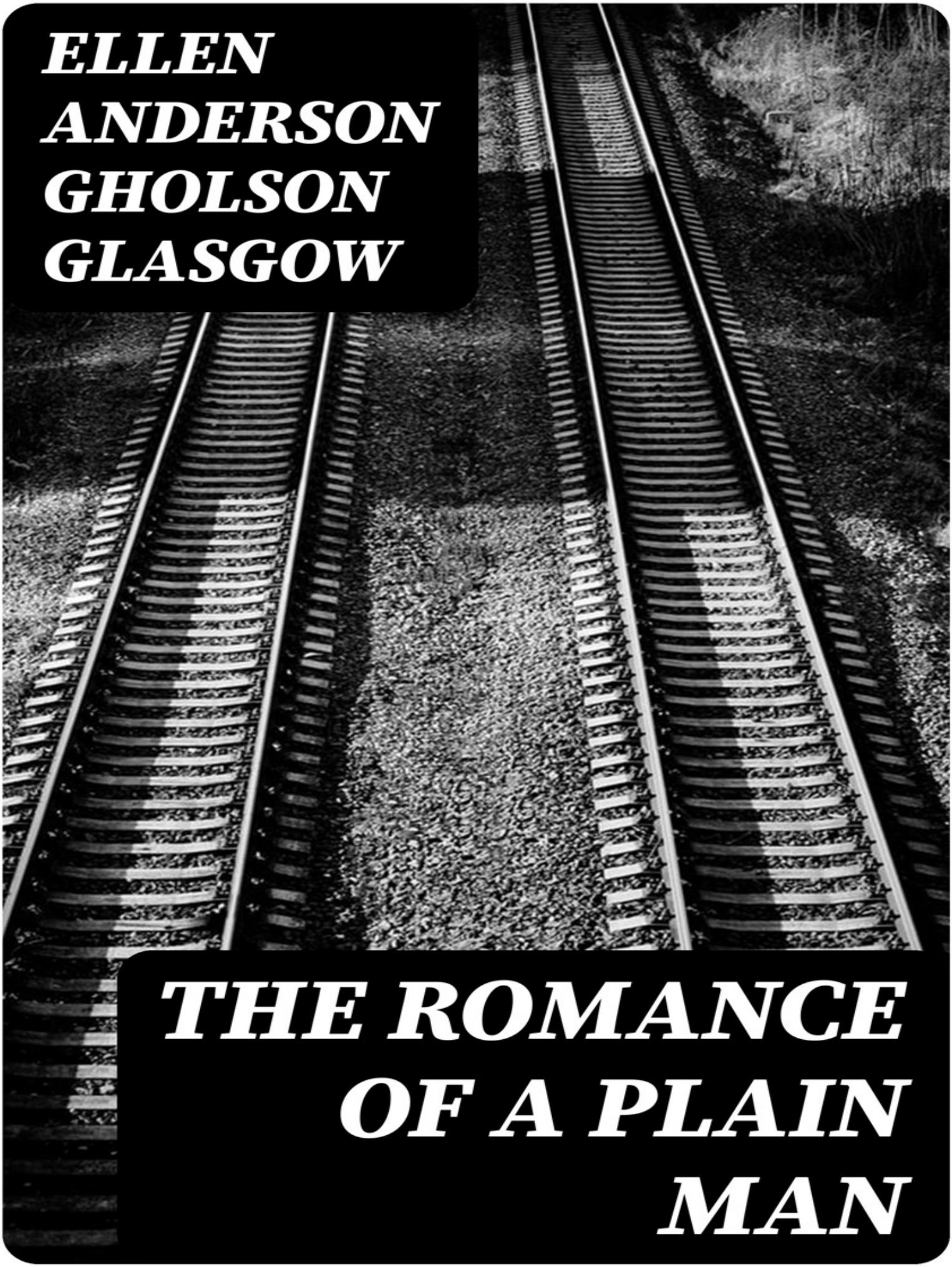
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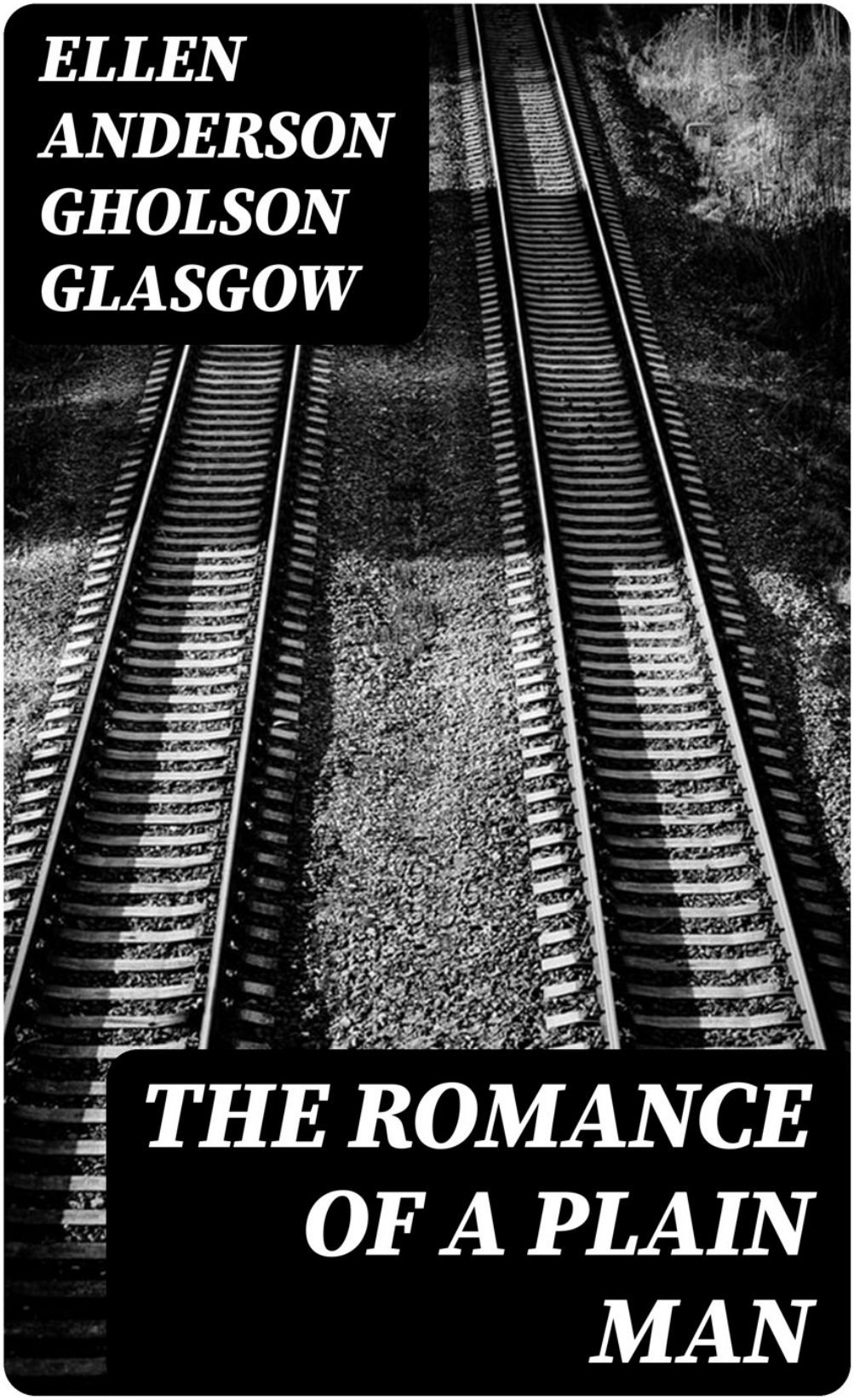
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The Romance of a Plain Man

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CHAPTER I

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IN WHICH I APPEAR WITH FEW PRETENSIONS

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As the storm broke and a shower of hail rattled like a handful of pebbles against our little window, I choked back a sob and edged my small green-painted stool a trifle nearer the hearth. On the opposite side of the wire fender, my father kicked off his wet boots, stretched his feet, in grey yarn stockings, out on the rag carpet in front of the fire, and reached for his pipe which he had laid, still smoking, on the floor under his chair.

"It's as true as the Bible, Benjy," he said, "that on the day you were born yo' brother President traded off my huntin' breeches for a yaller pup."

My knuckles went to my eyes, while the smart of my mother's slap faded from the cheek I had turned to the fire.

"What's become o' th' p-p-up-p?" I demanded, as I stared up at him with my mouth held half open in readiness to break out again.

"Dead," responded my father solemnly, and I wept aloud.

It was an October evening in my childhood, and so vivid has my later memory of it become that I can still see the sheets of water that rolled from the lead pipe on our roof, and can still hear the splash! splash! with which they fell into the gutter below. For three days the clouds had hung in a grey curtain over the city, and at dawn a high wind,

blowing up from the river, had driven the dead leaves from the churchyard like flocks of startled swallows into our little street. Since morning I had watched them across my mother's "prize" red geranium upon our window-sill—now whipped into deep swirls and eddies over the sunken brick pavement, now rising in sighing swarms against the closed doors of the houses, now soaring aloft until they flew almost as high as the living swallows in the belfry of old Saint John's. Then as the dusk fell, and the street lamps glimmered like blurred stars through the rain, I drew back into our little sitting-room, which glowed bright as an ember against the fierce weather outside.

Half an hour earlier my father had come up from the marble yard, where he spent his days cutting lambs and doves and elaborate ivy wreaths in stone, and the smell from his great rubber coat, which hung drying before the kitchen stove, floated with the aroma of coffee through the half-open door. When I closed an eye and peeped through the crack, I could see my mother's tall shadow, shifting, not flitting, on the whitewashed wall of the kitchen, as she passed back and forth from the stove to the wooden cradle in which my little sister Jessy lay asleep, with the head of her rag doll in her mouth.

Outside the splash! splash! of the rain still sounded on the brick pavement, and as I glanced through the window, I saw an old blind negro beggar groping under the street lamp at the corner. The muffled beat of his stick in the drenched leaves passed our doorstep, and I heard it grow gradually fainter as he turned in the direction of the negro hovels that bordered our end of the town. Across the street,

and on either side of us, there were rows of small boxlike frame houses built with narrow doorways, which opened from the sidewalk into funny little kitchens, where women, in soiled calico dresses, appeared to iron all day long. It was the poorer quarter of what is known in Richmond as "Church Hill," a portion of the city which had been left behind in the earlier fashionable progress westward. Between us and modern Richmond there were several high hills, up which the poor dripping horses panted on summer days, a railroad station, and a broad slum-like bottom vaguely described as the "Old Market." Our prosperity, with our traditions, had crumbled around us, yet there were still left the ancient church, with its shady graveyard, and an imposing mansion or two inherited from the forgotten splendour of former days. The other Richmond—that "up-town" I heard sometimes mentioned—I had never seen, for my early horizon was bounded by the green hill, by the crawling salmon-coloured James River at its foot, and by the quaint white belfry of the parish of old St. John's. Beneath that belfry I had made miniature graves on summer afternoons, and as I sat now opposite to my father, with the bright fire between us, the memory of those crumbling vaults made me hug myself in the warmth, while I edged nearer the great black kettle singing before the flames.

"Pa," I asked presently, with an effort to resume the conversation along cheerful lines, "was it a he or a she pup?"

My father turned his bright blue eyes from the fire, while his hand wandered, with an habitual gesture, to his coarse

straw-coloured hair which stood, like mine, straight up from the forehead.

"Wall, I'll be blessed if I can recollect, Benjy," he replied, and added after a moment, in which I knew that his slow wits were working over a fresh attempt at distraction, "but speaking of dawgs, it wouldn't surprise me if yo' ma was to let you have a b'iled egg for yo' supper."

Again the storm was averted. He was so handsome, so soft, so eager to make everybody happy, that although he did not deceive even my infant mind for a minute, I felt obliged by sheer force of sympathy to step into the amiable snare he laid.

"Hard or soft?" I demanded.

"Now that's a matter of ch'ice, ain't it?" he rejoined, wrinkling his forehead as if awed by the gravity of the decision; "but bein' a plain man with a taste for solids, I'd say 'hard' every time."

"Hard, ma," I repeated gravely through the crack of the door to the shifting shape on the kitchen wall. Then, while he stooped over in the firelight to prod fresh tobacco into his pipe, I began again my insatiable quest for knowledge which had brought me punishment at the hand of my mother an hour before.

"Pa, who named me?"

"Yo' ma."

"Did ma name you, too?"

He shook his head, doubtfully, not negatively. Above his short growth of beard his cheeks had warmed to a clear pink, and his foolish blue eyes were as soft as the eyes of a baby.

"Wall, I can't say she did that—exactly."

"Then who did name you?"

"I don't recollect. My ma, I reckon."

"Did ma name me Ben Starr, or just Ben?"

"Just Ben. You were born Starr."

"Was she born Starr, too?"

"Good Lord, no, she was born Savage."

"Then why warn't I born Savage?"

"Because she married me an' I was born Starr."

I gave it up with a sigh. "Who had the most to do with my comin' here, God or ma?" I asked after a minute.

My father hesitated as if afraid of committing himself to an heretical utterance. "I ain't so sure," he replied at last, and added immediately in a louder tone, "Yo' ma, I s'pose."

"Then why don't I say my prayers to ma instead of to God?"

"I wouldn't begin to worry over that at my age, if I were you," replied my father, with angelic patience, "seein' as it's near supper time an' the kettle's a-bilin'."

"But I want to know, pa, why it was that I came to be named just Ben?"

"To be named just Ben?" he repeated slowly, as if the fact had been brought for the first time to his attention. "Wall, I reckon 'twas because we'd had considerable trouble over the namin' of the first, which was yo' brother President. That bein' the turn of the man of the family, I calculated that as a plain American citizen, I couldn't do better than show I hadn't any ill feelin' agin the Government. I don't recollect just what the name of the gentleman at the head of the Nation was, seein' 'twas goin' on sixteen years ago, but I'd

made up my mind to call the infant in the cradle arter him, if he'd ever answered my letter—which he never did. It was then yo' ma an' I had words because she didn't want a child of hers named arter such a bad-mannered, stuck-up, ornary sort, President or no President. She raised a terrible squall, but I held out against her," he went on, dropping his voice, "an' I stood up for it that as long as 'twas the office an' not the man I was complimentin', I'd name him arter the office, which I did on the spot. When 'twas over an' done the notion got into my head an' kind of tickled me, an' when you came at last, arter the four others in between, that died befo' they took breath, I was a'ready to name you 'Governor' if yo' ma had been agreeable. But 'twas her turn, so she called you arter her Uncle Benjamin—"

"What's become o' Uncle Benjamin?" I interrupted.

"Dead," responded my father, and for the third time I wept.

"I declar' that child's been goin' on like that for the last hour," remarked my mother, appearing upon the threshold. "Thar, thar, Benjy boy, stop cryin' an' I'll let you go to old Mr. Cudlip's burial to-morrow."

"May I go, too, ma?" enquired President, who had come in with a lighted lamp in his hand. He was a big, heavy, overgrown boy, and his head was already on a level with his father's.

"Not if I know it," responded my mother tartly, for her temper was rising and she looked tired and anxious. "I'll take Benjy along because he can crowd in an' nobody'll mind."

She moved a step nearer while her shadow loomed to gigantic proportions on the whitewashed wall. Her thin brown hair, partially streaked with grey, was brushed closely over her scalp, and this gave her profile an angularity that became positively grotesque in the shape behind her. Across her forehead there were three deep frowning wrinkles, which did not disappear even when she smiled, and her sad, flint-coloured eyes held a perplexed and anxious look, as if she were trying always to remember something which was very important and which she had half forgotten. I had never seen her, except when she went to funerals, dressed otherwise than in a faded grey calico with a faded grey shawl crossed tightly over her bosom and drawn to the back of her waist, where it was secured by a safety pin of an enormous size. Beside her my father looked so young and so amiable that I had a confused impression that he had shrunk to my own age and importance. Then my mother retreated into the kitchen and he resumed immediately his natural proportions. After thirty years, when I think now of that ugly little room, with its painted pine furniture, with its coloured glass vases, filled with dried cat-tails, upon the mantelpiece, with its crude red and yellow print of a miniature David attacking a colossal Goliath, with its narrow window-panes, where beyond the "prize" red geranium the wind drove the fallen leaves over the brick pavement, with its staring whitewashed walls, and its hideous rag carpet—when I think of these vulgar details it is to find that they are softened in my memory by a sense of peace, of shelter, and of warm firelight shadows.

My mother had just laid the supper table, over which I had watched her smooth the clean red and white cloth with her twisted fingers; President was proudly holding aloft a savoury dish of broiled herrings, and my father had pinned on my bib and drawn back the green-painted chair in which I sat for my meals—when a hurried knock at the door arrested each one of us in his separate attitude as if he had been instantly petrified by the sound.

There was a second's pause, and then before my father could reach it, the door opened and shut violently, and a woman, in a dripping cloak, holding a little girl by the hand, came from the storm outside, and ran straight to the fire, where she stood shaking the child's wet clothes before the flames. As the light fell over them, I saw that the woman was young and delicate and richly dressed, with a quantity of pale brown hair which the rain and wind had beaten flat against her small frightened face. At the time she was doubtless an unusually pretty creature to a grown-up pair of eyes, but my gaze, burning with curiosity, passed quickly over her to rest upon the little girl, who possessed for me the attraction of my own age and size. She wore red shoes, I saw at my first glance, and a white cloak, which I took to be of fur, though it was probably made of some soft, fuzzy cloth I had never seen. There was a white cap on her head, held by an elastic band under her square little chin, and about her shoulders her hair lay in a profuse, drenched mass of brown, which reminded me in the firelight of the colour of wet November leaves. She was soaked through, and yet as she stood there, with her teeth chattering in the warmth, I was struck by the courage, almost the defiance, with which

she returned my gaze. Baby that she was, I felt that she would scorn to cry while my glance was upon her, though there were fresh tear marks on her flushed cheeks, and around her solemn grey eyes that were made more luminous by her broad, heavily arched black eyebrows, which gave her an intense and questioning look. The memory of this look, which was strange in so young a child, remained with me after the colour of her hair and every charming feature in her face were forgotten. Years afterwards I think I could have recognised her in a crowded street by the mingling of light with darkness, of intense black with clear grey, in her sparkling glance.

"I followed the wrong turn," said the pale little woman, breathing hard with a pitiable, frightened sound, while my mother took her dripping cloak from her shoulders, "and I could not keep on because of the rain which came up so heavily. If I could only reach the foot of the hill I might find a carriage to take me up-town."

My father had sprung forward as she entered, and was vigorously stirring the fire, which blazed and crackled merrily in the open grate. She accepted thankfully my mother's efforts to relieve her of her wet wraps, but the little girl drew back haughtily when she was approached, and refused obstinately to slip out of her cloak, from which the water ran in streams to the floor.

"I don't like it here, mamma, it is a common place," she said, in a clear childish voice, and though I hardly grasped the meaning of her words, her tone brought to me for the first time a feeling of shame for my humble surroundings.

"Hush, Sally," replied her mother, "you must dry yourself. These people are very kind."

"But I thought we were going to grandmama's?"

"Grandmama lives up-town, and we are going as soon as the storm has blown over. There, be a good girl and let the little boy take your wet cap."

"I don't want him to take my cap. He is a common boy."

In spite of the fact that she seemed to me to be the most disagreeable little girl I had ever met, the word she had used was lodged unalterably in my memory. In that puzzled instant, I think, began my struggle to rise out of the class in which I belonged by birth; and I remember that I repeated the word "common" in a whisper to myself, while I resolved that I would learn its meaning in order that I might cease to be the unknown thing that it implied.

My mother, who had gone into the kitchen with the dripping cloak in her arms, returned a moment later with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a mug of hot milk in the other.

"It's a mercy if you haven't caught your death with an inner chill," she observed in a brisk, kindly tone. "'Twas the way old Mr. Cudlip, whose funeral I'm going to to-morrow, came to his end, and he was as hale, red-faced a body as you ever laid eyes on."

The woman received the cup gratefully, and I could see her poor thin hands tremble as she raised it to her lips.

"Drink the warm milk, dear," she said pleadingly to the disagreeable little girl, who shook her head and drew back with a stiff childish gesture.

"I'm not hungry, thank you," she replied to my mother in her sweet, clear treble. To all further entreaties she returned the same answer, standing there a haughty, though drenched and battered infant, in her soiled white cloak and her red shoes, holding her mop of a muff tightly in both hands.

"I'm not hungry, thank you," she repeated, adding presently in a manner of chill politeness, "give it to the boy."

But the boy was not hungry either, and when my mother, finally taking her at her word, turned, in exasperation, and offered the mug to me, I declined it, also, and stood nervously shifting from one foot to the other, while my hands caught and twisted the fringe of the table-cloth at my back. The big grey eyes of the little girl looked straight into mine, but there was no hint in them that she was aware of my existence. Though her teeth were chattering, and she knew I heard them, she did not relax for an instant from her scornful attitude.

"We were just about to take a mouthful of supper, mum, an' we'd be proud if you an' the little gal would jine us," remarked my father, with an eager hospitality.

"I thank you," replied the woman in her pretty, grateful manner, "but the coffee has restored my strength, and if you will direct me to the hill, I shall be quite able to go on again."

A step passed close to the door on the pavement outside, and I saw her start and clutch the child to her bosom with trembling hands. As she stood there in her shaking terror, I remembered a white kitten I had once seen chased by boys into the area of a deserted house.

"If—if anyone should come to enquire after me, will you be so good as to say nothing of my having been here?" she asked.

"To be sure I will, with all the pleasure in life," responded my father, who, it was evident even to me, had become a victim to her distressed loveliness.

Emboldened by the effusive politeness of my parent, I went up to the little girl and shyly offered her a blossom from my mother's geranium upon the window-sill. A scrap of a hand, as cold as ice when it touched mine, closed over the stem of the flower, and without looking at me, she stood, very erect, with the scarlet geranium grasped stiffly between her fingers.

"I'll take you to the bottom of the hill myself," protested my father, "but I wish you could persuade yourself to try a bite of food befo' you set out in the rain."

"It is important that I should lose no time," answered the woman, drawing her breath quickly through her small white teeth, "but I fear that I am taking you away from your supper?"

"Not at all, you will not deprive me in the least," stammered my father, blushing up to his ears, while his straight flaxen hair appeared literally to rise with embarrassment. "I—I—the fact is I'm not an eater, mum."

For an instant, remembering the story of Ananias I had heard in Sunday-school, I looked round in terror, half expecting to hear the dreadful feet of the young men on the pavement. But he passed scathless for the hour at least, and our visitor had turned to receive her half-dried cloak from my mother's hands, when her face changed suddenly

to a more deadly pallor, and seizing the little girl by the shoulder, she fled, like a small frightened animal, across the threshold into the kitchen.

My father's hand had barely reached the knob of the street door, when it opened and a man in a rubber coat entered, and stopped short in the centre of the room, where he stood blinking rapidly in the lamplight. I heard the rain drip with a soft pattering sound from his coat to the floor, and when he wheeled about, after an instant in which his glance searched the room, I saw that his face was flushed and his eyes swimming and bloodshot. There was in his look, as I remember it now, something of the inflamed yet bridled cruelty of a bird of prey.

"Have you noticed a lady with a little girl go by?" he enquired.

At his question my father fell back a step or two until he stood squarely planted before the door into the kitchen. Though he was a big man, he was not so big as the other, who towered above the dried cat-tails in a china vase on the mantelpiece.

"Are you sure they did not pass here?" asked the stranger, and as he turned his head the dried pollen was loosened from the cat-tails and drifted in an ashen dust to the hearth.

"No, I'll stake my word on that. They ain't passed here yet," replied my father.

With an angry gesture the other shook his rubber coat over our bright little carpet, and passed out again, slamming the door violently behind him. Running to the window, I lifted the green shade, and watched his big black

figure splashing recklessly through the heavy puddles under the faint yellowish glimmer of the street lamp at the comer. The light flickered feebly on his rubber coat and appeared to go out in the streams of water that fell from his shoulders.

When I looked round I saw that the woman had come back into the room, still grasping the little girl by the hand.

"No, no, I must go at once. It is necessary that I should go at once," she repeated breathlessly, looking up in a dazed way into my mother's face.

"If you must you must, an' what ain't my business ain't," replied my mother a trifle sharply, while she wrapped a grey woollen comforter of her own closely over the head and shoulders of the little girl, "but if you'd take my advice, which you won't, you'd turn this minute an' walk straight back home to yo' husband."

But the woman only shook her head with its drenched mass of soft brown hair.

"We must go, Sally, mustn't we?" she said to the child.

"Yes, we must go, mamma," answered the little girl, still grasping the stem of the red geranium between her fingers.

"That bein' the case, I'll get into my coat with all the pleasure in life an' see you safe," remarked my father, with a manner that impressed me as little short of the magnificent.

"But I hate to take you away from home on such a terrible night."

"Oh, don't mention the weather," responded my gallant parent, while he struggled into his rubber shoes; and he added quite handsomely, after a flourish which appeared to

set the elements at defiance, "arter all, weather is only weather, mum."

As nobody, not even my mother, was found to challenge the truth of this statement, the child was warmly wrapped up in an old blanket shawl, and my father lifted her in his arms, while the three set out under a big cotton umbrella for the brow of the hill. President and I peered after them from the window, screening our eyes with our hollowed palms, and flattening our noses against the icy panes; but in spite of our efforts we could only discern dimly the shape of the umbrella rising like a miniature black mountain out of the white blur of the fog. The long empty street with the wind-drifts of dead leaves, the pale glimmer of the solitary light at the far corner, the steady splash! splash! of the rain as it fell on the brick pavement, the bitter draught that blew in over the shivering geranium upon the sill—all these brought a lump to my throat, and I turned back quickly into our cheerful little room, where my untasted supper awaited me.

CHAPTER II

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THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

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The funeral was not until nine o'clock, but at seven my mother served us a cold breakfast in order, as she said, that she might get the dishes washed and the house tidied before we started. Gathering about the bare table, we ate our dismal meal in a depressed silence, while she bustled back and forth from the kitchen in her holiday attire, which consisted of a stiff black bombazine dress and the long rustling crape veil she had first put on at the death of her uncle Benjamin, some twenty years before. As her only outings were those occasioned by the deaths of her neighbours, I suppose her costume was quite as appropriate as it seemed to my childish eyes. Certainly, as she appeared before me in her hard, shiny, very full bombazine skirt and attenuated bodice, I regarded her with a reverence which her everyday calico had never inspired.

"I ain't et a mouthful an' I doubt if I'll have time to befo' we start," she was saying in an irritable voice, as I settled into my bib and my chair. "Anybody might have thought I'd be allowed to attend a funeral in peace, but I shan't be,—no, not even when it comes to my own."

"Thar's plenty of time yet, Susan," returned my father cheerfully, while he sawed at the cold cornbread on the table. "You've got a good hour an' mo' befo' you."

"An' the things to wash up an' the house to tidy in my veil and bonnet. Thar ain't many women, I reckon, that would wash up china in a crape veil, but I've done it befo' an' I'm used to it."

"Why don't you lay off yo' black things till you're through?"

His suggestion was made innocently enough, but it appeared, as he uttered it, to be the one thing needed to sharpen the edge of my mother's temper. The three frowning lines deepened across her forehead, and she stared straight before her with her perplexed and anxious look under her rustling crape.

"Yes, I'll take 'em off an' lay 'em away an' git back to work," she rejoined. "It did seem as if I might have taken a holiday at a time like this—my next do' neighbour, too, an' I'd al'ays promised him I'd see him laid safe in the earth. But, no, I can't do it. I'll go take off my veil an' bonnet an' stay at home."

Before this attack my father grew so depressed that I half expected to see tears fall into his cup of coffee, as they had into mine. His handsome gayety dropped from him, and he looked as downcast as was possible for a face composed of so many flagrantly cheerful features.

"I declar, Susan, I wa'nt thinkin' of that," he returned apologetically, "it just seemed to me that you'd be mo' comfortable without that sheet of crape floatin' down yo' back."

"I've never been comfortable in my life," retorted my mother, "an' I don't expect to begin when I dress myself to go to a funeral. It's got to be, I reckon, an' it's what I'm used

to; but if thar's a man alive that would stand over a stove with a crape veil on his head, I'd be obliged to him if he'd step up an' show his face."

At this point; the half-grown girl who had promised to look after the baby arrived, and with her assistance, my mother set about putting the house in order, while my father, as soon as his luncheon basket was packed, wished us a pleasant drive, and started for old Timothy Ball's marble yard, where he worked. At the sink in the kitchen my mother, with her crape veil pinned back, and her bombazine sleeves rolled up, stood with her arms deep in soapsuds.

"Ma," I asked, going up to her and turning my back while she unfastened my bib with one soapy hand, "did you ever hear anybody call you common?"

"Call me what?"

"Common. What does it mean when anybody calls you common?"

"It means generally that anybody is a fool."

"Then am I, ma?"

"Air you what?"

"Am I common?"

"For the Lord's sake, Benjy, stop yo' pesterin'. What on earth has gone an' set that idee workin' inside yo' head?"

"Is pa common?"

She meditated an instant. "Wall, he wa'nt born a Savage, but I'd never have called him common—exactly," she answered.

"Then perhaps you are?"

"You talk like a fool! Haven't I told you that I wa'nt?" she snapped.

"Then if you ain't an' pa ain't exactly, how can I be?" I concluded with triumph.

"Whoever said you were? Show me the person."

"It wa'nt a person. It was a little girl."

"A little girl? You mean the half-drowned brat I wrapped up in yo' grandma's old blanket shawl I set the muffin dough under? To think of my sendin' yo' po' tired pa splashin' out with 'em into the rain. So she called you common?"

But the sound of a carriage turning the corner fell on my ears, and running hastily into the sitting-room, I opened the door and looked out eagerly for signs of the approaching funeral.

A bright morning had followed the storm, and the burnished leaves, so restless the day before, lay now wet and still under the sunshine. I had stepped joyously over the threshold, to the sunken brick pavement, when my mother, moved by a sudden anxiety for my health, called me back, and in spite of my protestations, wrapped me in a grey blanket shawl, which she fastened at my throat with the enormous safety-pin she had taken from her own waist. Much embarrassed by this garment, which dragged after me as I walked, I followed her sullenly out of the house and as far as our neighbour's doorstep, where I was ordered to sit down and wait until the service was over. As the stir of her crape passed into the little hall, I seated myself obediently on the single step which led straight from the street, and made faces, during the long wait, at the merry driver of the hearse—a decrepit negro of ancient days, who grinned provokingly at the figure I cut in my blanket shawl.

"Hi! honey, is you got on swaddlin' close er a windin' sheet?" he enquired. "I'se a-gittin' near bline en I cyarn mek out."

"You jest wait till I'm bigger an' I'll show you," was my peaceable rejoinder.

"Wat's dat you gwine sho' me, boy? I reckon I'se done seed mo' curus things den you in my lifetime."

I looked up defiantly. Between the aristocratic, if fallen, negro and myself there was all the instinctive antagonism that existed in the Virginia of that period between the "quality" and the "poor white trash."

"If you don't lemme alone you'll see mo'n you wanter."

"Whew! I reckon you gwine tu'n out sump'im' moughty outlandish, boy. I'se a-lookin' wid all my eyes an I cyarn see nuttin' at all."

"Wait till I'm bigger an' you'll see it," I answered.

"I'se sho'ly gwine ter wait, caze ef'n hits mo' curus den you is en dat ar windin' sheet, hit's a sight dat I'se erbleeged ter lay eyes on. Wat's yo' name, suh?" he enquired, with a mocking salute.

"I am Ben Starr," I replied promptly, "an' if you wait till I get bigger, I'll bus' you open."

"Hi! hi! wat you wanter bus' me open fur, boy? Is you got a pa?"

"He's Thomas Starr, an' he cuts lambs and doves on tombstones. I've seen 'em, an' I'm goin' to learn to cut 'em, too, when I grow up. I like lambs."

The door behind me opened suddenly without warning, and as I scrambled from the doorstep, my enemy, the merry driver, backed his creaking vehicle to the sidewalk across

which the slow procession of mourners filed. A minute later I was caught up by my mother's hand, and borne into a carriage, where I sat tightly wedged between two sombre females.

"So you've brought yo' little boy along, Mrs. Starr," remarked a third from the opposite seat, in an aggressive voice.

"Yes, he had a cold an' I thought the air might do him good," replied my mother with her society manner.

"Wall, I've nine an' not one of 'em has ever been to a funeral," returned the questioner. "I've al'ays been set dead against 'em for children, ain't you, Mrs. Boxley?"

Mrs. Boxley, a placid elderly woman, who had already begun to doze in her corner, opened her eyes and smiled on me in a pleasant and friendly way.

"To tell the truth I ain't never been able really to enjoy a child's funeral," she replied.

"I'm sure we're all mighty glad to have him along, Mrs. Starr," observed the fourth woman, who was soft and peaceable and very fat. "He's a fine, strong boy now, ain't he, ma'am?"

"Middlin' strong. I hope he ain't crowdin' you. Edge closer to me, Benjy."

I edged closer until her harsh bombazine sleeve seemed to scratch the skin from my cheek. Mrs. Boxley had dozed again, and sinking lower on the seat, I had just prepared myself to follow her example, when a change in the conversation brought my wandering wits instantly together, and I sat bolt upright while my eyes remained fixed on the small, straggling houses we were passing.

"Yes, she would go, rain or no rain," my mother was saying, and I knew that in that second's snatch of sleep she had related the story of our last evening's adventure. "To be sure she may have been all she ought to be, but I must say I can't help mistrustin' that little, palaverin' kind of a woman with eyes like a scared rabbit."

"If it was Sarah Mickleborough, an' I think it was, she had reason enough to look scared, po' thing," observed Mrs. Kidd, the soft fat woman, who sat on my left side. "They've only lived over here in the old Adams house for three months, but the neighbours say he's almost killed her twice since they moved in. She came of mighty set up, high falutin' folks, you know, an' when they wouldn't hear of the marriage, she ran off with him one night about ten years ago just after he came home out of the army. He looked fine, they say, in uniform, on his big black horse, but after the war ended he took to drink and then from drink, as is natchel, he took to beatin' her. It's strange—ain't it?—how easily a man's hand turns against a woman once he's gone out of his head?"

"Ah, I could see that she was the sort that's obliged to be beaten sooner or later if thar was anybody handy around to do it," remarked my mother. "Some women are made so that they're never happy except when they're hurt, an' she's one of 'em. Why, they can't so much as look at a man without invitin' him to ill-treat 'em."

"Thar ain't many women that know how to deal with a husband as well as you an' Mrs. Cudlip," remarked Mrs. Kidd, with delicate flattery.