RED TASSELS

BY MARGARET SUTTON BRISCOE

WITH PICTURES BY A. B. FROST

"WHOA, pet! Whoa, I say! Whoa! Steady, girl! Up! There, that 's it. Just what I thought! Another ten miles and you 'd never have been four-footed again."

The owner of the horse sat in his buggy, helplessly holding the ends of the useless reins. The sunbonneted female figure which had suddenly appeared at his horse's head to check his progress and take charge of his affairs seemed to have sprung up out of the dusty road. He roused himself from his amazement and bent forward over the dash-board. What on earth was this most extraordinary person doing with his horse's leg? She had taken the animal's foot up from the ground, and was talking to herself as she felt the tendons and joint with a practised hand. If the horse had an owner whose time or opinion might be of any value, she apparently was not aware of the fact. When she rose fina ly it was to push back her sunbonnet and at once address herself to unharnessing the horse with a swiftness and dexterity which left its owner uncomfortably certain that unless he made some countermove, and that quickly, his means of locomotion would be gone.

What did happen in a few moments was that he found himself left alone in his buggy in the middle of the road, staring after his retreating quadruped and the sunbonnet bobbing by its side.

Roused to action of some kind, he sprang from the buggy, and, taking the horse's place between the shafts, he was soon a part of the short procession, holding his place at an interval behind. At the first gate the head of the procession turned into a neat yard in which stood a low farmhouse with the usual stable and out-buildings gathered about it. Straight on toward the stable, like homing birds, trotted the horse and the sunbonnet, and on behind the man wheeled the buggy.

As the horse and its guide vanished through the open stable door, the man let the buggy-shafts drop, took off his hat, wiped his damp brow, and looked about him. It was a quaint, attractive old house which he saw, covered with overgrown vines and set in a flowery yard, with shade-trees near the door and fruit-orchards flanking the yard on either side. A cooler, more comfortable retreat on a hot, dusty day could not well be imagined. He was still looking about him when the wearer of the sunbonnet came out of the stable and hurried to the house, from which she as quickly emerged again, carrying a heavy pail of steaming water in one hand and a large bundle of flannel in the other. She was walking straight on toward the stable when the traveler, stepping forward, hat in hand, blocked the way.

"Allow me," he said firmly, taking the bucket from her hand. Then walking on beside her, he added as casually as if continuing an interrupted conversation:

"Will you kindly tell me why your stable is painted one color ten feet up, and quite another shade all the rest of the way?"

The owner of the stable pushed the covering back from her face to look up.

"Of all the exasperating things I ever had happen to me," she said with feeling, "that was the most aggravating. I could have painted the whole stable as easily as not, if I 'd begun early enough. I hired a man to paint the upper part because I had to stop to prune the fruit-trees, and I think in my soul he mixed the paint a different color on purpose to make people say I

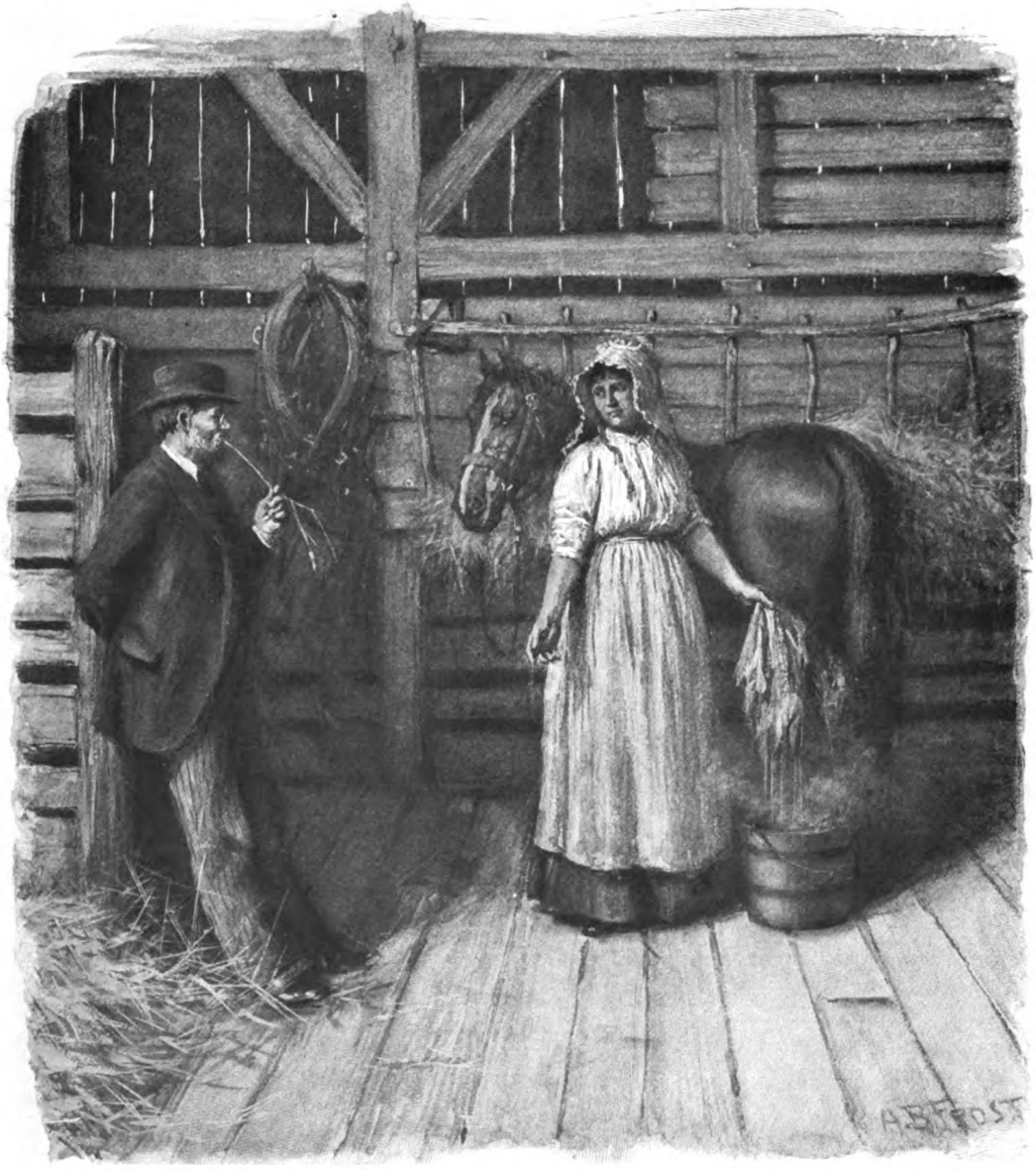
painted as high as I could reach and then had to hire a man to finish the job."

"I can see," remarked the traveler, in the same casual way, "that you also pruned the fruit-trees as high as you could reach, but you did n't get any man to finish that job."

"Yes," confessed the wearer of the sunbonnet, with a little dejection of tone. "It does show where I could n't reach the tops; but next year I 'll do better."

"Expect to grow taller?" asked the traveler, cheerfully. "I would n't bother. I kind of like the way you 've got those trees. They look like so many umbrellas. I never saw orchards look just like those two. Give me variety!"

The sunbonnet turned toward him quickly. He saw that the wearer was not young, yet neither was she old. She was not pretty, but she certainly was far from



Drawn by A. B. Frost. Half-tone plate engraved by J. Tinkey

"'HOLD A HORSE'S LEG! WELL, IF YOU 'D EVER TRIED TO, YOU WOULD N'T BE STANDING THERE NOW TALKING ABOUT IT'"

ugly. The traveler liked pretty women, but he liked handsome ones better. This woman either had been handsome or still might be, he was not sure which. He decided that she was handsome enough to have her own way a little longer, and so followed on to the stable, where, divested of harness and tied comfortably to a hay-rack, stood the traveler's mare.

"How soon will she be about again?" asked the traveler, nodding toward his horse. "She 's been going lame off and on for some days. I thought it was just a bad trick."

"Trick! Mercy! I saw the horse from my up-stairs window half a mile off, and I knew it was going dead lame. How would you like to travel on an abscess? People can't seem to remember dumb brutes are dumb. She could n't *tell* you. You may be a horse yourself some day, and then you will know what it is to have abscesses taken for tricks."

"I 'm not going to be a horse," answered the traveler, calmly. "I 'm going to be an angel. Where shall I set this bucket, Mrs. Gray?"

"Right here in the stall." A moment's thoughtful pause, then: "Who told you my name was Gray?"

"Gray—the Widow Gray. Is n't that your name?"

"My name 's Delia Harding, and always has been. I never was married."

"Indeed!" said the traveler, as if the statement was incredible.

He was a short, strongly built man, with a touch of gray in the hair over his temples, a merry twinkle in his eyes, and a mouth that always foretold a laugh by twitching in the corners. The laugh, when it came, was a high, contagious chuckle. Leaning against the stall, he interestedly watched Miss Harding soaking flannels in water much too hot for her hands.

"What 's that for?" he asked.

"Embrocation."

"Well, I know as much now as I did before. I suppose that goes on the beast's leg, eh? Want me to hold her leg while you slap it on?"

Miss Harding lifted a face flushed crimson by her exertions, and across the steaming applications gave him one look of utter scorn.

"Hold a horse's leg! Well, if you 'd ever tried to, you would n't be standing there now talking about it."

She held the hot application in one hand, while with the other she patted the animal's side, working her soothing way down to the tender joint, upon which, by a similar course of gradual approaches, she successfully bound the hot flannel.

"That 's done," she said, rising as the last knot was tied, and with the word caught up her bucket and walked rapidly out of the stable, closing and bolting the door behind her. The traveler was obliged to move with more celerity than dignity in order not to be shut in with the horse, for Miss Harding's previous state of forgetfulness as to his existence seemed to have returned in force, and had his buggy, left in the house yard, been smaller, it might almost have been said that she stubbed her toe on it in her progress. What she actually did was to run up against it, and when brought to a stand, she absent-mindedly regarded it a moment, then circling about it, disappeared into the house. The traveler also stopped at the side of his buggy and watched the mistress of the farm vanishing, without a backward look, through her doorway. With his head cocked on one side, his lips puckered into a silent whistle, he stood thinking. Then, as if upon a sudden determination, he burst into a hearty laugh.

It was ten minutes later when Miss Harding, standing with her back to the door gazing down into a pot boiling on the stove, started at a voice from the doorway and dropped the pot-lid with a clatter.

"You 've got everything so convenient, Miss Harding. By the way, my name 's Marcus Town. I 'm a traveling salesman—brass polish. That 's the nicest carriage-house I ever saw. Place for everything. Could n't imagine what those *snaps* in the wall were for at first. I found out as soon as I stuck my buggy-shafts in them. Hello, kitty! Come here, pussy-cat. Well, now, you keep talking about my driving a lame horse! I never punched holes in a pussy-cat's ears to put red tassels in them! Poor pussy! Come, pussy!"

Delia Harding came quickly toward the door, and looked down at the cat in Marcus Town's arms.

"I did n't bore those holes in her ears. She 's a stray cat that came in here long ago. She had n't tassels in her ears then, only the holes and a broken leg. It took

Drawn by A. B. Frost. Half-tone plate engraved by J. W. Evans

"'THAT WOMAN MAKES ME WORK EARLY AND LATE'"

me a long time to decide whether she 'd rather wear those tassels or not. I put it to myself finally, and then I made her the tassels. I argued she might be ashamed of the holes before the other cats."

"I think you decided just right," said Marcus, cordially. He sat down upon the door-step, his back against the open door. "The chances are this cat 's a kind of a king with the other cats because of these tassels. I tell you, there 's lots of us wearing red tassels to hide awful holes, and lots of others envying us the tassels."

"Yes," said Delia, slowly; "that 's true."

She turned back sharply into the kitchen and to her domestic duties, hurrying out of sight by a back door behind which Marcus Town decided the buttery was situated. He waited a moment after the door was shut, then rose in leisurely fashion. His step was noiseless as he walked to the stove and lifted the lid of the pot. He sniffed critically at the freed steam which rose in a cloud, nodded approval, and replaced the lid. From the stove he proceeded to the dresser, where he softly opened several drawers, and finally dragged out a table-cloth, which he shook from its folds and spread neatly over the table in the center of the room. In a wonderfully short space of time all that he wanted from the dresser was upon the table; and then carefully filling a tall celery-glass with water from the kitchen pail, he set it in the center of the cloth, and went out into the yard. When he entered the kitchen again by the front door Miss Harding was coming in at the back. Her hands were full of dishes, and she was pushing open the buttery spring-door with her shoulder, while preventing its slamming with her foot, after the graceless habit of full-handed housekeepers. With her foot still caught in the door she paused transfixed, her gaze upon the table set neatly for two, and upon Marcus Town filling the celery-glass with yellow buttercups which he had plucked in the yard.

"Wait a minute," he called cheerfully. "You 've got too much there. Why in the world did n't you call me to help you? Give me the butter. Looks pretty right under those yellow buttercups, don't it? Milk here, cake here, preserves here. Guess that 's all right. I 'll lift the stew off the fire for you. Those pots always seem to me ever so much too heavy for a woman. You don't say you 've got hot light-rolls for dinner! Bless me! I have n't tasted hot light-rolls since I started on the road."

Delia Harding stood motionless, her foot still caught in the door, her empty hands still extended, as if yet holding the buttery-china of which she had been relieved. Only her astonished eyes moved as they mechanically followed Marcus with exactly the same expression in them that his had worn when watching her unharness his horse. He opened the hot oven door with Delia's best dish-cloth, took out her pan of rolls, lifted off the stew, talking cheerfully the while, and, as a sleep-walker moves, Delia Harding stepped slowly forward, dished the stew, and set it on the table.

"No," said Marcus Town from the door-step, where he was alternately blowing puffs of tobacco-smoke out into the air and turning to throw his remarks back into the room—"no, it don't seem to be two weeks since I came here, does it? No. Time does certainly fly. That beast of mine 's set her pace to get well when she 's good and ready, and not before. I 'm not worrying about my animal as much as I am about yours, though. Here I 've been driving him around the country as if he was mine. You sure it ain't too much for him? I don't know why I asked you that. Don't I know that you would n't have let me use him a quarter of an hour more than was healthy for him? See here, Miss Harding, I want to ask you something else. Did you ever see anybody take to the country like I have? Duck to water! Every night of the world when I comb my hair the hayseeds rattle on the floor, and I never, so to speak, saw the country before. Being a bustling city salesman all my life, I had n't much chance to get away, and when I did, it was n't to go to the country. When I sold out my share in the business and bought that good-for-nothing mare and buggy of mine, and started out with the polish, I did it because my doctor said my health would n't be worth a hurrah unless I got right out of town. He knew his business. The very first day on the road I was better. I 'd been on the road some weeks, Miss Harding, and I was getting my health back nicely and doing pretty well with the polish, when one morning a highwaywoman jumped out of the bushes into the road right in front of my mare, and, if you 'll believe

me, she took her right out of the shafts and ran away with her, and when I ran after them she caught me, too; and, oh my! the life I 've been led since then! Talk about slave-drivers! That woman makes me work early and late. In two weeks' time she 's made me prune two whole orchards, paint a whole barn over again, trim the vines, wash the front of the house, cut all the grass around the yard, and—the fact is, she 's made me do all the things on the farm that she 'd thought she could do and found she could n't, and you know just what a lot of things that would be, Miss Harding."

Miss Harding appeared in the doorway, a cooking-apron over her shoulders and gown, a cooking-spoon in her hand, and her face flushed hotly, partly, it was evident, from the heat of the stove, but partly also from vexation.

"I never so much as asked you to do a single thing on this farm, and you know it!" she exclaimed. "I never knew you were pruning the orchards until I saw you up a tree at work; and as for the barn, if you had n't started on that before the sun was up, or anybody else, you 'd never have been let begin it at all. You cut the grass just the same way. I never heard such talk! And as for washing the front of the house, have n't I done it every year, and was n't I up the ladder doing it myself this year when you came and shook me off the rung and almost broke my neck?"

"*Miss Harding*, do you mean to tell me you did n't set me to work washing the front of this house as if it was a baby's face? I never before in my life saw anybody made to fondle a house-front that way. Don't you remember how I kept talking to it: 'Just a *little* more! Mother 'll soon be through. Don't you cry.' Lord! I thought I 'd fall off the ladder myself. Excuse my mirth." He wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes.

"I never so much as hinted to you to wash my house," retorted Miss Harding.

Marcus pretended to hold back his laughter behind pursed lips, looking at her teasingly.

"Well," he went on, "I forgive you—all but the gloves. I never in all my life saw anybody but you make a man put gloves on the ends of his ladder to protect the house. Those gloves 'most killed me. I never would have used 'em in the world if I had n't been afraid not to. I can't imagine why I am afraid of you. I used to be the biggest tease. I 'd tease anybody, but I 'd no more dare to tease you! By the way, I 've had something in mind to speak to you about for some days. You see, there 's nothing catching the matter with me—nothing that good air and a sensible life can't cure. When I first came here and saw all the old farmers so happy and hearty, says I to myself: 'Why, what a fool I have been not to come here before! This is just what I need,' says I; 'and, furthermore, just what I mean to have.' I 've got enough tucked away to live on in this kind of country way and do nothing, if I choose; but I don't choose, now I see how well I can farm. I 've about decided to buy this farm, Miss Harding, and settle down. I can give you any references you want—good ones, moral, financial, anything. You must know by now you can't run a farm. No woman can. Just see how it 's looked up since I took hold."

He pointed with his pipe-stem toward the shaven grass, the neat orchards, the trimmed vines, the newly painted barn, with an air of proprietorship which seemed to rob Delia of any power to reply. She dropped back against the door-post and, spoon in hand, stood listening motionless to the audacious proposal.

"Well," said Marcus, "what 's your price?"

Delia lifted herself and looked at Marcus Town as if about to speak, then, changing her mind, closed her lips so firmly that the action almost reached the dignity of a gesture, and turned away to the stove and her cooking.

Marcus sat watching her, his eyes twinkling, his mouth twitching. The clock pointed a time half an hour earlier than the accustomed supper-hour, but in a few moments, with set lips and high color, a suppressed and significant energy in every motion, Delia began to lay the table—for one.

"Hold on! That 's my job," said Marcus, from the doorway. "You know you have n't set that table since the first day I came."

But Delia paid no heed to him, and he went on smoking, watching her meantime out of the corners of his eyes as she hurriedly took the meal from the stove, and seating herself at the table, her back

to the door, began to eat her supper alone. As she poured out her cup of tea the hot stream ran partly into the saucer, partly into the cup, and as she helped herself to the baked hash her hand trembled so that half the portion landed on the table. Delia flushed angrily, and spoke to herself under her breath with scornful energy as she repaired the damages: "I don't wonder you 're ashamed of yourself, Delia Harding. I don't wonder at all. Why don't you tell him the truth? Why don't you? Oh, the Lord only knows why I don't! I guess I 'm going crazy." She leaned her head wearily on her hand and forgot to eat.

From the doorway came Marcus Town's deliberate voice.

"I have never," said Marcus, ponderingly, "forgotten that first and only meal I ate at my hotel. It 's bad enough sleeping there, for a self-respecting man, but eat there—no, sir! It 's out of the question. The first day I came here I ate my dinner with you, you may remember, and my supper I *tried* to eat at the hotel. Says I to myself as I rose from that supper-table, 'Never again, Marcus, *never* again!' I walked over here the next morning, just as you were cooking bacon and eggs for breakfast. You can't run a farm, perhaps, but this man knows you can cook. Somehow, you make the things you 're cooking *smell* so good. When I came to this door that morning I thought I 'd never smelled anything like that bacon and eggs cooking. Says I from the doorway to you at the stove: 'I never tasted such a dreadful supper as those hotel people gave me last night.' And says you, as hard as a hammer and not so much as looking round: 'The hotel supper was bad? Well, you 'll get a worse breakfast.' And me leaning, hungry, sad, and lonely, against this very door-jamb! How could you, Miss Harding? How could you? What did I do? I walked firmly in at the door, like this. I walked over to the dresser, like this. I took down a plate, knife, fork, and tumbler, just this way—and down I sat me at the table, just so. And that settled it. And it 's been so settled, in that same kind of pleasant, informal way, every day and three times a day, and so it 's going to be settled *now*. Hash, is it? Baked hash? You knew I liked that for supper better than anything else, and you knew I 'd had a long, hard drive to-day, and so you made me my favorite dish, did n't you? That was kind of you, Delia."

Miss Harding's hand was lying on the table, and Marcus laid his over it, then glanced up at her, smiling. As he looked he drew back quickly, deciding that though some women might be very different from other women, all women looked exactly alike just before they began to cry.

"How 's that horse of mine to-day? No better, I suppose. Can't walk a step yet. Well, I guess you were right about her being worse before she 's better. It 's turned out a long job. It kind of broke it to me it would be when you locked her in the box-stall by herself, as if she was too sick to stand company. By the way, what about that rack in the box-stall? I told you I 'd mend it, and I will, right after supper. I 'd have mended it long before, but I never could find the key of the stall when you were n't around, and when you were around, you know, you always had so much for me to do—"

"I mended the rack myself," interrupted Delia, shortly.

Marcus looked up at her quizzically.

"You did, eh? How did you mend it? With a hair-pin? Why, I do believe you did!" He burst into a shout of laughter. "Why, I only said that for a joke; but I do believe she actually did mend the rack with a hair-pin!"

"I did n't depend on the hair-pin," said Delia, goaded to speech. "I tied a surcingle round the rack and tied that to a rafter. The hair-pin was just to secure the knot."

"You need n't blush over it, Miss Harding. It 's nothing to be ashamed of. I like a real feminine woman myself, and you certainly are one. Everybody round here thinks you are a kind of man-woman, but I knew better right off, as soon as I met you, and here 's this hair-pin business just proving it. I guess I 'll stick a nail or two alongside of the hair-pin just to encourage it. That hay-rack 's pretty heavy, and if it did fall—hello! I bet that 's it now! Hear that! hear that, will you! Whew! There won't be much stable left!"

Indeed, judging from the sounds, as if of bombardment, the banging and cracking and trampling echoes that came from the old barn, the whole structure was being demolished. Delia and Marcus reached the kitchen door at the same moment, and there each paused, as the opening was too

narrow to admit the two, and the next moment Marcus would not have moved if he could, and Delia could not if she would, for he held her arm in an iron grasp.

"Delia Harding," he said sternly, "what does that mean?" And as he spoke he pointed to the house yard, where his mare, followed by Miss Harding's calmer horse, was kicking up her heels with joy in her freedom, prancing and squealing, evidently as sound as a horse could be. There was not the slightest trace of lameness about her, except that her leg was incrusted with bandages. A bit of the rack hanging to her halter told the story. The hair-pin had proved faithless, the rack had fallen, and both horses, the strength of terror in them, had kicked and broken their way to freedom from the old stable.

"What does this mean?" he repeated; and Delia, raising such desperate eyes as she might at the call to judgment, replied:

"It means that your horse has been just as well as mine for a week, and I locked her in the box-stall so you would n't know it. And you would n't have known it now if I could have helped it; and I had n't made up my mind when I 'd let you know—maybe I never would. And I was cruel to the horse, for it needed exercise, and the wonder is it did n't ruin it. And I can't tell you why I did it, for I don't know myself. I only know I 've been a wicked woman and a liar." She went on with a kind of wailing note: "Before you came it seemed to me all right, me living alone here and doing for myself. I did n't care if people did call me queer. It all began to be different from the day you said you guessed the other cats thought mine was a kind of king because of the tassels in the poor thing's ears. It seemed to me then you were just talking about me! From that very minute I knew my farm and orchards and all were just like my cat's red tassels, and if I did n't exactly have holes in my ears, it was the same. I have n't had any kind of satisfaction in anything I owned since that day. All I 've got 's only mine because I 'm a lonely, forlorn old maid with nobody belonging to me and nobody to share anything with, and—I guess I 'm going crazy! I 've been thinking so for days and days."

Once the plaintive flood-gates opened, the stream flowed on and on with no signs of stopping. Marcus stood still, grasping her arm and staring at her working face, his own utterly bewildered.

"Hold on there," he interrupted at last. "Just go a little slower, won't you? When you do once get started, you 're too swift for my class. What 's all this mean, anyhow? Why on earth did n't you want me to know my horse was well?"

He paused suddenly, and then over his perplexed face crept an expression, half astonishment, half dismay. For a moment he said nothing, then, to his own evident and intense surprise, he began to blush, and the more intently he studied Delia's unhappy face the deeper his blush became. He dropped his grasp of her arm, and leaving her side, began to stride to and fro in the kitchen. When presently he checked his walk and returned to her again, it was to grasp her arm as before, and, as usual, he was laughing.

"Go 'long, Delia Harding!" he said, shaking her slightly by the arm he held. "Anybody but you and me 'd have known a week ago—indeed, I ain't sure but it was sooner—that horses and abscesses and brass polish business was n't keeping me here. Don't you know an offer of marriage when you get it? Said I to you not half an hour ago, 'What will you sell this farm for?' and I told you all my ailments and wants and needs, and I said I 'd something saved up, and—did you suppose all that was meant to go in the deed of transfer? No, sir! I have n't got so much to offer you for the farm,—just all my worldly goods I thee endow, and me thrown in as a kind of good measure,—but that 's my offer, and it stands just so—yours the accepting or the refusal. I have n't said I love you, but I guess we both know I do, or we will know it when you say the word. What are you going to say? Is it a go?"

She looked up at him. Delia had become a woman when she ceased to be a child, and now, after years of womanhood, her slighted girlhood seemed to descend upon her. Marcus was laughing, but, as his eyes met hers, something behind their kindly mischief took her breath away. His plans bewildered her, his vernacular confused her, his personality swept her away with him and to him.

"A go?" she faltered. "No, oh, no! I—oh, I wanted you to *stay!*"

"Then stay it is," answered Marcus. And stay it was.