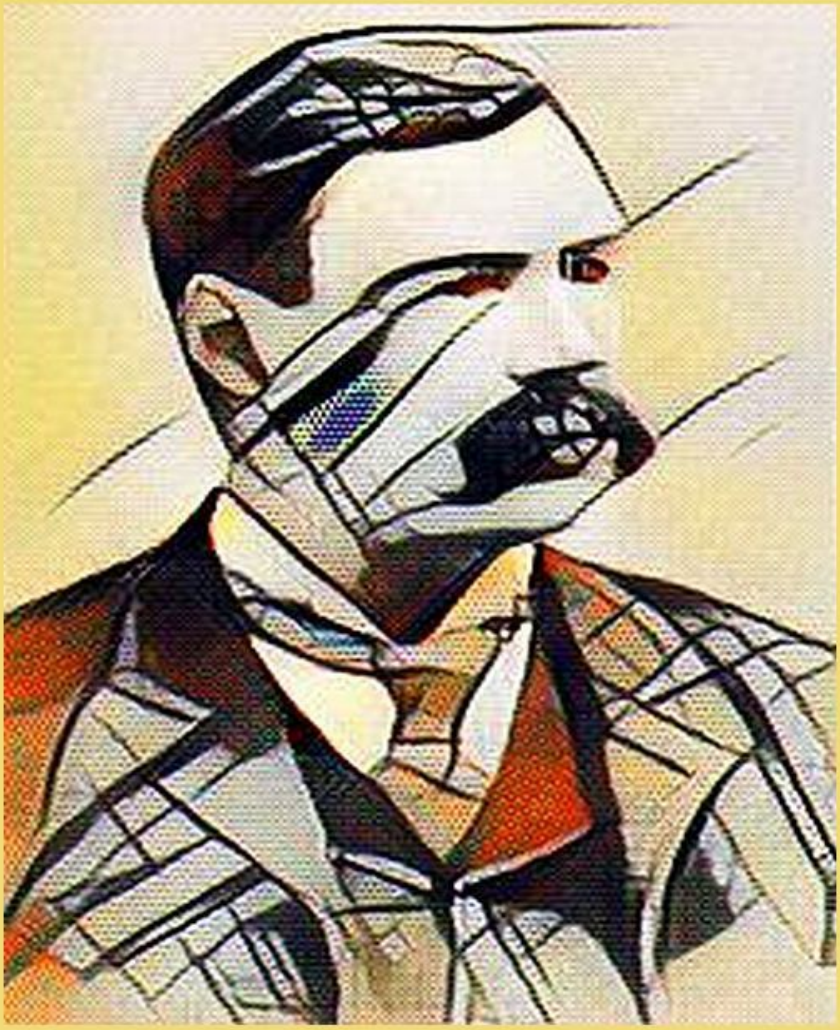
HAROLD FREDERIC



SETH'S BROTHER'S WIFE

Seth's Brother's Wife

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CHAPTER I. - THE HIRED FOLK.

" Ef ther' ain't a flare-up in this haouse 'fore long, I miss my guess," said Alvira, as she kneaded the piecrust, and pulled it out between her floury fingers to measure its consistency. " Ole Sabriny's got her back up this time to stay."

" Well, let 'em flare, says I. 'Tain't none o' aour business, Alviry."

"I knaow, Milton; but still it seems to me she might wait at least till th' corpse was aout o' th' haouse."

" What's thet got to dew with it? "

The callousness of the question must have grated upon the hired girl, for she made no reply, and slapped the dough over on the board with an impatient gesture.

It was near the close of a fair day, late in May, and the reddened sunlight from the West would have helped to glorify any human being less hopelessly commonplace than Milton Squires as he sat in its fall radiance on the doorstep, peeling and quartering apples over a pan which he held between his knees. This sunlight, to reach him, painted with warm tints many objects near at hand which it could not make picturesque. The three great barns, standing in the shadow to the south, were rickety and ancient without being comely, and the glare only made their awkward outlines and patched, paintless surfaces the meaner; the score of lean cows, standing idly fetlock-deep in the black mire of the barn-yard, or nipping the scant tufts of rank grass near the trough, seemed all the dingier and scrawnier for the brilliancy of the light which covered them; the broken gate, the bars eked out with a hop-pole, the wheelbarrow turned shiftlessly against a break in the wall, the mildewed well-curb, with its antiquated reach — all seemed in this glow of dying day to be conscious of

exhibiting at its worse their squalid side. The sunset could not well have illumined, during that hour at least, a less inspiring scene than this which Alvira, looking out as she talked, or the hired man, raising his head from over the apples, could see from the kitchen door of Lemuel Fairchild's farm-house. But any student of his species would have agreed that, in all the uninviting view, Milton was the least attractive object.

As he rose to empty his pan within, and start afresh, he could be seen more fully. He was clumsily cased from neck to ankles in brown overalls, threadbare, discolored, patched, with mud about the knees and ragged edges lower down. He wore rubber boots, over the bulging legs of which the trousers came reluctantly, and the huge feet of these were slit down the instep. His hat had been soft and black once; now it seemed stiffened with dirt, to which the afternoon milking had lent a new contribution of short reddish hair and was shapeless and colorless from age. His back was narrow and bent, and his long arms terminated in hands which it seemed sinful to have touch anything thereafter to be eaten.

Viewed from behind, Milton appeared to be at least fifty. But his face showed a somewhat younger man, despite its sun-baked lines and the frowzy beard which might be either the yellow of unkempt youth or the gray of untidy age. In reality he was not yet thirty-six.

He slouched out now with a fresh lot of apples, and, squatting on the door-stone, resumed the conversation.

"I s'pose naow Sissly's gone, ther' won't be no livin' under th' same roof with Sabriny fer any of us. Ther' ain't nobuddy lef fer her to rassle with 'cep' us. Ole Lemuel's so broken up, he won't dare say his soul's his own; 'n' John — well, Lize Wilkins says she heerd him say he didn't know's he'd come to th' fun'r'l 't all, after th' way him 'n' Sabriny hed it aout las' time he was here."

" I wasn't talkin' o'' *them* .' " said Alvira, slapping the flour from her hands and beginning with the roller; " it 'd be nothin' new, her tryin' to boss them. But she's got her dander up naow agin somebuddy that beats them all holler. They won't no Richardsons come puttin' on airs 'raoun' here, an' takin' th' parlor bedroom 'thaout askin', not ef th' ole lady knaows herself — 'n' I guess she does."

"What Richardsons?" asked Milton. "Thought Sissly was th' last of 'em — thet they wa'n't no more Richardsons." __

" Why, man alive, ain't Albert's wife a Richardson, th' daughter of Sissly's cousin — you remember, that pock-pitted man who kep' th' fast hoss ' here one summer? Of course she's a Richardson — full-blooded! When she come up from th' train here this mornin', with Albert, I see by th' ole lady's eye 't she meant misch'f I didn't want to see no raow here, with a corpse in th' haouse, 'n' so I tried to smooth matters over, 'n' kind o' quiet Sabriny daown, tellin' her thet they had to come to th' fun'r'l, 'n' they'd go 'way soon's it was through with, 'n' that Albert, bein' the oldest son, hed a right to th' comp'ny bed-room."

" 'N' what'd she say? "

" She didn't say much, 'cep' thet th' Richardsons hed never brung nothin' but bad luck to this haouse, 'n' they never would, nuther. 'N' then she flaounced upstairs to her room, jis 's she allus does when she's riled, 'n' she give Albert's wife sech a look, I said to m'self, 'Milady, I wouldn't be in your shoes far all yer fine fixin's.' "

" Well, she's a dum likely-lookin' woman, ef she is a Richardson," said Milton, with something like enthusiasm. " Wonder ef she wears one o' them low-necked gaowns when she's to hum, like th' picters in th' Ledger. They say they all dew, in New York."

" Haow sh'd I knaow! " Alvira sharply responded. " I got enough things to think of, 'thaout both'rin' my head about city women's dresses. 'N' you ought to hev, tew. Ef you 'n' Leander'd pay more heed to yer work, 'n' dew yer chores

up ship-shape, 'n' spen' less time porin' over them good-fer-nothin' storypapers, th' farm wouldn't look so run-daown 'n' slaouchy. Did yeh hear what Albert said this mornin', when he looked 'raoun'? ' I swan! ' he said, ' I b'lieve this is th' seediest-lookin' place 'n all Northern New York.' Nice thing fer him to hev to say, wa'n't it? "

" What d' I keer what ke says? He ain't th' boss here, by a jug-full! "

"'N' more's th' pity, tew. He'd make yeh toe th' mark! "

"Yes, 'n' Sabriny 'd make it lively fer his wife, tew. Th' ole fight 'baout th' Fairchileses 'n' th' Richardsons wouldn't be a succumstance to thet. Sissly 'd thank her stars thet she was dead 'n' buried aout o' th' way."

These two hired people, who discussed their employer and his family with that easy familiarity of Christian names to be found only in Russia and rural America, knew very well what portended to the house when the Richardson subject came up. Alvira Roberts had spent more than twenty years of her life in the thick of the gaseous strife between Fairchild and Richardson. She was a mere slip of a girl, barely thirteen, when she had first hired out at the homestead, and now, black-browed, sallow from much tea-drinking, and with a sharp, deep wrinkle vertically dividing her high forehead, she looked every year of her thirty-five. Compared with her, Milton Squires was a new-comer on the farm, but still there were lean old cows over yonder in the barn-yard, lazily waiting for the night-march to the pastures, that had been ravenous calves in their gruel-bucket stage when he came.

What these two did not know about the Fairchild family was hardly worth the knowing. Something of what they knew, the reader ought here to be told.

CHAPTER II. - THE STORY OF LEMUEL.

Lemuel Fairchild, the bowed, gray-haired, lumpish man who at this time sat in the main living room within, feebly rocking himself by the huge wood-stove, and trying vaguely, as he had been for thirty-six hours past, to realize that his wife lay in her final sleep in the adjoining chamber, had forty odd years before been as likely a young farmer as Dearborn County knew. He was fine-looking and popular in those days, and old Seth Fairchild, dying unexpectedly, had left to this elder son his whole possessions — six hundred acres of dairy and hop land, free and clear, a residence much above the average farm-house of these parts, and a tidy sum of money in the bank.

The contrast now was sweeping. The Fairchild's house was still the largest residential structure on the Burfield road, which led from Thessaly across the hills to remote and barbarous latitudes, but respect had long since ceased to accrue to it upon the score of its size. To the local eye, it was the badge and synonym of " rack and ruin; " while sometimes strangers of artistic tastes, chancing to travel by this unfrequented road, would voice regrets that such a prospect as opened to the vision just here, with the noble range of hills behind for the first time looming in their true proportions, should be spoiled by such a gaunt, unsightly edifice, with its tumbledown surroundings, its staring windows cheaply curtained with green paper, and its cheerless, shabby color, that indescribable gray with which rain and frost and Father Time supplant unrenewed white. The garden, comprising a quarter-acre to the east of the house, was a tangled confusion of flowers and weeds and berry-bushes run wild, yet the effect somehow was mean

rather than picturesque. The very grass in the yard to the west did not grow healthfully, but revealed patches of sandy barrenness, created by feet too indifferent or unruly to keep the path to the barns.

Yet the neighbors said, and Lemuel had come himself to feel, that the blame oi this sad falling-off was not fairly his. There had been a fatal defect in the legacy.

The one needful thing which the Hon. Seth Fairchild did not leave his elder son was the brains by means of which he himself, in one way or another, had gathered together a substantial competency, won two elections to the State Senate, and established and held for himself the position of leading citizen in his town — that most valued and intangible of American local distinctions. But while Lemuel's brown hair curled so prettily, and his eyes shone with the modest light of wealthy and well-behaved youth, nobody missed the brains. If there was any change in the management of the farm, it passed unnoticed, for all attention was centered on the great problem, interesting enough always when means seeks a help-meet, but indescribably absorbing in rural communities, where everybody knows everybody, and casual gallants never come for those luckless damsels neglected by native swains — Whom will he marry?

It boots not now to recall the heartburnings, the sad convictions that life would henceforth be a blank, the angry repinings at fate, which desolated the village of Thessaly and vicinity when Lemuel, returning from a mid-winter visit to Albany, brought a bride in the person of a bright-eyed, handsome, and clever young lady who had been Miss Cicely Richardson. He had known her, so they learned, for some years — not only during his school-days at the Academy there, but later, in what was mysteriously known in Thessaly as " society," in whose giddy mazes he had mingled while on a visit to his legislative sire at the Capital City. No, it is not worthwhile to dwell upon the village

hopes rudely destroyed by this shock — for they are dim memories of the far, far past.

But to one the blow was a disappointment not to be forgotten, or to grow dim in recollection. Miss Sabrina Fairchild was two years younger than her brother in age — a score of years his senior in firmness and will. She had only a small jointure in her father's estate, because she had great expectations from an aunt in Ohio, in perpetual memory of whose anticipated bounty she bore her romantic name, but she was a charge on her brother in that she was to have a home with him until she chose to leave it for one of her own. I doubt not that her sagacious father foresaw, from his knowledge of his daughter, the improbability that this second home would ever be offered her.

Miss Sabrina, even at this tender age, was clearly not of the marrying kind, and she grew less so with great steadiness. She was at this early date, when she was twenty-four, a woman of markedly strong character, of which perhaps the most distinct trait was family pride.

There has been a considerable army of State Senators since New York first took on the honors of a Commonwealth, and unto them a great troop of daughters have been born, but surely no other of all these girls ever exulted so fondly, nay, fiercely, in the paternal dignity as did Sabrina. She knew nothing of politics, and little of the outside world; her conceptions of social possibilities were of the most primitive sort; one winter, when she went to Albany with her father, and was passed in a bewildered way through sundry experiences said to be of a highly fashionable nature, it had been temporarily apparent to her own consciousness that she was an awkward, ignorant, red-armed country-girl — but this only for one wretched hour or, so. Every mile-post passed on her homeward ride as she looked through the stage window, brought restored self-confidence, and long before the tedious journey ended she was more the Senator's daughter than ever.

Through this very rebound from mortification she queened it over the simpler souls of the village with renewed severity and pomp. The itinerant singing-master who thought to get her for the asking into his class in the school-house Wednesday evenings, was frozen by the amazed disdain of her refusal. When young Smith Thurber, the kiln-keeper's son, in the flippant spirit of fine buttons and a resplendent fob, asked her to dance a measure with him at the Wallaces' party, the iciness of her stare fairly took away his breath.

Something can be guessed of her emotions when the brother brought home his bride. With a half-cowardly, half-kindly idea of postponing the trouble certain to ensue, he had given Sabrina no warning of his intention, and, through the slow mails of that date, only a day's advance notice of his return with Mrs. Lemuel. The storm did not burst at once. Indeed, it may be said never to have really burst. Sabrina was not a bad woman, according to her lights, and she did nothing consciously to make her sister-in-law unhappy. The young wife had a light heart, a sensible mind, and the faculty of being cheerful about many things which might be expected to annoy. But she had some pride, too, and although at the outset it was the very simple and praiseworthy pride of a well-meaning individual, incessant vaunting of the Fairchilds quite naturally gave a family twist to it, and she soon was able to resent slights in the name of all the Richardsons.

After all, was she not in the right? for while the grass was scarcely green on the grave of the first Fairchild who had amounted to anything, there were six generations of Richardsons in Albany chronicles alone who had married into the best Dutch families of that ancient, aristocratic town, to say nothing of the New England record antedating that period. Thus the case appeared to her, and came gradually to have more prominence in her mind than, in her maiden days, she could have thought possible.

So this great Forty Years' War began, in which there was to be no single grand, decisive engagement, but a thousand petty skirmishes and little raids, infinitely more vexatious and exhausting, and was waged until the weaker of the combatants, literally worn out in the fray, had laid down her arms and her life together, and was at peace at last, under the sheet in the darkened parlor.

The other veteran party to the feud, her thin, iron-gray hair half concealed under a black knit cap, her bold, sharp face red as with stains of tears, sat at the window of her own upper room, reading her Bible. If Milton and Alvira had known that she was reading in Judges, they might have been even more confident of a coming " flare-up."

CHAPTER III. - AUNT SABRINA.

Neighboring philosophers who cared, from curiosity or a loftier motive, to study the Fairchild domestic problem, in all its social and historic ramifications, generally emerged from the inquiry with some personal bias against Miss Sabrina, tempered by the conclusion that, after all, there was a good deal to be said on the old lady's side.

Certainly, as the grim old maid in the rusty bombazine gown and cap, which gave a funereal air even to the red plaid shawl over her shoulders, sat at her upper window, and tried through a pained and resentful chaos of secular thoughts to follow the Scriptural lines, there was an extremely vivid conviction uppermost in her mind that justice had been meted out neither to her nor to the Fairchilds. She would have repelled indignantly, and honestly enough too, the charge that there was any bitterness in her heart toward the sister-in-law whose burial was appointed for the morrow. She had liked poor Cicely, in her iron-clad way, and had wept genuine tears more than once since her death. Indeed, her thoughts — and they were persistent, self-asserting thoughts which not even her favorite recital of Gideon's sanguinary triumph could keep back — ran more upon the living than upon the dead.

And what gloomy, melancholy thoughts they were! They swept over two score of years, the whole gamut of emotion, from the pride and hope of youth to the anguish of disappointed, wrathful, hopeless old age, as her hand might cover all there was of sound in music by a run down her mother's ancient spinet which stood, mute and forgotten, in the corner of the room. Her brother, this brother whom

satirical fate had made a Lemuel instead of a Lucy or a Lucretia, a man instead of a woman, as befitted his weakness of mind and spirit — had begun life with a noble heritage. Where was it now? He had been the heir to a leading position among the men of his county. What was he now? The Fairchilds had been as rich, as respected, as influential as any Dearborn family. Who did them honor now?

The mental answers to these questions blurred Miss Sabrina's spectacles with tears, and Gideon's performance with the lamps seemed a tiresome thing. She laid the Book aside, and went softly downstairs to her brother, who sat, still rocking in his late wife's high, cushioned arm-chair, disconsolate by the stove.

There were also in the room his eldest son and this son's wife, sitting dumbly, each at a window, making a seemly pretense of not being bored by the meagre prospect without. They looked at their aunt in that far-off impassive manner with which participants in a high pageant or solemn observance always regard one another. There was no call for a greeting, since they had already exchanged whispered conversations, earlier in the day. Miss Sabrina glanced at the young wife for an instant — it was not a kindly glance. Then her eyes turned to the husband, and, while surveying him, seemed suddenly to light up with some new thought. She almost smiled, and her tight-pressed lips parted. Had they followed the prompting of the brain, and spoken, the words would have been:

" Thank God, there is still Albert! " Albert Fairchild would have been known in any company, and in any guise, I think, for a lawyer. The profession had its badge in every line and aspect of his face, in every movement of his head, and, so it seemed, in the way he held his hands, in the very tone of his voice. His face was round, and would have been pleasant, so far as conformation and expression went, had it not been for the eyes, which were unsympathetic, almost cold. Often the

rest of his countenance was wreathed in amiable smiles; but the eyes smiled never. He had looked a middle-aged man for a decade back, and casual acquaintances who met him from year to year complimented him on not growing old, because they saw no change. In fact, he had been old from the beginning, and even now looked more than his age, which lacked some few months of forty. He was growing bald above the temples, and, like all the Fairchilds, was taking on flesh with increasing years.

Nothing could have better shown the extremity of poor Sabrina's woe than this clutching at the relief afforded by the sight of Albert, for she was not on good terms with him. Albert had been born and reared through boyhood at a time when the farm was still prosperous and money plenty. He had been educated far beyond the traditions of his sires, and was the first University man of his family, so far as was known. He had been given his own bent in all things before he settled down to a choice of profession, and then, at considerable expense, had been secured a place with one of the greatest legal firms in New York City. For years the first fruits of the soil, the cream off all the milk — so the aunt's mingled scriptural and dairy metaphors ran — had been his. And what return had they had for it? He had become a sound, successful lawyer, with a handsome income, and he had married wealth as well. Yet year after year, as the fortunes of the Fairchild homestead declined, he had never interfered to prevent the fresh mortgage being placed — nay, had more than once explicitly declined to help save it.

" Agriculture is out of date in this State," she had heard him say once, with her own ears. " Better let the old people live on their capital, as they go along. It's no use throwing good money after bad. Farm land here in the East is bound to decrease in value, steadily."

This about the homestead — about the cradle of his ancestors! Poor old lady, had the Fairchilds been sending baronial roots down through all this soil for a thousand

years, she couldn't have been more pained or mortified over Albert's callous view of the farm which her grandfather, a revolted cobbler from Rhode Island, had cleared and paid for at ten cents an acre.

Then there was his marriage, too. In all the years of armed neutrality or tacit warfare which she and Cicely had passed together under one roof, they had never before or since come so near an open and palpable rupture as they did over a city-bred cousin of Cicely's — a forward, impertinent, ill-behaved girl from New York, who had come to the farm on a visit some ten years before, and whose father was summoned at last to take her away, because otherwise she, Sabrina, threatened to herself leave the house. There had been a desperate scene before this conclusion was reached. Sabrina had stormed and threatened to shake the dust of the homestead from off her outraged sandals. Cicely for the once had stood her ground, and said she fancied even "worse things than that might happen without producing a universal cataclysm. Lemuel had almost wept with despair over the tumult. The two older boys, particularly John, had not concealed their exuberant hope that their maiden aunt might be taken at her word, and allowed to leave. And the girl herself, this impudent hussy of a Richardson, actually put her spoke in too, and said things about old cats and false teeth, which it made Sabrina's blood still boil to recall.

And it was this girl, of all others in the world, whom Albert must go and marry!

Yet Sabrina, in her present desponding mood, felt herself able to rise above mere personal piques and dislikes, if there really was a hope for the family's revival. She was not very sanguine about even Albert, but beyond him there was no chance at all.

John, the second brother, had talent enough, she supposed. People said he was smart, and he must be, else he could scarcely have come in his twenty-eighth year to be

owner and editor of the Thessaly Banner of Liberty, and put in all those political pieces written in the first person plural, as if he had the power of attorney for all Dearborn county. But then he was mortally shiftless about money matters, and they did say that since his wife's death — a mere school-teacher she had been — he had become quite dissipated and played billiards. Besides she was at open feud with him, and never, never would speak to him again, the longest day he lived! So that settled John.

As for Seth, the youngest of the brothers, it is to be doubted if she would have thought of him at all, had he not come in at the moment. He had been down to the village to get some black clothes which the tailor had constructed on short notice for him and he, too, passed through the sitting-room to the stairs with the serious look and the dead silence which the awful presence imposes.

Then she did think of him for a moment, as she stood warming her fingers over the bald, flat top of the stove — for though bright and warm enough outside, the air was still chilly in these great barns of rooms.

Seth was indisputably the handsomest of all the Fairchilds, even handsomer than she remembered his father to have been — a tall, straight, broad-shouldered youth, who held his head well up and looked everybody in the face with honest hazel eyes. He had the Richardson complexion, a dusky tint gained doubtless from all those Dutch intermarriages of which poor Cicely used to make so much, but his brown hair curled much as Lemuel's used to curl, only not so effeminately, and his temper was as even as his father's had been, though not so submissive or weak. His hands were rough and coarse from the farm work, and his walk showed familiarity with ploughed ground, but still he had, in his way, a more distinguished air than either Albert or John had ever had.

Looking him over, a stranger would have been surprised that his aunt should have left him out of her thoughts of the

family's future — or that, once pausing to consider him, she should have dropped the idea so swiftly. But so it was. Miss Sabrina felt cold and aggrieved toward Albert, and she came as near hating John as a deeply devout woman safely could. She simply took no account of Seth at all, as she would have expressed it. To her he was a quiet, harmless sort of youngster, who worked pretty steadily on the farm, and got on civilly with people. She understood that he was very fond of reading, but that made no special impression on her. If she had been asked, she would undoubtedly have said that Seth was her favorite nephew — but she had never dreamed of regarding him as a possible restorer of the family glories.

"Is yer oven hot enough?" she asked Alvira in the kitchen, a minute later. "If they's anything I dew hate, it's a soggy undercrust."

"I guess I kin manage a batch o' pies by this time," returned the hired girl, with a sniff. Through some unexplained process of reasoning, Alvira was with the Fairchilds as against the Richardsons, but she was first of all for herself, against the whole human race.

" Milton gone aout with the caows? " asked the old lady, ignoring for the once the domestic's challenge. " When he comes back, he 'n' Leander better go over to Wilkinses, and get what chair-s they kin spare. I s'pose there'll be a big craowd, ef only to git in and see if there's any holes in our body-Brussels yit, 'n' haow that sofy-backed set in the parlor's holdin' out. Poor Cicely! I think they better bring over the chairs to-night, after dusk. What people don't see they can't talk abaout."

"Heard Milton say he was goin' to borrer some over at Warren's," remarked Alvira, in a casual way, but looking around to see how the idea affected Miss Sabrina.

"Well, he jis' won't!" came the answer, very promptly and spiritedly. "If every mortal soul of 'em lies to stan' up, he won't! I guess Lemuel Fairchild's wife can be buried 'thaout

asking any help from Matildy Warren. I wouldn't ask her if 'twas th' las' thing I ever did."

" But Annie sent word she was comin' over fus' thing in th' mornin', so's to help clear up th' breakfast things. If she's good enough fer that, I don't see why you need be afeered o' borryin' her chairs."

" They ain't her chairs, and you knaow it, Alviry.

I ain't got a word to say agin' Annie Fairchild, but when it comes to her gran'mother, I kin ride a high horse as well's she kin. After all the trouble she made my family, the sight of a single stick of her furnitur' here 'd be enough to bring the rafters of this haouse daown over my head, I do believe! "

"Well, of course, 'tain't none o' my business, but seems to me there'll be a plaguey slim fun'r'l when *your* turn comes, if you're goin' to keep up all these old-woman's fights with everybody 'raound abaout."

" Naow, Alviry! " began Miss Sabrina, in her shrillest and angriest tone; then with a visible effort, as if remembering something, she paused, and then went on in a subdued, almost submissive voice, " You knaow jis' haow Matildy Warren's used us. From the very day my poor brother William ran off with her Jenny — and goodness knaows whatever possessed him to dew it — thet old woman's never missed a chance to run us all daown — ez ef she oughtn't to been praoud o' th' day a Fairchild took up with a Warren."

" Guess you ain't had none the wu'st of it," put in Alvira, with sarcasm. " Guess your tongue's 'baout as sharp as her'n ever was. B'sides, she's bedridden naow, 'n' everybody thought she wouldn't get threw th' spring. 'N' ef Seth's goin' to make up to Annie, you ought to begin to smooth things over 'fore she dies. There's no tellin' but what she mightn't leave the farm away f'm th' girl at th' last minute, jis' to spite you."

"Yeh needn't talk as if I wanted her pesky farm! "

'.' Oh, well now, you knaow what I mean 's well 's I dew. What's th' use o' harpin' on what yer brother William did, or what ole Matildy said, 'fore I was born, when you knaow th' tew farms jine, and yer heart's sot on havin"em in one — Yes, 'fore I was born," repeated the domestic, as if pleased with the implication of juvenility.

Miss Sabrina hesitated, and looked at Alvira meditatively through her spectacles, in momentary doubt about the propriety of saying a sharp thing under all the circumstances; but the temptation was not to be resisted. " 'N' you ain't percisely a chicken yourself, Alviry," she said, and left the kitchen.

Later, when Milton had returned from the pasture, and hung about the kitchen, mending the harness that went with the democrat waggon while waiting for Leander to return from the cheese factory, Alvira remarked:

" Seems 's if Sabriny 'd lost all her sper't this last day or tew. Never see sech a change. She don't answer up wuth a cent. I shouldn't be s'prised if she didn't tackle Albert's wife after all. Oh yes, 'n' you ain't to go to Warren's for them chairs. Sabriny's dead-set agin that."

"What's up?" asked Milton. "Hez Seth broke off with Annie? "

"Don't knaow 's they ever' was anything particular to break off. No, 'tain't that; it's the same raow 'tween the two ole women. Goodness knaows, I'm sick 'n' tired of hearin"baout it."

" No, but ain't Seth 'n' Annie fixed it up? " persisted Milton; " daown 't th' corners they say it's all settled." Then he mutteringly added, as he slouched out to meet Leander, who drove up now with a great rattle of empty milk-cans, " I wish 't I was in Seth's shoes."

" Oh, you devj, dew yeh? " said Alvira, thus left to herself.

CHAPTER IV. - THE TWO YOUNG WOMEN.

The young girl whose future had been settled down at the corners came along the road next morning toward the Fairchild house, all unconscious of her destiny. She lived in a small, old-fashioned farm-dwelling back in the fields, alone with her grandmother, and although there was a bitter feud between the heads of the two houses, it had not stopped her from being a familiar and helpful figure in her uncle's homestead.

Annie Fairchild was a country girl in some senses of the term, calm-faced, clear-eyed, self-reliant among her friends, but with a curious disposition toward timidity in the presence of strangers. She was held to be too serious and " school-ma'am-ish " for pleasant company by most rural maidens of her acquaintance, and the few attempts of young farmers of the countryside to establish friendly relations with her had not been crowned with conspicuous success. It could scarcely be said that she was haughty or cold; no one could demonstrate in detail that her term of schooling in a far-off citified seminary had made her proud or uncivil; but still she had no intimates.

This was the more marked from the fact that she was a pretty girl — or if not precisely pretty, very attractive and winning in face. No other girl of the neighborhood had so fine and regular a profile, or such expressive dark eyes, or so serenely intelligent an expression. It had been whispered at one time that Reuben Tracy, the schoolmaster, was likely to make a match of it with her, but this had faded away again as a rootless rumor; by this time everybody on the Burfield road tacitly understood that eventually she was to be the wife of her cousin Seth, when it " came time for

the two farms to join." And she had grown accustomed long since to the furtive, half-awed, half-covetous look which men cast upon her, without suspecting the spirit of reluctant renunciation underlying it.

She met Milton Squires on the road, close in front of the Fairchild's house, this morning, and, nodding to him, passed on. She did not particularly note the gaze he bent upon her as she went by, and which followed her afterward, almost to the Fairchild gate. If she had done so, and could have read all its meaning, she would not have gone on with so unruffled a face, for it was a look to frighten an honest young woman — an intent, hungry, almost wolfish look, unrelieved by so much as a glimmer of the light of manliness.

But she was alike unconscious of his thoughts and of the gossip he had heard at the corners. Certainly no listener who followed her to the gate, where she encountered Seth at work screwing on a new hinge, would have gathered from the tone or words of the greeting on either side any testimony to confirm the common supposition that they were destined for each other.

" Good morning, Seth," she said, halting while he dragged the great gate open for her, " you're all through breakfast, I suppose? "

" No; I think Albert and his wife are at the table still. We didn't call them when the rest got up, you know. They're not used to country ways."

" Anybody else here? "

" No, except John."

" Oh, I'm so glad he came. That Lize Wilkins has been telling everybody he wouldn't come on Sabrina's account. And it would have looked so bad."

" Yes, Lize Wilkins talks too much. All John ever said was that he wouldn't stay here in the house any more than he could help. It's too bad he can't get along better with Aunt; it would make things so much pleasanter."

" How's your father, Seth? He seemed at first to take it pretty hard."

"He appeared a little brighter yesterday, after Albert came, but he's very poorly this morning. Poor old man! it makes a sad difference with him — more, I suppose, than with us boys, even with me, who never have been away from her hardly for a day."

" Yes, Seth, a boy outgrows his mother, I suppose; but for an old couple who have lived together forty years a separation like this must be awful. I shall go up to the house now.''

Seth followed her with his eyes as she walked up the road, past the old-fashioned latticed front door with its heavy fold of crape hanging on the knocker, and turned from sight at the corner of the house; and the look in his face -n-as soft and admiring, even if it was hardly lover-like. In his trouble — and he felt the bereavement most keenly — it seemed restful and good to have such a girl as Annie about. Indeed, a vague thought that she had never before seemed so sweet and likeable came to him, as he turned again to the hinge, and lightened his heart perceptibly, for almost the last words his mother had spoken to him had been of his future with Annie as his wife.

" You will have the farm before long, Seth," she said, smiling faintly as he stroked her pale hair — somehow to the last it never grew grey — and looked at her through boyish tears, "and Annie will bring you the Warren farm. Her grandmother and I have talked it over many a time. . Annie's a good girl, there's no better, and she'll make my boy a good, true wife."

For a year or two back Seth had understood in a nebulous way that his parents had an idea of his eventually marrying Annie, but his mother's words still came to him in the form of a surprise. First, it had been far from his thoughts that old Mrs. Warren, Annie's invalid grandmother, would listen to such a thing, much less plan it. There was a bitterness of

long standing between the two families, he knew. His father's younger brother — a half-brother — named William Fairchild, had married Mrs. Warren's only daughter under circumstances which he had never heard detailed, but which at least had enraged the mother. Both William and his wife had died, out West, he believed, years and years ago, leaving only this girl, Annie Fairchild, who came an orphan to the grandmother she had never seen before, and was reared by her. In this Mrs. Warren and his aunt Sabrina had found sufficient occasion for a quarrel, lasting ever since he could remember, and as he had always understood from his aunt that her battle was in defense of the whole family, he had taken it for granted that he not less than the other Fairchilds were included in Mrs. Warren's disfavor. He recalled, now, indeed, having heard Annie say once or twice that her grandmother liked him; but this he had taken in a negative way, as if the grandmother of the Capulets had remarked that of all the loathed Montagus perhaps young Romeo was personally the least offensive to her sight.

And second, he was far from being in a Romeo's condition of heart and mind. He was not in love with Annie for herself — much less for the Warren farm. To state plainly what Seth had not yet mustered courage to say in entire frankness even to himself, he hated farming, and rebelled against the idea of following in his father's footsteps. And the dreams of a career elsewhere which occupied the mutinous thoughts Seth concealed under so passive an exterior had carried him far away from the plan of an alliance with the nice sort of country cousin who would eventually own the adjoining farm. So in this sense, too, his mother's dying words were a surprise — converting into a definite and almost sacred desire what he had supposed to be merely a shapeless fancy.

Not all this crossed his mind, as he watched Annie till she disappeared, and then turned back to his work. But the

sight of her had been pleasant to him, and her voice had sounded very gentle, and yet full of the substance of womanliness —:and perhaps his poor, dear mother's plan for him, after all, was the best.

The gate swinging properly at last, there was an end to Seth's out-door tasks, and he started toward the house. The thought that he would see Annie within was distinct enough in his mind, almost, to constitute a motive for his going. At the very door he encountered his brother Albert's wife, coming out, and stopped.

Isabel Fairchild was far from deserving, at least as a woman, the epithets with which Aunt Sabrina mentally coupled her girlhood. There was nothing impertinent or ill-behaved about her appearance, certainly, as she stood before Seth, and with a faint smile bade him good morning.

She was above the medium height, as woman's stature goes, and almost plump; her hair, much of which was shown in front by the pretty Parisian form of straw hat she wore, was very light in color; her eyes were blue, a light, noticeable blue. She wore some loose kind of black and gray morning dress, with an extra fold falling in graceful lines from her shoulders to her train, like a toga, and she carried a dainty parasol, also of black and gray, like the ribbons on her dark hat. To Seth's eyes she had seemed yesterday, when he saw her for the first time, a very embodiment of the luxury, beauty, refinement of city life — and how much more so now, when her dingy travelling raiment had given place to this most engaging garb, so subdued, yet so lovely. It seemed to him that his sister-in-law was quite the most attractive woman he had ever seen.

" I thought of going for a little stroll," she said, again with the faint, half-smile. " It is so charming outside, and so blue and depressing in the house. Can I walk along there through the orchard now? — I used to when I was here as a girl, I know — and won't you come with me? I've scarcely had a chance for a word with you since we came."

The invitation was pleasant enough to Seth, but he looked down deprecatingly at his rough chore clothes, and wondered whether he ought to accept it or not.

" Why, Seth, the idea of standing on ceremony with me? As if we hadn't played together here as children — to say nothing of my being your sister now!"

They had started how toward the orchard, and she continued —

" Do you know, it seems as if I didn't know anybody here but you — and even you almost make a stranger out of me. Poor Uncle Lemuel, he is so broken down that he scarcely remembers me, and ot course your aunt and I couldn't be expected to get very intimate — you remember our dispute? Then John, he's very pleasant, and all that, but he isn't at all like the John I used to look up to so, the summer I was here. But you — you have hardly changed a bit. Of course," she made haste to add, for Seth's face did not reflect unalloyed gratification at this, " you have grown manly and big, and all that, but you haven't changed in your expression or manner. It's almost ten years — and I should have known you anywhere. But John has changed — he's more like a city man, or rather a villager, a compromise between city and country."

" Yes, I'm a countryman through and through, I suppose," said Seth, with something very like a sigh.

" John has seen a good deal of the world, they tell me, and been on papers in large cities. I wonder how he can content himself with that little weekly in Thessaly after that."

" I don't think John has much ambition," answered Seth, meditatively. '' He doesn't seem to care much how things go, if he only has the chance to say what he wants to say in print. It doesn't make any difference to him, apparently, whether all New York State reads what he writes, or only thirty or forty fellows in Dearborn County — he's just as well satisfied. And yet he's a very bright man, too. He might

have gone to the Assembly last fall, if he could have bid against Elhanan Pratt. He will go some time, probably."

" Why, do you have an auction here for the Assembly? "

" Oh no; but the man who's willing to pay a big assessment into the campaign fund can generally shut a poor candidate out. John didn't seem to mind much about being frozen out, though — not half so much as I did, for him. Everybody in Thessaly knows him and likes him and calls him ' John,' and that seems to be the height of his ambition. I can't imagine a man of his abilities being satisfied with so limited a horizon."

" And you, Seth, what is your horizon like? " asked Isabel.

They had entered the orchard path, now, and the apple blossoms close above them filled the May morning air with that sweet spring perfume which seems to tell of growth, harvest, the fruition of hope.

" Oh, I'm picked out to be a countryman all the days of my life, I suppose." There was the sigh again, and a tinge of bitterness in his tone, as well.

" Oh, I hope not — that is, if you don't want to be. Oh, it must be such a dreary life! The very thought of it sets my teeth on edge. The dreadful people you have to know: men without an idea beyond crops and calves and the cheese-factory; women slaving their lives out doing bad cooking, mending for a houseful of men, devoting their scarce opportunities for intercourse with other women to the weakest and most wretched gossip; coarse servants, who eat at the table with their employers and call them by their Christian names; boys whose only theory about education is thrashing the school teacher, if it is a man, or breaking her heart by their mean insolence if it is a woman; and girls brought up to be awkward gawks, without a chance in life, since the brighter and nicer they are the more they will suffer from marriage with men mentally beneath them — that is, if they don't become sour old maids. I don't wonder you hate it all, Seth."

"You talk like a book," said Seth, in tones of unmistakable admiration. " I didn't suppose any woman could talk like that."

" I talk as I feel always, when I come into contact with country life, and I get angry with people who maunder about its romantic and picturesque side. Where is it, I should like to know? "

" Oh, it isn't all so bad as you paint it, perhaps, Isabel. Of course "—here he hesitated a little — " you don't quite see it at its best here, you know. Father hasn't been a first-rate manager, and things have kind o' run down."

"No, Seth, it isn't that; the trail of the serpent is over it all — rich and poor, big and little. The nineteenth century is a century of cities; they have given their own twist to the progress of the age — and the farmer is almost as far out of it as if he lived in Alaska. Perhaps there may have been a time when a man could live in what the poet calls daily communion with Nature and not starve his mind and dwarf his soul, but this isn't the century."

" But Webster was a farm boy, and so was Lincoln and Garfield and Jackson — almost all our great men. Hardly any of them were born in cities, you will find."

" Oh, the country is just splendid to be to born in, no doubt of that; but after you are born, get out of it as soon as you can."

"I don't know as I can leave father very well," said Seth slowly, and as if in deep thought.

They walked to the end of the pasture beyond the orchard, to within view of the spot where all the Fairchilds for three generations had been laid, and where, among the clustering sweet-briars and wild strawberry vines, Milton had only yesterday dug a new grave. The sight recalled to both another subject, and no more was said of country life as they returned to the house. Indeed, little was said of any sort, for Seth had a thinking mood on. Nothing was very clear in his mind, perhaps, but more distinctly than