Aftermath eBook

Aftermath by James Lane Allen

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I

I was happily at work this morning among my butterbeans—a vegetable of solid merit and of a far greater suitableness to my palate than such bovine watery growths as the squash and the beet. Georgiana came to her garden window and stood watching me.

“You work those butterbeans as though you loved *them*,” she said, scornfully.

“I do love them. I love all vines.”

“Are you cultivating them as vines or as vegetables?”

“It makes no difference to nature.”

“Do you expect me to be a vine when we are married?”

“I hope you’ll not turn out a mere vegetable. How should you like to be my Virginia-creeper?”

“And what would you be?”

“Well, what would you like? A sort of honeysuckle frame?”

“Oh, anything! Only support me and give me plenty of room to bloom.”

I do not always reply to Georgiana, though I always could if I chose. Whenever I remain silent about anything she changes the subject.

“Did you know that Sylvia once wrote a poem on a vegetable?”

“I did not.”

“You don’t speak as though you cared.”

“You must know how deeply interested I am.”

“Then why don’t you ask to see the poem?”

“Was it on butterbeans?”

“The idea! Sylvia has better taste.”

“I suppose I’d better look into this poem.”

“You are not to laugh at it!”

“I shall weep.”

“No; you are not to weep. Promise.”

“What am I to promise?”

“That you will read it unmoved.”

“I do promise—solemnly, cheerfully.”

“Then come and get it.”

I went over and stood under the window. Georgiana soon returned and dropped down to me a piece of writing-paper.

“Sylvia wrote it before she began to think about the boys.”

“It must be a very early poem.”

“It is; and this is the only copy; please don’t lose it.”

“Then I think you ought to take it back at once. Let me beg of you not to risk it—” But she was gone; and I turned to my arbor and sat down to read Sylvia’s poem, which I found to be inscribed to “The Potato,” and to run as follows:

“What on this wide earth
  That is made or does by nature grow
Is more homely yet more beautiful
  Than the useful Potato?

“What would this world full of people do,
  Rich and poor, high and low,
Were it not for this little-thought-of
  But very necessary Potato?

“True, ’tis homely to look on,
  Nothing pretty even in its blow,
But it will bear acquaintance,
  This useful Potato.

“For when it is cooked and opened
  It’s so white and mellow,
You forget it ever was homely,
  This useful Potato.

“On the whole it is a very plain plant,
  Makes no conspicuous show,

But the internal appearance is lovely
Of the unostentatious Potato.

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"On the land or on the sea,
Wherever we may go,
We are always glad to welcome
The sound Potato."[*]

[*]The elder Miss Cobb was wrong in thinking this poem Sylvia's. It was extant at the time over the signature of another writer, whose authorship is not known to have been questioned. Miss Sylvia perhaps copied it out of admiration, or as a model for her own use.

J.L.A.

In the afternoon I was cutting stakes at the wood-pile for my butterbeans, and a bright idea struck me. During my engagement to Georgiana I cannot always be darting in and out of Mrs. Cobb's front door like a swallow through a barn. Neither can I talk freely to Georgiana—with her up at the window and me down on the ground—when I wish to breathe into her ear the things that I must utter or die. Besides, the sewing-girl whom Georgiana has engaged is nearly always there. So that as I was in the act of trimming a long slender stick, it occurred to me that I might make use of this to elevate any little notes that I might wish to write over the garden fence up to Georgiana's window.

I was greatly taken with the thought, and, dropping my hand-axe, hurried into the house and wrote a note to her at once, which I thereupon tied to the end of the pole by a short string. But as I started for the garden this arrangement looked too much like catching Georgiana with a bait. Therefore, happening to remember, I stopped at my tool-house, where I keep a little of everything, and took from a peg a fine old specimen of a goldfinch's nest. This I fastened to the end of the pole, and hiding my note in it, now felt better satisfied. No one but Georgiana herself would ever be able to tell what it was that I might wish to lift up to her at any time; and in case of its being not a note, but a plum—a berry—a peach—it would be as safe as it was unseen. This old house of a pair of goldfinches would thus become the home of our fledgling hopes: every day a new brood of vows would take flight across its rim into our bosoms.

Watching my chance during the afternoon, when the sewing-girl was not there, I rushed over and pushed the stick up to the window.

"Georgiana," I called out, "feel in the nest!"

She hurried to the window with her sewing in her arms. The nest swayed to and fro on a level with her nose.

"What is it?" she cried, drawing back with extreme distaste.

"You feel in it!" I repeated.

“I don’t wish to feel in it,” she said. “Take it away!”

“There’s a young dove in it,” I persisted—“a young cooer.”

“I don’t wish any young cooers,” she said, with a grimace.

Seeing that she was not of my mind, I added, pleadingly; “It’s a note from me, Georgiana! This is going to be our little private post-office!” Georgiana sank back into her chair. She reappeared with the flush of apple-blossoms and her lashes wet with tears of laughter. But I do not think that she looked at me unkindly. “Our little private post-office,” I persisted, confidingly.

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“How many more little private things are we going to have?” she inquired, plaintively.

“I can’t wait here forever,” I said. “This is growing weather; I might sprout.”

“A dry stick will not,” said Georgiana, simply, and went back to her sewing.

I took the hint, and propped the pole against the house under the window. Later, when I took it down, my note was gone.

I have set the pole under Georgiana’s window several times within the last two or three days, It looks like a little dip-net, high and dry in the air; but so far as I can see with my unaided eye, it has caught nothing so large as a gnat. It has attracted no end of attention from the birds of the neighborhood, however, who never saw a goldfinch’s nest swung to the end of a leafless pole and placed where it could be so exactly reached by the human hand. In particular it has fallen under the notice of a pair of wrens, which are like women, in that they usually have some secret business behind their curiosity. The business in this case is the matter of their own nest, which they have located in a broken horse-collar in my saddle-house. At such seasons they are alert for appropriating building materials that may have been fetched to hand by other birds; and they have already abstracted a piece of candle-wick from the bottom of my post-office.

Georgiana has been chilly towards me for two days, and I think is doing her best not to freeze up altogether. I have racked my brain to know why; but I fear that my brain is not of the sort to discover what is the matter with a woman when nothing really is the matter. Moreover, as I am now engaged to Georgiana, I have thought it better that she should begin to bring her explanations to me—the steady sun that will melt all her uncertain icicles.

At last this morning she remarked, but very carelessly, “You didn’t answer my note.”

“What note, Georgiana?” I asked, thunderstruck.

She gave me such a look.

“Didn’t you get the note I put into that—into that—” Her face grew pink with vexation and disgust.

“Did you put a note into the—into the—” I could not have spoken the word just then.

I retired to my arbor, where I sat for half an hour with my head in my hands. What could have become of Georgiana’s note? A hand might have filched it; unlikely. A gust of wind have whisked it out; impossible. I debated and rejected every hypothesis to the last one. Acting upon this, I walked straight to the saddle-house, and in a dark corner peered at the nest of the wrens. A speck of white paper was visible among the sticks and shavings. I tore the nest out and shook it to pieces. How those wrens did rage!

The note was so torn and mudded that I could not read it. But suppose a jay had carried it to the high crotch of some locust! I ran joyfully back to the window.

“I’ve found it, Georgiana!” I called out.

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She appeared, looking relieved, but not exactly forgiving.

“Where!”

My tongue froze to the roof of my mouth.

“Where did you find it?” she repeated, imperiously.

“What do you want to know for?” I said, savagely.

“Let me see it!” she demanded.

My clasp on it suddenly tightened.

“Let me see it!” she repeated, with genuine fire.

“What do you want to see it for?” I said.

She turned away.

“Here it is,” I said, and held it up.

She looked at it a long time, and her brows arched.

“Did the pigs get it?”

“The wrens. It was merely a change of post-office.”

“I’d as well write the next one to them,” she said, “since they get the letters.”

Georgiana was well aware that she slipped the note into the nest when they were looking and I was not; but women—*all* women—now and then hold a man responsible for what they have done themselves. Sylvia, for instance. She grew peevish with me the other day because my garden failed to furnish the particular flowers that would have assuaged her whim. And yet for days Sylvia has been helping herself with such lack of stint that the poor clipped and mangled bushes look at me as I pass sympathetically by them, and say, “If you don’t keep her away, we’d as well be weeds!”

The truth is that Sylvia’s rampant session in school, involving the passage of the Greatest Common Divisor—far more dreadful than the passage of the Beresina—her blue rosettes at the recent Commencement, and the prospect of a long vacation, together with further miscellany appertaining to her age and sex, have strung the chords of her sentimental being up to the highest pitch. Feeling herself to be naturally a good instrument and now perfectly in tune, Sylvia requires that she shall be continually played upon—if not by one person, then by another. Nature overloads a tendency in order to

make it carry straight along its course against the interference of other tendencies; and she will sometimes provide a girl with a great many young men at the start, in order that she may be sure of one husband in the end. The precautionary swarm in Sylvia's case seems multitudinous enough to supply her with successive husbands to the end of her days and in the teeth of all known estimates of mortality. How unlike Georgiana!

I think of Georgiana as the single peach on a tree in a season when they are rarest. Not a very large peach, and scarcely yet yielding a blush to the sun, although its long summer heat is on the wane; growing high in the air at the end of a bough and clustered about by its shining leaves. But what beauty, purity, freshness! You must hunt to find it and climb to reach it; but when you get it, you get it all—there is not a trace left for another. But Sylvia! I am afraid Sylvia is like a big bunch of grapes that hangs low above a public pathway: each passer-by reaches up and takes a grape.

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I caught some one taking a grape the other evening—a sort of green grape. Sylvia has been sending bouquets to the gosling who was her escort on the evening of her Commencement—him of the duck trousers and webbed feet. On one occasion I have observed her walking along the borders of my garden in his company and have overheard her telling him that *he* could come in and get flowers whenever he wished. I wish I might catch him once.

To cap the climax, after twilight on the evening in question, I strolled out to my arbor for a quiet hour with thoughts of Georgiana. Whom should I surprise in there but Sylvia and the gosling! deep in the shadow of the vines. He had his arm around her and was kissing her.

“Upon my honor!” I said; and striding over to him I thrust my hand under his coattails, gripped him by the seat of his ducks, dragged him head downward to the front fence and dropped him out into the street.

“Let me catch *you* in here kissing anybody again!” I said.

He had bit me viciously on one of my calves—which are sizable—as I had dragged him along; so that, I had been forced to stoop down and twist him loose by screwing the end of his spongy nose. I met him on the street early the next morning, and it wore the hue of a wild plum in its ripeness. I tapped it.

“Only three persons know of your misbehavior last night,” I said. “If you ever breathe it to a soul that you soiled that child by your touch, the next time I get hold of you it will not be your nose: it will be your neck!”

My mortification at Sylvia’s laxness was so keen that I should have forborne returning to the arbor had I not felt assured that she must have escaped to the house through modesty and sheer shame. But she had not budged.

“I blush for you, Sylvia!” I exclaimed. “I know all about that fellow! He shouldn’t kiss—-my old cat!”

“I don’t see what *you* have to do with it!” said Sylvia, placidly. “And I have waited to tell you that I hope you will never interrupt me again when I am engaged in entertaining a young gentleman.”

“Sylvia, my dear child!” I said, gravely, sitting down beside her. “How old are you?”

“I am of the proper age to manage my own affairs,” said Sylvia, “with the assistance of my immediate family.”

“Well, I don’t think you are,” I replied. “And since your brother is at West Point, there is one thing that I am going to take the liberty of telling you, which the other members of

your family may not fully understand. If you were younger, Sylvia, you might do a good deal of this and not be hurt by it; or you might not be hurt by it if you were a good deal older; but at your age it is terrible; in time it will affect your character."

"How old must I be?" said Sylvia, wickedly.

"Well, in your case," I replied, warmly, a little nettled by her tone, "you'd better abstain altogether."

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“And in your case?” said Sylvia.

“You never mind my case!” I retorted.

“But I do mind it when I suffer by it,” said Sylvia. “I do mind it if it’s going to affect my character!”

“You know very well, Sylvia,” I replied, “that I never kissed you but three times, and then as a brother.”

“I do not wish any one but my brother to kiss me in that way,” said Sylvia, with a pout of contempt.

It seemed to me that this was a fitting time to guide Sylvia’s powers of discrimination as to the way she should act with indifferent men—and as to the way that different men would try to act with her.

I had been talking to her in a low tone I do not know how long. Her ill-nature had quickly vanished; she was, in her way, provoking, charming. I was sitting close to her. The moonlight played upon her daring, wilful face through the leaves of the grape-vines. It was unpremeditated; my nature was, most probably, unstrung at the instant by ungratified longings for Georgiana; but suddenly I bent down and kissed her.

Instantly both Sylvia and I started from the seat. How long Georgiana had been standing in the entrance to the arbor I do not know. She may that instant have come. But there she was, dressed in white—pure, majestic, with the moon shining behind her, and shedding about her the radiance of a heavenly veil.

“Come, Sylvia,” she said, with perfect sweetness; and, bidding me good-night with the same gentlewoman’s calm, she placed her arm about the child’s waist, and the two sisters passed slowly and silently out of my garden.

At that moment, if I could have squeezed myself into the little screech-owl perched in a corner of the arbor, I would gladly have crept into the hollow of an oak and closed my eyes. Still, how was I to foresee what I should do? A man’s conversation may be his own; his conduct may vibrate with the extinct movements of his ancestors.

Georgiana’s behavior then was merely the forerunner of larger marvels. For next morning I wrote a futile drastic treatise on Woman’s inability to understand Man and Man’s inability to understand Himself, and set it under her window. It made such a roll of paper that the goldfinch’s nest looked as though it were distent with a sort of misshapen ostrich egg. All day I waited with a heart as silent as a great clock run down; my system of philosophy swung dead in the air. To my tortured vision as I eyed it secretly from my porch, it took on the semblance of one of Sylvia’s poetical potatoes, and I found myself urging in its behalf Sylvia’s fondest epithets: “how homely, yet how

beautiful," "little thought of, but very necessary," "unostentatious, but of lovely internal appearance."

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Towards sunset I took it sadly down. On top of the nest lay Georgiana's old scarlet emery-bag stuck full of her needles! She had divined what all the writing meant and would not have it. Instead she sent me this emblem not only of her forgiveness but of her surrender. When a man expects a woman to scold him and she does not, he either gets to be a little afraid of her morally or he wants to take her in his arms. Henceforth, if Georgiana were removed to another planet, I would rather worship her there simply as my evening or morning star than coexist with any earthly woman. One thought besets me: did she realize that perhaps she herself was the cause of my misdemeanors with Sylvia? Has she the penetration to discover that when a woman is engaged to a man she cannot deny him all things except at her own peril?

This proof of her high-mindedness and the enchanting glimpses of her face that she has vouchsafed me since, goaded me yesterday morning to despatch a reckless note: "Will you come to the arbor for a little while tonight? I have never dared ask this before, but you know how I have desired it. It is so much more private there. Write on the back of this paper one word, 'Yes.' There is a pencil in the nest."

The shutters were nearly closed, but I caught sight of the curve of a shoulder and the movement of a busy hand. As I pushed the note up I said:

"Read it at once. I am waiting."

A hand came out and took in the note, then the pencil; then note and pencil were put back. On the former was written, "Yes."

I think I must have done a dozen things in five minutes, and then I started aimlessly off to town. On the way I met Georgiana.

"Good God, Georgiana!" I exclaimed. "You *here*!"

"Where else?" said she. "And why not?"

"I thought I just saw you at the window—" And then my awful soul within me said: "H-sh-sh-sh! Not a word of this to a human being!"

After supper last night I called old Jack and Dilsy into the garden, and led them around it, giving orders; thence to the arbor, where I bade them sit down.

In the year of 1805 Mr. Jefferson, as president of the Philosophical Society, ordered excavations to be made at Big Bone Lick in Kentucky for the skeletons of extinct animals. My father, who was interested in antiquities, had had much correspondence with Mr. Jefferson in regard to earlier discoveries at that spot; and when this expedition was undertaken he formed one of the explorers. Jack, his servant, at that time a strapping young fellow, had been taken along as one of the negroes who were to do the digging.

The wonders then unearthed have always been the greenest spot in old Jack's memory; so that they have been growing larger ever since. Whenever I wish to hear him discourse with the dogmatic bluster of a sage who had original information as to geological times, I set Jack to talking about the bones of the Mastodon-Maximus, the name of which he gets from me, with a puzzled shake of his head, about regularly once a year. It is my private opinion that old Jack believes Big Bone Lick to have been the place where the Ark settled, and these to have been the bones of animals that had been swept out by Noah on landing.

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Last night I had merely to ask him whether he credited the story of an old traveller that he had once used some ribs found there for his tent-poles and a tooth for his hominy beater; whereupon Dilsy, foreseeing what was coming, excused herself on the plea of sudden rheumatism and went to bed, as I wished she should.

The hinges on the little private gate under Georgiana's window I keep rusty; this enables me to note when any one enters my garden. By-and-by I heard the hinges softly creak, whereupon I feigned not to believe what Jack was telling me; whereupon he fell into an harangue of such affectionate and sustained vehemence that when the hinges creaked again I was never able to determine. Was ever such usage made before of an antediluvian monster?

To-day the sewing-girl thrust out spiteful faces at me several times.

She is the one that helped Georgiana last year when she was making her wedding-clothes to marry the West Point cousin. God keep him safely in the distance, or guide him firmly to the van of war! How does a woman feel when she is making her wedding-clothes for the second time and for another man? I know very well how the other man feels. Upon my urging Georgiana to marry me at once—nature does not recognize engagements; they are a device of civilization—she protested:

"But I must get ready! Think of the sewing!"

"Oh, bother!" I grumbled. "Where are all those clothes that you made last year?"

How was I to suppose that Georgiana must have everything made over as part of her feeling for me? I would not decree it otherwise; yet I question whether this delicacy may not impose reciprocal obligations, and remove from my life certain elements of abiding comfort. What if it should engender a prejudice against my own time-worn acquaintances—the familiars of my fireside? It might be justifiable sagacity in me to keep them locked up for the first year or so after Georgiana and I become a diune being; and, upon the whole, she should never know what may have been the premarital shortcomings of my wardrobe as respects things unseen. No matter how well a bachelor may appear dressed, there is no telling what he conceals upon his person. I feel sure that the retrospective discovery of a ravelling would somehow displease Georgiana as a feature of our courtship. Nature is very stringent here, very guarded, truly universal. Invariably the young men of my day grow lavish in the use of unguents when they are preparing for natural selection; and I flatter myself that even my own garments—in their superficial aspects at least, and during my long pursuit of Georgiana—have not been very far from somewhat slightly ingratiating.

This pursuit is now drawing to a close. It is nearly the last of June. She has given me her word that she will marry me early in September. Two months for her to get the bridal feathers ready; two for me to prepare the nest.

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II

I have forgotten nature. I barely know that July, now nearly gone, has passed, sifted with sweetness and ablaze with light. Time has swept on, the world run round; but I have stood motionless, abiding the hour of my marriage as a tree the season of its leaves. For all that it looks so calm, within goes on a tremendous surging of sap against its moments of efflorescence.

After which I pray that, not as a tree, but as a man, I may have a little peace. When Georgiana confessed her love, I had supposed this confession to mark the end of her elusiveness. When later on she presented to me the symbol of a heart pierced with needles, I had taken it for granted that thenceforth she would settle down into something like a state of prenuptial domestication, growing less like a swift and more like a hen. But there is nothing gallinaceous about my Georgiana. I took possession of her vow and the emery-ball, not of her; the privilege was merely given to plant my flag-staff on the uncertain edge of an unknown land. In war it sometimes becomes necessary to devastate a whole country in order to control a single point: I should be pleased to learn what portion of the earth's surface I am required to subdue ere I shall hold one little citadel.

As for me, Georgiana requires that I shall be a good deal like an old rock jutting out of the quiet earth: never ruffled, never changing either on the surface or at heart, bearing whatever falls upon me, be it frost or sun, and warranted to waste away only by a sort of impersonal disintegration at the rate of half an inch to the thousand years. Meantime she exacts for herself the privilege of dwelling near as the delighted cave of the winds. The part of wisdom in me then is not to heed each sallying gust, but to capture the cave and drive the winds away.

For I know in whom I have believed; I know that this myriad caprice is but the deepening of excitement on the verge of captivity; I know that on ahead lie the regions of perpetual calm—my Islands of the Blest.

Georgiana does not play upon the pianoforte; or, as Mrs. Walters would declare, she does not perform upon the instrument. Sylvia does; she performs, she executes. There are times when she will execute a piece called "The Last Hope" until the neighbors are filled with despair and ready to stretch their heads on the block to any more merciful executioner. Nor does Georgiana sing to company in the parlor. That is Sylvia's gift; and upon the whole it was this unmitigated practice in the bosom—and in the ears—of her family that enabled Sylvia to shine with such vocal effulgence in the procession on the last Fourth of July and devote a pair of unflagging lungs to the service of her country.

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But Georgiana I have never known to sing except at her sewing and alone, as the way of women often is. During a walk across the summer fields my foot has sometimes paused at the brink of a silvery runlet, and I have followed it backward in search of the spring. It may lead to the edge of a dark wood; thence inward deeper and deeper; disappearing at last in a nook of coolness and shadow, green leaves and mystery. The overheard rill of Georgiana's voice issues from inner depths of being that no human soul has ever visited, or perhaps will ever visit. What would I not give to thread my way, bidden and alone, to that far region of uncaptured loveliness?

Of late some of the overhead lullabies have touched me inexpressibly. They beat upon my ear like the musical reveries of future mother hood—they betoken in Georgiana's maidenhood the dreaming unrest of the maternal.

One morning not long ago, with a sort of pitiful gayety, her song ran in the wise of saying how we should gather our rose-buds while we may. The warning could not have been addressed to me; I shall gather mine while I may—the unrifled rose of Georgiana's life, body and spirit.

Naturally she and I have avoided the subject of the Cardinal. But to the tragedy of his death was joined one circumstance of such coarse and brutal unconcern that it had left me not only remorseful but resentful. As we sat together the other evening, after one of those silences that fall unregarded between us, I could no longer forbear to face an understanding.

"Georgiana," I said, "do you know what became of the redbird?"

Unwittingly the color of reproach must have lain upon my words, for she answered quickly with yet more in hers,

"I had it buried!"

It was my turn to be surprised.

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure. I told them where to bury it; I showed them the very spot—under the cedar. They told me they had. Why?"

I thought it better that she should learn the truth.

"You know we can't trust our negroes. They disobeyed you. They lied to you; they never buried it. They threw it on the ash-pile. The pigs tore it to pieces; I saw them; they were rooting at it and tearing it to pieces."

She had clasped her hands, and turned towards me in acute distress. After a while, with her face aside, she said, slowly,

“And you have believed that I knew of this—that I permitted it?”

“I have believed nothing. I have waited to understand.”

A few minutes later she said, as if to herself,

“Many a person would have been only too glad to believe it, and to blame me.” Then folding her hands over one of mine, she said, with tears in her eyes:

“Promise me—promise me, Adam, until we are married, and—yes, *after* we are married —as long as I live, that you will never believe anything of me until you *know* that it is true!”

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“I do promise, dear, dear, dearest one-!” I cried, trying to draw her to me, but she would not permit it. “And you?”

“I shall never misunderstand,” she replied, as with a flash of white inward light. “I know that you can never do anything that will make me think the less of you.”

Since the sad, sad day on which I caused the death of the Cardinal, I have paid little heed to the birds. The subject has been a sore one. Besides, my whole life is gradually changing under the influence of Georgiana, who draws me farther and farther away from nature, and nearer and nearer to my own kind.

When, two years ago, she moved into this part of the State, I dwelt on the outskirts of the town and of humanity. On the side of them lay the sour land of my prose; the country, nature, rolled away on the other as the sweet deep ocean of my poetry. I called my neighbors my manifestations of prose; my doings with the townspeople, prose passages. The manifestations and passages scarce made a scrimp volume. There was Jacob, who lived on his symptoms and died without any; there was and there is Mrs. Walters—may she last to the age of the eagle. In town, a couple of prose items of cheap quality: an old preacher who was willing to save my soul while my strawberries were ripe, and an old doctor who cared to save my body so long as he could eat my pears—with others interested severally in my asparagus, my rhubarb, my lilies, and sweet-peas. Always not forgetting a few inestimably wholesome, cheery, noble souls, who sought me out on the edge of human life rather than succeeded in drawing me over the edge towards the centre.

But this Georgiana has been doing—long without my knowing it. I have become less a woodsman, more a civilian. Unless she relents, it may end in my ceasing to be a lover of birds, and running for the Legislature. Seeing me so much on the streets, one of my fellow-townsmen declared the other day that if I would consent to come out of the canebrakes for good they would make me postmaster.

It has fallen awkwardly for me that this enforced transformation in my tastes and habits should coincide with the season of my love-making; and it is well that Georgiana does not demand in me the capering or strutting manners of those young men of my day who likewise are exerting themselves to marry. I am more like a badger than like one of them; and indeed I find the image of my fate and my condition in a badger-like creature close at hand.

For the carpenter who is at work upon bridal repairs in my house has the fancy not uncommon among a class hereabouts to keep a tamed raccoon. He brings it with him daily, and fastens it by its chain to a tree in my front yard: a rough, burly, knowing fellow, loving wild nature, but forced to acquire the tediousness of civilization; meantime leading a desperately hampered life; wondering at his own teeth and claws, and sorely put to it to invent a decent occupation. So am I; and as the raccoon paces everywhere

after the carpenter, so do I in spirit pace everywhere after Georgiana; only his chain seems longer and more easily to be broken. The restless beast enlivens his captivity by the keenest scrutiny of every object within his range; I too have busied myself with the few people that have come this way.

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First, early in the month, Georgiana's brother—down from West Point, very stately, and with his brow stern, as if for gory war. When I called promptly to pay my respects, as his brother-in-law to be, he was sitting on the front porch surrounded by a subdued family, Georgiana alone remaining unawed. He looked me over indifferently, as though I were a species of ancient earthworks not worth any more special reconnoissance, and continued his most superior remarks to his mother on the approaching visit of three generals.

Upon leaving I invited him to join me on the morrow in a squirrel hunt with smooth-bores, whereupon he manifested surprise that I was acquainted with the use of fire-arms. Whereupon I remarked that I would sometimes hit big game if it were so close that I could not miss it, and further urged him to have breakfast with me at a very early hour in order that we might reach the woods while the squirrels were at theirs.

Going home, I knocked at the cabin where Jack and Dilsy lay snoring side by side with the velocity of rival saw-mills, and begged Dilsy to give me a bite about daybreak—-coffee and corn-batter cakes—saying that I could get breakfast when I returned. I shared this scant bite with my young soldier—to Dilsy's abject mortification, I not having told her of his coming. Then we set off at a brisk pace towards a great forest south of the town some five miles away, where the squirrels had appeared and were doing great damage, being the last of a countless plague of them that overran northern and central Kentucky a year ago.

On the way I dragged him through several canebrakes, a thicket of blackberry; kept him out all day; said not a word about dinner; avoided every spot where he could have gotten a swallow of water; not once sat down to rest; towards the middle of the afternoon told him I desired to take enough squirrels home to make Jack a squirrel-skin overcoat, and asked him to carry while I killed; loaded him with squirrels, neck, shoulders, breast, back, and loins, till as he moved he tottered and swayed like a squirrel pyramid; about sundown challenged him to what he had not yet had, some crack shooting, which in that light requires young eyesight, and barked the squirrel for him four times; later still snuffed the candle for him, having brought one along for the purpose; and then, with my step fresh, led him swiftly home.

He has the blood of Georgiana in him, and stood it like a man. But he was nearly dead. He has saluted me since as though I were a murderous garrison intrenched on the Heights of Abraham.

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Then the three generals of the United States army descended in a body—or in three bodies; and the truth is that their three bodies scarce held them, they were in such a state of flesh when they reached Kentucky, and of being perpetually overfed while they remained. The object of their joint visit under a recent act of Congress was to locate a military asylum for disabled soldiers; and had they stayed much longer they must have had themselves admitted to their own institution as foremost of the disabled. Having spent some time at the Lower Blue Lick Springs, the proposed site—where this summer are over five hundred guests of our finest Southern society—they afterwards were drawn around with immense solidity towards Louisville, Frankfort, Maysville, Paris, and Lexington, being everywhere received with such honors and provisions that these great guns were in danger of becoming spiked forever in both barrel and tube.

Upon reaching this town one of them detached himself from the heated rolling mass and accepted the invitation of young Cobb—who had formed the acquaintance at West Point—to make a visit in his home. He had not been there many days before he manoeuvred to establish a private military retreat for himself in the affections of Mrs. Cobb. So that his presence became a profanation to Georgiana, whose reverence for her heroic father burns like an altar of sacred fire, and whose nature became rent in twain between her mother's suitor and her brother's guest.

A most pestiferous variety of caterpillar has infested the tops of my cherry-trees this summer, and during the general's encampment near Mrs. Cobb I happened several times to be mounted on my step-ladder, busy with my pruning-shears, when he was decoying her around her garden—just over the fence—buckled in to suffocation, and with his long epaulettes golden in the sun like tassels of the corn. I was engaged in exterminating this insect on the last day of his sojourn. They were passing almost beneath me on the other side; he had been talking; I heard her brief reply, in a voice low and full of dignity,

"I have been married, sir!"

"Mother of Georgiana!" I cried, within myself. But had she ever thought of taking a second husband she must have seen through "Old Drumbeater," as Sylvia called him. There were times when their breakfast would be late—for the sake of letting his chicken be broiled in slow perfection or his rolls or waffles come to a faultless brown; and I, being at work near the garden fence, would hear him tramping up and down the walk on the other side and swearing at a family that had such irregular meals. The camel, a lean beast, requires an extraordinary supply of food, which it proceeds to store away in its hump as nourishment to be drawn upon while it is crossing the desert. There may be no long campaigning before the general; but if there were and rations were short, why could he not live upon his own back? It is of a thickness, a roundness, and an impenetrability that would have justified Jackson in using him as a cotton-bale at the battle of New Orleans.

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Thus in my little corner of the world we have all been at the same business of love, and I wonder whether the corner be not the world itself: Mrs. Cobb and the general, Georgiana and I the sewing-girl and the carpenter; for I had forgotten to note how quickly these two have found out that they want each other. My arbor is at his service, if he wishes it; and Jack shall keep silent about the mastodon.

It is true that from this sentimental enumeration I have omitted the name of Mrs. Walters; but there is a secret here which not even Georgiana herself will ever get from me. Mrs. Walters came to this town twenty years ago from the region of Bowling Green. Some years afterwards I made a trip into that part of the State to hear the mocking-bird—for it fills those more southern groves, but never visits ours; and while there I stepped by accident on this discovery: *There never was any Mr. Walters*. It is her maiden name. But as I see the freedom of her life and reflect upon the things that a widow can do and an old maid cannot—with her own sex and with mine—I commend her wisdom and leave her at peace. Indeed I have gone so far, when she has asked for my sympathy, as to lament with her Mr. Walters's death. After all, what great difference is there between her weeping for him because he is no more, and her weeping for him because he never was? After which she freshens herself up with another handkerchief, a little Florida water, and a touch of May roses from the apothecary's.

And I have omitted the name of Sylvia; but then Sylvia's name, like that of Lot's wife, can never be used as one of a class, and she herself must always be spoken of alone. However, if Sylvia had been Lot's wife she would not have turned to a pillar of salt, she would most probably have become a geyser.

I don't know why, but she went on a visit to Henderson after that evening in the arbor. I suspect the governing power of Georgiana's wisdom to have been put forth here, for within a few days I received from Sylvia a letter which she asked me not to show to Georgiana, and in which she invited me to correspond with her secretly. The letter was of a singularly adhesive quality as to the emotions. Throughout she referred to herself as "the exile," although it was plain that she wrote in the highest spirits; and in concluding she openly charged Georgiana with having given her a black eye—a most unspeakable phrase, surely picked up in the school-room. As a return for the black eye, Sylvia said that she had composed a poem to herself, a copy of which she enclosed.

I quote Sylvia's commemorative verses upon her wrongs and her banishment. They show features of metrical excess, and can scarcely claim to reflect the polish of her calmer art; but they are of value to me as proving that whatever the rebuke Georgiana may have given, it had rebounded from that elastic spirit.

LINES TO MYSELF

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Oh! she was a lovely girl,
  So pretty and so fair,
With gentle, love-lit *eyes*,
  And wavy, dark brown hair.

I loved the gentle girl,
  But, oh! I heaved a sigh
When first she told me she could see
  Out of only *one* eye.

But soon I thought within myself
  I'd better save my tear and sigh
To bestow upon an older person I know
  Who has more than one eye.

She is brave and intelligent
  Too. She is witty and wise.
She'll accomplish more now than *another person* I know
  Who has *two* eyes.

Ah, you need not pity *her*!
  She needs not your tear and sigh.
She'll make good use, I tell you,
  Of her *one* remaining eye.

In the home where we are hastening,
  In our eternal Home on High,
See that *you* be not rivalled
  By the girl with only *one* eye.[*]

[*]Miss Sylvia could not have been speaking seriously when she wrote that she had "composed" this poem. It is known to be the work of another hand, though Sylvia certainly tampered with the original and produced a version of her own. J. L. A.

Having thus dealt a thrust at Georgiana, Sylvia seems to have turned in the spirit of revenge upon her mother; and when she came home some days ago she brought with her a distant cousin of her own age—a boy, enormously fat—whom she soon began to decoy around the garden as her mother had been decoyed by the general. Further to satirize the similarity of lovers, she one day pinned upon his shoulders rosettes of yellow ribbon.

Sylvia has now passed from Scott to Moore; and several times lately she has made herself heard in the garden with recitations to the fat boy on the subject of Peris weeping before the gates of Paradise, or warbling elegies under the green sea in regard

to Araby's daughter. There is a real aptness in the latter reference; for this boy's true place in nature is the deep seas of the polar regions, where animals are coated with thick tissues of blubber. If Sylvia ever harpoons him, as she seems seriously bent on doing, she will have to drive her weapon in deep.

Yesterday she sprang across to me with her hair flying and an open letter in her hand.

"Oh, read it!" she cried, her face kindling with glory.

It turned out to be a letter from the great Mr. Prentice, of the Louisville *Journal* accepting a poem she had lately sent him, and assigning her a fixed place among his vast and twinkling galaxy of Kentucky poetesses. The title of the poem was, "My Lover Kneels to None but God."

"I infer from this," I said, gravely, "that your lover is a Kentuckian."

"He is," cried Sylvia. "Oh, his peerless, haughty pride!"

"Well, I congratulate you, Sylvia," I continued, mildly, "upon having such an editor and such a lover; but I really think that your lover ought to kneel a little to Mr. Prentice on this one occasion."

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“Never!” cried Sylvia. “I would spurn him as chaff!”

“Some day when you meet Mr. Prentice, Sylvia,” I continued, further, “you will want to be very nice to him, and you might give him something new to parse.”

Sylvia studied me dubiously; the subject is not one that reassures her.

“Because the other day I heard a very great friend of Mr. Prentice’s say of him that when he was fifteen he could parse every sentence in Virgil and Homer. And if he could do that then, think what he must he able to do now, and what a pleasure it must afford him!”

I would not imbitter Sylvia’s joy by intimating that perhaps Mr. Prentice’s studious regard for much of the poetry that he published was based upon the fact that he could not parse it.

There has been the most terrible trouble with the raccoon.

This morning the carpenter tied him in my yard as usual; but some time during the forenoon, in a fit of rage at his confinement, he pulled the collar over his head and was gone. Whither and how long no one knew; but it seems that at last, by dint of fences and trees, he attained to the unapproachable distinction of standing on the comb of Mrs. Walters’s house—poor Mrs. Walters, who has always held him in such deadly fear! she would as soon have had him on the comb of her head. Advancing along the roof, he mounted the chimney. Glancing down this, he perhaps reached the conclusion that it was more like nature and a hollow tree than anything that civilization had yet been able to produce, and he proceeded to descend to the ground again by so dark and friendly a passage. His progress was stopped by a bundle of straw at the bottom, which he quickly tore away, and having emerged from a grove of asparagus in the fireplace, he found himself not on the earth, but in Mrs. Walters’s bedroom. In what ways he now vented his ill-humor is not clear; but at last he climbed to the bed, white as no fuller could white it, and he dripping with soot. Here the ground beneath him was of such a suspicious and unreasonable softness that he apparently resolved to dig a hole and see what was the matter. In the course of his excavation he reached Mrs. Walters’s feather-bed, upon which he must have fallen with fresh violence, tooth and nail, in the idea that so many feathers could not possibly mean feathers only.

It was about this time that Mrs. Walters returned from town, having left every window closed and every door locked, as is her custom. She threw open her door and started in, but paused, being greeted by a snow-storm of goose feathers that filled the air and now drifted outward.

“Why, what on earth is the matter?” she exclaimed, peering in, blank with bewilderment. Then her eyes caught sight of what had once been her bed. Sitting up in it was the

raccoon, his long black jaws bearded with down, his head and ears stuck about with feathers, and his eyes blazing green with defiance.

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She slammed and locked the door.

“Run for the sheriff!” she cried, in terror, to the boy who had brought her market basket; and she followed him as he fled.

“What is it, Mrs. Walters?” asked the sheriff, sternly, meeting her and bringing the handcuffs.

“There’s somebody in my bed!” she cried, wringing her hands. “I believe it’s the devil.”

“It’s my ’coon,” said the carpenter, laughing; for by this time we were all gathered together.

“What a dear ’coon!” said the sewing-girl.

“Oh, Mrs. Walters! You are like Little Red Riding-hood!” said Sylvia.

“I can’t arrest a ’coon, madam!” exclaimed the sheriff, red in the neck at being made ridiculous.

“Then arrest the carpenter!” cried poor, unhappy, excited Mrs. Walters, bursting into tears and hiding her face on Georgiana’s shoulder.

And among us all Georgiana was the only comforter. She laid aside her own work for that day, spent the rest of it as Samaritan to her desperately wounded neighbor, and at nightfall, over the bed, now peaceful and snowy once more, she spread a marvellous priceless quilt that she had long been making to exhibit at the approaching World’s Fair in New York.

“Georgiana,” I said, as I walked home with her at bedtime, “it seems to me that things happen in order to show you off.”

“Only think!” Georgiana replied; “she will never get into bed again without a shiver and a glance at the chimney. I begrudge her the quilt for one reason: it has a piece of one of your old satin waistcoats in it.”

“Did she tell you that she had had those bedclothes ever since her marriage?”

“Yes; but I have always felt that she couldn’t have been married very long.”

“How long should you think?”

“Oh, well—about a minute.”

“And yet she certainly has the clearest possible idea of Mr. Walters. I imagine that very few women ever come to know their husbands as perfectly as Mrs. Walters knew hers.”

“Or perhaps wish to.”

III

The end of August—the night before my marriage.

Several earthquakes have lately been felt in this part of the globe.
Coming events cast their shocks before.

The news of it certainly came like the shock of an earthquake to many people of the town, who know perfectly well that no woman will allow the fruit and flowers to be carried off a place as a man will. The sagacious old soul who visits me yearly for young pie-plant actually hurried out and begged for a basketful of the roots at once, thus taking time—and the rhubarb—by the forelock. And the old epicurean harpy whose passion is asparagus, having accosted me gruffly on the street with an inquiry as to the truth of my engagement and been quietly assured, how true it was, informed me to my face that any man situated as happily as I am was an infernal fool to entangle himself with a wife, and bade me a curt and everlasting good-morning on the spot. Yet every day the theme of this old troubadour’s talk around the hotels is female entanglements—mendacious, unwifely, and for him unavailing.

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Through divers channels some of my fellow-creatures—specimens of the most dreadful prose—have let me know that upon marrying I shall forfeit their usurious regard. As to them, I shall relapse into the privacy of an orchard that has been plucked of its fruit. But my wonderment has grown on the other hand at the number of those to whom, as the significant unit of a family instead of a bachelor zero, I have now acquired a sterling mercantile valuation. Upon the whole, I may fairly compute that my relation to the human race has been totally changed by the little I may cease to give away and by the less that I shall need to buy.

And Mrs. Walters! Although I prefer to think of Mrs. Walters as a singer, owing to her unaccountable powers of reminiscential vocalization, I have upon occasion classified her among the waders; and certainly, upon the day when my engagement to Georgiana transpired, she waded not only all around the town but all over it, sustained by a buoyancy of spirit that enabled her to keep her head above water in depths where her feet no longer touched the bottom.

It was the crowning triumph of this vacant soul's life to boast that she had made this match; and for the sake of giving her so much happiness, I think I should have been willing to marry Georgiana whether I loved her or not.

So we are all happy: Sylvia, who thus enters upon a family right to my flowers and to the distinction of being the only Miss Cobb; Dilsy, who, while gathering vegetables about the garden, long ago began to receive little bundles of quilt pieces thrown down to her with a smile and the right word from the window above; and Jack, who is to drive us on our bridal-trip to the Blue Lick Springs, where he hopes to renew his scientific studies upon the maxillary bones. I have hesitated between Blue Lick and Mud Lick, though to a man in my condition there can be no great difference between blue and mud. And I had thought of the Harrodsburg Springs, but the negro musicians there were lately hurried off to Canada by the underground railway, out of which fact has grown a lawsuit for damages between the proprietor and his abolitionist guest.

A few weeks ago I intrusted a secret to Georgiana. I told her that before she condescended to shine upon this part of the world—now the heavenlier part—I had been engaged upon certain researches and discoveries relating to Kentucky birds, especially to the Kentucky warbler. I admitted that these studies had been wretchedly put aside under the more pressing necessity of fixing the attention of all my powers, ornithological and other, upon her garden window. But as I placed specimens of my notes and drawings in her hand, I remarked gravely that after our marriage I should be ready to push my work forward without delay.

All this was meant to give her a delightful surprise; and indeed she examined the evidences of my undertaking with devouring and triumphant eagerness. But what was my amazement when she handed them back in silence, and with a face as white as though as fragrant as a rose.

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“I have distressed you, Georgiana!” I cried, “and my only thought had been to give you pleasure. I am always doing something wrong!”

She closed her eyes and passed her fingers searchingly across her brow, as we sometimes instinctively try to brush away our cares. Then she sat looking down rather pitifully at her palms, as they lay in her lap.

“You have shared your secret with me,” she said, solemnly, at length. “I’ll share mine with yon. It is the only fear that I have ever felt regarding our future. It has never left me; and what you have just shown me fills me with terror.”

I sat aghast.

“I am not deceived,” she continued; “you have not forgotten nature. It draws you more powerfully than anything else in the world. Whenever you speak of it, you say the right thing, you find the right word, you get the right meaning. With nature alone you are perfectly natural. Towards society you show your shabby, awkward, trivial, uncomfortable side. But these drawings, these notes—there lies your power, your gift, your home. You truly belong to the woodsmen.”

Never used to study myself, I listened, to this as to fresh talk about a stranger.

“Do you not foresee what will happen?” she went on, with emotion. “After we have been married a while you will begin to wander off—at first for part of a day, then for a day, then for a day and a night, then for days and nights together. That was the way with Audubon, that was the way with Wilson, that is the way with Thoreau, that will be the way with all whom nature draws as it draws you. And, me—think of me—at home! A woman not able to go with you! Not able to wade the creeks and swim the rivers! Not able to sleep out in the brown leaves, to endure the rain, the cold, the travel! And, so I shall never be able to fill your life with mine as you fill mine with yours. As time passes, I shall fill it less and less. Every spring nature will be just as young to you; I shall be always older. The water you love ripples, never wrinkles. I shall cease rippling and begin wrinkling. No matter what happens, each summer the birds get fresh feathers; only think how my old ones will never drop out. I shall want you to go on with your work. If I am to be your wife, I must be wings to you. But think of compelling me to furnish you the wings with which to leave me! What is a little book on Kentucky birds in comparison with my happiness!”

She was so deeply moved that my one desire was to uproot her fears on the spot.

“Then there shall be no little book on Kentucky birds!” I cried. “I’ll throw these things into the fire as soon as I go home. Only say what you wish me to be, Georgiana,” I continued, laughing, “and I’ll be it—if it’s the town pump.”

“Then if I could only be the town well,” she said, with a poor little effort to make a heavy heart all at once go merrily again.

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Bent on making it go merrily as long as I shall live, the following day I called out to her at the window:

“Georgiana, I’m improving. I’m getting along.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, in town this morning they chose me as one of the judges of vegetables at the fair next month. I said, ’Gentlemen, I expect to be married before that time, and I do not intend to be separated from my wife. Will she have the privilege of accompanying me among these competing vegetables? And last month they made me director of a turnpike company—I suppose because it runs through my farm. To-day at a meeting of the directors I said, ’Gentlemen, how far is this turnpike to run? I will direct it to the end of my farm and not a step farther. I do not wish to be separated from my wife.’”

Georgiana has teased me a good deal in my life. It is well to let a woman taste of the tree of knowledge whose fruit she is fond of dispensing.

“You’d better be careful!” she said, archly.

“Remember, I haven’t married you yet.”

“I *am* careful,” I replied. “I haven’t married *you* yet, cither! My idea, Georgiana,” I continued, “is to plant a grove and raise cocoons. That would gratify my love of nature and your fancy for silk dresses. I could have my silk woven and spun in our manufactory at Newport, Kentucky; and you know that we couldn’t possibly lose each other among the mulberry-trees.”

“You’d better take care!” she repeated. “Do you expect to talk to me in this style after we are married?”

“That will all depend upon how you talk to me,” I answered. “But I have always understood married life to be the season when the worm begins to turn.”

Despite my levity, I have been secretly stricken with remorse at the monstrous selfishness that lay coiled like a canker in my words. I was really no better than those men who say to their wives:

“While I was trying to win you, the work of my life was secondary—you were everything. Now that I have won you, it will be everything, and you must not stand in the way.”

But the thought is insupportable that Georgiana should not be happy with me at any cost. I divine now the reason of the effort she has long been making to win me from nature; therefore of my own free will I have privately set about changing the character of

my life with the idea of suiting it to some other work in which she too may be content. And thus it has come about that during the August now ended—always the month of the year in which my nature will go its solitary way and seek its woodland peace—I have hung about the town as one who is offered for hire to a master whom he has never seen and for a work that he hates to do. Many of the affairs that engage the passions of my fellow-beings are to me as the gray stubble through which I walk in the September fields—the rotting wastage of harvests long

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since gathered in. At other times I drive myself upon their sharp and piercing conflicts as a bird is blown uselessly again and again by some too strong a wind upon the spikes of the thorn. I hear the angry talk of our farmers and merchants, I listen to the fiery orations of our statesmen and the warning sermons of our divines. (Think of a human creature calling himself a divine.) The troubled ebb and flow of events in Kentucky, the larger movements of unrest throughout the great republic—these have replaced for me the old communings with nature that were full of music and of peace.

Evening after evening now I turn my conversations with Georgiana as gayly as I can upon some topic of the time. She is not always pleased with what I style my researches into civilized society. One evening in particular our talk was long and serious, beginning in shallows and then steering for deep waters.

“Well, Georgiana,” I had said, “Miss Delia Webster has suddenly returned to her home in Vermont.”

“And who is Miss Delia Webster?” she had inquired, with unmistakable acidity.

“Miss Delia Webster is the lady who was sentenced to the State penitentiary for abducting our silly old servants into Ohio. But the jury of Kentucky noblemen who returned the verdict—being married men, and long used to forgiving a woman anything—petitioned the governor to pardon Miss Delia on the ground that she belongs to the sex that can do no wrong—and be punished for it. Whereupon the governor, seasoned to the like large experience, pardoned the lady. Whereupon Miss Webster, having passed a few weeks in the penitentiary, left, as I stated, for her home in Vermont, followed by her father, who does not, however, seem to have been able to overtake her.”

“If she’d been a man, now,” suggested Georgiana.

“If she’d been a man she would have shared the fortunes of her principal, the Reverend Mr. Fairbanks, who has *not* returned to his home in Ohio, and will not—for fifteen years.”

“Do you think it an agreeable subject of conversation?” inquired Georgiana.

“Then I will change it,” I said. “The other day the editor of the Smithland *Bee* was walking along the street with his little daughter and was shot down by a doctor.”

“Horrible!” exclaimed Georgiana. “Why?”

“Self-defence,” I answered. “And last week in the court-room in Mount Sterling a man was shot by his brother-in-law during the sitting of court.”

“And why did *he* kill *him*?”

“Self-defence!” I answered. “And in Versailles a man down in the street was assassinated with a rifle fired from the garret of a tavern. Self-defence. And in Lexington a young man shot and killed another for drawing his handkerchief from his pocket. Self-defence!—the sense of the court being that whatever such an action might mean in other civilized, countries, in Kentucky and under the circumstances—the young fellows were quarrelling—it naturally betokened the reaching for a revolver. Thus in Kentucky, Georgiana, and during a heated discussion, a man cannot blow his nose but at the risk of his life.”

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“I’ll see that you never carry a handkerchief,” said Georgiana. “So remember—don’t you ever reach for one!”

“And the other day in Eddysville,” I went on, “two men fought a duel by going to a doctor’s shop and having him open a vein in the arm of each. Just before they fainted from exhaustion they made signs that their honor was satisfied, so the doctor tied up the veins. I see that you don’t believe it, but it’s true.”

“And why did they fight a duel in that way?”

“I give it up,” I said, “unless it was in self-defence. We are a most remarkable society of self-defenders. But if every man who fights in Kentucky is merely engaged in warding off a murderous attack upon his life, who does all the murderous attacking? You know the seal of our commonwealth: two gentlemen in evening dress shaking hands and with one voice declaring, ‘United we stand, divided we fall.’ So far as the temper of our time goes, these two gentlemen might well be represented as twenty paces apart, and as calling out, ’United, we stood; divided, *you* fall!’ Killings and duels! Killings and duels! Do you think we need these as proofs of courage? Do you suppose that the Kentuckians of our day are braver than the pioneers? Do you suppose that any people ever elevated its ideal of courage in the eyes of the world by all the homicides and all the duels that it could count? There is only one way in which any civilized people has ever done that, there is only one way in which any civilized people has ever been able to impress the world very deeply with a belief in the reality and the nobility of its ideal of courage: it is by the warlike spirit of its men in times of war, and by the peaceful spirit of its men in times of peace. Only, you must add this: that when those times of peace have come on, and it is no longer possible for such a people to realize its ideal of courage in arms, it is nevertheless driven to express the ideal in other ways—by monuments, arches, inscriptions, statues, literature, pictures, all in honor of those of their countrymen who lived the ideal before the world and left it more lustrous in their dying. That is the full reason why we know how brave a people the Greeks were—by their peaceful ways of honoring valor in times of peace. And that in part is why no nation in the world doubts the courage of the English, because when the English are not fighting they are forever doing something to honor those who have fought well. So that they never have a peace but they turn it into preparation for the next war.

“And that is why, as the outside world looks in upon us to-day and sifts the evidence of whether or not we are a brave people, it does not find the proof of this in our homicides and duels, but in the spirit of our forefathers of the Revolution, in the soldiers of the wilderness and of Indian warfare, of the war of 1812, of the war with Mexico, at Cerro Gordo, at Buena Vista, at Palo Alto, at Resaca de la Palma. Wherever the Kentuckians have fought as soldiers, many or few, on whatever battle-field, in whatsoever cause, there you may see whether they know what it is to be men, and whether they have an ideal of courage that is worth the name.

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“Then a few years ago in Frankfort twenty thousand people followed to the grave the bodies of the men who had fallen in Mexico. The State has raised a monument to them, to the soldiers of 1812, to those who fought at the river Raisin. The Legislature has ordered a medal to be struck in honor of a boy who had defended his ensign. No man can make a public speech in Kentucky without mention of Encancion and Monterey, or of the long line of battles in which every generation of our people has fought. This is the other proof that in times of peace we do not forget. It is not much, but it is of the right kind—it is the soldier’s monument, it is the soldier’s medal, it is the soldier’s funeral oration, it is the recognition by the people of its ideal of courage in times of peace. And with every other brave people this proof passes as the sign universal. But our homicides and our duels, nearly all of them brought about in the name—even under the fear—of courage, what effect have they had in giving us abroad our reputation as a community? I ask myself the question, what if all the men who have killed their personal enemies or been killed by them in Kentucky, and if all the men who have killed their personal friends or been killed by them in Kentucky, had spent their love of fighting and their love of courage upon a monument to the Pioneers—such a monument as stands nowhere else in the world, and might fitly stand in this State to commemorate the winning of the West? Would the world think the better or the worse of the Kentucky ideal of bravery?

“I had not meant to talk to you so long on this subject,” I added, in apology, “but I have been thinking of these things lately since I have been so much in town.”

“I am interested,” said Georgiana; “but as I agree with you we need not both speak.” But she looked pained, and I sought to give a happier turn to the conversation.

“There is only one duel I ever heard of that gave me any pleasure, and that one never came off. A few years ago a Kentuckian wrote a political satire on an Irishman in Illinois—wrote it as a widow. The Irishman wished to fight. The widow offered to marry the Irishman, if such a sacrifice would be accepted as satisfactory damages. The Irishman sent a challenge, and the Kentuckian chose cavalry broadswords of the largest size. He was a giant; he had the longest arms of any man in Illinois; he could have mowed Erin down at a stroke like a green milkweed; he had been trained in duelling with oak-trees. You never heard of him: his name is Abraham Lincoln.”

“I have heard of him, and I have seen him—in Union County before I came here,” said Georgiana, with enthusiasm.

“He came here once to hear Mr. Clay speak,” I resumed; “and I saw them walking together one day under the trees at Ashland—the two most remarkable-looking men that I ever beheld together or in human form.”

My few acres touch the many of the great statesman. Georgiana and I often hear of the movements of his life, as two little boats in a quiet bay are tossed by the storms of the ocean. Any reference to him always makes us thoughtful, and we fell silent now.

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“Georgiana,” I said at length, softly. “It’s all in self-defence. I believe you promised to marry me in self-defence.”

“I did!” she said, promptly.

“Well, I certainly asked you in self-defence, Miss Cobb,” I replied. “And now in a few days, according to the usage of my time, I am going to take your life—even at the peril of my own. If you desire, it is your privilege to examine the deadly weapons before the hour of actual combat,” and I held out my arms to her appealingly.

She bent her body delicately aside, as always. “I am upset,” she said, discouragingly. “You have been abusing Kentucky.”

“Ah, that is the trouble!” I answered. “You wish me to become more interested in my fellow-creatures. And then you will not let me speak of what they do. And the other day you told me that I am not perfectly natural with anything but nature. Nature is the only thing that is perfectly natural with me. When I study nature there are no delicate or dangerous or forbidden subjects. The trees have no evasions. The weeds are honest. Running water is not trying to escape. The sunsets are not colored with hypocrisy. The lightning is not revenge. Everything stands forth in the sincerity of its being, and nature invites me to exercise the absolute liberty of my mind upon all life. I am bidden to master and proclaim whatsoever truth she has fitted me to grasp. If I am worthy to investigate, none are offended; if I should be wise enough to discover any law of creation, the entire world would express its thanks. Imagine my being assassinated because I had published a complete report upon the life and habits of the field-mouse!”

“If one mouse published a report on the life and habits of another, there’d be a fight all over the field,” said Georgiana.

“A ridiculous extreme,” I replied. “But after you have grown used to study nature with absolute freedom and absolute peace, think how human life repels you. You may not investigate, you may not speak out, you may not even think, you may not even feel. You are not allowed to reveal what is concealed, and you are required to conceal what is revealed. Natural! Have you ever known any two men to be perfectly natural with each other except when they were fighting? As for the men that I associate with every day, they weigh their words out to one another as the apothecary weighs his poisons, or the grocer his gunpowder.”

“You forget,” said Georgiana, “that we are living in a very extraordinary time, when everybody is sensitive and excited.”

“It is so always and everywhere,” I replied. “You may never study life as you study nature. With men you must take your choice: liberty for your mind and a prison for your

body; liberty for your body and a prison for your mind. Nearly all people choose the latter; we know what becomes of the few who do not."

But this reference to the times led us to speak slowly and solemnly of what all men now are speaking—war that must come between the North and the South. We agreed that it would come from each side as a blazing torch to Kentucky, which lies between the two and is divided between the two in love and hate—to Kentucky, where the ideal of a soldier's life is always the ideal of a man's duty and utmost glory.

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At last I felt that my time had come.

“Georgiana,” I said, “there is one secret I have never shared with you. It is the only fear I have ever felt regarding our future. But, if there should be a war—you’d better know it now—leave you or not leave you, I am going to join the army.”

She grew white and faint with the thought of a day to come. But at last she said:

“Yes; you must go.”

“I know one thing,” I added, after a long silence; “if I could do my whole duty as a Kentuckian—as an American citizen—as a human being—I should have to fight on both sides.”

I have thus set down in a poor way a part of the only talk I ever had with Georgiana on these subjects during the year 1851.

Yesterday, about sunset, the earth and sky were beautiful with that fulness of peace which things often attain at the moment before they alter and end. The hour seemed to me the last serene loveliness of summer, soon to be ruffled by gales and blackened by frosts.

Georgiana stood at her window looking into the west. The shadows of the trees in my yard fell longer and longer across the garden towards her. Darkest among these lay the shapes of the cedars and the pines in which the redbird had lived. Her whole attitude bespoke a mood surrendered to memory; and I felt sure that we two were thinking of the same thing.

As she has approached that mystical revelation of life which must come with our marriage, Georgiana’s gayety has grown subtly overcast. It is as if the wild strain in her were a little sad at having to be captured at last; and I too experience an indefinable pain that it has become my lot to subdue her in this way. The thought possesses me that she submits to marriage because she cannot live intimately with me and lavish her love upon me in any other relation; and therefore I draw back with awe from the idea of taking such possession of her as I will and must.

As she stood at her window yesterday evening she caught sight of me across the yard and silently beckoned. I went over and looked up at her, waiting and smiling.

“Well, what is it?” I asked at length, as her eyes rested on me with the fulness of affection.

“Nothing. I wanted to see you standing down there once more. Haven’t you thought of it? This is the last time—the last of the window, the last of the garden, the end of the

past. Everything after this will be so different. Aren't you a little sorry that you are going to marry me?"

"Will you allow me to fetch the minister this instant?"

In the evening they put on her bridal dress and sent over for me, and, drawing the parlor doors aside, blinded me with the sight of her standing in there, as if waiting in duty for love to claim its own. As I saw her then I have but to close my eyes to see her now. I scarce know why, but that vision of her haunts my mind mysteriously.

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I see a fresh snow-drift in a secret green valley between dark mountains. The sun must travel far and be risen high to reach it; but when it does, its rays pour down from near the zenith and are most powerful and warm; then in a little while the whole valley is green again and a white mist, rising from it, muffles the face of the sun.

Oh, Georgiana! Georgiana! Do not fade away from me as I draw you to me.

My last solitary candle flickers in the socket: it is in truth the end of the past.

IV

Last summer I felled a dead oak in the woods and had the heart of him stored away for my winter fuel: a series of burnt-offerings to the worshipful spirit of my hearth-stone. There should have been several of these offerings already, for October is almost ended now, and it is the month during which the first cool nights come on in Kentucky and the first fires are lighted.

A few twilights ago I stood at my yard gate watching the red domes of the forest fade into shadow and listening to the cawing of crows under the low gray of the sky as they hurried home. A chill crept over the earth. It was a fitting hour; I turned in-doors and summoned Georgiana.

“We will light our first fire together,” I said, straining her to my heart.

Kneeling gayly down, we piled the wood in the deep, wide chimney. Each of us then brought a live coal, and together we started the blaze. I had drawn Georgiana’s chair to one side of the fireplace, mine opposite; and with the candles still unlit we now sat silently watching the flame spread. What need was there of speech? We understood.

By-and-by some broken wreaths of smoke floated, outward into the room. My sense caught the fragrance. I sniffed it with a rush of memories. Always that smell of smoke, with other wild, clean, pungent odors of the woods, had been strangely pleasant to me. I remember thinking of them when a boy as incense perpetually and reverently set free by nature towards the temple of the skies. They aroused in me even then the spirit of meditation on the mystery of the world; and later they became in-wrought with the pursuit and enjoyment of things that had been the delight of my life for many years. So that coming now, at the very moment when I was dedicating myself to my hearth-stone and to domestic life, this smell of wood smoke reached me like a message from my past. For an instant ungovernable longings surged over me to return to it. For an instant I did return; and once more I lay drowsing before my old camp-fires in the autumn woods, with the frosted trees draping their crimson curtains around me on the walls of space and the stars flashing thick in the ceiling of my bedchamber. My dog, who had stretched himself at my feet before the young blaze, inhaled the smoke also

with a full breath of reminiscence, and lay watching me out of the corner of his eye—I fancied with reproachful constancy. I caught his look with a sense of guilt, and glanced across at Georgiana.

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Her gaze was buried deep in the flames. And how sweet her face was, how inexpressibly at peace. She had folded the wings of her whole life, and sat by the hearth as still as a brooding dove. No past laid its disturbing touch upon her shoulder. Instead, I could see that if there were any flight of her mind away from the present it was into the future—a slow, tranquil flight across the years, with all the happiness that they must bring. As I set my own thoughts to journey after hers, suddenly the scene in the room changed, and I beheld Georgiana as an old, old lady, with locks of silver on her temples, spectacles, a tiny sock stuck through with needles on her knee, and her face finely wrinkled, but still blooming with unconquerable gayety and youth.

“How sweet that smoke is, Georgiana,” I said, rousing us both, and feeling sure that she will understand me in whatsoever figure I may speak. “And how much we are wasting when we change this old oak back into his elements—smoke and light, heat and ashes. What a magnificent work he was on natural history, requiring hundreds of years for his preparation and completion, written in a language so learned that not the wisest can read him wisely, and enduringly bound in the finest of tree calf! It is a dishonor to speak of him as a work. He was a doctor of philosophy! He should have been a college professor! Think how he could have used his own feet for a series of lectures on the laws of equilibrium, capillary attraction, or soils and moisture! Was there ever a head that knew as much as his about the action of light? Did any human being ever more grandly bear the burdens of life or better face the tempests of the world? What did he not know about birds? He had carried them in his arms and nurtured them in his bosom for a thousand years. Even his old coat, with all its rents and patches—what roll of papyrus was ever so crowded with the secrets of knowledge? The august antiquarian! The old king! Can you imagine a funeral urn too noble for his ashes? But to what base uses, Georgiana! He will not keep the wind away any longer; we shall change him into a kettle of lye with which to whiten our floors.”

What Georgiana’s reply could have been I do not know, for at that moment Mrs. Walters flitted in.

“I saw through the windows that you had a fire,” she said, volubly, “and ran over to get warm. And, oh! yes, I wanted to tell you—”

“Stop, *please*, Mrs. Walters!” I cried, starting towards her with an outstretched hand and a warning laugh. “You have not yet been formally introduced to this room, and a formal introduction is necessary. You must be made acquainted with the primary law of its being;” and as Mrs. Walters paused, dropping her hands into her lap and regarding me with an air of mystification, I went on:

“When I had repairs made in my house last summer, I had this fireplace rebuilt, and I ordered an inscription to be burnt into the bricks. We expect to ask that all our guests will kindly notice this inscription, in order to avoid accidents or misunderstandings. So I beg of you not to speak until you have read the words over the fireplace.”

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Mrs. Walters wonderingly read the following legend, running in an arch across the chimney:

Good friend, around these hearth-stones speak
no evil word of any creature.

She wheeled towards me with instantaneous triumph.

“I’m glad you put it there!” she cried. “I’m glad you put it there! It will teach them a lesson about their talking. If there is one thing I *cannot* stand it is a gossip.”

I have observed that a fowl before a looking-glass will fight its own image.

“Take care, Mrs. Walters!” I said, gently. “You came very near to violating the law just then.”

“He meant it for me, Mrs. Walters,” said Georgiana, fondling our neighbor’s hand, and looking at me with an awful rebuke.

“I meant it for myself,” I said. “And now it is doing its best to make me feel like a Pharisee. So I hasten to add that there are other rooms in the house in which it will be allowed human nature to assert itself in this long-established, hereditary, and ineradicable right. Our guests have only to intimate that they can no longer restrain their propensities and we will conduct them to another chamber. Mrs. Moss and I will occasionally make use of these chambers ourselves, to relieve the tension of too much virtue. But it is seriously our idea to have one room in the house where we shall feel safe, both as respects ourselves and as respects others, from the discomfort of evil-speaking. As long as these walls stand or we dwell in them, this is to be the room of charity and kindness to all creatures.”

Although we exerted ourselves, conversation flagged during the visit of Mrs. Walters. Several times she began to speak, but, with a frightened look at the fireplace, dropped into a cough, or cleared her throat in a way that called to mind the pleasing habit of Sir Roger de Coverly in the Gardens of Gray’s Inn.

Later in the evening other guests came. Upon each the law of that fireside was lightly yet gravely impressed. They were in the main the few friends I know in whom such an outward check would call for the least inner restraint; nevertheless, on what a footing of confidence it placed our conversation! To what a commanding level we were safely lifted! For nothing so releases the best powers of the mind as the understanding that the entire company are under bond to keep the peace of the finest manners and of perfect breeding.

And Georgiana—how she shone! I knew that she could perfectly fill a window; I now see that she can as easily fill a room. Our bodies were grouped about the fireplace; our

minds centred around her, and she flashed like the evening star along our intellectual pathway.

The next day Mrs. Walters talked a long time to Georgiana on the edge of the porch.

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Thus my wife and I have begun life together. I think that most of our evenings will be spent in the room dedicated to a kind word for life universal. No matter how closely the warring forces of existence, within or without, have pressed upon us elsewhere, when we enter there we enter peace. We shall be walled in, from all darkness of whatsoever meaning; our better selves will be the sole guests of those luminous hours. And surely no greater good-fortune can befall any household than to escape an ignoble evening. To attain a noble one is like lying calmly down to sleep on a mountain-top towards which our feet have struggled upward amid enemies all day long.

Although we have now been two months married, I have not yet captured the old uncapturable loveliness of nature which has always led me and still leads me on in the person of Georgiana, I know but too well now that I never shall. The charm in her which I pursue, yet never overtake, is part and parcel of that ungraspable beauty of the world which forever foils the sense while it sways the spirit—of that elusive, infinite splendor of God which flows from afar into all terrestrial things, filling them as color fills the rose. Even while I live with Georgiana in the closest of human relationships, she retains for me the uncomprehended brightness and freshness of a dream that does not end and has no waking.

This but edges yet more sharply the eagerness of my desire to enfold her entire self into mine. We have been a revelation to each other, but the revelation is not complete; there are curtains behind curtains, which one by one we seek to lift as we penetrate more deeply into the discoveries of our union. Sometimes she will seek me out and, sitting beside me, put her arm around my neck and look long into my eyes, full of a sort of beautiful, divine wonder at what I am, at what love is, at what it means for a man and a woman to live together as we live. Yet, folded to me thus, she also craves a still larger fulfilment. Often she appears to be vainly hovering on the outside of a too solid sphere, seeking an entrance to where I really am. Even during the intimate silences of the night we try to reach one another through the throbbing walls of flesh—we but cling together across the lone, impassable gulfs of individual being.

During these October nights the moon has reached its fulness and the earth been flooded with beauty.

Our bed is placed near a window; and as the planet sinks across the sky its rays stream through the open shutter and fall upon Georgiana in her sleep. Sometimes I lie awake for the sole chance of seeing them float upon her hair, pass lingeringly across her face, and steal holily downward along her figure. How august she is in her purity! The whiteness of the fairest cloud that brushes the silvering orb is as pitch to the whiteness of her nature.

The other night as I lay watching her thus, and while the lower part of the bed remained in deep shadow, I could see that the thin covering had slipped aside, leaving Georgiana’s feet exposed.

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With a start of pain I recollected an old story about her childhood: that one day for the sake of her rights she had received a wound in one of her feet—how serious I had never known, but perhaps deforming, irremediable. My head was raised on the pillow; the moonlight was moving down that way; it would cross her feet; it would reveal the truth.

I turned my face away and closed my eyes.

V

It is nearly dark when I reach home from town these January evenings. However the cold may sting the face and dart inward to the marrow, Georgiana is waiting at the yard gate to meet me, so hooded and shawled and ringed about with petticoats—like a tree within its layers of bark—that she looks like the most thick-set of ordinary sized women; for there is a heavenly but very human secret hiding in this household now, and she is thoughtfully keeping it.

“We press our half-frozen cheeks together, as red as wine-sap apples, and grope for each other’s hand through our big lamb’s-wool mittens, and warm our hearts with the laughter in each other’s eyes. One evening she feigned to be mounted on guard, pacing to and fro inside the gate, against which rested an enormous icicle. When I started to enter she seized the icicle, presented arms, and demanded the countersign.

“Love, captain,” I said, “If it be not that, slay me at your feet!”

She threw away her great white spear and put her arms around my neck.

“It is ‘Peace,’” she said. “But I desert to the enemy.”

Without going to my fireside that evening I hurried on to the stable; for I do not relinquish to my servants the office of feeding my stock.

Believe in the divine rights of kings I never shall, except in the divine right to be kingly men, which all men share; but truly a divine right lies for any man in the ownership of a comfortable barn in winter. It is the feudal castle of the farm to the lower animals, who dwell in the Dark Ages of their kind—dwell on and on in affection, submission, and trust, while their lord demands of them their labor, their sustenance, or their life.

Of a winter’s day, when these poor dumb serfs have been scattered over the portionless earth, how often they look towards this fortress and lift up their voices with cries for night to come; the horses, ruffled and shivering, with their tails to the wind, as they snap their frosted fodder, or paw through the rime to the frozen grass underneath, causing their icy fetlocks to rattle about their hoofs; the cattle, crowded to leeward of some deep-buried haystack, the exposed side of the outermost of them white with whirling flakes; the

sheep, turning their pitiful, trusting eyes about them over the fields of storm in earth and sky!

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What joy at nightfall to gather them home to food and warmth and rest! If there is ever a time when I feel myself a mediaeval lord to trusty vassals, it is then. Of a truth I pass entirely over the Middle Ages, joining my life to the most ancient dwellers of the plains, and becoming a simple father of flocks and herds. When they have been duly stabled according to their kinds, I climb to the crib in the barn and create a great landslide of the fat ears that is like laughter; and then from every stall what a hearty, healthy chorus of cries and petitions responds to that laughter of the corn! What squeals and grunts persuasive beyond the realms of rhetoric! What a blowing of mellow horns from the cows! And the quick nostril trumpet-call of the horse, how eager, how dependent, yet how commanding! As I mount to the top of the pile, if I ever feel myself a royal personage it is then; I ascend my throne; I am king of the corn; and there is not a brute peasant in my domain that does not worship me as ruler of heaven and earth.

Or I love to catch up the bundles of oats as they are thrown down from the loft and send them whirling through the cutting-box so fast that they pour into the big baskets like streams of melted gold; or, grasping my pitchfork, I stuff the ricks over the mangers with the rich aromatic hay until I am as warm as when I loaded the wagons with it at midsummer noons.

With what sweet sounds and odors now the whole barn is filled! How robust, clean, well-meaning are my thoughts! In what comfort of mind I can turn to my own roof and store!

This hour in my stable is the only one out of the twenty-four left to me in which my feet may cross the boundary of human life into the world of the other creatures; for I have gone into business in town to gratify Georgiana. I think little enough of this business otherwise. Every day I pass through the groove of it with no more intellectual satisfaction in it than I feel an intellectual satisfaction in passing my legs through my pantaloons of a morning. But a man can study nothing in nature that does not outreach his powers.

If time is left, I veer off from the barn to the wood-pile, for I love to wield an axe, besides having a taste to cut my own wood for the nightly burning. This evening I could but stop to notice how the turkeys in the tree tops looked like enormous black nutgalls on the limbs, except that the wind whisked their tails about as cheerily as though they were already hearth-brooms.

It is well for my poor turkeys that their tails contain no moisture; for on a night like this they would freeze stiff, and the least incautious movement of a fowl in the morning would serve to crack its tail off—up to the pope’s-nose.

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As I set my foot on the door-step, I went back to see whether the two snow-birds were in their nightly places under the roof of the porch—the guardian spirits of our portal. There they were, wedged each into a snug corner as tightly as possible, so not to break their feathers, and leaving but one side exposed. Happening to have some wheat in my pocket, I pitched the grains up to the projecting ledge; they can take their breakfast in bed when they wake in the morning. Little philosophers of the frost, who even in their overcoats combine the dark side and the white side of life into a wise and weathering gray—the no less fit external for a man.

The thought of them to-night put me strongly in mind of a former habit of mine to walk under the cedar-trees at such dark winter twilights and listen to the low calls of the birds as they gathered in and settled down. I have no time for such pleasant ways now, they have been given up along with my other studies.

This winter of 1851 and 1852 has been cold beyond the memory of man in Kentucky—-the memory of the white man, which goes back some three-quarters of a century. Twice the Ohio River has been frozen over, a sight he had never seen. The thermometer has fallen to thirty degrees below zero. Unheard of snows have blocked the two or three railroads we have in the State.

News comes that people are walking over the ice on East River, New York, and that the Mississippi at Memphis bears the weight of a man a hundred yards from the bank.

Behind this winter lay last year’s spring of rigors hitherto unknown, destroying orchards, vineyards, countless tender trees and plants. It set everybody to talking of the year 1834, when such a frost fell that to this day it is known as Black Friday in Kentucky; and it gave me occasion to tell Georgiana a story my grandfather had told me, of how one night in the wilderness the weather grew so terrible that the wild beasts came out of the forests to shelter themselves around the cabins of the pioneers, and how he was awakened by them fighting and crowding for places against the warm walls and chimney-corners. If he had had opened his door and crept back into bed, he might soon have had a buffalo on one side of his fireplace and a bear on the other, with a wild-cat asleep on the hearth between, and with the thin-skinned deer left shivering outside as truly as if they had all been human beings.

Such a spring, with its destruction of seed-bearing and nut-hearing vegetation, followed by a winter that seals under ice what may have been produced, has spread starvation among the wild creatures. A recent Sunday afternoon walk in the woods—Georgiana being away from home with her mother—showed me that part of the earth’s surface rolled out as a vast white chart, on which were traced the desperate travels of the snow-walkers in search of food. Squirrel, chipmunk, rabbit, weasel, mouse, mink, fox—their tracks crossed and recrossed,

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wound in and out and round and round, making an intricate lace-work beautiful and pitiful to behold. Crow prints ringed every corn-shock in the field. At the base of one I picked up a frozen dove—starved at the brink of plenty. Rabbit tracks grew thickest as I entered my turnip and cabbage patches, converging towards my house, and coming to a focus at a group of snow-covered pyramids, in which last autumn, as usual, I buried my vegetables. I told Georgiana:

"They are attracted by the leaves that Dilsy throws away when she gets out what we need. Think of it—a whole neighborhood of rabbits hurrying here after dark for the chance of a bare nibble at a possible leaf." Once that night I turned in bed, restless. Georgiana did the same.

"Are you awake?" she said, softly.

"Are you?"

"Are you thinking about the rabbits?"

"Yes; are you?"

"What do you suppose they think about us?"

"I'd rather not know."

Georgiana tells me that the birds in unusual numbers are wintering among the trees, driven to us with the boldness of despair. God and nature have forgotten them; they have nothing to choose between but death and man. She has taken my place as their almoner and nightly renders me an account of what she has done. This winter gives her a great chance and she adorns it. It seems that never before were so many redbirds in the cedars; and although one subject is never mentioned between us, unconsciously she dwells upon these in her talk, and plainly favors them in her affection for the sake of the past. There are many stories I could relate to show how simple and beautiful is this whole aspect of her nature.

A little thing happened to-night.

Towards ten o'clock she brought my hat, overcoat, overshoes, mittens, comforter.

"Put them on," she said, mysteriously.

She also got ready, separating herself from me by so many clothes that I could almost have felt myself entitled to a divorce.

It was like day out-of-doors with the moon shining on the snow. We crept towards the garden, screened behind out-buildings. When we reached the fence, we looked through towards the white pyramids. All that part of the ground was alive with rabbits. Georgiana had spread for them a banquet of Lucullus, a Belshazzar's feast. It had been done to please me, I knew, and out of a certain playfulness of her own; out there are other charities of hers, which she thinks known only to herself, that show as well the divine drift of her thoughtfulness.

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She is asleep now—for the sake of the Secret. After she had gone to bed, what with the spectacle of the rabbits and what with our talk beforehand of the many cardinals in the cedars, my thoughts began to run freshly on old subjects, and, unlocking my bureau, I got out my notes and drawings for the work on Kentucky birds. Georgiana does not know that they exist; she never shall. With what authority those studies call me still, as with a trumpet from the skies! and I know that trumpet will sound on till my ears are past hearing. Sometimes I look upon myself as a man who has had two hearts; one lies buried in the woods, and the other sits at the fireside thinking of it. But sleep on, Georgiana—mother that is to be. The dreams of your life shall never be disturbed by the old dreams of mine.

VI

The population of this town on yesterday was seven thousand nine hundred and twenty; today it is seven thousand, nine hundred and twenty-*one*. The inhabitants of the globe are enriched by the same stupendous unit; the solar system must adjust itself to new laws of equilibrium; the choir of angels is sweetened by the advent of another musician. During the night Georgiana bore a son—not during the night, but at dawn, and amid such singing of birds that every tree in the yard became a dew-hung belfry of chimes, ringing a welcome to the heir of this old house and of these old trees—to the dispenser of seed during winters to come—to the proprietor of a whole race of seed-scatterers as long as nature shall be harsh and seasons shall return.

I had already bought the largest family Bible in the town as a repository for his name, Adam Cobb Moss, which in clear euphony is most fit to be enrolled among the sweetly sounding vocables of the Hebrew children. The page for the registration of later births in my family is so large and the lines ruled across it are so many that I am deeply mortified over this solitary entry at the top. But surely Georgiana and I would have to live far past the ages of Abraham and Sarah to fill it with the requisite wealth of offspring, beginning as we do, and being without divine assistance. When the name of our eldest-born is inscribed in this Bible, not far away will be found a scene in the home of his first parents, Georgiana and I being only the last of these, and giving, as it were, merely the finishing Kentucky touch to his Jewish origin.

But I gambol in spirit like a hawk in the air. Let me hood myself with parental cares: I have been a sire for half a day.

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I am speechless before the stupendous wisdom of my son in view of his stupendous ignorance. Already he lectures to the old people about the house on the perfect conduct of life, and the only preparation that he requires for his lectures is a few drops of milk. By means of these, and without any knowledge of anatomy, he will show us, for instance, what it is to be master of the science of vital functions. When he regards it necessary to do anything, he does it instantly and perfectly, and the world may take the consequences and the result. He forthwith addresses himself to fresh comfort and new enterprises for self-development. Beyond what is vital he refuses to go; things that do not concern him he lets alone. He has no cares beyond his needs; all space to him is what he can fill, all time his instant of action. He does not know where he came from, what he is, why here, whither bound; nor does he ask.

My heart aches helplessly for him when he shall have become a man and have grown less wise: when he shall find it necessary to act for himself and shall yet be troubled by what his companions may think; when he shall no longer live within the fortress of the vital, but take up his wandering abode with the husks and swine; when he shall no longer let the world pass by him with heed only as there is need, but weary himself to better the unchangeable; when space shall not be some quiet nook of the world large enough for the cradle of his life, but the illimitable void filled with floating spheres, out upon the myriads of which, with his poor, puzzled, human eyes, he will pitifully gaze; when time shall not be his instant of action, but two eternities, past and future, along the baffling walls of which he will lead his groping faith; and when the questioning of his stoutest years shall be: Whence came I? And what am I? Why here for a little while? Where to be hereafter? A swimmer is drowned by a wave originating in the moon; a traveller is struck down by a bolt originating in a cloud; a workman is overcome by the heat originating in the sun; and so, perhaps, the end will come to him through his solitary struggle with the great powers of the universe that perpetually reach him, but remain forever beyond his reach. If I could put forth one protecting prayer that would cover all his years, it would be that through life he continue as wise as the day he was born.

The third of June once more. Rain fell all yesterday, all last night. This morning earth and sky are dark and chill. The plants are bowed down, and no wind releases them from their burden of large white drops. About the yard the red-rose bushes fall away from the fences, the lilacs stand with their purple clusters hanging down as heavily as clusters of purple grapes. I hear the young orioles calling drearily from wet nests under dripping boughs. A plaintive piping of lost little chickens comes from the long grass.

How unlike the day is to the third of June two years ago. I was in the strawberry bed that crystalline morning; Georgiana came to the window, and I beheld her for the first time. How unlike the same day one year back. Again I was in the strawberry bed, again Georgiana came to window and spoke to me as before. This morning as I tipped into her room where she lay in bed, she turned her face to me on the pillow, and for the third time she said, fondly;

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“Old man, are you the gardener?”

The sky being so blanketed with cloud, although the shutters were open only a faint gray light filled the room. It was the first day that she had been well enough to have it done; but now the bed in which Georgiana lay was spread with the most beautiful draperies of white; the pillows were rich with needle-work and lace, and for the first time she had put on the badge of her new dignity, a little white cap of ribbons and lace, the long wide streamers of which, edged with lace, lay out upon the counterpane like bauds of the most delicate frost. The fingers of one hand rested lightly on the child beside her, as though she were counting the pulse of its oncoming life. Out in the yard the lilies of the valley, slipping out of their cool sheaths of green leaves, were not more white, more fresh. And surely Georgiana’s gayety is the unconquerable gayety of the world, the youthfulness of youth immortal.

I went over to her with the strange new awe I feel at my union with the young mother, where hitherto there has but been a union with the woman I love. She stretched out her hands to me, almost hidden under the lace of her sleeves, and drew my face down against hers, as she said in my ear,

“*Now* you are the old Adam!”

When she released me, she bent over the child and added, reproachfully,

“You haven’t paid the least attention to the baby yet.”

“I haven’t noticed that the baby has bestowed the least attention upon me. He is the youngest.”

“He is the guest of the house! It is your duty to speak to him first.”

“He doesn’t act like a guest in my house. He behaves as though he owned it. I’m nobody since he arrived—not even his body-servant.”

Georgiana, who was still bending over the child, glanced up with a look of confidential, whimsical distress.

“How could anything so old be born so young!”

“He will look younger as he gets older,” I replied. “And he will not be the first bachelor to do that. At present this youngster is an invaluable human document in too large an envelope; that’s all.”

Georgiana, with a swift, protecting movement, leaned nearer to the child, and spoke to him:

“It’s your house; tell him to leave the room for his impertinence.”

“He may have the house, since it’s his,” I replied. “But there is one thing I’ll not stand; if he ever comes between me and you, he’ll have to go; I’ll present him to Mrs. Walters.”

I was not aware of the expression with which I stood looking down upon my son, but Georgiana must have noticed it.

“And what if he supplants me some day?” she asked, suddenly serious, and with an old fear reviving.

“Oh, Georgiana!” I cried, kneeling by the bedside and putting my arms around her, “you know that as long as we are in this world I am your lover.”

“No longer?” she whispered, drawing me closer.

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“Through eternity!”

By-and-by I went out to the strawberry-bed. The season was too backward. None were turning. With bitter disappointment I searched the cold, wet leaves, bending them apart for the sight of as much as one scarlet lobe, that I might take it in to her if only for remembrance of the day. At last I gathered a few perfect leaves and blossoms, and presented them to her in silence on a plate with a waiter and napkin.

She rewarded me with a laugh, and lifted from the plate a spray of blossoms.

“They will be ripe by the time I am well,” she said, the sunlight of memory coming out upon her face. Then having touched the wet blossoms with her finger-tips, she dropped them quickly back into the plate.

“How cold they are!” she said, as a shiver ran through her. At the same time she looked quickly at me, her eyes grown dark with dread.

I set the plate hastily down, and she put her hands in mine to warm them.

VII

A month has gone by since Georgiana passed away.

To-day, for the first time, I went back to the woods. It was pleasant to be surrounded again by the ever-living earth that feels no loss and has no memory; that was sere yesterday, is green to-day, will be sere again to-morrow, then green once more; that pauses not for wounds and wrecks, nor lingers over death and change; but onward, ever onward, along the groove of law, passes from its red origin in universal flame to its white end in universal snow.

And yet, as I approached the edge of the forest, it was as though an invisible company of influences came gently forth to meet me and sought to draw me back into their old friendship. I found myself stroking the trunks of the trees as I would throw my arm around the shoulders of a tried comrade; I drew down the branches and plunged my face into the new leaves as into a tonic stream.

Yesterday a wind storm swept this neighborhood. Later, deep in the woods, I came upon an elm that had been struck by a bolt at the top. Nearly half the trunk had been torn away; and one huge limb lay across my path.

As I stood looking at it, the single note of a bird fell on my ear—always the same note, low, quiet, regular, devoid of feeling, as though the bird had been stunned and were trying to say: *What can I do*? *What can I do*? *What can I do*?

I knew what that note meant. It was the note with which a bird now and then lingers around the scene of the central tragedy of its life.

After a long search I found the nest, crushed against the ground under the huge limb, and a few feet from it, in the act of trying to escape, the female. The male, sitting meantime on the end of a bough near by, watched me incuriously, and with no change in that quiet, regular, careless note—he knew only too well that she was past my harming. The plan for his life had reached an end in early summer.

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I sat down near him for a while, thinking of the universal tragedy of the nest.

It was the second time to-day that this divine wastage in nature had forced itself on my thought, and this morning the spectacle was on a scale of tragic greatness beyond anything that has ever touched human life in this part of the country: Mr. Clay was buried amid the long sad blare of music, the tolling of bells, the roll of drums, the boom of cannon, and the grief of thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people—a vast and solemn pageant, yet as nothing to the multitude that will attend afar. For him this day the flags of nations will fly at half-mast; and the truly great men of the world, wherever the tidings may reach them of his passing, will stand awe-stricken that one of their superhuman company has been too soon withdrawn.

Too soon withdrawn! Therein is the tragedy of the nest, the wastage of the divine, the law of loss, whose reign on earth is unending, but whose right to reign no creature, brute or human, ever acknowledges.

The death of Mr. Clay is one of the many things that are happening to change all that made up my life with Georgiana. She was a true hero-worshipper, and she worshipped him. I no less. Now that he is dead, I feel as much lonelier as a soldier feels whose chosen tent-mate and whose general have fallen on the field together.

As I turned, away from the overcrowded town this afternoon towards the woods and was confronted by the wreck of the storm, my thoughts being yet full of Mr. Clay, of his enemies and disappointment, there rose before my mind a scene such as Audubon may once have witnessed:

The light of day is dying over the forests of the upper Mississippi. The silence of high space falls upon the vast stream. On a thunder-blasted tree-top near the western bank sits a lone, stern figure waiting for its lordliest prey—the eagle waiting for the swan. Long the stillness continues among the rocks, the tree-tops, and above the river. But far away in the north a white shape is floating nearer. At last it comes into sight, flying heavily, for it is already weary, being already wounded. The next moment the cry of its coming is heard echoing onward and downward upon the silent woods. Instantly the mighty watcher on the summit is alert and tense; and as the great snowy image of the swan floats by, in mid-air and midway of the broad expanse of water, he meets it. No battle is fought up there—the two are not well matched; and thus, separated from all that is little and struggling far above all that is low, with the daylight dying on his spotlessness, the swan receives the blow in its heart.

So came Death to the great Commoner.

Oh, Georgiana! I do not think of Death as ever having come to you. I think of you as some strangely beautiful white being that one day rose out of these earthly marshes

where hunts the dark Fowler, and uttering your note of divine farewell, spread your wings towards the open sea of eternity, there to await my coming.

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VIII

It is a year and four months since Georgiana left me, and now everything goes on much as it did before she came. The family have moved back to their home in Henderson, returning like a little company of travellers who have lost their guide. Sylvia has already married; her brother writes me that he is soon to be; the mother visits me and my child, yearningly, but seldom, on account of her delicate health; and thus our lives grow always more apart. None take their places, the house having passed to people with whom, beyond all neighborly civilities, I have naught to do. Nowadays as I stroll around my garden with my little boy in my arms strange faces look down upon us out of Georgiana's window.

And I have long since gone back to nature.

When the harvest has been gathered from our strong, true land, a growth comes on which late in the year causes the earth to regain somewhat of its old greenness. New blades spring up in the stubble of the wheat; the beeless clover runs and blossoms; far and wide over the meadows flows the tufted billows of the grass; and in the woods the oak-tree drops the purple and brown of his leaf and mast upon the verdure of June. Everywhere a second spring puts forth between summer gone and winter nearing. It is the overflow of plenty beyond the filling of the barns. It is a wave of life following quickly upon the one that broke bountifully at our feet. It is nature's refusal to be once reaped and so to end.

The math: then the aftermath.

Upon the Kentucky landscape during these October days there lies this later youth of the year, calm, deep, vigorous. And as I spend much time in it for the fine, fresh work it brings to hand and thought, I feel that in my way I am part of it, that I can match the aftermath of nature with the aftermath of my life. The Harvester passed over my fields, leaving them bare; they are green again up to the winter's edge.

The thought has now come into my mind that I shall lay aside these pages for my son to ponder if he should ever grow old enough to value what he reads. They will give him some account of how his father and mother met in the old time, of their courting days, of their happy life together. And since it becomes more probable that there will be a war, and that I might not be living to speak to him of his mother in ways not written here, I shall set down one thing about her which I pray he may take well to heart. He ought to know and to remember this: that his life was the price of hers; she was extinguished that he might shine, and he owes it to her that the flame of his torch be as white as the altar's from which it was kindled.

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Perhaps the most remarkable thing, then, in the character of his mother—which, please God, he will have, or, getting all things else, he can never be a gentleman—was honor. It shone from her countenance, it ran like melody in her voice, it made her eyes the most beautiful in expression that I have ever seen, it enveloped her person and demeanor with a spiritual grace. Honor in what are called the little things of life, honor not as women commonly understand it, but as the best of men understand it—that his mother had. It was the crystalline, unshakable rock upon which the somewhat fragile and never to be completed structure of her life was reared.

If he be anything of a philosopher, he may reason that this trait must have made his mother too serious and too hard. Let him think again. It was the very core of soundness in her that kept her gay and sweet. I have often likened her mind to the sky in its power of changeableness from radiant joyousness to sober calm; but oftenest it was like the vault of April, whose drops quicken what they fall upon; and she was of a soft-heartedness that ruled her absolutely—but only to the unyielding edge of honor. Yet she did not escape this charge of being both hard and serious upon the part of men and women who were used to the laxness of small misdemeanors, and felt ill at ease before the terrifying truth that she was a lady.

Beyond this single trait of hers—which, if it please God that he inherit it, may he keep though he lose everything else—I set nothing further down for his remembrance, since naught could come of my writing. By words I could no more give him an idea of what his mother was than I could point him to a few measures of wheat and bid him behold a living harvest.

Upon these fields of cool October greenness there risen out of the earth a low, sturdy weed. Upon the top of this weed small white blossoms open as still as stars of frost. Upon these blossoms lies a fragrance so pure and wholesome that the searching sense is never cloyed, never satisfied. Years after the blossoms are dried and yellow and the leaves withered and gone, this wholesome fragrance lasts. The common people, who often put their hopes into their names, call it life-everlasting. Sometimes they make themselves pillows of it for its virtue of bringing a quiet sleep.

This plant is blooming out now, and nightly as I wend homeward I pluck a handful of it, gathering along with its life the tranquil sunshine, the autumnal notes of the cardinal passing to better lands, and all the healthful influences of the fields. I shall make me a tribute of it to the memory of her undying sweetness.

If God wills, when I fall asleep for good I shall lay my head beside hers on the bosom of the Life Everlasting.