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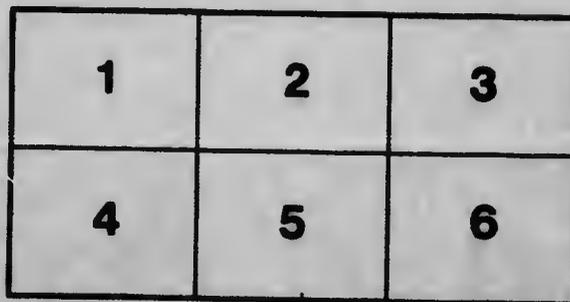
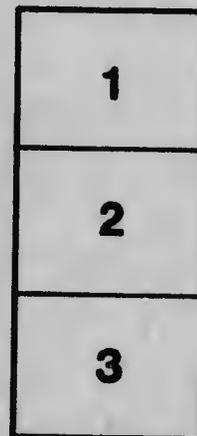
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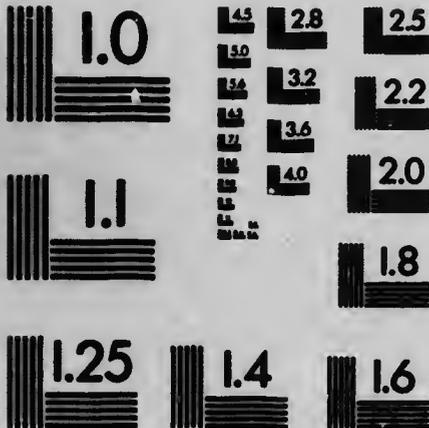
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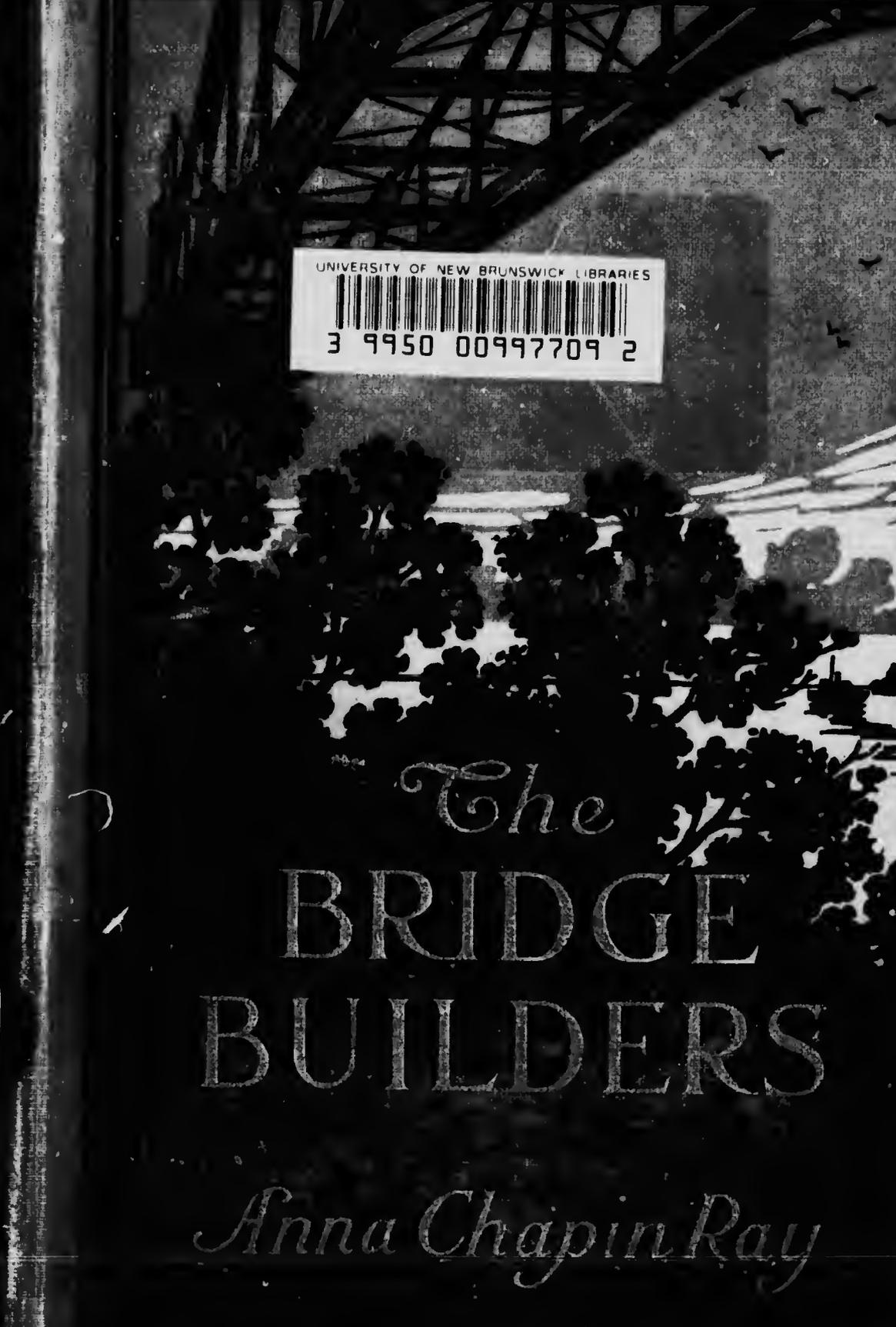
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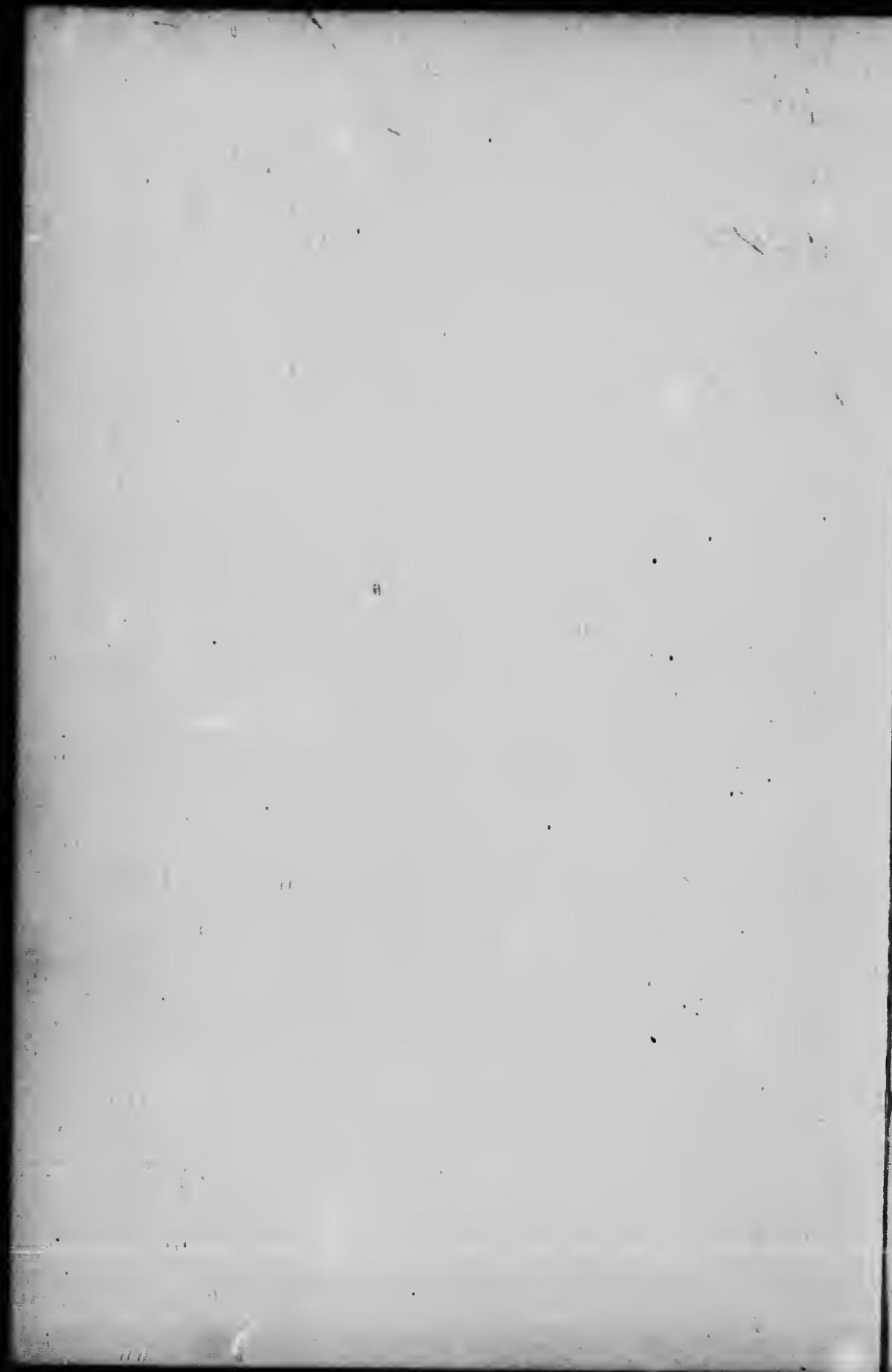
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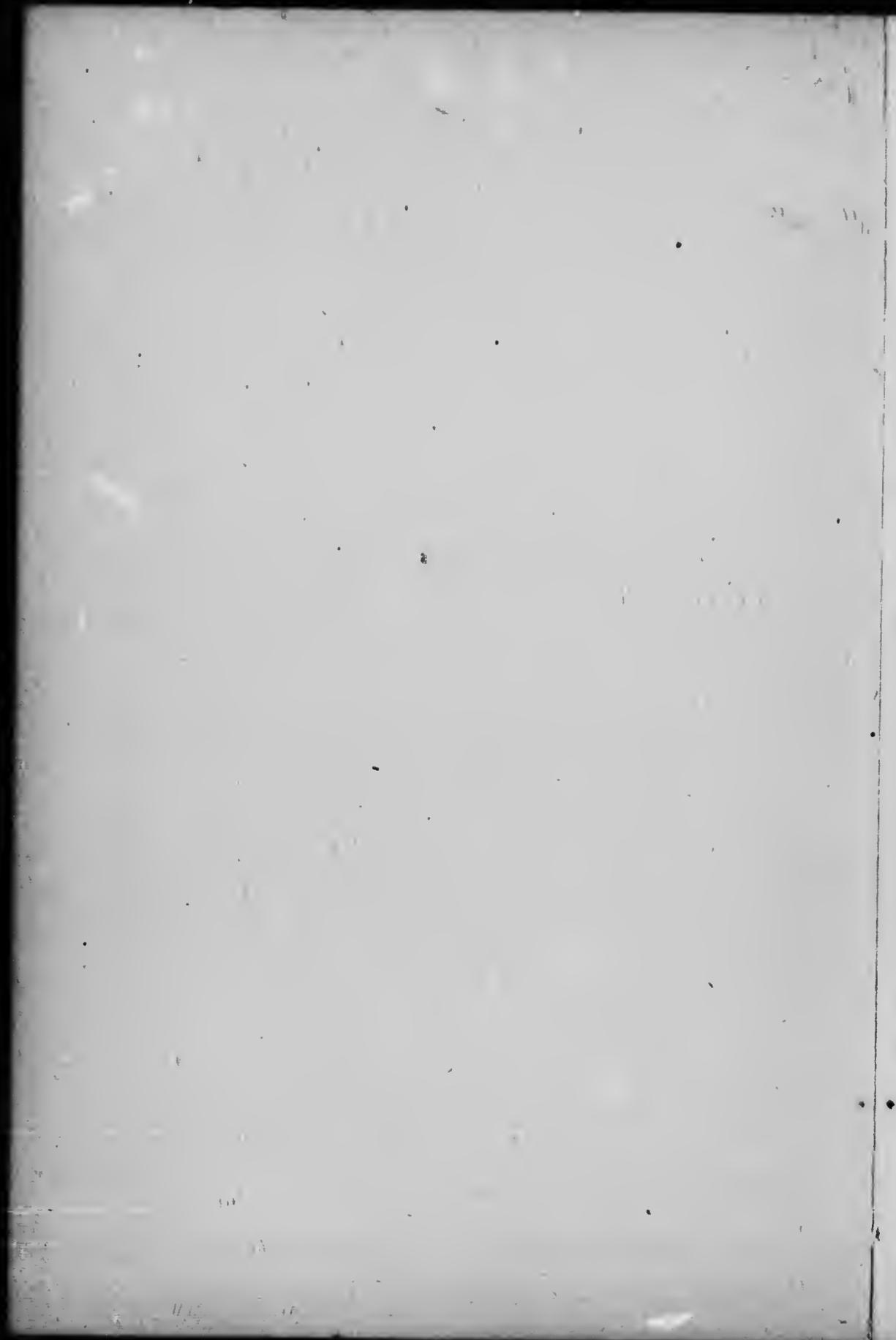
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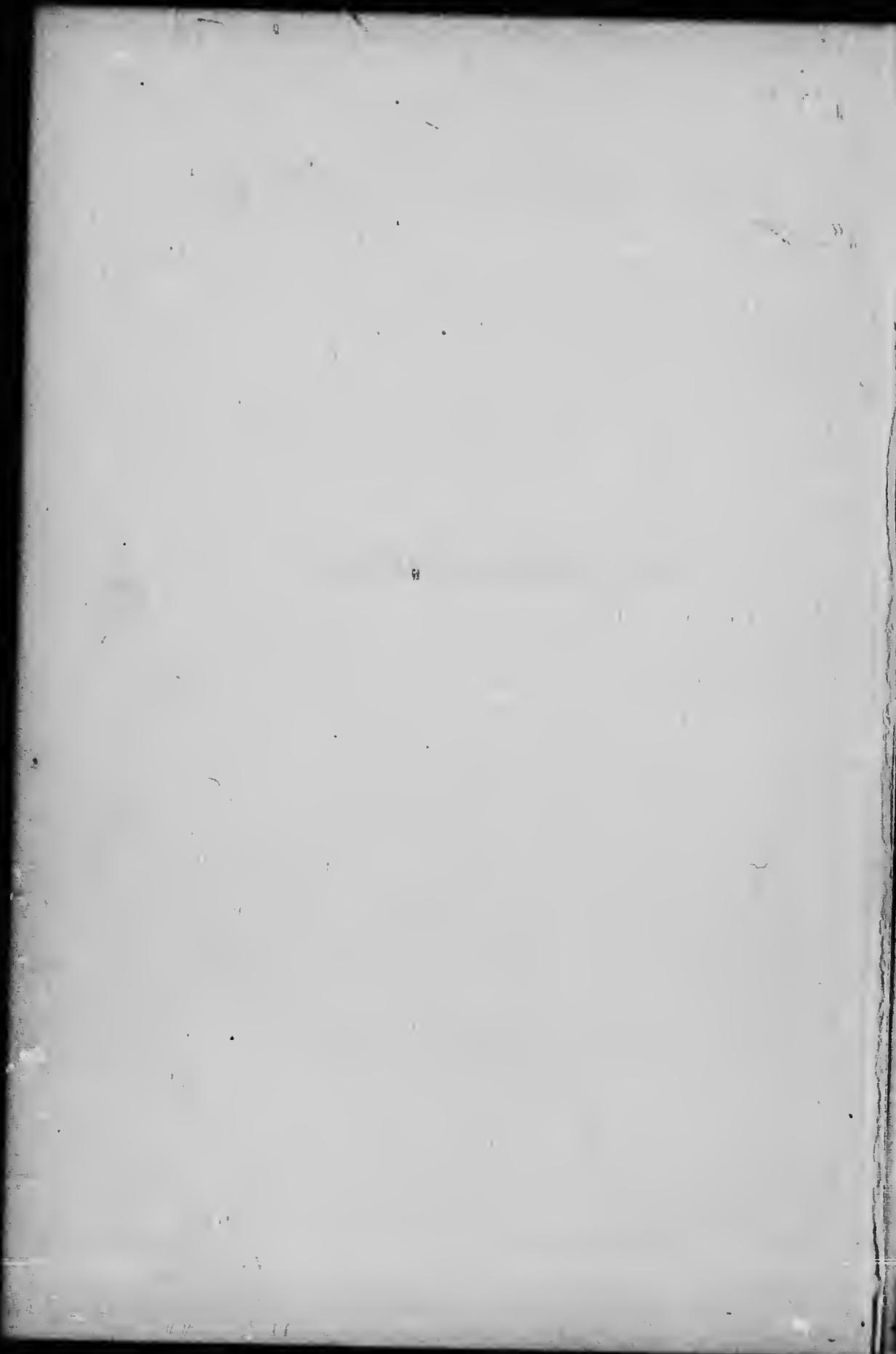


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**THE BRIDGE BUILDERS**



# THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

BY

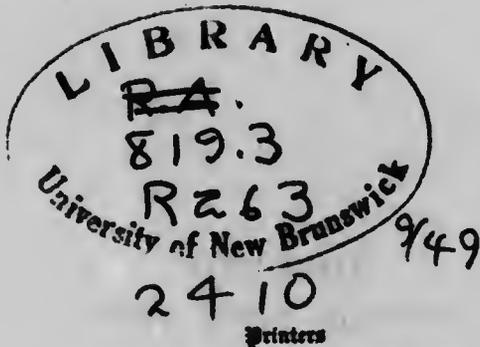
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AUTHOR OF "QUICKENED," "HEARTS AND CREEDS,"  
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CHRISTMAS DAY, 1908.



# THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

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## CHAPTER ONE

**S**TEEP banks, here wooded, there scarred by outcropping crapes of purplish-red rock, between them the wide blue avenue of the mighty river, an avenue up which crawled a distant ocean steamship, a western sky dappled below, above striped with one dark, sinister band of cloud: these were the background. In the foreground, a little steamer bobbed and tossed on the restless waves, small and fragile and reduced to the look of a child's toy in comparison with the huge arms of steel lattice springing from the bank on either hand. One day, and that not too remote, the arms were destined to meet in the vastest arch as yet attempted by any maker of bridges. Now, however, the southern arm reached scarcely to mid-stream, while that from the northern bank was only just beginning to stretch forth to meet its twin. None the less, even in its incompleteness, its great steel chords and girders, light as cobwebs against the sky, buoyant, aggressive, yet gave a curious impression of strength and stability as well as daring, of majesty inherent in itself apart from all comparison with the little steamer which bobbed and tossed so far beneath.

Down below, upon the steamer's deck, the people revolved their lifted heads with the precision of military drill, their eyes upon the one fixed point ahead of them, while the little boat swung about its customary circle beneath the outstretched arm of open lantern. Then, expectation and enthusiasm alike exhausted, they breathed a little sigh of relief and relaxed their craning necks, as the steamer headed down the strait towards home. The sight had been wonderful, impressive; none the less, it was good to know that the day was over, good to scatter in search of comfortable nooks where they might take tranquil enjoyment of the more ordinary scenes around them upon their own hand.

The young girl, already seeking a seat near the rail, halted and looked back, following the pointing finger of her companion. Then she laughed, and her laugh transformed her completely. Grave, she became pretty. Merry, she became dazzling.

"Bet you!" she assented tersely to some inaudible remark.

As if in spite of himself, a man already seated behind her lifted a pair of steady, keen brown eyes and let them rest upon her in contemplative wonder. There was a curious incongruity between the girl's daintiness of the figure in pale green linen and the crude baldness of the phrase. The voice was good, clear and with vibrant contralto notes. The accent was a strange blending of native roughness and polished veneering, as if here and there the veneering had cracked or been chipped away from the rougher foundation material. The contemplative wonder remained even in the face of the merry, slanting gray eyes.

the dimples coming and going beside the scarlet lips, remained while the girl deftly appropriated for herself one of the two unused chairs in sight and forestalled a man already laying hands upon the other.

"Look out, or else you'll miss your chance," she warned her companion. Then she recurred to the subject of her former speech. "I wish I knew the man that planned it," she said, and her tone had a ring of honest, understanding admiration quite alien to the unreasoning hero-worship commonly bestowed by girls of her age and class.

Her companion nodded.

"And it takes a clever fellow to work out such a plan as this," he added. "There's never been anything like it before. I only hope they can carry it through all right. Look back now, Jessica." He pointed to the arch of cloud banding the sky above the uncompleted bridge.

The girl glanced backward over her shoulder.

"It looks like a cloud of ill-omen." She shuddered, half in jest, half earnest. "Let's hope it doesn't overhang the bridge. I should hate to have it drop down and swallow us in its whirlpool. As for the men, you're right. All in all, the man on duty at the gun is likely to be more interesting than the one who invented the smokeless powder. Never mind that now, Dad. Sit down here, do. I want to talk."

Yielding, her companion sank down into the unoccupied seat. He moved slowly as if weighted with an undue amount of leisure and with a comfortable sense of his own importance.

"Anything especial?" he queried.

Her hand still resting on the arm of the chair she

had been guarding for his use, the girl looked up into his face, while her own face lost its smile. Then slowly she withdrew her hand, over the other hand lying in her lap and sat up straight.

She nodded.

"Only your going away," she made brief answer.

"Is it a fact?"

"Lynch needs me. He wired, to-day."

"From Lone Wolf?"

"Yes. There's trouble with the men."

"What does he expect you to do about it?" the girl demanded impatiently.

"He thinks I can calm them down."

"More wages, I suppose."

"Not one cent. They are getting more than any other gang in the state."

"Then what can you do?" she demanded again.

"Listen to their complaints, I suppose, and try to get along with them."

Once more the gray eyes flashed with mirth.

"And coax," she supplemented. "You'll get along a long way with you, Dad, that nobody can stand up against."

He smiled in answer to her compliment; but even the little expression of obvious good will bore one half so eloquent testimony to their intimacy and understanding as did the short, interchange of question and reply. Manlike in its terse abruptness, it would have been impossible between any but the most congenial friends. The young man, still watching them over the pages of his magazine, noted the fact; noted, too, certain points of resemblance between the fluffy young girl and the

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perous, well-groomed man at her side. There had been no need of the girl's last phrase to assure him of the relationship which existed between them. For the rest, both were comely, hearty Americans, with an obvious enjoyment of their own prosperity which somehow lacked repose and suggested that it had not come to them from out a very remote past. The heap of Boston and New York papers resting on his knee showed him to be a man in active business, no less surely than did a trio of fantastic little brooches fastened to one side of her blouse show her to be but recently emancipated from a popular boarding school and its secret societies. The brown eyes dropped back to the magazine. The old, old type. And yet, there was a certain difference. Not every pretty product of a boarding school showed herself sufficiently emancipated to say "Bet you" in public and in an alien land. He kept his eyes on the printed page before him; but he listened shamelessly to the talk as it went on. In fact, no other course was open to him. The girl spoke, not loudly, but in clear, unveiled tones after the American fashion, tones which imply that one's words are neither secret, nor yet of sufficient interest to arouse attention in the casual hearer. It is an American trick, perhaps, this utter disregard of the casual hearer as a thing of no account. But, for the once, the casual hearer was becoming interested.

The girl was speaking once more.

"It doesn't seem hardly fair, though, to call you back to Lone Wolf, the very day after you get here," she observed thoughtfully, while, leaning forward, she took possession of one of the papers, folded and tore off a square and fell to plaiting the square in her left

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fingers whose rings were a bit too showy for the demands of the strictest taste.

"It is the way of the world, Jessica. Did you ever know me to be left long in one place?"

She disregarded the question. Instead, —

"You said you were going to give up work and be lazy, as soon as I was out of school," she reminded him.

"Yes; but the work won't give up me," he answered, laughing.

She pouted, and it was evident from the look in her eyes that long since the pout had been one of the effective weapons in her arsenal.

"Then why not stay on in Lone Wolf?" she asked him.

The laugh left his eyes.

"Lone Wolf is no place for you, my girl. I didn't send you off to school in Denver, just to bury you in the gulch forever after. We don't polish our gold, if we are going to put it back in the mine and cover it up again." His eyes, as he spoke, made the personal application of his phrase.

The bit of paper, now folded to a cocked hat, fell from the girl's fingers. Careless who saw her, she bent forward and once more rested her elbow on the arm of his chair.

"What a darling old beau you are, Dad! I wish I had been on hand, when you went a-wooing in earnest. No wonder that mama never can be teased into telling what happened then. But, truly, I'd rather have Lone Wolf with you than Paradise and Paris without. As for this juraping-off place —" Her gesture supplied the ending of the phrase.

"I am sorry, Jessica. But I couldn't afford to refuse this contract; neither could I afford to lose touch with it, as long as it is my first contract outside the States."

"But you don't do any work now," she objected.

"No; I only see that it is done. Sometimes, though, that is the hardest part of the whole."

"Parker is one of your oldest men." Again came the crisp, understanding speech, the speech as of man to man.

"Parker is my trump card. As a rule, though, he has had three or four American aces back of him."

The girl laughed again, but thoughtfully.

"And now?"

Cautiously the man lowered his voice.

"Now he has a full hand of French Canadian deuces, men who think political pull is better than professional training. He is bound to have troubles of his own; I can't afford to have him play a losing game on even a small corner of the Transcontinental ground. As a rule, my other men can look out for themselves, and, for the present, my place is here."

"Then why go back to Lone Wolf?" she queried restively, although her eyes showed that she had followed in detail the logic of his reasoning.

"Lone Wolf is a short emergency; this is a steady need. I shall be back soon," he answered, with a swift lapse into epigram of which the listener took approving note.

"And when you come back — if you ever do?" With a sudden petulant gesture, the busy fingers plucked the cocked hat apart until it lay, an open boat, in the pale green sea of lap.

## THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

"Then I shall take life easily, send out my letters of introduction — I have some good ones, Jessica — and spend the summer enjoying myself and you."

Then the listener held his breath. Roguishly the girl was cocking her gray eyes up at her father's face.

"And mama?" she supplemented, with an accent of mock rebuke.

"Yes. Yes — of course. But your mother is more strenuous, Jessica."

The little boat flew overboard, to land on the crest of one of the waves which danced along beside the steamer's wake.

"Don't you suppose I know that?" the girl demanded shortly. "And do you realize —"

"I realize it all, Jessica," the man said a little wearily. "It can't be helped. She was born that way, born with a conscience, and better than you or I can ever hope to be, if we keep making new resolutions for forty thousand years. And yet —"

A naughty light came into the gray eyes, the extreme tip of a tongue showed itself between two lines of dazzling teeth. Then the girl said demurely, —

"And yet, you know I am much nicer to play with, Dad. You really, truly can't fancy mama like a kitten who feels like chasing her tail; now can you? And, after all, it's the play that counts. We do our work alone, and our worries; but —"

However, the man interrupted, interrupted with a dropping voice more eloquent than many words.

"Not when I can get you to worry with me, Jessica. We've thrashed out things together more than once, and God knows the thrashing has done a world of good to your old dad."

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Then for a time the silence dropped between them, a silence broken only by the murmured talk around them, by the hiss of the water as the little boat cleft its way homeward against the flowing tide. Before them, the gray-walled Citadel lay cuddled on its cliff, a friendly giant drowsing peacefully under the summer sun. Beside them stretched the red-rock shore, hallowed for all time by the gallant souls who landed there, only to die, victorious, on the plains above. And behind them, now a flimsy web against the wall of sky, the uncompleted arms of the giant bridge sprang up and out, flaunting before the world their promise to prove that the day of miracles is not already dead. For, in this modern day, miracles can express themselves in stone and fine-wrought steel no less than in the loosened tongue, the opened eye. And it was no small miracle, the planning of that giant span on which the eye of all the engineering world was bent. To some, the Unknown was soonest reached by multiplication of the Known. A few, however, doubted; and, while they doubted, they held their breath in fear. Among those few was the man from Lone Wolf. Yet, true to the reticence which had always been his surest safety, doubting and fearing, he held his peace. Admitting the wonder of the undertaking, he left its outcome to speak for itself. He was no builder of bridges; he was merely the chief of a contracting firm that was constructing roadbeds from eastern Quebec to southern California. His creed was the doing work of his own, not the discussing the work of others.

At last, Jessica spoke again, and her voice held falling cadence.

"Dad, how long are you going to be gone?"

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"For two or three weeks. Perhaps more."

Her next words were almost tragic in their intonation.

"I shall die here, without you."

"You can live on the hope of my return," he suggested.

"It won't last so long as that, without getting threadbare. Can't you take me with you?"

"Across the continent, and back again?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"And leave your mother here alone?"

"She wouldn't mind. She hates to travel, you know, and she would be perfectly comfortable here," the girl argued eagerly.

"Not if we went away and left her, Jessica."

"But she doesn't want to go, and I do," the girl urged again.

He shook his head.

"I am sorry, Jessica. I'd do almost anything for you; but I can't think this is best," he answered, with the finality which was the only law her life had ever recognized. "I like to have you with me; but this will be a quick, hard little trip, and a short time. Besides, you'll be happy here, and it will give you and mama a chance to get acquainted."

The girl dismissed his words with a curt little gesture of disdain.

"We're acquainted now, as much as we ever shall be," she said.

"Not after all these years of school. It needs time to take root again in the old bed."

Her face softened.

"Not with you, Dad."

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Once more came the note of epigram, a note so at variance with his sturdy, matter-of-fact prosperity.

"It's a shallower soil, Jessica."

"Maybe so," she returned prompt answer; "but, at least, as far as it goes, it's richer."

There was another pause. Jessica broke it, pointing, the while, to the open arms of cobwebby lattice stretching out across the stream.

"Dad," she said gravely; "I mean to be nice about it, I mean not to be a horrid little cat; but mother and I are different. You must see it, must see that we never understand each other, no matter how I try. I do try, for a while. Then I lose my temper and give it up as a bad job. I have to explain things to her. I don't, to you. You must see the difference, for it has always been there. It isn't school that has done it; it is no worse now than it always has been. I don't know the reason; I only know the fact. Try as we may, we are no nearer coming together than those two ends of bridge up there."

The loose sheet of paper in her lap fluttered, as she lifted her hand to point towards the uncompleted bridge, just vanishing behind Sillery point, fluttered and rose into the air. Her voice had parted with all of its young life, and sounded sad and dreary, so listless in its cadence that the stranger, hearing, lifted his brown eyes to search her face for explanation of the change.

"But they will meet in time." The man rose, while he spoke lightly, as if to drive away her sombre mood.

Her hand dropped back into her lap, just too late, however, to catch the loosened page of paper which rose, fluttered, rose again and then went sailing back-

ward with unerring aim to lodge full across the face of the man behind her, blinding completely the two keen brown eyes, just as her response came heavily, —

“Perhaps, Dad. Still, one can never tell.”

But, by the time the stranger had pushed aside the ignominious muffler and wiped the tears from his anguished eyes, girl and man had vanished, lost in the heart of the throng already moving towards the gang-plank on the lower deck.

## CHAPTER TWO

ON the wide pages of the Château register, that vast collection of autographs open to all it might concern and some whom it might not, there had appeared, the night before, the dashing signature of Colonel Peter West. Like an unimportant postscript were added the words "and Wife"; but, on the line below, the dashing hand had added another name, Miss Jessica Marguerite King West. The address followed by way of climax. To the British clerk behind the counter, Lone Wolf, Arizona, suggested untold experiences. The Colonel's personal accoutrements, borne by a brace of perspiring bellboys, suggested untold wealth. The British clerk lost no time in assigning the party to a suite of rooms looking out upon the terrace and upon the river far beneath. That done, he launched upon their retreating heels a train of attendants whose zeal was subject for rich reward.

Next morning, the Colonel took his wife and daughter out for the conventional tour of the city. Later on, their carter confessed that he had been struck dumb by the flood of questions and comments which had been flung upon him by the Colonel and his pretty daughter. They looked serious; they sounded very, very serious. Nevertheless, in thinking backward, the carter had his doubts. The experience had been new to him. As a rule, he was accustomed to do all

the talking. His tourist clients heard him out in an admiring silence, punctuated only by little *ahs* of awe and comprehension. At the start, the older lady had given vent to one such *ah*, and he had turned to her as to the one owning the most sympathetic pair of ears directed to his monologue. He launched forth into his wonted tale, ready, according to his wont, to do all the talking. Before he realized what was occurring, his clients were talking back to him. Worse than that, worse even than their progressive tendency to monopolize the talk, they'gently, gayly, albeit very firmly, insisted that he should reverse his customary round and show the city backwards. A Frenchman who had learned his one English story off by heart, he struggled in vain to reverse his story in order to fit it to the text. Worsted in his endeavours, he fell into a sullen silence, and the Colonel and Jessica, with eyes which belied the pontifical solemnity of their voices, alternately extracted mismatched facts from him and imparted to him their own views. Chastened, bewildered and very weary, he deposited his passengers at the Château steps and went his way, much in the mood of a new Saint Lawrence grilled on a gridiron of his own forging.

That was at noon, and the luncheon was made hilarious by the reminiscences of Jessica and her father, so hilarious that the settled melancholy of Mrs. West dropped completely out of sight, unnoticed and ignored. The same melancholy, however, led her to refuse to join the afternoon trip up the river and Jessica and her father had set out alone, the one too much absorbed in her girlish enjoyment of the passing hour to heed her mother's causeless gloom,

the other ignoring it with the callousness born of long experience.

That was Saturday. The next day, as a matter of course, was Sunday; and on Sunday morning, equally as a matter of course and in obedience to the dictates of world-wide custom, the Wests were a good hour late in coming to breakfast. With the coldly critical eye of his kind, their waiter watched them as they sat at meat, watched them, weighed them, and popped them into their proper pigeon-holes. Thin, angular, her womanhood worn a little threadbare by friction with some unknown roughness in her past, Mrs. West yet betokened a certain breeding, albeit totally devoid of grace. Nevertheless, she minced a little as she walked, she was a bit too careful of her own back breadths, a bit too heedful of the sequence of her silver, too ostentatiously thoughtful of her bread-and-butter knife. Her brow was still gloomy; she wore an air of conscious self-abnegation, and her black silk frock reeked of Sabbath psalms. Beside her, the Colonel and Jessica seemed a pair of jovial, lovable young puppies, kindly, full of mirth, full, too, of liking for their fellow men, even though the liking might betray itself in strange and uncouth ways. True, Jessica did put both elbows on the table and, her chin in her cupped palms, embroider her order to the waiter with jokes and friendly smiles until even that stolid being, catching the cold eye of his chief, blushed to the roots of his stubby hair. True, the Colonel did allow his knife and fork handles to trail about over the cloth at all manner of unexpected angles, did fill his mouth with coffee before swallowing his food, did even order doughnuts and, breaking them up, cast

them by handfuls into his coffee, to be skimmed out later and devoured with noisy gusto. And yet, even the critical waiter, as he drew back the chairs from the table, admitted to himself that he preferred the careless gaucherie of the Colonel and Jessica to the careful gentility of the Colonel's lady.

As they went up the three little steps that lead from the dining-room, Jessica and her mother spoke at the same instant.

"Let's come out for a walk on the terrace, Dad."

"Peter, if you can spare a little time, I wish you would come back to our room and talk over a few necessary plans."

Half wishfully, the Colonel glanced at Jessica. Then he faced about.

"Certainly, my dear. But I thought you were going to church."

"So I am, later."

"There are the bells."

The head waiter, passing, offered information.

"That is the Basilica. If Madame is going there —"

But Madame interrupted.

"I am a Methodist," she said, with brief finality, and the head waiter went his way.

"Shall I come, too?" Jessica queried.

"If you like." The brevity was still manifest in the tone.

Jessica, however, did not like. Instead, she went out on the terrace to await the end of the conference. In her childhood, she had learned only too well what such conferences were like. In the old, old days when life had lived itself in the rough little shack in the heart of the mining camp, there had been no escape

for the child from these conferences. She had been forced to sit by, silent, to hear her mother's pitiless, insistent logic put to rout her father's jovial, easy-going gayety. Early in her childhood, she had learned the lesson of silence. Once and once only she had ventured to put in a plea for mercy to her father, a plea which had done more harm than good. Later, she had learned that such conferences, one-sided as they were, were yet wholly ineffective. Their only good was to relieve her mother's nerves. As far as the Colonel was concerned, he merely played the part of the fabled duck in water. The shower once over, he shook his feathers out to their accustomed state of fluff and went his way, a way which showed no deviation as result of the drenching. Jessica, as she grew to years of reason, confessed to herself that the chief effect of these so-called conferences was that left upon the bystander. Accordingly, as soon as the shack grew past the two-room limit, she promptly removed herself from sight and hearing. This had lasted until she had left the eight-room house which in time replaced the primeval shack, and had gone away to Denver's most haughty school. Three years later and just three weeks before the present time, she had left that school, the proud possessor of an engraved diploma, forty-seven bosom friends and a brand-new code of manners; and, sitting cuddled up beside her father in the stateroom of the sleeping-car, she had started southward for Lone Wolf. When she left Denver, she would have declared she had lost all memory of these old-time conferences. Four days later, as she fled past the Japanese butler to bury her ears in the pillows of her mahogany tester bed, the

memory was back upon her in all its force. And yet, in justice to Mrs. West, it should be stated that she was never strident. She was merely aggrieved; but that is sometimes infinitely worse.

And Jessica, in all her girlish life, had never known a grievance, much less hugged its corners to a lacerated heart. Opposed, she could rage like a tornado, flash like a broken electric current; but injured dignity held no place among her rôles. Her loves and her hates were too downright for that.

And now, in a round window just above the great circular drawing-room, Mrs. West was seating herself and turning to face her husband. His hands in his trouser pockets and his lips shaped to an imaginary whistle, he smiled back at her from his place on the rug. The smile, unruffled and exceeding full of self-content, only aroused in her a mood akin to asperity. If, for one moment, only one, he would doubt himself as feudal lord of creation, and turn to her for support and sympathy! She shut her teeth and smoothed down her silken skirt, quite unaware that the deepened creases about her thin lips and the revealing folds about her thin form added little to her meagre attractions. If only he ever turned to her for anything! And yet, down in the depths of her woman's heart, she admitted to herself that in her husband's gay self-sufficiency rested a good three-quarters of his charm. Born dictatorial, she would have despised the man who yielded to her own dictation. In that very contradiction, she proved her woman's birthright.

"What is it about this western trip, anyway?" she asked him, and her accent, had it been a shade less mournful, would have been aggressive.

"Lynch needs me. At least, he thinks he does. He wired, yesterday," her husband answered carelessly, as he rested one elbow on the mantel and with his shoe-tip touched the coals smouldering in the grate to drive away the morning's chill.

"So Jessica told me." There was the faintest possible stress upon the name, a stress which, an instant later, became a spoken phrase. "It seems you talked it all over with her."

Manlike, he was deaf to the meaning of both stress and phrase. He merely answered, —

"By Jove, yes. Poor little soul, I felt sorry, too, for the way she's going to miss me. She begged like a nigger that I'd take her back with me."

"And shall you?"

Again he missed the hostile scorn in the short question.

"Not if I know myself. Lone Wolf is no place for a pretty child like that. She's better off up here with you. She'll be good company for you, too, you know," he added, with a tardy kindness.

"I hope so."

The Colonel's thoughts, rushing off to his gay young daughter, brought a laugh to his lips, an added friendliness to his hearty voice.

"You know so; don't you, Julia? Hang it, she's yours as much as she is mine! You must be proud of your possession. Anyway, I am."

"Evidently." Mrs. West spoke with nippy brevity.

"Good reason too." The man's voice was as urgent as if he had been pleading the girl's cause before a total stranger, not the mother who had given her birth. "You don't often see a prettier child, nor a brighter,

nor one with nicer manners. I was watching her ordering the waiter about, this very morning, and I'll be hanged if I could believe she was ever the bare-footed litt'le tad that used to ride me pickaback, when I came home from the mill at night. What? Did you say something?"

With an effort, she controlled her irritation. Such reminiscences were anguishing to her. She felt they cast aspersions even on the fit of her silk Sunday frock. And the Colonel's hearty voice was loud; the walls might not be too thick. Moreover, according to her creed of refinement, one should have reservations, even from one's self. Else, what would be the good of leaving any past behind?

"Jessica is certainly pretty," she admitted guardedly at length. "The only trouble is, her beauty makes her a little — a little too conspicuous, that and her free and easy manner. I do wish, Peter, you could teach her not to treat everybody as a friend —"

"Jessica isn't particularly strong in enemies," he reminded her.

"And equal," she completed her phrase.

Her husband laughed.

"Oh, for the matter of that, we're pretty much all of us mined from the same mother lode," he assured her. "It's only a question of the shaft and the gearing that hauls us out. Let the child alone, Julia. She's no fool, and she will learn to sort out her friends in time. Till then, she can't do herself much harm."

"No; only — You must see, Peter, that she takes too much for granted," his wife urged him.

"For instance?"

Mrs. West attacked a minor issue.

"I think we both must insist upon her being more reserved. People will be sure to notice her, if she goes on like this."

"Isn't she worth noticing?" Long since, the Colonel had discovered that his best weapon lay in asking question, direct and brief. His wife's talent consisted in formulating her objections, never in coming to their defence.

Again she shifted her position, veiling as best she could her growing irritation at the unruffled manner of her husband.

"How long do you expect to be away?" she demanded, with a brusqueness which, in another woman, would have found relief in tears.

"I told Jessica I thought I should be away about three weeks in all."

"Jessica?"

"Yes. We were talking about it, coming down the river, last night." As he spoke, the Colonel, his hands still thrust into his trouser pockets, sauntered across the room and stood looking out upon the busy river.

With a sharp effort, his wife forced back the stinging question that trembled on her lips. Instead, her voice was gentler, her faded blue eyes, lifted to the Colonel's face, wore a look of pleading, dumb, but all the more pathetic in its very dumbness.

"Why didn't you tell me about it, too, Peter?" she asked.

Turning, he laughed down at her with the same merry frankness which, a score of years before, had captivated her hungry spinster heart.

"But you weren't there, my dear."

"Yes; but when I was?" she urged him.

## THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

He laughed again, kindly, but it was the laugh with which one dismisses an importunate child.

"My dear, you never asked me."

"Did Jessica?"

"Trust her!" He chuckled. "There are precious few things that young woman doesn't ask about. She's learned more of my business, the past three weeks, than I know, myself. She's got a head on her all right, and a pretty little will of her own, too. By Jove, I don't see her down there, anywhere! I believe I'd best run down and look her up. I don't want any of these French frog-eaters picking her up and carrying her off. I'll be back again in half a minute, Julia; that is, if you have anything more to say. If not —" Like a restless schoolboy, he held the sentence open for his dismissal.

Jessica, however, was not to be seen. She had found the terrace charming in the crisp, cool morning air; but she had also found it deserted, save for a lumpy-browed, loose-mouthed Frenchman who sat on a bench in the sun, and manifested the fabled chivalry of his race by staring her quite out of countenance. Jessica, her chin in the air, ignored the staring, albeit with a wayward desire to halt and make a wry face at the starrer before she quite passed him by. However, notwithstanding the charm of the sunny morning, the wide blue river and the soft purple mountains beyond, Jessica speedily found the terrace a bit of a bore. Not all the charm in the inanimate world could atone for the lack of human interest; and, to her American young mind, there was no human interest at all in the lank-haired, loose-mouthed Frenchman, nor yet in the trio of soutaned, round-top-hatted, spectacled young priests

who came tramping down the terrace from the upper end. For a moment, she halted by the rail, staring down at the blue water beneath, staring up at the blue heavens above, listening to the clashing of the Levis bells which came softly across to her, came like the prolonged echo of the great bell that had just ceased its mellow booming in the Basilica tower close by. Then suddenly and quite without reflection, she yielded to the invitation of that booming bell, turned, crossed the little Ring and sought the great door in the old gray façade of the Basilica.

Late as she was, the service seemed but just beginning; the gold-truncheoned, gold-laced beadle was still escorting strangers to their seats. Jessica smiled cordially up into his impassive face, nodding, the while, her thanks for his offer of a seat. Then, touching her hat with one hand, her belt with the other, by way of assuring herself that both were accurately adjusted, with this brief genuflection before the altar of tidiness, she started up the aisle hard upon the beadle's heels.

Some one else had started up the aisle at the same instant, a shabby little some one, Catholic and devout, but with the vaguest possible notions of the proper functions of a belt. Jessica, a step behind, was fast losing consciousness of the place around her, even of the gold-laced beadle, in her wonder how long the single hook in sight could support the weight depending on it, when, with a bow of his head and a grave inclination of his staff, the beadle stepped aside and waved Jessica to her seat. At the exact instant, the owner of the hook halted and made swift genuflection in the aisle, preparatory to entering a pew across the way. The

whole manœuvre executed itself so suddenly, and Jessica, unused to Catholic form, was so totally unprepared for the event that, before she could check her own momentum, she had landed full above the hook, in exactly the primary position of one preparing for a game of leapfrog.

It was the work of but an instant for Jessica to disengage herself and slide into her pew; but, in the instant, a young man, watching from that pew, lowered his keen brown eyes, while his shoulders shook. Then, —

“*Kismet!*” he said to himself, as he offered her the edge of his prayer-book with an impersonal courtesy which might have disarmed a Minerva militant.

But Jessica shook her fluffy head with a finality which was not impersonal at all. Not only had she seen the shaking shoulders; but she had recognized the same keen brown eyes which had watched her so irrtently, only the day before. To her mind, it should take two at least to make even the most obviously fated *Kismet*.

### CHAPTER THREE

HE was most unheroic for a hero. He had red hair, red of that uncompromising shade which infallibly betokens a freckled boyhood. Moreover, he possessed a bad limp which did not show much about the house, but rendered his progress on the street a matter of concern to the casual on-looker.

For the rest, he had wide shoulders, a rugged, smooth-shaven face and clean brown eyes which, every now and then, held a glint of boyish fun. Now and then, too, between whiles, they held another glint. This matched the hair, and betokened a boyhood of storms and squabbles. He played golf and, after a fashion, tennis; he had some brains, more money; he bought his ink by the quart bottle, his imported pens by the gross. His name was Kay Dorrance. *The Sixth*, he might have added; and, in some inscrutable fashion, by face and bearing, he showed the other five. Such as he was, albeit distinctly unheroic, he was destined to be the hero of what, at one time, bade fair to be an international romance.

He and Jessica met at breakfast, four days later. He was already seated at the table, when Mrs. West and Jessica came into the little dining-room of the Maple Leaf; and he glanced up from his porridge at the stir which announced their coming. According to her custom, Jessica walked in first, gay, careless,

self-assured, a vision of shining white linen frock, of shining dark gray eyes. Even in her short season of budding maturity, the girl had become so accustomed to being the centre of all attention that, by reason of her very conspicuousness, she had achieved a certain sort of unconscious grace, the grace that comes with health and complete self-satisfaction. As yet, Jessica West had never been thrown much in contact with her superiors. Her inevitable self-measurings had always proved her dominance. She loved the world around her, though, with no sense of condescension. It was a dear, loving old world and one well worth the ruling. Of her ability to rule it, as yet she had no doubts.

The recognition between herself and Dorrance was instantaneous and mutual. Those keen brown eyes were no more to be forgotten than was the whole gay personality of Jessica herself. The recognition was mutual; but, between its two sides, it held a difference. To Dorrance, there was simple humour, humour and a bland curiosity as to what the girl would happen to do next. He told himself he used the word *happen* advisedly. It was quite impossible, even for a total stranger, to associate premeditation with Jessica. To Jessica, however, the humour contained its sting. All her life, she had laughed with all men. Dorrance's steady brown eyes, albeit quite respectful, brought to the girl her first hint that there might be sources of laughter to which she herself was blind. Twice before, the hint had crossed her mind, only to be dismissed with scorn. Now, as she seated herself across the table from Dorrance, it came leaping back again and refused to be ejected. Even now, however, it struck

less at the roots of her own self-assurance than at the base of any attraction she might have felt for Dorrance's clean-cut, manly face. Moreover, Jessica had not yet learned to conceal her true emotions. It was with an air of manifest hostility that she jerked her chair back from the table and plumped herself down, a thing of rustling linen and frowning, arching brows and nodding, ink-black plumes that only served to set off her dazzling skin and fluffy red-gold hair.

Kay Dorrance was used to all sorts of women, used, too, to accepting their homage as his natural right and thinking as little about it as might be. Still in the middle twenties, all women were fast becoming to him things to be seethed in his own inkpot. At a first glance, he had accustomed himself to make swift sorting: these to ignore, these to study and, in time, to classify. But Jessica, even at his first glance, had plainly showed him that she would balk at any attempted classification.

The girl was very pretty; in fact, aggressively so. Not for one single instant and in any crowd could he imagine her being ignored. Her figure and her gowns were perfect, although she bore herself like a half-trained hoyden, or, better, like a half-broken colt, now gentle, now proudly restive, but always with a wilful sense of her own latent power. Her features were irregular, but full of piquant charm, and her years in the great Denver school had taught her to produce the impression that, once her back was turned upon her mirror, she forgot her looks entirely. Other women might be acute enough to discern the falseness of the impression; but men, even men such as Dorrance, fell into the trap completely, and marvelled how she

could be so regardless of such a face. And, after all, the chief distinction of the face lay in its colouring, in the clear, healthy tints of the lips and cheeks, in the fluffy hair which was neither all red nor wholly gold, in the arching dark brown brows and long brown lashes, above all in the dark gray eyes whose sideways slant lent them expressiveness and untold mockery and mirth. The girl might defy detailed analysis. Nevertheless, it was plain that she was strongly, buoyantly alive.

From Jessica, Dorrance glanced at the mother who followed in her wake, glanced casually, then intently. Here was a type he knew, albeit with a strong dash of the unknown which piqued his curiosity while it aroused his interest. Obviously crude, obviously lacking in the self-assurance which marked her pretty young daughter, the mother yet showed a certain inherent breeding which in the daughter was completely lacking. True, she was distressfully ill at ease, distressfully shy. She edged and minced, and twisted her thin lips into an uneasy little smirk which was no more closely related to mirth than were the thin pothooks of hair across her brow related to the soft, ruddy curls that framed her daughter's face. Her tailor was an artist in his profession. On her lean, angular shoulders, his lines took on the shape commonly produced by the dressmaker who "sews round" a whole village community in exchange for board and pickings. Prematurely old, prematurely worn, self-distrustful and more than a little fretful, Mrs. West yet roused all the protecting chivalry inherent in Kay Dorrance. Plainly prosperous, she yet was manifestly unhappy, although Dorrance shrewdly suspected, from certain lines

between her sparse brows and bracketing her thin lips, that the unhappiness was largely of her own making. However, he also suspected, even from his brief study of the blithe and self-assured young daughter, that Mrs. West had the worst of any discomfort caused by her own unhappiness, and his pity followed fast upon the stirrings of his chivalry. A woman must have suffered a dozen purgatories to have gained a face like that; and Kay Dorrance was still at the epoch of his life where his sympathy went out to the under dog, regardless of the causes of the fight. Indeed, it was not altogether impossible that he would always remain within that epoch.

Nevertheless, had he but known it, Mrs. West's brow was unusually serene, that morning. By no means the under dog, she had won out in a three-day fight; she had accomplished the moving of herself and Jessica from the, to her, distressful elegancies of the Château to the humbler comforts of the Maple Leaf across the way. Prior to her starting forth upon this journey, Mrs. West's experience of large hotels had been singularly meagre. During the past ten years, her husband had travelled widely, while she had remained a fixture in Lone Wolf, at first from sheer necessity, at last from choice. And so it came about that while the Colonel, a born good comrade, had won bit by bit the ease and assurance which comes, even in belated prosperity, from association with one's mates, Mrs. West had shut herself inside her increasingly gorgeous house, had ruled her servants with an iron rod in the hope of making them forget that, not so very long since, she had scrubbed her kitchen floor with her own lean, soapy hands. Her few neighbours,

meanwhile, totally refused to forget that fact and a whole assortment of other similar facts. Instead, with the hearty generosity of the Western mind, they gloated openly and aloud over the Colonel's swift rise to fortune, and cited him abroad as a magnificent example of the life that wields a pick one day and a purse the next. He revelled in the notoriety before which his wife shrank back in injured dignity. She would fain have forgotten the episode of the pick and of the sloshy suds around her gray calico knees. Rather than run the risk of its meeting her abroad, she stopped at home, where it seemed to her that her life was shrivelling to a mere dull wisp, in comparison with the gay exuberance of the Colonel's swift expansion. To her mind, it summed the matter in a nutshell that no one thought to rejoice in her prosperity, only in that of the jovial Colonel. And, after all, perhaps the grind of the adversity had come hardest upon her.

With mutiny too great to be expressed in lamentation, Jessica had received her mother's announcement of the prospective change of quarters. She had listened to her mother's plan in frank disdain. Then, when her mother had emptied her mind of all her reasons and they had fallen flat within the void of silence, she gave tongue to her objection.

"What in the world do you want to go into that stuffy, snuffy little house for?" she demanded so suddenly that her mother, misconstruing her silence into assent, jumped as if a mouse had unexpectedly turned into a rat before her very eyes.

The very suddenness of the question did its work, as Jessica had foreseen. In opening up the subject, her mother had been braced to meet and reply to any

opposition. Opposition failing, however, she had emptied out her mind in a placid stream of reasons, had burned up her projectiles by way of harmless fireworks. Now, opposed too abruptly to have time to gather herself together for a second round, she found herself defenceless. Curiously enough, she never seemed to penetrate Jessica's method of drawing all her fire, while Jessica herself lay hidden in ambush. Till the end of time, the second round would find her without so much as a blank cartridge to her name.

"I thought I made it plain to you, my dear."

Jessica frowned. Upon her mother's tongue, the caressing phrase as a rule indicated paucity of arguments.

"What's the matter with this place?" she demanded again.

Mrs. West attempted to fire for a second time a cartridge used in her first round.

"It is quite too magnificent for so long a stay."

Naturally, the cartridge missed fire.

"What's the matter? Has dad gone bankrupt again?" Jessica queried flippantly.

"Of course not. But an hotel like this is not a place for unattended women," her mother said, with such prim severity that only the little gesture to arrange the pothooks on her brow betrayed the nervousness she always felt in arguing with her intrepid daughter.

Jessica sought to close the discussion.

"Fudge!" she said conclusively.

"My dear!" This time, there was real consternation in Mrs. West's phrase.

"What then?" Jessica, about to leave the room, halted on the threshold and looked back.

"Ladies don't say such words." Not even in rebuke, not even after years of poverty and roughing it, could Mrs. West bring herself to condone the offending syllable by its utterance.

"Dad does," Jessica defended herself.

"Your father isn't a lady," Mrs. West answered, with a logic which was wholly obvious.

"No; he's something a whole lot better," Jessica made loyal rejoinder. "He is a great, big, whole-hearted man, and that's more than we can say. But, about the moving: you can move, if you want to. I shall stay here."

"Where are you going now, Jessica?" her mother asked a little hastily, as the door swung open.

Jessica's answer came back from over her shoulder.

"To talk it out with dad, that and a whole lot of other things."

The lot of other things came first, however, came in one tumultuous tide, as they stood together in the warm June sun, looking down upon the huddled roofs at their feet.

"You go at two, to-morrow, then?" Jessica burst out forlornly.

"Yes."

"And will be gone, three weeks?"

"Two or three."

"It will be three, I know; it always takes you longer than you think. Dad, I shall die without you."

"But mama will be here," he said, with obvious attempt at consolation.

"Mama!" Then Jessica checked herself. Then she added slowly, "Dad, what makes her do it?"

His years-long loyalty to his marriage vows made the Colonel question promptly, —

“Do what, Jessica?” But he waited for no answer to his question. Instead, “Be patient, child,” he bade her. “It will all come out right in time.”

She shook her head.

“I wish it would; but I don’t see how it can, when I really don’t know what it is, after all the fuss. We just don’t jibe; that’s all.”

“You have been away from her for a long time, you know,” he reminded her.

She faced him courageously.

“It isn’t that, Dad. It is deeper than that, something I can’t understand. She means to be good to me; now and then she acts proud of me and tries to show me off. Not when you are around, though. Then she behaves as if she were trying to keep me in my proper place.” The girl’s laugh was scornful, but not hard. “In a way, too, she tries to make a lady of me, not just an heiress, but the real thing. Sometimes I almost think —” Her gray eyes fixed upon the ferry just drawing near the Levis shore, she spoke reflectively; “almost think, in spite of her being so dowdy and so mincing, that she’s nearer the real thing than I shall ever be.” The next minute, the reflective mood had vanished in a chuckle of unregenerate mirth. “Moreover, I’m not sure I want to be it, either, in view of all it must entail. After all, Dad, we both of us know perfectly well that there’s a certain fun in being new-rich and vulgar. It makes one a lot more independent. Nice people are always poky.”

Then her mood changed, and she shifted her subject.

"Dad," she urged tragically; "must we go to that horrid little boarding-house?"

"It's not so horrid, Jessica."

"No; but it's little. I'd rather stay on here."

"I think, myself, you would be a good deal more comfortable," her father admitted guardedly.

"Then why not stay?"

"Your mother wants to go."

Jessica faced him abruptly, a naughty light shining in her gray eyes, a naughty smile bringing into view the dimples beside her scarlet lips.

"Do you know why?" she demanded.

"No. For the life of me, I can't see."

"I can, then." Jessica nodded slowly to herself, as she once more approved the accuracy of her diagnosis. "It's because she is afraid of that head waiter. She edges past him, cornerwise, every time we come into the dining-room. I've watched her, times enough. He scares her stiff, and she wants to get out of his sight. Dad, I won't go."

After all, the Colonel was mere man, which is equivalent to saying that he dodged the present issue.

"I can't decide between you, Jessica," he told her hastily. "You'll have to fight it out for yourselves, as best you can."

At two, the next afternoon, the Colonel started for the long trip westward; and it was a damp and forlorn Jessica who plodded alone up Palace Hill, dabbing furtively, the while, at her pink-rimmed eyes. As she passed the Maple Leaf, however, and came under the archway leading to the Château court, she pulled herself together in anticipation of the fray. The next

thing before her was the task of fighting out with her mother the question of their change of habitation.

Two days, the battle raged. Then, with a suddenness quite unexpected, albeit quite characteristic, Jessica capitulated and demanded an immediate flitting. The cause of that demand, however, did not transpire till later. The flitting transpired, that very night. Favoured by a Fate that cleared the way before them, Jessica and her mother put themselves to bed in two great, airy front rooms of the Maple Leaf, were lulled to sleep by the clank of the flat-wheeled cars which follow one another in an apparently unbroken procession down the slope which encircles the Ring.

Morning brought reflection to Jessica, reflection and a measure of regret for the luxuries she had left behind. However, she had burned her bridges behind her; there was no possibility of rebuilding them once more from the charred embers. With what philosophy she could, she led the way downstairs and into the breakfast-room.

Boarding-house manners are a thing apart from all else in the world. Nothing else allows so sharp a separation at the start between the people that you wish to know and the people who are doomed to sit for ever outside the pale of your acquaintance. For practical reasons connected with his profession, Kay Dorrance often turned his back upon the large, impersonal hotel and took up his abode within a boarding-house. Furthermore, he had evolved in its perfection his own code of manners for use therein.

According to this code, he glanced at Jessica; then, when Mrs. West was seated, he bestowed upon the older woman a nod of grave impersonality. Jessica's

frown deepened. It was her custom to receive the nods, not watch them pass her by and fall upon her mother. Ten minutes later, Dorrance offered Jessica the salt. She received it haughtily and set it down unused. After a brief interval, Dorrance followed up the salt with the offer of the morning paper. This time, the girl shook her head.

"Thank you," she said curtly. "I never read, while I am at the table."

Up to the very stems of her pothooks Mrs. West flushed scarlet at the hostile emphasis by which Jessica had contrived to reduce her refusal to a declaration of war; but Dorrance was unable to repress his smile. His sense of humour was exuberant; he had no knowledge of what its lack might do to others, no notion that Jessica West, for all her mocking gray eyes, could see no joke of which she herself was the object. It was her revenge upon nature for denying her an ancestry of assured standing. Congenital, it would be her last defect to yield to proper training.

Philosophically Dorrance digested the rebuke; then philosophically he resumed his interrupted breakfast. Later on, and after the Wests had left him alone with his final cup of coffee, he betook himself and his spurned paper to the drawing-room to await the morning mail. While he waited and between the lines of his paper, he reflected how useful for his inkpot would be the image of this girl with the carriage and dress of a finished woman, the temper of a spunky child. A rustle of starchy linen aroused him, and he looked up to see Jessica standing on the threshold. Her crisp white frock fairly bristled with stiffness; but, as she saw Dorrance ensconced in an easy chair beside the front window,

the frock became limp in comparison with her manner. Retreat, however, would have seemed to Jessica an avowal of her fear of those keen eyes with the glint of fun in their brown depths. Retreat was therefore impossible. As she advanced, Dorrance looked up, nodded an off-hand greeting and started to rise. The next instant, he sank back into his chair. Totally careless of his presence and of the greeting he had felt was justified by Mrs. West's halting attempts at conversation above the table, Jessica had marched across the room, and now stood fingering a group of jade idols that filled the middle of the mantel. Behind her rampant spine, Kay Dorrance smiled again and irrepressibly. Then he essayed a friendly word.

"You are driving, to-day?"

"No."

He wondered if his ears deceived him into imagining the shadow of a final *p* upon the brief response.

"Walking?"

"Not if I can help myself."

"But I should have thought you were a bit of an athlete," he told her, much as he might have spoken to a little child, for her obvious and causeless ill-temper seemed to magnify the few years' difference in their ages.

"Not on these walks. There's nothing to see, and I am not going to sprain my ankle, just for that nothing," she assured him petulantly.

He laughed. Even in her petulance, she liked his laugh just as, even in her hostility, she admitted to herself his virility, his poise, and something dangerously akin to charm. Few men, she told herself, had such steady eyes, such firm, kindly lips, such unconscious

grace in the set of the head upon the wide shoulders. And yet, he was not good-looking in the very least.

"It might give you a reason to visit Sainte Anne," he was suggesting gayly.

She looked up, her hostility temporarily forgotten in her interest.

"What is Sainte Anne?"

"The place where they do the miracles, and cure things."

"Who cure things?"

"Sainte Anne — plus the priests," he told her.

"How funny!" Leaving the idols to smirk at vacancy, she faced about and crossed the room to one of the windows looking out upon the Ring. "They really cure things?"

"Ye—es."

"How funny!" she said once more, as if vaguely trying to adjust her practical mind to this new notion. "I'll go out, some day, and watch them do it." Then suddenly her gray eyes gathered focus, her hand pointed out across the Ring, and she added, with a swift return to her former wayward speech, "Why don't they set their miracle mill to work upon the local output? I wish they'd cure that man out there. If there's a thing on earth more awkward than a man who limps cornerwise, I have yet to see it."

There came a little pause, a pause which added tenfold to the weight of her ill-considered, petulant words. Then Kay Dorrance spoke.

"I doubt if there is," he assented quietly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

JESSICA, arrayed in a fluffy blue dressing-jacket, was brushing out her fluffy yellow hair, that same night, preparatory to bedecking herself for supper. True, the boarding-house dined at noon, and nobody took the trouble to dress for the nondescript later meal. Nevertheless, Jessica held fast to her school training and her love for pretty clothes. A frilly white frock lay on the bed, and a little heap of yellow velvet ribbons lay on the table at her side. Jessica, meanwhile, was intent upon her toilet. Suddenly she paused and spun about, brush in one hand, a heavy lock of hair in the other.

"Are you cold?" a deep voice was demanding, apparently just at the outer end of the tunnel made by her unoccupied keyhole.

"What?" she asked, too blankly to bethink herself of the more conventional phrase.

But the voice, instead of repeating itself, went on with a weighty deliberation which suggested endless leisure and unmeasured force of character, —

"I am not cold. I am very warm."

"What do you want?" Jessica asked boldly, as she took a step or two towards the closed door which separated her from the unseen speaker.

"Is your father a phy-si-ci-an?" the voice queried solemnly. Then, without awaiting reply, it continued, "My father is not a phy-si-ci-an; he is a lawyer."

"Go away!" Jessica's brush smote the panel of the closed door violently. Then she listened for retreating footsteps. Instead, she heard the voice lifting itself anew.

"Have you seen the cat, the small gray cat? The small gray cat is in the garden. She wishes to eat a bird." There was no especial menace in the words; but the voice rumbled more stormily with every succeeding syllable.

Visions of murderous servants and paranoiac fellow-boarders rose up in Jessica's brain. Breath held in and brush lifted in self-protection, she silently turned the knob and flung open the door, only to disclose a totally empty hallway, just as the voice once more took up its discursive conversation, —

"There is one God, and Allah is his Prophet."

The door banged together, and Jessica, now half-afraid and wholly angry, rushed across the room and sought the button of the electric bell connecting with the office, while the voice boomed out again in the astounding finale, —

"Yes, I will have cream and sugar in my tea."

The bell was imperative; the Head of the House came running. On the threshold, she was met by an irate Jessica in fluffy blue ruffles, and by a hoarse and angry clamour which she had no difficulty in tracing to the adjoining room, —

"My mother ate a cabbage and six apples; but my father is very hungry indeed."

Later, when the Head of the House had wiped the tears from her eyes, she explained to Jessica. Jessica heard her out in silence. Then, —

"He is French?"

"Yes."

"And teaching himself English?"

"Yes."

"And in his right mind?"

"What there is of it — yes."

Jessica sat down on her trunk, sat down hard.

"Then he'd better pack himself back to Paris. He never will learn to talk, at this rate and by his present method, until he gets himself translated."

"I am a student," proclaimed the voice, with a renewed care which manifested itself by long pauses between the words.

"I should think you were." The comment came from Jessica.

"I am a stranger and lonely. I have a sorrow which I will tell you soon."

Jessica laughed. Then, a moment later, she lifted her eyes to meet the eyes of the Head of the House.

"After all, I am sorry for him," she said slowly.

"Imagine not being born a talker! What is he doing here — besides teaching himself English?"

"He hopes he can get into one of the banks in time."

"Does he know anybody?"

"No."

"A stranger, and lonesome, and bored," Jessica made reflective comment. "Poor soul! I know how he feels, and it is awful, awful. Please trot him out, the first chance you have. I want to meet him."

The Head of the House was English.

"Your mother —" she suggested tentatively.

Jessica nipped the suggestion in the bud.

"Oh, mama wouldn't care a thing about him," she

averred. "She never cares much about my friends, anyway, any more than I care for hers. At home, I always have my calls in the parlour, and she takes hers out into the sitting-room. It's ever so much better, that way; we don't bore each other's people half so much." And she picked up her brush once more, in token that the talk was ended.

Fifteen minutes later, Jessica tapped at her mother's door.

"I'm going down," she said. "You'll be down in time for supper, I suppose." And she went her wayward way.

As she had hoped and half expected, she found Dorrance in the drawing-room. He had risen, with the apparent intention of going in to supper, when the girl's white frock and yellow bows appeared upon the threshold. For a moment, he hesitated, and Jessica, watching him, was surprised to see the colour mount up across his face and dye his forehead. It was not like the poise she already had learned to expect from him, even in the short time of her observation, and she wondered uneasily if anything could be amiss. Then, casting aside the wonder which had linked itself vaguely with her bad temper of the morning, she moved across the floor, dropped into the easiest chair that the room afforded, planted her elbows on its arms and surveyed him from above her clasped hands.

"Well?" she demanded gayly.

Her tone was irresistible. So were her eyes. Dorrance laughed, and his colour slowly faded, as he dropped down into the chair from which he had only just arisen.

"Thank you," he answered; "it is very well."

"I'm glad," she said, then added a bit discursively, "I was just wondering, you know."

"Wondering what?"

"Wondering what made you turn all colours of the rainbow, when I came in," she told him with alarming frankness. "I wasn't going to fight with you again, you know."

Dorrance's blush repeated itself, and then his laugh. The girl was unexpected to a degree. Her very unexpectedness made it impossible for him to regard her as being anything more than a child. As a child, then, he answered her; but with no intent to be rude. In certain ways, experience had made Kay Dorrance old beyond his years. His eyes alone retained anything of his boyishness, and even they lost its lustre now and then.

"What made you fight with me. in the first place?" he asked her, with a frankness which matched her own.

Watching him from above her clasped fingers where the rings glittered in barbaric splendour, she remained silent, while her eyes grew mocking, and the dimples came and went beside her scarlet lips. Then she shook her head. Then she sighed.

"Really, it is very lonely here now," she said pathetically.

"Now?"

"Since dad went."

"He was here, then?"

"Yes. He only went, last Monday. You must have seen him, that day on the steamer."

He smiled at the unconscious admission that he had provoked her notice. For the moment, however,

Jessica was too absorbed in her own honest regret for her father to interpret the smile as anything else than tribute to his charm.

"He is coming back again," she announced at length.

"Soon?" Dorrance asked the question because of the new light which had sprung up in her face at mention of her father. For the instant, the wayward child was turning to a woman with a heart.

"In two or three weeks, he says; but that generally means four or five." There came a dropping cadence in the tone.

"And then he'll stay?"

"Till cold weather. You see, dad — his name is Colonel West," she explained, with manifest pride in the title; "is a railroad contractor. Everybody knows him from Omaha to the coast, and he hasn't been so, either, very long. He has contracts everywhere, and now he has taken one up here on this new road. Of course, he doesn't do any work now; but he likes to follow up his men and see that they don't shirk. That's the best thing about dad, they all say; he never will stand for any graft."

"It certainly is a fine thing to say of any man," Dorrance agreed gravely.

"I tell you!" In her eagerness, she bent forward, her round cheeks resting on her cupped hands. "He's a man who never pinched a cent that didn't belong to him; and precious few contractors can say as much as that. He wasn't always a contractor," she added artlessly.

All things considered, Dorrance judged it best to change the subject.

"You have friends here?" he queried.

"Not a one. We've only been here a week, though. It takes a little time."

"Yes," Dorrance assented, while he reflected swiftly upon what he had already seen of the social code of the gray little city.

Jessica looked up jauntily.

"There's time enough," she reassured him. "We aren't unpacked and hung up yet. I wonder who the nicest people here are."

"There are so many nice ones, it would be hard to tell." Even as he spoke, Dorrance despised himself for taking refuge in a platitude.

Again Jessica spoke jauntily.

"Oh, well, it's easy enough to tell about that, when I begin to get acquainted. It doesn't generally take me very long to get acquainted," she added, with palpable truth.

This time, Dorrance judged that it was only fair to administer a gentle hint in social usage.

"Have you any letters?" he asked.

"Letters?" she queried blankly.

"Letters of introduction. Letters to people here."

"Oh, those things. Yes, dad has. Do you think they amount to much, though?" Her gray eyes met his brown ones squarely in frank question.

"I certainly do," Dorrance replied with unction.

"It is the only way for a stranger to become acquainted."

"But suppose they should be to the wrong sort of people?" she asked, with what seemed to Dorrance rare acumen. "I'd rather know the nice, jolly ones, not the old duds. Still, if you think it's worth the

while, I suppose I can take the things and start out making calls."

Dorrance gasped.

"Wouldn't it be better to wait and let your father take them?" he suggested.

Jessica shook her head.

"What's the use of wasting all that time?" she demanded. "He may not be back again for a month. Besides — Did you have any letters?"

"One or two," Dorrance confessed modestly.

"How long did you wait, before you started out?"

"A few days."

"I'll start, to-morrow morning," she announced.

Again Dorrance gasped. It was not his business to educate this pretty child in social forms; yet his inherent chivalry shrank from the thought of the chastening which must be bound to lie before her.

"Wouldn't — wouldn't it be best to send them later, after —" he began to offer suggestion; but a rustle of skirts behind him cut the suggestion short.

He looked up, to see the Head of the House entering the room. Beside her was a loose-mouthed Frenchman with a shining, lumpy forehead and a self-conscious smirk. Both of them were obviously bearing down on Jessica; and Dorrance, who had seen the Frenchman before and had come to the prompt decision that he had few of the virtues and most of the vices of his race and class, pulled an evening paper out of his pocket and buried himself in its pages with a celerity which would have done credit to a pantomime.

"Miss West, will you allow me to introduce Monsieur de la Haye?" the Head of the House asked as gently as if she had not disapproved the whole situation and

vainly laid her disapproving doubts on the knees of the uncomprehending Mrs. West.

The Frenchman, with a true Parisian gesture, laid his hand upon his heart, as if to still its beatings at sight of the dainty vision of white lace frills and yellow velvet bows.

"Unfortunately I spik ver' lit' English," he said, when his crown of lank dark hair was once more pointing to the ceiling.

Jessica, remembering and agreeing, turned a giggle to a cough and flung herself into a conversation, thanking her stars that she owned a fair-sized sample of boarding-school French and dragging it into use with a bare-faced certainty that it could not fail to be more plastic than was the English of Monsieur de la Haye. Unhappily, however, Monsieur de la Haye mistook her use of French as being a compliment to his nationality, a compliment he felt himself bound to repay by addressing himself to Jessica only in a granulated sort of English which demanded infinite leisure on the part of the speaker, infinite power of interpretation on the part of the unfortunate listener. On the whole, however, in a linguistic tournament between them, Monsieur de la Haye would have been the one to score, granted only that no time limit was set for the contest. Although not exactly idiomatic, his English was correct; while Jessica's French, albeit voluble, expressed itself entirely in the first person singular of the present tense and was totally lacking in negatives of any sort.

Kay Dorrance, disregarded and then forgotten in his corner, forgot his disapproval of the scene entirely, while his red head drooped lower and lower behind the opened paper. Alternately he thanked his Provi-

dence and bewailed his Fate that he was the only one to be regaled upon the eccentric bits of autobiography, experience and personal likings exchanged between the loose-mouthed Gaul and the fluffy young American, now seated beside the farther window with their backs turned towards him.

Dorrance was younger than the Frenchman, not so very much older than the girl. Nevertheless, as the moments passed, he felt himself a veteran while he sat there alone, ignored, and listened to the stream of confidences passing between that pair of total strangers. How could any one be so ingenuous as Jessica, he wondered gravely, be so receptive as that loose-mouthed Gaul, quite forgetting, in his grave displeasure, that, less than a quarter of an hour before, Jessica's confidences had been flowing out to him and that he had received them with an interest amounting to extreme cordiality. And, meanwhile, the confidences were now bumping heavily along over a veritable corduroy road of unmastered idioms.

The idioms had ended in a deadlock of misunderstanding, such misunderstanding as could only yield to a Pentecostal hour, when a fresh rustle of skirts announced the arrival upon the scene of Mrs. West. She came swishing into the room with a great *frou-frou* of silken linings. Her pothooks were arranged with careful precision, and an unfolded handkerchief dangled from her two crossed hands. Monsieur de la Haye arose to his feet with alacrity. He had brought a pair of keen eyes from his mother country; he had learned to recognize the golden calf in any guise that quadruped might see fit to assume.

"Mademoiselle will present me?" he murmured.

Jessica, interrupted in the parallels she was seeking to trace between Paris and Lone Wolf, looked up with a casual sort of stare which was not lost upon Kay Dorrance.

"Mama, this is Monsieur de la Haye," she said, without troubling herself to rise.

Monsieur de la Haye rendered himself into a right angle, with his coat-tails at the apex.

"But yes, how pretty!" he remarked. "Not the mamma, however? Madame is Mademoiselle's walk-mamma, perhaps?"

Kay Dorrance's doctorate had been won upon the strength of a thesis concerning "The Unconscious and Logical Lapses Tending to the Development of Human Speech." Accordingly, his shoulders shook. Jessica, however, had missed the boon of university training, and she turned a puzzled face to the speaker.

"My walk-mama?" she repeated blankly.

The Frenchman smiled, as at her lack of perspicuity.

"But yes, sure thing. I intend the wife of your deceased mamma's husband."

Dorrance interposed.

"You have had a busy day?" he said while, rising, he gave the easy chair an inviting tweak in Mrs. West's direction. "Sit here; won't you?"

"I am much obliged." In her embarrassment, Mrs. West let go her hold upon her handkerchief.

Dorrance restored it to her with a friendly little smile. Even during the short instant that he held it in his hand, he noted the ungarnished stoutness of the linen, the mathematical exactness of the finger prints upon the crossing of the middle folds.

"Won't you sit down?" he repeated kindly. "It's

early yet to go to supper, and the outlook from these windows is always pleasant."

"Mine are above it. I can see everything that passes." The words were as stiff as the motion with which she took the offered chair. "I'm afraid I've got your chair," she added then uneasily.

For his only answer to her latter phrase, Dorrance drew up another chair and seated himself, his back to Jessica. There was a simple friendliness about his manner which Mrs. West liked, even though it lacked the impressive courtliness of the Frenchman, now once more absorbed in Jessica. It would have been very fine, she told herself, to have been the object of some more of those deep bows and smiles; and yet, for some reason she could not analyze, she felt vastly more at home with Kay Dorrance.

"It is good fun to look on at things that are passing," he was saying now.

"Yes. I know it is." Then suddenly the meagre face before him flamed into a semblance of its earlier life, while the voice took on a thrill, half pathos, half instinct with a wayward longing which never had been, never could be quite repressed. "After all said and done, though, it's not like being in the pass, yourself."

"You like to be in things?" Dorrance questioned and his voice was full of cajoling charm. More than most men and quite unconsciously to himself, Kay Dorrance possessed the happy gift of treating women old enough to be his mother as if they were just budding into fresh maturity. He never planned to do it, never realized why it was that older women all adored him. It was merely that certain ingrained finenesses of his

character revolted against allowing any woman to feel as if she had been laid upon the shelf. And now, by the colour rising up across her face, by the throbbing of her voice, Mrs. West was confessing to him as plainly as by words not only that she had been laid upon the shelf, but that the laying had been done prematurely and quite against her will. Her answer was tragic in its simple brevity.

"What woman doesn't? But I've never had much chance."

"Perhaps the chance is coming now," he reassured her kindly. "It's a good little place here, and they say it can be very nice to strangers, when it chooses. I think you are going to enjoy it very much, once you know people."

Jessica glanced over the top of the yellow velvet bow poised on her shoulder.

"Mama never goes out so very much," she interpolated, with a carelessness which yet held no taint of censure. "She generally prefers to sit at home and sew."

There came a little pause. Dorrance broke it.

"Perhaps she would go more often, if you asked her," he said gently, but quite distinctly.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**A**LL that night at supper and all of the next day, a thunderous silence brooded over the table where Dorrance sat facing Jessica. Mrs. West was not often garrulous in public. Jessica was too thoroughly out of temper with Dorrance to vouchsafe him a single word, and Dorrance was quite as thoroughly out of temper with himself. Why in the name of all that was holy had he broken down his rule of passive observation? Why had he sought to right a situation which was obviously none of his own concern? Why, ever, had he been so sure that the situation was wrong? Middle-aged women had fretted before now, without arousing his militant pity. Pretty girls had snubbed their plain mothers in his presence, without his feeling any need to snub them in return. And Jessica did not really snub her mother, after all; it was only that she was masterful with her. Moreover, she teased her, and Mrs. West's sense of humour stopped short at the teasing. And Mrs. West was certainly fretful. One look at the vertical lines which seamed her face was sufficient to establish the fact past all gainsaying. Then why had he, a stranger, leaped to conclusions, and from conclusions into action? He gave up the question with a little laugh, set it down as a freak left over from an impulsive boyhood, and sought to cast the matter from his mind.

Busy his mind as he would with the minor details of the situation: Jessica's avowed hostility, the silence which lay like a pall across the table, the scornful lift of her chin as she swept her eyes above the topmost lock of his red hair in order to send a smile to Monsieur de la Haye who sat beyond: in spite of all these things, his main interest still summed itself up in Mrs. West and in the call she made to his protection. Kay Dorrance had lived too much in the world to be swept off his feet by a mere maudlin pity. It was not sentiment alone, but tragedy, which had gazed at him from those washed-out blue eyes, had spoken to him in that unwonted thrill which had deepened Mrs. West's flat, unmodulated voice into a momentary music. It was tragedy, and genuine, albeit Kay Dorrance, from his own luxurious masculine existence, was quite unable to analyze its nature. Were its elements all within the family; or did they include some one from outside? He checked his speculations with a blush, not so much for the nature of his speculations, as for the failure of his analytic power to separate such questionings from Mrs. West. No; the trouble lay inside the little family circle.

Not with the husband, however. Whatever were his limitations regarding women, Kay Dorrance knew men. He knew, from his one short hour of study, that the jovial Colonel would be the last man in the world to cause domestic sorrow. Not Jessica. The girl was arrogant, hot-tempered. Nevertheless, she was also affectionate, and she owned a certain sense of humour. In Mrs. West, herself? Dorrance, his fountain pen in hand, shook his head, as he bethought himself of those tell-tale lines. Then he capped his

fountain pen and put it back into his pocket. Time alone could tell. Meanwhile — he smiled grimly to himself — meanwhile, from present indications, his only interest would not be found in watching the two Wests and their attitude to each other. His own attitude to them both might also be well worth the watching. After all, the day of one's impulses was never really dead. He shoved a small red book into his pocket and betook himself to the terrace to smoke and read and watch the view change from gold to pinky-purple, and from pink to gray.

The gray heralded a coming storm which, by the next morning, had arrived and brought on its arm a blustering wind. Jessica waked early, with a pre-science of the boredom which such a day was bound to develop. In vain, she pulled the sheet about her ears; in vain, she counted little white pigs running along a country road; in vain, she repeated the books of the Bible backward. The sheet refused to keep out the noise of the rain, the pigs balked and Colossians and Corinthians mixed themselves in inextricable confusion. Sleep was not to be wooed in any such fashion as that. Impatiently she arose and dressed herself, hoping, the while, that such a day might not betray her into too fierce fights with anybody, hoping, also, that, granted such fights, she might come off the victor.

The morning was half over, when she rapped sharply at her mother's door. Her mother, with knitted slippers on her feet and three wisps of brown paper upon either temple, admitted her through the narrowest possible doorcrack. Jessica crossed the room and threw herself down beside the window.

"What a day!" she said, with a yawn. "Are you busy?"

"I was writing in my journal." Mrs. West blotted a page, as she spoke, and turned a leaf. Not all of Jessica's derision could divorce her from her allegiance to her padlocked volume.

Jessica tilted herself to and fro in the rocking-chair whose aged joints made plaintive moan with every change of position.

"I suppose it's as good a way as any to pass the time till your curl papers dry out," she observed. "I knew a girl at school who used to read her Bible while she polished her nails."

"My dear!" As she spoke, Mrs. West busied herself with the paper twists upon her brow.

"Yes. It kept the time from being wholly wasted," Jessica said ambiguously. Then she asked, "Why don't you fluff out your hair?"

"This is more ladylike."

"More Lone Wolf-like, you'd better say." Jessica shook her own fluffy head conclusively. Then, lifting her hands, she clasped them around her brow, flattening down her yellow hair. "How would you like to see me look like that?" she asked, in gay, good-tempered derision.

Mrs. West turned to look at her, while one of her own pothooks lifted itself like a rampant poker.

"I always liked to see you part your hair and comb it back behind your ears."

The girl released her shining mane.

"Bah! Nobody does it now. What do you suppose dad would say, if I came out like that?"

"Your father likes simplicity."

The girl's laugh was disdainful.

"Much he does! He'd cut me off with a shilling, and then tell me to take the shilling and buy some curling tongs. Dad looks demure; but he loves frivolity. Oh, dear; doesn't this sort of day make you long to get him back here?"

Her face pressed against the rain-streaked window in a vain attempt to see down into the street beneath, Jessica missed the sudden colour, the sudden look of longing, of abject, utter longing which had leaped into her mother's face, transforming it for an instant to the likeness of her long-gone girlhood. Her eyes shouted forth the truth; but her lips, trained by a meagre heredity and by lean, emotionless years of domestic drudgery, gave inexpressive answer, —

"We always miss him, when he isn't here."

Jessica abandoned the window, and faced her mother hotly.

"Is that all you can say about it?" she demanded.

"You don't deserve him for a husband, so there now! If he were mine, all my very own, a man like him, I should cry my eyes out, every day while he was gone; and, when he came home, I'd kiss him and kiss him and kiss him till he couldn't see out of his eyes. That's the difference between us, though," she added, with one of her swift lapses from emotion into matter-of-factness. "I wonder, sometimes, how I ever happened to be your daughter."

For a moment, Mrs. West, standing before her mirror which offered back a merciless picture of her lean, unlovely face and form, stared down at her daughter as if sharing in her fevered mood. Then, all at once, she bit her lip, faced back again to the

pitiless mirror and went on with her dressing. The sudden flush had left her forehead, by the time Jessica spoke again.

"Oh, by the way," she said as nonchalantly as if her outburst had never taken place; "would you mind letting me see those notes of introduction?"

"What notes?"

"The ones dad left with you, when he went away."

Mrs. West's face darkened. Was this slight mark of special confidence to be taken away from her by Jessica's careless, grasping hands? She sought to temporize. It had meant much to her starved womanhood, her husband's placing in her hands these social credentials with which he had come, armed, into the conservative, gray old city. She would not give them up without a battle.

"How do you know I have them?" she asked, too ingenuous to know that the very question betrayed her fear.

Jessica spoke with even greater nonchalance.

"I wired him, to find out where they were."

Mrs. West stared at her daughter in a certain terror. How was it possible for any one to stand out against this resourceful, intrepid young American?

"You telegraphed your father?"

"Yes. I wired, yesterday. He wired back that you had them and would let me see them. You won't mind. And I want very much to look them over," the girl added easily. "They may be useful, by and by. Mr. Dorrance says—" she bethought herself to correct her quotation of his opinions with a sniff of extreme hostility—"not that he knows anything

about it, though. Still, it is just as well to open our hand and see what trumps we've got."

"But —"

Jessica glanced up at her mother. The glance was followed by a light, persuasive laugh.

"Get them, there's a dear old mama," she said, as, rising, she lifted her hand to stroke her mother's cheek. "You may as well, you know; I always tease for things until I get them, so —"

"But —"

"So you may as well give in, first as last. In the steamer trunk? Where? The tray? Let me open it for you, there's a dear. That strap is too stiff for your hands." And the trunk came open with a jerk.

Later, after Mrs. West, alone in her room, had sat long at the front window, her left hand supporting her right elbow, her right hand pressed against her flushed, tear-distorted face, Jessica, humming gayly to herself, came out of her room and went running down the stairs. In her hands were half a dozen envelopes, blue and becrested.

Her letters dropped into the post-box, she started back upstairs. Then, yielding to her former boredom, she paused at the drawing-room door and looked in, not so much in the hope of finding amusement in the abstract, as of discovering a chance to lay emphasis upon her antagonism towards Kay Dorrance.

"And yet," she had said grimly to herself above her hooks and eyes, that morning; "I want him to understand that he didn't hurt my feelings in the least. It's only that I'm mad, just mad. Moreover, when it comes to a tug of war between us, I'll bet my hair is

as red as his." And, brush in hand, she attacked that hair with vigour.

Now that the morning had passed by, with no relaxation of her wrath, nor yet with any open demonstration of its fervour, Jessica felt herself longing to renew the fray. True, direct assault would be beneath her dignity; but there are other ways than direct assault open to pretty girls of vagrant temper. The strongest effects are often produced by judicious contrast, and Kay Dorrance was by no means the only person storm-bound within the Maple Leaf, that day. Her thirst for battle waxing high, she halted upon the threshold of the drawing-room and looked in.

For the first time in her experience of the house, the room was full. Although it was only June, the tourist tide was already running high, and the house was packed with strangers, mostly Americans, mostly birds of passage, and one and all of them badly bored by the weather and its interruption to their plans. The elders sat in their rooms, yawned, wrote letters, yawned again and squabbled feebly among themselves with the languid irritation born of a rainy day in strange surroundings. The younger ones, more restless and more full of initiative, had strayed downstairs in search of possible amusement. They hailed Jessica's advent eagerly, partly for her prettiness, partly for her wonderful clothes, in part because she had held herself aloof from any contact with them, and her aloofness had contained all the signs of total unconsciousness of their very existence. They were good young things of unimpeachable ancestry, colourless manners, bad tails and an utter absence of all that goes to interest a stranger. Gossiping mildly among themselves, they

had decided that Jessica and Dorrance, seated at the same table, represented the cream of the aristocracy of the house. To their extreme pleasure, they found the one reading beside the front window, and now the other, her face heavy with boredom, was delivering herself into their hands.

The day, and the mood, and the silent presence of Kay Dorrance were responsible, severally and together, for Jessica's yielding to a half-dozen remarks spoken at her, and allowing herself to be drawn into a general conversation. It was not entirely her own doing that, little by little, the conversation turned towards her latest hobby, the reading of character from handwriting. Nevertheless, Jessica could not find it in her heart to regret the turn the talk had taken, nor yet the deference with which her views were met. At school, she had made more than one lucky guess over the scraps of letters which had been offered for her interpretation. The subject had interested her until she had developed a good little vocabulary in its connection; and now, less for the benefit of the group about her than for that of the silent figure by the window, she brought her vocabulary into play.

"It's wonderful," one of the group said, when the products of the morning mail had all been offered to Jessica's scrutiny. "I don't see how you tell so closely. Try one more. Try this." As she spoke, she dived into the waste-paper basket underneath the table.

Jessica breathed more freely. This, at least, would be impersonal. She could speak her mind without fear or favour, sure that she was not likely to be abusing the dearest correspondent of any of the group. A gleam of real interest came into her eyes, as she bent

above the bit of paper laid on the table before her.

"However, whatever may be the cause, the result is sure. She is certainly —" She read it aloud slowly; and, as she read, the figure by the window stiffened above his book.

"It's a woman, anyway," somebody said, staring over Jessica's shoulder at the small black characters upon the paper.

Jessica shook her head.

"It is a man, a strong one," she said slowly. She fell silent again and, in the silence, her self-consciousness lost itself in interest in her theme. When she spoke again, her voice was different, more sincere. "I like this," she said. "He is unusual and very — very well worth while. If I were to sum him up in a phrase, I should call him conscious power. I think I'd like to watch —"

But some one interrupted.

"What's the use of this? We don't know who 'tis, so we can't tell whether she makes good guesses or not, and it loses all its fun. Let's get some more of our own letters, so we'll know."

The group scattered to their rooms, the speaker lingering just long enough to demand, —

"And you surely will be here, when we come back?"

The last heel-click sounded on the stairs. Then, slowly and as if compelled by some motive which she could not read, Kay Dorrance looked up at Jessica.

"Miss West," he said quietly; "I think it is only fair to tell you it was my writing you had there."

"Yours!" She was too surprised to show antagonism. "I am sorry. I didn't know."

"Why should you be sorry? If you didn't tell the fact, at least you gave me credit for the one thing I have always wished."

Still earnest, sincere, she sat considering him, her fluffy head bent a little to one side, her gray eyes eager, questioning.

"You mean?"

"That one's power, whatever it may be, never really counts for much, until one knows one has it. It's the knowing it that matters, not the power itself."

She smiled. His amplifying of her half-random phrase seemed lending a new dignity to her own vague idea, and her hostility lost itself for the moment in her pleasure at their mutual comprehension.

"Yes," she assented. "I can see that it might be rather nice to have."

"Perhaps you have it even more than you are aware," he suggested, with an apparent self-contradiction.

"The main question, after all, may be the way you use it."

He spoke thoughtfully, his mind upon the abstract question. Jessica, however, interpreted his words as being wholly personal, an echo of the rebuke he had given her, two days before. She flushed hotly at the memory, and her anger rose in swift rebellion at his assumed right to lecture her like this. Then her anger cooled as suddenly as it had arisen, cooled before her frankly personal interest in the subject of their talk.

"But why?" she asked bluntly. "Why should you want it?"

He answered her question with another.

"Miss West, haven't you ever known the sensation of distrusting the power you know you have?"

His application of the question was still entirely impersonal. Nevertheless, her mind swept swiftly backward over the past four days.

"Yes," she confessed honestly; "I have. But not you."

"Very much me," he assured her, with a sudden impulse to a frankness which took him quite unaware.

Again Jessica turned blunt.

"But I can't see why."

Her bluntness pleased him best of all her moods. It was sincere, full of the promise of an honest friendliness. Nevertheless, answering, his tone was a little dreary.

"Perhaps, some day, you may. In the meantime, please take my word for it that you have given me credit for the very thing I covet most."

And then the turbulent entrance of a group of chattering, letter-laden damsels cut short the conversation and left Jessica, still wondering at the reason for their truce, to ponder upon the meaning of his words, upon the mood which had dictated their falling cadence.

But Dorrance, returning to his book, was conscious of a sudden twinge of regret for certain plans which had been taking shape in the back of his brain. It was an old, old trick of his: becoming interested in some passing face, to dwell upon its possibilities, study them, resolve them into the elements of an entire character, and then a plot. That very morning, he had left his room secure in the truth of his own diagnosis. Now, all of a sudden, he began to doubt. And, after all, was his inkpot all there really was of life?

Two days later, Jessica, moved by some sudden

impulse, possibly the boredom resulting from their silent meals, possibly some unconscious yielding to Dorrance's implied rebuke, coaxed her mother into going out for a drive. In the hall, a maid awaited their return, four bits of pasteboard in her hand.

"The gentlemen have only just gone away, Mrs. West. They asked for Mr. West first, and one of them wrote a note on the back of his card."

It was never Jessica's habit to be backward in manifesting interest in her mother's social concerns, however small. Now, for reasons of her own, she felt she had every right to come forward and inspect the cards. *Mr. Willis S. Asquith*, she read; and *Mr. Willis Stone Asquith, Junior*. On the back of the former was written in pencil, —

*"We regret not finding you at home; but we shall give ourselves the pleasure of calling upon you again, the day after to-morrow. Meanwhile, we beg that you will let us know if we can be of any service to you."*

The cards shook a little in Mrs. West's hands.

"How in the world should they know I was here?" she queried, not unnaturally.

Prudently Jessica left the question in abeyance.

"Very nice indeed of the Asquiths," she commented, with an approving nod. "The next thing, though, is to find out who the Asquiths really are."

## CHAPTER SIX

**T**HEY were wonderfully alike, were the Asquiths, father and son, as they sat there side by side in the little drawing-room. Both were tall, both thin, both bald, both stamped with the indescribable seal of being Somebody in Particular, a seal which, affixed in the cradle, outlasts the needful preparation for the grave. One was famous; the other was about to become so. One had long been a lawyer of provincial reputation and not unknown in England. The other was refusing engineering calls abroad that he might give to his own colony and province the best fruits of his years-long study. Both had the same two hobbies: their ancient city and the great new bridge which, they believed, was destined to arouse that city from her commercial sleep and urge her to the forefront of the Dominion's life. The senior Asquith, in his time, had been perhaps the chief promoter of the bridge. His son, refusing office, leaving to others the honours and the income of which he had no especial need, yet kept himself in touch with the construction at each and every point. His opinions, freely asked, but sparingly given, were quoted not alone at Etchemin and Quebec, but in New York and Phoenixville as well, were quoted and, moreover, heeded. And now together, father and son, they were calling upon Mrs. Peter West.

And Mrs. West, facing them, her inevitable handkerchief of state between her hands, was distinctly nervous. With men like Dorrance or the Frenchman, men who apparently took her quite for granted, she felt she could be friendly to the verge of confidence. The Asquiths, by their very attitude of awaiting her opinions and of treating her judgments as of vast account, increased her shyness and dried up the sources of her speech. In some vague way, she realized that they were of supreme importance in the local world, that they had broken in upon concerns of great moment for the mere sake of calling on her humble self. She cleared her throat uneasily; then, as was her custom in times of extreme agitation, she laid a questioning, though furtive, hand upon her pothooks of hair, as if to assure herself that they had not yielded to her emotion and gone limp at a critical instant. She longed acutely for her husband, whose absence the guests deplored in courteously empty phrases. She even longed for Jessica, whose chatter would have eked out her own failing speech. She had begged Jessica to come down to the drawing-room; but Jessica, plotting certain things in her own brain, had shaken her fluffy head.

"Who are the Asquiths, anyway?" she had lingered to ask the oldest inhabitant of the house, that noon.

The oldest inhabitant took on a pontifical tone, as one who mentions greatness involved to the highest power.

"Mrs. Asquith, the Honourable Mrs. Asquith, is the descendant of two of our oldest lines which met in the veins of her paternal grandmother."

Jessica made no effort to sort out the metaphor.

Instead, she cut in with a flippancy which caused the oldest inhabitant to gasp, —

“Poor old lady! It must have given her varicose veins with a vengeance.”

Then she departed to her mirror, leaving the oldest inhabitant still gasping.

And now the Americans had arrived, and were finding themselves somewhat at a loss how to carry on a conversation with Mrs. Peter West. As a rule, the Americans whom they had seen previously were distressingly garrulous, either from lack of brains and breeding, or because they felt their position so assured as to demand no courteous reservations. The dumbness of Mrs. West was as unclassifiable to them as was her prematurely aged face, lined and thin beyond her years, as was her meagre, awkward frame clothed in its sweeping satin folds, as were her red, work-worn hands garnished with two rare pearls whose soft lustre took every vestige of life out of the fingers beneath and, like the great pearl brooch at her throat, turned her skin to the likeness of aged parchment.

And yet, both men were looking with kindly eyes upon their dowdy little hostess. She might be dowdy; she might be even a bit absurd; it was even within the limits of probability that she would bore them, bore them badly. Disgust, however, would never penetrate within that boredom. Even if it did, they still would have extended a cordial, kindly greeting to any friend of the man who had signed the note of introduction, a man whom the search for health had driven into the Arizona mountains. In that one fact, they showed their nationality. None but the English are so cordial to the random bearer of a note of introduction.

"Are you remaining here long, Mrs. West?" Mr. Asquith senior made not unnatural question, after the one-sided talk had skimmed at random over the usual impersonal topics decreed for an initial call.

"I— Really— I—" Mrs. West lost herself in a nervous contemplation of her handkerchief, which was sliding down her satin folds of skirt. "That depends," she said abruptly, when it had landed on the floor.

Quite naturally both men construed her discomfort and her words into a tacit admission that her plans in some way depended on the outcome of their call. It was a common trick of tourists, this holding their plans open for any local hospitality which might arise. Even what they mistook for a naive intimation that her future in some way depended upon them failed to strike a discordant note; rather, they accepted it simply as a tribute to their power to make the city enjoyable or no. Mr. Asquith senior, then, beholding her discomfort and interpreting it according to his lights, sought to bridge the conversational chasm created by her brief phrase.

"My wife will be back from Montreal, the first of next week," he said tentatively, while he stooped to restore the missing handkerchief.

"Thank you. I ought to have a pocket," she said, with embarrassed haste. "Then I shouldn't keep dropping it, all the time."

Mr. Willis Stone Asquith, Junior, hastened to his father's aid.

"And there are a lot of such jolly old things here in the city that you want to see, things you can't get anywhere else, don't you know," he urged persuasively.

Mr. Asquith senior rallied.

"And, as I started to say, of course, my wife will call on you at once, and I hope she may be able to persuade you to dine with us, at an early day."

"Thank you ever so much. I know the Colonel would be delighted," Mrs. West responded, in two separate jerks.

Mr. Asquith's eyes grew vague; but his voice lost none of its easy, kindly courtesy, as he echoed, in obvious question, —

"The Colonel?"

"Yes. Colonel West. It's a title they've given him, out there." Her uneasiness temporarily lost itself in the pride of her explanation.

"So your husband is a soldier. Mr. Andrews should have told us. But when will he return?"

"Jessica heard from him, to-day. He told her it would be about three weeks. Jessica is my daughter," she added hurriedly, as if to forestall another question.

"Your daughter is here with you, then?" Mr. Asquith asked, for the note of introduction had been reticent regarding the West connection, and he was conscious of a prudent desire to withdraw before too great an invasion of tourists swept into his home.

"Yes. She's out of school now, and I suppose the Colonel never will be willing to stir, after this, without taking her along. She's been three years at school in Denver; it was Miss Girard-Clegg's finishing school." Mrs. West breathed more freely. It seemed to her that she was finding her social feet. Indeed, it was no small achievement, to her mind, to have ventured to speak two consecutive sentences in the face of her august and impassive guests.

"Is she your only —"

"Mama dear?" A voice of haunting sweetness came across the threshold of the open door. "Excuse my interrupting you; but I am going now."

Both men glanced up, stared, smiled. Then the one allowed his glance to drop back to the object of their call; the other remained staring, smiling, as if stupefied by the unexpected picture before his bored and critical eyes. Mr. Willis Stone Asquith, Junior had met many women in many lands; he had long since come to pride himself that his veteran heart was immune. Now that veteran heart gave a quick bump of admiration. What was worse, he was too absorbed in the object of that admiration to heed the unwonted antics of his heart.

Framed in the narrow doorway of the drawing-room, backed by the dull-hued paper of the opposite wall stood a vision of white cloth and lace. A slender golden girdle marked her waist, a string of dull gold beads lay at her throat, and her golden hair was crowned with a wide, soft white hat whose white plumes were held in place by a great buckle of the same dull gold. Under the hat, two slanting, mocking gray eyes laughed out from a creamy oval face, one roguish dimple accented the smile which curved the scarlet lips. Nothing could have been more simple, nothing more guileless. Nothing at all conveyed a hint of the long half-hour which Jessica had spent before her mirror, communing with herself while she toiled to produce that vision. Now, as she halted on the threshold, her eyes were fixed upon her mother's face; but her every nerve was tingling with the satisfied conscious-

ness of the effect she had produced upon Mr. Willis Stone Asquith, Junior.

Mrs. West was conscious of it, too, and something akin to pride rose up within her. After all, the vision was her own, the child to whom she herself had given birth.

"Come in, Jessica," she said accordingly.

But Jessica shook her head.

"You know I promised, Mama dear," she said, with a sweet unction that completely veiled the vagueness of the phrase; "and you always like to have me keep my promises."

And the vision passed on, out of sight and hearing.

Next noon, Kay Dorrance lunched at the Garrison Club with Mr. Willis Stone Asquith, Junior. It had been with a pocketful of introductions that Dorrance had stepped out of the train at Quebec; but his stay in the old city was to be so long an one that he had been in no hurry to present them. The past months had been a season of unremitting professional work; he was tired and ready to rest a bit, before taking up even the light duties of society which his introductions were bound to impose upon him. Just one exception had he made, however. For two years, he and young Willis Asquith had known each other well by reputation and by frequent interchange of letters. Dorrance had lost no time in meeting Asquith, and the luncheon had been the natural result of such a meeting.

Dorrance was critical. Always he had had the best of all things, friends included. He saw no reason that he should not go on indefinitely, having the very best, and he made his choices with the utmost care.

Asquith's person, long, lean, athletic, pleased him no less than did Asquith's manner and Asquith's conversation. Dorrance, sincere, but impetuous, reflected with envy that, whatever happened, a man like Asquith never would have things to take back. Older by five or six years than Dorrance, the Englishman had no streak of red in his sparse hair, the pace set by his long, straight legs was slower by far than that of his companion, handicapped though that companion was by the results of a too strenuous game of mounted polo.

Over the luncheon, the talk was of the shop shoppy. It ranged over Canadian politics and American fiction, dallied with Dorrance's pet dream of uniting the two, struck off sharply to the great new bridge and ended on the Japanese question which periodically menaces the Anglo-Saxon world. Luncheon over, however, the two men lighted cigarettes and, at Asquith's suggestion, started for a saunter on the terrace, while the talk ceased to be conversation and became gossip pure and simple.

It was Asquith who began it, albeit in a roundabout fashion.

"We called at your shop, yesterday, the pater and I," he remarked tentatively.

Dorrance raised his brows interrogatively, while he flicked away his point of ash.

"Sorry I wasn't in, to do the honours. It's a good little shop, though."

Asquith voiced the question which had been taking shape in his mind from the hour of his meeting Kay Dorrance.

"Good enough; but what ever sent you there? I

should have thought the Château would be more in your line."

"Not always. Now and then I like something smaller and more personal. You meet all sorts, in either place; but, in a large hotel, you don't notice the other sort so much. In work like mine, it is the other sort that counts; else, one would get monotonous. Besides, I fancy the Maple Leaf is in the family, like red hair. I had a cousin there, a few years ago, a Miss Nancy Howard."

Asquith nodded.

"I met her. She is in England now?"

"Yes. She married a man with the heart of a saint and the brain of a gosling, and she is riotously happy with him and their little girl. She told me about the place, and the name stuck in my mind."

Asquith nodded again. Then he made a fresh start.

"Do you know a Mrs. Peter West?"

"We sit at the same table."

"What do you think of her?" Asquith continued, as one bound upon extracting information. All in all, there is no gossip comparable to the male Briton.

"Virgin soil; but not half so deadly as she looks,"

Dorrance answered, while he flung away his cigarette.

"Thank you, not another. Now and then, she would make an undertaker laugh. Still, she has her good points, and I rather like her."

Asquith assented gravely to his companion's diagnosis.

"I didn't mind her much, myself," he said temperately then. "She had a note of introduction; at least, her husband did, and we called, expecting to find the old gentleman there. Instead, we found her, and,

as you say, I rather liked the little woman. She isn't the strident sort one generally finds Americans. Oh, I don't mean you, my dear fellow!" Asquith pulled himself up suddenly. "You're quite the exception, you know."

"On the contrary," Dorrance corrected him gravely; "I am quite the rule. But go on."

"I was only going to say about the letter. It was a bit unusual in its appearing, not in the least what one would look for from a quaint old chap like Mrs. West. Her writing is huge, all italics, you might say; it seems to fall all over itself in a snarl of catacorners. As for the envelope —"

Dorrance laughed unfeelingly at the shudder which accompanied the pause.

"Out with it, man!" he advised his companion. "You may as well, and I have no national nerves to speak of."

"It came to the pater," Asquith explained; "came from a man, and about another man, and it was blue, the sort of thing they call robin's egg, and the whole flap was covered with a monstrous silver crest. I don't know what the beast was supposed to be. It had horns and a curly tail —"

"The devil?" Dorrance queried.

"Possibly. Anyway, I doubt whether it ever saw so much as the outer portal of the Herald's College. It looked more the sort of thing one meets in a bad nightmare, and it was as big and shiny as the spring announcement of a Saint Roch's haberdasher."

"Asquith," Dorrance broke in suddenly; "did you see the young person?"

Asquith stared, as well he might, at the apparently

malapropos introduction of the theme for which he had been angling.

"Who is that?" he asked in swift evasion, for something in his companion's tone was out of all harmony with the picture which never once had left his mental retina since the day before.

"The daughter."

"You know her, then?"

"No. Quite the contrary. She knows me. She knew me vehemently from the very start."

"Who introduced you?"

Dorrance laughed.

"Hanged if I know! I rather think she did the deed, herself."

Asquith pondered.

"How extraordinary!" he observed at length. Then he took a fresh start. "What is she like?" he asked cautiously.

"A holy terror," Dorrance made succinct reply.

"I beg your pardon?"

Dorrance laughed again, while he plunged his hands into his pockets. Both laugh and gesture were ridiculously boyish, when one took into consideration the steady intentness of his level eyes.

"I beg yours. I spoke in the vernacular, and I doubt if you have any corresponding term. Miss Woolley is distinctly fresh and unconventional."

"Miss Woolley?"

Dorrance nodded.

"Miss Woolley-West, and new, at that. From her accent, she comes from beyond the Missouri; from her gowns, her father has much money; from the way she wears them, he hasn't had it very long."

"I see." Asquith spoke reflectively, as if weighing many things in his British brain. "Your real type."

"Type be hanged! She's not like anybody I ever saw before."

"She is very pretty."

"You've seen her, then? Yes, she's pretty, and in an unexpected sort of way. Her eyes are distracting; she is charming, when she wants to be. Otherwise —" Dorrance shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Otherwise?" Asquith persisted.

"Otherwise, like the curly little girl, she's horrid. Wherefore this curiosity? Have you run afoul of her, too?"

"Too?"

"Yes. I went on her black books at once. She caught me watching her, and resented it. I think she suspected I was amused at her. Anyway, she has sulked in my presence, ever since, except for once when she aroused herself to the point of expressing her disapproval of my personal attributes."

Turning, Asquith swept his companion with a glance which held untold liking and comprehension. Then —

"The little cat!" he said, and, from a man of his carefully guarded speech, the phrase was full of condemnation.

"Yes," Dorrance assented. "As a rule, one doesn't say those things. Still, we must forgive a good deal on the score of her newness. She has arrived so recently that she hasn't yet had time to unpack her manners. You and I weren't born and bred in a mining-camp, you know. If we had been, we also might have developed greater frankness."

Again Asquith's downright persistence showed itself.

"But don't you find her interesting?" he queried.

"Yes, very," Dorrance responded with conviction.

"Only —"

But Asquith interrupted, and his tone was thoughtful.

"The mater is a bit critical," he observed. "What will she be to introduce?"

"The deuce and all," Dorrance made reassuring answer.

Asquith digested the answer at his leisure. Then he asked slowly, —

"You were saying, when I interrupted, *only* —"

"Was I?" Dorrance's eyes gleamed at the deliberate thought-processes of his companion.

"Yes. I would like to know what was in your mind," Asquith urged him. "You were saying *only*, and I cut in and stopped you. Only what?"

Dorrance reflected swiftly, swiftly knotted together his broken ends of thought.

"Only," he told Asquith; "it is a total impossibility to predict what she will do next." And then he ceased speaking, interrupted by the sudden confirmation of his own words.

From afar, Jessica had seen them coming towards her. She too had been caught with a desire for the terrace, that sunny, breezy afternoon; for a good hour, she had been pacing, pacing up and down the long stripe of boards which clings to the cliff above the wide blue river. Few people were out, that afternoon. It was still quite early; moreover, the residents of the city were already starting for their summer homes on lake and river, and, as for the tourists, they were too busy "doing" the place to have any time to spare



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for what is, perhaps, the most unique and obvious charm of all the ancient city. Accordingly, only an occasional group was dotted on the great brown expanse of terrace, and, in the clear June air, people stood out distinctly, a terrace-length away.

From afar, Jessica had recognized Asquith. The tall, slim figure, graceful, virile, would have been unmistakable in the heart of any crowd. Jessica watched it with the open admiration made safe by distance, watched it with a girlish exultation in its erect contrast to that other figure moving along beside it with a distressful limp. No better foil for Asquith, she told herself, could have been imagined than this awkward companion, doing his best to keep some sort of step with the vigorous man at his side.

Then, as they came nearer, the girl let her eyes slide from Asquith to the companion whose sole interest for her lay in his ability to throw emphasis upon the perfect carriage of the man beside him. The next instant, her cheeks grew scarlet, and a new look, half fear, half pity, had dawned in her eyes. Under the small gray cap, cocked down before the dazzling sun, she had made out the tawny hair and steady brown eyes of Kay Dorrance.

There was the briefest possible pause, while Jessica shut her teeth together upon a bitter memory. Then, vouchsafing not a glance at Asquith, she bore down on Dorrance, her eyes appealing and her hands extended.

"Why didn't somebody tell me?" she said impulsively. "You know, you must know that I never meant it!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**J**ULES DE LA HAYE was not bad, in the sense that spells itself with capital letters. He was merely totally selfish, totally greedy, totally unscrupulous in catering to that greed. Under a lacquer of sentimentality, he was as hard as a bit of flint, yet he carefully decorated the lacquer with a border of bows and smiles, of plaintive, broken words and still more plaintive sighs. It was all in the game. In some book or other, he had come across the statement that more flies could be caught with molasses than with vinegar. And the people about him were but flies. He would make his molasses thick and black and strong accordingly.

Nominally, Monsieur de la Haye had come out from France to enter business life in a fresher, less crowded community. Impoverished Frenchmen of better ancestry than brains, of better manners than morals were of no rare occurrence in the city of his birth. He was quick to discover that his best chances for advancement lay apart from the boulevards of Paris. He gave it out to all men, even his intimates, that he expected to win that advancement in commercial life. In his own mind, however, the map of his future career lay through far less strenuous courses. To go out to Quebec, and, in that bilingual city, to remain until he possessed fair mastery of English; then to furbish up his manners and

seek the States: this was his programme. And in the States, he had been told, a title-loving heiress bloomed upon every family tree, waiting to be plucked by any ambitious hand that offered.

Of course, he would go into an office, would speculate a little, by way of giving colour to his claims of commercial zeal. This would occupy his time while he was making choice of heiresses, would serve as check upon the chosen heiress, once she became too exigent of his daylight hours. As for the heiress herself, she mattered little, beyond the mere question of her riches. Money he must have, and in great abundance; it would be asking too much of the gods to demand beauty as well. As for brain, he owned to a distinct preference against it. Two brains in one household had a tendency to complicate discussions; and, although he considered himself self-distrustful, Monsieur Jules de la Haye regarded his own brain as quite sufficient for the entire menage.

This was his creed; and his creed and an English phrase-book, with his needful raiment and a box of cigarettes had been his whole stock in trade, when he had appeared at the table of the Maple Leaf in the end of May. A facile memory and a trick of using well-known names in referring to his friends had won him admission to the house, had won him, later, the possibility of a chance, once his English had improved, to occupy a stool behind the counter of a Saint Roch's bank. He sounded specious, looked presentable, and his English was still so far in the future tense as to allow the manager ample time for investigation of his past career. Meanwhile, a provisional promise was far more courteous than a flat refusal. The manager

smiled and promised; Monsieur de la Haye smiled and bowed and thanked, thanked humbly and effusively. Then he went his way.

The Frenchman could be tireless in carrying out his ends. For the present, his main end was to be achieved in English; and, accordingly, he bought a second phrase-book and set himself to work at it, wholly regardless of the fact that, after the fashion of phrase-books, it held little which could be of conversational use to a beginner in the language. Later, he economized on cigarettes and bought himself a phonograph; but that was not until he had met Jessica West.

It had been his first intention to journey to the States to seek his heiress. From the hour of Jessica's appearing at the Maple Leaf, he began to question the need of such a journey. Jessica's frocks and rings, her obvious trick of procuring for herself whatever took her fancy, her carriage and the poise of her fluffy yellow head betokened, to the Frenchman's heedful eye, that, if not an heiress in all literalness of the word, she yet possessed most of its more essential attributes. Moreover, she was pretty, very pretty. To be sure, her manners were a bit exotic; she was a shade more friendly to the passing stranger than his own sister was allowed to be. However, she was American. To his mind, as to many others, that word explained all things.

According to the custom of his country, once he had met Jessica and had bestowed upon her the sanctifying grace of his approval, he sought to increase the acquaintance by means of paying court to Mrs. West. To be sure, for a few troubled instants, he had contemplated the future need of going back to Paris in company with

this angular, uneasy mamma-in-law. Then he had dismissed the anxiety. Mrs. West did not look too rugged; like other fragile persons, she might not bear transplanting. Besides, Jessica herself would make some sacrifice seem worth the while. He laid a preliminary box of flowers at Mrs. West's maternal feet.

To his extreme surprise, the small attention landed him in a perfect net of trouble. Not only was Jessica plainly enraged that he had passed her by and placed the offering at her mother's feet; but Mrs. West quite as plainly regarded the flowers as tribute to her own individual charms. Poor Monsieur de la Haye, tongue-tied alike by courtesy and by lack of suitable vocabulary, was doomed to spend the succeeding day ground between the upper and nether millstones of Jessica's wrath and of Mrs. West's fulsome and too specific thanks. By evening, however, he could endure the situation no longer. When Jessica left the supper table, he gulped down the last of his meal, followed her out of the room, out of the house, and to the terrace.

He overtook her on the end of the terrace where she stood leaning on the rail, gazing down upon the chimney-pots beneath, whence slim wisps of smoke came trailing upward, dainty witness of the crude domestic feasting going on within. Over the Levis heights and above the river, the June day was dying slowly, as if loath to leave the picture. Already the shadows of the coming night brooded on the water; but a last vagrant beam struck warmly on the side of the little ferry, just sliding into her dock upon the farther shore. It was all so lazy, so peaceful, so apparently purposeless, save for the gladdening the eye received from such a restful picture.

"May I spik' to you?"

She turned abruptly. The voice of Monsieur de la Haye had fallen on her ears, and its hesitation was not wholly due to lack of English.

"It's a free country," she told him gayly.

Monsieur de la Haye looked perplexed.

"Yes, perhaps," he made guarded answer.

"Then go on," she bade him.

"But I wish to remain here," he explained. "I wish to talk."

Jessica's elbows returned to the rail; her face was once more fixed upon the scene below, but the white of one eye was cocked up at the waiting Frenchman.

"Why don't you, then?" she asked as casually as if at least one reason were not quite apparent.

"Have I Mademoiselle's permission?" he inquired.

Jessica nodded.

"Go it, Boots," she said.

No wonder that the Frenchman looked mystified. However, it was the turn of Jessica to look mystified, an instant later.

"Your mamma is exceeding grateful old lady," the Frenchman assured her, with a glibness born of long preparation of the phrase.

Jessica laughed softly to herself.

"You'd better not say that to her face," she admonished him.

"Yes; but she is. She is exceeding grateful for my flowers. She thinks she owns them."

"Well, she does," Jessica responded blankly. "Or did you lend them to her to smell of, and mean her to send them back again, after she had done it?"

"The flowers are for you," Monsieur de la Haye continued categorically. Then, diving into his side

pocket, he drew out a small volume and hastily fluttered its thin, narrow leaves.

"My name isn't Mrs. Peter West," Jessica reminded him chidingly. "That was the address on the box. I am Miss West. You shouldn't mix things up like that."

The Frenchman lifted one hand in appeal; then he fluttered the leaves more distractedly than ever.

"Do not be cold," he besought her. "Have pity. It is a faithful heart you wound. Only wait until — until I can spik' the correct word."

There came a silence, on Jessica's side fraught with an amused determination to let him work his own way out of the subject without the assistance of her French, on his, broken by impatient little *hhs* and hasty turning of the translucent leaves. At length, his face assumed a look of peace, and, his finger marking a still doubtful word, he spoke.

"I will explain," he proclaimed, with sonorous dignity. "The spirit of the flowers I send to you; but to your mother I must donate their fragrant carcasses."

Jessica turned to him, her face, save for her eyes, devoid of all expression.

"Thank you," she said hastily. "I will go and absorb their spirit." Then hastily she went away and left him standing there, a smile upon his lips and his hands clasped about the little book.

Dorrance, meanwhile, had followed Mrs. West along the hall and had paused invitingly upon the threshold of the drawing-room.

"You're coming in?" he said.

She hesitated, flushed, then entered the room where

Dorrance, with a word of apology, limped past her and drew out her favourite chair. Mrs. West watched him with contented eyes. To her life, starved in all the little attentions which go so far to the making of a woman's happiness, it was an unwonted experience to have some one wait upon her in this way, to have her comfort made the chief concern of the moment. Moreover, from the first of her meeting Dorrance, she had felt singularly at ease with him, singularly full of trust in him and in his judgment. To herself alone in her own room, apart from her daughter's mocking eyes, she phrased it that she felt just as though she could talk to him as if she had known him always. Not that she did it, however. Lifelong habits of reticence are not to be broken down so suddenly as that. It was something, however, that she wished it were possible to break them down. Asked, she would have found it hard to tell wherein Dorrance's attraction for her lay. She liked his whole personality which seemed to her to be so in harmony with itself that, noticing his limp at once, she had regretted it no more than she had regretted his red hair, his firm, thin lips and the steady intentness of his brown eyes. In short, she liked Dorrance far too well to wish him changed in any one particular.

Seated, she looked up at him with a grateful little smile which obliterated some of the vertical lines cut in her face.

"You're very nice to me," she said, with a simple gratitude which made a curious appeal to Dorrance, sated as he was by the fulsome adulation of the women among whom, as a rule, his life was being spent. Then she coloured, as if fearful lest she might have spoken

too familiarly. "We missed you at lunch," she added, with a return to her uneasily formal manner.

Dorrance dropped down into the chair beside her and faced her with friendly eyes. Even in the few days of their acquaintance, his initial curiosity regarding her was yielding to pity and to something closely akin to liking. As he had told Asquith, that same noon, she was manifestly impossible, and yet not half bad, after all. When she came out from under the shadow cast by that radiant, dominant daughter of hers, she showed herself thin-skinned and not devoid of a certain homely dignity. It was a pity she had allowed her face to grow so fretful: Else, she would not have been unattractive to the eye. And, besides, there was no obvious reason for the fretfulness. The Wests were manifestly, almost aggressively prosperous; after her own domineering fashion, Jessica was good to her dowdy little mother; while, as for the absent Colonel, his face had been his own best guarantee. The old question, still unanswered, cropped up once more in Dorrance's mind; but he tossed it aside in order to reply to his companion's words.

"I was lunching with a friend of yours," he told her.

"A friend? I didn't know I had any; at least, up here."

Dorrance was wholly unprepared for the sudden note of tragedy in her voice, for the expression that had flashed into the washed-out, inexpressive eyes.

"You've one, here in the house, I hope," he assured her kindly.

"You mean you?" she queried, with a baldness that brought the colour to his cheeks.

"I should be glad and proud to have you count me one," he evaded skilfully. "I meant your daughter, though."

"Jessica?"

"Who else?" He laughed a little, to cover his real embarrassment at the wonder in her voice. "My mother and sister are the greatest possible chums. I supposed it was always so. And Miss West is very charming."

"I suppose she is." The assent came listlessly. "People seem to think so. But she has been away from home most of the time, the last three years."

"All the more reason you must enjoy having her with you now." Dorrance spoke lightly, with the set purpose of concealing from his companion his own increasing consciousness that he had trodden upon dangerous ground.

"Yes," Mrs. West assented again. Then she looked up straight into Dorrance's eyes. "What do you really think of Jessica?" she demanded.

If she had rolled her carefully-tended handkerchief into a ball and hurled the ball into his face, Dorrance could not have been more astounded, more filled with a nervous desire to dodge. To his mind, conversation should be kept as impersonal as possible, at least in the early stages of acquaintance. Few things, however, could be more personal than to have a mother request him to stand and deliver his opinion of her daughter. All sorts of half-truths and evasions dashed through his mind. Then, dismissing them, he answered, with hearty honesty, —

"I really have seen almost nothing of your daughter, Mrs. West. Still, she seems to me a girl of great char-

acter. Of course, her beauty is an established fact that I don't need to mention."

"Oh." The old lines came out once more in Mrs. West's face, and she caught the inside of her lower lip between her teeth. "And you think she really is beautiful?"

"Wonderfully so." Dorrance's voice still held the ring of honest conviction, although he could form no notion of Mrs. West's motive in pressing home the unconventional question.

She sighed a little, and the last of the light died from her eyes.

"That's what they all say," she observed, as if speaking less to Dorrance than herself. "I suppose it must be true." But there was singularly little of maternal pride in the conclusion. "Who was the friend?" she asked at length. "The friend you were eating lunch with?"

"Mr. Asquith; the son, I mean." But, if he had expected her face to light, he was doomed to disappointment.

"Oh, him," she said.

"He told me he had called on you," Dorrance reminded her disingenuously.

Mrs. West corrected him.

"He and his father came here to see the Colonel, and were disappointed not to find him. I don't see how they knew he was here, though."

Dorrance saw no need to inform her. In fact, up to that very moment, he had supposed her to be ultimately responsible for the silver-crested envelopes.

"You enjoyed them?" he queried, still with the

friendly little smile which sat so well upon his keen young face.

"I thought they seemed like real nice men," she answered. "They were polite, and said they should have Mrs. Asquith ask me to eat dinner there, some day. I expect the Colonel will like them, when he comes to see them."

Again Dorrance could speak heartily, sincerely.

"I have no doubt of that. They are a rare pair of men. Do you look for your husband soon?"

"In a few days, I hope. We had a telegram, to-day." A new note of eagerness came into her voice.

Dorrance rose.

"I congratulate you," he said. "You must have missed him horribly, alone in this city full of strangers and strange ways. When he comes, your good times will begin in earnest, yours and your daughter's, too."

Her face was lighting swiftly; then, at his final phrase, the light was quenched, the lines between her brows cut themselves in deeply.

"Yes," she assented heavily. "Jessica and the Colonel will have their hands full, I guess."

"Hullo, Mama!" Jessica's blond, bare head and Jessica's mocking face appeared outside the open window. "So that's where you are? I'm coming in."

However, by the time she reached the threshold, Dorrance had vanished, and her mother sat alone.

"What's become of Mr. Dorrance?" she demanded, as she sat down in the chair he had but just abandoned, and turned her face, still lighted with mirth, to her mother.

Before answering the question, Mrs. West paused for a moment's study of her young daughter. Yes,

she was beautiful, radiantly beautiful, and as high-spirited, as imperious as any queen. Yet, with all her wayward imperiousness, she was gay, generous, loving. Candidly, as she studied her, Mrs. West made impersonal enumeration of her virtues.

"What's become of Mr. Dorrance?" Jessica demanded again. "Have you eaten him up? You look as if you had and, what's more, you look as if he had given you indigestion."

"Mr. Dorrance has gone upstairs, to do some packing."

The girl frowned in swift displeasure.

"What for? Is he going away?" There was a certain proprietorship in the question.

"I didn't ask him."

"No; but he might have told. I don't see what he wants to go off for, just as I was getting to like him," Jessica grumbled, with sudden fractiousness.

"I liked him from the start. He has been very polite to me," Mrs. West responded, and there was a note of self-assertion in her voice.

Jessica laughed carelessly.

"Oh, you; that's different," she replied. "Besides, he'd find out what I thought about it, if he wasn't polite to you. But I didn't care about him much at first. I thought he was stuck-up and critical; now, though —" She paused, flushing to her eyes, as she recalled their meeting on the terrace and what had gone before. Then she shifted her ground, with a sudden reticence which, by its very unusualness, showed the place the little scene was holding in her mind. "And now," she added; "I've come to get the spirit of my roses."

"Your roses?"

"Yes. The roses Monsieur de la Haye sent."

A dull red wave mounted across Mrs. West's cheeks and rested on her angular cheek-bones, throwing them into merciless relief. In fact, it seemed that emotion could touch Mrs. West only in order to point with remorseless finger at some line of latent ugliness. Quite well aware of the fact, herself, it only appeared to her to add a final sting to all her woes.

"Mr. de la Haye sent the roses to me, Jessica," she said, with swift asperity.

"Do call him *Monsieur*, Mama," Jessica corrected. "*Mister* doesn't match the rest of him at all. As for the roses, he has just been explaining to me, up on the terrace, that the carcasses were yours, but the spirit was for me." And she ended her explanation with a burst of laughter so infectious that the maid, sitting in the hall outside, laughed too in sympathy.

No laughter was in Mrs. West's mood, however. She rose, the dark flush still painting her lean cheek-bones, an angry lustre in her washed-out eyes.

"They are my roses, Jessica," she repeated sternly. "They were sent here, addressed to me, and they are mine. You try to take almost everything away from me; but you shall not have those flowers. You have enough. At least, you oughtn't to grudge me those."

Jessica, lounging in her chair, stared up at her mother with astounded eyes, while the merriment dropped out of her face, leaving it perplexed and anxious.

"What's the matter, Mama?" she expostulated at her mother's retreating, rigid back. "I didn't mean

any harm; I was only laughing. To hear you talk, anybody would say you were getting jealous of me."

Even in her consternation, she ended in a little ripple of mirth at the idea contained in her last words. But Mrs. West, mirthless and apparently unheeding, only quickened her step and vanished up the stairs. By the time Jessica could realize that her mother was in earnest and hasten after her to make her peace, the snap of her mother's key turning in the lock and the succeeding silence warned the girl that any overtures of peace were, for the present, useless.

Alone in her own room, all her merriment extinguished, the girl sat down forlornly by the window, rested her arms on the sill and buried her face in her arms.

"Dear God," she whispered softly; "do send dad back to me soon, or I shall die."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"SHE'LL probably wear a long-tailed satin gown and a diamond tiara," Mrs. Asquith remarked pessimistically to her husband.

It was a week later, and Mrs. Asquith's best drawing-room was ablaze with light; Mrs. Asquith's best dinner frock was majestically trailing over the moquette carpet beside her easy chair. As for Mrs. Asquith herself, she was large, commanding, critical; she wore eyeglasses and a perpetual frown. A bundle of conventions herself, she demanded conventions from others, and she was slightly inclined to sulk when those others failed to fulfil her demands.

Mr. Asquith, lean, domestically gentle and as casual as it is possible for a man to be, was standing with his hands in the pockets of his dinner coat and one toe on the fender before the crackling, purring grate. Beside him lay Mrs. Asquith's pet poodle, groomed and bedecked like a bride upon her wedding morning. A wide white ribbon encircled his neck, another rose up, stiff and straight, above his curly topknot, and he rejoiced in the expressive name of Tottykins.

Mr. Asquith smiled inscrutably to himself, while he listened to his wife's predictions.

"No. On the contrary, I think you will find her quite a modest violet," he made reassuring answer.

"That girl!" Mrs. Asquith's voice bristled with the exclamation points which she had been storing up during a week of industrious question and reply.

"The mother."

Mrs. Asquith's glasses, which had been slowly tilting forward on her nose, fell with a click.

"Oh, I don't mind about the mother," she said disdainfully. "Old America is never very bad; the younger generation keeps the upper hand too much for that. It is the girl I dread."

"Too bad you didn't find her at home when you called," Mr. Asquith suggested, more for the sake of filling the pause than because the subject seemed to him fit cause for mourning.

"Not at all. The mother was quite enough. However, she was a plain little person, and not too talkative. Most Americans are so tiresomely confidential; but Mrs. West really seemed to grudge me the information that it was a pleasant day." Mrs. Asquith, while she spoke, shook out her skirts, watching the heavy fall of the silken folds. Tottykins watched it, too, determining in his canine brain that those folds would make a good bed. When, quite unrebuked, he had moved in and settled himself to his liking, Mrs. Asquith spoke again. "Well," she said, with a slow accent of relief; "at least, it will soon be over." But she spoke with no foreshadowing of the truth.

Out in the dining-room, the Asquith butler was moving to and fro, giving final touches to the table, for a dinner was on foot, a dinner of many courses. Dutifully, in furtherance of Mr. Asquith's wishes and in recognition of the note of introduction, Mrs. Asquith had lost no time in calling at the Maple Leaf. The

call had been followed, in due season, by an invitation to dine.

"We've got to have the Bidwell girls, too, you know; and I like to get them over, at this season," she explained to her husband and son. "We may as well get them all done up at once. Can't you hunt up some men, Willis? It's not worth while to have a dinner for less than ten or twelve."

Willis reflected long, as was his wont. Deliberate by nature, his present deliberation was increased by his desire to hunt up men whose charms would not eclipse his own in the slanting gray eyes of that vision in white and gold. For the enjoyment of the Bidwell girls, he felt no compunctions at all. They were merely cousins out of a side street, cousins who went through the rest of the year on the strength of "the night we dined at the Asquiths', you know." Anything would do for them. He reflected. Then he suggested a musty lawyer and two dowdy captains, all three sure to be on hand for the sole and cogent reason of lack of invitations to be anywhere else, all three of the sort that one declares to be as good as gold, and then forgets entirely. Finally, he added Kay Dorrance to the list, merely for his own and his mother's pleasure. On the morning after the Garrison Club luncheon, Dorrance had vanished on a wholly unpremeditated trip up the Saguenay; but doubtless he would be back in time. Dorrance possessed social charm, much charm; but already he had registered his impression of Miss West as being a holy terror, whatever that phrase might mean. Moreover, he had used words to the effect that he was in Miss Woolley-West's black books. Willis felt no sinister forebodings.

He was still lingering in his room, adding the final touches to his toilet, when a premature ring of the door-bell announced the arrival of the Bidwell girls. Willis smiled at himself, and continued his leisurely ministrations to his back hair. The Bidwell girls were tall and lean and given over to charities. Worse still, they were learned, and prone to talk of books and even symphonies. They varied the monotony of their black silk frocks by inserting coloured tuckers which Willis shrewdly suspected them of owning in one common fund of self-beautification, drawing lots for them, whenever the social emergency arose. A mauve one with silvery spots was obviously first choice, since, whatever the others, that one was bound to put in an appearance.

A second jangling of the bell brought Willis on tiptoe to the stair-top, where he was summarily spied and dragged forth by one of the dowdy captains, just taking off his hat upon the threshold. A second captain followed him; and then, just on the stroke of the hour, the lawyer, and still no sign of Mrs. West and her daughter; no sign of Dorrance whose training, Asquith felt assured, ought to have fitted him for better things.

Mrs. Asquith shifted her folds to the other side, upsetting Tottykins in the process; then she took it out of the eldest Bidwell girl with the merciless petulance which one feels free to bestow upon one's relatives. The other Bidwell girls were busy with the captains whose gilded trappings atoned for other deficits. They were wholly unconscious of the sufferings of their elder sister, impaled upon the point of Mrs. Asquith's sharpening tongue, almost wholly oblivious of the passing moments. Far in the background, beyond the half-closed door, the butler hovered like an uneasy ghost,

one eye upon the table at his side, the other on the group before his lady, ready to announce the dinner, the instant that that group was full.

Twenty minutes past the hour, and the bell rang again. There came a light laugh, a light step on the stairs, and then silence. Hardly a second later, the door opened to admit Kay Dorrance who came bolting into the room, with shame and amusement struggling for mastery upon his honest face.

"I do assure you, Mrs. Asquith," he said, with a penitence which could not fail to mollify the most exacting hostess; "I was never late to an engagement in all my life till now. I truly couldn't help myself."

He laughed; but both face and voice betrayed such genuine contrition for his own misdoing that Mrs. Asquith held out a cordial hand, in token of forgiveness and of instant liking.

"Don't mind, Mr. Dorrance. Such things are bound to happen now and then. My son tells me we are to have the good luck to keep you with us for nearly the whole year. Sit down and tell me all your plans."

The butler came and went, his smooth brow barred with anxious thought for the quality of his waiting dinner. Willis Asquith, making a bored pretext of talking to the eldest Bidwell girl, played with his fob. Now and then he glanced at the door, glanced rebukingly, as if he thought its oaken panels were in some way responsible for the non-appearance of the belated guests. The youngest Bidwell girl had scrimped herself at luncheon, by way of ensuring her ability to do full justice to the feast to come; now she confessed to herself that she was fast turning to an aching void. And then, at last, the faces brightened, the dragging

conversation grew alert. Once again there came the light, girlish laugh outside; the light step was unmistakably turning towards the drawing-room door.

Contrary to their custom, it was Mrs. West who came in first. Her annoyance at their unseemly delay had lent a flush to her cheeks, an angry sparkle to her eyes. Her head was more erect than usual, and her hair, arranged by her daughter's clever fingers, was a miracle of art. Dressed in a clinging crape gown whose dove-coloured folds swept the floor at her feet, her collar fastened with a single gem which might have represented the total Asquith income for any given year, Mrs. Peter West was a figure calculated to win at least the respect of her critical hostess. Mrs. Asquith welcomed her with an unction mingled with relief, and withheld her criticism for the satin and tiara to be expected in the rear.

Instead, however, of the dreaded satin frock, Mrs. Asquith's eyes rested on a slim, girlish figure dressed in a fluff of muslin ruffles, reaching from the one great, lustrous pearl that hung in the hollow of the throat to the trim heels of the white satin slippers. Mrs. Asquith took swift note of the cut of the frock, of the quality of the lace that edged the ruffles. Then she breathed a second sigh of relief, and held out her hand. To her surprise, her hand was totally ignored. Instead, the girl cast herself upon Tottykins who had been before his mistress in his welcome.

"Well, oo b'essed 'ittle sing! Did oo put on all oo's best c'o'es an' come to meet zis auntie?" Jessica burst out delightfully; and, before Willis Asquith, watching, could divine her intention and forestall it, the girl had pounced upon the poodle, caught him up

in her lace-frilled arms and nestled him, rampant bows and all, against the pearl-filled hollow of her throat. Then, with the dog riding high on her fluffy shoulder, she finally advanced to meet her hostess. "Isn't he a darling? Is he yours?" she asked without preface while, with her disengaged hand, she pressed the dog's flat, hairy little cheek against her smooth round one.

For the space of a second, Dorrance's eyes sought those of Willis Asquith; but Willis Asquith, man-fashion in an emergency, was wrestling with the tongs.

"Yes. He is mine. I think this must be —" Mrs. Asquith's voice and Mrs. Asquith's pause would have frozen denatured alcohol.

"Yes, I'm Jessica," the girl said cheerily. "I was sorry to be so late, especially when I had made Mr. Dorrance promise to wait for us." She threw a merry glance of understanding across at Dorrance who felt himself grilled upon his inability to reply in kind. "You see, it is such an ordeal to make your bow in a strange house, and he knows your son, so I teased him to take dad's place as escort." Again the merry, mocking glance. "Then, after he had promised, everything went dead wrong; and, as a final woe, I put my waist on, upside down. It's such a mess of ruffles that it didn't seem to make much difference which way it went, and I didn't find out what the trouble was till it wouldn't button up the back. But really I was sorry to keep things waiting, and Mr. Dorrance fussed and fumed, all the way out here."

Willis, who knew the varying expressions of the maternal eye, judged it prudent to interpose.

"Mater dear, aren't you ever going to introduce me to Miss Woolley?" he protested.

"Miss — ? I thought —"

Jessica's laugh bubbled over, filled the room.

"Yes, I'm Miss Woolley-West," she explained, with another snuggle of the dog, now sitting and smirking upon her shoulder. "I expect that's what he's up to, trying to remind me I'm a woolly Westerner; but I'm used to that and don't mind it a bit. If he wants to tease me, he's got to guess again."

"The dinner is served," came in a portentous growl from the doorway.

Alertly Jessica turned her head.

"I'm so glad. I am nearly starved," she said, as much to the butler as to the butler's mistress. "You only need to live in a boarding-house to get up a stunning appetite. I could eat nails, by this time." Then before her astounded hostess could make a move to rearrange the group, she stepped across to Dorrance and snuggled her hand within the reluctant curve of his arm. "You'll look out for me, to-night; won't you?" she demanded, with an irresistible accent of confiding and cajolery. "You promised me you would, you know."

And it was with an air of majestic consternation that Mrs. Asquith gave the signal to the others and, at the side of the less dowdy captain, closed the procession in the direction of the impatient butler.

Later on, in the drawing-room, Jessica annexed Dorrance once more, annexed him, according to her wilful wont, entirely against his own will and in opposition to the desires of Asquith who was vainly seeking to concentrate upon himself the girl's entire attention.

The dinner, beginning badly, had gone from bad to worse. Not all of Mrs. Asquith's social strategy could

keep the conversation general; even the Bidwell girls showed signs of boredom. Two of the guests and two only were enjoying themselves. One of these was the musty lawyer whose appetite, trained by long years at a boarding-house table, could cope even with the dried-up entrées; the other was Jessica who was frankly absorbed in her companion who was quite as frankly writhing at the solecism of which he had been apparently a co-creator. Mrs. Asquith, at his other hand, was consuming food with the jetty brow of a Lady Macbeth, and Dorrance was powerless to offer her so much as a word. Each time he sought to break away from Jessica, the girl plumped her pretty elbows still nearer him upon the table, and attacked a fresh phase of a conversation which, Dorrance's rising goose-flesh assured him, was fast becoming over-personal. It is not, as a rule, at a formal dinner party in a strange house that one is held up and forced to deliver the autobiographical details which one usually reserves for private meditation. Into the childish brain of Kay Dorrance had been driven home the lesson, rendered needful by the colour of his hair, that only by keeping peace with all men could he walk the paths of righteousness. The lesson had stayed with him until now; now, however, he began to doubt the tenets of his child theology. Measured by the demands of social intercourse, Jessica's enmity was productive of far more righteousness in the recipient than was her friendship. He had smiled inscrutably at the one; in the presence of the other, he felt himself inclined towards fervent swearing.

And yet, the girl was so pretty, so eager, so swift to see and understand the things at which he merely

hinted. Judged by the standard of his inkpot and his interest in humanity *per se*, the girl was altogether charming. Judged by his duty to his neighbour, especially when that neighbour chanced to be Mrs. Asquith and his hostess, she was wellnigh insupportable. It was with a sigh of complete relief that Dorrance saw Mrs. Asquith nod across at Mrs. West, who plainly had not the least idea of what that nod was intended to convey. Later on, when the men abandoned their cigarettes in favour of the drawing-room, he was guilty of the cowardice of hiding behind Willis Asquith, and of fortifying himself with a dowdy captain upon either hand. Even then, he lingered in the doorway until he saw Asquith seated at Jessica's side, in the farther corner of the room.

Jessica, bored by the photographs which she had chosen as a lesser evil than the Bidwell girls, nodded a cordial, off-hand greeting to the tall Englishman who was placing himself at her side with every apparent indication that he had come to stay. That done, she lost no time in coming to the point.

"Isn't Mr. Dorrance delightful?" she asked.

Willis Asquith was human. Nevertheless, he was host; accordingly, he concealed as best he might his objection to the point.

"Very."

"I shall always be so glad we could come out here to dinner," Jessica went on alertly. "One gets so much better acquainted with people, you know, outside of a boarding-house."

All in all, it was not surprising that Asquith misunderstood. Jessica's real meaning was not exactly what convention expresses, whatever it may be reflect-

ing. Asquith did misunderstand. In consequence, he smiled.

"But you know we didn't meet you in the boarding-house," he replied. "You were unkind enough to insist upon going out."

For an instant, Jessica looked at him. Then her dimples came into view.

"Oh! You!" she said, and her accent was slightly disparaging.

As the social hero of the entire city, Asquith had had no past experience by which to recognize the disparagement.

"Certainly," he made direct reply. "Who else?"

For another instant, Jessica's slanting gray eyes swept the man beside her, the strong face, the lean, well-knit figure, the irreproachable attire. Then she smiled, with a swift approval which transfigured her face.

"Oh, you, of course," she assented. But she added then, "But I was really talking about Mr. Dorrance. I never half knew him until to-night."

"And now you do?" For the life of him, Asquith could not hold back the question.

"Sure! And he is the dearest man. I didn't like him a bit at first; I thought he was stiff and snippy. Now I know him, I think he is one of the nicest men ever. And he is so polite to mama." Jessica's tone suggested that she regarded this as being the final test.

"Why not?" Asquith asked gravely. "I can't think how anybody could wish to be anything but polite to Mrs. West."

Jessica laughed.

"Does that mean a dig at me?" she demanded.

"A — ?"

"A dig? A slap? Oh, I don't know what you Cane men would call it, anyway," the girl said impatiently. "Do you mean that I'm not?"

Asquith made hasty retreat from the ground on which he had inadvertently stumbled.

"Not at all. Not in the least. I fancy you couldn't be —" he gulped — "impolite to anybody."

"Not if I know myself," Jessica interrupted, with conviction.

"No," Asquith assented, with an equal conviction born of his literal interpretation of her phrase; "not if you knew, yourself. But Mrs. West is so —"

Jessica interrupted him eagerly.

"You find her so, too?" she questioned. Then, without giving him any opportunity for reply, she swept on; "But, about Mr. Dorrance, isn't it too bad he's so lame?"

"Yes." But Asquith's eyes, just then, said far more than did his tongue.

Jessica chattered on.

"Mama says she had noticed it; but I didn't know it at all, until I met him on the terrace, that day, with you." She dropped her eyes demurely, while she added, by way of checking any undue egotism on the part of her hearer, "At least, mama said it probably was you, when I told her about it afterwards." Then, that duty done, she resumed her interrupted theme. "In the house, it doesn't show much, and I generally had seen him sitting still. Out on the terrace, though, I surely thought he'd tip over, or else trip you up."

Dorrance, ten feet away and talking to the Bidwell

girl who wore the mauve tucker, reddened to the ears. Nevertheless, his eyes held their wonted glint of fun as, over Jessica's unconscious head, he answered Asquith's appealing glance.

"I was terribly upset, you see," the girl went on, in the lowered tone of one who confesses a penitential secret. "I had said things, before I knew, things that must have hurt him, and it's hard to apologize for things of that sort. Still, I did apologize. In the end, it saves trouble, just the speaking about it. He was very nice about it, too, blushed and said it was no matter. That was the first time I had liked him. No; the second. He was really very nice to me, tried to make me feel he didn't care. What did it?"

Asquith, who had been a silent and embarrassed on-looker at that brief interview, recalled his wandering attention with a jerk.

"Mounted polo, I believe."

Jessica shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Needn't have played the crazy game!" she commented. "Still, it is better than slipping on banana peel. At least, you've had a slice of your pudding, before you broke the dish and spilled it."

"I beg your pardon?" Asquith asked a little blankly.

But Jessica merely looked at him and laughed. As yet, she had no conception of the British paucity of metaphor. Neither, to do her justice, had she any conception of the British delicacy and reticence whereby Willis Asquith, under his unmoved exterior, was wincing at this frank discussion of the man who was his friend. Jessica, however, had spent her early years in the land of the drill and the shovel, and her mental processes were analogous. She continued her catechism.

"Have you known him long?"

"By reputation, yes."

"What is he here for?"

Asquith smiled, in recollection of certain reasons given by Dorrance for his interest in Jessica.

"For professional purposes, I fancy."

"What is his profession?"

This time, Asquith so far forgot his manners as to stare at his companion in blank astonishment.

"Didn't you know he was Kay Dorrance?"

Jessica laughed lightly.

"Sure. I looked him up in the register; he's from New York," she confessed. "What then?"

"Merely," Asquith told her; "that Kay Dorrance is one of the most promising young novelists your country holds."

"For gracious sake!" Jessica made sudden comment. "Who'd ever think it?" Then she lifted up her voice, ruthlessly breaking in on Dorrance's contemplation of the Bidwell girl in the tucker. "Mr. Dorrance! Mr. Dorrance! Do come here a minute," she entreated. "I've got a lot more things I want to say to you."

## CHAPTER NINE

**N**EXT morning found Jessica in the blackest depths of depression, partly due to certain over-cooked indigestibles of which she had partaken too freely, only the night before, in part to the air of haughty disapproval with which Mrs. Asquith had received, not accepted, her exuberant farewells.

“Hateful old thing! Invite me, and then snub me!” Jessica observed to her pillow, an hour later. “And our Haketono can get up a better dinner than their old fat man, for all his fancy buttons. I’d like to put her down at one good solid Western meal, and teach her that people, when they go to dinner, want to eat, not mince. Bah!” And, throwing her round bare arms about the pillow, one over, one under, Jessica snuggled down, forgot Mrs. Asquith, and Willis, and even Dorrance, and dropped off to sleep. Next morning, she awoke with a pain in her head and a consequent pain in her conscience. The latter, as it gathered focus, assured her that Willis Asquith, being merely human, might have chosen that she did not give all her thoughts and talk to the subject of another man, albeit that other man was his own chosen friend. And Willis Asquith had his own points of interest.

Meanwhile, for reasons which he kept to himself, Kay Dorrance had chosen to have an early breakfast, that morning, and then remove himself from the house.

Early in his career, he had taken to heart the lesson that enough was as good as a feast; and he felt assured that, at least for the present, he had had quite enough of Jessica's conversation. And yet, in all its phases: hostility, pity, friendship, admiration, it had been too downright to be really cloying. Jessica never left her meanings open to any doubt. Her attacks had had the random dash of a petulant child; her sweets had been free from adulteration. Even as he sauntered down Mountain Hill and boarded the Levis Ferry, he confessed to himself a sneaking liking for the girl, a sneaking curiosity as to what she would do next. Nevertheless, his interest in her was half-professional, wholly impersonal.

The past three weeks, albeit broken by his trip to the Saguenay, had modified his first impressions. Jessica was certainly an interesting study for a new type of the Young Person, as Kay Dorrance, in his dignity of seven additional years, had long since dubbed her; but the study would be far more complex than he had at first imagined. Contrary to his original idea, the young person was proving to be by no means a thing of one dimension. Would she stop at the safe limits of three, or would she go on developing to five, and leave him in the lurch, lacking the proper equipment with which to take her measure? He was still pondering the questions involved, when the ferry bumped against the Levis pier, and he was forced to dismiss the questions and decide what next: whether to seek Saint Joseph and the graving dock; or else Saint Romuald and, from there, walk on towards the end of the great new bridge which, Asquith had assured him, was a sight he could not well afford to miss.

Asquith's judgment and the cool, crisp morning decided him upon the bridge. However, by the time the car had landed him at Saint Romuald, his walking mood had departed from him, and he made leisurely choice of the dubious array of cabs drawn up beside the road. It was still so early that the heavy dew lay gleaming on the fields which rose up and away from his left hand. The low houses ranged along the road were all astir with busy life; but, between them and beyond, he could see the mighty river flowing peacefully away to join the far-off, restless sea. And, beyond the river and slightly down the stream, the one deep cove, the pathway scarred in the reddish purple bank: these marked the spot where had been driven the entering wedge that had cleft a nation's might. Those very bushes, or their ancestors, must have been brushed aside to make room for those brave feet treading, treading upward to a victory which was also death. Dorrance's keen eyes grew a little hazy, and as if swept on the wave of some sudden impulse, he took off his cap, leaving the red-gold sunlight to strike full upon his red-gold hair just as, long decades before, its rising beams had struck upon that leader whom Dorrance had bared his head to honour.

An ominous creak of his carriage aroused him, jerked him back to consciousness of the present and to his fears lest the aged body part company with its aged wheels, and leave him stranded by the country roadside with his aged steed to bear him company. Thence, by ways not unassociated with the real reason of this early-morning jaunt, his mind dashed back to Jessica who, he shrewdly suspected, was still dawdling over her breakfast in the hope that he was yet to appear.

He had parted from her in the hall, the night before, full of exasperation at the uncouth part she had forced him into playing, full of stern resolution that, save for an occasional word or two at meals, he would hold no more conversation with her. For the time being, his sense of humour had departed from him entirely, leaving him irritated beyond all words. He liked Willis Asquith, desired his lasting friendship and the friendship of his clan. Would that redoubtable British matron, Willis Asquith's mother, interpret aright the muffled, inarticulate apology which had accompanied his leave-takings, or would she go on to all eternity linking him, in her own mind, with the solecisms and vagaries of that irrepressible young person from Lone Wolf?

Dorrance retired to his slumbers in much the frame of mind he would have known, had he been caught eating with his knife. Now, however, the ozone of the morning and his consciousness of temporary safety were bringing with them a return of his normal sense of fun. And it had been funny, very funny. A June bug, on its back and impotently kicking to reverse itself and resume its normal pose, could have made no more frantic and unavailing attempts to free itself than he had done. Once or twice, success had been in sight; he had half risen from his chair in search of safety when Jessica had promptly bowled him over again with some question, unexpected and totally unanswerable. And so the evening had passed away, an interminable evening, since Mrs. West was too unused to social dissipations to realize that upon her alone devolved the duty of starting the farewells. If only he had had a charge of the Colonel's dynamite to let off under the

Colonel's lady! If only, only he had not come back from the Saguenay in time!

And Jessica had been the sole cause of his visit to the Saguenay. Dorrance had meant to leave the trip until later in the year. He was too comfortable just then to care about going out of town; he would have preferred to see the river for the first time under the October moon, when the nights were sharp and cold, and the mountains at dawn were powdered thick with snow. The thought of the trip had held much charm for him; he had meant to anticipate it long, to magnify it in advance of its fulfilment, to dawdle on, all summer, with the possibility dawdling on before him, always kept a bit out of reach. Then, in the fulness of time and of the October moon, he would saunter forth, filled in advance with the enthusiasm he had been storing up, all summer long. It was the plan of a poet, of a dreamer of dreams. Its fulfilment was the task of an overworked valet: the rush of seeking timetables, of booking, of wiring here and there for rooms and of tumbling a few fresh shirts and ties into his suitcase. And the cause of this swift change was Jessica.

Dorrance had a most healthy masculine disgust at anything approaching a scene; Jessica's rapid descent upon him, that afternoon, upon the terrace, had filled him with dismay. It was impossible to doubt the girl's real pity; but Dorrance was not accustomed to regard himself a candidate for pity; not, at least, from feminine acquaintances of six days' standing. It was equally impossible to doubt the girl's surprise and consternation at his lameness, her panic-stricken memory of her idle words and of the way they must have hurt him. In a sense, they had hurt him. He had shrunk away a

little from their plain meaning, as one shrinks from a mirror, when one has bumped his nose. There are some things best left to the imagination, and Dorrance had chosen to class his physical grace among them. The accident had been painful in many senses. It had hurt his pride and, worse, his prowess in polo matches. However, his friends had not chosen to discuss the matter with him, partly, perhaps, from certain reticences observed by Dorrance himself. Little by little, so carefully had he been dandled on the padded knees of society, he had reached the point of thinking it did not so much matter, after all. It had remained for this young person from Lone Wolf to undeceive him, first by her strictures, later by an eager penitence which betrayed how merited those strictures were.

Moved by the uneasy consciousness of Asquith's sympathetic gaze, he had gone through the situation well, had laughed off the matter as a thing of no account, had received Jessica's apologies as if they had been salve upon a burning wound. Nevertheless, alone in his room, he confessed to himself that it had been a bad half hour. Likewise, he confessed that Jessica, too kindly, too sympathetic, and all untrammelled as she was, was fully capable of following it up with worse hours to come. For the preservation of his own self-respect, those hours must be prevented at almost any cost.

"Hang it!" he observed grimly to himself. "She'll have me weeping on her neck; that is, if she keeps on like this. She's a good little soul, but disastrous to a fellow's dignity. I think I'd best move out for a while, and give her emotion a chance to abate."

The unexpected journey to Roberval had been the result of his determination. Jessica came down to breakfast, the next morning, just in season to catch a glimpse of Dorrance's back as he stepped aboard a street car. She did not catch another glimpse of him until he came strolling in to luncheon, on the day of the Asquith dinner. Dorrance had nodded at her as casually as if they had met at breakfast; she had sent him a casual nod in return, from between two phrases of her talk with Monsieur de la Haye who lingered beside her chair. Accordingly, Dorrance had dropped down into his old place, with the comfortable assurance that danger was at an end. The evening had taught him his mistake.

But what next? He had come to Quebec of definite purpose. He could not abandon that purpose and go dashing off to the ends of the earth, each time that Jessica turned her wayward friendship in his direction. Better than that, he would sit apart and cultivate a philosophic calm. But, even while he hugged his new-born resolution, he tried to fancy any man cultivating philosophic calm in the society of Jessica West. However — And again, however —

A clatter of hoofs in the road behind him aroused him from his reverie. The next instant, Willis Asquith drew rein at his side.

"Where away, old man?" he demanded cheerily, for, like a true Briton, he was all aglow with the exercise and the crispy morning air.

Dorrance looked up, laughed, answered.

"It depends on the endurance of the joints of my equipage. I may be bound for the next rut in the road; I may hold out to the next but one."

Asquith echoed his laugh.

"I incline to a belief in your former alternative," he said. "Why didn't you telephone me, and let me give you a mount? You ride, of course."

Dorrance shook his head.

"No; that transcends the limits of my genius, nowadays. I can do most things as well as ever; but I can't seem to stick on a horse."

"Beastly shame, that!" Asquith commented briefly. "I never thought; you do all the other things so thoroughly. However, riding isn't the only sport, by any means."

"No," Dorrance said quietly. "Still, it happens to be the best."

"That depends. This beast of mine is deucedly hard-bitted. Where are you going?"

"As I said, it depends on the luck. I started out to see your bridge."

"It's rather worth it. Why not give me your extra seat, then? I can send my horse back by a boy."

Dorrance cast up at his companion a glance of amused scorn, as full of liking as it was free from envy.

"What asses you are, Asquith, you English fellows!" he observed dispassionately. "I appreciate your offer; but I want all the room to myself. Trot along, man. I'll get there by noon. I infer you're bound for the same place?"

"Yes. I had to go out on a bit of business." Asquith bent down to adjust a buckle to his liking.

"Your pet hobby?" Dorrance queried, while he crossed his long legs on the opposite seat and screwed himself into a corner, the better to face and talk to the tall man on the horse beside him.

"After a fashion, yes. It's rather a large problem for us all to watch."

"It's working itself out all right, they tell me," Dorrance said, in careless optimism.

"For the present, yes. For the future, we none of us can tell."

"We?" Dorrance questioned keenly.

Asquith coloured.

"Yes, we; that is, professionally speaking," he said evasively. "There's no one profession, I suppose, more closely bound together than the engineer's; and, for the present, we stand or fall by the success of this bridge." Suddenly, as his horse rounded a little turn in the winding road, he flung out his arm to the westward.

"Look!" he said, and Dorrance, hearing, was startled at the quick enthusiasm throbbing in his usually even voice. "Here is your first good view."

An instant later, Dorrance was bending forward in an enthusiasm akin to Asquith's own, while his brown eyes swept from end to end of the half-completed span which sprang out, light, graceful, a dainty toy of cobweb, yet strong enough to bear the loaded construction train moving along its slender length, strong enough, too, to bear the giant gauntry traveller whose topmost members cut the air, two hundred feet above.

"By Jove!" he said at length, although without turning his eyes to Asquith's face. "It's stupendous, Asquith. No wonder you fellows are willing to stand by it, or fall."

Asquith nodded. To his mind, Dorrance's face, just then, counted for a good deal more than did his words.

"Wait a bit till you get nearer," he advised. "If

you don't mind, I'll ride on ahead and get my talking done, before you get there. Then, when you come, I'll be ready to do the honours." And, touching his impatient horse, he trotted off along the winding road.

But Dorrance, watching, sank back into the depths of his ancient vehicle with something very like a sigh. What a man the fellow looked, dashing off like that! And, after all, his was a man's profession, infinitely bigger, infinitely more virile than the mere knack of sitting in a corner and writing novels on a pad of paper. What was it Jessica had said, the first time he had heard her speak? Something about the doer and the dreamer, and which was the better man? All in all, Asquith was a man, and admirable. Moreover, like all mannish men, he looked his best upon a horse. The brown eyes left the road before him, and once more sought the bridge where the long construction train, looking a veritable toy at that great height, was puffing lazily at the extreme end. And, between the blue stripe of water beneath and the blue arch of sky above, the little wisps of white steam looked as petty and futile as the plot of one of his own novels. He shook his head and shut his teeth askew. What a fool he was, after all! Long since, he had determined that self-communings were not good for any man, least of all for himself.

Mrs. West, meanwhile, also had awakened to a mood of self-communings. With her, the mood was largely gastronomic, resulting from her feasting of the night before. The good lady, however, had yet to learn the close juxtaposition of stomach and conscience in the human animal. She merely seized upon the effect, and left the cause to shift for itself, unnoticed.

She picked at her breakfast with a gloomy brow, too absorbed in her own soul-searchings to pay any attention to the obvious perversity of Jessica. Breakfast over, moved by some whim quite alien to her nature, she left the house and, crossing the street, seated herself on one of the benches beside the fountain in the Ring. The morning migration through the Ring was ended; the little park was comparatively deserted, save for the great Newfoundland puppy retrieving sticks cast into the fountain by his small master, just across the pool. Mrs. West had sought the Ring, moved by some swift desire for solitude. Nevertheless, when a shadow crossed the path before her and Monsieur de la Haye halted, hat in hand, beside her bench, her glance upward was not unwelcoming.

"Madame is alone?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes."

"May I be permitted? Thank you." He seated himself, still hat in hand. Then he queried, "And lonely?"

"Yes. I generally am," Mrs. West added, in comprehensive pessimism.

"Truly? But Madame's so beautiful young daughter?"

"She has her own interests." Mrs. West made a furtive dab at her eyes.

The dab was not lost upon the Frenchman. Neither was the tone of aggrieved innocence. He essayed another question, while he meditated upon the best method of assuaging that grief and devoting it to his own end. That end, it should be explained, was Jessica. Mrs. West, to his single-minded purpose, was merely a bit of path whereon his feet might tread.

"And Madame's so devoted husband?"

"The Colonel? He is in Lone Wolf."

"Pardon? I fear I do not quite —"

The *quite* prolonged itself into a dozen questions. Mrs. West answered the most obvious.

"My husband has gone back west."

"And abandoned Madame?"

Madame interpreted the question literally. She bridled, whatever the word may mean.

"We're Americans, not French," she said severely. Then, fearful lest her severity drive away her companion, she went on more gently. "The Colonel has gone on business. He will be back here soon."

"The Colonel? But yes, your husband. And he will return? How happy for Madame!"

"Yes, if he and Jessica don't go philandering off together, all the time." Mrs. West spoke bluntly, yielding to her mood. There is no more communicative person in the world than the one whose habit is of reticence. The barrier down, it is sediment as well as froth that rushes out, sweeping away the landmarks along the overflowing channels of daily life and thought.

"Is it their custom to —" Monsieur de la Haye paused, less from delicacy than from sheer lack of vocabulary.

"Yes. It is." Even as she spoke, Mrs. West felt a vague surprise at her confiding her domestic concerns to the ear of a complete stranger. She attributed it to his swift and comprehending sympathy, not to her own mood which would have led her to become just as communicative to one of the stone posts outside the Cathedral close, had the post merely been endowed with ears and a facile tongue.

"And Madame is left alone? How sad! Each man should have a trustful friend." He shook his head. "But it will not exist for long," he added, his face brightening into sudden enthusiasm. "Madame has only to be patient for a little time, and then the end."

His phraseology, like his accent, was gloomy. She mistook his meaning.

"I was never very strong," she said a little sadly.

"Sure. Madame is very fragile. One can see that at glance. Still, there is time. A wedding can come before a funeral."

Mrs. West stiffened in every limb.

"Mr. de la Haye! I must insist — "

"But why?" he interrupted. "Mademoiselle, your daughter, is so young, so beautiful. She will marry very at once; it will not be long. Once she is married," he paused and smiled at his companion in a species of ecstasy; "she is gone away. Left to themselves, Madame and the — the Colonel will once more be all-sufficient. Is it not so? But pardon. I intrude." And, rising, he went his way, satisfied. His keen and cunning eyes had discerned quite clearly that his suggestion had fallen into fertile soil. With time and culture, it would take root and bring forth fruit. Meantime? Meantime, he would take upon himself the task of gardener.

And yet, he was no worse than others of his kind. He was only just as selfish and a bit more crafty. And Jessica, even apart from considerations of money, was full of charm.

And, while he went his way, Dorrance and Asquith were standing side by side, half way out the southern arm of the bridge.

"Can you make it, think?" Asquith had asked a little anxiously.

Dorrance had nodded.

"My head is level, if my knees aren't. Besides, it's worth a little risk," he had made undaunted answer. "Come."

It was worth the risk, well worth it, Dorrance assured himself, as they halted just beyond the portal and stepped aside to allow the construction train to pass, on its way back to the storage yard, a mile away. Behind them and before stretched the level flooring, four shining stripes of steel along the ties, between them the crude narrow plank footway leading from shore far out towards the middle of the stream. Between the ties under his feet, he could see the river far, far beneath, its surface fretted to the likeness of a mimic sea, eddying and circling and plashing around the outer pier, huge even for such a giant superstructure. As for the bridge itself, it rose before him, a mighty avenue of steel lattice, of clustered eyebars, of bolted chords and girders great beyond all previous imagining. Its flooring stretched out, wide and level; its upper courses rose, arching slowly, surely upward until they reached the pointed summits of the main posts, five hundred feet away; then they dropped, arching slowly, surely down again until, far towards the middle of the stream, eyebars and lattice, chords and girders ended beneath the mammoth crane whose engines were just lifting a fresh group of bars into position. Everywhere was order, silence, everywhere the extreme of tension, a tension no more manifest in the great steel cables, straining under the weight of scores of tons of swinging steel, than in the faces of the watching men. Only the

clank of the hoisting engines, an occasional hoarse order, and the bell on the little train, now almost out of sight behind the leafage of the shore: only these broke the stillness, these and the whispers of the river, far below. There was no sign of haste, no indecision. Even the men appeared like parts of some great machine which had been planned and set in motion by the same mind which had designed the bridge. Standing there in the midst of it all, it was impossible to fix upon any measure of the size; in face of it, tons meant nothing, nor yet feet, although both had been multiplied by the many score. It was all stupendous, stupendous in its every detail: the mighty river flowing down from lake to distant sea, the lofty banks scarred with their red-rock walls, the huge piers, two on either shore, and the long, long segment of the arch which sprang out from the southern bank, sprang out high in air, unsupported, tipped and topped by the gigantic crane whose open steelwork seemed a ladder reaching wellnigh to the sky above. Before a greatness such as that, all speech was stilled. Only a silent wonder could do homage to the massive beams and joints of steel, heavy even to the point of clumsiness, judged by themselves, yet destined to link themselves together into an arch of springing lightness which, meeting its twin from the other shore, should hang there, buoyant, lacelike, between the blue depths of the river and the bluer depths of heaven.

Once again, Kay Dorrance felt his own work narrowing to a pin-point's measure. Half involuntarily, he glanced up at his companion, tall, alert, perfect of body as of brain, his thin face eager with his thought. Yes, a fellow like that was fit to dominate all things,

even the bridge, Dorrance reflected; and he dropped his brown eyes in tribute to the man whose measure was large enough to fit his large profession. What more did Fate give to any man? And Asquith, realizing, was content with Fate. His face showed that, showed that he was about to voice his own contentment.

When Asquith spoke at last, his voice was thoughtful, dreamy; his eyes, resting upon the swinging weight of metal, were full of a supreme content.

"A most unexpected sort of girl, that Miss West!" he offered comment. "I wonder what the deuce she's doing now."

## CHAPTER TEN

IT had been in a spirit of all sincerity and fervour that Dorrance, on the night of the Asquith dinner, had prayed to be delivered from the society of Jessica West. During the next two weeks, it seemed to him that his prayer was being granted, granted in a wholesale fashion which left him a certain measure of regret. For two days, he had voluntarily absented himself from the Maple Leaf as much as possible, breakfasting early, and lunching and dining wherever the whim of the moment seized upon him. He had not the slightest notion how Jessica was spending those two days. Asked, he would have said he did not care. Beyond the one or two unconscious sittings for a possible portrait, she had no place within his plans. His immediate plans, formulated with the orderly care which marked his life, included a few weeks of present play, a few months of future work. In the one, Willis Asquith would be his chosen comrade; the other he must put through alone. That was the penalty of his profession: the long periods of absolute isolation which were bound to separate his seasons of making merry with his kind. And Dorrance by nature was gregarious. In any other profession whatsoever, he would have developed to a society man raised to the nth power. Nevertheless, to his mind, whatever the initial quality of his output, so long as it was improving, it was worth

any sacrifice whatsoever. He made the sacrifice, then, with a good grace; but he fell upon his seasons of play with avidity, sure, for the time being, that men were more than ink.

Such a season of play was before him now. With Willis Asquith as his comrade, the doors of the city swung open at his approach. To be sure, it was said the city emptied itself, each year, at the advent of tourists; and, in a measure, it was true. None the less, the city was not wholly empty; out of the few remaining, a goodly share were of Asquith's set, people whose great stone houses, roomy and cool, offered far more of comfort than did the flimsy summer quarters ordained by fashion in lieu of home. Among these, Dorrance was finding ready welcome. Asquith's friendship settled this at first, helped on by Dorrance's own introductions and his rising fame. Later on, introductions and fame both dropped completely out of sight. Once known, a man like Kay Dorrance was sure of welcome everywhere. Invitations, no longer tentative, poured in upon him. He accepted them all with a ready zest which added ten-fold to his popularity.

Jessica, meanwhile, in the days following the Asquith dinner, was having a share of good times upon her own account. The Colonel's sheaf of letters had brought other callers to the Maple Leaf, callers whom Mrs. West insisted that Jessica should help to entertain. And Jessica, nothing loath, did entertain them. To be sure, her method of entertainment was unusual and by no means all a matter of intention. That they were entertained, however, was manifest, not only by their faces, but by the prompt fashion in which they set a day for the Wests to come to tea, that simplest form of

hospitality which may lead to all things or to nothing. Their comments, however, when they had reached the corner of the next street but two and were out of hearing, were strangely unanimous in their phrasing.

"How American!" they said.

To their British minds, that one word told the story. No true Briton can ever be brought to differentiate, when America is the subject of discussion, between the regions of slum and palace, of effete East and struggling, strenuous West. The mere fact of nationality downs all minor details of training and tradition.

And Jessica viewed the situation, herself included, with shrewd and mischievous eyes. Mrs. Asquith she had taken a good deal in earnest. The one lesson, however, had been enough. Viewed in the light of that experience, the girl was quick to learn that her mother's callers, albeit kindly, yet looked upon her pretty self as a species of natural curiosity, as exotic as a mastodon, or even Buffalo Bill. It was a bit exasperating; but it held its own grain of humour, and, after a time or two, Jessica developed a certain skill in living up to the part they thrust upon her, and romanced wildly in answer to their naïve questions.

Nothing of this, however, was in her mood when Willis Asquith was the guest. On one excuse or other, he dropped in, first with a message from his father, then on his own account. In his presence, the girl abandoned her wayward mockery, abandoned something of her careless speech, and met him with a downright good-fellowship which Asquith found intensely winning. Accustomed to be treated as a petty god, this frank appeal to his more human side pleased him as no adulation could have done. Unused to being met

by women as a simple friend, he misconstrued Jessica's frame of mind entirely, and never suspected that her cordial greetings, her eager, practical talk were her own way of telling him he was too old and bald to be of vital interest, too dignified to allow her to think of him in any relation far apart from the paternal. Instead, he took it all as a mark of special favour, and laid his dignified self and his ponderous hobbies at her pretty feet, until, by the end of the third call, he was formulating his most sober judgments in terms of Jessica West, as the unit atom of his mental universe. And Jessica, though smiling and teasing him a little now and then, accepted it all as her own proper due, and cudgelled her active brain for appropriate phrases in which to discuss his hobbies. None the less, in the intervals between his calls, she turned with increasing enthusiasm to the society of Monsieur de la Haye.

Tongue-tied, the Frenchman was never ponderous. No matter what the emergency that faced him, he had a trick of rounding off the situation by means of a low bow, a smile, a broken sigh which Jessica deemed infinitely amusing. Amusing, too, was his talk. As the days went on, his vocabulary grew apace; but his literary method consisted in alternations of his phrase-book and the vernacular of the street. Now and then he added to this growth a blossom of Western slang culled from Jessica's own speech, yet taxing her gravity to the utmost when she met it in its unfamiliar setting. Curiously enough, no years of training in the Denver school proved so efficacious in pruning down her language as did the unconscious lesson taught by the Frenchman's careful imitation. Caricature succeeds where reasoning falls flat and impotent. So much, at

least, the girl was gaining from her increased association with Monsieur de la Haye.

Even in a city where no one, apparently, is ever busy, the Frenchman's palpable idleness rendered him an enjoyable comrade. During the hours which are set apart for calls and tea, Jessica was increasingly busy. Moreover, at a certain hour midway between the coming of the morning mails and the press of things which heralds luncheon, she swiftly found it advisable to remain seated in her room, ready for the announcement that Willis Asquith waited in the drawing-room below. It was not that he came, each day; but when a man is likely to appear, one day of every three, not even the most discerning hostess can rest assured that any given day may not prove to be that one. And Willis Asquith was the guest of all, just then, whom Jessica would have been most loath to miss.

Her mornings in her room, then, and her fast occupying afternoons, left to the girl merely such odds and ends of time as she dared offer only to a total idler like herself. And Monsieur de la Haye, to all appearing, was just such another idler, a forlorn and lonely one as well. Moreover, she had no need to offer him her odds and ends of time. He took them as his own right, took them, though, with expressions of gratitude which must have cost long hours of study of his phrase-book. Together, they never went far afield. They merely loitered in the empty drawing-room, sauntered along a deserted terrace, sat on an abandoned seat beside the fountain in the Ring. They were always in view of all men, yet always alone. Kay Dorrance, looking down from his window, felt the call of his red hair stirring the blood in his veins, while he watched the

complete absorption of Jessica in her companion, watched the insidious flattery in the Frenchman's steady gaze, in his unctuous smile. Nevertheless, Dorrance shrugged his shoulders and held his peace. It was no concern of his. Jessica was quite at liberty to flirt with every loose-mouthed, idle Gaul who crossed her path. However, he shut his teeth and jerked down the blind, before he returned to his interrupted page. If only the girl were his sister! Then, as he jerked up the blind once more, he thanked the Fates that she was not. Life was quite full enough of responsibility, without his assuming the charge of a girl like Jessica West. And yet, his sober judgment assured him that the time was coming fast when he would no longer sit by in silence and watch that pretty, ingenuous child fall victim to the insidious courtship of a bumpy-browed idler like the Frenchman. Over his interrupted page, Kay Dorrance smiled to himself in complete satisfaction. Unlike Asquith, he rather fancied the idea of himself in the paternal rôle. It would be interesting, intimate and altogether safe. Moreover, it would give a grand point of vantage for observation. He dropped his pen and, clasping his fists above his page, he fell to considering his fitness for the new relation.

In the meantime, however, Monsieur de la Haye was by no means an idler. In fact, he was becoming very, very busy. His need for English, fluent, plastic, persuasive, waxed upon him, day by day. Mrs. West spoke not one word of French; the language of bows and smiles and suggestive monosyllables might do for once, might even serve to impart the germ of his idea. It would be totally useless for fostering that germ, once

it had taken root. Of its taking root, Jules de la Haye felt scanty doubt. He only needed to watch Mrs. West, these past few days, to assure himself of that. She had a new way of studying her daughter, since her brief talk with the Frenchman, that morning in the Ring; a new fashion of forcing her into the foremost place in the group, a place which, up to that time, she apparently had sought to guard with jealous care for herself alone. Her furtive eye was constantly upon the girl, studying the impression she created, now urging her forward into greater prominence, then, as if her heart misgave her, seeking to undo the work she had all along been attempting to accomplish. And the Frenchman, watchful, smiling, was content. The very alternations of Mrs. West's new manner convinced him that her brain was playing the hand against her heart. For the time, the score was even. It only needed the coming of the Colonel, the sting of watching his absorption in his pretty daughter to range the heart upon the winning side. Meanwhile, Mrs. West was learning the simpler moves of the game. Of the final victor, Monsieur de la Haye felt no doubts at all. Kay Dorrance he dismissed with a shrug. He was neither dashing enough for Jessica, nor yet sufficiently a thing of beauty. Moreover, he was so lame as to be out of any running. As for Willis Asquith, the Frenchman might have had his doubts. As yet, however, he had not seen that possible rival in the game. He was clever enough to efface himself entirely, when Jessica was occupied with others. His surest hold could be gained by way of her periods of boredom.

And Jessica, meanwhile, was going her own wayward way. She was quite too much engrossed in her own

increasing good time to pay much attention to its elements. She was aware she was meeting new people and more enjoyable ones than ever before in her life. She was also aware of her increasing prominence among them, the increasing attention they yielded to her opinions and her wishes. Even this she accepted carelessly, as her right, and thought curiously little of it, even of the new interest which marked her mother's manner to her. Heretofore, she had felt her mother's toleration, not her love. Heretofore, she had quietly assumed the leading place; now she found herself thrust into it, while her mother sat back, and watched, and listened. Even the intentness of her mother's heed escaped the girl entirely. By very force of self-assurance, Jessica had long since lost self-consciousness. It never occurred to her to doubt her own methods any more than it occurred to her to study them. They were her methods, and useful. That was all. And, in the meantime, she was having an extremely good time with all men, including Willis Asquith, with herself, and even with her mother.

Two days and three had passed since the Asquith dinner, and at last Dorrance returned to a prudent measure of his old habits. Once more he took his meals at the accustomed hours, took them, lingered over them and even sought to open up new trails for conversation. It was Mrs. West who answered him, not Jessica. He smiled at her in kindly assent, and delivered a question point blank at Jessica. The girl recalled herself from her own reverie and replied. The reply was cordial, courteous; but it lacked all trace of her past exuberance. Dorrance told himself he was a subject for congratulation. None the less, his steady

eyes were a little overcast, as he finished his meal in haste and, rising, left the table.

Had he offended the girl in any way, he wondered. That would be unpardonable. A man of the world, such as he prided himself upon being, had no right to cross swords with an inexperienced child. Neither had he any right, even by his chilly manner, to offer a rebuke, when the only sin had lain in an excessive friendliness. And why should he, who never had repulsed a mongrel puppy in the streets, repulse the simple, careless friendship of an untrained girl? He had been friends with many women in his short life. Why, then, discriminate against this one? For his conscience, dismissing all thought of provocation, assured him that he had discriminated, assured him that the girl was hurt accordingly. And how bravely she had concealed that hurt! He had not suspected her of poise enough to turn and answer him in the old friendly way, without a hint of petulance or reserve. After all, perhaps she was not so untrained as she seemed. Training came fast to natures such as hers. Trained, she would be — His hands deep in his pockets, he stood before his window and considered the situation. He took for granted that his considerations were of purely professional import; none the less, as he saw Jessica and Monsieur de la Haye sauntering slowly through the Ring, he turned himself from the window with a jerk, jerked himself down into a chair at the far corner of the room and jerked open a book whose leaves, however, remained quite unturned.

Poise, however, was the last trait of which an impartial mind would have accused Jessica West. She showed no sense of hurt to Dorrance for the simple

reason that he had not hurt her in the least; he had not hurt her because, for the time being, in other and fresher interests, he had slipped completely out of her mind. She had seen no more reason to resent as personal his vanishing after the Asquith dinner than she had done to resent his sudden trip to Roberval. In neither case, had she been aware of doing anything to provoke that vanishing. It was his right to go, when and wherever he might choose. She liked Dorrance, liked him unaffectedly. Nevertheless, she regarded him as a constant quantity in her new life, one on whom she would be able to fall back when others had gone their way, or lost their charm. Monsieur de la Haye might pall in time. Even now, his sugar was fast turning to glucose and rendering their intercourse a trifle sticky. Willis Asquith might cease to call upon her, after the novelty was at an end. Dorrance, on the other hand, was in the same house, at the same table, almost one of their own family circle. Moreover, he had stated upon all sides his intention of remaining there for months to come, and Jessica was shrewd enough to read in Kay Dorrance's steady eyes the assurance that he changed his plans but rarely and for cause. Under such conditions, then, she determined to play with Asquith and the Frenchman while the novelty lasted, and then return to Dorrance, as to an older, more constant friend. Meanwhile and for the passing hour, she had dismissed Dorrance from her thoughts entirely. Whenever a random recollection of him had crossed her mind, it had taken the shape of pity for his lameness, and of the liking and trust one customarily bestows upon one's seniors. Her hostility,

for some reason she would have found quite unaccountable, had vanished completely out of sight.

For two days and three, and then a week, this state of things had endured: careless disregard on the part of Jessica, causeless remorse on the side of Dorrance. At length, when the Asquith dinner and its vexations were buried ten days deep, Dorrance waylaid the girl, one night, as she left the table. His manner was casual; the steadiness of his brown eyes and certain lines about his mouth betokened a set purpose.

"You're coming for a walk with me," he said, and his voice held less of query than of affirmation.

Instantly the mirth flashed up in her gray eyes, as she swept a glance over him from head to heel.

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't think; I know. Are you ready?"

She met his grave eyes laughingly. Then she glanced over her shoulder towards the corner of the hall where Monsieur de la Haye was lingering, his gaze upon her in mute invitation.

"Thank you," she said suddenly. "I'll come."

Once in the street, it took one or two false starts before she could adapt her pace to that of Dorrance. Then, when at last their steps were falling easily together, they turned, as by instinct and without a word, towards the deserted terrace. To Jessica's surprise, they had the place wholly to themselves. It was still an hour too early for the evening crowd; no stragglers were abroad; even the vagrant waifs who sit for hours at a time in the kiosks had wandered off in search of a belated supper. The sun had dropped behind the Citadel; its last beams still rested on the fluttering

Jack, but the terrace was in heavy shadow, a shadow against which the girl's white frock stood out in sharp relief, the one strong note of lightness in all the darkening expanse. Dorrance, with the quick, trained eye of the true artist, took in the fact, took in, besides, its symbolism, and applied it not alone to the girl, but, in a measure, to himself.

"Hul—lo—o!" The accent was long-drawn and gentle.

Dorrance cast aside the symbol and faced the fact. He discovered that the fact was fast becoming hilarious.

"I beg your pardon?" he said hastily.

"Oh, that's all right," Jessica reassured him. "I was just wondering if you were there; that's all. Sometimes Central gets careless and disconnects, you see. It's not always easy to tell."

Dorrance laughed a bit shamefacedly.

"*Adsum!*" he said.

"So'm I. But no matter. I only wondered what you brought me up here for."

"To walk," he told her gayly.

"But you could walk just as well with a stick. Excuse me!" She flushed hotly. "I truly didn't mean that, you know. But —"

"But a stick is the best companion I deserve?" he asked, in manifest contrition. "I'm afraid that is the truth, Miss West. I'd no business to bring you up here, and then go off on my own mental tangent. I can do that, when I am all alone. But really," he faced her, smiling, and once more she felt the curious charm of his smile; "I was thinking about you, you know."

The frank brightness of his manner pleased her; it was akin to her own nature.

"What about me?" she questioned, as they turned at the upper end of the terrace.

"Divers things. Among them, how it happened I had seen so little of you, the past few days."

"I was here," she reminded him demurely.

"And so was I. And yet, we didn't seem to meet."

"Whose fault was that?" she asked, still more demurely.

The boyish frankness came back into his speech, as if he would have cast aside this futile fencing.

"Mine, I suspect. I didn't mean to be rude about it, though, Miss West."

Pausing, she gazed at him meditatively, as if assimilating a wholly new idea.

"But you weren't rude, as far as I could see. Why should you be?" she asked flatly, after a moment's pause.

"No reason. None at all." Dorrance spoke in haste, fearing he might have blundered. As he spoke, he lost step.

Both the haste and the loss of step Jessica attributed to weariness. It must be tiresome to limp along like that; even her young vigour felt the strain of keeping pace beside him.

"Shall we sit down?" she queried kindly, with a little gesture at the seat which they were just then passing.

His colour came hotly. His sudden irritation at himself shifted to rest on her.

"Not unless you are tired of walking with me," he answered, a bit more curtly than was his wont. It was a new experience for him to feel himself in the wrong, and he resented it accordingly.

For an instant, she lifted to his a pair of eyes that were grave, questioning. Then, —

“You needn't be so testy about it,” she rebuked him unexpectedly. “I only thought you might get sick of walking; that was all.”

Once more Dorrance laughed, the bubble of his vexation pricked by the directness of her thrust.

“I fancy I was rather testy,” he confessed. “It's a trick of mine, goes with the hair, perhaps. But let's come back to the point, Miss West. What have you been doing with yourself?”

It was the surest proof of the aloofness of her present interest in him, had Dorrance only known it, the way she assented to his right to question how she spent her time. She answered carelessly, while once more she fitted her step to the measure of his less elastic one.

“I've been gloriously busy, enjoying myself. I sent out dad's letters, you know, the way you advised me to, and all sorts of funny people have been to call on him. Some of them we saw; some of them I just peeked down at from my room. When they didn't find him here, they sent all their wives and daughters to call on us. I tell you, they were a crazy set!” Her laugh bubbled up and over till Dorrance laughed in turn, although, from certain random words of Asquith, he had long since learned that the crazy set included some of Quebec's electest matrons.

“You didn't get on with them?” he questioned.

Jessica shook her head.

“They didn't get on with me,” she corrected him, with one of her swift out-speakings of ungarnished truth. “They tried their best, poor old things; but

they hadn't any idea how to talk to me. Some of the pauses were as long as your arm."

"What did you do?" Dorrance, after an old trick of his when he was interested, locked his hands behind him, while he faced his companion whose eyes met his eyes almost on a level.

"I just yawned and waited for them to go at it again. They were making the visit, not I; it was up to them. Sometimes, they did begin; sometimes, they only yawned back at me, and then made off, still yawning. They all with one consent did ask us to come to tea, though," she added, as in tardy justice to the good intentions of her new acquaintances.

"And have you been?"

For an instant, the fluffy bare head dropped a little to one side, as if she were considering not alone the question, but Dorrance too, as well. Then, —

"Give me time," she adjured him. "They are well-preserved; they'll keep."

The second turn of the terrace was at an end, the third was more than half made, when Dorrance broke in upon the girl's gay chatter, broke in and dragged it to the point which had been foremost in his mind, when he had proposed the walk. Around them, the dusk was turning into dark, the electric lamps were cutting across and across the shadows, and an occasional group of strollers passed them by, sure token that the evening had fully come. Dorrance's pace was perforce slow, and Jessica had loitered along beside him, quite content, for the once, to exchange her usual brisk step for this slow sauntering. Dorrance was proving himself a blithe comrade, yet something in his personality had acted as restraint upon the

vagaries of the girl, had brought her to his level, rather than dropped him to her own. Save for the few short moments, that rainy day in the drawing-room, it was the first time they had been alone together. Afterwards, long afterwards, Jessica looked back upon that hour as on the beginning of her knowledge that a code of life existed other than that of Denver and Lone Wolf. At the time, however, she only knew that she was unreasonably, yet quietly, happy.

Half way up the terrace, Dorrance paused and faced her. Under the electric lamps above them, Jessica, looking into his face, felt a vague surprise at the expression written there, half self-distrustful, half resolute, but wholly boyish.

"Miss West," he laughed a little uneasily; "I wish you'd tell me— At least I have been wondering—"

She helped out his obvious embarrassment with a direct question.

"Wondering what?"

"Whether you've been thinking — Really, it sounds a caddish sort of thing to ask. Whether you have been thinking I hadn't been very polite to you, the past few days."

It was out at last, the question which had been getting more and more upon his conscience, out with a crude baldness which made his own ears wince at the echo of his words. However, it was useless to seek involved methods in dealing with a girl like Jessica. He knew he had meant to be rude; he knew he was honestly sorry. He spoke directly, in honest desire to make amends.

She answered him directly, and her laugh showed her words were free from any intentional sting.

"Not the least bit in the world, Mr. Dorrance. The fact is, I've been so busy, ever since we were out at Mrs. Asquith's, that I haven't had much time to think about you, one way or the other."

Nevertheless, they stung.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**I**T was the next day that the Bidwell girls called. They came, all three of them, clothed in their best, and they had wrapped their fresh handkerchiefs about the handles of their parasols to protect their glove fingers from undue friction. Jessica, beholding, was flippantly reminded of a trio of black-clothed orphans bandaged for sore throat; but she repressed the idea with sternness, as unspeakable, and discoursed sedately concerning the weather and the storm of the day before yesterday. Her one experience of the Bidwell girls had warned her to be literal in all her utterances.

Notwithstanding her rebellious protests, Jessica was receiving the Bidwell girls alone. Mrs. West was ill, that day, smitten with a nervous headache which had followed a long drive with Monsieur de la Haye. Jessica had been the medium of the invitation, and Jessica had giggled in passing it along.

"I suppose he means the spirit of the drive is for me," she interpreted irreverently; "and just the carcass of the steed is yours. However, it is the carcass that can trot, so you seem bound to have the best of it."

Mrs. West looked up, with one of the swift, furtive glances she so often bent upon her daughter nowadays.

"What will you do?" she queried.

"Suck my thumb and cry myself to bylow, like any other abandoned baby," Jessica responded tranquilly.

Mrs. West busied herself with her button-hook.

"Why don't you telephone Mr. Asquith and ask him to come in for tea?" she suggested.

Jessica surveyed her mother through narrowing lids. It was not the first time that Mrs. West had manifested a desire to throw her child into the society of Willis Asquith. Moreover, Jessica was coming to a tardy conclusion that her mother did few things by chance. Nevertheless, she took the suggestion in good part, and promptly sought the telephone. Mr. Asquith was out, she was told, up at the bridge. It was uncertain when he would return. Was there any message? And Jessica, recognizing the maternal accents, swiftly assumed that they belonged to a parlour maid, and lengthened out the conversation into a perfect maze of interlocking messages and of haughty commands concerning their delivery. That done, she went her way and quite forgot to mention to her mother that Asquith was not likely to arrive. Hence came Mrs. West's mistaken statements to Monsieur de la Haye, hence wrath, recrimination and subsequent explanation, and hence headache.

But Asquith, sole and ignorant occasion of the trouble, was standing at the extreme limit of the foot-path on the bridge, engaged in hot argument with one of the resident engineers. For the hour, even Jessica had no place in his mind. His whole attention was centred, just then, upon the question of the travelling gantry: whether so great a weight should be allowed to hang from the long, unsupported arm of open lattice. Asquith was saying no. The other man said yes, and it was the *yes* which finally prevailed. Willis Asquith was a Briton, and therefore measurably secure of the ground on which he had taken his stand. Like

a true Briton, too, he objected strenuously to being routed on that ground. Accordingly, he reached home, late that afternoon, in no mood to listen calmly to his mother's strictures concerning Americans in general and, in particular, young Americans, with Miss Jessica West as the accepted type.

"What has the girl done to you, mater?" he protested at length, the while he stirred his tea.

"Nothing, Willis." Mrs. Asquith poured herself a second cup.

"Then why do you dislike her so?" her son persisted. "She is a charming girl, when you know her. I really think you are a bit hard on her."

"Not at all." Mrs. Asquith bent to crumble a bit of bread-and-butter before the supercilious nose of Tottykins who was making clamour for pound cake. "It is only that I can't conceive how you can waste your time over a girl like that."

Willis helped himself to pound cake, then helped Tottykins.

"Like what?" he demanded briefly, and the brevity was hostile.

Mrs. Asquith set down her cup.

"Totally extraordinary," she said, and there was no need of the gesture to add accent to the phrase.

Nevertheless, it was not so much out of regard to the West as to do honour to a guest of Mrs. Asquith that the Bidwell girls called, next day.

"She really is a most extraordinary young person," the second Bidwell girl had objected, when they sat at luncheon.

"Yes; but she is American, you know. As a rule, they never are quite —"

But the eldest Bidwell girl rebuked her youngest sister.

"How censorious you are!" she said gravely.

"Besides, it's not the poor thing's fault."

The third Miss Bidwell had been born with elements of skittishness.

"No; but it may be our misfortune, if we take her up."

The eldest Miss Bidwell shook her head. Then she lifted her chin.

"No; the poor thing!" she answered. "Besides, I fancy our position is quite too well known to be affected by a small matter such as that. For my part, I mean to call."

"Why?" The second Miss Bidwell, who was speaking, was considered to own the better brain. The brain, or else the consideration, caused her to speak more slowly. "It really doesn't seem of any especial use. There isn't much that we possibly could have in common."

"Perhaps not, my dear," her elder sister assented deferentially. "You are so busy, you should feel free to do quite as you think best. As for me, I shall call, out of respect for dear Cousin Louisa Asquith. The fact that she chose us, out of all her friends, to meet the Wests, you know —"

Accordingly, the three Bidwell girls went together.

It was during that hushed and expectant interval between the sending up their cards and the appearing of Jessica, that the youngest Miss Bidwell had one of her occasional lapses into human nature.

"I wonder what Mr. West is like," she murmured.

Sternly her oldest sister snubbed the lapse.

"Sh—h!" she said. "My dear, he's married."

There came a little silence. The second Miss Bidwell broke it.

"After all," she murmured in her turn; "I am glad I came. Cousin Louisa is all that is kind, too kind; but poor Miss West must long for a few friends of her own age."

And, the next instant, Jessica, dainty, radiant, crossed the threshold and bore down upon them with extended hands.

"How dear of you to come!" she said exuberantly. "I was so bored, and wishing something nice would happen. Of course, I am having a beautiful time everywhere; but now and then I do want a girl chum to play with, and the having three of you at once is almost as good as — as a fudge party at Miss Girard-Clegg's." The finish of this climax found her clasping the slippery white glove of the oldest Bidwell girl whom she had overlooked until the last. "No; do sit here," she urged. "You'll get a better breeze beside the window, you see." And, with a deft pressure on the white kid fingers, she steered the eldest Bidwell girl towards an arm chair beside the open casement.

"Thank you?" The rising inflection, demanded by the Bidwell code of courtesy, might have been justified by literal fact. The eldest Bidwell girl took the offered chair, only to discover, too late for the discovery to do her any good, that the chair lacked a caster. Too late, also, she discovered a naughty gleam of satisfaction in the gray eyes of Jessica. The eldest Bidwell girl could be very stately, stately enough to triumph over a half-hour of involuntary teeterings.

Nevertheless, the process of her triumphs would be interesting to watch.

While the eldest Bidwell was seeking to get her balance, the youngest Bidwell assumed direction of the call.

"You are having fine weather for your stay, Miss West," she offered observation.

"Splendid! I make the most of it, too," Jessica responded with enthusiasm.

"We had a refreshing shower, night before last."

Jessica laughed.

"That depends on what you call refreshing. I was out driving, and I came home, sopping."

"Driving? Oh, yes. And is that the reason your mother feels so ill, to-day?"

"Mama's pretty devoted," Jessica shook her head thoughtfully; "but not so much as that would come to. That would be a case of vicarious atonement with a vengeance: my ducking, and her getting sick in consequence."

"But didn't she get wet, too?"

Jessica surveyed her with dancing eyes.

"The roof doesn't leak," she said composedly. "It was Monsieur de la Haye and I who got the ducking. Mama was high and dry, upstairs."

The eldest Bidwell had found her balance. Now, —

"O—oh—h?" she said gently.

The second Bidwell girl sought to lead the talk into safer paths.

"Has any one thought to put you down at the Library yet?" she queried.

Jessica turned to her with eagerness.

"I didn't know there was one. Does it have Mr. Dorrance's books?"

"I — Really, I don't know. It has most of our best classics, however, and I should be glad —"

Jessica interrupted.

"It's his books I want. I sent for some; but apparently they are stalled in the custom house, and I am losing patience. I want to see what sort of things he writes. Have you read any of them?"

"None at all. I read almost no novels," the second Bidwell made uncompromising answer.

Her elder sister offered swift correction.

"My dear, you read *Marcella* and *Fenwick's Career*."

The second Miss Bidwell accepted the amendment.

"Oh, yes," she admitted; "but those are different."

Jessica hastened to her support.

"I should say they were. We had *Robert Elsmere* read aloud to us at school, read aloud evenings; and, if it hadn't been for the short sleeves and lights and fancy work, and the general feeling of its being after dinner, it would have seemed just like morning prayers. If Mr. Dorrance writes such things as that, I'm sure I don't want to read him."

"I am told that Kay Dorrance is extremely modern in his literary methods." The second Miss Bidwell spoke with a disapproval which was quite impersonal.

Again Jessica flew to the rescue.

"Why not? I like it. So am I modern, for the matter of that. Aren't you?" The next instant, as her gaze fell upon her trio of guests, she went off into a fit of irrepressible laughter.

Providentially, the three Miss Bidwells were not prone to self-consideration. They merely set down Jessica's

ill-timed mirth to her embarrassment, and smiled indulgently. Indulgently, too, the eldest Miss Bidwell took the burden of conversation upon herself, fearful lest their hostess be swamped in the rising tide of her sister's literary criticism.

"I certainly thought, the night we met him at Cousin Louisa Asquith's, that Mr. Dorrance appeared extremely clever," she observed.

Jessica dabbed a bit of embroidery against her tear-hung lashes, and her voice steadied itself.

"Oh, do you think so?" she protested. "To me, the most fascinating thing about him is the way he never strikes you as knowing anything in particular."

The eldest Miss Bidwell, forgetful of her missing caster, dropped back in her chair.

"O—oh—h?" she queried gently; and then, in quite another key, she added, "Oh, my!"

Jessica became portentously grave.

"Is anything the matter?" she inquired.

And the eldest Miss Bidwell, heedful of her manners, made mendacious answer, —

"Thank you, Miss West; nothing. It was merely a passing twinge."

The call had reached this climax when a maid appeared, bringing in the tray. While the eldest Bidwell girl occupied herself in once more seeking to regain her balance, Jessica was busy with cups and spoons and with the slices of lemon which, despite the resulting discomfiture of her guests, she still persisted in dropping into every cup. With the advent of the cakes for which Quebec is justly famous, the youngest Miss Bidwell once more assumed direction of the talk.

"Our cousin, Mr. Asquith, is growing very fond of

Mr. Dorrance," she observed, between her bites of cake.

Jessica spoke through hers.

"Yes, so he told me."

"You have seen him lately, then?"

"Oh, yes. He pops in here, almost every day."

Jessica's eyes belied the nonchalance of her voice. "That is, if you can use so lively a word of him. The fact is, he always reminds me of a trundle-bed, and I expect to hear the casters squeak under his weight."

"A trundle-bed?"

Jessica nodded, while she swallowed the last of her tea, lemon and all.

"Sure. I call his mother the four-poster," she added irrelevantly.

The pause was long. Jessica employed it by filling all the cups, while she left her guests to choose the next subject of conversation. The youngest Miss Bidwell chose it.

"I wonder what makes Mr. Dorrance so very lame," she said.

Jessica flushed scarlet, and set down the teapot with a bump. Three weeks before that day, she had asked the same question in the same careless fashion. Now, for some reason wholly unaccountable, she resented it as no fit subject for discussion above a cup of tea.

"Probably because one leg is a good inch shorter than the other," she answered baldly.

"Oh!" It would be hard to say whether the second Miss Bidwell took more care in giving birth to the shocked exclamation, or in smothering it in its infancy.

"Well, what's the matter?" Jessica still spoke shortly; the colour still lingered in her cheeks.

The eldest Miss Bidwell felt that it devolved upon her to explain, albeit the explanation took the form of chiding. Even the gentleness of tone and smile was full of rebuke, as she said softly, —

“Here in Canada, dear Miss West, persons of the other sex are not supposed to have legs.”

Jessica's frown vanished.

“What do they do? Sit down and hitch?” she queried flippantly. Then, before the eldest Miss Bidwell could rally and reply, she had sprung up with a suddenness that came near demolishing the tray. “Heavenly Betsey, I believe it's dad!” she was exclaiming, as the last flutter of her skirts vanished from the doorway.

Left to themselves, the trio of guests lifted their brows, and smiled, and coughed a little behind their fingers. Then they emptied their cooling cups. Then they rubbed the bridges of their noses with their unoccupied hands. Then they began to talk, low and about subjects which would admit of interruption. No interruption came, and they fell into silence, a silence which was the echo of the silence following the clamour that had filled the hall outside. Ten minutes passed away, fifteen, twenty. Then the eldest Miss Bidwell arose, tiptoed to the tray and set down her empty cup. The others followed her example. Then, —

“I think perhaps, we might be excused, if —” the eldest Miss Bidwell whispered, nodding towards the door.

An instant later, clasping their parasols within their folded handkerchiefs and still on tiptoe, as if fugitives from tardy justice, the three Bidwell girls crept out to the street. When they were safely past the side of the

Cathedral close and had rounded the corner into quiet Garden Street, the second Miss Bidwell spoke.

"How extraordinary!" she said. And again, "Really, how very American that young person is!"

But the youngest Miss Bidwell was more lenient.

"Poor thing!" she said. "How very disconcerting it will be for her when she returns to find us gone!"

Dorrance, meanwhile, was settled in the Asquith drawing-room, Tottykins on his knee and a teacup in his hand. The three weeks which had gone by since the Asquith dinner had made him a familiar sight inside that drawing-room, a good friend of his redoubtable hostess. In his cheery presence, Mrs. Asquith lost much of her austerity, lost all of her frown. Under her cold exterior, she was very much a woman, much a mother. Adoring her son absolutely, albeit she never could seem to realize that he had grown to man's estate and passed the need for discipline, she had greeted his chosen friend with a cordiality shown by her to few. The cordiality had promptly warmed to liking, then to something closely akin to the mother love she bestowed upon her own grown-up boy. There was something curiously boyish, to her mind, in Dorrance's sturdy figure, simple manners and clean, mirthful eyes. His deference to her was boyish, too, and so was his frank way of confiding to her the story of his day's doings, his next day's plans, of asking her advice as one who knew the local custom, of listening to her talk. It was a new experience to her, this fearless meeting her on even ground, yet with the deference due to her age and womanhood. Most men and all strangers greeted her as the Honourable Mrs. Asquith. To Dorrance, she was Willis Asquith's mother, and he talked to her

as if she might have been his own. Her latent womanhood responded to the call; and Kay Dorrance's Mrs. Asquith and the Mrs. Asquith who customarily ruled society were two quite different persons.

Dorrance sought her tea-table often, far too often, in fact, to taint his calls with any hint of formal need. Sometimes he found Willis there, sometimes not; but he lingered just as long in one case as in the other, lingered and chatted, or, dropping his social chatter, spoke with an earnestness which annulled the difference in their ages and sent Mrs. Asquith to her room to dress for dinner, filled with a vague consciousness that once again she had looked on life with eyes of young maturity. On such nights, her manner at dinner was more considerate to her husband and son, less dictatorial to her guests, less overbearing to her servants.

It was so long since any one, even Willis, had dared forget her majesty and her haughtiness, and treat her as pure woman!

On this particular afternoon, Asquith came in late for tea. At his step in the hall outside, his mother's face lighted; but she merely sent the maid to bring fresh water, and then asked casually, —

“Were you at the bridge again, to-day, Willis?”

He nodded, while he gave his hand to Dorrance. Then, crossing to a chair, he sat down with a heaviness which matched that written on his brow, a heaviness as little characteristic of him as was the dust which still lay thick upon his riding clothes.

Mrs. Asquith took the kettle from the hand of the maid, hung it above the lamp, then opened her tea caddy.

"The old story?" she queried then, for, in the Asquith family, the rule was share and share alike in all things, worriments as well as honours, and she would have counted herself no worthy wife and mother, had she failed to inform herself of her son's concerns.

"The old argument, rather." He took his cup and fell to stirring the tea with a gloomy abstraction which rendered him quite heedless of the presence of the guest.

The guest put down Tottykins. Then he put down his cup.

"What's the row, Asquith?" he inquired.

Asquith gulped down a good half of his tea, before he spoke. Then, —

"I'm fighting to get the traveller moved back," he said. "It's too great a load for the suspended span they're beginning to work on now; it's more than the cantilever, even, should have carried. Moreover, it's not needed. They can use the little one now, and ship this over to the other end. It's safe enough, on the anchor arm. I don't believe in risking —" He checked himself abruptly.

Dorrance, limping forward to the rug, faced about.

"You think there's risk?" he queried.

"Risk, yes. Danger, no." Asquith stirred his tea once more.

Dorrance laughed.

"In my profession, we call that splitting hairs," he said.

Asquith set down his cup, rose and walked to the open window.

"Split them, then," he said impatiently. "There is a difference, though. With such men back of it and

managed with care, there can't be any danger, even in such a bridge as this. Mind you, Dorrance," he faced about sharply; "it's no easy matter to design this sort of bridge. The very conditions of the case force a man into using stresses he never dreamed of trying until now. The best men in the world are on it; but they have frankly stated that they've put to sea in the unknown, the untried. That doesn't for a minute imply that they're in danger. It does imply, though, that they're facing certain risks."

"And?" Dorrance urged him, as he paused.

"And, on that account, the risks should be minimized as much as possible. Because Providence is kind, there's no especial sense in tempting it beyond its limit of endurance. That's just what they are doing now, with the large traveller. Anybody can see that, with half an eye. Besides, there's no use in making the men get panicky, every now and then."

"They do get panicky?"

"Rather! They're an excitable race at best; and they all know that this is the largest bridge in existence, largest and, to look at, the lightest. They work, all day, driving ten-foot pins with a two-ton hammer; but, once they are on the ground again, they forget everything but the cobwebby look of the thing against the sky, and they talk about it, nights, as if it were a cobweb."

"Why don't you talk it out of them?"

"Me?" Asquith laughed shortly. "I'm nothing in it, except a mere spectator."

"All you engineering chaps, I mean?" Dorrance persisted.

But Asquith shook his head.

"They don't talk to the chiefs; they talk and smoke it out together. It's in the air, that's all. Now and then a fellow chucks his place, and then we get a glimpse down through the hole he leaves that tells us what is brewing underside. Last May, we had another glimpse, when one of the painters thought he'd found a crack in a ten-inch plate. For one day, there was chaos."

"The chief did hear of it, that time?" Dorrance asked, while he stooped to pick up Tottykins, now whimpering and digging at his knees.

The bitterness came back to Asquith's voice.

"Chiefs, not chief," he corrected Dorrance. "That's the keynote of the trouble, whether it's a question of hunting down a crack or moving the gantry. It always is the next man's business. There isn't any head at all, only a lot of tails that go on wagging out of time with each other."

"Asquith," with Tottykins upon his arm, Dorrance turned his steady eyes upon his friend; "do you ever realize what this risk may mean?"

"In science, or in steel?" Asquith questioned, as once more he flung himself into his chair.

"Both. More than that, in human life?" Dorrance's voice was very grave; but Asquith's was even graver, as he answered slowly, —

"Dorrance, God knows I do. He knows, too, that I'm powerless to do anything but stand and prate." And he buried his face in his hands, as if to shut out all thought of his own futile responsibility.

Dorrance stood for a moment, watching him in silence. Then gently he put Tottykins down and took his leave. For the hour, he was thankful that he was

a mere novelist, dealing with crises only of his own creation.

Late that same evening, the second Miss Bidwell went to the telephone in answer to an insistent call.

"I'm so sorry, dear Miss Bidwell," a penitent voice was saying. "Dad's coming made me forget all about your being there, and I never thought of it again till this very identical minute. I rang you up, to ask you how you ever tore yourselves away. And I'm going to bring dad to tea, in a day or two, so you can see that I had good reason to forget you. You know I didn't expect him for another week. But I'm sorry I forgot you. Good night, Miss Bidwell." And, after its ancient custom, the telephone rang off.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**A**SQUITH'S mood of the day before still lay heavy on him, the next morning, as he sat in the drawing-room of the Maple Leaf, waiting for Jessica to appear. It was three days now since he had seen her, and he felt a sudden imperative need of her buoyant presence. He had supposed he knew that presence in its every phase. Nevertheless, now, he drew back, dazzled, by the new light in the girl's face, as she crossed the floor to meet him.

"You look as if you had heard good news," he told her, while he took her hand.

"I have." Her voice thrilled with her content. "Dad has come." And, in the thought of her content, she took no heed of the fact that Asquith's fingers had remained shut over hers a fraction of a moment longer than was essential for his greeting.

"Your father?"

"Yes. Late yesterday afternoon, and looking so well and brown. But then, he always is well," she added inconsequently. "That is one of his chief charms, that and the fact that he has never remembered to grow old." She sighed, with a sudden renewed realization of her own happiness. "I feel as if I had begun to live again."

"You missed him so very much?" For all his

careful self-control, a little note of envy came into Asquith's voice.

Her gesture was superb in its pride. So was her tone, as she answered tersely, —

"Wait till you see him. Then you'll understand."

"Must I wait long?" Asquith, still standing, looked down into the girl's eyes with no trace of his former heaviness. What a child she was, he told himself, and yet how much a woman! And what a gift it was, her absolute adoration of this unknown father! Was the father worthy of it all, he wondered, and did he appreciate it as another, a younger man might do? It was to answer these two questions that Asquith added, "Is your father too busy to see me now?"

"Sit down." Jessica hastily recalled her manners.

"Really and truly, I think I quite forgot to tell you I was glad to see you. Still, you ought to know all about that by this time. Besides," she laughed at the recollection; "you aren't the only one to be forgotten. Yesterday, when dad came walking in, I entirely forgot that the three Bidwells were calling on me, and I went off and left them in a row, like three ten-penny nails stuck up in the floor. Goodness knows how they pulled themselves out and got away; but I never missed them till almost bedtime. Do you suppose they will be wrathful at me till the end of ever?"

Asquith laughed.

"They may forgive; but they aren't prone to forget," he reassured her. "When I was in pinafores, I refused to kiss the oldest one, on the ground that she was too ugly. She still reminds me of it periodically, and always when there are people about."

Jessica pursed up her own red lips.

"Do you mind?" she queried. "For my part, I think it is rather nice to get the credit of having had good judgment at such an early age. But do sit down. I want to bring down dad."

She went running up the stairs to make good her intention. Half way up the flight, Asquith heard her step lag a little, pause, go on, then stop entirely. A moment later, she came slowly back again, her head drooping a little, her cheeks scarlet.

"Do you mind very much, if I don't call him now?" she asked contritely, as she slid into her seat with an humility quite at variance with her usual dashing manner.

"Not at all. Not at all," Asquith reassured her hurriedly. Truth to tell, he was quite resigned at the delay. The Colonel was still an unknown quantity. Jessica was known, and it was by reason of his knowledge that he had come in search of her, this sunny July morning. An hour of her gay irresponsibility was due to him, he felt, after his two long afternoons upon the bridge, his two wholly sleepless nights. Now and then, when past work and anxiety crowd on the heels of future, one needs to take a tonic. Asquith took Jessica. "Your father must be very busy, this first morning," he added, as a sop to convention.

"That just shows you don't know dad," Jessica assured him, with a gayety which only half downed her unwonted perturbation. "He's never busy, never was busy in his life."

"But I thought he was —" Asquith hesitated for the proper word.

Jessica never stopped to supply it.

"So he is," she answered swiftly. "That doesn't

make him busy, though. He just wanders around, his hands in his pockets and smiling from ear to ear; and, first thing you know about it, everything is done. Now and then, when things are very messy, he does whistle a little bit; but that's as busy as he ever gets. To see him, you'd think he never would arrive; but he does manage to get around, a little bit ahead of time. When you go there to meet him, you find him ready, waiting for you. This morning, though — "

"This morning?" Asquith helped out her embarrassed pause.

"This morning," Jessica went scarlet, though she faced him bravely; "he is busy, as you'd call it, with mama. She has so many things to say to him, things she wants to say to him at once and all alone, and I — I think they'd better get it over. You see," she cast down her eyes; but, as they fell, Asquith could make out a gleam of fun in their gray depths; "last night after supper, dad and I ran up to the terrace for just a minute. We got to talking, and it was ten o'clock when we came in. Mama didn't like it a bit, and — and — well, if you don't mind, I think I'd a little rather not call him down just now."

And the Colonel, just then, was in a mood to echo her choice. Gregarious by nature, predisposed to like the Asquiths, he yet was filled with a distinct preference for his wife's room and his wife's society. He had inadvertently stumbled into the edge of a situation, and now he was determined to explore it to the bottom.

"What about this young Dorrance?" he had queried idly, after his better half had emptied her mind of her own grievances and filled it with hard-extracted facts concerning his long absence.

"Mr. Dorrance? What about him?"

"Nothing especial. He seems a good sort of fellow, and rather a friend of yours; that's all." As he spoke, the Colonel sauntered to the window and stood staring out across the sunny street with an intentness which brought a gesticulating carter within his field of vision.

"He is a friend. A good one." Mrs. West spoke in two crispy sentences.

The Colonel shook his head at the carter. Then, —

"Where did you pick him up?" he asked.

"He was here, when we came. He has been very kind indeed," Mrs. West added hastily.

"Hm! An eye on Jessica?" the Colonel asked, with swift suspicion.

"Oh, no. Mr. Dorrance never has much to say to her. In fact, he is more my friend than hers."

The Colonel chuckled unfeelingly.

"Not from the way he stares at her now and then. But," he glanced at his wife with a careless unconsciousness of the colour in her face; "but he looks a good fellow. What does he do with himself — that is, besides watching Jessica?"

"Mr. Dorrance is a novelist," Mrs. West made brief reply.

"Oh, he is; is he?" The Colonel's dropping accent showed his disappointment. "And I rather liked his looks! He might have had brains and push. Anyway, he does have manners. The real thing, I mean; not the sort of tinsel stuff that sticks out on that French baboon you introduced to me, last night."

"Monsieur de la Haye?"

"Yes, if that's his name. *Grass* would go better, he's so almighty fresh. What an infernal fool he is!"

The Colonel cast himself down into a willow chair which creaked and groaned beneath his weight. "Really, Julia, I don't see why you should be having anything to do with a fellow like that."

Mrs. West's colour mounted from her cheeks to her forehead, and the lines between her brows deepened.

"Why not?" she asked, with an unwonted spirit which her husband was swift to note. "He is a stranger here."

"So were you," her husband interpolated briefly.

"A stranger, and lonely, and speaking very little English."

"And you spoke French?" The question was prompted by sheer boyish fun. None the less, it hurt.

"I used to," she answered, with a sudden dignity. "It was only in our days of drudgery that I forgot it all."

The answer also hurt. The laugh left the Colonel's lips, and his eyes were appealing.

"Julia," he said; "God knows I was sorry for it all, all the hard times and the drudgery I brought on you. But — I worked, too."

"Yes," she made bitter answer; "but the scars were all left on me."

For a time, there was silence. Mrs. West broke it.

"Monsieur de la Haye has been very kind to me," she said defensively.

For the life of him, the Colonel could not keep a note of sarcasm out of his hearty, honest voice.

"And you were a candidate for kindness, Julia?"  
Again came the dignity.

"We all are. And two women, strangers, left here alone." The last word held a distinct flavour of rebuke.

The Colonel started to his feet.

"I couldn't help it, Julia. I had to go. I can't be at the head of such a plant as mine, and totally disregard the beckoning of the hands. Else, where would the business be? And where would you be then, you and Jessica?" He controlled himself with an effort, and returned to a semblance of the jovial calm from which he was so rarely stirred. "You were saying about this Frenchman —" he inquired.

"That he has been very good to me," she iterated, totally unconscious of the way his fingers were gripping fast the cloth of the bottoms of his pockets.

"And Jessica?" he asked quietly.

"Jessica? Yes, of course, in a way. They laugh and talk together. Now and then they go to walk. Still, I must confess —" The wrinkles left her brow at the confession; "Monsieur de la Haye has been more my friend than he was hers."

The Colonel laughed.

"Upon my soul, Julia, you appear to have been cutting a wide swath up here," he offered comment.

This time, she winced, before she could control herself. A blow directly in the face would have hurt her far less than did this frank amusement at her poor little claims. For an instant, her washed-out eyes snapped ominously. Then she said, with a certain still deliberation, —

"No. It is only that Monsieur de la Haye can understand some things that other people fail to see."

Her tension was completely wasted on her husband who had come back to his own jovial mood.

"What sort of things?" he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, "You say he has been out with Jessica?" he queried jealously.

"Yes."

"Often?"

"Now and then."

"How often?"

"Really, I can't say. Sometimes for just a few minutes, every noon. Sometimes not for days. I really haven't kept account."

"Does she care for him?"

"How should I know? I haven't the least idea."

"I intend to have." The Colonel spoke low, slowly.

"Moreover, I do not intend to have her go out with him any more. Remember, Julia, it must stop right now."

"But why?"

Turning on his heel, the Colonel looked at her steadily.

"Because I neither like nor trust the man," he answered.

"I don't see why."

"Perhaps you don't. I do."

"But what will Monsieur de la Haye think?" she demanded.

"It makes no difference to me what he thinks," he told her.

"But it does to me."

"You are quite at liberty to explain the matter to him fully."

"I — can't."

"Why not?"

"He has done too much for me."

"What?" The Colonel faced her sharply. "What, besides understanding things, that is?"

Once more she flushed, partly at his accent, partly at the phrasing of the question, partly in self-consciousness over her own answer.

"He has sent me flowers now and then, and he has taken me to drive."

"Julia! Are you quite a fool?" And the Colonel's manifest regret took all the sharpness from his form of speech.

"No," she made answer, with sudden spirit. "I am only a little grateful at being taken down from my shelf and dusted now and then."

He let her words fall, unanswered, into silence. Then, when they no longer echoed in his brain, —

"What about Jessica?" he asked shrewdly.

"I don't see how she enters into the matter at all."

The reply was sharp, nipping.

"Possibly not. However, with a starveling Frenchman, a girl as pretty as she is likely to enter, especially when her prettiness is overlaid with a good bank account," he responded callously. "However, I'll see that — Come in! Oh, come in!" he added, as a knock sounded on the door.

A maid put her head in at the crack.

"Is Miss West here? Mr. Asquith is downstairs."

The Colonel sat himself down hard.

"Good Lord!" he said. "Asquith! How many more?"

Prudently Mrs. West waited until the door was closed upon the maid.

"At least, Peter, even you can't object to Mr. Asquith," she said then.

Once more the Colonel started to his feet. Once more he thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Object!" he burst out. "I object to 'em all, Julia."

"But you must expect —"

"Expect nothing! The girl is mine. I'm not going to have a pack of puppies nosing around her like this. Why, Julia," he faced her with round and startled eyes; "she may be getting married, if we don't look out."

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Why — not! She's ours, I tell you; mine. I haven't brought her up, just to hand her over to the first fellow for the asking. And what could we ever do without her, I'd like to know?"

A new flush, paler and infinitely more becoming, succeeded the angry red on Mrs. West's thin cheeks.

"What did we do before she came, Peter?" she asked, and her voice thrilled appealingly.

But the Colonel, man-like, was all engrossed with this new peril which confronted him.

"How should I know?" he answered bluntly. "Existed till she did come, I suppose. It seems to me I can't remember back of the days when she used to ride me 'piggy-back,' and go to sleep on my knees, after supper."

But Mrs. West both could and did remember. Moreover, she looked forward. While she looked, it seemed to her that past and future met. Meanwhile, —

"Do you intend to say that you think this fellow Asquith means business?" the Colonel was asking bluntly.

"I think he comes here pretty often," his wife made guarded answer.

"How often?"

"Two or three times a week."

The Colonel shook his head heavily, as one who expects the worst.

"Does Jessica care for him?"

"How should I know?" The old grievance smouldered up once more. "Jessica never tells me things, any more than —"

He cut off her phrase, half-spoken.

"But you must know, from seeing them together. Women always do know such things, know them before they happen," he insisted.

"Sometimes. But Jessica isn't like me, you know," she reminded him a little recklessly.

Her punishment for her recklessness came in the accent of his answer, as he said, —

"No, Julia. She isn't."

"Mr. Asquith is quite a gentleman," she said, after an interval; "and he seems very kind and intelligent. They say he is good in his profession, too. She really couldn't expect to do much better."

The Colonel turned on her with sudden fierceness.

"Good God, Julia!" he said. "To hear you talk, one would think your whole end and aim of life was to see Jessica get married." And, without waiting for another word, he went out and banged the door behind him.

Jessica's light laugh met him on the stairs, followed by a phrase or two of her gay chatter. The Colonel's face cleared, as he approached the open door of the drawing-room. Then it clouded again. Jessica was sitting with her back towards the door; she was too much engrossed in her companion to hear and recog-

nize her father's step. Her companion could not be expected to know who was the stranger man who halted an instant on the threshold, then went his way. But the Colonel, going on his way, had an instantaneous vision of the loneliness which would await him upon his daughter's wedding morning. Up to that hour, he had looked forward to an unending future of holding her as his very own. Now doubt had come, and, with it, a foreboding. And Jessica was very dear. For her sake, everything else in life, hard work included, had been worth the while. And, now that everything was his for the asking, his to lay before her, was he to be confronted all at once with the bitter prospect of her loss? The Colonel's step rang heavy on the plank sidewalk running up the Court House hill. If he could have had his way, he would have kicked the planking into fragments. That denied him, he merely stamped along with a vigour which caught Jessica's attention, as she sat facing the open window of the drawing-room. She glanced up carelessly. Then her face lighted, and ruthlessly she broke in upon Asquith's uncompleted sentence.

"I do believe it's dad. But how did he get out, without our seeing him? And what an awful rumpus he is making with himself!" Then, after one wishful look towards the figure just vanishing around the Court House corner, she once more steadied to the subject in hand. "You really do feel uneasy?" she demanded.

"Yes, and no."

She frowned.

"That's no answer at all. Either you do, or else you don't. It is my impression that you do. What makes you uneasy?"

He smiled, but mirthlessly.

"They tell me it's my over-caution," he answered.

"That's plain nonsense. What is it you're afraid of?"

"Of too much weight on the outside end of the arm."

"And then?"

"Of pulling the arm over into the river."

"What should do it? I mean, what makes you think there's too much weight?"

Had Dorrance been present, he would instantly have been reminded of that first conversation he had overheard, long weeks before. Asquith, though, had nothing with which to make comparison. His past experience with women had brought him no such swift sequence of question and reply. It was as man to man, and yet it held a note of deference to his man's opinion; it was starred here and there by flashes of a woman's keener intuition.

"I think the traveller —"

"What's that?" she interrupted.

"The great, square frame that holds the lifting engines."

She nodded.

"Yes, I know. Dad showed me from the boat. And you think that's too heavy, heavier than railroad trains and snow and things?"

"Too heavy for the bridge, as it stands now. The rivets aren't all in. And if —"

She shook her fluffy head in disapproval.

"Let's not put it into words, that *if*; it's too terrible. Think of the broken rivets, and the broken hearts of all those women, and — and of the man who planned

it! It makes me crawl, the thinking of it, even." Suddenly her voice rang harder, more incisive. "But, if you really think there's danger, Mr. Asquith, what in the world are you sitting here for, doing nothing?"

"What can I do?" he asked, with the impotence developed by the past two days of futile argument.

"Get up! Get a move of some sort! Find the men and order them to take the what-you-call-it down. Tell them you think there's danger."

"I did, two days ago."

"And will they move it?"

"They said they must wait for orders."

"Orders!" Her tone was scornful. "Why don't you order it, yourself?"

"You forget I haven't any real connection with the staff," he reminded her.

"I don't forget you are a man, and responsible," she returned crisply. "Besides, your father —"

"Resigned from the company, last year."

"What of that?" she demanded impatiently.

"Everybody says that he was one of the main causes of having the bridge at all, and everybody says that you —" She checked herself. Then she added more slowly, "What do you propose to do about it all, then?"

Bending forward, his eyes upon the floor, he let his hands drop between his knees.

"Nothing," he said. "My hands are tied."

"Then I'd break the string," she flashed back at him hotly. "If need be, I'd shout the matter on the corners of the streets. Then, if that didn't do any good, I'd take the first train to New York, and have the matter settled there. You wouldn't catch me sitting down and

mourning for fear there might be danger. I'd have the question settled, one way or the other, before to-morrow night."

"But professional etiquette —" he was starting to say; but she interrupted him.

"Professional lollypops! I never thought you'd sneak away and hide behind that flimsy little screen."

"Miss West," Asquith looked up, after the pause had lasted long; "what is the reason you seem to — to feel this thing so strongly?"

Rising, she walked the length of the room, turned, walked back to his side as he remained there, still seated, to await her answer. When, at length she spoke, her face had lost its fire and grown gentle, full of womanhood.

"Because," she answered him, with a slow directness which brought the colour to his cheeks; "because, ever since I have known you, I've thought you one of the manniest men I've ever known, and I don't want to get disappointed in you, the first time I watch you face to face with a big responsibility." And gravely, as he rose, she held out her hand to him in farewell.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

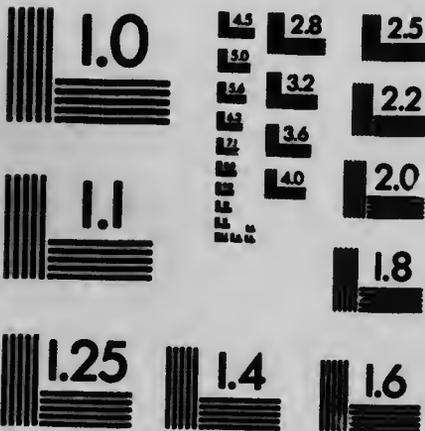
**T**HE Bidwell girls were not the only things feminine that made up Jessica's social world just then. There were other girls, younger and vastly more to her liking, gay, dainty young things of pretty clothes and careful manners and cordial, hospitable hearts. There were a round dozen of them in all. One or two among them had claimed to discover in the young person from Lone Wolf something more than an exotic assortment of jewels and of slang, of astounding clothes and of unconventional manners. The one or two had been omnipotent among the dozen, and, before she had been quite aware what was happening to her, Jessica had been caught up within at least the edge of the local summer gayety.

It was a gayety which had won her heart completely. It concerned all manner of out-door summer interests; it was always dainty and well-bred, always full of girlish enthusiasm for the sport of the passing hour. If her young hostesses were critical, Jessica gained no inkling of the fact. If they had their reservations, these were concealed with a care so scrupulous that she gained no suspicion of even their existence. And Jessica enjoyed it all immensely. Curiously enough, she almost ceased to be aware of any ingrained differences between herself and her Canadian comrades. Almost. Now and then, however, the differing view-



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points crossed at unexpected angles. For a time, after such crossing, Jessica was much absorbed inside her father's plans. She only emerged from them again upon the repeated invitations of her former hostesses.

Even in the winter, the English population of the city is so small that one is reasonably sure of meeting Everybody Everywhere. In summer, with two thirds of society away, the chance of meeting becomes even stronger. Even if some play tennis and some play only golf, if some ride and a few others drive a motor, there are always a remaining few who do all those things in turn, and those few are the ones who bind all the different sets into one whole. Among those few was Willis Asquith, and Jessica met him everywhere, the one steady, unchanging human fact in her Quebec experience. From the hour of her first beholding him, she had never been conscious of any alteration. There was always the same quiet, the same restful dignity, the same heed given to her slightest whim. Always, that is, until that July morning, ten days since, the morning which had preceded his abrupt journey to New York. Since then, in some indefinable fashion, his manner to her had been just a little unlike his manner to the other girls around her. She could not have analyzed the change, even had she wished to do so. She felt it, wondered at it a little now and then, and ended by accepting it as a matter of no especial importance. Willis Asquith, by reason of his bald head and his imperturbable quiet, seemed to her a man approaching middle years, a man whom one might treat as one treats one's mother's younger cousins. For the rest, even with one's mother's younger cousins, there is a certain pleasure in being singled out for

especial care and liking. Jessica felt neither reason nor desire to draw back before the steady advances of Willis Asquith.

The two mothers, however, watched the situation with better understanding, although with feelings which were totally unlike. Each one was well aware that she was facing a crisis in the life of her only child. The one was resolved to help it on at any cost; the other, although the more devoted, would have given anything, short of her very life, to prevent it.

Long days before the return of the Colonel, Mrs. West had weighed the matter in her own brain, had come to certain radical decisions. Some of these decisions she did not frame in words, not even in clear-cut thoughts. She left them vaguely drifting, formless and indistinct, in the rear recesses of her brain. Others she worked out with a mathematical precision. Jessica was pretty, lovable; one day she would be rich, rich past the dreams of Canadian avarice. As a natural consequence, she was bound, some day, to be asked in marriage. Asked, she was bound to marry. Granted so much, what better husband could there be for her than such a man as Willis Stone Asquith, Junior? He had family, brains, position and some money. He had a perfect arsenal of good points morally, and, try as she would, Mrs. West could not discover the trail of any vices. Furthermore, he was obviously on the brink of falling in love with Jessica, unless, perchance, the brink was already passed. Mrs. West pondered the situation well, and she rejoiced at the Colonel's lengthening absence, even while she pondered. Under his watchful eyes, it would have been infinitely more difficult to test the truth of her decisions.

For the last two or three weeks, Mrs. West had busied herself in systematic efforts to shove Jessica into Asquith's society. She did this with an adroitness of which her daughter had never before suspected her; for Mrs. West, in those days, was learning daily lessons in social craft, lessons which she did not discover wholly for herself, but which she adapted to uses never dreamed of by her clever teacher. It took adroitness, too. Let Jessica once suspect that she was being driven, she would have balked without delay. It was a new experience for Mrs. West, this careful study of her daughter's wishes, this careful bending them, ever so little, to fit into the groove that led her to her own ends. Long years before, Mrs. West had been called a clever woman. She never had laid such stress upon her cleverness as now, in this new study of her daughter's character and heart. Perchance, too, some lessons from the study would react upon herself. As yet, however, these were not manifest.

As for Mrs. Asquith, she groaned, often in spirit and sometimes aloud, over her son's increasing infatuation for the young American. To the mind of Mrs. Asquith, no more moderate word could apply to Willis's desire for Jessica's society, to his quiet championship of Jessica against the maternal attacks. A devoted wife and a loving one, Mrs. Asquith's world was summed up, after all, in this one son. He was everything to her; she desired to be everything to him. She could not have looked on with equanimity, while he paid court to Venus and Dorcas and Queen Alexandra, all rolled into one; and Jessica West, to a most remarkable extent, was lacking in all the essential attributes of the three. Deaf and uncomprehending before Jessica's

real wit, blind to her girlish efforts to be friendly, Mrs. Asquith merely straightened her glasses and stiffened her spine and stared blankly before her, never so much the Honourable as in Jessica's gay, girlish presence.

And Jessica, her cajolings ignored, her bribes refused, shook her head sadly and went her way. For all sorts of reasons, she would have been glad to be friends with Asquith's mother. Friendship was quite out of the question, however, so there was an end to it.

The sole result of all this attitude of Mrs. Asquith, an attitude which Jessica in her own mind and with an accuracy not to be gainsaid termed *sniffiness*, the sole result was one not at all foreseen by the haughty lady. At the start, Jessica had generously been prepared to meet Mrs. Asquith upon equal terms. That failing, she had accepted meekness as her proper rôle; but, in the fulness of time, unappreciated meekness became defiance. Mrs. Asquith was no strategist. Her manner to Jessica said as plainly as any words, "Hands off my son!" Jessica had no especial craving to lay a finger-tip on Asquith's heart. None the less, she speedily set to work to convince Asquith's mother that both her eager hands were clutching at the treasure. Asquith, by himself, was a good comrade, steady, reliable. Asquith, in his mother's presence, was a thing to be alternately coaxed and driven to ends manifestly not of his own choosing. Small wonder that Asquith himself found the situation passing comprehension. However, as is the case of most strong men with women, a dash of the incomprehensible merely increased the charm.

Just outside the Louis Gate and at the foot of the lawn sloping down from the great gray Parliament

Buildings on the ridge, the Quebec tennis club holds sway. There in the angle of the wall it has a court or two, a clubhouse which is mostly veranda, and a vast amount of *esprit du corps*. Thither, one morning in late July, Jessica had bent her steps in search of pleasure.

Jessica was at her best on a tennis court, best in playing close against the net. There, her wayward dash became skill, her swiftiness, her unexpectedness counted in her favour. Whether delivered by racket or by tongue, her volleys were as precise as they were quick; her service was swift and sure, though given with an indirectness all her own. Losing or winning, her careless good-temper was never ruffled. Unlike most women who are also good players, it was the sport she counted, not the score. As result, when others grew fretty at a losing score and lost their surety, Jessica's very laughter left her dominant. It also left her prey, however, to every zealous beginner who lacked a partner. As a rule, the partner who could win the set had scanty patience with a weak assistant. Jessica merely laughed and played a little harder, for the sake of evening up the game.

Fate favoured her, that morning. No new player was in sight, and she revelled in an hour of fighting a well-matched antagonist. Again and again she tied the score, held her own, lost, and once more made a tie. Then, gritting her teeth, she fell back upon her final trick, the one which had gained for her the championship of her school; and, holding her racket low in her left hand, she sent ball after ball pounding across the net in a fashion which left her adversary breathless, scoreless.

"Bravo, Miss West! Superb!"

Flushed with her effort, her ruddy hair loosened around her face and her sleeves rolled up above her elbows, she turned around to meet the hail. Dorrance and Asquith were crossing the lawn from the Louis Gate, and Asquith's hat was held under his arm, to leave his hands free for his applause. It was Dorrance, however, who had called to her.

"Trick work," she answered concisely, although she flushed a shade more deeply at his praise. "When you see me take to that serve, you may be sure I'm driven to a corner. Have you come to help us?"

The question was aimed at Asquith. It was Dorrance who replied.

"We had. Now I am not sure you need our help."

"It depends. I usually have to fight my own battles." Under her laugh, her face looked wishful. "However, I am always grateful for a little backing."

"Even mine?" Dorrance queried, as he halted at her side.

His face was earnest, she noticed, as he asked the question. She wondered whether it held a reference to his being barred out from sports like that. She also wondered whether it was because she had seen so little of him, during the past week or two, that now he made so strong an impression upon her, as he stood there bareheaded in the July sun. Curiously enough, it was the first time, since their meeting on the terrace, that she had seen him beside Asquith. Liking both men in such totally different ways, she had always shrunk from making any comparison between them. In a sense, it seemed disloyal to the finer part of Dorrance to measure him against a man of Willis Asquith's

perfect stature. Now, measured, she was surprised to find that Dorrance did not dwindle in her eyes. And yet, her intellect assured her that Asquith's standard was no mean one to attain. Dorrance was every inch of him a man, and — Her eyes, to her annoyance, drooped before his steady brown ones. Was he, perhaps, a little bit more human?

Asquith, meanwhile, had been appropriated by Jessica's antagonist; but Dorrance, after a careless "good morning" tossed across the net, remained with Jessica, silent, as if waiting for his answer.

His silence recalled her from her reverie.

"Even you?" she echoed. "Why not you, of all people? It's an American I need."

"Against all England?" At her side, he turned and sauntered towards the wide veranda, deserted so early in the morning.

She sighed a little, and shook her head. The gesture was wilfully comic; yet, like all true comedy, it held its note of pathos.

"Sometimes I feel so. Most of the time, I love it; but now and then it goes on my nerves. I love them; they are dear people. Still, I wish they weren't always so conscious of the existence of a frontier. What difference does it all make, anyway? I'm only one, and I can't fill the whole horizon. If I'm willing to forget it, why can't they?"

"You think they don't?"

"Mr. Dorrance!" Pausing, she spun about to face him, and again her colour came. "They're dear people; they've been dear to me; but," she laughed, notwithstanding her earnestness; "but, after all, I feel as if they were sitting back and trying to classify

me like a new, strange sort of beetle, and — and sometimes it isn't funny."

"No," Dorrance assented gravely. "No; it isn't."

She liked his gravity. It held a deeper tribute to the justice of her meaning than any laughter at her phrase.

"But not all?" he said at length. "You must make some exceptions."

"Who?"

He cast about in his mind. An American himself, he knew it was not Jessica's Americanism that they watched with comment, but something else, something inherent in the girl herself.

"The Asquiths, for instance," he suggested.

Over her shoulder, she flung a furtive glance at Willis.

"They're the worst of the whole lot, only for him," she said bluntly. She paused for a moment, her strong little thumbs unconsciously testing the tightness of her racket, her eyes, unseeing, fixed upon her thumbs, while her colour came and went. Then abruptly she raised her eyes to Dorrance, as frank and trusting as a little child in her reliance upon his stronger nature. "That's why I am so glad to have you here," she added simply. "You're an American, too; you understand things that they never can, and sometimes even that is a comfort."

He felt himself redden to his ears, less at her words than at the way his whole nature sprang out to receive them. For an instant, it seemed to him that their two selves stood there, hand in hand, apart from all the rest of the world. Moreover, although he was Kay Dorrance the Sixth and an author of increasing fame,

and she was the young person from Lone Wolf, he would not have had it otherwise.

The instant passed, however, and Dorrance sought to bury it beneath a little laugh.

"And so we're to stand against England, Miss West? All right. Where can I find another racket?"

Again his colour came. The obvious jerk with which she recalled herself to matters practical betrayed only too plainly that, for the instant, she had shared his vision, had felt the perfect contact of their alien natures. She caught herself back quickly, though, as if her maiden modesty shrank from such self-betrayal.

"You really play, then?" she asked him.

He saw no need to wince at her directness.

"I surely do, after my own fashion."

"I'm so glad; it's such grand fun. I didn't suppose you could, and yet you do such astounding things. Wait till I get a racket." And she vanished towards the lockers.

Dorrance looked after her with a meditative little smile. She had said the nice thing to him in a nice, direct, hearty way. Nevertheless, he read her doubts in her eyes, read them and noted with a certain pleasure that they took nothing away from her willingness to be his partner. It was like her, this ready comradeship which took no thought of her own advantage. His smile widened, as he resolved to test it a little farther, before he set himself to work in earnest to make good.

In the end, he did make good, make good brilliantly. Before that, however, he tried the girl to the uttermost, and the trial was dictated, not so much for his own amusement, as for the purpose of seeing whether she

would justify his estimate of her girlish generosity. It was a test calculated to shake the poise and ruin the temper of any girl, not merely a sport-loving one such as he deemed Jessica to be, of any girl whose yellow hair was dashed with red. The opposing girl was Jessica's one rival in the club. Asquith played tennis as he did all things else, supremely well. Against them were Jessica and Jessica's partner, and Jessica's partner was proving himself a bungler of the worst description. The score mounted against them: three, four, five, and Jessica, dishevelled in body but totally unruffled in mind, laughing, scarlet, panting, alternately chased the balls he missed, and made apologies for his having missed them. Dorrance bungled on, clumsily, stupidly, too late, too near the net, too vehement, too soon, too far back, too feebly apathetic. The other girl bit her lips and looked the other way. Asquith, who had played with him before, was totally dumfounded; but Jessica toiled away, without a sign of irritation. Dorrance smiled inscrutably to himself, as he picked up the balls for the final service which doubtless would end the set. Then he straightened his shoulders, tossed aside his cap, and proceeded to make good.

Afterward, he and Jessica went away together. Jessica gave a little sigh of satisfaction, as they left the court.

"Oh, but that was glorious! I could fairly see the eagle flapping his wings, in that last volley. We Americans are the people, after all." She laughed vain-gloriously. Then she added, while her eyes lighted with sudden mischief, "Besides, I told you so."

"When?" Dorrance, his cap cocked on the back

of his head, looked like a careless, merry boy, as he limped on beside her.

"Conscious power," she reminded him.

He surveyed her narrowly, half in surprise, half pleasure.

"You remember that?" The words seemed to slip out in spite of himself.

"Why not? It was great fun, and you must admit that I was accurate. In fact, you did admit it at the time."

"In little things, perhaps; but not the large," he corrected her.

She shook her head.

"You didn't qualify it then, whatever you may think about it now. Besides," she laughed; "I ought to remember it, for that was the very first time we had met without our fighting."

"Your fighting," he amended coolly. "I had nothing to do about it all."

"You? You merely put your hands in your pockets and said 'sic 'em!'" she corrected in her turn. "Still, as we both of us were Americans, it must have been a civil war. Where are you going now?"

"Are you tired?" he queried, without slackening his pace.

"I? Tired? Do I look it?" she demanded.

Turning his head, he made deliberate study of her lithe figure, her animated face.

"You look exhausted, a mere wreck," he told her.

"Nevertheless, I think we'll go home by way of the glaxis; it is less monotonous than Louis Street."

Again she bethought herself of the old phrase in which she had sought to sum him up. She felt like a

little child beside him, careless, irresponsible, but singularly happy. Now and then it was good to be led about in this masterful fashion. Even Asquith had an exasperating trick of asking her consent to every plan he made, while, as for the Frenchman, he left her to make the plans, while he applauded them. Dorrance not only made the plans; but he took it quite as a matter of course that she would carry them out. Ruling always, Jessica had a sudden and swift perception that it might be very restful to be ruled.

The perception came to her again, later on, as they were strolling along the footpath that leads around the Citadel outside the moat. At their feet, the city lay in her noon siesta beneath the glowing July sun, and the river, winding down among the mountains, glowed like the mid-day sky above. There was no shadow anywhere, no hint of cloud. Only they two were loitering along the path together, over crispy turf and under sunny skies which apparently had been created for themselves, they two, alone. Jessica, her brown hands locked behind her in unconscious imitation of Dorrance's own favourite pose, strayed onward, her eyes upon his face, her own face lighting now and then in answer to his words, heedless of self as any child, heedless, too, of her own unconscious yielding to his charm.

But Dorrance, on his side, was fully conscious of her charm for him. How could he help such consciousness, while his brown eyes rested on her face, changing in swift response to his own changing moods? For the hour, his inkpot and his traditions were alike forgotten; once more their natures met, met and walked onward, hand in hand, careless of all the rest of the world around

them and only intent, each upon the other. Afterward would come reaction. Such moods, of their very nature, were bound to be short-lived. In his room, that afternoon, Dorrance groaned at the memory of his talk, egotistic, autobiographical, while Jessica, at the other end of the house, was bemoaning the fact that, in her too obvious absorption in her comrade, she had entirely forgotten to roll down her sleeves. However, that was the hour of reaction, and it came later. For the moment, the delicious self-revealing, the inconsequent agreements and bits of mutual objections: these were the things that counted. The subject mattered not at all. The same results could have been reached by way of goloshes or of guava jelly.

And then came the end, and suddenly, to all their pleasant morning.

Lured on by their increasing fellowship, excited by the play, the walk and talk, the day, Dorrance yielded to one of the few impulses of his lifetime, an impulse well-meant, ill-judged, which left its mark on him for days and weeks to come.

"Miss West," he said persuasively, breaking in upon their random, gossiping roll-call of the people of the Maple Leaf; "I wish I might ask a favour of you."

Startled at the sudden earnestness of his tone, she turned to face him. His eyes were as earnest as his voice. Nevertheless, —

"What now?" she asked him gayly, and her phrase suggested that, for years, they had been on terms of friendship which permitted asking favours.

His gravity never lessened at her words. Rather, it deepened, as if they brought him better understanding

of how much need there was of the granting him this very favour. In his grave earnestness, he spoke as bluntly as any untrained boy.

"It's a queer thing to be asking you," he blurted out, while the colour rolled up across his cheeks. "But — we've been — you've been letting us get such good friends, this morning, that I'm going to say something, just as if you were my sister."

Deliberately she cocked the white of one eye at him.

"Fire!" she bade him. "You've been long enough about taking aim. Now bang away and see if you can hit your mark."

No living man could have retained his gravity in the face of her tone and words. In spite of his earnestness, Dorrance laughed; but the laugh died away again almost at once.

"It is about Monsieur de la Haye," he said tentatively, his brown eyes on the distant river.

Instantly her round chin lifted itself, and stiffened, hardened.

"What about Monsieur de la Haye?" she asked, and Dorrance, hearing, hardly recognized her voice.

"Merely that — Really," he laughed apologetically; "it's not at all my business, Miss West."

"No," she told him flatly. "No; it isn't. But go on."

"I —" his brown eyes left the river, sought her face, found it inflexible, and once more dropped to the river; "I am going to say it to you, just as I would to my own sister. If I say it to your mother, she'll pass it on to you; it will only make two rows instead of one. Besides, you said, yourself, you thought I understood

things." Again came the curiously boyish laugh, mingling in the graver note of apology.

"Well?" she said insistently, though without a glance at him, as he limped along beside her.

"Nothing, only I—I really wish you—you wouldn't go about with him so much," he went on bravely, sure he was in the right, sure that some one must come to the protection of the girl, sure that that some one must be himself, or nobody at all.

"Why?" Still the level insistence in her tone.

"Because—he's not the sort. Because I've been hearing things about the fellow."

"What sort of things?"

Again his eyes besought her face. Again they fell to the distant river, as she repeated her curt question. Why had he not followed the path of selfish safety, and told the Colonel all the story, and let the fellow get what he deserved? Why had he yielded to the impulse, tempting to every man alive, of seeking to play mentor to the prettiest girl in sight, sure that prettiness and charm betoken yielding?

"What sort of things?" she was demanding, for the third time.

Desperately he faced her, his brown eyes glinting with something which was not fun.

"The sort of things one doesn't tell a girl," he answered slowly. "The sort of things, too, that no decent chap forgives."

Again her chin lifted, and her voice rang hard, cold. It seemed to him incredible that her friendliness could so soon have given place to such intense hostility.

"Thank you for your care of me, Mr. Dorrance," she said incisively. "It is as needless as it is well-

meaning. But please remember that Monsieur de la Haye is my friend, and that I never have been in the habit of talking over my friends with other people, or listening to stories about them. I think, if you don't mind, I won't begin it now. Good morning, Mr. Dorrance." She bent her head in a haughty farewell which would not have disgraced a duchess. "I think I will go down, this shorter way."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"DAMN!" Dorrance observed to himself from between his ebony-backed brushes, next morning. "What an egregious ass I am!"

The remark was not wholly without foundation, as Dorrance had discovered, during a sleepless night. The night had brought with it something else than a sense of his own folly, however. Towards three o'clock, in summing up his reflections, the astounding truth had come to him that he cared far more for Jessica than he had supposed. It was not the sort of truth to steal upon him gently and by slow degrees. It bounced out at him with an unexpectedness akin to Jessica's own. Moreover, it refused to be driven away. Without his having the least inkling of the fact, Jessica West had become the one woman in the world to him. The whole notion was so extraordinary that he sat up in bed, clasping his crossed ankles in his hands, while he tried to discover just how the thing had happened. He might as well have tried to account for the tide, crawling in across a long-shore sandbar. It just was; that was all there was about it. He lay down again and pulled the sheet across his face and indulged in meditations. He was the Sixth, and his mother in New York was — well, a Colonial Dame and a member of The Colony. And the Colonel had eaten with his knife, that very noon. As for Jessica herself — He

tucked the edge of the sheet underneath his red hair to smother his emotions. It merely smothered him, however. He threw the sheet back once more, crossed his hands behind his head, and sought to sum up a situation whose items defied both logic and arithmetic. It was worse than adding pineapples and lemons.

On the one hand was he himself, Kay Dorrance the Sixth, born of fine old stock, educated to the outside limit of modern training, rich, a social favourite and already clutching the edge of fame in a profession whose primary demand upon its followers was that of a single-minded devotion. On the other was this young person from Lone Wolf, of dubious extraction and of by no means dubious manners and training, a beautiful, generous, tempestuous child, hot-tempered, wayward, but exceedingly loyal to those she called her friends, a child who could be counted upon to do the unexpected thing. She never would be conventional, never would be a lady, according to the old-time meaning which Dorrance's mother had taught him to read into the abused old word. And he, Kay Dorrance, after running the gauntlet of scores of women of his own class, had elected to care for this Jessica West who, on her side, quite obviously did not care for him. Like a modern Saul, as he lay there pondering, Kay Dorrance kicked against the pricks. Moreover, the pricks were by no means all launched in the one direction. Why? Wherefore? What had done this thing? He shook his head disconsolately in the darkness. Nothing had done it. It had done itself.

The truth had dawned upon him, after he had spent long hours in vainly trying to blame the girl for this new tempest which had blown between them.

The more he tried to cast the blame on her, the more his mind sought about to make excuses for her, to praise her for the attitude she had taken towards him. Leaving the past quite out of account, he went over and over again the details of the morning, of her cordial friendliness in greeting him, of her gay championship of his bad playing. Alone in the dark, his cheeks burned hotly at the memory of that bit of boyish gallery play, the act, it might have been, of the hero of a tenth-rate novel. He never would have stained one of his own pages with such a futile bit of pose. What did he want her to do about it, anyway? Confound it all! The room was scorching. He got up to open the shutters wider; but the lights from across the Ring blazed down into his face and fretted him until he once more banged the shutters into their old position. Confound the girl, anyway! What if she had been jolly and generous and kind? What if she was a beauty of rare sort? So were a dozen other girls. He would forget about her and roll over and go to sleep.

However, he did not.

Morning brought no change, save for a slight increase of logic. This assured him he had behaved like an idiot, an ass. Because the girl was friendly and uncommonly pretty, because — well, yes, because he — liked — her, there was no especial reason he should constitute himself her censor, a species of moral auditor of the excellencies of her friends. No wonder the girl had been furious at his officiousness. No wonder she had left him in a prompt resentment which had held its own share of dignity. And, besides, with what portentous, blatant pomposity had he held forth

about his own sister! All in all, though it was scarcely six o'clock, he decided he would get up and dress himself. The mere physical action of the dressing would break in upon his train of thought which defied all schedule time in record-breaking runs and flying switches which, however, never by any chance led far away from the main line.

Nevertheless, beyond the mere fact of strengthening the *confound* of the night watches into a sturdy, daylight *damn*, action brought little change, save to sift three or four solid facts out of the dust of his meditations. He had behaved like a fool. Jessica was justly angered at his clumsy interference. He cared for Jessica. Jessica did not care for him. Strange to say, it was those last two facts which gave him most concern. Between them, there was not one cent's worth of choice; and yet he gained no especial comfort from the surety that one would completely neutralize the other, so far as any results from either of them were concerned.

And yet, after all, Kay Dorrance had had a certain reason on his side in his impulsive words to Jessica. He knew men, even men of sorts quite alien to that from which he was accustomed to choose his friends. He was neither blind, nor deaf, nor of doubtful understanding. His finer instincts, apart from any reason, had taught him to distrust Monsieur de la Haye on sight. His later observations had assured him that, for ends of his own, ends which were wholly obvious to an onlooker like himself, Monsieur de la Haye was paying court to Mrs. West, who was receiving his attentions eagerly, regardless of the fact that the Frenchman's eye was on her pretty daughter. It was a clever courtship, too, with offerings of flowers and long, long talks and

longer gazings expressive of mute understanding too perfect to need the clumsy vehicle of words. And, now and then, there came an interval of paying court to Jessica, who received him with a gay comradeship quite alien to the solemn tremulousness of Mrs. West. And Dorrance, seeing, ground his teeth, wondering, the while, how the Colonel's lady, who seemed fairly endowed with feminine astuteness, could be so blind. He wondered even more when, after the Colonel's return, the situation still went on, apparently unchanged.

Neither his instinctive dislike of the Frenchman, nor his observation of his methods of attack, however, would ever have driven Dorrance to the indiscretion of a warning. The cause had been sudden, certain, almost justifiable. Dorrance, as often happened, had been dining at the Garrison Club, the night before. For the first time in his life, Monsieur de la Haye had been there, too. Chance placed him at the table next to that where Dorrance sat. Whether elated by his invitation, or roused by the neighbourhood of Dorrance whose dislike he could not have failed to discover, or whether it was merely that the wine had gone to his head, the Frenchman proceeded to forget himself entirely, himself and even the need for reticence in carrying out his plans. Before the end of his second glass, he was chuckling and babbling to his companion about the American heiress he was going to marry, pretty, impossible, but rich enough so one could put up with anything, even the old scarecrow of a mother who was helping along the scheme so well.

The Frenchman was not noisy, albeit quite outspoken, and Dorrance controlled himself with an effort. His red hair prompted him to knock the Frenchman down,

and then drag him out, heels first, and flay him; but reasoning prevailed. Dorrance hated scenes. Moreover, a scene of this sort and in such a place could not fail to make Jessica's name far more public than the drunken babblings of such a man as Monsieur de la Haye. He controlled himself, all but his eyes which took on a dangerous light; he finished a leisurely dinner and went into the smoking-room, thanking his Fates that his host was a man of scanty speech and that, above their cigars, he would have ample time to ponder over the situation and decide what it would be best for him to do.

His words to Jessica had been the result of much pondering. Impulsive, they were yet the substance of what he had hoped to convey to her with deliberate care. In most cases, the only natural thing would have been an appeal to her parents. However, in a small and gossipful community like the Maple Leaf, Dorrance felt that the matter should be settled as quietly as possible, for the sake of the girl herself. Mrs. West, he feared, would be of no avail. Her words carried little weight before her wayward daughter. Moreover, she was of a sentimental type of mind, and too little used to the world to grasp the undesirability of a man like Monsieur de la Haye. The Colonel? Dorrance shook his head. The Colonel did know men. His dislike of the Frenchman was as obvious as was his adoration of his daughter. Behind his ready smile lay an iron jaw; now and then a steely flash came into his eyes. Dorrance foresaw in all its consequences the possible tornado of his wrath. He decided that the safest course would be an appeal to the girl herself. Such an appeal, coupled with a few words of grave

explanation: this would be wholly justified by the remote, frank friendliness of their later intercourse. And Jessica was young of her years, while, by reason of his training and of his studious profession, he knew the world only too well. He would speak to Jessica kindly, gravely, and from the summit of his years. And she would listen, and heed, and, some day, she would thank him for his warning.

And then, all at once, his plans and his theories had gone to naught, scattered before the charm of Jessica's presence, her glad welcome, her gay companionship. He had only been conscious of a wild, overmastering desire to save her from the Frenchman's greedy plans at any cost. Her heedless good-fellowship had warned him what easy prey she might become; her gentle yielding to his minor wishes had deceived him into believing her far more plastic than he had supposed. And finally, her frank, generous acceptance of his limitations, downright as that of any kind-hearted boy: this had been the influence which had swept him from his carefully chosen ground of semi-paternal protection. He had spoken to her, but by no means as a father, spoken impulsively and with ill-considered baldness. She had resented his words in hot wrath, had stooped to no defence of her so-called friend, had merely glared at him for one speechless moment, and freed her mind and then had gone away and left him standing there alone, chop-fallen and filled with utter self-disgust.

Her dignity had been perfect, perfect the ground of her resentment: that he, Kay Dorrance, moved by some sudden spite, had sought to oust the Frenchman from the circle of her friends. For days on days to come, she stood firm upon that ground, her dignity and

her resentment alike unbroken. She avoided Dorrance when she could. When she could not, she treated him with a cold forbearance which made him efface himself as speedily as possible. In those days, Dorrance felt himself a mere unworthy atom, and disgraced at that. His only consolation rested in that, peer from his half-closed shutters as often as he would, in all those summer noons and cool, alluring evenings, he never once caught sight of Jessica and the Frenchman sauntering forth together. In the dining-room, and especially when Dorrance was present, Jessica's manner to Monsieur de la Haye was marked by a new consideration; but Dorrance paid little heed to anything that happened beneath the Colonel's watchful eye. It was only the Colonel's absence that he dreaded, that and the emotional heart of Mrs. West.

Meanwhile, the summer days were flying fast, by no means filled with heart-searchings and psychological crises brought about by a rising novelist cursed with red hair and an accusing conscience. Golf and luncheons, tennis and tea, drives and dinners: these rounded out the days into a succession of petty, pretty festivals in which the same people seemed always to be taking part. Among them, as a matter of course, were Kay Dorrance and Jessica West. At the first, before he had come in prolonged contact with a certain adamant stripe in the girl's freakish character, Dorrance had hoped much from these repeated meetings, as a means of ultimate reconciliation. He had reckoned totally without Jessica. One brief experiment had been sufficient to teach him his mistake. The memory of that one led him, in mercy to the hostess of the hour, to keep as far from Jessica as the width

of the function would allow. And so the days rushed on, and July had ended, and August was beginning.

It had been Jessica who had ordained to give a canoeing party for the second. As natural consequence, Dorrance was not present. Two of the Bidwell girls were, however, each with a dowdy captain in khaki undress detailed to do the paddling.

"They don't have too much fun," Jessica had explained to Asquith, in showing him her list. "Besides, they'll squeal, you know, and it is always fun to hear such people squeal."

And Asquith had assented, on condition that he should lead off up the river with Jessica as freight. Jessica had agreed to the condition without the barest pretext of hesitation.

"The others would probably drown me," she had observed. "Besides, one can get most horribly bored in a canoe. One's feet are sure to go to sleep, and the talk grows fitful, as they call it in books."

Asquith, lingering at the door until he had made sure of the acceptance of his condition, laughed at her accent of scorn. More than ever, a laugh suited his quiet dignity. Willis Asquith had grown unaccountably grave, those past few days.

"What do you call it?" he queried.

"I? I call it sentiment," she answered, with a frankness not wholly free from disgust. "I hate that sort of thing. It's foolish and futile. With you," the disgust left her voice, and she laughed up into his face with the gay friendship he always found so winning; "with you, I never have to bother. If you get the least bit of a bore, I only need to start you talking about

strets and strusses." She laughed again at her inadvertent blunder.

Asquith's face, however, had clouded over.

"You mean I'm a sort of chronic bore?" he asked.

She shook her head with a fervour whose truth he could not doubt.

"Never! You talk shop adorably, and there's nothing in the world I like as well as hearing a man talk shop. Besides, I know a little bit about yours; at least, I've watched it grow. When the great Clear River bridge was being built — You've seen it?" she paused to question eagerly.

"I've never seen it. I know it well," he answered, too intent upon her face to pay any attention to his own words.

She liked his brevity.

"Isn't it a beauty?" she swept on. "And I watched it grow and grow. The chief engineer was boarding at our house, all through the building. I was a little thing and, after supper, nights, I used to crawl up into dad's lap and listen to their talk. I can see it now: the funny little room, and the smoke of their pipes, and the way the engineer used to forget and pound down his lighted tobacco with his thumb, and then swear because it burned him. Oh, but it taught me things, things —" her voice grew dreamy; "I never really understood till now."

"Why not till now?" Asquith asked her, and then repented of his banal question.

Fearless as a child, she lifted her gray eyes to his.

"Because, now I know you, it has explained so many things. He, that engineer, was a common workman risen from the ranks; you are —" she hesitated;

"you. But you both give me the same impression of living inside your profession. I think at last I realize what he meant, that other man, when he called his bridge his child. And this great bridge of yours —"

"Not mine," he made correction. "It belongs to another man, one infinitely greater."

"Yours by adoption, then," she told him; "or else, the love of your whole life."

His eyes drooped before his longing to dispute her, and his final inability.

"Perhaps," he admitted; "though I don't know why you say so."

"Because," her smile was womanly in its full comprehension of his mood; "because I am not blind, nor altogether selfish. Do you suppose I can call myself your good friend, and not know how your heart is set on a glorious finish for this bridge; how it is wearing on you, all the friction and worry that you are having? And it's none of it for your own advantage; none of it will make one bit of difference to you in your professional record. It's only that you love the bridge as if it were a person, love it so much you're willing to worry and work just for its own sake." Then she bit her lip for an instant, before tossing her earnestness aside like a worn-out toy. "Now do go on," she bade him. "If we're to go up the river, Friday, I must get busy hunting up my people. You think we can count on nine canoes? And you're sure you don't mind if I ask the Bidwells? Poor old things! They haven't even a hobby to their names; they are such stone-gray sort of people, and I want this to be a red-letter day for us all. Good-bye. You'll be back, this afternoon?" And, after her own informal custom, she went with him

to the door and stood there, staring after him, as he went up the street.

Mid-morning, Friday, found the little fleet afloat upon the winding river, starting out for their red-letter day. There had been infinite mirth all along the drive, infinite merriment had attended their embarking. But to Asquith, as he dipped his paddle, his eyes, meanwhile, upon the girl before him in the little green canoe, it seemed that the red-letter day was destined for himself alone. Perchance it was better so, for it was the last red-letter day his calendar would show for long, long weeks to come. And even that, as in anticipation of the future, was to end in storm. No storm, however, was in sight, as Asquith led the little fleet out across the water, and turned to meet the current. Around them, the laughter of the others, the gay shouts from boat to boat cut across the sunny air. Then, with a dozen swift, strong strokes, Asquith's canoe shot far ahead, rounded a wooded point and came into a shady stretch of water where the silence was broken only by the hiss of the current among the rushes on the shore, by the cry of a distant bird. Asquith let the silence rest unbroken, as if he felt its brooding calm fall gratefully upon his tired nerves. And Jessica, too, felt a sudden wish for silence. There were so few people in her world with whom she dared sit quiet, sure that they would understand and respect her mood.

So they paddled on, now skirting the shores where the trees bent down to caress the water, now cutting a straight course up the swiftest of the current, now darting through the sunshine, now loitering in the cool, green shade. Now Asquith's paddle struck the water sharply, now it swept noiselessly along, its rising marked

by the tinkle of the drops which fell back again, as if laughing in their joy to rejoin their mates and go with them to the wide blue river and on and on to seek the far-off, restless sea. And always the other canoes were left astern, always their gay clamour came like a distant echo from out another world, came not to break, but to intensify, the stillness which wrapped them round.

When Asquith spoke, his voice matched the stillness; his manner, too, although his first words were trivial: a reference to this or that sight along the shore, a reminder of the next day's plan, another reminder of their hostess of the day before. That led to random gossip, and the random gossip led to Dorrance.

"It's too bad he isn't here," Asquith made meditative comment.

Jessica's left hand shut upon the other.

"Very," she answered.

"How does it happen that he isn't?" Asquith asked.

She laughed, and the laugh sounded careless.

"Because I didn't ask him," she replied.

"Why not?" The water swished, as Asquith turned the paddle, to round a jutting point of rocks.

"I wasn't sure he paddled, and I didn't want to drown."

"You wouldn't have been the one," Asquith assured her grimly. "Besides, as it happens, he does paddle. I was up the Saint Charles with him, one day."

"I believe he does everything," Jessica broke out a bit impatiently.

"So he does, everything but ride, poor chap! What odds if he does?"

She shook her head, with increased impatience.

"Nothing, only it makes him so very tiresome," she returned enigmatically. "Your all-round people do bounce along so comfortably, whatever side turns up."

But Asquith disagreed.

"Not Dorrance. He has his bad half-hours, like all the rest of us, I fancy. In fact, he seems to be in one now. He's hardly been like himself, since I came back from New York; no' since the day we were playing tennis, at least."

Even Jessica's ear-tips showed that she was blushing; but Asquith was too intent upon his theme to heed her rising colour.

"I'm sorry, if things are going badly with him," he went on slowly. "I like Dorrance; he's a good sort of chap, and I don't get on so well with everybody. With him, you don't have to spell out all your words before you use them. And, since I came back, he hasn't seemed —"

Jessica broke in, catching at a side issue of his talk.

"All in all, you were glad you went to New York?" she inquired abruptly.

Behind her back, Asquith's face lost its look of rest.

"Yes; as glad, that is, as a man can be who has the sole consolation of having freed his mind."

"But it did, it must have done, some good."

"Not the least. It merely —" He flung the subject from him with a jerk. "Miss West, do you realize you never yet have been on the bridge?" he queried.

She screwed herself about to look up at him, though at the imminent hazard of upsetting their unsteady craft.

"I haven't been invited," she replied demurely.

"Steady!" he cautioned her. "Well, I invite you now."

"To go, to-day?"

He shook his head, and the light came back into his eyes.

"Rather not. I like this better. Some day soon, we will go, though, drive out and go all over the thing, to the storage yards and all. That is," he added abruptly; "if it wouldn't bore you. You've had a trick of making me feel that, in a sense, it is your hobby, too." His honest voice was wishful.

"So it is," she answered, with the ready comradeship she always showed him nowadays; "mine, almost as much as yours, mine because it is yours; you've told me so much about it. What's more, you've told me as if you thought I understood. I hate men who talk child-talk to me," she ended hotly.

This time, Asquith laughed.

"I'm afraid I don't. You don't encourage the habit. But let's forget it all, to-day. I'm on a holiday, you know; and, after all, the bridge is work, no matter how I love it."

Her laugh answered his, as if in response to his call for holiday.

"So is paddling, I suspect. How fast we've come ahead! I don't hear the others anywhere, and I was counting on the Bidwell squeals. They are delicious, even if they are your cousins. Do let's turn back and look for them. Besides, I'm hostess, after all, and you oughtn't to make me forget my other guests." Her voice, full of chiding mirth, was full, too, of content.

Undecided, he held his blade poised in mid-air.

"Ought we?" he asked, and his tone betrayed his dislike of the obligation.

"Sure!" she answered gayly. "It's duty; likewise, it's the conventional thing to do, and convention is always decent. How black the sky is!" she added suddenly, as the canoe shot out from the shadow of the trees. "Do you think we'll have a shower?"

Asquith glanced up. Then his shoulders straightened, and his lean hands gripped the paddle.

"We're in for it," he said; "and soon. We shall have to race the storm, for there's no landing here. Sit steady, please, and keep your eyes open for a bit of good beach." And once more the paddle cut the water sharply.

For a time, it was a race, swift, three-fold, even, a race between the storm, the winding, rock-strewn current and the little green canoe. Now a gust of wind, forerunner of the blast to come, swept down upon them, driving them edgewise before its force. Now a dozen jagged, foam-flecked rocks sprang up in their pathway like fangs waiting to bite at them as they passed. But Asquith gripped his paddle strongly, steadily, with warring craft, righted the wind-tossed canoe, rounded the rocks and cleft the rising waves with a skill which Jessica, gamely laughing, the while she clutched the gunwale with both hands, could not fail to note and, noting, to admire. Only once he spoke, and that just as the hail swept down upon them.

"I really think you don't need to be afraid, Miss West," he said, with a calmness he was far from feeling.

Jessica's answering laugh rang out above the wind, above the first hissing of the hail.

"Afraid! With you!" she said scornfully. Then she added, as an after-thought, "Besides, you know, I can swim like any fish."

But, even as she bowed her head before the increasing fury of the storm, she realized, as Asquith had realized before her, that swimming beneath such hail as that could end in one thing only, and that, death.

Then they fell silent, Asquith because it was taking all his strength to steady the canoe, all his attention to make out, through the driving hail which fell in a white wall around them, the rocks and shoals that barred their way; Jessica because, reminded by the swirling storm of the Valkyries' ride, she had fallen into a vague wonderment what Valhalla would be like, that Valhalla which loomed so near them, and whether its halls held many men of better calibre than Asquith. The hail was beating down upon her pitilessly, the wind struck cruelly across her drenched shoulders and whipped her loosened hair about her face; yet, strange to say, she never heeded. She knew the danger was imminent, knew that the end might come at any moment; but she felt no fear. Instead, her face serene, her lips still laughing, she thought about Valhalla, about Asquith, and then about Kay Dorrance. The smile widened. Well, she had had the best of things, and one — one or two — good friends.

"Now! Steady!"

Asquith's voice recalled her to herself. She felt, rather than saw, that he had cast aside the paddle and risen in the little green canoe amid the lessening hail. There came a shock, a crash, drowned in its turn by the thunder which heralded the dying of the storm. An instant later, Jessica, struggling in the icy water,

heard again the voice, quiet as if he were offering her a cup of tea.

"Not hurt? That's good. Put your hand on my shoulder and strike out. The shore is open here, and not ten feet away."

Dazed by the shock, chilled and stiffened but indomitable, she laughed again, laughed and, without a word to waste her strength, obeyed. The hail was nearly spent by now; but the wind still blew fiercely, twisting the trees upon the banks and lashing the river to a foam; but, underneath her hand, Asquith's shoulder was firm as a rock, his steady stroke was steadying her own. And so, chilled, beaten by the waves and wind, they made their slow way forward until they touched the shore.

On the shore, Jessica, dragging the wisps of drenched hair away from her eyes, turned her face up to Asquith's. Her lips were blue, her teeth chattering; but she still wore her indomitable little smile.

"Mr. Asquith, I think you've saved my life," she said, with a brave effort for her wonted gayety. "You're a plucky man, and I hope you'll think it was worth your while. I can't thank you; but,—" her voice suddenly died out in something dangerously near a little sob; "but I do hope the day will come when I can do as much for you." And their eyes met, as they once more faced life again, faced it after they thought it must have gone away for ever, faced it without a notion how soon the girl's words were destined to fulfilment, nor half how tragically.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**K**AY DORRANCE had found himself deserted, that morning.

By a curious chance, the first knowledge of the canoeing party was not to come until that very noon, come, too, from the lips of Monsieur de la Haye. The reason of this, after all, was fairly obvious. With one exception, Jessica's guests had been so certain that Kay Dorrance would be included in their number that they had seen no reason to assure themselves of the fact. Asquith had been the one exception. Until they were fairly out upon the river, he had not commented to Jessica upon the omission of Dorrance from her list. Neither had he cared to comment regarding it to Dorrance. And Dorrance, used by this time to seeing Asquith come and go at all hours of the day, had paid scanty heed to the long conferences which had heralded the coming expedition. Moreover, he had been busy in his room, struggling with some proof sheets, when Asquith had called for Jessica, that morning.

Later, his proof sheets done, he bethought himself of Asquith and a walk. The telephone revealed the fact that Asquith was not at home. Dorrance did not wait to inquire where he had gone. Instead, he consulted the telephone book anew, and then a second time, and a third. The people he liked best to play

with were all unaccountably absent. Even the telephone at the tennis club appeared to be clanging into empty space, so far as his efforts for information were concerned. His desire for exercise departed from him. Instead, he went to his room, crammed a brace of little books into his pockets, and sought the corner of the terrace. On his way out through the hall, he heard a maid answering the telephone.

"Miss West? She's out. She will be gone, all day. She's gone to —"

Dorrance passed on, only too well aware that, under the present sulphurous condition of the atmosphere, Jessica's destination concerned him not one whit. Time was when he had felt an interest, keen, but impersonal, in all her plans and doings. Now, alas, he told himself with something between a blush and a shudder, that time for him was past. Albeit his right to have an interest in her was denied him, his attitude to her was anything but impersonal. He shrugged his shoulders; yet he admitted frankly to himself that he was lonesome, very lonesome, as he went his way. To a man with red hair, armed neutrality is far more wearing than battles without end. A good, downright fight with Jessica would be a welcome relief, after all these days of courteous, cold disregard; a fight to any sort of a finish would be preferable to this indeterminate hostility. And, the worst of it all was, do what he would, Kay Dorrance could never wholly dismiss the girl from his mind. Try as he would to bar her out, she always crept back again by some unsuspected loophole, ready to confront him when he was least aware of her proximity. Worst of all, not for one single instant in the past two weeks had he been resigned to

the fact that he had come to care excessively for Miss Jessica Marguerite King West.

His hands thrust into his pockets above the brace of books, philosophically he sought the terrace according to his wont, when he had nothing else to do. Long since, he had adopted as his own one particular seat in one of the kiosks, far up the terrace beyond the Château windows and in the angle of the wall. There, sheltered from the sun and catching every breeze that stirred around him, by turns he read, and dreamed bright day-dreams which somehow, as the time went on, centred less and less solely in the work which heretofore had been all in all to him. Now and then, both book and dreaming were forgotten, while he lost himself entirely in watching the picture at his feet: the huddled, pointed roofs just visible between the bars of iron railing, the great red wharves, the little white ferry which seemed to be eternally fretting at her dock, ready for a crossing that never came. Beyond it all, idle and leisurely and slow, the majestic river went its steady ways: the one, dotted here and there with little sails, passing the ragged gash cut in the Montmorency shore, passing the holy chaos of Sainte Anne's shrine; the other sweeping down between the farm-dotted hills and bearing on its breast a mighty steamship, bound, like the river itself, for the distant sea. Beyond the utmost limit of his sight, beyond the blue hills that guarded the silent passing, the two avenues would come together, deep and shallow, and go on and on until the river turned into a gulf, and the gulf became the ocean. And, beyond the other limit of his sight, far up the river, was rising day by day that mighty bridge, so soon

to span the stream, to link those shores, separate from the beginning of things until now, to bring down to that idle water front the busy stir of life, of cargoes and of men. But, once the pointed roofs gave way to tracks and elevators and to noisy, shouting men, once the ferry and the wharves sprang into bustling energy, would the picture still retain its loveliness? Dorrance cared for men, exulted in each new achievement. None the less, he shook his head. Environment made all the difference, that and the traditions of the place. The bridge rose grandly in its present grace and promised majesty. Its consequences were quite another thing.

On this particular morning, he felt the dread of the coming change far more than it was his wont to do. The old town at his feet lay sluggish, torpid, idle in the hot haze of the August noon. The sun smote sharply down on the deserted Allan wharf; the King's Wharf by its side lacked every sign of life. Down by the Champlain Market corner, a street car trundled on its way; but, so far beneath, it sent no sense of haste or clamour to the man in the kiosk above; and the little white ferry, always ready to start, yet seemingly never starting, was breathing lazy white smoke-trails out across the summer air. Behind him was the gray old city, and, high on its cliff above, the Citadel slumbered in the sun; even the Union Jack upon the bastion dangled inertly in the windless air. It was all so restful, so full of calm, so alien to the rushing cities to the southward of those faint blue hills beyond the river. In these strenuous twentieth-century days, it was good to find this little stronghold of an old-world peace.

His book, open on his knee, flung up into his dreamy eyes the contrast of the shadow which had barred one of its gleaming pages. Dorrance glanced up, impatient at the breaking of his formless reverie, still more impatient at the invasion of his solitude. Monsieur de la Haye was sitting down in the other seat of the kiosk. Dorrance returned his nod curtly and, his dream torn into tatters, resumed his book. The Frenchman, smiling slightly, coughed behind his hand, creaked his boots a little, coughed again, snapped the case of his watch and put it back into his pocket amid a little tinkle of the bunch of charms upon his fob. Dorrance read on. At least, he kept his eyes moving steadily down the page, up to the top of the next, then down again. If one disregarded puppies, they usually went away. The theory was a good one. In this case, it failed.

"Does Monsieur object, if I smoke?" Monsieur de la Haye inquired courteously, at length.

"Certainly not." Dorrance crossed his foot over his knee, clasped his ankle in his lean brown hand and buried his chin more deeply in his collar.

"I thank you. You are very kind." The Frenchman opened his cigarette case with a click, shut it with another click, then duplicated the clicks by means of his match box.

By the time the third match had spluttered feebly and gone out, and the fourth was rasping along the edge of the seat, Dorrance's foot fell to the floor and he shut his book, ready to thrust it in his pocket. Instantly the Frenchman rose.

"I intrude," he said. "I will go."

"Not at all." Dorrance rose, as he spoke, and made

a feeble pretext of looking at his watch. "It is time I was going back to the house."

Monsieur de la Haye smiled, not quite pleasantly, however.

"Monsieur also finds the time goes slow, this day?" he queried.

Dorrance stiffened.

"I am afraid I do not understand," he said; but, in his secret heart, he was much more afraid he did.

The Frenchman left him no doubt upon that score.

"Without the lovely lady from the Abandoned Cayote," he explained.

Dorrance's wrath downed his amusement. What business had the fellow to speak to him, in the first place? What business had he to link their moods with that *also*, in the second? And finally, what right had he to mention Jessica at all? In his rage, Dorrance quite forgot that he had no proprietary rights in the young person from Lone Wolf.

"How does it chance that Monsieur did not go with the party?" Monsieur de la Haye was continuing, with a bland assumption of a past acquaintance.

Dorrance turned on his heel.

"I was not aware that there was any party," he said curtly. In his annoyance, he dropped his book.

The Frenchman's bow and smile were irresistible, as he bent and picked up the volume.

"Permit me. It is more easy for me to fold myself," he said. "Yes, Mademoiselle is giving a party by the boats, a large party. I had not thought that Monsieur would also be among the — the — the those who rest at home."

Again Dorrance felt his gorge rising at the *also*, rising until it stopped his speech.

"Perhaps Monsieur is too fragile for such goings?" the Frenchman hinted blandly.

Dorrance scowled at him now with open and hearty dislike. Not every one was privileged to comment in that fashion. His answer, haughty and curt, seemed to himself final in its bluntness.

"On the contrary, I stayed at home, because I had not the honour of an invitation."

Instantly the Frenchman's face changed, all but his eyes.

"Ah?" he said gently. "Is it true? I am very sorry. I fear I have made a — a *bêtise*. Monsieur will forgive my *bêtise*, my evil crack; is it not so?" His pause demanded a reply.

"You needn't apologize," Dorrance assured him, still more curtly. "I am not at all sensitive about being left out of any function."

Monsieur de la Haye regarded him admiringly.

"But no?" he murmured. "You Americans are so quite independent. For me, I should have been crushed, crushed like the merest worm; but I am sensitive. It is my fault, and I repine him. But I too repine the mistaken telegram which he'd me here at home in vain."

Dorrance's lips straightened suddenly. So the fellow was invited, then? He had hardly thought it possible that even Jessica, defiant of conventions as she was, could have had the courage to thrust this loose-mouthed, anaemic Gaul, un-introduced, into the circle of young Quebeckers with whom she had cast in her social lot. Or had she done it merely to throw emphasis

upon her omission of himself? However — This time, he did slide the book into his pocket, and, turning, he left the kiosk. Before he could fathom the intention and forestall it by a word, Monsieur de la Haye had tossed aside his cigarette and fallen into step beside him.

“I too am returning to our home,” he said suavely. “Shall we walk together, you and I?”

Kay Dorrance fairly choked with his resentment; and yet there was nothing to resent. To be sure, he was Kay Dorrance the Sixth, and had red hair; but the Frenchman had been scrupulously courteous, and not the most bigoted recluse could deny that six weeks within the same small house furnished a proper basis for a little casual talk. Nevertheless, Dorrance’s brow was threatening as he faced down towards the Château, limping a bit more heavily than usual, as was his wont when mentally distressed. If only the fellow would drop his infernal palavering and give himself, Dorrance, an opportunity to tell him what he thought!

The opportunity came with exceeding promptness.

“Monsieur also admires Mademoiselle West?” the Frenchman inquired, after he had halted to light another cigarette, this time without any difficulty or delay at all.

Dorrance limped on steadily.

“Any stranger must admire such beauty,” he told his companion coldly.

“But yes. Still, the beauty is the outward carcass —” the Frenchman appeared to place great reliance upon the word; “of an internal beauty which is more wonderful to gaze upon.”

"Speak French, please," Dorrance bade him shortly.

"Ah, but I love your English! It is rude, but full of tenderness," Monsieur de la Haye reassured him quickly. "Also, I speak it very well now. It is not difficult to learn, and it has all my love, as do your people." His little bow added to the unction of his words.

Dorrance eyed him with the keenest disfavour.

"If I thought you could comprehend American slang, I should advise you to cut that out," he observed truculently. "However," he dropped into French, as he spoke; "you will oblige me by confining your remarks to me to French in future; there is less chance for misconception then."

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

"What misconception could there be?" he asked in his own tongue. "I think we understand each other."

"Not in the least," Dorrance made instant answer.

"No? But I had thought —"

"Your thoughts have no interest for me."

Monsieur de la Haye shook his head gently, as in sorrowful rebuke.

"Monsieur is very irritable," he remarked, as if to himself. "Perhaps, however, it is owing to his hair." Then, before Dorrance could gather himself together to reply, he added, with apparent artlessness, "Mademoiselle was regretting it to me, only yesterday."

"You will please leave Miss West out of the discussion." Even as he gave the peremptory command, Dorrance realized that he had been driven into a corner where his attitude appeared to be one less of chivalry

than of the boyish petulance which resents a personal grievance.

Monsieur de la Haye took a long pull at his cigarette, then slowly blew the smoke from between his lips. In his eyes was the ghost of a smile.

"Monsieur was saying?" he inquired then. "Pardon! I am very inattentive."

"Then you will pay attention, and at once," Dorrance said crisply. "I must insist that you drop Miss West's name from our talk."

The Frenchman's lips curved slightly.

"You?" he said, and the single word spoke volumes.

"Yes, I," Dorrance told him hotly.

The Frenchman's shoulder moved upward.

"By what right? Is Mademoiselle your —"

Dorrance cut him off in the middle of his word.

"By the sole right of being an American, and therefore decent," he said. "Also by the right of having heard your comments on Miss West at the Garrison Club, two weeks ago. Also — However, the other counts are quite enough. Unless you stop, immediately and for all time, your attentions to Miss Jessica West, I shall take it on myself to warn Miss West's mother."

"Madame West is my friend, my good and loyal friend," the Frenchman interpolated calmly.

"That doesn't imply that she will always remain so," Dorrance said sharply. "You'd best not count on it too much. However, if you choose, I can discuss the matter with Colonel West."

This time, the Frenchman flinched. The Colonel, under his jovial shell, might prove less plastic, far less vain and gullible than Monsieur de la Haye had found the Colonel's lady. Nevertheless, —

"Does Mademoiselle West know she has such a gallant champion?" he sneered.

"Does Miss West know that such a snake is in her path?" Dorrance retorted, losing a large measure of his self-control. "Now listen, you scoundrel," he burst out, while he halted, one hand on the rail beside him, the other shut upon the book inside his pocket to keep his fingers out of temptation's way. "I have kept still long enough; now I intend you should know what I think about you and your greedy plans. I know what you want; you're after Miss West's money."

Swift as were his words, the Frenchman was even swifter.

"And Monsieur wishes it, himself?" he queried courteously. "Pardon. We mutually interfere."

Dorrance disdained the interruption. Instead, he swept on with his arraignment.

"And, as soon as you get it, you don't care what becomes of her. Be still! You told it all, yourself. You've made yourself out an incarnate fiend, and sneaking, too, at that. You've twisted the mother around your finger, and now you're starting to twist that inexperienced child in the same way. If it were worth my while, I'd kick you; but I don't want the disgrace of having touched you. Now you go home, and attend to your own affairs. The next time I see you with Miss West—" Dorrance let the pause lengthen into a threat too strong for words.

The Frenchman heard him out to the very end, heard him without losing one whit of his jaunty little smile. When he had finished, —

"Bravo!" he said softly. "Monsieur is very clever in his words. Why does he not write a melodrama?"

But, as for Miss West, she is my friend; and that, as we both know, is more than Monsieur is able to claim for himself, however much his heart may wish it otherwise. Monsieur remains here, after all? Good day, then. I must return to the house." And, still smiling, still jaunty, and with a gleam of something very like satisfaction in his eyes, he went his way, leaving Dorrance to stare heavily down the valley to distant, cloud-capped Sainte Anne, and curse himself a second time for his futile interference.

All in all, he had done more harm than good. Instead of protecting Jessica, as he had dreamed of doing, he had merely proved his own lack of right to protect her and, meanwhile, had converted to an open enemy what should have been a casual impersonal acquaintance. He shrugged his shoulders together and, his elbows on the rail, dropped his head upon his hands and gave himself up to his unavailing regrets, sweeping down upon him as thick and black as the clouds fast gathering in the northern sky. Not only had he hopelessly antagonized the Frenchman; but, worse than that, far worse, in the process he had infallibly betrayed to his wily rival the fact that Jessica West's concerns were also his. His very anxiety on behalf of Jessica had proved it, that and his irritation. And Dorrance, still fighting off the knowledge of his love for Jessica, was by no means minded to share that knowledge with another, least of all, with a man like Monsieur de la Haye.

"Why, Mr. Dorrance!"

He raised his head wearily, for the past bad quarter of an hour had told upon him in more ways than one. Mrs. West, her pothooks of hair ruffled by the quicken-

ing breeze, stood at his elbow, regarding him with kindly solicitude.

"Aren't you feeling well?" she asked him.

He forced himself to laugh reassuringly, although he answered, —

"I'm well, thank you; but a good deal worried."

"I am sorry." Her voice had a ring of honest regret. "Have you had bad news from home?"

"No; not at all." He roused himself yet more and faced her, filled with a sudden hope. "My worry is nearer than that, something quite close at hand. I've been having a little talk with Monsieur de la Haye."

Mrs. West's face showed her astonishment, as well it might. Up to now, Dorrance had manifested no interest at all in the Frenchman's concerns. It was a bit sudden for him to assume their worries.

"Poor Monsieur de la Haye!" she said, with precisely the same accent of kindly liking which, two minutes before, she had been bestowing upon Dorrance.

Strange to say, this even division of her interest irritated him more than his whole talk with Monsieur de la Haye. His irritation once more made him cast discretion to the winds.

"Not poor at all, Mrs. West," he told her coldly. "To my sure knowledge, the man is the meanest little wretch on earth, the meanest and the most plausible."

For a moment, Mrs. West's colour came. She eyed him dubiously, and then in grave rebuke.

"Why—ee!" she said. And then, by way of heightening the effect of her disapproval, "Why, Mr. Dorrance!"

How like a woman, he thought impatiently. A man, in such condition, would either have struck out, or

argued. That would have given him chance at justification of his belief. Now he could only reiterate it in almost the same words.

"The meanest, because he is the most plausible," he explained.

"He has been very kind to me," she admonished Dorrance.

"Very likely. Why?" But, as he spoke, Dorrance dropped his eyes in shame at his own words and at the pain which they were bound to inflict. Needed, at least he would not watch their scar.

They did hurt, too, as was shown by her rising colour, by the old, ugly lines that were deepening between her brows. Her answer, though, came with a certain note of dignity.

"For the same reason you have been, I suppose," she told him quietly.

For a moment, her words left Dorrance dumb. Then he rallied.

"Thank you," he said gravely. "I am glad if I have seemed kind to you. At least, I meant it in all single-hearted sincerity."

"Of course," she assented, purposely disregarding his emphasis upon the pronoun. "I believe that; that was what has made me care for it so much. We older women do — do like to be looked after, now and then."

So intent was she upon her halting admission that she was deaf to the low growl of thunder rumbling across the sky. The thunder growled again, more loudly; but Dorrance, too, was absorbed in the argument before him, in his questionings whether to denounce the Frenchman to Mrs. West, or no.

"But, Mrs. West, I am not so sure of Monsieur de la Haye," he began falteringly. He felt his opportunity had come to him, had come a little in advance of his surety of its being best to use it. The dilemma was not an easy one to decide. Though the future seemed to him quite evident, would it not be wiser to shrug his shoulders and dismiss the matter, and the responsibility as well, from his mind, and go his way? Else, what awaited him but a host of enemies? Already, he had succeeded in antagonizing Jessica whose rage was manifest and durable, in antagonizing the Frenchman whose hatred would be more insidious and quite as lasting. Now, was it worth his while, his while and Jessica's — for the first time, their names were linked in his own mind — to add to the list of his foes Mrs. West who would be aggrieved and mournful? For a long minute, he stood silent, weighing the matter in his mind, while the thunder, growling ominously, was quite unheeded, unheeded, too, the vivid flash that tore the clouds apart, only to let them fall together, heavy and full of threatenings of storm. Then Kay Dorrance took his resolution. "Mrs. West," he faced her bravely and with something of the boyish smile which had won her at the first; "I know you'll think I'm officious. Perhaps I am, for the matter of that. However — I do wish you wouldn't put too much confidence in Monsieur de la Haye. Really, you don't know anything about the man; about his past, I mean; not one bit more than you do about my own. And aren't you letting him —"

His question stopped midway, as if cut in two by the blinding flash that seemed to carve the air with a fiery edge sweeping down close at their sides. The

thunder followed, crashing from shore to shore like the echoes of the evening gun; but its reverberations lost themselves in the clashing of the hail.

"Come! Quick as you can!" Breathless and a little white, Mrs. West laid a hand on Dorrance's arm, not so much for protection as to steady his step in case of need. "The kiosk, quick! There's no time to get to the house."

And Dorrance, turning, bowed his head less to the storm than to the sudden Fate which had swept away his opportunity, unused. Such opportunities would come but rarely. Let this one pass. At least, he had done his best, according to the dictates of his conscience and his code of chivalry.

The storm lasted for full half an hour. Huddled together in the shelter of the small kiosk, they watched it, side by side, speechless by reason of the roaring, clattering hail which would have drowned their voices utterly. So far as thought was possible in the fierce excitement of the storm, they both were thoughtful. Then, when the thunder ceased, and the lessening hail once more gave them glimpses of the foaming river and of the white banks of egg-large stones about them, Mrs. West spoke.

"What a shame," she said thoughtfully; "that you two nice men should quarrel!"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"OH, thank you, yes." Jessica held out a welcoming hand to her hostess. "I've come up like a weed. Nothing ever downs me for long."

"You were fortunate." Mrs. Asquith let go the hand and straightened up her glasses. "Poor Willis is still in bed."

"In bed!" Jessica echoed in utter consternation, although it was by reason of an uneasiness developed by Asquith's three-day silence that she had sought his mother's tea-tray, that Monday afternoon. "What for? Is he ill?"

Mrs. Asquith gave a final hitch to her glasses, then brushed an imaginary scrap of lint from the bodice of her gown.

"Willis is not the man to go to bed for nothing," she said severely.

Jessica felt humbled, although she was at a loss to tell why. However, she would have bitten out her scarlet tongue, rather than have allowed it to give admission to the fact.

"I hope it wasn't my poor canoeing party," she said, with a gay little laugh which completely veiled her regret. "It was bad enough to spoil the luncheon and the Bidwell frocks, without spoiling Mr. Asquith into the bargain."

Mrs. Asquith gave her a cup of tea. Then she tasted her own, wearing, the while, a martyr's brow.

"Really, I fear he's very ill," she said, after a pause.

Jessica whitened a little, and her voice lost its nonchalant ring. Mrs. Asquith noted both facts, half in malicious satisfaction at the girl's regret, half in forebodings as to what such manifest regret might signify.

"I'm so sorry," the girl was saying contritely. "Of course, I didn't engage the shower as one hires an orchestra or a vaudeville singer for a party." In spite of her contrition, she was guilty of a little chuckle over her own idea. "Still, I can't help feeling rather guilty. He said he was all right, though; he told me so, when he left me at the house," she added, as in tardy consolation offered a stricken mother.

The stricken mother swallowed a bit of anchovy sandwich so hurriedly that she choked upon a crumb. The choking added asperity to her speech.

"Willis is — a-uh! a-uh! — is not the man to — a-uh! — complain," she told her guest.

"I suppose not. And," Jessica contemplated her gloves; "and men do hate to be coddled. What seems to be the matter?" she asked more cheerily.

"A general collapse. Of course, he strained his shoulder a good deal; but that was to be expected, under such a weight. I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," Jessica assured her briefly. "Go on."

"And then the chill, that and the nervous shock. The poor boy hasn't been feeling well for some time, with the worry of that hateful bridge." Mrs. Asquith diverted a share of her resentment into that channel, much to the relief of Jessica whose lashes were beginning to look a little damp. "That, and the strain,

and the long chill seem to have done him up completely."

"Oh, mater, what rot!" Asquith, a little gaunt and white and his arm in a sling, came strolling into the room and offered his free hand to Jessica. "I'm all right, and will be out in a day or two," he added reassuringly.

"Not at all. You ought to be in bed, this minute," his mother interposed; but no one heeded.

"I heard your voice in the hall and came down to prove I was alive," Asquith was saying, with a little smile, while his eyes held Jessica's for a long minute of mute question and reply. "I was afraid the mater would be terrifying you, if I didn't appear. You're none the worse? That's good. I wanted to telephone; but I didn't really feel up to it till this afternoon. Sit down and tell me all the news. Two days on his back make a chap feel he has lost touch with everything that ever moved. And, his hand still shut on hers, he deftly steered her back into her chair.

Deftly, too, he steered the conversation, steered it past the shoals of Mrs. Asquith's displeasures at his unexpected appearing and at the open good-fellowship and understanding which existed between Jessica and himself, steered it past the eddies of Jessica's worryment and contrition over the results of her well-meaning party. He accomplished this by the steady dignity which was so characteristic of the whole man; but he gave a sigh of relief and settled back in his chair a little wearily, when at last the talk was flowing smoothly on. Another caller had come to monopolize the attention of the hostess; but Jessica, yielding to a whispered word from Asquith, merely had nestled a

bit lower in her chair and chattered on: about their fright and ducking, about her mother's being in the storm with Dorrance, about her father's trip up to the bridge, the day before, the rumours of a coming strike which he had brought back with him. Then, warned by the roughening of Asquith's brow that she had made bad choice of subject, she shifted hastily to something else.

"Of course, I am sorry as I can be about your being ill," she said. "Yes, really ill; you show it, so there's no use to fib. And, besides that, I had been counting on you for to-night."

"To-night?" he echoed.

"Yes. You needn't prick up your ears like that, though. It will be several nights more, before you're fit for escort duty." She pouted in mock displeasure, watching, the while, with kindly eyes the brightening face of her companion. "Just when I need you most, too," she added; "for dad hiked —" she caught her breath and stole a furtive glance in the direction of her hostess; "for my father departed to the wilderness, this noon, to see what his men are doing."

"And what's to-night?" Asquith asked. "Forgive me, if I've forgotten something; but I do feel quite rusty and out of touch, you know."

Jessica shook her head, under its crown of gold buckle and soft white plumes.

"It's nothing you've known about, I expect," she reassured him. "It's only a Saint Roch's tempest that I want to see."

"A — what!" Mrs. Asquith turned abruptly from her other guest. "What were you saying, Miss West?"

Her voice was full of a general disapproval, embracing in advance whatever Jessica might say.

The girl turned wayward.

"Don't you want to go, Mrs. Asquith? I'd love to have you," she said alertly. "There's going to be a rousing political rally down in Saint Roch's, Jacques Cartier Square, I think it is. I heard some men talking about it, this noon; one of them said it would be the greatest sight Quebec has ever known. And I do love Quebec sights. Don't you want to go?"

"Miss West!" The voice was so portentous that Tottykins, across the room, yipped in the middle of his dreams. "A political meeting! And in Saint Roch's! No lady would do such a thing."

Jessica gathered her white ostrich boa about her shoulders. Then she rose, laughing and still wayward, too wayward to see the genuine anxiety and consternation on Willis Asquith's face.

"Really? Then the exception will have to prove the rule, Mrs. Asquith, because I'm going. Good-bye, nice people. No, Mr. Asquith, please don't get up." And, with a rustle and a flutter of white feathers, she was gone, her careless whim stiffened to firm intention by Mrs. Asquith's haughty, disapproving words.

A party of friends from home, motoring through eastern Canada, had carried Dorrance up to Montreal with them, the day before. Returning by the afternoon train which was as late as is its daily custom, it was just after eight o'clock, that evening, when he stepped off the car before the Maple Leaf. At the door, he was forced to halt and stand aside, hat in hand, in an impersonal salute. Jessica, still in her white frock and feathers, was just leaving the house. Beside her was

Monsieur de la Haye, smiling with a satisfaction which increased at sight of Dorrance. Jessica merely bent her neck in salutation, then hurried on to board the car which Dorrance had just left. His steady eyes never wavered, as he returned the salute with precisely the same degree of cordiality which Jessica had bestowed on him. Where was she going with that cad, he wondered, with a carelessness resulting from two days spent with friends to whom such a girl as Jessica West would have been unthinkable. Then, as he recalled her gay, girlish charm, the frank friendliness of which she had given him an occasional glimpse, the carelessness vanished, to be replaced by something more poignant, something akin to anxiety. To Jessica's manner he would have given no second thought. It was the bearing of her escort which had angered him, filled him with a vague unrest.

He was still loitering over a belated supper table, alternately consuming nutriment and leaning back in his chair to be consumed by worry at his ease, when the maid warned him that he was wanted at the telephone. Some seventh sense also warned him, as he rose, that the message concerned Jessica. He felt a swift relief when he recognized the voice of Asquith. The relief faded swiftly, however, as the talk went on.

"That you, Dorrance?"

"Yes."

"Thank heaven! I've been calling you up at intervals, for two hours."

"Sorry. I've been up in Montreal. Just came back now, half an hour ago."

"So that's it. I've been ill, a bit knocked out by my ducking in the hail. No; nothing serious at all,

so you needn't stop to condole. We'll take that later, when we've more time to fool away. I say, old man, do you happen to know where Miss West is, to-night?"

Even Dorrance, anxious as he had been to answer that very question for himself, was forced to stop and chuckle at the perturbation in Asquith's tone.

"I don't usually carry Miss West about in my pocket; at least, not nowadays," he suggested.

"Don't chaff, man; it's really serious," Asquith besought him impatiently. "If I weren't laid up with a shoulder and a cold, I'd go on the trail, myself. There's a row on in Saint Roch's, to-night; it may grow into something worse, and I am afraid she's there."

"What!" The single word suggested half a score of exclamation points.

"Fact," Asquith said tersely. "It's some sort of a political French speech-making; but it's a red-hot crowd in a red-hot ward, and I just telephoned down there and found the play was on in earnest, five thousand men, *Marseillaise*, bricks and all the rest."

"But Miss West wouldn't be in that mob," Dorrance scoffed. "Man alive, your shoulder, or whatever it is, has gone to your head. Besides, I just met her in all her best array, sallying forth with our French friend, as I came in."

"What French friend?"

"De la Haye."

"The devil! That settles it, Dorrance. She was up here, this afternoon, announcing that only my invalidism saved me from playing escort. She was half in joke; but — something went on her nerves, and her eyes looked — well, they made me anxious, when she

went away. Now that fellow has gone down there, and taken her with him."

Dorrance laughed shortly.

"More likely, she has taken him. No use worrying, Asquith. The milk is spilt, and the tabby-cat of the Fates is licking it up by now. Are you really laid up, man? I'm infernally sorry. I'll be out in the morning to see you."

Again Asquith's voice became impatient.

"Dorrance, for God's sake, do listen! Do you take in this situation? Down in Saint Roch's, to-night, now, there's something dangerously near a mob, a French mob, too. I know what that means, if you don't. And Miss West is down there in it, without a soul to look out for her but that beast of a Frenchman. Her father's out of town. You're the only man in the place who knows her well enough to act, for I'm down and out. I'd do more harm than good, and — What's that? Jacques Cartier Square. Take the Saint Roch's car. Now, man! It's getting worse with every minute. And, Dorrance, use my name to get inside the Hall. I've been doing all I could to —"

But he was talking into empty air.

It was getting worse with every minute. Dorrance assured himself of that, as soon as he stepped off the car. The din of voices, rising from beyond the gray stone building on his left, the cheers and groanings and songs both martial and uncouth, all these punctuated now and then by the clash of shattered glass, these told him that Asquith's fears were not unfounded. Of course, Jessica might not be there, might not have been there at all; then again, she might. Knowing the girl, Dorrance, even with the clamour in his ears, yet in-

clined to the latter chance. At least, no harm in asking.

The streets about the Square were wellnigh deserted, save for a fringe of the crowd which lay out across Rue de Couronne and eddied around the corner of the Hall. The entrance to the Hall was deserted, too; the gray old building looked as peaceful under the electric lights as if the Square beyond were filled with market carts instead of the brawling multitude whose shoutings filled the air. As swiftly as he was able, Dorrance crossed the empty street and went hurrying past the Hall in search of he knew not what. Crowds of this sort had not been too common in his life. He felt no especial fears for this one, albeit it was the first time in his experience of men that he had heard them shouting the *Marseillaise* with full-throated earnestness. It was not fear at all; but, rather, curiosity. None the less, his heart was beating quickly as he approached the corner of the Hall. The next instant, there came a fresh clash of broken glass, fresh shoutings, mounting to a roar of rage. An instant later, Dorrance was almost swept from his feet by the crowd which, turning, yielding to some panic which he could not see, rushed down upon him in a blind fury of flight, crying out, elbowing, trampling, tearing on in a mad dash for what they regarded as safety. It was useless to try to stand against them. Dorrance could only yield and follow with the tide. Then, as he felt his weaker knee failing him a little, he sought the support of a friendly electric light post and, clinging to that, halted and looked about him, forgetful of all things else just then beside his interest in this strange scene.

Around him, the crowd, already realizing the cause-

lessness of their recent panic, was slowly drifting back again towards the former post of observation. It was a motley crowd: men, for the most part, with here and there a woman of the streets, tawdry, unkempt, dishevelled by her flight. The men, short, thick and of the lower class of townsmen, were all at the highest tide of nervous strain. Their eyes betokened this no less than did their feverish, unsteady lips, the shaking of their outstretched hands, as they gesticulated wildly in explaining to one another the reason for their sudden flight. All about him was the voluble, harsh *patois*. Dorrance, used as he was to spend long weeks in Paris, could make out only an occasional word: the name of this party demagogue and that, a reference to the police, to stones hidden here and there among the crowd, to some window or other looking down upon the platform where the speakers stood.

The tide had turned again; the flood had ceased and the last ripple of humanity had once more vanished in the Square, before Dorrance, mindful of certain twinges in his knee, judged it wise to leave his shelter. Long since, he had given up all notion that Jessica was in any such crowd as that. She might have been there, even; but she would have gone away at once. These sodden, uncouth faces would have disgusted her completely. They disgusted Dorrance, too. He felt the same shrinking from their contact that Jessica infallibly must have done. None the less, now he was there, the professional half of him resolved to see it through, in spite of the twinges in his knee. Such spectacles were bound to come but once in a lifetime. Even as he moved cautiously forward, limping a little bit more than usual, he yet felt himself inclined to give thanks

to Asquith, whose ungrounded fears had put him face to face with such grand copy.

At the corner of the Square, he came to a sudden halt, confronted by a solid barrier of human backs, steady now and silent, listening to a voice which came from somewhere at the west end of the Square. Not a word was audible to Dorrance, as he stood there; not a thing could he see, save for this solid, impenetrable wall of backs stretching from the Jacques Cartier Hall to the houses far across the Square. The Hall! The very thing! Dorrance bethought him of the final words of Asquith.

Crossing the floor of the dark Hall, after the briefest possible parley at the door, Dorrance once more heard the furious clamour, this time with a new note of rage, a rage akin to madness. Then, as he groped his way across the stage and up a flight of stairs, he heard the shout burst forth a second time, linked with the clatter of missiles against the shutters overhead.

"The hose is kept in here," his guide said grimly. "They know it, and that's the answer they're giving, every time it's used. It's over for now. You are safe enough again. As soon as you hear the water, though, slam your shutters together and duck down out of range. They're crazy now; but they'll be worse, before they're done." And he left Dorrance and an empty chair beside an open window.

And Dorrance, looking out, felt for the moment he was looking down on chaos, just such a chaos as had raged in Rue Saint Antoine, six score years ago. At first, he could make out no details, only a shrieking, cursing, gesticulating mob of human beings, swept to inhuman madness by some cause which he, an alien,

could never fathom. Then, bit by bit, as his eyes grew accustomed to the glare of swaying arc lights and of flickering torches, as his ears became wonted to the cries, now hoarse, now strident, now of applause, now anger, he slowly made out the elements of the scene.

At the western end of the Square, a high, narrow platform had been built of slender scantling, backed by a flimsy flight of stairs. A swinging arc light, just above, cast its merciless glare down upon the frock-coated men seated in a semicircle of chairs drawn up about the standing central figure of the group. Behind the platform, not forty feet away, an open door led into the police headquarters. Before it, grouped about the speaker, a band of hired ruffians clustered close, ready with shouts and accusations, or, if need be, stones, to interrupt the more logical, although less potent argument. And, behind all these, stretching from side to side and from end to end of the Square, a solid mass of human beings rocked slowly to and fro with the unconscious and almost imperceptible motion which excitement lends to any crowd. Above, the windows were full, full the roofs of the hangars bordering the Hall upon its northern side, hangars by day sheltering the stores of the city's daily food, by night converted to a standing place for the city's lowest type of human life.

As Dorrance took his seat and, folding his arms upon the window sill, looked down, the excitement seemed once more abating. Some sudden sally of the speaker had lured the crowd into good humour; they laughed a little, and applauded. That was all. An instant later, there came another change. Too far away to hear the phrase which called it forth, Dorrance could feel it

almost before it burst out, a low hum, rising to a groan and then breaking into a clamour of fierce shouts which culminated in a final clash as another stone, well-aimed and swift, shattered the light above the little stage. Then Dorrance held his breath in fear, not for himself, but for that maddened, helpless mob below; not for the instant, but for the later hours and years to which that instant might well lead.

Out from the open door in the rear swept a long file of men, their badges flashing in the lights. They charged the crowd which, powerless to escape, turned upon them fiercely. The rear ranks fled, just such another fleeing as had met Dorrance on his approach. Pushing, elbowing, jostling, trampling on one another like a pack of wolves, they turned and dashed in search of safety. But these were only in the rear. For those packed in the front, there was no such turning. They did the only thing left to them, fought the police with struggling arms and flying stones and beating sticks, fought them in vain. Conquered, struggling, they were dragged away out of a losing fight. Unhappily, however, the police were obliged to go with them, to delay with them for a moment inside the open door. That moment was the signal for revenge. Heedless of their vanished leaders, maddened by the sight of armed and legal opposition to their will, the mob surged forward once again, shrieking with rage, awaiting only some signal which should give them the lead what to do. The lead came, and swiftly.

Above the open door of the police headquarters, the shutters of the topmost window swung out softly, slowly, so softly and so slowly as to catch the attention of no one beneath. An instant later, a small volley of stones

came hurtling down upon the little stage below. Then, for the first time, the speakers flinched. Their flinching gave to the waiting mob the signal what to do. Swirling fiercely forward as the tide swirls against a rock, they cast themselves against the slender scantlings and tore at them in sudden fury.

And Dorrance, strong man and quiet though he was, shut his eyes for an instant, while he prayed for a speedy coming of an inevitable end. Then, as if held by a force he was powerless to resist, he opened his eyes again and sat there, motionless, almost mindless in his sudden terror of that ungovernable beast, a human mob.

Only in front was there action, in front where, curiously enough, was also the only silence. Behind, the crowd, tight-wedged, motionless save for its constant rocking, rocking to and fro, was bursting again into that same growl, low, ominous, which soon would mount into a roar. A second arc light had been shattered, and a third. Down in the Square beneath, the shadow was increasing, and, in the shadow, the human mass looked a monotonous, dun gray. All but — Dorrance sprang to his feet in swift, sharp terror, arching his hands above his eyes and leaning far out across the sill. Was that a gleam of white, just where the mob was thickest? Did he make out, in the stray beam of a torch which had flared up from nowhere, an answering gleam of dull, pale gold?

He held his breath, and leaned out even farther than before. If only once more the torch would swing that way! It swung, and Dorrance, watching its clear band of light, felt his heart turn sick within him, saw the lights beneath go whirling round and round. There

in the heart of the mob, alone, dainty and indomitable, although apparently abandoned by her escort, powerless to move hand or foot towards an escape, marked off of all men by her tossing, nodding feathers, there in the very heart of that maddened, shrieking mob stood Jessica West.

Under some conditions, it does not take long to say a prayer. Not even Dorrance, later, would have known what wild promises he laid at the feet of Deity, that night. He only knew that his whole future would be empty, worthless, unless that Deity restored to him, unharmed, the woman of his heart, restored her to him safe, if only for one hour, if only to be given up to another man, the next. And yet, down in his heart of hearts, Kay Dorrance, for the first time, felt assured that, once his, safe with him, never, never would he give her up. In that instant, doubt ended, and regret. For him, henceforward, life held but one object only. That object was Jessica.

He sprang back from the open window with a haste that sent the chair clattering backward on the floor and, heedless of his steps, heedless of his weakened knee, he went rushing down the dim stairway, out across the still darker Hall and into the street. There the clamour once more filled his ears, and the glare of lights, striking across his eyes after the dimness of the Hall, blinded him completely. Dazed, he never yielded for an instant to the dazing. Blindly he stumbled on, nearer and nearer to the clamour, guided by an instinct which seemed dragging him straight towards Jessica.

Before the blinding glare had left his eyes, he reached the barrier of human backs. He found it as he had left it, solid, wellnigh impenetrable. He was aware of

using no especial strength; it yielded, nevertheless, and left him passage. An interval of open ground inside the first barrier brought him to a second. That yielded in its turn. Beyond was no opening, only a solid, clotted mass of men, body pressing hard against body, eyes to the front, ears strained, and every pair of lungs helping to swell the ceaseless, beastlike clamour. Dorrance pushed forward, pushed sidewise, spoke, urged; then crowded fiercely on. Inch by inch he was gaining ground; inch by inch he was coming nearer the middle of the crowd. Now a man, jostled from the other side, fell heavily against him. Now another man, feeling his crowding body, lifted a foot and planted a vicious kick straight on his injured leg. Dorrance was aware of no pain, no alarm; only a dull anger, and a keen anxiety lest he should be too late. He crowded on and on, now gaining an inch or two, now hurled back again, now working sidewise along a line of tall men in order to wriggle past the smaller one beyond, and so on and on till, just before him, a sudden shifting of the crowd showed him a gleam of white. His strength was going from him fast by now; but excitement took the place of strength. He shut his teeth and once more moved forward, only to be caught by a second swaying of the crowd and swept backward out of sight of the goal he had been within an inch of touching.

This time, it took him longer to fight his way forward. His ears were ringing; the lights, striking across his eyes, seemed to bewilder him, to spoil his sense of distance. Excitement for a time can prove a grand substitute for strength; but, when the excitement yields to apathy, there is little left. Dorrance's determination still held good; but his courage was ebbing fast. Easier

far to stem a mountain torrent than to force a way against those serried ranks of men!

There came a crash in front, a cry, a chorus of shouts, mixed with the thud of falling blows. Again the mob swept forward, eager, moblike, to approach the scene of the disaster, no matter what it was. And Dorrance, by now too weak to render any opposition, was swept forward in its course, a tossing chip upon the human tide.

And the tide, as it chanced, bore him straight to Jessica.

Pale, her frock in ribbons about her, but her white lips shut into a semblance of a smile, she started at his touch upon her arm, started and drew away.

"Do not touch me," she said haughtily, without once turning her head in his direction. "I told you before that you must let me quite alone."

The touch grew to a clasp, and the clasp tightened.

"Jessica?"

The voice was unrecognizable, so hoarse was it and so weak. The smile vanished, and she turned to face him. For an instant, she stared unrecognizingly at the shabby, torn clothing, at the wan, white face of the man halting by her side. Then, as she met his eyes, brown, steady eyes, but burning feverishly now, her own eyes widened and the colour flamed up in her cheeks, as she cast herself upon him with a little sob.

"You've come at last," she told him brokenly. "I was sure you would, when you found out about it; but I have been waiting for you very, very long."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**S**TRANGE to say, it was Asquith's sense of humour which came out dominant, during the next few days, not that of Dorrance.

"It was an evil fate that inspired your Holy Terror, as you called her once upon a time, to bowl us both over at the same hour," he observed, between puffs at his pipe.

Dorrance nodded curtly. The political speech-making and its attendant mob were now three or four days in the past. Nevertheless, this was his first call upon Asquith who was still a restless captive in his room, and the call had achieved itself by means of a cab and a stout stick. None the less, Dorrance, recalling the gay figure standing in her window to wave him a farewell, contrasting that gay figure with the glum one he had seen about the halls and faced at table for long days on days, Dorrance was inclined to the belief that, after all, his own share in the event had been well worth the while.

Jessica, however, had been by no means a gay figure, all the past three or four days. It had been a limp and silent Jessica, her cockiness all jostled out of her, whom Dorrance had at last rescued from the centre of the mob, that night. For the future of the human atoms which composed that mob, he now cared not one whit. His sole thought was to get the girl away, uninjured,

before his strength gave out entirely; and his first long breath came to him when, side by side, weary and dishevelled, they stood together in Saint Joseph Street. Even then, no cab was at hand. They could only climb into a crowded tram, and use up their last bit of strength in keeping their footing, as the car went swinging up the Côte d'Abraham. And yet, neither one regretted it. In the car, they could be silent; a cab would have demanded speech, and speech just now was the one thing they dared not trust themselves to attempt.

In the hall of the Maple Leaf, however, there came an awkward pause, as they halted before going to their rooms. It lengthened. Dorrance busied himself with his cap, with brushing the dust from his shoulders. Jessica let the ruins of her ostrich boa drop to her waist, while she surveyed what once had been its fluffy ends. Then, when the pause could last no longer, she dropped the crumpled feathers to the floor, faced Dorrance, and started to speak. She had reckoned beyond her strength, however. Instead of words, there came one little choking sob. Angrily she bit it off, lifted her head and forced her lips into the same indomitable little smile which she had worn, three days ago, while she looked Death between the eyes. The look in her gray eyes now, however, was by no means the same. Before it, the eyes of Dorrance lost their wonted steadiness and fell, while her two hands shut hard on his, shut and clung there for longer than they either one were quite aware. An instant later, he stood alone in the low, lonely hall.

For reasons obvious to himself and wholly disconnected with Jessica, Dorrance kept his room, next day. At noon, upon his tray, there appeared a note.

"I'm so worried and unhappy," it said. "I know it's all my fault. Do come down, when you can, and let me thank you."

That was all. It lacked beginning and end, lacked meaning to any one but Dorrance. To him, however, its meaning was plain enough to drag him downstairs upon the morrow. Downstairs, he found himself confronted by a new Jessica, gentle, pitiful for him, even a little meek, a Jessica who calmly threw over a dozen engagements for the day, for the mere sake of sitting about the house and keeping him amused. He was amused, too, amused and ridiculously happy. He marvelled now and then, when she was called out of the drawing-room and when his bruised and strained anatomy allowed him consecutive thought, he marvelled that, in all her gentleness, she yet made no direct reference to his battered state, nor yet to its cause. Time was, he recalled with disconcerting clearness, that her outspoken pity had driven him clean out of town. Viewed in comparison with that, her present reticence was not easy of comprehension. It was not until late afternoon, however, that the wall of her reticence broke down.

Dorrance, wriggling about in search of comfort, had clasped his hands back of his head. His chin, thrown up a little and turned to Jessica, brought into full view his cheek, and the girl's random chatter faltered suddenly, as her eyes rested on a great green and yellow bruise which had come into sight above his collar.

"Mr. Dorrance!" Her hands shut, one upon the other. "Your cheek! What did it?"

His laugh was disconcerting to any possible heroics.

"Who, you mean," he corrected gayly. "I really don't know the fellow's name, Miss West."

She bit her lip.

"Was it night before last?" she asked him, low.

He nodded.

"Don't mind about it. It's all over now, and we came out of it well."

"I did," she said. "But you! I wish — oh, I do wish I could tell you what I think about it all; but, if I began, I should cry, and," she laughed a little fiercely; "and crying takes all the poetry out of penitence. If only it hadn't been you, though!"

"Why not me?" he inquired lightly.

"Because — because I've never done a thing but fight you, ever since I came. I don't know why, either. I've just done it; that's all. And now — do you suppose I've got eyes and common sense, and don't know what you did for me, that night, did for me, when the man I'd fought with you for distrusting, was frightened and ran away and left me there alone? And you —" Expressively her glance went from his invalid knee up to his face, still a little worn and white save for the great green bruise. "And, as for me, nothing ever hurts me," she went on impatiently. "If I could only be the one to get hurt, or if I could just faint away or something, it would be so much more decent. But I come out of it all without a scratch, and you get pounded till you're black and blue." She fell into a penitential sort of silence which lasted until she herself broke it, with the question, "What sent you down there after me, in the first place?"

Dorrance coloured. Then he made honest answer, —

"Willis Asquith."

And Jessica bit her lip once more. Then she be-  
thought herself that it was time to dress for dinner, and  
Dorrance beheld her no more, that night.

The next morning, however, she lined up once more  
for duty; and Dorrance, though a shade more lithe  
than he had been, the day before, yet spent a good share  
of his waking hours inside the drawing-room, with  
Jessica sitting idly by to bear him company. By tacit  
consent, they both avoided the causes of the present  
situation. Neither did they admit, even to themselves,  
certain of the most beatific of its phases. Jessica, upon  
her side, had no real notion of the change the past four  
days had made in all her point of view, no notion how  
deep the change would prove to be. She was merely  
very sorry for her sins, very, very sorry for the obvious  
wreck they had made of Dorrance; and she was giving  
herself up to a spree of girlish penitence. And Dorrance,  
all unused to girlish penitence, interpreted her gentle-  
ness and her thought for him according to the dictates  
of his wishes, and dreamed all sorts of tender, foolish  
dreams during the nights that followed those days of  
quiet comradeship. The dreams endured until the  
ending of the fourth day when Jessica, meeting him  
upon the threshold, rained down upon him all manner  
of eager questions as to Asquith. Then the dreams  
ended in a nightmare of doubt.

The Frenchman, meanwhile, appeared to have  
vanished, totally, incontinently. Late in the first after-  
noon, when Dorrance, in his room, had been plying the  
liniment bottle and smothering his emotions as best he  
could, a messenger had arrived at the Maple Leaf with  
orders for the wardrobe of Monsieur de la Haye. Two  
hours later, the messenger departed, riding off upon a

lean little trunk and clasping in his arms a phonograph, whose brazen tube added a triumphal setting to the exodus.

Dorrance and Asquith, in consultation with each other and with their pipes, had arrived at the conclusion that, for the sake of Jessica's future good times in Quebec, the secret of that evening's escapade must be buried by the fewest possible mourners. Dorrance, at the very first, had had the foresight to give out the story that his strains and bruises had been the result of a misstep and fall upon a flight of steps vaguely located somewhere between the upper and the lower towns. Monsieur de la Haye could be safely trusted not to babble, and Dorrance had scanty fears lest Jessica enlighten Mrs. West concerning the details of the way she had spent that August evening. The Colonel, still absent on the south shore, they left quite out of account.

The Colonel proved himself to be of account, however, upon his return to town, some ten days later. To him Jessica, nestling on his knee after her old-time fashion and shedding the tears she bravely had kept back till her father's hands were ready to wipe them away, to this one tested confidant, she told over the whole story, omitting nothing, excusing nothing. The Colonel heard her to the end, silent, his strong arms tightening about her now and then. The story ended, he kissed her gently, gently pushed her from his knee and went in search of Dorrance. Later and less gently, he went in search of Monsieur de la Haye.

After some slight delays, he found the Frenchman temporarily abiding in a small hotel at Levis. The Frenchman made a futile attempt to efface himself from the Colonel's presence. That failing, he summoned

all the effrontery which had been serving him as courage, and faced the irate Colonel with a smile of welcome. Their interview was long, outspoken and exhaustive. When it was nearly at an end, the Colonel lifted his head and spoke.

"Then, as I understand you, it has been your serene intention to marry my daughter?" he said.

Monsieur de la Haye smiled back at him, unruffled.

"If Mademoiselle will only be so kind as —" he murmured in suavest French.

"Talk English, please," the Colonel thundered, turning on him with blazing eyes. "You can talk it well enough, when you're with Mrs. West. Stop your infernal mumbling, and speak out."

When he had spoken, the Colonel continued steadily, —

"And I also understand that you claim you have the support and approval of my wife?"

"Madame is always kind," the Frenchman simpered, while a cunning light crept to his eyes.

There was a pause, short, electric. Then, —

"You — rotten — little — rascal!" the Colonel said slowly and, as he ceased speaking, his foot flashed out once, and then again. A moment later, he had gone away, without one backward glance over his shoulder.

"He'll get over it," he explained to Asquith, that same night. "It bumped his body a little; but the main wreck was where I intended it to land, his pride. I expect he'll need a change of climate, though, before he is able to get out and about very much. And how about yourself?"

Asquith shrugged his shoulder.

"I'm filled with a sense of ignominy," he confessed. "However, I'm going out, to-morrow."

"Glad of that." The Colonel's voice was hearty. "You've had a long pull. What did it? Aside from Jessica, that is. Or was she responsible for the whole?"

"Oh, no," Asquith made haste to answer. "I struck on a bad stone, when I went out of the canoe. One couldn't see much, in all that hail."

The Colonel laughed.

"I did, then, sights such as I never dreamed of. I was in the train, you know, and we had people on their knees and telling their beads, all up and down the Pullman. But I'm glad it really wasn't all Jessica's doing. Between you and Dorrance, when I came back, I didn't know but I'd find the child had been indicted for manslaughter. At least, she's penitent."

"Don't let her worry about me. I'm all right. How is Dorrance?"

"The other victim?" The Colonel laughed in his old ringing fashion. "He's about as well as ever, only he doesn't walk so fast, nor quite so far. In fact," the Colonel laughed again; "he seems to think nowadays that, if he walks as far as the drawing-room, it is all his strength will stand." There was a pause, before he added gravely, "Asquith, that fellow's very much a man, even if he does write books."

Asquith caught at the side issue.

"Even if?" he questioned.

"Yes, even if," the Colonel answered steadily. "It's not a man's profession, after all. It's womanish, not like your own. That's man, all over, takes the best of a man's body and mind and soul. By the way, how comes on the bridge?"

Asquith moved restlessly in his chair.

"That's what I want to know. I've not seen any of the men, and telephoning never is very satisfactory."

"Sometimes you get the best of things, that way," the Colonel reassured him.

Again the impatient, restless motion.

"I want the worst," Asquith said.

Their eyes met.

"You think?" the Colonel inquired slowly.

Asquith nodded silently, his eyes fixed upon the sling still steadying his arm and shoulder.

"Yes," the Colonel assented slowly at length; "you may as well face the fact, Asquith. You're up against a fearful proposition. In such hands, planned by such men, there's no possible doubt the bridge is safe; but there always is, always will be the fear. Meanwhile," as if with an effort, he cast his gravity aside; "how comes on the work?"

There was a long pause. Then, —

"I really do not know," Asquith answered gravely. "The air is full of rumours; the pater gets them now and then. My being knocked out just now has made me lose touch with it all. I've had the reputation of being a bit of a croaker; none of the other chaps would care to come to tell me, if things are going wrong, and, as I say, one can't find out so much by telephoning. Under happier conditions, I'd have sent Dorrance up, by way of scout. He knows a few things about the situation, and I could have trusted him to hold his tongue. However, that was out of the question, so I've had to bide my time and wait till I could get back on the spot and see it for myself."

The Colonel had been thinking.

"What sort of rumours?" he demanded, harking back to the first of Asquith's speech.

Asquith hesitated. Then he yielded to the trust the Colonel had inspired in him.

"Ugly ones," he said tersely. "The bottom chords, the compression ones, aren't holding stiff. You know how they're made, four single ribs latticed into one. It's a month, now, since one of the cantilever chords showed wavy lines between the latticings. To my mind, that meant mischief; but the others all say not. The last week, though, has put two or three other chords on the suspect list — or so the men are saying. I wish they were not so optimistic." Asquith jerked himself back in his chair. "However, I mean to get out, to-morrow, whatever comes."

Nevertheless, Asquith did not get out, the next day, nor for many nexts. Chafe as he would at the delay, the doctor was insistent, and the sprained shoulder upheld the wisdom of the doctor. Dorrance, too, was singularly slow in making convalescence; but his delay was accompanied by no rebellion. A bruise or two and a strain to his leg were merely the best possible excuses for loitering about the house, allowing Jessica to wait on him a bit and amuse him, while, day by day, he increased his knowledge of her warm-hearted, tempestuous, out-spoken nature. He had no idea of being selfish in those days, no notion that Asquith, really ill, could need his services. He was merely a little indolent, exceedingly content. And the golden August days that brooded above the gray old city were a fit setting to his little idyl.

The time wore on for ten days more before Asquith, now gaunt and worried, was allowed to leave his domes-

tic prison. Once free, his first move was towards the bridge. Even Jessica, unseen for three long weeks, was relegated to the second place. Allowed on Sunday morning to set out for church, he left his mother to go home alone, and sought the Levis Ferry and the Saint Romuald tram. The jar of riding would be quite out of the question for still some days to come. However, there was always the tram, and a carter waiting at the end. He came in late to dinner, tired to exhaustion, but with a face of manifest relief. He had found a stray inspector on the bridge, and the inspector had said that all was going well. Relieved on that score, the next day he sought Jessica. He found her playing pinochle with Dorrance; but Dorrance, after a hearty greeting, had the grace to recall an engagement, and departed.

"Do you know, Miss West," Asquith said, as he arose to go, two good hours later; "that you've never once been on the bridge?"

"I've been waiting for my invitation," she reminded him.

"Come, to-morrow, then," he bade her.

"But —" she was beginning.

He overruled her objections with a masterfulness he rarely showed her.

"No matter what else you have on hand," he told her. "I need to be indulged a little, after all my woes. I'm going up; I can't ride yet, and it's dull to drive alone. Won't you go?"

His eyes were eager, as he made his plea. She yielded, with a little laugh.

"Yes, I suppose I can, if you really want me. Mr. Dorrance and I were —"

He cut her off in the middle of her phrase.

"We'd best start early, then, before it gets too warm. That will give us time to see it all: storage yards, bridge, everything. I'll stop for you, just after breakfast. Till then —" His outheld hand completed the unspoken phrase.

"No wonder you love it as you do!" Jessica said thoughtfully, next morning. "I'm a stranger to it all, to this side of it, I mean, and yet it makes my throat ache with the very hugeness of it." Her left hand shut on a fold of her skirt. "Think of being the man who designed it all! It's almost like the Book of Genesis. And then the method of it all, the orderly way it works itself out!" Her other hand, pointing in a circle, swept around the whole great area. Then again she turned to Asquith, her lips parted and her face alight with an emotion akin to his. "I understand it now," she told him. "I shall not wonder, any more. It's the love of your life, Mr. Asquith, of your whole life."

For an instant before he spoke, he paused, studying her face, eager, unconscious of reservation as any child. Then he answered slowly, —

"Yes. And no. There is one other."

Impatiently, and heedless of the meaning in his tone, she shook her head.

"There shouldn't be. Not one. No living man is large enough to have his life hold more than this. Few men are large enough to grasp it at all. You are." She gave a short little sigh, as if her earnestness needed other vent than words; and, as she sighed, she once more glanced about her, at the encircling curve of hills, at the vast expanse of shining tracks and shining piles of well-cast steel, at the long, loaded train just

puffing itself to rest and at the giant cranes already reaching out their metal fingers to lift away the load and lay it beside the other loads already there. Save for the puffing of the engine and for an occasional shout from the workmen, the place was very still. Order and electric power together yield but slight confusion. The yard was as organized as any piece of clockwork. Clean-cut the method, clean-cut the results.

"That's what I love," the girl made comment, as they drove away in the direction of the bridge. "It all seems to work so smoothly. Do they ever get into confusion, back there at the yard?"

Asquith laughed, meeting her own return to her old blithe mood.

"Now and then. You'd have had a bit of confusion, if you'd been there, one day last summer."

"What then?"

"They dropped one of the bottom chords."

She turned to him with a consternation that was not all feigned.

"One of those huge four-web things? What happened?"

"They were lifting it; the hook broke and let it get away. It dropped on some eyebars, and broke a little at the edges."

She screwed herself about and looked at him mockingly.

"How surprising! And what happened to the eyebars? They must have been somewhat annoyed. I suppose they had to make another piece."

"No. It could be mended, here in the yard."

Instantly her mood changed.

"I don't like damaged goods," she said, and her tone was so full of grave finality that Asquith answered her with unwonted vigour.

"It was all right, Miss West. They call me critical; but even I would stake my professional reputation on the safety of that chord, when it finally went in."

None the less, once on the bridge, Jessica went back to the subject of the injured chord, not by chance, but seemingly with the insistent pertinacity of a child whose mind, undistracted by the talk around it, runs along in a groove of its own wilful choosing. It was not until they had turned to leave the bridge, however, that Jessica spoke. Side by side with Asquith, she had gone from end to end of the vast structure, walking with a free, fearless step along the open flooring, although the dizzy height above the moving water might well have daunted a less steady nerve. Once only had she halted to express her fear.

"What makes it wobble like this?" she had queried, as they paused at the outer end to watch the workmen dismantling the great traveller, ready to move it to the northern shore.

"Wobble?" Asquith's voice was full of horrified question.

"Not wobble really; but there's a queer little thrill that runs along the floor. Don't you feel it? Wait!" She lifted her hand for silence, as the great mass of steel shivered anew. "There! That's it."

Asquith's face cleared.

"That's only the jar of the riveting machines. You feel it now. Once the rivets are in, it will be firm enough."

"But aren't they in? Why not?"

"They are, nearly all. It needs freedom to give a little here and there, as the strain increases. It will stiffen up in time." And he held out his hand, as if to steady her back to the shore.

She laughed disdainfully, while she stepped aside to allow the construction train to pass her by.

"No fear," she told him. "I'm never dizzy in a place like this, never any of the nice feminine things. It's only —" she smiled up into his face; "only that I've come to share all your anxiety for the safety of your beloved bridge." The laugh left her eyes, as she added gravely, "No wonder you feel to it as you do! It is so grand one can't describe it; only feel it, and keep very still."

Slowly they sauntered back again, still side by side, while Asquith pointed out to her the giant eyebars clustered to form the upper chords, the intricate and orderly snarl of latticings and rivets, of bolts and plates and ribs and bars, each in its destined place to withstand its destined strain of other ribs and bars, of moving trains, of blowing winds and drifted, heaped-up snow. And, as he talked, the grave, silent Englishman took fire, until his words, eager, picturesque, came tumbling forth in ecstatic praises of this masterpiece of modern engineering. Jessica heard him to the end, although the end did not come until they had passed inside the giant gateway of the main posts and stood once more upon the anchor arm, while Asquith's eyes stared up the river, as if looking towards a future hidden beyond her sight. She let his last words fall into silence, held by something in their fervour which gave her new insight into the heart of the man beside her, and, through him, into the heart of every honest

man whose profession holds the core of his life. At length, when the silence had lasted long, she lifted her eyes from the flowing river far beneath her feet to the massive turrets of the main posts far above her head, then let them fall back to Asquith's face, flushed and transfigured by his theme.

"I think I understand," she said gently. "It's a man's work; and, besides, it is a work that makes a man."

It was after that, when they had once more turned their faces to the shore, that she recurred to the breaking of the chord.

"You've showed me everything besides," she told him chidingly. "Now please show me the very chord that dropped."

Obediently he paused, turned and led the way back for an intervening panel or two.

"You can't see it very well from here. Still, if you lean out a little bit. Wait, though, till I look down to make sure."

Laughing at her own whim, she stretched out one small brown hand, as if to steady him, watching, the while, his questioning face. Then, —

"What is it?" she asked sharply. "Is something wrong?"

Slowly he drew back his head.

"No; I think not," he answered. "Two of the inspectors are down there, looking at the thing; that's all. Hang this lame shoulder of mine! I don't half dare take a look."

"Lie down on the floor," she suggested practically. "I'll see you don't roll through, and you won't be half so apt to strain yourself again. Wait, though," she added, as her ear, quicker than that of Asquith, caught

the voices of men approaching from below. "Here they come now. You can ask them, in a minute." Again she laughed out with her wonted merriment. "Just suppose they had caught you lying on your stomach, eavesdropping to their conference!" she made hilarious suggestion.

"It would have been —" Asquith was beginning.

Jessica checked him.

"Hush! Do you hear what they're saying?" she demanded. "Buckled? Two inches and a quarter? An inch and a half since last week? What does it all mean, Mr. Asquith?" She faced him in girlish curiosity, quite unmixed with alarm.

The last of the glow died out of Asquith's face, died, not to live again for long weeks on weeks to come. His lips shut to a hard line, and his voice, hardening to conceal all possible emotion, dropped down an octave lower.

"It means," he answered slowly; "the beginning of the end."

She looked him in the eyes.

"Now?" she asked steadily.

"Not yet. But some day." The words were heart-broken, heart-breaking, too, in their heavy dreariness. Then they stood silent, facing one another.

Jessica was the first to rally.

"It is your place to be here, to listen to the talk and advise them," she said. "You haven't any time to fuss about a woman. Our carter is waiting. I'll have him drive me back to town, and you come when you can. Only," again she faced him and laid her hand upon his arm with a firm, strong touch which held no taint of coquetry; "only please do be careful,"

she urged. "Remember, to a few of us, you count a good deal more than a dozen bridges. Don't come ashore with me. I'm not afraid." And, her head held high, she walked steadily away along the open flooring of the bridge, a slim, white figure silhouetted sharply against the surrounding blackness of the interlocking girders. It was so in years to come that Asquith saw her oftenest, generous, indomitable, always quick to understand his man's point of view.

Late that evening, the Colonel and Dorrance sat smoking in the Château café opening out on the terrace. The band concert was at an end, the crowd had melted slowly away, before the Colonel spoke the word uppermost in the minds of both.

"You've heard the news?" he queried, nodding up the river.

"I saw Asquith, an hour ago," Dorrance responded briefly. "You know it, too, then?"

"Jessica told me, when I came in, this noon. She was there with Asquith, when they were taking the final measures. What do they mean to do?"

Dorrance shook his head.

"Asquith says they talk of tightening it up, all over," he answered, as he rose and crossed to the opposite rail.

The Colonel followed him, and stood there at his side, smoking, his elbows on the rail, his eyes fixed on the moving ferry lights.

"Dorrance," he said at last; "the thing's a plain impossibility. Why don't they see it?"

Dorrance stood silent for a moment, his eyes upon the other shore.

"Asquith does," he answered gravely then.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"IT is the greatest comfort to me," Jessica observed from above her porridge, next morning; "that my self-made hospital is convalescent. Mr. Dorrance, you needn't put on any more invalid airs, after this."

"Why not, if you please?" he demanded. Then he corrected his momentary lapse. "Not that I have put on any airs, though. Do you honestly think I have been shamming, Miss West?" His voice sounded a little injured at the suspicion.

"Honestly, do you want to know?" she demanded, while she plumped her elbows on the table, bridging her plate with her clasped hands.

"Honestly." His brown eyes met her gray ones with defiant mirth.

She met the challenge with downright truth.

"You've shammed outrageously," she told him then. "Only day before yesterday, you spent the whole afternoon with your foot, your poor foot, on a rest, and let me trot about to get your mail and the cards and all the other things we wanted."

"Well?" His tone was a bit pathetic.

"Well." Jessica dropped her elbows and once more returned to her oatmeal. "I happened to hear, last night," she continued, after a pause; "that yesterday, while I was at the bridge, you spent the livelong morning playing tennis. That's all." Her laugh, gay as

the sunshine lying in the street outside, caused the jaded tourists across the room to turn their heads in wonder that any human visitor in that historic city dared take so frivolous a view of life.

Dorrance laughed, too, although his blush dyed the roots of his hair.

"What would you have had me do?" he demanded.

"A chap can't sit about all day alone."

"Deceit is one of the deadly sins," she reminded him pointedly. Then, with a second point, "Mr. Asquith has been really and truly ill," she reminded him.

"Poor fellow! No wonder," Dorrance answered.

"How could he help it, when you took him out and drowned him? If it's invalids you want, why don't you do the same by me?"

She appeared to be considering the question.

"I might, I suppose," she consented grudgingly at length.

Dorrance rose, pushing aside his chair. He looked a mere boy and very happy, as he faced her.

"Now?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I've promised to play tennis, all this morning. Our set is full," she added, a little maliciously; "else, I would ask you. To-morrow, though, I might."

He faced her suddenly.

"Will you, then?" he urged, eager as a boy. "I wish you would come out for a day's rowing. We'd drive out to Cap Rouge, you know, and row about a bit, and then come down the river on the tide. I've done it once or twice, and it's grand fun."

And his face, as he finally limped away out of the room, betrayed how he was rejoiced at Jessica's con-

sent. It would be a grand day for them both together on the river, a fitting climax to their idle days of loitering about the house during those past two or three weeks. Moreover — Dorrance smiled to himself in manifest content. Moreover, it should not be his fault if the ending of the day did not find him a long stride nearer to his wished-for goal. He had marked time long enough. It was now for him to move. The past three weeks had flown by him too rapidly for his own pleasure. Nevertheless, they had been quite long enough to make him forgetful that the time had ever been when he had recoiled from the fact of his love for Jessica; when its consequences had filled him with dismay; when its consequences, even, had been threaded on a chain of doubts. Dorrance, going to his room in search of cap and gloves, took the stairs in haste, whistling, the while, the *Soldiers' Chorus*. He was whistling it still, when he came out from Valiquet's, after giving in a luncheon order which the damsel at the desk interpreted as token that the eager, red-haired man was planning for a public picnic on a majestic scale. Then, when there was nothing more to do in preparation for the morrow's outing, he plunged his hands into his pockets and set his jovial face towards home. It was still early. Jessica might not yet have started for the tennis club. If not, at least he could walk out with her to the Louis Gate, on plea of a morning call on Mrs. Asquith.

Jessica had gone, however. Dorrance halted irresolutely in the narrow hallway, started to leave the house and seek the terrace, then, catching sight of the morning mail heaped upon the table, he sorted it over swiftly, appropriated his own letters and, sauntering to the

drawing-room, crammed his cap into his pocket and sat down to read.

He had saved until the last a thick letter from his mother, and he was contentedly going down its pages when he heard the rustle of a skirt. Glancing up, he swiftly rose. Mrs. West was just entering the room.

Contrary to her wont, she wasted no time in trivial greetings, but went directly to the point.

"I was looking for you, Mr. Dorrance. Have you a little time to spare?"

The content left by his mother's letter still lingered in his eyes. It lent an added kindliness, too, to his smile.

"Always, Mrs. West." Then, when he had her seated in the easiest chair, "What is it?" he asked her.

"Finish up your letter first," she bade him.

Smiling, he shook his head.

"It's from my mother in New York. Like all good things, it will keep," he assured her. "You were going to say?"

Apparently she found the saying difficult. The scarlet tide rushed across her lean cheeks, the tell-tale lines deepened in her face, before she answered.

"I've wanted to say something to you for ever so long," she said abruptly at length. "You've been so busy with Jessica, though, that there never seemed to be any time for me."

At the sudden hostile note in her voice, he glanced up swiftly. Swiftly he made correction.

"We both of us would have been delighted to have had you here with us," he told her.

She shook her head.

"Thank you. But it wasn't so, after all. I'd have been another one, somebody that would have had to be lugged into all your talk. That's the lesson we older women all have to learn, when our daughters grow up and grow pretty." Again there came the bitter note. "However," she added, after an instant's pause; "that's neither here nor there. What I wanted to say to you was something Jessica didn't need to hear. I wanted to speak about Monsieur de la Haye."

"What about him?" Dorrance's tone, albeit kind, was yet a shade less friendly.

Mrs. West fidgeted with the slide of her long watch chain, knotted the chain, picked out the knot.

"I suppose it's only fair for me to tell you I know now you were right about him," she jerked out at length. "The Colonel has told me all about — about that night with Jessica, that and some other things. When you talked to me about him, that day on the terrace, I thought at first you must have had a quarrel with him. Then, when I thought it over afterwards, I came to the conclusion you were a little jealous." A sudden flush of pink succeeded the red which had been dyeing her cheeks.

"Jealous?" Dorrance coloured in his turn, as his mind swept away to Jessica. So Mrs. West had guessed his secret. Well, what matter? If all went as he hoped, it would be no secret soon. However, convention quite apart, he would have chosen the Colonel as the one to receive his first confidences.

"Yes." Mrs. West inspected a rip in the carpet at her feet. Then she lifted her washed-out eyes to Dorrance's waiting ones. "Because he was so very nice to me," she added, in slow reminiscence.

"Oh." Then Dorrance controlled himself and smiled. "That's all right, Mrs. West," he said heartily. "I'm very glad he was so nice. It shows the fellow has some good in him."

"He has. Much good." Mrs. West nodded slowly. "And he was very fine, in certain ways; his perceptions were very quick. He understood some things that no one —" She let her sentence die away.

Dorrance sought to resuscitate it.

"Not even the Colonel?" he asked smilingly.

Heavily Mrs. West shook her head.

"He least of all," she answered.

"Mrs. West," Dorrance broke the silence, speaking with a quiet, honest friendship whose sincerity she could not fail to feel; "I don't want to — to butt in," he laughed boyishly in apology for his phrase; "but now and then I've wondered whether — whether you hadn't some worry that we others don't know about."

"I have. No one does know it, though, but Monsieur de la Haye."

"Could I help you, if you told me?" Dorrance asked her. "I'd be so glad, you know, if I could be of any use."

"I don't know." She looked irresolutely at him, in obvious distress. "It is so hard to put it into words."

"But you told Monsieur de la Haye," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"He guessed it." For an instant, her tone held a note of distinct rebuke. "He was always very quick to see."

No answer suggested itself to Dorrance's mind. He sat there, silent, straightening out the fingers of his gloves, while he waited for the words so plainly trem-

bling on her tongue. He waited long; but, at long length, they came.

"Mr. Dorrance," her tone was half hysterical, when at last she spoke; "I don't know why I tell you this. I think it's because you're just such a son as I used to pray God to send to me. But — I must speak out to some one, or die. The trouble is — is my husband."

For an instant, Dorrance held his breath and nerved himself to conceal his swift recoil. Then he spoke quietly.

"Mrs. West, you are nervous and, perhaps, a little tired. But do you think even that can make it best for you to tell me things like —"

She interrupted him, scarlet now with her outraged woman's dignity.

"You don't understand me," she said, in a swift hauteur such as he had never seen her assume until that hour. "You think I am meaning something else, something no decent woman could dream of putting into words. No, wait! You must listen now, and get at the truth. The Colonel is the noblest man that ever walked the earth, noblest, best, most lovable. I do love him, too, love him as no man was ever loved before." Her head lifted itself upon her thin, chain-encircled neck, and her voice rang out in eager protestation.

Dorrance yielded to a swift revulsion of feeling, yielded, too, to his sense of humour.

"Then what in thunder is the matter, Mrs. West?" he asked her, as he sank back again in his chair.

"Jessica," she made brief answer.

"Your daughter!" Dorrance sat up sharply.

"But I —"

"Wait," she bade him again. "You don't understand me yet; but I think — I hope you will. You must understand us women; else, you couldn't write about us, the way you do. It doesn't seem to me that anybody who wasn't a woman could have said some of the things you've said about us." The tears stood in her eyes, as she looked up at him in her appeal for understanding.

Dorrance sought to break the tension of the moment.

"I assure you I really am a man," he said lightly.

"I fancy we all know a good deal more about each other, though, than we are popularly supposed to do."

With a slight gesture, she brushed his words aside. Then, bending forward, she spoke slowly, and with an obvious attempt at self-control.

"Mr. Dorrance, listen, please. Suppose you were a woman, not a very young woman, who loved her young husband better than the bread of life. Suppose he stood to you for all that was best and sweetest and happiest in life. Suppose that, when the hard times came to him, you didn't mind them, but felt happy to work and slave and scrub about, just to help him be comfortable and make both ends meet; and didn't care at all, so long as he didn't notice it, because the scrubbing turned you to an old, old woman before your time. Suppose you were glad it came on you, glad you could save him. And then —"

"Go on," Dorrance told her gently, though with the curious detachment of his sympathy that went now and then with his profession.

She bit her lips. Then she went on, quite low.

"Suppose, in her hardest days, a little daughter was born. Suppose her whole hope was to save this little

daughter, just as she had saved her husband, from all the rougher side of life. And then suppose — " Her voice faltered and died away.

Again Dorrance found it impossible to break the silence.

"And then," Mrs. West pulled herself together and went on; "and then, as the daughter grew, times were easier, there was more money, and still more, and then more than they could spend. The daughter was sent away to school. The mother had been a teacher once." A faint pride crept into her tone. "She had been a New England teacher who went West to take a new school, and — and fell in love with the biggest boy. It wasn't a graded school, you know. And so she knew what schooling meant; she was the one to decide that the girl must go away to school."

Dorrance nodded.

"Go on," he said again, when Mrs. West had sat for long, staring out across the Ring, as if at the distant cañons far beyond her gaze. "That is, if —"

"While she was away at school," Mrs. West's tone was now as absent as her eyes; "the father used to go off on business trips. He was always a taking, likable sort of man, always the one to pick up new friends, to get their manners, and keep them, too. Each time he came home, he seemed less and less the man he had been, more and more the — the real, born gentleman. At least," she interrupted herself abruptly and with the first personal word she had trusted herself to speak; "that was how he seemed to me. And, every single time, he grew more lovable, every single time, I —" too interested was she now to heed her unconscious lapses into the first person; "grew more thankful I



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had been able to keep the brunt of things from bearing down on him. And always so considerate and kind. But, by and by, the daughter began coming home for her vacations. She was pretty; she had the clothes of a duchess. He always saw to that. She was bright and full of fun and full of the little ways a woman has who never has known a worry or an hour of work in all her life. That's what she was: a beautiful, merry, loving woman. And — " suddenly the graying head fell forward on the work-ridged hands; " and, in the end, she took away my husband from me." The last words came between great, uncouth sobs.

Dorrance drew a long breath, smothering, as best he could, a mad desire to dash away out of sight and hearing of this bitter sobbing, bitterer because so long suppressed.

" Mrs. West, for — for your own sake, don't! " he begged her. " I am sure she never meant — "

Strangling back her sobs, she faced him, unlovely with her sobbing, yet with a dignity which would not be denied.

" That was the worst of all, " she said, with tragic brevity. " They never meant it, for the simple reason that they neither of them ever knew it. They were all in all to each other; they were just alike: good-looking and full of fun and healthy, the sort of people to get on with every one they met, get on with them, and have a good time with them, too. They were so busy, having a good time with each other and with everybody else that they never once stopped to think that I would have loved to be just like them, if only it all hadn't been drudged out of me, years and years ago. They never stopped to think that he was my husband

before he was her father; that my love went on and on, without anything to feed on but a memory and a husk. They used to laugh and joke together like a pair of children. I couldn't, at first because I was too tired, at last because I had lost the habit, and didn't know how to begin it again. They used to sit and talk about his work, about the cost of things and the best way to do them. She never was a bit afraid of him. She'd go right at him and ask him questions about things I'd never dared to mention. And I used to sit by, dumb, out of it, and listen to them, and look at her, young, pretty as I'd never even dreamed of wanting to be, and — " Abruptly she paused, drawing a long, hard breath. Then, "And that's the way it is," she added; "the way I suppose it's always going to be."

"I am sorry," Dorrance told her gravely; "more sorry than I can say. Can't you get a better grip on each other somehow? It seems too bad a family should — shouldn't pull together better," he concluded lamely, conscious that even now, pitiful as she was, he yet pitied himself still more.

She shook her head.

"There's only one end for it all," she made dreary answer. "I'm not sure even that will do much good."

"You mean?" he questioned vaguely, for his mind, search as it would, could find no possible clue to her meaning.

"I mean," she told him; "that the only chance to right things will come when Jessica gets married."

The scarlet rushed to his cheeks, as if her hand, not her tongue, had dealt the blow. His heart bumped hard once, twice; then fell to beating fast.

"How do you mean?" he questioned again, and, as he spoke, he marvelled that his voice was so steady.

Slowly the old blush remounted across her face. Her eyes, meeting his eager, anxious eyes, drooped and rested in her lap, although she plainly had no inkling of the cause of his anxiety. To her rather sluggish mind, Dorrance, by reason of his profession, his lameness and, above all, of his personality, was barred completely out from personal interest in the question. Nevertheless, moved by some instinct she could never have defined, she shrank from meeting his gaze.

"It was Monsieur de la Haye who suggested it to me," she answered, half deprecating and half in pride.

"He was really very quick to see; he seemed to understand at once just what the situation was, just how I was the one who stood alone in a corner, while the others had their good time together."

"How do you know he saw it?" Try as he would, Dorrance could not hold back the curt question.

"He spoke of it, one day, when he found me all alone," Mrs. West replied, with a simple dignity. "I think he saw that I had been crying. Later, he spoke to me again. It was only a word or two, only now and then; but it was a great comfort to find somebody who was sorry for me. And then, one day, he said something, not very much, that showed he felt sure, if Jessica were only married, the Colonel would come back to me in the old way."

"Yes," Dorrance assented. "And?"

She turned to him and in her carriage was the majesty of loyal, loving womanhood.

"And, if he does, he will find I am always just the same old wife," she told him frankly. "He hasn't

meant to be to blame. Underneath it all, he's always loved me, when he stopped to think about it."

Dorrance, listening, bowed his head. This, at least, was loyalty. Pathetic, too, was the final phrase, pathetic in its admission that she had not always been remembered as she might. But he lifted his head, for she was speaking once more, speaking with the utter self-abandonment which comes to women like herself, comes and refuses to be satisfied as long as there is any reservation.

"Of course, it's made me irritable and bitter," she confessed. "Besides, I was never one to do much joking. I suppose he missed it, for he has always loved his joke. And Jessica has joked with him; she's even made fun of him now and then. You know she's not afraid of anything?"

"No." As Dorrance answered the question held in the last words, his memory rushed backward to the girl standing there alone, indomitable, in the heart of that howling, rocking mob, his ears heard again her haughty voice, bidding him remove his hand from her arm. No; she was not afraid. Therein lay half the secret of her charm.

He roused himself with an effort. Mrs. West, her story done, was lying back in her chair, white and breathing a little heavily, while her fingers twisted her handkerchief into a tight rope, only to pluck it out again and twist it the other way. At last she spoke once more, her eyes on Dorrance's face.

"Mr. Dorrance, suppose all this, wouldn't you be a little sorry for the woman?"

"I should," he answered briefly, for he saw no need to inform this woman, older than his own mother, that

the cure for all her troubles, that even the troubles themselves, were of her own making, in her own hands.

"And don't you think," again she sat up and faced him; "that, when she's married, it will all come out right?"

"Perhaps. I hope so." He waited until his heart stopped bumping, before he added quietly, "Is Miss West going to be married?"

"I — hope so. It would be best for every one."

"To — ?" He could not bring his lips to shape a definite question.

A ghost of a smile, the first he had seen, that morning, crossed Mrs. West's lips.

"Monsieur de la Haye wanted to marry her. The Colonel settled that, though, settled it for all time."

Dorrance looked up, with a swift return to his old, boyish smile.

"And there is no one else at present," he made comment.

"Not unless," Mrs. West dropped her voice to a murmur, while the smile froze on Dorrance's lips; "not unless it should be Mr. Asquith."

There was a bit of silence. Then Dorrance looked up, and his smile now had no trace of boyishness.

"There couldn't be a better man," he answered quietly.

Mrs. West rose.

"You think so, too? I am glad, for he seems to me a very fine man, one who would steady Jessica. Of course, we never know. It is only that I have thought once in a while that he cared more for her than — than a man does care for the average run of pretty girls," she concluded a little baldly. "I shouldn't

mind, myself; and I don't think the Colonel would mind, either."

"And," Dorrance rose and stood beside her, his unseeing eyes upon her face; "and what about Miss West?" he asked, with that same mirthless little smile.

Mrs. West, her sadness vanished, shook her head, laughing a little, as she did so.

"Oh, as for that!" she made enigmatic answer.

Then she left him.

And Dorrance, standing there alone and looking out upon the street whence all the sunshine seemed to have taken flight, was conscious of no regrets for the dispelling of his dreams, for the sudden shattering of his fool's paradise, conscious of no envy of his good friend, Willis Asquith. Instead, standing there, his teeth shut hard together and his hands gripping each other behind his back, he was aware of one emotion only, one determination. Sooner or later, to-morrow, if he could bring it to pass, he would put the question to the test. Tested? He drew a deep breath, then shut his teeth again. Tested, he would accept one answer only. That was the priceless privilege of man: to fight until the bitter end, and then, if need be, to die fighting, rather than accept defeat.

Nevertheless, in spite of his resolve, his brow was overcast, his step heavy and lifeless as he turned away to leave the room and, a little later on, the house. Let his courage be ever so high, let the morrow bring forth what it would, he lacked the pluck, just then, to meet Jessica on her return, to face her gay and buoyant mirth.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

JUST so long as Willis Asquith could see the slight white figure walking away along the great steel pathway of the bridge, he stood and looked after it intently. His face, the while, was grave with the shock of the tidings he had heard, of his own interpretation of them; but his eyes, still fixed on Jessica, were full of admiring loyalty and something as near akin to passionate love as his well-balanced nature could ever know. Then, when the last flutter of white linen had vanished out of the long perspective, he gave a little sigh, straightened his wide shoulders and faced about, ready to answer once again the urgent call upon the professional half of himself. Moreover, so urgent was the call, so great the emergency, so full of plans and counterplans and consultations the hours to come, that it was more than two days and nights before the image of Jessica West once more moved across the retina of his mind. It was as Jessica had said to him, only an hour before. The bridge was the love of his whole life. He had assured her that there was one other which stood beside it. Now, the bridge endangered, his mind sprang to its relief; the other love he left, lying alone, upon a little lower plane and, for the moment, quite forgotten.

It was not that he was disloyal, nor yet cold. However dainty she might be, however full of charm, no

young girl in such a crisis could make good her claim for place beside the passion of his whole mature existence. And, for years, that passion had been centred in the bridge, the grandest engineering feat as yet designed by man. It mattered nothing to Asquith that the design was another's work. He would have given ten years of his life to have been that man. That denied him, however, he accepted the fact as something too impossible, too remote to give opportunity for regrets. He exulted in the achievement for itself alone; he felt a share of the glory which it must bring upon the whole profession.

Asquith had been still in his professional schools, when the bridge had been originally planned. His father had been one of the first men to see the need for so great an undertaking. Asquith's vacations, so far from breaking in upon the subject of his work, had been filled up with discussions of all the possibilities, all the obstacles. His final thesis had dealt with the peculiar conditions to be met: the long, long span, the floating, drifting ice-floes, the heavy weights of snow. His engineering degree had been won with honour, and he had come home to find the plans well under way. He had talked with his father, now out of all official connection with the bridge, had talked with his professors. Then, giving up his plans for foreign study, he had determined that the better training lay at home, watching the slow growth of the monster undertaking. By the time he had received his first offer to take up work on his own account, he had had branded into him the conviction that, until the bridge was ended, he must stay near to see it grow.

It had grown, too, grown to a majesty and beauty of

which Asquith, poring over the blue prints, years before, had had no notion. Slowly emerging from its supporting falsework trestles, slowly springing farther and farther out across the stream, massive, yet buoyant as a bubble, it needed no professional eye to gauge its grandeur. To Asquith, watching, exulting in its slow advance towards its maturity, it was a living thing, sentient and lovable. And now! He shut his hand upon an upright post beside him, while the steel-work about him swam round and round and round. Then, at the sound of nearer voices, he rallied sharply.

"What now?" he asked.

"Chord nine, this time."

"Something wrong?" He forced himself to ask the question with apparent carelessness.

"Rather. It's buckled, a good two and a quarter inch deflection."

"That's bad. When did you find it out?"

"Just now. That is, I measured it a week ago and found a little error, not dangerous, but enough to make me sit up and take notice. I watched it, all last week; but it didn't seem to change. An hour ago, one of the riveters discovered it, and called an inspector down. It shows quite plainly now."

"You think?"

"Asquith, I've not had time to think. Not yet, that is."

Again Asquith sought to give a careless accent to his words.

"Nine. That's the one that fell, up in the yard?"

"Yes."

"Think it made any difference?"

"Not one bit. From the way it fell, it would have inclined to buckle the other way, if it were going to buckle at all. No. The cause is nearer now than that."

Asquith looked him in the eye.

"Stress?"

There came an answering nod. Then, side by side and in perfect silence, the two men walked away together.

In all his after life, Asquith carried, clear and sharp, the chronology of the succeeding hours. Each man, with one exception, admitted that the crisis was a grave one. It was a time when, if ever, the tie of a common profession was bound to assert itself. Partly on that account, partly by reason of his father's old-time association with the scheme, partly from his own personality, cool, reticent and, above all, judicial, Asquith found himself jerked suddenly out of the ring of onlookers and into the heart of all the serious discussion. Hour after hour, the little knot of engineers went over each detail: the plan, the working-out, the inevitable discrepancies between the blue-print theory and the steel fact. And the real captain of the enterprise was six hundred miles away. It would be well-nigh useless to seek to embody in report what needed really to be seen with actual eyes.

Dusk drove them from the bridge at last, drove them back to town, leaving behind them the hasty determination to abandon work until orders should come from headquarters. They spent a restless, busy evening; they spent a well-nigh sleepless night. When they did sleep, their dreams were ugly, sinister.

Morning brought counsel, however. When Asquith,

his eyes unduly hollow and his lips parched and dry, once more sought the Saint Romuald shore, he found the work progressing quite after its wonted fashion. From afar, he heard the clang of blows cutting across the morning air, heard the shouts of the workmen, saw the workmen themselves swarming over the steel lattice, just as he might have seen and heard it, every summer morning for the past two years.

The reasons for this change were specious, almost wholly obvious. Once let the work stop short, once let the labourers get wind of the anxiety of their chiefs, then good-bye to the whole undertaking until the passing of another winter had blown away the germs of panic. For the skilled bridgehand, work was never quite so scarce as to make it needful for him to risk his life in building a forlorn hope. Already, the men had grumbled, doubted. Some, even, had gone away in sheer terror at the undertaking. And that had happened while the chiefs were full of eager trust and hope. Now, once the rumour went abroad that those same chiefs were doubtful, not a man would venture out above the stream. For the rest, apart from the demoralization which they dreaded, there was no need to lose the time. Until the final word came from New York, every chief would be there upon the spot, his senses strained to detect new signs of danger. Besides, there could be no danger. The bridge was not carrying three-quarters of its destined load. What if it had been needful to move the little traveller out, a panel more? Fifty pounds more on every inch, beside the mammoth total, could not make a difference in the end. And so the work went on, while the chiefs held their breath and watched with anxious eyes; while the

labourers above sang their accustomed chanty, as they drove the rivets home.

And, down on the beach below, a little scarlet-skirted child laughed and called "Papa!" while it tossed round pebbles upward towards its father, working far above its head.

The day ended, and the night came on. The men left their work, the engineers their anxious watching, until another day should dawn. But, rushing southward all night long, the one young engineer chosen to be the messenger of ill news, lay wide awake, fitting the beating of the car-wheels to the measure of his foreboding thoughts. However, by mid-morning, whatever the result, the responsibility would be shifted to other shoulders, older ones and better broken to the weight.

Mrs. Asquith was loud in her rebellion, next morning, when her son rose from the breakfast table, and answered her questions with the brief announcement that he was once more starting for the bridge.

"What folly!" she told him, with an irritation which scantily veiled her real alarm. "You look perfectly done up, as if your proper place ought to be in bed. Besides, there's no reason you should be there. It's not your bridge, you know."

"It is the bridge of every living engineer," he answered her. "Don't worry, mater; I'm well enough. I think I can't well stop away."

Above the tea-pot, Mrs. Asquith shook her head gloomily.

"That bridge will be the death of you," she predicted. "At least, you'll come home to luncheon?"

"If I can."

"But, Willis, it is essential that you eat," she assured

him, with renewed exasperation. "If you won't stop at home and rest, where you belong, you might at least pay some attention to your meals."

He tried to turn her off with a small joke.

"Possibly some of the men will give me a bite out of their pails," he suggested. "That would sustain life, at all events."

"Not at all." Her glasses slid off from her nose and clicked against the clasp of her belt. "You need a good strong soup. I shall have some chops, too. What time shall I have it ready, Willis?"

But already he had gone.

Noon of the second day found the situation coming upon all their nerves. The messenger ought to have been in New York a good two hours ago, by now, and still no sign had come from there. The engineers alternately stared at the chords and at the hands of their watches, both seemingly alike motionless. Talk among them was at its lowest ebb. Under so great a strain of anxious waiting, it was impossible to pass away the time in idle gossip. The facts before them had been all discussed and rediscussed, down to the remotest consequences of any end.

Bit by bit, too, the workmen on their side were gaining some inkling of their chiefs' alarm. It had been of no especial use to take precautions against the possible spread of news by use of telephone and telegraph, by sending special messengers, by holding their conferences in secret and apart. The men were quite well aware that such conferences were being held, were quite well aware that a lower chord had buckled. And, if one, then why not others? And why were the engineers all there, all watchful, yet all sunk in moody silence?

It was plain that something was amiss. The men, whispering together, grew restless, nervous, irritated.

And, meanwhile, just nine miles down the river, the city lay in its noon slumber, dreaming, perchance, of the day when the completed bridge should bring new, bustling life to all its idle water front. And, meanwhile, too, just beneath the bridge, the little scarlet-skirted child, still playing in the sun, broke off its game to wave its hand to "Papa" far above. Its mother, in Saint Romuald street, was sitting in her open doorway with a quartette of other mothers, discussing what would happen to them when the finished bridge no longer offered work to the young men of the village. And, while they discussed it, ever and anon they dropped their knitting and cupped their hands above their eyes, peering up at the steel archway to see if, by chance, they could make out their husbands crawling like spiders upon the giant web flung out across the sky.

And over the city and the beach and the quiet village street brooded the calm of the August noon, unsullied by foreboding.

Nevertheless, the Colonel, that noon, felt anxious. However, he held his peace and gave no hint of his alarm, save by the shutting of his mouth, as he turned away from the telephone.

"Oh, it's Mrs. Asquith? I am Colonel West. Well, thank you; quite well. Has your son come in? Not yet? Up at the bridge-site? Nothing wrong there, I hope. Not for a few days. I had thought a little of going up there, this afternoon. No. I don't think so. Mrs. West will be delighted. Thank you. Good-bye." And the telephone rang off.

The afternoon was more than half gone, however,

when the Colonel was able to carry his intention to effect. One thing had delayed him, then another, then another yet. Accordingly, it was long past three, when he left the Maple Leaf, rounded the post office corner and turned down the iron steps leading to Mountain Hill and then the Levis ferry. Across the ferry and seated in the Saint Romuald tram, he forgot somewhat of his vague anxiety, the while he stared out on the river, dazzling and blue in the hot August sun. Beside him, racing almost neck and neck with the car in which he rode, the little steamer *Frontenac*, her decks packed tight with tourists, was plowing up the stream. The Colonel smiled a little, while he watched her, recalling that June day, now seemingly so long ago, when he and Jessica had been in the thick of that same tourist crowd. And now the city seemed to them both like a second home. That was the day when Jessica had first seen Dorrance, so she had reminded him, only the day before. Only the first time! And what chums they were now! His smile widened at the thought, while he bent forward in his seat, gazing eagerly upstream, as if he fancied that, even at that great distance, he could make out the little boat in which the two young people had been making plans to drift home on the falling tide.

The first time she had seen Dorrance! The first time, too, that they had ever seen the bridge! At that second thought, the Colonel's old anxieties swept down upon him, linked, by some strange freak of memory, with that low band of threatening cloud which had backed the nearer picture. It was with a sense of genuine relief that the Colonel roused himself to leave the car, and, with a dissenting wave of his

hand to the persistent carters, went striding off along the two-mile walk up to the bridge.

It was no new walk for the Colonel. Again and again, during the past two months, he had gone striding up the winding roadway, bordered on one side by the hills, on the other by the broad avenue of river. At his left hand, slope lifted itself above the shoulder of slope, topped by Malakoff Rock where the latest sunbeams always linger to say a long good night. At his right, the wide, level beach led out to the wide, level river on whose other shore the Church of Saint Columba broods always on her purple cliff. And, so close on either hand that they seemed edging into the very roadway, the double line of curved-roofed cottages stood open to the summer breeze. The women sitting in the doorways nodded blithe greeting to the passer-by. The tiny children came rushing out to clamour at his heels, taught by experience that the Colonel's pockets were never empty of their store of pennies.

Then came the stretch of open country, the slow rise up to the Garneau Bridge, spanning the gash in the encircling hills that ring the Chaudière Basin. On the long red bridge, the Colonel broke his stride, halting to look about him while he chose his later path: on along the upper road which led to the bridge's long approach, or down along the steep, rocky slant which led to the river beach, and so on to the main pier just without the water's edge. Halting beside the rail of the bridge, he weighed the two alternatives, as one does weigh the rival claims whose final outcome is, after all, a matter of supreme indifference. Because it was of such supreme indifference to him, he weighed the matter carefully. His decision to take the lower

path, however, made for him all the difference between life and the chance of swift, sudden death; but, for him, that chance was still veiled, still beyond his sight.

Even after his decision was taken for the beach, he stood a moment longer, looking down upon the picture at his feet. Behind him, the round, hill-locked basin lay in shadow. Before him, the sun smote sharply on the falling tide, turning the river to a coppery sheet of molten flame, on which the little *Frontenac*, her tour completed, was sliding slowly home. Far down the stream, the twin gray cities seemed clasping hands across the narrowed channel. Above him, the great steel archway sought to span the sky, its tip still crested with the remaining portions of the giant gantry, its shoreward end decked with one long plume of pearl-gray smoke which lifted itself from the construction train, just passing on the bridge. The rolling vibration of the wheels came out across the distance and furnished a sombre bass to the high clink of hammer falling upon rivet, to the occasional voices which came floating down the stream. Across, upon the opposite shore, just to the westward of the bridge's other arm, a little boat lay drawn up on the beach, with two white spots beside it. Again the Colonel smiled. Dorrance and Jessica, no doubt, idling there until the sunset glow had deepened to glorify their homeward drifting on the tide. And, close at hand upon the nearer shore, the little scarlet-skirted child sat playing with her store of gathered pebbles, while she waited for her father's coming from his daily toil above her head. Again he smiled. Once on a time, Jessica had awaited him in that same way.

Turning, he left the bridge, went scrambling down the bank and out upon the beach, still glistening from the falling tide. Everything was very peaceful, very full of promise of another day just like so many in the past. Seen from close at hand, there was so little room for doubt. Everything was moving forward with the self-same order he had admired so often. It must be very late, though. He had loitered on the way. His hand was on his watch, when a shrill whistle from the shore sounded the signal for leaving work. Even from so far below, he could see the workmen stop, gather up their tools and then straighten their tired forms; could see the inspectors turn away, ready to leave their problems and anxieties for yet another night; could hear the jangling bell of the construction train, now poised far out above the stream. Yes, he was quite too late. However, he could turn back to meet Asquith at the Garneau Bridge, and go with him back to town. Nevertheless, he lingered, his eye, as always, held by the grandeur of that unfinished archway jutting out across the coppery yellow sky.

A sudden crash exploded on the quiet air. A sudden flash of smoke, or was it dust, rolled up across the yellow sunlight. Then in the middle of the anchor arm, whence crash and flash had come, the great bridge slowly, surely lifted while, at the outward end, the giant traveller tilted slowly forward, tilted fast and faster out and out, then dropped down, down, down into the copper-coloured river, dragging behind it thousands of tons of steel.

Far up upon the upper level of the bridge, far out beyond the gateway of the towering mainposts, where he had spent the dreary, lagging hours which had

passed, one after one, and brought no message, there Asquith, too, had heard the sudden crash. Turning about abruptly, he saw the mainposts swaying towards him, felt the bridge moving underneath his feet. Tired to the verge of complete exhaustion, he yet nerved himself to one great effort, the dashing towards the shore. He knew the distance was a long one; he wondered vaguely, as he fled blindly on, to find his pathway leading up a long, steep slope. The bridge was swaying more and more; in his ears was the sound of groaning, writhing joints, of snapping bolts, of here and there a hideous human cry. Then, all at once, he ceased his running; the bridge beneath him parted and he dropped down, down, at first through untold agonies of thought and question and bitter certainty, at last to merciful darkness and a total peace.

Two hours later, another merciful darkness crept upon the scene, completely blotting out the terrified watchers on the shore, blotting out, too, the twisted heap of wreckage which stretched far out towards the middle of the stream. And, all alone and neglected in the growing darkness, a little scarlet-skirted child stretched out its baby arms to what had been a bridge, and called aloud, —

“Papa!” And again, “Papa, it’s time to come.”

But the father, deaf to the baby voice, like four score other workmen lay buried in that monster heap of wreckage.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

**T**O Jessica, sitting on the river bank, with Dorrance at her side, it seemed that the afternoon was as golden as the burnished surface of the stream, flowing past her feet. Before them on the sand rested their little boat, drawn up out of reach of the rising tide to await the ebb of tide and afternoon before it bore them homeward. And Dorrance stretched out at full length on the grass, shared the content of Jessica. Under the lure of her presence, his doubtings of the day before had been swept from him. The present day, he felt assured, perhaps the present hour, would place him fairly on the threshold which led to the fulfilment of all his hopes.

They had set forth from the Maple Leaf, that morning, like two happy children starting for a long day's outing. Whatever the reservations of Dorrance's mood as he had come down the stairs, they had been forced to vanish, once he met Jessica. Never had the girl been more buoyant, more flashing in her wit than that self-same morning; and yet, even in her very buoyance, there had been an unfamiliar note of gentleness, of wistful caring for Dorrance's own point of view. Asked, she herself would have denied the difference, denied it in all honesty. None the less, it was there, the result, maybe, only of her own overflowing happiness at the prospect of their long day together in the open.

It might have been, though, that the happiness came from another cause. Girls have an extra sense at times like this, and Dorrance's mood was not a hard one to interpret.

All morning and till long past noon, they rowed and drifted, now one, now the other at the oars. Far up the little river, into the little, little river and up it till they ran aground upon its shallows, in and out amid the woodland the little boat held its vagrant, intermittent way, now halting in a bit of shade, now cutting across the sun-beaten stream. And the talk was as vagrant as their wanderings; it touched the surface of their minds as lightly as the oars swept the surface of the water. Now and then it flashed like the golden drops which fell from their lifted oars, catching the sunlight as they fell.

Still like two happy, carefree children escaped from school for a day's outing, they tied their boat's bow to an overhanging branch and then, while Dorrance rested and gave advice, Jessica spread out their luncheon in the boat. Their appetites were childlike, too, childlike their tranquil disregard of manners, wrangling as to which one should have which piece of what, as to which one had proved the better oarsman. They both were heedless of the fact that wrangling of that sort is a far better gauge of friendship than any amount of talk, however earnest.

Luncheon over, the talk flagged a little. Jessica, in the stern, dabbled her fingers in the running water and watched the fish playing their game of hide and seek amid the sunken roots. In the bow, Dorrance reclined at ease, enjoying the cigarette she had insisted on his lighting, and watching with indolent, half-

closed eyes the girl at the other end of the little boat. While he watched her, his mind was busy with the change the three months had wrought upon his judgment of her character. Or had the change been not wholly one of judgment? Had the girl also changed? Keeping her old-time wit, her careless unconsciousness of the impression she created, had she yet smoothed down certain of the roughened edges? Had she gained, not so much in graciousness, as in the way she chose to show it? Or, after all, was it merely his great love which made him tolerant of what, a dozen weeks before, had seemed to him intolerable? His hands clasped behind his head, his eyes upon her face, he formed question after question, only to dismiss them all, unanswered. Never mind the past. Merely the future counted. Moreover, granted no unexpected hindrance, the setting of that day's sun would see the future made over into the present. He smiled to himself; then he cast aside the end of his smoked-out cigarette so suddenly that Jessica started, as she heard the little hiss upon the water.

"Yes?" she queried vaguely.

"Five pennies for your thoughts," he told her.

Under her wide black hat, her face flushed rosily.

"Never. They're worth much more," she answered, laughing. "Besides, I never haggle."

For a moment, he sat upright, looking at her intently.

"No," he said deliberately then. "I fancy not. You don't have to."

The next minute, he yawned, rose and lazily stepped across the seat to his old place.

"Where now?" he asked. "Dream-time is over,

and we'd best be moving; else you'll get bored and, what's worse, show it."

For an instant, her eyes lay full on his, and in their gray depths was a new light, gentle and very wistful. Then she too cast her dream aside and answered briskly, —

"Anywhere that's unexplored."

"Out on the Saint Lawrence?"

She nodded, eager as a little girl.

"If you won't drown me. Still, as I've said before, I swim like a fish."

"I wish I could say as much." Dorrance's tone was full of envy.

"You don't?"

"Not now. I used."

"Of course. I didn't think. Still," she laughed, as if in the hope of making him forget her careless question; "I think I can pull you into the boat, if anything goes wrong. It's always been dad's hobby, the teaching me to swim. When I was a little bit of a girl, one of my friends was drowned close to our house. From that day, dad took it on himself to see to it that I could look out for myself in any sort of current: swim, tread water, and all the rest. He wasn't satisfied, even, until one day he had me rescue him from drowning, tow him ashore and roll him on a barrel. Poor old dad!" Her laugh, never far below the surface, bubbled up and over. "I expect his sides were sore for a week after. I knew he was only shamming, and I took it out of him with all my might."

The dreaming was all dispelled by now. Light, trivial, broken by much laughter, the talk ran on while Dorrance turned the boat's bow down the stream, past

the wooded shores, past the little village beneath the cliff which sheltered Jacques Cartier, centuries ago, under the low bridge, and out upon the mighty river, a sheet of dazzling blue under the yellow sun. The tide, flowing strongly upward, made it easy work to pull against the current, and they glided up and up for many furlongs, hugging the northern shore for shelter, while they watched the dazzling blue change to a yet more dazzling gold, as the sun, the zenith passed, sank in the western sky. Then, turning, they faced backwards down the stream, while Dorrance, borne on by the current, pulled but lightly at the oars to overcome the tide.

Back at the entrance of the little river, he hesitated for an instant, resting upon his oars while the boat drifted idly. Then, without a word to Jessica, he dropped his oars once more and fell to pulling sharply, steadily down the larger stream. Just above the northern arm of the new bridge, yet far enough away to lose the sharpness of its sounds, he turned the boat's bow towards the shore. A moment later, it grated on the pebbles of the beach. Rising, he held out his hand to Jessica.

"Come," he said. "Let's go ashore for a bit. It will rest us to move about, and it will be a good while yet before the tide is turning."

However, their moving about amounted merely to the change from boat to grassy bank. There, on the soft green turf, Jessica dropped down and, with an inviting gesture, called Dorrance to a place beside her.

"I'm too contented even to explore," she told him lazily. "Let's just stay here a while. No one knows when we can come again."

Then she fell silent, plucking the long grassblades beside her and braiding them, child fashion, to a ring. And Dorrance fell silent, too, watching her deft brown fingers at their trivial task, watching her face, bent intently upon her aimless toil. Then, when the ring was done and lay, a bright green band, about her finger, he stirred a little, rolled over, resting on his elbow, and began to speak.

He talked aimlessly at first, with random references to their idle summer, then to the winter which had gone before. From that, he branched off into bits of talk regarding his home, his mother, his past life, warming a little, as his words ran on and called out an occasional question and comment from the girl seated by his side. By slow degrees, he came to speak less guardedly, with more of personality, and, by the same degrees, Jessica's interest increased. Her questions came more often, more often her little smile of understanding; while a second, larger ring, now almost finished, lay unheeded in her lap.

And Dorrance, answering, told over bit by bit much of the record of his short young life, of his school-boy days and pranks, even of his school-boy dreams; of college; of his two wander-years, and of his first steps in his work, feeble steps only, yet tending towards the present with its acknowledged fame. Then, breaking off, he told her jovial stories of the absurdities which come into the life of every writer, until their old gay mood came back upon them and, side by side, they giggled like a pair of youngsters making holiday.

Then, with a sudden change of mood, and yielding to an impulse for which he, later, was quite unable to account, he flung his mirth aside and went back to

that day, unendingly remembered, when, an edge of fame already in his hands, the future opening wide and sunny before him, he had started for the country club and for the final polo-match of a hard-contested season. But Jessica's hands ceased their busy moving and lay, hard shut, in her lap, while, with her gray eyes on the distant river, she listened to the story that came after: the fierce excitement of the game, the spill, the dreary days of pain that followed and then the undying consequences to himself. The end was long in coming, although Dorrance told his story simply and briefly as he might. When he had finished, she gave a little sigh.

"And then?" she asked, her eyes still on the flowing river.

"Then, as soon as I was able, I went back to work," he answered quietly.

She turned her gray eyes on him then, and, for the first time in his knowledge of her, Dorrance saw the tears upon her cheeks.

"Yes, it was like you," she said slowly. "I might have known, without 'he asking."

The river at their feet had time to whisper many things to both of them, before Dorrance spoke again. When he did speak, the subject of the accident was left behind, touched on and understood once for all. Instead, haltingly and with the modesty of a half-grown lad, he touched upon the matter of his work, not of the past, but rather of the present and the future, not what he had done, but what he hoped to do. And Jessica, her gaze no longer on the river, listened with a grave attention, asking half-timid questions now and then. Her interest was manifest, manifest, too, her

ear lest she intrude within some hiding-places of his mind. Asquith, listening, would have been struck by the unlikeness of her present hesitancy to the way she had been wont to discuss his own profession with him, to her swift seeking of question and reply, to her clear expressions of her grasp upon his point of view. The one was full of frankness, the other of reservations. However, Asquith was across the river, high up upon the bridge which jutted sharply out along the skyline towards them. And even Asquith, listening and struck by the difference, might yet have found it hard to explain.

Dorrance was sitting straight up now. Long before, he had risen from his old position, prone upon the ground, his head cradled in his arm, his eyes upon her face, risen as if in deference to the sudden rush of tears into the gray eyes above him. Now he sat erect, his knee bent, his strong brown hands clasped about it, his eyes resting up and out across the river, as if he dared not trust himself to meet the gaze of Jessica. At least, not yet. The time was coming, coming soon, he told himself, when he would turn to meet her gaze, meet it and hold it and let it go from him no more. But the afternoon lay long before him, long and happy. The past now was forgotten, the future almost in his grasp. He had only to stretch forth his hand, to turn his eyes to hers; that was all he needed to put it to the test. And after? He smiled a little to himself, as he recalled her early dictum. Conscious power? Well, after all, why not? Meanwhile, with the future close at hand, what need for haste? Why not prolong for a little the present moment, with all its consciousness of power, consciousness, too, of supreme content?

And so, hands clasped about his knee, eyes out upon the river, he talked on. Bit by bit and scarcely aware of what he was doing, he turned his whole life out for her inspection. Even as he talked and with a frankness quite apart from conceit, he rejoiced to himself that it had been a cleanly life, one whose fabric her honest gray eyes could scan from end to end. Simply and without reservation, he laid his past before her: inheritances, training, everything. Then just as simply he mapped out his future, a future of hard, honest work, of struggling towards an ideal he could never touch, an unremitting striving towards a receding goal. And, in all his future plans, his work could gain its full perfection through one source of inspiration only. What that inspiration was, however, Kay Dorrance did not tell. Instead, he left it nameless, vague, something far too sacred for any words. None the less, he made it plain to her that for it, and by it, and by reason of its influence alone, his professional work could reach its highest excellence. And Jessica listened, and understood, and, understanding, felt her very heart rush out to meet his own. Yet never once her colour wavered, never once her gray eyes fell from his intent face. Frank as a child, she still could hold herself away from self-betrayal. However, she, like Dorrance, realized that each moment measured by the dropping sun was bringing nearer to their grasp a wondrous future before whose radiant fulness her girlish eyes must droop, in dazzled wonder at what lay beyond.

Dorrance at last fell silent, his story done. With his lean brown hands still shut around his knee, his eyes upon the steel archway jutting out across the

stream, he sat there motionless, lost in his own thoughts, his own anticipations. To Jessica's watching eyes, he looked a very boy as he sat there, his hair ruffled by the breeze and lying crisply about his face, his lips smiling a little, and full of deep content. He was just a merry boy, she told herself; then added that he was a man as well, forceful, dominant. Her own lips lost their laughing steadiness, her gray eyes faltered, even as she watched him. Then she too faced outward, looking up and across the stream.

For longer than they knew, they sat there silent, sat while the sun walked down across the sky, sat while the little ripples, eddying about before their feet, waited to tell them that the turning tide was ready now to bear them safely home. Then slowly, reverently, Dorrance moved his keen brown eyes until they rested full on Jessica's intent, expectant face.

"Jessica," he said slowly, and, as he spoke, he laid one hand gently over hers.

Slowly also, as if she dreaded to lose the dreaming in the fact, the girl's face grew into attention. An instant later, Dorrance felt his hand roughly flung aside, while Jessica sprang to her feet and took a quick step forward on the bank.

"The bridge!" Her voice was harsh, breathless. "Look!" Her pointing finger helped out her failing breath.

Dorrance obeyed and looked. Then, as if stupefied by what he saw, he sat there motionless, speechless, almost mindless, and watched it till the finish of the tragedy. He saw the shore end of the bridge seem to be moving towards him, saw the great traveller move up and out, saw the swaying mainposts, saw the whole

great steel pathway lower itself by inches and come as if sliding towards him until, forty feet above the water's level, it went crashing, hurtling down, shattering the copper surface of the stream and sending out rings of tossing waves that slowly died out in the distant levels of the mighty river which already was closing in above the tangled wreckage.

The last steel chord, bent, twisted, had writhed itself to rest; the last concentric ring of wave had settled back, before the two watchers stirred, or spoke, or moved their frightened eyes. Then, white, terror-stricken, they faced each other for an instant, before Jessica spoke.

"Poor Mr. Asquith!" she said brokenly. Then she shut away the sight with her clasped hands.

But Dorrance, risen now and standing by her side, was deaf to the sound of her half-smothered sobs, deaf to all things since her words had torn his hopes in two. It was Jessica who first roused herself once more. Turning, she caught his hand, hanging inertly by his side, and tugged at it with all her might.

"Come," she besought him. "Come quick!"

He faced her, half-unseeing, for his daze was still upon him.

"Where?"

"The boat. Hurry! Here, give me your arm. We must be quick. There may be—" she faltered; "things to do out there."

The daze left him as he faced her, his love spurred on by her quick, brave purpose.

"No one could live," he told her gently as he could. "Besides, it's no place for a woman."

She turned upon him proudly.

"Why not a woman, if you please? Woman or man, it makes no difference, as long as one is strong and wants to help. There were so many up there. They may not all be dead. And, even if they are —"

Hand, voice, eyes, they were all begging him, urging him to action. What wonder that he yielded? Once in the boat, —

"Four oars, I think," she told him briefly. "The current is so strong. Besides, it's quicker."

And Dorrance nodded. For the hour, he felt himself a child beside her. Like a child, he yielded to her swift, imperious orders. Together, timing their strongest strokes into what accord they could, they struck out across the stream, cutting sharply through the current which vainly tried to draw them downward, seaward upon the ebbing tide. Even by now, the farther shore was dotted thick with people. Here and there a little boat was putting out to carry the help which might be all too late.

Their own boat now had passed the middle of the river, passed the swiftest of the racing current, and still it held its headway, scarcely dropping down the stream. As they came opposite the snarl of steelwork which, so short a time before, had been the wonder of the engineering world, Jessica, seated in the bow, lifted her oars and turned about to look ahead. Dorrance, his back towards her, could not see the ashy gray that overspread her face; but his quick ear made out the little gasp, the little catch of breath, before she said, with perfect quiet, —

"Left oar, Mr. Dorrance! Softly, please."

He turned his head. As his glance sought Jessica, it halted on the way, as if frozen by that on which it

rested. Was that a log, one of the wooden ties, that long, straight gray thing which the river was bearing down upon him? A log, or — ? His head still turned, he bent his great strength upon his oar, then headed up the stream.

"There! Not too far. A little more." He marvelled at her quiet skill and strength. "There! Can you hold it steady? Now!"

As Dorrance once more put out his strength to hold the boat secure, she shut her hands upon the long, straight thing that floated down upon them, then, with a little lurch, came to a rest beside the outstretched oar. But, at the lurch, at what it showed him, Dorrance, still straining at his oars, dropped his head, aghast and sick at heart.

"My God!" he said. "It's Asquith."

At the cry, the girl's nerves became like the finest, toughest steel. Even in her momentary consternation, her voice rang out, indomitable.

"Thank God, you'd better say," she offered terse correction. "Between us, we will save him."

Dorrance shuddered.

"Unless —" he whispered, as if to himself.

"No *unless* about it," she insisted. "He isn't, must not, be dead. You hold the boat. I think I can lift him." Already, and with a strength which filled Dorrance with amazement, she was bending out above the river, straining to lift the great dead weight beside them.

"Miss West, you can't. Let me." Gently Dorrance sought to put her aside; but she resisted.

"It's my place," she flashed, with sudden anger. "I know — oh, I know so much about what this

means to him. I must be the one; he'd like it." Then she controlled herself and spoke more quietly, although her eyes, still bent upon her task, were blind to the ashy look of deadness her words were bringing to the face of the man kneeling at her side. "Please let me help," she besought him. "I think, if we both lift at once —"

But the boat, rolling far to one side, the motionless dead weight of body in the stream, these filled out the gap in her unfinished sentence.

"It's no use. He is too heavy for us," she said at last unsteadily. "Mr. Dorrance," rising to the seat, she faced him with anguished eyes; "what can we do? He will never live like this, till we can row ashore."

Dorrance drew in one deep, long breath.

"God knows I'd give my life for his, Miss West," he answered. "He is my dearest friend. But — you know I can't swim."

Even in her anguish, her face grew gentle, as she turned to him, resting her dripping hand on his.

"Don't you suppose I know about it all?" she asked him. "Know that, in all these years, your being lame has never hurt you as it does now?" Her eyes met his, and Dorrance, had he not been blinded by his fears, could not have failed to read the love and understanding in their gray depths. "I know all that. Some day, we'll tell it over. Now there isn't time." While she spoke, her hands were tearing at the fastenings of her shoes.

"Miss West! What are you doing?"

The love was still in her eyes, turning them soft and dreamy as they had been while she had sat there with him on the shore. Her lips, though, were shut together.

tight, hard, into a little smile of indomitable determination, indomitable courage.

"We're going to save him, you and I," she answered. "Listen, and do as I say. No matter if I am a woman. You'd be the one to do it, if only your pony hadn't slipped, one day. You take the oars and row very slowly ashore. If I can rest one hand on the boat, and swim with my feet, I think — perhaps — we can get him to the shore alive. Steady, please!" A moment later, she had tossed aside her outer skirt and, her two brown hands touching above her head, she had dived into the fading copper of the stream.

It was only an instant before she reappeared. In that one instant, however, Kay Dorrance suffered ten times the tortures of the damned. It was bad enough for a manly man to sit there in the boat and watch a woman take the lead which should have fallen to his share. It was infinitely worse, when that lead held within its many chances the death of the woman of his choice. In that one instant, Dorrance accepted as fact that Jessica loved Asquith, not himself; accepted as second fact that, Asquith winning and wedding Jessica, he himself, Kay Dorrance, would go on to the end of life, still holding her in spotless and undying love. Few men could win a greater privilege than the mere knowing and loving a girl like Jessica. Lacking the girl, the love he would clutch as long as life endured, clutch though his hands and heart were bleeding with the thorns that ringed it round. And, first step into that unending future, he forced himself to smile bravely when Jessica, gasping, came up above the surface of the great deep river. After all, it was something to know that she was still alive, still resolute.

"Can you manage?" he queried briefly, as he turned the boat around. "It will be a long, hard pull for you. All right. Very slowly? His head on your left shoulder, better, so you can have your right hand free. Wait till I bring the boat around. Ail right? Then —" And the oars fell gently in the waves whose coppery hue was changing fast to rose.

A long hour afterwards, Willis Asquith's eyelids wavered and fluttered, fluttered and then lifted. Jessica, until then watching and issuing crisp orders, left the middle of the group and, her drenched clothing clinging to her supple, girlish form, she sought out Dorrance.

"Mr. Dorrance," her words came heavily; "will you please take me home. I think the danger is over for the present, and — and I'm a little tired." Then, the same brave little smile curving her drawn, white lips, she lurched forward and dropped, a wet, unconscious little heap, at Dorrance's very feet.

## CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

"YOU oughtn't, child."

She shook her head.

"I'm able, Dad. It's better for me to be going out. Besides, there may be things that we can do."

"But I sent the check —"

Impatiently Jessica interrupted.

"Yes, and it was a good-sized one, I suppose. Still, it went to the committee and must be sat on and discussed. Meanwhile, you and I are going up there to do human things, not committee ones. Money isn't the only thing such people want. We'll find enough up there to do." And, albeit wan and white still from the shock and strain of two days before, she had her way.

The ferry on which they crossed the river was packed, packed the Saint Romuald car. Here and there a grave-faced priest, a gentle nun broke the otherwise monotonous rank of tourists who were taking in the fallen bridge in the same apathetic, conscientious fashion in which they took Kent House and the Gray Nunnery. Even as they took it in, they talked of how they grudged the time for such an expedition, yet feared they might always regret it, if they left it undone; and, long before Levis post office was out of sight in the rear, they were peering this way and that, in hopes of an early glimpse of the wreck.

Jessica, heavy-eyed and listless, watched them with the impersonal interest one might bestow upon another race of beings. It seemed to her incredible that the ruined bridge could so soon be relegated to a tourist sight, a subject of idle curiosity and futile, jesting conversation, that bridge whose fall had shocked a whole dominion and brought undying sorrow into so many hearts. She wondered vaguely whether the widows of the missing workmen felt an acuter sorrow than the one which would one day come to Willis Asquith.

For Asquith, as yet, was ignorant of any accident. Merciful unconsciousness, a merciful delirium had come to veil his mind until his bruised and broken body had adjusted itself to the shock, had won a little time to rally. Later, the second shock, and that the mental one, would drain his strength. His greatest hope lay in the fact that the shocks came in succession, not together. Asquith was not a weakling; yet either one alone would test to the limit his vitality.

Very gently, very quietly Dorrance had lifted Jessica into a waiting cab, that Thursday evening. Together, while the fading rose of twilight turned into opalescent gray, they drove away, without a backward glance, silent, full of sorrow. For the first time in Jessica's young life, for Dorrance's second, they had been face to face with tragedy at its worst. Not even their loyal affection for Willis Asquith could blind them to the fact that four score other men had gone down to a death which defied rescue, even recognition. Around them, wailing women, wives, mothers, and sobbing little children filled the air of sunset with one great chorus of lamentation, wild, hopeless. That was out upon the pebbly beach whither,

it seemed at first, all the world had gathered, standing about in dazed and aimless groups, or dashing to the water's edge to greet an incoming boat and ask if it bore news, or — something else. All the world seemed gathered there. Yet, as they left the open country and came into the village streets, Saint Romuald, Etchemin, even Levis, they found out their mistake, found, too, the saddest scene of all in the people waiting in their doorways: the sick, the crippled, those too old and weak to go forth in search of news. Jessica, white and spent, hid herself in her corner, her hands across her face to shut out sight and sound of this great misery she could not touch, nor help. But Dorrance, smiling bravely, his head bared in deference to the sorrow which lay all about him bade the carter drive slowly, slowly, while he answered as he could the storm of questions that fell on him from all sides. And then, at last, they reached the ferry, and so Mountain Hill, and so home.

"Forgive me. But —" And with a touch, firm, steady and full of a brother's kindness, Dorrance half led, half lifted the girl into the house. Then, for a moment, he stood looking straight down into her eyes, upraised to meet his own. Only a blind man could have failed to read their gaze aright; but, for the time, Dorrance was blind, blinded by the doubts and fears which, sweeping back upon him in the last two hours, had taken on the shape of facts. That Asquith was ready and waiting to love Jessica he had never doubted. That Jessica did love Asquith now he doubted even less. Women did not risk their lives on lesser counts than that. Women did not steady to emergencies without some hidden inner strain that held them tense, ready for instant service. And,

leaving theorems and coming to the single fact, what woman would not love Asquith, straight and strong in body as in mind? Asquith was man, all man; and lovable withal. Dorrance shut his teeth on his own accepted Fate, while he stood there, silent, in the little hall of the Maple Leaf, his eyes on Jessica's. Then, —

"You are all right?" he asked. "You have been grandly brave. Sure you're all right? Then I think perhaps I'd best go out to Mrs. Asquith." For one more moment, his hand shut hard on hers. Then, smiling with a pitiful attempt at his old boyish manner, he limped away and left her, standing there alone.

And Jessica, as if dazed, stared after him until the outer door swung to behind him. Then she took one swift, impetuous step to follow him, but checked herself as swiftly, while the deep colour mounted across her face. The next moment, she flung herself, sobbing hysterically, into the motherly arms of the Head of the House.

Since that time, she had had no glimpse of Dorrance. Mrs. Asquith, turning to him in her alarm and sorrow, had begged him to remain with them for the next few days, at least, until Willis should be upon the upward road. And Dorrance, filled with anxious doubts as to whether Asquith would ever tread that road, was quite unable to refuse her urging. He knew too well her friendship for him to doubt her wish; he knew as well the steadying that comes, in times like this, from the mere presence of an outsider to the normal home circle. Moreover, he too needed a certain steadying. Just for the present days, it would be better not to sit face to face with Jessica. As yet, he dared not trust

himself to meet her questioning eyes, as he had seen them in that last, long look before they parted.

From time to time, he telephoned to her and, over the wire, his voice seemed to her to have the old-time ring. Not that she expected it to sound otherwise. Jessica West was a girl bound, once the nervous strain had slackened, to look in the face the facts. Being human, not too dense and, above all, a woman, she had not failed to guess the secret of Dorrance's mood, that day, not failed to feel, by merest instinct, the unanswered question hanging on his lips, the very instant that the bridge went down. The falling bridge and what came after had postponed the question; that was all. For her own answer, she felt not the slightest hesitation. And, after all, what did the mere postponement matter? Kay Dorrance, as she knew him, was not the man to change. They both were merely waiting until a more convenient hour. And so, feeling that, in her secret heart, she had pledged herself to him, Jessica waited, content. Over the telephone, she cast aside her teasing and her girlish coquetries, and spoke to him with womanly, sweet gravity. Alone in her own room, she sat for hours, staring out across the Ring, but seeing only two brown and steady eyes looking into hers with an expression no true woman could fail to understand, feeling, the while, the grip of the strong brown hands which crushed her hands within their clasp. Happy, content and full of dreams, she waited, never doubting. She had not seen the look in those same brown eyes, when they had watched her sitting on the shore with Asquith's bruised head resting in her lap.

Meanwhile, the bulletins from Asquith were not

alarming. How he had escaped death was the miracle of all. Perchance some angle of his dizzy fall had saved him in the sharp concussion. Some instinctive preparation for the blow upon the surface of the water might have marked his last half-conscious seconds. In any case, he lived, bruised, broken, still unconscious. However, in a case like that, mere life was the main point. The doctors were grave and busy; yet they did not shake their heads and lift their brows at one another when Mrs. Asquith's back was turned. Instead, they worked on broken bones and strained ligaments and an ugly cut made by a falling bar of steel. As for the unconsciousness and then the light delirium, they left that mainly to the nurse. There was no concussion of the brain; it was merely the nerve shock, following so soon on the heels of his late illness. Once the bones began to knit, once the danger of fever was safely in the background, then the rest would follow as a matter of course. For the present, the sole question was Asquith's physical vitality, how far a man's heart could meet the shock of a half-dozen broken bones. The first night was one of strychnine and alarms; what there was left of it, that is, by the time the specially chartered steamer and the ambulance had brought Asquith from his heap of hay upon the beach back to the quiet of his own room at home. By noon of the next day, the heart was stronger. By one day more, the greatest of the danger was in the past. The case would be one of many weeks; the outcome seemed to be a matter of only the slightest possible question.

So Dorrance gave his messages, precluded always by a careful question as to Jessica herself. Out of that

question, try as he would, he could not keep a note of keen anxiety. And Jessica, listening, even over the prosaic medium of an electric wire, could not hold herself from thrilling in response to the quiver in his voice; and her own answering thrill lent a note, seemingly of grave alarm, to all her counter questions as to Asquith. Dorrance, hearing, answering as blithely as he could, shut his lips hard and tight in his own intervals of listening. And then, hanging up the receiver, he went away into a black mood of self-disgust. After all, Asquith was his friend. Unthinkable that he should accept the fact of his friend's possible danger and certain suffering so impersonally, so measured in the light of its influence on Jessica! Conscientiously and for his own sake as well as hers, he shook himself out of this mood, and went in search of Mrs. Asquith.

As for Mrs. Asquith, in those first, maddening hours, she was never so little the Honourable, never one half so much the woman. She met her shock bravely, bore it patiently, although Dorrance, watching her with the heaped-up knowledge he had won during those past three months, knew it was shaking the strongholds of her very life. Mr. Asquith had been away from home. Mrs. Asquith had spent the entire afternoon inside the house, resting and reading a new novel, too much absorbed to heed the excited voices now and then lifted in the street outside. On Dorrance, then, had fallen the weight of telling her the accident, of the danger through which her son had passed, they hoped, alive. He had done it with a brief directness which was the extreme of mercy. Five minutes after he entered the house, she was in full possession of past facts and future chances. Five minutes after that, the tears still wet

upon her face, she was dictating a dozen telephonic messages in order that all things might be ready for the sorrowful home-coming, once the doctors judged it safe. Only after the home-coming had occurred, after Asquith had been placed in his own bed, and Dorrance had picked up his cap in signal of departure, had she broken down. Then, for a moment, she clung to him, sobbing.

"Stay with me," she begged hysterically. "I shall be insane, without some one to talk to, some one I care about. Promise me that you'll stay with me, at least, until he's conscious."

And Dorrance promised, while, casting aside his cap, he drew her head against his shoulder and stroked her hot, wet cheek in as gentle a caress as ever he had given his mother.

All the next day, he never left her for an hour. The next noon after, Mr. Asquith came home, tired and anxious; and Dorrance, after sitting out the luncheon with them, judged it best to leave them alone together for a while. Once more he hunted up his cap and started out irresolutely, unsure which way to go. Fresh from the strain and sorrow of the Asquith home, fresh from the sight of the still, white figure in the bed, he was in no mood for tennis or for tea. The Maple Leaf? Not yet. He had no strength to spare from Mrs. Asquith to spend in facing out a situation to which, as yet, he was trying to dull his mind. He smiled a little at the thought. Perhaps, after all, Asquith did not have the worst of it. After so great a shock, there might be worse things to endure than mere unconsciousness, or even a delirium that babbled happily of struts and stresses. He shrugged his shoulders, plunged

his fists into his pockets and boarded the first car that came along. The car was going out Maple Avenue. Nevertheless, in process of time, it landed him at the top of Mountain Hill where, yielding to the impulse which had drawn him at the start, he left the car and sought the Levis Ferry. An hour later, he was in the open country beyond Saint Romuald.

More than an hour afterwards, Jessica and the Colonel were walking through the little village. Not a carter was to be found; each one had gathered up his tourist load and started for the bridge. The Colonel had made swift investigation. Then, with a laugh, he had slung a heavy market basket upon either arm and started out along the road, with Jessica beside him. With one hand, the girl was clutching a dozen parcels, gathered up against her shoulder. Over the other arm hung the great mat of tangled, fragrant pink sweet peas she had insisted upon bringing with her.

"You've food enough for a small army," she told her father as they started. "All sorts of people will take them things they ought to need. Let me get some flowers, Dad. After all, the things we don't need are the ones we want the most of all; and flowers do soften the barrenness a little bit."

And her father, his baskets packed and waiting, had nodded his assent. He would have nodded assent to any suggestion made by Jessica just then, even though assenting entailed a half-hour wait while Jessica ransacked the florist shops. The afternoon before, he had learned by the merest chance what men, strong men and men of level judgment, were saying of his daughter. A word overheard here and there, in the post office, on the terrace, in a Fabrique Street shop:

these had led to a question from the Colonel who, up to then, had gained no notion of the part his daughter had been playing in the tragedy. He himself, directly the bridge had fallen, had rushed up to the office on the high approach where he had been kept busy with the telephone, until the darkness had completely fallen. By the time he had reached the Maple Leaf, that night, Jessica, singularly taciturn, was ready to go to bed. Next morning early, he had started out in search of chances to be useful; and Jessica, coming down to breakfast late, found only his good-bye message. By afternoon, the slackening of his self-sought duties left him leisure to discover that his daughter's name was in every mouth, linked with the name of Asquith.

At last, the Colonel asked a question, listened to the answer. Then he went away, walking as if on the air. In that hour, he tasted the greatest sweetness life could have offered him. Jessica, his Jessica, pretty, gay young thing and accounted a bit careless, a bit spoiled, Jessica had made good for all his trust in her. The Colonel, mindful of his fifty years and nine score pounds, checked his inclination to run; but he went whistling home through the busy streets, by way of holding his lips from apparently senseless smiles.

Jessica! His little Jessica! And Asquith! Well, well!

The exuberance of his pride lay on him still. Some other girls might play the hero. Few, he was convinced, could follow up their heroism with such tact and gentleness as Jessica was showing among those stricken people. The whole village sorrowed together, that late August day. Scarcely a home in the entire little street but held its mourner: parent, wife, child,

sweetheart. From many and many a door hung the signal of the mourning going on within. Out through many an open window came the sounds of smothered sobs, of fierce, convulsive wailing. Even in the homes untouched by death, sorrow lay heavily, for that simple-hearted country village accepted all things as a common fund, sadness as well as joy. Moreover, not the least of all the tragedy lay in the fact that many of the villagers must lie, dead and unreachable for ever, in that great heap of wreckage on which the windows of their homes looked out; that the same eyes which, day by day, had watched them starting for the rising bridge as for their daily task, must now stare out upon the fallen bridge, their tomb. Small wonder that Jessica, coming out of the last crape-hung cottage, should falter a little and then cross the country road to stand leaning on the low fence, while she gathered up her failing strength, ready to face her father smilingly, when he came back to her from the little knot of men, farther down the road. It had been a long, hard hour she had spent among those wailing women, the hardest hour of all her glad young life. Yet, even now, although the tears were still upon her face, their kisses were also still upon her hands. It had all been worth the while, down to the last word of her broken French, down to the last little limp sweet pea. At least, they knew she was sorry; and that must count for something.

Then, her gray eyes on the distant line of tangled, knotted steel, the others faded from her mind, leaving one woman there alone, a woman sitting with dazed eyes beside a chair on which there lay, outspread, the simple bridal frock she was to have worn, not ten days later. She was a pretty thing, the merest girl in years,

yet with all her girlhood blotted out with crying. What could life hold for her in the future, to make good? The twisted steel vanished behind a sudden mist, and Jessica's head dropped on her folded arms. What would life hold for her, if that same fall had taken Dorrance from her? She dared not face the thought of any future, without the chance of meeting those steady, true brown eyes, that little smile, half resolute, half boyish in its quiet mirth. And this girl, young as herself, was facing an endless empty future of the self-same sort.

How long she stood there, her head resting on her arms, she did not know. She roused herself at the sound of an approaching step, and faced about, smiling bravely as welcome to her father. It was not her father who halted at her side, however, but Kay Dorrance. At the sight of him, standing beside her in the flesh, the forced smile vanished. In its place, her face blazed with the sudden joy of meeting. Impulsively she held out to him her two strong, brown little hands.

"Mr. Dorrance! You here?"

For a moment, at her greeting, it seemed to Kay Dorrance that the world was spinning round and round. Coming along the country road with the sun in his eyes, he had not seen her till she spoke. Moreover, it is doubtful whether his absorption in his own thoughts would have left him free to realize even the physical presence of the subject of his thoughts. For the first time in the past three days, Dorrance was forcing himself to analyze the situation, to face the future. The facts were simple, once they were baldly stated. He loved Jessica, perhaps even more than Asquith loved her. Jessica loved Asquith, had risked

her life to save his. Dorrance's own love for Jessica was in no wise shaken by this fact. Rather than have it lose one iota of its force, he would face the going through a long old age, loving her still and accepting the fact that his love could win no return. Under most conditions, he would straightway have put the question to the test, that day, that hour, would have trusted to the very dominance of his love for her to override her love for Willis Asquith; but not now, not while Asquith, his chosen friend before he had been his rival, was down and out. That was where Fate had tangled things, tangled them badly.

After all said and done, Kay Dorrance was a bit visionary. Born facing an ideal he could never reach, other visions had one by one been taken from him by the stress of his profession, by the circumstances of his life. Removed, first by his own choice, later by his lameness, always by his wealth, from the rough and tumble business life of men, he inclined to look less at the practical side of things than at the spiritual. Willis Asquith, in his case and under the same conditions, would have sought Jessica without delay, would have demanded prompt answer to his own belated question. To Dorrance, such a course was unthinkable, as holding in it all the germs of disloyalty to his friend. No. According to his sense of honour, inflated, unpractical, yet also rather admirable, he could only await the hour of Asquith's full recovery, even though the period of his waiting should mark, bit by bit, the relinquishing of all his hopes. So far in the framing of his code had he progressed, when Jessica's voice, eager as that of a child, fell on his ears.

His new-made code dropped, shattered, at his feet, while he took her hands in his. For a minute or two, they stood there speechless, hands and eyes holding fast together in mute question and reply. Then Dorrance let go her hands, gently, regretfully, but definitely; and his brown eyes veiled themselves.

"I'd no idea of finding you up here, Miss West," he said, and his voice sounded cold, almost formal.

She caught her breath, stared up at him during an instant of silent wonder, and then dropped her eyes to the empty basket at her feet. The colour rolled up across her face, then faded; but, when she spoke, it was with a little smile.

"Yes, dad and I came up to bring some things. I am waiting for him now. How — how is Mr. Asquith?"

With an effort, Dorrance brought his eyes away from his own study of the basket. Jessica felt them coming to her face, felt the blood rise to meet them. When they did come, Dorrance wholly misinterpreted the flush.

"Not wholly conscious yet; but they say that is no bad sign."

"Does he —" hurt, mystified, she yet steadied her voice; "does he suffer?"

"Not much. They're not letting him. I fancy that will come to the poor chap later." This time, Dorrance's voice held its wonted cadence.

"You think it will be long?" she asked, her eyes still on the basket.

"They say two months, at least." Again, as he watched her, he allowed his tone to harden. It was his only refuge, that or one other thing.

Her lip quivered. Dorrance watched her mercilessly, the while, watched and drew his own inferences. He believed them implicitly, although, as it chanced, they were totally wrong.

"And Mrs. Asquith?" she asked at length, obviously as an afterthought. "How is she?"

Dorrance breathed more easily. Mrs. Asquith, at least, was a subject more impersonal than her son.

"She is well, and very brave," he answered.

"You are staying there?" By now, her tone had steadied to match his own.

"Yes, for the present."

"You must be a great comfort to them. We miss you at the table, of course. Mama mourns for you, audibly and aloud. Here comes dad, now. He seems to have accumulated a carter from somewhere. Are you going to drive back with us?" She glanced up, with a merry nod of invitation which gave no hint of the strain she had placed upon her nerves. "You'd better. It's a long, hard walk, you know."

For an instant, an instant which held in it the fated misery of future days, he faced her, hesitating, longing to accept, yet drawing back from the inevitable end to which that acceptance was bound to lead. Then he shook his head.

"Thank you, no. I think I shall go on a little farther." Lifting his cap, he turned and went away.

"Who was that, Jessica?" her father queried, as he reached her side. "Dorrance? I wish I'd known in time. I'd have asked him to take you home. They need me up here, a little longer; another poor fellow has just been brought ashore. I hate to send you home

alone, child; you're tired with all this horror. Sha'n't I call him back?"

Jessica shook her head.

"No, please, Dad," she answered wearily. "I'd rather not."

The carter was weary, too, and phlegmatic. So long as he won his fare, he cared nothing whether his passengers pointed and stared about, or whether, as now, they leaned back in a corner and sobbed a little now and then. Mademoiselle was very sympathetic; that was all.

Meanwhile, alone in the woods at the back of the Chaudière Basin, Kay Dorrance was lying on the grass, his arm across his face. Visionary, full of inflated notions concerning honour and fair play, he was also very wretched. Now and then, in the intervals of other and more poignant thoughts, he wondered if his self-respect were worth the price it demanded from him.

Nevertheless, try as he would, he could not bring himself to answer in the negative.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**A** SMALLER man than Dorrance would have walked away from the whole ugly situation. He stayed and faced it out, influenced less by a frugal desire to feast upon the half-loaf of Jessica's friendship than by the knowledge that, in the days immediately to come, there would be things for him to do.

For the present, the things concerned the Asquith home; and, after a day or two of planless existence, he had allowed Mrs. Asquith to send for his belongings from the Maple Leaf, with the understanding that, for the next two or three weeks, he became her guest. Mr. Asquith senior was obliged to be away from home just then, imperatively summoned for a business conference in the extreme Northwest whither he had departed, as soon as the doctors had pronounced his son in no immediate danger. Willis, alternating between unconsciousness and light delirium, was in the hands of doctors and trained nurses. There was nothing his mother could do for him, beyond assuring herself, by visits once in half an hour or so, that he was neither neglected nor abused. She could not sit alone downstairs, to read a book or idly hold her hands. To be sure, the house was overrun with callers, tearful, depressing; but what she needed was some one there to stay, some one cheerful and alive. So Dorrance stayed.

He came in and out of the house after a man's inconsequent fashion, bringing with him the zest of the outer air and sunshine. He sat in Asquith's place at table, occupied Asquith's customary chair before the open fire, led Mrs. Asquith on to talk of random subjects or, with just the same apparent good will and interest, listened to her interminable monologues concerning her son's past life and present symptoms. Mrs. Asquith, her hands clasped in her satin lap, while she freed her mind, had no sort of notion that Dorrance, as she talked, had withdrawn his own mind into a place apart from all her conversation. While she spoke, while he assented and made brief comment in all the proper places, in reality he was deaf to all but an occasional one of her words. Instead of hearing the *a*, he had retired behind his smile and sat there, pondering many things. The things, however, centred all in Jessica, none in that old-time crowning interest of all, his work.

For the present, work had ceased to charm. Bit by bit, during those last happy days of playtime with his kind, Dorrance had felt rising within him the vague, exhilarating tide of human understanding which, he had learned, was the infallible forerunner of long, eager weeks of work. As the tide rose higher, pulsing through his veins and setting his brain athrob, he had been alternating plans of work with formless, rosy dreams of laying that work, completed, at Jessica's feet. Now suddenly the tide had ebbed again, leaving his plans cast up upon a barrer shore whence no paths led to anywhere. He let the plans lie, unregretted, almost unheeded. What was the use of working now, anyway? There was never any outward need; now there

was no incentive from within. In fact, there was no especial incentive to anything, save to sit quiet until Asquith was recovered, and then to play out the game, with him for adversary. He took it quietly, as a man of his race and training was rather bound to do. None the less, the glint of fun seemed to have left his eyes for ever, and his lips were learning the trick of shutting to a harder line. The Asquith butler, too, might have told tales, had he wished. It was his duty to make a final round of the house, late at night. Late as he might be, Dorrance's light was always burning, often and often Dorrance's floor echoed to a slow, uneven tread, pacing, pacing the rug before the open fire. But the butler, laying it all to Dorrance's anxiety for the young master of the house, loving the guest the more on that account, yet held his peace. No need to increase Mrs. Asquith's alarms by stories of her anxious, restless guest.

And, meanwhile, Mrs. West was growing anxious in her turn. Jessica was inert, listless. Her fun flashed out but rarely in those latter days; she accepted, rather than sought, her old-time companionship with her father, his teasing, his exuberant caresses. What outside invitations she could refuse, she let go entirely. When refusal was out of the question, she went late and came home early. Much of the rest of the time, she sat in her own room, idle, her gaze fixed on the Ring outside her window. Now and then she flushed a little and bent forward. Then, while the colour faded from her face, she settled back in her chair and resumed her idle staring.

The Colonel, after the fashion of adoring fathers, fumed and fretted, alternately prescribing tonics and

planning treats; but Mrs. West, far more quiet, was also more observant.

"Wait," she told her husband, one September morning. "The child has something on her mind; but," she smiled a little bitterly; "she's your own child. You can count upon it that she'll tell us what it is, when she gets ready, not before."

"She'll tell me," her father blustered.

His wife shook her head until the curving pothooks upon her brow danced with the motion.

"No, Peter," she said. "You are the very one she will not tell. Some things no woman ever tells to any man."

The Colonel spun about to face her.

"You mean the child's in love?" he demanded testily.

His wife gave a little sigh, not so much at the fact, as at the mode of his acceptance of it.

"Perhaps," she assented.

The Colonel spun about again, this time to face the window.

"Rubbish!" he said explosively. Then, after a few moments apparently spent in assimilating that rubbish, "What makes you think so?" he made fresh demand. "Do you mean the child is pining over Asquith?"

Mrs. West dropped her eyes; then she dropped herself into a chair. Then, for the first time in her life in talking to her husband, she admitted her lack of omniscience.

"Peter, I wish I knew," she told him heavily.

A moment later, she found herself wondering at her own heaviness. It was new to Mrs. West, this dull

depression which took its centre in an anxiety for her gay young daughter. Ten days before, she never would have thought it possible that Jessica could have caused her such anxiety, still less possible that anxiety of such a kind could lead her to her own depression. She sat irresolutely for a moment more. Then, rising, she went away and left the astonished Colonel to discuss the matter alone with himself.

"Come in," the girl's voice answered the tap upon her door.

Mrs. West pushed the door open and walked in. Beside the open window sat Jessica, her face, a little flushed, bent over an open paper. Mrs. West was never slow to notice small details, and from them to draw her own inferences. She drew them now unerringly from the fact that the week-old *Times* was open at the stock market page.

"Are you busy, Jessica?" she asked, with an assumption of briskness which, for her, amounted to exceeding tact.

"Not so very," the girl said listlessly, as she glanced up from the outspread paper in her hands. Then, as if fearful lest she had been too indifferent, she added, "Is there something you'd like me to do?"

Even more than the words, the tone made her mother fearful. Listless as it was, it was courteous, full of a new deference. All the wonted gay self-assurance was missing; all the charming, egotistic vitality was gone. And, that gone, what was left behind? Mrs. West stood for one moment and then another, looking down into her daughter's gray eyes, and confessed she did not know. Something was wrong, very wrong with Jessica. Could it be that she,

too, was learning some of the bitterness which had filled her mother's cup? Was her love, too, going to be given out in vain? It was impossible. The blindest of moles could not have failed to be aware that Willis Asquith had been only waiting a convenient time to begin his wooing. The only doubt had lain in Jessica: whether so downright a friendship ever heralded the coming of real love. However, that doubt seemed ending, now that there had arisen this sorrowful delay in the coming of the convenient time.

Mrs. West went a step nearer to her daughter, as she asked her kindly, —

“Aren't you feeling well, Jessica?”

The girl looked up, at the new emotion in her mother's tone; then, seeing the same emotion in the face above her, she swiftly dropped her eyes.

“Oh, yes. Why not?”

“I thought you seemed — dull.”

Again the lack of all endearments between them, a lack established in Jessica's little childhood. Again, however, the unwonted note of woman's sympathy.

“No; only lazy.” This time, the girl forced herself to smile. “What is it that you want?”

“I wondered,” as she spoke, Mrs. West feared lest the baldness of her words defeat their purpose; “whether you couldn't make time to call on Mrs. Asquith, this afternoon.”

The paper shook in the girl's hands.

“With you?” she asked. “If you really think —”

Mrs. West took hasty refuge in a fib. The recording angel, listening, forgot to drop a tear.

“I promised your father I'd go to the Island with him, this afternoon. But, Jessica, I do think you

ought to go out there before long. You've always called on her, every now and then. Besides, it's polite to go to see her, now she's in such trouble. More than that, I'd like to know, first hand, how her son is getting on."

"But dad was there, night before last." Jessica appeared to have found matters of great interest in her financial page, and spoke absently, although her face was very red.

Her suggestion safely made, Mrs. West was preparing to beat a retreat, by way of avoiding discussion.

"Yes; but a man never really finds out anything one ought to know," she responded, as she moved slowly towards the door. "Besides, my dear," again the half-unconscious note of kindness; "I really think you'd better go."

The outspread paper was quite steady now. Behind it, however, the girl's heart was bumping wildly, as she made submissive answer, —

"Very well. If you think I'd better go, I suppose I can." And, while she spoke, she wondered whether her mother, in her eagerness for tidings from Asquith, realized that Dorrance, too, was under that same roof.

As if in answer to that question, her mother halted on the threshold long enough to add, as obvious afterthought, —

"By the way, Jessica, if you should see Mr. Dorrance, I wish you'd tell him I think it's high time he came back here to his old friends. Tell him we miss him more than tongue can tell."

Miss him! Tell him that! Jessica sat motionless until she heard the closing of her mother's door, across

the landing, sat there motionless while the colour came and went in her cheeks and her chin quivered ominously, as if in promise of the tears to come. No tears came, however. Instead, the girl slowly laid aside her paper, rose to her feet, smiling a little and with her chin a little lifted, and crossed the room to rearrange her disordered hair. As she had said to Dorrance, long before, tears, by their very ugliness, spoiled the pathos of almost any episode. Whatever his changed attitude to her might mean, she would meet him dauntlessly and smiling.

That was the way, in fact, she did meet him. Late, that afternoon, halting just outside the Louis Gate to speak to a friend, she found him stopping at her side, and she turned to greet him with her usual blithe little smile. This time, she had herself quite prepared. She had seen him coming far down the gray old tunnel of the street, had known him, not alone by his step, but by the gleam of his ruddy hair where the sun struck full across it. Her sole question had been as regarded his stopping; and, when he met her in the old-time cordial fashion, she was surprised to find how quickly her heart left off its thumping, how natural, how unbroken it all seemed. The friend passed on under the gate and turned down the Esplanade; Dorrance hesitated only an instant, then asked in his old fashion, —

“Which way, Miss West?”

She caught into her answer the same gay, unceremonious note.

“Yours. That is, if you’re going home.”

Laughing, and without making a move to walk along, he queried, —

"The only question is, which way is home?"

Her pulses were bounding gayly. The listlessness had left her, and never had she been more brilliantly, buoyantly alive than now, as she stood there, laughing up into his eyes.

"I meant at the Asquiths'," she explained demurely.

"Mama thinks differently; she sent you word she's mourning for your return. I really think she's bored to death without you. But truly I must go on, Mr. Dorrance. I'm on my way to call on Mrs. Asquith."

"Really? She'll be glad to see you."

Jessica made a grimace of dubiousness, not unmingled with disgust.

"Think so?" she demanded gayly. "I wish I did; but I can't force myself to the delusion. How is Mr. Asquith?"

Dorrance's gravity came back upon him.

"Better, poor old chap. Still, the better isn't very best," he made answer.

"Dad says he's conscious and rational enough now." As she spoke, Jessica fitted her free step to his, then moved on by his side, a picture of girlish happiness as well as health and dainty charm. It was the first time since the bridge had fallen that life had looked the same to her. In her returned contentment, she even found it hard to hold her voice down to a proper degree of concern regarding Asquith. "Does he know all about things yet: the falling of the bridge, and the rest of it?"

"Not yet. They haven't dared to tell him all of it, and he doesn't incline to ask much. No wonder, though; I fancy it's taking all there is of him to bear the pain, these days."

"Is it so bad as that?" Jessica's voice instantly grew pitiful.

"Ribs always hurt, they say," Dorrance told her briefly. "As for the rest, it's none of it too comfortable, to say nothing of the weight of plaster. He's plucky as he can be, and they're keeping him very quiet. I only see him now and then, myself."

"How long do they think it will be?"

"A good two months. More, perhaps."

She looked up at him steadily.

"And in the end?"

"As well as ever, thank God!" he said.

Her eyes never left his face. Instead, remaining there, they softened wondrously.

"Amen," she echoed gently. "If only it had been like that for —"

But he interrupted, speaking from the inside of a mood which never once had really left him since an hour before Asquith's fall.

"It would have been harder on Asquith," he said very slowly; "harder and a lot more final. It's all right, Miss West. Else, what's the use of Fate?"

"None whatsoever," she made undaunted answer. "In fact, there isn't any Fate, except what we manufacture for ourselves. As for you," again she laughed up at him in her old blithe way; "you can't have forgotten my early diagnosis of your character. Don't you always get just what you want, Mr. Dorrance?"

Again came the gravity.

"Not always, Miss West."

"Not in the very end of the end?" she persisted gayly, Asquith forgotten now. "You surely don't give

up trying, as long as there is any chance of getting there at last?"

"That's another question: when is *at last*?" he said, as if half to himself.

Pausing in her walk, she faced him and spoke with a sudden earnestness that surprised them both.

"The last moment that you are really you, whether that moment comes in this life or the next," she answered fearlessly. "Till then, as long as your aims are good ones, it is worth your while to keep on trying for them." Then, after her wont, she threw aside her earnestness as suddenly as it had come upon her.

"How is Mrs. Asquith nowadays?" she demanded. "Do you think she will take it out of me very badly?"

"Not a bit," Dorrance reassured her, wondering in spite of himself, the while, how any British matron could find it in her heart to take it out of anything so winning.

With mock mournfulness, Jessica shook her head.

"Oh, but she always does," she reminded him.

"You were there, yourself, that first awful time. You ought to know."

"She is gentler now," he protested. "Think what she has suffered."

"That doesn't work out in the same way on everybody," Jessica asserted. "Sometimes, it does make one sanctified; but it generally has the opposite effect and makes her cranky. And really, you know, Mrs. Asquith doesn't need much addition to her crankiness."

"I wish you knew her as I do, Miss West," Dorrance suggested.

She liked his loyalty. Nevertheless, —

"Thank Providence I don't!" she told him flatly.

"It's all I can do to nibble at a quinine pill. It would choke me, if I swallowed it. Of course, it might be beneficial, if I didn't die of the choking before it got in its effects. Mrs. Asquith does choke me, too. Goodness knows what she'll do to me, to-day. The last time I saw her was just after my canoeing party, and she took the ground I had ordered up the hail, just for the sake of slaughtering her only child. To-day, she will probably assume I undermined the bridge for the same laudable end. Oh, dear, are we there? Aren't you coming in to protect me? Good-bye, then, for a while." And it was the old Jessica, gay, self-assured, a little bit perverse and wholly exhilarated by her walk with Dorrance, who went lightly up the steps and sought admission at the Asquith door.

Dorrance, meanwhile, as he went limping on along the Grande Allée, was scarcely conscious whether he trod on asphalt or on air. The past two weeks fell away from him as falls a nightmare from a waking man. She was the same Jessica. His questionings, manufactured like the Fate at which she jeered, had been thrust on him by others. According to his old besetting sin, he had doubted the power which yet he knew he owned. Now he doubted his own doubts. Hereafter, he would trust only to his own instincts, to himself and her. No girl in love with Asquith would have spoken of him as she did, with a pity as impersonal as it was tender, and then dismiss him wholly from her talk. Her very attitude to Asquith's mother seemed to Kay Dorrance proof positive that that mother dwelt in no place tangent to her girlish dreams. Passing the tollgate, he turned out across the Plains and on to the woodland at the back of Marchmont, walking slowly,

head bowed, hands locked behind him, while he once more gave himself over to his own dreams.

The dreams lasted till he came inside the Asquith house, late for tea and with barely time to dress for dinner. He found his hostess still seated by the tray, gloom on her brow, her manner a strange mingling of the Honourable and of childish irritation. For a wonder, her irritation did not vanish at the sight of Dorrance.

"You'll have some tea?" she asked him a little curtly.

"Thank you, no. Please don't ring. I'm sorry to be so beastly late." His smile would have disarmed a dragon, as he came limping forward, his cap still in his hand, to take possession of his favourite chair before the fire.

It did not disarm Mrs. Asquith, however. She faced him in obvious vexation, straightening, the while, her glasses on her nose.

"That young person has just been here," she said explosively.

Dorrance flushed hotly at her tone. Feeling to Jessica as he did, he could not sit there, quiet, accepting all that Mrs. Asquith's tone implied.

"You mean Miss West?" he queried, and, level as was his voice, it yet held an accent which Mrs. Asquith had never encountered until then.

Curiously enough, the encounter merely increased her latent irritation.

"Yes. She has been here to call."

"I met her on the way out here," Dorrance assented carelessly, as he dropped down in the chair. After all, what was the use of quarrelling with his hostess?

His hostess sniffed.

"She didn't tell me she had seen you," she said truculently, as she rattled the spoons about.

Dorrance laughed.

"That's hard on my egotism, Mrs. Asquith," he observed.

"Not at all. A scatterbrain like that never alludes to anything." Mrs. Asquith abandoned her spoons and once more assaulted her glasses which, Dorrance noted with sudden interest, adjusted themselves by means of a sort of spiral spring across her nose. Had they always been like that, he wondered, with a man's belated attention to detail, or was this a new pair? His wandering attention recalled itself with a jerk. "The girl is a perfect minx," Mrs. Asquith was concluding. "Even you must admit it, Mr. Dorrance."

"Really, Mrs. Asquith, I don't believe I know what the word means," he pleaded honestly, for not even her vehement accent had been able to remove the epithet from a thing of types to a mere personal fact.

Mrs. Asquith rubbed her nose in a manifest irritation which promptly communicated itself to Tottykins, asleep in her folds of skirt. Tottykins awoke and sought an imaginary flea, thereby causing his borrowed irritation to react upon that of his mistress and so precipitate his own removal, kicking wildly in the arms of a maid. When quiet was restored, Mrs. Asquith spoke again.

"Some girls," she said severely; "would have known enough not to come dashing into a house filled with trained nurses, as she did, to-day."

Again Dorrance felt the call of his hair summoning

him to conflict. Again he hushed it as well as he was able.

"What was the row?" he queried as casually as if Jessica were to him the impersonal fact which Mrs. Asquith assumed her to be.

"No row. She was merely very inconsiderate, to say the least." When Mrs. Asquith tempered the emphasis of her speech, she was always the most earnest. "With poor Willis ill, upstairs, and me down here, anxious as I can be, she came out here, dressed like an actress, and as gay as you please. You'd have said she was going to a ball, not a house of suffering."

"Possibly she thought you might need cheering up," Dorrance suggested lamely, although it was his private opinion, from certain signs manifested in Mrs. Asquith's demeanour that, by the time the call was ended, Jessica was the one in need of cheer.

Mrs. Asquith's voice dropped to a majestic contralto.

"She would scarcely have taken that upon herself," she said. Then she relented a little. "I must say, though, that she was very kind in asking about Willis; would have been very kind, that is," she corrected herself, as if her relenting had carried her too far; "that is, if her kindness had not been the veil for something else."

Dorrance rose, feeling the masculine need to be upon his legs.

"How do you mean?" he queried.

Mrs. Asquith gazed up at him impressively.

"Don't you know?" she asked, her level accent spreading over all three words.

He shook his head.

She glanced over her shoulder, as the portière stirred

slightly. Reassured by the sight of only the inquiring eyes and brow of Tottykins poked through the bottom edge of fringe, she faced back again to Dorrance.

"Mr. Dorrance," she clasped her hands in her lap; "ever since that young person came to Quebec, she has had just one bee in her pretty bonnet. That is why I distrust her so."

Purposely he tried to lead her along a side track.

"Do you distrust Miss West?"

With a jerk, she switched herself back to the main line.

"I distrust her, because I see her plan, hers and her mother's. The mother is a simple-minded old person who would like to be a cat. The father I exonerate entirely. He is a good man, and perfectly straightforward. The girl takes her tricks from her mother." With a gesture, she silenced his attempted refutation of the charge. "From the very first night they dined here, both the girl and her mother made up their minds to have Willis, if they could."

"But —" Dorrance flushed, gulped back the words trembling on his tongue.

Mrs. Asquith disregarded the gulp, and went on.

"Of course, it would be impossible, impossible. In spite of her gowns and her pretty face, she is impossible, too. There was a little while when I had thought the worst was wearing off a little; but, to-day, she was more extraordinary than ever, so very American. You know what I mean, Mr. Dorrance." Again she forestalled his interruption. "You are so cosmopolitan that you will understand my speaking so plainly. Miss West is very typical: money, looks, assurance, all the rest of it. And poor dear Willis is so simple, so unsus-

picious, it makes me tremble. I almost feel a sense of thankfulness that, for a little while, he is safely out of her way. The worst of it is," Mrs. Asquith rose, as she spoke, upsetting Tottykins, again comfortably snoozing on her skirt; "I sometimes am afraid the girl is getting to care for him. Her eyes were quite wide and wet, to-day, when I had finished telling her about his being brought into the house. I oughtn't to have done it; but my mind is full of nothing else, and I forgot to whom I was speaking. She seemed quite overcome, when I had finished."

Dorrance's eyes had wandered from his hostess back to the smouldering fire.

"Poor child!" he said softly.

"Not at all!" Mrs. Asquith made impressive answer.

"It only makes her just so much more dangerous."

Then she went away and left him, standing alone before the fire, once more busy with his doubts and wondering grimly, the while, whether any other man ever had doubts so pounded into him before.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

**T**HE first week in October found the doubts still unsettled. The same exaggerated sense of chivalry which had led Dorrance, weeks on weeks before, to bestow a deferential courtesy upon the thin charms of Mrs. West now kept him from taking profit from the removal of Willis Asquith out of the game. It was the old, old story of the under dog with whom Dorrance's sympathies were bound to lie. Had Asquith not been his own chosen friend, his host for days at a time, all that past summer; had Asquith been knocked out at an instant less critical, then Dorrance would have felt no especial qualms in working out his own salvation as best he might. It was the combination that made the trouble, the outside elements coupled with his own temperamental code of honour.

Moreover, had he put the matter to the test, under any other conditions than the present, he would have accepted an adverse answer as a mere bit of delay, and set himself to win out in time by siege and by assault. Had he only been given a free hand, he could have come out dominant. Of that he was convinced. Now that his hands were tied, albeit by himself, he had leisure to review and re-review the evidence, to weigh over and over again his own instinct as against the word of two such mature judges as Mrs. West and

Mrs. Asquith. If hopes and fears, though diametrically opposed, led feminine judgment to the same end, what chance, as against that end, had his own blunt, masculine point of view? His red head buried in his hands, he pondered the question in its length and breadth, yet never reached its answer. And so September vanished, and October came to find Kay Dorrance still dumbly pondering the questions involved, to find Jessica day by day losing her gay carelessness which was now replaced by listless silences alternating with hours of feverish mirth.

She was quite well, she told her father. She was very happy, and she had been to nine teas and four dinners, in the last week. She loved the city dearly, dreaded the time when they might be called away, a dread which was made evident by the sudden pallor with which she received his suggestion that they go farther south at once. No; she loved the place and people. She wished to stay on there indefinitely. But, once it was decided that they were to stay, the old listless look settled back into her eyes. The old listless intervals came back again and lasted longer. It was as if, her father told himself uneasily, she had tired herself out with listening for a word that never came.

Dorrance was back in his old place at table now. Under the eyes of the others, his intercourse with Jessica had all its old-time cordiality. After the first day or two, however, Jessica saw to it that they were never left alone together. She found the strain of that too great for her endurance. Rather than have had Dorrance see her relax one whit of her gay carelessness of manner, she would have died. For two days, she shut her teeth and played her part superbly. On the third

day, she fled from the need. Better to keep out of Dorrance's way than give him any glimpse of her real mind just then. And Dorrance, seeing himself avoided, drew his own conclusions, drew them all wrong and out of all perspective, congratulated himself grimly upon the increase of his acumen, and sought about for excuses to absent himself from town as often as he could. By common consent, his final departure had been in any case delayed until the end of Asquith's convalescence.

That convalescence, albeit slow, by now had yet become an established fact. Normal in mind and temperature, his body still a thing of compound fractures and consequent plaster bandages, Asquith had reached the point where his nurses palled upon him and he demanded the society of his kind. Accordingly, his kind were bidden, one by one, to call upon him, after being first warned to edit their conversation to a state of vague impersonality which should preclude any return of feverish symptoms. Among the kind, by Asquith's expressed request, the Colonel had been included.

Three days after his first call, Asquith demanded him again. The demand had the full approbation of the nurse, for the Colonel, big and jovial as he was, had yet manifested a surprising fineness in choosing the right thing to say, an equally surprising deftness in managing his great bulk inside the sickroom. The nurse herself telephoned in the message; the nurse herself admitted him when he came, ruthlessly curtailing, for that purpose, the daily visit of Kay Dorrance.

Asquith hailed the Colonel eagerly, nodded in the direction of the easy chair beside the bed, and forthwith

launched into talk. By degrees and with what Asquith considered the extreme of finesse, the talk, by way of Dorrance and the Maple Leaf, came around to Jessica. That accomplished, Asquith gave a great sigh of relief and, with a brightening face, approached the point at which he had been aiming.

"The mater says she came out here, one day when I was about at the worst," he observed. "It was most uncommonly kind of her, too."

The Colonel nodded.

"Jessica is rather given to that sort of thing," he answered opaquely.

Asquith tried again.

"She hasn't been out since?" he ventured.

"I haven't heard her say," the Colonel made literal reply, suppressing the fact of what he had heard her say, upon her return from that earlier visit.

"No," Asquith assented. "I asked the mater, and she said she hadn't been here at all since. I suppose she's very busy, though?" Long, lean Englishman that he was, his accent was as wishful as that of a little, little boy.

"Yes, she's quite busy," the Colonel made guarded answer, as became one who knew to the full the opinion of his daughter regarding the welcome she had received in the drawing-room below. "At least, she goes out a good deal, and I suppose that's what a woman means by being busy."

"Dorrance told me she was out a good share of the time," Asquith remarked, with thoughtful emphasis, as if an extra witness added to the value of the testimony in this, as in more important cases.

The Colonel caught at the possible change of subject.

"What a good fellow Dorrance is!" he said, as he had so often said before. "Under all his quiet, he is very much a man."

"Very. One learns to count on him a good deal, too." Then, with British pertinacity, Asquith returned to his former theme. "Miss West is very well, I hope," he told her father.

"Fairly." The Colonel made great efforts to keep his voice properly inexpressive. Nightly for the past four weeks, his wife's tongue had scourged the man before him, as the cause of Jessica's listless apathy.

In so far as he was able, Asquith stirred uneasily. His ability, however, was in no wise proportioned to the restlessness which assailed him at their lack of progress towards his own objective point. He essayed another path, one still more direct.

"I told the mater that, next time Miss West came out here, she'd better bring her up to see me," he remarked, tucking his chin down over a vagrant corner of the sheet which persisted in shutting off the Colonel's eyes from view.

He was just in time to see the clearing of the Colonel's eyes. Instructed by his wife to proceed with circumspection, the unhappy Colonel had been floundering about in a perfect sea of uncertainty as to the way in which circumspection applied itself to the subject of their talk. Now he found himself, his head above water, his feet on the firm shore of matter-of-fact speech. In his pleasure, he laughed out jovially.

"Oh, if it's a matter of that sort, Asquith," he replied; "I think the child would come out here, almost any day."

When eyes become the chief means of physical

expression, they gain an untold amount of speaking quality. Now, Asquith's eyes helped out his tongue, as he asked eagerly, —

"You really think she'd come? It wouldn't bore her?"

"Of course she'd come, feel honoured at the invitation, as we all do. When do you want to see her?"

"Whenever she'll come," Asquith answered simply.

"The nurse is always here, you know. I'll tell her to be on the watch."

To the three Wests, it seemed not at all unconventional that Jessica should sally forth alone, the next afternoon, for her call on Asquith. As he had said, the nurse was always there; and Mrs. Asquith, even now, went out but rarely. It chanced, however, that one of those rare times was on that afternoon.

The butler, admitting Jessica, looked doubtful.

"Mr. Asquith?" The accent was on the title. "Be seated in the drawing-room, please. I will speak to the nurse." And he withdrew himself.

A moment or two later, he came back, the day nurse at his heels. To the nurse, a stranger in Quebec, the name had signified nothing; she had drawn her own inferences as to the probable age and appearance of any woman who had the temerity, his mother out, to ask for Willis Asquith. On the threshold of the drawing-room, she halted in astonishment at the pretty young girl who sat there, talking baby-talk to Tottykins curled up in her broadcloth lap. Flushed with her walk and with the excitement of her errand, Jessica had regained a semblance of her old vitality; and her costume, pale grayish green from the fluffy feather boa about her throat to the tips of her suede shoes,

set off to its extremest limit her vivid colouring and her slim girlish figure. She glanced up at the sound of steps; then, at sight of the white gown in the doorway, she stopped her chatter and, gently putting down the little dog, crossed the room with her hand outstretched in greeting.

"You are the nurse who has brought him back to life?" she said. "How glad and how proud of it you must be! But tell me," her fingers shook a little in the nurse's hand; "is he — is it — will I find him very much changed?" Her voice sank to a frightened whisper.

No sign of fright was in her manner, though, as she entered the room beside the nurse and, with a little exclamation of glad welcome, went forward to the bed. Her heart was bumping a bit unsteadily, however, her gray eyes were very pitiful, as they swept over the muffled outline under the gay, soft rug that covered up the bed, and rested on the kind, strong face she had learned to know so well. And yet, the room had no appearance of a sickroom, with its bright rugs and pillows on the bed, its snapping fire and its great jugs of flowers. Asquith, too, beyond the fact of his being prone and motionless, was singularly little changed. Looking down at him now, as he smiled up at her in greeting, Jessica found it impossible to bring back into her mind the picture which had haunted her, ever since the accident, the picture of him, long, and stark, and still, floating down the current to lodge against their outstretched oars. In that first moment of their meeting, the picture, heretofore inerasable, vanished, to return no more.

A moment later, she had dropped down in the chair

beside the bed, while the nurse, a bit of sewing in her hands, played discreet and deaf propriety from across the room.

"I'm immensely tickled, as mama says, to be asked out here," Jessica launched out directly, dreading a pause. "It's weeks and weeks since I've seen you, and so many things have been happening."

Asquith lay smiling up at her contentedly. It was the first time such irresponsible chatter had penetrated his invalid quarters. He was prepared to enjoy it to the utmost.

"What sort of things?" he queried.

Her fluffy head far to one side, she proceeded to lift her fingers, one by one, in count.

"Well, there was the tennis club luncheon, and the Sheffield dinner, and the Bidwell tea — only they postponed it, so it didn't really happen. I was so glad they did postpone, too; I wanted you to be there to see it happen. And — oh, yes, the Asquith accident."

"What was that?" he asked, with sudden interest.

"Why, you, of course." She laughed at his prompt fall into the trap she had set for him. "That's what we call it, you know, when we mourn over your not appearing at all sorts of things. You are always so frightfully ubiquitous, you know."

"Not now."

"No; but you will be, before you know it. Dad held up one of your doctors in Anne Street, a day or so ago, the fat one with the spectacles, and he gives you a month more before the Bidwells can have their tea."

"The Bidwells? Am I the obstacle?"

"Sure. Didn't you know it? The invitations were

out, the very afternoon you — you fell from grace. Next day, they telephoned to everybody that it must be postponed on account of — ” she twisted her mouth as if she were relishing the words to the full; “ ‘ poor dear Cousin Willis.’ Of course, it was very polite of them, as far as you were concerned. Besides, I expect they don’t have a tea too often, and thought they’d get in all the frills on this one.”

“ They needn’t have minded,” Asquith said bluntly. “ They’re only third cousins, and I wasn’t dead.”

“ N—no; but you might have been,” Jessica made consoling answer, the while she kept a wary eye upon the invalid to see how he would take her chaff.

To her surprise, he took it well.

“ Haven’t you learned yet that I never do the thing expected of me, Miss West? ” he demanded so hilariously that the nurse looked up in wonder at his voice.

“ That’s what makes us such chums, I suppose,” she answered him demurely.

“ Perhaps.” The laugh left his eyes, and, for a moment, he lay intently staring up into her face, framed in its nodding wreath of gray-green plumage. “ Moreover,” he added gravely then; “ a fellow never dies, when he has so much to live for.”

At his tone, she caught her breath a little. Then she rallied swiftly.

“ That might depend somewhat upon the circumstances,” she suggested. “ Not every man, even with the best of intentions, can drop into the water from mid-air, and come out safe and sound.”

“ Safe,” he amended, with a whimsical glance down across the bed; “ but not exactly sound.”

For a moment, the colour rushed into her cheeks. Then she laughed.

"And yet you wouldn't care to have us say you were cracked," she retorted. Then, dropping her teasing mood, she spoke with earnest, girlish gravity. "Mr. Asquith, I don't need to tell you how we all have felt about your dreadful fall and hurt, all the suffering, and the bore of being kept in bed. Day in and day out, we all, all the people you know all over the city, have talked about you, and been sorry for you, and wished we could do something for you. Because I laugh now, I'm not unsympathetic, truly." Her eyes held his in their direct, unveiled gaze. "It's only that I'm so glad to see you again that I don't half know what I'm saying, so glad to know that all the worst is over and, in another month, you'll be back, doing all the same old things with us again. You understand it; don't you?" Her voice was slightly pleading, as she ended her breathless explanation.

He nodded once, and again.

"Yes, I understand," he said; but the nurse, across the room, heard no sound of his low words.

Relieved, Jessica settled back again in her chair.

"That's the joy of you, you always do understand," she told him. "I've never had to explain things much to you, any more than," she smiled down at him in manifest self-pleasure; "than you had to explain to me the way you felt about your poor old bridge. Isn't that a tragedy?"

From across the room, the nurse looked up in alarm. Talk of the fallen bridge had not as yet been encouraged in that room.

Asquith's face, his only mobile member, changed at her words.

"I've been waiting for your consolation," he said slowly, sadly.

Impetuously the girl bent forward and rested one slim hand against the edge of his pillow. She spoke with simple gravity.

"You have it, Mr. Asquith; you've had it, all the time. I knew just what it would mean to you; it was like the death of somebody you loved very, very much. It has left a great hole in your life that nobody, nothing else can ever fill. Do you know," her voice dropped to a murmur, and her gray eyes were absent, sweet; "I have sometimes wondered whether — please don't be shocked at what I'm going to say — whether, as long as the bridge was doomed to fall, if you had known and could have made your plans, you wouldn't almost rather have fallen with it, not left it to go down alone." Her voice trailed off to silence on the final words. "It seemed more loyal, somehow."

The silence lingered, broken for Jessica, however, by the assent in Asquith's eyes. In his eyes, too, was something else than the grateful assent for the girlish comprehension which had touched upon one point no other person had ever seen. Back of that was a look of utter, impotent wistfulness. It was a little hard, even for a man brave and self-contained as Willis Asquith, to lie there less than ten inches distant from those slender fingers and be no more able to touch them than if they had been a world-length away. He stirred his head impatiently at the thought; and, with the stir, the pillow slipped aside. Jessica replaced

it promptly, with a deftness which won the approving notice of the nurse. In fact, the nurse was approving most things about the girlish visitor who added to her own cordial charm and beauty a goodly share of her father's tact in choosing the right word to say. Few girls, in such a case, would have been able to walk along the narrow boundary between pure sympathy and mawkish sentiment. And, with the possible exception of Kay Dorrance, Jessica had been the only person who had dared to chaff the invalid upon his plight. After four weeks of heavy sympathy, a laugh and a bit of chatter cleared the air amazingly. Asquith looked more alive than he had done in weeks.

It was he who broke the silence, speaking thoughtfully.

"After all, don't you know, what I can't understand is how I got ashore," he remarked at length.

Jessica, bending down until her wide hat shaded half her face, flushed hotly at his words. Had no one told him? Strange! In her surprise at his ignorance, she took no heed of the fact that, up to that hour, Asquith had been too much absorbed, first in the bridge, later in planning how to achieve this call from herself, to think very much about his own share in the tragedy. Yes, it was strange no one had told him all the story. However, she would not be the one to give him the facts of the case. Perhaps it would be best of all that he should never know them. Instead, she laughed audaciously.

"Mere trifles always float," she told him. "Accept that fact with thankfulness, and don't worry about the way it was achieved."

This time, he failed to rally to her nonsense.

"I'm not worrying," he answered. "Not about that, at least."

"Not about anything, I hope." She shook her head rebukingly. "Worries and broken bones don't go well together. Each needs your whole attention; you're bound not to do either one of them justice, if you try to drive them tandem." Then, seeing that his face still refused to light, she bent forward in her chair once more, her chin resting on her clasped fingers. "Well," she challenged him; "out with it! What's the worry? The poor dear old bridge?"

He blushed a little, and his honest eyes dropped from her smiling face.

"That's one," he admitted.

"And there are two? We infer, though, that's the main one. Well, now what is the other?"

On the mantel, the clock ticked madly, timing its beats, it seemed to Asquith's straining nerves, to the pulsing of the blood along his temples. From far across the room, the prick of the nurse's needle entering the cloth smote on his ears like a blow. Then, when his nerves could bear the strain no longer, he lifted his eyes once more to the eager, lovely face above him, and answered gently, —

"You."

There was no withdrawing of the steady gray eyes looking into his, no change in the eager, friendly little smile. Instead, —

"Me? But why? I don't believe I understand you, this time, Mr. Asquith."

Fire smouldered in his eyes, lighting by degrees his whole grave face.

"Not understand? But surely, Jessica, you must know how I love you."

Her eyes widened, grew afraid, then grew very, very pitiful; but she never stirred from her old position.

"I am sorry," she answered, far too low to be overheard by the nurse across the room. "I never knew it at all, Mr. Asquith."

He lay there for a moment, silent, his whole manhood, clean, strong, virile, in his eyes. Then he spoke.

"I supposed you knew," he told her slowly then. "I—I really can't remember the time now when I didn't love you. And I thought—every man is bound to be egotistic in a case like this—I thought you knew it, all the time."

Unclasping her hands, she let them slip to her knee, shaking her head, the while.

"I'm sorry," she said again and, this time, her voice was a bit unsteady. "I never knew it, never guessed it in the least. I thought we were just a splendid pair of friends."

"So were," he broke in eagerly; "that was the finest part of it all. We were grand friends; I never had a man friend, even, that seemed to understand me as you did."

She ignored the little egotism.

"I'm glad," she answered cordially; "I like to have you say it. Nowadays, so few people do understand, and you and I never have to waste time explaining things to each other."

"Never," he assented. "We were the best chums one can think about. But, Jessica," his voice caught

a little, as he spoke the name; "is that any reason we can't be something a great deal more?"

She whitened to her lips; but the lips were steady, albeit her voice was gentle, sorrowful.

"I am afraid it is," she told him. "That, or something else."

Under the pallor of his long illness, he grew even a little whiter. His brown eyes met hers bravely in their appealing.

"You mean — you can't love me?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

Her girlish gayety all vanished, Jessica shut her lips to steady them, while her hand, now resting on the bed, quivered in all its length, then shut, thumb in. Bravely she faced him still, however, for her girlish code of honour would have dubbed it cowardice to flinch from before his waiting eyes. She faced him, though it shook her courage to its foundations. Under other chances, it might have been so easy to have loved that big, silent, honourable man who lay there, motionless, and waited for her answer. But — there was Dorrance; there always had been Dorrance.

"I mean that," she said unsteadily.

For an instant, his brows contracted, as with physical pain. For another instant, he lay staring out across the room, trying to adjust himself to this new, unexpected fact. To the girl, watching, there was something infinitely pathetic in the plight of this strong man, doomed to lie there, prostrate under her gaze, and accept the blow with what grace he could. That the blow was a heavy one, she, still watching, could feel no doubt. At length, he turned to her again, infinite pleading in his eyes, in his every accent.

"Not in time?" he begged her briefly.

This time, she could only shake her head, for her voice had failed her.

There came a long, long pause. Asquith, white and still, lay with his eyes fixed upon the opposite wall. Beside him, her eyes upon his face, Jessica sat bending forward, supported by one hand resting on the bed. Across the room, the nurse was nodding drowsily above her work; on the mantel, the clock ticked with nervous, urgent haste, as if to remind them both how fast and how far the silence lengthened.

At last, Asquith stirred a little and brought back his absent gaze to Jessica's face, still bending there above him. For a time, their eyes clung together in mute apology, mute forgiveness. Then, with a masterful effort, Asquith stirred again, moved a very little, and, with a second effort, supreme and fraught with pain and danger, he laid his cheek against her slender fingers in the one caress his broken body could achieve.

## CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

**T**HE butler broke the stillness.

"A—uh!" he observed from the threshold. Slowly, as if recalled from immeasurable distances, Asquith turned his head.

"What is it, Elkins?" he demanded, and Jessica, as she furtively dabbed her hand across her eyes, gave a quick breath of relief at the return of the old commanding ring to his tone.

"Mrs. Asquith has returned, Miss West."

Jessica smiled at the butler from over her shoulder.

"Oh, has she?" she said casually. Then she turned back to Asquith. "Yes, it's a pretty stone," she said unblushingly. "But, really, I'm distressed over your growing so near-sighted. You ought to have some glasses, as soon as you are able to be tested." She gave a second glance over her shoulder. Then, bending forward once more, she dropped her voice a little.

"Mr. Asquith," she said, and her manner was humble, like the manner of a little child; "I don't want you to think I've been a horrid little flirt. I didn't know, I never thought you cared about me in this way. If I had, of course — But, if I had thought about it in that way at all, I should have said you were a great deal too busy and too — big to care about me as you say you do. I just supposed we were friends, splendid friends that cared a lot about each other and about

each other's interests. That's truly all. I did care about you, too. No, wait," for his face had lighted at her words; "not in the way you mean, the way you want. I don't think that would ever, ever come; we're too many centuries and miles apart for that. But, truly," her face and voice were very sweet with her emotion now; "as long as I live, I shall always care for you, always want you for my best friend, always," she hesitated; then she faced him bravely; "always and always be proud and glad to know that once, for a little while, you thought you loved me. I must go now; you're tired." She rose, but lingered, looking wistfully down upon him. "Some day, though, when we've both of us had time to think things over and get used to them, won't you send word you want another visit from your friend?" As she spoke, she had been hastily stripping off her glove. Now, careless of what the nurse might think or say, she rested her slim, cool fingers for an instant on his brow, his cheek, while her gray eyes smiled straight down into his. An instant later, she was gone.

Out on the landing of the stairway, she halted long enough to swallow hard, to wipe her eyes a little. Then, her smile still very tender, her cheeks flushed, but her chin held high, she sauntered down the last of the stairway, drawing on her glove as she went. Tottykins, his beard charged heavily with cake crumbs, met her in the hall.

"How de do? May I come in and get a cup of tea?" Jessica demanded, as she pushed aside the portières across the open doorway.

"Of course, Miss West. Come in." Mrs. Asquith's accent was about as mellow as the cup poised in her

hand. Down on the rug at her feet, a second cup betrayed the fact that Mrs. Asquith had not been taking tea alone.

Jessica nodded her gratitude, as she received her cup and her cake.

"Thank you," she said prosaically. "Your cakes are always so good, and I am very hungry. You've been out?"

"I thought Elkins told you," Mrs. Asquith said, the majesty of her words somewhat mitigated by the obvious relish with which, once the words were spoken, she munched another bite of cake.

Jessica shut her teeth daintily into her own cake, then nodded assent.

"So he did," she added, after a speechless moment.

"And that I had come in again. At least," Mrs. Asquith fixed her eye on the tip of Jessica's suede shoe; "I sent him up for that purpose."

Jessica construed the words into a question.

"Yes, he told me," she answered cheerily. "Why didn't you come along up?"

"Because I feared I might be intruding." Mrs. Asquith, as she spoke, bent down to refill the empty cup of Tottykins.

"Look out! You'll run it over," Jessica warned her anxiously. "There! I thought so! Hurry up, dog, and eat it up quick, before it sinks in." Then she returned to the subject in hand. "The idea of your intruding, Mrs. Asquith!" she said, with a fervour which was by no means honest, in view of the events of the last ten minutes she had spent in the room above.

"I was told you had asked for Willis," Mrs. Asquith informed her briefly.

"Well, so I did. He's the novelty, you know, the convalescent invalid. One always has to coddle them up a little." As she spoke, Jessica helped herself to a second cake.

"Exactly," Mrs. Asquith answered dryly; "and I was afraid I might intrude upon the coddling." This time, she lifted her eyes and fixed them accusingly upon Jessica's reddened lids.

Jessica felt the accusation and blushed hotly, so hotly that Mrs. Asquith's brow cleared and she settled back into her chair, secure in her conviction that she had scored her point. Jessica, reading aright the little gesture of content, consumed her tea and cake in silence, while she registered a vow she would not be so caught a second time.

When Mrs. Asquith spoke again, her voice was still accusing.

"It is a long time since you have been out to see me," she observed.

"I wanted to let my welcome ripen," Jessica answered her demurely.

Mrs. Asquith raised her head.

"I hope no one, no one at all, ever questions my welcome."

Jessica's lashes drooped.

"I wasn't sure, you see," she said gently. "At a time like this, one never really knows. Besides," she gave a little sigh; "I've not been very well."

"Mr. Dorrance," there was the faintest possible accent on the name, the sort of accent one gives to Hegel, or Mrs. Grundy, or the Book of Job; "Mr. Dorrance has surely spoken of your being very gay."

Jessica coloured becomingly, less, however, at the words of her hostess than at the name of Dorance.

"Yes," she assented; "I have been out a good deal, just lately. People are very kind, and I keep up, too, for mama's sake, for fear she might begin to worry. She is a great worrier, is mama."

Mrs. Asquith ignored the pride with which Jessica delivered herself of the British idiom.

"You have probably been going out too much," she asserted remorselessly. "A little quiet is what you need, all you Americans. Have you had a doctor?"

"Eh?" This time, Jessica delivered herself of her idiom in a point-blank fashion which Mrs. Asquith could not well ignore. Neither, however, could she well answer it in kind.

"I asked if you had had a doctor," she repeated. "What seems to be the matter?"

Jessica shrugged her shoulders, as she set down her cup.

"Temper, chiefly," she made flippant answer, yet with a fervour which supported the truth of her own assertion.

"It's your nerves," Mrs. Asquith asserted for a second time. "Too late hours and too much strong tea. You'd better go down into the country for a month or two, to rest."

Jessica shook her head, with a return of her former gentleness.

"I fear it wouldn't do me any good, dear Mrs. Asquith," she said slowly. "The trouble has a deeper root than that."

Mrs. Asquith stiffened in her chair. She felt at last

the truth was coming, the truth she had so long suspected.

"Where is that?" she asked. "The root, I mean?"

Jessica's lips quivered; her lashes drooped still lower over her gray eyes; her voice sank to a mere murmur of confession.

"In —"

"Yes, Miss West?"

"In — my infundibulary hypothesis," she answered softly; and Mrs. Asquith, lacking an Imperial Dictionary, gave up the question and went off upon another tack.

"How did you find poor Willis?" she asked, after a little pause.

Instantly the colour rushed to the girl's cheeks.

"Magnificent," she answered swiftly and in quite another tone; "but terribly pathetic."

Again Mrs. Asquith felt the need for a dictionary, this time, however, of moods, not of words. Jessica's downright answer was not easily catalogued; it might be the cloak for some deep-seated guile.

"How do you find him pathetic?" she asked again.

Jessica's eyes met hers in grave rebuke. Mrs. Asquith suspected from their glitter, too, that tears were not far off.

"How can you find him anything else, Mrs. Asquith? He has always been so big and so tremendously alive, and now — it broke my heart to see him lying there, not able to move a muscle, and so brave and patient. In his case, I'd — I'd — make Rome howl!" she concluded, in one vehement outburst.

"Very likely," Mrs. Asquith gave assent.

Jessica caught herself out of her earnest mood, and

flashed upon her hostess a sidelong glance. Then she added crisply, —

“However, I am not his mother.”

“Unfortunately not,” Mrs. Asquith assented once again.

There came another pause, for Jessica had made up her wilful mind, not only to sit the situation out, but to force Mrs. Asquith now to do the talking. Mrs. Asquith, in the meantime, was struggling with her curiosity which would not in the end be downed.

“Did Willis talk much?” she inquired at length.

“Ever so much.”

“It tires him, if he talks too long.”

“The nurse was there. She could have stopped him.”

“She might not have felt at liberty.”

Jessica laughed, as she bent to pick up Tottykins.

“Oh, I don’t think she was so much afraid of me as all that,” she said.

“I was referring to Willis.”

“Oh.” And Jessica, having thus closed the subject, fed a cake to Tottykins.

“What was Willis talking about, to-day?” his mother asked at length.

Jessica stared vaguely about the room, as if trying to recall the conversation.

“He talked about his father’s trip, and about dad, and about the way Tottykins spilled the milk all over the Bishop’s gaiters.”

Mrs. Asquith settled her glasses firmly. Then, unsettling them, she hitched them higher up.

“Did he say anything about the bridge?” she asked.

"Not so very much," Jessica answered, with perfect truth.

"Nor about Mr. Dorrance?"

"Nothing in particular."

All at once, Mrs. Asquith abandoned her random queries and became direct, exasperated by the careless, unruffled nonchalance of the girl before her. Jessica's manner was respect itself. None the less, Mrs. Asquith, reading beneath the manner, was seized with a sudden furious desire to see the girl wince, even writhe. She bent a little forward in her chair and faced Jessica directly.

"Miss West," she said; "in a way, I am going to take you into my confidence. After all, now and then, even we mothers need to talk to another woman. I know, of course, that Willis would be angry, seriously angry at me. Still, the poor dear boy is so very reticent, and I feel anxious to know how his mind is running, in these long, lonely days. Sometimes a random word to a stranger tells so much. Did he happen, in talking with you, to mention Miss Bertie Wynnehope?"

Instantly, and to the relief of Mrs. Asquith, Jessica's gray eyes veiled themselves. Mrs. Asquith could not be expected to be aware that Jessica, suspecting ambush, was seeking time to protect herself from possible attack.

"Miss Bertie Wynnehope," she echoed, after the pause had lasted long enough to satisfy even Mrs. Asquith. "Who is she?"

"A friend of my son. She is a Montreal girl, very beautiful, and from one of the best old families in the Dominion. Really," Mrs. Asquith added impressively; "she is extremely worth the knowing, Miss West."

Jessica looked up at her with childlike candour.

"Of course," she assented, with a long-drawn stress upon the words. "Do you know any other sort, dear Mrs. Asquith?"

The retort was obvious. It should be set down to the distinct credit of Mrs. Asquith that she avoided the temptation. Instead, —

"If I only had had a daughter," she went on, with increased impressiveness; "I should have chosen one exactly like Miss Wynnehope."

"Is she so like your son?" Jessica inquired guilelessly.

"Wonderfully." Their tastes all seem to run on the same lines."

"Bridges, for instance?" Jessica spoke above the lifted brow of Tottykins who was endeavouring to lunch upon her brooch.

"Not so much bridges, as art, literature, sports: the things that really go to make up living," Mrs. Asquith corrected her sombrely.

"But bridges are his profession; aren't they?" Jessica murmured from beneath the weight of the correction.

"Nominally. A man in my son's position never has any real profession. Besides," Mrs. Asquith appeared to be reflecting upon a phase of the subject which she had not considered until that very moment; "I doubt if my son could ever bring himself to care for any woman who rode astride his hobbies."

Jessica shook her head.

"No," she assented quietly. "A side saddle looks a whole lot better."

Even Mrs. Asquith blushed at the veiled rebuke for

the unseemly picture her own words had presented. Then she rallied to maintain the strength of her position.

"I have heard him say, so very often, how he disliked a woman who talked shop," she added reminiscently.

"No; Willis could never care for such a woman."

"And he does care for Miss Wynnehope?" Jessica asked in a subdued voice, while she gently set down Tottykins upon the floor.

"Very much indeed."

Jessica rose, her eyes upon the topmost curl of Tottykins.

"The way you do?" she persisted slowly.

"Yes, exactly."

The gray eyes lifted, rested on the eyes of Mrs. Asquith, now standing by her side.

"How nice!" she said, with bubbling enthusiasm.

"I have always longed to have a nice man care for me as if I'd been his real born sister; but I never seemed to manage it, myself." And she held out her hand in farewell.

Mrs. Asquith sought to have the final word.

"My son's feeling to Miss Wynnehope is not at all fraternal, Miss West. It is something widely different from a brother's love," she made conclusive answer, as she took the hand.

Out on the steps, however, Jessica had the final word, albeit it was spoken to herself.

"The gray old tabby-cat!" she said.

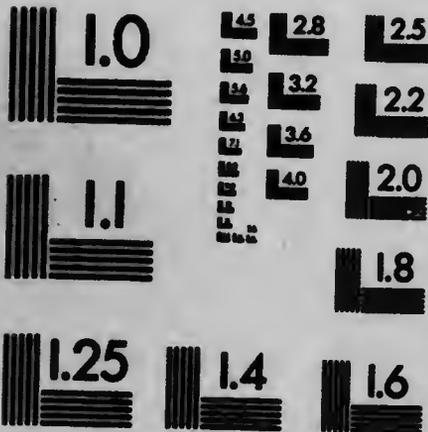
Then she went her way, conscious of victory in that she held, safe locked in her own mind, a final understanding of the situation denied to Mrs. Asquith.

The consciousness lent to her exhilaration, and the exhilaration lasted throughout dinner, restoring to her



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much of her old buoyancy, and sending Dorrance to his room to spend a restless evening and a sleepless night. Over his cigar on the terrace, that noon, the Colonel had made no secret of Jessica's invitation from Asquith. Later on, in recollection of Jessica's mood, that night at dinner, Dorrance felt no surprise at the increasing speed of Asquith's convalescence. He himself, it seemed to Dorrance, would have come back from the spaces beyond the grave, for the sake of one such hour with Jessica.

There was no manner of doubt, by this time, that Asquith's worst dangers were in the past. A sound nervous system and a cleanly life work wonders in such a case as his. The future of his accident was an established fact, albeit the present was still a case of motionlessness and plaster. The surgery had been of the best; the knitting of the bones had been slow, but sure and accurate. Three days after Jessica's first call, Asquith began to shed his plaster. By the end of the week, he had been moved from the bed to a couch; and, in due time, clothes and an easy chair would follow. He came up from the edge of the grave, as he had gone down, strong, steady, as reticent as he was reliable. Only his eyes showed the mark of his bad times, and that by addition to their old expressiveness.

In the days of his later convalescence, it was characteristic of Asquith that he made no effort to analyze his bad times, none to sort them out into distinct packets; so much his broken heart, so much his broken bones, so much the broken, ruined bridge. Instead of that, he linked them all together in one huge asset of pain and disappointment; all together he sought to accept them manfully without an open moan; and,

bearing them bravely as he could, to face forward and go on his way. It might be stolid, unromantic; yet it was not a bad working theory of life. Anyway, Asquith took it for his own, for better, for worse, and suffered his mental pain to leave no mark upon his outward convalescence. Fast as the days rushed past him, his gain was even faster.

Faster still, the days were rushing past Jessica West, although each day, taken as a thing apart, dragged onward in a series of leaden hours. One morning early in October, Dorrance had chanced to remark at breakfast that a change in all his plans would take him back to New York, once Asquith was fully recovered and once again in his old groove. As long as Asquith cared about his daily visits, Dorrance had added, he should stay on in Quebec. Later, he would go to Paris for the winter. The remark had been made in answer to a question from the Colonel. Jessica had overheard. A moment later, though still quivering at this sudden limit set to all her hopes, she had flung herself into the conversation with a bright enthusiasm which left Dorrance wondering whether she were more dense or heartless. He wondered more, as the October days went on, turning the land to scarlet, then to gray and gold, and at last to sombre drab. And, in like manner, the two young people, facing each other across the table of the Maple Leaf and talking with a gayety which deceived all but their two selves, felt their hearts losing all their brightness and turning sombre, dull. Each dreaded every passing day which led them nowhere; each dreaded the ending of the formless hope which, greeting them with every dawn, said a fresh farewell to them with every night.

However, now that their young minds had adjusted themselves to the burden, the long strain of increasing doubt and waning hope left singularly little impression upon their outer lives. True, it had killed for all time the irresponsible young person from Lone Wolf. Out of her grave had arisen a new Jessica, strong, steady, as gay at times as of old, but not so irresponsible; more self-poised, but far less self-assured. Her unexpected wit would always remain to her. There would always remain, too, a downright, earnest kindness that now and then defied convention. None the less, it was a new Jessica who watched the ripening leaves, that year, gentler than of old, infinitely more charming, and now and then plainly a little wistful. Her old-time major key, sometimes a little strident, was broken now by an occasional minor note, enriching all the harmony.

And Dorrance, on his side? A little bit more quiet; a little longer between his intervals of boyishness, and those intervals a little bit more brief. That was really all.

Strangely enough, as September and then October waxed and waned, it was Mrs. West of them all who seemed to dominate the situation. Ever since that August day when she had bared her disappointed heart to Dorrance, the young man had treated her with a new deference, a new pity. As he had surmised long, long ago, her trouble was chiefly of her own making. What help she had had, however, had been the work of Fate itself. Moreover, even a broader woman than Mrs. West might have rebelled a little at the unkind chance which, aging her before her time, had placed her threadbare, outworn womanhood beside the glori-

ous freshness of her own young daughter. The Colonel had been only human in that, faithful in word and deed to his loyal, unattractive wife, he had yet revelled in the comradeship of a gay young girl like Jessica. Alike in temperament, they both of them had a trick of extracting all the meat of daily life, of leaving behind them only husks. It was no more their fault than it was the fault of Mrs. West that she was so constituted as to feel it her duty to eat up the husks they left, and so grow thin and querulous upon the meagre diet. They were all three born after their own fashions; there had been no intended fault on any side.

But Dorrance, seeing all sides, hearing one, gave his sympathy to the Colonel, his unmeasured pity to the Colonel's lady. The disease is no less pitiful, because it makes the victim unattractive. Try as he would, after their long talk together, Dorrance could never again see only ugliness in the deep lines which barred the face of Mrs. West. They were ugly, peevish still; yet they held their hint of honest tragedy. From that day onward, as the occasion rose, Dorrance singled her out for the little attentions which heretofore he had accorded her casually and as if by intermittent chance. Now it was a bit of talk, now a posy of late pansies from the market, now merely a look of quiet understanding which Mrs. West interpreted gratefully, as earnest that she no longer stood alone and disregarded in their busier lives.

Even apart from Dorrance, however, she stood less alone than ever in her life before. In those last weeks of strain and vague uncertainty, Jessica had come to turn to her mother for a comprehension which the Colonel, jovial, devoted to his child, could yet never

give her. By some instinct which Jessica never sought to analyze, it was always her mother now who knew when she was tired and wished to be left to go her way, when she was irritable and needing to hold herself in check, when she was lonely and longing for a bit of care and petting. It was a new sensation for Jessica to like the touch of her mother's work-worn hands upon her fluffy hair, the sound of her mother's unmodulated accent in her ears, the feel of her mother's arm, on rare occasions, about her drooping shoulders. It was also a new sensation, the knowing that, in an emergency, her mother stood back of her, to ward off futile talk and irritating discussion. New, it had yet come upon her so slowly and so by degrees that the girl made no more effort to account for it than for the cool wind that swept across the terrace, a little while ago so breezeless and so warm. She felt the same refreshment in the one as in the other, the same refreshment and the same great strength.

Curiously enough, Mrs. West felt no elation in this new prominence which she had coveted so long. Now it had come to her at last, it seemed to her comparatively meaningless in itself, a cause for neither pain nor pleasure, regret nor self-congratulation. It merely gave her increased vantage-ground from which to watch her daughter, that wonderful, beautiful young daughter, changed all at once from child to woman, from a charming, but perplexing puzzle to a lovable human creature whose inner nature, at every point, was proving tangent to her own. The cause of the tangency Mrs. West made no effort to discover. It was enough for her that, hour by hour, she grew more clear-sighted in her interpretation of her daughter's mood.

"Peter," she said abruptly to her husband, one October evening, when they sat alone; "I sometimes think I haven't been quite fair to Jessica."

The Colonel looked up from his paper, his eyes vague with the sudden shifting of his thoughts. Then, as they gathered focus and settled on his wife's face, meagre, work-worn, but lighted from within with a new radiance that brought back a faint reflection of her far-gone youth, he smiled back at her in a full comprehension of the things he chose not to allow her to say. Instead, he stretched out his hand across the table, and shut it on her wrinkled, knobby fingers.

"Julia, dear old girl, I knew we'd come to it, some day," he told her gently.

But, in the silence that came after, he quite forgot to drop her hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY - FIVE

**I**T was with a countenance singularly at peace that Mrs. West sat sewing by her window, next morning. To be sure, the lines engraved by many discontented years can not all be erased in one night. Nevertheless, the new light in Mrs. West's faded eyes, the upward curve of her thin lips, these went far to atone for the old fretful lines. And the lines themselves would yield to time, time and her new-found happiness.

Mrs. West and the Colonel had talked late, the night before, talked with a freedom each had supposed could never again come between them. They had gone to bed, ridiculously happy. They had waked up, that morning, as if to enter a new honeymoon. After all, a misunderstanding built on reservations, misconceptions, as a rule proves to be no misunderstanding at all. More than once while they were dressing, Mrs. West's thin treble had been added to the rumbling basso of her husband's laughter. And now, by her window, her husband gone out on an errand, Mrs. West was busy mending his stockings and pondering upon her happiness.

A little noise from the next room aroused her. The walls of the Maple Leaf are thin, and, in the mid-morning silence, sound carried easily. Mrs. West lifted her head to listen. Then she laid down her sock,

and shook off her thin old silver thimble. An instant later, she was knocking at her daughter's door.

"Come."

She opened the door. Jessica was ransacking her wardrobe, her head among her skirts.

"I thought you were out at the tennis club, Jessica."

"It was too windy. I thought I wouldn't go. The season is about over, anyway."

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to make room for that new Paquin gown."

"You like it?" her mother queried as casually as if new frocks were the one theme worth discussion.

"Well enough."

"I thought it was very pretty. When you get through there, come in and sit with me."

"I — I must write some letters."

Mrs. West took a step forward across the room, took another.

"Jessica child," she said at last; "you're worrying."

Jessica lifted her head, then tried to shake it.

"What makes you think so?" she asked, with a forlorn little effort at deceit.

"I know so," her mother answered, with a finality which Jessica made no effort to gainsay. Then, after a little interval, "I wish you would tell me about it," she added. "Maybe I could be of a little help."

The girl shook her head. The gesture was as dreary as was the expression in her eyes.

"There isn't anything to tell. Really and truly, nothing." Then she laughed a little shortly. "It's late hours and strong tea, I suspect, as Mrs. Asquith says."

To Mrs. West's mind, the association of ideas was in line with her own suspicions.

"You have seen Mrs. Asquith, then?"

"Three weeks ago, the day I went to see Mr. Asquith, you know."

"Haven't you been there since?"

The girl's smile had a hint of her customary mirth.

"Once was quite enough," she answered demurely.

"But Mr. Asquith —"

"From what dad says," Jessica interrupted; "it won't be long before he calls on me. At least, I hope so."

"Jessica —" There was question in the older woman's eyes, question and infinite appeal.

Jessica disregarded both. Instead, —

"Where is dad?" she queried carelessly.

As if at the stimulus of the name, Mrs. West took a sudden resolution.

"Jessica, sit down here, child," she bade her daughter gently. "Here on the bed beside me. I want to tell you something."

Wondering no less at the tone than at the new light, half joy, half wistfulness, in her mother's thin, worn face, Jessica obeyed; and, for a moment, a hush fell on the room. Then tremulously, low and a little fearful, Mrs. West began.

Substantially, the story was the one which, two months ago, she had told to Dorrance. Now however, even at the first, she made no effort to veil its personality, none to veil the intensity of its petty tragedy. From the very first, she felt sure that now at last Jessica would understand it all, would make apology for the distorted point of view, the warped perspective of those

wretched years. She told it all, omitting nothing, modifying nothing. With remorseless truth, she laid bare her naked woman's heart: the girlhood spent in the emotionless barren of a small New England village; the young maturity starving for something on which its love might feed; the going westward into the newer civilization where life was as much more vital as it was more primitive, where human love outranked expediency. Then the Colonel entered the narrative, the handsome, lovable "big boy" of an ungraded school whose prim teacher was only a few years his senior. The rest of the story followed in due course: the marriage, the blissful months that followed, months when her love, fully satisfied at last, was strong enough to glorify the simple, humdrum duties of young wifehood. Then had come bad times and, in their midst, there came the baby daughter, created exactly in the image of her father, body and mind and soul. And after came the years of grinding, stupefying toil when the problem of mere bread and bacon filled her entire horizon, driving out all other thoughts, save that of her great and increasing love. The Colonel was still the one great fact of her existence; her great longing was to give her life for his, not in one grand instant of self-sacrifice; but in the ceaseless, grubbing round which spared him from friction while it sapped her very life. And she had spared him. Her account was victorious, as she told her daughter, sitting beside her, dumb with comprehending pity for all the story left untold, how, when the lean years ended and the tide of prosperity set towards them, her husband was ready to meet it, his pride and strength alike unbroken. She made no mention of her own dulled brain, her work-

racked body, her nervous, fretful mind, save as the explanation of all that followed. She had been unable to rally as swiftly as her husband, unable to go out into the world and meet it jovially, unable, even, to meet him in the way he would have chosen for the prevailing keynote of their family life. Dumb, fretful and a bit suspicious, it was thus her worn-out nerves and exhausted body had made her, no fit companion for her cheery husband. That comradeship he had been forced to seek in Jessica who, fresh, buoyant, had never failed him, in whom his life was now so closely bound.

And there the story ended, and she let it drop into the silence.

Jessica raised her head at last.

"Mama," she said; "I've been a little beast."

"No, Jessica," her mother answered slowly. "You weren't to blame. You were born that way, bright and full of fun and not afraid to speak your mind. I was born the other way, shy, thinking things, and not speaking out till it was too late to have the speaking do any especial good. Your father liked your way better. That was the reason he used to take you about with him and leave me at home, used to talk over things with you that I knew nothing at all about."

"Mama!" Jessica stared up at her mother's face. "Have you been jealous of me? Is that the trouble?"

Under her daughter's look of consternation, Mrs. West coloured hotly.

"Yes," she assented. "I was jealous."

"Mama!"

The colour ebbed again.

"But not now," her mother added softly.

Jessica drew a tired sigh.

"I'm glad of so much," she said; "glad it is over. I think I am a little glad, too, that you've told me. It explains so many things."

"You — you felt it, too, Jessica?"

She smiled.

"Yes. I'm not altogether dense, Mama, even if I do love a joke. I knew something was wrong between us; but I had no real idea what it was. I can't seem to grasp it, even now."

"Don't try," her mother begged her. "It is all over, dear."

"Yes; but it was so horrible, such a fearful thing to have happen," the girl said dully, as if the thought clogged her brain and rendered it powerless for coherent, analytic thought. "And, now you've told me, I shall always feel that perhaps I was the one to blame."

Her mother faced her steadily.

"Jessica," she asked gravely; "were you the one to blame that I was pouring out all my very life in a dumb love that no one saw; that I could neither hold it back, nor make it reach the place where it of right belonged?"

Jessica whitened, while she drew a long, deep breath.

"No," she answered then, her eyes upon the carpet at her feet. "Such things are not the fault of any one. They come; that's all."

Her mother allowed the pause to lengthen, before she broke it.

"And they go," she added gently then.

"How?" The question seemed slipping out without the girl's volition.

"By a few direct words. That is all."

"But if — they can't be spoken?"

"They can."

"Not always." Then Jessica bent forward, her elbows on her knees, her cheeks resting in her hands, while her gray eyes appeared to be resuming their study of the carpet. At last, she looked up once more. "You mean you've gone to the bottom of it with dad?" she asked, with her old, fearless directness.

"Yes."

"And it's all right?"

"Yes."

"He understood, and all the rest?"

"Yes."

She dropped her face into her hands once more.

"I'm glad," she said slowly. "It makes it easier all round. And it isn't enough just to love; one wants to know, now and then, that she's loved back again. I can see how it must have hurt." She freed one of her hands, and for a minute laid it on her mother's fingers. Then she resumed her old position. "How did you get there?" she asked abruptly.

"There?"

"On the right track of things; with dad, I mean."

Mrs. West hesitated. Then, with a sudden feeling that nothing should be too sacred for this one only daughter, —

"We were talking about you," she answered simply; "how we loved you and were worrying about you. And then, all at once and almost before we knew it, the rest came."

"All at once and almost before you knew it," Jessica echoed thoughtfully. "I suppose that is the way it

does — sometimes." Then, after a minute, she demanded, "What makes you worry about me, Mama?"

"Because you haven't seemed quite like yourself, the last few weeks."

Impatiently she shrugged her shoulders.

"What harm? It's time I changed a little; people always do." Again came the abrupt change in her train of thought. "What made you let it drag along so many years? With dad right in the family, there wasn't any need."

A pink flush, rising in Mrs. West's thin cheeks, deepened to dark, dark red.

"Jessica," she looked straight into her daughter's eyes; "it's not an easy thing for any woman to face the fact that she adores a man who may have stopped caring for her."

The gray eyes dropped, and clouded.

"No," Jessica said; "it can't be — easy."

"And so," her mother watched her intently, as she went on; "I fought against it as long as I could, fought till I was completely sure. Then I shut my teeth and made up my mind that I would die before I would let anybody know what had happened. That is the way with us women. We love so much that, in time, we fairly love our love. We guard it as long as we possibly can. Some of us die, guarding it."

The silence lengthened again. When Mrs. West spoke, it was with a little laugh.

"After all, Jessica," she said; "it was our French friend, Monsieur de la Haye, that helped to end the situation. He was very shrewd and quick to read people; I'll always give him credit for that. He found

me, one day when I was all alone and in the blues, and, by the time he had asked a dozen questions, he was in full possession of the facts."

"Mama!" There was no mistaking the consternation in the girl's tone.

"Don't worry, Jessica. He guessed; I didn't tell him much. Besides, what harm? I didn't think so much about it, at the time. Now, as I look back, I can see that he set me thinking. He proposed remedies, and that set me to looking out for causes. It was the first I'd ever faced the fact; and, faced out, facts aren't ever so bad as we try to make out. As for Monsieur de la Haye, you know even worms do some good in every garden."

In answer to the little jest, the girl smiled, but very faintly.

"Jessica," her mother said at length; "there's been a reason in my telling you all this. It wouldn't have needed quite so many words to make you see the trouble was over and in the past; there was another reason than that. It has seemed to me, the last few weeks, that we were growing to understand each other better; that we, woman and woman, felt things the same way, without needing to go into too much talk. And so I thought perhaps, if I told you all the story, it might help you to see why we understand each other. It might be even that would be a little comfort."

Jessica smiled wanly.

"Do you think I am in especial need of comfort?"

"Yes, dear child, I do."

Jessica rose slowly, slowly crossed the room to the window and stood there looking out. Mrs. West

picked up a fallen ribbon and smoothed it with deliberate care.

"Jessica," she asked at length and as if with an utter change of subject; "when are you going out to Mrs. Asquith's?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you go, to-day?"

"Why should I?"

"It's a charming day. The walk would do you any amount of good."

"But there are other walks besides the Grande Allée," Jessica made perverse opposition.

"And Mrs. Asquith is always glad to see you."

The girl laughed shortly.

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Jessica," there came a change in her mother's accent, a change indicative of fear; "has there been any trouble between you and the Asquiths?"

Jessica faced away from the window, while her chin lifted itself proudly.

"No trouble. Mrs. Asquith is always rather horrid; I don't like her. That is all."

"And her son?"

A new note came into Jessica's voice, gentler, sincere.

"Mr. Asquith is a gentleman, and good."

"I'm glad you think so, Jessica."

The girl's face betrayed exasperation. She checked it.

"Why?" she questioned flatly.

The answer came quite as flatly.

"Because your father and I both like Mr. Asquith very, very much, and because we both think —"

"He likes me?" Jessica questioned deliberately.

"We hope so."

"Then," she spoke still more deliberately; "then you'd best stop hoping."

"But — we think we — know."

"Never mind what you think you know," Jessica bade her mother quietly. "I also know one thing: I shall never marry Willis Asquith."

Her mother caught her breath, then sat staring up at her in speechless consternation.

"Why, Jessica!" she said at length. And then, "Not if he asks you?"

"Not if he asks me, twenty thousand times."

Poor Mrs. West felt her vaunted comprehension of her daughter vanish like an idle dream.

"But you like him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you say he is a gentleman, and good?"

"Yes."

"And you know he is rich, and in the very best set of people in the city?"

"Yes."

"Is it on account of anything his mother has said, or done?"

Jessica's chin lifted itself once more, and she spoke distinctly, slowly.

"Mrs. Asquith could do and say nothing to change my plans, Mama."

"Then what is the matter?" Mrs. West demanded, in blank futility.

"Merely that I don't love him."

Mrs. West's brow cleared, for her mind had harked back to the adages of her long-gone youth.

"Not now," she told her daughter softly; "but, when he speaks, you will find out you do."

Jessica did not smile, not even at the worn-out adage.

"No, Mama; I never shall," she said, and her accent allowed no argument.

It was the turn of Mrs. West to sit staring at the carpet. Across the room, the girl still gazed heavily out upon the Ring, now bare and brown and leafless.

"Jessica," Mrs. West spoke with a sudden asperity of which she did not dream; "are you cold and hard? I thought —" But her thought ended in silence.

The girl had flushed and whitened at the words whose sharpness seemed to her to be the veil for a bitter disappointment. She tried to answer; but she dared not trust her voice. Besides, what answer could she give? She had no right to tell her mother of that last scene with Asquith. For the rest, her womanhood revolted at the thought of putting into words her attitude towards Dorrance. She pressed her lips together resolutely, not so much to hold back unguarded speech, as to still their quivering. Moment by moment, there grew upon her the dread of self-betrayal, betrayal of the secret she had guarded so long and so jealously. Not even to her mother would she tell it. Least of all, in fact, to her. She would understand it all only too well; and Jessica shrank from understanding, lest it break down the wall of her self-control. Once that was broken down, what hope would be remaining for her dignity, her woman's modesty? She had given her love, as she believed now, unsought, undesired. The knowledge of this giving was hers alone; hers alone should be its sorrow and its shame. And yet, after all, she was not wholly sure that she would willingly give

up out of her life her five months of companionship with Dorrance, in spite of all which that companionship had brought with it in its train. It was as her mother had just said: she had loved until she had reached the point of loving her very love. And what was it her mother was saying now? She turned her face to meet the words which were coming to her, slowly, sorrowfully, from across the room, —

“Sometimes I almost wonder if you really know just what it means to love.”

“Mama!”

The word came, with a little choking cry. A moment later, Jessica had crossed the room and flung herself down upon the carpet, her head buried in her mother's lap, indomitable no longer, but sobbing as if her girlish heart must break.

Meanwhile, upon the sunny terrace, Kay Dorrance and the Colonel were pacing to and fro, engrossed in earnest talk.

“You really mean to go, next week?” the Colonel had inquired, a little earlier.

Dorrance nodded.

“Next Thursday.”

“What has changed your plans?” the Colonel queried bluntly. “You came to stay all winter.”

“If I liked it,” Dorrance amended, with a smile.

“And you don't?”

Dorrance blushed like a little boy.

“Not enough to stay on longer,” he replied. “I've only been waiting, you know, for Asquith to get about.”

“And he is?”

“He's been out driving, all this last week. We go up to the bridge, to-morrow.”

The Colonel's face expressed his sympathy.

"It's his first sight of the ruins; isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, poor old chap! I dread it for him," Dorrance answered simply. "He asked me, long ago, if I'd be the one to drive up with him. I've just been staying on, till he was well enough to go."

"It will be a tough sort of day for him," the Colonel offered kindly comment. "His very heart was in that bridge. I mean it literally. He'll never care for any woman, as he cared for that great steel arch. Some men are made that way; their profession is the one great passion of their lives."

"Not Asquith," Dorrance corrected him quietly.

"Yes, Asquith more than most," the Colonel answered thoughtfully. "I watched him, off and on, all summer long. I never saw a man more obviously in love than he was with his bridge. It was broad of him, too, the being so in love with the next man's work."

"Asquith is broad," Dorrance assented promptly.

"Broad — and narrow. He is as contradictory in his make up as all the rest of us." Then the Colonel dismissed his rare attempt at analysis and returned to simple fact. "Dorrance, we shall miss you, when you're gone," he said.

"Really? I'm glad."

"Yes. I've come to count on you; so have we all, in fact. Deuce knows what we'll do without you. You've seemed to stand between us and these damned Canadians, and explain us to each other. Heaven knows we've needed the explanation, too," the Colonel added ruefully. "I trust it also knows how we'll get on without them. Anyhow, I don't."

An echo of his regret came into the voice of Dorrance, as he said slowly, —

“I wish I might have stayed.”

“Why don't you?”

“I can't. It's a bit out of the question now.”

Turning, the Colonel eyed him keenly, kindly.

“Out with it, Dorrance!” he said. “What's the row? Heart? Lungs? Liver? With you, it's not likely to be a question of mere money, or any need for work. What is the trouble, anyway?”

The very unexpectedness of the question brought its own need for answer, simple, direct. So, at least, it seemed to Dorrance, moved afresh by the inexplicable liking he had always felt for Colonel West ever since the day, five months before, when he had seen him first upon the little steamer coming down the river. He paused for one short moment. Then his answer came, simple, direct.

“Colonel West, I love your daughter,” he said briefly.

For another short moment, the Colonel's eyes looked straight into his. Then, —

“Well,” said the Colonel; “I am very glad to hear it. What then?”

“Merely that I have no idea that she loves me in return,” Dorrance answered as briefly as before.

The Colonel caught his trick of brevity.

“That, or whether?” he asked.

“Either one.”

“And so you're going away?”

“Yes. At least, for the present.”

“What's the good of that?”

“To wait until the matter is settled.”

"Who is going to settle it?"

"Asquith."

The Colonel gazed at him in big-bodied disapproval.

"Damn it, man!" he almost shouted. "You're as bad as any woman. If you want to know how Jessica feels about it, why the devil don't you ask her?"

"Asquith is my friend," Dorrance said simply, as if the whole matter were too evident to admit of any discussion. "I couldn't do it, while Asquith was laid up, you know."

"Asquith also be damned!" the Colonel told him with whole-hearted profanity. "What has he to do with you, anyhow?"

Patiently Dorrance set himself to explain: hopes, doubts, everything. It seemed to him that his explanation was logical and clear; but, in the very middle of it, the Colonel interrupted.

"I wonder if it's because you're a writer, Dorrance, that you are behaving like an ass," he observed thoughtfully. "In fact, that has been the worst thing against you, anyhow, your writing. It's bound to make a man unpractical. If you had only had Asquith's profession, it would have been so much better. However, Asquith is one person; you're another. Unless Jessica turns he-Mormon, which I doubt, she can't well take you both. Neither is she the girl to settle it by flipping pennies. Look here, Dorrance!" The Colonel's eyes lost their laughter. "As I understand it, you love my daughter?"

"I do." Dorrance's voice was as solemn as if he had been repeating the marriage sacrament.

"And you want to marry her?"

"I surely do." Against his red hair, his face looked white, sharp-featured, wan.

"Then take my blessing, and go in and win."

"But —" Again and a bit wearily, this time, Dorrance set himself to explain.

The Colonel heard him to the end now. When at last he spoke, —

"Dorrance," he said kindly; "I think I understand. In your place, I should not do the same thing; not many of us would. I suspect it is like you, though. About Jessica: she's not the child to talk, and I have no idea how she feels. For myself, there's no man living, not even Willis Asquith, to whom I would give her half so willingly as to you."

"Thank you." But Dorrance's voice was scarcely audible. Then he turned to go away.

The Colonel's voice recalled him.

"Wait!" There was now a ring of imperiousness in the tone. "As I say, I have no idea, not the least, how Jessica may feel to you. Moreover, much as I admire your ground, I feel you have no right to sacrifice yourself and her to your inflated sense of honour. A simple question and answer costs you very little, and it may save you both an untold sorrow. Sooner or later, unless events answer for her, I feel it is your duty to ask it. And, Dorrance —" The imperiousness was all gone now. He merely crushed Dorrance's hand inside his own; then he turned away, without another word.

## CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

"SHALL we make it Wednesday?" Asquith asked.

And Dorrance answered, as casually as if he had not been dreading the proposed expedition from the depths of his soul, —

"As you will."

"Wednesday, then," Asquith confirmed the engagement.

Dorrance looked up into his friend's face.

"Sure you're strong enough for it, old man? It's bound to be a good deal of a strain."

"I know. Still, I shall be glad when it is over. Of course, I've more than a notion how it is bound to look; and yet the notion never comes up to the actual fact. I dread it, Dorrance; dread it a good deal more than I care to say." He smiled; but his eyes were fixed, unseeing, upon the opposite wall. "Possibly that's the reason I wanted you to be the one to go up with me."

"Because I won't know enough to talk shop?" Dorrance queried, with intentional flippancy.

Asquith's eyes came back to focus, turned to Dorrance's face and rested there intently.

"No; not that," he said. "It's just because I fancy that, some time or other, you've known what it

is to stake your whole interest, your whole personality upon a losing game."

Dorrance's gaze dropped to the rug.

"Yes, I have," he answered briefly; but it was not until long afterward that Asquith knew that that losing game had no connection with the real work of his profession.

"It makes a chap feel a bit lonesome, when the game is done," Asquith said thoughtfully at length.

"It does," Dorrance assented as briefly as before.

But Asquith roused himself to the finish of his metaphor.

"However," he added; "one can always pick up the cards and deal them out again."

"Sometimes," Dorrance corrected him. "Not always."

Asquith remained intent upon his theory.

"I suppose that is the difference in our professions," he suggested.

And once more Dorrance corrected him.

"More likely, the difference is in us." Then suddenly he cast aside his thoughtfulness, and spoke in quite a different key. "Oh, hang it, Asquith! Wednesday is the day of the Bidwell tea."

"What of that?" Asquith queried calmly.

"Aren't you going?"

"Not on any terms."

"Ingrate!" Dorrance laughed. "Do you realize it was postponed on your account, postponed till you were well enough to go?"

Asquith yawned.

"I'm not."

"What about the bridge?"

"Professional necessity. Besides, the doctor wants me to get it off my mind. What's the row, man? Are you going?"

Dorrance made a wry face.

"Promised."

"More fool you!" Asquith laughed, as he spoke, and the laugh took away from his face the last traces of his long illness.

"I couldn't help myself," Dorrance defended himself. "That skittish young thing in the purple tucker, the oldest one, I believe, cornered me in front of Fisher's, the other day, and insisted on my naming the most propitious afternoon. I chanced it for this Wednesday. Now I'm bound to see the thing out."

"And you want —"

Dorrance turned upon his friend with something midway between a frown and a laugh.

"Hang it, Asquith!" he said. "Do you think I admire the Bidwells?"

It was the last week in October now. The leaves had fallen, the turf grown brown, and an occasional flurry of snow filled the air and whitened the city pavements. However, for the most part, a warm purplish haze lay upon the hills and the sunshine at noon still held its old caressing warmth. Winter, albeit now in sight, yet kept its proper distance.

For ten days, now, Asquith had been walking about his room, then about the house. He was still a little slow, still moved with an uncertain carefulness of tread, still used his arms as if he were not quite sure where they ought to bend. However, all that was bound to wear off in time, together with the pallor and the gauntness of his long, tedious days of suffering and later

convalescence. And even now, in some ways, he showed the effects of the past ten weeks far less than did Kay Dorrance. Not that Asquith was conscious of any change in his friend; nor that his unconsciousness was wholly due to selfishness. Almost from the very first of his illness, he had seen Dorrance daily. The hurt had been fresh upon them both at the selfsame hour. Dorrance had had a little time to rally from its first intensity while Asquith lay unconscious; later, Asquith's brain had worked too sluggishly to take much heed of anything beyond the bare facts of his friend's kind presence and his own broken bones. By the time his mind was working normally, the change in Dorrance was too fully established to admit of any question.

In those weeks of increasingly close companionship, weeks when the two men, so curiously unlike, came to learn that, whatever might arise to separate them, their surest friendship, surest understanding yet lay for each in the other, a stranger, looking on, might have marvelled that, in all their talk, no mention was ever made of Jessica West. For hours and hours, they were together. Their talk ranged over all things in earth and heaven, save one. That one was Jessica. Strange to say, so intent was each man upon the need of avoiding the theme that neither one noticed the omission in the other. Asked, both men would have replied in perfect sincerity that, only by his own prompt and extreme tact, Jessica had been kept out of their discussion.

The Bidwell sisters, the next Wednesday, waked at dawn, and from room to room they exchanged congratulations on the bright, warm day: Asquith,

although he felt the day one for congratulations, yet did not wake at dawn. In fact, he did not wake at all; his night had been a white one. As Kay Dorrance had pointed out to him, the coming day was bound to be a strain on strength and pluck. Not a glimpse of the fallen bridge had he gained as yet. His few drives had been with his mother who, with theories of her own, had ordered the horses' heads turned in another direction. From no place inside the city could the bridge be seen. Moreover, distant glimpses could do no good. Out of his own knowledge of the case, Asquith could construct a far better picture than any gained from Sillery Point. Better than that, even, would be a Saturday Supplement. It was best, far best of all, to wait until his strength would allow a trip to the scene of the disaster.

Asquith's choice would have been to go alone; but his mother had vetoed that. It would be a long, hard trip for a man so lately convalescent. He would become exhausted, do rash things; and she, at home, would be beside herself with worry. Asquith had yielded, but on the condition that Dorrance should be his sole companion. Distrusting his own courage, his own steadiness of nerve, he would soonest have Kay Dorrance the man to witness his temporary weakening, his possible emotion. And Dorrance, long days since, had given his promise.

It was scarcely past noon, that day, when the Asquith carriage went trundling down Mountain Hill and dropped the two young men at the entrance of the ferry wharf. It was still early afternoon when, leaving the tram at Saint Romuald, they were making leisurely choice of a carter to drive them to the fallen bridge.

Dorrance put out a steadying hand, as Asquith left the carriage at the bridge.

"Rather like the blind leading the blind," he said apologetically. "Still, if I can be of any use —"

Asquith shook his head.

"I'm all right," he said bravely. "I only need a little time. But, Dorrance, it's all —"

Dorrance nodded in comprehension of what the broken phrase implied.

"I know. Take your time, man, and go slow," he answered, and Asquith knew his words referred to his mental steps no less than to his physical ones.

It was still so early in the afternoon that no sight-seers were abroad. Asquith took instant note of that fact with thankfulness. Seen from afar, constructed from professional knowledge of the chances, the picture in his mind had at no point touched the fact. Now, in the presence of the fact, he shrank from any human eyes, even the kindly ones of Dorrance, until he had had time to accustom himself a little to the scene. He had expected to find disaster; he was standing face to face with tragedy. It was no mere heap of fallen girders, of twisted chords, of broken eyebars that lay stretched out before him; it was the ruin of a country's dream, of a profession's hope, worse, even, of an old man's life. And Asquith, realizing it all to the full: all the disaster to the province, all the human tragedy, felt it no disgrace to his honest British soul that two great tears rolled down his face and had to be wiped away. The best of British men are made like that; their sorrows, like their joys, are silent and very strong.

There was ample cause for Asquith's sorrow. Standing there above the abutment on the southern shore,

he looked out across the main approach, stretching away before his eyes, broad, strong and totally uninjured; but leading nowhere, unless into chaos. For full two hundred feet, the pathway lay before him. Then it ended, broken off short above the anchor pier, beyond which and far, far below lay the tangled mass of steel which, so short a time before, had been the full third of what had been regarded as the grandest bridge ever designed by the brain of man. Two months before that very day, that very hour, it had arched boldly out across the sky, cobweb-light, yet strong enough, it seemed, to bear up against wind and storms and beneath the load of moving, laden trains. Now it lay, crumpled together by its own falling weight, crushed and wrinkled like a bit of paper. Down on the stony beach beneath the piers, there lay a trail of wreckage. The trail looped itself above the main pier, a long, tattered string of latticed chords and fallen eyebars and twisted, buckled bars of steel; then it dropped again to the sand beyond and led the eye on to the river's edge, and on again until the deeper water of midstream hid the tattered, crumpled end from sight. But out above the stream and pointing slightly upwards, as if to call the mercy of the heavens down upon the ruins, down upon the men buried beneath, slanted one pointed, ornamental peak of the mainpost, unbroken still, still noble in its fallen beauty.

"Where are you going, Asquith?"

Asquith turned slowly, as if Dorrance's voice, breaking the long stillness, had called him back from endless distances.

"I'm going to the beach."

"You can't."

"I must, Dorrance. I want to see it from below. In my place, you'd feel the same. I'll be very careful." His voice was childlike in its note of pleading.

Once down on the beach, Dorrance breathed more freely. The climb had told upon them both, although Asquith, knowing every trick of the bank, had taken a comparatively easy path. However, once down, there would be no need to go back; the carter had been told to await them on the lower level. Moreover, in spite of the dangers that lurk in rolling stones, Dorrance felt Asquith was far more safe upon the pebbly beach than on the open flooring of the approach above. The tide was far, far out; the main pier stood well inside the water-line, as they made their way carefully out along the beach and halted just beside the spot where the crumpled, tangled pile rose on its curve to mount across the pier.

Seen from below, the hugeness of the tragedy left them speechless. They were mere dots beside the twisted mass before them, mere dots whose brains were bound to be far too small to hatch such giant schemes, to work out detailed computation for structures such as that had been. Dwarfed, awed, they stood in silence, gazing up and out along the wreckage buried beneath the river it had hoped to span. And, for both men standing there, something lay buried in that river, other than the broken, twisted pile of steel. For both alike, anticipations were buried there, and bright dreams and brighter hopes. To Asquith's mind, however, all these things now lay included in the heap of steel. For Dorrance, the picture drew itself in other and more human lines. But to neither one was the ruin altogether finite in extent or time.

"Dorrance," Asquith's low voice cut the silence, till then broken only by the ripple of the falling tide; "the best part of my life has gone down there."

For the first clause of his answer, Dorrance took out his case of cigarettes; for the second, he pointed to a strand of steel, fallen apart from the general tangle.

"Sit down," he said. "How do you mean?"

But Asquith chose a heap of stones, smiling in shame-faced apology, the while.

"I'd rather not sit on top of the ruins; at least, not just yet," he explained, blushing at his own whim. "About the going down: it seems to me to explain itself. Ever since I was a youngster, that bridge has been the focus of everything for me."

"And yet, the next man's work." Dorrance spoke thoughtfully, as he lifted his lighted match.

"The next man's work; but my profession. It has been something, Dorrance, to feel even so much personal connection with the thing. And my profession is my life; the last month has taught me that, even if I had never realized it before."

"Your life, yes," Dorrance told him gravely; "and yet, not all your life, by any means."

"I'm not so sure of that." Above his own match, Asquith shook his head.

"I am, then," Dorrance responded half impatiently.

"Wake up, man, and realize you're in the world again, not buried in the bridge out there."

"I do realize it," Asquith answered simply. "It is just because I realize it so well that I know the day will come when I shall help to plan and build a new bridge to cross the river in this very spot."

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Dorrance's eyes lighted at the words; but his lips were very grave, as he made question, —

"Very well. What then?"

"Then?" Asquith echoed, with a curious note of interrogation. "Why need there be any other *then*? Isn't that enough for any man's dreams to hold inside them?"

Dorrance shook his head.

"Much. Not enough," he answered between whiffs.

"One's profession offers nothing greater."

With a jerk, Dorrance's cigarette went flying far across the beach. Then, with his old, impetuous gesture, his fists went into his pockets.

"Asquith," he said; "you've been shut up too long. You've been fed by nurses, when you've needed men. Listen. I've a profession, myself. God knows I love it, knows I — revere it. To me, it is the one great profession in the universe, the one that holds inside it all the others, the one that can do most harm, or else most good. That doesn't make me forget that the universe holds a few other things, though."

"Others, yes; but of less account," Asquith replied, and his slow deliberation offered curious contrast to the other's heat.

"I'm not so sure. If I were sure, I fancy I'd find my work had narrowed me by just so much," Dorrance told him fearlessly, though well aware his friend might choose to make personal application of his words and feel their smart. "To me, my work, done carefully and with some degree of conscience, seems a great thing. That doesn't mean, though, that it's the greatest, or the only one that's great."

"What else?"

Dorrance pushed his fists even deeper into his pockets.

"Friends, family," his brown eyes fixed themselves on the opposite shore, while his voice dropped and slowed a little; "love itself."

Asquith shook his head.

"Dorrance, in almost the same breath, I told you the best of my life is buried here, and then confessed my dream of doing something larger in the future. Can't you see that doesn't leave me much room for other things? My family? Yes, as a matter of course. Friends? One or two; in other words, you and one other. Both of you, I suspect, have endeared yourselves to me chiefly because you have been good enough to sit still and let me prate about my work. No; wait a bit. That isn't all. I ought to add in common honesty that, without you two people, my path ahead of me would look about as aimless as the bridge approach up there, a great, wide, empty space that leads into nothing. It was a good day for me, Dorrance, the day that brought you into Quebec."

For a little time, both men smoked in silence. Then Dorrance said, —

"Thanks, old man." And the silence came again.

Asquith broke it, his eyes fixed upon the water, eddying in and out about the fallen heap of steel.

"And as for love," he said, quite as if there had been no pause; "that doesn't seem to hold much place inside my plans."

Dorrance caught his breath sharply. Then he went on smoking quietly, until he dared trust his voice to speak.

"It may, in time," he said at last.

Asquith shook his head at the rippling sheet of water.

"Not now. Not again. It came once."

"And?" Dorrance questioned briefly, for it was plain to him that Asquith only awaited encouragement to go on.

"And it was no use. Instead, I changed it to the other friendship I hold side by side with yours."

"But — but is that necessarily final?" Dorrance asked him, after a pause.

The lighted end of the cigarette fell from Asquith's lips, bitten sheer in two, before he answered.

"Yes. It is final. I was a fool to hope; but I did hope. I suppose we men hang on to hopes like that to the bitter end. We were splendid friends, and I was fool enough to suppose she would come in time to care for me, the other way. I found out my mistake, found out, too, she was big enough, even if she couldn't love me, to forget the rest and just keep on being friends. There aren't so many women of that kind."

"No." Dorrance's eyes were fixed upon the falling tide, his face, as if in response to Asquith's thoughtful words, wore its old-time happy, boyish smile. "No, Asquith; there are not."

For long, Asquith sat silent, his gaze upon the pebbles at his feet. When at last he did look up, his eyes had cleared, his voice had gained again its resonance.

"And so it's all as I've told you, Dorrance," he said, while he slowly rose and stood staring out across the river sparkling in the sun. "I've put it all together and buried it out there, a mass of unfulfilled dreams that, in a way, stand for the best part of my life. It

was a bad disappointment; but all that's left for me now is to make good, in spite of it." He hesitated for a moment. Then he added, "I didn't mean to speak of it at all; but now and again it is a relief to say things out to a man like you. Beyond a bit of boredom, it can't make any difference to you; but at times one has to speak, or else go under utterly. Thanks, old man." He held out his hand to Dorrance.

And Dorrance, now not daring to trust himself to speak, shut his hand over Asquith's fingers in a crushing grasp. Then, side by side, but silent, the two men faced about towards home, leaving behind them the dead past, as if buried in the shining stream.

"Willis," his mother said to him, that night; "you don't know how sorry the Bidwell girls were that you weren't at their tea."

"I was a bit too tired," Asquith made answer, as he lifted his eyes from the paper in his hand.

"So I told them. It was a pity you couldn't have chosen another day for the bridge."

"Dorrance goes away, next week," her son reminded her.

"Yes; but there are other days, and those poor creatures never had a tea before. Really, it was very nice," Mrs. Asquith added reminiscently. "I never ate a better pound cake, even at home."

Asquith roused himself from the reverie which had held him, for the past two hours, with his eyes fixed upon the same paragraph of the evening paper in his hand.

"Were many there?" he inquired, as a dutiful manifestation of interest in the function.

"About forty, I should say. Of course, I was among

the last. I usually make a point of that, for one finds the nicest people then — that is, unless there is a better reception going on at some other house." Mrs. Asquith picked up Tottykins, as she spoke, and straightened up the rampant bow that held his love-locks. "I didn't see that Miss West," she added, after an interval of silence. "I understood she was to be invited."

"Possibly she didn't care to go," her son suggested.

Mrs. Asquith smiled. Then she sniffed.

"The Bidwells are your cousins," she reminded him.

"What of it?" Asquith yawned, then turned his paper inside out.

His indifference fretted his mother's nerves, and betrayed her into speaking with more asperity than she had ever showed him.

"She doubtless thought that you would be there," she said sharply.

Asquith raised his brows.

"She doesn't appear to come here on that account."

"She did once. That was enough."

Deliberately Asquith rose, laid aside his paper and, clasping his hands behind him, faced his mother. Quiet as he was, and smiling, he looked every inch a man, and one not to be trifled with.

"On the contrary," he said slowly; "I mean that she shall come again, and often."

Now that her hour had come, Mrs. Asquith went white to her lips which stiffened until her words would only come with difficulty.

"Willis, are you going to marry that —" but his look checked her, and she went on more gently; "that young person?"

"No, mater; never."

She sank back in her chair, breathing a little quickly.

"Thank God!" she said.

"Wait!" He lifted his head, waiting for her attention. Then, for a moment or two, he stood there, tall and commanding. "Hear me through it all, mater. If I tell you this, it will be to show you where I have stood, where I stand, to-day. It will be to keep you from speaking carelessly of Miss West in the future. I shall never marry Miss West on one account. Four weeks ago, I asked her to be my wife, and she refused me. I love her now as well as ever; it is my dearest wish to keep the rest of my life worthy of the friendship she has promised me." His voice changed suddenly. "That's all, mater dear," he added. "I told you, because I wanted you to be good friends."

"But, Willis —"

"For my sake, mater?"

And then she yielded.

## CHAPTER TWENTY - SEVEN

**I**N her desperation at the solemn hush brooding over the Bidwell dining-room, Jessica turned flippant.

"Drop a cup of tea in the slot, and hear the American talk," she said, and, even as she spoke, she blushed at herself for taking refuge in a joke.

She had her reward, however. The second Miss Bidwell glanced up from her pot of tea.

"What slot, dear Miss West?" she inquired, with a smile of politest interest.

"My mouth," Jessica informed her gravely.

"O—oh—h?" said the second Miss Bidwell vaguely, and, in her puzzlement, she ran the tea all over the cup and saucer in her other hand.

The youngest Bidwell girl, passing by, halted to scrutinize the widening pool.

"My dear, what a horrid, nasty mess you've made!" she observed rebukingly.

"I couldn't really help it," her older sister offered mild excuse. "I was listening to Miss West, you know. She really is so—" her apologetic smile included Jessica; "so very unexpected."

"Exactly." Jessica helped herself to a sandwich and opened it to assure herself, by a nearer view, whether the lettuce and the Miss Bidwells really were coeval. "That's why I happen."

"Happen to what?" This time, it was the youngest Bidwell who fell into the trap. Too late, she realized the trap, but not its exit; and, in turn, her eyes grew vague. "Really?" she said, in blank, but courteous question. And then she hastened on her way.

"We did so hope poor dear Willis would be here, this afternoon," the second Miss Bidwell observed, when she had made safe pouring of another cup of tea. "You'd have liked that; wouldn't you, Miss West?"

"I always like to see my friends happy," Jessica made enigmatic answer. "One more cup of tea, Miss Bidwell, and please, please not any milk in it."

The second Bidwell girl looked up in surprise.

"Don't you like cream, Miss West?"

"In its proper place," Jessica responded, as she gazed at the immaculate tips of her white gloves, and wondered whether she ought to attempt another sandwich by way of proving her delight in the present gayety.

The second Miss Bidwell smiled at her tea-pot as if it had been an infant child in need of encouragement. In reality, the smile was meant for Jessica; but, since her former fiasco, the second Miss Bidwell dared not turn her eyes from the tea before her.

"Where is the proper place?" she asked indulgently, while she tilted up the cream jug.

"The cow," Jessica answered, in a sudden wave of rebellion, as she saw the milky pallor spreading through the tea. "Oh, my dear Miss Bidwell! Please, please not!"

The second Miss Bidwell had the grace to blush, although she handed Jessica the milky cup with a calm

assumption that she was expected to drain it to the dregs.

"I quite forgot," she said calmly, by way of adequate excuse.

Jessica sniffed daintily at the cup, shut her teeth, then gulped the contents of the cup as if it had been hemlock.

"Another time, you'd better tie a knot in the nose of your tea-pot," she suggested dryly.

"But," the second Miss Bidwell looked up in surprise at the limitations of Jessica's intelligence; "but, if I did, I'm afraid the tea couldn't run out nicely," she returned.

Then Jessica gave up her efforts to converse and, setting down her cup, started to cross the room. Three steps from the table, however, she was met by an arriving friend in search of tea, and dragged back again inside the Bidwell radius. The friend was relatively modern, and could even gossip, so Jessica yielded to her welcoming little gesture.

"What a sweet frock!" she said admiringly, as she tested the hotness of her tea.

Jessica glanced down at the trailing folds of her reception gown.

"You like it?" she questioned a little eagerly, for it had not been solely for her own pleasure that she had donned the clinging, cream-coloured frock, that day. The hat was cream-coloured, too, and crowned with great soft feathers that were held in place by the dull gold buckle she had last worn, one August night, in Jacques Cartier Square.

"It's adorable! I wish I had one like it," her friend sighed; "only it wouldn't look the same on me."

"What is that?" The second Bidwell girl set down her pot of tea and turned to stare. "Miss West's gown? Nonsense, my dear! You would look very sweet in that. So would I, too. It is nice; but plain and modest, the sort of thing any woman could wear. Where was it made? Paquet's?"

A gleam of mirth came into Jessica's gray eyes.

"I had it out from Paris," she informed her hostess.

"Really? Then it must have been dearer than I thought; but it doesn't look it."

Jessica nodded till her feathers shook.

"I'm glad of that," she said meekly.

The second Bidwell girl smiled up at her guest in full approval.

"My dear," she said; "you'd get to be quite one of us in time."

But Jessica demurred.

"I am afraid I couldn't stay here long enough."

In mercy to their hostess, the other guest interposed.

"I called for you on my way out here, Jessica," she said. "They told me you had gone. What started you off so early?"

"To get it safely —" Jessica caught herself up short, and shrugged her shoulders. Then she added hastily, "Did you see mama?"

"Only the maid. What a quaint house it is! And yet I can't see how you ever came to go there. The Château seems more in your line."

Jessica laughed.

"It was," she answered crisply. "Then it wasn't. Thereby hangs a —"

"Tale?" her friend supplemented.

"No. A toasting-fork." Jessica laughed again.

"I never meant to tell of it; but it's all so long ago that I don't mind now. We were there at first."

"So I was told. What made you go away?"

"My dear," the second Miss Bidwell urged; "remember how long they've been here."

"And how dear the Château is," Jessica supplemented. "Thank you, Miss Bidwell. Quite so. Still, dad might have managed to meet his bills, even if we had stayed on there. When he went West in June, though, mama wanted to move to a smaller house. I wanted to stay there, and we had a deadlock. At last, the deadlock broke, and I was literally forked over."

The youngest Miss Bidwell, straying to the group, had paused to listen.

"Don't you mean the horns, dear Miss West?" she queried. "That's the word we Canadians use for such dilemmas."

"No dilemma about it!" Jessica objected. "It was just a great, big toasting-fork with a slab of toast hung on the end."

"Oh—oh—h!" said the second Bidwell girl.

"That was just about what I thought," Jessica responded promptly. "Since then, I've grown used to being pestered with toast at all sorts of hours. I was new to Quebec then, and I resented it as an insult to my digestion. At home in Lone Wolf, mama used to eat toast and tea, when she had headache; but we didn't feed it out to company, as you do here. We'd as soon have given squills. However, that's all bygones now. Apropos, do give me another cup, Miss Bidwell. Yours is so very good. But no cream, please."

"But the toast?"

Jessica stirred her tea.

"It was at luncheon," she said, with an air of thoughtful reminiscence. "You know the second waiter, the one that's bow-legged in his eyes? He stood down by the open fireplace, apparently warming himself, for it was a cold, wet day. We were hardly seated when he faced about and came marching up the dining-room like a triumphal procession, or else the beadle in the Basilica; only, instead of the gold-headed staff, he bore a monstrous iron fork with a monstrous slice of toasted bread on the end, bread enough for a dozen hungry mouths. 'Madame will have toast?' he said to me. Really, it was as final as 'Hold up your hands.' One could almost see the gun in his pocket. I didn't dare refuse, and he slid the thing on my plate and tramped away again in search of more."

"How nice of him!" It was the youngest Miss Bidwell who spoke, and her tone was greedy. "Wasn't it very good?"

Jessica sighed a little.

"I never knew. In fact, I never finished up my luncheon. He had hardly gone, when the head waiter descended on me with a plate of butter, a sort of gastronomic acolyte, you know. I was so terrified I dropped the butter knife, butter and all, all over the head waiter's boots."

There was a pause. Then, —

"Poor dear Miss West! How disconcerting! What could you do?"

"Engage rooms at the Maple Leaf, that afternoon," Jessica answered, with a swift return to her customary unconcern.

"And that was the way you and Mr. Dorrance met each other?"

Jessica set down her half-empty cup.

"Yes," she replied briefly.

"How interesting! It almost seemed like Fate," the second Miss Bidwell murmured softly.

Jessica rallied.

"Fate in buttery boots?" she queried, with a flippancy she was far from feeling. "It doesn't sound especially romantic, Miss Bidwell."

The other guest felt it was high time for her to reënter the talk.

"I just saw Mr. Dorrance, as I came in here," she said. "He was driving out the Grande Allée with Mr. Asquith."

"He will be here soon now." The youngest Bidwell girl spoke with an air of importance. "In fact, we are looking for him, every minute. He was the one who chose to-day for our tea."

"Mr. Dorrance?"

"Yes. Sister met him, two weeks ago, and told about our plans, and asked him when we'd better have it. He was so interested, and set to-day. One could almost believe he also chose the weather. But it is time the naughty man was here."

"You said he was out driving with Mr. Asquith?" Jessica inquired, more for the sake of saying something than because she lacked information on that score. Over the breakfast table, Dorrance had talked to the Colonel about his mid-day trip, had spoken of his need to return in time to put in a tardy appearance at the Bidwell tea. And Jessica, leaving the table, had gone directly to her room in order to unpack this especial gown and sew the dull gold buckle among the plumes of her hat. For all this reason, then, she

paid the scantest heed to the answer to her question. Instead, she made a mental reckoning of the time since the arrival of her friend, then faced about until, without stirring, she could command the late-comers still passing in at the drawing-room door. When that manœuvre was executed, —

“I should think Mr. Asquith would regard you as his good angel, Jessica,” she found her friend was saying.

“In what way?” she asked, with a carelessness which belied her blush.

“In the way you carried him ashore. All the men in the city are saying you saved his life.”

“Not all the men,” Jessica contradicted lightly.

“The last I knew, Mr. Asquith himself wasn’t saying so at all.”

“How horrid of him!”

“Not at all.” Quite unconsciously Jessica was echoing the phrase of Mrs. Asquith. “I ordered every one I knew to keep still about the matter. Mr. Asquith hasn’t any notion how he got ashore.”

The second Miss Bidwell looked up, with what, for her, was haste.

“I told him,” she said, with a smile of exasperating sweetness.

Jessica frowned.

“Miss Bidwell! How — too bad of you!” It was plain that she suppressed a sharper phrase.

The smile expanded.

“But he had a right to know, my dear Miss West. You are too modest. And it was so romantic. At least,” swiftly she corrected her unguarded statement; “it would have been romantic, if it hadn’t been quite

so — so lusty. Men never seem to care for lusty women," she added, with a little sigh of sympathy for Jessica.

"And you told him?" Jessica demanded shortly.

"Yes. I told him all about it. Really, it did make a very pretty little story. I wish you had been there to see how interested in it he was. I spoke slowly, not to tire him, and he lay quite still, with his eyes almost shut, and listened like a little baby. Really, I do wish you had been there. They said you had been to see him, only the very day before. It would have been so very nice, if you had only happened in, while I was telling," the second Miss Bidwell added gently, moved by the picture which she herself had created.

The other guest was realistic in her tendencies.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He said," the speaker dropped her eyes and assumed a tone of modest sentiment, as if her meaning were by no means all included in her words; "he said, after he had lain still and thought about it for a long, long time, 'Dear Cousin Lucy, you never would have been rambustious enough to accomplish that.'"

Then Jessica giggled, nervously and long.

When at last she raised her eyes, she started violently, and her colour came rolling up in a glorious tide across her cheeks and brow, and, with the colour, there came a new lustre in her eyes, new eagerness in the curves of her scarlet lips.

On the threshold of the drawing-room stood Kay Dorrance; but not the grave and sombre Dorrance she had known of late. In his place stood an alert, happy boy, his head lifted proudly on his wide, straight shoulders, his face smiling expectantly and his brown

eyes sweeping the rooms in evident search for some one who should be there before him. Swiftly his eyes roved up and down the little gathering, until at last they came to rest upon the eyes of Jessica. From far across the rooms, he sent her his eager, wordless message. Then, with an odd little smile of supreme contentment, he went limping forward to greet the eldest Miss Bidwell, receiving her guests just inside the door.

A minute or two later, he came upon Jessica in the corner of the back drawing-room, whither the second Bidwell girl had followed her. Her back to the room, Jessica was bending above a volume of sacred prints, apparently absorbed in the plumage of Elijah's ravens, when she heard Dorrance's voice close in her ears.

"Jessica?" he said.

And then they went away together.

The second Miss Bidwell stood looking after them.

"O—oh—h?" she said. And added, "Poor dear Willis!"

THE END.

