

"Do you care for me, just a little, Midge?"

The tears started now, but she nodded bravely.

"I mustn't take advantage of your sympathy, must I? You must decide for yourself. It's your happiness that counts, dearie, not mine. But if you could know just what you have been to me all these years. I'm not a whiner, but the years were hard and no one to care after Mother left me. It was your friendship and sympathy that got me over the rough places. And now, after all these years, I want you, dear—so much. I thought I would be contented with your friendship and what it had meant. But it isn't enough. I want you with every fibre of feeling in me."

She put her head on the high arm of the garden-seat.

He walked back of her and patted the black hair.

"But you musn't feel badly for me," dear, if you care for him. Your happiness is more than mine, little girl—more than mine."

His big hand was stroking her hair as gently and tenderly as a woman's. Nothing was heard but the homely sounds of the old town—a bird or two, a pony trotting along the shady street, the rustle of the vines.

"It's such a quiet old place—you might not be happy here. I know I'm crazy asking you to come, when that other means ease and all the gay life you love. For myself, I like the place. I'd love it above every other place on earth if you were here to stay," he continued in his deep, quiet voice.

"Every day in going to the office I pass by the little house next door. For years I've liked that little place. Each time I go past there I think what it would mean to me to turn in at the gate and have you there. Winter nights I've gone by when the lights were low and the shades half drawn and a fire burning in the grate. It looked so peaceful and homelike. I've pretended you were sitting by the fire waiting for me. Sometimes I've pretended you were on the porch or sitting in the window-seat. You would have on a white dress and your hair would be coiled low, like you used to wear it."

The girl was sobbing frankly now. The big man stood looking down at her with all his love in his eyes.

"Now I've made you feel badly—maybe spoiled your visit. That would be punishment enough for me. I'm going to leave you now, little girl, and let you be alone. You must do just what your heart says; for, rich or poor, city or town, Betty girl, the heart must be satisfied. I'm coming back this evening and you are to tell me then."

He stroked the dark, fluffy hair for a moment longer and went quietly out of the arbor.

Half an hour later a big limousine, too aristocratic for Baywood, came up the shady street, and gracefully and silently drew up to the curbing.

Betty, curled up in the window-seat of her room, saw the chauffeur alight and start toward the house, and heard a refined voice saying: "Wait a moment, Trotter; I will go myself."

She descended to answer the old knocker, to invite the caller in, and to tell of her aunt's hurried departure to the bedside of a sick friend that afternoon.

The caller was a woman of middle age with a face of haunting sweetness. She was most perfectly gowned, and had that unmistakable air that betokens culture and gentle breeding.

"I am very sorry, indeed, to miss your good aunt," she said, "but I have a favor to ask of you. Could you tell me where I might find the agent of the little house next door? I want so much to go over the place."

"Why," said Betty in her pleasant, girlish voice, "the key is here. The agent, who is a very old friend of Uncle Thad's, is away, and he asked to leave the key with Uncle for a few days. Let me get it for you."

She had seen Uncle Thad put it on the mantel, so getting it quickly she gave it to the stranger.

"I am not a prospective renter"—and the gracious lady smiled—"but just a sentimental old woman who wants to turn back many pages and live for a time in the past. Will you come with

me, my dear? I would be very glad to have you."

Betty, glad to accommodate her, and just a wee bit curious, too, readily assented, and they passed down the moss-grown steps, across the green lawn, sweet from its recent mowing, and through the opening in the hedge that separated the big house from the little one.

Betty was studying hard on the problem of who this beautiful woman could be, for at no time had she volunteered that information. Like a flash there suddenly came to her mind a name of National reputation, a name of such immense wealth and of such social position that it was, indeed, a name to conjure with. There was no mistaking that beautifully pathetic face. Betty had seen it in papers and magazines many times.

So it was with a feeling of surprise and astonishment that she heard the great lady say: "You see, my dear, I lived in this little house when I was first married. We built it too. My husband was a lumber clerk, so we got the material cheaper."

The story of that lumber clerk's rise, like a fairy story, was known to every schoolchild in the land: clerk, lumberyard owner, long-sighted purchaser of timberlands, investor in hardwood forests, Wall Street multi-millionaire. And his lovely wife, whose beauty and social triumphs were known to two continents, was saying simply: "So we got the material cheaper."

Betty gave her a sympathetic smile from which she eliminated all curiosity.

The modish skirts of the gracious lady fluttered delicately against the low, green currant bushes as they passed up the path.

"I made currant jelly that first year," she said smilingly. "There were twelve little glasses of it. I remember it as though it were yesterday. I could have got it all in eleven, but I had twelve cunning little glasses, and I wanted to fill the whole dozen to surprise John, so I put short measure in each."

Betty couldn't resist a smile, too, but her smile was at the thought of "John" exulting over the jelly—"John," whose pleasures now were Mediterranean cruises on an elegant yacht, and a twenty-room hunting lodge in the mountains.

They passed up the steps and the lady paused with the key in the door: "I wonder why I'm doing this. It will break my heart and not do anybody the least good in the world. But for some reason or other I have felt this summer that after all these years I must come back. It is more luck than I dared expect, to find the house vacant. People would not have wanted a foolish old woman poking about their rooms."

She opened the door slowly, as though she were either afraid to meet the past or desired to prolong an anticipated pleasure.

They stepped directly into the living-room, apparently a pleasant one, running across the entire front of the house. Although empty it had been left neat and clean. The warm afternoon sun flooding it cheerfully gave it a hospitable appearance, void of that feeling of loneliness usual in empty houses.

"It seems like yesterday," the lady said again. "For years it seemed so very far away—the life here—like it was another girl who had lived it. Sometimes I think it was another girl, for, as I remember her, she was sweet and happy and contented—and I'm not—I'm a cross, discontented woman."

Betty shook her head and smiled, deeming it more tactful to let the lady think she was unknown to her.

"I suppose it looks like a forlorn little house to you, my dear," she said, as she walked over to the empty fireplace.

"But to me there is a pretty Axminster rug on the floor and a library table in the center. The rug cost twenty-eight dollars and a half, and John and a carpenter made the table. The bookshelves are here, each side of the mantel. A vase, the only piece of cut glass we had, is on top of this one, and a little plaster cast of Psyche is on this one."

"Over here is the piano—my father's and mother's wedding gift to us. The little music-cabinet stood here. The music in it is 'The Maiden's Prayer' and 'Angels' Serenade,' and some old songs

that John used to like: 'Daisy Dean,' 'The Little Brown Church in the Vale' and 'Ben Bolt.'" She hummed the line, "Sweet Alice, whose hair was so brown," in a singularly sweet and clear voice.

"Ah me! Ah me!" she smiled; "and now we have Sembrich and Melba and Scotti at the house to sing for us." She paused and looked out of the small-paned windows for a few moments, unmindful of Betty, and then suddenly resumed more cheerfully:

"And here on the table are the books. Some say 'From John to Molly,' and some 'From Molly to John.' There were Emerson's 'Essays' and 'Jane Eyre' and Tennyson. I wonder how it ever became changed to Bernard Shaw and Ibsen and Masterlinck."

"And the chairs: there were just three in this room, John's and mine and the caller's, and when more than one caller came we had to bring a dining-room chair in. The caller's chair was slender and had little fine spindles. I know John sat in it one time and broke the arm off—he was too big for it." And she laughed reminiscently. "My chair was on this side of the fireplace and John's was on this. And we sat there, long winter evenings, and read and talked. Oh, my dear," she broke off passionately, "whatever you do always keep two chairs by the fireplace."

Betty knew the meaning of that little heartiness as well as though it had been explained at length—a cry that carried a world of sorrow with it because they were such a long way now from the two chairs by the fireplace.

"Well, let us go to the dining-room," she said brightly. "Such a wee little house, isn't it, but so bright and cheery!"

Even to Betty's eyes the possibilities of the cozy little dining-room were apparent although it was empty, save for the built-in china-closet and window-seat.

"The table was here," the visitor began. "John sat here, and I sat there and poured the coffee. I had three square tablecloths and two long ones. We had pretty little dishes with pink sprays on them. We only had six drinking-glasses, and in my clumsiness I had broken all but two. I neglected to replenish the supply, and one noon just as we sat down to dinner—we dined at noon in those days—John's cousin walked in. Luckily John had not tasted his glass of water, and he quickly passed it to the cousin's plate. Then during the meal he nearly convulsed me at intervals by looking at me and swallowing painfully as though he were choking to death." And she laughed a merry, youthful laugh.

Betty laughed, too, and followed her to the window-seat.

"Here is the place I used to sit and watch for John in the evening," she was saying.

Betty's heart began playing her a riotous tune. "I'd pretend you were sitting in the window-seat waiting for me," Bob had said.

"It is a dear little house," Betty said impulsively.

"Yes," said the lady. "Any one who lives here should be very happy. I think I'll tell you a secret. I never breathed it to a soul before: I believe if we had stayed here among the vines with the window-seat and the two chairs by the fireside we, too, would have been happy always."

They passed into the kitchen, and the sorrowful mood of the lady changed to her girlish one.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she laughed, "wasn't it funny! I had blue gingham dresses and white aprons with little pockets in them, and I loved to cook. Once I entered doughnuts at the county fair. I didn't get the prize, and John said he didn't know what the judge was thinking of."

Betty laughed and opened the cupboard door.

"What a dear little place," she said.

"Yes," said the lady, "I kept my spices on that shelf, sugar and coffee on that one, and the milk tickets here. How it all comes back. The stove was here and the table there. We ate here on cold mornings. I baked little griddle cakes or waffles. John always liked them so well."

Betty thought of John's reputation for ordering dinners, his titles of "Prince of Diners" and "Connoisseur of Wines."

"I had a little servant girl who came Wednesday and Saturday mornings to help me," the lady continued. "She was a Swede and so neat and clean. We laughed and had such good times together with the work. Her name was Selma Knudsen. She was going to marry a carpenter. I wish I knew where Selma is. I would like to see her."

They had passed back to the dining-room, and the lady said: "I must hurry, for the sun is getting low."

"This room," opening a door, "was a little guest-chamber. There were pink poppies in the wall paper, and the chairs had pink cretonne coverings. There were white, ruffled curtains, and in the spring the cherry blossoms looked in at the windows. The first person who ever slept here was my grandfather. He said it was a fine room and a fine house, but none too good for his Molly. When he left he said, 'Always be a good girl, Molly, and keep sweet and true.'"

Tears glistened for the first time in the fine eyes.

"Now," she said, as she put her hand on the knob of a closed door, "I've purposely saved this until the last, for I want to say good-bye to my little house from here."

She swung open the door and stepped softly in as though someone lay sleeping.

"This had pale blue paper," she said in a hushed voice, "and a little silver moulding. There was matting on the floor, and there were two little blue rugs. The bed had a dotted Swiss coverlet over blue and the curtains were the same. There was just one picture. It hung at the foot of the bed. John gave it to me one Christmas. It was a little copy of a Madonna and Child in a silver frame. I went to Europe last year to get the original."

She put up a jeweled hand and touched the spot where the copy had hung.

"That was the Christmas before the baby came," she said. "She only lived a few hours."

She walked across the room and stood looking down, as though upon a sleeping child.

"If you had lived," she said softly, "I would have been a good mother."

Betty turned away quickly and walked from the room. The other came, too, and together they stepped out on the porch.

The lady placed the key in the lock, but made no move to close the door. Instead she stood looking into the house as though loth to leave. She was repeating something, but Betty only caught the last:

"And what if it crumbled away at our feet,

We had our dream—and the dream was sweet."

"Love began here. I wonder," she said curiously, "was it here that it ended?" She was speaking slowly. "Maybe we just left it here. Wouldn't it be queer if we simply forgot to pack it—and it is still here?"

"Perhaps it is," said Betty. "Aunt calls this the 'Bride's House.' Ever so many people have lived here, and they have all been happy."

The lady's face cleared. "I'm glad you told me that. It is a happy thought. I shall always think of it in that way. We left our love here for others." She locked the door and turned to Betty. "Here is the key. I hope you will give it only to someone who is worthy."

They passed down the little walk, bordered with sweet alyssum and candy-tuft. At the gateway they paused while the car glided up softly. Already the lady's manner had changed. Although seemingly as gracious as ever, there was a faint suggestion of hauteur about her, as though, coming out of the past, she had again assumed an habitual mask.

"Good-by, dear," she said, taking Betty's hand; "forget the ravings of a passing stranger—and thank you for a charming half hour."

At supper-time Betty was irresistible. She had coiled her hair low, and wore a little white slip of a dress in which she