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THE FORK OF THE ROAD.

BY GRACE M. GALLAHER.

"Father's a-tain', Saloame, I can see it."

Saloame started to her feet with a cry.

"You don't mean, Achah, he's a-dyin' now?"

"No, no, child. But the end ain't far off. Felle's a-sert'n' with him now. I come out for a minute's air."

Saloame put her arms tenderly about her sister.

"Rest just a minute, dear, on the wall. It's real soothin' here now."

Achah yielded stiffly to the pressure drawing her down. The two sisters sat on the crumbling old wall watching the sun disappearing behind Ely's Hill in a sea of gold. The waters of the Cove murmured against the wall with a soft unceasing sound. Beyond the Cove flowed the Connecticut, and beyond the river lay the great, mysterious sea. Saloame had watched the sun setting good-night to the river ever since she was a wee little girl, her head hardly above the wall. Her face wore a dreamy, rapt expression as if she were looking away off, through the shining West, into some fairy world. Achah showed the placidity of the hour that was all. The two sisters were unlike. Achah was short and plump with a worn but contented face. Saloame had a tall, slender figure, "wisp'ry" her family called it, delicate features and wild rose colouring. Ordinarily her face had a dullness, a blackness, as if her mind were elsewhere. But when her interest was aroused, her colour deepened, her lips smiled, and her eyes glowed. She became another woman. Her eyes were always wonderful, great, dark ones, with mysterious depths of tenderness and of fire. Saloame was twenty-nine. The grace of her figure and her child-like way made her seem much younger. Achah was twelve years older. The brother Ethelbert ("Felle"), came between. The dip of oars sounded over the Cove. Achah rose with a smile.

"Don't stay out in the damp," she said, and walked away.

Saloame leaned over the wall, her breath coming quickly, her eyes bright. A boat slipped against the little pier. The man in it held out one hand to Saloame, while with the other he steadied his boat.

"Good-even", David.

"Good-even", Saloame.

They looked into one another's eyes and found no need of speech. The man was of a type not common outside of New England, tall and powerful, with a strong, grave, kind face. He seemed many years older than Saloame.

"Father ain't near so well."

"He ain't?"

"It'd make an awful change to us when he's gone," she went on, her lips quivering.

David stroked her hand softly.

"He's been a good man," he said with an effort.

"It's you that's the good man to speak so of him," cried the other with sudden heat.

"Why, Saloame, why, my girl! The Judge acted as he thought 'twas right to, when he refused to let his daughter marry a fellow like me, nothin' but a common lighthouse-keeper an' farmer with no prospects of ever risin', an' belongin' to a poor family. The Judge's been a consistent church member all his life; I guess he made it a habit of prayer before he done it. Not but what it's been awful now. You know that?" David paused in some embarrassment; this was a long speech for him. Saloame shook her head stubbornly.

"You are a good man, David," she persisted.

"Saloame! Saloame!" cried a voice, "come quick. Any says there's a bad change in father."

Ethelbert was running towards her. He was an older edition of his younger sister, without her fire. With a swift glance he caught up to David, Saloame hurried after her mother. The Judge Lyman Compton's house, the grandest in the village, lay on a hill. It stood on a peninsula with a green lawn and a shady garden. The Judge had always kept it in excellent repair, so that it looked as new as when his grandfather built it. Within the same neatness and order prevailed. The heavy old furniture had not been moved out of

its stiff rows since the day it was set in them. The portraits of George III. and his "royal consort" had hung in the same positions for a hundred years. The brother and sister groped their way up the dark stairs into a room where a lamp burned dimly. Through the open windows rustled the soft September air. Achah was weeping quietly at the head of the bed. The face on the pillow was a grey white, the eyes were closed, yet the dying man was evidently awake. Saloame looked at him steadily, strange thoughts filling her mind.

Judge Phineas Lyman was the richest, most powerful man in the village. When a young man he had loved and won Lucy Starkey and had been like one beside himself with joy. Not a month before the wedding Lucy had jilted him to marry Elisha Compton, a poor farmer. The blow had been a bitter one to the Judge's pride as well as to his affections. He had told his suffering to none, but at once set about "courtin'" so his neighbours phrased it. Sophia Dillingham. He married her a little later than the day appointed for his wedding with Lucy.

Fortunately for Sophia, "the drop of nervous fluid too much," said to be the inheritance of the New Englander, had been omitted in her make up, otherwise her life would have been unbearable. For the Judge, never amiable, grew yearly more caustic, livier and irritable; harder to bear, even than his fierce temper, was his selfishness. He made splendid the outside of the cup and platter—his house and grounds were an envy or a delight to his neighbours, family went to their dispositions. His family grand abroad clothed in Solomon-like grandeur, at least according to the village standards. But within his home he forced the household to live with the most pinching economy, not even allowing sufficient food. Achah, who, at her mother's death, became the manager, spent her strength struggling to make a dollar do the work of ten. None of the children ever had any money, not even the smallest sum, to spend. Saloame had never possessed fifty cents in her whole life. The greatest injustice, however, the Judge had committed against his family had been when twelve years before he had refused to allow David Compton to marry Saloame. David was the son of the Judge's sweetheart, Lucy. The sight of her happiness when she lived at the very foot of his garden, had been a daily torment to him. Now he could be avenged through her only child, her idol. He made David's poverty and low origin the grounds of his refusal. He seemed to rejoice when people said he hastened Mrs. Compton's death. To Saloame, who had begged and reasoned with him, he said, "marry that fellow, and your father's curse goes with you." And Saloame, to whom disobedience to parents, even the most undeserving, was a religious duty, could only weep, and steal out year after year, to meet David every evening as he came home from lighting the lamp in the lighthouse.

All this was dimly forming itself in the girl's mind as she waited for her father to make some sign. After a long time he opened his eyes.

"Achah, Felle, Saloame, where are you?"

The three crept nearer.

"My will is in my secretary," he said faintly. "I've given each one of you an equal share. Spend it as you please."

Then, after a pause,

"Where's David Compton? You needn't look so scared. I'm of sound mind. Saloame, run fetch him."

In a few minutes Saloame reappeared with David, both breathless from running. The Judge held out his hands feebly. David and Saloame each put one of theirs in his.

"There," David, he said, with a last flicker of his bitter humour, "Saloame ain't quite the girl she was when you courted her, twelve years does make a girl a little older, but if you want her she's yours."

Saloame dropped on her knees beside the bed, kissing the cold face repeatedly. She had never kissed her father before. The old man made no motion as if he noticed it; he seemed to have fallen asleep. But when Achah whispered,

"Oughten we to get Parson Howard?"

He answered her with, "Do you think I'm a Catholic to need extreme unction before I die? I've been a professin' Christian fifty years, I ain't afraid of death."

He lay very quiet after that. Suddenly he raised himself, calling in a strange, tender voice, "Lucy, is it you?"

Then he fell back dead.

A month later Saloame was seated on the wall by the Cove. The day was Sunday one of those mild hazy October days when summer seems to have stolen back for a last look of the world. Saloame was bent over her lap, her cheeks on fire, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Beside her were a few crayons, some worn brushes, and a handful of twisted tubes. Surely never had artist a more meagre outfit. For Saloame was an artist; ever since she had been able to hold a slate pencil her great happiness had been to draw whatever she saw or imagined. A teacher in the village school had given her a few lessons and a set of crayons. Year after year she had worked, with no instruction and almost no materials. One summer, five years before, a young artist from New York had spent some months in the village. She was very kind to Saloame and enthusiastic over what she called her genius. The girl had listened breathlessly to her stories of art and artists. She had longed to go with her new friend to some one of the schools of which she spoke. Ethelbert had a musician's spirit and had asked his father to let him be one. The Judge in a fury at such ridiculous notions, had set his son at the dry copying of law papers at once. Saloame, fearing a like fate, had never dared mention her ambition. Her love for David, her love for art, that was her life. She laid down her brush and looked at her picture critically. It was horribly crude in colouring and in drawing, yet it had the feeling of tranquil pensiveness, of quiet dreaminess that belonged to the radiant summer day. David's slow step sounded on the path. It was the most marked sign of the Judge's death, the freedom with which David came and went. Saloame scrambled together her work with a guilty blush, then said bravely,

"I guess you'll think I'm a profanin' the Sabbath paintin' like this. I jest had a feelin' I must paint the water an' the sky the way it looks to-day. I couldn't make myself wait until to-morrow."

David smiled sympathetically. If his lady-love had danced a jig on the stairs of the church pulpit, he would have considered it highly fit and becoming. For him "the king can do no wrong."

"I guess art ain't work nor pleasure neither, it's—it's sorter like preachin'."

Having settled that question he proceeded to a more vital one.

"Saloame, dear, we don't want to do nothin' that's disrespectful to your father's memory. But we've waited a sight of years an' he approved our marriage. Don't you think it might be sometime this fall—say Thanksgiving?"

Saloame caught David's hands in hers.

"I've got to say somethin' to you. It'll hurt you, dear David, but I must! All my life I've been a-longin' an' a hankerin' for a chance to learn art. I jest love to paint! An' I know I could make real pictures like those Miss Dwight done, if I only had some lessons. I can't tell you how I love it, David."

"More'n me, Saloame?"

"Oh, David! Of course not. It's like Parson Howard; he loves his wife, but he loves his preachin' too. What I want to do is this. I want to go to New York an' take lessons. You know I'm a rich woman, now," with an innocent importance, "an' father said we could do as we liked with the property. I'm a goin' to! That is, if you're willin'. Oh, David, it don't seem as if I could be happy even in Heaven if I don't take them lessons." She pressed his hands tight, her eyes were like stars.

David was a little pale, and his kind face quivered for a minute, but he answered gently:

"If that's the way you feel, Saloame, there ain't nothin' to do but jest go. I've waited considerable long so I guess few months more won't make much differ."

Saloame kissed him rapturously.

"You dear, good David!" she cried. "I'm comin' back in June with a famous picture; you'll be so proud o' me you'll be glad you let me go."

David smiled patiently. Saloame unfolded plans for living with the artist friend, painting all day, and the rest of her glowing dreams. In a few minutes David was entering into them as cheerily as if he, and not she, were their chief promoter. Yet as he went away to his supper she thought his head drooped a little.

Saloame's preparations were soon made. A week later saw her standing on the platform at Saybrook Junction waiting for her first ride in a train. David was with her. The misery of the separation overcame them both. They clung to one another unmindful of the other passengers, while Saloame sobbed.

"It don't seem now as if I cared so great about art."

But who can resist the excitement of a first railway journey? Not Saloame Lyman with her adventurous spirit and her intense interest in "the pageantry of human life." By the time she reached New York she felt as if David, Achah, Felle, all the people of her existence hitherto were dwellers in another world with which she had for ever severed connections. What a wonderful experience began for her with her first day in New York! Generations of staid, home-keeping New England farmers and merchants whose blood was in her veins, counted as naught now; the old vikings, the rovers of Queen Elizabeth's day were showing their power over this, their descendant. The little, home-bred, mousey woman revelled like a child in the confusion and excitement of the city. She threw on its tainted air as never on the breeze of Connecticut. She loved to walk the streets, meeting the crowds of people, not one of whom she would ever know. Her complete joy, however, was in her art; she worked at it ceaselessly. Her progress in it was remarkable.

In June, tired but happy, she returned home. The morning after her arrival she called to David who was hoeing potatoes in his garden.

"Don't you want to come see all my grand pictures?"

David climbed the fence, smiling delightfully.

"I dunno but what I ought to get on my meetin' clothes if I'm a-goin' to a picture show."

Saloame laughed, yet down in her heart she thought:

"I wonder if I talk as bad as David does! I 'spose I do. I never knew no—any—better, an' of course he don't."

The pictures were mostly those severe anatomical heads and figures which the untrained regard with such outward exclamations of pleasure and such inward contempt. There were some sketches of lemons in a green dish; oranges, currants, and other fruit joined in a union Nature certainly could not approve; and a few sketches from memory of the Connecticut. David admired them all unreservedly, calling them "handsome," "elegant," and "real pretty;" the adjectives varied, not with the merit of the picture, but in accordance with his own ideas of diversity. Saloame shuffled them over a little impatiently.

"This one my teacher thought had a great deal of atmosphere," she said, holding up a bit of woods and sky.

"Well, now, I guess it has," answered David, peering at the picture as if "atmosphere" were a particular sort of varnish.

Saloame shut them quickly away in her portfolio. Her cheeks were red. David sat smilingly watching her motions. A line of graceful white boats was gliding down the river, but his eyes never moved from her.

"Do you know what I'm a-goin' to do this summer? I'm a-goin' to draw your head. You've got a real noble head, David, like some of them old statues."

"Sho, now, you're makin' fun o' my headpiece. I warn't never good for much, 'cept rememberin' time to light the lamp an' the like o' that. Do you know, the Inspector said there warn't a man on the river, no, nor the Sound neither, that could keep his light a-goin' every night, year in an' year out, blizzard or no, the way I do," he glowed with modest pride.

"You're jest as faithful!" cried Saloame, and David cared more for