EGGLESTON
EDWARD

THE GRAYSONS: A STORY OF ILLINOIS

Edward Eggleston

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PREFACE

I had thought to close up the cycle of my stories of life in the Mississippi Valley with "Roxy" which was published in 1878. But when I undertook by request of the editor to write a short story for "The Century Magazine," and to found it on a legendary account of one of President Lincoln's trials, the theme grew on my hands until the present novel was the result. It was written mostly at Nervi, near Genoa, where I could not by any possibility have verified the story I had received about 1867 from one of Lincoln's old neighbors. To have investigated the accuracy of my version of the anecdote would have been, indeed, to fly in the face and eyes of providence, for popular tradition is itself an artist rough-hewing a story to the novelist's hands. During the appearance of this novel in serial form I have received many letters from persons acquainted in one way or another with the actors and sufferers in the events, of which these here related are the ideal counterparts. Some of these letters contain information or relate incidents of so much interest that I have it in mind to insert them in an appendix to some later edition of this book.

EDWARD EGGLESTON.

Joshua's Rock, Lake George, 1888.

This Book is respectfully inscribed to the Hon. Jonathan Chace, United States Senator from Rhode Island; the Hon. Joseph Hawley, United States Senator from Connecticut; the Hon. W. C. P. Breckenridge, Representative from Kentucky; and the Hon. Patrick A. Collins, Representative from Massachusetts, who have recently introduced or had charge of International Copyright Bills, and to those Members of both Houses of Congress who have coöperated with them in the effort to put down literary buccaneering.

E. E.

I
TURNING THE BIBLE

The place of the beginning of this story was a country neighborhood on a shore, if one may call it so, that divided a forest and prairie in Central Illinois. The date was nearly a lifetime ago. An orange-colored sun going down behind the thrifty orchard of young apple-trees on John Albaugh's farm, put into shadow the front of a dwelling which had stood in wind and weather long enough to have lost the raw look of newness, and to have its tints so softened that it had become a part of the circumjacent landscape. The phebe-bird, locally known as the pewee, had just finished calling from the top of the large barn, and a belated harvest-fly, or singing locust, as the people call him, was yet filling the warm air with the most summery of all summery notes – notes that seem to be felt as well as heard, pushing one another faster and yet faster through the quivering atmosphere, and then dying away by degrees into languishing, long-drawn, and at last barely audible vibrations.

Rachel, the daughter of the prosperous owner of the farm, was tying some jasmine vines to the upright posts that supported the roof of a porch, or veranda, which stretched along the entire front of the house. She wore a fresh calico gown, and she had something the air of one expecting the arrival of guests. She almost always expected company in the evening of a fine day. For the young person whose fortune it is to be by long odds the finest-looking woman in a new country where young men abound, and where women are appreciated at a rate proportioned to their scarcity, knows what it is to be a "reigning belle" indeed. In the vigorous phrase of the country, Rachel was described as "real knock-down handsome"; and, tried by severer standards than those of Illinois, her beauty would have been beyond question. She had the three essentials: eyes that were large and lustrous, a complexion rich and fresh, yet delicately tinted, and features well-balanced and harmonious. Her blonde hair was abundant, and, like everything about her, vital. Her hands and feet were not over-large, and, fortunately, they were not disproportionately small; but just the hands and feet of a well-developed country girl used to activity and the open air. Without being more than ordinarily clever, she had a certain passive intelligence. Her voice was not a fine one, nor had her manners any particular charm except that which comes from the repose of one who understands that she is at her best when silent, and who feels herself easily ahead of rivals without making any exertion. Hers was one of those faces the sight of which quickens the pulses even of an old man, and attracts young men with a fascination as irresistible as it is beyond analysis or description. Many young men were visitors at John Albaugh's hospitable house, and where the young men came the young women were prone to come, and thus Albaugh's became a place of frequent and spontaneous resort for the young people from all the country round.

But it had happened with this much-courted girl, as it has happened to many another like her, that with all the world to choose from, she had tarried single longer than her companions. Rachel was now past twenty-three, in a land where a woman was accounted something of an old maid if unmarried at twenty. Beauties such as she find a certain pleasure in playing with their destiny, as pussy loves the excitement of trifling with the mouse that can hardly escape her in any way. Prey that comes too easily in reach is not highly valued. Every bid for such a woman's hand leads her to raise her estimation of her own value. Rachel's lovers came and went, and married themselves to young women without beauty. Lately, however, Rachel Albaugh's neighbors began to think that she had at length fallen in love "for keeps," as the country phrase expressed it.

"I say, Rache," called her brother Ike, a youth of fifteen, who was just then half-hidden in the boughs of the summer apple-tree by the garden gate, "they's somebody coming."

"Who is it, Ike?"

"Henry Miller and the two Miller girls."

"Oh! is that all?" said Rachel, in a teasing tone.

"Is that *all*?" said Ike. "You don't care for anybody but Tom Grayson these days. I'll bet you Tom'll be here to-night."

"What makes you think so?" asked Rachel, trying not to evince any interest in the information.

"Don't you wish you knew?" he answered, glad to repay her teasing in kind.

"Did you see him to-day?"

"Say, Sis," said Ike, affecting to dismiss the subject, "here's an awful nice apple. Can you ketch?"

Rachel held up her hands to catch the apple, baring her pretty arms by the falling back of her loose sleeves. The mischievous Ike threw a swift ball, and Rachel, holding her hands for it, could not help shrinking as the apple came flying at her. She shut her eyes and ducked her head, and of course the apple went past her, bowling away along the porch and off the other end of it into the grass.

"That's just like a girl," said Ike. "Here's a better apple. I won't throw so hard this time." And Rachel caught the large striped apple in her two hands.

"I say, Ike," she said, coaxingly, "where did you see Tom?"

"Oh! I met him over on the big road as I went to mill this morning; he was going home to his mother's, an' he said he was coming over to see you to-night. An' I told him to fetch Barbara, so 's I'd have somebody to talk to, 'cause you wouldn't let me get a word in ageways with him. An' Tom laughed an' looked tickled."

"I guess you won't talk much to Barbara while Ginnie Miller's here," Rachel said; and by this time Henry Miller and his two sisters were nearing the white gate which stood forty feet away from the cool front porch of the house.

"Howdy, Rachel!" said Henry Miller, as he reached the gate, and "Howdy! Howdy!" came from the two sisters, to which Rachel answered with a cordial "Howdy! Come in!" meant for the three. When they reached the porch, she led the way through the open front door to the "settin' room" of the house, as the living-room was always called in that day. The fire-place looked like an extinct crater; curtains of narrow green slats hung at the windows, and the floor was covered by a new rag-carpet in which was imbedded a whole history of family costume; a patient geologist might have discovered in it traces of each separate garment worn in the past five years by the several members of the Albaugh family. The mantel-piece was commonplace enough, of "poplar" wood – that is, tulip-tree – painted brown. The paint while fresh had been scratched in rhythmical waves with a common coarse comb. This graining resembled that of some wood yet undiscovered. The table at the side of the room farthest from the door had a cover of thin oil-cloth decorated with flowers; most of them done in yellow. A tall wooden clock stood against the wall at the right of the door as you entered, and its slow ticking seemed to make the room cooler. For the rest, there was a black rocking-chair with a curved wooden seat and uncomfortable round slats in the back; there were some rank-and-file chairs besides, – these were black, with yellow stripes; and there was a green settee with three rockers beneath and an arm at each end.

Henry Miller was a square-set young fellow, without a spark of romance in him. He had plowed corn all day, and he would have danced all night had the chance offered, and then followed the plow the next day. His sisters were like him, plain and of a square type that bespoke a certain sort of "Pennsylvania Dutch" ancestry, though the Millers had migrated to Illinois, not from Pennsylvania, but from one of the old German settlements in the valley of Virginia. Ike jumped out of the apple-tree to follow Virginia, the youngest of the Millers, into the house; there was between him and "Ginnie," as she was called, that sort of adolescent attachment, or effervescent reaction, which always appears to the parties involved in it the most serious interest in the universe, and to everybody else something deliciously ridiculous; a sort of burlesque of the follies of people more mature.

This was destined to be one of Rachel's "company evenings"; she had not more than seated the Millers and taken the girls' bonnets to a place of security, when there was a knock on the door-jamb. It was Mely McCord, who had once been a hired help in the Albaugh family. There were even in that day wide differences in wealth and education in Illinois, but class demarcations there were not. Nothing was more natural than that Mely, who had come over from Hubbard township to visit some cousin in the neighborhood, should visit the Albaughs. Mely McCord was a girl – she was always called a girl, though now a little in the past tense – with a stoop in the shoulders, and hair that would have been better if it had been positively and decoratively red. As it was, her head seemed always striving to be red without ever attaining to any purity of color.

Half an hour later, Magill, an Irish bachelor of thirty-five, who, being county clerk, was prudently riding through the country in order to keep up his acquaintance with the voters, hitched his horse at the fence outside of the Albaugh gate, and came in just as Rachel was bringing a candle. Though he had no notion of cumbering himself with a family or with anything else likely to interfere with the freedom or pleasure of "an Irish gentleman," Magill was very fond of playing at gallantry, and he affected a great liking for what he called "faymale beauty," and plumed himself on the impression his own sprucely dressed person and plump face – a little overruddy, especially toward the end of the nose – might make on the sex. He could never pass Albaugh's without stopping to enjoy a platonic flirtation with Rachel. George Lockwood arrived at the same time; he was a clerk in Wooden's store, at the county-seat village of Moscow, and he could manage, on his busiest days even, to spend half an hour in selling a spool of cotton thread to Rachel Albaugh. He had now come five miles in the vain hope of finding her alone. The country beauty appreciated the flattery of his long ride, and received his attention with a pleasure undisguised.

George Lockwood's was no platonic sentiment. He watched intently every motion of Rachel's arms only half-hidden in her open-sleeved dress; even the rustling of the calico of her gown made his pulses flutter. He made a shame-faced effort to conceal his agitation; he even tried to devote himself to Mely McCord and the "Miller girls" now and then; but his eyes followed Rachel's tranquil movements, as she amused herself with Magill's bald flatteries, and Lockwood could not help turning himself from side to side in order to keep the ravishing vision in view when he was talking to some one else.

"You had better make the most of your chance, Mr. Lockwood," said pert little Virginia Miller, piqued by his absent-minded pretense of talking with her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Oh, talk to Rachel while you can, for maybe after a while you can't!"

"Why can't I?"

"She's glad enough to talk to you now, but just you wait till Tom Grayson comes. If he should happen in to-night, what do you think would become of you?"

"Maybe I'm not so dead in love as you think," he answered.

"You? You're past hope. Your eyes go round the room after her like a sunflower twistin' its neck off to see the sun."

"Pshaw!" said George. "You know better than that."

But Virginia noted with amusement that his smile of affected indifference was rather a forced one, and that he was "swallowing his feelings," as she put it. He took her advice as soon as he dared and crossed to where Rachel was sitting with the back of her chair against the jamb of the mantel-piece. Rachel was smiling a little foolishly at the shameless palaver of Magill, who told her that there was a ravishing perfiction about her faychers that he'd niver sane surpassed, though he'd had the exquisite playsure of dancing with many of the most beautiful faymales in Europe. Rachel, a little sick of unwatered sweetness, was glad to have George Lockwood interrupt the frank criticisms of an appreciative connoisseur of loveliness.

"I hear Tom Grayson outside now," said Mely McCord, in a half-whisper to Henry Miller. "George Lockwood won't be nowhere when he gits here"; and Mely's freckled face broke into ripples of delight at the evident annoyance which Lockwood began to show at hearing Grayson's voice on the porch. Tom Grayson was preceded by his sister Barbara, a rather petite figure, brunette in complexion, with a face that was interesting and intelligent, and that had an odd look hard to analyze, but which came perhaps, from a slight lack of symmetry. As a child, she had been called "cunning," in the popular American use of the word when applied to children; that is to say, piquantly interesting; and this characteristic of quaint piquancy of appearance she retained, now that she was a young woman of eighteen. Her brother Tom was a middle-sized, well-proportioned man, about two years older than she, of a fresh, vivacious countenance, and with a be-gone-dull-care look. He had a knack of imparting into any company something of his own cheerful heedlessness, and for this his society was prized. He spoke to everybody right cordially, and shook hands with all the company as though they had been his first cousins, looking in every face without reserve or suspicion, and he was greeted on all hands with a corresponding heartiness. But while Tom saluted everybody, his eye turned toward Rachel, and he made his way as quickly as possible to the farther corner of the room where she was standing in conversation with George Lockwood. He extended his hand to her with a hearty,

"Well, Rache, how are you? It would cure fever and ague to see you"; and then turning to Lockwood he said: "Hello, George! you out here! I wouldn't 'ave thought there was any other fellow fool enough to ride five miles and back to get a look at Rachel but me." And at that he laughed, not a laugh that had any derision in it, or any defiance, only the outbreaking of animal spirits that were unchecked by foreboding or care.

"I say, George," he went on, "let's go out and fight a duel and have it over. There's no chance for any of us here till Rachel's beaux are thinned out a little. If I should get you killed off and out of the way, I suppose I should have to take Mr. Magill next."

"No, Tom, it's not with me you'd foight, me boy. I've sane too many handsome girls to fight over them, though I have never sane such transcindent – "

"Ah, hush now, Mr. Magill," entreated Rachel.

"Faymale beauty's always adorned by modesty, Miss Albaugh. I'll only add, that whoever Miss Rachel stoops to marry" – and Magill laughed a slow, complacent laugh as he put an emphasis on stoops – "I'll be a thorn in his soide, d'yeh mark that; fer to the day of me death, I'll be her most devoted admoirer"; and he made a half-bow at the close of his speech, with a quick recovery, which expressed his sense of the formidable character of his own personal charms.

But if Magill was a connoisseur of beauty he was also a politician too prudent to slight any one. He was soon after this paying the closest heed to Mely McCord's very spontaneous talk. He had selected Mely in order that he might not get a reputation for being "stuck up."

"Tom Grayson a'n't the leas' bit afeerd uh George Lockwood nur nobody else," said Mely rather confidentially to Magill, who stood with hands crossed under the tail of his blue-gray coat. "He all-ays wuz that away; a kind'v a high-headed, don't-keer sort uv a feller. He'd better luck out, though. Rache's one uh them skittish kind uh critters that don't stan' 'thout hitchin', an' weth a halter knot at that. Tom Grayson's not the fust feller that's felt shore she wuz his'n an' then found out kind uh suddently't 'e wuzn't so almighty shore *arter* all. But, lawsee gracious! Tom Grayson a'n't afeerd uv nothin', nohow. When the master wuz a-lickin' him wunst, at school, an' gin 'im three cuts, an' then says, says he, 'You may go now,' Tom, he jes lucks at 'im an' says uz peart 's ever you see, says he, 'Gimme another to make it even numbers.'"

"An' how did the master fale about that?" asked Magill, who had been a schoolmaster himself.

"W'y he jes let him have it good an' tight right around his legs. Tom walked off an' never wunst said thank yeh, sir. He did n' wear uz good close in them days 's 'e does now, by a long shot. His mother's farm 's in the timber, an' slow to open; so many stumps and the like; an' 'f 'is uncle down 't Moscow had n't a' tuck him up, he 'd 'a' been a-plowin' in that air stickey yaller clay 'v Hubbard township yit. But you know *ole* Tom Grayson, his father's brother, seein' 's Tom wuz named arter him, an' wuz promisin' like, an' had the gift of the gab, he thought 's how Tom mought make 'n all-fired smart lawyer ur doctor, ur the like; an' seein' 's he had n' got no boy to do choores about, he takes Tom an' sends him to school three winters, an' now I believe he's put him to readin' law."

"Yis, I know he went into Blackman's office last May," said Magill.

"Ole Tom Grayson 's never done nothin' fer the old woman nur little Barb'ry, there, an' little Barb'ry 's the very flower of the flock, accordin' to *my* tell," Mely went on. "Mrs. Grayson sticks to the ole farm, yeh know, an' rents one field to pap on the sheers, an' works the rest uv it by hirin'. She sets a mighty sight uv store by Tom. Talks about 'im by the hour. She 'lows he'll be a-gittin' to Congress nex' thing. But I d' know" – and here Mely shook her head. "High nose stumped his toes," says *I*. "Jes look how he's a-carryin' on with Rache, now."

"She's older 'n he is," said the clerk, knowing that even this half unfavorable comment would be a comfort to one so far removed from rivalry with her as Mely.

"Three years ef she's a day," responded Mely promptly. "Jest look at that Lockwood. He's like a colt on the outside of a paster fence, now," – and Mely giggled heartily at Lockwood's evident discomfiture.

In gossip and banter the time went by, until some one proposed to "turn the Bible." I do not know where this form of sortilege originated; it is probably as old as Luther's Bible. One can find it practiced in Germany to-day as it is in various parts of the United States.

"Come, Sophronia, you and me will hold the key," said Lockwood, who was always quick to seize an advantage.

These two, therefore, set themselves to tell the fortunes of the company. The large iron key to the front door and a short, fat little pocket-Bible were the magic implements. The ward end of the key was inserted between the leaves of the Bible at the first chapter of Ruth; the book was closed and a string bound so tightly about it as to hold it firmly to the key. The ring end of the key protruded. This was carefully balanced on the tips of the forefingers of Lockwood and Sophronia Miller, so that the Bible hung between and below their hands. A very slight motion, unconscious and invisible, of either of the supporting fingers would be sufficient to precipitate the Bible and key to the floor.

"Who can say the verse?" asked Lockwood.

"I know it like a book," said Virginia Miller.

"You say it, Ginnie," said her sister; "but whose turn first?"

The two amateur sorcerers, with fingers under the key-ring, sat face to face in the dim light of the candle, their right elbows resting on their knees as they bent forward to hold the Bible between them. The others stood about with countenances expressing curiosity and amusement.

"Rachel first," said Henry Miller; "everybody wants to know who in thunderation Rache *will* marry, ef she ever marries anybody. I don't believe even the Bible can tell that. Turn fer Rachel Albaugh, and let's see how it comes out. Say the verse, Ginnie."

"Letter A," said Virginia Miller, solemnly; and then she repeated the words like a witch saying a charm:

"'Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried.'"

The key did not turn. It was manifest, therefore, that Rachel would never marry any man whose name began with the first letter of the alphabet. The letter B was called, and again the solemn charm was repeated; the company resting breathless to the end. The Bible and key refused to respond for B, or C, or D, or E, or F. But when Ginnie Miller announced "Letter G," it was with a voice that betrayed a consciousness of having reached a critical point in her descent of the alphabet; there was a rustle of expectation in the room, and even McGill, standing meditatively with his hands behind his back, shifted his weight from his left foot to his right so as to have a better view of any antics the Bible might take a notion to perform. Just as Virginia Miller reached the words "and where thou diest will I die," the key slipped off Sophronia's fingers first, and the book fell to the floor.

"G stands for Grayson," said Magill gravely, but he pronounced his "G" so nearly like "J" that a titter went around the room.

"Don't you know better than to spell Grayson with a J, Mr. Magill?" asked Rachel.

Magill did not see the drift of the question, and before he could reply, Lockwood, without looking up, broke in with: "What are you talking about, all of you? It's not the last name, it's the given name you go by."

"Oh!" cried Mely McCord, in mild derision, "George begins with G. I didn't think of that."

"Yis," said Magill, reflectively, "that's a fact; George does begin with jay too."

"I tell you it's the last name," said Tom, laughing.

"I tell you it isn't," said Lockwood, doggedly; but Henry Miller, seeing a chance for disagreeable words, made haste to say: "Come, boys, it's the good-natured one that'll win. Hang up the Bible once more and let's see if it 'll drop for Lockwood when it gets to L, or for Tom when we come to T. I don't more than half believe in the thing. It never will turn for me on anything but Q, and they a'n't no girl with Q to her name this side of Jericho except Queen Brooks, an' she lives thirteen miles away an' 's engaged to another feller, and I would n't look at her twiste if she wuz n't, nur she 't me like 's not. Come, Ginnie, gee-up your oxen. Let's have H."

The Bible refused to turn at H.

"Rachel won't marry you, Henry Miller," said the county clerk.

"No," said Henry, "Rache an' me 's always been first-rate friends, but she knows me too well to fall in love with me, an' I'm the only feller in this end of the county that's never made a fool of myself over Rachel."

Neither would the Bible turn at I, J, or K. But at L it turned.

"Of course it'll turn at L, when Lockwood 's got hold of the key," said Tom with another laugh. "That 's what he took hold for."

"That's the same as saying I don't play fair," said Lockwood, with irritation.

"Fair and square a'n't just your way, George. But there's no use being cross about it."

"Come, boys, if you 're going to quarrel over the Bible you can't have it," said Rachel, who loved tranquillity. "As for me, I'm going to marry whoever I please, and I won't get married *till* I please, Bible or no Bible"; and she untied the string, put the rusty key in the door, and laid the plump little book in its old place on the mantel-piece, until it should be wanted again for religious disputation or fortune-telling.

Grayson went rattling on with cheerful and good-natured nonsense, but George Lockwood, pushed into the shade by Tom's ready talk and by Rachel's apparent preference for him, was not in a very good humor, and departed early in company with Magill. After all the rest had gone, Barbara Grayson had to remind Tom more than once of the lateness of the hour, for nine o'clock was late in that day.

"Send him home, Rachel," she said, "at half-past nine; he'll never go while you look good-natured." Then, taking her brother by the arm, Barbara led him to the gate. Rachel followed, almost as reluctant to close the evening as Tom himself.

II
WINNING AND LOSING

The next Friday evening Grayson and Lockwood were again brought together; this time in the miscellaneous store of Wooden & Snyder, in which George Lockwood was the only clerk. Here after closing-time the young men of the village were accustomed to gratify their gregarious propensities; this was a club-room, where, amid characteristic odors of brown sugar, plug tobacco, new calico, vinegar, whisky, molasses, and the dressed leather of boots and shoes, social intercourse was carried on by a group seated on the top of nail-kegs, the protruding ends of shoe-boxes, and the counters that stretched around three sides of the room. Here were related again all those stock anecdotes which have come down from an antiquity inconceivably remote, but which in every village are yet told as having happened three or four miles away, and three or four years ago, to the intimate friend of the narrator's uncle. The frequency of such assemblies takes off something of their zest; where everybody knows all his neighbor's history and has heard everybody else's favorite story, a condition of mental equilibrium ensues, and there is no exchange of electricities. The new-comer, or the man who has been away, is a heaven-send in a village; he stirs its stagnant intellect as a fresh breeze, and is for the time the hero of every congregation of idlers.

Such a man on this evening was Dave Sovine, the son of a settler from one of the Channel Islands. Four years ago, when but sixteen years old, Dave had unluckily waked up one summer morning at daybreak. Looking out of the little window in the end of the loft of his father's house, he had contemplated with disgust a large field of Indian corn to be "plowed out" that day under a June sun. So repulsive to his nature was the landscape of young maize and the prospect of toil, that he dressed himself, tied up his spare clothes in a handkerchief, and, taking his boots in his hand, descended noiselessly the stairway which was in the outside porch of the house. Once on the ground, he drew on his boots and got away toward the Wabash, where he shipped as cook on a flat-boat bound for New Orleans. No pursuit or inquiry was made by his family, and the neighbors suspected that his departure was not a source of regret. At Shawneetown the flat-boat was suddenly left without a cook. Dave had been sent up in the town with a little money to lay in supplies of coffee and sugar; instead of coming back, he surreptitiously shipped as cabin-boy on the steamboat *Queen of the West*, which was just leaving the landing, bound also for the "lower country." Sovine had afterward been in the Gulf, he had had adventures in Mexico, and he had contrived to pick up whatever of evil was to be learned in every place he visited. He had now come home ostensibly "to see the folks," but really to gratify his vanity in astonishing his old acquaintances by an admirable proficiency in deviltry. His tales of adventure were strange and exciting, and not likely to shrink in the telling. The youth of Moscow listened with open-mouthed admiration to one who, though born in their village, had seen so much of the world and broken all of the commandments. For his skill at cards they soon had not only admiration but dread. He had emptied the pockets of his companions by a kind of prestidigitation quite incomprehensible to them. He seemed to play fairly, but there was not a loafer in Moscow who had not become timid about playing with Dave; the long run of luck was ever on his side. It was much more amusing to his companions to hear him, with ugly winks and the complacent airs of a man who feels sure that he had cut his eye-teeth, tell how he had plucked others in gambling than to furnish him with new laurels at their own expense.

On this particular evening Dave Sovine lounged on one of the counters, with a stack of unbleached "domestic" cloth for a bolster, while his bright patent-leather shoes were posed so as to be in plain view. Thus comfortably fixed, he bantered the now wary and rather impecunious "boys" for a game of poker, euchre, seven-up, or anything to pass away the time. George Lockwood, as representing the proprietors of the store, sat on a ledge below the shelves with his feet braced on a box under the counter. He was still smarting from his discomfiture with Rachel Albaugh, and he was also desirous of investigating Dave Sovine's play without risking his own "fips" and "bits" in the game. So, after revolving the matter in his mind as he did every matter, he said to Dave, with a half-sinister smile:

"Tom Grayson's upstairs in Blackman's office. Maybe you might get up a game with him. He plays a stiff hand, and he a'n't afraid of the Ole Boy at cards, or anything else, for that matter."

"You call him down," said Dave, winking his eye significantly, and involuntarily disclosing a vein of exultant deviltry which made the cool-blooded Lockwood recoil a little; however, George felt that it would be a satisfaction to see Tom's pride reduced.

Lockwood got down off the ledge in a sluggish way, and walked around the end of the counter to the stove-pipe which ran from the box-stove in the store up through the office above.

"I say, Tom!" he called.

"What?" came out of the pipe.

"Dave Sovine says he can beat you at any game you choose. Come down and try him."

Grayson was bending over a law-book with only a tallow candle for light. Studying the law of common carriers was, in his opinion, dull business for a fellow with good red blood in his veins. He heard the murmur of conversation below, and for the last half-hour he had longed to put the book up beside its sheepskin companions on the shelves and join the company in the store. This banter decided him.

"I'll come down a little minute and try just three games and no more," he said. Then he closed the book with a thump and went down the outside stairway, which was the only means of egress from the law-office, and was let into the back door of the store by George Lockwood. He got an empty soap-box and set it facing the nail-keg on which Dave Sovine had placed himself for the encounter. A half-barrel with a board on top was put between the players, and served for table on which to deal and throw the cards; the candle rested on the rusty box-stove which stood, winter and summer, midway between the counters. Lockwood snuffed the candle and then, with an affectation of overlistlessness, placed himself behind Sovine, so as to command a view of his cards and of all his motions.

Tom had prudence enough to insist on playing for small stakes of a twelve-and-a-half-cent bit at a game; – his purse was not heavy enough for him to venture greater ones. At first the larger number of games fell to Grayson, and his winnings were considerable to one who had never had more than money enough for his bare necessities. He naturally forgot all about the law of common carriers and the limit of three games he had prescribed himself.

Dave cursed his infernal luck, as he called it, and when the twelfth round left Tom about a dollar ahead, he gave the cards a "Virginia poke" whenever it came his turn to cut them; that is to say, he pushed one card out of the middle of the pack, and put it at the back. By this means Dave proposed to "change the luck," as he said; but George Lockwood, who looked over Dave's shoulder, was not for a minute deceived by this manœuvre. He knew that this affectation of a superstition about luck and the efficiency of poking the cards was only a blind to cover from inexpert eyes the real sleight by which Dave, when he chose, could deal himself strong hands. Even the Virginia poke did not immediately bring a change, and when Tom had won a dozen games more than Dave, and so was a dollar and a half ahead, and had got his pulses well warmed up, Dave manifested great vexation, and asked Grayson to increase the stakes to half a dollar, so as to give him a chance to recover some of his money before it was time to quit. Tom consented to this, and the proportions of winnings passed to the other side of the board. Dave won sometimes two games in three, sometimes three in five, and Tom soon found a serious inroad made in the small fund of thirteen dollars which he had earned by odd jobs writing and even by harder and homelier work. This money had been hoarded toward a new suit of clothes. He began to breathe hard; he put up his hard-earned half-dollars with a trembling hand, and he saw them pass into Sovine's pocket with a bitter regret; he took his few winnings with eagerness. Every lost half-dollar represented a day's work, and after every loss he resolved to venture but one more, if the luck did not change. But how could he endure to quit defeated? He saw before him weeks of regret and self-reproach; he felt a desperate necessity for recovering his ground. As the loss account mounted, his lips grew dry, the veins in his forehead visibly swelled, and the perspiration trickled from his face. He tried to hide his agitation under an affectation of indifference and amusement, but when he essayed to speak careless words for a disguise, his voice was husky and unsteady, and he kept swallowing, with an effort as though something in his throat threatened him with suffocation. Dave noted these signs of distress in his adversary with a sort of luxurious pleasure; he had in him the instincts of a panther, and the suffering inflicted on another gave an additional relish to his victory.

Lockwood watched the play with a sharp curiosity, hoping to penetrate the secret of Sovine's skill. He felt, also, a certain regret, for he had not expected to see Tom quite so severely punished. At length Tom's last dollar was reached; with a flushed face, he held the coin in his trembling hand for a moment, and then he said bravely: "It might as well go with the rest, if I lose this time," and he laid it down as a single stake, hoping that luck would favor him.

When Dave had pocketed this he leaned back and smiled with that sort of ruthless content that a beast of prey feels when he licks his chops after having enjoyed a meal from his lawful prey.

Tom's losses were relatively great; it was a kind of small ruin that had suddenly overtaken him. A month of writing, if he had it to do, would not have replaced the money, nor was his a nature that could easily brook defeat. The very courage and self-reliance that would have stood him in admirable stead in another kind of difficulty, and that in other circumstances would have been accounted a virtue, were a snare to him now.

"Look here, Dave," he said, with a voice choked by mortification, "give me a chance to win a little of that back," and he laid his pocket-knife on the table.

"Tom, you'd better quit," said three or four voices at once. But Dave rather eagerly laid a half-dollar by Tom's knife and won the knife. He liked this chance to give a certain completeness to the job. Then Tom laid out his silk handkerchief, which he also lost – for the games all went one way now.

"Come, Tom, hold on now," said the chorus.

But Tom was in the torment of perdition. He glared at those who advised him to desist. Then, in a mixture of stupor and desperation, he placed his hat on the board against a dollar and lost that; then he stripped the coat from his back and lost it, and at last his boots went the same way. When these were gone, having nothing further to wager without consigning himself to aboriginal nakedness, he sat in a kind of daze, his eyes looking swollen and bloodshot with excitement.

"Come, Dave," said Lockwood, "give him back his clothes. You've won enough without taking the clothes off his back."

"That's all you know about it," said Dave, who noted every token of Tom's suffering as an additional element in his triumph. "That may be your Illinois way, but that isn't the way we play in New Orleans. Winnings is winnings where I learnt the game." And he proceeded to lay Tom's things in a neat pile convenient for transportation.

"Aw! come now, Dave," said one and another, "'t a'n't the fair thing to send a fellow home to his folks barefooted and in his shirt-sleeves."

But Dave smiled in supercilious contempt at this provincial view of things, and cited the usages of the superior circles to which he had gained admission.

Lockwood at length lent Tom the money to redeem his garments, and the necessity which obliged him to borrow from the man who had got him into the scrape was the bitterest of all the bitter elements in Tom's defeat. He went out into the fresh air and walked home mechanically. His dashing, headlong ways had already partly alienated his uncle, and the only hope of Tom's retaining his assistance long enough to complete his law studies lay in the chance that his relative might fail to hear of this last escapade. It was clear to Tom without much canvassing of the question that he could not borrow from him the money to replace what he had gotten from Lockwood to redeem his clothes. He entered the garden by the back gate, climbed up to the roof of the wood-shed by means of a partition fence, and thence managed to pull himself into the window of his own chamber as stealthily as possible, that his uncle's family might not know that he had come home at half-past twelve. He stood a long while in the breeze at the open window watching the shadows of clouds drift over the moonlit prairie, which stretched away like a shoreless sea from the back of his uncle's house. He could not endure to bring his thoughts all at once to bear on his affairs; he stood there uneasily and watched these flitting black shadows come and go, and he gnashed his teeth with vexation whenever a full sense of his present misery and his future perplexities drifted over him.

He shut the window and went to bed at last, and by the time daylight arrived he had turned over every conceivable expedient. There was nothing for him but to accept the most disagreeable of all of them. He would have to draw on the slender purse of his mother and Barbara, for Lockwood's was a debt that might not be put off, and he could see no present means of earning money. He purposed to make some excuse to go home again on Saturday. It would be dreadful to meet Barbara's reproaches, and to see his mother's troubled face. How often he had planned to be the support of these two, but he seemed doomed to be only a burden; he had dreamed of being a source of pride to them, but again and again he had brought them mortification. Had he been less generous or more callous he would not have minded it so much. But as it was, his intolerable misery drove him to castle-building. He comforted himself with the reflection that he could make it all right with the folks at home when once he should get into practice. Barbara should have an easier time then. How often had he drawn drafts on the imaginary future for consolation!

III
PAYING THE FIDDLER

"You didn't mean no harm, Tommy," said Mrs. Grayson, "I know you didn't." She was fumbling in the drawer of a clothes-press, built by the side of the chimney in the sitting-room of the Grayson farm-house in Hubbard township. She kept her money in this drawer concealed under a collection of miscellaneous articles.

Tom sat looking out of the window. Ever since his gambling scrape he had imagined his mother's plaintive voice excusing him in this way. It was not the first time that he had had to be pulled out of disasters produced by his own rashness, and it seemed such an unmanly thing for him to come home with his troubles; but he must pay Lockwood quickly, lest any imprudent word of that not very friendly friend should reach his uncle's ears. Nothing but the fear of bringing on them greater evil could have scourged him into facing his mother and sister with the story of his gambling. Once in their presence, his wretched face had made it evident that he was in one of those tight places which were ever recurring in his life. He made a clean breast of it; your dashing dare-devil fellow has less temptation to lie than the rest of us. And now he had told it all, – he made it a sort of atonement to keep back nothing, – and he sat there looking out of the window at the steady dropping of a summer rain which had pelted him ever since he had set out from Moscow. He looked into the rain and listened to the quivering voice of his disappointed mother as she rummaged her drawer to take enough to meet his debt from the dollars accumulated by her own and Barbara's toil and management – dollars put by as a sinking fund to clear the farm of debt. But most of all he dreaded the time when Barbara should speak. She sat at the other window of the room with her face bent down over her sewing, which was pinned to her dress at the knee. She had listened to his story, but she had not uttered a word, and her silence filled him with foreboding. Tom watched the flock of bedraggled and down-hearted chickens creeping about under the eaves of the porch to escape the rain, and wondered whether it would not be better to kill himself to get rid of himself. His mother fumbled long and irresolutely in the drawer, looking up to talk every now and then, mostly in order to delay as long as possible the painful parting with her savings.

"I know you didn't mean no harm, Tommy; I know you didn't; but it's awful hard on Barb'ry an' me, partin' with this money. Dave Sovine's a wicked wretch to bring such trouble on two women like us, that's had such a hard time to git on, an' nobody left to work the place. Out uv six children, you an' Barb'ry's all that's left alive. It's hard on a woman to be left without her husband, an' all but the two youngest children dead."

Here she stopped ransacking the drawer to wipe her eyes. She gave way to her grief the more easily because she still lacked resolution to devote her earnings to filling up the gap made by Tom's prodigality. And in every trouble her mind reverted involuntarily to the greater tribulations of her life; all rills of disappointment and all rivers of grief led down to this great sea of sorrow.

"You're the only two't's left, you two. Ef you'd just keep out uv bad comp'ny, Tommy. But," she said, recovering herself, "I know you're feelin' awful bad, an' you're a good boy only you're so keerless an' ventersome. You didn't mean no harm, an' you won't do it no more, I know you won't."

By this time Mrs. Grayson's trembling hands, on whose hardened palms and slightly distorted fingers one might have read the history of a lifetime of work and hardship, had drawn out a cotton handkerchief in which were tied up thirty great round cumbersome Spanish and Mexican dollars, with some smaller silver. This she took to a table, where she proceeded slowly to count out for Tom the exact amount he had borrowed to redeem his clothes, – not a fi'-penny bit more did she spare him.

At this point Barbara began to speak. She raised her face from her work and drew her dark eyes to a sharp focus, as she always did when she was much in earnest.

"It don't matter much about us, Tom," she said, despondently. "Women are made to give up for men, I suppose. I've made up my mind a'ready to quit the school over at Timber Creek, though I do hate to."

"Yes," said her mother, "an' it's too bad, fer you did like that new-fangled study of algebray, though I can't see the good of it."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings," Barbara went on, "but maybe it'll do you good, Tom, to remember that I've got to give up the school, and it's my very last chance, and I've got to spin and knit enough this winter to make up the money you've thrown away in one night. You wouldn't make us trouble a-purpose for anything, – I know that. And, any way, we don't care much about ourselves; it don't matter about us. But we do care about you. What'll happen if you go on in this heels-over-head way? Uncle Tom'll never stand it, you know, and your only chance'll be gone. That's what'll hurt us all 'round – to give up all for you, and then you make a mess of it – in spite of all we've done."

"You're awful hard on me, Barb," said Tom, writhing a little in his chair. "I wish I'd made an end of myself, as I thought of doing, when I was done playing that night."

"There you are again," said Barbara, "without ever stopping to think. I suppose you think it would have made mother and me feel better about it, for you to kill yourself!"

"Don't be so cuttin' with your tongue, Barb'ry," said her mother, "we can stand it, and poor Tom didn't mean to do it."

"Pshaw!" said Barbara, giving herself a shake of impatience, "what a baby excuse that is for a grown-up man like Tom! Tom's no fool if he would only think; but he'll certainly spoil everything before he comes to his senses, and then we'll all be here in the mud together; – the family'll be disgraced, and there'll be no chance of Tom's getting on. What makes me mad is that Tom'll sit there and let you excuse him by saying that he didn't *mean* any harm, and then he'll be just as gay as ever by day after to-morrow, and just as ready to run into some new scrape."

"Go on, Barb, that's hitting the sore spot," said Tom, leaning his head on his hand. "Maybe if you knew all I've gone through, you'd let up a little." Tom thought of telling her of the good resolutions he had made, but he had done that on other occasions like this, and he knew that his resolutions were by this time at a heavy discount in the home market. He would liked to have told Barbara how he intended to make it all up to them whenever he should get into a lucrative practice, but he dreaded to expose his cherished dreams to the nipping frost of her deadly common sense.

He looked about for a change of subject.

"Where's Bob McCord?" he asked.

"It was a rainy day, and he's gone off to the grocery, I guess," said Mrs. Grayson. "I'm afeerd he won't come home in time to cut us wood to do over Sunday."

Tom had intended to ride back to Moscow and pay his debt this very evening. But here was a chance to show some little gratitude – a chance to make a beginning of amendment. He did not want to stay at home, where the faces of his mother and Barbara and the pinching economy of the household arrangements would reproach him, but for this very reason he would remain until the next day; it would be a sort of penance, and any self-imposed suffering was a relief. The main use that men make of penitence and the wearing of sackcloth is to restore the balance of their complacency. Tom announced his intention to see to the Sunday wood himself; putting his uncle's horse in the stable, he went manfully to chopping wood in the rain and attending to everything else that would serve to make his mother and sister more comfortable.

IV
LOCKWOOD'S PLAN

George Lockwood, being only mildly malicious, felt something akin to compensation at having procured for Tom so severe a loss. But he was before all things a man secretive and calculating; the first thing he did with any circumstance was to take it into his intellectual backroom, where he spent most of his time, and demand what advantage it could give to George Lockwood. When he had let all the boys out of the store at a quarter past twelve, he locked and barred the door. Then he put away the boxes and all other traces of the company, and carried his tallow candle into his rag-carpeted bedroom, which opened from the rear of the store and shared the complicated and characteristic odors of the shop with a dank smell of its own; this last came from a habit Lockwood had when he sprinkled the floor of the store, preparatory to sweeping it, of extending the watering process to the rag-carpet of the bedroom. His mind gave only a passing thought of mild exultation, mingled with an equally mild regret, to poor Tom Grayson's misfortune. He was already inquiring how he might, without his hand appearing in the matter, use the occurrence for his own benefit. Tom had had presence of mind enough left to beg the whole party in the store to say nothing about the affair; but notwithstanding the obligation which the set felt to protect one another from the old fogies of their families, George Lockwood thought the matter would probably get out. He was not the kind of a man to make any bones about letting it out, if he could thereby gain any advantage. The one feeling in his tepid nature that had ever attained sufficient intensity to keep him awake at night was his passion for Rachel Albaugh; and his passion was quite outside of any interest he might have in Rachel's reversionary certainty of the one-half of John Albaugh's lands. This, too, he had calculated, but as a subordinate consideration.

He reflected that Rachel might come to town next Saturday, which was the general trading-day of the country people. If she should come, she would be sure to buy something of him. But how could he tell her of Tom's unlucky gambling? To do so directly would be in opposition to all the habits of his prudent nature. Nor could he bethink him of a ruse that might excuse an indirect allusion to it; and he went to sleep at length without finding a solution of his question.

But chance favored him, for with the Saturday came rain, and Rachel regretfully gave over a proposed visit to the village. But as some of the things wanted were quite indispensable, Ike Albaugh was sent to Moscow, and he came into Wooden & Snyder's store about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. George Lockwood greeted him cordially, and weighed out at his request three pounds of ten-penny nails to finish the new corn-crib, a half-pound of cut tobacco to replenish the senior Albaugh's pipe from time to time, a dollar's worth of sugar, and a quarter of a pound of Epsom salts, – these last two for general use. He also measured off five yards of blue cotton drilling, six feet of half-inch rope for a halter, and two yards of inch-wide ribbon to match a sample sent by Rachel. Then he filled one of the Albaugh jugs with molasses and another with whisky, which last was indispensable in the hay harvest. These articles were charged to John Albaugh's account; he was credited at the same time with the ten pounds of fresh butter that Isaac had brought. George Lockwood also wrapped up a paper of "candy kisses," as they were called, which he charged Ike to give to Rachel from him, but which he forgot to enter to his own account on the day-book.

"By the way, Ike," he said, "did you know that Dave Sovine got back last week?"

"Yes," said Ike; "I hear the Sovine folks made a turrible hullabaloo over the returned prodigal, – killed the fatted calf, and all that."

"A tough prodigal *he* is!" said Lockwood, with a gentle smile of indifference. "You'd better look out for him."

"Me? Why?" asked Ike. "He never had any grudge ag'inst me, as I know of."

"No," said Lockwood, laughing, "not that. But he's cleaned all the money out of all the boys about town, and he'll be going after you country fellows next, I guess. He's the *darnedest* hand with cards!"

"Well, he won't git a-holt of *me*," said Ike, with boyish exultation. "I don't hardly more 'n know the ace f'um the jack. I never played but on'y just once; two or three games weth one of the harvest hands, four years ago. He was showin' me how, you know, one Sunday in the big hay-mow, an' jus' as I got somethin' 't he called high low jack, the old man took 't into his head to come up the ladder to see what was goin' on. You know father's folks was Dunkers, an' he don't believe in cards. I got high low jack that time, an' I won't fergit it the longest day I live." Ike grinned a little ruefully at the recollection. "Could n' draw on my roundabout fer a week without somebody helpin' me, I was so awful sore betwixt the shoulders. Not any more fer me, thank you!"

"It'u'd be good for some other young fellows I know, if they'd had some of the same liniment," said Lockwood, beginning to see his way clear, and speaking in a languid tone with his teeth half closed. "Blam'd 'f I didn't see Sovine, a-settin' right there on that kag of sixp'ny nails the other night, win all a fellow's money, and then his handkerchief and his knife. The fellow – you know him well – got so excited that he put up his hat and his coat and his boots, an' Dave took 'em all. He's got some cheatin' trick ur 'nother, but I stood right over 'im an' I can't quite make it out yet. I tried to coax 'im to give back the hat an' coat an' boots; but no, sir, he's a regular black-leg. He wouldn't give up a thing till I lent the other fellow as much money as he'd staked ag'inst them."

"Who wuz the other fellow?" asked Ike Albaugh, with lively curiosity.

"Oh! I promised not to tell"; but as Lockwood said this he made an upward motion with his pointed thumb, and turned his eyes towards the office overhead.

"W'y, not Tom?" asked Ike, in an excited whisper.

"Don't you say anything about it," said George, looking serious. "He don't want his uncle's folks to know anything about it. And besides, I haven't mentioned any name, you know"; and he fell into a playful little titter between his closed teeth, as he shook his head secretively, and turned away to attend to a woman who, in spite of the rain, had brought on horseback a large "feed-basket" full of eggs, and three pairs of blue stockings of her own knitting, which she wished to exchange for a calico dress-pattern and some other things.

But Lockwood turned to call after the departing youth: "You won't mention that to anybody, will you, Ike?"

"To b' shore not," said Ike, as he went out of the door thinking how much it would interest Rachel.

Ike Albaugh was too young and too light-hearted to be troubled with forebodings. Rachel might marry anybody she pleased "f'r all of him." It was her business, and she was of age, he reflected, and he wasn't her "gardeen." At most, if it belonged to anybody to interfere, "it was the ole man's lookout." But the story of Tom Grayson's losing all his money, and even part of his clothes, was something interesting to tell, and it did not often happen to the young man to have the first of a bit of news. A farm-house on the edge of an unsettled prairie is a dull place, where all things have a monotonous, diurnal revolution and a larger annual repetition; any event with a parabolic or hyperbolic orbit which intrudes into this system is a godsend; even the most transient shooting-star of gossip is a relief. But this would be no momentary meteor, and Isaac saw in the newly acquired information something to "tease Rache with," and teasing one's sister is always lawful sport. He owed her some good-natured grudges; here was one chance to be even with her.

Ike got home at half-past six, and Rachel had to spread for him a cold supper, chiefly of corn-bread and milk. He gave her the ribbon and the little package of square candy kisses from Lockwood. Rachel sat down at the table opposite her hungry brother, and, after giving him a part of the sweets, she amused herself with unfolding the papers that inclosed each little square of candy and reading the couplets of honeyed doggerel wrapped within.

"Did you hear anything of Tom?" Rachel asked.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Oh! I promised not to say anything about it."

"You needn't be afraid of making me jealous," said the sister, with a good-natured, half-defiant setting of her head on one side.

"Jealous? No, it's not anything like that. You ain't good at guessin', Sis; girls never air."

"Not even Ginnie Miller," said Rachel. She usually met Ike's hackneyed allusions to the inferiority of girls by some word about Ginnie. It was plain her brother was in a teasing mood, and that her baffled curiosity would not find satisfaction by coaxing. She knew well enough that Ike was not such a fool as to keep an interesting secret long enough for it to grow stale and unmarketable on his hands.

"Let it go, – I don't care," she said, as she got up and moved about the kitchen.

"You would, if you knew," said Ike.

"But I don't, and so there's an end of it"; and she began to hum a sentimental song of the languishing sort so much in vogue in that day. The melancholy refrain, which formed the greater part of this one, ran:

"Long, long ago, long ago."

It is one of the paradoxes of human nature that young women with all the world before them delight in singing retrospective melodies about an auld-lang-syne concerning which, in the very nature of the case, they cannot well know anything, but in regard to which they seem to entertain sentiments so distressful.

"It wasn't so very long ago, nuther," said Ike, whose dialect was always intensified when there were harvest hands on the place.

"What wasn't?" said Rachel, with her back to him.

"Why, Tom's scrape, of course."

"Was it a very bad one? Did he get took up?" Rachel's face was still averted, but Ike noted with pleasure that her voice showed a keen interest in his news.

"Oh, no, 't's not him that ought to be took up; it's Dave Sovine."

Rachel cleared her throat and waited a few seconds before speaking again.

"Did Dave hurt Tom much?" she asked, groping after the facts among the various conjectures that suggested themselves.

"Well, yes," said Ike, with a broad grin of delight at his sister's wide guessing; but by this time he was pretty well exhausted by the strain put upon his feeble secretiveness. "Yes, hurt him? I sh'd say so!" he went on. "Hurts like blazes to have a black-leg like Dave win all yer money an' yer knife, 'an yer hankercher, an' yer hat an' coat an' boots in the bargain. But you mus'n't say anything about it, Sis. It's a dead secret."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody," said Ike, feeling some compunction that he had gone so far. "I just heard it."

"Who'd you hear it from?"

"George Lockwood kind uh let 't out without 'xactly sayin' 't wuz Tom. But he didn't deny it *wuz* Tom."

Having thus relieved himself from the uncomfortable pressure of his secret, Ike got up and went out whistling, leaving Rachel to think the matter over. It was not the moral aspect of the question that presented itself to her. If Tom had beaten Sovine she would not have cared. It was Tom's cleverness as well as his buoyant spirit that had touched her, and now her hero had played the fool. She had the wariness of one who had known many lovers; her wit was not profound, and she saw rather than contrived the course most natural to one of her prudent and ease-loving temperament; she would hold Tom in check, and postpone the disagreeable necessity for final decision.

V
THE MITTEN

Next to Tom's foreboding about his uncle was the dread of the effect of his bad conduct on Rachel. On that rainy Saturday afternoon he thought much about the possibility of making shipwreck with Rachel; and this led him to remember with a suspicion, foreign to his temper, the part that Lockwood had taken in his disgrace. By degrees he transferred much of his indignation from Sovine to George Lockwood. He resolved to see Rachel on his way back to town, and if possible by a frank confession to her to forestall and break the force of any reports that might get abroad. The bold course was always the easiest to one of so much propulsiveness. He remembered that there was a "singin'," as it was called in the country, held every Sunday afternoon in the Timber Creek school-house, half-way between his mother's house and the Albaugh's. This weekly singing-school was attended by most of the young people of the neighborhood, and by Rachel Albaugh among the rest. Tom planned to stop, as though by chance, at the gathering and ride home with the ever adorable Rachel.

When Tom reached the school-house, Bryant, the peripatetic teacher of vocal music, was standing in front of his class and leading them by beating time with his rawhide riding-whip. Esteeming himself a leader in the musical world, he was not restricted to the methods used by musicians of greater renown. It is easy for ignorance to make innovation, – the America of a half century ago was seriously thinking of revising everything except the moral law. While Noah Webster in Connecticut was proposing single-handed to work over the English tongue so as to render it suitable to the wants of a self-complacent young nation, other reformers as far west as St. Louis were engaged in improving the world's system of musical notation. Of the new method Bryant was an ardent propagator; he made much of the fact that he was a musical new light, and taught the "square notes," a system in which the relative pitch was not only indicated by the position of the notes upon the clef, but also by their characteristic shapes. Any simpleton could here tell "do" from "me" at sight.

In the "Missouri Harmonist" the lines and spaces were decorated with quavers and semi-quavers whose heads were circles, squares, and triangles; Old Hundred becoming a solemn procession of one-legged and no-legged geometric figures. But Bryant understood his business too well to confine his Sunday classes of young people to Sunday tunes. When Tom, after tying his horse to the inner corner of a rail-fence, pushed back the school-house door, creaking on its wooden hinges, the four divisions of the class were chasing one another through a "round," the words of which ran:

"Now, Lawrence, take your bag,
And go right straight to mill,
And see, m – y b – o – y,
That not a bit you spill!"

This kind of music was naturally popular. Such a service relieves the tedium of a Sunday afternoon, and has something of the charm a dog finds in pursuing his own tail.

Some of the members of the class turned their heads and their vocal mouths towards the door when Tom came in, but in the midst of this jangle of voices singing different portions of the same air most of them had all they could do to keep their time by waving their heads or thumping their toes on the puncheon floor, while they alternately looked at their books and at Bryant, who thrashed away with his whip, his lips seeming to say, though the words were inaudible in the general din:

"Up, down, right, left, up," as he perpetually made right angles in the air. Rachel was in the act of drawing the word "boy" to the full length of a long note with a hold after it, but she looked up long enough to recognize the new arrival; then she dropped her eyes to the book again and gave the most severe attention to Bryant and the square notes thereafter, not once looking at Tom to the end. From this unwonted absorption in her music, Tom inferred that Rachel had somehow heard of his misconduct and was offended. But her charms enchanted him more than ever now that they were receding from him, and with a characteristic resolution he determined not to give her up without a sharp endeavor to regain his lost ground.

When the "singing" "let out," Tom availed himself of the first moment of confusion, while Rachel stood apart, to ask permission to go home with her, in the well-worn formula which was the only polite and proper word to use for the purpose; for it is strange how rigidly certain exact forms were adhered to among people where intercourse was for the most part familiar and unconventional.

"May I see you safe home?" he asked, as he had often asked before, but never before with trepidation.

"No," said Rachel, with an evident effort, and without looking at Tom's face.

Such an answer is technically known as "the sack" and "the mitten," though it would take a more inventive antiquary than I to tell how it got these epithets. But it was one of the points on which the rural etiquette of that day was rigorous and inflexible, that such a refusal closed the conversation and annihilated the beau without allowing him to demand any explanations or to make any further advances at the time. Tom was not of the sort easily snuffed out. He had to ride past Rachel's house, and it would be an addition to his disappointment that everybody would see his discomfiture. So he answered.

"Well, I'll lead up your horse for you anyhow," and he went out before she could make up her mind to refuse him, and brought the sorrel filly alongside a tree-stump left standing in front of the school-house for a horse-block. The rest had by this time either mounted and gone, or were walking away afoot. Rachel felt a secret admiration for his audacity as she sprang into her saddle, while Tom held her bridle and adjusted the stirrup to her foot.

"What have I done, Rachel?"

"You know, well enough." Her voice was low and tremulous. She had dismissed other favorites, but never before had she found in herself so much reluctance.

"Do you mean my gambling with Dave Sovine?" said Tom, driving, as usual, point-blank at the very center of things.

"Yes."

"Who told you?" He still held on to her bridle-rein with his left hand, – somewhat as a highwayman does in romances.

"Oh! I guess everybody knows. Ike heard it yesterday, from George Lockwood or somebody."

"It was Lockwood got me into it," said Tom, shutting his teeth hard. "If you'd let me go home with you, I could explain things a little."

But those who are enervated by the balmy climate of flattery naturally dread a stiff breeze of ridicule. Rachel Albaugh did not like to bear any share of the odium that must come on Tom when his recklessness, and, above all, his bad luck, should become known. She drew the rein that Tom held, until he felt obliged to let it go, and said "No."

"I have got what I needed," said Tom, making the best of his defeat.

"What?" asked Rachel.

"Oh! one mitten isn't of any use alone; you've given me a pair of them."

Tom felt now the exhilaration of desperation. He gayly mounted his horse, and bade Rachel a cheerful good-bye as he galloped past her; then, when he had overtaken a group of those ahead of Rachel, he reined up and turned in the saddle, leaning his left hand on the croup, while he joked and bantered with one and another. Then he put his horse into a gallop again.

When he was well out of hearing, Henry Miller, who was one of the party, remarked to his companions that he didn't know what was up, but it seemed to him as though Tom Grayson had got something that looked like a mitten without any thumb. "That's one more that Rache's shed," he remarked. "But when she gets a chance to shed me she'll know it."

As Tom rode onward toward the village his spirits sank again, and he let his horse break down into an easy trot and then into a slow walk.

It was no longer Sovine that he cursed inwardly. George Lockwood, he reflected, had called him away from the Law of Common Carriers to play a little game with Dave, and it was Lockwood who had reported his discomfiture to the Albaughs. He put these things together by multiplication rather than by addition, and concluded that Lockwood, from the first, had planned his ruin in order to destroy his chances with Rachel, which was giving that mediocre young man credit for a depth of forethinking malice he was far from possessing.

Monday morning Tom went into Wooden & Snyder's store on the way to his office above. Lockwood had just finished sweeping out; the sprinkling upon the floor was not dry; it yet showed the figure 8s which he had made in swinging the sprinkler to and fro as he walked. The only persons in the store were two or three villagers; the country people rarely came in on Monday, and never at so early an hour. One frisky young man of a chatty temperament had stopped to exchange the gossip of the morning with George; but meaning to make his halt as slight as possible, he had not gone farther than the threshold, on which he now balanced himself, with his hands in his pockets, talking as he rocked nervously to and fro, like a bird on a waving bough in a wind. Another villager had slouched in to buy a pound of nails, with which to repair the damage done to his garden fence by the pigs during Sunday; but as he was never in a hurry, he stood back and gave the first place to a carpenter who wanted a three-cornered file, and who was in haste to get to his day's work. When Lockwood had attended to the carpenter, Tom beckoned him to the back part of the store, and without saying a word counted out to him the money he had borrowed.

Something in Tom's manner gave Lockwood a sneaking feeling that his own share in this affair was not creditable. His was one of those consciences that take their cue from without. Of independent moral judgment he had little; but he had a vague desire to stand well in the judgment of others, and even to stand well in his own eyes when judged by other people's code. It was this half-evolved conscience that made him wish – what shall I say? – to atone for the harm he had but half-intentionally done to Tom? or, to remove the unfavorable impression that Tom evidently had of his conduct? At any rate, when he had taken his money again, he ventured to offer some confidential advice in a low tone. For your cool man who escapes the pitfalls into which better and cleverer men often go headlong is prone to rank his worldly wisdom, and even his sluggish temperament, among the higher virtues. Some trace of this relative complacency made itself heard perhaps in Lockwood's voice, when he said in an undertone:

"You know, Tom, if I were you, I'd take a solemn oath never to touch a card again. You're too rash."

This good counsel grated on the excited feelings of the recipient of it.

"I don't want any advice from you," said Tom in a bitter monotone.

I have heard it mentioned by an expert that a super-heated steam-boiler is likely to explode with the first escape of steam, the slight relief of pressure precipitating the catastrophe. Tom had resolved not to speak a word to Lockwood, but his wounded and indignant pride had brooded over Rachel's rejection the livelong night, and now the air of patronage in Lockwood drew from him this beginning; then his own words aggravated his feelings, and speech became an involuntary explosion.

"You called me down-stairs," he said, "and got me into this scrape. Do you think I don't know what it was for? You took pains to have word about it go where it would do me the most harm."

"I didn't do any such thing," said Lockwood.

"You did," said Tom. "You told Ike Albaugh Saturday. You're a cold-blooded villain, and if you cross my path again I'll shoot you."

By this time he was talking loud enough for all in the store to hear. The villager who wanted nails had sidled a little closer to the center of the explosion, the young man tilting to and fro on the threshold of the front door had come inside the store and was deeply engaged in studying the familiar collection of pearl buttons, colored sewing-silks, ribbons, and other knick-knacks in the counter showcase, while the carpenter had forgotten his haste, and turning about stood now with his tool-box under his arm, looking at Tom Grayson and Lockwood with blunt curiosity.

"That's a nice way to treat me, I must say," said Lockwood, in a kind of whine of outraged friendship. "You'd 'a' gone home bareheaded and in your shirt-sleeves and your stocking-feet, if 't hadn't 'a' been fer me."

"I'd 'a' gone home with my money in my pocket, if you and Dave Sovine hadn't fixed it up between you to fleece me. I 'xpect you made as much out of it as Dave did. You've got me out 'v your way now. But you look out! Don't you cross my track again, George Lockwood, or I'll kill you!"

In a new country, where life is full of energy and effervescence, it is much easier for an enraged man to talk about killing than it is in a land of soberer thinking and less lawlessness. The animal which we call a young man was not so tame in Illinois two generations ago as it is now. But Tom's threat, having given vent to his wrath, lowered the pressure: by the time he had made this second speech his violence had partly spent itself, and he became conscious that he was heard by the three persons in the store, as well as by Snyder, the junior proprietor, who stood now in the back door. Tom Grayson turned and strode out of the place, dimly aware that he had again run the risk of bringing down the avalanche by his rashness. For if Tom was quickly brought to a white-heat, radiation was equally rapid. Long before noon he saw clearly that he had probably rendered it impossible to keep the secret of his gambling from his uncle. All the town would hear of his quarrel with Lockwood, and all the town would set itself to know to the utmost the incident that was the starting-point of a wrath so violent.

If Tom had not known by many frosty experiences his uncle's unimpressionable temper, he would have followed his instinct and gone directly to him with a frank confession. But there was nothing to be gained by such a course with such a man.

VI
UNCLE AND NEPHEW

Thomas Grayson the elder was one of those men who contrive to play an important part in a community without having any specific vocation. He had a warehouse in which space was sometimes let for the storage of other people's goods, but which also served to hold country produce whenever, in view of a probable rise in the market, he chose to enter the field as a cash buyer in competition with the "storekeepers," who bought only in exchange for goods. Sometimes, in the fall and the winter, he would purchase hogs and cattle from the farmers and have them driven to the most promising market. He also served the purpose of a storage reservoir in the village trade; for he always had money or credit, and whenever a house, or a horse, or a mortgage, or a saw-mill, or a lot of timber, or a farm, or a stock of goods was put on the market at forced sale, Grayson the elder could be counted on to buy it if no better purchaser were to be found. He had no definite place of business; he was generally to be found about the street, ready to buy or sell, or to exchange one thing for another, whenever there was a chance to make a profit.

He had married late; and even in marrying he took care to make a prudent investment. His wife brought a considerable addition to his estate and no unduly expensive habits. Like her husband, she was of a thrifty disposition and plain in her tastes. The temptations to a degree of ostentation are stronger in a village than in a city, but Mrs. Grayson was not moved by them; she lent herself to her husband's ambition to accumulate. Not that the Graysons were without pride; they thought, indeed, a good deal of their standing among their neighbors. But it was gratifying to them to know that the village accounted Grayson a good deal better off than some who indulged in a larger display. The taking of Tom had been one of those economic combinations which men like Grayson are fond of making. He knew that his neighbors thought he ought to do something for his brother's family. To pay the debt on the farm would be the simplest way of doing this, but it would be a dead deduction from the ever-increasing total of his assets. When, however, Barbara had come to him with a direct suggestion that he should help her promising brother to a profession, the uncle saw a chance to discharge the obligation which the vicarious sentiment of his neighbors and the censure of his own conscience imposed on him, and to do it with advantage to himself. He needed somebody "to do choores" at his house; the wood had to be sawed, the cow had to be milked, the horse must be fed, and the garden attended to. Like most other villagers, Grayson had been wont to look after such things himself, but as his wealth and his affairs increased, he had found the chores a burden on his time and some detraction from his dignity. So he, therefore, took his namesake into his house and sent him to the village school for three years, and then put him into the office of Lawyer Blackman, to whom he was wont to intrust his conveyancing and law business. This law business entailed a considerable expense, and Thomas Grayson the elder may have seen more than a present advantage in having his nephew take up the profession under his protection. But the young man's unsteadiness, late hours, and impulsive rashness had naturally been very grievous to a cool-headed speculator who never in his life had suffered an impulse or a sentiment to obstruct his enterprises.

Of domestic life there was none in the house of Thomas Grayson, unless one should give that name to sleeping and waking, cooking and eating, cleaning the house and casting up accounts. With his wife Grayson talked about the diverse speculations he had in hand or in prospect, and canvassed his neighbors chiefly on the business side of their lives, pleasing his pride of superior sagacity in pointing out the instances in which they had failed to accomplish their ends from apathy or sheer blundering. The husband and wife had no general interest in anything; no playful banter, no interesting book, no social assemblage or cheerful game ever ameliorated the austerity of their lives. The one thread of sentiment woven into their stone-colored existence was a passionate fondness for their only child

Janet, a little thing five years old when Tom came into the house to do chores and go to school, – a child of seven now that Tom was drifting into trouble that threatened to end his professional career before it had been begun. Janet was vivacious and interesting rather than pretty, though her mass of dark hair, contrasting with a fair skin and blue eyes, made her appearance noticeable. Strict in their dealings with themselves and severe with others, Janet's father and mother did not know how to refuse her anything; she had grown up willful and a little overbearing; but she was one of those children of abundant imagination and emotion that sometimes, as by a freak of nature, are born to commonplace parents. Those who knew her were prone to say that "the child must take back"; for people had observed this phenomenon of inheritance from remote ancestors and given it a name long before learned men discovered it and labeled it atavism.

A fellow like Tom, full of all sorts of impetuosities, could not help being in pretty constant conflict with his uncle and aunt. On one pretext or another he contrived to escape from the restraints of the house, and to spend his evenings in such society as a village offers. A young man may avoid the temptations of a great city, where there are many circles of association to choose from; but in a village where there is but one group, and where all the youth are nearly on a level, demoralization is easier. Tom had a country boy's appetite for companionship and excitement; he had no end of buoyant spirits and cordial friendliness; and he was a good teller of amusing stories, – so that he easily came to be a leader in all the frolics and freaks of the town. His uncle administered some severe rebukes and threatened graver consequences; but rebukes and threats served only to add the spice of peril to Tom's adventures.

The austerity of acquisitiveness is more tedious to others, perhaps, than the austerity of religious conviction. To a child like Janet, endowed with passion and imagination, the grave monotony of the Grayson household was almost unbearable. From the moment of Tom's coming she had clung to him, rejoicing in his boyish spirits, and listening eagerly to his fund of stories, which were partly made up for her amusement, and partly drawn from romances which he had somewhat surreptitiously read. When he was away, Janet watched for his return; she romped with him in defiance of the stiff proprieties of the house, and she followed him at his chores. She cherished a high admiration for his daring and rebellious spirit, often regretting that she was not a boy: it would be fine to climb out of a bedroom window at night to get away to some forbidden diversion! On the other hand, the unselfish devotion of Tom to the child was in strange contrast with the headlong willfulness of his character. He made toys and planned surprises for her, and he was always ready to give up his time to her pleasure.

It is hardly likely that Grayson would have borne with his nephew a single year if it had not been for Janet's attachment to him. More than once, when his patience was clean tired out, he said to his wife something to this effect:

"I think, Charlotte, I'll have to send Tom back to his mother. He gets nothing but mischief here in town, and he worries me to death."

To which Mrs. Grayson would reply: "Just think of Janet. I'm afraid she'd pine away if Tom was sent off. The boy is kind to her, and I'm sure that's one good thing about him."

This consideration had always settled the question; for the two main purposes of life with Grayson and his wife were to accumulate property and to gratify every wish of their child. Having only one sentiment, it had acquired a tremendous force.

VII
LOCKWOOD'S REVENGE

When Tom, after his violent speech on that unlucky Monday morning, had gone out of Wooden & Snyder's store, George Lockwood turned to Snyder, the junior partner, and said, with his face a little flushed:

"What a fool that boy is, anyhow! He came in here the other night after the store was shut up and played cards with Dave Sovine till he lost all the money he had. I tried my best to stop him, but I couldn't do it. He went on and bet all the clo'es he could spare and lost 'em. I had to lend him the money to get 'em back. It seems Tom's girl – John Albaugh's daughter – heard of it, and now he will have it that I went in partnership with Sovine to get his money, and that I wanted to get Rachel Albaugh away from 'im."

"You oughtn't to have any card-playing here," said Snyder.

"I told the boys then that if they come in here again they mustn't bring any cards."

"Tom's a fool to threaten you that way. You could bind him over on that, I suppose," said Snyder.

"I s'pose I could," said George.

But he did nothing that day. He prided himself on being a man that a body couldn't run over, but he had his own way of resisting aggression; he was not Esau, but Jacob. He could not storm and threaten like Tom; there was no tempest in him. Cold venom will keep, and Lockwood's resentments did not lose their strength by exposure to the air. The day after Tom's outburst, Lockwood, having taken time to consider the alternatives, suggested to Snyder, that while he wasn't afraid of Tom, there was no knowing what such a hot-head might do. Lockwood professed an unwillingness to bind Tom over to keep the peace, but thought some influence might be brought to bear on him that would serve the purpose. Snyder proposed that Lockwood should go to see Tom's uncle, but George objected. That would only inflame Tom and make matters worse. Perhaps Snyder would see Blackman, so that Lockwood need not appear in the matter? Then Blackman could speak to Grayson the elder, if he thought best.

The calculating temper, and the touch of craftiness, pliancy, and tact in Lockwood served the ends of his employers in many ways, and Snyder was quite willing to put his clerk under obligations of friendship to him. Therefore, when he saw Tom go out of the office, Snyder mounted the stairs and had an interview with Blackman. As the lawyer was intrusted with all the bad debts and pettifogging business of Wooden & Snyder, any suggestion from a member of the firm was certain to receive attention. Snyder told the lawyer that Lockwood didn't want to drag Tom before a squire, and suggested that Blackman could settle it by getting the uncle to give the fellow a good admonition. He offered the suggestion as though it were quite on his own motion, he having overheard Tom's threat. The hand of George Lockwood was concealed; but it was only Lockwood who knew how exceedingly vulnerable Tom's fortunes were on the side of his relations with his uncle. That evening Blackman sat in Grayson's sitting-room. He was a man with grayish hair, of middle height, and rather too lean to fill up his clothes, which hung on his frame rather than fitted it; and if one regarded his face, there seemed too little substance to quite fill out his skin, which was not precisely wrinkled, but rather wilted. Grayson had turned around in his writing-chair and sat with one leg over the arm, but Blackman had probably never lolled in his life: he was possessed by a sort of impotent uneasiness that simulated energy and diligence. He sat, as was his wont, on the front rail of the chair-seat, as though afraid to be comfortable, and he held in his hand a high hat half full of papers, according to the custom of the lawyers of that day, who carried on their heads that part of their business which they could not carry in them. Blackman told the story of Tom's gambling as he had heard it, and of his threatening Lockwood, while the brows of Tom's uncle visibly darkened. Then the lawyer came to what he knew would seem to Grayson the vital point in the matter.

"You know," he said, "if George Lockwood was a-mind to, he could bind Tom to keep the peace; though I don't s'pose Tom meant anything more than brag by talking that way. But it wouldn't be pleasant for you to have Tom hauled up, and to have to go his bail. I told Snyder I thought you could fix it up without going before the squire." Blackman passed his heavily laden hat from his right hand to his left, and then with the right he nervously roached up his stiff, rusty hair, which he habitually kept standing on end. After which he took a red silk handkerchief from his hat and wiped his face, while Grayson got up and walked the floor.

"I shouldn't like to have to go anybody's bail," said the latter after awhile; "it's against my principles to go security. I suppose the best thing would be to send him back to the country to cool off."

Blackman nodded a kind of half assent, but did not venture any further expression of opinion. He rose and deposited his silk handkerchief in a kind of coil on the papers in his hat, and then bent his head forward and downward so as to put on the hat without losing its contents; once it was in place he brought his head to a perpendicular position, so that all the mass of portable law business settled down on the handkerchief, which acted as a cushion between Blackman's affairs and his head.

Tom came in as Blackman went out, and something in the manner of the latter gave him a feeling that he had been the subject of conversation between the lawyer and his uncle. He went directly to his room, and debated within himself whether or not he should go down and interrupt by a frank and full confession the discussion which he thought was probably taking place between Mr. and Mrs. Grayson. But knowing his uncle's power of passive resistance, he debated long – so long that it came to be too late, and he went to bed, resolved to have the first of it with his uncle in the morning.

There was a very serious conference between the two members of the Grayson firm that evening. Mrs. Grayson again presented to her husband the consideration that, if Tom should go away, she didn't see what she was to do with Janet. The child would cry her eyes out, and there'd be no managing her. Grayson sat for some time helpless before this argument.

"I don't see," he said at length, "but we've got to face Janet. We might as well teach her to mind first as last." It was a favorite theory with both of them that some day Janet was to be taught to mind. So long as no attempt was made to fix the day on which the experiment was to begin, the thought pleased them and did no harm. But this proposition to undertake the dreadful task at once was a spurt of courage in Thomas Grayson that surprised his wife.

"Well, Mr. Grayson," she said, with some spirit, "the child's as much yours as she's mine; and if she's to be taught to mind to-morrow, I only hope you'll stay at home and begin."

To this suggestion the husband made no reply. He got up and began to look under the furniture for the boot-jack, according to his custom of pulling off his boots in the sitting-room every night before going to bed.

"You see, Charlotte," he said deprecatingly, when he had fished his boot-jack out from under the bureau, "I don't know what to do. If I keep Tom, Lockwood'll have him before the squire, and I'll have to pay costs and go bail for him."

"I wouldn't do it," said Mrs. Grayson promptly. "We can't afford to have the little we've got put in danger for him. I think you'll have to send him home, and we'll have to get on with Janet. I'm sure we haven't any money to waste. People think we're rich, but we don't feel rich. We're always stinted when we want anything."

The consideration of the risk of the bail settled the matter with both of them. But, like other respectable people, they settled such questions in duplicate. There are two sets of reasons for any course: the one is the real and decisive motive at the bottom; the other is the pretended reason you impose on yourself and fail to impose on your neighbors. The minister accepts the call to a new church with a larger salary; he tells himself that it is on account of opportunities for increased usefulness that he changes. The politician accepts the office he didn't want out of deference to the wishes of importunate friends. A widower marries for the good of his children. These are not hypocrites imposing on their neighbors; that is a hard thing to do, unless the neighbors really wished to be humbugged in the interest of a theory. But we keep complacency whole by little impostures devised for our private benefit. It is pleasant to believe that we are acting from Sunday motives, but we always keep good substantial week-day reasons for actual service. These will bear hard usage without becoming shiny or threadbare, and they are warranted not to lose their colors in the sunshine.

"I'm sure," said Grayson, "Tom gets no good here. If anything will do him any good, it will be sending him to the country to shift for himself. It'll make a man of him, maybe." No better Sunday reason for his action could have been found.

"I think it's your duty to send him home," said his wife, who was more frightened the more she thought of the possible jeopardy of a few hundred dollars from the necessity her husband would be under of going Tom's bail. "A boy like Tom is a great deal better off with his mother," she went on; "and I'm sure we've tried to do what we could for him, and nobody can blame us if he will throw away his chance."

Thus the question was doubly settled; and as by this time Mr. Grayson's boots were off, and he had set them in the corner and pushed the boot-jack into its place under the bureau with his foot, there was no reason why they should not take the candle and retire.

But when morning came Grayson was still loth to face the matter of getting rid of Tom, and especially of contending with Janet. Tom found no chance to talk with him before breakfast, for the uncle did not come out of his bedroom till the coffee was on the table, and he was so silent and constrained that Tom felt his doom in advance. Janet tried to draw her father and then her mother into conversation, but failing, she settled back with the remark, "This is the *crossest* family!" Then she made an attempt on Tom, who began by this time to feel that exhilaration of desperation that was usually the first effect of a catastrophe on his combative spirit, for no man could be more impudent to fate than he. When Janet playfully stole a biscuit from his plate, he pretended to search for it everywhere, and then set in a breakfast-table romp between the two which exasperated the feelings of Grayson and his wife. When they rose from the table the uncle turned severely on his nephew, and said: "Tom – "

But before he could speak a second word, the nephew, putting Janet aside, interrupted him with:

"Uncle, I should like to speak with you alone a minute."

They went into the sitting-room together, and Tom closed the door. Tom was resolved to have the first of it.

"Uncle, I think I had better go home." Tom was looking out of the window as he spoke. "I got into a row last week through George Lockwood, who persuaded me to play cards for money with Dave Sovine. I don't want to get you into any trouble, so I'm off for Hubbard Township, if you don't object. There's no use of crying over spilt milk, and that's all there is about it."

"I'm very sorry, Tom, that you won't pay attention to what I've said to you about card-playing." The elder Grayson had seated himself, while Tom now stood nervously listening to his uncle's voice, which was utterly dry and business-like; there was not the slightest quiver of feeling in it. "I've got on in the world without anybody to help me, but I never let myself play cards, and I've always kept my temper. You never make any money by getting mad, and if you're going to make any money, it's better to have people friendly. Now, I have to stand a good deal of abuse. People try to cheat me, and if I take the law they call me a skinflint; but I shouldn't make a cent more by quarreling, and I might lose something. I can't keep you, and have you go on as you do. I've told you that before. You'd better go home. Town will ruin you. A little hard work in the country'll be better, and you won't be gambling away the last cent you've got with a loafer like Dave Sovine, and then threatening to shoot somebody, as you did young Lockwood day before yesterday. Just think what you are coming to, Tom. I've done my best for you, and you'll never be anything but a gambler and a loafer, I'm afraid."

These hard words sounded harder in the level and self-complacent voice of the senior Grayson, who spoke slowly and with hardly more intensity than there would have been in his depreciation of a horse he was trying to buy. "Just think what you're coming to," he repeated, because he felt that the proper thing to do under the circumstances was to give Tom a good "talking to," and he couldn't think of anything more to say.

"I don't need you to tell me what I'm coming to," replied Tom, tartly; "I'm coming to the plow-handle and the grubbing-hoe. I'm sorry to give you trouble, but what I feel meanest about is mother and poor Barbara. I know what a fool I've been. But I'm no more a gambler and a loafer than you are. It'll take me longer to work into the law by myself, but I'll get there yet, and you'll see it."

This was Tom's only adieu to his uncle, on whom confessions of wrong and expressions of gratitude, had he felt like uttering them, would have been wasted. Tom went to his room, thumping his feet defiantly on the stairs. He made a bundle of his clothes, while his uncle sneaked out of the house to avoid a collision with his little daughter, the only person of whom he was afraid.

Tom told his Aunt Charlotte good-bye with a high head; but when it came to Janet, he put both arms about the child and drew her to him with a fond embrace.

"You shan't go away, Tom," she said, disengaging herself. "What are you going for? Did they say you must?" By "they" Janet meant her parents, whom she regarded as the allied foes of poor Tom. She looked indignantly at her mother, who had turned her back on this scene of parting.

"I'm going to help my mother," said Tom; "she's poor, and I oughtn't to have left her."

He again embraced the child, who began to cry bitterly. "What *shall* I do when you're gone?" she sobbed on his shoulder. "This house won't be fit to live in. *Such a lot of old pokes!*" And she stamped her feet and looked poutingly at her mother.

Tom disengaged himself from her intermittent embraces, and went out with his bundle in his hand.

He went first to the law-office, and sat his bundle on a chair, and addressed himself to Blackman, who had already arrived, and who was apparently much preoccupied with his writing.

"Mr. Blackman, I've made a fool of myself by gambling, and Uncle Tom has concluded I can't stay with him any longer. I don't much wonder at it either. But I do hate to give up the study. Couldn't you give me something to do, so that I could earn my board at your house?"

"No," said the lawyer, looking off horizontally, but not at Tom. "I was just going to tell you I couldn't keep you in the office. You've got altogether too much gunpowder for a lawyer. Better get into the regular army, Tom; that would suit your temper better." Then, after a moment's pause, he added: "I've got young sons, and your example might ruin them if you should come to my house to live." And he leaned forward as though he would resume his writing. These were sound and logical reasons that Blackman gave for not keeping Tom, and the lawyer was sincere as far as he went. But had he discovered by this time that Tom's mind was clearer and more acute than his own, and that if Tom should come to the bar with his uncle's backing he would soon be a formidable rival?

"Besides," resumed the lawyer, as Tom turned reluctantly away, "it's better for you to go to the country. George Lockwood will have you bound over to keep the peace if you stay, and now you're out with your uncle, who's going your bail?"

"Always George Lockwood," Tom thought, as he took up his bundle.

"Good-bye, Mr. Blackman!" Tom's voice was husky now. But when he descended the stairs he went down the village street with a bold front, telling his old cronies good-bye, answering their questions frankly, and braving it out to the last. Put the best face upon it he could, his spirit was bitter, and to a group of old companions who followed him to the "corporation line," at the edge of the village, he said, almost involuntarily:

"George Lockwood got me into this scrape to upset me, and he's purty well done it. If he ever crosses my path, I'm going to get even with him."

Such vague threats do not bind one to any definite execution, and they are a relief to the spirit of an angry man.

Having broken with his uncle, Tom must walk the long ten miles to his mother's farm in Hubbard Township. Before he got there his head was down; the unwonted fatigue of his journey, the bitter sense of defeat, the dark picture his imagination made of his mother's disappointment and of the despair of the ambitious Barbara took all the heart out of him.

When he reached home he strode into the house and sat down without saying a word.

"Has Uncle Tom turned you off?" asked Barbara, faltering a little and putting down her knitting. She had been dreading this end of all her hopes.

"Yes," said Tom; "and I wish to the Lord I was dead and done for." And he leaned his head on his left hand.

"Oh, my poor boy!" began Mrs. Grayson, "and you didn't mean no harm neither. And you're the only boy I've got, too. All the rest dead and gone. They's no end of troubles in this world!"

Tom's shoulders were heaving with feeling. After a moment or two of silence, Barbara went over and put her hand on him.

"Pshaw, Tom! what's the use of giving up? You're a splendid fellow in spite of all, and you'll make your way yet. You only needed a settler, and now you've got it. It won't look so bad by next week. You'll take a school next winter, and after that go back to study law again."

Then she quietly went to the clothes-press by the chimney and got out a hank of yarn, and said to Tom:

"Here, hold this while I wind it. I was just wishing you were here when I saw my ball giving out. That's like you used to do for me. Don't you remember? Mother, get Tom something to eat; he's tired and hungry, I expect."

And choking down the disappointment which involved more than Tom suspected, the keen, black-eyed girl wound her yarn and made an effort to chat with Tom as though he had come home on a visit.

As the last strands were wound on the ball, Tom looked at his sister and said:

"Barbara, you're one of a thousand. But I know this thing's thundering hard on you. I'm going to try to make it up to you from this time. I wish to goodness I had half of your steady sense."

VIII
BARBARA'S PRIVATE AFFAIRS

From childhood Barbara's ambition had centered in Tom; it was her plan that the clever brother should give standing to the family by his success in life. If Tom could only be persuaded to be steady, he might come to be a great man. A great man, in her thinking, was a member of the State legislature, or a circuit judge, for example: to her provincial imagination the heights above these were hazy and almost inaccessible. The scheme of a professional career for Tom had been her own, in conception and management; for though her brother was nearly two years her senior, she, being prudent and forecasting, had always played the part of an elder. Tom's undeniable "brightness" was a great source of pride to her. In spite of his heedless collisions with the masters, he was always at the head of his classes; and it seemed to Barbara the most natural thing in the world that she, being a girl, should subordinate herself to the success of a brother so promising. She had left school to devote herself to the house and the cares of the farm, in order that Tom might be educated – in the moderate sense of the word then prevalent. The brother was far from being ungrateful; if he accepted his sister's sacrifices without protest, he repaid her with a demonstrative affection and admiration not often seen in brothers; and there were times when he almost reverenced in her that prudence and practical wisdom in which he found himself deficient.

It was only during this summer that Barbara had been seized with independent aspirations for herself; and perhaps even these were not without some relation to Tom. If Tom should come to be somebody in the county, she would sit in a reflected light as his sister. It became her, therefore, not to neglect entirely her own education. To go to Moscow to a winter school was out of the question. Every nerve was strained to extricate the farm from debt and to give a little help, now and then, to Tom. It chanced, however, that a student from an incipient Western college, intent on getting money to pay his winter's board bills, had that summer opened a "pay school" in the Timber Creek district school-house, which was only two miles from the Grayson farm.

Those who could attend school in the summer were, for the most part, small fry too young to be of much service in the field, and such girls, larger and smaller, as could be spared from home. But the appetite for "schooling" in the new country was always greater than the supply; and when it was reported that a school was "to be took up" in the Timber Creek school-house, by a young man who had not only "ciphered plumb through the Rule of Three," but had even begun to penetrate the far-away mysteries of Latin and algebra, it came to pass that several young men and young women, living beyond the district limits, subscribed to the school, that they might attend it, even if only irregularly; – not that any of the pupils dreamed of attacking the Latin, but a teacher who had attained this Ultima Thule of human learning was supposed to know well all that lay on the hither side of it. The terms of a "pay school," in that day, were low enough, – a dollar and twenty-five cents was the teacher's charge for each pupil for thirteen weeks; but the new schoolmaster had walked from home to avoid traveling expenses, the log school-house cost him no rent, and he had stipulated that he should "board 'round" in the families of his patrons, so that the money he received from twenty pupils was clear profit, and at the price of living in those primitive times would pay his board at college for six months.

Barbara, for one, had resolved to treat herself to a dollar and a quarter's worth of additional learning. The Timber Creek school-house was on the road leading to the village of Moscow; she could therefore catch a ride, now and then, on the wagon of some farmer bound to the village, by mounting on top of a load of wood, hay, or potatoes; and often she got a lift in the evening in a neighbor's empty wagon rattling homeward from town, or for a part of the way by sitting in the tail of some ox-cart plying between forest and prairie; but more frequently she had to walk both in going and coming, besides working early and late at her household duties.

Hiram Mason was the name of the new teacher whom the pupils found behind the master's desk on the first day of school. He was the son of a minister who had come out from New England with the laudable intention of lending a hand in evangelizing this great strapping West, whose vigorous and rather boisterous youth was ever a source of bewilderment, and even a cause of grief, to the minds of well-regulated Down-easters. The evangelists sent out aimed at the impossible, even at the undesirable, in seeking to reproduce a New England in communities born under a different star. Perhaps it was this peninsular trait of mind that prevented the self-denying missionaries from making any considerable impression on the country south of the belt peopled by the current of migration from New England. The civilization of the broad, wedge-shaped region on the north side of the Ohio River, which was settled by Southern and Middle State people, and which is the great land of the Indian corn, has been evolved out of the healthier elements of its own native constitution. But it was indebted to New England, in the time of its need, for many teachers of arithmetic and grammar, as well as for the less-admirable but never-to-be-forgotten clock-peddlers and tin-peddlers from Connecticut, who also taught the rustics of southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois things they had never dreamed of before, and took high pay for the instruction. Young Mason, though he had mostly grown up in the new country, and would have scorned the name of Yankee, had got from his father that almost superstitious faith in the efficacy of knowledge which, in the North-eastern States, has been handed down from generation to generation, and which has produced much learning and some pedantry. Mason was of middle stature, good breadth of shoulder, prominent, broad forehead, and brows that overhung his eyes, but were rather high above them. He had a well-set chin and a solid jaw; his mouth was too large to be handsome and was firmly closed; his gait was strong, straightforward, resolute, and unhurried. There were little touches of eccentricity in him: he had a way of looking at an interlocutor askance, and his habitual expression was one of mingled shyness and self-contained amusement. The religious enthusiasm of his father had been transmuted in him to a general earnestness of character, which was veiled under a keen perception of the droll side of life, derived from a mother of Southern extraction. His early-and-late diligence in study was the wonder of the country, but the tastes and aspirations that impelled him to so much toil rarely found utterance in any confessions, even to his nearest friends. Reserved as he was, the people could never complain that he held himself above them. A new-country youth, the son of a minister on slender pay, Hiram understood how to extend a helping hand, when occasion required, in any work that might be going on. At school, when the young master saw the boys playing at the boisterous and promiscuous "soak about," he would sometimes catch the contagion of the wild fun, and, thrusting his "Livy" into the desk, rush out of the door to mix in the confusion, throwing the yarn ball at one and another with a vigor and an accuracy of aim that doubled the respect of his pupils for him. But when once he had extricated himself from the *mélée*, and had rapped on the door-frame with his ruler, crying, "Books, books!" the boy who a minute before had enjoyed the luxury of giving the master what was known in school-boy lingo as a "sockdolager," delivered full in the back, or even on the side of the head, did not find any encouragement to presume on that experience in school-hours.

The new master's punishments usually had a touch of his drollery in them; he contrived to make the culprit ridiculous, and so to keep the humor of the school on his side. A girl who could not otherwise be cured of munching in school had to stand in front of the master's desk with an apple in her teeth; a boy who was wont to get his sport by pinching his neighbors, and sticking them with pins, was forced to make no end of amusement for the school in his turn, by standing on the hearth with a cleft stick pinching his nose out of shape. It was soon concluded that there was no fun in "fooling" with a master who was sure to turn the joke on the offender.

The older pupils who occupied the "writing bench," in front of a continuous shelf-like desk fixed along the wall, spent much of their time in smuggling from one to another fervid little love notes, which, for disguise, were folded like the "thumb-papers" that served to protect their books from the wear and tear of their over-vigorous thumbs, and from soiling. By passing books from one to another, with such innocent-looking square papers in them, a refreshing correspondence was kept up. This exchange of smuggled billets-doux was particularly active when Rachel Albaugh was present. As for the love-letters thus dispatched, they were fearfully monotonous and not worth the pains of capture by a schoolmaster. Some were straightforward and shameless declarations of admiration and affection in prose scrawls, but a very common sort was composed entirely of one or another of those well-worn doggerel couplets that have perhaps done duty since the art of writing became known to the Anglo-Saxons.

"If you love me as I love you,
No knife can cut our love in two,"

was a favorite with the swains of the country school-house; but

"The rose is red, the violet's blue,
Sugar's sweet, and so are you,"

had a molasses-like consistency in its alliterative lines that gave it the preference over all other love poems extant.

Amongst these unblushing scribblers of love doggerel and patient cutters and folders of many sorts of thumb-papers, whose fits of studying, like chills and fever, came on only "by spells," Barbara sat without being one of them. The last chance for education was not to be thrown away; and Mason soon singled out this rather under-sized, sharp-eyed girl, not only as the most industrious and clever of the pupils in the Timber Creek school, but as a person of quite another sort from the rest of them. When he was explaining anything to a group of half-listless scholars, her dark eyes, drawn to beads, almost startled him with their concentrated interest. She could not be taught in any kind of classification with the rest; her rate of progress was too rapid. So finding that Barbara studied all through the recess time, he undertook to give her extra instruction while the others were on the playground. The most agreeable minutes of his day were those in which he unfolded to her the prosaic principles of Vulgar Fractions, of Tare and Tret, and of the Rule of Three. This last was the great and final goal, and it was attained by few of those who attended an intermittent country school in that time. To reach it was to become competent to teach school. Barbara, with the help of the master, who directed her to save time by omitting some of the rubbish in Pike's Arithmetic, was soon in sight of this promised land of the Rule of Three, and it became a question of reviewing the book once more, when she should be through with it, so as to take rank among those who would certainly "do every sum in the book."

"Why not take up algebra?" said the teacher to her, during a long noon recess as they sat side by side at his desk poring over a slate full of figures.

"Do you think I could learn it?" she asked.

"You could learn anything," he said; and the assurance gave Barbara more pleasure than any commendation she had ever received. But she did not know what to reply. To go beyond the arithmetic would be, according to the standard of the country, to have a liberal education, and she was ambitious enough to like that. But where would she get the money to buy a text-book? She didn't wish to confess her scruple of economy. It was not that she was ashamed of her poverty, for poverty might be said to be the prevailing fashion in the Timber Creek country; but it would be bringing to Mason's attention her private affairs, and from that she shrank with an instinct of delicacy for which she could not have given any reason. Yet there sat Mason, leaning back and waiting for her to reply to his question. After a few moments she mustered courage to ask timidly:

"Would the book cost much?"

"I wouldn't buy any book just now," said the master, seeing the drift of her thoughts. He went to one corner of the school-room, and, standing on the bench, pushed aside one of the boards laid loosely over the joists above. It was here, in the dark loft, that he kept the few articles not necessary to his daily existence in boarding 'round. Reaching his hand up above the boards, he found a copy of a school text-book on algebra, and brought it down with him, rapping it against his hand and blowing the dust off it.

"Use that for a while," he said.

"Oh, thank you!" said Barbara, taking hold of the book with a curious sense of reverence, which was greatly increased as she turned the leaves and regarded the symbols, whose nature and use were quite inconceivable to her. Here was a knowledge beyond any that she had ever dreamed of looking into; beyond that of any schoolmaster she had ever known, except Mason. "It looks hard," she said, regarding him.

"Take it home and try it," he replied, as he took up his ruler to call the scholars to books.

A closer companionship now grew up between the master and the pupil. Both of them anticipated with pleasure the coming of recess time, when the new study could be discussed together. Henceforth the boys looked in vain for Mason to take a turn with them in playing soak-about.

To a man of high aims nothing is more delightful than to have a devoted disciple. Even the self-contained Mason could not be quite unmoved in contemplating this young girl, all of whose tastes and ambitions flowed in the same channel with his own, listening to him as to an oracle. If he had not been so firmly fixed in his resolve that he would not allow any woman to engage his affections before he had completed his college course, he might have come to fall in love with her. But all such thoughts he resolutely put aside. Of course, teaching her was a delight; but who could help feeling delight in teaching such a learner? Moreover, he was particularly fond of algebra. But he could hardly lay all of his enjoyment to his liking for algebra, or his pleasure in teaching a quick-witted pupil. He could not make himself believe that it was his enjoyment of algebraic generalizations that made his hand tremble whenever he returned a slate or book to Barbara Grayson.

Barbara, for her part, was too intent on her work to think much about anything else. She had more than once caught sight of the furtive, inquiring glance of her teacher on her face before he could turn his eyes away; she was pleased to note that his voice had a tone in addressing her that it had not when he spoke to the others; and she took pleasure in perceiving that she was beyond question the favorite pupil. But Barbara was averse to building any castles in the air which she had small chance of being able to materialize.

One evening, as she was going briskly toward home, she was overtaken by Mason, who walked with her up hill and down dale the whole long rough new-country road through the woods, carrying her books, and chatting about trivial things as he had never done before. He contrived, half in pleasantry, but quite in earnest, to praise her diligence, and even her mind. She had hardly ever thought of herself as having a mind. That Tom had such a gift she knew, and she understood how important it was to cultivate his abilities. But she was only Tom's sister. It seemed to her a fine thing, however, this having a mind of her own, and she thought a good deal about it afterward.

When Hiram Mason reached the place where Barbara was accustomed to leave the main road, in order to reach her home by a shorter path through a meadow, he got over the fence first and gave her his hand, though he wondered afterward that he had had the courage to do it. Barbara had climbed fences and trees too, for that matter, from her infancy, and she was in the habit of getting over this fence twice a day, without ever dreaming that she needed help. But a change had come over her in this two-miles' walk from school. For the first time, she felt a certain loneliness in her life, and a pleasure in being protected. She let Mason take her hand and help her to the top of the fence, though she could have climbed up much more nimbly if she had had both hands free to hold by. Hiram found it so pleasant helping her up, by holding her hand, that he took both her hands when she was ready to jump down on the meadow side of the fence, and then, by an involuntary impulse he retained her right hand in his left a bare moment longer than was necessary. A little ashamed, not so much of the feeling he had shown as of that he had concealed, he finished his adieux abruptly, and, placing his hands on the top rail, vaulted clean over the fence again into the road. Then he thought of something else that he wanted to say about Barbara's new study of algebra, – something of no consequence at all, except in so far as it served to make Barbara turn and look at him once more. The odd twinkling smile so habitual with him died out of his face, and he looked into hers with an eagerness that made her blush, but did not make her turn away. Blaming himself for what seemed to him imprudence, he left her at last and started back, only stopping on the next high ground to watch her figure as she hurried along through the meadow grass, and across the brook, and then up the slope toward the house.

There were several other evenings not very different from this one. The master would wait until all the pupils had gone, and then overtake Barbara. He solaced his conscience by carrying a book in his pocket, so as to study on the way back; but he found a strange wandering of the mind in his endeavors to read a dead language after a walk with Barbara. He still held to his resolution, or to what was left of his resolution, not to entangle himself with an early engagement. What visions he indulged in, of projects to be carried out in a very short time after his graduation, belong to the secrets of his own imagination; all his follies shall not be laid bare here. But to keep from committing himself too far, he drew the line at the boundary of Mrs. Grayson's farm, – the meadow fence. He gave himself a little grace, and drew the line on the inside of the fence. He was firmly resolved never to go quite home with his pupil, and never to call at her house. So long as he stopped at the fence, or within ten, or say twenty, or perhaps thirty, feet of it he felt reasonably safe. But he could not, in common civility, turn back until he had helped her to surmount this eight-rail fence; and indeed it was the great treat to which he always looked forward. There was a sort of permissible intimacy in such an attention. He guarded himself, however, against going beyond the limits of civility – of kindly politeness – of polite friendship; that was the precise phrase he hit on at last. But good resolutions often come to naught because of its being so very difficult to reckon beforehand with the involuntary and the uncontrollable. The goodman of the house never knows at what moment the thief will surprise him. One evening Mason had taken especial pains to talk on only the most innocent and indifferent subjects, such as algebra. On this theme he was the schoolmaster, and he felt particularly secure against any expression of feeling, for *x*, *y*, and *z*

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