NOTHING about old Calista Bliss was weak except her body; that was exceeding weak. Her voice now rang out strongly: "Ziny! Ziny!"

He came with the automatic patience of one used to coming. Nothing about Zina Bliss except his body was patient. Within that was dreary, continuous mutiny. "Yes,—yes, ma!"

In his hindering apron he came near stumbling over the threshold. His hands were flouiry.

"You got the bread kneaded out yet? I want to see one o' the loaves—and, Ziny, wait! When you get to the sweeping up, don't forget to sweep under the stove. Laying here on the flat o' my back I can see hunks o' dust!"

A small passageway intervened between the bedroom and kitchen; the kitchen stove was round a corner. But the eyes of old Calista Bliss's imagination could see round corners. Her son, Zina Bliss, pottered back to his kneading-board, his feet in their carpet slippers appearing to drag behind him as he went. In his soul he was planning revolt, as for fifteen years he had planned it. He had always swept under the kitchen stove, but today—

The dough adhered to all his lean, spread fingers. He plunged them into the flour barrel for relief.

"Ziny! Ziny, why don't you sing? How can I tell you're there if you ain't singing? I don't hear anything rattling."

Zina began to sing. The words were sacred, but there was an odd effect of their being the opposite. He sang in a jerky, unmusical way; the tumult within him boiled up in a kind of accompaniment.

Out of doors brooded a great heat, but it called to Zina Bliss. He longed to be out in it, swinging a scythe,—he wanted to feel honest man-sweat on his brow and to do man-work. The summer smells and sweet, stinging summer sounds called him. Suddenly the sight of his mother's apron flapping about his knees maddened him and he tore it off. It was all worse—worse—worse today.

"Sing, Ziny, sing, or else clatter something! It makes me nervous to hear you keeping still. What you doing now, Ziny?"

"Singin'," he called back grimly and took up the sacred-profane tune again. The bread was molded into loaves and one of them, as a sample, submitted to the terrible little old woman in the bedroom. She prodded it tentatively with a wrinkled finger, a certain wistfulness in her old face.

"Oh, I guess it'll do," she sighed, remembering fairer, plumper
loaves. "You set it to rise again, Ziny, and mind you cover it over while you sweep—you going to sweep next, ain't you?"

He swept next, holding the broom with a man's clumsiness in spite of his fifteen years of practice. He swept carefully under the stove. It was as usual, a tragic little masquerade, the patient mask of his face hiding the impatience of his soul. He even sang.

"You got the bread-pan's covered up, Ziny?"
"Yes,—yes, I covered 'em, ma."
"What with?"
He snatched off his coat and substituted the dish towel. "With a towel," he answered.
"A clean one, Ziny Bliss?"
He hurried a clean one from a drawer. "Yes, ma,—right out o' the drawer."

At the window he stood a moment gazing out at the denied things of out-of-door life. There seemed piling before him a mountain of denied things and he at the foot saw no path up over it. Zina Bliss was forty years old, but he felt an impulse to play truant. What if he should do it,—drop the broom and vault out of the window like a boy and run—run? Results flashed through his mind. Ma calling in her sharp old voice and getting no answer, the bread rising over the sides of the pans and going unbaked, the floor half swept, the ironing undone,—the Mount of Results towered higher than the Mount of Denials.

He turned back to his work. A humorous thought saved the moment. If he ran away he would probably be sent to bed, when he came sneaking back, without his supper.

"What you doing now, Ziny? Seems as if I heard you laugh."
"Yes, ma,—kind of." His lips were still faintly twitching.
"Well, I'm thankful you feel to. I guess you ain't very likely to hear me laugh."
"No, ma."
He was suddenly aware that he could not remember ever to have heard her laugh. Poor ma! He hung up his broom and went in to her.

"Don't you want I should read you a chapter?" he asked, gently. Like a woman he smoothed her bedclothes and set her pillows straight. "I can as well as not, while the bread's second-rising. What chapter would you rather, ma?"

The wizened face of Calista Bliss peered up at him from under her cap border. It was the face of a woman terribly alive, in the thrall of death. The eyes were restless eyes. Poor ma!

"What I guess you better do is iron. I can say over a chapter to myself—I'm used to it. Don't you forget to wipe the irons when
you use ’em; it worries me, laying here thinking how dirty they most likely are. And, Ziny,—"

“Yes, ma,” in his stilled, patient tone.

“Don’t you burn the bread!”

“No, ma.”

The routine of life of these two—mother and son—was unvaried from day to day. There was little in it to suggest affection between the two. Duty on one hand met sharp criticism on the other; always duty, always criticism. Yet Calista Bliss loved her son in her own way. In his way Zina Bliss loved his mother. Zina’s way had been for fifteen years the way of devotion and self-sacrifice.

Over his ironing Zina plotted. The childish impulse to escape that had seized him a little while ago came back and gripped him fiercely. He could not loose its hold. All the man’s soul was in revolt. He was used to these tumultuous moments, but a sort of climax seemed to have been reached today. Earlier in the day he had seen Rosalia Carter go by the house at her swift, swinging gait. The sight of her after so long a time had set his middle-aged pulses athrob in a foolish, irritating way. He had been conscious of being angry with Rosalia instead of fate.

He was thankful now that he had not hurried into the house or snatched off his apron. He was angrily sorry he had blushed like a woman. “Good morning, Zina,” Rosalia had called pleasantly. “Good mornin’, Rosalia,—you got home?” he had answered, with brilliance.

She had been away nine of the years of Zina’s servitude. He had seen her but twice in that time with bodily vision, though there had been no day that he had not with the eyes of his soul seen her slender figure and gentle face. The remembrance that she had first seen him, on her return, in an apron hanging out clothes maddened him. He could not bear it.

“Ziny, I smell something scorchin’!” his mother shrilled. And he might have answered that it was his pride.

He ironed solidly on, till all ma’s clothes were smoothed. Then without hesitation he bundled together his own things and tiptoed with them into his tiny bedroom. Moist and crumpled as they were he crowded them into a drawer. He had made up his mind. Ma was by this time embarked on her long afternoon nap, but he took no chances. He tiptoed to her door and made sure of it. The bread in the oven he had forgotten.

He had resolved to show himself to Rosalia Carter in the guise of a man. The men who were cutting the lower fields had not touched the little upper piece of hay that Rosalia’s windows overlooked. He
would work there. He stripped off his vest, got his shoes, his old straw hat and a scythe and strode away. He had a sense of running and an impulse to look back over his shoulder. He might at any moment hear his mother calling, “Ziny!”

The scythe was heavy to his long-unaccustomed arms, but he swung it mightily. The swaths he cut were man-swaths. He held his head high and worked without cessation. Because he would not permit his eyes to look he could not be sure Rosalia was at her window; but he worked under that assumption. He had not been so happy for many years. No scent of burning loaves came to him, but only the scent of fresh-slaughtered clover and timothy stems. It was good—it was grand to be a man again!

Now he was glad that Rosalia had come home; in the morning he had been sorry. She had come back to live in her little house alone. She had gone away at the death of her mother nine years ago. Rosalia was a social woman and living alone would come hard—Zina pitied her. He dropped suddenly from his unnatural jubilation into wistful thinking of the time when he had meant to make a home for Rosalia.

The hot sun beat upon Zina’s head. He was long unaccustomed to midsummer sun and to this lusty scythe swinging. He flung away his hat and loosened the collar of his shirt. His arms throbbed with the exertion of their great sweeps; he thought with the old bitterness that they were muscled better for flatirons and brooms—woman-tools. But he mowed on in the awful heat.

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“Zina!—there, drink this, Zina.” The voice was so sweet it hurt him. He seemed to struggle toward it out of a great silence. The face that belonged to the voice he knew would be Rosalia’s face when he got to it. He had been away somewhere.

It was Rosalia’s. She was stooping to him, it seemed from the sky. He was on the short hay stubble in a patch of shade. His face felt cool and wet.

“There, you’re all right now. It was too terribly hot, that’s all. You haven’t grown much wiser, have you, Zina? You never took care of yourself.”

He liked to lie there, but he sat up with a little difficulty. The things he liked to do Zina Bliss had not done for so long. He must find the scythe—or was it the flatiron?

“Don’t you stir yet! You wait awhile. You were kind of—overcome.” She realized, instinctively, he would like that name better than fainting.

“I didn’t feel anything—except something wet on my face.”
Rosalia laughed, and her laugh, if not her face, was a girl’s. “Of course; that was the water I sprinkled you with! I’d started out to bring you a drink, it looked so hot out here. It was sweetened water!” she added. “There was just a swallow left for you to drink!”

The fifteen years vanished. Both of them remembered the other hayfield and the other drink she brought.

“That was sweetened, too,” Zina said. “You brought it in a green pitcher—”

“Blue,—look!” She held it up before him. “I put in a pinch of ginger and half a cup of molasses, with a little vinegar to tone it.”

“That day or today?”

“Both. You liked it that day.”

“I like it today,” he laughed. Zina’s laugh had an odd sound as if he were out of practice. He sat up suddenly,—tried to stand. The harassed lines deepened around his mouth. He stared, as an awakened sleep-walker.

“I must go home,” he stumbled, picking up the words laboriously. His hand strayed to his head. “I can’t remember—I’ve forgotten what it is I’ve forgotten! There was something—”

“Zina, sit down again,” she had almost said ‘dear.’ She wanted to play mother to the big, dazed boy. He needed a mother, she reflected, bitterly.

“Sit down, you’re not going to stir yet awhile—not till you look better than this. I’ve heard my father say your father was always remembering things he ought to do. I guess it’s bred in the bone.”

“That’s it—the bread!” Zina exclaimed, in excitement, “and ma! I left it asleep and ma in the oven bak—” He broke off and began again. There was nothing humorous in his confusion of ideas—nothing humorous anywhere. Rosalia Carter pulled him down gently and got up herself.

“I’ll see to it, if it’s only bread! That’s a woman’s chore.” But on the way to the house she repented the last clause. Perhaps it had hurt Zina. Poor Zina—poor Zina! Rebellion and bitterness roiled the clear stream of her thoughts. It was fate she was angry with, but she thought it was old Calista Bliss. What right had even a bedridden old woman to humiliate the soul of her son!

The loaves were a beautiful, even black. Rosalia’s eyes filled with tears when she drew them out. They appealed dumbly to her—the painful tidiness of the kitchen, the littered corners appealed, the iron left to scorch its way through the ironing-sheet, the unscraped kneading-board on the flour barrel, everything. It was a hard-tidied kitchen and the heart of the woman who saw it was stricken.
Suddenly she buried her face in the calico apron that hung on a nail. It was the apron she had seen Zina wear in the morning.

No sound issued from the room across the tiny passage. Rosalia stole to the door and looked within. The old face on the pillows was temporarily peaceful in slumber. If Calista Bliss was calling “Ziny! Ziny!” in her sleep, it was tenderly. Rosalia, watching, was gripped with pangs of sympathy again, but now for Zina’s old mother. The output of so much sympathy made her oddly weak and she leaned against the door. As she stood, what she meant to do came and faced her in the quiet room. She seemed to have known that it was coming,—to have been waiting for it.

She went out at once to Zina. He lay in the shade in a sort of roseate dream in which Rosalia came stepping down to him at her swinging gait. He had seen her coming like that on the day he had meant to ask her to marry him. When she got as far as the cedar hedge, he had thought, he would go to meet her, and when their hands touched he would say the words. There was nothing left to do but say the words.

Then and today blended confusedly in his daze. She was coming now. When she got to the hedge—he must get up at once and go to meet her. It was today he was to say the words.

He was heavy on his feet and stumbled along at first like a drunken man. The strange lightness in his head was in strong contrast to the weight of his feet. But he got, in some wise, to the cedar hedge and Rosalia.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he said, simply. He had meant to reach out both hands to her, but he needed them for clinging to the hedge. “Will you come to me? I love you, Rosalia.” It was just as he had meant always to say it.

“Yes,” she answered. This was what she had come home for. The leading-strings of fate had drawn her home. She saw a clear, long path before her.

But Zina Bliss’s mind was emerging from its mists. He came slowly to himself and knew what he had done. Today was relentlessly today and love was for yesterday. He looked across the hedge at Rosalia’s dear face and without warning his chin quivered with the awful quivering of a man’s chin. He could not give up this beautiful thing he had won in his brief fogginess of mind.

He caught at her arm, entreating her: “Don’t let me give it up!—Rosalia, don’t let me!”

But he gave it up. For fifteen years he had sacrificed his pride and travestied his manhood for a woman. For this other woman he could do more. It took but a moment of clear thought.
A TOUCH OF THE SUN

“Come round this side and sit down, Rosalia,—I’ve got to,” he said, gently. “I guess I’ve had a touch o’ sun and it’s kind o’ unsteadied me.” But now it was only his body that was unsteady. He had certain things to say, but he could say them sitting down. The man of forty turned his worn face to the woman scarcely younger. “I thought for jest a minute it was then,” he explained, slowly. “So I said it. But I take it back, Rosalia, now I’m myself. It’s now—I couldn’t ask you now. That’s a man’s part and I’ve been doin’ a woman’s for so long—” He broke off and started again. He was not making a plea for sympathy. “It was a mistake just now. I gave up ever askin’ you, fifteen years back when ma was taken down. That was the end of my life, I guess, Rosalia. I guess I was taken down too!”

She cried out muffledly at his smile; it hurt her like pain. “I don’t say I gave up right in a minute—not till I saw how ’twas all comin’ out. I used to work daytimes, along for a spell, and go out-doors nights and tramp it out. And when I’d got good and tired I could go back home and set a batch o’ bread.”

He did not look any more at the woman beside him for fear he should take her in his arms or kiss her forehead where her smooth hair scalloped faintly. He looked steadfastly upfield toward the green blinds of ma’s windows. There seemed still a little explanation wanting; he made it quietly.

“You see, she was—ma,” he said. “She’s been ma ever since. Folks said I needn’t have given up to her when she wouldn’t have anybody round but me. They called it a whim, but it wasn’t; it was ma. I suppose they’d call somethin’ else a whim, too,—Rosalia, there’s somethin’ I haven’t ever told anyone, but I’m goin’ to tell you.” His plain, harassed face put on suddenly a strange solemnness. “I haven’t ever told, because ma is ashamed of it. There’s times when she suffers terribly and she’s ashamed of ’em—poor ma! Sometimes seems as if the pain in her soul was as awful as the pain in her body—I’ve stood over ma those times and been glad I gave up to her ‘whims.’ I’d give up again, just the same.

The doctors said they couldn’t do anything. So ma sent ’em off and held on tighter to me. Nobody except ma would be ashamed o’ sufferin’, but she’s ma. Even the Lord couldn’t make her anybody else. That’s all,” he concluded, “except that I couldn’t sacrifice anybody else—not you, Rosalia. Oh, I tell you I tramped it out nights and all I could make out of it was two things—just two separate things. Ma and me—and you, and I couldn’t make ’em go together. I can’t now either, Rosalia. I haven’t got any right to.”

He got on his feet with difficulty and stood looking down at her.
He had said it all. He seemed to Rosalia to have grown taller. In spite of the “touch of sun” he stood quite straight.

“I’m kind of glad to have the chance to tell you all o’ this,” he said, slowly. “It’ll be a real relief. There’s one other thing I’d like to do, but I’m afraid. I’m afraid o’ my life to shake hands—I’ve been too sort of near to you. I guess I better not do it, Rosalia. I guess I better go away now. If I didn’t know you’d understand everything, I’d apologize for what I asked.”

The woman was on her feet, confronting him. In her extremity she had recourse to tremulous flippancy.

“Zina Bliss, you’ve done all the talking! You’ve talked a perfect streak! Now it’s about my turn—Listen, dear,” she broke down; a passion of tenderness leaped to her lips. “You can’t take it back, Zina. Do you think I’m going to let you? I have promised to be your wife.” She was already his wife. “You asked me and I promised. Do you think it makes any difference what you’ve said! Zina, stop turning away—kiss me, Zina.”

“Rosalia, I can’t let you—”

“Kiss me.”

But he was even yet strong. He took a backward step. With a curiously eloquent gesture he pointed to his knees.

“I left my apron at home—you saw me wearin’ it this mornin’.”

“I’ll wear it!” she cried. Her voice had a joyous quality as if it were a crown he offered.

“I can’t let you—don’t let me let you, Rosalia!”

“You can’t help yourself—Zina, kiss me!”

At this second touch of the sun fell away his scruples and resolves. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

They went presently upfield to the little house with ma’s shuttered window. Zina in a new strength of soul walked strongly, oblivious of recent weakness of body. He had the effect of marching to a triumphant tune, and the woman beside him marched with him. They had come down from their rarified atmosphere to the lower zone of plain things, but a radiance remained in both their faces. Rosalia was talking of bread.

“I’ll show them to you in a minute, Zina,—blackened to a beautiful turn!”

They opened the kitchen door and entered quietly. A thin old voice came to meet them in querulous crescendo.

“Ziny! Ziny! Ziny!”

Together they went in to ma.