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CHAPTER VII.

Seth would be coming for her presently, and together, perched high on the wagon, with its cargo of seed cotton rising in a dazzling pile behind their backs, they would ride home under the faraway blue of the October sky, crushing the plumes of the goldenrod that lined the narrow rutted road beneath the ruthless iron tires of their clumsy wagon wheels, and while the mellow song of the care free cotton pickers floated to her ears, punctuated by the short stertorous breathing of the steam engine at the gin. Seth would entertain her with the "weights" picked by each hand, and tell her how the race between the champion pickers progressed. She must be very much interested in it. She owed it to Seth.

From where she sat on the moldering brick steps she could see the willow fringed pond near by the ginhouse. They were ginning that day. Woolly white clouds of steam escaped in swift jerks from the short, black pipe that pierced the ginhouse roof and lost themselves in the upper blue. The whirr of the machinery, the whizzing of the great rubber bands, the tearing teeth of the saws, were all mercifully deadened to her ears. She was glad they had put the family burying ground as remote as possible from all that rattle and clatter. It seemed an especial intrusion into the holy calm of that October day.

Another long, quiet hour passed. The lace patterns of the elder bushes were losing their nice exactness of outline and growing blurred. What a pile of cotton Seth must be weighing! She settled her turban more securely on her head and retraced her steps to where she had left her drawing materials all scattered about on the low flat stone that covered the remains of some long forgotten Strong. She gathered her crayons and sketchbook into her satchel with reluctant fingers.

"Here, and here only, the peace that passeth all understanding abides with me."

She clasped her small hands and stood looking out over the gentle landscape with yearning eyes. "Graveyard point," as the promontory she was standing on was called, lifted its green head full 200 feet above the water level. Across the many tinted vines that wrapped the tall forest trees in royal mantles of scarlet and gold she looked down upon the flat bottom lands that lay green and moist at the foot of the cliffs. It was down there that Strong was making a hermit of himself. Why, no one knew.

She was thinking of him. Sorrowfully, pitifully, tenderly. Perhaps no one could come as near comprehending his dark mood as she could. He had found it impossible to take up the old life just where he had dropped it before going to Shingleton. But why should he have tried to do it? He was a man. The world was all before him. He could have gone out to grapple with it. She was a woman. That meant so much in the way of restriction and limitation. She could only stand and wait.

Neck or Nothing looked desolate enough from where she gazed down upon it. Faithless worm fences crawled in decrepit crookedness about its few acres of cleared land. A solitary forlorn cabin, shutterless and unpainted, was his home. A starveling pair of mules, browsing on the stiff crab grass within the inclosure; a shadeless, hard beaten dooryard, with half a dozen chickens in full possession; a ragged patch of cotton crowding close up about the crooked fence; one noble sycamore spreading wide, sheltering arms over all this dreariness. She took in the details one by one.

"What was Strong thinking of?" Into this dissatisfied reverie came a heavy, crashing footfall, and Seth stood before her, staggering under the weight of two rough hewn willow posts. He flung them down with a laugh and dried his streaming forehead on his shirt sleeves.

"What now, Seth?" Liza asked, walking around the long posts inquisitively. "Why, what a Hercules you are!"

"I been thinkin' 'bout you, sissy, ever sence we parted this mornin, and it come to me, if you was bent on doin all your picture makin in this pertickler spot, I'd better be providin ag'inst accidents. The rainy season is comin on, and w'en it rains here it don't make no bones about it. Sometimes we has regular chunk floaters. I'm goin to put you up a storm shed. Them's the posts for it."

Liza looked affectionately up at the great sunburned fellow, with his moist, yellow hair and his loving blue eyes. She had pronounced him "common" in her heart that very morning, for which she did repent her.

"Seth, you are entirely too good to me. I don't deserve one-half that you do for me." She patted his stooping shoulders caressingly.

"Yes, you do, honey, you deserves

lots more. I sometimes thinks it mighty rough on you—mighty rough. And I'm sorry for you, b'dogged if I ain't."

Liza stooped and loosened a silvery lichen from the bark of one of the posts. Her eyes were shining and she did not want Seth to see it.

"What is rough on me, buddy Seth?"

It was the first time she had ever fallen into the old childish form of address.

"All of it," said Seth gently, "all of it. Me and pa and the niggers and the quarters and—well, everything in a lump. I sorter feel like we all had trapped a little hummin bird and was rumplin its purty feathers all the wrong way with our clumsy handlin. I do, for a fac'. You needn't to laugh."

"Never mind my plumage. I will try to keep it smooth. It will be lovely to have a storm shed out here, Seth. And will you put me up a shelf too? One that will hold all my boxes and brushes, so that I need not bring them backward and forward every day? That is one of my greatest bothers."

"A dozen, if you want 'em," said Seth delightedly.

"One will do. Where is your hat, Seth?"

He put a long, sunburned hand up to his lank, yellow hair and laughed unconcernedly.

(To be Continued.)



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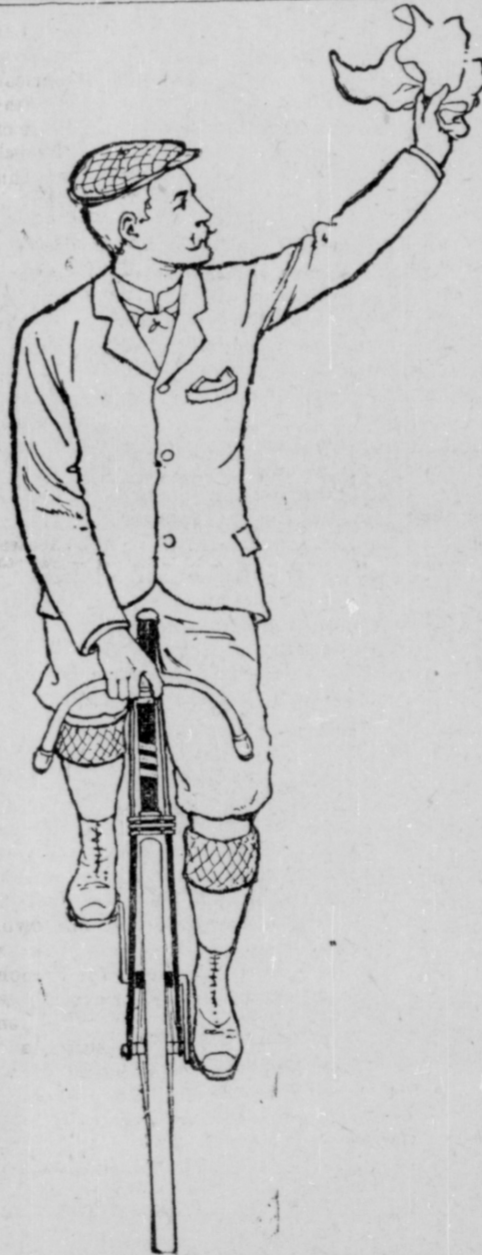
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