

During Christmas week he was summoned to a consultation in a distant town. He would be detained for two days. Joe Brainerd came to stay with his mother and sister. When the minute of departure came he went to say good-bye to his wife. It was a ceremony he never omitted. Sometimes she met him with a blow, sometimes with sullen silence. To-day she looked up with something of the old childish smile on her lips, and, to his amazement, put her arms about his neck and kissed him.

Some way it did not reassure him. As the train rolled away through the darkening afternoon, a sense of danger grew upon him more and more. It impressed him like the positive knowledge of an impending catastrophe. At last he could endure it no longer; by the time the train had reached the junction his resolve was taken. The consultation might go. A cross-country train would land him within five miles of home. If there was no conveyance there—it was a lonely little place—he would have the distance to walk over these horrible roads. No matter. Anything was better than this.

It was nearly midnight when, as he had expected, he set out on his lonely walk. A winter thunder storm had come on, and the night was black as pitch. A mile from the station he heard approaching wheels. There was nothing unusual in that, but it brought his heart into his throat. He took his stand by the roadway and waited. The carriage came on slowly, floundering through the mud-clogged road.

In the next flash of lightning he thought the faces of the occupants were revealed to him. Without a second's consideration he sprang at the horses' heads and had the startled animals by the bits. An oath came from the driver, and the whip fell in a stinging blow upon the plunging horses. Hall kept his hold. He was a man of unusual strength in his unexcited minutes; now he had the nerve of desperation. They dragged him—he was almost under their hoofs—but he did not lose his grasp, and at length he was on his feet again. Another flash must have showed his face; there was a smothered shriek, and then a pistol ball stung his shoulder sharply.

"You have not killed me, John Stacy, but by heaven, unless you leave that carriage in one minute, I will kill you."

The doctor's voice was very steady. The horses were standing in comparative quiet, and John Stacy did what was, perhaps, the wisest thing, under the circumstances—dismounted at once.

"You idiot," Hall half whispered, "don't you know that you are running away with an insane woman?"

Words and tone carried conviction. The guilty man stood bewildered and helpless. Hall took his vacated place, and left him standing.

"You will find your team at Lewis' stable to-morrow," Hall said, with perfect composure, as he turned back on the road they had just traveled.

Not a word was spoken. Alice sat motionless in her corner. When he reached his house no one was stirring. Her escape had not been discovered.

There was a wretched scene next day. For once Hall broke over his stern resolve of silence.

"What am I to do, Alice? This is twice that I have saved you. How many times must I, can I, stand between you and ruin?"

"Ruin!" with a cold rage in her voice. "What right have you to talk of that to me? I never belonged to you. I was married to John Stacy three months before I ever saw you."

Hall turned away without a word. He went straight to her mother and told her.

"Is it true?"

Mrs. Brainerd wrung her hands.

"I don't know—nobody knows. She was away with him three days once."

"And that was the girl that you gave me for a wife."

That was all he said. He went straight to his office and locked the door. All that afternoon there was utter silence within. Mrs. Brainerd came and went anxiously. Once she knocked timidly, but no answer came and she went away again. If she could have entered the darkened, fireless room, she would have found the doctor outstretched on the floor, like a woman—sobbing, too, as a few women do sob. In all these weary weeks and months he had rigidly shut out all voluntary thought of those weeks beside the sea. It had not been so difficult as it might seem. Body and brain had both been taxed to the uttermost with stern present necessities. But now it came back on him—the pure-faced woman that had crossed his path, that might have been so much to him.

And this other? In the eyes of God and man she had no claim on him. But if he let her go out of his keeping, what would become of her? She had been put into his hands. In the eyes of man he was free. In his own eyes—in the eyes of the Power above all—That was the way it ended, no matter by what train of thought he wrought out the problem. He went over it again and again, and the evening found him worn out with the struggle, but seeing no way but this. Not his wife, thank God; and yet in his care while she lived. He would stand between her and the shame and suffering she was struggling toward. It was hardly likely that Stacy would renew the attempt. If he did he would confront him with her statement. If he could prove it—a sudden sense of relief set his heart to bounding, and then it sunk again just as suddenly. He could not believe her. There was nothing to do but to face his duty, and his duty set him as guardian over her physical well being at least.

Half the night the doctor's steps went back and forth. There was stillness again. When Joe Brainerd, alarmed at the silence, forced the door next morning, he lay asleep on the lounge. It was a sleep that proved a