him; for the times were innumerable in which that outspoken woman "got at him" for his good. He was equally indifferent to Nannie Marvin's efforts to be friendly with him after the manner in which she tried to be to all

the employees of the farm, and to Elfrida's grown up and superior airs. But he looked grave when he thought of Corliss Elliott; the boy interested him; he saw in him great possibilities. Stuart King, the scholar, might do much for him; John Stuart, his father's hired man, was powerless. It was so, in a measure at least, with the boys he had met that evening. The rudest and most ignorant among them, by reason of his being a factory hand, or a boy struggling at home on the worn-out farm, considered himself a grade above a hired man, and would not be disposed to take help or hint from him. Yet let him be perfectly frank with himself, at least. It was not simply being somebody's hired man that had put him outside the line of helpfulness. He felt assured that had this been his legitimate position in life, he could have built up by degrees such a character as would have commanded the respect of every boy in the neighborhood.

"It is because I am a sham," he told himself gloomily; "the very boys do not more than half believe in me; they eye me with suspicion, and feel the difference between what I profess to be and what I really am. I am a growing object of suspicion. I could see it to-night in her eyes. I should not be surprised to hear that I am a fugitive from justice! It is as Fletcher said, I cannot do it. No man can be successfully, for any length of time, what he is not."

Should he drop the whole thing? There was

an easy way out. He could say to Mr. Elliott that he had decided to go home; and take his month's wages that were due the next day, and telegraph Fletcher to express his trunk to Bennettsville, and stop with it at an obscure downtown hotel where none of his set ever penetrated, and engage a room and make his toilet, and appear at his rooms on Chester Square as Stuart King, the author, returned at last from his summer wanderings. Within forty-eight hours at the utmost he could take up his dropped life, and make all things as they used to be.

Could he? His startled consciousness asked this question of him with a force that he had not suspected. What about that picture of Truth on his study table that had so interested him? Would he ever again be satisfied with the pictured eyes, when he knew that not far away their counterpart looked with real living gaze upon those of her world, — yes, and read them apparently, as she would an open book? In plain language, did he care to go back to his cultured, refined, rich life, and leave Hildreth Elliott secure in her father's farmhouse? — never to see her again, never to make her understand that he was true, and earnest, and had a purpose in life as assuredly as she had herself?

“If I do not,” he said aloud at last, and gloomily, “then I would better by all means go tomorrow; let me retain at least the semblance of

manhood. But I could not go so soon ; it would not be treating Mr. Elliott well. I ought to give him opportunity to supply my place."

He was shamefaced over the pleasure that this thought gave him. The idea that an honest reason for a week's delay could set his heart to beating faster ! It was high time he went. He rose abruptly at last, refusing to allow himself to come to any decision, refusing positively to think longer upon certain themes that kept urging their right to be considered.

"I'll go to work, I believe," he said with a laugh, "and see if I can forget myself in the troubles of Reuben and Hannah. I wonder what that precious couple intend doing with me next ? The idea that an author creates his situations is the merest nonsense. Witness how these two wind me about their little fingers, compelling me to allow them to do and say what I had not the remotest intention should be said or done."

Then he went over to his table for the first time that evening, and found lying there a bulky package addressed to "John Stuart." It was from Fletcher, of course ; but where did it come from ? He had himself driven over to the office at five o'clock and found nothing. Some neighbor must have been ahead of him, and brought the mail. He looked troubled over it. This thing had occurred once or twice before, and each time he had received a suspiciously heavy packet ; and Susan, the out-

spoken, had said on one occasion: "Seems to me you get an awful lot of letters. I should think it would take all you could earn to pay the postage, if you answer them all." It was evidently one of the things about him that looked suspicious. Perhaps it helped to create that pained and puzzled look he had seen in Hildreth's eyes that night. Oh, to be able to look into those eyes with perfectly honest ones, with nothing to conceal or explain! If he were back at his rooms to-night with his present knowledge, and could start out to-morrow morning, John Stuart King, student and author, and could come out to Bennettsville by train, and thence to the Elliott farm by the public conveyance, and boldly ask to be boarded for a few weeks while he studied the conditions of country life with a view to a certain portion of his next book, why then the tramp question that had started him out on his quest might be investigated by whoever would do it; he should not care. But, in that case, how would he have known of such a being as Hildreth Elliott? No, his experience had been too rich to give up easily. Besides, he could not have come to the farm-house and boarded with any such ideas. Being a man of honor, this could not have — pshaw! What "ideas"? What was he talking about? And what was the matter with him to-night? It was that remarkable meeting that had upset him; no, it was that remarkable talk during the drive home. How troubled she

had looked! And then he opened his letter. It enclosed others, bearing foreign postmarks. Fletcher's was brief, and ran as follows:—

“See here, my boy, isn't it time you gave up this folly and came home? If you don't appear soon I shall get up a search party, and come after you. Dr. Wells asks all sorts of questions as to what you are about; and even Dickson from your bank stopped me on the street to ask if you were ill, because he had not been called upon to cash any of your checks lately. I shall not promise to keep the peace much longer. How many tramps can you study, pray, staying forever in one place?

I looked up Bennettsville yesterday; and it is an insignificant little place, not even large enough for a Money Order office. Is it headquarters for tramps? Do come home, John. I'm tired of this, if you are not.”

“John” laid down the letter with a faint smile on his face, and turned the two foreign ones over, apparently to study their postmarks. Then he opened one, written in a delicate running hand. It began:—

“MY DEAR SON,—

I have delayed writing for several days, hoping to hear of you as back in town. What can you be doing in the country so late? And why don't you give me your correct address, instead of my having to send letters always to Fletcher's care? Don't you stay long enough in one place to receive any mail? If not, I do not see why you might not as well be with us. We have been in the same place now for three weeks; and a quieter place, with better opportunities for you to go on with your interminable writ-

ing, I am sure you could not find. I think Elizabeth is rather hurt with your conduct, although she would not say so for the world. She is certainly gayer than she was; but that is not strange; a girl of her age must have some amusement. I told her yesterday, that if you were within a thousand miles of her, and likely to hear about it the same season, I should almost accuse her of flirting. Have a care, Stuart; Elizabeth is young and beautiful, and accustomed to attention. She will not endure patiently neglect of any sort; and if you are not attentive now, what can she expect for the future?"

There was more of it in the same strain; the reader's face gathered in a frown, and he presently skipped to the next page and glanced hurriedly down its contents, then took up the other letter with a sigh. It was shorter than his mother's, and the hand was even more feminine and difficult to read.

"MY DEAR STUART, —

We are still to address you nowhere in particular, it seems. Your friend Fletcher is certainly very kind. Does he have the privilege of reading the letters before he forwards them, to pay him for his trouble? It seems sometimes as though you were nowhere. We wonder daily what you can find to hold you to the country so late. The utmost that I could ever endure of the country was a very few weeks in the summer. But I believe you always raved over it; it is another illustration of how startlingly our tastes differ.

"We are really quite domesticated at this point; there is talk of our remaining all winter, in which case it would have been a delightful place for you to indulge your scrib-

bling propensities. There is a certain Mr. Capen here, an English gentleman with a prospective title I believe, who is very attentive, chiefly to your mother, though of course he has to let me share his courtesies for propriety's sake. How should you enjoy a step-papa, my dear boy? He is not old, but neither is your mother. I am not sure but it would be a good idea. If you say so, I will encourage it to the best of my ability."

At this point the letter was tossed angrily down, and the frown on the reader's face had gathered in great cords. He could not have told what it was that irritated him so painfully. He had for years contemplated the possibility of his mother's marrying again. Not exactly with satisfaction, it is true; they were so totally different that there could not in the truest sense of the word be very close companionship; still, the young man had been wont to say mournfully to himself that his mother was all he had; and at the same time he had schooled himself to the possibility of her assuming closer ties than his; so it was not astonishment over the unexpected that helped to deepen the frowns on his face. It was rather, perhaps, the utter absence of feeling of any sort, of heart, in either letter, that struck home with a dull pain. Mother and Elizabeth, — the two names had been associated in his life for years, — always indeed; for Elizabeth was a second cousin, left early to his mother's care. For at least four years he had thought of her as his promised wife. This had

seemed a natural and entirely reasonable outgrowth of their intimacy; his mother had desired it, and neither he nor Elizabeth had been in the least averse to the arrangement. He had been somewhat tried, of late, by her apathy with regard to his literary studies, and her indifference to his success as an author; but he had told himself that she was like all young women. Now as the frowns deepened on his face until it was positively scarred with them, he admitted to himself that all young women were not like her. "What is truth? What is truth?" repeated the wretched phonograph in his brain, over, and over, and *over!* He was angry even with that. He swept all the papers and letters, Reuben and Hannah, the creations of his brain, Fletcher with his gay nothings, his mother and Elizabeth with their empty nothings, into his padlock box and turned the key. Then he went to bed; but it was late that night, or rather it was early in the morning, before he forgot his perplexities in sleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRUTH *VERSUS* FALSEHOOD.

CORLISS ELLIOTT was tilted back in an easy-chair in one of the small reading rooms connected with the college. His attitude was that of a loungeur, and several other young fellows were sitting or standing about in positions suggestive of leisure and recreation. Some topic of considerable interest, involving a difference of opinion, had been up for discussion between two of them; and Corliss had just drawn attention to himself by asking: —

“Why don’t you two fellows appeal to me to settle that dispute for you?”

“How should you know anything about it?” one of them asked. “You don’t even know the person we are talking about.”

“Don’t I, indeed! What makes you so sure of that?”

“Well, do you? He hasn’t been in town but about a week; and he hasn’t been out to the college at all, despite the fact that he has a dear cousin in this neighborhood.”

“It is never safe to jump at conclusions, Harry,

my boy. I know the color of his hair and eyes as well as I do those of my own father, not to speak of several other important items of information that I could give you concerning him on occasion."

The young man, Harry, was about to enlist him for his side of the debate, when the other, who had been gazing meditatively at Corliss, suddenly turned their thoughts into a new channel.

"I say, Elliott, you were not — upon my word I believe you were — one of those fellows the other night!" The color instantly flamed into Elliott's face; but he answered with his easy laugh, —

"What a definite question! What a lawyer you will make, Alf! Fancy pitching such carefully planned and lucid queries as that at the head of a trembling witness! Let me see; I was a 'fellow' of some sort the other night? undoubtedly; and I was one of a lot of fellows, no doubt, but how shall it be determined which lot you refer to?"

"He wouldn't chaff like that if he had been with them last night," volunteered Harry. "You've heard of the precious scrape they got into at the Belmont House, haven't you?"

"Oh! some more gossip? That's right, Hal; lawyers have to be on the lookout for all such little things. What did we do at the Belmont House to create a sensation?"

"So you were one of them?" chimed in the other.

“I wonder we never thought of you ; we knew you were out somewhere last night. Tell us all about it, Corl, that’s a good fellow. If you hadn’t been out of town to-day, you would know that there has been quite an excitement over it. Lots of stories are afloat ; one is that the Prex is going to expel every one of you. It isn’t true, is it? We think it would be mean for a little fracas like that, and gotten up in honor of a stranger too. We’ll stand by you, Corl, if that is it ; though we thought it was mean in Bliss not to invite all our set. It was Bliss’s spread, wasn’t it? And what did you break, anyhow? Those yarns are always so awfully exaggerated.”

They closed about him in great eagerness, — all the young men in the room ; all talked at once, each asking a question about the affair at the Belmont House. They had evidently been brought back to a subject that had excited them much earlier in the day, and from which they had been resting, having gleaned, as they supposed, all possible information. Behold ! here was a new and unexpected vein to work.

“I’m sorry you were with them, Corl,” said one of the older boys. “It isn’t simply that one evening’s performance ; but that fellow Traverse has a bad name, if he is from Oxford. I shouldn’t care to be associated with him. How came you to know him so well?”

“Oh, hold on !” shouted another. “Dick is

green with envy, Corl, because he wasn't invited. Don't listen to his preaching, but tell us about the scrape, and how you are going to get out of it. We heard that they couldn't find but three that they were sure of, and those three wouldn't give so much as a hint about the others. You weren't one of the three, were you?"

"My dear fellow, how am I going to know, unless you tell me who the three were?" This was Corliss's laughing rejoinder; then, his face suddenly growing grave, "It's a bad business, boys. I'm glad you weren't in it; though we had no end of fun, and didn't mean any harm. What's that? Traverse? Oh, he isn't so bad as his reputation; hardly anyone is. No, we haven't been expelled yet, at least I haven't; but there is no telling what will come. You fellows will stand by us, won't you, whatever happens?"

In this way he parried rather than answered their questions for several minutes. At the time they seemed to themselves to be acquiring a great deal of information; but after it was over, they reviewed the interview with a mortified realization that Corliss had told them nothing, after all, about the famous Belmont House trouble. In the midst of one of his gay, half serious, half comic responses, a click like that of a closing door sounded in the alcove just behind him. He was separated from it only by a portière. He stopped suddenly, and turned toward the portière. "Is some one in there,

boys?" he asked. "I glanced in when I sat down here, and thought it was vacant."

One of the boys pushed back the curtain and looked in. "No," he said, "there is no one here; it is that old door; it gives a click every now and then."

Corliss drew a sigh of relief. "I was preparing to be scared," he said gayly; "it would have been rather hard on me to have had the Prex, for instance, hiding there, to listen to my confessions." Then the questions and answers went eagerly forward. In point of fact, President Chambers had been standing in the corner of the alcove, almost concealed by the heavy curtains, looking thoughtfully at a book whose leaves he did not turn. It was he who had clicked the door as he passed out.

Fifteen minutes afterwards, while Corliss Elliott was still alternately astonishing and irritating his small audience, Jackson, the colored dignitary who managed all the important affairs of the college, appeared with his courtly bow to say that President Chambers would like to have Mr. Elliott come to him in his office immediately.

"Now for it!" exclaimed the boys, while Corliss suddenly and in silence tilted forward his chair, and sprang to his feet.

"I'm glad I'm not in your shoes," said Harry sympathetically. "But remember," added another voice, "we will stand by you." Then Corliss

Elliott moved away, wondering what in the world President Chambers could want with him.

The President gave no time for consideration ; glancing up as the young man entered, he began without other recognition than the slightest possible bend of his stately head.

“Elliott, you doubtless remember that I gave you fifty dollars yesterday morning, and asked you to step in at Wellington’s as you passed, and pay the bill ?”

“Certainly sir,” said Elliott politely.

“Very well ; what did you do with the money ?”

“Paid the bill of course.” And now Elliott’s voice had taken on both a questioning and a haughty tone.

“And secured a receipt for it ?”

“No, sir ; the receiving clerk was very busy ; and he remarked to me that I might leave the bill with the money, and he would send up the receipt by mail. I knew the college had dealings constantly at Wellington’s, and supposed it would be all right. Is there anything wrong ?”

“Yes ; many things are wrong ; this is by no means the worst feature. Words would not express my astonishment, I may say dismay, at learning that you were involved in the disgraceful scene that took place at the Belmont House last night. Had my information come from any other source than the one it did, I should have indignantly denied it, on the ground that your father’s son

could not have been guilty of such a lapse. To find that you were not only a participant, but that the remembrance of it simply amuses you, and is even to be boasted of, almost staggers my belief in young men altogether. I had not imagined it of you. I have decided that you perhaps anticipated the result, in dollars and cents, of the disgrace, and are now aware that your share will amount to something more than fifty dollars. Plate glass and decorated china are expensive articles to play with, young man."

By this time Corliss Elliott's face was aflame. His anger, which had been steadily rising since the first words were spoken to him, had reached white heat. Yet he kept his voice low as he said, "May I be allowed to ask what informant against me is so trustworthy, that on the strength of his words you feel yourself at liberty not only to accuse me falsely, but to insult me by insinuations that I should think would be beneath you?"

President Chambers looked steadily and sternly at the flushed face; but his voice was sorrowful as he said, —

"Elliott, if you were innocent, I should pass over the impudence of your language, I believe I should even rejoice in it; but it is bitter to me to remember that my informant was no other than yourself. I was in the lower reading-room this evening, in the alcove just back of where you sat, and heard your remarkably genial, even merry,

admissions to your classmates, as well as your frank avowal of intimate acquaintance with a man whom I believe to be thoroughly bad in every sense of the word. After that, can you wonder at my suspicions?"

The young man caught his breath in a sudden gasp as he listened, and stifled what sounded like a groan. For a moment he stared almost vacantly at the stern face before him, as though he felt unable to gather his thoughts into words. Then he burst forth, —

“President Chambers, there was not a word of truth in that. I was just chaffing the fellows, to show them how easy it was to cheat them. I had not heard anything about the trouble at the Belmont House until they told me, and I don’t know any of the particulars even now. I have been away all day, by permission of the authorities. The boys were so excited and so gullible that I could not help having a little fun at their expense. Besides, I had reasons for wishing” — Here he came to a sudden stop. It was clear that his listener did not believe him. The stern look never left his face. Instead, it deepened, as he said after a moment of impressive silence, —

“Can I believe that a self-respecting young man, deliberately and without other motive than fun, would tell as many lies as I heard you tell to your classmates, if what you are now saying is true? Elliott, is it possible that you do not see that this

way of trying to evade disgrace is but a deeper disgrace? Listen!" lifting his hand with an imperative gesture, as the impetuous young voice was about to burst forth. "You have accused me of insulting you by an insinuation. I did speak words to you that nothing but your own language, as heard by me, could have wrung from me; but I ought to speak plainer. It is right that you should know that the fifty dollars which you say you left with the receiving-clerk at Wellington's, he says he has never received. I came home from there, firm in the belief that you could explain the matter as soon as you reached here. I thought that the hour might have been later than you supposed, and you might have felt compelled to let the errand wait until another time, or that it had slipped your mind; but when I heard you to-night, and learned that you were one of those who had, but the evening before, defied authority, and disgraced yourself and the college, and then that you could laugh over it, I felt that I was justified in believing that you had been tempted into other lines of disgrace. I do not wish to be hard upon you," he added in tones less stern, as he saw the suddenly paling face. "I would be glad to help you, and to shield you from all the public disgrace possible. With regard to this affair at the Belmont House, the trustees and faculty are agreed to a unit that public and decided examples must be made of those who, in so flagrant a manner,

dared college sentiment. Every student knows the position which we hold in regard to these matters. It is not possible for any of you to sin ignorantly. But as concerns this other, Elliott, I am persuaded that you may have been led into sudden temptation; and if you will be true to me, and state everything exactly as it is, I will shield you, and give you a chance to recover yourself."

"You are very kind," said Corliss; "very kind indeed! But I want you to distinctly understand that I do not wish any shielding from you, nor any 'chances,' as you call them. It shall go hard with me if I do not make you repent this night's work." And turning, he strode from the room. He had never been so angry in his life. The veins in his temples seemed swelling into cords, and the blood beat against them as though determined to burst forth. Bareheaded and without overcoat as he was, he strode into the chill night air, uncertain which way he went, and indifferent as to what became of him. The idea that he, Corliss Elliott, son of a father whose word was accounted as good as a bond, grandson of a man who had been noted for his unswerving fidelity to truth and honor, should have it hinted to him that he had spoken falsely, acted falsely, actually descended to the place of a common thief! It was almost beyond belief. Thus far, no thought of the immediate consequences of this state of things had entered his mind. That people would hear of it, that he would be expelled

from college in disgrace, that his mother's heart would break, and his father's be wrung with agony, did not occur to him. It was simply the sense of personal outrage which he felt, and the overwhelming desire to punish President Chambers for the insults that he had heaped upon him. In that state of mind he was, of course, incapable of continued thought, or of connected thought of any sort. Twice he made the circuit of the grounds, raging inwardly so much that he was not conscious that the night was cold. When at last he came to himself sufficiently to ask what should be done under the extraordinary circumstances that now surrounded him, the strongest feeling he had was a desire to escape from college authority. Not that he feared it. Not he! It might rather be said that he scorned it. The very grounds had suddenly become hateful to him. If he could only be at home that minute, in his mother's room, telling her the story of his wrongs, with his hand slipped into both of hers, while his father sat opposite with his keen, searching, yet sympathetic eyes resting upon him, and Hildreth leaning over the back of his chair listening intently, while she planned even then how to help him! In the distance he heard the whistle of an out-bound train. He stopped before a friendly lamp-post, and looked at his watch. In less than an hour there would be another, going westward; and in two hours more he could be at home. Why not! Not in

that state, hatless and coatless! No, he could venture into the hateful building long enough to secure what he needed. Should he go, and without a word to any one? What right had those who had so outraged his feelings to expect courtesy from him? He still had no thought of consequences for himself. To be sure, it wanted less than two days to Friday, when he should go home as usual; but two days under some circumstances are an eternity.

He rushed toward the building where he roomed. Jackson was carrying the mail to the various rooms, and held out a letter for him. It was from Hildreth. He stopped under the hall-lamp to read it.

DEAR CORLISS, — Father says it is foolish, but he really is not so well this evening. He has been feverish and somewhat flighty all day, and has asked frequently for you. We think he might have a more restful night if you could come down and sit with him. Could you, do you think? He is not seriously ill, you know, but there is fever enough to make us anxious. We shall send John to the station in the hope that you can come; but father says if you cannot, you are not to worry in the least, and he bids me tell you that he is only sending for you to please mother and me.

Corliss gave a kind of groan as he finished. He had forgotten that his father was ill.

“No bad news, I hope, sir.” It was Jackson speaking with respectful sympathy, but Corliss did not answer him. Professor Marchant was moving down the hall. Corliss turned toward him, speak-

ing hurriedly. "Professor Marchant, my father is ill. Can you excuse me from college for to-morrow. I want to take the eight o'clock train."

Professor Marchant was prompt with his sympathy. He had not heard the latest news, and he took it for granted that the father's illness was very serious. How else was he to account for the manifest distress of the son?

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR HER SAKE.

JOHN STUART did not leave the Elliott farm on the following week, neither did he give notice that he intended to do so. Before he had quite settled it that this must undeniably be the next step, an event occurred that put it in the background. Farmer Elliott fell ill. Not seriously so; at least the doctor spoke cheerily, and hoped that the tendency toward a course of fever would be broken before it had a chance to get seated. But the fact that Farmer Elliott was ill at all was sufficient to awaken almost consternation in his family. Never, since the children could remember, had there been a day in which "father" had not been able to attend to his usual round of duties. That he was actually ill enough to call a physician, and later to be even sat up with at night, was a startling innovation on the home life. Of course John Stuart would not talk of leaving under such circumstances. Instead, he assumed Mr. Elliott's out-door duties entirely, and made himself so steadily necessary in the house that even Susan said, for her part she didn't see how

they should ever get on without him when he took a notion to leave, as hired folks always did.

In addition to the duties of his position, John had other cares and burdens known only to himself. Quite unexpectedly he found himself painfully associated with the affairs of the Elliott family. During her father's illness Hildreth was dependent upon him for her trips to and from her schoolhouse for the weekly evening gathering. They were generally accompanied either by Rex Hartwell or Elfrida Elliott, sometimes by both; for Rex had given himself with great earnestness to the business of helping the young men and older boys who gathered there. Nannie Marvin, however, much to Hildreth's disappointment, had steadily refused to make a second attempt. She had a dozen excuses; she did not know how to teach girls, not girls of that stamp; it was much better for them all to be under Hildreth's lead. No, indeed, she would not take boys instead. Rex could do better for them than she could. She was very busy just now; perhaps later in the season, when she had settled down, she might be able to help. Hildreth was puzzled. Could it be Nannie's approaching marriage that made her seem so unlike herself? Of course she was busy, but not to be able to give a single evening in a week to work in which Rex was not only engaged, but absorbed, seemed strange indeed. As for Elfrida, she frankly stated that she went for the fun to be got out of the going and coming, and not

for any interest that she had in the gatherings. John Stuart had been accepted doubtfully and with many misgivings as the present leader of the five little boys who had first interested him, mainly because they begged to be under his care, and showed the keenest interest, not only in the meeting, but in studying up to the best of their small abilities the subject upon which he had talked to them. Hildreth, watching, anxious, could find nothing to which to object; evidently John had more general knowledge than she had supposed, but, as yet, he seemed to be doing no harm. As soon as her father was well enough to be talked to, she must ask his advice, and together they must arrange this thing differently; and there, for the time being, the matter rested.

The father did not get well; instead, the slow fever took obstinate hold of him, and while he was not at any time seriously ill, at least the doctor did not call it serious, he was in need of constant care, and was the subject of more or less anxiety. To one evening class Rex and John Stuart went alone, Rex taking Miss Elliott's place as well as he could, and being helped out in ways that surprised him, by the watchful John. He commended that person warmly on the way home, and then cross-examined him in a manner that made it painfully difficult to answer with even the semblance of truth. He was very kind, assuring John that, with the degree of education that he evidently had, he ought to be able

to get work better suited to him than that which he was now doing. He said he could imagine a chain of circumstances that might have led, in a fit of desperation perhaps, to taking the first thing that offered; the times had been very hard indeed, and he honored him for doing anything honest, rather than to live upon others. But when Mr. Elliott recovered his health, they would talk it over together, and see what could be done. Mr. Elliott, he was sure, would be the last person to try to hold a man to a place lower than he was fitted to fill. Under existing circumstances what could a self-respecting young man do, but mumble something that was intended to sound like gratitude, and then maintain silence? After that conversation, Rex told Hildreth that there was some mystery about the man; he was afraid that all had not been quite right with his past, he seemed so utterly averse to frankness, and did not respond kindly to sympathy. Of course this made Hildreth more anxious and more careful.

It was nearly a week afterwards that John was driving rapidly home from town one evening, when he met one of the boys belonging to Hildreth's, or rather to Rex Hartwell's, evening class, a shock-headed, clumsy, dull-eyed boy, who had seemed to John to have no distinctive character of any sort.

"'Evening," he said, halting close to the wagon-wheel, with the evident intention of arresting its progress. "I was comin' to meet you."

“So I perceive; is there anything I can do for you?”

“I dunno; maybe you can try, and maybe you can't. I went to see Rex Hartwell; but he has gone into town, and won't be back in time, I reckon.”

“In time for what, Thomas? Jump in, and we can talk while we ride; I am in a hurry to get home. If I can help you in any way, I shall be glad to do so.”

“I dunno as it is helping me,” said the boy, clambering into the wagon; “only I feel as though anything that would help her would kind of help me, somehow; you're a friend of hers, ain't you?”

“I hope so. Who is she?”

“Well, it's that Elf Elliott I'm talking about. I ain't much of a friend to *her*; she's always laughing and poking fun at us, but bein' she's her sister, I thought something ought to be done.”

“Thomas,” said John Stuart sharply, “tell me, in as few words as you can, what you are talking about.”

Thus admonished, Thomas told with some idea of brevity the piece of gossip that had stirred him to action.

He had learned, through listening to the talk of others who considered him too dull to join them, and too stupid to report their sayings where harm might result, of a company of “fellows and girls” who were to spend that very evening at the Way-

side House. One of the boys had a brother who worked at Wayside; and he said that supper had been ordered at ten o'clock, and there was to be a dance before and afterwards.

"They are a lot of college fellows," explained Thomas, "and as mean a lot as they can get up, even there, I guess;" from which verdict it will be understood what estimate Thomas was getting of higher education. "And they are going to bring a lot of girls with them from the city; some of them have been there before, and Dick says no sister of his should have anything to do with them girls. But one of them they are going to get here, and that's Elf Elliott."

"Take care, Thomas!" said John Stuart sharply, and he felt the indignant blood flushing his own face; "Miss Elliott would not like to hear you using her young sister's name in such connection; if you are a friend of hers, you should remember that."

"I am taking care," said the boy impatiently; "if I hadn't been, do you think I would have tramped out here to tell you about it? I thought maybe it could be stopped, and that you could do something about it; if you can't, why, I'll find somebody else."

"Yes," said John Stuart soothingly, very much ashamed of his unnecessary outburst; "I see your motive is good; tell me all that you know about it; something must be done. Why do you think Miss Elfrida is connected with it?"

“ Because some of the girls from our neighborhood go to her school ; two of 'em do, you know ; and they overhear talk ; and they know that Elf Elliott and one or two other girls have been writing letters to some of the college boys. They don't sign their own names, you know ; they don't sign the names of anybody that really is, and they just do it for fun ; only you know what Miss Elliott thinks of such fun. You heard her a few weeks ago, didn't you, talk about that in the meetin' ? and some of the girls looked at one another then ; they saw she didn't know her own sister was doin' it. Well, the college fellow she has been writin' to has made a plan to come out here, and get her and go for a ride, and bring up at the Wayside House, and introduce her to them other girls, and they're a set ! Jack says ; not a decent one among 'em, he says ; and it seems awful, don't it, to have her sister among 'em ? ”

“ Tell me how you learned this last, Thomas.”

“ Why, one of our girls that goes up there to school sets right behind Elf Elliott and that Holcombe girl, and she heard them talking it all over. Elf, she don't know about being taken to the Wayside House ; she just thinks she is going to have a ride with him, you know, and I s'pose she don't see no great harm in it ; but Jack says she is one of 'em, that he heard the two fellows who came out to order the supper and room and everything, talking and laughing about it.”

Thomas must certainly have been satisfied with the close attention that his story received. John Stuart listened, and questioned, and went over the main points again, approaching them skilfully from another angle, to be sure that the narrator did not contradict himself; and felt sure at the close that the story he had heard had some foundation, enough to make it important to give it attention, and that immediately.

He looked at his watch, and found that the hour was even later than he had supposed, and that what was done must be done quickly. Then he hurried his horses and got rid of Thomas, with the assurance that he had done all that was necessary, and that the matter should receive prompt attention; also with an injunction not to mention what he had told him to another human being. This last was earnestly impressed.

“Remember, Thomas, Miss Elliott would be seriously injured if this story should get out. Since there are only a very few of us who know it, and all of us are to be trusted, we may hope to save her sister from unpleasant consequences, and at the same time shield her. I am sure I can depend upon you to make the others feel the same.”

Thomas went away with the belief that he was being depended upon to do an important work, and also with the vague feeling, which had come to him before, that John Stuart was a “real smart man.”

Yet John Stuart, left to himself, had no such comfortable realization of his power. He drove rapidly, under the impression that there was need for haste; but just what could be done had by no means occurred to him. Had he heard this remarkable story earlier, he might have proceeded with caution, and accomplished results without frightening anybody. Then again, for the hundredth time, came that dreary second thought that, were he himself, instead of a man masquerading under an assumed name and character, his way would be infinitely plainer.

However, the first step was, of course, to learn whether Elfrida was at home, and if so, whether she had an appointment for the evening away from home. Susan could help him thus far.

"No, she ain't to home," said Susan, speaking in a crisp tone, "and it's my opinion that she ought to be; I think myself that her pa is a good deal sicker than they tell about. He ain't no hand to lie abed for common things."

"Can you tell me where to find Miss Elfrida? I have an errand to do for her."

"Oh, you'll find her, I s'pose, down to that Holcombe girl's house; at least that is where she has gone to spend the night. I told Hildreth I would keep her at home if I was her; but Hildreth said she was so kind of nervous, and not like herself, that her mother thought she'd better go. They think she's worryin' about her pa; but it's

queer kind of worryin' that'll be willing to go off, and leave him all night. I don't see, for my part, what she finds in that Holcombe girl to be so fond of; they ain't a mite alike."

John left her still moralizing, and went out in haste, to consider. He had been gone all day on business that Mr. Elliott had felt to be of importance; he had heard nothing about plans, but Elfrida often walked home in pleasant weather. Now it appeared that she must have left in the morning with the intention of spending the night with Laura Holcombe. John did not like "that Holcombe girl" any better than did Susan.

Without any clear idea as to what he should do next, he went to Mrs. Elliott for permission to drive to the village on important business. It distressed him to remember that she gave a reluctant consent, and evidently wondered, as well she might, what business of importance could call him back to the village, leaving work that had been long waiting for him. She was, however, too preoccupied to ask close questions. Not so Hildreth; she came out to the wagon with troubled face.

"John, must you really go back to town to-night? There are so many things to be done to get ready for the night. Why didn't you stop and attend to the business when you came through?"

"This is something that I have thought of since," said John, lamely enough; and went away angry with himself that he seemed to be living a

life which made it necessary to give every sentence he spoke a double meaning.

“The way of the dissembler is hard, at least,” he told himself bitterly as he drove away. What did he mean to do next? He would drive at once to the Holcombes’, and learn if Elfrida was there; and then what? He drove on hurriedly, entirely uncertain of his next move. Would it have been better to have told Hildreth what he had heard? No, he answered himself emphatically, he would shield her as long as he could from any added anxiety. He wondered how it would do to tell Elfrida that he had a message for her, and then take her home; telling her, by the way, the story that had come to his ears. Even if there was not a word of truth in it, it might open her eyes to the importance of taking the utmost care of her movements, lest they could be construed into evil. This was the only course he had thought of when he reached the Holcombes’, only to be informed that Miss Elfrida had gone to take a short drive with a friend.

“Did Miss Laura go with her?” he ventured to ask.

“Oh, no!” Mrs. Holcombe said; Laura was not well enough to go out evenings; didn’t he know she had been sick again? It was an old friend of Elfrida’s who had called for her, a college friend of her brother, she believed. Then she, too, questioned closely in return, and hoped that Mr. Elliott

was not worse. Laura would be dreadfully disappointed if Elfie had to go home.

He got away as soon as he could, taking the direct road to the Wayside House, and making all speed; but he overtook no one. There was a gay company at the Wayside House, and among them undoubtedly several "fast" young women and some college men, thus much of the story was true; but Elfrida Elliott, so far as he could learn, was not present. He told the host that he had called with a message for a person whom he had expected to meet there, and, declining to leave any word, was departing, when he caught a glimpse of Corliss Elliott in the small room opening from the main reception-room, leaning against a mantel, and looking moodily into the fire. He went out with a new trouble knocking at his heart. Was sorrow coming to Hildreth through this young man also? And was there nothing that he could do? Did the young man know that his sister was to be of the questionable company in that questionable house that night?

Busy with these thoughts, he drove very slowly, all the time on the watch. The long lane down which he was driving was the private entrance to the Wayside House. At the gateway he was stopped by a handsome turnout. The driver, apparently a gentleman, was having some trouble with spirited horses, who resented the appearance of the gate-post. The light from the gate-lamp

shone full on the carriage. It was Elfrida Elliott who shrank back from the glare of light. In an instant John was at her side, speaking distinctly.

“Miss Elfrida, you are needed at home immediately; I came here in search of you.”

“O John!” she said, her very lips pale with apprehension, “father is worse!”

He had made no sort of reply. While he helped her, frightened and weeping, from one carriage to the other, and her companion tried to express his polite regrets, looking all the time excessively annoyed, John Stuart held himself to utter silence. He would have enough to say, that he did not under these peculiar circumstances know in the least how to say, when he had driven away with his charge.

CHAPTER XV.

TANGLES.

“JOHN,” said Corliss Elliott, as he took his seat in the sleigh, “how ill is my father?” His voice shook with strong feeling of some sort, and even by the dim light of the station lamp his face showed pale and drawn. John Stuart felt a keen pity for him, and as they rode swiftly along talked as cheerily as he could.

“I do not think there is cause for serious anxiety. He has a slow fever, which is, of course, exhausting; but the doctor speaks confidently of the outcome. His inability to sleep has been the most trying feature of the trouble for a day or two; and in his semi-wakeful feverish thoughts there seemed to have been troubled fancies about you; so that your mother and sister thought, if you could be beside him in health and strength, these might be dispelled, and he be able to rest.”

John was forgetting himself again in the interest of the present moment. Had Corliss not been too self-occupied to have noticed, he would have stared at hearing just this form of address from the hired man.

Part of the sentence caused him pain. He drew a deep quivering sigh that went to John's heart, as he said tremulously, "He is troubled about me, is he? That seems almost prophetic, poor father! I do not know how I am to get along without his advice; I never needed it more." Then, after a moment's silence, "John, I must manage in some way to see Hildreth to-night, and to see her alone. Can you think how it can be done?"

He was in trouble, certainly, else he would never have appealed to the hired man in this way! He had been always more or less interested in this experiment of his father's, and was uniformly kind to John; but it had been the kindness of condescension, as though he would always say, "I am Corliss Elliott, a college student, and you are my father's hired tramp." The tremble in his voice, and his appeal, had in them a note of equality. He went on eagerly.

"The truth is, I am in trouble, in very great trouble; of course I cannot talk to my father, and equally of course my mother must not be disturbed now; but Hildreth has always time and courage for everybody's trouble. If I can talk it all over with her, I know I shall feel better at once. But I don't know how to manage it without worrying my mother, and perhaps my father."

"Oh, I think we can arrange that," was John's cheerful reply. "I help in taking care of your

father nights; and when he has enjoyed you for a while, and is resting, we can plan to have you and your sister disappear together for a few minutes."

He did plan it successfully. No sooner was the father lying back with quiet eyes, resting from the pleased excitement of seeing his boy, than John, who had meantime been moving quietly about, arranging fire and lights, and doing a dozen other small things to add to the comfort of all, came over to Mrs. Elliott, speaking low, —

"Could I remain here now on guard, while Miss Elliott goes out with her brother for a breath of fresh air? I heard you urging it earlier in the evening."

Mrs. Elliott responded promptly. Hildreth, who had a week's vacation from school, and was spending it all in her father's room, was a source of anxiety to her mother.

"Go, Hildreth," she said earnestly, "and take a brisk walk with Corliss out in the moonlight; it will do you good. Corliss, carry her off; she has not been out of this room to-day, and there is really no need. John," with a grateful glance toward him, "is as good as a trained nurse."

The father added feebly his desire for the same thing; and the two slipped away, only one being aware how eager Corliss was to go. John, at his post near the window, ready for anything that might be wanted, watched the two pacing back

and forth in the moonlight, with a great ache in his heart. The boy was in trouble; and he, by reason of his own folly, was powerless to help him. If he were occupying his proper position in this household, how easily and naturally he could say to Corliss, "Tell me all about it, my friend; it is but a very few years since I was as young as you are; I can understand most things without being told, and stand ready to help you in whatever direction help is needed." As matters stood, what was there that he could say? He puzzled over the possible trouble; if it was a question of money, and careless boys like Corliss were always getting into money scrapes, how easily could John Stuart King have drawn a check for any reasonable amount! What could John Stuart, hired farm-hand, consistently do? Yet what was there that he would not do for this merry-eyed, kind-hearted, free and easy boy? Not alone for his sake, nor for the sake of his father and mother, both of whom John Stuart loved, but because nothing this world contained would be better for him than to be able to bring a happy light into Hildreth Elliott's grave, and in these days anxious, eyes. He told himself gloomily that at least to himself he would speak the truth.

Out in the clear, cold air, pacing briskly back and forth, never going out of sight of the windows where the watcher stood, were Corliss and Hildreth, — he, pouring out his eager, passionate story,

almost too rapidly at times for coherence; she, alert, keen, questioning, yet alive with tender sympathy.

“O Corliss!” she said once, her voice full of sadness. He hastened to answer the unspoken reproach.

“Yes, I know; it all comes from my intolerable habit of chaffing, playing with the truth. You said it would get me into trouble some day, and it has. I did not think it could. I thought you were over-particular, but I have learned a lesson! I don’t do it half as much as I used, Hildreth, I don’t, indeed. I can seem to see your eyes looking right into mine, and stopping the words. I wish I had seen them that night; but I was excited and anxious, you know, that the fellows — no, you don’t know that, either.”

“What is it that I don’t know, Corliss? Let me have all the truth this time.”

The boy looked annoyed, and hesitated a moment; then he said, “It has to do with a matter that I was not going to mention for fear of causing you needless anxiety; but I shall have to tell it now, and it doesn’t matter, since it came to nothing. You know the Wayside House, at the junction, what a bad name it has? Well, there are a lot of fellows in college, or not a lot, either, three or four, who are about as bad as they need be. Two of them, it seems, have been holding correspondence with some girls in this neighborhood. I

don't know who the girls are; they have assumed names, or at least names that I never heard of before. One of the boys, named Hooper, is the worst scamp in college, or out of it. He has been writing letters by the volume to this girl, whoever she is, and making fun of her to all the boys in his set. I don't hear much about their proceedings, for, as you may naturally suppose, I don't belong; but I overheard enough one night to interest me, and I went in where they were, just as he was exhibiting a picture. The girl actually committed the folly of sending her photograph to him! Hildreth, if you could have heard those fellows talk as they bent over it, I think your eyes would have blazed! I caught only a glimpse of the face, and it was taken in a fancy head-dress of some sort that shaded the features; but I was almost certain that it was Nell Marvin! You don't think it possible that Nell could have sent him her picture, do you? I tried in every possible way to get another look at it; but the fellow did not mean I should see it at all, so I failed. After that, I tried to find out what their next scheme might be; they always have something on hand; and I found, no matter how, it took a good while to do it, that they had an appointment, two or three of them, with ladies, so-called, at this same Wayside House, on Tuesday evening of this week; and that that rascal Hooper had an appointment to meet the girl with whom he had been corresponding,

at the same place! Think of it, Hildreth! The only thing I could think of was to rush off the next afternoon down here, and spend the evening at the Wayside House; and a charming evening I had of it! Think of being so near home as that, Hildreth, and not being able to come home! Those precious scamps and their so-called ladies were on hand, but there was no girl among them that I had ever seen before; and the chief scamp, Hooper, wasn't there at all. He was expected, however. I overheard all sorts of conjectures as to his non-appearance; the fear that he would come, later, held me there until the party broke up.

“They had a lovely row, some of them, before that time; drank too much, you know. Well, there was nothing for me but to get back to college; and, meantime, trouble had been brewing there for me. This fracas at the Belmont House occurred, you understand, on that very evening. It would be easy enough for me to prove an alibi, only—how much better off would I be in proving myself to have spent the evening, and away into the night, with a questionable company at the Wayside House? For that matter none but questionable companies gather there, while respectable people do frequent the Belmont. You can see why I was anxious to throw those boys off the track in regard to where I was that evening. I hadn't heard any particulars about the trouble at the Belmont, and I don't know any-

thing about it yet, save that some costly dishes and furniture were smashed. I suppose there will be a big bill to pay, but of course I can get out of that. As to the fifty dollars, I'm in awful trouble. I paid it in as certainly as my name is Elliott; and I paid it to the assistant book-keeper, who stands very high. How is it possible for him to say that I didn't; and what has become of it? You see how it is, Hildreth; circumstances are all against me. If I had been at home that night in my room, at work, as I should have been but for that notion I got that some of our young people were in danger, why, I could prove it in two minutes; in fact, there would be nothing to prove; the boys wouldn't have thought of such a thing as my being among that crowd if I had not pretended to know that wretch of a Traverse, whom I have not even seen. It all comes back to that, Hildreth; I have been playing with falsehoods, and they have got me into a scrape, as you said they would. I don't see any way out. When I started for home to-night I was too angry to think; I am yet, for that matter. What business had President Chambers to charge me with being a thief! Suppose the fifty dollars cannot be found, what is that to me, when I know I laid it down before the book-keeper's eyes, and he acknowledged it? Hildreth, I have been treated meanly; I am sure my father would say so; but just how to manage it I don't know. I suppose I shall have to pay it again.

Do you think it would be possible for us to raise that amount extra, Hildreth, while father is sick? And why should I pay it, anyway? Wouldn't that look like a confession of crookedness on my part? I cannot think clearly; if there was only some one with whom we could advise."

"How would it do to talk with Rex Hartwell?"

The young man shrank and shivered. "O Hildreth, I couldn't! he would think I wanted to borrow the money from him; and I would rather work it out on the road than do that. Must people hear about it, do you think? There will be so many details to explain, and all sorts of false stories will get afloat. But then, if I am expelled from college, it will be all out anyhow. What a miserable business it is; and I always prided myself so much on our good name. To think that I should be the one to stain it!"

The poor fellow's voice quivered with pain, and his sister arose at once to the situation.

"Never mind, Corliss; we shall find our way out. It is not as though you had really done any of the things with which you are charged; if that were so, it almost seems as though I could not bear it. As it is, we shall be shown a way to make the truth plain. Let me think it over to-night, and in the morning I am sure some light as to how to act will have come to us."

The boy's grasp on her arm tightened; and his voice had a husky note, as he said, —

“You trust me, Hildreth, don't you? You don't believe for a moment that I am guilty of any of the horrid things?”

Her reply was prompt and reassuring. “Why, of course, Corliss. How can you ask such a question? I know you do nothing but play with falsehood. If you would only give up that.”

“I will, Hildreth; I give you my word for it. If I get safely out of this scrape, see if hereafter I don't make my communications ‘yea,’ and ‘nay.’”

They were opposite the window again, and he caught sight of John standing framed in it. This reminded him of something he had meant to say; he broke in with it abruptly.

“Hildreth, does John frequent the Wayside House? Last night, when I was hanging around, watching for what might develop, I saw him walk into the reception-room, and look about him, like a person in search of some one. I slipped into the small room, for, as you may well suppose, I did not care to be recognized there; but I could not help wondering what had brought him. Do you suppose he can be of that stamp?”

Hildreth drew a weary sigh. “I don't know,” she said mournfully. “I confess that I don't know what to think of him. I should like to believe in him in every way, he is so kind to father, and so thoughtful of us all, and so entirely faithful in his work; but there are suspicious circumstances connected with him, and sometimes I am afraid

that" — She broke off abruptly. Was it quite fair to speak any of her suspicions, so long as it was not necessary? Memories of his talk during that ride home from her evening meeting came to her. John's language then had been so unfitted to his position; and then, the remembrance of the haste with which he had turned his horses and gone back to town but the evening before, though he knew there were pressing duties awaiting him at home. What could possibly have called him to the Wayside House? He had had an errand, he told her, at the Holcombes'; and Elfrida had returned with him. Of course this must have taken place after he left the Wayside House. He would not have dared to take her little sister there! And her face grew dark over the passing possibility; not that Elfie would have allowed him to do so; that of course was folly. It had not surprised her that the child had suddenly resolved upon returning home; she had fits of nervousness over her father's state that could only be accounted for by supposing that she heard talk outside, which made her believe he was more seriously ill than his own family thought. The child had cried a dozen times that day; and Hildreth had foreborne to question, believing this to be the cause. Probably the Holcombes had questioned her with such serious faces and such foreboding sighs that the poor girl had been seized with a panic, and welcomed John's appearance with joy. The utmost that the sister had

said to her had been in the form of a gentle rebuke for coming back with John ; she had been reminded that he was still a comparative stranger, and that their father had been very careful not to trust him too fully. And Elfrida had said, —

“Oh! you need not be afraid of John ; he is good.” And then had followed another burst of tears.

What this much-enduring sister said aloud, after all these reflections, was, “O Corliss, if everybody would just be frank and sincere in all their words and ways, how much easier living would be! I cannot get away from the fear that John has something to conceal.”

The protective instinct came over the boy.

“Poor little woman!” he said, with his arm around her. “So many of us to worry over and to help. You have helped me, dear. The thought of looking into your true face was like a tonic. I’ve made lots of fun of your truth-telling propensities, I know, but that wasn’t being honest ; all the time I admired you for it. I tell you what it is, I should like to have my face reflect soul, as yours does. What do you think Wayland says? He’s our star boy in college, you know ; never does anything wrong. He says when he looks at your photograph he thinks of every mean thing he ever did, and is ashamed of it! Hildreth, I feel better ; you have heartened me up, somehow ; I knew you would. Let’s go in to father.”

CHAPTER XVI.

REVELATIONS.

CORLISS ELLIOTT'S courage lasted well into the next morning, when he bade his father a cheery good-by, and assured him that he would get away as early as possible on the following day, and that he would not go back at all, were it not for some important matters at college needing his attention.

Hildreth, too, was cheerful. "Keep up a good heart, Corliss," was her admonition; "the truth must conquer, you know, it always does. And, Corliss, if you find that money is needed, I mean, if you decide that it will be right to pay that money over again, we can raise it; don't worry about that, either."

This she said in the face of the fact that money was scarce, and that she had not at that moment the remotest idea how to raise the extra sum. It will be remembered that, although Mr. Elliott was what was counted a successful farmer, he was by no means a wealthy man; and to raise even fifty additional dollars, at that season of the year, would be no small matter.

When Corliss was fairly gone, some of the brightness that had been worn for his sake faded from Hildreth's face. She was haunted now with a nameless anxiety concerning Elfrida. The child was at home, having begged permission to remain there. She was well, she said, but she did not feel like school; it seemed to her that she should fly if she tried to study.

"She is worried about her father," was Mrs. Elliott's conclusion; "she certainly must have heard some grave doubts expressed as to his recovery. She cried last night whenever I mentioned his name; although I assured her that the doctor, when he came last evening, pronounced the symptoms in every way better. Do you think that exaggerated accounts of his illness can have gotten around?"

"Possibly," said Hildreth, more reticent than usual with her mother, and resolved upon a quiet talk with Elfrida at the first opportunity.

It was late in the day before the opportunity occurred; in fact, she had finally to make it. She grew the more resolved to do so, as it became evident that Elfrida distinctly avoided her, or, at least, studied to avoid a moment's conversation with her in private. There was certainly a stronger, or, rather, a different, disturbing force than her father's illness. Nervous the child certainly was, and had been, her sister reflected, for several days; and as her nerves were naturally in

a healthy and well-managed state, it became important to learn what had unsettled them. Just how she associated the girl's unrest with what Corliss had told her about the Wayside House, and the mysterious photograph, she could not have told; indeed, she assured herself indignantly that she did not associate them for a moment, only the two anxieties would persist in floating through her mind. Nevertheless, whenever she recalled Corliss's words about anonymous letters written by some one in their neighborhood, a strange shiver ran through her frame.

About the middle of the afternoon Elfrida came down-stairs dressed for walking, and announced to Susan that she was going for a long walk. That young woman, who had been sorely tried with the girl's unusual nervousness, replied tartly that she hoped she would "walk off her tantrums," and come back acting like herself.

Hildreth was on duty in her father's room at the time, but as soon as she was released made ready to follow, having taken note of the direction Elfrida had chosen. She understood her habits, and met her on her return trip, just as she had planned, half a mile from home.

"I have been sent out to take the air," she said cheerily to Elfrida, who had been walking with eyes bent on the ground, and who started like a frightened creature at first sight of her.

"Is that so?" was the eager reply; "then go on

to the rocks, there will be a lovely sunset view to-night. I thought of waiting for it myself."

"No, I have not time for the sunset to-day. I must get back and help mother; besides, I came this way on purpose to meet you. I want to have a little visit with you; we have hardly seen each other for a week or two." She linked her arm within her sister's as she spoke, and the two moved on together. Elfrida, however, had made no response; and as Hildreth stole a glance at her, she saw that she was crying softly. Her evident misery struck to the elder sister's heart.

"What is it, dear?" she asked, in tones such as a mother might have used; "you cannot be worried about father, at least, you need not be; we are more hopeful of his speedy recovery than we have been for nearly two weeks. The doctor spoke positively this morning, you know; and father feels and looks better in every way. Everything is going all right, Elfie; what is it that troubles you? Has some one been telling you that father was very ill, and not going to recover?"

Elfrida shook her head, and began to cry harder.

"Then it must be some trouble of your own, dear; I have seen for several days that something was wrong. Can't you confide in me, Elfie? I thought I was your best and dearest friend, next to mother; and she is so busy with father,—cannot I take her place for a little while?"

“I don't know how to tell it,” said poor Elfie; and her tone was so full of abject misery that her sister was sure there was something gravely wrong. They walked on for some seconds in silence, the elder sister trying to determine how best to approach a girl who had suddenly become a bundle of sore nerves. She had meant to question her closely as to why John was at the Holcombes', and how it was that she changed all her plans, and came home with him. But the girl was evidently too much excited now, and too miserable, to talk about personalities. She determined to try to interest her in something that she had forced herself to believe was entirely outside of her sister's knowledge. Perhaps through that story Elfie would get control of herself, and begin to realize that there was real trouble in the world.

“Corliss told me a strange thing last night,” she began quietly; “he is troubled about some of the college boys, wild fellows, not at all of his set, of course. There is one in particular, named Hooper, about whom he is especially anxious; or, at least, he is the one for whom he has the least hope of any young man in college. He says there is hardly any evil that that boy is not capable of planning. He overheard through some of that set that certain very bad or very foolish girls had been corresponding with them, strangers, you know, Elfie, never having so much as met them! What especially worried Corliss was that this Hooper

has a correspondent in this neighborhood. Can you imagine who it can be? They use assumed names, he thinks; and she has even sent him her photograph! Should you suppose that a girl who had intelligence enough to write a letter could be guilty of such an act of folly as that? Corliss came upon the fellow when he was exhibiting it, and laughing and making simply terrible speeches over it. Corliss caught just a glimpse of the picture, and has been haunted ever since with the idea that it bore a resemblance to Nell Marvin. Of course it was a mere resemblance, but only think how dreadful! It makes me angry for all pure-hearted girls, to think that there are others who can bring their class into disrepute in this way. Then, worse than all the rest, they had planned, those fellows, to bring a party of so-called ladies out to the Wayside House night before last for supper and a dance. This Hooper was to come out here, and take his correspondent to the Wayside to join them. Corliss was so troubled about it all, for fear, you know, that some poor ignorant girl in our neighborhood would get into trouble, that he secured leave of absence, and came out to the Wayside House."

"Corliss came to the Wayside House!" interrupted Elfrida, her voice indicating intense excitement; and she trembled so violently that the hand resting on Hildreth's arm shook as if with an ague chill.

“Yes,” said Hildreth gravely, and with sinking heart. Something very serious must be the matter. Her hope was, poor sister, that Elfrida must have become aware, in some way, of the correspondence, and knew who was carrying it on, and that her conscience was troubling her because she had kept it secret. She tried to finish her story without visible agitation.

“He spent the entire evening at the Wayside House, in such company, he says, as he was never in before, and desires never to be again; but he knew none of the people, at least none of the girls. And this Hooper did not appear at all. He does not know now whether Hooper learned in some way that he was there, and feared that he would recognize the girl, or what detained him. Corliss is still worried and anxious. He talked with me this morning about it, and suggested that perhaps you could help us to get at the truth. It touches home, you see, coming right into our neighborhood. Do the schoolgirls ever talk up any such ideas, Elfie? Of course none of them would go to the Wayside House; but there is no girl among your classmates who would write an anonymous letter, is there?”

Elfrida made no sort of answer; and Hildreth, suppressing an anxious sigh, after a moment went on.

“There’s another thing. Corliss says that, while he was waiting there that evening, he saw John

moving about in the large room, as though he, too, were waiting for somebody. Corliss didn't speak to him, because, of course, he did not care to be recognized in that place if it could be avoided; but he could not help wondering if John were in the habit of going to the Wayside. I cannot think that he is, and yet I do not know; there is something suspicious about him, and I have been disappointed in a good many people of late."

"Is the Wayside House such a perfectly dreadful place, Hildreth?"

It was Elfrida's voice that asked the question, but so hoarse and constrained that her sister felt that she would not have known it under other circumstances. She looked anxiously at the tear-filled eyes and flushed face, and spoke gently: —

"Why, Elfie dear, it is hardly necessary for you to ask that question. You know the reputation of the house; our father, you remember, would not think for a moment of sending one of us there on an errand, even in broad daylight. Why do you ask? Do you think John goes there often? or had he an errand that he felt was important? He must have gone early in the evening, before he went to the Holcombes', of course. I confess that all his movements on that evening looked suspicious to me; the fact that he must drive back to town at all, when there were so many duties awaiting him at home, seemed strange. I don't like to be always suspecting people of wrong, but

we ought to be careful about John; we are responsible for his being in this neighborhood, I suppose. And as to this other matter, we simply cannot put it away from us. One cannot help fearing that some poor girl who has no mother, and has had no bringing up, has been led into evil ways right here in our midst. If it were one of my scholars, Elfie, it almost seems as though it would break my heart; but I cannot think of any of them who would be tempted in this way."

"It isn't one of them," exclaimed Elfrida, bursting into a perfect passion of tears, and speaking words so choked with sobs that Hildreth could scarcely understand them; "it isn't one of your girls. It is just I, your own sister; I have done it all! I didn't mean any harm; it was just for fun. They dared me to do it, the girls did. Laura Holcombe said I wouldn't dare to write a letter to anybody, because of you; she said, if I had a grandfather, and wrote to him, I would have to show all my letters to you before they were sent, and a lot more stuff like that. So I thought I would show them that I wasn't afraid. I thought, too, that it was real fun; and I didn't think for a minute that any harm could come of it. O Hildreth! have I disgraced you all? and will father and mother have to be told? Oh, I wish I could die!" She turned suddenly, and threw herself down on an old log by the wayside, and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed as though

her heart would break. Hildreth stood still, regarding her with an expression of mingled pain and wonder. She had hardly even yet taken in the thought that the poor, ignorant, misguided girl, that she had been alternately blaming and compassionating ever since she had heard of her, could possibly be their Elfie! Solicitude for her sister finally overmastered other feelings.

“Get up, dear,” she said, bending down and reaching for the child’s arm; and she tried to make her voice very kind. “You mustn’t sit there, you will take cold; we must hurry home as fast as we can, mother will be needing me. We must not trouble mother and father with this now,” she continued, as Elfrida allowed herself to be helped up from the log; “we must do the best we can, until father is well; but, Elfie, I must know all about it from the beginning, every word, if I am to be of real help to you. Those people who came to the Wayside House that evening, had you anything to do with them?”

“I didn’t know that I had,” said poor Elfie. “I’ll tell you every bit of it, Hildreth. We picked out the name from the catalogue because we liked the sound of it—Augustus Sayre Hooper. Laura said it had a very aristocratic sound, and she shouldn’t wonder if he were a connection of the Sayres of Boston. All I thought was, that he would be a nice, smart young man like Corliss, you know, and that it would be great fun to get letters

from him, and make him to think all sorts of nice things about me. I didn't mean ever to see him, or to let him know who I really was, for the world. But — Hildreth, he wrote real beautiful letters. I thought, after a while, that he was everything that was good and noble, and that it would be an honor to be a friend of his. I'll show you his letters, and you will see how truly noble he makes himself out to be — I mean, without praising himself in the least; it does seem as though Corliss must be mistaken in him."

"Go on," said Hildreth; and, despite her effort, her voice was cold. This sister of hers was both younger and older than she had thought her.

"There isn't much more," said the poor girl meekly. "He kept wanting to come and call upon me. He said that a matter begun in jest had developed into earnest, and he felt sure that we would be good friends for life, and that he needed my influence, and my letters to help him through the temptations of college life; and you know it is a life of temptation, Hildreth; I have often heard mother and father say so. He said I had done him good already; that I would never know, in this world, how my letters had helped him over some hard places. I wanted to do a little good, Hildreth; I did, really. I can never be like you, helping everybody, and interested in everybody, no matter how common and uninteresting they are; but I thought I could help him, and I cannot

bear to think that what Corliss says of him is true." Another burst of tears. Hildreth felt the strangest mixture of emotions. She could have shaken the trembling girl leaning on her arm for being such an arrant simpleton, and she could have gathered her to her heart and wept over her as the innocent dupe of a villain; and she was still such a child! They had thought her singularly free from temptations of this sort.

"Please, Elfie, try to control yourself, and tell me all about it," she said at last; it was the utmost that she could bring herself to say. "Does the Wayside House meeting come in?"

"Why, he wanted me to go and take a ride with him; he was to meet me at Laura Holcombe's; and — O Hildreth, there is something more that I am afraid you will think is dreadful. He wanted my picture, a good while before this; and I would not send it to him, not my own, of course. I hunted through the photographs in Corliss's collection for a fancy one; and I came upon that one of Nell Marvin's that she had taken in her wedding finery when she was her Aunt Kate's maid of honor, you remember. You can hardly see her face in it, because there is such a cloud of drapery. Well, I sent him that, and let him think it was I."

"O Elfie!" The listener could not repress this single outcry of indignant pain.

"Was it awful, Hildreth? I can feel that it was, now; it is very strange how dreadful things

sound, told over to you, that seemed nothing but fun when Laura and I planned them! I had not the least idea that he would ever learn whose picture it was. Then, when I began to know him better, and to enjoy his letters, and really like him, as I told you, I thought it would be such fun to let him come and call on Laura and me, and show him that the picture he had been raving over was not mine at all. I thought we should have a good laugh over it, and that would end the matter. So that night he came. Laura and I were to go to drive with him, but Laura was not well enough to go, and he insisted on my going without her; he said I had promised. He did not mind about the picture in the least; in fact, he said he liked my face much better than he did the pictured one. I thought he was everything that was good and noble. I did not know we were going to Wayside until just as he was turning in at the gate; then he said that he had an appointment there with a college friend, and when I told him that I did not want to go there, he asked me if I would just step in with him for a moment or two while he spoke to his friend, and then we would come right out. He said he had no idea that the house was any different from other country hotels, and that he must warn his college friends of its local reputation."

"Did you go with him to the Wayside House?" interrupted Hildreth.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDER SUSPICION.

POOR sister! she was all but stunned over the magnitude of the discoveries she was making. It seemed to her that every sentence Elfrida spoke revealed a new horror. The idea of her pure-hearted young sister, whom they had looked upon as hardly yet out of her babyhood, descending to such depths as these! To a nature like Hildreth Elliott's an anonymous letter was in itself a poisonous thing; and an anonymous letter addressed by a young girl to a man, and that man a stranger, was to her a form of disgrace from which she shrank with all the force of her strong, pure nature. Yet she must meet and face disgrace such as this, and help her young sister to overcome it if she could. Therefore she controlled all exhibition of feeling so far as possible, and asked that probing question, "Did you go with him to the Wayside House?"

"No," said Elfrida; "I didn't. Just as we were driving into the gateway, we met John with the carriage; he told me that I was wanted at home immediately. I was frightened half to

death ; for, of course, I thought that father must be worse. He took me out of the carriage, and put me into ours, and drove away quickly, without saying a word, until we were on the road ; then he frightened me more, by telling me what a dreadful thing it was for me to go to the Wayside House. You need not worry about John, Hildreth, he is good ; he made me promise that I would tell you all about it. He had heard it somewhere, the whole story — about the letters, I mean, and all ; and I promised I would tell you every word, and I have. It wasn't just because you came out to meet me that I told you. I have been planning all day how to do it, and I meant to do it before I slept. O Hildreth, do speak to me, or I shall die ! Have I disgraced father and mother and you, and everybody, and injured Nell ? Oh, dear me ! if I *could* just die, and be forgotten ! ”

It was a childish wail, and for the moment did not appeal to Hildreth's heart ; somehow she felt more humiliated still under the force of this new truth. John, the hired man, her father's tramp, taken in, in the first place, out of charity, must be the one to come to the rescue of her sister ! And the burning question was, how did he come by the knowledge that he possessed ? If only he were a simple, honest hired man, earning his honest living by daily toil ; if he had been one of the roughest and most uncouth of their back country neighbors come to the rescue, — she could have

blessed him; but what was John? Possibly, for all she knew, a worse man even than Augustus Sayre Hooper, having knowledge of evil because he was himself of that same evil world. Then came the thought of the humiliation in store for her because of the necessity for talking the whole wretched business over with John, discovering just how much he knew, and, if possible, from what source he had gathered it. Her face burned at the mere idea, and then paled at the memory of Nell Marvin, and the disgrace that had been carelessly brought upon her. What would Nannie say if she heard of it, or *when* she heard of it? Must it not, as a matter of honor, all be told? The poor girl found herself bewildered over these questions of right and wrong, uncertain which way to turn. If she could only have appealed to her clear-headed father, or to her quiet, far-seeing mother, but she was firm in the conviction that neither of them must be told for the present; of course, it was out of the question for her father, and she could not feel that it would be right, under present circumstances, to add to her mother's burdens.

Meantime, what was to be said to Elfrida? Not one word of comfort had she yet spoken, for the reason, poor girl! that she had not reached the point where she could sincerely speak comfort. She struggled with the sense of disappointment, and angry irritation against Elfrida. How could

a girl who had grown up in such a home as hers, with such a father and mother, have gotten so far astray? If this was what the wicked outside world did for a sheltered and carefully guarded one, how could girls who came up without the environment of a Christian home ever escape? It was thoughts like these that made her answer the child's last appeal so coldly.

"People cannot die, Elfie, at a moment's notice, and leave the consequences of their — mistakes to others." She had hesitated for a word, and had almost said "sins;" but a glance at the woe-begone face beside her restrained her tongue, and made her say "mistakes" instead. "It is much more noble to live, and do one's utmost to set right anything that may have gone wrong through fault of ours." One more probing question she would ask. "Elfie, you say that you did not at any time realize that you were doing wrong; it was just a bit of fun from which no serious consequences were expected. Will you tell me, then, why you did not explain the whole scheme to mother and me, and let us share the fun with you? It seems to me that we are both capable of enjoying fun, and quite ready to sympathize with it. Had you thought of that, dear?"

Elfrida's eyes drooped, and there was silence for several seconds; then she said, speaking low, —

"Hildreth, Laura Holcombe thinks you are over-particular about some things, and I am afraid she

has made me feel so sometimes. I told myself that that was the reason why I said nothing to you about it; but I am going to speak exactly the truth after this, to myself as well as to other people, and I know now that I did not tell you because I felt that you and mother would be sure to put a stop to the whole thing. At first I didn't want it stopped because it was such fun, he wrote such merry letters; and after that I liked him so well that I wanted you to meet and like him too before I told you anything about it. Then I thought he would be a friend to all of us. He said he was going to take pains to get acquainted with Corliss, and that, being older than he, there were perhaps ways in which he could help him."

Hildreth's lip curled derisively. Such a creature as he help Corliss!

It was probably well for both the girls that home duties held their attention closely for the remainder of that day. Certainly the older sister was not yet ready with either advice or comfort, beyond the few words she had compelled herself to speak.

When, at last, she was at liberty to go over the whole trying business in the privacy of her own room, she tried to shoulder calmly her perplexities and responsibilities, and determine what should be done. But she found quietness of spirit very hard to assume. She had hoped to give this first hour of leisure and solitude to Corliss and his very serious troubles; and, behold, here was a much more

serious matter pressing up to claim immediate and absorbing attention. It is true that Corliss had brought his troubles upon himself by the merest folly, but there was a bright side to that trouble; it was folly, and not deliberate sin. What if he had been one of the company at the Belmont House on the evening in question, and had been forever associated with the disgraceful scene, minute particulars of which were spread out in this evening's paper for the wondering country people to read? No names were mentioned; but such matter always got abroad, especially in the country. What if one could not indignantly deny that Corliss had had the remotest connection with it? Or what if he had been goaded by poverty into the appropriation of that fifty-dollar note? Certainly there was a bright side! What a rest of soul it was to her to realize that not so much as a passing suggestion as to his honesty had disturbed her.

When it came to a matter that Corliss chose to consider important, his word could be implicitly believed. What an infinite pity it was that he found his amusement in exaggerations, or at times, as in this case, in positive untruthfulness. But there was a way out for him, of course, and that a speedy one; or if not, if it came to public embarrassment and disgrace to endure, there was always that central brightness flashing out from the thought that she could be sure that he was bearing disgrace unjustly. But Elfrida's trouble was

on another plane. The poor child had undoubtedly gone astray. Not so far as she might have gone; she had been mercifully shielded from an introduction to a world outside of, and far below her, such as an evening at the Wayside House would have given her. Would it perhaps have been a revelation that she actually needed, in order to open her eyes to the dangers awaiting foolish feet in that cruel world? Not that Hildreth would for the world have had the experiment tried! And that it was not, they had John to thank! Then she thought again of the interview she must have with him, and the careful questioning there must be to find how much or how little he knew. What did that mysterious and, at times, suspicious John know of the world? How conversant was he with the Wayside House and places of like reputation? How much of what he would tell her would be truth, and how much invented to suit the occasion? It was very bitter; but it seemed to her then, that, because of the habit of falsifying that had taken hold of people, there was almost nobody whom she could trust. Never mind, she must shoulder the burden, and do the best she could. Perhaps she ought not to have waited until morning. Her young sister's name might even now be tossing about among the low and the coarse. Also, there was Nell Marvin's photograph, — how were they to get possession of it again, or to explain to Nellie and her father and

mother Elfrida's share in the wretched transaction?

At last she gave over trying to think, reminding herself that she was simply taking counsel of her own overwrought brain. And then this sorely tried young disciple of Truth, who had been bitterly stung by falsehood, remembered her refuge, and betook herself to prayer.

Corliss Elliott, as he was being driven to the train that morning, had certainly cares enough of his own to think about; nevertheless, he gave some attention to John. In certain lines he anticipated his sister Hildreth's train of thought. Why was John at the Wayside House? Who was John, anyway? and to what extent were they justified in trusting him as they had? His young eyes recently opened to certain temptations and dangers that waited for the unwary, he wondered if it had been quite wise to leave his sisters, especially Elfrida, so much to the care of this unknown man, upon whom they must be more or less dependent now that their father was ill. Yet the fellow had a good face, and he could not help being interested in him. Perhaps he was weak, and was being led into evil surroundings since he came into their neighborhood! He wondered if there was some word of warning that he might speak, even though he were so much younger than John. Certainly this young man had changed much in a single

night. There was no inclination now to appeal to John for sympathy; instead, he was putting his own affairs in the background, and trying to plan in a manly way for others. The thought occurred to him that possibly it might be his duty to get leave of absence from college, and remain at home until his father was able to be about again; and then there came the stinging thought that circumstances might make this unnecessary. He might be, even now, suspended or expelled from college!

The thoughts of the two crossed; it was John who spoke first.

“Mr. Corliss,” breaking a silence that had lasted for several minutes, “you told me last night, you know, that you were in trouble. I have thought about it a good deal. I wish I could help, in some way; your father has been very kind to me. If it is anything about money, perhaps I could; I’ve got a little money laid up. I know young men in college sometimes need more than they thought they would.”

Corliss turned, and regarded him with a suspicious look. So he had money laid up! that was very strange. Not that an honest working-man, who was getting fair wages and had only himself to care for, might not be able to lay up a little money; but John had been with them so short a time, and had come in the regular tramp fashion, asking for food, to be supposedly paid for in work. Did that look like a man who had money laid up?

It must be money that he had secured in some way since he came to them. Was he a professional gambler? or was he simply a bungling gambler, trying his hand at it from time to time, and occasionally winning by a sort of accident? In that case, was it the Wayside House and its frequenters who had led him astray? Meantime, some reply must be made to his offer.

“That is very good of you, I am sure!” with an attempt at a good-natured laugh; “college fellows are always in need of money, I believe; but I had not thought of appealing to you. Suppose I should be in want of — say fifty dollars? I fancy that would be a larger figure than you could compass?”

“No,” said John, falling unsuspectingly, even eagerly, into the trap; “I could lend you fifty dollars as well as not. I could raise it in an hour’s time. I could telegraph you a money order, you know. I’ll be very glad to do it, if you will let me, and you needn’t be troubled about paying me; any time in the future when you can do it as well as not will be all right.”

Every word he spoke increased the suspicion against him. Corliss, who had had not the slightest idea of borrowing money from him, and had mentioned the sum merely to learn, if possible, the extent of John’s resources, was for the moment in doubt as to what reply to make.

“It is certainly very generous in you to offer to

help me," he said at last, "and, of course, I am obliged to you ; but, at present at least, I shall not borrow. I shall have to confess that you have given me a surprise ; I didn't imagine that you had a bank account. The circumstances under which you came to my father, had not led me to suppose that you were a moneyed man."

John's face grew red under the taunt, and the realization of his own folly ; he had made another mistake. He drove on for some seconds in silence, then he said coldly, —

"A man can earn money, Mr. Corliss, by working with his hands, and be honest about it."

"Of course he can," said Corliss heartily. "I don't want you to imagine for a minute that I look down upon any working-man, or feel superior to him ; but, John, an honest working-man, who has money laid up, doesn't, as a rule, turn tramp, and come into a neighborhood where he is an entire stranger, in search of a meal. However, that is none of our business, I suppose, so long as you do your work well ; you look as though you would like to say something of that kind to me, so I will say it for you. I'll tell you something that may surprise you. I had occasion to go to the Wayside House on business night before last, and I was very sorry to catch a glimpse of you in the same place. You may be so much of a stranger in the neighborhood as not to understand the character of that house ; if this is so, the sooner you can be

put on your guard the better. So far as I know, no respectable person frequents it; and it is the regular resort of some of the worst characters in this part of the country. If you are a good honest fellow, John, as I want to think you are, you will not mind my plain speaking. I am quite sure that my father would not like to continue in his employ a man who is in the habit of going to such places."

"I was never at the Wayside House before in my life," said John quickly; "it was very important business which took me there that evening. I saw you there, Mr. Corliss, and wondered at it. I have heard about the house; your father himself told me of some things that have taken place there. You have been good enough to tell me that you were sorry to see me in such a place; perhaps you will excuse me if I say that I had much the same feeling about seeing Mr. Elliott's son there."

Corliss laughed. "There are two of us, are there?" he said gayly. "I believe it was also my first visit to that renowned spot. Queer that we chose the same night, isn't it? Do you know what I would advise? That neither of us go again. The business that I thought called me didn't amount to anything; it would have been better in every way if I had not gone; I dare say the same could be said of yours."

John made no audible reply to this tentative

question. In his heart he said, "Indeed it could not! If you knew what took me there, my lofty young man, you would go down upon your knees in gratitude for my effort and its success."

They were nearing the station; and the horses being restive under the passing of a freight-train, the driver had a good excuse for giving undivided attention to them.

After his passenger had alighted, and bowed his good-morning, he turned back to say kindly, —

"I don't know whether I thanked you for your kind intentions. I really am very grateful; if I ever need your help in any way, I shall be sure to remember. And if you should need my help at any time, I shall be glad to give it."

Then he ran for his train.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ACTS IX. 11.

JOHN STUART drove home from the station in what might be called a mixed frame of mind. There was undoubtedly a ludicrous side to the interview just closed. He had been thinking more or less about Corliss Elliott for several weeks, partly because he seemed to him such a merry-hearted, easily led fellow, and he knew the peculiar temptations of life in certain colleges for such as he; also because he knew by reputation certain students at this particular college who he fancied were friends of Corliss; and mainly — this he told himself, with that stern resolve to *think* just the truth — because he was Hildreth Elliott's brother; and evidently peculiarly precious to her; and her interests — he never allowed himself to carry his trains of thought in this direction an inch farther.

But he laughed, in spite of the undertone of gloom, over the ludicrous side of the interview. He had been troubled for Corliss, and Corliss had been troubled for him; he was suspicious that Corliss had gotten into trouble that would bring

sorrow to his sister, and Corliss was suspicious of him in a dozen different ways. Both of them had been guests, at least once, at a disreputable house; and each deeply regretted it for the other!

After the laugh, his face gloomed; he had failed in his attempt at helpfulness, and reasonably so; he could not but admit that all he had done had been to make his own position more suspicious.

“That is what I am,” he said irritably, “simply an object of suspicion; the boy frankly tells me of it! I am a fool, and I continue to get myself more deeply involved each day. Yet what can I do? It would be the vilest ingratitude to leave them just now, in their trouble; but until I do leave them I fear there is nothing that I can do to help them. I have put myself into a strange position, certainly.”

He sighed heavily, and then gave the horses an irritable flick with the tassels of his whip, as though they were to blame; and, as they quickened their steps and hurried him homeward, he continued to make himself miserable over the various efforts he could now make for the Elliott family, provided he was in their eyes what he was in reality.

Seated in the train, speeding toward college and trouble, Corliss Elliott went all over his recent interview, with a half-smile on his face. It was so ridiculous to think of *John* offering him money!

But it was kind in him, and showed warm-heartedness; the fellow ought to be helped. Why was not Hildreth at work trying to do it? Then he was obliged to smile again over the folly of that thought. Poor Hildreth, who seemed to be the one who had always to shoulder the family burdens — had he not himself just laid a heavy one upon her? Doubtless, too, she was doing what she could for John; she would not be his sister Hildreth if she were not. This thought reminded him of a little note that had been thrust into his vest-pocket; Hildreth had handed it to him as she bade him good-by. “Read that when you are quite alone,” she had said. It was doubtless some added word of sympathy for him in his trouble, or of suggestion as to the way out. Dear Hildreth! she had lain awake half the night, probably, thinking of him; while he, after sitting with his father until midnight, had been so thoroughly tired, over the excitements of the day, that he had put everything from him, and gone to sleep like a veritable schoolboy. He glanced about him at his fellow-passengers; the train was full enough, nevertheless, he felt quite alone. Not a face there that invited his attention. He would read the little note, and see what suggestion Hildreth had to offer. She was level-headed, this sister of his; and anything she had thought out was worthy of consideration.

“DEAR CORLISS [it began], I went all over your affairs a hundred times, I think, last night, and found no light or comfort until I suddenly remembered a direction that I had once resolved to follow : ‘ Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you.’ I proved it once more, taking the whole matter, with all its possible entanglements, to Jesus Christ. When I arose from my knees, of course not a circumstance was in any way changed, yet my weight of anxiety was gone ! I felt sure that you would be brought safely through, and that the experience would work for your good. Do you know what I thought next ? ‘ Oh, if Corliass only *prayed* !’ I said to myself. It does seem strange, Corliass dear, that you are not willing to try that simple remedy for all ills, which has never been known to fail. Won’t you let me ask you once more, more earnestly, if possible, than I ever did before, to take it all to Christ ?

“ Now I can almost hear your old refrain about being a goat, and having therefore no right to the sheep’s pasture ; but of course you know that that is simply a merry way of begging a serious question. Suppose a sheep persisted in remaining outside with the goats, though offered all the protection and privileges of the sheepfold ? But I do not mean to preach ; I only want to ask you most earnestly if, in this crisis in your life, you will not test Jesus Christ.”

The young man slowly folded the little note, and laid it away. Its contents had been very different from what he had imagined. He could not tell why the simple words appealed to him so forcefully ; it was not the first, nor indeed perhaps the hundredth time, that Hildreth had, in one form or another, put in an earnest plea for him to become a man of prayer.

He had put her petitions aside with gay courtesy, always with the mental resolution to some time or other give attention to this matter; and with this concession he had always been able to turn his thoughts quickly into another channel. This morning he was not. In vain he tried to concentrate his thought on his present perplexities, to arrange an interview with President Chambers, to apologize for some of the rude words he had spoken on the evening before; to plan ways of making plain his absence from the city on the Tuesday evening in question, without confessing that he had spent it at the notorious Wayside House, where several of the college men had already encountered disgrace. Above all things, to try to plan some feasible theory concerning the disappearance of that fifty-dollar note. He could not think consecutively about any of these matters. Instead, his brain kept constantly repeating to him that last sentence: "I only want to ask you most earnestly if, in this crisis in your life, you will not test Jesus Christ?" That was a startling way of putting it! Almost irreverent, if it had come from any other pen than Hildreth's. Had one a right to talk about testing God? Straightway came to mind an old verse learned in childhood: "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord;" what was that but a challenge to be tested? It was true, as Hildreth had intimated, that he and

Elfrida had actually jested together about their being goats, while all the rest of the family were of the best sheep in the fold; but, on this particular morning, it did not seem like a jest, he did not want to be left out, homeless. He wanted to claim utmost and eternal kinship with that blessed father and mother of his. Then he thought of how pale his father had looked after the fever went down, and how the hand he had held out to grasp his had trembled. That kind hand which had never failed him in any need! If God really were like a father, how much he needed him now! To be able to tell all his story to that blessed earthly father of his would be such a relief! If one only knew how to go in that way to God! Certainly that was the way in which Hildreth understood religion; there was no sham to her, not the merest shadow of a make-believe. He tried to determine just what his own belief was.

He had been the subject, at given times in his life, of certain experiences that might perhaps be called sentimentalisms. That is, his emotional nature had been reached by some powerful appeal to it in the name of religion; but he had never been deeply enough moved for action. The impression which was being made this morning was different. There was nothing in Hildreth's note to excite him or to awaken emotion; yet he felt himself arraigned, as before an invisible judge, to account for his position. He believed in prayer,

of course; his father's son could not have done less. But just what did he believe in regard to it? Why this, beyond question: that it was possible for a human being to secure audience with One, known in history as Jesus Christ, a divine being, infinite in wisdom and power and love—therefore, a being both able and willing to befriend him. Why, then, if he were a person of average common sense, did he persist in holding himself aloof from the help that such a belief undoubtedly afforded? Why should not this powerful Friend be his friend? Why should not the promise on which his parents and his sister leaned, the promise of divine guidance for the asking, be his also? He confessed to himself that, very often indeed, as he had looked into his sister's pure face and earnest eyes, he had been reminded of a Bible verse, learned in his early boyhood, about certain persons who took knowledge of certain others that they had been with Jesus. He admitted that had he been inclined to be sceptical, his sister's singularly consecrated life would have been an unanswerable argument to him; but he was not sceptical. Nothing that he had studied in the schools seemed clearer or more certain to him than did the fundamental verities of the Christian religion. It had been but a few days before, in a free-and-easy conversation with some of the students, during which certain sceptical sentiments had been advanced, that he had assured the speaker that he

had three volumes of the Evidences of Christianity in the persons of his father and mother and sister; and that any fellow who had opportunity to study them, would as soon think of doubting the daily sunrise as of questioning the foundations on which such living as theirs was built.

He recalled the promptness with which he had made this response; and he told himself that he was an inconsistent fellow, unworthy of credence. How was his life proving that he was any better than a boy who had no mother, and a mean father, and a sister without an ounce of brains? He knew certain boys whose home life might be thus described. If he honestly believed what, when he talked with the boys, he professed to, why not avail himself of the offered help? He certainly was in trouble; he might put it aside for the time with the assurance that there was a way out, yet all the while he was conscious of an undertone of grave anxiety.

“That’s an awfully selfish motive; you ought to be ashamed to go to God for the first time for any such reason.” He did not recognize the enemy of souls as the speaker, but his good sense made immediate answer.

“What of that?” It would be a selfish motive that would prompt him to seek human help. Yet if there were an available human friend at this moment, one whom he had reason to think had both ability and desire to help him, it would

not take him two minutes to decide to seek him at the first opportunity, and lay the case before him. He could conceive of a man who would be great enough to overlook past indifference upon his part, and even slights, and come forward to his aid. There were such people; undoubtedly there were such fathers. Didn't he know that if he were the worthless creature President Chambers evidently considered him, and yet had gone frankly to his father with the story of his trouble, he would have been met more than half way, and helped to the extent of that father's ability? Why should it be an incredible thing that God, who had chosen to name himself Father, should do as much?

Yet let him be sincere in this matter. He would not go even to his earthly father without being ready to say to him, "Father, I have done wrong; I have gone contrary to what you would have advised, and have brought this trouble upon myself largely by my folly. I want you to understand that I don't mean to get into this sort of scrape again; I mean to follow your footsteps after this as well as I can." Was he ready to make such a statement to a Father in heaven?

Had he counted the cost? Yet, after all, what was the cost? What obligations were to be assumed in order to become a member of this family, and claim the privileges of sonship? It seemed wonderful to him afterwards to remember how

frequently during that morning's conference with himself there appeared before him words that he had learned in childhood, ready to answer his questions authoritatively. One such came now: —

“What doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul?”

Tremendous obligations, certainly; yet, really, they were entirely reasonable, remembering who he was, and what he knew of God. Had he not always intended to give this subject serious attention some time? Did he not believe that it was every man's duty to use his common sense in this, as in all other matters, and act in accordance with his best judgment? Those fellows who had bad habits to give up, and who did not care to make the best they could of their lives, certainly had excuses for delay that he had not. He believed that he had been simply a fool to put off settling such important questions as these. He did not know why he had done so. It seemed strange that they persisted now in being thought of. It was quite vain to try to push them aside with the excuse that he had affairs requiring immediate attention; they persisted in remaining uppermost in his mind as the most important of all affairs. Instead of going in search of President Chambers, as he had intended to do as soon as he reached the college

grounds, he went directly to his own room, and closed and locked the door.

It might have been an hour, perhaps it was longer, that he sat with folded arms staring straight into nothingness, thinking as he had not thought before in his life. Recalling it afterwards, he remembered that there went from him, for the time, all memory, even, of what was awaiting him in college; this one subject pressed its claims in a singularly assertive manner. At the close of the hour, or whatever period of time it was, he arose with the air of one who had settled something, crossed over to the window, drew down the shade, and dropped upon his knees.

“Jackson,” said President Chambers that afternoon, “did Elliott return by the morning train?”

“Yes, sir; he came in at eleven o’clock.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“He went directly to his room, sir, and I haven’t seen him since. I noticed particularly that he did not come out for his twelve o’clock hour.”

“Jackson, go to his room, and say that I should like to see him immediately.”

Jackson bowed himself away, and in a very brief space of time returned alone.

“Well,” said President Chambers inquiringly, “did you find him?”

“Yes, sir; he is in his room, but” —

“Did you give him my message?”

“No, sir, I didn’t, because he is — he is very much engaged, sir, and I didn’t think you would like to have him disturbed ; I didn’t even knock at the door.”

“Indeed! What is the nature of an engagement which is so important in your eyes that you cannot deliver a message from me? Is it visible from the key-hole?”

“No, sir, I didn’t see him, but I heard him ; to tell you the truth, sir, he is praying.”

A sudden softened look overspread the handsome face of the president; he had not known that Corliss Elliott ever had engagements of that kind.

“Very well,” he said to the waiting Jackson, “you did quite right. Watch your opportunity, and send Elliott to me as soon as he is disengaged.”

CHAPTER XIX.

“BEFORE THEY CALL, I WILL ANSWER.

CORLISS ELLIOTT waited for no word from the president, but, directly he was permitted to enter, went straight toward him, and spoke rapidly : —

“President Chambers, I was just coming to ask if I might speak with you for a moment, when Jackson told me you had sent for me. I want to ask your pardon, sir, for the very disrespectful words that I spoke last night. I was so excited and angry that I did not realize what I was saying. I told you the truth, sir, in every particular; but I can see, upon reflection, that under the circumstances you are perhaps justified in not believing me; and, in any case, I ought not to have said what I did.”

“Sit down, Elliott,” said President Chambers, motioning the young man to a seat; “I want to have a little talk with you. There are two of us, it seems. I sent for you in order to tell you that I evidently spoke, last night, without due consideration. Within an hour after my words with you, information came to me that proved the

truth of your statements with regard to the Belmont House disgrace. I am more glad than I can perhaps make plain to you to learn that you were not present that evening, and are not in any way associated with the affair. At the same time I learned another thing that caused me pain. Are you willing to tell me where you were on Tuesday evening?”

Elliott's face flushed, but he answered quickly: “I will tell you, sir, although I cannot say that I like to do so. I spent the evening and the greater part of the night at a country hotel called the Wayside, about five miles from my own home. It is a disreputable place, and my father has never approved of my stopping there, even on business; nevertheless, I thought I had business that evening which would justify my going.”

“Are you willing to tell me the nature of the business?”

“In part, yes; I had reason to fear that a young person in our own neighborhood had been led into trouble, and was in danger of being led farther; so, on the impulse of the moment, I went out there to learn the truth, if possible. It came to nothing, and I am sorry I went; but that is where I was on Tuesday night.”

The president's grave face lighted with the semblance of a smile. “I am very glad to hear it,” he said heartily; “for one thing, I am glad to have an authentic witness to what occurred at The

Wayside on that evening. I am not unaware that some of our own students were the planners of that choice entertainment, and I need hardly tell you that all the circumstances connected with it will be most carefully inquired into. You may be able to do the college good service by helping us to put down this form of iniquity. I congratulate you on having learned that none of the girls of your own neighborhood were implicated in the disgraceful affair. And now, with regard to the fifty-dollar bank-note that you left at Wellingtons', no light has been thrown upon its mysterious disappearance; but, in view of the light that has come to me from other sources, I am prepared to ask your pardon for my last night's insinuations, and to assure you that I have this morning no hesitancy in taking your word that you did with it just as you said."

For the first time since his troubles had come upon him Corliss Elliott felt a choking sensation in his throat, and knew that, if he had been a girl, he would have burst into tears.

"Thank you," he said with difficulty. "It is very good of you, indeed, after all the lies you overheard me tell in fun; but I assure you, President Chambers, I never told a lie in earnest in my life. I could hardly belong to my father's family, and not be true."

"I can well believe that," said the president heartily. "I know your family very well, and I

knew your grandfather. But I wonder if I may remind you that, when you get your sport in such ways, you are playing with edged tools?”

Poor Corliss's face flushed deeply. “I should think myself an idiot,” he said, “if I had not learned that lesson. But, President Chambers, what can have become of the fifty-dollar note?”

The president shook his head. “I don't know, Elliott, we will not go into that; it is one of the mysteries that perhaps may never be explained; suffice it to say, that I entirely exonerate you from all blame in the matter.”

“But I cannot have it left so, sir; it *must* be found! There are two of us who will suffer unjustly all our lives if it is not.”

“You gave it to young Esterbrook, Elliott?”

“I laid it down before his eyes; and he said he would attend to it in a moment, and would send up the receipt.”

“And you have entire confidence in Esterbrook?”

“I would as soon think of my appropriating the money as of his doing it!”

“I am glad to hear you say so, Elliott. I, too, have strong confidence in that young man; therefore, as I say, it must for the present remain a mystery. But let me repeat my assurance”—Just at that moment came a knock at the door, and Jackson's head appeared.

“A note for you, sir, marked ‘Haste!’”

The president held out his hand, broke the seal, glanced through the contents, with a smile on his face that grew as he read; then rising, he went over to Elliott, and held out his hand.

“Let me congratulate you, my boy; I am glad that I assured you of my perfect faith in your word. The missing note is found; there isn't even the dignity of a thief in the matter. Esterbrook is humiliated to the dust to find it with some refuse paper in his own waste-basket!”

That afternoon John Stuart made the Elliott horses travel faster than they had ever been known to do in their short and easy lives. He left them at the gate uncared for, while he hurried into the kitchen, and intercepted Hildreth on her way to her father's room with a tray of tea and toast.

“A telegram for you, Miss Elliott.” As he spoke, he took the tray from hands that trembled, and waited while they tore open the fateful yellow messenger. Mrs. Elliott, coming at that moment from the sick-room, waited, her face very pale, only for a second; then Hildreth laughed, and her mother's heart went on beating again.

“What is it, dear?”

“It is from Corliss, mother; it says, ‘O. K. Hallelujah!’ and not another word beside. Corliss was having some trouble in college, that he did not want you worried with; and is safely out of it.”

“Trouble in college!” repeated Mrs. Elliott,

wonderingly. “About his studies, do you mean? Hildreth, your father is calling.” And Hildreth was spared the duty of replying.

Her way through difficulties was less bright than Corliss’s had been. She found it very hard to determine just what ought to be done. The interview with John was not so trying as she had expected. She had said that, if it were only one of her scholars to whom she was indebted for shielding Elfrida, she could be grateful; and, behold, it was Thomas, the dullard and blunderer! John kept his share of the proceedings in the background; from his standpoint what he did was the merest commonplace, that would have been done, as a matter of course, by any employee of Mr. Elliott. Hildreth felt soothed by his manner; but, no sooner had she left him, than she began to reflect that it was very unlike the manner of the average working-man. Once or twice he had appeared strangely embarrassed, beginning a sentence that seemed to have a suggestion of helpfulness in it, and then suddenly ceasing before it was completed. Did he know more than he had chosen to tell her? No, that could not be; for his story had been very direct and explicit. He had not hesitated, nor compelled her to question him for particulars; yet there was something strange about him. She dismissed him from her mind, and took up Elfrida’s problem. Could she wait until her father was better, and ask his advice? No; manifestly she

could not. Circumstances settled that point all too promptly. Despite vigorous exertions on the part of John Stuart, that she knew nothing about, a painful publicity was given to the affair. A scandal, such as gossips love to feed upon, had arisen in connection with that evening at the Wayside House; and reporters travelled everywhere, hungry for every particular that could in the remotest degree be connected with it, being skilful in putting together particulars that it needed a microscope to make fit the central story. Under such circumstances, it became simply impossible to keep hints about Elfrida out of the daily papers. Her name was mercifully and by great effort suppressed; but a certain class of reporters know how to prepare a dish so marked in its flavor that, though even its initials be not given, those who pass may recognize it. They found an efficient helper in Laura Holcombe, who, having been sharply reprimanded even by her own parents for her share in the disgrace, was sulky, and took revenge by telling freely all she knew about the correspondence between "Elf Elliott" and the unknown college boy, and the engagement to drive with him without the knowledge of her own family. Laura had even discovered, in some way, John's share in that evening's programme; and this made a most toothsome morsel for the reporters. It was not that Laura Holcombe was malicious to that extent; she even cried when she found that

some of her talk had got into the papers, and was plain enough for all acquainted with the locality to understand. She had not meant to brew deep mischief for her friend, but simply to talk, while she was angry, and could find interested listeners, who were not too scrupulous in repeating what they heard. Possibly it was a salutary and certainly a much-needed lesson for Laura. They had selected two names from the college catalogue, and written each a letter. Laura Holcombe fully understood that it was only because the name that she happened to choose belonged to a gentleman, who took no notice of it, that she was not in a like plight with her friend. No, I am wrong; it is doubtful if she would, under any circumstances, have gotten herself into such a plight. She understood this wicked world much better than Elfrida did, and belonged to that wretched class of human beings who can urge another on to depths that they themselves are too wise to descend. The one had sinned ignorantly, as a child; the other had held back like a girl who knew too much about the world of sin. And the older sister, weeping and praying, realized, what the sisters and mothers of to-day are so slow to learn, that ignorance is not a shield. If she had only talked more plainly with Elfie, instead of trying to shelter her and keep her in ignorance of the dangers that lie in wait for the unwary!

Meantime, she wrought as well as prayed; that

photograph, which ought never to have been sent, must be recovered. After careful deliberation she resolved to write for it herself; indeed, there was no one else to do it. She considered the wisdom of putting the matter into Corliss's hands, and decided that she must not. Corliss was young, and not too discreet where his feelings were engaged, and he was in the same building with the offender; a serious quarrel might result if he undertook to have an interview with Augustus Sayre Hooper. She wrote the letter, such a one as Hildreth Elliott could write on occasion; and let us hope that the said Augustus Sayre Hooper arose from its perusal with, for once, a true opinion of himself. He wrote a reply that made Hildreth's indignation burn, but he returned the photograph. The sarcasms in his letter may have been increased by the fact that he was not finding the way of the transgressor easy. The phials of President Chambers's wrath had been poured out upon him, and prompt expulsion from college had followed investigation. His only solace was that he did not suffer alone; there may possibly also have been a drop of comfort in the thought that the results of his ill-doings were not so far-reaching nor so disastrous as were those of two of his boon companions.

It had, of course, been impossible to save Corliss the knowledge of Elfrida's share in the disgrace; indeed, the evening papers would have enlightened him, had he heard from no other source. His pain

and shame, when the astounding facts first revealed themselves to him, it would be impossible to describe. He told Hildreth afterwards, that, but for President Chambers's thoughtful sympathy and un-failing kindness, it seemed to him that he should have died. To think that the ignorant country girl, that he had rushed away to try to warn and save, had been his own beautiful young sister, his playmate and darling.

“It is a factory town, sir,” he had explained to the president, before he knew this terrible fact; “and there are girls by the dozen who are densely ignorant of the common proprieties of life. My sister is trying to help them in every way that she can, and I thought it might possibly be one in whom she was interested.”

“I understand,” President Chambers had said; “it was noble in you, Elliott,” but his voice had had a curious, almost a pitying, note in it. Corliss had wondered at the time, and his face had burned over it afterwards. Even then, probably, President Chambers had known who the girl was! Smarting under the shame of it all, he wrote such a letter to his young sister as he regretted afterwards; and she cried over it as nothing up to that time had made her cry. In truth, she, poor girl, was having a lesson that might well be sufficient for a lifetime. It was not enough that she had all but broken the heart of her father and mother, for the day came when they, too, had to know the

whole, and made the faces of brother and sister burn with shame for her; but the neighborhood, that portion of it which was least to be respected, got hold of scraps of her story, and imagined more, and tossed it back and forth on rude and careless tongues, until there were many who began to look askance at her, and speak of her as "that Elliott girl," and to say that no wonder her father was so ill, it is a wonder that he did not die, and that they had always thought Elf Elliott a bold-acting girl, and that they guessed Hildreth's pride would be taken down a little now. And other helpful and sympathetic words came, by one source and another, back to Elfrida, until she fairly shunned the daylight, and was in such a deplorably nervous state that it was judged wise to keep her out of school; though this Hildreth regretted for her bitterly, knowing what an ordeal it would be for her when the time came that she must return.

The time came speedily to this watchful sister when she felt only pity for the poor flower whose brightness had been crushed before it was really time for her to bloom. Undoubtedly she had done wrong, and of course she ought to have known better. But then she had sinned so ignorantly and so childishly; she had honestly believed in all the fine theories that Augustus Sayre Hooper had spun for her on paper. She had thought that, through her, a friend rich and wise and powerful had been introduced to the family, who would do

vaguely wonderful things for Corliss and all the rest of them. Hildreth, as she went carefully over the letters, anxious to know just how much poison had been scattered through them, could not but admit that the young man had a talent for writing. Most of the letters were sparkling with fun; and the compliments, though lavish, were so gracefully worded that it was not surprising that one as young as Elfrida had been pleased with them. To Hildreth's older eyes there was an offensive undertone that led her to see distinctly from what depths of shame and pain their darling had probably been rescued. If the child had only shown her the letters! Why had not this been done? Why were not she and Elfrida so intimate that nothing of this kind could have been carried on without her knowledge? There was not so great a difference in their ages that confidential relations between them should be unreasonable; she was only a trifle over four years the elder. Had she been too much absorbed in her more mature and cultivated tastes, so that the child had instinctively drawn away from her as unsympathetic? Could she not have interested herself more heartily in the merry schoolgirl's pursuits and plans if she had tried, and so been able to shield her?

Some very searching thoughts were hers during the reading of those letters, and some strong resolves were born of them. Resolutions that were

near to breaking within the hour; it tried her so to see Elfrida weeping bitterly over the burning of those same letters.

“I can’t help it,” sobbed the child; “he may not be good, but his letters were lovely; nobody will ever write such nice things to me again. People look at me as though I were not fit to speak to, and I didn’t mean any harm. I don’t believe he knows that he has done wrong; he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me for the world.”

And then the sister knew that she must be very wise and very patient; more than mere fun was involved in this dangerous escapade of her sister’s. The young villain had reached and awakened her girlish heart.

CHAPTER XX.

THORNS.

THE most bewildering of Hildreth's experiences during this trying time was connected with Nannie Marvin, the playmate of her childhood, and the closest friend of her young womanhood.

She went over, one afternoon, to the Marvin farm, armed with Nell's returned photograph, and the resolution strong upon her to tell both Mr. and Mrs. Marvin exactly what had occurred, and make what excuse she could for her poor young sister.

Nevertheless, she admitted to her own heart a strong sense of relief over the knowledge that Mr. and Mrs. Marvin were away from home for the day, and therefore the first talk could be had with Nannie alone. It ought not to be hard to talk to Nannie. The main features of the story, she, of course, knew already; everybody in the neighborhood did. The trouble was, they knew much more about it all than the facts would justify. Hildreth, therefore, began at the beginning, and told every detail as briefly as she could, shielding Elfrida as much as downright honesty would admit. She was not a little pained over Nannie's persistent silence

during this recital. She had assured herself that she must expect to find the Marvins in a thoroughly indignant frame of mind; she realized that they might find it hard to forgive Elfrida for placing their young daughter in such a questionable position. Of course Nannie must share this feeling; yet there had lurked in her heart the hope that Nannie, being herself so young and so merry, would understand how childishly and ignorantly it had all been done, and how far Elfrida was, even now, from understanding what a gross wrong she had done her friend.

She had looked to have Nannie interrupt her with some such suggestion, and with possibly a word of sympathy. She did nothing of the kind. No sphinx could have sat more silently and immovably through the entire story. When at last she spoke, her words were entirely different from those which her friend had expected or hoped for.

“After all, Hildreth, what was the use in telling me this? It doesn't do Nell nor anybody else any good, so far as I can see. You have the photograph back, and it belongs to Corliss's collection. Why didn't you put it up with the others, and let it go? The beloved public haven't got hold of the photograph part of the story, so far; probably they will not. Why need anybody have been the wiser for that?”

Hildreth gave her a surprised, pained look, and was unable to keep reproach from her voice: —

“Why, Nannie! how could I do such a thing as that?”

“Why couldn't you? That is what I am asking. You wouldn't harm anybody by silence, and there is a sense in which it would have shielded Elfie. Nell cannot very well help being angry when she hears of it; and as for father and mother, I don't know what they will say, father is so terribly particular about such things. He is like you. If I had been you, I should just have kept it still; but I know you well enough to be sure that your dreadful conscience will give you no rest until you have told father and mother every turn of the story. You ought to have lived in the days of the martyrs, Hildreth. Did you really have no temptation to a different course?”

“Temptation?” said Hildreth hesitatingly, with a heightened color on her face. “I don't think I thought of it as a temptation, but perhaps it was. The thought came to me, that, if the story of the photograph was not known at all, it might cause less pain to others to have nothing said about it. But you are quite right, Nannie; I could not get the consent of my conscience to such a course, it savored too strongly of deception. Besides, such things always get out. I have been expecting every hour to hear fearfully exaggerated accounts of it all; and to have had to come to you then with the truth would have been much more humiliating than to do it now. It was that thought

which made the right course plain to me, because I realized that I should have been ashamed to have it known that I had had the truth from the beginning. No, I have thought it all over, Nannie, trying to learn just what would be the right thing to do; and the more I have thought and prayed, the more firm has become the conviction that in this case, as in most others, entire frankness was the safer and wiser course. I have told you now all that there is to tell; no stories, however garbled, need add in the least to your anxiety or annoyance. Suppose I had kept back portions of the truth, and had been obliged to confess them by piecemeal afterwards; don't you see how instantly you would be troubled with the thought, 'Perhaps there is more of it still, that she does not choose to tell'? As it is, I believe you will trust me."

"Oh, trust you!" said Nannie impatiently; "no one ever had any doubts about being able to do that. You are fearfully frank, Hildreth. I do think, if it is possible to carry sincerity into fanaticism and almost into sin, you do it. I tell you, if I had been you, I should have kept entirely still about Nell's photograph. Poor Elf has had enough to bear because of her silly little venture into a hateful world. I don't believe Nell will make life any easier for her on account of it. Nell is older than I am, Hildreth, already. She is inclined to be prudish, or over particular, like some other people that I could mention," — this last

with an attempt at merriment. "Not that I am sorry, of course, that she is growing up to be such a discreet young woman; but still, I confess to a feeling of sympathy with the giddy ones who play with edged tools while they are children, and cry about it afterwards. If Elf had come to me with her escapades, I would have shielded and petted her into common sense again, and neither you nor anybody else would have been the wiser."

Hildreth arose to go; no good could result from prolonging such an interview.

"I have helped Elfie as well as I knew how," she said sadly, "and have shielded her in every way that seemed right; but I cannot go contrary to my ideas of right to shield anybody. One must have 'a conscience void of offence' in the sight of God if one is to have any comfort in life. Poor Elfie is having a bitter lesson; but my hope for her is that, when her eyes are fully opened to the realization of her wrong-doing, she will not shield herself at the expense of truth. I don't think I am fanatical, Nannie; I would not go up and down the streets, blazoning any story; I hope this one may be kept from the public as much as possible. Certainly I shall speak of it to none but your own family; they are the only ones who have a right to know the facts. What I said was, that things always get out in mysterious ways; perhaps the way may not be so mysterious this time. Laura Holcombe is earnestly at work trying to put all the

wrong upon Elfie, and leave herself blameless. She, of course, knows about the photographs; I presume she will tell it, I do not know why she has not done so already. That is Elfie's misfortune; I would gladly shield her from it if I could. But I saw no honorable way except to tell you the whole. She herself did not; she quite agreed with me that Nell must know, and that your father and mother must be told, as a matter of course. I do not think she could ever have been happy again if it had been managed in any other way."

"She has caught the disease from you," said Nannie, still trying to speak gayly. "I am glad I am not your sister! You may be sure I shall not speak of the photograph; and, if I had my way, even now mother and father should not be troubled with it; but I can see that there is no use in arguing with you."

"My father does not think that any other than the exact truth would be honorable treatment of your father," said Hildreth coldly; then she went away, without trusting herself to say more than a muffled "good-by." As she walked slowly homeward she went over the interview in sorrowful detail; she had not realized before how much she had counted on a word of real sympathy from her one intimate friend. She could not understand the strange change in the girl; certain it was that her standard of right and wrong had not used to be so low. As unlike as possible in general appearance

and phrases of speech, she had supposed that on all vital points they thought much alike. It was only comparatively lately that Nannie had seemed to be drifting away from all her old standpoints. It could not be Rex Hartwell's influence; for he had not changed, unless, indeed, he stood on higher ground than he had once occupied. She recalled the faithful work he was doing at the schoolhouse among her boys, giving up one of his cherished evenings for the purpose, and remembered the stand that certain of the boys had taken lately, impelled thereto by the influence of Rex, and exonerated him from all blame. But it was very bitter to lose in this way the friend of her girlhood.

Could she have seen Nannie within ten minutes after her departure, her bewilderment and anxiety on her account would have deepened.

That young woman, as soon as the door closed after her friend, locked it, and even slipped the bolt, as though that would make her more entirely alone, then flung herself on the bed, and buried her face in the pillows with bitter weeping. Not quiet tears, but a passionate outburst such as an excited child might indulge. She knew that she was quite alone in the house, and perhaps, for that reason, gave fuller vent to her emotions.

"Oh! what shall I do? What *shall* I do?" Again and again did this wailing cry fill the silent room. There followed an interval of comparative quiet, then excited exclamations.

“I never can! I never will! she need not talk at me in this way. What are Elf Elliott’s babyish pranks and Nell’s old photograph compared with this? She as good as told me to my face that I could never be happy again. O me! I know it! I know it! I can never respect myself again, never. Respect! I hate myself. And Rex would hate me, if he knew; and there would be plenty to point the finger of shame at me. I can never do it; and I don’t believe that it is the only right way. Hildreth is hard, hard! She is insane over that word, Truth. I hate the word; I wish I had never heard it. As if there were no other virtue in the world except hard, cold truth; and the more mischief it could work the more virtuous an act she considers it to speak! I will not believe any such thing! What mischief the truth could work in this case! And silence could work no real harm to anybody. To think that in a few weeks is to come my wedding-day, and I to have such burdens as these to bear! It is too cruel! If anybody but me had discovered the truth, I could have borne it; or if it had been as we thought it was in the first place, I should not have cared. I had grown used to it, and I didn’t feel so very badly about it; but to think of it now, after Rex has planned so, and arranged everything, drives me wild. I am not going to think any more about it. Hildreth Elliott may preach all the rest of her days, and look at me out of those eyes of hers, as

if they were made of plate glass, and she would show me my real self through them! I wish I need never see her again. I am doing right, I know I am; and I am not to be turned from it by a sentimental girl who doesn't know anything about life, and has never been tried for herself. It is easy enough to confess the faults of others. Why didn't she make poor little Elf come and tell us? She has forgotten that there is anything but what she calls Truth in the world. What about the fifth commandment? I must think of my poor father, who has struggled all his life under a burden of debt, and my mother, who is growing old far too fast under her weight of care. Is it to be supposed that I can force back the burdens that Rex is ready to lift from them both? Oh! what *shall* I do? I am so wretched, *so wretched!* And I thought I should be so happy! I believe I should like to die and get away from it all. But I don't suppose I am ready to die; I know I am not. I cannot even pray, any more. As surely as I kneel down this hateful thing must come and stare at me, and insist upon being thought about. It is a wonder that I haven't gone insane; perhaps I shall. I know exactly how people feel who are tormented day and night with a single thought, that will not go away from them for a moment. I am growing cross and hateful under the strain. I never treated Hildreth as I have lately. I treat everybody badly. I have seen mother look sorrow-

fully at me sometimes, as though she could not understand; and I am even cross at Rex occasionally, he is so persistently good. What is to become of me if this state of things continues? Am I never to have any happiness, any peace, again?" The outburst was followed by another passion of tears.

She did not overrate the change in herself. Interested friends had been watching her with more or less anxiety for some time, and making comments on her steadily failing health, in accordance with their various natures. Some of them thought that Rex Hartwell really ought to hasten the marriage, and give Nannie the rest that she evidently needed. She was probably trying to save her mother in all possible ways, and so overdoing. Others had it that she was undoubtedly killing herself trying to manage a wardrobe that would be in keeping with her future position; so foolish in her! Why didn't she wait, and let Rex supply the wardrobe afterwards? There was still another class who felt sure that Rex Hartwell ought to have sense enough to manage the money question beforehand in some way. It was ridiculous for a man who had thousands of ready money in the bank to let his wife kill herself in getting ready to marry him.

The Marvins, and a very few friends who were intimate enough to know that Nannie's bridal preparations were very simple indeed, and that Rex

had exhausted his ingenuity in efforts to assist her with money, were at an entire loss to understand why a girl for whom life was about to bloom in all its beauty, apparently without a thorn to disturb, should have dark rings gathering under her eyes, and admit the fact of almost sleepless nights, and grow daily nervous and irritable. Her mother, who, when the trials of poverty were heaviest, had been wont to say that she took fresh heart whenever she came in contact with Nannie's sunny face, carried about with her a daily anxiety such as poverty had never forced upon her, but could only wonder and wait and pray.

Hildreth's call that day marked a crisis in her friend's life. The girl lay prone on her bed for an hour or more, breaking the silence only by detached exclamations, specimens of which have been given; then for another hour she lay wide awake, but so entirely quiet that intense work of some sort must have been done. After that she arose, bathed from face and eyes as much of the traces of tears as she could, rearranged her disordered dress and hair, then sat down to her writing-table, and prepared the following brief, imperative message: —

“DEAR REX, —

I know it is not your evening to come, but you must come, nevertheless. Do not let anything hinder you. I must see you to-night without fail, and as early as it is possible for you to come. I have something very important to tell you, something that cannot wait for another day.

NANNIE.”

This letter she gave to John Stuart as he drove by on his way to town, instructing him to place on it a special delivery stamp, and be sure to have it go in that afternoon's mail.

Thus summoned, Rex Hartwell excused himself from an evening class at the medical college, with what skill he could, and took the six o'clock train out, arriving at the Marvin farm just before eight.

Nannie was still alone; her father and mother were in town for a weary day of shopping and errand-doing; the younger portion of the family had gone merrily forth in the farm-wagon to meet them at the station, not so sadly disappointed as they might have been, under other circumstances, to have Nannie refuse to accompany them. They had not known, until the last moment, that Rex was expected that evening. They discussed the situation as they rode along.

"I wonder what Rex is coming for to-night? I thought he had a class. He would better take care of himself. Nan is doing high tragedy to-night of some sort; she looks as though she might shoot him, on occasion." This from Kate, the family hoyden, who always excused any unladylike conduct on her part with the statement that she ought to have been a boy, and was trying to atone to her father and mother for the disappointment.

"I wonder what can be the matter with Nannie?" added Lillian, her next in age, and most

intimate sister. "She hasn't been her real self for weeks, it seems to me; if getting ready to be married has such an effect on everybody's nerves as it does on hers, I hope I shall never have to go through the ordeal."

Then Alice, more staid and thoughtful than either of her older sisters: "Mother is afraid that Nannie isn't well; I can see that she is very anxious about her, and Nan certainly hasn't acted like herself this long time; but I suppose, when she is fairly married and settled down, she will feel differently.

"Isn't it fun," said Kate, "to think of Nan as a rich woman, able to go where she likes, and buy what she likes? But she doesn't seem to see much fun in it. I got off a lot of stuff to her this morning about how I looked forward to talking before the girls about, — 'my sister, Mrs. Hartwell,' who is abroad this winter; or, who is spending the summer at Bar Harbor, or Niagara, or some other grand place. But she didn't laugh a bit; I believe it even vexed her. Her face grew just as red! and that queer look that she has sometimes, lately, came in her eyes, and all she said was: 'Don't be a simpleton, if you can help it; there is more to getting married than going abroad and having a good time.'"

"She acts queer," said Nell, the youngest Marvin, thoughtfully. "I read a story about a girl who acted very much as she does; but she was

going to be married to a man whom she didn't like; she hated him, in fact. That can't be the way with Nannie, can it? She just idolizes Rex. I believe, if anything should happen that she couldn't be married to him, it would kill her."

CHAPTER XXI.

“HOW GOOD HE WAS!”

WHILE her sisters thus freely discussed her affairs, Nannie Marvin waited alone for the coming of her intended husband. It would have taken only a very casual observer to discover that she was in a state of intense though suppressed excitement. She was carefully dressed, and had perhaps never looked prettier than on that evening which she felt was such a fateful one to her. She was relieved at the thought of being quite alone in the house. For days the good-natured comments of her sisters and the anxious surveillance of her mother had been all but torture to her. Yet she started nervously at every sound, and when at last she heard well-known footsteps on the walk, alternately flushed and paled, as a girl might have done who was watching for her lover after an absence of months, instead of waiting for one with whom she had parted but the day before. She sat quite still. It seemed to her that she had not strength enough left to step into the hall, and open to him the old-fashioned farmhouse door. As it happened, he did not wait for her.

He had met the merry group of girls at the station, and learned from them that Nannie was alone; so he let himself into the hospitable door, that, after the fashion of the neighborhood, was rarely locked, and pausing for only a premonitory tap at the parlor door, opened that also, and went toward her. He recognized at once the unusual excitement that was upon her; indeed, he had read it in her hurried note. More than one perplexed hour he had spent of late in trying to determine what was troubling Nannie. Could it be that she was breaking in health just now, when the long struggle with poverty was over, and he was about to place her in that position which she was fitted to grace? Long before this, he had made it unnecessary for her to worry about the future of her parents or sisters. He had insisted upon utmost frankness in regard to these matters, reminding Nannie that she would be in a position to give practical help to the young people. Schools, musical advantages, and those mysterious perplexities that come under the head of clothes, he rejoiced to remember were largely within the power of money. He had taken much pleasure in impressing upon Nannie that it was simply her duty to plan for her sisters just what she would like for them. As for the mortgage that had rested heavily for years on her father's weary shoulders, it was already a thing of the past, the prospective son-in-law having flatly refused to wait until he was formally admitted

into the family before disposing of it. He had looked forward with satisfaction to the pleasure he would give Nannie in presenting to her father the cancelled papers, but it had not been a happy time. Instead of smiles, and gratitude, the bewildering girl had given herself up to what were evidently very bitter tears. The next morning she confessed to her mother that her night had been almost sleepless, and she had gone about more heavy eyed and far more "nervous" than before. All things considered, Rex Hartwell was beginning to count the days when he could take Nannie away from surroundings that seemed to be wearing her out.

On the evening in question she did not rise to meet him, but sat erect in the straightest and most uncompromising chair that the room contained. A strange pallor was on her face, despite two small spots that burned on either cheek; it was almost a hectic flush, and her eyes shone like stars.

"What is it, Nannie dear?" he asked, bending over her; "I am afraid you are not well to-night. I made all possible haste after receiving your summons, and was relieved to hear from the girls, whom I met at the station, that you were much as usual. But I think they are mistaken; you are not so well."

"Sit down!" commanded Nannie. "No, I don't want that," as he drew an easy-chair forward, and prepared to place her in it. "I want to

sit just here, where I am ; and you take that seat opposite me. I have something to tell you. I don't want you close beside me, Rex ; I can't talk so well. I told you in my note that I had something very important indeed to tell you. I want you to sit where I can see every change on your face, and I want you to help me if you can. Oh, I need help ! it is very hard !

“ Rex, we cannot be married at Christmas ; we can *never* be married ! You will not want me to be your wife when you have heard my story. Don't interrupt me, please,” with an imperative gesture when he would have spoken eagerly. “ Wait till you hear what I have to say. I thought I could not tell it, but I have determined that I must and will. I will if it kills me. O Rex ! ” She stopped suddenly, and placed both hands over her heart, as if to steady its beating. But when he sprang toward her she motioned him back.

“ Never mind ; it is nothing ; I am not sick. Don't come, please ; sit there, where I told you. It is true, as I said ; we cannot be married. I can't decide what you will think, when you hear what I have done — or haven't done. Yes, I can ; I know you will think it is terrible, and it is. I can see it plainly now ; yet I made myself believe that it was not so very bad ; that, in fact, it was the right thing to do.

“ Perhaps I should have kept on thinking so but for Hildreth Elliott. She is awful, Rex, *awful* !

Don't interrupt me; I am going to tell you the whole, just as that girl did at the schoolhouse that night; do you remember? It seems as though I ought to have as much courage as she, doesn't it? Rex, *I have found the will!* the lost one — you understand? I found it a long time ago, and have kept it a secret. Oh! I didn't hide it away; don't think that. I found it by the merest accident, when I was not looking for, nor even remembering it. And I made myself believe, for a time, that because I happened upon it in that way, so long after everything was settled and everybody satisfied, there could be no harm in just keeping still. O Rex, don't look at me in just that way! Can't you look — some other way?"

"My poor little girl!" Rex Hartwell's voice, though grave, was full of tenderness. Once more he arose, but she waved him back.

"No, hear the rest; I must tell it all now. I should *die* if I had to keep it to myself another hour. That old secretary in your uncle's room — you know how many times we went through it together, and the lawyer went through it, and the lawyer's clerk, and the detective, and I don't know how many more, and found nothing? Well, I wasn't even hunting, remember; I had given up all idea of ever finding that will. I believed that your uncle had destroyed it, and that he meant you to have his money.

"Do you remember when the housekeeper wrote

asking me to go up to the house, and look under the rug in your uncle's room for that lost ring of hers? It was the only place she could think of where she hadn't looked, and she remembered pushing it back and forth on her finger that last time she talked with him. Do you remember that you could not get away from the office to go with me, and that I went alone? It was then that I found it. Now you know how long I have waited! I had to push the old secretary out of its corner; and as I pushed it, and slipped in behind it to take up the corner of the rug, — I knew that poor woman's marriage ring was not there, but I meant to be as thorough as possible in the search for it, — I saw a bit of paper sticking out from the back of the secretary. Do you know that board which was put across to strengthen the back? That is where it was. I don't know how I happened to pay so much attention to it. I had no thought of the will; but I pulled at it, and thought it was queer that a paper should have worked itself in there, and wondered if it came from the drawer, or had slipped down from the top. I saw that it had probably not shown at all until I caught my dress on a little corner sliver, and loosened the board, or at least shook it. I pulled at the paper until I began to see writing, your uncle's hand — 'Last will and testament' — then I knew! I don't think I fainted quite away; but I know the room began to whirl around, and then grew dark.

“When I came to my senses I pushed the paper back where it was before. It slid quite in so that no corner of it showed. Rex, I know you will believe me when I tell you that I did this mechanically, without a thought of secreting it. Then the thought came to me that no one would find it there; and I got a knife, and slipped it in, and worked at the paper until I had made a little corner of it show, just as it did before; then I pushed the secretary into place, and came away. I meant to tell you everything, of course; but the next time I saw you, those plans about your office, and the case of instruments, and the expensive books, had all come up, and it seemed to me that I *couldn't*.

“It was not for myself; indeed, it wasn't. You know I am not afraid of poverty. What else have I known all my life? But for me to be the one to crush all your plans and ambitions, and set you back dozens of years perhaps; I couldn't bear it. If the property had been left to some poor person I think I should have felt differently about it; but that man doesn't care for it; he has enough without it. See how indifferent he acted when he believed it was his; never even coming to see it. It was thinking over all this that made me decide to let things go. I wasn't to blame for its not being found in the first place, and how could I be to blame now? Why need I go and blazon it to the world, and spoil all your beautiful plans of life? I saw the date, Rex, just that horrid date! I

couldn't do it; and I haven't. All these weeks I have struggled with my horrible secret; part of the time feeling that I had a perfect right to keep still and let others find the will if they could, and part of the time feeling as though I must go out on the street and shout it to everybody who passed. I can truly say that I have not had a happy moment since that hour; but it is only this very day that I reached a decision. Hildreth came to see me this afternoon, and her eyes seemed to burn me; they were to me like the eyes of God. If I could not endure her eyes, how could I meet his? I determined that before I slept again, or tried to sleep, and before I tried to pray, I would tell just the truth. I knew *at last* that I was doing wrong; and I called upon God to be my witness that not another night should pass before I told you the whole, and left it for you to decide what must be done next. I know, without your telling me, that I have forfeited your love and trust. I have been mean and false, and I know they are traits that you hate. You are like Hildreth; nothing would tempt you to falsehood, or to silence where truth was at stake. You cannot marry me now, Rex; you cannot want to. I despise myself, and I know that you cannot but despise me. I want you to understand that I free you entirely from your engagement with me, and, if you never speak to me again, exonerate you from all blame. I know only too well that you could never be

happy with one whom you could not trust. Now I want to ask of you a favor—will you go away at once, without speaking any words, and leave me alone?"

Said Rex Hartwell, "My poor little Nannie!" and with one stride he was beside her, and had gathered her into his strong arms. "I am so sorry," he said, stroking back the hair from her forehead, and speaking soothingly, as he might have done to a trembling child, "so sorry that you bore this burden all alone, instead of letting me share it with you; no wonder you have torn my heart by growing thin and pale. Hush, dear! I will hear no more self-accusing words from your lips;" and he stopped the words she would have spoken. "I have let you talk long enough; it is my turn now. I will not have you say that you have fallen. You have been tempted of the devil these many days, but the truth in your soul has triumphed. It was a heavy temptation. I, who know you so well, can understand, even better than any other, how infinitely greater it was to you because it involved me. Don't you know, Nannie, that it is never yourself of whom you think? I have not an idea that you would have carried your silence through to the end. The Lord takes better care of his children than that."

She needed them, those words of soothing and of trust, needed them more than she herself realized. Her poor brain reeled; and for a second

time during this strain, the world grew dark before her, but this time strong arms upheld her.

The interview, begun in this startling manner, lasted well into the night. Many questions pressed forward for consideration. In the dining-room the family lingered over a late tea, the younger portion chatting gayly, and the weary mother exerting herself to give them every possible item of news, interrupting herself once to ask anxiously, —

“How has Nannie been to-day?”

They recognized the note of anxiety in her voice; and Kate, who had opened her lips to reply that Nannie had been “as cross as two sticks,” checked herself, and only said, —

“Oh! she has been much as usual. What did you do about the velvet, mother? Could you match it?”

The mother sighed, and glanced toward the closed parlor door, and wondered that Nannie did not come out for a minute to welcome them; then, mother-like, put herself aside, and gave careful attention to the details of the day. It grew late, and still Nannie did not appear. At last Mrs. Marvin expressed her surprise. Rex was so much at home with them now that he rarely passed an evening with Nannie without coming for a few minutes' chat with them all; and she and “father” had been gone all day, an event in itself unusual; she felt as though she had been gone for a week. Then it occurred to her to wonder at Rex being

there at all. She thought he had an engagement for Thursday evening.

"He has," said Kate; "but he was ordered out here to-night for some special reason, I don't know what; but I know that Nan sent a special delivery note to him, and she was in the fidgets when we went away because he hadn't arrived, although she knew that the train he would have to come on wasn't due yet. Let Nan alone, mother, and don't worry over her; she will fume herself into good humor after a while. It is all because she is getting ready to be married, I suppose."

They had family worship presently, and the family group separated. Mrs. Marvin was the last to go up-stairs. She looked hesitatingly toward the parlor door, and took one step in that direction, then retreated. Ordinarily, or at least before this strange new mood had come upon Nannie, nothing would have been simpler or more natural than for her to have gone in for a little visit and a good-night to Nannie and Rex; but as it was, the mother hesitated, then decided that Nannie might not like being interrupted; there were so many things nowadays that she did not like.

The house grew still; but the mother lay long awake, vaguely troubled. Rex was not in the habit of keeping late hours; he was too earnest a student for that. Something unusual must have occurred.

In truth, such unusual things as would have

amazed the mother were taking place behind that closed door. Well was it for Nannie Marvin that she had given her confidence to a strong character. Rex was very tender and patient, entirely unexcited, and sure from the first moment as to what was to be done next.

“It will be all right, Nannie;” and his voice was not only soothing, but cheery. “Don’t worry about it any more. To-morrow you shall go yourself, if you wish, or I will go for you, just as you please, and get the paper, and place it in the hands of my uncle’s lawyer, with the simple statement that it has at last been found, and ask him to take at once the proper steps to place the rightful owner in possession. As to what money has been already spent, I anticipate no trouble on that ground. The prospective heir has not shown himself a man eager for money, and a mistake of this kind he will be willing to wait for a man to rectify. There hasn’t been a great deal spent, Nannie, not as men of wealth count. I have been economical; the habit of my life asserted itself, and helped me in that. Then, for you and me, there is simply the waiting that we planned before; not so long a waiting indeed. I have done good work the past year, and feel much more assured of what I can do than I did a year ago. I don’t think it will be for very long, Nannie; and I know you will be brave, as you were before, and put fresh heart into me every time I see you.”

He would not let her speak many words. He assured her cheerfully that she had said quite enough for her good. Especially he would not permit another word of self-condemnation, declaring that he had already borne from her in that line more than he had believed possible, and he was not to be tried any further. The only time that he grew positively stern was when she tried to repeat her assurance that she could not hold him to his engagement with her.

"Hush, Nannie!" he said; and his face was very grave. "You must not speak such words. In the sight of God you are to me as my wife, never more tenderly beloved than at this hour, when by his grace you have overcome a great temptation, and stood bravely for truth and purity. Only God himself shall separate us, dear; and I believe he will let us do our work for him together."

How good he was! Like an angel of God! This was her thought of him.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT OUGHT I?

AT the end of an hour, during which time Rex Hartwell had made an earnest effort to bring peace to Nannie's troubled heart, and flattered himself that he was succeeding, she rose up from the easy-chair on which he had placed her, and stood before him resolute.

"No, Rex, listen; I must speak. You are like, you are almost exactly like, what I can imagine Jesus Christ would be if he were here, as he used to be; but I have suffered enough to know, now that I can think connectedly, that there is something more for me to do. I must be honest *now* at any cost. I have been honest to you, and you were the very worst; but there are others, father and mother, and oh — everybody! Must I not, in order to be true, let everybody know just the truth? It seems so to me. I wish I could do it right away. If there were a great meeting to-night, in the church or somewhere, where all the people were gathered who have ever known me, I would like to go down and tell them that I found that will many weeks ago, and hid it again.

I would like to describe just how it was done, so that there would not be one least little thing omitted."

Her excitement had even increased, and her misery was pitiful to see. In vain the young man talked low, soothing words, trying to reason with her, to persuade her to trust him, and let him manage the entire matter in the way that would be right and best. She shook her head. "No, I cannot trust you. You are not God, you know, although you can forgive like him; but you are just human, and you might make a mistake. You want to shield me, you see; you are so pitiful for me, so eager to comfort me. I bless you for it, Rex; you have saved my reason, I think, but I cannot trust your judgment — not in this."

Suddenly a new thought came to her.

"Rex, if I could see Hildreth Elliott to-night — I mean now. I *must* see her. Her love for me is not great enough to blind her judgment, and she will tell me just what I ought to do. She knows, Rex, and she does not spare even her own sister from humiliation; besides, I have treated her shamefully; only to-day I spoke cruel words to her. I feel as though I must tell her the reason for them right away. Couldn't you go across the meadow and bring her? It would not take but a moment, and she would come at once if she knew I needed her. Will you?"

He hesitated for but a moment. He shrank from

the ordeal ; but if Hildreth could quiet her friend, she was certainly needed at this moment, and he hoped that she could be trusted. At least there seemed no other way but to try. He let himself quietly out of the front door while the tide of talk was highest in the dining-room, and sped across lots to the Elliott farm. Much wondering, Hildreth obeyed the summons promptly ; and she and Rex walked almost in silence across the fields.

“Nannie is in very great excitement,” he said, as they neared the house ; “she has something to tell you which will doubtless surprise and pain you. I wish she had not thought it necessary, or at least that she had let me talk for her, but — I know I can trust your good judgment ; such a terrible strain as she has put upon herself is dangerous in the extreme ; at almost any cost her excitement must be allayed. She seems to think, among other crimes of which she accuses herself, that she has ill treated you ; but I am sure she exaggerates that.”

“Why, the poor child !” said Hildreth. “What an idea ! I can easily dispossess her mind of any such feeling. I know she has been in some sort of trouble for a good while ; my only wish is to help her.”

Nannie was standing at the window watching for them. She came toward them eagerly, her excitement in no wise abated.

“I knew you would come,” she said, holding

out her hand to Hildreth; you never fail me, no matter how hateful I am. O Hildreth, you have been a good friend to poor little Elfie, but a worse than Elfie is here! The child's escapade is as nothing compared with my deliberate sin. I want you to know the whole story."

She told it briefly, with almost painful frankness, making not even so much of an attempt to shield herself as she had done to Rex, and Hildreth was startled; there was no question about that; the temptation was in a form so foreign to any that she could have felt. She held herself, of course, from any such expression, and spoke only the tenderest of sympathetic words; but Nannie scarcely heeded them. She hurried on, —

"There was a reason for my wanting to see you to-night, right away; I cannot trust to Rex — not in this. He is too anxious to shield me; he cannot bear to give me any more pain. But at the expense of pain and humiliation, no matter how extreme, I feel that I must do right; and some way I felt that you, with your calm, quiet eyes, would see just what right is. Hildreth, must I not tell everybody about it as I have told you? Father and mother, and all the world? Is not that the only way to be true?"

Rex Hartwell turned anxious eyes upon Hildreth. Was she to be depended upon? or had her ideas about truth become fanaticism such as would demand further martyrdom of poor Nannie?

Her reply came quickly, without an instant's hesitation.

“O Nannie, no indeed! I think you did just right to tell Rex the whole; I do not think you could have respected yourself otherwise; and in regard to your father and mother, it seems to me that you have a right to exercise your own judgment. If you want to tell them, I mean if you would feel better to do so, I can understand that feeling; but as to the lawyer and all the others, what is it to them? Justice is to be done in every particular; and as I look at it, that is enough. Am I not right, Rex?”

He gave her a grateful glance as he said that he had offered the same advice, but that Nannie had been afraid that his feeling for her biassed his judgment.

By nightfall of the following day, not only the neighboring countryside and the little village near at hand, but even the large town a few miles farther away, was in a buzz of excitement over the latest developments in 'Squire Hartwell's affairs. The missing will had come to light! Nannie Marvin herself had found it, and given it to Rex, who had taken instant steps toward having the property pass into the hands of the rightful heir! Many and varied were the circumstances said to be connected with this discovery. The story as it travelled grew so rapidly that both Rex and Nannie might have been excused from recognizing their

share in it. Never had anything occurred in the neighborhood that was so thoroughly exciting. Poor Elfrida Elliott reaped some benefit from this sudden outburst of interest, — her own affairs were for the time being forgotten; and all tongues were busy trying to glean, as well as to give, information as to how Nannie “bore it,” and what the Marvins said and did, and what Rex would do now; whether, after all, he would try to be married.

The Marvin girls came in also for their share of attention. Somebody said that it was to be hoped that Kate Marvin would now be cured of her habit of boasting what her sister was going to do and to wear, and how her rooms were to be furnished. There were some who said that “pride must have a fall,” and that the Marvins had always been rather too lofty for their good. But for the most part, the country was sympathetic and regretful. It certainly was hard lines for poor Nannie, — so much harder, all agreed, than if the matter had stayed settled in the first place. Also they agreed that it was undoubtedly an added drop of bitterness for Nannie to have found the will herself; and none of them knew, either then or afterwards, through what depths of terrible temptation Nannie waded before that will was really found.

Neither did those beyond their immediate family circle ever learn just how the Marvins “bore it.”

Very soon after the astounding announcement of the discovery had been made to the family, Mrs. Marvin was closeted with Nannie for an hour or more. When she came out, her other curious daughters could see that she had been crying. Yet they could not resist the temptation to question her; there were so many particulars that they wanted to know. Where had the will been found? How had it been found? Kate, the inquisitive, said in response to one item, "Why, mother, Nan hasn't been at the stone house in ever so long! How does it happen that she did not find it until now? Oh, I believe I know just how it was! It must have been hidden away among those old papers that Rex brought for Nannie to look over at her leisure, and she has just got to it! Was that the way, mother?"

And then Mrs. Marvin resolved that she would answer no more questions, but would issue her mandate.

"Girls," she said impressively, "you are all old enough to feel deep sympathy for your sister in this trial, which is to her of course a very sore one; our own share in it is heavy enough, yet after all, what is it compared with Nannie's? You can readily understand that questioning and cross-questioning and surmising, keeping the matter constantly before her, will simply be so much torture. She has found the will, and it is to be placed to-day in the hands of the proper authori-

ties; that is all that it is really necessary for any of us to know, and I want it distinctly understood that there must be no talk about it. Do not mention the subject to Nannie, except, of course, in the way of a word of sympathy — and even that I hope you will make as brief as possible. The poor child is not well, remember, and this strain upon her is of course very heavy; it becomes us to help her in every way that we can. I look to my girls to be considerate and patient. You will come in contact with hundreds of people hungry for details about matters that are none of their business; but all you need say to them is that Nannie came across the will in an unthought-of place, and that it had dropped there at some time and secreted itself; so there is no mystery about it. If you can truly say that you have forborne to annoy your sister with questions, you may be able to suggest a line of common propriety to others.”

They saw the force of their mother's words, albeit they grumbled a little at her evident disinclination to discuss the matter with them.

“You might tell us all about it,” said Kate, “then we wouldn't be so likely to bother Nannie. I'm sure there are a dozen things I should like to know. It is too horrid mean, anyway! Rex ought to have the property. It is his by every law of common sense and decency. I declare, if I had been Nan, I believe I should have pitched the old will into the grate and said nothing.”

“Katherine,” said Mrs. Marvin, and her face was actually pale, “I am astonished and shocked! How can you allow yourself to repeat such terrible words! Do not for the world say anything of that kind to Nannie.”

“Why, mother!” said Kate, astonishment in every line of her face, “I don’t understand you in the least! What possible harm could it do to repeat such utter nonsense as that, even to Nannie? It is not likely that she is so far beside herself as not to be able to recognize the folly of it.”

Mrs. Marvin turned away hastily, glad that some household matter called at that moment for attention. How could she have explained to her daughters the thrill of horror which the mere suggestion of such a course had given her?

Rex Hartwell did not go to his office that day; he had other duties pressing upon him. The plans for his entire future had been overturned in a moment of time, and he must at once set about planning a new future. His first duty was at his old home. He came for Nannie by appointment, and they went together to the stone house where they had both spent many pleasant hours. Nannie herself led the way to his uncle’s room, and pointed silently to the secretary, while she seated herself on his uncle’s study chair close at hand. She had resolved to be where she could study every change on his expressive face during this trying scene. Neither spoke while he wheeled

out the old-fashioned piece of furniture, placing it at an angle for Nannie to see. There was the corner of the fateful paper peeping out just as Nannie had said. Had it not been peeping out, it was reasonable to suppose that it would never have been found; and had Nannie's dress not caught in the rough edge, it would not have peeped out — on such trivial accidents as these do great events sometimes hang. Rex pulled at the paper as Nannie had done, and drew it out, studying the characters as she had done.

“It is my uncle's handwriting without doubt,” he said gravely; “and that is the correct date. It certainly hid itself away securely. Well, Nannie,” with a rare smile for her, “I am glad we found it before we complicated matters more than they are.” He opened the writing-desk as he spoke, and took therefrom a large envelope such as lawyer's use, slipped the important paper within it, and proceeded to seal it carefully.

“Aren't you going to look at it?” asked Nannie faintly.

“No; why should I? We practically know its contents, and I would rather the lawyer should be the first to examine it.” He drew out his pen, and supplied the proper address.

“There,” he said cheerfully, “that matter is out of our hands. I will go to town this afternoon, and place it myself in our friend's keeping, with the request that he make all speed towards

the proper adjustment. And now, Nannie, let us have a talk."

As he spoke, he thrust the paper into his pocket, and going over to the south windows threw open the blinds and let in a glow of sunshine. For the first time Nannie noticed that a cheery fire was burning in the grate. She had been too preoccupied to think of it before. She looked at it wonderingly.

"Yes," he said, answering her look, "I have been here before, this morning. You did not think I was going to let you come to a closed and chilly room, I hope! Are you quite comfortable? Let us take these two chairs that you and I have used so often before, and draw up to the grate and have a visit."

In utter silence she obeyed his directions, dropping herself into the capacious leather chair that he wheeled forward. He took its counterpart, and settled it close beside her; then, as if by mutual consent, they looked about the great room furnished with lavish hand as regarded comfort and convenience. It had been a favorite room with both of them. It was here that Nannie had written those numberless letters for 'Squire Hartwell, and it was here that she and Rex had held those long talks while his uncle was taking his afternoon nap. It was here that they had expected to spend much of their time as husband and wife.

"You shall write business letters for me," Rex

had told her whimsically, "or no, I have it, you shall write out my lecture notes for me. I will see if you can throw as much light into them as you used to do for some of my uncle's obscure sentences." What plans they had had in connection with this room! Now they were here to bid it good-by.

"I should like to have these chairs," said Rex reflectively; "we have had such good times in them. I wonder if the owner would sell them to us some time? I shouldn't if I were he. They are splendid old-fashioned chairs; one cannot buy such in these days.

Nannie had thought that she had no more tears to shed, but her eyes grew dim as she listened. How could he talk about it so quietly, so cheerfully? Her heart was breaking for him. He turned toward her presently with a cheerful smile; suddenly he wheeled his chair a little in front of her, and leaning forward, took possession of both her hands.

"Nannie dear," he said, with a kind of cheerful gravity, "I am glad of a quiet talk with you in this old room where we learned to love each other. There is something I want to tell you. It involves the reason why this thing does not break me down as once it might have done. Of course I am sorry not to have immediate comfort for you, and for your father and mother — our father and mother, dear; they are all I

have; but even that is only a matter of waiting a little longer. We are young and strong, you and I; and it will be strange if we cannot carry out eventually the best of our plans. Meantime, I have come into the knowledge of an inheritance that is beyond computation. Do you know, I wonder, that the Lord Jesus Christ has in these last few weeks become more to me than I had realized he could ever be to a human creature? I have begun to have a dim realization of what it means to 'put on Christ.' I have wanted to talk it over quietly with you, dear, and above all things to have you share my experience. It is not that I have just begun the Christian life, you know; I realize that I have been a member of the family for years, and an heir to the wealth stored up for me; it is simply that I have just begun to claim my rights. By and by, when we have time, I shall like to tell you just how I came into this knowledge and experience, and just why I think I have been content with a starved life for so long; but what I want now is that you and I should kneel down here together in the room that we supposed was to be ours, and consecrate ourselves anew to his service. I had thought that we could use wealth for him; but since he plans it otherwise, let us gladly accept the direction as his best for us. And, Nannie, one thing more; I don't want you, dear, ever to speak again as though there was a possibility of our life, yours and mine,

being two. God has joined us; and through the blessing of him who has overcome the power of death, even that shall not separate us. You have been for weeks the subject of a fierce temptation, and God has carried you safely through it; your life and mine should be the stronger forever because of this exhibition of his grace. Shall we kneel together and thank him for this, and begin life all over again from this hour?"

Nannie Marvin never forgot that prayer; in some respects it was unlike any that she had ever heard before. She arose from it with a feeling that God had set his seal to her forgiveness, and that he had been very tender and gracious both to Rex and to her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THE NAKED TRUTH."

AMONG those who were counted as outsiders, the most astonished, and certainly the most disturbed, person over the news of the recovered will was John Stuart. Notwithstanding the fact that both Rex and Nannie seemed eager to have the news spread as far and as fast as possible, it happened that John, who had been sent ten miles into the country on business connected with the farm, did not hear of it until that evening, when he brought Hildreth from the station. She had been in town doing errands for her father; and John, as soon as he reached home, had been sent to meet her at the train.

She began by eager questions. Had he seen Mr. Hartwell that afternoon? She had expected him to be on the train, but he must have taken an earlier one. Did he know whether Mr. Hartwell waited for the lawyer? John had not seen Mr. Hartwell, nor heard of a lawyer; and his face expressed so much surprise that she was constrained to ask if he had not heard the news.

"I remember that you have been away to-day,"

she said, with a smile; “but our little neighborhood is in such a ferment that I did not suppose you could be at home for fifteen minutes without hearing something about the recent excitement. But I forget that you do not belong to this neighborhood; perhaps you did not hear anything about the second will that ’Squire Hartwell made?”

He had heard people talk about a second will that had been lost, and from all accounts he had thought it a very good thing that it was.

“It certainly seemed so to us,” Hildreth said, with a little sigh; “but now that it is found again, I suppose we must change our opinions, and at least hope that good will result.”

“What!” said John Stuart; and he reined in his horses with such suddenness that they resented it nervously. “Miss Elliott, you cannot mean that that ridiculous will has been found!”

Hildreth was unreasonable enough to be a trifle annoyed at his exceeding interest. Why should it be a matter of deep importance to him? This was carrying curiosity to the verge of impudence. She replied with cold caution. The will had been found, she believed; Miss Marvin herself had discovered it, and had notified Mr. Hartwell.

“When did this happen, Miss Elliott? Are you sure that the paper has already passed into the lawyer’s hands?”

There was no mistaking John Stuart’s interest,

even eagerness and anxiety. Hildreth was more and more annoyed.

“Probably it has,” she answered, with exceeding coldness. Mr. Hartwell was not the sort of man to delay, when he had important matters to look after; he had gone into town on the same train with herself for the purpose, and she had no doubt but that it was attended to by this time. Why did John care to know?

But for once John Stuart was not even aware of Miss Elliott’s coldness and evident annoyance; he was still eager and anxious.

“But you spoke of his waiting for the lawyer; may he not possibly have failed in seeing him? Excuse me, but it is important for me to know the facts.”

“I cannot imagine why! Judge Barnard was not at home early in the afternoon; I met him at the west end of the city, but I presume he returned in time for Mr. Hartwell to see him. Whether he did or not, does not concern even me, and it is impossible for me to conceive why it should in the remotest degree interest you.”

“It is because I will not permit any such absurdity; and I might possibly be able to avoid this offensive publicity.”

He had forgotten himself entirely, and for the moment had spoken the very thought of John Stuart King in that person’s voice and manner. He was recalled to his second self by feeling,

rather than seeing, Hildreth Elliott's stare of unbounded astonishment, mingled with a little touch of terror. Could the man who was driving her father's horses have suddenly become insane? How else could such remarkable words be accounted for?

Instantly he knew that he had blundered irreparably; but he was excited and annoyed. What of it? he asked himself recklessly, she will have to know the truth very soon; that ridiculous will has spoiled everything. Yet what was the truth? Or, rather, what portion of it must she know at once, and what must yet be concealed? He thought rapidly, and spoke again without any very perceptible delay.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Elliott; I was much excited, and forgot to whom I was speaking. I have reasons for being interested in this will; when you hear them, I think you will admit that the reasons are sufficient. If I may see you alone this evening for a few minutes, I can explain."

"I do not wish any explanation," she said, with grave dignity; "I of course have nothing to do with your views of this subject, unless you mean that there is something which you ought to tell me."

That last was an after-thought pressed into words by her conscience. Ought she to turn away from a man who perhaps needed to follow out his sudden impulse to tell something that he had con-

cealed? He felt her exceeding coldness and evident shrinking from an interview with him, but his reckless mood continued; she should see him, and talk with him, once.

“There is something that I think I ought to tell you,” he said, speaking with quite as much dignity as she had used.

“Very well; I shall be in the sitting-room to-night after seven o'clock; and I do not know of anything that will prevent your seeing me alone for a few minutes, if that amount of caution is necessary.”

The woodhouse chamber had the company of a very much disturbed man that evening. As soon as his horses were cared for, he went directly thither and locked himself in. He touched a match to the carefully laid fire in the small Franklin stove which Farmer Elliott had himself suggested that he set up for his comfort, then sat back and stared gloomily at it, feeling as though comfort was something that had gone out of his life. When he laid the fire, in the morning, he had looked forward to a long evening spent in this quiet retreat, — an evening that should do much to further the interests of Reuben and Hannah, those creatures of his brain, whose daily living he had the privilege of fashioning and directing. Now he felt that he wanted none of them, that he hated them both, and would, perhaps, with the next stroke of his pen put them both out of existence.

What was the use in playing with fiction when real life stalked before him in such dreary shape? What had he done by a few reckless words! Made it impossible for this part which he had been playing to be acted any longer, and therefore made it impossible for him to see again the one for whom he had long been playing it. For this one time he let the truth appear to him unrebuked. It was for Hildreth Elliott's sake that he had carried on this deception week after week, and month after month. It was not because he was studying human nature in a new guise, nor because he wanted to try the effect of plain living and very regular hours, nor because he was sleeping so well and had such a fine appetite, that he did not want to break the conditions hurriedly; it was not even because he took to heart the unkindness of depriving Farmer Elliott of his valuable services at a time when he most needed them. All these things would do to say on occasions when his conscience would admit them; to-night it demanded straightforwardness. He was lingering here that he might sit opposite to Hildreth Elliott at table, and watch her expressive face, and hear her voice; that he might carry wood and water for her, and replenish her fire, and close the shutters, and draw the shades by her direction; that he might drive her to the station, to the schoolhouse, to church; that he might, in short, avail himself of the hundred opportunities there were daily of being in her

presence. This was naked truth. And all these things were possible only because he was her father's hired man. Given that other truth which he had himself offered to explain to her, and instinctively he felt that, for a time at least, he could not hope for her friendship. Could he ever hope for it? As he answered this question to his conscience, the blood mounted and spread itself over his face until his very forehead was red; and it was not caused by the glow of the firelight. Was it possible that John Stuart King had put himself into a position of which he was ashamed? What did he want of Hildreth Elliott's friendship? Suppose she were willing to laugh with him over the part he had played, admire his cleverness, approve his motives, and agree that they should be good friends and comrades hereafter; would he be satisfied?

It humiliated him to realize how far removed from satisfaction his feeling would be. What, then, did he expect? O, "expect!" He kicked an unoffending stick of wood at his feet, as he told it angrily that one who had made an utter fool of himself had no right to expect anything. Suppose he had a chance to tell her every detail of the truth; should he do it? What would she think of Elizabeth? And then he drew himself up sharply; he was insulting her by intruding Elizabeth into the interview. Nay, was he not even insulting Elizabeth? The important point

was, what did he think of her? If there were directions in which John Stuart King was not strong, he certainly was not a weak man.

His friends were in the habit of attributing to him unusual strength of character; and while they may have mistaken a certain form of obstinacy for strength, as is often done where people are not very intimate, — and while it must be admitted that certain of his doings indicated the absence of that which we really mean or ought to mean by strength of character, — still the word "weak" would certainly not apply to him; and I think any one who understands his own nature, which is a deeper thing than to suppose that he understands human nature, would have pitied John Stuart King that night, as the extent of his moral degradation slowly revealed itself to him.

He was engaged to be married to one woman, and every fibre of his being was athrob with the thought of another! He had permitted himself to linger in this place of temptation long after he had admitted to his heart that he was tempted: he had put the thought aside, laughed at his conscience, or rather placed a stern seal of silence upon it, and deliberately, — yes, that was the proper word, — deliberately yielded to the desire to be near to Hildreth Elliott, and hear her voice, and watch her movements. Studying her for a character in fiction, indeed! It was long since he had allowed that thought to have any lodgment with him.

Studying her, or rather holding her as a character that had entered into his life, and must forever, whatever else happened, be a part of himself. She was too sacred for fiction,—his kind of fiction; and he felt the glow on his face deepen as he recalled certain words of hers. He had been driving them from the station, Rex Hartwell and Nannie Marvin and Hildreth, and they had been discussing his work — Stuart King's, as it had appeared in a current number of a popular magazine. Hildreth was sitting beside him with her face slightly turned toward those in the back seat, and every line of it visible to him. "I don't think I like him," she had said, "not wholly. Oh! he has undoubted talent. I think he will be recognized as one whom we call a great writer; perhaps he deserves the name better than most of them. They are all disappointing."

"In what sense does he disappoint you?" Rex Hartwell had asked, and John Stuart had blessed him for it; it was the very question he desired to ask.

"Why he ignores — they all do — the 'greatest thing in the world,'" she had replied with a slight laugh, and those subtle quotation marks in her voice which a cultured talker knows how to use. "In his great character, his 'Reuben,' that one can see he desires to have great, one is sensibly reminded of his omissions. For all that the story indicates, he might have been born and

reared among a class of beings who have no religion, — if there were any such, — so utterly does he ignore it. A great fact in the world, swaying lives more or less all about us, swaying more lives than any other single idea ever has, claiming to have to do, not only with this little inch of life, but with an endless eternity, is it being great to write a history of any life, and leave out all reference to it?"

How distinctly he remembered every word of her clear cut sentences; they had cut deeply.

"Probably he has no religion," Rex Hartwell had replied, "and therefore cannot be expected to produce any in fiction."

"Then ought he to profess to describe life?" Hildreth had asked. "Do you believe that in our present civilization there is any life, or at least any with which ordinary fiction deals, that is not distinctly affected by what we call religion?"

The talk had drifted away after that, from definite authors into a general discussion of fiction and its legitimate realm. John Stuart had listened closely, with a degree of interest that would have amazed the talkers, and had carried home some sword thrusts to consider. He had worked, away into the night, over his chief characters, Reuben and Hannah, trying to reconstruct their lives on a basis that he felt might interest Hildreth, and had failed. He could do nothing with them. Like many another writer of fiction, he learned that

they were not the plastic clay in his hand to be moulded as he would. He had created them; but they had wills of their own, and would insist upon carrying out their own ideas of destiny. No, it was more humiliating than that; he had failed in creating them; they were not like the great Creator's work, "made in God's image." He had brought them thus far, dwarfed and misshapen, and they refused to be re-created. He remembered vividly his experience and his disappointment, on this evening when he told himself that such a life as Hildreth Elliott's was too sacred for his kind of fiction. Must he descend yet lower in the moral scale, and admit that he could not even retain Hildreth Elliott as a friend?

He sat long, staring into the glowing fire; sat until it grew disheartened and died out, and a chill began to creep over the room. He utterly ignored Susan Appleby's repeated calls to "come that minute if he wanted any supper at all." To sit down opposite Hildreth Elliott, just then, and try to eat, he felt sure would choke him.

Just what was he to say to her in that interview for which he had asked? Why had he been such a fool? Yet what else could he have done? If that intolerable will that ought never to have been made, could have stayed hidden, he might have planned his way out less painfully than this; but at all hazards he must put a stop to that folly.

He sprang up at last with a sudden realization

of the fact that it was nearly seven o'clock; he must make ready for that interview, and the making ready required time. In an obscure corner of the woodhouse chamber stood a trunk that he had himself brought from the express-office but a few days before. It had been sent for under the vague impression that there might come a crisis in his life, before long, that would demand an appeal to its resources. He strode over to it and unlocked it. Fletcher and his city tailor had done his bidding; and all the belongings of a gentleman's dress were presently being tossed about the room, whose whitewashed walls seemed to stare in blank astonishment.

When he was dressed completely, even to the fine handkerchief with its faintest possible suggestion of the breath of violets, — an accompaniment that was associated with a certain tender memory of his childhood, and to which he always clung, — he looked in his twelve-inch mirror and laughed, — a short, dry laugh that had no touch of pleasure in it. What a humiliating thing it was that there should be such a transformation by the aid of mere clothes!

CHAPTER XXIV.

“I HAVE STARTED OUT NOW FOR TRUTH.”

HILDRETH was in the sitting-room, waiting for her caller. To say that she was annoyed does not express the situation; yet her face, besides being grave, was certainly somewhat disturbed. If she had spoken her inmost thought, she would perhaps have said that she was tired of it all, almost tired of everybody connected with her world. It had been such a trying world to her lately; so full of petty intrigues, that had, like most intrigues, their serious and dangerous side; so full of twists and quibbles and prevarications of the truth, when the truth would have served every purpose better, and would royally have shielded its adherents. There was Corliss, for instance, whose trouble, that had well nigh been serious indeed, was born entirely of his propensity to toy with words, and let others gain what impressions they would therefrom; the more false the impressions, the more intense his enjoyment. But her face cleared for a moment at thought of Corliss. The watching Father in heaven had been greater than his word; even Corliss's follies

had been made to “work together” for his good, and Corliss’s feet were securely settled at last on Rock foundation. But there was poor Elfie, led astray in the first place by her love of mystery; to have a secret to whisper over with Laura Holcombe; to receive letters from somebody who thought all the time that she was somebody else; to send him her photograph that should not be her photograph at all; it was all “such fun!” as the poor little simpleton had expressed it; yet what would be the outcome of such fun? Would Elfie ever recover from the shock that it had been to her to discover what the great censorious, cavilling world thought of such things?

She had had her lesson, poor darling! she had learned that it was not father and mother and sister alone who were “over particular,” but that, when it came to experiences like hers, the very people who had hinted at “strait-laced notions,” and “overstrained ideas,” and “fanatical theories,” were among the first to hold up hands of horror, and cry, “Who would have believed that she could do such a thing?”

Oh, yes! the child had learned a lesson that she would remember; but who could be sure that the sweetest flowers of innocence and guilelessness had not been crushed in the learning? Certainly it had been a bitter experience for them all; and Hildreth, who knew how fond the gossips were of talking, felt that the end was not yet.

There, too, was Nannie, her friend since childhood, beloved as few girl friends are; yet how constantly, as she grew old enough to realize and understand it, had she deplored in Nannie that marked trait which led her to appear what she was not! It had exhibited itself in almost babyhood, leading her to smile and appear pleased with attentions that were really a trial to her. This trait, which had been called amiability, had perhaps been unwisely admired and fostered. Certainly it grew, and developed in Nannie the sort of girl who said, "Oh, how delightful!" when she listened to a plan that in her heart she thought was a bore; and, "I shall be very happy to go," when she meant that she would do almost anything to avoid going. Pity for Nannie that she did not, at the most formative period in her life, come in contact with anyone who labelled this development "Falseness." Instead, it was: "Common politeness."

It grew upon her, and had finally borne the fruit which had brought her to the depths of humiliation and almost despair.

Thinking it over, and realizing that she had faults probably as grave, Hildreth could yet be sure that temptation in this guise would never have come to her.

And now, when she was all but sinking under the weight of pain and anxiety caused by the various outgrowths of this same form of sin, must

come John to add his experience, whatever it was! She shrank from it all. Why need she hear any more? She was tired; she felt that she had no more advice to give, and that even the vaguest kind of sympathy was almost too much to expect of her.

She had not the remotest conception of what John's confidence might be. She told herself half impatiently that she was too weary of it all to form a theory; yet there had floated through her mind a fancy that he must in some way be connected with that disagreeable and altogether unjust will. Perhaps as a witness, who for some reason known to himself had connived at hiding the document.

She smiled sarcastically over the memory of his surprising statement that he “would not permit any such absurdity!” Probably in his ignorance he imagined that he could prevent it. Yet John was not ignorant. She recalled abundant proof that he was remarkably well-informed; he was simply a mystery, and she hated mysteries. She was almost sorry that she had permitted him to come to her with his story. Not quite; for even in this unusual irritability which seemed to have her in hand, there was still the solemn sense of responsibility toward every person with whom she came in contact, especially for those who asked help at her hand. She had struggled with her unwillingness to shoulder any more “secrets,” and had concealed

her annoyance, if not weariness, when she said to her mother with a wan smile, —

“John wants to see me alone for a few minutes, mother? I told him he might come at any time after seven.”

“More burdens?” asked Mrs. Elliott, sympathetically. “Poor little woman! she has had to shoulder the troubles of others ever since she could walk. Never mind, dear; such work has its compensations. I hope John is not in any difficulty; I have a hearty liking for him. If he is ready to confide his history to you, it may be the dawning of a better day for him. Elfie, bring your book, and come to father’s room; he will like to have you read aloud for awhile.”

Poor Elfie had looked up with a quick apprehensive glance the moment she heard of John’s request, and then had dropped her eyes on her book again; but they saw nothing on the printed page. All sorts of incidents filled Elfie with apprehension in these days. What could John want of Hildreth but to impart to her cautiously some fresh gossip about herself, which it was necessary for them to know? He would naturally come to Hildreth, for her father was not yet well enough to be troubled more than was necessary, and they all shielded her mother as much as possible. There was no need for fearing that John was himself in trouble; John was good; she felt that she knew, better than any of them, how good he was.

So Hildreth sat waiting; and in order to banish as much as possible all disagreeable thinking, she took up the last number of a popular magazine, and turned to Stuart King's serial story. She might not approve of him, entirely, but he furnished very interesting reading.

And then the sitting-room door opened, and John Stuart entered unceremoniously. He had stood in the hallway for several seconds, being haunted by the silliest trivialities. In the garb of John Stuart King it seemed natural to think of conventionalities. In his side pocket at this moment reposed his card-case, well filled; under ordinary circumstances the proper thing would be to ring the door-bell, and send in his card by Susan Appleby; but under the circumstances in which he had placed himself, how absurd it would be even to knock! To continue this line of thought would make it impossible for him to talk with Miss Elliott. He hurriedly pushed open the sitting-room door, and as hurriedly closed it behind him. Hildreth looked up from her book, stared a bewildered second, then rose to her feet, a startled look on her face.

“ I beg your pardon if I am intruding; you gave me permission to come, you remember.”

Formal expression came naturally to his lips; it belonged, apparently, with his clothes!

“ I do not understand,” faltered Hildreth; she was still staring.

The ludicrous side of it became uppermost to John Stuart King, and put him for the moment at his ease.

“I begged the privilege of an interview, you remember? There was something that it seemed necessary to explain to you.”

“But you are not” — she was about to add “John;” but something in his strangely familiar, yet unfamiliar, face held back the word. It was ludicrous still.

“I am John Stuart at your service,” he said, speaking almost gayly; “Pray be seated, Miss Elliott; and I will try to explain as briefly as possible.”

She dropped back into her chair; and John Stuart drew a chair for himself, uninvited, and felt that the situation had already ceased to be ludicrous. He had, early in their acquaintance, imagined scenes in which he should “explain;” but they had never been like this one. If only he did not care much what she thought of him! He felt the perspiration starting on his forehead.

How he got through with the first of it he could never afterwards have told. He knew that he stammered something about being a student of human nature, and about desiring to better understand certain social conditions, especially the tramp question, before writing about them. It was a lame defence, and he realized it. His listener grew colder and more dignified.

She interrupted him at last:

“You claim to be a writer, then?”

“That is my business.”

“What do you write?”

He hesitated, and his face flushed. Her tone was so exactly that of a person who, not believing what he said, had resolved to entrap him.

“I have written on various lines,” he said, at last, “travel, and some purely literary papers; at present I am writing fiction.”

“Oh! so you thought you would create some, and act it out? It may have been a very clever way; but how am I to be sure which is fiction—or, rather, where fiction ends?”

“You are hard upon me, Miss Elliott!” he said quickly. “I have done nothing to deserve your contempt.” Then, for the first time, he noticed the magazine still in her hand. Her tone and manner stung him, forced him on.

“I see you have the *American Monthly*; there is what my friends call a very fair shadow of myself, for the frontispiece. Can you not corroborate that portion of my story?”

She gave a little start of surprise, was it also of dismay? gazed fixedly at him for a moment, then turned the leaves rapidly, and gazed at the pictured face, then back to his.

“You are Stuart King!” she said at last; and it is impossible for mere words to give an idea of what her tone expressed.

“I am John Stuart King. Was it a crime so great as to be beyond the reach of pardon to drop the last name for a time, and come into the country, and earn an honest living for myself, doing honest work, and doing it, I believe, in a satisfactory manner?”

She was looking steadily at him; there was no smile on her face, no indication that she was other than gravely displeased.

“Pardon me,” she said at last; “you must be your own conscience. Whether the end in view was worth the weeks and months of deception that you have had to practise, you ought to be better able to tell than I. I cannot pretend to fathom your motive.”

“My motive, Miss Elliott, as I told you, was distinctly in line with my work as a writer for the press. I wished to study certain social conditions, untrammelled by the conventionalities which seemed of necessity to belong to my life. In particular I desired to understand the life of the ordinary tramp, and to be able to describe it from his standpoint; in doing this I had a motive which even you might approve. I wanted, if I could, to help solve the problem of how to reach and save him.”

“And you found such satisfactory conditions for studying this phase of humanity here in my father’s quiet farmhouse, where a tramp rarely penetrates, that you have lingered on, through a large portion of your exile?”

Stuart King distinctly felt the blood surging in great waves over his face; once more he had blundered!

“I used the past tense, if you noticed,” he said presently, in a lower tone. “It was the end for which I started out; I will not deny that other motives have got hold of me, and shaped my later decisions.”

It was still a lame defence, he knew that; but it had in it, either in the words or the manner of rendering them, that which Miss Elliott did not care to probe farther.

“Well,” she said suddenly, in an altered and business-like tone, “I have nothing to do with all this, of course. You have not to justify yourself to *me*. May I ask you what it has to do with the matter of business which seems to have been the occasion of this revelation? Have you any information to give with regard to 'Squire Hartwell's will that has just been found?”

“Pardon me, Miss Elliott, but is that quite true? From the standpoint from which you view life, have you not something to do with it and with me? Am I not a human being with an immortal soul in which you are bound to be interested? Will it be of interest to you, I wonder, to know that, while I believe I was a Christian when I came into your home, I have received new views of what that word should imply since I have been here?”

She looked away from him at last, down at the book she still held, and toyed with the leaves for a moment, then she said, —

“Pardon me, Mr. King, I do not wish to be hard; but I am compelled to say to you that Christianity has its very foundations laid in truth.”

“I understand you,” he said. “You are hard on me, but I think you do not mean to be; and I believe I should hereafter agree with you. I have started out now for truth. You asked me a question. Do you not see the relation I sustain to that unjust and foolish will? Have you heard the name of the supposed heir?”

She looked quickly at him, catching her breath in an exclamation. “It is Stuart King! and you are” —

“And I am John Stuart King, distant relative of 'Squire Hartwell. That complication, Miss Elliott, was not of my planning; it is an accident. But you do not suppose, I hope, that I will allow such an unjust will as that to stand. It was made in a moment of passion, and the maker did not live long enough to recover his sane mind. It is manifestly unjust; and I shall have none of it. Am I wrong in supposing that I can in that way be the means of giving you a bit of pleasure? You will like to have your friends remain in undisturbed possession of their own?” Before he had completed the sentence, he regretted that it was commenced. Clearly,

John Stuart, her father's hired man, had been on terms of intimacy with this young woman such as were not to be accorded to John Stuart King, the somewhat famous author.

He made haste to change the subject. “ Miss Elliott, will you keep my secret for a few days, until I can look about me, and supply my place to your father? There are certain matters which he has intrusted to me that really require my attention, and ” —

She interrupted him.

“ That will be impossible, Mr. King. I am sure that my father, and my brother, who will be at home to-morrow, would undergo any inconvenience rather than to trouble you further. My father will, without doubt, entertain you as Mr. King, if it is not convenient for you to go away at once; but as for lending my aid to any form of deception, however slight it may seem to you, that is quite out of the question. If there were no other reason, the very recent painful experience in my own family would make it impossible.”

“ I understand that, too; I will go away at once, — to-night if you wish it. But, Miss Elliott, surely I may return? I may call upon you as a friend? ”

It was Hildreth's turn to flush. The color flamed into her face, that had been pale before; but she answered steadily, —

“ You make me appear very inhospitable, Mr.

King. I must remind you that we are not friends, but strangers."

"Yet you were kind to John Stuart, and friendly with him; trusted yourself to his care, and accepted his help. But the moment that he claims equality with you, you become strangers! Nothing is changed but the clothes, Miss Elliott; do they count for so much?"

There was a quick flash of indignation in her eyes. "You compel me to plain speaking," she said, "by utterly misunderstanding my position. It is not a question of equality or inequality. For John Stuart, an honest man, earning his living in an honest way, I had respect, and was ready to think and speak of him as a friend. When John Stuart went out of existence, my acquaintance with him necessarily ceased."

John Stuart arose; it seemed to him time that this interview should end.

"I will not intrude longer this evening," he said, in his most dignified, yet courteous tone; "but it is perhaps fair to warn you that, sometime, John Stuart *King* intends to try to secure an introduction to Miss Elliott."

CHAPTER XXV.

“IN EVERY RESPECT, SAVE ONE.”

MR. MARVIN'S prayer at family worship that evening revealed to Nannie that her mother had told him her story. She had shrunken nervously from doing it herself; it seemed to her that she could not bear the look of that pure-eyed, unworldly father when he first heard of his cherished daughter's temptation and downfall. She used that pitiless word in thinking of herself. Rex might blind his eyes to it if he would, and she blessed him for doing it; but she herself knew that she had sinned. And her father, who would lose every poor penny he could earn rather than wrong any one, would be clear-eyed in regard to this thing. She wanted him to know the whole; she assured her mother that she could not sleep until he was told, but somebody beside herself must tell him.

And the father's prayer fell like balm on her wounded and sensitive spirit. There was a touch of the divine sympathy in it that Rex had shown, and that she had thought no other possibly could. As he prayed, she found herself saying over softly

the words, "Like as a Father pitieth his children ;" and then, with a sudden rush of tears that were not altogether unhappy, she cast herself upon the pity of her infinite Father, and rested.

He came and kissed her after the prayer, that dear earthly father, who had just opened heaven for her ; and his voice trembled as he said, "God keep my daughter pure ; I bless him for having kept you thus far ; trust him, and he will bring you through to the end in peace. Poverty is not the worst trial that can befall."

"What a strange prayer that was of father's !" Kate Marvin said, as the sisters in their room lingered over the night toilet. "One who did not understand the state of things might have supposed that Nan had just had a fortune left her, instead of having just lost one."

"Nan seems different, too," said the thoughtful Alice ; "she has been gentler, and less nervous all day than I have seen her for a long time. Perhaps" —

"Well," said Kate, after waiting what seemed to her a reasonable length of time, "perhaps what?"

"I was only thinking that perhaps Nannie, too, had discovered something that father and mother have always had."

"What is that?"

"A mysterious power, Katie, to help them over hard places, and keep them sweet and strong ;

some people find it by praying. Don't you know that father and mother do?"

Blessed are those fathers and mothers of whom their children can give such testimony!

It was true that Nannie Marvin found herself more at rest that evening than in weeks, it almost seemed to her years, before. The great strain was over; they were poorer, poorer by contrast than ever before. The years stretched between Rex and herself, and hard work lay before them all. Nevertheless, as she knelt to pray, her first thought was one of gratitude. God had brought her through; and though years might stretch between her and Rex, there was no gulf between them now.

It seems a pity that dull mornings must so often follow periods of mental exaltation. With the next morning's dawn, Nannie Marvin felt the prosaic side of her life more keenly than she had at all. Depths of misery and heights of peace are both more interesting than the middle ground of every-day duty.

Nannie was quiet, but sad. The irritable stage had passed, and her voice had recovered the gentle note which habitually belonged to it; but it was hard to go about her room, folding away, out of sight and mind, those pretty wedding fineries that she had prepared with such painstaking care. She did not delay the task. There was an old trunk in the attic, which she had had brought down al-

most before daylight, and into which she folded away sundry garments, and a dress or two that would be "too fine" for her now.

"It's all horrid!" said Kate, who had been helping her move the trunk. "I'd rather she would scold; it feels as though there had been a funeral!" and she turned abruptly away to hide the tears. Perhaps Nannie had something of the same feeling. She had slept quietly most of the night, but had awakened early to think and plan. Rex should not have all the hard work this time; she was resolved upon so much. She, too, would go to work. Hildreth wanted to give up her position; her father and mother were not willing that she should teach any longer, and Hildreth herself wanted to go away for a year of study.

They had talked it all over together in the fall, how Hildreth would teach for one winter only; and Nannie had been secretly glad that, instead of planning to go away for study, she was planning to go to her own beautiful home, and make life glad and bright for ever so many people. They had wondered who would take Hildreth's place in the school, and had gone over their list of acquaintances, and been sure that none of them would quite suit; and Hildreth had said, half mournfully, "O Nannie, if it could be you, how delightful it would be for my girls and boys!" Nannie had laughed and blushed, and declared that she did not see her way clear to take up even

such beautiful work ; now her way was clear. She would talk with Hildreth about it that very day. Hildreth had once said that, if a suitable person could be found, she would like to be relieved before the spring term. If she was of the same mind now, not many weeks hence Nannie might be at work ; it would help a little. There were other ways, too, in which money might be earned. Although she was grave-faced and a bit sorrowful that morning, she was tingling with energy. Yet she had a tear or two for the wedding-dress, as she folded it away. She dried them quickly, when she heard Rex's voice in the hall below, and went down to him in a very few minutes.

"I had to pass the house on an errand," he explained, as he held her hand ; "and I did not succeed in passing, you perceive. This is a bright winter morning, Nannie ; how would a brisk walk over to Mr. Potter's place suit you ? "

She gave him a quick, regretful look. "O Rex ! you are going to offer your horse for sale ? "

"I am going to tell him he may have her. He has envied me her possession for so long that it seems a pity not to gratify him."

"But that horse is your very own."

"Oh, certainly ! she has nothing to do with my uncle's estate. But you know, Nannie, you and I are not going to keep a horse just yet ; that is one of the luxuries awaiting our future. Come, the walk out there will do you good."

"No," she said resolutely; "I am not going to begin in that way. I am to work too, Rex; I have plans, and I must set about carrying them out this very morning."

"What are your plans? Perhaps I shall not agree to them; you are not at liberty to carry them out, remember, until I give you leave. Mrs. Marvin, command your eldest daughter that she accompany me for a walk; the morning is just right for it."

"Is she averse to it?" asked Mrs. Marvin, smiling, as she paused in her transit through the hall. "I would go, Nannie, it will do you good."

"That is not to be my motto any longer, mother; I am going to work."

"Ah, but the work can wait for one morning," pleaded Rex; "you want to tell me all about it, you know, and honestly, Nannie, I shall have very few mornings after this; I shall not hinder you again in ever so long. I have some plans to tell you about that are calculated to hasten the time." The latter part of this sentence was spoken low, for her ear. Then he suddenly changed his tone.

"Nannie, you are about to have a call, or your father is. Just hide me in the kitchen, or somewhere, won't you? I don't care to be hindered by that man this morning; he will have a dozen questions to ask if he sees me. What can he want with your father?"

"Who is it?" asked Nannie, as she followed

rather than led the way to the dining-room, Mrs. Marvin having disappeared.

“It is my uncle’s lawyer. I placed that paper in his hands last night; had to wait until the late train before I could see him. He was absent all the afternoon, so I merely handed it to him with the statement that it would explain itself; of course I enclosed a note stating who had found it, and then came away. It made me too late to come out here last night, as I had planned; so I was the more glad of this opportunity this morning. He must have taken the eight o’clock train out; his business must be urgent.”

“I cannot imagine what it can be,” said Nannie wonderingly, and vaguely uneasy at the same time. “Father has no business dealings with him that I know of. I wish we had gone out, Rex, before he came; I feel as though I did not want to see him.”

“Oh! we need not see him,” said Rex cheerfully; “I am not ready for a business talk with him yet. There are some papers to go over first; I told him so in my note. Nannie, if you will put on your wraps, we can slip out of this dining-room door and be off.”

Then Mrs. Marvin opened the door, and closed it after her.

“It is Judge Barnard, Rex; he is in search of you; and he says he wants to see Nannie, too, on important business.”

Nannie shivered like a leaf, and grew deathly pale.

“My dear,” said Rex soothingly, “do not be startled nor troubled; there is nothing that need annoy you, — some absurd technicality, I presume, that might as well have waited until another time; but the average lawyer does not deal in common sense. I will go out and see him, and spare you the annoyance if possible, and I have no doubt that it is.”

But he was too late; the door that Mrs. Marvin thought she had closed after her did not latch, and it presently swung slowly open of its own will.

Judge Barnard, who was standing near it, turned at the sound.

“Good-morning,” he said; “am I to come in here?” and, suiting the action to the word, he walked toward Rex, holding out his hand. There was nothing for that gentleman to do but receive him with what grace he could.

“Good-morning, Miss Marvin,” said the Judge again, turning toward Nannie. He had met her, in the capacity of secretary, in 'Squire Hartwell's library; and he now bestowed a look of more than ordinary interest upon her. He was a dignified man of more than middle age, and looked as though he could, on occasion, “deal in common sense.” He stood very high in his profession, and it was long since he had attended in person to the minor details of business. The annoyed young man who

was watching him could not but think that he had been moved this morning by a vulgar desire to see how both Nannie and himself "bore" the very unusual fortune that had fallen to them. He had to exert himself to speak with courtesy.

"Mrs. Marvin said you wished to see me, Judge Barnard; I suppose there is no occasion for our detaining Miss Marvin?"

"Yes," said the judge, with interested eyes still upon Nannie, "the matter about which I have come to talk concerns her also." Then he looked about for a seat. Rex Hartwell controlled his inward indignation, and brought forward chairs for the three.

"I examined with a good deal of interest the paper you left with me last night," Judge Barnard began deliberately, "an unusual degree of interest, I may say, and following its examination came some very interesting developments. May I ask if the discovery of this paper has, to any extent, been made public?"

Rex gave a swift glance at Nannie before he replied.

"It has, sir, to quite an extent; we were rather anxious that our friends should know of the discovery, and of our change of plans, as promptly as possible."

He had adopted the plural pronoun in every reference to the subject; though, as a matter of fact, it was Nannie who had insisted upon telling

the news as promptly and as widely as lay in her power; it was one form that her nervousness took.

"It is a pity," said Judge Barnard dryly, "because there are people who will talk themselves ill over an affair of this kind, and you might have saved their tongues a good deal of work. I had a remarkable caller last night after I saw you; some time after, indeed; I think it was nearly midnight when he came; he was none other than the young man in whose favor your uncle drew a will."

"The heir!" said Rex, in surprise. "Has he heard of the discovery so soon?"

"Yes, he has been spending some time in this neighborhood, it seems, and making the acquaintance of his friends unknown to them." Judge Barnard evidently enjoyed the bewilderment he was causing. He paused between each sentence, and looked from one to the other as if to give them time to absorb his statements.

"In short, he is none other than your neighbor's man of all work. Mr. Elliott's farm joins this one, I believe?"

"John Stuart!" exclaimed Rex and Nannie in almost the same breath.

"That is the name by which he has chosen to be known; but the surprising part of my statement is yet to come; he called upon me for the purpose of saying that he repudiated the entire

property ; he would have nothing to do with it in any shape, except to turn it over, as rapidly as the forms of law would allow, to the rightful heir. He affirmed, what we all believe, Mr. Hartwell, that the property by right belongs to you, and that your uncle in his sane mind so intended ; that the other will was a freak of the moment, and has no moral ground to stand on ; therefore he declares that it shall not stand.”

“But I cannot have this sort of thing !” said Rex, in great excitement. “My uncle made the will, and lived for weeks afterwards, and did not alter it ; we have nothing to do with what ought to have been, we must deal with what is. I decline to have my uncle’s property on any such ground.”

“Then we apparently have two obstinate men to deal with,” said Judge Barnard, smiling as though he greatly enjoyed the whole ; “the other is equally obstinate.”

“He will change his mind. Who is he, Judge Barnard ? and why has he been posing as a stranger ? Is he a laboring man ?”

“Hardly ! not, at least, in the sense you mean. I have the climax to my story yet in reserve ; he is John Stuart King, the scholar, traveller, author, and what not.”

Their astonishment seemed to satisfy the judge ; it was so great as to almost drive personal matters from their minds for the moment.

“Well,” said Rex at last, “he has my uncle’s property to look after, that is all; you may tell him that I utterly refuse to receive as a gift from him what my uncle did not choose to leave me.”

Judge Barnard turned suddenly to Nannie.

“Do you approve of such a wholesale renunciation as that, Miss Marvin?” he asked. Nannie’s answer was quick and to the point.

“Certainly I do. Mr. Hartwell is not an object of charity. It may be noble in the man to feel as he does; I think it is; but a will is a *will*, and, however unjust, people must abide by it.”

Judge Barnard leaned back in his chair and laughed. The young people regarded him with astonishment and disapproval.

“Excuse me,” he said, “this is quite a new experience to me; there is not much in my profession to afford enjoyment. I told you that the climax to my story was to come; now you shall have it. That paper you found, Miss Marvin, was undoubtedly the last will and testament of this young man’s uncle, ‘Squire Hartwell. It is duly signed and dated, and all the forms of law are correct; in every respect, *save one*, it is a facsimile of the one that I drew up for ‘Squire Hartwell. But instead of John Stuart King being the heir, every solitary penny of the entire property is left to Miss Annette L. Marvin, on condition that she marry his obstinate nephew, Joshua Reginald Hartwell. Miss Marvin, are you going to consent

to meet those conditions, or are you, like the gentlemen, obstinate?"

But for the third time in Nannie Marvin's life the "room began to whirl around;" and Judge Barnard, instead of waiting to be answered, went haste, to find a glass of water.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DISMISSED.

IT was all very well to appear dignified before Miss Elliott, but never did a gentleman go out from her presence more thoroughly uncomfortable in mind than did John Stuart King on that memorable evening. He was sure that he had been a simpleton throughout the interview. He had allowed himself to be misunderstood, to have his motives maligned, in short, to appear ashamed of his position, instead of explaining calmly that he had adopted an ordinary business method of action for the sole purpose of studying social problems. It was a scheme of which he had a right to be proud, rather than ashamed. This he told himself while he was in a fume. In calmer moments he admitted that no man could be really proud of a position that compelled him to shade the truth a dozen times in a single day. Moreover, people did not like to be duped, even though the deception had done them no harm. There was something, undoubtedly, to be said for Miss Elliott's side.

He tramped off some of his surplus energy, by

making all speed to the station; one step of his future was clear to him. He would, without an hour's delay, do what he could to upset that will, which by this time he hated; he took a savage delight in the prospect of making it good for nothing. The train was late, after all his haste, and he had to march up and down the little platform to keep himself warm, subject to the sleepy-eyed stare of the station agent; it was unusual for residents of Bennettville and vicinity to take a train to town at that late hour.

He came back over the road with slower step, but not more cheerful views of life. His interview with Judge Barnard had added a little to his general sense of being ill used. That gentleman asked many questions, and imparted no information; he could not even learn from him whether the necessary forms of law could be managed without delay.

Before reaching the farm, however, he had decided upon the next step. He would not leave town that night, notwithstanding his offer to Hildreth Elliott to do so if she desired. She had not said, in words, that she desired it; and he believed there was a duty that he owed to her father, although she had been in too lofty a mood to recognize it. He had not exaggerated the confidence which Mr. Elliott had of late placed in him. On the very next day he was to have driven to a distant town to complete a certain business tran-

saction which required judgment and quick-wittedness. Mr. Elliott had not hesitated to place the matter in his hands; it should have his best attention; delay would cause embarrassment, and might result in pecuniary loss. He would start at daylight. If Miss Elliott chose, during his absence, to arrange so that he could do nothing further for her father, that was her concern; for himself, he stood ready to give honorable warning of his change of occupation. He should be absent all day, and therefore need not disturb Miss Elliott by a sight of him. Having settled this, he gave a very few hours to restless sleep, during which he continued his interview with Hildreth, with even more unsatisfactory results than had attended his waking, and then roused Susan Appleby at an hour which she considered unreasonable.

“Pity’s sake!” she grumbled, “Why didn’t you start last night! I suppose it is your supper you are hungry for, since you wouldn’t condescend to come and eat it.” He had packed away Stuart King’s garments in the trunk, and every article of clothing he wore belonged to the man known as John Stuart; so Susan felt at home with him, and, as usual, was not afraid to speak her mind. He was very gentle with her. Susan had been a friend to him; he could recall times without number when she had advised him for his good. He realized that she had honestly done her best to be

helpful to him. He replied meekly that it was not so much breakfast that he wanted, as to leave some messages for Mr. Elliott. It was to be explained to him that John had made a very early start, because he had learned, the day before, that on Saturdays the chief man he was going to see generally went to town by the noon train; and by starting thus early he believed that he could reach him, and transact the business before train-time. There followed other messages, or suggestions rather, concerning certain matters that ought to receive attention during his absence; until at last Susan Appleby, who was proud of the evident way in which he took the Elliott interests to heart, and who faithfully treasured every word he said, in order for an accurate report, grumbled again. Did he think she was a walking dictionary, or something, to remember all those words? Mr. Elliott had run the farm before he came there, and she thought likely enough he could do it again. Susan did not know what a thorn she thrust into the sore heart of John by that last. He felt its truth; he was probably exaggerating his importance even to Mr. Elliott; it really made little difference to anyone, save, possibly, his mother and Elizabeth, where he went or what he did.

As he drove into the farmyard late that afternoon, his errand having been accomplished in a gratifying manner, he saw, hanging on one of the bars that divided the meadow lot from the yard,

an individual whose presence actually gave him a pang of something like envy. This was no other than "Jim," the man who had worked for Mr. Elliott just before his own advent, and who had fallen sick, apparently for the purpose of giving him an opening. He had heard much of this individual. Susan, who thought much better of Jim ill and away, than she had of him at work on the farm, had given detailed accounts of his virtues.

Jim had fully recovered, and he was doubtless in search of his old place. John Stuart had met the youth several times in the village, and knew that he had a fondness for the Elliott farm; a few words with him as he sat astride the fence corroborated this idea. Jim was hoping that there would be an opening, at least in the spring, and had come around to see about it. He had been "talking things over" with Mr. Elliott; he didn't want to get in any other fellow's way, but, after all, this was kind of his place; a man couldn't help getting sick. John assented to it all; apparently the man had come in an opportune time; why was he not glad? Just what step should he take next? It seemed probable that Miss Elliott had made her disclosures; perhaps he could see Mr. Elliott at once, and depart without burdening her with a further glimpse of him. And then Susan Appleby shouted at him from the kitchen doorway.

“If I was you, I’d find out what I was to do next, before I unharnessed them horses. I should n’t wonder a mite if you would have to drive to the station after Hildreth. They tramped there this afternoon, her and Nannie Marvin; but it isn’t any ways likely that they mean to tramp out again. I don’t know nothing about it, but I think it’s likely that Mis’ Elliott does; if I was you I’d ask her, before I did a lot of work for nothing. I s’pose you’ve heard the news, haven’t you?”

“What news?” asked John Stuart tentatively, as he came toward the house with a view, perhaps, to acting upon Susan’s advice. Nothing seemed more improbable than that Miss Elliott would permit him to bring her from the station, but it was possible that he ought to inquire.

“Why, about that everlasting will; it is going to pop up in some shape or other the rest of our lives, I reckon. I don’t know what it will do next to make a hubbub, I’m sure.”

“What has it done this time?” John Stuart was washing his hands now at the sink, and reflecting whether it was probable that Susan had already heard of the heir’s rejection of the property. Evidently she did not know who the heir was. Susan’s views might indicate how much had already been told, therefore his question.

“Why, that fellow, whoever he is, that folks thought ’Squire Hartwell left his money to; you’ve heard of him, haven’t you?”

"I have heard his name mentioned several times!" said John Stuart dryly.

"Well, I reckon he feels fine to-day! only maybe he didn't hear the other story; I don't know how far off he is; I hope he didn't. I can't help feeling kind of sorry for the poor fellow; having money left him, and then not having it, and then having it again, and not having it some more, is worse than never having had a notion of getting any, according to my idea. It ain't his, you see, after all," — stopping in the act of filling her kettle to see the effect of her words, — "that will that Nannie Marvin found, and that none of 'em had sense enough to look at, but just rushed off to Judge Barnard with it — he come up there this morning post-haste, and told them that it was 'Squire Hartwell's last will and testament sure enough, but there isn't a red cent of the money left to that fellow, whatever his name was, nor to anybody else, but just Nannie Marvin herself; only she's got to promise to marry Rex Hartwell, or else she can't have it. Easy enough for her to promise that! She's been crazy after him ever since I knew her.

"For pity's sake! John Stuart, what are you dripping soapy water all over my floor for? It don't need cleaning. Didn't I finish scrubbing it not an hour ago?"

"Have I hurt the floor, Susan? I'm very sorry." He transferred the offending hands to the wash-

basin, finished his toilet in extreme haste, and got out again to the yard and the horses. It had suddenly become difficult to breathe inside. All his efforts, then, had been in vain. Had he simply kept quiet, and allowed things to take their course, all would have been well, and he might be at this moment quietly driving to the station for Miss Elliott, as a matter of course. It was a very bitter reflection. He had not been ready for disclosures, he had made them badly, and now to find them worse than unnecessary! The repentant Susan came out on the steps, and called again.

"Come on in, and get some dinner; I kept it hot for you. You needn't wait till supper; you must be about starved by this time."

He answered gently again, that he did not feel hungry, and would wait. Susan went in, slamming the door a little, and grumbling. "Pity's sake! if he's goin' to turn so touchy as that, what's the use in trying to do anything? Jest because I scolded a little about his drippy hands!"

He left his horses blanketed at last, and went into Mr. Elliott's room. That gentleman was now improving daily; he was sitting up in his easy chair, and was alone. The moment John Stuart saw his face he knew that he had been told the news. It was not a disagreeable interview. Mr. Elliott did not seem indignant, like his daughter. He said that he understood something of what the motive might have been, and congratulated John on his

success in carrying out the scheme. He even laughed a little over his own utter innocence, and recalled, with laughter, certain items of advice that he had given. John could sooner have cried; he felt himself parting with a friend. The truth was, he had come in closer touch with a real home than ever in his life before. Moreover, despite his kindness, there was in Mr. Elliott that little undertone of feeling about having been duped. Like all practical jokes, it had its disagreeable side; no man likes to have his faith in other men played with. John Stuart tried to hint at his willingness to remain until such time as Mr. Elliott could spare him better; but there was no opening for that. Evidently it was taken for granted that his reason for making the disclosure at all was his desire to get away. His sacrifice in connection with it had been apparently forgotten. Why not, since it was not needed? Mr. Elliott made light of his share of the inconvenience. Jim had come to him that very afternoon, desiring his old place; it seemed providential. Jim had really done very well indeed, for so young a fellow, and he himself should be around in a few days. Oh, no! they would not think of asking John to stay; under the circumstances it would be embarrassing for all of them. He was sorry that he had felt bound to attend to that day's business, but glad, of course, for its successful conclusion. Jim could hardly have managed that. If he would like to take the

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train that evening, Jim could drive him to the station when he went for Hildreth. In short, John Stuart went out from that interview feeling himself dismissed. Notwithstanding Farmer Elliott's closing words, half serious, and yet comic, "You have certainly served me faithfully; and if, at any time, you find yourself in need of a recommendation as a farm hand, don't hesitate to apply to me!" there was a sense in which he felt himself dismissed in disgrace. He was almost compelled to leave the farm that night, and it was not what he wanted to do. He hesitated, with a lingering desire to say good-by to Susan, then thought better of it, and made his way up to the woodhouse chamber just as Jim was responding with alacrity to Mr. Elliott's call.

He did not go directly to the city that he called home. Instead, he bought his ticket for the college town where Corliss Elliott was staying. He was in no mood for home just now; he shrank from Fletcher's probing questions, and felt that he had no story to tell about his summer's outing.

A vague feeling that Corliss Elliott might be in embarrassment of some sort, and a desire to be helpful to him, was, as nearly as he could understand his motives, what prompted him to stop at the college town. He had never learned what form of trouble it was that sent Corliss home that night so heavily laden, nor how he had gotten out of it as triumphantly as his telegram would seem

to indicate. That it had to do with money, in some way, he thought was evident; and a boy who was deeply involved in money difficulties did not usually find his way out so quickly. Perhaps the telegram was only a skilful effort to lift the burden from his sister's shoulders. The more he thought about it, the more he convinced himself that the boy was in danger — in greater danger, probably, than his secluded sister could even imagine. If he, John Stuart King, could secure an influence over him, could win him, perhaps, from dangerous companions, could gradually secure his confidence, and help him practically and permanently, if debt were one form of his trouble, would not that be something worth stopping for? It would dignify his more than doubtful experiment, and restore to him his self-respect. Moreover, would it not, in a way which perhaps nothing else could, soften Miss Elliott's feelings toward him? — help her to understand that, although he had chosen to masquerade for a time as another character, he was really an honest, earnest man with a purpose in life? .

This last motive he tried to put away from him, as unworthy. Miss Elliott had practically insulted him; had shown him that he was less than nothing to her, despite the kindly interest that she had taken in John Stuart, an interest that had evidently been growing of late. He owed it to his self-respect to think no more about her; but the

boy Corliss, who had been uniformly kind to him, even when he regarded him with more or less suspicion, he should like to win him, and watch over him, and help him.

Arrived in town, he wandered about, valise in hand, in the lower and more obscure portions of the city, until he found a lodging-house sufficiently humble for his needs, and hired a room for the night. From this he emerged in the morning, fully attired as John Stuart King, to the unbounded astonishment, and, he could not help feeling, suspicion, of the sleepy-looking maid who stared after him as he walked down the street. He had taken the precaution to pay his bill the night before, and had said that he wanted no breakfast. It annoyed him, however, to think of that servant maid's stare; he wanted to be done with intrigue of every sort from this time forth.

He took a car for up town, and, having questioned his way, selected one of the best hotels in the city, where he registered at once as "Stuart King," with possibly an extra flourish of his pen about the last name; then unpacked his valise, and established himself, resolved to give exclusive attention to Reuben and Hannah, and wait for Monday, and the hope of an interview with Corliss Elliott.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CITIZEN, OR SOJOURNER?

“UPON my word!” said Corliss Elliott, “I do not wonder that my sister was startled to the degree that she confesses, when you appeared to her. I really do not think that I should have recognized you at the first moment, had I not been prepared. Is it possible that you have not made any changes, except in dress?” and he looked critically at hair and mustache.

“It is simply clothes,” said Stuart King. “Isn’t it humiliating?”

“It is very interesting. You should have stayed, and given our neighborhood another sensation; it is fairly boiling with excitement as it is. What with the recovered will, and an entirely new heir, or rather heiress, and then your sudden, and to them mysterious, disappearance, — I do not know, on the whole, that it could safely have borne any more.”

They were sitting together in Stuart King’s room. Corliss, who had been at home for the Sabbath, as usual, and had returned by a later train than usual, had not visited his room until night,

and then had found Stuart King's card. His curiosity to see that gentleman was so great that it was with difficulty he had restrained himself, the next day, until college duties were over, before rushing to return the call. He was cordial in the extreme, and heartily interested in the idea that had led Stuart King to sacrifice his position in the world to a summer and fall of country life and obscurity.

"I do not know that I understand social problems well enough to appreciate your work in that direction," he said frankly, when Mr. King, with anxious care, tried to elaborate them for him; "but I can see at a glance that the whole thing would be great fun, and I confess I do not see the harm in it that—some people might."

He had made a noticeable pause before concluding, and Stuart King studied his face for news.

"You think, then, that some people would disapprove? Is that the feeling in your neighborhood?"

"Not to any extent," said Corliss, laughing. "Susan Appleby was the only really cross person I saw. She considers herself cheated, but she admits that you did it well; the fact is, she believes that the man who could cheat Susan Appleby, 'right before her face and eyes,' as she expresses it, is a genius. My father, too, sees the jolly side of it. He laughed over some of the advice he had given you, and he says that you have the material in you for a first-class farmer."

Stuart King tried to laugh with him, and to make his voice sound not too anxious as he said, —

“But your mother and sisters feel differently, perhaps?”

“Well,” said Corliss hesitatingly, “my sister Hildreth, as perhaps you know, is a worshipper of Truth; if she had lived in the old days, or in some heathen country, she would have had a carved image named Truth, and bowed down to it. I like it in her. I used to think her too particular, perhaps she is in certain directions; but, on the whole, it is grand to have a character that one can trust, always and everywhere. Hildreth is over-sensitive in some lines; she cannot help that. She is one, you see, who looks and thinks truth, as well as speaks it.”

Mr. King felt that he need not question farther. Hildreth had criticised him, probably with severity, and her brother had tried to take his side. He must wait. Meantime, he would cultivate the acquaintance of this young brother, and win him, and sometime, perhaps — Well, perhaps what? The mail had been brought to his room since Corliss had arrived, and on the table before him lay a bulky letter from Fletcher; it undoubtedly contained foreign enclosures.

He pushed aside all merely personal matters, and gave himself to the entertainment of Corliss, with such success that he presently felt he might safely say, with the most winning of smiles, —

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"And now that you understand me better than you did, I wonder if I may renew the offer that I once almost offended you by making? In that line or any other I should be glad to be called upon. In other words, I should like you, if you are willing, to look upon me as a friend. It is true I am a few years older than you, but by no means so many that I have forgotten my college experiences, and the satisfaction that a frank friendship with a man older than myself would have been to me. Is it too early in our acquaintance to ask you to take me for a real friend?"

"I thank you ever so much," said Corliss heartily. "I do not feel that you are a new acquaintance at all. I told Hildreth that it scared me to think of the great Stuart King, and remember that I had actually given him directions about horses and cows and the like!" — he stopped to laugh merrily over the memory, — "and I said that I hoped our roads would never cross again, because I shouldn't know what to say; but you see I rushed away in search of you as soon as possible, and I confess that I am not at all afraid of you. I always liked John Stuart even better than I thought it wise to show him." The half merry and yet really earnest look on the handsome young face was pleasant to see.

"Poor little Elfie," he continued, "had a momentary return of her love of mystery and romance, and announced that she thought it would be just

delightful to meet you as Stuart King, the great writer! I say, Mr. King, we owe you a debt of gratitude for your share in the rescue of that poor little girl that we can never repay. Hildreth admitted that you were very wise and very kind about that matter, and my mother cannot be grateful enough."

This certainly was comforting. Mr. King's heart warmed yet more toward Hildreth Elliott's brother. He contrived, before the interview closed, to renew his offer of help; approaching the subject from another side, and, he flattered himself, with such adroitness that it would not sound like mere repetition. Corliss had arisen to go, but he turned back with the bright look shining on his face.

"That is very good of you! I recognized it as truly good when you offered help to me before; the only thing I was afraid of was, that John Stuart ought not to have so much money!" His frank laugh was very fascinating. "I am glad to be able to tell you that I have no need of help in that direction. I was in a sea of trouble; but there came an Infinite Helper to my aid, and carried me through." There was no mistaking his reverent tone. Stuart King waited respectfully for whatever more he might have to say in that line.

Suddenly he changed his tone, and spoke eagerly, —

“I do need help, however, in other directions. It seems strange to be asking it of you, at this time; it was the last thought I had when I came; but you have been so kind. My sister Hildreth told me that you were a Christian man; and I know, by the energy with which you take hold of anything that is to be done, what sort of a Christian you must be. I wonder if you would not be just the one to set me at work? I have just started on that road, Mr. King; in fact, my decision dates from the morning following my night of trouble. I was driven into the fold, one may say. A vast amount of coaxing was done beforehand, but I would pay no attention to it; however, I am inside at last. Now what I want is to get to work. I am just alive from head to foot with undirected energy. There is work enough needing to be done, I can see that; among the boys in college, for instance, and outside, in the city, plenty of it; but I don't know how to set about any of it. Could you give me a hint? sort of start me, you know? What is your line of Christian work in your own city? And what did you do in college? Did you have some system, something that I can get hold of? You wouldn't imagine it, perhaps, but I am a systematic sort of fellow; I have definite hours for definite things, and mental pigeon holes filled with them, you understand.”

Poor Stuart King! yes, he understood, but he

stood silent, constrained, embarrassed before the bright young face and earnest eyes looking up to him for guidance. What was his line of Christian work? What indeed! Would anything astonish the people of his own city more than to see him at any sort of Christian work? How many times had he spoken to others upon this subject? Fletcher, his friend and fellow church-member, and he had often criticised sermons together as they walked home from church; but, aside from that, he could not recollect having held any religious conversation even with him. The mid-week prayer-meeting of his church he had not been in the habit of attending; it fell on a night when there was generally a literary lecture of importance, in some other portion of the city; and then, too, he had been abroad a great deal, and had never fallen into the habit of a mid-week prayer-meeting, nor indeed of any prayer-meeting. What had he done in college in the name of Christian work? Nothing. If he spoke plain truth, such as he had declared to himself that he meant to speak in future, he should have to use that word. Would it be well to make such a confession to this eager beginner, looking to him for guidance?

He did not think all these thoughts in detail while Corliss waited for his answer; instead, they flashed through his brain, making a stinging path to his awakening conscience. He was glad that Corliss was on his feet, and had but a moment

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before explained that he must meet a college engagement.

“These are very important questions,” he said, and he was afraid that his smile was a sickly one; “they cannot be answered hurriedly; come and see me again, and we will talk things over. When will you come? Can you spare an evening for me soon?”

Corliss ran hurriedly over the week’s programme. Tuesday was lecture evening, and on Wednesday he had promised to go with a friend to make a call at some distance.

“How would Thursday evening do?”

“Thursday,” said Corliss, “is our college prayer-meeting evening; I have only very recently begun to attend it, but I thought I would not allow other engagements to interfere with it. You think that is the way to begin, don’t you? Because, if one starts out with letting other matters push in, there is always something to push.”

“Undoubtedly,” said the supposed guide; and he hoped that the blood which he felt flushing his face was unnoticeable. Then there were no other evenings that week. On Friday Corliss went home again; and he could not know how much Stuart King envied him this privilege, nor how devoutly he wished that he could be invited to hold their next conference at the Elliott farm. There was nothing for it but to wait until the following Monday; though he had wanted very much to say cer-

tain things to this young brother that he might possibly report to his sister.

Left alone, Stuart King let the bulky letter wait, while he gave himself up to some of the most serious, as well as humiliating, thinking that he had ever done in his life.

Once more were his plans, and yes, his hopes, shattered! He had earnestly hoped to be helpful to this young man, to win him from careless and probably dangerous ways, to guide him into higher lines of thought and of study than his commonplace opportunities had as yet suggested to him. In short, to be such a friend to him that Hildreth Elliott might one day say, possibly with the grateful tears making her beautiful eyes soft and bright, "I have to thank you for saving my brother to his highest self." And now, behold, the boy was not only safe from the common and petty temptations that he had feared for him, but was tremendously in earnest, and needed leading in exactly the lines in which he was powerless to help! The older man could feel the throb of energy and of settled purpose in the boy. He could be sure that it was no common decision that had been reached; he could foretell that Corliss Elliott's religion meant a force that would be known among his classmates, and in his boarding-house, and that would grow with his growth, and develop as his mental powers strengthened. He would, in short, become such a Christian as Hil-

dreth Elliott already was, with Christianity for an underlying test to which all acts, however trivial, must be brought.

Could he wish him to be less than this? No, indeed; he drew himself up proudly with the thought. He respected and admired such characters; but he had been content to admire them afar off, and to feel, rather than reason, that such a condition was attainable only for the few. Now he discovered that, if he would be the friend of Hildreth Elliott not only, but even of the boy, he must search after that condition.

He sat well into the night, busy with the most serious problems that can concern the human mind. After a time he was able to put Hildreth Elliott, and then all human friendships or embarrassments, aside, and let conscience speak to his soul. Very solemn questions it asked him. Why should he, a man who had had unusual opportunities for education and culture, discover himself to be actually below a young fellow like Corliss Elliott, when it came to matters of the most vital importance? He might call it boyish enthusiasm, and smile excusingly, and give his mind to his studies; he had been doing something of that kind, heretofore, he discovered; but some new light had entered his soul, and was compelling him, for the time at least, to be consistent with himself. Did he believe that this life at its longest was short as compared with that eternity, only a faint concep-

tion of which even the cultured mind was able to grasp? Did he believe that one book, claiming to be from God, told us all that we actually know about that eternity? Putting aside for the moment the differing opinions of Christendom, did he believe in the general statements plainly made in that revelation? Unhesitatingly his mind answered, "Yes," to all these questions. Then came the searching one. Was his life arranged and managed in accordance with these beliefs? Much of his time since he grew to manhood had been spent abroad; he might in a sense have been said to have lived there; yet it had always interested him to note that an Englishman or Frenchman seemed to recognize him at once as an American, and as a sojourner rather than a resident.

"You are an American?" said, rather than asked, a man in London to whom he had been but a short time before introduced; and then, "I suppose you are like all the rest of them, planning to go home as soon as you can manage it?" He thought of this as he sat alone with his conscience. Did he impress any person with whom he came in contact as a citizen of another country planning to go home? Had he not rather lived always as though this inch of life were all that deeply interested him, and religion but an incident, somewhat trifling than otherwise, along the way? Corliss, it is true, had appealed to him, asked his help, confident, apparently, that he would

be able to give it; but his clear-eyed sister had not been deceived. And Corliss would learn very soon, that, boy as he was, and but just started on this road, he was, by reason perhaps of his lifelong environment, already farther advanced than this traveller who professed to have begun the journey years before.

What was he going to do about it? The boy had been drawn to him, had enjoyed the evening, and would come again; he could win and influence him, could gradually mould him by what pattern he chose; should he try it? His own aims had been high, his life could in no ordinary sense of the word be called a failure; most parents, yes, and most sisters of his acquaintance, would feel honored by any notice from him bestowed upon their sons and brothers. Would the Elliots? Sooner than turn into other channels the high aspirations that the boy now had, he would hold aloof from him entirely! Was there no other alternative?

After a time, as has been said, he got beyond all these, and let not alone his conscience, but the voice of God, speak to him. It sent him to his knees.

On the next Monday evening, at the close of a talk with Corliss about the home he had just left, Stuart King laid a cordial hand on the young fellow's shoulder, and said, —

“My friend, I have something to say to you.

I am not the one to advise you as to the most important part of your life. If it were a question of Greek or mathematics, I think I might be of service, but I am simply a babe in this matter of practical Christianity; I believe I have done even without creeping." There was a sad smile on his face as he made this confession. "I don't mind telling you," he added, with grave dignity, "that I am ashamed of my life as a Christian, I mean to have a different record from this time forth; but it is only right to tell you that, much as I should like to help you in the line of which you spoke the other night, I don't know how. You will have to go to some one who has not wasted his opportunities."

The younger man, wondering, touched, attracted powerfully by simple frankness and earnestness, hesitated a moment, then, holding out his hand, said eagerly, "Suppose we start together, then, and find out what to do?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE SEASON'S HARVEST.

THE great stone house, that had belonged in the Hartwell family ever since one stone of it was laid upon another, was ablaze with light; and from all the hospitable rooms issued the sound of merry voices. The long hoped for, long deferred social function that had filled the thoughts of Bennettville and vicinity for so long was in progress. Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Hartwell were "at home," after their wedding journey, and had gathered their friends about them royally.

Not one person in the neighborhood who could lay claim to even a slight acquaintance with Nannie Marvin Hartwell had been forgotten. Hildreth's boys and girls, as the young people from her school were called, were there in force. So also was Susan Appleby, in the dining-room door, with her arms akimbo just then, staring about her complacently, but doing most efficient service in the kitchen between times.

"I had as good an invite as the best of 'em," she confided, in a strong voice, to Jack Sterritt; "if I hadn't I shouldn't have stirred a step to

help; but they ain't the kind that looks down on folks the minute they get a little money. Ain't she sweet to-night in that bride dress? I declare for it, I didn't know Nannie Marvin was so pretty. It beats all what wedding finery will do!"

"We'll have them here often," said the bride, in confidence to Hildreth, as they watched some of the country girls who were gazing earnestly at the pictures on the walls. "We mean to have an 'evening' on purpose for our friends in this neighborhood; and we'll teach them all sorts of little things that will help them, without their ever imagining that they are being taught. Gradually we will drive out of the region those games that you dislike so much, along with several other objectionable things, just by showing them a better mode of entertainment. Rex says we will try the 'expulsive power' of new entertainments. O Hildreth! we mean to do so many things with this dear old house! Rex has such lovely plans! you don't half know him. We knelt together in this very library, by that leather chair near the grate, and consecrated this room especially to the work. And, O Hildreth," this with lowered tone and a little nervous clutch of her friend's arm, "I thought then, while I listened to his prayer about what we meant to try to do, what if I had burned that will! I was tempted to it! What if I had?"

"You never would have done it," said Hildreth,

with quiet confidence. "Do not even think of it, dear. God takes care of his own."

She stood, later, near one of the great leather chairs; she liked to look down into their depths, and remember that they had been "consecrated." She was feeling very happy; there were lovely possibilities for Rex and Nannie, and through them her dear boys and girls would receive help. Money was a beautiful servant! Young Dr. Warden moved toward her; he was Rex Hartwell's most intimate friend, and had taken a journey at an inconvenient time to act as his "best man." It had not been found difficult to persuade him to take it again, and assist at this reception. He was evidently well pleased to be intimately associated with Miss Elliott, as she was of course the bride's "maid of honor."

"I think you told me I was to help you 'feel at home' to-night!" he said, laughing. "Are there many guests left whom you have not met?"

"Oh, there must be dozens! the entire medical college has come out to-night, I think."

"Then I ought to be doing my duty. I believe I have at least met most of the guests from the college. But there are others equally distinguished, if not more so. Of course you have met the star of the evening? He came late, however, after we had ceased to receive formally; perhaps you really have not met him? What an oversight!"

"How can I know until you name the wonder?" laughed Hildreth. "Who is the star? I thought there were several."

"Ah, but this one is of the first magnitude. His last book, just out, is creating a furore. I mean Stuart King, of course."

At that instant some one tapped him on the shoulder, and spoke low a few words.

"Certainly," said Dr. Warden. "Miss Elliott, allow me to make you acquainted with my friend, Mr. King. All right, Hartwell. Excuse me, Miss Elliott, the 'chief' is summoning me." Whereupon he disappeared in the throng.

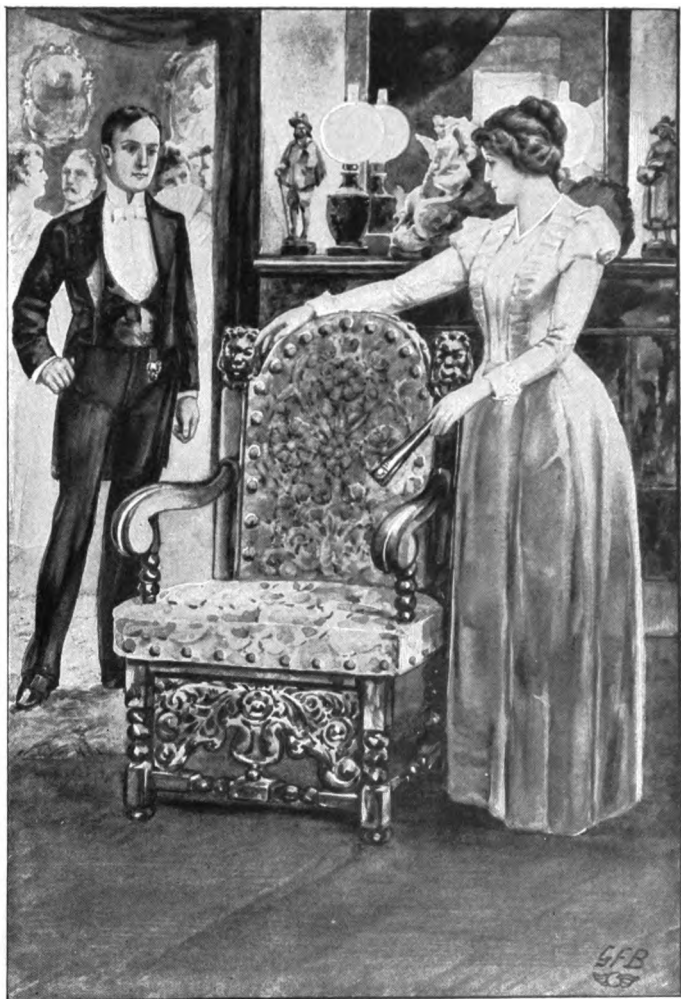
Stuart King and Miss Elliott stood confronting each other. There was a moment's hesitation, as though she were trying to determine what to say; then she laughed, a low, rippling laugh full of merriment.

"I am acquainted with you, after all," she said. "Clothes are not so important as we supposed."

"But you said we were to be strangers."

"I know I did. I was hard on you, Mr. King; I have realized it since. My brother takes care that we shall not, in the family, forget your name. I like the work that you and he are doing."

"It is he who is doing it," said Mr. King earnestly. "I have only been able to help a little with the organization. I could not enter into it as I should like to do, because I am going home so soon."



STUART KING AND MISS ELLIOTT STOOD CONFRONTING EACH OTHER.

It was a very different conversation from any of the numberless ones that he had tried to plan since he first knew that he was to have this coveted opportunity. He had been anxious, if she would talk with him at all, to make her talk, or rather to make her listen to his defence, of his fall campaign. He felt that, while he had not himself so high an opinion of it as he used to have, he could yet convince her that he had been thoroughly in earnest in his effort to understand a form of life about which he wished to write; and he meant to ask her if she would not read his book, and see if she did not find evidence that he understood, some points at least, better than he could have done without some such aid. But, after that first laughing sentence, she utterly ignored their past acquaintance, and went straight to the centre of their present work, his and her brother's. She was eager for details, for suggestions as to what he would try to do if he were to continue in the college town. She had certain plans of her own to propose, and was anxious to learn, through him, whether they would be feasible for her brother to add to his. In short, she showed him, plainly as words could have done, that it was the special Christian effort that he, in common with her brother, had undertaken, which interested her, instead of Stuart King, author of the most popular work of fiction of the season; and immeasurably instead of John Stuart, the dissembler, to whom she had

once been so kind, and once so severe, but now whom she seemed almost to have forgotten.

For the next few weeks he had much opportunity to study this phase of Miss Elliott's character. At least he made the opportunities. His invitation to call had been sufficiently cordial, and he improved it. Twice, during the week following the reception at the stone house, came invitations from certain of the wealthier families of the surrounding neighborhood, that took him back. Of course there were people who had never noticed John Stuart by so much as a glance, who were more than delighted to have the chance of receiving John Stuart King at their homes. On both of these occasions he went down by an early train, and called at the Elliott farm.

Early in the ensuing week he persuaded himself that courtesy demanded the making of a few calls in the neighborhood; notably, of course, upon the bride and groom, also at the Elliott farm. On Friday night he went down, by Corliss's hearty invitation, and spent the Sabbath. Certainly Hildreth Elliott had decided that he was not a stranger. She was frank and cordial, was as deeply interested as ever in the enterprise that he and Corliss were managing, and showed herself an efficient helper.

Farmer Elliott had apparently recovered from his slight sense of annoyance at having been made the subject of a practical joke, and was as cordial

as possible. As for the quiet mother, she had never been other than kind and friendly; and poor Elfie, who had not recovered from her frightened air, and her timidity in the presence of others, yet received him most gratefully. Only Susan Appleby held aloof.

“Humph!” she said, when his position in the literary world was explained to her, “how do you know he writes books? He may have borrowed 'em, like he did his work clothes. Who knows what he will do next? I shouldn't be surprised to see him turn out a circus man, or something.”

This estimate so amused Corliss that he could not resist the temptation to repeat it to Stuart King; who laughed with him genially, and hid a sense of shame and pain. Did Susan voice in her rough, uncultured way something like Hildreth Elliott's thought of him? in other words, did *she* trust him fully?

There came a time, just as the spring was opening, when Mr. King steadily, yet with infinite pain to himself, declined Corliss's earnest invitation to go down home with him. The older man had held stern vigil with himself but the night before, and knew that honor demanded his staying away from the Elliott farm. Not for Hildreth's sake — and therein, with strange inconsistency, lay the deepest pain. She continued to be fully as indifferent to him personally as she had been at their first meet-

ing; but, for himself, he knew that mere friendliness was so far from satisfying him, that at times he was ready to declare that he would rather they should be strangers. Yet what did such a state of mind prove? It was humiliating to a degree that he had not thought he could endure; but he must face the facts, and he must be a man of honor if he could, and at the same time a man of truth.

It was late in the night when this decision brought him to the writing of a letter; and it was early in the morning before that letter was finished, although it was not long. Three times he tore the carefully written sheet into fragments, and commenced anew. Never before in his life had he spent so much time on a letter to Elizabeth. Never had he thought to write her, or any woman, such a letter. What a humiliation for a man of his years and his character, to have to own that he had made an irreparable mistake, and that the woman he had asked to be his wife did not share the first place in his heart. More than once he laid down the pen, and hid his burning face in his hands, and told himself that he could not write it, and told himself sternly a moment afterwards that he must. Honesty demanded it. Elizabeth could hold him to his pledged word if she would; he did not deny her right to do so; he was ready to abide by the mistake that he had made; but to go with her to the marriage altar hiding the facts, would be but adding insult to injury. It was vain

for him to go over his past, and groan at the folly of a boy playing at manhood, and allowing himself to drift into an engagement, when, had he understood his own heart, he would have known that he had only a friendly liking for the woman he asked to be his wife. He thought of his mother, and the interest she had taken in the entire matter, and the influence she had used; and then he put those thoughts sternly aside, assuring himself that he might have been a manly man, had he chosen, and that he need not call his mother to account for that which ought to have been controlled only by himself.

At last the letter was written and sealed, and started on its journey across the ocean. It remained now to wait for a reply. Worn with his night of self-humiliation, Stuart King had just strength enough left to decline Corliss's invitation. Miss Elliott might consider him the merest acquaintance; but he knew his own heart well enough now to be sure that it would be dishonorable in him to try to see her. Corliss went away vexed. He was growing extravagantly fond of Stuart King; and there seemed no possible reason why that gentleman should not prefer a visit with him at the farm, rather than a Sabbath alone in town. When the next Friday night came, and his pressing invitation was again rejected, Corliss was puzzled, and all but angry.

There was evidently some mystery about Stuart

King, as there had been about John Stuart. He professed to be so fond of the farm, and of "father and mother," and was so ready, even eager, to hear about every little detail of their family life; and this time, at his instigation, his mother had sent a genial invitation to "John," as she still called him, to come down, yet he had refused.

It was in the evening, while Stuart King sat alone, weakly wishing that it had been right to go to the farm, and sorely missing the bright-faced young man who grew daily nearer to him for his own sake, that the foreign mail was brought to his room. There was only one letter, and that from his mother. It could not possibly be in response to anything that he had written, not yet; but his face flamed as he tore it open. What would his next foreign mail have for him?

This one commenced ominously.

MY DEAR STUART, —

I hope you feel satisfied now with the result of your method of managing! I am sorry for you, of course; a mother's heart always remains the same, no matter how foolish her son may be; yet, while I do not for a moment admit it to Elizabeth, I cannot but feel that you have yourself to thank. No girl of spirit will endure such tardy letter writing, and such prolonged and unnecessary absences, as you have treated her to. She has written you all about it, I suppose; at least she promised four days ago that she would. This wretched little Englishman may be going to have a title, but he is in my opinion anything but a gentleman. He knew months ago that Elizabeth was engaged; I

told him so myself, it came naturally in my way to do so; but it evidently made not the slightest difference to him. I have never liked the creature; he was too fulsome. Elizabeth pretended that he was paying attention to me. The idea! she knew better all the time. Well, this is like all my other plans in life, for naught. I must say you have thwarted me, in one way or another, ever since you were a baby; but I suppose you cannot help it. You are like your father. I am too much provoked with Elizabeth just now to have heard any particulars, but I suppose the wedding will be soon; it is just like him to rush. I shall come home as soon as I can. I will write again when I know what is to be done.

Your affectionate

MOTHER.

P.S. It is just a case of pique on Elizabeth's part. I have no doubt but that you could make it all right again if you would, but I have no faith to believe that you will.

At this letter Stuart King sat and stared like one in a dream. Elizabeth engaged to be married, and he, — *free!* By degrees he took in that tremendous fact. He had not to wait for the foreign mail, and for a long series of embarrassments and humiliations, all of which, even at the best, would be terrible to talk about, to explain. Elizabeth had deserted him, and he was free! He need not have written that humiliating letter; he might have spared her so much. There seemed to be so many things that he need not have done if only he had been willing to wait! Nevertheless, he had not learned his lesson. He sat up again that

very night to write another letter. He could not wait; he was losing ground every day, and Dr. Warden was gaining! Twice during his calls at the Elliott farm he had met Dr. Warden. Moreover, Hildreth liked frankness; he would be frank. This letter was long; it confessed everything, but was very humble in its claims; it asked only for time, and opportunity to prove the sincerity of the writer. It was answered more promptly than he had dared to hope, — a frank, kindly letter; too kind.

Hildreth had been sorry more than once, she wrote, for those hard words she spoke to him on that first evening. She was so astonished, and had been so tried, that she did not realize what she was saying. She would be glad if he could forget the part that he had called “hard,” and look upon her as a friend. But as to more than that —

Stuart King sat longer over that letter than he had over any other. He read it through a dozen times, read it until the words burned into his heart; read between the lines, and knew the words that were not there as well as those that were. It meant, plainly, that she did not trust him, could not teach her heart to do so, could not forget John Stuart; he had deceived her, had successfully played a part. How could she be sure that Stuart King was not simply engaged upon another “study of human nature”? Oh! she did not write those words, but he read them plainly. Within

the week he went home. He had always meant to go as soon as he saw the way plain. He saw it now.

He was settled in his old rooms, seated before his old secretary, with sheets of paper strewn around, and two pictures mounted on easels, in their old places, looking down on him. One was a photograph of Elizabeth; he had not laid it away, why should he? Elizabeth was his cousin; her photograph had stood there ever since he occupied the room, he was entirely willing to have it there. He had only kindness in his heart for Elizabeth. The other was the pictured face of Truth. The eyes were certainly very like, he told himself, gazing at it earnestly; but they did not do hers justice.

Seated in his old place near the south window was Fletcher; he had been there all the evening, he had asked a thousand questions, he had been answered heartily, and with apparent fulness; but there was something about his old friend that he did not understand.

“He has taken strides,” he told himself; “he is changed; it evidently improves one to become a tramp! I feel as though he had gone out of my vision, or up out of my horizon. I wonder what it means?”

“Did you make any acquaintances that will last?” he asked presently, continuing his cross-examination. “Any kindred spirits, I mean?”

“A few that will last to all eternity.”

Fletcher's eyes had followed his friend's, and were resting on the pictured face of Truth, their old subject for discussion and disagreement.

“Did you convince yourself of the folly of finding such a face as that in flesh and blood?” he asked whimsically, simply for the sake of recalling old times.

“Especially the eyes,” he continued, as his friend was evidently not ready to answer. “They seem to look through one. I am glad there are none such in real life; they would make one see his own shortcomings, as a fine mirror does.”

Stuart King wheeled around in his chair to look full upon his friend.

“Fletcher,” he said earnestly, “there are such eyes; they belong to people who do remind one of his mistakes and failures, but who at the same time lift him up to a higher plane. I'll tell you something, in confidence; the woman who becomes my wife, if there is to be a wife for me in this world, will have eyes much like those.”

THE END.

