An Hour

The clock struck eleven.

“Look again, Gabriel; is there no light coming?”

“Not a ray, mother, and the night seems to darken every instant.”

“Surely, half an hour is time enough to reach the main land and find Dr. Firth.”

“Ample time; but Alec probably found the doctor absent, and is waiting for him.”

“But I bade the boy leave my message, and return at once. Every moment is precious; what can we do?”

“Nothing but wait.”

An impatient sigh was the only answer vouchsafed to the unpalatable advice, and silence fell again upon the anxious watchers in the room. Still leaning in the deep recess of the window, the young man looked out into the murky night, listened to the flow of the great river rolling to the sea, and let the unquiet current of his thoughts drift him whithersoever it would. His imaginative temperament found a sad similitude between the night and his own mood, for neither his physical nor mental eye could see what lay before him, and in his life there seemed to have come an hour as full of suspense, as prophetic of storm, as that which now oppressed the earth and lowered in the sky.

Every instant that brought the peace of death nearer to the father, also brought the cares of life nearer to the son, and their grim aspect daunted him. The child of a Northern mother, bred at the North by her dying desire, he had been summoned home to take the old man’s place, and receive a slave-cursed inheritance into his keeping. Had he stood alone, his task would have been an easy one; for an upright nature, an enthusiastic spirit, would have found more sweetness than bitterness in a sacrifice made for conscience sake, more pride than pain in a just deed generously performed. But a step-mother and her daughters were dependent on him now, for the old man’s sudden seizure left him no time to make provision for them; and the son found a double burden laid upon his shoulders when he returned to what for years had been a loveless home to him. To reduce three delicately nurtured women to indigence

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT
seemed a cruel and Quixotic act to others, a very hard, though righteous one to him; for poverty looked less terrible than affluence founded upon human blood and tears. He had resolved to set aside all private ambitions and aspirations that he might dedicate his life to his kindred; had manfully withstood their ridicule and reproaches, and only faltered when, in their hour of bereavement, they appealed to him with tears and prayers. Then pity threatened to conquer principle, for Gabriel’s heart was as gentle as it was generous. Three days of sorrowful suspense and inward strife had passed; now death seemed about to set its seal upon one life, and irresolution to mar another, for Gabriel still wavered between duty and desire, crying within himself, “Lord, help me! I see the right, but I am not strong enough to do it; let it be decided for me.”

It was—suddenly, entirely, and forever!

The tinkle of a bell roused him from his moody reverie, and, without quitting the shadow of the half-drawn curtain, he watched the scene before him with the interest of one in whom both soul and sense were alert to interpret and accept the divine decree which he had asked, in whatever guise it came. The bell summoned a person whose entrance seemed to bring warmth, vitality and light into that gloomy room, although she was only a servant, with the blood of a despised race in her veins. More beautiful than either of her young mistresses, she looked like some brilliant flower of the tropics beside two pale exotics, and the unavoidable consciousness of this showed itself in the skill with which she made her simple dress a foil to her beauty, in the carriage of her graceful head and the sad pride of her eyes, as if, being denied all the other rights of womanhood, the slave clung to and cherished the one possession which those happier women lacked. As she entered, noiselessly, she gave one keen, comprehensive glance about the room,—a glance that took in the gray head and pallid face upon the pillow, the languid lady sitting at the bedside, the young sisters spent with weeping and watching, half asleep in either corner of a couch, and the man’s glove that lay beside a brace of pistols on a distant table. Then her eyes fell, all expression faded from her face, and she stood before her mistress with a meek air, curiously at variance with the animated aspect she had worn on entering.
“Milly, are you sure you gave Alec my message correctly?” asked Mrs. Butler, imperiously, with a look of unconcealed dislike.

“Yes, missis, I gave it word for word.”

The voice that answered would have gone straight to a stranger’s heart and made it ache, for a world of hopeless patience rendered its music pathetic, and dignified the little speech, as if the woman’s spirit uttered a protest in every word that passed her lips.

“He has been gone nearly an hour. I can wait no longer. Tell Andy to go at once and see what keeps him.”

“Andy’s down at the landing, seeing to the boats before the storm, missis.”

“Let Tony do that, and send Andy off at once.”

“Tony’s too cut up with his last whipping to stir.”

“How very tiresome! Where is overseer Neal?”

“Sick, missis.”

“Sick! I saw him two hours ago, and he was perfectly well then.”

“He was taken very suddenly, but he’ll be out of pain by morning.”

As Milly spoke, with a slight motion of the lips that would have been a scornful smile had she not checked it, a faint, far-off cry came on the wind; a cry of mortal fear or pain it seemed, and so full of ominous suggestion that, though inured to sounds of suffering, Mrs. Butler involuntarily exclaimed,—

“What is that?”

“It’s only Rachel screaming for her baby; the last thing old master did was to sell it, and she’s been crazy ever since,” answered Milly, with a peculiar quickening of the breath and a sidelong glance.

“Foolish creature! but never mind her now: tell me who is about that I can send for Dr. Firth.”

“There’s no one in the house but blind Sandra and me.”

“What do you mean? Who gave the people leave to go?”

“I did.”

Hitherto the girl had spoken in the subdued tone of a well-trained servant, though there was no trace of her race in her speech but a word or two here and there; for Milly’s beauty had secured for her all the advantages which would increase her...
value as a chattel. But in the utterance of the last two words her voice rose with a sudden ring that arrested Mrs. Butler’s attention, and caused her to glance sharply at the girl. Milly stood before her meek and motionless, and not an eyelash stirred during that brief scrutiny. Her mistress could not see the mingled triumph and abhorrence burning in those averted eyes, did not observe the close clenching of the hand that hung at her side, nor guess what a sea of black and bitter memories was surging in her comely handmaid’s heart.

“How dared you send the servants away without my orders?” demanded Mrs. Butler, in an irritated and irritating voice.

“Master Gabriel said the house must be kept very quiet on old master’s account; I couldn’t make the boys mind, so I sent them to the quarters.”

“This is not the first time you have presumed upon my son’s favor, and exceeded my orders. You have been spoiled by indulgence, but that shall be altered soon.”

“Yes, missis,—it shall;” and as the girl added the latter words below her breath, there was a glitter as of white teeth firmly set lest some impetuous speech should break loose in spite of her. Her mistress did not mark that little demonstration, for her mind was occupied with its one care, as she said, half aloud, half to herself,—

“What shall I do? The night is passing, your master needs help, and Alec has evidently forgotten, or never received, my message.”

For the first time an expression of anxiety was visible on Milly’s face, and there was more eagerness than deference in her suggestion:

“Master Gabriel might go; it would save time and make the matter sure, as missis doubts my word.”

“It is impossible; his father might rouse and ask for him, and I will not be left alone. It is not his place to carry messages, nor yours to propose it. Quick! lift your master’s head, and chafe his hands. God help us all!”

A low sigh from the bed caused the sudden change from displeasure to distress, as Mrs. Butler bent over her husband, forgetful of all else. What a strange smile flashed across Milly’s face, and kindled the dark fire of her eyes, as she looked down upon the master and mistress, whose helplessness and grief touched
no chord of pity or sympathy in her heart! Only an instant did she stand so, but in that instant the expression of her face was fully revealed, not to the drowsy sisters, but to Gabriel in his covert. He saw it, but before he could fathom its significance it was hidden from him; and when his mother looked up there was nothing to be seen but the handsome head bending over the pale hand that Milly was assiduously chafing. Something in the touch of those warm palms seemed to rouse in the old man a momentary flicker of memory and strength, for the last thought that had disturbed his failing consciousness found utterance in broken words:

“I promised her her liberty,—she shall have it; wait a little, Milly,—wait till I am better.”

“Yes, master, I can wait now;” and the girl’s eye turned toward the clock with an impatient glance.

The old man did not hear her, for, with an incoherent murmur, he seemed to sink into a deeper lethargy than before. His wife believed him dying; and cried, as she wrung her hands in a paroxysm of despairing helplessness,—

“Look out, Milly, look out! and if no one is coming, run to the quarters and send off the first boy you meet.”

Milly moved deliberately toward the window, but paused half-way to ask, with the same shade of anxiety flitting over her face,—

“Where is Master Gabriel? shouldn’t he be called?”

“He was here a moment ago, and has gone to the landing, doubtless; you can call him as you go.”

With sudden eagerness the girl glided to the window, now too intent upon some purpose of her own to see the dark outline of a figure half concealed in the deep folds of the curtain; and, leaning far out, she peered into the gloom with an intentness that sharpened every feature.

“There is no one coming, missis,” she said, raising her voice unnecessarily, as one listener thought, unless the momentary stillness made any sound seem unusually loud. As the words left her lips, from below there came a soft chirp as of some restless bird; it was twice repeated, then came a pause, and in it, with a rapid, noiseless gesture, Milly drew a handkerchief from her pocket and dropped it from the window. It fluttered whitely for a moment, and as it disappeared an acute ear might have caught
the sound of footsteps stealing stealthily away. Milly evidently heard them, for an expression of relief began to dawn upon her face. Suddenly it changed to one of terror, as, in the act of withdrawing her arm, a strong hand grasped it, and Gabriel's voice demanded,—

“What does this mean, Milly?”

For a moment she struggled like some wild creature caught in a net, then steadied herself by a desperate effort, exclaiming, breathlessly,—

“Oh, Master Gabriel, how you frightened me!”

“I meant to. Now tell what all this means, at once and truly,” he said, in a tone intended to be stern, but which was only serious and troubled.

“All what means, sir?” she answered, feigning innocent surprise, though her eye never met his, and she still trembled in his hold.

“You know; the signals, the dropping of the handkerchief, the steps below there, and the figure creeping through the grass.”

“Master must have quick eyes and ears to see and hear all that in such a minute. I only saw my handkerchief drop by accident; I only heard a bird chirp, and one of the dogs creep round the house;” but as she spoke she cast an uneasy glance over her shoulder into the night without.

“Why lie to me, Milly? I have watched you ever since you came in, and you are not yourself to-night. Something is wrong; I’ve felt it all day, but thought it was anxiety for my poor father. Why are all the people sent off to the quarters? Why is Andy meddling with the boats without my orders? and why do you look, speak, and act in this inexplicable manner?”

“If master gets worried and imagines mischief when there is none, I can’t help it,” she said, doggedly.

Both while speaking and listening Gabriel had scrutinized her closely, and all he saw confirmed his suspicion that something serious was amiss. In the slender wrist he held the pulse thrilled quick and strong; he heard the rapid beating of her heart, the flutter of the breath upon her lips; saw that her face was colorless, her eyes both restless and elusive. He was sure that no transient fear agitated her, but felt that some unwonted excitement possessed her, threatening to break out in spite of the self-control which years of servitude had taught her. What he
had just seen and heard alarmed him; for his father had been a hard master, the island was governed by fear alone, and he never trod the dykes that bounded the long, low rice-fields without feeling as if he walked upon a crater-crust which might crack and spew fire any day. Many small omens of evil had occurred of late, which now returned to his recollection with sinister significance; and the vague disquiet that had haunted him all day now seemed an instinctive premonition of impending danger. Many fears flashed through his mind, and one resolution was firmly fixed. His face grew stern, his voice commanding, and his hand tightened its hold as he said,—

“Speak, Milly, or I shall be tempted to use my authority as a master, and that I never wish to do. If there is any deviltry afloat I must know it; and if you will not tell it me I shall search the island till I find it for myself.”

She looked at him for the first time, as he spoke, with a curious blending of defiance for the master and admiration for the man. His last words changed it to one of fear; and her free hand was extended as if to bar his way, while she said, below her breath, and with another glance into the outer gloom,—

“You are safe here, but if you leave the house it will cost you your life.”

“Then it must; for if you will not show me the peril, I swear I’ll go to meet it blindly.”

“No, no, wait a little; I dare not tell!”

“You shall tell. I am the mistress here, and have borne enough. Speak, girl, at once, or this proud spirit of yours shall be broken till you do.”

Mrs. Butler had heard all that passed, had approached them, and being a woman who was by turns imperious, peevish, and passionate, she yielded to the latter impulse as she spoke, and gave the girl’s shoulder an impatient shake, as if to force the truth out of her. The touch, the tone, were like sparks to powder; for the smouldering fire blazed up as Milly flung her off, wrenched herself free from Gabriel, and turned on his mother with a look that sent her back to her husband trembling and dismayed.

“Yes, I will speak, though it is too soon!” cried Milly, with a short, sharp laugh. “They may kill me for telling before the time; I can’t help it; I must have one hour of freedom, if I die
the next. There is deviltry afloat to-night, and it is yourselves you may blame for it. We can’t bear any more, and before a new master comes to torment us like the old one, we’ve determined to try for liberty, though there’ll be bloody work before we get it. The boys are not at the quarters, but fifty are waiting at the rice-mill till midnight, and then they’ll come up here to do as they’ve been done by. While they wait they’re beginning with overseer Neal; whipping, burning, torturing him, for all I know, as other men, and women too, have been whipped, burnt and tortured there. That was his scream you heard. Alec never went for the doctor; Andy’s guarding the boats till we want them; big Mose is watching round the house; the alarm bell’s down; I’ve cleared the house of arms, and spoilt the pistols that I dared not take; Master Gabriel’s the only white man on the island, and there’s no help for you unless the Lord turns against us. Who is the mistress now?"

The girl paused there, breathless but exultant, for the words had poured from her lips as if the pent-up degradation, wrath and wrong of nineteen years had broken bounds at last and must overflow, even though they wrecked her by their vehemence. Some spirit stronger than herself seemed to possess and speak out of her, making her look like an embodied passion, beautiful, yet terrible, as she glanced from face to face, seeing how pale and panic-stricken each became, as her rapid words made visible the retribution that hung over them. Gabriel stood aghast at the swift and awful answer given to his prayer; the daughters fled to their mother’s arms for shelter; the wife clung to her husband for the protection which he could no longer give, and, as if dragged back to life by the weight of a woe, such as he had himself inflicted upon others, the old man rose up in his bed, speechless, helpless, yet conscious of the dangers of the hour, and doubly daunted by death’s terrors, because so powerless to succor those for whom he had periled his own soul. A bitter cry broke from him as his last look showed him the impending doom which all his impotent remorse could not avert, and in that cry the old man’s spirit passed, to find that, even for such as he, Infinite justice was tempered by Infinite mercy.

During the few moments in which the wife and daughters forgot fear in sorrow, and the son took hurried counsel with himself how best to meet the coming danger, Milly was learning
that the bitter far exceeds the sweet in human vengeance. The slave exulted in the freedom so dearly purchased, but the woman felt that in avenging them her wrongs had lost their dignity, and though she had changed places with her mistress, she found that power did not bring her peace. She had no skill to analyze the feeling, no words in which to express it, even to herself, but she was so strongly conscious of it, that its mysterious power marred the joy she thought to feel, and forced her to confess that in the hour of expected triumph she was baffled and defeated by her own conscience. With women doomed to a fate like hers, the higher the order of intelligence the deeper the sense of degradation, the more intense the yearning for liberty at any price. Milly had always rebelled against her lot, although, compared with that of her class, it had not been a hard one till the elder Butler bought her, that his son, seeing slavery in such a lovely form, might learn to love it. But Gabriel, in his brief visits, soon convinced his father that no temptation could undermine his sturdy Northern sense of right and justice, and though he might easily learn to love the beautiful woman, he could not learn to oppress the slave whose utter helplessness appealed to all that was manliest in him.

Milly felt this deeply, and knew that the few black drops in her veins parted herself and Gabriel more hopelessly than the widest seas that ever rolled between two lovers. This inexorable fact made all the world look dark to her; life became a burden, and one purpose alone sustained her,—the resolution to achieve her own liberty, to enjoy a brief triumph over those who had wronged her, then to die, and find compensation for a hapless human love in the fatherly tenderness of a Divine one. She had prayed, worked and waited for this hour, with all the ardor, energy and patience of her nature. Yet when it came she was not satisfied; a sense of guilt oppressed her, and the loss seemed greater than the gain. Gabriel had given her a look which wounded more deeply than the sharpest reproach; and the knowledge that she had forfeited the confidence he had always shown her, now made her gloomy when she would have been glad, humble when she thought to have been proudest. Gabriel saw and understood her mood, felt that their only hope of deliverance lay in her, and while his mother and sisters lamented for the dead he bestirred himself to save the living.
“Milly,” he began, with sad seriousness, “we deserve no mercy, and I ask none for myself; I only implore you to spare the women and give me time to atone for the weak, the wicked hesitation which has brought us to this pass. I meant to free you all as soon as you were legally mine, as it was too late for my father to endear his memory by one just act. But it was hard to make my mother and my sisters poor, and so I waited, hoping to be shown some way by which I could be just and generous both to you and them.”

“Three women were more precious than two hundred helpless creatures in the eyes of a Christian gentleman from the free North! I’m glad you told me this;” and there was something like contempt in the look she gave her master.

There was no answer to that, for it was true; and in the remorseful shame that sent the blood to Gabriel’s forehead, he confessed the fact which he was too honest to deny. Still looking at her, with eyes that pleaded for him better than his words, he said, with a humility that conquered her disdain,—

“I shall expiate that sin if I die to-night; and I will give myself up to be dealt with as you please, if you will save my mother and my sisters, and let them free you in my name. Before God and my dead father I promise this, upon my honor!”

“There are no witnesses to that but those whom I’ll not trust; honor means nothing to us who are not allowed to keep our own,” said Milly, looking moodily upon the ground, as if she feared to look up lest she should relent, for excitement was ebbing fast, and a flood of regretful recollections rising in her heart.

“I did not expect that reproach from you,” Gabriel answered, taking courage from the signs he saw. “Do you remember, when my father gave you to me, how indignantly I rejected the gift, and promised that in my eyes you should be as sacred as either of those poor girls? Have I not kept my word, Milly?”

“Yes! O yes!” she said, with trembling lips, and eyes she dared not lift, they were so full of grateful tears. Carefully steadying her traitorous voice, she added, earnestly, “Master Gabriel! I do remember, and I’ve tried all day to save you, but you wouldn’t go. I will trust your word, and do my best to help the ladies, if they’ll promise to free us all to-morrow, and you will leave the island at once. Mose will let you pass; for that handkerchief was dropped to tell him that you were abroad, and were to be got
off against your will, if you wouldn’t go quietly. Both he and Andy will save you for my sake; the others won’t, because they don’t know you as we do. Please go, Master Gabriel, before it is too late.”

“No, I shall stay. What would you think of me, if I deserted these helpless women in such danger, to save myself at their expense? I cannot quite trust you, Milly, after treachery like this.”

“Who taught us to be treacherous, and left us nothing but our own cunning to help ourselves with?”

The first part of Gabriel’s speech made the last less hard to bear; and Milly’s question was put in a tone that was more apologetic than accusatory, for Gabriel cared what she thought of him, and that speech comforted her.

“Not I, Milly; but let the sins of the dead rest, and tell me if you will not help my mother and Grace and Clara off, instead of me? The promise will be all the sooner and the better kept, or, if it comes too late, I shall be the only and the fittest person to pay the penalty.”

Milly’s face darkened, and she turned away with an expression of keen disappointment. Mrs. Butler and her daughters had restrained their lamentations to listen; but at the sound of Gabriel’s proposal, the sisters ran to Milly, and, clinging about her knees, implored her to pity, forgive, and save them. Well for them that they did so; for Milly felt as if many degradations were cancelled by that act, and, as she saw her young mistresses at her feet, the sense of power soothed her sore heart, and added the grace of generosity to the duty of forgiveness. She did not speak, yet she did not deny their prayer, and stood wavering between doubt and desire as the fateful moments rapidly flew by; Gabriel remembered that, and, taking her hand, said, in a voice whose earnestness was perilously persuasive to the poor girl’s ear,—

“Milly, you said there was no hope for us unless God turned against you. I think He has, and, speaking through that generous heart of yours, pleads for us better than we can plead for ourselves. It is so beautiful to pity, so magnanimous to forgive; and the greater the wrong, the more pardon humbles the transgressor and ennobles the bestower. Dear Milly, spare these poor girls as you have been spared; prove yourself the truer woman,
the nobler mistress; teach them a lesson which they never can forget, and sweeten your liberty with the memory of this act.”

Milly listened still with downcast eyes and averted face, but every word went straight to her heart, soothing, strengthening, inspiring all that was best and bravest in that poor heart, so passionate, and yet so warm and womanly withal. No man had ever spoken to her before of magnanimity, of proving herself superior to those who had shown no mercy to her faults, accorded no praise to her virtues, nor lightened a hard servitude with any touch of friendliness. No man had ever looked into her face before with eyes in which admiration for her beauty was mingled with pity for her helpless womanhood; and, better than all, no man, old or young, had ever until now recognized in her a fellow-creature, born to the same rights, gifted with the same powers, and capable of the same sufferings and sacrifices as himself. That touched and won her; that appealed to the spirit which lives through all oppression in the lowest of God’s children; and through all her frame there went a glow of warmth and joy, as if some strong, kind hand had lifted her from the gloom of a desolate despair into the sunshine of a happier world. Her eye wandered toward the faces of dead master, conquered mistress, and darkened as it looked; passed to the pale girls still clinging to her skirts, and softened visibly; was lifted to Gabriel, and kindled with the new-born desire to prove herself worthy of the confidence which would be her best reward. A smile broke beautifully across her face, and her lips were parted to reply, when Mrs. Butler, who sat trembling behind her, cried, in a shrill, imploring whisper,—

“Remember all I’ve done for you, Milly, all I still have it in my power to do. I promise to free you, if you will only save us now. Be merciful, for your old master’s sake, if not for mine.”

The sound of that querulous voice seemed to sting Milly like a lash, threatening to undo all Gabriel’s work. Her eye grew fiery again, her mouth hard, her face bitterly scornful, as she said, with a glance which her mistress never forgot,—

“I’m not likely to forget all you’ve done for me; I would not accept my liberty from you if you could give it; and if a word of mine could save you, I’d not say it for old master’s sake, much less for yours.”
With a warning gesture to his mother, Gabriel turned that
defiant face toward himself, and holding it firmly yet gently be-
tween his hands, bent on it a look that allayed the rising storm
by the magic of a power which the young man had never used
till now, though conscious of possessing it,—for Milly’s tell-tale
countenance had betrayed her secret long ago. As he looked
deep into her eyes, with a glance which was both commanding
and compassionate, they first fell with sudden shame, then, as if
controlled by the power of those other eyes, they rose again and
met them with a sad sincerity that made their beauty tragical,
as they filled slowly till two great tears rolled down her cheeks,
waying the hands that touched them; and when Gabriel said,
softly, “For my sake you will save us?” she straightway answered,
“Yes.”

“God bless you, Milly! Now tell me how I am to help you,
for time is going, and lives hang on the minutes.”

He released her as he spoke; and, though she still looked at
him as if he were the one saving power of her thwarted life, she
answered, pleadingly,—

“How still the room grew as they waited! The presence of
death was less solemn than that of fear, for the dead seemed for-
gotten, and the living all unconscious of the awesome contrast
between the pale expectancy of their panic-stricken faces and
the repose of that one untroubled countenance. How suddenly
the night grew full of ominous sounds! How intently all eyes
were fixed upon the beautiful woman who stood among them
holding their lives in her hands, and how they started, when,
through the hush, came a soft chime as the half-hour struck!
Milly heard and answered that silvery sound as the anxious
watchers would have had her:

“It can be done,” she said, in a tone which carried hope to
every heart. “It can be done, but I must do it alone, for I can
pass Mose and get Andy across the river without their suspect-
ing that I’m going for help. You must stay here and do your
best to guard the ladies, Master Gabriel; it won’t be safe for any
of you to go now.”

“But, Milly, the boys may not wait till twelve, or you may be
delayed, and then we are lost.”
“I have thought of that; and as I go out I’ll take old Sandra with me; she’ll understand in a minute. She’ll go down to the mill and talk to them and keep them, if anything can do it, for they love and fear her more than any one on the island. Be quiet, trust to me, and I’ll save you, Master Gabriel.”

He silently held out his hand, as if pledging his word to obey and trust. With the warmth and grace of her impulsive temperament, Milly bent her head, laid her cheek against that friendly hand, wet it with grateful tears, kissed it with loving lips, and went her way, feeling as if all things were possible to her for Gabriel’s sake.

Listening breathlessly, they heard her foot-falls die away, heard Sandra’s voice below, a short parley with Mose, then watched the old woman and the young depart in opposite directions, leaving them to feel the bitterness of dependence in a strange, stern fashion, which they had never thought to know. Man-like, Gabriel could not long stand idle while danger menaced and women faced it for him. Anxious to take such precautions as might hold the expected assailants at bay, even for a moment, he bade his mother and sisters remain quiet, that no suspicion might be excited, and crept down to test the capabilities of the house to withstand a short siege, if other hopes failed. The slight, many-doored and windowed mansion, built for a brief occupancy when the winter months rendered the region habitable for whites, was but ill-prepared to repel any attack; and a hasty survey convinced Gabriel that it was both hazardous and vain to attempt a barricade which a few strong arms could instantly destroy. As he stood disheartened, unarmed, and alone in the long hall, dimly lighted by the lamp he carried, a sense of utter desolation came over him, dampening his courage, and oppressing his mind with the dreariest forebodings. Thinking of the many true hearts and stout arms far away there at the North, which would have come to his aid so readily could his need have been known, he yearned for a single friend, a single weapon, that he might conquer or die like a man. And both were given him.

Pausing before a door that opened out upon the rear of the house, his eye caught sight of a heavy whip, whose loaded handle had felled men before now, and might easily do so again, if wielded by a strong arm. He took it down, saying to himself,
“It is the first time I ever touched the accursed thing; God grant that it may be the last.” A low sound behind him caused the blood to chill an instant in his veins, then to rush on with a quicker flow, as, poising the weapon in one hand, he lifted the lamp above his head, and searched the gloom. Far at the other end of the long hall a dark figure crept along, and a pair of glittering eyes were fixed upon his own. “Come on; I’m ready,” he said, steadily, and was answered by the patter of rapid steps, the sight of an unexpected ally, as a great black hound came leaping upon him in a rapture of canine delight. Old Mort had been the fiercest, most efficient blood-hound on the island; and still, in spite of age, was a formidable beast, ready to track or assault a negro, and pull him down or throttle him, at word of command. He had been his possessor’s favorite till Gabriel came; then he deserted the old master for the young, and was always left at large when he was at home. Mort had been missing all day, and now the rope trailing behind him was sufficient evidence that he had been decoyed away, lest his vigilance should warn his master, and that, having freed himself, he had stolen home, to lie concealed till night and his master’s presence reassured him.

As the great creature reared himself before the young man, with a paw on either shoulder, and looked into his face with eyes that seemed almost human in their intelligent affection, Gabriel dropped the whip, put down the lamp, and caressed the hound with an almost boyish gratitude and fondness; for, with the sense of security this powerful ally brought, there came a remorseful memory, that, though the possessor of two hundred human beings, he had no friend but a dog. At this point Mort suddenly pricked up his ears, slipped from his master’s hold, and snuffed suspiciously at the closed door. Some one was evidently without, and the creature’s keen scent detected the unseen listener. With a noiseless command to the dog to keep quiet, Gabriel caught up his only weapon, and stood waiting for whatever demonstration should follow. None came; and presently Mort returned to him with a sagacious glance and a sleepy yawn, sure evidences that Mose had paused a moment in his round, and had gone on again. Big Mose was, with one exception, the strongest, most rebellious slave on the place; and
though Gabriel had longed to rush out and attack him, he had not dared to try it, for his strength was as a child’s compared to the stalwart slave’s. Now, with Mort to help him, the thing was possible; and as he stood there, with only a door between him and the man who had sworn to take his life, a strange consciousness of power came to him; his muscles seemed to grow firm as iron, his blood flowed calm and cool, and in his mind there rose a purpose, desperately simple, yet wise, despite its seeming rashness. He would master Mose, and, leaving Mort to guard him, would go down to the mill, and, if both Sandra’s and his own appeals and promises proved unavailing, would give himself up, hoping that his death or torture would delay the doom of those defenceless women, and give Milly time to bring them better help than any he could give. Some atonement must be made, he thought, and perhaps innocent blood would wash the black stain from his father’s memory better than the deed he had hoped to do in that father’s name on the morrow. He had held a precious opportunity in his hands, had delayed through a mistaken kindness; now it was lost, perhaps forever, and he must pay the costly price which God exacts of those who palter with their consciences. As the thought came, and the purpose grew, it brought with it that high courage, that entire self-abnegation which we call heroism; and that fateful moment made Gabriel a man.

A word, a gesture, put the dog upon his mettle; then cutting away the long rope, Gabriel threw it over his arm, unbarred the door, set it ajar, and, standing behind it, with the hound under his hand, he waited for Mose to make his round. Soon Mort’s restless ears gave token of his approach; and, as the stealthy steps came stealing on, he was with difficulty restrained; for now instinct showed him danger, and he was as eager as his master to be up and doing. The streak of light attracted the man’s eye. He paused, drew nearer, listened; then softly pushed the door open, and leaned in to reconnoitre. That instant Mort was on him, a heavy blow half stunned him, and, before his scattered wits could be collected, he was down, his hands fast bound, and both master and dog standing over him panting, but unhurt.

“Now, Mose, if you want to save your life, be still, and answer my questions truly,” said Gabriel, with one hand on the man’s
throat, the other holding back Mort, whose tawny eye was savage now. “I know your plot, and have found means to spoil it. How do you think I’m going to punish you all?”

“Dun’no, massa,” muttered Mose, with a grim resignation to any fate.

“I’m going to free every man, woman, and child on the island, and fling that devilish thing into the river,” he said, as he spurned the whip with his foot.

An incredulous look and derisive grin was the only thanks and answer he received.

“You don’t believe it? Well, who can blame you, poor soul? Not I. Now tell me how many men are on the watch between here and the rice-mill?” Gabriel spoke with a flash of the eye and a sudden deepening of the voice; for both indignation and excitement stirred him. The look, the tone, did more to convince Mose than a flood of words; for he had learned to try men by tests of his own, and had more faith in the promises of their faces than those of their tongues. More respectfully, he said,—

“No one, ’sides me, massa. Andy’s at de landin’, and de rest at de mill ’ceptin’ dem as isn’t in de secret.”

“Mind, no lies, Mose, or your free papers will be the last I sign to-morrow. Get up, and come quietly with me; for if you try to run, Mort will pin you. I’m going to the mill, and want you safely under lock and key first.”

“Is massa gwine alone?” asked Mose, glancing about him, for Gabriel spoke as if he had a score of men at his command.

“Yes, I’m going alone; why not?”

“Massa knows dere’s fifty of de boys dar sworn to kill him, if Milly don’t git him ’way ’fore dey comes up?”

“I know, and Milly’s done her best to get me off, but I’d rather stay; I’m not afraid.”

Gabriel’s blood was up now: danger had no terrors for him; and, beyond the excitement of the moment, his purpose lent him a calm courage which impressed the slave as something superhuman. Like one in a maze of doubt and fear, he obediently followed his master to an out-house, where, binding feet as well as hands, Gabriel left him with the promise and the warning,—

“Sit here till I come to let you out a free man, if I live to do it. Don’t stir nor call, for Mort will be at the door to silence you
and howl for me, if you try any tricks. I’ll not keep you long, if I can help it.”

The slave only stared dumbly at him, incapable of receiving the vast idea of liberty, pardon, and kindness all at once; and bidding Mort guard both prisoner and house, Gabriel stole along the path that wound away through grove and garden to the rice-mill, where so many fates were soon to be decided. As he went he glanced from earth to sky, and found propitious omens everywhere. No flowery thicket concealed a lurking foe to clutch at him in the dark; but the fragrance of trodden grass, the dewy touch of leaves against his cheek, the peaceful night-sounds that surrounded him, gave him strange comfort and encouragement; for when his fellow-creatures had deserted, Nature took him to her motherly heart. From above, fitful glimpses of the moon guided him on his perilous way; for the wind had changed, the black clouds were driving seaward, and the storm was passing without either thunderbolt or hurricane. Coming, at length, within sight of the half-ruined mill, he paused to reconnoitre. Through chinks in the rude walls a dim light shone, muffled voices rose and fell; and once there was a hoarse sound, as of a half-uttered shout. Creeping warily to a dark nook among the ruins, Gabriel made his way to a crevice in an inner wall, and, looking through it, saw a sight little fitted to reassure him, either as a master or a man.

The long, low-raftered portion of the mill, which once had been the threshing-floor, was now lighted by the red glare of several torches, which filled the place with weird shadows, and sudden glimpses of objects that seemed the more mysterious or terrible for being but half seen. In one corner, under a coarse covering, something lay stark and still; a clenched hand was visible, and several locks of light hair dabbled with blood, but nothing more. Fifty men, old and young, of all shades of color, all types of their unhappy race, stood or sat about three, who evidently were the leaders of the league. One, a young man, so fair that the red lines across his shoulders looked doubly barbarous there, was half-kneeling, and steadily filing at a chain that held his feet together as his hands had been held till some patient friend had freed them, and left him to finish the slow task. He worked so eagerly that the drops stood thick upon
his haggard face, and his scarred chest heaved with his painful breath; for this was the Tony who was too much cut up with his last whipping to run on Mrs. Butler’s errand, but not too feeble to strike a blow for liberty. The second man was as near an animal as a human creature could become, and yet be recognized as such. A burly, brutal-looking negro, maimed and distorted by every cruelty that could be invented or inflicted, he was a sight to daunt the stoutest heart, as he sat sharpening the knife which had often threatened him in the overseer’s hand, and was still red with the overseer’s blood.

Standing erect between the two, and in striking contrast to them, was a gigantic man, with a fine, dark face, a noble head, and the limbs of an ebony Hercules. A native African, from one of those tribes whose wills are never broken,—who can be subdued by kindness, but who often kill themselves rather than suffer the degradation of the lash. No one had dared to subject him to that chastisement, as was proved by the unmarred smoothness of the muscular body, bare to the waist; but round his neck was riveted an iron collar, with four curved spikes. It was a shameful badge of serfdom; it prevented him from lying down, it galled him with its ceaseless chafing, yet he wore it with an air which would have made the hideous necklace seem some barbaric ornament, if that had been possible; and faced the excited crowd with a native dignity which nothing could destroy, and which proved him their master in intelligence, as well as strength and courage.

Before them all, yet lifted a little above them by her position on a fallen fragment of the roof, stood old Cassandra. A tall, gaunt woman, with a countenance which age, in making venerable, had not robbed of its vigor; her sightless eyes were wide open with a weird effect of seeing without sight, and her high white turban, her long staff, and the involuntary tremor of her shrunken hands, gave her the air of some ancient sorceress or priestess, bearing her part in some heathen rite. The majestic-looking slave with the collar had apparently been speaking, for his face was turned toward her, and his dark features were still alive with the emotions which had just found vent in words. As Gabriel looked, old Sandra struck the floor with her staff, as if commanding silence; and, as the stir of some momentary outbreak subsided, she said, in a strong voice, which rose and
fell in a sort of solemn chant as her earnestness increased and
her listeners grew obedient to its spell,—

“Chil’en, I’se heerd yer plans,—now I wants ter len’ a han’
and help you in dis hour of tribbleation. You’s killed oberseer
Neal, and d’rectly you’s all gwine up ter de house to kill massa,
missis and de young folks. Now what’s you gwine to do dat fer?
and what’s dey eber done bad nuf ter make you willin’ ter fro
’way yer souls dis night?”

“Kase we can’t b’ar no more.” “Old massa hunted my boy
wid hounds and dey tore him ter def.” “He sold my chil’en and
drove Rachel crazy wid de partin’?” “Old missis had my pore girl
whipped kase she was too sick ter stan’ and dress her.” “Massa
Gabriel may be harder dan de ole one, and we’s tired ob hell.”

These, and many another short, stern answer, came to San-
dra’s question; she expected them, was ready to meet them, and
knew how best to reach the outraged hearts now hungering
for vengeance. Her well-known afflictions, her patience, her
piety, gave a certain sanctity to her presence, great weight to
her words, and an almost marvellous power to her influence
over her own people, who believed her to be half saint, half
seer. She felt her power, and, guided by an instinct that seldom
failed, she used it wisely in this perilous hour, remembering
that her listeners, though men in their passions, were children
in their feelings.

“You pore boys, I knows de troof ob all dat, and I’se had
my trubbles hard and heavy as you has, but I’se learnt to fergib
’em, and dey don’t hurt now. Ole massa bought me thirty year’
ago ’way from all I keered fer, and I’se slaved for him widout
no t’anks, no wages, eber since; but I’se fergived him dat. He
sole my chil’en, all ten; my boys up de riber, my perty little girls
down to Orleans, and brought up his chil’en on de money; dat
come bery hard, but de Lord helped me, and I fergived him
dat. He shot my ole Ben kase he couldn’t whip me hisself, nor
stan’ by and see it done; dat mos’ broke my heart, but in de end
I foun’ I could fergib him one time more. He made me nuss
him when de fever come and every one was ’fraid ob him; de
long watchin’, de hard work and de cryin’ fer my chil’en made
me bline at last; but I fergived him dat right hearty, fer though
dey took my eyes away dey couldn’t bline my soul, and in de
darkness I hab seen de Lord.”
The truth, the pathos, the devout assurance of her words, impressed and controlled the sympathetic creatures to whom she spoke, as no reproach or denunciation would have done. A murmur went through the crowd, and more than one savage face lost something of its brutality, gained something of its former sad patience, as the old woman touched, with wondrous skill, the chords that still made music in these tried and tempted hearts.

“Yes, chil’en, I hab seen de Lord, and He has made de night into day fer me, has held me up in all my trubbles, tole me to hole fas’ by Him, and promised He would bring me safe ter glory. I’se faith ter feel He will, and while I wait, I’se savin’ up my soul fer Him. Boys, He says de same to you froo me; He says hole fas’, b’ar all dat’s sent, beleeebe in Him, and wait the coming ob de Lord.”

“We’s done tired a-waitin’, de Lord’s so bery long a comin’, Sandra.”

It was a weary, hopeless voice that answered, as an old man shook his white head and lifted up the dim eyes that for eighty years had watched in vain.

“It’s you dat’s long a-comin’ ter Him, Uncle Dave, but He ain’t tired ob waitin’ for yer. De places dar in heaven is all ready, de shinin’ gowns, de harps ob gole, de eberlastin’ glory, and de peace. No rice-swamps dar, no sugar-mills, no cotton-fields, no houn’s, no oberseer, no massa but de blessed Lord. Dar’s yer chil’en, Uncle Dave, grewed beautiful white angels, and a-waitin’ till yer comes. Dar’s yer wife, Pete, wid no lashes on her back, no sobbin’ in her heart, a-waiting fer yer, anxious. Dar’s yer fader, Jake; he don’t need no proppin’ now, and he’ll run to meet yer when yer comes. Dar’s yer pore sister Rachel, Ned; she ain’t crying fer baby now; de Lord’s got her in de hol-lar ob His han’, and she’s a-waitin’ fer de little one and you to come. Dar’s my Ben, my chil’en all saved up for me, and when I comes I’ll see ‘em waitin’ fer me at de door. But, best ob all, dar’s de dear Lord waitin’ fer us; He’s holdin’ out his arm, He’s beckonin’ all de while, He’s sayin’, in dat lovin’ voice ob His, ‘I sees yer sorrows, my pore chil’en, I hears yer sobbin’ and yer prayers, I fergives yer sins, I knows yer won’t ’spoint me ob dese yere fifty precious souls, and I’se a-waitin’, waitin’, waitin’ fer yer all.’”

Strange fervor was in the woman’s darkened face, strange
eloquence in her aged voice, strange power in the persuasive


gestures of her withered hands outstretched above them, warn-
ing, pleading, beckoning, as if, in truth, the Lord spoke through


er, illuminating that poor place with the light of His divine

compassion, the promises of His divine salvation. A dead silence

followed as the last yearning cadence of the one voice rose,

fell, and died away. Sandra let the strong contrast between the

here and the hereafter make its due impression, then broke the

silence, saying briefly, solemnly,—

“Boys, de Lord has spared yer one great sin dis night; ole

massa’s dead.”

“Glory be to God, amen!” “Halleluyer! dat I’se libed ter see
dis happy day!” “De Debble’s got him, shore!” “Don’t give up
de chance, boys; young massa and de missis is lef’ for us.”

Such exclamations of gratitude, joy, and revenge, were the

only demonstration which the news produced, and, mingling

with them, a gust of wind came sweeping through the mill, as if

nature gave a long sigh of relief that another tyrant had ceased
to blight and burden her fair domain. Sandra’s quick ear caught

the last words, and a deep oath or two, as several men rose with

the fierce fire rekindling in their eyes.

“Yes!” she cried, in a tone that held them even against their

will,—“yes, young massa’s lef’; but not to die, for if yer gives up
your chancc of damnation dis night, you’ll all be free to-morrer.
He’s promised it; he’ll do it, and dere’ll be no blood but dat bad
man’s yonder, to cry from de groun’, and b’ar witness ’ginst yer
at de Judgment-Day.”

“Free! to-morrer! Who’s gwine to b’lieve dat, Sandra? We’s
been tole such stories often; but de morrer’s never come, and
now we’s gwine to bring one for ourselves.”

The gigantic man with the spiked collar on his neck said

that, with a smile of grim determination, as he took up the iron

bar, which in his desperate hands became a terribly formidable

weapon.

A low growl, as of muttering thunder, answered him, and

Sandra’s heart sunk within her. But one hope remained; and,
desperately clinging to it, she found that even in these betrayed,

benighted creatures there still lived a sense of honor, a loyalty to

truth, born of the manhood God had given them, the gratitude

which one man had inspired.
“Hear me, jes once more, ’fore yer goes, boys. Tell me, what has young massa done ter make yer want his blood? Has he ever lashed yer, kicked, and cussed yer? Has he sole yer chil’ren, ’bused yer wives, or took yer ole folks from yer? Has he done anything but try to make old massa kinder, to do his best fer us while he’s here; and when he can’t do nor b’ar no more, don’t he go ’way to pray de Lord ter help us fer His sake?”

Not a voice answered; not one complaint, accusation, or reproach was made, and Prince, the fierce leader of the insurrection, paused, with his foot upon the threshold of the door; for a grateful memory confronted and arrested him. One little daughter, the last of many children, had been taken from him to be sold, when Gabriel, moved by his despair, had bought and freed and given her back to him, with the promise that she never should be torn from him again. For an instant the clasp of little clinging arms seemed to make the sore chafing of the iron ring unfelt; the touch of the hand that gave the precious gift now made that rude weapon weigh heavily in his own, and from the darkness which lay between him and the doomed home there seemed to rise the shadow of the face which once had looked compassionately into his and recognized him as a man. He turned, and, standing with his magnificent yet mournful figure fully revealed by the red flicker of the torches, put out one hand as if to withhold the desperate crowd before him, and asked, with an air of authority which well became a prince by birth as well as name,—

“Sandra, who tole you massa meant ter free us right away? You has blessed dreams sometimes, and maybe dis is one ob ’em. It’s too good to be de troof.”

“It is de troof, de livin’ troof, and no dream ob mine was eber half so blessed as dis yere will be, if we has faith. Milly tole me jes now dat Massa Gabriel swore before de Lord and his dead father dat he’d free us all ter-morrer; and I come here ter save yer from de sin dat won’t help, but hinder yer awful in dis world and de next. Dere’s more good news ’sides dat. I heerd ’em talkin’ ’bout de Norf. It’s risin’, boys, it’s risin’!—de tings we’s heerd is shore, and de day ob jubilee is comin’ fas’.”

It was well she added that last hope, for its effect was wonderful. Men lifted up their heads, hope quenched hatred in eyes that grew joyfully expectant, and for a moment the black sky
seemed to glimmer with the first rays of the North star which should lead them up from that Dismal Swamp to a goodly land. Sandra felt the change, knew that only one more effective touch was needed to secure the victory, and, like the pious soul she was, turned in her hour of need to the only Friend who never had deserted her. Painfully bending her stiff knees, she knelt down before them, folded her hard hands, lifted her sightless eyes, and cried, in an agony of supplication,—

“Dear Lord, speak to dese yere pore chil’en, fer I’se done my bes’! Help ’em, save ’em, don’t let ’em spile de freedom dat’s comin’ by a sin like dis to-night, but let ’em take it sweet and clean from Thy han’ in de mornin’. Stan’ by young massa, hole him up, don’t let him ’spoint us, fer we’se ben bery patient, Lord; and help us to wait one night more, shore dat he’ll keep de promise fer Thy blessed sake."

“I will!”

The voice rang through the place like a voice from heaven; and out from the darkness Gabriel came among them. To their startled, superstitious eyes he seemed no mortal man, but a beautiful, benignant angel, bringing tidings of great joy, as he stood there, armed with no weapon but a righteous purpose, gifted with no eloquence but the truth, stirred to his heart’s core by strong emotion, and lifted above himself by the high mood born of that memorable hour.

“My people! mine only while I speak; break up your league, lay down your arms, dry your tears, and forgive as you are forgiven, for this island no longer holds a master or a slave; but all are free forever and forever.”

An awful silence fell upon the place, unbroken till old Sandra cried, with a glad, triumphant voice,—

“Chil’en! de Lord hab heerd, de Lord hab answered! Bless de Lord! O bless de Lord!”

Then, as a strong wind bows a field of grain, the breath of liberty swept over fifty souls, and down upon their knees fell fifty free men, while a great cry went up to heaven. Shouts, sobs, prayers and praises; the clash of falling arms; the rattle of fetters wrenched away; the rush of men gathered to each other’s breasts,—all added to the wild abandonment of a happiness too mighty for adequate expression, as that wave of gratitude and love rolled up and broke at Gabriel’s feet. With face hidden in
his hands he stood; and while his heart sung for joy, tears from the deepest fountains of a man’s repentant spirit fitly baptized the freedmen, who, clinging to his garments, kissing his feet and pouring blessings on his head, bestowed upon him a far nobler inheritance than that which he had lost.

“Hark!”

The word, and Sandra’s uplifted hand, hushed the tumultuous thanksgiving, as if she were in truth the magician they believed her. A far-off murmur of many voices, the tramp of many feet was heard; all knew what it portended, yet none trembled, none fled; for a mightier power than either force or fear had conquered, and the victory was already won.

Through widening rifts in the stormy sky the moon broke clear and calm, gliding, like a visible benediction, from the young man’s bent head to the dusky faces lifted toward the promised light; and in that momentary hush, solemn and sweet, across the river a distant clock struck twelve.

(1864)