

her standing there in the doorway. She looked just the same as she had the night before, except that there was shadows under her eyes; but Sam thought his brains had gone back on him, and he was seeing things.

"Sam!" she said, in a voice that wasn't any bigger than a sparrow's.

That put the springs back into him, and he was off the bed and on his feet with one jump.

"Sam! You do know what love is!"

"Stop that!" said Sam. "You're a married woman now!"

"No!" Mary's eyes crinkled up the way he'd seen them do a hundred times,

only this time they looked at him different. "No, I'm not! I knew—I'd made a mistake—when you let me go; but I had to argue with Murray all night to make him bring me back!"

Maybe it was twenty minutes later on that Sam looked over Mary's shoulder, and saw Singlefoot standing in the doorway.

"I'll be jiggered!" said Singlefoot, when he could talk. "Sam, you homely-looking critter, how did you get her?"

"Because he let me go!" said Mary Dare, with her fingers gripped tight into Sam's shirt. "And don't you call him a homely-looking critter—he's beautiful!"

The Bargainer

PROVING ONCE MORE THAT AN APPARENT GAIN MAY BE A
LOSS, AND VICE VERSA

By Emmet F. Harte

THERE was a buoyance, a sprightliness, in Elspeth's step that May morning as she came down the path to the spring. There was something of the light and lissom grace of a deer in the free-swinging rhythm of her stride; but there was strength, too—the fine, confident, competent strength of youth—in the lines of her straight, lithe back and the elastic symmetry of her hips and limbs.

She carried two wooden pails. They were the kind commonly called "candy buckets"—larger than ordinary pails, with a capacity of five or six gallons. Elspeth had youth—she was not yet twenty-four—and she hummed the air of a Sunday school song, one of the few tunes she knew, as she followed the winding path. The spring, a dark, still pool in its rock-walled grotto, lay cool and mossy in a shaded nook under the hill—a wooded slope where ferns and wild violets grew beneath the beech and basswood trees.

Dew sparkled like many-colored jewels in the green leafage about her—gems that gleamed and quickly vanished before the ardent glances of the mounting sun. It

was a clean world—rain-bathed, flushed, eager, athrill with tingling energies. Matin songs rose from forest and thickets—the pipe of robin and oriole, the ringing aria of redbird, the clear, sweet notes of lark and thrush. The air was fragrant with the perfume of lilac blossoms and the blooms of apple, peach, and cherry trees.

Elspeth Adams was not wondrously fair of face. Her brown-tanned skin was somewhat dark, and her hair and eyes were of a dull and lusterless shade of brown; but her skin was smooth and her features were pleasing. She possessed an attractiveness, the definite charm of health and youth. She was wholesome, radiant with vitality, yet feminine, from the thick braids of her hair, wound in an unstudied, becoming coil at the back of her head, to the small tips of her low-heeled sandals.

Arrived at the cool, shady nook beside the pool, she put down her buckets and stood idly resting for a moment. Farther up the wooded slope the dogwoods were gleaming white like snowdrifts, and the redbuds glowed, flaming, against a background of blended tints of green. She

filled her lungs with the cool, fresh, fragrant air and stretched her round, slender arms above her head in a gesture of sheer enjoyment. Then she stooped and proceeded mechanically to fill the buckets, one at a time, by dipping them into the pool; after which she straightened to an erect posture and moved to ascend the path, carrying the heavy pails, one in either hand, with apparent ease.

Now she became aware of a young man's figure standing not far away, at the edge of the thicket which screened the hollow above the spring pool. He had probably been watching her while she filled her buckets.

Not far from Elspeth's own age—at least, not more than two years older—he was a type of young man to appeal to the feminine eye. Of good height and massive build, he had a certain deliberation of manner and bearing that gave him an air of thoughtfulness, if not of learned sagacity. He might have been called distinguished-looking, too, with his high-bridged, aquiline nose, his piercing black eyes, and his thin-lipped, unsmiling mouth. He was dressed in coat and breeches of brown corduroy, and he wore a high-crowned, broad-brimmed black hat.

Calvin Carter was really a striking figure of a young man. Elspeth unconsciously slackened her pace when she saw him, although she did not put down her burden or stop stock-still.

He came forward at once, and, without offering to take the buckets, turned into the path behind her.

"How are you, Elspeth?" he grunted perfunctorily. "You're looking chipper."

"How do you do, Calvin?" she replied.

"Is your grandpa up and stirring this morning?"

"Yes—you'll find him eating his breakfast, I reckon, if you want to see him."

"I'll stop a minute," he said. "I thought I'd speak to him about a little matter that needs attending to."

The girl evidently thought that no comment was necessary or expected, and she made none.

The young man followed her silently up the path to the house, which stood in the midst of a grove of live oaks and chestnut trees. There was a look of appreciative appraisal in his lazily observant eyes as he noted the easy movements and firm tread of the girl in front of him. His in-

terest seemed wholly impersonal, however. It had nothing of sentiment in it, or of emotion arising from the fact that she was a maid and not uncomely, and he a young man.

Calvin Carter, at that moment, admired Elspeth Adams just as he would have viewed a sound, clean-limbed young horse or cow. He saw that she was strong, active, vigorous of lung and muscle, yet not nervous or excitable. She would have endurance. Hard work would never hurt that type, human or dumb animal. The thought pleased him.

Elspeth was well known throughout the countryside as a diligent and indefatigable worker. Her grandfather, John Streeter, was, as he himself said, "getting along in years"—he was nearing seventy-six. Lately he had been ailing a great deal, and the girl virtually managed the farm work, with the help of a neighbor lad to do the heavier tasks. She had kept the house and looked after countless incidental details—the garden, the poultry, milking, caring for calves and pigs, preserving the products of orchard and truck patch—since the death of her grandmother, five or six years before.

Her own parents died when she was a baby, and it was generally understood that Elspeth would inherit the eighty-acre farm at her grandfather's passing. John Streeter was considered to be "fairly well fixed" financially. The farm was well improved and stocked, equipped with buildings and modern tools, and free from indebtedness. Besides that, there was money in the bank at the county seat, and loaned out at interest. There were those who said that Elspeth was foolish to make a slave of herself at hard work, when she might have lolled in idleness.

She viewed the matter in a different light. She quite understood that, as far as she was concerned, an existence of idleness would be one of utter misery. To any one of her active temperament and energetic habits, a life of sloth and indolence would be unbearable. She was not very imaginative, but she was thoroughly sane and practical. She wasn't much given to day-dreaming, or to cherishing fond and futile illusions.

This purposefulness, this steady adherence to the daily routine of her tasks, which almost amounted to stolidity, was one of the things that attracted Calvin Carter to Elspeth. A worker himself, he had no pa-

tience with the man or woman who deliberately chose to take the easy way.

Life, as Calvin saw it, was a game of getting things for one's self. He measured success by a material yardstick. A man's place was established by the visible evidences of his ability to get and keep the solid, worldly rewards for sustained effort. Elspeth Adams was the kind of girl who would help a man, instead of hindering him, in the acquisition of material goods and chattels.

The two had known each other since both were children. They had attended the same country school, gone to the same neighborhood picnics, played charades and made taffy or popcorn balls at the same boy and girl parties. Now the two lived on adjoining farms. Calvin Carter had leased the hundred acres known as the Uncle Billy Miller place, north of John Streeter's farm, four years before. He kept bachelor quarters there, in company with his hired man.

The young man was undoubtedly destined to get on in the world—every one conceded that. He was keenly alert to his own interests, and was already deemed a man to be wary of when it came to driving a bargain. Those who had tried to get the best of him in various barterings had found this out to their undoing. Most of them had been shorn of more substantial possessions than their bright expectations.

These found a meager solace in calling Cal Carter closefisted, and a cunning and unscrupulous trickster, behind his back. He wasn't disturbed by it. He rather gloried in the fact that people respected his cleverness, even if they hated him for taking advantage of their own lack of acumen. If the choice had been offered him, he would have preferred to have men fear him a little, instead of loving him.

II

THE tall, lean, slightly stooped figure of John Streeter could be seen on the rear porch of the old-fashioned house, as the two young people came nearer. The older man greeted his visitor with something akin to cordial friendliness in his tone and manner.

"Good morning, Cal! How are you making it?" he said heartily. "A nice shower we had yesterday. I was just in the act of setting down to eat breakfast. Come in and have a bite of Elspeth's cooking with me!"

"No, I guess I won't this time, Uncle John," the young man said. "I had my breakfast before I started. I wouldn't want to spoil my dinner piecing between meals that way," he added, with an attempt at humor.

"Well, come up and set down and rest yourself, anyway," the other invited.

"I'll sit here, Uncle John."

The young man seated himself with his broad back against one of the porch posts. Elspeth placed her buckets on the bench beside the door, and went on into the kitchen.

"I thought I'd step by and speak to you about that line fence between our two places," Carter continued. "It's getting in pretty bad shape. My cattle will be breaking through into your corn patch, one of these days. It's easy to spoil 'em that way. They learn to be breachy mighty quick."

"That's right, Cal—no question about it. A cow's sense is mostly foolish sense, as a rule. I know the fence is getting old. I reckon it ought to be rebuilt new, as a matter of fact, but seems like this is a busy time of year. If we could get somebody to do the work—"

"That was what I had in mind," Carter said in his deliberate way. "I came over to make you a proposition. It will take about a couple of spools of new wire and say fifty new posts to fix up the fence in fine shape. Counting the work and all, it probably would amount to about twenty-five dollars. If we go halvers on it, that would be fair, don't you think?"

Uncle John Streeter scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Yes, that would be fair," he assented.

"I don't see why it wouldn't."

"So I thought I'd offer to furnish everything, and my hand and myself will do the work and save you all the bother. I noticed a spotted heifer calf you've got down there in your barn lot, Uncle John," he went on. "It looks like it might be worth ten dollars at the most, at market price. I'd be willing, seeing that we're neighbors and friends, to take the calf for your share of fixing the fence, if that would suit you."

"Why"—the older man paused, considering—"I kind of think Elspeth's been planning to keep that heifer calf. Well, it's all right anyway, Cal—you take the calf along, and go ahead and fix the fence."

Carter rose.

"I'll be getting back home," he said. "I'll see to it that the fence is attended to right away. While I'm here, I guess I might just as well take the calf along with me. You don't need to bother, Uncle John. I brought a piece of cord along in my pocket I can use for a leading string."

III

"THAT was what I call a smart piece of scheming," Elspeth said a little while afterward, as she poured her grandfather a cup of coffee. "He must have thought it all out—just what he'd say and do to wheedle you into giving him that heifer calf. Oh, he's good at making people do the way he wants them to do, all right!"

John Streeter pulled his chair up to the table somewhat shamefacedly, but he affected to speak with a show of bluster.

"Cal didn't wheedle me, young lady," he retorted. "Not a bit of it! I let him take the calf because I wanted him to. He admitted that it wouldn't bring more than ten dollars at market price."

"Of course he would say that, naturally; but I'll warrant you he wouldn't sell it back to you this minute for less than twenty!"

"Well, child, I can't help it if he over-values the critter just because it belongs to him," the old gentleman said, chuckling.

He regarded her quizzically from beneath his bushy brows.

"I had a little scheme of my own in mind," he said. "Elspeth, Cal will take good care of that calf. He'll feed it well, and coddle it up into a fine young cow; and I reckon in the end it'll be yours as much as it ever was, won't it? When you and Cal get married, what's his will be yours and what's yours will be his."

"Yes—when Cal and I get married," she repeated scornfully, "a lot of things will happen, no doubt! I suppose he'll ask me to marry him some day, if he makes up his mind that it's to his advantage."

"Now, now, Elspeth!" the old man chided, not unkindly. "Cal's smart. You can well afford to let him take his own time about it. He's steady and dependable, not a fly-up-the-creek like most young fellows. He'll be a rich man some day."

Elspeth turned toward the door.

"I'd much better be feeding the chickens than standing here talking foolishness," she said. "It isn't likely he spends any time worrying about me. He's too busy

planning to get the best of somebody in a trade."

John Streeter gazed at his granddaughter's retreating form. Then he chuckled softly to himself and went on eating his breakfast.

The idea that Calvin Carter cherished some thought of making her his wife was not a new one to Elspeth. Her grandfather frankly favored the idea, and made free to remind her of it whenever an opportunity presented.

In his desultory fashion, Calvin Carter had "kept company" with her for nearly five years. His manner of paying court to her, if he meant to play the rôle of a suitor, was strangely indirect and indefinite. He made it a point to come at least once a week, usually after supper, to sit in casual conversation with her grandfather for an hour, or perhaps longer. Seldom did he have much to say to Elspeth, or seek to talk to her alone. On infrequent occasions the two young people walked together across the fields to the meetinghouse, a mile away, to attend Wednesday evening prayer meeting or Sunday night preaching service; but in five years he never had mentioned the subject of love or marriage.

In the neighborhood, it was tacitly accepted that Calvin and Elspeth were plighted lovers. He did not pay attentions to any other girl, and she had not received the attentions of any other young man.

There were those who declared that he was only waiting for John Streeter to die before he married Elspeth.

"He won't take any chances. He isn't the kind to assume the burden of taking care of a helpless old man, and he'll make sure that she has the farm all secure in her own right before he does anything radical."

Sometimes Elspeth passively accepted the thought that Calvin intended to make her his wife. There were days, too, when she decided that she abhorred him. She was convinced that he wasn't in love with her—or with any one else, for that matter, unless it might be himself.

She did not let that fact disturb her peace of mind. Her disposition was naturally placid, without any great range of emotional reflexes. If she did not mount to transcendent heights of gayety or exultation, she did not descend to dark depths of despondency or rancor. Physically, she was superbly well—almost never ill or depressed. As for her mentality, an alienist

would probably have called her magnificently sane.

"I noticed that Cal and his hired man fixed the division fence to-day," she informed her grandfather one evening. "They used just about one spool of new wire, and put in maybe a dozen new posts. I took it on myself to walk over that way and see just what they did do, after they'd finished the job and left. The fence has been moved over—a foot or so, all along—on to our land."

"Now, now, child!" her grandfather said reproachfully. "You don't mean to say Calvin's tried to give us the worst of it, surely? He's fair. He wouldn't hog a little thing like a foot of land. You probably overestimated it with your eye."

"Oh, wouldn't he do such a thing?" she returned calmly. "I wonder!"

IV

JOHN STREETER was stricken with paralysis on the 10th of August. He lived until the 15th in a state of stupor, from which he did not emerge, even at the end.

His passing was a cruel and crushing blow to Elspeth. It had come with a sort of incredibly amazing and implacable swiftness. For a little while her grief obscured all other thoughts and considerations in the world. She had loved her grandfather very dearly. They had been more to each other than merely kindred of the same blood; they had been kindly, companionable, loyal friends.

It was Calvin Carter who shared with Elspeth the task of nursing her grandfather during his last illness. Other neighbors came and went, doing what they could, and giving generously of sympathy and compassion—the Fletchers, who lived nearest on the south road, the Stinsons, the Haineses—but it was Cal who sat up with the sick man four nights running, and who hardly left the bedside in the days that intervened.

The young man had little to say to the girl, but she found a certain comfort in his being present. She watched him when he wasn't conscious of it, marking his gentleness as he changed the position of her grandfather's insensible form, noting, too, the strength expressed in his great shoulders, his deep chest, and his capable arms, as well as the set of his fine, dark, masterful head on his massive neck. However self-centered and sordidly grasping he might

be at heart, outwardly Calvin Carter was a splendid figure of manhood, and even in the time of her grief and anxiety, Elspeth could not be wholly unmindful of his rugged masculinity.

After the day of the funeral, Elspeth arranged to stay at the Fletchers' at night. Her affairs were not otherwise changed. She was her grandfather's only near relative. All that he possessed became hers—the farm, with everything thereon, and certain moneys, in cash and investments, amounting in all to twenty thousand and some odd hundreds of dollars.

She found it silent and lonely in the house, at first. Her outlook upon life seemed somehow changed and altered. Familiar objects did not look the same. Even the sunlight appeared to have a different quality, a dead whiteness. She had an odd feeling that she lived and moved in a world of unrealities, such as one visualizes in dreams.

Such fancies soon passed. She had merely to readjust her mental processes to the basic premise that her grandfather's familiar face and form was no longer there, that the sound of his kindly, gentle voice was forever stilled. Very sensibly, she tried to reassert her normal self-control.

V

CAL CARTER came around the corner of the house as Elspeth sat on the shaded south porch in the afternoon of the second day after the funeral. She was hemming some flour sacks, which would serve later for dish cloths. The young man took off his hat and sat down on the edge of the porch.

"I thought I'd stop and talk over some things," he began a little hesitantly. "I just turned a dozen head of my cattle into the woods pasture on this side. The grass is better over here, and your stock don't keep it half eaten down."

Elspeth gazed at his face with steady eyes. She did not speak.

"I've been thinking," he continued. "I guess, now that your grandpa's out of the way, there's nothing to hinder us from marrying. It's my idea that we might as well go to the county seat to-morrow morning. We can get the license, and Judge Wayne will marry us. He's a good friend of mine, and I reckon he won't charge anything. I'll drive past for you in my buggy, and we can start early, while it's cool."

Still the girl uttered no word, but a faint color reddened her temples.

"It 'll be a smart move, combining these two farms," he went on argumentatively. "I haven't let it be known generally, but I've got my plans all laid to get hold of the place I'm on. I've worked it pretty slick. You remember that old Miller and his wife moved to town five or six years ago? They figured that the rent from the farm would keep them comfortably the rest of their lives; but the old man didn't have gumption enough to look out for himself. He went security on notes for two or three of his blanding friends, and got stuck. The consequence was he had to mortgage the farm for eight thousand dollars, and he's had to sail mighty close to the wind to pay the interest, taxes, and what not, and have enough left to live on."

Elspeth listened breathlessly. The Millers—Uncle Billy and Aunt Martha they had always been to her—were beloved friends of her childhood. They had no children of their own, and John Streeter's granddaughter was a petted favorite with them. Elspeth could see in her mind's eye the wonderful, golden-brown honey cakes Aunt Martha had baked especially for her in other days.

"I've made good money the last five years," Cal continued; "so I scouted around a little and bought up that Miller mortgage. It's due now, principal and interest, and I've told the old man I can't renew it for him. Money's pretty tight now, and it isn't likely he'll be able to get it anywhere else. I've had the farm advertised according to the law, to be sold by the sheriff, the second Saturday in September. I figure I can bid it in for the amount of the mortgage. Nobody else will bother to bid, I don't suppose."

Elspeth took up her sewing.

"Have you thought what will become of Uncle Billy and Aunt Martha, if everything goes as you have planned?" she asked quietly.

He gave a short, mirthless laugh.

"I reckon that's their lookout. He ought to have thought about that before he signed notes for every Tom, Dick, and Harry. If the worst comes to the worst, the county will take care of them."

"The farm would be cheap at eight thousand dollars, wouldn't it?"

"It's worth a hundred an acre," he declared. Then he got up awkwardly. "I'll

be getting back home. I want to mow that patch of clover. You be all ready in the morning, Elspeth. I'll come early." He stared questioningly at her downcast face. "I should think you'd be kind of surprised at us getting married so sudden like."

"No, I'm not surprised—at the way you've planned it," she said.

He shuffled his feet, hesitated, and turned away. A little later she saw him stalking along one of the aisles between the apple trees in the orchard. He stopped once to examine a laden branch, bending with its load of fruit. She dropped her head in her hands and silently wept.

VI

ELSPETH returned home from the Fletchers' soon after sunrise. She had not slept well. Her limbs were heavy with weariness, but her eyes were bright, as if from a light that burned within.

There was one upper window in the old house from which the house and barn on the Miller farm, where Calvin Carter lived, could be plainly seen. From this vantage point she observed that certain activities were under way at the distant farmhouse. The young man was loading his possessions into a wagon which stood in the yard; and presently she saw him go to the barn, from which, in due time, he emerged with his team and buggy.

It was only a little while until she heard the sound of wheels at the front gate. Then his heavy tread sounded on the porch. She went to the door.

"Well," he said familiarly, "here I am! I've done a day's work already, before the morning's fairly started. I loaded up my furniture and things as soon as it got light. Everything's going to work out just fine. I paid off my hired man and let him go last night, so I loaded up all my truck to bring over here. We'll drive to town and get married, and we can get back here by noon. I want to go to Smith's cattle sale after dinner. The chances are there'll be some good stock to be bought cheap. I thought you could take your team over while I'm at the sale, and bring my stuff—it's all loaded on the wagon. Then to-morrow you can help me haul in that little patch of clover hay. It 'll be ready to put in the barn by then."

"No!" she said sharply. "You can't have me to take the place of your hired man, Cal Carter!"

He eyed her curiously, in blank amazement at the vehemence of her tone.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's hard to believe that any one could be as utterly selfish and mean as you are! You've got it all planned out, haven't you? You've made all your arrangements to marry me, because I look like I'm a good bargain. I'm strong, and with you to drive me I'd be a good worker. Marrying me would be a fine stroke of business. My farm and everything would be yours!"

Her lip curled in bitter scorn. Calvin continued to stare at her bleakly, as if without comprehension.

"You mean," he blurted finally—"you mean you don't intend to go with me this morning to be married?"

"That is exactly what I mean," she said. "I am not going with you this morning, or any other morning. Can't you understand? Can't you see the road you're traveling? All you think of is getting the best of somebody. You got the best of my grandfather when you persuaded him to give you that spotted heifer for fixing the fence, and then you set the fence over on our land. It's that way with everything. You turned your cattle into my pasture because the grass was better there. You're planning to beat Uncle Billy out of his farm. You practically admitted that you've only been waiting until my grandfather died to marry me and get possession of this place. You've never said anything about—caring for me, as a man should care for the girl he would marry!"

She faltered. Her eyes filled with tears.

"You don't need to say any more," he interposed gruffly. "I guess you've been waiting for this chance to give me the mitten. I didn't think you was that kind of a girl, Elspeth. I didn't think you'd lead me on, only to turn me down at the last minute."

"That isn't true, Cal Carter! I haven't led you on. Have you ever asked me to marry you? Have I ever said I would marry you? How could we be engaged, when such a thing never was mentioned? I wish you would go away. I—I don't want to talk any longer. If you can't see the right and wrong of things yourself, there isn't any use my trying to tell you."

"I'll go—don't you worry," he said angrily. "I'll get my cattle out of your pasture right away, and I won't bother you again."

"Very well, Cal Carter—get them out," she returned in a low tone. "The quicker you do, the better!"

He scowled at her for a moment in silence. She met his gaze without wavering. Then, with a gesture half contemptuous, half derisive, he turned away.

At the gate, where his team stood somnolently waiting, he untied the hitching strap and mechanically looped its end in a ring of the harness. Having climbed into the buggy, he jerked the horses around and lashed them viciously with the whip. They broke into a lumbering trot.

VII

At first Calvin's emotion was one of defiant recklessness. In the manner of slow thinkers, his ire did not flame up quickly; but it was all the more fierce when it did gather headway. By the time he reached home, he was angry enough to think of seeking reprisals; yet he retained sufficient calmness of judgment to realize that he couldn't revenge himself against a girl by the usual measures one would employ if his enemy were a man. He couldn't call Elspeth to account at the first favorable opportunity, and give her a good beating, for example.

Anything he might do, in fact, to punish her in a material or physical sense would only react against himself. At the best, he would make himself ridiculous; at the worst, he would become an object of loathing and contempt in the eyes of the neighborhood. A woman had all the advantage of a man, and she didn't hesitate to take it, he reflected bitterly. Nevertheless, he vowed he would find some way to get even.

He found a momentary outlet for his anger in jerking the harness from the horses' backs and sending them careering into the dry feed lot with unmerited kicks. Then he remembered that he needed one of the animals to ride upon his errand of retrieving his cattle from Elspeth's pasture. Both horses were suspicious of his advances, and he found it necessary to run them around and around the inclosure under the beaming eye of the midsummer sun before he could catch one.

He experienced more or less difficulty in rounding up the cattle and driving them out of their new grazing territory. Perspiring and disheveled, exuding animosity from every pore, he returned to the dismantled house after accomplishing his task.

He had worn his best clothes that fateful morning, when he set out so serenely to thread the pleasant lanes of romance. In the mental turmoil of his return from that rather disconcerting venture, he had forgotten to change. One coat sleeve was torn from shoulder to elbow, where a thorny bramble had caught it, and he bristled from head to foot with burrs and beggar lice.

The wagon loaded with his household chattels stood at the side of the house, a grim memorial to his defeated plans. In a kind of blind, bovine rage he began to unload the inanimate object of his impotent choler, tumbling the heavier articles to the ground, careless of consequences.

Something heavy fell on his foot. It was a bundle of cookstove legs, tied with a string. He flung them from him angrily. They struck the stone underpinning of the house, and two of them broke into a cascade of fragments. He lifted the stove itself with a frenzied muscular effort, and set it on end just inside the kitchen doorway.

Meanwhile his mind was busy. Elspeth had maligned him shamefully, without any shadow of justification. There was what she said about the line fence, as a sample. She might as well have said that he had stolen a strip of her land—and any fair-minded person could see that he had set the fence over a trifle merely for the purpose of getting at the brush and weeds, to clear them away. As for the spotted calf—that had been a droll idea of his. He meant to take special care of it, feeding and pampering it until it grew into a prize winner, and then he planned to present it to Elspeth on her wedding day.

Well, there wasn't going to be any wedding day in which he was concerned; but he would give her unmistakably to understand that he wasn't a thief! He decided that he would begin at once to replace the fence precisely in its original position. He would take the calf back and put it in her barn lot without saying a word.

The task of replacing the fence he forthwith proceeded to undertake with feverish energy. The August sun shone with burning fervor. The heat hung in a glowing irradiance between seared sky and parched earth. Calvin didn't notice what a hot day it was. His mental temperature was fully as high, perhaps higher.

It was only toward the approach of evening that a measure of his inner ardor was dissipated, and he began to suspect that

the fires outside of him were hotter than those within. Thereafter he became a steaming, parboiled mass of dissolving tissues. Night was falling when he finished his task—night, and none of the farm chores done!

He fed and watered his stock, milked his cow, and plodded wearily to his dismantled and disordered house. The stove must be set up before he could get supper. He had a long search to find some pieces of bricks and stones to serve in place of the two broken legs. He built a fire, made coffee, and fried bacon and flapjacks. Later on he contrived a pallet of quilts on the floor, amid the jumble of furniture, and fell asleep.

The flux of his anger was somewhat cooled when he awoke in the morning. His feeling of bitter resentment toward Elspeth was less violent. He thought of her more in a spirit of melancholy and regretful sadness. His mood was almost self-reproachful now.

He held to his determination to return the heifer. The motive that actuated him in that, he told himself, was one of magnanimity. He really felt that he was performing an act of noble and generous self-sacrifice; but when he came to lead the calf home, soon after dawn, his assurance deserted him. He took a roundabout way through thickets and under cover of weed-screened hollows, so that he could reach the Streeter barnyard unseen. There he loosed his charge, shut the gate, and hastily retreated homeward along the way by which he had come.

Elspeth had marked his movements. When she could have appeared in the open, so that he would see her and know that she saw him, she let the chance pass. She was undecided whether to refuse the gift of the calf, or to accept it with a curt note of thanks, or simply to wait, deferring action, until a more propitious occasion. She ended by waiting.

The days went by in unhurried, unheeding sequence. The young man made no further moves, hostile or conciliatory. He ceased to come on his frequent, if casual, visits. Elspeth rarely saw him, even at a distance. The vantage of her upstairs window was of little avail. It almost seemed that he was aware of that particular point of espionage, and took pains to keep out of sight.

After he had raked and stored his hay,

Calvin Carter had little work to occupy him. He found time for much thinking.

VIII

It was drawing toward the close of day when David Fletcher returned home from the county seat, on the second Saturday in September. Elspeth had spent most of the afternoon with Mrs. Fletcher. He put away his team, and presently came to the house, where the two women awaited him. He regarded them with twinkling eyes.

"Of course you two don't care about hearing what happened," he said; "so I don't need to waste talk telling you. I bet you'd be curious though, if you knew!"

"David!" his wife exclaimed. "Don't tease Elspeth. Quit fooling, now!"

"Well," he said, "I was on hand at the sheriff's sale, Elspeth, as you told me to be. I don't think Cal had any suspicion of what was in the wind. The fact is, it was all over in about two minutes. Cal made the first bid, and he just simply knocked the breath out of everybody there. Nobody had the courage to bid against him. You said you wanted me to run the price up to a hundred an acre against him, but it turned out it wasn't necessary."

"It—it wasn't necessary?" she murmured faintly.

"No. You see, Cal started the ball rolling with a bid of one hundred and twenty-five an acre. There was a look in his eye that said he meant business, too. I kind of think he had his mind set to buy that farm, no matter what it cost him."

"Oh, I'm glad!" Elspeth's face was radiant. "I—I must go home," she told them excitedly. "I'll be back in a little while, Mrs. Fletcher; but I must run home for a few minutes. There's something I want to do."

Calvin Carter walked aimlessly in the deepening twilight. Then, abruptly, he was aware that he was following the familiar path that led to the fence behind the Streeter orchard. The path was getting choked with late-growing weeds. He stopped at the fence and stood there, staring down the dim, grass-carpeted orchard aisles.

There Elspeth found him.

"I heard what you did to-day," she began impulsively, "and I—I just had to come and—and thank you. It was a fine thing to do, Calvin!"

"Elspeth!" he said in a voice full of tender yearning. "Elspeth, you aren't mad at me? You don't hate me any longer?"

"No," she said. "No, I'm not mad at you, Calvin; and I never have hated you—only sometimes I thought you ought to have done differently." She gazed at him demurely, her hands resting on the fence board against which he leaned.

He put out one hand awkwardly and touched hers.

"I know," he said. "I've been about as mean as they make 'em; but I've done a lot of thinking these last two weeks, and I've changed my mind about—about everything, I guess. I've found out a lot of things, too. I've found out that I—I love you, Elspeth; and love makes a fellow see—the other side of things, I suppose you'd call it. I've always been pretty much what you said I was—a bargain-hunter. I thought I was getting the best of things in a bargain, but I wasn't. I was getting the worst of it, every time. I know now that what you get doesn't count with a man's real self. It's how you treat the other fellow that counts. To-day, after I'd tried to do the right thing by Uncle Billy and Aunt Martha Miller, and they both hung on to my hands and kept thanking me, and she cried and—and kissed me, I understood mighty plain the way you go about getting the sure-enough best of a bargain."

She clasped his big, brown hand in both of her small brown ones.

"Dear Cal!" she whispered.

"I—I would like to keep company with you again, Elspeth," he said bashfully, "if—if you'll let me. It's been a pretty miserable time for me, since that day we fell out. Could I come over to see you now and then like—like I used to?"

"Oh, Cal!" She paused, then went on breathlessly but determinedly: "Of course you can come. I want you to come—can't you see? I—I care, too. I've cared all the time, I think."

"Elspeth! You mean you might—you'll marry me—some time?"

"Yes!" Her arms stole around his neck, and she hid her face against his breast. "Whenever you want me to, Cal."

"Why—why, Elspeth!" His arms encircled her clumsily. With the eager pride of possession, he said: "You're giving a whole lot for little or nothing, sweetheart!"

"I'm not," she said. "I guess I know when I'm getting a good bargain."

Obligations

CONCERNING THE FEES THAT HOPE AND FEAR AND PAIN
AND HAPPINESS COLLECT FROM US ALL

By Elizabeth York Miller

Author of "The Greatest Gamble," "The Ledbury Fist," etc.

XXIV

AT the door of the doctor's house Nicholas paused, caught his breath, and mopped his streaming face with his coat sleeve.

A miracle had happened; but he had no one to share the joy of it with him. Dr. and Mme. Dessau, Lonny Collins, Marietta—who were they? Oh, of course they would be pleased, but not one of them could understand what this meant to him—a man under life sentence suddenly pardoned, the prison doors flung open, told to go free on his own feet. Oh, God, of course they couldn't understand! Not one of them had ever been in such a prison.

He refused to think of Virginia any more than he could possibly help, although it was she who had unconsciously wrought the thing. Through his passionate love and hatred of her, through the jealousy that had driven him close to madness, through rage, piteous desire, and a misery of soul too deep to be gaged by ordinary people, he had been shocked into forgetfulness of himself, and in forgetting himself he had forgotten his cruel infirmity.

The Dessaus, apparently, were giving a party. Nicholas could not see into the dining room, because the curtains were drawn, but there were bright lights and the sound of hearty laughter. Still, the doctor would see him; he only wanted a moment.

He rang the bell, and presently plump little Mme. Dessau bustled to the door.

"Who is it?" she asked, peering out into the darkness.

She had on her Sunday bonnet and wrap. Evidently she was just going out, or had recently come in.

"It's me—Wayne," Nicholas replied. "Could I see the doctor a moment?"

"M. Wayne!" The doctor's wife shrieked unbelievably. "But it cannot be you, *monsieur*! You are ill in bed!"

"No," Nicholas replied. "You see that that is not so. I have no sticks—I am walking without them."

"Come in, come in! We are in the dining room. Your wife is here. I persuaded her to stop for a glass of wine after vespers—it was so cold. But, *monsieur*, I do not understand! Mme. Wayne said nothing about this—this—"

"Miracle," Nicholas finished. "She doesn't know."

"But, *monsieur*, you are walking just as if—*mon Dieu!* Felix—Felix!"

She ran ahead and opened the dining room door, throwing a shaft of light into the passage. The room was full of people—relatives, no doubt, come to exchange the compliments of the season. A coffeepot hissed on the air-tight stove, and cake and decanters were set out on the table.

In the midst of this scene of domestic festivity sat Virginia, holding a small wine-glass in one of her shabbily gloved hands. She looked tragically sad, her eyes heavy with secret tears, yet she was smiling, grateful for the neighborly attention that had been paid her. When she saw Nicholas, she rose slowly and set her glass down on the table. Then her startled gaze flew from him to Dr. Dessau.

The other people fell silent. They did not know what was happening, or had happened, that seemed of such tremendous importance, although it was apparent that the sudden entry of the tall, bareheaded young man had created a sensation.

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