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A Man and a Woman

Stanley Waterloo

Imprint

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I PROLOGUE
- II CLOSE TO NATURE
- III BOY, BIRD, AND SNAKE
- IV GROWING UP WITH THE COUNTRY
- V GRIM-VISAGED WAR
- VI THE SPEARING OF ALFRED
- VII HOW FICTION MADE FACT
- VIII NEW FORCES AT WORK
- IX MRS. POTIPHAR
- X THE BUILDING OF THE FENCE
- XI SETTLING WITH WOODDELL
- XII INCLINATION AGAINST CONSCIENCE
- XIII FAREWELL TO THE FENCE
- XIV A RUGGED LOST SHEEP
- XV A STRANGE WORLD

- XXVI THE REALLY UGLY DUCKLING
- XXVII "EH, BUT SHE'S WINSOME"
- XXVIII THE WOMAN
- XIX PURGATORY
- XX TWO FOOLS
- XXI "MY LITTLE RHINOCEROS-BIRD"
- XXII TWO FOOLS STILL
- XXIII JUST A PANG
- XXIV "AS TO THOSE OTHERS"
- XXV NATURE AGAIN
- XXVI ADVENTURES MANIFOLD
- XXVII THE HOUSE WONDERFUL
- XXVIII THE APE
- XXIX THE FIRST DISTRICT
- XXX THE NINTH WARD
- XXXI THEIR FOOLISH WAYS
- XXXII THE LAW OF NATURE
- XXXIII WHITEST ASHES

A MAN AND A WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

PROLOGUE.

But for a recent occurrence I should certainly not be telling the story of a friend, or, rather, I should say, of two friends of mine. What that occurrence was I will not here indicate—it is unnecessary; but it has not been without its effect upon my life and plans. If it be asked by those who may read these pages under what circumstances it became possible for me to acquire such familiarity with certain scenes and incidents in the lives of one man and one woman,—scenes and incidents which, from their very nature, were such that no third person could figure in them,—I have only to explain that Grant Harlson and I were friends from boyhood, practically from babyhood, and that never, during all our lives together, did a change occur in our relationship. He has told me many things of a nature imparted by one man to another very rarely, and only when each of the two feels that they are very close together in that which sometimes makes two men as one. He was proud and glad when he told me these things—they were but episodes, and often trivial ones—and I was interested deeply. They added the details of a history much of which I knew and part of which I had guessed at.

He was not quite the ordinary man, this Grant Harlson, close friend of mine. He had an individuality, and his name is familiar to many people in the world. He has been looked upon by the tactful as but one of a type in a new nationality—a type with traits not yet clearly defined, a type not large, nor yet, thank God, uncommon—one of the best of the type; to me, the best. A close friend perhaps is blind. No; he is not that: he but sees so clearly that the world, with poorer view, may not always agree with him.

I hardly know how to describe this same Grant Harlson. At this stage of my story it is scarcely requisite that I should, but the account is loose and vagrant and with no chronology. Physically, he

was more than most men, six feet in height, deep of chest, broad-shouldered, strong-legged and strong-featured, and ever in good health, so far as all goes, save the temporary tax on recklessness nature so often levies, and the other irregular tax she levies by some swoop of the bacilli of which the doctors talk so much and know so little. I mean only that he might catch a fever with a chill addition if he lay carelessly in some miasmatic swamp on some hunting expedition, or that, in time of cholera, he might have, like other men, to struggle with the enemy. But he tossed off most things lightly, and had that vitality which is of heredity, not built up with a single generation, though sometimes lost in one. Forest and farm-bred, college-bred, city-fostered and broadened and hardened. A man of the world, with experiences, and in his quality, no doubt, the logical, inevitable result of such experiences—one with a conscience flexible and seeking, but hard as rock when once satisfied. One who never, intentionally, injured a human being, save for equity's sake. One who, of course, wandered in looking for what was, to him, the right, but who, having once determined, was ever steadfast. A man who had seen and known and fed and felt and risked, but who seemed to me always as if his religion were: "What shall I do? Nature says so-and-so, and the Power beyond rules nature." Laws of organization for political purposes, begun before Romulus and Remus, and varied by the dale-grouped Angles or the Northmen's Thing, did not seem to much impress him. He recognized their utility, wanted to improve them, made that his work, and eventually observed most of them. This, it seemed to me, was his honest make-up—a Berseker, a bare-sark descendant of the Vikings, in a dress-coat. He had passions, and gratified them sometimes. He had ambitions, and worked for them. He had a conscience, and was guided by it.

It was always interesting to me to look at him in youthful fray, more so, years afterward, in club or in convention, or anywhere, and try to imagine him the country small boy. Keen, hard, alert in all the ways of a great city, it was difficult to conceive him in his early youth, well as I knew it; difficult to reflect that his dreams at night were not of the varying results of some late scheme, nor of white shoulders at the opera, nor the mood of the Ninth Ward, nor of the drift of business, but of some farm-house's front yard in mid-summer with a boy aiming a long shot-gun at a red-winged poacher

in a cherry tree, or that he saw, in sleep, the worn jambs beside the old-fashioned fireplace where, winter mornings, he kicked on his frozen boots, and the living-room where, later in the morning, he ate so largely of buckwheat cakes. He was a figure, wicked some said, a schemer many said, a rock of refuge for his friends said more. This was the man, no uncommon type in the great cities of the great republic.

As for the woman, I write with greater hesitation. I can tell of her in this place but in vague outline. She was slender, not tall, brown-haired and with eyes like those of the deer or Jersey heifer, save that they had the accompanying expression of thought or mood or fancy which mobile human features with them give. She was a woman of the city, with all that gentle craft which is a woman's heritage. She was good. She was unlike all others in the world to one man—no, to two.

I have but tried to tell what these two people appeared to me. I can see them as they were, but cannot tell it as I should. I have not succeeded well in expressing myself in words. Even were I cleverer, I should fail. We can picture characters but approximately.

CHAPTER II.

CLOSE TO NATURE.

The great forest belt, oak, ash, beech and maple, sweeps south-westward from New England through New York and trends westward and even to the north again till one sees the same landscape very nearly reproduced in Wisconsin wilds. Not far from where its continuity is broken by the southern reach of Lake Huron was a clearing cut in the wood. The land was rolling, and through the clearing ran a vigorous creek, already alder-fringed—for the alder follows the chopper swiftly—and glittering with countless minnows. In the spring great pickerel came up, too, from the deep waters, miles away, to spawn and, sometimes, to be speared. From either side of the creek the ground ascended somewhat, and on one bank stood a little house. It was a house pretentious for the time, since it was framed and boarded instead of being made of logs, but it contained only three rooms: one, the general living-room with the brick fireplace on one side, and the others, smaller, for sleeping apartments. So close to the edge of the forest was the house that the sweep of the wind through the tree-tops made constant music, and the odd, squalling bark of the black squirrel, the chatter of the red one, the drumming of the ruffed grouse, the pipe of the quail and the morning gobble of the wild turkey were familiar sounds. There were deer and bear in the depths of the green ocean, and an occasional wolverine. Sometimes at night a red fox would circle about the clearing and bark querulously, the cry contrasting oddly with the notes of whippoorwills and the calls of loons. The trees were largely oak and beech and ash and birch, and in the spring there were great splashes of white where the Juneberry trees had burst into bloom. In summer there was a dense greenness everywhere, and in autumn a great blaze of scarlet and yellow leaves.

There was an outlined flower garden in front of the house, made in virgin soil, and with the stumps of trees, close-hewn, still showing above the surface. Beside the door were what they called "bouncing Betties" and "old hen and chickens," and on each side of a

short pathway, that led to what was as yet little more than a trail through the wood, were bunches of larkspur and phlox and old-fashioned pinks and asters, and there were a few tall hollyhocks and sunflowers standing about as sentinels. The wild flowers all about were so close to these that all their perfumes blended, and the phlox and pinks could see their own cousins but a few feet away. The short path ran through a clump of bushes but a few yards from the creek. In these bushes song-sparrows and "chippy-birds" built their nests.

In the doorway of the little house by the forests edge stood, one afternoon in summer, a young man. He was what might perhaps be termed an exceedingly young man, as his sixth birthday was but lately attained, and his stature and general appearance did not contradict his age. His apparel was not, strictly speaking, in keeping with the glory of the general scene. His hat had been originally of the quality known as "chip," but the rim was gone, and what remained had an air of abandon about it. His clothing consisted of two garments, a striped, hickory shirt and trousers of blue drilling. The trousers were supported by suspenders, home-made, of the same material. Sometimes he wore but one. It saved trouble. He was barefooted. He stood with a hand in each pocket, his short legs rather wide apart, and looked out upon the landscape. His air was that of a large landed proprietor, one, for instance, who owned the earth.

This young man under consideration had not been in society to any great extent, and of one world had seen very little. Of another he knew a great deal, for his age. With people of the sort who live in towns he was unacquainted, but with nature's people he was on closer terms. He had a great friend and crony in a person who had been a teacher, and who had come to this frontier life from a broader field. This person was his mother. With his father he was also on a relationship of familiarity, but the father was, necessarily, out with his axe most of the time, and so it came that the young man and his mother were more literally growing up together with the country. To her he went with such problems as his great mind failed to solve, and he had come to have a very good opinion of her indeed. Not that she was as wise as he in many things; certainly not. She did not know how the new woodchuck hole was progressing, nor where

the coon tracks were thickest along the creek, nor where the woodpecker was nesting; but she was excessively learned, nevertheless, and could be relied upon in an emergency. He approved of her, decidedly. Besides, he remembered her course on one occasion when he was in a great strait. He was but three years old then, but he remembered all about it. It was, in fact, this occurrence which had given him his hobby.

The young man had a specialty. He had several specialties, but to one yielded all the rest. He had an eye to chipmunks, and had made most inefficient traps for them and hoped some day to catch one, but they were nothing to speak of. As for the minnows in the creek, had he not caught one with a dipper once, and had he not almost hit a big pickerel with a stone? He knew where the liverwort and anemones grew most thickly in the spring and had gathered fragrant bunches of them daily, and he knew, too, of a hollow where there had been a snowy sheet of winter-green blossoms earlier, and where there would soon be an abundance of red berries such as his mother liked. At beech-nut gathering, in the season, he admitted no superior. As for the habits of the yellow-birds, particularly at the season when they were feeding upon thistle-seed and made a golden cloud amid the white one as they drifted with the down, well, he was the only one who really knew anything about it! Who but he could take the odd-shaped pod of the wild fleur-de-lis, the common flag, and, winding it up in the flag's own long, narrow leaf, holding one end, and throwing the pod sling-wise, produce a sound through the air like that of the swoop of the night-hawk? And who better than he could pluck lobelia, and smartweed, and dig wild turnips and bring all for his mother to dry for possible use, should, he or his father or she catch cold or be ill in any way? Hopes for the future had he, too. Sometimes a deer had come in great leaps across the clearing, and once a bear had invaded the hog-pen. The young man had an idea that as soon as he became a little taller and could take down the heavy gun, an old "United States yager" with a big bore, bloodshed would follow in great quantities. He had persuaded his father to let him aim the piece once or twice, and had confidence that if he could get a fair shot at any animal, that animal would die. Were it a deer, he had concluded he would aim from a great stump a few feet distant from the house. If a bear came, he

would shut the door and raise the window, not too far, and blaze away from there. But in none of all these things, either present exploits or imaginings for the future, was his interest most entangled. His specialty was Snakes.

Not intended by nature for a naturalist was this youthful individual whose specialty was snakes. Very much enamored was he of most of nature's products, but not at all of the family *ophidia*. Snakes were his specialty simply because he did not approve of them. All dated back to the affair of three years before. Snakes were abundant in the wood, but were not of many kinds. There were garter-snakes, dreaded of the little frogs, but timid of most things; there was a small snake of wonderful swiftness and as green as the grass into which it darted; there were the water pilots, sunning themselves in coils upon the driftwood in the water, swart of color, thick of form and offensive of aspect; there were the milk-snakes, yellowish gray, with wonderful banded sides and with checker-board designs in black upon their yellow bellies. Sometimes a pan of milk from the solitary cow, set for its cream in the dug-out cellar beneath the house, would be found with its yellow surface marred and with a white puddling about the floor, and then the milk remaining would be thrown away and there would be a washing and scalding of the pan, because the thief was known. There were, in the lowlands, the massasaugas; short, sluggish rattle-snakes, venomous but cowardly, and, finally, there were the black-snakes ranging everywhere, for no respecter of locality is *bascanion constrictor* when in pursuit of prey. Largest of all the snakes of the region, the only constrictor among them, at home in the lowlands, on the hill-sides or in the tree-tops, the black-snake was the dread of all small creatures of the wood. There was a story of how one of them had dropped upon a hunter, coiled himself about his neck and strangled him.

This young man of six remembered how, one day, three years back, before he had assumed trousers or become familiar with all the affairs of the world, he was alone in the house, his mother having gone into the little garden. He remembered how, looking up, he saw, lifted above the doorsill, a head with beady, glittering eyes, and how, after a moment's survey, the head was lifted higher and there came gliding over the floor toward him a black monster, with darting tongue and long, curved body and evident fierce intent. He

remembered how he leaped for a high stool which served him at the table, how he clambered to its top and there set up a mighty yell for succor—for he had great lungs. He could, by shutting his eyes, even now, see his mother as she came running from the garden, see her look of terror as she caught sight of the circling thing upon the floor, and then the look of desperation as the mother instinct rose superior and she dashed into the room, seized the great iron shovel that stood before the fireplace, and began dealing reckless blows at the hissing serpent. A big black-snake is not a pleasant customer, but neither—for a black-snake—is a frenzied mother with an iron fire shovel in her hand, and this particular snake turned tail, a great deal of it, by the way, since it extended to its head, and disappeared over the doorsill in a cataract of black and into the wood again.

From that hour the individual so beleaguered on a stool had been no friend of snakes. Talk about vendettas! No Sicilian feud was ever bitterer or more relentlessly pursued, as the boy increased in size and confidence. Scores of garter-snakes had been his victims; once even a milk-snake had yielded up the ghost, and once—a great day that—he had seen a black-snake in the open and had assailed it valorously with stones hurled from a distance. When it came toward him he retreated, but did not abandon the bombardment, and finally drove it into a cover of deep bushes. Come to close quarters with a black-snake he had never done, for a double reason: firstly, because stones did almost as well as a club, and, secondly, because his father, fearing for him, had threatened him with punishment if he essayed such combat, and the firm old rule of "spare the rod and spoil the child" was adhered to literally by the father and indorsed by the mother with hesitation. And, growing close to the house, were slender sprouts of birch and willow, each of which leaned forward as if to say, "I am just the thing to lick a boy with," and such a sprout as one of these, especially the willow, does, under proper conditions, so embrace one's shoulders and curl about one's legs and make itself familiar. But the feud was on, and as a permanency, though, on this particular afternoon, the young man, as he stood there in the doorway, had no thought of snakes. Something else this summer was attracting much of his attention. He had a family on his hands.

CHAPTER III.

BOY, BIRD AND SNAKE.

The young man's family was not large, but a part of it was young, and he felt the responsibility. The song-sparrow is the very light and gladness of the woods and fields. There are rarer singers, and birds of more brilliant plumage, but he is the constant quantity. His notes may not rival those mellow, brief ones of the blue-birds in early spring, so sweet in their quaint inflection, which suggest all hope, and are so striking because heard while snow may be yet upon the ground; he may not have the wild abandon of the bobolink with that tinkle and gurgle and thrill; he is no pretentious songster, like a score of other birds, but he is a great part of the soul of early summer, for he is telling, morning, noon and night, how good the world is, how he approves of the sunshine, and how everything is all right! And so the young man approved much of the song-sparrow, and was interested in the movements of all his kind.

One day in May, the boy had noted something in the clump of bushes, between the house and creek, which very much resembled a small bird's-nest, and had at once investigated. He found it, the nest of the song-sparrow, and, when the little gray guardian had fluttered away, he noted the four tiny eggs, and their mottled beauty. He did not touch them, for he had been well trained as to what should be the relations between human beings and all singing birds, but his interest in the progress of that essay in summer housekeeping became at once absorbing. He announced in the house that he intended to watch over the nest all summer, and keep off the hawks, and that when the little eggs were hatched, and the little birds were grown, maybe he would try to tame one. He was encouraged in the idea. It is good to teach a boy to be protective. And when the birds were hatched, his interest deepened.

He was half inclined, as he stood in the doorway on this particular day, to visit the dense bushes and note the condition of affairs in that vicinity, but, buoyant as he was, there was something in the

outlook which detained him. There was such a yellow glory to the afternoon, and so many things were happening.

Balanced above the phlox, a humming-bird, green-backed and glittering, hung and tasted for a moment, then flashed to where the larkspurs were. A red-headed woodpecker swung downward on the wing to the white-brown side of a dead elm, sounded a brief tattoo upon the surface, then dived at a passing insect. A phoebe bird was singing somewhere. A red squirrel sat perched squarely on the drooping limb of a hickory tree and chewed into a plucked nut, so green that the kernel was not formed, then dropped it to the ground, and announced in a chatter that he was a person of importance. Great yellow butterflies, with black markings upon their wings, floated lazily here and there, and at last settled in a magnificent cluster upon a moist spot in a mucky place where something pleased their fancy, and where they fed and fluttered tremulously. There were myriads of wild bees, and a pleasant droning filled the air, while from all about came the general soft clamor of the forest, made up of many sounds.

The boy was satisfied with the prospect. Suddenly he started. There was a call which was not of peacefulness. He knew the cry. He had heard it when some bird of prey had seized a smaller one. It was the call of the sparrow now, and it came from his clump of bushes. His family was in danger. A hawk, perhaps, but he would have seen such a foe in its descent. It might be a cat-bird or a weasel?

With a rush, the boy was across the garden, and as he ran he snatched up what was for a person of such inches an ideal club, a cut of hickory, perhaps two feet in length, not over an inch in thickness, but tough and heavy enough for a knight errant of his years. He broke through the slight herbage about the place where the bushes grew thickest, and, getting into an open space, had a fair view of the particular shrub wherein were the bird's-nest and his birdlings. He stopped short and looked, then ran back a little, then looked again, and straightway there rose from his throat a scream which, though greater in volume, was almost in its character like that other wild cry of the two sparrows who were fluttering pitifully and desperately about their nest, tempting their own death each