

A Far–Away Melody And Other Stories

Mary E. Wilkins

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"A Far–Away Melody"

The clothes–line was wound securely around the trunks of four gnarled, crooked old apple–trees, which stood promiscuously about the yard back of the cottage. It was tree–blossoming time, but these were too aged and sapless to blossom freely, and there was only a white bough here and there shaking itself triumphantly from among the rest, which had only their new green leaves. There was a branch occasionally which had not even these, but pierced the tender green and the flossy white in hard, gray nakedness. All over the yard, the grass was young and green and short, and had not yet gotten any feathery heads. Once in a while there was a dandelion set closely down among it.

The cottage was low, of a dark–red color, with white facings around the windows, which had no blinds, only green paper curtains.

The back door was in the centre of the house, and opened directly into the green yard, with hardly a pretence of a step, only a flat, oval stone before it.

Through this door, stepping cautiously on the stone, came presently two tall, lank women in chocolate–colored calico gowns, with a basket of clothes between them. They set the basket underneath the line on the grass, with a little clothespin bag beside it, and then proceeded methodically to hang out the clothes. Everything of a kind went together, and the best things on the outside line, which could be seen from the street in front of the cottage.

The two women were curiously alike. They were about the same height, and moved in the same way. Even their faces were so similar in feature and expression that it might have been a difficult matter to distinguish between them. All the difference, and that would have been scarcely apparent to an ordinary observer, was a difference of degree, if it might be so expressed. In one face the features were both bolder and sharper in outline, the eyes were a trifle larger and brighter, and the whole expression more animated and decided than in the other.

One woman's scanty drab hair was a shade darker than the other's, and the negative fairness of complexion, which generally accompanies drab hair, was in one relieved by a slight tinge of warm red on the cheeks.

This slightly intensified woman had been commonly considered the more attractive of the two, although in reality there was very little to choose between the personal appearance of these twin sisters, Priscilla and Mary Brown. They moved about the clothesline, pinning the sweet white linen on securely, their thick, white–stockinged ankles showing beneath their limp calicoes as they stepped, and their large feet in cloth slippers flattening down the short, green grass. Their sleeves were rolled up, displaying their long, thin, muscular arms, which were sharply pointed at the elbows.

They were homely women; they were fifty and over now, but they never could have been pretty in their teens, their features were too irredeemably irregular for that. No youthful freshness of complexion or expression could have possibly done away with the impression that they gave. Their plainness had probably only been enhanced by the contrast, and these women, to people generally, seemed better–looking than when they were young. There was an honesty and patience in both faces that showed all the plainer for their homeliness.

One, the sister with the darker hair, moved a little quicker than the other, and lifted the wet clothes from the basket to the line more frequently. She was the first to speak, too, after they had been hanging out the clothes for

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some little time in silence. She stopped as she did so, with a wet pillow-case in her hand, and looked up reflectively at the flowering apple-boughs overhead, and the blue sky showing, between, while the sweet spring wind ruffled her scanty hair a little.

"I wonder, Mary," said she, "if it would seem so very queer to die a mornin' like this, say. Don't you believe there's apple branches a-hangin' over them walls made out of precious stones, like these, only there ain't any dead limbs among 'em, an' they're all covered thick with flowers? An' I wonder if it would seem such an awful change to go from this air into the air of the New Jerusalem." Just then a robin hidden somewhere in the trees began to sing. "I s'pose," she went on, "that there's angels instead of robins, though, and they don't roost up in trees to sing, but stand on the ground, with lilies growin' round their feet, maybe, up to their knees, or on the gold stones in the street, an' play on their harps to go with the singin'."

The other sister gave a scared, awed look at her. "Lor, don't talk that way, sister," said she. "What has got into you lately? You make me crawl all over, talkin' so much about dyin'. You feel well, don't you?"

"Lor, yes," replied the other, laughing, and picking up a clothespin for her pillow-case; "I feel well enough, an' I don't know what has got me to talkin' so much about dyin' lately, or thinkin' about it. I guess it's the spring weather. P'r'aps flowers growin' make anybody think of wings sproutin' kinder naterally. I won't talk so much about it if it bothers you, an' I don't know but it's sorter nateral it should. Did you get the potatoes before we came out, sister?"—with an awkward and kindly effort to change the subject.

"No," replied the other, stooping over the clothes-basket. There was such a film of tears in her dull blue eyes that she could not distinguish one article from another.

Well, I guess you had better go in an' get 'em, then they ain't worth anything, this time of year, unless they soak a while, an' I'll finish hangin' out the clothes while you do it."

"Well, p'r'aps I'd better," the other woman replied, straightening herself up from the clothes-basket. Then she went into the house without another word; but down in the damp cellar, a minute later, she sobbed over the potato barrel as if her heart would break. Her sister's remarks had filled her with a vague apprehension and grief which she could not throw off. And there was something little singular about it. Both these women had always been of a deeply religious cast of mind. They had studied the Bible faithfully, if not understandingly, and their religion had strongly tintured their daily life. They knew almost as much about the Old Testament prophets as they did about their neighbors; and that was saying a good deal of two single women in a New England country town. Still this religious element in their natures could hardly have been termed spirituality. It deviated from that as much as anything of religion—which is in one way spirituality itself—could.

Both sisters were eminently practical in all affairs of life, down to their very dreams, and Priscilla especially so. She had dealt in religion with the bare facts of sin and repentance, future punishment and reward. She had dwelt very little, probably, upon the poetic splendors of the Eternal City, and talked about them still less. Indeed, she had always been reticent about her religious convictions, and had said very little about them even to her sister.

The two women, with God in their thoughts every moment, seldom had spoken his name to each other. For Priscilla to talk in the strain that she had to-day, and for a week or two previous, off and on, was, from its extreme deviation from her usual custom, certainly startling.

Poor Mary, sobbing over the potato barrel, thought it was a sign of approaching death. She had a few superstitious-like grafts upon her practical, commonplace character.

She wiped her eyes finally, and went up-stairs with her tin basin of potatoes, which were carefully washed and put to soak by the time her sister came in with the empty basket.

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At twelve exactly the two sat down to dinner in the clean kitchen, which was one of the two rooms the cottage boasted. The narrow entry ran from the front door to the back. On one side was the kitchen and living–room; on the other, the room where the sisters slept. There were two small unfinished lofts overhead, reached by a step–ladder through a little scuttle in the entry ceiling: and that was all. The sisters had earned the cottage and paid for it years before, by working as tailoresses. They had, besides, quite a snug little sum in the bank, which they had saved out of their hard earnings. There was no need for Priscilla and Mary to work so hard, people said; but work hard they did, and work hard they would as long as they lived. The mere habit of work had become as necessary to them as breathing.

Just as soon as they had finished their meal and cleared away the dishes, they put on some clean starched purple prints, which were their afternoon dresses, and seated themselves with their work at the two front windows; the house faced southwest, so the sunlight streamed through both. It was a very warm day for the season, and the windows were open. Close to them in the yard outside stood great clumps of lilac bushes. They grew on the other side of the front door too; a little later the low cottage would look half–buried in them. The shadows of their leaves made a dancing net–work over the freshly washed yellow floor.

The two sisters sat there and sewed on some coarse vests all the afternoon. Neither made a remark often. The room, with its glossy little cooking–stove, its eight–day clock on the mantel, its chintz–cushioned rocking–chairs, and the dancing shadows of the lilac leaves on its yellow floor, looked pleasant and peaceful.

Just before six o'clock a neighbor dropped in with her cream pitcher to borrow some milk for tea, and she sat down for a minute's chat after she had got it filled. They had been talking a few moments on neighborhood topics, when all of a sudden Priscilla let her work fall and raised her hand. "Hush!" whispered she.

The other two stopped talking, and listened, staring at her wonderingly, but they could hear nothing.

"What is it, Miss Priscilla?" asked the neighbor, with round blue eyes. She was a pretty young thing, who had not been married long.

"Hush! Don't speak. Don't you hear that beautiful music?" Her ear was inclined towards the open window, her hand still raised warningly, and her eyes fixed on the opposite wall beyond them.

Mary turned visibly paler than her usual dull paleness, and shuddered. "I don't hear any music," she said. "Do you, Miss Moore?"

"No–o," replied the caller, her simple little face beginning to put on a scared look, from a vague sense of a mystery she could not fathom.

Mary Brown rose and went to the door, and looked eagerly up and down the street. "There ain't no organ–man in sight anywhere," said she, returning, "an' I can't hear any music, an' Miss Moore can't, an' we're both sharp enough o' hearing'. [sic] You're jest imaginin' it, sister."

"I never imagined anything in my life," returned the other, "an' it ain't likely I'm goin' to begin now. It's the beautifullest music. It comes from over the orchard there. Can't you hear it? But it seems to me it's growin' a little fainter like now. I guess it's movin' off, perhaps."

Mary Brown set her lips hard. The grief and anxiety she had felt lately turned suddenly to unreasoning anger against the cause of it; through her very love she fired with quick wrath at the beloved object. Still she did not say much, only, "I guess it must be movin' off," with a laugh, which had an unpleasant ring in it.

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After the neighbor had gone, however, she said more, standing before her sister with her arms folded squarely across her bosom. "Now, Priscilla Brown," she exclaimed, "I think it's about time to put a stop to this. I've heard about enough of it. What do you s'pose Miss Moore thought of you? Next thing it'll be all over town that you're gettin' spiritual notions. To-day it's music that nobody else can hear, an' yesterday you smelled roses, and there ain't one in blossom this time o' year, and all the time you're talkin' about dyin'. For my part, I don't see why you ain't as likely to live as I am. You're uncommon hearty on vittles. You ate a pretty good dinner to-day for a dyin' person."

"I didn't say I was goin' to die," replied Priscilla, meekly: the two sisters seemed suddenly to have changed natures. "An' I'll try not to talk so, if it plagues you. I told you I wouldn't this mornin', but the music kinder took me by surprise like, an' I thought maybe you an' Miss Moore could hear it. I can jest hear it a little bit now, like the dyin' away of a bell."

"There you go agin!" cried the other, sharply. "Do, for mercy's sake, stop, Priscilla. There ain't no music."

"Well, I won't talk any more about it," she answered, patiently; and she rose and began setting the table for tea, while Mary sat down and resumed her sewing, drawing the thread through the cloth with quick, uneven jerks.

That night the pretty girl neighbor was aroused from her first sleep by a distressed voice at her bedroom window, crying, "Miss Moore! Miss Moore!"

She spoke to her husband, who opened the window. "What's wanted?" he asked, peering out into the darkness.

"Priscilla's sick," moaned the distressed voice; "awful sick. She's fainted, an' I can't bring her to. Go for the doctor—quick! quick! quick! The voice ended in a shriek on the last word, and the speaker turned and ran back to the cottage, where, on the bed, lay a pale, gaunt woman, who had not stirred since she left it. Immovable through all her sister's agony, she lay there, her features shaping themselves out more and more from the shadows, the bedclothes that covered her limbs taking on an awful rigidity.

"She must have died in her sleep," the doctor said, when he came, "without a struggle."

When Mary Brown really understood that her sister was dead, she left her to the kindly ministrations of the good women who are always ready at such times in a country place, and went and sat by the kitchen window in the chair which her sister had occupied that afternoon.

There the women found her when the last offices had been done for the dead.

"Come home with me to-night," one said; "Miss Green will stay with her," with a turn of her head towards the opposite room, and an emphasis on the pronoun which distinguished it at once from one applied to a living person.

"No," said Mary Brown; "I'm a goin' to set here an' listen." She had the window wide open, leaning her head out into the chilly night air.

The women looked at each other; one tapped her head, another nodded hers. "Poor thing!" said a third.

"You see," went on Mary Brown, still speaking with her head leaned out of the window, "I was cross with her this afternoon because she talked about hearin' music. I was cross, an' spoke up sharp to her, because I loved her, but I don't think she knew. I didn't want to think she was goin' to die, but she was. An' she heard the music. It was true. An' now I'm a-goin' to set here an' listen till I hear it too, an' then I'll know she 'ain't laid up what I said agin me, an' that I'm a-goin' to die too."

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They found it impossible to reason with her; there she sat till morning, with a pitying woman beside her, listening all in vain for unearthly melody.

Next day they sent for a widowed niece of the sisters, who came at once, bringing her little boy with her. She was a kindly young woman, and took up her abode in the little cottage, and did the best she could for her poor aunt, who, it soon became evident, would never be quite herself again. There she would sit at the kitchen window and listen day after day. She took a great fancy to her niece's little boy, and used often to hold him in her lap as she sat there. Once in a while she would ask him if he heard any music. "An innocent little thing like him might hear quicker than a hard, unbelievin' old woman like me," she told his mother once.

She lived so for nearly a year after her sister died. It was evident that she failed gradually and surely, though there was no apparent disease. It seemed to trouble her exceedingly that she never heard the music she listened for. She had an idea that she could not die unless she did, and her whole soul seemed filled with longing to join her beloved twin sister, and be assured of her forgiveness. This sister–love was all she had ever felt, besides her love of God, in any strong degree; all the passion of devotion of which this homely, commonplace woman was capable was centred in that, and the unsatisfied strength of it was killing her. The weaker she grew, the more earnestly she listened. She was too feeble to sit up, but she would not consent to lie in bed, and made them bolster her up with pillows in a rocking–chair by the window. At last she died, in the spring, a week or two before her sister had the preceding year. The season was a little more advanced this year, and the apple–trees were blossomed out further than they were then. She died about ten o'clock in the morning. The day before, her niece had been called into the room by a shrill cry of rapture from her: "I've heard it! I've heard it!" she cried. "A faint sound o' music, like the dyin' away of a bell."

"The Little Maid at the Door"

JOSEPH BAYLEY and his wife Ann came riding down from Salem village. They had started from their home in Newbury the day before, and had stayed overnight with their relative, Sergeant Thomas Putnam, in Salem village; they were on their way to the election in Boston. The road wound along through the woods from Salem to Lynn; it was some time since they had passed a house.

May was nearly gone; the pinks and the blackberry vines were in flower. All the woods were full of an indefinite and composite fragrance, made up of the breaths of myriads of green plants and seen and unseen blossoms, like a very bouquet of spring. The newly leaved trees cast shadows that were as much a part of the tender surprise of the spring as the new flowers. They flickered delicately before Joseph Bayley and his wife Ann on the grassy ridges of the road, but they did not remark them. Their own fancies cast gigantic projections which eclipsed the sweet show of the spring and almost their own personalities. That year the leaves came out and the flowers bloomed in vain for the people in and about Salem village. There was epidemic a disease of the mind which deafened and blinded to all save its own pains.

Ann Bayley on the pillion snuggled closely against her husband's back; her fearful eyes peered at the road around his shoulder. She was a young and handsome woman; she had on her best mantle of sad–colored silk, and a fine black hood with a topknot, but she did not think of that.

"Joseph, what is that in the road before us?" she whispered, timorously.

He pulled up the horse with a great jerk.

"Where?" he whispered back.

"There! there! at the right; just beyond that laurel thicket. 'Tis some what black, an' it moves. There! there! Oh, Joseph!"

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Joseph Bayley sat stiff and straight in his saddle, like a soldier; his face was pale and stern, his eyes full of horror and defiance.

"See you it?" Ann whispered again. "There! now it moves. What is it?"

"I see it," said Joseph, in a loud, bold voice. "An' whatever it be, I will yield not to it; an' neither will you, goodwife."

Ann reached around and caught at the reins. "Let us go back," she moaned, faintly. Oh, Joseph, let us not pass it. My spirit faints within me. I see its back among the laurel blooms. 'Tis the black beast they tell of. Let us turn back, Joseph, let us turn back!"

"Be still, woman!" returned her husband, jerking the reins from her hand. "What think ye 'twould profit us to turn back to Salem village? I trow if there be one black beast here, there is a full herd of them there. There is naught left but to ride past it as best we may. Sit fast, an' listen you not to it, whatever it promise you." Joseph looked down the road towards the laurel bushes, his muscles now as tense as a bow. Ann hid her face on his shoulder. Suddenly he shouted, with a great voice like a herald: "Away with ye, ye cursed beast! away with ye! We are not of your kind; we are gospel folk. We have naught to do with you or your master. Away with ye!"

The horse leaped forward. There was a great cracking among the laurel bushes at the right, a glossy black back and some white horns heaved over thorn, then some black flanks plunged heavily out of sight.

"Oh!" shrieked Ann, "has it gone? Goodman, has it gone?"

"The Lord hath delivered us from the snare of the enemy," answered Joseph, solemnly.

"What looked it like, Joseph, what looked it like?"

"Like no beast that was saved in the ark."

"Had it fiery eyes?" asked Ann, trembling.

"'Tis well you did not see them."

"Ride fast! oh, ride fast!" Ann pleaded, clutching hard at her husband's cloak. "It may follow on our track." The horse went down the road at a quick trot. Ann kept peering back and starting at every sound in the woods. "Do you mind the tale Samuel Endicott told last night?" she said, shuddering. "How on his voyage to Barbadoes he, sitting on the windlass on a bright moonshining night, was shook violently, and saw the appearance of that witch Goody Bradbury, with a white cap and a white neckcloth on her? It was a dreadful tale."

"It was naught to the sight of Mercy Lewis and Sergeant Thomas Putnam's daughter Ann, when they were set upon and nigh choked to death by Goody Proctor. Know you that within a half–mile we must pass the Proctor house?"

Ann gave a shuddering sigh. "I would I were home again," she moaned. "They said 'twas full of evil things, and that the black man himself kept tavern there since Goodman Proctor and his wife were in jail. Did you mind what Goodwife Putnam said of the black head, like a hog's, that Goodman Perley saw at the keeping–room window as he passed, and the rumbling noises, and the yellow birds that flow around the chimney and twittered in a psalm tune? Oh, Joseph, there is a yellow bird now in the birch–tree–see! see!"

They had come into a little space where the woods were thinner. Joseph urged his horse forward.

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"We will not slack our pace for any black beasts nor any yellow birds," he cried, in a valiant voice.

There was a passing gleam of little yellow wings above the birch–tree.

"He has flown away," said Ann. "'Tis best to front them as you do, goodman, but I have not the courage. That looked like a common yellowbird; his wings shone like gold. Think you it has gone forward to the Proctor house?"

"It matters not, so it but fly up before us," said Joseph Bayley.

He was somewhat older than Ann; fair–haired and fair–bearded, with blue eyes set so deeply under heavy brows that they looked black. His face was at once stern and nervous, showing not only the spirit of warfare against his foes, but the elements of strife within himself.

They rode on, and the woods grew thicker; the horse's hoofs made only a faint liquid pad on the mossy road. Suddenly he stopped and whinnied. Ann clutched her husband's arm; they sat motionless, listening; the horse whinnied again.

Suddenly Joseph started violently, and stared into the woods on the left, and Ann also. A long defile of dark evergreens stretched up the hill, with mysterious depths of blue–black shadows between them; the air had an earthy dampness.

Joseph shook the reins fiercely over the horse's back, and shouted to him in a loud voice.

"Did you see it?" gasped Ann, when they had come into a lighter place. "Was it not a black man?"

"Fear not; we have outridden him," said her husband, setting his thin intense face proudly ahead.

"I would we were safe home in Newbury," Ann moaned. "I would we had never set out. Think you not Dr. Mather will ride back from Boston with us to keep the witches off? I will bide there forever, if he will not. I will never come this dreadful road again, else. What is that? Oh, what is that? 'Tis a voice coming out of the woods like a great roar. Joseph! What is that? That was a black cat run across the road into the bushes. 'Twas a black cat. Joseph, let us turn back! No; the black man is behind us, and the beast. What shall we do? What shall we do? Oh, oh, I begin to twitch like Ann and Mercy last night! My feet move, and I cannot stop them! Now there is a pin thrust in my arm! I am pinched! There are fingers at my throat! Joseph! Joseph!"

"Go to prayer, sweetheart," shouted Joseph. "Go to prayer. Be not afraid. 'Twill drive them away. Away with ye, Goody Bradbury! Away, Goody Proctor! Go to prayer, go to prayer!"

Joseph bent low in the saddle and lashed the horse, which sprang forward with a mighty bound; the green branches rushed in their faces. Joseph prayed in a loud voice. Ann clung to him convulsively, panting for breath. Suddenly they came out of the woods into a cleared space.

"The Proctor house! the Proctor house!" Ann shrieked. "Mercy Lewis said 'twas full of devils. What shall we do?" She hid her face on her husband's shoulder, sobbing and praying.

The Proctor house stood at the left of the road; there were some peach–trees in front of it, and their blossoms showed in a pink spray against the gray unpainted walls. On one side of the house was the great barn, with its doors wide open; on the other, a deep ploughed field, with the plough sticking in a furrow. John Proctor had been arrested and thrown into jail for witchcraft in April, before his spring planting was done.

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Joseph Bayley reined in his horse opposite the Proctor house. "Ann," he whispered, and his whisper was full of horror.

"What is it?" she returned, wildly.

"Ann, Goodman Proctor looks forth from the chamber window, and Goody Proctor stands outside by the well, and they are both in jail in Boston." Joseph's whole frame shook in a strange rigid fashion, as if his joints were locked. "Look, Ann!" he whispered.

"I cannot."

"Look!"

Ann turned her head. "Why," she said, and her voice was quite natural and sweet, it had even a tone of glad relief in it, "I see naught but a little maid in the door."

"See you not Goodman Proctor in the window?"

"Nay," said Ann, smiling; "I see naught but the little maid in the door. She is in a blue petticoat, and she has a yellow head, but her little cheeks are pale, I trow."

"See you not Goodwife Proctor in the yard by the well?" asked Joseph.

"Nay, goodman; I see naught but the little maid in the door. She has a fair face, but now she falls a–weeping. Oh, I fear lest she be all alone in the house."

"I tell you, Goodman Proctor and Goodwife Proctor are both there," returned Joseph. "Think you I see not with my own eyes? Goodman Proctor has on a red cap, and Goodwife Proctor holds a spindle." He urged on the horse with a sudden cry. "Now the prayers do stick in my throat," he groaned. "I would we were out of this devil's nest!"

"Joseph," implored Ann, "prithree wait a minute! The little maid is calling 'mother' after me. Saw you not how she favored our little Susanna who died? Hear her! There was naught there but the little maid. Joseph, I pray you, stop."

"Nay; I'll ride till the nag drops," said Joseph Bayley, with a lash. "This last be too much. I tell ye they are there, and they are also in jail. 'Tis hellish work."

Ann said no more for a little space; a curve in the road hid the Proctor house from sight. Suddenly she raised a great cry. "Oh! oh!" she screamed, "'tis gone; 'tis gone from my foot." Joseph stopped. "What is gone?"

"My shoe; but now I missed it from my foot. I must alight, and go back for it."

Joseph started the horse again.

Ann caught at the reins. "Stop, goodman," she cried, imperatively. "I tell you I must have my shoe."

"And I tell you I'll stop for no shoe in this place, were it made of gold."

"Goodman, you know not what shoe 'tis. 'Tis one of my fine shoes, in which I have never taken steps. They have the crimson silk lacings. I have even carried them in my hand to the meeting–house on a Sabbath, wearing my old ones, and only put them on at the door. Think you I will lose that shoe? Stop the nag."

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But Joseph kept on grimly.

"Think you I will go barefoot or with one shoe into Boston?" said Ann. "Know you that these shoes, which were a present from my mother, cost bravely? I trow you will needs loosen your purse strings well before we pass the first shop in Boston. Well, go on, an' you will, when 'tis but a matter of my slipping down from the pillion and running back a few yards."

Joseph Bayley turned his horse about; but Ann remonstrated.

"Nay," said she; "I want not to go thus. I am tired of the saddle. I would like to feel my feet for a space."

Her husband looked around at her with wonder and suspicion. Dark thoughts came into his mind.

She laughed. "Nay," said she, "make no such face at me. I go not back to meet any black man nor sign any book. I go for my fine shoe with the crimson lacing."

"'Tis but a moment since you were afraid," said Joseph. "Have you no fear now?" His blue eyes looked sharply into hers.

She looked back at him soberly and innocently. "In truth, I feel no such fear as I did," she answered. "If I mistake not, your bold front and your prayers drove away the evil ones. I will say a psalm as I go, and I trow naught will harm me."

Ann slipped lightly down from the pillion, and pulled off her one remaining shoe and her stockings; they were her fine worked silk ones, and she could not walk in them over the rough road. Then she set forth very slowly, peering here and there in the undergrowth beside the road, until she passed the curve and the reach of her husband's eyes. Then she gathered up her crimson taffeta petticoat and ran like a deer, with long, graceful leaps, looking neither to right nor left, straight back to the Proctor house.

In the door of the house stood a tiny girl with a soft shock of yellow hair. She wore a little straight blue gown, and her baby feet were bare, curling over the sunny door–step. When she saw Ann coming she started as if to run; then she stood still, her soft eyes wary, her mouth quivering .

Ann Bayley ran up quickly, and threw her arms around her, kneeling down on the step.

"What is your name, little maid?" said she, in a loving, agitated voice.

"Abigail Proctor," replied the little maid, shyly, in her sweet childish treble. Then she tried to free herself, but Ann held her fast.

"Nay, be not afraid, sweet," said she. "I love you. I once had a little maid like you for my own. Tell me, dear heart, are you all alone in the house?"

Then the child fell to crying again, and clung around Ann's neck.

"Is there anybody in the house, sweet?" Ann whispered, fondling her, and pressing the wet baby cheek to her own. "The constables came and took them," sobbed the little maid. "They put my poppet down the well, and they pulled mother and Sarah down the road. They took father before that, and Mary Warren did gibe and point. The constables pulled Benjamin away too. I want my mother."

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"Your mother shall come again," said Ann. "Take comfort, dear little heart, they cannot have the will to keep her long away. There, there, I tell you she shall come. You watch in the door, and you will see her come down the road."

She smoothed back the little maid's yellow hair, and wiped the tears from her little face with a corner of her beautiful embroidered neckerchief. Then she saw that the face was all grimy with tears and dust, and she went over to the well, which was near the door, and drew a bucket of water swiftly with her strong young arms; then she wet the corner of the neckerchief and scrubbed the little maid's face, bidding her shut her eyes. Then she kissed her over and over.

"Now you are sweet and clean," said she. "Dear little heart, I have some sugar cakes in my bag for you, and then I must be gone."

The little maid looked at her eagerly, her cheeks were waxen, and the blue veins showed in her full childish forehead. Ann pulled some little cakes out of a red velvet satchel she wore at her waist, and Abigail reached out for one with a hungry cry. The tears sprang to Ann's eyes; she put the rest of the cakes in a little pile on the door–stone, and watched the child eat. Then she gathered her up in her arms.

"Good–bye, sweetheart," she said, kissing the soft trembling mouth, the sweet hollow under the chin, and the clinging hands. "Before long I shall come this way again, and do you stand in the door when I go past."

She put her down and hastened away, but little Abigail ran after her. Ann stopped and knelt and fondled her again.

"Go back, deary," she pleaded; "go back, and eat the sugar cakes."

But this beautiful kind vision in the crimson taffeta, with the rosy cheeks and sweet black eyes looking out from the French hood, with the gleam of gold and delicate embroidery between the silken folds of her mantilla, with the ways like her mother's, was more to little deserted Abigail Proctor than the sugar cakes, although she was sorely hungry for them. She stood aloof with pitiful determined eyes until Ann's back was turned, then, as she followed, Ann looked around and saw her and caught her up again.

"My dear heart, my dear heart," she said, and she was half sobbing, "now must you go back, else I fear harm will come to you. My goodman is waiting for me yonder, and I know not what lie will do or say. Nay; you must go back. I would I could keep you, my little Abigail, but you must go back." Ann Bayley put the little maid down and gave her a gentle push. "Go back," she said, smiling, with her eyes full of tears; "go back, and eat the sugar cakes."

Then she sped on swiftly; as she neared the curve in the road she thrust a band in her pocket, and drew forth a dainty shoe with dangling lacings of crimson silk. She glanced around with a smile and a backward wave of her hand the glowing crimson of her petticoat showed for a minute through the green mist of the undergrowth; then she disappeared.

The little maid Abigail stood still in the road, gazing after her, her soft pink mouth open, her hands clutching at her blue petticoat, as if she would thus hold herself back from following. She heard the tramp of a horse's feet beyond the curve; then it died away. She turned about and went back to the house, with the tears rolling over her cheeks; but she did not sob aloud, as she would have done had her mother been near to hear. A pitiful conviction of the hopelessness of all the appeals of grief was stealing over her childish mind. She had been alone in the house three nights and two days, ever since her sister Sarah and her brother Benjamin had been arrested for witchcraft and carried to jail. Long before that her parents, John and Elizabeth Proctor, had disappeared down the Boston road in charge of the constables. None of the family was spared save this little Abigail, who was deemed too young and insignificant to have dealings with Satan, and was therefore not thrown into prison, but was left alone

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in the desolate Proctor house in the midst of woods said to be full of evil spirits and witches, to die of fright or starvation as she might. There was but little mercy shown the families of those accused of witchcraft.

"Let some of Goody Proctor's familiars minister unto the brat," one of the constables had said, with a stern laugh, when Abigail had followed wailing after her brother and sister on the day of their arrest.

"Yea," said another; " she can send her yellow–bird or her black hog to keep her company. I wot her tears will be soon dried."

Then the stoutly tramping horses had borne out of sight and bearing the mocking faces of the constables; Sarah's fair agonized one turned backward towards her little deserted sister, and Benjamin raised a brave youthful clamor of indignation.

"Let us loose!" Abigail heard him shout; "let us loose, I tell ye! Ye are fools, rather than we are witches; ye are fools and murderers! Let us loose, I tell ye!"

Abigail waited long, thinking her brother's words would prevail; but neither he nor Sarah returned, and the sounds all died away, and she went back to the house sobbing. The damp spring night was settling down in a palpable mist, and the woods seemed full of voices. The little maid had heard enough of the terrible talk of the day to fill her innocent head with vague superstitious horror. She threw her apron over her head and fled blindly through the woods, and now and then she fell down and bruised herself, and rose up lamenting sorely, with nobody to hear her.

As soon as she was in the house she shut the doors, and barred them with the great bars that had been made as protection against Indians, and now might wax useless against worse than savages, according to the belief of the colony.

All night long the little maid shrieked and sobbed, and called on her father and her mother and her sister and her brother. Men faring in the road betwixt Boston and Salem village heard her with horror, and fled past with psalm and prayer, their blood cold in their veins. They related the next day to the raging, terror–stricken people how at midnight the accursed Proctor house was full of flitting infernal lights, and howling with devilish spirits, and added a death–dealing tale of some godly woman of the village who outrode their horses on a broomstick and disappeared in the Proctor house.

The next day the little maid unbarred the door, and stood there watching up and down the road for her mother or some other to come. But they came not, although she watched all day. That night she did not sob and call out; she had become afraid of her own voice, and discovered that it had no effect to bring her help. Then, too, early in the night, she heard noises about the house which frightened her, and made her think that perchance the dreadful black beast of which she had heard them discourse was abroad.

The next morning she found that the two horses and the cow and calf were gone from the barn; also that there was left scarce anything for her to eat in the house. There had been some loaves of bread, some boiled meat, and some cakes; now they were all gone, and also all the meal from the chest, and the potatoes and pork from the cellar. But for that last she did not care, since she was not old enough to make a fire and cook. She had left for food only a little cold porridge in a blue bowl, and that she ate up at once and had no more, and a little buttermilk in a crock, which, she being not over–fond of it, served her longer. But that was all she had had for a day and a night, until Goodwife Ann Bayley gave her the sugar cakes. These she ate up at once on her return to the house. Then again she stood watching in the door, but nothing passed along the road save a partridge or a squirrel. It was accounted a bold thing for any solitary traveler to come this way, save a witch, and she, it was supposed, might find many comrades in the woods beside the road and in the Proctor house, which was held to be a sort of devils' tavern. But now no witch came, nor any of her uncanny friends, unless indeed the squirrel and the partridge were familiar

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demons in disguise. Nothing was too harmless and simple to escape that imputation of the devil's mask.

Abigail took her little pewter porringer from the cupboard, and got herself a drink of water from the bucketful that Goodwife Bayley had drawn; then she stood on a stone, and peered into the well, leaning over the curb. Her poppet was in there, her dear rag doll that Sarah had made for her, and dressed in a beautiful silver brocade made from a piece of a wedding–gown that was brought from England. One of the constables had caught sight of little Abigail Proctor's poppet, and being straightway filled with suspicion that it was an image whereby Goody Proctor afflicted her victims by proxy, had seized it and thrown it into the well. The other constables had chidden him for such rashness, saying it should have been carried to Boston and produced as evidence at the trial; and little Abigail had shrieked out in a panic for her poppet.

She could see nothing of it now, and she went back to her watching–place in the door.

In the afternoon she felt sorely hungry again, and searched through the house for food; then she went out in the sunny fields behind the house, and found some honeysuckles on the rocks, and sucked the honey greedily from their horns. On her return to the house she found a corn–cob, which she snatched up and folded in her apron, and began tending. She sat down in the doorway in her little chair, which she dragged out of the keeping–room, and hugged the poor poppet close, and crooned over it.

"Be not afraid," said she. "I'll not let the black beast harm you; I promise you I will not."

That night she formed a new plan for her solace and protection in the lonely darkness. All the garments of her lost parents and sister and brother that she could find she gathered together, and formed in a circle on the keeping–room floor; then she crept inside with her corn–cob poppet, and lay there hugging it all night. The next day she watched again in the door; but now she was weak and faint, and her little legs trembled so under her that she could not stand to watch, but sat in her small straight–backed chair, holding her poppet and peering forth wistfully.

In the course of the day she made shift to creep out into the fields again, and lying flat on the sun–heated rocks, she sucked some more honey drops from the honeysuckles. She found, too, on the edge of the woods, some young wintergreen leaves, and she even pulled some blue violets and ate them. But the delicate, sweet, and aromatic fare in the spring larder of nature was poor nourishment for a human baby.

Poor little Abigail Proctor could scarcely creep home, still clinging fast to her poppet; scarcely lift herself into her chair in the door; scarcely crawl inside her fairy–ring of her loved ones' belongings at night. She rolled herself tightly in an old cloak of her father's, and it was a sweet and harmless outcome of the dreadful superstition of the day, grafted on an innocent childish brain, that it seemed to partake of the bodily presence of her father, and protect her.

All night long, as she lay there, her mother cooked good meat and broth and sweet cakes, and she ate her fill of them; but in the morning she was too weak to turn her little body over. She could not get to her watching–place in the door, but that made no difference to her, for she did not fairly know that she was not there. It seemed to her that she sat in her little chair looking up the road and down the road; she saw the green branches weaving together, and hiding the sky to the northward and the southward; she saw the flushes of white and rose in the flowering undergrowth; she saw the people coming and going. There were her father and mother now coming with store of food and presents for her, now following the constables out of sight. There was that fine pageant passing, as she had seen it pass once before, of the two magistrates, their worshipful masters John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin, with the marshal, constables, and aids, splendid and awe–inspiring in all their trappings of office, to examine the accused in the Salem meeting–house. There were the ministers Parris and Noyes coming, with severe malignant faces, to question her mother as to whether she had afflicted Mary Warren, their former maidservant, who was now bewitched. There went Benjamin, clamoring out boldly at his captors. There came

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Sarah with the poppet, which she had drawn out of the well, shaking the water from its silver brocade.

All this the little maid Abigail Proctor saw through her half–delirious fancy as she lay weakly on the keeping–room floor, but she saw not the reality of her sister Sarah coming about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Sarah Proctor, tall and slender, in her limp bedraggled dress, with her fair severe face set in a circle of red shawl, which she had pinned under her chin, came resolutely down the road from Boston, driving a black cow before her with a great green branch. She was nearly fainting with weariness, but she set her dusty shoes down swiftly among the road weeds, and her face was as unyielding as an Indian's.

When she came in sight of the Proctor house she stopped a second. "Abigail!" she called; "Abigail!"

There was no answer, and she went on more swiftly than before. When she reached the house she called again, "Abigail!" but did not wait except while she tied the black cow, by a rope which was around her neck, to a peach–tree. Then she ran in, and found the little maid, her sister Abigail, on the floor in the keeping–room.

She got down on her knees beside her, and Abigail smiled up in her face waveringly. She still thought herself in the door, and that she had just seen her sister come down the road.

"Abigail, what have they done to you?" asked Sarah, in a sharp voice; and the little maid only smiled.

"Abigail, Abigail, what is it?" Sarah took hold of the child's shoulders and shook her; but she got no word back, only the smile ceased, and the eyelids drooped faintly.

"Are you hungry, Abigail?"

The little maid shook her head softly.

"It cannot be that," said Sarah, as if half to herself; "there was enough in the house; but what is it? Abigail, look at me; how long is it since you have eaten? Abigail!"

"Yesterday," whispered the little maid, dreamily.

"What did you eat then?"

"Some posies and leaves out in the field."

"What became of all the bread that was baked, and the cakes, and the meat?"

"I—have forgot."

"No, you have not. Tell me, Abigail."

"The black beast came in the night and did eat it all up, and the cow, and calf, and the horses, too."

"The black beast!"

"I heard him in the night, and in the morning 'twas gone."

Sarah sprang up. "Robbers and murderers!" she cried, in a fierce voice; but the little maid on the floor did not start; she shut her eyes again, and looked up and down the road.

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Sarah got a bucket quickly, and went out in the yard to the cow. Down on her knees in the grass she went and milked; then she carried in the bucket, strained the milk with trembling haste, and poured some into Abigail's little pewter porringer. "She was wont to love it warm," she whispered, with white lips.

She bent close over the little maid, and raised her on one arm, while she put the porringer to her mouth. "Drink, Abigail," she said, with tender command. "'Tis warm—the way you love it."

The little maid tried to sip, but shut her mouth, and turned her head with weak loathing, and Sarah could not compel her. She laid her back, and got a spoon and fed her a little, by dint of much pleading to make her open her mouth and swallow.

Afterwards she undressed her, and put her to bed in the south–front room, but the child was so uneasy without the ring of garments which she had arranged, that Sarah was forced to put them around her on the bed; then she fell asleep directly, and stood in her dream watching in the door.

Sarah herself stood in the door, looking up and down the road. There was the sound of a galloping horse in the distance; it came nearer and nearer. She went down to the road and stood waiting. The horse was reined in close to her, and the young man who rode him sprang off the saddle.

"It is you, Sarah; you are safe home," he cried, eagerly, and would have put his arm about her; but she stood aloof sternly.

"For what else did you take me—my apparition?" she said, in a hard voice.

"Sweetheart!"

Know you that I have but just come from the jail in Boston, where I have lain fast chained for witchcraft? See you my fine apparel with the prison air in it? Know you that they called me a witch, and said that I did afflict Mary Warren and the rest? I marvel not that you kept your distance, David Carr; I might perchance have hurt you, and they might have accused you, since you were in fellowship with a witch. I marvel not at that. I would have no harm come to you, though far greater than this came to me, but wherefore did you let my little sister Abigail starve? That can I not suffer, coming from you, David."

The young man took her in his arms with a decided motion; and indeed she did not repulse him, but began to weep.

"Sarah," said he, earnestly, "I was in Ipswich. I knew naught of you and Benjamin being cried out upon until within this hour, when I returned home, and my mother told me. I knew not you were acquitted, and was on my way to Boston to you when I saw you at the gate. And as for Abigail, I knew naught at all; and so 'twas with my mother, for she but now wept when she said the poor little maid had been taken with the rest. But you mean not that, sweetheart; she has not been let to starve?"

"They stole away the food in the night," said Sarah, "and the horses and the cow and calf. I found the cow straying in the woods but now, on my way home, and drove her in and milked her; but Abigail would take scarce a spoonful of the warm milk. She has had but little to eat for three days, and has been distracted with fear, being left alone. She has ever been but a delicate child, and now I fear she has a fever on her, and will die, with her mother away."

"I will go for my mother, sweetheart," said David Carr, eagerly.

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"Bring her under cover of night, then," said Sarah; "else she may be suspected if she come to this witch tavern, as they call it. Oh, David, think you she will come? I am in a sore strait."

"I will bring her without fail, sweet, and a flask of wine also, and needments for the little maid," cried David. "Only do you keep up good heart. Perchance, sweet, the child will amend soon, and the others be soon acquit. Nay, weep not, poor lass! poor lass! Thou hast me, whatever else fail thee, poor solace though that be, and I will fetch thee my mother right speedily. She has ever set great store by the little maid, and knows much about ailments; and I doubt not they will be soon acquit."

"The say my mother will," answered Sarah, tearfully; "and Benjamin is acquit now, but had best keep for a season out of Salem village. But my father will not be acquit; he has spoken his mind too boldly before them all."

"Nay, sweetheart," said David Carr, mounting, "'twill all have passed soon; 'Tis but a madness. Go in to the little maid, and be of good comfort."

Sarah went sobbing into the house, but her face was quite calm when she stood over little Abigail. The child was still asleep, and she could arouse her only for a moment to take a few spoonfuls of milk; then she turned her head on her pillow with weary obstinacy, and shut her eyes again. She still held the poor corn–cob poppet fast.

Sarah washed herself, braided her hair, and changed her prison dress for a clean blue linen one; then she sat beside Abigail, and waited for David Carr and his mother, who came within an hour.

Goodwife Carr was renowned through Salem village for her knowledge of medicinal herbs and her nursing. She had a gentle sobriety and decision of manner which placed her firmly in her neighbors' confidences, they seeing how she abode firmly in her own, and arguing from that. Then she had too the good fortune to have made no enemies, consequently her ability had not incurred for her the suspicion of being a witch.

Goodwife Carr brought a goodly store of healing herbs, of bread and cakes and meat, and she brewed drinks, and bent her face, pale and soberly faithful, in her close white cap, untiringly over Abigail Proctor. But the little maid never arose again. A fever, engendered by starvation and fright and grief, had seized upon her, and she lay in the bed with her little corn–cob baby a few days longer, and then died.

They made a straight white gown for her, and dressed her in it, after washing her and smoothing her yellow hair; and she lay, looking longer and older than in life, all set about with flowers—pinks and lilacs and roses—from Goodwife Carr's garden, until she was buried. And they had the Ipswich minister come for the funeral, for David Carr cried out in a fury that Minister Parris, who had prosecuted this witchcraft business, was her murderer, and blood would flow from her little body if he stood beside it, and that it was the same with Minister Noyes; and Sarah Proctor's pale face had flushed up fiercely in assent.

The morning after the little maid Abigail Proctor was buried, Joseph Bayley and his wife Ann came riding down the road from Boston, and they were in brave company, and needed to have but little fear of witches; for the great minister Cotton Mather rode with them, his Excellency the Governor of the colony, two worshipful magistrates, and two other ministers—all on their way to a witch trial in Salem.

And as they neared the Proctor house there was much discourse concerning it and the inmates thereof, many strange and dreadful accounts, and much godly denunciation. And as they reached the curve in the road they came suddenly insight of a young man and a tall fair maid standing together at the side by some white–flowering bushes. And Sarah Proctor, even with her little sister Abigail dead and her parents in danger of death, was smiling for a second's space in David Carr's face, for the love and hope in tragedy that make God possible, and the selfishness of love that makes life possible, were upon her in spite of herself.

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But when she saw the cavalcade approaching, saw the gleam of rich raiment, and heard the tramp and jingling, the smile faded straightway from her face, and she stood behind David in the white alder bushes. And David stood before her, and gazed with a stern and defiant scowl at the gentry as they passed by. And the great Cotton Mather gazed back at that beautiful white face rising like another flower out of the bushes, and he speculated with himself if it were the face of a witch.

But Goodwife Ann Bayley thought only on the little maid at the door. And when they came to the Proctor house she leaned eagerly from the pillion, and she smiled and kissed her hand.

"Why do you thus, Ann?" her husband asked, looking about at her.

"See you not the little maid in the door?" she whispered low, for fear of the goodly company. "I trow she looks better than she did. The roses are in her checks, and they have combed her yellow hair, and put a clean white gown on her. She holds a little doll, too."

"I see nobody," said Joseph Bayley, wonderingly.

"Nay, but she stands there. I never saw naught shine like her hair and her white gown; the sunlight lies full in the door. See! see! she is smiling! I trow all her griefs be well over."

The cavalcade passed the Proctor house, but Goodwife Ann Bayley's sweet face was turned backward until it was out of sight, towards the little maid in the door.

"A Symphony in Lavender"

It was quite late in the evening, dark and rainy, when I arrived, and I suppose the first object in Ware, outside of my immediate personal surroundings, which arrested my attention was the Munson house. When I looked out of my window the next morning it loomed up directly opposite, across the road, dark and moist from the rain of the night before. There were so many elm–trees in front of it and in front of the house I was in, that the little pools of rain–water, still standing in the road here and there, did not glisten and shine at all, although the sun was bright and quite high. The house itself stood back far enough to allow of a good square yard in front, and was raised from the street–level the height of a face–wall. Three or four steps led up to the front walk. On each side of the steps, growing near the edge of the wall, was an enormous lilac–tree in full blossom. I could see them tossing their purple clusters between the elm branches: there was quite a wind blowing that morning. A hedge of lilacs, kept low by constant cropping, began at the blooming lilac–trees, and reached around the rest of the yard at the top of the face wall. The yard was gay with flowers, laid out in fantastic little beds, all bordered trimly with box. The house was one of those square, solid, white–painted, green–blinded edifices which marked the wealth and importance of the dweller therein a half–century or so ago, and still cast a dim halo of respect over his memory. It had no beauty in itself, being boldly plain and glaring, like all of its kind but the green waving boughs of the elms and lilacs and the undulating shadows they cast toned it down, and gave it an air of coolness and quiet and lovely reserve. I began to feel a sort of pleasant, idle curiosity concerning it as I stood there at my chamber window, and after breakfast, when I had gone into the sitting–room, whose front windows also faced that way, I took occasion to ask my hostess, who had come in with me, who lived there.

"Of course it is nobody I have ever seen or heard of," said I; "but I was looking at the house this morning, and have taken a fancy to know."

Mrs. Leonard gazed reflectively across at the house, and then at me. It was an odd way she always had before speaking.

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"There's a maiden lady lives there," she answered, at length, turning her gaze from me to the house again, "all alone; that is, all alone except old Margaret. She's always been in the family—ever since Caroline was a baby, I guess: a faithful old creature as ever lived, but she's pretty feeble now. I reckon Caroline has to do pretty much all the work, and I don't suppose she's much company, or much of anything but a care. There she comes now."

"Who?" said I, feeling a little bewildered.

"Why, Caroline—Caroline Munson."

A slim, straight little woman, with a white pitcher in her hand, was descending the stone steps between the blooming lilac–trees opposite. She had on a lilac–colored calico dress and a white apron. She wore no hat or bonnet, and her gray hair seemed to be arranged in a cluster of soft little curls at the top of her head. Her face, across the street, looked like that of a woman of forty, fair and pleasing.

"She's going down to Mrs. Barnes's after milk," Mrs. Leonard explained. "She always goes herself, every morning just about this time. She never sends old Margaret ; I reckon she ain't fit to go. I guess she can do some things about the house, but when it comes to travelling outside Caroline has to do it herself."

Then Mrs. Leonard was called into the kitchen, and I thought over the information, at once vague and definite, I had received, and watched Miss Caroline Munson walk down the shady street. She had a pretty, gentle gait.

About a week later I received an invitation to take tea with her. I was probably never more surprised in my life, as I had not the slightest acquaintance with her. I had sometimes happened to watch her morning pilgrimages down the street after milk, and occasionally had observed her working over her flower–beds in her front yard. That was all, so far as I was concerned; and I did not suppose she knew there was such a person as myself in existence. But Mrs. Leonard, who was also bidden, explained it.

"It's Caroline's way," said she. "She's always had a sort of mania for asking folks to tea. Why, I reckon there's hardly a fortnight, on an average, the year round, but what she invites somebody or other to tea. I suppose she gets kind of dull, and there's a little excitement about it, getting ready for company. Anyhow, she must like it, or she wouldn't ask people. She probably has heard you were going to board here this summer—Ware's a little place you know, and folks hear everything about each other—and thought she would invite you over with me. You had better go; you'll enjoy it. It's a nice place to go to, and she's a beautiful cook, or Margaret is; I don't know which does the cooking, but I guess they both have a hand in it. Anyhow, you'll have a pleasant time. We'll take our sewing, and go early—by three o'clock. That's the way people go out to take tea in Ware."

So the next afternoon, at three o'clock, Mrs. Leonard and I sallied across the street to Miss Caroline Munson's. She met us at the door, in response to a tap of the old–fashioned knocker. Her manner of greeting us was charming from its very quaintness. She hardly said three words, but showed at the same time a simple courtesy and a pleased shyness, like a child overcome with the delight of a tea–party in her honor. She ushered us into a beautiful old parlor on the right of the hall, and we seated ourselves with our sewing. The conversation was not very brisk nor very general so far as I was concerned. There was scarcely any topic of common interest to the three of us, probably. Mrs. Leonard was one of those women who converse only of matters pertaining to themselves or their own circle of acquaintances, and seldom digress. Miss Munson I could not judge of as to conversational habits, of course; she seemed now to be merely listening with a sort of gentle interest, scarcely saying a word herself, to Mrs. Leonard's remarks. I was a total stranger to Ware and Ware people, and consequently could neither talk nor listen to much purpose.

But I was interested in observing Miss Munson. She was a nice person to observe, for if she was conscious of being an object of scrutiny, she did not show it. Her eyes never flashed up and met mine fixed upon her, with a suddenness startling and embarrassing to both of us. I could stare at her as guilelessly and properly as I could at a

flower.

Indeed, Miss Munson did make me think of a flower, and of one prevalent in her front yard, too—a lilac: there was that same dull bloom about her, and a shy, antiquated grace. A lilac always does seem a little older than some other flowers. Miss Munson, I could now see, was probably nearer fifty than forty. There were little lines and shadows in her face that one could not discern across the street. It seemed to me that she must have been very lovely in her youth, with that sort of loveliness which does not demand attention, but holds it with no effort. An exquisite, delicate young creature, she ought to have been, and had been, unless her present appearance told lies.

Lilac seemed to be her favorite color for gowns, for she wore that afternoon a delicious old–fashioned lilac muslin that looked as if it had been laid away in lavender every winter for the last thirty years. The waist was cut surplice fashion, and she wore a dainty lace handkerchief tucked into it. Take it altogether, I suppose I never spent a pleasanter afternoon in my life, although it was pleasant in a quiet, uneventful sort of a way. There was an atmosphere of gentle grace and comfort about everything about Miss Munson, about the room, and about the lookout from the high, deep–seated windows. There was not one vivid tint in that parlor; everything had the dimness of age over it. All the brightness was gone out of the carpet. Large, shadowy figures sprawled over the floor, their indistinctness giving them the suggestion of grace, and the polish on the mahogany furniture was too dull to reflect the light. The gilded scrolls on the wall–paper no longer shone, and over some of the old engravings on the walls a half–transparent film that looked like mist had spread. Outside, a cool green shadow lay over the garden, and soft, lazy puffs of lilac–scented air came in at the windows. Oh, it was all lovely, and it was so little trouble to enjoy it.

I liked, too, the tea which came later. The dining–room was as charming in its way as the parlor, large and dark and solid, with some beautiful quaint pieces of furniture in it. The china was pink and gold; and I fancied to myself that Miss Munson's grandmother had spun the table linen, and put it away in a big chest, with rose leaves between the folds. I do believe the surroundings and the circumstances imparted a subtle flavor to everything I tasted, which gave rise to something higher than mere gustatory delight, or maybe it was my mood; but it certainly seemed to me that I had never before enjoyed a tea so much.

After that day, Miss Munson and I became very well acquainted. I got into the habit of running over there very often; she seldom came to see me. It was tacitly understood between us that it was pleasanter for me to do the visiting.

I do not know how she felt towards me—I think she liked me—but I began to feel an exceeding, even a loving, interest in her. All that I could think of sometimes, when with her, was a person walking in a garden and getting continually delicious little sniffs of violets, so that he certainly knew they were near him, although they were hidden somewhere under the leaves, and he could not see them. There would not be a day that Miss Munson would not say things that were so many little hints of a rare sweetness and beauty of nature, which her shyness and quietness did not let appear all at once.

She was rather chary always of giving very broad glimpses of herself. I was always more or less puzzled and evaded by her, though she was evidently a sincere, childlike woman, with a liking for simple pleasures. She took genuine delight in picking a little bunch of flowers in her garden for a neighbor, and in giving those little tea–parties. She was religious in an innocent, unquestioning way, too. I oftener than not found an open Bible near her when I came in, and she talked about praying as simply as one would about breathing.

But the day before I left Ware she told me a very peculiar story, by which she displayed herself to me all at once in a fuller light, although she revealed such a character that I was, in one way, none the less puzzled. She and I were sitting in her parlor. She was feeling sad about my going, and perhaps that led her to confide in me. Anyway, she looked up, suddenly, after a little silence.

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"Do you," she said, "believe in dreams?"

"That is a question I can't answer truthfully," I replied, laughing. I don't really know whether I believe in dreams or not."

"I don't know either," she said, slowly, and she shuddered a little. "I have a mind to tell you," she went on, "about a dream I had once, and about something that happened to me afterwards. I never did tell any one, and I believe I would like to. That is, if you would like to have me," she asked, as timidly as a child afraid of giving trouble.

I assured her that I would, and, after a little pause, she told me this:

"I was about twenty–two," she said, " and father and mother had been dead, one four, the other six years. I was living alone here with Margaret, as I have ever since. I have thought sometimes that it was my living alone so much, and not going about with other girls more, that made me dream as much as I did, but I don't know. I always used to have a great many dreams, and some of them seemed as if they must mean something; but this particular one, in itself and in its effect on my after–life, was very singular."

"It was in spring, and the lilacs were just in bloom, when I dreamed it. I thought I was walking down the road there under the elm–trees. I had on a lilac muslin gown, and I carried a basket of flowers on my arm. They were mostly white, or else the very faintest pink–lilies and roses. I had gone down the street a little way, when I saw a young man coming towards me. He had on a broad–brimmed soft hat and a velvet coat, and carried something that looked odd under his arm. When he came nearer I could see that he had a handsome dark face, and that he was carrying an artist's easel. When he reached me he stopped and looked down into my face and then at my basket of flowers. I stopped too—I could not seem to help it in my dream—and gazed down at the ground. I was afraid to look at him, and I trembled so that the lilies and roses in my basket quivered.

Finally he spoke. "Won't you give me one of your flowers," he said—"just one?"

I gathered courage to glance up at him then, and when his eyes met mine it did seem to me that I wanted to give him one of those flowers more than anything else in the world. I looked into my basket, and had my fingers on the stem of the finest lily there, when something came whirring and fanning by my face and settled on my shoulder, and when I turned my head, with my heart beating loud, there was a white dove.

"But, somehow, I seemed in my dream to forget all about the dove in a minute, and I looked away in the young man's face again, and lifted the lily from the basket as I did so.

"But his face did not look to me as it did before, though I still wanted to give him the lily just as much. I stood still, gazing at him, for a moment; there was, in my dream, a sort of fascination over me which would not let me take my eyes from him. As I gazed, his face changed more and more to me, till finally—I cannot explain it—it looked at once beautiful and repulsive. I wanted at once to give him the lily and would have died rather than give it to him, and I turned and fled, with my basket of flowers and my dove on my shoulder, and a great horror of something, I did not know what, in my heart. Then I woke up all of a tremble."

Miss Munson stopped. "What do you think of the dream?" she said, in a few minutes. "Do you think it possible that it could have had any especial significance, or should you think it merely a sleeping vagary of a romantic, imaginative girl?"

"I think that would depend entirely upon after–events," I answered; "they might or might not prove its significance."

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"Do you think so?" she said, eagerly. "Well, it seemed to me that they did, but the worst of it has been I have never been quite sure—never quite sure. But I will tell you, and you shall judge. A year from the time I dreamed that dream, I actually met that same young man one morning in the street. I had on my lilac gown, and I held a sprig of lilac in my hand; I had broken it off the bush as I came along. He almost stopped for a second when he came up to me, and looked down into my face. I was terribly startled, for I recognized at once the man of my dream, and I can't tell you how horrible and uncanny it all seemed for a minute. There was the same handsome dark face; there were the broad hat, and the velvet coat, and the easel under the arm. Well, he passed on, and I did; but I was in a flutter all day, and his eyes seemed to be looking into mine continually.

"A few days afterwards he called upon me with Mrs. Graves, a lady who used to live in Ware and take boarders: she moved away some years ago. I learned that he was an artist. His name was—no, I will not tell you his name: he is from your city, and well known. He had engaged board with Mrs. Graves for the summer. After that there was scarcely a day but I saw him. We were both entirely free to seek each other's society, and we were together a great deal. He used to take me sketching with him, and he would come here at all hours of the day as unconcernedly as a brother might. He would sit beside me in the parlor and watch me sew, and in the kitchen and watch me cook. He was very boyish and unconventional in his ways, and I used to think it charming. We soon grew to care a great deal about each other, of course, although he said nothing about it to me for a long time. I knew from the first that I loved him dearly, but from the first there was, as there was in my dream, a kind of horror of him along with the love: it kept me from being entirely happy. The night before he went away he spoke. We had been to walk, and were standing here at my door. He asked me to marry him. I looked up in his face, and felt just as I did in my dream about giving him the flower, when all of a sudden his face looked different to me, just as it did in the dream. I cannot explain it. It was as if I saw no more of the kindness and the love in it, only something else—evil—and the same horror came over me.

"I don't know how I looked to him as I stood gazing up at him, but he turned very pale, and started back. 'My God! Caroline,' he said, 'what is it?'

"I don't know what I said, but it must have expressed my sudden repulsion very strongly; for, after a few bitter words, he left me, and I went into the house. I never saw him again. I have seen his name in the papers, and that is all.

"Now I want to know," Miss Munson went on, "if you think that my dream was really sent to me as a warning, or that I fancied it all, and wrecked—no, I won't say wrecked—dulled the happiness of my whole life for a nervous whim?"

She looked questioningly at me, an expression at once serious and pitiful on her delicate face. I hardly knew what to say. It was obvious that I could form no correct opinion unless I knew the man. I wondered if I did. There was an artist of about the right age whom I thought of. If he were the one—well, I think Miss Munson was right.

She saw that I hesitated. "Never mind," she said, rising with her usual quiet, gentle smile on her lips, "you don't know any more than I do, and I never shall know in this world. All I hope is that it was what God meant, and not what I imagined. We won't talk any more about it. I liked to tell you, for some reason or other, that is all. Now I am going to take you into the garden and pick your last poesy for you."

After I had gone down the stone steps with my hands full of verbenas and pansies, I turned and looked up at her standing so mild and sweet between the lilac-trees, and said good-bye again. That was the last time I saw her.

The next summer when I came to Ware the blinds on the front of the Munson house were all closed, and the little flower-beds in the front yard were untended; only the lilacs were in blossom, for they had the immortal spring for their gardener.

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"Miss Munson died last winter," said Mrs. Leonard looking reflectively across the street. "She was laid out in a lilac-colored cashmere gown; it was her request. She always wore lilac, you know. Well" (with a sigh), "I do believe that Caroline Munson, if she is an angel—and I suppose she is—doesn't look much more different from what she did before than those lilacs over there do from last year's ones."

"The Hall Bedroom"

MY name is Mrs. Elizabeth Jennings. I am a highly respectable woman. I may style myself a gentlewoman, for in my youth I enjoyed advantages. I was well brought up, and I graduated at a young ladies' seminary. I also married well. My husband was that most genteel of all merchants, an apothecary. His shop was on the corner of the main street in Rockton, the town where I was born, and where I lived until the death of my husband. My parents had died when I had been married a short time, so I was left quite alone in the world. I was not competent to carry on the apothecary business by myself, for I had no knowledge of drugs, and had a mortal terror of giving poisons instead of medicines. Therefore I was obliged to sell at a considerable sacrifice, and the proceeds, some five thousand dollars, were all I had in the world. The income was not enough to support me in any kind of comfort, and I saw that I must in some way earn money. I thought at first of teaching, but I was no longer young, and methods had changed since my school days. What I was able to teach, nobody wished to know. I could think of only one thing to do: take boarders. But the same objection to that business as to teaching held good in Rockton. Nobody wished to board. My husband had rented a house with a number of bedrooms, and I advertised, but nobody applied. Finally my cash was running very low, and I became desperate. I packed up my furniture, rented a large house in this town and moved here. It was a venture attended with many risks. In the first place the rent was exorbitant, in the next I was entirely unknown. However, I am a person of considerable ingenuity, and have inventive power, and much enterprise when the occasion presses. I advertised in a very original manner, although that actually took my last penny, that is, the last penny of my ready money, and I was forced to draw on my principal to purchase my first supplies, a thing which I had resolved never on any account to do. But the great risk met with a reward, for I had several applicants within two days after my advertisement appeared in the paper. Within two weeks my boarding-house was well established, I became very successful, and my success would have been uninterrupted had it not been for the mysterious and bewildering occurrences which I am about to relate. I am now forced to leave the house and rent another. Some of my old boarders accompany me, some, with the most unreasonable nervousness, refuse to be longer associated in any way, however indirectly, with the terrible and uncanny happenings which I have to relate. It remains to be seen whether my ill luck in this house will follow me into another, and whether my whole prosperity in life will be forever shadowed by the Mystery of the Hall Bedroom. Instead of telling the strange story myself in my own words, I shall present the journal of Mr. George H. Wheatcroft. I shall show you the portions beginning on January 18 of the present year, the date when he took up his residence with me. Here it is:

"January 18, 1883. Here I am established in my new boardinghouse. I have, as befits my humble means, the hall bedroom, even the hall bedroom on the third floor. I have heard all my life of hall bedrooms, I have seen hall bedrooms, I have been in them, but never until now, when I am actually established in one, did I comprehend what, at once, an ignominious and sternly uncompromising thing a hall bedroom is. It proves the ignominy of the dweller therein. No man at thirty-six (my age) would be domiciled in a hall bedroom, unless he were himself ignominious, at least comparatively speaking. I am proved by this means incontrovertibly to have been left far behind in the race. I see no reason why I should not live in this hall bedroom for the rest of my life, that is, if I have money enough to pay the landlady, and that seems probable, since my small funds are invested as safely as if I were an orphan-ward in charge of a pillar of a sanctuary. After the valuables have been stolen, I have most carefully locked the stable door. I have experienced the revulsion which comes sooner or later to the adventurous soul who experiences nothing but defeat and so-called ill luck. I have swung to the opposite extreme. I have lost in everything—I have lost in love, I have lost in money, I have lost in the struggle for preferment, I have lost in health and strength. I am now settled down in a hall bedroom to live upon my small income, and regain my health by mild potations of the mineral waters here, if possible; if not, to live here without my health—for mine is not a necessarily fatal malady—until Providence shall take me out of my hall bedroom. There is no one place more

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than another where I care to live. There is not sufficient motive to take me away, even if the mineral waters do not benefit me. So I am here and to stay in the hall bedroom. The landlady is civil, and even kind, as kind as a woman who has to keep her poor womanly eye upon the main chance can be. The struggle for money always injures the fine grain of a woman; she is too fine a thing to do it; she does not by nature belong with the gold grubbers, and it therefore lowers her; she steps from heights to claw and scrape and dig. But she can not help it oftentimes, poor thing, and her deterioration thereby is to be condoned. The landlady is all she can be, taking her strain of adverse circumstances into consideration, and the table is good, even conscientiously so. It looks to me as if she were foolish enough to strive to give the boarders their money's worth, with the due regard for the main chance which is inevitable. However, that is of minor importance to me, since my diet is restricted.

"It is curious what an annoyance a restriction in diet can be even to a man who has considered himself somewhat indifferent to gastronomic delights. There was to–day a pudding for dinner, which I could not taste without penalty, but which I longed for. It was only because it looked unlike any other pudding that I had ever seen, and assumed a mental and spiritual significance. It seemed to me, whimsically no doubt, as if tasting it might give me a new sensation, and consequently a new outlook. Trivial things may lead to large results: why should I not get a new outlook by means of a pudding? Life here stretches before me most monotonously, and I feel like clutching at alleviations, though paradoxically, since I have settled down with the utmost acquiescence. Still one can not immediately overcome and change radically all one's nature. Now I look at myself critically and search for the keynote to my whole self, and my actions, I have always been conscious of a reaching out, an overweening desire for the new, the untried, for the broadness of further horizons, the seas beyond seas, the thought beyond thought. This characteristic has been the primary cause of all my misfortunes. I have the soul of an explorer, and in nine out of ten cases this leads to destruction. If I had possessed capital and sufficient push, I should have been one of the searchers after the North Pole. I have been an eager student of astronomy. I have studied botany with avidity, and have dreamed of new flora in unexplored parts of the world, and the same with animal life and geology. I longed for riches in order to discover the power and sense of possession of the rich. I longed for love in order to discover the possibilities of the emotions. I longed for all that the mind of man could conceive as desirable for man, not so much for purely selfish ends, as from an insatiable thirst for knowledge of a universal trend. But I have limitations, I do not quite understand of what nature—for what mortal ever did quite understand his own limitations, since a knowledge of them would preclude their existence?—but they have prevented my progress to any extent. Therefore behold me in my hall bedroom, settled at last into a groove of fate so deep that I have lost the sight of even my horizons. Just at present, as I write here, my horizon on the left, that is my physical horizon, is a wall covered with cheap paper. The paper is an indeterminate pattern in white and gilt. There are a few photographs of my own hung about, and on the large wall space beside the bed there is a large oil painting which belongs to my landlady. It has a massive tarnished gold frame, and, curiously enough, the painting itself is rather good. I have no idea who the artist could have been. It is of the conventional landscape type in vogue some fifty years since, the type so fondly reproduced in chromos—the winding river with the little boat occupied by a pair of lovers, the cottage nestled among trees on the right shore, the gentle slope of the hills and the church spire in the background—but still it is well done. It gives me the impression of an artist without the slightest originality of design, but much of technique. But for some inexplicable reason the picture frets me. I find myself gazing at it when I do not wish to do so. It seems to compel my attention like some intent face in the room. I shall ask Mrs. Jennings to have it removed. I will hang in its place some photographs which I have in a trunk.

"January 26. I do not write regularly in my journal. I never did. I see no reason why I should. I see no reason why anyone should have the slightest sense of duty in such a matter. Some days I have nothing which interests me sufficiently to write out, some days I feel either too ill or too indolent. For four days I have not written, from a mixture of all three reasons. Now, to–day I both feel like it and I have something to write. Also I am distinctly better than I have been. Perhaps the waters are benefiting me, or the change of air. Or possibly it is something else more subtle. Possibly my mind has seized upon something new, a discovery which causes it to react upon my failing body and serves as a stimulant. All I know is, I feel distinctly better, and am conscious of an acute interest in doing so, which is of late strange to me. I have been rather indifferent, and sometimes have wondered if that were not the cause rather than the result of my state of health. I have been so continually balked that I have settled

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into a state of inertia. I lean rather comfortably against my obstacles. After all, the worst of the pain always lies in the struggle. Give up and it is rather pleasant than otherwise. If one did not kick, the pricks would not in the least matter. However, for some reason, for the last few days, I seem to have awakened from my state of quiescence. It means future trouble for me, no doubt, but in the meantime I am not sorry. It began with the picture—the large oil painting. I went to Mrs. Jennings about it yesterday, and she, to my surprise—for I thought it a matter that could be easily arranged—objected to having it removed. Her reasons were two; both simple, both sufficient, especially since I, after all, had no very strong desire either way. It seems that the picture does not belong to her. It hung here when she rented the house. She says if it is removed, a very large and unsightly discoloration of the wall—paper will be exposed, and she does not like to ask for new paper. The owner, an old man, is traveling abroad, the agent is curt, and she has only been in the house a very short time. Then it would mean a sad upheaval of my room, which would disturb me. She also says that there is no place in the house where she can store the picture, and there is not a vacant space in another room for one so large. So I let the picture remain. It really, when I came to think of it, was very immaterial after all. But I got my photographs out of my trunk, and I hung them around the large picture. The wall is almost completely covered. I hung them yesterday afternoon, and last night I repeated a strange experience which I have had in some degree every night since I have been here, but was not sure whether it deserved the name of experience, but was not rather one of those dreams in which one dreams one is awake. But last night it came again, and now I know. There is something very singular about this room. I am very much interested. I will write down for future reference the events of last night. Concerning those of the preceding nights since I have slept in this room, I will simply say that they have been of a similar nature, but, as it were, only the preliminary stages, the prologue to what happened last night.

"I am not depending upon the mineral waters here as the one remedy for my malady, which is sometimes of an acute nature, and indeed constantly threatens me with considerable suffering unless by medicine I can keep it in check. I will say that the medicine which I employ is not of the class commonly known as drugs. It is impossible that it can be held responsible for what I am about to transcribe. My mind last night and every night since I have slept in this room was in an absolutely normal state. I take this medicine, prescribed by the specialist in whose charge I was before coming here, regularly every four hours while awake. As I am never a good sleeper, it follows that I am enabled with no inconvenience to take any medicine during the night with the same regularity as during the day. It is my habit, therefore, to place my bottle and spoon where I can put my hand upon them easily without lighting the gas. Since I have been in this room, I have placed the bottle of medicine upon my dresser at the side of the room opposite the bed. I have done this rather than place it nearer, as once I jostled the bottle and spilled most of the contents, and it is not easy for me to replace it, as it is expensive. Therefore I placed it in security on the dresser, and, indeed, that is but three or four steps from my bed, the room being so small. Last night I wakened as usual, and I knew, since I had fallen asleep about eleven, that it must be in the neighborhood of three. I wake with almost clock–like regularity and it is never necessary for me to consult my watch.

"I had slept unusually well and without dreams, and I awoke fully at once, with a feeling of refreshment to which I am not accustomed. I immediately got out of bed and began stepping across the room in the direction of my dresser, on which I had set my medicine–bottle and spoon.

"To my utter amazement, the steps which had hitherto sufficed to take me across my room did not suffice to do so. I advanced several paces, and my outstretched hands touched nothing. I stopped and went on again. I was sure that I was moving in a straight direction, and even if I had not been I knew it was impossible to advance in any direction in my tiny apartment without coming into collision either with a wall or a piece of furniture. I continued to walk falteringly, as I have seen people on the stage: a step, then a long falter, then a sliding step. I kept my hands extended; they touched nothing. I stopped again. I had not the least sentiment of fear or consternation. It was rather the very stupefaction of surprise. 'How is this?' seemed thundering in my ears. 'What is this?'

"The room was perfectly dark. There was nowhere any glimmer, as is usually the case, even in a so–called dark room, from the walls, picture–frames, looking–glass or white objects. It was absolute gloom. The house stood in a quiet part of the town. There were many trees about; the electric street lights were extinguished at midnight; there

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was no moon and the sky was cloudy. I could not distinguish my one window, which I thought strange, even on such a dark night. Finally I changed my plan of motion and turned, as nearly as I could estimate, at right angles. Now, I thought, I must reach soon, if, I kept on, my writing-table underneath the window; or, if I am going in the opposite direction, the hall door. I reached neither. I am telling the unvarnished truth when I say that I began to count my steps and carefully measure my paces after that, and I traversed a space clear of furniture at least twenty feet by thirty—a very large apartment. And as I walked I was conscious that my naked feet were pressing something which gave rise to sensations the like of which I had never experienced before. As nearly as I can express it, it was as if my feet pressed something as elastic as air or water, which was in this case unyielding to my weight. It gave me a curious sensation of buoyancy and stimulation. At the same time this surface, if surface be the right name, which I trod, felt cool to my feet with the coolness of vapor or fluidity, seeming to overlap the soles. Finally I stood still; my surprise was at last merging into a measure of consternation. 'Where am I?' I thought. 'What am I going to do?' Stories that I had heard of travelers being taken from their beds and conveyed into strange and dangerous places, Middle Age stories of the Inquisition flashed through my brain. I knew all the time that for a man who had gone to bed in a commonplace hall bedroom in a very commonplace little town such surmises were highly ridiculous, but it is hard for the human mind to grasp anything but a human explanation of phenomena. Almost anything seemed then, and seems now, more rational than an explanation bordering upon the supernatural, as we understand the supernatural. At last I called, though rather softly, 'What does this mean?' I said quite aloud, 'Where am I? Who is here? Who is doing this? I tell you I will have no such nonsense. Speak, if there is anybody here.' But all was dead silence. Then suddenly a light flashed through the open transom of my door. Somebody had heard me—a man who rooms next door, a decent kind of man, also here for his health. He turned on the gas in the hall and called to me. 'What's the matter?' he asked, in an agitated, trembling voice. He is a nervous fellow.

"Directly, when the light flashed through my transom, I saw that I was in my familiar hall bedroom. I could see everything quite distinctly—my tumbled bed, my writing-table, my dresser, my chair, my little wash-stand, my clothes hanging on a row of pegs, the old picture on the wall. The picture gleamed out with singular distinctness in the light from the transom. The river seemed actually to run and ripple, and the boat to be gliding with the current. I gazed fascinated at it, as I replied to the anxious voice:

"'Nothing is the matter with me,' said I. 'Why?'"

"'I thought I heard you speak,' said the man outside. 'I thought maybe you were sick.'"

"'No,' I called back. 'I am all right. I am trying to find my medicine in the dark, that's all. I can see now you have lighted the gas.'"

"'Nothing is the matter?'"

"'No; sorry I disturbed you. Good-night.'"

"'Good-night.' Then I heard the man's door shut after a minute's pause. He was evidently not quite satisfied. I took a pull at my medicine-bottle, and got into bed. He had left the hall-gas burning. I did not go to sleep again for some time. Just before I did so, some one, probably Mrs. Jennings, came out in the hall and extinguished the gas. This morning when I awoke everything was as usual in my room. I wonder if I shall have any such experience to-night.

"January 27. I shall write in my journal every day until this draws to some definite issue. Last night my strange experience deepened, as something tells me it will continue to do. I retired quite early, at half-past ten. I took the precaution, on retiring, to place beside my bed, on a chair, a box of safety matches, that I might not be in the dilemma of the night before. I took my medicine on retiring; that made me due to wake at half-past two. I had not fallen asleep directly, but had had certainly three hours of sound, dreamless slumber when I awoke. I lay a few

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minutes hesitating whether or not to strike a safety match and light my way to the dresser, whereon stood my medicine-bottle. I hesitated, not because I had the least sensation of fear, but because of the same shrinking from a nerve shock that leads one at times to dread the plunge into an icy bath. It seemed much easier to me to strike that match and cross my hall bedroom to my dresser, take my dose, then return quietly to my bed, than to risk the chance of floundering about in some unknown limbo either of fancy or reality.

"At last, however, the spirit of adventure, which has always been such a ruling one for me, conquered. I rose. I took the box of safety matches in my hand, and started on, as I conceived, the straight course for my dresser, about five feet across from my bed. As before, I traveled and traveled and did not reach it. I advanced with groping hands extended, setting one foot cautiously before the other, but I touched nothing except the indefinite, unnameable surface which my feet pressed. All of a sudden, though, I became aware of something. One of my senses was saluted, nay, more than that, hailed, with imperiousness, and that was, strangely enough, my sense of smell, but in a hitherto unknown fashion. It seemed as if the odor reached my mentality first. I reversed the usual process, which is, as I understand it, like this: the odor when encountered strikes first the olfactory nerve, which transmits the intelligence to the brain. It is as if, to put it rudely, my nose met a rose, and then the nerve belonging to the sense said to my brain, 'Here is a rose.' This time my brain said, 'Here is a rose,' and my sense then recognized it. I say rose, but it was not a rose, that is, not the fragrance of any rose which I had ever known. It was undoubtedly a flower-odor, and rose came perhaps the nearest to it. My mind realized it first with what seemed a leap of rapture. 'What is this delight?' I asked myself. And then the ravishing fragrance smote my sense. I breathed it in and it seemed to feed my thoughts, satisfying some hitherto unknown hunger. Then I took a step further and another fragrance appeared, which I liken to lilies for lack of something better, and then came violets, then mignonette. I can not describe the experience, but it was a sheer delight, a rapture of sublimated sense. I groped further and further, and always into new waves of fragrance. I seemed to be wading breast-high through flower-beds of Paradise, but all the time I touched nothing with my groping hands. At last a sudden giddiness as of surfeit overcame me. I realized that I might be in some unknown peril. I was distinctly afraid. I struck one of my safety matches, and I was in my hall bedroom, midway between my bed and my dresser. I took my dose of medicine and went to bed, and after a while fell asleep and did not wake till morning.

"January 28. Last night I did not take my usual dose of medicine. In these days of new remedies and mysterious results upon certain organizations, it occurred to me to wonder if possibly the drug might have, after all, something to do with my strange experience.

"I did not take my medicine. I put the bottle as usual on my dresser, since I feared if I interrupted further the customary sequence of affairs I might fail to wake. I placed my box of matches on the chair beside the bed. I fell asleep about quarter past eleven o'clock, and I waked when the clock was striking two—a little earlier than my wont. I did not hesitate this time. I rose at once, took my box of matches and proceeded as formerly. I walked what seemed a great space without coming into collision with anything. I kept sniffing for the wonderful fragrances of the night before, but they did not recur. Instead, I was suddenly aware that I was tasting something, some morsel of sweetness hitherto unknown, and, as in the case of the odor, the usual order seemed reversed, and it was as if I tasted it first in my mental consciousness. Then the sweetness rolled under my tongue. I thought involuntarily of 'Sweeter than honey or the honeycomb' of the Scripture. I thought of the Old Testament manna. An ineffable content as of satisfied hunger seized me. I stepped further, and a new savor was upon my palate. And so on. It was never cloying, though of such sharp sweetness that it fairly stung. It was the merging of a material sense into a spiritual one. I said to myself, 'I have lived my life and always have I gone hungry until now.' I could feel my brain act swiftly under the influence of this heavenly food as under a stimulant. Then suddenly I repeated the experience of the night before. I grew dizzy, and an indefinite fear and shrinking were upon me. I struck my safety match and was back in my hall bedroom. I returned to bed, and soon fell asleep. I did not take my medicine. I am resolved not to do so longer. I am feeling much better.

"January 29. Last night to bed as usual, matches in place; fell asleep about eleven and waked at half-past one. I heard the half-hour strike; I am waking earlier and earlier every night. I had not taken my medicine, though it was

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on the dresser as usual. I again took my match–box in hand and started to cross the room, and, as always, traversed strange spaces, but this night, as seems fated to be the case every night, my experience was different. Last night I neither smelled nor tasted, but I heard—my Lord, I heard! The first sound of which I was conscious was one like the constantly gathering and receding murmur of a river, and it seemed to come from the wall behind my bed where the old picture hangs. Nothing in nature except a river gives that impression of at once advance and retreat. I could not mistake it. On, ever on, came the swelling murmur of the waves, past and ever past they died in the distance. Then I heard above the murmur of the river a song in an unknown tongue which I recognized as being unknown, yet which I understood; but the understanding was in my brain, with no words of interpretation. The song had to do with me, but with me in unknown futures for which I had no images of comparison in the past; yet a sort of ecstasy as of a prophecy of bliss filled my whole consciousness. The song never ceased, but as I moved on I came into new sound–waves. There was the pealing of bells which might have been made of crystal, and might have summoned to the gates of heaven. There was music of strange instruments, great harmonies pierced now and then by small whispers as of love, and it all filled me with a certainty of a future of bliss.

"At last I seemed the centre of a mighty orchestra which constantly deepened and increased until I seemed to feel myself being lifted gently but mightily upon the waves of sound as upon the waves of a sea. Then again the terror and the impulse to flee to my own familiar scenes was upon me. I struck my match and was back in my hall bedroom. I do not see how I sleep at all after such wonders, but sleep I do. I slept dreamlessly until daylight this morning.

"January 30. I heard yesterday something with regard to my hall bedroom which affected me strangely. I can not for the life of me say whether it intimidated me, filled me with the horror of the abnormal, or rather roused to a greater degree my spirit of adventure and discovery. I was down at the Cure, and was sitting on the veranda sipping idly my mineral water, when somebody spoke my name. 'Mr. Wheatcroft?' said the voice politely, interrogatively, somewhat apollogetically, [sic] as if to provide for a possible mistake in my identity. I turned and saw a gentleman whom I recognized at once. I seldom forget names or faces. He was a Mr. Addison whom I had seen considerable of three years ago at a little summer hotel in the mountains. It was one of those passing acquaintances which signify little one way or the other. If never renewed, you have no regret; if renewed, you accept the renewal with no hesitation. It is in every way negative. But just now, in my feeble, friendless state, the sight of a face which beams with pleased remembrance is rather grateful. I felt distinctly glad to see the man. He sat down beside me. He also had a glass of the water. His health, while not as bad as mine, leaves much to be desired.

"Addison had often been in this town before. He had in fact lived here at one time. He had remained at the Cure three years, taking the waters daily. He therefore knows about all there is to be known about the town, which is not very large. He asked me where I was staying, and when I told him the street, rather excitedly inquired the number. When I told him the number, which is 240, he gave a manifest start, and after one sharp glance at me sipped his water in silence for a moment. He had so evidently betrayed some ulterior knowledge with regard to my residence that I questioned him.

"'What do you know about 240 Pleasant Street?' said I.

"'Oh, nothing,' he replied, evasively, sipping his water.

"After a little while, however, he inquired, in what he evidently tried to render a casual tone, what room I occupied. 'I once lived a few weeks at 240 Pleasant Street myself,' he said. 'That house always was a boarding–house, I guess.'

"'It had stood vacant for a term of years before the present occupant rented it, I believe,' I remarked. Then I answered his question. 'I have the hall bedroom on the third floor,' said I. 'The quarters are pretty straitened, but comfortable enough as hall bedrooms go.'

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"But Mr. Addison had showed such unmistakable consternation at my reply that then I persisted in my questioning as to the cause, and at last he yielded and told me what he knew. He had hesitated both because he shrank from displaying what I might consider an unmanly superstition, and because he did not wish to influence me beyond what the facts of the case warranted. 'Well, I will tell you, Wheatcroft,' he said. 'Briefly all I know is this: When last I heard of 240 Pleasant Street it was not rented because of foul play which was supposed to have taken place there, though nothing was ever proved. There were two disappearances, and—in each case—of an occupant of the hall bedroom which you now have. The first disappearance was of a very beautiful girl who had come here for her health and was said to be the victim of a profound melancholy, induced by a love disappointment. She obtained board at 240 and occupied the hall bedroom about two weeks; then one morning she was gone, having seemingly vanished into thin air. Her relatives were communicated with; she had not many, nor friends either, poor girl, and a thorough search was made, but the last I knew she had never come to light. There were two or three arrests, but nothing ever came of them. Well, that was before my day here, but the second disappearance took place when I was in the house—a fine young fellow who had overworked in college. He had to pay his own way. He had taken cold, had the grip, and that and the overwork about finished him, and he came on here for a month's rest and recuperation. He had been in that room about two weeks, a little less, when one morning he wasn't there. Then there was a great hullabaloo. It seems that he had let fall some hints to the effect that there was something queer about the room, but, of course, the police did not think much of that. They made arrests right and left, but they never found him, and the arrested were discharged, though some of them are probably under a cloud of suspicion to this day. Then the boarding–house was shut up. Six years ago nobody would have boarded there, much less occupied that hall bedroom, but now I suppose new people have come in and the story has died out. I dare say your landlady will not thank me for reviving it.'

"I assured him that it would make no possible difference to me. He looked at me sharply, and asked bluntly if I had seen anything wrong or unusual about the room. I replied, guarding myself from falsehood with a quibble, that I had seen nothing in the least unusual about the room, as indeed I had not, and have not now, but that may come. I feel that that will come in due time. Last night I neither saw, nor heard, nor smelled, nor tasted, but I felt. Last night, having started again on my exploration of, God knows what, I had not advanced a step before I touched something. My first sensation was one of disappointment. 'It is the dresser, and I am at the end of it now,' I thought. But I soon discovered that it was not the old painted dresser which I touched, but something carved, as nearly as I could discover with my unskilled finger–tips, with winged things. There were certainly long keen curves of wings which seemed to overlay an arabesque of fine leaf and flower work. I do not know what the object was that I touched. It may have been a chest. I may seem to be exaggerating when I say that it somehow failed or exceeded in some mysterious respect of being the shape of anything I had ever touched. I do not know what the material was. It was as smooth as ivory, but it did not feel like ivory; there was a singular warmth about it, as if it had stood long in hot sunlight. I continued, and I encountered other objects I am inclined to think were pieces of furniture of fashions and possibly of uses unknown to me, and about them all was the strange mystery as to shape. At last I came to what was evidently an open window of large area. I distinctly felt a soft, warm wind, yet with a crystal freshness, blow on my face. It was not the window of my hall bedroom, that I know. Looking out, I could see nothing. I only felt the wind blowing on my face.

"Then suddenly, without any warning, my groping hands to the right and left touched living beings, beings in the likeness of men and women, palpable creatures in palpable attire. I could feel the soft silken texture of their garments which swept around me, seeming to half infold me in clinging meshes like cobwebs. I was in a crowd of these people, whatever they were, and whoever they were, but, curiously enough, without seeing one of them I had a strong sense of recognition as I passed among them. Now and then a hand that I knew closed softly over mine; once an arm passed around me. Then I began to feel myself gently swept on and impelled by this softly moving throng; their floating garments seemed to fairly wind me about, and again a swift terror overcame me. I struck my match, and was back in my hall bedroom. I wonder if I had not better keep my gas burning to–night? I wonder if it be possible that this is going too far? I wonder what became of those other people, the man and the woman who occupied this room? I wonder if I had better not stop where I am?

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"January 31. Last night I saw—I saw more than I can describe, more than is lawful to describe. Something which nature has rightly hidden has been revealed to me, but it is not for me to disclose too much of her secret. This much I will say, that doors and windows open into an out-of-doors to which the outdoors which we know is but a vestibule. And there is a river; there is something strange with respect to that picture. There is a river upon which one could sail away. It was flowing silently, for to-night I could only see. I saw that I was right in thinking I recognized some of the people whom I encountered the night before, though some were strange to me. It is true that the girl who disappeared from the hall bedroom was very beautiful. Everything which I saw last night was very beautiful to my one sense that could grasp it. I wonder what it would all be if all my senses together were to grasp it? I wonder if I had better not keep my gas burning to-night? I wonder—"

This finishes the journal which Mr. Wheatcroft left in his hall bedroom. The morning after the last entry he was gone. His friend, Mr. Addison, came here, and a search was made. They even tore down the wall behind the picture, and they did find something rather queer for a house that had been used for boarders, where you would think no room would have been let run to waste. They found another room, a long narrow one, the length of the hall bedroom, but narrower, hardly more than a closet. There was no window, nor door, and all there was in it was a sheet of paper covered with figures, as if somebody had been doing sums.

They made a lot of talk about those figures, and they tried to make out that the fifth dimension, whatever that is, was proved, but they said afterward they didn't prove anything. They tried to make out then that somebody had murdered poor Mr. Wheatcroft and hid the body, and they arrested poor Mr. Addison, but they couldn't make out anything against him. They proved he was in the Cure all that night and couldn't have done it. They don't know what became of Mr. Wheatcroft, and now they say two more disappeared from that same room before I rented the house.

The agent came and promised to put the new room they discovered into the hall bedroom and have everything new-papered and painted. He took away the picture; folks hinted there was something queer about that, I don't know what. It looked innocent enough, and I guess he burned it up. He said if I would stay he would arrange it with the owner, who everybody says is a very queer man, so I should not have to pay much if any rent. But I told him I couldn't stay if he was to give me the rent. That I wasn't afraid of anything myself, though I must say I wouldn't want to put anybody in that hall bedroom without telling him all about it; but my boarders would leave, and I knew I couldn't get any more. I told him I would rather have had a regular ghost than what seemed to be a way of going out of the house to nowhere and never coming back again. I moved, and, as I said before, it remains to be seen whether my ill luck follows me to this house or not. Anyway, it has no hall bedroom.

"A Gentle Ghost"

OUT in front of the cemetery stood a white horse and a covered wagon. The horse was not tied, but she stood quite still, her four feet widely and ponderously planted, her meek white head banging. Shadows of leaves danced on her back. There were many trees about the cemetery, and the foliage was unusually luxuriant for May. The four women who had come in the covered wagon remarked it. "I never saw the trees so forward as they are this year, seems to me," said one, gazing up at some magnificent gold-green branches over her head.

"I was sayin' so to Mary this mornin'," rejoined another. "They're uncommon forward, I think."

They loitered along the narrow lanes between the lots: four homely, middle-aged women, with decorous and subdued enjoyment in their worn faces. They read with peaceful curiosity and interest the inscriptions on the stones; they turned aside to look at the tender, newly blossomed spring bushes—the flowering almonds and the bridal wreaths. Once in a while they came to a new stone, which they immediately surrounded with eager criticism. There was a solemn hush when they reached a lot where some relatives of one of the party were buried. She put a bunch of flowers on a grave, then she stood looking at it with red eyes. The others grouped themselves deferentially aloof.

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They did not meet any one in the cemetery until just before they left. When they had reached the rear and oldest portion of the yard, and were thinking of retracing their steps, they became suddenly aware of a child sitting in a lot at their right. The lot held seven old, leaning stones, dark and mossy, their inscriptions dimly traceable. The child sat close to one, and she looked up at the staring knot of women with a kind of innocent keenness, like a baby. Her face was small and fair and pinched. The women stood eying her.

"What's your name, little girl?" asked one. She had a bright flower in her bonnet and a smart lift to her chin, and seemed the natural spokeswoman of the party. Her name was Holmes. The child turned her head sideways and murmured something.

"What? We can't hear. Speak up; don't be afraid! What's your name?" The woman nodded the bright flower over her, and spoke with sharp pleasantness.

"Nancy Wren," said the child, with a timid catch of her breath.

"Wren?"

The child nodded. She kept her little pink, curving mouth parted.

"It's nobody I know," remarked the questioner, reflectively. "I guess she comes from—over there. She made a significant motion of her head towards the right. "Where do you live, Nancy?" she asked.

The child also motioned towards the right.

"I thought so," said the woman. "How old are you?"

"Ten."

The women exchanged glances. "Are you sure you're tellin' the truth?"

The child nodded.

"I never saw a girl so small for her age if she is," said one woman to another.

"Yes," said Mrs. Holmes, looking at her critically; "she is dreadful small. She's considerable smaller than my Mary was. Is there any of your folks buried in this lot?" said she, fairly hovering with affability and determined graciousness.

The child's upturned face suddenly kindled. She began speaking with a soft volubility that was an odd contrast to her previous hesitation.

"That's mother," said she, pointing to one of the stones, "an' that's father, an' there's John, an' Marg'ret, an' Mary, an' Susan, an' the baby, and here's—Jane."

The women stared at her in amazement. "Was it your—" began Mrs. Holmes; but another woman stepped forward, stoutly impetuous.

"Land! it's the Blake lot!" said she. "This child can't be any relation to 'em. You hadn't ought to talk so, Nancy."

"It's so," said the child, shyly persistent. She evidently hardly grasped the force of the woman's remark.

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They eyed her with increased bewilderment. "It can't be," said the woman to the others. "Every one of them Blakes died years ago."

"I've seen Jane," volunteered the child, with a candid smile in their faces.

Then the stout woman sank down on her knees beside Jane's stone, and peered hard at it.

"She died forty year ago this May," said she, with a gasp. "I used to know her when I was a child. She was ten years old when she died. You ain't ever seen her. You hadn't ought to tell such stories."

"I ain't seen her for a long time," said the little girl.

"What made you say you'd seen her at all?" said Mrs. Holmes, sharply, thinking this was capitulation.

"I did use to see her a long time ago, an' she used to wear a white dress, an' a wreath on her head. She used to come here an' play with me."

The women looked at each other with pale, shocked faces; one nervous; one shivered. "She ain't quite right," she whispered. "Let's go." The women began filing away. Mrs. Holmes, who came last, stood about for a parting word to the child.

"You can't have seen her," said she, severely, "an' you are a wicked girl to tell such stories. You mustn't do it again, remember."

Nancy stood with her hand on Jane's stone, looking at her. "She did," she repeated, with mild obstinacy.

"There's somethin' wrong about her, I guess," whispered Mrs. Holmes, rustling on after the others.

"I see she looked kind of queer the minute I set eyes on her," said the nervous woman.

When the four reached the front of the cemetery they sat down to rest for a few minutes. It was warm, and they had still quite a walk, nearly the whole width of the yard, to the other front corner where the horse and wagon were.

They sat down in a row on a bank; the stout woman wiped her face; Mrs. Holmes straightened her bonnet.

Directly opposite across the street stood two houses, so close to each other that their walls almost touched. One was a large square building, glossily white, with green blinds; the other was low, with a facing of whitewashed stone–work reaching to its lower windows, which somehow gave it a disgraced and menial air; there were, moreover, no blinds.

At the side of the low building stretched a wide ploughed field, where several halting old figures were moving about planting. There was none of the brave hope of the sower about them. Even across the road one could see the feeble stiffness of their attitudes, the half– palsied fling of their arms.

"I declare I shouldn't think them old men over there would ever get that field planted," said Mrs. Holmes, energetically watchful. In the front door of the square white house sat a girl with bright hair. The yard was full of green light from two tall maple–trees, and the girl's hair made a brilliant spot of color in the midst of it.

"That's Flora Dunn over there on the door–step, ain't it?" said the stout woman.

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"Yes. I should think you could tell her by her red hair."

"I knew it. I should have thought Mr. Dunn would have hated to have had their house so near the poor–house. I declare I should!"

"Oh, he wouldn't mind," said Mrs. Holmes; "he's as easy as old Tilly. It wouldn't have troubled him any if they'd set it right in his front yard. But I guess she minded some. I heard she did. John said there wa'n't any need of it. The town wouldn't have set it so near, if Mr. Dunn had set his foot down he wouldn't have it there. I s'pose they wanted to keep that big field on the side clear; but they would have moved it along a little if he'd made a fuss. I tell you what 'tis, I've 'bout made up my mind—I dun know as it's Scripture, but I can't help it—if folks don't make a fuss they won't get their rights in this world. If you jest lay still an' don't rise up, you're goin' to get stepped on. If people like to be, they can; I don't."

"I should have thought he'd have hated to have the poor–house quite so close," murmured the stout woman.

Suddenly Mrs. Holmes leaned forward and poked her head among the other three. She sat on the end of the row. "Say," said she, in a mysterious whisper, "I want to know if you've heard the stories 'bout the Dunn house?"

"No; what?" chorussed the other women, eagerly. They bent over towards her till the four faces were in a knot.

"Well," said Mrs. Holmes, cautiously, with a glance at the bright–headed girl across the way—"I heard it pretty straight— they say the house is haunted."

The stout woman sniffed and straightened herself. "Haunted!" repeated she.

"They say that ever since Jenny died there's been queer noises 'round the house that they can't account for. You see that front chamber over there, the one next to the poorhouse; well, that's the room, they say."

The women all turned and looked at the chamber windows, where some ruffled white curtains were fluttering.

"That's the chamber where Jenny used to sleep, you know," Mrs. Holmes went on; "an' she died there. Well, they said that before Jenny died, Flora had always slept there with her, but she felt kind of bad about goin' back there, so she thought she'd take another room. Well, there was the awfulest moanin' an' takin' on up in Jenny's room, when she did, that Flora went back there to sleep."

"I shouldn't thought she could," whispered the nervous woman, who was quite pale.

"The moanin' stopped jest as soon as she got in there with a light. You see Jenny was always terrible timid an' afraid to sleep alone, an' had a lamp burnin' all night, an' it seemed to them jest as if it really was her, I s'pose."

"I don't believe one word of it," said the stout woman, getting up. "It makes me all out of patience to hear people talk such stuff, jest because the Dunns happen to live opposite a graveyard."

"I told it jest as I heard it," said Mrs. Holmes, stiffly.

"Oh, I ain't blamin' you; it's the folks that start such stories that I ain't got any patience with. Think of that dear, pretty little sixteen–year–old girl hauntin' a house!"

"Well, I've told it jest as I heard it," repeated Mrs. Holmes, still in a tone of slight umbrage. "I don't ever take much stock in such things myself."

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The four women strolled along to the covered wagon and climbed in. "I declare," said the stout woman, conciliatingly, "I dun know when I've had such an outin'. I feel as if it had done me good. I've been wantin' to come down to the cemetery for a long time, but it's most more'n I want to walk. I feel real obliged to you, Mis' Holmes."

The others climbed in. Mrs. Holmes disclaimed all obligations gracefully, established herself on the front seat, and shook the reins over the white horse. Then the party jogged along the road to the village, past outlying farmhouses and rich green meadows, all freckled gold with dandelions. Dandelions were in their height; the buttercups had not yet come.

Flora Dunn, the girl on the door–step, glanced up when they started down the street; then she turned her eyes on her work; she was sewing with nervous haste.

"Who were those folks, did you see, Flora?" called her mother, out of the sitting–room.

"I didn't notice," replied Flora, absently.

Just then the girl whom the women had met came lingeringly out of the cemetery and crossed the street.

"There's that poor little Wren girl," remarked the voice in the sitting–room.

"Yes," assented Flora. After a while she got up and entered the house. Her mother looked anxiously at her when she came into the room.

"I'm all out of patience with you, Flora," said she. "You're jest as white as a sheet. You'll make yourself sick. You're actin' dreadful foolish."

Flora sank into a chair and sat staring straight ahead with a strained, pitiful gaze. "I can't help it; I can't do any different," said she. "I shouldn't think you'd scold me, mother."

"Scold you; I ain't scoldin' you, child; but there ain't any sense in your doin' so. You'll make yourself sick, an' you're all I've got left. I can't have anything happen to you, Flora." Suddenly Mrs. Dunn burst out in a low wail, hiding her face in her hands.

"I don't see as you're much better yourself, mother," said Flora, heavily.

"I don't know as I am," sobbed her mother; "but I've got you to worry about besides—everything else. Oh, dear! oh, dear, dear!"

"I don't see any need of your worrying about me." Flora did not cry, but her face seemed to darken visibly with a gathering melancholy like a cloud. Her hair was beautiful, and she had a charming delicacy of complexion; but she was not handsome, her features were too sharp, her expression too intense and nervous. Her mother looked like her as to the expression; the features were widely different. It was as if both had passed through one corroding element which had given them the similarity of scars. Certainly a stranger would at once have noticed the strong resemblance between Mrs. Dunn's large, heavy–featured face and her daughter's thin, delicately outlined one—a resemblance which three months ago had not been perceptible.

"I see, if you don't," returned the mother. "I ain't blind."

"I don't see what you are blaming me for."

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"I ain't blamin' you, but it seems to me that you might jest as well let me go up there an' sleep as you."

Suddenly the girl also broke out into a wild cry. "I ain't going to leave her. Poor little Jenny! poor little Jenny! You needn't try to make me, mother; I won't!"

"Flora, don't!"

"I won't! I won't! I won't! Poor little Jenny! Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"What if it is so? What if it is—her? Ain't she got me as well as you? Can't her mother go to her?"

"I won't leave her. I won't! I won't !"

Suddenly Mrs. Dunn's calmness seemed to come uppermost, raised in the scale by the weighty impetus of the other's distress. "Flora," said she, with mournful solemnity, "you mustn't do so; it's wrong. You mustn't wear yourself all out over something that maybe you'll find out wasn't so some time or other."

"Mother, don't you think it is—don't you?"

"I don't know what to think, Flora." Just then a door shut somewhere in the back part of the house. "There's father," said Mrs. Dunn, getting up; "an' the fire ain't made."

Flora rose also, and went about helping her mother to get supper. Both suddenly settled into a rigidity of composure; their eyes were red, but their lips were steady. There was a resolute vein in their characters; they managed themselves with wrenches, and could be hard even with their grief. They got tea ready for Mr. Dunn and his two hired men; then cleared it away, and sat down in the front room with their needlework. Mr. Dunn, a kindly, dull old man, was in there too, over his newspaper. Mrs. Dunn and Flora sewed intently, never taking their eyes from their work. Out in the next room stood a tall clock, which ticked loudly; just before it struck the hours it made always a curious grating noise. When it announced in this way the striking of nine, Mrs. Dunn and Flora exchanged glances; the girl was pale, and her eyes looked larger. She began folding up her work. Suddenly a low moaning cry sounded through the house, seemingly from the room overhead. "There it is!" shrieked Flora. She caught up a lamp and ran. Mrs. Dunn was following, when her husband, sitting near the door, caught bold of her dress with a bewildered air; he had been dozing. "What's the matter?" said he, vaguely.

"Don't you hear it? Didn't you hear it, father?"

The old man let go of her dress suddenly. "I didn't hear nothin'," said he.

"Hark!"

But the cry, in fact, had ceased. Flora could be heard moving about in the room overhead, and that was all. In a moment Mrs. Dunn ran up—stairs after her. The old man sat staring. "It's all dum foolishness," he muttered, under his breath. Presently he fell to dozing again, and his vacantly smiling face lopped forward. Mr. Dunn, slow–rained, patient, and unimaginative, had had his evening naps interrupted after this manner for the last three months, and there was as yet no cessation of his bewilderment. He dealt with the simple, broad lights of life; the shadows were beyond his speculation. For his consciousness his daughter Jenny had died and gone to heaven; he was not capable of listening for her ghostly moans in her little chamber overhead, much less of hearing them with any credulity.

When his wife came down—stairs finally she looked at him, sleeping there, with a bitter feeling. She felt as if set about by an icy wind of loneliness. Her daughter, who was after her own kind, was all the one to whom she could

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look for sympathy and understanding in this subtle perplexity which had come upon her. And she would rather have dispensed with that sympathy, and heard alone those piteous, uncanny cries, for she was wild with anxiety about Flora. The girl had never been very strong. She looked at her distressfully when she came down the next morning.

"Did you sleep any last night?" said she.

"Some," answered Flora.

Soon after breakfast they noticed the little Wren girl stealing across the road to the cemetery again. "She goes over there all the time," remarked Mrs. Dunn. "I b'lieve she runs away. See her look behind her."

"Yes," said Flora, apathetically.

It was nearly noon when they heard a voice from the next house calling, "Nancy! Nancy! Nancy Wren!" The voice was loud and imperious, but slow and evenly modulated. It indicated well its owner. A woman who could regulate her own angry voice could regulate other people. Mrs. Dunn and Flora heard it understandingly.

"That poor little thing will catch it when she gets home," said Mrs. Dunn.

"Nancy! Nancy! Nancy Wren!" called the voice again.

"I pity the child if Mrs. Gregg has to go after her. Mebbe she's fell asleep over there. Flora, why don't you run over there an' get her?"

The voice rang out again. Flora got her hat and stole across the street a little below the house, so the calling woman should not see her. When she got into the cemetery she called in her turn, letting out her thin sweet voice cautiously. Finally she came directly upon the child. She was in the Blake lot, her little slender body, in its dingy cotton dress, curled up on the ground close to one of the graves. No one but Nature tended those old graves now, and she seemed to be lapsing them gently back to her own lines, at her own will. Of the garden shrubs which had been planted about them not one was left but an old low–spraying white rose–bush, which had just gotten its new leaves. The Blake lot was at the very rear of the yard, where it verged upon a light wood, which was silently stealing its way over its own proper boundaries. At the back of the lot stood a thicket of little thin trees, with silvery twinkling leaves. The ground was quite blue with houstonias.

The child raised her little fair head and stared at Flora, as if just awakened from sleep. She held her little pink mouth open, her innocent blue eyes had a surprised look, as if she were suddenly gazing upon a new scene.

"Where's she gone?" asked she, in her sweet, feeble pipe.

"Where's who gone?"

"Jane."

"I don't know what you mean. Come, Nancy, you must go home now."

"Didn't you see her?"

"I didn't see anybody," answered Flora, impatiently. "Come!"

"She was right here."

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"What do you mean?"

"Jane was standin' right here. An' she had her white dress on, an' her wreath."

Flora shivered, and looked around her fearfully. The fancy of the child was overlapping her own nature. There wasn't a soul here. "You've been dreaming, child. Come!"

"No, I wasn't. I've seen them blue flowers an' the leaves winkin' all the time. Jane stood right there." The child pointed with her tiny finger to a spot at her side. "She hadn't come for a long time before," she added. "She's stayed down there." She pointed at the grave nearest her.

"You mustn't talk so," said Flora, with tremulous severity. "You must get right up and come home. Mrs. Gregg has been calling you and calling you. She won't like it."

Nancy turned quite pale around her little mouth, and sprang to her feet. "Is Mis' Gregg comin'?"

"She will come if you don't hurry."

The child said not another word. She flew along ahead through the narrow paths, and was in the almshouse door before Flora crossed the street.

"She's terrible afraid of Mrs. Gregg," she told her mother when she got home. Nancy had disturbed her own brooding a little, and she spoke more like herself.

"Poor little thing! I pity her," said Mrs. Dunn. Mrs. Dunn did not like Mrs. Gregg.

Flora rarely told a story until she had ruminated awhile over it herself. It was afternoon, and the two were in the front room at their sewing, before she told her mother about "Jane."

"Of course she must have been dreaming," Flora said.

"She must have been," rejoined her mother.

But the two looked at each other, and their eyes said more than their tongues. Here was a new marvel, new evidence of a kind which they had heretofore scented at, these two rigidly walking New England souls; yet walking, after all, upon narrow paths through dark meadows of mysticism. If they never lost their footing, the steaming damp of the meadows might come in their faces.

This fancy, delusion, superstition, whichever one might name it, of theirs had lasted now three months—ever since young Jenny Dunn had died. There was apparently no reason why it should not last much longer, if delusion it were; the temperaments of these two women, naturally nervous and imaginative, overwrought now by long care and sorrow, would perpetuate it.

If it were not delusion, pray what exorcism, what spell of book and bell, could lay the ghost of a little timid child who was afraid alone in the dark?

The days went on, and Flora still hurried up to her chamber at the stroke of nine. If she were a moment late, sometimes if she were not, that pitiful low wail sounded through the house.

The strange story spread gradually through the village. Mrs. Dunn and Flora were silent about it, but Gossip is herself of a ghostly nature, and minds not keys nor bars.

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There was quite an excitement over it. People affected with morbid curiosity and sympathy came to the house. One afternoon the minister came and offered a prayer. Mrs. Dunn and Flora received them all with a certain reticence; they did not concur in their wishes to remain and hear the mysterious noises for themselves. People called them "dreadful close." They got more satisfaction out of Mr. Dunn, who was perfectly ready to impart all the information in his power and his own theories in the matter.

"I never heard a thing but once," said he, "an' then it sounded more like a cat to me than anything. I guess mother and Flora air kinder nervous."

The spring was waxing late when Flora went up–stairs one night with the oil low in her lamp. She had neglected filling it that day. She did not notice it until she was undressed; then she thought to herself that she must blow it out. She always kept a lamp burning all night, as she had in timid little Jenny's day. Flora herself was timid now.

So she blew the light out. She had barely laid her head upon the pillow when the low moaning wail sounded through the room. Flora sat up in bed and listened, her hands clinched. The moan gathered strength and volume; little broken words and sentences, the piteous ejaculations of terror and distress, began to shape themselves out of it.

Flora sprang out of bed, and stumbled towards her west window—the one on the almshouse side. She leaned her head out, listening a moment. Then she called her mother with wild vehemence. But her mother was already at the door with a lamp. When she entered, the moans ceased.

"Mother," shrieked Flora, "it ain't Jenny. It's somebody over there—at the poor–house. Put the lamp out in the entry, and come back here and listen."

Mrs. Dunn set out the lamp and came back, closing the door. It was a few minutes first, but presently the cries recommenced.

"I'm goin' right over there," said Mrs. Dunn. "I'm goin' to dress myself an' go over there. I'm goin' to have this affair sifted now."

"I'm going too," said Flora.

It was only half–past nine when the two stole into the almshouse yard. The light was not out in the room on the ground–floor, which the overseer's family used for a sitting–room. When they entered, the overseer was there asleep in his chair, his wife sewing at the table., and an old woman in a pink cotton dress, apparently doing nothing. They all started, and stared at the intruders.

"Good–evenin'," said Mrs. Dunn, trying to speak composedly. "We thought we'd come in; we got kind of started. Oh, there 'tis now! What is it, Mis' Gregg?"

In fact, at that moment, the wail, louder and more distinct, was heard.

"Why, it's Nancy," replied Mrs. Gregg, with dignified surprise. She was a large woman, with a masterly placidity about her. "I heard her a few minutes ago," she went on; "an' I was goin' up there to see to her if she hadn't stopped."

Mr. Gregg, a heavy, saturnine old man, with a broad bristling face, sat staring stupidly. The old woman in pink calico surveyed them all with an impersonal grin.

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"Nancy!" repeated Mrs. Dunn, looking at Mrs. Gregg. She had not fancied this woman very much, and the two had not fraternized, although they were such near neighbors. Indeed, Mrs. Gregg was not of a sociable nature, and associated very little with anything but her own duties.

"Yes; Nancy Wren," she said, with gathering amazement. "She cries out this way 'most every night. She's ten years old, but she's as afraid of the dark as a baby. She's a queerchild. I guess mebbe she's nervous. I don't know but she's got notions into her head, stayin' over in the graveyard so much. She runs away over there every chance she can get, an' she goes over a queer rigmarole about playin' with Jane, and her bein' dressed in white an' a wreath. I found out she meant Jane Blake, that's buried in the Blake lot. I knew there wa'n't any children round here, an' I thought I'd look into it. You know it says 'Our Father,' an' 'Our Mother,' on the old folks' stones. An' there she was, callin' them father an' mother. You'd thought they was right there. I've got 'most out o' patience with the child. I don't know nothin' about such kind of folks." mThe wail continued. "I'll go right up there," said Mrs. Gregg, determinately, taking a lamp.

Mrs. Dunn and Flora followed. When they entered the chamber to which she led them they saw little Nancy sitting up in bed, her face pale and convulsed, her blue eyes streaming with tears, her little pink mouth quivering.

"Nancy—" began Mrs. Gregg, in a weighty tone. But Mrs. Dunn sprang forward and threw her arms around the child.

"You got frightened, didn't you?" whispered she; and Nancy clung to her as if for life.

A great wave of joyful tenderness rolled up in the heart of the bereaved woman. It was not, after all, the lonely and fearfully wandering little spirit of her dear Jenny; she was peaceful and blessed, beyond all her girlish tumults and terrors; but it was this little living girl. She saw it all plainly now. Afterwards it seemed to her that any one but a woman with her nerves strained, and her imagination unhealthily keen through watching and sorrow, would have seen it before.

She held Nancy tight, and soothed her. She felt almost as if she held her own Jenny. "I guess I'll take her home with me, if you don't care," she said to Mrs. Gregg.

"Why, I don't know as I've got any objections, if you want to," answered Mrs. Gregg, with cold stateliness. "Nancy Wren has had everything done for her that I was able to do," she added, when Mrs. Dunn had wrapped up the child, and they were all on the stairs. "I ain't coaxed an' cuddled her, because it ain't my way. I never did with my own children."

"Oh, I know you've done all you could," said Mrs. Dunn, with abstracted apology. "I jest thought I'd like to take her home to–night. Don't you think I'm blamin' you, Mis' Gregg." She bent down and kissed the little tearful face on her shoulder: she was carrying Nancy like a baby. Flora had hold of one of her little dangling hands.

"You shall go right up–stairs an' sleep with Flora," Mrs. Dunn whispered in the child's ear, when they were going across the yard; "an' you shall have the lamp burnin' all night, an' I'll give you a piece of cake before you go."

It was the custom of the Duns to visit the cemetery and carry flowers to Jenny's grave every Sunday afternoon. Next Sunday little Nancy went with them. She followed happily along, and did not seem to think of the Blake lot. That pitiful fancy, if fancy it were, which had peopled her empty childish world with ghostly kindred, which had led into it an angel playmate in white robe and crown, might lie at rest now. There was no more need for it. She had found her place in a nest of living hearts, and she was getting her natural food of human love.

They had dressed Nancy in one of the little white frocks which Jenny had worn in her childhood, and her hat was trimmed with some ribbon and rose–buds which had adorned one of the dead young girl's years before.

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It was a beautiful Sunday. After they left the cemetery they strolled a little way down the road. The road lay between deep green meadows and cottage yards. It was not quite time for the roses, and the lilacs were turning gray. The buttercups in the meadows had blossomed out, but the dandelions had lost their yellow crowns, and their filmy skulls appeared. They stood like ghosts among crowds of golden buttercups; but none of the family thought of that; their ghosts were laid in peace.

"The Twelfth Guest"

"I DON'T see how it happened, for my part," Mrs. Childs said. "Paulina, you set the table."

"You counted up yesterday how many there'd be, and you said twelve; don't you know you did, mother? So I didn't count to-day. I just put on the plates," said Paulina, smilingly defensive.

Paulina had something of a helpless and gentle look when she smiled. Her mouth was rather large, and the upper jaw full, so the smile seemed hardly under her control. She was quite pretty; her complexion was so delicate and her eyes so pleasant. "Well, I don't see how I made such a blunder," her mother remarked further, as she went on pouring tea.

On the opposite side of the table were a plate, a knife and fork, and a little dish of cranberry sauce, with an empty chair before them. There was no guest to fill it.

"It's a sign somebody's comin' that's hungry," Mrs. Childs' brother's wife said, with soft effusiveness which was out of proportion to the words.

The brother was carving the turkey. Caleb Childs, the host, was an old man, and his hands trembled. Moreover, no one, he himself least of all, ever had any confidence in his ability in such directions. Whenever he helped himself to gravy, his wife watched anxiously lest he should spill it, and he always did. He spilled some to-day. There was a great spot on the beautiful clean table-cloth. Caleb set his cup and saucer over it quickly, with a little clatter because of his unsteady hand. Then he looked at his wife. He hoped she had not seen, but she had.

"You'd better have let John give you the gravy," she said, in a stern aside.

John, rigidly solicitous, bent over the turkey. He carved slowly and laboriously, but everybody had faith in him. The shoulders to which a burden is shifted have the credit of being strong. His wife, in her best black dress, sat smilingly, with her head canted a little to one side. It was a way she had when visiting. Ordinarily she did not assume it at her sister-in-law's house, but this was an extra occasion. Her fine manners spread their wings involuntarily. When she spoke about the sign, the young woman next her sniffed.

"I don't take any stock in signs," said she, with a bluntness which seemed to crash through the other's airiness with such force as to almost hurt itself. She was a distant cousin of Mr. Childs. Her husband and three children were with her. Mrs. Childs' unmarried sister, Maria Stone, made up the eleven at the table. Maria's gaunt face was unhealthily red about the pointed nose and the high cheek-bones; her eyes looked with a steady sharpness through her spectacles. "Well, it will be time enough to believe the sign when the twelfth one comes," said she, with a summary air. She had a judicial way of speaking. She had taught school ever since she was sixteen, and now she was sixty. She had just given up teaching. It was to celebrate that, and her final home-coming, that her sister was giving a Christmas dinner instead of a Thanksgiving one this year. The school had been in session during Thanksgiving week.

Maria Stone had scarcely spoken when there was a knock on the outer door, which led directly into the room. They all started. They were a plain, unimaginative company, but for some reason a thrill of superstitious and fantastic expectation ran through them. No one arose. They were all silent for a moment, listening and looking at

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the empty chair in their midst. Then the knock came again.

"Go to the door, Paulina," said her mother.

The young girl looked at her half fearfully, but she rose at once, and went and opened the door. Everybody stretched around to see. A girl stood on the stone step looking into the room. There she stood, and never said a word. Paulina looked around at her mother, with her innocent, half–involuntary smile.

"Ask her what she wants," said Mrs. Childs.

What do you want?" repeated Paulina, like a sweet echo.

Still the girl said nothing. A gust of north wind swept into the room. John's wife shivered, then looked around to see if any one had noticed it.

"You must speak up quick an' tell what you want, so we can shut the door; it's cold," said Mrs. Childs.

The girl's small sharp face was sheathed in an old worsted hood; her eyes glared out of it like a frightened cat's. Suddenly she turned to go. She was evidently abashed by the company.

"Don't you want somethin' to eat?" Mrs. Childs asked, speaking up louder.

"It ain't no matter." She just mumbled it.

"What?"

She would not repeat it. She was quite off the step by this time.

"You make her come in, Paulina," said Maria Stone, suddenly. "She wants something to eat, but she's half scared to death. You talk to her."

"Hadn't you better come in, and have something to eat?" said Paulina, shyly persuasive.

"Tell her she can sit right down here by the stove, where it's warm, and have a good plate of dinner," said Maria.

Paulina fluttered softly down to the stone step. The chilly snow–wind came right in her sweet, rosy face. "You can have a chair by the stove, where it's warm, and a good plate of dinner," said she.

The girl looked at her.

"Won't you come in?" said Paulina, of her own accord, and always smiling.

The stranger made a little hesitating movement forward.

"Bring her in, quick! and shut the door," Maria called out then. And Paulina entered with the girl stealing timidly in her wake.

"Take off your hood an' shawl," Mrs. Childs said, "an' sit down here by the stove, an' I'll give you some dinner." She spoke kindly. She was a warm–hearted woman, but she was rigidly built, and did not relax too quickly into action.

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But the cousin, who had been observing, with head alertly raised, interrupted. She cast a mischievous glance at John's wife—the empty chair was between them. "For pity's sake!" cried she; "you ain't goin' to shove her off in the corner? Why, here's this chair. She's the twelfth one. Here's where she ought to sit." There was a mixture of heartiness and sport in the young woman's manner. She pulled the chair back from the table. "Come right over here," said she.

There was a slight flutter of consternation among the guests. They were all narrow-lived country people. Their customs had made deeper grooves in their roads; they were more fastidious and jealous of their social rights than many in higher positions. They eyed this forlorn girl, in her faded and dingy woollens which fluttered airily and showed their pitiful thinness.

Mrs. Childs stood staring at the cousin. She did not think she could be in earnest.

But she was. "Come," said she; "put some turkey in this plate, John."

"Why, it's jest as the rest of you say," Mrs. Childs said, finally, with hesitation. She looked embarrassed and doubtful.

"Say! Why, they say just as I do," the cousin went on. "Why shouldn't they? Come right around here." She tapped the chair impatiently.

The girl looked at Mrs. Childs. "You can go an' sit down there where she says," she said, slowly, in a constrained tone.

"Come," called the cousin again. And the girl took the empty chair, with the guests all smiling stiffly.

Mrs. Childs began filling a plate for the new-comer.

Now that her hood was removed, one could see her face more plainly. It was thin, and of that pale brown tint which exposure gives to some blond skins. Still there was a tangible beauty which showed through all that. Her fair hair stood up softly, with a kind of airy roughness which caught the light. She was apparently about sixteen.

"What's your name?" inquired the school-mistress sister, suddenly.

The girl started. "Christine," she said, after a second.

"What?"

"Christine."

A little thrill ran around the table. The company looked at each other. They were none of them conversant with the Christmas legends, but at that moment the universal sentiment of them seemed to seize upon their fancies. The day, the mysterious appearance of the girl, the name, which was strange to their ears—all startled them, and gave them a vague sense of the supernatural. They, however, struggled against it with their matter-of-fact pride, and threw it off directly.

"Christine what?" Maria asked further.

The girl kept her scared eyes on Maria's face, but she made no reply.

"What's your other name? Why don't you speak?"

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Suddenly she rose.

"What are you goin' to do?"

"I'd—ruther—go, I guess."

"What are you goin' for? You ain't had your dinner."

"I—can't tell it," whispered the girl.

"Can't tell your name?"

She shook her head.

"Sit down, and eat your dinner," said Maria.

There was a strong sentiment of disapprobation among the company. But when Christine's food was actually before her, and she seemed to settle down upon it, like a bird, they viewed her with more toleration. She was evidently half starved. Their discovery of that fact gave them at once a fellow–feeling toward her on this feast–day, and a complacent sense of their own benevolence.

As the dinner progressed the spirits of the party appeared to rise, and a certain jollity which was almost hilarity prevailed. Beyond providing the strange guest plentifully with food, they seemed to ignore her entirely. Still nothing was more certain than the fact that they did not. Every outburst of merriment was yielded to with the most thorough sense of her presence, which appeared in some subtle way to excite it. It was as if this forlorn twelfth guest were the foreign element needed to produce a state of nervous effervescence in those staid, decorous people who surrounded her. This taste of mystery and unusualness, once fairly admitted, although reluctantly, to their unaccustomed palates, served them as wine with their Christmas dinner.

It was late in the afternoon when they arose from the table. Christine went directly for her hood and shawl, and put them on. The others, talking among themselves, were stealthily observant of her. Christine began opening the door.

"Are you goin' home now?" asked Mrs. Childs.

"No, marm."

"Why not?"

"I ain't got any."

"Where did you come from?"

The girl looked at her. Then she unlatched the door.

"Stop!" Mrs. Childs cried, sharply. "What are you goin' for? Why don't you answer?"

She stood still, but did not speak.

"Well, shut the door up, an' wait a minute," said Mrs. Childs.

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She stood close to a window, and she stared out scrutinizingly. There was no house in sight. First came a great yard, then wide stretches of fields; a desolate gray road curved around them on the left. The sky was covered with still, low clouds; the sun had not shone out that day. The ground was all bare and rigid. Out in the yard some gray hens were huddled together in little groups for warmth; their red combs showed out. Two crows flew up, away over on the edge of the field.

"It's goin' to snow," said Mrs. Childs.

"I'm afeard it is," said Caleb, looking at the girl.

He gave a sort of silent sob, and brushed some tears out of his old eyes with the back of his hands.

"See here a minute, Maria," said Mrs. Childs.

The two women whispered together; then Maria stepped in front of the girl, and stood, tall and stiff and impressive.

"Now see here," said she; "we want you to speak up and tell us your other name, and where you came from, and not keep us waiting any longer."

"I—can't." They guessed what she said from the motion of her head. She opened the door entirely then and stepped out.

Suddenly Maria made one stride forward and seized her by her shoulders, which felt like knife-blades through the thin clothes. "Well," said she, "we've been fussing long enough; we've got all these dishes to clear away. It's bitter cold, and it's going to snow, and you ain't going out of this house one step to-night, no matter what you are. You'd ought to tell us who you are, and it ain't many folks that would keep you if you wouldn't; but we ain't goin' to have you found dead in the road, for our own credit. It ain't on your account. Now you just take those things off again, and go and sit down in that chair."

Christine sat in the chair. Her pointed chin dipped down on her neck, whose poor little muscles showed above her dress, which sagged away from it. She never looked up. The women cleared off the table, and cast curious glances at her.

After the dishes were washed and put away, the company were all assembled in the sitting-room for an hour or so; then they went home. The cousin, passing through the kitchen to join her husband, who was waiting with his team at the door, ran hastily up to Christine.

"You stop at my house when you go to-morrow morning," said she. "Mrs. Childs will tell you where 'tis—half a mile below here."

When the company were all gone, Mrs. Childs called Christine into the sitting-room. "You'd better come in here and sit now," said she. "I'm goin' to let the kitchen fire go down; I ain't goin' to get another regular meal; I'm jest goin' to make a cup of tea on the sittin'-room stove by-an'-by."

The sitting-room was warm, and restrainedly comfortable with its ordinary village furnishings—its ingrain carpet, its little peaked clock on a corner of the high black shelf, its red-covered card-table, which had stood in the same spot for forty years. There was a little newspaper-covered stand, with some plants on it, before a window. There was one red geranium in blossom.

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Paulina was going out that evening. Soon after the company went she commenced to get ready, and her mother and aunt seemed to be helping her. Christine was alone in the sitting–room for the greater part of an hour.

Finally the three women came in, and Paulina stood before the sitting–room glass for a last look at herself. She had on her best red cashmere, with some white lace around her throat. She had a red geranium flower with some leaves in her hair. Paulina's brown hair, which was rather thin, was very silky. It was apt to part into little soft strands on her forehead. She wore it brushed smoothly back. Her mother would not allow her to curl it.

The two older women stood looking at her. "Don't you think she looks nice, Christine?" Mrs. Childs asked, in a sudden overflow of love and pride, which led her to ask sympathy from even this forlorn source.

"Yes, marm." Christine regarded Paulina, in her red cashmere and geranium flower, with sharp, solemn eyes. When she really looked at any one, her gaze was as unflinching as that of a child.

There was a sudden roll of wheels in the yard.

"Willard's come!" said Mrs. Childs. "Run to the door an' tell him you'll be right out, Paulina, an' I'll get your things ready."

After Paulina had been helped into her coat and hood, and the wheels had bowled out of the yard with a quick dash, the mother turned to Christine.

"My daughter's gone to a Christmas tree over to the church," said she. "That was Willard Morris that came for her. He's a real nice young man that lives about a mile from here."

Mrs. Childs' tone was at once gently patronizing and elated.

When Christine was shown to a little back bedroom that night, nobody dreamed how many times she was to occupy it. Maria and Mrs. Childs, who after the door was closed set a table against it softly and erected a tiltish pyramid of milkpans, to serve as an alarm in case the strange guest should try to leave her room with evil intentions, were fully convinced that she would depart early on the following morning.

"I dun know but I've run an awful risk keeping her, " Mrs. Childs said. "I don't like her not tellin' where she come from. Nobody knows but she belongs to a gang of burglars, an' they've kind of sent her on ahead to spy out things an' unlock the doors for 'em."

"I know it," said Maria. "I wouldn't have had her stay for a thousand dollars if it hadn't looked so much like snow. Well, I'll get up an' start her off early in the morning."

But Maria Stone could not carry out this resolution. The next morning she was ill with a sudden and severe attack of erysipelas. Moreover, there was a hard snow–storm, the worst of the season; it would have been barbarous to have turned the girl out–of–doors on such a morning. Moreover, she developed an unexpected capacity for usefulness. She assisted Pauline about the housework with timid alacrity, and Mrs. Childs could devote all her time to her sister.

"She takes right hold as if she was used to it," she told Maria. "I'd rather keep her a while than not, if I only knew a little more about her."

"I don't believe but what I could get it out of her after a while if I tried," said Maria, with her magisterial air, which illness could not subdue.

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However, even Maria, with all her well–fostered imperiousness, had no effect on the girl's resolution; she continued as much of a mystery as ever. Still the days went on, then the weeks and months, and she remained in the Childs family.

None of them could tell exactly how it had been brought about. The most definite course seemed to be that her arrival had apparently been the signal for a general decline of health in the family. Maria had hardly recovered when Caleb Childs was laid up with the rheumatism; then Mrs. Childs had a long spell of exhaustion from overwork in nursing. Christine proved exceedingly useful in these emergencies. Their need of her appeared to be the dominant, and only outwardly evident, reason for her stay; still there was a deeper one which they themselves only faintly realized—this poor young girl, who was rendered almost repulsive to these honest downright folk by her persistent cloak of mystery, had somehow, in a very short time, melted herself, as it were, into their own lives. Christine asleep of a night in her little back bedroom, Christine of a day stepping about the house in one of Paulina's old gowns, became a part of their existence, and a part which was not far from the nature of a sweetness to their senses.

She still retained her mild shyness of manner, and rarely spoke unless spoken to. Now that she was warmly sheltered and well fed, her beauty became evident. She grew prettier every day. Her cheeks became softly dimpled; her hair turned golden. Her language was rude and illiterate, but its very uncouthness had about it something of a soft grace.

She was really prettier than Paulina.

The two young girls were much together, but could hardly be said to be intimate. There were few confidences between them, and confidences are essential for the intimacy of young girls.

Willard Morris came regularly twice a week to see Paulina, and everybody spoke of them as engaged to each other.

Along in August Mrs. Childs drove over to town one afternoon and bought a piece of cotton cloth and a little embroidery and lace. Then some fine sewing went on, but with no comment in the household. Mrs. Childs had simply said, "I guess we may as well get a few things made up for you, Paulina, you're getting rather short." And Paulina had sewed all day long, with a gentle industry, when the work was ready.

There was a report that the marriage was to take place on Thanksgiving Day. But about the first of October Willard Morris stopped going to the Childs house. There was no explanation. He simply did not come as usual on Sunday night, nor the following Wednesday, nor the next Sunday. Paulina kindled her little parlor fire, whose sticks she had laid with maiden preciseness; she arrayed herself in her best gown and ribbons. When at nine o'clock Willard had not come, she blew out the parlor lamp, shut up the parlor stove, and went to bed. Nothing was said before her, but there was much talk and surmise between Mrs. Childs and Maria, and a good deal of it went on before Christine.

It was a little while after the affair of Cyrus Morris's note, and they wondered if it could have anything to do with that. Cyrus Morris was Willard's uncle, and the note affair had occasioned much distress in the Childs family for a month back. The note was for twenty–five hundred dollars, and Cyrus Morris had given it to Caleb Childs. The time, which was two years, had expired on the first of September, and then Caleb could not find the note.

He had kept it in his old–fashioned desk, which stood in one corner of the kitchen. He searched there a day and half a night, pulling all the soiled, creasy old papers out of the drawers and pigeonholes before he would answer his wife's inquiries as to what he had lost.

Finally he broke down and told. "I've lost that note of Morris's," said he. "I dun know what I'm goin' to do."

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He stood looking gloomily at the desk with its piles of papers. His rough old chin dropped down on his breast.

The women were all in the kitchen, and they stopped and stared.

"Why, father," said his wife, "where have you put it?"

"I put it here in this top drawer, and it ain't there."

"Let me look," said Maria, in a confident tone. But even Maria's energetic and self–assured researches failed.

"Well, it ain't here," said she. "I don't know what you've done with it."

"I don't believe you put it in that drawer, father," said his wife.

"It was in there two weeks ago. I see it."

"Then you took it out afterwards."

"I ain't laid hands on't."

"You must have; it couldn't have gone off without hands. You know you're kind of forgetful, father."

"I guess I know when I've took a paper out of a drawer. I know a leetle somethin' yit."

"Well, I don't suppose there'll be any trouble about it, will there?" said Mrs. Childs. "Of course he knows he give the note, an' had the money."

"I dun know as there'll be any trouble, but I'd ruther give a hundred dollar than had it happen."

After dinner Caleb shaved, put on his other coat and hat, and trudged soberly up the road to Cyrus Morris's. Cyrus Morris was an elderly man, who had quite a local reputation for wealth and business shrewdness. Caleb, who was lowly–natured and easily impressed by another's importance, always made a call upon him quite a formal affair, and shaved and dressed up. He was absent about an hour to–day. When he returned he went into the sitting–room, where the women sat with their sewing. He dropped into a chair, and looked straight ahead, with his forehead knitted.

The women dropped their work and looked at him, and then at each other.

"What did he say, father?" Mrs. Childs asked at length.

"Say! He's a rascal, that's what he is, an' I'll tell him so, too."

"Ain't he goin' to pay it?"

"No, he ain't."

"Why, father, I don't believe it! You didn't get hold of it straight," said his wife.

"You'll see."

"Why, what did he say?"

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"He didn't say anything."

"Doesn't he remember he had the money and gave the note, and has been paying interest on it?" queried Maria.

"He jest laughed, an' said 'twa'n't accordin' to law to pay unless I showed the note an' give it up to him. He said he couldn't be sure but I'd want him to pay it over ag'in. I know where that note is!"

Caleb's voice had deep meaning in it. The women stared at him.

"Where?"

"It's in Cyrus Morris's desk—that's where it is."

"Why, father, you're crazy!"

"No, I ain't crazy, nuther. I know what I'm talkin' about. I—"

"It's just where you put it," interrupted Maria, taking up her sewing with a switch; "and I wouldn't lay the blame onto anybody else."

"You'd ought to ha' looked out for a paper like that," said his wife. "I guess I should if it had been me. If you've gone an' lost all that money through your carelessness, you've done it, that's all I've got to say. I don't see what we're goin' to do."

Caleb bent forward and fixed his eyes upon the women. He held up his shaking hand impressively. "If you'll stop talkin' just a minute," said he, "I'll tell you what I was goin' to. Now I'd like to know just one thing: Wa'n't Cyrus Morris alone in that kitchen as much as fifteen minutes a week ago to–day? Didn't you leave him there while you went to look arter me? Wa'n't the key in the desk? Answer me that!"

His wife looked at him with cold surprise and severity.

"I wouldn't talk in any such way as that if I was you, father," said she. "It don't show a Christian spirit. It's jest layin' the blame of your own carelessness onto somebody else. You're all the one that's to blame. An' when it comes to it, you'd never ought to let Cyrus Morris have the money anyhow. I could have told you better. I knew what kind of a man he was."

"He's a rascal," said Caleb, catching eagerly at the first note of foreign condemnation in his wife's words. "He'd ought to be put in state's–prison. I don't think much of his relations nuther. I don't want nothin' to do with 'em, an' I don't want none of my folks to."

Paulina's soft cheeks flushed. Then she suddenly spoke out as she had never spoken in her life.

"It doesn't make it out because he's a bad man that his relations are," said she. "You haven't any right to speak so, father. And I guess you won't stop me having anything to do with them, if you want to."

She was all pink and trembling. Suddenly she burst out crying, and ran out of the room.

"You'd ought to be ashamed of yourself, father," exclaimed Mrs. Childs.

"I didn't think of her takin' on it so," muttered Caleb, humbly. "I didn't mean nothin'."

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Caleb did not seem like himself through the following days. His simple old face took on an expression of strained thought, which made it look strange. He was tottering on a height of mental effort and worry which was almost above the breathing capacity of his innocent and placid nature. Many a night he rose, lighted a candle, and tremulously fumbled over his desk until morning, in the vain hope of finding missing note.

One night, while he was so searching, some one touched him softly on the arm.

He jumped and turned. It was Christine. She had stolen in silently.

"Oh, it's you!" said he.

"Ain't you found it?"

"Found it? No; an' I sha'n't, nuther." He turned away from her and pulled out another drawer. The girl stood watching him wistfully. "It was a big yellow paper," the old man went on—"a big yellow paper, an' I'd wrote on the back on't, 'Cyrus Morris's note.' An' the interest he'd, paid was set down on the back on't, too."

"It's too bad you can't find it," said she.

"It ain't no use lookin'; it ain't here, an' that's the hull on't. It's in his desk. I ain't got no more doubt on't than nothin' at all."

"Where—does he keep his desk?"

"In his kitchen; it's jest like this one."

"Would this key open it?"

"I dun know but 'twould. But it ain't no use. I s'pose I'll have to lose it." Caleb sobbed silently and wiped his eyes.

A few days later he came, all breathless, into the sitting room. He could hardly speak; but he held out a folded yellow paper, which fluttered and blew in his unsteady hand like a yellow maple-leaf in an autumn gale.

"Look-a-here!" he gasped—"look-a-here!"

"Why, for goodness' sake, what's the matter?" cried Maria. She and Mrs. Childs and Paulina were there, sewing peacefully.

"Jest look-a-here!"

"Why, for mercy's sake, what is it, father? Are you crazy?"

"It's—the note!"

"What note? Don't get so excited, father."

"Cyrus Morris's note. That's what note 'tis. Look-a-here!"

The women all arose and pressed around him, to look at it.

"Where did you find it, father?" asked his wife, who was quite pale.

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"I suppose it was just where you put it," broke in Maria, with sarcastic emphasis.

"No, it wa'n't. No, it wa'n't, nuther. Don't you go to crowin' too quick, Maria. That paper was just where I told you 'twas. What do you think of that, hey?"

"Oh, father, you didn't!"

"It was layin' right there in his desk. That's where 'twas. Jest where I knew—" "Father, you didn't go over there an' take it!"

The three women stared at him with dilated eyes.

"No, I didn't."

"Who did?"

The old man jerked his head towards the kitchen door. "She."

"Who?"

"Christiny."

"How did she get it?" asked Maria, in her magisterial manner, which no astonishment could agitate.

"She saw Cyrus and Mis' Morris ride past, an' then she run over there, an' she got in through the window an' got it; that's how." Caleb braced himself like a stubborn child, in case any exception were taken to it all.

"It beats everything I ever heard," said Mrs. Childs, faintly.

"Next time you'll believe what I tell you!" said Caleb.

The whole family were in a state of delight over the recovery of the note; still Christine got rather hesitating gratitude. She was sharply questioned, and rather reproved than otherwise.

This theft, which could hardly be called a theft, aroused the old distrust of her.

"It served him just right, and it wasn't stealing, because it didn't belong to him; and I don't know what you would have done if she hadn't taken it," said Maria; "but, for all that, it went all over me."

"So it did over me," said her sister. "I felt just as you did, an' I felt as if it was real ungrateful too, when the poor child did it just for us."

But there were no such misgivings for poor Caleb, with his money, and his triumph over iniquitous Cyrus Morris. He was wholly and unquestioningly grateful.

"It was a blessed day when we took that little girl in," he told his wife.

"I hope it'll prove so," said she.

Paulina took her lover's desertion quietly. She had just as many soft smiles for every one; there was no alteration in her gentle, obliging ways. Still her mother used to listen at her door, and she knew that she cried instead of

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sleeping many a night. She was not able to eat much, either, although she tried to with pleasant willingness when her mother urged her.

After a while she was plainly grown thin, and her pretty color had faded. Her mother could not keep her eyes from her.

"Sometimes I think I'll go an' ask Willard myself what this kind of work means," she broke out with an abashed abruptness one afternoon. She and Paulina happened to be alone in the sitting–room.

"You'll kill me if you do, mother," said Paulina. Then she began to cry.

"Well, I won't do anything you don't want me to, of course," said her mother. She pretended not to see that Paulina was crying.

Willard had stopped coming about the first of October; the time wore on until it was the first of December, and he had not once been to the house, and Paulina had not exchanged a word with him in the meantime.

One night she had a fainting–spell. She fell heavily while crossing the sitting–room floor. They got her on to the lounge, and she soon revived; but her mother had lost all control of herself. She came out into the kitchen and paced the floor.

"Oh, my darlin'!" she wailed. "She's goin' to die. What shall I do? All the child I've got in the world. An' he's killed her! That scamp! I wish I could get my hands on him. Oh, Paulina, Paulina, to think it should come to this!"

Christine was in the room, and she listened with eyes dilated and lips parted. She was afraid that shrill wail would reach Paulina in the next room.

"She'll hear you," she said, finally.

Mrs. Childs grew quieter at that, and presently Maria called her into the sitting–room.

Christine stood thinking for a moment. Then she got her hood and shawl, put on her rubbers, and went out. She shut the door softly, so nobody should hear. When she stepped forth she plunged knee–deep into snow. It was snowing hard, as it had been all day. It was a cold storm, too; the wind was bitter. Christine waded out of the yard and down the street. She was so small and light that she staggered when she tried to step firmly in some tracks ahead of her. There was a full moon behind the clouds, and there was a soft white light in spite of the storm. Christine kept on down the street, in the direction of Willard Morris's house. It was a mile distant. Once in a while she stopped and turned herself about, that the terrible wind might smite her back instead of her face. When she reached the house she waded painfully through the yard to the side–door and knocked. Pretty soon it opened, and Willard stood there in the entry, with a lamp in his hand.

"Good–evening," said he, doubtfully, peering out.

"Good–evenin'." The light shone on Christine's face.

The snow clung to her soft hair, so it was quite white. Her cheeks had a deep, soft color, like roses; her blue eyes blinked a little in the lamp–light, but seemed rather to flicker like jewels or stars. She panted softly through her parted lips. She stood there, with the snow–flakes driving in light past her, and "She looks like an angel," came swiftly into Willard Morris's head before he spoke.

"Oh, it's you," said he.

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Christine nodded.

Then they stood waiting. "Why, won't you come in?" said Willard, finally, with an awkward blush. "I declare I never thought. I ain't very polite."

She shook her head. "No, thank you," said she.

"Did—you want to see mother?"

"No."

The young man stared at her in increasing perplexity. His own fair, handsome young face got more and more flushed. His forehead wrinkled. "Was there anything you wanted?"

"No, I guess not," Christine replied, with a slow softness.

Willard shifted the lamp into his other hand and sighed. "It's a pretty hard storm," he remarked, with an air of forced patience.

"Yes."

"Didn't you find it terrible hard walking?"

"Some."

Willard was silent again. "See here, they're all well down at your house, ain't they?" said he, finally. A look of anxious interest had sprung into his eyes. He had begun to take alarm.

"I guess so."

Suddenly he spoke out impetuously. "Say, Christine, I don't know what you came here for; you can tell me afterwards. I don't know what you'll think of me, but— Well, I want to know something. Say—well, I haven't been 'round for quite a while. You don't—suppose—they've cared much, any of them'"

"I don't know."

"Well, I don't suppose you do, but—you might have noticed. Say, Christine, you don't think she—you know whom I mean—cared anything about my coming, do you?"

"I don't know," she said again, softly, with her eyes fixed warily on his face.

"Well, I guess she didn't; she wouldn't have said what she did if she had."

Christine's eyes gave a sudden gleam. "What did she say?"

"Said she wouldn't have anything more to do with me," said the young man, bitterly. "She was afraid I would be up to just such tricks as my uncle was, trying to cheat her father. That was too much for me. I wasn't going to stand that from any girl." He shook his head angrily.

"She didn't say it."

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"Yes, she did; her own father told my uncle so. Mother was in the next room and heard it."

"No, she didn't say it," the girl repeated.

"How do you know?"

"I heard her say something different[,]" Christine told him.

"I'm going right up there," cried he, when he heard that.

"Wait a minute, and I'll go along with you."

"I dun know as you'd better—to–night," Christine said, looking out towards the road evasively. "She—ain't been very well to–night."

"Who? Paulina? What's the matter?"

"She had a faintin'–spell jest before I came out," answered Christine, with stiff gravity.

"Oh! Is she real sick?"

"She was some better."

"Don't you suppose I could see her just a few minutes? I wouldn't stay to tire her," said the young man, eagerly.

"I dun know."

"I must, anyhow."

Christine fixed her eyes on his with a solemn sharpness. "What makes you want to?"

"What makes me want to? Why, I'd give ten years to see her five minutes."

"Well, mebbe you could come over a few minutes."

"Wait a minute,!" cried Willard. "I'll get my hat."

"I'd better go first, I guess. The parlor fire'll be to light."

"Then had I better wait?"

"I guess so."

"Then I'll be along in about an hour. Say, you haven't said what you wanted."

Christine was off the step.

"It ain't any matter," murmured she.

"Say—she didn't send you?"

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"No, she didn't."

"I didn't mean that. I didn't suppose she did," said Willard, with an abashed air. "What did you want, Christine?"

"There's somethin' I want you to promise," said she, suddenly.

"What's that?"

"Don't you say anything about Mr. Childs."

"Why, how can I help it?"

"He's an old man, an' he was so worked up he didn't know what he was sayin'. They'll all scold him. Don't say anything."

"Well, I won't say anything. I don't know what I'm going to tell her, though."

Christine turned to go.

"You didn't say what 'twas you wanted," called Willard again.

But she made no reply. She was pushing through the deep snow out of the yard.

It was quite early yet, only a few minutes after seven. It was eight when she reached home. She entered the house without any one seeing her. She pulled off her snowy things, and went into the sitting–room.

Paulina was alone there. She was lying on the lounge. She was very pale, but she looked up and smiled when Christine entered.

Christine brought the fresh out–door air with her. Paulina noticed it. "Where have you been?" whispered she.

Then Christine bent over her, and talked fast in a low tone.

Presently Paulina raised herself and sat up. "Tonight?" cried she, in an eager whisper. Her cheeks grew red.

"Yes; I'll go make the parlor fire."

"It's all ready to light." Suddenly Paulina threw her arms around Christine and kissed her. Both girls blushed.

"I don't think I said one thing to him that you wouldn't have wanted me to," said Christine.

"You didn't—ask him to come?"

"No, I didn't, honest."

When Mrs. Childs entered, a few minutes later, she found her daughter standing before the glass.

"Why, Paulina!" cried she.

"I feel a good deal better, mother," said Paulina.

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"Ain't you goin' to bed?"

"I guess I won't quite yet."

"I've got it all ready for you. I thought you wouldn't feel like sittin' up."

"I guess I will; a little while."

Soon the door–bell rang with a sharp peal. Everybody jumped—Paulina rose and went to the door.

Mrs. Childs and Maria, listening, heard Willard's familiar voice, then the opening of the parlor door.

"It's him!" gasped Mrs. Childs. She and Maria looked at each other.

It was about two hours before the soft murmur of voices in the parlor ceased, the outer door closed with a thud, and Paulina came into the room. She was blushing and smiling, but she could not look in any one's face at first.

"Well," said her mother, "who was it?"

"Willard. It's all right."

It was not long before the fine sewing was brought out again, and presently two silk dresses were bought for Paulina. It was known about that she was to be married on Christmas Day. Christine assisted in the preparation. All the family called to mind afterwards the obedience so ready as to be loving which she yielded to their biddings during those few hurried weeks. She sewed, she made cake, she ran of errands, she wearied herself joyfully for the happiness of this other young girl.

About a week before the wedding, Christine, saying good–night when about to retire one evening, behaved strangely. They remembered it afterwards. She went up to Paulina and kissed her when saying good–night. It was something which she had never before done. Then she stood in the door, looking at them all. There was a sad, almost a solemn, expression on her fair girlish face.

"Why, what's the matter?" said Maria.

"Nothin'," said Christine. "Good–night."

That was the last time they ever saw her. The next morning Mrs. Childs, going to call her, found her room vacant. There was a great alarm. When they did not find her in the house nor the neighborhood, people were aroused, and there was a search instigated. It was prosecuted eagerly, but to no purpose. Paulina's wedding evening came, and Christine was still missing.

Paulina had been married, and was standing beside her husband, in the midst of the chattering guests, when Caleb stole out of the room. He opened the north door, and stood looking out over the dusky fields. "Christiny!" he called; "Christiny!"

Presently he looked up at the deep sky, full of stars, and called again—"Christiny! Christiny!" But there was no answer save in light. When Christine stood in the sitting room door and said good–night, her friends had their last sight and sound of her. Their Twelfth Guest had departed from their hospitality forever.