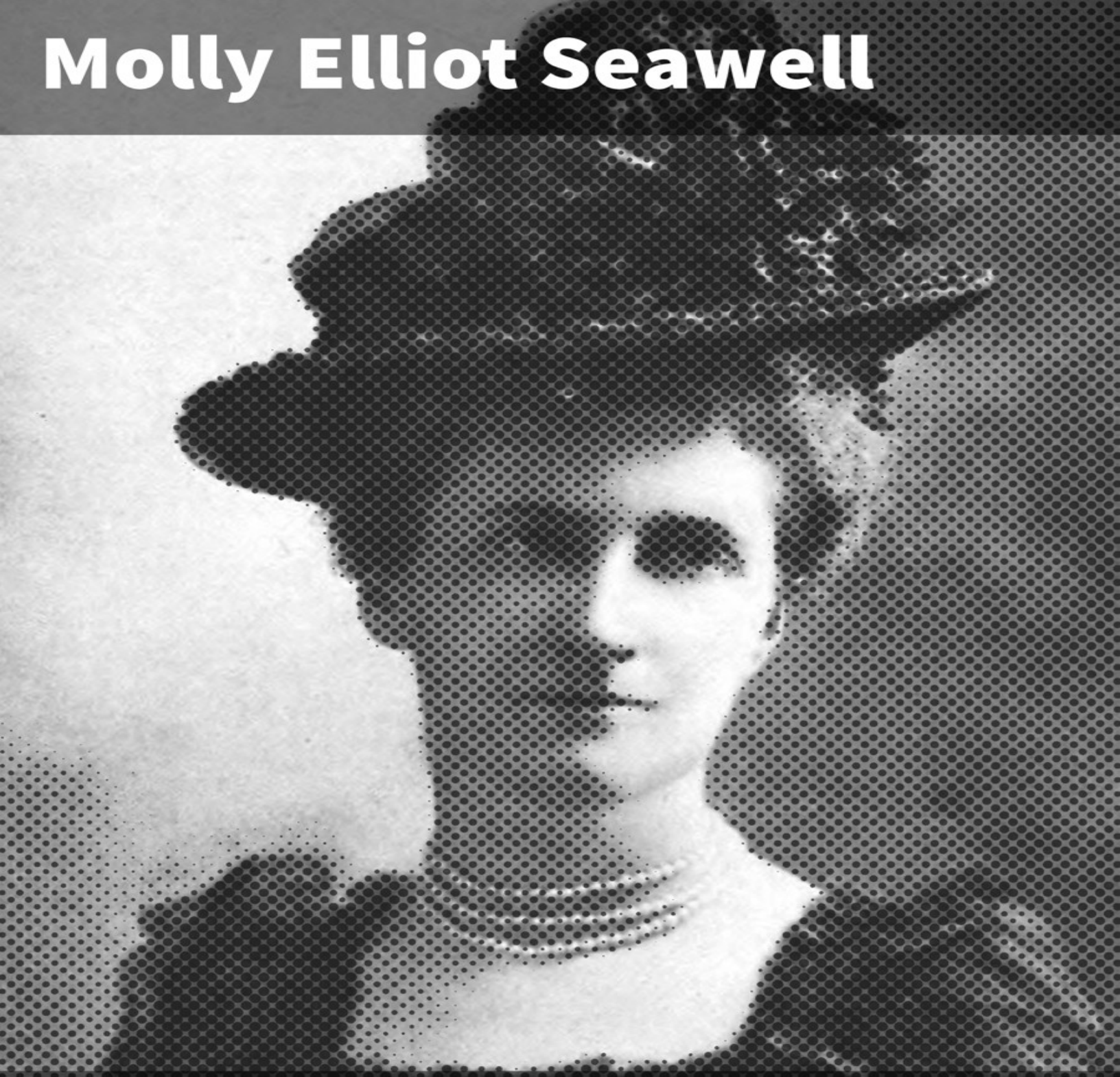
Molly Elliot Seawell



A Strange, Sad Comedy

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ONE sunny November day, in 1864, Colonel Archibald Corbin sat placidly reading “The Spectator” in the shabby old library at Corbin Hall, in Virginia. The Colonel had a fine, pale old face, clean shaven, except for a bristly, white mustache, and his white hair, which was rather long, was combed back in the fashion of the days when Bulwer’s heroes set the style for hair-dressing. The Colonel—who was no more a colonel than he was a cheese-box—had an invincible placidity, which could not be disturbed by wars or rumors of wars. He had come into the world in a calm and judicial frame of mind, and meant to go through it and out of it calmly and judicially, in spite of rude shocks and upheavals.

Everything about Colonel Corbin had reached the stage of genteel shabbiness—a shabbiness which is the exclusive mark of gentlemen. His dignified frock-coat was white about the seams with much brushing, and the tall, old-fashioned “stock” which supported his chin was neatly but obviously mended. The furniture in the room was as archaic as the Colonel’s coat and stock. A square of rag carpet covered the floor; there had been a Brussels carpet once, but that had long since gone to the hospital at Richmond—and the knob of the Colonel’s gold-headed cane had gone into the

collection-plate at church some months before. For, as the Colonel said, with a sort of grandiose modesty—“I can give but little, sir, in these disjointed times. But when I do give, I give like a gentleman, sir.”

There had been a time, not long before that, when he had been compelled to “realize,” as the Virginians euphemistically express it, upon something that could be converted into cash. This was when it became necessary to bring the body of his only son, who had been killed early in the war, back to Corbin Hall—and likewise to bring the dead man’s twelve-year-old daughter from the far South, where her mother had quickly followed her father across the gulf. Even in that sad extremity, the Colonel had never dreamed of “realizing” on the great piles of silver plate, which would, in those times, have commanded instant sale. The Corbins, who were perfectly satisfied to have their dining-room furnished with some scanty horsehair sofas and a few rickety chairs and tables, had a fancy for loading down rude cupboards with enough plate for a great establishment, according to a provincial fashion in Virginia. But instead of this, the Colonel sacrificed a fine threshing-machine and some of his best stock without a qualm. The Colonel had borne all this, and much more,—and the rare, salt tears had worn little furrows in his cheeks,—but he was still calm, still composed, under all circumstances.

The sun had just marked twelve o’clock on the old sun-dial in the garden, when the Colonel, happening to glance up, saw Aunt Tulip, the dairymaid, streaking past the window, with her petticoat over her head, followed by Nancy, the scullion, by little Patsy Jane, who picked up chips

for the kitchen fire, by Tom Battercake, whose mission in life was indicated by his name,—the bringing in of battercakes being an important part of life in Virginia,—and by Juba, who was just beginning his apprenticeship by carrying relays of the eternal battercakes from the kitchen to the dining-room. And the next moment, Miss Jemima, the Colonel's sister and double, actually danced into the room with her gray curls flying, and gasped, "Brother, the Yankees are coming!"

"Are they, my dear Jemima?" remarked the Colonel, rising. "Then we must prepare to meet them with all the dignity and composure possible." As the Colonel opened the door, his own man, Dad Davy, nearly ran over him, blurting out the startling news, "Marse, de Yankees is comin'!" and the same information was screeched at him by every negro, big and little, on the plantation who had known it in time to make a bee-line for the house.

"Disperse to your usual occupations," cried the Colonel, waving his hand majestically. The negroes dispersed, not to their business, but with the African's natural love of a sensation to spread the alarm all over the place. By the time it got to the "quarters,"—the houses of the field-hands, farthest away from "de gret house,"—it was reported that Dad Davy had told Tom Battercake that he saw Aunt Tulip "runnin' outen de gret house, and the Yankees wuz hol'in er pistol at ole Marse' hade, and Miss Jemima, she wuz havin' er fit with nobody but little Patsy Jane," etc., etc., etc. What really happened was, the Colonel walked calmly out in the hall, urging Miss Jemima to be composed.

"My dear Jemima, do not become agitated. David, you are an old fool. Thomas Battercake, proceed to your usual

employment at this time of day, cleaning the knives, or whatever it is. Would you have these Yankee miscreants to think us a body of Bedlamites?”

Just then, down the stairs came running pretty little twelve-year-old Letty, his granddaughter. Letty seized his veined and nervous hand in her two pink palms, and expressed a willingness to die on the spot for him.

The Colonel marched solemnly out on the porch, and by that time, what seemed to him an army of blue-coats was dashing across the lawn. A lieutenant swung himself off his horse, and, coming up the steps, demanded the keys of the barn, in a brogue that could be cut with a knife.

“No, sir,” said the Colonel, firmly, his gray hair moved slightly by the autumn wind, “you may break open my barn-door, but I decline to surrender the keys.”

The lieutenant, at that, struck a match against the steps, and a little point of flame was seen among the withered tendrils of the Virginia creeper that clung to the wooden pillars of the porch.

“Now, will you give up those keys, you obstinate ould ribil?” asked the lieutenant, fiercely.

“No!” responded the Colonel, quite unmoved. “The term that you apply to me is the one that was borne with honor by the Father of his country. Moreover, from your accent, which I may be permitted to observe, sir, is grotesque to the last degree, I surmise that you yourself may be a rebel to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, for certainly there is nothing American about you.”

At this, a general snicker went around among the enemy, for discipline was not very well observed between officers

and men in those days. Then, half a dozen cavalrymen dropped off their horses and made for the well, whence they returned in a twinkling with water to put out the fire that had begun to crackle ominously. The Colonel had not turned a hair, although Miss Jemima behind him and Letty had clung together with a faint cry.

The lieutenant rode off in the direction of the barn, ordering most of the men to follow him. Wagons were then seen coming down the lane, and going toward the barn to cart off the Colonel's corn and wheat. The sympathies of those who were left behind were plainly with the Colonel. Especially was this so with a tall, lanky, grizzled sergeant, who had been the first man to put out the fire.

"I am much obliged to you, my good man," said Colonel Corbin, loftily, "for your efforts in extinguishing the flames started by that person, who appears to be in command."

"You're welcome," answered the lanky sergeant, with the easy familiarity of the rural New-Englander.

The lieutenant had showed unmistakably the bullying resentment of a peasant brought face to face with a gentleman, but the lanky sergeant indirectly felt some subtile sympathy with a spirit as independent as his own.

"I am glad, brother," said Miss Jemima, "that these men who are left to guard us are plainly Americans. They will be more humane than foreigners."

"Vastly more so," answered the Colonel, calmly watching the loading of his crops upon the wagons in the distance. "There is, particularly in New England, a sturdy yeomanry, such as our friend here belongs to," indicating the sergeant, "which really represents an admirable type of man."

“Gosh,” exclaimed the sergeant, in admiration, “it’s the durndest, gamest thing I ever see, you standin’ up here as cool as a cucumber, when your property’s bein’ took. I kin stand fire; my grandfather, he fought at Lexington, and he didn’t flunk nuther, and I ain’t flunked much. But I swan, if you Johnny Rebs was a-cartin’ off my hay and stuff, I’d be a deal more excited ’n you are. And my old woman—gosh t’ almighty!”

The lanky sergeant seemed completely staggered by the contemplation of the old woman’s probable behavior upon such an occasion.

“There are other things, my friend,” answered the Colonel, putting his hands under his coat-tails and turning his back upon the barn in the distance, “which are of more consequence, I opine, than hay and corn. That, I think, the most limited intelligence will admit.”

“That’s so,” responded the lanky sergeant, “I kin do a sight better keepin’ bees up in Vermont than down here in Virginny fightin’ the rebs for eighteen dollars a month, but when Uncle Abe called for seventy-five thousand men I couldn’t a-kep’ them bees another day, not if I had been makin’ two hundred dollars a month at it. When I heard ’bout it, I kem in, and I said to the old woman: ‘I’ve got a call,’ and she screeched out, ‘A call to git converted, Silas?’—the old woman’s powerful religious,—and I says, ‘No, Sary—a call to go and fight for the Flag.’ And when we talked it over, and remembered about my grandfather,—he lived to be selectman,—the old woman says, ‘Silas, you are a miser’bul man, and you’ll git killed in your sins, and no insurance on your life, and it’ll take all I kin rake and scrape

to bring your body home, but mebbe it’s your duty to fight for your country.’ And she said I might come, and here I am, and the bees is goin’ to thunder.”

“Unfortunately for me, sir,” said the Colonel, with a faint smile, but with unabated politeness. “However, I wish to say that you are pursuing your humble but unpleasant duty in a most gentlemanlike manner. For, look you, the term gentleman is comprehensive. It includes not only a man who has had the advantages of birth and station,—advantages which I may, with all modesty, claim, as enjoying them without any merit of my own,—but a man like yourself, of honorable, though humble parentage, who possesses a sturdy independence of spirit to which, I may say, my friend with the violent brogue is a stranger.”

The lanky sergeant, who had a dry, Puritanical humor of his own, was immensely tickled at this, and, at the same time, profoundly respectful of a man who could enter into disquisitions respecting what constituted a gentleman while his goods were being confiscated under his very nose.

“I tell you what,” said he, becoming quite friendly and confidential with the Colonel, “there’s a fellow with our command,—an Englishman,—and he’s got the same name as yours—Corbin—only he’s got a handle to it. He is Sir Archibald Corbin, and I never see a young man so like an old one as he is like you. He just seems to me to be your very image. He ain’t reg’larly attached nor nothin’; he’s just one of them aide’campers. He might be your son. Hain’t you got any son?”

At this, little Miss Letty, who had kept in the background clinging to Miss Jemima, came forward, and the Colonel put

one arm around her.

“I had a son,—a noble son,—but he laid down his life in defense of his State, and this is his orphan child,” said he.

The lanky sergeant took off his cap and made a bow.

“And I’ll be bound,” he said, with infinite respect in his awkwardly familiar manner, “that your son was true grit.” He stopped and hunted about in his mind for a title to bestow upon the Colonel superior to the one he had, and finally hit upon “Judge,” to which title the Colonel was as much entitled as the one he bore.

“Judge, I don’t believe you’d turn a hair if there was a hundred pieces of artillery trained on you. I believe you’d just go on talkin’ in this ’ere highflown way, without kerin’ about anything except your dignity. And if your son was like you, he didn’t have no skeer in him at all, General.” By this time the sergeant had concluded that the old gentleman deserved promotion even from the title of Judge.

The Colonel inclined his head, a slight flush creeping into his wan face.

“You do me honor,” he said, “but you do my son only justice.”

By this time the wagons had been loaded up and were being driven off. The scared negroes that had flocked about the house from all over the plantation were peering, with ashy faces, around the corners and over the garden fence. The men were ordered to fall in, the lieutenant giving his orders at a considerable distance, and in his involuntary and marked brogue. The lanky sergeant and the few men with him mounted, and then all of them, simultaneously, took off their caps.

“Three cheers for the old game-cock!” cried the lanky sergeant enthusiastically. The cheers were given with a will and with a grin. The Colonel bowed profoundly, smiling all the time.

“This is truly grotesque,” he said. “You have just appropriated all of my last year’s crops, and now you are assuring me of your personal respect. For the last, I thank you,” and so, with cheering and laughter, they rode off, leaving the Colonel with his self-respect unimpaired, but minus several hundred bushels of corn and wheat. The negroes gradually quieted down, and the Colonel and Miss Jemima and little Miss Letty retired to the library. The Colonel took down his family tree, and began gravely to study that perennially entertaining document in order to place the Corbin who was serving as aide-de-camp in the Union army. Miss Jemima, too, was deeply interested, and remarked sagely:

“He is no doubt a great-grandson of Admiral Sir Archibald Corbin, who adhered to the royal cause and was afterward made a baronet by George III.”

At that very moment, the Colonel hit upon him.

“That is he, my dear Jemima. General Sir George Corbin, grandson of the admiral and son of Sir Archibald Corbin, second, married to the Honorable Evelyn Guilford-Hope, has one son and heir, Archibald, born May 18, 1842. His father must be dead, and he has but little more than reached his majority. Sister, if he were not in the Federal army, I should be most happy to greet him as a kinsman. But I own to an adamantine prejudice toward strangers who dare to meddle in civil broils.”

So had Miss Jemima, of course, who regarded the Colonel's prejudices as direct inspirations from on high.

The very next week after the visitation of the Federal cavalry came a descent upon the part of a squad of Confederate troopers. As the Colonel and Miss Jemima entertained the commanding officers in the library, with the most elaborate courtesy and home-made wine, the shrill quacking and squawking of the ducks and chickens was painfully audible as the hungry troopers chased and captured them. The Colonel and Miss Jemima, though, were perfectly deaf to the clamor made by the poultry as their necks were wrung, and when a cavalryman rode past the window with one of Miss Jemima's pet bronze turkeys hanging from his saddle-bow and gobbling wildly, Miss Jemima only gave a faint sigh, and looked very hard at little Miss Letty, who was about to shriek a protest against such cruelty. Even next morning she made not a single inquiry as to the startling deficit in the poultry yard. And when Aunt Tulip began to grumble something about "dem po' white trash dat cum ter a gent'mun' house, an' cornfuscate he tu'keys settin' on the nes'," Miss Jemima shut her up promptly.

"Not a word, not a word, Tulip. Confederate officers are welcome to anything at Corbin Hall."

A few nights after that, the Colonel sat in the library looking at the hickory fire that danced up the chimney and shone on the polished floor, and turned little Letty's yellow hair into burnished gold. Suddenly a terrific knocking resounded at the door.

In those strange times people's hearts sometimes stood still when there was a clamor for entrance; but the Colonel's brave old heart went on beating placidly. Not so Dad Davy's, who, with a negro's propensity to get up an excitement about everything, exclaimed solemnly:

"D'yar dee come to bu'n de house over we all's hades. I done dream lars night 'bout a ole h'yar cotch hade fo'mos' in er trap, an' dat's a sho' sign o' trouble and distrus'fulness."

"David," remarked the Colonel, according to custom, "you are a fool. Go and open the hall door."

Dad Davy hobbled toward the door and opened it. It was about dusk on an autumn night, and there was a weird half-light upon the weedy lawn, and the clumps of gnarled acacias, and the overgrown carriage drive of pounded oyster-shells. Nor was there any light in the large, low-pitched hall, with its hard mahogany sofa, and the walls ornamented with riding-whips and old spurs. A tall and stalwart figure stood before the door, and a voice out of the darkness asked:

"Is this the house of Mr. Archibald Corbin, and is he at home?"

The sound of that voice seemed to paralyze Dad Davy.

"Lord A'mighty," he gasped, "'tis Marse Archy's voice. Look a heah, is you—is you a *ha'nt?*"[1]

"A what?"

But without waiting for an answer Dad Davy scurried off for a moment and returned with a tallow candle in a tall silver candlestick. As he appeared, shading the candle with one dusky hand, and rolling two great eyeballs at the

newcomer, he was handed a visiting card. This further mystified him, as he had never seen such an implement in his life before; he gazed with a fixed and frightened gaze at the young man before him, and his skin gradually turned the ashy hue that terror produces in a negro.

“Hi, hi,” he spluttered, “you is de spit and image o’ my young Marse, that was kilt long o’ dis lars’ year. And you got he voice. I kin mos’ swar you wuz Marse Archy Corbin, like he wuz fo’ he got married.”

“And my name is Archibald Corbin, too,” said the young man, comprehending the strange resemblance between himself and the dead and gone Archy that had so startled the old negro. He poked his card vigorously into Dad Davy’s hand.

“What I gwine to do with this heah?” asked Dad Davy, eying the card suspiciously.

“Take this card to your master.”

“And if he ax me who k’yard ’tis, what I gwi’ tell him?”

At this the young man burst out into a ringing, full-chested laugh. The negroes were new to him, and ever amusing, and he could not but laugh at Dad Davy’s simplicity. That laugh brought the Colonel out into the hall. He advanced with a low bow, which the stranger returned, and took the card out of Dad Davy’s hand, meanwhile settling his spectacles carefully on his nose, and reading deliberately:

“Sir Archibald Corbin, Fox Court.”

The Colonel fixed his eyes upon his guest, and, like Dad Davy, the resemblance to the other Archibald Corbin overcame him instantly. His lips trembled slightly, and it was

a moment or two before he could say, with his usual blandness:

“I see you are Archibald Corbin, and I am your kinsman, also Archibald Corbin.”

“Being in your neighborhood,” said Sir Archibald, courteously, “I could not forbear doing myself the pleasure of making myself known to the only relatives I have on this side of the water.”

There was something winning and graceful about him, and the Colonel was much surprised to find that any man born and bred outside of the State of Virginia should have so fine an address.

“It gives me much gratification,” replied Colonel Corbin, in his most imposing barytone, “to acknowledge the relationship existing between the Corbins of Corbin Hall in Virginia and those of Fox Court in England.”

In saying this he led the way toward the library, where two more tallow dips in silver candlesticks had been lighted.

When young Corbin came within the circle of the fire’s red light—for the tallow dips did not count—Miss Jemima uttered a faint scream. This strange sensation that his appearance made in every member of the family rather vexed the young Englishman, who was a robust specimen, and with nothing uncanny about him, except the strange and uncomfortable likeness to a dead man whom he had never seen or heard of until that moment.

“Pardon me,” said the Colonel, after a moment, in a choked voice, “but your resemblance to my only son, who was killed while gallantly leading his regiment, is something extraordinary, and you will perhaps understand a father’s

agitation”—here two scanty tears rolled down upon his white mustache. Even little Miss Letty looked at the newcomer with troubled eyes and quivering lips.

Young Corbin, with a hearty and healthy desire to get upon more comfortable subjects of discourse, mentioned that, having a taste for adventure, he had come to America during the terrible upheaval, and through the influence of friends in power he had obtained a temporary staff appointment, by which he was able to see something of actual warfare.

This statement was heard in absolute silence. Young Corbin received a subtile impression that his new-found relatives rather disapproved of him, and that the fact that he was a baronet with a big rent-roll, which had hitherto brought him the highest consideration, ranked as nothing with these primitive people. Naturally, this was a stab to the self-love of a young fellow of twenty-two, but with the innate independence of a man born to position and possessions, he refrained from forcing his consequence upon his relatives. The Colonel talked learnedly and eloquently upon the subject of the Corbins and their pedigree, to which Miss Jemima listened complacently. Little Miss Letty, though, seemed to regard the guest as a base intruder, and glowered viciously upon him, while she knitted a large woolen sock.

Supper was presently announced by Dad Davy. There might be a rag carpet on the floor at Corbin Hall, and tallow dips, but there was sure to be enough on the table to feed a regiment. This supper was the most satisfactory thing that young Sir Archy had seen yet among his Virginia relations.

There was an “old ham” cured in the smoke from hickory ashes, and deviled turkey after Miss Jemima’s own recipe, and it took Tom Battercake, Black Juba, and little Patsy Jane, all together, to bring in supplies of battercakes, to which the invariable formula was: “Take two, and butter them while they are hot.”

The Colonel kept up a steady fusillade, reinforced by Miss Jemima, of all the family history, peculiarities, and what not, of the Corbin family. The Corbins were, to a man, the best judges of wines in the State of Virginia; they inherited great capacity for whist; and were remarkable for putting a just estimate upon people, and inflexible in maintaining their opinions. “Of which,” said the Colonel, suavely, “I will give you an example:

“My honored father always believed that it was the guest’s duty, when spending the night at a house, to make the motion toward retiring for the night. My uncle, John Whiting Corbin, held the contrary. As both knew the other’s inflexibility they avoided ever spending the night at each other’s houses, although upon the most affectionate and brotherly terms. Upon one occasion, however, my uncle was caught at Corbin Hall by stress of weather. The evening passed pleasantly, but toward midnight the rest of the family, including my sister Jemima and myself, retired, leaving my father and his brother amicably discussing the Virginia resolutions of ’98. As the night wore on both wished to retire, but my father would not transgress the code of etiquette he professed, by suggesting bedtime to his guest, nor would my uncle yield the point by making the first move.

“When, at daylight the next morning, my boy Davy came in to make the fire, here, sir, in this library, I assure you, my father and his brother were still discussing the resolutions of ’98. They had been at it all night.”

This was one of the Colonel’s crack stories, and Sir Archy laughed at it heartily enough. But with all this studied hospitality toward himself, he felt more, every moment, in spite of the Colonel’s sounding periods, that he was merely tolerated at best, and as he had never been snubbed before in his life, the experience did not please him. At ten o’clock he rose to go, saying that he preferred traveling by night under the circumstances. The Colonel invited him to remain longer, with careful politeness, but when the invitation was declined, no more was visible than civil regret. Nevertheless, the Colonel went himself to see that Sir Archy’s horse had been properly fed and rubbed down, and Miss Jemima went to fetch a glass of the home-made wine, which nearly choked Sir Archy in the effort to gulp it down. He was alone for a few moments with pretty little Letty, who had not for a moment abandoned her standoffish attitude.

“Will you be glad to see me the next time I come, little cousin?” he asked, mischievously.

Here was a chance for Letty to annihilate this brazen newcomer, and she proceeded to do it by quoting one of the Colonel’s most elaborate phrases. She got slightly mixed on the word “adamantine,” but still Letty thought it sounded very well when she remarked, loftily, “I have an anti-mundane prejudice toward foreigners meddling in domestic broils.” And every word was punctuated by a scowl.

Miss Letty fondly imagined that the young Englishman would be awed and delighted at this prodigious remark in one so young, but when Sir Archy burst into one of his rich and ringing laughs, Letty promptly realized that he was laughing at her, and could have pulled his hair with pleasure.

Sir Archy was still laughing and Letty was still blushing and scowling when their elders returned. In a little while Sir Archy was galloping down the sandy lane at Corbin Hall, with the faint lights of the grim old house twinkling far behind him. It was an odd experience, and not altogether pleasing. For once, he had met people who knew he was a baronet, and who did not care for it, and who knew he had a great property, and who did not feel the slightest respect for it. There was something sad, something ludicrous, and something noble and disinterested about those refined, unsophisticated people at Corbin Hall; and when that little sulky, frowning thing grew up, she would be a beauty, Sir Archy decided, as he galloped along the sandy road through the moonlight night.