

THE FLOWERING OF VENGEANCE

BY HARRIET L. SMITH

WITH A DRAWING BY GEORGE WRIGHT

AMELIA ANDERSON'S linen-chest was filled and her wedding-gown was bought when Jim Parker's letter came.

"Forgive me, Milly," it ran, "or forget me, anyway. I am married to Polly."

Amelia tore the letter slowly into bits, while her mother stood by and wrung her hands. She did not heed either injunction. She neither forgave nor forgot.

The village was puzzled. It was sorry for Amelia, but she flung back pity in the faces of those who offered it. She tilted her chin defiantly as she walked the street, the target of curious eyes; and in course of time the tide of sympathy turned. The people who were sorry for Amelia grew tired of being snubbed.

It was much more comfortable to sympathize with Polly, who went about shedding tears of contrition and saying she knew it was awful, but she and Jim loved each other so. And when the baby came, the young father and mother had the good wishes of the entire community, while the wronged Amelia, in her proud loneliness, scorned the world's injustice as she had scorned its pity. She grew silent and forbidding, and kept much to herself.

When her cousin Ezra died, and she took his boy, the neighborhood drew a breath of relief—not so much that the little orphan had found a haven as for Amelia's sake.

Ezra had been the shiftless one of a capable family. He had married a black-eyed seamstress from the city, who had never conquered her homesickness for the crowded tenements and who had died when the boy was two years old. Ezra had struggled on weakly, getting farther and farther behind every year. The farm was mortgaged to its full

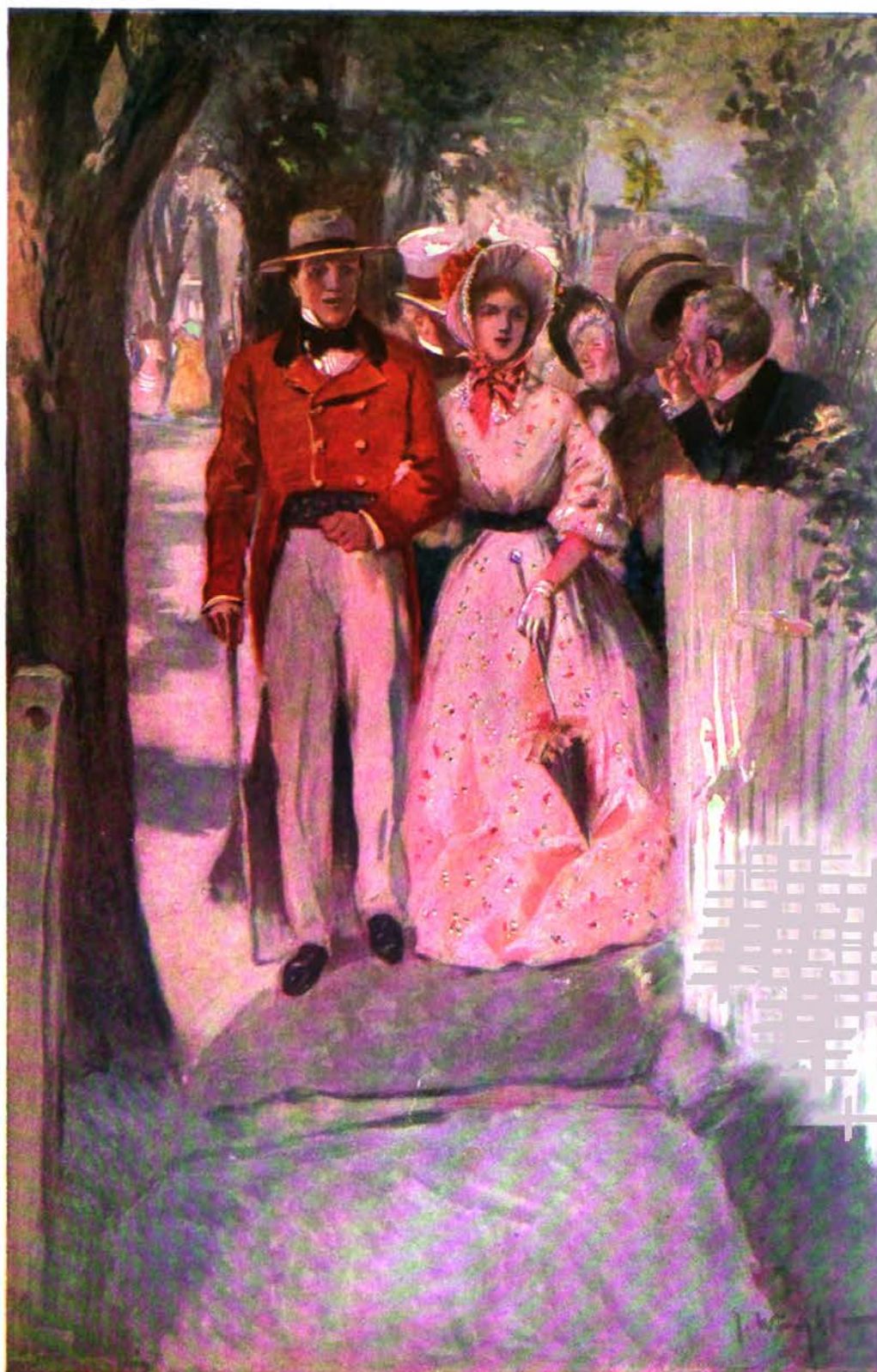
value. He was glad to close his eyes on a world that had been too much for him, since he felt sure that Amelia would not let his son want.

The boy, Richard, had little of his father in him, though he had inherited his mother's beauty. He was big and strong, with brown eyes that always laughed, and dark curls of which he chose to be ashamed. In the village school he looked like some rare tropical plant growing in a field of daisies. Jim's daughter, Elizabeth, shy, sweet, and shrinking as her mother had been, watched him with fond admiration over the top of her spelling-book.

Gossips wondered how Amelia would accept the evident attraction between the two children. It was a great relief to have Aunt Mehitable report that she was taking tea with Amelia when Richard came home bruised, blood-stained, and in high spirits. He had fought with three of his schoolmates, and had vanquished the trio.

"They were teasing Elizabeth Parker, an' making her cry," Richard explained as Amelia brought out the liniment. Aunt Mehitable waited for the storm to break; but it did not come. "She smiled kind of queer," said Aunt Mehitable, in telling the story; "an' says she, 'Elizabeth Parker ought to think a lot of you, for looking out for her.' I guess she thought it time that by-gones was by-gones, though the Andersons mostly hang on to their grudges till the last gasp."

When Richard was twenty and Elizabeth eighteen, the young people were looked upon as lovers by the whole community. Nothing had been said; but Dick's handsome face was aglow with adoration when the girl came in view.



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and Elizabeth's downcast eyes were more eloquent than even her shy glances.

Amelia had bided her time. Now the moment had come for speaking.

"Dick," she said one day, "I'm afraid that little Elizabeth Parker's getting to think a great deal of you." The boy turned his face away, flushing to the roots of his hair. His strong young body trembled; a sacred confidence was on his lips. Amelia saw it and spoke on quickly. "I want you to stop going there."

Richard looked at her blankly.

"Why, Aunt Amelia, you don't understand! I *want* her to like me."

"And I want you to give her up," said Amelia.

Her eyes met his like steel. She braced herself for the conflict. Richard laughed aloud.

"Give her up? Why, I love her, and she loves me. You don't know what you're talking about, Aunt Amelia."

He had begun with a laugh, but at the close his voice had taken on an almost terrified appeal. He put his hand on hers, but Amelia shrank back from his touch.

"Dick, it's twelve years since I took you from the home where your father lay dead. I haven't ever thrown up at you what you owed me, but now I ask you to remember it. I paid his funeral expenses and his doctor's bill. He hadn't a cent to call his own. I had to get you a new suit, so you could be fit to go to the funeral."

"Yes, Aunt Amelia, I know—"

"Wait—I'm not through. You've been like my son, and I leave you to say whether or not I've been a mother to you. I've gone without to give you what you wanted. I've cared for you when you were sick, and brought you back to life when the doctors thought you were past saving. I sent you to school when other folks had their boys in the fields, saving the wages of a hired man. I want to know if you owe me anything."

"I owe you everything," said Richard Anderson. "You've been father and mother to me."

Again he tried to take her hand, and again she drew it away.

"I've never asked you to sacrifice anything for me. I wouldn't even let you stay away from a party when I was sick.

You've fretted often because I wouldn't let you do enough for me. Now I ask you to do this one thing in return for twelve years' sacrifices. Will you give up that girl?"

Richard got to his feet. In the twilight his young face looked gray.

"Aunt Amelia, if you put it that way—I guess you've a right to ask me anything you like—my life, if you wanted it. I wish you had!" he cried, his voice breaking.

"Oh, you'll soon get over feeling that way," said Amelia, and he wondered at her cruelty, not knowing that her bitterness was not for him, but for the faithless lover of her bygone youth.

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Gossip rioted in the village for the next few weeks. What had happened? Had the lovers quarreled? No one knew; but certain it was that the genial Richard had suddenly become a recluse, and could not be seen away from the haying-fields, while Elizabeth was like a fading lily, white and wan and pathetically sweet. Her father raged helplessly, her mother wept, and Amelia Anderson lay awake at night to think over the completeness of her triumph.

Her enjoyment was disturbed, sometimes, by strange, muffled sounds from the room across the hall, where Richard sobbed on his pillow. Then she sat upright, a gaunt, gray figure in the dark, till all was silent again.

"Thank God, it won't last long," Amelia would think, wiping her damp forehead. "It ain't in men's nature to care long!"

One afternoon she persuaded Richard to go to town. The change would do him good, she told herself. Perhaps he would see some pretty face that would capture his fancy. She even arranged an errand to take him to the doctor's, where there were four attractive daughters.

She was in the midst of plans in which the doctor's second daughter figured largely, when there was a sound of wheels in the yard. Richard was back again. He threw the lines upon the mare's neck, and ran into the house. There was a look upon his face which she had never seen there before—a look of desperation. Her knitting dropped

in her lap, and her hands rose appealingly at the sight.

"Aunt Amelia," he said, standing very straight before her, "I'm going away."

"Going away!" she repeated blankly. She took hold of her chair to steady herself, trying vaguely to realize what a life without Richard could mean.

"Yes, I'm going away. I've done as you asked me. I've played coward and traitor. Every decent man must want to cowhide me, and every girl with a woman's heart in her would cross the street to avoid me. But that isn't the worst. I saw Elizabeth to-day!" Amelia moved involuntarily in her chair, and he burst out furiously: "No, I didn't go to her house. I saw her on the street by accident. She's as white as a ghost, and her eyes will haunt me as long as I live. Oh, I'll keep my word to you. I'll break her heart and my own, but I won't stay and look on while she suffers."

He broke suddenly into helpless weeping; and what appalled her most was that he did not even try to hide his tears.

Amelia Anderson arose and put away her knitting. She folded the gingham apron she wore, and laid it carefully aside. Then she came and touched Richard lightly on the shoulder.

"I'm going out for a little," she said. "Promise me you won't do anything till I come back."

Richard's head was down on his arms now, and he did not lift it as he answered, "Very well." Then, as she still lingered, he spoke fiercely: "I promise. What are you waiting for? Don't you know you can trust me?"

She took her sunbonnet from the rail and stepped lightly into the buggy Richard had just vacated. Then, to the surprise and disappointment of Sorrel Nell, she turned to the road.

Amelia Anderson had the reputation of being a considerate horsewoman, but the mare was in a lather when she stopped before the comfortable white house where Richard had so often driven. Elizabeth sat on the porch—a frail, pale Elizabeth, who fluttered to her feet and then ran down the walk at the sight of Amelia's beckoning hand.

"Elizabeth," said Amelia, "will you come home to supper with me?"

The girl looked doubtfully toward the house.

"If I was you, I'd get right in," Amelia said cunningly. "If your pa sees you, like as not he won't let you go."

In an instant Elizabeth was up beside her, and Sorrel Nell was off with a bound.

"Perhaps I ought not to go, dear Miss Amelia," Elizabeth cried, seizing the older woman's arm. "He just stopped coming, and when I wrote and asked him what was the matter, he sent me a little note and told me to forget him." She sobbed over the cruelty of it.

"Did you really want to see him so much?" Amelia asked, and then a slender form collapsed against her shoulder. "Child, child, don't take on so," said the older woman, clearing her throat. "That's my driving arm. Besides, he was just as bad as you were. There ain't many men that can love as women do, but he's one."

Apparently Richard had not stirred since she left him.

"Here, Dick," said Amelia, patting the brown head, "I've brought home company to supper. Suppose you young folks step into the next room and talk things over while I stir up something."

She waited till the door closed upon the two, and then, dropping into her armchair, she sobbed for very joy. The bitterness of twenty years was gone, and in its place was a strange new happiness.

"It's all nonsense sacrificing my broilers and bringing out the fruit-cake," thought Amelia, listening to the sound of low voices in the next room, followed by still more eloquent silences. "They won't know what they're eating. But I hope I've got a sense of what's due a betrothal supper, if they haven't!"

Later, when she was slipping her biscuits into the oven, she smiled over a new idea that had flashed upon her.

"I guess I've got even with Polly Parker at last. She stole Jim from me, and now I'll steal her daughter, for of course they'll live here with me!"

The thought of their happiness swept over her like a wave, drowning the last remnant of bitterness in her heart. Amelia's vengeance, watched and tended for so long, had come to blossoming, and had flowered into forgiveness.