

***JAMES LANE
ALLEN***



***THE METTLE
OF THE PASTURE***

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The Mettle of the Pasture

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PART FIRST

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I

She did not wish any supper and she sank forgetfully back into the stately oak chair. One of her hands lay palm upward on her white lap; in the other, which drooped over the arm of the chair, she clasped a young rose dark red amid its leaves—an inverted torch of love.

Old-fashioned glass doors behind her reached from a high ceiling to the floor; they had been thrown open and the curtains looped apart. Stone steps outside led downward to the turf in the rear of the house. This turf covered a lawn unroughened by plant or weed; but over it at majestic intervals grew clumps of gray pines and dim-blue, ever wintry firs. Beyond lawn and evergreens a flower garden bloomed; and beyond the high fence enclosing this, tree-tops and house-tops of the town could be seen; and beyond these—away in the west—the sky was naming now with the falling sun.

A few bars of dusty gold hung poised across the darkening spaces of the supper room. Ripples of the evening air, entering through the windows, flowed over her, lifting the thick curling locks at the nape of her neck,

creeping forward over her shoulders and passing along her round arms under the thin fabric of her sleeves.

They aroused her, these vanishing beams of the day, these arriving breezes of the night; they became secret invitations to escape from the house into the privacy of the garden, where she could be alone with thoughts of her great happiness now fast approaching.

A servant entered noiselessly, bringing a silver bowl of frozen cream. Beside this, at the head of the table before her grandmother, he placed scarlet strawberries gathered that morning under white dews. She availed herself of the slight interruption and rose with an apology; but even when love bade her go, love also bade her linger; she could scarce bear to be with them, but she could scarce bear to be alone. She paused at her grandmother's chair to stroke the dry bronze puffs on her temples—a unique impulse; she hesitated compassionately a moment beside her aunt, who had never married; then, passing around to the opposite side of the table, she took between her palms the sunburnt cheeks of a youth, her cousin, and buried her own tingling cheek in his hair. Instinct at that moment drew her most to him because he was young as she was young, having life and love before him as she had; only, for him love stayed far in the future; for her it came to-night.

When she had crossed the room and reached the hall, she paused and glanced back, held by the tension of cords which she dreaded to break. She felt that nothing would ever be the same again in the home of her childhood. Until marriage she would remain under its dear honored roof, and there would be no outward interruption of its familiar

routine; but for her all the bonds of life would have become loosened from old ties and united in him alone whom this evening she was to choose as her lot and destiny. Under the influence of that fresh fondness, therefore, which wells up so strangely within us at the thought of parting from home and home people, even though we may not greatly care for them, she now stood gazing at the picture they formed as though she were already calling it back through the distances of memory and the changes of future years.

They, too, had shifted their positions and were looking at her with one undisguised expression of pride and love; and they smiled as she smiled radiantly back at them, waving a last adieu with her spray of rose and turning quickly in a dread of foolish tears.

"Isabel."

It was the youthful voice of her grandmother. She faced them again with a little frown of feigned impatience.

"If you are going into the garden, throw something around your shoulders."

"Thank you, grandmother; I have my lace."

Crossing the hall, she went into the front parlor, took from a damask sofa a rare shawl of white lace and, walking to a mirror, threw it over her head, absently noting the effect in profile. She lifted this off and, breaking the rose from part of its stem, pinned that on her breast. Then, stepping aside to one of the large lofty windows, she stood there under the droop of the curtains, sunk into reverie again and looking out upon the yard and the street beyond.

Hardly a sound disturbed the twilight stillness. A lamplighter passed, torching the grim lamps. A sauntering

carrier threw the evening newspaper over the gate, with his unintelligible cry. A dog-cart rumbled by, and later, a brougham; people were not yet returned from driving on the country turnpikes. Once, some belated girls clattered past on ponies. But already little children, bare-armed, bare-necked, swinging lanterns, and attended by proud young mothers, were on their way to a summer-night festival in the park. Up and down the street family groups were forming on the verandas. The red disks of cigars could be seen, and the laughter of happy women was wafted across the dividing fences and shrubbery, and vines.

Breaking again through her reverie, which seemed to envelop her, wherever she went, like a beautiful cloud, she left the window and appeared at the front door. Palms stood on each side of the granite steps, and these arched their tropical leaves far over toward her quiet feet as she passed down. Along the pavement were set huge green boxes, in which white oleanders grew, and flaming pomegranates, and crepe myrtle thickly roofed with pink. She was used to hover about them at this hour, but she strolled past, unmindful now, the daily habit obliterated, the dumb little tie quite broken. The twisted newspaper lay white on the shadowed pavement before her eyes and she did not see that. She walked on until she reached the gate and, folding her hands about one of the brass globes surmounting the iron spikes, leaned over and probed with impatient eyes the long dusk of the street; as far as he could be seen coming she wished to see him.

It was too early. So she filled her eyes with pictures of the daylight fading over woods and fields far out in the country.

But the entire flock of wistful thoughts settled at last about a large house situated on a wooded hill some miles from town. A lawn sloped upward to it from the turnpike, and there was a gravelled driveway. She unlatched the gate, approached the house, passed through the wide hall, ascended the stairs, stood at the door of his room—waiting. Why did he not come? How could he linger?

Dreamily she turned back; and following a narrow walk, passed to the rear of the house and thence across the lawn of turf toward the garden.

A shower had fallen early in the day and the grass had been cut afterwards. Afternoon sunshine had drunk the moisture, leaving the fragrance released and floating. The warmth of the cooling earth reached her foot through the sole of her slipper. On the plume of a pine, a bird was sending its last call after the bright hours, while out of the firs came the tumult of plainer kinds as they mingled for common sleep. The heavy cry of the bullbat fell from far above, and looking up quickly for a sight of his winnowing wings under the vast purpling vault she beheld the earliest stars.

Thus, everywhere, under her feet, over her head, and beyond the reach of vision, because inhabiting that realm into which the spirit alone can send its aspiration and its prayer, was one influence, one spell: the warmth of the good wholesome earth, its breath of sweetness, its voices of peace and love and rest, the majesty of its flashing dome; and holding all these safe as in the hollow of a hand the Eternal Guardianship of the world.

As she strolled around the garden under the cloudy flush of the evening sky dressed in white, a shawl of white lace over one arm, a rose on her breast, she had the exquisiteness of a long past, during which women have been chosen in marriage for health and beauty and children and the power to charm. The very curve of her neck implied generations of mothers who had valued grace. Generations of forefathers had imparted to her walk and bearing their courage and their pride. The precision of the eyebrow, the chiselled perfection of the nostril, the loveliness of the short red lip; the well-arched feet, small, but sure of themselves; the eyes that were kind and truthful and thoughtful; the sheen of her hair, the fineness of her skin, her nobly cast figure,—all these were evidences of descent from a people, that had reached in her the purity, without having lost the vigor, of one of its highest types.

She had supposed that when he came the servant would receive him and announce his arrival, but in a little while the sound of a step on the gravel reached her ear; she paused and listened. It was familiar, but it was unnatural—she remembered this afterwards.

She began to walk away from him, her beautiful head suddenly arched far forward, her bosom rising and falling under her clasped hands, her eyes filling with wonderful light. Then regaining composure because losing consciousness of herself in the thought of him, she turned and with divine simplicity of soul advanced to meet him.

Near the centre of the garden there was an open spot where two pathways crossed; and it was here, emerging from the shrubbery, that they came in sight of each other.

Neither spoke. Neither made in advance a sign of greeting. When they were a few yards apart she paused, flushing through her whiteness; and he, dropping his hat from his hand, stepped quickly forward, gathered her hands into his and stood looking down on her in silence. He was very pale and barely controlled himself.

"Isabel!" It was all he could say.

"Rowan!" she answered at length. She spoke under her breath and stood before him with her head drooping, her eyes on the ground. Then he released her and she led the way at once out of the garden.

When they had reached the front of the house, sounds of conversation on the veranda warned them that there were guests, and without concealing their desire to be alone they passed to a rustic bench under one of the old trees, standing between the house and the street; they were used to sitting there; they had known each other all their lives.

A long time they forced themselves to talk of common and trivial things, the one great meaning of the hour being avoided by each. Meanwhile it was growing very late. The children had long before returned drowsily home held by the hand, their lanterns dropped on the way or still clung to, torn and darkened. No groups laughed on the verandas; but gas-jets had been lighted and turned low as people undressed for bed. The guests of the family had gone. Even Isabel's grandmother had not been able further to put away sleep from her plotting brain in order to send out to them a final inquisitive thought—the last reconnoitring bee of all the In-gathered hive. Now, at length, as absolutely as he could

have wished, he was alone with her and secure from interruption.

The moon had sunk so low that its rays fell in a silvery stream on her white figure; only a waving bough of the tree overhead still brushed with shadow her neck and face. As the evening waned, she had less to say to him, growing always more silent in new dignity, more mute with happiness.

He pushed himself abruptly away from her side and bending over touched his lips reverently to the back of one of her hands, as they lay on the shawl in her lap.

"Isabel," and then he hesitated.

"Yes," she answered sweetly. She paused likewise, requiring nothing more; it was enough that he should speak her name.

He changed his position and sat looking ahead. Presently he began again, choosing his words as a man might search among terrible weapons for the least deadly.

"When I wrote and asked you to marry me, I said I should come to-night and receive your answer from your own lips. If your answer had been different, I should never have spoken to you of my past. It would not have been my duty. I should not have had the right. I repeat, Isabel, that until you had confessed your love for me, I should have had no right to speak to you about my past. But now there is something you ought to be told at once."

She glanced up quickly with a rebuking smile. How could he wander so far from the happiness of moments too soon to end? What was his past to her?

He went on more guardedly.

"Ever since I have loved you, I have realized what I should have to tell you if you ever returned my love. Sometimes duty has seemed one thing, sometimes another. This is why I have waited so long—more than two years; the way was not clear. Isabel, it will never be clear. I believe now it is wrong to tell you; I believe it is wrong not to tell you. I have thought and thought—it is wrong either way. But the least wrong to you and to myself—that is what I have always tried to see, and as I understand my duty, now that you are willing to unite your life with mine, there is something you must know."

He added the last words as though he had reached a difficult position and were announcing his purpose to hold it. But he paused gloomily again.

She had scarcely heard him through wonderment that he could so change at such a moment. Her happiness began to falter and darken like departing sunbeams. She remained for a space uncertain of herself, knowing neither what was needed nor what was best; then she spoke with resolute deprecation:

"Why discuss with me your past life? Have I not known you always?"

These were not the words of girlhood. She spoke from the emotions of womanhood, beginning to-night in the plighting of her troth.

"You have trusted me too much, Isabel."

Repulsed a second time, she now fixed her large eyes upon him with surprise. The next moment she had crossed lightly once more the widening chasm.

"Rowan," she said more gravely and with slight reproach, "I have not waited so long and then not known the man whom I have chosen."

"Ah," he cried, with a gesture of distress.

Thus they sat: she silent with new thoughts; he speechless with his old ones. Again she was the first to speak. More deeply moved by the sight of his increasing excitement, she took one of his hands into both of hers, pressing it with a delicate tenderness.

"What is it that troubles you, Rowan? Tell me! It is my duty to listen. I have the right to know."

He shrank from what he had never heard in her voice before—disappointment in him. And it was neither girlhood nor womanhood which had spoken now: it was comradeship which is possible to girlhood and to womanhood through wifehood alone: she was taking their future for granted. He caught her hand and lifted it again and again to his lips; then he turned away from her.

Thus shut out from him again, she sat looking out into the night.

But in a woman's complete love of a man there is something deeper than girlhood or womanhood or wifehood: it is the maternal—that dependence on his strength when he is well and strong, that passion of protection and defence when he is frail or stricken. Into her mood and feeling toward him even the maternal had forced its way. She would have found some expression for it but he anticipated her.

"I am thinking of you, of my duty to you, of your happiness."

She realized at last some terrible hidden import in all that he had been trying to confess. A shrouded mysterious Shape of Evil was suddenly disclosed as already standing on the threshold of the House of Life which they were about to enter together. The night being warm, she had not used her shawl. Now she threw it over her head and gathered the weblike folds tightly under her throat as though she were growing cold. The next instant, with a swift movement, she tore it from her head and pushed herself as far as possible away from him out into the moonlight; and she sat there looking at him, wild with distrust and fear.

He caught sight of her face.

"Oh, I am doing wrong," he cried miserably. "I must not tell you this!"

He sprang up and hurried over to the pavement and began to walk to and fro. He walked to and fro a long time; and after waiting for him to return, she came quickly and stood in his path. But when he drew near her he put out his hand.

"I cannot!" he repeated, shaking his head and turning away.

Still she waited, and when he approached and was turning away again, she stepped forward and laid on his arm her quivering finger-tips.

"You must," she said. "You *shall* tell me!" and if there was anger in her voice, if there was anguish in it, there was the authority likewise of holy and sovereign rights. But he thrust her all but rudely away, and going to the lower end of the pavement, walked there backward and forward with his hat pulled low over his eyes—walked slowly, always more

slowly. Twice he laid his hand on the gate as though he would have passed out. At last he stopped and looked back to where she waited in the light, her face set immovably, commandingly, toward him. Then he came back and stood before her.

The moon, now sinking low, shone full on his face, pale, sad, very quiet; and into his eyes, mournful as she had never known any eyes to be. He had taken off his hat and held it in his hand, and a light wind blew his thick hair about his forehead and temples. She, looking at him with senses preternaturally aroused, afterwards remembered all this.

Before he began to speak he saw rush over her face a look of final entreaty that he would not strike her too cruel a blow. This, when he had ceased speaking, was succeeded by the expression of one who has received a shock beyond all imagination. Thus they stood looking into each other's eyes; then she shrank back and started toward the house.

He sprang after her.

"You are leaving me!" he cried horribly.

She walked straight on, neither quickening nor slackening her pace nor swerving, although his body began unsteadily to intercept hers.

He kept beside her.

"Don't! Isabel!" he prayed out of his agony. "Don't leave me like this—!"

She walked on and reached the steps of the veranda. Crying out in his longing he threw his arms around her and held her close.

"You must not! You shall not! Do you know what you are doing,

Isabel?"

She made not the least reply, not the least effort to extricate herself. But she closed her eyes and shuddered and twisted her body away from him as a bird of the air bends its neck and head as far as possible from a repulsive captor; and like the heart of such a bird, he could feel the throbbing of her heart.

Her mute submission to his violence stung him: he let her go. She spread out her arms as though in a rising flight of her nature and the shawl, tossed backward from her shoulders, fell to the ground: it was as if she cast off the garment he had touched. Then she went quickly up the steps. Before she could reach the door he confronted her again; he pressed his back against it. She stretched out her hand and rang the bell. He stepped aside very quickly—proudly. She entered, closing and locking noiselessly the door that no sound might reach the servant she had summoned. As she did so she heard him try the knob and call to her in an undertone of last reproach and last entreaty:

"Isabel!—Isabel!—Isabel!"

Hurrying through the hall, she ran silently up the stairs to her room and shut herself in.

Her first feeling was joy that she was there safe from him and from every one else for the night. Her instant need was to be alone. It was this feeling also that caused her to go on tiptoe around the room and draw down the blinds, as though the glimmering windows were large eyes peering at her with intrusive wounding stare. Then taking her position close to a front window, she listened. He was walking slowly backward

and forward on the pavement reluctantly, doubtfully; finally he passed through the gate. As it clanged heavily behind him, Isabel pressed her hands convulsively to her heart as though it also had gates which had closed, never to reopen.

Then she lighted the gas-jets beside the bureau and when she caught sight of herself the thought came how unchanged she looked. She stood there, just as she had stood before going down to supper, nowhere a sign of all the deep displacement and destruction that had gone on within.

But she said to herself that what he had told her would reveal itself in time. It would lie in the first furrows deepening down her cheeks; it would be the earliest frost of years upon her hair.

A long while she sat on the edge of the couch in the middle of the room under the brilliant gaslight, her hands forgotten in her lap, her brows arched high, her eyes on the floor. Then her head beginning to ache, a new sensation for her, she thought she should bind a wet handkerchief to it as she had often done for her aunt; but the water which the maid had placed in the room had become warm. She must go down to the ewer in the hall. As she did so, she recollected her shawl.

It was lying on the wet grass where it had fallen. There was a half-framed accusing thought that he might have gone for it; but she put the thought away; the time had passed for courtesies from him. When she stooped for the shawl, an owl flew viciously at her, snapping its bill close to her face and stirring the air with its wings. Unnerved, she ran back into the porch, but stopped there ashamed and looking kindly toward the tree in which it made its home.

An old vine of darkest green had wreathed itself about the pillars of the veranda on that side; and it was at a frame-like opening in the massive foliage of this that the upper part of her pure white figure now stood revealed in the last low, silvery, mystical light. The sinking of the moon was like a great death on the horizon, leaving the pall of darkness, the void of infinite loss.

She hung upon this far spectacle of nature with sad intensity, figuring from it some counterpart of the tragedy taking place within her own mind.



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Isabel slept soundly, the regular habit of healthy years being too firmly entrenched to give way at once. Meanwhile deep changes were wrought out in her.

When we fall asleep, we do not lay aside the thoughts of the day, as the hand its physical work; nor upon awakening return to the activity of these as it to the renewal of its toil, finding them undisturbed. Our most piercing insight yields no deeper conception of life than that of perpetual building and unbuilding; and during what we call our rest, it is often most active in executing its inscrutable will. All along the dark chimneys of the brain, clinging like myriads of swallows deep-buried and slumbrous in quiet and in soot, are the countless thoughts which lately winged the wide heaven of conscious day. Alike through dreaming and through

dreamless hours Life moves among these, handling and considering each of the unredeemable multitude; and when morning light strikes the dark chimneys again and they rush forth, some that entered young have matured; some of the old have become infirm; many of which have dropped in singly issue as companies; and young broods flutter forth, unaccountable nestlings of a night, which were not in yesterday's blue at all. Then there are the missing—those that went in with the rest at nightfall but were struck from the walls forever. So all are altered, for while we have slept we have still been subject to that on-moving energy of the world which incessantly renews us yet transmutes us—double mystery of our permanence and our change.

It was thus that nature dealt with Isabel on this night: hours of swift difficult transition from her former life to that upon which she was now to enter. She fell asleep overwhelmed amid the ruins of the old; she awoke already engaged with the duties of the new. At sundown she was a girl who had never confessed her love; at sunrise she was a woman who had discarded the man she had just accepted. Rising at once and dressing with despatch, she entered upon preparations for completing her spiritual separation from Rowan in every material way.

The books he had lent her—these she made ready to return this morning. Other things, also, trifles in themselves but until now so freighted with significance. Then his letters and notes, how many, how many they were! Thus ever about her rooms she moved on this mournful occupation until the last thing had been disposed of as either to be sent back or to be destroyed.

And then while Isabel waited for breakfast to be announced, always she was realizing how familiar seemed Rowan's terrible confession, already lying far from her across the fields of memory—with a path worn deep between it and herself as though she had been traversing the distance for years; so old can sorrow grow during a little sleep. When she went down they were seated as she had left them the evening before, grandmother, aunt, cousin; and they looked up with the same pride and fondness. But affection has so different a quality in the morning. Then the full soundless rides which come in at nightfall have receded; and in their stead is the glittering beach with thin waves that give no rest to the ear or to the shore—thin noisy edge of the deeps of the soul.

This fresh morning mood now ruled them; no such wholesome relief had come to her. So that their laughter and high spirits jarred upon her strangely. She had said to herself upon leaving them the evening before that never again could they be the same to her or she the same to them. But then she had expected to return isolated by incommunicable happiness; now she had returned isolated by incommunicable grief. Nevertheless she glided into her seat with feigned cheerfulness, taking a natural part in their conversation; and she rose at last, smiling with the rest.

But she immediately quitted the house, eager to be out of doors surrounded by things that she loved but that could not observe her or question her in return—alone with things that know not evil.

These were the last days of May. The rush of Summer had already carried it far northward over the boundaries of

Spring, and on this Sunday morning it filled the grounds of Isabel's home with early warmth. Quickened by the heat, summoned by the blue, drenched with showers and dews, all things which have been made repositories of the great presence of Life were engaged in realizing the utmost that it meant to them.

It was in the midst of this splendor of light and air, fragrance, colors, shapes, movements, melodies and joys that Isabel, the loftiest receptacle of life among them all, soon sat in a secluded spot, motionless and listless with her unstanched and desperate wound. Everything seemed happy but herself; the very brilliancy of the day only deepened the shadow under which she brooded. As she had slipped away from the house, she would soon have escaped from the garden had there been any further retreat.

It was not necessary long to wait for one. Borne across the brown roofs and red chimneys of the town and exploding in the crystal air above her head like balls of mellow music, came the sounds of the first church bells, the bells of Christ Church.

They had never conveyed other meaning to her than that proclaimed by the town clock: they sounded the hour. She had been too untroubled during her young life to understand their aged argument and invitation.

Held In the arms of her father, when a babe, she had been duly christened. His death had occurred soon afterwards, then her mother's. Under the nurture of a grandmother to whom religion was a convenience and social form, she had received the strictest ceremonial but in no wise any spiritual training. The first conscious awakening of

this beautiful unearthly sense had not taken place until the night of her confirmation—a wet April evening when the early green of the earth was bowed to the ground, and the lilies-of-the-valley in the yard had chilled her fingers as she had plucked them (chosen flower of her consecration); she and they but rising alike into their higher lives out of the same mysterious Mother.

That night she had knelt among the others at the chancel and the bishop who had been a friend of her father's, having approached her in the long line of young and old, had laid his hands the more softly for his memories upon her brow with the impersonal prayer:

"Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace, that she may continue thine forever, and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until she come unto thy Everlasting Kingdom."

For days afterwards a steady radiance seemed to Isabel to rest upon her wherever she went, shed straight from Eternity. She had avoided her grandmother, secluded herself from the closest companions, been very thoughtful.

Years had elapsed since. But no experience of the soul is ever wasted or effaceable; and as the sound of the bells now reached her across the garden, they reawoke the spiritual impulses which had stirred within her at confirmation. First heard whispering then, the sacred annunciation now more eloquently urged that in her church, the hour of real need being come, she would find refuge, help, more than earthly counsellor.

She returned unobserved to the house and after quick simple preparation, was on her way.

When she slipped shrinkingly into her pew, scarce any one had arrived. Several women in mourning were there and two or three aged men. It is the sorrowful and the old who head the human host in its march toward Paradise: Youth and Happiness loiter far behind and are satisfied with the earth. Isabel looked around with a poignant realization of the broken company over into which she had so swiftly crossed.

She had never before been in the church when it was empty. How hushed and solemn it waited in its noonday twilight—the Divine already there, faithful keeper of the ancient compact; the human not yet arrived. Here indeed was the refuge she had craved; here the wounded eye of the soul could open unhurt and unafraid; and she sank to her knees with a quick prayer of the heart, scarce of the lips, for Isabel knew nothing about prayer in her own words—that she might have peace of mind during these guarded hours: there would be so much time afterwards in which to remember—so many years in which to remember!

How still it was! At first she started at every sound: the barely audible opening and shutting of a pew door by some careful hand; the grating of wheels on the cobblestones outside as a carriage was driven to the entrance; the love-calls of sparrows building in the climbing oak around the Gothic windows.

Soon, however, her ear became sealed to all outward disturbance. She had fled to the church, driven by many young impulses, but among them was the keen hope that her new Sorrow, which had begun to follow her everywhere since she awoke, would wait outside when she entered

those doors: so dark a spirit would surely not stalk behind her into the very splendor of the Spotless. But as she now let her eyes wander down the isle to the chancel railing where she had knelt at confirmation, where bridal couples knelt in receiving the benediction, Isabel felt that this new Care faced her from there as from its appointed shrine; she even fancied that in effect it addressed to her a solemn warning:

"Isabel, think not to escape me in this place! It is here that Rowan must seem to you most unworthy and most false; to have wronged you most cruelly. For it was here, at this altar, that you had expected to kneel beside him and be blessed in your marriage. In years to come, sitting where you now sit, you may live to see him kneel here with another, making her his wife. But for you, Isabel, this spot must ever mean the renunciation of marriage, the bier of love. Then do not think to escape me here, me, who am Remembrance."

And Isabel, as though a command had been laid upon her, with her eyes fixed on the altar over which the lights of the stained glass windows were joyously playing, gave herself up to memories of all the innocent years that she had known Rowan and of the blind years that she had loved him.

She was not herself aware that marriage was the only sacrament of religion that had ever possessed interest for her. Recollection told her no story of how even as a child she had liked to go to the crowded church with other children and watch the procession of the brides—all mysterious under their white veils, and following one and another so

closely during springs and autumns that in truth they were almost a procession. Or with what excitement she had watched each walk out, leaning on the arm of the man she had chosen and henceforth to be called his in all things to the end while the loud crash of the wedding march closed their separate pasts with a single melody.

But there were mothers in the church who, attracted by the child's expression, would say to each other a little sadly perhaps, that love and marriage were destined to be the one overshadowing or overshadowing experience in life to this most human and poetic soul.

After she had learned of Rowan's love for her and had begun to return his love, the altar had thenceforth become the more personal symbol of their destined happiness. Every marriage that she witnessed bound her more sacredly to him. Only a few months before this, at the wedding of the Osborns—Kate being her closest friend, and George Osborn being Rowan's—he and she had been the only attendants; and she knew how many persons in the church were thinking that they might be the next to plight their vows; with crimsoning cheeks she had thought it herself.

Now there returned before Isabel's eyes the once radiant procession of the brides—but how changed! And bitter questioning she addressed to each! Had any such confession been made to any one of them—either before marriage or afterwards—by the man she had loved? Was it for some such reason that one had been content to fold her hands over her breast before the birth of her child? Was this why another lived on, sad young wife, motherless? Was this why in the town there were women who refused to marry at

all? So does a little knowledge of evil move backward and darken for us even the bright years in which it had no place.

The congregation were assembling rapidly. Among those who passed further down were several of the girls of Isabel's set. How fresh and sweet they looked as they drifted gracefully down the aisles this summer morning! How light-hearted! How far away from her in her new wretchedness! Some, after they were seated, glanced back with a smile. She avoided their eyes.

A little later the Osborns entered, the bride and groom of a few months before. Their pew was immediately in front of hers. Kate wore mourning for her mother. As she seated herself, she lifted her veil halfway, turned and slipped a hand over the pew into Isabel's. The tremulous pressure of the fingers spoke of present trouble; and as Isabel returned it with a quick response of her own, a tear fell from the hidden eyes.

The young groom's eyes were also red and swollen, but for other reasons; and he sat in the opposite end of the pew as far as possible from his wife's side. When she a few moments later leaned toward him with timidity and hesitation, offering him an open prayer-book, he took it coldly and laid it between them on the cushion. Isabel shuddered: her new knowledge of evil so cruelly opened her eyes to the full understanding of so much.

Little time was left for sympathy with Kate. Nearer the pulpit was another pew from which her thoughts had never been wholly withdrawn. She had watched it with the fascination of abhorrence; and once, feeling that she could not bear to see him come in with his mother and younger

brother, she had started to leave the church. But just then her grandmother had bustled richly in, followed by her aunt; and more powerful with Isabel already than any other feeling was the wish to bury her secret—Rowan's secret—in the deepest vault of consciousness, to seal it up forever from the knowledge of the world.

The next moment what she so dreaded took place. He walked quietly down the aisle as usual, opened the pew for his mother and brother with the same courtesy, and the three bent their heads together in prayer.

"Grandmother," she whispered quickly, "will you let me pass! I am not very well, I think I shall go home."

Her grandmother, not heeding and with her eyes fixed upon the same pew, whispered in return;

"The Merediths are here," and continued her satisfying scrutiny of persons seated around.

Isabel herself had no sooner suffered the words to escape than she regretted them. Resolved to control herself from this time on, she unclasped her prayer-book, found the appointed reading, and directed her thoughts to the service soon to begin.

It was part of the confession of David that reached her, sounding across how many centuries. Wrung from him who had been a young man himself and knew what a young man is. With time enough afterwards to think of this as soldier, priest, prophet, care-worn king, and fallible judge over men—with time enough to think of what his days of nature had been when he tended sheep grazing the pastures of Bethlehem or abided solitary with the flock by night, lowly

despised work, under the herded stars. Thus converting a young man's memories into an older man's remorse.

As she began to read, the first outcry gripped and cramped her heart like physical pain; where all her life she had been repeating mere words, she now with eyes tragically opened discerned forbidden meanings:

"Thou art about my path and about my bed . . . the darkness is no darkness to thee. . . . Thine eyes did see my substance being yet imperfect . . . look well if there be any wickedness in me; and lead me in the way everlasting . . . haste thee unto me . . . when I cry unto thee. O let not my heart be inclined to an evil thing."

She was startled by a general movement throughout the congregation.

The minister had advanced to the reading desk and begun to read:

"I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

Ages stretched their human wastes between these words of the New

Testament and those other words of the Old; but the parable of

Christ really finished the prayer of David: in each there was the

same young prodigal—the ever-falling youth of humanity.

Another moment and the whole congregation knelt and began the confession. Isabel also from long custom sank upon her knees and started to repeat the words, "We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep." Then she