A MODERN INSTANCE

I

The Village stood on a wide plain, and round it rose the mountains. They were green to their tops in summer, and in the winter white through their serried pines and drifting mists, but at every season serious and beautiful, furrowed with hollow shadows, and taking the light on masses and stretches of iron-gray crag. The river swam through the plain in long curves, and slipped away at last through an unseen pass to the southward, tracing,a score of miles in its course over a space that measured but three or four. The plain was very fertile, and its features, if few and of purely utilitarian beauty, had a rich luxuriance, and there was a tropical riot of vegetation when the sun of July beat on those northern fields. They waved with corn and oats to the feet of the mountains, and the potatoes covered a vast acreage with the lines of their intense, coarse green; the meadows were deep with English grass to the banks of the river, that doubling and returning upon itself still marked its way with a dense fringe of elders and white birches.

But winter was full half the year. The snow began at Thanksgiving, end fell snow upon snow till Fast Day, thawing between the storms, and packing harder and harder against the break-up in the spring, when it covered the ground in solid levels three feet high, and lay heaped in drifts that defied the sun far into May. When it did not snow the weather was keenly clear and commonly very still.

Then the landscape at noon had a stereoscopic glister under the high sun that burned in a heaven without a cloud, and at setting stained the sky and the white waste with freezing pink and violet. On such days the farmers and lumbermen came in to the village stores, and made a stiff and feeble stir about their doorways, and the school children gave the street a little life and color, as they went to and from the academy in their red and blue woollens. Four times a day the mill, the shrill wheeze of whose saws had become part of the habitual silence, blew its whistle for the hands to begin and leave off work, in blasts that seemed to shatter themselves against the thin air. But otherwise an Arctic quiet prevailed.

Behind the black boles of the elms that swept the vista of the street with the fine gray tracery of their boughs, stood the houses deep-sunken in the accumulating drifts, through which each householder kept a path cut from his doorway to the road, white and clean as if hewn out of marble. Some cross-streets straggled away east and west with the poorer dwellings; but this that followed the northward and southward reach of the plain, was the main thoroughfare, and had its own impressiveness, with those square, white houses which they build so large in northern New England. They were all kept in scrupulous repair, though here and there the frost and thaw of many winters had heaved a fence out of plumb, and threatened the poise of the monumental. urns of painted pine on the gateposts. They had. dark-green blinds

of a color harmonious with that of the funereal evergreens in their dooryards; and they themselves had taken the tone of the snowy landscape as if by the operation of some such law as blanches the furbearing animals of the north. They seemed proper to its desolation, while some of more modern taste, painted to a warmer tone, looked, with their mansard roofs and jig-sawed piazzas and balconies, intrusive and alien.

At one end of the street stood the Academy with its classic facade and its belfry; midway was the hotel with the stores, the printing-office and the churches, and at the other extreme, one of the square white mansions stood advanced from the rank of the rest, at the top of a deep-plunging valley, defining itself against the mountain beyond, so sharply that it seemed as if cut out of its dark wooded side. It was from the gate before this house, distinct in the pink light which the sunset had left, that on a Saturday evening in February a cutter, gay with red-lined robes, dashed away and came musically clashing down the street under the naked elms. For the women who sat with their work, at the windows on either side of the way, hesitating whether tc light their lamps, and drawing nearer and nearer to the dead-line of the outer cold, for the latest glimmer of the day, the passage of this ill-timed vehicle was a vexation little short of grievous. Every movement on the street was precious tc them and with all the keenness of their starved curiosity these captives of the winter could not make out the people in the cutter. Afterwards it was a mortification to

them that they should not have thought at once of Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord. They had seen him go up towards Squire Gaylord's house half an hour before, and they now blamed themselves for not reflecting that of course he was going tc take Marcia over tc the church-sociable at Lower Equity. Their identity being established, other little proofs of it reproached the inquirers; but these perturbed spirits were at peace, and the lamps were out in the houses, (where the smell of rats in the wainscot and of potatoes in the cellar strengthened with the growing night) when Bartey and Marcia drove back through the moon-lit silence to her father's door. Here, too, the windows were all dark, except for the light that sparely glimmered through the parlor blinds; and the young man slackened the pace of his horse, as if to still the bells, some distance away from the gate.

The girl took the hand he offered her when he dismounted at the gate, and as she jumped from the cutter, Wont you come in?" she asked.

"I guess I can blanket my horse and stand him under the wood-shed," answered the young man, going round tc the animal's head, and leading him away.

When he returned to the door the girl opened it, as if she had been listening for his step; and she now stood holding it ajar for him to enter, and throwing the light upon the threshold from

the lamp which she lifted high in the other hand. The action brought her figure in relief, and revealed the outline of her bust and shoulders, while the lamp flooded with light the face she turned to him, and *again* averted for a moment, as if startled at some noise behind her. She thus showed a smooth low forehead, lips and cheeks deeply red, a softly rounded chin touched with a faint dimple, and in turn a nose short and aquiline; her eyes were dark, and her dusky hair flowed crinkling above her fine black brows, and vanished down the curve of a lovely neck. There was a peculiar charm in the form of her upper lip: it was exquisitely arched, and at the corners it projected a little over the lowerlip, so that when she smiled it gave a piquant sweetness to her mouth, with a certain demure innocence that qualified the Roman pride of her profile. *For* the rest, her beauty was *of* the kind that coming years would only ripen and enrich: at thirty she would be even handsomer than at twenty, and be all the more southern in her type for the paling of that northern color in her cheeks. The young man who looked up at her from the doorstep had a yellow moustache, shadowing either side of his lip with a broad sweep like a bird's wing; his chin, deep cut below his mouth, failed to come strenuously forward; his cheeks were filled to an oval contour; and his face had otherwise the regularity common to Americans; his eyes, a clouded gray, heavy-lidded and long-lashed, were his most striking feature, and he gave her beauty a deliberate look from them as he lightly stamped the *snow* from *his* feet, and pulled the seal-skin gloves from his long hands.

"Come in!" she whispered, coloring with pleasure under his gaze; and she made haste to shut the door after him with a luxurious impatience of the cold. She led the way into the room from which she had come, and set down the lamp on the corner of the piano, while he slipped off his overcoat, and swung it over the end of the sofa. They drew up chairs to the stove, in which the smouldering fire, revived by the opened draft, roared and snapped. It was midnight, as the sharp strokes of a wooden clock declared from the kitchen; and they *were* alone together and all the other inmates of the house were asleep. The situation, scarcely conceivable to another civilization, is so common in ours, where youth commands its fate, and trusts solely to itself, that it may be said to be characteristic of the New England civilization wherever it keeps its simplicity. It was not stolen or clandestine; it would have interested everyone but would have shocked no one in the village if the whole village had known it; all that a girl's parents ordinarily exacted was that they should not be waked up.

"Ugh!" said the girl, "it seems as if I never should get warm." She leaned forward, and stretched her hands toward the stove, and he presently rose from the rocking-chair in which he sat somewhat lower than she, and lifted her sack to throw it over her shoulders. But he put it down, and took up his overcoat.

"Allow my coat the pleasure," he said, with the ease of a man who is not too far lost to be really flattering.

"Much obliged to the coat," she replied, shrugging herself into it, and pulling the collar close about her throat. "I wonder you didn't put it on the sorrel. You could have tied the sleeves round her neck."

"Shall I tie them round yours?" He leaned forward from the low rocking-chair into which he had sunk again, and made a feint at what he had proposed.

But she drew back with a gay, "No!" and added, "Some day, father says, that *sorrel* will be the death of us. He says it's a bad color for a horse. They're always ugly, and when they get heated, they're crazy."

"You never seem to be very much frightened when you're riding after the *sorrel,*" said Bartley.

"Oh, I've great faith in your driving."

"Thanks. But I don't believe in this notion about a horse being vicious because he's of a certain color. If your father didn't believe in it, I should call it a superstition. But the Squire has no superstitions."

"I don't know about that," said the girl. "I don't think he likes to see the new moon *over* his left shoulder."

"I beg his pardon, then," returned Bartley. "I ought to have said religions. The Squire has no religions."

The young fellow had a rich caressing voice, and a securely winning manner which comes from the habit of easily pleasing; in this charming tone and with this delightful insinuation, he often said things that hurt; but with such a humorous glance from his softly shaded eyes that people felt in some sort flattered at being taken into the joke, even while they winced under it.

The girl seemed to wince, as if, in spite of her familiarity with the fact, it wounded her to have her father's skepticism recognized just then. She said nothing, and he added, "I remember we used to think that a red-headed boy was worsetempered on account of his hair. But I don't believe the sorreltops, as we called them were any fierier than the rest of us."

Marcia did not answer at once, and then she said with the vagueness of one not greatly interested by the subject, "You've got a sorrel-top in your office that's fiery enough if she's anything like what she used to be when she went to school."

"Hannah Morrison?"

"Yes."

"Oh, she isn't so bad. She's pretty lively; but she's very eager to learn the business, and I guess we shall get along.

I think she wants to please me."

"Does she! But she must be going on seventeen, now."

"I dare say," answered the young man carelessly, but with perfect intelligence. "She's good-looking in her way, too."

"Oh! Then you admire red-hair."

He perceived the anxiety that the girl's pride could not keep out of her tone, but he answered indifferently: "I'm a little too near that color, myself. I hear that red hair's coming into fashion, but I guess it's natural I should prefer black."

She leaned back in her chair, and crushed the velvet collar of his coat under her neck in lifting her head to stare at the high-hung mezzotints and family photographs on the walls, while a flattered smile parted her lips, and there was a little thrill of joy in her voice. "I presume we must be a good deal behind the age in everything: at Equity."

'Well, you know my opinion of Equity," returned the young man. "If I didn't have you here to free my mind to, once in a while, I don't how what I should do."

She was so proud to be in the secret of his discontent with the narrow world of Equity, that she tempted him to disparage it farther by pretending to identify herself with it. "I don't see why

you abuse Equity to me. I've never been anywhere else, except those two winters at school. You'd better look out: I might expose you," she threatened fondly.

"I'm not afraid. Those two winters make a great difference. You saw girls from other places-from Augusta and Bangor and Bath."

Well, I couldn't see how they were so very different from Equity girls."

"I dare say they couldn't, either, if they judged from you."

She leaned forward again and begged for more flattery from him with her happy eyes. 'Why, what does make me so different from all the rest? I should really like to know."

"Oh, you don't expect me to tell you to your face!"

"Yes, to my face! I don't believe it's anything complimentary."

"No, it's nothing that you deserve any credit for."

"Pshaw!" cried the girl. "I know you're only talking to make fun of me. How do I know but you make fun of me to other girls, just as you do of them to me. Everybody says you're sarcastic."

"Have I ever been sarcastic with you?"

"You know I wouldn't stand it."

He made no reply, but she admired the ease with which he now turned from her, and took one book after another from the table at his elbow, saying some words of ridicule about each. It gave her a still deeper sense of his intellectual command when he finally discriminated, and began to read out a poem with studied elocutionary effects. He read in a low tone, but at last some responsive noises came from the *room* overhead; he closed the book, and threw himself into an attitude of deprecation with his eyes cast up to the ceiling.

"Chicago," he said, laying the book on the table, and taking his knee between his hands, while he dazzled her by speaking from the abstraction of one who has carried on a train of thought quite different from that on which he seemed to be intent, "Chicago is the place for me. I don't think I can stand Equity much longer. You know that chum of mine I told you about: he's written to me to come out there and go into the law with him at once."

"Why don't you go?" the girl forced herself to ask.

"Oh, I'm not ready, yet. Should you write to me if I went to Chicago?"

"I don't think you'd find my letters very interesting. You wouldn't want any news from Equity."

"Your letters wouldn't be interesting if you gave me the Equity news; but they would if you left it out. Then you'd have to write about yourself."

"Oh, I don't think that would interest anybody."

"Well, I feel almost like going out to Chicago to see."

"But I haven't promised to write yet," said the girl, laughing for joy in his humor.

"I shall have to stay in Equity till you do, then. Better promise at once."

"Wouldn't that be too much like marrying a man to get rid of him?"

"I don't think that's always such a bad plan - for the man." He waited for her to speak; but she had gone the length of her tether, in this direction. "Byron says:

"'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart-
'Tis woman's whole existence.'

Do you believe that?" He dwelt upon her with his free look, in the happy embarrassment with which she let her head droop.

"I don't know," she murmured. "I don't know anything about a man's life."

"It was the woman's I was asking about."

"I don't think I'm competent to answer."

Well, I'll tell you, then. I think Byron was mistaken. My experience is that when a man is in love, there's nothing else

of him. That's the reason I've kept out of it altogether, of late years. My advice is, Don't fall in love: it takes too much time." They both laughed at'this. "But about corresponding, now: you haven't said whether you would write to me, or not. Will you?"

"Can't you wait and see?" she asked, stealing a look at him, which she could not keep from being fond.

"No, no! Unless you wrote to me, I couldn't go to Chicago."

"Perhaps I ought to promise, then, at once."

"You mean that you wish me to go."

"You said that you were going. You oughtn't to let anything stand in the way of your doing the best you can for yourself."

"But you would miss me a little, wouldn't you? You would try to miss me, now and then?"

"Oh, you are here, pretty often. I don't think I should have much difficulty in missing you."

"Thanks, thanks! I can go with a light heart, now. Good-by!" He made a pretence of rising.

What! Are you going at once?"

"Yes, this very night - or to-morrow. Or no, I can't go tomorrow. There's something I was going to do to-morrow."

"Perhaps go to church."

"Oh, that, of course. But it was in the afternoon. Stop! I have it! I want you to go sleighriding with me in the afternoon."

"I don't know about that," Marcia began.

"But I do," said the young man. "Hold on: I'll put my request in writing." He opened her portefolio, which lay on the table. What elegant stationery! May I use some of this elegant stationery? The letter is to a lady-to open a correspondence. May I?" She laughed her assent; "How ought I to begin? Dearest Miss Marcia, or just Dear Marcia: which is best?"

"You had better not put either" -

"But I must. You're one or the other, you know. You're dear,-to your family-and you're Marcia: you can't deny it. The only question is whether you're the dearest of all the Miss Marcias. I may be mistaken, you know. We'll err on the safe side: Dear Marcia:" He wrote it down. "That looks well, and it reads well. It looks very natural, and it reads like poetry-blank verse; there's no rhyme for it that I can remember. Dear Marcia: Will you go sleigh-riding with me to-morrow afternoon at two o'clock sharp? Yours-Yours sincerely, or cordially, or affectionately, or what-ly? The Dear Marcia seems to call for something out of the common. I think it had better be affectionately." He suggested it with ironical gravity.

"And I think it had better be Truly," protested the girl.

"Truly, it shall be, then. Your word is law-statute in such case made and provided." He wrote With unalterable devotion, Yours truly, Bartley J. Hubbard," and read it aloud.

She leaned forward, and lightly caught it away from him, and made a feint of tearing it. He seized her hands. "Mr.Hubbard," she cried in undertone, "let me go, please."

"On two conditions-Promise *not to tear* up my letter, and promise to answer it in writing."

She hesitated long, letting him hold her wrists. At last she said, "Well," and he released her wrists on whose whiteness his clasp left red circles. She wrote a single word on the paper, and pushed it across the table to him. He rose with it, and went round to her side. "This is very nice. But you haven't spelled it correctly. Anybody would say this was No, to look at it; and you meant to write Yes. Take the pencil in your hand, Miss Gaylord, and I will steady your trembling nerves, so that you can form the characters. Stop! At the slightest resistance on your part, I will call out and alarm the house; or I will" - He put the pencil into her fingers, and took her soft fist into his, and changed the word, while she submitted, helpless *with* her smothered laughter. "Now the address. Dear" -

"No, no!" she protested.

"Yes, yes! Dear Mr.Hubbard. There, that will do! Now the signature: Yours" -

"I wont write that. I wont, indeed!"

"Oh, yes you will. You only think you wont. Yours gratefully, Marcia Gaylord. That's right. The Gaylord *is not very* legible, on account of a slight tremor in the writer's arm, resulting from a constrained posture, perhaps. Thanks, Miss Gaylord, I will be here promptly at the hour indicated" -

The noises renewed themselves overhead; some one seemed to be moving about. Hubbard laid his hand on that of the girl still resting on the table, and grasped it in burlesque alarm; she could scarcely stifle her mirth. He released her hand, and reaching his chair with a theatrical stride, sat there cowering till the noises ceased. Then he began to speak soberly, in a low voice. He spoke of himself; but in application of a lecture which they had lately heard, so that he seemed to be speaking of the lecture. It was on the formation of character, and he told of the processes by which he had formed his own character. They appeared very wonderful to her, and she marvelled at the ease with which he dismissed the frivolity of his recent mood, and was now all seriousness. When he came to speak of the influence of others upon him, she almost trembled with the intensity of her interest. "But of all the women I have known, Marcia," he said, "I believe you have had the strongest influence upon me. I believe you could make me do anything; but you have always influenced me for good; your influence upon me has been ennobling and elevating."

She wished to refuse his praise; but her heart throbbed for bliss and pride in it; her voice dissolved on her lips. They sat in silence; and he took in his the hand that she let hang over the side of her chair.

The lamp began to burn low; and she found words to say, "I had better get another," but she did not move.

"No; don't," he said; "I must be going, too. Look at the wick, there, Marcia: it scarcely reaches the oil. In a little while it will not reach it, and the flame will die out. That is the way the ambition to be good and great will die out of me when my life no longer draws its inspiration from your influence." This figure took her imagination; it seemed to her very beautiful; and his praise humbled her more and more. "Good-night," he said, in a low, sad voice. He gave her hand a last pressure, and rose to put on his coat. Her admiration of his words, her happiness in his flattery filled her brain like wine. She moved dizzily as she took up the lamp to light him to the door. "I have tired you," he said, tenderly, and he passed his hand around her to sustain the elbow of the arm with which she held the lamp; she wished to resist, but she could not try.

At the door he bent down his head and kissed her. "Good-night, dear-friend."

"Good night," she panted, and after the door had closed upon him, she stooped and kissed the knob on which his hand had rested.

As she turned, she started to see her father coming down the stairs with a candle in his hand. He had his black cravat tied round his throat, but no collar; otherwise he had on the rusty black clothes in which he ordinarily went about his affairs: the cassimere pantaloons, the satin vest, and the dresscoat which old fashioned

country lawyers still wore, ten years ago, in preference to a frock or sack. He stopped on one of the lower steps, and looked sharply down into her uplifted face, and as they stood confronted, their consanguinity came out in vivid resemblances and contrasts; his high, hawklike profile was translated into the fine aquiline outline of hers; the harsh rings of black hair, now grizzled with age, which clustered tightly over his head, except where they had retreated from his deeply seamed and wrinkled forehead, were the crinkled flow above her smooth, white brow; and the line of the bristly tufts that overhung his eyes was the same as that of the low arches above hers. Her complexion was from her mother: his skin was dusky yellow; but they had the same mouth and hers showed how sweet his mouth must have been in his youth'. His eyes, deep sunk in their cavernous sockets, had rekindled their dark fired in hers; his whole visage, softened to her sex and girlish years, looked up at him in his daughter's face.

"Why , father! Did we wake you?"

"No. I hadn't been asleep at all. I was coming down to read. But it's time you were in bed, Marcia."

"Yes, I'm going, now. There's a good fire in the parlor stove. "

The old man descended the remaining steps but turned at the parlor door, and looked again at his daughter with a glance

that arrested her with her foot on the lowest stair. "Marcia," he asked grimly, "are you engaged to Bartley Hubbard?"

The blood flashed up from her heart into her face like fire, and then as suddenly fell back again and left her white. She let her head droop and turn till her eyes were wholly averted from him, and she did not speak. He closed the door behind him and she went up stairs to her own room; in her shame she seemed to herself to crawl thither, with her father's glance burning upon her.

IX

KINNEY came into town the next morning bright and early, as he phrased it; but he did not stop at the hotel for Bartley till nine o'clock. "Thought I'd give you time for breakfast," he explained," and so I didn't hurry up any about gettin in my supplies."

It was a beautiful morning, so blindingly sunny, that Bartley winked as they drove up through the glistening street, and was glad to dip into the gloom of the first woods; it was not cold: the snow felt the warmth, and packed moistly under their runners. The air was perfectly still; at a distance on the mountain sides it sparkled as if full of diamond-dust. Far overhead some crows called. "The sun's getting high," said Bartley, with the light sigh of one to whom the thought of spring brings no hope.

"Well, I shouldn't begin to plough for corn just yet," replied Kinney. "It's curious," he went on, "to see how anxious we are to have a thing over, it don't much matter what it is, whether it's summer or winter. I suppose we'd feel different if we wa'n't sure there was going to be another of 'em. I guess that's one reason why the Lord concluded not to keep us clearly posted on the question of another life. If it wa'n't for the uncertainty of the thing, there are a lot of fellows like you that wouldn't stand it here a minute. Why if we had a dead sure thing of over-the-river-good climate, plenty to eat and wear, and not much to do-I don't believe any of us would keep Darling Minnie waiting, well, a great while. But you see the thing's all on paper, and that makes us cautious, and willing to hang on here a while longer. Looks splendid on the map: streets regularly laid out; public squares; band-stands; churches; solid blocks of houses with all the modern improvements; but you can't tell whether there's any town there till you're on the ground; and then if you don't like it, there's no way of gettin' back to the States."

He turned round upon Bartley, and opened his mouth wide to imply that this was pleasantry.

"Do you throw your philosophy in, all under the same price, Kinney?" asked the young fellow.