

Habakkuk

By Katharine Fullerton Gerould

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When they carried Kathleen Somers up into the hills to die where her ancestors had had the habit of dying--they didn't grieve about, those early Somerses; they dropped in their tracks, and the long grass that they had mowed and stacked and trodden under their living feet flourished mightily over their graves--it was held to be only a question of time. I say "to die," not because her case was absolutely hopeless, but because no one saw how, with her spent vitality, she could survive her exile. Everything had come at once, and she had gone under. She had lost her kin, she had lost her money, she had lost her health. Even the people who make their meat of tragedy--and there are a great many of them in all enlightened centres of thought--shook their heads and were sorry. They thought she couldn't live; and they also thought it much, much better that she shouldn't. For there was nothing left in life for that sophisticated creature but a narrow cottage in a stony field, with Nature to look at.

Does it sound neurotic and silly? It wasn't. Conceive her if you can--Kathleen Somers, whom probably you never knew. From childhood she had nourished short hopes and straightened thoughts. At least: hopes that depend on the Æsthetic passion are short; and the long perspectives of civilized history are very narrow. Kathleen Somers had been fed with the Old World: that is to say, her adolescent feet had exercised themselves in picture-galleries and cathedrals and palaces; she had seen all the right views, all the right ceremonies, and all the censored picturesqueness. Don't get any Cook's tourist idea, please, about Miss Somers. Her mother had died young, and her gifted father had taken her to a hundred places that the school-teacher on a holiday never gets to and thinks of only in connection with geography lessons. She had followed the Great Wall of China, she had stood

before the tomb of Tamburlaine, she had shaded her eyes from the glare of Kañrouan the Holy, she had chattered in Tiflis and in Trebizond. All this before she was twenty-five. At that time her father's health broke, and they proceeded to live permanently in New York. Her wandering life had steeped her in delights, but kept her innocent of love-affairs. When you have fed on historic beauty, on the great plots of the past, the best tenor voices in the world, it is pretty hard to find a man who doesn't in his own person, leave out something essential to romance. She had herself no particular beauty, and therefore the male sex could get on without her. A few fell in love with her, but she was too enchanted and amused with the world in general to set to work at the painful process of making a hero out of any one of them. She was a sweet-tempered creature; her mental snobbishness was not a pose, but perfectly inevitable; she had a great many friends. As she had a quick wit and the historic imagination, you can imagine--remembering her bringing up--that she was an entertaining person when she entered upon middle age: when, that is, she was proceeding from the earlier to the later thirties.

It was natural that Kathleen Somers and her father--who was a bit precious and pompous, in spite of his ironies--should gather about them a homogeneous group. The house was pleasant and comfortable--they were too sophisticated to be "periodic"--and there was always good talk going, if you happened to be the kind that could stand good talk. Of course you had to pass an examination first. You had at least to show that you "caught on." They were high-brow enough to permit themselves sudden enthusiasms that would have damned a low-brow. You mustn't like "Peter Pan," but you might go three nights running to see some really perfect clog-dancing at a vaudeville theatre. Do you see what I mean? They were eclectic with a vengeance. It wouldn't do for you to cultivate the clog-dancer and like "Peter Pan," because in that case you probably liked the clog-dancer for the wrong reason--for something other than that sublimated skill which is art. Of course this is only a wildly chosen example. I never heard either of them mention "Peter Pan." And the proper hatreds were ever more difficult than the

proper devotions. You might let Shakespeare get on your nerves, provided you really enjoyed Milton. I wonder if you do see what I mean? It must be perfect of its kind, its kind being anything under heaven; and it must never, never, never be sentimental. It must have art, and parti pris, and point of view, and individuality stamped over it. No, I can't explain. If you have known people like that, you've known them. If you haven't, you can scarcely conceive them.

By this time you are probably hating the Somerses, father and daughter, and I can't help it--or rather, I've probably brought it about. But when I tell you that I'm not that sore myself, and that I loved them both dearly and liked immensely to be with them, you'll reconsider a little, I hope. They were sweet and straight and generous, both of them, and they knew all about the grand manner. The grand manner is the most comfortable thing to live with that I know. I used to go there a good deal, and Arnold Withrow went even more than I did, though he wasn't even hanging on to Art by the eyelids as I do. (I refer, of course, to my little habit of writing for the best magazines, whose public considers me intellectual. So I seem to myself, in the magazines ... "but out in pantry, good Lord!" Anyway, I generally knew at least what the Somerses were talking about--the dears!) Withrow was a stock-broker, and always spent his vacations in the veritable wilds, camping in virgin forests, or on the edge of glaciers, or in the dust of American deserts. He had never been to Europe, but he had been to Buenos Aires. You can imagine what Kathleen Somers and her father felt about that: they thought him too quaint and barbaric for words; but still not barbaric enough to be really interesting.

I was just beginning to suspect that Withrow was in love with Kathleen Somers in the good old middle-class way, with no drama in it but no end of devotion, when the crash came. Mr. Somers died, and within a month of his death the railroad the bonds of which had constituted his long-since diminished fortune went into the hands of a receiver. There were a pitiful hundreds a year left, besides the ancestral cottage--which had never even been worth selling. His

daughter had an operation, and the shock of that, plus the shock of his death, plus the shock of her impoverishment, brought the curtain down with a tremendous rush that terrified the house. It may make my metaphor clearer if I put it that it was the asbestos curtain which fell suddenly and violently; not the great crimson drop that swings gracefully down at the end of a play. It did not mark the end; it marked a catastrophe in the wings to which the plot must give place.

Then they carried Kathleen Somers to the hills.

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It was Mildred Thurston who told me about it first. Withrow would have rushed to the hills, I think, but he was in British Columbia on an extended trip. He had fought for three months and got them, and he started just before Kathleen Somers had her sudden operation. Mildred Thurston (Withrow's cousin, by the way) threw herself nobly into the breach. I am not going into the question of Mildred Thurston here. Perhaps if Withrow had been at home, she wouldn't have gone. I don't know. Anyhow, when she rushed to Kathleen Somers's desolate retreat she did it, apparently, from pure kindness. She was sure, like every one else, that Kathleen would die; and that belief purged her, for the time being, of selfishness and commonness and cheap gayety. I wouldn't take Mildred Thurston's word about a state of soul; but she was a good dictograph. She came back filled with pity; filled, at least, with the means of inspiring pity for the exile in others.

After I had satisfied myself that Kathleen Somers was physically on the mend, eating and sleeping fairly, and sitting up a certain amount, I proceeded to more interesting questions.

"What is it like?"

"It's dreadful."

"How dreadful?"

Mildred's large blue eyes popped at me with sincere sorrow.

"Well, there's no plumbing, and no furnace."

"Is it in a village?"

"It isn't 'in' anything. It's a mile and a half from a station called Hebron. You have to change three times to get there. It's half-way up a hill--the house is--and there are mountains all about, and the barn is connected with the house by a series of rickety woodsheds, and there are places where the water comes through the roof. They put pails under to catch it. There are queer little contraptions they call Franklin stoves in most of the rooms and a brick oven in the kitchen. When they want anything from the village, Joel Blake gets it, if he doesn't forget. Ditto wood, ditto everything except meat. Some other hick brings that along when he has 'killed.' They can only see one house from the front yard, and that is precisely a mile away by the road. Joel Blake lives nearer, but you can't see his house. You can't see anything--except the woods and the 'crick' and the mountains. You can see the farmers when they are haying, but that doesn't last long."

"Is it a beautiful view?"

"My dear man, don't ask me what a beautiful view is. My education was neglected."

"Does Kathleen Somers think it beautiful?"

"She never looks at it, I believe. The place is all run down, and she sits and wonders when the wall-paper will drop off. At least, that is what she talks about, when she talks at all. That, and whether Joel Blake will remember to bring the groceries. The two women never speak to each other. Kathleen's awfully polite, but--well, you can't

blame her. And I was there in the spring. What it will be in the winter!--But Kathleen can hardly last so long, I should think."

"Who is the other woman?"

"An heirloom. Melora Meigs. Miss Meigs, if you please. You know Mr. Somers's aunt lived to an extreme old age in the place. Miss Meigs 'did' for her. And since then she has been living on there. No one wanted the house--the poor Somerses!--and she was used to it. She's an old thing herself, and of course she hasn't the nerves of a sloth. Now she 'does' for Kathleen. Of course later there'll have to be a nurse again. Kathleen mustn't die with only Melora Meigs. I'm not sure, either, that Melora will last. She all crooked over with rheumatism."

That was the gist of what I got out of Mildred Thurston. Letters to Miss Somers elicited no real response--only a line to say that she wasn't strong enough to write. None of her other female friends could get any encouragement to visit her. It was perhaps due to Miss Thurston's mimicry of Melora Meigs--she made quite a "stunt" of it--that none of them pushed the matter beyond the first rebuff.

By summer-time I began to get worried myself. Perhaps I was a little worried, vicariously, for Withrow. Remember that I thought he cared for her. Miss Thurston's pity for Kathleen Somers was the kind that shuts the door on the pitied person. If she had thought Kathleen Somers had a future, she wouldn't have been so kind. I may give it to you as my private opinion that Mildred Thurston wanted Withrow herself. I can't swear to it, even now; but I suspected it sufficiently to feel that some one, for Withrow's sake had better see Kathleen besides his exuberant and slangy cousin. She danced a little too much on Kathleen Somers's grave. I determined to go myself, and not to take the trouble of asking vainly for an invitation. I left New York at the end of June.

With my perfectly ordinary notions of comfort in traveling, I found that it would take me two days to get to Hebron. It was beyond all the resorts that people flock to: beyond, and "cross country" at that. I must have journeyed on at least three small, one-track railroads after leaving the Pullman at some junction or other.

It was late afternoon when I reached Hebron; and nearly an hour later before I could get myself deposited at Kathleen Somers's door. There was no garden, no porch; only a long, weed-grown walk up to a stiff front door. An orchard of rheumatic apple-trees was cowering stiffly to the wind in a far corner of the roughly fenced-in lot; there was a windbreak of perishing pines.

In the living-room Kathleen Somers lay on a cheap wicker chaise-longue, staring at a Hindu idol that she held in her thin hands. She did not stir to greet me; only transferred her stare from the gilded idol to dusty and ungilded me. She spoke, of course; the first time in my life, too, that I had ever heard her speak ungently.

"My good man, you had better go away. I can't put you up."

That was her greeting. Melora Meigs was snuffling in the hallway outside--listening, I suppose.

"Oh, yes, you can. If you can't I'm sure Joel Blake will. I've come to stay a while, Miss Somers."

"Can you eat porridge and salt pork for supper?"

"I can eat tenpenny nails, if necessary. Also I can sleep in the barn."

"Melora!" The old woman entered, crooked and grudging of aspect. "This friend of my father's and mine has come to see me. Can he sleep in the barn?"

I cannot describe the hostility with which Melora Meigs regarded me. It was not a pointed and passionate hatred. That, one could have examined and dealt with. It was, rather, a vast disgust that happened to include me.

"There's nothing to sleep on. Barn's empty."

"He could move the nurse's cot out there, if he really wants to. And I think there's an extra washstand in the woodshed. You'll hardly need more than one chair, just for a night," she finished, turning to me.

"Not for any number of nights, of course," I agreed suavely. I was angry with Kathleen Somers, I didn't know quite why. I think it was the Hindu idol. Nor had she any right to address me with insolence, unless she were mad, and she was not that. Her eyes snapped very sanely. I don't think Kathleen Somers could have made her voice snap.

Melora Meigs grunted and left the room. The grunt was neither assent nor dissent; it was only the most inclusive disapproval: the snarl of an animal, proceeding from the topmost of many layers of dislike.

"I'll move the things before dark, I think." I was determined to be cheerful, even if I had to seem impertinent; though the notion of her sticking me out in the barn enraged me.

"You won't mind Melora's locking the door between, of course. We always do. I'm such a cockney, I'm timid; and Melora's very sweet about it."

It was almost too much, but I stuck it out. Presently, indeed, I got my way; and moved--yes, actually lugged and lifted and dragged--the cot, the chair, and the stand out through the dusty, half-rotted corridors and sheds to the barn. I drew water at the tap in the yard and washed

my perspiring face and neck. Then I had supper with Miss Somers and Melora Meigs.

After supper my hostess lighted a candle. "We go to bed very early," she informed me. "I know you'll be willing to smoke out-of-doors, it's so warm. I doubt if Melora could bear tobacco in the house. And you won't mind her locking up early. You can get into the barn from the yard any time, of course. Men are never timid, I believe; but there's a horn somewhere, if you'd like it. We have breakfast at six-thirty. Good-night."

Yes, it was Kathleen Somers's own voice, saying these things to me. I was still enraged, but I must bide my time. I refused the horn, and went out into the rheumatic orchard to smoke in dappled moonlight. The pure air soothed me; the great silence restored my familiar scheme of things. Before I went to bed in the barn, I could see the humor of this sour adventure. Oh, I would be up at six-thirty!

Of course I wasn't. I overslept; and by the time I approached the house (the woodshed door was still locked) their breakfast was long over. I fully expected to fast until the midday meal, but Kathleen Somers relented. With her own hands she made me coffee over a little alcohol lamp. Bread and butter had been austere left on the table. Miss Somers fetched me eggs, which I ate raw. Then I went out into the orchard to smoke.

When I came back, I found Miss Somers as she had been the day before, crouched listlessly in her long chair fondling her idol. I drew up a horsehair rocking-chair and plunged in.

"Why do you play with that silly thing?"

"This?" She stroked the idol. "It is rather lovely, Father got it in Benares. The carving is very cunningly done. Look at the nose and mouth. The rank Hinduism of the thing amuses me. Perhaps it was

cruel to bring it up here where there are no other gods for it to play with. But it's all I've got. They had to sell everything, you know. When I get stronger, I'll send it back to New York and sell it too."

"Why did you keep it out of all the things you had?"

"I don't know. I think it was the first thing we ever bought in India. And I remember Benares with so much pleasure. Wasn't it a pity we couldn't have been there when everything happened?"

"Much better not, I should think. You needed surgeons."

"Just what I didn't need! I should have liked to die in a country that had something to say for itself. I don't feel as though this place had ever existed, except in some hideous dream."

"It's not hideous. It's even very beautiful--so wild and untouched; such lovely contours to the mountains."

"Yes, it's very untouched." She spoke of it with just the same scorn I had in old days heard her use for certain novelists. "Scarcely worth the trouble of touching I should think--shouldn't you?"

"The beauty of it last night and this morning has knocked me over," I replied hardily.

"Oh, really! How very interesting!" By which she meant that she was not interested at all.

"You mean that you would like it landscape-gardened?" Really, she was perverse. She had turned her back to the view--which was ripping, out of her northern window. I could tell that she habitually turned her back on it.

"Oh, landscape-gardened? Well, it would improve it, no doubt. But it would take generations to do it. The generations that have been here already don't seem to have accomplished much. Humanly speaking, they have hardly existed at all."

Kathleen Somers was no snob in the ordinary sense. She was an angel to peasants. I knew perfectly what she meant by "humanly." She meant there was no castle on the next hill.

"Are you incapable of caring for nature--just scenery?"

"Quite." She closed her eyes, and stopped her gentle, even stroking of the idol.

"Of course you never did see America first," I laughed.

Kathleen Somers opened her eyes and spoke vehemently. "I've seen all there is of it to see, in transit to better places. Seeing America first! That can be borne. It's seeing America last that kills me. Seeing nothing else forever, till I die."

"You don't care for just beauty, regardless," I mused.

"Not a bit. Not unless it has meant something to man. I'm a humanist, I'm afraid."

Whether she was gradually developing remorse for my night in the cobwebby barn, I do not know. But anyhow she grew more gentle, from this point on. She really condescended to expound.

"I've never loved nature--she's a brute, and crawly besides. It's what man has done with nature that counts; it's nature with a human past. Peaks that have been fought for, and fought on, crossed by the feet of men, stared at by poets and saints. Most of these peaks aren't even named. Did you know that? Nature! What is Nature good for, I should

like to know, except to kill us all in the end? Don't Ruskinize to me, my dear man."

"I won't. I couldn't. But, all the same, beauty is beauty, wherever and whatever. And, look where you will here, your eyes can't go wrong."

"I never look. I looked when I first came, and the stupidity, the emptiness, the mere wood and dirt and rock of it seemed like a personal insult. I should prefer the worst huddle of a Chinese city, I verily believe."

"You've not precisely the spirit of the pioneer, I can see."

"I should hope not. 'But, God if a God there be, is the substance of men, which is man.' I have to stay in the man-made ruts. They're sacred to me. I'll look with pleasure at the Alps, if only for the sake of Hannibal and Goethe; but I never could look with pleasure at your untutored Rockies. They're so unintentional, you know. Nature is nothing until history has touched her. And as for this geological display outside my windows--you'll kindly permit me to turn my back on it. It's not peevishness." She lifted her hand protestingly. "Only, for weeks, I stared myself blind to see the beauty you talk of. I can't see it. That's honest. I've tried. But there is none that I can see. I am very conventional, you know, very self-distrustful. I have to wait for a Byron to show it to me. American mountains--poor hulking things--have never had a poet to look at them. At least, Poe never wasted his time that way. I don't imagine that Poe would have been much happier here than I am. I haven't even the thrill of the explorer, for I'm not the first one to see them. A few thin generations of people have stared at these hills--and much the hills have done for them! Melora Meigs is the child of these mountains; and Melora's sense of beauty is amply expressed in the Orthodox church in Hebron. This landscape, I assure you"--she smiled--"hasn't made good. So much for the view. It's no use to me, absolutely no use. I give you full and free leave to take it away with you if you want it. And I don't think the house is much

better. But I'm afraid I shall have to keep that for Melora Meigs and me to live in." It was her old smile. The bitterness was all in the words. No, it was not bitterness, precisely, for it was fundamentally as impersonal as criticism can be. You would have thought that the mountains were low-brows. I forebore to mention her ancestors who had lived here: it would have seemed like quibbling. They had created the situation; but they had only in the most literal sense created her.

"Why don't you get out?"

"I simply haven't money enough to live anywhere else. Not money enough for a hall bedroom. This place belongs to me. The taxes are nothing. The good farming land that went with it was sold long since. And I'm afraid I haven't the strength to go out and work for a living. I'm very ineffectual, besides. What could I do even if health returned to me? I've decided it's more decent to stay here and die on three dollars a year than to sink my capital in learning stenography."

"You could, I suppose, be a companion." Of course I did not mean it, but she took it up very seriously.

"The people who want companions wouldn't want me. And the one thing this place gives me is freedom--freedom to hate it, to see it intelligently for what it is. I couldn't afford my blessed hatreds if I were a companion. And there's no money in it, so that I couldn't even plan for release. It simply wouldn't do."

Well, of course it wouldn't do. I had never thought it would. I tried another opening.

"When is Withrow coming back?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard from him." She might have been telling a squirrel that she didn't know where the other squirrel's nuts were.

"He has been far beyond civilization, I know. But I dare say he'll be back soon. I hope you won't put him in the barn. I don't mind, of course, but his feelings might be hurt."

"I shall certainly not let him come," she retorted. "He would have the grace to ask first, you know."

"I shall make a point of telling him you want him." But even that could strike no spark from her. She was too completely at odds with life to care. I realized, too, after an hour's talk with her, that I had better go--take back my fine proposition about making a long visit. She reacted to nothing I could offer. I talked of books and plays, visiting virtuosos and picture exhibitions. Her comments were what they would always have been, except that she was already groping for the cue. She had been out of it for months; she had given up the fight. The best things she said sounded a little stale and precious. Her wit perished in the face of Nature's stare. Nature was a lady she didn't recognize: a country cousin she'd never met. She couldn't even "sit and play with similes." If she lived, she would be an old lady with a clever past: an intolerable bore. But there was no need to look so far ahead. Kathleen Somers would die.

Before dinner I clambered up or down (I don't remember which) to a brook and gathered a bunch of wild iris for her. She had loved flowers of old; and how deftly she could place a spray among her treasures! She shuddered. "Take those things away! How dare you bring It inside the house?" By "It" I knew she meant the wild natural world. Obediently I took the flowers out and flung them over the fence. I knew that Kathleen Somers was capable of getting far more pleasure from their inimitable hue than I; but even that inimitable hue was poisoned for her because it came from the world that was torturing her--the world that beat upon her windows, so that she turned her back to the day; that stormed her ears, so that she closed them even to its silence; that surrounded her, so that she locked every gate of her mind.

I left, that afternoon, very desolate and sorry. Certainly I could do nothing for her. I had tried to shock her, stir her, into another attitude, but in vain. She had been transplanted to a soil her tender roots could not strike into. She would wither for a little under the sky, and then perish. "If she could only have fallen in love!" I thought, as I left her, huddled in her wicker chair. If I had been a woman, I would have fled from Melora Meigs even into the arms of a bearded farmer; I would have listened to the most nasal male the hills had bred. I would have milked cows, to get away from Melora. But I am a crass creature. Besides, what son of the soil would want her: unexuberant, delicate, pleasant in strange ways, and foreign to all familiar things? She wouldn't even fall in love with Arnold Withrow, who was her only chance. For I saw that Arnold, if he ever came, would, fatally, love the place. She might have put up with the stock-broking, but she never could have borne his liking the view. Yes, I was very unhappy as I drove into Hebron; and when I finally achieved the Pullman at the Junction, I was unhappier still. For I felt towards that Pullman as the lost child feels toward its nurse; and I knew that Kathleen Somers, ill, poor, middle-aged, and a woman, was a thousand times more the child of the Pullman than I.

I have told this in detail, because I hate giving things at second-hand. Yet there my connection with Kathleen Somers ceased, and her tragedy deepened before other witnesses. She stayed on in her hills; too proud to visit her friends, too sane to spend her money on a flying trip to town, too bruised and faint to fight her fate. The only thing she tried for was apathy. I think she hoped--when she hoped anything--that her mind would go, a little: not so much that she would have to be "put away"; but just enough so that she could see things in a mist--so that the hated hills might, for all she knew, be Alps, the rocks turn into castles, the stony fields into vineyards, and Joel Blake into a Tuscan. Just enough so that she could re-create her world from her blessed memories, without any sharp corrective senses to interfere. That, I am sure, was what she fixed her mind upon through the prolonged autumn; bending all her frail strength to turn her brain ever so little

from its rigid attitude to fact. "Pretending" was no good: it maddened. If her mind would only pretend without her help! That would be heaven, until heaven really came.... You can't sympathize with her, probably, you people who have been bred up on every kind of Nature cult. I can hear you talking about the everlasting hills. Don't you see, that was the trouble? Her carefully trained imagination was her religion, and in her own way she was a ritualist. The mountains she faced were unbaptized: the Holy Ghost had never descended upon them. She was as narrow as a nun; but she could not help it. And remember, you practical people who love woodchucks, that she had nothing but the view to make life tolerable. The view was no mere accessory to a normal existence. She lived, half-ill, in an ugly, not too comfortable cottage, as far as the moon from any world she understood, in a solitude acidulated by Melora Meigs. No pictures, no music, no plays, no talk--and this, the whole year round. Would you like it yourselves, you would-be savages with Adirondack guides? Books? Well: that was one of life's little stupidities. She couldn't buy them, and no one knew what to send her. Besides, books deferred the day when her mind should, ever so little, go back on her. She didn't encourage gifts of literature. She was no philosopher; and an abstraction was of no use to her unless she could turn it to a larger concreteness, somehow enhancing, let us say, a sunset from the Acropolis. I never loved Kathleen Somers, as men love women, but many a time that year I would have taken her burden on myself, changed lives with her, if that had been possible. It never could have been so bad for any of us as for her. Mildred Thurston would have gone to the church sociables and flirted as grossly as Hebron conventions permitted; I, at least, could have chopped wood. But to what account could Kathleen Somers turn her martyrdom?

Withrow felt it, too--not as I could feel it, for, as I foretold, he thought the place glorious. He went up in the autumn when everything was crimson and purple and gold. Yet more, in a sense, than I could feel it, for he did love her as men love women. It shows you how far gone she was that she turned him down. Many women, in her case, would

have jumped at Withrow for the sake of getting away. But she was so steeped in her type that she couldn't. She wouldn't have married him before; and she wasn't going to marry him for the sake of living in New York. She would have been ashamed to. A few of us who knew blamed her. I didn't, really, though I had always suspected that she cared for him personally. Kathleen Somers's love, when it came, would be a very complicated thing. She had seen sex in too many countries, watched its brazen play on too many stages, within theatres and without, to have any mawkish illusions. But passion would have to bring a large retinue to be accepted where she was sovereign. Little as I knew her, I knew that. Yet I always thought she might have taken him, in that flaming October, if he hadn't so flagrantly, tactlessly liked the place. He drank the autumn like wine; he was tipsy with it; and his loving her didn't tend to sober him. The consequence was that she drew away--as if he had been getting drunk on some foul African brew that was good only to befuddle woolly heads with; as if, in other words, he had not been getting drunk like a gentleman.... Anyhow, Arnold came back with a bad headache. She had found a gentle brutality to fit his case. He would have been wise, I believe, to bring her away, even if he had had to chloroform her to do it. But Withrow couldn't have been wise in that way. Except for his incurable weakness for Nature, he was the most delicate soul alive.

He didn't talk much to me about it, beyond telling me that she had refused him. I made out the rest from his incoherences. He had not slept in the barn, for they could hardly have let a cat sleep in the barn on such cold nights; but Melora Meigs had apparently treated him even worse than she had treated me. Kathleen Somers had named some of the unnamed mountains after the minor prophets; as grimly as if she had been one of the people they cursed. I thought that a good sign, but Withrow said he wished she hadn't: she ground the names out so between her teeth. Some of her state of mind came out through her talk--not much. It was from one or two casually seen letters that I became aware of her desire to go a little--just a little--mad.

In the spring Kathleen Somers had a relapse. It was no wonder. In spite of the Franklin stoves, her frail body must have been chilled to the bone for many months. Relief settled on several faces, when we heard--I am afraid it may have settled on mine. She had been more dead than alive, I judged, for a year; and yet she had not been able to cure her sanity. That was chronic. Death would have been the kindest friend that could arrive to her across those detested hills. We--the "we" is a little vague, but several of us scurried about--sent up a trained nurse, delaying somewhat for the sake of getting the woman who had been there before; for she had the advantage of having experienced Melora Meigs without resultant bloodshed. She was a nice woman, and sent faithful bulletins; but the bulletins were bad. Miss Somers seemed to have so little resistance: there was no interest there, she said, no willingness to fight. "The will was slack." Ah, she little knew Kathleen Somers's will! None of us knew, for that matter.

The spring came late that year, and in those northern hills there were weeks of melting snow and raw, deep slush--the ugliest season we have to face south of the Arctic circle. The nurse did not want any of her friends to come; she wrote privately, to those of us who champed at the bit, that Miss Somers was fading away, but not peacefully; she was better unvisited, unseen. Miss Somers did not wish any one to come, and the nurse thought it wiser not to force her. Several women were held back by that, and turned with relief to Lenten opera. The opera, however, said little to Withrow at the best of times, and he was crazed by the notion of not seeing her before she achieved extinction. I thought him unwise, for many reasons: for one, I did not think that Arnold Withrow would bring her peace. She usually knew what she wanted--wasn't that, indeed, the whole trouble with her?--and she had said explicitly to the nurse that she didn't want Arnold Withrow. But by the end of May Withrow was neither to hold nor to bind: he went. I contented myself with begging him at least not to poison her last hours by admiring the landscape. I had expected my earnest request to shock him; but, to my surprise, he nodded understandingly. "I shall curse the whole thing out like a trooper, if she gives me the chance."

And he got into his daycoach--the Pullmans wouldn't go on until much later--a mistaken and passionate knight.

Withrow could not see her the first evening, and he talked long and deeply with the nurse. She had no hope to give him: she was mystified. It was her opinion that Kathleen Somers's lack of will was killing her, speedily and surely. "Is there anything for her to die of?" he asked. "There's nothing, you might say, for her to live of," was her reply. The nurse disapproved of his coming, but promised to break the news of his presence to her patient in the morning.

Spring had by this time touched the hills. It was that divine first moment when the whole of earth seems to take a leap in the night; when things are literally new every morning. Arnold walked abroad late, filling his lungs and nostrils and subduing his pulses. He was always faunishly wild in the spring; and for years he hadn't had a chance to seek the season in her haunts. But he turned in before midnight, because he dreaded the next day supremely. He didn't want to meet that face to face until he had to. Melora Meigs lowered like a thunderstorm, but she was held in check by the nurse. I suppose Melora couldn't give notice: there would be nothing but the poor-farm for her if she did. But she whined and grumbled and behaved in general like an electrical disturbance. Luckily, she couldn't curdle the milk.

Withrow waked into a world of beauty. He walked for an hour before breakfast, through woods all blurred with buds, down vistas brushed with faint color. But he would have given the spring and all springs to come for Kathleen Somers, and the bitter kernel of it was that he knew it. He was sharp-faced and sad (I know how he looked) when he came back, with a bunch of hepaticas, to breakfast.

The nurse was visibly trembling. You see, Kathleen Somers's heart had never been absolutely right. It was a terrible responsibility to let her patient face Withrow. Still, neither she nor any other woman could

have held Withrow off. Besides, as she had truly said, there was nothing explicitly for Kathleen Somers to die of. It was that low vitality, that whispering pulse, that listlessness; then, a draught, a shock, a bit of over-exertion and something real and organic could speedily be upon her. No wonder the woman was troubled. In point of fact, though she had taken up Miss Somers's breakfast, she hadn't dared tell her the news. And finally, after breakfast, she broke down. "I can't do it, Mr. Withrow," she wailed. "Either you go away or I do."

Withrow knew at first only one thing: that he wouldn't be the one to go. Then he realized that the woman had been under a long strain, what with the spring thaws, and a delicate patient who wouldn't mend--and Melora to fight with, on behalf of all human decency, every day.

"You go, then," he said finally. "I'll take care of her."

The nurse stared at him. Then she thought, presumably, of Kathleen Somers's ineffable delicacy, and burst out laughing. Hysteria might, in all the circumstances, be forgiven her.

Then they came back to the imminent question.

"I'll tell her when I do up her room," she faltered.

"All right. I'll give you all the time in the world. But she must be told I'm here--unless you wish me to tell her myself." Withrow went out to smoke. But he did not wish to succumb again to the intoxication Kathleen Somers so disdained, and eventually he went into the barn, to shut himself away from temptation. It was easier to prepare his vilifying phrases there.

To his consternation, he heard through the gloom the sound of sobbing. The nurse, he saw, after much peering, sat on a dusty chopping-block, crying unhealthily. He went up to her and seized her arm. "Have you told her?"

"I can't."

"My good woman, you'd better leave this afternoon."

"Not"--the tone itself was firm, through the shaky sobs--"until there is some one to take my place."

"I'll telegraph for some one. You shan't see her again. But I will see her at once."

Then the woman's training asserted itself. She pulled herself together, with a little shake of self-disgust. "You'll do nothing of the sort. I'll attend to her until I go. It has been a long strain, and, contrary to custom, I've had no time off. I'll telegraph to the Registry myself. And if I can't manage until then, I'll resign my profession." She spoke with sturdy shame.

"That's better." Withrow approved her. "I'm awfully obliged. But honestly, she has got to know. I can't stand it, skulking round, much longer. And no matter what happens to the whole boiling, I'm not going to leave without seeing her."

"I'll tell her." The nurse rose and walked to the barn-door like a heroine. "But you must stay here until I come for you."

"I promise. Only you must come. I give you half an hour."

"I don't need half an hour, thank you." She had recovered her professional crispness. In the wide door she stopped. "It's a pity," she said irrelevantly, "that she can't see how lovely this is." Then she started for the house.

"I believe you," muttered Withrow under his breath.

In five minutes the nurse came back, breathless, half-running. Arnold got up from the chopping-block, startled. He believed for an instant (as he has since told me) that it was "all over." With her hand on her beating heart the woman panted out her words:

"She has come downstairs in a wrapper. She hasn't been down for weeks. And she has found your hepaticas."

"Oh, hell!" Withrow was honestly disgusted. He had never meant to insult Kathleen Somers with hepaticas. "Is it safe to leave her alone with them?" He hardly knew what he was saying. But it shows to what a pass Kathleen Somers had come that he could be frightened at the notion of her being left alone with a bunch of hepaticas.

"She's all right, I think. She seemed to like them."

"Oh, Lord!" Withrow's brain was spinning. "Here, I'll go. If she can stand those beastly flowers, she can stand me."

"No, she can't." The nurse had recovered her breath now. "I'll go back and tell her, very quietly. If she could get down-stairs, she can stand it, I think. But I'll be very careful. You come in ten minutes. If she isn't fit, I'll have got her back to bed by that time."

She disappeared, and Withrow, his back to the view, counted out the minutes. When the large hand of his watch had quite accomplished its journey, he turned and walked out through the yard to the side door of the house. Melora Meigs was clattering dish-pans somewhere beyond, and the noise she made covered his entrance to the living-room. He drew a deep breath: they were not there. He listened at the stairs: no sound up there--no sound, at least, to rise above Melora's dish-pans, now a little less audible. But this time he was not going to wait--for anything. He already had one foot on the stairs when he heard voices and stopped. For just one second he paused, then walked cat-like in the direction of the sounds. The front door was open. On the step

stood Kathleen Somers, her back to him, facing the horizon. A light shawl hung on her shoulders, and the nurse's arm was very firmly round her waist. They did not hear him, breathing heavily there in the hall behind them.

He saw Kathleen Somers raise her arm slowly--with difficulty, it seemed. She pointed at the noble shoulder of a mountain.

"That is Habakkuk," said her sweet voice. "I named them all, you know. But I think Habakkuk is my favorite; though of course he's not so stunning as Isaiah. Then they run down to Obadiah and Malachi. Joel is just peeping over Habakkuk's left shoulder. That long bleak range is Jeremiah." She laughed, very faintly. "You know, Miss Willis, they are really very beautiful. Isn't it strange, I couldn't see it? For I honestly couldn't. I've been lying there, thinking. And I found I could remember all their outlines, under snow ... and this morning it seemed to me I must see how Habakkuk looked in the spring." She sat down suddenly on the top step; and Miss Willis sat down too, her arm still about her patient.

"It's very strange"--Withrow, strain though he did, could hardly make out the words, they fell so softly--"that I just couldn't see it before. It's only these last days.... And now I feel as if I wanted to see every leaf on every tree. It wasn't so last year. They say something to me now. I don't think I should want to talk with them forever, but you've no idea--you've no idea--how strange and welcome it is for my eyes to find them beautiful." She seemed almost to murmur to herself. Then she braced herself slightly against the nurse's shoulder, and went on, in her light, sweet, ironic voice. "They probably never told you--but I didn't care for Nature, exactly. I don't think I care for it now, as some people do, but I can see that this is beautiful. Of course you don't know what it means to me. It has simply changed the world." She waved her hand again. "They never got by, before. I always knew that line was line, and color was color, wherever or whoever. But my eyes went back on me. My father would have despised me. He wouldn't

have preferred Habakkuk, but he would have done Habakkuk justice from the beginning. Yes, it makes a great deal of difference to me to see it once, fair and clear. Why"--she drew herself up as well as she could, so firmly held--"it is a very lovely place. I should tire of it some time, but I shall not tire of it soon. For a little while, I shall be up to it. And I know that no one thinks it will be long."

Just then, Withrow's absurd fate caught him. Breathless, more passionately interested than he had ever been in his life, he sneezed. He had just time, while the two women were turning, to wonder if he had ruined it all--if she would faint, or shriek, or relapse into apathy.

She did none of these things. She faced him and flushed, standing unsteadily. "How long have you been cheating me?" she asked coldly. But she held out her hand before she went upstairs with the nurse's arm still round her.

Later he caught at Miss Willis excitedly. "Is she better? Is she worse? Is she well? Or is she going to die?"

"She's shaken. She must rest. But she's got the hepaticas in water beside her bed. And she told me to pull the shade up so that she could look out. She has a touch of temperature--but she often has that. The exertion and the shock would be enough to give it to her. I found her leaning against the door-jamb. I hadn't a chance to tell her you were here. I can tell you later whether you'd better go or stay."

"I'm going to stay. It's you who are going."

"You needn't telegraph just yet," the nurse replied dryly. She looked another woman from the nervous, sobbing creature on the chopping-block.

The end was that Miss Willis stayed and Arnold Withrow went. Late that afternoon he left Kathleen Somers staring passionately at the

sunset. It was not his moment, and he had the grace to know it. But he had not had to tell her that the view was beastly; and, much as he loved her, I think that was a relief to him.

None of us will ever know the whole of Kathleen Somers's miracle, of course. I believe she told as much of it as she could when she said that she had lain thinking of the outlines of the mountains until she felt that she must go out and face them: stand once more outside, free of walls, and stare about at the whole chain of the earth-lords. Perhaps the spring, which had broken up the ice-bound streams, had melted other things besides. Unwittingly--by unconscious cerebration--by the long inevitable storing of disdained impressions--she had arrived at vision. That which had been, for her, alternate gibberish and silence, had become an intelligible tongue. The blank features had stirred and shifted into a countenance; she saw a face, where she had seen only odds and ends of modelling grotesquely flung abroad. With no stupid pantheism to befuddle her, she yet felt the earth a living thing. Wood and stone, which had not even been an idol for her, now shaped themselves to hold a sacrament. Put it as you please; for I can find no way to express it to my satisfaction. Kathleen Somers had, for the first time, envisaged the cosmic, had seen something less passionate, but more vital, than history. Most of us are more fortunate than she: we take it for granted that no loom can rival the petal of a flower. But to some creatures the primitive is a cipher, hard to learn; and blood is spent in the struggle. You have perhaps seen (and not simply in the old legend) passion come to a statue. Rare, oh, rare is the necessity for such a miracle. But Kathleen Somers was in need of one; and I believe it came to her.

The will was slack, the nurse had said; yet it sufficed to take her from her bed, down the stairs, in pursuit of the voice--straight out into the newly articulate world. She moved, frail and undismayed, to the source of revelation. She did not cower back and demand that the oracle be served up to her by a messenger. A will like that is not slack.

Now I will shuffle back into my own skin and tell you the rest of it very briefly and from the rank outsider's point of view. Even had I possessed the whole of Arnold Withrow's confidence, I could not deal with the delicate gradations of a lover's mood. He passed the word about that Kathleen Somers was not going to die--though I believe he did it with his heart in his mouth, not really assured she wouldn't. It took some of us a long time to shift our ground and be thankful. Withrow, with a wisdom beyond his habit, did not go near her until autumn. Reports were that she was gaining all the time, and that she lived out-of-doors staring at Habakkuk and his brethren, gathering wild flowers and pressing them between her palms. She seemed determined to face another winter there alone with Melora, Miss Willis wrote. Withrow set his jaw when that news came. It was hard on him to stay away, but she had made it very clear that she wanted her convalescent summer to herself. When she had to let Miss Willis go--and Miss Willis had already taken a huge slice of Kathleen's capital--he might come and see her through the transition. So Withrow sweltered in New York all summer, and waited for permission.

Then Melora Meigs was gracious for once. With no preliminary illness, with just a little gasp as the sun rose over the long range of Jeremiah, she died. Withrow, hearing this, was off like a sprinter who hears the signal. He found laughter and wit abiding happily in Kathleen's recovered body. Together they watched the autumn deepen over the prophets. Habakkuk, all insults forgiven, was their familiar.

So they brought Kathleen Somers back from the hills to live. It was impossible for her to remain on her mountainside without a Melora Meigs; and Melora, unlike most tortures, was unreplaceable. Kathleen's world welcomed her as warmly as if her exile had been one long suspense: a gentle hypocrisy we all forgave each other. Some one went abroad and left an apartment for her use. All sorts of delicate little events occurred, half accidentally, in her interest. Soon some of us began to gather, as of old. Marvel of marvels, Withrow had not spoken in that crimson week of autumn. Without jealousy he had

apparently left her to Habakkuk. It was a brief winter--for Kathleen Somers's body, a kind of spring. You could see her grow, from week to week: plump out and bloom more vividly. Then, in April, without a word, she left us--disappeared one morning, with no explicit word to servants.

Withrow once more--poor Withrow--shot forth, not like a runner, but like a hound on a fresh scent. He needed no time-tables. He leaped from the telephone to the train.

He found her there, he told me afterward, sitting on the step, the door unlocked behind her but shut.

Indeed, she never entered the house again; for Withrow bore her away from the threshold. I do not think she minded, for she had made her point: she had seen Habakkuk once more, and Habakkuk had not gone back on her. That was all she needed to know. They meant to go up in the autumn after their marriage, but the cottage burned to the ground before they got back from Europe. I do not know that they have ever been, or whether they ever will go, now. There are still a few exotic places that Kathleen Withrow has not seen, and Habakkuk can wait. After all, the years are very brief in Habakkuk's sight. Even if she never needs him again, I do not think he will mind.

FOOTNOTE:

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