
GENE STRATTON-PORTER
THE WHITE FLAG

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CHAPTER I

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“He That Was Cold and Hungry”

Elizabeth Spellman opened her eyes, turned on her pillow, and minutely studied the face of her sleeping husband. To her, Mahlon Spellman was not a vain, pompous, erratic little man of fifty. When she looked at him she saw the man who had courted her, of whose moral and mental attainments she had been so sure. She had visioned him as a future deacon of the Methodist Church, a prominent member of the School Board and the city council, and her vision had materialized; reality had been better than the Dream. He was Chairman of the County Republican Committee, frequently a delegate to state conventions, the Methodist Sunday School Superintendent, the richest dry-goods merchant of the town. As she studied his features that particular September morning, she choked down a rising flutter of satisfaction. Mahlon, as he lay there, represented success, influence, wealth. He slept as fastidiously as he walked abroad; he seemed conscious of his dignity and pride even as he lay unconscious.

Her home, of which she was inordinately proud, was his gift to her. The very satisfactory life she was living was possible because she was under the shelter of his sufficient hands. The child she mothered was the offspring of her love for him. She did not know that the elements in him which she mentally labelled “neat” and “thorough,” were denominated “fussy” by his neighbours. She lauded the scrupulous cleanliness and precision which kept him

constantly flicking invisible dust from his sleeve and straightening his tie. To her this only meant that personally he was as scrupulous as she was herself; to her these traits never revealed the truth that Mahlon was an egoist, who kept himself constantly foremost in his own mind, a man selfish to a degree that would have been unendurable had not his selfishness encompassed his pride in her, their child, and their home as the fulfilment of one branch of his personality. His craze for power she denominated laudable ambition. The position in which he was able to place her socially, she accepted as her due; she spent her days prettifying her really beautiful home, doing everything in her power to pamper Mahlon physically, to uphold and further his ambitions, because she was comfortably certain that there was no eminence to which she could boost him that she might not share in proud security with him. Among the demands of society, her position as a Colonial Dame, a pillar of the Church, leader of social activities, charities, and the excruciating exactions she bestowed upon the office of motherhood, she was a busy person.

At that minute she sighed with satisfaction, thinking of her wonderful achievement in marrying Mahlon Spellman; but with the thought came the memory of the duties that such a marvellous alliance entailed. At the present minute it was her duty to slip from their bed so quietly that Mahlon, the bread winner, the bearer of large gifts, the roof of the house, might have a few minutes more sleep. She slipped her feet into her bedroom shoes, tiptoed to the closet, and gathering up her clothing, stole softly to her one of the three bathrooms of the town, where, with exacting care, she made

her toilet for the morning, aided by the magnificence of a tin tub and a marble bowl that absorbed stains with disconcerting ease.

She glanced from the window to watch the small town of Ashwater waking to the dawn of the first Monday of September. It lay among the hills and valleys of rolling country. A river wound around it following a leisurely course toward the sea. Ashwater was one of the oldest towns of the state, peopled by self-respecting merchants, professional men who took time to follow the ramifications of their business in a deliberate manner, and retired farmers who were enjoying, in late life, the luxury of being in close touch with social, political, and religious activities.

It was early morning. The sun was slanting across the hills, showing the country brilliant in autumnal foliage. A blood-red maple lifted like a flame in her line of vision, and close to it was the tapestry of buckeye and the rich brown of oak. The big white colonial house in which she, the wife of the wealthy dry-goods merchant, lived, was surrounded with gorgeous colour from every shrub, bush, and tree that would endure the rigours of winter. She looked approvingly on the white picket fence that shut off her small world from the worlds of her less fortunate neighbours. She approved of the screening evergreens that made homing places for the birds, and the gorgeous beds of chrysanthemums brocading the smooth turf of the lawn. Her view from the bathroom window was restricted, but mentally she envisaged her surroundings and knew that they made a picture which would indicate to any passer-by that here was a home of

wealth and comfort. She was certain that any one going by would think it a home of happiness.

She stood a minute before the mirror, studying her pretty little face. She was nearly twenty years younger than her husband, an exacting woman, perfectly capable of muttering “prunes and prisms” by the hour for the shaping of her mouth as she moved about her occupation of being her husband’s wife, her daughter’s mother, her own social Influence. Elizabeth Spellman believed in Influence. It was her duty to set a shining example. She had no vision of a modest candle—when she let her light “so shine” she meant it to be a headlight, and of no mean proportions at that. As she patted her hair in place, set the bow at her throat with exact precision, she smiled with pleasure over the picture her mirror held facing her. But Elizabeth Spellman was a woman who firmly held duty above pleasure, or rather, who found her greatest pleasure in her personal conception of her duty; so she turned from the mirror, gathered up her belongings, and leaving everything in place, went hurriedly down the hall. She softly opened a white door and her eyes instantly sought a small bed, standing in a room made dainty with pale pinks and blues. She hurried to the bed, and bending, laid her hand upon the little girl sleeping there.

“Mahala,” she said softly, “you must wake up now, dear. It’s the first day of school, you know, and you mustn’t spoil a year, that I hope will be extremely beneficial to you, by being late. And certainly you must not slight your other duties in order to be on time.”

Elizabeth Spellman said this because she was the kind of woman who would say exactly this without the slightest regard as to whether her little daughter were sufficiently awake either to hear or to understand it. She said it in order to give herself the satisfaction of knowing that in case Mahala did hear any part of it she would have got the right impression. She believed in impressions quite as firmly as she believed in influence—possibly even more strongly—for if one did not make a good impression, she would lose her influence, or, fatal thing! have none to lose. Elizabeth Spellman was a firm believer in the fact that, if the twig is bent in the proper direction, the tree will be inclined in the right manner.

Mahala opened her eyes and looked at her mother. Then she shut them and tried to decide how long she might lie still before she made a move to get up. She discovered that there was no time to waste that morning. A firm hand turned back the covers and gripped her shoulder. So she mustered a smile, swung her feet to the floor, and still half asleep, stumbled down the hall before her mother.

Her bath thoroughly awakened her. She was old enough to have been of some help to herself, but helping herself with her toilet was not a point stressed by her mother, who took particular pride and pleasure in bathing the exquisitely shaped little body under her hands. She examined the ears particularly. She made sure there were no obtrusive “boos” disfiguring the small nose by the use of a handkerchief stretched over a hairpin. Mahala’s hair curled naturally around her face. Her mother assisted the long heavy back hair occasionally. She now unwound the golden curls from

their papers and brushed them into place with exquisite precision. Every small undergarment she put upon the child was of fine material, hand made, elaborately trimmed. A mirror was lifted from the closet and set upon the floor before which Mahala had to stand and see that her stocking seams were straight in the back. The ruffles of her pantalettes were carefully fluffed; her slippers were securely buttoned. Her petticoats and her wide-skirted dress were in the height of style and of expensive material. The finishing touch to her toilet was a white apron having a full skirt, and wide shoulder pieces meeting at the band, then curving to form deep pockets. From an open drawer a handkerchief was taken from a box and carefully scented.

“Please, Mother, put some on me,” begged Mahala.

Elizabeth Spellman laughed softly. She tipped the contents of the bottle against the glass stopper which she touched in several spots on the golden curls and over the shoulders.

“My little girl likes to be sweet like a flower, doesn’t she?” she asked.

And the child answered primly: “Yes, Mama, so that Papa will be pleased with me.”

Whereupon her mother immediately kissed her and commended her for thinking of anything that would be a pleasure to her father.

As she gathered up Mahala’s nightdress and turned the bed to air, she said to the child: “Now run, dear, and waken your father, but remember you must not muss yourself or spend too much time.”

Mahala hurried down the hall, softly opened the door to her parents' bedroom, and poised on her tiptoes. Her heart was racing. Her eyes were big pools having dancing lights. Her muscles cried for exercise. She wanted to make a flying leap and land on the bed, but she knew what her reception would be if she did; so she crossed the room very primly and laid a soft hand on her father's face.

"Papa, dear," she said, "wake up! School begins this morning and you won't be in time to have breakfast with me unless you hurry."

She leaned over and kissed him and patted his face, but, when he reached up and drew her down in his arms, she was instantly on the defensive.

"Papa, be careful!" she cautioned. "Mother has my curls made and I am all dressed for school. She wouldn't like it if you were to muss me."

Instantly Mahlon's arms relaxed.

"No, she wouldn't like it," he said, "and neither would I. Give Papa another kiss and run to your music, like a little lady."

So Mahala hurried back to her room, where she took in her arms a beautiful wax doll, almost as large as herself, carefully carrying it down the stairs and into the living room. With her keen eyes she surveyed this familiar place, but the same stiffly starched lace curtains depended from the fringed lambrequins, the same gorgeous flowers spread among the scrolls of the Brussels carpet, the same mahogany chairs stood, each in its exact spot, each picture covered its size in the original freshness of the wall paper. She could not see a thing to arrest or interest her, so she

proceeded to the parlour, where the big square piano stood among the real treasures of the house: rosewood sofa and chairs, a parlour table having leaves, cabinets for books and bric-a-brac, a loaded what-not, and the roses of the velvet carpet so big and so bright that it was a naughty trick of Mahala to pretend she stubbed her toes and stumbled over them. Here the lace curtains fell from velvet draperies and spread widely on the floor; a china dog guarded glass-encased hair flowers on the mantel, while the morning-glories climbing up the wall paper must have sprung from the same exuberant soil that furnished the originals of the carpet roses.

Mahala swept this room also with a bird-alert glance and seeing not the change of a fleck of dust anywhere, set Belinda on a chair beside the piano stool and surveyed her minutely.

“Belinda, can’t you sit like a little lady?” she said reprovingly. “Two curls over each shoulder, the rest down your back; heels touching, toes out. If I got to wear a silk dress every day, let me tell you, I’d swish it properly.”

She spread the silken skirts, fixed the curls, and placed a hymn book in the hands of the doll. Carefully spreading her own skirts, she climbed to the piano stool. Hearing her mother’s step on the stairs, in a sweet little voice she began singing, to her own accompaniment: “I thank thee, Father, for the light.” Then she slid from the stool, exchanged the hymn book in the doll’s lap for a piece of sheet music, and climbing back, began practising her lesson. She worked with one eye on the door of the living room and the other on the keyboard. Every time her mother’s back was turned, she

stuck her feet straight out, and with propulsion attained by setting her hands against the piano, whirled in a circle on the stool, first to the left until the stool was too low, and then to the right until the stool was the required height. She was so dexterous at this that she could accomplish one revolution between the measures of the music in places where a rest occurred. Her face was sparkling with suppressed laughter whenever she feelingly struck a chord and then accomplished a revolution before catching the next note and continuing her exercise. But she was quite serious, seemingly intent upon her work, when her mother stepped to the door to announce: “Your time is up, Mahala. You have still a few minutes remaining that you might profitably spend with your needle.”

Mahala slipped to the floor, put away her music and Belinda’s, and going to the living room, took from a cupboard a small sewing basket. She sat down in a rocking chair beside the window, placing the doll in a chair near her. She put a piece of sewing into her hands and gravely reproved her for careless work. Her own fingers were weaving a needle in and out, executing a design in cross stitch in gaudy colours on a piece of cardboard. When her mother was within hearing she leaned toward the doll and said solicitously: “Now be careful, my dear child. You never will be a perfect lady unless you learn to take your stitches evenly. No lady makes a crooked seam.”

But, when her mother stepped to the adjoining dining room, with her brows drawn together she said sternly to the doll: “Belinda, if you don’t sit up straight and make your stitches even, I’ll slap you to pieces. You needn’t look as

meek as a mouse. I shall do it for your own good; although, of course, it will hurt me more than it does you."

When the breakfast bell rang, Mahala folded her sewing neatly, returned to the basket the piece she had given Belinda, put the basket where it belonged, and the doll on the sofa, and then walked to the dining-room door. She held her apron wide at each side and made a low formal courtesy to each of her parents exactly as if she had not seen them before that morning.

Primly she said: "Good morning, Papa dear. Good morning, dear Mama. I hope you slept well during the night."

This drilling Elizabeth Spellman insisted upon because she considered it very pretty when there were guests in the house. When there were not, she thought it better to have it rehearsed in order that it should become habitual.

When they were seated at the table Mrs. Spellman and Mahala bowed their heads while Mr. Spellman addressed the Lord in a tone which was meant to contain a shade more deference than he would have tried to put into addressing the President or a Senator. He thanked the Lord for the food that was set before them, asked that it might be blessed to their good, prayed that all of them might execute the duties of the day faithfully, and returned all of their thanks for the blessing they were experiencing. Then they ate the food for which they had given thanks because it was very good food. They had every reason to be thankful for such cooking as Jemima Davis had accomplished in their kitchen during all the years of their wedded life.

It was just as Mr. Spellman was buttering his fourth pancake that the voice of Jemima Davis arose in the regions of the back porch in a shrill shriek. Mahala laid down her fork and stared with wide, expectant eyes. Mrs. Spellman started to rise from her chair. Mr. Spellman pushed back his own chair and looked at his wife.

“Now, now,” he said admonishingly, “be calm. You are familiar with Jemima’s divagations.”

Another shriek, wilder than the first, broke upon them.

“I will attend to this myself,” said Mr. Spellman.

Arising, he vanished in the direction of the kitchen. Finding that room empty, he proceeded to the back porch and there, at the corner of the house, he saw Jemima tugging at the rear anatomy of Jimmy Price. Jimmy Price was the village handy-man. His task that morning was to mow the Spellman lawn and trim the grass around the trees. Just why he should have been standing on his head in the rain barrel was a question Mahlon Spellman did not wait to ask until he had upset the barrel and allowed Jimmy the privilege of backing out. When Jimmy lifted his drenched tow head and sallow, freckled face, there was no need for explanation. In one hand he grasped a pair of sheep shears which he used to clip the grass around the snowball and lilac bushes. Exactly why or how he had lost them in the barrel was not a matter of concern to his employer. At the precise minute that Jimmy backed from the barrel, soaked and spluttering, Mahlon was felicitating himself upon the presence of mind which had kept his wife and daughter from witnessing a sight so ludicrous. At the same time he realized that he could not so easily control the neighbours and the

street. Mahlon felt like a fool to be seen in proximity to such a ridiculous sight, and he hated feeling like a fool more than almost any other calamity that could possibly overtake him. In a voice highly touched with exasperation he cried: “James Price, is it quite impossible for you to perform your work without having some sort of fool accident or doing some ludicrous thing every fifteen minutes? Are you a man or a monkey? You don’t seem happy unless you are making a back-alley spectacle of yourself,”—“and me,” Mahlon added in his consciousness.

Jimmy wiped the muck of the barrel bottom and the water from his face, and looked at his employer.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” he said humbly.

“I wonder what for,” muttered Mahlon Spellman, and turning, marched back to the dining room where he resumed his place. As Mahlon went, Jimmy squared his shoulders, smoothed his dripping hair, set in place a tie he was not wearing, and flipped a very real bit of soil from his sleeve in Mr. Spellman’s best manner.

Jemima launched the back porch broom at Jimmy’s head and he dodged it expertly.

“You poor bumpkin, you,” she cried. “Don’t you dare be aping the master!”

“But I was merely following the natural impulses of a gentleman,” said Jimmy, as he used the sheep shears to flirt slime from his sleeves, while Jemima suddenly retreated, but not before Jimmy in deep satisfaction noted her heaving shoulders.

Mrs. Spellman opened her lips and an inquisitive little “What——?” escaped therefrom.

“Nothing of the slightest importance, my dear,” said Mr. Spellman, waving his hand to indicate that the matter was of such slight moment that it might be carried away in the wake of the gesture without consuming any of their valuable time for its consideration.

Mrs. Spellman bowed her head in acceptance of her husband’s ultimatum. Mahala distinctly pouted. In the back of her small head she knew that her mother would leave the breakfast table and go immediately to the kitchen for information. She would be sent to school and might never learn why Jemima had screamed so wholeheartedly. It was not fair; but then, Mahala reflected, there were few things that were fair where young people were concerned. That being the case, she lingered at the table, watched her chance, and slipped to the kitchen.

“Jemima, what made you scream so?” she whispered as she watched the doorway behind her.

Jemima wiped the batter from the pancake spoon with expert finger: “That half-wit Jim Price laid the sheep shears on the rain barrel,” she said scornfully. “Of course they fell in and of course he went in head first when he tried to get them out!”

Mahala clapped her hands over her mouth and danced until her curls flew.

“Careful, honey, careful,” whispered Jemima.

Instantly Mahala became a demure little maiden again. Her glance swept the kitchen as it had the other rooms and rested on a basket of clothes standing ready for the washerwoman. She backed to the table, asking questions of Jemima, snatched up a fine big apple, and with a swallow-

swift dip, tucked it under the sheet covering the basket at the handle, covered to be sure, yet visibly there to the experienced eye.

“Mahala, what are you doing?” asked her mother at the door.

Mahala’s swift glance took in her nightdress in her mother’s hands. She lifted her face to Jemima: “Thank you for my good breakfast,” she said. “Allow me, Mama!” She took the nightdress from her mother’s hands, tucked it under the sheet at the handle opposite the apple, and ran after her books.

“Jemima, did you ever see such a darling, thoughtful child?” asked Elizabeth Spellman, and Jemima answered wholeheartedly: “I never did! God bless her!”

Mahala watched the filling of her book satchel with an occasional anxious glance toward the kitchen, but nothing happened; the apple had not been discovered. With the satchel strap over her shoulder and a bottle of ink in her hand, accompanied by her mother, Mahala went down the front walk. Mrs. Spellman opened the gate for her, kissed her good-bye, and stood waiting until she should turn to look back and throw a last kiss from the corner, the rounding of which carried her from sight.

All the neighbours were familiar with this proceeding. They were familiar with the demure step and studied grace with which Mahala turned the corner and threw back the kiss; and those whose range of vision covered the corner were also familiar with the wild leap for freedom with which the child flew down the street, the corner having been accomplished with due decorum. She sped up the steps of

an attractive home, rang the bell and waited for a dark, lean little girl of her own age, dressed quite as carefully as she, to join her on their way to school.

The contrast between the children was very marked. Edith Williams was a sallow little creature, badly spoiled in the home of the leading hardware merchant whose only brother had died and left his child to her uncle's care. She was not attractive. She was full of complaining and fault-finding. Her little heart bore a grudge against the world because she had not health and strength with which to enjoy the money left by her father, which her uncle would have allowed her to use had she not been naturally of a saving disposition.

It was a strange thing that children so different should have been friends. It is quite possible that their companionship was not due to natural selection, but to the fact that they lived near each other, that they constantly met going in the same direction to church, to school, and to entertainments, and that they had been sent to play together all their lives. This morning they kissed, and with their arms locked, started on their way to school.

Two blocks down the street they passed a big brick house surrounded by a thick hedge of evergreen trees inside a high iron fence having heavy, ornate gates. There were a few large trees scattered over the lawn and a few flowering bushes, while among them stood cast-iron dogs, deer, and lions. This was the home of Martin Moreland, the wealthiest man in the county, the president and the chief stockholder of the bank, a man whose real-estate and financial operations scattered over several adjoining counties.

While Mrs. Spellman had been dressing her little girl for school, Mrs. Moreland had been trying to accomplish the same feat with her only son; but her efforts had vastly different results. Junior was a handsome boy of eleven, with a good mind. His mother was trying to rear him properly. His father was ostensibly trying to do the same thing, but in his secret heart he wanted his son to be the successor not only to his business but also to his methods of doing business.

Mr. Moreland was a man of forty, tall and slender, having a fair complexion, light hair, and a fine, athletic figure. His eyes were small, deep-set, and penetrating, a baffling pair of eyes with which to deal. They looked straight in the face every one with whom he talked and reinforced a voice of persuasive import. But no man or woman ever had been able to see the depths of the eyes of Martin Moreland, and no man or woman ever had been perfectly sure that what his persuasive voice said was precisely the thing that he meant.

Mrs. Moreland was five years older than her husband, and it was understood in the town that he had married her because of her large inheritance from her father. She tried to be a good wife, a good mother, neighbour, and friend. She tried with all her might to love and to believe in her husband, and yet almost every day she noted some tendency in him that bred in her heart a vague fear and uncertainty, and years of this had made the big, raw-boned, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman into a creature of timid approaches, of hesitation. Sometimes there was almost fear in her eyes when she looked at Martin Moreland.

This morning she had tried repeatedly to awaken her son. Over and over she called to him: “Junior, you must get up and dress! Don’t you remember that school begins to-day? You mustn’t be late. It would be too bad to begin a new year by being tardy.”

From a near-by room Martin Moreland listened with a slight sneer on his handsome face. When his wife left the boy’s room in search of some article of clothing, he stepped to the side of the bed, shook Junior until he knew that the boy was awake, and then slid a shining dollar into his hand.

“Get up and put on your fine new suit,” he said. “You’ll cut a pretty figure being late for school. The son of the richest man in town should be first. He should show the other children that he is their natural leader. Come now, stir yourself.”

Junior immediately slid out of bed and began putting on the clothing his mother had laid out for him, slipping the money into a pocket before she saw it. As he dressed, an expression of discontent settled on his handsome young face. Everything in his home was sombre, substantial, and very expensive, but he knew that it was not a happy home. At the last minute he entered the dining room, wearing a shirt of ruffled lawn, long trousers, and a blouse of dark blue velvet with a flowing tie of dark blue lined with red. His wavy black hair was like his mother’s, so were his dark eyes, but his face was shaped very much on the lines of his father’s. He dropped to his chair and looked at the table with eyes of disapproval.

“Why can’t we ever have something fit to eat?” he asked.

“That is exactly what I am wondering,” added his father.

Mrs. Moreland surveyed the table critically.

“Why, what is the trouble?” she asked anxiously. “Everything seems to be here. The food looks all right. How can you tell that it doesn’t suit you, when you haven’t even tasted it?”

“I am going on the supposition,” said the elder Moreland, “that Hannah hasn’t greatly changed since supper last night, which wasn’t fit for a dog.”

“Then I’d better discharge her at once, and try to find some one else,” said Mrs. Moreland with unexpected spirit.

In his own way the banker retreated.

“What good would that do?” he asked shortly. “You would let the next woman you hire spoil things exactly the same way you have Hannah. We might as well go on eating the stuff she gives us as to have somebody else do the same thing.”

Then he proceeded to eat heartily of the food that was set before him. But Junior fidgeted in his chair, pushed back his plate, and refused to eat anything until the clanging of the first bell on the school house reached his ears. Then he jumped up, and, running into the hall, snatched his cap from the rack and clapped it on the back of his head. He stood hesitating a second, then, returning to the dining room, caught up all the food he could carry in his hands, rushing from the house without taking the satchel of books his mother had ready for him.

A minute later Mrs. Moreland saw them and hurried after him. He turned at her call, but he would not stop. He went on down the street munching the food he carried, while she stood looking after him, unconsciously shaking her head. In

her heart, depression and foreboding almost equalled any hope she had concerning him, yet it was on hope for him that she lived.

Earlier than any of these households, Marcia Peters opened a door that led to a garret of her small house and called: “Jason!” As she stood waiting to hear the sound of a voice that would indicate that the lad was awake, her hand rested against the door casing in a position of unconscious grace. She was unusually tall for a woman, her clothing so careless as completely to conceal her figure. Her hair was drawn straight back and wadded in a tight knot on the top of her head at the most disfiguring angle possible. She did expert laundry work and mending for a living. Her home was a tiny house, owned by the banker, on the outskirts of town. She made no friends and very seldom appeared on the streets.

“Jason!” she repeated sharply, and immediately thereafter she heard the boy’s feet on the floor. A few minutes later he came hurrying down the stairway on the run. If he had stopped to think of it, he might have realized that most of his life he had been on the run. He ran all over town, collecting and delivering Marcia’s work. Between times he ran errands for other people for the nickels and dimes that they paid him. Mostly he was late and ran to school. This continuous running on scant fare kept him pale and lean, but the exercise developed muscle, the strength of which was untried, save on work. There was a wistful flash across his thin, homely face at times, and continuous loneliness in his heart. Being the son of the village washerwoman he had always been snubbed and imposed

upon by other children, while he never had experienced the slightest degree of mother love from Marcia. He milked the cow, watered and fed the chickens, and then hurried to the Spellman home to bring a big basket of clothes for his mother to wash. With these he stopped at the grocery of Peter Potter, on Market Street, for packages of food which he carried home on the top of his clothes basket, and in handling them his fingers struck the apple. How good of Jemima Davis! She had tucked in a teacake, a cooky, a piece of candy, or an apple for him before. Next time he must surely thank her. The apple was firm and juicy and tasted as if flavoured with flowers. He must surely muster courage the next time to thank her, but not if Mrs. Spellman was in the kitchen. She might not know that Jemima gave away her apples. He had heard her say in a sweetly inflected voice when money was being raised in church for foreign missions: “We will give fifty dollars”; but he had never known her to give an apple to a hungry boy. Then a thought as delicious as the apple struck him. Maybe——just maybe ——He did not even dare think it. But she never had joined the other children in trying to shame him. Maybe——

His position in school always had been made difficult and bitter to him by cruel, thoughtless children. It did not help that he had an excellent mind and very nearly always stood at the head of his classes. In school he had a habit of setting his elbows on his desk, grasping his head with a hand on either side, and, leaning forward, he really concentrated. He knew that his only chance lay in thoroughly learning his lessons. He could not be clothed as were the other children, his mother’s occupation shut him from social intercourse

with them; he was not invited to their little parties and merry-makings. If he ever rose to a position of wealth and distinction like Mr. Moreland or Mr. Spellman, it must be through thorough application during school hours, because he had short time outside. The result was that his nervous fingers, straying through a heavy shock of silky reddish hair slightly wavy, kept it forever standing on end, and this, coupled with his lean, freckled face, made him just a trifle homelier than he would have been had his mother carefully dressed and brushed him as were most of the other children.

In school he allowed himself only one distraction. When he had pored over a book until his brain and body demanded relaxation, then he resorted to the pleasant diversion of studying the loveliest thing Number Five afforded. He studied Mahala Spellman. He was familiar with every flash of her eyes, every light on her face, each curl on her head. When she folded her hands and repeated: “Our Father Which art in Heaven,” during morning exercises, she was like an angel straight down from the skies. When she hid behind her Geography and surreptitiously nibbled a bit of candy, or flipped a note to Edith Williams, the laughter on her face, the mischief in her eyes,—Heaven had nothing in the way of angels having eyes to begin to compare with the dancing blue of her eyes,—the varying rose of her cheeks, the adorable sweetness of her little pampered body were irresistible.

Jason hurried into the kitchen. Setting the basket on the floor he snatched off the groceries and laid them on the

table and looked around to see if there was anything further he might do that would be of help before he left for school.

“That basket is about twice as heavy as usual,” he said, “I am afraid it means a hard day for you.”

Marcia Peters looked at the boy and in the deeps of her eyes there was a slight flicker that he did not catch. Neither did he notice that one of her hands slightly lifted and reached in his direction; the flicker was so impalpable, the hand controlled so instantly, that both escaped his notice.

“Elizabeth Spellman entertained the Mite Society last week,” she said tersely, “and, of course, she used stacks of embroidered linen and napkins that I must send back in perfect condition. You had better take your books and march to school now, and be mighty careful that you keep at the head of your class. It’s your only hope. Never forget that.”

Jason crossed the room, and from a shelf in the living room took down a stack of books. He never forgot.

“I’ll do my best,” he said, “but it isn’t as easy as you might think.”

“I don’t know what I ever did or said,” retorted Marcia, “that would give you the impression that I thought anything about life was easy for either one of us. ‘Easy’ is a funny word to use in connection with this house.”

Jason found himself standing straight, gripping his books, and looking into her eyes.

“I’m sorry you have to work so hard,” he said.

His glance left the face of the woman before him and ran over the small mean kitchen, the plain, ugly living room. Without seeing it actually, he mentally saw the house

outside, and the unprepossessing surroundings. There was a catch in his breath as he again faced Marcia.

“I’ll try very hard,” he told her, “and maybe it won’t be long until I can be a lawyer or a doctor or rent a piece of land, and then I’ll take care of you like a real lady.”

And again a close observer could have seen a stifled impulse toward the boy on the part of the woman; but it was not of sufficient impetus that the boy caught it, for he hesitated a second longer, then turning on his heel, he ran from the room and made his way down the street, happy to discover that for once he had plenty of time.

So it happened that at the same hour these four children were on the different streets of Ashwater, all headed toward the village school house, a grade and high school combined in one brick building designed for the educational purposes of the town. The day labourers of the village had passed over those same streets earlier that morning. The people that the children met were doctors and lawyers going to their offices, and the housewives of the village, many of them with their baskets on their arms, going to do their morning shopping. Front walks were being swept and rugs shaken from verandas. Walking demurely arm in arm, chattering to each other, went Mahala Spellman and Edith Williams. At the same time they saw an approaching figure and their arms tightened around each other.

Down the street toward them came a woman that all the village knew and spoke of as Crazy Becky. She wore the usual long, wide skirt of the period, with the neat, closely fitting waist. Her dress was of a delicately flowered white calico carefully made, her face and head covered by a deep

sunbonnet well drawn forward. The children were accustomed to having only a peep of her face with its exquisite modelling, delicate colouring, and big, wide-open, blue-gray eyes with long, dark lashes. Sometimes a little person, passing her closely and peering up, caught a gleam of wavy golden hair surrounding her face. Over one shoulder, firmly gripped in her hand, was a long red osier cut from the cornels bordering the river. From it there waved behind her as she walked, a flag of snow-white muslin, neatly tacked to its holder and carefully fringed on the lower edge. In the other hand she carried an empty basket. On her face was a look of expectancy. Always her eyes were flashing everywhere in eager search for something.

Seeing the children coming in all directions, she stationed herself on the steps leading to the lawn of a residence that stood slightly above the street, and facing the passers-by, she began to offer them the privilege of walking under her white flag. In a mellow voice, sweet and pathetic, she began timidly: “Behold the White Flag! Mark the emblem of purity.” Then, gathering courage, she cried to those approaching her: “If you know in your hearts that you are clean, pass under the flag with God’s blessing. If you know that your hearts are filled with evil, bow your heads, pass under, and the flag will make you clean.”

The people passing Rebecca acted in accordance with the dictates of common human nature. Those who knew her, humoured her, and gravely bowing their heads, passed under the flag to her intense delight. Several strangers in the village who had not seen her before and did not understand her pathetic history, stared at her in amazement

and hurried past. It had been such a long stretch from the days when John had cried in the wilderness that he was forgotten. As always, there were the coarse and careless who sneered at Rebecca and said rough, provoking things to her. After these she hurled threats of a dreadful nature and the serene beauty of her face was marred with anger for a few moments.

Edith Williams walked slowly and gripped Mahala tighter.

“Let’s run across the street,” she whispered. “I’m afraid of her.”

Mahala tightened her grip on her little friend: “I sha’n’t run from her,” she said. “I’m not afraid of her. She’s never yet hurt anybody who treated her politely. She only fights with naughty boys who tease her. Smile at her and say: ‘Good morning! Please, may I pass under your flag?’ and she will do anything in the world for you. Mama always walks under Becky’s flag. Watch me and do it as I do.”

Then Mahala, who had been taught all her life that she was to set an example for the other children of Ashwater, dropped her arm from Edith’s, and gripping her ink bottle and her books, bravely concealed the flutter of fear that was in her small heart. She marched up to Rebecca and made her a graceful bow.

“Good morning,” she said with suave politeness. “Please, may I pass under your flag this morning?”

Encouraged by the pleased smile Rebecca gave her, she added: “I try very hard to be a good child.”

“God has a blessing for all good children. Pass under the flag,” said Rebecca. She drew up her form to full height, extended her arm and held the flag in the morning sunlight.

There was beauty in her figure, there was beauty in the expression of her perfectly cut face, there was grace in her attitude, and the white banner, hanging from its red support, really appeared like an emblem of purity. A queer thrill surged through Mahala. She bowed her head and with precise steps passed under the flag reverently.

Then Edith Williams repeated her words and walked under the flag also, joining Mahala who was waiting for her. Close behind them came Junior Moreland surrounded by a crowd of boys of whom he was evidently the leader. He was a handsome lad in the morning light, and the beauty of his face and figure was emphasized by his rich suit of velveteen, his broad collar, and his tie of silk. The instant he saw Rebecca he whispered to the other boys: “Oh, look! There’s Crazy Becky. Come on, let’s have some sport with her.”

Immediately the boys rushed in a crowd toward Rebecca, led by Junior. They made faces at her, they tried to snatch the flag which she held at arm’s length high above their heads, they tweaked her skirts, and one of them, more daring than the others, slipped behind her and pulled the bonnet from her head by the crown, exposing her face and uncoiling a thick roll of waving gold hair. In an effort to be especially daring, to outdo all the others, Junior sprang high and snatched the flag from her hand in a flying leap. Then he trailed it in the dirt of the gutter. He pulled off his cap, and bowing from the waist before her, he offered the soiled emblem to her. To Rebecca this was the most horrible thing that could happen. Her deranged brain was firm in the conviction that it was her mission in life to keep that flag

snow-white, to use it as the emblem of purity. Instantly, a paroxysm of anger shook her. Her face became distorted; she dropped the flag and started after the offender. Junior was afraid of Rebecca in a spasm of anger, because he knew that the strongest man in town could not hold her when she became violent. So he dodged from under her clutching fingers and ran toward the school house.

Mahala and Edith heard the cries and turned just in time to see the white flag polluted.

“Oh, the wicked, wicked boy!” cried Mahala. She dragged Edith out of the way of the oncoming rush, but as she did so, her eyes swiftly searched the board walk over which they had been passing. One of her feet moved forward from beneath the hem of her skirts and a toe tip was firmly set on the end of a loose board. As Junior approached, running swiftly, that board lifted slightly so that he tripped over it and fell sprawling, soiling his hands, his face, and sliding over the walk on his velvet suit. Unable to stop in her rush after him, Rebecca tripped and fell on him in a heap. Jason turned a corner and came in sight, reading one of his books as he walked.

Instantly he understood. He dropped his books on a strip of grass between the fence and the walk, and ran to Rebecca. He helped her to her feet, and knowing her aversion to having her head and face seen by the public, he flew to find and replace her bonnet. He found the white flag and did what he could to straighten and clean it, and, as he put it into her hand, he said to her: “Never mind, you can wash it, you know. You can make it white again in only a