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## *Fools*

Two men rode down the crushed-stone pike that promised to be dusty in the summer, but now, in the early spring, after so much rain and with the rain falling yet again, the road was very nearly swamped. One of the men was slightly taller in the saddle, with a heavier build, and thick curling black hair showing under the rim of his hat. Though both men were clean-shaven, it was the taller of the two who continually stroked an imaginary mustache. The other man appeared to be of a slight build, but this was a trick of the eye – he merely seemed slight by comparison to his riding partner. He wore his hat far back on his head – the weak and watery morning sun nearly straight ahead did not compel him to shade his eyes – completely covering the color of his hair. The bigger man was, coincidentally, the older by several years, though this didn't establish any hierarchy between them. The older man, in fact, often deferred to the younger man, in defiance of natural order.

Their primary business had been in Cincinnati, and it was that proximity to Louisville that had been the final factor which drew for them this other, dubious assignment. During their time in Cincinnati, they had spent a good deal of time on trains, traveling in the last month alone several times between Cincinnati and Washington City. They could have crossed the Ohio and taken the train from Covington to Louisville, but the silly idea took hold of them to ride a riverboat downstream to Louisville, the excursion to be a sort of buffer, a small and deserved vacation, between assignments. Some of these new Cincinnati boats, they had heard, were veritable floating palaces, sporting every possible comfort and luxury. It just seemed more practical, in view of all the water lying about, to take a boat.

They had met, in the saloon of their Cincinnati hotel, the captain of a steamer, idling somewhere along Cincinnati's riverside. Like all ship's captains, John Elliott spoke with pride of his ship. He also told them of the independent packet line he operated with his two brothers, working the Memphis-White River trade in their small but growing fleet of ships. And he spoke with true fatherly affection of his daughter Emma, after whom he intended to name a ship soon to be building downriver at Jeffersonville. He assured the gentlemen it would be far more comfortable on his ship than on a train car crowded with wet and steamy passengers, and, worse, with no bar to patronize.

They were already leaning heavily towards taking passage on Captain Elliott's steamer, but what really convinced the younger man was the promise of the company of two lovely female passengers who had just stopped at their table – they didn't wish to interrupt, only to speak with the captain and to *promise* him they would be ready on time; what really convinced the older of the two men was the name of Captain Elliott's steamer – *Legal Tender*. As employes of the Department of the Treasury, it seemed only right that they should patronize a ship so named.

It was a pleasant idea – a leisurely float down the Ohio in the company of two young ladies (shockingly without chaperones) on a handsome boat with an auspicious name and offering all the amenities. The two men joined the captain and a few other early passengers the next afternoon. It was a day ahead of the scheduled departure, but they had seen enough of Cincinnati and were tired of it, their hotel room, and the unpleasant weather. They determined to spend the night on the boat and while away the hours watching the river traffic and indulging in the steamer's amenities.

It was cloudy and cool all that next day, and more than ever, there seemed no reason to remain at the hotel. Despite the chill and the clouds, they passed a very pleasant afternoon on the boiler deck of *Legal Tender*, giving passing attention to Captain Elliott's tour of his great side-wheeler, but giving a good deal of

attention to the ladies who had also decided to board a day early. A moderate but steady flow of liquor kept the chill away, and by evening, they were slightly drunk. They were ashamed to admit the next day to having been greatly amused by an attempted suicide just off their port side. The silly fellow had walked the entire length of the bridge from Covington in Kentucky merely to throw himself from the bridge on the Cincinnati side and within rescue reach of *Legal Tender*. He was plucked from the river by better and soberer people on the boat than themselves, and then commended to the care of his friends, who succeeded in taking the man back across the bridge, only to have him attempt a second suicide at the Covington end of the bridge. It was uncharitably suggested, later in the evening in the boat's saloon, that the fellow was only half-heartedly interested in drowning himself, else he would have made a better and more successful attempt in the middle of the bridge, where the drop was longer and the water was deeper and more treacherous, and where there was no hope of rescue. Instead, he made these cowardly attempts at either end of the bridge where rescue was far more probable.

The next morning broke clear and fine, one of only a handful of days in the past month to be clear and fine, and one of only three days that could charitably be called warm. A great deal of the month had been spent in rain and snow and chilly (even wintery) temperatures. Yet despite the relatively pleasant weather, the river continued to rise, as it had done for nearly a week. But now she was rising rapidly – gaining eight feet in the last 24 hours alone. Like the Lord, the Ohio was slow to wrath but great in power, and once it was aroused to its power it would not be denied its release. Nevertheless, Captain Elliott expected to depart on time at five pm. The departure time came and went and so did the evening and the next morning and the next afternoon. Now they were told to expect the Ohio to rise yet another three feet. They would be departing the next day, positively, at five p.m., once Captain Elliott's other passengers and freight could be brought aboard.

They spent another night aboard *Legal Tender* and woke to yet another cloudy and damp day, a constant light drizzle of rain falling. The captain had been generous in his meals for these, his captive fares, and, of course, they had enjoyed the pleasure of the ladies' company and some fine wine. The river had indeed risen another three feet, and a rise of several more feet was expected. The cloudy and damp morning developed into a wet afternoon and evening, the drizzle becoming heavier until it became a real rain that drummed on the pilot house and the hurricane deck all night. Captain Elliott assured them they would depart, positively, the next day at five p.m.

The rain continued to gain during the night and it rained all the next day, the last miserable day of a miserable March. The river was up another two feet; at least three more feet was expected. Captain Elliott informed them at breakfast that water now stood four feet deep in the buildings at the foot of Main Street. Captain Elliott was looking a little haggard, but he promised them they would be leaving, positively, this evening at five p.m. But positively was becoming a relative word; the ship would leave positively only as soon as she was able.

They did not see Captain Elliott the rest of the day, but they did not really look for him. As long as his supply of food and drink kept pace with them, he need not be present. *Legal Tender* did not leave as promised at five p.m., but she did leave, finally, late that night. All the passengers – the veterans of the past few days and the neophytes just joining the ship on the day of departure – celebrated far into the night their long overdue retreat from Cincinnati. As a result, the two men found it rather objectionable to be roused in the early hours of Friday morning and told curtly that it was time to leave, if Louisville was their destination. Captain Elliott intended to stay in Louisville but a few short hours before heading back to his home port of Memphis, and then on to his regular routes on the White River in Arkansas. He had seen quite enough of the Ohio River for the time being.

And so the two men had been forced to leave *Legal Tender* a little earlier than planned, and with no valid reason to delay further their objective, they retired to the first hotel at which they were assured a bath and quick attention to their now rumpled clothes. Within very reasonable time, they were clean, newly shaven, and properly attired. They had only to arrange for travel to the place of their next assignment.

The duty that lay before them had always seemed tedious, but now it loomed before them as positively onerous. They had drunk too much and slept too little, and now their heads were fuzzy and their eyes were heavy. This little side venture promised to be vexatious and trying. Escorting young women over long distances always carried with it both tedium and delight, but escorting old widows promised only tedium.

Images of brutal afternoon teas and stultifying conversations made all the more cumbersome by the certainty of long and frequent stops, loomed heavy in the older man's mind. A simple two- or three-day trip could become a protracted odyssey of unnecessary overnight stays and constant adjustments to travel arrangements and ticket fares. And if the weather persisted in this dismal pattern – they had stepped from the boat into another cloudy, damp, and cool day – the old woman may balk at making a start at all, until conditions improved.

The roads in town had been miserable and sloppy, and the roads that led south and east out of town were not much better. Like Cincinnati, Louisville and its environs had received several inches of rain in just the last week. If the directions they had received in town were correct, they should be coming upon the farmhouse around the curve in the road up ahead. They had ridden for the most part in silence, each privately nursing his crapulous condition and resentment, but now the taller man briefly considered his friend. He knew his younger friend's dark mood had as much to do with where they were *not* as with where they now found themselves. Until they had been requested for this assignment, they were to have left Cincinnati and its rains and cold behind for hopefully better and warmer weather in New Orleans. Captain Bradley of the police force there had done invaluable work investigating the sugar frauds in the New Orleans Custom House, but those cases were well – and successfully – underway in the courts. It wasn't certain what more Bradley could tell them, but whatever it was would have to wait a week or two.

They had passed and counted the houses along the pike, some of them quite grand, not at all what one thought of in the semi-wilds of Kentucky, and at the appropriate place described for them (“Look for the two-story stone springhouse”), they took a rough road to their right and continued on until they found themselves at the bottom of a fairly steep rise in the land.

At the top, maybe a quarter of a mile away, they saw the farmhouse. Unlike the other houses, both large and small, glorious and humble, that they had passed on the turnpikes out of Louisville, this house did not face the main road, or even its own drive, but looked south down the steeper slope of the hill, overlooking a creek below and the woods beyond. Regardless of which way it faced, the house gave the appearance of stability and a simple pride. It was not the glorified shack that they had both, independently, imagined they would find, and a twinge of guilt passed through them both.

As they drew nearer to the house, the land leveled out and the horses labored less, falling back into the lazy walk they had adopted from the beginning. They stopped directly in front of the porch and tied their horses to the newels at the bottom of the steps. They took one last breath before wearily mounting the five or six wide steps that evenly divided the length of the porch. A slow, rhythmic creaking sound that had been slowly dawning on them now revealed its source – a long, oversized swing hung at the far end of the porch to their left. On it, a man was stretched out, with one hand flung over the eyes, one muddy, booted foot raised and resting on the chain, and the other foot, equally booted and muddy, rested on the floor, keeping the swing slowly – barely – rocking back and forth.

The swinger appeared to be sleeping, retaining only just enough consciousness to direct the foot. Certainly, this person was far enough into sleep to be unaware of the presence of the two men on the porch. The two men looked at each other. The younger man had a habit of rolling his eyes by way of rolling his head, and this he did now in mockery and irritation. He announced their presence by loudly clearing his throat.

The swing abruptly stopped and the arm that had lain across the eyes now slid slowly up and over the forehead as the head turned equally slowly to gaze at the strangers on the porch. The foot slid down the chain and the person slowly sat up. It was apparent now that this was a young woman – perhaps in the early to middle years of her third decade – wearing a man's old and worn work coat over an old white shirt and dark blue trousers, rolled up above the high mud mark on the boots. A long thick hank of brown hair hung in a simple queue down her neck and beyond. She blinked slowly, once, twice, trying to bring focus to her sight and mind. She had indeed been very nearly asleep.

“Yes?”

It occurred to both men that this was not how they themselves would have reacted to having been woken to the presence of strangers, much less the reaction one would expect a woman, alone, to have in such circumstances. Perhaps she was not yet quite enough awake to appreciate the delicacy of her situation.

“Yes?” she asked again, this time with a slight hint of impatience. She was, in fact, quite awake and, far from being alarmed at this surprising presence of men or ashamed at her state of dress, she was irritated.

The taller, older man (yet not so much taller or older) stood paralyzed with the confusion of novelty (a woman in pants, alone, unperturbed at this intrusion). If he continued in this state much longer, he would be guilty of staring. The other man broke the trance by clearing his throat again, this time less dramatically.

“Um, my name is Merritt,” placing his right hand upon his chest, as if he were taking an oath, “and this is my colleague, Mr. Argent.” Merritt waited for her to respond, but she only remained seated on the swing, both knees now demurely pressed together. But her hands gripping the bench of the swing on either side of her knees suggested that being demure was an unintended side effect. She sat, hunched forward, leaning on her hands, expectantly. She continued to gaze steadily at Merritt, with a look of lazy boredom that also managed to convey some latent warning. There was something that was at once mature and childish about her. When it was obvious that her own name was not forthcoming, Merritt continued.

“We were hoping to find Mrs. Warner. Is this the home of Mrs. Warner?”

A new look came into her eyes: wicked amusement. “No, there is no Mrs. Warner here. This is not her home.” Her voice was low, confident. It occurred to Argent that this woman may be older than he first thought; this was not the high, nervous voice of a young woman, but the voice of a more mature woman. Why was she dressed like that?

Then Merritt said something that visibly disturbed and angered her, and instantly the air felt as if lightning had struck nearby. “Is your father or husband at home? We’d like to confirm directions with him.”

The young woman on the swing rose slowly and threateningly; the change in her demeanor was so sudden and drastic that it startled both men into a small step backward. She was taller than most women and broader in the shoulder than most, and this must have given her some deluded belief that she was physically equal to the men. Without knowing who these strange men were, beyond their names, she seemed actually prepared to fight them. Her eyes were half-closed in insolent disdain for these men, and she drew a deep breath to speak. But whatever speech it was that she intended to hurl at them was preempted by a shout heard coming from beyond the other side of the porch.

Merritt and Argent moved across the porch to look out over the railing behind them, opposite the swing. A small, thin, colored woman in a faded red cotton blouse and a white apron covering a worn-out gray skirt had obviously just run up the hill just back of the house. A shawl had been hastily thrown over her shoulders, the corners tucked into the waistband of her apron. With her left hand she was holding up her skirts to keep from tripping as she ran, while her right hand she held up, waving wildly as she shouted between heaving breaths, “Wait! Wait!”

The men indeed waited, watching the woman finish the last few yards of her run until she reached the porch. There was a large hydrangea bush flanking this side of the porch, so that she had to stop a few feet away. She bent over at the waist, breathing heavily, her right arm still outstretched, as if in supplication. Every so often she looked up to make sure the men were still there.

While the colored woman recovered, the men turned in unspoken unison to look back at the woman standing before the swing. Another change had washed over her. The anger and defiance were gone, receded, and in their place was a mild dread.

“Now look what you’ve done!” She was hissing at them across the porch. “Miss Carrie’s seen you and now she’s all riled up and hell-*bent* on having things her way.”

Both men were astonished. They looked back at the smaller colored woman, still catching her breath in the drizzling rain, and then to the taller young woman, who had only moments before appeared to be ready to offer combat to two grown men, but who now appeared nearly terrified of the hornet’s nest the colored woman apparently presented. A desperate and truly ridiculous plea was issued by the young woman: “I’ll pay you each \$10 for your trouble, if you tell her you made a mistake and you go away right now.”

“Are you trying to *bribe* us?” Merritt spoke with equal mixture of incredulity and amusement. All this time, Argent remained in confused silence, but no longer paralyzed. In fact, he was almost dizzy from turning to look at first one woman and then the other.

Miss Carrie had recovered enough to reach the stairs in the front, still holding her skirts, now to facilitate mounting the steps, her right arm still outstretched, now to reach for the railing at the top of the

stairs. Before the young woman could respond to Merritt's allegation, Miss Carrie scolded her. "Miss Mary, don't leave your guests standing on the porch in this damp and chill. Invite them in."

Before there was any further discussion of guests or invitations, Mary quickly retorted, "They are not guests. They were just leaving."

Mr. Argent casually remarked, "Well, there was just now some mention of compensation for the long ride. I'd be pleased to have a drink of water."

"Water! We can do better than that." Carrie was at the front door with her hand about to turn the knob, when Merritt addressed her, hoping for a better answer than Miss Mary had given.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sure." The thought of any drink other than water, however, was causing some disquiet in his person. "But we were hoping to find Mrs. Warner. Is this her home?"

Miss Carrie stopped turning the knob and twisted back to her right to look up at Merritt with a curious look on her face.

"Mrs. Warner!?! No, sir, she doesn't live here anymore. She's gone to her rewards. Nearly four years now."

Merritt turned slowly and deliberately to face Miss Mary and looked at her with open appraisal and challenge. Still watching Miss Mary, he asked - no, stated - "But there is a Mary Warner living here."

"Why, yes, sir. You're looking right at her." Twisting in the other direction, but still for some reason retaining hold on the doorknob, she scolded Mary. "Fifteen minutes that I know of, these gentlemen been kept at the threshold and you ain't even told them your name?" Carrie's grammar always lapsed when she was in high dudgeon. "Shame on you! Your mother and I both taught you better than that. And what would your father think of you? You know how he felt about the way you treat eligibles."

The smirk that had been growing on Merritt's face and the bemused enjoyment that Argent had been indulging at Miss Mary's expense as she was publicly reprimanded on her own porch quickly faded from both men as the portent of the word 'eligibles' sank in.

Mary enjoyed watching the table turned on these two interlopers on her morning nap. The whole morning, now that she thought of it, ruined because of these two, with the very real probability that the rest of the day would be spent in ridding herself of them. It could have been handled quickly, if Carrie had kept to her own business. Just how was it that Carrie seemed to know every time one of these land-miners came up the lane? Carrie's house was out of sight of the lane; she couldn't see the comings and goings on it. In a flash the answer came to her: Thea. Betrayal, that's what it was, pure and simple. And on today of all days. Thea knew it was Randy's birthday, and that Mary wanted to be alone, more so, today. Mary would make sure Thea felt the full weight of her disappointment and anger.

Argent's words broke in on her revelation. Argent was awkwardly explaining something, while Merritt alternately nodded or shook his head in agreement with Argent's statements.

"I think there has been a misunderstanding," Merritt nodded solemnly, casting a glance at Miss Warner. "We aren't here for any . . ." - Argent was desperately casting about for the proper word, the dignified word - ". . . sort of . . ."

"Fishing expedition," Merritt suggested.

Mary slowly closed her eyes; *Can anyone really be that clumsy and coarse?* She opened her eyes to find Merritt smiling broadly at her, teasing her - the way Randy used to do. A small lurch in her heart at the thought of Randy was swiftly followed by a hard, cold anger at this man who had triggered the memory.

Argent spared Merritt a brief glance of irritation before continuing with renewed effort, "Any sort of social activity." Merritt emphatically shook his head.

It was beginning to dawn on Carrie that she had run herself to near collapse up that slippery, wet hill in the hopes that two fresh eligible bachelors were interested in Miss Mary. She had promised Mr. Warner that she would take care of his daughter, but, really, a husband was what was needed for Mary. A strong hand, a man's hand, any hand but hers. Now Carrie's hand left the doorknob and placed itself on her hip. It seemed the offer of a drink was being withdrawn.

"What other kind of activity is there when gentlemen come to call at a lady's house, so far from town?" A challenging and warning edge had entered Carrie's voice. "And what gentleman," it suddenly occurred to her, "comes calling at a lady's house, unannounced and without having made sure of a

chaperone?” Now it was Mary’s turn to smile broadly. She raised her eyebrows in a saucy approval of Carrie’s questioning.

“This is an official call.” Argent was smiling confidently, now that he had entered familiar territory. People usually responded with all due respect to this type of pronouncement. For added gravity, and to truly lay to rest any idea of marital prospecting, he added, “We have come at the request of President Grant.”

Merritt and Argent were both smiling, anticipating the flurry of gasps and excitement and professions of received honor that are the usual reactions of women when they are visited by the representatives of the highest office in the land. It was because of the eminence of their patron that they had paid such particular attention to the manner of their apparel this morning. Argent pulled from his best coat the letters of introduction and other papers proper to assuring the people they called on of their respectability and validity. The papers and letters, however, remained in his outstretched hand, neither woman moving to accept them.

The dead silence that followed caused their smiles to fade rapidly. Once again, the balance of power on the porch had shifted. Carrie now looked fearfully, truly fearfully, at Miss Warner. Merritt and Argent followed her gaze to see Miss Warner standing stiff and white with small patches of red beginning to blossom and spread over her whole face. For a moment, Argent feared that she had suffered some kind of attack. He realized, however, that she wasn’t ill, but furious.

With a visible effort to contain herself, Miss Warner said with deadly calm, “Leave.”

Carrie – brave woman – spoke equally softly. “Mary, no matter who sent these gentlemen, they don’t deserve such treatment after such a long and miserable ride. We’ll feed them and tend to their horses, then send them on their way.” She said this with more hope than with any real conviction that this is what would happen. She quickly opened the door and frantically motioned the gentlemen inside, giving each in turn a look that said, ‘Say nothing.’ She continued to hold the door open for Mary and asked probingly, “Mary, honey, aren’t you coming in?”

“I’ll see to the horses.”

Carrie breathed a sigh of relief and walked through the door, shutting it quietly behind her. She took the men’s cloaks and disappeared behind the broad, plain staircase in the middle of the hall, then returned to show the gentleman to the front room on the left of the wide central hallway. She absently asked them to sit and also if they would like anything in particular to drink. But she was lost in thought, and didn’t hear the gentlemen tell her, twice, that water would truly be enough.

“Miss Carrie?” Carrie realized she had been directly addressed, and acknowledged, for the first time in some minutes, the gentlemen’s presence. “Miss Carrie, are you unwell?” It was Mr. Argent speaking to her with some amount of concern in his voice.

“Oh, no, sir. I’m just trying to remember where all the guns are kept. I don’t think there’s one in the barn. I’ll be sure and check her before she comes into the house.”

Merritt mouthed the word, *guns*. Argent took Carrie’s hand and guided her to sit on one of the two short sofas in the room. The upholstery on all the seats was a little worn, but it was still a handsome room in all. Perching himself next to her on the couch, he said, “Maybe you had better tell us what just happened.”

“Maybe you had better tell me what the General wants with Miss Mary.”

Argent started to correct her as regards to Grant’s title, but Merritt cut in before Argent could do so. “President Grant has sent us to escort Miss Warner to Washington. To meet with him.”

“Oh, well” – and here she gave a little laugh – “that won’t happen.” She patted Argent’s hand that still held hers and said appeasingly, and with a little pity, “I’ll be as quick as I can with some food for you boys, so you’ll be able to get back to town as soon as possible.” She moved to get up, the matter obviously closed to her, but Argent would not let go of her hand. She sat again, looking at him quizzically. She felt a little naughty at letting a white man hold her hand for so long and with such politeness. What would her Henry think if he saw her right now?

Even though it was Argent who held her in place and pinned her with his gaze, it was Merritt again who spoke. “We won’t be leaving without her. The President insisted. In fact, he gave instructions that we were not to take ‘no’ for an answer and to use any means possible – including throwing her over our shoulders and carrying her, bound, to Washington.”

Argent was watching Carrie's face, and was a little surprised to find no alarm or indignation at the thought of Miss Warner's casual abduction. "Oh, Lord, do not tell her any such thing, or she'll dig in her heels and then it may just come down to gunplay. Tell her anything else you need to convince her, but do not mention the General again."

This time Argent did correct her. "He's the President now, Miss Carrie."

"And for heaven's sake do not correct her on that. Not unless you want an earful and then some of how he isn't *her* president since she was denied the opportunity to vote for him or anyone else. The thought of her rights denied will sour her mood for days. You mention the President, especially this one, and it's on your own heads what follows."

"Miss Carrie, can you tell us, why is she so angry with the Presi, - with the General?"

She looked at Argent, clearly wanting to tell him, but some strange code of honor she apparently shared with Miss Warner held her tongue. "It isn't my place to say. But you should know - if you're to spend any time with her - that she is an angry child, in an ailing woman's body, hobbled by a crippled soul. Surely the General told you of the tragedies that have befallen and smothered this house?"

"Only that Miss Warner is the last of her family." Here Argent looked truly regretful at the sad situation. Then his regret gave way to vexation. "But we were allowed to believe that Miss Warner was Mrs. Warner, the mother, a widow."

Carrie laughed heartily but covered her mouth with her apron at such unseemly conduct. "Oh, the General was wicked to leave you with that idea. But, how would you have thought to treat her if you had known how young she is? No, the General knew what he was doing. If you had come in here giving commands and expecting obedience because she is young and unattached, she would have shredded you on the spot. It's a vicious and quick tongue she has. Or worse," Carrie laughed anew at the emerging picture in her mind, "speaking softly and cajoling-like to her, as if she were an addled old woman, why you'd be just an oily spot on the porch wall. It's hard to know which she hates more - being told what to do or being molly-coddled." Carrie was still shaking with laughter at the thought of innocent gentlemen being flayed alive by Miss Mary's acid tongue. Merritt and Argent looked at each other in high disapproval of such blood sport among the ladies. "No. No, it was better the way it happened, that she thought you were just two more men come to try their luck with her hand."

Now Carrie did rise, wiping her eyes with her apron, Argent finally letting go of her hand. Carrie sighed. "Her father died seven months ago, leaving her alone in this big house that used to have so many in it. She spends too much time alone, and she's becoming peculiar . . . more so than usual. I don't know how you can manage it, but the General is right: don't you take 'no' for an answer. I'll help you as much as I can, but she must go and face the General. She must get out of this house, away from this farm and all the ghosts that walk it. She needs to be among the living."

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When she entered the room, Mary knew instantly something had changed. Merritt and Argent were sitting, speaking quietly, sipping tea. Out of her mother's good china tea cups, she noted. She glanced to the short china cabinet, to which Carrie had the only key, and saw the empty places where not only teacups were missing, but also plates and serving dishes. So, Carrie was putting on the dog for Grant's men. That meant some agreement had been reached between them.

The men looked up casually, then stood politely as she moved from the doorway into the room. "Miss Warner," they said by greeting, as if they were merely meeting on the street, touching their hats to her. She hated the superficiality of it all - it just made her sick - but if she was to dispense with these men, she had to let them play their parts, and she had to play hers.

"I shall see about dinner." She was going to make Carrie pay dearly for this gross intrusion on her time and solitude, and she would never forgive her for her obvious participation in whatever was happening in the front room. She turned to go to the kitchen, and nearly stumbled into Carrie carrying a tray of small biscuit and ham sandwiches, and a pot of more tea. She sat the tray down on the low table in the middle of the room as if she were serving royalty. Carrie loved playing lady of the house with Mary's mother's things.

Normally, Mary didn't care - Miss Carrie, Mr. Henry, and their children had been like family as far back as Mary could remember - but some subterfuge was going on here and it angered Mary that even her mother's china, now *her* china, was conspiring in it. Worse, Mary had planned on living off those very biscuits for the next week. Now she would have to spend another morning cleaning and stoking the stove, making the dough, rolling it out and shaping the biscuits, then cleaning up the dishes while she watched over the biscuits as they baked. Since it was only herself now that needed feeding, cooking had become an enormous, exhausting task and she rarely bothered with it. But she had been wanting biscuits and she had made the effort to make them, and now Carrie was parading them around on fine china for anyone to eat, as many as they liked.

Carrie must have read her thoughts, for she whispered as she passed on her way out of the room, "I'll make you some more tomorrow, I promise. By the way, they're a little overcooked." Mary lowered her eyes at this last comment. When Carrie reached the doorway, she turned and spoke to Mary as if she were some dull child who needed prompting, "Now, run upstairs and put on something proper for dinner. And I don't mean changing out what you have on for more of the same. Put on a dress. The occasion calls for it." From the hallway, Carrie added, "And for heaven's sake, put on some shoes."

Mary, from long habit established in childhood, had removed her muddy boots before entering the house, and now stood in stockings, her legs exposed to the calf, her pants still rolled up. The gentlemen, she noticed, had walked into the front room in their muddy boots, without any consideration of her mother's best carpet.

She realized the men were still standing in deference to her. She took a seat as far from the men as possible. She was losing control of the situation. The truth was, she wasn't quite sure what the situation was or how to handle it. Suitors were easy enough to dispatch. But these men, these were not suitors or salesmen or creditors, all of whom she could handle, in one way or another. She wasn't really sure what they were, other than that the General had sent them. She wanted nothing to do with the General and nothing to do with these men. Silence was the best course of action. She knew that women were expected to engage in, even initiate, light conversation, especially as hostess, as she now found herself. Her sisters had learned this somehow without being told, but Mary's mother had had to pointedly instruct her in this. It was one more disappointment to her mother, one more lesson in which she had failed to provide a proper example for her younger sisters. Well, there were no more little sisters to mislead, no mother to disappoint. If mindless chatter was how a woman kept guests happy, the opposite was how a hostess inspired guests to leave. Mary maliciously ignored the two gentlemen. She slid to the back of the chair, crossed her legs and clasped her hands around her top knee, the way her father always sat. This was patently unladylike, probably even considered lewd, but she was in a foul mood, her sleep interrupted, Randy's memory muddled, her bile stirred by news of the General, her time usurped by convention, all on account of these two men, unannounced and unbidden. She could out-wait them. She could sit this way for hours, while her mind roamed and skipped and explored. It had begun to rain again, and the soft patter on the porch roof provided a soothing background to her thoughts. She stared at the blue cloth of her pants and felt herself float away from the room.

She went to the cemetery with its unfinished stone wall and the opening that still needed a gate. Turning east, she walked along the creek, between the trees that lined it. Suddenly, an image of a vast terraced garden erupted and settled against the slope of the hill. Stone by stone, it constructed itself, a perfect cyanotype in motion, like one of Randy's flip-drawings - a practical guide to a fantastic structure. She saw it completed - an enormous walled-in, terraced garden - carved into the hillside, overlooking the creek. Eventually, she could connect it to the family cemetery situated farther west along the curve of the hill. There was plenty of creek rock for the walls and even the walkways. Digging into the side of the hill would be work, as would hauling the rock from farther and farther up and down the creek, but work was comforting as well as tiring; she needed the physical exhaustion to help her sleep. And she had all the time and freedom she needed to complete the project. She could even work far into the winter on a project like this. Once the foundations were laid, it wouldn't matter if the ground was frozen; she'd be working above ground. Winters were brutal for her. When the weather kept her from her projects and distractions, from the work of the farm, she crawled the walls with frustration, depression, and loss. This past winter had nearly claimed her sanity, this first winter truly alone, even her father gone.



She heard “Miss Warner?” and looked up. She had actually forgotten these two were in the room with her. She often heard and saw things in a kind of delayed echo, and looking at the men now, she saw that idiotic, placid gaze on their faces, but a delayed image in her mind had seen – for an instant – concern and pity. When Argent saw that he had her attention, he commented, apparently repeating himself, “I said, these little ham biscuits are delicious. Do you cure your own ham?”

Mary gazed back at him with what she hoped was the same bland expression she saw on his face. “You will ruin your appetite.” She returned to her study of the blue cloth of her pants, grasping at the threads of her vision. But Merritt pulled her back from her reverie before she could dive back into her thoughts.

“I’ve often told Mr. Argent the same thing. He usually agrees with me, but invariably it is after the dinner that he has indeed spoiled.” He smiled idiotically at her.

Well, this was just deplorable conversation, even for mixed company. Grown men discussing ham biscuits and sharing delightful tales of dinners spoiled. Moreover, an exercise in rude silence, originally intended to punish the General’s agents, had unintentionally produced an idea, a goal, a distraction, a pleasurable pursuit of the mind that she could translate to her hands, work that in its mindless repetition and exertion could, in turn, calm and even stop her jagged thoughts. She wanted to get back to it, but now Merritt and Argent were bombarding her with inane observations and glimpses into their everyday interactions that made her cringe.

Merritt asked, “Is something wrong? Can we do anything for you?” Of the two, she despised him the more.

She stared dully at him, then blurted out, “Why did the General send you two?” She had just broken two of her own rules that she had set for herself while tending the horses: don’t mention Grant, and don’t ask about his reasons for sending them. The question as she meant it, did not inquire as to Grant’s reasons for sending them, but as to Grant’s reasons for choosing them.

To his credit and her surprise, Merritt asked, “Do you mean why did the General send anyone at all? Or, why did the General send us in particular?”

“Answer how you will.” It galled her that he had found the same flaw in her question.

Argent intercepted Merritt’s reply, suggesting, “Perhaps this is a discussion that could wait until after dinner.”

“But that would interfere with your plans to leave after dinner. Just after dinner.” Conversation during dinner would be tedious enough; heaven forbid there should be further tedium afterwards as well.

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but those are your plans, and not necessarily ours.” He said it genially enough, but there was just enough force to it that he must have truly thought he had a say in the matter.

“Putting a fine point on things is the noble and ultimate goal of higher speech and language.” Here, Mary’s voice became glacial. “And the point I want to make – crystal clear – is that this is my house and I make the plans in it.”

For the first time, Mary saw a stiff anger rise in both men. She had gone too far, had been too rude, and they rightfully bridled at the open disrespect. Mary felt the color rise to her face at her own shame. But rather than causing her to soften her demeanor, her shame brought to the surface even more bile. Mary was never uglier in her thoughts and words than when she was undeniably, inescapably wrong. She was like a cornered possum, spitting and snapping with sharp, jagged teeth; a possum refusing to play dead.

Into this caustic atmosphere stepped Althea. Thea. The traitor. Carrie’s second youngest child and only daughter and, until this day, the only human being in this last year that Mary had suffered to be near her. In Thea, Mary had found both a kindred soul and a growing, living creature that she could nurture. Though Thea was a mere child, Mary and Thea got along as if they were of the same age. They spent hours together, roaming the woods and wading the creeks. Mary was teaching her to read and write, and they both were learning to play the piano, something Mary was supposed to have learned long ago, but she had balked at the hours of practice that mere scales required. Now, like so many other things, she regretted the lost opportunity.

Thea was a beautiful child, with large round eyes that were always bright with amusement. She was rarely seen without a smile, and she rarely walked anywhere; she skipped to all her destinations. Thea, therefore, didn’t step into the room, but rather skipped in to announce that dinner was, finally, ready. She

fairly twirled over to Mary, brimming with eagerness to tell her something, anticipating the excitement her news would bring.

“Miss Mary! Do you know what? I saw a turtle today! The first one this year!”

Turtles were a passion they both shared. Normally, such an announcement would have indeed been received with great excitement, as well as an immediate removal to the place of discovery. Nothing was normal about today, however, and Mary, fresh from her fault and stinging with guilt and the ghosted reproaches of her parents, rounded on Thea.

“You’re quite the little intelligence gatherer, aren’t you? What else do you see, from your perch in the tree?” Usually, Thea would have giggled at the unintended rhyme. Mary, herself hearing the ridiculous rhyme in a question intended to wound – it was like throwing a spear with a ribbon and bow tied on it – quickly added, “Besides a turtle.”

Miss Warner had never raised her voice or changed the tone, not that the two gentlemen could hear, yet the question had an immediate effect on the little colored girl standing before her. Thea’s large eyes widened even more, seeming to threaten the delicate skin around them. She had been found out and called out. True remorse flooded her heart. Miss Mary had been her friend, a close companion even, and Thea had betrayed her. Thea saw that now, and also saw the wonderful hours spent together dissipating, like clouds swept before a tornado.

Mary was watching her and saw with satisfaction that the message had been received. But new realizations were occurring to Mary, realizations she intended to expose. “I see,” she said, though Thea had not spoken at all. “Tell me this, then. Where are the boys?” She had asked the question almost musically – Mary herself tried to trace the notes on piano keys in her mind: A, F flat, E, F flat.

Thea broke easily. “Caleb took them hunting – when I first saw the gentlemen.” She nodded at Merritt and Argent. She was not going to suffer this alone. She had lured the boys – Jack and Morty, two oversized puppies – away from the house, and Caleb, Thea’s brother, had kept them away. Jack and Morty – Mary’s big, beautiful hounds, who always warned her of anyone’s approach with beautiful, melodious baying. Until she had been given these dogs she had never understood the stories she had read of hunters and their joy at the sound of their baying partners. Her boys truly made a joyful sound, and Mary found simple pleasure and pride when they gave voice.

“I see,” she said again. She was unaware that Carrie, wondering why her dinner was going cold in the dining room across the hall, had come herself to announce a second time the advent of dinner. Merritt and Argent’s earlier righteous indignation had been transformed into an awkward sympathy for the little colored girl obviously undergoing some kind of inquisition. They were uncomfortable observers of some private altercation. They looked to Carrie for release, both for themselves and for Thea.

“And while Caleb was out hunting with the boys, two strange men were able to bring themselves with stealth and ease to my very front door, while I lay unaware and unprepared for their coming.”

“Oh, Miss Mary! You were never in danger! Papa was watching from the trees along the creek, all the time.” Thea was giving it all up now; everyone involved was being dished up to share in Thea’s disgrace. In the spirit of complete capitulation, Thea pointed out the window behind Mary in the direction of the creek and swung her pointing arm wildly from right to left, to show the expanse of the area under surveillance.

“And was he armed?” Some of the anger was ebbing. She was enjoying Thea’s discomfort and her ready willingness to sacrifice even her father in the hopes of mitigating Mary’s wrath. She was also enjoying the developing scenario in her mind: that so much coordination had been executed – was required – to ensure the safe arrival of ‘eligibles.’ From the periphery of her mind, she was also aware of the discomfort of Merritt and Argent. That was an added bonus, like bourbon in her tea.

“Yes, ma’am.” Thea was eager to reveal all aspects of this covert operation. “He had his rifle and another gun, and some ammunition.”

Another realization now dawned on Mary. “Did he get this other gun from the *barn*? Did he take *my* gun from the *barn*?” The gun that Mary had looked for and found missing, just a short time ago.

“Oh, praise the Lord!” Carrie had finally found an opening to rescue her daughter from Mary’s bullying questioning. “I wasn’t sure if that gun was still there or not.”

Mary completely ignored Carrie's interruption. This was all too much. She was enjoying herself for the first time since Grant's men had connived their way into the house. For the first time, really, in months, maybe even years. "Do you mean to tell me," she enunciated slowly, "that your daddy is lying in wait down by the creek, right now, in case there's trouble? From *them*?" She was trying so hard not to smile or laugh, but the thought of burly Mr. Henry, positioned among the wet underbrush and slippery rocks, waiting and at the ready for some trouble from these two dandies, was delicious. "Tell me." She patted the air in excited anticipation. "Tell me, what is the sign for danger? How was he to be alerted that he was needed? That *guns* were called for?"

This was the excitement that Thea had hoped for, and though the first turtle of the year had not produced it, she was relieved to see that Miss Mary was still capable of it, even in the midst of her righteous indignation and anger. Thea clapped her hands and danced in place with the thrill of the conspiracy and its secret passwords. "I was to go to the front porch and say as loud as I could, 'Oh, no, the turtles have got out.' That was my idea. Papa said it had to be something I could remember, and I remembered how you and me is going to build a new turtle pen, so I got to pick."

During the course of her interrogation, Mary had slowly been inching forward in her seat, unconsciously bringing her presence forward to bear down on Thea, but now she rocked back in her seat, clapped her hands in glee, and said, "Of course you did!" She jumped up, grabbed Thea's little hand, and pulling her from the room, she laughed, "Oh, Thea! Let's go and do it now!" Merritt and Argent heard from the porch two female voices, both seemingly children's, saying loudly and dramatically, over and over again, "Oh, no, the turtles have got out."

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Dinner was not as tedious or trying as everyone privately expected. Miss Warner's temper had moderated, and she had adopted a resigned patience during the meal. Carrie had prepared a creditable dinner on impossibly short notice. Carrie was in no way responsible for Mary's dinners or any of her other domestic needs, but she had always helped Mrs. Warner, and Mr. Warner had always quietly paid her for the help. Carrie felt a strange obligation to continue helping. After the Great Tragedy - as Carrie referred to it in her mind - had taken Mrs. Warner and the last of her children, save Miss Mary, Carrie had assumed the role of mistress of the house. Mary had been woefully unprepared - she had resisted all efforts to prepare herself for running a household - as well as too grief-stricken to assume so much responsibility. Both Mary and Mr. Warner, in their shared shock and grief, would have allowed the house to fall down around them, and never would have noticed. Carrie, then, had seen to the running of the household and Mr. Warner had rallied enough to acknowledge her efforts with regular and fair payments.

After Mr. Warner's death, Carrie began to feel as if the household were truly hers to run. Before his death, Mary had developed slovenly ways, even getting out the fine china whenever she ran out of everyday dishes to use. Carrie put a stop to that by taking possession of the key to the china cabinet in the front room, as well as to the top doors to the linen press in the serving pantry off the dining room. Mrs. Warner had always kept these locked against curious little hands tempted to handle pretty things. Mary never commented on the locked cabinets, or why the dishes were suddenly washed and put away.

At Carrie's urging, Mary had kept up regular dinner times for her father's sake, eating food she did not want merely to encourage her father to eat and keep up his strength. With the death of Mary's father - the last of her family - all pretenses of eating or wanting to eat disappeared. Nothing had taste for her. Hunger didn't visit her. She was too tired and dispirited to cook for herself, and she didn't keep anything in the pantry anyway. Carrie began to stock the Warner pantry with simple food items that would keep and be available for Miss Mary to eat whenever hunger finally struck. Carrie kept a wrapped platter or two of small oatmeal cakes and sweet cornbread in the pantry, along with apples and nuts and hard cheeses, and she noted with pride and satisfaction that these items needed restocking on a fairly regular basis. This is all Mary had lived on for the last several months since her father's passing - until a few days ago, when Carrie had noticed (as she noticed everything about the house on the hill) that smoke was issuing from the kitchen cabin just to the back of the house. Carrie had sent Thea up to find out what was going on, and Thea had reported back that

Miss Mary was baking biscuits and was carving up the last of the hams that had been hanging in the smokehouse. Carrie's genuine delight at Mary's reawakening appetite and attempts to cook for herself was paired with a disappointment at the loss of a ham she had been planning to use for their Easter dinner next month.

Carrie, in fact, had been making liberal use of many of the Warner stores — justifiably in her mind, since part of it was going to Mary's meals and since Carrie thought it was just compensation for her cooking and cleaning efforts, now that Mr. Warner was no longer making payments. Her husband had forbidden her to bring up the subject of payment with Mary, until at least a year had passed after good Mr. Warner's death. Henry had been devoted to Mr. Warner, and now he was devoted to Mr. Warner's daughter. He would never have asked for money from Mr. Warner. There had never been any need to ask for money; Mr. Warner had always thought to preempt the need for asking, and paid Henry promptly for any work he did for the family. Sometimes, Mr. Warner paid in advance. It was likely that Miss Mary was not aware of any of these arrangements, and Henry was not going to burden her about them during the time of her grief.

As word of the Great Tragedy and Mr. Warner's failing health spread throughout the county and beyond, it was realized that Miss Mary, Mr. Warner's odd first daughter, would eventually, if not soon, be in sole possession of a large chunk of land, ideally situated near Louisville, Kentucky's biggest city and river port. Mr. Warner soon learned that questions were being asked in town about the land and matters of solvency, and even about his own health. Although the tactics disgusted him, this flurry of interest in his first and last daughter made him realize that, if he was to have any say in her choice of a husband, he had better form a strategy. Initially, suitors who simply showed up at the farm were summarily dismissed as being unforgivably forward. Mr. Warner then engaged in a letter-writing campaign to invite the sons of old colleagues and war friends to visit Louisville — conveniently located on the Ohio, very nearly in the middle of the country, he would mention — one of the few 'southern' cities to roar back to economic health after the war. He encouraged them to come try their fortunes in this booming city, and, while they were in the locale, to ride out to his farm for dinner on a Sunday afternoon. It would give him great pleasure to see the sons of his old friends and hear reports of their fathers.

Sons of friends came, and sons of friends went. Some reported back to their families that, while Mr. Warner was very likable, Miss Mary was very odd. She performed as was expected of her — presiding over dinner and then sitting demurely in the front room after dinner, at which she had largely remained silent. Some thought she played her role a little too well, that she seemed mechanical, as one modern man prone to modern industrial metaphors called her. Others squirmed under her silent stares that preceded answers to questions that apparently took her some time to comprehend. She was correct, she was polite, but she was odd. Her father seemed to take no notice of it, nor of the discomfort of the young men in attendance. Afterward, he would comment that it had been a pleasant afternoon well-spent.

When all the sons of all the old comrades had proven uninterested, Mr. Warner began inviting to dinner those suitors who simply showed up at the farm. When this was learned in town, there began a steady stream of men of all kinds coming to the Warner farm — young men, old men, the merely curious, and even Protestants (who obviously hadn't conducted even the slightest research into the matter). Mr. Warner's judgment began to fail alongside his health, and he began to see this steady stream of 'eligibles' (as he called them) as a testament to his Mary's beauty and charms. In truth, very little credit could be attached to any charms, and there was nothing truly memorable about her looks except her height and except, perhaps, her eyes. There had been some dispute, among those men who compared notes, as to whether her eyes were blue or green. Only three of the Warner children had inherited their father's crystal blue eyes (and they were all the older sons); the rest had inherited their mother's brilliant emerald green eyes. Except for Mary, who seemed to have absorbed a little of the color, but none of the brilliance, of both parents. The result was eyes of a dull green, except when light hit them at the right angle, at which time they flared into a sapphire blue. Had she been aware of the effect and had she been almost any other woman, she would have endeavored to always present her eyes to this magical angle of light.

Regardless of her looks or her height or her reputed eccentricities, men kept coming down the dusty pike and up the drive to the Warner farmhouse. All these men needed feeding, and they needed to be fed well, if they were to be impressed enough to return. Carrie firmly believed that good cooking could overcome

a whole host of other shortcomings in a woman. While it would be Carrie's cooking that would overcome Mary's shortcomings, the effort had to be made, in the hopes that one man more devoted to his stomach than any other matrimonial requisites would come back for seconds.

Carrie had learned from this brief interval in Warner family life – the unproductive courtship of Miss Mary Warner – to keep something handy, if not actually cooking, in readiness for unexpected company. This was especially true for Sundays, and that was why Carrie had been caught off guard this day, a Friday. All vestiges from last Sunday's dinner were long gone. Preparation for this Sunday's main meal would not start until tomorrow. Nonetheless, Carrie had already started a few scrawny chickens for their Friday dinner, and she always had something canned or preserved in reserve. Mary would not eat the chicken or ham, it being Friday when she abstained from flesh, but that left more for her guests. And there was the fortunate availability of biscuits and ham to stave off true hunger while Carrie finished dinner. It was by the merest good luck that Thea had espied the two men as they rode far down the road. And luckier still that they had taken their pokey time getting here.

Carrie did not believe in gambling or the idea of chances in any form; indulging in such things was sinful and destructive. But it did seem that luck was playing a very strong hand in the happenings of the day, and if she didn't tend to believe in it or rely on it, she certainly was willing to let it fall where it may, and she would never say a word against it. She had only needed someone (Thea, it turned out, along with her brother Bill) to run from the big house on the hill to Carrie's much smaller one a short distance away, to fetch what foodstuffs she needed to cobble together this meal for these gentlemen – gentlemen, it was becoming apparent, who could be something much more valuable than mere eligibles, the supply of which was rapidly dwindling in both number and quality. These gentlemen might – had to, by explicit order – take Miss Mary from this mournful house to the city of Washington, where even she might find a suitable husband. Surely men in Washington, men who made a living of squabbling and arguing, would find in Miss Mary a suitable sparring partner.

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After dinner, the men were dismissed to the front room, and Carrie and Mary began to clear the table. In the small serving pantry next to the dining room, Carrie took the dirty plates from Mary's hands, and whispered, "You join those gentlemen in the front room and you sit and listen to what they have to say. Give them that much of your time. You know you'll rest better if you treat them right, before you throw them out the door. In this weather."

Mary looked closely at Carrie, and from her height, Mary's scrutiny bore down on her, but Carrie returned the gaze in equal strength, until at last, in exasperation, she shooed Mary out the door. "Go on, now. It's rude to keep them waiting."

In the front room, Mary resumed the same seat she had occupied before dinner. Merritt and Argent had stood upon her entering and had remained standing, like the puppets they were, until Mary was settled. Then they did an unexpected thing. Rather than take their same seats as Mary had done, they moved to take seats on the other end of the couches. Whereas before, they had been seated at the far end of two opposing couches separated by a table, now they were seated at the near ends of these same couches, putting Merritt to her left, separated from her by a small round table, and Argent nearly directly across from her. Mary had always hated the summer arrangement of this room, but her father had been so ill last summer and fall that rearranging the furniture for winter – with the sofas perpendicular to the fireplace, channeling the heat between them – had been abandoned for the time, and probably forever – Mary could not bear to change a single thing from the moment he had died, even if that meant sitting with her back to the window. She hated it even more now that all the occupants were huddled together in one small corner. She felt unbalanced; the room seemed top-heavy, as if someone had tipped the room up at the far end, and they had all slid forward and down to lay in a tangled heap near the door.

She tried to call up the image of Carrie's face just a few moments ago. Did she miss something there? This all smacked of Carrie. She was far too agreeable on the matter of dismissing Grant's men.

Argent began, "Miss Warner, we hope you'll give us the opportunity of explaining the nature of our visit." He was smiling at her patiently, as if she were addled. A disgust and anger, long her natural reaction to such smiles, was threatening to rise.

"I would be remiss if you came all this way and left without the courtesy of a fair hearing." She sat straight in her seat, with one hand lightly resting in the other in her lap. Her feet were crossed at the ankles and tucked behind one of the legs of her chair. She was wearing a dress now. Not her best dress, but her best-fitting dress. After she and Thea had worn out "Oh, no, the turtles have got out" on the front porch, Mary had fairly run upstairs to dress for dinner. She owed Mr. Henry that much. The poor man had crept from his surveillance, damp and sheep-faced, and headed to his own home, where there was no dinner waiting for him. If wearing a dress would make Carrie happy, then things would go that much easier for him at home.

She looked a good deal different in a dress, almost pretty. Argent decided she could be very pretty, with a little attention. It would certainly help if she were to wear a dress that fit properly; this one was loose and bunched awkwardly as she sat. Occasionally, she tried to surreptitiously adjust the left shoulder of the dress, which continually threatened to slip, an imbalance that had no consequence on her modesty, but which irritated her greatly.

"Well, that is all anyone can ask, especially since we came unannounced. As Mr. Merritt has said, President Grant has sent us to speak with you on his behalf." Argent had already begun poorly, forgetting the thorny issue of Grant's title.

Immediately, Mary pounced. "He is not my president. I was not extended the right and privilege to vote, though I pay the same taxes as any man. And I should think that the General, having a wife and a daughter of his own, would be sensitive to the political disabilities that female citizens must suffer. Yet, to my knowledge, he has made no effort to advance the political standings of women. I wonder at a man who cannot even bring himself to champion the rights of his own female relations."

Argent's practiced smile had slowly faded during Miss Warner's response, until he looked lost and dejected. Mary was smugly satisfied; he had been far too cock-sure of his charms.

Merritt, however, was not deterred by this tirade, and suggested, "Why not move to Wyoming? I hear women have the vote there."

"And why," Mary grated at him, "should I uproot myself from my home to live in some foreign territory with a ridiculous name like Wyoming, just to claim the right as a tax-paying citizen to participate in the choosing of my president? I will stand my ground here."

"The people of Wyoming don't think the name is ridiculous." Merritt was deliberately focusing on the wrong point.

"Well, they can't be held responsible, if they don't know any better."

"They seem to know better as far as the vote goes."

Merritt was pointedly baiting her, and from the look on his face, enjoying it. Just the sight of him was raising her hackles. Argent, realizing that the almost genial tone of dinner was under assault (and at the instigation of his partner - what was he doing?), intervened.

"I think we're losing sight of our topic. We are merely representing the president in a private matter, outside the scope of politics."

"If you insist on his presidency, how can it be outside the scope of politics? And if I don't acknowledge the president, how can I acknowledge his emissaries?"

Argent, after his first clumsy attempts to open the discussion, finally had an inspired thought. "Would you acknowledge emissaries of the General?" Merritt smiled at him, tapping the side of his nose with his finger.

"Certainly. I could treat with you under those terms."

Argent dipped his head slightly and smiled above his irritation. Miss Warner presented a grating mix of quick intelligence and stubborn childishness. He began again. "The General - as a private citizen -"

Mary quickly interrupted. "Are you then being paid as private emissaries? That is to say, with private money? His private money?"

“No, ma’am, we’re being paid by the government.” Merritt cheerfully responded with complete honesty. Argent thought he could have been more circumspect in the matter, as it clearly was going to be yet another point of contention for Miss Warner.

“The General is using taxpayer money to fund his private correspondence?”

“Taxpayer money was going to be spent regardless – either in attendants and traveling staff and communication costs, if the President were to come here personally – a great expense – or he could send a personal emissary, as you call us – at far less expense.”

This was unassailably rational. Argent condescended to explain further, “Even when acting as a private citizen, the President is, in fact, no longer private.”

“I grieve for his trying circumstances. Tell me his message and I will give him my reply by mail. That will free you to return to your normal duties, whatever they are, and perform functions of real benefit to the weary taxpayers.”

“There seems to be some problem with the mail in this part of the country. In this particular part of the country.”

Mary had burned every communiqué sent by the General since her father’s death; the last two had never even been read.

“The General’s many attempts to reach you by mail or telegraph have all failed to produce a reply. Thus, he felt the need to relay his message through more reliable means. Because of all the mysterious delays of the mails, this is more of a mission than a message.”

Merritt was looking at Argent with a wild question and warning in his eyes. Argent was about to disclose the ultimatum that Miss Carrie had promised would create the greatest resistance. It was Merritt’s turn to wonder of his partner: what was he doing?

“Oh?” There it was, the challenge already rising.

Argent pushed ahead, heedless of the direction. “The Presi-, the General would like for you to accompany us back to Washington where he would like to meet with you, personally and privately.”

There was a short pause, as if she were still listening to the words hanging in the air. Then she gave a sharp, incredulous laugh. If this is what Carrie was hoping to facilitate, she had gone too far in her assumptions about her place in this house.

Without any anger or indignation or emotion of any kind, Mary simply stated, flatly, “That won’t happen. That can’t happen. I cannot possibly be absent from the farm now – the planting begins later this month, and preparing the fields has hardly begun, because of the weather.”

“Surely you don’t do all the work yourself?”

“No, I don’t do it all myself. Mr. Henry helps when he can take time from his own work, and his sons help when they want to earn a little money. Even then I need to hire men from town to finish all the work.” Moreover, she heard her father’s oft-repeated maxim: *There is no room in the budget for laziness.*

This was, strictly speaking, her first spring in full charge of running the farm. The last four years she had been learning from her father. Even when he was physically no longer able to direct and oversee in the fields, he was constantly reinforcing what she had already learned and adding odd bits and pieces of advice as they occurred to him. In truth, she had been directing the plantings and harvestings solo for the past two years. This, then, was her third spring planting under her sole supervision, and she knew exactly the time and labor it would take for a successful beginning.

But Merritt and Argent were unaware of all this. They suspected that Miss Warner overstated both her involvement and the vicissitudes of farming.

Seeing the patronizing doubt on their faces made the old familiar disgust rise suddenly. The fight returned to her voice. “Does the general think I can ignore the seasonal cycles of this farm simply because he crooks his finger and bids me come sit at his knee? If he wants to apologize for the sins of his past, he will have to do so with a good deal more consideration as to the time and place. And his first apology should be for this outrageous and arrogant summons.”

“We don’t know about any of the General’s past sins,” Merritt said quietly, and for once, without any attempt to tease or bait her.

Mary flushed and stood abruptly. "I see that I owe an apology to the General for assuming he has revealed something private, and I owe an apology to you both for assuming you had knowledge of it and were complicit in this venture of his. But now you've had your dinner, relayed your message, and your horses are rested. You'll be wanting to head back now to reach town before dark. If you follow the path from the porch, you'll find the steps that lead down to the barn. Your horses are in the field behind the barn." For all her other social failings, she had mastered the art of the polite and firm dismissal.

She moved to the door that led to the hall and stood there, unmistakably inviting them to leave. At the front door, she left them only long enough to gather their cloaks. Returning these to them, she then said, as she was supposed to in these situations, "I am sorry you have travelled so far to find so little success in your endeavors."

With that final course of her dismissal served, she turned to re-enter the house. Argent saw as she closed the door that she was wearing no shoes, but only stockings. She had not completely capitulated to Miss Carrie's dress code. She had covered this act of defiance by tucking her feet under the chair, behind its leg.

Merritt and Argent had no choice but to reclaim their horses. They descended the porch steps, waded through the jonquils, top-heavy with the intermittent rain that had fallen all day and, subdued by the late chill, bending over the stones of the walk. Some distance from the porch, the walkway fell off into rough stone steps that descended to the horse barn. Part of the barn was built into the side of the lower hill, so that to their left, only a few feet of wall (mostly stone at this end) and the roof peered above the ground, but to their right, nearly the entire wall showed, the stone foundation tapering with the decline of the ground. Behind the barn, the ground leveled out again. What looked like a small corral attached to the right of the barn actually wrapped around the back for the entire length of the structure. Their horses, however, were in the barn; either someone had retrieved them from the field, or the horses had availed themselves of the warmer, dryer barn. Inside the barn, they found one horse standing, spiritless, held in cross-ties in a large stall. The other stood, equally spiritless, in a smaller stall. The man they had earlier seen emerge from the underbrush now emerged from the back of the barn and came towards them. "One of the horses has thrown a shoe," he said heavily. Mr. Henry led the men out of the barn to return to the house.

From the porch window of the dining room, Mary had been watching the progress of the men's egress. She had momentarily lost sight of them as they descended the stone stairs but picked it up again when they moved beyond the hide of the hill. She saw them disappear into the barn, and then emerge moments later, without their horses, but with Mr. Henry. She continued to watch, her stomach lurching, as the three men moved towards the stone steps. They disappeared briefly from view, but then their heads, jerking with each step, rose above the cut of the hill.

She bolted from the house and down the porch steps to intercept the trio, not caring that this would reveal that she had obviously been tracking their movements. Mr. Henry held up his hand in a gesture that not only meant 'halt,' but that also meant there would be no arguing.

Mr. Henry preempted her question. "One of their horses has thrown a shoe, Miss Mary."

She regarded Mr. Henry suspiciously. "Just standing in the field? Those horses don't have enough energy or ambition to toss their own manes, much less throw a shoe."

Mr. Henry gave Miss Mary a look that said, all at once, that he heard the suspicion in her voice, that the suspicion was unfounded, and that he didn't deserve the suspicion.

Merritt and Argent, aware of their good luck, remained silent, letting Mr. Henry handle Miss Warner in her disappointment. There was some Morse code by which they communicated, and Merritt and Argent knew better than to distract an operator when working the key.

Mary, in growing desperation, asked, "But you can re-shoe her? I'll help. I'll get the tools."

She started past Mr. Henry but came back to face him when he told her, wearily anticipating the coming storm that was brewing both in the sky and Miss Mary, "I can re-shoe the horse. Of course I can. But not in time for these gentlemen to reach town before dark, and not in time for them to reach any shelter before more rain comes in. They can't be expected to ride in this rain, and it isn't right to risk the beasts on these roads that can only have gotten worse." He looked up to inspect the sky. It had rained off-and-on all day, and though it was not raining at the moment, there was no doubt that more rain was moving in.



Mary refused to be distracted by meteorology. She stated defiantly what Mr. Henry knew to be true. "These are Mr. Edwards' hack horses. They know the way home. Even in the dark. Even in the rain. Is that my gun?"

Mr. Henry had been cleaning and oiling it before replacing it in its oilcloth wrap when he had seen Merritt and Argent enter the barn. He forgot he had it in his hand. Mary grabbed it from him and stalked off to the barn to replace the gun herself, and to see just what was the situation with Edwards' nags.

Mr. Edwards ran a stable near the river, where he was able to almost exclusively attract the business of people departing the riverboats, now finding themselves in need of horses or carriages. Most everyone in town knew to avoid Edwards' Stables; only the desperate and uninitiated contracted with Mr. Edwards. He had perfectly good horses, but these he kept in reserve for those customers whose return business he insured by renting to them first those horses sure to disappoint. When these hapless creatures were returned, Mr. Edwards greeted them with loud lamentations and sentiments of concern and surprise, and he greeted his customers with assurances of satisfaction in the replacement horse, which rented at a higher price; it was all he had left to offer. Other stables in town publicly deplored his tactics and privately begrudged him both his success and the prime real estate he occupied that guaranteed such success.

The horses usually threw their shoes within a ten-block radius of Edwards' Stables, so that Mr. Edwards could predict with amazing accuracy the time of any customer's return. This was crucial to timing his lunch and supper hours. Such were the horses Merritt and Argent, in their fatigue and vestigial alcoholic haze, had contracted for use. Mr. Edwards waited for them, expecting the pleasure of their return business well before lunch. He even delayed lunch, much to the distress of his very regular stomach, to no profit. Eventually, he conceded the lost revenue, saying, "I'll be damned. That shoe held."

Mr. Henry at length followed Miss Mary back down to the barn. Merritt and Argent shrugged at each other and also retraced their steps to the barn. They not only had a vested interest in the outcome of Miss Warner's inspection, but they found themselves looking forward to her next parry and thrust in her determination to thwart their mission. They were observing some kind of play, in which the audience literally follows the actors from scene to scene, occasionally being asked to contribute to the dialogue. It was more diversion than they had hoped for on the steamboat, and it was certainly shaping up to be less dreary than they had anticipated.

Carrie suddenly appeared at the barn, wiping her hands on her apron. She was again wearing her shawl with its corners tucked into the waistband of her apron. She, too, had been watching the interplay, first at the barn, then at the top of the steps. Carrie missed nothing. "What's the trouble?" she asked, and Mary had to silently applaud her for the expertly contrived sincerity of her concern.

"No trouble. Mr. Henry needs to re-shoe this horse, then the gentlemen can resume their travels." Now it was Mary who was absent-mindedly holding the gun. The shoe had indeed been thrown, and it looked like one on the other horse was ominously loose; it would take only a few steps in this sucking mud to pull it off. How had they made it all the way out here on those shoes? She was lost in thought, staring at the horses, the gun hanging loose at her side.

On cue, Carrie protested, "But surely it will be too dark to ride by the time Henry is finished?" The time required to solve the problem of the shoe and the timing of the approaching dark were dovetailing perfectly. That kind of perfect coincidence was unnatural. Carrie silently thanked the luck of it.

"Horses know the way." Even the heavens were conspiring against Mary. There was more wet weather coming, a storm blowing in; they could all smell the approaching rain.

"Mary -"

"Don't you say it!"

"- Warner!"

Whatever name Miss Carrie was saying was completely covered in practiced and perfect synchronicity by Miss Warner's interjection. Apparently, she had had occasion to drown out Miss Carrie in the past.

"You can't send them out in the night, and it sure to storm."

Mary felt a trap closing in on her. Miss Carrie and Mr. Henry (she couldn't believe it of Mr. Henry!) working so hard to send her away to Washington. Thea's complicity. The incredibly bad luck of Edwards' nags. And those two government men, stupid enough to rent these rundown old flea traps (she was not usually

so uncharitable towards beasts) in the first place. They were standing there, taking it all in, gawping like a couple of rustics at some carnival or county fair. She didn't like her misfortune and humiliation being put on display like this. She replied savagely, "Well, they can't stay here."

"Mary!" This time it was Mr. Henry. He only dropped the 'Miss' when he was truly astonished at her. A look crossed between him and his wife.

Merritt and Argent finally broke in, to assure Miss Carrie that they were quite capable of taking care of themselves. They were old campaigners, and often endured the elements in the course of their work. Mary found that truly hard to believe. Nothing about their behavior or dress or in the course of conversation with them indicated anything of the sort. That made turning them out all the more delicious. She was feeling spiteful, and it seemed to intensify with the growing energy in the air. The sky was oppressive, the atmospheric tension was building, and Mary thought it would have to burst soon. Her own storm was coming; she could feel it - an oncoming sick headache that was a vise on her temples. She was beginning to discern around the people standing here a growing glow that would eventually obliterate their faces, so that all she saw was searing colors. These men had to leave soon, or she would burst as well.

Carrie headed back up the stone stairs, and Mr. Henry followed an obviously ailing Miss Warner into the barn. He and Carrie both recognized the hollow stare that had come into Miss Mary's eyes. There was nothing to do for what was coming but to leave her alone and wait for her to ride it out. A look also crossed between Merritt and Argent, a realization that perhaps Miss Warner wasn't just strident and willful, but troubled and sick as well. Grant did not prepare them for this, and it was becoming clear that convincing Miss Warner to accompany them would not be the end of their duty.

Mr. Henry found Mary in the barn almost in a panic, trying to gather together all the tools and materials he would need to shoe the horse.

She turned to find him behind her with an apologetic look in his eyes. She rushed to say, "Did you find the shoe in the field? If not, I found a shoe that should fit and some nails, and I've gotten the tools together for you. I can bring the horse out here near the workbench if you need more room. I can hold her steady while you work." She was talking rapidly, almost frantically. Her eyes were wild and unfocused, though her mind was completely turned over to the task at hand.

"Miss Mary." Mary stopped at his voice. Mr. Henry released the horse from the cross-ties. "Miss Mary, I can shoe this horse, and I will check all the other shoes as well, so these gentlemen don't have any more problems. It's been a hard afternoon for them, too. But, Miss Mary, it can't be done in time."

She was dirty from her efforts. Her face was black in places where she had smoothed back the wild escaping hairs at her temples with dirty hands. Her dress was dirty, too. The bottoms of her stockings were black. A fine sweat had broken out on her face, even though the weather was decidedly chilly. In her rush to halt the tide of events, she had bolted from the house without any kind of cloak or other covering. Mr. Henry waited patiently while what he said was entirely understood. She was tired, exhausted by the visitors, by the effort it took to listen to them, to Carrie, and to the voices of her parents that Mr. Henry knew were never far from her mind. She was exhausted by her own efforts to stop the stampede of change she felt charging toward her. She stood before him in her moment of defeat.

Merritt and Argent had followed Mr. Henry into the barn, determined to help with the horses, and to assure Miss Warner of their very real intention to leave. They did not understand the nature of her problem, but it was clear that the distress they were causing her was not mere irritation at unannounced guests. They would not give her further cause for distress this night. They would return to town, storm or no, and telegraph Washington asking for advice. They had never asked the director to be excused from an assignment, and certainly they would never turn down an assignment from the President. But it was possible that he had recruited the wrong men for the job. It was possible that the President should have come in person.

Standing just inside the barn, they were guilty observers to Miss Warner's disarray and dismay. She was dirty as no woman should allow herself to become, and certainly not in the presence of guests. But rather than be embarrassed for her, they were full of pity. She was standing, but slouched, in front of Mr. Henry with a pleading and defeated look. She looked like she would collapse. Then from outside the barn, Miss Carrie called, "I've made up beds for the gentlemen for the night."

At that, Mary tore her eyes away from Mr. Henry, unbelieving what she was hearing. Then she saw Merritt and Argent standing there eavesdropping on her and Mr. Henry, and white-hot shame washed over her. She turned back to the work bench where she had been gathering together the impotent armaments of her final assault and grabbed the gun she had laid there.

She pushed past Merritt and Argent and strode to where Carrie stood at the top of the stairs. Looking up from the bottom Mary ordered, "They. Are. Not. Staying."

Merritt and Argent followed Miss Warner out of the barn, alarmed at the volatile mix of her mood and the gun. Mr. Henry slowly rejoined them. He seemed unperturbed by the powder keg in front of him: a visibly upset Miss Warner, challenging his wife, and a loaded gun in Miss Warner's possession.

Anxious to diffuse the situation, Argent said with finality, "We can no longer trespass on your hospitality. We will be leaving as soon as we are able. We will send to ask if we might be received at a later date."

Mr. Henry looked steadily at Mary's back, so that when she turned at the sound of Argent's voice, she found his eyes on her. He never wavered in his gaze.

The first rumbles of thunder sounded in the distance. Carrie said to Mary's back, "It's coming on to rain."

Mr. Henry continued to hold Mary with his gaze. Cornered, she desperately suggested to Carrie, although she was still looking at Mr. Henry, "They can stay in the barn."

"Mary! What would your father say?"

That was quite enough from Miss Carrie. Whirling back to face her, Mary demanded, "What would my father say, indeed, to two strangers, two men, staying in the house with me and no one else?"

There was more than a little merit to this question, and even Carrie realized it.

Mr. Henry looked to the two men standing a little to the side. He felt sorry for these men, trying their best to do their duty and to do right at the same time. Usually, those were one and the same thing, but as always, where Miss Mary was concerned, things rarely followed the norm. The men had no way of knowing that when they crossed the boundary to the Warner farm, they crossed into a place apart. For Miss Mary, it was a sanctuary from the normal and expected; for visitors it often proved chaotic, disorienting, and unredeemable. He said apologetically, "I mean no disrespect, but I'll be staying in the front room tonight. With a gun."

"Not my gun." Mary turned back to the stairs and mounted them until she and Carrie were at eye level. Miss Carrie met Mary's glare with a steady and confident gaze.

"Whose . . . room . . . did you . . . make up?" Though Miss Warner was facing away from the men standing below, they could hear the words coming from clenched teeth. Merritt and Argent again wondered at Mr. Henry's composure at the seeming threat to his wife.

In a level voice, unintimidated, she answered, "No one's, Mary." She was sure of her decision and sure of her knowledge of Mary. "I've made up the cots in the back room."

Mary, having fought a losing battle all day and now having to admit total defeat, could not deny the propriety of it all – she couldn't send them out into the night that threatened to storm, and she should offer them proper beds and shelter – but she hated admitting it and being forced to accept it. Barely stifling a scream in her throat, she whirled away from Carrie and shot the gun in the direction of the barn. Merritt and Argent instinctively flinched and ducked at both her movement and the report of the gun. Mr. Henry had moved to lean with one elbow on the wooden railing of the corral off the side of the barn where the two guilty horses stood, heads hanging. They had let themselves out through the barn's back doors that led into the corral behind. They, too, were following the drama that had come down to them from the big house on the hill. With his other hand Mr. Henry wearily pushed his hat back off his forehead.

A large clap of thunder answered the gunshot. Mary strode off away from the house – away from Carrie, away from the stupid horses and their stupid shoes, away from the stupid men who had picked the stupid horses. They had ruined her day, and, because they were too stupid to know when they were being fleeced, looked to ruin the next day as well. Mr. Edwards was losing his touch – that shoe should have been thrown long before these men ever got out of town.

Miss Carrie shouted after her, "Where do you think you are going in those stockings and in this rain? You come back here, right now. They'll be black as soot and you'll catch the pneumony walking around in this rain and cold!" Carrie's penchant for exaggerating the elements was undeniable in this statement - there had not been the first drop of rain since she had first predicted that it was sure to storm. Mary did not answer. She was quickly disappearing on the horizon.

"I wisht she'd pick a target closer to the ground." Mr. Henry heaved himself away from the fence. "I'm getting too old to climb up there and fix that whirligig." Merritt and Argent looked up to see that Miss Warner had shot the crude weather vane perched at the peak of the barn roof.

A delayed breath of relief escaped Argent. But then the possibility of Miss Warner returning for more target shooting crossed his mind. "Is it safe for her to have a gun?"

Mr. Henry laughed at the question, but not unkindly. "The real hazard would be in trying to take it from her. Miss Mary will sleep with that loaded gun next to her tonight. It's best you not leave the back room until morning."

Merritt asked, "Will she be all right?"

Argent was suddenly ashamed that his first thought had been for his own safety. Miss Warner had stalked off, alone and angry, into the cold dark and an approaching storm, with nothing to cover herself, and no one had seemed to care.

"Yes. She just needs her time alone. She don't like change, and you two hauled it in by the wagonload today. I'll start after her and bring her back before the storm hits. But there's no need to worry about her in the dark - she knows every inch of this land, where to shelter. And where to hide."

Mr. Henry started towards the stairs with what looked like weariness but was instead deep sadness. As he approached his wife still standing at the top, Carrie said with just frustration and exasperation, "I can't do this anymore! She needs someone else caring for her!" In a voice low with admitted defeat she added, "She needs an institution."

Mr. Henry patted her on the shoulder and kissed her lightly on the cheek as he moved past her on the top stair. "You don't mean that, Mother."

"I know it."