HERE was a lilac bush down beside the front gate. All through the days of early spring it was like a white, perfumed cloud. There were other flowers in the yard; little round beds of pansies, tall bushes of flowering currant, rose bushes whose tiny green leaves hinted of blooms to come, and spreading masses of lilies-of-the-valley.

Old Mrs. Lane loved best to watch the white lilac, sitting with her sewing or knitting beside the parlor window. She lived alone in the little house to which her husband had brought her as a bride. All her married life had been spent in it. The walls had echoed to the laughter of children, then given back the silence of three little graves in the burial-ground behind the hill. Her daughter Lucy had been the last one to go, but she had left the old place for a home of her own, and the white lilac had been in full bloom when she walked down the path to the front gate, and drove away.

The house was a little, low story and a half structure, painted white and set far back in its yard. There were no other houses within half a mile, and the narrow country road running past it on the north, wound like a tawny ribbon, now in the shade of over-arching trees, then again emerging into the open sunlight. The fields waved away on either side, girded by low lines of distant green-crowned hills. At the rear of the house was a patch of garden; to the left a well with its old-fashioned sweep, and over the back porch ran the blue, white and crimson screen of the ivy-leaved morning-glory.

Every afternoon after her simple housekeeping duties were over, old Mrs. Lane would sit down in her rocking-chair beside the parlor window. The rocking-chair had a high back and a cushion of gay colored chintz, and as she knitted or sewed, she rocked gently back and forth. In her neat, freshly starched dress pinned at the throat with an old-fashioned hair brooch, and with a bit of fine lace on her white hair, she seemed surrounded by an atmosphere of content, of orderliness and calm. Her sweet old face still retained something of the beauty of youth, a beauty that had mellowed into the delicate tints of old ivory. Her eyes had the softened dimness of one who has left the past far behind, yet can still summon it back at will across the threshold of the present.

The early spring afternoon went by on soft footsteps. The air was vibrant with the promise of coming summer, the scent of moist brown earth, the freshness of green, growing things. Birds darted
by, busy at their nesting; the far line of hills shone clear and distinct in the mirrored light.

Mrs. Lane knitted on, her long, steel needles clicking in the stillness. At half-past five she rolled up the stocking, stuck her needles through it and put it away. Then she went out into the kitchen, made the fire and filled the teakettle. In its shining copper surface she could see the reflection of her own face. From an oak dresser that stood in one corner she took down a cup and saucer and plate of a quaint blue pattern. She held the cup to the light and it was as transparent as an egg-shell. Then she cut some thin slices of bread, brought out quince preserve and spice cake, and a little pat of butter, then when the teakettle sent forth a cloudy steam, she made the tea and sat down to the table. She ate slowly, sipping her tea and breaking off small pieces of the rich cake. When she had finished she washed the blue dishes carefully and set them away. A few flaky ashes had dropped onto the hearth and these she brushed underneath the grate. She moved the teakettle back, straightened the table-cloth, and then went back to her rocking-chair beside the parlor window.

Presently she rose and went out of doors, down the path to the front gate. She rested her arms upon it and stood there in the soft spring dusk. The hills rose faintly in the afterglow like hills of dream. Fireflies lit the fields like wavering candle-flames. Along the road the shadows lengthened and grew darker. In the dusk of night the lilac bush was like a white blur, breathing forth a fragrance of old days, old loves, old joys. For a long time Mrs. Lane stood there in the twilight, then she turned and went slowly back into the house.

The next morning at work in the garden, she heard the sound of wheels coming along the road. They stopped at the gate, and hastily wiping her earth-stained hands on her apron she came around the corner of the house just as her daughter Lucy climbed down from the step. Lucy lived not far away and she drove over every now and then to see her mother. She reached back into the buggy, pulled out the hitching-strap and tied the horse to the post with quick jerks of the strap. Then she opened the gate and came up the path. The old woman hurried to meet her.

"I'm real glad to see you, Lucy, even though I wa'nt expectin' you. Come right in an' lay off your things."

She pushed back her sunbonnet as she spoke and the younger woman stooped and kissed her.

"Well I didn't hav' anythin' very pressin' just now, an' the
weather so nice an' all, I thought I better come whilst I had the chance.”

She followed her mother around the house to the back door. She was a large woman and she walked heavily. A little out-reaching spray of morning-glory touched her shoulder as she passed beneath the porch, and she brushed it aside impatiently. In the kitchen she sat down in the rocking-chair and began to untie the strings of her bonnet. Mrs. Lane stood watching her, rolling her hands in her apron.

“Sakes alive, ma, what's all thet on your apron?”

“Tain't nothin', Lucy, only a little fresh dirt. I've been workin' a little out in the garden.”

“I don't see no need o' your workin' out in the yard same's a man.” Lucy rocked back and forth, fanning her red face with her handkerchief. “An old woman like you, diggin' an' grubbin'. I've no patience with it.”

“I wan't doin' very much, Lucy, just kind o' loosenin' the earth a little. Beans an' peas an' radishes an' all them little green, growin' things, need tendin' same's children. I'm goin' to hev a real nice garden.”

Lucy did not reply directly.

“I met old man Haynes,” she said, “as I was comin' along an' he stopped an' asked how you was. Said he hadn't seen you in a long time. I don't see how you ever stand it here, not seein' folks from one week's end to the other.”

“Old folks ain't like young folks, Lucy. Their thoughts is comp'ny enough.”

Lucy brushed a speck of dust from the skirt of her dress, then she got up and took her bonnet and gloves into the little bedroom off the kitchen. She paused a moment before the dresser and smoothed back her hair. She had large, heavy features, with decision molded in every line. Her light blue eyes were purposeful, unwavering. The very swing of her shoulders as she walked bespoke conviction—leadership.

“You'd best let me get the dinner, ma, while you rest,” she was saying as she came out of the bedroom. “I know where to find everything. You set still now an' let me do it.”

Mrs. Lane protested a little but the other moved about with uncompromising assurance from table to cupboard, from cupboard to stove, with a great deal of rattling of dishes and pans. They ate for a few minutes in silence, then Lucy spoke.

“Seem's like it's awful quiet 'round here, ma. Don't you never notice it, stayin' here alone all day? It's a sight lonesomer than
over to our place. I was tellin’ Sam last night, an’ he said ‘twan’t no way for wimmen folks to live alone.’

‘Tain’t lonesome to me, Lucy. It’s diff’runt with you. You’ve got Sam an’ the children, an’ Sam’s home’s your home now.’
She paused a moment.

‘I’ve allays plenty to do, an’ then—an’ then besides there’s most allays somebody here.’

‘Somebody here!’ Lucy looked up in surprise. ‘What do you mean, ma?’

The older woman’s cheeks flushed faintly.

‘It’s just this way. I never go ’bout my work here in the kitchen, Lucy, that I don’t see your father settin’ in his old chair there by the window. Whenever I go in the bedroom I hear the little help-less cry I heard early the mornin’ you was born. I never sit in the parlor of an afternoon an’ see the sunshine playin’ over the walls, that I don’t seem to see some little outstretched hands tryin’ to catch the brightness. An’ after supper, down by the gate, with the hills an’ the fields an’ the long road, an’ the smell o’ the lilacs, we stand there, your father an’ me, just like the first evenin’ I come here a bride.’

She looked at her daughter with a something in her eyes that was almost an appeal. Lucy set down her coffee cup.

“Well, ef you don’t beat all!’

She pushed back her chair with a grating sound.

‘I don’t wonder you’ve got such notions, livin’ here alone day in an’ day out. I never heard o’ such a thing.’

She did not look at her mother as she poured some hot water into the pan and began to wash the dishes vigorously. Mrs. Lane wiped each one carefully and put it away. A little later in the soft spring afternoon, they sat down with their work in the parlor. The room was sweet with the fragrance of the lilacs. Lucy began stitching the wristband of a little shirt. Once she paused and looked out of the window.

“That white lilac’s kind o’ sickinin’ sweet, ain’t it? But it’s pretty with all them white blooms.”

Her mother looked at her.

“It looked just thet way the day you was married, Lucy, do you remember?”

“Why, yes, so it did. It was just this kind o’ a day,” too, mos’ twelve years ago.”

She took up her work, and they sewed on in silence while the sunlight grew softer and the shadows longer and more pointed. At half-past five Mrs. Lane went out into the kitchen.
"I’ll set out the supper," she said with a timid eagerness as the other followed her. She laid the white cloth carefully.

"Don’t you find white ones make a sight o’ washin’?"

Lucy was watching her from her place beside the window.

"I ain’t so very hard on ’em," the old woman answered as she crossed the room to the oak dresser. She took down two plates and two cups and saucers and put them on the table.

Lucy drew her chair to the table. The late afternoon light coming in at the window lay in broken bars across the floor. The morning-glories over the back porch hung closed and drooping. The air held a strange restlessness; the buzz and hum of hurrying wings that precedes the hush of night. Mrs. Lane reached over and helped herself to a piece of the spice cake.

"Sakes alive, ma, I shouldn’t think you’d hev any stomach left, eatin’ such rich stuff ’s thet!"

"I never touch but one piece, Lucy. I don’t think it hurts me a mite."

Early the next morning Lucy started on her homeward drive. Her mother standing at the gate watched her as she turned out the buggy. She came back a moment and stooping kissed the gentle old face.

"Good-bye, ma," she said. "Now don’t you go to workin’ too hard. Sam an’ I want you should come over an’ make us a visit ’fore long."

The old woman watched until the turn in the dusty road hid horse and buggy, then she went back into the house. As she went about her work she was conscious of a feeling of elation, a sort of freedom of joy. Though she would scarcely admit it to herself she was glad to be alone once more; glad of the smell of the fresh earth and the stains on her hands as she loosened the ground in the little patch of garden; glad of the long, still afternoon and of her supper of tea and spice-cake; of the lilac-scented dusk, and the happy quiet of her own thoughts.

"It’s just Lucy’s way," she said to herself, as if in justification.

Toward the end of the week, as she worked in the morning sunshine, she heard again the sound of wheels along the road. She straightened up, pushing back her sunbonnet and shading her eyes with her hand. A bird darted past, a swift shadow in the blue. The wheels came steadily on and stopped before the gate as they had stopped that other morning more than a week ago. In a few minutes Lucy’s ponderous figure came around the corner of the house.

"Why, Lucy!" Old Mrs. Lane stepped stiffly forward.

"Yes, it’s me, ma. I got to thinkin’ things over after I got home
the other day an’ I said to Sam I’m a goin’ right back ’s soon ’s the road’s dry so’s I can get there.”

She paused for breath. Standing there in the brilliant sunshine she looked the very embodiment of determination.

“Yes, we talked it over, Sam an’ me, an’ we decided you’d best come an’ live with us. We’re goin’ to build on another room an’ fix it up fer you. ’Tain’t right, ma, you’re livin’ here alone, an old woman like you.”

The trowel in Mrs. Lane’s hands dropped to the ground.

“I guess we’d better go in the house, Lucy. The sun’s pretty warm.”

She led the way and Lucy followed her into the cool kitchen. The old woman sat heavily down in the chair beside the window. Her hands trembled as she took off her sunbonnet.

“There now, ma, you’re all tired out diggin’ an’ workin’ out in thet garden. ’Tain’t any kind o’ work fer an old woman like you.”

Lucy stood looking down at her.

“I’ve been thinkin’ fer a long time back that you’d ought to make your home with Sam an’ me. It’s all nonsense your livin’ alone way off here. I got to thinkin’ it all over an’ I just couldn’t stand it another minute ’til I got here. You can live with us an’ it’ll be just the same as ’tis here, only you won’t need to do a bit o’ work. An’ with the children round ’twon’t be near so lonesome.”

The clock ticked loudly. Beyond the open door the morning-glories swayed back and forth in the breeze.

“It’s good of you an’ Sam to want me, Lucy,” Mrs. Lane looked up hesitatingly, “but I think I’m better off here. What would we do with all my things, an’ besides—no, I don’t see how I could go, Lucy.”

“There’s no use o’ your worryin’ ’bout that, mother. You just leave it all to Sam an’ me. You won’t need to tend to a thing. We can store all the things in our barn, there’s plenty o’ room.”

“But the house, Lucy? What’ll become o’ the house, an’ that white lilac bush down by the front gate?”

Lucy looked out of the window at the blue hills. “Sam says he don’t think we’ll have any trouble sellin’ the house. This is a good piece o’ land.”

The other leaned forward.

“Sell this place! Sell the house where you was born! An’ let strangers come in. Whatever are you thinkin’ of, Lucy?”

Her voice faltered and broke.

“Why, mother, I never dreamed you’d take it like that. We thought this was a good chance to get rid of the place. I don’t
blame you for feelin’ bad, of course, when it’s been your home all these years, but we can’t always take account o’ our feelin’s. It’s a bad thing for a house to stand empty, Sam says. An’ as for your tryin’ to live on here all alone at your age, it ain’t right an’ I ain’t a goin’ to let you do it!"

It was a few hours later when Lucy kissed her mother good-bye. "I’ll drive over after you a week from today. Sam can move the things afterward. There’s no real hurry about ’em.”

She placed one foot on the step of the buggy, then turned once more. In the strong afternoon sunlight her mother’s face looked very old and strangely tired.

“You’re all wore out now,” she said as she drove off.

The days went by—days of brilliant sunshine when the air quivered as though seen through a glass. Each morning old Mrs. Lane standing in the doorway beneath the morning-glories, looked out at the dew-drenched earth, the tender green of grass and leaf. Every afternoon sitting in the chintz-cushioned chair beside the parlor window she saw the playing sunbeams on the walls; the white mist of the lilac-bush. She clung to each hour with a passionate clinging, an exquisite joy that yet had in it the shadow of futurity.

On the last night she stood long at the gate, while the dusk unfolded slowly like the petals of a great flower. Beneath the trees the road wound dark and still and fireflies gleamed across the fields. She leaned heavily, her hands clasped upon the top rail. Out from the surrounding shadows the white lilac stood forth in an almost ethereal beauty and with the fragrance of some far-off, long-remembered June. There had been a spray of it on her wedding bonnet and the two little graves on the hill behind the house were always covered with it in season. Her mind went back to all her yesterdays; that first night of all when she had stood there, young and a bride; on down through all the happy years to these last ones in their peaceful twilight of content. As the slender spiral shoots of a plant cling around the body that gives them life, so she clung to the remembrance of each lilac-scented dusk. Suddenly above the rim of the treetops on the opposite side of the road, a single star shone forth. Alone, yet serene and luminous it hung in the immeasurable distance of the summer sky. The old woman watched it, then she straightened up. She reached over and touched a spray of the white lilac. Trembling a little, yet with a certain inward buoyancy, she went back up the path to the house.

It was noon the next day when Lucy came for her. She entered
the little kitchen in a sort of arrogant strength, her presence seeming to tower above everything else in the room.

"Well, here I am, mother, same's I said I'd be. We've got a nice day, too. Sam'll be over first thing in the morning after the things. Don't you be frettin' about 'em—they'll be safe enough."

Lucy, pausing to get her breath, looked sharply at her mother. The latter had on her calico dress. It had some fresh mud-stains on the skirt. She was moving about setting the table for dinner.

"Why, mother, ain't you dressed yet? You've got on that old calico—an'—whatever are you doin' settin' out the table like that?"

The old woman glanced up at the clock.

"It's mos' dinner time," she said quietly. A strange new note had crept into her voice. "You'd better put your hat and gloves in the bedroom. It'll be ready in a minute."

"It'll be the middle o' the afternoon 'fore we're ready to start, at this rate, mother." Lucy spoke impatiently. "I s'posed you'd be all ready. I dropped everything to come an' I thought we'd just eat a bite on the way an' have an early supper after we get home."

She looked around her.

"I didn't know but what you'd have some o' the things you set so much store by, them blue dishes an' all, packed up to take along with us. Well, Sam can fetch 'em with the rest o' the things. You go on in an' change your dress an' I'll set this dinner into a basket."

"No, Lucy, I'm goin' to dish it up an' we'll have dinner at my house," she spoke with gentle emphasis. "You can go right afterward if you feel you must get back. I've got some dumplin's on the stove—your father was dretful fond of 'em."

"Why, mother,—whatever—?"

"Just listen to me, Lucy. I've decided I ain't a goin' home to live with you an' Sam. I'm a goin' to stay on right here in this house where your father brought me a bride. It's allays been home an' it allays will be 'til the Lord calls me to a better one. When you married Sam you went away to start a new home of your own. You've fixed it all up with your own things that nothin' else can ever take the place of. Mebbe you're too young to understan', Lucy, but some day you'll know that it's allays home where the heart is. An' it's the buildin' up o' each generation that's made the world—the goin' out o' the young folks to start all over again. You ain't so far away but what you could come if you was needed. The little work I hev to do ain't a goin' to hurt me a mite. I'm happy every hour o' the day an' as I told you I ain't ever lonesome. I ain't like some. I've comp'ny enough. Mebbe when you get as old as I be you'll understan'."
WHITE LILACS

She smiled a little, then went on.

"An' why shouldn't I hev things nice if I do be all alone. I never question what's set afore me at your house. I never tell you what you'd ought o' do. Folks 's got their own ways, what's best for 'em. No, Lucy, you've got your own home an' I've got mine. You'll allays be welcome whenever you're a mind to come, an' Sam an' the children, but it's my house an' it allays will be, to do as I please."

She paused. Two bright spots of color were burning in either cheek. For the first time in her life Lucy was shaken out of her complacent, self-satisfied dominance. She recognized that she had to do at last with a will, which though so newly assertive, was as strong as her own.

"Well I must say I think you're dretful foolish, mother. An' I don't know what Sam'll think!"

She drew up her chair to the table.

"I s'pose I might 's well have some warm victuals 'fore I start back again."

As soon as dinner was over she rose and pinned on her hat. The older woman watched her, the color still burning in her cheeks. Lucy pulled on both gloves with a jerk, then she stooped and kissed her mother good-bye.

"The children 'll be dretful disappointed," she said.

When the turn in the road had hid her ponderous figure from sight, old Mrs. Lane went back into the kitchen. All through the rest of the afternoon she went about her work in a sort of exaltation—a strange intoxicating sweetness of newly acquired power. She sat with her sewing beside the parlor window while the sunbeams played over the walls. When it came to be supper-time she got out the white cloth and the thin blue china cup, then drank her tea and ate her one piece of spice cake and a little dish of preserves.

The light slowly left the hills and the day deepened to dusk. Fireflies lit their lamps in the gloom of the fields. The stillness enfolded like a caress. Down beside the front gate the white lilac leaned familiarly, breathing forth a peace ineffable, the calm of old undisturbed memories, and its fragrance was as a fragrance everlasting.