

SHORT STORY AMERICA

ON PICKET DUTY

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

What air you thinkin' of, Phil?

"My wife, Dick."

"So was I! Aint it odd how fellers fall to thinkin' of thar little women, when they get a quiet spell like this?"

"Fortunate for us that we do get it, and have such gentle bosom guests to keep us brave and honest through the trials and temptations of a life like ours."

October moonlight shone clearly on the solitary tree, draped with gray moss, scarred by lightning and warped by wind, looking like a venerable warrior, whose long campaign was nearly done; and underneath was posted the guard of four. Behind them twinkled many camp-fires on a distant plain, before them wound a road ploughed by the passage of an army, strewn with the relics of a rout. On the right, a sluggish river glided, like a serpent, stealthy, sinuous, and dark, into a seemingly impervious jungle; on the left, a Southern swamp filled the air with malarial damps, swarms of noisome life, and discordant sounds that robbed the hour of its repose. The men were friends as well as comrades, for though gathered from the four quarters of the Union, and dissimilar in education, character, and tastes, the same spirit animated all; the routine of camp life threw them much together, and mutual esteem soon grew into a bond of mutual good fellowship.

Thorn was a Massachusetts volunteer; a man who seemed too early old, too early embittered by some cross, for though grim of countenance, rough of speech, cold of manner, a keen observer would have soon discovered traces of a deeper, warmer nature hidden, behind the repellent front he turned upon the world. A true New Englander, thoughtful, acute, reticent, and opinionated; yet earnest withal, intensely patriotic, and often humorous, despite a touch of Puritan austerity.

Phil, the "romantic chap," as he was called, looked his character to the life. Slender, swarthy, melancholy eyed, and darkly bearded; with feminine features, mellow voice and, alternately languid or vivacious manners. A child of the South in nature as in aspect, ardent, impressible, and proud; fitfully aspiring and despairing; without the native energy which moulds character and ennobles life. Months of discipline and devotion had done much for him, and some deep experience was fast ripening the youth into a man.

Flint, the long-limbed lumberman, from the wilds of Maine, was a conscript who, when government demanded his money or his life, calculated the cost, and decided that the cash would be a dead loss and the claim might be repeated, whereas the conscript would get both pay and plunder out of government, while taking excellent care that government got precious little out of him. A shrewd, slow-spoken, self-reliant specimen, was Flint; yet something of the fresh flavor of the backwoods lingered in him still, as if Nature were loath to give him up, and left the mark of her motherly hand upon him, as she leaves it in a dry, pale lichen, on the bosom of the roughest stone.

Dick "hailed" from Illinois, and was a comely young fellow, full of dash and daring; rough and rowdy, generous and jolly, overflowing with spirits and ready for a free fight with all the world.

Silence followed the last words, while the friendly moon climbed up the sky. Each man's eye followed it, and each man's heart was busy with remembrances of other eyes and hearts that might be watching and wishing as theirs watched and wished. In the silence, each shaped for himself that vision of home that brightens so many camp-fires, haunts so many dreamers under canvas roofs, and keeps so many turbulent natures tender by memories which often are both solace and salvation.

Thorn paced to and fro, his rifle on his shoulder, vigilant and soldierly, however soft his heart might be. Phil leaned against the tree, one hand in the breast of his blue jacket, on the painted presentment of the face his fancy was picturing in the golden circle of the moon. Flint lounged on the sward, whistling softly as he whittled at a fallen bough. Dick was flat on his back, heels in air, cigar in mouth, and some hilarious notion in his mind, for suddenly he broke into a laugh.

"What is it, lad?" asked Thorn, pausing in his tramp, as if willing to be drawn from the disturbing thought that made his black brows lower and his mouth look grim.

"Thinkin' of my wife, and wishin' she was here, bless her heart! set me rememberin' how I see her fust, and so I roared, as I always do when it comes into my head."

"How was it? Come, reel off a yarn and let's hear how yeou hitched teams," said Flint, always glad to get information concerning his neighbors, if it could be cheaply done.

"Tellin' how we found our wives wouldn't be a bad game, would it, Phil?"

"I'm agreeable; but let us have your romance first."

"Devilish little of that about me or any of my doin's. I hate sentimental bosh as much as you hate slang, and should have been a bachelor to this day if I hadn't seen Kitty jest as I did. You see, I'd been too busy larkin' round to get time for marryin', till a couple of years ago, when I did up the job double-quick, as I'd like to do this thunderin' slow one, hang it all!"

"Halt a minute till I give a look, for this picket isn't going to be driven in or taken while I'm on guard."

Down his beat went Thorn, reconnoitring river, road, and swamp, as thoroughly as one pair of keen eyes could do it, and came back satisfied, but still growling like a faithful mastiff on the watch; performances which he repeated at intervals till his own turn came.

"I didn't have to go out of my own State for a wife, you'd better believe," began Dick, with a boast, as usual; "for we raise as fine a crop of girls thar as any State in or out of the Union, and don't mind raisin' Cain with any man who denies it. I was out on a gunnin' tramp with Joe Partridge, a cousin of mine,--poor old chap! he fired his last shot at Gettysburg, and died game in a way he didn't dream of the day we popped off the birds together. It ain't right to joke that way; I won't if I can help it; but a feller gets awfully kind of heathenish these times, don't he?"

"Settle up them scores byme-by; fightin' Christians scurse raound here. Fire away, Dick."

"Well, we got as hungry as hounds half a dozen mile from home, and when a farmhouse hove in sight, Joe said he'd ask for a bite and leave some of the plunder for pay. I was visitin' Joe, didn't know folks round, and backed out of the beggin' part of the job; so he went ahead alone. We'd come up the woods behind the house, and

while Joe was foragin', I took are connoissance. The view was fust-rate, for the main part of it was a girl airin' beds on the roof of a stoop. Now, jest about that time, havin' a leisure spell, I'd begun to think of marryin', and took a look at all the girls I met, with an eye to business. I s'pose every man has some sort of an idee or pattern of the wife he wants; pretty and plucky, good and gay was mine, but I'd never found it till I see Kitty; and as she didn't see me, I had the advantage and took an extra long stare."

"What was her good pints, hey?"

"Oh, well, she had a wide-awake pair of eyes, a bright, jolly sort of a face, lots of curly hair tumblin' out of her net, a trig little figger, and a pair of the neatest feet and ankles that ever stepped. 'Pretty,' thinks I; 'so far so good.' The way she whacked the pillers, shooked the blankets, and pitched into the beds was a caution; specially one blunderin' old featherbed that wouldn't do nothin' but sag round in a pig-headed sort of way, that would have made most girls get mad and give up. Kitty didn't, but just wrestled with it like a good one, till she got it turned, banged, and spread to suit her; then she plumped down in the middle of it, with a sarcy little nod and chuckle to herself, that tickled me mightily. 'Plucky,' thinks I, 'better 'n' better.' Jest then an old woman came flyin' out the back-door, callin', 'Kitty! Kitty! Squire Partridge's son's here, 'long with a friend; been gunnin', want luncheon, and I'm all in the suds; do come down and see to 'em.'

"'Where are they ?' says Kitty, scrambling up her hair and settlin' her gown in a jiffy, as women have a knack of doin', you know.

"'Mr. Joe's in the front entry; the other man's somewheres round, Billy says, waitin' till I send word whether they can stop. I darsn't till I'd seen you, for I can't do nothin', I'm in such a mess,' says the old lady.

"'So am I, for I can't get in except by the Error! [Hyperlink reference not valid.](#) entry window, and he'll see me,' says Kitty, gigglin' at the thoughts of Joe.

"'Come down the ladder, there's a dear. I'll pull it round and keep it stiddy,' says her mother.

"'Oh, ma, don't ask me!' says Kitty, with a shiver. 'I'm dreadfully scared of ladders since I broke my arm off this very one. It's so high, it makes me dizzy jest to think of.'

"Well, then, I'll do the best I can; but I wish them boys was to Jericho!" says the old lady, with a groan, for she was fat and hot, had her gown pinned up, and was in a fluster generally. She was goin' off rather huffy, when Kitty called out,--

"Stop, ma! I'll come down and help you, only ketch me if I tumble."

"She looked scared but stiddy, and I'll bet it took as much grit for her to do it as for one of us to face a battery. It don't seem much to tell of, but I wish I may be hit if it wasn't a right down dutiful and clever thing to see done. When the old lady took her off at the bottom, with a good motherly hug, I found myself huggin' my rifle like a fool, but whether I thought it was the ladder, or Kitty, I ain't clear about. 'Good,' thinks I; 'what more do you want?'

"A snug little property wouldn't a ben bad, I reckon. Well she had it, old skin-flint, though I didn't know or care about it then. What a jolly row she'd make if she knew I was tellin' the ladder part of the story! She always does when I get to it, and makes believe cry, with her head in my breast-pocket, or any such handy place, till I take it out and swear I'll never do so ag'in. Poor little Kit, I wonder what she's doin' now. Thinkin' of me, I'll bet."

Dick paused, pitched his cap lower over his eyes, and smoked a minute with more energy than enjoyment, for his cigar was out and he did not perceive it.

"That's not all, is it?" asked Thorn, taking a fatherly interest in the younger man's love passages.

"Not quite. 'Fore long, Joe whistled, and as I always take short cuts everywhar, I put in at the back-door, jest as Kitty come trottin' out of the pantry with a big berry-pie in her hand. I startled her, she tripped over the sill and down she come; the dish flew one way, the pie flopped into her lap, the juice spatterin' my boots and her clean gown. I thought she'd cry, scold, have hysterics, or some confounded thing or other; but she jest sat still a minute, then looked up at me with a great blue splosh on her face, and went off into the good-naturedest gale of laughin' you ever heard in your life. That finished me. 'Gay,' thinks I; 'go in and win.' So I, did; made love hand over hand, while I stayed with Joe; pupposed a fortnight after, married her in three months, and there she is, a tip-top little woman, with a pair of stunnin' boys in her arms!"

Out came a well-worn case, and Dick proudly displayed the likeness of a stout, much bejewelled young woman, with two staring infants on her knee. In his sight, the poor picture was a more perfect work of art than any of Sir Joshua's baby-

beauties, or Raphael's Madonnas, and the little story needed no better sequel than the young father's praises of his twins, the covert kiss he gave their mother when he turned as if to get a clearer light upon the face. Ashamed to show the tenderness that filled his honest heart, he hummed "Kingdom Coming," while relighting his cigar, and presently began to talk again.

"Now, then, Flint, it's your turn to keep guard, and Thorn's to tell his romance. Come, don't try to shirk; it does a man good to talk of such things, and we're all mates here."

"In some cases it don't do any good to talk of such things; better let 'em alone," muttered Thorn, as he reluctantly sat down, while Flint as reluctantly departed.

With a glance and gesture of real affection, Phil laid his hand upon his comrade's knee, saying, in his persuasive voice, "Old fellow, it *will* do you good, because I know you often long to speak of something that weighs upon you. You've kept us steady many a time, and done us no end of kindnesses; why be too proud to let us give our sympathy in return, if nothing more?"

Thorn's big hand closed over the slender one upon his knee, and the mild expression, so rarely seen upon his face, passed over it as he replied,--

"I think I could tell you almost anything if you asked me that way, my boy. It isn't that I'm too proud,--and you're right about my sometimes wanting to free my mind,--but it's because a man of forty don't just like to open out to young fellows, if there is any danger of their laughing at him, though he may deserve it. I guess there isn't now, and I'll tell you how I found my wife."

Dick sat up, and Phil drew nearer, for the earnestness that was in the man dignified his plain speech, and inspired an interest in his history, even before it was begun. Looking gravely at the river and never at his hearers, as if still a little shy of confidants, yet grateful for the relief of words, Thorn began abruptly,--

"I never hear the number eighty-four without clapping my hand to my left breast and missing my badge. You know I was on the police in New York, before the war, and that's about all you do know yet. One bitter cold night, I was going my rounds for the last time, when, as I turned a corner, I saw there was a trifle of work to be done. It was a bad part of the city, full of dirt and deviltry; one of the streets led to a ferry, and at the corner an old woman had an apple- stall. The poor soul had dropped asleep, worn out with the cold, and there were her goods left, with no one to watch 'em. Somebody was watching 'em, however; a girl, with a ragged

shawl over her head, stood at the mouth of an alley close by, waiting for a chance to grab something. I'd seen her there when I went by before, and mistrusted she was up to some mischief; as I turned the corner, she put out her hand and cribbed an apple. She saw me the minute she did it, but neither dropped it nor ran, only stood stocks still with the apple in her hand till I came up.

"This won't do, my girl,' said I. I never could be harsh with 'em, poor things! She laid it back and looked up at me with a miserable sort of a smile, that made me put my hand in my pocket to fish for a ninepence before she spoke.

"I know it won't,' she says. 'I didn't want to do it, it's so mean, but I'm awful hungry, sir.'

"Better run home and get your supper then.'

"I've got no home.'

"Where do you live?'

"In the street.'

"Where do you sleep?'

"Anywhere; last night in the lock-up, and I thought I'd get in there again, if I did that when you saw me. I like to go there, it's warm and safe.'

"If I don't take you there, what will you do?'

"Don't know. I want to go over there and dance again, as I used to; but being sick has made me ugly, so they won't have me, and no one else will take me because I have been there once.'

"I looked where she pointed, and thanked the Lord that they wouldn't take her. It was one of those low theatres that do so much damage to the like of her; there was a gambling den one side of it, an eating saloon the other, and at the door of it lounged a scamp I knew very well, looking like a big spider watching for a fly. I longed to fling my billy at him; but as I couldn't, I held on to the girl. I was new to the thing then, but though I'd heard about hunger and homelessness often enough, I'd never had this sort of thing, nor seen that look on a girl's face. A white, pinched face hers was, with frightened, tired-looking eyes, but so innocent; she wasn't more

than sixteen, had been pretty once I saw, looked sick and starved now, and seemed just the most helpless, hopeless little thing that ever was.

"You'd better come to the Station for to-night, and we'll see to you to-morrow,' says I.

"Thank you, sir,' says she, looking as grateful as if I'd asked her home. I suppose I did speak kind of fatherly. I ain't ashamed to say I felt so, seeing what a child she was; nor to own that when she put her little hand in mine, it hurt me to feel how thin and cold it was. We passed the eating-house where the red lights made her face as rosy as it ought to have been; there was meat and pies in the window, and the poor thing stopped to look. It was too much for her; off came her shawl, and she said in that coaxing way of hers,--

"I wish you'd let me stop at the place close by and sell this; they'll give a little for it, and I'll get some supper. I've had nothing since yesterday morning, and maybe cold is easier to bear than hunger.'

"Have you nothing better than that to sell?" I says, not quite sure that she wasn't all a humbug, like so many of 'em. She seemed to see that, and looked up at me again with such innocent eyes, I couldn't doubt her when she said, shivering with something beside the cold,--

"Nothing but myself.' Then the tears came, and she laid her head down on my arm, sobbing,--'Keep me! oh, do keep me safe somewhere!'"

Thorn choked here, steadied his voice with a resolute hem! but could only add one sentence more:

"That's how I found my wife."

"Come, don't stop thar? I told the whole o' mine, you do the same. Whar did you take her? how'd it all come round?"

"Please tell us, Thorn."

The gentler request was answered presently, very steadily, very quietly.

"I was always a soft-hearted fellow, though you wouldn't think it now, and when that little girl asked me to keep her safe, I just did it. I took her to a good woman whom I knew, for I hadn't any women belonging to me, nor any place but that to

put her in. She stayed there till spring working for her keep, growing brighter, prettier, every day, and fonder of me I thought. If I believed in witchcraft, I shouldn't think myself such a cursed fool as I do now, but I don't believe in it, and to this day I can't understand how I came to do it. To be sure I was a lonely man, without kith or kin, had never had a sweetheart in my life, or been much with women since my mother died. Maybe that's why I was so bewitched with Mary, for she had little ways with her that took your fancy and made you love her whether you would or no. I found her father was an honest fellow enough, a fiddler in the some theatre, that he'd taken good care of Mary till he died, leaving precious little but advice for her to live on. She'd tried to get work, failed, spent all she had, got sick, and was going to the devil, as the poor souls can hardly help doing with so many ready to give them a shove. It's no use trying to make a bad job better; so the long and short of it was, I thought she loved me; God knows I loved her, and I married her before the year was out."

"Show us her picture; I know you've got one; all the fellows have, though half of 'em won't own up."

"I've only got part of one. I once saved my little girl, and her picture once saved me."

From an inner pocket Thorn produced a woman's housewife, carefully untied it, though all its implements were missing but a little thimble and from one of its compartments took a flattened bullet and the remnants of a picture.

"I gave her that the first Christmas after I found her. She wasn't as tidy about her clothes as I liked to see, and I thought if I gave her a handy thing like this, she'd be willing to sew. But she only made one shirt for me, and then got tired, so I keep it like an old fool, as I am. Yes, that's the bit of lead that would have done for me, if Mary's likeness hadn't been just where it was."

"You'll like to show her this when you go home, won't you?" said Dick, as he took up the bullet, while Phil examined the marred picture, and Thorn poised the little thimble on his big finger, with a sigh.

"How can I, when I don't know where she is, and camp is all the home I've got?"

The words broke from him like a sudden cry, when some old wound is rudely touched. Both of the young men started, both laid back the relics they had taken up, and turned their eyes from Thorn's face, across which swept a look of shame and sorrow, too significant to be misunderstood. Their silence assured him of their

sympathy, and, as if that touch of friendlessness unlocked his heavy heart, he eased it by a full confession. When he spoke again, it was with the calmness of repressed emotion; and calmness more touching to his mates than the most passionate outbreak, the most pathetic lamentation; for the coarse camp-phrases seemed to drop from his vocabulary; more than once his softened voice grew tremulous, and to the words "my little girl," there went a tenderness that proved how dear a place she still retained in that deep heart of his.

"Boys, I've gone so far; I may as well finish; and you'll see I'm not without some cause for my stern looks and ways; you'll pity me, and from you I'll take the comfort of it. It's only the old story,--I married her, worked for her, lived for her, and kept my little girl like a lady. I should have known that I was too old, too sober, for a young thing like that; the life she led before the pinch came just suited her. She liked to be admired, to dress and dance and make herself pretty for all the world to see; not to keep house for a quiet man like me. Idleness wasn't good for her, it bred discontent; then some of her old friends, who'd left her in her trouble, found her out when better times came round, and tried to get her back again. I was away all day, I didn't know how things were going, and she wasn't open with me, afraid, she said; I was so grave, and hated theatres so. She got courage, finally, to tell me that she wasn't happy; that she wanted to dance again, and asked me if she mightn't. I'd rather have had her ask me to put her in a fire, for I *did* hate theatres, and was bred to; others think they're no harm. I do; and knew it was a bad life for a girl like mine. It pampers vanity, and vanity is the Devil's help with such; so I said No, kindly at first, sharp and stern when she kept on teasing. That roused her spirit. 'I will go!' she said, one day. 'Not while you're my wife,' I answered back; and neither said any more, but she gave me a look I didn't think she could, and I resolved to take her away from temptation before worse came of it.

"I didn't tell her my plan; but I resigned my place, spent a week or more finding and fixing a little home for her out in the wholesome country, where she'd be safe from theatres and disreputable friends, and maybe learn to love me better when she saw how much she was to me. It was coming summer, and I made things look as home-like and as pretty as I could. She liked flowers, and I fixed a garden for her; she was fond of pets, and I got her a bird, a kitten, and a dog to play with her; she fancied gay colors and tasty little matters, so I filled her rooms with all the handsome things I could afford, and when it was done, I was as pleased as any boy, thinking what happy times we'd have together and how pleased she'd be. Boys, when I went to tell her and to take her to her little home, she was gone."

"Who with?"

"With those cursed friends of hers; a party of them left the city just then; she was wild to go; she had money now, and all her good looks back again. They teased and tempted her; I wasn't there to keep her, and she went, leaving a line behind to tell me that she loved the old life more than the new; that my house was a prison, and she hoped I'd let her go in peace. That almost killed me; but I managed to bear it, for I knew most of the fault was mine; but it was awful bitter to think I hadn't saved her, after all."

"Oh, Thorn! what did you do?"

"Went straight after her; found her dancing in Philadelphia, with paint on her cheeks, trinkets on her neck and arms, looking prettier than ever; but the innocent eyes were gone, and I couldn't see my little girl in the bold, handsome woman twirling there before the Error! [Hyperlink reference not valid.](#) She saw me, looked scared at first, then smiled, and danced on with her eyes upon me, as if she said,--

"See! I'm happy now; go away and let me be."

"I couldn't stand that, and got out somehow. People thought me mad, or drunk; I didn't care, I only wanted to see her once in quiet and try to get her home. I couldn't do it then nor afterwards by fair means, and I wouldn't try force. I wrote to her, promised to forgive her, begged her to come back, or let me keep her honestly somewhere away from me. But she never answered, never came, and I have never tried again."

"She wasn't worthy of you, Thorn; you jest forgit her."

"I wish I could! I wish I could!" in his voice quivered an almost passionate regret, and a great sob heaved his chest, as he turned his face away to hide the love and longing, still so tender and so strong.

"Don't say that, Dick; such fidelity should make us charitable for its own sake. There is always time for penitence, always a certainty of pardon. Take heart, Thorn, you may not wait in vain, and she may yet return to you."

"I know she will! I've dreamed of it, I've prayed for it; every battle I come out of safe makes me surer that I was kept for that, and when I've borne enough to atone for my part of the fault, I'll be repaid for all my patience, all my pain, by finding her again. She knows how well I love her still, and if there comes a time when she is sick and poor and all alone again, then she'll remember her old John, then she'll come home and let me take her in."

Hope shone in Thorn's melancholy eyes, and long-suffering all-forgiving love beautified the rough, brown face, as he folded his arms and bent his gray head on his breast, as if the wanderer were already come.

The emotion which Dick scorned to show on his own account was freely manifested for another, as he sniffed audibly, and, boy-like, drew his sleeve across his eyes. But Phil, with the delicate perception of a finer nature, felt that the truest kindness he could show his friend was to distract his thoughts from himself, to spare him any comments, and lessen the embarrassment which would surely follow such unwonted confidence.

"Now I'll relieve Flint, and he will give you a laugh. Come on Hiram and tell us about your Beulah."

The gentleman addressed had performed his duty, by sitting on a fence and "righting up" his pockets, to beguile the tedium of his exile. Before his multitudinous possessions could be restored to their native sphere, Thorn was himself again, and on his feet.

"Stay where you are Phil; I like to tramp, it seems like old times, and I know you're tired. Just forget all this I've been saying, and go on as before. Thank you, boys! thank you!" and with a grasp of the two hands extended to him, he strode away along the path already worn by his own restless feet.

"It's done him good, and I'm glad of that; but I'd like to see the little baggage that bewitched the poor old boy, wouldn't you, Phil?"

"Hush! here's Flint."

"What's up naow? want me tew address the meetin', hey? I'm willin', only the laugh's ruther ag'inst me, ef I tell that story; expect yeu'll like it all the better fer that." Flint coiled up his long limbs, put his hands in his pockets, chewed meditatively for a moment, and then began with his slowest drawl--

"Waal, sir, it's pretty nigh ten year ago, I was damster daown tew Oldtown, clos't tew Banggore. My folks lived tew Bethel; there was only the old man, and Aunt Siloam, keepin' house fer him, seein' as I was the only chick he hed. I hedn't heard from 'em fer a long spell, when there come a letter sayin' the old man was breakin' up. He'd said it every spring fer a number er years, and I didn't mind it no more'n the breakin' up er the river; not so much jest then; fer the gret spring drive was comin' on, and my hands was tew full to quit work all tew oncet. I sent word I'd be

'long fore a gret while, and bymeby I went. I ought tew hev gone at fust; but they'd sung aout 'Wolf!' so often I wasn't scared; an' sure 'nuff the wolf did come at last. Father hed been dead an' berried a week when I got there, and aunt was so mad she wouldn't write, nor scurcely speak tew me fer a consider'ble spell. I didn't blame her a mite, and felt jest the wust kind; so I give in every way, and fetched her raound. Yeou see I hed a cousin who'd kind er took my place tew hum while I was off, an' the old man hed left him a good slice er his money, an' me the farm, hopin' to keep me there. He'd never liked the lumberin' bizness, an' hankered arfter me a sight, I faound. Waal, seein' haow 'twas, I tried tew please him, late as it was; but ef there was ennything I did spleen ag'inst, it was farmin, 'specially arfter the smart times I'd ben hevin, up Oldtaown way. Yeou don't know nothin' ababout it; but ef yeou want tew see high dewin's, jest hitch onto a timber-drive an' go it daown along them lakes and rivers, say from Kaumchenungamooth tew Punnobscot Bay. Guess yeou'd see a thing or tew, an' find livin' on a log come as handy as ef yeou was born a turtle.

"Waal, I stood it one summer; but it was the longest kind of a job. Come fall I turned contrary, darned the farm, and vaowed I'd go back tew loggin'. Aunt hed got fond er me by that time, and felt dreadful bad ababout my leavin' on her. Cousin Siah, as we called Josiah, didn't cotton tew the old woman, though he did tew her cash; but we hitched along fust-rate. She was 'tached tew the place, hated tew hev it let or sold, thought I'd go to everlastin' rewin ef I took tew lumberin' ag'in, an' hevin' a tidy little sum er money all her own, she took a notion tew buy me off. 'Hiram,' sez she, 'ef yeou'll stay tew hum, merry some smart gal, an' kerry on the farm, I'll leave yeou the hull er my fortin. Ef yeou don't, I'll leave every cent on't tew Siah, though he ain't done as waal by me as yeou hev. Come,' sez she, 'I'm breakin' up like brother; I shan't wurry any one a gret while, and 'fore spring I dessay you'll hev cause tew rejice that yeou done as Aunt Si counselled yeou.'

"Now, that idee kinder took me, seein' I hedn't no overpaourin' love fer cousin; but I brewdid over it a spell 'fore I 'greed. Fin'lly, I said I'd dew it, as it warn't a hard nor a bad trade; and begun to look raound fer Mis Flint, Jr. Aunt was dreadf'l pleased; but 'mazin pertickler as tew who was goan tew stan' in her shoes, when she was fetched up ag'inst the eternal boom. There was a sight er lovely women-folks raound taown; but aunt she set her foot daown that Mis Flint must be smart, pious, an' good-natered; harnsome she didn't say nothin' ababout, bein' the humliest woman in the State er Maine. I hed my own calk'lations on that pint, an' went sparkin' two or three er the pootiest gals, all that winter. I warn't in no hurry, fer merryin' is an awful resky bizness; an' I warn't goan to be took in by nobuddy. Some haouw I couldn't make up my mind which I'd hev, and kept dodgin', all

ready to slew raound, an' hitch on tew ary one that seemed likeliest. 'Long in March, aunt, she ketched cold, took tew her bed, got wuss, an' told me tew hurry up, fer nary red should I hev, ef I warn't safely merried 'fore she stepped out. I thought that was ruther craoudin' a feller; but I see she was goan sure, an' I'd got intew a way er considerin' the cash mine, so that it come hard to hear abaout givin' on't up. Off I went that evenin' an' asked Almiry Nash ef she'd hev me. No, she wouldn't; I'd shilly-shallyed so long, she'd got tired er waitin' and took tew keepin' company with a doctor daown tew Bang-gore, where she'd ben visitin' a spell. I didn't find that as hard a rub to swaller, as I'd a thought I would, though Almiry was the richest, pootiest, and good-naterest of the lot. Aunt larfed waal, an' told me tew try agin; so a couple er nights arfter, I spruced up, an' went over to Car'line Miles's; she was as smart as old cheese, an' waal off intew the barg'in. I was just as sure she'd hev me, as I be that I'm gittin' the rewmatiz a settin' in this ma'sh. But that minx, Almiry, hed ben and let on abaout her own sarsy way er servin' on me, an' Car'line jest up an' said she warn't goan to hev annybuddy's leavin's; so daown I come ag'in.

"Things was gettin' desper't by that time; for aunt was failin' rapid, an' the story hed leaked aout some way, so the hull taown was gigglin' over it. I thought I'd better quit them parts; but aunt she showed me her will all done complete, 'sceptin' the fust name er the legatee. 'There,' sez she, 'it all depends on yeou, whether that place is took by Hiram or Josiah. It's easy done, an' so it's goan tew stan' till the last minnit.' That riled me consid'able, an' I streaked off tew May Jane Simlin's. She want very waal off, nor extra harnsome, but she was pious the wust kind, an' dreadf'l clever to them she fancied. But I was daown on my luck agin; fer at the fust word I spoke of merryin', she showed me the door, an' give me to understan' that she couldn't think er hevin' a man that warn't a church-member, that hadn't experienced religion, or even ben struck with conviction, an' all the rest on't. Ef anny one hed a wanted tew hev seen a walkin' hornet's nest, they could hev done it cheap that night, as I went hum. I jest stramed intew the kitchen, chucked my hat intew one corner, my coat intew 'nother, kicked the cat, cussed the fire, drewed up a chair, and set scaoulin' like sixty, bein' tew mad for talkin'. The young woman that was nussin' aunt,--Bewlah Blish, by name,--was a cookin' grewel on the coals, and 'peared tew understan' the mess I was in; but she didn't say nothin', only blowed up the fire, fetched me a mug er cider, an' went raound so kinder quiet, and sympathizin', that I faound the wrinkles in my temper gettin' smoothed aout 'mazin' quick; an' 'fore long I made a clean breast er the hull thing. Bewlah larfed, but I didn't mind her doin' on't, for she sez, sez she, real sort o' cunnin',--

"Poor Hiram! they didn't use yeou waal. Yeou ought to hev tried some er the poor an' humly girls; they'd a' been glad an' grateful fer such a sweetheart as yeou be.'

"I was good-natered agin by that time, an' I sez, larfin' along with her, 'Waal I've got three mittens, but I guess I might's waal hev 'nother, and that will make two pair complete. Say, Bewlah, will yeou hev me?'

"'Yes, I will,' sez she.

"'Reelly?' sez I.

"'Solemn trew,' sez she.

"Ef she'd up an' slapped me in the face, I shouldn't hev ben more throwed aback, fer I never mistrusted she cared two chips for me. I jest set an' gawped; fer she was solemn trew, I see that with half an eye, an' it kinder took my breath away. Bewlah drawed the grewel off the fire, wiped her hands, an' stood lookin' at me a minnet, then she sez, slow an' quiet, but tremblin' a little, as women hev a way er doin', when they've consid'able steam aboard,--

"'Hiram, other folks think lumberin' has spilt yeou; I don't; they call yeou rough an' rewd; I know you've got a real kind heart fer them as knows haow tew find it. Them girls give yeou up so easy, 'cause they never loved yeou, an' yeou give them up 'cause yeou only thought abaout their looks an' money. I'm humly, an' I'm poor; but I've loved yeou ever sence we went a-nuttin' years ago, an' yeou shook daown fer me, kerried my bag, and kissed me tew the gate, when all the others shunned me, 'cause my father drank an' I was shably dressed, ugly, an' shy. Yeou asked me in sport, I answered in airnest; but I don't expect nothin' unless yeou mean as I mean. Like me, Hiram, or leave me, it won't make no odds in my lovin' er yeou, nor helpin' er yeou, ef I kin.'

"'Tain't easy tew say haouw I felt, while she was goin' on that way; but my ideas was tumblin' raound inside er me, as ef half a dozen dams was broke loose all tew oncet. One thing was ruther stiddier 'n the rest, an' that was that I liked Bewlah morn'n I knew. I begun tew see what kep me loopin' tew hum so much, sence aunt was took daown; why I want in no hurry tew git them other gals, an' haow I come tew pocket my mittens so easy arfter the fust rile was over. Bewlah was humly, poor in flesh, dreadful freckled, hed red hair, black eyes, an' a gret mold side er her nose. But I'd got wonted tew her; she knowed my ways, was a fust rate housekeeper, real good-tempered, and pious without flingin' on't in yer face. She was a lonely creeter,--her folks bein' all dead but one sister, who didn't use her

waal, an' somehow I kinder yearned over her, as they say in Scriptor. For all I set an' gawped, I was coming raound fast, though I felt as I used tew, when I was goin' to shoot the rapids, kinder breathless an' oncertin, whether Id come aout right side up or not. Queer, warn't it?"

"Love, Flint; that was a sure symptom of it."

"Waal, guess 'twas; anyway I jumped up all er a sudden, ketched Bewlah raound the neck, give her a hearty kiss, and sung aout, 'I'll dew it sure's my name's Hi Flint!' The words was scurcely aout er my maouth, 'fore daown come Dr. Parr. He'd ben up tew see aunt, an' said she wouldn't last the night threw, prob'ly. That give me a scarer the wust kind; an' when I told doctor haow things was, he sez, kinder jokin',--

"Better git merried right away, then. Parson Dill is tew come an' see the old lady, an' he'll dew both jobs tew oncet.'

"Will yeou, Bewlah?' sez I.

"Yes, Hiram, to 'blige yeou,' sez she.

"With that, I put it fer the parson and the license; got 'em both, an' was back in less'n half an haour, most tuckered aout with the flurry er the hull concern. Quick as I'd been, Bewlah hed faound time tew whip on her best gaoun, fix up her hair, and put a couple er white chrissanthymums intew her hank'chif pin. Fer the fust time in her life, she looked harnsome,--leastways I thought so,--with a pretty color in her cheeks, somethin' brighter'n a larf shinin' in her eyes, an' her lips smilin' an' tremblin', as she come to me an' whispered so's't none er the rest could hear,--

"Hiram, don't yeou dew it, ef yeou'd ruther not. I've stood it a gret while alone, an' I guess I can ag'in.'

"Never yeou mind what I said or done abaout that; but we was married ten minutes arfter, 'fore the kitchen fire, with Dr. Parr an' oaur hired man, fer witnesses; an' then we all went up tew aunt. She was goan fast, but she understood what I told her, hed strength tew fill up the hole in the will, an' to say, a-kissin' Bewlah, 'Yeou'll be a good wife, an' naouw yeou ain't a poor one.'

"I couldn't help givin' a peek tew the will, and there I see not Hiram Flint, nor Josiah Flint, but Bewlah Flint, wrote every which way, but as plain as the nose on yer face. 'It won't make no odds dear,' whispered my wife, peekin' over my

shoulder. 'Guess it won't!' sez I, aout laoud; 'I'm glad on't, and it ain't a cent more'n yeou derserve.'

"That pleased aunt. 'Riz me, Hiram,' sez she; an' when I'd got her easy, she put her old arms raound my neck, an' tried to say, 'God bless you, dear--,' but died a doin' of it; an' I ain't ashamed tew say I boo-hoed real hearty, when I laid her daown, fer she was dreadf'l good tew me, an' I don't forgit her in a hurry."

"How's Bewlah?" asked Dick, after the little tribute of respect all paid to Aunt Siloam's memory, by a momentary silence.

"Fust-rate! that harum scarum venter er mine was the best I ever made. She's done waal by me, hes Bewlah; ben a grand good haousekeeper, kin kerry on the farm better'n me, any time, an' is as dutif'l an' lovin' a wife as,--waaal as annything that *is* extra dutif'l and lovin'."

"Got any boys to brag of?"

"We don't think much o' boys daown aour way; they're 'mazin resky stock to fetch up,--alluz breakin' baounds, gittin' intew the paound, and wurry your life aout somehaow 'nother. Gals naow doos waal; I got six o' the likeliest the is goin', every one on 'em is the very moral of Bewlah,--red hair, black eyes, quiet ways, an' a mold side the nose. Baby's ain't growed yet; but I expect tew see it in a consid'able state o' forrardness, when I git hum, an' wouldn't miss it fer the world."

The droll expressions of Flint's face, and the satisfied twang of his last words, were irresistable. Dick and Phil went off into a shout of laughter; and even Thorn's grave lips relapsed into a smile at the vision of six little Flints with their six little moles. As if the act were an established ceremony, the "paternal head" produced his pocket-book, selected a worn, black and white paper, which he spread in his broad palm, and displayed with the air of a connoisseur.

"There, thets Bewlah! we call it a cuttin'; but the proper name's a silly-hoot I b'leeve. I've got a harnsome big degarrytype tew hum but the heft on't makes it bad tew kerry raound, so I took this. I don't tote it abaout inside my shirt as some dew,--it aint my way; but I keep it in my puss long with my other valleu'bles, and guess I set as much stoxe by it as ef it was all painted up, and done off to keell."

The "silly-hoot" was examined with interest, and carefully stowed away again in the old brown wallet which was settled in its place with a satisfied slap, then Flint said briskly,--

"Naouw, Phil, yeou close this interestin' and instructive meeting; and be spry, fer time's most up."

"I haven't much to tell, but must begin with a confession which I have often longed but never dared to make before, because I am a coward."

"Sho! who's goan to b'leeve that o' a man who fit like a wild cat, wuz offered fer permotion on the field, and wuz reported tew headquarters arfter his fust scrimmage. Try ag'in, Phil."

"Physical courage is as plentiful as brass buttons, nowadays, but moral courage is a rarer virtue; and I'm lacking in it, as I'll prove. You think me a Virginian; I'm an Alabamian by birth, and was a reb three months ago."

This confession startled his hearers, as he knew it would, for he had kept his secret well. Thorn laid his hand involuntarily upon his rifle, Dick drew off a little, and Flint illustrated one of his own expressions, for he "gawped." Phil laughed that musical laugh of his, and looked up at them with his dark face waking into sudden life as he went on:--

"There's no treason in the camp, for I'm as fierce a Federalist as any of you now, and you may thank a woman for it. When Lee made his raid into Pennsylvania, I was a lieutenant in the--well, never mind what regiment, it hasn't signalized itself since, and I'd rather not hit my old neighbors when they are down. In one of the skirmishes during our retreat, I got a wound and was left for dead. A kind old Quaker found and took me home; but though I was too weak to talk, I had my senses by that time, and knew what went on about me. Everything was in confusion, even in that well-ordered place; no surgeon could be got at first, and a flock of frightened women thee'd and thou'd one another over me, but hadn't wit enough to see that I was bleeding to death. Among the faces that danced before my dizzy eyes was one that seemed familiar, probably because no cap surrounded it. I was glad to have it bending over me, to hear a steady voice say, 'Give me a bandage, quick!' and when none was instantly forthcoming to me, the young lady stripped up a little white apron she wore, and stanch'd the wound in my shoulder. I was not as badly hurt as I supposed, but so worn-out, and faint from loss of blood, they believed me to be dying, and so did I, when the old man took off his hat and said,--

"Friend, if thee has anything to say, thee had better say it, for thee probably has not long to live.'

"I thought of my little sister, far away in Alabama, fancied she came to me, and muttered, 'Amy, kiss me, good-by.' The women sobbed at that; but the girl bent her sweet compassionate face to mine, and kissed me on the forehead. That was my wife."

"So you seceded from Secession right away, to pay for that lip-service, hey?"

"No, Thorn, not right away,--to my shame be it spoken. I'll tell you how it came about. Margaret was not old Bent's daughter, but a Virginia girl on a visit, and a long one it proved, for she couldn't go till things were quieter. While she waited, she helped take care of me; for the good souls petted me like a baby when they found that a Rebel could be a gentleman. I held my tongue, and behaved my best to prove my gratitude, you know. Of course, I loved Margaret very soon. How could I help it? She was the sweetest woman I had ever seen, tender, frank, and spirited; all I had ever dreamed of and longed for. I did not speak of this, nor hope for a return, because I knew she was a hearty Unionist, and thought she only tended me from pity. But suddenly she decided to go home, and when I ventured to wish she would stay longer, she would not listen, and said, "I must not stay; I should have gone before."

"The words were nothing, but as she uttered them the color came up beautifully over all her face, and her eyes filled as they looked away from mine. Then I knew that she loved me, and my secret broke out half against my will. Margaret was forced to listen, for I would not let her go, but she seemed to harden herself against me, growing colder, stiller, statelier, as I went on, and when I said in my desperate way,--

"'You should love me, for we are bid to love our enemies,' she flashed an indignant look at me and said,--

"'I will not love what I cannot respect! Come to me a loyal man, and see what answer I shall give you.'

"Then she went away. It was the wisest thing she could have done, for absence did more to change me than an ocean of tears, a year of exhortations. Lying there, I missed her every hour of the day, recalled every gentle act, kind word, and fair example she had given me. I contrasted my own belief with hers, and found a new significance in the words honesty and honor, and, remembering her fidelity to principle, was ashamed of my own treason to God and to herself. Education, prejudice, and interest, are difficult things to overcome, and that was the hottest

fight I ever passed through, for, as I tell you, I was a coward. But love and loyalty won the day, and, asking no quarter, the Rebel surrendered."

"Phil Beaufort, you're a brick!" cried Dick, with a sounding slap on his comrade's shoulder.

"A brand snatched from the burnin'. Hallelujah!" chanted Flint, seesawing with excitement.

"Then you went to find your wife? How? Where?" asked Thorn, forgetting vigilance in interest.

"Friend Bent hated war so heartily that he would have nothing to do with paroles, exchanges, or any martial process whatever, but bade me go when and where I liked, remembering to do by others as I had been done by. Before I was well enough to go, however, I managed, by means of Copperhead influence and returned prisoners, to send a letter to my father and receive an answer. You can imagine what both contained; and so I found myself penniless, but not poor, an outcast, but not alone. Old Bent treated me like a prodigal son, and put money in my purse; his pretty daughters loved me for Margaret's sake, and gave me a patriotic salute all round when I left them, the humblest, happiest man in Pennsylvania. Margaret once said to me that this was the time for deeds, not words; that no man should stand idle, but serve the good cause with head, heart, and hand, no matter in what rank; for in her eyes a private fighting for liberty was nobler than a dozen generals defending slavery. I remembered that, and, not having influential friends to get me a commission, enlisted in one of her own Virginia regiments, knowing that no act of mine would prove my sincerity like that. You should have seen her face when I walked in upon her, as she sat alone, busied with the army work, as I'd so often seen her sitting by my bed; it showed me all she had been suffering in silence, all I should have lost had I chosen darkness instead of light. She hoped and feared so much she could not speak, neither could I, but dropped my cloak, and showed her that, through love of her, I had become a soldier of the Flag. How I love the coarse blue uniform! for when she saw it, she came to me without a word and kept her promise in a month."

"Thunder! what a harnsome woman!" exclaimed Flint, as Phil, opening the golden case that held his talisman, showed them the beautiful, beloved face of which he spoke.

"Yes! and a right noble woman too. I don't deserve her, but I will. We parted on our wedding-day, for orders to be off came suddenly, and she would not let me go

until I had given her my name to keep. We were married in the morning, and at noon I had to go. Other women wept as we marched through the town, but my brave Margaret kept her tears till we were gone, smiling, and waving her hand to me,--the hand that wore the wedding-ring,--till I was out of sight. That image of her is before me day and night, and day and night her last words are ringing in my ears,--

"I give you freely, do your best. Better a true man's widow than a traitor's wife.'

"Boys, I've only stood on the right side for a month; I've only fought one battle, earned one honor; but I believe these poor achievements are an earnest of the long atonement I desire to make for five and twenty years of blind transgression. You say I fight well. Have I not cause to dare much?--for in owning many slaves, I too became a slave; in helping to make many freemen, I liberate myself. You wonder why I refused promotion. Have I any right to it yet? Are there not men who never sinned as I have done, and beside whose sacrifices mine look pitifully small? You tell me I have no ambition. I have the highest, for I desire to become God's noblest work,--an honest man,--living, to make Margaret happy, in a love that every hour grows worthier of her own,--dying, to make death proud to take me."

Phil had risen while he spoke, as if the enthusiasm of his mood lifted him into the truer manhood he aspired to attain. Straight and strong he stood up in the moonlight, his voice deepened by unwonted energy, his eye clear and steadfast, his whole face ennobled by the regenerating power of this late loyalty to country, wife, and self, and bright against the dark blue of his jacket shone the pictured face, the only medal he was proud to wear.

Ah, brave, brief moment, cancelling years of wrong! Ah, fair and fatal decoration, serving as a mark for a hidden foe! The sharp crack of a rifle broke the stillness of the night, and with those hopeful words upon his lips, the young man sealed his purpose with his life.