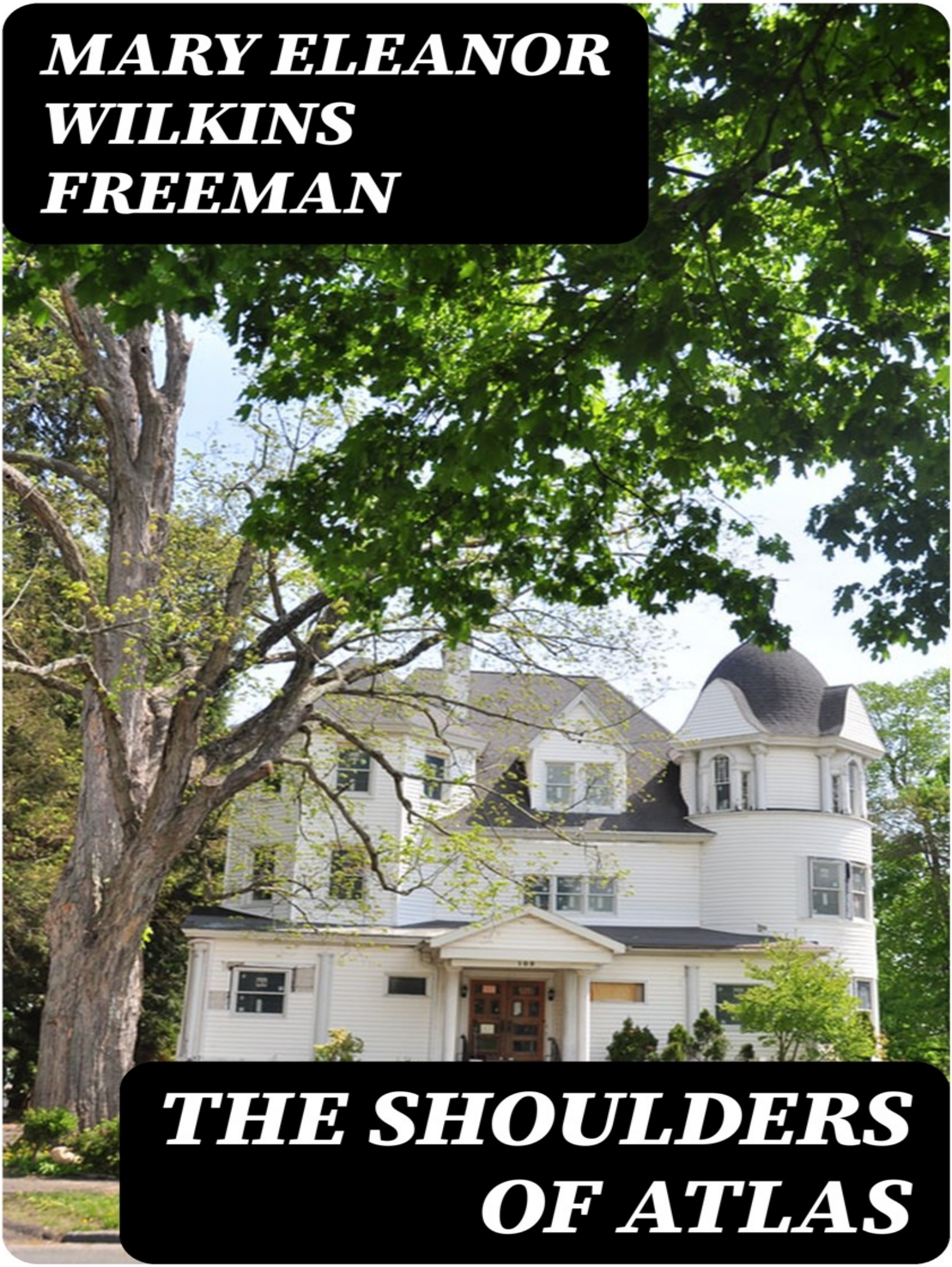
MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN



THE SHOULDERS OF ATLAS

MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN

THE SHOULDERS OF ATLAS

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

The Shoulders of Atlas

A Novel

EAN 8596547142386

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

Chapter I

Henry Whitman was walking home from the shop in the April afternoon. The spring was very early that year. The meadows were quite green, and in the damp hollows the green assumed a violet tinge—sometimes from violets themselves, sometimes from the shadows. The trees already showed shadows as of a multitude of bird wings; the peach-trees stood aloof in rosy nimbuses, and the cherry-trees were faintly a-flutter with white through an intense gloss of gold-green.

Henry realized all the glory of it, but it filled him with a renewal of the sad and bitter resentment, which was his usual mood, instead of joy. He was past middle-age. He worked in a shoe-shop. He had worked in a shoe-shop since he was a young man. There was nothing else in store for him until he was turned out because of old age. Then the future looked like a lurid sunset of misery. He earned reasonably good wages for a man of his years, but prices were so high that he was not able to save a cent. There had been unusual expenses during the past ten years, too. His wife Sylvia had not been well, and once he himself had been laid up six weeks with rheumatism. The doctor charged two dollars for every visit, and the bill was not quite settled yet.

Then the little house which had come to him from his father, encumbered with a mortgage as is usual, had all at once seemed to need repairs at every point. The roof had leaked like a sieve, two windows had been blown in, the paint had turned a gray-black, the gutters had been out of order. He had not quite settled the bill for these repairs. He

realized it always as an actual physical incubus upon his slender, bowed shoulders. He came of a race who were impatient of debt, and who regarded with proud disdain all gratuitous benefits from their fellow-men. Henry always walked a long route from the shop in order to avoid passing the houses of the doctor and the carpenter whom he owed.

Once he had saved a little money; that was twenty-odd years before; but he had invested it foolishly, and lost every cent. That transaction he regarded with hatred, both of himself and of the people who had advised him to risk and lose his hard-earned dollars. The small sum which he had lost had come to assume colossal proportions in his mind. He used, in his bitterest moments, to reckon up on a scrap of paper what it might have amounted to, if it had been put out at interest, by this time. He always came out a rich man, by his calculations, if it had not been for that unwise investment. He often told his wife Sylvia that they might have been rich people if it had not been for that; that he would not have been tied to a shoe-shop, nor she have been obliged to work so hard.

Sylvia took a boarder—the high-school principal, Horace Allen—and she also made jellies and cakes, and baked bread for those in East Westland who could afford to pay for such instead of doing the work themselves. She was a delicate woman, and Henry knew that she worked beyond her strength, and the knowledge filled him with impotent fury. Since the union had come into play he did not have to work so many hours in the shop, and he got the same pay, but he worked as hard, because he himself cultivated his bit of land. He raised vegetables for the table. He also made

the place gay with flowers to please Sylvia and himself. He had a stunted thirst for beauty.

In the winter he found plenty to do in the extra hours. He sawed wood in his shed by the light of a lantern hung on a peg. He also did what odd jobs he could for neighbors. He picked up a little extra money in that way, but he worked very hard. Sometimes he told Sylvia that he didn't know but he worked harder than he had done when the shop time was longer. However, he had been one of the first to go, heart and soul, with the union, and he had paid his dues ungrudgingly, even with a fierce satisfaction, as if in some way the transaction made him even with his millionaire employers. There were two of them, and they owned houses which appeared like palaces in the eyes of Henry and his kind. They owned automobiles, and Henry was aware of a cursing sentiment when one whirred past him, trudging along, and covered him with dust.

Sometimes it seemed to Henry as if an automobile was the last straw for the poor man's back: those enormous cars, representing fortunes, tyrannizing over the whole highway, frightening the poor old country horses, and endangering the lives of all before them. Henry read with delight every account of an automobile accident. “Served them right; served them just right,” he would say, with fairly a smack of his lips.

Sylvia, who had caught a little of his rebellion, but was gentler, would regard him with horror. “Why, Henry Whitman, that is a dreadful wicked spirit!” she would say, and he would retort stubbornly that he didn't care; that he had to pay a road tax for these people who would just as

soon run him down as not, if it wouldn't tip their old machines over; for these maniacs who had gone speed-mad, and were appropriating even the highways of the common people.

Henry had missed the high-school principal, who was away on his spring vacation. He liked to talk with him, because he always had a feeling that he had the best of the argument. Horace would take the other side for a while, then leave the field, and light another cigar, and let Henry have the last word, which, although it had a bitter taste in his mouth, filled him with the satisfaction of triumph. He loved Horace like a son, although he realized that the young man properly belonged to the class which he hated, and that, too, although he was manifestly poor and obliged to work for his living. Henry was, in his heart of hearts, convinced that Horace Allen, had he been rich, would have owned automobiles and spent hours in the profitless work-play of the golf links. As it was, he played a little after school-hours. How Henry hated golf! “I wish they had to work,” he would say, savagely, to Horace.

Horace would laugh, and say that he did work. “I know you do,” Henry would say, grudgingly, “and I suppose maybe a little exercise is good for you; but those fellers from Alford who come over here don't have to work, and as for Guy Lawson, the boss's son, he's a fool! He couldn't earn his bread and butter to save his life, except on the road digging like a common laborer. Playing golf! Playing! H'm!” Then was the time for Horace's fresh cigar.

When Henry came in sight of the cottage where he lived he thought with regret that Horace was not there. Being in a

more pessimistic mood than usual, he wished ardently for somebody to whom he could pour out his heart. Sylvia was no satisfaction at such a time. If she echoed him for a while, when she was more than usually worn with her own work, she finally became alarmed, and took refuge in Scripture quotations, and Henry was convinced that she offered up prayer for him afterward, and that enraged him.

He struck into the narrow foot-path leading to the side door, the foot-path which his unwilling and weary feet had helped to trace more definitely for nearly forty years. The house was a small cottage of the humblest New England type. It had a little cobbler's-shop, or what had formerly been a cobbler's-shop, for an ell. Besides that, there were three rooms on the ground-floor—the kitchen, the sitting-room, and a little bedroom which Henry and Sylvia occupied. Sylvia had cooking-stoves in both the old shop and the kitchen. The kitchen stove was kept well polished, and seldom used for cooking, except in cold weather. In warm weather the old shop served as kitchen, and Sylvia, in deference to the high-school teacher, used to set the table in the house.

When Henry neared the house he smelled cooking in the shop. He also had a glimpse of a snowy table-cloth in the kitchen. He wondered, with a throb of joy, if possibly Horace might have returned before his vacation was over and Sylvia were setting the table in the other room in his honor. He opened the door which led directly into the shop. Sylvia, a pathetic, slim, elderly figure in rusty black, was bending over the stove, frying flapjacks. “Has he come home?” whispered Henry.

“No, it's Mr. Meeks. I asked him to stay to supper. I told him I would make some flapjacks, and he acted tickled to death. He doesn't get a decent thing to eat once in a dog's age. Hurry and get washed. The flapjacks are about done, and I don't want them to get cold.”

Henry's face, which had fallen a little when he learned that Horace had not returned, still looked brighter than before. While Sidney Meeks never let him have the last word, yet he was much better than Sylvia as a safety-valve for pessimism. Meeks was as pessimistic in his way as Henry, although he handled his pessimism, as he did everything else, with diplomacy, and the other man had a secret conviction that when he seemed to be on the opposite side yet he was in reality pulling with the lawyer.

Sidney Meeks was older than Henry, and as unsuccessful as a country lawyer can well be. He lived by himself; he had never married; and the world, although he smiled at it facetiously, was not a pleasant place in his eyes.

Henry, after he had washed himself at the sink in the shop, entered the kitchen, where the table was set, and passed through to the sitting-room, where the lawyer was. Sidney Meeks did not rise. He extended one large, white hand affably. “How are you Henry?” said he, giving the other man's lean, brown fingers a hard shake. “I dropped in here on my way home from the post-office, and your wife tempted me with flapjacks in a lordly dish, and I am about to eat.”

“Glad to see you,” returned Henry.

“You get home early, or it seems early, now the days are getting so long,” said Meeks, as Henry sat down opposite.

“Yes, it's early enough, but I don't get any more pay.”

Meeks laughed. “Henry, you are the direct outcome of your day and generation,” said he. “Less time, and more pay for less time, is our slogan.”

“Well, why not?” returned Henry, surlily, still with a dawn of delighted opposition in his thin, intelligent face. “Why not? Look at the money that's spent all around us on other things that correspond. What's an automobile but less time and more money, eh?”

Meeks laughed. “Give it up until after supper, Henry,” he said, as Sylvia's thin, sweet voice was heard from the next room.

“If you men don't stop talking and come right out, these flapjacks will be spoiled!” she cried. The men arose and obeyed her call. “There are compensations for everything,” said Meeks, laughing, as he settled down heavily into his chair. He was a large man. “Flapjacks are compensations. Let us eat our compensations and be thankful. That's my way of saying grace. You ought always to say grace, Henry, when you have such a good cook as your wife is to get meals for you. If you had to shift for yourself, the way I do, you'd feel that it was a simple act of decency.”

“I don't see much to say grace for,” said Henry, with a disagreeable sneer.

“Oh, Henry!” said Sylvia.

“For compensations in the form of flapjacks, with plenty of butter and sugar and nutmeg,” said Meeks. “These are fine, Mrs. Whitman.”

“A good thick beefsteak at twenty-eight cents a pound, regulated by the beef trust, would be more to my liking after

a hard day's work,” said Henry.

Sylvia exclaimed again, but she was not in reality disturbed. She was quite well aware that her husband was enjoying himself after his own peculiar fashion, and that, if he spoke the truth, the flapjacks were more to his New England taste for supper than thick beefsteak.

“Well, wait until after supper, and maybe you will change your mind about having something to say grace for,” Meeks said, mysteriously.

The husband and wife stared at him. “What do you mean, Mr. Meeks?” asked Sylvia, a little nervously. Something in the lawyer's manner agitated her. She was not accustomed to mysteries. Life had not held many for her, especially of late years.

Henry took another mouthful of flapjacks. “Well, if you can give me any good reason for saying grace you will do more than the parson ever has,” he said.

“Oh, Henry!” said Sylvia.

“It's the truth,” said Henry. “I've gone to meeting and heard how thankful I ought to be for things I haven't got, and things I have got that other folks haven't, and for forgiveness for breaking commandments, when, so far as I can tell, commandments are about the only things I've been able to keep without taxes—till I'm tired of it.”

“Wait till after supper,” repeated the lawyer again, with smiling mystery. He had a large, smooth face, with gray hair on the sides of his head and none on top. He had good, placid features, and an easy expression. He ate two platefuls of the flapjacks, then two pieces of cake, and a large slice of custard pie! He was very fond of sweets.

After supper was over Henry and Meeks returned to the sitting-room, and sat down beside the two front windows. It was a small, square room furnished with Sylvia's chief household treasures. There was a hair-cloth sofa, which she and Henry had always regarded as an extravagance and had always viewed with awe. There were two rockers, besides one easy-chair, covered with old-gold plush—also an extravagance. There was a really beautiful old mahogany table with carved base, of which neither Henry nor Sylvia thought much. Sylvia meditated selling enough Calkin's soap to buy a new one, and stow that away in Mr. Allen's room. Mr. Allen professed great admiration for it, to her wonderment. There was also a fine, old, gold-framed mirror, and some china vases on the mantel-shelf. Sylvia was rather ashamed of them. Mrs. Jim Jones had a mirror which she had earned by selling Calkin's soap, which Sylvia considered much handsomer. She would have had ambitions in that direction also, but Henry was firm in his resolve not to have the mirror displaced, nor the vases, although Sylvia descanted upon the superior merits of some vases with gilded pedestals which Mrs. Sam Elliot had in her parlor.

Meeks regarded the superb old table with appreciation as he sat in the sitting-room after supper. “Fine old piece,” he said.

Henry looked at it doubtfully. It had been in a woodshed of his grandfather's house, when he was a boy, and he was not as confident about that as he was about the mirror and vases, which had always maintained their parlor estate.

“Sylvia don't think much of it,” he said. “She's crazy to have one of carved oak like one Mrs. Jim Jones has.”

“Carved oak fiddlestick!” said Sidney Meeks. “It's a queer thing that so much virtue and real fineness of character can exist in a woman without the slightest trace of taste for art.”

Henry looked resentful. “Sylvia has taste, as much taste as most women,” he said. “She simply doesn't like to see the same old things around all the time, and I don't know as I blame her. The world has grown since that table was made, there's no doubt about that. It stands to reason furniture has improved, too.”

“Glad there's something you see in a bright light, Henry.”

“I must say that I like this new mission furniture, myself, pretty well,” said Henry, somewhat importantly.

“That's as old as the everlasting hills; but the old that's new is the newest thing in all creation,” said Meeks. “Sylvia is a foolish woman if she parts with this magnificent old piece for any reproduction made in job lots.”

“Oh, she isn't going to part with it. Mr. Allen will like it in his room. He thinks as much of it as you do.”

“He's right, too,” said Meeks. “There's carving for you; there's a fine grain of wood.”

“It's very hard to keep clean,” said Sylvia, as she came in rubbing her moist hands. “Now, that new Flemish oak is nothing at all to take care of, Mrs. Jones says.”

“This is worth taking care of,” said Meeks. “Now, Sylvia, sit down. I have something to tell you and Henry.”

Sylvia sat down. Something in the lawyer's manner aroused hers and her husband's keenest attention. They looked at him and waited. Both were slightly pale. Sylvia was a delicate little woman, and Henry was large-framed

and tall, but a similar experience had worn similar lines in both faces. They looked singularly alike.

Sidney Meeks had the dramatic instinct. He waited for the silence to gather to its utmost intensity before he spoke. “I had something to tell you when I came in,” he said, “but I thought I had better wait till after supper.”

He paused. There was another silence. Henry's and Sylvia's eyes seemed to wax luminous.

Sidney Meeks spoke again. He was enjoying himself immensely. “What relation is Abrahama White to you?” he said.

“She is second cousin to Sylvia. Her mother was Sylvia's mother's cousin,” said Henry. “What of it?”

“Nothing, except—” Meeks waited again. He wished to make a coup. He had an instinct for climaxes. “Abrahama had a shock this morning,” he said, suddenly.

“A shock?” said Henry.

Sylvia echoed him. “A shock!” she gasped.

“Yes, I thought you hadn't heard of it.”

“I've been in the house all day,” said Sylvia. “I hadn't seen a soul before you came in.” She rose. “Who's taking care of her?” she asked. “She ain't all alone?”

“Sit down,” said Sidney. “She's well cared for. Miss Babcock is there. She happened to be out of a place, and Dr. Wallace got her right away.”

“Is she going to get over it?” asked Sylvia, anxiously. “I must go over there, anyway, this evening. I always thought a good deal of Abrahama.”

“You might as well go over there,” said the lawyer. “It isn't quite the thing for me to tell you, but I'm going to. If

Henry here can eat flapjacks like those you make, Sylvia, and not say grace, his state of mind is dangerous. I am going to tell you. Dr. Wallace says Abrahama can't live more than a day or two, and—she has made a will and left you all her property.”

Chapter II

There was another silence. The husband and wife were pale, with mouths agape like fishes. So little prosperity had come into their lives that they were rendered almost idiotic by its approach.

“Us?” said Sylvia, at length, with a gasp.

“Us?” said Henry.

“Yes, you,” said Sidney Meeks.

“What about Rose Fletcher, Abrahama's sister Susy's daughter?” asked Sylvia, presently. “She is her own niece.”

“You know Abrahama never had anything to do with Susy after she married John Fletcher,” replied the lawyer. “She made her will soon afterward, and cut her off.”

“I remember what they said at the time,” returned Sylvia. “They all thought John Fletcher was going to marry Abrahama instead of Susy. She was enough sight more suitable age for him. He was too old for Susy, and Abrahama, even if she wasn't young, was a beautiful woman, and smarter than Susy ever thought of being.”

“Susy had the kind of smartness that catches men,” said the lawyer, with a slight laugh.

“I always wondered if John Fletcher hadn't really done a good deal to make Abrahama think he did want her,” said Sylvia. “He was just that kind of man. I never did think much of him. He was handsome and glib, but he was all surface. I guess poor Abrahama had some reason to cut off Susy. I guess there was some double-dealing. I thought so at the time, and now this will makes me think so even more.”

Again there was a silence, and again that expression of bewilderment, almost amounting to idiocy, reigned in the faces of the husband and wife.

“I never thought old Abraham White should have made the will he did,” said Henry, articulating with difficulty. “Susy had just as much right to the property, and there she was cut off with five hundred dollars, to be paid when she came of age.”

“I guess she spent that five hundred on her wedding fix,” said Sylvia.

“It was a queer will,” stammered Henry.

“I think the old man always looked at Abrahama as his son and heir,” said the lawyer. “She was named for him, and his father before him, you know. I always thought the poor old girl deserved the lion's share for being saddled with such a name, anyhow.”

“It was a dreadful name, and she was such a beautiful girl and woman,” said Sylvia. She already spoke of Abrahama in the past tense. “I wonder where the niece is,” she added.

“The last I heard of her she was living with some rich people in New York,” replied Meeks. “I think they took her in some capacity after her father and mother died.”

“I hope she didn't go out to work as hired girl,” said Sylvia. “It would have been awful for a granddaughter of Abraham White's to do that. I wonder if Abrahama never wrote to her, nor did anything for her.”

“I don't think she ever had the slightest communication with Susy after she married, or her husband, or the

daughter,” replied Meeks. “In fact, I practically know she did not.”

“If the poor girl didn't do well, Abrahama had a good deal to answer for,” said Sylvia, thoughtfully. She looked worried. Then again that expression of almost idiotic joy overspread her face. “That old White homestead is beautiful—the best house in town,” she said.

“There's fifty acres of land with it, too,” said Meeks.

Sylvia and Henry looked at each other. Both hesitated. Then Henry spoke, stammeringly:

“I—never knew—just how much of an income Abrahama had,” he said.

“Well,” replied the lawyer, “I must say not much—not as much as I wish, for your sakes. You see, old Abraham had a lot of that railroad stock that went to smash ten years ago, and Abrahama lost a good deal. She was a smart woman; she could work and save; but she didn't know any more about business than other women. There's an income of about—well, about six hundred dollars and some odd cents after the taxes and insurance are paid. And she has enough extra in the Alford Bank to pay for her last expenses without touching the principal. And the house is in good repair. She has kept it up well. There won't be any need to spend a cent on repairs for some years.”

“Six hundred a year after the taxes and insurance are paid!” said Sylvia. She gaped horribly. Her expression of delight was at once mean and infantile.

“Six hundred a year after the taxes and insurance are paid, and all that land, and that great house!” repeated Henry, with precisely the same expression.

“Not much, but enough to keep things going if you're careful,” said Meeks. He spoke deprecatingly, but in reality the sum seemed large to him also. “You know there's an income besides from that fine grass-land,” said he. “There's more than enough hay for a cow and horse, if you keep one. You can count on something besides in good hay-years.”

Henry looked reflective. Then his face seemed to expand with an enormous idea. “I wonder—” he began.

“You wonder what?” asked Sylvia.

“I wonder—if it wouldn't be cheaper in the end to keep an —automobile and sell all the hay.”

Sylvia gasped, and Meeks burst into a roar of laughter.

“I rather guess you don't get me into one of those things, butting into stone walls, and running over children, and scaring horses, with you underneath most of the time, either getting blown up with gasolene or covering your clothes with mud and grease for me to clean off,” said Sylvia.

“I thought automobiles were against your principles,” said Meeks, still chuckling.

“So they be, the way other folks run 'em,” said Henry; “but not the way I'd run 'em.”

“We'll have a good, steady horse that won't shy at one, if we have anything,” said Sylvia, and her voice had weight.

“There's a good buggy in Abrahama's barn,” said Meeks.

Sylvia made an unexpected start. “I think we are wicked as we can be!” she declared, violently. “Here we are talking about that poor woman's things before she's done with them. I'm going right over there to see if I can't be of some use.”

“Sit down, Sylvia,” said Henry, soothingly, but he, too, looked both angry and ashamed.

“You had better keep still where you are to-night,” said Meeks. “Miss Babcock is doing all that anybody can. There isn't much to be done, Dr. Wallace says. To-morrow you can go over there and sit with her, and let Miss Babcock take a nap.” Meeks rose as he spoke. “I must be going,” he said. “I needn't charge you again not to let anybody know what I've told you before the will is read. It is irregular, but I thought I'd cheer up Henry here a bit.”

“No, we won't speak of it,” declared the husband and wife, almost in unison.

After Meeks had gone they looked at each other. Both looked disagreeable to the other. Both felt an unworthy suspicion of the other.

“I hope she will get well,” Sylvia said, defiantly. “Maybe she will. This is her first shock.”

“God knows I hope she will,” returned Henry, with equal defiance.

Each of the two was perfectly good and ungrasping, but each accused themselves and each other unjustly because of the possibilities of wrong feeling which they realized. Sylvia did not understand how, in the face of such prosperity, she could wish Abrahama to get well, and she did not understand how her husband could, and Henry's mental attitude was the same.

Sylvia sat down and took some mending. Henry seated himself opposite, and stared at her with gloomy eyes, which yet held latent sparks of joy. “I wish Meeks hadn't told us,” he said, angrily.

“So do I,” said Sylvia. “I keep telling myself I don't want that poor old woman to die, and I keep telling myself that you don't; but I'm dreadful suspicious of us both. It means so much.”

“Just the way I feel,” said Henry. “I wish he'd kept his news to himself. It wasn't legal, anyhow.”

“You don't suppose it will make the will not stand!” cried Sylvia, with involuntary eagerness. Then she quailed before her husband's stern gaze. “Of course I know it won't make any difference,” she said, feebly, and drew her darning-needle through the sock she was mending.

Henry took up a copy of the East Westland *Gazette*. The first thing he saw was the list of deaths, and he seemed to see, quite plainly, Abrahama White's among them, although she was still quick, and he loathed himself. He turned the paper with a rattling jerk to an account of a crime in New York, and the difficulty the police had experienced in taking the guilty man in safety to the police station. He read the account aloud.

“Seems to me the principal thing the New York police protect is the criminals,” he said, bitterly. “If they would turn a little of their attention to protecting the helpless women and children, seems to me it would be more to the purpose. They're awful careful of the criminals.”

Sylvia did not hear. She assented absently. She thought, in spite of herself, of the good-fortune which was to befall them. She imagined herself mistress of the old White homestead. They would, of course, rent their own little cottage and go to live in the big house. She imagined herself looking through the treasures which Abrahama

would leave behind her—then a monstrous loathing of herself seized her. She resolved that the very next morning she would go over and help Miss Babcock, that she would put all consideration of material benefits from her mind. She brought her thoughts with an effort to the article which Henry had just read. She could recall his last words.

“Yes, I think you are right,” said she. “I think criminals ought not to be protected. You are right, Henry. I think myself we ought to have a doctor called from Alford to-morrow, if she is no better, and have a consultation. Dr. Wallace is good, but he is only one, and sometimes another doctor has different ideas, and she may get help.”

“Yes, I think there ought to be a consultation,” said Henry. “I will see about it to-morrow. I will go over there with you myself to-morrow morning. I think the police ought not to protect the criminals, but the people who are injured by them.”

“Then there would be no criminals. They would have no chance,” said Sylvia, sagely. “Yes, I agree with you, Henry, there ought to be a consultation.”

She looked at Henry and he at her, and each saw in the other's face that same ignoble joy, and that same resentment and denial of it.

Neither slept that night. They were up early the next morning. Sylvia was getting breakfast and Henry was splitting wood out in the yard. Presently he came stumbling in. “Come out here,” he said. Sylvia followed him to the door. They stepped out in the dewy yard and stood listening. Beneath their feet was soft, green grass strewn with tiny spheres which reflected rainbows. Over their heads was a

wonderful sky of the clearest angelic blue. This sky seemed to sing with bell-notes.

“The bell is tolling,” whispered Henry. They counted from that instant. When the bell stopped they looked at each other.

“That's her age,” said Sylvia.

“Yes,” said Henry.

Chapter III

The weather was wonderful on Abrahama White's funeral day. The air had at once the keen zest of winter and the languor of summer. One moment one perceived warm breaths of softly undulating pines, the next it was as if the wind blew over snow. The air at once stimulated and soothed. One breathing it realized youth and an endless vista of dreams ahead, and also the peace of age, and of work well done and deserving the reward of rest. There was something in this air which gave the inhaler the certainty of victory, the courage of battle and of unassailable youth. Even old people, pausing to notice the streamer of crape on Abrahama White's door, felt triumphant and undaunted. It did not seem conceivable, upon such a day, that that streamer would soon flaunt for them.

The streamer was rusty. It had served for many such occasions, and suns and rains had damaged it. People said that Martin Barnes, the undertaker, ought to buy some new crape. Martin was a very old man himself, but he had no imagination for his own funeral. It seemed to him grotesque and impossible that an undertaker should ever be in need of his own ministrations. His solemn wagon stood before the door of the great colonial house, and he and his son-in-law and his daughter, who were his assistants, were engaged at their solemn tasks within.

The daughter, Flora Barnes, was arraying the dead woman in her last robe of state, while her father and brother-in-law waited in the south room across the wide hall.

When her task was performed she entered the south room with a gentle pride evident in her thin, florid face.

“She makes a beautiful corpse,” she said, in a hissing whisper.

Henry Whitman and his wife were in the room, with Martin Barnes and Simeon Capen, his son-in-law. Barnes and Capen rose at once with pleased interest, Henry and Sylvia more slowly; yet they also had expressions of pleasure, albeit restrained. Both strove to draw their faces down, yet that expression of pleasure reigned triumphant, overcoming the play of the facial muscles. They glanced at each other, and each saw an angry shame in the other's eyes because of this joy.

But when they followed Martin Barnes and his assistants into the parlor, where Abrahama White was laid in state, all the shameful joy passed from their faces. The old woman in her last bed was majestic. The dead face was grand, compelling to other than earthly considerations. Henry and Sylvia forgot the dead woman's little store which she had left behind her. Sylvia leaned over her and wept; Henry's face worked. Nobody except himself had ever known it, but he, although much younger, had had his dreams about the beautiful Abrahama White. He remembered them as he looked at her, old and dead and majestic, with something like the light of her lost beauty in her still face. It was like a rose which has fallen in such a windless atmosphere that its petals retain the places which they have held around its heart.

Henry loved his wife, but this before him was associated with something beyond love, which tended to increase

rather than diminish it. When at last they left the room he did what was very unusual with him. He was reticent, like the ordinary middle-aged New-Englander. He took his wife's little, thin, veinous hand and clasped it tenderly. Her bony fingers clung gratefully to his.

When they were all out in the south room Flora Barnes spoke again. “I have never seen a more beautiful corpse,” said she, in exactly the same voice which she had used before. She began taking off her large, white apron. Something peculiar in her motion arrested Sylvia's attention. She made a wiry spring at her.

“Let me see that apron,” said she, in a voice which corresponded with her action.

Flora recoiled. She turned pale, then she flushed. “What for?”

“Because I want to.”

“It's just my apron. I—”

But Sylvia had the apron. Out of its folds dropped a thin roll of black silk. Flora stood before Sylvia. Beads of sweat showed on her flat forehead. She twitched like one about to have convulsions. She was very tall, but Sylvia seemed to fairly loom over her. She held the black silk out stiffly, like a bayonet.

“What is this?” she demanded, in her tense voice.

Flora twitched.

“What is it? I want to know.”

“The back breadth,” replied Flora in a small, scared voice, like the squeak of a mouse.

“Whose back breadth?”

“Her back breadth.”

“*Her* back breadth?”

“Yes.”

“Robbing the dead!” said Sylvia, pitilessly. Her tense voice was terrible.

Flora tried to make a stand. “She hadn't any use for it,” she squeaked, plaintively.

“Robbing the dead! Its bad enough to rob the living.”

“She couldn't have worn that dress without any back breadth while she was living,” argued Flora, “but now it don't make any odds. It don't show.”

“What were you going to do with it?”

Flora was scared into a storm of injured confession. “You 'ain't any call to talk to me so, Mrs. Whitman,” she said. “I've worked hard, and I 'ain't had a decent black silk dress for ten years.”

“How can you have a dress made out of a back breadth, I'd like to know?”

“It's just the same quality that Mrs. Hiram Adams's was, and—” Flora hesitated.

“Flora Barnes, you don't mean to say that you're robbing the dead of back breadths till you get enough to make you a whole dress?”

Flora whimpered. “Business has been awful poor lately,” she said. “It's been so healthy here we've hardly been able to earn the salt to our porridge. Father won't join the trust, either, and lots of times the undertaker from Alford has got our jobs.”

“Business!” cried Sylvia, in horror.

“I can't help it if you do look at it that way,” Flora replied, and now she was almost defiant. “Our business is to get our

living out of folks' dying. There's no use mincing matters. It's our business, just as working in a shoe-shop is your husband's business. Folks have to have shoes and walk when they're alive, and be laid out nice and buried when they're dead. Our business has been poor. Either Dr. Wallace gives awful strong medicine or East Westland is too healthy. We haven't earned but precious little lately, and I need a whole black silk dress and they don't."

Sylvia eyed her in withering scorn. "Need or not," said she, "the one that owns this back breadth is going to have it. I rather think she ain't going to be laid away without a back breadth to her dress."

With that Sylvia crossed the room and the hall, and entered the parlor. She closed the door behind her. When she came out a few minutes later she was pale but triumphant. "There," said she, "it's back with her, and I've got just this much to say, and no more, Flora Barnes. When you get home you gather up all the back breadths you've got, and you do them up in a bundle, and you put them in that barrel the Ladies' Sewing Society is going to send to the missionaries next week, and don't you ever touch a back breadth again, or I'll tell it right and left, and you'll see how much business you'll have left here, I don't care how sickly it gets."

"If father would—only have joined the trust I never would have thought of such a thing, anyway," muttered Flora. She was vanquished.

"You do it, Flora Barnes."

"Yes, I will. Don't speak so, Mrs. Whitman."

"You had better."