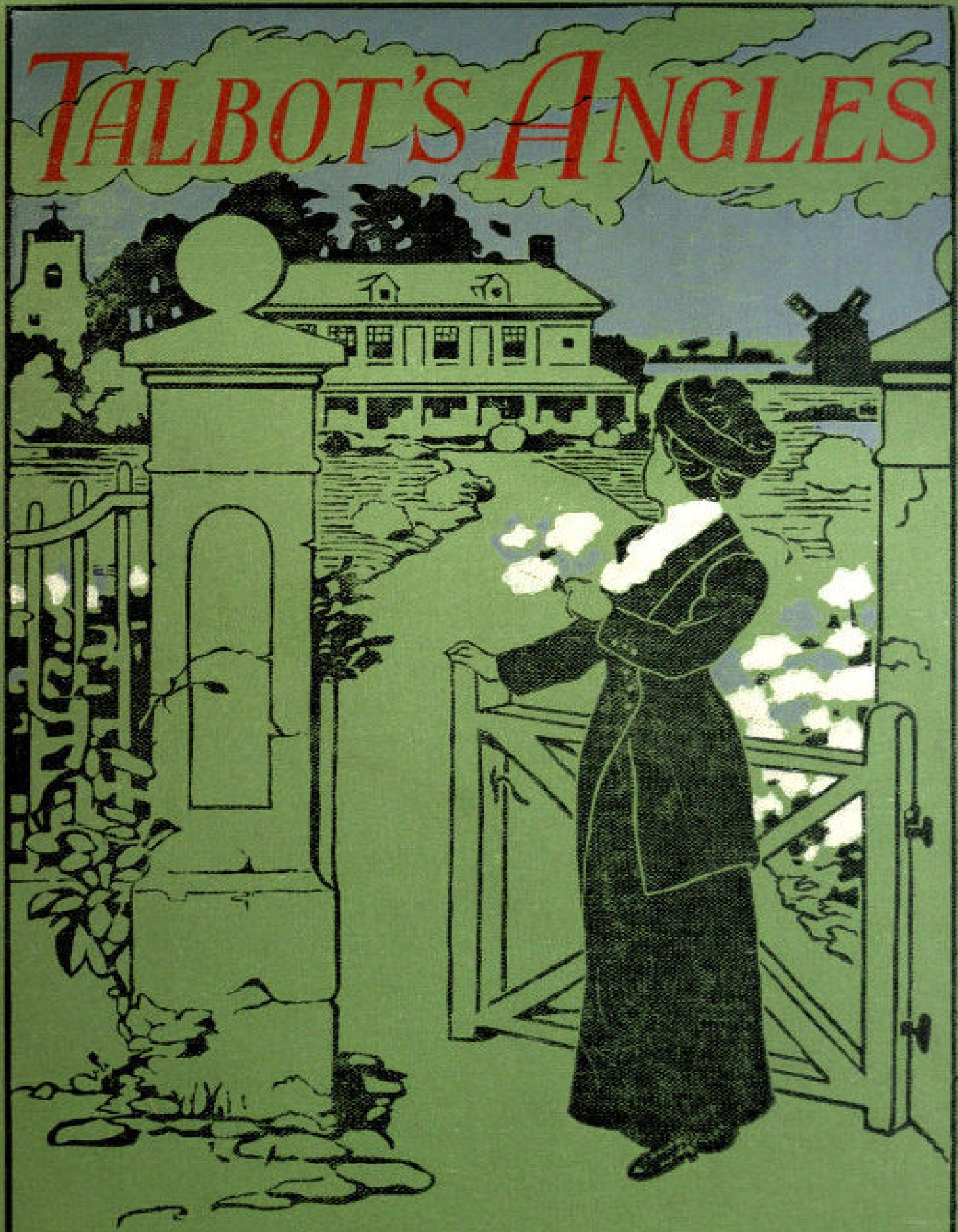
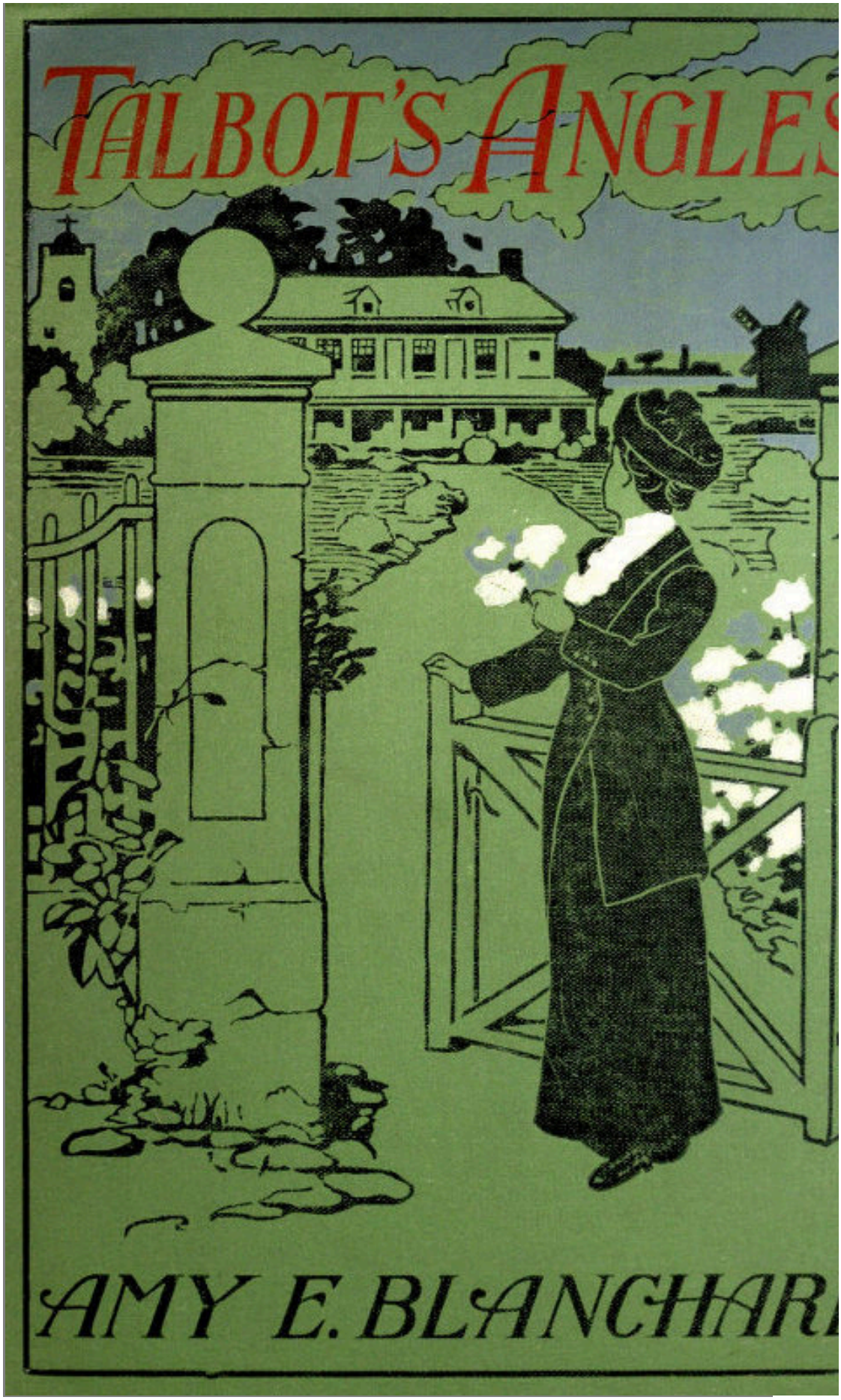
TALBOT'S ANGLES



AMY E. BLANCHARD


TALBOT'S ANGLES
AMY E. BLANCHARD

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TALBOT'S ANGLES

"I AM AS PROUD AS CAN BE OF YOU."
FRONTISPIECE (*Page 147*).

TALBOT'S ANGLES
BY
AMY E. BLANCHARD

Author of "A Journey of Joy," "Wits' End," "The Glad Lady," etc.

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TALBOT'S ANGLES

CHAPTER I

THE END OF A DAY

The sun was very low in the west and the evening colors were staining the creek whose quiet waters ran between flat lands to be carried out to the river further on, which, in its turn, found the broader bay. The arms of one or two ancient windmills, which had been moving lazily in the breeze, made a few rotations and then stopped, showing themselves dark objects against a glowing sky. An old church, embowered by tall trees, caught some of the evening glow upon its ancient brick walls, and in the dank long grass gray headstones glimmered out discovering the graveyard. Beyond the church the sparkling creek murmured gently. A few turkey-buzzards cast weird shadows as they circled slowly overhead or dropped with slanting wing to perch upon the chimneys of a long low house which stood not many rods from the weather-stained church. One reached the church by way of a green lane, and along this lane was now coming Linda Talbot, a girl above medium height whose dark hair made her fine fair skin look the fairer by contrast. Her eyes were downcast so that one could not discern their depth of violet blue, but one could note the long black lashes, the well-shaped brows and the rounded chin. Just now her lips were compressed so the lines of her mouth could not be determined upon. She walked slowly, never once raising her eyes toward the sparkling creek and the sunset sky. But once beyond the gate opening from the lane, she stood and looked around, taking in the view which included the windmills raising protesting arms, the fields where lately, corn had been stacked, the long low brown house. Upon this last her eyes lingered long and lovingly, observing the quaint lines, the low sloping roof, the small-paned windows, the chimneys at each end, the porch running the length of the building, each detail so familiar, so dearly loved, and now passing from her.

She gave her head a little quick shake as if to scatter the thoughts assailing her, then she moved more quickly toward

the house, but passing around to the kitchen rather than entering by way of the porch. An old colored woman was picking crabs at a table near the window. "Gwine give yuh some crab cakes fo' suppah, Miss Lindy," she announced, looking up. "Dark ketch me fo' I git 'em done I specs, dat no 'count Jake so long gittin' 'em hyar. He de no countines' niggah evah I did see. Thinks he ain't got nothin' to do but set 'roun' rollin' his eyes at de gals."

"Get me an apron, Mammy," said Linda, "and I'll help you."

"Go 'long, Miss Lindy. 'Tain't no need o' dat."

"But I'd like to," persisted the girl feeling relief at not immediately being obliged to seek other society than that of the old colored woman to whom she had brought her troubles from babyhood.

Enveloped in a huge gingham apron, she sat down to her task, but was so much more silent than was her wont that the old woman from time to time, raised her eyes to watch her furtively.

Presently she could stand it no longer. "Wha' de matter, honey?" she asked solicitously. "Yuh got sumpin mo' on yo' min' dat honin' fo' Mars Martin."

Linda dropped crab and fork into the dish of crab meat, rested her arms on the table and hid her face in them that Phebe should not see the tears she could no longer keep back.

"Dere, honey, dere baby," crooned Phebe. "Tell yo' ole Mammy all about it. Wha' she been a doin' to Mammy's honey chile?"

Linda lifted her tearful eyes. "Oh, Mammy, I can't stand it. I must go."

Phebe's hands shook. "What yuh mean, chile?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"I mean I must earn my own living. Phebe, I shall have to. Oh, Mammy, you know I cannot blame my brother, but if he had only left a little, just a little for my very own. If he had not made the conditions so hard."

"Tell Mammy agin jes' how yuh stan's, honey," said Phebe soberly.

"It's this way, Mammy. The place is left to Grace and me. As long as she chooses to make it her home I am to live here. If Grace marries she forfeits her right to it, but while she remains a widow she has a claim to the whole farm, the crops, everything. I am permitted only a place to sleep and enough to eat, and if she elects not to stay here, what am I to do? I cannot keep up an establishment on nothing, can I? Oh, Mammy, I did try, you know I did, while Martin lived, I tried to be patient and good. It hurt more than anyone knew when he brought home a silly pretty girl to take my place, to show a petty jealousy of me. You know how I used to delight in saving that I might buy something for Christmas or birthdays that he particularly wanted. Every little possession meant some sacrifice, and when, one by one, all the little treasured things that I had scrimped and saved to get for him, when they were shoved out of sight and something took their place that she had bought, I never said a word though it did hurt. We were such comrades, Mart and I, and I was only a school girl when I began to keep house for him and he came to me with all his confidences. We used to talk over the crops, the investments, this, that, the other thing, and it seemed as if it must always be so until—"

"Yas, honey, yas, I knows." Phebe spoke soothingly.

"She was jealous of every little thing," Linda went on. "She was very sweet and appealing, always calling me 'dear little sister' to Mart and gradually weaning him from me and my interests, subtly poisoning his mind—No, not that exactly, but making him believe he was such a wonderful brother to give me a home, to support me. She never ceased to praise him for what she told him was his great unselfishness. She never ceased to put me in the light of a dependent who had no real right to what he gave. It used to be share and share alike, Mammy, and Mart used to be the one to praise me for making a cheerful home. He used to say that he would work day and night rather than have me go out into the world to make my living, but, Mammy—to-day—Grace said I ought to do it, and I must, for she is going to the city for the winter."

"Law, honey! Law, honey! Mah li'l baby!" groaned Mammy. "Yo' ma an' pa'll riz up in dere grabes ef yuh does dat. Ain't it yo' home 'fore it hers? Ain't yo' gran'daddy an' you gre't-gran'-daddy live hyar? Ain't yuh de one dat has de mostes' right?"

"Yes, Mammy, dear, in the ordinary order of things it would be so, but you know the place was mortgaged up to the last dollar and it was Mart who lifted the mortgage and made the farm all his before father died. According to the law I have no part nor parcel in it except what he chose to leave me. Poor dear Mart, he was so blind, he thought never was such a wife as Grace; he couldn't see that she worked steadily, cleverly, cunningly all the time to build a barrier between us, to chain him fast, to make him see through her eyes, to make me appear a poor, weak incapable creature who ought to be left in her guardianship. Well, she succeeded; my darling brother, whose thought was always for me, made his will in such a way as to render me homeless."

"Lord, have mercy," groaned Mammy, rocking back and forth, the crabs unheeded in their pan.

"Oh, he was innocent enough, poor dear," Linda went on quickly. "He couldn't see anything but that it would be a fine thing for us two to live together like loving sisters always. I would be Grace's right hand; she would be my kind elder sister. That is the way it looked to him. He couldn't see through her little deceits. How could he know that her smiles covered a jealous, grasping nature? How could he know that six months after he left us she would practically turn me out-of-doors, that she would tell me I could not expect anything more than food and shelter for part of the year, and that she intended to spend her winters with her family and only her summers here?"

"Ain't it de troof?" ejaculated Mammy.

Having for the first time poured forth her grievances to a sympathetic ear, Linda was not disposed to stop the torrent which gave her relief. "She told me that it was for my sake as well as her own, and that she thought I would be much happier if I were to make myself entirely independent, all with that solicitous manner as if she lay awake nights thinking of my

welfare. Oh, no one but you, Mammy, who have seen it, could realize the thousand little pin pricks that I have endured."

"Yas, honey, I knows; Mammy knows," responded the old woman gravely. "But lemme tell yuh right now, ef yuh leaves de ole place, I leaves it."

"Oh, no, Mammy," Linda spoke in alarm, "Master Mart wouldn't like you to do that."

"I ain't thinkin' so much about Marster Mart as I is o' my baby, an' huccome she goes away. I ain't thinkin' so much o' him as I am o' mah ole mistis, yo' grandma. Yuh reckon she think I 'bleedged to stay? No, ma'am, dat she don't. 'Sides, honey, I reckons by dis time de angels done cl'ar yo' brudder's eyes o' de wool what been pull over dem dese two ye'rs pas', an' I reckons he a-sayin' to his own daddy an' ma', de ole place ain't de same nohow, an' po' li'l sis she need her ole Mammy Phebe, wharever she go!"

At these words, Linda quite broke down again, but this time she hid her face on Phebe's shoulder and was patted gently with many soothing words of, "Dere, honey, dere now, baby, don' cry; de good Lord gwine look arfter yuh."

After a few minutes Linda raised her head to say, "Grace's sister is coming down to help her close the house. They mean to leave before Christmas and Phillips will manage the place. I haven't told you yet what I mean to do. I had a letter to-day from Mr. Willis and he thinks I can have a position in one of the schools, for one of the teachers is going to be married and he will do all he can to get me her place."

"Dat up in town?"

"Yes, it will be in the primary department, and I shall have a class of little boys."

"Humph!" Mammy expressed her disdain. "Whar yuh gwine live?"

"I shall have to board somewhere, of course."

The old woman's face fell. "I hopes I ain't live to see mah ole mistis' gran'child bo'din' in a common bo'din' house, 'thout no

lady to give her countenance an' make it proper fo' her beaux to come an' see her. No, ma'am, I hopes I ain't live to see dat."

"But, Mammy, what can I do? I haven't any very near relatives down here, you know, and none nearly related anywhere, certainly not near enough for me to invite myself to their homes. I can't afford a chaperone, and besides I am sure I am well enough known in town to be treated with respect wherever I may happen to live."

"I ain't say yuh isn't, but what I do say is dat it ain't fittin' an' proper fo' one of de fambly to go off to bo'd thes anywhar lak common folks."

"Then please to tell me what I am to do. Pshaw! Mammy, it's nonsense to talk as if I were a princess. We've got to face facts —plain, every-day facts. I must make my living, and I am lucky to be able to do it in a nice, ladylike way, in my own town and among my own friends."

Mammy began to pick at the crabs again, working away sullenly. She knew these were facts, but she rebelled against the existence of them. She thought seriously over the situation for some minutes. "If yuh goes, I goes," at last she reiterated. "Miss Ri Hill she tell me laughin' like, mo' times dan one, 'When yuh wants a place, Phebe, mah kitchen ready fo' yuh.' She ain't think I uvver leave yuh-alls, but I knows she tek me ef she kin git me."

"Miss Ri Hill! Why, Mammy, that is an inspiration. She is the very one. Perhaps she will take me in, too," cried Linda.

"Praise de Lord! Ain't it de troof now? Co'se she tek yuh. 'Tain' nobody think mo' o' yuh dan Miss Ri. She yo' ma's bridesmaid, an' yuh always gre't fav'ite o' hers. Dat mek it cl'ar as day. She yuh-alls kin' an' she stan' fo' yuh lak home folks. When yuh gwine, Miss Lindy?"

"Oh, pretty soon, I think."

Just here the door opened and a high-pitched, rather sweet, but sentimentally pathetic voice said, "Phebe, have you forgotten that it is nearly supper time? Linda, dear, is that you? I wouldn't hinder Phebe just now. I was wondering where you

were. I saw you walking about so energetically and am so glad you can take pleasure in outside things, for of course I couldn't expect you to appreciate my loneliness, a young girl like you is always so buoyant." A plaintive sigh followed, as Grace Talbot turned to go. She was a fair, plump young woman with an appealing expression, a baby mouth and wide-open eyes in which it was her effort to maintain a look of childish innocence. "Do try to have supper promptly, Phebe," she said as she reached the door. "Of course, I don't care for myself, as I eat very little, but Miss Linda must be hungry after her walk."

Phebe gave a suggestive shrug and muttered something under her breath about "snakes in the grass," while Linda, with a sad little smile of deprecation, followed her sister-in-law through the irregular rooms, up a step here, down there, till the parlor was reached. Here an open fire was burning dully, for, though it was early fall, the evenings were chill even in this latitude, and Grace was a person who loved warmth. Creature comforts meant much to her, a certain chair, a special seat at table, a footstool, a cushion at her back, these she had made necessities, and had demanded them in the way which would most appeal to her husband, while later, for the sake of harmony, Linda had followed his precedent.

Grace now sank into her chair by the fire, put her head back against the cushion and closed her eyes. "Linda, dear," she said, "would you mind seeing if there is more wood? One gets so chilly when one's vitality is low, and I am actually shivering."

Silently Linda went to the wood box, brought a log, stirred the fire and started a cheerful blaze, then sat down in a dim corner, resting elbows on knees, chin in hands.

"Where were you walking?" asked Grace presently, stretching herself like some sleek animal in the warmth of the fire.

"I went to the graveyard," replied Linda slowly.

Grace shivered slightly. "What strong nerves you have. I simply cannot bear to do such things; I am so sensitive. I cannot endure those reminders of my loss. You are so different,

but, of course, all natures are not the same. I saw you talking to Phillips. I am glad to know that you can still take an interest in the place, but as for me it is too sad to talk over those things which were always a concern of my dear husband's. I cannot face details yet. My sorrow consumes all my thoughts and outside matters have no place in them. I suppose," she added in a weary voice, "everything is going on all right or you would tell me."

"Everything is right so far as I can judge," returned Linda; "but I would advise you to rouse yourself to take an interest soon, Grace, for I shall not be here."

"Are you really going soon?" asked Grace, opening her eyes.

It was Linda's impulse to say, "I hope so," but she refrained. "I think so," she answered. "I will tell you just when after I have definite information."

"Please don't be so secretive," said Grace a little sharply. "You must consider that I have my own arrangements to make and that it is due me to know your plans as soon as they are made."

"I will tell you as soon as they are settled," returned Linda stoutly. Here Phebe came in to announce supper and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER II

THE CLINGING VINE

When, two years earlier, Martin Talbot brought his wife to the old family homestead of Talbot's Angles, Linda determined to make the best of the situation. If it was for Martin's happiness to marry the pretty, rather underbred, wholly self-centered Grace Johnson, his sister would not be the one to offer disillusionment. Grace was from the city, dressed well, had dependent little ways which appealed to just such a manly person as Martin. She made much of him, demanded his presence continually, cooed to him persuasively when he would be gone, pouted if he stayed too long, wept if he chided her for being a baby, but under her apparent softness there was obstinacy, and the set purpose of a jealous nature.

Between Linda and her brother there had always been good comradeship, but not much over-demonstration of affection. Each felt that the other was to be depended upon, that in moments of stress, or in emergency there would be no holding back, and consequently Martin expected nothing less than that Linda should accept a new sister-in-law serenely, should make no protests. In fact, he was so deeply in love that, as is the way of mankind, he could not conceive that anyone should not be charmed to become the housemate of such a lovable creature as he assumed Grace to be, one so warm-hearted, so enchantingly solicitous, so sweetly womanish, and, though he did not exactly underrate Linda, he grew to smile at Grace's little whispers of disparagement. Linda was so cold, so undemonstrative; Linda was so thoughtless of dear Martin. Why, she had never remarked that he was late for dinner. Wasn't it just like Linda to go off by herself to church instead of walking with them? How unappreciative sisters could be of a brother's sacrifices. Not every brother would have supported his sister so uncomplainingly all these years, but dear Martin was such an unselfish darling, he never once thought of its being a sacrifice, and that a less unselfish man would expect

his sister to take care of herself. Martin was so chivalrous, and so on.

Therefore, Linda's days of devotion, her constant proofs of affection told in acts rather than in reiterated words, her hours of poring over accounts that she might economize as closely as possible in order that the mortgage might the sooner be paid, her long consultations with Mammy, and her continual mending, patching, turning, contriving, all were forgotten or taken for granted as a just return for her support. That she had driven to town and back again, seven miles each way, during the last years of her school life, that she might still be companion and housekeeper for her brother, seemed no great matter from Grace's point of view, though in those days themselves there had been many a protest against the necessitated late hours that were the result of her many tasks, and "What should I do without my little sister?" was the daily question.

There was no lack of employment for Linda's hands, even after Grace came, for though very tenacious of her prerogative as mistress of the house, Grace did nothing but assume a great air of being the busy housekeeper, and such work as was not done by Phebe, fell to Linda's share. Martin saw nothing of this, for Grace would bustle in with a show of having been much occupied, would throw herself into a chair with a pretence of fatigue, cast her eyes innocently at Martin, and say, "Oh, I am so tired. Housekeeping in the country is so difficult, but I love doing it for you, dear. Can't you stay home with your little Gracie this afternoon?" And Martin would stay nine times out of ten, with not the slightest perception of the fact that a surface sentimentality which stands in the way of the advancement or profit of another is worth nothing by the side of the year in, year out thought and activity in those little things which, in the end, show a far deeper affection than any clamor for a person's presence or any foolish and unmeaning words of praise.

Linda's pride constrained her to keep all these things to herself, and not even from her old Mammy would she allow criticism of her brother and his wife. Mammy, be it said, was ready enough to grumble at the new order of things to Linda herself,

but it was not till the burden was too heavy to bear longer in silence that Linda poured forth the grievances to which no one could listen so sympathetically as Mammy. Indeed, no one could have been a safer listener, for Mammy's pride in the family was as great as Linda's own, and she would have died rather than have noised its trouble abroad.

Before the next Sunday, Linda had made her arrangements to leave her old home, and Grace's eldest sister, Lauretta, had arrived. Lauretta was a colorless, well-meaning person, a little shaky in her English, inclined to overdress, with no pretension to good looks, and admiring her younger sister the more because of her own lack of beauty. Being less of the spoiled darling, she was less vain and selfish, less wilful and obstinate, but was ready to reflect Grace's opinions, as born of a superior mind, so she quite approved of Linda's departure and prepared to fit into her place as soon as might be, assuming the responsibilities of housekeeping with perfect good will. Of Phebe's departure nothing more had been said, and when Linda questioned the old woman the only answer she received was: "Ain't a-sayin' nuffin."

However, when Linda went into the kitchen one morning and remarked, "I'm going up to town to see Miss Ri Hill, Phebe," she was answered by, "I was thes a-thinkin' I'd go up mahse'f, Miss Lindy."

"How were you going?"

"Well, honey, I kin walk, I reckon."

"You will do no such thing. I intended to go up in the buggy, but I think I can get Jake to drive, and you can go along in the surrey. Have you said anything to Miss Grace about going?"

"No, I ain't, an I ain't a-gwineter. I been hyar befo' she was bo'n, an' she nuvver hire me nohow. I ain't got no call to say nuffin. When I goes, I goes."

Linda was silent for a moment. "But, Mammy," she said presently, "I don't feel that it is exactly right for you to do that way. If you go to town with me to see about a place, I am responsible in a measure."

"No, yuh ain't. Who say I cain't go see Miss Ri? I ain't a-gwine bag an' baggage. Ef I doesn't go with yuh, I goes on Shanks's mare."

"But who will get dinner to-day?"

"I reckon I kin git Popsy to come in an' git it."

"Well, go along and find out, for I want to get off pretty soon."

Mammy put a discarded felt hat of Martin Talbot's upon her head, and an old table-cover over her shoulders, then sallied forth down the road in search of the woman whose little cabin was one of a number belonging to a negro settlement not far off. Trips to town were so infrequent upon Phebe's part, and she demanded so few afternoons out, that what she wanted was generally conceded her, and though Grace pouted and said she didn't see why both Linda and Phebe should be away at the same time, Lauretta smoothed her down by saying: "Oh, never mind, Gracie dear, I have no doubt the other servant will do very well, and we'll have a nice cosey day together. I can see to everything, and it will give me a good chance to poke around. Old Phebe is such a martinet, she won't allow me inside the kitchen when she is here."

"She certainly is a regular tyrant," admitted Grace, "but no one can cook better, and I am glad to keep her, for down here it is hard to get competent servants; they are all more or less independent."

"Her being away to-day won't make much difference to you and I," replied Lauretta, with careful attention to her pronoun. She was always very particular never to say you and me. "I'm not a bad cook myself, and we can try some of our own home recipes. For my part, I should think you would get rather tired of oysters and Maryland biscuits."

"I do," returned Grace plaintively. "Linda doesn't always consider me in ordering. Dear Martin didn't seem to notice that until I called his attention to it."

"I don't see why you didn't take up all the housekeeping at the very first," responded Lauretta.

"Oh, I was so unused to it, and these Eastern Shore ways were so unfamiliar. Linda understood them much better than I. Besides, it would have taken up so much of the time I might want to be with Martin." She sighed deeply and wiped a furtive tear before going on: "Then, too," she continued, "I didn't want to neglect my friends, and it does take time to write letters. Everyone always said I was such a good correspondent, and when anyone is in trouble, that my letters are so sympathetic."

Lauretta changed the subject. Even in her sisterly eyes Grace was almost too eager a correspondent. "Why has Linda gone to town?" she asked. "To do some shopping? I suppose she will need some additions to her wardrobe now she is in mourning and is going to town to live."

"Oh, dear no; she is not going to do any shopping for herself. She has all she needs for the present. I gave her some things, and she will soon be earning money for herself. No; she has gone to see about a boarding place, she told me, and she has some errands for me. I think it so much better to give her occupation just now. She is rather a restless person, and she will be much happier than she could be brooding by herself. You know, Lauretta dear, Linda is not so very companionable. She hasn't the nice, confidential way with me that I have with my sisters."

"But she isn't your sister," returned Lauretta bluntly.

"Alas, no. Dear Martin hoped we would be congenial, but you can see it is impossible. I wouldn't acknowledge this to everyone, Lauretta; but I always feel that she holds herself superior. I have seen a look sometimes that made me want to box her ears."

Lauretta kept silence a moment before she said: "The Talbots are of excellent family, Grace."

"And we are not, you mean. That is between ourselves. I am sure I try to impress everyone with the belief that we are," which was too true, "and though our grandparents may have been plain people, Lauretta, in the beginning, they did have plenty of means at the last; we have enough of their solid

silver to prove that fact," and indeed Grace's display of solid silver on the sideboard at Talbot's Angles was not allowed to go unnoticed and was her most cherished possession, one of which she made much capital.

"There they go," said Lauretta, looking from the small-paned windows to see the carriage turn from the driveway into the road. "I may be wrong, but it does seem to me rather like turning Linda out of house and home, Grace, doesn't it?"

"Oh, dear, no; you are quite mistaken. I haven't a doubt but she would much rather live in town. I don't credit her with any real sentiment. She was as calm and self-possessed as possible when Martin died, while I went from one fit of hysterics into another. She can do things which would upset me completely. Oh, you needn't waste your sympathies upon Linda; it is I who am the real sufferer."

"You poor dear," murmured Lauretta. "I am glad you have decided not to spend your winters in this lonely place; it would be too much for one of your sensitive nature."

This was balm to Grace, and she cast a pathetic look at the sister, murmuring: "It is so sweet to be understood."

Meanwhile over the flat, shell road Mammy and Linda were travelling toward the town. Once in a while a thread of blue creek appeared in the distance beyond fields of farmlands, or a white house glimmered out from its setting of tall trees, the masts of a sailing vessel behind it giving one the feeling that he was looking at a floating farm, or that in some mysterious way a vessel had been tossed up far inland, so intersected was the land with little creeks and inlets.

Linda knew every step of the way; to Phebe it was less familiar, and the excitement of going up to town was an unusual one. She hugged herself in her ample shawl and directed, criticised and advised Jake the entire distance. Up through the shaded streets of the town they continued until they stopped before a gate leading to an old red house which faced the sapphire river. Here lived Miss Maria Hill.

Her cheery self came out on the porch to meet them. "Of all things, Verlinda Talbot!" she cried. "And Phebe, too. Well, this

is a surprise. Come right in. You are going to stay to dinner and we will have a good old-fashioned talk." She never failed to call Linda by the quaint name which had been given to various daughters of the Talbot family for many generations. "Go right out into the kitchen, Phebe," continued Miss Ri, "and if you can put any energy into that lazy Randy's heels, I'll be thankful. When are you going to make up your mind to come and live with me, Phebe?" she asked, laughing at the never-failing joke.

But this time Phebe's answer, instead of being: "When de dead ducks eat up all de mud, Miss Ri," was: "Whenever yuh likes to have me, Miss Ri."

Miss Maria stopped short in surprise. She looked from one to another. "You don't mean it!" she cried.

"Yas'm, I means it; dat is, ef acco'din' to de ques', yu teks Miss Lindy, too."

Miss Ri turned her gaze on Linda. "What does all this mean?" she asked. "Come on in, Phebe—no, you mustn't go into the kitchen just yet; we must thrash this out first." She led the way into a cheerful living-room, against whose ancient walls stood solid pieces of shining mahogany. Time-stained pictures, one or two portraits, old engravings, a couple of silhouettes looked down at the group. "Sit right down here, Verlinda dear. There's a chair for you, Phebe. Now let us hear all about it." Miss Ri drew up a chair and enfolded one of Linda's black-gloved hands in hers. "What does it all mean?"

"It means just this, Miss Ri," said Linda; "Grace is preparing to leave Talbot's Angles and is going to the city for the winter. I cannot stay there alone, even if I had the means to keep up the house, and as it is to be closed, I am thrown on my own resources. Mr. Willis has been good enough to interest himself in getting me a position in one of the schools, and I have come up to town to find a boarding place. I have passed my examinations and am to have Miss Patterson's position, for you know she is going to be married this fall. And now, Miss Ri, Phebe thinks that maybe you would be so good as to take me in."

"Ef yuh teks her, yuh gits me," broke in Phebe with an air of finality.

"It's a bargain," cried Miss Maria. "Have I been speaking for Phebe all these years to be deprived of her now on account of so slight a thing as Verlinda Talbot? No, indeed. I shall be delighted to have you as my guest, my dear. While as for you, Phebe, go right into the kitchen and stir up that lazy Randy with a poker, or anything else you can find. Thank goodness, I shall not have to keep her long. Go along, Phebe." Thus adjured, Phebe departed, ducking her head and chuckling; she dearly liked the errand.

"It must be as a paying guest, you understand," said Linda, when Phebe had left them.

"Paying nonsense! Isn't my house big enough for plump me, skinny you, and fat Phebe? You see how I discriminate between my size and Phebe's?"

"Then if I am not to be a real boarder, I can't come," said Linda firmly.

"And I shall lose Phebe! Verlinda Talbot, you are right-down mean. All right, then, come any way you like, and the sooner, the better. We'll fix it somehow; just make yourself easy on that score. My! I never looked for such luck; a young companion and a good cook at one and the same time. I'll get your room ready right away. I don't suppose you could stay now?"

Linda smiled. "Not to-day. I haven't a very extensive wardrobe, but such as it is, I must get it together; but I shall come within the next ten days. It is so very good of you to take me in, Miss Ri. Joking aside, I am most grateful. It makes the giving up of my own home less of a dread."

"Bless your heart, you dear child; I will try to make you comfortable. I have always wanted someone to mother, but I never expected the Lord would send me Verlinda Talbot. I am not going to ask any questions now, but some day we'll get at the root of the matter. Meantime let it rest. How is Grace bearing up?"

Linda hesitated. "Of course, she misses Martin terribly, but I think she is well; she has a good appetite."

Miss Ri smiled. "I don't doubt it. Has her sister come?"

"Yes."

"A nice sort of somebody, is she?"

"Yes, quite harmless, really good-hearted, I think, but rather dull. However, though she may bore one, she has no affectations. She is devoted to Grace, and I think will be of great use to her."

Miss Ri nodded understandingly. "Take off your things, dear," she said gently. "You are going to stay to dinner, you know, and then we will choose a room for you." She missed the color from the girl's face and noted the heavy shadows under the violet eyes, when Linda removed her hat. "Poor darling," she said to herself, "only time can help her. Grief sits heavily on her heart." She turned to a curious old cupboard in one corner of the room. "You must have some of my home-made wine," she said, "and then we will pick out the room. Would you like one looking out on the river or on the road?"

"Oh, a river room, if I may," replied Linda eagerly.

"Very well; so be it. I'll show you both and you can take your choice; or no, better still, I will fix up the one I am sure you will prefer, for it will look cosier than it does now, and you will have a better impression of it." She poured out some amber-hued wine from an old decanter. "Here, drink this," she said, "and I will join you in a health. Here's to many happy days under my roof, Verlinda, and may you never regret coming to your old friend, Maria Hill."

Just then Phebe's black face appeared at the door. "Miss Ri," she said, "I cain't stan' pokin' 'roun' arfter that fool nigger. I is gwine to set de table, ef yuh'll show me whar de things is, please, ma'am."

Miss Ri finished her glass with a "Here's to Phebe!" and Linda followed her to the dining-room.

CHAPTER III

LEAVING THE NEST

In this quiet little corner of Maryland's eastern shore, if life lacked the bustle and stir of more widely-known localities, it did not lack interest for its residents, while at the same time it provided a certain easy content which is missed in places more densely populated, or of more stirring affairs.... To Linda Talbot the days had come and gone in careless fashion up to the time of her brother's death, for even his marriage did not rob her of friendships, and of concern in the small neighborhood doings, especially in matters relating to the little church, which, because it stood upon Talbot ground, had always been considered the special care of those dwelling at Talbot's Angles. The church was very old and it had required many bazars, many efforts at subscription, many appeals to keep it in repair, and now it showed its antiquity in moss-grown walls, mouldy woodwork, falling plaster and weather-stained casements.

On this last Sunday, when she should perform her weekly duty of placing flowers upon the altar, Linda clipped her choicest white chrysanthemums from the bushes and early in the day took them to the church, making her way through dankly green paths overgrown with woodbine, that she might reach the enclosure where dead and gone Talbots of many generations were buried. Upon a newly-sodded grave she laid her fairest blossoms, and stood for a moment with heaving breast and quivering lips, then she went on to the church, pushing open the creaking door which led into the still, dimly-lighted, musty-smelling place.

"There must be more air and sun," she said, setting wide the door and forcing open a window that the sunlight might pour in. Then she busied herself with placing the flowers in their vases. This done, she sat down in the old family pew, her thoughts travelling back to the days when it had been scarce

large enough for them all, father, mother, grandmother, two brothers, three sisters, and now all resting in the quiet churchyard, herself the youngest of them all, the only one left. She ran her hand lovingly along the corner of the pew where her mother had been wont to sit; she touched with her lips the spot where Martin's forehead had so often rested as he knelt by her side. Next she knelt, herself, for a few minutes; then, without looking back, she left the church, to return later to the one service of the day, letting Grace and Lauretta follow.

Even sorrow possessed certain elements of satisfaction to Grace when she was made a conspicuous object of sympathy. She could not have mourned in silence, if she had tried, and the gratification of hearing someone say as she passed: "Poor, dear Mrs. Talbot, how pathetic she looks," was true balm to her grief. She always went regularly to church, swept in late in all her swathing of crape, to take her place in the Talbot pew, and as certain suggestive looks were cast her, she returned them with a plaintive droop of the eye, and a mournful turn of the head, as if she would say: "Yes, here I am in all my woe. Pity me who will, and I shall be grateful." Linda, on the contrary, stole into a back seat just before the service began and stole out again as soon as it was over. She could not yet face sympathy and commiseration.

Especially on this last Sunday did she feel uncertain of herself and wished heartily that the day were over, for Grace could not and would not be set aside for any matter of packing, and reproached the girl for her coldness and indifference toward her "own brother's wife," from whom she was about to be parted, so that Linda must fain sit and listen to commonplaces till Grace settled herself for a nap, and then she escaped to her room. There had promised to be a stormy time over Phebe's leave-taking, but as both Linda and Lauretta brought arguments to bear upon the matter, Grace was at last made to admit that, after giving a week's notice, Phebe could not be expected to lose the opportunity of taking a good place when Grace herself should so soon cease to need her. At first there was an effort at temporizing, and then Grace tried to exact a promise that Phebe would return in the summer, but the old

woman would give her no satisfaction, and she was obliged to make the best of it.

There was a great bustle and stir the next morning, more because of Phebe's departure than because of Linda's, for Phebe was here, there, everywhere giving orders and scolding away "Jes' lak a ole bluejay," declared Jake. She was so importantly funny that Popsy, who was to fill her place, and Jake, who had long known her ways, grinned and snickered so continually, that after all, Linda's departure was not the heart-breaking thing she had fancied it would be, and even the drive to town was deprived of melancholy on account of the lively chatter which Jake and Phebe kept up and which was too droll not to bring a smile from one listening.

"Of course, you will come back for the summer holidays," Grace had said at parting, with the air of one who knows her duty and intends to do it. "Of course, you remember that it was dear Martin's wish that you would make the place your home whenever I might be here."

SCOLDING AWAY "JES LAK AN OLE BLUE JAY." DECLARED JAKE.

But Linda had made no reply except a faint "I don't know what I shall do next summer." That season was too far off to be making plans for it now when the winter must be gone through, a winter whose unknown ways she would be compelled to learn.

But Miss Ri's welcome was so warm that there was little room left for the sadness of parting after the cheery greeting. "Welcome home, dear child. Come right upstairs. Your room is all ready. That's it, Phebe. Fetch along the bags. I've fixed you up a place over the kitchen. It is a new experience for me to have a cook who doesn't want to go home nights. Right through the kitchen and up the back stairs. You'll find your way. Come, Verlinda, let me have your umbrella or something. I can take that bag."

"Indeed, no. I'm not going to have you waiting on me, Miss Ri."

"Just this once. I'm so proud of having a young lass to look after that you'll have to let me have my way for this first day. There, how do you like it?" She threw open the door of the spotless room, whose windows, though small, were many, and revealed a view of the sparkling blue river, the harbor near by and, on the opposite shores, stretches of green farmlands. The room itself was long and low. It held an old-fashioned four-poster bed with snowy valance, a handsomely-carved mahogany bureau, a spindle-legged table with leaf set up against the wall, a desk which was opened to show many pigeon-holes and small drawers. A low, soft couch, chairs of an antique pattern, and a wood stove completed the furniture. White curtains were at the windows, and on the high mantel were one or two quaint ornaments.

"Now, my dear," said Miss Ri, "this is your sanctum. You can switch the furniture around any way that you prefer, tack up pictures, put your own belongings where you choose, and if there is anything you don't like, it shall be removed."

"It is a darling room," returned Linda gratefully. "I can't imagine how one could want to change a single thing."

"Then we'll have your trunk up; there will be room for one at least in this closet," Miss Ri told her, flinging open a door to disclose further accommodations. "Here's your washstand, you see, and there will be room for some of your frocks on these hooks; the rest can go in the clothes-press on the other side of the room and you can have another bureau, if you like. The trunks could go up in the attic, if that would suit better; but we will let that work out as it will later. Now, make yourself comfortable, and I'll go look after Phebe. Come down when you are ready."

Left to herself, Linda sank down in a chair by the window, for a moment overcome by the thought that she had cut loose from all the ties which bound her to the dear old home. But in a moment her courage returned. "What nonsense," she murmured. "Was ever a girl so lucky? Here I am with my living assured and with dear Miss Ri to coddle me; with this darling room; and, last of all, with my own old Mammy at hand. I am a perfect ingrate to want more." She turned her eyes from a survey of the room to a survey of the outside. Along the river's brink stood some little houses, where the oystermen lived; nearer, was a long building, where the oyster-packing went on. Every now and then, through the open window, came a sound of cheerful singing from the shuckers at work. Tall-masted sail-boats dipped and curtseyed upon the sapphire waters. Across the river a line of shore was misty-green in the autumn light; closer at hand a grassy slope, over which tall trees cast their shadows, stretched down to the river. One or two little row-boats tethered to a stake, near a small boat-house, rocked gently as the tiny wavelets leaped up on the sandy brink. Vines clambered to the very windows of her room, amongst their leaves birds were twittering. The trees about the place were many, and from one of them a scarlet tanager was shrilling out his inviting call. "It is next best to being at home," Linda told herself, "and to get next best is a rare thing. I will unpack at my leisure, for perhaps I'd better see how Mammy is faring."

She found Miss Ri in the sitting-room and Phebe already busy in the kitchen. Miss Ri was looking over some photograph

prints. She handed one to Linda. "Tell me what you think of it," she said.

"Fine!" exclaimed Linda. "I didn't know you were an expert photographer, Miss Ri."

"I'm not. Don't give me credit for them. Sit down and I'll tell you how I happen to have them. One day, not long ago, I was potting some of my plants for the winter, when a young man came in the gate. I had never seen him before and thought he must be a book-agent or some sort of trader in dustless dusters or patent flat-irons, though he was much too nice-looking for that kind of business. Well, he walked up to me and said, 'Don't you want me to take some photographs of your house and grounds? This is certainly the most picturesque place I have seen about here.'"

"Of course, that pleased you, and so—"

"Yes, that is it exactly, and so he took a lot of views, interiors and exteriors, and I think they are pretty good. He didn't overcharge, and if he had done it, I should be disposed to forgive him. He stayed all the morning—"

"And I'll venture to say you asked him to dinner."

Miss Ri laughed. "Well, yes, I did; for who wouldn't have almost anyone rather than eat alone? He did stay and told me his story, which was a most interesting one."

"I hope he didn't go off with his pockets full of your old silver."

"My dear, he is a gentleman."

"Oh, is he? And goes around taking photographs? This is interesting, Miss Ri. Tell me some more."

"Well, it seems that he has come down here to look up some property that belonged to his great-grandfather and which he should have inherited by all rights; but, unfortunately, his trunk, with all the papers he needs, has gone astray, and, what is more, he was robbed of his pocketbook; so now, while he is waiting to find the trunk and until his next quarter's money comes in, he finds himself, as they express it, 'momentarily embarrassed'; but, having his camera with him and being a

good amateur photographer, he is turning his gifts to account, that he may at least pay his board."

"It seems to me it would have been more to the purpose, if he had been robbed of the camera instead of the pocket-book. He strikes me as a very careless young man to lose both his trunk and his purse."

"He didn't lose the pocket-book; it was stolen; he is sure of that; and as for the trunk, it was sent by a local expressman to the steamboat, and so far has not been traced."

"A very clever story," Linda went on. "I am only surprised that you didn't offer to take him in here until the missing articles are found."

"I did think of it," returned Miss Ri with a twinkle in her eye, "and if you hadn't been coming, I might have done it; but I was afraid he might prove too susceptible or that—"

"I might," returned Linda, laughing. "You certainly are considerate, Miss Ri. Where is our paragon, now?"

"Oh, I sent him to Parthy Turner's, and they are both having a mighty nice time of it. She has turned him over to Berk Matthews, and he is doing what he can for him."

"And do you believe there really was a great-grandfather?"

"Oh, dear, yes; I am convinced of it. The young man has shown us his credentials, and I have no doubt but that in time he can find enough proof to substantiate what he has told us about his claim. If only the trunk could be found, he says he thinks it would be a very simple thing to establish his rights."

"And am I not to see this mysterious stranger? I suppose he comes here sometimes to report."

"If you are very good, I may let you see him through the crack of the door; but he is not for you. I have picked out someone else."

"Oh, you have? So you are a confessed matchmaker, Miss Ri? May I know the name of my knight?"

"No, you may not; that would be enough to make you turn your back on him at once. It is entirely my secret."

"And the picked out person doesn't know he is picked out?"

"Not a bit of it; he hasn't the faintest suspicion. How good that dinner does smell. Phebe is the only thing I wanted that I didn't have, and now I have her."

"Do you really mean, Miss Ri, that you get everything you want in this world?"

"Why, yes; at least of late years it has been so. I found out the secret from Thoreau some ten or more years ago."

"A precious secret, I should say."

"A very simple one. It is easy enough to get what one wants, when one makes it a rule to want only what he can get. If you think you haven't enough for your wants, all you have to do is to reduce your wants."

"I'm afraid my philosophy isn't sufficient for such a state of things," said Linda with a sigh.

"Why isn't it? Now, let's face the question. What do you want that you can't get?"

Linda was silent before she said tremulously, "My brother."

"Ah, my dear, that is all wrong. Don't you believe that you have your brother still? If he were in Europe, in China, in India, wouldn't you still have him? Even if he were in some unreachable place like the South Pole, he would still be your brother, and now because he has gone a little further away, is he not yours just the same?"

"Oh, Miss Ri, sometimes I am afraid I doubt it."

"But I know it, for there was One who said, 'If it were *not* so, I would have told you.' Even the greatest scoffer among us must admit that our Lord was one who did speak the truth; that is what comforts."

Linda laid her cheek against the other woman's hand. "That does comfort," she said. "I never saw it that way before. Is it that, Miss Ri, that keeps you almost always so bright and happy? You who have lost all your nearest and dearest, too? You so seldom get worried or blue."

"Yes, I suppose it is that and another reason," returned Miss Ri, unwilling to continue so serious a talk.

"And what is the other?"

"I try to make it a rule never to get mad with fools," replied Miss Ri with a laugh. "Of course, I don't always succeed, but the trying helps a lot."

Just here Phebe's head appeared at the door. "Miss Ri, I cain't find no tater-masher. What I gwine do?"

"Oh, dear me; let me see. Oh, yes, I remember; Randy threw it at black Wally the other day when he was pestering her. She didn't hit him and I reckon she never troubled herself to pick up the potato-masher; you'll find it somewhere about the back yard. Randy certainly has a temper, for all she is so slow in other ways. Come along, Verlinda; I promised to show you that old wine-cooler we were talking about the other day. I found it down cellar, when the men were clearing out the trash; I've had it done over, and it isn't bad." She led the way to the living-room, which, rich in old mahogany, displayed an added treasure in the quaint wine-cooler, in which the bottles could lie slanting, around the central receptacle for ice.

"It is a beautiful piece of wood," commented Linda, "and it is certainly curious enough. I do love this room, with all this beautiful old furniture. How do you manage to keep it so beautifully polished?"

"Give it a rub up once in a while; and, you see, between whiles there is no one to abuse the things, so they keep bright. Let us see about the potato-masher; Phebe's found it, I declare. I venture to say it won't lie out of doors for a week, while she's here."

CHAPTER IV

"DEPARTED DAYS"

Miss Parthy Turner's back garden was separated from Miss Maria Hill's by a fence in which a gate was cut that the two might sociably jog back and forth without going around the block. One of Linda's windows overlooked these gardens, where apple-trees disputed right of way with lilac bushes and grape-vines, and where, just now, late roses were cast in the shade by the more brilliant chrysanthemums. Miss Parthy, it may be said, was of a more practical turn than her neighbor in that she gave over to vegetables a larger part of her garden space, so that there were still discernible rows of cabbages, slowly-ripening pumpkins, high-poled beans, and a few late tomatoes.

The morning after her arrival, Linda noticed in the garden, beyond the dividing line, a young man walking about with an evident eye to the quality of the apples shining redly above his head. She regarded this person with some curiosity, conjecturing that he was the mysterious stranger who had taken the photographs for Miss Ri. "He doesn't look like a fake," she told herself. "I suppose his story may be true. By the way, Miss Ri didn't tell me his name nor where he hails from." However, her thoughts did not long dwell upon the stranger, for this was to be her initial morning at school, and she was looking forward to it with dismay and dread. She scarce tasted her breakfast and looked so pale and anxious, that Miss Ri's heart ached for her. Mammy, too, was most solicitous, but knew no better way to express her sympathy than by urging hot cakes upon the girl with such persistence that at last, to please her, Linda managed to eat one.

In spite of fears, the morning went more smoothly than she had anticipated, for Miss Patterson remained to coach her and she became familiarized with the routine, at least. Her pupils were little boys, none too docile, and naturally a new teacher

was a target for tricks, if so she did not show her mettle. Under Miss Patterson's watchful eye there was no chance for mutiny, and Linda went home with some of her qualms allayed. She had passed her examinations creditably enough and felt that she could cope with the mere matters of teaching, but the disciplining of a room full of mischievous urchins was quite another question, and the next morning her heart misgave her when she met the rows of upturned faces, some expressing mock meekness, some defiant bravado, some open mirth. Courageously as she met the situation, it was a trying morning. If her back was turned for but an instant, there were subdued snickers; if she made a statement, it was questioned; if she censured, there were black looks and whispers of disapproval. At last one offender, sneaking on his hands and knees to the desk of another boy, was captured and marched off to the principal, a last resort, as poor Linda's nerves could stand no more. She was near to crying, her voice trembled and her heart beat fast. She scarcely knew how she went through the rest of the morning, for, though her summary act had quelled open rebellion, she was not at ease and keenly felt the undercurrent of criticism. She did not realize that the boys were trying her spirit, and she went home discouraged and exhausted, a sense of defeat overcoming her.

As she was entering the gate, she met someone coming out, a young man, rather heavily built, with a keen, clever face, rather than a handsome one. "Ah, Miss Linda," he exclaimed, holding out his hand, "I've just been hearing about you."

"From Miss Ri, of course. Well, what has she been telling you?"

"It wouldn't do to say. How is the school going?"

"The school in general seems to be going very well; as to my part of it, the least said, the better."

"Really? What's the trouble?"

"I don't know exactly. I suppose that I am the trouble, perhaps; Miss Patterson seemed to get along well enough."

"Boys or girls do you have?"

"Boys; little wretches from eight to ten, such sinners, not a saint among them."

"Would you have even one saint? I wouldn't, for he couldn't be a truly normal, healthy boy. But I am keeping you standing and I know you are ready for your dinner. I'll walk back to the house with you, and you can tell me the particular kinds of sin that have annoyed you. I was a boy myself once, you know."

He walked by her side to the house. Miss Ri, seeing them coming, was at the door to meet them. "I thought I sent you home once, Berk Matthews," she said.

"So you did, but I took this way of going. Don't imagine for a moment that my return involves an invitation to dinner, Miss Ri."

"That is an excellent thing, for I don't intend to extend one."

"Could you believe that she would so fail in hospitality?" said the young man, turning to Linda. "I am mortified, Miss Ri, not because of the dinner, but that you should go back on the reputation of an Eastern Shore hostess. Isn't it a world-wide theory that we of the Eastern Shore never turn a guest from the door when there is the faintest possibility of his accepting a bid to a meal? Alas, that you should be the first to establish a precedent that will change the world's opinion of us."

Miss Ri laughed. "You would think I was a client for the other side and that he was using his wiles to get me fined, at least. Come along in, if you must; I can guarantee you better fare than you will get at the Jackson House, I am bound to say."

"That sounds alluring, but my feelings are hurt because I had to hint for an invitation."

"Could anything so obvious be dignified by the name of a hint? Very well, go along and cut off your nose to spite your face, if you like; you will be the loser."

"Not very complimentary, is she?" said Mr. Matthews, laughing. "I believe I will come now, just to show you that I am not to be badgered."

"Then don't stand there keeping us from our dinner. It is all ready, and I don't want it spoiled." Thus adjured, the young

man followed the others into the dining-room, where Phebe was just setting forth the meal.

"Well, and how did it go to-day, Verlinda?" asked Miss Ri, when they had seated themselves.

"Don't ask her anything till after dinner," put in Mr. Matthews. "Things will assume an entirely different aspect when she has had something to eat. Just now the shooting of the young idea is not a pleasant process to contemplate, in the eyes of Miss Linda. We'll talk about something else. Where did you get these oysters, Miss Ri? I never tasted such a pie."

"Of course you didn't, for you never ate one made by such a cook. The oysters came from the usual place, but I'm in high feather, Berk, for I have the best cook in town. I have Linda's Phebe."

"You don't want another boarder?"

"Not I. Linda is adopted; she is not to be classed with common boarders, and I certainly don't want to spoil my ideal household by taking in a—"

"Mere man," interrupted Berkley. "Very well, I will find an excuse to come in every day about meal time. What are you going to have for supper?"

"Cold cornbread, dried apples and chipped beef," replied Miss Ri with gravity.

"That's mean. Well, I'll come around with the papers to-morrow."

"We're going to have the remains of the chipped beef and dried apples for dinner."

"Then I'll come about supper time; they can't last over three meals."

"You don't know the surviving qualities of those articles of diet; they may last a week with proper care."

"I'll come and find out. I can go in the back way and ask Phebe, or I might bribe her to throw the stuff over the fence to Miss Parthy's chickens."

"Don't you be up to any of your lawyer's tricks, Berk Matthews. I warn you, not a meal in my house shall you eat, if I hear of any shenannyging on your part."

"I'll be good then, but I'd like a piece of that pie, a nice big piece."

While all this nonsense was going on, Linda kept silence. She was really hungry and the light foolish talk was a relief, as the others intended it should be. In consequence, she went back to school in better spirits and the afternoon passed more satisfactorily.

True to his threat, Berkley Matthews did appear with some papers just before supper time, but refused to stay, telling Miss Ri with great glee that Miss Parthy had invited him to her house and that she was going to cook the supper herself, while he and her other guest, Wyatt Jeffreys, were going to help.

"Wyatt Jeffreys, Wyatt Jeffreys," repeated Linda. "That name sounds very familiar. I wonder where I have heard it. Where is he from, Miss Ri?"

"From Connecticut, I believe. Any more light on the case, Berk?"

"No. Nothing can be done till he shows up his papers, and they seem to be lost irrevocably. It's pretty hard on the poor chap, if there is really anything in the claim. Good-by, Miss Linda. I must be going, Miss Ri; you can't wheedle me into staying this time."

"Wheedle you!" cried Miss Ri in pretended indignation. "I can scarcely get rid of such a persistent beggar. Go along and don't come back."

"I'll have to," cried he. "You must sign those papers at once, this very evening."

"I'll bring them to your office to-morrow morning," Miss Ri called after him, but he only waved his hand with a parting "Shan't be there," and Miss Ri turned to Linda, laughing. "We always have it back and forth this way. He attends to my business, you know, and runs in often. Now that his mother

and sister have left town, he boards at the hotel, and likes the home feeling of coming here to a meal. Nice boy, Berk is."

Linda had known Berkley Matthews all her life. As a little stocky boy he had come to play with her in Miss Ri's garden on some of the occasions when she was brought from Talbot's Angles to spend the day. Later he had gone to boarding-school, then to college, and she had seen little of him during late years.

"He'll be back," said Miss Ri nodding, "just to get the better of me. But to tell you the truth, Verlinda, he certainly is a comfort, for he looks out for my interest every time. I wouldn't have a house nor a field left by this time, if it had depended upon my kin folks. Don't be an old maid, Verlinda. When their very nearest and dearest are gone, old maids seem to be regarded, by the world in general, as things so detached as to have no rights whatever; their possessions appear to be regarded as so many threads hanging from them; whoever comes along in need of a needleful, makes a grab, possesses himself of such a length and makes off with it, never stopping to see that it leaves a gaping rent behind."

Linda laughed. Miss Ri's grievances were not many, but were generally those caused by her stepbrother's family, who lived not far away and made raids upon her whenever they came to town.

"Oh, well, you may laugh," Miss Ri went on, "but it is quite true. Why, only the last time Becky was here she carried off a little mirror that had belonged to my great-grandmother."

"Why did you let her have it? Your great-grandmother was no relation of hers."

"I know that; but she talked so much, I had to let her take it to get rid of the incessant buzzing. You know what a talker Becky is."

"But you like Mrs. Becky; I've often heard you say so."

"Oh, yes, I like her well enough. She is entertaining when she is talking about other people's affairs and not mine," remarked Miss Ri with a droll smile. "That is the way it generally is, I suppose. Well, anyhow, Berk Matthews keeps my business

together, and I'm sure I am satisfied to have him run in when he chooses, if only to keep me in a good humor."

"I thought you were always so, and that you never got mad with fools."

"I don't; but Becky is no fool, my dear."

They turned into the big drawing-room, a room charming enough in itself, without the addition of the fine old Chippendale chairs and tables, the carved davenport, the big inlaid piano, and the portraits representing beauties of a departed time. Linda knew them all. The beautiful girl in white, holding a rose, was Miss Ri's grandmother, for whom she was named and who was a famous belle in her day. The gentleman in red hunting-coat was a great-grandfather and his wife the lady with powdered hair and robed in blue satin. The man with the sword was another great-grandfather, and so on. One must go up a step to reach the embrasured windows which looked riverward, but at the others, which faced the lawn, hung heavy damask curtains. Linda had always liked the smaller windows, and when she was a little child had preferred to play on the platform before them to going anywhere else. There was such a sense of security in being thus raised above the floor. She liked, too, the little writing-room and the tiny boudoir which led from the larger room, though these were closed, except in summer, as so large a house was hard to heat comfortably.

A freshly-burning fire in the fireplace sent glancing lights over the tall candlesticks and sought out the brightest spots on the old picture-frames. It picked out the brass beading on the yellow-keyed piano, and flickered across Chinese curios on the spindle-legged tables. Miss Ri's grandfather had been an admiral in the navy and many were the treasures which were tucked away here, out of sight there, or more happily, brought forth to take the place of some more modern gift which had come to grief in the hands of careless servants.

"It is a dear old room," said Linda, sitting down at the piano and touching softly the yellowed keys, which gave forth a tinkling response.

"I ought to have a new piano," said Miss Ri, "and now you have come, it will be an excuse to get one. I'll see what I can do next time I go to town. I remember that you have a nice voice."

"Nothing to boast of."

"Not very powerful, perhaps, but sweet and true. I wish you'd sing for me, Verlinda, if you are not too tired."

"I will, if you will first play for me some of those things I used to love when I was a child. You would play till I grew drowsy, and then you would carry me off to bed."

"Oh, my dear, I don't play nowadays, and on that old tinkling piano."

"But it is just because it is the old piano that I want the old tunes."

"Then pick out what you like, and I will try."

Linda turned over a pile of music to find such obsolete titles as "Twilight Dews," "Departed Days," "Showers of Pearl," and the like. She selected one and set it on the rack. "Here is one I used to like the best," she said. "It suggested all sorts of things to my childish mind; deep woods, fairy calls, growling giants; I don't know what all."

"'Departed Days.' Very fitly named, isn't it? for it is at least fifteen years ago, and it was an old thing then. Well, I will try; but you mustn't criticise when I stumble." She sat down to the piano, a stout, fresh-colored, grey-haired woman with a large mouth, whose sweet expression betokened the kindly nature better than did the humorous twinkling eyes. She played with little style, but sympathetically, though the thin tinkling notes might have jarred upon the ears of one who had no tender associations with the commonplace melody. To Linda it was a voice from out of her long-ago, and she listened with a wistful smile till suddenly the door opened and the music ended with a false chord. Miss Ri shut the piano with a bang, and turned to greet the young man who entered.

CHAPTER V

THE ALARM

"Have I interrupted a musicale?" asked Berkley jauntily.

"You are just in time to hear Verlinda sing," responded Miss Ri with ready tact and in order to cover her own confusion.

"Ah, that's good," cried he, though "Oh, Miss Ri," came in protest from Linda.

"Didn't you promise to sing for me, if I played for you?" queried Miss Ri.

"Yes,—but—only for you."

"Now, Miss Linda," Berkley expostulated, "haven't I known you as long as Miss Ri has?"

"Not quite," Linda answered.

"But does the matter of a few months or even years, when you were yet in a state of infantile bewilderment, make any difference?"

"It makes all the difference," Linda was positive.

"Oh, come, come," spoke up Miss Ri, "that is all nonsense. You don't make any bones of singing in the church choir, Verlinda."

"Oh, but then I have the support of other voices."

"Well, you can have the support of Berk's voice; I am sure it is big enough."

"Oh, but I don't sing anything but college songs," the young man declared.

"Such a very modest pair," laughed Miss Ri.

"Well, who was blushing like a sixteen-older when I came in? Tell me that," said Berkley triumphantly. And Miss Ri was perforce to acknowledge that she was as bad as the rest, but the

controversy was finally ended by Linda's consenting to sing one song if Berkley would do the same. She chose a quaint old English ballad as being in keeping with the clinking piano, and then Berkley sang a rollicking college song to a monotonous accompaniment which, however, was nearly drowned by his big baritone.

By the time this was ended the ice was broken and they warmed up to the occasion. They dragged forth some of Miss Ri's old music-books to find such sentimental songs of a former day as pleased their fancy. Over some of these they made merry; over others they paused. "My mother used to sing that," Berkley would say. "So did my mother," Linda would answer, and then would follow: "She Wore a Wreath of Roses," "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton," "Cast That Shadow from Thy Brow," or some other forgotten ballad.

"Oh, here is 'The Knight of the Raven Black Plume,'" cried Linda, as she turned the discolored pages of one of the old books. "How I used to love that; it is so romantic. Listen," and she began, "A lady looked forth from her lattice."

So they went from one thing to another till Berkley, looking at his watch exclaimed, "I'm keeping you all up, and Miss Ri, we haven't seen to those papers. That music is a treasure-trove, Miss Linda. We must get at the other books sometime, but we'll take some Friday night when you can sleep late the next morning."

Linda's face shadowed. "Why remind me of such things? I had nearly forgotten that there were matters like school-rooms and abandoned little wretches of boys."

"Don't be so hard on the little chaps. I was one once, as I reminded you, and I have some sympathy with them caged up in a school-room. Just get the point of contact and you will be all right."

"Ah, but there's the rub," returned Linda ruefully. "I am not used to boys, and any sort of contact, pointed or otherwise, doesn't appeal to me."

"You must just bully them into good behavior," put in Miss Ri. "Here, Berk, you be the little boy and I'll be the school-marm.

Verlinda needs an object lesson." Then followed a scene so funny that Linda laughed till she cried.

"Where are those papers?" inquired Miss Ri suddenly putting an end to the nonsense. "Bring them into the sitting-room, Berk, and we will get them done with. I'm going up to town to-morrow, and we may as well finish up this business before I go."

"One of your mysterious errands, Miss Ri?" said Berkley smiling.

"Never mind what it is; that is none of your concern. You don't suppose because you collect my rents, and look after my leases that you must know every time I buy a paper of hairpins."

"You don't have to go up to the city for those, you see. It is my private opinion, Miss Linda, that she makes a semi-annual visit to a fortune-teller or some one of that ilk. I notice she is more than ordinarily keen when she gets back after one of these trips."

"Come along, come along," interrupted Miss Ri. "You'll stand here talking all night. I declare you are as bad as Becky Hill."

"Oh, yes, I'm coming, Miss Ri. Do you know Mrs. Hill, Miss Linda? and did you ever hear what her sister, Mrs. Phil Reed says of her?"

"I know Mrs. Hill, yes, indeed, but I never heard the speech. What was it?"

"You know what a talker Mrs. Becky is. Mrs. Reed refers to it in this way. 'Becky, dear child, is so sympathetic, so interested in others that she exhausts herself by giving out so much to her friends.'"

"I should say it was the friends who were exhausted," returned Linda. But here Miss Ri suddenly turned out the lights leaving them to grope their way to the sitting-room where the papers were signed and then Berkley was, as Miss Ri termed it, driven out.

The steamboat which left at six o'clock every evening bore Miss Ri away on its next trip. It was an all night journey down the river and up the bay, and therefore, Miss Ri would not

return till the morning of the second day when the boat arrived on its voyage from the city.

"If you are afraid to sleep in the house with no one but Phebe, get some one to come and stay with you," charged Miss Ri. "Bertie Bryan will come, I am sure."

"I shall not be in the least afraid," declared Linda. "Phebe and I have often stayed in the house alone at Talbot's Angles."

"Nevertheless, I would rather you did have someone. I'll send Phebe over to the Bryans with a note." This she did in spite of Linda's protest that it was not necessary, and after Linda had returned from seeing Miss Ri on her way, Bertie arrived. She was a nice wholesome girl who had been a schoolmate of Linda's and had spent many a day with her at Talbot's Angles. She was not exactly a beauty, but a lovely complexion and sweet innocent eyes helped out the charm of frank good nature and unaffected geniality.

"It certainly is good to see you in town, Linda," she said as she greeted her friend. "Why didn't you send me word you were here? I would have been over long ago."

"I wanted to gather my wits together first. I am experimenting, you see, and I didn't know how my experiment might turn out. I was afraid I might have to slink off again ignominiously after the first week."

"But, as this is the second week and you are not slinking, I surmise it is all right."

"Not exactly all right, but I manage to keep from having hysterics, and am getting my youngsters in hand better."

"I heard Miss Adams say this morning that you were getting on very well for one who had never had any experience."

"That is the most encouraging thing I have heard yet. I have been wondering what my principal really did think, and to have that much praise is worth a great deal," said Linda gratefully. "Now don't let us talk shop. Tell me what is going on in town."

"Don't you hear every bit of town news from Miss Ri? What she can't tell you Miss Parthy can."

"I haven't seen much of Miss Parthy. The hobnobbing between those two generally goes on while I am at school. Have you met the mysterious stranger, Bertie?"

"Yes, indeed, and he is quite an acquisition, or would be if he could find his trunk. Have you met him?"

Linda smiled. "No, Miss Ri is afraid I shall fall in love with him, I think, and has stipulated that he is only to call at such hours as I am at school."

"What nonsense. Is she making a recluse of you?"

"Oh, no. Berk Matthews is allowed, or rather he comes without being allowed, being a favorite and liable to take his own way. Tell me more of the man without a trunk."

"Sounds rather ghastly, doesn't it? Well, he is like almost any other nice young man, has good manners, speaks correctly, makes himself agreeable when the opportunity is afforded. It is rumored that his affairs are in better shape, and that money orders and checks and things have come in, so he is no longer a mere travelling photographer."

"I wonder he stays here now that he has the means to get away."

"Oh, but he came prepared to stay. At least his object was to look up this property. He has been up to the city once or twice and is still hoping to recover the trunk which he thinks must be in Baltimore still. In the meantime he is very reticent about his case, won't talk of it to anyone, so nobody seems to know exactly what he does claim."

"The name is very familiar," remarked Linda thoughtfully. "I can't think where I have heard it."

"There is some sort of romantic tale about him, Miss Parthy says. She seems to know more than anyone."

"He can't be a duke or a prince in disguise," said Linda.

"He might be, for he was educated abroad, I have heard."

"Wyatt Jeffreys—Jeffreys—I can't get the name located. I suppose it will come to me sometime."

The girls had a quiet chatty evening alone, and started upstairs betimes. To Bertie was given a room opening out of Linda's, and with many a good-night they at last settled down to sleep.

From her first nap Linda, after a while, was awakened by the low murmur of voices beneath her window. She listened with beating heart. No, there was no mistake. Should she arouse Bertie? She listened for a few moments and then heard a sound as of someone trying a shutter. Next a door-knob rattled slightly. Though frightened enough Linda was no coward, and as she sat up in bed listening, her brain worked rapidly. It would be better to arouse Bertie than to go prowling around alone, and have her friend doubly alarmed. Together they would go down stairs and perhaps could scare off the would-be burglars. Slipping on some clothing she cautiously went to Bertie's door, candle in hand. Flashing the light before her friend's closed eyes she succeeded in awaking without alarming her.

"What's the matter, Linda?" asked Bertie sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "Are you ill? It isn't morning, is it?"

"No, I'm not ill. Don't be scared, Bertie, but get up and put on some clothes quickly. I am sure I heard someone trying to get into the house."

"But what can we do?" asked Bertie in a shaking voice. "We mustn't go down, Linda; we mustn't. Let's lock the doors and let them take what they want."

"I don't believe they have really broken in yet, and I am going to try to scare them away. I wish I had a pistol; I left mine in the country, not supposing I should need it here."

"I'm sure we left everything safely locked and barred; you know we tried every door and window."

"Yes, I know. It wouldn't be any sneak thief, of course. I have a plan. Come into my room and let's peep out the window." They extinguished the candle and crept to Linda's window, already raised. There was no one in sight.

"Now we'll go to Miss Ri's room," whispered Linda. Tiptoeing across the hall they went into this room at the front of the

house and gently raised a window here.

"I believe I hear someone on the porch," whispered Linda, drawing in her head. "Someone is at the front door. Come on down. They are not inside yet; that is a comfort."

"Oh, but do you think we ought to go?" asked Bertie in trepidation. "Suppose they should get in and shoot us."

"No, they are still outside, I am sure."

The rooms below were dark and silent, windows and shutters tightly closed. The girls listened at the front door. Yes, surely there was a very low murmur of voices. Linda crept into the dining-room, Bertie holding tightly to her sleeve.

"What are you going to do?" asked Bertie fearfully.

"I'll show you. Don't be scared, and don't hold on to me."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to blow up some paper bags. You take this one and blow into it while I open the window. As soon as it is up burst your bag, and I'll get mine ready. Say when you are ready."

"DON'T SHOOT!"

"Ready!" whispered Bertie and up went the window, back shot the bolt and upon the silence of the night sounded a loud report

quickly followed by a second.

"Hallo!" cried a surprised voice. "Here, Miss Linda, don't shoot."

The girls who had drawn back from the window clutched one another, but felt an immense relief.

There were footsteps on the porch and presently two figures appeared before the open window. "Hallo, in there," called someone. "It's only I, Berk Matthews, Miss Linda."

The two girls approached the window. "What in the world are you doing prowling around here at this time of night, trying our bolts and bars?" asked Linda, indignantly. "You scared us nearly to death."

"And don't you reckon you gave us a good scare. It is lucky you don't see one of us weltering in gore, Linda Talbot. Just like a girl to be reckless with fire-arms."

Bertie stifled a giggle and pinched Linda's arm.

"It would serve you right to welter," Linda replied severely. "What right had you to try to frighten us, I demand?"

"We didn't intend to, but I promised Miss Ri faithfully that I would make a point of coming around here after you had gone to bed to see if by any chance some door or window had been left insecure."

"Well, you might have told us what you were going to do," returned Linda somewhat mollified.

"I couldn't," returned Berkley meekly, "for I haven't seen you since, and—Do you happen to know Mr. Jeffreys? Here, Jeffreys, I want to present you to Miss Talbot and—who is with you, Linda?"

"Bertie Bryan."

"And Miss Bryan. It is rather dark to tell which from t'other, but I would like especially to warn you against Miss Talbot. She carries a pistol and in her hot rage against us may still yearn for prey."

"It was Bertie who fired the first shot," declared Linda with a gravity which brought a giggle from Bertie. "Don't tell what it was," whispered Linda to her.

"Oh," said Mr. Jeffreys, "I have met Miss Bryan, so it will not be difficult to identify her when she is brought up with intent to kill."

"Well, whatever happens to-morrow, we mustn't keep these ladies from their slumbers now," said Berkley. "I'm awfully sorry, girls, really I am, that we frightened you. We tried not to make any noise. Let's be friends. We will forgive you for the shooting if you will forgive us for the scare."

"But," said Linda, "the laugh is entirely on our side, for—it wasn't a pistol. Please shut in the shutters, Berk, and I'll fasten them inside."

"It wasn't a pistol? Then what in the world was it?" Berkley paused in the act of closing the shutters.

"Paper bags!" returned Linda pulling the shutters together with a bang and closing the window, while upon the quiet of the night rang out a hearty peal of laughter from the two outside.

"It's lucky I didn't use a bottle of ammonia to throw in their faces," remarked Linda as the girls climbed the stairs. "That was my first thought, but the bags were handy in my washstand drawer."

"It was an awfully good joke," replied Bertie, "and I wouldn't have missed it, scared as I was at first. I was dreadfully afraid of burglars getting in and chloroforming us."

"Did you ever hear of the girl who slept with her head at the foot of her bed and who was roused by feeling something cold on her toes? A burglar was chloroforming them, and she let him do it, then when he was out of the room she jumped up, locked her door and gave the alarm."

Bertie laughed. "There is no fear of burglars now, I think, when we have two self-appointed watchmen."

"It does give us a safer feeling," acknowledged Linda.

"So we can rest in peace," returned Bertie going to her room.

There was no disturbing of slumbers the next night, for the young men made noise enough to arouse the girls, who, in fact, had not gone to bed when stentorian voices called to them, "Here we are. Get out your ammunition. We're ready to stand fire."

The girls looked down from above. "Anyone who is scared at a bag of wind would be sure to run from a flash in the pan," called Bertie. "We won't test your courage to-night, Berk."

"Did you find everything all right?" asked Linda.

"All's well," answered Berkley.

"Thank you, watchmen," returned Linda, and then the window was closed and the young men tramped off softly singing: "Good-night, ladies."

CHAPTER VI

AN INQUISITIVE NEIGHBOR

Miss Ri returned in due time. The girls were at breakfast when she came in bearing a small package which she laid on the table, a merry twinkle in her eye. "Well, girls," she exclaimed, "so nobody has carried you off, I see."

The girls laughed. "No one has, although—" began Linda.

"Don't tell me anything has happened," exclaimed Miss Ri. "Now isn't that just the way? I might stay at home a thousand years and nothing would happen. Tell me about it. I'm glad it's Saturday, Verlinda, so you don't have to hurry. Just touch the bell for Phebe to bring in some hot coffee. I don't take meals on the boat when I know what I can get at home. Those rolls look delicious."

"Did you have a good trip, Miss Ri?" asked Bertie.

"Never had such a stupid one. I didn't get a good state-room going up, and what with the men talking in the cabin outside my door all night, and the calves bleating in their stalls below, I did not get a wink of sleep, and there never was such a stupid sale."

"Sale? Oh, you went to a sale? Of what?" Bertie was interested.

"Oh, just things—all kinds of things," returned Miss Ri vaguely. Then, turning her attention to her breakfast she said, "Go on now, and tell me all that has been going on."

The girls delivered themselves of the news of their adventure with supposed burglars to the great entertainment of Miss Ri, and then a message coming to Bertie from her mother, she departed while Miss Ri finished her breakfast.

"I've almost as good a tale to tell myself," remarked that lady as she folded her napkin. "I think I shall have to tell you,

Linda, but you must promise not to repeat it. I couldn't have told it to Bertie for she would never rest till she had passed it on. However, I can trust you, and you mustn't hint of it to Bertie of all people."

Linda gave the required promise, Miss Ri picked up her wraps and the small bundle, and proposed they should go into the sitting-room where the sun was shining brightly. They settled themselves comfortably and Miss Ri proceeded to unfold her secret. "Berk was entirely too keen when he said I had a special purpose in going to town periodically," she began. "I have a harmless little fad, Verlinda; it is nothing more nor less than the buying of "old horse" if you know what that is."

"I'm sure I don't," Linda confessed.

"It's the stuff that collects at the express office; it may have been sent to a wrong address, or in some way has failed of being delivered. When it has accumulated for so many months they sell it at auction to the highest bidder. I have had some rare fun over it for it is much on the principle of a grab-bag at a fair. Of course I never venture a large sum and I generally go early enough to look around and make up my mind just what I will bid on. Once I had a whole barrel of glass ware knocked down to me; another time I was fortunate enough to get a whole case of canned goods of all sorts. This time—" she shook her head as denying her good luck. "I saw this neat little package which looked as if it might contain something very nice; it had such a compact orderly appearance, so I bid on it, only up to fifty cents, Verlinda, and when I came out of the place to take the car I couldn't forbear from tearing the paper in order to peep in. I saw a nice wooden box, and I said to myself, 'Here is something worth while.' I had some errands to do before boat time so didn't examine further until I was in my state-room, then I opened the box and what do you think I found?"

"I can't imagine." Linda's curiosity was aroused. She looked interestedly at the small parcel.

"I found a bottle," Miss Ri chuckled, "a bottle of what is evidently nice, home-made cough syrup, sent by some well-meaning mother to her son who had left the address to which it

was sent. As I haven't an idea of the ingredients I don't dare pass it along to anyone else. I was tempted to chuck it in the river, but I thought I would bring it home to you." She made great form of presenting it to Linda who took it laughing.

"I'll give it to Phebe," declared the girl. "She'd love to take it when she has a 'mis'ry in her chist.'"

"Don't you do it," cried Miss Ri in alarm. "It might make her really ill, and then who would cook for us? Give it right back to me." She possessed herself of the bottle, trotted back to the dining-room where she emptied the contents into the slop-bowl, returning to the sitting-room with the empty bottle in her hand. "You can have the bottle," she said, "and the nice wooden box. I don't want to keep any reminder of my folly."

"And you have sworn off?"

Miss Ri laughed. "Not exactly. At least I've sworn off before, but I am always seized with the craze as soon as I see the advertisement in the paper. Once I was cheated out of a dollar by getting a box of decayed fruit, and another time I got a parcel of old clothes that I gave to Randy after making her boil them to get rid of any lingering microbes. This is the third time I have been bamboozled, but very likely next time I will draw a prize. Goodness, Verlinda, if here doesn't come Grace and her sister. Do you suppose they are off for the city to-night?"

"I think it is very probable," returned Linda as she followed Miss Ri to the door.

Even though she did not admire Grace Talbot, Miss Ri could not be anything but graciously hospitable, and was ready to greet the visitors heartily as they came up on the porch. "Well, Mrs. Talbot," she exclaimed, "come right in. This is your sister, isn't it? How are you, Miss Johnson. It is lucky you chose Saturday when Linda is at home. You'll stay to dinner, of course. Here, let me take those bags. Are you on your way to the city?"

"Yes," returned Grace, "we're leaving for the winter. Howdy, Linda." She viewed her sister-in-law critically, finding her paler and thinner, but keeping the discovery to herself. Lauretta, however, spoke her thought. "I don't believe town

agrees with you as well as country, Linda. You look a little peaked."

"That comes from being shut up in a school-room," Miss Ri hastened to say; "it is trying work."

"She will get used to it in time," Grace replied. "Why, there is Miss Sally Price about as sturdy and rosy as anyone I know, and she's been teaching twenty-five years. What lovely old tables you have, Miss Ri. They remind me of grandmother's, don't they you, Lauretta? Dear grandmother, she was such a very particular old dame and would have her mahogany and silver always shining. I remember how she would say to her butler, 'James, that service is not as bright as it should be.'" Grace's imitation of her various forbears always conveyed the idea that they were most haughty and severe personages who never spoke except with military peremptoriness. She was constantly referring to grandmother Johnson, or great-uncle Blair or someone utterly irrelevant to the topic of the moment, and as entirely uninteresting to her audience.

"Did you leave everything all right at the farm?" asked Linda, hastening to change the subject. She knew that great-uncle Blair would be paraded next, if the slightest opportunity was allowed.

"Everything is as it should be," returned Grace high-and-mightily. "You didn't suppose for an instant, Linda, that I would leave anything at loose ends. Of course, it has been most arduous work for Lauretta and I, but we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have not neglected anything. I am completely fagged out, and feel that a rest is essential."

Miss Ri's eye travelled from Grace's plump proportions to Linda's slight figure. "Well," she said bluntly, "work evidently agrees with you, for I never saw you looking better."

Grace bit her lip and searched her mind for a fitting retort but could only say piously, "One must bear up for the sake of others. The world cannot see behind the scenes, my dear Miss Hill, and that a smile may hide a breaking heart."

"Come up and see my room," proposed Linda, anxious to prevent what promised to be a passage at arms between Miss

Ri and Grace. "Come, Lauretta, I want you to see the view from my windows." And so she managed to get them away before there were any hurt feelings.

After this matters passed off well enough, although great-uncle Blair was dragged in more than once at the dinner table, and grandmother Johnson's haughty attitude toward underlings was again reproduced for the benefit of all. Miss Ri chafed under the affectations, but was too polite to show it, though when the door at last closed upon her guests she turned to Linda.

"I'm glad enough they are not your blood kin, Verlinda Talbot. I hope Heaven will give me patience always to behave with politeness when Grace Talbot is around. A daily dose of her would be too much for my Christian forbearance. I wonder you stood her so long, and what Martin was thinking of to be blinded by a superficial, shallow, underbred creature like that is beyond me."

"Grace has her good points," said Linda with an effort to be loyal. "I think she was genuinely fond of Martin."

"You mean she was fond of his fondness for her. There is a lot of difference, my dear. The idea of her trying to parade her ancestors before me. Why, old John Blair was the plainest of the plain, a decent, humble sort of man who accumulated a tidy little sum which his sister Eliza Johnson inherited; the Johnsons hadn't a picayune; I know all about them. I have heard my grandfather speak of John Blair and his sister a dozen times. They lived down in East Baltimore and he had a little carpenter shop. Grandfather used to tell a funny story of how Blair brought him in a bill in which he had spelled tacks, t-a-x. 'That isn't the way to spell tacks, John,' said grandfather. John scratched his head and looked at the bill. 'Well, Mr. Hill,' he said; 'if t-a-x don't spell tacks, what do it spell?' He was a good honest man enough, and afterward became a builder, but he never put on any airs, as why should he? You may talk a great deal about your grandfather, and make much display of your family silver, my dear, but if you don't speak correct English the ancestors don't count for much. Evidently Grace thinks solid silver is vastly more important than correct speech."

"You certainly are put out of humor this time, Miss Ri."

"Oh, such people exasperate me beyond words. 'Major Forbes sent tickets to Lauretta and I.' To I, forsooth. 'Mrs. General So-and-So invited Grace and I to tea.' Invited I, did she?"

"It seems there is a necessity for a schoolmarm in the family," remarked Linda.

"Yes, but the unfortunate part of it is that they haven't a ghost of an idea that they do need one. Well, let them go up to the city, to their Major Forbes and their Mrs. Generals, I say, and I hope to goodness Grace will marry her major and good luck to him."

"Oh, Miss Ri."

"I can't help it. Let me rave for awhile. I shall feel better afterward. Did you ever know such a talker as she is? She is as bad as Becky, and did you hear Lauretta? 'Poor dear Grace does so draw upon her vitality.' Oh, dear me, what fools we mortals be."

"And you are the one who never gets mad with fools."

"I don't, as a rule, but when a person is as many kinds of a fool as Grace is I can't grapple with all the varieties at one sitting. There now, I have finished my tirade. I won't abuse your in-laws any more. Let us hope they have passed out of our lives. Now let us talk about something pleasant. How do you like Mr. Jeffreys?"

"Is he something pleasant? I really haven't had a chance to decide. We met in the dark and we didn't exchange a dozen words. Bertie likes him."

Miss Ri sat looking out of the window, drumming on the arms of her chair with her strong capable fingers. "I wish I knew," she murmured; "I wish I knew. Has Berk been here?" she asked presently.

"If you call his nocturnal prowlings visits, he has."

"Oh, I don't mean those, but, of course, he wouldn't come. I must see him. I think I'd better call him up, although he is pretty sure to look in upon us this evening."

After the strain consequent upon Grace's visit, Linda felt that even Miss Ri's cheerful chatter was more than she could stand, so she sought an opportune moment to escape to the lawn and from there to wander down the box-bordered walks to the foot of the garden. The chickens in Miss Parthy's premises on the other side of the fence, were discoursing in their accustomed manner before going to roost, making contented little sounds as someone threw them handfuls of grain. Once in a while would come a discordant "Caw! Caw!" as an over-greedy rooster would set upon one less aggressive. It all sounded very homelike and Linda wondered how matters were going with the familiar flocks she had left at home. Grace's coming, her talk of affairs at the farm had made a great wave of homesickness come over the girl as she approached the fence to look at Miss Parthy's chickens. These, she discovered, were being fed with careful hand by some other than Miss Parthy. A young man with crisp auburn hair, which was cropped close. He had a good figure, and rather a serious expression. His eyes, much the color of his hair, were turned quickly upon Linda as her face appeared above the fence. "Good-evening, Miss Talbot," he said.

"Good-evening, Mr. Jeffreys," she returned. "How is it you are taking Miss Parthy's tasks upon yourself?"

"Oh, I begged leave to do it. I like it. Don't you think chickens are very amusing? They are as different in character as people, and give me as much amusement as a crowd of human beings. Look at that ridiculous little hen; she reminds me of a girl scared by a mouse the way she jumps every time I throw down a handful of food."

"Don't you think," said Linda mockingly, "that it is more reasonable to be afraid of creepy things like mice than to be frightened out of your wits by a paper bag?"

"You have me there," returned the young man. "That was certainly one on us. I hope you have not been disturbed since."

"Oh, no, and now my natural protector has returned, I shall feel perfectly safe. You know Miss Ri, I believe."

"Oh, yes. She is a most interesting character. She doesn't run from mice, I fancy."

"No, and neither do I."

"Really? Then you are a rarity whom I am fortunate in meeting. I understand, Miss Talbot, that your home is some distance from this town."

"My home was some distance, about seven miles away."

"On Broad Creek? Do the Talbots come from that neighborhood?"

"Yes, they are old settlers. We hold the original land grant from Lord Baltimore."

"That is interesting. Did you ever happen to know of a Madison Talbot who lived—let me see—about 1812 or thereabouts?"

"Why, yes. That was the name of my great-grandfather."

"It was?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired Linda curiously.

"Oh, because I have heard the name. My grandfather has mentioned him. I believe he knew him, and coming down to this unexplored region, I am naturally reminded of anyone who might have been connected with what I have heard of it."

"Unexplored? Do you mean by yourself?"

"Well, yes, and by some others. I doubt if the majority of those one meets could locate this special town, for instance."

"Anyone who knows anything must have heard of it," said Linda with innocent conviction.

"Oh, I am not disparaging it. In some respects it is the nicest place I ever saw. Tell me something about your home there on Broad Creek."

Linda's eyes grew wistful. "It is the dearest spot on earth. The house is old and low and queer, with rambling rooms that go up a step here, down one there. The water is always in sight, and through the trees you can see the old church; it is on our

ground, you know, and there is an old windmill on the place. I should hate to have that old windmill taken away. I used to watch its long arms go around and around when I was a child, and I made up all sorts of tales about it."

"How many acres are there?" Mr. Jeffreys asked the practical question suddenly.

"About two or three hundred. There was another farm. It all belonged to the same estate originally, or at least there were two farms, and ours is the older. My brother brought it up wonderfully, and it is in very good condition now. My father was in ill health for years and when he died his affairs were in a sad state; the farm was not making anything till my brother took hold of it."

"And it is yours?"

Linda wondered at the question. She colored with both indignation and confusion. "It is my home," she replied with dignity, "and it is the dearest spot on earth to me." Having made this answer she turned from the fence and resumed her walk while Mr. Jeffreys gave one wide flourish with his pan of screenings and then walked thoughtfully back to the house where Miss Parthy waited supper.

CHAPTER VII

WAS IT CURIOSITY?

"Don't talk to me about the curiosity of women," said Linda coming upon Miss Ri after her return walk. "The new importation at Miss Parthy's is certainly the most inquisitive person it has ever been my lot to meet. I was prepared to like him from what Bertie told me, but I never met a man who could ask such personal questions upon such short acquaintance."

"Why, Linda, I never thought he could be called exactly rude. Perhaps he doesn't pay one those little courteous attentions that we are used to down here, though he is polite enough as I remember. Parthy and I have wondered whether he could be an adventurer, or whether he were a visionary sort of person or what, but we have come to the conclusion that he is neither."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if he were an adventurer and that he has come down here to hunt up some unsuspecting damsel with property of her own whom he could beguile into marrying him."

"Why, my child, did he ask you to marry him?"

"Oh, dear no, I hope not, since my first real conversation with him has just taken place, but he wanted to know all about Talbot's Angles, how much land there was and all that, and he wound up by inquiring if it belonged to me."

"That does look somewhat suspicious, though it does not show much tact, if his object is really what you surmise. A real adventurer would make his inquiries of someone else. I wouldn't judge him too severely. He says he is looking up an old claim, you know, and it may lie near your place. I would wait and see what happens."

"Tell me, Miss Ri, did he bring any sort of credentials with him?"

"Yes, I think so, at least he gave Berk a business card and said he was well known by the insurance company by whom he had been employed in Hartford, and that he had friends there who could vouch for him, and he said he had a number of letters in his trunk."

"Oh, says, says; it's easy enough to say. I don't believe he ever had a trunk, and I believe his story is made out of whole cloth."

"Why, Verlinda, dear, I never knew you so bitter. Do give the lad a chance to prove himself."

"I thought you didn't want me to know him. You know you said you weren't going to have him come when I was at home."

"Oh, well, I didn't mean that exactly; I only wanted to provide against your flying off into a sentimental attitude, but now you have gone to the other extreme; I don't want that either. Parthy says there never was a more considerate man, and that he is not any trouble at all. Of course, he hasn't the little thoughtful ways that Berk has; he doesn't always stand with his hat off when he is talking to me in the street, and he doesn't rise to his feet every time I leave my chair, and stand till I am seated. He has allowed my handkerchief to lie till I chose to pick it up myself, and doesn't always spring to open the door for me; in those things he differs from Berk, but he is certainly quiet and dignified. There comes Berk now, Verlinda; I knew he'd be along about supper time."

Berkley's broad shoulders were seen over the rows of chrysanthemums and scarlet salvia as he took a leisurely passage up the gravelled walk. He waved a hand in greeting. "I knew I wasn't too late because I saw you both from the street."

"And of course you hurried before that?" questioned Miss Ri.

"Yes, I always make it a point to hurry if there is a chance of being late to supper, but I never hurry when there is no need to. I don't wish to squander my vital energies, you see. What's for supper, Miss Ri?"

"You haven't been invited to take it with us, yet."

"I don't have to be. Once, many a year ago, you said, 'Berk, drop in whenever you feel like it,' and I have piously enshrined that saying upon the tablets of my memory. Once invited, always invited, you see, so I repeat my anxious query: what's for supper?"

"I am sure I don't know. Linda did the ordering this morning for I wasn't here."

"Tell me, Linda." Berkley had dropped formalities since the evening of song.

Linda shook her head. "As if I could be expected to remember things that occurred this morning before breakfast; so many things have happened since then."

"Things have happened in this blessed sleepy old place? That is news. I didn't know anything could happen in Sandbridge."

"Oh, they might not be important to you, but they are to me."

"Then, of course, they are important to me."

"A very nice speech, sir. Well, in the first place, Miss Ri has returned, as you see. Then Grace and Lauretta were here and have just departed for the city."

"For good?"

"Let us hope it is for good only," put in Miss Ri.

"Sh! Sh!" warned Linda. "That wasn't pretty, Miss Ri. Then I have been talking over the fence to your friend, Mr. Jeffreys, and he has aroused my antagonism to a degree."

"He has?" Berkley looked surprised. "I don't see why or how he could do that."

"Wait till she tells you, Berk," Miss Ri spoke up. "I am going in to tell Phebe to set another place at table. If I am to have guests thrust upon me whether I invite them or not, I must be decent enough to see that they have plates to eat from." She left the two to saunter on to the house while she entered the path which led to the kitchen.

Linda recounted her tale to which Berk listened attentively. "What do you think of a man who would put such questions to

a perfect stranger?" queried Linda.

Berkley knit his brows. "Looks like one of two things; either unqualified curiosity or a deeper purpose, that of finding out all about the farm on account of personal interest in it."

"But what nonsense. You don't mean he thinks *that's* the place to which he lays claim? Why, we've held the grant for hundreds of years."

"We don't know what he thinks; I am not saying what are the facts; I am only trying to account for his interest."

"Miss Ri thought he might be interested because his claim may perhaps touch our property somewhere, and that there may be some question of the dividing line."

"That could very well be. At all events, I don't believe it was idle curiosity. I'll sound him a little if I can, but he is a reticent sort of fellow, and as dumb as an oyster about that matter, though there is really no use in his talking till he gets his papers, which, poor fellow, it's mighty unlikely he'll ever find."

"I'd hate a prying neighbor," remarked Linda.

"You're not liable to have one from present indications. If I had time I'd really like to look into some of the old titles, and see just how the property in the vicinity of Talbot's Angles has come down to the present owners. I know about a good many, as it is. Your brother sold off Talbot's Addition, didn't he?"

"Yes. You know my father had mortgaged it up to the hilt, and then Mart sold it in order to get rid of the interest and to have something to put into the home place. He thought he would rather hold one unencumbered place and have some money to improve it than to struggle along with two places."

"Good judgment, too. If I am not mistaken there was still more property belonging to the Talbot family originally. Wasn't Timber Neck theirs at one time?"

"I believe so, though it was so long ago that I don't remember hearing much about it."

"I see. Well, here we are, and I think there must be crab cakes from the odor."

"So there are; I remember now. I knew Miss Ri was fond of them and no one can make them as well as Phebe."

The supper set forth on the big round table displayed the crab cakes, brown and toothsome, the inevitable beaten biscuits on one side, and what Phebe called "a pone of bread" on the other. There were, too, some thin slices of cold ham, fried potatoes and a salad, while the side table held some delectable cakes, and a creamy dessert in the preparation of which Phebe was famous. No one had ever been able to get her exact recipe, for "A little pinch" of this, "a sprinkling" of that, and "what I thinks is right" of the other was too indefinite for most housekeepers. Many had, indeed, ventured after hearing the ingredients but all had failed.

"This is a supper fit for a king," said Berkley, sitting down after a satisfied survey of the table.

"You might have just such every day," returned Miss Ri.

"Please to tell me how. Do you mean I could induce Phebe to accept the place of head cook at the hotel?"

"Heaven forbid. No, bat, of course not."

"Why bat?"

"You are so blind, just like most conceited young men who might have homes of their own if they chose."

"Please, Miss Ri, don't be severe. You haven't the right idea at all. Don't you know it is my lack of conceit which prevents my harboring the belief that I could induce anyone to help me to make a home?"

"I don't know anything of the kind. I know it is your selfish love of ease and your desire to shirk responsibility."

"Listen to her, Linda. She will drive me to asking the first girl I meet if she will marry me. You might do it, by the way, and then we might take our revenge by luring Phebe away from her. Of course, Phebe would follow you. I wonder I never thought of that before."

"You are a flippant, senseless trifler," cried Miss Ri with more heat than would appear necessary. "I won't have you talking so

of serious subjects."

"So it is a serious subject to your mind?" Berkley laughed gleefully.

But Miss Ri maintained a dignified silence during which Berkley made little asides to Linda till finally Miss Ri said placidly, "I told Linda not long ago that I never got mad with fools, and," she added with a gleam of fun in her eyes, "I'm not going to begin to do it now."

"You have the best of me as usual, Miss Ri," laughed Berkley, "although I might get back at you, if one good turn deserves another. By the way, Linda, did you ever hear the way old Aaron Hopkins interprets that?"

"No, I believe not."

"Someone sent him a barrel of apples last year, and he told me the other day that he expected the same person would send another this year. 'He sent 'em last year,' said the old fellow, 'and you know 'one good turn deserves another.' He is a rare old bird, is Aaron."

"He certainly is," returned Linda. "I think it is too funny that he named his boat the *Mary haha*. He told me he thought that *Minnehaha* was a nice name for young folks to use, 'but for an old fellow like me it ain't dignified,' he said."

"Tell Berk what he said to your brother when he came back from college," urged Miss Ri.

"Oh, yes, that was funny, too. You know Mart had been away for three years, and he met old Aaron down by the creek one day. I doubt if Aaron has ever been further than Sandbridge in his life. He greeted Mart like one long lost. 'Well, well,' he said, 'so you've got back. Been away a right smart of a time, haven't you?' 'Three years,' Mart told him. 'Where ye been?' 'To New Jersey.' 'That's right fur, ain't it?' 'Some distance.' 'Beyand Pennsylvany, I reckon. Well, well, how on airth could you stand it?' 'Why, it's a pretty good place, why shouldn't I stand it, Aaron?' said Mart. 'But it's so durned fur from the creek,' replied Aaron."

"Pretty good," cried Berkley. "A true Eastern shoreman is Aaron, wants nothing better than his boat and the creek. Good for him."

They lingered at table talking of this and that till presently there came a ring at the door. Phebe lumbered out to open. She was unsurpassed as a cook, but only her extreme politeness excused the awkwardness of her manner as waitress. "It's dat Mr. Jeffs," she said in a stage whisper when she returned. "He ask fo' de ladies."

"Then you will have to come, Linda," said Miss Ri, "and you, too, Berk."

"Of course, I'll come," replied the young man.

"You don't imagine I am going to stay here by myself while you two make eyes at an interloper." And he followed the two to the drawing-room into which Phebe had ushered the visitor.

The young man sitting there arose and came forward, and after shaking hands with Miss Ri he said, "I believe you have not formally presented me to your niece, Miss Hill, though I was so unceremonious as to talk to her over the fence this evening."

"You mean Linda. She is not my niece; I wish she were. How would it do for me to adopt you as one, Verlinda? I'd love to have you call me Aunt Ri."

"Then I'll do it," returned the girl with enthusiasm.

"Then, Mr. Jeffreys, allow me to present you to my adopted niece, Miss Verlinda Talbot, and beware how you talk to her over the fence. I am a very fierce duenna."

The young man smiled a little deprecatingly, not quite understanding whether this was meant seriously or not, and wondering if he were being censured for his lack of ceremony.

"I presented Mr. Jeffreys quite properly myself," spoke up Berkley. "To be sure, it was in the dark and he wasn't within gun-shot. I haven't recovered from my scare yet, have you, Jeffreys? Next time you go to town, Miss Ri, I am going with you, for I don't mean to be left behind to the tender mercies of anyone as bloodthirsty as Linda."

They all laughed, and the visitor looked at the two young people interestedly. Evidently they were on excellent terms. He wondered if by any chance an engagement existed between them, but when later Bertie Bryan came in, and he saw that Berk treated her with the same air of good comradeship, he concluded that it was simply the informality of old acquaintance, though he wondered a little at it. In his part of the country not even the excuse of lifelong association could set a young man so at his ease with one of the opposite sex, and he was quite sure that he could not play openly at making love to two girls at once. However, they spent a merry time, Linda, under the genial influence of her friends, was livelier than usual, and however much she may have resented Mr. Jeffreys' inquisitiveness earlier in the day, on further acquaintance she lost sight of anything but his charm of manner and his art of making himself agreeable.

After the young men had seen Bertie to her home, they walked down the shadowy street together. "Haven't heard anything of those papers yet, I suppose," Berkley said to his companion.

"Nothing at all."

"Too bad. Are you going to give it up?"

"Not quite yet. I thought I'd allow myself six months. I have a bit of an income which comes in regularly, and one doesn't have to spend much in a place like this. Once my papers are found, I think my chances are good." Then abruptly, "You've known Miss Talbot a long time, I suppose, Matthews."

"Nearly all my life. At least we were youngsters together; but I was at college for some years, and I didn't see her between whiles. She was grown up when I came back."

"Then you probably know all about her home, Talbot's Angles, do they call it?"

"Yes, certainly. Everyone about here knows it, for it is one of the few places that has remained in the family since its first occupation." Then suddenly, "Good heavens, man, you don't mean that's the place you are thinking to claim? I can tell you it's not worth your while. The Talbots have the original land grant and always have had it, and—why, it's an impossibility."

His companion was silent for a moment. "You know, I am not talking yet. If I find the papers are lost irrevocably, I shall go away with only a very pleasant memory of the kindness and hospitality of Sandbridge."

Berkley in turn was silenced, but after parting from his companion at Miss Parthy's door, he went down the street saying to himself, "I'll search that title the very first chance I get. I am as sure as anyone could be that it is all right. Let me see, Miss Ri would know about the forbears; I'll ask her." He stopped under a street lamp and looked at his watch. "It isn't so very late, and she is a regular owl. I'll try it."

Instead of continuing his way to the hotel, he turned the corner which led to Miss Ri's home. Stopping at the gate, he peered in. Yes, there was a light in the sitting-room, and from some unseen window above was reflected a beam upon the surface of the gently-flowing river. "She is up and Linda has gone to her room," he told himself. "Just as I thought."

He stepped quickly inside the ground and went toward the house. One window of the sitting-room was partly open, for the night was mild. He could see Miss Ri sitting by her lamp, a book in her hand. "Miss Ri," he called softly.

She came to the window. "Of all prowling tomcats," she began. "What are you back here for?"

"I forgot something. May I come in?"

"Linda has gone to bed."

"I didn't come to see Linda."

"Oh, you didn't. Well, I'll let you in, but you ought to know better than to come sneaking around a body's garden at this time of night."

"You see, I've gotten into the habit of it," Berkley told her. "I've done it for two nights running and I can't sleep till I've made the rounds."

"Silly!" exclaimed Miss Ri. But she came around to open the door for him. "Now, what is it you want?" she asked. "I've no midnight suppers secreted anywhere."

"Is thy servant a dog, that he comes merely to be fed?"

"I've had my suspicions at times," returned Miss Ri. "Come in, but don't talk loud, so as to waken Linda; the child needs all the sleep she can get. Now, go on; tell me what you want."

"I want you to tell me exactly who Linda's forbears were; that is, on the Talbot side. Her father was James, I know."

"Yes, and his father was Martin. He had a brother, but he died early; there were only the two sons, but there was a daughter, I believe."

"And their father was?"

"Let me see—Monroe? No, Madison; that's it, Madison Talbot, and his father was James again. I can't give you the collaterals so far back."

"Humph! Well, I reckon that will do."

"What in the world are you up to? Are you making a family tree for Linda?"

"No; but I have some curiosity upon the subject of old titles, and as it may come in my way, I thought I would look up Talbot's Angles."

"There's no use in doing that. Linda has the original land grant in her possession. Poor child, she clings to that, and I am glad she can. I wish to goodness you'd marry Grace, Berk Matthews, so Verlinda could get her rights."

"I'd do a good deal for a pretty girl, but I couldn't bring myself up to the scratch of marrying Grace Talbot. Now, if it were Linda herself, that might be a different matter."

"You'd get a treasure," avowed Miss Ri, shaking her head wisely. "She doesn't have to air her family silver in order to make people forget her mistakes in English."

"True, O wisest of women."

"There's another way out of it, Berk; the place reverts to Verlinda in the event of Grace's death."

"Do you mean I shall poison her or use a dagger, Lady Macbeth?"

"You great goose, of course I don't mean either such horrible thing. I was only letting my thoughts run on the possibilities of the case. I'm not quite so degenerate as to wish for anyone's death, but I haven't found out yet why you were looking into the family procession of names."

"Oh, just a mere matter of legal curiosity, as I said. I come across them once in a while, and I wanted to get them straight in my mind. James, son of Martin, son of Madison, son of James; that's it, isn't it?" He checked them off on his fingers.

"That's it."

"Well, good-night, Miss Ri. I won't keep you any longer from that fascinating book at which you've been casting stealthy glances ever since I came in. Don't get up; I can let myself out."

Miss Ri did not immediately return to the book. "Now, what is he driving at?" she said to herself. "It's all poppycock about his interest in the names because he wants to get them straight in his mind. He's not so interested in Verlinda as all that, worse luck. I wish he were." She gave a little sigh and, adjusting her glasses, returned to the page before her.

CHAPTER VIII

A DISCLOSURE

"The old horse is neighing again," said Miss Ri, whimsically, one morning a little later. "I must go to town, Verlinda."

The girl looked up from some papers over which she was working. The two were sitting at the big table before an open fire, for it had suddenly turned colder. The room was very cosey, with warm touches of color found in the table-cover of red, in the yellow chrysanthemums by the window, and in the deep tones of the furniture. Linda looked frailer and thinner than when her life at the farm admitted of more open-air employment and less indoor. She did her work conscientiously, even thankfully, but hardly lovingly, and in consequence it was a constant strain upon her vitality. "What were you saying, Aunt Ri?" she asked, her thoughts vaguely lingering with her work, while yet she was conscious of Miss Ri's remark.

"I said the old horse was neighing again. There is another sale this week, a different express company this time, and I feel the call of the unknown. I think I'll go up by train, and then you will be alone but one night. Bertie enjoyed herself so much last time, that I am sure she will like to come again, if you want her. Bertie is a nice child, not an overstock of brains in some directions, but plenty of hard sense in others."

"Do you suppose it will be cough medicine this time?" asked Linda, making little spirals on the edge of her paper with her pencil.

"Heaven forfend! No, I'm going to bid on the biggest thing there, if it be a hogshead. I saw one man get a stuffed double-headed calf, and another the parts of some machine whose other belonging had evidently gone elsewhere. I shall try to avoid such things. I wish you could go with me, Verlinda; it is such fun." Miss Ri's eyes twinkled, as her hands busied themselves with some knitting she had taken up.

"I'd like to go," admitted Linda wistfully, "but it isn't a holiday, and I mustn't play truant. Good luck to you, Aunt Ri." She returned to her work, while Miss Ri knitted on for a while.

"Shall you be working long?" asked the latter presently. "I must make such an early start, that I think I'll go up, if you will put out the lights and see to the fire."

"I have considerably more to do," Linda answered, turning over her papers. "I'll put out the lights, Aunt Ri."

"Don't sit up too late," charged the other, stuffing her knitting into a gay, flowery bag. "Good-night, child. I'll be off before you are up. Just order anything you like, and don't bother about anything." She dropped a kiss upon the shining dark hair, and went her way, stopping to try the front door.

For half an hour Linda worked steadily, then she stacked her papers with a sigh, arose and drew a chair before the fire, whose charred logs were burning dully. She gave a poke to the smouldering ends, which sent up a spurt of sparks and caused the flame to burn brightly. With chin in hands, the girl sat for some time gazing into the fire which, after this final effort, was fast reducing itself to gray ashes and red embers. The old clock in the hall struck eleven slowly and solemnly. Miss Ri's quick tread on the floor above had ceased long before. The tick-tock of the clock and the crackle of the consuming wood were the only sounds. Linda returned to the table, picked up a bit of paper and began to write, at first rapidly, then with pauses for thought, frequent re-readings and many erasures. She occupied herself thus till the clock again struck deliberately but insistently. Linda lifted her head and counted. "Midnight," she exclaimed, "and I am still up. I wonder if it is worth it." She stopped to read once more the page she had finally written, then, tucking the paper into her blouse, she gathered up the rest, found a candle in one of the dignified old candlesticks, put out the lamp and tip-toed to her room.

The sun was shining brightly on the river when she awakened next morning. Miss Ri had gone long before. Linda had been dimly conscious of her stirring about, but had slept on, realizing vaguely that it was early. Her first movement was to sit up in bed, abstract a paper from under her pillow, and read

it over. "I wondered how it would sound by daylight," she said to herself. "I think it isn't so bad, and it was such a joy to do it after those stupid papers. I wonder, I wonder if it is worth while." She tucked the paper away in her desk, feeling more blithe and content than for many a day. How blue the river was, how picturesque the tall-masted ships, how good the tang of the autumn air, laden with the odor of leaf-wine. Even the turkey-buzzards, sailing over the chimney-tops, gave individuality to the scene. It was a beautiful world, even though she must be shut up in a school-room all day with a parcel of restless urchins.

She went down-stairs humming a tune, to the delight of Phebe, who waited below. "Dat soun' lak ole times, honey chile," she said. "I ain't hyar dem little hummy tunes dis long while. I always use say to mahse'f, 'Dar come mah honey chile. I knows her by dat little song o' hers, same as I knows de bees by dere hummin' an' de robin by he whistle.' Come along, chile, fo' yo' breakfus spile." She bustled back to the kitchen, and Linda entered the dining-room, warm from the fire in the wood stove and cheery by reason of the scarlet flowers with which Phebe had adorned the table. There was an odor of freshly-baked bread, of bacon, of coffee.

"I believe I'm hungry," said Linda.

Phebe's face beamed. "Dat soun' lak sumpin," she declared. "Jes' wait till I fetches in dem hot rolls. Dey pipin' hot right out o' de oben. I say hongry," she murmured to herself, as she went clumsily on her errand.

The day went well enough. On her way home from school, Linda stopped to ask Bertie to spend the night with her. But Bertie was off to a birthday dance in the country, which meant she would not be back till the next morning. She was "so sorry." If she had "only known," and all that. "But, of course, you can get someone else," she concluded by saying.

"Oh, I don't mind staying alone, if it comes to that," Linda told her.

"You stay too much alone, Linda."

"And I, who am surrounded all day by such a regiment of boys."

"Oh, they don't count; I mean girls of your own age. How are you getting along, Linda, by the way?"

"Oh, well enough," responded Linda doubtfully. "The more successful I am, the more it takes it out of me, however, and I am afraid I shall really never love teaching. Even though you may succeed in an undertaking, if you don't really love it, you tire more easily than if you did something much harder, but which you really loved."

"I suppose that may be true. Well, Linda, I hope you will not always be a teacher."

"I hope not," responded Linda frankly.

"I wish you would come over oftener, and would go around more with the girls. They would all love to have you."

Linda shook her head gravely. "That is very nice for you to say, but I couldn't do it—yet."

"Well, be sure you don't stay by yourself to-night," Bertie charged her.

Linda promised, and started off to fulfil the intention. Miss Parthy, from her porch, called to her as she went by. "When's Ri coming back?" she asked, over the heads of her three dogs, who occupied the porch with her.

"Not till to-morrow morning."

"You'd better come over here and sleep," Miss Parthy advised her. "I have an extra room, you know."

"And leave dear old Mammy to her lonesome? No, I think I'd better not, Miss Parthy; thank you. I'll get someone to stay."

"You can have one of the dogs," offered Miss Parthy quite seriously. "They are better than any watchman."

Linda thanked her, but the thought of Brownie's tail thumping on the floor outside her door, or of Pickett's sharp bark, or Flora's plaintive whine, decided her. "I think I'd rather have a human girl, thank you, Miss Parthy, and even if I find no one,

it will be all right; I have stayed with only Mammy in the house dozens of times."

She continued her way, stopping at the house of this or that friend, but all were bound for the birthday party, and after two or three attempts she gave it up. Rather than put any more of the good-hearted girls to the pain of refusing, she would stay alone. More than one had offered to give up the dance, and this she could not allow another to propose. After all, it would not be bad, though Mammy should drop to sleep early, for there would be the cheerful fire and another bit of paper to cover with the lines which had been haunting her all day. She turned toward home again, with thoughtful tread, traversing the long street between rows of flaming maples or golden gum trees, whose offerings of scarlet and yellow fluttered to her feet at every step. There was the first hint of winter in the air, but the grass was green in the gardens and in the still unfrosted vines birds chattered and scolded, disputing right of way.

At the corner she met Mr. Jeffreys, who joined her. "Bound for a walk?" he asked. "May I go with you?"

As a girl will, who does not despise the society of a companionable man, she tacitly accepted his escort, and they went on down the street toward the river, where the red and yellow of trees appeared to have drifted to the sky, to be reflected in the waters below.

"Miss Talbot," said the young man, when they had wandered to where houses were few and scattered, "I have a confession to make."

Linda looked at him in surprise. He was rather a reticent person, though courteous and not altogether diffident. "To me?" she exclaimed.

"To you first, because—well, I will tell you that I, too, can claim kinship with the Talbot family. My great-grandfather and yours were brothers. Did you ever hear of Lovina Talbot?"

"Why, yes. Let me see; what have I heard? It will come back to me after a while. That branch of the Talbots left here years ago."

"Yes, just after the War of 1812. My great-grandfather, Cyrus, went to Western Pennsylvania. His only daughter, Lovina, was my grandmother. She married against his wishes, and then he married a second time—a Scotch-Irish girl of his neighborhood—and the families seem to have known little of one another after that. My father, Charles Jeffreys, was Lovina's son. He settled in Hartford, Connecticut. And now you have my pedigree."

"Why, then we are really blood relations. No wonder you were interested in the old Talbot place. Why—" she paused, hesitated, flushed up—"then it must be some of the Talbot property you are looking up."

"That is it; but I don't exactly know which it is, and without proof I can make no claim, as I have often said."

Linda ran over in her mind the various pieces of property which she was aware of having belonged to the original grants. "There was a good deal of it," she said. "Some of it was sold before my father's time, and he parted with more, so now all we have is the old homestead farm. I should like to know," she continued musingly, "which place you think it really is. I suppose it must be Timber Neck, for that was the first which passed out of our hands."

"I cannot tell, for I don't know exactly."

"Why didn't you make yourself known before? Didn't you know it would have made a difference to me—to us all, if you belonged, even remotely, to one of the old families?"

"Yes, I did, I suppose; but for that very reason I was slow to confess it. I came here under rather awkward circumstances. For a time I was in a position to be looked upon with suspicion, to be considered a mere adventurer. I may be yet," he continued, with a smile and a side glance at the girl, "even if I do pay my board bills and my laundress."

"Oh, we don't think that of you; we are quite sure you are genuine," Linda hastened to assure him.

"You have only my word. You don't know who my father was."

"You just told me he was Charles Jeffreys."

"Yes, but—" He did not finish the sentence. "I thought it was due you to know something of myself and my errand."

"I am glad to know it."

"Thank you. That is very good of you. Do you mind if I ask that you do not repeat what I have been telling you?"

"Not even to Miss Ri?"

Mr. Jeffreys considered the question. "I think Miss Hill should certainly know, for she was my first friend; and Mr. Matthews, too, perhaps. I will tell them and ask them to respect my secret for the present. When I can come among you as one who has a right to claim ancestry with one of your Eastern Shore families, that will be a different thing."

"BUT YOU MUST NOT CALL ME COUSIN," SAID LINDA.

Linda would like to have asked for more of his personal history and, as if reading her thought, he went on: "I have not had a wildly-adventurous life; it has been respectably commonplace. I had a fair education, partly in Europe; but I am not college-bred. My father was a gentleman, but not over-successful in business. He left only a life insurance for my mother, enough for her needs, if used with care. My mother died two years ago, and I have neither brother nor sister."

Linda's sympathy went out. "Neither have I brother nor sister," she returned softly. "I can understand just how lonely you must be. But you know you have discovered a cousin, and you may consider it a real relationship."

The young man cast her a grateful look. "That makes me feel much less of an alien. I am afraid an outsider would not meet with such graciousness up our way."

"But you must not call me cousin," said Linda, "or we shall have your secret public property, and that will never do." Her sweet eyes were very tenderly bright, and the gentle curve of her lips suggested a smile.

"She is much prettier than I thought," the young man told himself. "She has always looked so pale and unresponsive, I thought she lacked animation; but when one sees—I beg your pardon," he was roused by Linda's speaking. "Oh, yes; it is getting on to supper time, I am afraid. Perhaps we'd better turn back."

They returned by the river walk, parting at Miss Ri's gate. "Good-night, cousin," said Linda, "and good luck to you."

The walk had stirred her blood, the talk had roused a new and romantic interest in her companion, and the same song which Phebe had heard in the morning was on her lips as she entered the house.

Phebe was on the watch for her. "Ain't nobody comin' to eat suppah with yuh?" she inquired.

"No; the girls are all off to a dance in the country. I don't need anyone, Mammy. You and I have been alone many a time before this, and it will seem like old times."

Mammy looked at her critically. "Yuh sholy is beginnin' to git some roses in yo' cheeks," she said. "Whar yuh been?"

"Just around town a little, and then I took a walk by the river."

"By yose'f? Who dat come to de gate wi' yuh?"

"You prying old Mammy. I believe you could see even around the corner. That was Mr. Jeffreys."

"Dat bo'ds wi' Miss Parthy an' feeds de chickens?"

"That is the one."

"Humph!" Mammy's tones expressed contempt. Who was he to be gallanting her young lady around town? But she knew better than to follow up her expressive ejaculation with any spoken comment, and went in without another word.

It was a quiet, cosey evening that Linda spent. It being Friday, there were no lessons to be considered for the morrow, and so she smiled over her own scribbling or smiled into the fire when pleasant thoughts possessed her. At the end of the evening, there was a carefully-copied contribution, which was ready to go to a weekly paper; but so precious was it, that it

must not be trusted to remain on the sitting-room table, but must be carried upstairs until, with her own hand, she could take it to the postoffice.

As she went to her window to draw down the shades, a handful of pebbles clicked against the pane. She raised the sash and looked out. "I'm making the rounds," said a voice from below. "Good-night." And through the dimness she saw Wyatt Jeffreys' tall figure tramping around the corner of the house.

"That is nice of him," she said to herself. "Poor fellow, I hope he does recognize that I don't mean to be offish. I am sure he is proving his own cousinly consideration."

CHAPTER IX

THE LETTERS ON THE TRUNK

Miss Ri arrived betimes that Saturday morning. She was in high glee and declared she had made the luckiest bid yet, for her "old horse" proved to be a box of books. "Not bad ones, either," she declared, "and those I have duplicates of, I can give away at Christmas. The box was certainly well worth the two dollars I paid for it."

"New books, are they?" Linda inquired.

"Quite new, and it looks as if they had been selected for someone's library. We'll have a good time looking them over when they get here. Here's something else for your consideration, Linda: Berk Matthews went with me. He is the greatest one to tease. I met him on the street and couldn't get rid of him. I didn't want him to go to the sale, but the more I tried to shake him off, the more determined he was to stay with me, and finally I had to let him go along. Well, he became interested, too. Oh, I have a joke on him. He bought a trunk."

"A trunk?"

"Yes, a nice little compact trunk, which he says will be just the thing for him to take when he goes off with Judge Baker. It has the letters J. S. D. on it, which Berk declares mean 'Judge Some Day,' and he doesn't mean to change them. He is a nonsensical creature."

"What is in the trunk?"

"Oh, he hadn't opened it; for, of course, he had no key. He was in a hurry to see his mother and sister, and didn't want to bother with the trunk then. He is going to stay over till Sunday. That is a good son, Verlinda. I wish you could see the beautiful little desk he bought for his mother's birthday. I went with him to pick it out. It is on account of the birthday that he went up to

the city. I am firmly convinced that he will not marry until he can give his mother just as much as he gives his wife."

"That would be expecting a little too much, wouldn't it?"

"Not from Berk's present point of view. Nothing is too good for that mother of his, and when Margaret was married, well, no girl in town could have had a better outfit. I don't believe Berk has had even a new necktie since."

"Then I'll crochet him one for a Christmas gift," said Linda smiling. "What color would you suggest?"

"A dull blue would be becoming to his style of beauty."

"Not much beauty there."

"Not exactly beauty, maybe, but Berk looks every inch a man."

"And not any superfluous inches, unless you measure his shoulders and take him in square measure."

"Well, Verlinda, you must admit he has a fine, honest face."

"So has Brownie, Miss Parthy's setter."

"That is just like a foolish girl. I'll venture to say you think Mr. Jeffreys much better looking."

"Far handsomer. By the way—no, I'll not tell you; I'll let him do that."

"You rouse my curiosity. Tell me."

"I don't need to, for here comes the young man himself."

Mr. Jeffreys was seen coming up between the borders of box which led from Miss Parthy's back fence to Miss Ri's back door. He skirted the chrysanthemum beds, and came around to the front door, Miss Ri watching him the while. "Berk would have bolted in through the kitchen," she commented. "I don't suppose anything would induce Mr. Jeffreys to be seen coming in the back door. I am surprised that he did as much as to come in through the garden." She went to the door to meet him.

Conscious of his lack of ceremony, Mr. Jeffreys began to apologize at once. "I hope you will pardon my taking the short

cut, Miss Hill; but I promised Miss Turner that I would deliver this note into your hands before the ink had time to dry."

"I should be much less inclined to forgive you, if you had taken the long way around," replied Miss Ri. "Come in, Mr. Jeffreys, and let us see what this weighty matter is."

He followed her into the sitting-room, where Linda was watering some house-plants lately brought in. "Here, Verlinda, you entertain Mr. Jeffreys while I answer this note," said Miss Ri. "It's about a church meeting, and Parthy thinks I don't know, or haven't made up my mind to go, or something. I shall have to relieve her mind."

Mr. Jeffreys drew near to Linda at the window. "I hope you slept without fear of robbers," he said.

She looked up smiling. "Oh, yes. I felt very safe after your examination of bolts and bars." She went on with her task, nipping off a dead leaf here, straightening a bent twig there. "They don't look very well, yet," she said. "It takes plants some time to become used to a change of habitation."

"Like some people," he returned.

She gave him an understanding nod. "Yes, but just as surely they will thrive under proper treatment."

Miss Ri left her desk and came toward them. "I'm not going to ask you to deliver this, Mr. Jeffreys, for I want to send Parthy a lemon pie that Phebe has just baked, and I'd never trust a man to carry a lemon pie. Just sit down and I'll be back in a moment."

"Are you going to tell her?" asked Linda, when the door had closed after Miss Ri.

"Maybe. It will depend. I won't force the information."

"Get her to tell you about her trip to town; she is so funny about it."

"Miss Hill, you are to tell me about your trip to town," began Mr. Jeffreys when Miss Ri returned.

"I shall not do it," she declared. "What do you mean, Verlinda Talbot, by trying to get me to tell my secrets?"

"Maybe if you do, Mr. Jeffreys will tell you one of his."

"In that case, we must make a compact. Can you keep a secret, Mr. Jeffreys?"

"I have kept my own, so far."

"But another's is quite a different matter."

"I will keep yours, if you will keep mine."

"Then it is a bargain. Well, then, I have a fad for buying 'old horse.' You don't know what 'old horse' is? It's the stuff the express companies collect in the course of some months. If persons refuse to pay expressage, if the address is wrong, if it has been torn off, you see how it would be, they have a sale, an auction. I enjoy the fun of buying 'a pig in a poke.' Sometimes it turns out a nice fat pig and sometimes it doesn't."

"And this time?"

"It was a nice fat one. I became the possessor of a box of really good and desirable books. Perhaps I shouldn't be so ready to tell, if Berk Matthews hadn't been along; but I'm quite sure he will think it too good a story on me not to tell it. But I have one on him, too. He bid for a trunk, and it was knocked down to him."

"A trunk? You know I am interested in stray trunks. If mine had been sent by express, I'd be very keen about it."

"How was yours sent?"

"A local expressman was to take it to the steamer and I was unable to identify him when the trunk didn't turn up. I had his claim check, but that was in the pocket-book of which I was robbed—so you see—There was a tag on the trunk, but that might have been torn off. Well, let's hear about Mr. Matthew's trunk. It's rather interesting, this, and may give me a clue to mine."

"My dear young man, I fear a dishonest driver is what is wrong in your direction, or your trunk may have been stolen from the wagon, or have fallen off. However, that is an old subject, isn't it? Mr. Matthews' is a neat little steamer trunk, of

rather an old fashion. Of course, he has no key, and had no time to get a locksmith, so we don't know the contents."

"Mine was a small steamer trunk, not of a new fashion. It had been my mother's; but, being small and in good condition, I used it for myself, old as it was. It had her initials on it, for she had it before she was married."

Miss Ri leaned forward and asked earnestly: "What were they?"

"J. S. D. Julia Somers Darby was her maiden name."

Miss Ri looked at him excitedly. "J. S. D.? My dear man, those are the very initials on Berk's trunk."

It was Mr. Jeffreys' turn to look agitated. "Miss Hill, are you sure? Do you think—?" he began. "Miss Hill, could it be possible that it is my trunk? Will you tell me all the details? Where is this place that you found it? Perhaps, though, I'd best see Matthews."

"But he has not yet come back."

"True; I had forgotten that."

"I can tell you where the place is," continued Miss Ri, "if it will do any good," and she proceeded to describe the locality, Mr. Jeffreys listening intently.

"It is well worth looking into," he decided. "I don't suppose there is any chance of my catching Mr. Matthews in town before he leaves?"

"There is no boat up to-night, you know."

"That is so. I did not remember that this was Saturday."

"Moreover, if you were to take the train, very likely he would have left by the time you could reach the city. Better possess your soul in patience, Mr. Jeffreys, and wait till he gets back."

"I have been patient for some time," he responded quietly.

"To be sure, you have; so that twenty-four hours longer will not seem impossible. It certainly is a curious coincidence, though doubtless there are other steamer trunks bearing the initials J. S. D."

"Yes, I admit that; and how mine could have found its way to the express office is another puzzle."

"I shouldn't bother much about the how, if you discover that it really did reach there."

There was a pause for a moment, then Linda said: "You haven't told Aunt Ri your secret yet, cousin."

Miss Ri wheeled around in her chair. "Cousin! What are you talking about, Verlinda Talbot?"

"Our great-grandfathers were brothers, Miss Hill," said Mr. Jeffreys. "It doesn't give a very near relationship, I admit, but there it is and we are of the same blood."

"Well, I am astonished. Tell me all about it, right away. Your great-grandfather on the Talbot side, is it, Verlinda? Yours was Madison, and who was yours, Mr. Jeffreys?"

"Cyrus, whose daughter Lovina married Wyatt Jeffreys, after whom I am named. My grandfather that was, you see."

"And that is why the name always sounded so familiar," exclaimed Linda. "I am sure I have heard my grandmother speak of him, for you see, Lovina would be her husband's first cousin. Go on, please, Mr. Jeffreys."

"Very well. After the War of 1812, Cyrus Talbot removed to Western Pennsylvania. I believe his house was burned during that war, and he, like many others, was seized with the spirit of emigration to the West."

"The old house at Talbot's Addition was burned, you remember," cried Linda, turning to Miss Ri, "though I don't know just when." She turned again to Mr. Jeffreys.

"Lovina married a young Englishman," he continued. "In those days the feeling was very bitter against the English, and her father refused to see her; but after his death an old box of papers came into her possession, and they were found to be his. He had married a second time, but there were no children by this marriage. By his will, Cyrus Talbot left most of his property in Western Pennsylvania to his wife, but a clause of the will read: 'The remainder of my property to my daughter Lovina.' A little farm in that part of the country to which he

emigrated was supposed to be all that came to Lovina, but the old papers show, we believe, that he still had a claim to estates here in Maryland. Lovina went to England after her marriage, and the papers were left with some of the neighbors, though she seems to have had possession of them afterward, for there was a memorandum giving the name and address of the persons in whose care it was eventually left. This memorandum my father found after her death, and when he came to this country later on, he hunted up the box and told me several times that there might be something in those papers if one had time or would take the trouble to look them over. He settled in Hartford and died there. My father left a life insurance which was sufficient for my mother's needs and which has descended to me now that she is gone. I have not studied a profession, but had a clerkship, which seemed to promise little future, and after thinking over the situation, I determined to make a break, come down here and see if there were really anything to be done about that property."

He concluded his story. Miss Ri sat drumming on the arms of her chair, as was her habit when thinking deeply. Linda, no less preoccupied, sat with eyes fixed upon the plants in the window. It was she who broke the silence. "It must be Talbot's Addition," she decided; "but, oh, what a snarl for the lawyers."

"It certainly will be," agreed Miss Ri, with a little laugh. "My dear man, I am thinking the game will not be worth the candle. However, we shall see. If Berk takes up your case, you may be sure of honest dealing, at least. He little knows what his purchase has brought about."

Yet it was not at the end of twenty-four hours that Wyatt Jeffreys received the assurance he hoped for, though he sought the Jackson House immediately upon the arrival of the morning boat. Mr. Matthews was not there. Had he arrived? Oh, yes; he came in on the train the night before, but went off again with Judge Baker first thing in the morning. When would he be back? Not for some time. He took a trunk with him, and would be making the circuit with the judge.

Therefore Wyatt Jeffreys turned disappointedly away. He went directly to Miss Ri, who observed him walking so dejectedly

up the gravelled path, that she went out on the porch to meet him.

"Wasn't it your trunk?" she began. "I had worked myself quite into the belief that it must be, so I am not ready for a disappointment."

"It is not exactly disappointment, but only hope deferred," was the reply. "Mr. Matthews came last night, but went off early this morning with Judge Baker."

"Pshaw! that is trying, isn't it? However, we must make the best of it. Perhaps he didn't take the trunk."

"He took *a* trunk."

"I wonder if he started from the Jackson House or his office? We might make a tour of investigation. Just wait till I look to one or two things, and then we'll see what can be done."

She did not keep him waiting long, and together they went first to the square brick building, with its white columns, which was designated the Jackson House. Its porch was occupied by various persons who, with chairs tipped back, were smoking sociably. In the lobby were gathered others who, less inclined for outdoor air, were taking a morning cigar there. Miss Ri interviewed the clerk, porter, and chambermaid to gather the information that Mr. Matthews had come in on the train with a trunk, which came up on the bus with him and which the porter afterward carried to his office; the same trunk it was which he took with him that morning.

"Now we'll go to his office," decided Miss Ri as they left the hotel. "I am wondering what he did with the papers. There is probably a youngster in charge of the office, who can tell us something."

The office was just across the street. Here they learned that Mr. Matthews had come in that morning in a great rush to gather up what he should need for the trip. "He was here last night, too, Miss Ri," said the lad, a fresh-faced youngster of seventeen or so. "He told me he had to do some work, and he came to my house and got the key."

"Do you know if he took any papers from his trunk to leave behind?" inquired Miss Ri.

"I don't know; but if he did, they would be in the little room upstairs. I can see. Were there some papers of yours, Miss Ri? Perhaps I could find them, if you will tell me what they are."

"There were some papers belonging to a particular case which I wanted to get at," she explained.

The lad hesitated when she asked, "Could we go up to the little room?"

"It's not in very good order," he told her. "It's where Mr. Matthews keeps odds and ends."

"We shall not mind the disorder," Miss Ri told him. So he led the way up a narrow stairway to a little attic room with a small dusty-paned window at each end. The room held a motley collection of things: saddles and bridles, a shooting outfit, two or three old hats hung on the wall, one or two boxes of books and pamphlets were shoved under some rough shelves. The boy dragged out a large valise stuffed so full that its sides gaped. It was locked, but from one end hung a cravat, which Mr. Jeffreys drew out, slowly examining it, Miss Ri regarding him questioningly.

"It looks very like one of mine," he said; "but I don't lay claim to a particular brand of tie." He turned over the heavy valise, shaking it from side to side. From the bulging crevice fell a card upon which was printed, "Wyatt B. Jeffreys, Hartford Fire Insurance Co." The young man held it out silently to Miss Ri, who gasped, "Of all things! That settles it."

CHAPTER X

PURSUING CLUES

"When do you expect Mr. Matthews?" Miss Ri asked the boy, who was watching them curiously.

"Oh, not for a week or more. He told me to hold down the office till he came, so I'm keeping the lid on the best I know how. I don't see any papers marked for you, Miss Ri." He looked around on the shelves at some dusty collections.

"No? Well, never mind; we can see about it later. Suppose we slip that card and necktie back, Mr. Jeffreys? Thank you, Billy, for letting us come up." Everyone in town was known to Miss Ri, as she was known to everyone.

Once out in the street, Miss Ri gave voice to her conjectures. "Of course, Mr. Jeffreys, we can be positive now, don't you think?"

"One might suppose so, only that I have been thinking I may have given Matthews one of my cards which I chanced to have with me, and he has stuffed it into his valise along with other things which may have no connection with me whatever. I can't exactly believe it is proof positive."

"But the cravat?"

"Almost anyone might have a blue spotted tie like that. No, Miss Hill; I can't say I think it wise to jump at the conclusion."

"Oh, dear me, the masculine mind does work more deliberately than ours, doesn't it? At all events, I think it is something to go on, if not absolute proof. Let me see; first the trunk with the same initials, next the cravat, then the card. One doesn't expect to meet three such coincidences and gain no result, does one? Eliminate two, and you still have one pretty good proof, I should say. What are you going to do next, pending Berk's return? You surely don't mean to sit down and twiddle your thumbs?"

"No, hardly. I think I will go up to the city and interview the express people. If this is really my trunk, it may be superfluous to make the trip, but it will give me something to do, and may bring about some satisfactory conclusion."

"It isn't a bad move," returned Miss Ri. "You know the date, I suppose, and no doubt they have some record."

"That is what I am hoping for. If I only knew the number, which they must have marked on the trunk, it would help."

"How would it do to follow up Berk? You could probably find out where the judge is going; it may be his family can tell. Suppose we stop by and see what Mrs. Baker can tell us?"

But the Baker family were all in the city and that clue was dropped. Then the two returned to Miss Ri's and bethought themselves of getting Berkley on the telephone, but this, too, failed. He had been to the hotel, in a certain little town, which they called up, but had departed. Where was he going next? "Couldn't say."

"That clips off one thread," said Miss Ri, putting down the receiver. "You'd better go to town, after all. It will keep you occupied, and it is always a relief to be doing something, when one must wait. You'd get there quicker by taking the train, but the boat is cheaper, and I don't know that you would gain anything by starting earlier, for it would be too late to accomplish anything if you did get in this evening. You'll report progress, of course, when you get back?"

"Surely."

Miss Ri watched him depart, and then sat for a long time pondering over the situation. Why should she interest herself in a stranger? And supposing it were so that he found his papers and proved his claim, mightn't that mean loss to Linda; or if not to her, to someone they all had known as a neighbor? It might possibly be Talbot's Angles. No, that couldn't be, thought Miss Ri, for everyone knows it belonged to Jim Talbot and his father before him. Well, it is all very puzzling, and Linda may yet have her chance. Grace is just the silly kind of pretty woman to attract some blind bat of a man. There comes my girlie; I must tell her all the news. "It's the greatest comfort

in the world to have someone in the house I can gossip to," she said as Linda entered. "I don't know what I did before you came."

"Stepped out the back way to Miss Parthy."

"Yes, that is just what I did; but fond as I am of Parthy Turner, there are subjects I would rather not discuss with her, to say nothing of the plague of finding a man in the way whenever I go over there nowadays. Tired, are you?"

"Not so very. If I am half the comfort to you that you are to me, Aunt Ri, I am very glad."

"So we are mutually satisfied; that is good. Lie down there on the sofa till dinner is ready, and I'll tell you what I've been doing."

Linda obeyed, and Miss Ri gave an account of the pursuit of clues, ending up with, "Now, what do you think of it?"

"I think it is very remarkable, to say the least, and I am inclined to believe with you that the trunk Berk bought is really Mr. Jeffreys'. Aunt Ri, do you suppose Berk could have found that out? I don't see why he shouldn't have made the discovery as soon as he opened it, in which case I think he ought to have notified Mr. Jeffreys at once."

"My dear, I don't for a moment think that of Berk. He is too honest and straightforward, and besides, what would be his object?"

"I don't know; yet, if he removed the papers, how could he help seeing whose they were? They must have been marked in some way to identify them."

"I don't believe he noticed them at all."

"Wouldn't you have done so?"

"I am a woman, and a woman always notices details more quickly than a man. Don't be suspicious, Verlinda."

"I'm not; but I can't help conjecturing."

"It isn't worth while to do even that till the two come back. We will nab Berk as soon as he gets here and have it settled. I

don't know when anything so exciting has occurred in this town, and to think it concerns you, too. We mustn't let it get out, or the whole place will be agog. That young man is right to keep his affairs to himself."

But in spite of Miss Ri's intention to nab Berkley Matthews as soon as he returned, that opportunity was not accorded her, for though she called up his office daily, he arrived one evening and was off again the next day, unfortunately making his call at Miss Ri's when neither she nor Linda was at home. Mrs. Becky Hill had come to town and had carried off Miss Ri, willy-nilly, to look at a horse which Mrs. Becky thought of buying. When Miss Ri returned from the five-mile drive, Phebe met her at the door, saying, "Mr. Matthews done been hyar whilst yuh away, Miss Ri. He lef' a note on de table in de settin'-room."

Miss Ri was reading the note when Linda came in. "Now isn't this hard luck?" exclaimed the older woman. "Becky came in this afternoon and nothing would do but I must be dragged off to Hillside to see about a horse she has an idea of buying. She wanted my advice, as if I were a horse-dealer and spent my time looking in horses' mouths to count their teeth."

"Didn't you have a pleasant drive? It is a lovely day," returned Linda.

"Oh, it was pleasant enough; I really enjoyed it, but it made me miss Berk Matthews. Here's a note from him saying he was sorry not to find us at home and that he is going off duck-shooting down the bay. Isn't that provoking?"

"It surely is. Does he say anything about the trunk?"

"Not a syllable."

"Nor when he will be back?"

"Not a word. Here read for yourself."

Linda took the hastily-scribbled note, written in the rather cramped, lawyer-like handwriting which she had come to know as Berkley's:

"Sorry not to see you. Am off for some duck-shooting. I will bring a brace to you and we'll eat them together, allowing Linda the bones to pick.

"In haste,

"BERK."

That was all.

"It sounds very like Berk," said Linda, "and it doesn't seem possible that he could be keeping away on purpose. Mr. Jeffreys will be very much disappointed, I am afraid."

"Of course, it is not on purpose. What an idea, Verlinda! All the men go duck-shooting this time of year; it's about all the amusement they get in this part of the world. You wouldn't deprive him of it?"

"Yes, I would; for I don't like even ducks to be killed. However, I suppose it is inevitable."

"Of course it is inevitable while ducks fly over the waters of the bay. For my part, I like to see the lads go off in their shooting clothes, with their dogs and their guns. Ducks can't live forever, and if we don't eat them, something else will."

"If they were all killed outright, I shouldn't care so much; for, of course, they are intended for food, but I can't bear to think of their only being wounded and of their suffering, perhaps, for days."

"You have too tender a heart, Verlinda, for a girl who has been brought up in a hunting community."

"Perhaps that is the very reason; because I have seen something of what it means to the poor ducks. Have you seen Mr. Jeffreys? He was to have returned this morning."

"No, I haven't seen him. I'll call up Parthy and find out if he has returned. If he has, I'll ask her to send him over."

"Do you want to do that?"

"Why not?"

Linda did not give any reason, and Miss Ri went to the 'phone. Mr. Jeffreys himself answered it, and promised to come over immediately.

He was met by the question: "What report?"

"Not much of any account. I went to see the express people," he told them, "and they admitted that there were such things as drunken drivers who might hand over orders to others who, in turn, would maybe deliver a trunk to the wrong place; that had sometimes happened. And if the trunk were not marked, or if the tag were torn, there would be little chance of its reaching the proper owner, unless he held the express company's receipt. So I came away with nothing more than a warning not to trust any but the regular expressmen, and that is about all the satisfaction I could get."

"Too bad!" declared Miss Ri. "And now, I suppose you know Berk is off duck-shooting, and that is another delay for you."

"Yes, I heard about that. I went to the hotel, but couldn't very well ask to be allowed to break into his room, where the trunk probably is; and Billy would think me a most suspicious character, if I asked for a second view of the valise. I am beginning to think that, after all, we have made a mistake, and that he has not my property at all, or he surely would have notified me."

"It does look that way, and it is very provoking to be kept in suspense. I will tell you what I will do. If you can't get into Berk's room, I can. I know the proprietor of the Jackson House, and his wife, as well; so I am sure I can manage. I'll make an effort this very afternoon. Berk won't mind when I tell him and he learns it was in a good cause. I will bring away a pile of stockings to mend, and that will be an excellent excuse. I can make a strict examination of the trunk and bring you an accurate description, so if there are any identifying marks, I can tell you. How will that do?"

"Miss Hill, you are a miracle of ingenuity. That is a great scheme."

Miss Ri looked up at the clock. "It isn't so late. I believe I will go now. No time like the present. You can stay here with Linda

till I get back. I won't be long."

"Isn't she wonderful?" said Mr. Jeffreys, looking after the stout figure admiringly. "She is so direct, and so initiative. A woman like that is a friend worth having. I liked her from the moment I saw her out in this old garden."

Linda warmed to the praise of her friend. She was somewhat annoyed at Berkley's readiness to allow other matters to interfere with his visits to the house, and with his attention to Mr. Jeffreys' affairs. She felt sorry for the young man who, like herself, was lonely and bereft. She was too tender-hearted not to show sympathy for anyone so unfortunate, and she was very gentle in her manner toward him, so the two sat there talking of those personal things which draw those with similar interests together, and Miss Ri's absence seemed a very short one.

She came in flushed and panting from a rapid walk, a bundle of stockings, done up in newspaper, under her arm, and in her hand a bit of paper which she laid triumphantly on the table. It was getting dark, and she called for lights, as she threw aside her wraps. "Find the matches, Verlinda, and get Mr. Jeffreys to light the gas. I really think I have found something worth while."

While Linda was searching for the matches, Mr. Jeffreys had taken the bit of paper to the window and was examining it by the waning light. He came back to take the matches from Linda's hand and to say, "Miss Hill, I really think you have brought me proof positive."

"Wait till we get a light," she returned.

Another moment furnished this, and then, under the lighted chandelier, he showed them the paper, a piece of a tag from which more than half had been torn. That remaining showed but four letters, though they were enough. "You see here," said Mr. Jeffreys, "on this first line was W. B. Jeffreys. The W. B., in my handwriting, remains. On the second line was Sandbridge, of which the S alone is left. The third line showed Md., and you see not quite all of the M. I would swear to it in any court."

"Which will not be necessary, as no doubt you have the trunk key and can describe the contents."

"Tell us how you managed, Aunt Ri," urged Linda.

"Well, first I hunted up Mrs. Beall, told her I wanted to get some of Berk's socks to mend in order to surprise him; so she told the chambermaid to open his room for me. I hunted out the holey socks and then I turned my attention to the trunk. There it sat with its J. S. D. as plain as day. It was locked and, of course, I couldn't get at the inside; but on one of the handles I saw this piece of tag hanging, so I took it off and brought it away. Of course, I examined it and came to my own conclusions, which were the same as yours, Mr. Jeffreys. So now, let me congratulate you. Since there seems no doubt but that you have found your trunk, the waiting for Berk will not be so trying."

"I congratulate you, too," added Linda, holding out her hand.

"Thank you," replied the young man, taking Miss Ri's proffered hand rather than Linda's, and then turning somewhat confusedly to examine again the piece of paper.

But, as if to make up for this seeming rudeness, for the next few days he was rarely absent from the house when Linda was there. He was at the gate when she started forth to school; he was at the corner to join her when she came home. Supper was scarcely over before his step was heard upon the porch, and if there was no open love-making, there was at least a sufficient show of interest to make the girl feel that no word of hers passed unnoticed.

"I believe the man is falling in love with you," averred Miss Ri bluntly, when he left them one evening; "if he is not already there."

Linda flushed, but replied steadily: "You must remember that I am a relative, and naturally he turns to me for sympathy and advice. The poor fellow has neither mother nor sister, and, of course—"

"Take care, Verlinda. That 'poor fellow' sounds very dangerous. You know what pity is akin to."

But Linda did not reply. She turned out the light by the piano, busied herself in straightening the room, and then, kissing Miss Ri good-night, went directly upstairs. She stood a long time before her mirror, thoughtfully gazing at the reflection she saw there, and after she had turned out her light, she went to the window which opened upon the back garden, looking across to where a twinkling beam shone out from Miss Parthy's house. "It is rather nice to have a new cousin," she said to herself, as she drew down the shade again and turned to open a window further away from her bed.

On the other side of the entry, Miss Ri, in her room, was frowning and saying savagely to herself: "Maria Hill, you are an idiot. It is just like you to be carried away by some new excitement, never looking far enough ahead to discover what it is all leading to. I say you are an idiot, and you are not the only one, if the truth were known."

CHAPTER XI

A NEWSPAPER

Linda, though spontaneous enough in ordinary matters like most Southern girls, was reticent when it came to those things which touched her most nearly. She was but fifteen when her mother died; her sisters, older than herself, had passed out of her life before she had really known them well. The elder had married and had died within a year, the younger, Linda remembered only as a delicate girl, who was too frail to go so far as town to school, and who one day was covered with flowers and was borne to the little churchyard. So at the very time Linda had needed someone to whom to give her confidences she had only her older brother, Martin, a busy man, and one who could hardly sympathize with her youthful fancies, her flights of imagination, however kind he might be. Therefore because she must have some outlet for her fanciful thoughts she began to scribble, for her own pleasure at first, later with the hope that she might one day write something worth publishing. It was not till she had taken up her abode with Miss Ri that she did timidly send forth some little verses, very doubtful of their finding a place in the columns of the newspaper to which she sent them.

Time went on and she had heard nothing of her small venture, but one Saturday morning, having gone to the school-house for some book she needed, she stopped at the postoffice for the mail, forestalling the postman who could deliver it later.

On the threshold she met Berk Matthews. "Why, hallo, Linda," he exclaimed. "Haven't seen you for a month of Sundays."

"And whose fault is that, I'd like to know," she answered.

"Whose fault? Why, the ducks, of course. I didn't have any luck and am going out again. By the way when did you turn poet?"

Linda paled, flushed, looked down nervously, shuffled the letters and papers she held. "What do you mean?" she asked at last.

"There's only one Verlinda Talbot, isn't there? Unless someone has borrowed your very pretty and unusual name. Look at this." He thrust his hand into his coat pocket and drew forth a paper, opened the sheet and pointed out the following:

THE MARCHING PINES

Up from the hill-slope and over the ridge
An army is coming of marching pines.
The cloud-shadows lurking, lie low on the bridge
Wrought out by the moonbeams in delicate lines.

They march from the meadow land over the snow
With bayonets pointed, a solid phalanx,
Save where, on their outlying edges, they show
A few timid stragglers who've broken the ranks.

And down in the field, set in orderly rows
Are wigwams, one sees by the light of the moon.
Hark! Hark! Does a war-whoop discover the foes?
From out of the marsh comes the laugh of a loon.

Verlinda Talbot.

"Here, let me take your things," said the young man gently as he perceived by her shaking hands and changing color that she was agitated. He watched her read the lines through and as she raised sweet questioning eyes, he bit his lip and drew in his breath quickly and sharply. "I like it, Linda," he said as she folded the paper and handed it back to him. "How did you manage to do it? I am as proud as can be of you."

"Are you really, Berk? That is very nice of you. To think you saw it before I did. Why I didn't even know they were going to print it."

"You didn't? Then I'm the discoverer. I'm proud of that, too. Very likely you will find a copy of the paper in your mail. Are they paying you well for it?"

"Oh, no, I don't think they pay at all. I don't expect that. I am paid sufficiently by seeing it in print this time. Perhaps—some day—if I keep on—"

"You will be a great writer."

"Oh, never that, but I may be able to write something worth while. I long to."

"And give up teaching? You don't like teaching."

"I don't believe I do very much."

"Yet I hear good accounts of you."

"Really, Berk?"

"Certainly I do. Mr. Willis told me you were very satisfactory, and had broken in your class so they trotted along without a break."

"I think we do get along better," Linda acknowledged a little dubiously, "and I believe the small boys do begin to like me more than they did, at least some of them do."

"All of them will in time, I am sure."

"You're a nice encouraging friend, Berk. Is this where we part?"

"Yes, I have an appointment with Judge Morris this morning. Good-by. Tell Miss Ri I'll be around soon."

He gave the budget into her hands, raised his hat and entered the little one-storied building at the side of whose door were signs denoting the calling of those whose offices were within, lawyers all, two judges among them.

The trees over-arching the long street had lost most of their leaves, but the river was as blue as ever, and the gardens still held late blooms. A tall cosmos peeped over the fence of one, chrysanthemums made a brave showing in another. A few courageous nasturtiums started brilliantly from amid their yellowing leaves, scarlet salvia shot out myriads of little tongues of flame before almost every house. The streets were quite full of people this Saturday morning. Country vehicles, mud-stained, and in many cases rickety and drawn by shabby

mules, jostled more pretentious teams. Lolling darkies singing some monotonous camp-meeting hymn, drove their brick carts to a new building which was going up near by. Dogs were seen everywhere, some at the heels of the young men who, in hunting attire, were making ready to start out for a day's shooting, some lying on the porches ready to bark at any passer-by, some sportively chasing one another up and down the street, playfully catching at the long silky ear of a companion, or rolling him over and over, then off again in hot chase. One or two thrust their cold noses into Linda's hand as she passed them, and with wagging tail received her caress and "Nice doggie" as something not only expected but deserved. The air was soft, sweet and languorous, for Indian summer was here and the days still held suggestions of the earlier season.

Linda turned in at the gate leading to Miss Ri's house, and pushing her feet through the drift of crisp leaves which covered the gravelled walk, enjoyed the exhilaration of the hour. She was buoyant, hopeful, really happy. Life was opening up wonderful possibilities. The music of the spheres was hers. She read the spirit of the universe in each dancing leaf, in each scarlet flower-flame.

Seeing Phebe at the back of the house she ran around to her. The old woman raised herself ponderously from where she was spreading her dish-towels on the grass. "Do you like it here? Are you happy, Mammy?" asked Linda.

"Jes listen to de chile," exclaimed Mammy. "Is I happy? I done got 'ligion long ago, honey, and I ain't back-slid fo' many a ye'r. Co'se I is happy. I ain't shoutin' but I ain't mo'nin', an' I hopes I ain't lak dese young things dat hollers hallelujah at nights and steals from de madam in de mawnin'. Co'se I is happy long as mah baby ain't down in de mouf. Yuh sutt'nly looks peart, honey, an' bless mah Lord an' Marster dat I kin say it. Whar all yo' beaux, honey chile?"

Linda laughed. "Oh, they'll be around after a while."

Mammy chuckled and Linda entering by the back door, after some searching, at last found Miss Ri upstairs looking over the house linen.

"Well, Verlinda, you have a fine color," said the lady looking up. "It does you good to get out into the fresh air. Any news up town?"

"I met Berk."

"You did? What did he say about the trunk?"

Linda stopped in the act of tearing the wrapper from a newspaper she held. "Aunt Ri, I declare I never said a word to him about it. Never once did it enter my mind."

"Verlinda Talbot! I can scarce believe that. What were you talking about to make you forget it?"

Linda finished freeing the paper from its wrapper. Her eyes were downcast, and the flush lingered in her cheeks; a smile played around her lips. "This," she answered holding out the paper on which her verses were printed.

Miss Ri adjusted her spectacles, read the lines, laid the paper aside and took the girl's hands in hers. "You dear, sentimental child," she said, "I am proud of you."

"That is what Berk said," returned Linda with a little pleased smile.

"Did he? Well, he may be. Why, my dear, we shall all be proud of you, the whole town. We must have you in the club; you will be an ornament to it."

Linda fairly laughed at this. "One meagre little set of verses will not give more than a rushlight's beam," she answered, "even in Sandbridge, Aunt Ri. But maybe I shall be a real shining light some day. Anyhow it is great fun."

"Of course it is to those who can do it. I couldn't to save me."

"And, you see, in the excitement of the discovery, the reason of my forgetting the trunk. Please don't tell Mr. Jeffreys that I have seen Berk; he will think me a very indifferent cousin if he knows."

"What did Berk have to say besides mentioning that he was proud of you?"

"He said he had no luck shooting and that he was going out again. I imagine he has been pretty busy, but he said I was to tell you he'd be around soon."

"Ducks or no ducks?"

"The ducks weren't mentioned."

"Well, he'd better come if he knows what is good for him. Here is your other swain heading this way. Go down and see him and keep the trunk out of the conversation when I am around or I might forget myself and tell on you. I think you'd better take him off somewhere if you want to be quite safe. It's a fine day to be out of doors."

"We can sit on the porch or go out on the river," responded Linda as she left the room.

She felt a little diffident about showing her newspaper to her visitor, but, reflecting that Miss Ri would be sure to speak of it, she decided to have the matter over with, and at once displayed her verses. If Mr. Jeffreys did not openly express the same appreciation that Berkley had done he was at least as effusive as Linda expected, being at no time a person who showed ardent enthusiasm. His call was not a long one, for Linda felt a little ill at ease, condemning herself for having forgotten a thing so important to him, and in consequence she was not able to talk of his affairs with the same show of interest, a fact which he, however, attributed to her excitement over the printing of her verses.

As the two walked to the gate together they saw Berkley drive by with a friend. Both men were equipped for hunting, and from between Berkley's knees looked out the intelligent face of a fine brown setter who was all a-quiver with the prospect in view.

Mr. Jeffreys gave a sudden call after the buggy, but checked himself directly, turning to Linda with an air of apology. "I should not have done that, but I was carried away by my interest in seeing Mr. Matthews. I didn't know he was in town."

"He is going off with Elmer Dawson, evidently," rejoined Linda, looking after the buggy.

"And there is no telling when he will return. The fates are against me, Miss Linda."

"You certainly are having a lesson in patience," Linda admitted. "Never mind, Mr. Jeffreys, the case won't suffer by reason of delay. Why don't you write a note to Mr. Matthews?" she asked suddenly catching at the idea. "Tell him you think he has happened upon your trunk, describe it, and ask him to let you see it. You must remember his attention has not been called to it yet, and he hasn't a notion that you are in a state of suspense."

"Unless he has examined the contents."

"Which he may or may not have done. At all events, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have brought the subject to his notice. He seems such a difficult person to get at these days that it might be as well to write."

"Thank you for the suggestion; it might not be a bad idea. I will go home and think it over." He lifted his hat and Linda watched him thoughtfully walking down the street. "If Berk does know it is pretty mean of him," she said to herself, and she voiced the opinion to Miss Ri when she went indoors.

"It is mighty mean if he really knows it, and it almost seems as if he must," agreed Miss Ri. "One might almost think he was doing it on purpose, if it were not really a serious matter. Berk is something of a tease, you know. I'll call him up to-night and tell him to come and get his socks. He doesn't deserve to have me mend them, the rascal."

But Mr. Matthews was not at the hotel, came the news over the 'phone that evening. Neither did he appear on Sunday. On Monday it was learned that he had returned but was at Court when Mr. Jeffreys tried to see him. The day went by and there was no response to the note Mr. Jeffreys mentioned having written.

"It begins to look very queer," said Miss Ri soberly when Monday had passed and no Berkley appeared. "I'm beginning

to lose faith, Linda, and that is something I have never done before where Berk was concerned. He can't want to steal such a paltry thing as a trunk."

"Perhaps to his legal mind it is his own property since he bought it," remarked Linda in excuse.

"But there are the papers."

"True, there are the papers. He has no right to them. Dear me, my head fairly buzzes with trying to account for it. I wish we had never heard of Wyatt Jeffreys and his old trunk. Why did he come here to disturb our peace?"

"It certainly is queer for Berk to act so," continued Miss Ri, "and the queerest part of the whole business to me is that he has not been near us for two weeks."

"He did come, you remember, that day you went to the country with Mrs. Becky."

"Yes, I had forgotten that."

"And he was as nice and friendly as could be the day I met him at the postoffice."

"But he hasn't sent us those ducks," contended Miss Ri.

CHAPTER XII

A BRACE OF DUCKS

The very next morning after this talk Wyatt Jeffreys met Berkley Matthews on the street just outside the Jackson House. "Hallo," cried the latter. "Just have your note. I've been staying with John Emory, and we've been off ducking so I didn't get my mail till this morning. It certainly would be a good joke if I had captured your trunk. Suppose you come and have a look at it, and if you identify it, of course you shall have it without delay. Come up to my room."

As Mr. Jeffreys followed the springing step all suspicion fled. Once in the room the trunk was easily recognized. "There were some papers," said Mr. Jeffreys.

"Oh, yes, they are over at my office. I had to get a locksmith to open the trunk for me, and he had to put on a new lock, as you see. I took out the clothing over here, sent the trunk across the way, dumped out the papers in a valise without looking at them, and there they are. You can get them any time."

"I'd like you to go over them with me when you have time, Matthews."

"Very well. Just now I am a little rushed, but we can take it up later when I get this case through I am now at work upon. In the meantime I will see that you get the trunk and the rest of the things. I'll try to get them off this afternoon. I am certainly glad I happened to take a fancy to your trunk, but what a queer coincidence it is. I never associated it with you at all. Those initials, J. S. D. would have misled me in any event. I told Miss Ri they stood for Judge Some Day, and I think they are about the only part of the trunk I feel loth to give up."

Mr. Jeffreys smiled. It was like a sentimental Southerner, he thought. Then, after some discussion about cost of transportation and all that, the matter was settled to the satisfaction of both.

With the delivery of the trunk came the ducks, not inside the trunk, of course, for that contained everything which was in it at the time of Berkley's first possession, everything except the papers. The trunk was brought to Miss Parthy's by an old colored man picturesquely antique both as regarded his costume and himself. Uncle Moke everyone called him, his real name of Moses having fallen into disuse so long before that no one remembered it. He was general factotum around town and a trusty messenger. He had delivered his first charge at Miss Parthy's door, and then was ready for Miss Ri. Nothing pleased him more than such an errand. "Evenin' Miss Ri," said the old fellow with many a bow and scrape, his ragged hat in his hand. "Mr. Berk Matthews' compliments, Miss Ri, an' dese yer ducks, Miss. He say he hopes yuh-alls have 'em fo' suppah, an' he be 'long 'bout seben fo' to he'p yuh-alls eat 'em," the last with a little chuckle of pleasure at delivering such a message.

"Very well, Uncle Moke," returned Miss Ri, taking the ducks. "Whether I have them for supper or not is my look out, you tell Mr. Berk."

"Dey nice fat ducks," remarked Uncle Moke with the privilege of an old acquaintance.

"I see they are."

"Yuh got some cu'ant jelly, is yuh, Miss Ri? Ef yuh ain't mah ole woman got a little she kin spare yuh."

"I know Aunt Welcome's jelly is good, Uncle Moke, but I reckon I have enough for some time to come. How is your wife?"

"She thes tollable, Miss Ri."

"And you?"

"I thes tollable. I has mis'ry in mah j'ints f'om de rheumatiz dese col' days. I kin skeerce tote de rale heavy trunks. Dat one I thes now taken to Miss Parthy's fo' de strange young man wa'n't de heavy kin'."

"Did you take a trunk to Miss Parthy's for Mr. Jeffreys?"

"Yas'm. Mr. Berk he done sont it f'om de hotel. Little weenchy trunk, kinder old-fashion."

"Um-hm," said Miss Ri, nodding her head. "So that's done. Have you good warm flannels, Uncle Moke?" Miss Ri looked him over, perceiving the shabbiness of his attire, ragged shirt, threadbare trousers.

"I ain't had time to buy no winter flannins yet, Miss Ri," responded the old man with a pride that forbade giving the real reason.

"Well, you stop by to-morrow," said Miss Ri. "I shouldn't in the least wonder if there were some things in the house that you could wear, and there is no use to buy anything when I'd be glad to get rid of some underwear that I have on hand."

"Thanky, ma'am, thanky." The bowing and scraping were continued to a degree. "I sholy is obleedged to yuh, Miss Ri. It save me a lot o' bother. I nuvver was no han' at buyin' flannins, and Welky she don' git about much."

Miss Ri watched him stiffly mount his creaking wagon drawn by a scrubby mule, then she went in with the ducks. "Well," she announced, "here they are at last. Don't let me forget, Verlinda, to hunt up some things for Uncle Moke, and if I haven't anything I must buy some. The poor old soul hasn't enough to keep him warm. I don't suppose he makes a great deal these days, for the younger and stronger men are employed where he used to be. He is not able to carry heavy burdens. By the way, the trunk seems to have been delivered, too. Aren't you curious to hear the report. Berk, the impudent boy, sent word he was coming over to help eat the ducks, and wouldn't we please to have them for supper to-night. Isn't that just like him? He does not deserve to be treated decently after the way he has neglected us, but I suppose we shall have to be nice to him as long as he has sent us the ducks." She went on to the kitchen to see Phebe about supper of which she was ready enough to make a true feast.

True to his promise, Berkley arrived promptly for supper. "You renegade," cried Miss Ri. "We were beginning to think all manner of evil about you."

"You were? I didn't expect that of you. What have I done?"

"You have neglected us abominably."

"It does look that way, but I really couldn't help it. I had a tough week of it off with Judge Baker, and then to limber up my brain I took a little outing with some of the boys. We all went down to John Emory's little shack. Didn't I send you the first fruits of my chase? I hope Unc' Moke understood he was to leave the ducks here, and that he didn't take them to Miss Parthy's."

"They came safely enough, and our thanks are ready. We accept your excuses since they seem moderately reasonable, don't we, Verlinda?"

She smiled her response and came forward to greet the young man.

"And how goes the school? Does the verse-making continue?" he asked looking down with interest showing in his eyes.

"The school hasn't finished me yet, and the verses," she blushed a little, "go spasmodically. I haven't sent out any more effusions."

"You must do it. Aren't we proud of her, Miss Ri? Oh, did you hear that the trunk had been found, and that mine was the great mind that happened to realize its value?"

"It was accident, pure accident," cried Miss Ri. "Your great mind had nothing to do with it. You have sent it back to the owner?"

"Yes, worse luck. I wanted to keep it on account of the letters upon it. Now I have nothing to cheer me in my despondent moments. It was quite a fillip to my ambitions to see those letters. I don't know where I shall get another mascot."

"What of the papers?" asked Linda.

"Oh, we haven't come to those yet; they are at my office, and there they will stay till Jeffreys and I can look them over. Ducks ready? Good! May I escort you, Miss Ri. Will you take my other arm, Linda?" They marched solemnly to the dining-room. For some reason Berkley was suddenly subdued and was so long in taking the initiative in the carving of the ducks that Miss Ri spoke up. "Where are your thoughts, Berk?" Then

he picked up the wrong knife and fork in confusion and laughed a little nervously.

But though the ducks were done to a turn, and everything was as it should be, Berkley was distrait and ill at ease all the evening, though he stayed quite as late as usual and went off with a jest.

The door had no sooner closed behind him than Miss Ri turned to Linda to say. "I can't think what is the matter with Berk. Did it strike you that he was embarrassed and unlike himself."

"I did think so, but put away the thought as coming from my own vain imaginings. What do you suppose is the matter?"

"I should say it was one of two things; either he is in love or there is something in those papers that is bothering him. I wonder if, after all, it was his mother whom he was so eager to see in the city. I'm beginning to get suspicious."

"But about the papers; what could be in them?"

"That is just what I don't know, but I'm going to find out. I have a deal of thinking to do, Verlinda, my dear. Go to bed and let me puzzle out a few things. Berk said he had seen Grace Talbot, didn't he?" Linda paused, her foot on the stair. "Yes, he spoke of her, said she was looking unusually well." Then a little laugh rippled out. "You don't imagine he has fallen in love with Grace, do you?"

"Some men are fools enough to do anything," returned Miss Ri crossly.

"Then, of course, you don't get mad with such," vouchsafed Linda. Then she turned, a slim graceful figure in trailing black, and came swiftly up to Miss Ri. "You dear old thing," she said, "you mustn't get notions in your head like that; it doesn't make any difference; nothing makes very much difference. Suppose he should marry Grace, then I'd have Talbot's Angles."

"And I'd lose you," returned Miss Ri ruefully. "Are you sleepy? No? Come in then, and let's talk over people and things."

"Let's leave out Berkley and Grace."

"Very well, we'll talk of your new cousin. By the way, if Berk has examined those papers he must know the relationship. Possibly that is just what is the matter."

"I don't think so, besides, I had the impression that he had not looked at them. But we weren't going to talk of Berk, you know. Tell me plainly, what do you think of my new cousin?"

"YOU DON'T IMAGINE HE HAS FALLEN IN LOVE WITH GRACE, DO YOU?"

"I think he is an out and out Yankee. Clever enough in some directions, rather whimsical, deadly afraid you will find out what he is thinking about, frightfully cautious of showing his feelings, with a conscience which worries him because his inclination isn't always to follow it exactly, wherein he differs from another who follows his impulses, and whose impulses are always generous ones. Your Mr. Jeffreys sits down and pros and cons for hours. Someone, whose name we don't mention, plunges out, impelled by an unselfish motive, and does the thing that the other deliberates over. Yet I won't say the cousin doesn't do fine honorable things once he makes up his mind it is right. Very likely he rises to his heights by a different process, and doesn't ever make the mistake of over

zeal, of going at too brisk a pace like the unmentioned sometimes does. What the latter does is with his whole heart. I think he might almost perjure himself for one he loved; I know he would cheerfully die in the same cause."

Linda, leaning with elbows on table, thoughtfully tapped one hand with an ivory paper-cutter. "You are analytical, Aunt Ri, but probably you are right. Yet, after all if a man, through evolutions of reasoning, reaches a point where his conscience bids him do a noble deed, isn't he just as much to be approved as he who rushes out, never asking for reasons, and does a like noble thing? And isn't he more to be approved than the man who sacrifices his integrity, or does a wrong thing for love's sake?"

"Oh, yes, I don't doubt it though it depends largely upon one's view of the case. For my part I admire the spontaneous, intrepid man more than the deliberate one, but that is a matter of preference."

"Which do you think would be the easier to live with?" Linda balanced the paper-cutter on the tips of her fingers. "Wouldn't the impetuous man be more difficult, more trying, for the very reason of his impetuosity?"

"Yes, but he'd be vastly more entertaining, to my mind, because of his uncertainty."

"In perjuring himself, for example?"

"Oh, we needn't go so far as that, Verlinda. A really good man would never go so far unless—"

"Unless?"

"He felt the cause for which he criminated himself was a greater thing than his own state of well-being. I can imagine certain men who would sacrifice their immortal welfare for the sake of a sacred cause."

"And you think Berkley Matthews is like that?"

"No, I don't say so? I won't go so far in my estimate of him, though I do say there are few things he wouldn't do for one he loved. But you remember we were not to mention him."

"We don't appear to be doing much else. We are comparing him all the time with Mr. Jeffreys whether we mention his name or not. I agree with you in thinking Berk is capable of fine things, but so I believe is Mr. Jeffreys."

"Berk has the tenderest of hearts," continued Miss Ri, "and he has thoughtful little ways that please an elderly woman like myself. I could but notice the difference when I was walking with Mr. Jeffreys. Did he help me over a gutter, or up a steep curb? Not he. Not that I wanted help, but it was the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that I missed. Berk watches out for your every step, makes way for you, as it were. If he wore a Sir Walter Raleigh cloak it would be mud from end to end so readily would he spread it for a woman's feet to tread on. He may not have the tall and graceful figure of your cousin, but he can bow like a courtier, and will stand with his head uncovered in any weather rather than wear his hat in a lady's presence."

"I have noticed all those things," admitted Linda. "So far, in your opinion, his side of the scales tip far, far below my cousin's, but then one must make allowances for your partiality. You've known Berk since he was born. Perhaps Mr. Jeffreys' mother may have had just so good an opinion of him."

"Being his mother she probably had. What have you to put in his side of the scales?"

"Oh, good looks, a very dignified bearing, and a perfectly well-trained conscience which wouldn't run away with him."

"You know I don't call that so desirable a quality as the impulsive generosity."

"But I do, so if you leave your impulsive generosity in the scales, I must have the well-trained conscience."

"Very well. Go on."

"Then, there's your mud-spattered cloak which I will balance with—let me see—"

"You can't find anything to equal that," cried Miss Ri triumphantly.

"Oh, yes, I can. There is a certain beautiful dignity and a certain indescribable charm; I don't know exactly wherein it lies, but it is there. Bertie Bryan has discovered it, too, and very probably it has not escaped you."

"I don't see it at all."

"There we are again, so you will have to take the courtesy and I'll have the dignity and charm. I haven't a doubt but if we knew Mr. Jeffreys better we should find a host of other things."

"He is not sympathetic in the way Berk is."

The paper-cutter was at work again. "No-o," Linda admitted, "he doesn't seem to be, but perhaps he really is, inside."

"Then I don't see what use it is to anyone. Berk shows that quality in his eyes. He has dear eyes, I think."

Linda neither affirmed nor denied though she suddenly remembered the eager, tender look bestowed upon her that day in the postoffice when she gave back the newspaper after reading her little poem in it. "We certainly have discussed those two long enough," she said lightly. "How their ears must burn. What next, Aunt Ri?"

"I've been thinking I'd like to get some facts for you from some other source than Wyatt Jeffreys. There's our old family lawyer, Judge Goldsborough, who was your family's lawyer as well. He retired from active life long ago, and is a very old man now, but I believe he could tell us things. He knew your grandfather and all that. Some day we will go to see him. We'll make it an ancestral pilgrimage. He lives up in the next county where his son has a fine estate. On the way we can take in that old church where my grandparents were married; they were Roman Catholics, you see, and I have always wanted to see that old church. How do you like the idea of such a trip?"

"Immensely. You are very clever to have thought of it, Aunt Ri."

"Then some Saturday we will go. The judge will be delighted to see you, and me, too, I am not too modest to say. He is a dear old man and, though his memory is not what it was, the

way back things are those he remembers the best. Now go to bed. We've talked long enough. Go to bed."

CHAPTER XIII

AN ANCESTRAL PILGRIMAGE

Miss Ri was not one to be dilatory when an idea once took possession of her, and she therefore began planning at once for the trip to "Mary's Delight," where Judge Goldsborough lived. It was a roundabout journey involving several changes, if one went all the way by rail to the nearest station, but was not nearly so far if one drove from Sandbridge to the point where a train could be had which would go direct to the little village of Mackenzie. Miss Ri finally decided upon the latter course, naturally choosing a Saturday as being the day when Linda could most easily leave. It was not a matter to be made secret, and Berkley was consulted as to the best method of getting to the desired point.

"You'd better take the train from Boxford to Mackenzie," he told them. "Of course you must drive from here to Boxford, and you would better send word ahead to Mackenzie to have some sort of vehicle ready for you there to take you to 'Mary's Delight,' unless you prefer to let the Goldsboroughs know you are coming."

Miss Ri shook her head. "I think I'll let that go, and trust to luck, for it might be a bad day which would prevent our going, and I don't want them to make preparations, as they might do; besides we want to stop at the old church, and I should prefer a hired team if we are to do that."

"Very well, then, suppose I drop a line to Mackenzie, to the postmaster there, he knows me, and I'll tell him two ladies are coming from Sandbridge. He will do all he can for you. You can go right to the postoffice, and then it will be plain sailing."

"You are a good thoughtful boy, Berk, to smooth our way so nicely," Miss Ri told him. "By the way," she added, "aren't you feeling well these days? You seem so serious. Anything wrong?"

The young man flushed up and turned over some papers on his desk. They were in his office where Miss Ri had stopped to consult him. "I'm all right," he replied in reply. "Working a little hard, maybe. I must, you know, if I want to get ahead."

"And that is why you don't drop in so often," returned Miss Ri. Then after waiting a moment for the answer which did not come, she went on. "Well, you know you are always welcome, Berk. I may bamboozle you, but you know it is all talk. Come when you can and thank you very much for straightening out this route. I did not want to go around the other way and be all day getting there, spending half the time waiting at stations to make connections."

"I find the most direct way is generally the best," he told her. "When you want to go across country you'd better drive instead of depending upon trains. Good luck to you, Miss Ri." And he turned to his desk as she went out.

Saturday furnished all that anyone could ask in the way of weather. It was almost too warm for the season, and a few clouds piled up in the west, but it could not be a finer day, as everyone declared with satisfaction, and the two travellers sat down to their morning meal in happy anticipation of what was before them.

"We're going to have a lovely time, Verlinda," remarked Miss Ri. "The judge will have some good tales for us, I know. I am sure he will be interested to know you are a great-niece of the Verlinda Talbot he used to know, and, if report speaks the truth, with whom he was much in love, but like the gallant gentleman he was, when she married someone else he made no sign though he was hard hit, and he was always a devoted friend to her and to your grandfather. His son Dick isn't unlike him. He has a nice wife and half a dozen children, some of whom are grown up by now." She was silent for a little while and then she said, with half a laugh and half a sigh, "I didn't expect to be visiting Dick Goldsborough's house in my old age."

Linda looked up from the coffee she was sipping. "That sounds very much as if there were a story, a romance hidden in your remark."

Miss Ri gave a little comfortable laugh. "Well, there was something like it once."

"Oh, Aunt Ri, and you never told me. Were you—were you engaged to Mr. Dick Goldsborough?"

"No-o. You see there were two of us, Julia Emory and I, and it seemed hard for him to make up his mind which he liked best—but finally—he did."

"Oh, dear Aunt Ri! And he married the other girl? Did it—were you—"

"Oh, yes, I was dreadfully cut up for a time, I can frankly say. The first year I thought I'd die and wanted to; the second I was not averse to living, though in a sort of twilight world; the third I was quite glad to live; the fourth I wondered how I could ever have been such a sentimental goose, and the fifth I thanked the Lord that I had escaped."

"Oh, Aunt Ri, Aunt Ri, you are dreadful."

"It is a fact, I can assure you, and I have been thankful ever since, not that Dick isn't a fine man, for he is, but, dear me, he would never have suited me, as I came to find out, and he suits Julia to a T. They are as happy as two clams at high tide."

"Then that is why you never married."

"It probably had something to do with it, for during the two or three years when I was wearing the willow came other chances which I didn't take, and when I had reached the stage of thanking the Lord for my escape my patient suitors had become impatient and had danced off to those who, in their opinions, had better taste. But, Verlinda, bear this truth in mind; I am still thanking the Lord. Come, if you have finished we'll be off. I see Nichols has sent around the man with the surrey; he is waiting outside."

The ride to Boxford over level shell roads would have been pleasant enough with a less companionable person than Miss Ri, but she who knew every house along the way had innumerable stories to tell, humorous, pathetic, romantic, and the time seemed very short before they reached the station from which they were to start on the second and more

commonplace stage of their journey which ended at Mackenzie. This was a small settlement which appeared to consist of the station, a country store, and a few houses straggling along an unpaved street which stretched out into the country road, leading on and on indefinitely. There were few people in sight; a half dozen darkies lounged around the station, inside which the telegraph operator clicked away at his transmitter industriously, some children played in the street further up, but no one else was to be seen.

"Where do you suppose the postoffice is?" asked Miss Ri, looking around.

"At the store in all probability," replied Linda.

"We'll go over and see."

But, contrary to their expectation, they found the postoffice was not there but at the second house up the street. They could read the sign outside, they were told.

Its location known, the place was easy enough to find; a small white house, like any other of its type. The door was ajar and the travellers entered to find themselves in a square enclosure, a door to their left, and in front of them a box-like structure with a sort of window cut in it. Before the window hung a calico curtain. From behind this curtain presently appeared the head of a man.

"Good morning, ladies," the voice came with pleasant eagerness; "you're the ladies from Sandbridge? Mr. Matthews wrote to me about you. Will you just walk into the front room there, and take seats while I am sorting the mail. I'll be with you as soon as it is distributed."

Linda opened the only door in sight, and the two entered a plainly furnished room, which, however, provided two comfortable chairs, and in these they seated themselves to wait the postmaster's leisure.

They were mistaken if they thought their arrival was the unimportant matter it would seem to be, for, as the villagers began to come in, each made some excuse to enter the room, the first leaving the door ajar so the visitors could distinctly

hear the postmaster, as he handed out the mail, importantly informing his friends: "The ladies from Sandbridge have come." So one after another made some pretext for seeing the strangers. "Where can I get a match?" one would inquire. "Oh, I've opened the wrong door," the next would say, while the third showed his ardent curiosity simply and honestly by merely standing in the doorway and beaming on the two ladies. Once or twice a salutation was offered, though more often it was not.

The finale occurred when two little girls, with hair slicked tightly back and braided in flaxen pigtails, appeared, each holding the hand of a little boy with as shining a face as her own. Each little girl grasped a large red apple, in one hand, taking frequent succulent bites as she stared with round china-blue eyes at the strangers. The little roly-poly boy stared quite as fixedly, but at the first question addressed, the three fled, though Miss Ri and Linda could hear them shrilly reporting their experiences to someone in the next room.

In due time the postmaster appeared. "You wanted a fix, ladies, I believe. I meant to have gotten Jo Wilson's, but he's gone to his wife's brother's funeral. Maybe I can get Tom Skinner's; I'll see. I reckon a buggy will do, and you can drive yourselves. Going to the old church, I hear."

"I don't think we can drive," spoke up Miss Ri. "We don't know the road, in the first place, and in the second I don't care to drive a strange horse."

The man looked quite taken aback; he had not counted on these complications. "Now, that's too bad," he said. "I just depended on Jo, you see, but funerals won't wait. I'll look around and find out what we can do." He departed, leaving the two to be peeped at over the window-sill by three pairs of china-blue eyes. Evidently the children's curiosity was not yet satisfied.

"I feel as if I belonged to a menagerie," laughed Linda, "and as if they'd be feeding me peanuts next."

Miss Ri laughed and beckoned to the children who incontinently took to their heels.

After some time the postmaster returned saying he had been able to get a buggy and a boy to drive it. He hoped the ladies wouldn't mind sitting three on a seat; the boy wasn't so very big. It was the best he could do; he hoped they would be comfortable and if it hadn't been for Jo Wilson's wife's brother all would have been well.

If Linda had been of Miss Ri's proportions they would have found it a tight squeeze, but the boy, as reported, was not very big, and they assured the postmaster that they could manage. The lad evidently had been gathered in hastily from the fields to don his Sunday best, and to make such ablutions as consisted in clearing a circular expanse in the center of his face, and then wiping his wet hands on his hair which was still moist from the application. With many charges to the boy and with many anxious queries as to the comfort of the strangers, the postmaster at last sped them on their way, and before many miles were covered the old church appeared dully through the trees. It had a decayed, unkempt aspect even at a distance, and a nearer view showed it set amidst riots of thorny bushes, and old trees, which had never been trimmed.

In what probably had been the priest's quarters in bygone days, they found an old woman who lived there as care-taker. She hobbled to the door to open to their knock, showing one foot swathed in bandages. She was as unkempt as the rest of it, but was both surprised and pleased to see visitors, and was ready to display to them remnants of tawdry hangings, shrines from which the paint was scaling, and in the dingy church, a company of dusty saints who looked out dimly from altar and niche, bedecked with once garish but now faded and discolored artificial flowers. Miss Ri gazed around with an expression half contemptuous, half pitying. "And this is where my grandparents worshipped. Poor dears, I hope it was better in their day."

"Oh, it was a fine church once," spoke up their guide, "but very few comes to it now, and there's a service only once a month."

They were glad to escape out into the sunlight. The old woman led the way back to her own quarters, discoursing all the time

upon her ailments and asking for remedies. Being thirsty after the drive Linda begged for a glass of water, but when a brass thimble was fished out of a murky tumbler before it was filled, she concluded that nothing would induce her to drink it, and finally she made the excuse of speaking to the boy outside, when she found an opportunity of emptying the glass upon the grass.

This turning aside to visit the church had occupied some time, and it was noon when they reached "Mary's Delight," a beautiful old place bordering upon one of the many salt rivers which pierce Maryland's eastern shore. A tall, grey-haired man met them at the gate to open to them. "Howdy, Dick Goldsborough," cried Miss Ri.

"Of all things, Maria Hill," he responded. "Get right out. Well, this is a surprise. This your niece?"

"An adopted one. This is Betty Dorsey's daughter, Verlinda Talbot."

"Is that so? You are doubly welcome, Miss Talbot, for your father's as well as your mother's sake. I declare, Maria, this does take me back to old times. Come right in and I'll see about your horse. Where did you drive from?"

"We came up from Mackenzie. I wanted to see the old church, and the little boy has been our driver."

"Well, we can send him back and you shall return in a more comfortable way when you are ready to go. The boy must have some dinner. Just drive around to the stable, my boy, and one of the men will fix you up. You are going to make us a good visit, I hope, Maria. Father will be perfectly charmed to see you, and so will Julia."

They were ushered into a fine hall with a noble staircase rising on either side to the floor above. On one side the hall was a large room with a great fireplace now filled with crackling logs, in spite of the mildness of the day. Before the fire sat an old white-haired man who rose at the entrance of visitors.

"Here's a surprise for you, Father," said the younger man, raising his voice slightly. "Here is an old friend and the

daughter of another. Miss Ri Hill and Jim Talbot's daughter have come to see us."

The old gentleman's fine face brightened as he held out a slender frail hand. "My dears, I am delighted, pleased beyond measure to see you. Won't you come to the fire after your drive?"

"It is very mild out, Judge; we won't come too near," Miss Ri told him.

He waited till they were seated and then took his old place, looking at first one then the other. Linda thought him charming with a nobly intellectual head, hair white and fine as floss, waving thickly around a face full of strength and sweetness, eyes both wise and kind, still showing brilliancy. The rather high and prominent nose was saved from coarseness by delicate nostrils, the mouth had not lost its shapeliness nor the chin its firmness.

Before Linda had time for many words with the judge Mrs. Goldsborough entered to welcome them warmly and to carry them upstairs to lay aside their wraps. A white-curtained room exhibiting the beauty lent by handsome old furniture and exquisite neatness was placed at their disposal. The windows on one side looked out on the river, on the other was obtained a view of fields and garden. A little negro boy chasing chickens was the liveliest object in sight. It was quite necessary that chickens be caught for a company dinner, as Linda well knew.

The children were all at school, Mrs. Goldsborough told them, all but the eldest daughter who was in Baltimore where an aunt would chaperon her in this her débutante season. The younger children had a governess at home, the two older boys were at St. John's in Annapolis. Mrs. Goldsborough, a very neat, still rather pretty woman, was graciousness itself, and would fain have carried Miss Ri off for a long talk, but that she must be down-stairs to oversee the rather inefficient servants which the country supplied. So the visitors were handed over to the judge and his son.

Miss Ri was not long in bringing the conversation around to where she wanted it, and began her queries on the subject of the Talbot estates, giving the judge her reasons for asking. With the intricacies of a conjectural case in view the judge threw up his head like an old war horse and declared his opinion. "Any flaw in the title to Jim Talbot's property? Of course not. He was the eldest son as his father and grandfather were before him. The home plantation was always left to the eldest son. Madison Talbot bought Addition from his brother Cyrus when he went west, I am sure of that. Talbot's Addition was what Cyrus inherited from his father, while Madison had the Angles. Oh, I can't make any mistake there. Anyone who claims the Angles can't have a shred of proof. I've a lot of papers somewhere; I'll get them out, Maria, and you shall hear from me. Dick, don't let me forget that. I think the papers are in the old secretary in my office, but I am not sure; they may have been moved. Who is this young man, Maria, who says he is the great grandson of Cyrus Talbot? Let me see. Hm!" He put the tips of his delicate fingers together and bent his gaze on the fire. "Cyrus had a son who was killed in the War of 1812, I remember that, but this son was unmarried. There was a daughter who went away with him."

"Lovina, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was the name. I remember all that. You can't get me confused when it comes to those old matters, Maria; it is what happened yesterday that I forget. I'll look up those papers, however, and we will see if there is any sort of complication. Dinner, did you say, Julia? Maria, allow me. Dick, will you take out Miss Talbot?" And in this stately and formal manner they were conducted to the dining-room where was spread such a meal as one rarely sees except in just such a house in just such a locality. A great platter of fried chicken stood at one end of the table, a home-cured ham at the other, oysters, numerous vegetables smothered in rich cream, homemade jellies, pickles and sauces, the ever-present beaten biscuits, corn bread, wheat bread, all were there, and at the last a dainty dessert served with thick cream and pound cake.

The judge entertained them with many a tale of the days when he was young, when Martin Talbot, Senior, and he were

chums, when old Admiral Hill used to sail over to Sandbridge from Annapolis to spend a holiday in his old home and to stir the boys' young blood with his sea stories.

It was after dinner that Miss Ri had a chance to talk to the old man in confidence and to tell him of Linda's misfortunes while he frowned and shook his head and spoke of men who disgraced themselves and their families by marrying beneath them, and at last he became so scornful of "John Blair's people," that Miss Ri was glad Linda was not at hand to hear. She was with the children and their pretty young governess out in the little school-house where the day's lessons were had, and it was only when she was sent for that she realized how happy a time she was having.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO BUGGIES

It was with difficulty that the two visitors were able to take their leave that afternoon, and only the promise to come again and stay longer gave them liberty to go without hurting the feelings of these old friends. The little lad from Mackenzie had been dismissed long before, and it was Mr. Dick Goldsborough himself who insisted upon setting them upon their way. The dear old judge stood on the porch to wave a last farewell and to repeat his promise to look into the matter of Talbot plantations.

Linda wondered how it must seem to Miss Ri to be driving behind the horses of her former lover, himself holding the reins. She tried to place herself in a like position but when she attempted to replace Mr. Goldsborough in her mind with some other, two quite different persons would appear, and she could decide on neither.

Instead of going around by the old church they took the shorter way to the village which brought them to the borders of a stream where Mr. Goldsborough left them to be ferried across, thus saving some miles of travel. It was a very usual way of getting about in that part of the country where waterways were so numerous. From the old church at Talbot's Angles one could watch many of the congregation approaching in boats from the opposite shore of the creek, and when, before an approaching gale the tide would rise to cover the road, the little boats would be rowed in through the gateway half way up the path that they might land their passengers. It was therefore no novelty to be transported to the upper end of the village by means of the little boat, though it involved a walk down the long street to the lower end.

Miss Ri looked at her watch as they started on this walk. "It is earlier than I thought," she remarked. "The days are getting so short one cannot realize the time. The train doesn't leave till

seven, and we have over an hour to spare. What shall we do with ourselves?"

"We don't want to go to the postoffice to be stared at," returned Linda, "so perhaps we'd better entertain one another as best we can at the station; it seemed rather a horrid little place, but what better can we do?"

However, this experiment was spared them, for they had not gone more than half way to their destination when they were pleasantly accosted by a man who was coming from the other direction. "I believe you are the ladies who came from Sandbridge on the train this morning," he began. "I am Mr. Brown, the agent of the railroad, and as such I feel that I must extend you such hospitality as we have to offer. Our accommodations at the station are rather poor, and you have a long wait before you, for I suppose you take the seven o'clock train."

"Yes, we intended to," Miss Ri told him.

"Then I beg that you will make yourselves comfortable at my house. It is only a step away. I am sure you will find it a better place to wait than the station." He was so evidently anxious for the good repute of the village, and was so earnestly sincere in his invitation that there was but one thing to do, and that to accept.

Mr. Brown conducted them up on the porch of a neat little house, opened the door and ushered them into an orderly sitting-room where he saw that they were provided with the most comfortable of the chairs and then he settled himself to entertain them. But a very few remarks had been exchanged before he sprang to his feet with a shocked expression on his face. "Ladies," he exclaimed, "I am entirely forgetting that you will not be able to get any supper before you reach home, and that it will be then very late. What was I thinking of? We have only just finished our own meal, and—Excuse me, but I must speak to Mrs. Brown," and before they could utter a word of protest he rushed from the room.

"Do you suppose he has gone to fetch the keys of the city?" whispered Linda. "What are we to do, Aunt Ri? We can't run,

for there is nowhere that we can escape, and—"

She was interrupted by the entrance of their host with his wife, who, though somewhat less importunate, was nevertheless quite determined that the strangers should not leave the town without being properly fed, and this in spite of Miss Ri's protest that they had brought some fruit and biscuits with them, and that they really needed nothing more.

Mr. Brown waved all such suggestions aside. Therefore, seeing that it would be less rude to accept the proffered hospitality they followed Mrs. Brown to the small dining-room where a dainty little meal was soon spread for them, served by Mrs. Brown and her sister, Miss Weedon.

The rain, which the gathering clouds in the west had threatened that morning, and which had begun to drop before they entered the house, was coming down in torrents by the time the meal was over, and was accompanied by heavy rolls of thunder and vivid lightning. At each resounding peal and sharp flash the hostess and her sister would disappear within the recesses of a darkened room somewhere beyond, issuing only when there was a lull in the storm.

"It is rather unusual to have so heavy a thunderstorm this late in the season," Miss Ri was remarking when from the station someone came in haste to say that lightning had struck the building and would Mr. Brown come at once. He hurried off, though not without the parting assurance that he would soon return, leaving his wife and Miss Weedon divided between the responsibility of remaining with their guests and their desire to escape to the darkened room.

The storm, however, seemed to have spent its fury in hurling a final bolt at the station, and the timid women had the hardihood to remain in the outer room while only sullen mutterings once in a while reached them. Miss Ri and Linda did their best to reassure them, but in the face of the fact that lightning had struck so near, this was not easy to do.

It was getting on toward train time, and though the station was but a short walk the two visitors wondered how they were to reach it without umbrellas, but in spite of the confusion

occasioned by the lightning shock, they were not forgotten by good Mr. Brown, who, true to his feeling of responsibility as agent, appeared with umbrellas at the proper moment, and bore them off with the manner of one who would furnish a band of music if he could. He was faithful to the last, piloting them to seats in the car, telling the conductor to look after them, and at the last expressing regret at the coming of the storm as if he were in some way accountable for it. He came to the car window to urge them to come again when it should be made more agreeable for them, then as the train began to move off, he stood, hat in hand till darkness hid him from sight.

"That is what I call a true Maryland gentleman," said Miss Ri. "Did you ever meet such beautiful hospitality, and isn't it worth while to find out that it has not entirely disappeared from the land?"

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," declared Linda. "It has been a wonderful trip, Aunt Ri, from beginning to end."

"And the end is not yet," responded Miss Ri with prophetic vision.

"I don't see what more could happen," rejoined Linda.

What could happen was made very obvious as they stepped from the train at Boxford, for they had hardly alighted before Berkley Matthews rushed up to them. "Here you are," he cried, as if it were quite to be expected that he would meet them. "It has been a pretty bad storm and I didn't know whether you would venture or not, but I thought I'd be on the safe side. Now—"

But he had not finished his sentence when another figure loomed up in the doorway of the dimly lighted waiting-room, and who should come forward but Wyatt Jeffreys. The two men looked at one another and each gave a little embarrassed laugh. "I didn't know you were here, Jeffreys," said Berkley.

"Nor did I know you were," was the reply. "How long since you came?"

"Oh, half an hour or so. When did you get in?"

"Just at this moment. I suppose I don't know the road quite as well as you do."

"Linda, will you give me the pleasure of taking you to Sandbridge in my buggy," broke in Berkley with visible haste.

Miss Ri chuckled. "Go with him, Linda, and I'll give Mr. Jeffreys the inestimable privilege of taking me, that is, if he intends going back to-night. Perhaps you were going on by train, Mr. Jeffreys?"

"Oh, no, I came up—I came up," he was not so ready to announce his purpose as Berkley. "I thought you ladies might not be provided against the storm," he continued, "and it seemed to me that I might perhaps be of use in some way."

"And you were quite right," Miss Ri returned. "It saves me the bother of hunting up a team from the stables, or of deciding upon the other alternative of spending the night in Boxford, something I would much prefer not to do. Where is your buggy? I know the road perfectly." So Mr. Jeffreys was forced to hide whatever disappointment he might feel while Berkley bore off Linda to where his buggy, well provided with rain-proof covers, stood under shelter of the station's shed.

Well protected from the weather Linda and her escort drove off hidden behind the oilcloth curtains on which the rain pattered steadily. The lights of the buggy sent long beams over the wet shell road, the air had a mingled odor of salt marsh and moist, fallen autumn leaves. From the clouds rolling off overhead, once in a while rumbled muffled peals of thunder. Berk's horse responded to his master's slightest word, and on a worse night and over worse roads could be depended upon, so Berkley assured his companion.

"So you've been to see the old judge," said the young man by way of beginning conversation. "Isn't he a fine old fellow?"

"He is the dearest old man I ever saw," returned Linda enthusiastically. "He has such a beautiful head, and if one wanted to meet the very pattern of an old time courtly gentleman he would have to go no further than Judge Goldsborough."

"I quite agree with you, and I wish I could ever hope to become anything like him, but nature has not endowed me with his fine presence nor with his brains."

"But you can hope to be J. S. D., you know."

"I don't know. The some day seems a very far cry, just now." He was silent a moment before he asked: "What did the judge have to say to you, Linda?"

"Miss Ri asked him about the Talbot estates and he appeared quite sure that there could be no complications as regards Talbot's Angles, at least. He said he had some old papers which might give him some points about the other places."

"He ought to know if anyone does," returned Berkley. "Suppose there should be complications, Linda, and suppose it should be Talbot's Angles that Jeffreys lays claim to, and that he proved a legitimate claim, what then?"

"I'd not be much worse off than I am now."

"Oh, yes, you would. There is the chance of your sister-in-law marrying again."

"Which I don't think she is liable to do. I don't know that I would mind Mr. Jeffreys' having it any more than I do that Grace should. He, at least, is of the Talbot blood."

"There is something in that. I wish it were all yours; I can't bear the idea of your wearing yourself out teaching, Linda." The words came with caressing concern.

"I am more fortunate than most. Think of my having a home with Miss Ri, and among my own people. I suppose it actually isn't so much that the teaching is difficult as that I am so constituted that I can't really love it. It is a great thing to make one's living in the way one likes best; that seems to me to be half the battle."

"And what is it you like best?"

"To scribble."

"Have you sent out any more of your work?"

"No, but I intend to."

"And I hope you will finally meet such success that you can give yourself up to that kind of work. I agree with you that one ought to discover what are his best powers and make the best use of them he possibly can; if he would be happy."

"You are happy in your work, Berk, aren't you?"

"Yes, I love it, thank fortune, and I am beginning to see glimpses of a future."

"That is good," returned Linda with satisfaction. "You deserve success, Berk."

"No more than others."

"Much more than most others. Was ever a better son, or brother, if it comes to that?"

"Oh, nonsense, it is no sacrifice to do things for those you love; in fact, I've been rather selfish in pleasing myself, indulging my love of bestowing. It is really no credit to give because one enjoys it."

"Then there is no such thing as unselfishness in the world."

"Oh, yes, there is; when one does a thing he doesn't like, or gives up something he really wants very much; that is my idea of unselfishness."

"Then am I or am I not to consider that you have performed a selfish act in coming all the way to Boxford for me in all this rain?" asked Linda laughing. There may have been a little coquetry in the question, but she was hardly prepared for the seriousness of the reply.

"It was purely and entirely selfish on my part. It was the one thing I wanted most to do, and I would go much further and through a thousand greater difficulties for you. In fact, there is nothing I wouldn't do to make you happy, Linda Talbot."

"There's chivalry for you," returned Linda, determined to take the answer as lightly as possible.

The warmth but not the earnestness had gone out of his tones when he made the next remark: "I wish I could make it possible for you to stop teaching, Linda."

"Marry Grace off and get back Talbot's Angles for me, and I will stop," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Then would you go down there to live?"

"No, I'd still let Phillips have the place, but I would go down there often, and it would bring me enough to live on. I could persuade Miss Ri to spend part of the year there, maybe, and—oh, wouldn't it be lovely?"

Berkley did not reply, but spoke to his horse, "Go on there, Jerry." They had been driving so slowly that the other buggy had passed them though Berkley's was the fleeter horse. But now they sped along over the hard wet road, silence between them. Linda's imagination was busy picturing the delights of having the old homestead for her very own, and was fancying days spent there with Miss Ri and Mammy, for of course Mammy would go.

She was roused by hearing Berkley say in a hard dispassionate voice, "Then your dearest wish on earth is to possess Talbot's Angles."

"I really think it is. I don't suppose it is very nice of me to feel so about what belongs to another, but I confess to you, Berk, that I can't help counting a little on Grace's marrying again."

"That is perfectly natural, and it isn't half so bad as wishing her dead, though some might think so," he added. Then after a moment's silence: "Linda, I was selfish to carry you off this way without giving you any choice in the matter. Perhaps you would rather have gone with Jeffreys. It isn't too late to change now, if you say so. We can easily overtake his buggy."

"At the eleventh hour? No, I thank you, not after I am comfortably settled and safe from the rain. You have tucked me in so well, Berk. I don't believe Mr. Jeffreys could have done it half so well, but probably he has not had the experience you have. I might enjoy variety of companionship, but my bodily comfort is worth more to me." Linda was very skilful in giving non-committal replies it seemed.

Berkley drew a little sigh; whether of relief or disappointment Linda could not determine.

They had nearly overtaken the other two by now and soon had passed them, reaching home before the others. Berkley refused to come in; spite of inducements in the shape of hot coffee and sandwiches. Mr. Jeffreys, however, was not averse to joining in a late supper, and taking his horse around to shelter, he returned to the house while Berkley bade all good-night and drove off in the rain.

Anyone noticing the little office opposite the Jackson House would have seen a light there burning nearly all night, and could he have looked in he would have observed a young man whose earnest eyes were bent upon pages of yellow manuscript. These absorbed him so closely that the clock in the church tower struck three before he aroused himself. Even then he did not leave the place, but sat with elbows on desk and head in hands for another hour. Then, turning out the light and locking the door he crossed the street to the hotel where the watchman, snoring in his chair, paid no heed to the quiet entrance of this late guest.

Long before this Linda had said good-night to her departing relative, but the words which haunted her before she dropped asleep were not his unemotional and polite phrases, but the words spoken softly, caressingly yet with subdued fire: "There is nothing I would not do to make you happy, Linda Talbot." Was there a confession? Dared she understand it so?

CHAPTER XV

A DISTINCT SENSATION

For two days the storm continued, increasing to a gale which whipped the waters of the placid river to a yellow angry flood, and beat the few remaining leaves from their clasp on the trees. During this time Linda and Miss Ri kept indoors as closely as they could, their chief visitor being Mr. Jeffreys. Miss Parthy, to be sure, paddled up the walk to the back door in all the rain, and Bertie Bryan's rosy face peeped in at them one afternoon, but Berkley did not come near, and no one guessed his reason for staying away.

How great a struggle had been going on in the young man's mind none associated with him imagined. Since that night when it was disclosed to him through the papers which Mr. Jeffreys had left in his care, that there was a possibility of Linda's losing her chance to inherit Talbot's Angles, he had fought his giants; one his love for the girl, the other the temptation to withhold the more important papers. He need not destroy them; he would only set them aside, and tell Jeffreys there was not sufficient evidence to warrant a legal claim. At last, however, when he must really face the issue, he laughed at such an idea, and realized that there was but one thing for him to do. He would give up Linda to his rival. Why should Jeffreys not possess the property as well as Grace? So, perhaps, would Linda be given her dearest wish. That day at the postoffice it had been revealed to him what his feeling for the girl really meant, and from that moment his love had grown stronger, deeper, fuller. On that rainy night he had nearly spoken of his feeling for her. Had she spoken less lightly he might have done so, even though at that time his cursory glance at the papers had given him some belief in the justice of Jeffreys' claim. But he had recognized that the girl herself was still heart free, and therefore, though there might be a chance for him he must keep away, must make excuses not to see her. He must assume a great air of one too absorbed

in business to spare time for visiting his friends. He could manage all that. But first he must pave the way. He would go and tell them all that to Jeffreys would probably fall the old homestead, and he would say: "Better into the hands of an honest and honorable man, the descendant of the old stock, than to Grace Talbot." He would praise this future owner, and would plant the seeds which should blossom into regard and affection. Jeffreys was a good fellow, a little stiff, maybe, but a man of strict morality and—the fight was bitter—he would make her a good husband.

He shrank from making the revelation which should first suggest to Linda that it was really Talbot's Angles to which the papers referred. He could see her startled look, her fluttering hands, the color coming and going in her cheeks. He bit his lip fiercely and tramped up and down his small office savagely. Why should this ordeal be his to meet? He would turn it over to some other, Miss Ri, perhaps.

"I can't do it," he cried aloud. "I'll fling the whole dog-goned pack of papers into the river first." Her dearest wish! He stopped short. Could he supply it? Was he able to buy Talbot's Angles supposing it were for sale? What nonsense. He laughed mirthlessly. "I am a pretty sort of duffer," he exclaimed. "What am I thinking of?"

He jammed his hat upon his head, slammed the door behind him and strode down the street, passing Uncle Moke without a word and with such a set look on his face as caused the old man to mumble, "Mr. Berk sholy is riled. Look lak he gwine 'res' some o' dese bank robbers, or sumpin."

Berkley's step never faltered as he marched on with head up, as one going to battle. His savage peal of the door-bell brought Miss Ri in haste. Her face cleared when she saw who it was. "Well, Berk," she exclaimed, "what a mighty pull you did give, to be sure. Come in, come in and help us celebrate. We've a great piece of news for you."

He entered the room, where Linda sat, her face all alight, and some distance away, Mr. Jeffreys, with a queer strained expression in his eyes, but a forced smile upon his lips. On the table stood a tray with glasses filled with some of Miss Ri's

famous homemade wine. "Here comes another to help us celebrate," cried Miss Ri. "Get another glass, Verlinda." She filled it, when brought, from the heavy old decanter and, holding her own glass aloft, she exclaimed: "Here's to the next owner of Talbot's Angles!"

Berkley's hand shook so that his glass overflowed and a few drops were spilled. His eyes met those of the other man. Neither spoke, nor did either touch the wine.

"You don't understand my toast," cried Miss Ri, looking from one to the other. "Grace Talbot is going to marry Major Forbes, and Linda will have her heart's desire."

"Of course, I'll drink to Linda, if that is what you mean," said Berkley, recovering himself and tossing off the contents of the glass, while Mr. Jeffreys echoed: "Of course, we'll drink to Miss Linda."

Berkley sat down, his head in a whirl. This put an entirely different face on the matter. He would have to think it over. This was no time to force conclusions. He scarcely heard Linda's eager account of the letter she had that day received from her sister-in-law. "It was so like Grace," she told him. "Major Forbes was such an old friend—"

"Quite old," put in Miss Ri. "He must be sixty, if he's a day."

"And she was such a dependent creature," Linda went on. "It seemed only proper that these two starved hearts should be united. She hoped Linda would not think she had been precipitate, but it had been eight months since poor Martin—not darling Martin any more—" Linda commented sadly, "and she would, of course, wait for the full year to pass. She felt that dear Linda would be pleased, not only because of Grace's happiness, but because it would benefit her. She must not think that little Grace was unmindful of that part of it. She had it in mind to do what she could for Martin's sister and, though it was a sacrifice to give up her home to Linda, it was done cheerfully. Linda must feel assured of that."

"Now, isn't it like that woman to take such an attitude," sneered Miss Ri. "Give it up? She can't help herself, as I see it."

"Major Forbes is abundantly able to keep me in the style to which I have been accustomed," Linda read—another sneer from Miss Ri—" and I am sure I shall be happier than living a lonely and forlorn widowhood," and so on and so on.

As Linda's soft slow tones ceased, Berkley roused himself to say, "I only dropped in for a minute. I am terribly busy these days. I must run right back to the office." He did not look at Mr. Jeffreys, but shook hands with Miss Ri. "Sorry I can't stay," he said nervously. "I'll come again as soon as I get time, Miss Ri."

Linda followed him to the door. "Aren't you glad, Berk?" she asked wistfully.

He looked past her down the street. "Glad? Of course, I'm glad," he said, then he ran down the steps, Linda looking after him with a quivering lip.

She returned to find that Mr. Jeffreys, too, had gone. "By the side door," explained Miss Ri.

Linda went over to the fireplace and put her foot on the fender, her back to Miss Ri, that the latter might not see the tears which filled her eyes. "They weren't a bit glad, either of them," she said presently. "I thought Berk would be, anyhow. Don't you think he acted queerly, Aunt Ri?"

"I think they both did; but it may have been that they were completely bowled over with surprise. You know we could scarcely believe it at first, ourselves, and men are much slower to grasp things than women. They were dumbfounded, that was all and, no doubt, Berk is busy. I hope he is. So much the better for him, my dear."

Linda made no response. She was not aware that Berkley had gone back to his office to wage another battle. What a turn of fate, to be sure, and now what was to be done? It would be Linda, Linda who was to be deprived of her own, and his must be the hand to deal the blow. Those papers! He struck them with his clenched fist, as he stood over his desk, and if a smothered oath escaped him, it is to be hoped the recording angel failed to register it against him. "There is one thing certain," he told himself; "if the thing is to be carried on, I'll

throw up the case. I'll be hanged if I have anything to do with it."

He picked up a letter which he had laid aside, sat down, and began to read it over. It was from Cyrus Talbot to his brother Madison, and it read:

> "You say that your property Addition has not suffered as much as some others, but that on account of hard times, you do not feel it possible at this time to rebuild the house burnt some months ago; therefore, since evil times have befallen you by reason of the ravages of war, I am quite willing that you should continue to occupy the house at Talbot's Angles; but as soon as peace visits our land, I would esteem it a favor, if you would find someone to take the plantation itself, paying me a yearly rental, which shall be fixed as circumstances allow. My own affairs here continue to prosper, and I do not think I shall return to Maryland, having found me a wife whose relatives live in close proximity and are a God-fearing and industrious people. I shall be glad to hear from you as occasion permits, and subscribe myself
>
> "Your aff. brother,
>
> "CYRUS."

This letter appeared never to have been sent, but there were others bearing upon the subject from Madison to his brother. It seemed from them that Madison was able to find a tenant for the Angles, but in time he proved unsatisfactory, as there were many reports of his thriftlessness, and at the time of Cyrus's death the place lay idle.

That this place was Talbot's Angles appeared evident from references to certain fields lying next the old church, and in an account of some disaster befalling the old windmill in a heavy storm. There were, too, old receipts and bills which identified the property and proved that, at least during the life of Cyrus Talbot, it had been in his possession, whatever may have happened afterward. Owing to the fact that many deeds and records had been destroyed during the War of 1812 and later

during the Civil War, when neglect and indifference caused many legal papers to be lost, it promised to be a difficult thing to trace the ownership through succeeding years, unless further proof could be found.

At last Berkley happened upon a letter dated much later, a letter from Linda's own father to Charles Jeffreys. It said: "I have looked into the matter you bring to my notice, and I find that you are right in most of your surmises; but, as the place lay idle and neglected for a number of years, tenantless and abandoned, it was in no condition to bring in any return when I took it in hand. I have spent a good deal on it, and if you are willing to consider this outlay as rental for the time being, I shall be glad to be considered as your tenant, otherwise I must give up the place. Since the slaves were freed, labor is difficult to get, and I cannot afford to bring up so neglected a place at my own expense and pay rent besides. We have continued to live in the old house, which has been kept in good repair. Later on, we may be able to come to a different arrangement; but at present it seems to me it would be to your better advantage if you allow matters to remain as they are. If you take the property into your own hands, much money will have to be spent on it before it can bring you any appreciable return."

"Twenty-five years ago," mused Berkley. "I wonder if Martin knew, or whether a different arrangement was at last made. I imagine not and that the place was allowed to remain in James Talbot's hands in return for what he might do for it. That is the latest information to be had, that I can see, and there is really nothing more to be found out from these papers."

He rested his head on his hand and remained lost in deep thought. For all Miss Ri's decided announcement that he might even perjure himself for one he loved, that was something Berkley Matthews would never do. No, there was no help for it; facts were facts, and he must let them be known. Could he ever expect to win Linda's love and respect, if he had won her by such unworthy means? Would he not always be playing a false part, and would not the result fail of good to him and to her? No, a dishonorable transaction, no matter what its motive, would never do to base true love upon. Let things take their course, and let the best man win. It might be, after all, that she

would not marry Jeffreys, in spite of his prospects. But this hope he dared not cherish. He pressed his hand over his eyes, as if he would shut out too bright a vision, and just then the door of his office opened and in walked Mr. Jeffreys.

Berkley turned sharply at the sudden entrance. "Ah," he exclaimed, "you are just the man I was thinking of. I've been going over these papers again, Jeffreys, and so far as I can judge, it looks like a pretty good case. Sit down and we'll talk it over."

Jeffreys drew up a chair. Berkley wheeled around and the two sat facing one another. "Of course," Berkley began, "you realize that the property referred to is Miss Talbot's old home, Talbot's Angles."

Mr. Jeffreys looked down. "Yes, I inferred so, although at first I was uncertain, not knowing as much as I do now."

"The records will have to be searched, of course, and we can find out who has been paying taxes and all that, you understand. I don't know that I shall have time to attend to it myself; I am pretty busy just now."

"That is too bad; I depended on you, Matthews."

"I know you did, but—"

Wyatt Jeffreys leaned forward. "Is it only because you are busy? Is that the only reason?"

Berkley did not answer at once; then he parried the question.

"What other reason could there be?"

"Your interest in Miss Talbot. I realize, Matthews, that I have come down here a perfect stranger to deprive a very lovely young woman of her property, and that you should in all reason feel antagonistic is not to be wondered at. I think you have known for some time that it was her property that I claimed."

"I have known it only since I made a closer examination of these papers."

"Very well; that does not alter the fact that you have been uniformly kind and considerate so far as I was concerned, and

therefore I feel that I can speak as man to man." He paused. "Unless you have a prior claim, there is no need of Miss Talbot's losing her property if—"

"She will take you with it," Berkley filled the pause. "I understand." The crucial moment had come. Berkley suddenly swung his chair around, his face, turned from the other, was white and set, but he said steadily, "That would certainly be the best way out of the difficulty. I have no prior claim, Jeffreys, and I wish you success." He swung himself back again and held out his hand.

The other took it in a firm grip. "That is good of you, Matthews. I appreciate your kindness more than I can say." There was silence, broken by Mr. Jeffreys, who went on: "If it is only the matter of delay then, Matthews, I can wait your good pleasure, if you will take up my case."

Berkley gave himself time before he answered. Why shouldn't he take the case? What odds, now, what Linda thought? He had relinquished all rights to her consideration. If he did not hunt up the evidence, someone else would, and she be no better off. If he must disregard her, he could at least be true to Jeffreys. "I'll not go back on my word. I'll take it," he said shortly.

"I've kept a busy man too long," said Jeffreys rising, "but I hope some day I can show my appreciation of what you are doing for me, in more ways than one," he added with a smile. He held out his hand. Berkley took it mechanically, saying, "Good-night."

"Good-evening," returned Mr. Jeffreys, and he went out.

It was not late, though growing dark, but to Berkley it had become darkest night. Never, till that moment, had he realized how strong a hold upon him his affection for Linda had taken. She was so sweet, so gentle, one whose presence always brought calm and peace, yet she could be very droll and merry, very bright and entertaining, with a blessed grace of humor. With all her poetic fancy there was the domestic side, too, which had made her the successful housekeeper when yet but a school girl. And how dainty she always was, how womanly her

little frills and simple ornaments. Even the way her dark hair grew around her pretty low forehead, and was worn parted above it, made her distinctive from other girls, whose monstrous puffs and braids gave them a top-heavy look. What a woman for a man to come home to after a day of stress. She, who had striven for her daily bread, how well she would understand what a man's battle of life meant. His first impulse was to throw everything to the winds, to snatch up his hat and rush off to her, beg her to listen to him, tell her he would work for her, live for her, die for her. He stood for a moment, trembling with intensity of feeling, then he sat heavily down again. "I can't do it," he whispered. "I must think of her, of what is best for her."

Moments passed. The street lamps shone out, footsteps echoed and reëchoed. Some boys went by singing. In the darkness Berkley sat very quietly, only once in a while he whispered, "Oh, God! oh, God!" as one who has found his Gethsemane. The hours wore on, the street grew very quiet, the rumbling of wagons, the tread of passers-by ceased. Lights in the lower stories of the houses began to be extinguished, while those above showed in first one room and then another. Berkley finally arose, stumbled uncertainly across the street and up to his room, where he threw himself across his bed, face down, and lay there all night wrestling with himself.

CHAPTER XVI

"BEGONE, DULL CARE"

The days slipped by till the Christmas holidays were at hand. Linda was busy with her school. Miss Ri occupied herself with the hundred things which kept her interests alive. Her clubs, church meetings, visits to sick neighbors, public and private charities, all filled her days to overflowing. Mr. Jeffreys called regularly, so it came to be an understood thing that he would appear either afternoon or evening. Berkley visited the house seldom, and rarely when Linda was at home. He would run in once in a while, asserting that he was too busy to stay and had only dropped in to say "Howdy." He would question Miss Ri about her affairs, but before she could turn her queries upon him, he would be off. After that one bitter fight, he had himself well in hand, and the fact that he worked far into the night and was fast gaining a reputation for industry and exactness, not only bore out his statements, but caused him to stand well with the older lawyers.

"That's a young man who will make his mark," said Judge Baker to Miss Ri one morning when he met her on the street—Berkley had just passed them with a swift bow—"though I am afraid he is working too hard."

"I'll have to haul him over the coals," returned Miss Ri. "You know he is a great favorite of mine, Judge."

"So I have observed. Give him a little motherly advice, Miss Ri. He needs it. He mustn't be burning the candle at both ends; but I prophecy, that if he continues to exhibit the keenness and skill he is developing, he will be judge some day."

The words returned to Miss Ri as she walked down street, and her thoughts went back to the trunk and then to the papers. There had been no news from Judge Goldsborough, and there appeared to be an absolute lull. Mr. Jeffreys had announced

that Berkley was going to take up the case as soon as he had time, and so it stood.

If Linda missed Berkley, she did not say so, and never commented upon his sins of omission. She accepted Mr. Jeffreys' constant attention as a matter of course, was chagrined only when he refused to tell her about his claim, for he always set aside the question with, "We cannot tell definitely as yet."

"He is such a cautious, deliberate person," complained the girl one day to Miss Ri. "I wish he would show a little more spontaneity."

"I thought you admired his beautiful dignity and reserve."

"Oh, I do; except when I want my curiosity satisfied," laughed Linda. "I don't doubt but that he says what he really means, which is more than can be believed of some persons I know."

Miss Ri gave her a sharp, quick look, but made no comment. Her crochet needle moved swiftly in and out the meshes of white wool she held. "Verlinda," she said presently, "how would you like to go up to the city for your holiday? I invite you as my guest. We can get someone to stay here in the house to keep Phebe satisfied, and we'll have a real rollicking time going to the theatre, shopping, seeing our friends, and giddy-gadding generally. What do you say to it?"

"Oh, Aunt Ri, it would be perfectly delightful, but—"

"But what?"

"Won't it be very expensive?"

"It won't be too expensive. I've just had a dividend I didn't expect, and I can't think of a pleasanter way of spending it. I hate to go poking around by myself, and I don't know anyone whom it would be more real joy to have with me."

"Not Miss Parthy?"

"Oh, Parthy's an old stick when it comes to the city. She isn't young enough," Miss Ri laughed comfortably.

Linda sat bending over an embroidered piece she was doing for Grace's Christmas. There was a reminiscent look on her

face. This would be her first Christmas since Martin died. It would be hard not to spend the day as usual in the old home, and harder still not to hear the voice of him who had always made Christmas a happy day for her. Yet, after all, it would be less lonely with Miss Ri, for had not the dear woman made this a true home for her? It was like her to plan this outing, that the girl might not yearn too deeply for past joys. There would not be the old church to decorate, as in the years gone by, but on Christmas Eve she could take wreaths to the churchyard. Her thoughts were far away when Miss Ri's voice roused her.

"Well, shall we go?"

"If you really think you would enjoy having me," answered Linda, coming back to the present. "I think you are a darling to ask me."

"Of course I'd enjoy having you. We can have our Christmas here—Phebe would be broken-hearted if we didn't allow her to cook our Christmas dinner—and then we'll pack up our duds and go. I don't know that I can take you to any big functions, but we can have a mighty good time, I truly believe. We ought to have someone to dine with us on Christmas Day to make it more festive. I'd ask Berk, but he wouldn't miss spending the day with his mother for worlds. We might have Parthy and Mr. Jeffreys. Parthy hasn't any too good a woman in the kitchen, and it would suit all around; give her a rest and please the cook."

So it was arranged, and Linda looked forward quite joyously to the ten days in the city. Never before had such a treat been hers; a few days at a time had been the utmost of her stay. She had gone to her brother's wedding, a showy affair in which she had little heart, and had several times remained with a friend over Sunday, but this was a very different affair.

Phebe, on being consulted as to whom she would prefer to look after while the two were absent, gave an unqualified vote for Mr. Berk. "He so jokey, Miss Ri," she said, "an' he do look at my wittles lak he can't wait. Den he a gem'man. I laks to wait on a rale gem'man, one o' de ole fambly kin'. Mr. Jeffs he a gem'man, too, I specs, but he don' know nuffin how to talk to us niggers. He so solemn, lak ole owl, or fo' all de worl' lak a

preacher. He tas'es dis an' he tas'es dat lak he dunno whe'r he gwine lak it or no. Mr. Berk he shake he haid an' say, 'Um-um, dat sholy look good.' Mr. Jeffs ack lak he feard somebody think he enjyin' hisse'f, but Mr. Berk thes pitch in an enjy hisse'f 'thout carin' what anybody think."

Miss Ri laughed and, upon the occasion of her next walk down town, stopped at Berk's office to ask if he would take possession and sleep nights at her house during the holidays. He responded with alacrity, promising to behave himself, but begging that he might be allowed to take his meals at the hotel.

"And disappoint Phebe? Never!" cried Miss Ri. "She is counting upon feeding you up. I told her you were getting thin and pale because they didn't give you enough to eat at the Jackson House, and she is fairly aching to provide for you. She will have to cook for herself, and why not for you? Besides, you are her choice of the whole townful, so you should feel flattered."

"I do," returned Berkley, "and very grateful to both you and her. I'll come, Miss Ri. When do you start?"

"The day after Christmas. You'll be back by then?"

"Oh, yes, I'll be back. I shall go to town only for the day, and must be here for various reasons as soon as practicable."

"Then that is settled. Merry Christmas, Berk. I wish you could dine with us, but I know your mother's mind, and I wouldn't even suggest such a thing."

Miss Ri's box of books provided several gifts for outsiders, but for Linda was a special gift obtained, a fine soft evening cloak, something she did not possess, and which she would need during her holiday visit. From the new cousin came a handsome set of books and a box of flowers, the latter for both ladies. A very ornate, wholly impossible scarf of coarse texture arrived from Grace for her sister-in-law.

"It just looks like her," commented Miss Ri. "You can always tell underbred people by the presents they give. No lady would look twice at a thing like that. Why didn't she send you one plain fine handkerchief, if she didn't want to spend her money

for something handsome? It would at least have shown some refined taste."

"I don't believe she knows any better," returned Linda, by way of excuse.

"Exactly," replied Miss Ri.

From Berk came merely an unostentatious little card for Linda, though for Miss Ri arrived a fine potted plant. "I'll allow you to look at it," remarked the recipient with a little laugh.

Not even a card found its way from Linda to Berkley, though in her upper drawer lay a half-finished blue silk tie. She had stopped working on it long before.

Mr. Jeffreys saw them off on a cold twenty-sixth of December. That same evening Berkley arrived to take possession of the room Miss Ri had told Phebe to make ready for him. Phebe, with her head tied up in a new kerchief, and with an immaculate expanse of white apron, was ready to receive him, to show him upstairs and to wait upon him hand and foot. She adored Linda, had great respect for Miss Ri, but "a rale young gem'man" awakened all the love of service within her, and if he had done the justice she expected to the meal she served, he would probably have died of indigestion that very night, and the close of this chapter would mark the end of this tale. However, whether from lack of appetite or for other reasons, he ate with discretion, and then retired to the sitting-room, where he worked over a budget of papers till near midnight. With candle in hand, he then went upstairs. As he passed through the upper hall he perceived the door of a room open. He tip-toed up to it, stood for a moment on the sill, then entered softly and with the expression of one approaching a sanctuary. Phebe had removed all suggestion of disorder, but she could not remove the subtle reminders of a girlish presence, which were suggested by the pictures on the wall, the books on the table, by the little slippers peeping from under the foot of the lounge. An end of ribbon fluttered out from behind the door of the small wash-closet, which stood partly open. Berkley gently lifted the satiny end and laid it against his cheek, then to his lips. After this, he tip-toed out

again, closing the door softly behind him. He had this once entered a holy of holies, but he must not be tempted again.

Meanwhile Miss Ri and Linda were settled at their hotel and were making plans for the next day.

"I suppose I must go to see Grace," remarked Linda.

"Oh, not right away," was Miss Ri's reply. "Wait till the memory of that scarf becomes a little more vague, then you will be able to thank her for it with some similitude of warmth. In the case of that gift, it is one of the instances when 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.' No, I have planned what we are to do to-morrow. In the morning we will go shopping; in the afternoon we will stay at home and receive calls; in the evening we will go to the theatre."

"Oh, but, Aunt Ri, I haven't been going anywhere."

"High time you did. I don't want you to do anything that might distress you, Verlinda, but I think a good play or two will do you a world of good. We will look at the paper and see what is going on. We must hear some good music. Perhaps there are to be some good concerts at the Peabody; we will find out. I don't believe in persons making a selfish indulgence of a sorrow. I am sure no one more than Martin would like you to have a pleasant, cheerful time. You need it, and we ought to do what is best for us."

"Very well," Linda acquiesced. "I am in your hands, Aunt Ri. I will do as you say."

Miss Ri looked pleased. "That is what I do like about you, Verlinda; you are always so sweetly reasonable. Come, let's go down to supper."

It was rather a pleasant sensation to be one of the company which occupied the dining-room, and Linda enjoyed looking about her quite as much as she did the partaking of the excellent meal. They had just finished, when suddenly she caught sight of a party at one of the tables across the room. "Aunt Ri, Aunt Ri," she said, turning toward her companion. "Who do you think is over there, just across from us, a little to your rear? You'll have to turn your head—the Goldsboroughs.

Mrs. Goldsborough, the governess, the two little girls, and an older one. She must be the débutante."

Miss Ri turned her head, but by this time the little girls had caught sight of them and were smiling and nodding. "They've evidently come up for the holidays," said Miss Ri. "That Miss Carroll is quite a pretty girl, isn't she?"

"Yes, I thought so when we met her the other day at 'Mary's Delight,' It was nice of them to bring her, wasn't it? She told me that she was very happy with the Goldsboroughs, that the children were dears, and that she was quite like a daughter in the house."

"Julia would make her feel so. She is one of the kindest-hearted women in the world, and not the least of a snob. They are coming over to speak to us."

The two groups met half way, and walked to the reception room together. Freddy, the eldest daughter, was bound for a theatre party and must hurry away. "She was named Fredericka, for her grandfather," Mrs. Goldsborough explained. The other little girls, Julia and Mary, sat one each side of Linda, on the sofa; Miss Carroll drew up a stool opposite, while Mrs. Goldsborough and Miss Ri settled themselves further away for a good talk.

There were ever so many things going on in the city, the girls told Linda. One of their cousins was to have a tea, another had asked them to a box party, a third to a small dance. "We won't be out for two or three years yet," said Mary; "but we shall have just as good a time as Fred, if she is a débutante." Then there was much talk of this and that one who had come out that season; of Fred's engagements and the attention she was having, the twittering chat which young girls like. Miss Carroll smiled indulgently at the little chatterers, but once or twice gave Linda a look, as much as to say, "We know what it is worth." However, Linda enjoyed this glimpse into a frivolous world and went upstairs with Miss Ri without a thought to sadden her.

There was a morning's shopping, luncheon at a quaint little place on Charles Street, a return to the hotel, an afternoon with

the friends who had been notified of their arrival and who called promptly, then the theatre, and Linda's first day in the city was so full that she dropped to sleep with never a thought of Sandbridge and the friends there who might be missing her.

The next day Miss Ri reluctantly consented to a call on Grace. The house where the Johnsons lived was in a new, rather than a fashionable part of the city. The room into which the maid showed them was pretentiously furnished, crowded with ornaments, ugly though expensive, the walls lined with poor pictures in gaudy frames. Money value, rather than good taste, was the keynote of the establishment, it was easily seen.

After keeping them waiting for some time, Grace swept in wearing a new gown tinkling with jets and redolent with sachet. She made many apologies for having kept them waiting. "Such a surprise. So sorry I couldn't have known." She had been up so late the night before, and the rest of it. Were they up for a shopping expedition? There were so many good bargains after the holidays.

**"HE HAS GIVEN ME
THE DEAREST RING."**

She lifted her eyebrows and viewed Linda with surprise when told why they had come, where they were staying, and how long they intended to remain. She could not quite understand why Miss Ri should have invited anyone so uninteresting as she conceived her sister-in-law to be. Yet she did not voice her opinion, but only said gushingly, "Oh, then you'll be able to meet the dear Major. I do so want you to know him, Miss Hill, and you, too, Linda. Of course, the engagement cannot be announced except to the family, but he has given me the dearest ring, which I do not wear in public, naturally." She stretched out her plump hand and displayed the solitaire with much satisfaction.

There was some talk upon trifling matters, then Grace, turning to Linda, said, "Oh, by the way, what about that Mr. Jeffreys? I had a note from Mr. Matthews a few days ago, and he tells me there is a claimant for Talbot's Angles, and that he is going to law about it. Mr. Matthews asked me if I knew of any old papers which might be in the house down there. I told him Mr. Phillips had the key and he would go with him to see what could be found. It would be sad, would it not, Miss Hill, if, after my effort to do what would seem best for Linda, the property should pass into other hands?"

"Talbot's Angles? Are you sure it is Talbot's Angles?" asked Linda. "We have always thought it must be Addition, or even Timber Neck."

"No, I am quite sure it is the Angles. Of course, that is the most valuable of the three places now, though the Major says none of them are worth so very much; but then he has such large ideas. The amount at which we value the place would be a mere bagatelle to him."

The call was short. Miss Ri could not stand much of Grace, but they were urged to come soon again and to come in the evening, when the dear Major would be there. Grace was invited to have tea with the two at their hotel, an invitation which she accepted eagerly, and then the callers left.

"Aunt Ri," began Linda as soon as they had turned from the house, "did you dream it was Talbot's Angles?"

"Why, yes, dear; I half suspected it all the time."

"Why?"

"From the way those two, Berk and Mr. Jeffreys, acted."

"And that is why you wanted to consult Judge Goldsborough?"

"Yes, that was why."

"But he says there is not a shred of proof."

"He said so at first. Later, he was not so sure but there might be complications."

"I understand." Linda was silent for some time; then she spoke again, following out her thoughts: "Aunt Ri, do you think that is why Berk has avoided me? Do you think he has known all this time?"

Miss Ri hesitated before she made answer. "It may be that, Verlinda."

Linda gave a little sigh. "I am sorry he had to feel that way about it. I wouldn't have blamed him, for he was not to blame, was he? He couldn't help it."

"Not unless he chose to be disloyal to Mr. Jeffreys and dishonorable altogether."

"And that he could never be. We know that, don't we, Aunt Ri? Shall we see his sister and mother, do you think?"

"I am sure we shall. I wrote to Mrs. Matthews that we were coming."

No more was said on the subject just then; but, in thinking it over in the seclusion of her room, it dawned upon Miss Ri that Linda was much more concerned for Berkley's part in the transaction than in her own loss of the property. "Well," she exclaimed, sitting down to face the situation, "this is a revelation. How on earth is it going to end now, I'd like to know."

CHAPTER XVII

AS WATER UNTO WINE

The time passed as gaily as Miss Ri meant it should: in receiving and returning calls, in a little sight-seeing, in shopping, lunching, dining, a moderate amount of theatre-going. There was a visit to the old low-roofed, grey-shingled market one Saturday evening, when the Goldsborough girls, with their governess, begged Miss Ri and Linda to join them in a frolic.

"We want to buy taffy," they said, "and see the funny people. Do go with us; it will be so jolly." The expedition was quite to Miss Ri's taste and, that Linda might have the experience, she urged the going. A merry time they all had of it, pushing their way from one end of the long market-house to the other, and then parading up and down outside, where the country people, with their wagons, exhibited their wares on tables improvised from a couple of barrels with boards laid across. A little of anything that might be salable was offered, from bunches of dried herbs to fat turkeys.

"It hasn't changed a particle since I was a little girl," declared Miss Ri. "My uncle used to take me to market with him before breakfast on summer mornings, and would buy me a glass of ice cream from that very stand," she designated one with a bee-hive on its sign. "I wonder how I could eat such a thing so early in the morning, though then I thought it a great treat. On Saturday evenings in winter he always brought home a parcel of taffy, which tasted exactly as this does which we have bought to-night. And my aunt, I can see her now with a colored boy walking behind her carrying a huge basket, while she had a tiny one in which to bring home special dainties."

"That custom isn't altogether done away with yet," Miss Carroll told her. "Some of the good old housekeepers still cling to their little baskets."

"And a good thing, too," asserted Miss Ri.

One afternoon, Grace brought her Major to call, and they found him to be a stout, elderly man, rather florid, a little consequential, but quite genial and polite, and evidently very proud of his young fiancée.

"He's not so bad," commented Miss Ri, "although he is not of our stripe. I was sure he could not be a West Point man, and he isn't. He served in the Spanish War for a short time, he told me. However, I don't doubt that it is going to be a perfectly satisfactory marriage. He likes flattery, and Grace is an adept in bestowing it."

Mrs. Matthews and her daughter, Margaret Edmondson, were among the very first to call and to offer an invitation to luncheon. "We shall not make a stranger of you any more than of Maria," said Mrs. Matthews, taking Linda's hands in hers. "I remember you so well as a little bit of a girl, of whom Berkley was always ready to make a playmate when you came to town. My first recollection of you is when I brought Berkie over at Miss Ri's request. You were no more than three and he was perhaps six or seven. You looked at him for a long time with those big blue eyes of yours, and then you said, 'Boy, take me to see the chickens.' You liked to peep through the fence at Miss Parthy's fowls, but were not allowed to go that far alone, you were such a little thing. From that day Berkie was always asking when Miss Ri's little girl was coming back, for you left that same evening."

Miss Ri looked at Linda. Her face was flushed and her eyes downcast.

"I shouldn't be surprised," put in Margaret, "if Berk were wishing now that Miss Ri's little girl would come back."

Linda withdrew her hand from Mrs. Matthews' clasp and turned from the gentle face, whose eyes were searching hers. "Oh, you are mistaken, Mrs. Edmondson," she said hurriedly. "Berk and I very seldom see one another; in fact, I have not laid eyes on him for weeks."

"He's working too hard," said Mrs. Matthews, turning to Miss Ri. "I thought he looked thin and careworn when he was last

here. I wish you all would advise him not to overwork. He values your advice very highly, Maria."

"We all think he is working too hard," returned Miss Ri, "but if he listens to anyone, it will be his mother. I never knew a more devoted son."

"He is indeed," replied Mrs. Matthews. "Maria, I hate to have him in that comfortless hotel; he was always such a home boy."

"Come, Mother, come," broke in Mrs. Edmondson. "Miss Ri, if you get mother started on the subject of Berk, she will stand and talk all day. We shall expect you both on Thursday. Take the car to Cold Spring Lane and you will not have far to walk."

The callers departed and though Linda said little of them, Miss Ri noticed that she made no protest against the trip to the pretty suburb where they lived. She had not been so ready on other occasions.

Mrs. Edmondson, proud of her pretty new house, was ready to show off its conveniences and comforts, and to discourse upon the delights of living in a place which was not city and yet was accessible to all that one desired, for it was not half an hour by trolley to the center of the town. Her husband, a young business man, was making his way rapidly, Mrs. Matthews told Miss Ri with pride. "And he is a good son to me," she added, "so I shall never want for a home while I have three children. Margie insists that I shall never leave her; but, unless Berkley marries, I think I should make a home for him. I can't have him living in a hotel all his life." Then followed anecdotes of Berkley, of this act of self-denial, that evidence of devotion. "You know, Maria, that he is exactly like his father. The Doctor always thought of himself last."

"Mother, dear," interrupted Margaret, "they didn't come to hear Berk eulogized, but to see your pretty room. Come, Linda, let us leave them. Miss Ri is almost as bad as she is when it comes to Berk." She put her arm around Linda and drew her away, whispering, "Mother thinks I am jealous, but I am not a bit; I only don't want her to get the notion that she must leave me and go back to Sandbridge. After all Berk has done for us, I

think he ought to have his chance to get ahead, and the very least I can do is to try to make mother happy here with me. Herbert agrees with me. I wish Berk had a home of his own, and then mother would be satisfied."

The two younger women went off to view other parts of the house, while their elders talked of those things nearest their hearts. They were old friends and had much in common. Margaret was a sweet womanly person, not a beauty, but fresh and fair and good to look upon, with the same honest grey eyes as her brother's, and the same sturdy frankness of manner. Linda thought her a trifle expansive, till she realized that herself was anything but a stranger, in spite of the fact that she had not met these two since she was a little girl.

"I am glad I wasn't brought up within hail of the monument," said Margaret as she exhibited her spick and span kitchen. "I should hate to be deprived of the privileges of my own kitchen, and I shouldn't like to believe I must live on certain streets or be a Pariah. There is too much of that feeling in this blessed old city, and I must say our Cavalier ancestors did give us pleasure-loving natures as an inheritance. Half the girls I know are pretty and sweet and amiable, but they never read anything but trash, think of nothing but wearing pretty clothes and of having a good time. However, I think they do make good wives and mothers when it comes to settling down. Someone said to me the other day, that Southern girls married only for love and that poverty came in at the door to mock them for being so silly as to think any marriage was better than none; that they didn't mind love flying out of the window half so much as they did going to their graves unmarried. There may be some truth in that, but I think they are generally pretty contented and are satisfied to take life as it comes."

Margaret was a great chatterer, and was delighted to get Linda to herself, to air her own views and to learn of Linda's. "Aren't you glad, Linda," she went on, "that you are making a place for yourself in the world? Berk has often said that you were quite different from most of the girls he knew, and that he wished we could be good friends. He says you can talk of other things than dress and gossip, and that you are quite domestic. Are you domestic?"

"Why"—Linda paused to consider—"yes, I think I am. I like to keep house. I did for my brother, you know; yet I like a good time and pretty clothes as much as anyone."

"Of course. So do I. But you care for other things, too. Berk thinks you are so wonderful to write so well, and to get along so successfully with your teaching."

Linda made a little grimace. "Berk is very kind to say so, but that is something for which I do not feel myself fitted and which I really do not enjoy."

"So much the more credit for doing it well. Linda, you must come to the Club while you are here. I know you would enjoy it. Mother and I both belong. There is another and more fashionable literary club, but we like ours much the best. The real workers are members of it, not the make-believes. It meets every Tuesday afternoon. We must arrange for you to go with us, and Miss Ri must come, too." Here the elder women entered, and Miss Ri reminded Linda that they were to go to a tea on their way home, so they departed, Linda and Margaret parting like old friends.

The tea was a quiet little affair which Linda had promised Miss Ri to attend, as it was at the house of one of the latter's particular friends, and here they lingered till dinner time. As they were going to their rooms a card was handed them. Miss Ri raised her lorgnette to read the name. "Mr. Jeffreys has been here," she exclaimed.

"The gen'l'man say he be back this evenin'," the elevator boy told them.

"Humph!" Miss Ri looked at Linda. "Were we going anywhere to-night?"

"No. You remember that we said we would be going all day and that we'd better stay in and rest."

"Then rest shall I, and you can see the young man. Now, no protests; I am not going down one step. I can trust you to go unchaperoned this once, I should think. I don't feel like talking to him. I have been talking all day."

Therefore Linda went down alone when the young man was announced, to find him sitting in a little alcove, waiting for her. He was in correct evening dress and looked well. Linda had never seen him so carefully attired and could but acknowledge that there was a certain elegance in the tall, dignified figure, and that he looked quite as distinguished as any man she had met. She, herself, was all in white, Miss Ri having persuaded her that such a dress was as appropriate as her frocks of black. She looked very charming, thought the young man, who rose to meet her, and his manner was slightly more genial than usual.

"It seems a very long time since I saw you, Miss Linda," he said.

"Only a week," returned Linda, seating herself on a low divan, her skirts making soft billows around her.

"You have enjoyed yourself and the time has passed very quickly, I presume."

"Very quickly. We have had a delightful week. And you?"

"There have been festivities in Sandbridge from which you were missed."

"And to which, probably, I should not have gone. No piece of news of any importance?"

"One which will interest you and which I came to tell you of."

He hesitated so long that Linda, to help him out, began, "And the news is—"

"About my claim." He hesitated, as if finding it very hard to go on.

"Oh, I think I can anticipate what you have to say," rejoined Linda easily. "My sister-in-law has told me that it is Talbot's Angles to which your papers refer. Is that true?"

"It is."

"And have you established your facts?" Linda asked the question steadily.

"Not perfectly; although the past week has given us some extra proof in the papers found at the house itself. Among them we found some receipts given by Cyrus Talbot to the tenant for rent. They read: 'Received from John Briggs one quarter's rent for Talbot's Angles,' so much, and are signed by Cyrus Talbot."

"By 'us' you mean Mr. Matthews and yourself?"

"Yes, it is through his efforts that we are able to get so much evidence as we have."

"I see." There was silence for a moment. Linda sat perfectly still and, except that she nervously played with a ring on her finger, appeared unmoved.

Mr. Jeffreys watched her for a moment, then he leaned forward. "Miss Linda," he began, "I know how you must feel, and it pains me beyond expression to bring you news that must be disappointing to you, but—" he halted in his precise speech, "but you need not lose your old home, if you will take the claimant with it."

Linda lifted startled eyes.

The young man went on: "I have thought the matter over and while I could not consider it expedient to live on the place, I would not sell it unless you wished, and would always, under any circumstances, reserve the house, that you might still consider it your home."

Linda laughed a little wildly. "It seems that is always the way of it. I am merely to consider it my home in every case."

He drew nearer and took her hand. "Then, will you accept it as I offer it? With myself? I would try to make you happy. I think if I had the stimulus of your companionship, I could succeed. We could make our home in Hartford, and you could return to Maryland when it pleased you each year. I have just received an offer from an insurance company. They wish to send me to England on business, and on my return they give me the promise of such a position as will insure me a future."

"It is in Hartford?"

"Yes; and it is a lovely city, you know."

"Where, as in Sandbridge, they are always ready to welcome strangers cordially? I think I have heard how very spontaneous they are up there, quite expansive and eager to make newcomers feel at home." She spoke with sarcastic emphasis.

"Of course, my friends would welcome you," returned Mr. Jeffreys a little stiffly. "Dear Miss Linda," he continued more fervently, "don't get the idea that there are no warm hearts in the North because you have heard of some cold ones. Once you know the people, none could be better friends. I would try to make you happy. Will you believe me when I say that you are the first woman I have ever wished to make my wife?"

"Yes, I believe you." She smiled a little.

"Please think it over. I would rather not have my answer now. I know there is much to bewilder you, and I would rather you did not give me an impulsive reply. I will not pursue the subject. I will come to-morrow. I would much rather wait."

"Thank you for your consideration," returned Linda. "I will think it over, Mr. Jeffreys. It is only right that I should. Must you go?"

"I think so. May I come to-morrow afternoon? At what hour?"

"About five. We have an engagement in the evening."

He arose, took her hand, pressed it gently and said earnestly, "I beg that you will remember that it would be my dearest wish to make you my wife under any circumstances."

"I will remember," returned Linda.

"Please give my regards to Miss Hill," continued Mr. Jeffreys, taking up his hat. "I owe her a debt of thanks for giving me this opportunity of seeing you alone." And he bowed himself out.

There were but few persons in the large drawing-room, and they had been quite sequestered in their little alcove. Linda returned to her seat, and lingered there, thinking, thinking. Presently she smiled and whispered to herself, "He never once said he loved, never once. 'As moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine,'" she murmured musingly. So he would marry her and take her to his city, where there would be no

Aunt Ri, no warm-hearted neighbors to welcome her with cordial emphasis, as there would be when she went back to Sandbridge. Nevermore the flat, level roads, the little salt rivers, the simple every-day intercourse of friend with friend, the easy-going unambitious way of living, the smiling content. Instead, the eager struggle for greater ostentation and luxury, which she saw even in the city where she now was; the cold, calculating stares from utter strangers, when she went among them, interest lacking, affection wanting. But on the other hand, she would come back to her old home every year, and it would be truly hers. But how hard it would be to go from it again! And after a while she would be coming less and less frequently. She would grow reticent and unapproachable. Repression would silently work the change in her. She would have the opportunity of pouring out her thoughts on paper, to be sure, but—so she would at home. "No, no, no," she cried; "I'd rather a thousand times teach my restless boys for the remainder of my life. I don't love him, and that is exactly what is wrong. Where he lives has nothing to do with it. Goodbye, Talbot's Angles. You were never mine, and you never will be now."

She went to her room, tip-toeing gently that Miss Ri might not hear her in the adjoining one. She slipped quietly into a chair near the window and gave herself up to her thoughts. She must not let Miss Ri think her caller had remained so short a time, and the dear woman must not be told of what had occurred. When she heard a stirring around in the next room, she knocked on the door, which was quickly opened to her.

"Well, child, has your young man gone?" came the query. "What did he have to say?"

"He told me the same thing Grace did about Talbot's Angles."

"He did? The wretch!... Linda, why did we ever treat him so well? He doesn't deserve it."

"Why, Aunt Ri, he can't help being the great-grandson of Cyrus Talbot."

"He could help coming down here and stirring up all this fuss."

"He sent his regards to you."

"I don't want them. What else did he say?"

"It appears that they have some new evidence, found in the paper which Grace directed them to. Some old receipts which seem to establish the fact that Cyrus Talbot really did have the right to rent the place to a certain John Briggs. I don't know how these receipts came into the possession of our branch of the family, but probably Briggs gave them to our great-grandfather to keep safely. At all events, Berkley Matthews and Mr. Jeffreys have worked it all out."

"I don't see how Berkley could have the conscience. It is outrageous for him to be party to a scheme for defrauding an orphan girl."

"Oh, Aunt Ri, you mustn't say it is defrauding; it is just legal rights. We may have been defrauding them."

"We'll see whether it is so or not. Judge Goldsborough was so sure; but then I suppose all these things were not known to him. I wish we could hear from him and learn what he has discovered in the papers he holds."

"We shall, in good time. Meanwhile, what difference does it make? I am used to having the place belong to someone else, and I am growing content to spend my days in teaching. I shall even be glad to get back to my boys."

Miss Ri swung around sharply and took the girl's face between her hands. "Verlinda, Verlinda," she said, "I wish I could turn a search-light on that heart of yours?"

"Why, Aunt Ri?"

"Oh, because, because, a woman's reason." Then she put her arms around the girl and hugged her close to her ample night-dress. "You are a darling child. Teach as long as you like; it will be so much the better for me than seeing you go off to Hartford."

Linda felt the color rise to her face. "How do you know that opportunity will ever be afforded me?" she asked lightly.

"If it hasn't been, it will. How did that miserable usurper look?"

"Very handsome; in quite correct evening dress, which suited him perfectly. Aunt Ri, it would be a privilege to sit opposite such a fine-looking man three times a day for the rest of my life."

"It would, would it? and have to use a knife to dissect him before you could find out what he really felt about anything? And even then you wouldn't discover a thing in his veins but ice-water."

Linda laughed. "You can be the most vehement person for one who pretends to be so mild and serene. I notice that where those you love are concerned, you are anything but mild, bless your dear heart. Don't be scared, Aunt Ri; I'll never leave Sandbridge, never. I'll never leave the dear old Eastern Shore for anyone. No, indeed."

"Who is vehement now, Verlinda Talbot? I verily believe that man has proposed to you. I am convinced of it. Oh, my dear, maybe after all you ought to consider him, for that would settle it all. You could live in the old home and be happy ever after, only, Verlinda, Verlinda, what would become of Berk?"

Linda gave a little smothered cry and Miss Ri felt the slender figure quivering, though quite steadily came the words, "We can't take Berk into consideration, Aunt Ri; he is fighting with all his might for Mr. Jeffreys, and so far as I am concerned, he doesn't think of me at all—in any direction."

"I don't believe it," returned Miss Ri. "I admit he is an enigma, but I don't believe a word of his not thinking of you. I've talked to his mother," she added triumphantly.

After that not a word would she say on the subject, but sent Linda off to bed, and if the girl needed anything to fix her decision regarding Mr. Jeffreys, it is possible that Miss Ri's last words helped to the conclusion.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DELIBERATE CONSCIENCE

In spite of having already made up her mind when she left Miss Ri, Linda conscientiously devoted an hour's serious thought to the subject of Wyatt Jeffreys; for she told herself that it was only fair to him. She took down her hair, wrapped herself in a dressing-gown, and gave herself up to contemplation. "It wouldn't be so hard," she thought, drawing her brows together, "if he had determined to live at Talbot's Angles, for I should at least have my old home."

"And see Berkley Matthews whenever you went to town," something whispered.

"Oh, well," the argument came as if in reply, "would that be any worse than it will be now when I have to stay in town and run the risk of meeting him at any time?"

"But now there is a little hope," again came the inward voice.

"There isn't! there isn't!" Linda contradicted. "I can't believe there is. Look how he has acted: avoiding me openly, sending me only a little trifling card at Christmas, taking up this case which defies my rights. Tell me such a thing? It is not so."

"But Miss Ri has talked to his mother. Margaret herself told you that Berk never wearied of sounding your praises."

"That is all a blind. He doesn't care; he couldn't, and act as he is doing." She resolutely shut her ears to the voice of the charmer and turned her attention to the other claimant to regard. He had many fine qualities, but comparisons would crop up. Mr. Jeffreys had praised her work and had congratulated her upon appearing in print; but it was more on account of the recognition, than because of what she wrote. Berk, on the other hand, perceived the spirit rather than the commercial value. She had shown both men other little writings; Berk had commented upon the thought, the

originality of some fancy; Mr. Jeffreys had praised the metre, or the quality which would make it marketable. "There is the difference," thought Linda; "Mr. Jeffreys does not lack intellectual perception but Berk has a spiritual one. I saw deep into that one day when I was talking to him about Martin. He may be flippant and boyish on the surface, but back of it all there is that in his soul which can penetrate behind the stars. If he loved anyone he would not care for her looks, her position, her wealth, or for anything but just her individual self. Mr. Jeffreys would weigh the qualities which go to make a satisfactory wife. It was his dearest wish. I was the first, he would try to make me happy; all that, and not a word of his feelings toward me. His heart did not speak, his deliberate conscience did, for I don't doubt he has one, and it makes him uncomfortable when he thinks of wresting Talbot's Angles from me. Well, my good man, keep your conscience. You have done your duty and there is an end of it. Go back to where you belong."

She pondered awhile longer and then took out her writing-materials. "I'll have this ready when he comes," she said to herself. "In case Aunt Ri is at hand and I do not have a chance to speak to him privately." She wrote the note, addressed the envelope and sealed it with an emphasis which had an air of finality about it, and then she went to bed. What her dreams were she did not tell, but no doubt Queen Mab galloped through her brain.

Prompt to the minute, Mr. Jeffreys arrived. Miss Ri and Linda, hurrying back from a call, found him there, and as fate would have it Miss Ri sat down for a chat. She would like to have the gossip of the town from Mr. Jeffreys. How was Parthy and how were the dogs, and what was going on? Had he seen Berk? and all the rest of it. The young man, whatever may have been his impatience, answered quietly and politely, giving at length certain little details which he knew would interest Miss Ri, and for this he deserved more credit than he received.

After half an hour he asked if Linda would take a walk with him, but Miss Ri objected, saying that Linda was tired and that she was going out to dinner and must not be late, which hint

started the young man off, though not before he had given the girl a deprecating, inquiring look. She responded by handing him the little note she had written the night before.

"Here is what you asked me for," she said, the color rising to her cheeks and a little regret to her heart when she realized that she was dealing him a blow.

He looked at her searchingly, but she dropped her eyes, and he was obliged to go without receiving a spark of satisfaction.

As girls will be, in such cases, Linda was a little hard on the man whom she had just refused. She gave him less credit than he deserved, for he was honestly and fervently in love with her, though having lived in an atmosphere of repression, and where it was considered almost a crime to show a redundance of affection, he had betrayed little of what he really felt, but it is a comment upon his eagerness to state that he wasted no time in finding out the contents of the note she gave him. It was brief, but to the point, and was enough to send the young man back to Sandbridge on the evening boat which he had barely time to catch. He felt rather badly treated, for in her sweet sympathetic manner he had read a deeper concern than existed. Now he realized that it was nothing more than she would show anyone thrown upon her generosity, or at the most, presenting a claim to kinship of blood. He credited her with magnanimity in yielding up Talbot's Angles without showing resentment, and he valued her invariable attention to his confidences, as he reported the various ups and downs of his affairs, but in his heart of hearts he charged her with a little coquetry, failing to understand her spontaneous sympathy as a man of her own locality would have done.

He had the wisdom to believe that her decision was final, yet he lingered in Sandbridge till her return, giving himself up to brooding over his troubles more pessimistically, if less passionately than a more impulsive man would have done, and his cheerful little remarks to Miss Parthy, clipped off with the usual polite intonation, gave her no evidence that he was most unhappy.

But one day he walked into Berkley's office. Berkley looked up from the litter of legal documents crowding his desk. "Well,

Jeffreys, old man, how goes it? Been up to town, I hear. When did you get back?"

"Several days ago," was the answer. "I did not stay long."

"Sit down and tell me about it."

Mr. Jeffreys took the vacant chair, but ignored the invitation to "tell about it." "I came in to say that I am thinking of returning to Hartford," he began. "I suppose you can continue to push my business without my presence."

"Why, yes, I imagine so. You could run down if necessary. I don't suppose you mean to stay away very long in any event."

"I should probably not return except in case of necessity." He paused, then said with an effort, "You were good enough, Matthews, to encourage me in my addresses to Miss Talbot so I think it is due you to say that she has refused me."

"My dear man!" Berk leaned forward and laid his hand on the other's knee. "You mustn't give up so easily. You know a woman's No isn't always final."

"I believe this to be. You wouldn't accuse Miss Linda of being an undecided character.

"No, I must confess I wouldn't. She is very gentle but she generally knows her own mind pretty thoroughly. Jeffreys, my dear fellow, I am sorry. I don't wonder you are cut up and are thinking of leaving us. It would be a desperately hard fight to stay and be obliged to see her every now and then. For a man to lose a girl like Linda Talbot is pretty tough lines. I shouldn't want my worst enemy to go through such a purgatory."

"You speak feelingly," returned Mr. Jeffreys with a little bitter smile. Then his better manhood asserting itself, "Matthews, you know you love her yourself."

Berkley tossed up his head proudly. "What if I do? I am not ashamed of it."

"And you deliberately gave me the chance of winning her if I could. Why?"

Berkley made savage dabs with his pen upon the blotting pad before him, thereby injuring the pen hopelessly and doing the

blotter no good. He suddenly threw the pen aside. "What sort of chump would I be if I hadn't done it? Her happiness was the first thing to be considered, not mine. I knew she wanted Talbot's Angles more than anything in the world, and that ought to have made it dead easy for a man who really loved a girl in the right way."

"And you have been doing everything in your power to win the property for me. You have been loyal to both of us. Shake hands, Berkley Matthews, you are far and away a better man than I am, but I will not be outdone. Do you think I have no pride? I may have a deliberate conscience, as Miss Talbot herself once told me, but I hope it is as well developed as yours. I'll fight it out and then we shall see. What right had I to expect that I could throw a sop to my conscience by asking her to marry me? I see it all now. You love her; so do I, and I will prove it to you both."

"Do you suppose I doubted the truth of your feeling for her?" cried Berkley. "That would be a poor compliment to her. I think you are too easily downed, Jeffreys. Cheer up. Take another chance. Wait awhile. Do your best to better your chances. Unbend a little. Be more free and easy. Make her dependent upon you for encouragement and sympathy. Oh, there are a thousand ways."

Jeffreys regarded him with a half smile. "You mean I must substitute a Southern temperament for a Northern one. That is easier said than done. The day of miracles is past."

"You've not known her so very long," Berkley persisted in his argument.

"I've seen her almost every day, sometimes twice a day for three months. I have known young ladies for years whom I seem to know less well. Certainly there has been no bar to our becoming well acquainted."

"Well, I wouldn't give up this early in the game," Berk continued his pleading.

"You think there is a chance for me, do you? I can tell you there is not," replied Mr. Jeffreys with emphasis.

Berkley accompanied him to the street where they stood talking a few minutes longer. A horse and buggy were there in waiting for Berkley. "I promised John Emory to go with him to sign a deed," he said, "and he left his buggy. I am to pick him up further along. Can I take you anywhere, first, Jeffreys?"

"No, thank you. I have no special errand. I'm not a man of business just now, you remember."

Berkley took his place in the vehicle, was about to gather up the reins when around the corner dashed an automobile. The horse threw up his head, gave a sudden plunge, and in another second would have swung the buggy directly in the path of the rushing car, but that Jeffreys sprang forward and seized the horse's head to jerk him to one side, but this was not done before the car grazed him sufficiently to send him to the ground, close to the horse's hoofs. Without stopping the car sped on. By this time Berkley had grabbed the reins and had spoken commandingly to the horse which fortunately, stood still. Several by-standers sprang to Jeffreys' aid and dragged him from his precarious position.

Berkley threw the reins to Billy, who had run out at the sound of this commotion, and leaped to where Jeffreys now stood. "Are you hurt, old man?" he asked as Jeffreys limped to the sidewalk. "Come right into the office." He dismissed the little crowd which had gathered and assisted Jeffreys inside.

The latter shook himself. "I'm not actually hurt," he answered "only a little bruised, I think, and slightly shaken up."

"You were within an ace of being killed, man," said Berkley gravely. "And you risked your life for me. I am not going to forget that, Jeffreys."

The young man smiled. "It evens up matters a little," he returned, "though we are not quits yet. I haven't lost sight of that fact."

"Doesn't saving a man's life come about as near settling any existing score as a thing could?" asked Berkley.

"Oh, we won't strain a point so far as to say it was saving your life. You might not have been hurt at all, and it merely

happened that I was the first to grab the bridle. There were others ready to do it if I had not."

"Bah!" cried Berkley. "That's all wrong argument; if the horse had not been there; if the car had not come along; we could go on indefinitely with conjecturing, but what we face is a visible truth. You risked your life and limbs for me, and that is the exact statement of the case. Thank you, is a very feeble way to say what I feel."

"I'm quite all right now," returned the other, setting aside further discussion. "If you will let me have a brush or something to get rid of this dust on my clothes, I'll be as good as ever. That's it, thanks," for Berkley was vigorously applying a whisk broom to his dusty coat and trousers. He refused further aid, insisting that there was no need of any assistance in getting home. He would rather walk; it would be good for him. So Berkley was perforce to see him leave, and himself reëntered the buggy, and drove off to keep his appointment.

He was very grateful to and infinitely sorry for his rival, but there was an undercurrent of joy singing through his heart. She had refused him, bless her, and she would return home that very day. He took out a note received from Miss Ri the day before, saying that they would arrive by the morning's boat. He reread the lines. "It isn't decent of me; it really isn't," he exclaimed, stuffing the note back into his pocket. "It's like dancing on another man's grave, and after what he has just done for me, too. What right have I to be glad anyway? It is losing her the comfort of living again in her old home, and, dickens take it, how do I know that I am any better off? Simmer down, Berkley Matthews; it won't do for you to go galloping off with an idea before you have all the facts in the case. At least you will have the grace to keep quiet while the other fellow is around." And he altered his train of thought with the determination of one who has learned the art of concentration under difficulties.

He had restrained himself from rushing off to the boat to meet the returning travellers, but, after his return to his office, Miss Ri called him up and imperiously demanded his presence to dinner, and he accepted without a word of protest.

"You're looking better," remarked Miss Ri, after they had shaken hands. "I knew Phebe would be as good for you as untold bottles of tonic. Come right in. Linda is waiting in the dining-room."

And there Linda was. Berkley wondered if she could hear the thumping of his heart. Here was her hand in his. What a wonderful fact! She was there before him,—free—as possible for him as for any other. He longed to ask if she were the least little bit glad to see him, but he didn't; all he said was: "Glad to see you back, Linda. I hear you have been having a great time."

"Who told you?" she asked with a sudden bright smile.

"Mother wrote me a long letter. I'll tell you about it another time. I suppose you were sorry to come away."

"No, not at all, though we had a lovely time. If you want a thoroughly skilled designer of good times you must employ Aunt Ri.

"I think the trip did much for me in many ways. One must get off from things to acquire a really true perspective, you know, and now I am so happy to be here again, to see the dear blue river, and this blessedly stupid town and all that. There is no place like it, Berk."

What pure joy to hear her speak like that. Berkley wished she would go on forever, but she was waiting for some response, he suddenly realized. "That is the way I like to hear you talk," he said quite honestly. "I've noticed myself, that when I have been away for any length of time I am always glad to get back to the simple life."

"Very simple with such a dinner," laughed Linda. "Phebe has prepared all this in honor of our home-coming."

"It seemed a pity that you should not be here to share it," spoke up Miss Ri. "There was no need to send you back to husks this very first day."

"I came near not being here at all," he answered. Then he recounted the episode of the morning, sparing no praise of Mr.

Jeffreys, but looking at Miss Ri rather than at Linda as he told the tale over which his hearers were much excited.

Fain as he was to linger after dinner, he would not allow himself such a luxury, but rushed off almost immediately, saying he must get back to work. Miss Ri watched him with tender eyes as he hurried down the path. "It is good to get him back," she said turning from the window. "I don't know what I should have done if anything serious had happened to him. He is looking very well, I think. That troubled, anxious expression has left his face. I think the poor boy must have been under some great strain. If you go off with that waxen image to Hartford I'll adopt Berk as sure as you live."

"Oh, Aunt Ri," expostulated Linda, "you know he is no tailor's dummy, but a very fine-looking man, and just think of what a heroic thing he has just done. There was no deliberation then, but the quick sacrifice of himself at the critical moment. Berk might have been killed but for him. I don't see how you can talk so about my brave cousin."

"Cousin is it? Well, so long as he remains only that I have no complaint to make of him. I suppose now we shall have to have more respect for him than ever."

Linda had to laugh at the aggrieved tone. "*I* certainly have," she answered emphatically. "I think he was perfectly splendid."

"Berk, or any other half way decent man would have done the same thing under like circumstances," argued Miss Ri. "I don't see that it was anything for him to crow over."

"I think it was decidedly." Linda stood her ground.

"Well, we won't quarrel over it," continued Miss Ri. "Let's change the subject. I was just thinking, Linda, that I have discovered something since I have had you here with me, though, by the way, one does that all through life; some truth, some moral of living is suddenly revealed at a given stage. Life is nothing more than a series of revelations."

"And what has been revealed to you, wisest of Aunt Ris." Linda came over and took her friend's face between her hands.

"That one must have somebody to work for in order to get the best out of existence."

Linda's hands dropped; her face grew wistful. "And I have no one but myself to work for," she shook her head sadly.

"You have me, in a certain sense, and it is too early yet for you to despair of having someone else." Miss Ri laughed wickedly.

Linda pretended to box her ears. "You are a naughty old thing. I am going out to talk to Mammy, and leave you to meditate upon your sins," she said.

Mammy was sitting at the table lingering over her dinner. She never liked to cut short this happy hour of the day, and was fond of picking here and picking there, though she would not remain at the table if anyone entered. It would never do to have "white folkes" see you eat.

"I thes gwine to cl'ar away," she said with a beaming smile as she swept bones and potato skins into her empty plate.

"Oh, Mammy, you haven't finished your dinner," exclaimed Linda.

"Yas, I done et all I wants. I thes res'in' up a little 'fo' I does mah dishes. Set down, honey, an' tell yo' Mammy what yuh-all been a-doin' whilst yuh was up in de city. Mighty fine doin's, I reckon. Yuh stay at de big hotel?"

"Yes."

"An' w'ar dat nice floppity white frock?"

"Yes, I wore it several times."

"An' yuh has uver so many nice young gem'mans come to see yuh?"

"Not very many. You see I don't know a great many people, and I am not going to dances this winter, of course. Mr. Jeffreys came up while I was there, and he is a nice young gentleman, I am sure."

Mammy began delicately to wipe her tumblers. "Miss Lindy, yuh ain't gwine ma'y dat man, is yuh?"

"No, Mammy." Linda spoke quite decidedly, "but you know he is a kind of cousin, and I must be as nice to him as possible, besides I like him very much."

"He kain't hol' a can'le to Mr. Berk; he de likenes' young man I uvver see."

"You'll make me jealous if you talk that way," said Linda fondly and to please her Mammy.

Mammy ducked her head and laughed, shaking her head from side to side.

"I'll not go away again if you are going to get so fond of someone else while I am gone," Linda went on with a pretence of pouting.

Mammy fairly doubled up at this. "Ain' it de troof?" she cried. "Law, chile," she continued appeasingly, "I ain't so t'arin' fond o' him; he ain't tall enough."

It was Linda's turn to laugh, and she went back to Miss Ri to repeat Mammy's criticism.

CHAPTER XIX

OF WHAT AVAIL?

Berkley's words did have the effect of encouraging Mr. Jeffreys to take heart anew, and, as it would be another month before his presence would be required in Hartford, he concluded not to neglect his opportunities. Therefore again Berkley retired to the background to watch his rival pass by with Linda, walk to church with her, while he heard of his visiting her daily. It seemed, then, that he did not intend to give her up lightly.

"I don't know what to do about it," Linda confided to Miss Ri ruefully. "I can't tell him to go home when he comes, and I can't disappear like the Cheshire cat when he joins me on the street. He will be such a short time here that it doesn't seem worth while to do more than let matters drift."

"I rather like his persistence," declared Miss Ri. "He'll win you yet, Verlinda."

Linda neither affirmed nor denied. Another little poem had found its way into print and there was hope ahead, even though Talbot's Angles should be lost to her.

"It isn't such a tremendously valuable piece of property after all," Miss Ri continued her remarks, showing the trend of her thought, "and if you weren't so sentimentally fond of it, Verlinda, I don't know that it would be such a great loss. I wish you'd let me adopt you; then I'd leave you this place."

"You'd have me give up my independence, Aunt Ri? Oh, no. We've canvassed that question too often. If you had taken me before I had known what it was to hoe my own row, it might have done, but now, oh, no. You're the dearest of dears to tempt me, but we shall both be happier with no faster bond than that which self-elected friends must always feel. I love no one so well as you, and you don't dislike me, though I admit I don't consider myself first in your regard."

"And who do you think is? Not Becky Hill's brood, I'm sure. They will have enough, and I am not one of those who think everything should go to those of the name, unless there's love, too. Who do you mean? If you're not first, who is?"

"Berkley Matthews."

"Better say he used to be. He hasn't the sense he was born with. If I were his mother I'd spank him."

"Now, Aunt Ri, what for?"

"On general principles, just because he is such a notional piece of humanity. I admire him, too; I can't help it; all the same he tries me. When you desert me to turn Yankee, Verlinda, I'll make my will and leave this place as a home for indigent females or something of that kind."

"How nice," returned Linda comfortably; "then when I grow decrepit I can come back here and have my old room."

The little creases appearing around Miss Ri's eyes, showed that she appreciated this retort. "There comes Bertie," she announced a moment after.

"Then I'll ask her to walk with me," returned Linda, rising with alacrity.

"Doesn't Mr. Jeffreys make his appearance about this time?"

"Generally, but I can skip him to-day. I'd rather go with Bertie. Just tell him, Aunt Ri."

"That you'd rather go with Bertie?"

"Of course not, but that we have gone out for a walk."

"Where are you going?"

"There's no need of your knowing, is there?"

Miss Ri looked up with a smile. "I understand. Go along. I reckon you're right to suggest the unattainable once in a while; it adds to the zest later." And with this Parthian shot following her, Linda left the room to join Bertie.

In another moment Miss Ri saw the two girls going out the gate. "I'll not even watch to see which way they turn," she said

to herself, letting her gaze fall on her work rather than on the outside world. The dear lady made a good conspirator.

"When are you going to announce your engagement?" was one of the first questions Bertie put to her companion, as they set their faces toward the main street.

"What do you mean?" asked Linda.

"Oh, now Linda Talbot, everyone knows you are engaged to Mr. Jeffreys. You wouldn't be together so continually if you were not."

"I think I could mention several young persons in this town who have set a worthy precedent," replied Linda.

"Oh, well, of course, but in this case—He isn't the flirty kind, we all know."

"He is my cousin," argued Linda in self-defence.

Bertie laughed. "We all know that kind of cousin. The Irish maids have flaunted them before our eyes for generations. That won't do, Linda. Own up."

"Positively there are none but friendly relations between Wyatt Jeffreys and myself."

"Truly? I can scarcely believe it, but there is not a doubt but that there will be different ones, and everyone is thinking it such an ideal arrangement, for of course it is known that he is the claimant for Talbot's Angles."

"I am sorry to disappoint my neighbors."

"I, for one, don't expect to be disappointed. If I did I would set my cap for the young man myself. I've heard girls talk that way before, and the first thing you knew their wedding cards were out. I don't see how you can possibly give up the joy of owning that dear old home of yours. He'd better not offer himself to me, I'd accept him for Talbot's Angles if for nothing else."

Linda winced. It might come to that, perhaps. For the moment she felt annoyed at Bertie who might have been more tactful, she thought.

"Do you know," continued Bertie, "whether Mr. Jeffreys intends to live there? We are all dying to know, and if you don't become the mistress of the dear old place it will not want for one for the lack of appreciative damsels. The girls are ready, even now to reckon on their chances. We don't have so many eligible young men come to town that we can afford to let such a desirable one go away unappropriated."

"It seems to me that he is not the only one," responded Linda.

"There are not more than half a dozen, not near enough to go around. I know perfectly well, for at the last dance I had to dance twice with a girl, and I do hate that. Let me see, there are Elmer Dawson, John Emory, Todd Bryan, Billy Tucker, Tom Willis, and Berk Matthews, though Berk doesn't count. Nobody sees him nowadays. He has turned into a regular greasy grind, so that he is no good at all. He has a girl up in the city, you know. I charged him with it, and he the same as admitted it. I think he might have looked nearer home. Berk used to be great fun, too; it is rather a shame. So you see, Linda, even counting him there are not more than six who are really worth while; the rest are mere boys. Now, if you really don't want your cousin yourself, you might speak a good word for me, and I'll be mighty thankful."

"Bertie, you are a silly child. You know you don't mean a word of all this. Why do you rattle on in such a brainless way?"

"I'm in dead earnest, I assure you. I'll take him in a minute, now that I can't get Berk who is as good as gone. We are wild to know who the girl is, what she looks like and all that. I suppose you didn't happen to meet her when you were in the city. Miss Ri ought to know, if anyone does."

"We didn't meet any such person," replied Linda a little defiantly. "We saw Mrs. Matthews and Margaret, but, of course, they did not mention her."

"Very likely they would be the last ones to know. At all events he is not the lad he was, as anyone with half an eye can see. Even if he hadn't told me there would be but one conclusion to gather from his absolute indifference to us all. Every one of the girls agree to that."

Linda smiled mechanically. Suppose it were true. There had been but the one meeting, that which took place upon the day of her arrival from the city, then it had seemed as if they were about to return to the old pleasant relations, but since then not another sign. Yet—"There isn't anything I wouldn't do to make you happy, Linda Talbot." What was the meaning of that saying? Only the gentle concern of a chivalrous, tender-hearted man, probably. She gave a little sigh which drew Bertie's attention.

"Tired, Linda? We're going too far, perhaps. I forget that you are a busy bee all the morning. We'd better turn back."

Linda agreed. She felt singularly heavy-spirited and would be glad to reach home, she realized. Bertie left her with a laughing challenge to "hurry up or she would try to cut her out," and then Linda went in.

Miss Ri was just stirring the fire, for she loved the dancing lights at a twilight hour. "Draw up, draw up," she cried, "and tell me the news. What did you learn from Bertie?"

"First that I was engaged to Mr. Jeffreys, and if not that I ought to be. Second; it is reported that Berkley Matthews has a sweetheart in the city."

"The wretch!" cried Miss Ri. "I'd like to see him bring a strange girl here for me to conciliate and defer to."

"He has a perfect right, hasn't he, Aunt Ri?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure. I hate to think of it. So the report is that you are certainly engaged."

"Yes, they have arranged it all, and are quite pleased. I am to live at Talbot's Angles, it seems, and it is considered a delightful way to settle matters for me. Bertie was quite enthusiastic. Did Mr. Jeffreys come?"

"Yes, and was sorry to have missed you. He'll be back this evening. He tells me he is going to leave for Hartford next week. Are you going with him, Verlinda?"

The girl thoughtfully prodded a long stick which needed pushing further back. "I haven't decided," she replied presently.

"You had decided there in Baltimore, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, so I had. Oh, I don't know. I don't know. I don't see how I could stand it to keep on living here." She put down the tongs and clasped her hands tightly.

"Why, Verlinda, my dear child, what do you mean? You—" Miss Ri paused and laid her hand gently on the girl's. "The wretch," she murmured, "the wretch."

Linda turned to kiss her cheek. "Never mind, Aunt Ri," she rejoined; "no doubt I'll be thanking the Lord yet."

Miss Ri laughed shortly, then the words came pleadingly, "Don't leave me, Verlinda, and don't think you will be any happier if you go away. You can't run from yourself, you know. Stay where you are and fight it out as I did. I'll do my best for you."

"Dear Aunt Ri! As if I didn't know that. After all, I believe you are right. I'd be happier here with you than among strangers under any circumstances, even with my old home calling me and a good man to share it. I suppose it is cowardly to want to take refuge in a love you can't return."

"It isn't only cowardly," affirmed Miss Ri with decision, "but it is unfair to the one who gives all and receives no return. I think you are too proud as well as too honest to allow that, Verlinda."

"Do you think I've been unkind, unfair to Mr. Jeffreys? I haven't meant to be. I've been trying my best to care for him, to learn to know him better and to appreciate his good qualities so they would seem sufficient for me. I haven't meant to encourage him unduly. I meant to do the very fairest thing I could, but I am afraid I haven't, after all, or the town wouldn't take things so for granted."

"The town takes things for granted upon slighter evidence than that. Don't struggle any more, dear child. What is that old quotation? 'To thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day, thou can'st not then be false to any man.' Don't forget that. Now, let's light up and be as cheery as we can.

Don't believe all the gossip you hear; there's not one tenth of it true."

Mr. Jeffreys came again that evening. Miss Ri, with a wisdom born of experience, went around to Miss Parthy's and with the opportunity afforded him Mr. Jeffreys made a final throw—and lost. Miss Ri returned to find Linda, with her head in the cushions of the sofa, shaking with sobs.

"You poor darling child," said Miss Ri, bending over her, "was it so hard?"

"Oh, I hated to do it. I hated to, Aunt Ri. He was so quiet and dignified, and so kind. He tried to make me feel that it wasn't my fault and he—cares much more than I believed. He didn't say so before."

"Before? There was a first time, then, and this was the second."

"Yes, as you suspected, there in Baltimore, but I wasn't half so distressed then. Oh, dear, why should we have such contrary hearts?" Down went her head again.

"There, dear, there," Miss Ri soothed her. "Don't cry about it. There never was a man living worth so many tears. He will get over it beautifully; I never knew one who didn't. You will probably get cards for his wedding while you are still grieving over this night's business. Mark my words."

Linda sat up at this. "I suppose I am silly," she said steadily. "I haven't a doubt but I was overwrought and nervous. You see it is the first time I ever refused a man to his face; I gave him a note before. Very likely if I had refused a dozen men as some girls do, I should get to rather enjoying it." She smiled ruefully.

Miss Ri sat down and snuggled her up close. "Dear, good little lass, you'd never be one to glory in scalps. I am sorry for you both, but it can't be helped, and you have done exactly right. Now don't lie awake all night thinking about it." A wise piece of advice but one which profited Linda little.

With more than his usual gravity Wyatt Jeffreys presented himself at Berkley's office the next morning. "Can I see you

privately?" he asked, for Billy was rattling papers in the next room where a couple of countrymen were waiting, beguiling the time by a plentiful use of chewing tobacco.

Berkley glanced at his clients. "Can you wait a few minutes? I shall be through with these men before very long. Suppose you go over to the hotel and tell them that you are to meet me there. Ask them to show you to my room. I'll be over as soon as I can."

Jeffreys nodded approvingly. "Very well. I will meet you there. Thank you for suggesting it."

He was admitted to the room without question. He remembered it from having first visited Berkley there to identify the little trunk. Better it had never been found and that he had left the place then and there. He sat down in the one easy chair, and looked around. On the bureau stood a row of photographs, the first of a gentle looking woman whose eyes were like Berkley's; that must be his mother, and the next his sister. A third, evidently taken some years before, showed a man with thoughtful brow and a strong, though not handsome face; this was Dr. Matthews of whom Jeffreys had heard much from those who still missed their beloved physician. There was another photograph standing by itself, the thin white outer covering dropped like a veil over it, but through this Jeffreys could see that it was a head of Linda. He did not lift the veil, but stood thoughtfully looking at the dim outline. He had put his own camera to use often enough to secure several snap-shots of the girl in Miss Ri's old garden, but this picture he had not seen. He wondered if she had given it to Berkley, and when. There were no other pictures about except those three of the family standing side by side.

The man sat down again and presently Berkley hurried in. "Sorry I had to keep you waiting," he said, "but these country fellows are slow. Well, anything new?"

"Nothing," responded Jeffreys dully. "I only wanted to tell you that I am leaving next week, and that I wish to stop proceedings in the matter of Talbot's Angles."

"What do you mean, man?" Berkley turned in surprise.

"Just that. Do you think you're the only man who can do a brave thing? Do you suppose you can flaunt your heroics without making me feel that I am a small specimen who has no right to be smirking around as a complacent recipient of others' property? I will not have it. I am as capable as you of making sacrifices. I will not be outdone by you."

"Please explain yourself." Berkley spoke quietly, eyeing the other man's tense face.

"I mean this: I wish Miss Talbot to retain her property. I have taken your advice, but, as I told you before, it was not worth while. Not even for the sake of having her own again would she take me with the property."

"You wouldn't expect one of her caliber to do it for the sake of that only," said Berkley a little proudly. Then more gently, "I am no end of sorry. Believe me or not, I had hoped for a better report from you."

"Is that honestly said?"

"It is."

The man's face softened. "I believe you, Matthews. If ever a man has shown himself loyal, you are he. I see it all, and I bow to the inevitable. I never have had much of what I wanted in this world, and I suppose I shall never have. As yet I cannot be as generous as you, but some day I hope to reach your heights. I have the promise of a good future before me, and I can do without Cyrus Talbot's inheritance. What I came to say I have said. Stop proceedings. I relinquish all claim to Talbot's Angles."

What could Berkley answer? He realized that these were sorry days for Jeffreys, and the least said now the better. "Very well," he agreed; "it shall be as you wish. I consider it most generous of you. Of course nothing of any account has been done, and we will drop the whole thing for the present. Perhaps you will wish to reconsider it some day. If you do, I am at your service. Shall I hand you back your papers?"

"No. Throw them into the fire. I don't care what you do with them. I shall never want them."

He rose to go. Berkley followed him to the street where they parted, the one to return to his room, the other to his office where he tied up the papers and thrust them into his desk. That was done. What a storm of feeling those yellow sheets had raised, and now—"Poor devil," said Berkley to himself. "It was pretty hard lines and he has shown himself of good stuff. Confound it all, why did it have to happen so? At least I must have the delicacy to keep out of the way while the man is in town." The color rushed to his face, but receded almost as quickly. "I'm a conceited ass," he cried inwardly. "If she couldn't care for such a man as Jeffreys why should I expect her to care for me? Go to, Berkley Matthews. Crawl down from your pinnacle, and don't lay any such flattering unction to your soul." He set to work at one of his briefs, determined not to encourage himself in any illusions.

CHAPTER XX

"THE SPRING HAS COME"

During the remainder of Mr. Jeffreys' stay in the town Berkley religiously kept away from Miss Ri's brown house on the point, and even carried his determination so far that once seeing Linda in the distance as he was coming out of his office he bolted back again and waited till she was well out of sight before he came out. "What did I do that for?" he said to himself, smiling a little. He did not see Mr. Jeffreys again until one afternoon a week later when he came into the office.

"I am going around making my farewell calls, Matthews," he said. "I take the boat for Baltimore this evening. My unfortunate old trunk and I will soon be out of your way. Again let me thank you for all your kindness."

"I'm sorry to see you go," replied Berkley, "but I hope you will carry away some pleasant memories of our old 'eastern shore.'"

"I shall carry away many. I can never forget the hospitality and kindness shown me here."

"And about those papers; if ever you want to renew the case I am ready to help you, remember." He held out his hand.

"That matter is disposed of," returned Jeffreys with a little frown. "We will dispense with the subject if you please. I am going to Miss Talbot from here, and shall tell her that she need fear no more interference from me. To-day our paths separate. Have you seen her, Matthews?" he asked after a slight pause.

"No, I have not." Berkley looked straight into the other's eyes.

Jeffreys gave the hand he held a closer grip. "You are a good friend, Matthews. Let me echo your offer; if there is anything I can ever do for you, command me. Good-by."

Berkley laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Thank you, Jeffreys. I will remember. Good luck to you and good-

by."

So they parted and the boat slipping through the darkness over the quiet waters of the river that night, bore away him whose coming and going both seemed made under unpropitious stars.

It was a warm afternoon in February, one of those days when Spring seems close at hand by reason of a bluebird's early note, and the appearance of some venturesome crocus in the grass. February brings such days in this part of Maryland. The morning's mail had given Linda the happiness of receiving a magazine in which were some of her verses, accepted and paid for. This step, which carried her beyond the satisfaction of seeing herself in print, merely by compliment, was one which well agreed with the springlike day. She was sitting at the piano joyously singing:

"The spring has come, the flowers in bloom
The happy birds—"

She broke off suddenly, for in through the window open to the floor came Berkley.

"Don't stop," he begged. "I love to hear you."

They stood smiling at one another, before either spoke again, then Linda turned back to the piano to finish the song while Berkley leaned above her to watch her slim fingers moving over the keys. "It just suits the day, doesn't it?" she said when she had finished. "Did you see that there was a crocus by the side of the walk? And this morning I heard a bluebird."

"And that is what makes you look so happy?"

"Not altogether. Sit down over there by the little window, and if you will be very good I will show you something."

He obediently took the place assigned him, where the window seat ran along the small raised platform, and Linda produced the magazine. "There," she said, opening to a certain page. "And it is paid for," she added triumphantly.

Berkley read the lines through. "You have climbed into fame, haven't you?" he said. "Are you feeling very high and mighty?

Would you like me to sit on the floor at your feet. It would be very easy on this platform."

She laughed. It was good to hear the old foolish manner of speech again. "No, I won't insist upon that, though I can't tell what I may require if this continues. Do you like my verses, Berk?"

"Yes, very much. I suppose they are really better than these. He took from his pocket-book a little clipping, 'The Marching Pines,' but I shall always care more for these. I shall never be quite so fond of any others, perhaps."

"Why?"

Berkley did not answer, but instead asked, "Did Jeffreys tell you of his determination not to follow up his claim?"

"Yes, he told me." Linda looked grave.

"It was generous of him, don't you think?"

A half smile played around Linda's lips. "Yes, I suppose it was. He meant to do me a great kindness and I appreciate it."

"But you could not agree to share it with him. He is a good fellow, Linda, and I am very sorry for him. He was greatly cut up."

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

"That—"

"That he had asked you to marry him? Yes, he told me that. Poor old chap. I grew quite fond of him. Why didn't you, Linda?"

"I don't know. I didn't; that's all; I didn't, though I tried very hard."

"Don't you think he was actually heroic to give up the claim?"

"I am sure he meant to be, but of course you understand that I could not accept such a sacrifice from him and that if the law were to give him a right to Talbot's Angles, I couldn't think of doing anything but giving it up to him."

"But he refuses to allow me to go on. I have the papers and I am to burn them if I choose."

Linda smiled, a little mysterious, exultant smile. "That doesn't alter my point of view."

"And so you refuse to allow him to be a hero."

"He isn't the only hero in the world. He himself told me of another." There was a wise, kind expression in her eyes.

Berkley slipped down from the window seat to a cushion at her feet. She bent over him as a mother over her child. "Linda," he said whisperingly. "Linda." He took her soft hand in his strong lithe fingers, and she let it lie there. He pressed the cool little hand against his hot brow, then he looked up. "Linda," he repeated, "here I am at your feet. I love you so! Oh, how I love you! I know I don't deserve it, but do you think you could ever learn to care a little for me? I am not rich, but some day maybe I could buy back Talbot's Angles. There is nothing I would not do to make you happy."

"You said that once before, Berk."

"Did I?"

"Yes,—that night in the rain."

"I meant it."

"As much as you do now?"

"Every bit."

"And yet you avoided me, passed me by, allowed another to step in."

"It was for you, for you. I wanted you to be happy," he murmured.

"I see that now, but I missed my friend."

"Your friend? Am I never to be anything more, Linda? I love you with my whole heart. You are the one woman in the world to me. Don't you think that some day you might learn to love me a little?"

Linda's face was aglow with a tender light; her eyes were like stars. "No, Berk," she said slowly, lingeringly, "I could never learn to love you a little."

He dropped her hand and looked down, all the hope gone from his face.

"Because," Linda went on, bending a little nearer that he could hear her whisper, "I already love you so much."

He gave a little joyous cry and sprang to his feet, all his divine right suddenly recognized. He held out his arms. "Come," he said.

Linda arose with shining face, stepped down from the platform and went to him.

The dim portraits on the walls smiled down at them. It was the old story to which each passing generation had listened. The ancient house could tell many a like tale.

"Berk," said Linda when they had gone back to the seat by the window, "they told me you had a sweetheart in the city. Bertie Bryan vowed you acknowledged it to her."

He took her hands and kissed them. "So I may have done, my queen, but it was when you were there."

Linda sighed, a happy satisfied sigh. "Berk, dear, were you very unhappy, then? You didn't have to be, you see."

"I thought it was necessary, and perhaps I needed the discipline."

"Just as I have needed the discipline of teaching. I am realizing by degrees what a wonderful life work it might become."

"But you shall not teach long, though, Linda darling, I haven't told you that we shall have to begin life rather simply, for you know I must always think of my mother."

"Berk, dear, I couldn't be happy if I thought you ever would do less than you do now for her."

"You are so wonderful, so wonderful," he murmured. "I hope to do better and better in my profession, for I am much

encouraged, and some day, remember I shall buy back Talbot's Angles for you."

"You will never do that, Berk," returned Linda, trying to look very grave.

"Why, sweet?"

"Because when Grace marries it will be mine without any question. We have had a letter from Judge Goldsborough."

"And he said—"

"That he had discovered papers which prove that Cyrus Talbot had only a lease on the place; it was for ninety-nine years, and it expired more than ten years ago."

"Of all things!" ejaculated Berkley. "That was the last explanation that would have occurred to me. Did Jeffreys know before he left?"

"Yes, we told him that afternoon he called to say good-by. Aunt Ri thought it was best to tell him, and to show him the judge's letter."

"Poor old chap! And he had to go without even the recompense of having made a sacrifice for you."

Linda's face clouded. "Yes, he said that everything had failed, even his attempted good deeds. I hope he will find happiness some day."

"And you are very glad that you can feel an undisputed ownership of the old home?"

"Yes, of course I am glad. Aren't you?"

"What is your happiness is mine, beloved Verlinda."

"The only drop of bitterness comes from the thought of Wyatt Jeffreys, but even there Aunt Ri insists his unhappiness will not last and that comforts me."

"Who is talking about Aunt Ri?" asked that lady coming in and throwing aside her hat. "Parthy has a brood of thirteen young chickens just out, and I have been down to see them. What were you two saying about me? Hallo, Berk, what has brought

you here, I'd like to know? I thought you were so busy you could scarcely breathe."

"Oh, I'm taking an afternoon off," he responded. "A man can't be a mere machine such weather as this."

"I've been telling him about the judge's letter," put in Linda.

"And I reckon that was a mighty big surprise; it certainly was to us. It took a better lawyer than you, Berk Matthews, to unravel that snarl. Even the judge himself didn't remember the facts."

"Which were?"

"That to Cyrus Talbot belonged Addition and a part of Timber Neck, while to Madison belonged the Angles and the other part of Timber Neck; that was in the first place when they had their inheritance from their father, you see. They sold Timber Neck, and then Madison retained the Angles, while Cyrus kept Addition. Well, it seems the Angles, being the home plantation, had always gone to the eldest son. Madison's first child was a daughter, and after her birth Madison's wife died. Cyrus' first child was a son, and he wanted the Angles for him but Madison wouldn't give it up, but at last he consented to lease the place to his brother. Later on Cyrus' son died, and he left for the West, selling out Addition to his brother Madison who had married a second time. Madison went to Addition to live while Cyrus still clung to his lease of the Angles. However, when the house at Addition was burned he allowed his brother to go back to the homestead place to live. The rest you know; how Cyrus rented the lands to this and that tenant, and how the place went to the dogs at one time, and how it was finally discovered by Charles Jeffreys to belong to his mother's family. He wrote the letter you remember, the answer to which you have shown us. There is no use going over all that, for you will see just how the matter stands, and Verlinda will come to her own."

Linda looked at Berk who smiled back at her understandingly. "Aunt Ri," said the girl, going over and laying her cheek against the gray head, "Verlinda has come to her own in more

than one sense." She held out her hand to Berkley who took it and drew it against his heart.

"What?" almost screamed Miss Ri. "You haven't a sweetheart in the city, Berk Matthews? What did I tell you, Verlinda? I knew that Bertie Bryan was making that all up."

"Not exactly, Miss Ri," said Berkley, "for I did give her reason to think so."

"And why did you do it? Just to make Verlinda unhappy?"

"Oh, Aunt Ri," Linda put her hand over the dear lady's lips.

"I did have a sweetheart there, when you were in the city," replied Berk, "and here she is, the only sweetheart for me."

Miss Ri pulled out her handkerchief and began to mop her eyes.

"I'm as glad as I can be," she wept, "but I am tremendously sorry for myself. You will leave me, Verlinda, and you will take Phebe, too. What am I to do?"

"Oh, it will not be for a long, long time from now," said Linda consolingly.

"Yes, it will." Miss Ri was decided. "Of course it must be. Why in the world should you wait? You will stop teaching after this year, anyway, for then you will have the farm to depend upon, while as for Berk, he is out of the woods, I know that; his mother told me so. By the way, Berk, how glad your mother will be. She fell in love with Linda at first sight. Oh, she told me a thing or two, and that's why I knew Bertie Bryan was—"

"But she wasn't, you remember," interposed Linda. "She thought so."

"It amounts to the same thing. Well, I shall have to adopt somebody. Never shall I be happy alone again, now that I know what it is to have a young thing about. I believe I will send for Jeffreys, he is mighty forlorn, and he needs coddling."

"He wouldn't come," said Berkley triumphantly.

"You mean you don't want him to; you look much better when he isn't here to give the contrast," retorted Miss Ri. "I don't want him myself, to tell the truth. See here, children, why can't you both come here and live with me till I can find an orphan who wants an Aunt Ri? I'm speaking for myself, for how I am to endure anyone's cooking after Phebe's is more than I can tell, and think of me rattling around in this big house like a dried pea in a pod. I should think you would be sorry enough for me to be ready to do anything."

Miss Ri was so very unlike a dried pea that the two laughed. "We'll talk about it some day," said Berkley, "but just now—"

"HER GAZE FELL ON THE TWO."

"All you want is to be happy. Well," Miss Ri sighed, but immediately brightened. "Go along," she cried, "I never get mad with fools, you remember, and, as I have frequently told Verlinda, I am still thanking the Lord that I have escaped. Go along with you. My brain has about as much as it can stand."

The two stepped out upon the porch, but Miss Ri bustled after them. "Here, take this shawl, Verlinda; it is growing damp. Don't stay out too late. You'll stay to supper, Berk, of course."

"Thank you, Miss Ri. I'll be glad to come, but I must go to the office for a few moments. I'll be back, though."

The sun was dropping in the west. Day was almost done for the workers in the packing house near by, from which presently arose a burst of song. Phebe, at her kitchen door, joined in, crooning softly:

"I'se gwine away some o' dese days
'Cross de riber o' Jordan
    My Lord, my Lord."

As she sang her gaze fell on the two walking slowly toward the river's brim, the man leaning over the girl, her eyes lifted to his. Suddenly Mammy clapped her hand over her mouth, then she seized her knees, bending double as she chuckled gleefully. "Ain't it de troof, now," she murmured. "She nuvver look dat away at Mr. Jeffs, I say she nuvver. Bless my honey baby." Then she lifted up her voice fairly drowning the rival singers further away as she chanted:

"Dis is de way I long has sought—
  Oh, glory hallelujah!
And mo'ned because I found it not—
  Oh, glory hallelujah!"

"Phebe," said Miss Ri, suddenly interrupting the singing, "we have got to have the best supper you ever cooked."

"Ain't it de troof, now, Miss Ri," Phebe responded with alacrity. "Dat's thes what I say, dat's thes what I say."

The shadows fell softly, the singers ceased their weird chant. Phebe, too busy conferring with Miss Ri to think of singing, bustled about the kitchen. Berkley and Linda walked slowly to the gate.

"Berk," said the girl, "I wouldn't live anywhere but on this blessed old Eastern Sho' for the world, would you?"

"If you were in the anywhere else, yes," he answered.

She stood at the gate watching his sturdy figure and springing step as he went off down the street. So would she stand to

watch him in the years to come. It was all like a wonderful dream. The old home and the love of Berkley, what more could heaven bestow upon her!

The sun had disappeared, but a golden gleam rose and fell upon the water's surface with each pulsation of the river's heart. The venturesome crocus had shut its yellow eye, the harbinger bird had tucked its head under its wing. The world, life, love, all made a poem for Linda.

Presently Mammy came waddling down the path in breathless haste. "Miss Lindy, Miss Lindy," she panted, "Miss Ri say yuh jes' got time to come in an' put on that purty floppity white frock. She puttin' flowers on de table, an' we sho' gwine hab a fesibal dis night."

Linda turned her laughing face toward the old house, lightly ran up the path, and disappeared within the fan-topped doorway. Presently Miss Ri heard her upstairs singing:

"The spring has come."

Transcriber's Notes:

Both homemade and home-made are used.

Both pocketbook and pocket-book are used.

Both schoolmarm and school-marm are used.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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