The mellow light of the October sun fell full upon the porch of the stately old Grayman house, and the long shadows of the Lombardy poplars pointed to the two silvery haired women who sat there placidly knitting.

The mansion dated back to colonial times. That it had been erected before public sentiment was fully settled in regard to the proper site of the village might be inferred from its lonely position on the banks of the river which flowed through the little town a mile away. The funereal poplars, winter-killed and time-beaten now in their tops, had been in their prime half a century ago, yet they were young when compared to the house before which they stood sentinel. From the small-paned windows of this dwelling Graymans whose tombstones where long sunken and rusted with patient moss had seen British vessels sailing up the river with warlike intent, and on the porch where the women sat knitting peacefully, Captain Maynard Grayman had stood to review his little company of volunteers before leading them against the redcoats, and had spoken to them in fiery words of the patriots whose blood had but a week before been shed at Lexington. The place had still the air of pre-Revolutionary dignity and self-respect.

As the poplars had steadily cast their sombre shadows upon the Graymans, father and son and son’s son, as generation after generation they lived and died in the old mansion, so had the Southers no less constantly remained the faithful servants of the family. They had seen the greatness of the masters wane sadly from its original splendors, the family pride alone of all the pristine glories remaining unimpaired; they had striven loyally against the fate which trenched upon the wealth and power of the house; and they had seen money waste, reputation fade, until now even the name was on the verge of extinction, and the family reduced to a bed-ridden old man querulously dwelling in futile dreams of vanished importance and the lovely and lonely daughter who wore out her life beside him.

As the Graymans diminished, the Southers, perhaps from the very energy with which they strove to aid the fallen fortunes of their masters, had waxed continually. The change which keeps from stagnation republican society, abasing the lofty and exalting the lowly, could not have had better illustration than in the two families. It was from no necessity that old Sarah was still the servant of the house; a servant, in truth, with small wage, and one who secretly helped out the broken revenues of her master. Dollar for dollar, she could have out-counted the entire property of her employers; and might have lived where and as she pleased, had she been minded to have servants of her own. In old Sarah’s veins, however, flowed the faithful Souther blood, transmitted

by generations of traditionary adherents of the Grayman family; and neither the persuasions of her children, who felt the quickening influence of the new order of things, nor the amount of her snug account in the village savings bank, could tempt the steadfast creature from her allegiance. When long ago she had married her cousin, an inoffensive, meek man, dead now a quarter of a century, she had made it a condition that she should not abandon her service; and her position in the Grayman mansion, like her name, had remained practically unchanged by matrimony.

She was a not uncomely figure as she sat in the October sunlight knitting steadily, her hair abundant although silvery, and her figure still alert and erect. From her dark print gown to the tips of her snowy cap-strings she was spotlessly neat, while an air of mingled energy and placidity imparted a certain piquancy to her bearing. Her active fingers plied the bright needles with the deftness of long familiarity, and from time to time her quick glance swept in unconscious inspection over the row of shining tin pans ranged along the porch wall, over the beehives in their shed not far away, robbed now of their honey, over the smooth-flowing river beyond, and over her sister who knitted beside her. She had the air of one accustomed to responsibility and used to watching sharply whatever went on about her. She bestowed now and then a brief look upon the yellow cat asleep at her feet with his paws doubled under him, and one instinctively felt that were he guilty of any derelictions in relation to the dairy, her sharp eye would have detected it in some tell-tale curl of his whiskers. She scanned with a passing regard of combined suspicion and investigation the ruddy line of tomatoes gaining their last touch of red ripeness on the outside of the window-ledge, her expression embodying some vague disapproval of any fruit of which the cultivation was so manifestly an innovation on good old customs. In every movement she displayed a repressed energy contrasting markedly with the manner of the quiet knitter beside her in that strange fashion so often to be found in children of the same parents.

The second woman was little more than a vain shadow from which whatever substance it had ever possessed had long since departed. Hannah West was one of those ciphers to which somebody else is always the significant figure. In her youth she had been the shadow of her sister, and when her husband departed this life, she had merely returned to her first allegiance in becoming the shadow of Sarah Souther once more. She was a tiny, faded creature, who came from her home in the village to visit her sister upon every possible occasion, much as a pious devotee might make a pilgrimage to a shrine. She believed so strongly and so absolutely in Sarah that the belief absorbed all the energy of her nature and left her without even the power of having an especial interest in anything else. What Sarah Souther did, what she thought, what she said, what were the fortunes and what the opinions of her children, with such variations as could be rung on these themes, formed the subject of Mrs. West’s conversation, as well as of such transient and vague mental processes as served her in place of thought. The afternoons which she passed in aimless, placid gossip with her sister were the only bits of light and color in her monotonous existence, to be dwelt upon in memory with joy as they were looked forward to with delight.

“I d’ know,” Hannah remarked, after an unusually long interval of silence this afternoon, “what’s set me thinkin’ so much ’bout George and Miss Edith as I hev’ lately. Seems ef things took hold o’ me more the older I get.”

A new look of intelligence and alertness came into Sarah’s face. She knit out the last stitches upon her needle, and looked down over the river, where a little sail-boat was trying to beat up to the village with a breeze so light as to seem the mere ghost of a wind. The story of the hapless loves of her son and Edith Grayman was sure to be touched upon some time in the course of every afternoon when she and Hannah sat together, and she was conscious of having to-day a fresh item to add to the history.

“I had a letter from George yesterday,” she said, approaching her news indirectly that the pleasure of telling it might last the longer.

“Did you?” asked Hannah, almost with animation. “I want to know.”

“Yes,” Sarah answered, a softer look coming into her bright gray eyes. “Yes, and a good letter it was.”

“George was always a master hand at writin’,” Hannah responded. “He is a regular mother’s son. He would n’t tell a lie to save his right hand.”

“No,” Sarah responded, understanding perfectly that this apparently irrelevant allusion to the veracity of her son had a direct bearing upon the difficulties which had beset his wooing; “when Mr. Grayman asked him if he had been makin’ love to Miss Edith, he never flinched a mite. He spoke up like a man. There never was a Souther yet that I ever heard of that ’u’d lie to save himself.”

She laid her knitting down upon her lap and fixed upon the little boat a regard which seemed one of the closest attention, yet which saw not the white sloop or the dingy sail with its irregular patch of brown. Some tender memory touched the eternally young motherhood in her aged bosom, and some vision of her absent son shut out from her sense the view of the realities before her.

“He would n’t ’a’ been his mother’s son if he had ’a’ lied,” Hannah remarked, with a sincerity so evident that it took from the words all suspicion of flattery.

“Or his father’s either,” Sarah said. “I never set out that Phineas had much go to him, but he was a good man, and he was as true as steel.”

“Yes,” her sister assented, as she would have assented to any proposition laid down by Mrs. Souther, “yes, he was that.”

They sat for a moment in silence. Sarah resumed her knitting, and once more became conscious of the lagging sloop.

“That’s likely Ben Hatherway’s boat,” she remarked. “If he don’t get on faster, he’ll get caught in the turn of the tide and carried out again.”

Hannah glanced toward the boat in a perfunctory way, but she was too deeply interested in the theme upon which the talk had touched to let it drop, and her mind was hardly facile enough to change so quickly from one subject to another.

“What did George say?” she asked. “You said it was a good letter.”

“Yes,” the mother answered, “it was a regular good letter, if I do say it that had n’t ought. He’s comin’ home.”

“Comin’ home?” echoed Hannah, in a twitter of excitement. “I want to know! Comin’ home himself?”

“I dunno what you mean by comin’ home himself,” Sarah replied, with a mild facetiousness born of her joy at the news the letter had brought; “but ’t ain’t at all likely he’ll come home nobody else. He’s comin’, ’t any rate. It’ll be curious to see how him and Miss Edith ’ll act. It’ll be ten years since they said good-by to one another, and ten years is considerable of a spell.”

“Happen he’ll be changed,” Hannah observed. “Ten years does most usually change folks more or less.”

“Happen,” Sarah responded, in a graver and lower tone, “he’ll find her changed.”

As if to give opportunity for the testing of the truth of this remark, the slight figure of Edith Grayman at that moment appeared at the head of the steep and crooked stairway which led from the chambers of the old house into the kitchen close by the porch door. She was a woman whose face had lost the first freshness of youth, although her summers counted but twenty-seven. Perhaps it was that the winters of her life had been so much the longer seasons. There was in her countenance that expression of mild melancholy which is the heritage from generations of ancestors who have sadly watched the wasting of race and fortune, and the even more bitter decay of the old order of things to which they belong. She was slender and graceful in shape, with a stately and gracious carriage, and the air of the patrician possibly a faint shade too marked in her every motion.

As she came slowly down the time-stained stairway, her fair hair twisted high upon her shapely head, her lips slightly pressed together, and her violet eyes pensive and introspective, Edith might have passed for the ghost of the ancestress whose

rejuvenated gown of pale blue camlet she wore.

The long shadows of the lugubrious Lombardy poplars had already begun to stretch out in far-reaching lines, as if laying dusky fingers on the aged mansion, and the sun shone across the river with a light reddened by the autumn hazes. The knitters, as they turned at the sound of Edith's footfall, shone in a sort of softened glory, and into this they saw her descend as she came down the winding stair.

"Father is asleep," Miss Grayman said, stepping into the porch with a light tread. "I am going down to the shore for a breath of air before the night mist rises. You will hear father's bell if he wakes."

She moved slowly down the path which led toward the river, and the regards of the two old women followed her as she went.

"She is a born lady," Sarah said, not without a certain pride as of proprietorship.

"She is that," Hannah acquiesced. "Does she know he's comin'?"

"I just ain't had the sconce to tell her," was the response. "Sometimes 't seems just as though I'd ought to tell her, and then agen 't seems if 't would n't do no kind or sort of good. Two or three times she's sort of looked at me 's if she had an idea something was up, but even then I could n't bring it out."

"When 's he comin'?"

"Any day now. He was in Boston when he wrote, and he's likely to be on the boat 'most any day."

Hannah laid down her knitting for a moment in the breathless excitement of this announcement. The romance of young George Souther and Edith Grayman had thrilled her as nothing in her own experience could have done, so much more real and so much more important were these young people to her mind than was her own personality. For ten years the tale, brief and simple though it was, had for her been the most exciting of romances, and the possibility of the renewal of the broken relations between the lovers appealed to her every sense.

The story of the ill-starred loves of the young couple was really not much, although the two gossips knitting in the sun had spun its length over many a summer's afternoon. Young, lovely, and lonely, Edith Grayman had responded to the love of the manly, handsome son of her nurse as unconsciously and as fervently as if the democratic theories upon which this nation is founded had been for her eternal verities. She had been as little aware of what was happening as is the flower which opens its chalice to the sun, and the shock of discovery when he dared to speak his passion was as great

as if she had not felt the love she scorned. Indeed, it is probable that the sudden perception of her own feelings aroused her to a sense of the need she had to be determined, if she hoped to hold her own against her lover's pleading. She was beset within and without, and had need of all her strength not to yield.

"She gave in herself ten years ago," Sarah commented, following the train of thought which was in the mind of each of the sisters as they watched Edith's graceful figure disappear behind a thicket of hazel bushes, turning russet with the advance of autumn. "She stood out till that night George was upset in that sail-boat of his and we thought he was never comin' to. It makes me kind o' creepy down my back now to recollect the screech she give when she see him brought in; an' mercy knows I felt enough like screechin' myself, if it had n't 'a' been for knowin' that if I did n't get the hot blankets, there wa'n't nobody to do it. She could n't deny that she was in love with him after that."

"But she sent him off," interposed Hannah, in the tone of one repeating an objection which persistently refused to be explained to her satisfaction.

"Yes," Sarah returned; "that's what you always say, when you know as well 's I do that that was to please her father; and there he lies bed-rid to-day just as he did then, and just as sot in his way as ever he was."

The pair sighed in concert and shook their gray heads. Of the real significance of the romance which lay so near them they were almost as completely ignorant as was the great yellow cat, who opened his eyes leisurely as Hannah let fall her ball of yarn, and then, considering that upon the whole the temptation to chase it was not worth yielding to, closed the lids over the topaz globes again with luxurious slowness. Themselves part of the battle between the old order and the new, the good creatures were hardly aware that such a struggle was being waged.

"She said," Sarah murmured, bringing forward another scrap of the story, "that she never 'd marry him 's long 's her father objected, and if I don't know that when once Leonard Grayman 's sot his mind on a thing to that thing he 'll stick till the crack o' doom, then I don't know nothin' about him; that's all. She won't go back on her word, and he won't let her off, and that's just the whole of it."

"No," Hannah agreed, sniffing sympathetically, "they won't neither of 'em change their minds; that you may depend upon."

"He'd object if he was in his coffin, I do believe," Sarah continued, with a curious mixture of pride in the family and of personal resentment. "The Graymans are always awful set."

"George must be considerable rich," Hannah observed, in a tone not without a note of

reverence; “he’s sent you a power o’ money, first and last, ain’t he?”

“Considerable,” the other replied, with conscious elation. “I never used none of it. He kept sendin’ till I told him it wa’n’t no manner o’ mortal use; the family would n’t let me use it for them, and I had more ’n I knew what to do with anyway. I’ve got more ’n ’nough to bury me decenter ’n most folks.”

“Yes, I s’pose y’ have,” Hannah assented.

The knitters sat silent a little time, perhaps reflecting upon the thoughts which the mention of the last rites for the dead called up in their minds. The shadows were growing longer very fast now, and already the afternoon had grown cooler.

Suddenly a step sounded on the graveled walk, and a firmly built, handsome man of thirty-two or three came around the house and neared the porch where the old women sat.

“George!” cried old Sarah, so suddenly that the cat sprang up, startled from his dreams of ancestral mice. “Where on earth did you come from?”

“I want to know!” Hannah exclaimed, rather irrelevantly, in her excitement dropping a stitch in her knitting.

She was instantly aware of the misfortune, however, and while the mother and son exchanged greetings after their ten years’ separation, Hannah occupied herself in endeavors to pick up the loop of blue yarn which her purblind eyes could scarcely see in the dimming light. When the stitch had been secured, she proffered her own welcome in sober fashion, being, in truth, somewhat overcome by this stalwart and bearded man whom she remembered as a stripling. The two women twittered about the robust newcomer, who took his seat upon the porch steps, pouring out each in her way a flood of questions or exclamations to which he could hardly be expected to pay very close attention.

After a separation of ten years the greetings were naturally warm, but the Southers were not a folk given to demonstrativeness, and it was not to the surprise of Mrs. Souther that before many minutes had passed her son said abruptly:—

“Where is she?”

“There, there,” his mother said, in a tone in which were oddly mingled pride, remonstrance, and fondness, “ain’t you got over that yet?”

“No,” he responded briefly, but laying his hand fondly on that of his mother. “Where is she?”

“Like as not she won’t see you,” his mother ventured.

“She sent for me.”

The two women stared at him in amazement.

“Sent for you?” they echoed in unison, their voices raised in pitch.

“Yes,” he said, rising and throwing back his strong shoulders in a gesture his mother remembered well. “I don’t know why I should n’t tell you, mother. She said she had been proud as long as she could bear it.”

The situation was too overwhelmingly surprising for the women to grasp it at once. Their knitting lay neglected in their laps while they tried to take in the full meaning of this wonderful thing.

“It is n’t her pride,” old Sarah said softly. “’T ’s his; but she would n’t say nothin’ against her father if she was to be killed for it.”

“Is she in the house?” he asked.

“No; she ’s down to the shore,” his mother answered, with a gasp.

At that moment sounded from the house the tinkle of a bell. The two women started like guilty things surprised.

“Oh, my good gracious!” ejaculated Hannah under her breath.

“What is that?” demanded George.

“That’s his bell,” Mrs. Souther answered. “He wants me. You need n’t mind.”

“But he must have heard—” began Hannah breathlessly. Then she stopped abruptly.

“Do you think he heard me?” George asked.

“Oh, he ’d wake up about this time anyway,” his mother said. “Besides,” she added, with a novel note of rebellion in her voice, “what if he did? You have a right to come to see me, I should hope.”

Again the bell tinkled. Old Sarah turned to go into the house.

“You’ll find her down to the shore,” she repeated.

He turned away at her word, and with long, rapid strides took the path which Miss Edith had taken earlier. The mother paused to look at him from the threshold. Hannah knitted on with a feverish haste and a frightened countenance. For a third time the bell called, now more imperatively, and Sarah mounted the crooked stairway followed by the frightened gaze of her sister.

In the cool and shaded chamber into which Sarah went, a chamber fitted with high-shouldered old mahogany furniture, the youngest piece of which had known the grandfathers of the withered old man who lay in the carved bed, the air seemed to her electric with dreadful possibilities. Mr. Grayman was sitting up in bed, his scant white locks elfishly disheveled about the pale parchment of his face, his eyes unnaturally bright.

“Where have you been?” he demanded, with fierce querulousness. “Why did n’t you come when I rang?”

She did not at first reply, but busied herself with the medicine which it was time for him to take.

“Whose voice did I hear?” the old man demanded, as soon as he had swallowed the teaspoonful of liquid she brought him.

“Hannah is here,” she answered briefly.

“But I heard a man’s voice,” he continued, his excitement steadily mounting. “I know who it was! I know who it was!”

“Lie down,” his nurse said sternly. “You know the doctor said your heart would n’t stand excitement.”

“It was George!” he exclaimed shrilly. “He’s an impudent—” A fit of gasping choked him, but he struggled fiercely to go on. “If she speaks to him, if she looks at him even, I’ll curse her! I’ll curse her! I’ll come back from my grave to—”

A convulsive gasping ended the sentence. He tore at his throat, at his breast, he struggled dreadfully. Old Sarah supported him in her arms, and tried to aid him, but nothing could save him from the effect of that paroxysm. With one tremendous final effort, the old man threw back his head, drew in his breath with a frightful gasp, then forced it out again in the attempt to utter a last malediction.

“Curse—” The shrill word rang through the chamber, but it was followed by no other. A strong, wrinkled hand, a hand that for a lifetime had worked faithfully for him and his, was pressed over his mouth. He choked, gasped, and then the male line of the

Grayman family was extinct.

In the meantime Hannah had been sitting on the porch, knitting like an automaton, and staring at the yellow cat with eyes full of dazed terror. She heard the disturbance in the chamber above, but it came to her very faintly until that last shrill word rang down the ancient stairway. Then she dropped her knitting in complete consternation.

“Oh, goodness!” she said aloud. “Oh, goodness gracious me!”

She was swept away completely by the sudden turmoil which had come to trouble the peaceful afternoon. With the leveling tendencies of modern days Hannah had become in a way familiar, as she had for a time lived at a distance in a town of some size, and of late years in the village, where the unruffled existence of the old Grayman place might almost seem as remote as the life of another century. But Hannah never made any application of modern principles to “the family.” The Graymans were an exception to any rules of social equality or democratic tendency. The presumption of her nephew in raising his eyes to Miss Edith had always been all but incredible to the simple old soul; and to understand that a lady of the Grayman stock could for a moment have entertained feelings warmer than those of patronage for a Souther was utterly beyond Hannah’s power. She had heard George say that Miss Edith had sent for him; but she had understood it no more than she would have understood a vision of the Apocalypse. The slow steps by which the girl had come to be in revolt against the family traditions, to be ready to abandon her heart-breaking resolutions, and to summon her lover, could have been made credible to old Hannah only on the theory of madness. She sat there in the silence which had followed that shrill cry from the chamber of death, dazed and half cowering, unable to think or to move.

At last she saw George Souther returning alone by the river-path. The brightness was gone from his face, and his lips were contracted sternly.

“She ’s sent him away again,” Hannah West said within herself. “She had to.”

The universe seemed to her to be righting itself again. Some monstrous aberration might for a moment have come upon Miss Grayman, but the stars in their courses were not more steadfast than the principles of the blood. Hannah breathed more freely at the sight of her nephew’s drawn face. She wished him no ill, but she could not regard this desire of his as not unlike that of a madman who would pluck the moon from the sky. She instinctively accepted his evident failure as a proof that sanity still existed in the world, and that the moral foundations of society were still undestroyed.

“Where is mother?” George asked abruptly, as he came upon the porch.

“She ain’t come down yet,” Hannah answered, her thin hands going on with the knitting like a machine.

“I don’t think I’ll wait,” he said simply. “She’ll understand.”

But at that instant the figure of his mother appeared on the stairway. She came out upon the porch, bent, gray, cowering. As her eye caught the face of her son, however, she straightened herself and a new look came into her eyes.

“Where is Miss Edith?” she asked abruptly.

George came to her and took her hand gently.

“Mother,” he said, “you must n’t blame her. She can’t break her father’s heart. She has sent me away again.”

His mother looked at him quietly, but with eyes that shone wildly.

“You need n’t go,” she announced calmly. “He is dead.”

“Dead!” echoed her son.

“Dead!” cried Hannah shrilly.

“Yes,” Sarah responded, with increasing calmness. “He had one of his paroxysms. The doctor said he’d go off in one of them. You’d better go to Miss Edith and tell her.”

Hannah rose from her chair as if the feebleness of age had come upon her suddenly.

“The doctor said he must n’t be excited,” she quavered. “Did he know George was here?”

The son, who had half turned away, wheeled back again.

“Was that what killed him?” he demanded.

Old Sarah straightened herself with a supreme effort. The very strain of uttering a falsehood and of the dreadful secret which must darken her soul for the rest of her life gave to her words an added air of sincerity.

“He did n’t know,” she said. “He went off as peaceful as a child.”

Her son waited for nothing more, but once more hastened down the river-path. Hannah stood as if transfixed.

“But, Sarah,” she said, “I heard—”

Sarah looked at her with a wild regard. For a moment was silence.

“No,” she said, “you heard nothing. He did not say it!”

She leaned against the doorpost and looked at her right hand strangely, as if she expected to see blood on it. Then she stood erect again, squaring her shoulders as if to a burden accepted.

“Be still,” she said. “They’re coming.”

Mechanically old Hannah, bowed and bewildered, began to do up her knitting in the fading autumnal afternoon.

“It is growing chilly,” she muttered shiveringly.