



## CHAPTER I

I heard the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, the story was different each time.

If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post office. If you know the post office, you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it; drop the reins on his hollow-backed, reddish-brown horse, Bay; and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade. And you must have asked who he was.

It was at the post office that I saw Ethan for the first time, several years ago. The sight pulled me up sharp. Although he was only the ruin of a man, he was the most striking figure in Starkfield. It wasn't so much his great height that distinguished him (Starkfield residents tend to be tall). It was his careless, powerful look, despite a lameness that checked

each of his steps like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face. He was so stiff and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he wasn't much older than fifty. I learned this from Harmon Gow, who had driven the stagecoach from Bettsbridge to Starkfield in pre-trolley days and knew the history of every family on his route.

"He's looked that way ever since he had his smash-up, and that will be twenty-four years ago come next February," Harmon said between reminiscent pauses.

I gathered from Harmon that the "smash-up" had drawn the red gash across Ethan's forehead and so shortened and warped his right side that it cost him a visible effort to take the few steps from his buggy to the post office window.

Ethan would drive in from his farm every day around noon. Because that was when I fetched my mail, I often passed him on the post office porch or stood beside him while we waited for the postmaster to finish handing out the mail. Ethan would come punctually, but he seldom received anything other than a copy of the *Bettsbridge Eagle*, which he would put, without a glance, into his sagging pocket. Every so often, the postmaster would hand

him an envelope addressed to Zenobia, or Zeena, Frome. Usually the address of some medicine manufacturer appeared in the envelope's upper left corner. Ethan would pocket these envelopes, too, without a glance, then turn away with a silent nod to the postmaster.

Everyone in Starkfield knew Ethan and gave him a greeting suited to his grave manner. His habit of not speaking was respected. It was only rarely that one of Starkfield's older men detained him for a word. When this happened, Ethan would listen quietly, his blue eyes on the speaker's face, and answer so softly that I never heard his words. Then he would climb stiffly into his buggy, gather up the reins in his left hand, and drive slowly away toward his farm.

"Was it a bad smash-up?" I asked Harmon, looking after Ethan's retreating figure and thinking how handsome he must have been before his strong shoulders were bent out of shape and his thick blond hair started to gray.

"Worst kind," Harmon said. "More than enough to kill most men. But the Fromes are tough. Ethan probably will live to a hundred."

At the moment Ethan, having climbed to his seat, was leaning over to check that a

wooden box he'd placed in the back of the buggy was secure. The box had a druggist's label on it. I saw his face as it probably looked when he thought he was alone. "That man live to a hundred?" I exclaimed. "He already looks dead and in hell!"

Harmon drew a slab of tobacco from his pocket, cut off a wedge, and pressed it into his leathery cheek. "I guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

"Why didn't *he*?"

"Someone had to stay and care for his folks—first his father, then his mother, then his wife. There never was anyone but Ethan.

"And then the smash-up?"

Harmon chuckled sardonically. "That's right. Then he had to stay."

"I see. Others have taken care of him since then?"

Harmon passed his tobacco to the other cheek. "No. Ethan always has been the one to take care of others."

Harmon conveyed the story as much as his mental and moral reach permitted. There were gaps, and I sensed that the story's deeper meaning lay in these gaps. One comment especially stuck in my mind: "I guess he's

been in Starkfield too many winters.”

Before my own time in Starkfield ended, I learned what that meant. I had come in the era of trolleys, bicycles, and rural delivery. Communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages. The valleys' bigger towns, such as Bettsbridge and Shadd's Falls, had libraries, theaters, and YMCAs, where young people could go for recreation. But when winter descended on Starkfield and the village lay under a sheet of snow perpetually renewed from the pale skies, I began to see what life there must have been during Ethan's young manhood.

My employers had sent me on an engineering job connected with construction of an electricity powerhouse at Corbury Junction. A carpenters' strike had delayed the work for such a long time that I had found myself anchored at Starkfield, the nearest habitable spot, most of the winter. At first I had chafed. Gradually, under the hypnotizing effect of routine, I had begun to find a grim satisfaction in the life.

During the early part of my stay, I'd been struck by the contrast between the climate's vitality and the community's deadness. Day by day, after the December snows ended, a blazing

blue sky had poured down light on the white landscape, which had glittered. You would think that such an atmosphere would enliven people, but it seemed to produce no change except to further slow Starkfield's sluggish pulse. This phase of crystal clearness was followed by long stretches of sunless cold, when I felt the force of Harmon's remark, "Most of the smart ones get away." I wondered what obstacles had hindered Ethan's flight.

During my stay at Starkfield, I lodged with Ruth Hale, a middle-aged widow. Her father, Jim Varnum, had been Starkfield's lawyer. The Varnum house, where Ruth and her mother Nancy lived, was Starkfield's mansion. It stood at one end of Main Street. Its classic portico and small-paned windows looked down a path between Norway spruces to the slim white steeple of the Congregational church. The Varnum fortunes were in decline, but Ruth and Nancy did what they could to preserve their dignity. In particular, Ruth had a wan refinement in keeping with her pale, old-fashioned house.

Every evening, in a parlor with mahogany furniture, I listened to a history of Starkfield. More refined and educated than her neighbors, Ruth judged them with detachment. I

hoped to learn the missing facts of Ethan's story from her, or at least the key to his character. Her mind was a storehouse of anecdotes. Any question about her acquaintances brought forth a volume of detail. But she was reluctant to speak of Ethan or his affairs. No matter how persistently I sought information, she would say little more than "Yes, I knew them both. It was awful." The subject clearly distressed her.

When I asked Harmon why Ruth was so reluctant to speak on the subject, he said, "She's always been as nervous as a rat. She was the first one to see them after they were picked up. It happened right below the Varnums' house, at the bend of the Corbury road, about the time that Ruth got engaged to Ned Hale. The young people all were friends. I guess Ruth can't bear to talk about it. She's had troubles enough of her own."

No one in Starkfield would explain the devastated look of Ethan's face. I might have contented myself with the patchy story I pieced together if it hadn't been for Ruth's silence and, a short time later, personal contact with Ethan.

Each day, someone from Michael Eady's stables would drive me from Starkfield to

Corbury Flats, where I would catch a train for Corbury Junction. But in mid-winter Michael's horses fell ill. The illness spread to Starkfield's other stables. For two days I was unable to get to the train station. Then Harmon mentioned that Ethan's horses were healthy and Ethan might be glad to drive me.

I stared. "Ethan? I've never even spoken to him. Why would he put himself out for me?"

"I didn't say he'd put himself out. He'd be glad to earn a dollar," Harmon responded.

I'd heard that Ethan was poor and that the sawmill and his farm's dry acres yielded scarcely enough to sustain his household through the winter. Still, I was surprised.

Harmon continued, "When a man's been sitting around like a hulk for more than twenty years, seeing things that need doing, it eats into him, and he loses his grit. That Frome farm was always about as bare as a milk pan after the cat's been around, and that old mill is nearly worthless. When Ethan could sweat over both of them from sunrise to sunset, he squeezed a living out of them. But even then his folks ate up almost everything. I don't see how he gets by. First his father was kicked in the head by a horse and went softheaded;

before he died, he gave away money as freely as quotes from the Bible. Then his mother got so senile and arthritic that she dragged along for years as weak as a baby. Ethan's wife, Zeena, needed more doctoring than anyone else in the county. Sickness and trouble—that's what Ethan's had on his plate ever since the first helping."

The next morning when I looked out, I saw Bay between the Varnum spruces. Throwing back his worn bearskin, Ethan made room for me in the sleigh at his side. After that, he drove me to the train station every morning for a week. Every afternoon he drove me back to Starkfield, through the icy night. The distance each way was barely three miles, but Bay's pace was slow. Even with firm snow under the runners, the trip took us nearly an hour.

Ethan drove in silence, the reins held loosely in his left hand. Against the white background of snow, under his helmet-like cap, his seamed face looked like that of an ancient hero. He never turned his face to mine or responded to my chitchat or questions with more than monosyllables. He seemed part of the mute, melancholy landscape, an incarnation of frozen woe. There was nothing

unfriendly in his silence. I sensed that his feelings simply were bound below the surface; he lived too deeply isolated for casual access. I sensed that his loneliness was partly the result of personal tragedy, party the result of many Starkfield winters.

Only twice the distance between us was momentarily bridged, increasing my desire to know more. Once, I mentioned an engineering job I'd been on the previous year in Florida. I commented on the contrast between the winter landscape around us and Florida's climate. To my surprise, Ethan suddenly said, "I was down there once. For a long time afterward, I could imagine the sight of it in winter. But now the memory is all snowed under." He didn't say anything else.

Another day, on the train, I found that I was missing a volume of *Popular Science* that I had carried with me to read. I didn't think about the book anymore until I got into the sleigh that evening and saw it in Ethan's hands.

"I found it after you were gone," he said.

I put the book into my pocket, and we dropped back into our usual silence. As we crawled up the long hill from Corbury Flats to the Starkfield ridge, I became aware in the dusk that Ethan had turned his face to mine.

“There are things in that book that I didn’t know the first thing about,” he said. His voice had a note of resentment. He was evidently surprised and slightly aggrieved at his own ignorance.

“Does that sort of thing interest you?” I asked.

“It used to.”

“There are one or two rather new things in the book. There have been some strides lately in biochemistry.” For a moment I waited for a response that didn’t come. Then I said, “If you’d like to look through the book, I’ll be glad to leave it with you.”

He hesitated. “Thank you. I’ll take it.”

Ethan was so straightforward that I was sure his curiosity about the book was based on genuine interest in its subject. The contrast between his outer situation and his inner needs was poignant. I hoped that this chance for him to satisfy some of those inner needs might make him more communicative. But something in his past or present apparently had driven him too deeply into himself for any casual impulse to draw him out.

At our next meeting Ethan didn’t refer to the book. Our conversation seemed fated to remain as one-sided as before.

Ethan had been driving me to the train station for about a week when one morning I looked out of my window into a thick snowfall. The height of the white waves massed against the garden fence and along the church's wall showed that the storm must have continued all night. The drifts were likely to be heavy in the open. I thought it probable that my train would be delayed, but I had to be at the powerhouse for an hour or two that afternoon. I decided that, if Ethan showed up, I'd push through to the train station and wait there until my train came. Actually, I never doubted that Ethan would come. He wasn't the kind of man to let a snowfall interfere with his business. At the appointed hour his sleigh glided up through the snow.

I was getting to know him too well to express either wonder or gratitude at his keeping his appointment. But I exclaimed in surprise as I saw him turn Bay in a direction opposite to that of the Corbury road.

"The railroad's blocked by a freight train that got stuck in a drift below the Flats," Ethan explained as we headed off into the stinging whiteness.

"Where are you taking me, then?"

"Straight to Corbury Junction, by the

shortest way," he answered, pointing up School House Hill with his whip.

"To the Junction? In this storm? It's a good ten miles!"

"Bay will do it if you give him time. You said you had some business there this afternoon. I'll get you there."

He said it so quietly that I could only answer, "You're doing me a great favor."

"That's all right."

Abreast of the schoolhouse the road forked. We dipped down a lane to the left, between hemlock boughs bent by the snow's weight. I often had walked that way on Sundays. I knew that the solitary roof showing through bare branches near the bottom of the hill was that of Ethan's sawmill. The mill's idle wheel loomed above a stream with yellow-white spume. A cluster of sheds sagged under their load of snow. As we drove by, Ethan didn't even turn his head.

About a mile farther, on a road I never had traveled, we came to an orchard of starved apple trees among slate outcroppings that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe. Beyond the orchard lay two fields, their boundaries lost under drifts. Above the fields,

huddled against the white immensities of land and sky, was one of those lonely New England farmhouses that make the landscape even lonelier.

“That’s my place,” Ethan said with a side-way jerk of his lame elbow.

The scene was so depressing that I didn’t know what to say. The snow had ceased. A flash of sunlight exposed the house on the slope above us in all its plaintive ugliness. Under a worn coat of paint, the thin wooden walls seemed to shiver in the wind that had risen with the end of the snowfall.

With a twitch of the left rein, Ethan checked Bay’s evident intention of turning in through the broken-down gate. “The house is sort of isolated now. Before the railroad was extended through to the Flats, there was considerable traffic. I think that the railroad contributed to my mother’s going downhill. When her arthritis got so bad that she couldn’t move around, she would sit and watch the road. One year, while the Bettsbridge pike was being repaired after floods, Harmon Gow brought his stagecoach past here for about six months. Nearly every day, my mother would go down to the gate to see him. But after the trains started running, hardly anyone came by

here. Mother couldn't understand what had happened; it weighed on her until she died."

As we turned into the Corbury road, snow began to fall again, cutting off our last glimpse of the house. Ethan returned to silence. The wind didn't cease when the snow returned. It sprang up to a gale. The landscape was tossed chaotically. But Bay was as good as Ethan's word. We pushed on, through the wild white scene, to Corbury Junction.

In the afternoon the storm held off. I finished my business as quickly as possible, and Ethan and I set out for Starkfield with a good chance of getting there for supper. But at sunset the clouds gathered again, bringing an earlier night, and the snow began to fall steadily. The snow seemed to be part of the thickening darkness. The small ray of Ethan's lantern soon was lost in a smother of falling snow. Finally, even Ethan's sense of direction and Bay's homing instinct ceased to serve us. Several times some ghostly landmark sprang up to warn us that we had gone astray and then was sucked back into the whiteness. When we finally regained our road, Bay showed signs of exhaustion. I blamed myself for having accepted Ethan's offer. I persuaded

him to let me get out of the sleigh and walk through the snow at Bay's side. In this way we struggled on for another mile or two.

At last, peering into what seemed to me a formless night, Ethan said, "That's my gate yonder."

The last stretch had been the hardest. The bitter cold and the heavy going had nearly knocked the wind out of me. I could feel Bay's side ticking like a clock under my hand. "Look here, Ethan," I said. "There's no use in your going any farther."

"Nor should you," he said. "This has been enough for anyone."

I understood that he was offering me a night's shelter at his farm. I turned into the gate at his side and followed him to the barn, where I helped him to unharness and bed down tired Bay. When this was done, Ethan unhooked the lantern from the sleigh, stepped out into the night, and called to me over his shoulder: "This way."

Ethan and I headed toward a far-off square of light that trembled through the screen of snow. I staggered along behind Ethan. In the darkness I almost fell into a deep drift against the front of the house. Ethan scrambled up the porch's slippery steps, digging a path through the snow with

his heavily booted foot. Then he lifted his lantern, found the latch, and led the way into the house.

I followed into a low, unlit passage with a ladder-like staircase at the back. On our right a line of light marked the door of the room that had sent its ray across the night. Behind the door a woman droned complainingly.

Ethan stamped on the worn oilcloth to shake the snow from his boots. He set his lantern on a kitchen chair that was the hall's only furniture. Then he opened the door.

"Come in," he said.

As he spoke, the droning woman fell silent.

That night I found the clue to Ethan Frome and began to put together this version of his story.