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CHAPTER I.

Old Jason Fanshaw sat at an open window, his fat legs on the sill. As he talked, his hearers in the big bare room drowsed, nodded or stared at him with lackluster eyes. He usually held forth on Sundays when the law and the Lord prohibited work and there was nowhere to go.

On this sultry afternoon his theme was his own misfortune in being burdened with a family that contributed naught to his desires. He had never, in exact words, voiced their shortcomings, but in his secret soul he would have had them perhaps less like himself, certainly less like his wife, who weighed 200 if she weighed a pound.

The two girls, Mary Lou, aged 18, and Ann Josephine, 20, threatened, as their bodices continued to break, to surpass their mother in the flesh they were heir to, and in addition to this impediment to activity and encourager of sloth, they had come honestly by a combination of their father's tow-colored and their mother's red hair, which little suited their florid complexions. They had, also, freckles as big as peck-marks, which a diligent application of "stump water" had failed to dim.

Fanshaw had two sons. Ronald, the eldest child, was not in the room. David, a hasty fellow built on his father's plan, but with a more cheerful face, was lying on the high-posted bed in the corner of the room. He always hurled into his father's tirades against his family comments in favor of his brother, whom he admired intensely.

"You cayn't complain of Ron," he said this afternoon, as he fanned the flies from his face with his big straw hat lined with blue calico. "He looks after his own business. Mr. Hague told Saturday before last that he'd rather have Ron rent land from 'im than any man in the country. He 'lowed Ron paid every dollar he contracted to pay an' that the niggers liked 'im so much that they'd work twice as hard for 'im as they would for anybody else."

"That don't do me no good," snarled Fanshaw.

"No, I reckon not," admitted Dave, "but you won't ever be ashamed of 'im, if you are of the rest of us. He's been readin' and studyin' every spare minute sence he was knee high to a grasshopper. For the last six months Mr. Redding, the best lawyer in Danbury, has been providin' 'im with books, an' my idea is that he is goin' to make a lawyer out'a hisse'f. You cayn't hold 'im down; he'll rise like a cork; an' as fur good looks, geewhillikins! did I ever tell you-uns what happened at campmeetin'? I was a settin' under the bush arbor about four benches from the front last Sunday was a week when Ron come in dyked out in his best Sunday clothes. You ort to ha've seen how the folks turned their heads. A young dude behind me axed a man next to 'im who in the thunder that was, an' the fellow said he wasn't certain, but he 'lowed it was some chap visitin' at Col. Hasbrooke's from Boston or New York. Then it was my turn in. I bent over an' informed 'em that it was Ronald Fanshaw, the oldest son of Jason Fanshaw. An' you ort to a-heard 'em giggle. Then the man that had axed the question come back at me fairly slobberin' in the mouth to keep from laughin' out loud.

"'You're away off, my friend,' sez he; 'you shorely ain't acquainted 'bout seer. Old Fanshaw is the daddy of the sorriest lay-out on the face of creation. I hain't never been to his side-show myself, but I know a heap o' folks that has paid the'r way an' never axed fur the money back, rather.'

"Then I jest punched my face over to his ear an' sez, I sez: 'I ort to know 'im,' I says, totchin' the butt o' my pistol. 'He's my brother, an' when meetin' is over mo'n you'll go into the side-show for a minute; the lion's stretched right out thar in the rushes an' the latest addition to it is a Buffalo Bill dead shot.'

"He wilted an' got as white as the inside of a cucumber, an' then the preacher axed everybody to kneel down and pray. I was askin' the Lord to bless my purpose when them two riz up'n poled it out over the straw. I half way got up, but the preacher broke off in his prayer an' began to talk about the law agin disturbin' public worship, an' I sunk down on my knees an' seed them two mount an' gallop off like the woods was afire."

"You ort to a-mashed 'is teeth down his throat," said Mrs. Fanshaw. "Folks has poked too much fun at us to suit me. In war times you wouldn't a-stood it, Jade."

She called her husband Jade, not because he was tired or was a horse, but because it was the only abbreviation of the name she knew.

An expression of hot fury lay on Fanshaw's wrinkled face as he looked out into the yard where half a hundred ducks, turkeys, guinea-hens and peacocks were feasting on the remains of the watermelon the family had just eaten. "My Lord," he grunted, "ef I took folks to taw ever time they joked about you-uns, I'd have my hands full."

"Well, they'd better not let me heer 'em throwin' off on us," declared Dave, and he stood up and stretched himself. "But when you come to think of it, Ron is so different from the rest of us that it's no wonder folks take 'im for one o' that highfalutin' crowd. I tell you, he's no slouch!"

Dave went out into the back porch, where a stream of water shot from the end of a hollow log into a trough; the water came from a spring on a hillside half a mile distant. The inventor of this crude aqueduct was Ronald Fanshaw; he was only a boy when he conceived the idea, but he gave every spare moment to its construction. He had felled the trees, dug the long ditch through the meadows and fields, taken the level and completed what was still considered a marvel of convenience by the neighbors. While it was building, Jason Fanshaw had contributed many peevish objections to the work, which he considered a waste of time, but when the clear, cold water gushed out at his door, he melted under a blaze of wonder, and now no stranger ever came to his house who was not shown "the waterworks."

"Huh," he would exclaim with pride, "nobody else has got a spring on his land high enough fur such a thing. Col. Hasbrooke would pay no end o' money ef he could have it. He has to keep two niggers busy fillin' his tank an' then the water's stale an' hot. You see, we sunk our pipes so deep that the water's as cold as ice."

A hundred yards from the house was a dense wood which stretched on to a small river a mile away, and further on to a high mountain, and here Dave found his brother lying on the grass reading his Blackstone. In his unlikeness to his family he was an anomaly; he was over six feet in height, well built, slender, dark of complexion, hair and eyes. There was in the shapely prominence of his brow a suggestion of strong mentality one might look for in vain in any of the other Fanshaws; his limbs had the slight, strong look of a blooded horse; a palmist would have said that his hands indicated the possession of a refined, sensitive spirit.

"Oh, I had no idea you was heer!" exclaimed Dave. "I jest thought I'd take a walk to git away from all that clatter up at the house. An' to tell you the truth, I've got a quart kid in that stump thar; don't you want to wet yore whistle, as the feller said? I have to keep it hid from the old man; he's too all-fired stingy to buy whisky, but he loves it like a hog does slop."

"You know I never drink," replied the other, firmly. His words formed a striking contrast to the dialect of his brother; there was a vague sadness of tone in his voice, and his eyes drooped as if they were weary of the print upon which they had been resting.

"Well, I reckon you won't mind ef I take a pull at it," said Dave. "I'm dry as a powder-horn." He removed a flat stone from the hollow of the stump and took out his flask. "Here's lookin' at you," and the neck of the bottle went into his mouth.

"I suppose they made me the subject of their talk, as usual," said Ronald, when Dave had replaced the flask under the stone and sat on the stump, his legs crossed.

"Not any more'n common, Ron; they've got to talk; talkin' somes as natural to women as cluckin' does to hens; the only difference is hens cluck when they are busy, an' cackle when they've laid; the time to git away from a woman's tongue is when she's idle, an' that's all the time. But, honest, I don't see why they won't let you alone. You want to read an' study, because it suits you, an' I am with you, tooth an' toe nail. Now, I had my head set on much life out west, because I jiner'ly love hoss flesh an' cattle-raisin', but they all come down on me like a landslide an' I's had to hoe corn an' cotton like a nigger fur about forty cents a day, when I might a been makin' two dollars an' a-had my independence."

Ronald Fanshaw smiled genially, but he made no reply, and Dave sauntered away to the river to see if his trout lines had caught anything. When he found himself alone our hero fell to dreaming of his past life. Above the tree-tops half a mile to the east, or a slight elevation, he could see the high, steep roof and dormer windows of the chief mansion of the locality, "Carnleigh," the splendid home of the county's greatest planter, Col. Henry Hasbrooke.

The house, in its silent grandeur, representing wealth and power, had been a potent factor in the struggles of this young man towards the acquisition of things above and beyond him in the dreamy blue realm of possibility. Its massive Corinthian columns, its vast white proportions and its aristocratic inmates, whom he saw driving along the roads, told him constantly what he and his family were not. Up to his twenty-fifth year his fancy had dared to play only about the exterior of this old family seat, but of late his imagination—call it ambition, if you will, had led him beyond the mystic portals, and he walked there with men and ladies; he dined there; he discussed topics he had read with the white-haired host; he stood near the piano and heard Evelyn Hasbrooke play and sing; he saw her white hands flit over the keys, and felt her smile up at him. And then the bubble would burst and the grim, sordid contrast of his real existence would grasp and wring the gall from his soul.

Evelyn Hasbrooke was unwittingly responsible for these later dreams. He had rendered her a service the preceding summer when she was home from school. To him the act was nothing, but when it was over she had hung white and enlivening on his arm, and in that wonderful cadence of hers had told him that he had saved her life. He had helped her over the fence and felt the warmth of her breath on his face. They had stood and chatted for awhile and then they had parted. He had not seen her since, for she was at school in Boston, but he had never forgotten the glory of her deep, gray eyes, the infinite sweetness and beauty of her face. A thousand times since that moment he had wondered if she, too, remembered. Sometimes when his hopes were brightest he fancied that she did—that she must if only because his mind was on her so constantly.

CHAPTER II.

About a week after this he heard that she was home again to remain, her school days being over. His informant also told him that Carnleigh was to have visitors—Mr. James Hardy, a cotton merchant of Charleston, who was supposed to be a suitor for the hand of the colonel's eldest daughter, Caroline, and Capt. Charles Winkle, who owned a fine plantation five miles beyond the mountain and was believed to be an admirer of the young debutante.

Ronald was longing to see Evelyn again, but he met the two sisters and their escorts sooner than he desired. He had taken his books and fishing tackle to a shady nook on the river bank and was just getting settled when he heard merry laughter in the wood between the river and the road and a moment later the two couples emerged from the tangle of cane, vines and foliage. Instinctively Ronald drew his wide-brimmed straw hat down over his eyes, and Evelyn did not recognize him for a moment. He had resolved that he should never speak to her again unless she showed a disposition to renew their informal acquaintance, and he was averse to putting her to the test before the others. But Capt. Winkle knew by sight (he did not bother himself with their names) nearly all of what he jocularly termed "the white trash" of that section, and he usually addressed them without ceremony or courtesy. For a moment he paused watching Ronald's line, and then he asked:

"Are they biting, my man?"

Ronald felt the hot blood of anger rush to his face and his fingers tightened on his rod. It was on his tongue to retort sharply, but Evelyn's presence helped him control his temper. He made no reply. Capt. Winkle curled his mustache with his white fingers; he thought the fisherman had not heard his question.

"I see you have some bait, my good fellow," he said in a louder tone. "Will you let me have some of your crickets? the boy has not come with ours," and the captain tossed a silver coin on the grass near Ronald. There was a pause. Ronald was conscious that Evelyn and Mr. Hardy had moved on and that Miss Caroline was waiting for Winkle. Then our hero picked up the piece of silver and tossed it into the stream, at the same moment he doffed his hat and lifted his basket of crickets.

"You are welcome to them," he said. "I should hate to see ladies lose their sport."

"Oh, no, Capt. Winkle!" objected Miss Caroline, "do not mind them; we are very much obliged. I hear the boy coming now."

As she turned away and the captain was following her he looked back and said with a sneer:

"I think, Miss Hasbrooke, that we'd better go further down the stream; he'll be diking for that money and will frighten all the fish."

Ronald's ear had never been so acute; he heard Caroline Hasbrooke's low, guarded voice above the rustling of the leaves against her stiff duck skirt. "You ought not to have noticed him," she said; "that's one of old man Fanshaw's sons; he has taken up the study of law, and it seems to have given him the big head."

"You don't tell me," laughed the captain, "haw, haw!"

Then the negro boy, carrying a basket of crickets, passed at the top of his speed. Ronald baited his hook and flung the line into the stream; his hands were quivering; he was almost beside himself with rage. The drone of voices told him that the fishing party had paused about forty yards away. The reflection of the sunlight on the face of the water was maddening. This, then, was his long dreamed of meeting with Evelyn; she would hear her sister's account of what had taken place after she had moved on. Half an hour passed; a fish nibbled at his bait, taking his line round in a circle, but he did not notice it. Suddenly there was a light step on the grass near him. It was Evelyn Hasbrooke and she came to him with hand outstretched.

"You must pardon me, Mr. Fanshaw," she faltered. "I did not recognize you under that big hat. I did not know it was you till sister mentioned it just now."

He stood up, dropping his hat on the ground.

"I really did not presume that you would care to—to renew our slight acquaintance," he stammered, red in the face.

A pained expression passed over her beautiful features.

"I can't remember anything I have done to make you think so ill of me, Mr. Fanshaw."

She seated herself on the root of a tree and opened the novel she held in her hands. He found himself unable to formulate a suitable reply and he drew in his line and put another cricket on his hook.

"I am afraid," she said, searching his face, "that Capt. Winkle offended you just now. I am sorry that a guest of our house should fail to treat anyone—you especially—with due courtesy, and I am glad you rebuked him as you did."

"You are very kind, Miss Hasbrooke."

"My sister is Miss Hasbrooke," she said, with a little laugh. "I am still little Evelyn, even if I have laid my school books away."

Again she had made an unanswerable remark, and silence fell between them. He broke it after a moment's pause.

"But you have grown; you are" (he wanted to say more beautiful) "different."

"I presume a year does change a girl, but you are just the same, Mr. Fanshaw—exactly the same."

It would have been impossible for him to believe that she was not speaking to him as she would have spoken to an old friend, and this drew him to her. The irritation of a short while before was swept away. He found himself telling her that he had feared she would never remember him, and that she had made him very happy by coming back to speak to him.

"As if I could forget the first time I ever saw you!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands over her knee and looking out over the stream. "I had actually given myself up for lost, Mr. Fanshaw. Being a man, it may not seem that you did much for me, that day, but I have seen that frightful bull in my dreams and heard his awful bellowing a thousand times. I remembered that he had gored a little boy almost to death the spring before and when I saw him coming I simply could not run. Then I saw you rush into the very arms of death and catch it by the horns. Ah, I have seen that awful struggle in my dreams, too! You don't know how terrible it was; the veins of your face and neck stood up like cords under the skin and your eyes nearly left their sockets. Once your foot slipped and I screamed as you went down. I thought it was all over then, but you held onto his horns and when he flung up his head he raised you. Then I saw the gleam of a set purpose in your eye as you slowly backed him to the big stick near by and then I saw you grasp it and beat him off."

She paused out of breath, she had spoken so rapidly.

"I see you have not forgotten," he laughed, modestly. "My arms ached for a week after that. I don't think I ever gave my muscles a greater test."

She gazed at him admiringly.

"I think a strong, manly man is God's best creation"—her tone was almost reverent. "No, I have not forgot—I never shall forget that you offered your life as readily as Capt. Winkle" (she sneered slightly) "would hand me a glass of wine. You were so exhausted afterwards that you could not speak and yet you helped me over that high fence; I know you were exhausted, for you sank down and could not rise."

Ronald flushed slightly. "I hoped you would forget that," he said.

"It is what I want to remember most," the girl declared, "because it proves how very much you did for me."

Her voice was low, and it quivered as if strong emotions were working in her breast. The branches of the trees were moving overhead, and a shaft of shifting sunlight fell on her glorious, golden brown hair. The breeze coming from the east brought the strain of a plantation melody sung by the negroes working in one of her father's cotton fields. For one instant the eyes of these two met, and then, like a man in a blissful dream, he turned and picked up his rod. His cork was under water and he could see the slack line being drawn here and there. It was a fine trout and he laughed merrily as he drew it out of the water. She sprang up and stood by him as he took it from his hook and put it into his basket.

"I am afraid I am disturbing your sport," she said, tentatively.

"You see you have given me good luck," he made answer.

"I have wanted another talk with you for a long time." She cast a glance in the direction of her party. "I presume I ought to join them, but I have really not said all I wished. It seems half a lifetime since we met."

Later that day he actually shuddered over the boldness of his reply to this, and yet I am convinced that it was one of his remarks which she remembered in its entirety.

"The meeting in itself seemed a whole lifetime to me," he said, in a full tense voice—"the beginning, the end—a short, beautiful life, for I thought I might never, perhaps never, see you again."

"You thought we should never meet again!" she spoke in slow surprise, as the import of his words dawned on her, and then he saw her eyes go down, and a fresh shaft of bitterness pierced his heart. He knew she was thinking of the gulf which lay between them. The look of pain which crossed her face almost distorted it. Still it was only to add new character to her beauty.

"I want to tell you more than all," she shrugged her shoulders, as if to shake off the unpleasant thought he had just read, "how very much good your example has done me. You remember you told me how you had learned French by studying it at night, and by hiring a man to work for you who spoke the language to you as you worked in the field together, and that you used to walk three miles after supper to an old German, who spoke his tongue to you and lent you the German classics? Well, when I got back to school and was tempted to neglect my studies I recalled the efforts you were making to educate yourself and I became ashamed of myself and really I profited by your example. I took two medals. I should never have won them but for you."

Her companion laughed softly.

"I did not have such good fortune in adding a teacher of Italian to my faculty," he told her. "He was making his way over the mountain with a hand-organ and a monkey and told me he was out of money. My answer to him was that I needed a man to pick cotton and that I would pay him the wages of an experienced hand if he would stay with me through the season. He readily consented and everything might have worked out to the glory of my perseverance, but he insisted on working with the monkey on his shoulder, and the two together proved such an attraction that all the negroes in my field gathered around him. I gave them the first day off, but when the next came and the pickers came in holiday attire accompanied by hosts of neighboring negroes I called a halt. I paid the stroller for the day he had not worked and dismissed him. This infuriated him, and I received my first gratuitous lesson in Italian—a beautiful string of oaths which may never be worth what I paid for them."

Evelyn laughed long and heartily.

"You are the most original man I ever met," she declared. "What funny experiences you do have. And did your Italian master forsake you?"

Ronald laughed drily.

"After he had got his organ out of the barn, he began to play it in the main road, and it wasn't twenty minutes till every negro, young and old, for a mile around was dropping his money into the monkey's cap. The trouble is the farmers in the neighborhood blamed me with the commotion and called me a greater crank than ever."

There was a sound of some one coming through the woods, and David Fanshaw, barefooted and coatless, emerged carrying a gun and a bag of game. Seeing them together he stared in astonishment, and shifting his gun awkwardly from one hand to the other he blurted out: "I didn't know anybody was heer; I was a-after a flyin' squirrel in that tree thar."

"I wouldn't shoot here," his brother admonished. "There is a party fishing a little way down the stream."

Without saying more the great ill-clothed fellow shouldered his gun and plunged again into the wood; this time headed for the main road.

"It is my brother David," explained Ronald to Evelyn.

"I thought he was," she said, looking down, "but I don't think he is at all like you," and then it seemed to strike her that the comparison was too great a reflection on David to be quite polite, for she reddened.

"No, we are decidedly unlike," he came to her relief. "In fact, people are constantly remarking that I am unlike my whole family."

"I—I think you are very unlike them all," agreed Evelyn—"all that I have happened to see."

There the conversation paused. A merry laugh came from the fishing trio and then there was a low muttering of voices, in which Evelyn's name was spoken by her sister.

"I think they are wondering what has become of me," said the girl. "I'd better join them."

He held the vines which hung over the path out of her way, and when she had gone he went back to his fishing; but he found himself casting an unbaited hook into the water and holding his rod in tense, quivering hands. How much he had lived in those few moments! He took a deep breath. "My God," he said, "I don't know what has come over me! Am I mad? Am I foolish enough to think—to hope—?"

He checked himself, and opened the law book he had brought with him. But though his eyes rested on the page for twenty minutes, he read not a word. The sun went down slowly; he saw its light on the brown side of a distant cliff creeping upward; he heard the distant crack of his brother's gun, and, picking up his things, he started homeward.

TO BE CONTINUED.

FASHIONS IN MILLINERY.

Flowers to Lead in Spring Millinery—Little Change in Shapes.

As will be seen, flowers and feathers are pretty equally favored, still for the opening weeks of the season it is understood that for day wear flowers will have the lead, whereas somewhat later on trimmings composed of flowers and feathers will have preference for smart hats. Between this and Easter large toques and medium-sized hats made entirely of violets will be well worn. There is always a run on these flowers just at this time. But it is to be noted this year that the bluish-purple violets are neglected for those with a decided strain of pink or red in them, and for the lilac and pearl-gray varieties. A cluster of gardenias or of camelias, or a bunch of white violets on one side is considered an improvement. Sometimes it is only the brim that is covered with flowers, and the crown with heavy or maiden-hair fern.

So little change having been made in shapes, the slightest modifications become of importance. Indeed, details are of paramount interest just now, and by the curve of a brim or the set of a feather it is possible to determine whether a model comes from a first-rate house or not. For instance, most of the chic of a broad-brimmed hat in yellow tuscan comes from the way in which its brim is rolled and crushed at the edge. These irregular rolls and wrinkles may be compared to those on the edge of a rose-petal. At the same time there is a decided movement upward of the brim on the left. The trimming is a cordon of large roses running from bloch to deepest pink, which encircles the low crown from the side where its two ends form a double band keeping up the brim. From behind these bands protrudes a little coquille of yellow lace.

A large hat in black straw is made to assume vaguely a tricorne form by having the crown and brim upped together in their base in three places by pearl cabochons. But its noticeable feature is the way in which the single long white ostrich feather is placed; its stem is fastened on the right side of the brim beneath a loose rosette of black velvet ribbon and it passes thence straight across the crown and brim on the left to curve under the latter and rest finally tip forward on the hair.

The brim of a pretoria hat built up of mid-brown braids rolls from the front and left side, dates slightly on the right and has two fluted pleats at the back. The outside trimming consists of a very wide soft taffeta ribbon, brown shot with two shades of green, arranged in groups of loops held in their places by dull gilt slides, the two ends ravelled out at their extremities, fanning it off behind. The under side of the brim is faced to a certain depth with rose leaves made of brownish-green panne, studded here and there with small gilt spangles. On the left side is placed a cluster of four white palestine roses.—The February Millinery Trade Review, New York.

THE NEW DAY IN VERMONT.

(From the Chicago Tribune.)

By an ancient soda fountain, looking at the swallest thing,
Sits a barkeep in Montpelier, and his heart is glad once more;
And he calls to all Vermonters who have rambled far away:
"Come you back, you thirsty Yankees, for we're open up to-day!
Come back to old Vermont,
Where the days no longer taunt!
Can't you hear the corks a-poppin' just as merd as in their wont?
O, we hear the glasses clink!
Come you home and get a drink,
For they've lowered local option, and it comes without a wink."

And in every town and hamlet such a lively scene there is,
With a welcoming committee for the rickety and the lame.
From the peaks of the Green mountains to the level snowy plain
You can see them chase the growler down the street with might and main.
O, they've opened up the bar
Where the many glasses are,
And they're calling back the Yankees from the places near and far;
"Come you back, you thirsty Yanks,
To the Onion river's banks,
For the spigot is on duty and we're filling all the tanks!"

"Come a runnin' back to Rutland, where the best is like the worst;
Where there ain't no local option an' a man can slake his thirst;
For the seltzer bottle spatters and the goods are on the bar,
An' we ain't a spittin' cotton when we see the mornin' star.
O you thirsty Yanks, come home,
For there ain't no need to roam
Up an' down the turnal country—hurry back, we're blowin' foam!
Hit the highway homeward, then;
Come to mountain side an' glen,
For we've stored the soda fountain an' the state is wet again!"

ROLL BUTTER.

The young housekeeper who told the fishman that she wanted some eels, and when he asked her how much, replied: "About two yards and a half," has a rival in a woman mentioned in the Chicago News.

"I wish to get some butter, please," she said to the dealer.

"Roll butter, ma'am?" he asked, politely.

"No; we wish to eat it on toast. We seldom have rolls."

WHAT HAPPENED.

"She married the coachman because she wanted some one who could drive.

"Well?"

"Well, he drove her to distraction?"—Chicago Post.

INSEPARABLE WORDS.

"Say," asked the red-faced man in the hotel writing room. "How do you spell 'unmitigated?'"

"Why," replied the stranger next to him, "it's u-n-m-i-t-say, my friend, I wordn't advise you to call a man a liar of any sort in a letter. You'll get yourself in trouble."—Philadelphia Press.

It's a mistake to imagine that itching piles can't be cured; a mistake to suffer a day longer than you can help. Dibin's Ointment brings instant relief and permanent cure. At all druggists, 50 cents.

SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE.

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CHAPTER VIII.

Kate was stirring early, but not as early as her sister, who met her on the threshold of her room. Her face was quite pale, and she held a letter in her hand. "What does this mean, Kate?"

"What is the matter?" asked Kate, her own color fading from her cheek.

"They are gone—with their horses. Left before day, and left this."

She handed Kate an open letter. The girl took it hurriedly, and read:

"When you get this we shall be no more; perhaps not even as much. Ned found the trail yesterday, and we are taking the first advantage of it before day. We dared not trust ourselves to say 'Good-by!' last evening; we were too cowardly to face you this morning; we must go as we came, without warning, but not without regret. We leave a package and a letter for your husband. It is not only our poor return for your gentleness and hospitality, but, since it was accidentally the means of giving us the pleasure of your society, we beg you to keep it in safety until his return. We kiss your mother's hands. Ned wants to say something more, but time presses, and I only allow him to send his love to Minnie, and to tell her that he is trying to find the red snow.

"GEORGE LEE."

"But he is not fit to travel," said Mrs. Hale. "And the trail—it may not be passable."

"It was passable the day before yesterday," said Kate drearily, "for I discovered it, and went as far as the buck-eyes."

"Then it was you who told them about it," said Mrs. Hale reproachfully.

"No," said Kate indignantly. "Of course I didn't." She stopped, and, reading the significance of her speech in the glistening eyes of her sister, she blushed. Josephine kissed her and said:

"It was treating us like children, Kate, but we must make them pay for it hereafter. For that package and letter to John means something, and we shall probably see them before long. I wonder what the letter is about, and what is in the package?"

"Probably one of Mr. Lee's jokes. He is quite capable of turning the whole thing into ridicule. I dare say he considers his visit here a prolonged jest."

"With his poor leg, Kate! You are as unfair to him as you were to Falkner when they first came."

Kate, however, kept her dark eyebrows knitted in a piquant frown.

"To think of his intimating *what* he would allow Falkner to say! And yet you believe he has no evil influence over the young man."

Mrs. Hale laughed. "Where are you going so fast, Kate?" she called, mischievously, as the young lady flounced out of the room.

"Where! Why, to tidy John's room. He may be coming at any moment now. Or do you want to do it yourself?"

"No, no," returned Mrs. Hale, hurriedly, "you do it. I'll look in a little later on."

She turned away with a sigh. The sun was shining brilliantly outside. Through the half-open blinds its long shafts seemed to be searching the house for the lost guests, and making the hollow shell appear doubly empty. What a contrast to the dear dark days of mysterious seclusion and delicious security, lit by Lee's laughter and the sparkling hearth, which had passed so quickly! The forgotten outer world seemed to have returned to the house through these open windows and awakened its dwellers from a dream.

The morning seemed interminable, and it was past noon, while they were deep in a sympathetic conference with Mrs. Scott, who had drawn a pathetic word picture of the two friends perishing in the snowdrift, without flannels, brandy, smelling salts or jelly, which they had forgotten, when they were startled by the loud barking of Spot on the lawn before the house. The women looked hurriedly at each other.

"They have returned," said Mrs. Hale.

Kate ran to the window. A horseman was approaching the house. A single glance showed her that it was neither Falkner, Lee nor Hale, but a stranger.

"Perhaps he brings some news of them," said Mrs. Scott, quickly. So complete had been their preoccupation with the loss of their guests that they could not yet conceive of anything that did not pertain to it.

The stranger, who was at once ushered into the parlor, was evidently disconcerted by the presence of the three women.

"I reckoned to see John Hale yer," he began, awkwardly.

A slight look of disappointment passed over their faces. "He has not yet returned," said Mrs. Hale briefly.

"Sho! I wan'er know. He's had time to do it, I reckon," said the stranger.

"I suppose he hasn't been able to get over from the Summit," returned Mrs. Hale. "The trail is closed."

"It ain't now, for I kem over it this mornin' myself."

"You didn't—meet—any one?" asked Mrs. Hale timidly, with a glance at the others.

"No."

A long silence ensued. The unfortunate visitor plainly perceived an evident abatement of interest in himself, yet he still struggled politely to say something. "Then I reckon you know what kept Hale away?" he said dubiously.

"Oh, certainly—the stage robbery."

"I wish I'd known that," said the stranger reflectively, "for I ez good ez rode over jist to tell it to ye. Ye see John Hale, he sent a note to ye 'splainin' matters by a gentleman; but the road agents tackled that man, and left him for dead in the road."

"Yes," said Mrs. Hale impatiently.

"Luckily he didn't die, but kem to and managed to crawl inter the bush, whar I found him when I was lookin' for stock, and brought him to my house"——

"You found him? Your house?" interrupted Mrs. Hale.

"Inter my house," continued the man doggedly. "I'm Thompson of Thompson's Pass over yon; mebbe it ain't much of a house, but I brought him thar. Well, ez he couldn't find the note that Hale had guv him, and like ez not the road agents had gone through him and got it, ez soon ez the weather let up I made a break over yer to tell ye."

"You say Mr. Lee came to your house," repeated Mrs. Hale, "and is there now?"

"Not much," said the man grimly; "and I never said Lee was thar. I mean that Bilson was shot by Lee and kem"——

"Certainly, Josephine!" said Kate, suddenly stepping between her sister and Thompson, and turning upon her a white face and eyes of silencing significance; "certainly—don't you remember?—that's the story we got from the Chinaman, you know, only muddled. Go on, sir," she continued, turning to Thompson calmly; "you say that the man who brought the note from my brother was shot by Lee?"

"And another fellow they call Falkner. Yes, that's about the size of it."

"Thank you; it's nearly the same story that we heard. But you have had a long ride, Mr. Thompson; let me offer you a glass of whisky in the dining room. This way, please."

The door closed upon them none too soon. For Mrs. Hale already felt the room whirling around her and sank back into her chair with an hysterical laugh. Old Mrs. Scott did not move from her seat, but, with her eyes fixed on the door, impatiently waited Kate's return. Neither spoke, but each felt that the young, untried girl was equal to the emergency and would get at the truth.

The sound of Thompson's feet in the hall and the closing of the front door was followed by Kate's reappearance. Her face was still pale, but calm.

"Well?" said the two women in a breath.

"Well," returned Kate, slowly, "Mr. Lee and Mr. Falkner were undoubtedly the two men who took the paper from John's messenger and brought it here."

"You are sure?" said Mrs. Scott.

"There can be no mistake, mother."

"Then," said Mrs. Scott, with triumphant feminine logic, "I don't want anything more to satisfy me that they are perfectly innocent!"

More convincing than the most perfect masculine deduction, this single expression of their common nature sent a thrill of sympathy and understanding through each. They cried for a few moments on each other's shoulders.

"To think," said Mrs. Scott, "what that poor boy must have suffered to have been obliged to do—that to—to—Bilson—isn't that the creature's name? I suppose we ought to send over there and inquire after him, with some chicken and jelly, Kate. It's only common humanity, and we must be just, my dear; for even if he shot Mr. Lee and provoked the poor boy to shoot him, he may have thought it his duty. And, then, it will avert suspicions."

"To think," murmured Mrs. Hale, "what they must have gone through while they were here—momentarily expecting John to come, and yet keeping up such a light heart."

"I believe, if they had stayed any longer, they would have told us everything," said Mrs. Scott.

Both the younger women were silent. Kate was thinking of Falkner's significant speech as they neared the house on their last walk; Josephine was recalling the remorseful picture drawn by Lee, which she knew was his own portrait. Suddenly she started.

"But John will be here soon; what are we to tell him? And then that package and that letter."

"Don't be in a hurry to tell him anything at present, my child," said Mrs. Scott gently. "It is unfortunate this Mr. Thompson called here, but we are not obliged to understand what he says now about John's message, or to connect our visitors with his story. I'm sure, Kate, I should have treated them exactly as we did if they had come without any message from John; so I do not know why we should lay any stress on that, or even speak of it. The simple fact is that we have opened our house to two strangers in distress. Your husband," continued Mr. Hale's mother-in-law, "does not require to know more. As to the letter and package, we will keep that for further consideration. It cannot be of much importance or they would have spoken of it before; it is probably some trifling present as a return for your hospitality. I should use no indecorous haste in having it opened."

The two women kissed Mrs. Scott with a feeling of relief, and fell back into the monotony of their household duties. It is to be feared, however, that the absence of their outlawed guests was nearly as dangerous as their presence in the opportunity it afforded for uninterrupted and imaginative reflection. Both Kate and Josephine were at first shocked and wounded by the discovery of the real character of the two men with whom they had associated so familiarly, but it was no disparagement to their sense of propriety to say that the shock did not last long, and was accompanied with the fascination of danger. This was succeeded by a consciousness of the delicate flattery implied in their indirect influence over the men who had undoubtedly risked their lives for the sake of remaining with them. The best woman is not above being touched by the effect of her power over the worst man, and Kate at first allowed herself to think of Falkner in that light. But if in her later reflections he suffered as a heroic experience to be forgotten, he gained something as an actual man to be remembered. Now that the proposed rides from "his friend's house" were a part of the illusion, would he ever dare to visit them again? Would she dare to see him? She held her breath with a sudden pain of parting that was new to her; she tried to think of something else, to pick up the scattered threads of her life before that eventful day. But in vain; that one week had filled the place with implacable memories, or more terrible, as it seemed to her and her sister, they had both lost their feeble, alien hold upon Eagle's Court in the sudden presence of the real genii of these solitudes, and henceforth they alone would be strangers there. They scarcely dared to confess it to each other, but this return to the dazzling sunlight and cloudless skies of the past appeared to them to be one unreal experience; they had never known the true wild flavor of their home except in that week of delicious isolation. Without breathing it aloud, they longed for some vague denouement to this experience that should take them from Eagle's Court forever.

It was noon the next day when the little household beheld the last shred of their illusion vanish like the melting snow in the strong sunlight of John Hale's return. He was accompanied by Col. Clinch and Rawlins, two strangers to the women. Was it fancy or the avenging spirit of their absent companions? But *he*, too, looked a stranger, and as the little cavalcade wound its way up the slope he appeared to sit his horse and wear his hat with a certain slouch and absence of his usual restraint that strangely shocked them. Even the old half condescending, half-punctilious gallantry of his greeting of his wife and family was changed, as he introduced his companions with a mingling of familiarity and shyness that was new to him. Did Mrs. Hale regret it, or feel a sense of relief in the absence of his usual seigneurial formality? She only knew that she was grateful for the presence of the strangers, which for the moment postponed a matrimonial confidence from which she shrunk.

"Proud to know you," said Col. Clinch, with a sudden outbreak of the antique gallantry of some remote Huguenot ancestor. "My friend, Judge Hale, must be a regular Roman citizen to leave such a family and such a house at the call of public duty. Eh, Rawlins?"

"You bet," said Rawlins, looking from Kate to her sister in undisguised admiration.

"And I suppose the duty could not have been a very pleasant one," said Mrs. Hale, timidly, without looking at her husband.

"Gad, madam, that's just it," said the gallant Colonel, seating himself with a comfortable air, and an easy, though by no means disrespectful familiarity. "We went into this fight a little more than a week ago. The only scrimmage we've had has been with the detectives that were on the robbers' track. Ha! ha! The best people we've met have been the friends of the men we were huntin', and we've generally come to the conclusion to vote the other ticket! Ez Judge Hale and me agreed ez we came along, the two men ez we'd most like to see just now and shake hands with are George Lee and Ned Falkner."

"The two leaders of the party who robbed the coach," explained Mr. Hale, with a slight return of his usual precision of statement.

The three women looked at each other with a blaze of thanksgiving in their grateful eyes. Without comprehending all that Col. Clinch had said, they understood enough to know that their late guests were safe from the pursuit of that party, and that their own conduct was spared criticism. I hardly dare write it, but they instantly assumed the appearance of aggrieved martyrs, and felt as if they were!

"Yes, ladies!" continued the colonel, inspired by the bright eyes fixed upon him. "We haven't taken the road ourselves yet, but—John honor—we wouldn't mind doing it in a case like this." Then with the fluent but somewhat exaggerated phraseology of a man trained to "stump" speaking, he gave an account of the robbery and his own connection with it. He spoke of the swindling and treachery which had undoubtedly provoked Falkner to obtain restitution of his property by an overt act of violence under the leadership of Lee. He added that he had learned since at Wild Cat Station that Harkins had fled the country, that a suit had been commenced by the Excelsior Ditch company, and that all available property of Harkins had been seized by the sheriff.

"Of course it can't be proved yet, but there's no doubt in my mind that Lee, who is an old friend of Ned Falkner's, got up that job to help him, and that Ned's off with the money by this time—and I'm right glad of it. I can't say ez we've done much toward it, except to keep tumbling in the way of that detective party of Stanner's, and so throw them off the trail—ha, ha! The judge here, I reckon, has had his share of fun, for while he was at Hennicker's trying to get some facts from Hennicker's pretty daughter, Stanner tried to get up some sort of vigilance committee of the stage passengers to burn down Hennicker's ranch out of spite, but the judge here stepped in and stopped that."

"It was really a highhanded proceeding, Josephine, but I managed to check it," said Hale, meeting somewhat consciously the first direct look his wife had cast upon him, and falling back for support on his old manner. "In its way, I think it was worse than the robbery by Lee and Falkner, for it was done in the name of law and order; while, as far as I can judge from the facts, the affair that we were following up was simply a rude and irregular restitution of property that had been morally stolen."

"I have no doubt you did quite right, though I don't understand it," said Mrs. Hale, languidly; "but I trust these gentlemen will stay to luncheon, and in the meantime excuse us for running away, as we are short of servants, and Manuel seems to have followed the example of the head of the house and left us, in purs