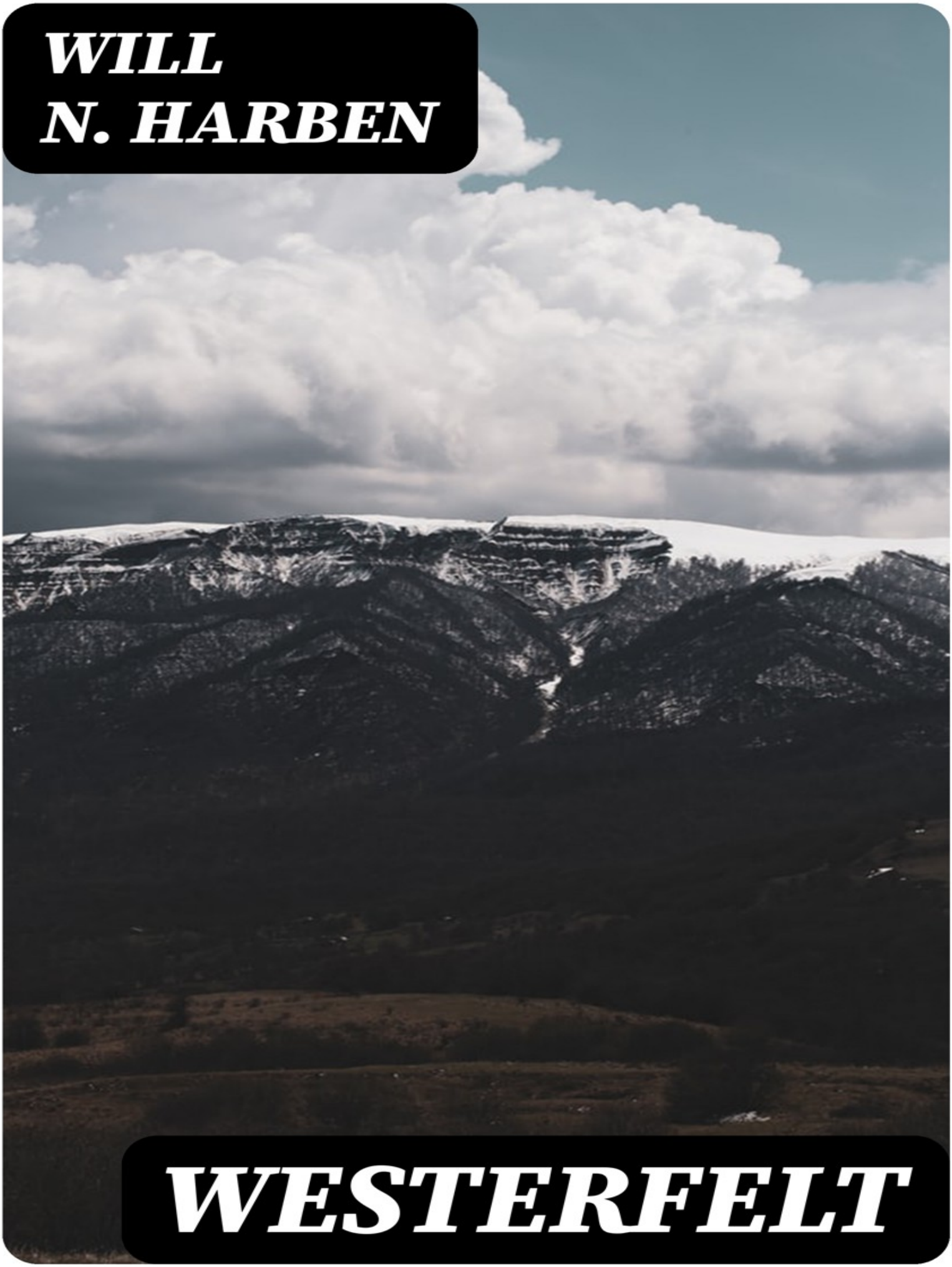
WILL
N. HARBEN



WESTERFELT

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Westerfelt

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Chapter I

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They had had a quilting at the house of the two sisters that day. Six or seven women of the neighborhood, of middle age or older, had been in to sew on the glaring, varicolored square. All day long they had thrust their needles up and down and gossiped in their slow, insinuating way, pausing only at noon to move their chairs to the dinner-table, where they sat with the same set curves to their backs.

The sun had gone down behind the mountain and the workers had departed, some traversing the fields and others disappearing by invisible paths in the near-by wood. The two sisters had taken the finished quilt from its wooden frame, and were carefully ironing out the wrinkles preparatory to adding it to the useless stack of its kind in the corner of the room.

"I believe, as I'm alive, that it's the purtiest one yet," remarked Mrs. Slogan. "Leastwise, I hain't seed narry one to beat it. Folks talks mightily about Mis' Lithicum's last one, but I never did have any use fer yaller buff, spliced in with indigo an' deep red. I wisht they was goin' to have the Fair this year; ef I didn't send this un I'm a liar."

Mrs. Slogan was a childless married woman of past sixty. Her sister, Mrs. Dawson, had the softer face of the two, which, perhaps, was due to her having suffered much and to the companionship of a daughter whom she loved. She was shorter than her sister by several inches, and had a small, wrinkled face, thin, gray hair, and a decided stoop. Some

people said she had acquired the stoop in bending so constantly over her husband's bed during his last protracted illness. Others affirmed that her sister was slowly nagging the life out of her, and simply because she had been blessed with that which had been denied her—a daughter. Be this as it may, everybody who knew Mrs. Slogan knew that she never lost an opportunity to find fault with the girl, who was considered quite pretty and had really a gentle, lovable disposition.

"Whar's Sally?" asked Mrs. Slogan, when she had laid the quilt away.

"I don't know whar she is," answered Mrs. Dawson. "I reckon she'll be in directly."

"I'll be bound you don't know whar she is," retorted the other, with asperity; "you never keep a eye on 'er. Ef you'd a-watched 'er better an' kept 'er more at home thar never would 'a' been the talk that's now goin' about an' makin' you an' her the laughin'-stock of the settlement. I told you all along that John Westerfelt never had marryin' in the back o' his head, an' only come to see her beca'se she was sech a fool about 'im."

"I seed 'er down the meadow branch just now," broke in her husband, who sat smoking his clay pipe on the door-step. "She was hard at it, pickin' flowers as usual. I swear I never seed the like. That gal certainly takes the rag off'n the bush. I believe she'd let 'possum an' taters git cold to pick a daisy. But what's the talk?" he ended, as he turned his head and looked at his wife, who really was the source of all his information.

"Why," replied Mrs. Slogan, with undisguised satisfaction in her tone, "Mis' Simpkins says Westerfelt is goin' with Ab Lithicum's daughter Lizzie."

"Well," said Slogan, with a short, gurgling laugh, "what's wrong with that? A feller as well fixed as Westerfelt is ort to be allowed to look around a little, as folks say in town when they are a-tradin'. Lord, sometimes I lie awake at night thinkin' what a good time I mought 'a' had an' what I mought 'a' run across ef I hadn't been in sech a blamed fool hurry! Lawsy me, I seed a deef an' dumb woman in town t'other day, and, for a wonder, she wasn't married, nur never had been! I jest looked at that woman an' my mouth fairly watered."

"Yo're a born fool," snorted Mrs. Slogan.

"What's that got to do with John Wester—"

"Sh—" broke in Mrs. Dawson. "I heer Sally a-comin'."

"But I *want* 'er to heer me," cried the woman appealed to, just as the subject of the conversation entered the room from the passage which connected the two parts of the house. "It'll do 'er good, I hope, to know folks think she has made sech a goose of 'erse'f."

"What have I done now, Aunt Clarissa?" sighed the frail-looking girl, as she took off her sun-bonnet and stood in the centre of the room, holding a bunch of wild flowers and delicate maiden-hair fern leaves in her hand.

"Why, John Westerfelt has done you exactly as he has many a other gal," was the bolt the woman hurled. "He's settin' up to Lizzie Lithicum like a house afire. I don't know but I'm glad of it, too, fer I've told you time an' time agin that he didn't care a hill o' beans fer no gal, but was out o'

sight out o' mind with one as soon as another un struck his fancy."

Sally became deathly pale as she turned to the bed in one of the corners of the room and laid her flowers down. She was silent for several minutes. All the others were watching her. Even her mother seemed to have resigned her to the rude method of awakening which suited her sister's heartless mood. At first it looked as if Sally were going to ignore the thrust, but they soon discovered their mistake, for she suddenly turned upon them with a look on her rigid face they had never seen there before. It was as if youth had gone from it, leaving only its ashes.

"I don't believe one word of it," she said, firmly. "I don't believe it. I wouldn't believe it was anything but your mean meddling if you swore it."

"Did you ever!" gasped Mrs. Slogan; "after all the advice I've give the foolish girl!"

"Well, I reckon that's beca'se you don't want to believe it, Sally," said Slogan, without any intention of abetting his wife. "I don't want to take sides in yore disputes, but Westerfelt certainly is settin' square up to Ab's daughter. I seed 'em takin' a ride in his new hug-me-tight buggy yesterday. She's been off to Cartersville, you know, an' has come back with dead loads o' finery. They say she's l'arned to play 'Dixie' on a pyanner an' reads a new novel every week. Ab's awfully tickled about it. Down at the store t'other day, when Westerfelt rid by on his prancin' hoss, Clem Dill said: 'Ab, I reckon it won't be long 'fore you move over on yore son-in-law's big farm,' an' Ab laughed so hard he let the tobacco juice run down on his shirt.

"'Liz 'll manage his case,' sez he. 'Westerfelt may fly around the whole caboodle of 'em, but when Liz gits 'er head set she cuts a wide swathe an' never strikes a snag ur stump, an' cleans out the fence-corners as smooth as a parlor floor.'"

Sally bent down over her uncle; her face was slowly hardening into conviction. When she spoke her voice had lost its ring of defiance and got its strength of utterance only from sheer despair.

"You saw them in his new buggy, Uncle Peter," she asked, "taking a ride—are you sure?"

Peter Slogan dropped his eyes; he seemed to realize the force of the blow he had helped to deal, and made no answer.

Mrs. Slogan laughed out triumphantly as she stooped to put her smoothing-iron down on the hearth.

"Ride together!" she exclaimed. "As ef that was all! Why, he's been goin' thar twice an' three times a week regular. Jest as he begun taperin' off with you he tapered on with her. I don't reckon you hardly remember when he come heer last, do you? Ab Lithicum's as big a fool as yore mother was in not callin' a halt. Jest let a man have a little property, an' be a peg or two higher as to family connections, an' he kin ride dry-shod over a whole community. He's goin' thar to-night. Mis' Simpkins was at Lithicum's when a nigger fetched the note. Lizzie was axin' 'er what to put on. She's got a sight o' duds. They say it's jest old dresses that her cousins in town got tired o' wearin', but they are ahead o' anything in the finery line out heer."

A look of wretched conviction stamped itself on the girl's delicate features. Slowly she turned to pick up her flowers, and went with them to the mantel-piece. There was an empty vase half filled with water, and into it she tried to place the stems, but they seemed hard to manage in her quivering fingers, and she finally took the flowers to her own room across the passage. They heard the sagging door scrape the floor as she closed it after her.

"Now, I reckon you two are satisfied," said Mrs. Dawson, bitterly. "Narry one of you hain't one bit o' feelin' ur pity."

Mrs. Slogan shrugged her shoulders, and Peter looked up regretfully, and then with downcast eyes continued to pull silently at his pipe.

"I jest did what I ort to 'a' done," said Mrs. Slogan. "She ort to know the truth, an' I tol' 'er."

"You could 'a' gone about it in a more human way," sighed Mrs. Dawson. "The Lord knows the child's had enough to worry 'er, anyway. She's been troubled fer the last week about him not comin' like he used to, an' she'd a-knowed the truth soon enough."

An hour later supper was served, and though her aunt called to her that it was on the table, Sally Dawson did not appear, so the meal passed in unusual silence. The Slogans ate with their habitual zest, but the little bent widow only munched a piece of bread and daintily sipped her cup of buttermilk.

Presently they heard the rasping sound of Sally's door as it was drawn open, and then they saw her go through the passage and step down into the yard. Rising quickly, Mrs.

Dawson went to the door and looked out. She descried her daughter making her way hastily towards the gate.

"Sally!" cried out the old woman, her thin voice cracking on its too high key, "Sally, wait thar fer me! Stop, I say!"

The girl turned and waited for her mother to approach through the half-darkness, her face averted towards the road.

"Sally, whar have you started?"

The girl did not move as she answered:

"Nowhere, mother; I—"

The old woman put out her bony hand and laid it on the girl's arm. "Sally, you are not a-tellin' me the truth. You are a-goin' to try to see John Westerfelt."

"Well, what if I am, mother?"

"I don't believe I'd go, darlin'. I'd be above lettin' any triflin' man know I was that bad off—I railly would try to have a little more pride."

Sally Dawson turned her head, and her eyes bore down desperately on the small face before her.

"Mother," she said, "you don't know what you'd do if you was in my place."

"I reckon not, darlin', but—"

"Mother, I'll die if I don't know the truth. Once he told me if I ever heard one word against him to come to him with it, and I said I would. Maybe Aunt Clarissa is right about Lizzie an' him, but I've got to get it straight from him. He went to town to-day, and always drives along the road about this time."

"Then I'll go out thar with you, Sally, if you will do sech a thing."

"No, you won't, mother. Nobody has any right to hear what I've got to say to him."

The old woman raised the corner of her gingham apron to her eyes as if some inward emotion had prompted tears, but the fountains of grief were dry.

"Oh, Sally," she whimpered, "I'm so miserable! I'll never forgive yore aunt fer devilin' you so much, right now when you are troubled. I'll tell you what me 'n' you'll do; we'll git us a house an' move away from 'er."

"I don't care what she says—if it's true," replied Sally. "If—if John Westerfelt has fooled me, I wouldn't care if it was printed in every paper in the State. If he don't love me, I won't care for nothin'. Mother, you know he made me think he loved—wanted me, at least—that was all I could make out of it."

"I was a leetle afeerd all along," admitted Mrs. Dawson. "I was afeerd, though I couldn't let on at the time. Folks said he was powerful changeable. You see, he has treated other gals the same way. Sally, you must be brave, an' not let on. Why, thar was Mattie Logan—jest look at her. Folks said she was a rantin' fool about 'im, but when he quit goin' thar she tuck up with Clem Dill, an' now she's a happy wife an' mother."

Sally turned towards the gate. "What's that to me?" she said, fiercely. "I'm not her, and she's not me. Stay here, mother. I'll be back soon."

"Well, I'm goin' to set right thar on that log outside the gate, an' not budge one inch till you come back, Sally. If you wait too long, though, I'll come after you. Oh, Sally, I'm awful afeerd—I don't know what at, but I'm afeerd."

Together the two passed through the gate, and then, leaving her mother at the log, Sally hastened through the darkness towards the main road, several hundred yards away. Mrs. Dawson sat down and folded her hands tightly in her lap and waited. After a few minutes she heard the heat of a horse's hoofs on the clay road, and when it ceased she knew her child was demanding and learning her fate. Fifteen minutes passed. The beat of hoofs was resumed, and soon afterwards Sally Dawson came slowly through the darkness, her dress dragging over the dewy grass. She seemed to have forgotten that her mother was waiting for her, and was about to pass on to the house, when Mrs. Dawson spoke up.

"Heer I am, Sally; what did he say?"

The girl sat down on the log beside her mother. There was a desperate glare in her eyes that had never been in eyes more youthful. Her lips were drawn tight, her small hands clinched.

"It's every bit true," she said, under her breath. "He's goin' with Lizzie, regular. He admitted he had an engagement with her tonight. Mother, it's all up with me. He's jest tired of me. I don't deserve any pity for bein' such a fool, but it's awful—awful—awful!"

Mrs. Dawson caught her breath suddenly, so sharp was her own pain, but she still strove to console her daughter.

"He's railly not wuth thinkin' about, darlin'; do—do try to forget 'im. It may look like a body never could git over a thing like that, but I reckon a pusson kin manage to sort o' bear it better, after awhile, than they kin right at the start. Sally, I'm goin' to tell you a secret. I'd 'a' told you before this but I 'lowed you was too young to heer the like. It's about

me 'n' yore pa—some'n' you never dreamt could 'a' happened. Mebby it 'll give you courage, fer if a old woman like me kin put up with sech humiliation, shorely a young one kin. Sally, do you remember, when you was a leetle, tiny girl, that thar was a Mis' Talley, a tall, slim, yaller-headed woman, who come out from town to board one summer over at Hill's? Well, she never had nothin' much to occupy 'er mind with durin' the day, an' she used to take 'er fancy-work an' set in the shady holler at the gum spring, whar yore pa went to water his hoss. Of course, she never keerd a cent fer him, but I reckon to pass the time away she got to makin' eyes at him. Anyway, it driv' 'im plumb crazy. I never knowed about it till the summer was mighty nigh over, an' I wouldn't 'a' diskivered it then if I hadn't 'a' noticed that he had made powerful little headway ploughin' in the field whar he claimed to be at work. She wasn't a bad woman. I give 'er credit fer that, an' I reckon she never talked to 'im many times, an' never thought of him except to laugh at him after she went back home, but he never quit thinkin' about her. She had 'er picture printed in a paper along with some other church-women in town, an' somehow he got a-hold of it an' cut it out. He used to keep it hid in a ol' Testament, in a holler tree behind the cow-lot, an' used to slip out an' look at it when he 'lowed he wasn't watched. Sally, I never once mentioned it to him. I seed what had been done couldn't be undone, but the Lord on High knows well enough how I suffered. Sally, maybe it's the Lord's will fer you to lose this feller now when you are young an' able to fight agin it, so you won't suffer the awful humiliation at a

time o' life when a body ort to be easy. Sally, are you a-listenin' to me?"

"Yes, mother. I heard every word you said about pa an' the woman. I heard that, and I heard them frogs down there croaking, too, and the chickens fluttering on their roosts. I heard his horse still a-trotting. Mother, he was whistling when he drove up just now—*whistling*!"

The two stared into each other's eyes for a moment, then the old woman went on:

"It'll go powerful hard with you now, but you'd better have it over with when you're young 'an to suffer when you're a weak old woman like me. Ol' age cayn't stand such things so well. No, I never once mentioned the woman to yore pa. I knowed it would jest make him resort to lyin', an' at the bottom he was a good, pious man. He jest couldn't quit thinkin' o' that yaller-headed woman an' her blue eyes an' shiny store shoes. I jest pitied 'im like he was a baby. It went on till he got sick, an' many an' many a day he'd lie thar helpless an' look out towards the cow-lot, wistful like, an' I knowed he was thinkin' o' that pictur'. He was lookin' that way when he drawed his last breath. It may 'a' been jest a notion o' mine, fer some said he was unconscious all that day, but it looked that away to me. I nussed him through his sickness as well as I could, an' attended to every wish he had till he passed away. Now, you know some'n' else, Sally. You know why I never put up no rock at his grave. The neighbors has had a lots to say about that one thing—most of 'em sayin' I was too stingy to pay fer it, but it wasn't that, darlin'. It was jest beca'se I had too much woman pride. When I promised the Lord to love an' obey, it

was not expected that I'd put up a rock over another woman's man if he was dead. Sally, you are a sight more fortunate than you think you are."

Sally rose, the steely look was still in her eyes, her face was like finely polished granite. Mrs. Dawson got up anxiously, and together they passed through the gate. They could see the red fire of Peter Slogan's pipe, and the vague form of his wife standing over him.

"Now, darlin'—" began Mrs. Dawson, but Sally checked her.

"Don't talk to me any more, mother," she said, impatiently. "I want to be quiet and think—oh, my God, have mercy on me!"

Mrs. Dawson said nothing more, and with a sinking heart she saw the stricken child of her breast walk on into her room and close the door.

"Whar's she been?" asked Mrs. Slogan, aggressively.

"She went to git out o' re'ch o' yore tongue," said the widow, desperately.

To this apt retort Mrs. Slogan could not reply, but it evoked an amused laugh from her appreciative husband.

"Well, Sally didn't shorely try to do that afoot, did she?" he gurgled. "Looks like she'd 'a' tuck a train ef sech was her intention."

Mrs. Dawson passed into the house and through the dining-room into her own small apartment and closed the door. She lighted a tallow-dip and placed it on the old-fashioned bureau, from which the mahogany veneering had been peeling for years. Her coarse shoes rang harshly on the smooth, bare floor. She sank into a stiff, hand-made

chair and sat staring into vacancy. The bend of her back had never been more pronounced.

"The idee," she muttered, "o' my goin' over my trouble as ef that amounted to a hill o' beans ur would be a bit o' comfort! My God, ef some'n' ain't done to relieve Sally I'll go stark crazy, an'—an'—I could kill 'im in cold blood, freely, so I could. Oh, my pore, helpless baby! it seems like she never did have any rail friend but me."

She rose and crept to the window, parted the calico curtains, and peered across the passage at her daughter's door. There was a narrow pencil of light beneath it. "She's readin' his letters over," said the old woman, "ur mebby she's prayin'. That's railly what I ort to be a-doin' instead o' standin' heer tryin' to work out what's impossible fer any mortal. I reckon ef a body jest would have enough faith—but I did have faith till—till it quit doin' me a particle o' good. Yes, I ort to be a-prayin', and I'll do it—funny I never thought o' that sooner. Ef God fetched a rain, like they claim he did t'other day, shorely he'll do a little some'n' in a case like this un."

She blew out the tallow-dip and knelt down in the darkness, and interlaced her bony fingers.

"Lord God Almighty, King of Hosts—my Blessed Redeemer," she began, "you know how I have suffered an' why I never could put no grave-rock over my husband's remains; you know how I have writhed an' twisted under that scourge, but I kin bear that now, an' more an' more of it, but I jest cayn't have my pore little baby go through the same, an' wuss. It don't look like it's fair—no way a body kin look at it, for shorely one affliction of that sort in a family is

enough, in all reason. I stood mine, bein' a ol' woman, but Sally, she'll jest pine away an' die, fer she had all her heart set on that one man. Oh, God Almighty, my Redeemer, you that forgive the dyin' thief an' begged fer help in yore own agony, let this cup pass. Huh! I'd ruther have 'em stick a speer through my side time an' time agin 'an have it go on with Sally like it is. You'd better do what I ask, fer it's makin' a reg'lar devil out o' me. I feel it comin' on, an' I won't be fit fer no place but hell fire. I jest cayn't see no sense, jestice, nur reason in my pore little child lyin' in her bed an' twistin' with sech trouble. You, or some power above or below, tuck Jasper frum me an' left that yaller-haired sting fer me to brood over day an' night, but the same ur wuss mustn't come to Sally, kase she don't deserve it—she's *helpless*! Oh, Lord, have mercy—have mercy—mercy—mercy!"

She rose to her feet, and without undressing threw herself on the bed. She could hear Slogan and his wife, now barefooted, thumping about in the next room. Far away against the mountain-side she heard a hunter calling to his dogs and blowing a horn.

Chapter II

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John Westerfelt lived on his own farm in the big two-storied frame house which had been built by his grandfather, and which came to him at the death of his father and mother. The place was managed for him by a maternal uncle, whose wife and daughter kept the house in order. But all three of them had gone away on a short visit, leaving only the old negro woman, who was the cook and servant about the house, to attend to his wants.

The morning following his meeting with Sally Dawson on the road near her house, Westerfelt arose with a general feeling of dissatisfaction with himself. He had not slept well. Several times through the night he awoke from unpleasant dreams, in which he always saw Sally Dawson's eyes raised to his through the darkness, and heard her spiritless voice as she bade him good-bye, and with bowed head moved away, after promising to return his letters the next day.

He was a handsome specimen of physical manhood. His face was dark and of the poetic, sensitive type; his eyes were brown, his hair was almost black, and thick, and long enough to touch his collar. His shoulders were broad, and his limbs muscular and well shaped. He wore tight-fitting top-boots, which he had drawn over his trousers to the knee. His face was clean-shaven, and but for his tanned skin and general air of the better-class planter, he might have passed for an actor, poet, or artist. He was just the type of Southerner who, with a little more ambition, and close application to books, might have become a leading lawyer

and risen finally to a seat in Congress. But John Westerfelt had never been made to see the necessity of exertion on his part. Things had come easily ever since he could remember, and his wants were simple, and, in his own way, he enjoyed life, suffering sharply at times, as he did this morning, over his mistakes, for at heart he was not bad.

"Poor little girl," he said, as he went out on the front veranda to wait for his breakfast. "It was just blind thoughtlessness. I really never dreamt she was feeling that way. I've just got to make it lighter for her. To begin with, I'll never put my foot inside of Lithicum's gate, and I'll go over there this morning and try to make her see what a worthless scamp I really am. I wonder if I couldn't marry her—but, no, that wouldn't be right to her nor to me, for a man hasn't the moral right to marry a woman he doesn't really love, even if she thinks he is the only man on earth. I wonder if I really told her I loved her?" Here Westerfelt shuddered, and felt a flush of shame steal over his face. "Yes, I have—I have," he muttered, "and I reckon I really did fancy I cared for her at the time. Yes, I have been a contemptible coward; for my own idle enjoyment I have allowed her to go on counting on me until the thought of my going to see Lizzie Lithicum nearly kills her. Well, by George! I can cut that off, and I shall, too."

Just then, in looking across the meadow lying between his house and the main road, he saw the short form of Peter Slogan approaching.

"He's coming here," thought Westerfelt. "She has asked him to bring the letters, even before breakfast. That's the

little woman's way of showing her pride. What a contemptible scoundrel I am!"

But as he continued to watch the approaching figure he was surprised to note that Slogan was displaying more energy than usual. The little, short man was taking long steps, and now and then jumping over an obstacle instead of going around it. And when he had reached the gate he leaned on it and stared straight at Westerfelt, as if he had lost his power of speech. Then it was that Westerfelt remarked that Slogan's face looked troubled, and that a general air of agitation rested on him.

"I wish you'd step out, if you please, John," he said, after a moment, "I've been walkin' so blamed fast I've mighty nigh lost my breath. I'm blowin' like a stump-suckin' hoss."

Westerfelt went to him.

"What is the matter, Slogan?" he questioned, in a tone of concern.

"We've had big trouble over our way," panted Slogan. "Sally fell off'n the foot-log into the creek this mornin' an' was drowned."

"Drowned! You don't mean that, Slogan!" cried Westerfelt, in horror; "surely there is some mistake!"

"No; she's as dead as a mackerel," Slogan answered. "She wasn't diskivered tell she'd been under water fer a good half-hour. She started, as usual, about daybreak, over to her cousin, Molly Dugan's, fer a bucket o' fresh milk, an' we never missed 'er until it was time she was back, an' then we went all the way to Dugan's before we found out she hadn't been thar at all. Then her ma tuck up a quar notion, an' helt to it like a leech fer a long time. My hoss had got out

o' the stable an' strayed off some'rs in the woods, an' Sally's mother firmly believed the gal had run off. I don't know why she 'lowed Sally would do sech a thing, but she did, and jest paced up an' down the yard yellin' an' takin' on an' beggin' us to go fetch her back, so that none of us at the house thought o' draggin' the hole at the foot-log. But Bill Dugan did, an' soon come with the news whar she was at. Then her ma jest had a spasm. I railly believe on my soul she cussed God an' all futurity. She raved till she was black in the face."

"Then there is—is no doubt about it?" gasped Westerfelt. "She is dead?"

"Of course she's dead," answered Slogan; "an' bein' as my hoss ain't to be had, I 'lowed I'd try to borrow one o' yore'n to go order the coffin." Slogan here displayed a piece of twine which he had wound into a coil. "I've got the exact length o' the body. I 'lowed that would be the best way. I reckon they kin tell me at the store how much play a corpse ort to have at each end. I've noticed that coffins always look longer, a sight, than the pusson ever did that was to occupy 'em, but I thought ef I tuck the exact measure—"

"Here's the stable key," interrupted Westerfelt, with a shudder. "Take any horse you want. You'll find saddles and bridles in the shed."

Slogan turned away, and Westerfelt walked back to the veranda. "My God!" he groaned; "why don't I *know* it was accident? If it was not, then may the Lord have mercy on my soul!"

He went into his room and threw himself on his bed and stared fixedly at the ceiling, a thousand conflicting thoughts

crowding upon him. Presently he heard Slogan talking to the horse in the yard, and went out just as he was mounting.

"I wisht you'd hand me a switch, John," he said. "I don't want to be all day goin' an' comin'. I'll be blamed ef I ain't afeerd them two ol' cats 'll be a-fightin' an' scratchin' 'fore I get back. They had a time of it while the gal was alive, an' I reckon thar 'll be no peace at all now."

"Does Mrs. Dawson blame anybody—or—or—?" Westerfelt paused as if he hardly knew how to finish.

"Oh, I reckon the ol' woman does feel a leetle hard at us—my wife in particular, an'—an' some o' the rest, I reckon. You see, thar was a lot said at the quiltin' yesterday about Lizzie Lithicum a-cuttin' of Sally out, an' one thing or other, an' a mother's calculated to feel bitter about sech talk, especially when her only child is laid out as cold an' stiff as a poker."

Again Westerfelt shuddered; his face was ghastly; his mouth was drawn and his lips quivered; there was a desperate, appealing, shifting of his eyes.

"I reckon Mrs. Dawson feels hurt at me," he said, tentatively.

Slogan hesitated a moment before speaking.

"Well," he said, as if he felt some sort of apology should come from him, "maybe she does—a little, John, but the Lord knows you cayn't expect much else at sech a time, an' when she's under sech a strain."

"Did she mention any names?" questioned the young man, desperately; and while he waited for Slogan to speak a look of inexpressible agony lay in his eyes.

"I never was much of a hand to tote tales," said Slogan, "but I may as well give you a little bit of advice as to how you ort to act with the ol' woman while she is so wrought up. I wouldn't run up agin 'er right now ef I was you. She's tuck a funny sort o' notion that she don't want you at the funeral or the buryin'. She told me three times, as I was startin' off, to tell you not to come to the church nur to the grave. She was clean out o' her senses, an' under ordinary circumstances I'd say not to pay a bit of attention to 'er, but she's so upset she might liter'ly pounce on you like a wild-cat at the meetin'-house."

"Tell her, for me, that I shall respect her wish," said Westerfelt. "I shall not be there, Slogan. If she will let you do so, tell her I am sorry her daughter is—dead."

"All right, John, I'll do what I can to pacify 'er," promised Peter, as he took the switch Westerfelt handed him and started away.

Chapter III

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When Slogan had ridden off through the mild spring sunshine, Westerfelt saddled another horse and rode out of the gate towards the road leading away from the house containing Sally Dawson's remains. He hardly had any definite idea of whither he was going. He had only a vague impression that the movement of a horse under him would to some degree assuage the awful pain at his heart, but he was mistaken; the pangs of self-accusation were as sharp as if he were a justly condemned murderer. His way led past the cross-roads store, which contained the post-office. Two men, a woman, and a child stood huddled together at the door. They were talking about the accident; Westerfelt knew that by their attitudes of awed attention and their occasional glances towards Mrs. Dawson's. He was about to pass by when the storekeeper signalled to him and called out:

"Mail fer you, Mr. Westerfelt; want me to fetch it out?"

Westerfelt nodded, and reined in and waited till the storekeeper came out with a packet. "It must 'a' been drapped in after I closed last night," he said. "Thar wasn't a thing in the box 'fore I went home, an' it was the only one thar when I unlocked this mornin'. Mighty bad news down the creek, ain't it?" he ended. "Powerful hard on the old woman. They say she's mighty nigh distracted."

Making some unintelligible reply, Westerfelt rode on, the packet held tightly in his hand. It was addressed in Sally Dawson's round, girlish handwriting, and he knew it