The Rise of Roscoe Paine

Joseph C. Lincoln

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CHAPTER I

"I'm going up to the village," I told Dorinda, taking my cap from the hook behind the dining−room door.

"What for?" asked Dorinda, pushing me to one side and reaching for the dust−cloth, which also was behind the door.

"Oh, just for the walk," I answered, carelessly.

"Um−hm," observed Dorinda.

"Um−hm" is, I believe, good Scotch for "Yes." I have read that it is, somewhere−−in one of Barrie's yarns, I think. I had never been in Scotland, or much of anywhere else, except the city I was born in, and my college town, and Boston−−and Cape Cod. "Um−hm" meant yes on the Cape, too, except when Dorinda said it; then it might mean almost anything. When Mother asked her to lower the window shade in the bed−room she said "Um−hm" and lowered it. And, five minutes later, when Lute came in, loaded to the guards with explanations as to why he had forgotten to clean the fish for dinner, she said it again. And the Equator and the North Pole are no nearer alike, so far as temperature is concerned, than those two "Um−hms." And between them she had others, expressing all degrees from frigid to semi−torrid.

Her "Um−hm" this time was somewhere along the northern edge of Labrador.

"It's a good morning for a walk," I said.

"Um−hm," repeated Dorinda, crossing over to Greenland, so to speak.

I opened the outside door. The warm spring sunshine, pouring in, was a pleasant contrast and made me forget, for the moment, the glacier at my back. Come to think of it, "glacier" isn't a good word; glaciers move slowly and that wasn't Dorinda's way.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Work," snapped Dorinda, unfurling the dust cloth. "It's a good mornin' for that, too."

I went out, turned the corner of the house and found Lute sound asleep on the wash bench behind the kitchen. His full name was Luther Millard Filmore Rogers, and he was Dorinda's husband by law, and the burden which Providence, or hard luck, had ordered her to carry through this vale of tears. She was a good Methodist and there was no doubt in her mind that Providence was responsible. When she rose to testify in prayer−meeting she always mentioned her "cross" and everybody knew that the cross was Luther. She carried him, but it is no more than fair to say that she didn't provide him with cushions. She never let him forget that he was a steerage passenger. However, Lute was well upholstered with philosophy, of a kind, and, so long as he didn't have to work his passage, was happy, even if the voyage was a rather rough one.

Just now he was supposed to be raking the back yard, but the rake was between his knees, his head was tipped back against the shingled wall of the kitchen, and he was sleeping, with the sunshine illuminating his open mouth, "for all the world like a lamp in a potato cellar," as his wife had said the last time she caught him in this position. She went on to say that it was a pity he wouldn't stand on his head when he slept. "Then I could see if your skull was as holler as I believe it is," she told him.

Lute heard me as I passed him and woke up. The "potato cellar" closed with a snap and he seized the rake handles with both hands.

"I was takin' a sort of observation," he explained hurriedly. "Figgerin' whether I'd better begin here or over by the barn. Oh, it's you, Roscoe, is it! Land sakes! I thought first 'twas Dorindy. Where you bound?"

"Up to the village," I said.

"Ain't goin' to the post−office, be you?"

"I may; I don't know."

Lute sighed. "I was kind of cal'latin' to go there myself," he observed, regretfully. "Thoph Newcomb and Cap'n Jed Dean and the rest of us was havin' a talk on politics last night up there and 'twas mighty interestin'. Old Dean had Thoph pretty well out of the race when I hauled alongside, but when I got into the argument 'twas different. 'What's goin' to become of the laborin' men of this country if you have free trade?' I says. Dean had to give in that he didn't know. 'Might have to let their wives support 'em,' he says, pompous as ever. 'That would be a calamity, wouldn't it, Lute?' That wasn't no answer, of course. But you can't expect sense of a Democrat. I left him

fumin' and come away. I've thought of a lot more questions to ask him since and I was hopin' I could get at him this mornin'. But no! Dorindy's sot on havin' this yard raked, so I s'pose I've got to do it."

He had dropped the rake, but now he leaned over, picked it up, and rose from the wash bench.

"I s'pose I've got to do it," he repeated, "unless," hopefully, "you want me to run up to the village and do your errand for you."

"No; I hadn't any errand."

"Well, then I s'pose I'd better start in. Unless there was somethin' else you'd ruther I'd do to−day. If there was I could do this to−morrer."

"To−morrow would have one advantage: there would be more to rake then. However, judging by Dorinda's temper this morning, I think, perhaps, you had better do it to−day."

"What's Dorindy doin'?"

"She is dusting the dining−room."

"I'll bet you! And she dusted it yesterday and the day afore. Do you know−−" Lute sat down again on the bench−−"sometimes I get real worried about her."

"No! Do you?"

"Yes, I do. I think she works too hard. Seems's if sometimes it had kind of struck to her brains−−work, I mean. She don't think of nothin' else. Now take the dustin', for instance. Dustin's all right; I believe in dustin' things. But I don't believe in wearin' 'em out dustin' 'em. That ain't sense, is it?"

"It doesn't seem like it, that's a fact."

"You bet it don't! And it ain't good religion, neither. Now take−− well, take this yard, for instance. What is it that I'm slavin' myself over this fine mornin'? Why, rakin' this yard! And what am I rakin'? Why, dead leaves from last fall, and straws and sticks and pieces of seaweed and such that have blowed in durin' the winter. And what blowed 'em in? Why, the wind, sartin! And whose wind was it? The Almighty's, that's whose! Now then! if the Almighty didn't intend to have dead leaves around why did he put trees for 'em to fall off of? If he didn't want straws and seaweed and truck around why did He send them everlastin' no'theasters last November? Did that idea ever strike you?"

"I don't know that it ever did, exactly in that way."

"No. Well, that's 'cause you ain't reasoned it out, same as I have. You've got the same trouble that most folks have, you don't reason things out. Now, let's look at it straight in the face." Lute let go of the rake altogether and used both hands to illustrate his point. "That finger there, we'll say, is me, rakin' and rakin' hard as ever I can. And that fist there is the Almighty, not meanin' anything irreverent. I rake, same as I'm doin' this mornin'. The yard's all cleaned up. Then−−zing!" Lute's clenched fist swept across and knocked the offending finger out of the way. "Zing! here comes one of the Almighty's no'theasters, same as we're likely to have to−morrer, and the consarned yard is just as dirty as ever. Ain't that so?"

I looked at the yard. "It seems to be about as it was," I agreed, with some sarcasm. Lute was an immune, so far as sarcasm was concerned.

"Yup," he said, triumphantly. "Now, Dorindy, she's a good, pious woman. She believes the Powers above order everything. If that's so, then ain't it sacrilegious to be all the time flyin' in the face of them Powers by rakin' and rakin' and dustin' and dustin'? That's the question."

"But, according to that reasoning," I observed, "we should neither rake nor dust. Wouldn't that make our surroundings rather uncomfortable, after a while?"

"Sartin. But when they got uncomfortable then we could turn to and make 'em comfortable again. I ain't arguin' against work−−needful work, you understand. I like it. And I ain't thinkin' of myself, you know, but about Dorindy. It worries me to see her wearin' herself out with−−with dustin' and such. It ain't sense and 'tain't good religion. She's my wife and it's my duty to think for her and look out for her."

He paused and reached into his overalls pocket for a pipe. Finding it, he reached into another pocket for the wherewithal to fill it.

"Have you suggested to her that she's flying in the face of Providence?" I asked.

Lute shook his head. "No," he admitted, "I ain't. Got any tobacco about you? Dorindy hove my plug away yesterday. I left it back of the clock and she found it and was mad−−dustin' again, of course."

He took the pouch I handed him, filled his pipe and absently put the pouch in his pocket.

"Got a match?" he asked. "Thanks. No, I ain't spoke to her about it, though it's been on my mind for a long spell. I didn't know but you might say somethin' to her along that line, Roscoe. 'Twouldn't sound so personal, comin' from you. What do you think?"

I shook my head. "Dorinda wouldn't pay much attention to my ideas on such subjects, I'm afraid," I answered. "She knows I'm not a regular church−goer."

Lute was plainly disappointed. "Well," he said, with a sigh, "maybe you're right. She does cal'late you're kind of heathen, though she hopes you'll see the light some day. But, just the same," he added, "it's a good argument. I tried it on the gang up to the post−office last night. I says to 'em, says I, 'Work's all right. I believe in it. I'm a workin' man, myself. But to work when you don't have to is wrong. Take Ros Paine,' I says−−"

"Why should you take me?" I interrupted, rather sharply.

"'Cause you're the best example I could think of. Everybody knows you don't do no work. Shootin' and sailin' and fishin' ain't work, and that's about all you do. 'Take Ros,' says I. 'He might be to work. He was in a bank up to the city once and he knows the bankin' trade. He might be at it now, but what would be the use?' I says. 'He's got enough to live on and he lives on it, 'stead of keepin' some poor feller out of a job.' That's right, too, ain't it?"

I didn't answer at once. There was no reason why I should be irritated because Luther Rogers had held me up as a shining example of the do−nothing class to the crowd of hangers−on in a country post−office. What did I care for Denboro opinion? Six years in that gossipy village had made me, so I thought, capable of rising above such things.

"Well," I asked after a moment, "what did they say to that?"

"Oh, nothin' much. They couldn't; I had 'em, you see. Some of 'em laughed and old Cap'n Jed he hove out somethin' about birds of a feather stickin' up for each other. No sense to it. But, as I said afore, what can you expect of a Democrat?"

I turned on my heel and moved toward the back gate. "Ain't goin', be you?" asked Lute. "Hadn't you better set down and rest your breakfast a spell?"

"No, I'm going. By the way, if you're through with that tobacco pouch of mine, I'll take it off your hands. I may want to smoke by and by."

Lute coolly explained that he had forgotten the pouch; it had "gone clean out of his head." However, he handed it over and I left him seated on the wash bench, with his head tipped back against the shingles. I opened the gate and strolled slowly along the path by the edge of the bluff. I had gone perhaps a hundred yards when I heard a shrill voice behind me. Turning, I saw Dorinda standing by the corner of the kitchen, dust cloth in hand. Her husband was raking for dear life.

I walked on. The morning was a beautiful one. Beside the path, on the landward side, the bayberry and beach−plum bushes were in bud, the green of the new grass was showing above the dead brown of the old, a bluebird was swaying on the stump of a wild cherry tree, and the pines and scrub oaks of the grove by the Shore Lane were bright, vivid splashes of color against the blue of the sky. At my right hand the yellow sand of the bluff broke sharply down to the white beach and the waters of the bay, now beginning to ebb. Across the bay the lighthouse at Crow Point glistened with new paint and I could see a moving black speck, which I knew was Ben Small, the keeper, busy whitewashing the fence beside it. Down on the beach Zeb Kendrick was overhauling his dory. In the distance, beyond the grove, I could hear the carpenters' hammers on the roof of the big Atwater mansion, which was now the property of James Colton, the New York millionaire, whose rumored coming to Denboro to live had filled the columns of the country weekly for three months. The quahaug boats were anchored just inside the Point; a clam digger was wading along the outer edge of the sedge; a lobsterman was hauling his pots in the channel; even the bluebird on the wild cherry stump had a straw in his beak and was plainly in the midst of nest building. Everyone had something to do and was doing it−−everyone except Lute Rogers and myself, the "birds of a feather." And even Lute was working now, under compulsion.

Ordinarily the sight of all this industry would not have affected me. I had seen it all before, or something like it. The six years I had spent in Denboro, the six everlasting, idle, monotonous years, had had their effect. I had grown hardened and had come to accept my fate, at first rebelliously, then with more of Lute's peculiar kind of philosophy. Circumstances had doomed me to be a good−for−nothing, a gentleman loafer without the usual excuse−− money−−and, as it was my doom, I forced myself to accept it, if not with pleasure, at least with resignation. And I determined to get whatever pleasure there might be in it. So, when I saw the majority of the

human race, each with a purpose in life, struggling to attain that purpose, I passed them by with my gun or fishing rod on my shoulder, and a smile on my lips. If my remnant of a conscience presumed to rise and reprove me, I stamped it down. It had no reasonable excuse for rising; I wasn't what I was from choice.

But, somehow, on this particular morning, my unreasonable conscience was again alive and kicking. Perhaps it was the quickening influence of the spring which resurrected it; perhaps Luther's quotation from the remarks of Captain Jedediah Dean had stirred it to rebellion. A man may know, in his heart, that he is no good and still resent having others say that he is, particularly when they say that he and Luther Rogers are birds of a feather. I didn't care for Dean's good opinion; of course I didn't! Nor for that of any one else in Denboro, my mother excepted. But Dean and the rest should keep their opinions to themselves, confound them!

The path from our house−−the latter every Denboro native spoke of as the "Paine Place"−−wound along the edge of the bluff for perhaps three hundred yards, then turned sharply through the grove of scrub oaks and pitch pines and emerged on the Shore Lane. The Shore Lane was not a public road, in the strictest sense of the term. It was really a part of my land and, leading, as it did, from the Lower Road to the beach, was used as a public road merely because mother and I permitted it to be. It had been so used, by sufferance of the former owner, for years, and when we came into possession of the property we did not interfere with the custom. Land along the shore was worth precious little at that time and, besides, it was pleasant, rather than disagreeable, to hear the fish carts going out to the weirs, and the wagons coming to the beach for seaweed, or, filled with picnic parties, rattling down the Lane. We could not see them from the house until they had passed the grove and emerged upon the beach, but even the noise of them was welcome. The Paine Place was a good half−mile from the Lower Road and there were few neighbors; therefore, especially in the winter months, any sounds of society were comforting.

I strode through the grove, kicking the dead branches out of my way, for my mind was still busy with Luther and Captain Dean. As I came out into the Lane I looked across at the Atwater mansion, now the property of the great and only Colton, "Big Jim" Colton, whose deals and corners in Wall Street supplied so many and such varied sensations for the financial pages of the city papers, just as those of his wife and family supplied news for the society columns; I looked across, I say, and then I stopped short to take a longer look.

I could see the carpenters, whose hammers I had heard, at work upon the roof of the barn, now destined to do double duty as a stable and garage. They, and the painters and plumbers, had been busy on the premises for months. The establishment had been a big one, even when Major Atwater owned it, but the new owners had torn down and added and rebuilt until the house loomed up like a palace or a Newport villa. A Newport villa in Denboro! Why on earth any one should deliberately choose Denboro as a place to live in I couldn't understand; but why a millionaire, with all creation to select from, should build a Newport villa on the bluff overlooking Denboro Bay was beyond comprehension. The reason given in the Cape Cod Item was that Mrs. Colton was "in debilitated health," whatever that is, and had been commanded by her doctors to seek sea air and seclusion and rest. Well, there was sea air and rest, not to mention seclusion or sand and mosquitoes, for a square mile about the new villa, and no one knew that better than I, condemned to live within the square. But if Mrs. Colton had deliberately chosen the spot, with malice aforethought, the place for her was a home for the feeble minded. At least, that was my opinion on that particular morning.

It was not the carpenters who caused me to pause in my walk and look across the lane and over the stone wall at my new neighbor's residence. What caught my attention was that the place looked to be inhabited. The windows were open−−fifty or so of them−−smoke was issuing from one of the six chimneys; a maid in a white cap and apron was standing by the servants' entrance. Yes, and a tall, bulky man with a yachting cap on the back of his head and a cigar in his mouth was talking with Asa Peters, the boss carpenter, by the big door of the barn.

I had not been up to the village for two days, having been employed at our boat−house on the beach below the house, getting my motor dory into commission for the summer. But now I remembered that Lute had said something about the Coltons being expected, or having arrived, and that he seemed much excited over it. He would have said more, but Dorinda had pounced on him and sent him out to shut up the chickens, which gave him the excuse to play truant and take his evening's trip to the post−office. It was plain that the Coltons HAD arrived. Very likely the stout man with the yachting cap was the mighty "Big Jim" himself. Well, I didn't envy him in his present situation. He had my pity, if anything.

Possibly the fact that I could pity some one other than myself helped to raise my spirits. At any rate I managed to shake off a little of my gloom and tramped on up the Lane, feeling more like a human being and less like a

yellow dog. Less as I should imagine a yellow dog ought to feel, I mean, for, as a matter of fact, most yellow dogs of my acquaintance seem to be as happy as their brown or white or black relatives. I walked up the Lane, turned into the Lower Road, and headed for the village. The day was a gorgeous one, the air bracing as a tonic, and my thirtieth birthday was not yet so far astern as to be lost in the fog. After all, there were some consolations in being alive and in a state of health not "debilitated." I began to whistle.

A quarter of a mile from the junction of the Shore Lane, on the Lower Road, was a willow−shaded spot, where the brook which irrigated Elnathan Mullet's cranberry swamp ran under a small wooden bridge. It was there that I first heard the horn and, turning, saw the automobile coming from behind me. It was approaching at a speed of, I should say, thirty miles an hour, and I jumped to the rail of the bridge to let it pass. Autos were not as common on the Cape then as they have become since. Now the average pedestrian of common−sense jumps first and looks afterwards.

However, I jumped in time, and stood still to watch the car as it went by. But it did not go by−−not then. Its speed slackened as it approached and it came to a halt on the bridge beside me. A big car; an aristocratic car; a machine of pomp and price and polish, such as Denboro saw but seldom. It contained three persons−−a capped and goggled chauffeur on the front seat, and a young fellow and a girl in the tonneau. They attracted my attention in just that order−−first the chauffeur, then the young fellow, and, last of all, the girl.

It was the chauffeur who hailed me. He leaned across the upholstery beside him and, still holding the wheel, said:

"Say, Bill, what's the quickest way to get to Bayport?"

Now my name doesn't happen to be Bill and just then I objected to the re−christening. At another time I might have appreciated the joke and given him the information without comment. But this morning I didn't feel like joking. My dissatisfaction with the world in general included automobilists who made common folks get out of their way, and I was resentful.

"I should say that you had picked about as quick a way as any," I answered.

The chauffeur didn't seem to grasp the true inwardness of this brilliant bit.

"Aw, what−−" he stammered. "Say, what−−look here, I asked you−−"

Then the young man in the tonneau took charge of the conversation. He was a very young man, with blond hair and a silky mustache, and his clothes fitted him as clothes have no right to fit−−on Cape Cod.

"That'll do, Oscar," he ordered. Then, turning to me, he said:

"See here, my man, we want to go to Bayport."

I was not his man, and wouldn't have been for something. The chauffeur had irritated me, but he irritated me more. I didn't like him, his looks, his clothes, and, particularly, his manner. Therefore, because I didn't feel like answering, I showed my independence by remaining silent.

"What's the matter?" he demanded, impatiently. "Are you deaf? I say we want to go to Bayport."

A newspaper joke which I had recently read came to my mind. "Very well," I said, "you have my permission."

It was a rude thing to say, and not even original. I don't attempt to excuse it. In fact, I was sorry as soon as I had said it. It had its effect. The young man turned red. Then he laughed aloud.

"Well, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "What have we here? A humorist, I do believe! Mabel, we've discovered a genuine, rural humorist. Another David Harum, by Jove! Look at him!"

The girl in the tonneau swept aside her veil and looked, as directed. And I looked at her. The face that I saw was sweet and refined and delicate, a beautiful young face, the face of a lady, born and bred. All this I saw and realized at a glance; but what I was most conscious of at the time was the look in the dark eyes as they surveyed me from head to foot. Indifference was there, and contemptuous amusement; she didn't even condescend to smile, much less speak. Under that look my self−importance shrank until the yellow dog with which I had compared myself loomed as large as an elephant. She might have looked that way at some curious and rather ridiculous bug, just before calling a servant to step on it.

The young man laughed again. "Isn't it a wonder, Mabel?" he asked. "The native wit on his native heath! Reuben−−pardon me, your name is Reuben, isn't it?−−now that you've had your little joke, would you condescend to tell us the road which we should take to reach Bayport in the shortest time? Would you oblige us to that extent?"

The young lady smiled at this. "Victor," she said, "how idiotic you are!"

I agreed with her. Idiot was one of the terms, the mildest, which I should have applied to that young man. I wanted very much to remove him from that car by what Lute would call the scruff of the neck. But most of all, just then, I wanted to be alone, to see the last of the auto and its occupants.

"First turn to the right, second to the left," I said, sullenly.

"Thank you, Reuben," vouchsafed the young man. "Here's hoping that your vegetables are fresher than your jokes. Go ahead, Oscar."

The chauffeur threw in the clutch and the car buzzed up the road, turning the corner at full speed. There was a loose board projecting from the bridge just under my feet. As a member−−though an inactive one−−of the Village Improvement Society I should have trodden it back into place. I didn't; I kicked it into the brook.

Then I walked on. But the remainder of my march was a silent one, without music. I did not whistle.

CHAPTER II

The post−office was at Eldredge's store, and Eldredge's store, situated at the corners, where the Main Road and the Depot Road−− which is also the direct road to South Denboro−−join, was the mercantile and social center of Denboro. Simeon Eldredge kept the store, and Simeon was also postmaster, as well as the town constable, undertaker, and auctioneer. If you wanted a spool of thread, a coffin, or the latest bit of gossip, you applied at Eldredge's. The gossip you could be morally certain of getting at once; the thread or the coffin you might have to wait for.

I scarcely know why I went to Eldredge's that morning. I did not expect mail, and I did not require Simeon's services in any one of his professional capacities. Possibly Lute's suggestion had some sort of psychic effect and I stopped at the post−office involuntarily. At any rate, I woke from the trance in which the encounter with the automobile had left me to find myself walking in at the door.

The mail was not yet due, to say nothing of having arrived or been sorted, but there was a fair−sized crowd on the settees and perched on the edge of the counter. Ezra Mullet was there, and Alonzo Black and Alvin Baker and Thoph Newcomb. Beriah Doane and Sam Cahoon, who lived in South Denboro, were there, too, having driven over behind Beriah's horse, on an errand; that is, Beriah had an errand and Sam came along to help him remember it. In the rear of the store, by the frame of letter boxes, Captain Jedediah Dean was talking with Simeon.

Alvin Baker saw me first and hailed me as I entered.

"Here's Ros Paine," he exclaimed. "He'll know more about it than anybody else. Hey, Ros, how many hired help does he keep, anyhow? Thoph says it's eight, but I know I counted more'n that, myself."

"It's eight, I tell you," broke in Newcomb, before I could answer. "There's the two cooks and the boy that waits on 'em−−"

"The idea of having anybody wait on a cook!" interrupted Mullet. "That's blame foolishness."

"I never said he waited on the cooks. I said he waited on them−−on the family. And there's a coachman−−"

"Why do they call them kind of fellers coachmen?" put in Thoph. "There ain't any coach. I see the carriages when they come−−two freight cars full of 'em. There was a open two−seater, and a buckboard, and that high−wheeled thing they called a dog−cart."

Beriah Doane laughed uproariously. "Land of love!" he shouted. "Does the dog have a cart all to himself? That's a good one! You and me ain't got no dog, Sam, but we might have a couple of cat− carts, hey? Haw! haw!"

Thoph paid no attention to this pleasantry. "There was the dog− cart," he repeated, "and another thing they called the 'trap.' But there wan't any coach; I'll swear to it."

"Don't make no difference," declared Alvin; "there was a man along that SAID he was the coachman, anyhow. And a big minister−lookin' feller who was a butler, and two hired girls besides the cooks. That's nine, anyhow. One more'n you said, Thoph."

"And that don't count the chauffeur, the chap that runs the automobiles," said Alonzo Black. "He's the tenth. Say, Ros," turning to me, "how many is there, altogether?"

"How many what?" I asked. It was my first opportunity to speak.

"Why, hired help−−servants, you know. How many does Mr. Colton keep?"

"I don't know how many he keeps," I said. "Why should I?"

The group looked at me in amazement. Thoph Newcomb voiced the general astonishment.

"Why should you!" he repeated. "Why shouldn't you, you mean! You're livin' right next door to 'em, as you might say! My soul! If I was you I cal'late I'd know afore this time."

"No doubt you would, Thoph. But I don't. I didn't know the Coltons had arrived until I came by just now. They have arrived, I take it."

Arrived! There was no question of the arrival, nor of its being witnessed by everyone present, myself and the South Denboro delegates excepted. Newcomb and Baker and Mullet and Black began talking all together. I learned that the Colton invasion of Denboro was a spectacle only equaled by the yearly coming of the circus to Hyannis, or the opening of the cattle show at Ostable. The carriages and horses had arrived by freight the morning before; the servants and the family on the afternoon train.

"I see 'em myself," affirmed Alonzo. "I was as nigh to 'em as I be to you. Mrs. Colton is sort of fleshy, but as handsome a woman as you'd want to see. I spoke to her, too. 'It's a nice day,' I says, 'ain't it?'"

"What did she say?" asked Newcomb.

"She didn't say nothin'. Engine was makin' such a noise she didn't hear, I presume likely."

"Humph!" sniffed Baker, evidently envious; "I guess she heard you, all right. Fellers like you make me tired. Grabbin' every chance to curry favor with rich folks! Wonder you didn't tell her you drove a fish−cart and wanted her trade! As for me, I'm independent. Don't make no difference to me how well−off a person is. They're human, just the same as I am, and _I_ don't toady to 'em. If they want to talk they can send for me. I'll wait till they do."

"Hope you've got lots of patience, Alvin," observed Mullet drily. During the hilarity which followed, and while the offended apostle of independence was trying to think of a sufficiently cutting reply, I walked to the rear of the store.

Our letter box was Number 218, in the center of the rack, and, as I approached, I glanced at it involuntarily. To my surprise there was a letter in it; I could see it through the glass of the box door. Lute had, as I knew, got the mail the previous evening and the morning's mail had not yet arrived. Therefore this letter must have been written by some one in Denboro and posted late the night before or early that morning. It was not the custom for Denboro residents to communicate with each other through the medium of the post. They preferred to save the two cents stamp money, as a general thing. Bills sometimes came by mail, but this was the tenth, not the first, of the month; and, besides, our bills were paid.

I reached into my pocket for my keys, unlocked the box and took out the letter. The envelope was square, of an expensive quality, and eminently aristocratic. It was postmarked Denboro, dated that morning, and addressed in a sharp, clear masculine hand unfamiliar to me, to "Roscoe Paine, Esq." The "Esq." would have settled it, if the handwriting had not. No fellow−townsman of my acquaintance would address me, or any one else, as Esquire. Misters and Captains were common enough, but Esquires−−no.

It was a Denboro custom, when one received a mysterious letter, to get the fullest enjoyment out of the mystery before solving it. I had known Dorinda Rogers to guess, surmise and speculate for ten minutes before opening a patent medicine circular. But, though mysteries were uncommon enough in my life, I think I should have reached the solution of this one in the next second−−in fact, I had torn the end from the envelope−−when I was interrupted.

It was Captain Dean who interrupted me. He had evidently concluded his conversation with the postmaster and now was bearing down majestically upon me, like a ten thousand ton steamer on a porgie schooner.

"Hey, you−−Ros!" he roared. He was at my elbow, but he roared just the same. Skipper of a coaster in his early days, he had never outgrown the habit of pitching his voice to carry above a fifty− mile gale. "Hey, Ros. See here; I want to talk to you."

I did not want to talk with any one, particularly with him. He was the individual who, according to Lute, had bracketed Mr. Rogers and myself as birds of a feather, the remark which was primarily responsible for my ill humor of the morning. If he had not said that, and if Lute had not quoted the saying to me, I might have behaved less like a fool when that automobile overtook me, I might not have given that young idiot, whose Christian name it seemed was Victor, the opportunity to be smart at my expense. That girl with the dark eyes might not have looked at me as if I were a worm or a June bug. Confound her! what right had she to look at me like that? Victor, or whatever his name was, was a cub and a cad and as fresh as the new paint on Ben Small's lighthouse, but he had deigned to speak. Whereas that girl−−!

No, I did not want to talk with Jedediah Dean. However, he wanted to talk to me, and what he wanted he usually got.

Captain Dean was one of Denboro's leading citizens. His parents had been as poor as Job's turkey, but Jedediah had determined to get money and now he had it. He was reputed to be worth "upwards of thirty thousand," owned acres and acres of cranberry swamps, and the new house he had just built was almost as big as it was ugly, which is saying considerable. He had wanted to be a deacon in the church and, though the church was by no means so eager, deacon he became. He was an uncompromising Democrat, but he had forced himself into the Board of Selectmen, every other member a Republican. He was director in the Denboro bank, and it was town talk that his most ardent desire at the present time was to see his daughter Helen−−Nellie, we all called her−−married to George Taylor, cashier of that bank. As George and Nellie were "keeping company" it seemed

likely that Captain Jed would be gratified in this, as in all other desires. He was a born boss, and did his best to run the town according to his ideas. Captain Elisha Warren, who lived over in South Denboro and was also a director in the bank, covered the situation when he said: "Jed Dean is one of those fellers who ought to have a big family to order around. The Almighty gave him only one child and so he adopted Denboro and is bossin' that."

"I want to talk to you, Ros," repeated Captain Jed. "Come here."

He led the way to the settee by the calico and dress goods counter. I put the unread letter in my pocket and followed him.

"Set down," he ordered. "Come to anchor alongside."

I came to anchor.

"How's your mother?" he asked. "Matilda was cal'latin' to go down and set with her a spell this afternoon, if she didn't have anything else to do−−if Matilda didn't, I mean."

Matilda was his wife. In her husband's company she was as dumb as a broken phonograph; when he was not with her she talked continuously, as if to get even. A call from Matilda Dean was one of the additional trials which made Mother's invalid state harder to bear.

"Course she may not come," Jedediah hastened to say. "She's pretty busy these days. But if she don't have anything else to do she will. I told her she'd better."

"Mother will be charmed," I said. Captain Jed was no fool and he looked at me sharply.

"Um; yes," he grunted. "I presume likely. You're charmed, too, ain't you?"

I was not expecting this. I murmured something to the effect that I was delighted, of course.

"Sartin. Well, that's all right. I didn't get you on this settee to charm you. I want to talk business with you a minute."

"Business! With me?"

"Yup. Or it may be business later on. I've been thinkin' about that Shore Lane, the one that runs through your land. Us town folks use that a whole lot. I cal'late most everybody's come to look at it as a reg'lar public road to the beach."

"Why, yes, I suppose they have," I said, puzzled to know what he was driving at. "It is a public road, practically."

"No, 'tain't, neither. It's a private way, and if you wanted to you could shut it off any day. A good many folks would have shut it off afore this."

"Oh, I guess not."

"I guess yes. I'd shut it off myself. I wouldn't have Tom, Dick and Harry drivin' fish wagons and tip carts full of seaweed through my premises free gratis for nothin'."

"Why?" I asked. "What harm does it do?"

"I don't know as it does any. But because a tramp sleepin' on my front piazza might not harm the piazza, that's no reason why I'd let him sleep there."

I laughed. "The two cases aren't exactly alike, are they?" I said. "The land is of no value to us at present. Mother and I are glad to have the Lane used, if it is a convenience, as I suppose it is."

"It's that, sartin. Ros, who owns that land the Lane runs through−− you or your mother?"

"It is in my name," I said.

"Um−hm. Well, would you sell it?"

"Sell it! Sell that strip of sand and beach grass! Who would buy it?"

"I don't know as anybody would. I just asked if you'd sell it, that's all."

"Perhaps I would. I presume I should, if I had the chance."

"Ain't had any chance yet, have you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'! Well, you just think it over. If you decide you would sell it and get so fur as fixin' a price on it, let me know, will you?"

"Captain, what in the world do you want of that land? See here! you don't want to shut off the Shore Lane, do you?"

"What in time would I want to shut it off for? I use it as much as anybody, don't I?"

"Then I don't see−−"

"Maybe there ain't nothin' TO see. Only, if you decide to sell, let me know. Yes, and don't sell WITHOUT lettin' me know. Understand?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, you understand enough, I cal'late. All I want you to do is to promise not to sell that land the Lane's on without speakin' to me fust. Will you promise that?"

I considered for a moment. "Yes," I said, "I'll promise that. Though I can't imagine what you're driving at."

"You don't need to. Maybe I'm just drivin' blind; I hope I am. That's all I wanted to talk about," rising from the settee. "Oh, by the way," he added, "your neighborhood's honored just now, ain't it? The King of New York's arrived, they tell me."

"King of New York? Oh! I see; you mean the Coltons."

"Sartin. Who else? Met his Majesty yet?"

"No. Have you?"

"I met him when he was down a month ago. Sim Eldredge introduced me right here in the store. 'Mr. Colton,' says Sim, proud but humble, so to speak, 'let me make you acquainted with one of our selectmen, Cap'n Dean. Cap'n, shake hands with Mr. Colton of New York.' We shook, and I cal'late I'd ought to have kept that hand in a glass case ever since. But, somehow or other, I ain't."

"What sort of a chap is Colton?" I asked.

"Oh, all right of his kind, I guess. In amongst a gang of high financers like himself he'd size up as a pretty good sport, I shouldn't wonder. And he was polite enough to me, I suppose. But, darn him, I didn't like the way he looked at me! He looked as if−− as if−−well, I can't tell you how he looked."

"You don't need to," I said, brusquely. "I know."

"You do, hey? He ain't looked at you, has he? No, course he ain't! You said you hadn't met him."

"I've met others of his kind."

"Yes. Well, I'm a hayseed and I know it. I'm just a countryman and he's a millionaire. He'll be the big show in this town from now on. When he blows his nose seven−eighths of this community 'll start in workin' up a cold in the head."

He turned on his heel and started to go.

"Will you?" I asked, slily.

He looked back over his shoulder. "I ain't subject to colds−− much," he snapped. "But YOU better lay in a supply of handkerchiefs, Ros."

I smiled. I knew what was troubling him. A little tin god has a pleasant time of it, no doubt, until the coming of the eighteen carat gold idol. Captain Jed had been boss of Denboro−−self− appointed to that eminent position, but holding it nevertheless−− and to be pushed from his perch by a city rival was disagreeable. If I knew him he would not be dethroned without a fight. There were likely to be some interesting and lively times in our village.

I could understand Dean's dislike of Colton, but his interest in the Shore Lane was a mystery. Why should he wish to buy that worthless strip of land? And what did he mean by asking if I had chances to sell it? Still pondering over this puzzle, I walked toward the front of the store, past the group waiting for the mail, where the discussion concerning the Coltons was still going on, Thoph Newcomb and Alvin Baker both talking at once.

"You ask Ros," shouted Alvin, pounding the counter beside him. "Say, Ros, Newcomb here seems to think that because a feller comes from the city and is rich that that gives him the right to order the rest of us around as if we was fo'mast hands. He says−−"

"I don't neither!" yelled Thoph. "What I say is that money counts, and−−"

"You do, too! Ros, do YOU intend to get down on your knees to them Coltons?"

I laughed and went on without replying. I left the store and strolled across the road to the bank, intending to make a short call on George Taylor, the cashier, my most intimate acquaintance and the one person in Denboro who came nearest to being my friend.

But George was busy in the directors' room, and, after waiting a few moments in conversation with Henry Small, the bookkeeper, I gave it up and walked home, across the fields this time; I had no desire to meet more automobilists.

Dorinda had finished dusting the dining room and was busy upstairs. I could hear the swish−swish of her broom overhead. I opened the door leading to Mother's bedroom and entered, closing the door behind me.

The curtains were drawn, as they always were on sunny days, and the room was in deep shadow. Mother had been asleep, I think, but she heard my step and recognized it.

"Is that you, Boy?" she asked. If I had been fifty, instead of thirty−one, Mother would have called me "Boy" just the same.

"Yes, Mother," I said.

"Where have you been? For a walk? It is a beautiful morning, isn't it."

Her only way of knowing that the morning was a beautiful one was that the shades were drawn. She had not seen the sunlight on the bay, nor the blue sky; she had not felt the spring breeze on her face, or the green grass beneath her feet. Her only glimpses of the outside world were those which she got on cloudy or stormy days when the shades were raised a few inches and, turning her head on the pillow, she could see beneath them. For six years she had been helpless and bedridden in that little room. But she never complained.

I told her that I had been uptown for a walk.

"Did you meet any one?" she asked.

I said that I had met Captain Dean and Newcomb and the rest. I said nothing of my encounter with the motor car.

"Captain Jed graciously informed me that his wife might be down to sit with you this afternoon," I said. "Provided she didn't have anything else to do; he took pains to add that. You mustn't see her, of course."

She smiled. "Why not?" she asked. "Matilda is a little tiresome at times, but she means well."

"Humph! Mother, I think you would make excuses for the Old Harry himself. That woman will talk you to death."

"Oh, no! Not as bad as that. And poor Matilda doesn't talk much at home, I'm afraid."

"Her husband sees to that; I don't blame him. By the way, the Captain had a queer bee in his bonnet this morning. He seems to be thinking of buying some of our property."

I told her of Jedediah's interest in the Shore Lane and his hint concerning its possible purchase. She listened and then said thoughtfully:

"What have you decided to do about it, Roscoe?"

"I haven't decided at all. What do you think, Mother?"

"It seems to me that I shouldn't sell, at least until I knew his reason for wanting to buy. It would be different if we needed the money, but, of course, we don't."

"Of course," I said, hastily. "But why not sell? We don't use the land."

"No. But the Denboro people need that Lane. They use it a great deal. If it were closed it would put many of them to a great inconvenience, particularly those who get their living alongshore. Every one in Denboro has been so kind to us. I feel that we owe them a debt we never can repay."

"No one could help being kind to you, Mother. Oh! I have another piece of news. Did you know that our new neighbors, the Coltons, have arrived?"

"Yes. Dorinda told me. Have you met any of them?"

"No."

"Dorinda says Mrs. Colton is an invalid. Poor woman! it must be hard to be ill when one has so much to enjoy. Dorinda says they have a very pretty daughter."

I made no comment. I was not interested in pretty daughters, just then. The memory of the girl in the auto was too fresh in my mind.

"Did you go to the post−office, Roscoe?" asked Mother. "I suppose there were no letters. There seldom are."

Then I remembered the letter in my pocket. I had forgotten it altogether.

"Why, yes, there was a letter, a letter for me. I haven't read it yet."

I took the envelope from my pocket and drew out the enclosure. The latter was a note, very brief and very much to the point. I read it.

"Well, by George!" I exclaimed, angrily.

"What is it, Roscoe?"

"It appears to be a summons from what Captain Jed called the King of New York. A summons to appear at court."

"At court?"

"Oh, not the criminal court. Merely the palace of his Majesty. Just listen."

This was the letter:

Roscoe Paine, Esq.

Dear Sir:

I should like to see you at my house this−−Thursday−−forenoon, on a matter of business. I shall expect you at any time after ten in the morning.

Yours truly,

JAMES W. COLTON.

"From Mr. Colton!" exclaimed Mother. "Why! what can he want of you?"

"I don't know," I answered. "And I don't particularly care."

"Roscoe!"

"Mother, did you ever hear such a cool, nervy proposition in your life? He wants to see me and he orders me to come to him. Why doesn't he come to me?"

"I suppose he didn't think of it. He is a big man in New York and he has been accustomed to having people come at his convenience. It's his way of doing things, I suppose."

"Then I don't like the way. This is Denboro, not New York. He will expect me at any time after ten, will he? Well, as Mullet said to Alvin Baker just now at the post−office, I hope he has lots of patience. He'll need it."

"But what can he want of you?"

"I don't know. Wants to look over his nearest jay neighbor, I should imagine, and see what sort of a curio he is. He thinks it may be necessary to put up barbed wire fences, I suppose."

"Roscoe, don't be narrow−minded. Mr. Colton's ways aren't ours and we must make allowances."

"Let him make a few, for a change."

"Aren't you going to see him?"

"No. At least not until I get good and ready."

Dorinda came in just then to ask Mother some questions concerning dinner, for, though Mother had not seen the dining room since that day, six years ago, when she was carried from it to her bedroom, she kept her interest in household affairs and insisted on being consulted on all questions of management and internal economy. I rose from my chair and started toward the door.

"Are you going, Roscoe?" asked Mother.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Oh, just out of doors; perhaps to the boat−house."

"Boy."

"Yes, Mother?"

"What is the matter? Something has gone wrong; I knew it as soon as you came in. What is it?"

"Nothing. That is, nothing of any consequence. I'm a little out of sorts to−day and that man's letter irritates me. I'll get over it. I'll be back soon. Good−by, Mother."

"Good−by, Boy."

I went out through the dining room and kitchen, to the back yard, where, seating myself on Lute's favorite resting place, the wash bench, I lit my pipe and sat thinking, gloomily thinking.

CHAPTER III

It is a dreadful thing to hate one's own father; to hate him and be unable to forgive him even though he is dead, although he paid for his sin with his life. Death is said to pay all debts, but there are some it cannot pay. To my father I owed my present ambitionless, idle, good−for−nothing life, my mother's illness, years of disgrace, the loss of a name−−everything.

Paine was my mother's maiden name; she was christened Comfort Paine. My own Christian name is Roscoe and my middle name is Paine. My other name, the name I was born with, the name that Mother took when she married, we dropped when the disgrace came upon us. It was honored and respected once; now when it was repeated people coupled it with shame and crime and dishonor and broken trust.

As a boy I remember myself as a spoiled youngster who took the luxuries of this world for granted. I attended an expensive and select private school, idled my way through that somehow, and entered college, a happy−go−lucky young fellow with money in my pocket. For two−thirds of my Freshman year−−which was all I experienced of University life−−I enjoyed myself as much as possible, and studied as little. Then came the telegram. I remember the looks of the messenger who brought it, the cap he wore, and the grin on his young Irish face when the fellow sitting next me at the battered black oak table in the back room of Kelly's asked him to have a beer. I remember the song we were singing, the crowd of us, how it began again and then stopped short when the others saw the look on my face. The telegram contained but four words: "Come home at once." It was signed with the name of my father's lawyer.

I presume I shall never forget even the smallest incident of that night journey in the train and the home−coming. The lawyer's meeting me at the station in the early morning; his taking care that I should not see the newspapers, and his breaking the news to me. Not of the illness or death which I had feared and dreaded, but of something worse−−disgrace. My father was an embezzler, a thief. He had absconded, had run away, like the coward he was, taking with him what was left of his stealings. The banking house of which he had been the head was insolvent. The police were on his track. And, worse and most disgraceful of all, he had not fled alone. There was a woman with him, a woman whose escapades had furnished the papers with sensations for years.

I had never been well acquainted with my father. We had never been friends and companions, like other fathers and sons I knew. I remember him as a harsh, red−faced man, whom, as a boy, I avoided as much as possible. As I grew older I never went to him for advice; he was to me a sort of walking pocket−book, and not much else. Mother has often told me that she remembers him as something quite different, and I suppose it must be true, otherwise she would not have married him; but to me he was a source of supply coupled with a bad temper, that was all. That I was not utterly impossible, that, going my own gait as I did, I was not a complete young blackguard, I know now was due entirely to Mother. She and I were as close friends as I would permit her to be. Father had neglected us for years, though how much he had neglected and ill−treated her I did not know until she told me, afterward. She was in delicate health even then, but, when the blow fell, it was she and not I who bore up bravely and it was her pluck and nerve, not mine, which pulled us through that dreadful time.

And it was dreadful. The stories and pictures in the papers! The rumors, always contradicted, that the embezzler had been caught! The misrepresentation and lies and scandal! The loss of those whom we had supposed were friends! Mother bore them all, wore a calm, brave face in public, and only when alone with me gave way, and then but at rare intervals. She clung to me as her only comfort and hope. I was sullen and wrathful and resentful, an unlicked cub, I suspect, whose complaints were selfish ones concerning the giving up of my college life and its pleasures, and the sacrifice of social position and wealth.

Mother had−−or so we thought at the time−−a sum in her own name which would enable us to live; although not as we had lived by a great deal. We took an apartment in an unfashionable quarter of the city, and thanks to the lawyer−−who proved himself a real and true friend−−I was given a minor position in a small bank. Oddly enough, considering my former life, I liked the work, it interested me, and during the next few years I was made, by successive promotions, bookkeeper, teller, and, at last, assistant cashier. No news came from the absconder. The police had lost track of him, and it seemed probable that he would never be heard of again. But over Mother and myself hung always the dread that he might be found and all the dreadful business revived once more. Mother

never mentioned it, nor did I, but the dread was there.

Then came the first breakdown in Mother's health which necessitated her removal to the country. Luther and Dorinda Rogers were distant relatives of our friend, the lawyer. They owned the little house by the shore at Denboro and the lawyer had visited them occasionally on shooting and fishing trips. They were in need of money, for, as Dorinda said: "We've got two mouths in this family and only one pair of hands. One of the mouths is so big that the hands can't fill it, let alone the mouth that belongs to THEM." Mother−−as Mrs. Paine, a widow−−went there first as a boarder, intending to remain but a few months. Dorinda took to her at once, being attracted in the beginning, I think, by the name. "They call you Comfort Paine," she said, "and you are a comfort to everybody else's pain. Yet you ain't out of pain a minute scurcely, yourself. I never see anything like it. If 'twan't wicked I'd say that name was give you by the Old Scratch himself, as a sort of divilish joke. But anybody can see that the Old Scratch never had anything in common with you, even a hand in the christenin'."

Dorinda was very kind, and Lute was a never−ending joy in his peculiar way. Mother would have been almost happy in the little Denboro home, if I had been with her. But she was never really happy when we were separated, a condition of mind which grew more acute as her health declined. I came down from the city once every month and those Sundays were great occasions. The Denboro people know me as Roscoe Paine.

For a time Mother seemed to be holding her own. In answer to my questions she always declared that she was ever so much better. But Doctor Quimby, the town physician, looked serious

"She must be kept absolutely quiet," he said. "She must not be troubled in any way. Worry or mental distress is what I fear most. Any sudden bad news or shock might−−well, goodness knows what effect it might have. She must not be worried. Ros−−" after one has visited Denboro five times in succession he is generally called by his Christian name−−"Ros, if you've got any worries you keep 'em to yourself."

I had worries, plenty of them. Our little fortune, saved, as we thought, from the wreck, suffered a severe shrinkage. A considerable portion of it, as the lawyers discovered, was involved and belonged to the creditors. I said nothing to Mother about this: she supposed that we had a sufficient income for our needs, even without my salary. Without telling her I gave up our city apartment, stored our furniture, and took a room in a boarding−house. I was learning the banking business, was trusted with more and more responsibility, and believed my future was secure. Then came the final blow.

I saw the news in the paper when I went out to lunch. "Embezzler and His Companion Caught in Rio Janeiro. He Commits Suicide When Notified of His Arrest." These headlines stared at me as I opened the paper at the restaurant table. My father had shot himself when the police came. I read it with scarcely more than a vague feeling of pity for him. It was of Mother that I thought. The news must be kept from her. If she should hear of it! What should I do? I went first of all to the lawyer's office: he was out of town for the day. I wandered up and down the streets for an hour. Then I went back to the bank. There I found a telegram from Doctor Quimby: "Mrs. Paine very ill. Come on first train." I knew what it meant. Mother had heard the news; the shock which the doctor dreaded had had its effect.

I reached Denboro the next morning. Lute met me at the station. From his disjointed and lengthy story I gathered that Mother had been "feelin' fust−rate for her" until the noon before. "I come back from the post−office," said Lute, "and I was cal'latin' to read the newspaper, but Dorindy had some everlastin' chore or other for me to do−−I believe she thinks 'em up in her sleep−−and I left the paper on the dinin'−room table and went out to the barn. Dorindy she come along to boss me, as usual. When we went back to the house there was Mrs. Comfort on the dinin'−room floor−−dead, we was afraid at fust. The paper was alongside of her, so we judge she was just a−goin' to read it when she was took. The doctor says it's a paralysis or appleplexy or somethin'. We carried her into the bedroom, but she ain't spoke sence."

She did not speak for weeks and when she did it was to ask for me. She called my name over and over again and, if I left her, even for a moment, she grew so much worse that the doctor forbade my going back to the city. I obtained a leave of absence from the bank for three months. By that time she was herself, so far as her reason was concerned, but very weak and unable to bear the least hint of disturbance or worry. She must not be moved, so Doctor Quimby said, and he held out no immediate hope of her recovering the use of her limbs. "She will be confined to her bed for a long time," said the doctor, "and she is easy only when you are here. If you should go away I am afraid she might die." I did not go away. I gave up my position in the bank and remained in Denboro.

At the end of the year I bought the Rogers house and land, moved a portion of our furniture down there, sold

the rest, and resigned myself to a period of idleness in the country. Dorinda I hired as housekeeper, and when Dorinda accepted the engagement she threw in Lute, so to speak, for good measure.

And here I have been ever since. At first I looked upon my stay in Denboro as a sort of enforced vacation, which was to be, of course, only temporary. But time went on and Mother's condition continued unchanged. She needed me and I could not leave her. I fished and, shot and sailed and loafed, losing ambition and self−respect, aware that the majority of the village people considered me too lazy to earn a living, and caring little for their opinion. At first I had kept up a hit or miss correspondence with one or two of my associates in the bank, but after a while I dropped even this connection with the world. I was ashamed to have my former acquaintances know what I had become, and they, apparently, were quite willing to forget me. I expected to live and die in Denboro, and I faced the prospect with indifference.

The summer people, cottagers and boarders, I avoided altogether and my only friend, and I did not consider him that, was George Taylor, the Denboro bank cashier. He was fond of salt−water and out−door sports and we, occasionally enjoyed them together.

Thanks to the lawyer, our names had been scarcely mentioned in the papers at the time of my father's death. No one in the village knew our identity or our story. And, because I knew that Mother would worry if she were told, I kept from her the fact that our little income was but half of what it had been. Our wants were few, and if my clothes were no longer made by the best tailors, if they were ready−made and out−of−date and lacked pressing, they were whole, at all events, because Dorinda was a tip−top mender. In fact, I had forgotten they were out−of−date until the sight of the immaculately garbed young chap in the automobile brought the comparison between us to my mind.

But now, as I sat on the wash−bench, thinking of all this, I looked down at my baggy trousers and faded waistcoat with disgust. One of the surest signs of the loss of self−respect is a disregard of one's personal appearance. I looked like a hayseed−−not the independent countryman who wears old clothes on week days from choice and is proudly conscious of a Sunday suit in the closet−−but that other variety, the post−office and billiard−room idler who has reached the point of utter indifference, is too shiftless to care. Captain Jed was not so far wrong, after all−−Lute Rogers and I were birds of a feather in more ways than one.

No wonder that girl in the auto had looked at me as if I were something too contemptible for notice. Yet I hated her for that look. I had behaved like a boor, of course. Because I was a failure, a country loafer with no prospect of ever being anything else, because I could not ride in automobiles and others could−− these were no good reasons for insulting strangers more fortunate than I. Yet I did hate that girl. Just then I hated all creation, especially that portion of it which amounted to anything.

I took the letter from my pocket and read it again. "I should like to see you . . . on a matter of business." What business could "Yours truly, James W. Colton" have with me? And Captain Jed also had talked business. I supposed that I had given up business long ago and for good; now, all at once, it seemed to be hunting me. Well, all the hunting should be on its side.

At another time I might have treated the great Colton's "summons to court" as a joke. I might, like Mother, have regarded the curtness of the command and its general tone of taking my prompt obedience for granted as an expression of the Wall Street magnate's habit of mind, and nothing more. He was used to having people jump when he snapped his fingers. But now it made me angry. I sympathized with Dean and Alvin Baker. The possession of money did not necessarily imply omnipotence. This was Cape Cod, not New York. His Majesty might, as Captain Jed put it, have blown his Imperial nose, but I, for one, wouldn't "lay in a supply of handkerchiefs"−−not yet.

I heard a rustle in the bushes and, turning my head, saw Lute coming along the path. He was walking fast−−fast for him, that is−− and seemed to be excited. His excitement, however, did not cause him to forget prudence. He looked carefully about to be sure his wife was not in sight, before he spoke.

"Dorindy ain't been here sence I've been gone, has she?" was his first question.

"I guess not," said I. "She has been in the house since I got back. But I don't know how long you've been gone."

"Only a few minutes. I−−I just stepped over 'cross the Lane for a jiffy, that's all. Say, by time; them Coltons must have money!"

"That's a habit of millionaires, I believe."

"Hey? What do you mean by that? If they didn't have money they couldn't be millionaires, could they? How'd you like to be a millionaire, Ros?"

"I don't know. I never tried."

"By time! I'D like to try a spell. I've been over lookin' 'round their place. You never see such a place! Why, their front doorstep's big as this yard, pretty nigh."

"Does it have to be raked?" I asked.

"Raked! Whoever heard of rakin' a doorstep?"

"Give it up! But it does seem to me that I have heard of raking a yard. I think Dorinda mentioned that, didn't she?"

Lute looked at me: then he hurried over and picked up the rake which was lying near the barn, a pile−−a very small pile−−of chips and leaves beside it.

"When did she mention it?" he asked.

"A week ago, I think, was the first time. She has referred to it occasionally since. She was mentioning it to you when I went up town this morning. I heard her."

Lute looked relieved. "Oh, THEN!" he said. "I thought you meant lately. Well, I'm rakin' it, ain't I? Say, Ros," he added, eagerly, "did you go to the post−office when you was uptown? Was there a letter there for you?"

"What makes you think there was?"

"Asa Peters' boy, the bow−legged one, told me. The chauffeur, the feller that pilots the automobiles, asked him where the post−office was and he see the address on the envelope. He said the letter was for you. I told him he was lyin'−−"

"What in the world did you tell him that for?" I interrupted. I had known Lute a long time, but he sometimes surprised me, even yet.

"'Cause he is, nine times out of ten," replied Lute, promptly. "You never see such a young−one for dodgin' the truth. Why, one time he told his grandmother, Asa's ma, I mean, that−−"

"What did he say about the letter?"

"Said 'twas for you. And the chauffeur said Mr. Colton told him to mail it right off. 'Twan't for you, was it, Ros?"

"Yes."

"It WAS! Well, by time! What did a man like Mr. Colton write to you about?"

Among his other lackings Lute was conspicuously short of tact. This was no time for him to ask me such a question, especially to emphasize the "you."

"Why shouldn't he write to me?" I asked, tartly.

"But−−but HIM−−writin' to YOU!"

"Humph! Even a god stoops once in a while. Read your mythology, Lute."

"Hey? Say, look here, what are you swearin' about?"

"Swearing? Oh, that's all right. The god I referred to was a heathen one."

"Well, it's a good thing Dorindy didn't hear you; she's down on swearin', heathen or any other kind. But what did Mr. Colton write to you for?"

"He says he wants to see me."

"See you? What for?"

"Don't know. Perhaps he wants to borrow money."

"Borrow−−! I believe you're crazy!"

"No, I'm tolerably sane. There! there! don't look at me like that. Here's his letter. Read it, if you want to."

Lute's fingers were so eager to grasp that letter that they were all thumbs. He dropped it on the grass, picked it up with as much care as if it was a diamond, and holding it a foot from his nose−− he had broken his spectacles and was afraid to ask Dorinda for the money to have them repaired−−he spelt it out to the last word.

"Well, by time!" he exclaimed, when he had finished. "He wants to see you at his house this forenoon! And−−and−−why, the forenoon's all but gone now! What are you settin' here for?"

"Well, I thought I should enjoy watching you rake the yard. It is a pleasure deferred so far."

"Watchin' me−−! Roscoe Paine, you are out of your head! Ain't you goin' to see him?"

"No."

"You AIN'T!"

"No."

"Ros Paine, have you jined in with them darn fools uptown?"

"Who's swearing now? What fools do you mean?"

"Darn ain't swearin'. Dorindy herself says that once in a while. I mean Alvin Baker, and Jed Dean and the rest of 'em. They was goin' on about Mr. Colton last night; said THEY wan't goin' to run at his beck and call. I told 'em, says I, 'You ain't had the chance. You'll run fast enough when you do.'"

"Did you say that to Captain Jed?"

"No−o. I said it to Alvin, but old Jed's just as bad. He's down on anybody that's got more'n he has. But Ros, you ain't foolish enough to side with Jed Dean. Just think! Here's Mr. Colton, richer'n King Solomon and all his glory. He's got servants and butlers and bonds and cowpons and horses and teams and automobiles and−−"

I rose from the wash bench.

"I know what he's got, Lute," I interrupted. "And I know what he hasn't got."

"What? Is there anything he ain't got?"

"He hasn't got me−−not yet. If he wants to see me he may. I expect to be at home for the next day or two."

"You don't mean you expect a millionaire like him to come cruisin' after YOU! Well, by time! I think I see him!"

"When you do, let me know," I said. "I should like to be prepared."

"Well,−−by−−time!" said Lute, by way of summing up. I ate dinner with Dorinda. Her husband did not join us. Dorinda paid a visit to the back yard and, seeing how little raking had been done, announced that until the job was finished there would be "no dinner for some folks." So she and I ate and Lute raked, under protest, and vowing that he was so faint and holler he cal'lated to collapse 'most any time.

After the meal was finished I went down to the boathouse. The boathouse was a little building on the beach at the foot of the bluff below the house. It was a favorite resort of mine and I spent many hours there. My eighteen foot motor launch, the Comfort, the one expensive luxury I allowed myself and which I had bought second−hand two years before, was jacked up in the middle of the floor. The engine, which I had taken apart to clean, was in pieces beside it. On the walls hung my two shot guns and my fishing rod. Outside, on the beach, was my flat−bottomed skiff, which I used for rowing about the bay, her oars under the thwarts. In the boathouse was a comfortable armchair and a small shelf of books, novels for the most part. A cheap clock and a broken−down couch, the latter a discard from the original outfit of the cottage, made up the list of furniture.

My idea in coming to the boathouse was to continue my work with the engine. I tried it for a half hour or so and then gave it up. It did not interest me then. I shut the door at the side of the building, that by which I had entered−−the big double doors in front I had not opened at all−−and, taking a book from the shelf, stretched myself on the couch to read.

The book I had chosen was one belonging to the Denboro Ladies' Library; Miss Almena Doane, the librarian, had recommended it highly, as a "real interesting story, with lots of uplifting thoughts in it." The thoughts might be uplifting to Almena, but they did not elevate my spirits. As for the story−−well, the hero was a young gentleman who was poor but tremendously clever and handsome, and the heroine had eyes "as dark and deep as starlit pools." The poor but beautiful person met the pool−eyed one at a concert, where he sat, "his whole soul transfigured by the music," and she had been "fascinated in spite of herself" by the look on his face. I read as far as that and dropped the book in disgust.

After that I must have fallen asleep. What awakened me was a knock on the door. It was Lute, of course. Probably mother wanted me for something or other, and Dorinda had sent her husband to hunt me up.

The knock was repeated.

"Come in," I said, sleepily.

The door opened and in came, not Lute, but a tall, portly man, with a yachting cap on the back of his gray head, and a cigar in his mouth. He looked at me as I lay on the couch and I lay on the couch and looked at him.

"Afternoon," he said, curtly. "Is your name Paine?"

I nodded. I was waking rapidly, but I was too astonished to speak.

"Roscoe Paine?"

"Yes."

"Well, mine's Colton. I sent you a letter this morning. Did you get it?"

CHAPTER IV

I sat up on the couch. Mr. Colton knocked the ashes from his cigar, waited an instant, and then repeated his question.

"Did you get my letter?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Oh, you did. I was afraid that man of mine might have forgotten to mail it."

"No, I got it. Won't you−−er−−won't you sit down?" He pulled the armchair toward him and sat down. I noticed that he had a habit of doing things quickly. His sentences were short and to the point and he spoke and acted like one accustomed to having his own way. He crossed his knees and looked about the little building.

"It is a pleasant day," I observed, for the sake of saying something. He did not seem to hear me, or, if he did, he was not interested in the weather. For my part I found the situation embarrassing. I knew what his next question would be, and I did not know how to answer. Sure enough, he asked it.

"I wrote you to come over to my place this forenoon," he said. "You didn't come."

"No. I−−"

"Why not?"

Here was the issue joined. Here, if ever, was the opportunity to assert my independence a la Jed Dean and Alvin Baker. But to assert it now, after he had done the unexpected, after the mountain had come to Mahomet, seemed caddish and ridiculous. So I temporized, weakly.

"I didn't read your letter until about noon," I said.

"I see. Well, I waited until two o'clock and then I decided to hunt you up. I called at your house. The woman there said you were down here. Your mother?"

"No." My answer was prompt and sharp enough this time. It was natural, perhaps, that he should presume Dorinda to be my mother, but I did not like it.

He paid absolutely no attention to the tone of my reply or its curtness. He did not refer to Dorinda again. She might have been my wife or my great−aunt for all he cared.

"This your workshop?" he asked, abruptly. Then, nodding toward the dismembered engine, "What are you? a boat builder?"

"No, not exactly."

"What's the price of a boat like that?" indicating the Comfort with a kick in her direction.

"About two hundred and fifty dollars, I believe," I answered.

"You believe! Don't you know?"

"No. I bought that boat second−hand."

He did not refer to the boat again; apparently forgot it altogether. His next move was to rise and turn toward the door. I watched him, wondering what was going to happen next. He had a habit of jumping from one subject to another which was bewildering.

"What's that fellow doing off there?" he asked, suddenly.

I looked where he was pointing.

"That is Zeb Kendrick," I answered. "He's raking for quahaugs."

"Raking for what hogs?"

"Quahaugs. What you New Yorkers call clams."

"Oh! Sell 'em, does he?"

"Yes."

"Tell him to call at my house next time you see him. And for heaven's sake tell him to come to the servants' door. Don't you people down here have any servants' doors to your houses? There have been no less than fifty peddlers on my porch since yesterday and my butler will die of apoplexy if it keeps on. He's a good one, for a wonder, and I don't want to lose him."

I made no reply to this observation and he did not seem to expect any. He watched Zeb rake for a moment and then he turned back to me.

"Can you come over to my house now?" he asked.

I was not expecting this and again I did not have an answer ready.

"Can you?" he went on. "I've got a business deal to make with you and I'd rather make it there. I've got a lot of carpenters and painters at work and they ask me ten questions a minute. They are unnecessary questions but if I don't answer them the fellows are sure to make some fool mistake or other. They need a governess. If you'll come over with me I'll be in touch with them and you and I can talk just as well. Can come, can't you?"

I did not know what to say. I wanted to say no, that if he had any business with me it could be discussed in that boathouse. I did not like his manner, yet I had a feeling that it was his usual one and that he had not meant to be rude. And I could think of no good reason for not going with him.

"You can come, can't you?" he repeated.

"I suppose I can. But−−"

"Of course if you're too busy to leave−−"

I remembered the position he had found me in and I rather think I had turned red. He did not smile, but there was a sort of grim twinkle in his eyes.

"I'll come," I said.

"Much obliged. I won't keep you long. Come on."

He led the way and I followed, rebellious, and angry, not so much with him as with myself. I wished now that I had gone over to the Colton place when I first received the summons to court, instead of making proclamations of defiance to mother and Lute Rogers. This seemed such a complete backdown. As we passed the house I saw Lute peering from the barn. I devoutly hoped he might not see me, but he did. His mouth opened and he stared. Then, catching my eye, he winked triumphantly. I wanted to punch his head.

The King of New York walked briskly on in silence until we were just at the edge of the grove by the Shore Lane. Then he stopped and turned to me.

"You own all this land, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Humph! Get a good view from here."

I admitted that the view was good. At that particular point it embraced nearly the whole of the bay in front, and a large portion of the village at the side.

He waved his hand toward the cluster of houses.

"There are eighteen hundred people in this town, they tell me," he said. "Permanent residents, I mean. What do they all do?"

"Do?"

"Yes. How do they get a living? They must get it somehow. In the regular summer resorts they squeeze it out of the city people, I know that. But there aren't so many cottagers and boarders here. What do you all do for a living?"

I told him that most of masculine Denboro fished or farmed or kept store.

"Which do you do?" he asked. "You said you weren't a boat−builder."

"I'm not doing anything at present," I replied, shortly.

"Out of a job?"

"You might call it that. Is this a part of the business you wished to see me about, Mr. Colton?"

I was boiling inwardly and a little of the heat was expressed in my tone. I don't know whether he took the hint or merely lost interest in the subject. At any rate his reply was a brief "No," and we continued our walk.

As we reached the Shore Lane he paused again, and I thought he was about to speak. He did not, however, and we crossed the boundary line of my property and entered the Colton grounds. As we drew nearer to the house I was surprised to see how large it was. When the Atwaters owned it I was an occasional caller there, for old Major Atwater was fond of shooting and sometimes borrowed my decoys. But, since it changed hands, I had not been nearer to it than the Lane. With the new wing and the other additions it was enormous. It fairly reeked of money, though, so far as I was a judge, the taste shown in rebuilding and decorating was good. We turned the corner, where Asa Peters, the head carpenter, came hurrying up. Asa looked surprised enough to see me in company with his employer and regarded me wonderingly. "Mr. Colton," he said, "I wanted to ask you about them skylights." I stepped back out of hearing, but I inferred from Colton's actions that the question was another one of the

"unnecessary" ones he had so scornfully referred to in the boathouse.

"Jackass!" he exclaimed, as he rejoined me. I judged he was classifying Asa, but, if so, he did not trouble to lower his voice. "Come on, Paine," he added, and we passed a long line of windows, hung with costly curtains, and stepped up on a handsome Colonial portico before two big doors.

The doors were opened by an imposing personage in dark blue and brass buttons, who bowed profoundly before Colton and regarded me with condescending superiority. This personage, whom I recognized, from Alvin's description, as the "minister−lookin'" butler, led us through a hall about as large as our sitting−room, dining−room and kitchen combined, but bearing no other resemblance to these apartments, and opened another door, through which, bowing once more, he ushered us. Then he closed the door, leaving himself, to my relief, outside. It had been a long time since I was waited upon by a butler and I found this specimen rather overpowering.

The room we were in was the library, and, though it was bigger and far more sumptuous than the library I remembered so well as a boy, the sight of the books in their cases along the walls gave me a feeling almost of homesickness. My resentment against my millionaire neighbor increased. Why should he and his have everything, and the rest of us be deprived of the little we once had?

Colton seated himself in a leather upholstered chair and waved his hand toward another.

"Sit down," he said. He took a cigar from his pocket. "Smoke?" he asked.

I was a confirmed smoker, but I was not going to smoke one of his cigars−−not then.

"No thank you," said I. He did not comment on my refusal, but lit the cigar himself, from the stump of his former one. Then he crossed his legs and proceeded, with characteristic abruptness, to his subject.

"Paine," he began, "you own this land next to me, you say. Your property ends at the fence this side of that road we just crossed, doesn't it?"

"It ends where yours begins," I announced.

"Yes. Just this side of that road."

"Of the Shore Lane. It isn't a road exactly."

"I don't care what you call it. Road or lane or cow−path. It ends there?"

"Yes."

"And it IS your land? It belongs to you, personally, all of it, free and clear?"

"Why−−yes; it does." I could not see what business of his my ownership of that land might be.

"All right. I asked that because, if it wasn't yours, if it was tied up or mortgaged in any way, it might complicate matters. But it isn't."

"No."

"Good! Then we can get down to brass tacks and save time. I want a piece of that land."

I looked at him.

"You want−−?" I repeated, slowly.

"I want a strip of your land. Want to buy it, of course. I don't expect you to give it to me. What's it worth, by the acre, say?"

I did not answer. All at once I was beginning to see a light. Captain Jed Dean's mysterious conversation at the post−office was beginning to lose some of its mystery.

"Well?" asked Colton, impatiently. Then, without waiting longer, he added:

"By the way, before you name a figure, answer me one more question. That road−−or lane, or whatever it is−−that is yours, too? Doesn't belong to the town?"

The light was growing more brilliant. I could see breakers ahead.

"No," I replied, slowly. "It is a private way. It belongs to me."

"Good! Well, what's that land of yours worth by the acre?"

I shook my head. "I scarcely know," I said. "I've never figured it that way."

"I don't care how you figure it. Here, let's get down to a business proposition. I want to buy a strip of that land from the Lower Road−−that's what you call the one above here, isn't it?−−to the beach. The strip I want is about three hundred feet wide, for a guess. It extends from my fence to the other side of that grove by the bluff. What will you sell it for?"

The breakers were close aboard. However, I dodged them momentarily.

"Why do you want to buy?" I asked.

"For reasons."

"I should think you had land enough already."

"I thought I had, but it seems I haven't. Well, what's your price for that strip?"

"Mr. Colton, I−−I'm afraid−−"

"Never mind that. I suppose you're afraid you'll make the price too low. Now, see here, I'm a busy man. I haven't time to do any bargaining. Name your price and, if it's anywhere within reason, we won't haggle. I expect to pay more than anyone else would. That's part of my fine for being a city man and not a native. Gad! the privilege is worth the money. I'll pay the fine. What's the price?"

"But why do you want to buy?"

"For reasons of my own, I tell you. They haven't anything to do with your selling."

"I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That strip takes in the Shore Lane, Mr. Colton."

"I know it."

"And, if you buy, I presume the Lane will be closed."

He looked at me, surprised, and, I thought, a little annoyed.

"Well?" he said; "suppose it is?"

"But it will be, won't it?"

"You bet your life it will! What of it?"

"Then I don't know that I care to sell."

He leaned back in his chair.

"You don't care to sell!" he repeated, slowly. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"What I said. And, besides, Mr. Colton, I−−"

He interrupted me.

"Why don't you care to sell?" he demanded. "The land is no good to you, is it?"

"Not much. No."

"Humph! Are you so rich that you've got all the money you want?"

I was angry all through. I rose from my chair.

"Good day, Mr. Colton," I said.

"Here!" he shouted. "Hold on! Where are you going?"

"I can't see that there is any use of our talking further."

"No use? Why−− There! there! sit down. It's none of my business how rich you are, and I beg your pardon. Sit down. Sit down, man, I tell you!"

I sat down, reluctantly. He threw his cigar, which had gone out, into the fireplace and lit another.

"Say," he said, "you surprise me, Paine. What do you mean by saying you won't sell that land? You don't know what I'll pay for it yet."

"No, I don't."

"Then how do you know you won't sell it? I never had anything yet−− except my wife and family−−that I wouldn't sell for a price. Look here! I haven't got time to do any Down−East horse−jockeying. I'll make you an offer. I'll give you five hundred dollars cash for that strip of land. What do you say?"

I didn't say anything. Five hundred dollars was a generous offer. I couldn't help thinking what Mother and I might do with that five hundred dollars.

"What do you say?" he repeated.

I answered, Yankee fashion, with another question. "Mr. Colton," I asked, "why do you want to close that Shore Lane?"

"Because I do. What difference does it make to you why I want to close it?"

"That Lane has been used by Denboro people for years. It is almost a public necessity."

He puffed twice on his cigar before he spoke again. When he did it was in a different tone.

"I see," he said. "Humph! I see. Paine, does the town pay you rent for the use of that road?"

"No."

"Has it been bidding to buy it?"

"No."

"Is any one else after it?"

"No−o. I think not. But−−"

"You THINK not. That means you're not sure. You've had a bite somewhere. Somebody has been nibbling at your hook. Well, they've got to bite quick and swallow some to get ahead of me. I want that road closed and I'm going to have it closed, sooner or later. I'd prefer it sooner."

"But why do you want to close it?"

Before he could answer there came a knock at the door. The butler appeared.

"I beg your pardon, sir−−" he began. His master cut him short.

"Tell 'em to wait," he ordered. "I can't see any one now, Johnson. If it is that damned carpenter he can wait."

"It isn't the carpenter, sir," explained Johnson. "It's Mrs. Colton, sir. She wishes to know if you have bought that road. She says three of those 'orrid fishcarts have gone by in the last hour, sir, and they are making her very nervous. That's all, sir."

"Tell her I've bought it," snapped the head of the house. "Get out."

The butler obeyed orders. Colton turned to me.

"You heard that, Paine," he said. "That's my reason, the principal one. I bought this place principally on account of Mrs. Colton's health. The doctors said she needed quiet and rest. I thought she could have them here−−God knows the place looked forsaken enough−− but it appears she can't. Whenever she or I sit on the veranda or at a window we have to watch a procession of jays driving smelly fish carts through that lane of yours, or be stared at by a gang of countrymen hanging over the fence. It's a nuisance. It is bad enough for me or my daughter and our guests, but it will be the ruination of my wife's nerves, and I can't stand for that. You see the position I'm in. You heard what I told that butler. I said I had bought the road. You wouldn't make me a liar, would you? I'll give you five hundred for that bunch of sand. You couldn't get more for it if you sold it by the pound, like tea. Say yes, and close the deal."

I shook my head.

"I understand your position, Mr. Colton," I said, "but I can't say yes. Not now, at any rate."

"Why not? Isn't five hundred enough?"

"It's a good offer."

"Then why not accept it?"

"Because, if I were certain that I wanted to sell, I could not accept any offer just now."

"Why not? See here! are you afraid the town will be sore because the road is closed?"

"It would be a great inconvenience to them."

"It's a greater one to me as it is. Can you afford to be a philanthropist? Are you one of those public−spirited citizens we read about?"

He was sneering now, and my anger, which had lessened somewhat when he spoke of his wife's ill health, was rising again.

"Are you?" he repeated.

"I don't know as to that. But, as I said a while ago, Mr. Colton, I couldn't sell that land to you now."

"Why not?"

"Because, if there were no other reason, I promised not to sell it without telling another person first."

He threw down his cigar and stood up. I rose also.

"I see," he said, with sarcasm. "I knew there was something beside public spirit. You think, by hanging off and playing me against this other sucker, you can get a higher price. Well, if that's the game, I'll keep him busy."

He took out his watch, glanced at it, and thrust it back into his pocket.

"I've wasted time enough over this fool thing," he declared. "Now that I know what the game is we'll talk to the point. It's highway robbery, but I might have expected to be robbed. I'll give you six hundred for that land."

I did not answer. I was holding my temper by main strength and I could not trust myself to speak.

"Well?" he sneered. "That shakes your public spirit some, hey? What do you say?"

"No," I answered, and started for the door.

"What!" he could hardly believe his ears. "By the Lord Harry! the fellow is crazy. Six hundred and fifty then, you infernal robber."

"No."

"NO! Say, what in thunder do you mean?"

"I mean that you may go to the devil," I retorted, and reached for the door knob.

But before my fingers touched it there was the sound of laughter and voices in the hall. The knob was turned from without. I stepped back and to one side involuntarily, as the door opened and into the library came, not the butler, but a young lady, a girl in an automobile coat and bonnet. And, following her, a young man.

"Father," said the young lady, "Johnson says you've bought that horrid road. I'm so glad! When did you do it?"

"Congratulations, Mr. Colton," said the young man. "We just passed a cart full of something−−seaweed, I believe it was−−as we came along with the car. Oscar had to slow down to squeeze by, and we certainly were swept by ocean breezes. By Jove! I can smell them yet. I−−"

The young lady interrupted him.

"Hush, Victor," she said. "I beg your pardon, Father. I thought you were alone. Victor, we're intruding."

The open door had partially screened me from the newcomers. But Colton, red and wrathful, had not ceased to glare in my direction and she, following his gaze, saw me. She did not recognize me, I think−−probably I had not made sufficient impression upon her mind even for casual remembrance−−but I recognized her. She was the girl with the dark eyes, whose look of contemptuous indifference had so withered my self−esteem. And her companion was the young chap who, from the tonneau of the automobile that morning, had inquired the way to Bayport.

The young man turned lazily. "Are we?" he said. "I−− What! Why, Mabel, it's the humorist!"

Then she recognized me. I could feel the blood climbing from my toes to the roots of my hair. I was too astonished and chagrined to speak or even move, though I wanted to move very much indeed. She looked at me and I at her. Then she turned coldly away.

"Come, Victor," she said.

But Victor was his own blase self. It took more than a trifle to shake his calm. He laughed.

"It's the humorist," he repeated. "Reuben, how are you?"

Colton regarded the three of us with amazement.

"What?" he began. "Mabel, do you−−"

But I had recovered my powers of locomotion. I was on my way out of that library.

"Here!" shouted Colton. "Stop!"

I did not stop. Feeling as I did at that moment it would have been distinctly unpleasant for the person who tried to stop me. The girl was in my way and, as I approached, she drew her skirts aside. No doubt it was my imagination which made her manner of doing it seem like an insult, but, imagination or reality, it was the one thing necessary to clench my resolution. Now when she looked at me I returned the look with interest. I strode through the doorway and across the hall. The butler would have opened the outer door for me, but I opened it myself to the imminent danger of his dignified nose. As I stepped from the portico I heard behind me a roar from Big Jim Colton and a shout of laughter from Victor.

I walked home at top speed. Only once did I look back. That was just as I was about to enter the grove on the other side of the Shore Lane. Then I turned and saw, at the big window at the end of the "Newport villa," a group of three staring in my direction: Colton, his daughter and that cub Victor. The distance was too great to see the expression of their faces, but I knew that two of them, at least, were laughing−−laughing at me.

I did not laugh.

Lute was waiting for me by the gate and ran to meet me. He was wild with excitement.

"He came after you, didn't he?" he cried, grabbing at my coat sleeve. "You went over to his house with him, didn't you! I see you and at fust I couldn't scurcely believe it. What did he want? What did he say?"

I did not answer. He ran along beside me, still clinging to my sleeve.

"What did he want?" he repeated. "What did he say to you? What did you say to him? Tell a feller, can't you?"

"I told him to go to the devil," I answered, savagely.

Lute let go of my sleeve.

"You−−you−− By time, you're stark loony!" he gasped; and collapsed against the gate post.

I went into the house, up the back stairs to my room, and shut the door.

CHAPTER V

So she was his daughter. I might have guessed it; would have guessed it if I had possessed the commonest of common−sense. I might have known that the auto was Colton's. No other machine was likely to be traveling on the Lower Road at that season of the year. She was the pretty daughter of whom Dorinda had spoken to Mother. Well, she was pretty enough; even I had to admit that. But I admitted it grudgingly. I hated her for her beauty and fine clothes and haughty arrogance. She was the incarnation of snobbishness.

But to be made twice ridiculous even by the incarnation of snobbishness was galling. She was to be my next−door neighbor; we were likely to meet almost anywhere at any time. When I thought of this and of the two meetings which had already taken place I swore at the blue and white water−pitcher on my bureau because it did not contain water enough to drown me. Not that I would commit suicide on her account. She would not care if I did and certainly I did not care whether she would care or not; but if I were satisfactorily dead I probably should not remember what a fool I had made of myself, or Fate had made of me.

Why had I not got out of that library before she came? Oh, if not, why hadn't I stayed and told her father, in her hearing, and with dignity, just what I thought of him and his remarks to me? But no; I had run away. She−−or that Victor−−would tell of the meeting at the bridge, and all my independence and the rest of it would be regarded as of a piece with that, just the big−headed "smartness" of a country boor. In their eyes I was a nuisance, that was all. A disagreeable one, perhaps, like the Shore Lane, but a nuisance, one to laugh at and forget−−if it could not be gotten rid of.

Why had I gone with Colton at all? Why hadn't I remained at the boathouse and there told the King of New York to go to the mischief? or words to that effect. But I had, at all events, told him that. In spite of my chagrin I could not help chuckling as I thought of it. To tell Big Jim Colton to go to the devil was, in its way, I imagined, a privilege enjoyed by few. It must have shaken his self−satisfaction a trifle. Well, after all, what did I care? He, and his whole family−−including Victor−−had my permission to migrate in that direction and I wished Old Nick joy of their company.

Having derived this much satisfaction from my reflections, I went downstairs. Dorinda was setting the table for supper. She looked at me as I came in.

"Been visitin', I hear," she observed, wiping an imaginary speck from the corner of a plate with her "afternoon" apron.

"Yes," said I.

"Um−hm," said Dorinda. "Have a good time?"

I smiled. "I had an interesting one," I told her.

"Um−hm, I judged so, from what Lute said."

"Where is Lute?"

"Out in the barn, beddin' down the horse. That is, I told him to do that, but his head was so full of you and what you told him you said to Mr. Colton that I shouldn't be surprised if he's bedded down the hens and was huntin' in the manger for eggs."

"Lute thinks I've gone crazy," I observed.

"Um−hm. He was all for fetchin' the doctor right off, but I told him I cal'lated we could bear with your ravin's for a spell. Did you say what he said you said?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"Um−hm. Well, it didn't do any good, did it?"

"Good? What do you mean?"

"I mean he didn't obey orders−−Colton, that is."

"He hadn't when I left."

"I thought not. I never saw any good come from profane language yet; and, besides, judgin' from what I hear about the way that Colton man lives, and what he does on Sundays and all, he'll make the port you sent him to when his time comes. All you need is patience."

I laughed, and she began sorting the plated spoons. We had silver ones, but Dorinda insisted on keeping those

to use when we had company. In consequence we used them about twice a year, when the minister came.

"Of course," she said, "I ain't askin' you what happened over there or why he wanted to see you. But I give you fair warnin' that, if I don't, Lute will. Lute's so stuffed with curiosity that he's li'ble to bust the stitches any minute."

"I'll tell you both, at supper," I said.

"Um−hm," said Dorinda. "Well, I can wait, and Lute'll have to. By the way," she added, seeing me about to enter Mother's room, "if it's anything too unpleasant I wouldn't worry Comfort with it. She'll want to know, of course, but I'd sort of smooth the edges."

Mother did want to know, and I told her, "smoothing the edges" all I could. I omitted my final order to "Big Jim" and I said nothing whatever about his daughter. Mother seemed to think I had done right in refusing to sell, though, as usual, she was ready to make allowances for the other side.

"Poor woman," she said, "I suppose the noise of the wagons and all that are annoying to any one with weak nerves. It must be dreadful to be in that condition. I am so sorry for her."

She meant it, too. But I, remembering the Colton mansion, what I had seen of it, and contrasting its splendor with the bare necessity of that darkened bedroom, found it hard to spare pity for the sufferer from "nerves."

"You needn't be," I said, bitterly. "I imagine she wouldn't think of you, if the conditions were reversed. I doubt if she thinks of any one but herself."

"You shouldn't say that, Roscoe. You don't know. You have never met her."

"I have met the rest of the family. No, Mother, I think you needn't he sorry for that woman. She has everything under the sun. Whereas you−−"

"Hush! hush! There is one thing she hasn't got. She hasn't a son like you, Boy."

"Humph! That must be a terrible deprivation. There! there! Mother, I won't be disagreeable. Let's change the subject. Did Matilda Dean come to see you this afternoon?"

"No. I presume she was too busy. But, Roscoe, it is plain enough why Captain Dean spoke to you about the Lane at the office this morning. He must have heard, somehow, that Mr. Colton wished to buy it."

"Yes. Or, if he didn't hear just that, he heard enough to make him guess the rest. He is pretty shrewd."

"You promised him you wouldn't sell without telling him beforehand. Shall you tell him of Mr. Colton's offer?"

"If he asks me, I shall, I suppose."

"I wonder what he will do then. Do you suppose he will try to persuade the Selectmen to buy the Lane for the town?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't wonder."

"It will be harder to refuse the town's offer."

"Yes. Although the town can't afford to pay Colton's prices. I believe that man would have raised his bid to a thousand, if I had let him. As a matter of business and nothing else, I suppose I am foolish not to push the price as high as possible and then sell. The land is worthless to us."

"I know. But this isn't just a matter of business, is it? And we DON'T need the money. We're not rich, but we aren't poor, are we, Boy."

"No. No, of course not. But, Mother, just see what I could do−− for you−−with a thousand dollars. Why, there are so many little things, little luxuries, that you need."

"I had rather not get them that way. No, Roscoe, I wouldn't sell to Mr. Colton. And I think I wouldn't sell to the town either."

"Why not?"

"Well, because we don't have to sell, and selling to either party would make ill−feeling. I should−−of course I'm only a woman; you are a man and know much more about such things than I−−but why not let matters stay just as they are? The townspeople can use the Lane, just as they have always done, and, as I told you before, every one has been so kind to us that I like to feel we are doing a little in return. Let them use the Lane, without cost. Why not?"

"What do you think the Coltons would say to that?"

"Perhaps they don't understand the real situation. The next time you see Mr. Colton you could explain more fully; tell him what the Lane means to the town, and so on. I'm sure he would understand, if you told him that.

And then, if the sight of the wagons was too annoying, he could put up some kind of a screen, or plant a row of fir trees by the fence. Don't you think so?"

I imagined the great man's reply to such a suggestion. However, I did not express my thoughts. I told Mother not to worry, I was sure everything would be all right, and, as Dorinda called me to supper, I went into the dining−room.

Lute was waiting for me at the table, and Dorinda, after taking the tray into Mother's room, joined us. Lute was so full of excitement and curiosity that he almost forgot to eat, a miracle of itself and made greater by the fact that he did not ask a single question until his wife asked one first. Then he asked three in succession. Dorinda, who was quite as curious as he but would not have shown it for the world, stopped him at the beginning of the fourth.

"There! there!" she said, sharply, "this is supposed to be a meal, not a parrot shop, and we're humans, not a passel of birds on a telegraph wire all hollerin' at once. Drink your tea and stop your cawin', Lute Rogers. Ros'll tell us when he gets ready. What DID Mr. Colton want of you, Roscoe?"

I told them as much of the interview at the Coltons' as I thought necessary they should know. Lute kept remarkably quiet, for him, until I named the figure offered by the millionaire. Then he could hold in no longer.

"Five hundred!" he repeated "Five hundred DOLLARS for the Shore Lane! Five−−"

"He raised it to six hundred and fifty before I left," I said.

"SIX hundred! Six hundred−−and FIFTY! For the Shore Lane! Six hun−−"

"Sshh! shh!" cut in Dorinda. "You sound like Sim Eldredge sellin' somethin' at auction. DO be quiet! And you told him, Roscoe−−?"

"I told you what I told him," I said.

"Um−hm. I ain't forgot it. Be quiet, Lute. Well, Roscoe, I cal'late you know your own affairs best, but, judgin' from some hints Matildy Dean hove out when she was here this afternoon, I don't believe you've heard the last from that Shore Lane."

"Matilda Dean!" I repeated. "Why, Mother said Matilda wasn't here to−day."

"Um−hm. Well, she was here, though Comfort didn't know it. I took pains she shouldn't. Matildy come about three o'clock, in the buggy, along with Nellie. Nellie was doin' the drivin', of course, and her mother was tellin' her how, as usual. I don't wonder that girl is such a meek, soft−spoken kind of thing. Between her pa's bullyin' and her ma's tongue, it's a wonder she's got any spirit left. It would be a mercy if George Taylor should marry her and take her out of that house. Matildy had a new book on Spiritu'lism and she was figgerin' to read some of it out loud to Comfort, but I headed her off. I know _I_ wouldn't want to be all stirred up about 'tests' and 'materializations' and such, and so I told her Comfort was asleep."

"She wasn't asleep, neither," declared Lute. "What did you tell such a whopper as that for? You're always sailin' into me if I stretch a yarn the least mite. Why, last April Fool Day you give me Hail Columby for jokin' you about a mouse under the kitchen table. Called me all kinds of names, you did−−after you got down off the table."

His wife regarded him scornfully. "It's pretty hard to remember which IS that partic'lar day with you around," she said. "I'd told Comfort she'd ought to take a nap and if she wan't takin' it 'twan't my fault. I wan't goin' to have her seein' her granddad's ghost in every corner. But, anyhow, Matildy made a little call on me, and, amongst the million other things she said, was somethin' about Cap'n Jed hearin' that Mr. Colton was cal'latin' to shut off that Lane. Matildy hinted that her husband and the Selectmen might have a little to say afore 'twas closed. If that's so I guess you may hear from him as well as the Colton man, Roscoe."

"Perhaps," I said. I could see no use in repeating my conversation with Captain Jed.

Dorinda nodded.

"Goin' to tell the town to go−−where you sent the other one?" she asked, dryly.

"I don't know."

"Humph! Well," with some sarcasm, "it must be fine to be in a position where money's no object. I never tried it, myself, but it sounds good."

I did not answer.

"Um−hm," she said. "Well, anyhow it looks to me−−Lute, you keep still−−as if there was goin' to be two parties in Denboro afore this Lane business is over. One for the Coltons and one against 'em. You'll have to take one side or the other, won't you, Roscoe?"

"Not necessarily."

"Goin' to set on the fence, hey?"

"That's a good place TO sit, isn't it?"

Dorinda smiled, grimly.

"If it's the right kind of a fence, maybe 'tis," she observed. "Otherwise the pickets are liable to make you uncomf'table after a spell, I presume likely."

I went out soon after this, for my evening smoke and walk by the bluff. As I left the dining−room I heard Lute reiterating his belief that I had gone crazy. Colton had said the same thing. I wondered what Captain Jed's opinion would be.

Whether it was another phase of my insanity or not, I don't know, but I woke the next morning in pretty good spirits. Remembrance of the previous day's humiliations troubled me surprisingly little. They did not seem nearly so great in the retrospect. What difference did it make to me what that crowd of snobs did or said or thought?

However, there was just enough bitterness in my morning's review of yesterday's happenings to make me a little more careful in my dress. I did not expect to meet my aristocratic neighbors−−I devoutly wished it might be my good luck never to meet any of them again−−but in making selections from my limited wardrobe I chose with more thought than usual. Dorinda noticed the result when I came down to breakfast.

"Got your other suit on, ain't you," she observed.

"Yes," said I.

"Goin' anywheres special?"

"No. Down to the boathouse, that's all."

"Humph! I don't see what you put those blue pants on for. They're awful things to show water spots. Did you leave your brown ones upstairs? Um−hm. Well, I'll get at 'em some time to−day. I noticed they was wearin' a little, sort of, on the bottoms of the legs."

I had noticed it, too, and this reminder confirmed my suspicions that others had made the same observations.

"I'll try and mend 'em this afternoon," went on Dorinda, "if I can find time. But, for mercy's sake, don't spot those all up, for I may not get time, and then you'd have to wear your Sunday ones."

I promised, curtly, to be careful, and, after saying good morning to Mother, I went down to the boathouse and set to work on the engine. It was the only thing in the nature of work that I had to do, but, somehow or other, I did not feel like doing it any more than I had the day before. A little of my good spirits were wearing off, like the legs of my "other" trousers, and after an hour of intermittent tinkering I threw down the wrench and decided to go for a row. The sun was shining brightly, but the breeze was fresh, and, as my skiff was low in the gunwale and there was likely to be some water flying, I put on an old oilskin "slicker" and sou−wester before starting.

I had determined to row across the bay over to the lighthouse, and ask Ben Small, the keeper, if there were any signs of fish alongshore. The pull was a long one, but I enjoyed every stroke of it. The tide was almost full, just beginning to ebb, so there was scarcely any current and I could make a straight cut across, instead of following the tortuous channel. My skiff was a flat bottomed affair, drawing very little, but in Denboro bay, at low tide, even a flat−bottomed skiff has to beware of sand and eel− grass.

Small was busy whitewashing, but he was glad to see me. If you keep a lighthouse, the average lighthouse, you are glad to see anybody. He put his brush into the pail and insisted on my coming to the house, because "the old woman," his wife, would want to hear "all the sewin' circle news." "It's the biggest hardship of her life," said Ben, "that she has to miss sewin' circle when the bay ices in. Soon's it clears she's at me to row her acrost to the meetin's. I've took her to two this spring, but she missed the last one, on account of this whitewashin', and she's crazy to know who's been talked about now. If anything disgraceful has happened for the land sakes tell her; then she'll he more reconciled."

I had nothing disgraceful to tell, but Mrs. Small was glad to see me, nevertheless. She brought out doughnuts and beach−plum jelly and insisted on my sampling both, the doughnuts because they were just made and she "mistrusted" there was too much flour in them, and the jelly because it was some she had left over and she wanted to see if I thought it was "keepin'" all right. After this, Ben took me out to see his hens, and then we walked to the back of the beach and talked fish. The forenoon was almost gone when I got back to the skiff. The tide had ebbed so far that the lightkeeper and I had to pull the little boat twenty feet to launch her.

"There!" said Ben, "now you're afloat, ain't you. Cal'late you'll have to go way 'round Robin Hood's barn to

keep off the flats. I forgot about the tide or I wouldn't have talked so much. Hello! there's another craft about your size off yonder. Somebody else out rowin'. Two somebodys. My eyes ain't as good for pickin' em out as they used to be, but one of 'em IS a female, ain't it?"

I looked over my shoulder, as I sat in the skiff and saw, out in the middle of the bay, another rowboat with two people in it.

"That ain't a dory or a skiff," shouted Ben, raising his voice as I pulled away from him. "Way she sets out of water I'd call her a lap−streak dingy. If that feller's takin' his girl out rowin' he'll have to work his passage home against this tide . . . Well, so long, Ros. Come again."

I nodded a goodby, and settled down for my long row, a good deal longer this time on account of the ebb. There was water enough on this side of the bay, but on the village side the channel made a wide detour and I should be obliged to follow it for nearly a mile up the bay, before turning in behind the long sand bar which made out from the point beyond my boathouse.

The breeze had gone down, which made rowing easier, but the pull of the tide more than offset this advantage. However, I had mastered that tide many times before and, except that the delay might make me late for dinner, the prospect did not trouble me. I swung into the channel and set the skiff's bow against the current. Then from the beach I had just left I heard a faint hail. Turning my head, I saw Ben Small waving his arms. He was shouting something, too, but I was too far away to catch the words.

The lightkeeper continued to shout and wave. I lifted an oar to show that he had my attention. He recognized the signal, and began pointing out over the water astern of me. I looked where he was pointing. I could not see anything out of the ordinary. Except for my own skiff and the gulls, and the row boat with the two persons in it there was nothing astir on the bay. But Ben kept on waving and pointing. At last I decided that it must be the row boat he was pointing at. I stopped rowing and looked.

The row boat was a good distance off and its occupants were but specks. Now one of the specks stood up and waved its arms. So far as I could see, the boat was drifting; there were no flashes of sunlight on wet blades to show that the oars were in use. No, it was drifting, and, as I looked, it swung broadside on. The standing figure continued to wave its arms.

Those people must be in trouble of some sort, I decided, and it was evident that Small thought so, too. There could no imminent danger threaten for, on a day like this, with no sea running, there was nothing to fear in the bay. If, however, they should drift out of the bay it might be unpleasant. And they certainly were drifting. I resigned myself to the indefinite postponement of my dinner, swung the skiff about, and pulled as hard as I could in the direction of the row boat.

With the tide to help me I made good progress, but, even at that, it took me some time to overtake the drifting craft. She was, as Ben had said, a lap−streaked, keel−bottomed dingy−−good enough as a yacht's tender or in deep water, but the worst boat in the world to row about Denboro bay at low tide. Her high rail caught what breeze there was blowing and this helped to push her along. However, I got within easy hailing distance after a while and called, over my shoulder, to ask what was the matter.

A man's voice answered me.

"We've lost an oar," he shouted. "We're drifting out to sea. Lend us a hand, will you?"

"All right," I answered. "I'll be there in a minute."

Within the minute I was almost alongside. Then I turned, intending to speak again; but I did not. The two persons in the dingy were Victor−−I did not know his other name−−and Mabel Colton.

I was wearing the oilskin slicker and had pulled down the brim of my sou'wester to keep the sun from my eyes; therefore they had not recognized me before. And I, busy at the oars and looking over my shoulder only occasionally, had not recognized them. Now the recognition was mutual. Miss Colton spoke first.

"Why, Victor!" she said, "it is−−"

"What?" asked her companion. Then, looking at me, "Oh! it's you, is it?"

I did not answer. Luck was certainly against me. No matter where I went, on land or water, I was fated to meet these two.

Victor, apparently, was thinking the same thing. "By Jove!" he observed; "Mabel, we seem destined to . . . Humph! Well? Will you give us a hand?"

The most provoking part of it was that, if I had known who was in that rowboat, I could have avoided the

encounter. Ben Small could have gone to their rescue just as well as I. However, here I was, and here they were. And I could not very well go away and leave them, under the circumstances.

Victor's patience was giving way.

"What are you waiting for?" he demanded. "Aren't you going to help us? We'll pay you for it."

I pulled the skiff a little closer and, drawing in my oars, turned and picked up the slack of my anchor rope.

"Here," I said, brusquely; "catch this line and I'll tow you."

I tossed him the loop of rope and he caught it.

"What shall I do with it?" he asked.

"Hold it, just as it is, for the present. What became of your other oar?"

"Lost it overboard."

"Why didn't you throw over your anchor and wait where you were?"

I think he had not thought of the anchor, but he did not deign to explain. Instead he began pulling on the rope and the two boats drew together.

"Don't do that," I said. "Wait."

I untied the rope, where it was made fast to the skiff's bow, and with it and the anchor in my hands, scrambled aft and wedged the anchor under the stern thwart of the little craft.

"Now," I said, "you can pull in the slack until you get to the end. Then make it fast to your bow somewhere."

I suppose he did his best to follow instructions, but the rope was a short one, the end jerked loose suddenly and he went backward in a heap. I thought, for an instant, that he was going overboard and that mine would be the mixed pleasure of fishing him out.

Miss Colton gave a little scream, which changed to a ripple of laughter. I might have laughed, too, under different circumstances, but just now I did not feel like it. Besides, the rope, having flown out of his hands, was in the water again and the two boats were drifting apart.

"What did you do that for?" demanded the fallen one, scrambling to his knees. I heard a sound from the dingy's stern as if the young lady was trying to stifle her merriment. Victor, doubtless, heard it, too.

"Where are you going?" he sputtered, angrily. "Give me that rope."

I gave it to him, literally gave it, for I pulled alongside and put the end in his hands.

"Tie it in the bow of your boat," I said. He did so. I drew in the slack until a fair towing length remained and made it fast. While he was busy I ventured to glance at Miss Colton. Her eyes were snapping with fun and she seemed to be enjoying the situation. But, catching my look, her expression changed. She turned away and looked indifferently out to sea.

I swung the skiff's bow around.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

Victor answered. "Back to Mr. Colton's landing," he said. "Get as much of a move on as you can, will you? I'll make it worth your while."

I was as anxious to get there as he was. I did not care for a quarrel, and I knew if he continued to use that tone in his remarks to me I should answer as I felt. I pulled with all my strength, but against the tide towing was hard work.

Victor sat on the amidships thwart of the dingy, with his back to me. But Miss Colton, seated in the stern, was facing me and I could not help looking at her. She did not look at me, or, if she did, it was as if I were merely a part of the view; nothing to be interested in, one way or the other.

She was beautiful; there was no doubt of that. Prettier even, in the blue and white boating costume and rough−and−ready white felt hat, than she had seemed when I saw her in the auto or her father's library. She represented the world that I had lost. I had known girls like her. They had not as much money as she, perhaps, but they were just as well−bred and refined, and almost as pretty. I had associated with them as an equal. I wondered what she would say, or think, if she knew that. Nothing, probably; she would not care enough to think at all. It did not matter to me what she thought; but I did wish I had not put on those fool oilskins. I must look more like a country longshoreman than ever.

If I had any doubts about it they were dispelled when I had rowed the two boats up the bay until we were abreast the Colton mansion. Then Victor, who had been talking in a low tone with his fellow passenger in the dingy, looked at the distant shore and, over his shoulder, at me.

"Here!" he shouted. "Where are you going? That's the landing over there."

"I know," I answered. "But we shall have to go around that flat. We can't cross here."

"Why? What's the reason we can't?"

"Because there isn't water enough. We should get aground."

He stood up to look.

"Nonsense!" he said. "There's plenty of water. I can't see any flat, or whatever you call it."

"It's there, though you can't see it. It is covered with eelgrass and doesn't show. We shall have to go a half mile further before we turn in."

"A half mile! Why, confound it! it's past one o'clock now. We haven't any time to waste."

"I'm sorry, but we can't cross yet. And, if I were you, I shouldn't stand up in that boat."

He paid no attention to this suggestion.

"There are half a dozen boats, bigger than these, by the landing," he declared. "There is water enough for them. What are you afraid of? We haven't any time to waste, I tell you."

I did not answer. Silence, on my part, was the safest thing just then. I continued rowing up the bay.

Miss Colton spoke to him and he sat down, a proceeding for which I was thankful. They whispered together for a moment. Then he turned to me.

"See here," he said; "this lady and I have an appointment. We must get ashore. Go straight in. If you're afraid I'll take the risk. If there is any danger I'll pay for that, too."

There was no question of risk. It was a certainty. I knew that channel.

"We can't cross here," I said, shortly.

"Why, confound you−−"

"Victor!" cautioned Miss Colton.

"Hush, Mabel! This is ridiculous. You and I saw two boats go straight out from the beach this morning. We went out that way ourselves. Here you−−Paine, or whatever your name is−−we've had enough of this. I've hired you to take us ashore, and I want to go there and not a half mile in another direction. Will you do as I tell you?"

When the dingy and the other boats crossed the flat the tide had been hours higher, of course; but I was in no mood to explain−−to him.

"No," I said, shortly.

"You won't? Then you give me an oar and I'll row the rest of the way myself."

There were only two oars in the skiff, but I could get on perfectly well with one. And it would serve him beautifully right to let him go. But there was the girl. I hesitated.

"Give me that oar," he repeated, angrily. "You won't? Then, by Jove, I'll do without it. Stop! Stop where you are! do you understand. We don't require your services any longer."

He turned and began untying the tow line. I stopped rowing.

Miss Colton looked troubled.

"Victor!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

"I know what I'm doing. Can't you see this fellow's game? The longer the row the higher his price, that's all. He can't work me. I've seen his kind before. Don't be frightened. If we can't do anything else we can anchor and wait until they see us from the house."

Idiot! At that point the channel was deep and the bottom soft mud. I doubted if his anchor would touch and, if it did, I knew it would not hold. I backed water and brought the skiff alongside the dingy, the rail of which I seized and held.

"Keep off!" ordered Victor, still fumbling with the rope. "We don't want your help."

I wasted no breath on him. I addressed my remarks to the girl.

"Miss Colton," I said, "will you listen to me, please. You can't anchor here because your anchor will not hold. And you can't cross that flat at this stage of the tide. I can give you an oar, of course, but it won't do any good. My oars are too light and small for your boat. Unless you wish to drift back where you were, or beyond, you must let me tow you around the head of this flat."

I don't know what answer she might have made. None, perhaps; although I am sure she was listening. But Victor, who had succeeded in untying the tow line, cut in ahead of her.

"Mabel," he warned, "don't pay any attention to him. Didn't your father tell us what he was? There!" throwing

the end of the rope overboard and addressing me; "now, you may clear out. We've done with you. Understand?"

I looked at Miss Colton. But I might as well have looked at an iceberg. I slid one of my oars over into the dingy.

"There you are," I said, grimly. "But I warn you that you're in for trouble."

I let go of the rail and the boats fell apart. Victor seized the borrowed oar with a triumphant laugh.

"Your bluff wouldn't work, would it, Reuben," he sneered. "I'll send you the oar and your pay later. Now, Mabel, sit tight. I'll have you ashore in fifteen minutes."

He began rowing toward the weed−covered flat. I said nothing. I was furiously angry and it was some moments before I recovered self−possession sufficiently to get my remaining oar over the skiff's stern and, by sculling, hold her against the tide. Then I watched and waited.

It was not a long wait. Victor was in difficulties almost from the beginning. The oar belonging to the dingy was a foot longer than the one I had given him and he zig−zagged wildly. Soon he was in the edge of the eelgrass and "catching crabs," first on one side, then on the other. The dingy's bow slid up on the mud. He stood up to push it off, and the stern swung around. Getting clear, he took a fresh start and succeeded only in fouling again. This time he got further into the tangle before he grounded. The bow rose and the stern settled. There was a mighty splashing, as Victor pushed and tugged, but the dingy stuck fast. And there she would continue to stick for four hours unless I, or some one else, helped her off.

I did not want to help. In fact, I looked all up and down the bay before I made a move. But it was dinner time and there was not another soul afloat. More than that, I noticed, as I had not noticed before, that brown clouds−−wind clouds−−were piling up in the west, and, if I was anything of a prophet, we would have squalls and dirty weather long before those four hours were over. And the dingy, in that position, was not safe to face a blow. No, as the small boys say, it was "up to me." I wished it was not, but it was.

So again I went to the rescue, but this time in an entirely different frame of mind. My anger and resentment had settled to a cold determination, and this trip was purely business. I was not at a disadvantage now, as I had been when I first met that girl and her friend, in "Big Jim" Colton's library. I was master of this situation and master I intended to be.

I sculled the skiff straight in to the edge of the flat, at a point where the bank sloped sharply to deep water. I threw over my anchor, shortened the rope and made it fast. Then I stepped out into water above my shoe tops and waded toward the dingy. The water was icy cold, but I did not know it at the time.

I splashed through the eelgrass. Victor saw me coming and roared an angry protest. He was still trying to push the boat off with an oar.

"Here!" he shouted. "You keep away. We don't want you."

I did not care what he wanted. I splashed alongside the dingy and looked at her and the position she was in. My mind was made up instantly.

"You'll never get her off if you both stay aboard," I said. "Let the lady move amidships and you get out and wade."

He glared at me as if I were as crazy as Colton or Lute had declared me to be. Then he laughed contemptuously.

"You go back where you came from," he ordered. "I'm running this."

"Yes, I've noticed that. Now I'll state the facts as plainly as I can. This boat is fast aground in the mud, the tide is still going out, and there are squalls coming. She must be got off or there may be danger. You can't get her off until she is lightened. Will you get out and wade?"

He did not answer; instead he continued to push with the oar. I turned to the girl.

"Miss Colton," I said, "I must ask you to stand up. Be careful when you rise."

She made no move, nor did she reply. The look she gave me was enough.

"You must stand up," I repeated, firmly. "Either your−−this gentleman−−must get out, as I tell him to, or I shall have to carry you to my skiff. We haven't any time to spare."

She gazed at me in blank astonishment. Then the color flamed in her cheeks and her eyes flashed.

"We don't wish your help," she said, icily.

"I'm sorry, but that makes no difference. I−−"

Victor whirled on me, the oar in his hands. I thought for an instant he was going to strike me with it.

"You blackguard!" he shouted. "Will you go away?"

I looked at him and then at her. It had to be done, and my mind was made up to do it. I waded in until the water was almost to my knees, and I was abreast the stern of the stranded boat.

"Miss Colton," I said, "I am going to carry you to my skiff. Are you ready?"

"You−− Why!−−" she breathed.

I stooped, lifted her in my arms, and ploughed through the weeds and water. The mud was soft and my feet sank into it. She struggled.

"You must keep still," I said, sharply, "or I shall drop you."

She gasped, but she stopped struggling. From behind me I heard a roar of rage from Victor.

I carried her to the anchored skiff and, plunging in still deeper, seated her on the stern thwart.

"Sit there, please, and don't move," I said. "I shall be back as soon as I've got your boat afloat."

I waded back to the dingy. Victor was frantic, but he did not disturb me. The worst of my unpleasant job was over.

"Now sit down," I ordered. "Do you hear me? Sit down and sit still."

"You−−you−−" he stammered.

"Because if you don't sit down," I continued serenely, "you're likely to tumble overboard. I'm going to push this boat off."

The first push helped to make up his mind. He sat, involuntarily. I pushed with all my might and, slowly and jerkily, the dingy slid off the shoal. But there were others all about. With one hand on the bow I guided her between them and to the edge of the channel. Then, wading along the slippery bank, I brought her to the skiff. My passenger had been making remarks in transit, but I paid no attention to them.

I made the rope fast for towing, took my oar from the dingy, pulled up the skiff's anchor and climbed aboard.

"Sit where you are," I said to Victor. "Miss Colton, please keep as still as possible."

I ventured to look at her as I said this, but I looked but once. All the way home I kept my gaze fixed on the bottom boards of the skiff.

I made the landing just in time. In fact, the squall struck before I was abreast the Colton place. The channel beyond the flat, which we had so lately left, was whipped to whitecaps in a moment and miniature breakers were beating against the mud bank where the dingy had grounded.

Under the high bluff it was calm enough. The tide was too low to make use of the little wharf, so I beached the skiff and drew the towed boat in by the line. I offered to assist Miss Colton ashore, but she, apparently, did not see my proffered hand. Victor scrambled out by himself. No one said anything. I untied the rope and pulled it in. Then I prepared to push off.

"Here!" growled Victor. "Wait a minute."

I looked up. He was standing at the edge of the water, with one hand in his pocket. Miss Colton was behind him.

"Well?" I asked.

"I haven't paid you yet," he said, sullenly. "How much?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. I knew, of course, but it pleased me to make him say it.

"Why, how much for towing us in? What's your price? Come, hurry up."

"I haven't any price. I'm not in the salvage business."

"Not−− Say, don't bargain. What's your price, I ask you?"

"Nothing, of course. Very glad to have been of assistance."

I took up my oars.

"Here!" he shouted. "Stop! hold on! Confound you! do you suppose we don't intend to pay you for this?"

I shook my head. "It has been a pleasure," I said, sweetly. "Good day."

I rowed off, but all the way down to my boathouse I smiled contentedly. I had seen the look on Mabel Colton's face. I rather thought I had evened the account between us; at least I had reduced the balance a trifle. This time it was not I who appeared ridiculous.

Dorinda saw me when I entered the kitchen. Her hands were upraised.

"My soul and body!" she exclaimed. "LOOK at them pants! LOOK at 'em! And I ain't had time to put a needle to your other ones yet!"

CHAPTER VI

The rain, which I expected would follow the squall, did not come until late that night, and it was still falling heavily the next morning. It was a warm rain, however, and, after breakfast, I walked up to the village. I said nothing, even to Mother, about the happenings in the bay, and Dorinda, who had asked many sarcastic questions concerning the state of my blue trousers−−if I had "mistook 'em for a bathin' suit" and the like−−seemed satisfied with my hurried explanation that I had gotten overboard. "Though how you fell in feet fust," she observed, "I don't see." She had mended my brown pair, sitting up until after two to do so.

Lute informed me that he had been up to the post−office. "Everybody's talkin' about them Coltons," he declared. "I see their automobile last night, myself. The Colton girl, she come into the store. My! she's a stunner, ain't she! Sim waited on her, himself, and gave her the mail. She wanted to buy some cheese−−for a rabbit, she said. I never heard of feeding a rabbit on cheese, did you, Ros?"

"No," I replied, laughing. It was not worth while to explain.

"Nor nobody else, but her! I guess," continued Lute, "likely she was just jokin'. Anyhow, Sim was all out of cheese, but he had some nice print butter, just in. She didn't want no butter, though."

"Humph!" sniffed Dorinda. "Did Sim Eldredge cal'late she wanted to feed the rabbit butter? Was the Colton girl alone?"

"No. There was a young feller with her; the one that's visitin' 'em. Carver his name is−−Victor Carver. Did you ever hear such a name in your life? Afore I'd name a child of mine Victor!"

"Um−hm. Well, I wouldn't waste time worryin' about that, if I was you. Look here, Lute Rogers, you didn't say anything about Roscoe's talk with Mr. Colton, did you?"

"No, no! no, no! Course I didn't."

"You sure?"

"Yes. 'Taint likely I would, would I? Cap'n Jed was on hand, as usual, and he was full of questions, but he didn't get anything out of me. 'What did Colton say to Ros?' he says. 'How do I know what he said?' says I. 'I wan't there, was I?' 'Where was you that forenoon?' he says. 'Forenoon!' says I, 'that shows how much you know about it. 'Twas three o'clock in the afternoon.' Oh, I had the laugh on him!"

Dorinda looked at me and shook her head.

"It's too bad, Roscoe," she said. "But I was afraid of it as soon as I found he'd sneaked off to the post−office. I cal'late it's all over town by now."

"What do you mean by that?" Lute's dignity was outraged. "All over town! I never told him nothin'."

"No. Only that Ros and Mr. Colton were together and 'twas three o'clock in the afternoon. And goodness knows how much more! DO be quiet! Seems sometimes as if I should lose patience with you altogether. Is this Carver the Colton girl's young man? Are they engaged?"

"I don't know. I guess he's keepin' company with her, by the looks. I got as nigh to 'em as I could, but I didn't hear much they said. Only, just as they was goin' out, he said somethin' about goin' for a little spin in the car. She said no, her father would want his letters. Carver, he said, why not send Oscar home−− that's the chauffeur, you know−−with the letters, and he'd run the car himself. She kind of laughed, and said she guessed not, she'd taken one trip with him already that day and she didn't believe she cared for another. He seemed kind of put out about it, I thought."

I had been feeling rather provoked at Lute for giving Captain Jed the information concerning my interview with Colton; but, somehow, this other bit of news restored my good humor. When I started for the village I did not take the short cut across the fields, but followed my regular route, the path by the bluff and the Shore Lane. I was no longer fearful of meeting my new neighbors. The memory of the happenings in the bay was a delightful solace to my wounded self−respect. I chuckled over it as I walked through the dripping pines of the little grove. No matter how contemptuously indifferent that girl might pretend to be she would not forget what had taken place; that she had been obliged to obey my orders; that I had carried her to that skiff; that I had saved her from a danger−−not a great danger, and against her will, of course−−but saved her nevertheless. She was under an obligation to me; she could not help herself. How that must gall her. I remembered the look on her face as I rowed

away. Sweet was revenge. And Victor−− Victor was a joke.

When I reached the Lane I looked over at the Colton mansion. The rain had given the carpenters and painters an enforced holiday, and, except for the chauffeur, whom I could see through the open door of the garage, there was no one in sight. I think I was a little disappointed. If "Big Jim" had appeared and hailed me with another offer for the land I should not have dodged. I was ready for him. But neither he, or any one else, appeared and I walked on.

At the Corners, Sim Eldredge shouted to me from the platform of his store.

"Hi, Ros!" he shouted. "You! Ros Paine! come here a minute, will you?"

I did not want to see him. I had intended avoiding the post−office altogether. But I crossed to the platform.

"Say, Ros," he asked eagerly, "what's this about you and Mr. Colton?"

I was annoyed.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why, you know, don't you? He come to see you and you went to see him over to his house. You had a reg'lar argument, I understand. About the Shore Lane, wan't it?"

"Who told you that?" I inquired, sharply.

"Why, nobody told me, exactly. Lute Rogers and Cap'n Jed was here last night and they got a−goin' as usual. The Cap'n does love to stir up Lute, and he commenced hintin' about somethin' of the kind. I don't know as they was hints, either, but Lute thought they was."

He grinned. I understood.

"I see," I said. "Well, what did Lute say?"

"I suppose he'd say he never said a word, but after he'd gone there was a kind of general sentiment that Colton wanted to buy the Shore Lane land off you, and that you and he had some words about it. Anyhow, you didn't sell the land, did you?"

"Suppose I did, or didn't; what of it?"

"Why, nothin', nothin'. Only, I tell you, Ros−−" he looked carefully about to make sure no one was listening; "I tell you; it's just this way. I can understand how you feel about it. You know Dean and some of the others are sore on Mr. Colton 'cause he's got more money than they have, and they want to make all the trouble for him they can. Jed's got an idea that he's after that Lane, to close it off, and he's stirrin' up sentiment against its bein' closed. He's talkin' about the town buyin' it. Now of course I know your position. You want to get just as high a price as you can afore you sell."

"That's my position, is it?"

"It would be the position of any sensible man, wouldn't it? I don't blame you. Now, what I wanted to say was this." He bent forward and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Why don't you let me handle this thing for you? I can do it better'n you. I see Cap'n Jed every night, you might say. And I see consider'ble of Mr. Colton. He knows I'm postmaster in this town and sort of prominent. All the smart folks ain't in the Board of Selectmen. I'll keep you posted; see? You just set back and pretend you don't want to sell at all. Colton, he'll bid and Jed and his gang'll bid. I'll tell each what the other bids, and we'll keep her jumpin'. When we get to the last jump, we'll sell−−and not afore. Of course Mr. Colton 'll get it, in the end."

"Oh, he will! What makes you think so?"

"What makes me think so? Don't be foolish. Ain't he a millionaire? How can Denboro stand up against a millionaire? I tell you, Ros, it's money counts in this world, and it pays to stand in with them that's got it. I'm goin' to stand in with Mr. Colton. But I'll pretend to stand in with Dean just as much. I can help a whole lot. Why, I shouldn't wonder if, between us, we could get−−er−−er−−I don't know how much, for that land. What do you say?"

I smiled. "It's very kind of you, Sim, to be willing to go to so much trouble on my account," I observed. "I didn't know there was such disinterested kindness in Denboro."

Sim seemed a bit put out. "Why," he stammered, "I−−I−−of course I presumed likely you'd be willin' to pay me a little commission−−or−− or−−somethin'. I thought I might be a sort of−−er−−agent for you. I've handled consider'ble real estate in my time−−and−−you see what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, drily; "I see. Well, Sim, if I decide to engage an agent I'll let you know. Good morning."

"But, hold on, Ros! I−−"

I did not "hold on." I walked across the road and entered the bank. Alvin Baker met me in the vestibule. He seized my hand and shook it violently.

"I declare," he exclaimed, "it does me good to shake hands with a feller that's got the grit you have. It does so! We're all proud of you."

"Much obliged, Alvin, I'm sure. But why?"

He winked and nudged me with his elbow.

"You know why, all right," he whispered. "Wouldn't sell him the land, would you? Tell me: Did he make you a real bid for it? Lute as much as said he did."

For a person who had told nothing, Lute seemed to have "as much as said" a good many things. I shook my head.

"So you think I shouldn't sell the land?" I asked.

"Course you shouldn't−−not to him. Ain't there such things as public spirit and independence? But I'll tell you somethin' more, Ros," mysteriously. "You may have a chance to sell it somewhere else."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir−ee! indeed! There's other public−spirited folks in Denboro as well as you. I know who they be and I stand in with 'em pretty close, too. I'm goin' to help you all I can."

"That's very kind of you, Alvin."

"No, no. I'm glad to do it. Shan't charge you nothin', neither."

"That's kinder still."

"No, 'tain't. . . Hold on a minute, Ros. Don't go. As I say, I'm goin' to work tooth and nail to get the town to buy that Lane property of yours. I'll stick out for you're gettin' a good price for it. I'll use all my influence."

"Thank you."

"You needn't thank me. It's a matter of principle. We'll show these city folks they ain't the whole ship, cargo and all. . . . Hold on a second more. Ros, I−−er−−I wonder if you'd do a little favor for me."

"What is it, Alvin?"

"Why, it's this way. I've got a note here in the bank; put it there when I bought the power engine for my cat−boat. Hundred and fifty dollars, 'tis. You're a pretty good friend of George Taylor, cashier here, and I was wonderin' if you'd mind puttin' in a word with him about my gettin' it renewed when it comes due. Just tell him you think I'm all right, and a good risk, or somethin' like that."

I could not help smiling. Alvin seemed to find encouragement in the smile.

"George thinks consider'ble of you," he said. "And Captain Jed−− he's one of the directors−−he will, too, now that you've stood up to Colton. Just put in a word for me, will you? And don't forget I'm a friend of yours, and I'm strong for your gettin' a good, fair price from the town. Remember that, won't you?"

"I won't forget, Alvin. Good−by."

I left him and went into the bank. Henry Small, the bookkeeper, was at his desk. I walked over to speak to him, but he, looking up from his figures, spoke first. There was, or so it seemed to me, a different note in his greeting. It was more hearty, I thought. Certainly he regarded me with a new and curious interest.

"Morning, Ros," he said. "Well, how are you these days?"

I answered that I was well, and was moving on but he detained me.

"Lively times ahead, hey," he whispered.

"What sort of times?" I asked.

He winked. "I guess you know, if anybody does," he observed. "All right, you'll have good friends on your side. I ain't saying anything, of course, but I'm on, all right."

He winked again. I walked back to the cashier's window. Taylor had, evidently, seen me talking with the bookkeeper, for he was standing by the little gate, waiting for me.

"Hello, Ros," he said. "Glad to see you. Come in."

George Taylor was a type of smart country boy grown to manhood in the country. His tone, like his manner, was sharp and quick and businesslike, but he spoke with the Down−East twang and used the Cape phrases and metaphors. He was younger than I, but he looked older, and, of late, it had seemed to me that he was growing more nervous. We shook hands.

"Glad to see you," be said again. "I was hoping you'd drift in. I presumed likely you might. Sit down."

I took the proffered chair. He looked at me with much the same curious interest that Small had shown.

"We've been hearing about you," he said. "You've been getting yourself talked about."

I mentally cussed Lute once more for his loquacity.

"I'll break the fellow's neck," I declared, with emphasis.

He laughed. "Don't do that yet awhile," he said. "The market is in bad enough shape as it is. If his neck was broke the whole of Wall Street would go to pot."

"Wall Street? What in the world has Lute got to do with Wall Street?"

"Lute! Oh, I see! Yes, Lute's been doing considerable talking, but it ain't his neck I mean. Say, Ros, what did you do to him, anyway? You stirred him up some, judging by what he said to me."

"Who said? What?"

"Why, Colton. He was in here yesterday. Opened what he called a household account; that was his main business. But he asked about you, along with it."

This explained some things. It was clear now why Small had appeared so interested. "Oh!" I said.

"You bet he did. Wanted to know if I knew you, and what you were, and so on. I told him I knew you pretty well. 'What sort of a fellow is he? A damn fool?' he asked. I strained the truth enough to say you were a pretty good fellow and a long ways from that kind of a fool, according to my reckoning. 'Umph!' says he. 'Is he rich?' I told him I guessed you wan't so rich that you got round− shouldered lugging your money. 'Why?' says I, getting curious. 'Have you met him, Mr. Colton? If you have you ought to have sized him up yourself. I always heard you were a pretty fair judge.' He looked at me kind of funny. 'I thought I was,' says he, 'but you seem to raise a new variety down here.' Then I guess he thought he'd said enough. At any rate, he walked off. What did you and he say to each other, Ros?"

I did not answer immediately. When I did the answer was non− committal. "Oh, we had a business interview," I said.

He nodded. "Well," he observed, "I suppose it's your affair and not mine. But, I tell you this, Ros: if it's what I suppose it is, it'll be everybody's affair pretty soon."

"You think so, do you?"

"I know so. Cap'n Jed's a fighter and he is on the war path. The two sides are lining up already. Whichever way you decide you'll make enemies, of course."

I shrugged my shoulders. The prospect of enemies, more or less, in Denboro, did not trouble me.

"But you'll have to decide," he went on, "who you'll sell to."

"Or not sell at all," I suggested.

"Can you afford to do that? There'll be money−−a whole lot of money−−in this before it's over, if I know the leaders on both sides. You've got the whip−hand. There'll be money in it. Can you afford to let it slip?"

I did not answer. Suddenly his expression changed. He looked haggard and care−worn.

"By the Almighty," he said, between his teeth, and without looking at me, "I wish I had your chance."

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. . . . How's your mother nowadays?"

I told him that my mother was much as usual, and we talked of various things.

"By the way," he said, "I've got some news for you. Nothing surprising. I guess all hands have seen it coming. I'm engaged to be married."

"Good!" said I, with as much heartiness as I could answer; marriage did not interest me. "Congratulations, George. Nellie Dean, of course."

"Yes."

"I'm glad for you. And for her. She'll make you a good wife, I'm sure."

He drew a long breath. "Yes," he said slowly, "Nellie's a good girl."

"When is the−−what do they call it? the happy event to take place?"

"In the fall some time, if all goes well. I hope it will."

"Humph! Yes, I should think you might hope as much as that. Why shouldn't it go well?"

"Hey? Oh, of course it will!" He laughed and rose from his chair as several men came into the bank. "I'll have to leave you, Ros," he said. "There's a directors' meeting this morning. They're coming now."

As I passed out of the gate and through the group of directors I noticed that they also regarded me with

interest. Two, men from neighboring towns whom I scarcely knew, whispered to each other. Captain Elisha Warren shook hands with me and inquired concerning Mother. The last of the group was Captain Jedediah Dean, and he touched me on the shoulder.

"Ros," he whispered, "you're all right. Understand? I say you're all right."

"Thanks," I answered, briefly.

"I heard about it," he whispered. "Ase Peters said the Grand Panjandrum was cranky as a shark with the toothache all day yesterday. You must tell me the yarn when we get together. I missed you when I called just now, but I'll be down again pretty soon. You won't lose nothin' by this. So long."

As I came down the bank steps Sim Eldredge called across the road.

"Good−by, Ros," he shouted. "Come in again next time you're up street."

In all my period of residence in Denboro I had never before been treated like this. People had never before gone out of their way to shake hands with me. No one had considered it worth while to ask favors of me. Sim and Alvin were not to be taken seriously, of course, and both were looking after their own pocketbooks, but their actions were straws proving the wind to be blowing in my direction. I thought, and smiled scornfully, that I, all at once, seemed to have become a person of some importance.

But my scorn was not entirely sincere. There was a certain gratification in the thought. I might pretend−−I had pretended−− that Denboro opinion, good or bad, was a matter of complete indifference to me. I had assumed myself a philosopher, to whom, in the consciousness of right, such trifles were of no consequence. But, philosophy or not, the fact remained that I was pleased. People might dislike me−−as that lofty Colton girl and her father disliked me, though they could dislike me no more than I did them−− but I could compel them to respect me. They already must think of me as a man. And so on−−as I walked home through the wet grass. It was all as foolish and childish and ridiculous as it well could be. I deserved what was coming to me−−and I got it.

For, as I came down the Lane, I met Oscar, the chauffeur, and a companion, whom I judged to be a fellow servant−−the coachman, I learned afterwards−−walking in the direction of the village. The rain had ceased, but they wore natty raincoats and caps and had the city air of smartness which I recognized and envied, even in them. The footpath was narrow, but they apparently had no intention of stepping to one side, so I made way for them. They whispered together as they approached and looked at me curiously as we passed. A few steps further on I heard them both burst out laughing. I caught the words, from Oscar, "fool Rube" and "the old man'll make him look−−" I heard no more, but as I turned into the grove I saw them both looking after me with broad grins on their faces.

Somebody has said that there is nothing harder to bear than the contempt and ridicule of servants. For one thing, you cannot resent it without a loss of dignity, and, for another, you may be perfectly sure that theirs is but the reflection of their employers' frame of mind. This encounter shook my self−satisfaction more than a little. It angered me, but it did more than that; it brought back the feeling I had when I left the Colton library, that my defiance was not, after all, taken seriously. That I was regarded by Colton as just what Oscar had termed me, a "fool Rube." When George Taylor told me of the great man's questions concerning my foolishness, I accepted the question as a tribute to my independence. Now I was not so sure.

Dorinda met me at the door.

"You've had two callers," she said.

"So? Who were they?"

"One of 'em was Cap'n Jed. He drove down just after you left. He come to see you about that land, I cal'late."

"Oh, yes. I remember he told me he missed me this morning. So he came here?"

"Um−hm. Him and me had a little talk. He seemed to know consider'ble about your rumpus with Mr. Colton."

"How did he know?"

"He wouldn't say, but I wouldn't wonder if he got a lot from Ase Peters. Ase and he are pretty thick; he's got a mortgage on Ase's house, you know. And Ase, bein' as he's doin' the carpenterin' over to Colton's, hears a lot from the servants, I s'pose likely. Leastways, if they don't tell all their bosses' affairs they're a new breed of hired help, that's all I've got to say. Cap'n Jed says Mr. Colton cal'lates you're a fool."

"Yes. So I've heard. What did the Captain say to that?"

"Seemed to think 'twas a pretty good joke. He said he didn't care how big a fool you was so long's you was feeble−minded on the right side."

So there it was again. My imagined importance in the eyes of the townspeople simmered down to about that. I was an imbecile, but they must pretend to believe me something else because I owned something they wanted. Well, I still owned it.

"Of course," continued Dorinda, "I didn't tell him you was figgerin' not to sell the land at all. If I had, I s'pose he'd have thought−−"

She stopped short.

"You suppose what?" I asked.

"Oh, nothin'."

She had said enough. I could guess the rest. I walked to the window and stood, looking out. The clouds were breaking and, as I stood there, a ray of sunlight streamed through a rift and struck the bay just at the spot where the dingy had grounded. The shallow water above the flat flashed into fire. I am not superstitious, as a general thing, but the sight comforted me. It seemed like an omen. There was the one bright spot in the outlook. There, at least, I had not behaved like a "fool Rube." There I had compelled respect and been taken seriously.

Dorinda spoke again.

"You ain't asked who your other caller was," she observed.

"Was there another?"

"Um−hm. I told you there was two. After Cap'n Jed left that chauffeur feller from the big house come here. He fetched a note for you. Here 'tis."

I took the note. It was addressed to me in a man's handwriting, not that of "Big Jim" Colton. I opened the envelope and read:

Roscoe Paine.

Sir: The enclosed is in payment for your work. No receipt is necessary.

Yours truly,

B. VICTOR CARVER.

The "enclosed" was a five−dollar bill.

I stood staring at the note. Then I began to laugh.

"What's the joke?" asked Dorinda, who had not taken her eyes from my face.

"This," said I, handing her the money. She looked at it in astonishment.

"Um−hm," she said, drily. "Well, I−−well, a five−dollar bill may be a joke to you, but _I_ ain't familiar enough with one to laugh at it. You don't laugh as if 'twas awful funny, either. Who's the joke on?"

"It's on me, just now.

"Um−hm. I'd be willin' to be joked ten times a day, at that price. And I'd undertake to laugh heartier than you're doin', too. What's it for? the money, I mean."

"It's for some 'work' I did yesterday."

She was more astonished than ever.

"Work! You?" she exclaimed.

"Yes. But don't worry; I shan't do it again."

"Land! THAT wouldn't worry me. What sort of work was it?"

"Oh, I−−I picked up something adrift in the bay."

"Um−hm. I see. Somethin' belongin' to the Coltons, I s'pose likely. Why won't you do it again? Ain't they paid you enough?"

Again I laughed. "They have paid me too much," I said, bitterly. "What I picked up wasn't worth the money."

CHAPTER VII

And that, in the end, was the answer I sent to Carver with his five dollars. I spent an hour in my room trying to compose and write a sarcastic reply to his note, but I finally gave it up. Then I put the money in an envelope, addressed the latter, and sent it to the big house by Lute. Lute was delighted with the errand.

"You'll explain to Dorindy, will you?" he asked. "She cal'lates I'm goin' to clean the henhouse. But I can do that some other time."

"You can−−yes."

"Do you know−−" Lute leaned against the clothes post and prepared to philosophize. "Do you know," he observed, "that I don't take no stock in cleanin' henhouses and such?"

"Don't you? I'm surprised."

"You're surprised 'cause you ain't thought it out. That's my way; I always think things out. Most folks are selfish. They want to do what they want to do, and they want others to want the same thing. If the others don't want it, then they like to make 'em have it; anyhow. Dorindy is crazy on cleanin'. She wouldn't live in a dirty house no more'n she'd live in a lobster pot. It's the way she's made. But a hen ain't made that way. A hen LIKES dirt; she scratches in it and digs holes in it to waller in, and heaves it over herself all day long. If you left it to the hens would THEY clean their house? I guess not! So, I say what's the use of cruelizin' 'em by makin' 'em live clean when they don't want to? I−−"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Lute, you're wasting your breath. It is Dorinda you should explain all this to, not to me. And you're wasting my time. I want you to take that envelope to Mr. Carver; and I want you to go now."

"Well, I'm goin', ain't I? I was only just sayin'−−"

"Say it when you come back. And if Mr. Carver asks you why I sent that envelope to him be sure and give him the message I gave you. Do you remember it?"

"Sartin. That what you done wan't wuth so much."

"Not exactly. That what I saved wasn't worth it."

"All right. I'll remember. But what did you save, Ros? Dorindy says 'twas somethin' you found afloat in the bay. If it was somethin' belongin' to them Coltons I'd have took the money, no matter what the thing was wuth. They can afford to pay and, if I was you, I'd take the reward."

"I have my reward. Now go."

I had my reward and I believed it worth much more than five dollars. I had learned my lesson. I knew now exactly how I was regarded by the occupants of the big house and by the townspeople as well. I should cherish no more illusions as to my importance in their eyes. I meant to be really independent from that time on. I did not care−−really did not care−−for anything or anybody outside my immediate household. I was back in the position I had occupied for years, but with one difference: I had an ambition now. It was to make both sides in the Shore Lane controversy realize that George Taylor was right when he said I had the whip−hand. By the Almighty, they should dance when I cracked that whip!

My first opportunity to crack it came a day or two later, when Captain Dean called upon me. He had a definite proposition to make, although his Yankee shrewdness and caution prevented his making it until he had discussed the weather and other unimportant trifles. Then he leaned against the edge of my work−bench−−we were in the boathouse−−and began to beat up to windward of his proposal.

"Ros," he said, "you remember I told you you was all right, when I met you at the bank t'other day."

"I remember," I answered.

"Yes. Well, I cal'late you know what I meant by that."

I did not pretend ignorance of his meaning.

"I presume," I replied, "that you meant I was right in not selling that strip of land to Mr. Colton."

"That's what I meant. You kept your promise to me and I shan't forget it. Nor the town won't forget it, neither. Would you mind tellin' me just what happened between you and His Majesty?"

"Not at all. He said he wanted to buy the Shore Lane strip and I refused to sell it to him. He said I was crazy

and an infernal robber and I told him to go to the devil."

"WHAT! you didn't!"

"I did."

Captain Jed slapped his knee and shouted in delight. He insisted on shaking hands with me.

"By the great and everlastin'!" he declared, between laughs, "you're all right, Ros Paine! I said you was and now I'll swear to it. Told old Colton to go to the devil! If that ain't−−oh, I wish I'd been there!"

I went on sand−papering a valve plug. He walked up and down the floor, chuckling.

"Well," he said, at last, "you've made yourself solid in Denboro, anyhow. And I told you you shouldn't lose nothin' by it. The Selectmen held a meetin' last night and they feel, same as me, that that Shore Lane shan't be shut off. You understand what that means to you, don't you?"

I looked at him, coolly.

"No," I answered.

"You don't! It means the town's decided to buy that strip of land of yours. Definitely decided, practically speakin'. Now what'll you sell it to us for?"

I put down the valve plug. "Captain," said I, "that land is not for sale."

"Not for SALE? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I have decided not to sell it, for the present, at least. Neither to Colton nor any one else."

He could not believe it. Of course I would not sell it to Colton. Colton was a stuck−up, selfish city aristocrat who thought all creation ought to belong to him. But the town was different. Did I realize that it was the town I lived in that was asking to buy now? The town of which I was a citizen? Think of what the town had done for me.

"Very well," I answered. "I'm willing to think. What has it done for me?"

It had−−it had−−well, it had done a whole lot. As a citizen of that town I owed it a−−a−−

"Look here, Captain Dean," I interrupted, "there's no use in our arguing the matter. I have decided not to sell."

"Don't talk so foolish. Course you'll sell if you get money enough."

"So Colton said, but I shan't."

"Ros, I ain't got any authority to do it, but I shouldn't wonder if I could get you three hundred dollars for that strip."

"It isn't a question of price."

"Rubbish! Anything's a question of price."

"This isn't. If it was I probably should have accepted Mr. Colton's offer of six hundred and fifty."

"Six hun−−! Do you mean to say he offered you six hundred and fifty dollars for that little mite of land, and you never took him up?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must be a . . . Humph! Six hundred and fifty! The town can't meet no such bid as that, of course."

"I don't expect it to."

He regarded me in silence. He was chagrined and angry; his florid face was redder than ever; but, more than all, he was puzzled.

"Well," he observed, after a moment, "this beats me, this does! Last time we talked you was willin' to consider sellin'. What's changed you? What's the reason you won't sell? What business reason have you got for not doin' it?"

I had no business reason at all. Except for Mother's counsel not to sell, which was based upon sentiment and nothing else, and my own stubbornness, I had no reason at all. Yet I was, if anything, more firm in my resolve.

"How about the Lane?" he demanded. "You know what that Lane means to Denboro?"

"I know what you say it means. The townspeople can continue to use the Lane, just as they always have, so long as they behave themselves. There is no use of our talking further, Captain. I've made up my mind."

He went away, soon after, but he asked another question.

"Will you do this much for me?" he asked. "Will you promise me not to sell the land to Colton?"

"No," I said, "I will make no promise of any kind, to anybody."

"Oh," with a scornful sniff, "I see. I'm on to you. You're just hangin' out for a big price. I might have known it. You're on Colton's side, after all."

I rose. I was angry now.

"I told you price had nothing to do with it," I said, sharply. "I am on no one's side. The town is welcome to use the Lane; that I have told you already. There is nothing more to be said."

He shook his head.

"I don't make many mistakes," he observed, slowly; "but I guess I've made one. You're a whole lot deeper'n I thought you was."

So much for the proletariat. I heard from the plutocrats next day. Sim Eldredge dropped in on me. After much wriggling about the bush he intimated that he knew of Captain Jedediah's call and what had taken place.

"You done just right, Ros," he whispered. He had a habit of whispering as the Captain had of shouting. "You done just right. Keep 'em guessin'; keep em guessin'. Jed's all upsot. He don't know whether he's keel down or on his beam ends. He'll be makin' a higher bid pretty soon. Say," with a wink, "I see Colton last night."

"Did you?"

"Yup. Oh, I give him a jolt. I hinted that the town had made you a fine offer and you was considerin' it."

"What did you do that for? Who gave you the right to−−"

"Sshh! Don't holler. Somebody might be listenin'. I come through the woods and round the beach so's I wouldn't be seen. What do you s'pose Colton said?"

"I don't care what he said."

"You will when I tell you. He as much as offered a thousand dollars for that land. My crimps! a thousand! think of that! I presume likely you wouldn't take that, would you, Ros?"

"Sim, I'll tell you, as I told Captain Jed, that land is not for sale."

I tried to make that statement firm and sharp enough to penetrate even his wooden head; but he merely winked again.

"All right," he whispered, hastily, "all right. I guess perhaps you're correct in hangin' on. Still, a thousand is a lot of money, even after you take out my little commission. But you know best. You put your trust in me. I'll keep her jumpin'. I understand. Good−by."

He went out hurriedly, and, though I shouted after him, he only waved and ducked behind a beach−plum bush. He did not believe me serious in my refusal to sell; neither did Dean, or Colton, or, apparently, any one else. They all thought me merely shrewd, a sharp trader driving a hard bargain, as they would have done in my place. They might think so, if they wished; I should not explain. As a matter of fact, I could not have explained my attitude, even to myself.

Yet this very attitude made a difference, a perceptible difference, in my position in Denboro. I noticed it each time I went up to the village. I saw the groups at the post−office and at the depot turn to watch me as I approached and as I went away. Captain Jedediah did not mention the Lane again−−at least for some time−−but he always hailed me cordially when we met and seemed anxious to be seen in my company. Eldredge, of course, was effusive; so was Alvin Baker. And other people, citizens of consequence in the town, who had heretofore merely bowed, now stopped to speak with me on the street. Members of the sewing circle called on Mother more frequently, and Matilda Dean, Captain Jed's wife, came regularly once a week. Sometimes she saw Mother and sometimes she did not, depending upon Dorinda's state of mind at the time.

Lute, always a sort of social barometer, noticed the change in the weather.

"Everybody's talkin' about you, Ros," he declared. "They cal'late you're a pretty smart feller. They don't just understand what you're up to, but they think you're pretty smart."

"No?" I commented, ironically. "Lute, you astonish me. Why am I smart?"

"Well, they don't know exactly, but they cal'late you must be. Oh, I hear things. Cap'n Jed said t'other night you'd make a pretty good Selectman."

"_I_ would? A Selectman?"

"Yup. He as much as hinted that to me; wondered if you'd take the nomination provided he could fix it for you. Sim Eldredge and Alvin and some more all said they'd vote for you if they got a chance. ARE you figgerin' to charge toll on the Lane?"

"Toll? What put that idea in your head?"

"Nothin', only some of the fellers wondered if you was. You see, you won't sell, and so−−"

"I see. That's a brilliant suggestion, Lute. When I adopt it I'll appoint you toll−keeper."

"By time! I wish you would. I'd make Thoph Newcomb pay up. He owes me ten cents; bet it one time and

never settled."

Yes, my position in Denboro had changed. But I took no pride in the change, as I had at first; I knew the reason for this sudden burst of popularity. The knowledge made me more cynical than ever−− cynical, and lonely. For the first time since I came to the Cape I longed for a real friend, not a relative or an acquaintance, but a friend to trust and confide in. Some one, with no string of his own to pull, who cared for me because I was myself.

And all the time I had such a friend and did not realize it. The knowledge came to me in this way. Mother had one of her seizures, one of the now infrequent "sinking spells," as the doctor called them, on an evening when I was alone with her. Dorinda and Lute had gone, with the horse and buggy, to visit a cousin in Bayport. They were to stay over night and return before breakfast the next morning.

I was alone in the dining−room when Mother called my name. There was something in her tone which alarmed me and I hastened to her bedside. One glance at her face was enough.

"Boy," she said, weakly, "I am afraid I am going to be ill. I have tried not to alarm you, but I feel faint and I am−−you won't be alarmed, will you? I know it is nothing serious."

I told her not to worry and not to talk. I hurried out to the kitchen, got the hot water and the brandy, made her swallow a little of the mixture, and bathed her forehead and wrists with vinegar, an old−fashioned restorative which Dorinda always used. She said she felt better, but I was anxious and, as soon as it was safe to leave her, hurried out to bring the doctor. She begged me not to go, because it was beginning to rain and I might get wet, but I assured her it was not raining hard, and went.

It was not raining hard when I started, but there was every sign of a severe storm close at hand. It was pitch dark and I was weary from stumbling through the bushes and over the rough path when I reached the corner of the Lane and the Lower Road. Then a carriage came down that road. It was an open wagon and George Taylor was the driver. He had been up to the Deans' and was on his way home.

I hailed the vehicle, intending to ask for a ride, but when Taylor discovered who his hailer was he insisted on my going back to the house. He would get the doctor, he said, and bring him down at once. I was afraid he would be caught in the storm, and hesitated in accepting the offer, but he insisted. I did go back to the house, found Mother in much the same condition as when I left her, and had scarcely gotten into the kitchen again when Taylor once more appeared.

"I brought Nellie along to stay with your mother," he said. "The Cap'n and the old lady"−−meaning Matilda−−"were up at the meeting− house and we just left a note saying where we'd gone. Nellie's all right. Between you and me, she don't talk you deaf, dumb and blind like her ma, and she's good company for sick folks. Now I'll fetch the doctor and be right back."

"But it's raining pitchforks," I said. "You'll be wet through."

"No, I won't. I'll have Doc Quimby here in no time."

He drove off and Nellie Dean went into Mother's room. I had always considered Nellie a milk−and−watery young female, but somehow her quiet ways and soft voice seemed just what were needed in a sick room. I left the two together and came out to wait for Taylor and the doctor.

But they did not come. The storm was under full headway now, and the wind was dashing the rain in sheets against the windows. I waited nearly an hour and still no sign of the doctor.

Nellie came out of Mother's room and closed the door softly behind her.

"She's quiet now," she whispered. "I think she's asleep. Where do you suppose George is?"

"Goodness knows!" I answered. "I shouldn't have let him go, a night like this."

"I'm afraid you couldn't stop him if his mind was made up. He's dreadful determined when he sets out to be."

"He's a good fellow," I said, to please her. She worshipped the cashier, a fact of which all Denboro was aware, and which caused gossip to report that she did the courting for the two.

She blushed and smiled.

"He thinks a lot of you," she observed. "He's always talking to me about you. It's a good thing you're a man or I should be jealous."

I smiled. "I seem to be talked about generally, just now," said I.

"Are you? Oh, you mean about the Shore Lane. Yes, Pa can't make you out about that. He says you've got something up your sleeve and he hasn't decided what it is. I asked George what Pa meant and he just laughed. He said whatever you had in your sleeve was your affair and, if he was any judge of character, it would stay there till

you got ready to shake it out. He always stood up for you, even before the Shore Lane business happened. I think he likes you better than any one else in Denboro."

"Present company excepted, of course."

"Oh, of course. If that wasn't excepted I should REALLY be jealous. Then," more seriously, "Roscoe, does it seem to you that George is worried or troubled about something lately?"

I thought of Taylor's sudden change of expression that day in the bank, and of his remark that he wished he had my chance. But I concealed my thoughts.

"The prospect of marriage is enough to make any man worried, isn't it?" I asked. "I imagine he realizes that he isn't good enough for you."

There was sarcasm in this remark, sarcasm of which I should have been ashamed. But she took it literally and as a compliment. She looked at me reproachfully.

"Good enough for me!" she exclaimed. "He! Sometimes I wonder if it is right for me to be so happy. I feel almost as if it was wrong. As if something must happen to punish me for it."

I did not answer. To tell the truth, I was envious. There was real happiness in the world. This country girl had found it; that Mabel Colton would, no doubt, find it some day−−unless she married her Victor, in which case I had my doubts. But what happiness was in store for me?

Nellie did most of the talking thereafter; principally about George, and why he did not come. At last she went in to see if Mother needed her, and, twenty minutes later, when I looked into the bedroom, I saw that she had fallen asleep on the couch. Mother, too, seemed to be sleeping, and I left them thus.

It was almost eleven o'clock when the sound of carriage wheels in the yard brought me to the window and then to the door. Doctor Quimby had come at last and Taylor was with him. The doctor, in his mackintosh and overshoes, was dry enough, but his companion was wet to the skin.

"Sorry I'm so late, Ros," said the doctor. "I was way up to Ebenezer Cahoon's in West Denboro. There's a new edition of Ebenezer, made port this morning, and I was a little bit concerned about the missus. She's all right, though. How's your mother?"

"Better, I think. She's asleep now. So is Nellie. I suppose George told you she was with her."

"Yes. George had a rough passage over that West Denboro road. It's bad enough in daylight, but on a night like this−−whew! I carried away a wheel turning into Ebenezer's yard, and if George hadn't had his team along I don't know how I'd have got here. I'll go right in and see Mrs. Paine."

He left us and I turned to Taylor.

"You're soaked through," I declared. "Come out to the kitchen stove. What in the world made you drive way up to that forsaken place? It's a good seven miles. Come out to the kitchen. Quick!"

He sat down by the stove and put his wet boots on the hearth. I mixed him a glass of the brandy and hot water and handed him a cigar.

"Why did you do it, George?" I said. "I never would have thought of asking such a thing."

"I know it," he said. "Course you wouldn't ask it. There's plenty in this town that would, but you wouldn't. Maybe that's one reason I was so glad to do it for you."

"I am almost sorry you did. It is too great a kindness altogether. I'm afraid I shouldn't have done as much for you."

"Go on! Yes, you would. I know you."

I shook my head.

"No, you don't," I answered. "Captain Jed−−your prospective father−in−law−−said the other day that he had been mistaken; he thought he knew me, but he was beginning to find he did not."

"Did he say that? What did he mean?"

"I imagine he meant he wasn't sure whether I was the fool he had believed me to be, or just a sharp rascal."

Taylor looked at me over the edge of his glass.

"You think that's what he meant, do you?"

"I know it."

He put the glass on the floor beside him and laid a hand on my knee.

"Ros," he said, "I don't know for sure what the Cap'n meant, though if he thinks you're either one of the two he's the fool. But _I_ know you−−better, maybe, than you know yourself. At least I believe I know you better than

any one else in the town."

"That wouldn't be saying much."

"Wouldn't it? Well, maybe not. But whose fault is it? It's yours, the way I look at it. Ros, I've been meaning to have a talk with you some day; perhaps this is as good a time as any. You make a big mistake in the way you treat Denboro and the folks in it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just that. Your whole attitude is wrong, has been wrong ever since you first came here to live. You never gave any of us a chance to know you and like you−−anybody but me, I mean, and even I never had but half a chance. You make a mistake, I tell you. There's lots of good folks in this town, lots of 'em. Cap'n Elisha Warren's one of 'em and there's plenty more. They're countrymen, same as I am, but they're good, plain, sensible folks, and they'd like to like you if they had a chance. You belong to the Town Improvement Society, but you never go to a meeting. You ought to get out and mix more."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess my mixing wouldn't be very welcome," I said. "And, besides, I don't care to mix."

"I know you don't, but you ought to, just the same."

"Nonsense! George, I'm not blind, or deaf. Don't you suppose I know what Warren and Dean and the rest think of me? They consider me a loafer and no good. I've heard what they say. I've noticed how they treat me."

"How you treat them, you mean. You are as cold and freezing as a cake of ice. They was willing to be friends but you wouldn't have it. And, as for their calling you a loafer−−well, that's your own fault, too. You OUGHT to do something; not work, perhaps, but you'd be a whole lot better off if you got really interested in something. Get into politics; get into town affairs; get out and know the people you're living with."

"I don't care to know them; and I'm sure they don't care to know me."

"Yes, they do. I understand how you feel. In this Shore Lane matter now: you think Cap'n Jed and Colton, because they pretend to call you a fool, don't respect you for taking the stand you have. They do. They don't understand you, maybe, but they can't help respecting you and, if they knew you even as well as I do, they'd like you. Come! I ain't throwin' any bouquets, but why do you suppose I'd be willing to drive to West Denboro forty times over, on forty times worse nights than this, for you? Why?"

"Heaven knows! Would you?"

"I would. I like you, Ros. I took a shine to you the first time I met you. I don't know why exactly. Why does anybody like anybody else? But I think a whole lot of you. I know this sounds foolish, and you don't feel that way towards me, but it's the truth."

I was amazed. I had always liked George Taylor, but I never felt any strong affection for him. I was a little less indifferent to him than to others in Denboro, that was all. And I had taken it for granted that his liking for me was of the same casual, lukewarm variety. To hear him declare himself in this way was astonishing−− he, the dry, keen, Yankee banker.

"But why, George?" I repeated.

"I don't know why; I told you that. It's because I can't help it, I suppose. Or because, as I said, I know you better than any one else."

I sighed. "Nobody knows me here," I said.

"One knows you, Ros. I know you."

"You may think you do, but you don't. You can thank God for your ignorance."

"Maybe I ain't so ignorant."

I looked at him. He was looking me straight in the eye.

"What do you know?" I asked, slowly.

"I know, for one thing, that your name ain't Paine."

I could not answer. I am not certain whether I attempted to speak or move. I do remember that the pressure of his hand on my knee tightened.

"It's all right, Ros," he said, earnestly. "Nobody knows but me, and nobody ever shall know if I can help it."

"How−−how much do you know?" I stammered.

"Why, pretty much all, I guess. I've known ever since your mother was taken sick. Some things I read in the paper, and the pictures of−−of your father, put me on, and afterwards I got more certain of it. But it's all right.

Nobody but me knows or shall know."

I leaned my head on my hand. He patted my knee, gently.

"Are−−are you sure no one else knows?" I asked.

"Certain sure. There was one time when it might have all come out. A reporter fellow from one of the Boston papers got on the track somehow and came down here to investigate. Luckily I was the first man he tackled, and I steered him away. I presume likely I lied some, but my conscience is easy so far as that goes."

"And you have told no one? Not even Nellie?"

"No. I tell Nellie most things, but not all−−not all."

I remembered afterwards that he sighed as he said this and took his hand from my knee; but then my agitation was too great to do more than casually notice it. I rose to my feet.

"George! George!" I cried. "I−−I can't say to you what I should like. But why−−WHY did you shield me? And lie for me? Why did you do it? I was hardly more than a stranger."

He sighed. "Don't know," he answered. "I never could quite see why a man's sins should be visited on the widows and fatherless. And, of course, I realized that you and your mother changed your name and came down here to get away from gossip and talk. But I guess the real reason was that I liked you, Ros. Love at first sight, same as we read about; hey?"

He looked up and smiled. I seized his hand.

"George," I said, chokingly, "I did not believe I had a real friend in the world, except Mother and Dorinda and Lute, of course. I can't thank you enough for shielding us all these years; there's no use in my trying. But if ever I can do anything to help YOU−− anything−−I'll do it. I'll swear to that."

He shook my hand.

"I know you will, Ros," he said. "I told you I knew you."

"If ever I can do anything−−"

He interrupted me.

"There's one thing you can do right now," he said. "That's get out and mix. That'll please me as much as anything. And begin right off. Why, see here, the Methodist society is going to give a strawberry festival on the meeting−house lawn next Thursday night. About everybody's going, Nellie and I included. You come, will you?"

I hesitated. I had heard about the festival, but I certainly had not contemplated attending.

"Come!" he urged. "You won't say no to the first favor I ask you. Promise me you'll be on hand."

Before I could answer, we heard the door of Mother's room open. George and I hastened into the dining−room. Doctor Quimby and Nellie Dean were there. Nellie rushed over to her lover's side.

"You bad boy," she cried. "You're wet through."

Doctor Quimby turned to me.

"Your ma's getting on all right," he declared. "About all that ails her now is that she wants to see you."

George was assisting Nellie to put on her wraps.

"Got to leave you now, Ros," he said. "Cap'n Jed and Matildy'll think we've eloped ahead of time. Good−night. Oh, say, will you promise me to take in the strawberry festival?"

"Why" I answered, "I suppose−− Yes, Mother, I'm coming−− Why, yes, George, I'll promise, to please you."

I have often wondered since what my life story would have been if I had not made that promise.

CHAPTER VIII

The Methodist church stood on the slope of a little hill, back from the Main Road, and the parsonage was next door. Between the church and the parsonage was a stretch of lawn, dotted with shrubs and cedars and shaded by two big silver−leaf poplars. It was on this lawn that, provided the night was fair, the strawberry festival was to be held. If the weather should be unpropitious the festival was to be in the church vestry.

All that day Dorinda was busy baking and icing cake. She was not going to the festival−−partly because I was going and she could not leave Mother−−but principally because such affairs were altogether too frivolous to fit in her scheme of orthodoxy. "I don't recollect," she said, "that the apostles did much strawberry festivalin'; they had other things to attend to." Lute, however, was going and if he had been invited to a Presidential reception he could not have been much more excited. He was dressed and ready at supper time, although the festival did not begin until seven− thirty.

"Think I'm all right, Dorindy, do you?" he queried, anxiously turning himself about for his wife's inspection. "How about these new pants? Fur enough down on my boots, be they?"

Dorinda looked him over with a critical eye. "Um−hm," she observed, "that end of 'em seems to be all right. But I cal'late the upper end ain't been introduced to your vest yet. Anyhow, the two don't seem to be well enough acquainted to associate close."

Lute bent forward to inspect the hiatus between trousers and waistcoat. "By time!" he exclaimed, "I told Sim Eldredge they was too short in the waist. He said if they was any longer they'd wrinkle under the arms. I don't know what to do. If I hist 'em up they'll be what the fellers call high−water, won't them?"

"Humph! I'd ruther have 'em high−water than shoal in the middle of the channel. You'll have to average up somehow. I ought to have known better than to trust you to buy anything all by yourself."

She condescended to approve of my appearance when, an hour later, I came downstairs, garbed in my best.

"Humph!" she vouchsafed, after a long look. "I declare! I'd hardly know you, Roscoe. You look more as you used to when you fust come here to live."

"Thanks," I answered, drily. "I'm glad to see that you respect old age. This suit is venerable enough to command that kind of respect."

"'Tain't the suit, though that's all right enough. It's the way you wear it, I guess. You look BETTER than you used to. You're browned up and broadened out and it's real becomin'. But," she added, with characteristic caution, "you must remember that good looks don't count for much. My father used to say to me that handsome is that handsome does. Not that I was so homely I'd scare the crows, but he didn't want me to be vain. Now don't fall overboard in THAT suit, will you?"

Mother noticed my unwonted grandeur when I went in to say good− night to her.

"Why, Roscoe!" she exclaimed. "You must consider this strawberry festival very important."

"Why, Mother?"

"Because you've taken such pains to dress for it."

"It did not require a great deal of pains. I merely put on what Dorinda calls my Sunday clothes. I don't know why I did, either. I certainly don't consider the festival important."

"I am glad you did. I have been a little troubled about you of late, Boy. It has seemed to me that you were growing−−well, not careless, exactly, but indifferent. As if you were losing interest in life. I don't blame you. Compelled to waste your time here in the country, a companion to a bedridden old woman like me."

"Hush, Mother. You're not old; and as to wasting my time−−why, Mother, you know−−"

"Yes, yes, Boy, I know what you would say. But it does trouble me, nevertheless. I ought to bid you go back into the world, and take your place among men. A hundred times I have been upon the point of telling you to leave me, but−−but−−I am SO selfish."

"Hush, Mother, please."

"Yes, I AM selfish and I know it. I am growing stronger every day; I am sure of it. Just a little longer, Roscoe, just a little longer, and then−−"

"Mother, I−−"

"There, there!" she stroked my hand. "We won't be sad, will we. It pleases me to see you taking an interest in affairs. I think this Shore Lane matter may be a good thing, after all. Dorinda says that Luther tells her you are becoming very popular in town because of your independent stand. Everyone recognizes your public spirit."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Not in those words. You know Dorinda. But what amounts to that. I am sure the Denboro people are very proud of you."

I thought of my "popularity" and the admiration of my "public spirit" as manifested in the attentions of Captain Jed and Eldredge and their followers, and I turned my head away so that she might not see my face.

"And I am glad you are going to the strawberry festival. I can't remember when you attended such a function before. Boy−−"

"Yes, Mother."

"There isn't any reason, any special reason, for your going, is there?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I mean−−well, you are young and I did not know but, perhaps, some one else was going, some one you were interested in, and−−and−−"

I laughed aloud. "Mother!" I said, reproachfully.

"Why not? I am very proud of my handsome boy, and I know that−−"

"There! there! I haven't noticed that my beauty is so fascinating as to be dangerous. No, Mother, there is no 'special reason' for my going to−night. I promised George Taylor, that was all."

"Well, I am sure you will have a good time. Kiss me, Boy. Good− night."

I was by no means so sure of the good time. In fact, I loitered on my way to the village and it was well past eight o'clock when I paid my fifteen cents admission fee to Elnathan Mullet at the gate of the church grounds and sauntered up the slope toward the lights and gaiety of the strawberry festival.

The ladies of the Methodist society, under whose management the affair was given, were fortunate in their choice of an evening. The early risen moon shone from a cloudless sky and there was so little breeze that the Japanese lanterns, hung above the tables, went out only occasionally. The "beauty and elite of Denboro"−−see next week's Cape Cod Item−−were present in force and, mingling with them, or, if not mingling, at least inspecting them with interest, were some of the early arrivals among the cottagers from South Denboro and Bayport. I saw Lute, proudly conscious of his new lavender trousers, in conversation with Matilda Dean, and I wondered who was the winner in that wordy race. Captain Jedediah strutted arm in arm with the minister. Thoph Newcomb and Alvin Baker were there with their wives. Simeon Eldredge had not yet put in an appearance but I knew that he would as soon as the evening mail was sorted.

I found Nellie Dean in charge of a table, and George Taylor seated at that table. I walked over and joined them.

"Good evening, Nellie," said I. "Well, George, here I am, you see."

He shook my hand heartily. "I see you are," he said. "Good boy! How does it seem to splash into society?"

"I haven't splashed yet. I have only just arrived."

"Oh, trying the feel of the water, hey? Guess you won't find it very chilly. As a preparatory tonic I'd recommend strawberries and cream. Nellie, get Ros a saucer of those genuine home−raised berries, why don't you?"

Nellie laughed. "Roscoe," she said, "isn't he dreadful! He knows we bought these berries in Boston. It's much too early for the native ones. But they really are very nice, though he does make such fun of them."

She went into the vestry to get the berries and I sat down at the table beside Taylor and looked about me.

"Most everybody's here," he observed. "And they'll be glad to see you, Ros. Get out and shake hands and be sociable, after you've done your duty by the fruit. How are things at home?"

"Mother is herself again, I am glad to say. George, I have scarcely thought of anything except what you told me the other night."

"Then it's time you did. That's one reason why I wanted you to come here. You've been thinking too much about yourself."

"It isn't of myself, but of Mother. If you had dropped a hint when that Boston reporter came−−"

"Now, look here, Ros, would YOU have dropped hints if things had been the other way around?"

"I don't know."

"I know you wouldn't. What's the use of giving the Denboro gossip mill a chance to run over time? Great heavens! it works twelve hours a day as 'tis."

"It was mighty good of you, just the same."

"No, it wasn't. The whole affair was your business and nobody else's."

"Well, as I said before, if ever I have an opportunity to do as much for you−−not that I ever will."

"How do you know you won't? Anybody's liable to be gossiped about some time or other."

"Not you. You are Denboro's shining light. The mothers and fathers here point you out as an example of what industry and ambition and honest effort may rise to. I−−"

"Shut up!" He said it almost savagely. "There!" he added, quickly, "let's change the subject. Talk about something worth while. Humph! I guess they must be opening another crate of those Boston 'homegrowns,' judgin' by the time it takes Nellie to get your sample."

"I am in no hurry. How are affairs at the bank?"

"Oh, so, so. Don't know a good man who wants a job, do you? Henry Small's going to leave the middle of next month."

"Small, the bookkeeper? Why?"

"Got a better chance up to the city. I don't blame him. Don't tell anybody yet; it's a secret. Say, Ros, DO you know of a good, sharp, experienced fellow?"

I smiled. "Is it likely?" I asked. "How large is my acquaintance among sharp, experienced fellows down here?"

"Not so large as it ought to be, I'll give in to that. But you know one."

"Do I, indeed? Who is he?"

"Yourself. You wouldn't take Small's job, would you?"

"I?" I laughed aloud.

"It's no joke. You've had a lot of banking experience. I've heard about it among my city friends, who don't know I know you. Course I realize the place is way beneath what you ought to have, but−−"

"Oh, don't be sarcastic. No, thank you, George."

"All right, if you say so. But I meant it. You don't need the salary, I know. But−−Ros, do you mind if I talk plain for a moment?"

I wondered what was coming now. "No," I answered. "Go ahead and talk."

"Well then, I tell you, as a friend, that 'twould be a good thing for you if you did take that job, or some other one. Don't make much matter what it is, but you ought to do something. You're too clever a fellow to be hanging around, shooting and fishing. You're wasting your life."

"That was wasted long ago."

"No, it wasn't. But it will be if you don't change pretty soon. I tell you you ought to get interested in something that counts. You might make a big name for yourself yet."

"That's enough of that. I have a name already. You know it, and you know what was made of it."

"YOU didn't make it that kind of a name, did you? And you're young enough to make it something altogether different. You ought to. You owe it to your mother and you owe it to yourself. As it is, if you keep on, you'll−−"

"George, you've said enough. No one but you would have been permitted to say as much. You don't understand."

"Maybe not, but, Ros, I don't like to have people around here call you−−"

"I don't care a continental what they call me. I don't want them to know who I am, but for public opinion generally I care nothing."

He leaned back in his chair. His face was in shadow and I could not see it, but his tone was grave enough.

"You think you don't," he said, slowly, "but there may come a time when you will. There may come a time when you get so interested in something, or some person, that the thought of what folks would say if−−if anything went wrong would keep you awake night after night. Oh, I tell you, Ros−− Hello, Nellie! thought you'd gone South to pick those berries yourself. Two saucers full! Well, I suppose I must eat the other to save it−−unless Ros here wants both."

I said one would be quite sufficient for the present, and we three chatted until Mrs. Dean came over and

monopolized the chat.

"Don't go, Roscoe," protested the matron. "The Cap'n's here and he'll want to talk to you. He's dreadful interested in you just now. Don't talk about nobody else, scurcely. You set still and I'll go fetch him."

But I refused to "set." I knew the cause of Captain Jedediah's interest, and what he wished to talk about. I rose and announced that I would stroll about a bit. Taylor spoke to me as I was leaving.

"Ros," he said, earnestly, "you think of what I told you, will you?"

I saw a group of people hurrying toward the entrance of the grounds and I followed them, curious as to the cause of the excitement. An automobile had stopped by the gate. Sim Eldredge came hastening up and seized me by the arm.

"Gosh! it's Ros," he exclaimed, in his mysterious whisper. "I hadn't seen you afore; just got here myself. But I'm glad you ARE here. I'll see that you and him get a chance to talk private."

"Who?" I asked, trying to pull my arm free.

"Why, Mr. Colton. Didn't you know? Yes, sir, that's his car. He's come and so's his daughter and that young Carver feller. I believe they've come to take in the sociable. There they be! See 'em! See 'em!"

I saw them. Colton and Victor had already alighted and Miss Colton was descending from the tonneau. There were two other men in the car, beside Oscar, the chauffeur.

"Who are those other people?" I asked.

"I don't know," whispered Sim, excitedly. "Stay where you be and I'll find out. I'll be right back, now. Don't you move."

I did not move, not because he had ordered me to stay where I was, but because I was curious. The spot where I stood was in shadow and I knew they could not see me.

Colton and his daughter were talking with Victor, who remained by the step of the auto.

"Well, Mabel," observed "Big Jim," "here we are, though why I don't know. I hope you enjoy this thing more than I am likely to."

"Of course I shall enjoy it, Father. Look at the decorations. Aren't they perfectly WONDERFUL!"

"Especially the color scheme," drawled Victor. "Mabel, I call your attention to the red, blue and purple lanterns. Some class? Yes? Well, I must go. I'll be back in a very short time. If Parker wasn't starting for Europe to−morrow I shouldn't think of leaving, but I'm sure you'll forgive me, under the circumstances."

"I forgive you, Victor," replied the girl, carelessly. "But don't be too long."

"No, don't," added her father. "I promised Mrs. Colton that I should not be away more than an hour. She's very nervous to−night and I may be sent for any time. So don't keep us waiting."

"No fear of that. I'll be back long before you are ready to go. I wouldn't miss this−−er−−affair myself for something. Ah, our combination friend, the undertaking postmaster."

Sim's hat was in his hand and he was greeting Mr. Colton.

"Proud to see you amongst us, sir," said Sim, with unction. "The Methodist folks are havin' quite a time to−night, ain't they?"

"How d'ye do, Eldredge," was the great man's salutation, not at all effusive. "Where does all this crowd come from? Didn't know there were so many people in the neighborhood."

"'Most everybody's out to−night. Church'll make consider'ble money. Good evenin', Miss Colton. Mr. Carver, pleased to meet you again, sir."

The young lady merely nodded. Victor, whose foot was on the step of the car, did not deign to turn.

"Thanks," he drawled. "I am−−er−−embalmed, I'm sure. All ready, Phil. Let her go, Oscar."

The auto moved off. Mr. Colton gave his arm to his daughter and they moved through the crowd, Eldredge acting as master of ceremonies.

"It's all right, Elnathan," ordered Sim, addressing the gate− keeper. "Don't bother Mr. Colton about the admission now. I'll settle with you, myself, later. Now, Mr. Colton, you and the lady come right along with me. Ain't met the minister yet, have you? He said you wan't to home when he called. And you let me get you some strawberries. They're fust−rate, if I do say it."

He led the way toward the tables. I watched the progress from where I stood. It was interesting to see how the visitors were treated by the different groups. Some, like Sim, were gushing and obsequious. A few, Captain Jed among them, walked stubbornly by, either nodding coldly or paying no attention. Others, like George Taylor and

Doctor Quimby, were neither obsequious nor cold, merely bowing pleasantly and saying, "Good evening," as though greeting acquaintances and equals. Yes, there WERE good people in Denboro, quiet, unassuming, self−respecting citizens.

One of them came up to me and spoke.

"Hello, Ros," said Captain Elisha Warren, "Sim's havin' the time of his life, isn't he?"

"He seems to be," I replied.

"Yes. Well, there's some satisfaction in havin' a thick shell; then you don't mind bein' stepped on. Yet, I don't know; sometimes I think fellers of Sim's kind enjoy bein' stepped on, provided the boot that does it is patent leather."

"I wonder why they came here," I mused.

"Who? the Coltons? Why, for the same reason children go to the circus, I shouldn't wonder−−to laugh at the clowns. I laugh myself sometimes−−though 'tain't always at their kind of clowns. Speakin' of that, young Carver's in good company this evenin', ain't he?"

"Who were those fellows in the auto?" I asked.

"Didn't you recognize them? One was Phil Somers−−son of the rich widow who owns the big cottage at Harniss. 'Tother is a bird of the same flock down visitin' em. Carver's takin' 'em over to Ostable to say good−by to another specimen, a college mate, who is migratin' to Europe tomorrow. The chauffeur told Dan, my man, about it this afternoon. The chauffeur figgered that, knowin' the crowd, 'twas likely to be a lively farewell. Hello! there's Abbie hailin' me. See you later, Ros."

I knew young Somers by reputation. He and his friends were a wild set, if report was true.

Eldredge had hinted that he intended arranging an interview between Colton and myself. The prospect did not appeal to me. At first I decided to go home at once, but something akin to Captain Dean's resentful stubbornness came over me. I would not be driven home by those people. I found an unoccupied camp chair−−one of Sim's, which he rented for funerals−−and carried it to a dark spot in the shrubbery near the border of the parsonage lawn and not far from the gate. There I seated myself, lit a cigar and smoked in solitude.

Elnathan Mullet, evidently considering his labors as door−keeper over, was counting his takings by lantern light. The moon was low in the west and a little breeze was now stirring the shrubbery. It was very warm for the season and I mentally prophesied thunder showers before morning.

I had smoked my cigar perhaps half through when a carriage came down the road and stopped before the gate. The driver leaned forward and called to Mullet.

"Hi, Uncle!" he shouted. "You, by the gate! Is Mr. Colton here?"

Elnathan, who was, apparently, half asleep, looked up.

"Hey?" he queried. "Mr. Colton? Yes, he's here. Want him, do you?"

"Yes. Where is he?"

"Up yonder somewheres. There he is, by Sarah Burgess's table. Mr. Colton! Mr. Col−−ton! Somebody wants ye!"

"What in blazes did you yell like that for?" protested the coachman, springing from the carriage. "Stop it, d'ye hear?"

"You said you wanted him, didn't you? Mr. Colton! Hi! Come here!"

Colton came hurrying down to the gate, his daughter following more slowly.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The coachman touched his hat.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said; "this man started yelling before I could stop him. I was coming to tell you. Mrs. Colton says she's very nervous, sir, and please come home at once."

Colton turned with a shrug to his daughter. "We might have expected it, Mabel," he said. "Come."

But the young lady seemed to hesitate. "I believe I won't go yet, Father," she said. "Mother doesn't need both of us. Victor will be here very soon, and we promised to wait for him, you know."

"We can leave word. You'd better come, Mabel. Heavens and earth! you don't want any MORE of this, do you?"

It was evident that he had had quite enough of the festival. She laughed lightly.

"I'm finding it very entertaining," she said. "I never saw so many quaint people. There is one girl, a Miss

Dean, whom I am really getting acquainted with. She's as country as can be, but she's very interesting."

"Humph! she must be. Dean, hey? Daughter of my particular friend, the ancient mariner, I suppose. I don't like to leave you here. What shall I tell your mother?"

"Tell her I am quite safe and in perfectly respectable company."

"Humph! I can imagine how respectable she'll think it is. Well, I know it's useless to urge if you have made up your mind. I don't see where you get your stubbornness from."

"Don't you? I can guess."

"It isn't from your dad. Now do be careful, won't you? If Victor doesn't come soon I shall send the carriage."

"Oh, he will come. It's all right, Father, dear. I am quite able to take care of myself."

Her father shook his head. "Yes," he observed, "I guess you are. All right, Jenkins."

He got into the carriage and was driven off. Miss Colton turned and walked back to the tables. I relit my cigar.

Another half−hour passed.

Mullet finished his counting, took up his money box and lantern and left the gate unguarded. Groups of home−going people began to come down the hill. Horses, which had been standing under the church sheds or hitched in neighboring yards, appeared and the various buggies and two−seaters to which they were attached were filled and driven away. Captain Warren and Miss Abbie Baker, his housekeeper, were among the first to leave. Abijah Hammond, the sexton, began taking down the lanterns. The strawberry festival was almost over.

I rose from my camp chair and prepared to start for home. As I stepped from behind the shrubbery the moonlight suddenly went out, as if it had been turned off like a gas jet. Except for the few remaining lanterns and the gleams from the church windows and door the darkness was complete. I looked at the western sky. It was black, and low down along the horizon flashes of lightning were playing. My prophecy of showers was to be fulfilled.

The ladies of the Methodist Society, assisted by their husbands and male friends, were hurrying the tables and chairs indoors. I picked up and folded the chair I had been occupying and joined the busy group. It was so dark that faces were almost invisible, but I recognized Sim Eldredge by his voice, and George Taylor and I bumped into each other as we seized the same table.

"Hello, Ros!" exclaimed the cashier. "Thought you'd gone. Going to have a tempest, ain't we."

"Tempest" is Cape Cod for thunderstorm. I agreed that one was imminent.

"Hold on till I get this stuff into the vestry," continued Taylor, "and I'll drive you home. I'll be ready pretty soon."

I declined the invitation. "I'll walk," I answered. "You have Nellie to look after. If you have a spare umbrella I'll borrow that. Where is Nellie?"

"Oh, she's over yonder with Miss Colton. They have been making each other's acquaintance. Say, Ros, she's a good deal of a girl, that Colton one, did you know it?"

I did not answer.

"Oh, I know you're down on the whole lot of 'em," he added, laughing; "but she is, just the same. Kind of top−lofty and condescending, but that's the fault of her bringing−up. She's all right underneath. Too good for that Carver cub. By the way, if he doesn't come pretty soon I'll phone her pa to send the carriage for her. If I was Colton I wouldn't put much confidence in Carver's showing up in a hurry. You saw the gang he was with, didn't you? They don't get home till morning, till daylight doth appear, as a usual thing. Hello! that's the carriage now, ain't it? Guess papa wasn't taking any chances."

Sure enough, there were the lights of a carriage at the gate, and I heard the voice of Jenkins, the coachman, shouting. Nellie Dean called Taylor's name and he hurried away. A few moments later he returned.

"She's off, safe and sound," he said. "I judged she wasn't any too well pleased with her Victor for not showing up to look out for her."

A sharp flash of lightning cut the sky and a rattling peal of thunder followed.

"Right on top of us, ain't it!" exclaimed George. "Sure you don't want me to drive you home? All right; just as you say. Hold on till I get you that umbrella."

He borrowed an umbrella from the parsonage. I took it, thanked him, and hastened out of the church grounds. I looked up the road as I passed through the gate. I could have seen an auto's lamps for a long distance, but there were none in sight. With a malicious chuckle I thought that my particular friend Victor was not taking the surest

way of making himself popular with his fiancee, if that was what she was.

The storm overtook me before I was half−way down the Lower Road. A few drops of rain splashed the leaves. A lightning stroke so near and sharp that I fancied I could hear the hiss was accompanied by a savage thunder−clap. Then came the roar of wind in the trees by the roadside and down came the rain. I put up my umbrella and began to run. We have few "tempests" in Denboro, those we do have are almost worthy of the name.

I had reached the grove of birches perhaps two hundred yards from the Shore Lane when out of the wet darkness before me came plunging a horse drawing a covered carriage. I had sprung to one side to let it go by when I heard a man's voice shouting, "Whoa!" The voice did not come from the carriage but from the road behind it.

"Whoa! Stop him!" it shouted.

I jumped back into the road. The horse saw me appear directly in front of him, shied and reared. The carriage lamps were lighted and by their light I saw the reins dragging. I seized them and held on. It was all involuntary. I was used to horses and this one was frightened, that was all.

"Whoa, boy!" I ordered. "Whoa! Stand still!"

The horse had no intention of standing still.

He continued to rear and plunge. I, clinging to the reins, found myself running alongside. I had to run to avoid the wheels. But I ran as slowly as I could, and my one hundred and ninety pounds made running, on the animal's part, a much less easy exercise.

The voice from the rear continued to shout and, in another moment, a man seized the reins beside me. Together we managed to pull the horse into a walk. Then the man, whom I recognized as the Colton coachman, vented his feelings in a comprehensive burst of profanity. I interrupted the service.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, this blessed−−"or words to that effect−−"horse is scared of thunder; that's all. He's a new one; we just bought him before we came down here and I hadn't learned his little tricks. Whoa! stand still, or I'll break your dumb neck! Say," turning to me, "go back, will you, and see if she's all right."

"Who?"

"Miss Colton−−the old man's daughter. She got out when he began to dance and I was holding him by the bridle. Then came that big flash and he broke loose. Go back and see to her, will you? I can't leave this horse."

For just a moment I hesitated. I am ashamed of my hesitation now, but this is supposed to be a truthful chronicle. Then I went back down the road. By another flash of lightning I saw the minister's umbrella upside down in the bushes where I had dropped it, and I took it with me. I was about as wet as I well could be but I am glad to say I remembered that the umbrella was a borrowed one.

After I had walked, or stumbled, or waded a little way I stopped and called.

"Miss Colton," I called. "Where are you?"

"Here," came the answer from just ahead. "Is that you, Jenkins?"

I did not reply until I reached her side.

"You are not hurt?" I asked.

"No, not at all. But who is it?"

"I am−−er−−your neighbor. Paine is my name."

"Oh!" the tone was not enthusiastic. "Where is Jenkins?"

"He is attending to the horse. Pardon me, Miss Colton, but won't you take this umbrella?"

This seemed to strike her as a trifle absurd. "Why, thank you," she said, "but I am afraid an umbrella would be useless in this storm. Is the horse all right?"

"Yes, though he is very much frightened. I−−"

I was interrupted by another flash and terrific report from directly overhead. The young lady came closer to me.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

I had an idea. The flash had made our surroundings as light as day for an instant and across the road I saw Sylvanus Snow's old house, untenanted, abandoned and falling to decay. I took Miss Colton's arm.

"Come!" I said.

She hung back. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Just across the road to that old house. On the porch we shall be out of the rain."

She made no further objections and together we stumbled through the wet grass and over Sylvanus's weed−grown flower beds. I presume I shall never again smell the spicy fragrance of "old maids' pinks" without thinking of that night.

I found the edge of the piazza by the direct process of barking my shins against it, and helped her up on to the creaking boards. My sanguine statement that we should be out of the rain proved not quite true. There was a roof above us, but it leaked. I unfurled the wet umbrella and held it over her head.

For some moments after we reached the piazza neither of us spoke. The roar of the rain on the shingles of the porch and the splash and gurgle all about us would have made conversation difficult, even if we had wished to talk. I, for one, did not. At last she said:

"Do you see or hear anything of Jenkins?"

I listened, or tried to. I was wondering myself what had become of the coachman.

"No," I answered, "I don't hear him."

"Where do you suppose he is? He could not have been far away when you met him."

"He was not. And I know he intended to come back at once."

"You don't suppose Caesar−−the horse−−ran away again? When that second crack came?"

I was wondering that very thing. That particular thunder clap was louder and more terrifying than those preceding it. However, there was no use in alarming her.

"I guess not," I answered. "He'll be here soon, I am sure."

But he did not come. The storm seemed to be passing over. The flashes were just as frequent, but there was a longer interval between each flash and its thunder peal. The rain was still a steady downpour.

Miss Colton was plainly growing more anxious.

"Where can he be?" she murmured.

"Don't be frightened," I urged. "He is all right. I'll go and look him up, if you don't mind being left alone."

"Can't−−can't we go together?"

"We could, of course, but there is no use in your getting wetter than you are. If you are willing to stay here I will run up the road and see if I can find him."

"Thank you. But you will get wet yourself."

"Oh, I am wet already. Take the umbrella. I'll be back in a minute."

I pressed the handle of the umbrella into her hand−−it was as steady as mine−−and darted out into the flood. I think she called me to come back, but I did not obey. I ran up the road until I was some distance beyond the point where I had stopped the runaway, but there were no signs of horse, carriage or coachman. I called repeatedly, but got no reply. Then, reluctantly, I gave it up and returned to the porch.

She gave a little gasp of relief when I reached her side.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "did you find him?"

"No," I answered. "He seems to have gone on. He cannot have gone far. It is only a little way to the Corners."

"Is−−isn't there a house, a house with people living in it, near this place?"

"No nearer than your house, Miss Colton. We seem to have chosen the most forsaken spot in Denboro to be cast away in. I am very sorry."

"I am not frightened for myself. But I know my father and mother will be alarmed if I don't come soon. I am sure Caesar must have run away again, and I am afraid Jenkins must be hurt."

I had thought of that, too. Only an accident could explain the coachman's non−appearance or, at least, his not sending help to his mistress.

"If you are really not afraid to remain here, Miss Colton," I said, "I will go to your house myself."

"Oh no! Some one will come soon. I can't understand where Victor−− Mr. Carver−−can be. He was to have joined me at the church."

I did not answer. Knowing Mr. Carver's associates and the errand upon which he had gone, I imagined I could guess the cause of his delay. But I did not speak my guess.

"The storm is not as severe just now," I said. "I can get to your house in a little while, if you are willing I should leave you."

She put her hand on my arm. "Come," she said. "Shall we start now?"

"But you must not go. You couldn't get there on foot, such a night as this."

"Yes, I can. I mean to. Please come."

I still hesitated. She took her hand from my arm and stepped out into the rain. "Are you coming?" she said.

I joined her, still protesting. We splashed on through the mud and water, she clinging lightly to my arm and I holding the perfectly useless umbrella over her head. The rain was descending steadily and the sky overhead was just black, but along the western horizon, as I caught a glimpse of it between the trees, I fancied the blackness was a little less opaque. The storm was passing over, sure enough.

But before it passed it gave us one goodby salute. We had about reached the point on the Shore Lane where I first met her and Carver in the auto. The shaky bridge over Mullet's cranberry brook was just ahead. Then, without warning, the black night split wide open, a jagged streak of fire shot from heaven to earth and seemed to explode almost in our faces. I was almost knocked off my feet and my fingers tingled as if I had been holding the handles of an electric battery. The umbrella flew out of my hands and, so far as I was concerned, vanished utterly. I believe Elnathan picked up the ruin next day, but just then I neither knew nor cared what had become of it. I had other things to think of.

But for a moment I could not think at all. I was conscious of a great crashing and rustling and splintering directly in front of me and then I realized that the young lady was no longer clinging to my arm. I looked about and up through the darkness. Then down. She was lying at my feet.

I bent over her.

"Miss Colton!" I cried. "Miss Colton! Are you hurt?"

She neither answered nor moved. My brain was still numb from the electric shock and I had a dazed fear that she might be dead. I shook her gently and she moaned. I spoke again and again, but she did not answer, nor try to rise. The rain was pouring down upon us and I knew she must not lie there. So once more, just as I had done in the dingy, but now under quite different circumstances and with entirely different feelings, I stooped and lifted her in my arms.

My years of outdoor life in Denboro had had one good effect at least; they had made me strong. I carried her with little effort to the bridge. And there I stopped. The bridge was blocked, covered with a mass of wet leafy branches and splintered wood. The lightning bolt had missed us by just that much. It had overthrown and demolished the big willow tree by the brook and to get through or over the tangle was impossible.

So again history repeated itself. I descended the bank at the side of the bridge and waded through the waters with Mabel Colton in my arms. I staggered up the opposite bank and hurried on. She lay quiet, her head against my shoulder. Her hat had fallen off and a wet, fragrant strand of her hair brushed my cheek. Once I stopped and bent my head to listen, to make sure that she was breathing. She was, I felt her breath upon my face. Afterwards I remembered all this; just then I was merely thankful that she was alive.

I had gone but a little way further when she stirred in my arms and spoke.

"What is it?" she asked. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," I answered, with a sigh of relief. "It is all right. We shall be there soon."

"But what is the matter? Why are you−−let me walk, please."

"You had better stay as you are. You are almost home."

"But why are you carrying me? What is the matter?"

"You−−you fainted, I think. The lightning−−"

"Oh yes, I remember. Did I faint? How ridiculous! Please let me walk now. I am all right. Really I am."

"But I think−−"

"Please. I insist."

I set her gently on her feet. She staggered a little, but she was plucky and, after a moment, was able to stand and walk, though slowly.

"You are sure you can manage it?" I asked.

"Of course! But why did I faint? I never did such a thing before in my life."

"That flash was close to us. It struck the big willow by the brook."

"Did it! As near as that?"

"Yes. Don't try to talk."

"But I am all right . . . I am not hurt at all. Are we almost home?"

"Yes. Those are the lights of your house ahead there."

We moved on more rapidly. As we turned in at the Colton walk she said, "Why; it has stopped raining."

It had, though I had not noticed it. The flash which smashed the willow had been the accompaniment of what Lute would call the "clearing−up shower." The storm was really over.

We stepped up on the portico of the big house and I rang the bell. The butler opened the door. His face, as he saw the pair of dripping, bedraggled outcasts before him, was worth looking at. He was shocked out of his dignity.

"Why! Why, Miss Mabel!" he stammered, with almost human agitation. "What−−"

A voice, a petulant female voice, called from the head of the stairs.

"Johnson," it quavered, "who is it? Mabel, is that you?"

The library door flew open and Mr. Colton himself appeared.

"Eh? What?" he exclaimed. "By George! Mabel, where have you been? I have been raising heaven and earth to locate you. The 'phone seems to be out of order and−− Great Scott, girl! you're wet through. Jenkins, what−−? Hey? Why, it isn't Jenkins!"

The fact that his daughter's escort was not the coachman had just dawned upon him. He stared at me in irate bewilderment. Before he could ask a question or his daughter could speak or explain there came a little shriek from the stairs, a rustle of silken skirts, and a plump, white−faced woman in an elaborate house gown rushed across the hall with both white arms outstretched.

"Mabel!" she cried, "where HAVE you been. You poor child! I have been almost beside myself, and−−"

Miss Colton laughingly avoided the rush. "Take care, Mother," she warned. "I am very wet."

"Wet? Why! you're absolutely drenched! Jenkins−− Mabel, where is Jenkins? And who is this−−er−−person?"

I thought it quite time for me to withdraw.

"Good night, Miss Colton," I said, and stepped toward the door. But "Big Jim" roared my name.

"It's that−−it's Paine!" he exclaimed. "Here! what does this mean, anyway?"

I think his daughter was about to explain, when there came another interruption. From the driveway sounded the blare of an auto horn. Johnson threw open the door just as the big car whirled up to the porch.

"Here we are!" laughed Carver, emerging from behind the drawn curtains of the machine. "Home again from a foreign shore. Come in, fellows, and have a drink. We've had water enough for one night. Come in."

He stumbled as he crossed the sill, recovered his balance, laughed, and then all at once seemed to become aware of the group in the hall. He looked about him, swaying a little as he did so.

"Ah, Mabel!" he exclaimed, genially. "Got here first, didn't you? Sorry I was late, but it was all old Parker's fault. Wouldn't let us say goodby. But we came some when we did come. The bridge is down and we made Oscar run her right through the water. Great ex− experience. Hello! Why, what's matter? Who's this? What? it's Reuben, isn't it! Mabel, what on earth−−"

She paid no attention to him. I was at the door when she overtook me.

"Mr. Paine," she said, "I am very grateful for your kindness. Both for what you have done tonight and for your help the other afternoon. Thank you."

She held out her hand. I took it, scarcely knowing that I did so.

"Thank you," she said, again. I murmured something or other and went out. As I stepped from the porch I heard Victor's voice.

"Well, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "Mabel!"

I looked back. He was standing by the door. She went past him without replying or even looking at him. From the automobile I heard smothered chuckles and exclamations. The butler closed the door.

I walked home as fast as I could. Dorinda was waiting up for me. What she said when she saw the ruin of my Sunday suit had better not be repeated. She was still saying it when I took my lamp and went up to bed.

CHAPTER IX

The strawberry festival and the "tempest" were, of course, the subjects most discussed at the breakfast table next morning. Lute monopolized the conversation, a fact for which I was thankful, for it enabled me to dodge Dorinda's questions as to my own adventures. I did not care to talk about the latter. My feelings concerning them were curiously mixed. Was I glad or sorry that Fate had chosen me to play once more the role of rescuer of a young female in distress? That my playing of the role had altered my standing in Mabel Colton's mind I felt reasonably sure. Her words at parting with me rang true. She was grateful, and she had shaken hands with me. Doubtless she would tell her father the whole story and he, too, in common decency, would be grateful to me for helping his daughter. But, after all, did I care for gratitude from that family? And what form would that gratitude take? Would Colton, like Victor Carver, offer to pay me for my services? No, hardly that, I thought. He was a man of wide experience and, if he did offer payment, it would be in some less crude form than a five dollar bill.

But I did not want payment in any form. I did not want condescension and patronizing thanks. I did not want anything−−that was it. Up to now, the occupants of the big house and I had been enemies, open and confessed. I had, so far as possible, kept out of their way and hoped they would keep out of mine. But now the situation was more complicated. I did not know what to expect. Of course there was no chance of our becoming friends. The difference in social position, as they reckoned it, made that too ridiculous to consider as a possibility, even if I wished it, which I distinctly did not. But something, an interview, awkward and disagreeable for both sides, or a patronizing note of thanks, was, at the very least, certain to follow the happenings of the previous night. I wished I had gone home when the Coltons first came to the festival. I wished I had not promised Taylor that I would attend that festival. I wished−−I wished a great many things. The thought of young Carver's public snubbing before his friends was my one unmixed satisfaction. I rather imagined that he was more uncomfortable than I was or could be.

Lute crowed vaingloriously over his own good judgment in leaving for home early.

"I don't know how 'twas," he declared. "Somethin' seemed to tell me we was in for a turrible tempest. I was settin' talkin' with Alvin Baker and eatin' my second sasser of berries, when−−"

"SECOND sasser?" interrupted Dorinda, sharply. "Where'd you get money for two sassers? I gave you thirty cents when you started for that festival. It cost you fifteen to get inside the gate, and Matildy Dean told me the church folks was cal'latin' to charge fifteen for a helpin' of berries and cream. And you had two sassers, you say. Who paid for the second one?"

Her husband swallowed half a cup of coffee before replying. Then his reply had nothing to do with the question.

"I don't know how 'twas," he went on. "I just had the feelin', that's all. Sort of a present−−presentuary, I guess, come over me. I looked up at the sky and 'twas gettin' black, and then I looked to the west−ard and I see a flash of lightnin'. 'Nothin' but heat lightnin',' says Alvin. 'Heat lightnin' nothin'!' says I, 'I tell you−−"

"Who paid for that second sasser of berries?" repeated his wife, relentlessly.

"Why now, Dorindy−−"

"Who paid for 'em? If 'twas Alvin Baker you ought to be ashamed of yourself, spongin' on him for your vittles."

"Alvin! Good land! did you ever know him to pay for anything he didn't have to?"

"Never mind what I know. Did you get trusted for 'em? How many times have I told you−−"

"I never got trusted. I ain't that kind. And I didn't sponge 'em, neither. I paid cash, right out of my own pocket, like a man."

"You did! Um−hm. I want to know! Well then−−MAN, where did the cash in that pocket come from?"

Lute squirmed. "I−−I−−" he stammered.

"Where did it come from? Answer me."

"Well−−well, Dorindy, you see−−when you sent me up to the store t'other day after the brown sugar and−−and number 50 spool cotton you give me seventy−five cents. You remember you did, yourself."

"Yes, and I remember you said there was a hole in your pocket and you lost the change. I ain't likely to forget

it, and I shouldn't think you'd be."

"I didn't forget. By time! my ears ain't done singin' yet. But that shows how reckless you talk to me. I never lost that change at all. I found it afterwards in my vest, so all your jawin' was just for nothin'. Ros, she ought to beg my pardon, hadn't she? Hadn't she now?"

Dorinda saved me the trouble of answering.

"Um−hm!" she observed, dryly. "Well, I'll beg my own pardon instead, for bein' so dumb as not to go through your vest myself. So THAT'S where the other fifteen cents come from! I see. Well, you march out to the woodpile and chop till I tell you to quit."

"But, Dorindy, I've got one of my dyspepsy spells. I don't feel real good this mornin'. I told you I didn't."

"Folks that make pigs of themselves on stolen berries hadn't ought to feel good. Exercise is fine for dyspepsy. You march."

Lute marched, and I marched with him as far as the back yard. There I left him, groaning before the woodpile, and went down to the boat house.

The Comfort's overhauling was complete and I had launched her the week before. Now she lay anchored at the edge of the channel. For the want of something more important to do I took down my shot gun and began to polish its already glittering barrels.

Try as I might I could not get the memory of my adventure in the "tempest" out of my head. I reviewed it from end to end, thinking of many things I might have done which, in the light of what followed, would have been better and more sensible. If, instead of leaving the coachman, I had remained to help him with the frightened horse, I should have been better employed. Between us we could have subdued the animal and Miss Colton might have ridden home. I wondered what had become of Jenkins and the horse. I wondered if the girl knew I carried her through the brook. Victor had said the bridge was down; she must know. I wondered what she thought of the proceeding; probably that splashing about with young ladies in my arms was a habit of mine.

I told myself that I did not care what she thought. I resolved to forget the whole affair and to focus my attention upon cleaning the gun. But I could not forget. I waded that brook a dozen times as I sat there. I remembered every detail; how still she lay in my arms; how white her face looked as the distant lightning flashes revealed it to me; how her hair brushed my cheek as I bent over her. I was using a wad of cotton waste to polish the gun barrel, and I threw it into a corner, having the insane notion that, in some way, the association of ideas came from that bunch of waste. It−−the waste−−was grimy and anything but fragrant, as different from the dark lock which the wind had blown against my face as anything well could be, but the hurry with which I discarded it proves my imbecility at that time. Confound the girl! she was a nuisance. I wanted to forget her and her family, and the sulphurous personage to whose care I had once consigned the head of the family apparently took a characteristic delight in arranging matters so that I could not.

The shot gun was, at last, so spotless that even a pretense of further cleaning was ridiculous. I held it level with my eye and squinted through the barrels.

"Don't shoot," said a voice from the doorway; "I'll come down."

I lowered the gun, turned and looked. "Big Jim" Colton was standing there, cigar in mouth, cap on the back of his head and both hands in his pockets, exactly as he had appeared in that same doorway when he and I first met. The expected had happened, part of it at least. He had come to see me; the disagreeable interview I had foreseen was at hand.

He nodded and entered without waiting for an invitation.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning," said I, guardedly. I wondered how he would begin the conversation. Our previous meeting had ended almost in a fight. We had been fighting by proxy ever since. I was prepared for more trouble, for haughty condescension, for perfunctory apology, for almost anything except what happened. His next remark might have been addressed to an acquaintance upon whom he had casually dropped in for a friendly call.

"That's a good looking gun you've got there," he observed. "Let's see it."

I was too astonished to answer. "Let's look at it," he repeated, holding out his hand.

Mechanically I passed him the gun. He examined it as if he was used to such things, broke it, snapped it shut, tried the locks with his thumb and handed it back to me.

"Anything worth shooting around here?" he asked, pulling the armchair toward him and sitting.

I think I did not let him see how astonished I was at his attitude. I tried not to.

"Why yes," I answered, "in the season. Plenty of coots, some black duck, and quail and partridge in the woods."

"That so! Peters, that carpenter of mine, said something of the sort, I remember, but I wouldn't believe him under oath. I could shoot HIM with more or less pleasure, but there seems to be no open session for his species. Where's your launch?"

"Out yonder." I pointed to the Comfort at her moorings. He looked, but made no comment. I rose and put the gun in the rack. Then I returned to my chair. He swung around in his seat and looked at me.

"Well," he said, grimly, but with a twinkle in his eye, "the last time you and I chatted together you told me to go to the devil."

This was quite true and I might have added that I was glad of it. But what would be the use? I did not answer at all.

"I haven't gone there yet," he continued. "Came over here instead. Got dry yet?"

"Dry?"

"Yes. You were anything but dry when I saw you last night. Have many such cloudbursts as that in these parts?"

"Not many. No."

"I hope not. I don't want another until I sell that horse of mine. The chap who stuck me with him is a friend of mine. He warranted the beast perfectly safe for an infant in arms to drive and not afraid of anything short of an earthquake. He is a lovely liar. I admire his qualifications in that respect, and hope to trade with him again. He bucks the stock market occasionally."

He smiled as he said it. There was not the slightest malice in his tone, but, if I had been the "friend," I should have kept clear of stocks for awhile.

"What became of the horse?" I asked.

"Ran away again. Jenkins had just got back into the carriage when another one of those thunder claps started more trouble. The horse ran four miles, more or less, and stopped only when the wheels got jammed between two trees. I paid nine hundred dollars for that carriage."

"And the coachman?"

"Oh, he lit on his head, fortunately, and wasn't hurt. Spent half the night trying to find a phone not out of commission but failed. Got home about four o'clock, leading the horse. Paine−−"

"Yes?"

"Of course you know what I've come here for. I'm much obliged to you."

"That's all right. You're welcome."

"Maybe I am, but I am obliged, just the same. Not only for the help you gave Mabel−−my daughter−−last night, but for that business in the bay the other afternoon."

So she had told him the whole story. Remembering her last words, as I left her in the hall, I had rather imagined she would.

"That didn't amount to anything," I said, shortly.

"Why, yes, it did. It might have amounted to a whole lot. I asked Peters some questions about the tides out here and, from what he said, I judge that being stuck on the shoals in a squall might not be altogether a joke. Mabel says you handled the affair mighty well."

I did not answer. He chuckled.

"How did young Carver enjoy playing second fiddle?" he asked. "From what I've seen of him he generally expects to lead the band. Happy, was he?"

I remained silent. He smiled broadly.

"He isn't any too happy this morning," he went on. "That young man won't do. I never quoted him within twenty points of par, but Mabel seemed to like him and her mother thought he was the real thing. Mrs. C. couldn't forget that his family is one of the oldest on the list. Personally I don't gamble much on families; know a little about my own and that little is enough. But women are different. However, family or not, he won't do. I should tell him so myself, but I guess Mabel will save me the trouble. She's got a surprising amount of common−sense, considering that she's an only child−−and who her parents are. By the way, Paine, what did Carver say when you

put him ashore?"

"He−−he said−−oh, nothing of importance."

"Yes, I know that. I listened to his explanations last night. But did he say anything?"

"Why, he offered to pay me for my work."

"Did he? How much?"

"I did not wait to find out."

"And you haven't heard from him since?"

I hesitated.

"Have you?" he repeated.

"Well, I−−I received a note from him next day."

"Humph! Offering apologies?"

"No."

"Sent you money, didn't he?"

I looked at him in surprise. "Did he tell you?" I asked.

"No, nobody told me. I'm only trying to find out whether or not I have lost all my judgment of human nature since I struck this sand heap. He did send you money then. How much?"

"Mr. Colton, I−−"

"Come now! How much?"

"Well−−he sent me five dollars."

"No! he didn't!"

"I am telling you the truth."

"Yes," slowly, "I know you are. I've got that much judgment left. Sent you five dollars, did he. And you sent it back."

"Yes."

"Any message with it?"

I was tired of being catechized. I had not meant to tell him anything. Now I decided to tell him all. If it angered him, so much the better.

"I sent him word that what I saved wasn't worth the money."

To my amazement he was not angry. Instead he slapped his knee and laughed aloud.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted. "Humph! Well, that was. . . . I'd like to have seen his face when he got that message. No, that young man won't do. He won't do at all."

It was not for me to dispute this conclusion, even if I had disagreed with him, which I did not. I said nothing. He rubbed his knee for a moment and then changed the subject.

"How did you happen to be on the Lower Road at that time of the night?" he asked. "I'm mighty glad you were there, of course, but where did you come from?"

"I left the festival rather late and−−"

"Festival? Oh, that thing up at the church. I didn't see you there."

I had taken pains that he should not see me.

"Do you mean to tell me," he continued, "that you enjoy a thing like that? What in blazes made Mabel want to go I don't see! She and Carver were set on going; and it would be the treat of a lifetime, or words to that effect. I can't see it myself. Of all the wooden headed jays I ever laid eyes on this town holds the finest collection. Narrow and stubborn and blind to their own interests!"

This was more like what I expected from him and I resented it. It may seem odd that I, of all persons, should have taken upon myself the defense of Denboro and its inhabitants, but that is what I did.

"They are no more narrow and stubborn in their way than city people are in theirs," I declared. "They resent being ordered about as if their opinions and wishes counted for nothing, and I honor them for it."

"Do, hey?"

"Yes, I do. Mr. Colton, I tell you that you are all wrong. Simply because a man lives in the country it does not follow that he is a blockhead. No one in Denboro is rich, as you would count riches, but plenty of them are independent and ask no help from any one. You can't drive them."

"Can't I?"

"No, you can't. And if you want favors from men here you must ask for them, not try to bully."

"I don't want favors. I want to be treated decently, that's all. When I came here I intended doing things to help the town. I should have enjoyed doing it. I told some of them so. Look at the money I've spent. Look at the taxes I'll pay. Why, they ought to be glad to have me here. They ought to welcome me."

"So they would if you had not behaved as if you were what some of them call you−−'Emperor of New York'. I tell you, Mr. Colton, you're all wrong. I know the people here."

"So? Well, from what I've been able to learn about you, you haven't associated with many of them. You've been playing a little at the high and mighty yourself."

Chickens do come home to roost. My attitude of indifference and coldness toward my fellow citizens had been misinterpreted, as it deserved to be. George Taylor was right when he said I had made a mistake.

"I have been foolish," I said, hotly, "but not for the reason you suppose. I don't consider myself any better than the people here−− no, nor even the equal of some of them. And, from what I have seen of you, Mr. Colton, I don't consider you that, either."

Even this did not make him angry. He looked at me as if I puzzled him.

"Say, Paine," he said, "what in the world are you doing down in a place like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. You upset my calculations. I thought I spotted you and put you in the class where you belonged when you and I first met. I can usually size up a man. You've got me guessing. What are you doing down here? You're no Rube."

If he intended this as a compliment I was not in the mood to accept it as such. I should have told him that what I was or was not was no business of his. But he went on without giving me the opportunity.

"You've got me guessing," he repeated. "You talk like a man. The way you looked out for my daughter last night and the way, according to her story, you handled her and Victor the other afternoon was a man's job. Why are you wasting your life down here?"

"Mr. Colton, I don't consider−−"

"Never mind. You're right; that's your affair, of course. But I hate to quit till I have the answer, and nobody around here seems to have the answer to you. Ready to sell me that land yet?"

"No."

"Going to sell to the public−spirited bunch? Dean and the rest?"

"No."

"You mean that? All right−−all right. Say, Paine, I admire your nerve a good deal more than I do your judgment. You must understand that I am going to close that fool Lane of yours some time or other."

"Your understanding and mine differ on that point."

"Possibly, but they'll agree before I'm through. I am going to close that Lane."

"I think not."

"I'm going to close it for two reasons. First, because it's a condemned nuisance and ought to be closed. Second, because I make it a point to get what I go after. I can't afford not to. It is doing that very thing that has put me where I am."

There was nothing to be said in answer to a statement like that. I did not try to answer it.

"Where you're holding down a job like mine," he continued, crossing his knees and looking out across the bay, "you have to get what you go after. I'm down here and I mean to stay here as long as I want to, but I haven't let go of my job by a good deal. I've got private wires−−telegraph and telephone−−in my house and I keep in touch with things in the Street as much as I ever did. If anybody tries to get ahead of the old man because they think he's turned farmer they'll find out their mistake in a hurry."

This seemed to be a soliloquy. I could not see how it applied to me. He went on talking.

"Sounds like bragging, doesn't it?" he said, reading my thoughts as if I had spoken them. "It isn't. I'm just trying to show you why I can't afford not to have my own way. If I miss a trick, big or little, somebody else wins. When I was younger, just butting into the game, there was another fellow trying to get hold of a lead mine out West that I was after. He beat me to it at first. He was a big toad in the puddle and I was a little one. But I didn't quit. I waited round the corner. By and by I saw my chance. He was in a hole and I had the cover to the hole. Before I let him out I owned that mine. It cost me more than it was worth; I lost money on it. But I had my way

and he and the rest had found out that I intended to have it. That was worth a lot more than I lost in the mine. Now this Lane proposition is a little bit of a thing; it's picayune; I should live right along if I didn't get it. But because I want it, because I've made up my mind to have it, I'm going to have it, one way or another. See?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "This seems to me like wasting time, Mr. Colton," I said.

"Then your seeing is away off. Look here, Paine, I'm through fiddling with the deal. I'm through with that undertaker postmaster or any other go−between. I just wanted you to understand my position; that's why I've told you all this. Now we'll talk figures. I might go on bidding, and you'd go on saying no, of course. But I shan't bid. I'll just say this: When you are ready to sell−−and I'll put you where you will be some day−−"

I rose. "Mr. Colton," I said, sharply, "you had better not say any more. I'm not afraid of you, and−−"

"There! there! there! who said anything about your being afraid? Don't get mad. I'm not−−not now. This is a business matter between friends and−−"

"Friends!"

"Sure. Business friends. I'm talking to you as I would to any other chap I intended to beat in a deal; there's nothing personal about it. When I get you so you're ready to sell I'll give you five thousand dollars for that strip of land."

I actually staggered. I said what Lute had said to me.

"You're crazy!" I cried. "Five thousand dollars for that land!"

"Yes. Oh, I know what it's worth. Five hundred is for the land itself. The other forty−five hundred is payment for the privilege of having my own way. Want to close with me now?"

It took me some time to answer. "No," is a short and simple word, but I found it tremendously difficult to pronounce. Yet I did pronounce it, I am glad to say. After all that I had said before I would have been ashamed to do anything else.

He did not appear surprised at my refusal.

"All right," he said. "I'm not going to coax you. Just remember that the offer holds good and when you get ready to accept it, sing out. Well!" looking at his watch, "I must be going. My wife will think I've fallen into the bay, or been murdered by the hostile natives. Nerves are mean things to have in the house; you can take my word for that. Good−by, Paine. Thank you again for last night and the rest of it. Mabel will thank you herself when she sees you, I presume."

He was on his way to the door when I recovered presence of mind sufficient to remember ordinary politeness.

"Your daughter−−er−−Miss Colton is well?" I stammered. "No ill effects from her wetting−−and the shock?"

"Not a bit. She's one of the kind of girls they turn out nowadays. Athletics and all that. Her grandmother would have died probably, after such an upset, but she's as right as I am. Oh . . . er−− Paine, next time you go shooting let me know. Maybe I'd like to go along. I used to be able to hit a barn door occasionally."

He stopped long enough to bite the end from a cigar and strolled away, smoking. I sat down in the armchair. "Five thousand dollars!" . . . "Carver won't do." . . . "I will have the Lane some time or other" . . . "Five thousand dollars!" . . . "Next time you go shooting." . . . "Friends!" . . . "Five thousand dollars!"

Oh, this was a nightmare! I must wake up before it got any worse.

CHAPTER X

Mother was the only one to whom I told the whole story of my experience in the "tempest" and of Colton's call. She and I had a long talk. She was as surprised to hear of the five thousand dollar offer as I had been, but that I had refused it did not surprise her. She seemed to take my refusal as a matter of course, whereas I was more and more doubtful of my sanity at the time. I knew well enough what the opinion of others would be concerning that sanity and I wondered whether or not they might be right. In fact, I rather resented her calm certainty.

"Mother," said I, "you speak as if the offer had been five cents instead of five thousand dollars."

"What difference does it make, Boy?" she asked. "If it had been only a matter of price you would have sold for six hundred and fifty. That is a good deal more than the land is worth, isn't it."

"I suppose so. But five thousand is a small fortune to us. I am not sure that we have the right to refuse it."

"Roscoe, if you were alone in this matter−−if I were not here to be considered at all−−would you have sold the land, no matter what he offered?"

"I don't know, Mother. I think, perhaps, I should."

"I know you would not. And I know the only reason you feel the refusal may be wrong is because you are thinking what the money might do for me. Do you suppose I will permit you to sacrifice a principle you know is right simply that I may have a few more luxuries which I don't need?"

"But you do need them. Why, there are so many things you need."

"No, I don't need one. So long as I have you I am perfectly happy. And it would not make me more happy to know that you accepted a bribe−−that is what it is, a bribe−−because of me. No, Boy, you did exactly right and I am proud of you."

"I am not particularly proud of myself."

"You should be. Can't you see how differently Mr. Colton regards you already? He does not condescend or patronize now."

"Humph! he is grateful because I helped his daughter out of a scrape, that's all."

"It is more than that. He respects you because you are what he called you, a man. I fancy it is a new experience to him to find some one, down here at any rate, to whom his millions make absolutely no difference."

"I am glad of it. It may do him good."

"Yes, I think it will. And what you told him about the townspeople may do him good, too. He will find, as you and I have found, that there are no kinder, better people anywhere. You remember I warned you against misjudging the Coltons, Roscoe. They, too, I am sure, are good people at heart, in spite of their wealth."

"Mother, you are too charitable for this earth−−too unworldly altogether."

"Haven't you and I reason to be charitable? There! there! let us forget the land and the money. Roscoe, I should like to meet this Miss Colton. She must be a brave girl."

"She is brave enough."

"I suppose poor Mr. Carver is in disgrace. Perhaps it was not his fault altogether."

This was a trifle too much. I refused to be charitable to Victor.

I heard from him, or of him, next day. I met Captain Jed Dean at the bank, where I had called to see Taylor and inquire concerning how he and Nellie got home from the festival. They had had a damp, though safe, journey, I learned, and the Methodist ladies had cleared seventy−four dollars and eighty−five cents from the entertainment.

Captain Jed entered the door as I left the cashier's gate.

"Ship ahoy, Ros!" hailed the captain, genially. "Make port safe and sound after the flood? I'd have swapped my horse and buggy for Noah's Ark that night and wouldn't have asked any boot neither. Did you see Mullet's bridge? Elnathan says he cal'lates he's got willow kindlin' enough to last him all summer. Ready split too−− the lightnin' attended to that. Lute Rogers don't talk about nothin' else. I cal'late he wishes lightnin' would strike your woodpile; then he'd be saved consider'ble labor, hey?"

He laughed and I laughed with him.

"I understood Princess Colton was out in the wust of it," went on Captain Jed. "Did you hear how her horse ran away?"

"Yes," I answered, shortly; "I heard about it."

"Never stopped till it got half way to West Bayport. The coachman hangin' onto the reins and swearin' at the top of his lungs all the time. 'Bije Ellis, who lives up that way, says the road smells like a match factory even yet−−so much brimstone in the air. The girl got home somehow or other, they tell me. I cal'late her fine duds got their never−get−over. Nellie says the hat she was wearin' come from Paris, or some such foreign place. Well, the rain falls on the just and unjust, so scriptur tells us, and it's true enough. Only the unjust in this case can afford new hats better'n the just, a consider'ble sight. Denboro's lost a promisin' new citizen; did you know it?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Hadn't you heard? That young Carver feller shook the dust−−the mud, I mean−−of our roads off his shoes this mornin'. He went away on the up train."

Here was news. "The up train?" I repeated. "You mean he has gone for good?"

"I should call it for good, for our good, anyhow. Yes, he's gone. Went to the depot in Colton's automobile. His majesty went with him fur's the platform. The gang that saw the proceedin's said the good−bys wan't affectin'. Colton didn't shed any tears and young Carver seemed to be pretty down at the mouth."

"But what makes you think he has gone for good?" I asked.

"Why, Alvin Baker was there, same as he usually is, and he managed to be nigh enough to hear the last words−−if there had been any."

"And there were not?"

"Nothin' to amount to much. Nothin' about comin' back, anyhow. Colton said somethin' about bein' remembered to the young feller's ma, and Carver said, 'Thanks,' and that was all. Alvin said 'twas pretty chilly. They've got it all figgered out at the post−office; you see, Carver was to come back to the meetin' house and pick up his princess, and he never come. She started without him and got run away with. Some of the folks paddlin' home from the festival saw the auto go by and heard the crowd inside singin' and laughin' and hollerin'. Nobody's goin' to sing a night like that unless they've got cargo enough below decks to make 'em forget the wet outside. And Beriah Doane was over to Ostable yesterday and he says it's town talk there that young Parker−−the boy the auto crowd was sayin' good−by to at the hotel−−had to be helped up to his room. No, I guess likely the Colton girl objected to her feller's gettin' tight and forgettin' her, so he and she had a row and her dad, the emperor, give him his discharge papers. Sounds reasonable; don't you think so, yourself?"

I imagined that the surmise was close to the truth. I nodded and turned away. I did not like Carver, I detested him, but somehow I no longer felt triumph at his discomfiture. I wondered if he really cared for the girl he had lost. It was difficult to think of him as really caring for any one except himself, but if I had been in his place and had, through my own foolishness, thrown away the respect and friendship of such a girl. . . . Yes, I was beginning to feel a little of Mother's charity for the young idiot, now that he could no longer insult and patronize me.

Captain Jed followed me to the bank door.

"Say, Ros," he said, "changed your mind about sellin' that Lane land yet?"

"No," I answered, impatiently. "There's no use talking about that, Captain Dean."

"All right, all right. Humph! the fellers are gettin' consider'ble fun out of that Lane."

"In what way?"

He laughed. "Oh, nothin'," he observed, with a wink, "only. . . . Heard any extry hurrahin' over to your place lately?"

"No. Captain, what do you mean?"

"I don't mean nothin'. But I shouldn't wonder if the Great Panjandrum and his folks was reminded that that Lane was still open, that's all. Ho! ho! So long, Ros."

I did not catch his meaning at the time. A few days later I discovered it by accident. I had been up to the village and was on my way home by the short cut. As I crossed the field behind Sylvanus Snow's abandoned house, the spot where Miss Colton and I had waited on the porch the night of the thunder shower, I heard the rattle of a cart going down the Lane. There was nothing unusual in this, of itself, but with it I heard the sound of loud voices. One of these voices was so loud that I caught the words:

"Now, boys, start her up! Three cheers for the Star Spangled Banner and make 'em loud. Let her go!"

The cheers followed, uproarious ones.

"Try it again," commanded the voice. "And keep her up all the way along. We'll shake up the 'nerves' I guess.

Hooray!"

This was enough. I understood now what Dean had meant by the Coltons realizing that the Lane was still open. I ran at full speed through the scrub and bushes, through the grove, and emerged upon the Lane directly opposite the Colton estate. The wagon−−Zeb Kendrick's weir cart−−was approaching. Zeb was driving and behind him in the body of the cart were four or five young fellows whom I recognized as belonging to the "billiard room gang," an unorganized society whose members worked only occasionally but were responsible for most of the mischief and disorder in our village. Tim Hallet, a sort of leader in that society, with the reputation of having been expelled from school three times and never keeping a job longer than a fortnight, was on the seat beside Kendrick, his back to the horse. Zeb was grinning broadly.

The wagon came nearer, the horse barely moving. Tim Hallet waved his arm.

"Now, boys," he shouted, "let's have some music."

"'Everybody works but father, And he sets around all day.'−−

Whoop her up!"

They whooped her up. I stepped out into the road.

"Here!" I shouted. "Stop that! Stop it, do you hear! Kendrick, what is all this?"

The song stopped in the middle of the verse. Zeb jerked the reins and shouted "Whoa!" Hallet and his chorus turned. They had been gazing at the big house, but now they turned and looked at me.

"Hello, Ros!" said Kendrick, still grinning, but rather sheepishly. "How be you? Got quite a band aboard, ain't I."

"Hello!" cried Hallet. "It's Ros himself! Ros, you're all RIGHT! Hi, boys! let's give three cheers for the feller that don't toady to nobody−−millionaires nor nobody else−−hooray for Ros Paine!"

The cheering that followed was not quite as loud as the previous outburst−−some of the "gang" may have noticed my attitude and expression−−but it was loud enough. Involuntarily I glanced toward the Colton mansion. I saw no one at the windows or on the veranda, and I was thankful for that. The blood rushed to my face. I was so angry that, for the moment, I could not speak.

Tim Hallet appeared to consider my silence and my crimson cheeks as acknowledgments of the compliment just paid me.

"Cal'late they heard that over yonder," he crowed. "Don't you think so, Ros. We've showed 'em what we think of you; now let's give our opinion of them. Three groans for old Colton! Come on!"

Even Zeb seemed to consider this as going too far, for he protested.

"Hold on, Tim!" he cautioned. "A joke's a joke, but that's a little too much; ain't it, Ros."

"Too much be darned!" scoffed Hallet. "We'll show 'em! Now, boys!"

The groans were not given. I sprang into the road, seized the horse by the bridle and backed the wagon into the bank. Tim, insecurely balanced, fell off the seat and joined his comrades on the cart floor.

"Hi!" shouted the startled driver. "What you doin', Ros? What's that for?"

"You go back where you come from," I ordered. "Turn around. Get out of here!"

I saved him the trouble by completing the turn. When I dropped the bridle the horse's head was pointing toward the Lower Road.

"Now get out of here!" I repeated. "Go back where you come from."

"But−−but, Ros," protested Zeb, "I don't want to go back. I'm goin' to the shore."

"Then you'll have to go some other way. You can't cross my property."

Hallet, on his knees, looked out over the seat.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, angrily. "Didn't you say the town could use this Lane?"

"Yes. Any one may use it as long as he behaves himself. When he doesn't behave he forfeits the privilege. Kendrick, you hear me! Go back."

"But I don't want to go back, Ros. If I do I'll have to go clear round by Myrick's, two mile out of my way."

"You should have thought of that before you brought that crowd with you. I won't have this Lane made a public nuisance by any one. Zeb, I'm ashamed of you."

Zeb turned to his passengers. "There!" he whined, "I told you so, Tim. I said you hadn't ought to act that way."

"Aw, what are you givin' us!" sneered Hallet. "You thought 'twas as funny as anybody, Zeb Kendrick. Look here, Ros Paine! I thought you was down on them Coltons. We fellers are only havin' a little fun with 'em for bein'

so stuck−up and hoggish. Can't you take a joke?"

"Not your kind. Go back, Zeb."

"But−−but can't I use the Lane NO more?" pleaded the driver. "I won't fetch 'em here agin."

"We'll see about that. You can't use it this time. Now go."

Zeb reluctantly spoke to his horse and the wagon began to move. Hallet swore a string of oaths.

"I'm on to you, Paine!" he yelled. "You're standin' in with 'em, after all. You wait till I see Captain Jed."

In three strides I was abreast the cart−tail.

"See him then," said I. "And tell him that if any one uses this Lane for the purpose of wilfully annoying those living near it I'll not only forbid his using it, but I'll prosecute him for trespass. I mean that. Stop! I advise you not to say another word."

I did not intend to prosecute Jim, he was not worth it, but I should have thoroughly enjoyed dragging him out of that wagon and silencing him by primitive methods. My anger had not cooled to any extent. He did not speak to me again, though I heard him muttering as the cart moved off. I remained where I was until I saw it turn into the Lower Road. Then I once more started for home.

I was very much annoyed and disturbed. Evidently this sort of thing had been going on for some time and I had just discovered it. It placed me in a miserable light. When Colton had declared, as he had in both our interviews, that the Lane was a nuisance I had loftily denied the assertion. Now those idiots in the village were doing their best to prove me a liar. I should have expected such behavior from Hallet and his friends, but for Captain Dean to tacitly approve their conduct was unexpected and provoking. Well, I had made my position plain, at all events. But I knew that Tim would distort my words and that the idea of my "standing in" with the Coltons, while professing independence, would be revived. I was destined to be detested and misunderstood by both sides. Yes, Dorinda was right in saying that I might find sitting on the fence uncomfortable. It was all of that.

I entered the grove and was striding on, head down, busy with these and similar reflections, when some one said: "Good morning, Mr. Paine."

I stopped short, came out of the day dream in which I had been giving Captain Jed my opinion of his followers' behavior, looked up, and saw Miss Colton in the path before me.

She was dressed in white, a light, simple summer gown. Her straw hat was simple also, expensive simplicity doubtless, but without a trace of the horticultural exhibits with which Olinda Cahoon, our Denboro milliner, was wont to deck the creations she prepared for customers. Matilda Dean would have sniffed at the hat and gown; they were not nearly as elaborate as those Nellie, her daughter, wore on Sundays. But Matilda or Nellie at their grandest could not have appeared as well dressed as this girl, no matter what she wore. Just now she looked, as Lute or Dorinda might have said, "as if she came out of a band box."

"Good morning," she said, again. She was perfectly self−possessed. Remembrance of our transit of Mullet's cranberry brook did not seem to embarrass her in the least. Nellie Dean would have giggled and blushed, but she did not.

_I_ was embarrassed, I admit it, but I had sufficient presence of mind to remove my hat.

"Good morning," said I. There flashed through my mind the thought that if she had been in that grove for any length of time she must have overheard my lively interview with Kendrick and Tim Hallet. I wondered if she had.

Her next remark settled that question.

"I suppose," she said, soberly, but with the same twinkle in her eye which I had observed once or twice in her father's, "that I should apologize for being here, on your property, Mr. Paine. I judge that you don't like trespassers."

I was more nettled at Zeb and his crowd than ever. "So you saw that performance," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I saw a little of it, and I'm afraid I heard the rest. I was walking here by the bluff and I could not help seeing and hearing."

"Humph! Well, I hope you understand, Miss Colton, that I did not know, until just now, this sort of thing was going on."

She smiled. "Oh, I understand that," she said. "You made that quite plain. Even those people in the wagon understood it, I should imagine."

"I hope they did."

"I did not know you could be so fierce, Mr. Paine. I had not expected it. You almost frightened me. You were

so very−−well, mild and long−suffering on the other occasions when we met."

"I am not always so mild, Miss Colton. However, if I had known you were within hearing I might not have been quite so emphatic."

"Then I am glad you didn't know. I think those ruffians were treated as they deserved."

"Not half as they deserved. I shall watch from now on and if there are any more attempts at annoying you or your people I shall do more than talk."

"Thank you. They have been troublesome−−of late. I am sure we are very much obliged to you, all of us."

"Not at all."

"Oh yes, we are. Not only for this, but for−−all the rest. For your help the other night especially; I want to thank you for that."

"It was nothing," I answered, awkwardly.

"Nothing! You are not very complimentary, Mr. Paine."

"I mean−−that is, I−−"

"You may consider rescuing shipwrecked young ladies, afloat and ashore, nothing−−perhaps you do it so often that it is of little consequence to you; but I am not so modest. I estimate my safety as worth something, even if you do not."

"I did not mean that, of course, Miss Colton. You know I did not. I meant that−−that what I did was no more than any one else would have done under the same circumstances. You were in no danger; you would have been safe enough even if I had not happened along. Please don't say anything more about it."

"Very well. But I am very glad you happened along, nevertheless. You seem to have the faculty of happening along just at the right time."

This sounded like a reference to the episode in the bay, and I did not care to discuss that.

"You−−I believe your father said you were not ill after your experience," I observed hastily.

"Not in the least, thank you. And you?"

"Oh, I was all right. Rather wet, but I did not mind that. I sail and fish a good deal, and water, fresh or salt, doesn't trouble me."

This was an unlucky remark, for it led directly to the subject I was trying to avoid.

"So I should imagine," she answered. "And that reminds me that I owe you another debt of thanks for helping me−−helping us out of our difficulty in the boat. I am obliged to you for that also. Even though what you saved was NOT worth five dollars."

I looked up at her quickly. She was biting her lips and there was a smile at the corners of her mouth. I could not answer immediately for the life of me. I would have given something if I had not told Colton of Victor's message and my reply.

"Your father misrepresented my meaning, I'm afraid," I stammered. "I was angry when I sent that message. It was not intended to include you."

"Thank you. Father seemed inclined to agree with your estimate−− part of it, at least. He is very much interested in you, Mr. Paine."

"Yes," I answered, dryly. "I can understand that."

Her smile broke into a ripple of laughter.

"You are quite distinctive, in your way," she said. "You may not be aware of it, but I have never known father to be so disturbed and puzzled about any one as he is about you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, he is, indeed."

"I am sorry that I am the cause of so much mental strain."

"No, you are not. From what I have learned about you, from him, I think you enjoy it. You must. It is great fun."

"Fun! Well, perhaps. Does your−−does Mrs. Colton find it funny?"

She hesitated. "Well," she answered, more slowly, "to be perfectly frank−−I presume that is what you want me to be−−I think Mother blames you somewhat. She is not well, Mr. Paine, and this Lane of yours is her pet bugbear just now. She−−like the rest of us−− cannot understand why you will not sell, and, because you will not, she is rather−−rather−−"

"I see. I'm not sure that I blame her. I presume she has blamed me for these outrageous disturbances in the Lane such as you have just witnessed."

She hesitated again. "Why yes," she said, more slowly still; "a little, I think. She is not well, as I said, and she may have thought you were, if not instigating them, at least aware of what was going on. But I am sure father does not think so."

"But you, Miss Colton; did you believe me responsible for them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, from what I have seen of you, you did not seem to me like that kind of a man. You kept your temper that day in the boat, though you had a good reason for losing it. All this," with a gesture toward the Lane, "the shouting and noise and petty insults, was so little and mean and common. I did not believe you would permit it, if you knew. And, from what I have learned about you, I was sure you would not."

"From what you learned about me? From your father?"

"No."

"Then from whom, pray?"

"From your friends. From that Mr. Taylor and Miss Dean and the others. They spoke of you so highly, and of your mother and your care of her. They described you as a gentleman, and no gentleman would countenance THAT."

I was so astonished that I blurted out my next question without thinking.

"You were speaking to them about ME?" I cried.

Her manner changed. Possibly she thought I was presuming on our chance acquaintance, or that she made a mistake in admitting even a casual interest; I might consider that interest to be real, instead of merely perfunctory. At any rate, I noticed a difference in her tone. It was as if she had suddenly withdrawn behind the fence which marked the border of our social line.

"Oh," she said, carelessly, "I did not cross−question, of course. Puzzles are always interesting, more or less. And a puzzle which perplexed my father was certainly unique. So I was a trifle curious, that's all."

I came to earth with a thud.

"I see," I said, curtly. "Well, I presume I should thank my friends for the testimonials to my character. And I promise you that you shall not be annoyed again. Good morning, Miss Colton."

I was turning away when she spoke my name.

"Mr. Paine," she said.

"Yes, Miss Colton."

"I have not explained why I was here, on your land, this morning."

"That is all right. You are quite welcome to be here at any time."

"Thank you. I told you I was walking by the bluff; that is true, but it isn't the whole truth. I was trying to muster courage to call on your mother."

I looked at her in amazement.

"Call on Mother!" I repeated.

"Yes, I have heard a great deal about your mother, and nothing except the very best. I think I should like to know her. Do you think she would consider me presuming and intrusive if I did call?"

"Why, Miss Colton, I−−"

"Please be frank about it, Mr. Paine. And please believe that my call would not be from idle curiosity. I should like to know her. Of course, if this disagreement about the land makes a difference, if she feels resentful toward us, I will not think of such a thing. Does she? Why do you smile? I am in earnest."

"I did not mean to smile, Miss Colton. The idea of Mother's feeling resentment toward any one seemed absurd to me, that was all."

"Then may I call on her?"

"Certainly. That is, if−−if you think it wise. If your mother−−"

"Oh, Mother has long ago given up trying to solve me. I am a greater puzzle to her than you seem to be to everyone, Mr. Paine. I have spoken to my father about it and he is quite willing. His difference with you is purely a business one, as you know."

Some of the "business" had been oddly conducted, but I did not raise the point. I could not reason just then. That this spoiled, city−bred daughter of "Big Jim" Colton should wish to know my mother was beyond reasoning.

She said good morning and we parted. I walked home, racking my brains to find the answer to this new conundrum. It was a whim on her part, of course, inspired by something George or Nellie had told her. I did not know whether to resent the whim or not, whether to be angry or indifferent. If she intended to inspect Mother as a possible object of future charity I should be angry and the first call would be the last. But Mother herself would settle all questions of charity; I knew that. And the girl had not spoken in a patronizing way. She had declared that idle curiosity had no part in her wish. She seemed in earnest. What would Mother say when I told her?

Lute was just coming through the gate as I approached it. He was in high good humor.

"I'm goin' up street," he declared. "Anything you want me to fetch you from the store, Ros?"

I looked at my watch. It was only eleven o'clock.

"Up street?" I repeated. "I thought you were slated to wash windows this forenoon. I heard Dorinda give you your orders to that effect. You haven't finished washing them already?"

"No," with a broad grin, "I ain't finished 'em. Fact is, I ain't begun 'em yet."

"So! Does Dorinda know that you are going up street?"

"Um−hm. She knows. Anyhow, she knows I'm goin' somewheres. She told me to go herself."

"She did! Why?"

"Don't ask ME. I was all ready to wash the windows; had the bucket pumped full and everything. But when I come into the dinin'−room she sung out to know what I was doin' with all that water on her clean floor. 'Why, Dorindy!' I says, 'I'm a−goin' to wash them windows same's you told me to.' 'No, you ain't,' says she. 'But what will I do?' says I. 'I don't care,' says she. 'Clear out of here, that's all.' 'But where'll I clear out to?' I wanted to know. 'I don't care!' she snaps again, savage as a settin' hen, 'so long's you clear out of my sight.' So here I be. Don't ask me why she changed her mind: _I_ don't know. Nothin' you want to the store?"

"No."

"Say, Ros, you know what I think?"

"Far be it from me to presume to guess your thoughts, Lute."

"Well, I think this is a strange world and the strangest thing in it is a woman. You never can tell what they'll do ten minutes at a stretch. I−−"

"All right, Lute. I'll hear the rest of the philosophy later."

"Philosophy or not, it's the livin' truth. And when you're as old as I be you'll know it."

I went in through the dining−room, steering clear of Dorinda, who scarcely looked up from her floor scrubbing.

"Mother," said I, entering the darkened bedroom, "I just met the Colton girl and what do you suppose she told me?"

"That she was very grateful to you for coming to her rescue the other night."

"That, of course. But she told me something else. She said she was coming to call on you. On YOU, Mother!"

I don't know what answer I expected. I flung the announcement like a bombshell and was ready for almost any sort of explosion at all.

"Did she?" observed Mother, placidly. "I am very glad. I have no doubt I shall like her."

My next remark had nothing to do with Miss Colton.

"Well, by George!" I exclaimed, with emphasis. "Lute IS a philosopher, after all. I take off my hat to him."

CHAPTER XI

I met Mabel Colton several times during the following week. Once, at the place where I had met her before, in the grove by the edge of the bluff, and again walking up the Lane in company with her father. Once also on the Lower Road, though that could scarcely be called a meeting, for I was afoot and she and her father and mother were in the automobile.

Only at the meeting in the grove were words exchanged between us. She bowed pleasantly and commented on the wonderful view.

"I am trespassing again, you see," she said. "Taking advantage of your good−nature, Mr. Paine. This spot is the most attractive I have found in Denboro."

I observed that the view from her verandas must be almost the same.

"Almost, but not quite," she said. "These pines shut off the inlet below, and all the little fishing boats. One of them is yours, I suppose. Which?"

"That is my launch there," I replied, pointing.

"The little white one? You built it yourself, I think Father said."

"He was mistaken, if he said that. I am not clever enough to build a boat, Miss Colton. I bought the Comfort, second−hand."

I don't know why I added the "second−hand." Probably because I had not yet freed my mind from the bitterness−−yes, and envy−−which the sight of this girl and her people always brought with it. It is comparatively easy to be free from envy if one is what George Taylor termed a "never−was"; for a "has been" it is harder.

The boat's name was the only portion of my remark which attracted her attention.

"The Comfort?" she repeated. "That is a jolly name for a pleasure boat."

"It is my mother's name," I answered.

"Is it? Why, I remember now. Miss Dean told me. I beg your pardon, Mr. Paine. It is a pretty name, at all events."

"Thank you."

"I must have misunderstood Father. I was sure he said that boat building was your business."

"No. He saw me overhauling the engine, and perhaps that gave him the impression that I was a builder. I told him I was not, but no doubt he forgot. I have no business, Miss Colton."

I think she was surprised. She glanced at me curiously and her lips opened as if to ask another question. She did not ask it however, and, except for a casual remark or two about the view and the blueness of the water in the bay, she said nothing more. I rather expected she would refer to her intention of calling on Mother, but she did not mention the subject. I inferred that she had thought better of her whim.

On the other occasions when we met she merely bowed. "Big Jim" nodded carelessly. Mrs. Colton, from her seat in the auto, nodded also, though her majestic bow could scarcely be termed a nod. It was more like the acknowledgment, by a queen in her chariot, of the applauding citizen on the sidewalk. She saw me, and she deigned to let me know that I was seen, that was all.

But when I inferred that her daughter had forgotten, or had decided not to make the call at our house, I misjudged the young lady. I returned, one afternoon, from a cruise up and down the bay in the Comfort, to find our small establishment−−the Rogers portion of it, at least−−in a high state of excitement. Lute and Dorinda were in the kitchen and before I reached the back door, which was open, I heard their voices in animated discussion.

"Why wouldn't I say it, Dorinda?" pleaded Lute. "You can't blame me none. There I was, with my sleeves rolled up and just settin' in the chair, restin' my arms a jiffy and thinkin' which window I'd wash next, when there come that knock at the door. Thinks I, 'It's Asa Peters' daughter's young−one peddlin' clams.' That's what come to my mind fust. That idee popped right into my head, it did."

"Found plenty of room when it got there, I cal'late," snapped Dorinda. "Must have felt lonesome."

"That's it! keep on pitchin' into me. I swan to man! sometimes I get so discouraged and wore out and reckless−−hello! here's Ros. You ask him now! Ros, she's layin' into me because I didn't understand what−−"

"Roscoe," broke in his wife, "I never was more mortified in all my born days. He−−"

"Let me tell you all about it, Ros. I went to the door−−thinkin' 'twas a peddler, you know; had this old suit on, all sloshed up with soapsuds and water, and a wet rag in my hand; and there she stood, styled up like the Queen of Sheby. Well, sir! I'll leave it to you if 'tain't enough to surprise anybody. HER! comin' HERE!"

"That wan't any reason why you should behave like a natural born−−"

"Hold on! you let me finish tellin' Roscoe. 'Good afternoon,' says she. 'Is Mrs. Paine in?' Said it just like that, she did. I was so flustered up from the sight of her that I didn't sense it right off and I says, 'What ma'am?' 'Is Mrs. Paine in?' says she. 'In?' says I−−"

"Just like a poll parrot," interjected Dorinda.

"Are you goin' to let me tell this or ain't you? 'In?' says I; hadn't sensed it yet, you see. 'Is Mrs. Paine to home?' she says. Now your ma, Ros, ain't never been nowheres else BUT home sence land knows when, so I supposed she must mean somebody else. 'Who?' says I, again. 'Mrs. Comfort Paine,' says she. She raised her voice a little; guessed I was deef, probably."

"If she'd guessed you was dumb she wouldn't have been fur off," commented Dorinda. I had not seen her so disturbed for many a day.

Her husband disdained to notice this interruption.

"'Mrs. Comfort Paine,' says she," he continued. "'She is in? And I says 'In?'"

"No, you didn't. You said, 'In where?' And she had all she could do to keep from laughin'. I see her face as I got to the door, and it's a mercy I got there when I did. Land knows what you'd have said next!"

"But, Dorindy, I tell you I thought−−"

"YOU thought! I know what SHE must have thought. That she'd made a mistake and run afoul of an asylum for the feeble−minded."

"Umph! I should have GOT feeble−minded if I'd had any more of that kind of talk. What made her ask if a sick woman like Comfort was 'in' and 'to home'? Couldn't be nowheres else, could she?"

"Rubbish! she meant could Mrs. Paine see folks, that's all."

"See 'em! How you talk! She ain't blind."

"Oh, my soul and body! She was tryin' to ask if she might make a call on Comfort."

"Well then, why didn't she ask it; 'stead of wantin' to know if she was in?"

"That's the high−toned way TO ask, and you'd ought to have known it."

"Humph! Do tell! Well, I ain't tony, myself. Don't have no chance to be in this house. Nothin' but work, work, work! tongue, tongue, tongue! for me around here. I'm disgusted, that's what I am."

"YOU'RE disgusted! What about, me?"

I had listened to as much of this little domestic disagreement as I cared to hear.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What is all this? Who has been here to see Mother?"

Both answered at once.

"That Colton girl," cried Lute.

"That Mabel Colton," said Dorinda.

"Miss Colton? She has been here? this afternoon."

"Um−hm," Dorinda nodded emphatically. "She stayed in your ma's room 'most an hour."

"'Twas fifty−three minutes," declared Lute. "I timed her by the clock. "And she fetched a great, big bouquet. Comfort says she−−"

I waited to hear no more, but went into Mother's room. The little bed chamber was fragrant with the perfume of flowers. A cluster of big Jacqueminot roses drooped their velvety petaled heads over the sides of the blue and white pitcher on the bureau. Mother loved flowers and I frequently brought her the old fashioned posies from Dorinda's little garden or wild blossoms from the woods and fields. But roses such as these were beyond my reach now−a−days. They grew in greenhouses, not in the gardens of country people.

Mother did not move as I entered and I thought she was asleep. But as I bent over the roses she turned on the pillow and spoke.

"Aren't they beautiful, Roscoe?" she said.

"Yes," I answered. "They are beautiful."

"Do you know who brought them to me?"

"Yes, Mother. Lute told me."

"She did call, you see. She kept her word. It was kind of her, wasn't it?"

I sat down in the rocking chair by the window.

"Well," I asked, after a moment, "what did she say? Did she condescend to pity her pauper neighbors?"

"Roscoe!"

"Did she express horrified sympathy and offer to call your case to the attention of her cousin in charge of the Poor Ward in the City General Hospital, like that woman from the Harniss hotel last summer?"

"Boy! How can you!"

"Oh, well; I am a jealous beast, Mother; I admit it. But I have not been able to bring you flowers like that and it galls me to think that others can. They don't deserve to have all the beautiful things in life, while the rest of us have none."

"But it isn't her fault that she has them, is it? And it was kind to share them with us."

"I suppose so. Well, what did she say to you? Dorinda says she was with you nearly an hour. What did you and she talk about? She did not offer charity, did she?"

"Do you think I should have accepted it, if she had? Roscoe, I have never seen you so prejudiced as you are against our new neighbors. It doesn't seem like you, at all. And if her father and mother are like Miss Mabel, you are very wrong. I like her very much."

"You would try to like any one, Mother."

"I did not have to try to like her. And I was a little prejudiced, too, at first. She was so wealthy, and an only child; I feared she might be conceited and spoiled. But she isn't."

"Not conceited! Humph!"

"No, not really. At first she seemed a trifle distant, and I thought her haughty; but, afterward, when her strangeness and constraint had worn away, she was simple and unaffected and delightful. And she is very pretty, isn't she."

"Yes."

"She told me a great deal about herself. She has been through Vassar and has traveled a great deal. This is the first summer since her graduation which she has not spent abroad. She and I talked of Rome and Florence. I−−I told her of the month I spent in Italy when you were a baby, Roscoe."

"You did not tell her anything more, Mother? Anything she should not know?"

"Boy!" reproachfully.

"Pardon me, Mother. Of course you didn't. Did she tell you why she called on us−−on you, I mean?"

"Yes, in a way. I imagine−−though she did not say so−−that you are responsible for that. She and Nellie Dean seem to be well acquainted, almost friendly, which is odd, for I can scarcely think of two girls more different. But she likes Nellie, that is evident, and Nellie and George have told her about you and me."

"I see. And so she was curious concerning the interesting invalid. Probably anything even mildly interesting is a godsend to her, down here. Did she mention the Shore Lane rumpus?"

"Yes. Although I mentioned it first. It was plain that she could not understand your position in the matter, Roscoe, and I explained it as well as I could. I told her that you felt the Lane was a necessity to the townspeople, and that, under the circumstances, you could not sell. I told her how deeply you sympathized with her mother−−"

"Did you tell her that?"

"Why, yes. It is true, isn't it?"

"Humph! Mildly so, maybe. What more did she say?"

"She said she thought she understood better now. I told her about you, Boy, and what a good son you had been to me. How you had sacrificed your future and your career for my sake. Of course I could not go into particulars, at all, but we talked a great deal about you, Roscoe."

"That must have been deliriously interesting−−to her."

"I think it was. She told me of your helping her home through the storm, and of something else you had not told me, Boy: of your bringing her and Mr. Carver off the flat in the boat that day. Why did you keep that a secret?"

"It was not worth telling."

"She thought it was. She laughed about it; said you handled the affair in a most businesslike and unsentimental way; she never felt more like a bundle of dry−goods in her life, but that that appeared to be your

manner of handling people. It was a somewhat startling manner, but very effective, she said. I don't know what she meant by that."

I knew, but I did not explain.

"You don't mean to say, Mother, that you glorified me to her for an hour?" I demanded.

"No, indeed. We talked of ever so many things. Of books, and pictures, and music. I'm afraid I was rather wearisome. It seemed so good to have some one−−except you, of course, dear−−to discuss such subjects with. Most of my callers are not interested in them."

I was silent.

"She is coming again, she says," continued Mother. "She has some new books she is going to lend me. You must read them to me. And aren't those roses wonderful? She picked them, herself, in their conservatory. I told her how fond you were of flowers."

I judged that the young lady must have gone away with the idea that I was a combination of longshore lout and effeminate dilettante, with the financial resources of the former. She might as well have that idea as any other, I supposed, but, in her eyes, I must be more of a freak than ever. I should take care to keep out of the sight of those eyes as much as possible. But that the millionaire's daughter had made a hit on the occasion of her first call was plain. Not only had Mother been favorably impressed, but even the practical and unromantic Dorinda's shell was dented. She deigned to observe that the young lady seemed to have "consider'ble common−sense, considerin' her bringin' up." This, from Dorinda, was high praise, and I wondered what the caller had said or done to win such a triumph. Lute made the matter clear.

"By time!" he said, when he and I were together, "that girl's a smart one. I'd give somethin' to have her kind of smartness. Dorindy was terrible cranky all the time she was in your ma's room and I didn't know what would happen when she come out. But the fust thing she done when she come out was to look around the dinin' room and say, 'Oh! what a pleasant, homey place! And so clean! Why, it is perfectly spotless!' Land sakes! the old lady thawed out like a cranberry bog in April. After that they talked about housekeepin' and cookin' and such, sociable as could be. Dorindy's goin' to give her her receipt for doughnuts next time she comes. And I bet that girl never cooked a doughnut in her life or ever will. If I could think of the right thing to say, like that, 'twould save me more'n one ear−ache. But I never do think of it till the next day, and then it's too late."

He borrowed my tobacco, filled his pipe, and continued:

"Say, Ros," he asked, "what's your idea of what made her come here?"

"To see Mother, of course," I answered.

"That's your notion, is it?"

"Certainly. What else?"

"Humph! There's other sick folks in town. Why don't she go to see them?"

"Perhaps she does. I don't know."

"I bet you ten cents she don't. No, I've been reasonin' of it out, same as I gen'rally do, and I've got some notions of my own. You don't cal'late her pa sent her so's to sort of soft soap around toward his gettin' the Shore Lane? You don't cal'late 'twas part of that game, do you?"

That supposition had crossed my mind more than once. I was ashamed of it and now I denied it, indignantly.

"Of course not," I answered.

"Well, I don't think so, myself. But if 'tain't that it's another reason. She may be interested in Comfort; I don't say she ain't; but that ain't all she's interested in."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. I ain't said nothin'. I'm just waitin' to see, that's all. I have had some experience in this world, I have. There's different times comin' for this family, you set that down in your log−book, Ros Paine."

"Look here, Lute; if you are hinting that Miss Colton or her people intend offering us charity−−"

"Who said anything about charity? No; if she had that idee in her head, her talk with your ma would drive it out. 'Tain't charity, I ain't sayin' what 'tis. . . . I wonder how 'twould seem to be rich."

"Lute, you're growing more foolish every day."

"So Dorindy says; but she nor you ain't offered no proof yet. All right, you wait and see. And say, Ros, don't mention our talk to Dorindy. She's more'n extry down on me just now, and if I breathe that Mabel Colton's name she hops right up in the air. How'd I know that askin' if a woman who's been sick in bed six year or more was 'in'

meant could she have folks come to see her?"

Mother would have discussed the Coltons with me frequently, but I avoided the subject as much as possible. The promised books arrived−−brought over by Johnson, the butler, who viewed our humble quarters with lofty disdain−−and I read one of them aloud to Mother, a chapter each evening. More flowers came also and the darkened bedroom became a bower of beauty and perfume. If I had yielded to my own wishes I should have returned both roses and books. It was better, as I saw it, that we and our wealthy neighbors had nothing to do with each other. Real friendship was out of the question; the memory of Mrs. Colton's frigid bow and her reference to me as a "person" proved that. Her daughter might think otherwise, or might think that she thought so, but I knew better. However, I did not like to pain Mother by refusing offerings which, to her, were expressions of sympathy and regard, so I had no protest and tried to enthuse over the gifts and loans. After all, what did they amount to? One tea−rose bred from Dorinda's carefully tended bush, or one gushful story book selected by Almena Doane from the new additions to the town library and sent because she thought "Mrs. Comfort might find it sort of soothin' and distractin'," meant more real unselfish thought and kindly feeling than all the conservatory exotics and new novels which the rich girl's whim supplied from her overflowing store. I was surprised only that the whim lasted so long.

Behind all this, I think, and confirming my feeling, was the fact that Miss Colton did not repeat her call. A week or more passed and she did not come. I caught glimpses of her occasionally in the auto, or at the post−office, but I took care that she should not see me. I did not wish to be seen, though precisely why I could not have explained even to myself. The memory of that night in the rain, and of our meetings in the grove, troubled me because I could not keep them from my mind. They kept recurring, no matter what I did or where I went. No, I did not want to meet her again. Somehow, the sight and memory of her made me more dissatisfied and discontented than ever. I found myself moodily wishing for things beyond my reach, longing to be something more than I was−−more than the nobody which I knew I must always be. I remembered my feelings on the morning of the day when I first saw her. Now they seemed almost like premonitions.

I kept away; not only from her, but from George Taylor and Captain Dean and the townspeople. I went to the village scarcely at all. Sim Eldredge, who had evidently received orders from headquarters to drop the Lane "agency," troubled me no more, merely glowering reproachfully when we met; and Alvin Baker, whose note had been renewed, although he hailed me with effusive cordiality, did not press his society upon me, having no axe to grind at present. Zeb Kendrick was using the Lane again, but he took care to bring no more "billiard roomers" as passengers. I had as yet heard nothing from my quarrel with Tim Hallet.

I spent a good deal of my time in the Comfort, or wandering about the shore and in the woods. One warm, cloudy morning the notion seized me to go up to the ponds and try for black bass. There are bass in some of the larger ponds−−lakes they would be called anywhere else except on Cape Cod−−and, if one is lucky, and the weather is right, and the bait tempting, they may be caught. This particular morning promised to furnish the proper brand of weather, and a short excursion on the flats provided a supply of shrimps and minnows for bait. Dorinda, who happened to be in good humor, put up a lunch for me and, at seven o'clock, with my rod and landing net in their cases, strapped, with my fishing boots and coffee pot, to my back, and my bait pail in one hand and lunch basket in the other, I started on my tramp. It was a long four miles to Seabury's Pond, my destination, and Lute, to whom, like most country people, the idea of a four−mile walk was sheer lunacy, urged my harnessing the horse and driving there. But I knew the overgrown wood roads and the difficulty of piloting a vehicle through them, and, moreover, I really preferred to go afoot. So I marched off and left him protesting.

Very few summer people−−and only summer people or irresponsible persons like myself waste time in freshwater fishing on the Cape−− knew where Seabury's Pond was. It lay far from macadam roads and automobile thoroughfares and its sandy shores were bordered with verdure−clad hills shutting it in like the sides of a bowl. To reach it from Denboro one left the Bayport road at "Beriah Holt's place," followed Beriah's cow path to the pasture, plunged into the oak and birch grove at the southern edge of that pasture, emerged on a grass−grown and bush−encumbered track which had once been the way to some early settler's home, and had been forsaken for years, and followed that track, in all its windings, until he saw the gleam of water between the upper fringe of brush and the lower limbs of the trees. Then he left the track and clambered down the steep slope to the pond.

I am a good walker, but I was tired long before I reached the slope. The bait pail, which I refilled with fresh water at Beriah's pump, grew heavier as I went on, and I began to think Lute knew what he was talking about

when he declared me to be "plumb crazy, hoofin' it four mile loaded down with all that dunnage." However, when the long "hoof" was over, and I sat down in a patch of "hog−cranberry" vines for a smoke, with the pond before me, I was measurably happy. This was the sort of thing I liked. Here there were no Shore Lane controversies, but real independence and peace.

After my smoke was finished and I had rested, I carried my "dunnage" around to the point where I intended to begin my fishing, put the lunch basket in a shady place beneath the bushes, and the bait pail in the water nearby, changed my shoes for the fishing boots, rigged my rod and was ready.

At first the fishing was rather poor. The pond was full of perch and they were troublesome. By and by, however, I hooked a four− pound pickerel and he stirred my lagging ambition. I waded on, casting and playing beyond the lily pads and sedge. At last I got my first bass, a small one, and had scarcely landed him than a big fellow struck, fought, rose and broke away. That was spur sufficient. All the forenoon I waded about the shores of that pond. When at half−past eleven the sun came out and I knew my sport was over, for the time at least, I had four bass−−two of them fine ones−−and two, pickerel. Then I remembered my appetite and Dorinda's luncheon.

I went back to the point and inspected the contents of the basket. Sandwiches, cold chicken, eggs, doughnuts and apple puffs. They looked good to me. Also there were pepper and salt in one paper, sugar in another, coffee in a third, and milk in a bottle. I collected some dry chips and branches and prepared to kindle a fire. As I bent over the heap of sticks and chips I heard the sound of horses' hoofs in the woods near by.

I was surprised and annoyed. The principal charm of Seabury Pond was that so few people visited it. Also fewer still knew how good the fishing was there. I was not more than ordinarily selfish, but I did not care to have the place overrun with excursionists from the city, who had no scruples as to number and size of fish caught and would ruin the sport as they had ruined it at other and better known ponds. The passerby, whoever he was−−a native probably−− would, if he saw me, ask questions concerning my luck, and be almost sure to tell every one he met. I left my fire unkindled, stepped back to the shade of the bushes and waited in silence, hoping the driver would go on without stopping. There was no real road on this side of the pond, but there was an abandoned wood track, like that by which I had come. The horse was approaching along the track; the sounds of hoofs and crackling branches grew plainer.

The odd part of it was that I heard no rattle of wheels. It was almost as if the person was on horseback. This seemed impossible, because no one in Denboro or Bayport−−no one I could think of, at least−−owned or rode a saddle horse. Yet the hoof beats grew louder and there was no squeak, or jolt, or rattle to bear them company. They came to a point in the woods directly opposite where I sat in the shade of the bushes and there they stopped. Then they recommenced and the crackle of branches was louder than ever. The rider, whoever he was, was coming down the bank to the pond.

A moment more and the tall swamp−huckleberry bushes at the edge of the sandy beach parted and between them stepped gingerly a clean− cut, handsome brown horse, which threw up its head at the sight of the water and then trotted lightly toward it. The rider, who sat so easily in the saddle, was a girl. And the girl was Mabel Colton!

She did not notice me at first, but gave her attention to the horse. The animal waded into the water to its knees and, in obedience to a pull on the reins, stopped, bent its head, and began to drink. Then the rider turned in her seat, looked about her, saw the heap of wood for the fire, the open lunch basket, the rods and landing−net, and−−me.

I had stepped from the bushes when she first appeared and was standing motionless, staring, I imagine, like what Dorinda sometimes called her husband−−a "born gump." There was Fate in this! no doubt about it. The further I went to avoid this girl, and the more outlandish and forsaken the spot to which I fled, the greater the certainty of our meeting. A feeling of helplessness came over me, as if I were in the clutch of destiny and no effort of mine could break that clutch.

For a moment she looked as if she might be thinking the same thing. She started when she saw me and her lips parted.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, softly. Then we gazed at each other without speaking.

She was the first to recover from the surprise. Her expression changed. The look of alarm caused by my sudden appearance left her face, but the wonder remained.

"Why! Why, Mr. Paine!" she cried. "Is it you?"

I stepped forward.

"Why, Miss Colton!" said I.

She drew a breath of relief. "It IS you!" she declared. "I was beginning to believe in hallucinations. How you startled me! What are you doing here?"

"That is exactly what I was going to ask you," I replied. "I am here for a fishing excursion. But what brought you to this out−of− the−way place?"

She smiled and patted the horse's shoulder. "Don here brought me," she answered. "He saw the water and I knew he was thirsty, so I came straight down the bank. But I didn't expect to find any one here. I haven't seen a horse or a human being for an hour. What a pretty little lake this is. What is its name?"

"It is called Seabury's Pond. How did you find it?"

"I didn't. Don found it. He and I came for a gallop in the woods and I let him choose his own paths. I have been in his charge all the morning. I haven't the least idea where we are. There, Don! you have had enough and you are splashing us dreadfully. Come back!"

She backed the horse out of the water and turned his head toward the woods.

"It is great fun to be lost," she observed. "I didn't suppose any one could be lost in Denboro."

"But this isn't Denboro. Seabury's Pond is in Bayport township."

"Is it, really? In Bayport? Then I must be a long way from home."

"You are; four miles and a half, at least. More than that over the road."

She looked at her watch and frowned slightly.

"Dear me!" she said. "And it is after twelve already. I am perfectly sure I can't find the way back in time for luncheon."

"I shall be glad to go with you and show you the way."

"No, indeed! Don and I will get home safely. This isn't the first time we have been lost together, though not on Cape Cod. Of course I shouldn't think of taking you from your fishing. Have you had good luck?"

"Pretty fair. Some bass and two good−sized pickerel."

"Really! Bass? I didn't know there were any about here. May I see them?"

"Certainly. They are over there in the bushes."

She swung lightly down from the saddle and, taking her horse by the bridle, led him toward the spot where my catch lay, covered with leaves and wet grass. I removed the covering and she bent over the fish.

"Oh, splendid!" she exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "That big one must be a three−pounder. I envy you. Bass fishing is great sport. Did you get these on a fly−−the bass, I mean?"

"No. I use a fly in the spring and fall, but seldom in June or July, here. Those were taken with live bait−shrimp. The pickerel with minnows. Are you fond of fishing, Miss Colton?"

"Yes, indeed. Whoa, Don! steady! Yes, I fish a good deal in September, when we are at our lodge in the Adirondacks. Trout there, principally. But I have caught bass in Maine. I thought I must give it up this year. I did not know there were fish, in fresh water, on the Cape."

"There are, a few. The people about here pay no attention to them. They scorn such small fry. Cod and pollock are more in their line."

"I suppose so. But that is all the better for you, isn't it? Were you fishing when I interrupted you?"

"No, I was just getting ready for lunch. My fire was ready to kindle."

"Fire? Why did you need a fire?"

"For my coffee."

"Coffee! You are a luxurious picnicer, Mr. Paine. Hot coffee on a fishing trip! and without a guide. And you are unfeeling, besides, for you remind me that I am very hungry. I must go at once. How far am I from home? Four miles, did you say?"

"Four and a half, or more, by road. And the roads are like those you have been traveling this morning. I doubt if you could find the way, even with your horse's help. I must insist upon going with you as far as the main road between Denboro and Bayport."

"I shall not permit it."

"But I insist."

Her answer was a little laugh. She put her foot in the stirrup and vaulted to the saddle.

"Your insisting is useless, you see," she said. "You are on foot and I have the advantage. No, Don and I will

go alone, thank you. Now, will you please tell me the way?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Go back along the road you came," I said, "until you reach the second, no, the third, path to the right. Follow that to the second on the left. Then follow that for two hundred yards or so until−−well, until you reach a clump of bushes, high bushes. Behind these is another path, a blind one, and you must take care to pick the right clump, because there is another one with a path behind it and that path joins the road to Harniss. If you should take the Harniss road you would go miles out of your way. Take the blind path I speak of and−−"

She interrupted me. "Stop! stop!" she exclaimed; "please don't. I am absolutely bewildered already. I had no idea I was in such a maze. Let me see! Second to the right; third to the left−−"

"No, third to the right and second to the left."

"And then the bushes and the choice of blind paths. Don, I see plainly that you and I must trust to Providence. Well, it is fortunate that the family are accustomed to my ways. They won't be alarmed, no matter how late I may be."

"Miss Colton, I am not going to allow you to go alone. Of course I am not. I can set you on the right road and get back here in plenty of time for fishing. The fish are not hungry in the middle of the day."

"No, but you are. I know you must be, because−−no, good day, Mr. Paine."

She spoke to the horse and he began to move. I took my courage between my teeth, ran after the animal and seized the bridle.

"You are not going alone," I said, decidedly. I was smiling, but determined.

She looked at me in surprised indignation.

"What do you mean?" she said.

I merely smiled. Her chin lifted and her brows drew together. I recognized that look; I had seen it before, on that afternoon when I announced my intention of carrying her from the dingy to the skiff.

"Will you be good enough to let go of my rein?" she asked. Every word was a sort of verbal icicle. I felt the chill and my smile was rather forced; but I held the bridle.

"No," I said, serenely as I could. For a minute−−I suppose it was not longer than that, it seemed an hour to me−−we remained as we were. Then her lips began to curl upward at the corners, and, to my surprise, she burst out laughing.

"Really, Mr. Paine," she said, "you are the most impossible person I ever met. Do you always order people about this way? I feel as if I were about five years old and you were my nurse. Are we to stand here the rest of the afternoon?"

"Yes; unless you permit me to go with you and show you the way."

"But I can't. I'm not going to spoil your picnic. I know you want your lunch. You must. Or, if you don't, I want mine."

"If you go alone, there are nine chances in ten that you will not get home in time for dinner, to say nothing of lunch."

She looked at me oddly, I thought, and started to speak. Whatever it was she was going to say she evidently thought better of it, for she remained silent.

Then I had a new idea. Whether or not it was her look which inspired it I do not know. I think it must have been; I never would have dared such a thing without inspiration.

"Miss Colton," I said, hesitatingly, "if you really are not−−if you are sure your people will not worry about you−−I−−I should be glad to share my lunch with you. Then we could go home together afterward."

She did not look at me now. Instead she turned her head.

"Are−−are you sure there is enough for two?" she asked, in a curiously choked tone.

By way of answer I led the horse to the bushes, drew the lunch basket from the shade, and threw back the cover. Dorinda's picnic lunches were triumphs and she had never put up a more tempting one.

Miss Colton looked down into the basket.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

"There appears to be enough, doesn't there?" I observed, drily.

"But−−but I couldn't think of . . . Are you sure I won't be . . . Thank you. Yes, I'll stay."

Before I could offer my hand to help her from the saddle she sprang to the ground. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Mr. Paine," she said, in a burst of confidence, "it is shameless to tell you so, I know, but I was dreadfully afraid you weren't going to ask me. I am absolutely STARVED."

CHAPTER XII

"And now," continued Miss Colton, after an interval during which, I presume, she had been waiting for some reply to her frank declaration concerning mind and appetite, "what must I do to help? Shall I unpack the basket?"

I was struggling, as we say in Denboro, to get the ship under control. I had been taken aback so suddenly that I had lost steerage way. My slight experience with the vagaries of the feminine mind had not prepared me for the lightning changes of this kind. Not two minutes before she had, if one might judge by her look and tone, been deeply offended, almost insulted, because I refused to permit her wandering off alone into the woods. My invitation to lunch had been given on the spur of the moment and with no idea that it would be accepted. And she not only accepted, but had expected me to invite her, had been fearful that I might not do so. She told me so, herself.

"Shall I unpack the basket?" she repeated. She was looking at me intently and the toe of her riding boot was patting the leaves. "What is the matter? Are you sorry I am going to stay?"

It was high time for me to get under way. There were squalls on the horizon.

"Oh, no, no!" I exclaimed, hastily. "Of course not. I am delighted. But you need not trouble to help. Just let me attend to your horse and I will have lunch ready in a jiffy."

I led Don over to the little green belt of meadow between the trees and the sand of the beach, unbuckled the reins and made him fast to a stout birch. He bent his head and began to pull big mouthfuls of the rich grass. He, too, was evidently glad to accept my invitation.

When I returned to my camping ground I found the basket unpacked and the young lady arranging the eatables.

"You shouldn't have done that," I said. "I am the host here."

She did not look up. "Don't bother the table maid," she observed, briskly. "That fire is not kindled yet."

I lit the fire and, going over to the bushes, selected two of the fish, a bass and a pickerel. I carried them down to the shore of the pond and began cleaning them, using my jacknife and a flat stone. I was nearing the end of the operation when she came over to watch.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked. "You are not going to cook them−−now−−are you?"

"I am going to try," I replied.

"But how? You haven't anything to cook them in."

"I don't need it. You don't appreciate the conveniences of this hotel, Miss Colton. There! now we're ready."

I rose, washed my hands in the pond, and picked up two other flat stones, large ones, which I had previously put aside. These I carried to the fire and, raking aside the burning logs with a stick, laid the stones in a bed of hot coals.

"Those are our frying pans," I informed her. "When they are hot enough they will cook the fish. At least, I hope they will. Now for the coffee."

But she waved me aside. "The coffee is my affair," she said. "I insist upon making the coffee. Oh, you need not look at me like that. I am not altogether useless. I studied Domestic Science−−a little−−in my prep school course. As much as I studied anything else," laughingly.

"But−−"

"Mr. Paine, I am not on horseback now and you can't hold my bridle as you did Don's. If you will fill the coffee pot and put it on to boil. Thank you. I am glad to see that even you obey orders, sometimes."

I had cooked fish in out−of−door fashion often before, but I am quite sure I never took such pains as I did with these. They were not culinary triumphs, even at that, but my guest was kind enough to pronounce them delicious. The lunch basket contained two plates, but only one knife and fork. These I insisted upon her using and I got on very well with sharpened sticks and a spoon. The coffee was−−well, it had one qualification, strength.

We conversed but little during the meal. The young lady said she was too hungry to talk and I was so confounded with the strangeness of the whole affair that I was glad to be silent. Sitting opposite me, eating Dorinda's doughnuts and apple puffs and the fish that I−−_I_ had cooked, was "Big Jim" Colton's daughter, the automobile girl, the heiress, the "incarnation of snobbery," the young lady whose father I had bidden go to the

devil and to whom, in company with the rest of the family, I had many times mentally extended the same invitation. And now we were picnicing together as if we were friends of long standing. Why, Nellie Dean could not appear more unpretentious and unconscious of social differences than this girl to−day! What would her parents say if they saw us like this? What would Captain Jed, and the rest of those in rebellion against the Emperor of New York, say? That I was a traitor, hand and glove with the enemy. Well, I was not; and I did not intend to be. But for her to−−

She interrupted my meditations.

"Mr. Paine," she observed, suddenly, "you will excuse my mentioning it, but you are distinctly not entertaining. You have not spoken a word for five minutes. And you are not attending to my needs. The apple puffs are on your side of the−−table."

I hastened to pass the paper containing the puffs.

"I beg your pardon," I said, hurriedly. "I−−I was daydreaming, I guess."

"So I imagined. I forgive you; this lunch would tempt me to forgive greater sins than yours. Did that delightful old housekeeper of yours cook all these nice things?"

"She did. So you think Dorinda delightful, do you?"

"Yes. She is so sincere and good−hearted. And so odd and bright and funny. I could listen to her for hours."

"Humph! Well, if you were a member of her household you would have that privilege often. I doubt if her husband considers it such a privilege."

"Her husband? Oh, yes! I met him. He is a character, too, isn't he?"

"Yes; a weak one."

She put down her coffee cup and sighed, contentedly.

"I think I never tasted anything so good as this lunch," she observed. "And I'm quite sure I never ate so much at one sitting. I am going to help you clear away, but please don't ask me to do it just now. Have you finished? You may smoke, if you like."

I had been longing for a smoke and now I filled my pipe and lighted it.

"Now we can talk, can't we?" she said. "I want you to tell me about your mother. How is she?"

"Just as she was when you saw her," I answered. "Mother is always the same."

"She is a dear. I had heard so many nice things about her and I was not disappointed. I intended to make only a short call and I stayed and stayed. I hope I did not tire her."

"Not at all. Mother enjoyed your call exceedingly."

"Did she? I am so glad. I really am. I went to your house with a good deal of misgiving, Mr. Paine. I feared that my coming might be considered an intrusion."

"I told you that it would not."

"I know. But, under the circumstances−−Father's disagreement with−− considering all the−−the−− Oh, what shall I call it?"

"The late unpleasantness," I suggested.

Again came the twinkle in her eye. She nodded.

"Thank you," she said. "That is a quotation, but it was clever of you to think of it. Yes, considering the late unpleasantness, I was afraid my visit might be misunderstood. I was fearful that your mother or−−someone−−might think I came there with an ulterior motive, something connected with that troublesome Lane dispute. Of course no one did think such a thing?"

She asked the question quickly and with intense seriousness. I remembered Lute's hint and my own secret suspicions, but I answered promptly.

"Of course not," I said.

"You did not think that, did you?"

"No," unblushingly.

"I came because from what I had heard of your mother I was sure she must be a wonderful woman. I wanted to meet her. And she IS wonderful; and so patient and sweet and good. I fell in love with her. Everyone must love her. You should be proud of your mother, Mr. Paine."

"I am," I answered, simply.

"You have reason. And she is very proud of you."

"Without the reason, I'm afraid."

She did not speak. Her silence hurt. I felt that I knew what she was thinking and I determined to make her say it.

"Without the reason," I repeated.

"I did not say that."

"But you thought it."

My stubborn persistence was a mistake. Again, as at our meeting in the grove, I had gone too far. Her answer was as completely indifferent as speech and tone could be.

"Indeed?" she said, coldly. "It is barely possible that I did not think about it at all. . . . Now, Mr. Paine, if you are ready shall we clear away?"

The clearing, most of it, was done silently. I washed the plates, the coffee pot and other things, in the pond and she packed them in the basket. As I returned with the knife and forks I found her looking at the coffee pot and smiling.

"What is the matter?" I asked, sulkily. I was provoked with myself for forgetting who and what I was, and with her for making me forget. "Isn't it clean?"

"Why, yes," she answered, "surprisingly so. Did they teach Domestic Science at your college, too?"

I started. "MY college!" I repeated. "How did you know I had been at college? Did Mother tell you?"

She laughed gleefully.

"Did Mother tell you?" I demanded. "If she did−−"

"Well, what if she did? However, she did not. But you have told me now. Harvard, was it? or Yale?"

I tossed the knife and fork into the basket and turned away.

"Princeton, perhaps," suggested Miss Colton.

I walked over and began to unjoint my rod. I was a fool to be trapped like this. No one in Denboro except Mother and George Taylor knew of my brief college career, and now I had, practically, told this girl of it. She might−−if she were sufficiently interested to remember, which was fortunately not probable−−tell her father and he might ask other questions concerning my history. Where would those questions lead?

I was angrily tugging at the rod when I heard her step behind me. I did not turn.

"I beg your pardon," she said.

I pretended not to hear.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Paine," she said again.

"It's all right," I muttered. "No apologies are necessary."

I said it like a sullen schoolboy. There was another moment of silence. Then I heard her move away. I looked over my shoulder. She was walking toward the meadow where Don, the horse, was picketed. There was offended dignity in every line of her figure.

For a moment I fought with my pride and injured self−respect. Then I hurried after her.

"Miss Colton," I said.

"Well?" she neither turned nor stopped.

"Miss Colton, I should not have answered like that. I was rude."

She stopped. "You were," she said.

"I know it. I am sorry. I apologize."

"No apologies are necessary."

Here was tit for tat. I did not know what more to say, so I said nothing.

"Do I understand that you ask my pardon?" she inquired, still without turning.

"I do. If you will permit me, I will explain. I−−"

She whirled about and faced me. To my astonishment she was smiling once more.

"Of course you won't explain," she declared. "I had no right to ask you about your college. But I couldn't help guessing. I told you that I liked puzzles. We'll say no more about it. I have enjoyed this picnic and I won't have it spoiled. Now why are you taking your rod apart?"

"Because I know you want to go home and I am going with you to show you the way."

"But I don't have to go yet, do I? It is not late. And I thought perhaps you would let me see you catch another bass. Won't you? Please."

Once more she had me at a disadvantage. I had no desire for more fishing, and I was fearful of further questions, but what could I do? And it was not late−−but a little past two o'clock.

So I rigged the rod again and led the way down the shore to the spot where the sedge extended out into the pond, with the lily pads beyond it. She walked beside me. Then she seated herself on a fallen tree and I baited the hook with a lively minnow and cast. For some time I got not even a nibble. As I waited she and I talked. But now it was I who questioned.

"Do you like Denboro?" I asked.

"I am beginning to like it very much. At first I thought it very dull, but now I am getting acquainted."

"There are few cottagers and summer people here. But in Harniss there is a large colony. Very nice people, I believe."

"Yes, I have met some of them. But it was not the summer people I meant. I am beginning to know the townspeople and to like some of them. I met that delightful old Captain Warren the other day."

"He is as good as they make."

"Indeed he is. And I had an interview with another captain, Miss Dean's father, yesterday. We had an interesting encounter."

"So I should imagine. Captain Jed! Whew! It MUST have been interesting."

"It was. Oh, we were very fierce at first−−at least he was, and I fought for my side as hard as I could. He said Father was a selfish pig for wanting to close the Lane, and I said it was because of its use by the pigs that he wished to close it."

"Ha! ha! How did it end?"

"Oh, we agreed to disagree. I respect Captain Dean for his fight; but Father will win, of course. He always does."

"He won't win this time, Miss Colton."

"Why not? Oh, I actually forgot I was talking to the head and front of the opposition. So you think he will not win, Mr. Paine?"

"I am sure of it. He cannot close that Lane until I sell it, and I shall not sell."

She regarded me thoughtfully, her chin upon her hand.

"It would be odd if he should not, after all," she said. "He prides himself on having his own way. It would be strange if he should be beaten down here, after winning so often in New York. Your mother told me something of your feeling in the matter, Mr. Paine. Father has offered you a good price for the land, hasn't he?"

"He has offered me a dozen times what it is worth."

"Yes. He does not count money when he has set his heart upon anything. And you refused?"

"Yes."

"But Nellie Dean says the town also wished to buy and you refused its offer, too."

"Yes."

"You don't seem to care for money, either, Mr. Paine. Are all Cape Cod people so unmercenary? Or is it that you all have money enough−−. . . Pardon me. That was impolite. I spoke without thinking."

"Oh, never mind. I am not sensitive−−on that point, at least."

"But I do mind. And I am sorry I said it. And I should like to understand. I see why the townspeople do not want the Lane closed. But you have not lived here always. Only a few years, so Miss Dean says. She said, too, that that Mr. Taylor, the cashier, was almost the only intimate friend you have made since you came. Others would like to be friendly, but you will not permit them to be. And, yet for these people, mere acquaintances, you are sacrificing what Father would call a profitable deal."

"Not altogether for them. I can't explain my feeling exactly. I know only that to sell them out and make money−−and heaven knows I need money−−at their expense seems to me dead wrong."

"Then why don't you sell to THEM?"

"I don't know. Unless it was because to refuse your father's offer and accept a lower one seemed a mean trick, too. And I won't be bullied into selling to anyone. I guess that is it, as much as anything."

"My! how stubborn you must be."

"I don't know why I have preached this sermon to you, Miss Colton. your sympathies in the fight are with your father, naturally."

"Oh, no, they are not."

I almost dropped the rod.

"Not−−with−−" I repeated.

"Not altogether. They are with you, just at present. If you had sold−−if you had given in to Father, feeling as you do, I should not have any sympathy with you at all. As it is−−"

"As it is?" I asked eagerly−−too eagerly. I should have done better to pretend indifference.

"As it is," she answered, lightly, "I respect you as I would any sincere fighter for a losing cause. And I shall probably feel some sympathy for you after the cause is lost. Excuse my breaking in on your sermon, provided it is not finished, but−−I think you have a bite, Mr. Paine."

I had, very much of a bite. The minnow on my hook had been forgotten and allowed to sink to the bottom, and a big pout had swallowed it, along with the hook and a section of line. I dragged the creature out of the water and performed a surgical operation, resulting in the recovery of my tackle.

"There!" I exclaimed, in disgust. "I think I have had enough fishing for one day. Suppose we call it off. Unless you would like to try, Miss Colton."

I made the offer by way of a joke. She accepted it instantly.

"May I?" she cried, eagerly. "I have been dying to ever since I came.

"But−−but you will get wet."

"No matter. This is an old suit."

It did not look old to my countrified eyes, but I protested no more. There was a rock a little below where we then were, one of the typical glacial boulders of the Cape−−lying just at the edge of the water and projecting out into it. I helped her up on to this rock and baited her hook with shrimp.

"Shall I cast for you?" I asked.

"No indeed. I can do it, thank you."

She did, and did it well. Moreover, the line had scarcely straightened out in the water when it was savagely jerked, the pole bent into a half−circle, and out of the foaming eddy beneath its tip leaped the biggest bass I had seen that day, or in that pond on any day.

"By George!" I exclaimed. "Can you handle him? Shall I−−"

She did not look at me, but I received my orders, nevertheless.

"Please don't! Keep away!" she said sharply.

For nearly fifteen minutes she fought that fish, in and out among the pads, keeping the line tight, handling him at least as well as I could have done. I ran for the landing net and, as she brought her captive up beside the rock, reached forward to use it. But she stopped me.

"No," she said, breathlessly, "I want to do this all myself."

It took her several more minutes to do it, and she was pretty well splashed, when at last, with the heavy net dragging from one hand and the rod in the other, she sprang down from the rock. Together we bent over the fish.

"A four−pounder, if he is an ounce," said I. "I congratulate you, Miss Colton."

"Poor thing," she mused. "I am almost sorry he did not get away. He IS a beauty, isn't he! Now I am ready to go home."

That journey home was a strange experience to me. She rode Don and bore the lunch basket and the net before her on the saddle. I walked alongside, carrying the rod, boots, and the fish in the otherwise empty bait pail. The sunshine, streaming through the leaves of the arching boughs overhead, dappled the narrow, overgrown paths with shifting blotches of light and shadow. Around us was the deep, living green of the woods, the songs of birds, the chatter of red squirrels, and the scent of wild honeysuckle. And as we moved onward we talked−−that is, she did most of the talking and I listened. Yet I must have talked more than I knew, because I remember expressing opinions concerning books and operas and pictures, subjects I had not discussed for years except occasionally with Mother, and then only because she was still interested in them. I seemed, somehow, to have become a different, a younger man, under the influence of these few hours with the girl I had professed to hate so cordially. Our companionship−−perfectly meaningless as it was, the mere caprice of an idle day on her part−−had rejuvenated me. During that homeward walk I forgot myself entirely, forgot that I was Ros Paine, the country loafer; forgot, too, that she was the only child of the city millionaire, that we had, or could have, nothing in common. She, also, seemed to forget, and we chatted together as unconsciously and easily as if we had known

each other all our lives.

Yet it may be that her part in the conversation was not altogether without a purpose. She led me to speak of Denboro and its people, of how they lived, and of the old days of sailing ships and deep sea skippers. George Taylor's name was mentioned and I praised him highly, telling of his rise from poor boy to successful man, as we rated success locally.

"He manages that bank well," I declared. "Everyone says so. And, from what I have seen of his management, I know it to be true."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because I have had some experience in banking myself. I−−"

I stopped short. My tongue was running away with me. She did not ask the question which I dreaded and expected. Instead she said, looking down at me:

"You are a loyal friend, aren't you, Mr. Paine."

"I have reason to be loyal to George," I answered, with feeling.

"Are you as loyal to yourself?"

I looked up at her in surprise.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I have been trying to understand you, Mr. Paine. Trying to get the answer to the puzzle. In one way I think I have it. I understand your attitude in the Lane affair and I think I know why you came to Denboro and are staying here."

I stopped short. "You−−you know THAT?" I cried.

"I think I do. You believe that your mother needs you and you will not leave her. That is your reason for living here, I think. But, in another way, I cannot understand you at all."

She spoke to the horse and we moved on again. I waited for her to continue, but she was silent.

"How? What is the other way! The way in which you cannot understand me?" I asked.

"Shall I tell you? Do you wish me to be perfectly frank?"

"Yes."

"I cannot understand how a man such as you seem to be, young, educated, and with life before him, can be content to do as you do, spend your time in fishing, or sailing, or shooting. To have no ambition at all. My father was a poor country boy, like your friend, Mr. Taylor, but he worked night and day until he became what he is now. And even now he works, and works hard. Oh, I am proud of him! Not because he is what he is, but because he has done it all himself. If I were a man I would have some purpose in life; I would do SOMETHING worth while if it were only to sell fish from a cart, like that old fellow with the queer name−−what is it?−− Oh, yes! Theophilus Newcomb."

I did not answer. She had said all that was necessary, and more. It was quite enough for me.

"There!" she observed, after a moment. "You asked me to tell you and I did. If you never speak to me again it will be exactly what I deserve. But I thought it and so I said it. Expressing my thoughts is one of my bad habits. . . . Oh, why, we are almost home, aren't we!"

We had come to the edge of the grove bordering Beriah Holt's pasture. The grove was on the west side of a little hill. Before us the pasture sloped away to Beriah's house and barn, with the road beyond it. And beyond that, in the distance, were the steeples and roofs of Denboro. Among them the gables and tower of the Colton mansion rose, conspicuous and costly.

She turned in the saddle. "I presume I may leave you now, Mr. Paine," she said. "Even you must admit that the rest of the way is plain sailing. Thank you for your hospitality and for your services as guide. I will send the basket and net over by one of the servants."

"I will take them now," I said, shortly.

"Very well, if you prefer. Here they are."

I took them from her.

"Good afternoon," she said. "And thanks once more for a very pleasant picnic."

"You are quite welcome, I'm sure. Thank you for your frank opinion of my−−worthlessness. It was kind of you to express it."

The sarcasm was not lost upon her.

"I meant it as a kindness," she replied.

"Yes. And it was true enough, probably. Doubtless I shall derive great benefit from your−−words of wisdom."

Her patience, evidently, was exhausted. She turned away. "Oh, that," she said, indifferently, "is your affair. I told you what I believed to be the truth, that was all. What you do is not likely to be of vast importance to me, one way or the other. Come, Don!"

Don cantered down the slope. I watched him and his rider disappear beyond the trees in the distance. Then I picked up my pail and other burdens and followed in their wake. The sun was behind a cloud. It had been a strange day with a miserable ending. I was furiously angry with her, but I was more angry with myself. For what she had told me WAS the truth, and I knew it.

I strode on, head down, through the village. People spoke to me, asking what luck I had had and where I had been, but I scarcely noticed them. As I reached the Corners and was passing the bank someone called my name. I glanced up and saw George Taylor descending the steps.

"Hold on, Ros," he hailed. "Wait a minute. What's your rush? Hold on!"

I halted reluctantly.

"Fishing again, I see," he observed, as he reached my side. "Any luck?"

"Fair," I told him.

"What pond?"

"Seabury's."

"Go alone?"

"Yes." That I had not been alone since was no business of his.

"Humph! You ain't exactly what a fellow'd call talkative this afternoon, seems to me. Anything wrong?"

"No."

"Tuckered out?"

"I guess so."

"Well, so am I, but I ain't had your fun getting that way. Small and I have been at it night and day getting things in shape so he could leave. He's gone. Went this noon. And that ain't the worst of it; I haven't got anybody yet to take his place. I'll have to be cashier and bookkeeper too for a spell. There's applicants enough; but they don't suit. Guess likely you'll have to help me out, after all, Ros. The job is yours if you say the word."

He laughed as he said it. Even to him the idea of my working was a joke.

But the joke did not seem funny to me, just then. I walked on for some distance without a word. Then I asked a question.

"What is expected of a man in that position?" I asked.

"Expected? Why, plain bank bookkeeping−−not much else at first. Yet there's a good chance for a likely fellow to be considerable more, in time. I need help in my part of the work. That's why I haven't hired any of the dozen or so who are after the place. What makes you ask? You don't know of a good man for me, do you, Ros?"

"When do you want him to begin?"

"To−morrow morning, if he satisfies me."

"Would I satisfy you?"

"You! Humph! Try me and see, that's all I'd ask."

"All right. I'll be on hand in the morning."

He stopped, looked at me, and then seized me by the arm.

"See here!" he cried, "I'm lost in the fog, I guess likely. What do you mean by that? Is it time to laugh−−or what?"

"It may be; I don't know. But I take the bookkeeper's position in your bank. Now, good−by. Don't talk to me. I don't feel like talking."

"But−−but, Ros."

"Good−by."

I walked on. I had taken but a few steps when he overtook me.

"Ros," he said, "I ain't going to say but just one thing. If you meant what you said I'm the most tickled man on the Cape. But you ain't asked a word about the salary."

"I know it. I haven't asked because I don't care. I'll be on hand in the morning."

I left him standing there, and hurried down the Lower Road. As I had said to him, I did not feel like talking. I did not want even to see any one. I wanted to be let alone. But it was fated that I should not be, not yet. Sim Eldredge was waiting for me around the corner. He stepped out from behind the fence where he had been hidden.

"Ros!" he whispered. "Ros Paine! Wait. It's me, Sim. I want to ask you somethin'. Wan't that George Taylor you was speakin' to just now?"

"Yes," I answered, impatiently. "What of it?"

"Say, Ros, you and me ain't pulled that Colton trade off, but it ain't my fault. You ain't got no hard feelin's against me, I know. And I want you to do a little mite of favor for me. Will you?"

"What is it? If it has anything to do with the Lane, I tell you now that−−"

"It ain't−−it ain't. It's about that bookkeepin' job in the bank, Henry Small's place, the one he's just quit. I've got a third cousin, name of Josiah Badger, over to South Harniss. He's a smart young chap, and an A−1 accountant at figgers. He's been keepin' books down at the fish wharf−−see? Now, he'd like that job and, bein' as you and George are so thick, I cal'lated maybe you'd sort of use your influence along of George, and−−and get it for him. There ain't nothin' in it for me−−that is, nothin' much. But I feel friendly toward Josiah and you know I like to do little kindnesses for folks. So−−"

"There! there!" I interrupted. "It's no use, Sim. I can't help you."

"Why! yes you can."

"No, I can't. I don't know your cousin, and besides−−well, you are too late. The place is filled."

Sim's expression changed. He looked surprised and crestfallen.

"Filled?" he exclaimed. "Why, no, 'tain't! If 'twas I'd have known it, wouldn't I? Who'd you hear had got it? Whoever you heard, 'tain't so."

"Yes, it is."

"How do you know? Who is it, then?"

I hesitated. Before noon of the next day every soul in Denboro would have heard the news. Eldredge might as well hear it now.

"I've taken the place myself," I said.

"You?" Sim actually forgot to whisper; he shouted the word. "YOU! Ha! ha! ha! Ros, quit your foolin'."

"I'm not fooling. I go to work in the bank to−morrow morning."

"But−− Oh, my soul! You! Aw, I know better! Say, Ros, don't let's waste time like this. Fun's all right, but . . . My heavens to Betsy! YOU work for a livin'! If I believed that I'd believe anything. Tell me, now. Who has got that job? . . . Why don't you answer me?"

I answered him. "Shut up!" I said, fiercely. Then I vaulted the fence and set out for home across lots.

I heard the next day that Sim went back to the post−office and informed the gathering there that Ros Paine had taken to drinking.

"He was tight as a biled owl," declared Sim; "and ugly−−don't talk! Wanted to fight me because I wouldn't believe he was goin' to work. Him! What in the everlastin' would HE want to work for? My heavens to Betsy!"

CHAPTER XIII

I think Taylor was almost as surprised as Eldredge had been, when, at half−past eight the following morning, I appeared at the bank. He was already at his desk and, when he looked up and saw me, he whistled.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "So. I didn't dream it, after all. You're here, ain't you."

"I am here," I answered, opening the gate and stepping in behind the rail.

"Going to take it back and say you never said it?"

"No."

"Come to go to work? Really?"

"That is my intention, unless you have changed your mind."

"Not me. It ain't likely. But, Ros, I−−sit down a minute and let's talk. What are you doing this for?"

It was a question I had been asking myself at intervals during a restless night. Now I gave the only truthful answer.

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know!"

"No. And I don't seem to care. Suppose we don't talk about it. I am here, and I am ready to begin work. That's enough, isn't it?"

"Why, no; not quite. You're not doing it just to help me out?"

"No."

"You don't need to work. You've got money enough."

"No, I haven't. But money isn't my reason. I haven't any reason. Now show me the books, will you?"

"Don't be in a hurry. What does your mother think about it?"

"I haven't told her yet. Time enough for that when I know that I really mean it and you know that I am competent to fill the position. George, if you keep on cross−examining me I am likely to quit before I begin. I don't know why I am doing this, but just now I think I am going to do it if I can. However, I am not sure. So you had better be careful."

"Humph! What did you catch up at that pond yesterday? I never saw a day's fishing make such a difference in a man in my life. . . . All right, Ros. All right. I won't pester you. Too glad to have you here for that. Now about the salary."

"Before we speak of that there is one more point. How about your directors? Dean and the rest? Do they know you offered me the position?"

"Sure thing! They put the whole affair in my hands. They'll be satisfied. And as for Cap'n Jed−−why, he was the one that suggested hiring you in the first place."

"Captain Jed! Captain Jed Dean! HE suggested it?"

"Yup. In a way, he did. You may not know it, Ros, but you've made a good deal of a hit with the old man. He ain't been used to having anybody stand up to him as you have. As a general thing Denboro jumps when he snaps the whip. You didn't, and he couldn't understand why. He is the kind that respects anything they can't understand. Then, too, Nellie likes you, and she's his idol, you know. Ah hum!"

He sighed and, for a moment, seemed to forget me altogether. I reminded him by another question.

"But why should the captain think of me for this place?" I asked. "Why should he dream that I would take it? I gave you no encouragement."

"I don't know as he did dream it. But he and I were speaking of you and he said he'd like to do something to show you what the town thought of your holding out against Colton. That tickled him down to the keel. I said you'd be a first−class helper to me in this bank, that I heard you knew something about banking−−"

"George!"

"It's all right. I only mentioned that I heard rumors that you were in a city bank somewhere at one time. He didn't ask any more and I shouldn't have told him if he had. But the idea pleased him, I could see that. 'Why don't you try to get him?' says he. 'Maybe the days of miracles ain't past. Perhaps even he'd condescend to work, if the right job came his way.'"

"So that's what you call his suggesting me, do you? Humph!"

"Well, I told him about it last night, when I was up to see Nellie, and he was pleased as Punch. Surprised, of course, but pleased. He's practically the whole board, as far as settling things is concerned, so it is all right. He ain't the worst friend you've got, by a long shot."

I imagined that I understood what Captain Jed's "friendship" meant. My accepting the bank position was one more bond binding me to his side in the Shore Lane battle. And, so long as I was under Taylor's eye and his own, I could not be subject to the Colton influence.

George and I discussed the question of salary, if his offer and my prompt acceptance might be called a discussion. The pay was not large to begin with, but it was more than I had a right to expect. And I was perfectly honest when I said that money was not the consideration which led me to make the sudden change in my habit of life. I was sick of idleness; I had longed for something to occupy my life and time; I might as well be doing this as anything; Taylor's offer had appealed to me when he first made it; these were the excuses I evolved for my own satisfaction and I tried to believe them real. But one reason I would not admit, even in my thoughts, as a possibility. It was not that girl, or anything she had said, which influenced me. No! over and over again−−no.

Sam Wheeler, the young fellow who acted as assistant bookkeeper and messenger, came in, and Taylor, after showing me the books and giving me a few hints as to what my duties would be, turned me over to him for further instruction. I found I needed but little. The pages, with their rows of figures, seemed like old friends. I almost enjoyed poring over them. Was it possible that I was going to like this new venture of mine?

Before noon I was fairly certain of it. The work in a country bank is different from that in the large city institutions, in that it is by no means as specialized. I found that, later on, I should be expected to combine the work of teller with that of bookkeeper. And this, too, seemed natural. I worked as steadily as I could, considering interruptions, and the forenoon was over almost before I knew it.

The interruptions, however, were numerous and annoying; some of them, too, were amusing. Depositors came, saw me behind the bars of the window, and, after expressing their astonishment, demanded to know what I was doing there. If I had answered all the questions put to me by the curious Denboroites I should have found time for little else. But Taylor helped me by shooing the curious ones away. "Don't bother the new hand," he said. "If you want to know particulars ask me. Anything I don't tell you you can read in next week's Item. This is a bank, not a question box."

Captain Elisha Warren came in and was as surprised as the rest. After an interview with the cashier he returned to my window and requested me to open up. When I did so he reached in a big hand and seized mine.

"Shake, Ros," he said, heartily. "I'm glad for the bank and I'm gladder still for you. Come hard at fust, does it?"

"A little," I confessed. "Not as hard as I expected, though."

"Fust day or two out of port is always the toughest. You'll get your sea legs on pretty soon. Then you'll be glad you shipped, I cal'late."

"I hope so," I answered, rather dubiously.

"I know you will. There's nothin' so tiresome as doin' nothin'. I know, because that's been my job for quite a spell. Seems sometimes as if I'd have a fit, I get so sick of loafin'."

His idea of a "loaf" was rising at six and weeding his garden, superintending the labor on his cranberry swamps or about his barns and grounds, attending bank and Selectmen's meetings, and generally keeping busy until sunset.

"I tell Abbie, my housekeeper," he continued, "that if 'twan't for my age I believe I'd go to sea again just to keep from fallin' apart with dry rot. I asked her if she'd noticed how my timbers creaked, and she said I didn't keep still long enough for her to notice anything. Ho! ho! Nothin' makes her more provoked than for me to mention gettin' old or goin' to sea. All the same, I envy you your youth, Ros. You've got your life afore you, and I'm glad to see that you're goin' to make somethin' of it. I always said you'd wake up if somebody give you a punch. Who punched you, Ros?"

My reply was non−committal.

"Better mind my own business, hadn't I," he observed. "All right, I will. No offense meant, you understand. But, you see, I've never believed that work was the cuss of mankind, like some folks, and no matter how much money a young feller's got I think he's better off doin' somethin'. That's the gospel accordin' to Elisha. Well, good

luck and a pleasant v'yage. See you again soon. Say," turning back, "keep an eye on George, will you? Folks in love are l'ble to be absent−minded, they tell me, and I should not want him to be absent with any of my money. Hear that, do you, George?"

Taylor, who was standing near, laughed and walked away. A moment later I saw him looking out of the window with the same strange expression on his face which I had noticed several times before when his approaching marriage was hinted at. Something was troubling him, that was plain. He loved Nellie devotedly, I knew; yet he obviously did not like to hear the marriage mentioned.

Sim Eldredge was one of the first visitors to the bank, but his visit was a short one. He entered the door, walked straight to the teller's window and peered through the bars. I heard him catch his breath.

"Good morning, Sim," said I. "What can I do for you?"

"Do?" he repeated. "Do for me? Nothin'−−nothin', 'special. You−− you meant it, then?"

"I told you I did."

"My soul!" was all the answer he made. Then he turned and walked out.

At about eleven o'clock I was half−way through the addition of a column of figures when I heard some one say, "Well, by time!" with such anguished fervor that it was almost like a prayer for help. I looked up. Lute Rogers was staring in at me, open−mouthed and horror−stricken.

"Hello, Lute!" I said.

Lute swallowed hard.

"They told me 'twas so," he stammered. "They said so and−−and I laughed at 'em. Ros, you ain't, be you?"

"What?"

"Goin' to stay in there and−−and take Henry's job?"

"Yes."

"You be! And you never said nothin' to nobody? To Dorinda? Or even Comfort?"

"No; not yet."

"Nor to me. To ME, by time! You let them fellers at the store make a fool of me−−"

"No one could do that, Lute. I have told you so often."

"And you let them know it afore I did. And me livin' right in the house with you! By time! I−−I−−"

"There, there, Lute! don't cry. I'll tell you all about it when I come home for dinner."

"Yes, I should think you might do that much. Treatin' your own family like−−why did you tell Sim Eldredge?"

"Sim asked me and so I told him, that was all. Don't stand there fidgeting. Run along home, there's a good fellow. Mr. Taylor has his eye on you already."

Lute glanced apprehensively toward the cashier's desk and turned to go.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "I've said you was crazy more'n once, that's some satisfaction. Say! can I tell 'em to home?"

I hesitated. "You may tell Dorinda if you like," I answered. "But I prefer to tell Mother, myself."

George rose from his desk just then and Lute hurried to the door. I smiled. I imagined his arrival in our kitchen and how he would explode the sensational news upon his unsuspecting wife.

But I was not altogether calm, though I did my best to appear so, when I entered that kitchen at a quarter past twelve. Lute was seated in a chair by the window, evidently watching and waiting. He sprang up as I entered.

"Set down," ordered Dorinda, who was taking a clam pie from the oven. She merely nodded when I came in. Dorinda often spoke in meeting against "sinful pride"; yet she had her share of pride, sinful or not. She would not ask questions or deign to appear excited, not she.

"But Dorinda," cried her husband, "it's Ros. Don't you see?"

"You set down, Lute Rogers. Well," turning to me, "dinner's ready, if you are."

"I shall be in a few minutes," I answered. "I want to see Mother first."

Breaking the news to Mother was a duty which I dreaded. But it turned out to be not dreadful at all. Mother was surprised, of course, but she did not offer a single objection. Her principal feeling seemed to be curiosity as to my reasons for the sudden change.

"Of course, Roscoe, if you are happier I shall be, too," she said. "I know it must have been very dull for you here. My conscience has troubled me not a little all these years. I realize that a man, a young man like you, needs an interest in life; he wants something more than the care and companionship of a useless creature like me."

"Mother, how often have I told you not to speak like that."

"But he does. Many times, when you and I have been here together, I have been on the point of urging you to leave me and go back to the world and take your place in it. More than once, you remember, dear, I have hinted at such a thing, but you have always chosen not to understand the hints, and I have been so weak and selfish that I have not pressed them. I am glad you have done this, if it seems right to you. But does it? Are you sure?"

"I think so, Mother. I confess I am not sure."

"This country bank is a pretty small place, isn't it? Not big enough for my boy to prove his worth in."

"It is quite big enough for that. That doesn't require a Rothschild's establishment."

"But your decision must have been a very sudden one. You did not mention that you thought of such a thing. Not even to me."

"It was sudden," I answered. "I took the position on the spur of the moment."

"But why? What led you to do it?"

"I don't know, Mother."

"What influenced you? Has any one urged you?"

"George Taylor offered me the place some time ago. He urged me."

"No one else?"

I avoided the issue. "You don't mind, then, Mother," I said. "You are willing that I should try the experiment?"

"I am glad, if it pleases you. And you must let me say this now, Roscoe, because it is true and I mean it. If another and better opportunity comes to you, one that might take you away from Denboro−−and from me−−for a time, of course, I want you to promise me that you will not refuse it on my account. Will you promise?"

"No. Of course I shan't promise any such thing. Is it likely that I would leave you, Mother?"

"I know that you would not leave me unless I were willing for you to go. I know that, Roscoe. But I am much better and stronger than I was. I shall never be well−−"

"Don't say that," I interrupted, hastily.

"But I must say it, because it is true. I shall never be well, but I am strong enough now to bear the thought of your leaving me and when the time comes I shall insist upon your doing so. I am glad we have had this talk, dear. I am glad, too, that you are going to be busy once more in the way you like and ought to be. You must tell me about your work every day. Now go, because your dinner is ready and, of course, you must be getting back to the bank. Kiss me, Boy."

And as I bent over her she put her arms about my neck.

"Boy," she whispered, "I know there is some reason for your doing this, a reason which you have not told me. You will tell me some day, won't you?"

I straightened hurriedly and tried to laugh. "Of course I'll tell you, Mother," I replied. "If there is anything to tell."

The clam pie was on the table in the dining−room and Dorinda was seated majestically before it. Lute was fidgeting in his chair.

"Here he is," he exclaimed, as I joined the pair at the table. "Ros, how did you ever come to do it?"

His wife squelched him, as usual. "If Roscoe's got anything to tell," she observed, with dignity, "he'll tell it without your help or anybody else's. If he ain't, he won't. This pie's colder than it ought to be, but that isn't my fault."

As I ate I told them of my sudden determination to become a laboring man. I gave the reasons that I had given Mother.

"Um−hm," said Dorinda.

"But I can't understand," pleaded Lute. "You don't need to work, and I've sort of took a pride in your not doin' it. If I was well− off, same as you be, I bet George Taylor'd have to whistle afore I wore out MY brains in his old bank."

"He wouldn't have time to whistle more'n once," was Dorinda's comment.

"Now, Dorinda, what kind of talk is that? Wouldn't have time to whistle? You do say more things without any sense to 'em! Just talk to hear yourself, I cal'late. What are you grinnin' at, Roscoe?"

"I can't imagine, Lute. This clam pie is a triumph. May I have another helping, Dorinda?"

Dorinda did not answer, but the second helping was a liberal one. She was so quiet and the glances she gave

me from time to time were so odd that I began to feel uneasy. I was fairly sure that she approved of my new venture, but why did she look at me like that?

"Well," said I, looking at my watch and rising, "what do you think of it? Am I doing right?"

Lute leaned back in his chair. "There's consider'ble to be said on that subject," he announced. "Work, as a general thing, I consider all right; I've told you that afore. But when it comes to−−"

"What do you think, Dorinda?" I interrupted.

Dorinda stirred her tea.

"Think?" she repeated. "I think . . . When's that Colton girl comin' to call on Comfort again?"

I had taken my hat from the hook. Now, with it in my hand, I turned and faced her.

"How should I know that?" I demanded. "That's a trifle off the subject, isn't it?"

"Um−hm," said Dorinda. "Maybe 'tis."

I went out hurriedly.

Within the week I was at home in my new position. The strangeness of regular hours and regular employment wore away with surprising rapidity. There were, of course, mornings when sea and sky and the freshness of outdoors tempted me and I wondered whether or not I had been foolish to give up my fine and easy life. But these periods of temptation were shorter and less frequent as I became more and more familiar with my duties and with the routine of the bank. I found myself taking a greater interest in the institution and, to my astonishment, I was actually sorry when Saturday came. It seemed odd enough to once more have money in my pocket which I had earned. It was not a great amount, of course, but I felt it to be mine. Yes, there was no doubt about it, I had done the right thing, and was glad. I was grateful to Taylor for having given me the opportunity. Perhaps I should have been grateful to the person whose brutal and impertinent frankness had piqued me into grasping that opportunity, but I was not.

She made her second call upon Mother two days after our impromptu picnic at Seabury's Pond. I heard all about it when I came home that afternoon. It appeared that she had brought more flowers and a fresh supply of books. She had remained even longer than on her first visit and she and Mother had talked about almost everything under the sun. One topic, however, had not been discussed, a fact which my guarded questions made certain. She, like myself, had said nothing concerning the day in the woods.

"I told her of your consenting to help Mr. Taylor in his dilemma," said Mother.

"Did you?" said I. "It was kind of you to put it in that way."

"That was the truthful way of putting it, wasn't it? She seemed very much interested."

"Indeed. And surprised, I presume."

"Why, yes, I think so. She seemed surprised at first; then she laughed; I could not understand why. She has a very pleasant laugh, hasn't she?"

"I have never noticed." This was untrue.

"She has. She is a charming girl. I am sorry you were not here when she called. I told her you would be home soon and asked her to wait, but she would not."

"I am glad she didn't."

"Roscoe!"

"I am, Mother. That young lady comes here to see you merely because she has nothing else to do just now. I shouldn't accept too many favors from her."

Mother said I was unreasonable and prejudiced and I did not argue the point. Lute and Dorinda discussed the caller at the supper table until I was constrained to leave the room. Mabel Colton might amuse herself with Mother and the two members of our household whom she had described as "characters," she might delude them into believing her thoughtful and sympathetic and without false pride, but I knew better. She had insulted me. She had, in so many words, told me that I was lazy and worthless, just as she might have told her chauffeur or one of the servants. That it was true made no difference. Would she have spoken in that way to−−to Victor Carver, for instance? Hardly. She was just what I had thought her at first, a feminine edition of Victor, with more brains than he possessed.

Captain Jed Dean came into the bank the third day after my installation as bookkeeper and teller. I was alone in the director's room, going over some papers, and he entered and shook hands with me. The old fellow professed delight at my presence there.

"George tells me you're takin' hold fust−rate," he said. "That's good. I'm glad to hear it."

"Why?" I asked. There was a trace of his old pomposity in the speech−−or I imagined there was−−and I chose to resent it. These were the days when I was in the mood to resent almost anything.

"Why?" he repeated, in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you glad?" I said. "I can't see what difference it makes to you whether I succeed or not."

He regarded me with a puzzled expression, but, instead of taking offense, he laughed.

"You've got a chip on your shoulder, ain't you, Ros?" he observed. "Workin' you too hard at the start, are we?"

"No," I answered, curtly.

"Then what is the matter?"

"Why, nothing, unless it is that everyone I meet seems to take such a great interest in my being here. I believe all of Denboro talks of nothing else."

"Not much else, I shouldn't wonder. But that's to be expected, ain't it? Everybody's glad you're makin' good."

"Humph! They all seem to regard that as the eighth wonder of the world. The position doesn't require a marvel of intelligence; almost any one with a teaspoonful of brains could fill it."

"Why no, they couldn't. But that's nothin' to do with it. I see what's the matter with you, Ros. You think all hands are knocked on their beam ends because you've gone to work. Some of 'em are, that's a fact, and you can't blame 'em much, considerin' how long you've lived here without doin' anything. But all of 'em that amount to a three−cent piece are glad, and the rest don't count anyway. You've made a good many friends in this town lately, son."

I smiled bitterly. "Friends," I said.

"Why, yes, friends. And friends are worth havin', especially if you make 'em without beggin' for their friendship. I give in that you've surprised some of us. We didn't know that you had it in you. But your standin' up to old Colton was a fine thing, and we appreciated it."

"That is because you were against his grabbing the Lane."

"What of it? And 'twan't that altogether. I, for one, ain't complainin' because you stood up to me and wouldn't sell to the town. By the way, Tim Hallet's gang haven't bothered you lately, have they?"

"No. And I advise them not to."

He chuckled. "I heard you advised 'em to that effect," he said. "I ain't complainin' at that, either, even though I knew what they was up to and thought 'twas more or less of a joke. But I liked the way you fired 'em out of there, not carin' a tinker's darn who was behind 'em. So long as a man stands square in his boots and don't knuckle to anybody he won't lose anything with Jed Dean. That's me!"

"You ought to like Colton, then," I said. "He hasn't knuckled, much."

Captain Jed grinned. "Well," he said, slowly, "I don't object to that in him. He seems to be a fighter and that's all right. Maybe if I was one of his tribe in New York I should like him. But I ain't. And you ain't, Ros. We're both of us country folks, livin' here, and he's a city shark buttin' into the feedin' grounds. He wants to hog the whole place and you and I say he shan't. I'm thankful to him for one thing: his comin' here has waked you up, and it's goin' to make a man of you, or I miss my guess."

I did not answer.

"You mustn't get mad because I talk this way," he went on. "I'm old enough to be your dad, Ros Paine, and I know what I'm talkin' about. I never took much of a shine to you in the old days. You was too much of what the story books call a 'gentleman' to suit me. I've had to scratch all my life for what I've got, but I've got it. When a young, able feller like you was contented to loaf around as you did and take no interest in nothin', I, naturally, figgered he was no−account. I see now I was wrong. All you needed was somethin' to stir you up and set you goin'. KEEP goin', that's my advice to you. And so long as you do, and don't bend when the pressure gets hard, you'll be somebody afore you die. And the friends you've made'll stand back of you."

"How about the enemies I have made?"

"Enemies? I suppose likely you have made some enemies, but what of it? I've made enemies all my life. It ain't because I'm popular here in Denboro that I'm what I am. Now is it?"

The truthful answer would have been no. Captain Dean was not popular, but he was respected even by the many who disliked and disagreed with him. I hesitated, trying to think what to say.

"You know 'tain't that," he said. "Popularity I never had, though it's a pleasant enough thing and sometimes I

wish−− But there, this ain't experience meetin'. I'm glad you're here in this bank. You're smart, and George says you are worth more than Henry Small ever was, even so early. If you really are what it begins to look as if you are I'm glad for Denboro. Maybe there'll be somebody besides George fit to run this town after I'm gone."

I smiled. The last remark was so characteristic that it was funny. He was turning away, but he noticed the smile and turned back.

"That's a joke, hey?" he asked.

"Captain," I said, "you are not consistent. When you and I first talked about the Lane you said that you would not blame me if I closed it. If it was yours you wouldn't have Tom, Dick, and Harry driving fish carts through it."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes. And you said, on another occasion, that anyone would sell anything if they were offered money enough."

"Humph! Well, sometimes I say 'most anything but my prayers. Matildy says I forget them pretty often, but I tell her her Friday night speeches are long enough to make up. Maybe I meant what I said to you at those times, Ros. I shouldn't wonder if I did. But 'twas a lie just the same. There are things I wouldn't sell, of course. Nellie, my daughter's one of 'em. She's goin' to get a good husband in George here, but her happiness means more to me than money. She's one of the things I wouldn't sell. And my Selectman's job is another. I fought for that, not so much for the honor, or whatever you call it, but because−−well, because I wanted to show 'em that I could get it if I set out to. I don't presume likely you can understand that feelin'."

"I think I can," I answered. "Mr. Colton gave about the same reason for his determination to close the Lane. You and he seem to be a good deal alike, after all."

He looked at me from beneath his bushy brows. His mouth twisted in a grim smile.

"Say, son," he said, "if I hadn't been so free with my proclamations about bein' your friend you and me would have a settlement for that little bit of talk. The Emperor and me alike! Ugh!"

The next afternoon he came in again and asked me to step outside the railing. He had something to say to me, he declared.

We sat down together on the settee by the wall.

"Ros," he said, in a low tone, "have you had any new offer for your property? Not from Colton or the town, but from anybody else?"

"No," I answered. "What do you mean?"

"You ain't heard anything from a Boston firm claimin' to represent the Bay Shore Development Company, or some such?"

"No. What sort of a company is that?"

"I don't know; that is, I don't know much about it. But there's talk driftin' 'round that a Boston syndicate is cal'latin' to buy up all the shore front land from South Ostable to the Bayport line and open it up for summer house lots. The name is the Bay Shore Development Company, or somethin' like that. You ain't heard from 'em, then?"

"Not a word. Where did your information come from?"

"From nobody in particular. It just seems to be in the air. Alvin Baker heard it over to Ostable. The feller that told him got it from somebody else, who got it from another somebody, and so on. There's talk about good prices bein' offered and, accordin' to Alvin, Ostable folks are pretty excited. Elnathan Mullet, who owns that strip below your house, knows somethin' about it, I think. I shouldn't wonder if he'd had an offer, or a hint, or somethin'. But Elnathan's mouth shuts tighter than a muskrat trap and I couldn't get nothin' out of him. He just looked knowin' and that was all. But, if it's so, it may mean a heap to Denboro."

I was considering the news when he spoke again.

"It might mean a lot to you, Ros," he whispered.

"How so?"

"Why, this way: If this concern offered you enough money you might sell out to them, mightn't you? Sell all your place, I mean; you could get another one easy enough. You ain't particular about livin' by the shore."

"But−−you urge me to SELL!" I exclaimed. "Sell the Shore Lane with the rest?"

"Why not? You wouldn't be sellin' to Colton. And, if this development scheme is what they say it is, there'll be roads cut through all along shore. The town could use any of 'em; at least that arrangement might be made. Think

it over, Ros. If they do offer and offer enough, I'd sell, if I was you. Say! that would be a reef under His Majesty's bows, hey? Jolt him some, I cal'late."

I did not answer. This was a new possibility. Of course his reason for advising my selling was plain enough, but, leaving the Coltons entirely aside, the idea was not without allurement. The town's convenience in the matter of a road might be considered, just as he said. And my scruples against selling at a profit were, after all, based upon that feature.

"You think it over," he counseled. "Don't say nothin' to nobody, but just think−−and wait. I'll keep my eye to wind'ard and see what I can find out. I tell you honest, Ros, I'll feel safer when I know old Imperial's game's blocked for good and all."

Old Imperial himself made his appearance before closing hours. I looked up from my work to see him standing by the window. He had not expected to see me there−−evidently his daughter had not considered Mother's news of sufficient importance to repeat−−and, at first, he did not recognize me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Colton," said I.

He nodded. "Cash this for me, will you," he said, pushing a check through the opening. "What? Hello! What in blazes are you doing in there?"

"I am employed here now," I answered.

"Humph! how long since?"

"Ten days, or such matter."

"What are you doing in a bank?"

"Banking was my business, at one time."

"Thought you hadn't any business."

"I haven't had any, for some years. Now I have. How do you wish this money? In tens and fives?"

"Yes. Nothing bigger. Down here it restricts the circulation if you spring a twenty dollar bill on them. So you've taken to banking? I was thinking of corraling you for a gunning trip one of these days. Now it's all off, I suppose."

"It looks that way. Sorry I am to be deprived of the pleasure."

"Humph!" Then, with one of his sudden changes, "How big a business does this concern do? What do your deposits amount to?"

I gave him the figures, as printed in the yearly statement. He made no comment. Instead he observed, "You haven't been around to accept that offer of mine yet, Paine."

"Not yet," I answered.

"Suppose I ought to raise it, now that you're a financier yourself. However, I shan't."

"I haven't asked you to."

He smiled. "No, you haven't," he said. "Well, it is open−−for a while. If I were you I'd accept it pretty soon."

"Possibly."

"Meaning that I am not you, hey? I'm not. I haven't your high principles, Paine. Can't afford 'em. You're what they call a 'Progressive' in politics, too, aren't you?"

"Here is your money," I said, ignoring the question.

"I'll bet you are!" he declared, taking the bills. "I never saw one of you high−principled chaps yet that wasn't−−until he got rich enough to be something else. Progress is all right, maybe, but I notice that you fellows pay for it and the rest of us get it. Just as I am going to get that land of yours."

"You haven't got it yet," I said, serenely. I had made up my mind that this time he should not provoke me into losing my temper.

He seemed to divine my determination. His eye twinkled. "You're improving, Paine," he observed. "I'll give you a piece of advice; it has cost me a good deal to learn, but I'll give it to you: Don't ever let the other fellow make you mad."

I remembered our first interview and I could not resist the temptation to retort.

"If my recollection is correct," I said, "you forgot that the first time we met."

He laughed aloud. "So I did," he admitted. "Maybe if I hadn't it would not cost me so much to get my own way in your case."

He walked out of the building. I heard one exclamation from behind and, turning, saw Sam Wheeler, my

youthful assistant, staring at me.

"My−−gosh!" exclaimed Sam, his tone a mixture of wonder and admiration, "I don't see how you dast to talk back to him like that, Ros. He'll sic the−−the 'System' onto you, won't he?"

It was evident that Sam had been reading the magazines.

I heard no more from Captain Jed and nothing from the mysterious "Development Company" for the remainder of that week. But on Sunday, as I sat in the boat house, smoking my after dinner pipe and reading, Lute excitedly entered, followed by a well−dressed, smooth−shaven man of middle age, whom he introduced as Mr. Keene of Boston, "who's driven all the way from Ostable a−purpose to see you, Ros."

Mr. Keene shook hands with me cordially and apologized for intruding upon my day of rest. He intended returning to the city in the morning, he said, and, as he had a little matter to discuss with me, had taken the liberty of calling. "I shan't take more than half an hour of your time, Mr. Paine," he explained. "At least I feel certain that you and I can reach an agreement in that period. If I might be alone with you−−"

This hint, evidently intended for Lute's benefit, was quite lost upon the last named individual, who had seated himself on the edge of the work bench and was listening with both ears. I was obliged to tell him that his presence was superfluous and request his returning to the house, which he reluctantly did, moving slowly and looking back with an expression of grieved disappointment. After he had gone I asked Mr. Keene what his "little matter" might be.

His reply was prompt and to the point. He gave me his card. He was, it seemed, junior partner in the firm of Barclay and Keene, real estate brokers and promoters, Milk Street, Boston. And, just now, he was acting as representative of the Bay Shore Development Company. "A concern of which, in spite of all our precautions and attempts at secrecy, you may, perhaps, have heard, Mr. Paine," he added, smiling.

I admitted that I had heard rumors concerning the company's existence. But, except for these very vague rumors, I knew nothing about it.

He expected that, he said, and was glad to give me further and complete information. In fact, that was his reason for coming so many miles to see me. If I would be good enough to listen he would tell me just what the Bay Shore Company was and what it contemplated doing.

I listened and he talked. According to him the Bay Shore syndicate−−that is what it was, a syndicate of capitalists−− represented one of the biggest real estate propositions ever conceived. Those behind it were awake to the possibilities of the Cape as a summer resort. Shore land, water front property in the vicinity, was destined to increase in value, provided it was properly exploited and developed. The company's idea was to do just that−−exploit and develop.

"We've been quietly looking about," he continued, "and are all ready for the preliminaries. And naturally, the first preliminary is to secure the land to develop. You have some of that land, Mr. Paine. We know just how much, as we do the holdings of every other party we have approached or intend to approach. I am here to get your figures and, if possible, conclude the purchase of your property this afternoon. It is Sunday, of course," he added, with a good−humored laugh, "and contracts signed to−day are not legal; but we can make a verbal contract and the papers may be signed later. I will defer my departure until the afternoon train to−morrow for that purpose. Now name your figure, Mr. Paine."

Of course I had guessed what was coming. If I intended to sell at all here was my opportunity to do so−−to, as Captain Jed expressed it, "block Colton's game" without sacrificing the principle for which I had fought, and make a good bit of money for myself. Another home near by could be secured, I had no doubt, and to it Mother might be safely and easily moved. Yet I hesitated to express even a qualified willingness.

"You appear to be certain that I will sell," I observed. "Isn't that taking a good deal for granted, Mr. Keene?"

He smiled−−in fact he smiled almost too often to please me. There is such a thing as being too cordial and good−natured; and he was so very friendly on short acquaintance.

"I understand," he said. "I have heard about you, Mr. Paine. This, however, is a different matter. We are not hogs, Mr. Paine, but business men. If our plans go through, Denboro will be grateful to us and to you."

"IF they go through? I thought you were certain of their going through."

"Certainly, certainly. There is, of course, an 'if' in all human plans, but our particular 'if' is a small one. I hope you will name your figure now, at once. Don't be afraid. We are disposed to be liberal. And, understand, this is entirely a cash transaction. You shall have the money in one hand as you sign the contract with the other. Ha! ha!

What is the price to be?"

But I would not name a price. I seemed to feel as unreasonably reluctant to close with the Bay Shore Development Company as I had been with Captain Jed or Colton.

"Shall I make a bid?" asked Keene.

"No, not yet at any rate. Tell me, this: Whose land have you already bought?"

He shook his head. "That, of course," he said, with the same gracious smile, "I can hardly tell even to you. Some of the deals are not yet closed, and, as a business man yourself, Mr. Paine, you−−"

"I am not a business man," I interrupted, impatiently. "At least, not much of a one. You say there are capitalists behind your scheme. Who are they?"

He laid his hand on my knee. "Why, that," he said, "is a secret no one is supposed to know. Men−−financiers such as we are proud to serve−−permit their names to be known only when the corporation is ready to begin actual operations. That is natural enough. If I were to mention names−−well, some of your Yankee neighbors would want to become millionaires before selling."

There was truth in this. I imagine that he guessed he had made an impression, for he went on to shout his praises of the company and the greatness of its plan. He talked and talked; in fact he talked too much. I did not like to hear him. I did not like HIM, that was the trouble. He was too smooth and voluble altogether. And he made a mistake in patting my knee.

"Very well," said I, rising from my chair; "I'll think it over."

He was plainly disappointed. "I don't wish to hurry you, of course," he said, not moving from his chair, "but we are anxious to close. This is to be cash, remember, and I stand ready to make an offer. I am sure we can reach an agreement, satisfactory to both sides, Mr. Paine."

"Perhaps, but I prefer to think the matter over before naming a price or hearing your offer."

As a matter of fact I did not intend to sell, or consider selling, until I had discussed the whole affair with Mother. But there was no need to tell him that.

"I am sorry, I confess," he said. "I hoped this particular deal might be closed. We have so many of these little details, Mr. Paine, and time is money. However, if you insist upon it, I presume the company will be willing to wait a few days."

"I am afraid it will have to."

"Very well, very well. I shall be down again in a day or two. Of course, waiting may have some effect upon the price. To−day I was empowered to . . . You don't care to hear? Very well. So glad to have met you, Mr. Paine. Of course you will not mention the subject of our interview to anyone. Business secrets, you know. Thank you, thank you. And I will see you again−−Thursday, shall we say?"

I refused to say Thursday, principally because he had said it first. I suggested Saturday instead. He agreed, shook hands as if I were an old friend from whom he parted with regret, and left me.

No, I did not like Mr. Keene. He was too polite and too familiar. And, as I thought over his words, the whole prospectus of the Bay Shore Development Company seemed singularly vague. The proposal to buy my land was definite enough, but the rest of it was, apparently, very much in the air. There was too much secrecy about it. No one was to tell anyone anything. I was glad I had insisted upon time for consideration. I intended to consider thoroughly.

CHAPTER XIV

When I left the boat house I did not go directly home, but wandered along the beach. I had puzzled my brain with Mr. Keene and his errand until I determined not to puzzle it any longer that day. If my suspicions were unfounded and existed merely because of my dislike of the Bay Shore Company's representative, then they were not worth worry. If they were well founded I had almost a week in which to discover the fact. I would dismiss the whole matter from my thoughts. The question as to whether or not I would sell the land at all to anybody, which was, after all, the real question, I resolved to put off answering until I had had my talk with Mother.

I walked on by the water's edge until I reached the Lane; turning into that much coveted strip of territory I continued until I came opposite the Colton mansion, where, turning again, I strolled homeward by the path through the grove. Unconsciously my wandering thoughts strayed to Mabel Colton. It was here that I had met her on two occasions. I had an odd feeling that I should meet her here again, that she was here now. I had no reason for thinking such a thing, certainly the wish was not father to the thought, but at every bend in the path, as the undergrowth hid the way, I expected, as I turned the corner, to see her coming toward me.

But the path was, save for myself, untenanted. I was almost at its end, where the pines and bushes were scattering and the field of daisies, now in full bloom, began, when I heard a slight sound at my left. I looked in the direction of the sound and saw her. She was standing beneath a gnarled, moss−draped old pine by the bluff edge, looking out over the bay.

I stopped, involuntarily. Then I moved on again, as noiselessly as I could. But at my first step she turned and saw me. I raised my hat. She bowed, coldly, so it seemed to my supersensitive imagination, and I replaced the hat and continued my walk. I thought I heard the bushes near which she stood rustle as if she had moved, but I did not look back.

Then, close behind me, I heard her voice.

"Mr. Paine," she said.

I turned. She had followed me and was standing in the path, a bit out of breath, as if she had hurried. I waited for her to speak, but she did not.

"Good afternoon, Miss Colton," I said, awkwardly. Some one had to speak, we could not stand staring at each other like that.

She said "Good afternoon," also. Then there was another interval of silence.

"You−−you wished to speak to me?" I stammered.

"I DID speak to you," with significant emphasis on the "did." "I thought you might, possibly, be interested to know that Don and I reached home safely the other day."

Considering that she had called upon Mother since, it seemed to me that my knowledge of her reaching home safely might have been taken for granted; but I said:

"I am very glad to hear it, Miss Colton."

"We had no difficulty in finding the way after you left us."

The way being almost straight, and over the main traveled roads, this, too, was fairly obvious.

"I felt sure you would have no trouble−−after I left you," I answered, with a significant emphasis of my own.

She did not reply and, as I had nothing further to say, I waited for her to continue, or to break off the interview. She did neither, but stood, as if irresolute, looking down and stirring with her foot the leaves at the edge of the path. Suddenly she looked up.

"Mr. Paine," she said, "you are making it hard for me to say what I intended. But I think I should say it, and so I will. I beg your pardon for speaking as I did when I last saw you. I had no right to judge or criticize you, none whatever."

"You do not need to apologize, Miss Colton. What you told me was probably true enough."

The conventional answer to this would have been a half−hearted denial of my statement. I presume I expected something of the sort. But this girl was not conventional.

"Yes," she said, thoughtfully, "I think it was. If I had not thought so I should not have said it. But that makes no difference. You and I are strangers, almost, and I had no right to speak as I did. I am impulsive, I know it, and I

often do and say things on impulse which I am sorry for afterward. I offended you."

"Oh no, no," I put in, hurriedly. She had offended me, but this frank confession touched me more than the offense had hurt. She was doing a hard thing and doing it handsomely.

"Yes, I offended you," she repeated, firmly. "I have considered the matter a good deal since then, and it seems to me that you were right to feel offended. You had been very kind to me on several occasions and I had been your"−−with a half smile−−"your guest that day. I should not have hurt your feelings. Will you accept my apology?"

"Why, yes, of course, since you insist, Miss Colton."

"Thank you."

She was turning to go; and I could not let her go thus. Although she had apologized for speaking her thought she had not retracted the thought itself. I was seized with a desire for justification in her eyes. I wanted to explain; forgetting for the moment that explanations were impossible.

"Miss Colton," I said, impulsively.

"Yes?"

"May I−−may I say a word?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

She turned again and faced me.

"Miss Colton, I−−I−−" I began, and paused.

"Well?" she said, patiently, "What is it?"

"Miss Colton," I blundered on, "you should not have apologized. You were right. Your estimate of me was pretty nearly correct. I realized that when you gave it and I have been realizing it ever since. I deserved what I got−−perhaps. But I should not wish you to think−−that is, I−−well, I had reasons, they seemed to me reasons, for being what I was−−what I am. I doubt if they were altogether good reasons; I am inclined now to think they were not. But I had come to think them good. You see, I−−I−−"

I stopped, face to face with the fact that I could not give those reasons to her or any one else. She was looking at me expectantly, and with, so it seemed to me, an expression of real, almost eager interest. I faltered, tried to go on, and then surrendered, absolutely, to the hopelessness of the situation.

"It is no use," I said, "I can't tell you what those reasons were."

I turned as I said it. I did not care to see her expression change. I knew what she must be thinking and I had no desire to read the thought in her eyes. I stood there, waiting for her to leave in disgust.

"I can't tell you," I repeated, stubbornly.

"Very well." Her tone was as coldly indifferent as I had anticipated. "Was that all you wished to say to me, Mr. Paine?"

"Miss Colton, I should like to explain if I could. But I cannot."

"Pray don't trouble yourself. I assure you I had no intentions of asking for your−−reasons. Good afternoon."

I heard her skirts brush the leaves at the border of the path. She was going; and the contemptuous slur at my "reasons" proved that she did not believe them existent. She believed me to be a liar.

"Miss Colton," I said, sharply; "wait."

She kept on.

"Wait," I said again. "Listen to me."

She seemed to hesitate and then turned her head.

"I am listening," she said. "What is it?"

"You have no right to disbelieve me."

"I disbelieve you? Why should you think I disbelieve you? I am not sufficiently interested to believe or disbelieve, I assure you."

"But you do. You judge me−−"

"_I_ judge you! You flatter yourself, Mr. Paine."

"But you do. You apologized just now for judging me without a hearing the other day. You acknowledged that you should not have done it. You are doing the same thing now."

"I apologized for presuming to offer advice to a stranger. I did not apologize for the advice itself. I think it good. I do not care to argue the matter further."

"You are not asked to argue. But your sneer at my reasons proves that you believe that I have none and am merely trying to justify myself with trumped up and lying excuses. You are wrong, and since you presumed to judge me then you must listen to me now. I have−− or had−−reasons for living as I have done, for being the idler and good−for−nothing you believe me to be. I can't tell you what they are; I can tell no one. But I do ask you to believe that I have them, that they are real, and that my being what you termed ambitionless and a country loafer is not my condition from choice. It is my right to insist upon your believing that. Do you believe it?"

At last I had made an impression. My earnestness seemed to have shaken her contemptuous indifference. She looked at me steadily, frowning a little, but regarding me less as if I were a clod and more and more as if I were the puzzle she had once declared me to be. I did not shun her look now, but met it eye to eye.

"Do you believe me?" I demanded.

Slowly her frown was disappearing.

"Do you believe me?" I said, again. "You must."

"Must?"

"Yes, you must. I shall make you. If not now, at some other time. You must believe me, Miss Colton."

The frown disappeared altogether and she smiled.

"If you order me to I suppose I must," she said, with a shrug of mock resignation. "I should have learned by this time that it is useless to say no when you say yes, Mr. Paine."

"But do you?"

She turned altogether and faced me.

"I am very glad to believe you," she said, with simple directness.

I stammered a "Thank you" and was silent. I dared not trust myself to speak at the moment. Somehow the sincerity of her words moved me far more than their trifling import warranted. She had declared her belief that I was not a liar, that was all; and yet I stood there fighting down all sorts of ridiculous emotions. The situation was decidedly strained, but, as usual, she saved it.

"It seems to me," she said, with the twinkle which I had learned to recognize as a forerunner of mischief on her part, "that you are inclined to make mountains out of mole−hills, Mr. Paine. Was there any need to be quite so fiercely tragic? And, besides, I think that even now you have not told the whole truth."

"The whole truth? Why, Miss Colton, I have just explained that−−"

"Oh, not that truth! Your mysterious 'reasons' are not my affair. And I have told you that I was willing to take those on trust. But you have not been quite truthful in another particular. You intimated that you were an idler. I have been given to understand that you are far from being an idler just now."

I was relieved. "Oh, I see!" I exclaimed. "You mean−−some one has told you of my employment at the bank."

"A number of persons have told me. Surely you did not expect to keep THAT a secret−−in Denboro?"

"Well, scarcely," I admitted, with a laugh. "That was known almost before I was sure of it myself. You should have seen Eldredge's face when I announced my intention. And Lute−−Mrs. Rogers' husband−−hasn't completely recovered yet. The sight of me, actually trying to earn a living, was too much for him. You see what a miracle worker you are, Miss Colton."

"Did you really accept the position simply because of what I said to you?"

"Yes. The chance had been offered me before, but it was your frankness that shocked me into taking it."

"Not really? You are joking."

"No, I'm not. You are responsible. Are you sorry?"

Her answer was a question.

"Are you?" she asked.

"No. At first it seemed ridiculous and strange, even to myself; but now I like the work. It is like old times."

"Old times?"

I was forgetting myself again; talking too much was a dangerous train−−for me. I laughed, with pretended carelessness.

"Why, yes; I was employed in a bank at one time. I think I told you that. Have you been motoring much of late, Miss Colton?"

"Yes. Tell me, please: You really like your work?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I will answer your question. I am not a bit sorry. I am glad I was impertinent and intrusive, especially now that I have apologized and you have accepted the apology. I am very glad I told you you should do something worth while."

"Even if it were nothing more than to follow Thoph Newcomb's example and sell fish."

"Yes," laughingly, "even that. I WAS impertinent, wasn't I! I don't wonder you were offended."

"I needed the impertinence, I guess. But frankly, Miss Colton, I can't see why you should be glad because I have gone to work. I can't see what difference my working or idling can possibly make to you."

"Oh, it doesn't, of course−−except on general principles. I am a dreadful idler myself; but then, I am a woman, and idleness is a woman's right."

I thought of Dorinda and of the other housewives of Denboro and how little of that particular "right" they enjoyed; which thought brought again and forcibly to my mind the difference between this girl's life and theirs−−and Mother's−−and my own.

"A man," continued Miss Colton, sagely, "should not idle. He should work and work hard−−so that the rest of us may be as good for nothing as we please. That is philosophy, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You were good enough not to say what sort of philosophy. Thank you. But seriously, Mr. Paine, I am fond of your mother−−very fond, considering our short acquaintance−−and when I saw her lying there, so patient, and deprived of the little luxuries and conveniences which she needs, and which a little more money might bring to her, it seemed to me . . . Gracious! what a lot of nonsense I am talking! What is the matter with me this afternoon? Do let's change the subject. Have you sold your land yet, Mr. Paine? Of course you haven't! That is more nonsense, isn't it."

I think she had again spoken merely on the impulse of the moment; doubtless there was no deliberate intention on her part to bring me to a realization of my position, the position I occupied in her thoughts; but if she had had such an intent she could not have done it more effectively. She believed me to have been neglecting Mother, and her interest in my "doing something worth while" was inspired merely because she wished Mother to be supplied with those "luxuries and conveniences" she had mentioned. Well, my question was answered; this was the difference my working or idling made to her. And, for a minute or two, I had been foolish enough to fancy her interested, as a friend, in my success or failure in life. I might have known better. And yet, because of the novelty of the thing, because I had so few friends, I felt a pang of disappointment.

But I resolved she should not know she had disappointed me. I might have been a fool, but I would keep my foolishness a secret.

"No, Miss Colton," I said, with a smile, "I haven't sold yet."

"Father said he saw you at the bank. Did he say anything about the land?"

"He said his offer was still open, that was all."

"You are resolved not to sell."

"To him? Yes, I am resolved. I think he knows it. I tried to make it plain."

"You say to him. Are you thinking of selling to any one else? To the town?"

"No. Probably not to any one. Certainly not to your father or the town."

She looked at me, with an odd expression, and seemed to hesitate.

"Mr. Paine," she said, slowly, "would you resent my giving you another bit of−−advice?"

"Not at all. What is it this time?"

"Why, nothing. I must not give you any advice at all. I won't. Instead I'll give you one of Father's pet proverbs. It isn't an elegant one, but he is very fond of repeating it. 'There are more ways of killing a cat than choking it to death with butter.' There! you will admit it is not elegant."

"But Miss Colton! Killing a cat! What in the world?"

"You mustn't ask me. I shouldn't have said even that. But remember, it is father's pet proverb. I must go. Please give my love to your mother and tell her I shall call again soon. Good−by."

She walked briskly away and did not look back. I went home. I thought a great deal during the evening and until late that night. When, at last, I did go to bed I had not made much progress in the problem of the cat, but I did believe that there was a rat in the vicinity. I was beginning to scent one. If I was not mistaken it called itself the Bay Shore Development Company.

I said nothing to Mother of the new proposal to buy our land, but next morning at the bank I wrote a letter to the cashier of a bank in Boston, one of our correspondents, and with which our little institution was on very friendly terms. I asked the cashier to make some guarded inquiries concerning the Bay Shore Company, to find out, if possible, who was behind it and also to inquire concerning Barclay and Keene, the real estate brokers of Milk Street.

The reply to my letter reached me on Friday. It was satisfactory, eminently so. And when, on Saturday afternoon, Mr. Keene, bland and smiling as ever, made his appearance at the house, I was ready for him. I stood on the step and made no move to invite him within. "Well, Mr. Paine," he said, cordially, "are you ready to talk business?"

"Quite ready," I answered.

He beamed with satisfaction.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Then what is your figure?"

"My figure is a naught," I replied, with emphasis. "You may tell your employer that I do not care to sell the land to him, no matter whether he calls himself James Colton or the Bay Shore Development Company. Oh yes; and, if you like, you may add that this particular cat declines to be choked."

Mr. Keene showed signs of choking, himself, and I shut the door and left him outside. Lute, who had been listening at the dining−room window and had heard only fragments of the brief interview, was in a state of added incoherence.

"Well, by time!" he gasped. "What−−what sort of talk was that? Chokin' a cat! A cat!! We ain't got no cat."

"Haven't we?" I observed. "Why, no, so we haven't! Perhaps you had better explain that to Mr. Keene, Lute. It may help him to understand the situation. And add that I suggest his telling the person who sent him here that soft−soap is no improvement on butter."

I think Lute did tell him just that, doubtless with all sorts of excuses for my insanity, for the next day, Sunday, as I walked along the beach, a big body came ploughing down the sandy slope and joined me.

"Hello!" said Colton.

"Good morning," said I.

"How are independence and public spirit these days?"

"Very well, thank you. How are Development Companies developing?"

He put back his head and laughed. He did not seem a bit chagrined or discomfited. The joke was on him, but he could enjoy it, nevertheless. In spite of my antagonism toward this man I could not help admiring certain traits of his character. He was big, in every way. Little repulses or setbacks did not trouble him.

"Say," he said, "how did you know about that cat?"

"Saw his footprints," I replied. "They were all over the scheme. And your friend Keene purred too loud."

"I don't mean that. Keene was a fool; that was plain enough for anyone to see. I had to use him; if Barclay hadn't been sick it might have been different. But how did you come to send me that message about the butter? Man, that is one of my favorite sayings−− the choking the cat thing! How did you know that? I never said it to you."

"Oh, it is an old saying. I have heard it often; and it did seem to fit in this case. I imagined you would understand and appreciate."

"Um−−yes," dryly. "I appreciated all right. As to understanding−− well, I'll understand later on. That's another little conundrum for me to work out. Somebody's been talking, of course. Here! hold on!" as I was walking away: "Don't go. I want to talk to you."

He characteristically did not ask whether or not I wanted to talk to him, but, as I happened to be in no hurry, I stopped and waited for him to continue. He thrust his hands into his pockets and looked me over, very much as he might have looked over a horse he was thinking of buying.

"Paine," he said, suddenly, "do you want to go to work?"

"Work?" I repeated. "I am at work already."

"You've got a job, such as it is. It might be work for the average jay, but it isn't for you. I'll give you something to work at−− yes, and work for."

I stared at him in wondering suspicion.

"What is this; another Development Company?" I demanded.

"Ha! ha! not this time. No, this is straight. If you'll say that you'll work for me I'll make an opening for you in my New York office."

I did not answer. I was trying to fathom the motive behind this new move.

"I'll put you to work in my office," he went on. "It may not be much to begin with, but you can make it anything you like; that'll be up to you. As to salary−−well, I don't know what you're getting in that one−horse bank, but I'll double it, whatever it is. That will be the start, of course. After that it is up to you, as I said."

"Mr. Colton this may be a good joke, but I don't see it−−yet."

"I don't joke often in business; can't afford to."

"You are really serious? You mean what you say?"

"Yes."

"But why? You don't know anything about me."

"I know all that is necessary. And I have found out that you are all right, so far as bank work goes. That fellow Taylor and some others told me that. But I didn't need their telling. Why, man, it is part of my trade to know men when I see them. I have to know 'em. I said a while ago that you didn't belong in this forsaken hole of a town. God knows it IS forsaken! Even my wife is beginning to admit that, and she was the keenest to come here. Some day I shall get sick of it and sell out, I suppose."

"Sell out?"

"Oh, not yet. Mabel−−my daughter−−seems to like it here, for some unknown reason, and wants to stay. And I don't intend to sell until I've bought−−what I set out to buy. But I'm not the subject we're talking about just now. You are. Come! here's your chance to be somebody. More chance than I had, I'll tell you that. You can go to work in my office next week, if you want to. Will you?"

I laughed at the idea. I believed I had found the motive I was seeking. "Of course not," I said. "You can't close the Lane by that kind of bribery, Mr. Colton."

"Bribery be hanged! Come, come, Paine! Wake up, or I shall think your brains aren't up to standard, after all. When I bribe I bribe. When I ask a man to work for me there are no strings tied to the offer. Forget your picayune land for a minute. Time enough to remember that when I've got it, which will be some day or other, of course. I'm making you this offer because I want you. You're sharp; you saw through that Development game. You're clever−−your sending me that 'cat' message proves it. And your not telling me where the idea for the message came from proves that you can keep your mouth shut. I could use a dozen fellows like you, if I could get them. You interested me right at the start. A chap with sand enough to tell Jim Colton to go to the devil is always interesting. I'm offering you this chance because I think it is a good chance for both of us. Yes, and because I like you, I suppose, in spite of your pig−headedness. Will you take it?"

"No, thank you," I answered.

"Why? Because you can't leave your sick mother? She'll be all right. I was talking with the doctor−−Quimby, his name is, isn't it−−and he happened to mention that he was encouraged about her. Said she had been distinctly better for the last month."

I could not believe it. Doctor Quimby had said nothing of the sort to me. It was impossible. Mother BETTER!

"That doesn't mean she is going to be well and strong again, of course," he added, not unkindly. "But I think Quimby believes she may be well enough to−−perhaps−−sit up one of these days. Be wheeled about in a chair, or something of that sort . . . Why! what is the matter? You looked as if I had knocked you out. Hasn't the doctor said anything to you?"

"No," I stammered. I WAS knocked out. I could not believe it. Mother, the bed−ridden invalid of six long years, to be well enough to sit up! to use a wheeled chair! It could not be true. It was too good to be true.

"So, you see, you could leave her all right," went on Colton. "If it was necessary you could get a nurse down here to look after her while you were away. And you might get home every fortnight or so. Better take my offer, Paine. Come!" with a grunt of impatient amusement, "don't keep me waiting too long. I am not used to coaxing people to work for me; it is usually the other way around. This offer of mine happens to be pretty nearly a disinterested one, and," with one of his dry smiles, "all my offers are not that kind, as you ought to know. Will you say yes now? Or do you want till to−morrow to think it over?"

The news concerning Mother had upset me greatly, but my common− sense was not all gone. That there was something behind his offer I believed, but, even if there were not−−if it was disinterested and made simply

because my unearthing of the Bay Shore "cat" had caught his fancy−−I did not consider for a moment accepting it. Not if Mother was like other women, well and strong, would I have accepted it. In Denboro I was Roscoe Paine, and my life story was my own secret. In New York how long would it be before that secret and my real name were known, and all the old disgrace and scandal resurrected?

"What do you say?" asked Colton, again. "Want more time to think about it, do you?"

I shook my head. "No," I answered. "I have had time enough. I am obliged for the offer and I appreciate your kindness, but I cannot accept."

I expected him to express impatience or, perhaps, anger; at least to ask my reasons for declining. But his only utterance was a "Humph!" For a moment he regarded me keenly. Then he said:

"Haven't got the answer yet, have I? All right. Well," briskly, "when are you and I going on that shooting trip?"

"There is no shooting at present," I answered, as soon as I could adjust my mind to this new switch in the conversation.

"That so? Any fishing?"

"I believe the squiteague are running outside. I heard they were."

"What? Squit−−which?"

"Squiteague. Weakfish some people call them."

"They are pretty fair sport, aren't they?"

"Yes, fair. Nothing like bluefish, however."

"All right. What is the matter with our going squint−−squint−− something or othering one of these days? Will you go? Or are you as pig−headed about that as you are about other things?"

I laughed. "Not quite," I said. "I should be glad of your company, Mr. Colton."

"Next Saturday suit you?"

"Yes. After bank hours."

"All right. I'll look after the boat. You provide the bait and tackle. That's fair, isn't it? Right. Be on hand at my dock at one o'clock. Morning."

He walked off. Neither of us had thought of the tide−−he, probably, not realizing that high water was an important factor, and I being too much agitated by what he had said about Mother, and the suddenness with which the fishing trip was planned, to think calmly of anything.

That week was a strange one to me, and the first of many strange ones. My manner of life was changing, although I did not realize it and although the change came through no effort of my own. Our house, which had been so long almost a hermitage, if a home containing four persons might be called that, was gradually becoming a social center. Matilda Dean had called once a week regularly for some time and this particular week Captain Jed came with her. Captain Elisha Warren and his cousin and housekeeper, Miss Abbie Baker, drove down for a half−hour's stay. George Taylor and Nellie spent an evening with us. I feared the unaccustomed rush of company might have a bad effect upon Mother, but she seemed actually the better for it. She professed to believe that Denboro was awakening to the fact of my merits as a man and a citizen. "They are finding you out at last, Boy," she said. I laughed at her. I knew better. It was because of my position in the bank that these people came. I was making good there, apparently, and the surprise at this caused Captain Warren and the rest to take a new, and no doubt transitory interest in me.

And I thought I knew Captain Jed's reason for coming. An interview between us gave me the inkling. Matilda was in Mother's room and Dean and I were together in the dining−room.

"Ros," said the captain, suddenly, "you ain't backin' water, are you?"

"Backing water? What do you mean by that?"

"In this Lane business. You ain't cal'latin' to sell out to Colton, after all?"

"Well, hardly. Why do you say that?"

"Nothin', maybe. But they tell me you're kind of thick with the R'yal family lately. Beriah Holt says he see you and the Colton girl come out of the woods back of his place one afternoon a spell ago. She was on horseback and you was walkin', but Beriah says you and she was mighty friendly."

I might have expected this. In Denboro one does few things unnoticed.

"She had lost her way in the woods and I helped her to find the road home," I said, "that was all."

"Hum! You helped her to find the road the night of the strawberry festival, too, didn't you?"

"How in the world did you find that out?"

"Oh, it just sort of drifted around. I've got pretty big ears−− maybe you've noticed 'em−−and they gen'rally catch some of what's blowin' past. There was a coachman mixed up in that night's work and he talked some, I shouldn't wonder; most of his kind do."

"Well, what of it?" I asked, sharply. "I helped her as I would your daughter if she had been caught alone in a storm like that. I should have been ashamed not to."

"Sartin! Needn't get mad about it. What's this about your takin' his Majesty off fishin' next Saturday?"

All of my personal affairs seemed to be common property. I was losing my temper in spite of my recent good resolutions.

"Look here, Captain Dean," I said, "I have a right to take any one fishing, if I choose. Mr. Colton asked me to do it and I saw no reason for saying no."

"Funny he should ask you. He ain't asked anybody else in town."

"I don't know that and I don't care. I shall do as I please. I have no grievance against the Coltons. I shall not sell them my land, but I reserve the right to meet them−−yes, and to associate with them−−if I choose. You and your friends may as well understand that, Captain."

"There! there! don't get huffy. I ain't got the right to say what your rights are, Ros. And I don't think for a minute you'd back water on the Lane business a−purpose. But I do think you're takin' chances. I tell you, honest, I'm scart of old Colton, in a way, and I ain't scart of many folks. He's a fighter and he's smart. He and I have had some talks−−"

"You have?" I interrupted.

"Yup. Lively squabbles they was, too. Each of us expressin' our opinion of t'other and not holdin' back anything to speak of. I don't know how he felt when we quit, but I know I respected him−− for his out and open cussedness and grit, if nothin' else. And I think he felt the same way about me. But he's smart−−consarn him, he is! And HE never backs water. That's why I think you're takin' chances in bein' too friendly with him. He's layin' low and, if you get off your guard just once he'll grab."

I hesitated; then I made up my mind.

"Captain Dean," I said, "his smartness hasn't caught me yet. I'm going to tell you something, but first you must promise not to tell anyone else."

He promised and I told him of Mr. Keene and the Bay Shore Company. He listened, interrupting with chuckles and exclamations. When I had finished he seized my hand and wrung it.

"By the everlastin'!" he exclaimed, "that was great! I say again, you're all right, Ros Paine. Even _I_ swallered that Development Company, hook, line, and sinker. But YOU saw through it!"

"I tell you this," I said, "so that you will understand I have no intention of backing water."

"I know you ain't. Knew it afore and now I know it better. But I can't understand what the Colton game is−−and there is a game, sure. That daughter of his, now−−she may be in it or she may not. She's pretty and I will give in that she's folksy and sociable with us natives; it's surprisin', considerin' her bringin' up. Nellie and Matildy like her, Nellie especial. They're real chummy, as you might say. Talk and talk, just as easy and common as you and I this minute. I've heard 'em two or three times at my house when they thought I wasn't listenin' and twice out of the three they was talkin' about you."

"About ME?" I repeated.

"Yes. I don't wonder you're surprised. I was myself. Asked Nellie about it and she just laughed. Said you was the principal object of interest in town just now, which is more or less true. But it makes me suspicious, all the same. Why should a girl like that Colton one talk about a feller like you? You're as fur apart, fur's anything in common is concerned, as molasses is from vinegar. Ain't that so?"

It was so, of course, but he need not have been so brutally frank in telling me. However, I nodded and admitted that he was right.

"Yes," he said. "A blind horse could see there was no sensible, open and above−board reason for HER bein' interested in YOU. So there's another reason, the way I look at it, and that's why I'd be mighty careful, mighty careful, Ros. Her pa's got a new trick up his sleeve and she's helpin' him play it, that's my notion. So be careful, won't you."

"I'll be careful," said I. I knew, as well as I knew my real name−− which he did not−−that Mabel Colton was not helping her father play any tricks. I had seen enough of her to be certain she was not tricky. And, besides, if she were in sympathy with her parent, why had she given me the hint which put me on the trail of the Development Company? Why had she given me the hint at all? That was the real riddle, and I had not, as yet, hit upon a plausible answer. Those I had hit upon were ridiculous and impossible, and I put them from my mind. But she was not tricky, that I knew.

Captain Jed changed the subject and we talked of Nellie's wedding, which was to take place in a month. The captain was full of various emotions, regret at losing his daughter and joy because of her getting such a good husband. His last words were these:

"Ros," he said, "be careful, for my sake full as much as yours. This Lane business and Nellie's gettin' married have sort of possessed me, same as the evil spirits did the swine, in scriptur'. I lay awake nights fussin' for fear the marriage won't turn out happy or for fear you'll sell the Lane after all. And one's just as likely to happen as t'other−−which means they're both impossible, I cal'late. But look out for that Colton girl, whatever else you do. She's a good deal better lookin' than her dad, but she's just as dangerous. You mark my words, son, the feller that plays with fire takes chances. So don't be TOO sociable with any of the tribe."

And the very next afternoon the dangerous person herself called and she and I spent an hour in Mother's room, where the three of us chatted like old friends. She had the rare power of making one forget self and personal worries and I could readily understand why Mother had been so completely won by her. She was bright and cheery and sympathetic. Here there was no trace of the pride of class and the arrogance which had caused me to hate her so heartily at first. It seemed almost as if she had set herself the task of making me like her in spite of my prejudices. My reason told me that this could not be; it was merely her fancy for Mother which caused her to notice me at all; she had as much as said so more than once. But I did like her; I acknowledged it in my thoughts; and, after she had gone, the room, with its drawn shades, seemed doubly dark and gloomy. Mother was silent for a few minutes and I, too, said nothing. Then:

"She is a wonderful girl, isn't she, Roscoe," said Mother.

She was altogether too wonderful, that was the trouble. A girl like her had no place in our lives. I went out for a walk and a smoke by the bluff edge; and, almost before I knew it, I found myself standing at the border of the grove, looking at the great house and trying to guess which was her room and if she was there and of what or whom she might be thinking just then. "Mark my words, son," Captain Jed had declared, "the feller that plays with fire takes chances."

I turned on my heel and set out for home. I would take no chances. I must not play with fire, even though the flames had, for the moment, dazzled me. I had called myself a fool many times in the past few years, but I would not be so great a fool as that.

CHAPTER XV

So I resolved, more resolutely than ever, to keep out of her way, to see as little of her as possible! and, as had happened before to similar resolutions of mine with which she was concerned, this one was rendered non−effective, through no fault of my own, almost as soon as it was made. For on Saturday afternoon, as I approached the Colton wharf, laden with bait and rods for the fishing excursion in the Colton boat, I saw her standing there beside her father, waiting for me.

"We've got a passenger, Paine," said "Big Jim." "You've met her before, I believe−−on the water and in it. No objections to my daughter's going along, have you?"

What could I say; except to announce delight at the addition to our party? Perhaps I did not say it as heartily as I might, for, Miss Colton, who was regarding me with a mischievous smile, observed demurely:

"I am sure he must be delighted, Father. Mr. Paine knows I am very fond of fishing; don't you, Mr. Paine?"

"Yes; oh, yes, of course," I stammered.

"He does, eh!" Her father seemed surprised. "How did he find that out?"

I thought the question was addressed to her, so I did not answer. She seemed to think otherwise, for she said:

"Did you hear, Mr. Paine? Father asks how you knew I was fond of fishing."

"Why−−er−−you told me so, Miss Colton," I replied. If she had not related her Seabury Pond experience to her parents I did not propose to be trapped into doing so. She laughed merrily.

"Did I?" she asked. "Yes, I believe I did."

Mr. Colton looked at us, each in turn.

"Humph!" he observed; "I don't seem to be aboard this train. What's the joke?"

She saved me the problem of inventing a satisfactory answer.

"Oh, it's a little joke of Mr. Paine's and my own," she explained. "I'll tell you about it by and by, Father. It would take too long to tell now. He saved my life once more, that's all."

"Oh! that's all! Humph! And you did not think a trifle like that worth mentioning to me, I suppose. Would you mind telling me what it was he saved you from this time?"

"From starvation. I was a famished wayfarer and he took me in. There, Daddy, don't puzzle your poor brain any longer. It is all right and I'll tell you all about it when we get home. Now I am sure we should be starting if we are to have any fishing at all. Shall we cast off, Mr.−−that is, Captain Paine?"

That fishing trip was not a huge success if judged solely by the size of the catch. The weakfish were not hungry or we did not tempt them with bait to their taste that day. We got a half dozen, of which I caught three, Miss Colton two, and her father but one. His, however, was a big one, much the biggest of the six, and he had a glorious time landing it. He fished as he appeared to do everything else, with intense earnestness and determination. He evidently considered the struggle a sort of personal disagreement between the fish and himself and, as usual, intended to have his way. He succeeded after a while, and announced that he had not enjoyed anything as much since arriving in Denboro.

His daughter also seemed to be enjoying herself. She was quite as good a fisher as her father, and, when the sport was over, and we reeled in our lines preparatory to starting for home, rallied him not a little at having been the least successful of the party. He took her teasing good−naturedly.

"You think it is quite a feat to get the better of your old dad, don't you, my lady," he observed.

"Of course I do. It is, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Well, maybe you're right," he admitted. "You do it oftener than any one else, that is certain. Paine, you might take lessons from her, if you are still hoping to keep up your end in the little fight you and I have on hand."

She turned to me and smiled. Her graceful head was silhouetted against the red glow of the sunset and a loosened strand of her hair waved in the light breeze.

"I think Mr. Paine does not need lessons from any one," she said. "He seems to be holding his own very well."

"But he's frightened, all the same. Come, Paine, own up now. You know you are frightened, don't you?"

"Not very," I answered, truthfully.

"So? Then you aren't as sensible as you ought to be. A wise man knows when to be scared. Let's make a little bet on it. I'll bet you two to one that I'll own that land of yours inside of six months."

I shook my head. "I never bet on certainties," I declared. "I should be ashamed to collect my winnings."

This seemed to amuse them both, for they both laughed.

"Father," said Miss Colton, "I am afraid you don't learn by experience. You have lost one bet already, you know."

"That's so. And I haven't paid it yet, either. I must, or you'll be telling every one that I am a poor sport. Paine, this young lady bet me a new pipe against a box of gloves that you wouldn't−−"

"Father," broke in the young lady, herself, "stop."

"Oh, all right, all right. Just as you say. But I tell you this, Paine; SHE hasn't any scruples against betting on certainties."

She was leaning against the cockpit rail, looking forward, and I could not see her face. She spoke without turning.

"You thought yours was the certainty," she said. "You warned me that I was sure to lose."

"Did I? Well, you may, even yet. On the whole, I think I'll wait a while before buying those gloves. Remember, there was no time limit. When you said that−−"

"Father," more firmly, "please be quiet. You have said quite enough. Mr. Paine is not likely to be interested in the family gambling."

I was interested in this particular "gamble." The wager had, obviously, something to do with me. I suppose I should have felt flattered at being made the subject of a bet in such select circles, but I did not. I had not been informed as to the details of that bet.

There was nothing more said about it at the time and my passengers talked of other things as we sailed home before the fast dying breeze. It died almost altogether as we passed the lighthouse at Crow Point and entered the bay and, for an hour, we barely held our own against the tide. The sun set, twilight came, and the stars appeared one by one. Colton, lying at full length on the deck forward of the cockpit, smoked in lazy enjoyment. His only remark in ten minutes was to the effect that his wife had probably drowned us all, in her mind, a dozen times over by now.

His daughter, sitting by the rail and looking out over the smooth, darkly glimmering water, bade him be quiet.

"You must not talk," she said. "This is the most wonderful night I ever experienced. How still it is! You can hear every sound. Hark!"

From the dusk, to port, came the clear strokes of a church bell striking eight.

"That is the clock at the Methodist Church, isn't it?" asked Miss Colton.

"Yes," said I.

"The church where the strawberry festival was held?"

"Yes."

Colton struck a match to relight his cigar.

"Shouldn't think that would be a pleasant reminder to either of you," he observed. "I am mighty sure it wasn't to me."

Miss Colton did not answer, nor did I.

The breeze sprang up again soon after, from a different quarter this time, but the tide had ebbed so far that I was obliged to make the detour around the end of the flat upon which Victor had grounded the dingy. "Big Jim" raised himself on his elbow.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "here's another joyful spot. Mabel, it was along here somewhere that Paine acquired the habit of carrying you about like a bundle. It must have been a picturesque performance. Wish I might have seen it."

He laughed heartily.

"Father," said the young lady, coldly, "don't be silly−−please."

He chuckled and lay down again, and no one spoke during the rest of the voyage. It was after nine when I brought the boat up to the wharf, made her fast, and lowered and furled the sail.

"Better come up to the house with us and have a bit to eat, Paine," urged Colton. "You must be hungry; I know I am."

"Oh, no, thank you," said I. "Supper will be waiting for me at home."

"Glad to have you, if you'll come. Tell him to come, Mabel."

Miss Colton's invitation was not over−cordial.

"I presume Mr. Paine knows what is best for him to do," she said. "Of course we shall be glad to have him, if he will come."

I declined, and, after thanking me for the sail and the pleasure of the fishing trip, they left me, Colton carrying his big squiteague by the gills, its tail slapping his leg as he climbed the bluff. A moment later I followed.

The night was, as my feminine passenger had said, wonderfully quiet, and sounds carried a long way. As I reached the juncture of the path and the Lane I heard a voice which I recognized as Mrs. Colton's. She was evidently standing on the veranda of the big house and I heard every word distinctly.

"You are so unthinking, James! You and Mabel have no regard for my feelings at all. I have been worried almost to death. Do you realize the time? I warned you against trusting yourself to the care of that common FELLOW−−"

The "fellow" heard no more. He did not wish to. He was tramping heavily through the dew−soaked undergrowth. He needed now no counsel against "playing with fire." The cutting contempt of Mrs. James W. Colton's remark was fire−extinguisher sufficient for that night.

Miss Colton and I met again at the door of the bank a day or two later, just at closing time. Sam Wheeler had already gone and I left George at his desk, poring over papers and busily figuring. He was working over time much of late and explained his industry by the fact of his approaching marriage and his desire to make things easy for me to handle while he was on his brief wedding trip. I was not much alarmed by the prospect. He was to be gone but a week and I had become sufficiently familiar with the routine to feel confident in assuming the responsibility. Small, my predecessor, had a brother who had formerly been employed in the bank and was now out of work, and he was coming in to help during the cashier's absence. I was not worried by the prospect of being left in charge, but I was worried about George. He, so it seemed to me, had grown pale and thin. Also he was nervously irritable and not at all like his usual good−natured self. I tried to joke him into better humor, but he did not respond to my jokes. He seemed, too, to realize that his odd behavior was noticeable, for he said:

"Don't mind my crankiness, Ros. I've got so much on my mind that I'd be mean to my old grandmother, if I had one, I guess likely. Don't let my meanness trouble you; it isn't worth trouble."

I laughed. "George," I said, "if I ever dreamed of such a thing as getting married myself, you would scare me out of it. You ought to be a happy man, and act like one; instead you act as if you were about to be jailed."

He caught his breath with a sort of gasp. Then, after a pause and without looking up, he asked slowly:

"Jailed? What in the world made you say that, Ros?"

"I said it because you act as if you were bound for state's prison instead of the matrimonial altar. George, what IS troubling you?"

"Troubling me? Why−−why, nothing special, of course. Catching up with my work here makes me nervous and−−and kind of absent−minded, I guess. Act absent−minded, don't I?"

He did, there was no doubt of that, but I did not believe it was his work which caused the absent−mindedness.

"If there is any trouble, George," I said, earnestly; "if you're in any difficulty, personally, I shall be very glad to help you, if I can. I mean that."

For a moment I thought he hesitated. Then he shook his head.

"I know you mean it, Ros," he answered. "I'm much obliged to you, too. But there's nothing to help me with. I'm just nervous and tired, that's all."

I did not believe it, but I felt that I had said all I could, considering his attitude. I bade him good night and left the building. As I came down the steps Miss Colton was just crossing the road from Eldredge's store, a good sized brown paper parcel in her hand.

Ever since the day when Captain Jed had given me his warning I had been strengthening my resolution. The remark of Mrs. Colton's which I had overheard on the night of the fishing trip, although it revealed to me, as I believed, my real standing in the minds of my neighbors, whatever they might pretend when in my company, was, after all, only a minor detail. I knew that I must break off my acquaintance with this girl. By all that was sensible and sane it must be broken off. I must not, for my own sake, continue to meet her, to see her and speak with her. No; I would avoid her if I could, but, at all events, I would break off the association, even if I were obliged to

offend her, deliberately offend her, to accomplish my purpose. I swore it; and then I swore at myself for being so weak−minded as to need to swear. That I should be afraid of a girl, a mere girl, ten years younger than I, who, as the casual pastime of an idle summer, had chosen to pretend an interest in me! I was not afraid of her, of course; I was afraid of myself. Not that I was in danger of falling in love with her−−that idea was too ridiculous to be even funny. But she was becoming a disturbing influence in my life−−that was it, a disturbing influence−−and I must not permit myself to be disturbed.

So now, as I saw the disturbing influence crossing the road in my direction, my first thought was to retreat to the bank. But it was too late to retreat; she had seen me, and she bowed pleasantly as she approached.

"Good afternoon," she said.

I bowed and admitted that the afternoon was a good one, conscious as I did so that Sim Eldredge had followed her to the door of his store and was regarding us with marked interest.

She exhibited the package. "I am acting as my own errand boy, you see," she said, smiling. "It was such a beautiful day that I refused to send any one for this, or even to ride. I did not realize that a few yards of muslin would make such a bundle. Now I must carry it, I suppose, in spite of appearances."

I believed I saw an opportunity to escape.

"I am going directly home," I said. "Let me carry it down for you. I will send it over to your house by Lute."

"Oh, no thank you. I could not think of troubling Mr. Rogers. But do you really want to carry it? You may, for a while. We will take turns. I am going directly home, too; and we will walk down together. Unless, of course, you are in a hurry."

I think it was the expression of my face which led her to add the last sentence. If I had had time to think, to summon my resolution, it is possible−−yes, it is possible that I should have declared myself to be in a hurry and gone on alone. But she had caught me unawares and resolution was wanting. I announced that I was in no hurry at all, and took the parcel.

We walked on together, she chatting easily, and I pretending to listen, although aware that our progress was watched by eager eyes and commented upon and exclaimed over by many tongues. The drawn shades of parlor windows moved significantly as we passed and, as we turned into the Lower Road, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Sim Eldredge and his clerk and Thoph Newcomb and Alvin Baker on the store platform, staring after us. As if this audience was not sufficient, and to make the affair complete, we met Captain Dean strutting importantly on his way to the post−office. He bowed and said "Afternoon," but the look he gave me was significant. There was surprise in it, and distrust. I knew I should have to do more explaining at our next meeting. And I knew, too, or could guess, what was being said that very moment at the store, and of the surmising and theorizing and strengthening of suspicions which would go on at a dozen supper tables that evening.

My companion, however, appeared to be quite unconscious of all this. That I might be suspected and misjudged because she had chanced to prefer my company to a walk home alone did not, evidently, occur to her. There was no reason why it should, of course; she was not in the position where the opinion or suspicions of Denboro's inhabitants need concern her in the least. But I, angry at Captain Jed for his look and with Sim Eldredge and his companions for their impudent stares and the trouble I knew their gossipy tongues would make for me, was gloomy and resentful.

She did most of the talking and I walked beside her, putting in a word occasionally and doing my best to appear as unconcerned as she really was. We crossed Elnathan Mullet's bridge and continued down the Shore Lane. Suddenly I was aware that she had not spoken for some minutes.

"Eh? Yes, Miss Colton; what is it?" I stammered. Then I realized that we were standing beside the granite posts marking the entrance to the Colton grounds. I had been so wrapped in my unpleasant thoughts and forebodings that we had reached our journey's end without my noticing it.

"Well!" I exclaimed, and then added the brilliant observation, "We are here, aren't we."

"We are," she said, dryly. "Didn't you know it?"

"Why, I had not realized. The walk has seemed so short."

"Yes, I'm sure it must. I think you have spoken exactly six words in the last five minutes. Will you come in?"

"Oh no; no, thank you."

"Why not? Father is in and will be glad to see you."

"I−−I must be getting on toward home. Supper will be ready."

She bit her lip. "Far be it from me to criticize your domestic arrangements, Mr. Paine," she said, "but it does seem to me that your housekeeper serves meals at odd hours. It is only a few minutes after four, by my watch."

She had me at a disadvantage. I imagined I must have appeared embarrassed. I know I felt that way.

"I did not realize . . . I thought it much later," I stammered.

"Then you will come in? Father will like to discuss the fishing with you, I know. He has talked of little but his wonderful weakfish ever since he caught it."

"No, thank you, Miss Colton. Really, I must not stop."

She took the parcel from my hands.

"Very well," she said, indifferently; "as you please. I thank you for your kindness in walking down with me. Good afternoon, Mr. Paine."

She turned away. Here was the opportunity I had been waiting for, the opportunity of breaking off our acquaintance. If I knew anything I knew the tone of that "Good afternoon" meant that, for some reason or other, she was offended, just as I had been certain I wished her to be. Here was the opportunity, Heaven sent, to rid my life of its disturbing influence. Just what I had prayed for had come to pass.

And so, to prove the sincerity of my prayers and the worth of my high resolve, I−−called her back.

"Miss Colton," I said.

She, apparently, did not hear me, so I called again.

"Miss Colton."

"Yes?"

"I seem somehow or other to have offended you." And even as I said it I realized the completeness of the back−down, realized it and blushed. I was ashamed of my weakness. Yet when she asked me to repeat my words I did so.

"You spoke to me?" she said, coldly.

"I−−I said I had not meant to offend you."

"Why should you imagine that I am offended, pray? You seem to think other people must necessarily regard you as seriously as you do yourself. I am not offended."

"But you are."

"Very well; then I am. We won't argue the matter; it is scarcely worth argument, is it?"

This observation called for no answer in particular, at least I could not think of one. While I was groping for a word she spoke again.

"Don't let me detain you, Mr. Paine," she said. "I am sure your−− supper, was it?−−must be waiting."

"Miss Colton, you−−you seem to resent my not accepting your invitation to visit your father. I assure you I−−I should be very glad to call upon him."

"Thank you. I will tell him so. He will be grateful, doubtless. Your condescension is overwhelming, Mr. Paine."

"Miss Colton, everything I say seems to be wrong this afternoon. I don't know what I have done. Twice you have spoken of my condescension."

Her foot was beginning to pat the grass. I recognized the battle signal, but I kept on.

"I don't understand what you mean by condescension," I said.

"Don't you, indeed? You are very dense all at once, Mr. Paine."

"Possibly. But I don't understand."

For an instant she hesitated. Then she turned on me with a gust of fierce impatience which took my breath away. Her eyes flashed.

"You do," she declared. "You do understand, I am not blind. Do you suppose I could not see that you wished to avoid me when I met you at the bank just now? That my company was neither welcome nor desired? That you accepted my suggestion of walking down together merely because you could think of no excuse for declining?"

This was a staggerer. And the worst of it was its truth.

"Miss Colton," I faltered, "I can't understand what you mean. I−−"

"You do understand. And please," with a scornful laugh, "oh, PLEASE understand that I am not troubled because of THAT. Your charming and cultivated society is not indispensable to my happiness, Mr. Paine, strange as that may appear to you. Really," with cutting contempt, "it is not."

"That I quite understand, Miss Colton," I said, "but−−"

"But you are like every one else in this horrid, narrow, bigoted place. Don't you suppose that I see it everywhere I go! Every one here hates us−−every one. We are intruders; we are not wanted here, and you all take pains to make us feel as uncomfortable as you can. Oh, you are all snobs−−all of you."

I actually gasped.

"Snobs!" I repeated. "We−−snobs?"

"Yes. That is exactly what you are. When Father came here he meant to be a citizen, a good citizen, of the town. He had intended to do all sorts of things to help the village and the people in it. He and I discussed ever so many plans for doing good here. And we wanted to be friendly with every one. But how have you treated us! No one comes to see us. We are avoided as if we had the small−pox. The majority of people scarcely speak to us on the street. I am so lonely and−−"

She stopped. I had never seen her so agitated. As for me, astonishment is much too mild a term to use in describing my feelings. That these people, these millionaires and aristocrats should feel that they had been avoided and slighted, that we Denboroites were the snobs, that THEY should be lonely because no one, or almost no one, came to call upon them−−this was too much for my bewildered brain to grasp all at once.

The young lady went on.

"And you!" she exclaimed. "You are as bad as the rest. Father has called upon you several times. I have called on your mother. Father and I have tried to be friendly and neighborly. Not that we are lacking in friends. We," haughtily, "are not obliged to BEG for friendship. But we felt it our duty to−−"

I interrupted. There is a limit to forbearance and I considered that limit reached.

"Miss Colton," I declared, "you are talking nonsense. Considering the manner in which your father treated me when we first met, I−−"

"How did you treat him? How did you treat Mr. Carver and me when you first met us in the auto? You insulted us. It was plain enough then that you hated us."

"I−−why, Miss Colton, I did not know who you were."

"Indeed! Would it have made any difference if you had known? I doubt it. No, you are like the rest of the people here. Because we have come from the city you have chosen to be as envious and petty and disagreeable as you can. Even Nellie Dean, whom I know better than any one here, has never returned my call. There is a concerted plan to make us feel we are neither welcome nor wanted. Very well," disdainfully, "we know it. I, for one, shall not force my presence upon any one of you again. And it is probable that I shall manage to exist even without the delights of Denboro society. Good−by, Mr. Paine."

"But, Miss Colton−−"

"Good−by."

"Miss Colton, listen to me. You are wrong, all wrong, I tell you. There is no plan or plot to make you feel uncomfortable. We are plain village people here, and you are wealthy and have been used to associating with those of your class. Every one in Denboro knew that when you came, and they have been shy of intruding where they might not be welcome. Then there was that matter of the Lane here."

"Oh, that precious Lane! I wish I had never seen it."

"I have wished that a number of times in the past few months. But it is here and the question overshadows everything else in the village just now. It does not seem of much importance to you, perhaps; perhaps it is not so very important to me; but−−"

Again she interrupted me.

"I think it is important enough to make you forget−−ordinary courtesy," she declared. "Yes, courtesy. DON'T look at me like that! You know what I mean. As I told you before, I am not blind. Do credit me with some intelligence. All the way during this cheerful walk of ours you scarcely spoke a word. Did you suppose I did not know what was troubling you? I saw how that Captain Dean looked at you. I saw those people staring from the post−office door. I knew what you were afraid of their saying: that you are altogether too companionable with Father and me; that you intend selling the land to us, after all. That is what you thought they would say and you were afraid−−AFRAID of their gossip. Oh, it is humiliating! And, for a time, I really thought you were different from the rest and above such things."

I began to feel as if I were once more a small boy receiving a lecture from the governess.

"I am not at all afraid of them, Miss Colton," I protested.

"You are. Why? Your conscience is clear, isn't it? You don't intend selling out to my father?"

"Certainly not."

"Then why should you care what people like that may think? Oh, you weary me! I admired you for your independence. There are few persons with the courage to face my father as you have done and I admired you for it. I would not have had you sell us the land for ANYTHING."

"You would not?" I gasped.

"Certainly not! I have been on your side all the time. If you had sold I should have thought you, like all the rest, holding back merely for a higher price. I respected you for the fight you were making. You must have known it. If I had not why do you suppose I gave you that hint about the Development Company?"

"Goodness knows!" I exclaimed, devoutly.

"And I was sure you could not be bribed by an offer of a position in Father's office. It was not really a bribe−−Father has, for some unexplainable reason, taken a fancy to you−−but I knew you would believe it to be bribery. That is why I was so positive in telling him that you would not accept. And now you−−oh, when I think of how I have LOWERED myself! How I have stooped to . . . But there! I am sure that supper of yours must be waiting. Pray condescend to convey my regrets to the faithful−−what is her name? Odd that I should forget a name like THAT. Oh, yes! Dorinda!−−Pray convey my regrets to the faithful Dorinda for being unwittingly the cause of the delay, and assure her that the offense will NOT be repeated. Good−by, Mr. Paine."

She walked off, between the granite posts and along the curved drive. This time I made no attempt to call her back. The storm had burst so unexpectedly and had developed into such a hurricane that I had had time to do little more than bend my head before it. But I had had time enough to grow angry. I would not have called her back then for the world. She had insulted me, not once only, but again and again. I stood and watched her go on her way, and then I turned and went on my own.

The parting had come. The acquaintance was broken off; not precisely as I had intended it to be broken, but broken, nevertheless, and ended for good and all. I was glad of it. There would be no more fishing excursions, no more gifts of flowers and books, no more charity calls. The "common fellow" was free from the disturbing influence and he was glad of it−−heartily glad of it.

Yet his gladness was not as apparent to others as it should, by all that was consistent, have been. Lute, evidently, observed no traces of transcendent happiness, when I encountered him in the back yard, beside the woodpile, sharpening the kindling hatchet with a whetstone, a process peculiarly satisfying to his temperament because it took such a long time to achieve a noticeable result.

"Hello, Ros!" he hailed. "Why! what ails you?"

"Ails me?" I repeated, crossly. "Nothing ails me, of course."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. You look as if you'd lost your last friend."

"I haven't lost any friends. Far from it."

"Nobody's dead, then?"

"No. Though I could find some who are half dead without trying very hard."

More perfectly good sarcasm wasted. Lute inquired eagerly if I meant old Mrs. Lobelia Glover. "I heard yesterday she was pretty feeble," he added. "'Tain't to be expected she'll last a long spell, at her age. Doctor Quimby says she had a spine in her back for twenty years."

I made no comment upon poor Mrs. Glover's surprising affliction. I merely grunted and went into the house. Dorinda looked at me curiously.

"What's the trouble?" she asked.

"Trouble! There isn't any trouble. You and Lute seem to be looking for trouble."

"Don't have to look far to find it, in this world. Anything wrong at the bank?"

"No."

"Um−hm. Settin' so long on the fence make you uneasy? I told you the pickets would wear through if you roosted on 'em too long."

"There is nothing the matter, I tell you. How is Mother?"

"She ain't any wuss. If 'twan't an impossibility I'd say she was better the last month than I'd seen her since she was took. Nellie Dean called on her this afternoon."

"Humph! I should think a next week's bride would be too busy to call on any one except possibly the dressmaker."

"Um−hm. Well, Nellie looks as if she'd been callin' on the dressmaker pretty often. Anyhow she looked worried and Olindy Cahoon's dressmakin' gabble is enough to worry anybody. She left a note for you."

"Who? Olinda?"

"Land sakes! no! What would Olindy be doin' down here? There ain't any brides to dress in this house, or bridegrooms either unless you're cal'latin' to be one, or Lute turns Mormon. That last notion ain't such a bad one," with a dry smile. "Another wife or two to help me take care of him would come in handy."

"Who did leave the note for me, then?"

"Nellie, of course. She wanted me to be sure you got it. Somethin' about that wonderful weddin', I s'pose. I left it upstairs on your bureau."

I found the note and put it in my pocket to read later on. I did not feel like reading it then. I did not feel like doing anything or seeing any one; yet least of all did I feel like being alone. For if I was alone I should think, and I did not want to think. I prowled about my room for a time and then went down and spent a short time with Mother. Her first question was concerning my day at the bank, and her second if I had seen any of the Coltons recently. "I rather hoped Miss Mabel would come to see me to−day," she added. "I look forward to her visits so, I think she's a real friend of ours, Roscoe. I know you don't, dear, or you try to believe you do not; but she is−−I am convinced of it. I wonder if she will come to−morrow."

I could have put a stop to her wondering on that subject, but I was in no mood to do it then. I went into the dining−room. Dorinda warned me not to go far from the house because supper would be ready in a few minutes. The word "supper" reminded me of my unfortunate choice of an excuse and the sarcastic reference to our odd domestic arrangements; which reminded me, in its turn, of other sarcasms which had followed it. My "charming and cultivated society" was not necessary to her happiness . . . When she thought of how she had lowered herself . . . Other people did not necessarily regard me as seriously as I did myself . . . And so on . . . until Dorinda called me in to sit at the table, and pretend to eat while she and Lute commented on my lack of appetite and my absent−mindedness.

It was eight o'clock, and I had gone up to my room to escape from their solicitude and pointed questioning, when I happened to think of Nellie's note. I had not been curious concerning its contents, for, as I had agreed to act as best man at the wedding, I assumed, as Dorinda had done, that she had written on that, to her, all−important topic. I took the note from my pocket and tore open the envelope.

Nellie had not written about the wedding. Her letter was a long one, evidently written in great agitation and with words blotted and underscored. Its subject was the man she loved, George Taylor. She was so anxious about him. Did I remember, that night when my mother was ill, how she had spoken of him to me and asked if I had noticed how troubled and worried he seemed of late?

"And, Roscoe," she wrote, "I have noticed it more and more since then. He IS in trouble. There is something on his mind, something that he will not tell me and that I can see is worrying him dreadfully. He is not like himself at all. I KNOW something is wrong, and I cannot find out what it is. I want to help him SO much. Oh, please, Roscoe, don't think this is just a foolish girl's imagination, and does not amount to anything. It does. I know it does. You are his best friend. Can't YOU find out what is troubling him and help him, for my sake? I have meant to speak to you about this ever so many times, but I seldom see you alone and I could not speak while he was with me. So I decided to write this letter. If you will try, just TRY to find out what ails him and help him I shall never, NEVER forget your kindness. Perhaps he does not want to marry me. Perhaps he does not care for me as much as he thought he did and will not tell me because he does not want me to feel bad. If that is it tell him not to mind my feelings at all. I want him to be happy. If it would make him happier to have me give him up I will do it, even though I shall pray to die right away. Oh can't you help him and me, Roscoe? Please, PLEASE try. A girl ought to be perfectly happy who is going to be married. And I am so miserable. I can't tell Mother and Father because they would not believe me. They would think I just imagined it all. But YOU won't think that, will you? You will see him and try to help him, for my sake."

And so on, eight closely written pages, ending with another plea to me to see "poor George" and help him, and begging me to "burn this letter, because I should be so ashamed to have any one else see it."

It was a pitiful letter and, even in the frame of mind I was then in, disgusted with humanity and hating the

entire feminine sex, I could not help feeling sorry for Nellie Dean. Of course I was surprised at receiving such a letter and I believed, just as she begged me not to believe, that the cause of her distress and anxiety was more imaginary than real. But that something was troubling George Taylor I had felt certain for a good while. The idea that he did not love Nellie I knew was preposterous. That was not it. There was something else, but what I could not imagine. I wanted to help the girl if I could, but how could I ask George to tell me his secrets? I, with a secret of my own.

After pondering for some time I decided to walk up to George's boarding place and talk with him. Nothing would come of the interview, probably, but I might as well do that as anything else. I must do something, something besides sit in that room and see mocking faces in every corner, faces with dark eyes and scornful lips which told me that my charming and cultivated society was not necessary to their happiness.

Taylor rented the upper floor of a house a quarter of a mile from the bank. His housekeeper answered my ring and informed me that her employer had not yet come home.

"He did not even come home for supper," she said. "Stayed over to Nellie's probably. You'll most likely find him there."

But I was pretty certain he was not at the Deans', for as I passed their house, I noticed the windows were dark, indicating that the family, like most of respectable Denboro, had already retired. I walked on to the Corners. Eldredge's store was closed, but the billiard room was radiant and noisy. I could hear Tim Hallet's voice urging some one to take a new cue, "'cause that one ain't pocketed many balls yet."

I looked across at the bank. The front portion of it was black enough, but the window of the directors' room was alight. I had located the object of my search; the cashier was there, working overtime, as he did so often nowadays.

I had my key in my pocket and I unlocked the big door and entered quietly. The door of the directors' room was open a little way and I tiptoed over and peeped in through the crack. Taylor was seated in a chair beside the big table, his elbows upon the table and his head in his hands. As I stood there, watching him, he took his hands away and I saw his face. Upon it was an expression of abject misery and utter despair. I opened the door and entered.

He heard the sound of the opening door and leaped to his feet. His chair fell backward on the floor with a clatter, but he paid no attention to it.

"Good God!" he cried, wildly. "Who's that?"

He was deathly pale and trembling violently. His appearance startled and alarmed me.

"It's all right," I said, hastily. "It is I−−Paine. I saw the light and knew you must be here. What ails you? What IS the matter?"

For a moment he stood there staring. Then he turned and picked up the fallen chair.

"Oh, it's you, Ros, is it?" he faltered. "I−−I−−Lord, how you scared me! I−−I−−"

"George! what IS the matter with you? For heaven's sake! stand up, man!" He was swaying and I thought he was going to faint. "George! George Taylor! Are you ill? I am going for the doctor."

"No, no! Stay where you are. I ain't sick. I'll be all right in a minute. You−−you scared me, creeping in that way. Sit down, sit down."

He steadied himself with one hand on the table and with the other reached to shut a drawer which had been open beside him. The drawer was almost full of papers, and, lying upon those papers, was a revolver.

CHAPTER XVI

Before he could close the drawer completely I caught his arm and held it.

"George," I cried, "George, what is the matter? Tell me; you must tell me."

He tried to pull his arm free. Finding that I would not let him do this he gave up the attempt and, with a poor attempt at a laugh, answered, "Matter? Why, nothing is the matter. I am tired and nervous, same as I've told you I've been for the last two or three months, and you scared me, tiptoeing in like a sneak thief, this time of night."

"Time of night! It is but a little after nine. What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing is the matter, I tell you. Let go of my arm, Ros. What do you mean by holding on to me like this?"

"What do YOU mean, George? What does THAT mean?"

I pointed to the drawer. He looked and, with a sudden effort, jerked his arm free and closed the drawer.

"That?" with a forced laugh. "Oh, that's nothing. It was late and I was alone here, so−−"

"I know better. George, you're frightening us all. Don't you suppose we can see that something is wrong with you? I have seen it ever since I came here to work. You are worrying your friends. You worry me. Give us a chance to help you. Give ME a chance. You owe me that. Tell me your trouble and I'll pull you out of it; see if I don't."

My confidence was, of course, only pretence, but my earnestness had some effect. He looked at me wistfully, and shook his head.

"Nobody can pull me out," he said. "You're a good fellow to want to help, but you can't. There ain't any trouble. I'm just nervous−−"

"I know better. You're lying, George. Yes, you are; you're lying."

"Humph! You're pretty plain spoken, Ros Paine. There ain't many people I'd take that from."

"You'll take it from me, because you can't help it and because you know it is true. Come, George; come. You have been a friend to me; the only real friend I have had in years. I have been looking for a chance to get even for what you have done for me. Maybe here is the chance. Let me help you. I will."

He was wavering; I could see it. But again he shook his head.

"Nobody can help me," he said.

"George, for my sake−−well, then, if not for my sake or your own, then for Nellie's, give me a chance. You aren't treating her right, George. You should think of her. You−−"

"Stop! Damn you, Ros Paine! what right have you to−−"

"The right of a friend, her friend and yours. You're frightening the poor girl to death. She is beginning to be afraid you don't care for her."

"I? I don't care for HER? I don't−− Oh, my God!"

To my utter amazement he began to laugh. And then, all at once, his laughter ceased, he swayed, choked, and, suddenly collapsing in the chair, dropped his head upon his arms on the table and sobbed, sobs that shook him from head to heel.

For one strong, healthy, normal man to see another cry is a disconcerting and uncomfortable experience. Masculine tears do not flow easily and poor George, on the verge of hysterics, was a pitiful and distressing spectacle. I was almost as completely disorganized as he. I felt ashamed for him and ashamed of myself for having seen him in such a condition. I wanted desperately to help him and I did not know what to do, so beyond patting him on the back and begging him repeatedly to brace up and not behave like that, I did nothing. At last his sobs ceased and he was silent. I had risen from my chair and now I stood there with a hand on his shoulder; the ticking of the ancient eight−sided clock on the wall sounded loud in the room.

Suddenly he sat up and threw off my hand.

"Well," he said, bitterly, "I'm a fine specimen of a man, ain't I. Ain't you proud of me?"

"I am mighty sorry for you," I answered. "And I mean to help you."

"You can't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I do know, Ros," he turned and looked me straight in the eye. "I am going to give you some good

advice. Take it, for your own sake. Clear out of here and leave me. Don't have anything more to do with me. Clear out."

I did not move.

"Are you going to do as I tell you?" he demanded. "Mind, I'm telling you this for your own good. Will you clear out and leave me?"

I smiled. "Of course not," I answered.

"Don't be a fool. You can't afford to be my friend. Clear out and leave me, do you hear?"

"I hear. Now, George, what is it?"

His fingers tapped the table. I could see he was making up his mind.

"You want to know?" he said. "You won't be satisfied until you do?"

"I have made that fairly plain, I hope. At least I've tried to."

His fist clenched and he struck the table.

"Then, by the Almighty, I'll tell you!" he cried, fiercely. "It'll be all over the county in a week. You might as well know it now. I'm a crook. I'm a thief. I've stolen money from this bank and I can't pay it back because I haven't got it and can't get it. I'm a crook, I tell you, and in a week or so it'll be the county jail for mine. Unless−−unless," with a significant glance at the drawer, "something else happens to me in the meantime. There; now you know. Are you satisfied? Are you happy because you've found out?"

I did not answer. To tell the truth I was not entirely overcome by surprise at the disclosure. I had begun to suspect something of the sort. Yet, now that my suspicions were confirmed, I was too greatly shocked and horrified to speak at once.

"Well?" he sneered. "Now will you clear out and let me settle this my own way?"

I pulled my chair forward and sat down.

"Tell me all about it, George," I said, as calmly as I could. "How much is it?"

He stared at me aghast. "You won't go?" he cried. "You−−you are going to stick by me even−−even−−"

"There! there! pull yourself together, old fellow. We won't give up the ship yet. How much is it? It can't be a great sum."

"It ain't. But, Ros−−you−−you can't−−you mustn't be mixed up in this. I shan't let you. Don't you see?"

I argued and pleaded and reasoned with him for what seemed a long time before he would consent to tell me the whole story. And when it was told there was nothing new or novel in it. The old tale of an honest man who had not meant to go wrong, but, tempted by one of those wiles of the devil, an "inside tip" on the stock market, had bought heavily on margins, expecting to clear a handsome profit in a short time. The stock was Louisville and Transcontinental and the struggle for its control by certain big interests had made copy for financial writers for nearly a year. George had bought at a time when one syndicate had, so it believed, secured the control.

Then something went wrong in the deal and the shares began to decline in value. He put up more margins and still more, but it continued to decline. Finally under the spur of another "tip," the last of his own savings having gone to the insatiate brokers, he sent, to bolster his account and to save him from utter ruin, some bonds belonging to the bank.

"Not much," he declared, "only about thirty−five hundred dollars' worth, that's all. I never would have done it, Ros, but I was wild, desperate, you see. Here I was, getting ready to be married; Nellie and Cap'n Jed and the rest believing me to be comfortably fixed. It's easy enough now to say that I ought to have gone to her and told her. If I hadn't been certain that the market would turn and I'd be all right in a week, I'd have done it. But I was sure I'd be all right and I couldn't take the chance. I knew what her father would say about her marrying a pauper, and I just couldn't take the risk of losing her; I couldn't. She means more to me than−−than−−oh, wait until your time comes! Wait until the girl comes along that you care for more than the whole world. And then see what you'd do. See what it would mean to give her up! Just wait−−wait and see!"

"Yes, yes," I put in, hastily. "I understand, George. But the stock, Louisville and Transcontinental, how is it now?"

"Just the same. It is dead, practically speaking. It hasn't moved half a point for six weeks. I've been expecting it would, but it hasn't. It's all right; the value is there; I know it. If I could only hang on and wait I could get my money back, part of it, anyhow. But I can't. I can't wait. And the broker people have got those bonds. Ros, I've been fighting this thing for weeks and weeks. I ain't slept a night for years, or so it seems. And next week−−next

WEEK I was to be married. My God! think of it!"

"Here, here! Don't do that," I urged. "Brace up. You and I must work this out. Wasn't there any one you could go to? Anyone you could borrow the money of? Thirty−five hundred isn't such a lot."

"Whom could I go to? I tried. Lord knows I tried! I did borrow a thousand of Cap'n Elisha Warren; trumped up some excuse or other and got that. But that was all he could let me have. And I know he thought my asking for that was queer."

"Did you consider going straight to Cap'n Dean and−−"

"Dean? Cap'n Jed? Her father? Oh, Ros, don't be a fool altogether! I beg your pardon, old man! I don't mean it. You mustn't mind. I ain't responsible for what I say just now. But I couldn't go to Cap'n Jed. You know him. He's as straight and square and honest as he is obstinate and cranky. If I went to him I couldn't tell him the truth. And if I lied he'd suspect and want to know why I needed to borrow money. And Nellie−−don't you see? There's the real awfulness of the whole thing. I couldn't go to her and tell her I was a thief. I couldn't see her face when I told her. And yet she's got to know it. She's got to know it!"

"But why? The stock may go up any day and then you could withdraw part of your margin."

He struck the table with another blow. "The stock ain't moved for six weeks, I tell you," he declared. "And, Ros," he leaned forward, his haggard face working with emotion, "those bonds ain't in our safe here, where they should be, and the bank examiner is due here within the next four days. He's at Middleboro now. I 'phoned Bearse, the cashier there, this very forenoon on a matter of business, and he happened to mention that the examiner was in his bank and working his way down the Cape. It's all up with me! All up! And Nellie! poor girl; I can't be here when she finds it out. I know you think I'm a poor specimen of a man, Ros, but I can't face the music. No," desperately, "and I won't."

He was giving way again, but I seized his shoulder and shook him.

"Stop it!" I commanded. "Stop it, George! Let me think. Be quiet now and let me think. There must be a way out somewhere. Let me think."

He leaned back in his chair. "All right," he said, hopelessly; "think, if you want to. Though why you should want to think about a thing like me I don't see. And I used to despise a crook as much as any one! and a coward still more! And now I'm both a crook and a coward."

I knew his cowardice was merely on Nellie's account. George Taylor was no coward in the ordinary sense of the word, nor was he a crook. I rose and paced up and down the room. He watched me listlessly; it was plain that he felt no confidence whatever in my being able to help him. After a time he spoke.

"It's no use, Ros," he said. "Don't worry your head about me; I ain't worth it. If there was any way out, any way at all, I'd have sighted it long ago. There ain't. Take my advice and leave me. You don't want to be mixed up with an embezzler."

I turned on him, impatiently. "I have been mixed up, as you call it, with one before," I said, sharply. "Is my own family record so clean that I need to pretend−−there, George! don't be an idiot. Let me think."

The clock chimed ten. I stopped in my walk and turned to him.

"George," I said, "tell me this: If you had the money to buy back these bonds belonging to the bank you would be all right, wouldn't you? If you had it in your hands by to−morrow morning, I mean."

"Yes; IF I had it−−but I haven't."

"You could send the money to the brokers and−−"

"Send! I wouldn't send; I'd go myself and fetch the bonds back with me. Once I had them in that safe again I−−"

"And you would not take any more risks, even if the market dropped and they had to sell out your account? Even if you lost every cent of your investment?"

The fierce earnestness of his answer satisfied even me. "What do you think I am?" he demanded. "Investment be hanged! It's my name as an honest man that I care about. Once let me get that back again and I'll face the poorhouse. Yes, and I'll tell Nellie the truth, all except that I was a thief; I can't tell her that. But I will tell her that I haven't got a cent except my salary. Then if she wants to give me up, all right. I'll bear it as best I can. Or, if she doesn't, and I lose my job here, I'll get another one somewhere else; I'll work at anything. She and I can wait and . . . But what is the use of talking like this? I've been over every inch of the ground a thousand times. There ain't a ray of light anywhere. The examiner will be here, the bonds will be missing, and I−−I'll be in jail, or in hell, one

or the other."

"No, you won't," I said, firmly.

"I won't! Why not?"

"Because there IS a ray of light. More than a ray. George, you go home and go to bed. To−morrow morning I may have news for you, good news."

The blood rushed to his face. He seized the arm of his chair.

"Good news!" he gasped. "Good news for ME! Ros−−Ros, for the Lord's sake, what do you mean? You don't mean you see a way to−−"

"Never mind what I mean. But I should like to know what you mean by not coming to me before? What are friends for, if not to help each other? Who told you that I was dead broke?"

"You? Why, you ain't got . . . Have you? Ros Paine, you ain't got thirty−five hundred to spare. Why, you told me yourself−−"

"Shut up! Get up from that chair and come with me. Yes, you; and now, this minute. Give me that thing you've got in the drawer there. No, I'll take it myself. You ought to be ashamed of its being there, George. I am ashamed of you, and, if I thought you really meant to use it, I should be still more ashamed. Come! don't keep me waiting."

"But−−but Ros−−"

"Will you do as I tell you?"

I dragged him, almost literally dragged him, from the chair. Then, after extinguishing the lamp, I led him to the door of the bank and locked it, putting the key in my pocket.

"Now," said I, "I want you to make me a promise. I want you to quit behaving like a coward, because you are not one, and promise me that you will go straight home and to bed. I'll see you again the first thing in the morning. Then, I think−−yes, I think your troubles, the worst part of them, will be over."

"But, Ros, PLEASE−−I can't believe it! Won't you tell me−−"

"Not a word. Will you promise me to behave like a man and go home? Or must I go with you?"

"No. I'll−−I'll promise. I'll go straight home. But, oh Ros, I can't understand−−"

"Good night."

I left him standing there, stammering incoherently like a man awakening from a nightmare, and hurried away.

I could not describe my progress down the dark Lower Road and along the Shore Lane. I do not remember any portion of it. I think I ran most of the way and if I met any one−−which is not likely, considering the time−−he or she must have thought me crazy. My thoughts were centered upon one fixed purpose. I had made up my mind to do a certain thing and, if possible, to do it that very night. If I did not, if I had time in which to reflect, to consider consequences, I might lose my nerve and it would not be done at all.

It was with a feeling of great relief that, as I came in sight of the Colton house, I saw lights in the rooms on the lower floor. The family, not being native born Denboroites, had not retired even though it was well after ten. I hastened up the long drive, and stood before the big door, my hand upraised to the knocker. And then, just for a moment, I hesitated.

If I lifted that knocker and let it fall; if I summoned the servant and announced that I wished to speak with Mr. Colton; if I did what I had come there to do, it would be all over with me in the village. My new born popularity, the respect which Cap'n Warren and Cap'n Jed and the rest of the townspeople had shown toward me of late, the cordial recognition which had been mine during the past few weeks and which, in spite of pretended indifference, I had come to expect and enjoy, all these would be lost if I persisted in my purpose. My future in Denboro depended upon whether or not I knocked at that door. And it was not too late to back out, even yet. I had only to turn quietly away and tell George, when I saw him in the morning, that I could not help him as I had hoped. And then I thought of his face as I saw it when I entered the bank−−and of Nellie's letter to me.

I seized the knocker and rapped sharply.

For a few moments my knock was unanswered. Then I heard footsteps and the door was opened. Johnson, the butler, opened it, and his clerical countenance assumed a most astonished expression when he saw me standing before him.

"Is Mr. Colton in?" I asked.

"What? What−−sir?" stammered Johnson. The "sir" was added under protest. He did not wish to show more

respect than was absolutely necessary to a countryman, but he scarcely dared speak as disrespectfully as he felt. Therefore he compromised by voicing the respect and looking the other way.

"Is Mr. Colton in?" I repeated.

"I don't know. I−−I don't think so−−sir."

The windows at my left were, I knew, those of the library, the room where "Big Jim" and I had had our first lively discussion of the Shore Lane matter. I glanced at them.

"I think he is," I said. "In fact I know it; there is his shadow on the curtain. Tell him Mr. Paine wishes to speak with him."

Johnson looked as insolent as he dared, and still hesitated.

"It is very late," he said. "Mr. Colton is not in the 'abit of receiving callers at this time of night and−−"

He was interrupted. The door behind him, the door leading from the library to the hall, opened and Colton himself appeared.

"What is it, Johnson?" he asked. "Anything wrong?"

The butler hastened to explain.

"No sir," he said; "nothing wrong exactly, sir. There is a person 'ere to see you, sir, and−−"

"To see me, eh? Who is it? Why, hello, Paine! is that you?"

"Mr. Colton," said I, "I am sorry to disturb you at such a late hour, but−−"

"Come in, come in," he interrupted. "What are you standing out there for? Johnson, why didn't you ask Mr. Paine in? What do you mean by keeping him out there?"

Mr. Johnson looked troubled.

"It was so late, sir," he stammered, "I thought−−"

"You thought! If I had wanted any one to think I never should have hired you. Come in, Paine. Come into the library."

He led the way to the library and I followed him. It was my second visit to the big, handsomely furnished room and again, as on the first occasion, the sight of the books and all the other refinements and luxuries which money brings to its possessor gave me a pang of envy and resentment. It added increased bitterness to the humiliation of my errand. I had left that room defiantly expressing my independence. I had come back to it−−"

"Sit down," ordered Colton, pulling forward the big, leather− covered chair. "Have a cigar?"

"No thank you."

"Humph! That's what you said when you were here before. You're young, Paine. When you get to be as old as I am you'll never refuse a good cigar, or anything else that is good, when it is offered you. Well, you're still standing. Aren't going to refuse to sit down, are you?"

That was exactly what I was going to do. I would not sit down in that house. I would not accept the slightest courtesy from this man or any of his people. I would get rid of the unpleasant task I had come to do and then go away, never to return. They might make the most of the triumph which was to be theirs, but I would compel them to understand that I was not seeking their favor. I would not accept their patronage and they should know it. This, as I look back at it now, seems silly and childish enough, but I was not myself that night.

"Mr. Colton," said I, ignoring the proffered chair, "I have come to see you on a matter of business."

"Business, eh? Umph! I thought probably you were going to ask me to go fishing with you again. I'm all ready for another tussle with those−−what do you call 'em−−squid−−squit−−good Lord! what a name for a decent fish! But I don't care a continental what you call 'em. I'm ready to get at 'em when you say the word."

"My business will not detain either of us long. I−−"

"Sit down, man, sit down. You make me nervous standing there."

"No. I won't sit."

He looked at me.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked. "You haven't got a balky digestion, have you? I've been fighting one for the last week. That fool of a country doctor tells me if I'm not careful what I eat I'll keel over pretty soon. I told him I'd eaten what I dashed please ever since I'd had teeth and I wasn't going to quit now. But I do feel like the devil. Look it, don't I?"

He did look ill, that was a fact, though I had not noticed it before and was far from feeling pity for him then. In fact I was rather glad to know that he was uncomfortable. I wanted him to be.

"What is the matter with you?" he demanded. "You look as if you had seen your grandmother's ghost."

I ignored the question. "Mr. Colton," I began again. "You made an offer not long ago."

I had caught his attention at last. He leaned back in his chair.

"I did," he said. "Ye−es, I did. Do you mean you are going to accept it?"

"In a way−−yes."

"In a way? What do you mean by that? I tell you frankly, Paine, if you go to work for me there must be no 'ifs' or 'buts' about it. You'll enter my office and you'll do as I, or the men under me, tell you to do."

I was glad he said that, glad that he misunderstood me. It gave me an opportunity to express my feelings toward him−−as I was feeling then.

"Don't let that trouble you," I said, sarcastically. "There will be no 'ifs' and 'buts' so far as that is concerned. I have no desire to work for you, Mr. Colton, and I don't intend doing so. That was not the offer I meant."

He was surprised, I am sure, but he did not express astonishment. He bent forward and looked at me more keenly than ever.

"There was only one other offer that I remember making you," he said, slowly. "That was for that land of yours. I offered you five thousand dollars for it. Do you mean you accept that offer?"

"Not exactly."

"Humph! Paine, we're wasting a lot of time here, it seems to me. My time is more or less valuable, and my digestion is, as I told you, pretty bad. Come! get it over. What do you mean? Are you going to sell me that land?"

"Yes."

He puffed deliberately at his cigar. His gaze did not leave my face.

"Why?" he asked, after a moment.

"That is my own affair. I will sell you the land, but not for five thousand dollars."

His expression changed. He knocked the ashes from his cigar and frowned.

"I see," he sneered. "Humph! Well, I've tried to make it plain to you fellows down here that I couldn't be held up. I thought I'd done it, but evidently I haven't. Five hundred is a good price for that land. Five thousand is ridiculous, but I gave you my reasons for being willing to be robbed that much. That, however, is the limit. I'll give you five thousand, but not another cent. You can take it or get out."

This was better. When he talked like that I could answer him and enjoy it.

"I'll get out very shortly," I said. "You are no more anxious to have that happen than I am. I don't want your other cent. I don't want your five thousand dollars. I'll sell you the land on one condition−−no, on two. The first is that you pay me thirty−five hundred dollars for it."

"WHAT?"

I had upset his composure this time. He forgot to sneer; he even forgot to smoke.

"What?" he cried again. "Thirty−five hundred! Why, I offered you−−"

"I know your offer. This is mine: I will sell you the land for thirty−five hundred, and not another cent. That, as you say, is the limit. You can take it or−−or I will follow your suggestion and get out."

We looked at each other. His fingers moved toward the match box on the table. He took a match, scratched it, and held it to the end of his cigar. Then he took the cigar from his lips, blew out the match and tossed the latter into the fireplace.

"What is the second condition?" he asked, abruptly.

"That you pay me in cash, in money and not by check, at once."

"At once? Now, do you mean?"

"Yes, now. To−night if possible; if not, no later than nine o'clock to−morrow morning."

"Humph! Do you think I carry thirty−five hundred loose in my change pocket?"

"I don't know. But that is the second condition."

"Humph! . . . Look here, Paine; what−−? I offered you the five thousand. That offer holds good."

"I don't accept it. I will sell for thirty−five hundred; no more and no less."

"But why not more?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do, too. You said once that you were willing to pay forty−five hundred for the privilege of having your own way. Perhaps I am willing to sacrifice fifteen hundred for the privilege of having mine. At all events I mean what I say."

"But why just thirty−five? Wouldn't you take thirty−six?"

"No. It is useless to argue, Mr. Colton, and useless to ask my reasons. I have them, and that is enough. Will you accept MY offer?"

He hesitated. The sneer had left his face and his tone when he addressed me was respectful, though there was a curious note of chagrin or dissatisfaction in it. I had expected him to be eager and, perhaps, mockingly triumphant. He was not. He seemed reluctant, almost disappointed.

"I suppose I'll have to," he said. "But, Paine, what is up? Why are you doing this? You're not afraid of me? No, of course you're not. You're not the kind to squeal and lie down because you think the odds are against you . . . Confound you!" with a sudden burst of impatience, "you are enough to upset all the self−conceit a man's got in him. Just as I think I'm beginning to size you up you break loose in a new place."

"Pardon me," I put in, "but I don't see that you are helping to save that valuable time of yours. I understand that you accept. Will you pay me now?"

He rose, threw away his cigar, and, with his hands in his pockets, stood regarding me.

"Your mind is made up, is it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Humph! Have you thought of what our mutual friend Dean and the rest of the patriots may say when they find this out?"

I had thought of little else all the way from the bank to his door. I was thinking of it then.

"Of course," he added, "that is not my affair, but−−"

"It is not."

"You're right; it isn't. Still−−hang it all, Paine! I don't often feel any compunctions when I beat a fellow in a game like this, and I did intend to have my own way in this one−−"

"Well, you're having it, aren't you?" I put in. "Why talk so much about it?"

"Because I am not so sure I am having it. Of course I can see that, for some reason or other, you need thirty−five hundred dollars. Anyone but you, if they were going to sell, would get the last dime they could squeeze. You won't, because you are as pig− headed as−−as−−"

"Oh, do cut it short," I snapped. And then, a trifle ashamed of my rudeness, "Excuse me, Mr. Colton, but this isn't exactly pleasant for me and I want to get it over. Will you pay me now?"

"Hold on; let me finish. I was going to say that, if you needed the thirty−five, perhaps I could manage to let you have it."

I stared at him. "Let me have it!" I cried. "Do you mean you'll lend it to me?"

"Why, yes, maybe. You and I have had such a first−rate, square, stand up fight that I rather hate to have it end. I want to lick you, not have you quit before I've really begun to fight. There's no fool philanthropy in this, understand; it is just for my own satisfaction."

I was so taken aback by this totally unexpected offer from the man whom I had insulted a dozen times since I entered his house, that I found it almost impossible to answer.

"What do you say?" he asked.

"No," I faltered. And then more firmly, "No; certainly not. I−−I am much obliged to you, Mr. Colton, but−−no."

"All right. You know best. I'll take your offer and I will hand you the money at the bank to−morrow morning. Will that do?"

"Not at the bank, Mr. Colton. Send it over to the house, if you can conveniently."

"I'll have it here before ten. My lawyer will draw up the papers and arrange for transfer of title in a few days. What? Going, are you? Good night. Oh−−er−−Paine, remember that my other offer, that of the place in my office, is open when you're ready to take it."

I shook my head. I had turned to go, but now I turned back, feeling that, perhaps, I should apologize again for my rudeness. After all, he had been kind, very kind, and I had scarcely thanked him. So I turned back to say something, I hardly knew what.

My doing so was a mistake. The door behind me opened and a voice said reproachfully, "Father, are you still here? The doctor said . . . Oh, I beg pardon."

I recognized the voice. Of all voices in the world I wished least to hear it just then. My back was toward the

door and I kept it so. If she would only go! If she would only shut that door and go away!

I think she would have gone but her father called her.

"Mabel," he cried, "Mabel, don't go. It's all right. Come in. Paine and I have finished our talk. Nothing more you wished to say, was there, Paine?"

"No," said I. I was obliged to turn now; I could not get out of that room without doing it. So turn I did, and we faced each other.

"Good evening, Miss Colton," I said, with all the calmness I could muster.

She said, "Good evening," distantly and without any enthusiasm, but I saw her glance at her father and then at me and I knew she was wondering what our being together could possibly mean.

"Paine has been making me a little call," explained Colton, his eye twinkling. "Mabel, I'll risk another bet that you can't guess why he came."

"I shall not try," she said, disdainfully.

"Oh, you'd better! No? You won't? Well, then, I'll tell you. He has just sold me that land of his . . . Don't look at me like that; he has. We had a little disagreement as to price, but," with a grin, "I met his figures and we closed the deal. Aren't you going to congratulate him on having come to his senses at last? Come! he's waiting for congratulations."

This was not true. I was waiting for nothing; I was on my way to the door. But, to reach it I was obliged to pass her and our eyes met. My glance wavered, I know, but hers did not. For a moment she looked at me. Then she smiled. Whenever I am tempted to be vain, even now, I remember that smile.

"I congratulate him," she said. "Come, Father; you must go to bed now."

CHAPTER XVII

I am not going to attempt a description of my thoughts that night. It would take too long and the description would be wearisome. Other people's miseries are not interesting and I shall not catalog mine. Morning came at last and I rose, bathed my hot face in cold water, and went down stairs. Early as it was, not yet six, I heard Dorinda in the kitchen and, having no desire for conversation, I went out and walked up and down the beach until breakfast time. I had to pretend to eat, but I ate so little that both Lute and Dorinda once more commented upon my lack of appetite. Lute, who had never become fully reconciled to my becoming a member of the working class, hastened to lay the blame for my condition upon my labors at the bank.

"The trouble is," he announced, dogmatically, "the trouble is, Roscoe, that you ain't fitted for bein' shut up astern of a deck. Look at yourself now! Just go into Comfort's room and stand in front of her lookin' glass and look at yourself. There you be, pale and peaked and wore out. Look for all the world just as I done when I had the tonsils two winters ago. Ain't that so, Dorindy?"

His wife's answer was a contemptuous sniff.

"If you mean to say that you looked peaked when you had sore throat," she announced, "then there's somethin' the matter with your mind or your eyesight, one or t'other. You peaked? Why, your face was swelled up like a young one's balloon Fourth of July Day. And as for bein' pale! My soul! I give you my word I couldn't scurcely tell where your neck left off and the strip of red flannel you made me tie 'round it begun."

"Don't make no difference! I FELT pale, anyhow. And I didn't eat no more'n Ros does. You'll have to give in to that, Dorindy. I didn't eat nothin' but beef tea and gruel."

"You et enough of them to float a schooner."

"Maybe I did," with grieved dignity; "maybe I did. But that's no reason why you should set there and heave my sufferin's in my face."

"What is the man talkin' about now? I didn't heave 'em in your face. They come there themselves, same as sore throat sufferin's generally do, and if you hadn't waded around in the snow with leaky boots, because you was too lazy to take 'em to the shoemaker's to be patched, they wouldn't."

Lute drew back from the table. "It's no use!" he declared, "a man can't even be sick in peace in this house. Some wives would have been sorry to see their husbands with one foot in the grave."

"Your feet was in the cookstove oven most of the time. There! there! the more you talk the further from home you get. You started in with Roscoe and the bank and you're in the grave already. If I was you I'd quit afore I went any further. Land knows where you might fetch up if you kept on! I . . . Mercy on us! who's at the kitchen door this time in the mornin'?"

Her husband, ever curious, was on his way to answer the knock already. He came back, a moment later, sputtering with excitement.

"It's that Mr. butler, the Johnson over to Mr. Colton's," he whispered. "I mean it's that Jutler−−that−− There, Dorindy! you see what sort of a state your hectorin' has worked me into! It's that parson critter who opens Colton's door for him, that's who 'tis. And he wants to see Ros. I tried to find out what for, but he wouldn't tell."

Even Dorinda showed surprise. She looked at the clock, "This hour of the mornin'!" she exclaimed; "what in the world−−?"

I hastened to the kitchen, closing the dining−room door behind me just in time to prevent Lute's following me. Johnson, the butler, was standing on the mica slab at the threshold inspecting our humble premises with lofty disdain.

"Mr. Colton sent this to you, sir," he said, handing me an envelope. "He wishes you to send a receipt by me."

I took the envelope and, stepping back out of sight, tore it open. Inside was a check on a New York bank for four thousand dollars. It was made payable to "Bearer." With it was this brief note:

Dear Paine:

This is the best I can do for you, as I haven't the money on hand. Cash it yourself, take out your thirty−five hundred and hold the additional five hundred until I, or one of the family, call for it. I made the thing payable to Bearer because I imagined you would prefer it that way. Send me some sort of receipt by Johnson; anything will

do. I will see my lawyer in a day or two. Meanwhile have your papers, deeds, etc., ready when he calls for them.

Yours truly,

JAMES W. COLTON.

For a minute I considered. If I could cash the check at the bank without Taylor's knowledge and get him off to Boston on the early train, I might be able to cover my tracks. It was necessary that they should be covered. Knowing George as I did I knew that he would never consent to my sacrifice. He would not permit me to wreck my future in Denboro to save him. The money must be turned over to the Boston bankers and the bank's bonds once more in the vault where they belonged before he learned where that money came from. Then it would be too late to refuse and too late to undo what had been done. He would have to accept and I might be able to prevail upon him to keep silent regarding the whole affair. I disliked the check with Colton's name upon it; I should have much preferred the cash; but cash, it seemed, could not be had without considerable delay, and with that bank examiner's visit imminent every moment of time was valuable. I folded the check, put it in my pocketbook, and, hastily scribbling a receipt in pencil at the bottom of Colton's note, replaced the latter in the envelope and handed it to Johnson, who departed.

Entering the dining−room I found Dorinda and Lute at the window, peering after the butler.

"By time!" exclaimed Lute, "if I didn't know I should say he was a bigger big−bug than old Colton himself. Look how he struts! He sartin is a dignified lookin' man. I don't see how he ever come to be just hired help."

"Um−hm," sniffed the cynical Mrs. Rogers. "Well; you can get an awful lot of dignity for its board and lodgin'! There's nothin' much more dignified or struts much better'n a rooster, but it's the hens that lay the eggs. What did he want, Roscoe?"

I made some excuse or other for Mr. Johnson's early call and, taking my cap from the rack, hurried from the house. I went "across lots" and, running a good part of the way, reached the bank just as Sam Wheeler was sweeping out. He expressed surprise at my early arrival and wished to know what was up.

"Ain't nothin' wrong, is there, Ros?" asked Sam anxiously. "I saw by the paper that the market was feverish again yesterday."

Sam was an ambitious youth and, being desirous of becoming a banker in the shortest possible time, read the financial page with conscientious thoroughness. I assured him that the market's fever was not contagious−−at least I had not contracted the disease−−and sent him out to sweep the front steps. As soon as he had gone I opened the safe, found, to my joy, that we had an abundance of currency on hand, cashed the Colton check and locked it securely in the drawer of my own desk. So far I was safe. Now to secure George's safety.

He came in soon after, looking as if, as he had told me, he had not slept for years. He bade Sam good morning and then walked over to my side.

"Well, Ros?" he asked, laying a shaking hand on the desk beside me.

"Not here, George," I whispered. "Come into the directors' room."

I led the way and he followed me. I closed the door behind us, took the thirty−five hundred dollars in notes from my pocket and laid them on the table.

"There's the money, George," I said. "Now you've got just time enough to catch that nine o'clock train for Boston."

I thought, for a moment, he was going to collapse altogether. Then he pounced upon the money, counted it with fingers that trembled so he could scarcely control them, and turned to me.

"Ros−−Ros−−" he stammered. "Where did you−−how did you−−Great God, man! I−−I−−"

"There! there!" I interrupted. "I told you I wasn't a pauper exactly. Put that where you won't lose it and clear out. You haven't any time to argue."

"But−−but, Ros, I hadn't ought to take this from you. I don't see where you got it and−−"

"That's my business. Will you go?"

"I don't know as I ever can pay you. Lord knows I'll try all my life, but−−"

I seized his arm. "George," I urged, impatiently, "you fool, don't waste time. Get that train, do you hear! Those bonds must be in that safe by night. Go!"

The mention of the bonds did what my urging had failed to do. He crammed the bills into his pocket book, thrust the latter into an inside pocket, and rushed from the room. I followed him as far as the outer door. He was running up the road like a wild man. Sam stared after him.

"For mercy sakes!" he cried, "what's the matter with the boss? Has he gone loony?"

"No," I said, turning back to my desk; "he's sane enough, I guess. He's after the train."

"I should think he was after somethin'. Did you see the face he had on him? If he ain't crazy then you and I are, that's all I've got to say."

"All right, Sam," I answered, drawing a long breath, "perhaps that's it. Perhaps you and I are the crazy ones−−one of us, at any rate."

All that day I worked hard. I did not go home for lunch, but sent Sam over to Eldredge's store for canned ham and crackers which I ate at my desk. It was a fairly busy day, fortunately, and I could always find some task to occupy my mind. Lute called, at two o'clock, to inquire why I had not been home and I told him that Taylor was away and I should be late for supper. He departed, shaking his head.

"It's just as I said," he declared, "you're workin' yourself sick, that's what you're doin'. You're growin' foolish in the head about work, just the same as Dorindy. And YOU don't need to; you've got money enough. If I had independent means same as you've got I tell you I'd have more sense. One sick invalid in the family's enough, ain't it?"

"No doubt, Lute," I replied. "At all events you must take care of your health. Don't YOU work yourself sick."

Lute turned on me. "I try not to," he said, seriously; "I try not to, but it's a hard job. You know what that wife of mine is cal'latin' to have me do next? Wash the hen house window! Yes sir! wash the window so's the hens can look at the scenery, I presume likely. I says to her, says I, 'That beats any foolishness ever I heard! Next thing you'll want me to put down a carpet in the pigsty, won't ye? You would if we kept a pig, I know.'"

"What did she say to that?" I inquired.

"Oh, the land knows! Somethin' about keepin' one pig bein' trouble enough. I didn't pay much attention. But I shan't wash no hen's window, now you can bet on that!"

I shouldn't have bet much on it. He went away, to spend the next hour in a political debate at Eldredge's, and I wrote letters, needlessly long ones. Closing time came and Sam went home, leaving me to lock up. The train was due at six−twenty, but it was nearly seven before I heard it whistle at the station. I stood at the front window looking up the road and waiting.

I waited only a few minutes, but they were long ones. Then I saw George coming, not running this time, but walking with rapid strides. The crowd, waiting on the post−office steps, shouted at him but he paid no attention. He sprang up the steps and entered the bank. I stepped forward and seized his hand. One look at his face was enough; he had the bonds, I knew it.

"Ros, you here!" he exclaimed. "Is it all right? The examiner hasn't showed up?"

"No," I answered. "You have them, George?"

"Right in my pocket, thank the Lord−−and you, Ros Paine. Just let me get them into that safe and I−− What! You're not going?"

"Yes, I'm going. I congratulate you, George. I am as glad as you are. Good night."

"But Ros, I want to tell you about it. I want to thank you again. I never shall forget . . . Ros, hold on!"

But I was already at the door. "Good night," I called again, and went out. I went straight home, ate supper, spent a half hour with Mother, and then went to my room and to bed. The excitement was over, for good or bad the thing was done beyond recall, and I suddenly realized that I was very tired. I fell asleep almost immediately and slept soundly until morning. I was too tired even to think.

I had plenty of time to think during the fortnight which followed and there was enough to think about. The lawyer came and the papers were signed transferring to James W. Colton the strip of land over which Denboro had excited itself for months. Each day I sat at my desk expecting Captain Dean and a delegation of indignant citizens to rush in and denounce me as a traitor and a turncoat. Every time Sam Wheeler met me at my arrival at the bank I dreaded to look him in the face, fearing that he had learned of my action and was waiting to question me about it. In spite of all my boasts and solemn vows not to permit "Big Jim" Colton to obtain the Shore Lane I had sold it to him; he could, and it was to be expected that he would, close it at once; Denboro would make its just demand upon me for explanations, explanations which, for George and Nellie's sake, I could not give; and after that the deluge. I was sitting over a powder mine and I braced myself for the explosion.

But hours and days passed and no explosion came. The fishcarts rattled down the Lane without hindrance. Except for the little flurry of excitement caused by the coming wedding at the Dean homestead the village life

moved on its lazy, uneventful jog. I could not understand it. Why did Colton delay? He, whose one object in life was to have his own way, had it once more. Now that he had it why didn't he make use of it? Why was he holding back? Out of pity for me? I did not believe it. Much more likely that his daughter, whose pride I had dared to offend, had taken the affair in her hands and this agony of suspense was a preliminary torture, a part of my punishment for presuming to act contrary to her imperial will.

I saw her occasionally, although I tried my best not to do so. Once we passed each other on the street and I stubbornly kept my head turned in the other direction. I would risk no more looks such as she had given me when, in response to her father's would−be humorous suggestion, she had offered me her "congratulations." Once, too, I saw her on the bay, I was aboard the Comfort, having just anchored after a short cruise, and she went by in the canoe, her newest plaything, which had arrived by freight a few days before. A canoe in Denboro Bay was a distinct novelty; probably not since the days of the Indians had one of the light, graceful little vessels floated there, and this one carried much comment among the old salts alongshore. It was the general opinion that it was no craft for salt water.

"Them things," said Zeb Kendrick, sagely, "are all right for ponds or rivers or cricks where there ain't no tide nor sea runnin'. Float anywheres where there's a heavy dew, they say they will. But no darter of mine should go out past the flats in one of 'em if I had the say. It's too big a risk."

"Yup; well, Zeb, you ain't got the say, I cal'late," observed Thoph Newcomb. "And it takes more'n say to get a skiff like that one. They tell me the metal work aboard her is silver−plated−−silver or gold, I ain't sure which. Wonder the old man didn't make it solid gold while he was about it. He'd do anything for that girl if she asked him to. And she sartin does handle it like a bird! She went by my dory t'other mornin' and I swan to man if she and the canoe together wan't a sight for sore eyes. I set and watched her for twenty minutes."

"Um−−ye−es," grunted Zeb. "And then you charged the twenty minutes in against the day's work quahaugin' you was supposed to be doin' for me, I suppose."

"You can take out the ten cents when you pay me−−if you ever do," said Newcomb, gallantly. "'Twas wuth more'n that just to look at her."

The time had been when I should have agreed with Thoph. Sitting in the canoe, bare−headed, her hair tossing in the breeze, and her rounded arms swinging the light paddle, she was a sight for sore eyes, doubtless. But it was not my eyes which were sore, just then. I watched her for a moment and then bent over my engine. I did not look up again until the canoe had disappeared beyond the Colton wharf.

I did not tell Mother that I had sold the land. I intended to do so; each morning I rose with my mind made up to tell her, and always I put off the telling until some other time. I knew, of course, that she should be told; that I ought to tell her rather than to have her learn the news from others as she certainly would at almost any moment, but I knew, too, that even to her I could not disclose my reason for selling. I must keep George's secret as he had kept mine and take the consequences with a close mouth and as much of my old indifference to public opinion as I could muster. But I realized, only too well, that the indifference which had once been real was now only pretense.

I have said very little about George Taylor's gratitude to me, nor his appreciation of what I had done for him. The poor fellow would have talked of nothing else if I had let him.

"You've saved my good name and my life, Ros," he said, over and over again, "and not only my life, but what is a mighty sight more worth saving, Nellie's happiness. I don't know how you did it; I believe yet that there is something behind all this, that you're keeping something from me. I can't see how, considering all you've said to me about your not being well−off, you got that money so quick. But I know you don't want me to talk about it."

"I don't, George," I said. "All I ask of you is just to forget the whole thing."

"Forget! I shan't forget while I live. And, as soon as ever I can scrape it together, I'll pay you back that loan."

He had kept his word, so far as telling Nellie of his financial condition was concerned. He had not, of course, told her of his use of the bank bonds, but he had, as he said he would, told her that, in all probability, he should be left with nothing but his salary.

"I told her she was free to give me up," he said, with emotion, "and what do you suppose she said to me? That she would marry me if she knew she must live in the poorhouse the rest of her days. Yes, and be happy, so long as we could be together. Well, I ain't worth it, and I told her so, but I'll do my best to be worth something; and she shan't have to live in the poorhouse either."

"I don't think there's much danger of that," I said. "And, by the way, George, your Louisville and Transcontinental speculation may not be all loss. You may save something out of it. There has been considerable trading in the stock during the past two days. It is up half a point already, according to the papers. Did you notice it?"

"Yes, I noticed it. But I tell you, Ros, I don't care. I'll be glad to get some of my money back, of course; enough to pay you and Cap'n Elisha anyhow; but I'm so happy to think that Nellie need never know I was a thief that I don't seem to care much for anything else."

Nellie was happy, too. She came to me and told me of her happiness. It was all on George's account, of course.

"The poor fellow had lost money in investments," she said, "and he thought I would not care for him if I found out he was poor. He isn't poor, of course, but if he was it would make no difference to me. I am so glad to see him without that dreadful worried look on his face that I−−I−− Oh, you must think me awful silly, Roscoe! I guess I am. I know I am. But you are the only one I can talk to in this way about−−about him. All Ma wants to talk about now is the wedding and clothes and such, and Pa always treats me as if I was a child. I feel almost as if you were the closest friend I have, and I know George feels the same. He says you have helped him out of his troubles. I was sure you would; that is why I wrote you that letter. We are both SO grateful to you."

Their gratitude and the knowledge of their happiness were my sole consolations in this trying time. They kept me from repenting what I had done. It was hard not to repent. If Colton had only made known his purchase and closed the Lane at once, while my resolution was red hot, I could have faced the wrath of the village and its inevitable consequences fairly well, I believed; but he still kept silent and made no move. I saw him once or twice; on one occasion he came into the bank, but he came only to cash a check and did not mention the subject of the Lane. He did not look well to me and I heard him tell Taylor something about his "damned digestion."

The wedding day came. I, as best man, was busy and thankful for the bustle and responsibility. They occupied my mind and kept it from dwelling on other things. George worked at the bank until noon, getting ready to leave the institution in my charge and that of Dick Small, Henry's brother, who had reported for duty that morning. The marriage was to take place at half past one in the afternoon and the bridal couple were to go away on the three o'clock train. The honeymoon trip was to be a brief one, only a week.

Every able−bodied native of Denboro, man, woman and child, attended that wedding, I honestly believe. It was the best sort of advertising for Olinda Cahoon and Simeon Eldredge, for Olinda had made the gowns worn by the bride and the bride's mother and a number of the younger female guests, and Sim had sold innumerable bottles of a peculiarly penetrating perfume, a large supply of which he had been talked into purchasing by a Boston traveling salesman.

"Smell it, Ros, do ye?" whispered Sim, grinning triumphantly between the points of a "stand−up" collar. "I give you my word when that slick−talkin' drummer sold me all that perfumery, I thought I was stuck sure and sartin. But then I had an idee. Every time women folks come into the store and commenced to talk about the weddin' I says to 'em, says I, 'Can't sell you a couple of handkerchiefs to cry on, can I, Miss So−and−so? Weddin's are great places for sheddin' tears, you know.' If I sold 'em the handkerchiefs all well and good; but if they laughed and said they had a plenty, I got out my sample bottle of 'May Lilock', that's the name of the cologne, and asked 'em to smell of it. 'If you cry with that on your handkerchief,' says I, 'all hands will be glad to have you do it. And only twenty cents a bottle!' You wouldn't believe how much I sold. You can smell this weddin' afore you come in sight of the house, can't ye now."

You could, and you continued to smell it long after you left. My best suit reeked of "May Lilac" weeks later when I took it out of the closet.

Dorinda was there, garbed in rustling black alpaca, her Sunday gown for ten years at least, and made over and "turned" four or five times. Lute was on deck, cutaway coat, "high water" trousers and purple tie, grand to look upon, Alvin Baker and Elnathan Mullet and Alonzo Black and Thoph Newcomb and Zeb Kendrick were, as the Item would say, "among those present" and if Zeb's black cutaway smelled slightly of fish it was, at least, a change from the pervading "May Lilac."

Captain Jed strutted pompously about, monarch of the day. He greeted me genially.

"Hello, Ros!" he said. "You out here? Thought you'd be busy overhaulin' George's runnin' riggin' and makin' sure he was all ready to heave alongside the parson."

"I have been," I answered. "I am on my way back there now."

"All right, all right. Matildy give me fits for not stayin' upstairs until the startin' gun was fired, but I told her that, between her with her eyes full of tears and Olindy Cahoon with her mouth full of pins, 'twas no place for a male man. So I cleared out till everything was shipshape. Say, Ros," he laid his hand on my shoulder and bent to whisper in my ear: "Say, Ros," he said, "I'm glad to see you're takin' my advice."

"Taking your advice?" I repeated, puzzled.

"Yes; about not playin' with fire, you know. I ain't heard of you and the Princess cruisin' together for the past week. Thought 'twas best not to be too familiar with the R'yal family, didn't you? That's right, that's right. We can't take chances. We've got Denboro and the Shore Lane to think about, ain't we?"

I did not answer. I did not risk looking him in the face.

"She's liable to be here most any time, I cal'late," he went on. "Nellie would insist on invitin' her. And I must say that, to be honest, the present she sent is the finest that's come aboard yet. The only thing I've got against her is her bad judgment in pickin' a father. If 'twan't for that I−−hello! Who−−Why, I believe−−"

There was a commotion among the guests and heads were turned toward the door. The captain started forward. I started back. She had entered the room and was standing there, looking about her with smiling interest. I had forgotten that, considering her friendship with Nellie, she was certain to be invited.

She was dressed in a simple, but wonderful, white gown and wore a bunch of lilies of the valley at her bosom. The doorway was decorated with sprays of honeysuckle and green boughs and against this background she made a picture that brought admiring whispers from the people near me. She did not notice me at first and I think I should have escaped by the side door if it had not been for Sim Eldredge. Simeon was just behind me and he darted forward with outstretched hand.

"Why, how d'ye do, Miss Colton!" exclaimed Sim. "You're just in time, ain't ye! Let me get you a chair. Alvin," to Mr. Baker, who, perspiring beneath the unaccustomed dignity of a starched shirt front, occupied a front seat, "get up and let Miss Colton set down."

She looked in Sim's direction and saw me, standing beside him. I had no opportunity to avoid her look now, as I had done when we met in the street. She saw me and I could not turn away. I bowed. She did not acknowledge the bow. She looked calmly past me, through me. I saw, or fancied that I saw, astonishment on the faces of those watching us. Captain Jed stepped forward to greet her and I went into the adjoining room, where George was anxiously awaiting me.

"Good land, Ros!" he exclaimed, with a sigh of relief, "I was beginning to be afraid you'd skipped out and left me to go through it all alone. Say something to brace me up, won't you; I'm scared to death. Say," with a wondering glance at my face, "what's struck YOU? You look more upset than I feel."

I believe I ordered him not to be an idiot. I know I did not "brace him up" to any extent.

It was a very pretty wedding. At least every one said it was, although they say the same of all weddings, I am told. Personally I was very glad when it was over. Nellie whispered in my ear as I offered her my congratulations, "We owe it all to you, Roscoe." George said nothing, but the look he gave me as he wrung my hand was significant. For a moment I forgot myself, forgot to be envious of those to whom the door for happiness was not shut. After all I had opened the door for these two, and that was something.

I walked as far as the corner with Lute and Dorinda. Dorinda's eyes were red and her husband commented upon it.

"I thought a weddin' was supposed to be a joyful sort of thing," he said, disgustedly. "It's usually cal'lated to be. Yet you and the rest of the women folks set and cried through the whole of it. What in time was there to cry about?"

"Oh, I don't know, Luther," replied Dorinda in, for her, an unusually tolerant tone. "Perhaps it's because we've all been young once and can't forget it."

"I don't forget, no more'n you do. I ain't so old that I can't remember that fur back, I hope. But it don't make me feel like cryin'."

"Well, all right. We won't argue about it. Let's be pleasant as we can, for once."

Now that is where Lute should have taken the hint and remained silent. At least he should have changed the subject. But he was hot and uncomfortable and, I suspect, his Sunday shoes were tight. He persisted.

"Huh!" he sniffed; "I don't see's you've given me no sensible reason for cryin'. If I recollect right you didn't cry

at your own weddin'."

His wife turned on him. She looked him over from head to foot.

"Didn't I?" she said, tartly. "Well, maybe not. But if I'd realized what was happenin' to me, I should."

"Lute," said I, as I parted from them at the corner, "I am going to the bank for a little while. Then I think I shall take a short run down the bay in the Comfort. Did you fill her tank with gasolene as I asked you to?"

Lute stopped short. "There!" he exclaimed, "I knew there was somethin' I forgot. I'll do it soon's ever I get home."

"When you get home," observed Dorinda, firmly, "you'll wash that henhouse window."

"Now, Dorinda, if that ain't just like you! Don't you hear Roscoe askin' me about that gas? I've had that gas in my head ever since yesterday."

"Um−hm," wearily. "Well, I shouldn't think a little extry more or less would make much difference. Never mind, don't waste any more on me. Get the gas out of your head, if Roscoe wants you to. You can wash the window afterward."

Lute's parting words were that he would fill that tank the very first thing. If he had−−but there! he didn't.

CHAPTER XVIII

The fog had come almost without warning. When, after leaving the bank, at four o'clock or thereabouts, I walked down to the shore and pulled my skiff out to where the Comfort lay at her moorings, there had not been a sign of it. Now I was near the entrance of the bay, somewhere abreast Crow Point, and all about me was gray, wet blankness. Sitting in the stern of the little launch I could see perhaps a scant ten feet beyond the bow, no more.

It was the sudden shift of the wind which had brought the fog. When I left the boat house there had been a light westerly breeze. This had died down to a flat calm, and then a new breeze had sprung up from the south, blowing the fog before it. It rolled across the water as swiftly as the smoke clouds roll from a freshly lighted bonfire. It blotted Denboro from sight and moved across the bay; the long stretch of beach disappeared; the Crow Point light and Ben Small's freshly whitewashed dwellings and outbuildings were obliterated. In ten minutes the Comfort was, to all appearances, alone on a shoreless sea, and I was the only living creature in the universe.

I was not troubled or alarmed. I had been out in too many fogs on that very bay to mind this one. It was a nuisance, because it necessitated cutting short my voyage, although that voyage had no objective point and was merely an aimless cruise in search of solitude and forgetfulness. The solitude I had found, the forgetfulness, of course, I had not. And now, when the solitude was more complete than ever, surrounded by this gray dismalness, with nothing whatever to look at to divert my attention, I knew I should be more bitterly miserable than I had been since I left that wedding. And I had been miserable and bitter enough, goodness knows.

Home and the village, which I had been so anxious to get away from, now looked inviting in comparison. I slowed down the engine and, with an impatient growl, bent over the little binnacle to look at the compass and get my bearings before pointing the Comfort's nose in the direction of Denboro. Then my growl changed to an exclamation of disgust. The compass was not there. I knew where it was. It was on my work bench in the boat house, where I had put it myself, having carried it there to replace the cracked glass in its top with a new one. I had forgotten it and there it was.

I could get along without it, of course, but its absence meant delay and more trouble. In a general way I knew my whereabouts, but the channel was winding and the tide was ebbing rapidly. I should be obliged to run slowly−−to feel my way, so to speak−−and I might not reach home until late. However, there was nothing else to do, so I put the helm over and swung the launch about. I sat in the stern sheets, listening to the dreary "chock−chock" of the propeller, and peering forward into the mist. The prospect was as cheerless as my future.

Suddenly, from the wet, gray blanket ahead came a call. It was a good way off when I first heard it, a call in a clear voice, a feminine voice it seemed to me.

"Hello!"

I did not answer. I took it for granted that the call was not addressed to me. It came probably, from the beach at the Point, and might be Mrs. Small hailing her husband, though it did not sound like her voice. Several minutes went by before it was repeated. Then I heard it again and nearer.

"Hello! Hello−o−o! Where are you?"

That was not Mrs. Small, certainly. Unless I was away off in my reckoning the Point was at my right, and the voice sounded to the left. It must come from some craft afloat in the bay, though before the fog set in I had seen none.

"Hello−o! Hello, the motor boat!"

"Hello!" I answered. "Boat ahoy! Where are you?"

"Here I am." The voice was nearer still. "Where are you? Don't run into me."

I shifted my helm just a bit and peered ahead. I could see nothing. The fog was thicker than ever; if that were possible.

"Where are you?" repeated the unseen voyager, and to my dismay, the hail came from the right this time.

"Don't move!" I shouted. "Stay where you are. I will keep shouting . . . LOOK OUT!"

Out of the fog to starboard a long dark shadow shot, silent and swift. It was moving directly across the Comfort's bow. I jammed the wheel over and the launch swung off, but not enough. It struck the canoe, for it was a canoe, a glancing blow and heeled it down to the water's edge. There was a scrape, a little scream, and two

hands clutched at the Comfort's rail. I let go the wheel, sprang forward and seized the owner of the hands about the waist. The canoe, half full of water, disappeared somewhere astern. I swung Mabel Colton aboard the launch.

I think she spoke first. I do not remember saying anything, and I think it must have been at least a full minute before either of us broke the silence. She lay, or sat, upon the cockpit floor, her shoulders supported by the bench surrounding it, just where I had placed her after lifting her over the rail. I knelt beside her, staring as if she were a spirit instead of a real, and rather damp, young lady. And she stared at me. When she spoke her words were an echo of my thought.

"It IS you?" she gasped.

"Yes."

"This−−this is the third time."

"Yes."

Another interval of silence. Then she spoke once more and her tone was one expressing intense conviction.

"This," she said, slowly, "is getting to be positively ridiculous."

I did not deny it. I said nothing.

She sat up. "My canoe−−" she faltered.

The mention of the canoe brought me partially to my senses. I realized that I was kneeling on the deck of a launch that was pounding its way through the fog with no one at the helm. I sprang to my feet and seized the wheel. That my doing so would be of little use, considering that the Comfort might be headed almost anywhere by this time, did not occur to me. Miss Colton remained where she was.

"My canoe−−" she repeated.

I was awakening rapidly. I looked out into the mist and shook my head.

"I am afraid your canoe has gone," I said. And then, as the thought occurred to me for the first time, "You're not hurt, I hope? I dragged you aboard here rather roughly, I am afraid."

"No, I am not hurt. But−−where are we?"

"I don't know, exactly. Somewhere near the mouth of the bay, that is all I can be sure of. You, are certain you are not hurt? You must be wet through."

She got upon her feet and, leaning over the Comfort's rail, gazed about her.

"I am all right," she answered. "But don't you know where you are?"

"Before the fog caught me I was nearly abreast the Point. I was running at half speed up the channel when I heard your hail. Where were you?"

"I was just beyond your boat house, out in the middle of the bay. I had come out for a paddle before dinner. I did not notice the fog until it was all about me. Then I think I must have been bewildered. I thought I was going in the direction of home, but I could not have been−−not if you were abreast the Point. I must have been going directly out to sea."

She shivered.

"You are wet," I said, anxiously. "There is a storm coat of mine in the locker forward. Won't you put that about your shoulders? It may prevent your taking cold."

"No, thank you. I am not wet, at all; or, at least, only my feet and the bottom of my skirt. I shall not take cold."

"But−−"

"Please don't worry. I am all right, or shall be as soon as I get home."

"I am very sorry about your canoe."

"It doesn't matter."

Her answers were short now. There was a different note in her voice. I knew the reason of the change. Now that the shock and the surprise of our meeting were over she and I were resuming our old positions. She was realizing that her companion was the "common fellow" whose "charming and cultivated society" was not necessary to her happiness, the fellow to whom she had scornfully offered "congratulations" and whom she had cut dead at the Deans' that very afternoon. I made no more suggestions and expressed no more sympathy.

"I will take you home at once," I said, curtly.

"If you please."

That ended conversation for the time. She seated herself on the bench near the forward end of the cockpit and kept her head turned away from me. I, with one hand upon the wheel−−a useless procedure, for I had no idea

where the launch might be headed−− looked over the rail and listened to the slow and regular beat of the engine. Suddenly the beat grew less regular. The engine barked, hiccoughed, barked again but more faintly, and then stopped altogether.

I knew what was the matter. Before I reached the gasolene tank and unscrewed the little cover I knew it. I thrust in the gauge stick and heard it strike bottom, drew it out and found it, as I expected, dry to the very tip. I had trusted, like an imbecile, to Lute. Lute had promised to fill that tank "the very first thing," and he had not kept his promise.

There was not a pint of gasolene aboard the Comfort; and it would be my cheerful duty to inform my passenger of the fact!

She did not wait for me to break the news. She saw me standing there, holding the gauge stick in my hand, and she asked the natural question.

"What is the matter?" she demanded.

I swallowed the opinion of Mr. Rogers which was on the tip of my tongue.

"I am sorry," I stammered, "but−−but−−well, we are in trouble, I am afraid."

"In trouble?" she said coldly. "What trouble do you mean?"

"Yes. The fact is, we have run out of gasolene. I told my man, Rogers, to fill the tank and he hasn't done it."

She leaned forward to look at me.

"Hasn't done it?" she repeated. "You mean−−why, this boat cannot go without gasolene, can it?"

"Not very well; no."

"Then−−then what are we going to do?"

"Anchor and wait, if I can."

"Wait! But I don't wish to wait. I wish to be taken home, at once."

"I am sorry, but I am afraid that is impossible."

I was on my way forward to where the anchor lay, in the bow. She rose and stepped in front of me.

"Mr. Paine."

"Yes, Miss Colton."

"I tell you I do not wish you to anchor this boat."

"I am sorry but it is the only thing to do, under the circumstances."

"I do not wish it. Stop! I tell you I will not have you anchor."

"Miss Colton, we must do one of two things, either anchor or drift. And if we drift I cannot tell you where we may be carried."

"I don't care."

"I do."

"Yes," with scornful emphasis, "I presume you do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean−−never mind what I mean."

"But, as I have explained to you, the gasolene−−"

"Nonsense! Do you suppose I believe that ridiculous story?"

"Believe it?" I gazed at her uncomprehendingly. "Believe it," I repeated. "Don't you believe it?"

"No."

"Miss Colton, do you mean that you think I am not telling you the truth? That I am lying?"

"Well," fiercely, "and if I did, would it be so astonishing, considering−−considering the TRUTHS you have told me before?"

I made no further effort to pass her. Instead I stepped back.

"Would you mind telling me," I demanded, with deliberate sarcasm, "what possible reason you think I might have for wishing to keep you here?"

"I shall tell you nothing. And−−and I will not have you anchor this boat."

"Is it your desire then that we drift−−the Lord knows where?"

"I desire you to start that engine and take me home."

"I cannot start the engine."

"I don't believe it."

For a moment I hesitated. Then I did what was perhaps the most senseless thing I ever did in all my life, which is saying considerable. I turned my back on her and on the anchor, and seated myself once more in the stern sheets. And we drifted.

I do not know how long we drifted before I regained my sanity. It must have been a good while. When I first returned to my seat by the wheel it was with the firm determination to allow the Comfort to drift into the bottomless pit rather than to stir hand or foot to prevent it. In fact that particular port looked rather inviting than otherwise. Any torments it might have in store could not be worse than those I had undergone because of this girl. I sat, silent, with my gaze fixed upon the motionless engine. I heard my passenger move once or twice, but I did not look at her.

What brought me to my senses was the boat hook, which had been lying on the seat beside me, suddenly falling to the floor. I started and looked over the rail. The water, as much of it as I could see through the fog, was no longer flat and calm. There were waves all about us, not big ones, but waves nevertheless, long, regular swells in the trough of which the Comfort rocked lazily. There was no wind to kick up a sea. This was a ground swell, such as never moved in Denboro Bay. While I sat there like an idiot the tide had carried us out beyond the Point.

With an exclamation I sprang up and hurried forward. Miss Colton was sitting where I had left her.

"What is it?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to anchor," I said.

"I do not wish you to anchor."

"I can't help that. I must. Please stand aside, Miss Colton."

She tried to prevent me, but I pushed her away, not too gently I am afraid, and clambered forward to the bow, where the anchor lay upon its coil of line. I threw it overboard. The line ran out to its very end and I waited expectantly for the jerk which would tell me that the anchor had caught and was holding. But no jerk came. Reaching over the bow I tried the line. It was taut and heavy. Then I knew approximately how far we had drifted. We were beyond the shoal making out from Crow Point over the deep water beyond. My anchor rope was not long enough to reach the bottom.

Still I was not alarmed. I was provoked at my own stubbornness which had gotten us into this predicament and more angry than ever at the person who was the cause of that stubbornness. But I was not frightened. There were other shoals further out and I left the anchor as it was, hoping that it might catch and hold on one of them. I went back once more to my seat by the wheel.

Then followed another interval of silence and inaction. From astern and a good way off sounded the notes of a bell. From the opposite direction came a low groan, indescribably mournful and lonely.

My passenger heard it and spoke.

"What was that?" she demanded, in a startled tone.

"The fog horn at Mackerel Island, the island at the mouth of Wellmouth harbor," I answered.

"And that bell?"

"That is the fog bell at Crow Point."

"At Crow Point? Why, it can't be! Crow Point is in Denboro Bay, and that bell is a long way behind us."

"Yes. We are a mile or more outside the Point now. The tide has carried us out."

"Carried us−− Do you mean that we are out at sea?"

"Not at sea exactly. We are in Cape Cod Bay."

"But−−why, we are still drifting, aren't we? I thought you had anchored."

"I tried to, but I was too late. The water is too deep here for the anchor to reach bottom."

"But−−but what are you going to do?"

"Nothing at present. There is nothing I can do. Sit down, please."

"Nothing! Nothing! Do you mean that you propose to sit there and let us be carried out to sea?"

"We shall not be carried far. There is no wind. When the tide turns we shall probably be carried in again."

"But," sharply, "why don't you do something? Can't you row?"

"I have only one oar."

"But you must do something. You MUST. I−−I−− It is late! it is growing dark! My people! What will they think?"

"I am sorry, Miss Colton."

"Sorry! You are not sorry! If you were you would do something, instead of sitting there as−−as if you enjoyed it. I believe you do enjoy it. You are doing it purposely to−−to−−"

"To what, pray?"

"Never mind."

"But I do mind. You have accused me of lying, Miss Colton, and of keeping you here purposely. What do you mean by it?"

"I mean that−−that−− Oh, you know what I mean! You hate me and you hate my father, and you are trying to−−to punish us for−−for−−"

I had heard enough. I did not propose to hear any more.

"Miss Colton," I interrupted, sternly, "stop! this is silly. I assure you that I am as anxious to end this−−excursion−−of ours as you can be. Your being afloat in Denboro Bay in a canoe was your own recklessness and not my fault. Neither was it my fault that the launch collided with your canoe. I called to you not to move, but to stay where you were. And, moreover, if you had permitted me to anchor when I first attempted to do so we should not be in this scrape. I shall get you out of it just as quick as I can. In order that I may do so I shall expect you to stop behaving like a child and do as I tell you. Sit down on that bench and keep still."

This had the effect I meant it to. She looked at me as if she could not believe she had heard aright. But I met her gaze squarely, and, with a shudder of disgust, or fear, I do not know which, she turned her back upon me and was silent. I went forward to the cuddy, found the tin horn which, until that moment, I had forgotten, and, returning, blew strident blasts upon it at intervals. There was little danger of other craft being in our vicinity, but I was neglecting no precautions.

The bell at Crow Point sounded further and further astern. The twilight changed to dusk and the dusk to darkness. The fog was as thick as ever. It was nearly time for the tide to turn.

Suddenly there was a jerk; the launch quivered, and swung about.

"Oh! what was that?" demanded Miss Colton, shortly.

"The anchor," I answered. "We have reached the outer shoal."

"And," hesitatingly, "shall we stay here?"

"Yes; unless−−"

"Unless what?"

"Unless . . . Hush! listen!"

There was an odd rushing sound from the darkness astern, a sort of hiss and low, watery roar. I rushed to the bow and dragged the anchor inboard with all my strength. Then I ran to the wheel. I had scarcely reached it when I felt a hand on my arm.

"What is it?" asked the young lady, her voice quivering. "Oh, what is it?"

"Wind," I answered. "There is a squall coming. Sit down! Sit down!"

"But−−but−−"

"Sit down."

She hesitated and I seized her arm and forced her down upon the bench beside me. I threw the helm over. The rushing sound grew nearer. Then came a blast of wind which sent my cap flying overboard and the fog disappeared as if it had been a cloth snatched away by a mighty hand. Above us was a black sky, with stars showing here and there between flying clouds, and about us were the waves, already breaking into foam upon the shoal.

The Comfort rocked and wallowed in the trough. We were being driven by the wind away from the shoal, but not fast enough. Somehow or other we must get out of that dangerous neighborhood. I turned to my companion. She had not spoken since the squall came.

"Miss Colton," I said, "give me your hands."

I presume she could not imagine what I meant. No doubt, too, my tone and the request frightened her. She hesitated. I seized her hands and placed them on the spokes of the wheel.

"I want you to hold that wheel just as it is," I commanded. "I must go forward and get steerage way on this craft somehow, or we shall capsize. Can you hold it, do you think?"

"Yes; I−−I think so."

"You must."

I left her, went to the cuddy and dragged out the small canvas tarpaulin which I used to cover the engine at night. With this, a cod line, the boathook, and my one oar I improvised a sort of jury rig which I tied erect at the forward end of the cockpit. Then I went aft and took the wheel again. The tarpaulin made a poor apology for a sail, but I hoped it might answer the purpose well enough to keep the Comfort before the wind.

It did. Tacking was, of course, out of the question, but with the gale astern the launch answered her helm and slid over the waves instead of rolling between them. I sighed in relief. Then I remembered my passenger sitting silent beside me. She did not deserve consideration, but I vouchsafed a word of encouragement.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "It is only a stiff breeze and this boat is seaworthy. We are all right now."

"But why did you take up the anchor?"

By way of answer I pointed aft over the stern. In the darkness the froth of the shoal gleamed white. I felt her shudder as she looked.

"Where are we going now−−please?" she asked, a moment later.

"We are headed for the Wellmouth shore. It is the only direction we can take. If this wind holds we shall land in a few hours. It is all deep water now. There are no more shoals."

"But," anxiously, "can we land when we reach there? Isn't it a bad coast?"

"Not very. If we can make Mackerel Island we may be able to get ashore at the light or anchor in the lee of the land. It is all right, Miss Colton. I am telling you the truth. Strange as it may seem to you, I really am."

I could not help adding the last bit of sarcasm. She understood. She drew away on the bench and asked no more questions.

On drove the Comfort. The first fierceness of the squall had passed and it was now merely what I had called it, a stiff breeze. Out here in the middle of the bay the waves were higher and we shipped some spray over the quarter. The air was sharp and the chill penetrated even my thick jacket.

"You must be cold," I said. "Aren't you?"

"No."

"But you must be. Take the wheel a moment."

"I am not cold."

"Take the wheel."

She took it. I groped about in the cuddy again, got out my storm coat, an old pea jacket which I wore on gunning expeditions, and brought it to her.

"Slip this on," I said.

"I do not care for it."

"Put it on."

"Mr. Paine," haughtily, "I tell you . . . . oh!"

I had wrapped the coat about her shoulders and fastened the upper button.

"Now sit down on the deck here," I ordered. "Here, by my feet. You will be below the rail there and out of the wind."

To my surprise she obeyed orders, this time without even a protest. I smiled grimly. To see her obey suited my humor. It served her right. I enjoyed ordering her about as if I were mate of an old− time clipper and she a foremast hand. She had insulted me once too often and she should pay for it. Out here social position and wealth and family pride counted for nothing. Here I was absolute master of the situation and she knew it. All her life she would remember it, the humiliation of being absolutely dependent upon me for life and safety and warmth. I looked down at her crouching at my feet, and then away over the black water. The Comfort climbed wave after wave.

"Mr. Paine."

The tone was very low but I heard it.

I came out of my waking dream−−it was not a pleasant one−−and answered.

"Yes?" I said.

"Where are we?"

"We are making fair progress, everything considered. Are you warmer now?"

"Yes−−thank you."

She said no more, nor did I. Except for the splash of the spray and the flapping of the loose ends of the

tarpaulin, it was quiet aboard the Comfort. Quiet, except for an odd sound in the shadow by my knee. I stooped and listened.

"Miss Colton," I said, quickly. "What is it?"

No answer. Yet I heard the sound again.

"What is it, Miss Colton?" I repeated. "What is the matter? Why are you crying?"

"I−−I am NOT crying," indignantly. And on the very heels of the denial came a stifled sob.

That sob went to my heart. A great lump rose in my own throat. My brain seemed to be turning topsy−turvy. A moment before it had been filled with bitterness and resentment and vengeful thoughts. Now these had vanished and in their place came crowding other and vastly different feelings. She was crying, sobbing there alone in the dark at my feet. And I had treated her like a brute!

"Miss Colton," I pleaded, in an agony of repentance, "what is it? Is there anything I can do? Are you still cold? Take this other coat, the one I have on. I don't need it, really. I am quite warm."

"I am not cold."

"But−−"

"Oh, please don't speak to me! PLEASE!"

I closed my lips tightly and clutched the wheel with both hands. Oh, I had been a brute, a brute! I should have known that she was not herself, that she was frightened and nervous and distraught. I should have been considerate and forbearing. I should have remembered that she was only a girl, hysterical and weak. Instead I had−−

"Miss Colton," I begged, "please don't. Please!"

No answer; only another sob. I tried again.

"I have been a cad," I cried. "I have treated you abominably. I don't expect you to forgive me, but−−"

"I−−I am so frightened!" The confession was a soliloquy, I think; not addressed to me at all. But I heard it and forgot everything else. I let go of the wheel altogether and bent over her, both hands outstretched, to−−the Lord knows what. I was not responsible just then.

But while I still hesitated, while my hands were still in the air above her, before they touched her, I was brought back to sanity with a rude shock. A barrel or so of cold water came pouring over the rail and drenched us both. The launch, being left without a helmsman, had swung into the trough of the sea and this was the result.

I am not really sure what happened in the next few seconds. I must, I imagine, have seized the wheel with one hand and my passenger with the other. At any rate, when the smoke, so to speak, had cleared, the Comfort was headed on her old course once more, I was back on the bench by the wheel, Mabel Colton's head was on my shoulder, and I was telling her over and over that it was all right now, there was no danger, we were perfectly safe, and various inanities of that sort.

She was breathing quickly, but she sobbed no more. I was glad of that.

"You are sure you are not hurt?" I asked, anxiously.

"Yes−−yes, I think so," she answered, faintly. "What was it? I−−I thought we were sinking."

"So did I for a moment. It was all my fault, as usual. I let go the wheel."

"Did you? Why?"

"I don't know why." This was untrue; I did. "But you are wet through," I added, remorsefully. "And I haven't another dry wrap aboard."

"Never mind. You are as wet as I am."

"Yes, but _I_ don't mind. I am used to it. But you−−"

"I am all right. I was a little faint, at first, I think, but I am better now." She raised her head and sat up. "Where are we?" she asked.

"We are within a few miles of the Wellmouth shore. That light ahead is the Mackerel Island light. We shall be there in a little while. The danger is almost over."

She shivered.

"You are cold!" I cried. "Of course you are! If I only had another coat or something. It is all my fault."

"Don't say that," reproachfully. "Where should I have been if it had not been for you? I was paddling directly out toward those dreadful shoals. Then you came, just as you have done before, and saved me. And," in a wondering whisper, "I knew it was you!"

I did not ask her what she meant; I seemed to understand perfectly.

"Yes," I said.

"But I tell you I knew it was you," she repeated. "I did not know−− I did not suspect until the moment before the collision, before the launch came in sight−−then, all at once, I knew."

"Yes. That was when I knew."

She turned and gazed at me.

"YOU knew?" she gasped, hysterically. "Why−−what do you mean?"

"I can't explain it. Just before your canoe broke through the fog I knew, that is all."

It was unexplainable, but it was true. Call it telepathy or what you will−−I do not know what it was−−I am certain only that, although I had not recognized her voice, I had suddenly known who it was that would come to me out of the fog. And she, too, had known! I felt again, with an almost superstitious thrill, that feeling of helplessness which had come over me that day of the fishing excursion when she rode through the bushes to my side. It was as if she and I were puppets in the hands of some Power which was amusing itself at our expense and would have its way, no matter how we might fight against it.

She spoke as if she were struggling to awaken from a dream.

"But it can't be," she protested. "It is impossible. Why should you and I−−"

"I don't know . . . Unless−−"

"Unless what?"

I closed my lips on the words that were on the tip of my tongue. That reason was more impossible than all else.

"Nothing," I stammered.

She did not repeat her question. I saw her face, a dainty silhouette against the foam alongside, turned away from me. I gazed at it until I dared gaze no longer. Was I losing my senses altogether? I−−Ros Paine−−the man whose very name was not his own? I must not think such thoughts. I scarcely dared trust myself to speak and yet I knew that I must. This silence was too dangerous. I took refuge in a commonplace.

"We are getting into smoother water," I said. "It is not as rough as it was, do you think?"

If she heard the remark she ignored it. She did not turn to look at me. After a moment she said, in a low voice:

"I can't understand."

I supposed her to be still thinking of our meeting in the fog.

"I cannot understand myself," I answered. "I presume it was a coincidence, like our meeting at the pond."

She shook her head. "I did not mean that," she said. "I mean that I cannot understand how you can be so kind to me. After what I said, and the way I have treated you; it is wonderful!"

I was obliged to wait another moment before I could reply. I clutched the wheel tighter than ever.

"The wonderful part of it all," I said, earnestly, "is that you should even speak to me, after my treatment of you here, to−night. I was a brute. I ordered you about as if−−"

"Hush! Don't! please don't. Think of what I said to you! Will you forgive me? I have been so ungrateful. You saved my life over and over again and I−−I−−"

"Stop! Don't do that! If you do I shall−−Miss Colton, please−−"

She choked back the sob. "Tell me," she said, a moment later, this time looking me directly in the face, "why did you sell my father that land?"

It was my turn to avoid her look. I did not answer.

"I know it was not because of the money−−the price, I mean. Father told me that you refused the five thousand he offered and would accept only a part of it; thirty−five hundred, I think he said. I should have known that the price had nothing to do with it, even if he had not told me. But why did you sell it?"

I would have given all I had, or ever expected to have, in this world, to tell her the truth. For the moment I almost hated George Taylor.

"Oh, I thought I might as well, give in then as later," I answered, with a shrug. "It was no use fighting the inevitable."

"That was not it. I know it was not. If it had been you would have taken the five thousand. And I know, too, that you meant what you said when you told me you never would sell. I have known it all the time. I know you were telling me the truth."

I was astonished. "You do?" I cried. "Why, you said−−"

"Don't! I know what I said, and I am so ashamed. I did not mean it, really. For a moment, there in the library, when Father first told me, I thought perhaps you−−but I did not really think it. And when he told me the price, I KNEW. Won't you tell me why you sold?"

"I can't. I wish I could."

"I believe I can guess."

I started. "You can GUESS?" I repeated.

"Yes. I think you wanted the money for some purpose, some need which you had not foreseen. And I do not believe it was for yourself at all. I think it was for some one else. Wasn't that it?"

I could not reply. I tried to, tried to utter a prompt denial, but the words would not come. Her "guess" was so close to the truth that I could only stammer and hesitate.

"It was," she said. "I thought so. For your mother, wasn't it?"

"No, no. Miss Colton, you are wrong. I−−"

"I am not wrong. Never mind. I suppose it is a secret. Perhaps I shall find out some day. But will you forgive me for being so hateful? Can you? What is the matter?"

"Nothing−−nothing. I−−you are too good to me, that is all. I don't deserve it."

"Hush! And we will be friends again?"

"Yes. . . . . Oh, no! no! I must not think of it. It is impossible."

"Must not think of it? When I ask you to? Can't you forgive me, after all?"

"There was nothing to forgive."

"Yes, there was, a great deal. Is there something else? Are you still angry with me because of what I said that afternoon at the gate?"

"No, of course not."

"It was hateful of me, I know. But I could see that you wished to avoid me and I was provoked. Besides, you have punished me for that. You have snubbed me twice since, sir."

"_I_ snubbed YOU?"

"Yes−−twice. Once when we met in the street. You deliberately turned away and would not look at me. And once when I passed you in the canoe. You saw me−−I know you did−−but you cut me dead. That is why I did not return your bow to−day, at the wedding."

"But you had said−−I thought−−"

"I know. I had said horrid things. I deserved to be snubbed. There! now I have confessed. Mayn't we be friends?"

"I . . . Oh, no, we must not, for your sake. I−−"

"For my sake! But I wish it. Why not?"

I turned on her. "Can't you see?" I said, despairingly. "Look at the difference between us! You are what you are and I−−"

She interrupted me. "Oh," she cried, impatiently, "how dare you speak so? How dare you believe that money and−−all the rest of it influences me in my friendships? Do you think I care for that?"

"I did not mean money alone. But even that Miss Colton, that evening when we returned from the trip after weakfish, you and your father and I, I heard−−I did not mean to hear but I did−−what your mother said when she met you. She said she had warned you against trusting yourself to 'that common fellow,' meaning me. That shows what she thinks. She was right; in a way she was perfectly right. Now you see what I mean by saying that friendship between us is impossible?"

I had spoken at white heat. Now I turned away. It was settled. She must understand now.

"Mr. Paine."

"Yes, Miss Colton."

"I am sorry you heard that. Mother−−she is my mother and I love her−−but she says foolish things sometimes. I am sorry you heard that, but since you did, I wish you had heard the rest."

"The rest?"

"Yes. I answered her by suggesting that she had not been afraid to trust me in the care of Victor−−Mr. Carver. She answered that she hoped I did not mean to compare Mr. Carver with you. And I said−−"

"Yes? You said−−?"

"I said," the tone was low but I heard every syllable, "I said she was right, there was no comparison."

"You said THAT!"

"Yes."

"You said it! And you meant−−?"

"I meant−−I think I meant that I should not be afraid to trust you always−−anywhere."

Where were my good resolutions−−my stern reasons to remember who and what I was−−to be sane, no matter at what cost to myself? I do not know where they were; then I did not care. I seized her hand. It trembled, but she did not draw it away.

"Mabel−−" I cried. "Mabel−−"

"BUMP!"

The Comfort shook as the bow of a dory scraped along her starboard quarter. A big red hand clasped the rail and its mate brandished a good−sized club before my eyes.

"Now," said a determined voice, "I've got ye at last! This time I've caught ye dead to rights! Now, by godfreys, you'll pay me for them lobsters!"

CHAPTER XIX

If I had been giving undivided attention to my combined duties as steersman and pilot, instead of neglecting them for other and more engrossing matters, I should, doubtless, have seen the dory before. As it was I had not seen it at all, nor heard the oars. It had sneaked up on the Comfort out of the darkness and its occupant had laid us aboard as neatly as you please.

I was, to say the least, startled and surprised. I dodged the threatening club and turned a dazed face toward the person brandishing it. He appeared to be a middle−sized, elderly person, in oilskins and souwester, and when he spoke a gray whisker wagged above the chin strap of the souwester.

"Who in blazes are you?" I demanded, as soon as I could get the words together.

"Never you mind that. You know who I be all right enough. Be you goin' to pay me for them lobsters? That's what _I_ want to know."

"What lobsters?"

"Them lobsters you've been stealin' out of my pots for the last fortnight."

"_I_ have been stealing?"

"Yes, you. I been layin' for you all night long. I don't know who you be, but you'll pay for them lobsters or come along with me to the lock−up, one or t'other."

I looked about, over the water. The light toward which I had been trying to steer blazed dead ahead, surprisingly near and bright. Except for that, however, there was no sign of anything except darkness and waves.

"Look here, my man," I said. "I haven't stolen your lobsters; but−−"

"I know better. I don't know who you be, but I'd know you was a thief if I run acrost you in prayer−meetin'. Just to look at you is enough."

I heard a hysterical giggle from the bench beside me. Evidently the person with the club heard it, too, for he leaned forward to look.

"So there's two of ye, eh!" he said. "Well, by godfreys, I don't care if there's a million! You'll pay for them lobsters or go to the lock−up."

I laughed aloud. "Very well," I said. "I am agreeable."

"You're agreeable! What do you mean by that? This ain't no laughin' matter, I'll tell you that."

I laughed again. "I don't care what you tell me," I observed. "And if you will take us somewhere ashore−−to the lock−up or anywhere else−−I shall be much obliged."

The occupant of the dory seemed to be puzzled. He leaned forward once more.

"What sort of talk is that?" he demanded. "Where's my lobsters? . . . Hey! What? I swan to man, I believe one of ye's a woman! Have the females turned thieves, too?"

"I don't know. See here, my friend, my name is Paine, and I'm the only lobster aboard this craft. This lady and I belong in Denboro. My launch has run out of gasolene and we have been drifting about the bay since five o'clock. Now, for heaven's sake, don't talk any more, but take us to the lock−up and be quick about it."

The unknown paid no attention to my entreaty. Instead he leaned still further over the Comfort's rail. The dory careened until I expected to see her capsize.

"I swan to man!" he muttered. "I swan to man! 'Tain't possible I'm mistook!"

"It scarcely seems possible, I admit. But I'm afraid it is true."

I heard the club fall with a clatter.

"My−−godfreys! Do you mean to say−−? From Denboro? Out of gasolene! Why−−why, you've got sail up!"

"Nothing but a tarpaulin on an oar."

"And you've been cruisin' all night? Through the fog−−the squall−− and all?"

"Yes," wearily, "yes−−yes−−yes."

"But−−but ain't you drownded?"

"Not quite. If you don't let go of that rail we shall be soon."

"Driftin' all night! Ain't you wet through?"

"Yes. Might I suggest that we postpone the rest of the catechism until we reach−−the lock−up?"

This suggestion apparently was accepted. Our captor suddenly became very much alive.

"Give me a line," he ordered. "Anchor rope'll do. Where is it? up for'ard?"

He pawed the dory along, hand over hand, until he reached the Comfort's bow. I heard the thump of the anchor as he dragged it into the dory. Then came the creak and splash of oars. His voice sounded from somewhere ahead.

"Head for the light," he shouted. "I'm goin' to tow you in."

"In where?"

"In ashore. That's Mack'rel Island light. My name's Atwood. I'm keeper of it."

I turned to my passenger.

"It looks," I said, "as if our voyage was almost over."

And it was. Mr. Atwood had a tough job on his hands, towing the launch. But the make−shift sail helped some and I did my best to steer in his wake. Miss Colton and I had no opportunity to talk. The gentleman in the dory kept up a running fire of remarks, shouted between grunts, and embroidered with cheerful profanity. We caught fragments of the monologue.

"I swan to man−−ugh−−I thought ye was thieves, for sartin. Some everlastin', dam−−ugh−−have been sneakin' out nights and haulin' my lobster pots. Ugh−−if I'd caught 'em I was cal'latin' to−−ugh−− break their−−ugh−−ugh−− This dory pulls like a coal barge−−I−− Wet through, ain't ye? And froze, I cal'late−− Ugh−−and hungry, too−− Ugh−−ugh−− My old woman's tendin' light. She−−ugh−− Here we be! Easy now!"

A low shore loomed black across our bows. Above it the lighthouse rose, a white chalk mark against the sky with a red glare at its upper end. Mr. Atwood sprang overboard with a splash. The launch was drawn in at the end of its anchor rope until its keel grated on the sand.

"Now then!" said our rescuer. "Here we be! Made harbor at last, though I did think I'd crack my back timbers afore we done it. I'll tote the lady ashore. You can wade, can't ye?"

I could and I was very glad of the opportunity. I turned to take Miss Colton in my arms, but she avoided me.

"Here I am, Mr. Atwood," she said. "Oh, thank you."

She was swung into the air and moved shoreward to the accompaniment of mighty splashings.

"Don't be scart, ma'am," said Mr. Atwood. "I shan't let ye drop. Lord sakes! I've toted more women in my time than you can shake a stick at. There's more da−−that is, there's more summer folks try to land on this island at low tide than there is moskeeters and there's more of them than there's fiddles in−− Hi! come on, you, Mr. What's−your−name! Straight as you go."

I came on wading through eelgrass and water until I reached a sandy beach. A moment later we stood before a white door in a very white little house. Mr. Atwood opened the door, revealing a cosy little sitting room and a gray−haired, plump, pleasant−faced woman sitting in a rocking chair beside a table with a lamp upon it.

"Hello, Betsy!" bellowed our rescuer, stamping his wet rubber boots on the braided mat. "Got company come to supper−−or breakfast, or whatever you want to call it. This is Mr. Paine from Denboro. This is his wife, Mrs. Paine. They've been cruisin' all the way from Cape Cod to Kamchatky in a motor boat with no power to it. Don't that beat the Old Scratch, hey?"

The plump woman rose, without a trace of surprise, as if having company drop in at three o'clock in the morning was nothing out of the ordinary, and came over to us, beaming with smiles.

"I'm real glad to see you, Mrs. Paine," she exclaimed. "And your husband, too. You must be froze to death! Set right down while I fix up a room for you and hunt up some dry things for you to put on. I won't be but a minute."

Before I could offer explanations, or do more than stammer thanks, and rather incoherent ones at that, she had bustled out of the room. I caught one glimpse of Mabel Colton's face; it was crimson from neck to brow. "Mrs. Paine!" "Your husband!" I was grateful to the doughty Mr. Atwood, but just then I should have enjoyed choking him.

The light keeper, quite unaware that his unfortunate misapprehension of the relationship between his guests might be embarrassing, was doing his best to make us feel at home.

"Take off your boots, Mr. Paine," he urged. "The old lady'll fetch you a pair of my slippers and some socks in a minute. She'll make your wife comf'table, too. She's a great hand at makin' folks comf'table. I tell her she'd make a cake of ice feel to home on a hot stove. She beats−−"

The "old lady" herself interrupted him, entering with a bottle in one hand and a lamp in the other.

"Joshua!" she said, warningly.

"Well, what is it, Betsy?"

"Be careful how you talk."

"Talk!" with a wink at me. "I wan't goin' to say nothin'."

"Yes, you was. Mrs. Paine, you mustn't mind him. He used to go mate on a fishin' schooner and, from all I can learn, they use pretty strong language aboard these boats."

"Pick it up same as a poll parrot," cut in her husband. "Comes natural when you're handlin' wet trawl line in February. Can't seem to get no comfort out of anything milder."

"He's a real good−hearted man, Joshua is, and a profession' church member, but he does swear more'n he ought to. But, as I tell the minister, he don't mean nothin' by it."

"Not a damn thing!" said Mr. Atwood, reassuringly. The bottle, it appeared, contained Jamaica ginger, a liberal dose of which Mrs. Atwood insisted upon our taking as a precaution against catching cold.

"There's nothin' better," she said.

"You bet there ain't!" this from the lightkeeper. "A body can't get within forty fathoms of a cold with a swallow of that amidships. It's hotter than−−"

"Joshua!"

"The Fourth of July," concluded her husband, triumphantly.

"And now, Mrs. Paine," went on the lady of the house, "your room's all ready. I've laid out some dry things for you on the bed and some of Joshua's, too. You and your husband−−"

I thought it high time to explain.

"The lady is not my wife," I said, quickly.

"She ain't! Why, I thought Joshua said−−"

"He−−er−−made a mistake. She is Miss Colton, a summer resident and neighbor of mine in Denboro."

"Sho! you don't say! That's just like you, Joshua!"

"Just like me! Well, how'd I know? I beg your pardon, Miss, I'm sure. Shan't beg your hus−−I mean Mr. Paine's pardon; he ought to thank me for the compliment. Haw! haw!"

Miss Colton herself made the next remark.

"If my room is ready, Mrs. Atwood," she said,, without even a glance in my direction, "I think I will go to it. I AM rather wet."

"Wet! Land sakes, yes! I guess you be! Come right in, Joshua, take them clothes of yours into our room and let Mr. Paine put 'em on."

Her husband obeyed orders. After I was alone in the room to which he conducted me and enjoying the luxury of dry socks, I heard him justifying his mistake in stentorian tones.

"I couldn't help it, Betsy," I heard him say. "I took it for granted they was married. When I hove alongside that motor boat they was a−settin' close up together in the stern sheets and so, of course, I thought−−"

"You hadn't any business to. You made that poor young lady blush somethin' dreadful. Most likely they're just keepin' company−−or engaged, or somethin'. You ought to be more careful."

I wondered if the young lady herself heard all this. I didn't see how she could help it.

Kinder−hearted people than these two never lived, I do believe. It was after three in the morning, both had been up all night, we were absolute strangers to them, and yet, without a word of complaint, they gave the remainder of the hours before daylight to making us comfortable. When I dressed as much of myself as a suit of Mr. Atwood's−−his Sunday best, I presume−−would cover, and, with a pair of carpet slippers about the size and shape of toy ferry boats on my feet, emerged from the bedroom, I found the table set in the kitchen, the teapot steaming and Mrs. Atwood cooking "spider bread" on the stove. When Miss Colton, looking surprisingly presentable−− considering that she, too, was wearing borrowed apparel four sizes too large for her−−made her appearance, we sat down to a simple meal which, I think, was the most appetizing I ever tasted.

The Atwoods were bursting with curiosity concerning our getting adrift in the motor boat. I described the adventure briefly. When I told of Lute's forgetfulness in the matter of gasolene the lightkeeper thumped the table.

"There, by godfreys!" he exclaimed. "I could see it comin'! That feller's for all the world like a cook I had once aboard the Ezry H. Jones. That cook was the biggest numskull that ever drawed the breath of life. Always

forgettin' somethin', he was, and always at the most inconvenient time. Once, if you'll believe it, I had a skipper of another vessel come aboard and, wishin' to be sort of hospitable, as you might say, I offered him a glass of rum."

"Joshua!"

"Oh, it's all right, Betsy. This was years ago. I'm as good a teetotaler now as you be, and I never was what you'd call a soak. But I've SEEN fellers−− Why, I knew one once that used to go to bed in the dark. He was so full of alcohol he didn't dast to light a match fear he'd catch a−fire. Fact! He was eighty−odd then, and he lived to be nigh a hundred. Preserved, you understand, same as one of them specimens in a museum. He'd kept forever, I cal'late, if he hadn't fell off the dock. The water fixed him; he wasn't used to it. He was the wust−−"

"Never mind him. Stick to the cook."

"Yes, yes. Well, I sent that cook for the rum and when he fetched it, I thought it smelt funny. And when I TASTED it−−godfreys! 'Twas bay rum; yes, sir, bay rum! same as they put on your hair. You see, he'd forgot to buy any rum when we was in our last port and, havin' the bay rum along he fetched that. 'Twas SOME kind of rum and that was enough for him. I WAS mad, but that visitin' skipper, he didn't care. Drank it down and smacked his lips. 'I'm a State of Maine man,' he says, 'and that's a prohibition state. This tastes like home,' he says. 'If you don't mind I'll help myself to another.' 'I don't mind,' says I, 'but I'm sorry I ain't got any hair−ile. If I had you might have a barber−shop toddy.' Yes, sir! Ho−ho! that's what I said. But he didn't mind. He was−−"

And so on. The yarns were not elegant, but, as he told them, they were funny. Mabel Colton laughed as heartily as the rest of us. She appeared to be in fine spirits. She talked with the Atwoods, answered their questions, and ate the hot "spider bread" and butter as if she had never tasted anything as good. But with me she would not talk. Whenever I addressed a remark to her, she turned it with a laugh and her next speech was pretty certain to be addressed to the lightkeeper or his wife. As for our adventure in the launch, that she treated as a joke.

"Wan't you awful scared when that squall struck so sudden?" inquired Mrs. Atwood.

"Dreadfully."

"Humph!" this from Joshua; "I cal'late Mr. Paine was some scart too. What did you do, Mr. Paine?"

"I rigged that canvas on the oar as soon as possible," I answered.

"Um−hm. That was good judgment."

"Tell me, Mr. Atwood," asked the young lady innocently, "are all seafaring men very dictatorial under such circumstances?"

"Very−−which?"

"I mean do they order people about and make them do all sorts of things, whether they wish to or not?"

"Sartin. Godfreys! I never asked nobody what they wished aboard the Ezry H. Jones."

"And do they tell them to 'sit down and keep still'?"

"Gen'rally they tell 'em to get up and keep movin'. If they don't they start 'em pretty lively−−with a rope's end."

"I see. Even when they are−−ladies?"

"Ladies? Godfreys! we never had but one woman aboard the Ezry. Had the skipper's wife one v'yage, but nobody ever ordered her around any to speak of. She was six feet tall and weighed two hundred. All hands was scart to death of her."

"Suppose she had been ordered to 'sit down and keep still'; what do you think would have happened?"

"Don't know. If 'twas one of the hands I guess likely she'd have hove him overboard. If 'twas the skipper I shouldn't wonder if she'd have knocked him down−−after she got over the surprise of his darin' to do such, a thing. She had HIM trained, I tell ye!"

"Miss Colton thinks me rather a bully, I am afraid," I said. "I did order her about rather roughly."

Mr. Atwood burst into a laugh. "That Ezry Jones woman was the skipper's wife," he declared. "Makes a lot of diff'rence, that does. I was considerable of a bully myself afore Betsy got me on the parson's books. Now I'm the most peaceable critter ever you see. Your turn's comin', Miss Colton. All you got to do is be patient."

"Joshua!" said Mrs. Atwood, in mild reproof. "You mustn't mind his talk, Miss Colton. He's a terrible joker."

Miss Colton changed the subject. She did not so much as look at me again during the meal and, after it was over, she went to her room, explaining that she was very tired and would try to get a little sleep.

I had discovered that the lighthouse, being close to the mainland, was equipped with a telephone. Now I begged permission to use it. I called up Denboro and asked to be connected with the Colton home. I felt very sure

that there would be no sleep in the big house that night and I wished to relieve their anxiety and to send word to Mother. Mr. Colton himself answered my call.

I announced my identity and explained where I was and that his daughter was in my care and perfectly safe.

"Thank God!" was the fervent exclamation at the other end of the wire, and the voice which uttered it was shaking with emotion. "Stay where you are a moment, Paine. Let me tell my wife. She is almost crazy. Hold the wire."

I held the wire and waited. The next voice which reached my ears was Mrs. Colton's. She asked a dozen questions, one after the other. Was Mabel safe? Was I sure she was safe? Wasn't the poor child almost dead after all she'd been through? What had happened? What was she doing away over there in that dreadful place? Why had I taken her there?

I answered as well as I could, telling briefly of the collision in the fog and what followed. The explanation appeared to be rather unsatisfactory.

"You take the wire, James," I heard the lady say. "I can't make it all out. Mabel is at some horrid lighthouse and there is no kerosene, or something. The poor child! Alone there, with that man! Tell him she must be brought home at once. It is dreadful for her! Think what she must have suffered! And with HIM! What will people say? Tell him to bring her home! The idea! I don't believe a word−−"

"Hello−−hello, Paine!" Colton was at the 'phone once more. "Can you get Mabel−−Miss Colton, over to Wellmouth, do you think?"

"Yes. I will get a boat as soon as I can. Miss Colton is in her room, asleep I hope. She is very tired and I think she should rest until daylight. I will get her to Wellmouth in time for the morning train."

"Never mind the train. I'll come after her in the auto. I will start now. I will meet you at the landing−−at the wharf, if there is one."

"Very well. Will you be good enough to send word to my mother that I am safe and sound? She will be worried."

"Yes, yes, I'll send word. Tell Mabel to be careful and not take cold. . . . Yes, Henrietta, I am attending to everything. Good− by, Paine."

That was all, not a word of thanks. I did not expect thanks and I made allowances for the state of mind at the mansion; but that telephone conversation, particularly Mrs. Colton's share in it, cast a gloom over my spirits. I did not care to hear more of Mr. Atwood's yarns and jokes. I went to my own room, but I did not sleep.

At half−past five I was astir again. The lightkeeper, it appeared, had an auxiliary engine in a catboat which he owned and could let me have a sufficient supply of gasolene to fill the Comfort's tank. When this was done−−and it took a long time, for Joshua insisted upon helping and he was provokingly slow−−I returned to the sitting room and asked Mrs. Atwood to call Miss Colton.

"Land sakes!" was the cheery answer, "I didn't have to call her. She's been up for fifteen minutes. Said she was goin' to take a cruise around the lighthouse. I cal'late you'll find her out there somewheres. Go and fetch her here. You two must have a bite−−a cup of hot coffee and a biled egg, anyhow−−afore you leave. Yes, you must. I shan't listen to a no from either of you."

I went out and crossed the sandy yard to the whitewashed lighthouse. There was no sign of Miss Colton in the yard, but the door of the lighthouse was open and I entered. No one there. The stairs, winding upward, invited me to climb and I did so. The little room with the big lantern, the latter now covered with a white cloth, was untenanted also. I looked out of the window. There she was, on the iron gallery surrounding the top of the tower, leaning on the rail and gazing out over the water. She had not heard me. For a moment I stood there, watching her.

She was not wearing Mrs. Atwood's gown now, but her own, wrinkled and stained from its last night's drenching in salt water, but dry now. She was bareheaded and her brown hair was tossing in the sea breeze. The sun, but a little way above the horizon and shining through the morning haze, edged her delicate profile with a line of red gold. I had never seen her look more beautiful, or more aristocratic and unapproachable. The memory of our night in the launch seemed more like an unbelievable dream than ever, and the awakening more cruel. For I was awake now. What I had heard over the 'phone had awakened me thoroughly. There should be no more dreaming.

I stepped out upon the gallery.

"Good morning," I said.

She turned quickly, and I heard her catch her breath with a little gasp.

"I beg pardon," said I; "I'm afraid I startled you."

She was startled, that was evident, and, it seemed to me, a trifle embarrassed. But the embarrassment was but momentary.

"Good morning," she said. "How very silent you can be when you choose, Mr. Paine. How long have you been standing there, pray?"

"Only a moment. I came to call you to breakfast."

"To breakfast?"

"Yes, Mrs. Atwood insists upon our breakfasting before I take you ashore."

"Oh! Why didn't you call me? I would have come down."

"I did not see you until I reached the lantern room. My silence was not premeditated. I made noise enough, or so it seemed to me; but you were so wrapped in your thoughts−−"

"Nonsense!" She interrupted me almost sharply. "I was not 'wrapped' in anything, except the beauty of this view. It IS beautiful, isn't it?"

"Very," I answered, but fear I was not looking at the view. It may be that she noticed this, for she said:

"You have come into your own again, I see. So have I."

She indicated her gown with a smile and a gesture. I laughed.

"Yes," I said. "I have returned unto Joshua that which was his."

"You should have kept it. You have no idea what a picturesque lightkeeper you make, Mr. Paine."

Somehow or other this harmless joke hurt.

"Yes," I answered, drily, "that is about my measure, I presume."

Her eyes twinkled. "I thought the measure rather scant," she observed, mischievously. "I wish I might have a snap−shot of you in that−−uniform."

"I am afraid the opportunity for that is past."

"But it−−" with a little bubble of mirth, "it was so funny."

"No doubt. I am sorry I can't oblige you with a photograph."

She looked at me, biting her lip.

"Is your bump of humor a dent, Mr. Paine?" she inquired. "I am afraid it must be."

"You may be right. I don't appreciate a joke as keenly as−−well, as Mr. Carver, for instance."

She turned her back upon me and led the way to the door.

"Shall we go to breakfast?" she asked, in a different tone.

Breakfast was a silent meal, so far as we two were concerned. The Atwoods, however, talked enough to make up the deficiency.

As we rose from the table the young lady turned to the lightkeeper.

"Mr. Atwood," she said, "I presume you are going to be kind enough to take me to Wellmouth?"

"Why, Miss, I−−I wan't cal'latin' to. Mr. Paine here, he's got all the gas he needs now and he'll take you over in his launch."

"Oh! But you will go, if I ask you to?"

"Sartin sure."

"You have been so very kind that I dislike to ask another favor; but I hoped you would send a telegram for me. My father and mother will be very much alarmed and I must wire them at once. You will have to send it 'collect,' for," with a rueful smile, "I haven't my purse with me."

"Land sakes! that'll be all right. Glad to help you out."

I put in a word. "It will not be necessary," I said, impatiently. "I have money enough, Miss Colton."

I was ignored.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Atwood. You will come with me and look out for the telegram?"

"Yes. Yes−−yes. But I don't see what you need to send no telegram for. Mr. Paine here, he telephoned to your folks last night."

She looked at me and then at Joshua.

"Last night?" she repeated.

"Why yes−−or this mornin' after you'd gone to bed. He was dead set on it. I could see he was 'most tired and wore out, but he wouldn't rest till he'd 'phoned your folks and told 'em you was safe and sound. Didn't seem to care nothin' about himself, but he was bound your pa and ma shouldn't worry."

She turned to me.

"Did you?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered. "Your father is to meet us at the Wellmouth wharf."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I intended to. I meant to tell you when I saw you in the lighthouse, but−−I forgot it."

She said no more, but when Joshua, hat and boots on, met us at the door she spoke to him.

"You need not go, Mr. Atwood," she said. "It will not be necessary−−now."

"Godfreys! I'd just as soon as not. Ruther, if anything."

He hurried down to the beach. I was about to follow when a hand touched my arm. I turned, to find a pair of brown eyes, misty but wonderful, looking into mine.

"Thank you," said Miss Colton.

"Don't mention it."

"But I shall. It was thoughtful and kind. I had forgotten, or−−at least−−I took it for granted there was no 'phone here. But you did not forget. It was thoughtful, but−−it was like you."

I was breathing hard. I could not look at her.

"Don't," I said, roughly. "It was nothing. Anyone with common sense would have thought of it and done it, of course."

"I did not. But you−− Oh, it was like you! Always some one else and never yourself. You were worn out. You must have been, after−−" with a shudder−−"last night. Oh, I have so much to thank you for! I−−"

"Come on! Heave ahead!" It was Mr. Atwood, bellowing from the beach. "All aboard for Wellmouth and pints alongshore."

Betsy appeared in the door behind us.

"All ready, be you?" she asked.

I could not have answered, but my companion was once more as calm and cool as the morning itself.

"All ready," she answered. "Good−by, Mrs. Atwood. And thank you over and over again. You have been so kind." With a sudden flash of enthusiasm. "Every one is kind. It is a beautiful world. Good−by."

She ran lightly down the slope and I followed.

The trip to Wellmouth was of but a half hour's duration. Atwood talked all the time. Miss Colton laughed at his stories and seemed to be without a care. She scarcely looked at me during the passage, and if she caught me looking at her and our glances met she turned away. On the wharf was a big automobile, surrounded by a gaping crowd of small boys and 'longshore loafers.

We drew up beside the landing. Our feminine passenger sprang ashore and ran up the steps, to be seized in her father's arms. Mrs. Colton was there also, babbling hysterically. I watched and listened for a moment. Then I started the engine.

"Shove off," I ordered. The lightkeeper was astonished.

"Ain't ye goin' ashore?" he demanded.

"No," I answered, curtly. "I'm going home. Shove off."

The launch was fifty feet from the pier when I heard a shout. Colton was standing on the wharf edge, waving his hand. Beside him stood his daughter, her mother's arms about her.

"Here! Paine!" shouted Colton. "Come back! Come back and go home with us in the car. There is plenty of room."

I did not answer.

"Come back! Come back, Paine!" he shouted again. Mrs. Colton raised her head from her daughter's shoulder.

"James! James!" she cautioned, without taking the trouble to lower her voice, "don't make a scene. Let him go in his dreadful boat, if he prefers to."

"Paine!" cried her husband again.

"I must look out for the launch," I shouted. "I shall be home almost as soon as you are. Good−by."

I left the lightkeeper at his island. He refused to accept a cent from me, except in payment for the gasolene,

and declared he had had a "fust−rate night of it."

"Come and see us again, Mr. Paine," he said. "Come any time and fetch your lady along. She's a good one, she is, and nice−lookin', don't talk! You're a lucky critter, did you know it? Haw! haw! Good−by."

The Comfort never made better time than on that homeward trip. I anchored her at her moorings, went ashore in the skiff, and hastened up to the house. It was past ten o'clock and I would be over an hour late at the bank. A fine beginning for my first day in charge of the institution!

The dining−room door was open, but no one was in the dining−room. The kitchen door, however, was shut and from behind it I heard Dorinda's voice.

"You can get right out of this house," she said. "I don't care if you've got a mortgage on the rest of the Cape! You ain't got one on this house, and you nor nobody else shall stay in it and talk that way. There's the door."

"Dorindy!" wailed another voice−−Lute's. "You mustn't talk so−−to him! Don't you realize−−"

"I realize that if I had a husband instead of a jellyfish I shouldn't have to talk. Be still, you!"

A third voice made itself heard.

"All right," it growled. "I ain't anxious to stay here any longer than is necessary. Bein' an honest, decent man, I'm ashamed to be seen here as it is. But you can tell that low−lived sneak, Ros Paine, that−−"

I opened the door.

"You may tell him yourself, Captain Dean," said I. "What is it?"

CHAPTER XX

My unexpected entrance caused a sensation. Lute, sitting on the edge of one of the kitchen chairs, an agonized expression on his face, started so violently that he almost lost his balance. Dorinda, standing with her back toward me, turned quickly. Captain Jedediah Dean, his hand on the knob of the door opening to the back yard, showed the least evidence of surprise. He did not start, nor did he speak, but looked at me with a countenance as grim and set and immovable as if it had been cast in a mould.

Lute, characteristically enough, uttered the first word.

"By time!" he gasped. "It's Ros himself! Ros−−Ros, you know what he says?" He pointed a shaking finger at the captain. "He says you−−"

"Keep still!" Dorinda struck her palms together with a slap, as if her husband had been what she often called him, a parrot. Then, without another glance in his direction, she stepped backward and took her stand beside me.

"I'm real glad to see you home safe and sound, Roscoe," she said, calmly.

"Thank you, Dorinda. Now, Captain Dean, I believe you were sending a message to me just now. I am here and you can deliver it. What is it you have to say?"

Before he could answer Dorinda spoke once more.

"Lute," she said, "you come along with me into the dinin'−room."

"But−−but, Dorindy, I−−"

"You come with me. This ain't any of my business any more, and it never was any of yours. Come! move!"

Lute moved, but so slowly that his progress to the door took almost a full minute. His wife paid no heed to the pleading looks he gave her and stood majestically waiting until he passed her and crossed the sill. Then she turned to me.

"If you want me, just speak," she said. "I shall be in the dining− room. There ain't no need for Comfort to know about this. She doesn't know that you've been away and hasn't been worried at all. I'll look out for her. Lute'll be with me, so you needn't fret about him, either."

She closed the door.

"Now, Captain Dean," I repeated, "what is it you have to say?"

The captain's grim mouth twisted in a savage sneer.

"You know what I'm goin' to say as well as I do," he answered.

"Possibly, but you had better say it."

"It won't take me long. You've sold that Shore Lane land to Jim Colton, ain't you?"

"Yes."

My calm affirmative seemed to astonish him. I think he expected a denial. His hand left the doorknob and he stepped toward me.

"You−−HAVE!" he cried. "You don't even take the trouble to−− You have the face to stand there and tell me−−"

He almost choked.

"Captain Dean," I interrupted, quickly, "wait a moment. Listen to me. I have sold Colton the land. I did not intend selling it at all, least of all to him, but circumstances compelled me to change my mind. I did it because I was obliged to. It is done. I am sorry I had to do it, but, under the same conditions, I should do it again. I am not ashamed."

He leaned forward, steadying himself with a hand upon the table, and stared at me.

"You ain't ashamed?" he repeated. "You ain't ashamed! Why, you−− Didn't you tell me you'd never sell that land? Didn't you promise me?"

"I did not promise anything. At first I promised not to sell without letting you know of my intention. Afterward I took back that promise."

"But why did you sell? You said it wan't a question of price at all. You made your brags that it wan't! To me, over and over, you made 'em. And then you sneak off and−−"

"Stop! I did think it was not a question of price. Then I found out that it was."

He clenched his fist.

"Damn you!" he shouted, furiously. "You liar! You sneak! After I−−"

"That is enough, Captain. This has gone far enough. I have sold the land−−for what seemed to me a good reason−−and your calling me names will not change the situation. I don't care to hear them. You had better go."

"WHAT?"

"I say you had better go."

"_I_ go? You'll put me out?"

"No, certainly not. But there is nothing to be gained by a quarrel, and so, for both our sakes, I think you had better go away."

For a moment I thought he would strike me. Then his fist fell heavily upon the table. His lips were quivering like those of an infirm person. He looked old, and I had never before considered him an old man.

"What made you do it?" he cried, desperately. "What made you do it? Is it all settled? Can't you back out?"

"No."

"But−−but why didn't you sell to me−−to the town? If you had to sell why didn't you do that? Why did you go to him?"

"Because he would pay me what I needed; because his price was higher than any you or the town could offer."

"How did you know that? My heavens above! I'd have paid−−I'd have paid most anything−−out of my own pocket, I would. I tell you this meant everything to me. I'm gettin' along in years. I ain't been any too well liked here in Denboro, and I knew it. You think that didn't make no difference to me, maybe I pretended it didn't, but it did; by the Almighty, it did! I intended for folks to be thankful to me for−−I−− Oh, WHY did you do it, Ros?"

I shook my head. I was sorry for him now−−sorry and astonished. He had given me a glimpse of the real Jedediah Dean, not the pompous, loud−voiced town politician and boss, but the man desirous of fighting his way into the esteem and liking of his neighbors.

"I'm sorry, Captain," I said. "If I had known−−if I had had time to think, perhaps I might have acted differently. But I had no time. I found that I must have the money which that land would bring and that I had to have it immediately. So I went where I knew I could get it."

"Money? You needed money? Why didn't you come to me? I'd have lent it to you."

"You?"

"Yes, me. What do you cal'late I've been backin' you all this summer for? What did I get you that job in my bank for?"

"YOU? George Taylor engaged me for that place."

"Maybe so. But do you suppose he did it on his own hook? HE couldn't hire you unless the directors said so and the directors don't say anything, the majority of 'em, unless I say it first. _I_ put the notion in George's head. He didn't know it, but I did. And I put it in the directors' heads, too. Ros Paine, I always liked you, though I did use to think you was a gentleman loafer. There was a somethin' about you even then, a kind of hands−off, mind your own business independence about you that I liked, though I knew mighty well you never liked me. And after you and me got together on this Lane thing I liked you more and more. You could tell me to go to the devil as well as you could anybody else, and I'll shake hands with a feller that'll do that. I always wanted a boy of my own. Nellie's a good girl, no better afloat or ashore, but she is a girl. George is a good feller, too, but somehow, or 'nother, I'd come to think of you as the kind of son I'd have had, if the Almighty had give me one. Oh, what did you do this for?"

I could not answer. He had overwhelmed me. I never felt meaner or more wicked. I had been ready to face him, ready for the interview with him which I knew was inevitable and which I had foreseen, but not this kind of an interview.

He took his hand from the table and stood erect.

"Money!" he said. "You wanted money. You must have wanted it bad. What did you want it for?"

"I can't tell you."

"You had better. It's your only chance, I tell you that!"

"I can't help it, Captain Dean. I can't tell you. I wish I could."

He regarded me in silence for a moment. Then: "All right," he said, solemnly. "I'm through with you, Ros Paine. In one way I'm through with you. In another I ain't. I cal'late you was figgerin' to go straight up to the bank,

as bold as brass, and set down at George Taylor's desk and draw your wages like an honest man. Don't you ever dare set foot in that bank again. You're fired! bounced! kicked out! Do you understand?"

"Very well; I understand."

"You will understand, whether you do now or not. Colton's got the Shore Lane and you've got his dirty money in your pocket. He's paid you, but the town ain't. The town you sold out ain't paid you−−but I'm goin' to see that it does. Ros Paine, I'm goin' to drive you out of Denboro."

He turned on his heel, strode to the door, went out, and slammed it behind him.

I went back to the dining−room. Lute was nowhere in sight, but Dorinda was standing by the mantel, dusting, as usual, where there was no dust. I did not speak but walked toward the door leading to the stairs. Dorinda stepped in front of me.

"Roscoe," she said, sharply, "can he do it?"

"Do it?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Can he give you your walkin' papers at that bank? Oh, I heard him! I tried not to, but he hollered so I couldn't help it. That kitchen door ain't much thicker'n a sheet of paper, anyhow. Can he do it?"

"I guess so. He seems to be boss of that institution."

"But can't 'Lisha Warren or some of the other directors help you? Jed Dean don't boss 'Lisha Warren−−not much."

"I shan't ask for help. Please don't trouble me, Dorinda."

I tried to pass her, but she would not permit it.

"I shan't trouble you, Ros," she said. "I guess you've got troubles enough without me. But you let me ask you this: Are you goin' to let him drive you out of town?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "It may not take much driving," I announced, listlessly, "if it were not for Mother I should be only too glad to go."

Again I tried to pass, but this time she seized my arm.

"Roscoe Paine," she cried, "don't you talk like that. I don't want to hear another word like that. Don't you let Jed Dean or nobody else drive you out of Denboro. You ain't done nothin' to be ashamed of, have you?"

"I sold that land to Mr. Colton. I don't know how Captain Jed found it out, but it is true enough; I did exactly what he said I did."

"Found out! He found out from somebody over to Ostable where the deed was recorded, that is how he found out. He said so. But I don't care for that. And I don't care if you sold the Lane ten times over. You didn't do it for any mean or selfish reason, that I know. There ain't a selfish bone in your body, Roscoe. I've lived along with you all these years and I know. Nobody that was mean or selfish would give up their chances in life and stay here in this one−hoss town because his ma was sick and had took a notion that she couldn't bear to part with him. Don't you mind Jed Dean−− pig−headed old thing!−−or anybody else in Denboro. Hold up your head and show 'em you don't care for the whole caboodle of 'em. Let 'em talk and act like fools, if they want to. It comes natural to most of 'em, I cal'late, and they'll be sorry some day. Don't you let 'em drive you out. They won't come inside THIS house with their talk, not while I'm here, I tell you that!"

Her eyes, behind the brass−rimmed spectacles, flashed fire. This was the longest speech I had ever heard her make.

"There, Dorinda," I said, smiling, "don't worry on my account. I'm not worth it. And, whatever I do, I shall see that you and Lute are provided for."

Instead of calming her this statement seemed to have the exactly opposite effect.

"Stop it!" she snapped. "The idea! Do you suppose it's for myself I'm talkin' this way to you? I guess 'tain't! My soul! I'll look out for myself, and Lute, too, long's I'm able to walk; and when I can't walk 'twill be because I've stopped breathin'. It's for you I'm talkin', for you and Comfort. Think of her."

I sighed. "I have been thinking of her, Dorinda," I declared. "She doesn't know a word about this."

"Then tell her."

"I can't tell her my reason for selling, any more than I can tell you−−or Dean."

"Tell her what you can, then. Tell her as much of the truth as you can. She'll say you done right, of course. Whatever you do is right to her."

I made no reply. She regarded me keenly.

"Roscoe," she went on, "do you WANT to go somewheres else?"

"I don't know, Dorinda. I might as well be here as anywhere, perhaps. I am rather blue and discouraged just now, that's all."

"I can't blame you much. But bein' discouraged don't do any good. Besides, it's always darkest just afore dawn, they say; anyhow, I've had that preached to me ever since I was a girl and I've tried to believe it through a good many cloudy spells. Roscoe, don't you let old Jed or anybody DRIVE you out of Denboro, but, if you WANT to go−−if you think you'd ought to go, to earn money or anything, don't you worry about leavin' Comfort. I'll look out for her as well as if she was my own. Remember that."

I laid my hand on hers. "Thank you," I said, earnestly. "Dorinda, you are a good woman."

To my surprise the eyes behind the spectacles became misty. Tears in Dorinda's eyes! When she spoke it was in, for her, a curiously hesitating tone.

"Roscoe," she faltered, "I wonder if you'd be cross if I asked about what wan't any of my business. I'm old enough to be your grandma, pretty nigh, so I'm goin' to risk it. You used to be independent enough. You never used to care for the town or anybody in it. Lately you've changed. Changed in a good many ways. Is somethin' besides this Lane affair frettin' you? Is somebody frettin' you? Are you worried about−−that one?"

She had caught me unawares. I felt the blood tingle in my cheeks. I tried to laugh and made a failure of the attempt.

"That one?" I repeated. "I−− Why, I don't understand, Dorinda."

"Don't you? Well, if you don't then I'm just talkin' silly, that's all. If you do, I . . . . Humph! I might have known it!"

She turned like a shot and jerked the door open. There was a rattle, a series of thumps, and a crash. Lute was sprawling upon the floor at our feet. I gazed at him in open−mouthed astonishment. Dorinda sniffed scornfully.

"I might have known it," she repeated. "Sittin' on the stairs there, listenin', wan't you?"

Lute raised himself to his knees.

"I think," he panted, "I−−I swan! I shouldn't wonder if I'd broke my leg!"

"Um−hm! Well, if you'd broke your neck 'twouldn't have been no more'n you deserve. Shame on you! Sneakin' thing!"

"Now, Dorindy, I−−I wan't listenin'. I was just−−"

"Don't talk to me. Don't you open your mouth. And if you open it to anybody else about what you heard I'll−−I declare I'll shut you up in the dark closet and keep you there, as if you was three year old. Sometimes I think your head ain't any older than that. Go right out of this house."

"But where'll I go?"

"I don't care where you go. Only don't let me set eyes on you till dinner time. March!"

Lute backed away as she advanced, waving both his hands and pleading and expostulating.

"Dorindy, I tell you . . . WHAT makes you so unlikely? . . . I was just . . . All right then," desperately, "I'll go! And if you never set eyes on me again 'twon't be my fault. You'll be sorry then. If you never see me no more you'll be sorry."

"I'll set eyes on you at dinner time. I ain't afraid of that. Git!"

She followed him to the kitchen and then returned.

"Ah hum!" she sighed, "it's pretty hard to remember that about darkest just afore dawn when you have a burden like that on your shoulders to lug through life. It's night most of the time then. Poor critter! he means well enough, too. And once he was a likely enough young feller, though shiftless, even then. But he had a long spell of fever three year after we was married and he's never been good for much since. I try to remember that, and to be patient with him, but it's a pretty hard job sometimes."

She sighed again. I had often wondered how a woman of her sense could have married Luther Rogers. Now she was telling me.

"I never really cared for him," she went on, looking toward the door through which the discomfited eavesdropper had made his exit. "There was somebody else I did care for, but he and I quarreled, and I took Luther out of spite and because my folks wanted me to. I've paid for it since. Roscoe," earnestly, "Roscoe, if you care for anybody and she cares for you, don't let anything keep you apart. If she's worth a million or fifty cents that don't make any difference. It shouldn't be a matter of her folks or your folks or money or pride or anything

else. It's a matter for just you and her. And if you love each other, that's enough. I tell you so, and I know."

I was more astonished than ever. I could scarcely believe that this was the dry, practical Dorinda Rogers who had kept house for Mother and me all these years. And with my astonishment were other feelings, feelings which warned me that I had better make my escape before I was trapped into betraying that which, all the way home from Mackerel Island, I had been swearing no one should ever know. I would not even admit it to myself, much less to anyone else.

I did not look at Dorinda, and my answer to her long speech was as indifferent and careless as I could make it.

"Thank you, Dorinda," I said. "I'll remember your advice, if I ever need it, which isn't likely. Now I must go to my room and change my clothes. These are too badly wrinkled to be becoming."

When I came down, after an absence of half an hour, she was sitting by the window, sewing.

"Comfort's waitin' to see you, Roscoe," she said. "I've told her all about it."

"YOU'VE told her−−what?" I demanded, in amazement.

"About your sellin' the Lane and losin' your job, and so on. Don't look at me like that. 'Twas the only common−sense thing to do. She'd heard old Leather−Lungs whoopin' out there in the kitchen and she'd heard you and me talkin' here in the dinin'−room. I hoped she was asleep, but she wan't. After you went upstairs she called for me and wanted to know the whole story. I told her what I knew of it. Now you can tell her the rest. She takes it just as I knew she would. You done it and so it's all right."

"Roscoe, is that you?"

It was Mother calling me. I went into the darkened room and sat down beside the bed.

She and I had much to say to each other. This time I kept back nothing, except my reason for selling the land. I told her frankly that that reason was a secret, and that it must remain a secret, even from her.

"I hate to say that to you, Mother," I told her. "You don't know how I hate it. I would tell you if I could."

She pressed my hand. "I know you would, Roscoe," she said. "I am quite content not to know. That your reason for selling was an honorable one, that is all I ask."

"It was that, Mother."

"I am sure of it. But," hesitatingly, "can you tell me this: You did not do it because you needed money−−for me? Our income is the same as ever? We have not met with losses?"

"No, Mother. Our income is the same that it has been for years."

"Then it was not because of me; because you felt that I should have those 'luxuries' you talk about so often? Oh, I don't need them, Roscoe I really don't. I am−−I scarcely dare say it for fear it may not be true−−but I THINK I am better than I have been. I feel stronger."

"I know you are better, Mother. Doctor Quimby is very much encouraged."

"Is he? I am so glad! For your sake, Boy. Perhaps the time will come when I may not be your Old Man Of the Sea as I am now. But you did not sell the land because of me?"

"No."

"You did not sell it for yourself, that I know. I wonder . . . But, there! I mustn't wonder, and I won't. Captain Dean was very angry and unreasonable, Dorinda says. I suppose his pride is hurt. I'm afraid he will make it unpleasant for you in the village."

"He will do his best, I'm sure of that."

"You poor boy! As if you did not have enough to bear without that! He has asked you to resign from the bank?"

I smiled. "He has pitched me out, neck and crop," I answered. "I expected that, of course."

"But what will you do? Can't Mr. Taylor help you? Perhaps he will use his influence with the captain."

"I don't need his influence, Mother. I took the place merely because of a whim. Now that I have lost it I am no worse off than I was before."

"But you enjoyed the work?"

"Yes."

I was only beginning to realize how much I had enjoyed it. I sighed, involuntarily.

Mother heard the sigh and the pressure of her hand on mine tightened.

"Poor boy!" she said again. Then, after a moment, "I wish I might talk with Miss Colton about this."

I started violently. What had put that idea in her head?

"Miss Colton!" I exclaimed. "Mother, whatever you do, don't speak to her−−about me."

"Why not? She has not called on us for some time, but she is interested in you, I know. And perhaps her father could−−"

"Mother, don't."

She was silent for an instant. Then she said, quietly. "Boy, what is it? Is there something else you haven't told me? Something about−−her?"

"No, no," I stammered.

"Isn't there? Are you sure?"

I do not know what reply I should have made. Her question, coming so close upon the heels of Dorinda's hints, upset me completely. Was it written upon my face, for everyone to see? Did I look the incredible idiot that I knew myself to be? For I did know it. In spite of my determination not to admit it even in my innermost thoughts, I knew. I was in love with Mabel Colton−−madly, insanely, hopelessly in love with her, and should be until my dying day. I had played with fire too long.

Before I could answer there came a knock at the door. It opened and Dorinda's head appeared. She seemed, for her, excited.

"There's somebody to see you, Ros," she said. "You'd better come out soon's you can. He's in a hurry."

"Someone to see me," I repeated. "Who is it?"

Dorinda glanced at Mother and then at me. She did not so much as whisper, but her lips formed a name. I rose from my chair.

Mother looked at me and then at Dorinda.

"Who is it, Roscoe?" she asked.

"Just a caller on a business matter," I answered, hurriedly. "I'll be out at once, Dorinda."

"But who is it, Roscoe?"

"It's Mr. Colton, Mother. He has probably come to−−"

"Dorinda," Mother interrupted me, "ask Mr. Colton to come in here."

"But, Mother−−"

"Ask him to come in here, Dorinda. I should like to meet him."

Dorinda hesitated, but when Mother spoke in that tone none of us hesitated long. She disappeared. A moment later the door opened wide and Colton entered. The sudden transition from sunlight to semidarkness bewildered him for a moment, doubtless, for he stood there without speaking. Dorinda, who had ushered him in, went out and closed the door. I stepped forward.

"Good morning, Mr. Colton," I said, as calmly as I could. "You have never met my mother, I think. Mother, this is Mr. Colton, our neighbor."

Colton turned toward the bed and murmured a few words. For once, I think, he was startled out of his customary cool self−possession. And when Mother spoke it seemed to me that she, too, was disturbed.

"Roscoe," she said, quickly, "will you draw that window−shade a little more? The light is rather strong. Thank you. Mr. Colton, I am very glad to meet you. I have heard of you often, of course, and I have met your daughter. She has been very kind to me, in many ways. Won't you sit down?"

I drew forward a chair. Our visitor accepted it.

"Thank you, Mrs. Paine," he said. "I will sit. To be honest, I'm very glad of the opportunity. I have been under the doctor's care for the past few weeks and last night's performance is not the best sort of treatment for a tender digestion. The doctor told me what I needed was rest and sleep and freedom from care. I told him I probably shouldn't get the last item till I was dead. As for the rest−−and sleep−− Humph!" with a short laugh, "I wonder what he would have said if he had seen me last night."

Mother's face was turned away from him on the pillow. "I am sorry to hear that you have been ill, Mr. Colton," she said.

"Ill! I'm not ill. I have never been sick in my life and I don't propose to begin now. If the crowd in New York would let me alone I should be all right enough. There is a deal on there that is likely to come to a head pretty soon and my people at the office are nervous. They keep 'phoning and telegraphing and upsetting things generally. I'll have to run over there myself in a day or two and straighten it out. But there! I didn't come here to worry you with my troubles. I feel as if I knew you, Mrs. Paine."

"Knew me? Knew ME, Mr. Colton?"

"Yes. I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, but my daughter has spoken of you often. She is a great admirer of yours. I won't tell you all the nice things she has said about you, for she has probably said them to you or to your son, already."

"You should be very proud of your daughter, Mr. Colton. She is a charming girl."

"Thanks. Just among us three I'll admit, in confidence, that I think you're right. And I'll admit, too, that you have a pretty good sort of a son, Mrs. Paine. He is inclined to be," with a glance in my direction, "a little too stubborn and high−principled for this practical world, but," with a chuckle, "he can be made to listen to reason, if you give him time enough. That is so, isn't it, Paine?"

I did not answer. Mother spoke for me.

"I am not sure that I understand you, Mr. Colton," she said, quietly. "I presume you are referring to the sale of the land. I do not know why Roscoe changed his mind in that matter, but I do know that his reason was a good one, and an honest one."

"He hasn't told it to you, then?"

"No. But I know that he thought it right or he never would have sold."

I broke in here. I did not care to hear my own praises.

"Did you call to discuss the Shore Lane, Mr. Colton?" I inquired. "I thought that affair settled."

"It is. No, I didn't come to discuss that. Mrs. Paine, I don't know why your son sold me that land, but I'm inclined to think, like you, that he wouldn't have done it unless he thought it was right. I know mighty well he wasn't afraid of me. Oh, you needn't laugh, young man. There ARE people in that fix, plenty of 'em. No, I didn't come to talk 'Lane.' That bird is dead. I came, first of all, to thank you for what you did for my daughter last night."

Mother turned her head and looked at him.

"For your daughter? Last night? Roscoe, what does he mean?"

"Nothing, Mother, nothing," I said, hastily. "I was unlucky enough to run the Comfort into Miss Colton's canoe in the bay yesterday afternoon in the fog. Fortunately I got her into the launch and−− and−−"

"And saved her from drowning, then and a dozen times afterward. He hasn't told you, Mrs. Paine? No, I can see that he hasn't. All right, I will. Paine, if your ingrowing modesty won't stand the pressure you had better leave the room. This is about what happened, Mrs. Paine, as Mabel tells it."

I tried to prevent him, but it was no use. He ignored me altogether and went on to tell of the collision in the fog, the voyage across the bay, and my telephone from the lighthouse. The story, as he told it, magnified what he called my coolness and common−sense to a ridiculous extent. I lost patience as I listened.

"Mr. Colton," I interrupted, "this is silly. Mother, the whole affair was more my fault than my good judgment. If I had anchored when it first happened we should have been home in an hour, instead of drifting all night."

"Why didn't you anchor, then?" asked Colton.

"Because I−−I−−"

I stopped short. I could not tell him why I did not anchor. He laughed aloud.

"That's all right," he said. "I guess Mabel's story is near enough to the truth for all practical purposes. Mrs. Paine," with a sudden change to seriousness, "you can understand why I have come here this morning. If it had not been for your son's pluck, and cool head, and good judgment I−−Mrs. Colton and I might have been−− God knows in what state we might have been to−day! God knows! I can't think of it."

His voice trembled. Mother put out a hand and took mine.

"Roscoe," she said, "Roscoe."

"So I came to thank him," went on our visitor. "This isn't the first time he has done something of the sort. It seems almost as if he−− But never mind that. I'm not going to be foolish. Your son and I, Mrs. Paine, have been fighting each other most of the summer. That's all right. It was a square fight and, until this newest freak of his−−and he has got me guessing as to what it means−−I admit I thought he was quite as likely to lick me as I was to lick him. I've watched him pretty closely and I am a pretty fair judge of a man, I flatter myself. Did he tell you that, a while ago, I offered him a place in my office?"

"In your office? You offered him that? No, he did not tell me. Roscoe!" reproachfully.

"I did not tell you, Mother, because it was not worth while. Of course I could not accept the offer."

She hesitated and, before she spoke, Colton broke in.

"Why not? That was what you were going to say, Mrs. Paine, I take it. That is what _I_ said−−why not? And I say it again. Paine, that offer is still open."

I shook my head. "I told you then that I could not accept," I said. "It is impossible."

"Why is it impossible? So far as I am concerned I believe you would be a mighty good investment."

"Impossible," I said again.

"Nothing is impossible. We won't waste words. I am going to be plain and I think Mrs. Paine will excuse me. You think you should not leave your mother, perhaps. I understand that reason. It would be a good one, except that−−well, that it isn't good any longer. Your mother is much better than she was. Quimby−−her doctor and mine−−says so. I shall see that she is well looked after. If she needs a nurse she shall have one, the best we can get. Oh, be still and let me finish! You can talk afterward. You're not going so far away. New York isn't the end of the earth; it is only the center, or it thinks it is. You'll be in close touch with Denboro all the time and you can come here whenever you want to. Now will you take my offer?"

"No."

"Young man, if I didn't know there were brains inside that head of yours I should think it was, as the boys say, solid ivory. Confound you! Here, Mrs. Paine," turning to Mother, "you take him in hand. Tell him he must come with me."

"Mother−−" I protested. He cut my protest short.

"Tell him," he ordered.

Mother looked at me. "I think, perhaps, you should accept, Roscoe," she said, slowly.

"Accept! Mother!"

"Yes. I−−I think you should. I am sure everyone else would think so. I should not wish you to do so if Mr. Colton was merely trying to be kind, to help you from motives of gratitude, or charity−−"

"Don't use that word, please," snapped "Big Jim." "When I lose my mind I may take to charity, but not before. Charity! Good Lord!"

"But it is not charity. I am better, Roscoe; I realize it every day; and with Dorinda I shall get on perfectly well. I have been thinking of something like this for a long time. You owe it to yourself, Roscoe. The chance is one that many men would be very, very glad to have come their way. I shall not urge you, Boy. You must decide for yourself, and I know you will; but, Roscoe, I shall be quite contented−−yes, glad and proud, if you say yes to Mr. Colton."

The gentleman named nodded emphatic approval. "That's the talk!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Paine, I congratulate you on your common− sense."

"I think, like you, that you will have made a good investment, Mr. Colton," was Mother's answer.

I rose to my feet. This must be ended now, for all time.

"I thank you, Mr. Colton," I said, though not as steadily as I could have wished. "I am greatly obliged to you and I realize that you offer me an exceptional opportunity, or what would be one for another man. But I cannot accept."

"Look here, Paine! I'll speak plainer still. I understand that that Shore Lane trade of ours has become common property, or, at any rate, it will be common property soon. If I see the situation clearly, Denboro is likely to be a rather unpleasant place for you. That fellow Dean has a lot of influence here−−heaven knows why!−− and he hates me worse than Old Nick hates holy water. Oh, I know you're not afraid of him! But what is the use of taking the rough road when the smooth one is right before your feet? Say yes, and let's end it."

"No," said I, stubbornly. "No, Mr. Colton."

"You mean it? Very well, I leave you in your Mother's hands. She will probably bring you to your senses before long. Mrs. Paine, you can handle him, I have no doubt. I am glad to have met you, and, with your permission, I shall call on you again. So will Mabel. As for you, young man, I thank you for last night's work. You will, perhaps, accept thanks if you refuse everything else. Good morning."

He rose, bowed, and walked to the door. As he opened it he staggered, perceptibly. I thought, for an instant, that he was going to fall, and I sprang to his assistance.

"It's all right," he said, gruffly. "This digestion of mine sets my head spinning sometimes. That doctor says I shall upset completely unless I rest. I told him he was a fool and I intend to prove it. Let me be. I can walk, I

should hope. When I can't I'll call the ambulance−−or the hearse. I'll find the way out, myself. Good−by."

The door closed behind him.

"Roscoe," said Mother, quickly, "come here."

I turned toward her. She was looking at me with a strange expression.

"What is it, Mother?" I asked, anxiously.

"Roscoe," she whispered, "I know him. I have met him before."

"Know him! You have met Mr. Colton−−before? Where?"

"At our home in the old days. He came there once with−−with your father. He was our guest at dinner."

I could scarcely believe it. Then, as the thought of what this might mean flashed to my mind, I asked anxiously:

"Did he know you, do you think?"

"No, I am sure he did not. We met but once and I have," with a little sigh, "changed since then. But I recognized him. The name of Colton was familiar to me when you first mentioned it, some time ago, but I did not remember where I had heard it. Of course, I did not connect this Mr. Colton with−−that one."

I frowned. This complicated matters still more, and further complications were superfluous.

"And, knowing this, knowing that he might recognize you at any time, you urged me to accept his offer," I said, reproachfully. "Mother!"

"Yes."

"Mother, how can you? Would you have me go to New York and enter a banking house where, any hour of any day, I might be recognized by some of the men I once knew? Where I might expect at any moment to be called by my real name? How can you?"

She gazed at me earnestly. "Why not tell him, Roscoe?" she asked.

I stared at her, aghast. "Tell him!" I repeated. "Tell him who I am? Tell him our story, the story that−− Mother, are you crazy?"

"No. I believe I am sane, at least. I have been thinking a great deal of late. As I have been growing stronger I have been thinking more and more and I am not sure that you and I have been right in hiding here as we have done. It was all my fault, I know, but I was weak and−−and I dreaded all the gossip and scandal. But, Boy, it was a mistake. After all, we have done no wrong, you and I−−we, personally, have nothing to be ashamed of. Why not end all this? Go to Mr. Colton, tell him who you are, tell him our story; then, if he still wants you−−"

I interrupted. "No, Mother," I said, "no, no! It is impossible. Even if he knew, and it made no difference, I could not do it. I may go away! I may feel that I must go, if you are well enough for me to leave you, but I can not go with him. I ought not to see him again. I must not see HER. . . . . Oh, don't you understand? Mother, I−−I−−"

She understood. I had seized her hand and now she stroked it gently with her own.

"So it is true," she said, quietly. "You love her, Roscoe."

"Yes! yes! yes!" I answered, desperately. "Oh, don't speak of it, Mother! I am insane, I think."

"Does she care for you, Boy? Have you spoken to her?"

"MOTHER! Is it likely?"

"But I think she does care, Roscoe. I think she does. She must."

This was so characteristic that, although I was in anything but a laughing mood, I could not help smiling.

"How could she help it? I presume you mean," I observed, sarcastically. "There, Mother, don't worry. I did not intend that you or anyone else should know what an idiot I am, but don't worry−− I shan't do anything ridiculous or desperate. I may go somewhere, to get away from Denboro, and to earn a living for you and me, but that is all. We won't speak of her again."

"But if she does care, Boy?"

"If she does−− Of course, she doesn't−−but, if she does, can't you see that only makes it worse? Think who she is and who and what I am! Her family−− Humph! you have not met her mother; I have."

"But if she loves you−−"

"Do you think I should permit her to ruin her life−−for me?"

"Poor boy! I am SO sorry!"

"It is all right, Mother. There! we won't be foolish any longer. I am going for a walk and I want you to rest. I am glad, we have had this talk; it has done me good to speak what I have been thinking. Good−by. I will be back

soon."

She would have detained me, but I broke away and went out. My walk was a long one. I tramped the beach for eight long miles and, though one might think that my adventures of the night before had provided exercise enough, this additional effort seemed to do no harm. I forgot dinner entirely and supper was on the table when I returned to the house.

I found Dorinda in a condition divided between anxiety and impatience.

"Have you seen anything of that man of mine?" she demanded. "I ain't seen hide nor hair of him since I pitched him out of this room this mornin'!"

I was surprised and a little disturbed. I remembered Lute's threat about "never seein' me no more."

"You don't suppose he has run away, or anything like that, do you?" I asked.

"He wouldn't run far; runnin's too much like work. But why he wan't home for dinner I don't understand. I never knew him to miss a meal's vittles afore. I hope nothin' ain't happened to him, that's all. Well, we'll have our supper, anyhow. After that we'll see."

But we did not have to see. We were at the table when we heard the sound of hurrying footsteps on the walk. The gate closed with a bang. Dorinda rose from her chair.

"I swan! I believe that's him now!" she exclaimed.

"If it is, he is certainly running this time," I observed. "What−−"

The door was thrown open and the missing member of the household appeared. He was red−faced and panting, but there was a curious air of dignified importance in his bearing. Dorinda's lips shut tightly.

"Well, Lute," said I, "where have you been?"

Lute struggled for breath.

"Don't ask me where I've been!" he gasped. "Don't waste no time askin' ME questions. Get your hat on, Ros! Get your hat on this minute! Where did I put that? Where in time did I put it?"

He was fumbling in his pockets. Dorinda and I looked at each other. She shook her head.

"He's gone stark foolish at last!" she said, with decision. "Well, I've been expectin' it! Lute Rogers, stop pawin' yourself over and act sensible, if you can. What is the matter with you?"

"Matter with me! Nothin's the matter with ME; but there's somethin' the matter with other folks, I tell you that! Doctor Quimby's been there twice already, and the telephone's been goin', and−−and−− My time! you ought to seen her face! 'Twas just as white as−−as−− WHERE did I put that letter?"

His "pawing" became more frantic than ever. His wife stepped forward and seized him by the arm.

"Stop it, I tell you!" she commanded. "Stop it! Who's sick? Whose telephone's ringin'? What letter are you talkin' about? Answer me! Stop that Saint Vitus dancin' and answer me this minute!"

She gave him a shake and his cap fell to the floor. From it fell an envelope. Lute pulled himself free and pounced upon it.

"There 'tis!" he exclaimed. "By time! I was scart I'd lost it! Read it, Ros! read it!"

He handed me the envelope. It bore my name. I tore it open−−took out the sheet of notepaper which it inclosed, and read as follows:

"Dear Mr. Paine:

"Father is very ill, and I am in great trouble. I think you, perhaps, can help us both. Will you come over at once? PLEASE do.

"Hastily yours,

"MABEL COLTON."

"And−−and−−" panted Lute, "she told me to tell you to please hurry. And you'd ought to seen her face! She−−"

I heard no more. I did not wait to get my hat, as the excited bearer of the note had urged me to do. Bareheaded, I hurried out of the dining−room and along the path toward the Colton mansion.

CHAPTER XXI

It was early in the evening, but the big house was lighted as if for a reception; lights in the rooms above, lights in the library and hall and drawing−room. Doctor Quimby's horse and buggy stood by one of the hitching posts and the Colton motor car was drawn up by the main entrance. From the open windows of the servants' quarters came the sounds of excited voices. I hastened to the front door. Before I could push the button of the electric bell the door was opened. Johnson, the butler, peered out at me. Most of his dignity was gone.

"Is it you, Mr. Paine?" he asked, anxiously. "Come in, sir, please. Miss Mabel has been asking for you not a minute ago, sir."

I entered the hall. "What is it, Johnson?" I asked, quickly. "How is Mr. Colton?"

The butler looked behind him before replying. He shook his head dubiously.

"He's awful ill, sir," he whispered. "The doctor's been with him for an hour; 'e's unconscious and Mrs. Colton is takin' on something terrible. It's awful, sir, ain't it!"

His nervousness was sufficient indication of the general demoralization of the household. And from one of the rooms above came the sobs of a hysterical woman.

"Brace up, man," I whispered in reply. "This is no time for you to go to pieces. Where is Miss Colton?"

"She's with her father, sir. Step into the library and I'll call her."

He was not obliged to call her, for, at that moment, I heard her voice speaking from the head of the stairs.

"Who is it, Johnson?" she asked, in a low tone.

"It's Mr. Paine, Miss Mabel."

I heard a little exclamation, of relief it seemed to me. Then she appeared, descending the staircase. Her face was, as Lute had said, pale, but her manner was calm, much calmer than the butler's.

She came to me and extended her hand. "Thank you for coming," she said. "I was sure you would."

"How is your father, Miss Colton?" I asked.

"He is no worse. Come into the library, please. Johnson, if Mother or the doctor need me, I shall be in the library. Come, Mr. Paine."

We entered the library together. The room in which I had had my two memorable encounters with "Big Jim" Colton was without its dominant figure now. His big armchair was drawn up beside the table and the papers and writing materials were in the place where I had seen them. A half−burned cigar lay in the ash tray. But the strong fingers which had placed it there were weak enough now and the masterful general of finance was in his room upstairs fighting the hardest battle of his life, fighting for that life itself. A door at the end of the library, a door which I had not noticed before, was partially open and from within sounded at intervals a series of sharp clicks, the click of a telegraph instrument. I remembered that Colton had told me, in one of his conversations, that he had both a private telephone and telegraph in his house.

Miss Colton closed the door behind us, and turned to me.

"Thank you for coming," she said, again. "I need help and I could think of no one but you. You have hurried dreadfully, haven't you!"

She was looking at my forehead. I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror above the mantel and reached for my handkerchief.

"I must have run every step of the way," I answered. "I didn't realize it. But never mind that. Tell me about your father."

"He was taken ill soon after he returned from your house. He was in the library here and I heard him call. When I reached him he was lying upon the couch, scarcely able to speak. He lost consciousness before we could get him to his room. The doctor says it is what he has feared, an attack of acute indigestion, brought on by anxiety and lack of rest. It was my fault, I am afraid. Last night's worry−− Poor Father!"

For just a moment I feared she was going to break down. She covered her eyes with her hand. But she removed it almost immediately.

"The doctor is confident there is no great danger," she went on. "Danger, of course, but not the greatest. He is still unconscious and will be for some time, but, if he is kept perfectly quiet and not permitted to worry in the

least, he will soon be himself again."

"Thank God for that!" I exclaimed, fervently. "And your mother−− Mrs. Colton−−how, is she?"

Her tone changed slightly. I inferred that Mrs. Colton's condition was more trying than serious.

"Mother is−−well, in her nervous state any shock is disturbing. She is bearing the anxiety as well as we should expect."

I judged that not much was expected.

"It was not on account of Father's illness that I sent for you, Mr. Paine," she went on. "If he had not been ill I should not have needed you, of course. But there is something else. It could not have happened at a more unfortunate time and I am afraid you may not be able to give me the help I need. Oh, I hope you can! I don't know what to do. I know it must be dreadfully important. Father has been troubled about it for days. He has been saying that he must go to New York. But the doctor had warned us against his going and so we persuaded him to wait. And now . . . Sit down, please. I want to ask your advice."

I took the chair she indicated. She drew another beside me and seated herself.

"Mr. Paine−−" she began. Then, noticing my expression, she asked, "What is it?"

"Nothing," I answered, "nothing except−− Isn't that the telegraph instrument I hear? Isn't someone calling you?"

"Yes, yes, it is Mr. Davis, Father's confidential man, his broker, in New York. He is trying to get us, I am sure. He telephoned an hour ago. I got a part of his message and then the connection was broken off. Central says there is something the matter with the wire, a big storm in Connecticut somewhere. It may take a whole day to repair it. And it is SO important! It may mean−−I don't know WHAT it may mean! Oh, Mr. Paine, DO you know anything about stocks?"

I looked at her blankly.

"Stocks?" I repeated.

"Yes, yes," a trifle impatiently. "Stocks−−the stock market−− railroad shares−−how they are bought and sold−−do you know anything about them?"

I was more puzzled than ever, but I answered as best I could.

"A very little," I replied. "I used to know a good deal about them once, and, of late, since I have been in the Denboro bank, my knowledge has been brushed up a bit. But I am afraid it is pretty fragmentary."

"Do you know anything about Louisville and Transcontinental?"

I started. Louisville and Transcontinental was the one stock about which I did know something. Of late I had read everything the papers printed concerning it. It was the stock in which George Taylor had risked so much and which had come so near to ruining him. No wonder I was startled. Why did she mention that particular stock?

"What?" I stammered.

"Louisville and Transcontinental," she repeated, eagerly. "DO you know anything about it? Why do you look at me like that?"

I must be careful. It was not possible that she could have learned George's secret. No one knew that except George himself, and his brokers, and I. Yet−−yet why did she ask that question? I must be on my guard.

"I did not realize that I was looking at you in any extraordinary way, Miss Colton," I answered.

"But you were. Why? Do you know anything about it? If you do−− oh, if you do you may be able to help me, to advise me! And, for Father's sake, I want advice so much."

For her father's sake! That did not sound as if her question concerned George or me. A trifle reassured, I tried to remember something of what I had read.

"I know, of course," I answered, slowly, "what every one knows, that the California and Eastern has been, or is reported to have been, trying to get control of the L. and T. Its possession would give the California people the balance of power and mean the end of the present rate war with the Consolidated Pacific. The common stock has fluctuated between 30 and 50 for months and there have been all sorts of rumors. So much the newspapers have made common property. That is all I know."

"You did not know then that Father and his associates control the California and Eastern?"

I leaned back in my chair.

"No," I said, "I did not know that. Then your father−−"

"Father tells me a great deal concerning his business affairs. I have been very much interested in this. It seems

almost like a great war and as if Father were a general. He and his associates have gradually bought up the C. and E. until they practically own it. And they have been working to get the Louisville road. Last winter, you remember, there was a great excitement and the stock went up and then down again. That was when it looked as if the other side−−the Consolidated Pacific−−had beaten Father, but they had not. You remember that?"

I remembered it. That is to say, George had told me of the rise and fall of the stock. It was then that he had bought.

"Yes," I said, "I remember something of it."

"If Father had stayed in New York he would have won before this. Oh," with a burst of pride, "they can NEVER beat him when he is leading the fight himself! He has, through his brokers, been selling−−what do they call it? Oh, yes, selling the Louisville stock 'short' ever since. I am not sure just what that means, but perhaps you know."

"I think I do," I answered, thoughtfully. "He has been selling, quietly, so as to force the stock down, preparatory to buying in. I remember the papers have said that the C. and E. were reported as having lost interest in the Louisville. That was only a blind, I presume."

"Yes. Father never gives up, you know that. But he was very anxious that the Consolidated Pacific people should think he had. And now−−now, when he is so ill−−comes this! Mr. Davis telephoned that−− Yes, what is it?"

There had been a knock at the door. It opened and the butler appeared.

"A telegram for Mr. Colton, Miss Mabel," he said.

"Give it to me. Tell the man to wait, Johnson. It is from Mr. Davis," she exclaimed, turning to me. "I am sure it is. Yes. See!"

She handed me the yellow telegram. I read the following aloud:

"James W. Colton,

"Denboro, Mass.

"Galileo potato soap currency tomato deeds command army alcohol thief weather family−−"

"What on earth−−!" I exclaimed.

"That is in the code, Father's private code. Don't you see? The code book is here somewhere. I must find it."

She was rummaging in the drawer of the desk. With a sigh of relief she produced a little blue leather−covered book.

"Here it is," she said. "Now read me the telegram and I will write the translation. Hurry!"

I read again:

"'Galileo'−−"

"That means 'Consolidated Pacific'. Go on."

It took us five minutes to translate the telegram. When we had finished the result was:

"Consolidated Pacific crowd wise situation. Strong buying close market to−day. Expect worse to−morrow. We are bad shape. Can deliver only part. Sure big advance opening and more follow. What shall I do? Why do not you answer private telegraph line? Telephone out order. Wire instructions immediately. Better still come yourself. Davis."

"Is that all?" asked Miss Colton. "What answer shall we make?"

"Wait. Wait, please, until I dig some sort of sense out of all this. 'Wise situation'−−"

"Wise TO situation, I presume that means. The Consolidated Pacific is wise to the situation. 'Wise' is slang, isn't it? It used to be at college."

"It is yet, even in Denboro. Humph! let me think. 'Sure big advance opening.' I suppose that means the market will open with Louisville and Transcontinental at a higher figure and that the price is sure to advance during the day."

"Yes. Yes, it must mean that. But why should Mr. Davis be so excited about it? He said something about 'ruin' over the 'phone. What does 'We are bad shape' mean? And 'Can deliver only part'?"

"I don't know . . . unless . . . Humph! If we had some particulars. Why don't you answer on the private telegraph, as he says?"

"Because I can't. Don't you see? I can't. There is no telegraph operator in the house. When we first came Father had a secretary, who could use the telegraph; but he sent him back to New York. Said he was sick of the

sight of him. They did not get on well together."

"But your father must have used the telegraph since."

"Yes. Father used it himself. He was a telegraph operator when he was a young man. Oh, you don't know what a wonderful man my father is! His story is like something in a book. He−− But never mind that. Hark! there is the instrument going again. It must be dreadfully important. Mr. Davis is so worried."

"He seems to be, certainly."

"But what shall we do?"

"I wish I knew, but I don't. You know nothing of the particulars?"

"No. Nothing more than I have told you. Oh, CAN'T you help me? I feel somehow as if Father had left me in charge of his affairs and as if I must not fail. Now, when he is helpless! when he is . . . Oh, can't YOU do something, Mr. Paine? I thought you might. You are a banker."

"A poor imitation only, I am afraid. Let me think. Did you tell this man Davis of your father's illness?"

"No. I thought perhaps Father would not wish it. And I had no opportunity . . . Oh, dear! there is someone at the door again! Who is it?"

Johnson's voice replied. "It is me, Miss Mabel," he said. "The telegraph person says he can't wait any longer. He 'asn't 'ad his supper. And there is a twenty−five−cent charge for bringing the message, Miss."

"Tell him he must wait a minute longer," I answered, for her. "Miss Colton, it seems to me that, whether we can do anything or not, we should know the particulars. Tell that man−−Phineas Cahoon, the depot master, I suppose it is−−that there is an answer and he must wait for it. Now let's consult that code."

She took the code book and I picked up a sheet of paper and a pencil from the table.

"We must ask him to send all the particulars," I declared. "Look up 'send' in the code, Miss Colton."

She was turning the pages of the little book when the butler knocked once more.

"He says he can't send any message until morning, Miss Mabel. The telegraph office closes at eight o'clock."

The code book fell to the table. Miss Colton stared helplessly at me.

"What SHALL we do?" she breathed.

I rose to my feet. "Wait, Johnson," I called. "Make that man wait a moment longer. Miss Colton, I have an idea. Would your father be willing to−−but, that is silly! Of course he would! I'll see Cahoon myself."

I found Phineas, long−legged and gaunt, sitting on the front step of the colonial portico. He had been invited into the hall, but had refused the invitation. "I had on my workin' duds," he explained later. "A feller that's been handlin' freight all the afternoon ain't fit to set on gold−plated furniture." He looked up in surprise as I came out.

"Well, for thunder sakes!" he exclaimed, in astonishment. "It's Ros Paine! What in the nation are you doin' in here, Ros? Ain't married into the family, have ye? Haw, haw!"

I could have kicked him for that pleasantry−−if he had not been just then too important a personage to kick. As it was, his chance remark knocked my errand out of my head, momentarily.

"How's the old man, Ros?" he whispered. "They tell me it's brought on by high livin', champagne wine and such. Is it?"

"Phin," said I, ignoring the question, "would you stay up all night for twenty dollars?"

He stared at me.

"What kind of conundrum's that?" he demanded. "'Would I set up all night for twenty dollars?' That may be a joke, but−−"

"Would you? I mean it. Mr. Colton is sick and his daughter needs some one to send and receive messages over their private telegraph wire. She will pay you twenty dollars−−or I will, if she doesn't−− if you will stay here and do that for her. Will you?"

For a minute he sat there staring at me.

"You mean it, Ros?" he asked, slowly. "You do, hey! I thought p'raps−−but no, it's long past April Fool day. WILL I do it? Show me the telegraph place quick, afore I wake up and come out of the ether. Twenty dollars! Consarn it, I send messages all the week for twelve, and hustle freight and sell tickets into the bargain. I ain't had no supper, but never mind. Make it twenty−five and I'll stay all day to−morrer."

I led him into the library and explained his presence to Miss Colton. She was delighted.

"It is SO good of you, Mr. Cahoon," she exclaimed. "And you shan't starve, either. I will have some supper sent in to you at once. You can eat it while you are at work, can't you?"

She hurried out to order the supper. Phineas, in accordance with my request, seated himself in the little room adjoining the library, before the telegraph instrument.

"Thunder!" he observed, looking about him. "I never expected to send messages for King Solomon in all his glory, but I cal'late I can stand it if Sol can. S'pose there'd be any objection to my takin' off my coat? Comes more nat'ral to work in my shirt sleeves."

I bade him take it off and he did so.

"This feller's in some hurry," he said, nodding toward the clicking instrument. "Shall I tell him we're on deck and ready for business?"

"Yes, tell him."

His long fingers busied themselves with the sender. A sharp series of clicks answered the call. Phineas glanced apprehensively out into the library.

"Say, he ain't no parson, is he?" he chuckled. "Wants to know what in hell has been the trouble all this time. What'll I tell him?"

"Tell him to send particulars concerning L. and T. at once. All the particulars."

The message was sent. The receiver rattled a hasty reply.

"He says you know all the particulars already. You must know 'em. Wants to know if this is Mr. Colton."

"Tell him Mr. Colton is here, in the house. That will be true enough. And say we wish all particulars, figures and all. We want to know just where we stand."

The demand for particulars was forwarded. There was more clicking.

"Give me a piece of paper and a pencil, quick," urged Phineas. "This is a long feller."

While he was writing the "long feller," as the telegraph ticked it off, Miss Colton and the butler appeared, the latter bearing a loaded tray. He drew a little table up beside the operator and placed the tray upon it. Then he went away. The telegraph clicked and clicked and Cahoon wrote. Miss Colton and I watched him anxiously.

"Say," observed Phineas, between intervals of clicks, "this feller's in some loony asylum, ain't he. This is pretty nigh as crazy as that message I fetched down. . . . Here 'tis. Maybe you folks know what it means, I don't. It's forty fathoms long, ain't it."

It was long enough, surely. It was not all in the code jargon−− Davis trusted the privacy of the wire sufficiently to send a portion of it in plain English−−but he did not trust even that altogether. Miss Colton and I worked it out as we had the first telegram. As the translation progressed I could feel my hair tingling at the roots.

Was it to help in such a complication as this that I had been summoned? I, of all people! These waters were too deep for me.

Boiled down, the "particulars" for which Davis had been asked, and which he had sent, amounted to this: Colton, it seemed, had sold L. and T. "short" for a considerable period of time in order, as I had surmised, to force down the price and buy in at a reasonable figure. He had sold, in this way, about three−eighths of the common stock. Of this amount he had in his possession−−in his broker's possession, that is−−but two of the eighths. The "other crowd"−−the Consolidated Pacific, presumably−−had, as Davis now discovered, three−eighths actual certificates, in its pocket, had been acquiring them, on the quiet, while pretending to have lost interest. The public, unsuspecting powers in this, as in most of Wall Street little games, had still three−eighths. The "other crowd," knowing "Big Jim's" position, had but to force immediate delivery of the missing one−eighth−−the amount of Colton's over− selling−−and he might be obliged to pay Heaven knew what for the shares. He MUST acquire them; he must buy them. And the price which he would be forced to pay might mean−−perhaps not bankruptcy for him, the millionaire−−but certainly the loss of a tremendous sum and all chance of acquiring control of the road. "This has been sprung on us all at once," wired Davis. "They have got us cold. What shall I do? You must be here yourself before the market opens."

And the man who "must be there himself" was critically ill and unconscious!

The long telegram, several hundred words of it, was before us. I read it through again, and Miss Colton sat and looked at me.

"Do you understand it−−now?" she whispered, anxiously.

"Yes, I think I do. . . . What is it, Phin?"

"I was just wonderin'," drawled Cahoon's voice from the adjoining room, "if I couldn't eat a little mite of this supper. I've got to do it or have my nose and eyes tied up. Havin' all them good things settin' right where I can see

and smell 'em is givin' me the fidgets."

"Yes, yes, eat away," I said, laughing. And even Miss Colton smiled. But my laugh and her smile were but transient.

"Is it−− Does it mean that things are VERY wrong?" she asked, indicating the telegram.

"They are very serious; there is no doubt of that."

The instrument clicked.

"Say, Ros," said Phin, his mouth full, "this feller's gettin' as fidgety as I was afore I got afoul of this grub. He wants to know what his instructions are. What'll he do?"

"What shall you tell him?" asked Miss Colton.

"I don't know," I answered. "I do not know. I am afraid I am of no use whatever. This is no countryman's job. No country banker, even a real one, should attempt to handle this. This is high finance with a vengeance. I don't know. I think he . . . Suppose we tell him to consult the people at your father's office."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "The people at the office know nothing of it. This was Father's own personal affair. No one knows of it but Mr. Davis."

"How about them instructions?" this from Cahoon.

"Tell him−−yes, tell him Mr. Colton cannot leave here at present and that he must use his own judgment, go ahead on his own responsibility. That is the only thing I see to do, Miss Colton. Don't worry; he must be a man of experience and judgment or your father never would use him. He will pull it through, I am sure."

I was by no means as confident as I pretended to be, however, and the next message from Davis proved my forebodings to be well founded. His answer was prompt and emphatic:

Matter too important. Decline to take responsibility. Must have definite instructions or shall not act. Is this Mr. Colton himself?

"He would not act without Father's orders in a matter like this. I was afraid of it. And he is growing suspicious. Oh, CAN'T you help me, Mr. Paine? CAN'T you? I relied on you. I felt sure YOU would know what to do. I am−−I am SO alone; and with Father so ill−−I−−I−−"

She turned away and leaned her head upon her hand on the table. I felt again the desperate impulse I had felt when we were alone on board the launch, the impulse to take her in my arms and try to comfort her, to tell her that I would do anything−−anything for her. And yet what could I do?

"Can't you help me?" she pleaded. "You have never failed me before."

There came a knock at the door and Johnson's voice called her name.

"Miss Mabel," he whispered, "Miss Mabel, will you come, please? The doctor wants you right away."

She rose quickly, drawing her hand across her eyes as she did so.

"I am coming, Johnson," she said. Then, turning to me, "I will be back as soon as I can. Do try−−try to think. You MUST, for Father's sake, for all our sakes."

She left the room. I rose and, with my hands in my pockets, began to pace the floor. This was the tightest place I had ever been in. There had been a time, years before, when I prided myself on my knowledge of the stock market and its idiosyncrasies. Then, in the confidence of youth, I might have risen to a situation like this, might have tackled it and had the nerve to pull it through or blame the other fellow if I failed. Now I was neither youthful nor confident. Whatever I did would be, in all human probability, the wrong thing, and to do the wrong thing now meant, perhaps, ruin for the sick man upstairs. And she had trusted me! She had sent for me in her trouble! I had "never failed her before"!

I walked the floor, trying hard to think. It was hard to think calmly, to be sensible, and yet I realized that common−sense and coolness were what I needed now. I tried to remember the outcome of similar situations in financial circles, but that did not help me. I remembered a play I had seen, "The Henrietta" was its name. In that play, a young man with more money than brains had saved the day for his father, a Wall Street magnate, by buying a certain stock in large quantities at a critical time. He arrived at his decision to buy, rather than sell, by tossing a coin. The father had declared that his son had hit upon the real secret of success in stock speculation. Possibly the old gentleman was right, but I could not make my decision in that way. No, whatever I did must have some reason to back it. Was there no situation, outside of Wall Street, which offered a parallel? After all, what was the situation? Some one wished to buy a certain thing, and some one else wished to buy it also. Neither party wanted the other to get it. There had been a general game of bluff and then . . . Humph! Why, in a way, it was like

the original bidding for the Shore Lane land.

It was like it, and yet it was not. I owned the land and Colton wanted to buy it; so also did Jed Dean. Each side had made bids and had been refused. Then the bidders had, professedly, stood pat, but, in reality, they had not. Jed had told me, in his latest interview, that he would have paid almost anything for that land, if he had had to. And Colton−−Colton had invented the Bay Shore Development Company. That company had fooled Elnathan Mullet and other property holders. It had fooled Captain Jed. It had come very near to fooling me. If Mabel Colton had not given me the hint I might have been tricked into selling. Then Colton would have won, have won on a "bluff." A good bluff did sometimes win. I wondered . . .

I was still pacing the floor when Miss Colton returned to the library. She was trying hard to appear calm, but I could see that she was greatly agitated.

"What is it?" I asked. "Is he−−"

"He is not as well just now. I−−I must not leave him−−or Mother. But I came back for a moment, as I told you I would. Is there anything new?"

"No. Davis has repeated his declaration to do nothing without orders from your father."

She nodded. "Very well," she said, "then it is over. We are beaten−−Father is beaten for the first time. It makes little difference, I suppose. If he−−if he is taken from us, nothing else matters. But I hoped you . . . never mind. I thank you, Mr. Paine. You would have helped him if you could, I know."

Somehow this surrender, and the tone in which it was made, stirred me more than all else. She had trusted me and I had failed. I would not have it so.

"Miss Colton," I said, earnestly, "suppose−−suppose I should go ahead and make this fight, on my own hook. Suppose I should give Davis the 'instructions' he is begging for. Have I permission to do it?"

She looked at me in surprise. "Of course," she said, simply.

"Do you mean it? It may mean complete smash. I am no railroad man, no stock manipulator. I have an idea and if this trouble were mine I should act upon it. But it is not mine. It is your father's−−and yours. I may be crazy to risk such a thing−−"

She stepped forward. "Do it," she commanded. "I tell you to do it. If it fails I will take the responsibility."

"That you shall not do. But I will take the chance. Phin!"

"Yup; here I be."

"Send this message at once: 'Try your hardest to get hold of any shares you can, at almost any figure in reason, before the market opens. When it opens begin buying everything offered.' Got that?"

"Yup. I've got it."

"Sign it 'Colton' and send it along. I am using your father's name," I added, turning to her. "It seems to me the only way to avoid suspicion and get action. No one must know that 'Big Jim' is critically ill; you understand that."

"Yes, I understand. But," hesitatingly, "to buy may mean paying tremendous prices, may it not? Can we−−"

"We must. Here is Davis's reply coming. What is it, Phin?"

Cahoon read off the message as the receiver clicked.

"You are insane. Buying at such prices will be suicide."

"Tell him no. Tell him to let it leak out that Colton is seizing the opportunity to clinch his control of the road. The other crowd will think, if he is willing to buy at any price, that he cannot be so short as they supposed. Send all that, Phin. It is a bluff, Miss Colton, nothing but a bluff, but it may win. God knows I hope it will."

She did not answer. Together we waited for the reply. It came as follows:

All right if you say so, of course, but still think it suicide. I am off on the still hunt for those shares but don't believe one to be had, Consolidated bunch too sharp for that. Stay by the wire. Will report when I can. Good luck and good−by.

"He's gone, I cal'late," observed Phineas. "Need me any more, do you think?"

"Yes. You must stay here all night, just as I told you."

"Right you be. Send word to the old woman, that's all, if you can. Cal'late she's waitin' at the kitchen door with a rollin' pin, by this time."

"I will send the word, Mr. Cahoon," replied Miss Colton. "And−− don't you think you could go home now, Mr. Paine? I know how exhausted you must be, after last night."

"No home for me," I answered, with assumed cheerfulness. "Admirals of Finance are expected to stick by the

ship. I will lie down here on the couch and Phineas can call me if I am needed. Don't worry, Miss Colton. Go to your father and forget us altogether, if you can. If−−if I should be needed for−−for any other cause, please speak."

She looked at me in silence for a moment. Then she came toward me and held out her hand. "I shall not forget, whatever else I may do," she said, brokenly. "And I will speak if I need you, my friend."

She turned hastily and went to the door.

"I will send word to your people as well as Mr. Cahoon's," she added. "Try and sleep, if you can. Good night."

The door closed behind her. Sleep! I was not likely to sleep. A man who has lighted the fuse of the powder magazine beneath him does not sleep much.

CHAPTER XXII

And yet sleep I did, for a little while, just before morning broke. I had spent the night pacing the floor and talking to Phineas, who was wide awake and full of stories and jokes, to which I paid little attention. Miss Colton did not come to the library again. From the rooms above I heard occasional sobs and exclamations in Mrs. Colton's voice. Once Doctor Quimby peeped in. He looked anxious and weary.

"Hello, Ros!" he hailed, "I heard you were here. This is a high old night, isn't it!"

"How is he?" I asked.

"About the same. No worse; in fact, he's better than he was a while ago. But he's not out of the woods yet, though I'm pretty hopeful, for the old boy has a husky constitution−−considering the chances he's taken with it all his life. It's his wife that bothers me. She's worse than one of the plagues of Egypt. I've given her some sleeping powders now; they'll keep her quiet for a spell, I hope."

"And Miss Colton−−how is she?"

"She! She's as calm and sensible and helpful as a trained nurse. By the Almighty, she is a wonder, that girl! Well, I must get back on my job. Don't have a millionaire patient every day in the week."

At three o'clock came a message from Davis. He had not been able to secure a single share. Did his instructions to buy still hold? I answered that they did and he replied that he was going to get a nap for an hour or so. "I shall need the rest, if I am any prophet," he concluded.

It was shortly after this that I lay down on the couch. I had determined not to close my eyes, but I was utterly worn out, I suppose, and exhaustion got the better of me. The next thing I knew the gray light of dawn was streaming in at the library windows and Johnson was spreading a tempting−looking breakfast on the table.

I sprang up.

"What time is it?" I demanded.

"About half−past five, sir, or thereabouts," was the answer, in a tone of mingled weariness and resentment. Plainly Mr. Johnson had been up all night and considered himself imposed upon.

I was thankful that my lapse from duty had been of no longer duration. It had been much too long as it was.

"How is Mr. Colton?" I asked.

"Better, sir, I believe. He is resting more quiet at present."

"Where is Cahoon?"

"Here I be," this from Phineas in the next room. "Have a good snooze, did you, Ros?"

"Too good." I walked in and found him still sitting by the telegraph instrument. "Has anything happened?" I asked.

"Nary thing. All quiet as the tomb since that last message, the one you heard. Pretty nigh fell asleep myself, I did. Guess I should have, only Miss Colton she came in and kept me comp'ny for a spell."

"Miss Colton−−has she been here? Why didn't you call me, Ros?"

"I was goin' to, but she wouldn't let me. Said you was all wore out, poor feller, and that you wan't to be disturbed unless 'twas necessary. She's an awful nice young woman, ain't she. Nothin' stuck up about her, at all. Set here and talked with me just as sociable and folksy as if she wan't wuth a cent. Asked more questions than a few, she did."

"Did she?" I was not paying much attention to his remarks. My mind was busy with more important things. I was wondering what Davis was doing just then. Phin went on.

"Yup. I happened to remember that you wan't at the bank to−day and I asked her if she knew the reason why. 'How did you know he wasn't there?' says she. 'Alvin Baker told me fust,' I says, 'and Sam Wheeler told him. Everybody knew it and was wonderin' about it. They cal'lated Ros was sick,' I told her, 'but that couldn't be or he wouldn't be round here settin' up all night.' What WAS the reason you wan't there, Ros?"

I thought it strange that he, and everyone else in town, did not know the reason before this. Was it possible that Captain Dean alone knew of my "treason" to Denboro, and that he was keeping the discovery to himself? Why should he keep it to himself? He had threatened to drive me out of town.

"I had other business to−day, Phin," I answered, shortly.

"Yup. So I gathered from what Cap'n Jed said. He was in the depot this noon sendin' a telegram and I asked him about you. 'Is Ros sick?' I says. 'Huh!' says he−−you know how he grunts, Ros; for all the world like a hog−−'Huh!' says he, 'sick! No, but I cal'late he'll be pretty sick afore long.' What did he mean by that, do you s'pose?"

I knew, but I did not explain. I made no reply.

"Twas a queer sort of talk, seemed to me," continued Phin. "I asked him again why you wan't at the bank, and he said you had other business, just same as you said now. He was ugly as a cow with a sore horn over somethin' and I judged 'twas best to keep still. That telegram he sent was a surprisin' thing, too. 'Twas to−−but there! he made me promise I wouldn't tell and so I mustn't. I ain't told a soul−−except one−−and then it slipped out afore I thought. However, that one won't make no difference. She ain't interested in−−in the one the telegram was sent to, 'tain't likely."

"Where is Miss Colton now?" I asked.

"With her ma and pa, I presume likely. Her and me set and whispered together for a long spell. Land sakes! she wouldn't let me speak louder'n a whisper for fear of wakin' you up. A body'd think you was a young−one in arms, the care she took of you."

Again I did not answer, and again the garrulous station master continued without waiting for a reply.

"I says to her, says I, 'It's a pity George Taylor ain't to home,' I says. 'I shouldn't wonder if he could help you with this Louisville stock you're so worried about. George was consider'ble interested in that stock himself a spell ago. I sent much as a dozen telegrams from him about that very stock to some broker folks up to Boston, and they was mighty anxious telegrams, too. I tell you!' I says."

He had caught my attention at last.

"Did you tell her that?" I demanded.

"Sure I did! I never meant to, nuther. Ain't told another soul. You see, George, he asked me not to. But she's got a way with her that would make Old Nick confess his sins, if she set out to larn 'em. I was sort of ashamed after I told her and I explained to her that I hadn't ought to done it. 'But I guess it's all right now, anyway,' I says. 'If there was any trouble along of George and that stock I cal'late it's all over. He acted dreadful worried for a spell, but for the week afore he was married he seemed chipper as ever. Biggest change in him you ever see,' says I. 'So my tellin' you is all right, I guess,' I says. 'I'm sure it's all right,' says she, and her face kind of lighted up, as you might say. When she looked at me that way I'd have given her my house and lot, if she'd wanted 'em, though you needn't tell my old woman that I said so. He! he! 'Of course it's all right,' she says. 'But you had better not tell anyone else. We'll have it for our secret, won't we, Mr. Cahoon?' she says, smilin'. 'Sartin we will,' says I. And−−well, by thunder!" as if the thought occurred to him for the first time. "I said that, and now I've been and blatted out the whole business to you! I am the DARNDEST fool!"

I did not contradict him. I was too angry and disturbed even to speak to him for the moment. And, before I could speak, we were interrupted. The young lady herself appeared in the doorway. SHE had not slept, that was plain. Her face was pale and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes. As I looked at her I was more ashamed of my own unpremeditated nap than ever. Yet she was, as the doctor had said, calm and uncomplaining. She even smiled as she greeted us.

"Good morning," she said. "Your breakfast is ready, Mr. Cahoon. I know you feel that you must be getting back to your work at the station."

Phineas pulled out an enormous nickel watch and glanced at it.

"Land sakes! most six, ain't it," he exclaimed. "I guess you're right. I'll have to be trottin' along. But you needn't fuss for no breakfast for me. I'm used to missin' a meal's vittles now and again and I et enough last night to last me one spell."

He was hurrying from the room, but she would not let him go.

"There has been no 'fuss' whatever, Mr. Cahoon," she said. "Breakfast is ready, here in the library. And yours is ready, too, Mr. Paine. I hope your few minutes' sleep has rested you. I am sorry you woke so soon. I told Johnson to be careful and not disturb you."

"I deserve to be shot for sleeping at all," I declared, in self reproach. "I did not mean to. I lay down for a moment and−−well, I suppose I was rather tired."

"I know. Last night's experience was enough to tire anyone."

"Nonsense! It was no worse for me than for you," I said.

"Yes, it was. You had the care and the responsibility. I, you see, knew that I was well guarded. Besides, I slept for hours this morning. Come, both of you. Breakfast is ready."

Phineas was already seated at the table, glancing over his shoulder at the butler, whose look of dignified disgust at being obliged to wait upon a countryman in his shirt sleeves would have been funny, if I had been in a mood for fun. I don't know which was the more uncomfortable, Cahoon or the butler.

"Won't you join us, Miss Colton?" I asked.

"Why−−why, yes, perhaps I will, if you don't mind. I am not hungry but I will take a cup of coffee, Johnson."

Phineas did almost all the talking while he remained with us, which was not long. He swallowed his breakfast in a tremendous hurry, a proceeding which still further discomposed the stately Johnson, and then rose and put on his coat.

"I hate to leave you short handed and on a lee shore, Miss," he explained, apologetically; "but I know you understand how 'tis with me. My job's all I've got and I'll have to hang onto it. The up train's due in forty minutes and I've got to be on hand at the deepo. However, I've got that Davis feller's address and I'll raise him the first thing to send his messages to me and I'll get 'em right down here by the reg'lar telephone. He can use that−−what−do−you−call−it?−−that code thing, if he's scart of anybody's findin' out what he says. The boss school−marm of all creation couldn't read that gibberish without the book."

I hated to have him go, but there was no alternative. After he had gone and she and I were left together at the table a sense of restraint seemed to fall upon us both. To see her sitting opposite me at the table, pouring my coffee and breakfasting with me in this intimate, family fashion, was so wonderful and strange that I could think of nothing else. It reminded me, in a way, of our luncheon at Seabury's Pond, but that had been out of doors, an impromptu picnic, with all a picnic's surroundings. This was different, quite different. It was so familiar, so homelike, so conventional, and yet, for her and me, so impossible. I looked at her and she, looking up at the moment, caught my eyes. The color mounted to her cheeks. I felt my own face flushing. Dorinda−−practical, unromantic Dorinda−−had guessed my feeling for this girl; Mother had divined it. It was plain enough for anyone to read. I glanced apprehensively at the butler, half expecting to see upon his clerical countenance the look of scornful contempt which would prove that he, too, was possessed of the knowledge. But he merely bent forward with a deferential, "Yes, sir. What is it?" and I meekly requested another roll. Then I began, desperately, to talk.

I inquired about Mr. Colton's condition and was told that he was, or appeared to be, a trifle better. Mrs. Colton was, at last, thanks to the doctor's powders, asleep. Johnson left the room for the moment and I switched to the subject which neither of us had mentioned since the night before, the Louisville and Transcontinental muddle. I explained what had been done and pretended a confidence which I did not feel that everything would end well. She listened, but, it seemed to me, she was not as interested as I expected. At length she interrupted me.

"Suppose we do not talk about it now," she said. "As I understand it, you−−we, that is−−have made up our minds. We have decided to do certain things which seem to us right. Right or wrong, they must be done now. I am trying very hard to believe them right and not to worry any more about them. Oh, I CAN'T worry! I can't! With all the rest, I−−I−− Please let us change the subject. Mr. Paine, I am afraid you must think me selfish. I have said nothing about your own trouble. Father−−" she choked on the name, but recovered her composure almost immediately−−"Father told me, after his return from your house this morning, that his purchase of the land had become public and that you were in danger of losing your position at the bank."

I smiled. "That danger is past," I answered. "I have lost it. Captain Dean gave me my walking papers this morning."

"Oh, I am so sorry!"

"I am not. I expected it. The wonder is only that it has not happened before. I realized that it was inevitable when I made up my mind to sell. It is of no consequence, Miss Colton."

"Yes, it is. But Father offered you the position in his employ. He said you refused, but he believed your refusal was not final."

"He was wrong. It is final."

"But−−"

"I had rather not discuss that, Miss Colton."

She looked at me oddly, and with a faint smile. "Very well," she said, after a moment, "we will not discuss it

now. But you cannot suppose that either Father or I will permit you to suffer on our account."

"There is no suffering. I sold the land to your father deliberately and with complete knowledge of the consequences. As to the bank−− well, I am no worse off than I was before I entered its employ. I am satisfied."

She toyed with her coffee spoon.

"Captain Dean seems to be the only person in Denboro who knows of the sale," she said. "Why has he kept it a secret?"

"I don't know. Has he?"

"You know he has, Mr. Paine. Mr. Cahoon did not know of it, and he would be one of the first to hear. It seems odd that the captain should tell no one."

"Probably he is waiting for the full particulars. He will tell, you may be sure of that. His last remark to me was that he should drive me out of Denboro."

I rather expected a burst of indignation. In fact I was somewhat hurt and disappointed that it did not come. She merely smiled once more.

"He has not done it yet," she said. "If he knew why you sold that land−−your real reason for selling it−−he would not drive you away, or try to."

I was startled and alarmed.

"What do you mean?" I asked quickly.

"If he knew he would not drive you away, would he?"

"He will never know."

"Perhaps he may. Perhaps the person for whose sake you sold it may tell him."

"Indeed he will not! I shall see to that."

"Oh, then there is such a person! I was sure of it before. Now you have told me."

Before I could recover from the mental disturbance and chagrin which my slip and her quick seizure of it caused me, the butler re−entered the room.

"Mrs. Colton is awake and asking for you, Miss Mabel," he said. "The doctor thinks you had better go to her at once, if you please."

With a word of apology to me, she hurried away. I rose from the table. I had had breakfast enough. The interruption had come at a fortunate time for me. Her next question might have forced me to decline to answer−−which would have been equivalent to admitting the truth−−or to lie. One thing I determined to do without delay. I would write Taylor at once warning him to be more close−mouthed than ever. Under no conditions would I permit him to speak. If it were necessary I would go to Washington, where he and Nellie were spending their honeymoon, and make him promise to keep silence. His telling the truth might ruin him, and it certainly would not help me. In the one essential thing−−the one which was clenching my determination to leave Denboro as soon as I could and seek forgetfulness and occupation elsewhere−−no one could help me. I must help myself, or be miserable always. Just now the eternal misery seemed inevitable, no matter what I did.

Johnson cleared the table and left me alone in the library. The hours passed. Nine o'clock came, then nine−thirty. It was almost time for the stock market to open. My thoughts, which had been diverted from my rash plunge into the intricacies of high finance, began to return to it. As ten o'clock drew near, I began to realize what I had bade Davis do, and to think what might happen because of it. I, Roscoe Paine, no longer even a country banker, was at the helm of "Big Jim" Colton's bark in the maelstrom of the stock market. It would have been funny if it had not been so desperate. And desperate it was, sheer reckless desperation and nothing else. I must have been crazier than ever, more wildly insane than I had been for the past month, to even think of such a thing. It was not too late yet, I could telegraph Davis−−

The telephone on the desk−−not the public, the local, 'phone, but the other, Colton's private wire to New York−−rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello−o! Hello−o!" a faint voice was calling. "Is this Colton's house at Denboro? . . . Yes, this is Davis. . . . The wire is all right now. . . . Is this Mr. Colton speaking?"

"No," I answered, "Mr. Colton is here in the house. You may give the message to me."

"I want to know if his orders hold. Am I to buy? Ask him. I will wait. Hurry! The market opens in five minutes."

I put down the receiver. Now was my opportunity. I could back out now. Five minutes more and it would be

too late. But if I did back out−−what?

One of the minutes passed. Then another. I seized the telephone.

"Go ahead!" I shouted. "Carry out your orders."

A faint "All right" answered me.

The die was cast. I was in for it. There was nothing to do but wait.

And I waited alone. I walked up and down the floor of the little room, looking at the clock and wondering what was happening on that crowded floor of the big Broad Street building. The market was open. Davis was buying as I had directed. But at what figure was he buying?

No one came near me, not even the butler. It was ten−twenty before the bell rang again.

"Hello! This is Mr. Davis's office. Is this Mr. Colton? Tell him Mr. Davis says L. and T. is one hundred and fifty now and jumping twenty points at a lick. There is the devil to pay. Scarcely any stock in sight and next door to a panic. Shall we go on buying?"

I was trying to decide upon an answer when some one touched my elbow. Miss Colton was standing beside me. She did not speak, but she looked the question.

I told her what I had just heard.

"One hundred and fifty!" she exclaimed. "That is−− Why, that is dreadful! What will you do?"

I shook my head. "That is for you to say," I answered.

"No, it is for you. You are doing this. I trust you. Do what you think is right−−you and Mr. Davis. That is what Father would wish if he knew."

"Davis will do nothing on his own responsibility."

"Then you must do it alone. Do it! do it!"

I turned to the 'phone once more. "Buy all you can get," I ordered. "Keep on bidding. But be sure and spread the news that it is Colton buying to secure control of the road, not to cover his shorts. Be sure that leaks out. Everything depends on that."

I hung up the receiver. She and I looked at each other.

"What will happen, do you think?" she asked.

"God knows! . . . Are you going? Don't go!"

"I must," gently. "Father is worse, I fear, and I must not leave him. Doctor Quimby says the next few hours may tell us whether he is−−is−−whether he is to be with us or not. I must go. Be brave. I trust you. Be brave, for−−for I am trying so hard to be."

I seized her hand. She drew it from my grasp and hastened away. Brave! Well, for her sake, I must be. Yet it was because of her that I was such a coward.

As I recall all this now I wonder at myself. The whole thing seems too improbable to be true, yet true it was. I lost my identity that day, I think, and, as the telephone messages kept coming, and the situation became more and more desperate, became some one else, some one a great deal braver and cooler and more clear−sighted than ever I had been or shall be again. I seemed to see my course plainer every moment and to feel surer of myself and that my method−−my bluff, if you like−−was the only salvation.

At eleven Louisville and Transcontinental was selling−−the little that was sold−−at four hundred and fifty dollars a share, on a par value of fifty. At eleven−thirty it had climbed another hundred. The whole Street was a Bedlam, so they 'phoned me, and the newspapers were issuing "panic" extras.

"Tell Davis to stop buying now," I ordered. "Let it be known that Colton has secured control and is satisfied."

At noon the figure was 700 bid and 800 asked. There was no trading at all, for the sufficient reason that no shares were to be had. Johnson came in to ask if he should bring my luncheon. I bade him clear out and let me alone. As he was tip−toeing away I called after him.

"How is Mr. Colton?" I asked.

"Very bad indeed, sir. Miss Mabel wished me to say that she could not leave him an instant. It is the crisis, the doctor thinks."

There were two crises then, one on each floor of the big house. At one Davis himself 'phoned.

"Still hanging around 700," he announced. "Begins to look as if the top had been reached. What shall I do now?"

My plan was ready and I gave my orders as if I had been doing such things for years.

"Sell, in small lots, at intervals," I told him. "Then, if the price breaks, begin buying through another broker as cautiously as you can."

The answer was in a different tone; there was a new note, almost of hope, in it.

"By the Lord, I believe you have got it!" he cried. "It may work. I'll report to you, Mr. Colton, right away."

Plainly he had no doubt that "Big Jim" was directing the fight in person. Far was it from me to undeceive him!

Another interval. Then he reported a drop of a hundred points.

"The bottom is beginning to fall out, I honestly believe. They think you've done 'em again. I am spreading the report that you have the control cinched. As soon as the scramble is really on I'll have a half dozen brokers buying for us."

It was half−past two when the next message came. It was exultant, triumphant.

"Down like an avalanche. Am grabbing every share offered. We've got 'em, sure!"

And, as three o'clock struck, came the final crow.

"Hooray for our side! They're dead and buried! You have two hundred shares more than fifty per cent, of the common stock. The Louisville road is in your pocket, Mr. Colton. I congratulate you. Might have known they couldn't lick the old man. You are a wonder. I'll write full particulars and then I am going home and to bed. I'm dead. I didn't believe you could do it! How did you?"

I sat there, staring at the 'phone. Then, all at once, I began to laugh, weakly and hysterically, but to laugh, nevertheless.

"I−−I organized a Development Company," I gasped. "Good night."

I rose from the chair and walked out into the library. I was so completely fagged out by the strain I had been under that I staggered as I walked. The library door opened and Johnson came in. He was beaming, actually beaming with joy.

"He's very much better, sir," he cried. "He's conscious and the doctor says he considers 'im out of danger now. Miss Mabel sent word she would be down in a short while. She can't leave the mistress immediate, but she'll be down soon, sir."

I looked at him in a dazed way. "Tell Miss Colton that I am very glad, Johnson," I said. "And tell her, too, that everything here is satisfactory also. Tell her that Mr. Paine says her father has his control."

"'His control!' And what may that be, if you please, sir?"

"She will understand. Say that everything is all right, we have won and that Mr. Colton has his control. Don't forget."

"And−−and where will you be, sir?"

"I am going home, I think. I am going home and−−to bed."

CHAPTER XXIII

The next thing I remember with any distinctness is Dorinda's knocking at my bedroom door. I remember reaching that bedroom, of course, and of meeting Lute in the kitchen and telling him that I was not to be disturbed, that I should not come down to supper and that I wanted to be let alone−−to be let ALONE−−until I saw fit to show myself. But these memories are all foggy and mixed with dreams and nightmares. As I say, the next thing that I remember distinctly after staggering from the Colton library is Dorinda's knocking at the door of my bedroom.

"Ros! Roscoe!" she was calling. "Can you get up now? There is somebody downstairs waitin' to see you."

I turned over in bed and began to collect my senses.

"What time is it, Dorinda?" I asked, drowsily.

"About ten, or a little after."

Ten! Then I had not slept so long, after all. It was nearly four when I went to bed and . . . But what made the room so light? There was no lamp. And the windows . . . I sat up.

"You don't mean to tell me it is ten o'clock IN THE FORENOON!" I cried.

"Um−hm. I hated to disturb you. You've been sleepin' like the everlastin' hills and I knew you must be completely wore out. But I felt pretty sartin you'd want to see the−−who 'tis that here's to see you, so I decided to wake you up."

"It is high time you did, I should think! I'll be down in a minute. Who is it that wishes to see me, Dorinda?"

But Dorinda had gone. I dressed hurriedly and descended the stairs to the dining−room. There, seated in a chair by the door, his eyes closed, his chin resting upon his chest, and his aristocratic nose proclaiming the fact that he slumbered, was Johnson, the Colton butler. I was not greatly surprised. I had rather suspected that my caller might be he, or some other messenger from the big house.

He started at the sound of my entrance and awoke.

"I−−I beg your pardon, sir," he stammered. "I−−I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure. I've been−−I 'aven't closed my eyes for the past two nights, sir, and I am tired out. Mr. Colton wishes to see you at once, sir. He wishes you to come over immediately."

I was surprised now. "MR. Colton wishes it," I repeated. "You mean Miss Colton, don't you, Johnson."

"No, sir. It is Mr. Colton this time, sir. Miss Colton is out in the motor, sir."

"But Mr. Colton is too ill to see me, or anyone else."

"No, sir, he isn't. He's very much better. He's quite himself, sir, really. And he is very anxious to see you. On a matter of business, he says."

I hesitated. I had expected this, though not so soon. He wanted to ask questions concerning my crazy dip into his financial affairs, doubtless. Well, I should have to see him some time or other, and it might as well be now.

I called to Dorinda, who was in the kitchen, and bade her tell Mother, if she inquired for me, that I had gone out, but would be back soon. Then Johnson and I walked briskly along the bluff path. We entered the big house.

"Mr. Colton is in his room, sir," explained the butler. "You are to see him there. This way, sir."

But before we reached the foot of the stairs Doctor Quimby came out of the library. He and I shook hands. The doctor was a happy man.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter with the one−horse, country−jay doctor now, hey! If there is any one of the Boston specialists at a hundred a visit who can yank a man out of a serious sickness and put him on his feet quicker than I can, why trot him along, that's all! I want to see him! I've been throwing bouquets at myself for the last ten hours. Ho! ho! Say, Ros, you'll think my head is swelled pretty bad, won't you! Ho! ho!"

I asked how the patient was getting on.

"Fine! Tip−top! The only trouble is that he ought to keep perfectly quiet and not do a thing or think of a thing, except getting his strength back, for the next week. But he hadn't been conscious more than a couple of hours before he was asking questions about business and so on. He and his daughter had a long confab this morning and after that he was neither to bind or tie. He must see you, that's all there was to it. Say, Ros, what did you and Phin Cahoon and the Colton girl do yesterday?"

"Oh, we put through one of Mr. Colton's little trades for him, that's all."

"That's all, hey! Well, whatever 'twas, he and I owe you a vote of thanks. He began to get better the minute he heard it. He's feeling so chipper that, if it wasn't that I swore he shouldn't, he'd have got out of bed by this time. You must go up and see him, I suppose, but don't stay too long. He's a wonder for strength and recuperative powers, but don't tire him too much. If that wife of his was in Europe or somewhere, I'd feel easier. She's the most tiring thing in the house."

Johnson led the way upstairs. At the chamber door he knocked and announced my presence.

"Bring him in! What is he waiting for?" demanded a voice which, considering how recently its owner had been at death's door, was surprisingly strong. I entered the room.

He was in bed, propped up with pillows. Beside him sat Mrs. Colton. Of the two she looked the more disturbed. Her eyes were wet and she was dabbing at them with a lace handkerchief. Her morning gown was a wondrous creation. "Big Jim," with his iron− gray hair awry and his eyes snapping, looked remarkably wide awake and alive.

"How are you, Paine?" he said. "Glad to see you. Sorry to bring you over here, but I had to see you and that doctor says I must stay in this room for a while yet. He may be right. My understanding is pretty shaky, I'll admit. You've met Mrs. Colton, haven't you?"

I bowed and expressed my pleasure at meeting the lady. Her bow was rather curt, but she regarded me with an astonishing amount of agitated interest. Also she showed symptoms of more tears.

"I don't remember whether or not Mr. Paine and I have ever been formally introduced," she observed. "If we haven't it makes no difference, I suppose. The other members of the family seem to know him well enough. And−−and mothers nowadays are not considered. I−−I must say that−−"

She had recourse to the lace handkerchief. I could understand what the doctor meant by calling her the "most tiring thing in the house." Her husband laid a hand on hers.

"There, there, my dear," he said, soothingly, "don't be foolish. Sit down, Paine. Henrietta, perhaps you had better leave Mr. Paine and I together. We have some−−er−−business matters to discuss and you are tired and nervous. I should go to my room and lie down, if I were you."

Mrs. Colton accepted the suggestion, but her acceptance was not the most gracious.

"I am in the way, as usual," she observed, chokingly. "Very well, I should be resigned to that by this time, no doubt. I will go. But James, for my sake, don't be weak. Remember what−− Oh, remember all we had hoped and planned! When I think of it, I−−I−− A nobody! A person without . . . What SHALL I do?"

The handkerchief was in active operation. She swept past me to the door. There she turned.

"I may forgive you some time, Mr. Paine," she sobbed. "I suppose I shall have to. I can't do anything else. But don't ask me to do it now. That would be TOO much!"

The door closed and I heard her sobs as she marched down the hall. To say that I was amazed and decidedly uncomfortable would be a very mild estimate of my feelings. Why should I expect her to forgive me? What had I done? I−−or luck and I together−−had saved one of her husband's stock speculations from ending in smash; but that was no injury for which I should beg forgiveness. At least I could not see that it was.

Colton looked after her with a troubled expression.

"Nerves are the devil, aren't they," he observed. "And nerves and a woman together are worse than that. My wife, Paine, is−−well, she hasn't been in good health for a long time and Mabel and I have done our best to give her her own way. When you've had your own way for years it rather hurts to be checkmated. I know that from experience. She'll feel better about it by and by."

"Better about what?" I demanded, involuntarily. "I don't understand Mrs. Colton's meaning in the least."

He looked at me keenly for a moment without speaking.

"Don't you?" he asked. "You are sure you don't?"

"Certainly I am sure. What I have done that requires forgiveness I don't see."

Another pause and more scrutiny.

"So you don't understand what she means, hey?" he said again. "All right, all right! We won't discuss that yet a while. If you don't understand−−never mind. Time enough for us to talk of that when you do. But, say, Paine," with one of his dry smiles, "who taught you to buck a stock pool?"

This question I could understand. I had expected this.

"No one taught me," I answered. "If I had any knowledge at all in that direction I was born with it, I guess. A form of original sin."

"It's a mighty profitable sort of wickedness−−for me. Young man, do you realize what you did? How do you expect me to thank you for that, hey?"

"I don't expect you to thank me at all. It was bull luck that won for you, Mr. Colton. Bull luck and desperation on my part. Miss Colton sent for me to help her. Your confidential man, Davis, refused to make a move without orders from you. You couldn't give any orders. Someone had to do something, or, so it seemed to your daughter and me, your Louisville and Transcontinental deal was a gone goose."

"It was more than that. I might have come pretty near being a gone goose along with it. Not quite gone, perhaps−−I should have had a few cents left in the stocking−−but I should have lost a lot more than I care to lose. So it was bull luck, hey? I don't believe it. Tell me the whole story, from beginning to end, will you? Mabel has told me some, but I want to hear it all. Go ahead!"

I thought of Quimby's warning. "I'm afraid I should tire you, Mr. Colton. It is a long story, if I give particulars."

"Never mind, you give them. That 'tiring' business is some more of that doctor's foolishness. HE makes me tired, all right. You tell me what I want to know or I'll get out of this bed and shake it out of you."

He looked as if he meant to carry out his threat. I began my tale at the beginning and went on to the astonishing end.

"Don't ask me why I did this or that, Mr. Colton," I concluded. "I don't know. I think I was off my head part of the time. But something HAD to be done. I tried to look at the affair in a common−sense way, and−−"

"And, HAVING common−sense, you used it. Paine, you're a brick! Your kind of common−sense is so rare that it's worth paying any price for. Ha! ha! So it was Keene and his 'Development Company' that gave you the idea. That's good! That little failure of mine wasn't altogether a failure, after all. You saw it was a case where a bluff might win, and you had the sand to bluff it through. That comes of living so long where there is more sand than anything else, I imagine, hey! Ha! ha! Well, bull luck or insanity or whatever you call it, it did the trick. Of course I'm more obliged to you than I can tell. You know that."

"That's all right, Mr. Colton. Now I think I must be going. You've talked enough."

"You sit still. I haven't begun to talk yet. Paine, before you did this thing for me I had taken a fancy to you. I believed there was good stuff in you and that I could use you in my business. Now I know I can't afford to do without you. . . . Stop! let me finish. Young man, I told you once that when I made up my mind to do a thing, I always did it. ALWAYS; do you understand? I am going to get you. You are coming with me."

I had foreseen this, of course. But I had hoped to get away from that room before he reached the point. He had reached it, however, and perhaps it was as well he had. We would end this for all time.

"Mr. Colton," I answered, "you have a monopoly of some things, but of others you have not. I am just as determined to have my own way in this matter as you are. I shall NOT accept your offer of employment. That is final."

"Final be damned! Young man−−"

"Mr. Colton, if you persist I shall go away."

"Go away! Before I tell you to? Why, you−−"

I rose. "The doctor told me that you must not excite yourself," I said. "I am going. Good−by."

He was excited, there was no doubt of that. He sat up in bed.

"You come back!" he ordered. "Come back! If you don't−− Well, by the Lord, if you don't I'll get up and come after you!"

I believe he would have tried to do it. I was frightened, on his account. I turned reluctantly. He sank back on the pillow, grinning triumphantly.

"Sit down there," he panted. "Sit down. Now I want you to tell me the real reason why you won't work for me. By gad! you're the first one in many a day I have had to ask twice. Why? Tell me the truth! Why?"

I hesitated. "Well, for one reason," I said, "I don't care for your business."

"Don't CARE for it! After what you just did!"

"I did that because I was driven to it. But I don't care for the stock game. Once I used to think I liked that sort of thing; now I know I don't. If I am anything I am a bank man, a poor sort of one, perhaps, but−−"

"Bank man! Why, you idiot! I don't care what you are. I can use you in a dozen places. You don't have to buck the market. I'll do that myself. But there are plenty of places where your brains and that common−sense you talk about will be invaluable to me. I do a banking business, on the side, myself. I own a mining property, a good one, out West. It needs a financial manager, and needs one badly. You come with me, do you hear! I'll place you where you fit, before I get through with you, and I'll make you a rich man in ten years. There! now will you say yes?"

I shook my head. "No," I said.

"NO! You are enough to drive a well man crazy, to say nothing of a half−sick relic like me. _I_ say yes−−yes−−YES! Sooner or later I'll MAKE you. You've lost your place here. You told me yourself that that old crank Dean is going to make this town too hot to hold you. You'll HAVE to go away. Now won't you?"

I nodded. "I shall go away," I answered. "I have made up my mind to go, now that Mother seems well enough for me to leave her."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know."

He stared at me in silence for what seemed a long time. I thought he must be exhausted, and once more I rose to go.

"Stop! Stay where you are," he ordered. "I haven't got the answer to you yet, and I know it. There's something back of all this, something I don't know about. I'm going to find out what it is, if it takes me a year. You can tell me now, if you want to. It will save time. What is the real reason why you won't take my offer?"

I don't know why I did it. I had kept the secret all the years and certainly, when I entered that room, I had no intention of revealing it. Yet, now, when he asked this question I turned on him and blurted out what I had sworn no one−−least of all he or his−−should ever know.

"I'll tell you why," I cried, desperately. "I can't take the place you offer because you know nothing about me. You don't know who I am. If you did you . . . . Mr. Colton, you don't even know my name."

He looked at me and shook his head, impatiently. "Either you ARE crazy, or I am," he muttered. "Don't know your name!"

"No, you don't! You think I am Roscoe Paine. I am not. I am Roscoe Bennett, and my father was Carleton Bennett, the embezzler."

I had said it. And the moment afterward I was sorry. I would have given anything to take back the words, but repentance came too late. I had said it.

I heard him draw a deep breath. I did not look at him. I did not care to see his face and read on it the disgust and contempt I was sure it expressed.

"Humph!" he exclaimed. "Humph! Do you mean to tell me that your father was Carleton Bennett−−Bennett of Bennett and Company?"

"Yes."

"Well! well! well! Carleton Bennett! No wonder there was something familiar about your mother, something that I seemed to remember. I met her years ago. Well! well! So you're Carleton Bennett's son?"

"Yes, I am his son."

"Well, what of it?"

I looked at him now. He was smiling, actually smiling. His illness had affected his mind.

"What OF it!" I gasped.

"Ye−es, what of it? What has that got to do with your working for me?"

I could have struck him. If he had not been weak and ill and irresponsible for what he was saying I think I should.

"Mr. Colton," I said, striving to speak calmly, "you don't understand. My father was Carleton Bennett, the embezzler, the thief, the man whose name was and is a disgrace all over the country. Mother and I came here to hide from that disgrace, to begin a new, clean life under a clean name. Do you think−−? Oh, you don't understand!"

"I understand all right. This is the first time I HAVE understood. I see now why a clever man like you was willing to spend his days in a place like Denboro. Well, you aren't going to spend any more of them there. You're going to let me make something worth while out of you."

This sounded, in one way, like sanity. But in another−−

"Mr. Colton," I cried, "even if you meant it, which you don't−−do you suppose I would go back to New York, where so many know me, and enter your employ under an assumed name? Run the risk of−−"

"Hush! Enter it under your own name. It's a good name. The Bennetts are one of our oldest families. Ask my wife; she'll tell you that."

"A good name!"

"Yes. I declare, Paine−−Bennett, I mean−−I shall begin to believe you haven't got the sense I credited you with. I can see what has been the matter with you. You came here, you and your sick mother, with the scandal of your father's crookedness hanging over you and her sickness making her super−sensitive, and you two kept the secret and brooded over it so long that you have come to think you are criminals, too. You're not. You haven't done anything crooked. What's the matter with you, man? Be sensible!"

"Sensible!"

"Yes, sensible, if you can. I don't care who your father was. He was a smart banker, before he went wrong, and I can see now where you inherited your ability. But never mind that. He's dead; let him stay so. I'm not trying to get him. It's you I want."

"You want ME! Do you mean you would take me into your employ, knowing who I am?"

"Sure! It is because I know WHAT you are that I want you."

"Mr. Colton, you−−I don't know what to say to you."

"Try saying 'yes' and see how it seems. It will be a change, anyhow."

"No, no! I cannot; it is impossible."

"Oh, you make me weary! . . . Humph! What is it now? Any more 'reasons'?"

'Yes." I faced him squarely. "Yes," I said, "there is another reason, one that makes it impossible, utterly impossible, if nothing else did. When I tell you what it is you will understand what I mean and agree with me. Your daughter and I have been thrown together a great deal since she came to Denboro. Our meetings have not been of my seeking, nor of hers. Of late I have realized that, for my own sake, for the sake of my peace of mind, I must not meet her. I must not be where she is. I−−"

"Here! Stop!" he broke in sharply. "What is this? Do you mean to tell me that you and Mabel−−"

"It is not her fault. It is my own, entirely. Mr. Colton, I−−"

"Stop, I tell you! Do you mean to tell me that you are−−that you have been making love to my daughter?"

"No. Certainly not."

"Then what do you mean? That she has been making love to you?"

"Mr. Colton−−"

"There! Don't act like the Wild Man of Borneo. Do you mean that you are in love with her?"

"Don't you see now why I cannot accept? I must go away. I am going."

"Humph! That will do. . . . Humph! Well, Paine−−Bennett, I should say; it is hard to keep track of your names−−you are rather−− er−−reckless, it seems to me. Mabel is our only child and her mother and I, naturally, had planned for her future . . . Have you told her of your−−recklessness?"

"Of course not! I shall not see her again. I shall leave Denboro as soon as I can. She will never know."

"Humph! I see . . . I see . . . Well, I don't know that there is anything for me to say."

"There is not."

"I am sorry for you, of course."

"Thank you."

There was a sharp rap at the door. Doctor Quimby opened it and entered the room. He glanced from me to his patient and his face expressed sharp disapproval.

"You'd better go, Ros," he snapped. "What is the matter with you? Didn't I tell you not to excite him."

"I'M not excited," observed Colton, drily.

"Clear out this minute!" continued the angry doctor. "Ros Paine, I thought you had more sense."

"So did I," this from "Big Jim". "However, I am learning a lot these days. Good−by, Paine."

I was at the door.

"Oh, by the way," he called after me, "let me make a suggestion. If I were you, Roscoe, I wouldn't leave Denboro to−day. Not before to−morrow morning, at any rate."

I did not understand him and I asked for no explanation. It was the first time he had addressed me by my

Christian name, but it was not until afterward that I remembered that fact.

That afternoon I was alone in my haven of refuge, the boathouse. Mother and I had had a long talk. I told her everything that had transpired. I kept back nothing, either of my acts or my feelings. She said she was not sorry for what I had done. She was rather glad, than otherwise, that I had disclosed our secret to Mr. Colton.

"He knows now, Roscoe," she said. "And he was right, too. You and I have brooded over our sorrow and what we considered our disgrace much more than we should. He is right, Boy. We are innocent of any wrong−doing."

"Yes, Mother," I answered, "I suppose we are. But we must keep the secret still. No one else in Denboro must know. You know what gossip there would be. There is enough now. I presume I am called a traitor and a blackguard by every person in the town."

"Why no, you are not. That is the strange thing about it. Luther was up at the post−office this morning and no one seems to know of your sale of the land. Captain Dean has, apparently, kept the news to himself. Why do you suppose he does that?"

"I don't know. I don't know, unless it is because he−−no, I can't understand it at all. However, they will know soon enough. By the way, I have never asked Dorinda where Lute was that noon−−it seems ages ago−−when he was missing at dinner time. And how did he know of Mr. Colton's illness?"

She smiled. "Poor Luther!" she said. "He announced his intention of running away, you remember. As a matter of fact he met the Coltons' chauffeur in the motor car and the chauffeur invited him to go to Bayport with him. The chauffeur had an errand there. Lute accepted−−as he says, automobile rides don't come his way every day in the week−−and they had trouble with the engine and did not get back until almost night. Then Miss Colton told him of her father's seizure and gave him the note for you. It was to you she turned in her trouble, Boy. She trusts you. Roscoe, I−−I think she−−"

"Don't say it, Mother. All that is ended. I am going to forget−− if I can."

The rest of our conversation need not be written here. She said many things, such as fond mothers say to their sons and which the sons know too well they do not deserve. We discussed my leaving Denboro and she was so brave and self−sacrificing that my conscience smote me.

"I'll stay, Mother," I said. "I can't leave you. I'll stay and fight it out with you. After all, it will not be much worse than it was before I went to the bank."

But she would not hear of my staying. I had a friend in Chicago, a distant relative who knew our story. Perhaps he could help me to a start somewhere. She kissed me and bade me keep up my courage, and I left her. I ate a hurried meal, a combination of breakfast and dinner, and, dodging Lute, who was in the back yard waiting to question me concerning the Coltons, walked down to the boathouse. There, in my armchair, I tried to think, to map out some sort of plan for my future.

It was a hopeless task. I was not interested in it. I did not much care what became of me. If it were not for Mother I should not have cared at all. Nevertheless, for her sake, I must try to plan, and I did.

I was still trying when I heard footsteps approaching the door, the small door at the side, not the big one in front. I did not rise to open the door, nor did I turn my head. The visitor was Lute, probably, and if I kept still he might think I was not within and go away again.

The door opened. "Here he is," said a voice, a voice that I recognized. I turned quickly and sprang to my feet. Standing behind me was Captain Jedediah Dean and with him George Taylor−− George Taylor, who should have been−−whom I had supposed to be in Washington with his bride!

"Here he is," said Captain Jed, again. "Well, Ros, we've come to see you."

But I paid no attention to him. It was his companion I was staring at. What was he doing here?

"George!" I cried. "GEORGE!"

He stepped forward and held out his hand. He was smiling, but there was a look in his eye which expressed the exact opposite of smiles.

"Ros," he said, quietly, "Ros Paine, you bull−headed, big−hearted old chump, how are you?"

But I could only stare at him. Why had he come to Denboro? What did his coming to me mean? Why had he come with Captain Jed, the man who had vowed that he was done with me forever? And why was the captain looking at me so oddly?

"George!" I cried in alarm, "George, you haven't−−you haven't made a fool of yourself? You haven't−−"

Captain Jed interrupted me. "He ain't the fool, Ros," he said. "That is, he ain't now. I'm the fool. I ought to have known better. Ros, I−−I don't know's you'll give it to me, but anyhow I'm goin' to ask it; I beg your pardon."

"Ros," said Taylor, before I could reply, "don't stand staring as if you were petrified. Sit down and let me look at you. You pig− headed old idiot, you! What do you mean by it? What did you do it for?"

He pushed me into the chair I had just vacated. Captain Dean took another. George remained standing.

"He IS petrified, I do believe!" he exclaimed.

But my petrification was only temporary. I was beginning to understand, and to be more alarmed than ever.

"What are you doing here in Denboro?" I demanded.

Captain Jed answered for him. "He's here because I telegraphed for him yesterday," he said. "I wired him to come straight home and take charge of the bank. I had fired you, like the dumb fool I was, and I wanted him to take command. He got here on the mornin' train."

I remembered what Phin Cahoon had said about the telegram and the captain's making him promise not to mention the name of the person to whom it was sent. It was George, of course. If I had been in a normal state of mind when Phin told me I should have guessed as much.

Taylor took up the conversation. "Yes, I got here," he said. "And when I got here−−or a little before−−" with a glance at the captain−−"I found out what had been going on since I left. You old chump, Ros Paine! What did you do it for?"

I looked at him and then at his companion. What I saw there confirmed my worst suspicions.

"George," I said, "if you have told him you must be crazy."

"I was crazy not to tell him before. I was crazy not to guess what you had been up to. But I didn't suppose anybody would be crazy enough to do what you did, Ros. I didn't imagine for a minute that you would be crazy enough to throw away your job and get yourself into the trouble you knew was sure to come, just to help me. To help ME, by the Lord! Ros! Ros! what can I say to you!"

"You've said enough, and more than enough," I answered, bitterly. "I did what I did so that you might keep your secret. I did it to help you and Nellie. And if you had kept still no one need ever have known, no one but you and I, George. And now you−−"

"Shut up, Ros!" he interrupted. "Shut up, I tell you! Why, confound you, what do you think I am? Do you suppose I would let you sacrifice yourself like that, while I set still and saw you kicked out of town? What do you think I am?"

"But what was the use of it?" I demanded. "It was done. Nothing you could say would change it. For Nellie's sake−−"

"There! there!" broke in Captain Jed, "Nellie knows. George told her the day they was married. He told her before they was married. He was man enough to do that and I honor him for it. If he'd only come to me then it would have been a mighty sight better. I'd have understood when I heard about your sellin' Colton the land, and I wouldn't have made a jackass of myself by treatin' you as I done. You! the man that sacrificed yourself to keep my girl from breakin' her heart! When I think what you saved us all from I−−I−− By the Almighty, Ros Paine! I'll make it up to you somehow. I will! I swear I will!"

He turned away and looked out of the window. George laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I am the one to make it up, Cap'n," he said, solemnly. "If I live I'll make it up to Ros here, and to you, and to Nellie, God bless her! I expected you would never speak to me again when I'd told you. Telling you−−next to telling Nellie−−was the toughest job I ever tackled. But I'll make it up to you both, and to Ros. Thank the Lord, it ain't too late to make it up to him!"

"We'll both make it up to him, George," replied Captain Jed. "As far as we can, we will. If he wants to come back to the bank this minute he can. We'll be proud to have him. But I cal'late," with a smile, "he'll have bigger fish to fry than we can give him. If what we've just heard is true, he will."

"I don't know what you mean," I answered. "And as for the bank−− well, you forget one thing: I sold the Shore Lane and the town knows it. How long would the other directors tolerate me in that bank, after that, do you think?"

To my surprise they looked at each other and laughed. Captain Dean shook his head.

"No," he said, "you're mistook, Ros. The town don't know you sold it. I didn't tell 'em because I wanted George in command of that bank afore the row broke loose. I larned of the sale myself, by chance, over to Ostable

and I never told anybody except Dorindy Rogers and her fool of a husband. I'll see that they keep still tongues in their heads. And as for the Lane−−well, that won't be closed. Colton don't own it no more."

"Don't OWN it," I repeated. "Don't own it! He does. I sold it to him myself."

"Yes. And George, here, bought it back not an hour ago. We saw His Majesty−−sick in bed he was, but just as high and mighty and independent as ever−−and George bought back the land and the Lane for thirty−five hundred dollars. The old man didn't seem to give a durn about it any more. He'd had his own way, he said, and that was all he cared about. Besides, he ain't goin' to stay in Denboro much longer. The old lady−−his wife−−is sick of the place and he only come here on her account. He cal'lates that New York is good enough for him. I cal'late 'tis. Anyhow, Denboro won't hang onto his coattails to hold him back. Tell Ros the whole story, George."

George told it, beginning with his receipt of his father−in−law's telegram and his hurried return to the Cape. He had gone directly to Captain Dean and confessed the whole thing. The captain had behaved like a trump, I learned. Instead of denouncing his daughter's husband he had forgiven him freely. Then they had gone to see Colton and George had bought the land.

"And I shall give it to the town," he said. "It's the least I can do. You wonder where the money came from, Ros? I guess you ain't seen the newspapers. There was a high old time in the stock market yesterday and Louisville and Transcontinental climbed half−way to the moon. From being a pauper I'm pretty well fixed."

"I'm heartily glad of it, George," I said. "But there is one thing I don't understand. You say you learned of my selling the land before you reached Denboro. Captain Jed says no one but he and my people knew it. How did you find it out?"

Again my two callers looked at each other.

"Why, somebody−−a friend of yours−−come to me at the Ostable station and dragged Nellie and me off the train. We rode with that person the rest of the way and−−the said person told us what had happened and begged us to help you. Seemed to have made a middling good guess that I COULD help, if I would."

"A person−−a friend of mine! Why, I haven't any friend, any friend who knew the truth, or could guess."

"Yes, you have."

"Who was it?"

George laughed aloud and Captain Jed laughed with him.

"I guess I shan't tell you," said the former. "I promised I wouldn't."

CHAPTER XXIV

They left me soon after this. I tried to make them tell who the mysterious friend might be, but they refused. The kind things they said and the gratitude they both expressed I shall never forget. They did not strenuously urge me to return to the bank, and that seemed strange to me.

"The job's yours if you want it, Ros," said Captain Jed. "We'd be only too happy to have you if you'd come−−any time, sooner or later. But I don't think you will."

"No," I answered, "I shall not. I have made other plans. I am going to leave Denboro."

That did not seem to surprise them and I was still more puzzled. They shook hands and went away, promising to call at the house that evening and bring Nellie.

"She wants to thank you, too, Ros," said George.

After they had gone I sat by the big door, looking out at the bay, smooth and beautiful in the afternoon sunlight, and thinking of what they had told me. For Mother's sake I was very glad. It would be easier for her, after I had gone; the townspeople would be friendly, instead of disagreeable. For her sake, I was glad. For myself nothing seemed to make any difference. George Taylor's words−−those he had spoken to me that fateful evening when I found him with the revolver beside him−−came back to me over and over. "Wait until your time comes. Wait until the girl comes along that you care for more than the whole world. And then see what you'd do. See what it would mean to give her up!"

I was seeing. I knew now what it meant.

I rose and went out of the boathouse. I did not care to meet anyone or speak with anyone. I strolled along the path by the bluff, my old walk, that which I had taken so many times and with such varied feelings, never with such miserable ones as now.

The golden−rod, always late blooming on the Cape, bordered the path with gorgeous yellow. The leaves of the scrub oaks were beginning to turn, though not to fall. I walked on and entered the grove where she and I had met after our adventure with Carver and the stranded skiff. I turned the bend and saw her coming toward me.

I stood still and she came on, came straight to me and held out her hand.

"I was waiting for you," she said. "I was on my way to your house and I saw you coming−−so I waited."

"You waited," I stammered. "Why?"

"Because I wished to speak to you and I did not want that−−that Mr. Rogers of yours to interrupt me. Why did you go away yesterday without even letting me thank you for what you had done? Why did you do it?"

"Because−−because you were very busy and−−and I was tired. I went home and to bed."

"You were tired. You must have been. But that is no excuse, no good one. I came down and found you were gone without a word to me. And you had done so much for me−−for my father!"

"Your father thanked me this morning, Miss Colton. I saw him in his room and he thanked me. I did not deserve thanks. I was lucky, that was all."

"Father does not call it luck. He told me what you said to him."

"He told you! Did he tell you all I told him?"

"I−−I think so. He told me who you were; what your real name was."

"He did! And you were still willing to meet me!"

"Yes. Why not? Does it make any difference that you are Mr. Bennett−−instead of Mr. Paine?"

"But my father was Carleton Bennett−−the−−the−− You must have heard of him."

"I never knew your father. I do know his son. And I am very proud to know him."

"But−−but, Miss Colton."

"Tell me," she interrupted, quickly, "have you seen Mr. Taylor? He is here in Denboro."

"Yes. I have seen him."

"And he told you about the Lane? That he has bought it?"

"Yes."

"And you will not be," with a smile, "driven from Denboro by that cross old Captain Dean?"

"I shall not be driven−−no."

"Then Mr. Taylor did help you. He promised me he would."

"He promised you? When? When did you see George Taylor?"

She appeared confused. "I−−I−− Of course I saw him at the house this noon, when he came to see Father."

"But he could not have promised you then. He had helped me already. Did you see him before that?"

"Why, how could I? I−−"

"Miss Colton, answer me. Was it you that met him at the Ostable station this morning? Was it?"

She was as red as the reddest of the autumn leaves. She laughed, confusedly.

"I did meet him there," she confessed. "That queer Mr. Cahoon, the station agent, told me that Captain Dean had telegraphed him to come. I knew he would probably be on that train. And Mr. Cahoon told me about his being interested in stocks and very much troubled. You had told me, or as much as told me, that you sold the land to get money to help some one. I put two and two together and I guessed the rest. I met him and Nellie and we rode to Denboro together in our auto. He promised me that he would make everything right for you. I am so glad he did!"

I caught my breath with a gasp.

"You did that!" I exclaimed. "You did that, for me!"

"Why not? Surely you had done enough for−−us. I could not let you be 'driven from town', you know."

I did not speak. I knew that I must not attempt a reply. I should say too much. She looked up at me, and then down again at the pine−needles beneath our feet.

"Father says he intends to do great things for you," she went on. "He says you are to come with him. He is enthusiastic about it. He believes you are a great man. No one but a great man, he says, could beat the Consolidated Pacific gang single−handed. He says you will be the best investment he ever made."

"I am afraid not," I answered. "Your father made me a generous offer. I wish I might have been able to accept it, but I could not."

"Oh, but you are going to accept."

"No, I am not."

"He says you are. And he always has his way, you know."

"Not in this case, Miss Colton."

"But _I_ want you to accept. Surely you will do it to oblige me."

"I−−I can't."

"What are you going to do; go back to the bank?"

"No, I am going to leave Denboro. I don't know where I shall go. This is good−by, Miss Colton. It is not likely that we shall meet again."

"But why are you going?"

"I cannot tell you."

She was silent, still looking down at the pine−needles. I could not see her face. I was silent also. I knew that I ought to go, that I should not remain there, with her, another moment. Yet I remained.

"So you think this is our parting," she said. "I do not."

"Don't you? I fear you are wrong."

"I am not wrong. You will not go away, Mr.−−Bennett. At least, you will not until you go where my father sends you. You will accept his offer, I think."

"You are mistaken."

"No. I think I am not mistaken. I think you will accept it, because−−because I ask you to."

"I cannot, Miss Colton."

"And your reason?"

"That I cannot tell anyone."

"But you told my father."

I was stricken dumb again.

She went on, speaking hurriedly, and not raising her eyes.

"You told my father," she repeated, "and he told me."

"He told you!" I cried.

"Yes, he told me. I−−I am not sure that he was greatly surprised. He thought it honorable of you and he was

very glad you did tell him, but I think he was not surprised."

The oaks and the pines and the huckleberry bushes were dancing great giddy−go−rounds, a reflection of the whirlpool in my brain. Out of the maelstrom I managed to speak somehow.

"He was not surprised!" I repeated. "He was not−−not−− What do you mean?"

She did not answer. She drew away from me a step, but I followed her.

"Why wasn't he surprised?" I asked again.

"Because−−because−− Oh, I don't know! What have I been saying! I−− Please don't ask me!"

"But why wasn't he surprised?"

"Because−−because−−" she hesitated. Then suddenly she looked up into my face, her wonderful eyes alight. "Because," she said, "I had told him myself, sir."

I seized her hands.

"YOU had told him? You had told him that I−−I−−"

"No," with a swift shake of the head, "not you. I−−I did not know that−−then. I told him that I−−"

But I did not wait to hear any more.

Some time after that−−I do not know how long after and it makes no difference anyway−−I began to remember some resolutions I had made, resolves to be self−sacrificing and all that sort of thing.

"But, my dear," I faltered, "I am insane! I am stark crazy! How can I think of such a thing! Your mother−−what will she say?"

She looked up at me; looking up was not as difficult now, and, besides, she did not have to look far. She looked up and smiled.

"I think Mother is more reconciled," she said. "Since she learned who you were she seems to feel better about it."

I shook my head, ruefully. "Yet she referred to me as a 'nobody' only this morning," I observed.

"Yes, but that was before she knew you were a Bennett. The Bennetts are a very good family, so she says. And she informed me that she always expected me to throw myself away, so she was not altogether unprepared."

I sighed. "Throwing yourself away is exactly what you have done, I'm afraid," I answered.

She put her hand to my lips. "Hush!" she whispered. "At all events, I made a lucky throw. I'm very glad you caught me, dear."

There was a rustle of leaves just behind us and a startled exclamation. I turned and saw Lute Rogers standing there in the path, an expression on his face which I shall not attempt to describe, for no description could do justice to it. We looked at Lute and he looked at us.

He was the first to recover.

"My time!" exclaimed Lute. "My TIME!"

He turned and fled.

"Come here!" I shouted after him. "Come back here this minute! Lute, come back!"

Lute came, looking shamefaced and awkward.

"Where were you going?" I demanded.

"I−−I was cal'latin' to go and tell Dorindy," he faltered.

"You'll tell nobody. Nobody, do you hear! I'll tell Dorinda myself, when it is necessary. What were you doing here? spying on me in that fashion."

"I−−I wan't spyin', Ros. Honest truth, I wan't. I−−I didn't know you and she was−−was−−"

"Never mind that. What were you doing here?"

"I was chasin' after you, Ros. I just heard the most astonishing thing. Jed Dean was to the house to make Dorindy and me promise to say nothin' about that Shore Lane 'cause you never sold it, and he said Mr. Colton had offered you a turrible fine job along of him and that you was goin' to take it. I wanted to find you and ask it 'twas true. 'Taint true, is it, Ros?" wistfully. "By time! I wish 'twas."

Before I could answer Mabel spoke.

"Yes, it is true, Mr. Rogers," she said. "It is quite true and you may tell anyone you like. It is true, isn't it, Roscoe?"

What answer could I make? What answer would you have made under the circumstances?

"Yes," I answered, with a sigh of resignation. "I guess it is true, Lute."