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Rose of Old Harpeth

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ROSE OF OLD HARPETH

[Illustration: Rose Mary]

ROSE OF

OLD HARPETH

BY MARIA THOMPSON DAVIESS

Author of "Miss Selina Lue," "The Road to Providence,"
"The Melting of Molly," *etc.*

[Illustration]

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

By W.B. *King*

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THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY

I DEDICATE

ROSE MARY

TO MY MOTHER

LEONORA HAMILTON DAVIESS

AND THE WHOLE BOOK

TO MY GRANDMOTHER

MARIA THOMPSON DAVIESS

ROSE OF OLD HARPETH

CHAPTER I

ROSE MARY OF SWEETBRIAR

"Why, don't you know nothing in the world compliments a loaf of bread like the asking for a fourth slice," laughed Rose Mary as she reached up on the stone shelf above her head and took down a large crusty loaf and a long knife. "Thick or thin?" she asked as she raised her lashes from her blue eyes for a second of hospitable inquiry.

"Thin," answered Everett promptly, "but two with the butter sticking 'em together. Please be careful with that weapon! It's as good as a juggler's show to watch you, but it makes me slightly---solicitous." As he spoke he seated himself on the corner of the wide stone table as near to Rose Mary and the long knife as seemed advisable. A ray of sunlight fell through the door of the milk-house and cut across his red head to lose itself in Rose Mary's close black braids.

"Make it four," he further demanded over the table.

"Indeed and I will," answered Rose Mary delightedly. And as she spoke she held the loaf against her breast and drew the knife through the slices in a fascinatingly dangerous manner. At the intentness of his regard the color rose up under the lashes that veiled her eyes, and she hugged the loaf closer with her left hand. "Would you like six?" she asked innocently, as the fourth stroke severed the last piece.

"Just go on and slice it all up," he answered with a laugh. "I'd rather watch you than eat."

"Wait till I butter these for you and then you can eat---and watch me---me finish working the butter. Won't that do as well? Think what an encouragement your interest will be to me! Really, nothing in the world paces a woman's work like a man looking on, and if he doesn't stop her she'll drop under the line. Now, you have your bread and butter and you can sit over there by the door and help me turn off this ten pounds in no time."

As she had been speaking, Rose Mary had spread two of the slices with the yellow butter from a huge bowl in front of her, clapped on the tops of the sandwiches and then, with a smile, handed them in a blue plate to the man who lounged across the corner of her table. She made a very gracious and lovely picture, did Rose Mary, in her light-blue homespun gown against the cool gray depths of the milk-house, which was fern-lined along the cracks of the old stones and mysterious with the trickling gurgle of the spring that flowed into the long stone troughs, around the milk crocks and out under the stone door-sill. From his post by the door Everett watched her as she drove her paddle deep into the hard golden mound in the blue bowl in front of her, and, with a quick turn of her strong, slender wrist slapped and patted chunk after chunk of the butter into a more compressed form. The sleeves of her dress were rolled almost to her shoulders and under the white, moist flesh of her arms the fine muscles showed plainly. The strong curves of her back

and shoulders bent and sprung under the graceful sweep of her arms and her round breasts rose and fell with quickened breath from her energetic movements.

"Now, you're making me work *too* hard," she laughed; and she panted as she rested her hand for a second against the edge of the bowl and looked up at Everett from under a black tendril curl that had fallen down across her forehead.

"Miss Rose Mary Alloway, you are one large, husky---witch," calmly remarked the hungry man as he finished disposing of the last half of one of the thin bread and butters. "Here I sit enchanted by---by a butter-paddle, when you and I both know that not two miles across the meadows there runs a train that ought to put me into New York in a little over forty-eight hours. Won't you, won't you let me go---back to my frantic and imploring employers?"

"Why no, I can't," answered Rose Mary as she pressed a yellow cake of butter on to a blue plate and deftly curled it up with her paddle into a huge yellow sunflower. "Uncle Tucker captured you roaming loose out in his fields and he trusts you to me while he is at work and I must keep you safe. He's fond of you and so are the Aunties and Stonewall Jackson and Shoofly and Sniffer and---"

"And anybody else?" demanded Everett, preparing to dispose of the last bite.

"Oh, everybody most along Providence Road," answered Rose Mary enthusiastically, though not raising her eyes from the manipulation of the third butter flower. "Can't you go out and dig up some more rocks and things? I feel sure you haven't got a sample of all of them. And there may be gold and silver and precious jewels just one inch deeper than you have dug. Are you certain you can't squeeze up some oil somewhere in the meadow? You told a whole lot of reasons to Uncle Tucker why you knew you would find some, and now you'll have to stay to prove yourself."

"No," answered Mark Everett quietly, and, as he spoke, he raised his eyes and looked at Rose Mary keenly; "no, there is no oil that I can discover, though the formation, as I explained to your uncle, is just as I expected to find it. I've spent three weeks going over every inch of the Valley and I can't find a trace of grease. I'm sorry."

"Well, I don't know that I care, except for your sake," answered Rose Mary unconcernedly, with her eyes still on her task. "We don't any of us like the smell of coal-oil, and it gives Aunt Viney asthma. It would be awfully disagreeable to have wells of it right here on the place. They'd be so ugly and smelly."

"But oil-wells mean---mean a great deal of wealth," ventured Everett.

"I know, but just think of the money Uncle Tucker gets for this butter I make from the cows that graze on the meadows. Wouldn't it be awful if they should happen to drink some of the coal-oil and make the butter we send down to the city taste wrong and spoil the Sweetbriar reputation? I like money though, most awfully, and I want some right now. I want to---"

"Mary of the Rose, stop right there!" said Everett as he came over from his post by the door and again seated himself on the corner of the table. "I *will* not listen to you give vent to the national craving. I *will* hold on to the illusion of having found one unmercenary human being, even if she had to be buried in the depths of Harpeth Valley to keep her so." There was banter in Everett's voice and a smile on his lips, but a bitterness lay in the depths of his keen dark eyes and an ugly trace of cynicism filtered through the tones of his voice.

"And wasn't it funny for me to count the little well-chickens before they were even hatched?" laughed Rose Mary. "That's the way of it, get together even a little flock of dollars in prospect and they go right to work hatching out a brood of wants and needs; but it's not wrong of me to want those false teeth so bad, because it's such a trial to have your mouth

all sink in and not be able to talk plain and---"

"Help, woman! What are you talking about? I never saw such teeth as you have in all my life. One flash of them would put a beauty show out of business and---"

"Oh, no, not for myself!" Rose Mary hastened to exclaim, and she turned the whole artillery of the pearl treasures upon him in mirth at his mistake. "It's Aunt Viney I want them for. She only has five left. She says she didn't mind so long as she had any two that hit, but the hitters to all five are gone now and she is so distressed. I'm saving up to take her down to the city to get a brand new set. I have eleven dollars now and two little bull calves to sell, though it breaks my heart to let them go, even if they are of the wrong persuasion. I always love them better than I do the little heifers, because I have to give them up. I don't like to have things I love go away. You see you mustn't think of going to New York until the spring is all over and summer comes for good," she continued, with the most delightful ingenuousness, as she shaped the last of the ten flowers and glanced from her task at him with the most solicitous concern. "Of course, you feel as if the smash your lung got in that awful rock slide has healed all up, and I know it has, but you'll have to do as the doctor tells you about not running any risks with New York spring gales, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose I will," answered Everett, with a trace of restlessness in his voice. "I'm just as sound as a dollar now and I'm wild to go with that gang the firm is sending up into British Columbia to thrash out that copper question. I know they counted on me for the final tests. Some other fellow will find it and get the fortune and the credit, while I---I---"

He stared moodily out the door of the milk-house and down Providence Road that wound its calm, even way from across the ridge down through the green valley. Rose Mary's milk-house was nestled between the breasts of a low hill, upon which was perched the wide-winged, old country house which had brooded the fortunes of the Alloways since the wilderness days. The spring which gushed from the back wall of the milk-house poured itself into a stone trough on the side of the Road, which had been placed there generations ago for the refreshment of beast, while man had been entertained within the hospitable stone walls. And at the foot of the Briars, as the Alloway home, hill, spring and meadows had been called from time immemorial, clustered the little village of Sweetbriar.

The store, which also sheltered the post-office, was almost opposite the spring-house door across the wide Road, the blacksmith shop farther down and the farm-houses stretched fraternally along either side in both directions. Far up the Road, as it wound its way around Providence Nob, could be seen the chimneys and the roofs of Providence, while Springfield and Boliver also lay like smoke-wreathed visions in the distance. Something of the peace and plenty of it all had begun to smooth the irritated wrinkle from between Mark Everett's brows, when Rose Mary's hand rested for a second over his on the table and her rich voice, with its softest brooding note, came from across her bowl.

"Ah, I know it's hard for you, Mr. Mark," she said, "and I wish---I wish---The lilacs will be in bloom next week, won't that help some?" And the wooing tone in her voice was exactly what she used in coaxing young Stonewall Jackson to bed or Uncle Tucker to tie up his throat in a flannel muffler.

"It's not lilacs I'm needing with a rose in bloom right---" But Everett's gallant response to the coaxing was cut short by a sally from an unexpected quarter.

Down Providence Road at full tilt came Stonewall Jackson, with the Swarm in a cloud of dust at his heels. He jumped across the spring branch and darted in under the milk-house eaves, while the Swarm drew up on the other bank in evident impatience. Swung bundle-wise under his arm he held a small, tow-headed bunch, and as he landed on the stone door-sill he hastily deposited it on the floor at Rose Mary's feet.

"Say, Rose Mamie," he panted, "you just keep Shoofly for us a little while, won't you? Mis' Poteet have done left her with Tobe to take care of and he put her on a stump while he chased a polecat that he fell on while it was going under a fence, and now Uncle Tuck is a-burying of him up in the woods lot. Jest joggle her with your foot this way if she goes to cry." And in demonstration of his directions the General put one bare foot in the middle of the mite's back and administered a short series of rotary motions, which immediately brought a response of ecstatic gurgles. "We'll come back for her as soon as we dig him up," he added, as he prepared for another flying leap across the spring stream.

"But, Stonie, wait and tell me what you mean!" exclaimed Rose Mary, while Everett regarded Stonewall Jackson and his cohorts with delighted amusement.

"I told you once, Rose Mamie, that Tobe fell on a polecat under a fence he was a-chasing, and he smells so awful Uncle Tuck have burned his britches and shirt on the end of a stick and have got him buried in dirt up to jest his nose. Burying in dirt is the onliest thing that'll take off the smell. We comed to ask you to watch Shoofly while he's buried, cause Mis' Poteet will be mad at him when she comes home if Shoofly smells. We're all a-going to stay right by him until he's dug up, 'cause we all sicked him on that polecat and we ought in honor!"

Stonie looked at the Swarm for confirmation of this worthy sentiment, and it arose in a murmur. The Swarm was a choice congregation of small fry that trailed perpetually at the heels of Stonewall Jackson, and at the moment was in a state of seething excitement. Jennie Rucker's little freckled face was pale under its usual sunburn, as a result of being too near the disastrous encounter, and her little nose, turned up by nature in the outset, looked as if it were in danger of never again assuming its normal tilt. She held small Pete by one chubby hand, and with a wry face he was licking out an absurd little red tongue at least twice each moment, as if uncertain as to whether his olfactory or gustatory nerves had been offended. Billy was standing with the nonchalant unconcern of one strong of stomach, and the four other little Poteets, ranging in size from Shoofly, on the floor, to Tobe, the buried, were shuffling their bare feet in the dust with evident impatience to be off to gloat over the prostrated but important member of the family. They rolled their wide eyes at almost impossible angles, and small Peggy sniffed audibly into a corner of her patched gingham apron.

"Yes, Stonie," answered Rose Mary judicially, while Everett's shoulders shook with mirth that he felt it best not to give way to in the face of the sympathetic Swarm, "you all must stay with Tobe, if he has to be buried, and go right back as fast as you can. Troubles must make us stay close by our friends."

"If I get much closer to him I'll throw up," sniffed Jennie, and her protest was echoed by a groan from Peggy into the apron, while the area which showed above its folds turned white at the prospect of being obliged to draw near to this brother in affliction.

"Yes, but you sicked Tobe, with the rest of us, and in this *girls* don't count. You've got to go back, smell or no smell, sick or no sick," announced the General firmly, in the decisive tones of one accustomed to be obeyed.

"Yes, Stonie," came in a meek and muffled tone from the apron, "we'll go back with you."

"Can't we just set on the fence of the lot---it ain't so far?" pleaded Jennie in almost a wail. "I'm afraid Pete will cry from the smell if we go any closter. He's most doing it now."

"Yes, General, let the girls sit on the fence," pleaded Everett, with his eyes dancing, but a bit of mockery in his voice, "after all they are---girls, you know."

"Oh, well, yes, they can," answered Stonewall Jackson in a magnanimously disgusted tone of voice. "They always get girls when they don't want to do anything. Come on, Tobe'll be crying if we don't hurry. Billy, you help Jennie drag

Pete, so he can go fast!"

But during the conference the disgusted toddler had been pondering the situation, and at this mention of his being dragged back to the scene of offense he had made a quick sally across the plank that spanned the spring branch and with masculine intuition as to the safe place in time of danger, he had plunged head foremost into Rose Mary's skirts, so that only his small fat back showed to the enemy.

"Please go on, Stonie, and leave him with me---he's just a baby," pleaded Rose Mary.

"All right," answered the General, "Tobe don't care about him; he'd just make us go slow," and thus dropping young Peter into the category of impedimenta, the General departed at top speed, surrounded, as he came, by the loyal Swarm. On the day of his birth Aunt Viney's choice for a name for the General had balanced for some hours between that of the redoubtable Abner the Valiant, of old Testament fame, and her favorite modern hero, Jackson of the stonewall nature. And in her final choice she had seemed so to impress the infant that he had developed more than a little of the nature of his patron commander. At all times Stonie commanded the Swarm, and also at all times was strictly obeyed.

Then seeing herself thus deserted by her companions, Shoofly began a low, musical hum of a wail and walled large eyes up at Everett, at whose feet she was seated. In instant sympathetic response he applied the toe of his shoe to the small of the whimpering tot's back and proceeded awkwardly, though with the best intentions in the world, to follow the General's directions as to pacification. Rose Mary laughed as she took a tin-cup from a nail in the wall, and filling it with milk from one of the crocks, she knelt at the side of the deserted one and held the brim to the red lips of Shoofly's generous mouth. With a series of gurgles and laps the consoling draft was quickly consumed and the whimperer left by this double ministrations in a state of placid contentment.

Peter the wise had stood viewing these attentions to the other baby with stolid imperturbability, but as Rose Mary turned away to her table he licked out his pink tongue and bobbed his head toward the milk crocks, while his solemn eyes conveyed his desire without words. Peter's vocabulary was both new and limited, and he was at all times extremely careful against any wastefulness of it. His lips quivered as if in uncertainty as to whether he was to be left out of this lactic deal, and his eyes grew reproachful.

"Why, man alive, did you think I had forgotten you!" exclaimed Rose Mary as she turned with the cup to one of the crocks standing in the water, at the sight of which motion relief dawned in the serious eyes of the young petitioner. Filling the cup swiftly, she lifted the youngster in her arms and came over to sit in the door beside Shoofly at Everett's feet. With dignified deliberation Peter began to consume his draft in slow gulps, and after each one he lifted his eyes to Rose Mary's face as if rendering courteous appreciation for the consumed portion. His chubby fingers were clasped around her wrist as she held the cup for him, and her other hand cuddled one of his bare, briar-scratched knees. The picture had its instituted effect on Everett, and he bent toward the little group in the doorway and rested his elbows on his knees as his world-restless eyes softened and the lines around his mouth melted into a smile.

"Rose Mary," he said with an almost abashed note in his deep voice, "we'll dispense with the lilacs---they're not needed as retainers, and I don't deserve them."

"But being good will bring you the lilacs of life; whether you think you deserve them or not, I'm afraid it's inevitable," answered Rose Mary, as she smiled up at him with instant appreciation of his change of mood.

"Well, I'll try it this once and see what happens," answered Everett with a laugh. "Indeed, I'm ashamed of having shown you any impatience at all---to think of impatience in this heaven country of hospitality amounts to positive sacrilege. Shrive me---and then bring on your lilacs!"

"Then you'll stay with us until it's safe for you to go North and I won't have to worry about you any more?" exclaimed Rose Mary, delighted, as she beamed up over Pete's tow-head that had dropped with repletion on her breast. Shoofly, who, true to her appellation, had been making funny little dabs of delight at a fly or two which had buzzed in her direction, had crawled nearer and burrowed her head under Rose Mary's knee, rolled over on her little stomach and gone instantaneously and exhaustedly to sleep. Rose Mary adjusted a smothering fold of her dress and continued in her rejoicing over Everett's surrender to circumstance inevitable.

"And do you think you can dig some more in the fields? Don't happiness and hoe mean the same thing to most men?" she questioned with a laugh.

"Yes, hoe to the death and the devil take the last man at the end of the row, fortune to the first!" answered Everett with a return of his cynical look and tone.

"Oh, but in the world some men just go along and chop down ugly weeds, stir up the good, smelly earth for things to grow in, reach over to help the man in the next furrow if he needs it, and all come home at sundown together---and the women have the supper ready. That's the kind of hoeing I want you to do---please dig me up those teeth for Aunt Viney and I'll have johnny-cake and fried chicken waiting for you every night. Please, sir, promise!" And Rose Mary's voice sounded its coaxing, comforting note, while her deep eyes brooded over him.

"I promise," answered Everett with a laugh. "I tell you what I think I will do. As I understand it, the Briars has about three hundred acres, all told. I have been all over it for the oil and there is none in any paying quantities. But in this kind of formation any number of other things may crop up or out. I am going to go over every acre of it carefully and find exactly what can be expected of it. There may be nothing of any value in a mineral way, but as I go I am going to make soil tests, and then put it all down on a complete map and figure out just what your Uncle Tucker ought to plant in each place for years to come. It will kill a lot of time, and then it might be doing something for you dear people, who have taken a miserable, cross invalid of a stranger man in out of the wet and made a well chap of him again.

"Do you know what you have done for me? That day when I had tramped over from Boliver just to get away from the Citizens' Hotel and myself and perched upon Mr. Alloway's north lot fence like a miserable funeral crow, I had reached my limit, and my spirit had turned its face to the wall. I had been down South six weeks and couldn't see that I felt one bit stronger. I had just heard of this copper expedition from one of the chaps, who had written me a heedlessly exultant letter about it, and I was down and out and no strength left to fight. I was too weak to take it like a man, and couldn't make up my mind to cry like a woman, though I wanted to. Just as it was at its worst your Uncle Tucker appeared on the other side of the fence, and when he looked at me with those great, heaven-big eyes of his I fell over into his arms with a funny, help-has-come dying gasp. As you know, when I woke I was anchored in the middle of that puffy old four-poster in my room under the blessed roof of the Briars and you were pouring something glorious and hot down my throat, while the wonderful old angel-man in the big gray hat, who had got me out in the field, was flapping his wings around on the other side of the pillows. I went to sleep under your very hands---and I haven't waked up yet---except in ugly, impatient ways. I never want to."

"I wonder what you would be like---awake?" said Rose Mary softly, as she gently lowered the head of young Peter down into the hollow of her arm, where, in close proximity to Shoofly's, he nodded off into the depths. "I think I'm afraid to try waking you. I'm always so happy when Aunt Viney has snuffed away her asthma with jimson weed and got down on her pillow, and I have rubbed all her joints; when the General has said his prayers without stopping to argue in the middle, and Uncle Tucker has finished his chapter and pipe in bed without setting us all on fire, that I regard people asleep as in a most blessed condition. Won't you please try and stay happy, tucked away fast here at the Briars, without wanting to wake up and go all over New York, when I won't know whether you are getting cold or hungry or wet or a pain in your lungs?"

"Again I promise! Just wake me enough to go out and hoe for you is all I ask--your row and your kind of hoeing."

"Maybe hoeing in my row will make you finish your own in fine style," laughed Rose Mary. "And I think it's wonderful of you to study up our land so Uncle Tucker can do better with it. We never seem to be able to make any more than just the mortgage interest, and what we'll wear when the trunks in the garret are empty I don't see. We'll have to grow feathers. Things like false teeth just seem to be impossible."

"Do you mean to tell me that the Briars is seriously encumbered?" demanded Everett, with a quick frown showing between his brows and a business-keen look coming into his eyes.

"The mortgage on the Briars covers it as completely as the vines on the wall," answered Rose Mary quickly, with a humorous quirk at her mouth that relieved the note of pain in her voice. "I know we can never pay it, but if something could be done to keep it for the old folks *always*, I think Stonie and I could stand it. They were born here and their roots strike deep and twine with the roots of every tree and bush at the Briars. Their graves are over there behind the stone wall, and all their joys and sorrows have come to them along Providence Road. I am not unhappy over it, because I know that their Master isn't going to let anything happen to take them away. Every night before I go to sleep I just leave them to Him until I can wake up in the morning to begin to keep care of them for Him again. It was all about--"

"Wait a minute, let me ask you some questions before you tell me any more," said Everett, quickly covering the sympathy that showed in his eyes with his business tone of voice. "Is it Gideon Newsome who holds this mortgage?"

"Why, yes, how did you know?" asked Rose Mary with a mild surprise in her eyes as she raised them to his, bent intently on her. "Uncle Tucker had to get the money from him six years ago. It--it was a debt of honor--he--we had to pay." A rich crimson spread itself over Rose Mary's brow and cheeks and flooded down her white neck under the folds of her blue dress across her breast. Tears rose to her eyes, but she lifted her head proudly and looked him straight in the face. "There is a reason why I would give my life--why I do and must give my life to protecting them from the consequences of the disaster. No sacrifice is too great for me to make to save their home for them."

"Do you mind telling me how much the mortgage is for?" asked Everett, still in his cool, thoughtful voice.

"For ten thousand dollars," answered Rose Mary. "The land is worth really less than fifteen. Nobody but such a--such a friend as Mr. Newsome would have loaned Uncle Tucker so much. He--he has been very kind to us. I--I am very grateful to him and I--" Rose Mary faltered and dropped her eyes. A tear trembled on the edge of her black lashes and then splashed on to the chubby cheek of Peter the reposer.

"I see," said Everett coolly, and a flint tone made his usually rich voice harsh and tight. For a few minutes he sat quietly looking Rose Mary over with an inscrutable look in his eyes that finally faded again into the utter world weariness. "I see--and so the bargain and sale goes on even on Providence Road under Old Harpeth. But the old people will never have to give up the Briars while you are here to pay the price of their protection, Rose Mary. Never!"

"I don't believe they will--my faith in Him makes me sure," answered Rose Mary with lovely unconsciousness as she raised large, comforted eyes to Everett's. "I don't know how I'm going to manage, but somehow my cup of faith seems to get filled each day with the wine of courage and the result is mighty apt to be a--song." And Rose Mary's face blushed out again into a flowering of smiles.

"A sort of cup of heavenly nectar," answered Everett with an answering smile, but the keen look still in his eyes. "See here, I want you to promise me something--don't ever, under any circumstances, tell anybody that I know about this mortgage. Will you?"

"Of course, I won't if you tell me not to," answered Rose Mary immediately. "I don't like to think or talk about it. I only told you because you wanted to help us. Help offers are the silver linings to trouble clouds, and you brought this one down on yourself, didn't you? Of course, it's selfish and wrong to tell people about your anxieties, but there is just no other way to get so close to a friend. Don't you think perhaps sometimes the Lord doesn't bother to 'temper the winds,' but just leads you up on the sheltered side of somebody who is stronger than you are and leaves you there until your storm is over?"

CHAPTER II

THE FOLKS-GARDEN

"Well," said Uncle Tucker meditatively, "I reckon a festibal on a birthday can be taken as a kind of compliment to the Lord and no special glorification to yourself. He instuted your first one Himself, and I see no harm in jest a-marking of the years He sends you. What are Sister Viney's special reasons against the junket?"

"Oh, I don't know what makes Aunt Viney feel this way!" exclaimed Rose Mary with distress in her blue eyes that she raised to Uncle Tucker's, that were bent benignly upon her as she stood in the barn door beside him. "She says that as the Lord has granted her her fourscore years by reason of great strength, she oughtn't to remind Him that He has forgotten her by having an eighty-second birthday. Everybody in Sweetbriar has been looking forward to it for a week, and it was going to be such a lovely party. What shall we do? She says she just won't have it, and Aunt Amandy is crying when Aunt Viney don't see it. She's made up her mind, and I don't know what more to say to her."

"Rose Mary," said Uncle Tucker, with a quizzical smile quirking at the corners of his mouth, "mighty often the ingredient of permanency is left out in the making up of a woman's mind, one way or another. Can't you kinder pervail with your Aunt Viney some? I've got a real hanker after this little birthday to-do. Jest back her around to another view of the question with a slack plow-line. Looks like it's too bad to---"

"Rose Mary, oh, Rose Mary, where are ye, child?" came a call in a high, sweet old quaver of a voice from down the garden path, and Miss Amanda hove in sight, hurrying along on eager but tottering little feet. Her short, skimpy, gray skirts fluttered in the spring breezes and her bright, old eyes peered out from the gray shawl she held over her head with tremulous excitement. She was both laughing and panting as Rose Mary threw her arm around her and drew her into the door of the barn. "Sister Viney has consented in her mind about the party, all along of a verse I was just now a-reading to her in our morning lesson. Saint Luke says: '*It is meet that we should make merry and be glad, for this thy brother was dead and is alive again,*' and at the same minute the recollection of how sick Mr. Mark has been hit us both. 'There now,' she says, 'you folks can jest go on with that party to-day for the benefit of our young brother Everett's coming to so good after all his sufferings. This time I will consider it as instituted of the Lord, but don't nobody say birthday next April, if I'm here, on no account whatever.' I take it as a special leading to me to have read that verse this morning to Sister Viney, and won't you please go over and tell Sally Rucker to go on with the cake, Rose Mary? Sister Viney called Jennie over by sun-up, when she took this notion, and told her to tell her mother not to make it, even if she had already broke all the sixteen eggs."

"Yes, Aunt Amandy, I'll run over and tell Mrs. Rucker, and then we will begin right away to get things ready. I am so glad Aunt Viney is---"

"Rose Mamie, Rose Mamie," came another loud hail from up the path toward the house and down came the General at top speed, with a plummy setter frisking in his wake. "Aunt Viney says for you to come there to her this minute. They is a-going to be the party and it's right by the Bible to have it, some for Mr. Mark, too. Tobe Poteet said 'shoo' when I told him he couldn't come, 'cause they wasn't a-going to be no party on account of worrying the Lord about forgetting Aunt

Viney, and I was jest a-going to knock him into stuffings, 'cause they can't nobody say 'shoo' at the Bible or Aunt Viney neither, to me, when there Aunt Viney called for us to go tell everybody that the party was a-going off and be sure and come. I believe God let her call me before I hit Tobe, 'cause I ain't never hit him yet, and maybe now I never will have to." The General paused, and an expression of devout thankfulness came into his small face at thus being saved the necessity of administering chastisement to his henchman, Tobe the adventurous.

"I believe he did, Stonie, and how thankful I am," exclaimed little Miss Amanda, with real relief at this deliverance of young Tobe, who was her especial, both self-elected and chosen, knight from the General's cohorts.

"Yes'm," answered Stonie. "Come on now, Rose Mamie! Put your hand on me, Aunt Amandy, and I'll go slow with you," and presenting his sturdy little shoulder to Miss Amanda on one side and drawing Rose Mary along with him on the other, Stonewall Jackson hurried them both away to the house.

"Well," remarked Uncle Tucker to himself as he took up a measure of grain from a bin in the corner of the feed-room and scattered some in front of a row of half-barrel nests upon which brooded a dozen complacent setting hens, "well, if the Lord has to pester with the affairs of Sweetbriar to the extent Stonie and the sisters, Rose Mary, too, are a-giving Him the credit of doing looks like we might be a-getting more'n our share of His attentions. I reckon by the time He gets all the women and children doings settled up for the day He finds some of the men have slipped the bridle and gone. That would account for some of these here wild covortings around in the world we hear about by the newspapers. But He'll git 'em some day sure as---"

"Am I interrupting any confidence between you and the Mrs. Biddies, Mr. Alloway?" asked Everett, as he stood in the barn door with a pan in one hand and a bucket in the other.

"No, oh, no," answered Uncle Tucker with a laugh. "I was jest remarking how the Almighty had the lasso of His love around the neck of all the wild young asses a-galloping over the world and would throw 'em in His own time. Well, I hear you're a-going to get a sochul baptism into Sweetbriar along about a hour before sundown. Better part your hair in the middle and get some taller for your shoes."

"I will, most assuredly, if that's what's expected of me for the ceremony," answered Everett with a delightful laugh. "Here's a pan of delicacies for the hens, and this bucket is for you to bring some shelled corn for Miss Rose Mary to parch for them, when you come to the house."

"I'm not a-counting on going any time soon," answered Uncle Tucker with a shrewd glance up at Everett as he came and stood in the doorway beside the tall young man, who lounged against one of the door posts. Uncle Tucker was himself tall, but slightly bent, lean and brown, with great, gray, mystic eyes that peered out from under bushy white brows. Long gray locks curled around his ears and a rampant forelock stood up defiantly upon his wide, high brow. At all times his firm old mouth was on the eve of breaking into a quizzical smile, and he bestowed one upon Everett as he remarked further:

"The barn is man's instituted refuge in the time of mop and broom cyclones in the house. I reckon you can't get on to your rock-picking in the fields now, but you really hadn't oughter dig up an oil-well to-day anyway; it might kinder overshadow the excitement of the party."

"Mr. Alloway, has any other survey of this river bend been made before?" asked Everett as he looked keenly at Uncle Tucker, while he lit his cigar from the cob pipe the old gentleman accommodatingly handed him.

"Well, yes, there was a young fellow came poking around here not so long ago with a little hammer pecking at the rocks. I didn't pay much attention to him, though. He never stayed but one day, and I was a-cutting clover hay, and too busy to notice him much 'cept to ask him in to dinner. He couldn't seem to manage his chicken dumplings for feeding his eyes with Rose Mary, and he didn't have time to give up much information about sech little things as oil-wells and phosphate beds. You know, they has to be a good touch of frost over a man's ears before he can tend to business, with good-looking dimity passing around him." And Uncle Tucker laughed as he resumed the puffing of his pipe.

"And after the frost they are not at all immune---to such dimity," answered Everett with an echo of Uncle Tucker's laugh, as a slight color rose up under the tan of his thin face. As he spoke he ruffled his own dark red mop of hair, which was slightly sprinkled with gray, over his temples. Everett was tall, broad and muscular, but thin almost to gauntness, and his face habitually wore the expression of deep weariness. His eyes were red-brown and disillusioned, except when they joined with his well-cut mouth in a smile that brought an almost boyish beauty back over his whole expression. There was decided youth in the glance he bestowed upon Uncle Tucker, whose attention was riveted on the manoeuvres of the General and Tobe, who were busy with a pair of old kitchen knives in an attack upon the grass growing between the cracks of the front walk.

"So you have had no report as to what that survey was?" Everett asked Uncle Tucker, again bringing him back to the subject in hand. "Do you know who sent the man you speak of to prospect on your land?"

"Never thought to ask him," answered Uncle Tucker, still with the utmost unconcern. "Maybe Rose Mary knows. Women generally carry a reticule around with 'em jest to poke facts into that they gather together from nothing put pure wantin'-to-know. Ask her."

And as he spoke Uncle Tucker began to busy himself getting out the grease cans, with the evident intention of putting in a morning lubricating the farm implements in general.

"Your friend, Mr. Gideon Newsome, said something about a rumor of paying phosphate here in the Harpeth bend when I met him over in Boliver before I came to Sweetbriar. In fact, I had tried to come to look over the fields just to kill time when I nearly killed myself and fell down upon you. Do you suppose he could have sent the prospector?" Again Everett brought Uncle Tucker back to the uninteresting topic of what might lay under the fields, the top of which he was so interested in cultivating.

"Oh, I reckon not," answered Uncle Tucker, puffing away as he laid out his monkey-wrenches. "The Honorable Gid is up to his neck in this here no-dram wave what is a-sweeping around over the state and pretty nigh rising up as high as the necks of even private liquor bottles. Gid's not to say a teetotaler, but he had to climb into the bandwagon skiff or sink outen sight. He's got to tie down his seat in the state house with a white ribbon, and he's got no mind for fooling with phosphate dirt. He's a mighty fine man, and all of Sweetbriar thinks a heap of him. Do you want to help me lift this wagon wheel on to this jack, so I can sorter grease her up against the next time I use her?"

"Say, Uncle Tuck, Aunt Viney says for you to come right there now and bring Mr. Mark and a spade and a long string with you," came just at the critical moment of balancing the notched plank under the revolving wagon wheel, in Stonewall Jackson's young voice, which held in it quite a trace of Miss Lavinia's decisive tone of command. Stonie stood in the barn door, poised for instant return along the path of duty to the front walk, only waiting to be sure his summons would be obeyed. Stonie was sturdy, freckled, and in possession of Uncle Tucker's big gray eyes, Rose Mary's curled mouth and more than a tinge of Aunt Viney's austerity of manner.

"Better come on," he further admonished. "Rose Mary can't hold that vine up much longer, and if she lets go they'll all fall down." And as he raced up the path Everett followed almost as rapidly, urged on by the vision of Rose Mary

drooping under some sort of unsupportable burden. Uncle Tucker brought up the rear with the spade and a long piece of twine.

"Oh, I thought you would never come," laughed Rose Mary from half way up the step-ladder as she lowered herself and a great bunch of budding honeysuckle down into Everett's upstretched arms. "I held it up as long as I could, but I almost let it tear the whole vine down."

[Illustration: "That's what comes from letting that shoot run catawumpas"]

"That's what comes from letting that shoot run catawumpas three years ago. I told you about it at the time, Tucker," said Miss Lavinia with a stern glance at Uncle Tucker, who stood with spade and twine at the corner of the porch.

Miss Lavinia sat in a large, calico-cushioned rocking-chair at the end of the porch, and had been issuing orders to Rose Mary and little Miss Amanda about the readjustment of the fragrant vine that trailed across the end of the porch over her window and on out to a trellis in the side yard. Her high mob cap sat on her head in an angle of aggression always, and her keen black eyes enforced all commands issuing from her stern old mouth.

"Now, Amandy, train that shoot straight while you're about it," she continued. "It comes plumb from the roots, and I don't want to have to look at a wild-growing vine right here under my window for all my eighty-second and maybe last year."

"I've gone and misplaced my glasses and I can't hardly see," answered Miss Amanda in her sweet little quaver that sounded like a silver bell with a crack in it. "Lend me your'n, Tucker!"

"You are a-going to misplace your eyes some day, Sister Amandy. Then you'll be a-wanting mine, and I'll have to cut 'em out and give 'em to you, I suppose," said Uncle Tucker as he handed over his huge, steel-rimmed glasses.

"The Bible says 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' Tucker, but not in a borrowing sense of the word, as I remember," remarked Miss Lavinia in a meditative tone of voice. "And that would be the thing about my getting the new teeth. Don't either of you need 'em, and it would be selfish of me to spend on something they couldn't anybody borrow from me. Amandy, dig a little deeper around that shoot, I don't want no puny vine under my window!"

"I'm a-trying, Sister Viney," answered Miss Amanda propitiatingly. "I've been a-bending over so long my knees are in a kinder tremble."

"Let me finish digging and put in the new dirt for you, Aunt Amandy," begged Rose Mary, who had given the armful of vine to Everett to hold while Uncle Tucker tied the strings in the exact angle indicated by Miss Lavinia. "I can do it in no time."

"No, child, I reckon I'd better do it myself," answered Miss Amanda as she sat back on the grass for a moment's rest. "I have dug around and trained this vine the last week in April for almost sixty years now. Mr. Lovell brought it by to Ma one spring as he hauled his summer groceries over the Ridge to Warren County. By such care it's never died down yet, and I have made it my custom to give sprouts away to all that would take 'em. I'm not a-doubting that there is some of this vine a-budding out all over Harpeth Valley from Providence Nob to the River bend."

"No, Amandy," interrupted Aunt Viney, "it wasn't sixty years ago, it was jest fifty-seven. Mr. Lovell brought the switch of it with him the first year Mr. Roberts rode this circuit, and he was a-holding that big revival over to Providence Chapel. Mr. Lovell came into the fold with that very first night's preaching, and we all were rejoiced. Don't you

remember he brought you that Maiden Blush rose-bush over there at the same time he brought this vine to Ma? And one bloom came out on the rose the next year jest in time to put it in his coffin before we buried him when he was taken down with the fever on the Road and died here with us. Fifty-six years ago come June, and him so young to die while so full of the spirit of the Lord!"

Feebly Miss Amanda rose to her knees and went on with the digging around the roots of the vine, but Rose Mary knelt beside her and laid her strong, young arm around the bent and shaking little shoulders. Uncle Tucker rested on his spade and looked away across the garden wall, where the little yard of graves was hid in the shadow of tall pine trees, and his big eyes grew very tender. Miss Lavinia fingered a shoot of the vine that had fallen across her thin old knees with a softened expression in her prophet-woman face, while something new and sweet stirred in Everett's breast and woke in his tired eyes, as across half a century was wafted the perfume of a shattered romance.

And then by the time the vine had been trained Miss Lavinia had thought of a number of other spring jobs that must be attended to along the front walk and around all the clumps of budding shrubs, so with one desperate glance toward the barn, his deserted haven, Uncle Tucker fell to with his spade, while Everett obtained a fork from the tool house and put himself under command. Rose Mary was sharply recalled and sent into the house to complete the arrangements for the festivities, when she had followed the forker down by the lilac hedge, rake in hand, with evident intention of being of great assistance in the gardening of the amateur.

"Pull the dirt up closter around those bleeding-hearts, Tucker," commanded Miss Lavinia from her rocker. "They are Rose Mary's I planted the identical day she was born, and I don't want anything to happen to 'em in the way of cutworms or such this summer."

"Well, I don't know," answered Uncle Tucker with a little chuckle in Everett's direction, who was turning over the dirt near a rose-bush in his close vicinity, "it don't do to pay too much attention to women's bleeding-hearts; let alone, they'll tie 'em up in their own courage and go on dusting around the place, while if you notice 'em too much they take to squeezing out more bleed drops for your sympathy. Now, I think it's best--"

"Mister Tucker, say, Mister Tucker," came in a giggle from over the front gate as Jennie Rucker's little freckled nose appeared just above the top plank, only slightly in advance of that of small Peggy's. "Mis' Poteet's got a new baby, just earned, and she says she is sorry she can't come to Mis' Viney's party; but she can't."

"Now, fly-away, ain't that too bad!" exclaimed Uncle Tucker. "That baby oughter be sent back until it has got manners to wait until it's wanted. Didn't neither one of you all get here on anybody's birthday but your own." Uncle Tucker's sally was greeted by a duet of giggles, and the announcement committee hurried on across the street with its news.

"Tucker, you Tucker, don't you touch that snowball bush with the spade!" came in a fresh and alarmed command from the rocker post of observation. "You know Ma didn't ever let that bush be touched after it had budded. You spaded around it onct when you was young and upty and you remember it didn't bloom."

"Muster been a hundred years ago if I was ever upty about this here flower job," he answered in an undertone to Everett as he turned his attention to the rose-bushes at which his apprentice had been pegging away. "At weddings and bornings and flower tending man is just a worm under woman's feet and he might as well not even hope to turn. All he can do is to--"

But it was just at this juncture when Uncle Tucker's patience was about to be exhausted, that a summons from Rose Mary came for a general getting ready for the birthday celebration.

And in a very few hours the festivities were in full swing. Miss Lavinia sat in state in her rocker and received the offerings and congratulations of Sweetbriar as they were presented in various original and characteristic forms. Young Peter Rucker, still a bit unsteady on his pink and chubby underpinning, was steered forward to present his glossy buckeye, hung on a plaited horse-hair string that had been constructed by small Jennie with long and infinite patience. Miss Lavinia's commendations threw both donor and constructor into an agony of bashfulness from which Pete took refuge in Rose Mary's skirts and Jennie behind her mother's chair. But at this juncture the arrival on the scene of action of young Bob Nickols with a whole two-horse wagon-load of pine cones, which the old lady doted on for the freshening up of the tiny fires always kept smoldering in her andironed fireplace the summer through, distracted the attention of the company and was greeted with great applause. Bob had been from early morning over on Providence Nob collecting the treasures, and, seated beside him on the front of the wagon, was Louisa Helen Plunkett, blushing furiously and most obviously avoiding her mother's stern eye of inquiry as to where she had spent the valuable morning hours.

The sensation of young Bob's offering was only offset at the unpacking of the complacent Mr. Crabtree's gift, which he bore over from the store in his own arms. With dramatic effect he placed it on the floor at Miss Lavinia's feet and called for a hatchet for its opening. And as from their wrappings of paper and excelsior he drew two large gilt and glass bottles, one containing bay rum and the other camphor, that precious lotion for fast stiffening joints, little Miss Amanda heaved a sigh of positive rapture. Mr. Crabtree was small and wiry, with a hickory-nut countenance and a luscious peach of a heart, and, though of bachelor condition, he at all times displayed sympathetic and intuitive domestic inclinations. He kept the Sweetbriar store and was thus in position to know of the small economies practised by the two old ladies in the matter of personal necessities. For the months past they had not bought the quantity of lubricating remedies that he considered sufficient and this had been his tactful way of supplying enough to last for some time to come. And from over the pile of gifts heaped around her, Miss Lavinia beamed upon him to such an extent that he felt like following young Pete's example, committing the awful impropriety of hiding his embarrassment in any petticoat handy, but just at this juncture up the front walk came the birthday cake navigating itself by the long legs of Mr. Caleb Rucker and attended by a riot of Sweetbriar youth, mad with excitement over its safe landing and the treat in prospect. In its wake followed Mrs. Rucker, complacent and beaming over the sensation caused by this her high triumph in the culinary line.

"Fly-away, if that's not Providence Nob gone and turned to a cake for Sister Viney's birthday," exclaimed Uncle Tucker, as amid generous applause the offering was landed on a table set near the rocker.

And again at this auspicious moment a huge waiter covered with little mountains of white ice-cream made its appearance through the front door, impelled by the motive power of Mr. Mark Everett's elegantly white-flannel-trousered legs, and guided to a landing beside the cake by Rose Mary, who was a pink flower of smiles and blushes.

Then it followed that in less time than one would think possible the company at large was busy with a spoon attached to the refreshments which to Sweetbriar represented the height of elegance. Out in the world beyond Old Harpeth ice-cream and cake may have lost caste as a fashionable afternoon refreshment, having been succeeded by the imported custom of tea and scones or an elaborate menu of reception indigestibles, but in the Valley nothing had ever threatened the supremacy of the frozen cream and white-frosted confection. The men all sat on the end of the long porch and accepted second saucers and slices and even when urged by Rose Mary, beaming with hospitality, third relays, while the Swarm in camp on the front steps, under the General's management, seconded by Everett, succeeded in obtaining supplies in a practically unlimited quantity.

"Looks like Miss Rose Mary's freezer ain't got no bottom at all," said Mr. Rucker in his long drawl as he began on a fourth white mound. "It reminds me of 'the snow, the snow what falls from Heaven to earth below,' and keeps a-falling." Mr. Rucker was a poet at heart and a husband to Mrs. Rucker by profession, and his flights were regarded by Sweetbriar at large with a mixture of pride and derision.

"Cal," said Mrs. Rucker sternly, "don't you eat more'n half that saucer. I've got no mind to top off this here good time with mustard plasters all around. Even rejoicings can get overfed and peter out into ginger tea. Jennie, you and Sammie and Pete stop eating right now. Lands alive, the sun has set and we all know Miss Viney oughter be in the house. Shoo, everybody go home to save your manners!" And with hearty laughs and further good-by congratulations the happy little company of farmer folk scattered to their own roof trees across and along Providence Road. The twilight had come, but a very young moon was casting soft shadows from the trees rustling in the night breezes and the stars were lighting up in competition to the rays that shot out from window after window in the little village.

Uncle Tucker had hurried away to his belated barn duties and little Miss Amanda into the house to stir up Miss Lavinia's fire in preparation for their retirement, which was a ceremony of long duration and begun with the mounting of the chickens to their roosts. Miss Lavinia sat with her hands folded in her lap over a collection of the smaller gifts of the afternoon and her eyes looked far away cross the Ridge, dim in the failing light, while her stern old face took on softened and very lovely lines. Rose Mary stood near to help her into the house and Everett leaned against a post close on the other side of the rocker.

"Children," she said with a little break in her usual austere voice, "I'm kinder ashamed of accusing the Lord of forgetting me this morning when I look at all these remembers of me here that my neighbors have given me. I found friends when I came here eighty-two years ago to-day and as they have died off He has raised up a new crop outen their seed for me. This rheumatism buckeye here is the present of the great grandson of my first beau, and this afternoon I have looked into the kind eyes of some of my friends dead and gone many a day, and have seen smiles come to life that have been buried fifty years. I'm a-feeling thankful to be here another summer to see my friends and flowers a-blooming onct more, and come next April I am a-going to want just such another infair as this one. Now help me into bed! Young man, you can lift me up some, I'm stiff with so long setting, and I'm a-going to want a power of rubbing this night, Rose Mary."

So, thus held by her duties of ministrations, it was quite an hour later that Rose Mary came out of the house, which was dark and sleep-quiet, and found Everett still sitting on the front steps smoking and---waiting.

"Tired?" he asked as she sank down on to the step beside him and leaned her dark head back against one of the posts that supported the mass of honeysuckle vine.

"Not much---and a heap happy," she answered, looking up at him with reflected stars in her long-lashed blue eyes. "Wasn't it a lovely party?"

"Yes," answered Everett slowly as he watched the smoke curl up from his cigar and blow in the soft little night wind across toward Rose Mary; "yes, it was a nice party. I seriously doubt if anywhere on any of the known continents there could have been one just like it pulled off by any people of any nation. It was unique---in sentiment and execution; I'm duly grateful for having been a guest---even part honoree."

"I always think of old people as being the soft shadows that sturdy little children cast on the wall. They are a part of the day and sunshine, but just protected by the young folks that come between them and the direct rays. They are strangely like flowers, too, with their quaint fragrance. Aunt Viney is my tall purple flag, but Aunt Amandy is my bed of white cinnamon pinks. I---I want to keep them in bloom for always. I can't let myself think---that I can't." Rose Mary's voice trembled into a laugh as she caught a trailing wisp of honeysuckle and pressed a bunch of its buds to her lips.

"You'll keep them, Rose Mary. You could keep anything you---you really wanted," said Everett in a guardedly comforting voice. "And what are Mr. Alloway and Stonie in your flower garden?" he asked in a bantering tone.

"Oh, Uncle Tucker is the briar rose hedge all around the place, and Stonie is all the young shoots that I'm trying to prune and train up just like him," answered Rose Mary with a quick laugh. "You're my new-fashioned crimson-rambler from out over the Ridge that I'm trying to make grow in my garden," she added, with a little hint of both audacity and tenderness in her voice.

"I'm rooted all right," answered Everett quickly, as he blew a puff of smoke at her. "And you, Rose Mary, are the bloom of every rose-bush that I ever saw anywhere. You are, I verily believe, the only and original Rose of the World."

"Oh, no," answered Rose Mary lifting her long lashes for a second's glance at him; "I'm just the Rose of these Briars. Don't you know all over the world women are blooming on lovely tall stems, where they have planted themselves deep in home places and are drinking the Master's love and courage from both sun and rain. But if we don't go to rest some you'll wilt, Rambler, and I'll shatter. Be sure and take the glass of cream I put by your bed. Good night and good dreams!"

CHAPTER III

AT THE COURT OF DAME NATURE

"Well, Rose Mary," said Uncle Tucker as he appeared in the doorway of the milk-house and framed himself against an entrancing, mist-wreathed, sun-up aspect of Sweetbriar with a stretch of Providence Road winding away to the Nob and bending caressingly around red-roofed Providence as it passed over the Ridge, "there are forty-seven new babies out in the barn for you this morning. Better come on over and see 'em!" Uncle Tucker's big eyes were bright with excitement, his gray lavender muffler, which always formed a part of his early morning costume, flew at loose ends, and a rampant, grizzly lock stuck out through the slit in the old gray hat.

"Gracious me, Uncle Tuck, who now?" demanded Rose Mary over a crock of milk she was expertly skimming with a thin, old, silver ladle.

"Old White has hatched out a brood of sixteen, assorted black and white, that foolish bronze turkey hen just come out from under the woodpile with thirteen little pesters, Sniffer has got five pups---three spots and two solids---and Mrs. Butter has twin calves, assorted sex this time. They are spry and hungry and you'd better come on over!"

"Lovely," laughed Rose Mary with the delight in her blue eyes matching that in Uncle Tucker's pair of mystic gray. "I'll come just as soon as I get the skimming done. We'll want some corn meal and millet seed for the chirp-babies, but the others we can leave to the maternal ministrations. I'm so full of welcome I don't see how I'm going to keep it from bubbling over."

"That's jest like you, Rose Mary, a-welcoming a whole passel of pesters that have deluged down on you at one time," said Uncle Tucker with a dubiously appreciative smile at Rose Mary's hospitable enthusiasm. "Looks to me like a girl tending three old folks, one rampage of a boy, a mollycuddle of a strange man, and a whole petting spoiled village has got enough on her shoulders without this four-foot, two-foot landslide."

"But it's in my heart I carry you all, old Sweetie," answered Rose Mary with a flirt of her long lashes up at Uncle Tucker. "A woman can carry things as a blessing in her heart that might be an awful burden on her shoulders. Don't you know I don't allow you out before the sun is up good without your muffler tied up tight? There; please go on back to the barn and take this crock of skimmed milk to Mrs. Sniffie---wait, I'll pour back some of the cream! And in just a few minutes I'll be ready to---"

"Rose Mary, Rose Mary," came a wild, enthusiastic shout from up the path toward the Briars and in a moment the General appeared around the row of lilac bushes through which the milk-house trail led down under the hill to Rose Mary's sanctum of the golden treasure. Stonie had taken time before leaving the seclusion of his apartment to plunge into his short blue jeans trousers, but he was holding them up with one hand and struggling with his gingham shirt, the tail of which bellowed out like a sail in the morning breeze as he sped along. And in his wake came Tobe with a pan in one hand and a cup in the other. "It's two calves, Tobe says, with just Mrs. Butter for the mother and Sniffie beat her with three more puppies than two calves. It's sixteen chickens and a passel of turkeys and we waked up Mr. Mark to tell him and he said---" Stonie paused in the rapid fire of his announcement of the morning news and then added in judicial tone of voice, as if giving the aroused sleeper his modicum of fair play: "Well, he didn't quite say it before he swallowed, but he threw a pillow at Tobe and pulled the sheet over his head and groaned awful. Aunt Viney was saying her prayers when I went to tell her, and Aunt Mandy was taking down her frizzles, but she stopped and gave Tobe some corn-bread for the chickens and some pot-licker with meat in it for Sniffie. Can't you come with me to see 'em now, Rose Mary? It won't be any fun until you see em!" The General had by this time lined up in the doorway with Uncle Tucker, and Tobe's black head and keen face peered over his shoulder. The expression in all three pairs of eyes fixed on hers was the same---the wild desire to make her presentation at the interesting court Dame Nature was holding in the barn. A most natural masculine instinct for feminine interpretive companionship when face to face with the miracle of maternity.

"Just one more crock of milk to skim and I can go," answered Rose Mary as she poised the skimmer over the last yellow surface down the line of huge, brown, earthen bowls that in Harpeth Valley were known as crocks. The milk-house was cool and clean and smelled of the fresh cream lifted from the milk into the stone jars to be clabbered for the to-morrow churning. And Rose Mary herself was a fresh, fragrant incarnation of the spirit of a spring sun-dawn that had come over the Ridge from Old Harpeth. Her merry voice floated out over the hillside as she followed in the wake of Uncle Tucker, Stonie and Tobe, with the provender for the new arrivals, and it made its way as a faint echo of a dream through one of the vine-covered, gable windows of the Briars and the effect thereof was well-nigh instantaneous.

Everett, after a hasty and almost as incomplete toilet as the one made by the General in his excitement, arrived on the scene of action just in time to witness the congratulatory interview between Mrs. Sniffie and the mistress of her undying affections. The long-eared, plummy, young setter-mother stood licking the back of Rose Mary's neck as she sat on the barn floor with all five of the young tumblers in her lap, with Tobe and Stonie hanging rapturously over her and them, while Uncle Tucker was expatiating on some points that had made themselves evident even at this very early stage of the existence of the little dog babies.

"They ain't not a single stub nose in the bunch, Uncle Tuck, not a one and everybody's of them toes stick way apart," exclaimed the General, his cheeks red with joyous pride.

"Watch 'em, Miss Ro' Mary; watch 'em smell Sniffie when I call her over here," exclaimed Tobe as he held out the pan to Mrs. Sniffer and thus coaxed her from the side of Rose Mary and the small family. And, sure enough, around squirmed every little white and yellow bunch and up went every little new-born nose as it sniffed at the recession of the maternal fount. One little precocious even went so far as to attempt to set his wee fore paddies against Rose Mary's knee and to stiffen a tiny plume of a tail, with a plain instinct to point the direction of the shifting base of supplies. Rose Mary gave a cry of delight and hugged the whole talented family to her breast, while Stonie and Tobe yelled and danced as Uncle Tucker turned with evident emotion to Everett to claim his congratulations.

"Never saw anything like it in my life," Everett assured him with the greatest enthusiasm, and, as he spoke, he laughed down into Rose Mary's lifted blue eyes that were positively tender with pride over the puppies in her arms. "It's a sight worth losing the tale of a dream for---taken all together."

"And all the others---I'll show you," and, gathering her skirts basketwise, Rose Mary rose to her feet and led the way across the barn, with Sniffer snuffing along at the squirming bundle in her skirts, that swung against the white petticoat ruffling around her slim ankles. With the utmost care she deposited the puppies in an overturned barrel, nicely lined with hay, that Stonie and Tobe had been preparing. "They are lovely, Sniffie," she said softly to the young mother, who jumped in and huddled down beside the babies as her mistress turned to leave them with the greatest reluctance.

And it was well that the strata of Everett's enthusiasm lay near the surface and was easily workable, for in the next half-hour there was a great demand of continuous output. Mrs. Butter stood switching her tail and chewing at a wisp of hay with an air of triumphant pride tinged with mild surprise as she turned occasionally to glance at the offspring huddled against her side and found eight wobbly legs instead of the four her former experiences had led her to expect, and felt two little nuzzling noses instead of one.

"Which one do you guess was the surprise calf to her, Rose Mamie?" demanded the General.

"Shoo!" said Tobe in answer to the General's question. "Old Butter have had them two calfs to purpose, boy and girl, one to keep and one to kill. She got mixed about whether Mr. Tuck keeps heifers or bulls and jest had both kinds so as to keep one sure."

"Well, Aunt Viney read in her book of a place they kills girls and keeps boys. At this place they jest gits it mixed up with the cows and it's no use to tell 'em," answered the General in a disgusted tone of voice, and with a stem glance at Uncle Tucker, as he and Tobe passed on over to the feed-room door, to lead the way to the display of the little turks and cheeps for Everett's further edification.

And just as the introductions were all completed two deep notes of the mellow old farm bell sounded over the hill in a hospitable and reverent summons to prayers and breakfast ensuing. On the instant two pairs of pink heels were shown to the company as Stonie and Tobe raced up the walk, which were quickly followed by Uncle Tucker, intent on being on hand promptly for the assembling of his household. More slowly Rose Mary and Everett followed, walking side by side along the narrow path.

"Rose Mary, have you let me sleep through such exciting scenes as this every morning for a month?" demanded Everett quizzically. "What time do you get up---or is it that the sun waits for your summons or---"

"No, not my summons---old lame Shanghi's. I believe he is of French extraction from his elaborate manner with the hens," answered Rose Mary, quickly applying his plagiarized compliment. "Let's hurry or I'll be late for prayers. Would you like---will you come in to-day, as you are already up?" The color rose in Rose Mary's cheeks up under her long lashes and she gave him just one shy glance that had a tinge of roguishness in it.

"Thank you, I---I would like to. That is, if I may---if I won't be in the way or---or---or---will you hold my hand so I won't go wrong?" he finished in laughing confusion as the color came under the tan of his cheeks to match that in hers and the young look lay for a moment in his eyes. "It'll be my debut at family worship," he added quickly to cover his confusion.

"Don't worry, Uncle Tucker leads it," answered Rose Mary as they ascended the front steps and came across the front porch to the doorway of the wide hall, which was the living-room, as well as the artery of the Briars.

And a decorous and seemly scene they stepped in upon. Uncle Tucker sat back of a small table, which was placed at one side of the wide open fireplace, in which crackled a bit of fragrant, spring fire. His Bible and a couple of hymn-books rested in front of him, his gray forelock had been meekly plastered down and the jocund lavender scarf had been laid

aside to display a straight white collar and clerical black bow tie. His eyes were bent on the book before him as he sought for the text for the morning lesson. Aunt Viney sat close beside him as if anxious to be as near to the source of worship as possible, though the strain of refraining from directing Uncle Tucker in the conducting thereof was very great. The tradition which forced silence upon women in places of public worship had held with Miss Lavinia only by the exercising of the sternest and most rigorous self-suppression, which at any time might have been broken except for the curbing of her iron will.

But even though silent she was still dominant, and over her glasses her eyes shot glances of stern rebuke at two offenders in a distant corner, while Uncle Tucker fluttered the leaves of his hymn-book, oblivious to the unseemly contention. The General and Tobe, who came as near to living and having his being at the Briars as was possible in consideration of the fact that he was supposed to have his bed and board under his own paternal roof, were kneeling demurely beside a small rocking-chair, but a battle royal was going on as to who would possess the low seat on which to bow the head of reverence.

Little Miss Amanda from across the room, in terror of what might befall her favorites at the hands of Miss Lavinia in a later hour of reckoning, was making beseeching gestures of alarm, warning and reproof that were entirely inadequate to the situation, which was fast becoming acute, when the two tardy members arrived on the scene of action. It took Rose Mary one second to grasp the situation, and, motioning Everett to a chair beside the rocker, she seated herself quickly in the very midst of the scuffle. In a half-second Tobe's head was bowed in triumph on the arm of her chair, while the General's was ducked with equal triumph upon her knee as Uncle Tucker's sweet old voice rose in the first words of his prayer.

But after a few minutes of most becoming reverence Stonie's eyes opened and revealed his surprise at Everett's presence as he knelt by the chair across from Tobe and almost as close to Rose Mary's protective presence as either of the two combatants. With a welcoming smile the General slipped the little brown hand of fellowship into the stranger's, thereby offering a material support to the latter's agony of embarrassment, which only very slowly receded from face and demeanor as the services proceeded.

Then as across the crackle of the fire came the confident word of David the Singer: "*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein,*" intoned in the old man's reverent voice, something led Everett's glance out through the open door to see the bit of divine dominion that spread before him with new eyes and a newer understanding. Harpeth Valley lay like the tender palm of a huge master hand with the knuckles of rough blue hills knotted around it, and dotted over the fostering meadows were comfortable homes, each with its morning altar fire sending up opal wreaths of mist smoke from the red brick or stone chimneys. Long creek lines marked their way across the fields which were growing tender green with the upbringing of the spring grain.

"*Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,*" droned Uncle Tucker. "*The hollow of His hand,*" assented Everett's conscience in artistic appreciation of the simile.

"*And stretched out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in,*" came as another line of interpretation of the picture spread before the strangely unshackled eyes of the bowed man with the little boy kneeling beside him. Quickly he turned toward Rose Mary with almost a startled glance and found in her eyes the fact that she had been faring forth over Harpeth Valley on the wings of Uncle Tucker's supplication as had he. The wonder of it rose in his eyes, which were about to lay bare to her depths never before stirred, when a fervent "Amen! I beat you that time, Tobe!" fairly exploded at his ear as the General took the final word out of Uncle Tucker's very mouth in rival to his worshipping opponent.

"I said it first, but it got blowed into Miss Ro' Mary's sleeve," avowed Tobe with a flaunt at his competitor.

"If nobody he'r'n it, it don't count," decided the General with emphasis. And in friendly dispute he escorted his rival down the front walk, while Uncle Tucker, as was his custom, busied himself straightening hymn-book and Bible, so leaving the family altar in readiness for the beginning of a new day. And thus the primitive ceremonial, the dread of which had kept Everett late in bed every morning for a month, had resolved itself into what seemed to him but the embrace of a tender, whimsical brotherhood in which the old mystic both assumed and accounted for a stewardship in behalf of the others assembled under his roof-tree.

But in the eyes of Miss Lavinia all forms of service were the marshalling of the hosts in battle array and at all times she was enlisted in the ranks of the church militant, and upon this occasion she bore down upon Everett with banners unfurled.

"We are mighty gratified to welcome you at last in the circle of family worship, young man," she declaimed, as reproach and cordiality vied in her voice. "I have been a-laying off to ask you what church you belonged to in New York, and have a little talk with you over some of our sacred duties that young people of this generation are apt---"

"Rose Mary," came Miss Amanda's cheery little voice from the doorway just in time to save Everett from the wish, if not even a vain attempt, to sink through the floor, "bring Mr. Mark right on in to breakfast before the waffles set. Sister Viney, your coffee is a-getting cold." Little Miss Amanda had seen and guessed at his plight and the coffee threat to Miss Lavinia had been one of the nimble manoeuvres that she daily, almost hourly, employed in the management of her sister's ponderosity. Thus she had saved this day, but Everett knew that there were others to come, and in the dim distance he discerned his Waterloo.

And as he worked carefully with his examining pick over beyond the north pasture through the soft spring-warm afternoon, he occasionally smiled to himself as the morning scene of worship, etched deep on his consciousness by its strangeness to his tenets of life, rose again and again to his mind's eye. They were a wonderful people, these Valley folk, descendants of the Huguenots and Cavaliers who had taken the wilderness trail across the mountains and settled here "in the hollow" of old Harpeth's hand. They were as interesting scientifically from a philosophical standpoint as were the geological formations which lay beneath their blue-grass and clover fields. They built altars to what seemed to him a primitive God, and yet their codes were in many cases not only ethically but economically and democratically sound. The men he had found shrewd and as a whole more interested and versed in statescraft than would seem possible, considering their shut-in location in regard to the places where the world wheels seem to revolve. But were there larger wheels revolving, silently, slowly, but just as relentlessly, out here where the heavens were stretched "*as a curtain,*" and "*as a tent to dwell in?*"

"*The earth and the fullness thereof,*" he mused as he raised his eyes to the sky; "it's theirs, certainly, and they dedicate it to their God. I wonder---" Suddenly the picture of the woman in the barn rose to his mind, strong and gracious and wonderful, with the young "fullness" pressing around her, teeming with---force. What force---and what source? Suddenly he dropped his pick behind a convenient bush, shouldered his kit of rocks and sand, climbed the fence and tramped away down Providence Road to Sweetbriar, Rose Mary and her cold milk crocks, thither impelled by deep---thirsts.

And under the hospitable eaves of the milk-house he found Rose Mary and her cooling draft---also Mrs. Caleb Rucker, with small Pete in tow.

"Howdy, Mr. Mark," the visiting neighbor answered in response to his forcedly cordial greeting. If a man has walked a mile and a half with a picture of a woman handing him a glass of cool milk with a certain lift of black lashes from over deep, black blue eyes it is---disconcerting to have her do it in the presence of another.

"I just come over to get a bucket of buttermilk for Granny Satterwhite," he found Mrs. Rucker saying as he forced his attention. "She won't touch mine if there's any of Rose Mary's handy. Looks like she thinks she's drinking some of Rose Mary's petting with every gulp."

Everett had just raised the glass Rose Mary had handed him, to his lips, as Mrs. Rucker spoke, and over its edge he regarded the roses that suddenly blushed out in her cheeks, but she refused to raise her lashes the fraction of an inch and went calmly on pressing the milk from the butter she had just taken from the churn.

"Granny knows that love can be sent just as well in a glass of buttermilk as in a valentine," she finally said, and as she spoke a roguish smile coaxed at the corner of her mouth. "Don't you suppose a piece of hemp twine would turn into a gold cord if you tied it around a bundle of true love?" she ventured further in a spirit of daring, still with her eyes on the butter.

"Now that's something in meaning like my first husband, Mr. Satterwhite, said when we was married," assented Mrs. Rucker with hearty appreciation of the practicality in Rose Mary's sentiment. "He gave me two sows, each with a litter of pigs, for a wedding present and said they'd be a heap more to me than any kind of jimcracks he could er bought for half the money they'd bring. And they was, for, in due course of time, I sold all them hogs and bought the plush furniture in the front room, melojeon and all. Now Mr. Rucker, he give me a ring with a blue set and 'darling' printed inside it that cost fifty cents extra, and Jennie Rucker swallowed that ring before she was a year old. I guess she has got it growed up inside her, for all I know of it, and her Paw is a-setting on Mr. Satterwhite's furniture at present, speaking still. Sometimes it makes me feel sad to think of Mr. Satterwhite when Cal Rucker spells out, *Shall we meet beyond the river* with two fingers on that melojeon. But then I even up my feelings by remembering how Cal let me name Pete for Mr. Satterwhite, which is a second-husband compliment they don't many men pass; and it pleased Granny so."

"Mr. Rucker is always nice to Granny Satterwhite," said Rose Mary with the evident intention of extolling the present incumbent of the husband office to her friend. But at the mention of his name a moment earlier, young Peter, the bond between the past and present, had sidled out the door and proceeded to sit calmly down on the rippling surface of the spring branch. His rescue and retirement necessitated his mother's departure and Everett was left in command of the two-alone situation he desired.

"Hasn't this been a lovely, long day?" asked Rose Mary as she turned the butter into a large jar and pressed a white cloth close over it with a stone top. "To-night is the full April moon and I've got a surprise for you, if you don't find it out too soon. Will you walk over to Tilting Rock, beyond the barn-lot, with me after supper and let me show you?"

"Will I cross the fields of Elysium to gaze over the pearly ramparts?" demanded Everett with boyish enthusiasm, if not a wholly accurate use of mythological metaphor. "Let's cut supper and go on now! What do you say? Why wait?"

"I'm afraid," laughed Rose Mary as she prepared to close up the wide window and leave everything in shipshape for the night. "A woman oughtn't to risk feeding a hungry man cold moonbeams instead of hot hoecake. Besides, I have to see everybody safely tucked in before I can leave. Aren't they all a precious houseful of early-to-bed chickens? The old Sweeties have forgotten there is such a thing as the moon and Stonie hasn't--found it out--yet." And with a mischievous backward glance, Rose Mary led the way up the lilac path to the Briars on top of the hill just as the old bell sounded two wobbly notes, their uncertainty caused by the rivalry of the General and Tobe over the pulling of the ropes.

And it was quite two hours later that she and Everett made their way across the barn-lot over to the broad, moss-covered Tilting Rock that jutted out from a little hackberry-covered knoll at the far end of the pasture.

"Now look--and smell in deep!" exclaimed Rose Mary excitedly as she pointed back to the Briars.

"Why---why!" exclaimed Everett under his breath, "it's enchantment! It's a dream---am I awake?"

And indeed a very vision spread itself out before the wondering man. The low roof and wide wings of the Briars, with the delicate traceries of vines over the walls and gables, shone a soft, old-brick pink in the glow of moonlight, and over and around it all gushed a very shower of shimmering white blossoms, surrounding the house like a mist around an early blooming rose. And as he looked, wave on wave of fragrance beat against Everett's face and poured over his head.

"What is it?" he demanded breathlessly, as if dizzy from a too deep drinking of the perfume.

"Don't you know? It's the locust trees that have bloomed out since sunset!" exclaimed Rose Mary in as breathless a tone as his own. "For a week I have been watching and hoping they would be out in the full moon. They are so delicate that the least little cold wind sets them back days or destroys them altogether. I wanted them so very much this year for you, and I was so afraid you would notice them before we got over here where you could get the full effect. I promised you lilacs for being good, but this is just because---because---"

"Because what?" asked Everett quietly.

"Because I felt you would appreciate it," answered Rose Mary, as she sank down on the stone that still held a trace of the warmth from the sun, and made room for Everett beside her with one of her ever-ready, gracious little gestures. "And it's lovely to have you here to look at it with me," she added. "So many times I have sat here alone with the miracle, and my heart has ached for the whole world to get the vision of it at least. I've tried sending my love of it out in little locust prayers to folks over the Ridge. Did you ever happen to get one any spring?"

"Last April I turned down a commission for a false test for the biggest squeeze-out copper people in the world, fifty thousand in it to me. I thought it was moral courage, but I know now it was just on account of the locusts blooming in Harpeth Valley at Sweetbriar. Do you get any connection?" he demanded lightly, if a bit unevenly.

"To think that would be worth all the loneliness," answered Rose Mary gently. "Things were very hard for me the first year I had to come back from college. I used to sit here by the hour and watch Providence Road wind away over the Ridge and nothing ever seemed to come or go for me. But that was only for a little while, and now I never get the time to breathe between the things that happen along Providence Road for me to attend to. I came back to Sweetbriar like an empty crock, with just dregs of disappointment at the bottom, and now I'm all ready every morning to have five gallons of lovely folks-happenings poured into a two-and-a-half-gallon capacity. I wish I were twins or twice as much me."

"Why, you have never told me before, Rose Mary, that you belong to the new-woman persuasion, with a college hall-mark and suffragist leanings. I have made the mistake of putting you in the home-guard brigade and classing you fifty years behind your times. Don't tell me you have an M.A. I can't stand it to-night."

"No, I haven't got one," answered Rose Mary with both a smile and a longing in her voice. "I came home in the winter of my junior year. My father was one of the Harpeth Valley boys who went out into the world, and he came back to die under the roof where his fathers had fought off the Indians, and he brought poor little motherless me to leave with the aunts and Uncle Tucker. They loved me and cared for me just as they did Uncle Tucker's son, who was motherless, too, and a few years after he went out into the world to seek the fortune he felt so sure of, I was given my chance at college. In my senior year his tragedy came and I hurried back to find Uncle Tucker broken and old with the horror of it, and with the place practically sold to avoid open disgrace. His son died that year and left---left---some day I will tell you the rest of it. I might have gone back into the world and made a success of things and helped them in that way, from a distance---but what they needed was---was me. And so I sat here many sunset hours of loneliness and looked along Providence Road until---until I think the Master must have passed this way and left me His peace, though my mortal

eyes didn't see Him. And now there lies my home nest swung in a bower of blossoms full of the old sweetie birds, the boy, the calf, puppy babies, pester chickens and---and I'm going to take a large, gray, prowling night-bird back and tuck him away for fear his cheeks will look hollow in the morning. I'm the mother bird, and while I know He watches with me all through the night, sometimes I sing in the dark because I and my nesties are close to Him and I'm not the least bit afraid."

[Illustration: "I hope you feel easy in your mind now"]

CHAPTER IV

MOONLIGHT AND APPLE-BLOW

"I hope you feel easy in your mind, child, now you've put this whole garden to bed and tucked 'em under cover, heads and all," said Uncle Tucker, as he spread the last bit of old sacking down over the end of the row of little sprouting bean vines. "When I look at the garden I'm half skeered to go in the house to bed for fear I haven't got a quilt to my joints."

"Now, honey sweet, you know better than that," answered Rose Mary as she rose from weighting down the end of a frilled white petticoat with a huge clod of earth and stretched it so as to cover quite two yards of the green shoots. "I haven't taken a thing of yours but two shirts and one of your last summer seersucker coats. I'm going to mend the split up the back in it for the wash Monday. Aunt Amandy lent me two aprons and a sack and a petticoat for the peony bushes, and Aunt Viney gave me this shawl and three chemises that cover all the pinks. I've taken all the tablecloths for the early peas, and Stonie's shirts, each one of them, have covered a whole lot of the poet's narcissus. All the rest of the things are my own clothes, and I've still got a clean dress for to-morrow. If I can just cover everything to-night, I won't be afraid of the frost any more. You don't want all the lovely little green things to die, do you, and not have any snaps or peas or peonies at all?"

"Oh, fly-away!" answered Uncle Tucker as he tucked in the last end of a nondescript frill over a group of tiny cabbage plants, "there's not even a smack of frost in the air! It's all in your mind."

"Well, a mind ought to be sensitive about covering up its friends from frost hurts," answered Rose Mary propitiatingly as she took a satisfied survey of the bedded garden, which looked like the scene of a disorganized washday. "Thank you, Uncle Tucker, for helping me---keep off the frost from my dreams, anyway. Don't you think---"

"Well, howdy, folks!" came a cheerfully interruptive hail from across the brick wall that separated the garden from the cinder walk that lay along Providence Road, which ran as the only street through Sweetbriar, and Caleb Rucker's long face presented itself framed in a wreath of budding rose briars that topped the wall in their spring growth. "Tenting up the garden sass ag'in, Miss Rose Mary?"

"No, we're jest giving all the household duds a mooning instead of a sunning, Cal," answered Uncle Tucker with a chuckle as he came over to the wall beside the visitor. "What's the word along the Road?"

"Gid Newsome have sent the news as he'll be here Sad'ay night to lay off and plow up this here dram or no-dram question for Sweetbriar voters, so as to tote our will up to the state house for us next election. As a state senator, we can depend on Gid to expend some and have notice taken of this district, if for nothing but his corn-silk voice and white weskit. It must take no less'n a pound of taller a week to keep them shoes and top hat of his'n so slick. I should jedge his courting to be kinder like soft soap and molasses, Miss Rose Mary." And Mr. Rucker's smile was of the saddest as he handed this bit of gentle banter over the wall to Rose Mary, who had come over to stand beside Uncle Tucker in the end of the long path.

"It's wonderful how devoted Mr. Newsome is to all his friends," answered Rose Mary with a blush. "He sent me three copies of the Bolivar *Herald* with the poem of yours he had them print last week, and I was just going over to take you and Mrs. Rucker one as soon as I got the time to---"

"Johnnie-jump-ups, Miss Rose Mary, don't you never do nothing like that to me!" exclaimed Mr. Rucker with a very fire of desperation lighting his thin face. "If Mis' Rucker was to see one verse of that there poetry I would have to plow the whole creek-bottom corn-field jest to pacify her. I've done almost persuaded her to hire Bob Nickols to do it with his two teams and young Bob, on account of a sciattica in my left side that plowing don't do no kind of good to. I have took at least two bottles of her sasparrilla and sorgum water and have let Granny put a plaster as big and loud-smelling as a mill swamp on my back jest to git that matter of the corn-field fixed up, and here you most go and stir up the ruckus again with that poor little *Trees in the Breeze* poem that Gid took and had printed unbeknownst to me. Please, mam, burn them papers!"

"Oh, I wouldn't tell her for the world if you don't want me to, Mr. Rucker!" exclaimed Rose Mary in distress. "But I am sure she would be proud of---"

"No, it looks like women don't take to poetry for a husband; they prefers the hefting of a hoe and plow handles. It's hard on Mis' Rucker that I ain't got no constitution to work with, and I feel it right to keep all my soul-squirmings and sech outen her sight. The other night as I was a-putting Petie to bed, while she and Bob was at the front gate a-trying to trade on that there plowing, a mighty sweet little verse come to me about

"The little shoes in mother's hand
Nothing like 'em in the land,"

and the tears was in my eyes so thick 'cause I didn't have nobody to say 'em to that one dropped down on Pete and made him think I was a-going to wash his face, and sech another ruckus as she had to come in to, as mad as hops! If I feel like it, I'm a-going to clean every weed outen the garden for her next week to try and make up to her for---"

"Aw, Mr. Rucker, M-i-s-t-e-r Rucker, come home to get ready for supper," came in a loud, jovial voice that carried across the street like the tocsin of a bass drum. The Rucker home sat in a clump of sugar maples just opposite the Briars, and was square, solid and unadorned of vine or flower. A row of bright tin buckets hung along the picket fence that separated the yard from the store enclosure, and rain-barrels sat under the two front gutters with stolid practicability, in contrast to the usual relegation of such store-houses of the rainfall to the back of the house and the planting of ferns and water plants under the front sprouts, as was the custom from the beginning of time in Sweetbriar. Mrs. Rucker in a clean print dress and with glossy and uncompromisingly smoothed hair stood at the newly whitewashed front gate. "Send him on home, Rose Mary, or grass'll grow in his tracks and yours, too, if he can hold you long enough," she added by way of badinage.

"I'm a-coming, Sally, right on the minute," answered the poet-by-stealth, and he hurried across the street with hungry alacrity. The poem-maker was tall and loose-jointed, and the breadth of his shoulders and long muscular limbs decidedly suggested success at the anvil or field furrow. He made a jocular pass at placing his arm around the uncompromising waist-line of his portly wife, and when warded off by an only half-impatient shove he contented himself by winding one of her white apron strings around one of his long fingers as they leaned together over the gate for further parley with the Alloways across the road.

"When did you get back, Mrs. Rucker?" asked Rose Mary interestedly, as she rested her arms on the wall and Uncle Tucker planted himself beside her, having brushed away one of the long briar shoots to make room for them both.

"About two hours ago," answered Mrs. Rucker. "I found everybody in fine shape up at Providence, and Mis' Mayberry sent Mr. Tucker a new quinzey medicine that Tom wrote back to her from New York just day before yesterday. I made a good trade in hogs with Mr. Hoover for myself and Bob Nickols, too. Mr. Petway had a half-barrel of flour in his store he were willing to let go cheap, and I bought it for us and you-all and the Poteets. Me and you can even up on that timothy seed with the flour, Mr. Tucker, and I'm just a-going to give a measure to the Poteets as a compliment to that new Poteet baby, which is the seventh mouth to feed on them eighty-five acres. I've set yeast for ourn and your rolls for to-morrow, tell your Aunt Mandy, Rose Mary, and I brought that copy of the *Christian Advocate* for your Aunt Viney that she lost last month. Mis' Mayberry don't keep hern, but spreads 'em around, so was glad to let me have this one. I asked about it before I had got my bonnet-strings untied. Yes, Cal, I'm a-going on in to give you your supper, for I expect I'll find the children's and Granny's stomicks and backbones growing together if I don't hurry. That's one thing Mr. Satterwhite said in his last illness, he never had had to wait---yes, I'm coming, Granny," and with the encomium of the late Mr. Satterwhite still unfinished Mrs. Rucker hurried up the front path at the behest of a high, querulous old voice issuing from the front windows.

"Well, there's no doubt about it, no finer woman lives along Providence Road than Sallie Rucker, Marthy Mayberry and Selina Lue Lovell down at the Bluff not excepted, to say nothing of Rose Mary Alloway standing right here in the midst of my own sweet potato vines," said Uncle Tucker reflectively as he glanced at the retreating figure of his sturdy neighbor, which was followed by that of the lean and hungry poet.

"Yes, she's wonderful," answered Rose Mary enthusiastically, "but---but I wish she had just a little sympathy for---for poetry. If a husband sprouts little spirit wings under his shoulders it's a kind thing for his wife not to pick them right out alive, isn't it? When I get a husband---"

"When you get a husband, Rose Mary, I hope he'll hump his shoulders over a plow-line the number of hours allotted for a man's work and then fly poetry kites off times and only when the wind is right," answered Uncle Tucker with a quizzical smile in his big eyes and a quirk at the corner of his mouth.

"But I'm going always to admire the kites anyway, even if they don't fly," answered Rose Mary with the teasing lift of her long lashes up at him. "Maybe just a woman's puff might start a man's kite sky high that couldn't get off right without it. You can't tell."

"Yes, child," answered Uncle Tucker as he looked into the dark eyes level with his own with a sudden tenderness, "and you never fail to start off all kites in your neighborhood. When I took you as a bundle of nothing outen Brother John's arms nearly thirty years ago this spring jest a perky encouraging little smile in your blue eyes started my kite that was a-trailing weary like, and it's sailed mostly by your wind ever since---especially these last few years. Don't let the breeze give out on me yet, child."

"It never will, old sweetie," answered Rose Mary as she took Uncle Tucker's lean old hand in hers and rubbed her cheek against the sleeve of his rough farm coat. "Is the interest of the mortgage ready for this quarter?" she asked quietly in almost a whisper, as if afraid to disturb some listening ear with a private matter.

"It lacks more than a hundred," answered Uncle Tucker in just as quiet a voice, in which a note of pain sounded plainly. "And this is not the first time I have fallen behind with Newsome, either. The repairs on the plows and the food chopper for the barn have cost a good deal, and the coal bill was large this winter. Sometimes, Rose Mary, I---I am afraid to look forward to the end. Maybe if I was younger it would be different and I could pay the debt, but I am afraid---if it wasn't for your aunts, looks like you and I could let it go and make our way somewhere out in the world beyond the Ridge, but they are older than us and we must keep their home as long as we can for 'em. Maybe in a few years---Newsome won't press me, I'm mighty sure. Do you think you can help me hold on for 'em? I don't matter."

"We'll never let it go, Uncle Tuck, never!" answered Rose Mary passionately as she pressed her cheek closer to his arm. "I don't know why I know, but we are going to have it as long as they---and you, *you* need it---and I'm going to die here myself," she added with a laughing sob as she shook two tears out of her lashes and looked up at him with adorning stars in her eyes.

"It's as He wills, daughter," answered Uncle Tucker quietly as he laid a tender hand on the dark braids resting against his shoulder. "It isn't wrong for us to go on keeping it if we can just pay the interest to our friend---pay it to the day. That is the only thing that troubles me. We must not fall behind and---"

"Oh, but honey-sweet, let me tell you, let me tell you!" exclaimed Rose Mary with shining eyes, "I've got just lots of money, more than twenty dollars, nearly twice more. I've saved it just in case we did need it for this or---or---or any other thing," she added hastily, not willing to disclose her tooth project even to Uncle Tucker's sympathetic ear.

Uncle Tucker's large eyes brightened with relief for a second and then clouded with a mist of tears.

"What were you saving it for, child?" he asked with a quaver in his sweet old voice, and his hand clasped hers more closely. "You don't ever have what pretty women like you want and need, and that's what grinds down on me most hardest of all. You are young and---and mighty beautiful, and looks like it's wrong for you to lay down yourself for us who are a good long way on the other side of life's ridge. I ought to send you back across the hills to---to find your own---no matter what happens!"

"Try it!" answered Rose Mary, again lifting her star eyes to his. "I was saving that money to buy Aunt Viney a set of teeth that she thinks she wants, but I know she couldn't use them when she gets them. If I'm as beautiful as you say, isn't this blue homespun of great Grandmother Alloways, made over twentieth century style, adornment enough? Some people---that is, some one---Mr. Mark said this morning it was---was *chic*, which means most awfully stylish. I've got one for my back and one for the tub all out of the same old blue bed-spread, and a white linen marvel contrived from a pair of sheets for Sunday. Please don't send me out into the big world---other people might not think me as lovely as you do," and her raillery was most beautifully dauntless.

"The Lord bless you and keep you and make the sun to shine upon you, flower of His own Kingdom," answered Uncle Tucker with a comforted smile breaking over his wistful old face. "I had mighty high dreams about you when that young man talked his oil-wells to me a month ago, and I wanted my rose to do some of her flowering for the world to see, but maybe---maybe---"

"She'll flower best here, where her roots go down into Sweetbriar hearts---and Sweetbriar prayers, Uncle Tucker; she knows that's true, and so do you," answered Rose Mary quickly. "And anyway, Mr. Mark is making the soil survey for you, and if we follow his directions there is no telling what we will make next year, maybe the interest and some of the money, too, and the teeth and---and a sky-blue silk robe for me---if that's what you'd like to see me wear, though it would be inconvenient with the milking and the butter and---"

"Tucker, oh Brother Tucker!" came a call across the garden fence from the house, in a weak but commanding voice, and Rose Mary caught a glimpse of Miss Lavinia's white mob cap bobbing at the end of the porch, "that is in Proverbs tenth and nineteenth, and not nineteenth and tenth, like you said. You come right in here and get it straight in your head before the next sun sets on your ignorance."

"Fly-away!" exclaimed Uncle Tucker, "now Sister Viney's never going to forgive me that Bible slip-up if I don't persuade her from now on till supper. But there is nothing more for you to do out here, Rose Mary, the sun'll put out the light for you," and he hurried away down the path and through the garden gate.

Rose Mary remained leaning over the garden wall, looking up and down the road with interest shining in her eyes and a laugh and nod for the neighbors who were hurrying supperward or stopping to talk with one another over fences and gates. A group of men and boys stood and sat on the porch in front of the store, and their big voices rang out now and again with hearty merriment at some exchange of wit or clever bit of horse-play. Two women stood in deep conclave over by the Poteet gate, and the subject of the council was a small bundle of flannel and lawn displayed with evident pride by a comely young woman in a pink calico dress. Seeing Rose Mary at the wall, they both smiled and started in her direction, the bearer of the bundle stepping carefully across the ditch at the side of the walk.

"Lands alive, Rose Mary, you never did see nothing as pretty as this last Poteet baby," exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett enthusiastically. "The year before last one, let me see, weren't that Evelina Virginia, Mis' Poteet? Yes, Evelina Virginia was mighty pretty, but this one beats her. I declare, if you was to fail us with these spring babies, Mis' Poteet, it would be a disappointment to the whole of Sweetbriar. Come next April it will be seven without a year's break, astonishing as it do sound."

"It would be as bad as the sweetbriar roses not blooming, Mrs. Poteet," laughed Rose Mary as she held out her arms for the bundle which cuddled against her breast in a woman-maddening fashion that made her clasp the mite as close as she dared.

"Yes, I tell you, seven hand-running is enough for any woman to be proud of, Mis' Poteet, and it ought to be taken notice of. Have you heard the news of the ten acres of bottom land to be given to him, Rose Mary? That's what all the men are a-joking of Mr. Poteet about over there at the store now. They are a-going to make out the deed to-night. They bought the land from Bob Nickols right next to Mr. Poteet's, crops and all, ten acres of the best land in Sweetbriar. I call it a nice compliment. 'To Tucker Poteet, from Sweetbriar, is to go right in the deed.'"

"'Tucker Poteet,' oh, Mrs. Poteet, have you named him for Uncle Tucker?" exclaimed Rose Mary with beaming eyes, and the rapture of her embrace was only modified by a slight squirm from the young heir of all Sweetbriar.

"Well, I had had that name in my mind from the first if he come a boy, but when Mr. Poteet got down to the store for some tansy, when he weren't a hour old, he found all the men-folks had done named him that for us, and it looked like we didn't have the chance to pass the compliment. We ain't told you-all nothing about it, for they all wanted Mr. Tucker to read it in the deed first."

"And ain't them men a-going to have a good time when they give Mr. Tucker that deed to read? Looks like, even if it is some trouble, you couldn't hardly begrudge Sweetbriar these April babies, Mis' Poteet," said Mrs. Plunkett in a consoling voice.

"Law, Mis' Plunkett, I don't mind it one bit. It ain't a mite of trouble to me to have 'em," answered the mother of the seven hardily. "You all are so kind to help me out all the time with everything. Course we are poor, but Jim makes enough to feed us, and every single child I've got is by fortune, just a hand-down size for somebody else's children. Five of 'em just stair-steps into clothes of Mis' Rucker's four, and Mis' Nickols saves me all of Bob's things to cut down, so I never have a mite of worry over any of 'em."

"Yes, I reckon maybe the worry spread over seven don't have a chanct to come to a head on any one of 'em," said Mrs. Plunkett thoughtfully, and her shoulders began to stoop dejectedly as a perturbed expression dawned into her gray eyes. "Better take him on home now, Mis' Poteet, for sundown is house-time for babies in my opinion. Hand him over, Rose Mary!"

Thus admonished, with a last, clinging embrace, Rose Mary delivered young Tucker to his mother, who departed with him in the direction of the Poteet cottage over beyond the milk-house.

"Is anything worrying you, Mrs. Plunkett? Can I help?" asked Rose Mary as her neighbor lingered for a moment and glanced at her with wistful eyes. Mrs. Plunkett was small, though round, with mournful big eyes and clad at all times in the most decorous of widow's weeds, even if they were of necessity of black calico on week days. Soft little curls fell dejectedly down over her eyes and her red mouth defied a dimple that had been wont to shine at the left corner, and kept to confines of straight-lipped propriety.

"It's about Louisa Helen again and her light-mindedness. I don't see how a daughter of mine can act as she does with such a little feeling. Last night Mr. Crabtree shut up the store before eight o'clock and put on his Sunday coat to come over and set on the front steps a-visiting of her, and in less'n a half hour that Bob Nickols had whistled for her from the corner, and she stood at the front gate talking to him until every light in Sweetbriar was put out, and I know it must have been past nine o'clock. And there I had to set a-trying to distract Mr. Crabtree from her giggling. We talked about Mr. Plunkett and all our young days and I felt real comforted. If I can jest get Louisa Helen to see what a proper husband Thomas Crabtree will make for her we can all settle down comfortable like. He wants her bad, from all the signs I can see."

"But--but isn't Louisa Helen a little young for---" began Rose Mary, taking what seemed a reasonable line of consolation.

"No, she's not too young to marry," answered her mother with spirit. "Louisa Helen is eighteen years old in May, and I was married to Mr. Plunkett before my eighteenth birthday. He was twenty-one, and I treated him with proper respect, too. I never said no such foolish things as Louisa Helen says to that Nickols boy, even to Mr. Crabtree, hisself."

"Oh, please don't worry about Louisa Helen, Mrs. Plunkett. She is just so lovely and young---and happy. You and I both know what it is to be like that. Sometimes I feel as if she were just my own youngness that I had kept pressed in a book and I had found it when I wasn't looking for it." And Rose Mary's smile was so very lovely that even Mrs. Plunkett was dazzled to behold.

"Lands alive, Rose Mary, you carry your thirty years mighty easy, and that's no mistake. You put me in mind of that blush peony bush of yours by the front gate. When it blooms it makes all the other flowers look like they was too puny to shake out a petal. And for sheep's eyes, them glances Mr. Gid Newsome casts at you makes all of Bob Nickols' look like foolish lamb squints. And for what Mr. Mark does in the line of sheeps---Now there they come, and I can see from Louisa Helen's looks she have invited that rampage in to supper. I'll have to hurry on over and knock up a extra sally-lunn for him, I reckon. Good-by 'til morning!" And Mrs. Plunkett hurried away to the preparation of supper for the suitor of her disapproval.

For a few moments longer Rose Mary let her eyes go roaming out over the valley that was lying in a quiet hush of twilight.

Lights had flashed up in the windows over the village and a night breeze was showering down a fall of apple-blow from the gnarled old tree that stood like a great bouquet beside the front steps of the Briars. All the orchards along the Road were in bloom and a fragrance lay heavy over the pastures and mingled with the earth scent of the fields, newly upturned by the plowing for spring wheat.

"Is that a regiment you've got camping in the garden, Rose Mary?" asked Everett as he came up the front walk in the moonlight some two hours later and found Rose Mary seated on the top of the front steps, all alone, with a perfectly dark

and sleep-quiet house behind her.

Rose Mary laughed and tossed a handful of the pink blow she had gathered over his shoulder. "Did you have your supper at Bolivar?" she asked solicitously. "I saved you some; want it?"

"Yes, I had a repast at the Citizens', but I think I can manage yours an hour or two later," answered Everett as he seated himself beside her and lighted a cigar, from which he began to puff rings out into the moonlight that sifted down on to them through the young leaves of the bloom-covered old tree. "You weren't afraid of frost such a night as this, were you?" he further inquired, as he took a deep breath of the soft, perfume-laden air.

"I'm not now, but a cool breeze blew up about sundown and made me afraid for my garden babies. Now I'm sure they will all wilt under their covers, and you'll have to help me take them all off before you go to bed. Isn't it strange how loving things make you afraid they will freeze or wilt or get wet or cold or hungry?" asked Rose Mary with such delightful ingenuousness that a warm little flush rose up over Everett's collar. "Loving just frightens itself, like children in the dark," she added musingly.

"And you saved my supper for me?" asked Everett softly.

"Of course I did; didn't you know I would?" asked Rose Mary quickly, in her simplicity of heart not at all catching the subtle drift of his question. "They all missed you, and Uncle Tucker went to bed almost grumpy, while Stonie---"

"Rose Mamie," came in a sleepy but determined voice as the General in a long-tailed nightshirt appeared in the dark doorway, "I went to sleep and you never came back to hear me pray. Something woke me; maybe the puppy in my bed or maybe God. I'll come out there and say 'em so you won't wake the puppy, because he's gone back to sleep," he added in a voice that was hushed to a tone of extreme consideration for the slumber of his young bedfellow.

"Yes, honey-heart, come say them here. Mr. Mark won't mind. I came back, Stonie, to hear them, truly I did, but you were so fast to sleep and so tired I hated to wake you." And Rose Mary held out tender arms to the little chap who came and knelt on the floor at her side, between her and Everett.

"But, Rose Mamie, you know Aunt Viney says tired ain't no 'scuse to the Lord, and I don't think it are neither. I reckon He's tired, too, sometimes, but He don't go back on the listening, and I ain't a-going to go back on the praying. It wouldn't be fair. Now start me!" and having in a completely argumentative way stated his feelings on the subject of neglected prayer, the General buried his head on Rose Mary's shoulder, folded one bare, pink foot across the other, clasped his hands at proper angle and waited.

"*Now I lay me,*" began Rose Mary in a low and tender tone.

"No," remonstrated Stonie in a smothered voice from her shoulder, "this is 'Our Father' week! Don't tire out the Lord with the '*Now I lay me,*' Rose Mamie!"

With an exclamation of regret Rose Mary clasped him closer and led the petition on through to its last word, though it was with difficulty that the sleepy General reached his Amen, his will being strong but his flesh weak. The little black head burrowed under Rose Mary's chin and the clasped pink feet relaxed before the final words were said. For a few minutes Rose Mary held him tenderly and buried her face against the back of the sunburned little neck, while as helpless as young Tucker Stonie wilted upon her breast and floated off into the depths. And for still a few seconds longer Everett sat very still and watched them with a curious gleam in his eyes and his teeth set hard in his cigar; then he rose, bent over and very tenderly lifted the relaxed General in his arms and without a word strode into the house with him. Very

carefully he laid him in the little cot that stood beside Rose Mary's bed in her room down the hall, and with equal care he settled the little dog against the bare, briar-scratched feet, returned to the moonlight porch and resumed his seat at Rose Mary's side.

"There is something about the General," he remarked with a half smile, "that---that gets next. He has a moral fiber that I hope he will be able to keep resistant to its present extent, but I doubt it."

"Oh," said Rose Mary, quickly looking up with pierced, startled eyes, "he must keep it--he must; it is the only hope for him. Tell me if you can how to help him keep it. Help me help him!"

"Forgive me," answered Everett in quick distress. "I was only scoffing, as usual. He'll keep what you give him, never fear, Rose Mary; he's honor bound."

"Yes, that's what I want him to be---'honor bound.' You don't know about him, but to-night I want to tell you, because I somehow feel you love him---and us---and maybe if you know, some day you will help him. Just after I came back into the Valley and found them all so troubled and---and disgraced, something came to me I thought I couldn't stand. Always it seemed to me I had loved him, my cousin, Uncle Tucker's son, and I thought---I thought he had loved me. But when he went out into the world one of the village girls, Granny Satterwhite's daughter, had followed him and---yes, she had been his wife for all the time we thought she was working in the city. They had been afraid---afraid of Uncle Tucker and me---to acknowledge it. She was foolish and he criminally weak. After his---his tragedy she came back---and nobody would believe---that she was his wife. I found her lying on the floor in the milk-house and though I was hurt, and hard, I took her into my room---and in a few hours Stonie was born. When they gave him to me, so little and helpless, the hurt and hardness all melted for ever, and I believed her and forgave her and him. I never rested until I made him come back, though it was just to die. She stayed with us a year---and then she married Todd Crabtree and moved West. They didn't want Stonie, so she gave him to me. When my heart ached so I couldn't stand it, there was always Stonie to heal it. Do you think that heartaches are sometimes just growing pains the Lord sends when He thinks we have not courage enough?" And in the moonlight Rose Mary's tear-starred eyes gleamed softly and her lovely mouth began to flower out into a little smile. The sunshine of Rose Mary's nature always threw a bow through her tears against any cloud that appeared on her horizon.

"I don't believe your heart ever needed any growing pains, Rose Mary, and I resent each and every one," answered Everett in a low voice, and he lifted one of Rose Mary's strong slim hands and held it close for a moment in both his warm ones.

"Oh, but it did," she answered, curling her fingers around his like a child grateful for a caress. "I was romantic---and---and intense, and I thought of it as a castle for---for just one. Now it's grown into a wide, wing-spreading, old country house in Harpeth Valley, with vines over the gables and doves up under the eaves. And in it I keep sunshiny rooms to shelter all the folks in need that my Master sends. Yours---is on the south side---corner---don't you want your supper now?"

CHAPTER V

THE HONORABLE GID

"Now, Amandy, stick them jack-beans in the ground round side upwards. Do you want 'em to have to turn over to sprout?" demanded Miss Lavinia, as she stood leaning on her crotched stick over by the south side of the garden fence, directing the planting of her favorite vine that was to be trained along the pickets and over the gate. Little Miss Amanda, as usual, was doing her best to carry out exactly the behests of her older and a little more infirm sister. Miss Amanda

was possessed of a certain amount of tottering nimbleness which she put at the disposal of Miss Lavinia at all times with the most cheery good-will. Miss Amanda was of the order of little sisters who serve and Miss Lavinia belonged to the sisterhood dominant by nature and by the consent of Miss Amanda and the rest of her family.

"It's such a long row I don't know as I'll hold out to finish it, Sister Viney, if I have to stop to finger the beans in such a way as that. But I'll try," answered the little worker, going on sticking the beans in with trembling haste.

"Let me help you, please, Miss Amanda," entreated Everett, who had come out to watch the bean planting with the intention of offering aid, with also the certainty of having it refused.

"No, young man," answered Miss Lavinia promptly and decidedly. "These jack beans must be set in by a hand that knows 'em. We can't run no risks of having 'em to fail to come up. I got the seed of 'em over to Springfield when me and Mr. Robards was stationed there just before the war. Mr. Robards was always fond of flowers, and these jack beans in special. He was such a proper meek man and showed so few likings that I feel like I oughter honor this one by growing these vines in plenty as a remembrance, even if he has been dead forty-odd years."

"Was your husband a minister?" asked Everett in a voice of becoming respect to the meek Mr. Robards, though he be demised for nearly half a century.

"He was that, and a proper, saddlebags-riding, torment-preaching circuit rider before he was made presiding elder at an astonishing early age," answered Miss Lavinia, a fading fire blazing up in her dark eyes. "He saved many a sinner in Harpeth Valley by preaching both heaven and hell in their fitten places, what's a thing this younger generation don't know how to do any more, it seems like. A sermon that sets up heaven like a circus tent, with a come-sinner-come-all sign, and digs hell no deeper than Mill Creek swimming pool, as is skeercely over a boy's middle, ain't no sermon at all to my mind. Most preaching in Sweetbriar are like that nowadays."

"But Brother Robards had a mighty sweet voice and he gave the call of God's love so as to draw answers from all hearts," said Miss Amanda in her own sweet little voice, as she jabbed in the beans with her right hand and drew the dirt over them with her left.

"Yes, husband was a little inclined to preach from Psalms more'n good rousing Proverbs, but I always belt him to the main meat of the Gospel and only let him feed the flock on the sweets of faith in proper proportion," answered Miss Lavinia, with an echo in her voice of the energy expended in keeping the presiding elder to a Jeremiah rather than a David role in his ministry.

"It was a mighty blow to the Methodist Church when he was taken away so young," said Miss Amanda gently. "I know I said then that they never would be---"

"Lands alive, if here ain't Miss Viney and Miss Amandy out planting the jack beans and I ain't got down not a square foot of summer turnip greens!" exclaimed a hearty voice as Mrs. Rucker hurried up across the yard to the garden gate. "Now I know I'm a behind-hander, for my ground's always ready, and in go the greens when you all turn spade for the bean vines. Are you a-looking for a little job of plowing, Mr. Mark? I'd put Mr. Rucker at it, but he give his left ankle a twist yestidy and have had to be kinder quiet, a-setting on the back porch or maybe a-hobbling over to the store."

"Yes, I'll plow, if you don't care whether your mule or plow or hame strings come out alive," answered Everett with a laugh. Miss Amanda had risen, hurried eagerly over to her favorite neighbor and held out her hand for the pan tendered her.

"Them's your sally luns, Miss Amandy, and they are a good chanct if I do say it myself. I jest know you and Rose Mary have got on the big pot and little kettle for Mr. Newsome, and I'm mighty proud to have the luns handed around with your all's fixings. I reckon Rose Mary is so comfusticated you can't hardly trust her with no supper rolls or such like. Have you seen him yet, Rose Mary?" she asked of Rose Mary, who had appeared at the garden gate.

"No; I've just come up from the milk-house," answered Rose Mary with a laughing blush. "When did Mr. Newsome come?"

"Just now," answered Mrs. Rucker, with further banter in her eyes. "And none of Solomon's lilies in all they glory was ever arrayed like one of him. You better go frill yourself out, Rose Mary, for the men ain't a-going to be able to hold him chavering over there at the store very long."

"It will only take me a few minutes to dress," answered Rose Mary, with a continuation of the blush. "The Aunties are all ready for supper, and Stonie and Uncle Tucker. Mag has got everything just ready to dish up, and I'll take in the sally luns to be run in the stove at the last moment. Isn't it lovely to have company? Friends right at home you can show your liking for all the time, but you must be careful to save their share for the others to give to them when they come. Mr. Mark, don't you want to---"

But before Rose Mary had begun her sentence Mr. Mark Everett, of New York City, New York, was striding away across the yard with a long swing, and as he went through the front gate it somehow slipped out of his hand and closed itself with a bang. The expression of his back as he crossed the road might have led one versed in romantics to conclude that a half-unsheathed sword hung at his side and that he had two flintlocks thrust into his belt.

And over at the store he found himself in the midst of a jubilation. Mr. Gideon Newsome, of Bolivar, Tennessee, stood in the doorway, and surrounding him in the store, in the doorway and on the porch was the entire masculine population of Sweetbriar.

Mr. Newsome was tall and broad and well on the way to portliness. His limbs were massive and slow of movement and his head large, with a mane of slightly graying hair flung back from a wide, unfurrowed brow. Small and very black eyes pierced out from crinkled heavy lids and a bulldog jaw shot out from under a fat beak of a nose. And over the broad expanse of countenance was spread a smile so sweet, so deep, so high that it gave the impression of obscuring the form of features entirely. In point of fact it was a thick and impenetrable veil that the Senator had for long hung before his face from behind which to view the world at large. And through his mouth, as through a rent in the smile, he was wont to pour out a volume of voice as musical in its drawl and intensified southern burr as the bass note on a well-seasoned 'cello.

He was performing the obligato of a prohibition hymn for the group of farmers around him when he caught sight of Everett as he came across the street. Instantly his voice was lowered to a honeyed conversational pitch as he came to the edge of the porch and held out a large, fat, white hand, into which Everett laid his own by courtesy perforced.

"I'm delighted to see you, Mr. Everett, suh, delighted!" he boomed. "And in such evident improved health. I inquired for you at Bolivar as soon as I returned and I was informed that you had come over here to find perfect restoration to health in the salubrious climate of this wonderful town of Sweetbriar. I'm glad to see your looks confirm the answer to my anxious inquiries. And is all well with you?"

"Thank you, Senator, I'm in pretty good shape again," answered Everett with a counter smile. "Ten pounds on and I'm in fighting trim." The words were said pleasantly, but for the life of him Everett could not control the hostility of a quick glance that apparently struck harmlessly against the veil of smiles.

"That there ten pounds had oughter be twenty, Senator, at the rate of the Alloway feeding of him, from milk-house to cellar preserve shelf," said Mr. Crabtree from behind the counter where he was doing up a pound of tea for the poet, who found it impossible to take his eyes off the politician. "Miss Rose Mary ain't give me a glass of buttermilk for more'n a week, and they do say she has to keep a loaf handy in the milk-house to feed him 'fore he gets as far as Miss Amandy and the kitchen. We're going to run him in a fattening race with Mis' Rucker's fancy red hog she's gitting ready for the State Fair and the new Poteet baby, young Master Tucker Poteet of Sweetbriar."

"So there's a new Poteet young man, and named for my dear friend, Mr. Alloway! My congratulations, Mr. Poteet!" exclaimed the senator as he pumped the awkward, horny hand of the embarrassed but proud Mr. Poteet up and down as if it were the handle of the town pump. "I must be sure to have an introduction to the young man. Want to meet all the voters," he added, shaking out the smile veil with energy.

And at this very opportune moment he looked down the Road and espied a procession of presentation approaching. The General in the midst of the Swarm was coming at a breakneck speed and clasped firmly in his arms he held a small blue bundle. On his right galloped Tobe with Shoofly swung at her usual dangerous angle on his hip, and Jennie Rucker supported his left wing, with stumbling Petie pulled along between her hand and that of small Peggy. Around and behind swarmed the rest of the Poteet seven, the Ruckers and the Nickols, with Mrs. Sniffer and the five little dogs bringing up the rear.

"Well, well, and what have we here?" exclaimed the great man as he descended and stood in front of the lined-up cohorts.

"It's the Poteet baby," answered the General with precision. "We bringed him to show you. He's going to be a boy; they can't nothing change him now. Shoofly is a girl, but Mis' Poteet didn't fool us this time. Besides if he'd been a girl we wouldn't a-had him for nothing."

"Why, young man, you don't mean to discredit the girls, do you?" demanded the Senator with a gallantly propitiating glance in the direction of Jennie, Peggy and the rest of the bunch of assorted pink and blue little calico petticoats. "Why could anything be finer than a sweet little girl?" And as he spoke he rested his hand on Jennie's tow-pigtailed head.

"Well, what's sweet got to do with it if we've got too many of 'em?" answered the General in his usual argumentative tone. "Till little Tucker comed they was three more girls than they was boys, and it wasn't fair. Now they is just two more, and four of Sniffie's puppies is boys, so that makes it most even until another one comes, what'll just *have* to be a boy." And the General cast a threatening glance in the direction of the calico bunch as he issued this ultimatum to feminine Sweetbriar.

"I'll ask Maw," murmured Jennie bashfully, but Miss Peggy turned up her small nose and switched her short skirts scornfully as the men on the porch laughed and the Senator emitted a very roar in his booming bass.

"Well, well, we'll have to settle that later," he said in his most propitiating urge-voter voice as he cast a smile over the entire Swarm. "Hadn't you better carry the young man back to his mother? He seems to be restless," he further remarked, taking advantage of a slight squirm in which young Tucker indulged himself, though he was not at all uncomfortable in Stonie's arms, accustomed as he was to being transported in any direction at any time by any one of his confreres. And with this skilful hint of dismissal the Senator bent down and bestowed the imperative political kiss on the little pink Poteet head, smattered one or two over Shoofly and Pete, landed one on the tip of Jennie Rucker's little freckled nose and started them all up the Road in good order as he turned once more to the men in the store.

But the advent of the Swarm had served to remind the group of his friends that the time for the roof-tree gathering was fast approaching, and Mr. Crabtree was busy filling half-forgotten supper orders for impatient waiters, while most of the men had gone up or down the Road in the wake of the scattering Swarm. For a few minutes the Senator and Everett were left on the porch steps alone.

"I hear from some of the men that you have been able to do some prospecting in the last weeks, Mr. Everett," remarked the Senator casually from behind the veil, as he accepted and lighted a cigar.

"Just knocked around a bit," answered Everett carelessly. "The whole Mississippi Valley is interesting geologically. There is quite a promise of oil here, but practically no outcrop."

"Your examination been pretty thorough---professional?" queried the Senator, still in an equally careless voice, though his little eyes gleamed out of their slits.

"Oh, yes, I thrashed it all out, especially Mr. Alloway's place. I'd like to have found oil for him---and the rest of Sweetbriar, too, but it isn't here." Everett spoke decidedly, and there was a note in his voice as if to end the discussion. His own eyes he kept down on his cigar and, as he lounged against a post he had an air of being slightly bored by an uninteresting shop topic. The Senator looked at him a few seconds keenly, started to make a trivial change in the conversation, then made a flank movement, bent toward Everett and began to speak in a suave and most confidential manner.

"I'm sorry, too, you didn't find the oil on the old gentleman's place," he said in his most open and dulcet tones. "I am very fond of Mr. Alloway; I may say of the whole family. Farming is too hard work for him at his years and I would have liked for him to have had the ease of an increased income. Some time ago a phosphate expert examined these regions, but reported nothing worth working. I had more hope of the oil. As I say, I am interested in Mr. Alloway and the family---I may say it to you in confidence, particularly interested in one of the members." And the smile that the Senator bestowed upon Everett aroused a keen desire for murder in the first degree. There was a challenge and a warning in it and a cunning, too, that was deeper than both. Controlling his impulse to smash the Senatorial bulldog jaw, Everett's mind went instantly after the cunning.

"So you only got the phosphate in your examination report of the Alloway place?" he asked in a friendly, interested tone, as if the hint had failed to make a landing. The cunning in his own glance and tone he was shrewd enough to hide.

"That was about all---nothing that was worth taking up then," answered the Senator again carelessly, and at that moment Mr. Crabtree came out to join them.

In a few minutes Everett threw away his cigar, glanced across at the Briars, where he could see Rose Mary and Uncle Tucker establishing Miss Lavinia, in her high company cap, in the big chair on the front porch, and without a word he strode out the back door of the store and across the fields toward Boliver. He stopped at the Rucker side fence and entrusted a message to the willing Jenny, and then went on into the twilight in the direction of the lights of the distant town.

And as he walked along his mood was, to say the least, savage, and he cut, with a long switch he had picked up, at some nodding little wind bells that had begun to show their colors along the side of the road. He was hungry and he was having his supper in detached visions. Now Rose Mary was handing the Senator a plate of high-piled supper rolls, each with a golden stream of butter cascading down the side, and as her lovely bare arm held them across to the guest probably she was helping Stonie's plate with her other hand to a spoonful of cream gravy over his nicely browned chicken leg. On her side of the table Miss Lavinia was pouring the rich cream over her bowl of steaming mush and the

materialized aroma from Uncle Tucker's cup of coffee that Rose Mary had just poured him brought tears to Everett's eyes. Then came a flash of Aunt Amandy helping herself under Rose Mary's urging to a second crisp waffle, and the Senator was preparing to accept his sixth, impelled by the same solicitous smile that had landed the second on the little old lady's plate. Again Rose Mary was pouring the Senator's second cup and stirring in the cream. If she had lifted the spoon to her lips, as she always did with Uncle Tucker's and sometimes forgot and did with his, Everett would have--And at this point he turned the bend and ran smash into the dramatic scene of a romance.

Seated by the side of the road was Louisa Helen Plunkett, and before her stood young Bob Nickols, an agony of helplessness showing in every line of his face and big loose-jointed figure, for Louisa Helen was weeping into a handkerchief and one of her blue muslin sleeves. And it was not a series of sentimental sobs and sighs or controlled and effective sniffs in which Louisa Helen was indulging, but she was boo-hooing in good earnest with real chokings and gurgles of sobs. Bob was screwing the toe of his boot into the dust and saying and doing absolutely and desperately nothing.

"Why, Louisa Helen, what is the matter?" demanded Everett as he seated himself beside the wailer and endeavored to bring down the pitch of the sobs by a kindly pat on the heaving shoulder.

"What's happened, Bob?" he demanded of the silent and dejected lover, who only shook his head as he answered from the depths of confusion.

"I don't know; she just of a sudden flung down and began to hollow and I ain't never got her to say."

"Oh, I want a supper and a veil and a bokay!" came in a perfect howl from the folds of the sleeve.

"I want some supper, too, Louisa Helen," said Everett quickly, and a smile lifted the corners of his mouth as the situation began to unravel itself to his sympathetic concern. "I guess I could take the bouquet and veil, too," he added to himself in an undertone.

"I ain't a-going to let Maw insult Bob no more, but I don't want no Boliver wedding in the office of no hotel. I want to be married where folks can look at me, and have something good to eat, and throw old shoes and rice at me," came in a more constrained and connected flow, as the poor little fugitive raised her head from her arm and reached down to settle her skirts about her ankles, from which she had flirted them in the kicks of one of her most violent paroxysms. Louisa Helen was very young and just as pretty as she was young. She was rosy and dimpled and had absurd little baby curls trailing down over her eyes, and her tears had no more effect on her face than a summer shower.

"Why, what did your mother say to Bob?" asked Everett, thus drawn into the position of arbitrator between two family factions.

"She told him that Jennie Rucker would be about his frying size when he got old enough to pick a wife, and it hurt his feelings so he didn't come to see me for a week, and he says he ain't never coming no more. If I want him I will have to go over to Boliver and marry him to-morrow." A sob began to rise again in the poor little bride prospective's throat at the thought of the horrible Boliver wedding.

The autocrat shifted uneasily, and in the dusk Everett could see that he was completely melted and ready to surrender his position if he could only find the line of retreat.

"Well," said Everett judiciously, as he looked up at Bob with a wink, which was answered by the slightest beginning of laugh from the insulted one, "I don't believe Bob wants to do without that bouquet and veil and supper either. They are

just the greatest things that ever happen to a man"---another wink at Bob---"and Bob don't want to give them up. Now suppose you go on back home to-night and don't say anything to your mother about the matter, and to-morrow I'll ask Mr. Crabtree to step over and make it up with Bob for her. I feel sure she'll invite them both in to supper, and then sometime soon we can all discuss the veil-bouquet question. You aren't in a hurry, are you?"

"Naw," answered Bob promptly. "Me and Paw ain't got all the winter wheat in yet, and we've got to cut clover next week. We're mighty busy now. I ain't in no hurry."

"And I don't want to get married no way except when the briar roses is in bloom so I can have the church tucked out in 'em. And I've got to get some pretty clothes made, too," answered Louisa Helen, thus putting in direct contrast the feminine and masculine attitude towards nuptials in general and also in particular.

"Then go on back home, you two," said Everett with a laugh, as he rose to his feet and drew to hers the now smiling Louisa Helen. "And I predict that by the time the briar roses are out something will happen to make it all right. Put your faith in Mr. Crabtree, I should advise, I suspect that he has---er influence with your mother." A giggle from Louisa Helen and a guffaw from Bob, as the two young people started on back along the Road, showed that they had both appreciated his veiled sally.

And as he stood watching them out of sight down the Road the twilight faded from off the Valley and darkness came down in a starlit veil from over old Harpeth. Everett climbed up and seated himself on the top rail of the fence and again gave himself over to his moods. This time one of bitterness, almost anger, rose to the surface. The same old wheel grinding out here in the wilderness that he had left in the market places of the world. The vision he had caught of the great cycle being turned by some still greater source above the hills was---a vision. The wheels ground on with the victims strapped and the cogs dripping. Loot and the woman---loot and the woman! And he had thought that out here "*in the hollow of His hand*" he had lost the sound of that grind. And such a woman---the lovely gracious thing with the unfaithful, dishonored lover's child in her arms, other women's tumbling children clinging to her skirts and with hands outstretched to protect and comfort the old gray heads in her care! A woman with a sorrow in her heart but with eyes that were deep blue pools in which there mirrored loves for all her little world! For a long time he sat and looked out into the darkness, then suddenly he squared his shoulders, gripped the rail tight in his hands for a half second and then slipped to the ground. Picking up his switch he turned and strode off toward Sweetbriar, which by this time was a little handful of fireflies glowing down in the sweet meadows.

When he got as far as the blacksmith's shop Everett climbed the wall and approached the house through the garden, for in front of the store had been piled high a bonfire of empty boxes and dry wood boughs, and most of the inhabitants of Sweetbriar, small fry and large, were assembled in jocular groups around its blaze of light. He could see Mr. Crabtree and Bob rolling out an empty barrel to serve as a speaking stand for the Honorable Gid, who stood in the foreground in front of the store steps talking to Uncle Tucker, with an admiring circle around him. Horses and wagons and buggies were hitched at various posts along the road, which indicated the gathering of a small crowd from neighboring towns to hear the coming oration, and the front porch of the store presented a scene of unwonted excitement.

Everett clicked the garden gate and steered around to the back door of the kitchen in hopes of finding black Mag still at her post and begging of her a glass of milk and a biscuit. But as he stood in the doorway, instead of Mag he discovered Rose Mary with her white skirts tucked up under one of her long kitchen aprons, putting the final polishing touch to a shining pile of dishes. She looked up at him for a second, and then went on with her work, and Everett could see that her curled lips were trembling like a hurt child's.

"I---I thought I might get a bite of something from---from Mag if she hadn't left---the kitchen---I---I---" Everett hesitated on the threshold and in speech. "I---I am sorry to trouble you," he finished lamely.

"I don't believe you care---care if you do," answered Rose Mary, and her blue eyes showed a decided temper spark under their black lashes. "I see I made a mistake in expecting anything of you. A friend's fingers ought not to slip through yours when you need them to hold tight. But come, get your supper---"

"Please, Rose Mary, I'm most awfully ashamed," he said as he came and stood close beside her, and there was a note in his voice that fairly startled him with its tenderness. "I'm just a cross old bear, and I don't deserve anything, no supper and no---no Rose Mary to care whether I'm hungry or not and no---"

"But I put the supper up," said Rose Mary, with a little laugh and catch in her voice. "I couldn't let you be hungry, even if you did treat me that way."

"Didn't Jennie Rucker come to tell you I couldn't get here to supper?" asked Everett with what he felt to be a contemptible feint of defense.

"Yes, she came; but you knew we were going to have company and that I wanted you to be here. You know Mr. Newsome is the best friend we have in the world and your staying away meant that you didn't care if he had been good to us. It hurt me! And the first bowl of lilacs was on the table; I had been saving them for a surprise for you for two days, and everything was so good and just as you like it and---" Rose Mary's voice faltered again and a little tear splashed on the saucer she held poised in her hand.

"Well," answered Everett, like a sulky boy, "I didn't want any of the Honorable Gid Newsome's lilacs or waffles or fried chicken, and I didn't want to see you fix any coffee for him," he ended by blurting out.

"I didn't---I---that is---you are *horrid*," answered Rose Mary, but she raised her eyes to his in which smiles waltzed around with tears and the glint of her white teeth showed through red lips curling with laugh that was forcing itself over them by way of the dimple in the corner of her chin. "Anyway, what I have here on the top of the stove is your waffles and your fried chicken, and these are your lilacs," and she drew out a purple spray from her belt and dropped it on the table beside him. "Sit down and I'll give it all to you right here while I finish wiping the dishes. Mag was taken with a spell before supper was over and had to go lie down and I stayed to finish things while the others went over to the speaking," she added as she began to bustle about with her usual hospitable concern.

"You are an angel, Rose Mary Alloway," said Everett as he placed himself on a split-bottom kitchen chair, bestowed his long legs under the table and drew up as near to Rose Mary and her dish-towel as was possible to be sure of keeping out of the flirt. "And I---I'm a brute," he added contritely, though he dared a quick kiss on the bare arm next and close to him.

"No, you're not---just a boy," answered Rose Mary, as she set his supper on the table before him. She had poured his coffee, stirred in the cream and sugar and then laid the spoon decorous and straight in the saucer beside the cup. For an instant Everett sat very still and looked at her, then she picked up the cup and tipped it against her lips, sipped judiciously and set it down with a satisfied air. For just a second her eyes had gleamed down at him over the edge of the cup and a tiny laugh gurgled in her throat as she swallowed her sip of his beverage.

"That was mine, anyway---he can have his chicken wings," said Everett with a laugh as he began operations on the food before him.

"It wasn't a very nice party," answered Rose Mary as she went on with her work on the pile of china. "Stonie acted awfully. He piled up his plate with pieces of chicken, and when Aunt Viney reproved him he said he was saving it for you. And Aunt Viney said she was sure you were sick, and then Uncle Tucker wanted to go look for you and I had to tell

him before them all that you had sent me word. Then Aunt Amandy said she was afraid you were not a Prohibitionist, and Aunt Viney said she would have to talk to you in the morning. Then they all told Mr. Newsome all about you, and I don't think he liked it much because he likes to tell us things about himself. We are so fond of him, and we always want to hear him talk about where he has been and what he has done. I tried to stop them and make him talk, but I couldn't. It's strange how liking a person gets them on your mind so that even if you don't talk about them you think about them all the time, isn't it? But I oughtn't to blame them, for I was so afraid they wouldn't leave enough of things for you that I forgot to talk myself. I was glad Stonie acted that way about the chicken, for the piece he saved made three pieces of white meat for you. Oh, please let's hurry, because we will miss the speaking if we don't. Mr. Newsome makes such beautiful speeches that I want you to hear him. Is there any kind of pride in the world like that you have over your friends?"

CHAPTER VI

THE ENEMY, THE ROD AND THE STAFF

And the days that followed the Senator's prohibition rally at Sweetbriar were those of carnival for jocund spring all up and down Providence Road and out over the Valley. Rugged old Harpeth began to be crowned with wreaths of tender green and pink which trailed down its sides in garlands that spread themselves out over meadow and farm away beyond the river bend. Overnight, rows of jonquils in Mrs. Poteet's straggling little garden lifted up golden candlestick heads to be decapitated at an early hour and transported in tight little bunches in dirty little fists to those of the neighbors whose spring flowers had failed to open at such an early date. In spite of what seemed an open neglect, the Poteet flowers were always more prolific and advanced than any others along the Road, much to the pride of the equally prolific and spring-blooming Mrs. Poteet. And in a spirit of nature's accord the white poet's narcissus showed starry flowers to the early sun in the greatest abundance along the Poteet fence that bordered on the Rucker yard. They peeped through the pickets, and who knows what challenge they flung to the poetic soul of Mr. Caleb Rucker as he sat on the side porch with his stockinged feet up on a chair and his nose tilted to an angle of ecstatic inhalation?

Down at the Plunketts the early wistaria vine that garlanded the front porch hung thick with long purple clusters which dropped continually little bouquets of single blossoms with perfect impartiality on the head of widow and maid, as the compromise of entertaining both young Bob and Mr. Crabtree at the same time was carried out by Louisa Helen. And often with the most absolute unconsciousness the demure little widow allowed herself to be drawn by the wily Mr. Crabtree into the mystic circle of three, which was instantly on her appearance dissolved into clumps of two. And if the prodigal vine showered blessings down upon a pair of clasped hands hid beside Louisa Helen's fluffy pink muslin skirts nobody was the wiser, except perhaps Mr. Crabtree.

And perched on the side of the hill the Briars found itself in a perfect avalanche of blossoms. The snowballs hung white and heavy from long branches, and gorgeous lilac boughs bent and swayed in the wind. A clump of bridal wreath by the front gate was a great white drift against the new green of a crimson-starred burning bush, while over it all trailed the perfume-laden honeysuckle which bowered the front porch, decorated trellis and trees and finally flung its blossoms down the hill to well-nigh cloister Rose Mary's milk-house.

One balmy afternoon Everett brushed aside a spray of the pink and white blossoms and stood in the stone doorway with his prospecting kit in his hands. Rose Mary lifted quick welcoming eyes to his and went on with her work with bowl and paddle. Everett had some time since got to the point where it was well-nigh impossible for him to look directly into Rose Mary's deep eyes, quaff a draft of the tenderness that he always found offered him and keep equanimity enough to go on with the affairs in hand. What business had a woman's eyes to be so filled with a young child's innocence, a violet's shyness, a passion of fostering gentleness, mirth that ripples like the surface of the crystal pools, and---could it be dawning---love? Everett had been in a state of uncertainty and misery so abject that it hid itself under an unusually

casual manner that had for weeks kept Rose Mary from suspecting to the least degree the condition of his mind. There is a place along the way in the pilgrimage to the altar of Love, when the god takes on an awe-inspiring phase which makes a man hide his eyes in his hands with fear of the most abject. At such times with her lamp of faith a woman goes on ahead and lights the way for both, but while Rose Mary's flame burned strongly, her unconsciousness was profound.

"I'm so glad you came," she said with the usual rose signal to him in her cheeks. "I've been wondering where you were and just a little bit uneasy about you. Mr. Newsome has been here and wants to see you. He stayed to dinner and waited for you for two hours. Stonie and Tobe and all the others looked for you. I know you are hungry. Will you have a drink of milk before I go with you to get your dinner I saved?"

"What did the Honorable Gid want?" asked Everett, and there was a strange excitement in his eyes as he laid his hand quickly on a small, irregular bundle of stones that bulged out of his kit. His voice had a sharp ring in it as he asked his question.

"Oh, I think he just wanted to see you because he likes you," answered Rose Mary with one of her lifted glances and quick smiles. "A body can take their own liking for two other people and use it as a good strong rope just to pull them together sometimes. I'm awfully fond of Mr. Newsome---and you," she added as she came over from one of the crocks with Peter Rucker's blue cup brimming with ice cold cream in her hand and offered it to Everett.

Instead of taking the cup from her Everett clasped his fingers around her slender wrist in the fashion of young Petie and thus with her hand raised the cup to his lips. And as his eyes looked down over its blue rim into hers the excitement in them died down, first into a very deep tenderness that changed slowly into a quiet determination which seemed to be pouring a promise and a vow into her very soul. Something in the strange look made Rose Mary's hand tremble as he finished the last drop in the cup, and again her lovely, always-ready rose flushed up under her long lowered lashes. "Is it good and cold?" she asked with a little smile as she turned away with the cup.

"Yes," answered Everett quietly, "it's all to the good and the milk to the cold."

"Is that a compliment to me and the milk, too?" laughed Rose Mary from over by the table as she again took up her butter-paddle. "It's nice to find things as is expected of them, women good and milk cold, isn't it?" she queried teasingly.

"Yes," answered Everett from across the table.

"And any way a woman must be a comfort to folks, just as a rose must smell sweet, because they're both born for that," continued Rose Mary as she lifted a huge pat of the butter on to a blue saucer. "Men are sometimes a comfort, too---and sweet," she added with a roguish glance at him over the butter flower she was making.

"No, Rose Mary, men are just thorns, cruel and slashing---but sometimes they protect the rose," answered Everett in his most cynical tone of voice, though the excitement again flamed up in his dark eyes and again his hand closed over the kit at his side. "Do you know what I think I'll do?" he added. "I think I'll take old Gray and jog over to Boliver for a while. I'll see the Senator, and I want to get a wire through to the firm in New York if I can. I'll eat both the dinner and supper you have saved when I come back, though it may be late before I get my telegram. Will you be still awake, do you think?"

"I may not be awake, for Stonie got me up so awfully early to help him and Uncle Tucker grease those foolish little turkeys' heads to keep off the dew gaps, but I'll go to sleep on the settee in the hall, and you can just shake me up to give you your supper."

"I'll do nothing of the kind, you foolish child," answered Everett. "Go to bed and---but a woman can't manage her dreams, can she?"

"Oh, dreams are only little day thoughts that get out of the coop and run around lost in the dark," answered Rose Mary, with a laugh. "I've got a little bronze-top turkey dream that is yours," she added.

"Is it one of the foolish flock?" Everett called back from the middle of the plank across the spring stream, and without waiting for his answer he strode down the Road.

And the smile that answered his sally had scarcely faded off Rose Mary's face when again a shadow fell across the plank and in a moment Mr. Crabtree stood in the doorway. Across the way the store was deserted and from the chair he drew just outside the door he could see if any shoppers should approach from either direction.

"Well, Miss Rose Mary, I thought as how I'd drop over and see if you had any buttermilk left in that trough you are fattening Mr. Mark at, for the fair in the fall," he said with a twinkle in his merry little blue eyes. And Rose Mary laughed with appreciation at his often repeated little joke as she handed him a tall glassful of the desired beverage.

"I'm afraid Stonie will get the blue ribbon from over his head if he keeps on drinking so much milk. Did you ever see anybody grow like my boy does?" asked Rose Mary with the most manifest pride in her voice and eyes.

"I never did," answered Mr. Crabtree heartily. "And that jest reminds me to tell you that a letter come from Todd last night a-telling me and Granny Satterwhite about the third girl baby borned out to his house in Colorado City. Looked like they was much disappointed. I kinder give Todd a punch in the ribs about how fine a boy General Stonewall Jackson have grown to be. I never did hold with a woman a-giving away her child, though she couldn't have done the part you do by Stonie by a long sight."

"Oh, what would I have done without Stonie, Mr. Crabtree!" exclaimed Rose Mary with a deep sadness coming into her lovely eyes. "You know how it was!" she added softly, claiming his sympathy with a little gesture of her hand.

"Yes, I do know," answered the store-keeper, his big heart giving instant response to the little cry. "And on him you've done given a lesson in child raising to the whole of Sweetbriar. They ain't a child on the Road, girl or boy, that ain't being sorter patterned after the General by they mothers. And the way the women are set on him is plumb funny. Now Mis' Plunkett there, she's got a little tin bucket jest to hold cakes for nobody but Stonie Jackson, which he distributes to the rest, fair and impartial. I kinder wisht Mis' Plunkett would be a little more free with---with---" And the infatuated old bachelor laughed sheepishly at Rose Mary across her butter-bowl.

"When a woman bakes little crisp cakes of affection in her heart, and the man she wants to have ask her for them don't, what must she do?" asked Rose Mary with a little laugh that nevertheless held a slight note of genuine inquiry in it.

"Just raise the cover of the bucket and let him get a whiff," answered Mr. Crabtree, shaking with amusement. "'Tain't no use to offer a man no kind of young lollypop when he have got his mouth fixed on a nice old-fashioned pound-cake woman," he added in a ruthless tone of voice as he and Rose Mary both laughed over the trying plight in which he found his misguided love affairs. "There comes that curly apple puff now. Howdy, Louisa Helen; come across the plank and I'll give you this chair if I have to."

"I don't wanter make you creak your joints," answered Louisa Helen with a pert little toss of her curly head as she passed him and stood by Rose Mary's table. "Miss Rose Mary, I wanter to show you this Sunday waist I've done made Maw and get you to persuade her some about it for me. I put this little white ruffle in the neck and sleeves and a bunch of it down

here under her chin, and now she says I've got to take it right off. Paw's been dead five years, and I've most forgot how he looked. Oughtn't she let it stay?"

"I think it looks lovely," answered Rose Mary, eying the waist with enthusiasm. "I'll come down to see your mother and beg her to let it stay as soon as I get the butter worked. Didn't she look sweet with that piece of purple lilac I put in her hair the other night? Did she let that stay?"

"Yes, she did until Mr. Crabtree noticed it, and then she threw it away. Wasn't he silly?" asked Louisa Helen with a teasing giggle at the blushing bachelor.

"It shure was foolish of me to say one word," he admitted with a laugh. "But I tell you girls what I'll do if you back Mis' Plunkett into that plum pretty garment with its white tags. I'll go over to Boliver and bring you both two pounds of mixed peppermint and chocolate candy with a ribbon tied around both boxes, and maybe some pretty strings of beads, too. Is it a bargain?" And Rose Mary smiled appreciatively as Louisa Helen gave an eager assent.

At this juncture a team driven down the Road had stopped in front of the store, and from under the wide straw hat young Bob Nickols' eager eyes lighted on Louisa Helen's white sunbonnet which was being flirted partly in and partly out of the milk-house door. As he threw down the reins he gave a low, sweet quail whistle, and Louisa Helen's response was given in one liquid note of accord.

"Lands alive, it woulder been drinking harm tea to try to whistle a woman down in my day, but now they come a-running," remarked Mr. Crabtree to Rose Mary, as he prepared to take his departure in the wake of the pink petticoats that had hurried across the street.

Then for another hour Rose Mary worked alone in the milk-house, humming a happy little tune to herself as she pounded and patted and moulded away. Every now and then she would glance down Providence Road toward Boliver, far away around the bend, and when at last she saw old Gray and her rider turn behind the hill she began to straighten things preparatory to a return to the Briars. In the world-old drama of creation which is being ever enacted anew in the heart of a woman, it is well that the order of evolution is reversed and only after the bringing together and marshaling of forces unsuspected even by herself comes the command for light on the darkness of the situation. Rose Mary was as yet in the dusk of the night which waited for the voice of God on the waters, and there was yet to come the dawn of her first day.

And in the semi-mist of the dream she finally ascended the hill toward the Briars with a bucket in one hand and a sunbonnet swinging in the other. But coming down the trail she met one of the little tragedies of life in the person of Stonewall Jackson, who was dragging dejectedly across the yard from the direction of the back door with Mrs. Sniffer and all five little dogs trailing in his wake. And as if in sympathy with his mood, the frisky little puppies were waddling along decorously while Sniffer poked her nose affectionately into the little brown hand which was hanging without its usual jaunty swing. Rose Mary took in the situation at a glance and sank down under one of the tall lilac bushes and looked up with adoring eyes as Stonie came and took a spread-legged stand before her.

"What's the matter, honey-sweet?" she asked quickly.

"Rose Mamie, it's a lie that I don't know whether I told or not. It's so curious that I don't hardly think God knows what I did," and the General's face was set and white with his distress.

"Tell me, Stonie, maybe I can help you decide," said Rose Mary with quick sympathy.

"It was one of them foolish turkey hens and Tobe sat down on her and a whole nest of most hatched little turkeys. Didn't nobody know she was a-setting in the old wagon but Aunt Amandy, and we was a-climbing into it for a boat on the stormy sea, we was playing like. It was mighty bad on Tobe's pants, too, for he busted all the eggs. Looks like he just always finds some kind of smell and falls in it. I know Mis' Poteet'll be mad at him. And then in a little while here come Aunt Amandy to feed the old turkey, and she 'most cried when she found things so bad all around everywhere. We had runned behind the corn-crib, but when I saw her begin to kinder cry I comed out. Then she asked me did I break up her nest she was a-saving to surprise Uncle Tucker with, and I told her no ma'am I didn't--but I didn't tell her I was with Tobe climbing into the wagon, and it only happened he slid down first on the top of the old turkey. It don't *think* like to me it was a lie, but it *feels* like one right here," and Stonie laid his hand on the pit of his little stomach, which was not far away from the seat of his pain if the modern usage assigned the solar-plexus be correct.

"And did Tobe stay still behind the corn-crib and not come out to tell Aunt Amandy he was sorry he had ruined her turkey nest?" asked Rose Mary, bent on getting all the facts before offering judgment.

"Yes'm, he did, and now he's mighty sorry, cause Tobe loves Aunt Amandy as well as being skeered of the devil. He says if it was Aunt Viney he'd rather the devil would get him right now than tell her, but if you'll come lend him some of my britches he will come in and tell Aunt Amandy about it. He's tooken his off and he has to stay in the corn-crib until I get something for him to put on."

"Of course I'll come get some trousers for Tobe and a clean shirt, too, and I know Aunt Amanda will be glad to forgive him. Tobe is always so nice to her and she'll be sorry he's sorry, and then it will be all right, won't it?" And thus with a woman's usual shrinking from meeting the question ethical, Rose Mary sought to settle the matter in hand out of court as it were.

"No, Rose Mamie, I ain't sure about that lie yet," asserted the General in a somewhat relieved tone of voice, but still a little uneasy about the moral question involved in the case. "Did I tell it or not? Do you know, Rose Mamie, or will I have to wait till I go to God to find out?"

"Stonie, I really don't know," admitted Rose Mary as she drew the little arguer to her and rested her cheek against the sturdy little shoulder under the patched gingham shirt. "It was not your business to tell on Tobe but--but--please, honey-sweet, let's leave it to God, now. He understands, I'm sure, and some day when you have grown a big and wise man you'll think it all out. When you do, will you tell Rose Mamie?"

"Yes, I reckon I'll have to wait till then, and I'll tell you sure, Rose Mamie, when I do find out. I won't never forget it, but I hope maybe Tobe won't get into no more mess from now till then. Please come find the britches for me!" And consoled thus against his will the General followed Rose Mary to the house and into their room, eager for the relief and rehabiting of the prisoner.

And in a few minutes the scene of the *amende honorable* between little Miss Amanda and the small boys was enacted out on the back steps, well out of sight and hearing of Miss Lavinia. A new bond was instituted between the little old lady, who was tremulous with eagerness to keep the culprit from any form of self-reproach, and Tobe, the unfortunate, who was one of her most ardent admirers at all times. And it was sealed by a double handful of tea-cakes to both offenders.

After she had watched the boys disappear in the direction of the barn, intent on making a great clean-up job of the disaster under Miss Amanda's direction, Rose Mary wended her way to the garden for a precious hour of communion with her flowers and vegetable nursery babies. She had just tucked up her skirts and started in with a light hoe when she espied Uncle Tucker coming slowly up Providence Road from the direction of the north woods. Something a bit dejected in his step and a slightly greater stoop in his shoulders made her throw down her weapon of war on the weeds

and come to lean over the wall to wait for him.

"What's the matter, old Sweetie---tired?" she demanded as he came alongside and leaned against the wall near her. His big gray eyes were troubled and there was not the sign of the usual quizzical smile. The forelock hung down in a curl from under the brim of the old gray hat and the lavender muffler swung at loose ends. As he lighted the old cob his lean brown hands trembled slightly and he utterly refused to look into Rose Mary's eyes. "What is it, honey-heart?" she demanded again.

"What's what, Rose Mary?" asked Uncle Tucker with a slight rift in the gloom. "They are some women in the world, if a man was to seal up his trouble in a termater-can and swoller it, would get a button-hook and a can-opener to go after him to get it out. You belong to that persuasion."

"I want to be the tomato-can---and not be 'swollered'," answered Rose Mary as she reached over and gently removed the tattered gray roof from off the white shock and began to smooth and caress its brim into something of its former shape. "I know something is the matter, and if it's your trouble it's mine. I'm your heir at law, am I not?"

"Yes, and you're a-drawing on the estate for more'n your share of pesters, looks like," answered Uncle Tucker as he raised his eyes to hers wistfully.

"Is it something about---about the mortgage?" asked Rose Mary in the gently hushed tone that she always used in speaking of this ever couchant enemy of their peace.

"Yes," answered Uncle Tucker slowly, "it's about the mortgage, and I'm mighty sorry to have to tell you, but I reckon I'll have to come to accepting you from the Lord as a rod and staff to hobble on. I---I had that settlement with the Senator this evening 'fore he left and it came pretty nigh winding me to see how things stood. Instead of a little more'n one hundred dollars behind in the interest we are mighty near on to six, and by right figures, too. It just hasn't measured out any year, and I never stopped to count it at so much. Gid was mighty kind about it and said never mind, let it run, but---but I'm not settled in my mind it's right to hold on like this; he maybe didn't mean it, but before dinner he dropped a word about being mighty hard pressed for money to keep up this here white ribbon contest he's a-running against his own former record. No, I'm not settled in my mind about the rights of it," and with this uneasy reiteration Uncle Tucker raised his big eyes to Rose Mary in which lay the exact quest for the path of honor that she had met in the young eyes of the General not two hours before. In fact, Uncle Tucker's eyes were so like Stonie's in their mournful demand for a decision from her that Rose Mary's tender heart throbbed with sympathy but sank with dismay at again having the decision of a question of masculine ethics presented to her.

"I just don't know what to say, Uncle Tucker," she faltered, thus failing him in his crisis more completely than she had the boy.

"The time for saying has passed, and I'm afraid to look forwards to what we may have to do," answered Uncle Tucker quietly. "After Gid was gone on up the road I walked over to Tilting Rock and sat down with my pipe to think it all over. My eyes are a-getting kinder dim now, but as far as I could see in most all directions was land that I had always called mine since I come into a man's estate. And there is none of it that has ever had a deed writ aginst it since that first Alloway got it in a grant from Virginy. There is meadow land and corn hillside, creeks for stock and woodlands for shelter, and the Alloways before me have fenced it solid and tended it honest, with return enrichment for every crop. And now it has come to me in my old age to let it go into the hands of strangers---sold by my own flesh and blood for a mess of pottage, he not knowing what he did I will believe, God help me. I'm resting him and the judgment of him in the arms of Mercy, but my living folks have got to have an earthly shelter. Can you see a way, child? As I say, my eyes are a-getting dim."

"I can't see any other shelter than the Briars, Uncle Tucker, and there isn't going to be any other," answered Rose Mary as she stroked the old hat in her hand. "You know sometimes men run right against a stone wall when a woman can see a door plainly in front of them both. She just looks for the door and don't ask to know who is going to open it from the other side. Our door is there I know---I have been looking for it for a long time. Right now it looks like a cow gate to me," and a little reluctant smile came over Rose Mary's grave face as if she were being forced to give up a cherished secret before she were ready for the revelation.

"And if the gate sticks, Rose Mary, I believe you'll climb the fence and pull us all over, whether or no," answered Uncle Tucker with a slightly comforted expression coming into his eyes. "You're one of the women who knot a bridle out of a horse's own tail to drive him with. Have you got this scheme already geared up tight, ready to start?"

"It's only that Mr. Crabtree brought word from town that the big grocery he sells my butter to would agree to take any amount I could send them at a still larger price. If we could hold on to the place, buy more cows and all the milk other people in Sweetbriar have to sell I believe I could make the interest and more than the interest every year. But if Mr. Newsome needs the money, I am afraid---he might not like to wait. It would be a year before I could see exactly how things succeed---and that's a long time."

"Yes, and it would mean for you to just be a-turning yourself into meat and drink for the family, nothing more or less, Rose Mary. You work like you was a single filly hitched to a two-horse wagon now, and that would be just piling fence rails on top of the load of hay you are already a-drawing for all of us old live stock. You couldn't work all that butter."

"Don't you know that love mixed in the bread of life makes it easy for the woman to work a large batch for her family, Uncle Tucker?---and why not butter? Will you talk to Mr. Newsome the next time he comes and see what he thinks of the plan? I would tell him about it myself---only I---I don't know why, but I don't---want to." Rose Mary blushed and looked away across the Road, but her confusion was all unnoticed by Uncle Tucker, who was busily lighting a second pipeful of tobacco.

"Yes, I'll talk to him and Crabtree both about it," he answered slowly. "I can't hardly bear the idea of your doing it, child, and if it was just me I wouldn't hear tell of it, but Sister Viney and Sister Amandy---moved they'd be like a couple of sprouts of their own honeysuckle vine that you had pulled up and left in the sun to wilt. Home was a place to grow in for women of their day, not just a-kinder waiting shack between stations like it has come to be in these times of women's uprising---in the newspapers."

"We don't get much new woman excitement out here in Harpeth Valley, Uncle Tucker," laughed Rose Mary, glad to see him rise once more from the depth of his depression to his usual philosophic level. "You wouldn't call---er---er Mrs. Poteet a modern woman, would you?"

"Fly-away, Peggy Poteet is the genuine, original mossback and had oughter be expelled from the sex by the confederation president herself," answered Uncle Tucker as they both glanced down past the milk-house where they saw the comely mother of the seven at her gate administering refreshment in the form of bread and jam to all of her own and quite a number of the other members of the Swarm, including the General and the reclothed and shriven Tobe. "If there is another Poteet output next April we'll have to report her," he added with a laugh.

"But there never was a baby since Stonie like little Tucker," answered Rose Mary in quick defense of the small namesake of whom Uncle Tucker was secretly but inordinately proud.

"Yes, and I'm a-going to report you to the society of suppression of men folks as a regular spiler, Rose Mary Alloway, if you don't keep more stern than you are at present with me and Stonie, to say nothing of all the men members of

Sweetbriar from Everett clean on through Crabtree down to that very young Tucker Poteet. You are one of the women that feed and clothe and blush on men like you were borned a hundred years ago and nobody had told you they wasn't worth shucks. Are you a-going to reform?"

"I'll try when I get time," answered Rose Mary with a smile as she bestowed both a fleeting kiss and the old hat on Uncle Tucker's forelock over the wall. "Now I want to run in and make a few cup custards, so I can save one for Mr. Mark when he gets home to-night. He loves them cold. Little cooking attentions never spoil men, they just nourish them. Anyway, what is a woman going to have left to do in life if she sheds the hovering feathers she keeps to tuck her nesties underneath?"

CHAPTER VII

THE SATSUMA VASE

"Well, howdy to-day, Mis' Poteet!" exclaimed Mrs. Rucker as she came across her side yard and leaned over the Poteet fence right opposite the Poteet back porch. "I brought you this pan of rolls to set away for Mr. Poteet's supper. When I worked out the sponge looked like my pride over 'em riz with the dough and I just felt bound to show 'em off to somebody; I know I can always count on a few open mouths in this here nest."

"That you can and thank you squaks, too, Mis' Rucker. I don't know however I would feed 'em all if it wasn't for the drippings from your kitchen," answered the placid and always improvident Mrs. Poteet as she picked up Shoofly and came over to the fence, delighted at a chance for a few minutes parley with the ever busy and practical Mrs. Rucker. She balanced the gingham-clad bunch on its own wobbly legs beside her, while through the pickets of the fence in greeting were thrust the pink hands of Petie, the bond, who had followed in the wake of his own maternal skirts. Shoofly responded to this attention with a very young feminine gurgle of delight and licked at the chubby fist thrust toward her like an overjoyed young kitten.

"Well, Monday is always a scrap day, so I try to kinder perk up my Monday supper. Singing in the quire twict on Sunday and too much confab with the other men on the store steps always kinder tires Mr. Rucker out so he can't hardly get about with his sciatica on Monday, and I have to humor him some along through the day. That were a mighty good sermon circuit rider preached last night."

"Yes, I reckon it were, but my mind was so took up with the way Louisa Helen flirted herself down the aisle with Bob on one side of her and Mr. Crabtree on the other, I couldn't hardly get my mind down to listening. And when she contrived Mr. Crabtree into the pew next to Mis' Plunkett, as she moved down for 'em, I most gave a snort out loud. Didn't Mis' Plunkett look nice in that second mourning tucker it took Louisa Helen and all of Sweetbriar to persuade her into?"

"Lou Plunkett is as pretty as a chiny aster that blooms in September and what she's having these number-two conniptions over Mr. Crabtree for is more than I can see. I look on a second husband as a good dessert after a fine dinner and a woman oughter swallow one when offered without no mincing. I wouldn't make two bites of taking Mr. Crabtree after poor puny Mr. Plunkett if it was me. Of course there never was such a man as Mr. Satterwhite, but he was always mighty busy, while Cal Rucker is a real pleasure to me a-setting around the house on account of his soft constitution. Mr. Satterwhite, I'm thankful to say, left me so well provided for that I can afford Mr. Rucker as a kind of play ornament."

"Yes, they ain't nothing been thought up yet to beat marrying," answered Mrs. Poteet. "Now didn't Emma Satterwhite find a good chanct when Todd Crabtree married her and took her away after all that young Tucker Alloway doings? It were a kind of premium for flightiness, but I for one was glad to get her gone off'en Rose Mary's hands. I couldn't a-bear

to see her tending hand and foot a woman she were jilted for."

"Well, a jilt from some men saves a woman from being married with a brass ring outen a popcorn box, in my mind, and Tucker Alloway were one of them kind of men. But talking about marrying, I'm kinder troubled in my mind about something, and I know I can depend on you not to say nothing to nobody. Mr. Gid Newsome stopped at my gate last week and got me into a kinder hinting chavering that have been a-troubling me ever since. Now that's where Mr. Rucker is such a comfort to me, he'll stay awake and worry as long as I have need of, while I wouldn't a-dared to speak to Mr. Satterwhite after he put out the light. But this is about what I've pieced outen that talk with the Senator, with Cal's help. That mortgage he has got on the Briars about covers it, like a double blanket on a single bed, and with the interest beginning to pile up it's hard to keep the ends tucked in. The time have come when Mr. Tucker can't make it no more and something has got to be done. But they ain't no use to talk about moving them old folks. I gather from a combination of what Mr. Gid looked and *didn't* say that he were entirely willing to take over the place and make some sorter arrangement about them all a-staying on just the same. That'd be mighty kind of him."

"You don't reckon he'd do no such take-me-or-get-out co'ting to Rose Mary, do you?" asked the soft-natured little Mrs. Poteet with alarmed sympathy in her blue eyes.

"Oh, no, he ain't that big a fool. Every man knows in marrying an unwilling woman he's putting himself down to eat nothing but scraps around the kitchen door. But I wisht Rose Mary could make up her mind to marry Mr. Newsome. She might as well, for in the end a woman can't tell nothing about taking a man; she just has to choose a can of a good brand and then be satisfied, for they all season and heat up about alike. I never gave him no satisfaction about talking his praises to her, but I reckon I'm for the tie-up if Rose Mary can see it that way." And Mrs. Rucker glanced along the Road toward Rose Mary's milk-house with a kindly, though calculating matchmaking in her practical eyes.

"I'm kinder for Mr. Mark," ventured the more sentimental Mrs. Poteet with a smile. "He's as handsome as Rose Mary are, and wouldn't they have pretty---"

"Oh, shoo, I don't hold with no marrying outen the Valley for Rose Mary! She's needed here and ain't got no call to gallivant off to New York and beyont with a strange man, beauty or no beauty. Besides she's pretty enough herself to hand it down even to the third and fourth generation. But I must go and see to helping Granny out on the side porch in the sun. I never want to neglect her, for she's the only child poor Mr. Satterwhite left me. Now Mr. Rucker---Why there comes Mis' Amandy down the front walk! Let's you and me go to meet her and see what she wants. We can help her across the Road if she is a-going to see anybody but us!" And with eager affection the two strong young women with their babies in their arms hurried across the street in order to serve if need be the delicate little old lady who, with her gray skirts fluttering and the little shawl streaming out behind, was coming at her tottering full speed in that direction. In her hand she held carefully a bit of sheer, yellow, old muslin, and her bright eyes were beaming with delight as she met the two neighbors at the gate.

"It's the dress," she exclaimed, all out of breath and her sweet little voice all a-tremble. "Sister and me and Tucker were all baptized in it when we were babies. Sister Viney has had me a-going through boxes and bundles for it ever since little Tucker was named for us, and here it is! It's hand-made and fine linen, brought all the way from New York down to the city in a wagon before the railroad run. It's all the present we have got for little Tucker, but we thought maybe---" And Miss Amanda paused with a shy diffidence in offering her gift.

"Gracious me, Miss Amandy, they didn't nothing ever happen to me like this little dress being gave to one of my children. I am going to let him be named in it and then keep it in the box with my Bible, where it won't be disturbed for nothing," exclaimed Mrs. Poteet in a tone of voice that was tear-choking with reverence as she took the dainty yellow little garment into her hand. "And to think how you all have wore yourself out a-looking for it!" she further exclaimed.

"Oh, me and Sister Viney have had a good time a-going through things; we haven't seen some of them for thirty or forty years. We found the flannel petticoat Ma was a-making for me when she died over forty-five years ago. The needle is a-sticking in it, and I'm a-going to finish it to wear next winter. I'll feel like it is a comfort for my old age she just laid by for me. I've got a little lace collar Ma's mother wore when she come over from Virginy, and it's in the very style now, so we're going to bleach it out to give to Rose Mary. Come on up to the house with me and see it and set with Sister Viney a spell, can't you? She's got mighty sore joints this morning, though Rose Mary rubbed her most a hour last night" And in response to the eager invitation they all three went back up the front walk together. The thrifty Mrs. Rucker cast a satisfied glance back towards her own side yard, where upturned tub and drying wash were in plain view. Mrs. Poteet had put off the task of the wash until a later day of the week and thus could make her visit with a mind unharrassed by the vision of suds boiling over on the stove and soap melting in the tub.

And there ensued several hours of complete absorption for the four women closeted in Miss Lavinia's room in reviewing the events of the last half century by means of the reminiscences which were inspired by one unearthed heirloom after another. Pete and Shoofly were happy on the floor enveloping themselves and each other in long wisps of moth-eaten yarn that Miss Amandy had unearthed in a bureau drawer and donated to their amusement. Mrs. Poteet had with her usual happy forgetfulness of anything but the very immediate occupation, lost sight of the fact that she had left young Tucker asleep on the bed in her room, which location, counting the distance across the two yards and down the Road, was at least slightly remote from aid in case of a sudden restoration to consciousness for the young sleeper.

And in the natural course of events the young Alloway namesake did awaken and gave lusty vent to a demand for human companionship, which was answered promptly by the General, who happened to be passing the front gate in pursuits of his own. Finding the house deserted, with his usual decision of action Stonie picked up the baby and kept on his way, which led past the garden up the hill to the barn. Young Tucker accepted this little journey in the world with his usual imperturbability, and his sturdy little neck made unusual efforts to support his bald head over the General's shoulders as if in pride at being in the company of one of his peers and not in the usual feminine thralldom.

Finding the barn also deserted, Stonie laid young Tucker on the straw in the barrel with two of Sniffer's sleeping puppies and began to attend to his errand, which involved the extraction of several long, stout pieces of string from a storehouse of his own under one of the feed bins and the plaiting of them into the cracker of a whip which he had brought along with him.

Down below the store the rest of the Swarm were busy marking out a large circus ring and discussing with considerable heat their individual rights to the various star parts to be performed in the coming exhibition. The ardors of their several ambitions were not at all dampened by the knowledge of the fact that the audience that would be in attendance to witness their triumphs would in all probability consist of only Granny Satterwhite, whom little Miss Amanda always coaxed to attend in her company, with perhaps a few moments of encouragement from Mr. Crabtree if he found the time. To which would always be added the interested and jocular company of Mr. Rucker, who always came, brought a chair to sit in and stayed through the entire performance. And in the talented aggregation of performers there was of course just one role that could have been assumed by General Jackson, that of ringmaster; so to that end he sat on the floor of the barn beside the sleeping puppies and young Tucker and plaited the lash by means of which he intended to govern the courses of his stars.

And it was here that Everett found him a few minutes later as he walked rapidly up the milk-house path and stood in the barn door in evident hurried search for somebody or some thing.

"Hello, General," he said with a smile at the barrel full of sleepers at Stonie's side, "do you know where Rose Mary is?"

"Yes," answered the General, "she are in her room putting buttermilk on the five freckles that comed on her nose when she hoed out in the garden without no sunbonnet. I found 'em all for her this morning, and she don't like 'em. You can go on in and see if they are any better for her, I ain't got the time to fool with 'em now."

"Not for worlds!" exclaimed Everett as he sat down on an upturned peck measure in close proximity to the barrel. "Have you decided to have Mrs. Poteet and Mrs. Sniffer swap---er---puppies, Stonie?" he further remarked.

"No, I didn't," answered Stonie with one of his rare smiles which made him so like Rose Mary that Everett's heart glowed within him. Stonie was, as a general thing, as grave as a judge, with something hauntingly, almost tragically serious in his austere young face, but his smiles when they came were flashes of the very divinity of youth and were a strange incarnation of the essence of Rose Mary's cousinly loveliness. "He was crying because he was by hisself and I bringed him along to wait till his mother came home. He belongs some to us, 'cause he's named for Uncle Tuck, and I oughter pester with him same as Tobe have to. It's fair to do my part."

"Yes, General, you always do your part--and always will, I think," said Everett, as he looked down at the sturdy little chap so busy with his long strings, weaving them over and over slowly but carefully. "A man's part," he added as two serious eyes were raised to his.

"In just a little while I'll be a man and have Uncle Tucker and Aunt Viney and Aunt Amandy to be mine to keep care of always, Rose Mamie says," answered Stonie in his most practical tone of voice as he began to see the end of the long strings draw into his weaving of the cracker.

"What about Rose Mamie herself?" asked Everett softly, his voice thrilling over the child's name for the girl with reverent tenderness.

"When I get big enough to keep care of everything here I'm going to let Rose Mamie get a husband and a heap of children, like Mis' Poteet--but I'm a-going to make 'em behave theyselves better'n Tobe and Peggie and the rest of 'em do. Aunt Viney says Mis' Poteet spares the rod too much, but I'll fix Rose Mamie's children if they don't mind her and me." The General's mouth assumed its most commanding expression as he glanced down at the little Poteet sleeping beside him, unconscious of the fact that he was, in the future, to be the victim of a spared rod.

"Stonie," asked Everett meekly, "have you chosen a husband for Rose Mary yet?"

"No," answered Stonie as he wove in the last inch of string. Then he paused and raised his eyes to Everett thoughtfully. "It's jest got to be the best man in the world, and I'm a-going to find him for her. If I can't I'll keep care of her as good as I can myself."

"General," said Everett as he held the child's eyes with a straight level compelling glance, "you are right--she must have only the best. And you 'keep care' until he comes. I am going away to-night and I don't know when I can come back, but you must always--always 'keep care' of her--until the good man comes. Will you?"

"I will," answered the General positively. "And if anybody of any kind bothers her or any of them I'll knock the stuffins outen 'em, and Tobe'll help. But say," he added, as if suddenly inspired by a brilliant idea, "couldn't you look for him for me? You'd know the good kind of a man and you could bring him here. I would give you one of the spotted puppies to pay for the trouble," and a hot wave engulfed Everett as the trustful friendly young eyes looked straight into his as Stonie made this extremely practical business proposition.

"Yes, General, I will come and bring him to you, and when he comes he will be the best ever---or he will have died in the attempt."

"All right," answered Stonie, completely satisfied with the terms of the bargain, "and you can take your pick of the puppies. Are you going on the steam cars from Boliver?"

"Yes," answered Everett, "and I want to find your Uncle Tucker to ask him---"

"Well, here he is to answer all inquiries at all times," came in Uncle Tucker's quizzical voice as he stood in the doorway of the barn with a bucket in one hand and a spade in the other. "Old age is just like a hobble that tithers up stiff-jinted old cattle to the home post and keeps 'em from a-roving. I haven't chawed the rope and broke over to Boliver in more'n a month now. Did you leave Main Street a-running east to west this morning?"

"Yes," answered Everett, "still the same old Boliver. But I wanted to see you right away to tell you that I have had a wire from the firm that makes it necessary for me to get back to New York immediately. I must catch that train that passes Boliver at midnight."

"Oh, fly away, you can't pick up and go like that!" exclaimed Uncle Tucker with alarmed remonstrance. "Such a hurry as that are unseemly. Good-byes oughter to be handled slowly and careful, like chiny, to save smashed feelings. Have you told Rose Mary and the sisters?"

"No; I've just come back from Boliver, and I couldn't find Rose Mary, and Miss Lavinia and Miss Amanda had company. I must go on over to the north field while there is still light to---to collect some---some instruments I---that is I may have left some things over there that I will need. I will hurry back. Will---you tell them all for me?" As Everett spoke he did not look directly at Uncle Tucker, but his eyes followed the retreating form of the General, who, with the completed whip, the nodding baby and the two awakened puppies was making his way down Providence Road in the direction of the circus band. There was a strange controlled note of excitement in his voice and his hands gripped themselves around the handles of his kit until the nails went white with the strain.

"Yes, I'll tell 'em," answered Uncle Tucker with a distressed quaver coming into his voice as he took in the fact that Everett's hurried departure was inevitable. "I'm sorry you have got to go, boy, but I'll help you get off if it's important for you. I'll have them get your supper early and put up a snack for the train."

"I don't want anything---that is, it doesn't matter about supper. I---I will be back to see Miss Lavinia and Miss Amanda before they retire." And Everett's voice was quiet with a calmness that belied the lump in his throat at the very mention of the farewell to be said to the two little old flower ladies.

"I'll go on and tell 'em now," said Uncle Tucker with an even increased gloom in his face and voice. "Breaking bad news to women folks is as nervous a work as dropping a basket of eggs; you never can tell in which direction the lamentations are a-going to spatter and spoil things. I'll go get the worst of the muss over before you get back."

"Thank you," answered Everett with both a laugh and a catch in his voice as they separated, he going out through the field and over the hill and Uncle Tucker along the path to the house.

And a little later Uncle Tucker found Rose Mary moving alone knee deep in the flowers and fruit of her beloved garden. For long moments she bent over the gray-green, white-starred bed of cinnamon pinks which sent up an Arabian fragrance into her face as she carefully threaded out each little weed that had dared rear its head among the white blossoms. As she walked between the rows the tall lilies laid their heads against her breast and kissed traces of their gold hearts on her

hands and bare arms, while on the other side a very riot of blush peonies crowded against her skirts. Long trails of pod-laden snap beans tangled around her feet and a couple of round young squashes rolled from their stems at the touch of her fingers. She was the very incarnation of young Plenty in the garden of the gods, and she reveled as she worked.

"Rose Mary," said Uncle Tucker as he came and stood beside her as she began to train the clambering butter-bean vines around their tall poles, "young Everett has got to go on to New York to-night on the train from Boliver, and I told him you would be mighty glad to help him off in time. I'd put him up a middling good size snack if I was you, for the eating on a train must be mighty scrambled like at best. We'll have to turn around to keep him from being late." And it was thus broadside that the blow was delivered which shook the very foundations of Rose Mary's heart and left her white to the lips and with hands that clutched at the bean vines desperately.

"When did he tell you?" she asked in a voice that managed to pass muster in the failing light.

"Just a little while ago, and the news hit Sister Viney so sudden like it give her a bad spell of asthma, and Sister Amandy was sorter crying and let the jimson-weed smoke get in her mouth and choke her. They are a-having a kind of ruckus, with nobody but Stonie helping 'em put Sis' Viney to bed, so I reckon you'd better go in and see 'em. He's gone over to the north field to get a hammer or something he left and will be back soon. Hurry that black pester up with the supper, I'm so bothered I feel empty," with which injunction Uncle Tucker left Rose Mary at the kitchen steps.

And it was a strenuous hour that followed, in which things were so crowded into Rose Mary's hands that the fullness of her heart had to be ignored if she was to go on with them. After a time Miss Lavinia was eased back on her pile of pillows and might have dropped off to sleep, but she insisted on having her best company cap arranged on her hair and a lavender shawl put around her shoulders and thus in state take a formal leave of the departing guest---alone. And it was fully a half hour before Everett came out of her room, and Rose Mary saw him slip a tiny pocket testament which had always lain on Miss Lavinia's table into his inside breast pocket, and his face was serious almost to the point of exhaustion. The time he had spent in Miss Lavinia's room little Miss Amanda had busily occupied in packing the generous "snack," which Uncle Tucker hovered over and saw bestowed to his entire satisfaction with the traps Everett had strapped up in his room. Stonie's large eyes grew more and more wistful, and after he and Uncle Tucker retired with their good-byes all said he whispered to Rose Mary that he wanted to say just one more thing to Mr. Mark.

Tenderly Everett bent over the cot until the blush rosebud that Miss Amanda had shyly pinned in his buttonhole as her good-by before she had retired, brushed the little fellow's cheek as he ran his arm under the sturdy little nightgowned shoulders and drew him as close as he dared.

"Say," whispered Stonie in his ear, "if you see a man that would buy Sniffer's other two spotted pups I would sell 'em to him. I want to get them teeth for Aunt Viney. I could get 'em to him in a box."

"How much do you want for them?" asked Everett with a little gulp in his voice as his heart beat against the arm of the young provider assuming his obligations so very early in life.

"A dollar a-piece, I guess, or maybe ten," answered Stonie vaguely.

"I'll sell them right away at your price," answered Everett. "I'll see that Mr. Crabtree has them packed and shipped." He paused for a moment. He would have given worlds to have taken the two little dogs with him and have left the money with Stonie---but he didn't dare.

"And," murmured Stonie drowsily, "don't forget that good man for Rose Mamie if you see him---and---and---" but suddenly he had drifted off into the depths, thus abandoning himself to the crush of a hug Everett had been hungry to

give him.

And out in the starlit dusk he found Rose Mary sitting on the steps, freed at last, with her responsibilities all asleep---and before him there lay just this one---good-by.

Silently he seated himself beside her and as silently lit his cigar and began to puff the rings out into the air. In the perfect flood of perfume that poured around and over them and came in great gusts from the garden he detected a new tone, wild and woody, sweet with a curious tang and haunting in its alien and insistent note in the rhapsody of odors.

"There's something new in bloom in your garden, Lady of the Rose?" he asked questioningly.

"Yes, it's the roses on the hedges coming out; don't they smell briary and---good? Just this last night you will be able to carry away with you a whiff of real sweetbriar. To-morrow the whole town will be in bloom. It is now I think if we could only see it." Rose Mary had gained her composure and the poignant wistfulness in her voice was but a part of the motif of the briar roses in the valley dusk.

"I'll see it all right to-morrow and often. Sweetbriar---it's going to blind me so that I won't be able to make my way along Broadway. Everything hereafter will be located up and down Providence Road for me." Everett's voice held to a tone of quiet lightness and he bravely puffed his rings of smoke out on the breezes.

"Perhaps some day you'll pass us again along the road to your Providence," said Rose Mary gently, and the wistful question was all that her woman's tradition allowed her to ask---though her heart break with its pride.

"Some day," answered Everett, and underneath the quiet voice sounded a savage note and his teeth bit through his cigar, which he threw out into the dew-carpeted grass. Just then there came from up under the eaves a soft disturbed flutter of wings and a gentle dove note was answered reassuringly and tenderly in kind.

"Rose Mary," he said as he turned to her and laid his hand on the step near her, "once you materialized your heart for me, and now I'm going to do the same for mine to you. Yours, you say, is an old gabled, vine-clad, dove-nested country house, a shelter for the people you love---and always kept for your Master's use. It is something just to have had a man's road to Providence lead past the garden gate. I make acknowledgement. And mine? I think it is like one of those squat, heathen, Satsuma vases, inlaid with distorted figures and symbols and toned in all luridness of color, into which has been tossed a poor sort of flower plucked from any bush the owner happened to pass, which has been salted down in frivolity---or perhaps something stronger. I'll keep the lid on to-night, for *you* wouldn't like the---perfume."

"If you'd let me have it an hour I would take it down to the milk-house and empty and scrub it and then I could use it to pour sweet cream into. Couldn't you---you leave it here---in Uncle Tucker's care? I---I---really---I need it badly." The raillery in her voice was as delicious and daring as that of any accomplished world woman out over the Ridge. It fairly staggered Everett with its audacity.

"No," he answered, coolly disapproving, "no, I'll not leave it; you might break it."

"I never break the crocks---I can't afford to. And women never break men's hearts; they do it themselves by keeping a hand on the treasure so as to take it back when they want it, and so between them both it sometimes gets---shattered."

"Very well, then---the lid's off to you---and remember you asked for---the rummage, Rose Mary," answered Everett in a tone as light as hers. Then suddenly he rose and stood tall and straight in front of her, looking down into her upraised eyes in the dusk. "You don't know, do you, you rose woman you, what a man's life can hold---of nothingness? Yes, I've

worked hard at my profession and thrown away the proceeds---in a kind of---riotous living. Other men's vast fortunes have been built on my brains, and my next year I'm going to enter as a penniless thirty-niner. When I came South three months ago I drew the last thousand dollars I had in bank, I have a couple of hundreds left, and that's all, out of over twenty thousand made in straight fees from mineral tests in the last year. Yes---a bit of riotous living. It's true about those poor flowers plucked off frail stems off frailer bushes---but---if it hadn't been---a sort of fair play all around I wouldn't stand here telling you about it, you in your hedge of briar roses. And now suddenly something has come into my life that makes me regret every dollar tossed to the winds and every cent burned in the fires---and in spite of it all I must make good. I'm going away from you and I don't know what is going to happen---but as I tell you from now on my feet do not stray from Providence Road, my eyes will turn from across any distance to catch a sight of the crown of old Harpeth, and my heart is in your milk-house to be of any kind of humble use. Ah, comfort me, rose girl, that I can not say more and that go I must if I catch my train." And he stretched out his hands to Rose Mary as she arose and stood close at his side, her eyes never leaving his and her lips parted with the quick breathing of her lifted breast.

"And you'll remember, won't you, when things go wrong, or you are tired, that the sunny corner in the old farm-house is yours? Always I shall be here in Harpeth Valley with my nest in the Briars, and because you are gone I'll be lonely. But I won't be in the least anxious, for whatever it is that calls you, I know you will give the right answer, because---because---well, aren't you one of my own nesties, and don't I know how strong and straight your wings can fly?"

CHAPTER VIII

UNCLE TUCKER'S TORCH

"And how do you do, Mr. Crabtree? Glad to see you, suh, glad to see you again! How is all Sweetbriar? Any new voters since young Tucker, or a poem or so in the Rucker family? And are you succeeding in keeping the peace with Mrs. Plunkett for young Bob?" And firing this volley of questions through the gently agitated smile-veil the Honorable Gideon Newsome stood in the door of the store, large-looming and jocular.

"Well, howdy, howdy, Senator, come right in and have a chair in the door-breeze!" exclaimed Mr. Crabtree as he turned to beam a welcome on the Senator from behind the counter where he was filling kerosene cans. "We ain't seen you in most a month of Sundays, and I'm sure glad you lit in passing again."

"I never just light in passing Sweetbriar, friend Crabtree," answered the senator impressively. "I start every journey with a stop at Sweetbriar in view, and it seems a long time until I make the haven I assure you, suh. And now for the news. You say my friend, Mrs. Plunkett, is enjoying her usual good health and spirits?"

"Well, not to say enjoying of things in general, but it do seem she has got just a little mite of spirit back along of this here bully-ragging of Bob and Louisa Helen. She come over here yesterday and stood by the counter upwards of an hour before I could persuade her to be easy in her mind about letting Bob take that frizzling over to Providence to a ice-cream festibal Mis' Mayberry was a-having for the church carpet benefit last night. After I told her I would put up early, and me and her could jog over in my buggy along behind them flippets to see no foolishness were being carried on, she took it more easy, and it looked like onct and a while on the road she most come to the point of enjoying her own self. But I reckon I'm just fooling myself by thinking that though," and Mr. Crabtree eyed the Senator with pathetic eagerness to be assured that he was not self-deceived at this slight advance up the steep ascent of his road of true love.

"Not a bit of doubt in my mind she enjoyed it greatly, suh, greatly, and I consider the cause of diverting her grief has advanced a hundred per cent by her consenting to go at all. Did any of the other Sweetbriar friends avail themselves of the Providence invitation---Miss Rose Mary and er---any of the other young people?"

"No, Miss Rose Mary didn't want to go, though Mr. Rucker woulder liked to hitch up the wagon and take her and Mis' Rucker and the children. She have been mighty quiet like sinct Mr. Everett left us, though she'd never let anybody lack the heartening of that smile of hern no matter how tetchd with lonesome she was herself. When the letters come I just can't wait to finish sorting the rest, but I run with hers to her, like Sniffie brings sticks back to Stonie Jackson when he throws them in the bushes."

"Ahm---er---do they come often?" asked the Senator in a casual voice, but his eyes narrowed in their slits and the veil became impenetrable.

"Oh, about every day or two," answered the unconsciously gossipy little bachelor. "Looks like the whole family have missed him, too. Miss Viney has been in bed off and on ever since he left, and Miss Amandy has tooken a bad cold in her right ear and has had to keep her head wrapped up all the time. Mr. Tucker's mighty busy a-trying to figure out how to crap the farm like Mr. Mark laid off on a map for him to do---but he ain't got the strength now to even get a part of it done. If Miss Rose Mary weren't strong and bendy as a hickory saplin she couldn't prop up all them old folks."

"Yes," answered the Senator in one of his most judicial and dulcet tones as he eyed the little bachelor in a calculating way as if deciding whether to take him into his confidence, "what you say of Mr. Alloway's being too old to farm his land with a profit is true. I have come this time to talk things over with him and---er---Miss Rose Mary. Did I understand you to say our friend Everett is still in New York? Have you heard of his having any intention of returning to Sweetbriar any time soon?"

"No, I haven't heard tell of his coming back at all, and I'm mighty sorry and disappointed some, too," answered Mr. Crabtree with an anxious look coming into his kind eyes. "I somehow felt sure he would scratch up oil or some kind of pay truck out there in the fields of the Briars. I shipped a whole box of sand and gravel for him according to a telegram he sent me just last week and I had sorter got my hopes up for a find, specially as that young city fellow came out here and dug another bag full outen the same place not any time after that. He had a map with him, and I thought he might be a friend of Mr. Mark's and asked him, but he didn't answer; never rested to light a pipe, even, so I never found out about him. I reckon he was just fooling around and I hadn't oughter hoped on such a light ration."

"When was it that the man came and prospected?" asked the Senator with a quick gleam coming into his ugly little eyes and the smile veil took on another layer of density, while his hand trembled slightly as he lighted his cigar.

"Oh, about a week ago," answered Mr. Crabtree. "But I ain't got no hopes now for Mr. Tucker and the folks from him. We'll all just have to find some way to help them out when the bad time comes."

"The way will be provided, friend Crabtree," answered the Senator in an oily tone of voice, but which held nevertheless a decided note of excitement. "Do you know where I can find Mr. Alloway? I think I will go have a business talk with him now." And in a few minutes the Senator was striding as rapidly as his ponderosity would allow up Providence Road, leaving the garrulous little storekeeper totally unconscious of the fuse he had lighted for the firing of the mine so long dreaded by his friends.

"Well now, Crabbie, don't bust out and cry into them dried apples jest to swell the price, fer Mis' Rucker will ketch you sure when she comes to buy 'em for to-morrow's turnovers," came in the long drawl of the poet as he dawdled into the door and flung the rusty mail-sack down on to the counter in front of Mr. Crabtree. "They ain't a thing in that sack 'cept Miss Rose Mary's letter, and he must make a light kind of love from the heft of it. I most let it drop offen the saddle as I jogged along, only I'm a sensitive kind of cupid and the buckle of the bag hit that place on my knee I got sleep-walking last week while I was thinking up that verse that '*despair*' wouldn't rhyme with '*hair*' in for me. Want me to waft this here missive over to the milk-house to her and kinder pledge his good digestion and such in a glass of her buttermilk?"

"No, I wisht you would stay here in the store for me while I take it over to her myself. I've got some kind of business with her for a few minutes," answered Mr. Crabtree as he searched out the solitary letter and started to the door with it. "Sample that new keg of maple drip behind the door there. The cracker box is open," he added by way of compensation to the poet for the loss of the buttermilk.

The imagination of all true lovers is easily exercised about matters pertaining to the tender passion, and though Mr. Crabtree had never in his life received such a letter he divined instantly that it should be delivered promptly by a messenger whose mercury wings should scarcely pause in agitating the air of arrival and departure. And suiting his actions to his instinct he whirled the envelope across the spring stream to the table by Rose Mary's side with the aim of one of the little god's own arrows and retreated before her greeting and invitation to enter should tempt him.

"Honey drip and women folks is sweet jest about the same and they both stick some when you're got your full of 'em at the time," philosophized the poet as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Say, Crabbie, don't tell Mis' Rucker I have come home yet, please. I want to go out and lay down in the barn on the hay and see if I can get that '*hair-despair*' tangle straightened out. She hasn't seen me to tell me things for two hours or more and I know I won't get no thinking done this day if I don't make the barn 'fore she spies me." And with furtive steps and eyes he left the store and veered in a round-about way toward the barn.

And over in the milk-house Rose Mary stood in the long shaft of golden light that came across the valley and fell through the door, it would seem, just to throw a glow over the wide sheets of closely written paper. Rose Mary had been pale as she worked, and her deep eyes had been filled with a very gentle sadness which lighted with a flash as she opened the envelope and began to read.

"Just a line, Rose girl, before I put out the light and go on a dream hunt for you," Everett wrote in his square black letters. "The day has been long and I feel as if I had been drawn out still longer. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and there's no balm of Gilead in New York. I can't eat because there are no cornmeal muffins in this howling wilderness of houses, streets, people and noise. I can't drink because something awful rises in my throat when I see cream or buttermilk, and sarsaparilla doesn't interest me any more. I would be glad to lap out of one of your crocks with Sniffie and the wee dogs.

"And most of all I'm tired to see you. I want to tell you how hard I am working, and that I don't seem to be able to make some of these stupid old gold backs see things my way, even if I do show it to them covered with a haze of yellow pay dust. But they shall--and that's my vow to--"

"I wish I could kneel down by your rocking-chair with Stonie and hear Uncle Tucker chant that stunt about '*the hollow of His hand.*' Is any of that true, Rose Mamie, and are you true and is Aunt Viney as well as could be expected, considering the length of my absence? I've got the little Bible book with Miss Amanda's blush rose pressed in it, and I put my hand to my breast-pocket so often to be sure it is there and some other things--letter things--that the heat and friction of them and the hand combined have brought out a great patch of prickly heat right over my heart in this sizzling weather. I know it needs fresh cold cream to make it heal up, and I haven't even any talcum powder. How's Louisa Helen and doth the widow consent still not at all? Tell Crabtree I say just walk over and try force of arms and not to--That force of arms is a good expression to use--literally in some cases. Something is the matter with my arms. They don't feel strong like they did when I helped Uncle Tucker mow the south pasture and turn the corn chopper--they're weak and--and sorter useless--and empty. Tell Stonie he could beat me bear-hugging any day now. Has Tobe discovered any new adventure in aromatics lately, and can little Poteet sit up and take notice? Help, help, I'm getting so homesick that I'm about to cry and fall into the ink!

"Good night---with all that the expression can imply of moonlight coming over the head of old Harpeth, pouring down its sides, rippling out over the corn-fields and flooding over a tall rose girl thing who stands in the doorway with her 'nesties' all asleep in the dark house behind her---and if any man were lounging against the honeysuckle vine getting a last puff out of his cigar I should know it, and a thousand miles couldn't save him. I'm all waked up thinking about it, and I could smash---Good night!

M.E.

P.S. I don't think it at all square of you not to let Stonie sell me the little dogs. Women ought to keep out of business affairs between men."

And as she turned the last page, slipped it back into place and promptly began at the beginning of the very first one, Rose Mary's face was an exquisite study in what might have been entitled pure joy. Her roses rioted up under her lashes, her rich lips curled like the half-blown bud between the flower of her cheeks, and her eyes shone like the two first stars mirrored in a woman's pool of life. Also it is one of the mysteries of the drama why a woman will scan over and over pages whose every letter is chiseled inches deep into her heart; and exactly one-half hour later Rose Mary was still standing motionless by her table, with the letter outspread in her hand.

And this was a very wonderful woman Old Harpeth had cradled in the hollow of His hand, nurtured on the richness of the valley and breathed into her with ever-perfumed breath the peace of faith---in God and man, for to any but an elemental, natural, faith-inspired woman of the fields would have come crushing, cruel, tearing doubts of the man beyond the hills who said so little and yet so much. However, Rose Mary was one of the order of fostering women whose arms are forever outheld cradle-wise, and to whose breast is ever drawn in mother love the child in the man of her choice, so her days since Everett's hurried departure had been filled with love and longing, with faith and prayers, but there had been not one shadow of doubt of him or his love for her all half-spoken as he had left it.

And added to her full heart had been burdens that had made her hands still fuller. She had gone on her way day by day pouring out the richness of her life and strength where it was so sorely needed by her feeble folk, with a song in her heart for him and them and to answer every call from along Providence Road. Thus it is that the motive power for the great cycles that turn and turn out in the wide spaces between time and eternity, regardless of the wheels of men that whirl and buzz on broken cog with shattered rim, is poured through the natures of women of such a mold for the saving of His nations.

At last Rose Mary folded her letter, hesitated, and with a glint of the blue in her eyes as her lashes fell over a still rosier hint in her cheeks, she tucked it into the front of her dress and smoothed and patted the folds of her apron close down over it, then turned with praiseworthy energy to the huge bowl of unworked butter.

And it was nearly an hour later, still, that the Honorable Gid loomed in the doorway under the honeysuckle vines, a complacent smile arranged on his huge face and gallantry oozing from every gesture and pose.

"Why, Mr. Newsome, when did you come? How are you, and I'm glad to see you!" exclaimed Rose Mary all in one hospitable breath as she beamed at the Senator across her table with the most affable friendship. Rose Mary felt in a beaming mood, and the Honorable Gid came under the shower of her affability.

"Do have that chair by the door, and let me give you a glass of milk," she hastened to add as she took up a cup and started for the crocks with a still greater accession of hospitality. "Sweet or buttermilk?" she paused to inquire over her shoulder.

"Either handed by you would be sweet" answered the Senator with praiseworthy ponderosity, and he shook out the smile veil until the very roots of his hair became agitated.

"Yes, Mr. Rucker says my buttermilk tastes like sweet milk with honey added," laughed Rose Mary, dimpling from over the tall jar. "He says that because I always pour cream into it for him, and Mrs. Rucker won't because she says it is extravagant. But I think a poet ought to have a dash of cream in his life, if just to make the poetry run smoother--and orators, too," she added as she poured half a ladleful of the golden top milk into the foaming glass in her hand and gave it to the Senator, who received it with a trembling hand and gulped it down desperately; for this once in his life the Honorable Gideon Newsome was completely and entirely embarrassed. For many a year he had had at his command florid and extravagant figures of speech which, cast in any one of a dozen of his dulcet modulations of voice, were warranted to tell on even the most stubborn masculine intelligence, and ought to have melted the feminine heart at the moment of utterance, but at this particular moment they all failed him, and he was left high and dry on the coast of courtship with only the bare question available for use.

"Miss Rose Mary," he blurted out without any preamble at all, and drops of the sweat of an agony of anxiety stood out all over the wide brow, "I have been talking with Mr. Alloway, and I have come to you to see if we can't all get together and settle this mortgage question to the profit of all concerned. I lent him that money six years ago with the intention of trying to get you to be my wife just as soon as you recovered from your--your natural grief over the way things had gone with you and young Alloway. I have waited longer than I had any intention of doing, because I was absorbed in this political career I had begun on, but now I see it is time to settle matters, as the farm is running us all into debt, and I'm very much in need of you as a wife. I hope you see it in that light, and the marriage can't take place too soon to suit me. You are the handsomest woman in my district, and my constituents can not help but approve of my choice." Something of the Senator's grandiloquence was returning to him, and he regarded Rose Mary with the pride of one who has appraised satisfactorily and is about to complete a proposed purchase.

And as for Rose Mary, she stood framed against the fern-lined dusk at the back of the milk-house like a naiad startled as she emerged from her tree bower. Quickly she raised her hand to her breast and just as quickly the pressure of the letter laying there against her heart sent a flood over her face that had grown pale and still, but she raised her head proudly and looked the Senator straight in the face with a questioning, hurt surprise.

"You didn't make the terms clear when you lent the money to us," she said quietly.

"Well," he answered, beginning to take heart at her very tranquil acceptance of the first bombardment, "I thought it best to let a time elapse to soothe your deceived affections and cure your humiliation. For the time being I was content to enjoy culling the flowers of your friendship from time to time, but I now feel no longer satisfied with them, but must be paid in a richer harvest. We will take charge of this place, assure a comfortable future for the aged relatives in your care, and as my wife you will be both happy and honored." The Senator was decidedly coming into his own, and smile, glance and voice as he regarded Rose Mary were unctuous. In fact, through their slits his eyes shot a gleam of something that was so hateful to Rose Mary that she caught her breath with horror, and only the sharp corner of her letter pressed into her naked breast kept her from reeling. But in a second she had herself in hand and her quick mother-wit was aroused to find out the worst and begin a fight for the safeguarding of her nesties--and the nest.

"And if I shouldn't want to--to do what you want me to?" she asked, and she was even able to summon a smile with a tinge of coquetry that served to draw the wily Senator further than he realized.

"Oh, I feel sure you can have no objections to me that are strong enough to weigh against thus providing suitably for your old relatives," was the bait he dangled before her humiliated eyes. "It is the only way to do it, for Mr. Alloway is too old to care any longer for the place, which has been run at a loss for too long already. We may say that in accepting

me you are accepting their comfortable future. Of course you could not expect things to go on any longer in this impossible way, as I have need of the home and family I am really entitled to, now could you?" The Senator bent forward and finished his sentence in his most beguiling tone as he poured the hateful glance all over her again so that her blood stopped in her veins from very fear and repulsion.

"No," she said slowly, with her eyes down on the bowl of butter on the table before her; "no, things couldn't go on as they have any longer. I have felt that for some time." She paused a second, then lifted her deep eyes and looked straight into his, and the wounded light in their blue depth was shadowed in the pride of the glance. "You are right---you must not be kept out of your own any longer. But you will---will you give me just a little time to---to get used to---to thinking about it? Will you go now and leave me---and come back in a few days? It is the last favor I shall ever ask of you. I promise when you come back to---to pay the debt." And the color flooded over her face, then receded, to leave her white and controlled.

"I felt sure you would see it that way; immediately, immediately, my dear," answered the Senator, as he rose to take his departure. A triumphant note boomed in his big gloating voice, but some influence that it is given a woman to exhale in a desperate self-defense kept him from bestowing anything more than an ordinary pressure on the cold hand laid in his. Then with a heavy jauntiness he crossed the Road, mounted his horse and, tipping his wide hat in a conquering-hero wave, rode on down Providence Road toward Boliver.

And for a long, quiet moment Rose Mary stood leaning against the old stone table perfectly still, with her hand pressing the sharp-edge paper against her heart; then she sank into a chair and, stretching her arms across the cold table, she let her head sink until the chill of the stone came cool to her burning cheeks. So this was the door that was to be opened in the stone wall---she had been blind and hadn't seen!

And across the hills away by the sea he was tired and cold and hungry---with only a few hundred dollars in his pocket. He was discouraged and overworked, and a time was coming when she would not have the right to shelter his heart in hers. Once when he had been so ill, before he ever became conscious of her at all, his head had fallen over on her breast as she had tended him in his weakness---the throb of it hurt her now. And perhaps he would never understand. She couldn't tell him because---because of his poverty and the hurt it would give him---not to be able to help---to save her. No, he must not know until too late---and *never* understand! Desperately thus wave after wave swept over her, crushing, grinding, mocking her womanhood, until, helpless and breathless, she was tossed, well nigh unconscious, upon the shore of exhaustion. The fight of the instinctive woman for its own was over and the sacrifice was prepared. She was bound to the wheel and ready for the first turn, though out under the skies, "*stretched as a tent to dwell in,*" the cycle was moving on its course turned by the same force from the same source that numbers the sparrows.

"Rose Mary, child," came in a gentle voice, and Uncle Tucker's trembling old hand was laid with a caress on the bowed head before she had even heard him come into the milk-house, "now you've got to look up and get the kite to going again. I've been under the waters, too, but I've pulled myself ashore with a-thinking that nothing's a-going to take *you* away from me and them. What does it matter if we were to have to take the bed covers and make a tent for ourselves to camp along Providence Road just so we all can crawl under the flap together? I need nothing in the world but to be sure your smile is not a-going to die out."

"Oh, honey-sweet, it isn't---it isn't," answered Rose Mary, looking up at him quickly with the tenderness breaking through the agony in a perfect radiance. "It's all right, Uncle Tucker, I know it will be!"

"Course it's all right because it *is* right," answered Uncle Tucker bravely, with a real smile breaking through the exhaustion on his face that showed so plainly the fight he had been having out in his fields, now no longer his as he realized. "Gid has got the right of it, and it wasn't honest of us to hold on at this losing rate as long as we did. There is

just a little more value to the land than the mortgage, I take it, and we can pay the behind interest with that, and when we do move off the place we won't leave debt to nobody on it, even if we do leave---the graves."

"Did he say---when---when he expected you to---give up the Briars?" asked Rose Mary in a guarded tone of voice, as if she wanted to be sure of all the facts before she told of the climax she saw had not been even suggested to Uncle Tucker.

"Oh, no; Gid handled the talk mighty kind-like. I think it's better to let folks always chaw their own hard tack instead of trying to grind it up friendly for them, cause the swallowing of the trouble has to come in the end; but Gid minced facts faithful for me, according to his lights. I didn't rightly make out just what he did expect, only we couldn't go on as we were---and that I've been knowing for some time."

"Yes, we've both known that," said Rose Mary, still suspending her announcement, she scarcely knew why.

"He talked like he was a-going to turn the Briars into a kinder orphan asylum for us old folks and spread-eagled around about something he didn't seem to be able to spit out with good sense. But I reckon I was kinder confused by the shock and wasn't right peart myself to take in his language." And Uncle Tucker sank into a chair, and Rose Mary could see that he was trembling from the strain. His big eyes were sunk far back into his head and his shoulders stooped more than she had ever seen them.

"Sweetie, sweetie, I can tell you what Mr. Newsome was trying to say to you---it was about me. I---I am going to be his wife, and you and the aunties are never, never going to leave the Briars. He has just left here and---and, oh, I am so grateful to keep it---for you---and them. I never thought of that---I never suspected such---a---door in our stone wall." And Rose Mary's voice was firm and gentle, but her deep eyes looked out over Harpeth Valley with the agony of all the ages in their depths.

But in hoping to conceal her tragedy Rose Mary had not counted on the light love throws across the dark places that confront the steps of those of our blood-bond, and in an instant Uncle Tucker's torch of comprehension flamed high with the passion of indignation. Slowly he rose to his feet, and the stoop in his feeble old shoulders straightened itself out so that he stood with the height of his young manhood. His gentle eyes lost the mysticism that had come with his years of sorrow and baffling toil, and a stern, dignified power shone straight out over the young woman at his side. He raised his arm and pointed with a hand that had ceased to tremble over the valley to where Providence Road wound itself over Old Harpeth.

"Rose Mary," he said sternly in a quiet, decisive voice that rang with the virility of his youth, "when the first of us Alloways came along that wilderness trail a slip of an English girl walked by him when he walked and rode the pillion behind him when he rode. She finished that journey with bleeding feet in moccasins he had bought from an Indian squaw. When they came on down into this Valley and found this spring he halted wagons and teams and there on that hill she dropped down to sleep, worn out with the journey. And while she was asleep he stuck a stake at the black-curved head of her and one by the little, tired, ragged feet. That was the measure of the front door-sill to the Briars up there on the hill. Come generations we have fought off the Indians, we have cleared and tilled the land, and we have gone up to the state house to name laws and order. In our home we have welcomed traveler, man and beast, and come sun-up each day we have worshipped at the altar of the living God---but we've never sold one of our women yet! The child of that English girl never leaves my arms except to go into those of a man she loves and wants. Yes, I'm old and I've got still older to look out for, but I can strike the trail again to-morrow, jest so I carry the honor of my women folks along with me. We may fall on the march, but, Rose Mary, you are a Harpeth Valley woman, and not for sale!"

CHAPTER IX

THE EXODUS

"Well, it just amounts to the whole of Sweetbriar a-rising up and declaring of a war on Gid Newsome, and I for one want to march in the front ranks and tote a blunderbuss what I couldn't hit nothing smaller than a barn door with if I waster try," exclaimed Mrs. Rucker as she waited at the store for a package Mr. Crabtree was wrapping for her.

"I reckon when the Senator hits Sweetbriar again he'll think he's stepped into a nest of yellar jackets and it'll be a case of run or swell up and bust," answered Mr. Crabtree as he put up the two boxes of baking-powder for the spouse of the poet, who stood beside his wife in the door of the store.

"Well," said Mr. Rucker in his long drawl as he dropped himself over the corner of the counter, "looks like the Honorable Gid kinder fooled along and let Cupid shed a feather on him and then along come somebody trying to pick his posey for him and in course it het him up. You all 'pear to forget that old saying that it's all's a fair fight in love and war."

"Yes, fight; that's the word! Take off his coat, strap his galluses tight, spit on his hands and fight for his girl, not trade for her like hogs," was the bomb of sentiment that young Bob exploded, much to the amazement of the gathering of the Sweetbriar clan in the store. Young Bob's devotion to Rose Mary, admiration for Everett and own tender state of heart had made him become articulate with a vengeance for this once and he spat his words out with a vehemence that made a decided impression on his audience.

"That are the right way to talk, Bob Nickols," said Mrs. Rucker, bestowing a glance of approval upon the fierce young Corydon, followed by one of scorn cast in the direction of the extenuating-circumstances pleading Mr. Rucker. "A man's heart ain't much use to a woman if the muscles of his arms git string-halt when he oughter fight for her. Come a dispute the man that knocks down would keep me, not the buyer," and this time the glance was delivered with a still greater accent.

"Shoo, honey, you'd settle any ruckus about you 'fore it got going by a kinder cold-word dash and pass-along," answered the poet propitiatingly and admiringly. "But I was jest a-wondering why Mr. Alloway and Miss Rose Mary was so---"

"Tain't for nobody to be a-wondering over what they feels and does," exclaimed Mrs. Rucker defensively before the query was half uttered. "They've been hurt deep with some kind of insult and all we have got to do is to take notice of the trouble and git to work to helping 'em all we can. Mr. Tucker ain't said a word to nobody about it, nor have Rose Mary, but they are a-getting ready to move the last of the week, and I don't know where to. I jest begged Rose Mary to let me have Miss Viney and Miss Amandy. I could move out the melojion into the kitchen and give 'em the parlor, and welcome, too. Mis' Poteet she put in and asked for Stonie to bed down on the pallet in the front hall with Tobe and Billy and Sammie, and I was a-going on to plan as how Mr. Tucker and Mr. Crabtree would stay together here, and I knew Mis' Plunkett would admire to have Rose Mary herself, but just then she sudden put her head down on my knee, her pretty arms around me, and held on tight without a tear, while I couldn't do nothing but rock back and forth. Then Mis' Poteet she cried the top of Shoofly's head so soaking wet it give her a sneeze, and we all had to laugh. But she never answered me what they was a-going to do, and you know, Cal Rucker, I ain't slept nights thinking about 'em, and where they'll move, have I?"

"Naw, you shore ain't---nor let me neither," answered the poet in a depressed tone of voice.

"I mighter known that Miss Viney wouder taken it up-headed and a-lined it out in the scriptures to suit herself until she wasn't deep in the grieving no more, but little Mis' Amandy's a-going to break my heart, as tough as it is, if she don't git comfort soon," continued Mrs. Rucker with a half sob. "Last night in the new moonlight I got up to go see if I hadn't left my blue waist out in the dew, which mighter faded it, and I saw something white over in the Briar's yard. I went across

to see if they had left any wash out that hadn't oughter be in the dew, and there I found her in her little, short old nightgown and big slippers with the little wore-out gray shawl 'round her shoulders a-digging around the Maiden Blush rose-bush, putting in new dirt and just a-crying soft to herself, all trembling and hurt. I went in and set down by her on the damp grass, me and my rheumatism and all, took her in my arms like she were Petie, and me and her had it out. It's the graves she's a-grieving over, we all a-knowing that she's leaving buried what she have never had in life, and I tried to tell her that no matter who had the place they would let her come and---

"Oh, durn him, durn him! I'm a-going clear to the city to git old Gid and beat the liver outen him!" exclaimed young Bob, while his sunburned face worked with emotion and his gruff young voice broke as he rose and walked to the door.

"I wisht you would, and I'll make Cal help you," sobbed Mrs. Rucker into a corner of her apron. Her grief was all the more impressive, as she was, as a general thing, the balance-wheel of the whole Sweetbriar machinery. "And I don't know what they are a-going to do," she continued to sob.

"Well, I know, and I've done decided," came in Mrs. Plunkett's soft voice from the side door of the store, and it held an unwonted note of decision in its hushed cadences. A deep pink spot burned on either cheek, her eyes were very bright, and she kept her face turned resolutely away from little Mr. Crabtree, over whose face there had flashed a ray of most beautiful and abashed delight.

"Me and Mr. Crabtree were a-talking it all over last night while Bob and Louisa Helen were down at the gate counting lightning-bugs, they said. They just ain't no use thinking of separating Rose Mary and Mr. Tucker and the rest of 'em, and they must have Sweetbriar shelter, good and tight and genteel, offered outen the love Sweetbriar has got for 'em all. Now if I was to marry Mr. Crabtree I could all good and proper move him over to my house and that would leave his little three-room cottage hitched on to the store to move 'em into comfortable. They have got a heap of things, but most of 'em could be packed away in the barn here, what they won't let us keep for 'em. If Mr. Crabtree has got to take holt of my farm it will keep him away from the store, and he could give Mr. Tucker a half-interest cheap to run it for him and that will leave Rose Mary free to help him and tend the old folks. What do you all neighbors think of it?"

"Now wait just a minute, Lou Plunkett," said Mr. Crabtree in a radiant voice as he came out from around the counter and stood before her with his eyes fairly glowing with his emotion. "Have you done decided *yourself*? This is twixt me and you, and I don't want no Sweetbriar present for a wife if I can help it. Have *you* done decided?"

"Yes, Mr. Crabtree I have, and I had oughter stopped and told you, but I wanted to go quick as I could to see Mr. Tucker and Rose Mary. He gave consent immediately, and looked like Rose Mary couldn't do nothing but talk about you and how good you was. I declare I began to get kinder proud about you right then and there, 'fore I'd even told you as I'd have you." And the demure little widow cast a smile out from under a curl that had fallen down into her bright eyes that was so young and engaging that Mr. Crabtree had to lean against the counter to support himself. His storm-tossed single soul was fairly blinded at even this far sight of the haven of his double desires, but it was just as well that he was dumb for joy, for Mrs. Rucker was more than equal to the occasion.

"Well, glory be, Lou Plunkett, if that ain't a fine piece of news!" she exclaimed as she bestowed a hearty embrace upon the widow and one almost as hearty upon the overcome Mr. Crabtree. "And you can't know till you've tried what a pleasure and a comfort a second husband can be if you manage 'em right. Single folks a-marrying are likely to gum up the marriage certificate with some kind of a mistake until it sticks like fly-paper, but a experienced choice generally runs smooth like melted butter." And with a not at all unprecedented feminine change of front Mrs. Rucker substituted a glance of unbridled pride for the one of scorn she had lately bestowed upon the poet, under which his wilted aspect disappeared and he also began to bloom out with the joy of approval and congratulation.

"And I say marrying a widow are like getting a rose some other fellow have clipped and thorned to wear in your buttonhole, Crabtree; they ain't nothing like 'em." Thus poet and realist made acknowledgment each after his and her own order of mind, but actuated by the identical feeling of contented self-congratulation.

"I'm a-holding in for fear if I breathe on this promise of Mis' Plunkett's it'll take and blow away. But you all have heard it spoke," said the merry old bachelor in a voice that positively trembled with emotion as he turned and mechanically began to sort over a box of clothespins, mixed as to size and variety.

"Shoo, Crabbie, don't begin by bein' afraid of your wife, jest handle 'em positive but kind and they'll turn your flapjacks peaceable and butter 'em all with smiles," and Mr. Rucker beamed on his friend Crabtree as he wound one of his wife's apron strings all around one of his long fingers, a habit he had that amused him and he knew in his secret heart teased her.

"Now just look at Bob tracking down Providence Road a-whistling like a partridge in the wheat for Louisa Helen. They've got love's young dream so bad they had oughter have sassaprilla gave for it," and the poet cast a further glance at the widow, who only laughed and looked indulgently down the road at the retreating form of the gawky young Adonis.

"Hush up, Cal Rucker, and go begin chopping up fodder to feed with come supper time," answered his wife, her usual attitude of brisk generalship coming into her capable voice and eyes after their softening under the strain of the varied emotions of the last half hour in the store. "Let's me and you get mops and broom and begin on a-cleaning up for Mr. Crabtree before his moving, Lou. I reckon you want to go over his things before you marry him anyway, and I'll help you. I found everything Cal Rucker had a disgrace, with Mr. Satterwhite so neat, too." And not at all heeding the flame of embarrassment that communicated itself from the face of the widow to that of the sensitive Mr. Crabtree, Mrs. Rucker descended the steps of the store, taking Mrs. Plunkett with her, for to Mrs. Rucker the state of matrimony, though holy, was still an institution in the realm of realism and to be treated with according frankness.

Meanwhile over in the barn at the Briars Uncle Tucker was at work rooting up the foundations upon which had been built his lifetime of lordship over his fields. In the middle of the floor was a great pile of odds and ends of old harness, empty grease cans, broken tools, and scraps of iron. Along one side of the floor stood the pathetically-patched old implements that told the tale of patient saving of every cent even at the cost of much greater labor to the fast weakening old back and shoulders. A new plow-shaft had meant a dollar and a half, so Uncle Tucker had put forth the extra strength to drive the dull old one along the furrows, while even the grindstone had worn away to such unevenness that each revolution had made only half the impression on a blade pressed to its rim and thus caused the sharpening to take twice as long and twice the force as would have been required on a new one. But grindstones, too, cost cents and dollars, and Uncle Tucker had ground on patiently, even hopefully, until this the very end. But now he stood with a thin old scythe in his hands looking for all the world like the incarnation of Father Time called to face the first day of the new regime of an arrived eternity, and the bewilderment in his eyes cut into Rose Mary's heart with an edge of which the old blade had long since become incapable.

"Can't I help you go over things, Uncle Tucker?" she asked softly with a smile shining for him even through the mist his eyes were too dim to discover in hers.

"No, child, I reckon not," he answered gently. "Looks like it helps me to handle all these things I have used to put licks in on more'n one good farm deal. I was just a-wondering how many big clover crops I had mowed down with this old blade 'fore I laid it by to go riding away from it on that new-fangled buggy reaper out there that broke down in less'n five years, while this old friend had served its twenty-odd and now is good for as many more with careful honing. That's it, men of my time were like good blades what swing along steady and even, high over rocks and low over good ground; but they don't count in these days of the four-horse-power high-drive, cut-bind-and-deliver machines men work right on

through God's gauges of sun-up and down. But maybe in glory come He'll walk with us in the cool of the evening while they'll be put to measuring the jasper walls with a golden reed just to keep themselves busy and contented. How's the resurrection in the wardrobes and chests of drawers coming on?" And a real smile made its way into Uncle Tucker's eyes as he inquired into the progress of the packing up of the sisters, from which he had fled a couple hours ago.

"They are still taking things out, talking them over and putting them right back in the same place," answered Rose Mary with a faint echo of his smile that tried to come to the surface bravely but had a struggle. "We will have to try and move the furniture with it all packed away as it is. It is just across the Road and I know everybody will want to help me disturb their things as little as possible. Oh, Uncle Tucker, it's almost worth the---the pain to see everybody planning and working for us as they are doing. Friends are like those tall pink hollyhocks that go along and bloom single on a stalk until something happens to make them all flower out double like peonies. And that reminds me, Aunt Viney says be sure and save some of the dry jack-bean seed from last year you had out here in the seed press for---"

"Say, Rose Mamie, say, what you think we found up on top of Mr. Crabtree's bedpost what Mis' Rucker were a-sweeping down with a broom?" and the General's face fairly beamed with excitement as he stood dancing in the barn door. Tobe stood close behind him and small Peggy and Jennie pressed close to Rose Mary's side, eager but not daring to hasten Stonie's dramatic way of making Rose Mary guess the news they were all so impatient to impart to her.

"Oh, what? Tell me quick, Stonie," pleaded Rose Mary with the eagerness she knew would be expected of her. Even in her darkest hours Rose Mary's sun had shone on the General with its usual radiance of adoration and he had not been permitted to feel the tragedy of the upheaval, but encouraged to enjoy to the utmost all its small excitements. In fact the move over to the store had appealed to a fast budding business instinct in the General and he had seen himself soon promoted to the weighing out of sugar, wrapping up bundles and delivering them over the counter to any one of the admiring Swarm sent to the store for the purchase of the daily provender.

"It were a tree squirrel and three little just-hatched ones in a bunch," Stonie answered with due dramatic weight at Rose Mary's plea. "Mis' Rucker thought it were a rat and jumped on the bed and hollowed for Tobe to ketch it, and Peg and Jennie acted just like her, too, after Tobe and me had ketched that mouse in the barn just last week and tied it to a string and let it run at 'em all day to get 'em used to rats and things just like boys." And the General cast a look of disappointed scorn at the two pigtailed heads, downcast at this failure of theirs to respond to the General's effort to inoculate their feminine natures with masculine courage.

"I hollered 'fore I knewed what at," answered the abashed Jennie in a very small voice, unconsciously making further display of the force of her hopeless feminine heredity. But Peggy switched her small skirts in an entirely different phase of femininity.

"You never heard me holler," she said in a tone that was skilful admixture of defiance and tentative propitiation.

"'Cause you had your head hid in Jennie's back," answered the General coolly unbeguiled. "Here is the letter we comed to bring you, Rose Mamie, and me and Tobe must go back to help Mis' Rucker some more clean Mr. Crabtree up. I don't reckon she needs Peg and Jennie, but they can come if they want to," with which Stonie and Tobe, the henchman, departed, and not at all abashed the humble small women trailing respectfully behind them.

"That women folks are the touch-off to the whole explosion of life is a hard lesson to learn for some men, and Stonie Jackson is one of that kind," observed Uncle Tucker as he looked with a quizzical expression after the small procession. "Want me to read that letter and tell you what's in it?" he further remarked, shifting both expression and attention on to Rose Mary, who stood at his side.

"No, I'll read it myself and tell you what's in it," answered Rose Mary with a blush and a smile. "I haven't written him about our troubles, because---because he hasn't got a position yet and I don't want to trouble him while he is lonely and discouraged."

"Well, I reckon that's right," answered Uncle Tucker still in a bantering frame of mind that it delighted Rose Mary to see him maintain under the situation. "Come trouble, some women like to blind a man with cotton wool while they wade through the high water and only holler for help when their petticoats are down around their ankles on the far bank. We'll wait and send Everett a photagraf of me and you dishing out molasses and lard as grocer clerks. And glad to do it, too!" he added with a sudden fervor of thankfulness rising in his voice and great gray eyes.

"Yes, Uncle Tucker, glad and proud to do it," answered Rose Mary quickly. "Oh, don't you know that if you hadn't seen and understood because you loved me so, I would have felt it was right to do---to do what was so horrible to me? I will---I will make up to you and them for keeping me from---it. What do you suppose Mr. Newsome will do when he finds out that you have moved and are ready to turn the place over to him, even without any foreclosure?"

"Well, speculating on what men are a-going to do in this life is about like trying to read turkey tracks in the mud by the spring-house, and I'm not wasting any time on Gid Newsome's splay-footed impressions. Come to-morrow night I'm a-going to pull the front door to for the last time on all of us and early next morning Tom Crabtree's a-going to take the letter and deed down to Gid in his office in the city for me. Don't nobody have to foreclose on me; I hand back my debt dollar for dollar outen my own pocket without no duns. To give up the land immediate are just simple justice to him, and I'm a-leaving the Lord to deal with him for trying to *buy* a woman in her time of trouble. We haven't told it on him and we are never a-going to. I wisht I could make the neighbors all see the jestic in his taking over the land and not feel so spited at him. I'm afraid it will lose him every vote along Providence Road. 'Tain't right!"

"I know it isn't," answered Rose Mary. "But when Mrs. Rucker speaks her mind about him and Bob chokes and swells up my heart gets warm. Do you suppose it's wrong to let a friend's trouble heat sympathy to the boiling point? But if you don't need me I'm going down to the milk-house to work out my last batch of butter before they come to drive away my cows." And Rose Mary hurried down the lilac path before Uncle Tucker could catch a glimpse of the tears that rose at the idea of having to give up the beloved Mrs. Butter and her tribe of gentle-eyed daughters.

And as she stood in the cool gray depths of the old milk-house Rose Mary's gentle heart throbbed with pain as she pressed the great cakes of the golden treasure back and forth in the blue bowl, for it was a quiet time and Rose Mary was tearing up some of her own roots. Her sad eyes looked out over Harpeth Valley, which lay in a swoon with the midsummer heat. The lush blue-grass rose almost knee deep around the grazing cattle in the meadows, and in the fields the green grain was fast turning to a harvest hue. Almost as far as her eyes could reach along Providence Road and across the pastures to Providence Nob, beyond Tilting Rock, the land was Alloway land and had been theirs for what seemed always. She could remember what each good-by to it all had been when she had gone out over the Ridge in her merry girlhood and how overflowing with joy each return. Then had come the time when it had become still dearer as a refuge into which she could bring her torn heart for its healing.

And such a healing the Valley had given her! It had poured the fragrance of its blooming springs and summers over her head, she had drunk the wine of forgetfulness in the cup of long Octobers and the sting of its wind and rain and snow on her cheeks had brought back the grief-faded roses. The arms of the hearty Harpeth women had been outheld to her, and in turn she had had their babies and troubles laid on her own breast for her and their comforting. She had been mothered and sistered and brothered by these farmer folk with a very prodigality of friendship, and to-day she realized more than ever with positive exultation that she was brawn of their brawn and built of their building.

And then to her, a woman of the fields, had come down Providence Road over the Ridge from the great world outside--the *miracle*. She slipped her hand into her pocket for just one rapturous crush of the treasure-letter when suddenly it was borne in upon her that it might be that even that must come to an end for her. Stay she must by her nest of helpless folk, and was it with futile wings he was breasting the great outer currents of which she was so ignorant? His letters told her nothing of what he was doing, just were filled to the word with half-spoken love and longing and, above all, with a great impatience about what, or for what, it was impossible for her to understand. She could only grieve over it and long to comfort him with all the strength of her love for him. And so with thinking, puzzling and sad planning the afternoon wore away for her and sunset found her at the house putting the household in order and to bed with her usual cheery fostering of creaking joints and cumbersome retiring ceremonies.

At last she was at liberty to fling her exhausted body down on the cool, patched, old linen sheets of the great four-poster which had harbored many of her foremothers and let herself drift out on her own troubled waters. Wrapped in the compassionate darkness she was giving way to the luxury of letting the controlled tears rise to her eyes and the sobs that her white throat ached from suppressing all day were echoing on the stillness when a voice came from the little cot by her bed and the General in disheveled nightshirt and rumpled head rose by her pillow and stood with uncertain feet on his own springy place of repose.

"Rose Mamie," he demanded in an awestruck tone of voice that fairly trembled through the darkness, "are you a-crying?"

"Yes, Stonie," she answered in a shame-forced gurgle that would have done credit to Jennie Rucker in her worst moments of abasement before the force of the General.

"Does your stomach hurt you?" he demanded in a practical though sympathetic tone of voice, for so far in his journey along life's road his sleep had only been disturbed by retributive digestive causes.

"No," sniffed Rose Mary with a sob that was tinged with a small laugh. "It's my heart, darling," she added, the sob getting the best of the situation. "Oh, Stonie, Stonie!"

"Now, wait a minute, Rose Mamie," exclaimed the General as he climbed up and perched himself on the edge of the big bed. "Have you done anything you are afraid to tell God about?"

"No," came from the depths of Rose Mary's pillow.

"Then don't cry because you think Mr. Mark ain't coming back, like Mis' Rucker said she was afraid you was grieving about when she thought I wasn't a-listening. He's a-coming back. Me and him have got a bargain."

"What about, Stonie?" came in a much clearer voice from the pillow, and Rose Mary curled herself over nearer to the little bird perched on the edge of her bed.

"About a husband for you," answered Stonie in the reluctant voice that a man usually uses when circumstances force him into taking a woman into his business confidence. "Looked to me like everybody here was a-going to marry everybody else and leave you out, so I asked him to get you one up in New York and I'd pay him for doing it. He's a-going to bring him here on the cars his own self lest he get away before I get him." And the picture that rose in Rose Mary's mind, of the reluctant husband being dragged to her at the end of a tether by Everett, cut off the sob instantly.

"What---what did you---he say when you asked him about---getting the husband---for you---for me?" asked Rose Mary in a perfect agony of mirth and embarrassment.

"Let me see," said Stonie, and he paused as he tried to repeat Everett's exact words, which had been spoken in a manner that had impressed them on the General at the time. "He said that you wasn't a-going to have no husband but the best kind if he had to kill him--no, he said that if he was to have to go dead hisself he would come and bring him to me, when he got him good enough for you by doing right and such."

"Was that all?" asked Rose Mary with a gurgle that was well nigh ecstatic, for through her had shot a quiver of hope that set every pulse in her body beating hot and strong, while her cheeks burned in the cool linen of her pillow and her eyes fairly glowed into the night.

"About all," answered the General, beginning to yawn with the interrupted slumber. "I told him your children would have to mind me and Tobe when we spoke to 'em. He kinder choked then and said all right. Then we bear-hugged for keeps until he comes again. I'm sleepy now!"

"Oh, Stonie, darling, thank you for waking up and coming to comfort Rose Mamie," she said, and from its very fullness a happy little sob escaped from her heart.

"I tell you, Rose Mamie," said the General, instantly, again sympathetically alarmed, "I'd better come over in your bed and go to sleep. You can put your head on my shoulder and if you cry, getting me wet will wake me up to keep care of you agin, 'cause I am so sleepy now if you was to holler louder than Tucker Poteet I wouldn't wake up no more." And suiting his actions to his proposition the General stretched himself out beside Rose Mary, buried his touseled head on her pillow and presented a diminutive though sturdy little shoulder, against which she instantly laid her soft cheek.

"You scrouge just like the puppy," was his appreciative comment of her gentle nestling against his little body. "Now I'm going to sleep, but if praying to God don't keep you from crying, then wake me up," and with this generous and really heroic offer the General drifted off again into the depths, into which he soon drew Rose Mary with him, comforted by his faith and lulled in his strong little arms.

CHAPTER X

IN THE HOLLOW OF HIS HAND

And the next morning a threatening, scowling, tossed-cloud dawn brought the day over the head of Old Harpeth down upon little Sweetbriar, which awakened with one accord to a sense of melancholy oppression. A cool, dust-laden wind blew down Providence Road, twisted the branches of the tall maples along the way, tore roughly at the festoons of blooming vines over the gables of the Briars, startled the nestled doves into a sad crooning, whipped mercilessly at the row of tall hollyhocks along the garden fence, flaunted the long spikes of jack-beans and carried their quaint fragrance to pour it over the bed of sober-colored mignonette, mixing it with the pungent zinnia odor and flinging it all over into the clover field across the briar hedge. The jovial old sun did his very best to light up the situation, but just as he would succeed in getting a ray down into the Valley a great puffy cloud would cast a gray shadow of suppression over his effort and retire him sternly for another half hour.

And on the wings of the intruding, out-of-season wind came a train of ills. Young Tucker Poteet waked at daylight and howled dismally with a pain that seemed to be all over and then in spots. When he went to take down the store shutters Mr. Crabtree smashed one of his large, generous-spreading thumbs and Mrs. Rucker's breakfast eggs burned to a cinder state while she tied it up in camphor for him. In the night a mosquito had taken a bite out of the end of Jennie's small nose and it was swelled to twice its natural size, and Peter, the wise, barked a plump shin before he was well out of the trundle bed. One of young Bob's mules broke away and necessitated a trip half way up to Providence for his capture, and Mrs. Plunkett had Louisa Helen so busy at some domestic manoeuvres that she found it impossible to go with him.

And before noon the whole village was in a fervid state of commotion. Mrs. Rucker had insisted on moving Mr. Crabtree and all his effects over into the domicile of his prospective bride, regardless of both her and his abashed remonstrance.

"Them squeems are all foolishness, Lou Plunkett," she had answered a faint plea from the widow for a delay until after the ceremony for this material mingling of the to-be-united lives. "It's all right and proper for you and Mr. Crabtree to be married at night meeting Sunday, and his things won't be unmarried in your house only through Saturday and Sunday. I'm a-going to pack up his Sunday clothes, a pair of clean socks, a shirt and other things in this basket. Then I'll fix him up a shake-down in my parlor to spend Saturday night in, and I'll dress him up nice and fine for the wedding you may be sure. We ain't got but this day to move him out and clean up the house good to move Rose Mary and the old folks into early Saturday morning, so just come on and get to work. You can shut your eyes to his things setting around your house for just them one day or two, can't you?"

"They ain't nothing in this world I couldn't do to make it just the littlest mite easier for Rose Mary and them sweet old folks, even to gettin' my house into a unseemly married condition before hand," answered Mrs. Plunkett as she brushed a tear away from her blue eyes.

"That's the way we all feel," said Mrs. Rucker. "Now if I was you I'd give Mr. Crabtree that middle bureau drawer. Men are apt to poke things away careless if they has the top, and the bottom one is best to use for your own things. Mr. Satterwhite always kept his clothes so it were a pleasure to look at 'em, but Cal Rucker prefers a pair of socks separated across the house if he can get them there. I found one of his undershirts full of mud and stuck away in the kitchen safe with the cup towels last week. There comes Mis' Poteet to help at last! I never heard anything yell like Tucker has been doing all morning. Is he quiet at last, Mis' Poteet?"

"Yes, I reckon he's gave out all the holler that's in him, but I'm afraid to put him down," and Mrs. Poteet continued the joggling, swaying motion to a blue bundle on her breast that she had been administering as a continuous performance to young Tucker since daylight. "I'm sorry I couldn't come help you all with the moving, but you can count on my mop and broom over to the store all afternoon, soon as I can turn him over to the children."

"We ain't needed you before, but now we have got Mr. Crabtree all settled down here with Mrs. Plunkett we can get to work on his house right after dinner. Have you been over to the Briars to see 'em in the last hour?"

"Yes, I come by there, but they didn't seem to need me. Miss Viney has got Miss Amandy and Tobe and the General at work, and Rose Mary has gone down to the dairy to pack up the last batch of butter for Mr. Crabtree to take to the city in the morning. Mr. Tucker's still going over things in the barn, and my feelings riz so I had to come away for fear of me and little Tucker both busting out crying."

And over at the Briars the scenes of exodus being enacted were well calculated to touch a heart sterner than that of the gentle, sympathetic and maternal Mrs. Poteet. Chilled by the out-of-season wind Miss Lavinia had awakened with as bad a spell of rheumatism as she had had for a year and it was with the greatest difficulty that Rose Mary had succeeded in rubbing down the pain to a state where she could be propped up in bed to direct little Miss Amanda and the children in the last sad rites of getting things into shape to be carried across the road at the beginning of the morrow, which was the day Uncle Tucker had sternly set as that of his abdication.

Feebly, Miss Amanda tottered about trying to carry out her sister's orders and patiently the General and Tobe labored to help her, though their hearts were really over at the store, where the rest of the Swarm were, in the midst of the excitement of Mr. Crabtree's change of residence. In all their young lives of varied length they had never before had an opportunity to witness the upheaval of a moving and this occasion was fraught with a well-nigh insupportable

fascination. The General's remaining at the post of family duty and his command of his henchman to the same sacrifice was indeed remarkable, though in a way pathetic.

"You, Stonewall Jackson, don't handle those chiny vases careless!" commanded Aunt Viney in a stern voice. "Put 'em in the basket right side up, for they were your great grandmother's wedding-present from Mister Bradford from Arkansas."

"Yes'm," answered Stonie, duly impressed. "But I've done packed 'em in four different baskets for you, and if this one don't do all right, can't me and Tobe together carry 'em over the Road to-morrow careful for you, Aunt Viney?"

"Well, yes, then you can take 'em out and set 'em back in their places," answered Miss Lavinia, which order was carried out faithfully by the General, with a generous disregard of the fact that he had been laboring over them under a fire of directions for more than a half-hour.

"Now, Amandy, come away from those flower cans and get out the grave clothes from the bureau drawers and let the boys wrap them in that old sheet first and then in the newspapers and then put 'em in that box trunk with brass tacks over there!" directed Miss Lavinia as Miss Amandy wandered over by the window, along which stood a row of tomato cans into which were stuck slips of all the vines and plants on the land of the Briars, ready for transportation across Providence Road when the time came. There was something so intensely pathetic in this effort of the fast-fading little old woman to begin to bud from the old life flower-plants to blossom in a new one, into which she could hardly expect to make more than the shortest journey, that even the General's young and inexperienced heart was moved to a quick compassion.

"I'm a-going to carry the flowers over and plant 'em careful for you, Aunt Amandy," he said as he sidled up close to her and put his arm around her with a protective gesture. "We'll water 'em twice a day and just *make* 'em grow, won't we, Tobe?"

"Bucketfuls 'til we drap," answered Tobe with a sympathy equal to and a courage as great as that of his superior officer.

"Is the blue myrtle sprig often the graves holding up its leaves, Amandy?" asked Miss Lavinia in a softened tone of voice.

"Yes, it's doing fine," answered Miss Amandy, bending over to the last of the row of cans.

"Then come on and get out the burying things and let's get that job over," Miss Lavinia continued to insist. "Don't get our things mixed! Remember that my grave shift has got nothing but a seemly stitched band on it while you would have linen lace on yours. And don't let anything get wrinkled. I don't want to rise on Judgment Day looking like I needed the pressing of a hot iron. Now pull out the trunk, boys, lift out the tray so as I can--"

But at this juncture Rose Mary appeared at the door with a tray on which stood a bowl of soup, and Miss Lavinia lay back on her pillows weakly, with the fire all gone out of her eyes and exhaustion written on every line of her determined old face.

"Go get dinner, everybody, so we can get back to work," she directed weakly as she raised the spoon to her lips and then rested a moment before she could take another sip. And with the last spoonful she looked up and whispered to Rose Mary, "You'll have to do the rest child, I can't drive any farther with a broke heart. I've got to lay myself in the arms of prayer and go to sleep." And so rested, Rose Mary left her.

Then finding the motive powers which had been driving her removed, little Miss Amandy stole away to the cedar grove behind the garden fence, the boys scampered with the greatest glee across the Road to the scene of mop and broom action behind the store, and Uncle Tucker stiffly mounted old Gray to drive the cows away to their separate homes. The thrifty neighbors had been glad to buy and pay him cash for the sleek animals, and their price had been the small capital which had been available for Uncle Tucker to embark on the commercial seas in partnership with Mr. Crabtree.

Thus left to herself in the old house, Rose Mary wandered from room to room trying to put things in shape for the morrow's moving and breasting her deep waters with what strength she could summon. Up to this last day some strange hope had buoyed her up, and it was only at this moment when the inevitable was so plainly closing down upon her and her helpless old people that the bitterness of despair rose in her heart. Against the uprooting of their feebleness her whole nature cried out, and the sacrifice that had been offered her in the milk-house days before, seemed but a small price to pay to avert the tragedy. Doubt of herself and her motives assailed her, and she quivered in every nerve when she thought that thus she had failed them. What! Was she to save herself and let the sorrow fall on their bent shoulders? Was it too late? Her heart answered her that it was, for her confession of horror of her purchaser to Uncle Tucker had cut off any hope of deceiving him and she knew he would be burned at the stake before he would let her make the sacrifice. She was helpless, helpless to safeguard them from this sorrow, as helpless as they themselves!

For a long hour she stood at the end of the porch, looking across at Providence Nob, behind whose benevolent head the storm clouds of the day were at last sinking, lit by the glow of the fast-setting sun. The wind had died down and a deep peace was settling over the Valley, like a benediction from the coming night. Just for strength to go on, Rose Mary prayed out to the dim, blue old ridge and then turned to her ministrations to her assembling household.

Uncle Tucker was so tired that he hardly ate the supper set before him, and before the last soft rays of the sun had entirely left the Valley he had smoked his pipe and gone to bed.

And soon in his wake retired the General, with two of the small dogs to bear him company in his white cot. But the settling of Miss Lavinia for the night had been long, and had brought Rose Mary almost to the point of exhaustion. Tired out by her afternoon over in the little graveyard, Miss Amanda had not the strength to read the usual chapters of retiring service that Miss Lavinia always required of her, and so Rose Mary drew the candle close beside the bed and attempted to go on with her rubbing and read at the same time. And though, if read she must, the very soul of Rose Mary panted for the comfort of some of the lines of the Sweet Singer, Aunt Viney held her strictly to the words of her favorite thunderer, Jeremiah, and little Aunt Amandy bunched up under the cover across the bed fairly shook with terror as she buried her head in her pillow to keep out the rolling words of invective that began with an awful "*Harken*" and ended with "*Woe is me now, for my soul is wearied!*"

"Now," concluded Miss Lavinia, "you can put out the light. Rose Mary, and if me and Amandy was to open our eyes on the other side of the river it would be but a good thing for us. Lay the Bible in that newspaper on top of that pile of *Christian Advocates*, with a string to tie 'em all up after morning lesson, to be carried away. The Lord bless and keep you, child, and don't forget to latch the front door on us all for the last time!"

Softly Rose Mary drew the door partly closed and left them in the quiet of the fast-deepening purple dusk. She peeped into Uncle Tucker's room and assured herself by his sonorous breathing that rest at last was comforting him, and for a moment in her own room she bent over the little cot where the General and his two spotted servitors lay curled up in a tangle and fast in the depths of sleep. Then she opened wide the old hall door that had for more than a century swung over the sill marked off by the length of the intrepid English foremother who had tramped the wilderness trail to possess what she, herself, was giving up.

And as she stood desperate, at bay, with her nest storm tossed and threatened, suddenly the impossibility of it all came down upon her, and stern with a very rigidity of resolve she went into the house, lighted a candle by the old desk in the hall, and wrote swiftly a few words of desperate summons to the Senator. She knew that Friday night always found him over the fields at Boliver, and she told him briefly the situation and asked him to come over in the early morning to the rescue---and sacrifice.

When she had first come out on the porch she had seen young Bob ride up to the store on one of his colts, and she ran fleetly down to the front gate and called to him. He consented instantly to ride over and deliver the note for her, but he shot an uneasy glance at her from beneath his wide hat as he put the letter in his pocket.

"Is anything wrong, Miss Rose Mary?" he asked anxiously but respectfully.

"No, Bob, dear, nothing that---that I can't make---right," she answered in a soft, tearless voice, and as he got on his horse and rode away she came slowly up the long front walk that was moonflecked from the leaves of the tall trees. Then once more she stood on the old door sill---at bay.

And as she looked at the old Ridge across the sweet, blooming clover-fields, with the darkened house behind her, again the waters of despair rose breast-high and heart-high, beat against her aching throat and were just about to dash over her head as she stretched out one arm to the hills and with a broken cry bent her white forehead in the curve of the other, but suddenly bent head, tear-blinded eyes, quivering breast and supplicating arms were folded tight in a strong embrace and warm, thirsty lips pressed against the tears on her cheeks as Everett's voice with a choke and a gulp made its way into her consciousness.

"I feel like shaking the very life out of you, Rose Mary Alloway," was his tender form of greeting.

"You're squeezing it out," came in all the voice that Rose Mary could command for an answer. And the broad-shouldered, burden-bearing, independent woman that was the Rose of Old Harpeth melted into just a tender girl who crushed her heart against her lover's and clung as meekly as any slip of vine to her young lord oak. "But I don't care," she finished up under his chin. And Everett's laugh that greeted and accepted her unexpected meekness rang through the hall and brought a commotion in answer.

The wee dogs, keen both of ear and scent, shot like small electric volts from Stonie's couch, hurled themselves through the hall and sprang almost waist-high against Everett's side in a perfect ecstasy of welcome. They yelped and barked and whined and nosed in a tumbling heap of palpitating joy until he was obliged to hold Rose Mary in one arm while he made an attempt to respond to and abate their enthusiasm with the other.

"Now, now, that's all right! Nice dogs, nice dogs!" he was answering and persuading, when a stern call from the depths of Miss Lavinia's room, the door of which Rose Mary had left ajar, abstracted her from Everett's arm on the instant and sent her hurrying to answer the summons.

"Is that young man come back? and light the candle," Miss Lavinia demanded and commanded in the same breath. And just as Rose Mary flared up the dim light on the table by the bed Everett himself stood in the doorway. With one glance his keen eyes took in the situation in the dim room in which the two old wayfarers lay prepared for the morning journey, and what Miss Lavinia's stately and proper greeting would have been to him none of them ever knew, for with a couple of strides he was over by the bed at Rose Mary's side and had taken the stern old lady into his strong arms and landed a kiss on the ruffle of white nightcap just over her left ear.

"No leaving the Briars this season, Miss Lavinia," he said in a laughing, choking voice as he bent across and extracted one of little Miss Amandy's hands from the tight bunch she had curled herself into under the edge of her pillow and bestowed a squeeze thereon. "It's all fixed up over at Boliver this afternoon. There's worse than oil on the place---and it's all yours now for keeps." With Rose Mary in his arms Everett had entirely forgotten to announce to her such a minor fact as the saving of her lands and estate, but to the two little old ladies his sympathy had made him give the words of reprieve with his first free breath. The bundles on the floor and the old trunk had smote his heart with a fierce pain that the impulsive warmth of his greeting and the telling of his rescue could only partly ease.

"The news only reached me day before---" he was going on to explain when, candle in hand, Uncle Tucker appeared in the doorway. His long-tailed night-shirt flapped around his bare, thin old legs, and every separate gray lock stood by itself and rampant, while his eyes seemed deeper and more mystic than ever.

"Well, what's all this ruckus?" he demanded as he peered at them across the light of his candle. "Have any kind of cyclone blowed you from New York clean across here to Harpeth Valley, boy?"

"He has come back with the mercy of our Lord in his hands to save our home; and you go put on your pants before your pipes get chilled, Tucker Alloway," answered Aunt Viney in her most militant tone of voice. "And, Rose Mary, you can take that young man on out of here now so Amandy can take that shame-faced head of hers out of that feather pillow. It's all on account of that tored place in her night-cap I told her to mend. You needn't neither of you come back no more, because we must get to sleep, so as to be ready to unpack before sun-up and get settled back for the day. And don't you go to bed, neither one of you, without reading Jeremiah twelfth, first to last verse, and me and Amandy will do the same." With which Everett found himself dismissed with a seeming curtness which he could plainly see was an heroic control of emotion in the feeble old stoic who was trembling with exhaustion.

Uncle Tucker, called to account for the lack of warmth and also propriety in his attire, had hastened back to his own apartment and Everett found him sitting up in his bed, lighting the old cob with trembling fingers but with his excitement well under control. He listened intently to Everett's hurried but succinct account of the situation and crisis in his own and the Alloway business affairs, as he puffed away, and his old eyes lighted with excitement at the rush of the tale of high finance.

And when at last Everett paused for lack of breath, after his dramatic climax, the old philosopher lay back on his high-piled feather pillows and blinked out into the candle-light, puffed in silence for a few minutes, then made answer in his own quizzical way with a radiant smile from out under his beetling white brows:

"Well," he said between puffs, "looks like fortune is, after all, a curious bird without even tail feathers to steer by nor for a man to ketch by putting salt on. Gid failed both with a knife in the back and a salt shaker to ketch it, but you were depending on nothing but a ringdove coo, as far as I can see, when it hopped in your hand. I reckon you'll get your answer."

"Are you willing---to have me ask for it, Mr. Alloway?" asked Everett with a radiant though slightly embarrassed smile.

"Yes," answered Uncle Tucker as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the table and looked straight into Everett's eyes. "After a man has plowed a honest, straight-furrowed field in life it's no more'n fair for Providence to send a-loving, trusting woman to meet him at the bars. Good night, and don't forget to latch the front door when you have finally torn yourself away from that moonlight!"

And the call of the young moon that came with the warm garden-scented gusts of winds that were sweeping across Harpeth Valley was a riot in Everett's veins as he made his way through the silent hall toward the moonlit porch on the

top step of which he could see Rose Mary sitting in the soft light, but a lusty young snore from a dark room on the left made him remember that there was one greeting he had missed. He bent over the General's little cot, across which lay a long shaft of the white light from the hilltops, and was about to press his lips on the warm, breath-stirred ones of the small boy, but he restrained himself in time from offering to the General in his defenseless sleep what would have been an insult to him awake, and contented himself with a most cautious and manly clasp of the chubby little hand.

"Ketch it, Tobe, ketch it---don't let Aunt Viney's vase be broked," murmured Stonie as he turned on his side and buried his head still deeper in the pillow.

"No, General, Aunt Viney's vase---is---not going to be broken, thank God," answered Everett under his breath as he turned away and left the General, who, even in sleep, carried his responsibilities sturdily.

"Rose Mary," he said a little later as he stood on the bottom step below her, so that his eyes were just on a level with hers as she sat and smiled down upon him, "for a woman, you have very little curiosity. Don't you want to ask me where I've been, why I went and what I've been doing every minute since I left you? Can it be indifference that makes you thus ignore your feminine prerogative of the inquisition?"

"I'm beginning at being glad you are here. Joy's just the white foam at the top of the cup, and it ought not to be blown away, no matter---how thirsty one is, ought it? Now tell me what brought you back---to save me," and Rose Mary held out her hand, with one of her lovely, entreating gestures, while her eyes were full of tender tears. And it was with difficulty that Everett held himself to a condition to tell her what he wanted her to know without any further delay.

"Well," he answered as he raised his lips from a joy draft at the cup of her pink palms, "the immediate cause was a telegram that came Tuesday night. It said '*Gid sells out Mr. Tucker and wants your girl,*' and it was signed '*Bob.*' All these weeks a bunch of hard old goldbugs had been sitting in conclave, weighing my evidence and reports and making one inadequate syndicating offer after another. They were teetering here and balancing there, but at eleven o'clock Wednesday morning the cyclone that blew me down here across Old Harpeth originated in the directors' rooms of the firm, and I guess the old genties are gasping yet.

"I had that telegram in my pocket, tickets for the three-o'clock Southern express folded beside 'em, and I put enough daylight into my proposition to dazzle the whole conclave into setting signatures to papers they'd been moling over for weeks. I don't know what did it, but they signed up and certified checks in one large hurry.

"Then I beat it and never drew breath until I made the Farmers' and Traders' Bank in Boliver this afternoon, covered those notes of Mr. Alloways, killed that mortgage and hit Providence Road for Sweetbriar. I met Bob out about a mile from town, and he put me next to the whole situation and gave *me* your note. I don't know which I came nearest to, swearing or crying, but the Plunkett-Crabtree news made me raise a shout instead of either. But if I did what I truly ought, Rose Mary Alloway, I *would* shake the life out of you for not writing me about it all. I may do it yet."

"Please don't!" answered Rose Mary with a little smile that still held its hint of the suffering she had gone through. "I thought you were out of work yourself and couldn't help us, and I didn't want to trouble you. It would have hurt you so to know if you couldn't help me, and I didn't---"

"God, that's it! Fool that I was to go away and risk leaving you without an understanding!" exclaimed Everett in a bitterly reproachful tone of voice. "But I was afraid to let you know what I had discovered until I could get the money to settle that mortgage. I was afraid that you or Mr. Alloway would unconsciously let him get a hint of the find, and I knew he could and would foreclose any minute. He was suspicious of me and my prospecting, anyway, and as he was an old, and as you both thought, tested friend, what way did I have of proving him the slob I knew him to be? I thought it best to

go and get the company formed, the option money paid to cover the mortgage and all of it out of his hands before he could have any chance to get into the game at all. And that was really the best way to manage it---only I hadn't counted on his swooping down on---you. Again, God, what I risked!"

"Yes," answered Rose Mary in a voice that barely controlled the cold horror of the thought that rose between them, "it almost happened. I thought I ought to---to save them, even if Uncle Tucker wouldn't let me, and I gave Bob that note---to---to him. It almost happened---to-morrow. Quick, hold me close---don't let me think about it---ever!" and Rose Mary shuddered in the crush of Everett's arms.

[Illustration: "You won't ever leave me any more?"]

"Out in the world, Rose Mary," said Everett as he lifted his lips from hers, "it would have happened---the tragedy, and you would have been the loot; but down here in Harpeth Valley they grow men like your Uncle Tucker, and they turn, by a strange motive power, wheels that do not crush, but---lift. I left you in danger because I had schemed it out in my world's way, fool, fool that I---"

"Please, please don't say things about yourself like that to me," pleaded Rose Mary, quickly raising her head and smiling through her tears at him. "Go on and tell me what you did find out there in the pasture; don't blow off any more of my foam!"

"Cobalt, if you care to know," answered Everett with an excited laugh, "the richest deposit in the States I found out---beats a gold mine all hollow. I came on it almost accidentally while testing for the allied metals up the creek. Your money will grow in bunches now, for the biggest and the best mining syndicate in New York has taken it up. You can just shake down the dollars and do what you please from now on."

"You'll have to do that sort of orchard work, I'll be busy in the house," answered Rose Mary, with a rapturous, breathless shyness, and she held out her hand to him with the most lovely of all her little gestures of entreaty. "You promised once to farm for me and---you won't ever leave---*ever* leave me any more, will you?"

"No, never," answered Everett as he took both her hands and at arms' length pressed them against his breast, "I'm not going to enact over again the role of poor chap obliged to be persuaded into matrimony by heiress, but I'm going to take my own and buckle down and see that you people get every cent of that dig-up that's coming to you. With the reputation this find gives me I'll be able to jolly well grubstake with commissions from now on, but I'll hit no trail after this with a mule-pack that can't carry double, Mary of the Rose."

"And that doesn't always lead back in just a little time to---to the nesties?" she asked with the dove stars deep in the pools of her eyes, while ever so slightly her hands drew him toward her.

"Always a blazed, short cut when they need---us," he answered, yielding, then paused a moment and held himself from her and said, looking deep into the eyes raised to his, "Truly, rose woman, am I that beggar-man who came over the Ridge, cold, and in the tatters of his disillusion? Do you suppose Old Harpeth has given me this warm garment of ideals that wraps me now for keeps?"

"Of course, he has, for it's made for you of your---Father's love. And isn't it---rose-colored?"

THE END