

How the moss has spread, how the wall sags down, —
 I saw it built! . . . Why, I think the town
 Is nearer now than it used to be
 When I was a boy. . . What's this I see,
 As I scrape the lichen from the stone?
 What name do I read? Good God, my own!

OUT OF THE QUESTION.

COMEDY.

I.

THE Ponkwasset Hotel stands on the slope of a hill and fronts the irregular mass of Ponkwasset Mountain, on which the galleries and northern windows of the parlor look out. The parlor is furnished with two hair-cloth sofas, two hair-cloth easy-chairs, and cane-seated chairs of 'divers patterns; against one side of the room stands a piano; in the centre is a marble-topped table supporting a state-lamp of kerosene, — a perfume by day, a flame by night, — and near this table sit two young ladies with what they call work in their hands and laps.

Miss Maggie Wallace, with her left wrist curved in the act of rolling up a part of her work, at which she looks down with a very thoughtful air: "I don't think I shall cut it bias, after all, Lilly."

Miss Lilly Roberts, letting her work fall into her lap, in amazement: "Why, Maggie!"

Maggie. "No. Or at least I shan't decide to do so till I've had Leslie's opinion on it. She has *perfect* taste, and she could tell at a glance whether it would do."

Lilly. "I wonder she is n't here, now. The stage must be very late."

Maggie. "I suppose the postmaster at South Herodias waited to finish his supper before he 'changed the mail,' as they call it. I was so in hopes she would come while they were at tea! It will so

disgust her to see them all strung along the piazza and staring their eyes out at the arrivals, when the stage drives up." Miss Wallace dreamily contemplates the horrible picture in a mental vision.

Lilly. "Why don't you go down, too, Maggie? Perhaps she'd find a familiar face a relief."

Maggie, recalled to herself by the wild suggestion: "Thank you, Lilly. I'd rather not be thought so vulgar as *that*, by Leslie Bellingham, if it's quite the same to other friends. Imagine her catching sight of me in that crowd! I should simply wither away."

Lilly, rebelliously: "Well, I don't see why she should feel authorized to overawe people in that manner. What does she do to show her immense superiority?"

Maggie. "Everything! In the first place she's so refined and cultivated, you can't live; and then she takes your breath away, she's so perfectly lovely; and then she kills you dead with her style, and all that. She is n't the least stiff. She's the kindest to other people you ever saw, and the carefulest of their feelings; and she has the grandest principles, and she's *divinely* impulsive! But somehow you feel that if you do anything that's a little vulgar in her presence, you'd better die at once. It was always so at school, and it always will be. Why you would no more dare to do or say anything just a little common, don't you know, with Leslie Bellingham" —

While Miss Wallace has been speaking, a young lady, tall, slender, and with an air of delicate distinction, has appeared at the door of the parlor. She is of that type of beauty which approaches the English, without losing the American fineness and grace; she is fair, and her eyes are rather gray than blue; her nose is slightly aquiline; her expression is serious, but it becomes amused as she listens to Miss Wallace. She wears one of those blonde traveling-costumes, whose fashionableness she somehow subduces into character with herself; over her arm she carries a shawl. She drifts lightly into the room. At the rustling of her dress Miss Wallace looks up, and with a cry of surprise and joy springs from her chair, scattering the contents of her work-box in every direction over the floor, and flings herself into Miss Leslie Bellingham's embrace. Then she starts away from her and gazes rapturously into her face, while they prettily clasp hands and hold each other at arm's length: "Leslie! You heard every word!"

Leslie. "Every syllable, my child. And when you came to my grand principles, I simply said to myself, 'Then listening at keyholes is heroic,' and kept on eavesdropping without a murmur. Had you quite finished?"

Maggie. "Oh, Leslie! You know I never can finish when I get on that subject! It inspires me to greater and greater flights every minute. Where is your mother? Where is Mrs. Murray? Where is the stage? Why, excuse me! This is Miss Roberts. Lilly, it's Leslie Bellingham! Oh, how happy I am to see you together at last! Did n't the stage?" —

Leslie, having bowed to Miss Roberts: "No, Maggie. The stage did n't bring me here. I walked."

Maggie. "Why, Leslie! How perfectly ghastly!"

Leslie. "The stage has done nothing but disgrace itself ever since we left the station. In the first place it pretended to carry ten or twelve people and their baggage, with two horses. Four horses ought n't to drag such a load up these

precipices; and wherever the driver would stop for me, I insisted upon getting out to walk."

Maggie. "How like you, Leslie!"

Leslie. "Yes; I wish the resemblance were not so striking. I'm here in character, Maggie, if you like, but almost nothing else. I've nothing but a hand-bag to bless me with for the next twenty-four hours. Shall you be very much ashamed of me?"

Maggie. "Why, you don't mean to say you've lost your trunks? Horrors!"

Leslie. "No. I mean that I was n't going to let the driver add them to the cruel load he had already, and I made him leave them at the station till to-morrow night."

Maggie, embracing her: "Oh, you dear, good, grand, generous Leslie! How — Why, but Leslie! He'll have just as many people to-morrow night, and your trunks besides theirs!"

Leslie, after reflection following profound sensation: "Very well! Then I shall not be there to see the outrage. I will not have suffering or injustice of any kind inflicted in my presence, if I can help it. That is all." She sinks into one of the arm-chairs with an air of mingled mortification and resolution, and taps the toe of her boot with the point of her umbrella.

Maggie. "But where is your hand-bag?"

Leslie, with mystery: "Oh, he's bringing it."

Maggie. "He?"

Leslie. "A young man, the good genius of the drive. He's bringing it from the foot of the hill; the stage had its final disaster there; and I left him in charge of mamma and aunt Kate, and came on to explore and surprise, and he made me leave the bag with him, too. But that is n't the worst. I shall know what to do with the hand-bag when it gets here, but I shan't know what to do with the young man."

Maggie. "With the young man? Why, Leslie, a young man is worth a thousand hand-bags in a place like this! You don't know what you're talking about, Leslie. A young man" —

Leslie, rising and going toward the window: "My dear, he's out of the question. You may as well make up your mind to that, for you'll see at once that he'll never do. He's going to stop here, and as he's been very kind to us it makes his never doing all the harder to manage. He's a hero, if you like, but if you can imagine it he is n't quite — well, what you've been used to. Don't you see how a person could be everything that was unselfish and obliging, and yet not — not?"

Maggie, eagerly: "Oh, yes!"

Leslie. "Well, he's that. It seems to me that he's been doing something for mamma, or aunt Kate, or me, ever since we left the station. To begin with, he gave up his place inside to one of us, and when he went to get on top, he found all the places taken there; and so he had to sit on the trunks behind — whenever he rode; for he walked most of the way, and helped me over the bad places in the road when I insisted on getting out. You know how aunt Kate is, Maggie, and how many wants she has. Well, there was n't one of them that this young man did n't gratify: he handed her bag up to the driver on top because it crowded her, and handed it down because she could n't do without it; he got her out and put her back so that she could face the front, and then restored her to her place because an old gentleman who had been traveling a long way kept falling asleep on her shoulder; he buttoned her curtain down because she was sure it was going to rain, and rolled it up because it made the air too close; he fetched water for her; he looked every now and then to see if her trunks were all right, and made her more and more ungrateful every minute. Whenever the stage broke down — as it did twice before the present smash-up — he befriended everybody, encouraged old ladies, quieted children, and shamed the other men into trying to be of some use; and if it had n't been for him, I don't see how the stage would ever have got out of its troubles; he always knew just what was the matter and just how to mend it. Is that the window that com-

mands a magnificent prospect of Ponkwasset Mountain — in the advertisement?"

Maggie. "The very window!"

Leslie. "Does it condescend to overlook so common a thing as the road up to the house?"

Maggie. "Of course; but why?"

Leslie, going to the open window, steps through it upon the gallery, whither the other young ladies follow her, and where her voice is heard: "Yes, there they come! But I can't see my young man. Is it possible that he's riding? No, there he is! He was on the other side of the stage. Don't you see him? Why he need n't carry my hand-bag! He certainly might have let that ride. I do wonder what he means by it! Or is it only absent-mindedness? Don't let him see us looking! It would be altogether too silly. Do let's go in!"

Maggie, on their return to the parlor: "What a great pity it is that he won't do! Is he handsome, Leslie? Why won't he do?"

Leslie. "You can tell in a moment, when you've seen him, Maggie. He's perfectly respectful and nice, of course, but he's no more social perspective than — the man in the moon. He's never obtrusive, but he's as free and equal as the Declaration of Independence; and when you did get up some little perspective with him, and tried to let him know, don't you know, that there was such a thing as a vanishing point somewhere, he was sure to do or say something so unconscious that away went your perspective — one simple crush."

Maggie. "How ridiculous!"

Leslie. "Yes. It was funny. But not just in that way. He is n't in the least common or uncouth. Nobody could say that. But he's going to be here two or three weeks, and it's impossible not to be civil, and it's very embarrassing, don't you see?"

Lilly. "Let me comfort you, Miss Bellingham. It will be the simplest thing in the world. We're all on the same level in the Ponkwasset Hotel. The landlord will bring him up during the evening and introduce him. Our table

girls teach school in the winter and are as good as anybody. Mine calls me 'Lilly,' and I'm so small I can't help it. They dress up in the afternoon, and play the piano. The cook 's as affable, when you meet her in society, as can be."

Maggie. "Lilly!"

Leslie, listening to Miss Roberts with whimsical trepidation: "Well, this certainly complicates matters. But I think we shall be able to manage." At a sound of voices in the hall without, Miss Bellingham starts from her chair and runs to the corridor, where she is heard: "Thanks, ever so much. So very good of you to take all this trouble. Come into the parlor, mamma — there 's nobody there but Maggie Wallace and Miss Roberts — and we'll leave our things there till after tea." She reënters the parlor with her mother and her aunt Kate, Mrs. Murray; after whom comes Stephen Blake, with Leslie's bag in his hand, and the wraps of the other ladies over his arm. His dress, which is evidently a prosperous fortuity of the clothing store, takes character from his tall, sinewy shape; a smile of somewhat whimsical patience lights his black eyes and shapes his handsome moustache, as he waits in tranquil self-possession the pleasure of the ladies.

Mrs. Bellingham, a matronly, middle-aged lady of comfortable, not cumbrous bulk, takes Miss Wallace by the hand and kisses her: "My dear child, how pleasant it is to see you so strong again! You're a living testimony to the excellence of the air! How well you look!"

Leslie. "Mamma, — Miss Roberts." Mrs. Bellingham murmurously shakes hands with Miss Roberts, and provisionally quiesces into a corner of the sofa.

Mrs. Murray. "Well, a more fatiguing drive I certainly never knew! How do you do, Maggie?" She kisses Miss Wallace in a casual, uninterested way, and takes Lilly's hand. "Is n't this Miss Roberts? I am Mrs. Murray. I used to know your family — your uncle George, before that dreadful business of his. I know it all came out right; he was n't to blame; but it was a shocking

experience." Mrs. Murray turns from Lilly, and refers herself to the company in general: "It seems as if I should expire on the spot. I feel as if I had been packed away in my own hat-box for a week, and here, just as we arrive, the landlord informs us that he did n't expect us till to-morrow night, and he has n't an empty room in the house!"

Maggie. "No room! To-morrow night! What nonsense! Why it's perfectly frantic! How could he have misunderstood? Why, it seems to me that I've done *nothing* for a week past but tell him you were coming to-night!"

Mrs. Murray. "I have no doubt of it. But it does n't alter the state of the case. You may well tell us to leave our things till *after tea*, Leslie. If they can't make up beds on the sofas and the piano, I don't know where we're going to pass the night." There is a moment of distressful sensation, and then Miss Wallace whispers something eagerly to her friend, Miss Roberts.

Maggie, with a laughing glance at Leslie and her mother, and then going on with her whispering: "Excuse the little confidence!"

Mrs. Bellingham. "Conspiracy, I'm afraid. What are you plotting, Maggie?"

Maggie, finishing her confidence: "Oh, we need n't make a mystery of such a little thing. We're going to offer you one of our rooms."

Mrs. Bellingham. "My dear, you are going to do nothing of the kind. We will never allow it."

Maggie. "Now, Mrs. Bellingham, you break my heart! It's nothing, it's less than nothing. I believe we can make room for all three of you."

Mrs. Murray, promptly: "Let me go with you, young ladies. I'm an old housekeeper, and I can help you plan."

Maggie. "Oh, do, Mrs. Murray. You can tell which room you'd better take, Lilly's or mine. Lilly's is" — Mrs. Murray is about to leave the room with the two young girls, when her eye falls upon Blake, who is still present, with his burden of hand-bags and shawls.

Mrs. Murray. "Oh! I had forgotten

that we were detaining you! Leave the things on the table, please. We are obliged to you." Mrs. Murray speaks with a certain finality of manner and tone which there is no mistaking; Blake stares at her a moment, and then, without replying, lays down the things and turns to leave the room, when Leslie rises with a grand air from her mother's side, on the sofa, and sweeps towards him.

Leslie, very graciously: "Don't let our private afflictions drive you from a public room, Mr." —

Blake. "Blake."

Leslie. "Mr. Blake. This is my mother, Mr. Blake, who wishes to thank you for all your kindness to us."

Mrs. Bellingham. "Yes, indeed, Mr. Blake, we are truly grateful to you."

Leslie, with increasing significance: "And my aunt, Mrs. Murray; and my friend, Miss Wallace; and Miss Roberts." Blake bows to each of the ladies as they are named, and persisting in his movement to quit the room, Leslie impressively offers him her hand. "Must you go? Thank you, ever, ever so much!" She follows him to the door in his withdrawal, and then turns and confronts her aunt with an embattled front of defiance.

Maggie, with an effort breaking the embarrassing silence that ensues: "Come, Lilly. Let us go and take a look at our resources. We'll be back in a moment, Mrs. Bellingham."

Leslie, as her aunt goes out with the two young girls, comes forward abruptly and droops meekly in front of her mother, who remains seated on the sofa: "Well, mamma!"

Mrs. Bellingham, tranquilly contemplating her for a moment: "Well, Leslie!" She pauses, and again silently regards her daughter. "Perhaps you may be said to have overdone it."

Leslie, passionately: "I can't help it, mother. I could n't see him sent away in that insolent manner, I don't care who or what he is. Aunt Kate's tone was outrageous, atrocious, hideous! And after accepting, yes, *demanding* every service he could possibly render, the

whole afternoon! It made me blush for her, and I was n't going to stand it."

Mrs. Bellingham. "If you mean by all that that your poor aunt is a very ungracious and exacting woman, I shall not dispute you. But she's your father's sister; and she's very much older than you. You seem to have forgotten, too, that your mother was present to do any justice that was needed. It's very unfortunate that he should have been able to do us so many favors, but that can't be helped now. It's one of the risks of coming to these out-of-the-way places, that you're so apt to be thrown in with nondescript people that you don't know how to get rid of afterwards. And now that he's been so cordially introduced to us all! Well, I hope you won't have to be crueller in the end, my dear, than your aunt meant to be in the beginning. So far, of course, he has behaved with perfect delicacy; but you must see yourself, Leslie, that even as a mere acquaintance he's quite out of the question; that however kind and thoughtful he's been, and no one could have been more so, he is n't a gentleman."

Leslie, impatiently: "Well, then, mother, I am! And so are you. And I think we are bound to behave like gentlemen at any cost. I did n't mean to ignore you. I did n't consider. I acted as I thought Charley would have done."

Mrs. Bellingham. "Oh, my dear, my dear! Don't you see there's a very important difference? Your brother is a man, and he can act without reference to consequences. But you are a young lady, and you can't be as gentlemanly as you like without being liable to misinterpretation. I shall expect you to behave very discreetly indeed from this time forth. We must consider now how our new friend can be kindly, yet firmly and promptly, dropped."

Leslie. "Oh, it's another of those embarrassments that aunt Kate's always getting me into! I *was* discreet about it till she acted so horribly. You can ask Maggie if I did n't talk in the wisest way about it; like a perfect — owl. I

saw it just as you do, mamma, and I was going to drop him, and so I will, yet; but I could n't see him so ungratefully trampled on. It's *all* her doing! Who wanted to come here to this out-of-the-way place? Why, aunt Kate, — when I was eager to go to Conway! I declare it's too bad! I wish" —

Mrs. Bellingham. "That will do, Leslie."

Leslie. "And now she's gone off with those poor girls to crowd them out of house and home, I suppose. It's a shame! Why did you let her, mamma?"

Mrs. Bellingham. "For the same reason that I let you talk on, my dear, when I've bidden you stop."

Leslie. "Oh, you dear, kind old mamma, you! You're a gentleman, and you always were! I only wish I could be half like you!" She throws her arms round her mother's neck and kisses her. "I know you're right about this matter, but you must n't expect me to acknowledge that aunt Kate is. If you both said exactly the same thing, you would be right and she would be wrong, you'd say it so differently!"

Mrs. Murray, who returns alone with signs of discontent and perplexity, and flings herself into a chair: "Their rooms are mere coops, and I don't see how even two of us are to squeeze into one of them. It's little better than impertinence to offer it to us. I've been down to see the landlord again, and you'll be pleased to know, Marion, that the only vacant room in the house had been engaged by the person to whom we've all just had the honor of an introduction." Leslie makes an impetuous movement, as if she were about to speak, but at a gesture from her mother she restrains herself, and Mrs. Murray continues: "Of course, if he had been a gentleman, in the lowest sense of the word, he would have offered his room to ladies who had none, at once. As long as he could make social capital out of his obtrusive services to us he was very profuse with them, but as soon as it came to a question of real self-sacrifice — to giving up his own ease and comfort for a single night" — The bell

rings for supper, and at the sound Mrs. Bellingham rises.

Mrs. Bellingham. "I think a cup of tea will put a cheerfuller face on our affairs. I don't at all agree with you about Mr. Blake's obligation to give up his room, nor about his services to us this afternoon; I'm sure common justice requires us to acknowledge that he was everything that was kind and thoughtful. Oh, you good child!" — as Miss Wallace appears at the door, — "have you come to show us the way to supper? Are you quite sure you've not gone without tea on our account as well as given up your room?" She puts her arm fondly round the young girl's waist, and presses her cheek against her own breast.

Maggie, with enthusiasm: "Oh, Mrs. Bellingham, you know I would n't ask anything better than to starve on your account. I wish I *had n't* been to tea! I'm afraid that you'll think the room is a very slight offering when you come to see it — it is such a little room; why, when I took Mrs. Murray into it, it seemed all at once as if I saw it through the wrong end of an opera-glass — it did dwindle so!"

Leslie. "Never mind, Maggie; you're only too good, as it is. If your room was an inch bigger, we could n't bear it. I hope you may be without a roof over your head yourself, some day! Can I say anything handsomer than that?" She kisses her friend, and they embrace with rapture. "Don't wait for me, mamma; I'll find the dining-room myself. I'm rather too crumpled even for a houseless wanderer." She opens her bag where it stands on the table. "I am going to make a flying toilet at one of these glasses. Do you think any one will come in, Maggie?"

Maggie. "There is n't the least danger. This is the parlor of the 'transients,' as they call them, — the occasional guests, — and Lilly and I have it mostly to ourselves when there are no transients. The regular boarders stay in the lower parlor. Shan't I help you, Leslie?"

Leslie, rummaging through her bag:

"No, indeed! It's only a question of brush and hair-pins. Do go with mamma!" As the others go out, Leslie finds her brush, and going to one of the mirrors touches the blonde masses of her hair, and then remains a moment, lightly turning her head from side to side to get the effect. She suddenly claps her hand to one ear. "Oh, horrors! That ear-drop's gone again!" She runs to the table, reopens her bag, and searches it in every part, talking rapidly to herself. "Well, really, it seems as if sorrows would never end! To think of that working out a third time! To think of my coming away without getting the clasp fixed! And to think of my not leaving them in my trunk at the station! Oh, dear me, I shall certainly go wild! What *shall* I do? It is n't in the bag at all. It *must* be on the floor." Keeping her hand in helpless incredulity upon the ear from which the jewel is missing, she scrutinizes the matting far and near, with a countenance of acute anguish. Footsteps are heard approaching the door, where they hesitatingly arrest themselves. "Have you come back for me? Oh, I've met with *such* a calamity! I've lost one of my ear-rings. I could cry. Do come and help me mouse for it." There is no response to this invitation, and Leslie, lifting her eyes, in a little dismay confronts the silent intruder. "Mr. Blake!"

Blake. "Excuse me. I expected to find your mother here. I did n't mean to disturb" —

Leslie, haughtily: "There's no disturbance. It's a public room: I had forgotten that. Mamma has gone to tea. I thought it was my friend Miss Wallace. I" — With a flash of indignation: "When you knew it was n't, why did you let me speak to you in that way?"

Blake, with a smile: "I could n't know whom you took me for, and I had n't time to prevent you speaking."

Leslie. "You remained."

Blake, with a touch of resentment tempering his amusement: "I could n't go away after I had come without speaking to you. It was Mrs. Bellingham I

was looking for. I'm sorry not to find her, and I'll go, now."

Leslie, hastily: "Oh, no — I beg your pardon. I did n't mean" —

Blake, advancing toward her, and stooping to pick up something from the floor, near the table: "Is this what you lost? — if I've a right to know that you lost anything."

Leslie. "Oh, my ear-ring! Oh, thanks. How did you see it? I thought I had looked and felt everywhere." A quick color flies over her face as she takes the jewel from the palm of his hand. As she turns to the mirror, and, seizing the tip of her delicate ear between the thumb and forefinger of one hand, hooks the pendant into place with the other, and then gives her head a little shake, the young man lightly sighs. She turns toward him, with the warmth still lingering in her cheeks. "I'm ever so much obliged to you, Mr. Blake. I wish I had your gift of doing all sorts of services — favors — to people. I wish I could find something for you."

Blake. "I wish you could — if it were the key to my room, which I came back in hopes of finding. I've mislaid it somewhere, and I thought I might have put it down with your shawls here on the table." Leslie lifts one of the shawls, and the key drops from it. "That's it. Miss Bellingham, I have a favor to ask: will you give this key to your mother?"

Leslie. "This key?"

Blake. "I have found a place to sleep at a farm-house just down the road, and I want your mother to take my room; I have n't looked into it yet, and I don't know that it's worth taking. But I suppose it's better than no room at all; and I know you have none."

Leslie remains some moments without replying, while she looks absently at him. Then with cold hauteur: "Thanks. It's quite impossible. My mother would never consent."

Blake. "The room will stand empty, then. I meant to give it up from the first, — as soon as I found that you were not provided for, — but I hated to make a display of doing it before all the people

down there in the office. I'll go now and leave the key with the landlord, as I ought to have done, without troubling you. But—I had hardly the chance of doing so after we came here."

Leslie, with enthusiasm: "Oh, Mr. Blake, do you really mean to give us your room after you've been so odiously— Oh, it's too bad; it's too bad! You must n't; no, you shall not."

Blake. "I will leave the key on the table here. Good night. Or—I shall not see you in the morning: perhaps I had better say good-by."

Leslie. "Good-by?— In the morning?"—

Blake. "I've changed my plans, and I'm going away to-morrow. Good-by."

Leslie. "Going— Mamma will be very sorry to— Oh, Mr. Blake, I hope you are not going because— But indeed—I want you to believe"—

Blake, devoutly: "I believe it. Good-by!" He turns away to go, and *Leslie*, standing bewildered and irresolute, lets him leave the room; then she hastens to the door after him, and encounters her mother.

Mrs. Bellingham. "Well, *Leslie*. Are you quite ready? We went to look at *Maggie's* room before going down to tea. It's small, but we shall manage somehow. Come, dear. She's waiting for us at the head of the stairs. Why, *Leslie*!"

Leslie, touching her handkerchief to her eyes: "I was a little overwrought, mamma. I'm tired." After a moment: "Mamma, Mr. Blake"—

Mrs. Bellingham, with a look at her daughter: "I met him in the hall."

Leslie. "Yes, he has been here; and I thought I had lost one of my ear-rings; and of course he found it on the floor the instant he came in. And"—

Mrs. Murray, surging into the room, and going up to the table: "Well, *Marion*, the tea— What key is this? What in the world is *Leslie* crying about?"

Leslie, with supreme disregard of her aunt, and adamant self-control: "Mr. Blake had come"— she hands the key to *Mrs. Bellingham*—"to offer you the

key of his room. He asked me to give it."

Mrs. Bellingham. "The key of his room?"

Leslie. "He offers you his room; he had always meant to offer it."

Mrs. Bellingham, gravely: "Mr. Blake had no right to know that we had no room. It is too great an obli— kindness. We can't accept it, *Leslie*. I hope you told him so, my dear."

Leslie. "Yes, mamma. But he said he was going to lodge at one of the farm-houses in the neighborhood, and the room would be vacant if you did n't take it. I could n't prevent his leaving the key."

Mrs. Bellingham. "That is all very well. But it does n't alter the case, as far as we are concerned. It is very good of Mr. Blake, but after what has occurred, it's simply impossible. We can't take it."

Mrs. Murray. "Occurred? Not take it? Of course we will take it, *Marion*! I certainly am astonished. The man will get a much better bed at the farmer's than he's accustomed to. You talk as if it were some act of self-sacrifice. I've no doubt he's made the most of it. I've no doubt he's given it an effect of heroism—or tried to. But that you should fall in with his vulgar conception of the affair, *Marion*, and *Leslie* should be affected to tears by his magnanimity, is a little too comical. One would think, really, that he had imperiled life and limb on our account. All this sentiment about a room on the third floor! Give the key to me, *Marion*." She possesses herself of it from *Mrs. Bellingham's* passive hand. "*Leslie* will wish to stay with you, so as to be near her young friends. I will occupy this vacant room!"

II.

Under the shelter of some pines near a lonely by-road, in the neighborhood of the Ponkwasset Hotel, lie two tramps asleep. One of them, having made his bed of the pine-boughs, has pillowed his head upon the bundle he carries by day;

the other is stretched, face downward, on the thick brown carpet of pine-needles. The sun, which strikes through the thin screen of the trees upon the bodies of the two men, is high in the heavens. The rattle of wheels is heard from time to time on the remoter highway; the harsh clatter of a kingfisher, poising over the water, comes from the direction of the river near at hand. A squirrel descends the trunk of an oak near the pines under which the men lie, and at sight of them stops, barks harshly, and then, as one of them stirs in his sleep, whisks back into the top of the oak. It is the luxurious tramp on the pine-boughs who stirs, and who alertly opens his eyes and sits up in his bed, as if the noisy rush of the squirrel had startled him from his sleep.

First Tramp, casting a malign glance at the top of the oak: "If I had a fair shot at you with this club, my fine fellow, I'd break you of that trick of waking people before the bell rings in the morning, and I'd give 'em broiled squirrel for breakfast when they did get up." He takes his bundle into his lap, and, tremulously untying it, reveals a motley heap of tatters; from these he searches out a flask, which he holds against the light, shakes at his ear, and inverts upon his lips. "Not a drop; not a square smell, even! I dreamt it." He lies down with a groan, and remains a moment with his head pillowed in his hands. Presently he reaches for his stick, and again rising to a sitting posture strikes his sleeping comrade across the shoulders. "Get up!"

Second Tramp, who speaks with a slight brogue, briskly springs to his feet, and rubs his shoulders: "And what for, my strange bedfellow?"

First Tramp. "For breakfast. What do people generally get up for in the morning?"

Second Tramp. "Upon me soul, I'd as soon have had mine in bed; I've a day of leisure before me. And let me say a word to you, my friend: the next time you see a gentleman dreaming of one of the most elegant repasts in the world, and just waiting for his stew to

cool, don't you intrude upon him with that little stick of yours. I don't care for a stroke or two in sport, but when I think of the meal I've lost, I could find it in me heart to break your head for you, you ugly brute. Have you got anything to eat there in your wardrobe?"

First Tramp. "Not a crumb."

Second Tramp. "Or to drink?"

First Tramp. "Not a drop."

Second Tramp. "Or to smoke?"

First Tramp. "No."

Second Tramp. "Faith, you're nearer a broken head than ever, my friend. Wake a man out of a dream of that sort!"

First Tramp. "I've had enough of this. What do you intend to do?"

Second Tramp. "I'm going to assume the character of an imposter, and pretend at the next farm-house that I have n't had any breakfast, and have n't any money to buy one. It's a bare-faced deceit, I know, but" — looking down at his broken shoes and tattered clothes — "I flatter myself that I dress the part pretty well. To be sure, the women are not as ready to listen as they were once. The tramping-trade is overdone; there's too many in it; the ladies can't believe we're all destitute; it don't stand to reason."

First Tramp. "I'm tired of the whole thing."

Second Tramp. "I don't like it myself. But there's worse things. There's work, for example. By me soul, there's nothing disgusts me like these places where they tell you to go out and hoe potatoes, and your breakfast will be ready in an hour. I never could work with any more pleasure on an empty stomach than a full one. And the poor devils always think they've said something so fine when they tell you that and the joke's so stale! I can tell them I'm not a thing to be got rid of so easy. I'm not the lazy, dirty vagabond I look, at all; I'm the inevitable result of the conflict between labor and capital; I'm the logical consequence of the corruptions in high places. I read it on the bit of newspaper they gave me round my dinner, yesterday; it was cold

beef of a quality that you don't often find in the country."

First Tramp, sullenly: "Well, I'm sick of the whole thing. I'm going out of it."

Second Tramp. "And what'll you do? Are ye going to work?"

First Tramp. "To work? No. To steal."

Second Tramp. "Faith, I don't call that going out of it, then. It's quite in the line of business. You're no bad dab at a hen-roost, now, as I know very well; and for any little thing that a gentleman can shove under his coat, while the lady of the house has her back turned buttering his lunch for him, I don't know the man I'd call master."

First Tramp. "If I could get a man to tell me the time of day by a watch I liked, I'd as lief knock him over as look at him."

Second Tramp. "Oh, if it's highway robbery you mean, partner, I don't follow you."

First Tramp. "What's the difference?"

Second Tramp. "Not much, if you take it one way, but a good deal if you take it another. It's the difference between petty larceny and grand larceny; it's the difference between three months in the House of Correction and three years in the State's Prison, if you're caught; not to mention the risks of the profession."

First Tramp. "I'd take the risks if I saw my chance." He lies down with his arms crossed under his head, and stares up into the pine. His comrade glances at him, and then moves stiffly out from the shelter of the trees, and, shading his eyes with one hand, peers down the road.

Second Tramp. "I did n't know but I might see your chance, partner. You would n't like an old gentleman with a load of potatoes to begin on, would ye? There's one just gone up the cross-road. And yonder goes an umbrella-mender. I'm afraid we shan't take any purses to speak of, in this neighborhood. Whoosh! Wait a bit—here's somebody coming this way." The first tramp is sufficient-

ly interested to sit up. "Faith, here's your chance at last, then, if you're in earnest, my friend; but it stands six feet in its stockings, and it carries a stick as well as a watch. I won't ask a share of the plunder, partner; I've rags enough of me own without wanting to divide your property with the gentleman coming." He goes back and lies down at the foot of one of the trees, while the other, who has risen from his pine-boughs, comes cautiously forward; after a glance at the approaching wayfarer he flings away his cudgel, and, taking a pipe from his pocket, drops into a cringing attitude. The Irishman grins. In another moment Blake appears from under the cover of the woods and advances with long strides, striking with his stick at the stones in the road as he comes on, in an absent-minded fashion.

First Tramp. "I say, mister!" Blake looks up, and his eye falls upon the squalid figure of the tramp; he stops. "Could n't you give a poor fellow a little tobacco for his pipe? A smoke comes good, if you don't happen to know where you're going to get your breakfast."

Second Tramp, coming forward, with his pipe in his hand: "True for you, partner. A little tobacco in the hand is worth a deal of breakfast in the bush." Blake looks from one to the other, and then takes a paper of tobacco from his pocket and gives it to the first tramp, who helps himself and passes it to his comrade; the latter offers to return it, after filling his pipe; Blake declines it with a wave of his hand, and walks on.

Second Tramp, calling after him: "God bless you! May you never want it!"

First Tramp. "Thank you, mister. You're a gentleman!"

Blake. "All right." He goes out of sight under the trees down the road, and then suddenly reappears and walks up to the two tramps, who remain where he left them and are feeling in their pockets for a match. "Did one of you call me a gentleman?"

First Tramp. "Yes, I did, mister. No offense in that, I hope?"

Blake. "No. But why did you do it?"

First Tramp. "Well, you did n't ask us why we did n't go to work; and you did n't say that men who had n't any money to buy breakfast had better not smoke; and you gave us this tobacco. I'll call any man a gentleman that'll do that."

Blake. "Oh, that's a gentleman, is it? All right." He turns to go away, when the second tramp detains him.

Second Tramp. "Does your honor happen to have ever a match about you?" *Blake* takes out his match-case and strikes a light. "God bless your honor. You're a real gentleman."

Blake. "Then this makes me a gentleman past a doubt?"

Second Tramp. "Sure, it does that."

Blake. "I'm glad to have the matter settled." He walks on absently as before, and the tramps stand staring a moment in the direction in which he has gone.

Second Tramp, who goes back to the tree where he has been sitting and stretches himself out with his head on one arm for a quiet smoke. "That's a queer genius. By me soul, I'd like to take the road in *his* company. Sure, I think there is n't the woman alive would be out of cold victuals and old clothes when he put that handsome face of his in at the kitchen windy."

First Tramp, looking down the road: "I wonder if that fellow could have a drop of spirits about him! I say, mister!" calling after *Blake*. "Hello, there, I say!"

Second Tramp. "It's too late, me worthy friend. He'll never hear you; and it's not likely he'd come back to fill your flask for you, if he did. A gentleman of his character'd think twice before he gave a tramp whisky. Tobacco's another thing." He takes out the half-paper of tobacco, and looks at the label on it. "What an extravagant dog! It's the real cut Cavendish; and it smells as nice as it smokes. This luxury is what's destroying the country. 'With the present reckless expenditure in all classes of the population, and the prodigious influx of ignorant and de-

graded foreigners, there must be a constant increase of tramps.' True for you, Mr. Newspaper. 'T would have been an act of benevolence to take his watch from him, partner, and he never could tell how fast he was going to ruin. But you can't always befriend a man six feet high and wiry as a cat." He offers to put the tobacco into his pocket again, when his comrade slouches up, and makes a clutch at it.

First Tramp. "I want that."

Second Tramp. "Why, so ye do!"

First Tramp. "It's mine."

Second Tramp. "I'm keeping it for ye."

First Tramp. "I tell you the man gave it to me."

Second Tramp. "And he would n't take it back from me. Ah, will you, ye brute?" The other seizes the wrist of the hand with which the Irishman holds the tobacco; they wrestle together, when women's voices are heard at some distance down the road. "Whoosh! Ladies coming." The first tramp listens, kneeling. The Irishman springs to his feet and thrusts the paper of tobacco into his pocket, and, coming quickly forward, looks down the road. "Fortune favors the brave, partner! Here comes another opportunity—three of them, faith, and pretty ones at that! Business before pleasure; I'll put off that beating again; it's all the better for keeping. Besides, it's not the thing, quarreling before ladies." He is about to crouch down again at the foot of the tree as before, when his comrade hastily gathers up his bundle, and seizing him by the arm drags him back into the thicket behind the pine-trees. After a moment or two, Miss Bellingham, Miss Wallace, and Miss Roberts come sauntering slowly along the road.

Lilly, delicately sniffing the air: "Fee, fi, fo, fum; I smell the pipe of an Irishman."

Leslie. "Never! I know the flavor of refined tobacco, thanks to a smoking brother. Oh, what a lonely road!"

Lilly. "This loneliness is one of the charms of the Ponkwasset neighborhood. When you're once out of sight of the

hotel and the picnic-grounds you'd think you were a thousand miles away from civilization. Not an empty sardine-box or a torn paper collar anywhere! The scent of tobacco is an unheard-of intrusion."

Maggie, archly: "Perhaps Mr. Blake went this way. Does he smoke, Leslie?"

Leslie, coldly: "How should I know, Maggie? A gentleman would hardly smoke in ladies' company — strange ladies." She sinks down upon a log at the wayside, and gazes slowly about with an air of fastidious criticism that gradually changes to a rapture of admiration. "Well, I certainly think that, take it all in all, I never saw anything more fascinating. It's wonderful! This little nook itself, with that brown carpet of needles under the pines, and that heavy fringe of ferns there, behind those trunks; and then those ghostly birches stretching up and away, yonder — thousands of them! How tall and slim and stylish they are! And how they do march into the distance! I never saw such multitudes; and their lovely paleness makes them look as if one saw them by moonlight. Oh, oh! How perfectly divine! If one could only have their phantom-like procession painted! But Corot himself could n't paint them. Oh, I *must* make some sort of memorandum — I won't have the presumption to call it a sketch." She takes a sketch-book from under her arm, and lays it on her knees, and then with her pencil nervously traces on the air the lines of the distant birches. "Yes; I *must*. I never shall see them so beautiful again! Just jot down a few lines, and wash in the background when I get to the hotel — But girls; you must n't stay! Go on and get the flowers, and I'll be done by the time you're back. I could n't bear to have you overlooking me; I've all the sensitiveness of a great artist. Do go! But don't be gone long." She begins to work at her sketch, without looking at them.

Maggie. "I'm so glad, Leslie. I knew you'd be perfectly fascinated with this spot, and so I did n't tell you about it. I wanted it to *burst* upon you."

Leslie, with a little impatient surprise, as if she had thought they were gone: "Yes, yes; never mind. You did quite right. Don't stay long." She continues to sketch, looking up now and then at the scene before her, but not glancing at her companions, who walk away from her some paces, when Miss Wallace comes back.

Maggie. "What time is it, Leslie? Leslie!"

Leslie, nervously: "Oh! What a start you gave me." Glancing at her watch: "It's nine minutes past ten — I mean ten minutes past nine." Still without looking at her: "Be back soon."

Maggie. "Oh, it is n't far." Again she turns away with Miss Roberts, but before they are quite out of sight Leslie springs to her feet and runs after them.

Leslie. "Oh, girls — girls!"

Maggie, anxiously, starting back toward her: "What? What?"

Leslie, dreamily, as she returns to her place and sits down: "Oh, nothing. I just happened to think of it." She closes her eyes to a narrow line, and looks up at the birches. "There are so many horrid stories in the papers. But of course there can't be any in this out-of-the-way place, so far from the cities."

Maggie. "Any *what*, Leslie?"

Leslie, remotely: "Tramps."

Maggie, scornfully: "There never was such a thing heard of in the whole region."

Leslie. "I thought not." She is again absorbed in study of the birches; and, after a moment of hesitation, the other two retreat down the road once more, lingering a little to look back in admiration of her picturesque devotion to art, and then vanishing under the flickering light and shadow. Leslie works diligently on, humming softly to herself, and pausing now and then to look at the birches, for which object she rises at times, and, gracefully bending from side to side, or stooping forward to make sure of some effect that she has too slightly glimpsed, resumes her seat and begins anew. "No, that won't do!" — vigorously plying her india-rubber on

certain lines of the sketch. "How stupid!" Then beginning to draw again, and throwing back her head for the desired distance on her sketch: "Ah, that's more like! Still, nobody could accuse it of slavish fidelity. Well!" She sings:—

"Through starry palm-roofs on Old Nile
The full-orbed moon looked clear;
The bulbul sang to the crocodile,
'Ah, why that bitter tear?'

"With thy tender breast against the thorn,
Why that society-smile?
The bird was mute. In silent scorn
Slow winked the crocodile."

"How perfectly ridiculous! *Slow winked*" — Miss Bellingham alternately applies pencil and rubber — "*slow winked the croco*—I never shall get that right; it's too bad! — *dile*." While she continues to sketch, and sing *da capo*, the tramps creep stealthily from their covert. Apparently in accordance with some preconcerted plan, the surlier and huger ruffian goes down the road in the direction taken by Leslie's friends, and the Irishman unobserved stations himself at her side and supports himself with both hands resting upon the top of his stick, in an attitude of deferential patience and insinuating gallantry. She ceases singing and looks up.

Second Tramp. "Not to be interrupting you, miss," — Leslie stares at his grinning face in dumb and motionless horror, — "would ye tell a poor traveler the time of day, so that he need n't be eating his breakfast prematurely, if he happens to get any?"

First Tramp, from his station down the road, in a loud, hoarse undertone: "Snatch it out of her belt, you fool! Snatch it! He's coming back. Quick!" Leslie starts to her feet.

Second Tramp. "Ye see, miss, my friend's impatient." Soothingly: "Just let me examine your watch. I give ye my honor I won't hurt you; don't lose your presence of mind, my dear; don't be frightened." As she shrinks back, he clutches at her watch-chain.

Leslie, in terror-stricken simplicity: "Oh, oh, no! Don't! Don't take my watch. My father gave it to me — and he's dead."

Second Tramp. "Then he'll never miss it, my dear. Don't oblige me to use harsh measures with a lady. Give it here, at once, that's a dear."

First Tramp. "Hurry, hurry! He's coming!" As the Irishman seizes her by the wrist, she utters one wild shriek after another; to which the other young girls respond, as they reappear under the trees down the road.

Maggie. "Leslie, Leslie! What is it?"

Lilly, at sight of Leslie struggling with the tramp: "Oh, help, help, help, somebody — do!"

Maggie. "Murder!"

First Tramp, rushing past them to the aid of his fellow: "Clap your hand over her mouth! Stop her noise, somehow! Choke her!" He springs forward, and while the Irishman stifles her cries with his hands, the other tears the watch-chain loose from its fastening. They suddenly release her, and as she totters gasping and swooning away, some one has the larger villain by the throat, who struggles with his assailant backward into the undergrowth; whence the crash of broken branches, with cries and curses, makes itself heard. Following this tumult comes the noise of a rush through the ferns, and then rapid footfalls, as of flight and pursuit on the hard road, that die away in the distance, while Maggie and Lilly hang over Leslie, striving to make out from her incoherent moans and laments what has happened.

Maggie. "Oh, Leslie, Leslie, Leslie, what was it? Do try to think! Do try to tell! Oh, I shall go wild if you don't tell what's the matter."

Leslie. "Oh, it was — Oh, oh, I feel as if I should never be clean again! How can I endure it? That filthy hand on my mouth! Their loathsome rags, their sickening faces! Ugh! Oh, I shall dream of it as long as I live! Why, why did I ever come to this horrid place?"

Maggie. "Leslie, — dear, good Leslie, — what was it all?"

Leslie, panting and sobbing: "Oh, two horrid, disgusting men! Don't ask me! And they told me to give them my watch, and I begged them not to take it. And

one was a hideous little Irish wretch, and he kept running all round me, and oh, dear! the other was worse than he was; yes, worse! And he told him — oh, girls! — to choke me! And he came running up, and then the other put one of his hands over my mouth; and I thought I should die; and I could n't breathe; but I was n't going to let the wretches have my watch, if I could help it; and I kept struggling; and all at once they ran away, and " — putting her hand to her belt — " Oh, it's gone, it's gone, it's gone! Oh, papa, papa! The watch you gave me is gone!" She crouches down upon the log, and leaning her head upon her hands against the trunk of a tree gives way to her tears and sobs, while the others kneel beside her in helpless distress. Upon this scene of inarticulate desolation Blake emerges from the road down which the steps were heard. His face is pale, and he advances with his right arm held behind him, while the left clasps something which he extends as he speaks.

Blake. "Here is your watch, Miss Bellingham."

Leslie, whirling swiftly round and rising to her feet: "My watch? Oh, where did you find it?" She springs towards him and joyfully seizing it from his hand scans it eagerly, and then kisses it in a rapture. "Safe, safe, safe! Not hurt the least! My precious gift! Oh, how glad I am! It's even going yet! How did you get it? Where did you get it?"

Blake, who speaks with a certain painful effort while he moves slowly away backward from her: "I found it — I got it from the thief."

Leslie, looking confusedly at him: "How did you know they had it?"

Maggie. "Oh, it was you, Mr. Blake, who came flying past us, and drove them away! Did you have to fight them? Oh, did they hurt you?"

Leslie. "It was you — Why, how pale you look! There's blood on your face! Why, where were you? How did it all happen? It was you that drove them away? You — And I never thought of you! And I only thought about myself — my watch! I never can forgive myself." She lets fall the watch from her heedless grasp, and he mechanically puts out the hand which he has been keeping behind him; she impetuously seizes it in her own and, suddenly shrinking, he subdues the groan that breaks from him to a sort of gasp and reels to the place where Leslie has been sitting.

Lilly. "Oh, see, Miss Bellingham; they've broken his wrist!"

Blake, panting: "It's nothing; don't — don't" —

Maggie. "Oh, dear, he's going to faint! What *shall* we do if he does? I did n't know they *ever* fainted!" She wrings her hands in despair, while Leslie flings herself upon her knees at Blake's side. "Ought n't we to support him, somehow? Oh, yes, do let's support him, all of us!"

Leslie, imperiously: "Run down to the river as fast as ever you can, and wet your handkerchiefs to sprink'e his face with." She passes her arm round Blake's, and tenderly gathers his broken wrist into her right hand. "One can support him."

W. D. Howells.

OLD WOMAN'S GOSSIP.

XIX.

GREAT RUSSELL STREET, }
February 7, 1831.

MY DEAR H——: I found your lecture waiting for me on my return from Brighton; I call it thus because if your two last were less than letters your yesterday's one is more; but I shall not attempt at present to follow you to the misty heights whither our nature tends, or dive with you into the muddy depths whence it springs. I have heard from my brother John, and now expect almost hourly to see him. The Spanish revolution, as he now sees and as many foresaw, is a mere vision. The people are unready, unripe, unfit, and therefore unwilling; had it not been so they would have done their work themselves; it is as impossible to urge on the completion of such a change before the time as to oppose it when the time is come. John now writes that all hope of rousing the Spaniards being over, and their party consequently dispersing, he is thinking of bending his steps homewards, and talks of once more turning his attention to the study of the law. I know not what to say or think. My cousin, Horace Twiss, was put into Parliament by Lord Clarendon, but the days of such parliamentary patronage are numbered, and I do not much deplore it, though I sometimes fancy that the House of Commons, could it by any means have been opened to him, might perhaps have been the best sphere for John. His natural abilities are brilliant, and his eloquence, energy, and activity of mind might perhaps have been made more and more quickly available for good purposes in that than in any other career.

I have just received your letter dated February 4th. The weather which you describe as so awful would, I should think, prevent the possibility of your traveling; we have full confidence in you, however. Come if you reasonably can; if you do not we will reasonably conclude that you

could not. I am not familiar with all that Burns has written; I have read his letters, and know most of his songs by heart. His passions were so violent that he seems to me in that respect to have been rather a subject for poetry than a poet; for though a poet should perhaps have a strongly passionate nature, he should also have power enough over it to be able to observe, describe, and, if I may so say, experimentalize with it, as he would with the passions of others. I think it would better qualify a man to be a poet to be able to perceive rather than liable to feel violent passion or emotion. May not such things be known of without absolute experience? What is the use of the poetical imagination, that lower inspiration, which, like the higher one of faith, is the "evidence of things not seen"? Troubled and billowy waters reflect nothing distinctly on their surface; it is the still, deep, placid element that gives back the images by which it is surrounded or that pass over its surface. I do not of course believe that a good man is necessarily a poet, but I think a devout man is almost always a man with a poetical imagination; he is familiar with ideas which are essentially sublime, and in the act of adoration he springs to the source of all beauty through the channel by which our spirits escape most effectually from their chain, the flesh, and their prison-house, the world, and rise into communion with that supreme excellence from which they originally emanated and into whose bosom they will return. I cannot now go into all I think about this, for I have so many other things to talk about. Since I began this letter I have heard a report that John is a prisoner, that he has been arrested and sent to Madrid. Luckily I do not believe a word of this; if he has rendered himself obnoxious to the British authorities in Gibraltar they may have locked him up for a week or two there, and I see no great harm in