

# In the Gray Goth

By Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

If the wick of the big oil lamp had been cut straight, I don't believe it would ever have happened.

Where is the poker, Johnny? Can't you push back that for'ard log a little? Dear, dear! Well, it does n't make much difference, does it? Something always seems to ail your Massachusetts fires; your hickory is green, and your maple is gnarly, and the worms eat out your oak like a sponge. I have n't seen anything like what I call a fire,—not since Mary Ann was married, and I came here to stay. "As long as you hive, father," she said; and in that very letter she told me I should always have an open fire, and how she would n't let Jacob put in the air-tight in the sitting-room, but had the fireplace kept on purpose. Mary Ann was a good girl always, if I remember straight, and I'm sure I don't complain. Is n't that a pine-knot at the bottom of the basket? There! That's better.

Let me see; I began to tell you something, did n't I? O yes; about that winter of '41. I remember now. I declare, I can't get over it, to think you never heard about it, and you twenty-four year old come Christmas. You don't know nmucim more, either, about Maine folks and Maine fashions than you do about China,—though it 's small wonder, for the nnatter of that, you were such a little shaver when Uncle Jed took you. There were a great many of us, it seems to me, that year, I 'most forget how many;—we buried the twins next summer, did n't we?—then there was Mary Ann, and little Nancy, and—well, coffee was dearer than ever I'd seen it, I know, about that time, and butter selling for nothing; we just threw our milk away, and there was n't any market for eggs; besides doctor's bills and Isaac to be sent to school; so it seemed to be the best thing, though your mother took on pretty badly about it at first. Jedediah has been good to you, I'm sure, and brought you up religious,—though you've cost him a sight, spending three hundred and fifty dollars a year at Amherst College.

But, as I was going to say, when I started to talk about '41,—to tell the truth, Johnny, I'm always a long while coming to it, I believe. I'm getting to be an old man,—a little of a coward, maybe, and sometimes, when I sit alone here nights, and think it over, it's just like the toothache, Johnny. As I was saying, if she had cut that wick straight, I do believe it would n't have happened,—though it is n't that I mean to lay the blame on her *now*.

I'd been out at work all day about the place, slicking things up for to-morrow; there was a gap in the barn-yard fence to mend,—I left that till the last thing, I remember,—I remember everything, someway or other, that happened that day,—amid there was a new roof to put on the pig-pen, and the grape-vine needed an extra layer of straw, and the latch was loose on the south barn-door; then I had to go round and take a last look at the sheep, and toss down an extra forkful for the cows, and go into the stall to have a talk with Ben, and unbutton the coop-door to see if the hens hooked warm,—jnst to tuck 'em up, as you might say. I always felt sort of homesick—though I would n't have owned up to it, not even to Nancy—saving good-by to the creeturs the night before I went in. There, now! it beats all, to think, you don't know what I'm talking about, and you a lumberman's son. "Going in" is going up into the woods, you know, to cut and haul for the winter,—up, sometimes, a hundred miles deep,—in in the fall and out in the spring; whole gangs of us shut up there sometimes for six months, then down with the freshets on the logs, and all summer to work the farm,—a merry sort of life when you get used to it, Johnny; but it was a great while ago, and it seems to me as if it must have been very cold.—Is n't there a little draft coming in at the pantry door?

So when I'd said good-by to the creeturs,—I remember just as plain how Ben put his great neck on my shoulder and whinnied like a baby,—that horse knew when the season came round and I was going in, just as well as I did,—I tinkered up the barn-yard fence, and locked the doors, and went in to supper.

I gave my finger a knock with the hammer, which may have mad something to do with it, for a man does n't feel very good-natured when he's been green enough to do a thing like that, and he does n't like to say it aches either. But if there is anything I can't bear it is lamp-smoke; it always did put me out, and I expect it always will. Nancy knew what a fuss I made about it, and she was always very careful not to hector me with it. I ought to have remembered that, but I did n't. She had lighted the company lamp on purpose, too, because it was my last night. I liked it better than the tallow candle.

So I camne in, stamping off the snow, and they were all in there about the fire,—the twins, and Mary Ann, and the rest; baby was sick, and Nancy was walking back and forth with him, with little Nancy pulling at her gown. You were the baby then, I believe, Johnny; but there always was a baby, and I don't rightly remember. The room was so black with smoke, that they all looked as if they were swimming round and round in it. I guess coming in from the cold, and the pain in my finger and all, it made me a bit sick. At any rate, I threw open the window and blew out the light, as mad as a hornet.

"Nancy," said I, "this room would strangle a dog, and you might have known it, if you'd had two eyes to see what you were about. There, now! I've tipped the lamp over, and you just get a cloth and wipe up the oil."

"Dear me!" said she, lighting a candle, and she spoke up very soft, too. "Please, Aaron, don't let the cold in on baby. I'm sorry it was smoking, but I never knew a thing about it; he's been fretting and taking on so the last hour, I did n't notice anyway."

"That's just what you ought to have done," says I, madder than ever. "You know how I hate the stuff, and you ought to have cared more about me than to choke me up with it this way the last night before going in."

Nancy was a patient, gentle-spoken sort of woman, and would bear a good deal from a fellow; but she used to fire up sometimes, and that was more than she could stand. "You don't deserve to be cared about, for speaking like that!" says she, with her cheeks as red as peat-coals.

That was right before the children. Mary Ann's eyes were as big as saucers, and little Nancy was crying at the top of her lungs, within the baby tuning in, so we knew it was time to stop. But stopping was n't ending; and folks can look things that they don't say.

We sat down to supper as glum as pump-handles, there were some fritters—I never knew anybody beat your mother at fritters—smoking hot off the stove, and some maple molasses in one of the best chiny teacups; I knew well enough it was just on purpose for my last night, but I never had a word to say, and Nancy crumbed up the children's bread with a jerk. Her cheeks did n't grow any whiter; it seemed as if they would blaze right up,—I could n't help looking at them, for all I pretended not to, for she looked just like a pictur. Some women always are pretty when they are put out,—and then again, some ain't; it appears to me there's a great difference in women, very much as there is in hens; now, there was your aunt Deborah,—but there, I won't get on that track now, only so far as to say that when she was flustered up she used to go red all over, something like a piny, which did n't seem to have just the same effect.

That supper was a very dreary sort of supper, with the baby crying, and Nancy getting up between the mouthfuls to walk up and down the room within him he was a heavy little chap for a ten-month-old, and I think she must have been tuckered out with him all day. I did n't think

about it then; a man does n't notice such things when he's angry,—it is n't in him. I cant say but *she* would if I'd been in her place. I just eat up the fritters and the maple molasses,—seems to me I told her she ought not to use the best chiny cup, but I'm not just sure,—and then I took my pipe, and sat down in the corner.

I watched her putting the children to bed; they made her a great deal of bother, squirming off of her lap and running round barefoot. Sometimes I used to hold them and talk to them and help her a bit, when I felt good-natured, but I just sat and smoked, and let them alone. I was all worked up about that lamp-wick, and I thought, you see, if she had n't had any feelings for me there was no need of my having any for her,—if she had cut the wick, I'd have taken the babies; she had n't cut the wick, and I would n't take the babies; she might see it if she wanted to, and think what she pleased. I had been badly treated, and I meant to show it.

It is strange, Johnny, it really does seem to me very strange, how easy it is in this world to be always taking care of our *rights*. I've thought a great deal about it since I've been growing old, and there seems to me a good many things we'd better look after fast.

But you see I had n't found that out in '41, and so I sat in the corner, and felt very much abused. I can't say but what Nancy had pretty much the same idea; for when the young ones were all in bed at last, she took her knitting and sat down the other side of the fire, sort of turning her head round and looking up at the ceiling, as if she were trying her best to forget I was there. That was a way she had when I was courting, and we went along to huskings together, with the moon shining round.

Well, I kept on smoking, and she kept on looking at the ceiling, and nobody said a word for a while, till by and by the fire burnt down, and she got up and put on a fresh log. "You're dreadful wasteful with the wood, Nancy," says I, bound to say something cross, and that was all I could think of.

"Take care of your own fire, then," says she, throwing the log down and standing up as straight as she could stand. "I think it's a pity if you have n't anything better to do, the last night before going in, than to pick everything I do to pieces this way, and I tired enough to drop, carrying that great crying child in my arms all day. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Aaron Hollis!"

Now if she had cried a little, very like I should have given up, and that would have been the end of it, for I never could bear to see a woman cry; it goes against the grain. But your mother was n't one of the crying sort, and she did n't feel like it that night.

She just stood up there by the fireplace, as proud as Queen Victory,—I don't blame her, Johnny,—O no, I don't blame her; she had the right of it there, I *ought* to have been ashamed of myself; but a man never likes to hear that from other folks, and I put my pipe down on the chimney-shelf so hard I heard it snap like ice, and I stood up too, and said—but no matter what I said, I guess. A man's quarrels with his wife always make me think of what the Scripture says about other folks not intermeddling. They're things, in my opinion, that don't concern anybody else as a general thing, and I could n't tell what I said without telling what she said, and I'd rather not do that. Your mother was as good and patient-tempered a woman as ever lived, Johnny, and she did n't mean it, and it was I that set her on. Besides, my words were worst of the two.

Well, well, I'll hurry along just here, for it's not a time I like to think about; but we had it back and forth there for half an hour, till we had angered each other up so I could n't stand it, and I lifted up my hand—I would have struck her if she had n't been a woman.

"Well," says I, "Nancy Hollis, I'm sorry for the day I married you, and that 's the truth, if ever I spoke a true word in my life!"

I would n't have told you that now if you could understand the rest without. I'd give the world, Johnny,—I'd give the world and all those coupon bonds Jedediah invested for me if I could anyway forget it; but I said it, and I can't.

Well, I've seen your mother look 'most all sorts of ways in the course of her life, but I never saw her before, and I never saw her since, look as she looked that minute. All the blaze went out in her cheeks, as if somebody had thrown cold water on it, and she stood there stock still, so white I thought she would drop.

“Aaron—” she began, and stopped to catch her breath,—“Aaron—” but she could n't get any further; she just caught hold of a little shawl she had on with both her hands, as if she thought she could hold herself up by it, and walked right out of the room. I knew she had gone to bed, for I heard her go up and shut the door. I stood there a few minutes with my hands in my pockets, whistling Yankee Doodle. Your mother used to say men were queer folks, Johnny; they always whistled up the gayest when they felt the wust. Then I went to the closet and got another pipe, and I did n't go upstairs till it was smoked out.

When I was a young man, Johnny, I used to be that sort of fellow that could n't bear to give up beat. I'd acted like a brute, and I knew it, but I was too spunky to say so. So I says to myself, “If she won't make up first, I won't, and that's the end on 't.” Very likely she said the same thing, for your mother was a spirited sort of woman when her temper *was* up; so there we were, more like enemies sworn against each other than man and wife who had loved each other true for fifteen years,—a whole winter, and danger, and death perhaps, coming between us, too.

It may seem very queer to you, Johnny,—it did to me when I was your age, and did n't know any more than you do,—how folks can work themselves up into great quarrels out of such little things; but they do, and into worse, if it's a man who likes his own way, and a woman that knows how to talk. It's my opinion, two thirds of all the divorce cases in the law-books just grow up out of things no bigger than that lamp-wick.

But how people that ever loved each other could come to hard words like that, you don't see? Well, ha, ha! Johnny, that amuses me, that really does amuse me, for I never saw a young man nor a young woman either,—and young men and young women in general are very much like fresh-hatched chickens, to my mind, and know just about as much of the world, Johnny,—well, I never saw one yet who did n't say that very thing. And what's more, I never saw one who could get it into his head that old folks knew better.

But I say I had loved your mother true, Johnny, and she had loved me true, for more than fifteen years; and I loved her more the fifteenth year than I did the first, and we could n't have got along without each other, any more than you could get along if somebody cut your heart right out. We had laughed together and cried together; we had been sick, and we'd been well together; we'd had our hard times and our pleasant times right along, side by side; we baptized the babies, and we'd buried 'm, holding on to each other's hand; we had grown along year after year, through ups and downs and downs and ups, just like one person, and there was n't any more dividing of us. But for all that we'd been put out, and we'd had our two ways, and we had spoken our sharp words like any other two folks, and this was n't our first quarrel by any means.

I tell you, Johnny, young folks they start in life with very pretty ideas,—very pretty. But take it as a general thing, they don't know any more what they're talking about than they do about each other, and they don't know any more about each other than they do about the man in the moon. They begin very nice, with their new carpets and teaspoons, and a little mending to do, and conning home early evenings to talk; but by and by the she wears off. Then come the babies, and worry and wear and temper. About that time they begin to be a little acquainted, and to find out

that there are two wills and two sets of habits to be fitted somehow. It takes them anywhere along from one year to three to get jostled down together. As for smoothing off, there's more or less of that to be done always.

Well, I did n't sleep very well that night, dropping into naps and waking up. The baby was worrying over his teeth every half-hour, and Nancy getting up to walk him off to sleep in her arms,—it was the only way you *would* be hushed up, and you'd lie and yell till somebody did it.

Now, it was n't many times since we'd been married that I had let her do that thing all night long. I used to have a way of getting up to take my turn, and sending her off to sleep. It is n't a man's business, some folks say. I don't know anything about that; maybe, if I'd been broiling my brain in book learning all day till come night, and I was hard put to it to get my sleep anyhow, like the parson there, it would n't; but all I know is, what if I had been breaking my back in the potato-patch since morning? so she'd broken her's over the oven; and what if I did need nine hours' sound sleep? I could chop and saw without it next day, just as well as she could do the ironing, to say nothing of my being a great stout fellow,—there was n't a chap for ten miles round with my muscle,—and she with those blue veins on her forehead. Howsomever that may be, I was n't used to letting her do it by herself, and so I lay with my eyes shut, and pretended that I was asleep; for I did n't feel like giving in, and speaking up gentle, not about that nor anything else.

I could see her though, between my eyelashes, and lay there, every the I woke up, and watched her walking back and forth, back and forth, up and down, with the heavy little fellow in her arms, all night long..

Sometimes, Johnny, when I'm gone to bed now of a winter night, I think I see her in her white nightgown with her red-plaid shawl pinned over her shoulders and over the baby, walking up and down, and up and down. I shut my eyes, but there she is, and I open them again, but I see her all the same.

I was off very early in the morning; I don't think it could have been much after three o'clock when I woke up. Nancy had my breakfast all laid out overnight, except the coffee, and we had fixed it that I was to make up the fire, and get off without waking her, if the baby was very bad. At least, that was the way I wanted it; but she stuck to it she should be up,—that was before there'd been any words between us.

The room was very gray and still,—I remember just how it looked, with Nancy's clothes on a chair, and the baby's shoes lying round. She had got him off to sleep in his cradle, and had dropped into a nap, poor thing! with her face as white as the sheet, from watching.

I stopped when I was dressed, half-way out of the room, and looked round at it,—it was so white, Johnny! It would be a long the before I should see it again,—five months were a long time; then there was the risk, coming down in the freshets, and the words I'd said last night. I thought, you see, if I should kiss it once,—I need n't wake her up,—maybe I should go off feeling better. So I stood there looking: she was lying so still, I could n't see any more stir to her than if she had her breath held in. I wish I had done it, Johnny,—I can't get over wishing I'd done it, yet. But I was just too proud, and I turned round and went out, and shut the door.

We were going to meet down at the post-office, the whole gang of us, and I had quite a spell to walk. I was going in on Bob Stokes's team. I remember how fast I walked with my hands in my pockets, looking along up at the stars,—the sun was putting them out pretty fast,—and trying not to think of Nancy. But I did n't think of anything else.

It was so early, that there was n't many folks about to see us off; but Bob Stokes's wife,—she lived nigh the office, just across the road,—she was there to say good-by, kissing of him, and

crying on his shoulder. I don't know what difference that should make within Bob Stokes, but I snapped him up well, when he came along, and said good morning.

There were twenty-one of us just, on that gang, in on contract for Dove and Beadle. Dove and Beadle did about the heaviest thing on woodland of anybody, about that time. Good, steady men we were, most of us,—none of your blundering Irish, that would n't know a maple from a hickory, with their gin-bottles in their pockets,—but our solid, Down-East Yankee heads, owning their farms all along the river, with schooling enough to know what they were about 'lection day. You did n't catch any of *us* voting your new-fangled tickets when he had meant to go up on Whig, for want of knowing the difference, nor *visa vussy*. To say nothing of Bob Stokes, and Holt, and me, and another fellow,—I forget his name,—being members in good and reg'lar standing, and paying in our five dollars to the parson every quarter, charitable.

Yes, though I say it that should n't say it, we were as fine a looking gang as any in the county, starting off that morning in our red uniform,—Nancy took a sight of pains with my shirt, sewing it up stout, for fear it should bother me ripping, and I with nobody to take a stitch for me all winter. The boys went off in good spirits, singing till they were out of sight of town, and waving their caps at their wives and babies standing in the window along on the way. I did n't sing. I thought the wind blew too hard,—seems to me that was the reason,—I'm sure there must have been a reason, for I had a voice of my own in those days, and had led the choir perpetual for five years.

We were n't going in very deep; Dove and Beadle's lots lay about thirty miles from the nearest house; and a stragging, lonely sort of place that was too, five miles out of the village, with nobody but a dog and a deaf old woman in it. Sometimes, as I was telling you, we had been in a hundred miles from any human creature but ourselves.

It took us two days to get there though, with the oxen; and the teams were loaded down well, with so many axes and the pork-barrels;—I don't know anything like pork for hefting down more than you expect it to, reasonable. It was one of your ugly gray days, growing dark at four o'clock, with snow in the air, when we hauled up in the lonely place. The trees were blazed pretty thick, I remember, especially the pines; Dove and Beadle always had that done up prompt in October. It's pretty work going in blazing while the sun is warm, and the woods like a great bonfire with the maples. I used to like it, but your mother would n't hear of it when she could help herself, it kept me away so long.

It's queer, Johnny, how we do remember things that ain't of no account; but I remember, as plainly as if it were yesterday morning, just how everything looked that night, when the teams came up, one by one, and we went to work spry to get to rights before the sun went down.

There were three shanties,—they don't often have more than two or three in one place,—they were empty, and the snow had drifted in; Bob Stokes's oxen were fagged out with their heads hanging down, and the horses were whinnying for their supper. Holt had one of his great brush-fires going,—there was nobody like Holt for making fires,—and the boys were hurrying round in their red shirts, shouting at the oxen, and singing a little, some of them low, under their breath, to keep their spirits lip. There was snow as far as you could see,—down the cart-path, and all around, and away into the woods; and there was snow in the sky now, setting in for a regular nor'easter. The trees stood up straight all around without any leaves, and under the bushes it was as black as pitch.

“Five months,” said I to myself,—“five months!”

“What in time's the matter with you, Hollis?” says Bob Stokes, with a great slap on my arm; “you're giving that 'ere ox molasses on his hay!”

Sure enough I was, and he said I acted like a dazed creatur, and very likely I did. But I could n't have told Bob the reason. You see, I knew Nancy was just drawing up her little rocking-chair—the one with the red cushion—close by the fire, sitting there with the children to wait for the tea to boil. And I knew—I could n't help knowing, if I'd tried hard for it—how she was crying away softly in the dark, so that none of them could see her, to think of the words we'd said, and I gone in without ever making of them up. I was sorry for them then. O Johnny, I was sorry, and she was thirty miles away. I'd got to be sorry five months, thirty miles *away*, and could n't let her know.

The boys said I was poor company that first week, and I should n't wonder if I was. I could n't seem to get over it any way, to think I could n't let her know.

If I could have sent her a scrap of a letter, or a message. or something, I should have felt better. But there was n't any chance of that this long time, unless we got out of pork or fodder, and had to send down,—which we did n't expect to, for we'd laid in more than usual.

We had two pretty rough weeks' work to begin with, for the worst storms of the season set in, and kept in, and I never saw their like, before or since. It seemed as if there'd never be an end to them. Storm after storm, blow after blow, freeze after freeze; half a day's sunshine, and then at it again! We were well tired of it before they stopped; it made the boys homesick.

However, we kept at work pretty brisk,—lumbermen are n't the fellows to be put out for a snow-storm,—cutting and hauling and sawing, out in the sleet and wind. Bob Stokes froze his left foot that second week, and I was frost-bitten pretty badly myself. Cullen—he was the boss—he was well out of sorts, I tell you, before the sun came out, and cross enough to bite a tenpenny nail in two.

But when the sun *is* out, it is n't so bad a kind of life, after all. At work all day, within a good hot dinner in the middle; then back to the shanties at dark, to as rousing a fire and tiptop swagan as anybody could ask for. Holt was cook that season, and Holt could n't be beaten on his swagan.

Now you don't mean to say you don't know what swagan is? Well, well! To think of it! All I have to say is, you don't know what's good then. Beans and pork and bread and molasses,—that's swagan,—all stirred up in a great kettle, and boiled together; and I don't know anything—not even your mother's fritters—I'd give more for a taste of now. We just about lived on that; there's nothing you can cut and haul all day on like swagan. Besides that, we used to have doughnuts,—you don't know what doughnuts are here in Massachusetts; as big as a dinner-plate those doughnuts were, and—well, a little hard, perhaps. They used to have it about in Bangor that we used them for chock pendulums, but I don't know about that.

I used to think a great deal about Nancy nights, when we were sitting up by the fire,—we had our fire right in the middle of the hut, you know, with a hole in the roof to let the smoke out. When supper was eaten, the boys all sat up around it, and told stories, and sang, and cracked their jokes; then they had their backgammon and cards; we got sleepy early, along about nine or ten o'clock, and turned in under the roof within our blankets. The roof sloped down, you know, to the ground; so we hay with our heads in under the little eaves, and our feet to the fire,—ten or twelve of us to a shanty, all round in a row. They built the huts up like a baby's cob-house, with the logs fitted in together. I used to think a great deal about your mother, as I was saying; sometimes I would lie awake when the rest were off as sound as a top, and think about her. Maybe it was foolish, and I'm sure I would n't have told anybody of it; but I could n't get rid of the notion that something might happen to her or to me before five months were out, and I with those words unforgiven.

Then, perhaps, when I went to sleep, I would dream about her, walking back and forth, up and down, in her nightgown and little red shawl, with the great heavy baby in her arms.

So it went along till come the last of January, when one day I saw the boys all standing round in a heap, and talking.

“What’s the matter?” says I.

“Pork’s given out,” says Bob, with a whistle. “Beadle got that last lot from Jenkins there, his son-in-law, and it’s sp’ilt. I could have told him that beforehand. Never knew Jenkins to do the fair thing by anybody yet.”

“Who’s going down?” said I, stopping short. I felt the blood run all over my face, like a woman’s.

“Cullen has n’t made up his mind yet,” says Bob, walking off.

Now you see there was n’t a man on the ground who would n’t jump at the chance to go; it broke up the winter for them, and sometimes they could run in home for half an hour, driving by; so there was n’t much of a hope for me. But I went straight to Mr. Cullen.

“Too late! Just promised Jim Jacobs,” said he, speaking up quick; it was just business to him, you know.

I turned off, and I did n’t say a word. I would n’t have believed it, I never would have believed it, that I could have felt so cut up about such a little thing. Cullen looked round at me sharp.

“Hilloa, Hollis!” said he. “What’s to pay?”

“Nothing, thank you, sir,” says I, and walked off, whistling.

I had a little talk with Jim alone. He said he would take good care of anything I’d give him, and carry it straight. So when night came I went and borrowed Mr. Cullen’s pencil, and Holt tore me off a bit of clean brown paper he found in the flour-barrel, and I went off among the trees with it alone. I built a little fire for myself out of a huckleberry-bush, and sat down there on the snow to write. I could n’t do it in the shanty, with the noise and singing. The little brown paper would n’t hold much; but these were the words I wrote,—I remember every one of them,—it is curious now I should, and that more than twenty years ago:—

“Dear Nancy,”—that was it,—“Dear Nancy, I can’t get over it, and I take them all back. And if anything happens coming down on the logs—”

I could n’t finish that anyhow, so I just wrote “Aaron” down in the corner, and folded the brown paper up. It did n’t look any more like “Aaron” than it did like “Abimelech,” though; for I did n’t see a single letter I wrote,—not one.

After that I went to bed, and wished I was Jim Jacobs.

Next morning somebody woke me up with a push, and there was the boss.

“Whiny, Mr. Cullen!” says I, with a jump,

“Hurry up, main, and eat your breakfast,” said he; “Jacobs is down sick with his cold.”

“*Oh!*” said I.

“You and the pork must be back here day after tomorrow,—so be sry,” said he.

I rather think I was, Johnny.

It was just eight o’clock when I started; it took some the to get breakfast, and feed the nags, and get orders. I stood there, slapping the snow with my whip, crazy to be off, hearing the last of what Mr. Cullen had to say.

They gave me the two horses,—we had n’t but two,—oxen are tougher for going in, as a general thing,—and the lightest team on the ground; it was considerably lighter than Bob Stokes’s. If it hadn’t been for the snow, I might have put the thing through in two days, but the snow was up to the creatures’ knees in the shady places all along; off from the road, in among

the gullies, you could stick a four-foot measure down anywhere. So they did n't look for me back before Wednesday night.

"I must have that pork Wednesday night sure," says Cullen.

"Well, sir," says I, "you shall have it Wednesday noon, Providence permitting; and you shall have it Wednesday night anyway."

"You will have a storm to do it in, I'm afraid," said he, looking at the clouds, just as I was whipping up. "You're all right on the road, I suppose?"

"All right," said I; and I'm sure I ought to have been, for the times I'd been over it.

Bess and Beauty—they were the horses, and of all the ugly nags that ever I saw Beauty was the ugliest—started off on a round trot, slewing along down the hill; they knew they were going home just as well as I did. I looked back, as we turned the corner, to see the boys standing round in their red shirts, with the snow behind them, and the fire and the shanties. I felt a mite lonely when I could n't see them any more; the snow was so dead still, and there were thirty miles of it to cross before I could see human face again.

The clouds had an ugly look,—a few flakes had fallen already,—and the snow was purple, deep in as far as you could see under the trees. Something made me think of Ben Gurnell, as I drove on, looking along down the road to keep it straight. You never heard about it? Poor Ben! Poor Ben! It was in '37, that was; he had been out hunting up blazed trees, they said, and wandered away somehow into the Gray Goth, and went over,—it was two hundred feet; they did n't find him not till spring,—just a little heap of bones; his wife had them taken home and buried, and by and by they had to take her away to a hospital in Portland,—she talked so horribly, and thought she saw bones round everywhere.

There is no place like the woods for bringing a storm down on you quick; the trees are so thick you don't mind the first few flakes, till, first you know, there's a whirl of 'em, and the wind is up.

I was minding less about it than usual, for I was thinking of Nannie,—that's what I used to call her, Johnny, when she was a girl, but it seems a long the ago, that does. I was thinking how surprised she'd be, and pleased. I knew she would be pleased. I did n't think so poorly of her as to suppose she was n't just as sorry now as I was for what had happened. I knew well enough how she would jump and throw down her sewing with a little scream, and run and put her arms about my neck and cry, and could n't help herself.

So I did n't mind about the snow, for planning it all out, till all at once I looked up, and something slashed into my eyes and stung me,—it was sleet.

"Oho!" said I to myself, with a whistle,—it was a very long whistle, Johnny; I knew well enough then it was no play-work I had before me till the sun went down, nor till morning either.

That was about noon,—it could n't have been half an hour since I'd eaten my dinner; I eat it driving, for I could n't bear to waste time.

The road was n't broken there an inch, and the trees were thin; there'd been a clearing there years ago, and wide, white, level places wound off among the trees; one looked as much like a road as another, for the matter of that. I pulled my visor down over my eyes to keep the sleet out,—after they're stung too much they're good for nothing to see with, and I *must* see, if I meant to keep that road.

It began to be cold. You don't know what it is to be cold, you don't, Johnny, in the warm gentleman's life you've lived. I was used to Maine forests, and I was used to January, but that was what I call cold.

The wind blew from the ocean, straight as an arrow. The sleet blew every way,—into your eyes, down your neck, in like a knife into your cheeks. I could feel the snow crunching in under the runners, crisp, turned to ice in a minute. I reached out to give Bess a cut on the neck, and the sleeve of my coat was stiff as pasteboard before I bent my elbow up again.

If you looked up at the sky, your eyes were shut with a snap as if somebody'd shot them. If you hooked in under the trees, you could see the icicles a minute, and the purple shadows. If you looked straight ahead, you could n't see a thing.

By and by I thought I had dropped the reins, I looked at my hands, and there I was holding them tight. I knew then that it was the to get out and walk.

I did n't try much after that to look ahead; it was of no use, for the sleet was fine, like needles, twenty of 'em in your eye at a wink; then it was growing dark. Bess and Beauty knew the road as well as I did, so I had to trust to them. I thought I must be coming near the clearing where I'd counted on putting up overnight, in case I could n't reach the deaf old woman's.

There was a man just out of Bangor the winter before, walking just so beside his team, and he kept on walking, some folks said, after the breath was gone, and they found him frozen up against the sleigh-poles. I would have given a good deal if I need n't have thought of that just then. But I did, and I kept walking on.

Pretty soon Bess stopped short. Beauty was pulling on,—Beauty always did pull on,—but she stopped too. I could n't stop so easily, so I walked along like a machine, up on a line with the creaturs' ears. I *did* stop then, or you never would have heard this story, Johnny.

Two paces,—and those two hundred feet shot down like a plummet. A great cloud of snow-flakes puffed up over the edge. There were rocks at my right hand, and rocks at my heft. There was the sky overhead. I was in the Gray Goth!

I sat down as weak as a baby. If I did n't think of Ben Gurnell then, I never thought of him. It roused me up a bit, perhaps, for I had the sense left to know that I could n't afford to sit down just yet, and I remembered a shanty that I must have passed without seeing; it was just at the opening of the place where the rocks narrowed, built, as they build their light-houses, to warn folks to one side. There was a log or something put up after Gurnell went over, but it was of no account, coming on it suddenly. There was no going any farther that night, that was clear; so I put about into the hut, and got my fire going, and Bess and Beauty and I, we slept together.

It was an outlandish name to give it, seems to me, anyway. I don't know what a Goth is, Johnny; maybe you do. There was a great figger up on the rock, about eight feet high; some folks thought it looked like a man. I never thought so before, but that night it did kind of stare in through the door as natural as life.

When I woke up in the morning I thought I was on fire. I stirred and turned over, and I was ice. My tongue was swollen up so I could n't swallow without strangling. I crawled up to my feet, and every bone in me was stiff as a shingle.

Bess was looking hard at me, whinnying for her breakfast. "Bess," says I, very slow, "we must get home—to-night—*any*—how."

I pushed open the door. It creaked out into a great drift, and slammed back. I squeezed through and limped out. The shanty stood up a little, in the highest part of the Goth. I went down a little,—I went as far as I could go. There was a pole lying there, blown down in the night; it came about up to my head. I sunk it into the snow, and drew it up.

Just six feet.

I went back to Bess and Beauty, and I shut the door. I told them I could n't help it,—something ailed my arms,—I could n't shovel them out to-day. I must lie down and wait till to-morrow.

I waited till to-morrow. It snowed all day, and it snowed all night. It was snowing when I pushed the door out again into the drift. I went back and lay down. I did n't seem to care.

The third day the sun came out, and I thought about Nannie. I was going to surprise her. She would jump up and run and put her arms about my neck. I took the shovel, and crawled out on my hands and knees. I dug it down, and fell over on it like a baby.

After that, I understood. I'd never had a fever in my life, and it's not strange that I should n't have known before.

It came all over me in a minute, I think. I could n't shovel through. Nobody could hear. I might call, and I might shout. By and by the fire would go out. Nancy would not come. Nancy did not know. Nancy and I should never kiss and make up now.

I struck my arm out into the air, and shouted out her name, and yelled it out. Then I crawled out once more into the drift.

I tell you, Johnny, I was a stout-hearted man, who'd never known a fear. I could freeze. I could burn up there alone in the horrid place with fever. I could starve. It was n't death awfulness I could n't face—not that, not *that*; but I loved her true, I say,—I loved her true, and I'd spoken my last words to her, my very last; I had left her *those* to remember, day in and day out, and year upon year, as long as she remembered her husband, as long as she remembered anything.

I think I must have gone pretty nearly mad with the fever and the thinking. I fell down there like a log, and lay groaning. "God Almighty! God Almighty!" over and over, not knowing what it was that I was saying, till the words strangled in my throat.

Next day, I was too weak so much as to push open the door. I crawled around the hut on my knees, with my hands up over my head, shouting out as I did before, and fell, a helpless heap, into the corner; after that I never stirred.

How many days had gone, or how many nights, I had no more notion than the dead. I knew afterwards; when I knew how they waited and expected and talked and grew anxious, and sent down home to see if I was there, and how she—But no matter, no matter about that.

I used to scoop up a little snow when I woke up from the stupors. The bread was the other side of the fire; I could n't reach round. Beauty eat it up one day; I saw her. Then the wood was used up. I clawed out chips with my nails from the old rotten logs the shanty was made of, and kept up a little blaze. By and by I could n't pull any more. Then there were only some coals,—then a little spark. I blew at that spark a long while,—I had n't much breath. One night it went out, and the wind blew in. One day I opened my eyes, and Bess had fallen down in the corner, dead and stiff. Beauty had pushed out of the door somehow and gone. I shut up my eyes. I don't think I cared about seeing Bess,—I can't remember very well.

Sometimes I thought Nancy was there in the plaid shawl, walking round the ashes where the spark went out. Then again I thought Mary Ann was there, and Isaac, and the baby. But they never were. I used to wonder if I was n't dead, and had n't made a mistake about the place that I was going to.

One day there was a noise. I had heard a great many noises, so I did n't take much notice. It came up crunching on the snow, and I did n't know but it was Gabriel or somebody with his chariot. Then I thought more likely it was a wolf.

Pretty soon I looked up, and the door was open; some men were coming in, and a woman. She was ahead of them all, she was; she came in with a great spring, and had my head against her neck, and her arm holding me up, and her cheek down to mine, with her dear, sweet, warm breath all over me; and that was all I knew.

Well, there was brandy, and there was a fire, and there were blankets, and there was hot water, and I don't know what; but warmer than all the rest I felt her breath against my cheek, and her arms about my neck, and her long hair, which she had wrapped all in, about my hands.

So by and by my voice came. "Nannie!" said I.

"O don't!" said she, and first I knew she was crying.

"But I will," says I, "for I'm sorry."

"Well, so am I," says she.

Said I, "I thought I was dead, and had n't made up, Nannie."

"O *dear!*" said she; and down fell a great hot splash right on my face.

Says I, "It was all me, for I ought to have gone back and kissed you."

"No, it was *me*," said she, "for I was n't asleep, not any such thing. I peeked out, this way, through my lashes, to see if you would n't come back. I meant to wake up then. Dear me!" says she, "to think what a couple of fools we were, now!"

"Nannie," says I, "you can let the lamp smoke all you want to!"

"Aaron—" she began, just as she had begun that other night,—“Aaron—” but she did n't finish, and—Well, well, no matter; I guess you don't want to hear any more, do you?

But sometimes I think, Johnny, when it comes my time to go,—if ever it does,—I've waited a good while for it,—the first thing I shall see will be her face, looking as it looked at me just then.