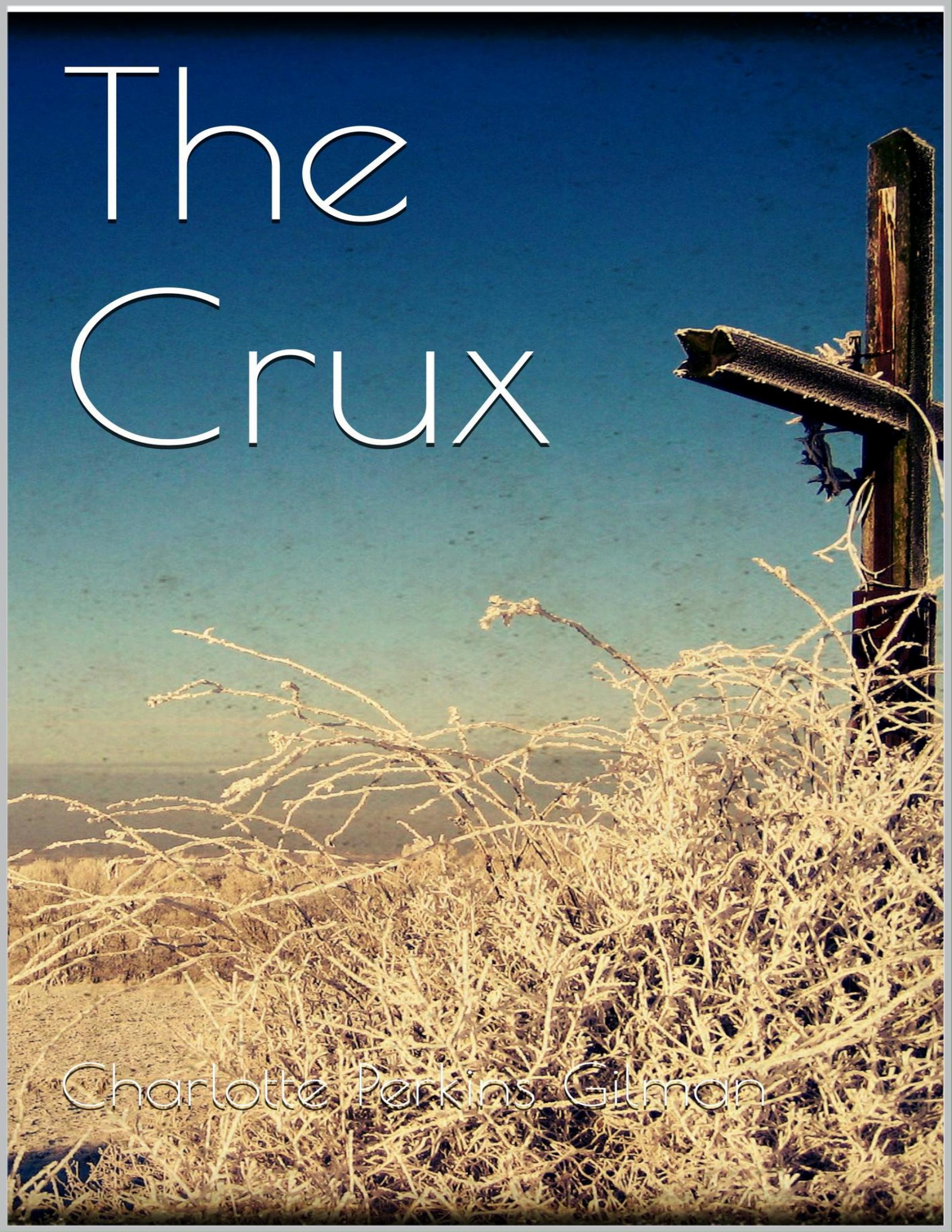
The Crux



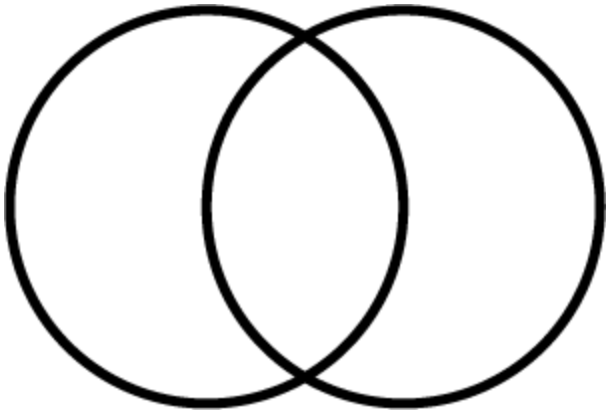
Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The Crux

The Crux

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

PREFACE



This story is, first, for young women to read; second, for young men to read; after that, for anybody who wants to. Anyone who doubts its facts and figures is referred to "Social Diseases and Marriage," by Dr. Prince Morrow, or to "Hygiene and Morality," by Miss Lavinia Dock, a trained nurse of long experience.

Some will hold that the painful facts disclosed are unfit for young girls to know. Young girls are precisely the ones who must know them, in order that they may protect themselves and their children to come. The time to know of danger is before it is too late to avoid it.

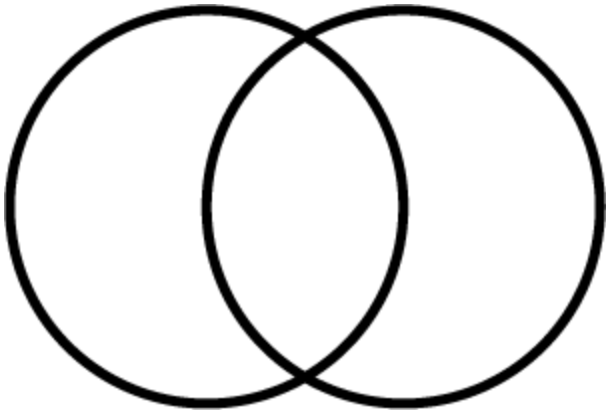
If some say "Innocence is the greatest charm of young girls," the answer is, "What good does it do them?"

Who should know but the woman?—The young wife-to-be?
Whose whole life hangs on the choice;
To her the ruin, the misery;
To her, the deciding voice.

Who should know but the woman?—The mother-to-be?
Guardian, Giver, and Guide;
If she may not foreknow, forejudge and foresee,
What safety has childhood beside?

Who should know but the woman?—The girl in her youth?
The hour of the warning is then,
That, strong in her knowledge and free in her truth,
She may build a new race of new men.

CHAPTER I



THE BACK WAY

Along the same old garden path,
Sweet with the same old flowers;
Under the lilacs, darkly dense,
The easy gate in the backyard fence—
Those unforgotten hours!

The "Foote Girls" were bustling along Margate Street with an air of united purpose that was unusual with them. Miss Rebecca wore her black silk cloak, by which it might be seen that "a call" was toward. Miss Jessie, the thin sister, and Miss Sallie, the fat one, were more hastily attired. They were persons of less impressiveness than Miss Rebecca, as was tacitly admitted by their more familiar nicknames, a concession never made by the older sister.

Even Miss Rebecca was hurrying a little, for her, but the others were swifter and more impatient.

"Do come on, Rebecca. Anybody'd think you were eighty instead of fifty!" said Miss Sallie.

"There's Mrs. Williams going in! I wonder if she's heard already. Do hurry!" urged Miss Josie.

But Miss Rebecca, being concerned about her dignity, would not allow herself to be hustled, and the three

proceeded in irregular order under the high-arched elms and fence-topping syringas of the small New England town toward the austere home of Mr. Samuel Lane.

It was a large, uncompromising, square, white house, planted starkly in the close-cut grass. It had no porch for summer lounging, no front gate for evening dalliance, no path-bordering beds of flowers from which to pluck a hasty offering or more redundant tribute. The fragrance which surrounded it came from the back yard, or over the fences of neighbors; the trees which waved greenly about it were the trees of other people. Mr. Lane had but two trees, one on each side of the straight and narrow path, evenly placed between house and sidewalk—evergreens.

Mrs. Lane received them amiably; the minister's new wife, Mrs. Williams, was proving a little difficult to entertain. She was from Cambridge, Mass., and emanated a restrained consciousness of that fact. Mr. Lane rose stiffly and greeted them. He did not like the Foote girls, not having the usual American's share of the sense of humor. He had no enjoyment of the town joke, as old as they were, that "the three of them made a full yard;" and had frowned down as a profane impertinent the man—a little sore under some effect of gossip—who had amended it with "make an 'ell, I say."

Safely seated in their several rocking chairs, and severally rocking them, the Misses Foote burst forth, as was their custom, in simultaneous, though by no means identical remarks.

"I suppose you've heard about Morton Elder?"

"What do you think Mort Elder's been doing now?"

"We've got bad news for poor Miss Elder!"

Mrs. Lane was intensely interested. Even Mr. Lane showed signs of animation.

"I'm not surprised," he said.

"He's done it now," opined Miss Josie with conviction. "I always said Rella Elder was spoiling that boy."

"It's too bad—after all she's done for him! He always was a scamp!" Thus Miss Sallie.
"I've been afraid of it all along," Miss Rebecca was saying, her voice booming through the lighter tones of her sisters. "I always said he'd never get through college."
"But who is Morton Elder, and what has he done?" asked Mrs. Williams as soon as she could be heard.
This lady now proved a most valuable asset. She was so new to the town, and had been so immersed in the suddenly widening range of her unsalaried duties as "minister's wife," that she had never even heard of Morton Elder.
A new resident always fans the languishing flame of local conversation. The whole shopworn stock takes on a fresh lustre, topics long trampled flat in much discussion lift their heads anew, opinions one scarce dared to repeat again become almost authoritative, old stories flourish freshly, acquiring new detail and more vivid color.
Mrs. Lane, seizing her opportunity while the sisters gasped a momentary amazement at anyone's not knowing the town scapegrace, and taking advantage of her position as old friend and near neighbor of the family under discussion, swept into the field under such headway that even the Foote girls remained silent perforce; surcharged, however, and holding their breaths in readiness to burst forth at the first opening.
"He's the nephew—orphan nephew—of Miss Elder—who lives right back of us—our yards touch—we've always been friends—went to school together, Rella's never married—she teaches, you know—and her brother—he owned the home—it's all hers now, he died all of a sudden and left two children—Morton and Susie. Mort was about seven years old and Susie just a baby. He's been an awful cross—but she just idolizes him—she's spoiled him, I tell her."
Mrs. Lane had to breathe, and even the briefest pause left her stranded to wait another chance. The three social

benefactors proceeded to distribute their information in a clattering torrent. They sought to inform Mrs. Williams in especial, of numberless details of the early life and education of their subject, matters which would have been treated more appreciatively if they had not been blessed with the later news; and, at the same time, each was seeking for a more dramatic emphasis to give this last supply of incident with due effect.

No regular record is possible where three persons pour forth statement and comment in a rapid, tumultuous stream, interrupted by cross currents of heated contradiction, and further varied by the exclamations and protests of three hearers, or at least, of two; for the one man present soon relapsed into disgusted silence.

Mrs. Williams, turning a perplexed face from one to the other, inwardly condemning the darkening flood of talk, yet conscious of a sinful pleasure in it, and anxious as a guest, *and* a minister's wife, to be most amiable, felt like one watching three kinetescopes at once. She saw, in confused pictures of blurred and varying outline, Orella Elder, the young New England girl, only eighteen, already a "school ma'am," suddenly left with two children to bring up, and doing it, as best she could. She saw the boy, momentarily changing, in his shuttlecock flight from mouth to mouth, through pale shades of open mischief to the black and scarlet of hinted sin, the terror of the neighborhood, the darling of his aunt, clever, audacious, scandalizing the quiet town.

"Boys are apt to be mischievous, aren't they?" she suggested when it was possible.

"He's worse than mischievous," Mr. Lane assured her sourly. "There's a mean streak in that family."

"That's on his mother's side," Mrs. Lane hastened to add. "She was a queer girl—came from New York."

The Foote girls began again, with rich profusion of detail, their voices rising shrill, one above the other, and playing

together at their full height like emulous fountains.
"We ought not to judge, you know;" urged Mrs. Williams. "What do you say he's really done?"
Being sifted, it appeared that this last and most terrible performance was to go to "the city" with a group of "the worst boys of college," to get undeniably drunk, to do some piece of mischief. (Here was great licence in opinion, and in contradiction.)
" *Anyway* he's to be suspended!" said Miss Rebecca with finality.
"Suspended!" Miss Josie's voice rose in scorn. " *Expelled!* They said he was expelled."
"In disgrace!" added Miss Sallie.
Vivian Lane sat in the back room at the window, studying in the lingering light of the long June evening. At least, she appeared to be studying. Her tall figure was bent over her books, but the dark eyes blazed under their delicate level brows, and her face flushed and paled with changing feelings.
She had heard—who, in the same house, could escape hearing the Misses Foote?—and had followed the torrent of description, hearsay, surmise and allegation with an interest that was painful in its intensity.
"It's a *shame* !" she whispered under her breath. "A *shame* ! And nobody to stand up for him!"
She half rose to her feet as if to do it herself, but sank back irresolutely.
A fresh wave of talk rolled forth.
"It'll half kill his aunt."
"Poor Miss Elder! I don't know what she'll do!"
"I don't know what *he'll* do. He can't go back to college."
"He'll have to go to work."
"I'd like to know where—nobody'd hire him in this town."
The girl could bear it no longer. She came to the door, and there, as they paused to speak to her, her purpose ebbed again.

"My daughter, Vivian, Mrs. Williams," said her mother; and the other callers greeted her familiarly.
"You'd better finish your lessons, Vivian," Mr. Lane suggested.
"I have, father," said the girl, and took a chair by the minister's wife. She had a vague feeling that if she were there, they would not talk so about Morton Elder.
Mrs. Williams hailed the interruption gratefully. She liked the slender girl with the thoughtful eyes and pretty, rather pathetic mouth, and sought to draw her out. But her questions soon led to unfortunate results.
"You are going to college, I suppose?" she presently inquired; and Vivian owned that it was the desire of her heart.
"Nonsense!" said her father. "Stuff and nonsense, Vivian! You're not going to college."
The Foote girls now burst forth in voluble agreement with Mr. Lane. His wife was evidently of the same mind; and Mrs. Williams plainly regretted her question. But Vivian mustered courage enough to make a stand, strengthened perhaps by the depth of the feeling which had brought her into the room.
"I don't know why you're all so down on a girl's going to college. Eve Marks has gone, and Mary Spring is going—and both the Austin girls. Everybody goes now."
"I know one girl that won't," was her father's incisive comment, and her mother said quietly, "A girl's place is at home—'till she marries."
"Suppose I don't want to marry?" said Vivian.
"Don't talk nonsense," her father answered. "Marriage is a woman's duty."
"What do you want to do?" asked Miss Josie in the interests of further combat. "Do you want to be a doctor, like Jane Bellair?"
"I should like to very much indeed," said the girl with quiet intensity. "I'd like to be a doctor in a babies' hospital."

"More nonsense," said Mr. Lane. "Don't talk to me about that woman! You attend to your studies, and then to your home duties, my dear."

The talk rose anew, the three sisters contriving all to agree with Mr. Lane in his opinions about college, marriage and Dr. Bellair, yet to disagree violently among themselves.

Mrs. Williams rose to go, and in the lull that followed the liquid note of a whippoorwill met the girl's quick ear. She quietly slipped out, unnoticed.

The Lane's home stood near the outer edge of the town, with an outlook across wide meadows and soft wooded hills. Behind, their long garden backed on that of Miss Orella Elder, with a connecting gate in the gray board fence. Mrs. Lane had grown up here. The house belonged to her mother, Mrs. Servilla Pettigrew, though that able lady was seldom in it, preferring to make herself useful among two growing sets of grandchildren.

Miss Elder was Vivian's favorite teacher. She was a careful and conscientious instructor, and the girl was a careful and conscientious scholar; so they got on admirably together; indeed, there was a real affection between them. And just as the young Laura Pettigrew had played with the younger Orella Elder, so Vivian had played with little Susie Elder, Miss Orella's orphan niece. Susie regarded the older girl with worshipful affection, which was not at all unpleasant to an emotional young creature with unemotional parents, and no brothers or sisters of her own.

Moreover, Susie was Morton's sister.

The whippoorwill's cry sounded again through the soft June night. Vivian came quickly down the garden path between the bordering beds of sweet alyssum and mignonette. A dew-wet rose brushed against her hand. She broke it off, pricking her fingers, and hastily fastened it in the bosom of her white frock.

Large old lilac bushes hung over the dividing fence, a thick mass of honeysuckle climbed up by the gate and mingled

with them, spreading over to a pear tree on the Lane side. In this fragrant, hidden corner was a rough seat, and from it a boy's hand reached out and seized the girl's, drawing her down beside him. She drew away from him as far as the seat allowed.
"Oh Morton!" she said. "What have you done?"
Morton was sulky.
"Now Vivian, are you down on me too? I thought I had one friend."
"You ought to tell me," she said more gently. "How can I be your friend if I don't know the facts? They are saying perfectly awful things."
"Who are?"
"Why—the Foote girls—everybody."
"Oh those old maids aren't everybody, I assure you. You see, Vivian, you live right here in this old oyster of a town—and you make mountains out of molehills like everybody else. A girl of your intelligence ought to know better."
She drew a great breath of relief. "Then you haven't—done it?"
"Done what? What's all this mysterious talk anyhow? The prisoner has a right to know what he's charged with before he commits himself."
The girl was silent, finding it difficult to begin.
"Well, out with it. What do they say I did?" He picked up a long dry twig and broke it, gradually, into tiny, half-inch bits.
"They say you—went to the city—with a lot of the worst boys in college——"
"Well? Many persons go to the city every day. That's no crime, surely. As for 'the worst boys in college,'"—he laughed scornfully—"I suppose those old ladies think if a fellow smokes a cigarette or says 'darn' he's a tough. They're mighty nice fellows, that bunch—most of 'em. Got some ginger in 'em, that's all. What else?"
"They say—you drank."

"O ho! Said I got drunk, I warrant! Well—we did have a skate on that time, I admit!" And he laughed as if this charge were but a familiar joke.
"Why Morton Elder! I think it is a—disgrace!"
"Pshaw, Vivian!—You ought to have more sense. All the fellows get gay once in a while. A college isn't a young ladies' seminary."
He reached out and got hold of her hand again, but she drew it away.
"There was something else," she said.
"What was it?" he questioned sharply. "What did they say?"
But she would not satisfy him—perhaps could not.
"I should think you'd be ashamed, to make your aunt so much trouble. They said you were suspended—or—*expelled* !"
He shrugged his big shoulders and threw away the handful of broken twigs.
"That's true enough—I might as well admit that."
"Oh, *Morton* !—I didn't believe it. *Expelled!* "
"Yes, expelled—turned down—thrown out—fired! And I'm glad of it." He leaned back against the fence and whistled very softly through his teeth.
"Sh! Sh!" she urged. "Please!"
He was quiet.
"But Morton—what are you going to do?—Won't it spoil your career?"
"No, my dear little girl, it will not!" said he. "On the contrary, it will be the making of me. I tell you, Vivian, I'm sick to death of this town of maiden ladies—and 'good family men.' I'm sick of being fussed over for ever and ever, and having wristers and mufflers knitted for me—and being told to put on my rubbers! There's no fun in this old clamshell—this kitchen-midden of a town—and I'm going to quit it."
He stood up and stretched his long arms. "I'm going to quit it for good and all."

The girl sat still, her hands gripping the seat on either side.
"Where are you going?" she asked in a low voice.
"I'm going west—clear out west. I've been talking with Aunt Rella about it. Dr. Bellair'll help me to a job, she thinks. She's awful cut up, of course. I'm sorry she feels bad—but she needn't, I tell her. I shall do better there than I ever should have here. I know a fellow that left college—his father failed—and he went into business and made two thousand dollars in a year. I always wanted to take up business—you know that!"
She knew it—he had talked of it freely before they had argued and persuaded him into the college life. She knew, too, how his aunt's hopes all centered in him, and in his academic honors and future professional life. "Business," to his aunt's mind, was a necessary evil, which could at best be undertaken only after a "liberal education."
"When are you going," she asked at length.
"Right off—to-morrow."
She gave a little gasp.
"That's what I was whippoorwilling about—I knew I'd get no other chance to talk to you—I wanted to say good-by, you know."
The girl sat silent, struggling not to cry. He dropped beside her, stole an arm about her waist, and felt her tremble.
"Now, Viva, don't you go and cry! I'm sorry—I really am sorry—to make *you* feel bad."
This was too much for her, and she sobbed frankly.
"Oh, Morton! How could you! How could you!—And now you've got to go away!"
"There now—don't cry—sh!—they'll hear you."
She did hush at that.
"And don't feel so bad—I'll come back some time—to see you."
"No, you won't!" she answered with sudden fierceness. "You'll just go—and stay—and I never shall see you again!"

He drew her closer to him. "And do you care—so much—Viva?"
"Of course, I care!" she said, "Haven't we always been friends, the best of friends?"
"Yes—you and Aunt Rella have been about all I had," he admitted with a cheerful laugh. "I hope I'll make more friends out yonder. But Viva,"—his hand pressed closer—"is it only—friends?"
She took fright at once and drew away from him. "You mustn't do that, Morton!"
"Do what?" A shaft of moonlight shone on his teasing face. "What am I doing?" he said.
It is difficult—it is well nigh impossible—for a girl to put a name to certain small cuddlings not in themselves terrifying, nor even unpleasant, but which she obscurely feels to be wrong.
Viva flushed and was silent—he could see the rich color flood her face.
"Come now—don't be hard on a fellow!" he urged. "I shan't see you again in ever so long. You'll forget all about me before a year's over."
She shook her head, still silent.
"Won't you speak to me—Viva?"
"I wish——" She could not find the words she wanted. "Oh, I wish you—wouldn't!"
"Wouldn't what, Girlie? Wouldn't go away? Sorry to disoblige—but I have to. There's no place for me here."
The girl felt the sad truth of that.
"Aunt Rella will get used to it after a while. I'll write to her—I'll make lots of money—and come back in a few years—astonish you all!—Meanwhile—kiss me good-by, Viva!"
She drew back shyly. She had never kissed him. She had never in her life kissed any man younger than an uncle.
"No, Morton—you mustn't——" She shrank away into the shadow.

But, there was no great distance to shrink to, and his strong arms soon drew her close again.
"Suppose you never see me again," he said. "Then you'll wish you hadn't been so stiff about it."
She thought of this dread possibility with a sudden chill of horror, and while she hesitated, he took her face between her hands and kissed her on the mouth.
Steps were heard coming down the path.
"They're on," he said with a little laugh. "Good-by, Viva!"
He vaulted the fence and was gone.
"What are you doing here, Vivian?" demanded her father.
"I was saying good-by to Morton," she answered with a sob.
"You ought to be ashamed of yourself—philandering out here in the middle of the night with that scapegrace! Come in the house and go to bed at once—it's ten o'clock."
Bowing to this confused but almost equally incriminating chronology, she followed him in, meekly enough as to her outward seeming, but inwardly in a state of stormy tumult.
She had been kissed!
Her father's stiff back before her could not blot out the radiant, melting moonlight, the rich sweetness of the flowers, the tender, soft, June night.
"You go to bed," said he once more. "I'm ashamed of you."
"Yes, father," she answered.
Her little room, when at last she was safely in it and had shut the door and put a chair against it—she had no key—seemed somehow changed.
She lit the lamp and stood looking at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were star-bright. Her cheeks flamed softly. Her mouth looked guilty and yet glad.
She put the light out and went to the window, kneeling there, leaning out in the fragrant stillness, trying to arrange in her mind this mixture of grief, disapproval, shame and triumph.
When the Episcopal church clock struck eleven, she went to bed in guilty haste, but not to sleep.

For a long time she lay there watching the changing play of moonlight on the floor.
She felt almost as if she were married.