EVANS LARRY

ONCE TO EVERY MAN

Larry Evans

Once to Every Man

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24713489
Once to Every Man:

Содержание

Larry Evans
Once to Every Man

CHAPTER I

The most remarkable thing about the boy was his eyes–that is, if any man with his spread of shoulder and masculine grace of flat muscled hips could be spoken of any longer as a boy, merely because his years happened to number twenty-four.

They, however–the eyes–were gray; not a too light, off-color, gleaming gray, but more the tone of slate, deep when one chanced to find oneself peering deep into them. And they were old. Any spontaneity of youth which might have flashed from them at one time had faded entirely and left a sort of wistful sophistry behind, an almost plaintive hunger which made the pity of his shoulder-stoop–still mercifully only a prophecy of what the next twenty years of toil might leave it–an even more pitiful thing. His sheer bigness should have been still unspoiled; instead it was already beginning to lose its rebound; it was growing imperceptibly slack, like the springy stride of a colt put too soon to heavy harness.

Late afternoon was giving way to nightfall–a long shadowed twilight that was heavy with the scent of spring in spite of the scattered patches of wet snow that still lurked in the swamp

holes. As the boy stood, facing toward the east and the town that sprawled in the hollow, his great, shoulder-heavy body loomed almost like a painted figure against the cool red background of the horizon. Even in spite of the pike-pole which he grasped in one hand and the vividly checkered blanket coat that wrapped him, the illusion was undeniable. Stripped of them and equipped instead with a high steeple-crowned hat and wide buckled shoes, his long half-saddened face and lean body might have been a composite of all the Puritan fathers who had wrestled with the rock-strewn acres behind him, two hundred years and more before.

Denny Bolton was waiting–Young Denny, the townsfolk preferred to call him, to distinguish him from Old Denny of the former generation. Somehow, although he had never mentioned it to anybody, it seemed to him that he had always been waiting for something–he hardly knew just what it was himself–just something that was drearily slow in the coming.

His home, the farmhouse of the Boltons, for which the straggling village of Boltonwood below had been named, was nearest of all the outlying places on the post route, yet last of all to be served, for when the rural delivery had been established they had begun delivery at the other end of the circle. Young Denny had never been able to understand quite why it was so–but it was, for all that. And with the minister, too, it happened, although not so often, for the minister of Boltonwood called at almost every door on his rounds and stayed longer at each, so sometimes for

months at a time he never got around to the shabby place on the hill at all. But the boy believed that he did understand this and often he smiled to himself over it, without any bitterness–just smiled half wistfully. He lived alone in the tumble-down old house and did his own cooking and–well, even a most zealous man of the gospel might have beamed more heartily upon better cooks than was Denny, without any great qualms of conscience.

One other reason existed, or at least Young Denny imagined that it did, but whenever he stopped to think about it–a thing he had come to do more and more often in the last few months–he never smiled. Instead, his lips straightened until the wistful quirk at the corners disappeared into a straight line and his eyes smouldered ominously.

There was a select circle of white-haired old men–the village old guard–which sat in nightly session about the fat-bellied old wood-stove in the Boltonwood Tavern. It convened with the first snowfall of the winter and broke up long after the ice had gone out in the spring; and this circle, when all other topics had been whipped over at fever heat, until all the zest of bitter contradiction was gone from them, always turned at last with a delightful sort of unanimity to the story of the night when Old Denny had died–the Bolton of the former generation.

An almost childish enthusiasm tinged their keen relish for the tale. They squirmed and puckered their wrinkled old faces and shivered convulsively, just as a child might have shivered over a Bluebeard horror, as they recalled how Old Denny had

moaned in agony one moment that night, and then screamed horribly the next for the old stone demijohn that always stood in the corner of the kitchen. They remembered, with an almost astonishing wealth of detail, that he had frothed at the mouth and blasphemed terribly one instant, and then wept, in the very same breath–wept hopelessly, like the uncouth, overgrown, frightened boy who knelt at the bedside.

The strangest part of the whole thing was that not one of them had realized at the time, or ever recalled since, that Old Denny's eyes were sane when he wept that night and blurred with madness when he cursed. But then, too, that would have smashed the dramatic element of the whole tale to flinters. They never missed a scene or a sob, however, in the re-telling, and they always ended it with an ominous tilt of the head and a little insinuating crook of the neck toward the battered, weather-torn old house where Young Denny had lived on alone since that last bad night. It was very much as though they had said aloud, "He's the next–he'll go just like the rest."

Perhaps they never really thought of it, and perhaps it was because Young Denny's failure to fulfil their prophecy had really embittered them, but the whole village had given the boy plenty of solitude in the last few years in which to become on terms of thorough intimacy with the demijohn which still occupied its place in the kitchen corner.

And yet that stone demijohn was almost the only tangible reminder there was left of the Bolton who had gone before.

There were a few in the village who wondered how, in the three intervening years, the big silent, shambling boy had managed to tear from his acres money enough to clear the place of its debt–the biggest thing by far in his heritage. Eight hundred dollars was a large sum in Boltonwood–and Denny's acres were mostly rocks. Old Denny would have sold the last scythe and fork in the dilapidated barn to fill the stone jug, save for the fact that fork and scythe had themselves been too dilapidated to find a purchaser.

But the same scythe had an edge now and a polish where the boy's hands had gripped and swung it, and it took a flawlessly clear-grained piece of ash to make a shaft that would stand the forkfuls of hay which his shoulders heaved, without any apparent effort, into the mow. The clapboards on the house, although still unpainted, no longer whined in the wind; they were all nailed tight. And still the circle around the stove in the Boltonwood Tavern tilted its head–tilted it ominously–as if to say: "Just wait a bit, he'll come to it–wait now and see!" But the prophecy's fulfilment, long deferred, was making them still more bitter–strangely bitter–toward the boy, who stood alone at sundown watching the road that wound up from the village.

All this Young Denny knew, not because he had been told, but because the part of him that was still boy sensed it intuitively. He was just as happy to be let alone, or at least so he told himself, times without end, for it gave him a chance to sleep. And tonight as he stood at the crest of the hill before the dark

house, waiting for Old Jerry to come along with the mail, he was glad, too, that his place was the last on the route. It gave him something to look forward to during the day–something to expect–for although he rarely received a letter or, to be more exact, never, the daily newspaper was, after all, some company. And then there were the new farm implement catalogues and seed books, with their dyspeptic looking fruits and vegetables. They made better reading than nothing at all.

But it was not the usual bundle of papers which came at the end of each week for which Young Denny was waiting. Old Jerry, who drove the post route, and had driven it as long as Denny could remember, was late tonight–he was even later than usual for Saturday night–and Denny's hand tightened nervously upon the shaft of the pike-pole as he realized the cause of the delay.

For many weeks he had heard but little else mentioned on the village streets on his infrequent trips after groceries and grain. The winter sledding was over; the snow had gone off a month back with the first warm rain; just that afternoon he had made the last trip behind his heavy team down from the big timber back on the ridges, but during that month the other drivers with whom he had been hauling logs since fall had talked of nothing but the coming event.

From where he stood, looking out across the valley, Young Denny could see the huge bulk of the Maynard homestead–Judge Maynard's great box of a house–silhouetted against the skyline, and back of it high piles of timber–framing and sheathing for the

new barn that was going up. For Judge Maynard was going to give a barn-raising–an old-fashioned barn-raising such as the hill country had not seen in twenty years.

Already Young Denny knew that there were to be two team captains who would choose from among the best men that the country boasted, the very pick of strength and endurance and daring. And these, when the word was given, would swarm up with mallet and lock-pin over their half of the allotted work, in the race to drive home the last spike and wedge into place the last scantling. For days now with a grave sort of satisfaction which he hardly understood himself, Young Denny had time after time put all his strength against a reluctant log, skidding timber back on the hillside, and watched the lithe pike-pole bend half double under the steadily increasing strain. Somehow he felt very sure that one or the other of the captains would single him out; they couldn't afford to pass him by.

But in that one respect only was Judge Maynard's barn-raising to be like those that had passed down into history a score of years back. Every other detail, as befitted the hospitality of the wealthiest man in the hill country, was planned on a scale of magnificence before unheard of, and Denny Bolton stood and touched furtively with the tip of his tongue lips that were dry with the glamour of it all.

It was to be a masquerade–the dance which followed on the wide, clean floors–not the kind of a masquerade which the church societies gave from time to time to eke out the minister's

salary and which, while he had never attended, Young Denny had often heard described as "poverty-parties," because everybody wore the oldest of his old clothes–but a marvelously brilliant thing of hired costumes. It did not mean so much to him, this last, and yet as he thought of it his tight lips twisted into a slow smile and his eyes swung from their hungry contemplation of the great Maynard house to a little clump of brushwood which made a darker blot against the black shadow of the hill from the crest of which the Judge's place dominated the surrounding country. Little by little Denny Bolton's lean face lost its hint of hardness; the lines that ran from his thin nose to the corners of his lips disappeared as he smiled–smiled with whimsical gentleness–at the light that glimmered from a single window through the tangled bushes, twinkling back at him unblinkingly.

There was a tiny cottage behind that light, a little drab cottage of a half dozen rooms. It stood, unpainted and unkempt, in a wedge-shaped acre of neglected garden which, between high weeds and uncut shrubbery, had long before gone to straggling ruin. And that wedge-shaped acre which cut a deep fissure in the edge of the immaculate pastures of Boltonwood's wealthiest citizen was like a barbed thorn in Judge Maynard's side.

The latter was not a judge in reality; partly the size of the cash balance which rumor whispered he carried at the county bank, partly the fact that he was the only lawyer in that section, had earned him the title. But every trick of his tricky trade which he could invent he had brought against the owner of that little,

dilapidated cottage in a vain effort to force him to sell. And yet the acre of neglect and ruin still clung like an unsightly burr to the hem of his smooth-rolling acres.

The people of Boltonwood were given to calling John Anderson a fool, and not alone because he persisted in his senseless antagonism of a man as great in the township as was Judge Maynard. There was at least one other reason. It was almost twenty years now since the day when John Anderson had first appeared in the stern old hill town, bringing with him a frail slip of a woman with great, moist violet-blue eyes and tumbled yellow hair, whose very white and gold prettiness had seemed to their puritanical eyes the flaunting of an ungodly thing. There was a transparent pallor in her white skin and heavy shadows beneath her big dark eyes that made them seem even larger and duskier. A whispered rumor went around that she was not too strong–that it was the brisk keen air for which John Anderson had brought her to the hills.

The little drab cottage had been white then and there was scarcely a day but what the passers-by saw the slender girl, in soft fluttering things that contrasted painfully with their dingy calico, the thick gleaming mass of hair that crowned her head wind-tossed into her eyes, standing with her face buried in an armful of crimson blossoms in the same garden where the weeds were now breast high, or running with mad, childish abandon between the high hedgerows. And many a night after it was too dark to see they heard the man's heavier bass underrunning the light treble

of her laughter which, to their sensitive ears, was never quite free from a tinge of mockery.

CHAPTER II

For a year or more it was like that, and then the day came which, with dawn, found John Anderson changed into a gray-haired, white-faced man, whose eyes always seemed to be looking beyond one, and who spoke but seldom, even when he was spoken to. During the month that followed that night hardly a person in the village heard a word pass his lips, except, perhaps, those members of the church societies who had volunteered to help care for the baby.

He locked himself up in the small shop which occupied the back room of the house and day after day he worked there alone in a deadly quiet, strangely mechanical fashion. Sometimes far into the night they heard the tap-tap of his mallet as he chipped away, bit by bit, on a slender shaft of white marble, until more than one man in those days shook his head dubiously and vouchsafed his neighbor the information that John Anderson "wa'n't quite right."

A month passed during which the steady chip-chip scarcely ever ceased; and yet, when the work was finally finished and set up over the fresh little mound in the grounds behind the church, and they came to stand before it, they found nothing ready for them to say. For once the tongues of the hillsfolk were sobered into silence.

It was like her–that slim little white statue–so like her in its

pallor and frailty of feature and limb that they only gasped and then fell to whispering behind their hands at the resemblance. And somehow, too, as they stared, their faces failed to harden as they had always hardened before, whenever they rebuked her slim, elfish untidiness, for upon the face of stone, which was the face of his wife, John Anderson's chisel had left a fleeting, poignantly wistful smile that seemed touched with the glory of the Virgin Mother herself.

They merely stood and stared–the townsfolk–and yet they only half understood, for when it was noised about the street a few days later that John Anderson had given up forever his occupation of chiseling tombstones for the bleak Boltonwood cemetery–an occupation which at least had yielded him a bare living–and had locked himself up in that back room to "putter with lumps of clay," he was instantly convicted of being queer in the eyes of the entire thrifty community, even without his senseless antagonism of the Judge in the years that followed to clinch the verdict.

After the first few weeks that followed that night the village saw less and less of the man who went on living alone in the small white cottage with only the child to keep him company–the girl-child whom he had named Dryad, perhaps in a blind, groping hunger for beauty, perhaps in sheer revolt against the myriad Janes and Anns and Marthas about him. His hair was snow white before she was half grown; he was an old man, wrinkled of face and vacant of eye, who bent always over the bench in his back-

room shop too engrossed with his work even to note that, day by day, her face and slim body and tumbled yellow hair grew more and more like the face which was always smiling up at him from the shaping clay or marble.

Months passed before he opened his lips again for speech. Then he began to talk; he began to murmur little, disjointed intimate phrases of endearment to the stone face growing under his fingers–phrases that were more than half unintelligible to strange ears–until as the habit grew there came long periods, days at a time, when he carried on an uncannily one-sided conversation with the empty air before him, or, as the villagers often hinted, with some one whom his eyes alone could see.

But as the years went by even this novelty lost its spice with long familiarity. The cottage at the edge of town went from straggling neglect to utter ruin, but John Anderson still clung to it with a senseless stubbornness over which they often shook their heads in pity–in heartfelt commiseration for the Judge who had to endure this eyesore at his very doors, in spite of all his shrewdness or the reputed size of his balance at the County National.

But if time had dimmed their interest in the father, it had only served to whet their keen curiosity over the girl, who, in the intervening eighteen years, had changed from a half-starved, half-clad child that flashed through the thickets like a wild thing, into a long slender-limbed creature with wide, duskily violet eyes and shimmering, tumbled hair–a creature of swift, passionate

moods who, if they could only have known it, was startlingly like the wild things for which he had named her.

They were not given to the reading of heathen mythology, the people of Boltonwood, and so they could not know. But with every passing day they did realize that Dryad Anderson's fiercely wistful little face was growing more and more like that of the little statue in the grounds behind the church–the stone face of John Anderson's frail bride of a year–long since turned a dull, nondescript gray by the sun and weather.

She had the same trick of smiling with her eyes when there was no mirth lurking in the corners of her full lips, the same full-throated little laugh that carried the faintest hint of mockery in its thrill. Year by year her slim body lost its unformed boyishness in a new soft roundness which her long outgrown skirt and too scant little waist failed completely to conceal. And the hillsfolk were given to shaking their heads over her now, just as the generation before had done, for to cap it all–the last straw upon the back of their toleration–Dryad Anderson had "took up" with Denny Bolton, Young Denny, the last of his name. Nothing more was needed to damn her forever in the eyes of the hills people, although they could not have explained just why, even if they had tried.

And Young Denny, waiting there in the thickening dusk before his own dark place, smiled gravely back at that single blinking light in the window of the cottage squatting under the hill–he smiled with whimsical gentleness, a man's smile that

softened somehow the hard lines of jaw and lip. It was more than three years now since the first night when he had stood and watched for it to flash out across the valley before he had turned and gone to set a lamp in the dark front windows behind him in answer to it.

He could never remember just how they had agreed upon that signal–there had never been any mutual agreement–but every Saturday night since that first one, three years back, he had come in from his week's work, ploughing or planting or teaming back in the timber and waited for it to call to him, just at dusk, across the valley.

His hand went tentatively to his chin, absently caressing his lean cheeks as he remembered that day. Late in the afternoon he had found a rabbit caught fast in a snare which he had set deep in the thicket, and the little animal had squealed in terror, just as rabbits always squeal, when he leaned and took it from the trap. And when he had straightened to his feet with it clutched fast in his arms, to look for a club with which to end its struggles quickly, his eyes had lifted to encounter the stormy eyes of the girl who had flashed up before him as silently as a shadow from the empty air.

Her two small brown fists were tight clenched against her breast; she was breathing in short irregular gasps as if she had been running hard.

At first Denny Bolton had been too amazed to do more than stare blankly into her blazing eyes; then before that burning

glare his face began to redden consciously and his gaze dropped, wavering from her face to the little blouse so long outgrown that it strained far open across the girl's round throat, doubly white by contrast below the brown line where the clear tan ended.

His glance went down from the fierce little face to the tight skirt, shiny from long wear and so short that the hem hung high above her slim ankles; and from there down to the cracked, broken shoes, string-laced and sized too large for her fine drawn feet. They were old and patched–the stockings–so thickly darned that there was little of the original fabric left, but for all the patches there were still wide gashes in them, fresh torn by the thorns, through which the flesh beneath showed very white.

Her face colored, too, as Young Denny's uncomfortable scrutiny passed over her. It flamed painfully from throat to hair and then went very white. She tried vainly with one hand to close the gap at her throat, while the other struggled to settle the dingy old skirt a little lower on her childish hips. But her hot eyes clung unwaveringly to the boy's face. Suddenly she lifted one hand and pointed a quivering finger at the furry mass palpitating in his arms.

"What are you going to do with it?" she demanded.

Young Denny started at the question. The uncompromising directness of the words startled him even more than had her first swift, silent coming. Involuntarily, spasmodically his arms closed until the rabbit squealed again in an ecstasy of terror.

"Why, I–I reckon to eat him!" he blurted at last, and then his

face grew hotter than ever at the baldness of the answer.

It was hard to follow the change that flashed over her face as she became conscious of his blundering, clumsy embarrassment. It came too quickly for that, but the angry light faded from her eyes and her lips began to curve in the faintest of quizzical smiles. She even forgot the too short skirt and gaping blouse to raise both hands toward him in coaxing coquetry.

"Please let him go," she wheedled softly. "Please let him go–for me!"

Young Denny backed away a step from her upturned face and outstretched hands, grinning a little as he slowly shook his head. It bewildered him–puzzled him–this swift change to supplication.

"Can't," he refused laconically. "I–I got to have him to eat."

His voice was calmly final and for no other reason than to learn what she would do next, because already the boy knew that the soft creature throbbing against him was to have its freedom again. No one, at least since he could remember, had ever before smiled and asked Denny Bolton to "do it–for me." For one flashing instant he saw her eyes flare at his candid refusal; then they cleared again with that same miraculous swiftness. Once more the corners of her lips lifted pleadingly, arched with guileful, provocative sweetness.

"Please," she begged, even more softly, "please–because I ask you to!"

Once more Young Denny shook his head.

Standing there before his dark house, still smiling vaguely at the light across the valley his fingers tentatively caressed his lean cheeks where her fingernails had bit deep through the skin that day. He never remembered how it had happened–it all came too swiftly for recollection–but even before he had finished shaking his head the tempting smile had been wiped from her lips, her little face working convulsively with rage, before she sprang at him–sprang with lithe, lightning, tigerlike ferocity that sent him staggering back before her.

Her hands found his face and tore deep through the skin before he could lift his wide-flung arms to protect it. And then, almost before he realized what had happened, she stood back, groping blindly away from him until her hands found a birch sapling. She clung to it with a desperately tight clasp as if to hold herself erect. A little spot of red flecked her own lip where her locked teeth had cut through. She swayed a moment, dizzily, the too-tight little waist gaping at her throat as she struggled for breath.

"There–there!" she gasped at him voicelessly. "There," she whispered through her white lips, "now will you let him go?"

And Denny Bolton had stood that afternoon in wondering silence, gazing back into her twitching, distorted face without a word while the blood oozed from the deep cuts in his cheeks and dripped noisily upon the dry leaves. Once he turned and followed with his eyes the mad flight of the rabbit through the underbrush; and then turned slowly back to her.

"Why, he's gone already," he stated with a gentle gravity that

was almost ponderous. And with a deliberation which he meant more to comfort than to conciliate: "I–I aimed to let him go, myself, right from the first time you asked me–after a while!"

She cried over him that afternoon–cried not as he had known other girls to cry, but with long noiseless gasps that shook her thin shoulders terribly. Her eyes swam with great drops that hung from her lashes and went rolling silently down her small face while she washed out the cuts with one sleeve ruthlessly wrenched from her blouse and soaked in the brook nearby.

But in almost the same breath while she crooned pityingly over him she bade him–commanded him with a swift, fierce passionate vehemence–to tell her that it did not hurt–did not hurt very much! And before she would let him go that day she made him promise to come back–she promised herself to set a light in the front window of the shabby little cottage to tell him that she had found the plaster–that there was enough left to close the cuts.

There had never been any spoken agreement between them, but since that night, three years ago, Denny Bolton had learned to watch each week end, just at dusk, for the signal to appear. From the first their very loneliness had drawn them together–a childish, starved desire for companionship; and as time passed they only clung the closer, each to the other, as jealously fearful as a marooned man and woman might have been of any harm which might come to the one and leave the other utterly, desolately alone.

Winter and summer Denny Bolton went every Saturday night,

close to nightfall, and waited for her to come, except that now, in the last few weeks since the first rumor of the Judge's big barn-raising and masquerade had gone forth, no matter how early he started or how much haste he made, he always found Dryad Anderson there before him. For weeks no other topic had passed the girl's lips, and with each recurring visit to the small clearing hidden back in the thicket near the brook the boy's wonder grew.

Almost from the first day she had decided upon the costume which she would wear. Night after night she sat and made plans in a tumultuous, bubbling flood of anticipation which he could scarcely follow, for it was only after long argument that he had sheepishly surrendered and agreed to "dress up" at all; she sat with a picture torn from an old magazine across her knees–a color-plate of a dancing girl which she meant to copy for herself–poring over it with shining eyes, her breath coming and going softly between childishly curved lips as she devoured every detail of its construction.

It was a thing of brilliantly contrasting colors–the picture which she planned to copy–a sleeveless waist of dullest crimson and a much bespangled skirt of clinging, shimmering black. And that skirt hung clear to the ankles, swinging just high enough to disclose the gleam of silken stockings and satiny, pointed slippers, with heels of absurdly small girth.

The boy only half understood the feverish hunger which glowed in Dryad Anderson's face, piquantly, wistfully earnest in the dull yellow lantern light as she leaned forward, ticking off

each item and its probable cost upon her fingers, and waited doubtfully for him to mock at the expense; and yet, at that, he understood far better than any one else could ever have hoped to comprehend, for Young Denny knew too what it was to wait–to wait for something that was drearily slow in the coming.

One other thing marked Judge Maynard's proffered hospitality as totally different from all the other half-similar affairs which Boltonwood had ever known. There were to be invitations–written, mailed invitations–instead of the usual placards tacked up in the village post-office as they always were whenever any public entertainment was imminent, or the haphazard invitations which were passed along by word of mouth and which somehow they always forgot to pass on to the boy who lived alone in the dark house on the hill. There were to be formal, mailed invitations, and Young Denny found it hard waiting that night for Old Jerry, who had never been so late before.

The cool red of the horizon behind him faded to a dusky gray and the dusk thickened from twilight to dark while he stood there waiting, leaning heavily upon the pike-pole, shifting more and more uneasily from one tired foot to the other. He had turned at last to go and set a light in answer to the one which was calling insistently to him from the blackness before the Judge's place when the shrill squeal of complaining axles drifted up to him from far down the long hill road.

Old Jerry came with exasperating slowness that night. The plodding ascent of the fat white mare and creaking buggy was

nerve-rackingly deliberate. Young Denny shifted the shaft of his pike-pole to the other hand to wipe his damp palm against the checkered coat as the rig loomed up ahead of him in the darkness. Old Jerry was complaining to himself bitterly in a whining, cracked falsetto.

"'Tain't reg'lar," the boy heard him whimpering. "'Tain't accordin' to law–not the way I figger it, it ain't. The Gov'mint don't expect nobody to work 'til this hour!"

The buggy came to a standstill, with the little, weazened old man leaning far out from the torn leather seat, shading his eyes with one unsteady hand while he peered into the shadows searching for the big-shouldered figure that stepped hesitatingly nearer the wheel. There was something birdlike in the brilliancy of the beady little eyes; something of sparrowlike pertness in the tilt of the old man's head, perked far over to one side.

"Still a-waitin', be ye?" he exclaimed peevishly. "Well, it's lucky you ain't been kept a-standin' there a whole sight longer–half the night, mebby! You would a-been, only for my havin' an orig'nal system for peddlin' them letters that's all my own. It's system does it–but it ain't right, just the same. The Gov'mint don't expect nobody to work more'n eight hours to a stretch, and look at me, two hours late and I ain't home yet! I'd complain, too–I'd complain to the authorities at Washington, only–only"–his thin, high-pitched voice dropped suddenly to a furtively conciliating whisper–"only a-course I don't want to make no trouble for the Judge."

Denny Bolton cleared his throat and shuffled his feet uneasily, but this hint for haste was utterly wasted upon Old Jerry. The latter failed completely to note the strained intensity of the face that was upturned before him and went on grumbling as he leaned over to fumble in the box beneath the seat. And the tirade continued in an unbroken, half-muffled stream until he straightened laboriously again, the boy's usual weekly packet of papers and catalogues in one hand.

"No," he emphasized deliberately, "I wouldn't really go so fur's that–I ain't figgerin' on makin' no complaint–not this time. I got too much regard for the Judge to try to get him into any hot water. But there wa'n't no real use nor reason in his postin' all them invitations to once. He could a-begun back a stretch and kinda run 'em in easy, a little to a time, instead of lumpin' 'em this way, and that would a-give me–"

Young Denny reached out and took the bundle from the extended, unsteady old hand. His own hands were shaking a little as he broke the string and fluttered swiftly through the half dozen papers and pamphlets. Old Jerry never skipped a breath at the interruption.

"But that finishes up the day–that's about the last of it." The thin voice became heavily tinged with pride. "There ain't nobody in the township but what's got his card to that barn-raising by now–delivered right on the nail! That's my system." And then, judiciously: "I guess it's a-goin' to be a real fancy affair, too, at that. Must be it'll cost him more'n a little mite before he gits done

feedin' 'em. They was a powerful lot of them invitations."

Slowly Denny Bolton's head lifted. He stood and stared into Old Jerry's peaked, wrinkled face as if he had only half heard the rambling complaint, a strange, bewildered light growing in his eyes. Then his gaze dropped once more, and a second time, far more slowly, his fingers went through the packet of advertisements. Old Jerry was leaning over to unwind the reins from the whipstock when the boy's hand reached out and stopped him.

"Ain't there–wasn't there anything more for me–tonight?" Young Denny inquired gravely.

Jerry paused impatiently. No other question ever caused him quite such keen irritation, for he felt that it was a slur at his reliability.

"More!" he petulantly echoed the question. "More? Why, you got your paper, ain't you? Was you expectin' sunthin' else? Wasn't looking for a letter, now was you?"

Denny backed slowly away from the wheel. Dumbly he stood and licked his lips. He cleared his throat again and swallowed hard before he answered.

"No," he faltered at last, with the same level gravity. "No, I wasn't exactly expectin' a letter. But I kind of thought–I–I was just hopin'–"

His grave voice trailed heavily off into silence. Eyes still numbly bewildered he turned, leaning forward a little, to gaze out across the valley at the great square silhouette of Judge

Maynard's house on the opposite ridge, while Old Jerry wheeled the protesting buggy and started deliberately down the hill. Just once more the latter paused; he drew the fat gray mare to a standstill and leaned a last time far out from the seat.

"A-course I didn't mean nothin' when I spoke about complainin' against the Judge," he called back. "You know that, don't you, Denny? You know I was just jokin', don't you?" A vaguely worried, appealing strain crept into the cracked accents. "An' a-course you wouldn't say nothin' about my speakin' like that. I think a whole heap too much of the Judge to even try to git him into trouble–and–and then the Judge–he might–you understand that I was only jokin', don't you, Denny?"

Young Denny nodded his head silently in reply. Long after the shrill falsetto grumbling had ceased to drift back up the hill to him he stood there motionless. After a while the fingers that still clutched the bundle of circulars opened loosely and when he did finally wheel to cross slowly to the kitchen door the papers and catalogues lay unheeded, scattered on the ground where they had fallen.

He stopped once at the threshold to prop his pike-pole against the house corner before he passed aimlessly inside, leaving the door wide open behind him. And he stood a long time in the middle of the dark room, staring dully at the cold, fireless stove. Never before had he given it more than a passing thought–he had accepted it silently as he accepted all other conditions over which he had no control–but now as he stood and stared, it came over

him, bit by bit, that he was tired–so utterly weary that the task of cooking his own supper that night had suddenly become a task greater than he could even attempt. The very thought of the half-cooked food sickened him–nauseated him. Motionless there in the dark he dragged one big hand across his dry lips and slowly shook his head.

"They didn't want me," he muttered hoarsely. "It wasn't because they forgot me before; they didn't want me–not even for the strength of my shoulders."

With heavy, shuffling steps he crossed and dropped loosely into a chair beside the bare board table that stood in front of one dingy window. A long time he sat silent, his lean chin propped in his rough palms, eyes burning straight ahead of him into vacancy. Then, little by little, his great shoulders in the vividly checkered coat began to sag–they slumped downward-until his head was bowed and his face lay hidden in the long arms crooked limply asprawl across the table-top.

Once more he spoke aloud, hours later.

"They didn't want me," he repeated dully. "Not even for the work I could do!"

CHAPTER III

It was very quiet in the front room of the little cottage that squatted in the black shadow below Judge Maynard's huge house on the hill. No sound broke the heavy silence save the staccato clip-clip of the long shears in the fingers of the girl who was leaning almost breathlessly over the work spread out on the table beneath the feeble glow of the single oil-lamp, unless the faint, monotonous murmur which came in an endless sing-song from the lips of the stooped, white-haired old figure in the small back room beyond the door could be named anything so definite.

John Anderson's lips always moved when he worked. His fingers, strong and clean-jointed and almost womanishly smooth–the only part of the man not pitifully seared with age–flew with a bewildering nimbleness one moment, only to dwell the next with a lingering caress upon the shaping features before him; and for each caress of his finger tips there was an accompanying, vacantly gentle smile or an uncertainly emphatic nod of the silvered head which gave the one-sided conversation a touch of uncanny reality.

And yet, at regularly recurring intervals, even his busy fingers faltered, while he sat head bent far over to one side as though he were listening for something, waiting for some reply. At every such pause the vacant smile left his face and failed to return immediately. The monotonously inflectionless conversation was

still, too, for the time, and he merely sat and stared perplexedly about him, around the small workshop, bare except for the single high-stool that held him and the littered bench on which he leaned.

There was a foot-wide shelf against each wall of that room, fastened waist high from the floor, and upon it stood countless small white statues, all slim and frail of limb, all upturned and smiling of lip. They were miraculously alike, these delicate white figures, each with a throat-tightening heartache in its wistful face–so alike in form and expression that they might have been cast in a single mold. Wherever his eyes might fall, whenever he turned in one of those endlessly repeated fits of faltering uncertainty, that tiny face was always before him, uplifted of lip, smiling back into John Anderson's vacant eyes until his own lips began to curve again and he turned once more, nodding his head and murmuring contentedly, to the clay upon his bench.

Out in the larger front room, as she hovered over the work spread out before her, the girl, too, was talking aloud to herself, not in the toneless, rambling voice that came from John Anderson's mumbling lips, but in hushed, rapt, broken sentences which were softly tinged with incredulous wonder.

The yellow glow of the single lamp, pushed far across the table from her, where the most of its radiance was swallowed up by the gloom of the uncurtained window, flickered unsteadily across her shining, tumbled hair, coloring the faintly blue, thinly penciled lines beneath her tip-tilted eyes with a hint of weariness

totally at variance with the firm little sloping shoulders and full lips, pursed in a childish pout over a mouthful of pins.

The hours had passed swiftly that day for Dryad Anderson; and the last one of all–the one since she had lighted the single small lamp in the room and set it in the window, so far across the table from her that she had to strain more and more closely over her swift flashing scissors in the thickening dusk–had flown on winged feet, even faster than she knew.

Twice, early in the evening she had laid the long shears aside and risen from the matter that engrossed her almost to the exclusion of every other thought, to peer intently out of the window across the valley at the bleak old farmhouse on the crest of the opposite ridge; and each time as she settled herself once more in the chair, hunched boyishly over the table edge, she only nodded her bright head in utter, undisturbed unconsciousness of the passage of time.

"He's late getting home tonight," she told herself aloud, after she had searched the outer darkness in vain for any answering signal, but there was not even the faintest trace of troubled worry in her words. She merely smiled with mock severity.

"He's later than he ought to be–even if it is his last week back in the hills. Next week I'll have to make him wait–"

Her vaguely murmured threat drifted away into nothingness, left unfinished as she rose and stood, hands lightly bracketed upon her hips, scrutinizing the completed work.

"There," she went on softly, sighing in deep relief, "there–

that's done–if–if it will only fit."

She removed the cluster of pins from her mouth and unfastened the long strip of newspaper from the section of the old black skirt which she had ripped apart that afternoon for a pattern. It was far too short–that old skirt–to duplicate the long free lines of the brilliant red and black costume of the dancer beside her elbow on the table, but Dryad Anderson's shears, coasting rapidly around the edge of the worn cloth, had left a wide margin of safety at the hem.

The critical frown upon her forehead smoothed little by little while she lifted cautiously that long strip of paper pattern and turned with it dangling from one hip to walk up and down before the tilted mirror at the far end of the room, viewing her reflected image from every possible angle. Even the thoughtful pucker at the corners of her eyes disappeared and she nodded her small head with its loosened mass of hair in judicious satisfaction.

"I do believe that's it," the hushed voice mused on, "or, if it isn't, it is as near as I can ever hope to get it. If–if only it doesn't sag at the heels–and if it does I'll have to–"

Again with a last approving glance flung over one shoulder the murmured comment, whatever it might have been, was finished wordlessly. Her fingers, in spite of their very smallness as strong and straight and clean-jointed as those of the old man bent double over his bench in the back room, lingered absently over the folding of that last paper pattern, and when she finally added it to the top of the stack already folded and piled beside the lamp

her eyes had become velvety blank with preoccupation.

From early afternoon, ever since the Judge himself had whirled up to the sagging gate at the end of their rotting boardwalk and clambered out of his yellow-wheeled buckboard to knock with measured solemnity at the front door, Dryad had been rushing madly from task to task and pausing always in just such fashion in the midst of each to stand dreamily immobile, everything else forgotten for the moment in an effort to visualize it–to understand that it was real, after all, and not just a cobweb fabric of her own fancy, like the dreams she was always weaving to make the long week days pass more quickly.

It was more than a few years since the last time Judge Maynard had driven up to the gate of that old, drab cottage; and now standing there with one slim outstretched hand lovingly patting the bundle of paper patterns which represented her afternoon's work, she smiled with gentle derision for the mental picture she had carried all those years of the wealthiest man in Boltonwood.

The paternal, almost bewildering familiar cordiality with which he had greeted her and the pompously jovial urgency of the invitation which he had come to deliver in person, urging acceptance upon her because she "saw entirely too little of the young folks of the town," was hardly in accord with the childish recollection she had carried with her, year after year, of a purple faced, cursing figure who leaned over the rickety old fence that bounded the garden, shook his fists in John Anderson's mildly puzzled face and roared threats until he had to cease from very

breathlessness.

A far different Judge had bowed low before her that afternoon when she answered the measured summons at the door–a sleek, twinkling, unctuously solicitous, far more portly Judge Maynard–and Dryad Anderson, who could not know that he had finally come to agree with the rest of the village that he might "catch more flies with molasses than with vinegar," and was ordering his campaign accordingly, flushed in painful memory for the half-clad, half-starved little creature that had clung to John Anderson's rusty coat-tails that other day and glared black, bitter hate back at the man beyond the fence.

Leaning against the table there in the half light of the room, a slow smile curled back the corners of her lips, still childishly quizzical in contrast with that slim roundness of body which was losing its boyish litheness in a new slender fullness that throbbed on the threshold of womanhood. She smiled deprecatingly as she lifted one hand to search in the breast of the blouse that was always just enough outgrown to fail of closing across her throat, and drew out the thing which the Judge had delivered with every possible flourish, barely a few hours back.

Already the envelope was creased and worn with much handling, but the square card within, thickly, creamily white, was still unspotted. As if it were a perishably precious thing her fingers drew it with infinite care from its covering, and she leaned far across the table to prop it up before her where the light fell brightest. Pointed chin cupped in her palms, she lay devouring

with hungry eyes the words upon its polished surface.

"– requests the pleasure of," she picked up the lines which she already knew by rote; and then, "Miss Dryad Anderson's company," in the heavy sprawling scrawl which she knew must have come from the Judge's own pen.

Suddenly her two hands flashed out and swept the card up to crush it against her with passionate impetuosity.

"Oh, you wonderful thing!" she crooned over it, a low laugh that was half a sob bubbling in her throat. "You wonderful thing! And to think that I've had you all the afternoon–almost all day–and he's had to wait all this time for his to come. He's had to wait for Jerry to bring his with the mail–and Jerry is so dreadfully slow at times."

Lingeringly, as though she hated to hide it, her fingers thrust the card back inside its envelope. And she was tucking it away in its warm hiding place within the scant fullness of the white blouse when the clock on the wall behind her began to beat out the hour with a noisy whir of loosened cogs.

"Hours and hours," she murmured, counting the strokes subconsciously.

And then as the growing total of those gong strokes beat in upon her brain, all the dreamy preoccupation faded from her face. The little compassionate smile which had accompanied the last words disappeared before the swift, taut change that straightened her lips. She whirled, peering from startled eyes up at the dim old dial, refusing to believe her own count; and as she

stood, body tensely poised, gazing incredulously at the hands, she realized for the first time how fast the hours had flown while she bent, forgetful of all else, over her paper patterns.

The table rocked dangerously as she crowded her body between it and the windowsill and, back to the light, stood staring with her face cupped in her hands out into the blackness. Far across the valley the dilapidated farmhouse on the ridge showed only a blurred blot against the skyline.

Minutes the girl stood and watched. The minutes lengthened interminably while the light for which she waited failed to show through the dark, until a dead white, living fear began to creep across her face–a fear that wiped the last trace of childishness from her tightened features.

"He's late," she whispered hoarsely. "It's the last week, and it's just kept him later than usual!"

But there was no assurance in the words that faltered from her lips. They were lifelessly dull, as though she were trying to convince herself of a thing she already knew she could not believe.

As long as she could she stood there at the window, doggedly fighting the rising terror that was bleaching her face; fighting the dread which was never quite asleep within her brain–the dread of that old stone demijohn standing in the corner of the kitchen, which for all her broken pleading Young Denny Bolton had refused with a strange, unexplained stubbornness to remove–until that rising terror drove her away from the pane.

One wide-flung arm swept the stack of neatly folded patterns in a rustling storm to the floor as she pushed her way out from the narrow space between table edge and sill. The girl did not heed them or the lamp, that rocked drunkenly with the tottering table. She had forgotten everything–the thick white square of cardboard, even the stooped old man in the small back room–in the face of the overwhelming fear that reason could not fight down. Only the peculiarly absolute silence that came with the sudden cessation of his droning monotone checked the panic haste of her first rush. With one hand clutching the knob of the outer door she turned back.

John Anderson was sitting twisted about on his high stool, gazing after her in infantile, perplexed reproach, his long fingers clasped loosely about the almost finished figure over which he had been toiling. As the girl turned back toward him his eyes wandered down to it and he began to shake his head slowly, vacantly, hopelessly. A low moaning whimper stirred her lips; then the hand tight-clenched over the knob slackened. She ran swiftly across to him.

"What is it, dear?" Her voice broke, husky with fright and pity. "Tell me–what is the matter? Won't it come right tonight?"

With shaking hands she leaned over him, smoothing the shining hair. At the touch of her fingers he looked up, staring with pleading uncertainty into her quivering face before he shook his head.

"It–it don't smile," he complained querulously. His fingers

groped lightly over the small face of clay. “I–I can’t make it smile–like the rest.”

Sudden terror contorted the thin features, a sheer ecstacy of terror as white-lipped as that which marred the face of the girl who bent above him.

“Maybe I’ve forgotten how she smiled!” he whispered fearfully. “Maybe I’ll never be able to–”

Dryad’s eyes flitted desperately around the room, along the shelves laden with those countless figures–all white and finely slender, all upturned of face. Again a little impotent gasp choked her; then, eyes filling hotly at that poignantly wistful smile which edged the lips of each, she stooped and patted reassuringly the trembling hands before she stepped a pace away from him.

“You’ve not forgotten, dear. Why, you mustn’t be frightened like that! We know, you and I, don’t we, that you never could forget? You’re just tired. Now, that’s better–that’s brave! And now–look! Isn’t this the way–isn’t this the way it ought to be?”

Face uptilted, bloodless lips falling apart in the faintest of pallid smiles, she swayed forward, both arms outstretched toward him. And as she stood the wide eyes and straight nose and delicately pointed chin of her colorless face took line for line the lines of all those, chalky white, against the wall.

For a moment John Anderson’s eyes clung to her–clung vacant with hopeless doubt; then they glowed again with dawning recollection. He, too, was smiling once more as his fingers fluttered in nervous haste above the lips of the clay face on the

bench before him, and almost before the girl had stepped back beside him he had forgotten that she was there.

"Marie!" she heard him murmur. "Marie, why, you mustn't be afraid! We'll never forget–you and I–we never could forget!"

Even while she waited another instant those plastic earthen lips began to curl–they began to curve with hungry longing like all the rest. He was talking steadily now, mumbling broken fragments of sentences which it was hard to understand. Her hand hovered a moment longer over his bowed head; once at the door she paused and looked back at him.

"It's only for a little while," she promised unsteadily. "I–I have to go–but it's only for a little while. I'll be back soon–so soon! And you'll be safe until I come!"

He gave no sign that he had heard, not even so much as a lifted glance. But as she drew the door shut behind her she heard him pick up the words, caressingly, after her.

"You'll be safe, Marie," he whispered. "It'll be only for a little while, now. You'll be safe till I come." An ineffably peaceful smile flickered across his face. "We couldn't forget–why, of course, we couldn't forget–you and I!"

With the short black skirt lifted even higher above her ankles that she might make still more speed, Dryad turned into the dark path that twisted crookedly through the brush to the open clearing beside the brook and from there on to the black house on the hill.

She ran swiftly, madly, through the darkness, with the wild,

panic-stricken, headlong abandon of a hunted thing, finding the narrow trail ahead of her by instinct alone. Only once she overran it, but that once a low hanging branch, face high, caught her full across the forehead and sent her crashing back in the underbrush. Just once she put one narrow foot in its loosely flapping shoe into the deep crevice between two rocks and gasped aloud with the pain of the fall that racked her knees. When she groped out and steadied herself erect she was talking–stammering half incoherent words that came bursting jerkily from her lips as she tore on.

"Help me … in time … God," she panted, "Just this once … get to him … in time. Lord, forgive … own vanity. Oh, God, please in time!"

Small feet drumming the harder ground, she flashed up the last rise and across the yard to the door of that unlighted kitchen. Her hands felt for the latch and failed to find it; then she realized that it was already open–the door–but her knees, all the strength suddenly drained from them at the black quiet in that room, refused to carry her over the threshold. She rocked forward, reaching out with one hand for the frame to steady herself, and in that same instant the man who lay a huddled motionless heap across the table top, moved a little and began to speak aloud.

"They didn't want me," he muttered, and the words came with muffled thickness. "Not even for the strength of my shoulders."

She took one faltering step forward–the girl who stood there swaying in the doorway–and stopped again. And the man lifted

his head and laughed softly, a short, ugly rasping laugh.

"Not even for the work I could do," he finished.

And then she understood. She tried to call out to him, and the words caught in her throat and choked her. She tried again and this time her voice rang clear through the room.

"Denny," she cried, "Denny, I've come to you! Strike a light! I'm here, Denny, and–oh, I'm afraid–afraid of the dark!"

Before he could rise, almost before his big-shouldered body whirled in the chair toward her, her swift rush carried her across to him. She knelt at his knees, her thin arms clutching him with desperate strength. Denny Bolton felt her body shudder violently as he leaned over, dumb with bewilderment, and put his hands on her bowed head.

"Thank God," he heard her whispering, "thank God–thank God!"

But far more swiftly than his half numbed brain could follow she was on her feet the next instant, tense and straight and lancelike in the gloom.

"Damn 'em," she hissed. "Damn 'em–damn 'em–damn 'em!"

His fingers felt for and found a match and struck it. Her face was working convulsively, twisted with hate, both small fists lifted toward the huge house that crowned the opposite hill. It made him remember that first day when he had looked up, with the rabbit struggling in his arms, and found her standing there in the thicket before him, only now the fury that blazed in her eyes was not for him. There was a rough red welt across her forehead

only half hidden by the tumbled hair that cascaded to her waist, torn loose from its scant fastenings by the whipping brush. And as he stood with the flame of the flickering match scorching his fingers, Denny Bolton remembered all the rest–he remembered the light that still burned unanswered in the window across the valley. He bowed his head.

"I–I forgot," he faltered at last. "I did not know it was so late. I must have been–pretty tired."

Slowly the girl's clenched hands came away from her throat while she stared up into his face, brown and lean and very hard and bitter. The ashen terror upon her own cheeks disappeared with a greater, growing comprehension of all that lay behind that dully colorless statement. For just a moment her fingers hovered over the opening at the neck of her too small blouse and felt the thick white card that lay hidden within, before she lifted both arms to him in impulsive compassion, trying to smile in spite of the wearily childish droop at the corners of her lips.

"I know, Denny," she quavered. "I–I understand." Her arms slipped up around his neck. "Hold me tight–oh, hold me tighter! For they forgot me, too, Denny; they forgot me, too!"

As his arms closed about her slim body she buried her bright head against the vividly checkered coat and sobbed silently–great noiseless gasps that shook her small shoulders terribly. Once, after a long time, when she held his face away to peer up at him through brimming eyes, she saw that all the numb bitterness was gone from it–that he had forgotten all else save her own hurt.

"Why, you mustn't feel so badly for me," she told him then, warmly tremulous of mouth. "I–I don't mind now, very much. Only"–her voice broke unsteadily–"only I did want to go just once where all the others go; I wanted them to see me just once in a skirt that's long enough for me–and–and to wear stockings without any patches, and silk, Denny, silk–next to my skin!"

CHAPTER IV

At her first swift coming when she had cried out to him there in the dark and run across to kneel at his knees, a dull, shamed flush had stained his lean cheeks with the realization that, in his own great bitterness he had failed even to wonder whether she had been forgotten, too.

Now as his big hand hovered over the tumbled brightness of her hair, loose upon his sleeve, that hot shame in turn disappeared. After the quivering gasps were all but stilled, he twice opened his lips as if to speak, and each time closed them again without a word. He was smiling a faint, gravely gentle smile that barely lifted the corners of his lips when she turned in his arms and lifted her face once more to him.

"We don't mind very much," she repeated in a half whisper. "Do we–either of us–now?"

Slowly he shook his head. With effortless ease he stooped and swung her up on one arm, seating her upon the bare table before the window. Another match flared between his fingers and the whole room sprang into brightness as he touched the point of flame to the wick of the lamp bracketed to the wall beside him.

She sat, leaning forward a little, both elbows resting upon her slim knees, both feet swinging pendulum-like high above the floor, watching with a small frown of curiosity growing upon her forehead, while he stooped without a word of explanation and

dragged a bulky package from the table and placed it beside her. Then she sighed aloud, an audible sigh of sheer surprise after he had broken the string and drawn aside the paper wrapper.

Just as they had seemed in the picture they lay there under her amazed eyes–the pointed, satiny black slippers of the dancing girl, with their absurdly slender heels and brilliant buckles, and filmy stockings to match. And underneath lay two folded squares of shimmering stuff, dull black and burnished scarlet, scarce thicker than the silk of the stockings themselves.

The faint, vaguely self-conscious smile went from Denny Bolton's lips while he stood and watched her bend and touch each article, one by one–the barest ghost of contact. Damp eyes glowing, lips curled half open, she lifted her head at last and gazed at him, as he stood with hands balanced on his hips before her.

A moment she sat immobile, her breath coming and going in soft, fluttering gasps, and looked into his sober, questioning face; then she turned again and picked up one web-like stocking and held it against her cheek, as hotly tinted now beneath its smooth whiteness as the shining scarlet cloth beside her.

He heard her murmur to herself little, broken, incoherent phrases that he could not catch.

"Denny," he heard her whisper, "Denny–Denny!"

And then, with the tiny slippers huddled in her lap, her hands flashed out and caught his face and drew it down against the too-small white blouse, open at the throat.

"Man–man," she said, and he felt her breast rise and fall, rise and fall, against his cheek. "Man, you didn't understand! It–it wasn't the clothes, Denny, but–but I'm all the gladder, I think, because you're so much of a man that you couldn't, not even if I tried a hundred years to explain."

He drew the chair at the side of the table around in front of her and dropped into it. With a care akin to reverence he lifted one slipper and held it outstretched at arm's length upon his broad palm.

"I–I hadn't exactly forgotten, tonight," he told her. "I'd watched for the light, and I meant to bring them–when I came." His steady eyes dropped to her slim, swinging feet. "They're the smallest they had in any shop at the county-seat," he went on, and the slow smile came creeping back across his face. "I crossed over through the timber late last night, after we had broken camp, and I–I had to guess the size. Shall we–try them on?"

She reached out and snatched the small thing of satin and leather away from him with mock jealous impetuosity, a little reckless gurgle of utter delight breaking from her lips.

"Over these," she demanded, lifting one foot and pointing at the thickly patched old stocking above the dingy, string-tied shoe. "You–you are trying to shame me, Denny–you want to make me confess they are too small!"

Then, almost in the same breath, all the facetious accusation left her face. Even the warm glow of wonder which had lighted her wet eyes gave way to a new seriousness.

"No one has ever told me," she stated slowly, "but I know it is so, just the same. Somehow, because it was to be the first party I had ever attended–or–or had a chance to attend, I thought it must be all right, just once, for you to buy me these. There was no one else to buy them, Denny, and maybe I wanted to go so very much I made myself believe that it was all right. But there isn't any party now–for us. And–and men don't buy clothes for women, Denny–not until they're married!"

Her face was tensely earnest while she waited for the big man before her to answer. And Young Denny turned his head, staring silently out of the opposite window down toward the village, dark now, in the valley below. He cleared his throat uncertainly.

"Do they?" She was leaning forward until her hair brushed his own. "Do they, Denny?" A rising inflection left the words hanging in midair.

"I don't know just what the difference is," he began finally, his voice very deliberate. "I've often tried to figure it out, and never been quite able to get it straight"–he nodded his head again toward the sleeping village–"but we–we've never been like the rest, anyhow. And–and anyway," he reached out one hand and laid it upon her knees, "we're to be married, too–when–when–"

With swift, caressing haste she lifted the slippers that lay cradled in her lap and set them back inside the open package. Lightly she swung herself down and stood before him, both hands balanced upon his shoulders. For just the fraction of a moment her eyes lifted over his head, flickering toward the stone

demijohn that stood in the far, shadowy corner near the door. Her voice was trembling a little when she went on.

"Then let me come soon, Denny," she begged. "Can't it be soon? Oh, I'm going to keep them!" One hand searched behind her to fall lightly upon the package upon the table. "They're–they're so beautiful that I don't believe I could ever give them back. But do we have to wait any longer–do we? I can take care of him, too."

Vehemently she tilted her head toward the little drab cottage across under the opposite hill.

"He hardly ever notices when I come or go. I–I want to come, Denny. I'm lonesome, and–and–" her eyes darkened and swam with fear as she stared beyond him into the dusky corner near the door, "why can't I come now, before some time–when it might be–too late?"

He reached up and took her hands from his shoulders and held them in front of him, absently contemplating their rounded smoothness. She bent closer, trying to read his eyes, and found them inscrutable. Then his fingers tightened.

"And be like them?" he demanded, and the words leaped out so abruptly that they were almost harsh. "And be like all the rest," he reiterated, jerking his head backward, "old and thin, and bent and worn-out at thirty?" A hard, self-scathing note crept into the words. "Why, it–it took me almost a month–even to buy these!"

He in turn reached out and laid a hand upon the bundle behind her. But she only laughed straight back into his face–a short,

unsteady laugh of utter derision.

"Old?" she echoed. "Work! But I–I'd have you, Denny, wouldn't I?" Again she laughed in soft disdain. "Clothes!" she scoffed. And then, more serious even than before: "Denny, is–is that the only reason, now?"

The gleam that always smoldered in Denny Bolton's eyes whenever he remembered the tales they told around the Tavern stove of Old Denny's last bad night began to kindle. His lips were thin and straight and as colorless as his suddenly weary face as he stood and looked back at her. She lifted her hands and put them back upon his shoulders.

"I'm not afraid–any more–to chance it," she told him, her lips trembling in spite of all she could do to hold them steady. "I'm never afraid, when I'm with you. It–it's only when I'm alone that it grows to be more than I can bear, sometimes. I'm not afraid. Does it–does it have to stay there any longer, in the corner, Denny? Aren't we sure enough now–you and I–aren't we?"

He stopped back a pace–his big body huge above her slenderness–stepped away from the very nearness of her. But as she lifted her arms to him he began to shake his head–the old stubborn refusal that had answered her a countless number of times before.

"Aren't we?" she said again, but her voice sounded very small and bodiless and forlorn in the half dark room.

He swung one arm in a stiff gesture that embraced the entire valley.

"They're all sure, too," his voice grated hoarsely, "They're all sure, too–just as sure as we could ever be–and there's a whole town of them!"

She was bending silently over the table, retying the bundle, when he crossed back to her side, a lighted lantern dangling in one hand.

"I don't know why myself," he tried to explain. "I only know I've got to wait. And I don't even know what I'm waiting for–but I know it's got to come!"

She would not lift her head when he slipped his free arm about her shoulders and drew her against him. When he reached out to take the package from her she held it away from him, but her voice, half muffled against his checkered coat, was anything but hard.

"Let *you* carry them?" she murmured. "Why–I wouldn't trust them to any other hands in the world but my own. You can't even see them again–not until I've finished them, and I wear them–for you."

With head still bowed she walked before him to the open door. But there on the threshold she stopped and flashed up at him her whimsically provocating smile.

"Tell me–why don't you tell me, Denny," she commanded imperiously, "that I'm prettier than all the others–even if I haven't the pretty clothes!"

When the ridges to the east were tinged with the red of a rising sun, Denny Bolton was still sitting, head propped in his hands,

at the table before the window, totally oblivious to the smoking lamp beside him, or to anything else save the square card which he had found lying there beneath the table after he had taken her back across the valley to John Anderson's once-white cottage. He rose and extinguished the smoking wick as the first light of day began to creep through the room.

"– requests the pleasure of Miss Dryad Anderson's company," he repeated aloud. And then, as he turned to the open door and the work that was waiting for him, in a voice that even he himself had never before heard pass his lips:

"And she could have gone–she could have, and she didn't–just because–"

His grave voice drifted off into silence. As if it were a perishably precious thing, he slipped the square card within its envelope and buttoned the whole within his coat.

CHAPTER V

As far back as he could remember Denny could not recall a single day when Old Jerry had swung up the long hill road that led to his lonesome farmhouse on the ridge at a pace any faster than a crawling walk. Nor could he recollect, either, a single instance when he had chanced to arrive at that last stop upon the route much before dark.

And yet it was still a good two hours before sundown; only a few minutes before he had driven his heavy steaming team in from the fields and turned toward the ladder that mounted to the hayloft, when the familiar shrill complaint of ungreased axles drifted up to him from the valley.

With a foot upon the first rung Young Denny paused, scowling in mild perplexity. He had crossed the next moment to the open double doors, as the sound floated up to him in a steadily increasing volume, and was standing, his big body huge in its flannel shirt, open at the throat, and high boots laced to the knees, leaning loosely at ease against the door frame, when the dingy rig with its curtains flapping crazily in the wind lurched around the bend in the road and came bouncing wildly up the rutty grade.

The boy straightened and stiffened, his head going forward a little, for the fat old mare was pounding along at a lumbering gallop–a pace which, in all the time he had watched for it, he had never before beheld. Old Jerry was driving with a magnificent

abandon, his hands far outstretched over the dash, and more than that, for even from where he stood Denny could hear him shouting at her in his thin, cracked falsetto–shouting for still more speed.

A rare, amused smile tugged at the corners of Young Denny's lips as he crossed the open yard to the crest of the hill. But when the groaning buggy came to a standstill and Old Jerry flung the reins across the mare's wide back, to dive and burrow in frantic haste under the seat for the customary roll of advertisements, without so much as a glance for the boy who strode slowly up to the wheel, that shadow of a smile which had touched his face faded into concerned gravity. He hesitated a moment, as if not quite certain of what he should do.

"Is there–there isn't any one sick, is there?" he asked at last, half diffidently.

The little, white-haired old man in the buggy jerked erect with startling, automatonlike swiftness at that slow question. For a moment he stood absolutely motionless, his back toward the speaker, his head perked far over to one side as though he refused to believe he had heard correctly. Then, little by little, he wheeled until his strangely brilliant, birdlike eyes were staring straight down into Denny's upturned, anxious face. And as he stared Old Jerry's countenance grew blankly incredulous.

"Sick!" he echoed the boy's words scornfully. "Sick!"

His grotesquely thin body seemed to swell as he straightened himself, and his shrill squeak of a voice took on a new note of

pompous importance.

"I guess," he stated impressively, "I reckon, Denny, you ain't heard the news, hev you?" He chuckled pityingly, half contemptuously. "I reckon you couldn't've," he concluded with utter finality.

The old, sullenly bewildered light crept back into Young Denny's gray eyes. He shifted his feet uneasily, shaking his head.

"I–I just got back down from the timber, three days ago," he explained, and somehow, entirely unintentionally, as he spoke the slow statement seemed almost an apology for his lack of information. "I guess I haven't heard much of anything lately–up here. Is it–is it something big?"

Old Jerry hesitated. He felt suddenly the hopeless, overwhelming dearth of words against which he labored in the attempt to carry the tidings worthily.

"Big!" He repeated the other's question. "Big! Why, Godfrey 'Lisha, boy, it's the biggest thing that's ever happened to this town. It–it's terrific! We'll be famous–that's what we'll be! In a week or two Boltonwood'll be as famous as–as–why, we'll be as famous as the Chicago Fair!"

He broke off with a gasp for breath and started fluttering madly through the paper which he had wrenched from Young Denny's bundle of closely wrapped mail, until he found the page he sought.

"There 'tis," he cried, and pointed out a lurid headline that ran half across the head of the sporting section. "There 'tis–or

leastwise that's a part on it. But they's more a-comin'–more that that won't be a patch to! But you just take a look at that!"

Young Denny took the paper from his hand with a sort of sober patience, and there across the first three column heads, following the direction of Old Jerry's quivering forefinger, he found his first inkling of the astounding news.

"Jed The Red wins by knockout over The Texan in fourteenth round," ran the red-inked caption.

Word by word he read it through, and a second time his grave eyes went through it, even more painstakingly, as though he had not caught at a single reading all its sensational significance. Then he looked up into the seamed old face above him, a-gleam and a-quiver with excitement.

"Jed The Red," the boy said in his steady voice. "Jed The Red!" And then, levelly: "Who's he?"

Old Jerry stared at him a moment before he shook his head hopelessly and collapsed with a thud upon the torn seat behind him, in an excess of disgust for the boy's stupidity which he made no effort to conceal.

"Jed who?" he mimicked, his voice shrill with sarcasm. "Now what in time Jed would it be, if 'twa'n't Jeddy Conway–our own Jeddy Conway from this very village? What other Jed is there? Ain't you got no memory at all, when you ought to be proud to be able to say that you went to school with him yourself, right in this town?"

Again Young Denny nodded a silent agreement, but Old

Jerry's feverish enthusiasm had carried him far beyond mere anger at his audience's apparent lack of appreciation.

"And that ain't all," he rushed on breathlessly, "not by a lot, it ain't! That ain't nothin' to compare with what's to come. Why, right this minute there's a newspaper writer down to the village–he's from New York and he's been stayin' to the Tavern ever since he come in this morning and asked for a room with a bath–and he's goin' to write up the town. Yes sir-e-e–the whole dad-blamed town! Pictures of the main street and the old place where Jeddy went to school, like as not, and–and"–he hesitated for an instant to recall the exact phrasing–"and interviews with the older citizens who recognized his ability and gave him a few pointers in the game when he was only a little tad. That's what's to follow, and it's comin' out in the New York papers, too–Sunday supplement, colors, maybe, and–and–"

Sudden recollection checked him in the middle of the tumbled flow of information. Leaning far out over the dash, he put all his slight weight against the reins and turned the fat white mare back into the road with astonishing celerity.

"Godfrey, but that makes me think," he gasped. "I ain't got no time to fritter away here! I got to git down to the Tavern in a hurry. He'll be waitin' to hear what I kin tell him."

The thin, wrinkled old face twisted into a hopeful, wheedling smile.

"You know that, don't you, Denny? You could tell him that there wa'n't nobody in the hills knew little Jeddy Conway better'n

I did, couldn't you? It–it's the last chance I'll ever git, too, more'n likely.

"Twice I missed out–once when they found Mary Hubbard's husband a-hangin' to his hay mow–a-hangin by the very new clothes-line Mary'd just bought the day before and ain't ever been able to use since on account of her feelin' somehow queer about it–and me laid up to home sick all the time! Everybody else got their names mentioned in the article, and Judge Maynard had his picture printed because it was the Judge cut him down. 'Twa'n't fair, didn't seem to me, and me older'n any of 'em.

"And 'twas just the same when they found Mrs. Higgins's Johnny, who had to go and git through the ice into the crick just the one week in all the winter when I was laid up with a bad foot from splittin' kindling. I begun to think I wasn't ever goin' to git my chance–but it's come. It's come at last–and I got to cut along and be there!"

Once more he leaned over the dash and slapped the old mare's back with the slack of the lines.

"Git there, you," he urged, and the complaining buggy went lurching down the rough road at the same unheard of pace at which it had ascended. Halfway down the hill, after he had lifted the mare from her shuffling fox-trot to a lumbering gallop, Old Jerry turned back for a last shouted word.

"He'll be anxious to git all I can tell him, don't you think?" the shrill falsetto drifted back to the boy who had not stirred in his tracks. "No article would be complete without that, would it?

And they's to be pictures–Sunday paper–and–maybe–in colors!"

There was an odd light burning in Denny Bolton's eyes as he stood and watched the crazy conveyance disappear from view. The half hungry, half sullen bewilderment seemed to have given place to a new confusion, as though all the questions which had always been baffling him had become, all in one breath, an astounding enigma which clamored for instant solution. Not until the shrill scream of the ungreased axles had died out altogether and his eyes fell once more to the vivid streak of red that ran across the top of the sheet still clutched in his hand did Young Denny realize that Jerry had even failed to leave him the rest of his mail–the bulky package of circulars.

He was smiling again as he turned and went slowly toward the back door of the house, but somehow, as he went, the stoop of his big shoulders seemed to have even more than the usual vague hint of weariness in their heavy droop. He even forgot that the hungry team which he had stabled just a few minutes before was still unfed, as he dropped upon the top step and spread the paper out across his knees.

"Jed The Red wins by knockout over The Texan in fourteenth round," he read again and again.

And then, with a slow forefinger blazing the way, he went on through the detailed account of the latest big heavyweight match, from the first paragraph, which stated that "Jed Conway, having disposed of The Texan at the Arena last night, by the knockout route in the fourteenth round, seems to loom up as the logical

claimant of the white heavyweight title," to the last one of all, which pithily advised the public that "the winner's share of the receipts amounted to twelve thousand dollars."

It was all couched in the choicest vocabulary of the ringside, and more than once Young Denny, whose literature had been confined chiefly to harvesters and sulky plows, had to stop and decipher phrases which he only half understood at first reading. But that last paragraph he did not fail to grasp.

It grew too dark for him to make out the small type any longer and the boy folded the paper and laid it back across his knees. With his chin resting upon one big palm he sat motionless, staring out beyond his sprawling, unpainted sheds toward the dim bulk of his hilly acres, with their jagged outcroppings of rock.

"Twelve thousand dollars!" He muttered the words aloud, under his breath. Eight hundred in three years had seemed to him an almost miraculous amount for him to have torn from that thin soil with nothing but the strength of his two hands. Now, with a bitterness that had been months in accumulating, it beat in upon his brain with sledgelike blows that he had paid too great a price–too great a price in aching shoulders and numbed thighs.

Methodically, mechanically, his mind went back over the days when he had gone to school with Jed Conway–the same Jed The Red whom the whole town was now welcoming as "our own Jeddy," and the longer he pondered the greater the problem became.

It was hard to understand. From his point of view

comprehension was impossible, at that instant. For in those earlier days, when anybody had ever mentioned Jed Conway at all, it had been only to describe him as "good for nothing," or something profanely worse. Young Denny remembered him vividly as a big, freckle-faced, bow-legged boy with red bristly hair–the biggest boy in the school–who never played but what he cheated, and always seemed able to lie himself out of his thievery.

But most vividly of all, he recalled that day when Jed Conway had disappeared from the village between sundown and dawn and failed to return. That was the same day they discovered the shortage in the old wooden till at Benson's corner store. And now Jed Conway had come home, or at least his fame had found its way back, and even Old Jerry, whipping madly toward the village to share in his reflected glory, had, for all the perfection of his "system," failed to leave the very bundle of mail which he had come to deliver.

For a long time Young Denny sat and tried to straighten it out in his brain–and failed entirely. It had grown very dark–too dark for him to make out the words upon it–when he reached into the pocket of his gray flannel shirt and drew out the card which he had found lying upon the kitchen floor that previous Saturday night, after he had lighted Dryad Anderson on her way home through the thickets. But he did not need, or even attempt, to read it.

"And it took me a month," he said aloud to the empty air

before him, “almost a month to save fifteen dollars.”

He rose at the words, stiffly, for the chill air had tightened his muscles, and stood a moment indecisively contemplating the lights which were beginning to glimmer through the dusk in the hollow, before he, too, took the long road to the village down which Old Jerry had rattled a scant hour or two before.

CHAPTER VI

The Tavern "office" was crowded and hazy with acrid blue smoke. Behind the chairs of the favored members of the old circle, who always sat in nightly conclave about the stove, a long row of men lounged against the wall, but the bitter controversies of other nights were still. Instead, the entire room was leaning forward, hanging breathlessly upon the words of the short fat man who was perched alone upon the worn desk, too engrossed even to notice Young Denny's entrance that night.

The boy stood for a moment, his hand still clasping the knob behind him, while his eyes flickered curiously over the heads of the crowd. Even before he drew the door shut behind him he saw that Judge Maynard's chair was a good foot in advance of all the others, directly in front of the stranger on the desk, and that the rest of the room was furtively taking its cue from him–pounding its knee and laughing immoderately whenever he laughed, or settling back luxuriously whenever the Judge relaxed in his chair.

Subconsciously Young Denny realized that such had always been the recognized order of arrangement, ever since he could remember. The Judge always rode in front in the parades and invariably delivered the Fourth of July oration. Undisputed he held the one vantage point in the room, but over his amply broad back, as near as he dared lean, bent Old Jerry, his thin face

working with alternate hope and half fearful uncertainty.

Denny Bolton would have recognized the man on the desk as the "newspaper writer" from New York from his clothes alone, even without the huge notebook that was propped up on his knees for corroborative evidence. From the soft felt hat, pushed carelessly back from his round, good-natured face, to the tips of his gleaming low shoes, the newcomer was a symphony in many-toned browns. And as Young Denny closed the door behind him he went on talking–addressing the entire throng before him with an easy good-fellowship that bordered on intimate *camaraderie*.

"Just the good old-fashioned stuff," he was saying; "the sort of thing that has always been the backbone of the country. That is what I want it to be. For, you see, it's like this: We haven't had a champion who came from our own real old Puritan stock in years and years like Conway has, and it'll stir up a whole lot of enthusiasm–a whole lot! I want to play that part of it up big. Now, you're the only ones who can give me that–you're the only men who knew him when he was a boy–and right there let's make that a starter! What sort of a youngster was he? Quite a handful, I should imagine–now wasn't he?"

The man on the desk crossed one fat knee over the other, tapping a flat-heeled shoe with his pencil. He tilted the brown felt hat a little farther back from his forehead and winked one eye at the Judge in jovial understanding. And Judge Maynard also crossed his knees, tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, and winked back with equal joviality.

"Well, ye-e-s," he agreed, and the agreement was weightily deliberate. "Ye-e-s, quite a handful was Jeddy."

One pudgy hand was uplifted in sudden, deprecatory haste, as though he would not be misunderstood.

"Nothing really wrong, of course," he hurried to add with oratorical emphasis. "Nothing like that! There never was anything mean or sneaking about Jeddy, s'far as I can recollect. Just mischievous–mischievous and up and coming all the time. But there were folks," Judge Maynard's voice became heavy with righteous accusation–"it's always that way, you understand–and there were folks, even right here in Jeddy's own village, who used to call him a bad egg. But I–I knew better! Nothing but mischievousness and high spirits–that's what I always thought. And I said it, too–many's the time I said–"

The big shouldered boy near the door shifted his position a little. He leaned forward until he could see Judge Maynard's round, red face a little more distinctly. There was an odd expression upon Denny Bolton's features when the fat man in brown lifted his eyes from his notebook, eyes that twinkled with sympathetic comprehension.

"–That it was better a bad egg than an omelette, eh?" he interrupted knowingly.

The Judge pounded his knee and rocked with mirth.

"Well, that's just about it–that's just about as near as words could come to it," he managed to gasp, and the circle behind him rocked, too, and pounded its knee as one man.

The man on the desk went on working industriously with his pencil, even while he was speaking.

"And then I suppose he was pretty good with his hands, too, even when he was a little shaver?" he suggested tentatively. "But then I don't suppose that any one of you ever dreamed that you had a world's champion, right here at home, in the making, did you?"

The whole room leaned nearer. Even the late comer near the door forgot himself entirely and took one step forward, his narrowing gray eyes straining upon the Judge's face.

Judge Maynard again weighed his reply, word for word.

"We-e-ll, no," he admitted. "I don't believe I can say that I downright believed that he'd make a world's champion. Don't believe's I could truthfully state that I thought that. But I guess there isn't anybody in this town that would ever deny but what I did say more than once that he'd make the best of 'em hustle–ye-e-s, sir, the very best of 'em, some day!"

The speaker turned to face the hushed room behind him, as if to challenge contradiction, and Young Denny, waiting for some one to speak, touched his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. But no contradiction came. Instead Old Jerry, leaning across the Judge's broad back, quavered breathlessly.

"That's jest it–that's jest as it was–right to a hair. It was system done it–system right from the very beginning. And many's the time the Judge says to me–says he–"

Old Jerry never finished, for Judge Maynard lifted one

hand majestically and the little white-haired old man's eager corroboration died on his lips. He shrank back into abashed silence, his lips working wordlessly.

"As I was saying," the Judge then proceeded ponderously, "I recognized he had what one could call–er–"

"Class?" the man on the desk broke in again with his engaging smile.

"Well, yes," the other continued, "or, as I was about to call it, talent. From the very first that was very apparent, but then, of course, a man in my position in the community could scarcely have been the one to encourage him openly. But he was pretty good, even as a little shaver! Why, there was nothing among the boys that he wouldn't tackle–absolutely nothing! Size, sir, never made any difference to him–not a particle. Jeddy Conway fight–!"

Again he turned to the close-packed circle behind him as if mere words were too weak things to do the question justice. And this time as he turned his eyes met squarely those of the gray-shirted figure that was staring straight back at him in a kind of fascination. For one disconcerted instant Judge Maynard wavered; he caught his breath before that level scrutiny; then with a flourish of utter finality he threw up one pudgy hand.

"There's one of 'em right now," he cried. "There's Young Denny Bolton, who went to school with him, right here in this town. *Ask him* if Jed Conway was pretty handy as a boy! Ask him," he leered around the room, an insinuating accent that

was unmistakable underrunning the words. Then a deep-throated chuckle shook him. “But maybe he won’t tell–maybe he’s still a little mite too sensitive to talk about it yet. Eh, Denny–just a little mite too sensitive?”

Denny Bolton failed to realize it at that moment, but there was a new quality in the Judge’s chuckling statement–a certain hearty admission of equality which he had only a second before denied to Old Jerry’s eager endeavor to help. The eyes of the fat man in brown lifted inquiringly from the notebook upon his knees and followed the direction of the Judge’s outstretched finger. He was still grinning expansively–and then as he saw more clearly through the thick smoke the face which Judge Maynard was indicating, the grin disappeared.

Little by little Young Denny’s body straightened until the slight shoulder stoop had entirely vanished, and all the while that his gaze never wavered from the Judge’s face his eyes narrowed and his lips grew thinner and thinner. The confused lack of understanding was gone, too, at last, from his eyes. He even smiled once, a fleeting, mirthless smile that tugged at the corners of his wide mouth. For the moment he had forgotten the circle of peering faces. The room was very still.

It was the man on the desk who finally broke that quiet, but when he spoke his voice had lost its easily intimate good-fellowship. He spoke instead in a low-toned directness.

“So you went to school with Jed The Red, did you?” he asked gravely. “Knew him when he was a kid?”

Slowly Denny Bolton's eyes traveled from the Judge's face. His lips opened with equal deliberation.

"I reckon I knew him–pretty well," he admitted.

The eyes of the man in brown were a little narrower, too, as he nodded thoughtfully.

"Er–had a few set-to's with him, yourself, now and then?"

He smiled, but even his smile was gravely direct. Again there was a heavy silence before Young Denny replied.

Then, "Maybe," he said, noncommittally. "Maybe I did."

The throbbing silence in that room went all to bits. Judge Maynard wheeled in his chair toward the man on the desk and fell to pounding his knee again in the excess of his appreciation.

"Maybe," he chortled, "maybe he did! Well–I–reckon!"

And, following his lead, the whole room rocked with laughter in which all but the man in brown joined. He alone, from his place on the desk, saw that there was a white circle about the boy's tight mouth as Young Denny turned and fumbled with the latch before he opened the door and passed quietly out into the night. He alone noticed, but there was the faintest shadow of a queer smile upon his own lips as he turned back to the big notebook open on his knees–a vaguely unpleasant smile that was not in keeping with the rotund jollity of his face.

For a moment Denny Bolton stood with his strained white face turned upward, the roar in the room behind him beating in his ears; then he turned and went blindly up the road that wound toward the bleak house on the hill–he went slowly and unsteadily,

stumbling now and again in the deep ruts which it was too dark for him to see.

It was only when he reached the crest of the hill, where Old Jerry had failed to remember to leave him his mail that afternoon, that he recalled his own failure to feed the team with which he had been ploughing all day back in the fields. And in the same blind, automatic fashion he crossed and threw open the door of the barn.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.