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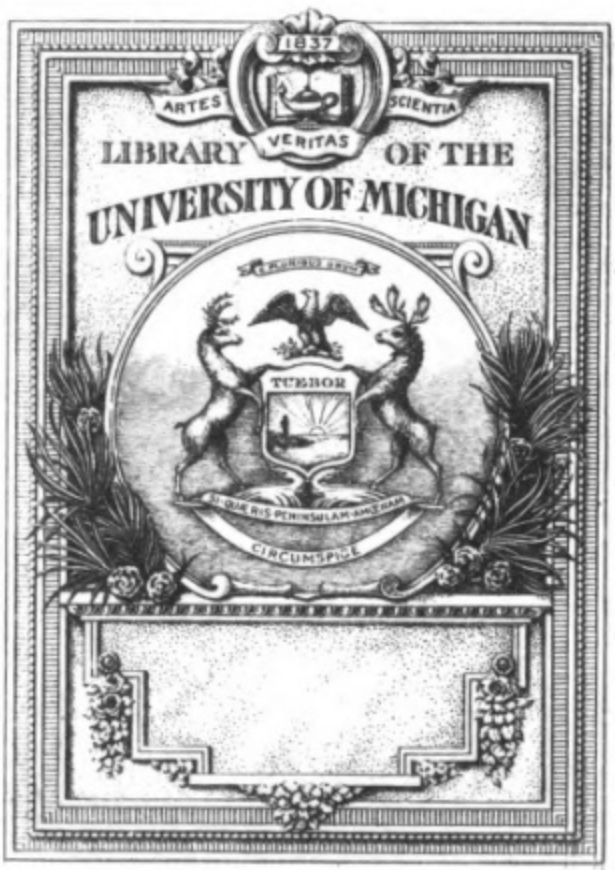

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THE MYSTERIES OF ANN

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ROBIN HOOD'S BARN

CHILDREN OF EARTH

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BROMLEY NEIGHBORHOOD

THE SECRET OF THE CLAN

THE WIND BETWEEN THE WORLDS

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THE MYSTERIES OF ANN

BY

ALICE BROWN

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1925

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THE MYSTERIES OF ANN

I

Emma Hale, a little old maid, something over fifty, sat crocheting a doily, at a front window of the old gray house where she and Ann, her sister, twelve years older, lived alone together. This story is not about Emma, though she is mentioned first, but sometimes a story-teller makes it a point of pride to get his scene setting into one sentence, and so begin neatly. Emma was a high-shouldered slenderness of a person with faded pink cheeks and the twitching animation that had once been gayety. She loved bright colors, and to-day she wore a pink delaine that had been new, though of another cut, in the days when the century itself was young, and she looked smilingly content, not apprehensive, as she often was, when her more eccentric sister gave her cause for wonderment. Ann, sitting by the center

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table, bent over a book laid flat before her, and Emma reflected that, although novel reading was a foolish waste of time, it did nobody any real harm, and kept Ann from the more conspicuous oddities that made the neighbors talk. There you have them, two New England old maids, tagged with the accepted commonplaces of narrow shoulders, worn fingers and hungry faces the prattling newer psychology fastens upon as significant of something or other, it hardly knows what; and yet there was something in them perhaps a little different from the accepted genus, something that was human before it was "New England."

Emma kept glancing up at Ann and then dropping her eyes again to her work. She wished Ann would speak. It was terrible dull to sit in the room with anybody and not have 'em say a word for an hour right on end. Finally she ventured the question she thought a triumph of artifice: it was so wide and wavering, like a signal flag, Ann could

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answer or not as she chose and it was exact enough to prove Emma knew perfectly well what she was up to.

"What you doin'?" enquired Emma. "Readin'?"

Ann looked up, keeping a forefinger on her place.

"I got to finish this," she said absently. "I want to take it back."

Emma went on crocheting. She also kept on thinking about Ann, how queer the neighbors thought her and how queer she really was. She probably looked queer, too, though Emma was so used to her looks that she had to judge them through the neighbors' eyes. She herself was devoted to Ann, and it hurt her deeply, in a dull inward way, to know her sister was being disapproved of or smiled at, either her pursuits or her manners. Ann was always too busy with her own varied concerns to spend even a fleeting thought on public opinion, but her neighbors were never tired of talking her over. The reason may

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have been that she throve cheerfully under the elastic term, odd. One thing about her, was that she never settled down to anything. Though so advanced in life, she could not yet stay put. She was always, with an energy those homekeeping women failed to understand, "on the go." After she had, with a smashing sort of vigor, done her share of the housework—the heavier part, because Emma was not so strong—she was likely to be seen striding off on her long legs to the small diversions a country region affords. And these quests of hers were strange, the women asserted, oftenest the sittings of court in the county town, sometimes, though with less enthusiasm, a flitting to camp meeting, and more than once she had made a two days' excursion to see if a night-blooming cereus would really bloom. The unknown, the untried, these beckoned and beguiled her. She made no discrimination, it seemed, in the legal cases she sat through with an alert ear and furrowed brow, but

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attended large and small alike. Anybody, the neighbors said, might be tempted to follow a murder case, but there did seem to be something coarsely like menfolks in sitting by while arson and petty larceny were dealt with. Some of her tramps were not on such easily comprehended quests as even the lure of camp meeting and night-blooming flowers. Often they led her through swamps where sweet flag, cowslip and thoroughwort grew. And yet she seldom came home with any gathered spoils. And that in itself bore out their theory of her. She was simply, they said, possessed to "go." And when it came to her regular business of digging ginseng to sell, she pressed farther afield, they averred, than any woman ought to in these days when 'most anybody would make way with you for a silver thimble. Once Mrs. Sheriff Holt mentioned that possibility to Emma, in those very words, and Emma, who had not a responsive fancy, said perplexedly:

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"Ann ain't never had a silver thimble. Me neither. I always wisht we had."

But she earned more in one ginseng trip, it was understood, than Emma by a month's crocheting. Emma's round doilies the antique shop, three miles out on the state road, bought for small sums and sold to its motor customers, and so many did she make that sometimes, when she had worked a long afternoon stabbing her needle in and out, she saw them whirling before her eyes. The two managed, between them, to rub along, and if they ceased to make good, in their different ways, it was concluded that their old cousin, Jason Hale, might do something for them: not, however, until the last gasp, for Jason was "nigh." He lived half a mile up the road, in the meager comfort of a man resolved to spend no more than he must, and served by a housekeeper, Selina Rule, a waif of a woman with a dexterous housewifely hand and a twitching face, the latter not so much a result of nervous

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disorder as overflowing energy. She was much younger than Jason, who was now over seventy, but for some reason she had escaped the suspicion attached to housekeeping females seeking to entrap the solitary male. Perhaps that was because of her self-effacement and absorption in her work; perhaps nobody had so wild a fancy as to imagine any woman as even calculatingly amorous of Jason. She was devoted to his comfort, as she had been to his wife's and, in spite of his niggardliness, no such food as she set before him was seen in any other house of the region. Her pies were of a flakiness, her biscuits light with art, and yet Jason bolted them without a word, and when they had passed his lantern jaws he seemed to forget them altogether, for he grew no fatter and was not even concerned about the cost, knowing Selina to be a careful woman who made an egg go a marvelous way. But then, they said, Jason didn't care about anything but his patch of peonies, and these he

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worshiped, especially in bloom time. In Emma and Ann, though they were his only kin, he showed no interest, however the neighbors might hint that the girls were getting on in years and poor as a crow. The only approach he had made to them of late was to urge Emma to sell him the wood lot that stood in her name, for a price, so the all-knowing surmised, a good many hundred dollars below its worth. But what could you expect? He'd always been ready to skin a flint, and a man wasn't going to change when he was over seventy and living on borrowed time. He had really come round Emma, gone to see her one day when Ann was off on one of her jaunts; he had then, they understood, told Emma she could sell him the wood lot or not as she pleased, but it was now or never, and she had signed the agreement he had ready for her and taken the money he paid down to bind the bargain. Precious few dollars he must have paid, so the neighbors guessed; that was

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all it was likely to be, but Emma was caught, just the same. So the talk ran on, and, when any side issue failed, the collective mind would settle upon the ever fruitful topic of the queerness of Ann.

It must be said again that Ann was very queer indeed, and she looked her queerness to the full. Her tanned leathery face wore an aspect of having endured a long time, through buffetings of wind and sun, and her brown eyes gazed out from under puckered brows in an inquiring wonder. She was as straight, the neighbors said, as a yard o' pump water, and as thin as a rail. Children were tolerant of her, all except the young Moreys, who depended on stealing her melons when they were on the road to ripeness, though Mirandy, the youngest and most daring, did realize that if there were no Ann there would be no melons to steal and accepted her on that score. To young men and women she was more or less funny. They hardly ever referred to her, being a care-

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lessly accepted oddity, but she was always "old Ann Hale." There was no lack of kindness in this; she merely seemed to them to have no vital connection with life itself except as occupying a very small spot in it which nobody else could possibly want, and they could hardly imagine she was ever anything but old. She would have to be old, she was so different. There were her trampings about when other women of her age were knitting or making cake, and think how she spent her evenings, poring over that everlasting calico covered algebra, and doing sums on her old school slate! They, boys and girls, had had to be punished and kept in for not doing their algebra right, and here was she, 'most old enough to die, doing it for fun. And then they would yawn and listen a moment to their elders talking over Cousin Jason and Emma's wood lot, before their minds sheered off to topics really important, like the movies or secondhand Fords.

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Again, on this September afternoon, Emma, hungry for familiar speech, looked up at Ann, and now Ann closed her book and smiled and answered her. At least, she answered what she knew to be in Emma's mind.

"Yes," she said, "I'm goin' over to the libr'y. I can return this now an' pick me out another one."

She went to the back entry closet and took down her old brown coat and the battered hat which had been her father's and, to Emma's mortification, served her spring and fall, slipped into the coat, pulled the hat well over her eyes, caught up the book and was away down the path into the road. Emma laid her crocheting on her knee and watched her from the window, with a sigh. There was always a distinct drop in temperature when Ann went away. She could charge the domestic atmosphere, without meaning to she could raise a breeze. The afternoon went

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flat without her, and Emma kept on crocheting with a lagging hand.

On this September afternoon, Mrs. Sheriff Holt, who was the neighborhood news center, opened the topic of the Hale wood lot to Annette Fleming, whom she met upon the road. Annette was the district school-teacher and much beloved. She was the Hale girls' niece and very affectionate toward them, as well as idly scornful over Aunt Ann's especial activities, the mysterious mania for algebraic idiocies, the unaccountable passion for finding out by formula how many shingles it would take for a barn of a given size or how many apples a boy nine years old could eat between now and sunset. Annette could teach algebra to admiration, but a pretty sense of humor went with her defiant wit, and few things seemed to her more ridiculous than the assumption of *x* and *y*. Now, standing there in the road with the hot September sunshine touching up her

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yellow hair and the dull tones of her blue dress, she was as lovely as the day. She had all the tanned rich sturdiness of the ripening season as well as the promise of June. Mrs. Holt, portly, upstanding, with fine pale hair and a network of red veining over her nose, reflected that she herself must in her girlhood have looked much as Annette did now. She almost said so, though in other words.

"I had an elegant suit o' hair, that color for all the world," she thought, "an' my cheeks were as red as a rose."

But what she did was to ask:

"How under the sun do you s'pose your Aunt Emma come to let that lumber lot go for so much less 'n it's worth?"

"I suppose," said Annette, a little coldly, "she didn't know how much 'twas worth."

"Yes," said Mrs. Holt, indiscreetly pursuing the question, "but there's your Aunt Ann. She's

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got a great headpiece, an' Emma never says her soul's her own if Ann tells her not to. Ann 'd ought to look into it 'fore it goes any further."

"I guess my aunts understand each other pretty well, when it comes to that," said Annette, with dignity. "They don't need anybody to tell 'em."

She went on along the road, not even, as Mrs. Holt remarked, troubling herself to speak of the hot weather or say good-by, and Mrs. Holt stood looking after her, thinking how high she held her head, and that, after all, the hair on it was not more than a third as thick as hers had been the day she met Hermie Holt. It was amazing, the hair Mrs. Holt had in those days, when she sued Elmer Peterson for breach of promise and came on Hermie Holt at camp meeting the very next Sunday that ever was. Annette needn't have taken her up so short for just showing an interest. She had meant to go home and have an early supper, but Annette's tight-lipped reserve

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had nettled her, and she turned in at the Hale sisters' gate. Emma was still at the front window, her head bent more droopingly over her work, now that Ann's going had left the room so large and still. She heard the gate and looking, saw Mrs. Holt, dropped her doily on the table and hurried to the door. It was a marvel how the belief in happiness, the love of life, surged up in her with the slightest hint of change. Emma had never ceased to find the world a wonderful spot, full of varying hopes. She had never met anything of an exciting nature face to face, but she never budged from her conviction that, in some form, there was a pot of gold and a rainbow's end. With the obstinacy of gentle natures, she cherished her hungers and found in them the promise of fruition.

Mrs. Holt, seeing her at the door, noted the pathetic travesty of style in the pink delaine, wondered how she could so forget her age and

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humble condition, and mentally commented: "Poor toad!" Emma looked to her as if she had come out of the year one.

"I'm real glad to see you," said Emma, in her sprightly voice which was, through all its quavering, sincere. "Come right in." She stepped back into the front room where she had been sitting. "You take this chair an' I'll take mine. I've got my crochetin' all over the lot."

Mrs. Holt sank into a chair with the relief of heavy matter finding an adequate base.

"What you doin'?" she inquired. "More o' them doilies? What under the sun folks want so many of 'em for I never could make out."

"Why, it's to set tumblers on an' preserve dishes, I s'pose," said Emma, taking up her work and catching the fine thread over her worn forefinger. "Henry Griffin says he guesses all the towns from here to the mountains must be carpeted with my doilies, the way they sell."

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Mrs. Holt leaned forward in her chair and fixed a sharpened gaze. If she could not find out the inner reasons for a lumber lot's going for less than its worth, here was at least one unsolved question to set her teeth into.

"That reminds me," said she. "I dunno whether Henry Griffin's goin' with Annette or not."

Emma looked up at her in a sudden beseeching apprehension. She knew Mrs. Sheriff Holt and that she herself was no match for her. But Ann had left her undefended, and she must do her best.

"I dunno's I know either," she replied, with some dignity.

"Folks said," Mrs. Holt pursued, her small eyes gleaming in the ardor of the chase, "folks said at the time you sold your wood lot Henry Griffin was ready an' willin' to take it off your hands an' put in a steam sawmill an' see how much he could make on it for him an' you, too."

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Emma found her hands trembling. She dropped a stitch and sought for it frowningly.

"I wish," she said, under her breath, "folks would let me alone about that wood lot. Seems if they were possessed to make a handle of it."

"Well," said Mrs. Holt reasonably, "I can't help thinkin' Henry'd have done the best he could for you, goin' with Annette so—I s'pose he is goin' with her?—an' it's plain to be seen you bit your own nose right off sellin' it to your Cousin Jason the way you did"—

"I ain't sold it," said Emma, goaded into a weak defiance. "Not so to speak. The deed ain't passed, an' that land stan's in my name same's it has for the last fifteen year."

"Well," said Mrs. Holt, with her air of triumphant cross-examination, "why ain't it passed? You've signed an agreement an' all, an' there's money been paid over, an' the deed's only a matter o' time. If the deed ain't made out, why ain't

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it, when it's got to be an' might as well be fust as last?"

"I'll tell you why it ain't," said Emma, responding to the spur. "Ann was kinder surprised when she found out what I'd done, an' when Cousin Jason come an' hounded me on about passin' the deed I kinder broke down an' had to have camphire an' Ann told him to leave the house an' he ain't been in sence."

"You don't think," said Mrs. Holt, in high delight over these new revelations and seeing herself spreading them forthwith to great acclaim, "you don't think he's give it up?"

"No, I don't," said Emma. "That ain't Cousin Jason, givin' anything up. You know that as well as I do. Ann said so herself. She said 'twas the camphire bottle that finished him. She said 'twas my breakin' down an' he'd had enough o' that to home, 'fore his wife died, an' it kinder got on his nerves. O forever! there's Ann."

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At that moment the front door opened and Ann stepped in. Emma could have cried aloud in joy. Her deliverer! her defender! Ann would know what to say. But Ann at the moment seemed disinclined to say anything. She was, for some reason not yet apparent, absorbed in thoughts of her own.

"How do?" she said to the visitor, with a perfunctory nod. "Nice day, ain't it?"

Without stopping to take off her coat, she stepped to a card table at the side of the room and laid down three books she had brought. They were covered with brown paper darkened and shiny through use. Now she did slip off her coat, but she paused on the way to hang it up when Mrs. Holt enquired curiously:

"Ann, what under the sun you readin', these days? Hermie spoke of it only yesterday. 'There goes Ann Hale,' says he, 'passel o' books under her arm. She's been on the road the whole durin'

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time sence the new lib'ry was opened. What's she readin' of?' says he. 'Suthin' about algebra, I s'pose.'" There was contempt in her tone when she said "algebra," evidently Hermie's contempt for the unknown strengthened by what she herself might reasonably feel.

But Ann was not offended. She paused by the door, her old brown coat over her arm and the soft hat now at a rakish angle, for she had put up a hand to take it off and thought better of it, remembering her hair was a crow's nest, and how Emma hated to have her look so unkempt before a neighbor. She liked to please Emma, when she could, in these outward things that seemed to her so foolish, though often she forgot it when the need came. She stood there, evidently considering what Mrs. Holt said and finding the matter echoing in her own mind.

"Why," she began, "fust time I went, I found a book there—only by accident I found it—an' I

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picked it up an' turned a page or two an' I couldn't lay it down."

Mrs. Holt gazed from one sister to the other in a growing curiosity. Ann, she saw, was deeply affected, and so was Emma, though in a different way. Emma was crocheting with a savage energy, if a creature so neutral could be moved by vindictive passion, and her cheeks were deeply red. Her hands trembled at their darting strokes and the tears came into her eyes.

"What was it?" Mrs. Holt asked curiously. "Was't that book that was mentioned Sunday about Foreign Missions an' the Far East?"

"No," said Ann, still thinking her own thoughts and answering from the surface of them. "'Twas about a man that was found settin' murdered in his chair right to home, an' how they made up their minds who done it."

"Forever!" said Mrs. Holt, in amazement. "What they call a mystery story. They advertise

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'em so. I don't see what there was about that to make such a handle of. None o' them books are true."

"'Twas terrible interestin'," said Ann, with that look of intense speculation still on her face. "I took it so's to read the rest of it"—

"An' set up half the night till 'twas finished," said Emma resentfully. "I'd wake up an' see the light goin' an' think somebody's breakin' in or Ann was took with suthin', an' so it's been ever sence."

"You don't mean," said Mrs. Holt, bending her amazed look on Ann, "you've took to that kind o' trash for a reg'lar diet?"

"There's lots o' books same kind as that is," said Ann, as if out of a dream. "Some of 'em ain't quite so interestin' an' some of 'em's more. An' they're all about folks that are murdered or you think they be, or folks that's shut up or laid by the heels somehow, an' how the knowin' ones trap the guilty ones an' find 'em out."

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"It's nothin' but wrongdoin', when it comes to that," said Mrs. Holt. Her lips tightened until they made no more than a scar across her plump face. "If you call that good for anybody to be studyin' of, day in an' day out, I don't, that's all."

"Oh," said Ann, eagerly ready to put her right, "it ain't what's done that's so interestin'. It's how they find it out."

Emma's fingers were trembling so that she could not hold her needle to advantage, and let her hands drop in her lap.

"An' so it's been ever sence," she repeated, beginning to rock back and forth in quick staccato strokes. "An' if anybody's goin' to sell anything—whether it's a piece o' crochet or a piece o' timber land—they've got to make up their minds themselves, because they can't get a word o' counsel, folks are so taken up tryin' to study into ways o' findin' out a murder in a book."

She had told her secret. She knew she had,

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and that Mrs. Sheriff Holt saw at last why she had let the lumber lot go at Cousin Jason's price. It was not only that Ann had not been by to help her. The foolish mystery books had absorbed Ann entirely, and Cousin Jason had been too wily for her to deal with alone. She would have given much to take back her disclosure, made in the heat of a moment's pent up anger, but there it was. Mrs. Holt knew. But Ann was not angry with her. She hardly seemed to hear. She dropped into a chair and let her old coat stray over her knees to the floor. Still she was thinking deeply.

"It ain't so much that the detectives are so terrible knowin'," she said, more to herself than the others. "It's because the murderers are so foolish, the way they go to work. Trace upon trace they leave behind 'em. Here it's layin' their fingers on winder glass an' makin' a mark, an' there it's droppin' a button off their coat with a piece o' the cloth hangin' to it. 'Course

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if you kill anybody right off quick when you're mad an' ain't never thought of it before, you'd do it all sorts o' ways. I shouldn't be surprised at that. But when you've got an enemy an' want to pay him back for suthin' or he's made a will an' you want to inherit—why, I can't for my life see why you don't plan it out as neat as you'd go about any other job, an' when they tried to ketch you they might whistle for 't."

Mrs. Holt's pale eyes were staring. Emma, chiefly occupied now in thinking how foolish she had been to give her little secret away, was crocheting tearfully. She was used to Ann's wild speculations. Sometimes, knowing she could find no answer Ann would consider seriously, she hardly listened. But this was different.

"Why, Ann Hale," said Mrs. Holt, "you don't mean you set down an' mull over ways o' makin' 'way with your fellar men? Seems to me that comes pretty nigh breakin' the law."

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"I've thought an' thought," said Ann abstractedly, "how 'twould be if there was anybody I had a grudge ag'inst an' I wanted to git 'em out o' the way. I bet," she concluded, in a flash of triumphant self-approval, "I could carry it through without makin' any such halfway job of it. I could do it as neat as wax." Then she smiled a little and looked from one to the other in a half shamefaced deprecation. "Fact is," said she, "I did se' down last night after Emma'd poked off to bed an' begun to plan one out."

If she wanted to produce an effect she had done it. There could be no doubt about that. In the two faces bent upon her there was nothing less than horror. Ann read it so and tried to assuage it.

"But I didn't get very fur," said she. "Trouble was, I couldn't think up anybody I wanted to git out o' the way, an' whenever I'd try to, it seemed so funny I couldn't git nowhere."

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"Funny! Puttin' your fellar creatur's out o' the world funny! Well, Ann Hale, I must say it beats me."

"I thought o' one an' another," said Ann, relishing her own grotesque humor. "I thought o' you, Mis' Holt—"

"Me?" echoed Mrs. Holt, half rising from her chair. "Why, I dunno but I'm 'most afraid o' you."

"An' then I thought how you come over an' set up nights when Emma had the lung fever," said Ann, "an' I says to myself, 'Well, she's a good soul, come to git right down to 't,' an' try as I would I couldn't see myself puttin' you out o' the way."

But now Emma awoke to the significance of Mrs. Holt's emotion. She spoke with unwonted vehemence.

"Ann, for heaven's sake don't you let Mis' Holt think you're out o' your head. Here she's come in to see how Cousin Jason got round me

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