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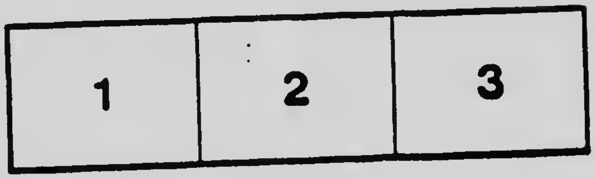

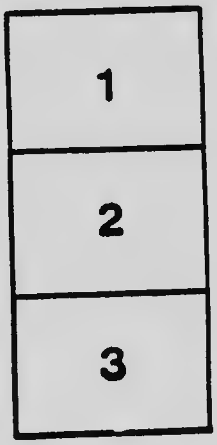

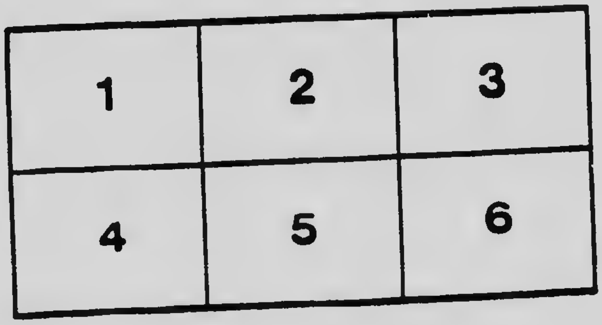

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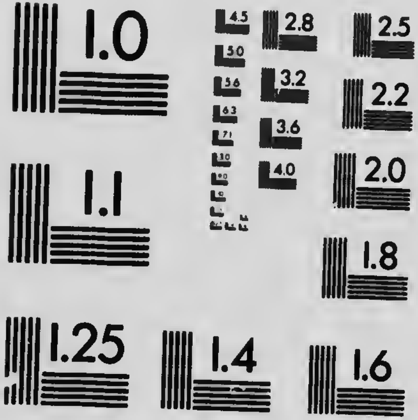
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The
CREEPING
TIDES
KATE JORDAN

[illegible]

H. Kathleen Horwood.

Will borrower
please return?

THE CREEPING TIDES

"*The tide! The tide! The tide be comin' for some on us. It 'ave someone every time . . . an' it come up. It come nearer . . . and then it spreads . . . On it comes With a rush! With a roar! And the claws clutchin' at you . . . Oh, it takes them! And it goes over them. Over them. One roarin' rush!*"

"*The Tragedy of Nan.*"
BY JOHN MASEFIELD.

The door closed. He took her into his arms.

Frontispiece. *See Page* 300.

THE CREEPING TIDES

A ROMANCE OF AN OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

BY

KATE JORDAN

AUTHOR OF "TIME, THE COMEDIAN," ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
LUCIUS WOLCOTT HITCHCOCK

TORONTO
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Published, May, 1913

THE COLONIAL PRESS
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09500822

TO

JOHN MASEFIELD

AN EXPRESSION OF APPRECIATION — AND BECAUSE YEARS
AGO, WHEN SHIPWRECKED IN NEW YORK, HE DRIFTED
TO HARBOR AMONG THE OLD STREETS OF GREENWICH
VILLAGE WHERE THIS STORY IS LAID

CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE
I. Out of Nowhere 1
II. The Start 20
III. Neighbors 33
IV. The Letter 42
V. Drifting Wrecks 54
VI. In Venice 66
VII. Within Four Walls 90
VIII. "Love, that is blood within the veins of time" 96
IX. The Tide Creeps to John's Door . . . 110
X. Dreaming 127
XI. A Meeting 134
XII. Lifting the Veil 143
XIII. The Stone Wall 157
XIV. The Unconquerable 175
XV. Not Needed 202
XVI. The Tide Creeps to Fanny's Door . . 218
XVII. The Man who was "Wanted" 237
XVIII. The Stairway into the Future . . . 257
XIX. The Tide Ebbs 269
XX. The Enemy's Country 292
XXI. Plans 301
XXII. Visitors 309
XXIII. The Old Scar 318
XXIV. "Good-by, my Captain" 328
XXV. The Petitioner 331
XXVI. Miss Onderdonk's Day 339

THE CREEPING TIDES

CHAPTER I

OUT OF NOWHERE

ON a dazzling, penetrating afternoon late in March in the year nineteen hundred and two, Miss Selena Onderdonk was ready for travel and waiting for a visitor. The world outside her windows seemed full of the elves of the air rioting in a cold radiance, high winds and swirls of gritty dust.

"An edgy, tempery day," she described it in her thoughts, and shivered. "Happy people are subdued to-day. Sad ones are made mad."

Over a warm steamer coat she wore a dust cloak that had been part of every journey for the last eight years. A scoop-shaped, black hat was settled straightly over her serene eyes and pepper-and-salt hair. Her valise was all she had to remember — her trunk having been sent on the day before — and this stood on a chair beside her. Gloves and handkerchief were spread on her knees. Her open watch was in her hand.

It lacked fully half an hour of the time the visitor had written that she would arrive, but already Miss Onderdonk was nervous. The situation that she found herself in was more unusual than any that had hitherto punctuated her sedate and methodical existence and had come about in this way: Several weeks before, when an aunt just widowed had persuaded her to make her home with her in San Francisco, Miss Onderdonk had put an advertisement in a New York paper:

> "Professional woman definitely leaving city will sell furniture of two large rooms in quiet, old neighborhood. Also small library of well-selected books. Rooms may be rented by the month if desired. Address for ten days — School Teacher — Box —

A number of replies had come, but all unsatisfactory, and she had about decided to dispose of her effects by some other method, when more than a week later a letter had arrived which made her change her mind. This was from Baltimore, from a woman signing herself "Mrs. Barrett," who gave the General Post-office as her address. Her offer to buy the furniture and rent the rooms was generous enough to fan to full flame the business perception that Miss Onderdonk inherited from the thrifty, Dutch fur traders who had been her ancestors. She had immediately written an acceptance. The next letter from the purchaser had come from Philadelphia, the General Post-office again being given as the address. This time Miss Onderdonk's curiosity, and the imaginative streak that made her love a story of adventure, were both aroused. The third letter bore the postmark of a small New Jersey town, showing that the peripatetic correspondent was nearing New York, and in this "Mrs. Barrett" stated that she would arrive at Miss Onderdonk's at three o'clock of this present day, pay the money and take possession.

This, as it developed, had formed an incident with a deepening mysterious flavor, delightful at first, then disturbing. Miss Onderdonk began to think it did not ring true. It might even be a stupid, practical joke. As she waited, she was much like a piece of well-oiled machinery that resented being slightly tip-tilted out of its narrow, accustomed gauge by some force it could not even see.

She sat in a really spacious room, a remnant of old-time, temperate opulence. Through the smoke-grime on the high ceilings, oleaginous Cupids bearing garlands were dimly seen. The sarcophagus-like, marble mantel was decorated with bunches of heavy grapes, all mutilated. The mirror set into the wall above it had a beautifully carved, old frame, a glass cheap and new. Few of the dangling prisms were left on the huge chandeliers. The colonnaded mahogany doors were scarred.

This stately room and two spaces partitioned from it, had been [illegible] home for eleven years. They were close to Waverly Place, in Greenwich Village — that one corner of relic-slaughtering New York that retains reminders of the dignified gentility of a century ago. Here Eleventh and Fourth Streets, refusing to be separated by arithmetical arrangement, meet at an unexpected point as if to shake hands; and Waverly Place sticks its head in where some other street ought to be, for all the world like a village busybody who has to see what is happening around the corner.

The place is two-toned in a most striking way: Along the streets that have survived impairment are lines of sedate, prosperous homes, many of them occupied by descendants of their builders and as conservatively American as any town in New England; there are other streets where decadent mansions are rented out in bare floors, even rooms, and house a curious, secretive, and constantly shifting population. Here one meets wrecks from strange pasts; walking sorrows with memories for companions; eyes that seem looking into graves; patrician voices often in strange tongues; beautiful hands in old gloves; proud, gray heads under old bonnets. The old Village, holding back from the shrieking rush of progress, has an affinity with these aimless, broken beings. They float in and out like spoil on the tides.

It still lacked twenty minutes of the time mentioned in Mrs. Barrett's letter when Miss Onderdonk heard light, hurried steps on the lower stairs She rose to her feet with a jolt, nervousness vanishing in the pleasant certainty that here was the eccentric purchaser who, without asking a question, had offered her almost twice what she had hoped to get for her household goods. She pulled open the door and peered through her glasses into the dim hallway.

At the turn of the stairs a stranger stood. She was not quite of middle height, slenderly made, and dressed in gray serge. A gray chiffon veil was caught under her chin, making a taut, filmy mask through which came a cloudy impression of dark eyes with an earnest gaze and the blur of a vivid mouth. She came nearer and spoke in a low-pitched voice of most pleasant sound:

"Is this Miss Onderdonk?"

"Yes."

"Oh." This was the satisfied breath of one tired, hurried. "Then I'll tell the man to fetch up my trunk."

She wheeled again and went rapidly down the one flight of stairs to the front door.

Miss Onderdonk remained where she was, pleasure and query in her face. She had somehow come to visualize her correspondent as old or middle-aged, the picture of an ample widow who would become asthmatically confidential, having particularly occurred to her. To find her young, and of pronounced though veiled prettiness, gave the quip of the romantic to the situation, and made Miss Onderdonk begin the little game — born of her imaginativeness and loneliness — that she called "noticing." To study strangers and arrive at conclusions about them was her favorite distraction on street cars, during ocean voyages, and lonely *entr'actes* at matinees.

When Mrs. Barrett returned, Miss Onderdonk's eyes, sharpened by twenty years of watchfulness over hundreds of pupils, flashed eagerly over her and her belongings. She noticed that the serge gown was of a recent, spring fashion, ready-made and not well-fitting; that the small trunk shouldered by the cabman was glaringly new; that newness also shrieked from the yellow suit-case carried by Mrs. Barrett; from her hand satchel, russet shoes, gloves, even from her small pigskin purse from which she paid the man — or rather overpaid him surprisingly, judging by his explosive thanks.

"I believe she 's been very poor and has just come into money," was Miss Onderdonk's first deduction.

Her second was that her visitor was nervous, very nervous. When they were alone and both seated, Mrs. Barrett began to tug at her new, gray gloves. Her hands trembled so it was with difficulty that she pulled them off. These small, childish hands next engaged Miss Onderdonk's attention and intensified the impression of her visitor's recent poverty; they were well-cared for, but bore about the nails and knuckles old signs of having toiled hard. There was no wedding ring; no ring of any sort upon them.

"I hope you 'll like the furniture," Miss Onderdonk began in her mild, informing voice. "It was quite a risk to buy it without seeing it."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Barrett interrupted; "you described it so thoroughly, you know."

"But people are so apt to see what belongs to them in a rose-colored light — at least I am. I 'm quite foolish about my things. They 're all genuinely old. I picked them up at auctions."

"Too bad you must part with them," Mrs. Barrett said sympathetically; "I 'll pay you now." She opened the hand satchel and handed Miss Onderdonk what seemed a pamphlet of money. "I counted it and had it all ready. But will you see if it 's right, please?"

As Miss Onderdonk obeyed, her head bent, she was conscious that her visitor was looking around with a cautious quiet, lifting and replacing the books on the table in a noiseless way as an intruding servant might have done.

"Absolutely correct. I 'll give you a receipt."

When she turned from the big Sheraton desk, the sheet of paper covered with her fine, Victorian writing fluttering in her hand, she found Mrs. Barrett had risen and was standing before the mantel looking up at a fine old print of Morland's "Cottages in Winter."

"Now," said Miss Onderdonk, going to her, "this receipt puts you into complete possession. I only hope you 'll love this little home as much as I have."

Mrs. Barrett took the paper silently. Miss Onderdonk could not see through the veil but she had a feeling that her visitor was fighting tears, that she did not even trust herself to speak. This suspicion scuttled the game of "noticing," and drops from the maternal well within Miss Onderdonk, that neither celibacy nor a long, tiresome struggle with other peoples' offspring had been able to parch, warmed her heart for this young and lonely woman.

"Would n't you like a cup of tea, my dear?" she asked.

Mrs. Barrett faced her gratefully. "Oh, have you time?"

"I can wait for a train a little later. I 'm only going up the Hudson to-day to stay with my brother. I don't leave for the Pacific coast until next week." She bustled about comfortably. "I 'd like a cup of tea myself, and I also want to show you where things are. Now you just sit down — this is my favorite," she said, putting her hands on top of a cushioned armchair.

"How cosy — and fat!" Mrs. Barrett exclaimed, and sat down.

There was a great deal of opening and shutting of drawers as Miss Onderdonk spread the cloth and set out the china. She talked continually, as she dashed in and out of a screened alcove, mentioning where each thing belonged, extolling the excellent gas-stove and the small ice-chest. She noticed that as Mrs. Barrett nodded and replied, she began to make ineffectual movements with her small, nervous hands toward the fastening of her veil; she had become aware that to have the tea she must lift this, yet that she did so unwillingly was evident to the kind but sharp eyes watching her. Miss Onderdonk put this down to a desire to hide the traces of the secret tears, and when she saw the gray gauze at length unpinned and flung back, she did not at first look at the uncovered face which was being delicately brushed with a handkerchief.

"You'll want to know where to buy things," Miss Onderdonk went on, as she carried the teapot, steaming like a censer, to the table. "I'm leaving you a little book containing the addresses of my laundress and the tradespeople. I've done my own housework lately — but you'll want a woman to come in, and I know an excellent Swedish girl — "

"No, thanks — no," Mrs. Barrett broke in sharply. Her eyes looked down and she took several moments to fold the veil on her lap. "I'll like to be by myself — at first. I'd like to be kept very busy."

Her gaze shot up at her companion, then quickly aside and down again in a furtive, awkward way that Miss Onderdonk had heretofore noticed only in uncultivated people when out of their element; in mothers from the slums, when they had come to talk to her about refractory children; in children bred in institutions, when brought for the first time in touch with family life; in rough working men, when being cross-examined by some authority. But this knowledge did not explain the same crudeness in Mrs. Barrett, who, though she had known manual toil, and had probably been very poor, was as surely a gentlewoman as Miss Onderdonk's self.

“Do you know New York at all?” Miss Onderdonk asked, as by a gesture she invited her guest to draw up her chair, and then seated herself.

“No,” Mrs. Barrett murmured.

“Then probably you don't know the history of this old neighborhood. It 's often spoken of by its ancient name of Greenwich Village. It 's like bits of Bloomsbury or Chelsea in London, or Montmartre in Paris. It 's absolutely out of the line of travel. The conventional New Yorker would need a map to find his way about. If a person wanted to slip away from the world, one could be quite lost here.”

Mrs. Barrett had stopped stirring her tea and was listening with intense interest.

"Quite lost?" she echoed and did not seem conscious of speaking.

It was then that Miss Onderdonk looked directly, for the first time, at the face opposite her. Without speaking, she remained looking at it, a delicate sadness going over her spirit like that which came to her with the reading of melancholy verse. Instead of prettiness, for which she had been prepared, this face had a great deal of beauty, but with blemishes that were like stains on a radiant texture. The long, shadowy eyes were sunken and strained; the cheeks had flattened in the cent under the pallor of the dry, drained skin hard lumps of a malign, purplish tint gleamed angrily. The face was young, yet had the look of finality given only by age or by the long, long suffering that breeds indifference.

"You 've been very ill, have n't you?" The words leaped from Miss Onderdonk without reflection. "I beg your pardon," her conservatism added.

Mrs. Barrett shook her head in denial, a nervous red spreading and fading in her face. "Tired. I 'll be quite well, when I rest."

"Then, my child, you ought to have in the Swedish girl. If you tire yourself here on the warm days of spring — "

Sudden light etherealized the stranger's face. "Oh, it will be like playing with toys!"

"Well — eat carefully. You seem a little anæmic and ill-nourished. I 've left you plenty for dinner to-night, so you won't need to market until the morning. You 'll find a bottle of milk, bread and butter, a slice of cold spring lamb, and a rice pudding on which I rather pride myself."

She bent forward and in a gentle, guardian-like way placed her fingers on Mrs. Barrett's arm. The effect of this upon the stranger was surprising. A hard tremor ran through her; her dark eyes grew blurred; she laid her hand on Miss Onderdonk's, at first lightly, and then with a burning appeal in it.

"You are so kind to me!" she said piercingly. Her wistful eyes with a look of fear in them made a rapid search of Miss Onderdonk's face, her lips parted as if a wild cry would break from them. She hesitated, withdrew her hand very slowly, and sank back in the chair, a hushed, trembling figure, hiding an inner storm.

The watcher's held-in breath came sharply. A cry, a prayer, a confession had almost been spoken by this woman and had been dragged back.

"You 'll want to hear something about your neighbors." Miss Onderdonk's curiosity was prodding her, but so was the desire to say something to interest and comfort.

Mrs. Barrett raised an exhausted face. "You mean the people in the house?" An anxious frown shot down between her brows. "They don't try to know each other — do they?"

"There are some in the upper rooms that I 've not even seen; they come and go all the time. You can't help meeting the permanent ones, however, and if you like 'types,' you 'll enjoy them." Miss Onderdonk poured out more tea. "There 's a little dressmaker down-stairs in the front — Mrs. Murray. She 's a mixture! Spanish and Irish-American. Her grammar is awful sometimes, and yet she has a streak in her that will make her weep over a sonnet or a sunset. On this floor, the front parlor is rented to an old German who mends violins. If the cupboards and the wardrobe did n't divide him from you, you 'd hear a wailing like sick animals. He 's always celebrating some anniversary or other and then he nails smilax around the frame of his door and has some very old men come to drink coffee with him. Each plays on something, and all beautifully! Over there — " She pointed across Mrs. Barrett's head to the big double mahogany doors; "is the back parlor of the house next door, which in its palmy days communicated with this as a double mansion. And in there," she said, her eyes brightening like a connoisseur's over a treasure, "divided from you by seven inches of old Domingo mahogany that 's clamped by rusty bolts which have not budged for twenty years, you have a neighbor who 's as interesting as many a three-volume novel! Do you read the papers?" she asked in a sudden way, pointed with meaning.

"Yes."

"Then you 've read lately about John Cross?"

"No."

"Have n't you read of the soldier, a man in the ranks, who out in the Philippines about last November made a wonderful record for bravery — things to take your breath away — who 's refused promotion and does n't seem even to want the usual medal? Now do you remember?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Barrett nodded. "I saw something about that quite recently. But surely — ?" and she trembled inquiringly.

"He 's your neighbor," said Miss Onderdonk, and pointed again to the big doors, "in there."

Mrs. Barrett looked over her shoulder. "In there!" she murmured with a wondering sigh. "A house like this is almost terrifying. Each life packed into a room as if into a box, with only a wall or a door between."

"I 've not seen John Cross, but Mrs. Murray has. She burst in here one morning about two weeks ago with the news that the back parlor rooms of the next house — they 're made into a regulation sort of suite — were rented. A big Irishman — a servant, as it has since turned out — had arrived with a wagon filled with packing cases and with three men to help him. A few days later a cab stopped, and a tall, young man, ghastly-pale and leaning on a cane, was helped in by the big Irish servant. A nurse arrived the same day. A doctor came and went. I must confess I was as curious as Mrs. Murray — and then after a few days we read in the paper all about the new arrival: giving his name; that he was an Englishman who had served as a common soldier in the Philippines; that he had refused promotion, and had been granted a discharge because of ill health following some terrible wounds. A reporter found out who he was, and that the Irishman who is his servant now had been his comrade in the ranks for years — in fact had come from England with him."

"But how — " came faintly, "how did the reporter find out about him, if he — hid — here?"

"Oh, trust them! A young newspaper man used to live up-stairs. He told me that if he once got on the track of something that promised news, he never rested night or day till he had what he called a 'scoop' for his paper. He said a hint could put him on the scent and that, once started, he was like a South Sea head-hunter instead of a sane American with a pencil and notebook."

She laughed at the memory of the young reporter, and Mrs. Barrett struggled desperately to give an answering smile, but her lips, after a fluttering, settled into taciturnity. Her pale hand upon the table crumbled bread absently. She had a dull, self-communing look.

"Is n't it interesting about John Cross?" Miss Onderdonk asked.

"It does n't seem like humdrum life," Mrs. Barrett smiled, rousing herself.

"Oh, my dear, I often think that life is exactly like a story, only we don't recognize its drama because it's around us instead of in lines of print between pasteboard covers."

Miss Onderdonk might have speculated more about the soldier-invalid beyond the mahogany doors, or she might have talked on in an effort to learn more about this stranger that chance had sent across her path, but a clock struck somewhere and she looked at her watch. "Gracious!" she exclaimed; "I missed two trains deliberately. I shall probably miss a third. And —" She stopped, astounded, her eyes on a yellow, striped cat which strolled languidly across the sill of the window; "if there is n't Piff come back, although I gave him away to a friend who lives half a mile off! What in the world shall I do with you now, Piff — you miserable vagabond?"

She squatted beside the cat and shook him tenderly. Mewing plaintively, he flattened his body, glided under her hand, and with a leap that was all grace, landed with velvet softness on Mrs. Barrett's knees.

"Be careful of him," Miss Onderdonk advised, as she drew on her gloves; "Piff 's affectionate, but has a way sometimes of saying '*Piff!*' suddenly, and spreading out his claws like a little rake; that 's how he got his name."

Mrs. Barrett had lifted Piff to her cheek and he was purring there melodiously. "See," she said wistfully, "he likes me. Have you got to give him to your friend?"

"Would you like to keep him, my dear?"

"Oh, so much!"

"Why, do, then. I had n't thought of that."

"I 'll be very good to him." She stroked the cat and whispered to him. The creature settled down in the niche made by her arm and began to blink. "He likes me," she said again, the tone full of wonder and poignant content.

Miss Onderdonk took up her light bag in one hand and held out the other to Mrs. Barrett. This stranger had not told her a single fact about herself, and her replies to questions that involved the personal had been monosyllabic. But Miss Onderdonk liked this better than a spineless, loquacious unreserve. Besides, she saw plainly that this woman bore the marks of a deep and very recent trouble. Her natural kindness bubbled to find an outlet in some warm words, but her conservatism kept them back as did the dulled repose that Mrs. Barrett, during the last few moments, had seemed to hook on like a mask.

"Good-by," said Miss Onderdonk.

"Good-by, and thank you for so many things."

"You won't be lonely, after your friends begin coming to see you."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Barrett in a dull way, "not then."

"Well — good-by." There seemed nothing left Miss Onderdonk but to go, until with a twitching, as if beyond her control, Mrs. Barrett's small, burning hand held yearningly to hers. "I don't suppose I 'll get to New York for a long time." There was an excited catch in Miss Onderdonk's voice. "But when I do, may I come to see you?"

"Oh, yes; yes, do!" The hand still clung to hers. "You 've been so good, so kind —" The voice trailed off to a sigh. "Good-by."

Miss Onderdonk looked back once as she went down the stairs, and saw Mrs. Barrett, the cat crushed in her arms, gazing wistfully after her.

"Somehow I feel like a brute," she thought, as she hurried down the street; "as if I 'd deserted a child on a doorstep. That woman's eyes —!" The picture of her own colorless but peaceful days shot up before her and made her add: "Oh, what have they looked upon?" She gazed back at the windows of her old home. "I'll surely come here the first time I'm in New York, and yet —" she nodded conclusively, "I have a feeling that I'll never see her again."

She never did.

CHAPTER II

THE START

AFTER she was left alone Mrs. Barrett remained in the doorway and gazed into the empty hall. Through the house door, half of which was standing open, the afternoon sunlight came up the stairs in a wash of quicksilver that exposed the dust and decay. The thin, excited voices of children playing a game, and, more faintly, the throb of trains and cars, came from the street. She wore the look of one who walks fearfully at dead of night from one empty room to another; that blank yet seeking look, with fright crouching just back of it. For a pause of several minutes she stood so, the cat in her arms, the solitude of the big room yawning behind her.

A descending step on the stairs above made her draw back. She closed the door and leaned against it. Some feeling attacked her, shook her convulsively, almost overpowered her. There was despair in the way she pressed her face and body to the door. She had reached the moment when Nature decides that struggle must end in temporary collapse, so that readjustment for another struggle may take place.

She let Piff fall heavily and her fingers fumbled at the lock and bolt. She went in one, disconsolate wave of motion from the door to the sofa and fell down on it, her hat crushed back from her face by the pillows, her coat dragged up about her neck. She lay like a creature that had been at the mercy of a cantankerous sea, flung up at last to get back breath or die. And then her sorrow seized her — then it came down on her as, in the remembering hours of life, sorrow will. She offered no resistance to it. She cried in the deep, bitter way that only the desolate know. The tears brought part of her life with them; she went down into the pit of her pain, to the very bottom of it. And when she had lain there a long time, with sick, burning blood and aching heart, until she seemed on the very edge of death, the first step in the work of readjustment began. She cried no more; her body slowly filled with peace; her heart grew strangely still; the coil of frantic thoughts gave place to a numbness that first put up the shutters against all thought, and then very slowly allowed a sane and healing philosophy to filter in. The end was reached when she struggled up and faced the room, to find the sun gone from it and Piff sedately using his tongue as a brush upon his amber side. Mrs. Barrett sat very still, shrunk as in defeat, her eyes half-closed and with scorched rims. She nodded sadly at Piff, who, though about to polish a paw already stiffly extended, paused to gaze at her with the eye of a student.

"Well, I 've done it, Piff," she said, a smile going over her tear-inflamed face; "I said I would n't go to pieces, and I have." She stood up and pulled the pins from her hat. "But it 's over." She pressed her hands to her head, that ached violently, and continued speech aloud in a dull, murmuring way: "It had to be. I 've kept it all in so long, I thought I could go through it defiantly to the end — without a tear — not one. But that woman was so sweet. It was letting her go that did it, and starting in to be alone — again. But it 's over now. Piff, come here." She caught up the cat and laid her lips upon the sleek, striped head. "You 'll never see swelled nose and red eyes again, my dear. I 'm going to make each day a finished mosaic, not belonging to any other that ever was. No look back! No look ahead! I swore this before, Piff, and I went under. But it won't happen again, I promise you."

Animated by this resolve, she set about making herself at home. After unpacking, she bathed her face, brushed her hair, and put on a house gown of pale blue, woolen stuff. Like the rest of her possessions, this was new, and like the gray serge it bore marks of being one of hundreds whirled off by machines to find a place in heaps in the shops that cater to appearances at a low price, but its color was becoming to her dead-white skin and pale hair, and its crude cut had followed a graceful model that showed her body to be girlishly thin and pliant. It was with a sigh, as of one in from the desert settling down upon an oasis, that she pushed one of the chairs up to the bookcase and took down one volume after another, examining them in the fondling way of the real book lover.

A quiet happiness suffused her bent face, the rapt look that tells of an escape from the actual. Here were all of Thackeray's — oh, how could Miss Onderdonk have given them up! — and Tennyson's verse — and Rossetti's — and Swinburne's — all of Dickens's, too; four of Stevenson's; two of Kipling's — old favorites not seen for so long, so long! She need never be alone now — not alone in the heaviest sense. These friends, though silent, could speak to her so marvellously.

After the shades were pulled down and the lamp lighted, she sat at the desk and wrote at the head of a sheet of paper:

"MEMO — TO BUY:

A ream of paper, foolscap size — Some softer pens — Manuscript fasteners and covers — Large envelopes — Some notebooks — Mucilage — all the Magazines.

A good tonic — Something for the blood — Oxide of zinc — Orange-flower water and a good cold cream.

LATER

Hire a typewriter — get flowers for the balcony."

She pinned this on the wall above the desk, set out the dinner left by Miss Onderdonk and ate it in company with Piff, who lapped up warm milk and nibbled dice-like bits of meat with a fussy daintiness. Afterward she seated herself in the largest armchair by the yellow lamp and read until her sight began to swoon from sleep. By ten o'clock she was in bed.

The next morning she was astonished and made happy to realize that on this first night in her new home she had slept without even the fragment of a dream to trouble her. She lay upon her arm, her silver-blond hair loosened, and gazed with content at the track of light upon the floor. It was Piff who fully aroused her. He came in from the big room with a questioning mew like the chirp of a sparrow, and then sat himself down in a prim, concise way, exactly in the middle of a rug, while he stared at her out of his gold, unblinking eyes with austere judgment that said: "Still in bed? I marvel at you. Look at *me*." She talked to him gaily while she bathed and dressed, but he paid little attention until the scent of the coffee was filling the air and breakfast seemed imminent.

Through the first part of the morning, as she moved lightly and busily about, the moments flashed by pleasantly for Mrs. Barrett. But when everything to the last detail was done, she sat down and clasped her hands in her lap. Just above the desk there was a decorative calendar. She had torn off the leaf belonging to yesterday and sat looking at "Saturday." This meant that she must buy food to-day, because on Sunday the shops would be closed. She would have to go into the streets just as other people went. Her lips tightened as she braced herself.

She put on her hat, letting the veil droop over her hair and eyes; kissed Piff on the head and set off into the alarms of the city. At first she walked with uneasy looks to right and left. When people approached her she irresistibly looked aside. At other times, over clear spaces, her restless eyes flashed an inquiry from door to door, window to window, and sometimes fixed themselves with steadfast scrutiny upon any distant, loitering figure. But she was soon impressed by the self-absorption of New Yorkers. She saw that she walked among hurrying people who were looking inward, each seeing only himself as he went on his engrossed way. The thought was like a shield between her and the world and she breathed more peacefully. When she made her purchases she forced herself to look straightly at the people who served her, for she remembered the phrase of Miss Onderdonk's that described the reporter hunting news: "A hint could put him on the scent." She must be careful not to suggest to her neighbors anything save the usual housekeeper.

Yet when she reached the gloom of the hall of her own house again, she became aware that her body and mind had been as taut as a fist holding to a life rope. As her arms relaxed, the several parcels she hugged sagged sidewise and would have fallen, had not a shadow suddenly overwhelmed her and a huge, hairy hand, lunging sharply over her shoulder, straightened them. She jolted with terror as she looked up, her mouth opening for a shriek. A big man had followed her and, deep in her own reflections, she had not heard him. Dumb, she stared at him.

"They 're too much entirely for you, miss," he said, with a pleasant, undulating brogue, and before she could resist, had taken the two largest from her weak hands.

He wore an alpaca coat and white linen trousers. He had rough, red hair, rugged cheekbones and jaw, and his blue-eyed stare had the simplicity of a ruminating calf's. Had he not spoken, a glance would have told that he was of Irish peasant stock. Also, in a way all too subtle for definition, he made himself known instantly both as a soldier and a servant.

"You 've too much to carry, miss," — and he smiled into her widened eyes, — "even without your relieving me of my share."

The thought that the man was drunk was routed by his clear gaze and respectful manner. "Your share?" she asked.

"I followed you in from the grocer's, miss," he smiled, "because in your haste you picked up my package as well as your own. It 's this one," and he tore a slip of the paper; "Did you by any chance buy a flitch of bacon?"

"No," she said.

"Well, I did, and there it is!" He laughed as if they were playing a game. "So now — you see?"

"Oh," she said, "I thought — "

"You thought I was a robber, no less — and 't was no wonder, miss. I gave you a start to make you grow an inch. Now I 'll help you up — "

"Please don't trouble — "

"Sure, 't is no trouble at all. They 're too much entirely for a young lady. You should have had them sent in for you." Carrying more than half the packages, he followed her up the wide, first stairway to the door at the head of it. "'T is here?" he asked, as she paused. "Not far."

"Thank you. I 'm sorry I made the mistake."

"'T was nothing at all." He turned to go, his fingers flashing to his forehead in the ghost of a military salute.

He was so winning, his face and voice so human and beaming, to let him go without a word was like wilfully shutting out the sun after a wet day, like refusing water when burning with thirst. Words, against her will to hold them back, struggled out very slowly and timidly: "You live in the next house — on this floor — don't you?"

"I do, miss."

"I've read — of — Mr. Cross," she said in the same breathless yet labored way, a self within her dazed at her making this effort to know another human being.

"I'm his man."

"He's been ill."

"Ah, dear me, he's ill now, God knows." He nodded mournfully.

"Oh, I hoped he was better."

"The whole trouble," said the man, settling himself against the banister and speaking in a tone of the simplest candor, "was that he left the Philippines for home before he should. Just as soon as he could crawl from the hospital he was put on the transport. 'Boys,' he said to the young doctors — and my God, but some of them that they had out there to patch up a man were the raw gossoons! — 'Boys,' said he, 'I want to get back to the States. For God's sake,' he said, 'let me get back where I'll feel a good gale making for a cold rain; where there'll be white women and dark beer,' says he, jesting, miss, sick as he was! Well, they let him go. It's my belief he faked being better than he was. His arm grew terrible troublesome on the long voyage, and by the time we came here, a few weeks ago, he was sick right through him. It's mostly a sort of malaria that 's as black as poison, and there 's fever with it that 'd frighten you — and then, when it gets high, the poor arm, that maybe he 'll lose altogether yet — though God send not! — begins to act cantankerous and will swell and ache to the very bone."

"He was wounded very badly," Mrs. Barrett said softly.

"He was so!" The servant's droll mouth crumpled into a little purse of tender emphasis. "He left a trail of blood after him in the Philippines, if ever a man did! The hip and shoulder and one of his lungs got some bad treatment from the dirty-skinned divils, but it was the poor left arm that fared terrible altogether. They had Mausers, and *while they could n't aim any more than a fish could crack a nut*, they did damage enough to him — damage enough!" He stood up and tucked the package under his arm, preparing to go. "I wish to God he had n't sent off the nurse!" To the inquiry that stole over her face, he continued: "About a week ago he seemed getting on fine, miss, and sitting up most of the day. Then nothing would do but the nurse must go. He got tired of seeing her hanging over him, and I don't wonder. She was a good soul, but she wore specs." His voice sank to deeper confidence. "She looked like a horse, too, poor thing, being long in the teeth."

Laughter gushed from Mrs. Barrett's lips. It startled her more than it did the listener. She became suddenly serious, conscious that for the first time in years she had laughed unthinkingly and from amusement.

" He 's back in bed again," the man continued; " and it 's hard to manage. What with tending him, keeping house, going on errands, and Mr. Cross left alone a good deal — well, it 's not right."

" You must get another nurse, of course."

" Mr. Cross says not," he sighed, " and he 's a wilful man when he takes a notion. But if I knew of a nice, cheerful body with rosy cheeks, that 'd do no more than stay with him when I 'm out, and give him a drink, and perhaps read him the papers — you don't know such a one, miss, I suppose ? "

A thought had leaped into Mrs. Barrett's brain. It was startling and made her heart-beats quicken. Unwise it was, even grotesque, and yet such a dear, cajoling thought that promised her companionship, usefulness, and a distraction from herself, she could not help letting it lead her! She found herself saying surprising words: " I 'm not like that. But — would I — do ? "

The man gazed at her with a contemplative smile that grew more and more bright until, like a blaze of sunshine, it danced in his blue eyes and flashed from his big, widening mouth and snowy teeth.

" You, miss ? Why, if you only would, it 'd be as if the high heaven itself had opened and a beautiful angel had stepped in out of the glory!"

She gave neither smile nor word to the burst of hyperbolic praise. Now that the arrangement was concluded, a numbing apprehension stole over her and made her long to draw into her seclusion again. Yet she could not help saying, in a stumbling, helpless way: "I 'll sit with Mr. Cross, when you have to go out."

"And why not come in by way of the balcony?" the man suggested glowingly. "Then — don't you see? — you won't have the bother of going into the street?"

"The balcony?" she asked, puzzled.

"And did n't you know that it 's the one balcony running right along forninst both houses? Why, I can come and tap at your window when I 'll be needing you, as easy as turning my hand. Thank you, miss, a thousand times." He turned again to go, adding briskly: "Would n't it be nice, too, if I 'd tap on the window every morning and find out what you 'd want in for the day in the way of groceries and the like? 'T would be the one labor for me."

"Oh, it would be nice not having to go out — early!" She added the last word hastily.

"And your name, miss? — so I 'll tell Mr. Cross."

"Mrs. Barrett."

"Mrs. — is it? Excuse me, ma'am, but you don't look it. My name 's Fergus, ma'am; Fergus McManus."

The door was shut. After dropping the packages on the table, Mrs. Barrett hurriedly opened one of the big, door-like windows. The man was right. To the left there were two other windows exactly like hers, the one balcony running the length of all. She came back to the center of the room and stood twisting her hands, while looking about in a bewildered way and yet in content. She had committed herself to an acquaintance with her neighbor, but by it, since the balcony would shelter her coming and going, she was running no further risk. In fact, by following the impulse to speak, she had helped herself, for now this Fergus McManus was to become her messenger and would shield her that much more. Within these four walls peace lay, and safety. If she need never leave them! With drooped head she stood listening. The growl of the city penetrated even to this remote spot, but it came over the crowding houses at the back that, like ramparts, generously and securely shut her in.

CHAPTER III

NEIGHBORS

FERGUS McMANUS lost no time. At about three o'clock that afternoon Mrs. Barrett heard his tap upon her window. She opened it, a feeling of excitement and expectancy enlivening her. Fergus was a picture of weighty respect, while his hand made a wavering motion toward his eyebrows.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. If it 's not asking too much, could you come in now? I want to go up-town to one of the big shops to get a few more linen pillowcases. Could you come in now, ma'am?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "You told Mr. Cross, I suppose? What did he say?"

"Ah, now, does it matter what a creature says when he 's full of a lot of doctor's stuff? He took on, but I did n't mind him. I told him that if he did n't need anything from you, you 'd be no more than an image! Or if he did, you 'd be just some one to give him a drink while I was out. He 's terrible sleepy — maybe he won't even see you. Carry in some book you like. Come now." He lowered his voice to the note of mystery. "And — easy — easy!"

He held the curtain aside for her to enter. She did so, prepared for several sorts of rooms, but not at all for the sort that was gradually disclosed. She was met by an atmosphere that stilled her. Thick shadow and quiet poured over her. It was curious to realize that just beyond the high doors was her own room, bathed in the metallic sunlight of the sharp, March day. The other points of difference crept to her slowly as her eyes grew used to the dimness. Both the parlors of the ancient double house were absolutely alike in every point of structure and decoration, but while her place was womanish and as charming as a small purse directed by an understanding of the beautiful could make it, this was bare, rigid, soldierly, its furnishings startlingly unexpected.

An army officer's tent in the tropics had been duplicated as well as could be within these walls, that surely in their many and diversified experiences had never stared down on anything more contradictory. The bare floor, blanched by scrubbing, had strips of matting on it. John Cross's body lay upon an army cot. The screen that shaded it was formed of plaited grass flung over an ordinary clothes-horse. The curtains at the windows were of lengths of cane sewn together with some glistening fibre. The chairs and table were of ordinary oak, but on the latter there were strange bowls and platters of bark and an Eastern water bottle of brick-colored pottery. On the mantel there was a most hideous god, daubed with bright, crude colors. On the wall above him primitive, savage weapons were fastened against hay-colored mats. Native hats with fringed brims decorated the tops of the dividing doors. A number of unframed photographs showed American soldiers in khaki and campaign hats, all in tropical settings, so that the prongs of the great palms and the thimble-shaped huts fitted in to complete a Philippine mirage in this wreck of an old New York home of the forties.

Fergus had the accomplishment of moving soundlessly. He helped seat Mrs. Barrett by the table, the screen dividing her from the sick man. He pointed to the water bottle, making motions of drinking. After a last peep behind the screen, he went out with a tiptoe quiet that would have meant his fortune as a sneak thief.

Mrs. Barrett did not open her book. She rested her head against the back of the chair and her eyes traveled with interest over every detail of the place. She had the gift of imagination. As she recalled what she had read of John Cross's bravery — so reckless it had fairly called to death — and then thought of his helpless body in this room surrounded by the things familiar to him as a soldier, a compassion that was almost sweet to the taste pulsed up from her heart. Not only was the romance in her delighted; she was glad that this bewildering opportunity permitted her to be there, of use to him.

After what seemed a very long time in that hush, only broken by a subdued hammering from the distance, where one of the first skyscrapers of the neighborhood was going up, she ventured to peep around the screen. There was the blur of a sick-bed picture, the outlines of a big, prone body, a head crowned by a snowy ice-cap, an arm wrapped in bandages. As she watched him, he sighed. A twist of pain went through him, and he muttered impatiently but in the strengthless way of one dulled by a drug. She drew back. A few moments later he muttered again and gave a plaintive groan. Mrs. Barrett's hands had grown very cold; her posture was stiff and nervous. Now that it seemed likely he would need her services, she was attacked by a morbid shyness. She heard him turn, and he began to speak in a low, halting voice:

> " 'What are the bugles blowing — for?'
> Said Fyles — on — parade;
> 'To — to — turn you out, to turn you out,'
> The color sergeant — said.
> 'What makes you look so pale, so pale?'
> Said Fyles — ' "

He stopped abruptly. It seemed to Mrs. Barrett that he had fully awakened, and was listening intently and waiting.

"Fergus?" The word was not much louder than his previous muttering.

Mrs. Barrett tried to answer, but for the moment a feeling almost of terror had stolen her speech. Her social sense had been damaged from disuse, and the art of agreeableness came back in mental convulsions. She could think of nothing to say.

"Who 's there?" the voice asked a little more clearly and with decided impatience.

"I am," she said brokenly.

"Oh!" It was a distinctly ungracious comment.

"Would you like a drink?" she plunged desperately.

"No, thank you." This was even sulky. "Where 's Fergus?"

"He 's — gone out."

"Where?"

"To buy something — yes — linen pillow-cases."

She heard him turn dolefully away. "I meant to say, madam, that I 'm extremely obliged to you for coming in." He yawned, and there was a piteous note in it. "Very good of you, I 'm sure," he said listlessly.

He became silent. Mrs. Barrett squirmed on the edge of her chair, feeling herself a failure.

"You called Fergus," she forced herself to say at last. "Is n't — is n't there? — Can't I do something for you?"

"I *would* like a drink — please."

When she stood by his side with the glass he was still turned away.

"Here 's the water," she said flatly.

He moved stiffly. "I 'll have to ask you to lift my head. Hard job, if it 's as heavy as it feels."

She slipped her arm under his head and he drank as a child does, looking up inquisitively over the glass's rim. Close to him, she saw the bright, hollow eyes, the fever-crusted and blistered lips. When she had lowered his head again, he said:

"I 've a handkerchief somewhere."

She gave it to him.

"Would you settle that ice back a little? I don't need it on the bridge of my nose." She arranged it capably, although her hand trembled. "Thank you," he sighed. "Why are n't all nurses like you?" As she put the glass back on the table, pleased at his praise, she heard him say: "But, do you know, I expected to see your mother?" She returned and stood looking down at him. He blinked up at her in an amiable way. "I thought you were Mrs. Bennett — or what is it? — Barrett? I suppose you 're her daughter?"

"I 'm Mrs. Barrett."

"Are you?" he drowsed. "You seem very young. Perhaps it 's the light. Perhaps I 'd find you older if it were n't so dark."

"Perhaps." She smiled, but her heart-beats were so violent they hurt her.

He smiled back. "This has been awfully good of you!"

She moved away. "I think you should be quiet, now."

"Then *you* talk."

Nervousness went over her in a sharp qualm, bringing self-consciousness with it. "I 'd rather read to you," she said, and seized a book.

He gave her a weary and pleading look. "No! Tell me some of the news of this funny, old neighborhood."

She hesitated. "I only came yesterday," she said, in a little burst.

"Oh?" This was speculative. "How many of you are there?"

"I 'm — alone."

"Are you?" His eyes flickered and then closed. "What do you do? You work, of course. Precious few idlers around here except myself. You teach something?"

"No." Her breath came more peacefully and after a halt she said with a touch of daring: "I have dreams to sell."

This had the effect of making him open his eyes and give her a look of mock wonder. "Are you a fairy? What sort of money pays for dreams? Star dust — or the pollen off a flower?"

She laughed in a fluttering, nervous way. "I 'm going to write — fiction," she said jerkily. "I 'll put my stories in big envelopes, post them at the corner, and they 'll reach the fiction market that way. You see it 's very practical!"

"Some day you 'll write a novel?"

"I mean to try," she said, a thrilling note in her subdued voice.

"Have you a pen name or will it be signed Barrett? You observe that I don't mean it to escape me."

"Barrett," she said briefly, giving an amused shrug.

"What 's your first name?" he asked.

The fear that dogged her touched her like a warning finger tip, yet from his steady look she felt forced to give out this much more of herself. "Fanny 's my name."

"Old-fashioned little name! You don't often hear it nowadays. It was my grandmother's." He lay quiet for some moments, his eyes closed. The drowsiness was going from his face and a look of tensity and exhaustion had replaced it. "I wish you luck!" he murmured sincerely.

As the effects of the drug disappeared entirely, it was plain to the watcher that pain distressed him. His brow would wrinkle in helpless questioning; with futile fingers he would stroke the bandaged weight upon his chest. When she closed a shutter that had blown open, sending in a flare that evidently tortured his eyes, he said, "Thank you," dully. When she lifted the ice-bag and, after wiping his forehead, replaced it more comfortably, he gave her one difficult, upward look of gratitude. But when, after another half hour or so, Fergus came in, he sighed contentedly and turned his face from her; her going away was unnoticed.

CHAPTER IV

THE LETTER

THE back rooms had been Fanny's home for close upon a month. During this time she had changed for the better. She looked healthier. Her face was still thin, but the meagreness had left it. She was naturally very pale, but her skin had lost both the dry, drained quality and the purple spots that had gleamed beneath it. At times her dark eyes gazed out with the steady, heavy cloud upon them, but often they were mirthful in a subdued way. She gave the impression now of a woman tasting a delayed youth, and of a defiant cheerfulness.

The pleasures of her shut-in life were clearly catalogued: The time she spent with John Cross came first in importance; talks with Fergus about war, the tropics and a wild life generally, was second; after this came her one bit of exercise — a rapid, long walk, always taken at night; lastly, there was her acquaintance with little Mrs. Murray, the dressmaker on the lower floor, who had already made one summer gown for her and was busy with a second. She had much to be thankful for. She told herself this many times, every day.

On one of those fresh, penetrating, still mornings that come in April she was resting in a deep chair after settling her rooms. When the click of a thimbled finger was heard on the door she ran gaily to answer it. "On time to the minute!" she cried.

Mrs. Murray, her arms enfolding billows of azure crêpe, stepped blinking from the darkness of the hall into the light. Once she had been pretty. Now she was frail and of nun-like pallor. Her sunken, luminous black eyes had arrows of light in them. Indian-like hair came down over her veined temples in black wads as solid as satin.

She was one of the many whimsicalities of Greenwich Village. On her father's side she was Irish-American, smacking of the East Side streets; on her mother's pure Spanish. She talked English with many of the idioms and errors of a deckhand, but she was as Spanish in looks and temperament as any flower-seller in Madrid. In her teens she had married a handsome Irish sailor, who had shipped on a sugar schooner to Cuba, and been lost in the hurricane which wrecked the boat; his vivid, reckless face, shut within a locket, lay above her heart. This was her history in little, but that with even a small portion of good fortune she would have made one for herself of quite a different sort was evident after an hour with her. For she was an emotional worshipper of beauty in every form. The only outlet for her enthusiasm was her work, and she gave to the making of a gown the reverence that an artist expends on a canvas. Unless people "appealed" to her, she would not sew for them; unless she liked the materials given her, she would refuse the work, no matter how much she needed the money. To Fanny she stood pathetically for the beginnings of things — a wonderful potion left half-mixed; a beautiful house with stairways or windows omitted. They had become friends. Fanny was even admitted to her most sacred confidence — a romantic attachment for big, blue-eyed Fergus.

"He 's the only man I 've ever give a thought to, Mrs. Barrett, since Tom 'went down to the sea in ships.' But there 's somethin' sort of thrilling about that big fellow, red hair and all," she had said. "He 's kind of like spicy carnations twinklin' in the sun after an April shower. Now that ain't foolish, either — for some people make you think of gardens — and some of tack factories! That 's honest!"

After entering the room to-day, she stood thoughtfully removing a nest of pins from the corner of her mouth, her rapier-like glance following Fanny, as she closed and locked the door.

"Why d' you keep on doing that, Mrs. Barrett?"

"What?"

"Always locking the door."

"Oh, I feel more comfortable that way," Fanny said, in a light tone of dismissal.

Mrs. Murray's big eyes had a rapacious stare. "Are you — afraid?" she asked, in a delighted, chilling whisper.

"Afraid?" Fanny's gaze did not waver as she tried to read her face.

"Afraid of — something?"

"Why, no — no!"

"You seem like that to me." She crept nearer mysteriously. "Mrs. Barrett, if you 're keeping out of somebody's way, let me help you. My room 's right by the front door. Now if any one comes askin' questions about you, shall I say you are here, or shall I say you ain't?"

Fanny forced a laugh and patted her shoulder. "You 're romantic. I merely don't like to think that the house door is so often left open. Why, any one could walk straight from the street in here! Don't you see?" She tried not to explain too earnestly. Although still watchful, she smiled into Mrs. Murray's steady, intense eyes. "I never lived in a city as big as this before. It frightens me a little."

"That 's it," said Mrs. Murray fondly, but with the patronizing inflection of the born New Yorker.

"Though you don't look it, you 're just a hayseed — that 's all!"

The fitting progressed. She spun Fanny under her fingers as if she were a toy.

"I returned Mrs. Davidson's dress!" she announced superciliously after a few moments. "I never was meant to fit stiff, gray, glazy alpaca on a woman who 's had nine children. 'Here,' I says to her, 'get some one who ain't got artistic ideals to make it. A gray alpaca basque with seams, and a skirt lined with buckram ain't within hollerin' distance of my standard!' I says."

"Was n't she furious?" Fanny asked, amused.

"No, she just give me a tired look. 'You got wheels!' she says." Mrs. Murray sighed and shook her head. "That 's it, Mrs. Barrett! Any one who holds to their ideals is called nutty by the common herd."

They sewed together afterward. By promising to help her, Fanny always managed to keep Mrs. Murray as long as possible. The companionship made a soothing break in her long solitude — they two stitching contentedly, the pretty room peaceful, Piff dozing, the kettle for tea singing on the stove behind the curtain.

"You 've not said one word about Fergus to-day!" Fanny exclaimed, after a pause.

Mrs. Murray looked up. Her black eyes grew quickly misty but her fierce spirit blazed through them. "That 's all over," she snapped.

"Quarreled — eh? About what?"

"We quarreled about Mr. John Cross!" said Mrs. Murray bitterly. "It come about like this: Yesterday Fergus was in to see me. He talked of his old home near Killarney and how often he felt homesick for it. And so, as innocent as a lamb, I says: 'I guess Mr. Cross often wishes he could get a smell of England, and often wishes he was back in the army there.' He turned on me, Mrs. Barrett, as sharp as a meat axe! 'The army?' he yells. '*What* army?' 'Why, the English army,' says I. 'The paper the other day spoke of it.' 'Damn the papers!' he says. 'Why can't they shut up about what don't concern them?' 'Well, then,' says I, 'why don't Mr. Cross say why he left England and not keep people guessin' about him and you?' Up steps Mr. Fergus and picks up his cap. 'I might have known,' he says, just like that — not another word! I jumped up and stood like Fedora, my arms acrost the door, keepin' him from goin' out. 'Known what?' I demands. He gave me a look like I was a worm, Mrs. Barrett. 'That you 're just like all women from Eve down — a lump of sizzling, white-hot curiosity!' Then he glared at me. 'Inquisitive women like you,' says he, 'ought to get a spanking every morning with a hair brush — *with the bristly* *side!'* says he. ''T would do you a world of good!'" She paused here eloquently. "After that I flung open the door, and pointed out just like this," and she extended a stiff, index finger. "'Go,' I says, 'you 're no gentleman!'"

As she was speaking the last dramatically scornful words, a skein of smoke floated past the window. They plainly heard the sound made by lips puffing on a pipe.

"Fergus! Will you see him?" Fanny asked, excited.

Mrs. Murray arose with terrible dignity. "I 'll come back this afternoon, Mrs. Barrett, and I 'll be glad then to enjoy a cup of tea with you in a refined manner — but women beaters ain't in my class!" She marched out as if suddenly sewed into lengths of the buckram she despised.

Fanny put her head out of the window and saw Fergus only a few feet away. She beckoned to him and he stepped in, cap in hand.

"Good morning," she said blithely. "How 's Mr. Cross to-day?"

He made a pitiful grimace as a mother does over a rebellious child. "Ah, very wilful to-day, God bless him! Restless, ma'am — and asking for you continual."

"I 'd have gone in earlier, but Mrs. Murray was giving me a fitting." She put her hands on her hips, a long, laughing look following. "Fergus, how nice if you and she should fall terribly in love and get married!"

Her words surprised him so he straightened as if at the command "Attention!" His mouth remained open. "Me, to marry?" he said aghast.

"Why not?" she challenged.

"Why, Mrs. Barrett, there is n't a woman living that could get me."

"Oh, don't talk as if you were a prize package, Fergus!"

"I 'm not, ma'am, I 'm not." He became quickly drenched with humility. "I should have married when I was young and manageable. I 'm spoiled for it now. Besides — " He shook his head solemnly, his face radiant with affection. "I 'm booked — *for life* — in the service of Mr. Cross."

"Oh, that 's it?" Fanny murmured, with wonder and respect.

"You can't serve two masters, Mrs. Barrett, and be a ha'porth of good to either of them. I 've got the habit now of just being hand and foot to Mr. Cross. I 'm fit for nothing else; and I want nothing else. Ah, but he 's been a wonder to me!" he said, in a trailing whisper of tenderness. "And we 've been through hell together! It 'd never seem natural for us to part now, after the long, long climb up. And so," he said, a twinkle coming back to his dog-like eyes, "that 's why I 've never said a word of love to any female person since I came to America long ago —"

"Oh, in that case —" she shrugged conclusively.

"That I have n't," he continued emphatically, "told them to beware of me! On my word, Mrs. Barrett, the way I describe myself in between every word of love I utter would make any *roo* you ever heard of look like a day-old kitten! The description would make you sick, ma'am. It 's enough for a woman to run a mile from me!"

"Do they run, Fergus?" Fanny asked, laughing.

"Well, 't is n't for me to say it, ma'am," he admitted, with a solemn sigh, "but they don't."

"All want to reform you?"

"That 's it!" He nodded. "Women — God bless them! — are oddities. They like to take holt of a holy terror of a man and polish him and scour him as they would a kitchen boiler!"

He had stepped over the window-sill and was laughing back at her. But as a furious blow, like the command of a gavel, struck the door leading to the hall, he stood still. The sound had an astonishing effect upon Fanny. She rocked forward weakly, her palms upon the table. Her face became gray-white. The knock shook the door again and her name was yelled in a hoarse, imperative voice:

"Barrett! Barrett!"

Fergus stepped back into the room. Fanny was murkily aware that he was looking at her in alarm. His words came to her as if from a drab thickness.

"What 's wrong, Mrs. Barrett? Sure it must be the postman — that 's all."

Self-defense prodded at her. She tried to stand erect, tried to smile at him. "Oh, how nervous I am — how foolish to let oneself —" The words dwindled on her dry lips as she took a few steps. Her fingers went feebly to her face and she found it wet and cold. "Will you see — who it is, Fergus, please? Will you please — see?"

Fergus strode like an avenger to the door and unlocked it defiantly. As he did so, he gave one look back and saw that Mrs. Barrett's eyes were like black circles in her white face. They flared beyond him. He opened the door.

"Barrett?" came querulously from the shadow.

"Yes, it 's Barrett," he cried angrily. "You made ructions enough to break down the house. Did you think you were at a deef and dumb asylum?"

A heavily burdened postman stepped in. At sight of him Fanny's blood slowly warmed, her heart settled into calmer beats. Though her hidden hand still had to clutch the table, strength came back to her.

"Have you a registered letter?" she asked faintly.

"Yes, ma'am." He extracted a large letter from a number. It had a red card and a white slip strapped to it, and he handed her a stubby pencil. "You 're Mrs. Barrett?"

"Yes."

"You sign there — and there."

Fanny withdrew to the table, bent over the card so that it was hidden, and used the pencil in a clumsy fashion, writing backward with big strokes.

When the postman had left, Fergus waited half-way down the room, thinking she might have something else to say to him. But she had forgotten him. As he hurried out by the window he saw her face, still ghastly but with an eerie radiance transforming it, bending over the letter.

The writing was a woman's. There was no beginning to it, no signature:

> "Notice the postmark and then tear up the envelope. As soon as you read this, tear it up too. We are still here. I don't dare hurry him before the time we arranged to leave. He has noticed how nervous I 've become. I keep thinking of you all the time. I 'm so afraid. Oh, be very careful. I don't dare make any very clear statements in this. They must wait till we can talk. I must not even mention the possible date of my visit to you, but a reasonable time after you receive this letter, allowing for a delay here of a few weeks, I 'll get to you. Here is some money. This is safer than a money order. Keep up your spirits. Don't write again. God bless you."

On the back of the envelope a name was scrawled that stood for "Brown." Within it there were ten American bank-notes of twenty dollars each. The postmark was "Venice."

CHAPTER V

DRIFTING WRECKS

FERGUS went along the balcony and entered the adjoining room so quietly that only the inflections of light and shadow made by his careful lifting of the curtain told of it. He could see his master's head plunged down in his arms, his big body stretched out, and swathed soldier-like in the thin blanket. Fergus's face grew radiant. Mr. Cross had dropped off. Ah, that was splendid, splendid altogether!

He slipped off his boots and put on a pair of felt slippers that were ready to his hand. Without removing his cap, he sat at the table and took up a stocking with a darning egg in the toe. His big fingers, glistening with reddish-white hairs and strong enough to strangle a wolf, handled the needle with almost a woman's effectualness. Without warning, a huge kick displaced the orderly blanket.

John tilted his head back to look at him. "What time is it?"

"Going on to one, sir."

"Oh, dear!" This was said as a tired child would say it, and he fell back impatiently. "Oh, Lord!"

He was not the very sick man that Mrs. Barrett had first seen. The ambitions of the convalescent were goading him. He was partially dressed. A currant-colored, Canton silk dressing-gown covered his pongee pajamas. His arm was only lightly bandaged. The subdued yet clear light showed him to be a big, bony, gray-eyed man. His pale brown hair, cut very close, crinkled in the narrow, stubborn waves that one sees on the marble heads of the Athenian deities. There were other points of resemblance to these physically splendid ideals: the wide sweep of the jaw line; the delicate, enduring carving of brow and nose; the perfect shape of his long head, small for his body, and set in a dominant way on a long, muscular throat. Long ago, in schooldays in England, his resemblance to a bronze Mercury decorating the gymnasium, together with his triumph as a runner and vaulter, had earned him the nickname of "Wings." This classical suggestion endured, though now the rippling hair showed sparkles of gray, though the lines of hard living and the clay-white left by fever were on the face. If he were not well past forty years, then he was a younger man who had been tossed and burned and pounded in the pestle of experience until all but the sediment of youth had gone out of him. And yet that there endured in him a fantastic humor was shown by his mouth, twisted to keep back laughter, as he listened to Fergus, who had begun to softly sing a negro song with a little more brogue than usual.

"Can I tempt you with a bit of broth, sir?" Fergus asked, stopping before him.

"No." This was said indifferently.

"Is there anything you *would* like, sir?"

"I'd like Mrs. Barrett!" This was said with resentful conciseness.

"Well, until she comes —"

There was a sound from the balcony.

"Is that Mrs. Barrett?" John demanded, turning and blinking, "or is it only her confounded, yellow cat?"

Before he had finished speaking, Fanny's low-pitched voice, with its tonic quality, came to him. "Ready for me?"

She dipped under the twinkling window curtains, and smiling at Fergus, who was retreating to his own room with his work-basket, she crossed over to the bed.

"How do you do?" she nodded.

John glowered at her, but with a happy under-light in his face. "I've been fighting a frenzy to jump out of the window and run amuck like a Malay."

"As bad as that?"

He pressed her hand before releasing it. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

"Are you sure I'm not coming too much? Think of your doctor, that I 've eluded by the window so far. Suppose he should ever see me," she smiled, "and shut me out altogether? Then -- what would you do?"

"Break his head," he said calmly.

She laughed and eyed him with an open fondness. "You nice man! Maybe it won't be long before you can break heads."

He turned upon his good arm and was gazing at her in the deepest contentment. Fanny sat down by the bed and took up "Vanity Fair." "You have it ready. Good."

"Put it away," he said.

"Put what away?"

"That book." He took it from her hand. "I mean to talk of *you*, to-day."

He saw her eyes narrow suddenly in a look of distaste. The melancholy that he had often noticed passed over her face like the shadow from a flitting object. She sat chilled and thoughtful. "I am tiresome. Think of something else."

"Let 's go on with 'Vanity Fair,'" he said shortly, handing her the worn volume. "You were up to old Pitt Crawley's proposal. Is the light quite right for you?"

She flung the book on the bed. "I don't like your tone. I sha'n't read a word. I see you have something you must say. Say it."

John lay for a while looking past her, thinking. The grave look deepened the ravages made by his long illness. He was so big — so weak! Made for strength and purpose — he lay there so helpless! Fanny felt her heart pulled towards him by a very tender yearning. The adoring look that a mother drapes about a child taking its first steps, deepened in her dreaming eyes.

"Go back to the first day I saw you," John said reflectively; "when being alive was merely a grinding pang between opiates. For nearly a month since, every day, you 've been here beside me — an angel! Why, in that time a dozen battles could be fought. And yet, at the end of it, are we friends? Not in the real sense. You 're still Mrs. Barrett, a very charming, reticent young lady who lives alone, next door. I 'm John Cross, a sick soldier. There you are!" he shrugged. "I 've had hopes that we 'd grow to be real pals. But you don't feel that way about me. That 's all."

"But we are friends, now!" she said wistfully.

"No, sweet and jolly as you 've been, you 've held me off in tongs. I 've felt them give a tighter pinch whenever I tried to get a bit nearer to you." He moved to the extreme edge of the pillow and continued with a subdued vehemence that magnetized her. "Have you ever thought of the wonder and charm of an old house like this? It 's a sort of Sargasso Sea. We 're two of the wrecks that have drifted into it. A whim brought me here; a chance brought you. Well, we two happened to knock against each other, and found comfort in being close to each other. It was as a wreck — of a sort — that I spoke as I did to you just now — a woman so silent, so alone!"

Again the fear inspired by Miss Onderdonk's words: "A hint can put him on the scent," prodded Fanny. Had she been suspiciously reticent? Too markedly alone? John's words brought her back.

"You see," he said, with a boyish smile, "I happened to like you tremendously at once! I 'd give a lot to have you like me the same way." A light bitterness quivered over his face. "I don't speak like this easily. Usually I 'm as silent, as difficult as you. People would tell you I 'm a sour, secret man. But from the very first there was something about you that seemed to pull me up out of a pit. The secret of attraction is hard to make out. All this may be flat boredom to you."

"Oh, no — no, no!" Fanny held out her hand and he gathered it warmly into his big clasp. A wild, choking note crept into her voice. "It 's curious what you said about the Sargasso Sea, where all wrecks drift. We 've seemed something like that to me. This old house has reminded me of a bit of sheltered beach — and you and I are two pieces of driftwood, after storms at sea, tossed up to rest upon it, side by side." He had a sense of dark and painful things behind her gaze. A hard shiver went over her and twitched her fingers. Her voice was very faint. "Maybe we can — while we 're here — help each other?"

"Let 's try!" he said.

She did not speak again until he had allowed her to draw her hand from his hold. Then quick, defiant comedy flashed at him from eyes weightily demure. "You want to find out things about me. My age — first?"

"On the contrary, I 'm wholly civilized and the enemy of many standard superstitions. That Time makes us all old equally, I deny. Besides, I don't like associating a woman with arithmetic in any form."

"That 's all very well for the woman who looks younger than she is. In my own defense I 'll tell you that I 'm just twenty-seven. You thought me older?"

He studied her. "No, not older — for the most striking thing about you is your air of youth. But sometimes you seem a too-mature, careworn child. It all depends upon — the something," he said gropingly, and smiled at her in a gentle, vague way. "It 's awfully queer — as mysterious as the little red mouse that Goethe saw peeping from the girl's lips. A shadow comes and goes upon you. Something sad and wise, and patient is seen behind your eyes — "

"It 's a touch of blight," Fanny said, in a calm, convincing tone.

"No," he said and winced, "it 's not that — "

"Blight." She nodded. "That 's what it is."

He looked at her with a melting kindness. "Why, Fanny, you 're like a little, white flower."

He had not spoken her name thinkingly. That it was unplanned made a pain that was sweet throb deeply in her. In his thoughts she was "Fanny." The gladness kept troubling her as she answered: "A flower after hard winds and wild rains — perhaps. Now what else would you like to know?"

He hesitated. "I 've noticed you don't wear a wedding ring. Are you a widow?"

She looked down at her bare hand. "My husband is dead. His memory is horrible. I sold the ring years ago when I was hungry."

"You don't mean that — literally?" he asked, with a look of trouble.

"Hunger and Thirst and I knew each other well at intervals." A contemptuous laugh twisted her mouth sidewise and she shrugged. "Life has used me so — so — cruelly — in so many ways — it 's become — funny."

John looked away from her. The merriment — that was not merriment — in her young face, hurt him. "I 'll only ask you one more thing — and this is so important. How long are you going to stay here?"

"That depends."

"May I ask on what?"

"On the tides." Her eyes dwelt upon his face with a deep, sweet gaze. "They creep up — they creep back. Who can tell what they'll do? what they'll leave or draw back into the vast seas?"

"Don't worry me! You want to stay?" he pleaded.

"Oh, you may be sure," she said, in a subdued yet fierce way, "I'll stay as long as I can!"

"That's good." He sank back, happy. "I like this way of living just because it's not steam-heated, fire-proofed, conventional. I mean to keep on here until I buy a ranch in Arizona and settle there."

He saw her gaze stray about the room, come back to his helpless arm, and linger on his face with the compassion that even when awakened momentarily in a stranger for another stranger has its roots in human love.

"*You've* not been very communicative, my friend! You've never said a word to me of your glorious record in the Philippines."

"Oh, don't let's talk of that," he cried petulantly. "I was afraid you might. It's grown a bore. Here's the absolute truth: I did no more than scores of others, as the army reports would show. This is not modesty. It 's the truth. I happened by some fluke to get the newspapers telescoped on me, possibly because I 'm an Englishman — "

"And," she said, holding up her finger, "because it got about that you refused a commission in our army. Was n't that contemptuous? Since you fought for the United States as a soldier, why don't you accept the honor it offers and become a captain?"

He rolled his head reflectively, his look impatient. "My dear Fanny — if you 'll let me call you so — this only proves how twisted things get by rumor. I was only offered a captaincy in the Quartermaster's or Commissary Department of the regular army. That was all I *could* be offered — not in the fighting force — not in the Cavalry, Artillery or Infantry. Military rank with commercial work attached to it, would not, under any circumstances, appeal to me — the garb of a captain behind the counter of a grocer — "

"Of course not," she cried warmly.

"I could have been a Captain of Volunteers — " He stopped sharply. "Why should n't I be perfectly honest with you? — I don't want — anything!"

"That 's very odd. But you must have some reason. You speak as if you have."

"A very deep one," came vehemently from lips that were almost closed, "the deepest possible!"

Questions fought at her tongue's end. She knew she was full sister to Eve, to Bluebeard's wife, to Mrs. Murray — the eternal woman fumbling at the key that locked another's secret — yet she spoke: "If I met you in Iceland wrapped in a Polar rug," she ventured, "I 'd say you were just one thing, and that you could not possibly be anything else!"

"And what would I suggest, even in that hirsute bathrobe?" John asked, grinning.

"An English officer." She spoke slowly, with daring, and watched him keenly.

He made round, childish eyes. "Do I really look like that? Like the heavy, military chaps in the clubs on Piccadilly and St. James Street?"

"That 's London. I 've never been out of America. But I know Kipling and when I was very young I used to adore John Strange Winter. I 've built up in my imagination a perfect English guardsman." She studied his face. "He looks exactly like you."

He did not reply directly. "The mind of a woman!" he murmured; "It 's very interesting."

There were steps in the hall and Fergus came into the room. "I believe it 's the doctor, sir."

Fanny sprang up, but John lunged for her hand and lifted it to his lips. He kept it long there, although she resisted.

"You've been so bully!" he said, with sincere gratitude. "And now we are pals."

She left him, her face happy. He raised himself to his elbow and smiled dreamily after her until the curtain fell.

CHAPTER VI

IN VENICE

DURING these days, incidents whose undercurrents circled around the life of Fanny were happening in Venice. In the old *palazzo* that they had hired by the month — a dream-haunted place of yellowed marble and dim frescoes — Mr. and Mrs. Esray Heath had said good night to the ten people who had been guests at one of their dinners that had the reputation of being both splendid and grotesque. Two detached young men — Simon Burgess, an American newspaper correspondent, and Wallace Craig, a Scotch novelist — had been of the party. While their gondola stole across the reaches of starry water and they smoked Esray Heath's excellent cigars, they discussed him, his wife, and their guests.

"I think this was the queerest dinner yet," said Craig. He was an anæmic youth with loose, sneering lips, good manners, bad morals, and a reputation for saying and writing pert and clever things. "The dropping rose leaves did n't go at all with the introduction of the jester and the minstrels in doublet and hose — one medieval, the other early Roman. But such distinctions don't trouble the fatty deposit under the skull of Esray Heath. I wonder his wife did n't keep him from making such a hodgepodge."

"Perhaps she tried. I 'm quite sure he 's obstinate sometimes. All stupid people are."

"Is it true that a high-priced rose extract was really sprinkled on the real flowers?"

"It certainly smelled overpoweringly rosyish."

"Well, we were a queer dozen — the old, half-dead Marchesa, who for a dinner with such vintage wines would dine with old Nick; his dis-Grace the Duke of Tadminton; even our two selves, asked in the hope that we may assist the Esray Heaths in their climb up the ladder which really leads to so little for all the trouble. I sha'n't go again. Just what is their status in America?" he asked. "They 'll be perfectly ripping as copy."

"Their place," said Burgess, "is outside the doors of fashion, knocking, constantly knocking, impervious to snubs. 'Let us in,' they say, 'we have millions and millions, and we want to please you. It 's true that we 're so new we creak — but then we 're so rich we chink! And we do want to please you. Try us and you 'll get your money's worth.' Would you like to hear a bit of their early history?"

"Would it interest me?"

"You want good, literary grist for American types.

You can use it in that way, but remember it 's otherwise confidential."

"I 'm safe. You know that."

Burgess drew his knees almost up to his chin, his collar lifted to his ears against the increasing chill.

"My memories of Heath and his wife," he began; "go back fifteen years, before they were married. I saw them first when I went to be the assistant editor on 'The Daily Star' in Locust City, Nebraska. I got to know them by sight and hearsay. I was a drudge and made few acquaintances; they did n't happen to be among them. In those days," Burgess drawled, with a side twist of the mouth, "our host's name was neither Esray nor Heath."

"The bounder has even an alias!" Craig commented.

"Not exactly. He 's merely a made-over in every sense. His father kept a sort of small department store, a place whose range of offerings went from dried apples to stove polish. The name over the shop was Ezra Heit. The old man was of Prussian and New England stock — a good sort, frightfully ambitious for his only son — Ezra. Ezra never soiled his hands selling candles or slicing ham, but during his vacations from college I 've seen him sitting on a pickle barrel, manicuring his nails, while he watched his father do both."

"My God," said Craig, "and to-night he was able to tell of buying a race horse for ten thousand pounds."

"As well as I remember, Ezra was thinking of being either a lawyer or a doctor. Within limits he was counted shrewd and very brisk mentally. But he was heavy. I 've heard him described as 'wet sawdust.' Even when he talked of what he understood, he bored. He had no resiliency. He has none now. Well, immediately after leaving college, he married, and a year or so after that his father died. It was not long before the most astounding news struck Locust City like a shell. Lands that old Heit had bought on speculation in Virginia had developed tin or oil or zinc — something filthy that means money — and overnight Ezra found himself a very rich man. One million seemed fairly to breed another until he became what he is today — not one of the spectacular millionaires, yet of sufficient importance to have a place near the bottom of the gold-edged list of the 'multis.'"

"Who was his wife?" Craig asked. "His money has n't made her happy. What 's the trouble there?"

"Stark boredom — an abysmal weariness of the game," said Burgess conclusively.

"How old is she?"

"About thirty-eight — about four years older than her husband. The modern riddle that hammers the sky — why do some women marry some men? — generally has a most prosaic answer. It 's so in this case," he continued, in the tender tone of one who loves his subject. "She was the daughter of a Locust City doctor, one of the sort who makes his own pills and carries them with him in the back pockets of a frock coat. She was a good many cuts above the Ezra Heit of those days. Her name was Claudia Lawson — you 've heard him call her 'Clo.' She had a sister — oh, fully ten or a dozen years younger than herself — an astonishingly pretty girl! When I saw this sister first she was a graceful, charming child with a joyous air, eyes like big, dark flowers in a milk-white, little face and with silver-gold hair lying heavily all around her brow and ears. Her name was Fanny or Annie — no, it was Fanny. Well, the elder sister was quite the most talked of young woman in Locust City. She had a glorious, dramatic soprano voice, sang in church and at concerts, and when she was twenty or so her father sent her to Paris, where she studied for years. Her goal was nothing less than grand opera. The people of Locust City expected big things of Claudia Lawson and my paper published foreign letters from her. Quite suddenly she came home. Her voice was utterly gone — diphtheria had done for it. She continued, however, to be the most conspicuous of the society girls in Locust City (having been to Europe and learned how to speak French), and Ezra Heit, when making his plans to settle in New York (this was before he developed the oil or zinc or whatever it was), was very glad to get her to marry him. As her father had in the meantime died, leaving nothing but debts, and her voice was gone, there 's no doubt but that she took Ezra just as board and lodging for herself and her sister. That 's the explanation of the marriage," he shrugged. "The sister was about sixteen at this time," he droned on. "She had a precocious but decided talent for story writing. Our paper published some of her stuff. Considering that it came from a kid like that, it was surprising — imagination in it — a good, gripping style. Some of the eastern magazines published a few short stories. She was very promising, in fact. Besides this, she was so pretty there was scarcely a boy or man in the town who did n't make her his standard of beauty. I met her once at a church party and dreamed of her that night. A newspaper cut of her was nailed above my desk, sharing honors with an old photograph of Adelaide Neilson — who, by the way, she resembled very strongly. Just about this time she began making history for herself — or rather allowed another to make it for her." Burgess's tone took on a dramatic meaning. "Locust City was pretty close to the Pecultico gold mines that were having a big boom. A good many strangers passed through Locust City; a few stayed. Among the latter was a man named Steven King." He leaned forward and his look was inward, though his narrowed eyes peered ahead like an artist's studying a picture. "Lord, what a fascinating study life is! Think of my remembering to-night every detail concerning Steven King. I don't believe I saw the man more than a dozen times, but had he wished he could have fastened me to him as a friend, for life. He was a graceful, long-limbed fellow of about twenty-eight or so, with thick, soft hair as black as coal, brushed back straight, as Frenchmen wear theirs; eyes of a melting, dark blue with a lazy smile deep down in them — the sort of eyes that pull the heart out of a woman! — a laugh and a smile to warm you through and through; a voice that was everything a man's voice should be, and one of the most persuasive I 've ever heard; a devil-may-care lightness to him; a gay, sharp wit; a schoolboy's sense of the ridiculous; a simplicity and friendliness that made children adore him; a touch of helplessness and pathos that made old ladies want to adopt him. That was Steven King."

"Whew!" said Craig. "That sort of perfection is never quite normal. Usually the devil has a hand in it."

"Now you 're talking!" said Burgess. "When you were out of reach of his diabolical charm you were aware of a distinct distrust. As you say, it sprang from the man's sheer attractiveness, which was so bewildering it troubled. No one as handsome, as clever, as winning, as exquisite a gentleman as Steven King appeared to be, should have been as he was, a loose end, a reckless soldier of fortune with family and history both vague — unless there was something wrong somewhere." He raised a minatory finger and continued: "There *was* something wrong. The fellow proved to be as tainted morally as a mildewing cheese. Although he came of educated, blameless people, he had been expelled from two colleges, and had spent his early twenties in a reformatory. He was congenitally deformed, a criminal by taste, a born 'crook.' These things about him came out by degrees, but not until about two years or so after he had bolted from Locust City. I 've spoken of him in connection with the Heaths, because he did n't bolt alone; he took Fanny Lawson, the idol of her sister's heart, the beauty of the city, with him."

"I knew he would," said Craig, with much satisfaction. "My novelist's nose scented that eternal sacrifice of the woman. What became of her?"

Burgess shook his head vaguely.

"After the news of their fortune, the Heaths, as soon as it could be arranged, left the town. They vanished from my horizon altogether. I think it was fully six or seven years afterward and when I was in South America, that I happened to pick up an old New York

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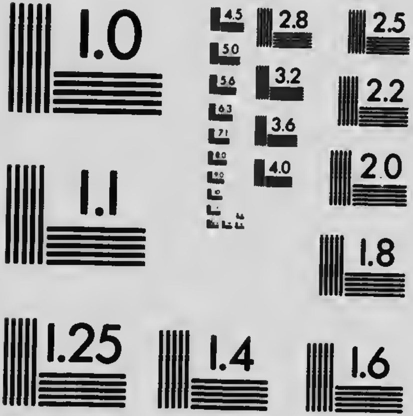
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newspaper in a Valparaiso café. There, told in a few paragraphs, I read that a man who had been known by various names — Mordaunt and Varick and Steven King — was wanted for counterfeiting on a large scale, that he had eluded arrest by hiding as a worker in a coal mine in Colorado. This last was learned when, after a fire-damp explosion and entombment, his was one of the bodies brought out. And then I read about his wife," said Burgess and stopped.

"So he married her? I had n't anticipated that."

"Yes. He married her." He stopped again. His face had grown serious and pitiful. "I — won't tell you that part, Craig."

"What!" Craig flung away his cigar and shook Burgess's knee. "You would n't play me such a trick as that when you 've almost given me the plot for a story?"

"You 'll have to 'finish to taste.' I 'll tell you this much, however. The girl stuck to the man and found to her cost what being married to a thief meant. She came to grief — bitter grief! Make what you like of it! But it 's her fate, Craig, that has crossed and criss-crossed Mrs. Heath's face. That 's the secret that 's wearing her out."

"Won't you give me a hint of the fate?" Craig demanded. "If not, why not?"

"It 's just occurred to me that to say anything further about her would be unkind. It 's quite possible you might meet her some time — if — "

" Are you going to stop, again ? "

" If she 's alive."

" Has Mrs. Heath never spoken of her ? "

" She would n't." Burgess set his lips grimly. " I can quite understand that she would n't."

The gondola stopped at Craig's door. " Well, you 've played me a nasty trick, but as it 's the result of a chivalrous afterthought that does you credit, come in for a whiskey and soda if you like."

Burgess refused, saying he had work that would keep him busy until morning. They said good night. The gondola slipped on with a lapping sound. Burgess sprawled in comfort, smoking his cigar to the end. He was thinking of the newspaper cut of Fanny Lawson's face that long ago had looked down from the wall above his office desk.

" If she 's dead, it 's just as well," he thought. " Poor little thing, how could she want to live, after that ? Poor little thing ! "

Claudia Heath was in her private sitting-room, waiting for her husband. She had slipped, exhausted, into an armchair, and had stuck out her feet for her kneeling maid to replace her slippers with a pair of *mules.* She was a tall woman of reed-like thinness. Her jaw line suggested a curving blade and stood out over her long, twisting throat. She had burning eyes, with the look in them of a soul ill at ease. Her face was etched with fine, down-dragging lines. It was a barren face; no future in it. She could be a sufficiently interested listener, clever when she roused herself, and yet one felt she had no concern in it at all. Her eyes, with their unexpectant but consuming expression, were made up with bluish cosmetic; her face was whitened and rouged; her mouth made too crimson. Her orange-red hair was palpably artificial in color, quantity and structure — and yet one felt she had no mind for what impression she made. She wore exquisite clothes as if she had flung them on her thin body without interest, and trailed them in scorn. Sadder than sharp pain was her appalling indifference.

Esray Heath came in and the maid went out. As he closed the door and crossed the big, palace room, his wife was conscious of a sharp clarifying of her vision. It was a moment that comes at some time to almost every one when a familiar creature, blurred by custom, will stand out clearly, distinct from previous acquaintance. Her eyes grew amused. She seemed a critical stranger looking at her husband for the first time.

He was fat — not paunchy or misshapen by flesh in any one spot — but of a settled, uniform fatness that cushioned his arms in a way to push them out from his body so that it was difficult for him to cross or fold them. His flesh had the density of soap; his black eyes through strong glasses often flamed up unnaturally large, but seen over the lens they were small, sly, and restless; he had big dimples in cheeks and chin, even in his hands; his large, concavely curved nose diminished into a sensitive tip that trembled when he was interested; he had scant hair, parted in the center, making two, sparse, upcurling ridges on each side, and it was whitish-blond, as were his lashes. His good points were a smile that could be pleasant, a voice that could be agreeable, and — at astonishing variance with his heavy body — a light and graceful carriage.

"Why he is a soft, white pig!" was his wife's thought. It ambled through her brain with the peace of a perfect truth. She watched him light a cigar. "In an earlier incarnation he perhaps was a fat, pinky-white, curly-tailed pig. It 's really quite amazingly funny."

"Well, it went off very well, don't you think?" he asked, propping his plump arm with difficulty on the mantel. "Even Tadmimon looked impressed when he heard I 'd bought Lady Bess." He chuckled. "He did n't dream that I was bidding through the Tomlinson stables. That was a sell. Clever!"

His wife sat with her cheek on one hand, the other swinging one of the long gloves she had pulled off, her eyes empty.

"I guess I did them pretty well, Clo, huh? They can't complain of me, as I heard the Marchesa say last week of the Brinsley-Jones: 'Nothing worth putting one's tongue to but the *hors d'œuvres* and green chartreuse.'"

She hid a yawn with one thin, ugly hand that was fiery with big jewels. "The dinner was a huge success — but it 's over. Now let us talk of something that has to be decided upon. I waited up to see you for that." She looked quietly at him with an arresting expression.

"Oh, you don't care about this sort of thing. You never do," he snapped out.

"But I don't let it be known. Give me that credit. I exerted myself horribly to-night. I did all — all your chores — "

"I wish you 'd drop those vulgar, rustic Americanisms!" he said, giving her an ugly glance.

"Burgess will do all he can for you in his papers. Craig has promised to get us Lord and Lady Edgerley. The evening, Esray, was thoroughly artificial, and from my standpoint, vulgar — but it was useful to you — and it 's over. Do we sail on the twenty-ninth?" she asked distinctly.

"How can we? You do rush things when you really care. The very earliest would be the boat after that."

"Very well." Her smooth, indifferent voice after his was like the cord of a 'cello after the gusts of a penny trumpet. "You see I 'm quite amiable? I 'll wait another week. But it is definite that we sail then from Naples."

"I suppose so," he muttered angrily.

She rose with a willowy lightness. "Good night, Esray."

He had put his hands in his pockets and was smoking in a fierce way, fairly sucking the cigar. "Look here," he said, as with bent head she walked slowly to a door opposite him. "The only thing you care a pin about is getting to America. I know why." She waited without reply. "It 's your sister! She 's the whole trouble! When you 're on the same side of the world with her, you come out of your trance." He glared at her.

"Well?"

"Well? Is n't it true?"

"So true, I 'm wondering why you go to the trouble of saying it again. This happens every few months."

"Well, this time," he said in a mincing, exasperated tone, "I 've a few important things to add to it. Listen here." He sank his voice and protruded his head. "I don't intend to be bothered with the idea of your precious sister any longer. I don't intend that a convicted thief shall stand in my way any more! Is that clear? I want her wiped out! I 'm sick of the thought of her. I 'm sick of seeing you like a death's-head thinking about her. You 're going to think of me, take an interest in what concerns me — or we quit!"

She came back rapidly, her face revived. "You mean a divorce?"

"Just that."

"You 've come to it at last! But why do you threaten me, Esray? Is n't it what I 've wanted for years?"

His small eyes twinkled at her with sneering knowledge. "You want it, provided a heap of my money goes with it."

"Of course I want money."

"*My* money. You 're not above taking it?"

"My dear Esray, the old romantic idea of the disillusionized wife pinning a note of farewell on a pillow and stealing out penniless — at midnight probably, and probably also into a snowstorm — is quite dead. Women need money. They need it more than men do. After an unfortunate marriage, when they are older and sadder and less fitted to fight the battle for existence, they need it more than ever. I 'm not asking a favor. Don't imagine it. A share of your money, if we part, is rightfully mine. I 've earned it. I have n't been your wife for eight years, Esray, but I 've been a most useful business partner." She spoke without a touch of heat. It made him seem common to himself and irritated him that his insults could not prevent her looking like a melancholy queen. Indeed there was even genuine kindness in her gaze as she added: "Poor Esray, what on earth would you have done without my help? We need n't go into that. You know! Arrange things, then, so that I can get my liberty and a million dollars."

"Is that all? A million?" He gave a chuckle, rich in spite.

"You have ten — or is it twenty? I want one."

She had always been honest with him. That was one reason why he hated her — for he did, deeply and sluggishly hate her. If she had lied to him, his vanity would have been soothed But she had been as candid as a straight business partner. When her sister had disappeared with Steven King, she had told him that, with her gone, her chief reason for marrying him had vanished. She would have left him then, if he had wished it. After his riches came she had even arranged to go. But he had felt helpless under the startling change in his life. He had begun to see that she was just the woman to be useful to him. She had been born with the social instinct that makes a leader. Unlike himself, she came of gentle people, and her residence in France had given her poise and comprehension. No other woman that he knew then had these accomplishments, and in those days when he was simpler and more likeable, he was also shy with new friends. So he had implored her to stay as an adviser and *aide-de-camp* under the title of wife, and she had agreed.

She had been splendid at first, coaching him and playing the big game with a feverish zest, slowly and surely landing him, each season making him a little more fashionably conspicuous. During this time she had been satisfied with the stray letters that had fluttered in from her sister Fanny at uneven intervals, from every part of the country, as she led her homeless life with her miscreant husband. A good deal of money had been sent to Steven King to keep his mouth shut and to keep him at a safe distance. Life had been pleasant enough until Claudia had received news of her sister's arrest and conviction — what he considered a logical outcome of such a marriage as hers had been! From that time things had been miserable. Claudia, at first, had become obsessed by the thought of Fanny. It had been with the greatest difficulty that he had prevented her trying to help her sister in a way to bring open disgrace upon him who was wholly innocent. He had to admit that even then she had schooled herself to temperateness and justice, and had done nothing to give a hint of the convicted woman's relati[illegible] herself. She had settled into apathy, while continuing the society woman's hard drudgery conscientiously.

But during the last year it had become intolerable, and she had asked him to let her go. She had told him that he could do without her now; that she knew there was one woman in their own set who had worn his gifts of pearls and sables and who, once he was free, could be, for the asking, put in her place. She had implored him not to hold her. And yet he had, because, as with all small natures, power over others was sweet to him. She wanted her freedom, but she wanted his money so that, once her sister was free, she could use it to make her happy. Should she go, he meant to pay back her indifference and her inescapable superiority to himself by giving her as little of it as possible. Should she stay, it would have to be on his terms. He meant to make those terms known to-night.

"A million?" He spoke musingly. "H'h! I've something to say about that. Will you sit down?"

She obeyed, watching him as he bruised out the light of his cigar in a copper bowl.

"I made up my mind to-day to tell you something at the very first opportunity. Your craze for America, intruded upon me to-night, makes this the opportunity." He went a little nearer; his small eyes twinkled. "I've a bit of news for you that will surprise you."

These last words seemed to nail her to the chair. The thought that swung out of her soul was like an electric lariat flung to Fanny in her far-off hiding-place. Death seemed to fall on her heart as she waited for his next words.

"I 've decided not to build at Newport, and not to lease the Charteris place after this year!"

The relief was as staggering as a blow. Her blood seemed to force its way through iron, before it could flow normally again. This was his "news" — only this! Breathless, she sat without answering, bent over, her elbows on her knees, her heavy head held up by her hands.

"I mean to sell the New York house, too." He smiled. "In fact, I mean to live in England."

She sat as before. She did not even shrug. This irritated him. "Well, what have you to say about it?"

"You 're foolish," she said mildly, as she wiped her face. "You have a certain position now in America. They won't like you in England, Ezra."

"You 'll kindly call me by my name!" he cried furiously.

"I beg pardon. It slipped out."

"My stand is taken. You 'll see your precious America about once in five years — if we stay together. If we don't, you 'll get just what allowance the law will think right. It won't be much, because you have no children, and I 've kept that letter you wrote me eight years ago in which you arranged our relations so nicely for yourself."

The rouge stood out in hard spots upon her tired face. She was weary of the wrangle. She had hoped he had decided to marry the woman of the pearls and sables and have children to inherit his money. But he was only bent on sticking the pins of his degrading sordidness into her. Only for Fanny how gladly she would walk out of his house and his life, taking whatever allowance he would be pleased to make. Only for Fanny! It had always been so since the days when she had gone without things herself that she might buy ribbons for her little sister's hair. Only for Fanny!—who, in following the wild love born of young blood, had been led into Doré-like darkness and made to drink from a black and bitter pool. After these thoughts of her sister, under which her heart was melted, her husband's next words were like the profanation of something holy:

"As an English resident, you will be finally separated from Mrs. Steven King!" He said the name with a deriding chuckle. "I mean that brilliant family connection to end." She gave him one flaming look of rebellion and looked down again. "As it 's only a year and a half now before her term ends, perhaps less, it is just as well that you know where I stand in this matter. Let us look at facts: You have a sister whose methods, to put it mildly, made her a menace to society — "

"No!" she said crisply, without looking up.

"You *will* blink facts!" he cried as if pained, but he was beginning to enjoy himself. "She was sent counterfeit money by her husband and she used it. When she was arrested, it was found that she was making plans to clear out, had in fact bought a railroad ticket with some of the money, and had a box of counterfeiting tools on the premises that she was preparing to express to her husband, who was working his game farther west. This state of affairs is n't comprehensible to you unless you consider — and I ask you to do so sensibly — just how young and malleable she was, just what a coercing sort of scoundrel King was. She did n't become a thief at a leap — but little by little, little by little. You note how reasonable I am?" She did not reply and he continued: "The fact that sometime before this happened she had had a nervous illness serious enough to keep her a long time in hospital, was made the most of by her counsel. He urged that she had been mentally irresponsible. Rot, my dear! She comes of a sound stock. Her illness was nothing more than a sort of hysteria from the dance that her admirable husband led her. Judges are getting pretty tired of that crook's dodge — nervous breakdown, melancholia, mental irresponsibility! It 's an old whine — and it 's rot!"

Claudia sat perfectly quiet. She did not mean to antagonize him by argument; she needed his money. This was plain to him, but the thought that if she had dared to let herself go she would have torn him like a tigress guarding her young had some satisfaction in it. He was really amiable as he paced before her silent, crouched figure, flourishing his chubby hands and protruding his head with every emphasis.

"There are a good many cases like this, my dear Clo," he said with a smile. "When the mental irresponsibility dodge does n't work, the crook is sent to jail. Your sister knew exactly what she was doing. She 's where she deserves to be — no more, no less. This is a protection to us. No one is likely to probe into her disgrace and smear us with it. She 's safe." Here he stopped short, expression and manner putting on an enamel-like glaze. "I 've no objection to your sending her money, but in every other way — now, and when she 's free — she is to be wiped out." He fluttered his hands in a final way. "Dead!"

Claudia stood up heavily, moistening her dry lips. "I 've listened to you attentively. Good night."

"Answer me!" he snapped.

She looked at him in weary amazement. She was like a blank paper on which he had struggled to write in vain. “When Fanny is free, we’ll talk of this again. By that time perhaps you’ll be ashamed of what you’ve said to-night.”

“You mean,” he muttered in fury, “you’ll identify yourself with her — after — ?”

“Not publicly — if you and I are together. But wherever I am, she’ll be close to me! All I can do to comfort her, to make up for this terrible and unjust punishment, I shall do! I am living only for that!”

He looked after her in futile exasperation as she walked, plainly exhausted, to the door. “All right. You hug that dream! Time enough to settle that — almost two years more. But there’s another thing. You may imagine that you’ll be able to sneak off on visits to her. I forbid it! I’ll have no risks run. If you slip out of New York, I’ll follow you.” He seized her arm. “Your promise that you won’t go near that prison!”

Claudia wearily disentangled his fingers from her arm. “You are unnecessarily vehement and obvious. I had no idea of leaving New York except to go to Newport.” She seemed to shed him like an irksome cloak and went into her bedroom.

Her maid was asleep against the dressing-table. She shook her stupidly and the girl began undressing her. As she stood so, the languid tears of one who has worn out weeping, slid from beneath her shut eyes. But as her fingers flickered about, and then closed fiercely upon a little satin bag sewed under the lace of her corset, light spread over her tortured face. The little bag, apparently filled only with a jasmine sachet powder, held the most precious thing in her life: a fragment of paper from Fanny's letter that gave detailed directions how to find her hiding-place among the confusing angles of Greenwich Village.

CHAPTER VII

WITHIN FOUR WALLS

DURING the month that followed the arrival of Claudia's letter from Venice, Fanny became expert in deceit. She never left her rooms except at night, but to hide this fact from John Cross, Fergus, and Mrs. Murray, required constant foresight on her part. She was naturally candid. There was not a grain of love of intrigue in her. She would have liked to be able to say, while keeping her secrets locked within herself, that she shunned the New York streets as she would smallpox, and that she had a reason for it. But she knew that such candor would single her out from the crowd, and Miss Onderdonk's description of how easily a reporter got scent of news and how rapaciously he went on its trail occurred to her continually. Having come to this decision, Fanny, like a general, arranged her tactics: She tried to seem as peacefully commonplace as possible and never to be taken by surprise. She lied when it was necessary.

In consequence she frequently wore her hat and gloves when she admitted Mrs. Murray or Fergus, as if she had just returned from a walk. She sometimes went into John's room with them on and showed decided cleverness in acting the part of a woman tired from shopping. At other times, when Mrs. Murray wanted her to go out, she had "only just come in." Once, when a reporter had given John seats for a special spring performance of "La Bohême," he sent them in to her. She had found a "headache" useful and sent them down to Mrs. Murray.

Meanwhile, famished for air and exercise other than the walk at night allowed, her skin had taken on a sickly color. A heat wave had come early and was torturing New York. These back rooms were as stifling as a green-house. It was impossible for a current of air to refresh them, unless she left the door wide open. She did this sometimes, a few moments at a time, but her nerves were troublesome until it was closed again and locked. She lost weight. Crescent-shaped, violet shadows showed under her eyes. A longing for breeze and space had begun to torment her. She slept badly. She would toss on her bed, that seemed to seethe in the motionless air, a verse of Swinburne's beating in her brain like a thin bell:

"Ah, yet would God this flesh of mine might be
Where air might wash and long leaves cover me,
Where tides of grass break into foam of flowers,
Or where the wind's feet shine along the sea."

Pictures of the open ways would rise before her and fill her with a gypsy frenzy. Two days in particular had a way of starting out at her from the girlhood that had ended at its beginning. One showed a sweep of deserted beach strewn with wreckage vomited up by the gray, pettish sea; some men belonging to the life-saving station had made a bonfire and its huge flames roared as they bent in the October gale. The other memory was of a wet, autumn wood and she walking there with a dog she had loved; she wore a rain-coat and an old hat, and as she walked lifted her face to the steady, stinging mist; she could fairly smell the sharp perfume from the dying vegetation mixing with the smoke from heaps of burning leaves; the forest path ended in a blotch of mist.

These were her longings — always for the autumn; for rain; for the cold air of the short days; for the sea of storms and danger signals. Her writing, too, bore marks of this shut-in, struggling spirit. A story on which she worked, in spite of heat and sleeplessness, was of stirring incident, starting grandly with shipwreck and continuing its way to an uncharted island in a lonely, tropical sea.

Her pleasantest hours were spent with John Cross. His rooms were cool. There the door was always open, shielded by a curtain of coarse Japanese crêpe which, fastened at top and bottom, swelled like a sail in the draught. Fergus was a genius at making reviving, iced drinks flavored with lime or pineapple. He had learned the secret of how to make sirocco heat bearable, and though the sun might burn hard on the balcony, the rooms were always as dim as a cave and the Japanese curtain at the door, sprinkled with lavender, gave the air blowing through it a spicy tang.

John was now up. He wore the thinnest of silky shirts made of Philippine pineapple fibre, belted flannel trousers and, on the most torrid days, Japanese sandals. He looked more gaunt than when in bed, but the greenish malarial pallor was disappearing and his eyes were bright and contented. His arm was out of bandages and rested in a sling fashioned from a large black silk handkerchief. He went for short, early walks every morning.

"I 'm allowed three pipes a day," he told Fanny one afternoon, and grinned like an urchin. "That looks like business — eh? After I 've taken iron and the other stuff for another fortnight, I 'll get a punching bag and a pair of dumb-bells. I 'll have to pamper my left arm for the next six months, but I 'll be an athletic wonder on my right side."

He was in joyous spirits. Fanny was deeply happy to see the radiance in his thin face, but she found it impossible to respond with animation. The night before there had been a thunder-storm of the electrical, terrifying sort encountered only in the tropics and the "temperate" United States, and her usual evening walk had been given up. This day of humidity and stifling torture had followed. She was drained of strength. The clothes on her languid body were drenched. She felt as if her eyes had faded to the huelessness of glass. A constant, feverish thirst tormented her.

She had not lost actual sense of herself and her surroundings, and yet their reality had dimmed and objects had diminished, when she felt John's fingers close around her wrist. "What 's the matter, Fanny?"

She struggled forward and tried to twist herself from his hold.

"Nothing!" This was a wild, imploring sigh, and she fainted.

John did not fully realize what had happened until Fanny's arms slipped down lifelessly and her head hung sidewise. He knelt beside her in fright, seized her with his free hand and slipped his arm around her shoulder. She fell against him, a dead weight. Her breath went in ripples over his cheek.

There was a pause, made up for him of crowding heart-beats. He gazed in confusion at her death-like face, as if seeing it for the first time. The look of one who, having casually opened a door leading from a dark room, finds himself staggered by a blaze of unexpected light beyond it, was in his rigid, wide-open eyes.

"Fanny! Fanny!" He spoke her name gently at first, then with yearning and reckless joy, while long parched currents began to trickle over the rock that had been his heart.

This ecstatic disorder of ideas continued, as in a man's awkward way he did the stereotyped things advised for the rousing of swooning women. Using his one hand, he made Fanny as comfortable as he could by propping a pillow under her shoulder. He poured water from the red, earthen bottle and tried unsuccessfully to make her swallow some of it, clapped her hands, bathed her forehead, fanned her. All the time he made little sympathetic sounds, as one does over a child or a sick animal. When nothing seemed of use, he dropped to one knee and propped her head on his arm. His lips were again close to her sculptured face.

"Fanny?" There was love under the alarm. "Can't you hear me?" and then, in a battling breath: "My sweet, my love! Look at me, speak to me!"

CHAPTER VIII

"LOVE, THAT IS BLOOD WITHIN THE VEINS OF TIME"

JOHN felt that he had gone clean mad for the moment. Then how wonderful was madness and how sweet! What it made of a dull life! What it made of a sick, lonely and purposeless man! The joy and fire in his blood was man's essential from man's beginning, and turned him for a moment into an exultant savage craving the body and soul of this one woman. And yet, not that only, for his hands were too reverent even to touch one of the damp hairs making a pale-gold net upon her forehead.

He yearned over her in pity, too. In wakeful moments action and expression can mask the soul; sleep leaves it exposed, helpless. So Fanny, prone in John's arms, betrayed the wounds that life had left upon her. The patience on the young face belonged rightfully to age. The "blight" of which she had spoken was not elusive now; its iron touch had picked out every muscle. The downward droop of the full, bluish-white lids was poignant with dumb appeal. And John, his thin, fierce face flaming with pity, wondered about her.

What storms of circumstance had she bent under, gasped under, and risen from to renewed endurance? What furnace blasts of pain had, like a scorch, touched her youthfulness, devitalizing it? She had told him a little — of the lean years; of the husband whose memory was "horrible." He did not try to fill in details, nor imagine what sort of man could have brutally used such a frail, appealing, winning creature as Fanny. But he did see clearly that the hurt had been a fearful one. He had often felt that she belonged more to those turbulent years in which she had suffered than to the monotonous present in which he had come to know her; that her memories, on which he often saw her obsessed and cloudy gaze bent, were more real than her actual existence.

The thought bit in now. Tenderness and generosity rose like a tide within him, and a rebellious craving for god-like power by which he might blot out memory and make her life seem to begin from the hour they had met, as if he had created her for himself — his to guard and love — utterly his!

Fanny sighed, and coming out of a fantasy made up of great heights, vast wildernesses and wide seas, found herself looking into his eyes — into their great hunger. As her bewilderment lessened, her first movement was a retreat from him. There was terror in the way she drew back and attempted to stand up, but she zigzagged and it became necessary for him to hold her. She felt the hard, excited throb of his heart against her arm. She felt his hand shake.

"By Jove, you gave me a fright — Fergus out — and only a one-armed man to help you, Fanny." He spoke jestingly, but under the lightness of the tone excitement quivered like a live wire. "Sit down again."

"I 'm better. I 'll go," she said, in a hurried breath.

"Go where?" he demanded. The look in his eyes was under even less control than his voice. It warmed her to a heady delight yet frightened her through and through.

From the white weakness of her face a laugh flashed. "Home," she said. "There is such a place, you know, although it 's natural you should forget it. Not content with paying you long visits, I go and faint all over your furniture."

He loved her for that laugh. It was like her to break the tension that both felt, that way.

"Sit down," he commanded.

"No, I 'm going."

He looked at her with mockery. "You seem now the obvious young woman terrified at finding herself in the rooms of a man. This is the first time that old bugaboo ever poked its ridiculous head between us. The superannuated belief that a man may visit a lone woman in her lone home and, as a matter of course, act the courteous gentleman, while if by any chance she stands in his home, alone with him, he at once becomes 'a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour,' I thought had been kicked out of the window by us. But," he smiled, dreamily studying her, "you stand there looking at me as if I were the villain in a melodrama, and just as if you were going to say: 'Sir, unhand me!'"

"I must look very silly, then," Fanny said, and promptly sat down.

"Now you're your own delightful, sensible, intelligent self!" He stood above her, nodding thoughtfully. "But you need looking after."

"Was it a real faint?" she inquired languidly, as he went to the stand where the liquors stood. "And how long? I'm awfully interested. You see it was my first." She felt the need of continuing the trifling talk. She remembered what for a moment she had seen in John's eyes. She knew that unless she steered through the next few moments with caution and delicacy, she would hear irrepressible, passionate words, and friendship — the only thing possible between them — would be ended.

John came to her with a small glass of brandy. "Don't have any doubts about your collapse. It was a wonder! You seemed to weigh as much as the Venus de Milo — and looked like her. Now get this down."

He sat before her and watched her as she sipped the burning fluid, laughing at her when she winked hard over it.

"It 'll set your blood running as if sparks had got into it," he said, and the threatening tenderness was again rioting in his tone. "It will take that gray paper look from your face." He bent forward quickly, his elbow on his knee. "What a blind ass I 've been not to see how this weather has been grilling you! It 's as bad as Manila! You 've been too much in the sun. Were you out to-day, too?"

"Not to-day," she said, without looking at him. The constant deceit was becoming wearisome.

"Anyway, you 're completely done up. Now, Fanny, be good enough to regard me as John Cross, M. D. I want to feel your pulse." She made a faint resistance, but he lifted the lace from her wrist with professional gravity and laid his fingers on the faintly-veined flesh. "As I thought —" he said after a pause; "faint and furiously fast — now a beat missed — now I can scarcely feel it at all." He drew down the lace and handed back the arm as if returning something detached from her. For a moment he paced before her in meditation. "You are to leave New York," he said conclusively.

"Am I? Might I be told when?" She felt better. Her smile was piquant and disobedient.

"The day after to-morrow. To-morrow you can shop and straighten up your affairs. Fergus will pack for you."

"And then what happens to me, please?"

"Then you are to go to the mountains in Vermont. My doctor has found a place for me, but as I can't get away from violet rays for a few weeks longer, you shall go first." As she did not speak, but lay back in the chair openly amused, he continued: "When you get up there, you can look about for some place for me, near you. And I should n't wonder, Fanny," he said, pausing before her, "if we 'd take walks together, and study botany, and —" the dangerous warmth was in his voice and look again — "watch the stars — even the moon!"

She sat forward jerkily. "You ought to write stories. I try to, but my imagination is puny beside yours."

"This means that you refuse to do what I ask?" he inquired gravely.

"Enchanting," she sighed lightly and stood up; "but not for me, unfortunately. May I go home now, doctor, and lie down?"

"You are not to treat what I say this way." She was astonished at the steeled quality of the quiet tone.

His mouth was severe, his eyes bright and cold. He was on the instant unconsciously an officer, briefly giving a command. This thought prompted her next impulsive words:

"I know now how you looked in the Philippines!" she said with delight, a smile flashing over her face.

"What do you mean?" he asked in a crisp, conservative tone.

"Do you know that you are ordering me about? You 're not a doctor. You 're an officer!" She made him a mocking little salute after the fashion of Fergus's.

Instead of meeting her mood, the darkest expression she had ever seen crossed his face and twisted it nervously.

"Did I ever tell you I was an officer in the Philippines?" he asked coldly.

"No, but in that column and a half about you in 'The Lantern,' two weeks ago," she said in self-defense, "you were described that way. It said you acted so splendidly — "

"I see. You were misinformed. But please don't quote that newspaper rubbish to me ever again." He became his poised self, even looking appealingly at her. "I told you before, that what I did any man worth his salt as a soldier would have done when the opportunity appeared. To continue about myself, let me make it known to you this once and for all time! In the Philippines I was n't riding chargers and leading men. I was not an officer, nor was I treated as one. For a good part of the time I was a miserable, inconspicuous dog in vermin-infested khaki and with hands covered with eczema. And I *obeyed* orders! I did n't give any, except —" he folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling — "except to an old, blind, half-scalped monkey that I rescued from a Chinaman who was going to fry him for his dinner." His face grew dreamy with a reminiscent affection. "Poor old Pedro! He got in among the surgeon's medicines, ate a pawful of calomel as *hors d'œuvres,* followed this up with a pawful of sulphonal tablets and made his dessert of a pawful of strychnine." He smiled broadly at her. "Need I say that Pedro died? He gave a short, falsetto shriek like a French locomotive, shot twenty feet into the air and came down as stiff as a bar of iron." A touch of sternness came back to his tone. "Pedro — except during the short latter time that I was a sergeant — was the only one, Fanny, who took orders of any sort from me in the Philippines. As for the 'Lantern' reporter who wrote about my 'exploits' and talked of my 'Napoleonic temperament,' and a lot more beastly rot that made me seem an ass — I 'd like to wring his neck! Fergus has his orders, if that bounder ever knocks at my door again, to kick him down the stairs."

He towered over her and became on the instant a very tender protector. "All this is unimportant. Will you please go to the farmhouse in the mountains?" he pleaded.

She looked at him wistfully, but shook her head.

"If I beg you to go as a favor to me, because —" he drew a deep breath, "because you 've grown to be a very precious item in my life and I want great care taken of you — then will you go? And Fanny, if you need help — let me help you. Please do?"

Her heart gave such a burning, stifling beat, that just at first she could not speak. Oh, to be able to give herself to this happiness, this sheltering will! She put the dream from her; her calm voice gave no hint of it.

"I wish I could please you," she said sincerely. "You think I can't afford to go. But you 're wrong. I have plenty of money." She stopped, and then said in a reluctant way: "I find I must tell you a secret. I 'm waiting here to see my sister. I love her — and I have n't seen her for ten years. When she really comes, the happiness will be almost more than I can bear. I expect her any day, now. I never come in to see you without leaving a notice on the outside of my door, saying that information can be had of me from Mrs. Murray, for I always tell her when I come here and she would call me. You understand? And please —" she said hesitatingly, "don't speak of my sister even to Fergus. I 'd rather not. But you see why I can't leave New York."

Angry voices were heard in the hall, and John had only time to press Fanny's hand understandingly before Fergus entered, a package under his arm.

"I got them all, sir," he said breathlessly as, trembling and excited, he hastily locked the door. "That 's to keep out a reporter," he explained, as he placed the package on the table.

John gave him a puzzled glance. Fergus had the look of one dazed by a bad fright. "What 's wrong?" John asked. "What about the reporter?"

"Oh, it 's an idiot that thinks you have nothing to do, sir, but recite answers to his questions. And the heat 's terrible. My hat 's like a wet sponge." He pointed to the package without meeting John's eyes. "You 'll find them all right, sir." Wiping his pallid face, he walked slowly into his room.

"Something 's happened," John said to Fanny, adding gaily: "Don't go until you see this." He untied the string around the package. "Have n't you felt the crying need of a post-office, so that we can talk when it is n't possible to visit? See here." He lifted a wicker basket, with a sliding top to it and made to hang on a hook. "Into this the letter is popped. But in order to proclaim who the writer is, I had a brilliant thought." He took [illegible] three small silk flags.

"First, the stars and stripes. When there 's a letter in the box from you, Fanny, you will be good enough to place the stick of the flag in this little iron slide and let it wave. I 'll do the same with this Union Jack. And so that Fergus would n't be out of it, I let him buy an 'Erin go Bragh.' In this way one look will tell who has written the letter."

Fanny expressed herself as enchanted with the idea. Laughing like school children, they fastened the box to the point of the balcony rail just midway between the houses and laid the flags in the covered wooden slide attached to it. Each was to have a small key to the lock.

"I was several days planning this," John said joyfully, "and Fergus was just as long finding a workman to put it together."

"It fits in with the new complexion of things, does n't it?" Fanny asked with a demure smile.

"That 's a cryptic remark — if you like!"

"Well, in spite of my unconventional visits to you when you were sick and they were a necessity, I 'm very usual in my point of view. In future you shall pay me visits in the orthodox way."

"I 'll go like a shot. But I don't like your talking like a young ladies' book of etiquette," he said, with an appearance of sadness. "What has the post-box to do with it, however? You don't — " he said suddenly, in horror — "you don't mean that I'm to wait for a regulation, posted invitation?"

"Just that!" Fanny called gaily, crossing to her window.

"Well, I sha'n't."

"You shall. Our manners have been dreadful. From to-day we'll mend them. I'll write you tonight, Mr. Cross, and give you an invitation to call upon me. Good-by," she said, laughed over her shoulder and hurried into her own place.

What she did there after a half hour's thought, during which she sat helplessly in the big chair with eyes staring before her, was most curious. She went to her trunk, took out an old wallet and from its flattened center drew a piece of printed paper. This was a newspaper paragraph. Sitting at the table, she spread out her arms so that she rested heavily, as with shrinking but stern eyes she read it:

> " . . . It was the decision of the medical examiners that while the prisoner had but recently recovered from a long illness during which she had suffered from intense mental depression, there were no salient evidences of a present mental condition that could amount to absolute irresponsibility of either intention or action. Her replies while short, often but 'yes' and 'no,' showed a definite grip of the subject on which she was questioned, etc. . . . Her sentence to prison was for four years. She received it indifferently. To the last she did not disclose any portion of her history nor give any clew by which the gang her husband and she worked with could be traced . . . "

The words sank in and seared. The horror that they revived — a place of spectres where the beating of the wings of the furies measured the hours — became clearer with every second, until she lay across the table, the weight of utter hopelessness upon her.

"It 's just as well now, at the very beginning, I make myself remember how it is with me," her thoughts sighed through her; "I could so easily forget everything but him."

Fergus was not to be seen when John returned, and the curtain was drawn before the door of his room. John filled his pipe and waited for him, listening. There was not a sound. He crossed the room very quietly and while saying, "Fergus?" pulled the curtain aside. It was as he expected. Fergus was seated on his bed. One hand was clutching his shoulder. His head was drooping.

"Come here," said John, and the big fellow, his eyes lowered, stumbled out, like a driven sheep. "I knew there was something wrong. Are you sick?"

"No," he said, bewildered.

"What is it then? What 's the matter with you? What 's the matter with your shoulder?"

"It was that reporter that was here the other day. I met him in the lower hall and told him to get out. He would n't. He came up and we — well, we rolled over each other until I did manage to fling him out. But before he went he told me — " The sentence absolutely ended. He stood staring at John. " You 've got to know it, Mr. Cross! There 's no keeping it back. It 's out, sir," he said feebly, yet with fierce pain as he flung up his hands. " The old story 's out! "

He waited for a reply, but John stood like stone, the pipe half-way to his lips.

" The papers have it, sir — or they will have it. That fellow faced me with it." His lips quivered like a child's. " Mr. Cross, I 'm sore and I 'm sick to think of it. I 'd rather my face was laid open by his fist than have this news to tell you! "

CHAPTER IX

THE TIDE CREEPS TO JOHN'S DOOR

JOHN sat down. "What did he say?" he asked in a dull voice.

"He said he wanted to see you. I told him that if you saw him, you 'd horsewhip him for the drivel he 'd written about you in that last interview with you — putting words into your mouth that you 'd never said. Then," Fergus concluded, "he told me what he 'd come for; said he knew it was true — but wanted to give you a chance to whitewash it — oh, that was the word that made me want to throttle him!"

"How did he put it?" John asked in the same dead way.

"I could n't say the words," Fergus said, a shrinking in his look.

"Just — *how?* The exact words, please."

Fergus looked away from him. "He said — there was a well-supported rumor that some years ago you 'd been in the English army, sir — an officer, in the Indian service — that you 'd been dismissed for cowardice — in the face of the enemy. He gave the name of the army post, the name of your colonel. Oh, Lord, Mr. Cross —!" he broke off, turning; "to hear that fellow speak Colonel Onslow's name — how it brought it all back!" He went on laboredly. "He said that he had no ill feeling against you and that you'd made good in the Philippines, but that he must have the facts of this story; he was after facts." Here Fergus blazed and trembled. "'Facts?' I said. 'You think Mr. Cross would speak of his life to you? You think he'd show you his heart for you to stick your pen in it?' said I. He tried to shoulder past me. I had two reasons for not letting him in, knowing Mrs. Barrett was sitting with you, sir. 'It will be better for him not to make an enemy of me,' he said. After I'd pitched him down the stairs, I said to him over the banisters by way of advice: 'If you should put your questions to him, he would n't make an enemy of you,' I said, 'he'd make a jelly of you!'"

John flung his head back and broke into a startling peal of laughter. "That conciliated him, of course!"

"I did wrong?" Fergus asked in concern and searched his face.

"Perhaps not," John answered, as he struck a match. "I hardly think it will matter. They'll be sure to treat this news the way it will pay best. As my laurels are new, and my disgrace old, they'll keep the wreath on me, I'm sure. Having gone to such infinite pains to dress me up as a hero," he smiled, "they can't very well take away my nice, fresh clothes before I 've even played in them. They will merely mark me down as a hero somewhat damaged."

He made himself comfortable in the huge cane chair. Fergus noticed that he was paler and unusually thoughtful, and his anxiety became torturing.

"You 're not going to fret, Mr. Cross?" he quavered. "Oh, sir, maybe it 's just as well to get finished with it. 'T was sure to come out! I often wondered why it did n't before."

"So did I," said John. "But it can't hurt me any more, Fergus."

They looked at each other. Into the mind of each came the thought that this was the first time since the day they left India together that this subject was spoken of between them. There had been glances and hand pressures in some of the strong hours of their lives, but never the actual words that could galvanize a disastrous thing.

"You understand — don't you?" John asked.

"Yes," said Fergus very softly. "It 's that you 've paid for it, sir."

John nodded. "That 's it. Once we 've paid, we cease to be petitioners and the case is closed. So don't let it bother you, Fergus. They can say what they like — now!"

Fergus went behind the screen and began to prepare the dinner. While he stirred mayonnaise for the cold salmon and the piercing fragrance of cut cucumber filled the air, memory, in the closing of his eyes, swung John back almost a dozen years.

A wild, hilly part of India edging on Turkestan spread before him, an army outpost on the farthest fringe of British possession, where wild, bearded tribes prostrated themselves to their white-faced conquerors but with murder just back of their smiles. Strange, that by a curious mental caprice, one pleasant and quite inconspicuous day should start up in such living clearness before him! It was a memory that had constantly occurred to him whenever he had looked back, perhaps because it showed him at the very crown of his happy young manhood, before doom had struck for him and shadow swallowed him. All the *minutiae* of the scene fitted in with Meissonier-like accuracy.

He saw a winding, yellow road; the bushy-headed palms rustled high above it in the burning sun; a fringe of herons with tucked-in heads stood asleep by a deeply-sunk pool shadowed by a great pyramidal rock; off on a rise, a roofless temple with cinnamon-colored walls gaped to the sky, that was a dark blue, burning square. There was a rush of horses down a hill — he fairly heard the descent of the loosened earth and stones — and three men in white drill riding suits and pith helmets came into sight upon the yellow road; Winky Phillips, Peter Roof, and himself. They eased into a trot. Over his own saddle hung the body of a young tigress; all were smoking; Winky, between puffs, was singing a song remembered from the "halls:"

"White wings, they never grow weary.
They carry me cheerily over the sea;
Night comes, I long for my dearie.
I 'll spread out my white wings and sail home to thee."

Singing they went at an easy gait out of sight.

John gazed and gazed at the self of that radiant time. There he was, a lieutenant in a cavalry regiment, gay, popular, over-confident, of almost insolent light-heartedness, and with his thirtieth birthday still remote. Golden youth! Golden days! Across what awful years he looked at them.

He could not follow the reverie to the hour of his fall. He balked at its anguish. It was an old wound that could always bleed at a touch. Some sorrows are like that. He opened his eyes and stared over the blazing bowl of his pipe at the big doors dividing Fanny's rooms from his. Not since the happy time so clearly recalled had he felt the combined body and spirit's craving for a woman as he had to-day. He had not lost faith in women; they had simply gone the way of other joys, when life, as by a volcanic seizure, had been twisted out of its course and he had found his back turned forever upon everything familiar and dear. His hand curved over his eyes as his head sank lower and brooding gripped him again.

He saw himself now a disgraced man. There were ghost pictures of long exile in South America, of filibustering in Cuba. These passed, and one endured showing him an insignificant unit among the rank and file of the first American regiments in the Philippines. Though only seven years older than the young hunter of his first vision who sang blithely of "White Wings" as he rode, he was an absolutely different being. He had become human mechanism, the power to love, dead; the power to hate, as well; almost gone too, the power to pity. At first he had tried to inflame himself with liquor, but Nature had been kind in making him physically incapable of obtaining stimulation through drunkenness; excesses brought nightmare sicknesses that tempted him to suicide. He escaped demoralization from that source. The only women he had known were such as came a common soldier's way when the prod of the brute appetite that dies last in a man made him seek them; the little brown women of the hot, southern islands, that some of the lonely soldiers had taken as permanent companions, had existed for him in the most transitory fashion; stupid children — squat, heavy dolls — they had left him only weariness of them and disgust of himself. But just as a disabled ant will keep on building, building, he had lived through the duties of each day, so numb he did not feel their hardships, so indifferently blind he had not seen their ugliness. For years he had breathed and ate and worked and slept, and during that time he had not been for an hour a living man.

The light grew faint in his pipe as he followed the thread of thought to the first throb of awakening from his dull despair.

He saw a hot, December day on the island of Luzon. It was a time of massacres by the Tagalogs upon the Spanish and Chinese, of ambuscades and assassinations, of guerilla attacks upon the Americans by strong, generally unseen forces of insurgents. On this day, so treasured by memory, he was one of a detachment of infantry which left for a week's reconnoitering in one of the northern provinces. It was humid, stifling, and a steady rain fell day and night. The men had been in the downpour and the mud for many weeks, in thin, tropical suits that were stained and faded; their faces were skull-like; their glassy eyes told of the sluggish fever nibbling into their bones.

The advance was made at first through dense, hill jungles, where they had to climb hand over hand, or slide down, holding on to brush for protection; and afterward, through vast swamps fairly sown with man-traps, where the grass was twelve feet high and so thick that after two yards it rose with the opaqueness of a solid wall. His old comrades! — like spectres they clustered around him. Most clear of all was little Wainwright, of whom he had been especially fond, whose young face was like a laughing girl's and who could sing "My Old Kentucky Home" in a seraph's voice that made tears shine on the leathery cheeks of big, rough men. John remembered the bullet that came singing through the grass, breaking a phrase on young Wainwright's lips and sending him down like a log, with half his head blown off. After that, as the boyish body was carried forward [illegible] litter, and the shots now came peppering from all sides, a conviction had come to John that his knowledge of Indian jungles and swamps could be of good service here. This grew from a dull idea to a desire, and he found himself asking to be allowed to cut a trail. After gaining the permission, he gave up his rifle to the shivering native worker and took his bolo instead. He recalled how a new feeling that had resurrection in it had begun to send pricks of fire about his heart and spine.

He went well in advance of the detachment and cut with such a will that the column was able to proceed much faster. He knew that all about him the hidden enemy watched, that he was a marked man. Shots fell near him, flew over him; two struck him, but without serious results. He could hear the musketry of the Americans behind him, as they fired well past him but quite at random, since the insurgents had taken the precaution of using smokeless powder. Once, what he had thought was a dead Filipino, had suddenly sprung at him, made a pass at his head with a huge bolo, and had then flashed into the grass with the incredible swiftness of a snake. Sweating and exhausted as he was, it had been ecstasy to follow the man, to find himself struggling with two, killing one, while the other was captured. And for this chance that flung up a new dawn upon the sky of his life, he had paid but cheaply — with merely a slashed shoulder and a twisted wrist.

There had been more and serious fighting that day, but the remainder of the experience trailed away into smoke before him; not so the closing lines of the report made by his captain:

> "For generally gallant and meritorious conduct throughout the march, I recommend Corporal John Cross. He displayed courage, when, after Private Wainwright had been killed, while firing was incessant, and knowing he would run into the enemy at any minute, he went well in advance of the company, into the almost impassable swamp, and cut a trail that greatly facilitated our progress."

They told him afterward that he had done a big thing, a fine thing. His colonel had him in his tent a whole night. They had smoked and talked, companions as never before. The next day he had been made a sergeant.

At first he had resisted this most usual mark of approbation. Only when the impatient colonel made it plain that the promotion gave better opportunities for action to a soldier did he consent to receive the change of stripes upon his arm. For, woven with his new longing to redeem himself, there was a determination that gradually became a rock foundation in his nature: to act without thought of reward. For his own, secret self to *wipe out* — there was majesty in that. But to build upon what he might be able to do, or accept honors for it, was to be *paid.* He would take nothing! This became a sacred obsession with him.

After this he had felt hope again; he saw hope for him in Fergus's eyes — Fergus, who was then his comrade in the ranks. Daily the desire for rebirth grew stronger. While inwardly he smiled sneeringly at the judgment of men, he waited for the chance that would make him truly know himself. God! God! Great God! to be made clean *in his own sight!* Nothing but that! If this could be —! It was his prayer day and night.

And when, during the autumn just past, the chance had come to him with almost certain death looming beyond it, he had given himself to it, expecting to be made one of that vast, humble, silent number whose carefully marked and hidden graves were rapidly edging Philippine roadsides and river banks.

His second feat had become a conspicuous bit of army history. As he had told Fanny, the experience had by some chance come under special newspaper notice, and had been written up in all the colors of the palette. The occurrence ran before him now in a series of pictures dim in blood-haze and smoke:

He was one of a scouting party of less than one hundred men, which under a captain started for a three days' trip through a dangerous territory. When about four miles from a Philippine village, the enemy — afterwards proven to have outnumbered the Americans four to one — opened fire on them from the thicket-covered hills. At a most important moment, while the Americans were answering the fire, the captain was wounded, a bullet passing through his neck and mouth. When he came to consciousness, he was being carried in John's arms to the shelter of a rice dike about fifty yards back. The lieutenant was placed in command. John put up a blanket to protect the captain and stood outside of this shelter, making good use of his rifle. Shots passed through the dike and shattered the blanket. Still John stood erect, blazing away in a cloud of smoke, while shots poured upon the spot where it was known the leader lay.

After a time the enemy was silenced. This gave the Americans a chance to plan what was best to be done. They were sure the insurgents would return, increased in number, for it was well known that the woods were swarming with demoniac tribesmen. Meanwhile, with the captain useless for action, only able to whisper, and with an appalling number of wounded and dead men on their hands, their chances were all on the side of having to surrender, unless reinforcements and medical aid could be had with dispatch. John, with six men under him, was commissioned to carry this message to headquarters, some eighteen miles away.

His course lay directly to a wide, rushing, deep river, on the opposite shore of which there was a mountainous gorge known to be alive with insurgents. By going down this swiftly moving stream on a raft that had been constructed during the march of the detachment forward, and which had been left hidden in the bushes, their errand could be accomplished in time. But when John reached the spot where the raft had been left, there was no trace of it. A hunt for it for a half mile up and down the river was fruitless. But they reached a spot from which they could see on the other bank a number of native boats, called *bancas*. How to reach them? The tumultuous river was dangerous, even to the most accomplished swimmer; firing, that at first had been weak from the thickets bordering the other shore, was becoming continual, and a man swimming slowly in the open, nearer and nearer the ambushed enemies, would offer an easy target. Nevertheless they saw that unless they could in some way reach the boats quickly without expending their strength too utterly, they were likely to be wiped out.

They answered the fire with surer marksmanship while they searched desperately for a bridge that was remembered somewhere close to this spot. But at this point an imperative and dire delay was necessary; two men were killed and to save their bodies from the mutilation sure to follow, they were given to the flood. A brother of one of the dead men, after gazing with wild eyes at the waters hurtling the bodies on, gave a weak shriek and leaping into the jungle, was never seen again. The remaining three, following John, came at last to what was left of the bridge — a mass of charred timber, still smoking in places and jutting in others, and reaching only a little more than half-way across the flood. There it loomed, a forlorn hope, but their only one. Without a second's hesitation, John rushed for it.

Just here he recalled an occurrence that had not been mentioned in his report — one regarding which no word had ever passed his lips, so sacred, so pitifully comprehensible it was to him! Of the other three men, two had hung back. The wild water across which they must creep and then swim slowly, straight into the face of almost certain death, had unhinged them. Their eyes were as wild as the deserter's. They were n't afraid, they said. They were willing to die. But this crossing, which meant failure anyway, would be slow torture, and they could n't face it. Rather than do it they would ram the muzzles of their guns into their mouths and blow their heads off. With his hand on the shaking rail, John had paused in pity at their almost demented faces. "Boys," he said quietly, "*I* am an Englishman. Won't *you* come?" And with their senses swinging back into place, they gave a cry and followed him.

He clambered over the charred and sagging structure, and swam the distance between it and the bank from which the insurgents, yelling like condors, sent down their greetings in Mauser bullets, native arrows and heavy stones. Another whirling moment dizzied even memory: Private Mallory, whose progress had been slower than his companions, while still almost in midstream, had received a bullet in his back. He was going down for the second time when John, who had gained the bank, plunged in again, reached him, and managed to bring him to the shore.

John's breath broke as he thought of it all. What a wild game it had been! — life and death the players, the odds always on the pale marksman's side. To struggle on, though terribly wounded, to go with teeth set and deliver the message that had been carried through horrors that had become almost harlequin, although they had been compounded of blood, pain, desertion, and death — this had been but part of the play. When he could pause to consider himself, it was found that a bullet had grazed a lung and passed out through his shoulder, that the flesh was ripped from his thighs, and that his left arm, which sagged helplessly and was tearing him with pain, had a jagged, protruding bone.

Here, too, memory showed him the closing words in his captain's report of this engagement:

> "I earnestly recommend Sergeant John Cross for heroism of the highest character. The arrival of reinforcements in time to save even a small portion of my command was due to this soldier's courage, which did not falter even when he was himself fearfully wounded. To his coolness in sheltering me and firing upon the enemy while himself in an exposed position and under heavy fire, I undoubtedly owe my life. His crossing into the enemy's country over the ruins of the burned bridge, and his saving Private Mallory from drowning, while almost exhausted himself, were also examples of the most sublime courage. Privates O'Toole, Morgan, and Mallory, who continued with him to the end of this most perilous journey, I also recommend for the most meritorious conduct."

After this there floated to John, on the waves of thought, pictures of long, gray, weary hospital days — how long, how gray! He had almost died — yet had lived — was living now to think about it all over his pipe, his eyes on Fanny's door.

As his pulses quieted and the hopelessness of India and the glory of Luzon both vanished, his heart went out to her — to her alone. During the months since he had won the triumphant inner knowledge that had purged him of psychological leprosy, he had, in spite of illness, known a deep, redeeming content that had seemed happiness. He had often named it so — until to-day. To-day, in the blaze of another feeling, his sense of well-being had sickened like candlelight in a full sun.

Was this love? He wanted to believe it, to cry: "A miracle! A miracle!" The wonder of it made him timid to trust it. [illegible] new what irresistible hypnotism could lie in sex attraction, often when analyzed no more than some endearing mannerism, a trick of glance, a curve of mouth, or the cadence of a voice. The ashes in the pipe, which hung forgotten from his lips, grew gray while he pondered, his eyes on Fanny's door. And the answer came in a way that settled doubt. Passion ebbed but did not leave him cold. In its place a protective tenderness rose in him like a sea and surged between him and Fanny. There was not a thought of self in the feeling. It was as pure as the instinct to shelter a child. His face had a look of lasting strength, a guardian light. Love! The word murmured in his brain like the sea on a still night, and with it some lines of Henley's:

> "And they who go with the word unsaid
> Though they walk with the living
> Are damned and dead —"

as he had been, until this hour.

CHAPTER X

DREAMING

THE dinner was as good as the best Fergus had ever prepared, but John ate only a little of it. Although he was nerved to face the impending disclosure and did not fear it, there was repugnance in the thought that the hidden sorrow of his life would be common talk to-morrow. He did not want Fanny to read of it in cold type. It angered him that by any chance it would come to her knowledge except through him. He longed to be with her. But for her illness that afternoon, and that he was aware she had then mutely forbidden him to tell her what he felt, he would have gone to her and eased his heart. This being impossible, he was urged to go out into the streets for air, for space. The walls seemed to press against him; the patch of luminous, evening green glittering above the houses beckoned to him. After an absent-minded ten minutes at the table, he stood up.

"It 's stifling here. I can't eat to-night. But I wish, Fergus, you 'd put some of these good things on a tray and take them in to Mrs. Barrett."

"I 'll do it, sir." Fergus ventured to add a suggestion in a voice that he tried to make absolutely blank: "But maybe Mrs. Barrett would be glad to have you go in yourself, sir, for company like. The little lady is not well at all. I 've noticed that for days back."

"She 'll be much better keeping quiet," John said briefly; "I think a walk will help me to sleep."

He got into his street clothes, filled his pipe, tucked his stick under the bandaged arm, and went out.

The halls and stairways of the old house affected him unpleasantly to-night. They were streaked with the summer dust. Beyond the open, battered colonial doorway, with its murky sidelights and glimpse of newel posts, scantily-dressed children were seen playing, some clambering on the doorstep. The poverty of the place, in contrast to his own refreshing rooms, came at him like an ugly grin. In the streets, the impression was supported. Privacy was flung overboard in a frantic effort to get relief from the stewing humidity, and front doorways were filled with pale, languid groups. Mrs. Murray's lower window with its sign: "Modes — Fit Guaranteed," was wide open; and John could see the owner's intensely pale face bending over a machine, whose whirr reached him as if it were a sullen groaning from the worker's soul. The old German who had the front parlors on the floor with Fanny, and whose long windows were filled with new and old musical instruments, sat in his shirt sleeves on the balcony, tapping at a violin case on his knee, while from the dim interior came groans of "Oh, oh, oh," from instruments that were being mended.

His coming to Greenwich Village had been a sick man's caprice. The cab that had carried him and Fergus from the transport to a hotel had come through this section of the town. The twisting streets, named instead of numbered, and the small orderly houses had reminded him of sober nooks in London. Later he remembered it and had said to Fergus: "Get me out of this hotel. Try to get rooms in that quiet old neighborhood I liked. Put the stuff in them that 's in the packing cases. Don't talk to any one about it, and keep people off."

He had come on a bitterly cold day when the wind had swept the streets clean and the people were housed. The place had been at its best then. To-night it was at its worst. Alert as he was for Fanny's welfare, the thought of her in the stifling back rooms while the packed streets teemed with dejected humanity, offended him. He could afford better quarters and so could she. If she still refused to leave New York, she must at least change to the open, hilly part of the city and to a better house.

"I 'll insist on her changing," he thought.

The word "insist" pulled him up in his musings.

He had to face the question that until now had danced upon his dream like a black speck upon sunny water. This interest in Fanny's future belonged only to the man she loved. Was he, or would he be, that man? She had been a most sympathetic neighbor and a fascinating comrade. But she had never in the faintest way mutely invited love from him, as the shyest of women can make her unexpressed selection. Neither had she given him her confidence. He knew nothing about her. To his direct question she had told him that her husband was dead, but this did not prove that there was not somewhere another man beloved by her. Vanity had long ago perished in him. He had been in the habit of thinking of himself as "done for," "a man that was." Except for its reconstructive elements that had wiped out the old stain, the fame that had turned him into a newspaper hero had been an irritation. He had only a small income, no social position, not even a country. Would she love him? For a moment, as he sauntered in the hot, moist dusk, he tasted failure.

Then in the burning, masterful demand that wins its way, his doubts were swept aside. There was no compounding by which love could be made logical. It had a way of coming into being for as many different reasons as there are weeds in the field, or for no reason at all. Fanny might give him her heart and soul, no matter what he was. Dear, adorable women — God bless them! — had from the beginning of time divinely loved men who had even less to give than he. On the very trail of this thought he would have gone to her if he could, have taken her little hand, filled his eyes with the charm of her pale, wistful face, and have uttered the simple words that are as old as earth: "I love you. I want and need your love."

He had been walking very slowly. By this time he had reached a street about a quarter of a mile from his home. This had lost completely any likeness to the old town and was used altogether for business. On one whole side of it and a part of another, a large and flourishing brewery extended. A line of horseless trucks stood banked together for the night along the curb. The big factory doors were closing. Faint daylight with shadows forming in it gave the street a seclusion that attracted John. He turned into it and strolled to the further end, that gave on a small square. Here, in astonishment, he came almost to a dead pause. Well hidden among the line of trucks a brougham stood. It was an exquisite thing — a woman's dainty, perfected toy, very small, of dark blue wood with silver trimmings and with a silky, pale blue shimmer from the interior. The coachman was slender, dark and foreign-looking, with a sharply-cut, Dante-like face. He sat motionless, staring steadily ahead.

John approached slowly, the convalescent's interest in trifles aroused. As he came quite level with the brougham he saw there was a woman in it. She was just in the act of stepping out. The light was dying and her clothes were dark and plain, but nevertheless he received an impression of elegance and completeness. The tiny, lustrous brougham belonged to this woman and to her world — as did orchids, lap dogs worth their weight in gold, and all the other costly, sometimes useless items that perfect the setting of a pampered, extravagant existence. John felt pleasure in being able to recognize her as a type. He had known her sort in India and England in the old days; later, among the officers' visitors in Manila, he had seen her in Luneta Park during the hour of the evening drive — the human diamond, polished and pointed by every device of art, and resting upon velvet under glass.

She had closed the door with one hand. In the other she held what in the dimness was to him only a white splash, until, as she moved, the rich fragrance of gardenias reached him. Her face was screened by a white, webby veil covered with such an intricate lace pattern as made it an effective mask. She stood peering at a small watch that was strapped to her wrist.

"Carlos?" she said softly. The man turned to listen, but not more sharply than John did at the sound of her voice. "Drive to lower Fifth Avenue and wait there. Don't come back here for two hours. When you do, wait exactly where you are."

The coachman touched his hat and resumed his immobile pose. The woman, with a beautiful, free step, swung around the corner quickly, leaving a stream of the gardenias' perfume in her wake. John stood gazing after her. He had just heard Fanny's voice — the same, slow, soft contralto, with a piquantly sharp vibration slurring it.

"Fanny's sister!" The certainty stirred a hazy alarm in him.

This rich woman!

CHAPTER XI

A MEETING

SINCE the day Fanny had disappeared with Steven King, and particularly during the last two years of tragic sorrow, Claudia had really only lived for the moment that would at last bring them together. In fancy she had always seen herself running wildly toward Fanny, crying out to her, her arms opened wide, tears blinding her. It was therefore, in a way, inconceivable that she should be walking at a discreet pace and watchful of possible followers. Who, to see her making her careful and graceful passage among the loiterers before the doors and the snarls of children upon the curb, would dream that she was nearing her life's happiness after long and desolate waiting? It must always be so, she told herself. Reality scraps us. We can never be as honest as our thoughts, nor as natural, nor as good nor — fortunately — as bad. And so, while her heart often gave a big pulsation as if it were a bird struggling in a closed hand, she progressed in a quite usual fashion until the corner of Fanny's street was reached.

From one side to the other she hurried, scanning the open doorways for a number. But numbers, except in a few obstinate instances, had in the general impairment been wiped out. It was the repeated "Oh, oh, oh," from the violins that revealed the house to her, for Fanny, in the one long letter that she had dared to write her after her arrival here, had mentioned the old German's violin-strung windows as part of the direction.

Claudia knew and loved music so well it had a way of coloring her reflections about life. This old house with the old musician upon the balcony working upon a maladied instrument; with Mrs. Murray's bent head nimbused in the lamplight; the heat, the dusk, the decadent grandeur; the children of the poor, laughing as they played; poor young lovers, keeping tryst; she, so rich in the things of the world, so bitterly sad and starved of heart; the approaching meeting with Fanny, glowing and beckoning through the dusk to her — what was it all but a Chopin nocturne, little staccato trills cleaving its long swathes of mournfulness, and at the end after chords of pain, the high, high note of ecstasy?

She entered the hall as noiselessly as a secret intruder. The gardenias' sweetness filled the dim place, and floating through the open door of Mrs. Murray's room, made her rest her fingers on the whizzing wheel for a moment and look around with her tired, inquiring smile. Claudia noticed how the spacious, old stairs sagged, each step as worn in the center as the backbone of an old horse; saw the faint decorations of the shining, upper walls and the bulging, mended spots of new gray plaster on the lower parts; saw that Fanny's door, though scarred and scratched, was majestic and of heavy mahogany. Seeing all this, she understood how the place was dear to Fanny because of her love for "the tender grace of faded things."

Beyond the door Fanny was trying to sleep. She had spent an earlier hour sitting with closed eyes while her mind had gazed and gazed through a barred grating at a woman in a prison cell. And in the useless, wasteful way of lonely women, she had wept for what had been and for what might have been. When Fergus had slipped in the tray with the delicious, cold dinner upon it, she had wiped her eyes, called herself a fool, bathed her face with orange-flower water, ate a little, fed Piff, tried to read, and failing — with another gust of hopeless tears threatening — had put on her thinnest nightgown, and drearily stretched herself on the bed that was made as cool as possible with hard mattress and linen sheets. It was so early she could hear voices through the open windows and the wailing of "*Oh, solé mio,*" on somebody's flageolet. It was so hot the air seemed a weight that fenced with and beat back her breath.

And it was then, as she lay open-eyed in the darkness, that a faint, cautious knocking sounded on her door.

Fanny sprang to her knees and remained tensely listening. She had come to have a sensitive recognition of these knockings for admission. As she knelt on the bed, her mind worked rapidly. Her visitor was not John, nor Fergus, nor Mrs. Murray. The faint sound had come from a woman's gloved knuckles. So far this pointed to Claudia, but Fanny had somehow never fancied her coming at night. Yet, why not? Why not better then, than in the clear day? As she asked the question, the knock came again, faint and cautious as before, but more imperative. Fanny ran out into the larger room and pressed her face to the door.

"Who is it?" She was scarcely able to speak the trembling words.

"Clo," was sighed through the crevice.

The door was opened. Claudia stepped into the dark room, saw the white figure only faintly, but with a wild thrill felt the out-reaching arms. And then, with the door closed, they stood wrapped together, sobbing lips on sobbing lips in that ultimate embrace of anguished affection after a long parting that wipes out everything else in life. It is impossible to show in words what two people say at such a time. What they say is often lame and astoundingly foolish. But what they do with kisses, tears, with arms that clutch and fingers that trail tenderly over wet cheeks — in these things hearts speak.

"Clo! It does n't seem as if it can be true!"

"Fanny, my sister! Oh, at last, my darling! My little darling, at last!"

Fanny had taken off Claudia's hat and gloves. Candles were lighted. The shades had been drawn, the windows closed, and though this shut out all air and made the room stifling, they scarcely felt it. Claudia sat well away from the big folding doors, and Fanny on a stool was in front of her, her clasped arms on Claudia's knees. In this position she sometimes gazed up, sometimes dropped her head to her arms, whose pressure alone was an embrace. She was filled with distress at the change in her sister. The wasted, made-up face, the burning, deep-set eyes were not what she had remembered.

"You 're a child, Fanny," Claudia said and held her away. "Let me look at you. Yes, you 're still a child. In this light, with your shoulders bare, you 've not grown up at all. Except that you have the look of a child that some one has hurt. Poor love!" In a rush of tenderness she took Fanny's face in her hands and kissed her. "But you find me an old woman? Burnt to cinders inside and out."

"You don't look well, dear," Fanny said, while smoothing the bony, hot hand. "My sorrows have hurt you. But now it will be different. You won't worry any more, now that I 'm here and safe."

Claudia bent quickly closer. "You *are* safe? There 's no doubt of that? You have n't noticed anything? You don't think —?"

"So far, I know I 'm not in the least suspected of anything. I 'm quite, quite safe," said Fanny.

"You never go out?"

"Only at night."

Claudia gazed at her, and gradually a look of peace deepened in her face. "You were right to come here. It 's out of the world — so different from up-town New York." She settled herself comfortably and said in a practical tone: "There are some things I want to understand clearly to-night. You must sketch years for me in a splash. To go back: From the letters you sent me from time to time as you drifted about the country with Steven, I can patch up the early part of your story, how you got into difficulties, how you gradually found out what he was. But in God's name, Fanny, tell me why you stayed with him? When I think what you might have been saved if you had n't! I 've never understood it. You knew he was dishonest —"

"No. I knew his methods were tricky; I thought he was given to what are called 'sharp' business practices; I knew he had no mercy about going into debt and not paying anybody. But I scarcely understood his talk of 'floating deals,' of 'pulling off big things.' He made me unhappy, afraid of some danger all the time — but I did n't dream that he was — what he was."

"You gradually suspected that he was a sort of small swindler, at least. You said as much in one of your letters," Claudia insisted. "And yet you remained with him."

"Yes, I did."

"I can't understand it."

Fanny looked up at her with a sublime quiet. "Clo, to understand, you would have to become me. It would be necessary for you to know Steven as I knew him, to have loved him very much, to have had him love you. Then, dear, you 'd understand." In a small voice, as if mystified, she was standing apart and gazing at her old self. "Steven King was *crass*. But even now, with the full knowledge of his baseness, — swindler, cheap rogue, thief! — I can feel stealing over me that wonderful charm that made me — his. Some women are like that, Clo. Some men can make women love them that way. What a good, fine man often can't do, a man like Steven may, and without effort. Of course you must understand that he always seemed to love me dearly. He was a curious being. During our periods of poverty he was simplest and gentlest. He never tyrannized — he *won* me — he could bring me to heel like a patient, adoring dog. Something in my soul and body wound itself about him pityingly, and to cut it would have been like bleeding to death." Her head drooped. "He was pursued by creditors and dupes. I hid with him. I often almost starved with him. But I was never dishonest with him. He never asked me to be. I knew nothing of that side of his life." She raised herself a little and her eyes searched her sister's face. "What I wrote you from the prison was true, Clo. I knew nothing of what they said was proved against me. I was sick. I did n't suspect that the money he sent me was counterfeit. I did n't know what was in the box that he wanted me to express to him. You believe me?"

"My darling!" Claudia kissed her. "I see it clearly. You could n't change the man, but staying with him, he broke you for a time in body and mind — and the rest followed." Claudia was now clear-eyed, keyed to be sentry and guide to Fanny. "I want you to understand why in those early days I could n't personally send you money. Steven's demands were constant and terrible — you knew that?" she broke off.

Fanny gave a little, sighing laugh. "I knew *him*. I felt certain he was bleeding Ezra, even when he did n't tell me."

"I had no allowance of my own until recent years," Claudia said, and her teeth clicked icily on the words, "or I 'd have kept you supplied. Esray sent Steven money until he exasperated him beyond endurance, and once Esray's wallet is closed and strapped, it 's like an oyster — to open it you 'd need a knife. Steven could have had a modest but steady income if he 'd walked the line set for him by Esray — "

"Impossible!" Fanny said. "Money did n't mean to him something by which one's needs are furnished. It meant a nucleus with which to experiment and get a great deal more money without working for it. There you have his theory of life in a nutshell." Her chin had dropped to her clasped hands. "Clo, in prison I used to thank God heartily that Steven had died. It was an awful death, but better for him than a long prison sentence — and oh, salvation for me! When I knew that he was dead I felt, even in my desolation, that sometime I might make something of life. Had he lived, I would have had to pity him, help him. I could not have escaped from him." Her awed eyes gazed into the shadow beyond the candlelight.

CHAPTER XII

LIFTING THE VEIL

THEY sat in silence for a few moments while the clock ticked, and the years that had separated them passed like spectres before their thoughts. Claudia's voice, when at last she spoke, was hesitating, and she bent her lips to Fanny's hair.

"When you came to know that you were in prison, darling — is that time too awful for you to tell me about it?"

"No! It will ease my heart to turn it inside out for you." She rested her elbows on Claudia's knee and pressed her knuckles to her chin. Her half-closed eyes had the look of searching for objects through a haze. "The terrible illness I 'd passed through a year before all this happened had left me with a melancholia that nothing could lift. I 've heard since that I did n't show this in my face or bearing. I was slender, pale, quiet, and very sad, but of my mental suffering there was n't any distinct sign. This counted against me at the trial. I have almost no memory of that. It was a drab splash, part of that toneless horror-land that only minds sick from melancholy can know. Things seemed happening to some one else. But except for the steady, settled despair, I did n't suffer. I 'm sure that after I was sent to prison I grew worse. I recall being afraid of everything and every one. They thought me sullen, obstinate, and put me on heavy machine work on dark blue overalls that used to stain my hands — " An unbearable sob broke from Claudia. " I won't tell you any more," Fanny said, in a little cry of pity. " It 's so old to me, it does n't matter now; but it hurts you."

" Go on, dear. I want to know. Besides, it 's my punishment. Were they kind to you — there ? " Claudia asked in a stifled tone. " Were they kind ? "

" Almost all were — after their fashion."

" But they did not realize that you were still ill ? "

" They saw that I was depressed, but then most prisoners are that," she said with a dim, sad smile that belonged to the life she was looking back upon. " My melancholy was of the silent sort. I asked no questions, made no complaints. I did n't betray any of the workings of my poor, sick mind, and as my health was otherwise good, it is n't strange they did not understand."

" And then you got better ? " Claudia asked, her eyes drenched with love. " Were you cured suddenly ? "

" Oh, no. Slowly, very slowly." Fanny straightened and drew back from Claudia. " Quite sharply, one day, I knew I was in prison and why I was there.

I knew, too, that I would come out of that gray land of my thoughts if I fought my way through it myself; and I began to fight. Oh, Clo, if you knew how I struggled! I concentrated — put memories away, thought only of my work, reduced living to a machine needle, a piece of cloth, lived for the moment — no, for the second. I began to watch my own recovery — I, my own physician. At night I 'd been tortured by awful fancies. I 'd constantly seen a great mass of shadow in some corner of my mind, which would gradually disclose itself as a huge bear that would lumber slowly and sullenly out of sight. This would be replaced by a ladder, on which a tiny bird would be perched, its bright eyes fixed on me. As I began to watch myself, I felt that if the bear's shadow would begin to decrease and I could keep the little bird from hopping to a lower step of the ladder, it would mean that I was getting well. How I used to wait for their coming at night, while I 'd set my teeth and say: 'I am not afraid. I am going to get well.' And then the joy that would rush through me as the bear and his shadow began to grow smaller, as the little bird either stayed on one step or mounted higher — never lower! — until at last both were gone! Gone forever," Fanny said, as she crept close to Claudia again, "and I was cured. It was then I resented being there and thought only of escape."

"How I have wondered about that," said Claudia.

"You did n't dare to write me anything but the fact."

"I 'd been there a year when my chance came. The niece of the warden came to live with the warden's family. She believed in me and became my secret friend. During months and months that followed, we planned how she might be able to help me. There was a quaint old man named Estey, who used to come to produce one-act plays for the prisoners. He had been an actor, and every few weeks he brought people with him to play famous parts in costume. Well, one night, with the help of the warden's niece, I found myself outside the prison dressed in the gown that had, earlier in the evening, been worn by her as the daughter of the Vicar of Wakefield. I found a hiding-place with Mr. Estey's daughter, who was not long from England, and quite unknown. She lived in a town about thirty miles from the prison. I was hidden there in an attic — literally hidden — never showing my face even at a window, for three months. It was from there I had Mr. Estey send you the first news of my escape. When the money came from you, I ventured north. The old actor helped me to disguise myself wonderfully. For the early part of my travels he stained my skin like a mulatto's. When I changed from that, I wore successively gray wigs, red wigs, black wigs; I limped — or I wore spectacles — and I got a wardrobe together, bit by bit, in several cities. I was headed for New York. I 'd never been here with Steven, but from all I 'd read of it, I felt that here, in this crowded city, I 'd find a hiding-place. Well — I have. I was in a small hotel in Baltimore when I saw an advertisement of these rooms." She looked around with a dreamy smile. "No one ever had a dearer little home than this has been to me."

Claudia also gazed around, but her look was hard and angry. "Yes, you were fortunate to find rooms as safe as these. But it 's just about time you had something better. It 's just about time that I began to pay my debt to you!" She sprang up, the hold on her emotions relaxed and she trembled as if sick. "Can I ever make this up to you? Can you forgive me, Fanny? Can you?" she asked, her nervous hands pulling at her throat.

"Claudia, what do you mean?" Fanny asked, springing up in alarm.

"I should have been with you through this long, hard sorrow. But I was n't."

"Why, at first you did n't even know —"

"I should have known!" she said in stifled frenzy. "Why was I going through the travesty of living with Ezra Heit while you were going through this hell alone? Fanny," she said, sobbing hard, "my life is yours from this moment. I dedicate it to you. You are the only creature I love. I 'll cheat and lie to guard you safely; I 'll stoop to anything to get what I need for you. When Ezra decides to dismiss me, I 'll have money, and I 'll pay lawyers to help free you if that 's possible. If they say it is n't wise to try, then we 'll creep far away together. We 'll create a new world for ourselves — just we two. Oh, I 'll make you happy, Fanny! I 'll make a full payment. You 'll see — you 'll see!"

Fanny saw back of these words the utter destitution of Claudia's life. To satisfy this starving, sisterly love was its one happiness. Gratitude filled her at first, but as Claudia's arms closed more jealously about her, she felt the beginning of a feeling of resistance. From long starving this protecting love had the tyranny that streaks all fanaticisms. In the picture sketched by Claudia there were blessings and rich gifts. But the sweet liberty of spirit enjoyed in these humble rooms would be gone. A chill went over her as she drew back. To Claudia she was all the world. But Claudia was not all the world to her. The thought of one whose name she had not mentioned was a barrier between them.

Claudia's desire to help was poured like a searchlight upon Fanny's life. She wanted to be admitted to the most secret corners of her heart. Fanny talked freely. She told amusing things of her simple housekeeping;

of the plot and progress of her story, and how she was soon to hire a typewriter; how it felt to steal out at night and walk for hours along quiet streets or take ferry-boat rides across the wide rivers, while always keeping to shadowy spots on the decks; of the gowns Mrs. Murray was making for her; of Piff and how he came into her possession. But she did not speak of John. She did not once look at the door dividing him from her. She could not talk of him in an untrue, casual way, and she had a feeling that Claudia would not sympathize with any other.

"I 'd send in a stack of new books and some fruit to you at once," Claudia said, when, after a glance she stood up, "but perhaps I 'd better not send them here."

"Better not. I must not give too many evidences of prosperity," Fanny answered, "except the books. You might chance them; I 'm starving for a good story."

"But it 'll be such a little while, dear — only a few days now — before you leave."

Fanny gave her a dazed look. "I 've made no preparation — "

"*I* have." Claudia wound her arm around her shoulder and led her to the mirror. "See those stains under your eyes? That house pallor? They 've got to go. You must get out of the city without delay."

The words made the definite parting from John fill her like a knell. She met it with a wild resistance.

The desire to keep what was so dear to her clashed with the pity and tenderness she felt for her sister.

"Don't make any plans for me, Clo dear," she said. "I'll stay here for at least another month. By that time I'll have most of my story typed — "

"Stay here a month?" Claudia looked at her aghast. "The place will kill you."

Fanny gave a dry laugh. "That's your luxurious point of view, Clo. But these rooms, except on the hottest days, are very comfortable. We've had a hot wave — now we're sure to have a cool week or so."

"But it's unnecessary to stay here when something better is offered." Claudia had taken up her hat. She now sat down with it, gave Fanny a puzzled look, and began pulling out the pins. "I had to go to Newport the very day we arrived. Ezra insisted. I was there almost a week. During that time, I looked about for a place for you. I found a little secluded cottage over in Jamestown, just across the ferry from Newport. It's sweet — in a setting of honeysuckle and briar-rose bushes. I'm leaving for Newport almost immediately and will stay into September. With you in Jamestown, you'll be as much out of Newport's reckoning as if you were in Harlem; yet I can get to you in twenty minutes! I can trust Carlos, who brought me here; he's devoted to me; you see I helped him to get married secretly against Ezra's absurd dictation that he must n't — " She broke off and looked in a startled way at Fanny. " Why are you looking over at those doors ? "

" I was thinking." Fanny went impulsively to Claudia and sat down before her. " Even if you think it very foolish, I don't want to leave New York just now. I feel perfectly well — I want to finish my story — "

" You can write in the little cottage in Jamestown, dear."

Fanny gave a wistful sigh. " As you spoke, Clo, I fancied myself there. Oh, when you were n't with me, I 'd be so lonely in that little cottage ! "

" Well, are n't you lonely here ? " Claudia asked, as if speaking to an unreasonable child.

" No." Although she tried, she could not keep a warm note out of her voice. " I 've made some friends."

Claudia smiled indulgently. " You mean you talk to a few of the poor people who live here. Naturally, you could n't escape that."

A light went over Fanny's face. She wanted to lift her head and send out the gust of triumphant laughter that John loved to hear. Instead she took on an engaging, critical air.

" After all you 've seen of the world, Clo — after living, observing, feeling — do you really think it would be impossible for me to find a friend in this poor old house?"

Claudia gave an epicurean shrug.

"Have you?"

"Yes, I have. A wonderful friend." Fanny pointed to the big doors. "He lives in there."

"He? I supposed you were speaking of some family. Who is — he?" Her gaze grew sharper.

Fanny told briefly what she knew of John's history, one fact following another as if she tore off strips from a bulletin; but quietly and flatly as the information was given, her face had a luminous look as she spoke of his soldierly renown, his illness, her visits to him, of the steady growth of their friendship, how his companionship had delighted and helped her, and what a treasure Fergus had been to her.

"The hours," Fanny concluded, "have just twinkled by!"

A sneer of dainty but deadly intolerance had begun to darken Claudia's face. She was the society woman, whose social creed, though covered by a casual, flippant manner, is an iron one.

"Amusing for you, I dare say," she said crisply. "But fancy your going into that man's rooms! Why, it makes my flesh creep. It could n't have been pleasant."

"Why not? His rooms are delightful. So is he.

He 's a gentleman. Not only that — he 's a most interesting and charming gentleman. Besides — I helped him."

"You were very slow at mentioning this — Mr. John Cross — to me."

"I thought you might n't like him, might not understand, and you see I was right."

"But this chance acquaintance?" There was mockery as well as jealous love in Claudia's eyes. "Is he important? Would my opinion of him matter? You chanced on him here; he 's an incident — soon to be forgotten."

Fanny looked at her in a full, straight way. "Never to be forgotten," she said simply and directly.

"This becomes eccentrically interesting," said Claudia drily.

Fanny shook her head obstinately. "We see things differently. You 're measuring what I 've told you with your little, conventional foot rule. These ten years have changed you, Clo. You think that my going in to nurse Mr. Cross was an indiscretion that poverty shields. It was not." Her tone grew reverent. "It was a chance sent to me by God! By it I was able to step into another's life, out of the loneliness and the cold in which I had sickened, and into his heart and soul!"

It was now Claudia's turn to see very clearly the marks that had been left on Fanny by her ten, very different years. In the candlelight, with her bare arms and naked throat, she had at the first glance the look of an ethereal child, but there was a terrible knowledge of life in the face — simplicity, charity, individuality — all born of suffering.

"When you see Mr. Cross, you 'll understand." She looked away from Claudia, her gaze going suddenly hopeless. "I want to stay while he does. Don't you see? It will be over so soon."

"Fanny!" The word came sharply from Claudia. "You are not honest. You care — you care for this man!"

There was defeat on Fanny's face. "I love him, dearly." She went to the table, rested her elbows on it, her face half hidden.

"Is this — serious?"

"It 's my whole self, my life. Are they serious?"

"I never dreamed of such a complication as this," Claudia muttered hopelessly. "He 's in love with you, of course."

"Yes, I 'm sure he is."

"Nothing has been said, then?" This was hopeful.

"Nothing."

Claudia crossed to her. "Does he know — about you? Have you told him — ?"

Fanny lifted her head in ineffable shrinking. "Told him that I 'm considered a thief, hiding? That I was ever — *there?* I 'd rather die!"

"Where will this end, Fanny?"

"It has ended now," she said clearly.

"I 'm glad you 're sensible, dear." Claudia laid her hand on her hair.

"I am so sensible about it," Fanny said, with a bitter smile going over her pale face, "that my soul is sick!"

"Then let me help you. Listen to me. There 's only one thing to do," Claudia said, in a low, determined voice. "Be ready to leave here just as soon as I can take you. If you don't — if you keep seeing this man — you won't end it. I know men and women and human weakness; and I know you. In your loneliness you 've probably come to idealize this Mr. Cross — an unusual man to meet in a place like this, I grant you — but if you don't want to twist your future into a terrible coil of some sort, don't see him again." She saw that her words were making their impression on Fanny. "Where would love with him lead to?" she asked. "Only through a blind alley to a stone wall."

With a reckless flinging out of her hands, Fanny stood up sharply. She walked to a little distance, and stood thinking. "You 're right," she whispered wildly. "Yes, you are right."

"You wrecked your life for a man before, Fanny. Don't do that again. Don't wait until you care too much." Claudia followed her and drew her into her arms. "It would be harder then, dear. You 'd suffer horribly. Make the wrench now."

"A blind alley — a stone wall." She nodded drearily as she looked into her sister's eyes. "I see them, Clo. I see them."

When Claudia left her, she took away the promise she craved. Fanny would see John only once, and that just before departure. She would get ready to leave for Jamestown.

"This is Friday. We 'll start on Monday. I 'll make all the arrangements," were Claudia's last words.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STONE WALL

JOHN knew that New York weather could be dramatic. He had seen it change and cavort in many unexpected ways. He had seen rain with cyclonic winds at noon melt into a sunset such as pours its crimson on the Mediterranean; had seen it snowing with a full moon shining; had melted one hour and shivered the next. Therefore the morning following his stifling, evening stroll did not surprise him. Half the night he had sat up smoking in the dark, in an airless humidity that paled even his memories of accursed summer days in the Indian lowlands; and after a few hours of exhaustion that could hardly be termed sleep, he had awakened to feel a riotous, chilly breeze lifting curtains and madly blowing papers about his room.

He stood in his deliciously cooled pajamas, looking through the cane curtains at the early sun streaking roofs and silvering windows. The crisp, rippling air made a vibrating sense of well-being fill him. It promised to be a glorious day; love was in his heart;

Fanny was near him; soon he would see her and say to her all the tender, adoring, foolish things that had been swirling in his mind. He could not see disappointment ahead of him — not seriously. The fact that there was no letter in the box as Fanny had promised, did not trouble him, for he assumed that her sister had naturally enough absorbed her whole evening. Something made him exultant. For one throb of anxiety, he felt a hundred stings of hope. Neither did the thought of what the morning papers might say of him dampen his spirit. Let them say what they pleased; he had clipped their talons and they could not tear him.

Thinking of this, a superstition among the blacks on a small, West Indian Island came into his thoughts: It was believed that as a gift to some of the most righteous the magical power of taking off their skins was given. These were able at night to step from their black skins, roll them up, roam without them and replace them before ordinary mortals were awake. The story was of one who, having sinned and paid for his sins in long pain and sacrifice, found himself in a glorious, white skin, having no need of the other. But the old one, rolled away and hidden out of sight, was discovered, and an owner sought for it. The man to whom it had belonged was found, but when they tried to make him replace it he refused. "But the skin is yours," came the cry. "It was mine," he said, "but I never felt at home in it; I never wanted it, and I came to hate it. I am now in the skin I love, and I 'll never put on the other again. Fling it into the sea." They would not hear of this solution to the matter — but behold —! when they tried to force the man back into the black, discarded skin, it would not fit him, he had outgrown it; it strained at every seam and broke where it seemed strongest. He stood triumphant, his arms up, the old skin in rags at his feet.

This was in John's thoughts when he told Fergus to get all the morning papers, and then, in his night clothes, his bare feet in cane slippers, he paced the room waiting for them. Separate as he felt from that old black skin in rags, he wondered to what extent he would be annoyed when he saw all the ugly details describing it spread out in print. When Fergus brought in the heap of papers smelling of fresh ink, he seized them and flung them on the table.

"Now we 'll see," he said, through the teeth that held a cigarette.

Fergus looked anxious. "Your bath 'll be cold, Mr. Cross — and had n't you better wait till you 've had your breakfast?"

"You think I need strength. No, Fergus. Orestes will proceed to see just what the monsters look like. Very likely you don't know about Orestes," he said, as he bent over, scanning the pages, "but he was a most sorely tried young man who was chased by furies. Like him, with an eye back over my shoulder, I have no mind for a tub, and rashers of bacon do not tempt me." He paused, delighted. He had looked quickly and carefully through a whole paper and had not seen the smallest reference to himself. "Not a thing!"

He took up another, and Fergus, becoming eager, took up a third. Calamities from fire and drowning; prostrations and deaths from the heat; columns about the thousands rushing away on the big liners to Europe — there was much of all these, but not a word about himself in any of them. Even "The Lantern," which the persistent and roughly-handled reporter had represented, was silent.

"Why," said John, "that 's very decent of them — very. Perhaps they don't feel sure of the facts. But they might have been very unpleasant and printed a lot of hearsay stuff. Very decent of them, indeed." He went joyfully to his bath and was soon splashing there and singing.

When he returned, cool, damp, and sleekly brushed, Fergus was just placing a covered, plated dish over an alcohol flame on the table. John noticed that his face was gloomy.

"Fergus, you look as sad as Hamlet. Did n't the milk come?" he asked, sitting at the table and briskly lifting the cover from the sizzling bacon.

"I 've just been thinking, Mr. Cross, about the papers." He squared himself, his gaze became fixed and shrewd. "They don't intend to let you off, sir. It 's my opinion they 're just *saving you up!*"

"That makes me feel like a lone missionary among cannibals, and you 're faithful Fido, come to warn me."

"To-day is Saturday," Fergus went on gravely. "They would n't waste you, to-day, sir. Oh, not they! But to-morrow — !"

John dropped his fork. "Saving me for the Sunday edition!"

"That 's it — the bloodhounds!" said Fergus, with a vicious look.

"Maybe they 'll illustrate me!" said John, in serio-comic horror. "Good Lord! And I can see the young man you threw down the stairs, Fergus, giving his pen a coat of prussic acid, this very moment!"

His appetite was not damaged — he drank three cups of tea — but he remained very thoughtful during the rest of the meal, and several times Fergus noticed that his head was inclined toward the big doors, listening for the faintest sound from Fanny's room.

"It 's now absolutely necessary that I see her before she gets the papers to-morrow," he thought. "Fergus," he said, as he lighted his pipe, "see if the American flag is waving over the letter-box."

"It is n't, sir," said Fergus, returning from the window.

"Perhaps there 's a glimpse of white in the box."

"No, sir," said Fergus, after another look.

"Nor blue — nor any color?"

"No, sir."

"And nothing 's fallen on the balcony?"

"Sorra a thing, sir."

"Have you seen Mrs. Barrett about this morning, sister Anne?" he asked, while smoking, as he looked through the papers with loose interest.

"No, sir."

"Is n't it about time for you to find out what she wants from the shops?"

"Oh, not for hours yet," said Fergus. "It 's only eight o'clock. And, anyway, sir, she 'd be likely to sleep late in the coolness that the Lord has sent down on us."

"Very likely," said John.

The words had thrilled him. He sat forward, his hands covering his eyes, and let his thoughts dwell on a picture of Fanny, asleep — her relaxed body in abandon; her lithely curved throat so white it melted into the linen; her hair a pale, shining maze; her languid mouth parted by her breath; and the curving stain of the still lashes; and the appealing, open hands! So she arose before him — tenderly precious — and his heart was drawn to her. His desire to see her became tormenting. He sprang up, went over to the window, and stared hungrily at the little box where no flag waved.

"I'm going out," he said, turning back, frankly sighing. "I'll get to the doctor's early. The walk up Fifth Avenue will be splendid on a day like this."

He found it so. The summer inertia was lifted from the town. The pavements outside the big shops were being smartly washed. In the blowing air, as cool as that of Scotland's hills, business men who had forsaken the street-cars, walked briskly down to their offices. Hansoms and cabs were filled with people in for the day from country homes. The Fifth Avenue stages were packed on top. Up on the roofs of the highest buildings the flags, lashed by a great gale, were spread out in starred and striped oblongs.

John swung on with the light, steady step of the good walker. In his drab tweeds, with the heavy cane and helpless arm, his thin, strong face lifted to the pleasant air, he was a figure to awaken interest in passers-by.

"That fellow walks like a soldier — seen service in the tropics, too," said a man who passed him.

A trio of splendid boys who came along arm in arm stopped talking as he approached, and as their eyes, round with youthful question and wonder, rose from his slung arm to his still sunburnt face, they smiled waveringly and John smiled back. It was a greeting from the dare-devil spirit of adventure in both.

Outside the Holland House he felt his sleeve touched and heard a high-noted, languid exclamation: "Cross, old man — *Jack!*"

He swung about to face a man who at sight of him had hurried down the hotel steps. To say he had crawled down would better describe his way of moving, for he was bent over in an angular awkwardness, and progressed in jerks that seemed to hurt him. He was dressed in a grotesque extreme of fashion. His tight, greenish-gray spring clothes were too small for him, and his Panama hat, with the brim flared back from his face, too large. He was very thin and went in at the chest. His face was dissipated, vacuous, and yet humorous and affectionate. This was Sir Robert Mowbray, a friend of John's school-days; a man whose good nature had wrecked him. He had taken to drink for gaiety's sake without wish or plan of his own. He had married a burlesque actress against his will, too, yet quite amiably, because the lady had wished it.

"Sir Robert," said John, the tone setting him aside, "how are you?"

"Sir Robert be dashed!" he exclaimed on high notes and with a gurgle. "Bob, it used to be." He held out his hand, his face twisted into a beaming knot. "Bob it is — eh?"

"If you like." John let him touch the fingers that were closed around his cane.

"Come in and have a gin and soda and a talk."

"Can't, thanks. I 've a pressing engagement with a doctor."

"Oh, let old Sawbones wait."

"Can't, really."

"No? Too bad. Well, step into the shade here a moment." He moved nearer the houses, wiping his eyes with the extreme point of an enormous handkerchief. "This sun blinds like electricity. Had to come to this confounded hole with Kitty — big summer engagement on a roof-garden — too good to lose." He gazed with his vague smile at John. "Heard all about you, we did at home — splendid — knew you had it in you — told Kitty so. Dashed glad, Jack. But you had a tough pull — eh? And look it still — a bit peaked. Gad, I envy you! Awful to be like me — love fights, and doing things to make people sit up — and yet never do a blessed thing — just think about doing them — stay at home, burrow in the same rooms off Regent Street — marry an actress and spend my time sitting in front, watching her, when I don't want to — rather be kicked, in fact — or else I 'm shaking my stick at managers who try to 'do' her. That 's all — that 's my life — ghastly. But I say — " He had been running on without pause in an unaccented way, making John think of a long, empty street without the relief of one crossing. At the last words, he straightened a little and his look had a keener quality: "heard from your cousin?"

"I have several cousins. I have n't heard from any of them."

"You mean you have n't heard from Sir Frederic?"

"No," said John quietly, "and don't want to."

"Oh, but you will." Sir Robert said, with a half-closed, knowing eye. "As the head of your family, he has been making himself conspicuous."

"In what way?"

"Since the reports about what you did in the Philippines got about in London, he 's said no end of nice things about you."

"Has he?" John's look was flat and null. It did not invite personalities and Sir Robert noticed this. Still he edged as far as he dared.

"You know Uncle Hal and he are great cronies — that 's where I get it from. Well, Sir Frederic would like awfully — to — to — well, to make it all up with you — bury the past and all that." John turned away a little. "That 's not all," he said pointedly. "He 's coming here — going to look you up. That 's why I asked you about him. I thought he might be here now and that you 'd seen him."

"I have n't."

"Well, you will — and, by Jove, yes, I'd almost forgotten! — old Colonel Onslow is coming with him. It's dollars to doughnuts — as Kitty's manager says — that they're both on the ocean now."

"Ah!" This was non-committal, a mere lifting of the eyebrows. "Well, good-by, Bob," said John.

The gossip had set certain nerves jangling, had revived certain emotions that were so old he had supposed he had outlived any twinge from them. Yet the flavor of London that the sight of Mowbray brought, the mere pronouncing of these names, as familiar once as his own, sent a light, disorganizing pang of homesickness through him.

He refused Sir Robert's continued invitations to drink, to lunch, to dine, or to go that evening to the roof-garden and hear Lady Mowbray sing: "Following In Father's Footsteps." So, after Sir Robert had dawdled beside him as far as the next hotel, where gin and soda and other early morning stimulants might be had, he left without having learned John's address. "Always find me in front staring at Kitty with my mouth open as if I'd never seen her before. Gad, I'd rather be kicked! — but — there you are! Well, good-by, old man!" He waved his hand vaguely. "Been a bracer to see you."

When John reached home, he found two letters. One was from Sir Frederic Cross and bore out Mowbray's

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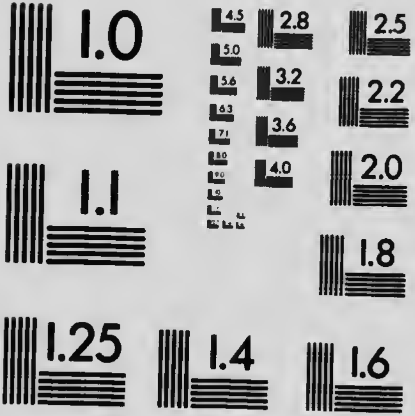
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gossip. It had been forwarded from the War Department. His cousin was already on the ocean, the letter having come on a ship ahead of him. Colonel Onslow was with him. They were going directly to visit the English Ambassador in Washington, and would John be good enough to write to him there?

" I was intolerant, unkind to you," the letter concluded. " I can only explain it by saying my actions arose from an exaggerated sense of duty. I am sure that whatever resentment you felt for me once has been wiped out by the vital and ennobling experiences through which you have passed. At any rate, I hope so, and that you will let me tell you personally of my happiness in being able to say to you, ' I was wrong! I am sorry! I am proud of you! ' Colonel Onslow is one with me in what I 've said. We have much to say to you. We are looking forward to seeing you, my dear Jack, with feelings of the deepest affection."

The other letter was from Fanny. Fergus had gone as usual to get her orders for the day, but there had been no response. At noon, however, he had seen this letter in the box. He had immediately knocked on the windows. They were closed, the shades down, and had remained so. After listening to this information, John read the letter and found it short and confusing:

" My Friend: — I 'm sending you a message in the form of a bulletin: Last night the visitor I had been expecting came. Now everything is to be changed. Does n't life twist curiously? I am going away for months. In consequence I 'm very busy. I shall leave on Monday, so very likely on Sunday evening I 'll be able to have a first and — alas! — a last visit from you. You 'll be glad to know that I 'm to have fresh air and the sea as a substitute for your mountains. Your ex-nurse and neighbor sends greetings to you, this lovely day."

The first letter had dropped to John's feet after one reading. He read the second a dozen times, and then sat staring at it, his face pale and a map of perplexity. His silence lasted so long that Fergus, stepping about softly, bent open glances of anxiety on him. The letters had upset Mr. Cross — both of them. He was accustomed to seeing him grow calm and defiant at bad news, or to see a fantastic, harlequin kind of humor seize him. It was a long time since anything had had the power to make him grave and silent. At length, to his relief, he saw him place Fanny's letter on the table. It was evident that he had made up his mind to something.

"Fergus," he said, "if I write a word we will have two distinguished visitors very soon."

"How is that, sir?" Fergus asked, suspending operations on the scouring of one of John's coats.

"Sir Frederic Cross and Colonel Onslow request that honor."

Fergus showed a loose and open mouth. "God above us!" he groaned. He flung down the coat. "Mr. Cross, if I was to let myself go —!"

"Please do," said John, his nod gracious. He was sitting placidly with clasped hands. His usual manner had returned. “Be just as overcome as you like.”

“Well, then, sir, I ’ll tell you. I ’ll be glad to see Colonel Onslow.” Fergus said this with a tender smile, but with a red light gathering in his eyes behind it. “He ’s a gentle creature, sir, that loved you well — a real soldier, though with a heart as kind as a woman’s for all under him. But your cousin, sir, — Sir Frederic — that codfish — !”

“Keep right on,” said John, delighted.

“The major!” Fergus fairly roared. “The major ’s coming, is he? The scheming vagabone! Him that took your sword — when no one told him to — and cracked it over his shin! For it I ’ve wished him bad luck every time I ’ve thought of his long face that ’s half a hangman’s and half an undertaker’s. Often I ’ve said — ‘May the divil — !’ ”

“I would n’t curse him, Fergus. That ’s never worth while. You see,” John said seriously, “he felt keenly — very keenly — what had happened to me.”

“Did he then?” Fergus blazed. “Well, it ’s a pity, sir, he did n’t feel keenly that he was one blood with you!” He melted suddenly. “Time was, Mr. Cross, when you could n’t speak of this at all. But you can now, and I thank God for that.”

John looked at him, affection and peace in his face. “Yes, I can, now.”

"Glory be for that! As for Sir Frederic! Make him eat his words. Make him eat them and without salt, Mr. Cross, and may they choke him in the swallyin' of them."

John gave a tender, little laugh. "Come here." He held out his hand. Fergus came awkwardly, his eyes misty. "I 've never thanked you, Fergus," said John.

It had come — this wonderful moment of frank speaking that Fergus had dreamed of often and yet had never, in his humility, expected. It had come this once; it never would again, they both knew, and it quivered between them. Fergus's hand fastened around John's like another skin.

"Too much," said Fergus in a thick, unsteady tone, "too much you 've thanked me."

"Never in words."

"I did n't need them, sir."

"It 's very hard to say some things, Fergus." John spoke softly but with the utmost emphasis. "I don't believe I 'd have come through it since the day we left India together, if it had n't been for you."

"Nothing, sir. It was nothing but what I wanted," Fergus muttered.

John seemed not to hear, as he went on: "I met Sir Robert Mowbray to-day — you remember him knocking about India for a little while when he was in love with Colonel Onslow's daughter? — and I 've had a letter from Sir Frederic saying that he and the Colonel are coming here — if I 'll have them. These have brought the old days back to me so that they 've gripped me. And Fergus, I want to thank you from my heart for what you 've done for me. It has n't been easy for you since the day when, your enlistment time being up in India, you could have gone back to Kerry, where a peaceful farmer's life was waiting for you. I 've often been a cantankerous or sullen devil that tried you pretty badly. You 've had hell's weather and wounds and disease and hardships. But — you stuck! Step by step you 've stayed near me, old man. If there 's a better man than you, Fergus, on earth — " John said huskily, " he has no business on earth at all."

Fergus was dumb. When their wrung hands parted, he picked up the coat he had been working on and went in an indeterminate way into his own room. He stood there a few moments quivering, smiling and winking hard. His next words to John informed him in a subdued but business-like tone that the summer suit of blue flannel was ready for wear and as good as new.

John had drawn the paper and pen toward him. When he had finished he gave the note to Fergus.

" Tap on Mrs. Barrett's window. If she answers, give her that. If she does n't, drop it in the box."

He had written: " DEAR FANNY — Will you be good enough to let me see you *to-day?* I have a special and personal reason

for wishing to see you before to-morrow morning. It concerns an affair peculiarly my own. If you do not let me see you to-day you will be unfair to me. To-morrow will be too late. Please put a reply in the box as soon as you can.

"John."

A few moments later he saw Fergus drop the letter in the box and rear the small British flag.

"Mrs. Barrett is still out, sir," he said, as he came back. "The windows are all shut up, and my knocking was no use."

During the afternoon, at intervals, John paced before the windows, the letter-box coming within range of his vision every few moments. But the silence in his neighbor's rooms continued and all through the day the little flag fluttered. Neither was there the faintest sound from beyond the big doors.

"The coming of the fine lady in the brougham has indeed changed things!" John thought. His heart was startled and desolate. "I 've been a fool, dreaming in a fog. I thought the days we 've had were going to last forever."

Fanny was dressed and lying on her bed in the inner room, an open book in her hand, Piff curled up against her. She had heard Fergus's knocking on her window, but had not stirred except to close her eyes and grow nervously rigid at the sound. She had heard Mrs.

Murray come up, and after knocking several times go rustling back.

At dusk she stepped out, and in her soft slippers that made no sound, moved about arranging a meal of bread and fruit and tea. After that she lighted her lamp in the inner room, where it would not show, even by a gleam upon the windows, and read determinedly until late.

She was resolved not to see John until close to the moment of departure, and she was keeping to this, though the strain made her sad and weak. One phrase of Claudia's kept searching her brain and circling there lonesomely: "It is a blind alley that leads to a stone wall."

CHAPTER XIV

THE UNCONQUERABLE

IT was some time after midnight before Fanny ventured to cautiously open her windows. After that she went to bed, and the night passed, somehow. She was glad when the dawn made a gray wash drawing of her room. As she bathed and dressed, she was aware that in the fight, her pain had lessened. She had grown apathetic. It was the flavorless triumph of the resigned.

Her breakfast was over before she glanced at the post-box. She had purposely avoided the thought of a letter — it might so easily turn her torpor into heart-burning again. And it did. After reading what John had written, her eyes filled with tears. But she remained strong. She did not put any new, vital meaning into his request; "the personal thing" he spoke of seemed to refer to the very thing she was avoiding — his love for her.

It was another lovely day. The pale, mild sun drenched the city. She stood by the window and craved to be abroad under the big sky. This ging constantly attacked her, but she had never before considered a reckless indulgence of it. The emotions of the present moment had crowded out fear, and for the first time since the morning on which she had made Fergus's acquaintance, she prepared to go out in the daytime.

When she stepped into the hall she was instantly diverted. A tapping that had puzzled her was explained when she saw the old German violin-maker standing on a stool, a heap of smilax wound like a serpent around his shoulders as he lifted a strand of it to the lintel of the door. He turned to her, hammer in hand, and beamed over his black-rimmed spectacles.

"Good morning," he called, with his gurgling accent.

"Good morning, Mr. Freitag," Fanny said, smiling and pausing to draw on her gloves. "Is th German holiday?"

"No. It is my holiday, Mrs. Barrett. It is my happiness that I am born to-day."

"And are you really very happy that you were born?" Fanny asked, pausing with her wistful air, at the top of the stairs.

"Why, sure so! At least I have known something. If I am not born, I am like stone and know nothing. For me to know always! — sometimes the sad, sometimes the happy — but anyway to *know!* That is better."

"I wish you a happy birthday, and a great many more to come."

He laughed and shrugged. "Much obliged — but not too many, my dear — not too many. To finish and then to rest; that is not the worst, neither!" He began his tapping again and Fanny went into the street.

She thought of the old man's philosophy. How mild, how sane. So different from the burning and struggle that tore youth! Perhaps he was right. Perhaps to suffer was the only way to know life, and it was good — also good to finish, to rest. The thought grew wide and dipped over into what followed — somewhere. Dying was just a phase of living, and not an end in any sense!

She went on her way uplifted. How wide the morning sky was and how tenderly, caressingly blue — an intimate thing! The streets were almost empty. The early, Sunday quiet was drenched with peace. A boat was leaving the ferry at Christopher Street. She went on board, and all the way across the river and back, stood on the deck, the steady breeze making the roar of a sea-shell in her ears, lashing her hair and snatching her breath while she drank in the sight of the white-capped water, the hills and low houses on the Jersey side, the colossal heights of stone cutting the sky jaggedly on the New York side.

She bought the Sunday papers from a lame boy;

some fruit from an Italian; and, from a German who was putting up his shutters after a few hours of business, a frosted coffee-cake that was particularly tempting. She had asked John to come to see her that night, but in the purchase of these dainties there was the beginning of a wish to have him as visitor and guest at one and the same time. The picture of a steaming pot of tea between them as a support to what might be a difficult hour kept rising before her, although she did not make any clear decision regarding it. But the eternal woman was in the forming desire — holding by her finger-tips to what she meant to give up.

When she unlocked her own door again, reality grew edged, and each familiar thing stabbed her. To each she would have to say good-by. Her eyes glistened with sudden moisture. The dear little home! The safe little place! As she sat down to look through the papers, she was still thinking of her departure.

"I 'll only keep a few of the books. I 'll give John the rest. Mrs. Murray shall have all the furniture. Perhaps she 'll move in here —!"

Her gaze that moved about the place was sharply caught by a splashing drawing, covering the whole upper part of the page before her. Half of this showed a fight with Hindoos, their dark faces grimacing through smoke, while mounted English officers with lifted swords rode against them. In a corner division of it, one officer was shown hiding, his eyes protruding, his hair on end with fear.

Another large section, a contrasting picture, showed a band of American soldiers crossing a torrent over a broken bridge while Filipino insurgents fired upon them from the hills.

The officer shown hiding in the first picture was recognizable as the leader in the second in the campaign hat, flannel shirt, khaki breeches and leggings of the American private. He stood alone on the sagging piece of bridge, his musket up, marshalling a band of men. Although these were sketches in rough outline, the artist had caught John's profile and figure. Underneath this the headlines stood out in hard, black capitals:

"CROSS RAN AWAY

HIDDEN CHAPTER IN A HERO'S LIFE LAID BARE"

Fanny, feeling chaos about her, began to read:

> "People thrilled by the accounts of the acts of bravery performed by Sergeant John Cross in the Philippines but recently, and for which he is soon to receive from the President's hands a Congressional medal of honor, will be astounded to learn of other military experiences of his, which, instead of winning him laurels, stuck the white feather in his cap. He is a younger son of one of England's most aristocratic families. A rumor comes from a most authentic source that in the neighborhood of ten years ago he was a lieutenant in the British army, stationed near the frontier in upper India — that he was found guilty by court

martial of abject cowardice during action, was disgraced, and dismissed the service. Like so many other damaged and superfluous younger sons of aristocratic families of England and other lands, he left his own country for that country's good and came to America. The army was a good place in which to hide. Lieutenant Cross — that had been — hid in it. He was accompanied by a raw-boned son of Erin who in India had worn the red coat of a Tommy Atkins under him — a man all fustian and brag — who enlisted here with him and was afterwards glad to do menial work for him, from blackening his boots to insulting any visitors his exclusive master might wish to avoid.

"The details of this early disgrace of Sergeant Cross, as rumor has it, are as follows:"

The lines continued, but they went into a murk before Fanny. She twisted the paper as if it were a snake. She was faint and cold as if a frightful blow had crashed over her heart. This was the "personal thing" John had meant. He had known of this impending brutality and had not wanted her to come upon it unprepared — perhaps had not wanted her to read it at all. She had failed him. This hurt her. She was all remorse and pity as she went passionately to the desk and wrote:

"Dear John: — I 'm sorry I did not read your letter in time. I want you to come in this afternoon, and have a cup of tea with me. I 'll look for you at four o'clock.

"Fanny."

She posted the letter, tapped gently at John's window and stepped back into her room, leaving the little flag flapping over the box.

She was ready at four, the table set with the tea-things, and she in a transparent white gown with pale blue flowers on it — ready, but with deathly cold hands and feet and with tremors running over her flesh. The thought that this was the last time she would see John kept charging at her like an attacking foe. She would beat the shadowy thing away and it would come again, stronger and stronger, until her throat stung from the sobs she choked back.

The fourth stroke from her clock was humming into silence when a knock fell upon her door. She had expected John to come in from the balcony. But —? The query was in her brain as she opened the door, deftly unlocking it as she did so. John stood without, his hat removed. He stepped in and bowed. She had not thought such pallor could show under a brown skin. The smiling defiance in his eyes, the light bitterness in his expression, sent a pang of compassion through her.

"You come very formally." With a fluttering laugh she held out her hand.

"But not more formally than the occasion demands," John said gravely. "Remember this is my first entrance" — he looked about — "into your very charming home."

"You like it?" Fanny had crossed to the table as to a refuge. Her hands were flickering among the tea-cups.

"Immensely. It expresses you."

"But the furniture was all here when I came," she went on, avoiding looking at him. "I only bought the chintz."

"It's the chintz that I find particularly satisfactory," he said graciously.

"Won't you put down your hat and sit — here?" She pointed to a chair near the table.

"May I? Thank you." He obeyed, while she watched him, her nerves jerking. "I can't tell you how I value your asking me to have tea with you. It shows much — well, much broad-mindedness on your part."

Fanny deliberately gave him an appealing glance. "Why do you say that to me?"

"Because it's true."

"But why should n't I ask you? Are n't we friends? — oh, very good friends?" She was very pale, but she smiled at him with the most beaming good will.

"Are we — still?"

"Of course."

"I did n't know," he murmured. "It seemed to me that for one reason you might not have kept me in your regard, just where you had me."

She faced him, one hand on the table. "You are just where I had you, John."

Their eyes exchanged a long look. He saw many things in hers — more than she knew — that swept his nerves electrically. In his she saw the adoring love he took no pains to conceal and with it a grieved question.

"Why did you send me that brutal little letter yesterday?" he asked.

She had seated herself at the table, and leaning her elbows on it, stuck her chin into her curved palms; her eyes were veiled. "That 's rather strong."

"You spoke so lightly of going away. I had a feeling of being dismissed."

"I am going," she said; "but I 'm sorry, for some reasons." She was selecting her words carefully, and still she did not look at him. "I 've been very happy here. This is more surprising than you know — that *I* should be happy, anywhere. I 'm glad I 've known you and I 'll never forget you."

"You say all this in a final way, Fanny. You don't speak of any afterward; you did n't in your letter. You seem to mean this to be good-by before you vanish like a fairy into space." The quiet was throbbing between them. He sat with his free hand clutching his knee and watched her gravely. "I 'm glad, however, you let me come in this afternoon. I believe you are a little sorry for me. I believe you read about me in 'The Lantern' to-day."

She could scarcely look up. "Yes, I read it. What will you do? Force a retraction, an apology?"

"Then you don't believe it?"

The question puzzled her. "Of course not. Of course I knew it was a sensational, dastardly, catchpenny thing!"

"I see," he said in a quiet, flat way, but a muscle in his cheek fluttered. "If you had believed it, you would n't have asked me to come here to-day?"

"Why, don't let us even consider such a thing!" she said, as if this juggling were distasteful.

"But I wish you would." A stupefied question began to grow in her steady gaze. "I wish you 'd consider it very seriously."

"Why?"

"Because it 's true. The main fact is true."

"What — is true?" Her bewildered gaze searched his.

"I was dismissed from the British army, for the reason given."

John watched the light go out of her face. Her arms grew slack and slipped down.

"I don't believe it," she said dully. "No, I don't believe it at all — and as a joke it 's — poor."

"I see now that I should have told you this in the beginning," he said, standing up. "If, as confession, I had said about ten ugly words, you would n't have had anything to do with me." Fanny had sunk down in the chair. Her lovely eyes had a helpless look and were fixed on him imploringly. "But people keep closed mouths about their secret sores. Besides, I did n't realize just how our friendship was going to take root in my life, whatever its effect on yours. And, to sum it all up, I had come to think little about this affair." He gave his big shoulders a twist. "It happened. That 's all there is to say!"

"You mean," — she could scarcely speak — "that awful picture was really true?"

"Oh, that? With me hiding behind a cactus?" John gave a curt laugh. "Dear me, no! I did n't hide. But if I had, I should have chosen something more *home-like* than a cactus." He walked over to his hat and picked it up. "You know you 're rather startling?" She made no answer. She seemed incapable of doing anything but stare at him. "I 've had letters from the colonel of my old regiment and from my cousin. They rather made me believe this would never count against me again. But they are old friends. You 're a test case for me. If you represent the opinion of new friends, of the public," he said, as he [illegible] to the window, "then, I 'm just where I was —"

Fanny stood up sharply. "Don't go! I don't want you to go!" Her voice was high, jolting. When he paused, she went on more calmly; "I — I can hardly follow what you 're saying to me. This has stunned me. Of all things, this is what I would have declared could never have been said of you. Don't you see? You do see? Please be fair to me. Give me a chance to understand." She became suddenly very persuasive and endearing. "I know you so well! And I know that your explanation will make all this different!"

"I have no explanation." He spoke with unaccented quiet and looked at her, straightly.

"But they call you a coward and I know you 're not!" her voice rang out.

His eyes brightened. "How do you know it?"

"Because of what that arm stands for!" she said, and realized with wonder that she was pleading, he judging.

He came nearer. "So you do feel that? I 'm glad! For that, Fanny, is my answer to what was proven — yes, proven — against me."

She looked up at him, quieted. She was trembling, her dark eyes radiant. "You are right! That is your explanation — and you need no other!" She thrust her hands out to him. "John, if I wounded you, if I seemed to doubt you, forgive me — oh, do, please!" He threw his hat aside and took both her hands into the one of his, gathering them into his hold, letting his fingers close fiercely upon them. "I don't ask you how such a thing happened — "

"I could n't tell you if you did," he said, passion trembling through the tone. In the excitement of the moment she forgot to be on the defensive against this. He crushed her hands to his breast. "But with the scar left by that black sore upon my soul — will you let me love you?" Fanny tried to leave him, but he held her. His craving eyes ruled her. "And, oh — can you love me?"

"I did n't want you to say this," she murmured breathlessly.

"I can ask you! You are free, and so am I."

"It 's impossible. Please let my hands go, John."

"When you answer me!"

"My answer is that I am leaving here — your friend. Nothing else. That is final."

"You —" his tone was happy, challenging, "don't care about me?"

"I care! But not —" she whispered, and stopped.

"Not love?"

"No, no."

She spoke so hopelessly that, while it seemed clear she was lying, he released her hands. She sat down at the table. He gazed at her thoughtfully, but without any serious fear of failure. If she loved him — and he felt she did — what could make him lose her? This mysterious sister whose name he had not even heard? Some situation that probably involved this mysterious sister? No. Nothing but Fanny's own will and wish should banish him.

"Have I seemed to take a lot for granted, Fanny?" he asked; "I could n't be anything but honest with you, and so I must tell you that I feel you do love me. That 's why, dear," he said wistfully, and waited. But she did not reply. "If you love me you 'll not finish with me to-day, as I can see you plan to do. Why," he said, the thrill of his heart in his quiet voice, "you could n't do that. You simply would n't be able to do it!"

Fanny was fighting herself. Her eyes were burning in her pale face. She lifted the steaming kettle and looked up at him with a candid and grave gaze.

"You must forget what you said. If you hope about this, you 'll be disappointed. It will be a long time before we see each other again. I don't know when — so let us be good friends —" she recalled a phrase of Claudia's — "and not complicate matters, please."

John took a seat by the table, leaned his arm on it, his face close to her. The smile she loved was flickering over it — boyish, daring, appealing. His eyes were sultry with love.

"You, Fanny, are complicating things. That 's what you 're doing this very moment."

"Are you going to make me sorry for having asked you to come?" she asked gently.

"Probably. I mean to try hard to get you. You may as well know it."

She handed him the tea and held out a plate of bread. "Bread," she asked, "or do you want cake?"

"I want love," he said. "I 'm starving for it." The entreaty in his face was soul-stirring. "Give it to me, my dearest?"

A feeling of delirium touched her. She thought of his kiss. She felt surrender near and grew frightened. A gray, pinched look settled on her face. "You 're going to spoil our last hour together?" she asked faintly and weak tears followed. "You are — determined."

For the first time he was afraid. Back of her pallor and reticence there was some serious, incognizable thing that balked him.

"I would n't pain you for the world!" he murmured tenderly. "Not for the world." He began to sip the tea. "I think I will have the cake," he said in a bright tone. "May I have the — off piece? No, the — stouter of the two? — thank you."

He talked of surface things; told her of the meeting with Sir Robert Mowbray. She was glad, on her side, to be able to truthfully describe the incidents of her early morning walk. He asked her what her plans were for the summer and where she was going. She masked her reply in vagueness, saying that her sister was going to settle her, somewhere; she had left it all to her.

"I saw your sister," John said.

A secretive, concentrated watchfulness crept into Fanny's gaze: "When? And how did you know who she was?"

"I spied a pretty brougham stuck in between two trucks in that street where the big brewery is, and out of it stepped a fine lady, veiled and bearing gardenias. The scene was like a back street in Moscow and she a Russian lady coming secretly to some poor den to plot with Nihilist companions. I knew she was your sister when she spoke to the coachman. Her voice was yours exactly. Besides, I knew you were expecting her."

"The brougham escaped notice there," Fanny hurriedly explained. "A crowd of children gathers in these streets so easily. Even a cab seems startling."

"Distinctly immoral," John declared.

He could see that her hands were clasped so tensely the knuckles showed like wax, although, when she spoke again, her voice was colorless. "Don't speak of my sister to any one else. Will you?"

"To whom?"

"Not even to Fergus. As he is friendly again with Mrs. Murray, they might think — they might say — "

"I have n't spoken of it, nor shall I."

"You see," Fanny went on, "I hate people to talk me over behind my back. That 's a feeling I can't endure. My sister's visit to me — down here — might seem — queer."

"Because she is evidently rich, you mean?"

"Yes," she said eagerly. She was really thankful for such a logical reason for her secretiveness, but John misread it. "Yes," Fanny continued, "she is very rich, and very well-known."

A new aspect of the situation menaced him, and while their talk changed to other things, his thoughts were charged with it. Deeply as he loved Fanny, his knowledge of her was incomplete, and had been gained in a setting of poverty and solitude. What if she had a venal spot that prospective prosperity would disclose? Women were, so largely, natural-born dependents, to be cared for, insured against possible poverty one of their most ancient instincts. What if Fanny, who had come through demoralizing hardships, were like this? Perhaps life's blows and disillusion had left their marks on her so that while she might love him as well as she could, the feeling lacked enthusiasm and unselfishness. Perhaps, although saddened by this knowledge, she had made her choice on the side of caution and materialism. If these things were true, his loss was certain.

He returned abruptly to the subject. "Your sister wants you to live with her. As she 's very rich she can help to make you very happy, of course."

"She 'll try to make me very happy."

The vacant look in eyes straining after a vanishing ship had come into his. "You want to go with her, Fanny? Your heart is really set upon it? Tell me in cold honesty and I'll believe you. This is what you want to do?"

The little word hurt horribly, but she said it. "Yes."

"Then I sha'n't try to spoil your future —" His smile had loneliness and good-by in it, "by complications — as you so wisely described them."

Fanny knew now that she had won. The meeting would end successfully, he going his way, she hers. She had to shut her eyes to hide their sickness from him.

"If I were not a poor beggar," he said, "with such a lot back of him, and so little ahead of him. I would still try. But as things are, Fanny, I shall have to learn, gracefully, to do without you."

"But being poor has nothing to do with it!" She said this fiercely, through the dulness and coldness closing around her. The idea was so repugnant she could not help saying it, though by doing so she weakened her defenses.

It seemed to him only a natural, feminine fiction. "Is there a chance of my ever seeing you? Once a year, even? Leaving love out as I must, I like you so much. I would be the humblest of your friends."

"Later," she murmured, crumbling some bread.

"Will you write to me? — let me know where I can write to you?"

"By and by I will. I don't know — now."

"Don't make it very long, will you?" He stood up and took his hat. "This is terribly hard on me. You'll admit that. If I'd even seen this total break coming and had prepared for it —" He broke off sharply and looked at her steadily for some seconds. "When you came," he said slowly, "I was something that had been broken and was patched again. I was without a spark of interest in anything. Though finished badly — I was finished. But, Fanny, you made me live." The triumph of the low tone gave it the value of a cry. "Even though I never see you after to-day, I know I'll not slip back to what I was. You've done your work well. And won't it be something good for you to remember — that you made a man live again?"

She stood up and moved toward him a few steps without knowing it. She wanted to touch him, to laugh in his arms, to feel herself drawn closely to him. But in despair that had become bodily nausea, she stood rigid. Oh, it was beyond belief that one moment could be so congested with pain! A picture of her whole life flashed past in a murk — all but one morsel — and that endured blindingly. As if at the end of a black tunnel she saw herself, at seventeen, standing in a blaze of light, her hands in Steven King's. There her misery had begun. But for that mistake in her simple youth, she would never have passed through the black space between, to stand now, looking for the last time on John's face.

" Stay a little longer," she said heavily.

" I 'd better go while I 'm obedient — and sane," he flashed in angry misery, adding, with a return of hope: " Do you want me to stay? "

She considered and held out her hand. " No. Don't think I 'm not sorry — for some reasons — that all this is over. Oh, I am! "

" Fanny — ! " They stood hesitating, in chaos, two souls in trouble.

" I want everything to be well with you! " Her wild smile was a rank failure. " Good-by — I 'll write."

That he should be walking to the window was unreal. That they had parted was, somehow, grotesque. Love was in the air between them. The hot hunger for happiness in his own blood he divined in hers. But he was going. She had let him go. The seemingly impossible thing had happened. There was a curiously biting humiliation to his manhood in it. With a woman's heart on his side — how had he failed?

The question was burning through him as he opened the casement. He halted on seeing Fergus outside, puzzling over a yellow envelope he held in his hand.

" What 's that? " John asked.

" Oh, sir," said Fergus, with evident relief as he came to him, beaming, "I was just wondering if I 'd put it in the box. It 's a telegram, sir, for Mrs. Barrett. I was on the front steps and saw the messenger boy looking for the house, and I made bold to have him give it to me. I brought it up myself." He handed it and retreated. John carried the telegram to Fanny. He had stepped to the balcony when a sound from her made him wait. She had torn it open and was gazing at it. Life was back in her face. She crushed the paper between her hands and raised her shining eyes to his.

"I don't have to go — not yet," she said, not realizing that every quivering word betrayed her. "It 's from my sister, and she can't leave New York for a week — perhaps two. I don't have to go — so soon!"

John was back at her side. The unconquerable was in his face. It battered down her shield.

"Fanny, you love me!" When she would have swung away, he gripped her shoulder.

"Please —" she stammered — "oh, please —"

"You love me. Don't fight against it. Say it."

"It 's finished — finished —"

"It 's only begun. You won't send me away! You won't make me do without you! You won't do without me, when we might be together. Think of it, Fanny!" he prayed and commanded. "Nothing in the world could take the place of that. Nothing could be as sweet as that. Think of it! You and I, darling — together."

Fanny had let him take her hand. He had pressed it to his lips, his cheek, and now drew it up about his neck. Her face had stiffened, but the fires that dare fate had been lighted in her eyes. "Must I tell you? You will have it so!" This was reckless, bitter, broken but exultant.

He laughed out as he caught her to him in fierce, adoring ownership. "I knew you loved me!"

"Yes. Deeply, dearly, honestly, I love you!"

"And you 'd have cheated me! Fanny, you would have cheated me!" he cried in accusing rapture, as he kissed her lips.

She trembled in his fierce hold and when she looked up he saw fear instead of love in her face. "But we are foolish — we are mad — as you 'll see —" and her breath broke on a wild note. "You will see!"

"Words! Why?"

"I am frightened — at this."

His eyes were glorified. He laid his lips on her brow. "So am I, my dearest. No wonder! Sheer, stark, sovereign happiness has come to us. It does n't belong to this world at all. It 's a bit of the ineffable, and when it touches us, Fanny, we can't help feeling afraid."

From the old violin-maker's rooms a plaint of music that at first had been very faint, now throbbed like a voice at the door. The birthday party was in swing. Some one was playing on a 'cello, and the song was "*Allerseelen.*" The sad rapture in the deep, rich strains seemed part of John's last words.

Lovers are lifted above Time. Fanny afterward remembered that when John had finished telling her his straight and simple story from boyhood up, the room was getting shadowy, and that a haze from lighted windows opposite was stealing into it. He had lingered over his happy school and college days in England, his love for the army, his going to India; had told her briefly but clearly of his disgrace; massed his latest sufferings in some raw, quivering sentences that made her know; and then had dwelt on her appearance at his bedside that first day and on all that had followed. He could not say too much of this. With her in his arms, it was rapture to analyze every detail of the growth of their attraction. Passionate love at its beginning — the most lyrical magic of life — engulfed them.

They were seated in the deep sofa. Fanny's hands were clasped upon John's shoulder. Her head rested so that her lips were near his throat, but he could not see her face. A silence had fallen upon them. It was a waiting silence. She knew it. It was time for her to speak.

"You remember what you called this old house, once ? — a Sargasso Sea where wrecks drift ! " she murmured. " I never forgot that. You have often wondered, I 'm sure, what wild storm wrecked me. It was — I am — " She lifted her face, absolutely speechless, appalled.

John tried to look at her, but she kept turned away from him. " Don't say another word. Let it go, dear. What does it matter ? "

" You should know," came to him thickly.

" Then, another time — "

" Now — at the beginning."

To gain time she went back to her early youth and her meeting with Steven King. All the while John pressed gentle, unobtrusive kisses on her hand. As she described the misery of her marriage, he gripped her closely ; " Poor kiddie — poor little thing ! " he said.

She broke from him and walked past the haze from the window into the deep shadow. He could not see that her hands were up against him. " I 'll tell you, here. Don't come near me, please."

And somehow she got past the first black spot in the story — Steven's crime and that he had sent her the spurious money. After this she came again to a full stop. She was foundering in a mire that sickened her. The bare facts about herself had never seemed uglier. She tried to think of words that might soften them. Nothing could do that. A sombre sense of fatality filled her. She thought of the midnight knocking on the gate in "Macbeth" — it was sounding for her. She must complete what fate had begun.

"After that — I — they — " She wavered; her voice went into splinters.

John crossed sharply and passionately to her. He seized her shoulder. "Fanny — stop."

"I must — it 's right — "

"I don't care anything about it. Whatever followed does n't matter a fig to me. I did n't ask you — did I? You 've made yourself almost sick." He kissed and soothed her.

She pressed him back wildly, yet held to him, her touch trembling over his arms, the appeal of one in trouble. "The rest — is worse."

"All the more reason why you keep it to yourself!"

"Oh, but you don't understand — listen — !"

"Fanny," he cried out sharply. She could scarcely see his face, but the tone seemed to tie her tongue. "I 'm sorry you 've told me what you have."

"Why?" she asked in pure amaze. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't like to think that such pitch ever touched you. I would rather not have to see you so in my thoughts."

"You mean it cheapens me to you — changes you. Then all the more reason — "

"I don't mean anything of the sort! I see you suffer just to look back upon the misfortunes you've met. If talking about them meant doing something to help you now, that would be different. Memories really make our lives. Each day we lay a stone or two on this house of memory that's always building. It's invisible except to the mind; but it lasts from birth to death! Now, my dearest, from to-night you are to try to forget these dark memories. Making me see them only vitalizes them still further for you. You've told me enough already. Too much."

"But John — certain things — "

"They don't matter to me, I tell you. You — free to love me — you, in the present! That's all I want."

The argument was like a life rope flung to her. It turned her hatred of speech into a hope that he would convince her not to speak — at least not then — and perhaps, never. Still she struggled to be just.

"But how frank you were with me," she said.

"The worst had been said — even published. Why, as much as I could I whitewashed myself to you! How ghastly your face is in this gloom — like a mask, with just stains for your eyes and your lips," he broke off. "Get your things on. Good Heavens, you must be fainting with hunger. I am." He bent to the window and looked at his watch. "Almost eight. Get your things on and we'll drive to Claremont."

It was past midnight when they returned, after a leisurely drive down in a hansom. The long day had held history for Fanny and she was very tired, but instead of going to bed she sat down, and stared before her. She was facing a crisis. She wanted to believe that she had the right to remain silent about the shame-streaked sorrow that perhaps had not yet finished with her — at least, to be silent about it as long as she could. What John had said about memory was a thing she had often felt herself. We *are* our memories! This one, that she loathed, sometimes started out upon her, resist it as she would, smearing her, sickening her, and making the day unclean. Why should she pass it on to the creature she loved? If she had been punished justly, then as sheer justice she must confess, but being instead resentful of having suffered unfairly, was there need of burning this picture of herself into John's mind? She ended by thinking that for many reasons her silence would be kind to him and best for them both.

In prison she had stopped praying. "God has forgotten me," had been her constant, bitter thought. To-night for the first time in years she knelt beside her bed. She wept wildly, joyously, and poured out passionate thanks. One cry ran through it all: "Let the past pass away forever. Keep that horror from ever soiling me again. Let us be happy!"

CHAPTER XV

NOT NEEDED

ESRAY HEATH had changed his plans of leaving for Newport because the necessity for remaining in town conferred a social honor on him. A great prince had arrived. It so happened that he was a thoughtful prince and his interest in the dinners and balls arranged for him in Newport, and on big country estates at other places, was slight, whereas his interest in New York was monumental. He wanted to study its many sides — business, mechanics, progress. Esray had been invited to be one of a committee of "distinguished citizens" who were to arrange for the entertainment of the royal guest. As his name was on the list with names that spelled prestige and millions in eight figures, he was flattered. Under these conditions what would have been detestable became delightful. He even said it was *chic* to whirl through the New York streets in June and study the great hot mortuary, teeming with business. A number of fashionables had returned from the country to hotels. Several of the big houses remained open. Yachts came down from Newport to rock in the bay, fluttering with flags by day, radiantly lighted at night. As far as could be judged, there was no hot wave imminent and the weather continued blue-skyed and breezy.

On Tuesday Claudia was able to pay Fanny another visit. She went early. As this was in the full morning, she wore a heavy chiffon veil, went very plainly dressed and took her first ride in a Fifth Avenue omnibus as far as Washington Square. She walked west under the trees and continued west down to the old house in the curious, obsolete angle of the town. Since seeing Fanny, she was more than ever eager to escape from the boredom of her life with Esray, and it was about this she wished to talk this morning. She wanted Fanny to enter joyously into her day dreams of the future when, both as free as before either had married, they would wander — light-hearted comrades — to safe and distant places. Her girlhood swung back to her. She was again the dreaming Claudia Lawson who had walked in her native town with pictures of a great singer's future firing her brain while her little sister skipped by her side, her arm tucked in hers.

Another reason for her hopeful step and the slight, scornful smile hidden by her veil, was the fact that she had seen " The Lantern's " attack on John. She rarely did more than scan the headlines in the newspapers, but

"John Cross!" The name had sprung out at her and she had read the satire to the last word. She had ordered her maid to cut it out and she had it now in the mesh bag that dangled from her wrist. That it had appeared just when it would help her cause had been most fortunate, as now of course Fanny would see that her interest in this man was ridiculously fantastic — an interest bred of the dire pathos of her life that had sent her like a disabled ship to this backwater shelter.

"Adventurer, black sheep, pariah — even worse than I had supposed!" had been Claudia's decisive thought, and except for her comfort in feeling that now Fanny would sanely agree to her directorship in everything, she dismissed John Cross as unimportant.

As she went up the steps of the old house Mrs. Murray was coming down, a partially-made gown in her arms. The veiled figure caught her attention and brought her to a standstill. Simplicity of attire might deceive the many, but *cut* — that subtle, most potent ingredient of a gown's charm — had a personality to the initiated eye. It was the cut of Claudia's blue serge that held Mrs. Murray rooted on a step. This, with the veiled face and a wave of diffused, delicate perfume that she knew meant "satchet," acted like an inspiration upon her.

"You're the lady Mrs. Barrett's expecting?" she asked, while her eyes tore with rapier-like keenness over every seam. As Claudia did not answer other than by a vacillating nod, Mrs. Murray continued, in the tone of hospitality: "Go right up — this one flight — door right there at the top."

She paused to watch the gown out of sight. Claudia glanced back and was disturbed to see her watching.

"I can't wait," Mrs. Murray thought, "to get my scissors into a newspaper. I 'll have that panelled effect on the back width pat before I sleep. My Lord, but Mrs. Barrett does have elegant costumes coming to see her!"

As soon as Fanny opened the door, Claudia threw back her veil nervously. "Who is that black-eyed woman?" she asked, as she kissed Fanny. "She frightened me."

"A little, slender thing — very pale? That 's Mrs. Murray."

"She knew I was coming to see you. You must have mentioned me to her."

"I had to — in case I might be out, you know."

"She stared so."

"It was at that sweet gown, dear." Then Fanny laughed. "She 'll have a doll dressed exactly like you, Clo, before the week 's out. No observation, no impression, is wasted on her. She 's quite a wonderful little being in her way. Sit down — give me your hat. How glad I am to see you!"

"I like this place," said Claudia. "Much prettier by daylight."

She gazed about in commendation, her natural self coming out of the conventional shell in which she masqueraded. She sat back in a big Sheraton armchair and told with merry scorn of the reason for Esray's change of plans.

"My dear, half the big men allowed their names to go on the list and then conveniently found it impossible to serve in the daytime. Esray was furious at first, but found himself tied up in it. Oh, dear," she continued, following another thought, "how I wish I could carry you off to the jonquil-colored suite that has a view of the park."

Fanny was not attentive. Her thoughts had been slipping away to a consideration of how she was to break her own news to Claudia. "Where?" she asked.

"Why, in my big tomb on Fifth Avenue!" said Claudia sharply. "Where else? With Esray out all day it would be sweet there for you and me. But we might as well dream of an excursion to the moon." Her gaze, which had been traveling over Fanny, remained, intensely puzzled, on her face.

"Why do you look at me that way?" Fanny asked, sitting opposite her and taking one of Claudia's bony, nervous hands that were so unlike her own small and childish ones. "What's wrong with me?"

“Wrong?” Claudia murmured, and the word was happy. “No, indeed. You know, Fanny, I always thought you distractingly pretty. But, dear — you are really wonderful this morning.”

“I ’m very much ‘dressed up,’ you see,” Fanny said, springing up and twirling. “This is one of Mrs. Murray’s ‘creations.’ To quote her: ‘Can you beat it on Fifth Avenue?’ ”

The gown was white mull with a faint rose shimmering through it, giving it the ethereal blush found in a white rose with a pink heart. Her pale, gauzy hair, banded flatly to her head, Greek fashion, was swathed close to her clearly flowing brows, and partially hid her ears. A black velvet ribbon clung to her stalk-like throat; a web of lace crossed her bosom.

“Really lovely!” said Claudia. “As good as anything I ’d pay Clement two hundred dollars for! But — it ’s not the gown, Fanny.” She paused, confused, and then ended with decision: “You have the look of happiness. Turn around. Look at me.”

“I am happy. Oh, Clo — I am!” Fanny sat down again, and again she took Claudia’s hand. She loved her so, and she knew she must pain her.

“The other night you looked tired. To-day — no,” said Claudia. “Have you been taking a tonic?”

Fanny laughed in a gay, musing way. “It might be called that — or better still, an elixir ”

Claudia gave her a sharp glance. "What do you mean? You don't seem worried. You don't seem a bit afraid — "

"There 's a curious thing!" Fanny cried, glad to delay the confession that would fully explain her exultation; "I 'm not a bit afraid. Fear seems to have left me absolutely, Clo. It 's just as if nipping steel rivets that had pressed down on all my nerves had been wrenched away. I 'm not going to keep my door locked any more. *I don't care.* Somehow, I 'm confident that I shall live happily, securely — all my life!"

"Can you trace the reason for this?" Claudia asked. Some feeling, not yet understood, began to chill her.

"The danger, of course, is just as real," said Fanny; "but somehow I 'm able to make myself forget about it!" She changed the subject and said gaily: "Oh, Clo, how lucky I am to have imagination! It is spiritual wealth! A prisoner walking between plaster walls — if he has imagination — can sail upon the Nile, can gamble at Monte Carlo, can feel a Russian sledge flashing him through an icy, lilac-colored twilight. It 's just as if God gives some of us a rose garden in our souls, a spring day in our constitutions! We can draw on these when life is gray and empty. I feel all this as I write on my story!"

Still Claudia sat studying her. She had a fancy that Fanny avoided meeting her eyes. She was thinking this as Fanny, with one of her light, quick movements whirled to her writing desk, returning with loose pages clasped to her breast.

"See here, I wrote a thousand words this morning!" she cried; "I have eight chapters done. It 's been joy. It 's fully four years since I wrote my last story. The writing ability left me absolutely when I was in the hospital — and afterward. But it 's come back and it gives me a feeling of triumph. You 'd never guess what this is about. No problems — no realism — nothing out of my own experience. I 've just revelled in writing about castaways in the far south seas. I had real data, for Steven once told me the kernel of this splendid tale. He knew that part of the world well. The story is full of danger, deceit, shipwreck, savages, quicksands. In writing it I was spirited away from this back room — like a bit of thistledown borne up to the sky and then plunged down to the sea on the back of a March gale! Of course I can't send it out under my old name. At first I thought I 'd use 'Barrett,' but I 've decided to take a perfectly new one — a man's. They 'll never find me out," she said, exultant. "Oh, I am a busy person. I 've ordered a typewriter and it comes to-day. Shall I read you the first chapter, Clo? There 's time before — " With the papers in her arms she paused, her eyes on the clock; "before — " She paused again, and looked hesitatingly at Claudia.

"Before what? I have all day. Before what?" Claudia's lips settled grimly. She bent forward. "You are expecting some one."

"Yes, but you need not go, dear," Fanny said, and placed the papers on the table. "You can stay, too. In fact, I want very much to have you stay." She came close to Claudia, made a sudden dip and laid her warm, smooth lips on her cheek. "Mr. Cross is coming to a noon breakfast with me to-day. Will you stay?"

"Then you have seen this man!" A thrill of the most passionate hate against this unknown being who was standing in her way, ran through Claudia. "And after giving me your word that — "

"No," Fanny said gently, "I said I would not see him except to say good-by to him — and that was just what I did. But when I got your telegram and he knew I was going to stay on, I — decided — differently." In another moment she would have told all the truth but Claudia interrupted.

"I see. This gown and this gaiety are not for me." There was triumph in the swirl of her arm as she reached to the table for her mesh bag that held the newspaper cutting.

Fanny sat down on the arm of Claudia's chair. "Don't be unreasonable, Clo. This does n't make me love you less — "

"Read that," said Claudia, and flourished the paper toward her. “Read it, and then let us drop this person’s name forever. Your hero has been given a bath in acid, my dear, and he has n’t stood the test. The gilding ’s washed off and he ’s all — tin.”

Fanny stood up. Stillness and a blazing pallor had come to her face. “That libel that was in ‘The Lantern?’” She took it, crushed it and flung it in a ball into the empty grate.

“You ’ve read it?”

“Yes.”

“And yet —” Claudia faltered in abject astonishment.

“Are n’t you unjust and narrow to condemn a man this way that you ’ve never seen?” Fanny demanded.

“It ’s quite enough to read of him.” While her heart hurt, her face flamed with scorn.

“You ’ve not seen him.”

“I don’t want to.” Claudia stood up and her trembling hand reached for her hat.

But Fanny flung her arms around her. “Clo, dear, don’t make me wretched just when I ’m — happy — after such a long, long time of sorrow!” she crooned. “Be glad for whatever makes me glad. Oh, you would — if you knew —” she said, with a whispered but piercing note; “you would if you could see those days when I never smiled.”

The appeal disarmed Claudia's jealousy. Her love was too great to harbor it. She took Fanny's face in both her hands and kissed her slowly and gently. "Yes, I ought to thank God that you are here. Nothing else ought to matter. I am selfish, dear. Forgive me," she said, and then she sat down suddenly, crumpling over in a hopeless way. She covered her haggard face with her big, thin hands and wept with a quiet dreariness that cut Fanny like a sword.

"Clo — Clo!" She knelt beside her. "Have I done this?"

"I 'm nervous, that 's all," Claudia said, through her shielding fingers. "You see, I counted so on being needed by you. I saw myself getting away from Esray, taking care of you, and we two going away together, alone." She looked up. "Well — that 's still possible, of course," she said and wiped her eyes. "I simply grew miserably jealous on finding when I came to spend a day with you that you were absorbed by this — man. But he can't possibly count, now that you know what he is. Besides, you would n't marry him, nor any one else, as things are. So I 'll have to be patient. When you 've amused yourself and I can get a decent settlement from Esray, our life together will begin. I 'll go now."

Fanny allowed her to stand up. She was still kneeling and in deep thought. After a time she spoke very quietly.

"I can't cheat you, Clo." She struggled up and held out her hands. "But do try to see things my way. John Cross loves me. He told me so on Sunday. I really, really love him, and he knows it."

"You can't." Claudia grew rigid, her scorn ablaze. "You can't love a coward. Don't tell me so."

"I did n't tell you that — nor do I," Fanny said, as firm as a rock. "I love a man who is worth loving — no coward."

"He has given you some lying explanation, Fanny. But that paper gives facts with authority."

"He has not given me any explanation. In a way, all that 's been printed is true."

"In a way? What way?"

"He was — dismissed — disgraced."

"A victim of some plot, no doubt?" Claudia sneered. "A misunderstood being! My dear Fanny, you are ten years younger than I am. You were the dupe, my poor darling, of one brilliant swindler. Amuse your starved life here with another, if you wish, but for God's sake, don't believe what he says. Don't believe — "

Fanny's lip curled. A smile that told of an uplifted spirit glowed in her face. "You don't realize that every word you utter is in his favor, Claudia. He might have concocted lies to defend himself. He did n't. He admits that the charge was proven against him."

"And yet you say —!"

"That he is a brave man."

Claudia shrugged. "I see. You 're pinning your faith on what he did in the Philippines. Well, the other should count, too. The fact remains — England sent him packing!"

She saw that her words did not unsettle Fanny nor wound her. Her face was now all sweet, grave decision.

"If you could see him — talk to him for even five minutes — you would understand."

"That 's the cry of the lovesick!" said Claudia bitterly. "You think so, because you see him with besotted eyes. I have to speak sharply, Fanny." She had put on her hat, and now she placed her hands on Fanny's shoulders, drawing her near. "I 've a right to guard you. I don't care," she said slowly, "a pin for anything in the whole world but you. To have a home for you, I married Esray. My life with him at its best has had about as much agreeableness as a long railroad journey with a bore you can't escape from; at its worst it 's been a compound of heart's bitterness and contempt. I stood it because at first he needed me and I 'd given my word. But this last two years it 's been for your sake alone, that I might be able to make him give me plenty of money to help you to a happy life, when you were free. I am showing you my right to question you now. Fanny," she said seriously, "what conclusion will there be to this love affair — what can there be?"

"I 've been trying to tell you, Clo. But you make it so hard."

Claudia edged from her with a look of affright. "Do you mean — ?"

"I 've made up my mind — to marry him — and take the chances."

The word "marry" moved on Claudia's lips without sound — a ghost of a word. "Fanny!"

"I 've said I would," she said in a thrilling tone. "I 'll risk it."

"Marry him, without telling him? You 'd do that?"

"Yes." It was a wild, determined whisper. "Oh, yes. I must. I could n't tell him. It is n't cheating, for I 'm sure he 'd marry me anyway. But I don't want him to know of that hideous background — that I have such memories. He may never be made to see it. But if — the worst should happen — he 'd stand by me; he 'd understand, he would n't blame me. And oh, the delight of believing — that it will never happen. He wants to live in Arizona. That will be safe. It 's my chance, and I 'm going to take it."

There was a deep silence. They gazed at each other — Claudia in a deep, reproachful farewell, Fanny with soft, anxious eyes.

"I am not needed — at all," Claudia said in a lifeless tone. "It 's — it 's — a little surprising — but I 'll get used to it." She kissed Fanny's cheek lightly. "Good-by. Good luck — whatever you do."

"What do you mean?" Fanny asked, holding her, her look hardening. "I want you, too. Because I disagree with you, am I nothing to you? Clo, you 're not like that! Nothing can ever part you and me. You forgave my folly once. You did n't shut me out then, and tell me to lie on the bed that I 'd made! You were so good to me, your letters the only joy in my life. Now, though to you I may seem an utter fool — and doing wrong — you 'll still forgive me and still love me?"

Claudia's eyes were thick with tears. "I can't stand this. It 's too bitter."

"But I 'm not counting you out. Leave Esray! Let his money go! You have some of your own — not much — but it will do. Let my home be your home. Come with us!"

"Us!" said Claudia, and gave her head a wild, agonized toss. "Us! That 's so likely. No, I go my own way. Now that I know you 've counted me out of your life, I can make something more of my own than

I have done. I never tried before to find anything delightful in just spending money and going the pace, but I will now. Or I may light on some fad or madness that will amuse me. There 's the suffrage movement, for example," she said, with a bitter laugh of tears. "In England duchesses are beginning to take it up. Oh, I 'll get — something! But of one thing rest assured — I shall never make my home with you and your Mr. Cross!" Her smile was one of storm. Her racked heart showed in her eyes.

"You 'll think better of this, Clo," Fanny said quietly. She felt cold, as she stood away from her sister, watching her in sorrowful dismay.

Claudia's shaking fingers were pinning on her veil. "Of course, if you ever need me, you can command me," she said politely. "I believe you have both my address and telephone number."

"You will think better of this!" Fanny said.

But with a passionate, ultimate gesture Claudia went blindly out.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TIDE CREEPS TO FANNY'S DOOR

IT would be difficult to say which heart ached the more — Claudia's, which sent up a hot, bitter mist through which the streets swam as she walked, or Fanny's, as she remained staring at the door, the charm lent by love gone out of her life in a big, sharp pity for Claudia. Such a situation between two people who really love each other is unthinkable and rarely endures long. Fanny's first movement was to her desk where she wrote:

"I am so wretched. Oh, how could you go away like that? If I had committed the sin of treachery against you, had profaned what you held holy, you could not have been more implacable. I have disappointed you, Clo, but I have not *wronged* you. Do come back — please do — and let us talk about it again. You will see that I do need you. If it 's not as big a need as you thought, that ought not to matter, if you love me. If I don't hear from you or see you before I go to sleep to-night, you will be doing the first cruel thing I 've ever known you to do."

This was signed with an old, childish, pet name — a most foolish, little name — but a sacred symbol between them and understood only by their two selves. When it reached Claudia through the post at about five o'clock, she was just writing her own message of peace:

> "I was a brute, a madwoman. It 's the unnatural sort of life I live — because I care so little — that makes me an extremist when I *do* care. I 've cried my eyes out and they look like oysters. Now I 'm sane. I shall hover around you, Fanny, ready if you need me. But it will be long — I warn you that on this I 'm *obstinate* — it will be long before I can bear to see your lover — or your husband, if he really becomes that."

On reading Fanny's letter with its babyish name at the bottom, which conjured up the picture of a very little girl with fair hair clustering about her neck, wearing a gray lamb's wool Tam O'Shanter, and with school books on her arm, Claudia's last shred of resistance melted. Her heart flooded with yearning. She tore up the message she had meant to send. It seemed a poor thing.

"I 'll go down again to her to-night," she thought. Her eyes had the gaping, waiting look that rests in the eyes of sailors' wives who gaze across black seas. "My poor Fanny! How is it going to end for you, dear?"

The clock in John's room had struck twelve.

"Do I go in, now?" he asked.

A healthy man, fresh from the bath and the brush, looks his best in the morning. John, in pale gray flannels, glowed with the same dewy brightness as the white carnation in his coat.

"Everything 's ready, sir," said Fergus. "I was able to get everything at the market, and helped Mrs. Barrett as much as I could, but she would n't let me cook the sweetbreads. She 's doing it herself on the chafing-dish." He lifted a brush and gave one of John's sleeves a last, quite unnecessary touch and added: "Something 's gone wrong with Mrs. Barrett to-day, sir."

John wheeled. "What do you mean?"

"As I went up with the groceries, I passed a lady on the stairs. In fact, she ran into me as if she was blind. She seemed excited, I thought — "

"What was she like?" Even John's eyes were listening.

"I had n't a good look, sir. Coming into the hall from the sun it was dark, and besides she had a veil all around her. But she smelled *fine* — 't was just like a conservatory on legs going past me. Well, when I got inside, Mrs. Barrett was starting to write a letter. She kept touching her eyes with one of them weeny little hankerchers she has. 'Fergus,' she says, 'I want you to post this for me right away and come back.' She gave it to me, but says with a smile: 'I 'm going to ask you not to look at the name, so I 'll trust you to keep it turned down, just like that, and drop it into the box.' I was terrible curious but I did just as she told me, of course — though if it had fallen face up and I could n't have helped seeing it," he laughed, "I'd have been obliged to it."

John pieced out the situation at once. Fanny had quarrelled with her sister, and about him. She had written to her sister, while still careful to keep her name from being found out. There was something here, warily hidden. But this did not matter to him at all. Fanny might have family secrets from him all her life and the fact would not trouble him. He was singularly lacking in curiosity about things that were not absolutely vital to him. The important thing was that Fanny could marry him and was going to marry him. It would be a pity if this should antagonize this woman she loved. But if so, it could not be helped.

After all, there was nothing really perfect in this world. The nearest to it was the almost crazy happiness that had filled him in a bubbling way since that moment two days ago when, even as he and Fanny had said good-by to each other, they had kissed. Were there but two days stretching between that moment and now? Two days only since then? No, no! Rather a great, throbbing, golden block of life that held all the enrapturing sweets vouchsafed by Fate to humanity. He understood the loves of Lancelot and Guinevere and Paolo and Francesca as never before. He put his own meaning into Solomon's Song: "*Behold thou art fair, my beloved; thou hast dove's eyes. Thy lips are like* *a thread of scarlet.*" His own thoughts barred the real world from him. He seldom heard what Fergus said to him unless he spoke of Fanny. He hardly knew what he ate — in fact, for the first time in his life, although he was constantly and feverishly hungry — he took absolutely none of the interest in his food that as a fastidious animal with good digestion he had been accustomed to take. He walked the crowded streets, his blood tingling, his heart light, and he saw only her face. He would come out of the obsession to say gaily to himself: " This is dementia! " When a clerk in a shop had that morning speculated about the size of his gloves and he had answered dreamily — thinking of her gloves — " The very *smallest* made, I should imagine," he felt sure it was.

Oh, how well it is that such sweet, lunatic moments like these are permitted to visit human beings! They glorify the world until we say: " This is Heaven; I want no other." Turned into memories, they become the roselight upon the path that goes down into the valley of loss and disillusion, and because of it we can walk there without utter bitterness.

Fanny's room looked very inviting as John stepped into it. He had not seen it before with the full light of noon pouring through the apple-green window curtains. The flowers he had sent were there — yellow jonquils in a jade-green vase; masses of pale, cloudy bloom, almost as tall as fishing-rods, bending from the corners; roses and sweet peas on the table. He was delighted to think that he had spent for those flowers at a Fifth Avenue florist's a great deal more than he could afford.

In the woodland light, with the flowers glowing, with the ancient, dark furniture shining, and beside a small table flashing with copper and glass, Fanny stood waiting for him. She was like one of the pale roses grown big and come to life. The appeal she made to him affected him so powerfully he felt it rush to his brain like an assault upon the very gate of life. It left him hushed, chilled. His touch on her shoulders, his kiss on her upturned lips had a sacred tenderness in them. A touch of that prevision that comes when we love deeply, yet realize our impotence under whatever cruelties destiny may deal out to us, dismayed him. He gazed gravely at her.

"How solemn you are," she said.

"I 'm worried."

"Why?"

"I think I love you too much."

She laughed. "Don't think that, Jack. You could n't."

He lifted her face in his hands and though his next words were half-jesting, she saw his need of her stark in his eyes. "If anything should happen to you, what would become of me?" A tinge of the old terror for what might arise in her path, kept her silent. "Cable cars are slaughtering people everywhere," he said, anxiety real through his smile. "*Are* you careful crossing the streets, Fanny? And that gown!" he said, in a voice of trouble. "That 's — *awful!*"

"Why, it 's lovely. I felt sure you 'd think so."

"I do think so, but it 's a sea-shelly bit of frippery that would blaze up in a second if you stepped on a match. And there 's an alcohol lamp burning under that chafing-dish!" he exclaimed, with a look of panic.

"I have to take my chances, like other people," and with a laugh, Fanny tore her hands from him and went to the table.

He followed her promptly. "But you 're not like other people," he protested, going close to her again and this time crushing her to him and kissing her in the wildest love. "Not a bit like them. Why will you persist in thinking so? I 'd rather you 'd dress in rubber — as a sort of life-preserver."

As she put the final touches to the lunch, he sat down and in besotted happiness watched her. "You have n't noticed something," he said. "Something about me!"

She paused with an uplifted spoon and studied him. Her eyes fell on his arms that were folded, the black sling dangling. "All better?" she asked joyously.

"Practically so. The doctor says I can use it — when necessary," he smiled.

"Did he leave that to your own judgment? The foolish man!" Fanny exclaimed.

"Oh, there won't be any judgment in how I use it. It 's going to be very reckless to-day — and it will be all your fault."

She appeared to ignore his eyes and their meaning. "It was very good of you to send such lovely melons. But why the brandy? Is n't the sauterne enough and better this weather?"

"You very fashionably call this breakfast, but I had my tea and some eggs quite early. I like black coffee at about this time — and with a bit of cognac in it."

"See that lovely copper and brass thing? The coffee will bubble in it on the table." She looked about with a pretty, house-keeping air. "I think we can sit down now. Come," she said, and waved him to a chair beside her.

Before he took his place he kissed her, and for a moment she glowed and trembled in his arms. "You must n't do this again for a long time," she said, pulling back sharply and arranging her hair. "It 's time to eat."

John sat down with a reckless flourish. "Fanny," he said, digging the spoon into the melon, "the truth is I 'm off my head about you! But I 'll try to be normal. I will, really."

It was a very wonderful experience. Their world was in that room. They ate and laughed. They said loving and gay things — utter nonsense, most of it — but electric with passionate love.

"As we 're to be married very soon," John said, "had n't we better talk of keeping house?"

"You 're not to interfere there at all," said Fanny, with a saucy lift of her lip; "I 'll keep the house."

"But surely," he said reproachfully, "you want to know what I like to eat, and how I like things cooked, and all that sort of thing?"

"A true, domineering Saxon, talking of food instead of art or poetry. Have n't you enough?"

"Well, Fanny, to be frank, I expected a chop after the sweetbreads and I don't believe I 'm going to get it." He sat back disconsolately. "Am I?"

"No."

"There! You see how necessary it is to consult about those details?"

"But the weather is too warm for meat."

"For *you*. In fact, you look incorporeal, as if a grape served on a rose leaf ought to be your menu. But I warn you that I have a horrible appetite."

"I 'm so sorry," she said seriously, and then pathetically: "You could really eat a chop?"

"I could eat two chops."

"Certainly, being in love, Jack dear, has not made you indifferent to food."

"You know that 's a funny thing?" said John, looking suddenly wide-eyed and boyish. "Ever since Sunday I have consumed a most dreadful quantity. I don't care what it is — half the time I don't know what I eat — but I keep at it in the busiest way imaginable. Fergus has spoken of it."

"Too bad," Fanny shrugged. "That upsets one of my pet illusions. In writing stories, whenever my heroes were in love, I had them absent-mindedly push away *everything* — and I remember ending one chapter with: 'All food was odious to him.' You 're not like that."

"So I can't be a hero," John exclaimed. "But I don't mind that — if you don't."

"There may be another reason. Perhaps you 're not in love at all. That would explain your brutal demand for chops."

"Perhaps I 'm not." He looked a savage warning at her. "Perhaps I 'm not in love. Can't we find out some way?"

"Oh, there is no way," she said, and rose gaily to bring the salad bowl from a smaller table. "We 'll have to assume that you are, and let time tell." She began to pour in the dressing that was already stirred.

"But I want to know, *now.*" He folded his arms on the table and rested bold, passionate eyes on her face. "It 's worrying me very much. Can't you put me through some sort of amorous examination?"

"Not until you 've quite finished eating and I 'm sure you have relieved that 'sinking feeling.'" They laughed uproariously at this. "Then we 'll decide just how much you do love me."

After a pause he suddenly put down his fork and gave a boy's secretive, mischievous laugh. "Is n't it wonderful that we two should be here like this without the ghost of a chaperon, shut away from the world as completely as if we were in a moated castle with the drawbridge up? Is n't it wonderful, dear? Don't you feel sorry for all the dull rich who sit at stolid dinners waited on by oppressive flunkeys?"

"We 'd horrify them!" said Fanny.

"We can pity them, can't we?" he asked.

"Oh, deeply!"

"Poor things!" said John. "Poor—poor things!"

Fanny brought the coffee over. As her fingers flickered about the little spigot she looked across at him gravely. "Something," she said dreamily, "made me very unhappy to-day."

"Your sister was here," said John, "and was dreadfully upset when she heard you were going to marry me."

"Is this telepathy?" Fanny asked with a smiling stare.

"No, it's Fergus. He passed a veiled and perfumed being on the stairs. Later he saw a tear in your eye and posted a letter for you to some person or persons unknown. Having a fine electrical intuition, I at once formed my own opinion."

Fanny rested on her elbow. It would be safer if she need not let her relationship to the Esray Heaths be known even to John, for by just such fine films, detection, like a spider, might crawl to her. But he would have to know it sometime. She must tell him that much, even if later she had to ask him to keep the fact a secret.

"My sister," she said thoughtfully, "is a very conspicuous woman. I've had a very miserable history. As yet I've never attached myself to her; I don't even mention her name. Her husband has not cared about me. He's one of the oligarchy at Newport — a very recent addition, for his fortune is new and not a startling one. He's dull, heavy, a snob, a bore. Until very recently he has not, from society's standpoint, been likeable. He is Esray Heath."

John sat back, his hands in his pockets. The name did not make any seeming impression on him. "What does the oligarchy call likeable?" he mused.

"Being able to astonish or amuse. Esray has at last astonished them by getting into *your* aristocracy. After that he found it easy to get into ours."

John laughed. "There are as many sorts of aristocrats in my country," he said amiably, "as there are sweet peas in that vase. With some — the right sort — such a man as you describe could never get further than their door-mats."

"Oh, I believe that," Fanny assented. "But people don't know of those things, here. A title is a title, you see."

He gave a dismayed toss to his head. "Do you realize the curiously contradictory quality of that statement with what are called republican ideals? You kicked lords and ladies out to be a republic. And now to get even the shoddiest of them in tow is a social victory."

"Only to the most foolish of our rich people," Fanny declared.

"I 'm not so sure of that, my dear. We 're all built alike. The most democratic of us has enough of the ancient caste quality in us to feel some interest in the doings, even when they 're contemptible, of a glittering nobleman, when we would not if he were a commoner."

"Contemptuous curiosity!" said Fanny staunchly.

"Even so — still curiosity," said John. "But we 're not going to have an international squabble —

yet — dearest. Just how nasty was your sister about me?"

"I have n't said she was nasty."

"But of course she was, because she 's a sensible woman! Here you are, a lovely, young creature — well, I won't try to describe you, for I can't — and here she is, able to launch you among the rich and powerful where you could wipe out all traces of your early, unfortunate marriage by making a really brilliant one; and you elect to marry a poor, expatriated Englishman with a shadow to live down. Why, the woman would be a fool if she did n't loathe the thought of me."

"Darling," said Fanny, suddenly melting to tenderness, "you are too adorable as you sit there abusing yourself!"

He brought his coffee close to her and knelt beside her. "She won't make you want to give me up? I say 'want,' you notice, for it would end there. I would n't *be* given up."

"No danger!" Fanny sighed, her finger gently tracing the ripple of hair around his brow. "When she knows you, Jack, she 'll be glad!"

"And now, don't you think you might try to discover if I love you? I 'm terribly keen on being tested."

A delicate faintness from happiness weighted all

Fanny's senses. "Tell me in your own way. Prove it to me," she murmured.

"It is n't only holding you so, and kissing you so — until life is a delirium of flame and joy — my darling!" he sighed, his arms closing around her. "Great as they are, and wonderful, there are other ways of proving it."

"If I died, you would not forget me?"

He pressed the words from her lips with his lips. "Don't speak of it." He shuddered. "If you were taken from me, Fanny, life would go out of living."

"Death would n't take me from your heart. Would disgrace?"

"No, no, I 'd love you more."

"Only my own baseness could make me lose you? Only that?" she said, radiant, while her lips trembled tenderly.

"Not that even." He pressed the laces tenderly away from her throat and laid his lips there. "Whatever you were — or did — I think I 'd have to love you and let you break my heart. I just could n't help it, you see."

In the old Greek dramas it is at this point, when happiness is on the highest note and safety seems sure, that the signal is given for Nemesis to enter by an unexpected door. More often than people realize, this happens in life, as if perfect joy, being at variance with the imperfect, human scheme, must insensibly attract what will deflect it. The fear is in our frequent phrase: "I am so happy, it cannot last." It is in the three knocks on wood that follow our declarations of health or success — perhaps the most ancient Christian superstition.

It was close to three o'clock when a wagon stopped before Fanny's door and a man climbed down from beside the driver. He was dark-bearded, slender, and moved as if every weak, dragging step were taken by the urging of a desperate will. His expressman's cap was new, his clothes very old. He pulled out a typewriting machine from the back of the wagon, looked at the label, and with difficulty shouldered it.

"Don't be all day in there, McKenzie!" the driver called; "I got a thirst again that you could photograph, and I could do now with about three of Keyser's rye bread sandwiches. Ain't you hungry yet?"

"No," said the other indifferently, without turning his head.

He went into the house, his shoulders rounding concavely under the load, and knocked at Mrs. Murray's door. "Barrett here?"

"Up-stairs — right at the top."

He went on, breathing in a jaded way until the door was reached. Here he swung the machine down, rested it on the banisters, and knocked. John opened it. "Barrett here?"

"Yes, come in."

When the lights from the windows fell on the man's exhausted face, John quickly pushed a chair to him. He laid the machine on it, rested his hand on the chair and looked at neither John nor about the room. He was merely a gasping wreck, a "hewer of wood, drawer of water," earning a wage by the sweat of a very ghastly brow.

"It 's the typewriter," John called to Fanny, who, thinking the caller might be Claudia, had run into her sleeping niche to brush her hair into sedateness. "Hard work," John continued to the expressman, realizing that the comparatively small weight had been agony to this poor, human shell. "Take a drink." He poured a little brandy into a glass and added some water.

The man drank it in a gulp. "Thanks," he said; "that 's very good."

"By the way — I 've just remembered that there are some books at the custom-house for me — came from England. Could you go down for them to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then wait a moment. I 'll get the bill for them." John hurried out by the window.

The strange man gave a look around the room, at the table, the flowers. A faint, amused sneer quivered over his revived face. It faded, and his look, all desire, rested on the bottle of brandy and stayed there. He was looking at it when Fanny entered, but he automatically stood up, took his cap off, and picked a slip of paper from the lining.

"You want me to sign, I suppose," Fanny said, and went to the desk for a pencil.

His gaze had strayed back to the bottle, but her voice made it leap in a jerk to her. He was staring at her in an unbelieving, quivering way as she turned and came towards him.

"Am I to pay you?" she asked, opening her purse and looking into it.

He did not reply, and she glanced over at him sharply. She remained so in silence, her eyes on him as one peers at an obscure print. A frightful, hysterical joy had rushed into the man's face. Into Fanny's the most piteous unbelief, the wildest, most desperate denial.

He answered the look. "Fanny, it is — it is — *Steven!* You *see?* But how do you — ? I was counting on getting word to you, somehow, when the time was up, but here you are — *now!*"

In his eagerness he came a step nearer. The movement brought her out of her stupefaction. She flung up her arm with a cry. His voice had been like an actual blow. *From this ghost's face, out of these rags, the dead had spoken to her.*

"I 've got to see you. Tell me how. Don't look so scared. For God's sake, keep a grip on yourself."

She would have fainted, or at least in her weakness have fallen, if she had not heard John speaking to Fergus on the balcony. With an effort that was fairly gigantic, she rallied and was able to blurt out in a dull way: "Come back — quietly — in half an hour."

When John came in Fanny was at the table, lifting glasses and cups that she did not see.

"I 've been neglecting this parcel," said John to the expressman, who was, if anything, more livid than before, and who kept nodding nervously. "I 'll give you a dollar for yourself if you get these here to-morrow or Thursday. Can you?"

"I 'll get them here," he said in a toneless, faltering voice, taking the paper, and went out.

"Do you know, Fanny," said John, "something in that poor chap's face made me shiver."

"Yes," Fanny picked up a spoon, looked at it, put it down vaguely. "It made me shiver, too."

CHAPTER XVII

THE MAN WHO WAS "WANTED"

FANNY had given a headache as a reason for sending John away. The windows were fastened, the shades lowered. A thunderbolt had struck the house of her life. As she sat by the littered table, her eyes on the door through which Steven King would return, she was struggling from the debris. She had always feared her own detection — never this. The unbelievable had happened. A confusing change spread through her as she waited: The present with its just-awakened hope and defiant joy was transmuted into the muffling sense of failure and the enveloping apprehension that she had known as a rogue's wife.

She heard a light, rapid step on the stairs. Although not as confident, it was the same step for which she had often waited at dead of night. How curious that was — and how it made this despoiling situation take on still more the hallmark of the familiar! Was it San Francisco in which she sat, or New Orleans? And was Steven returning from some unexplained absence of one day, or three days, or a week? The knock was of a different quality, however. It was very faint and very insinuating. It said, "This is for *your* ears. You will hear, but you need n't seem to do so unless it is wise."

Fanny crossed the room. Her step dragged, yet was furious. She opened the door with a large sweep and faced Steven King. There was something cautious and mendacious in the way he waited, his eye on her for the cue. The beggar and the criminal were both in the look. It was too horrid to see — this man was her husband! She made a sweeping movement of her arm to usher him in, but could say nothing. As he obeyed, she locked the door and sinking against it faced him, a look that was both distraught and hopeless storming over her face.

He moved with decision to a little distance, his cap in his hand, his head up. There was a pointed difference between this entrance and his previous one when he had come, an exhausted burden-bearer, into a stranger's house. Yet the calamitous marks upon him were wholly clear to Fanny now:

He wore the garb of wretchedness — broken boots, weather-mottled clothes aged to the basis of the cloth. A beard covered his cheeks, but through it and around the eyes and temples the face showed like a skull's. His black hair, of the desolate, spiked length that takes all character from a man's head, had solid gray tufts in it. Only the deep violet eyes were exactly as she remembered them — even the idyllic haze that had fluttered her childish heart while serving as a curtain for the smooth trickster scheming behind it, was there. And through this tragic downfall there still peeped out enduring reminders of his grace, his fascinating assurance. When he spoke, the honey-noted voice of memory was but little damaged; in fact, the delicate huskiness that now trailed through it helped to make its appeal to pity more piercing.

"Before you say the hard things I deserve, just think of this line — it 's from the Persian prose of old Omar, uncorrupted by anybody's rhyming." He squared his bony shoulders, put his hands, one of them holding the new cap, on his hips — a familiar attitude — and bent on her a brilliant, blue gaze. "'Mercy was made for the sake of sin,'" he quoted, a lyric note in every telling word.

For a few seconds Fanny could think of nothing but the strangeness of hearing a man who at sight would have been placarded with illiterate toilers speak such words. "You were always surprising," she said at last, her mouth twisting nervously. She came back to the table. "Well, say what you have to say, quietly."

He gave her and the folding doors a comprehensive look. "Quietly? I understand," he said. "I 'd like to know one thing right off. Am I Enoch Arden? Have you married him?"

"No," and then some dull, slow words at which she felt no astonishment seemed to speak themselves, "and never will."

"Then I 'm not quite a rotten outsider." He drew a little nearer to her and to the table. "When I saw you I was absolutely bowled over. It 's a wonder I did n't blurt out something and give it all away. A mighty good thing that it 's second nature for me to watch out for myself! Were you — pardoned?"

She did no more than faintly shake her head. The meaning of the experience was beginning to have a rowelling edge. Her mind was beginning to take in just what it meant to be facing this survivor of her life's mistake.

"A get-away?" he said admiringly. "Fine!" A crafty look peaked his face. "But I 'm better off. A dead man can run low easily, providing he keeps his eyes open just the same."

"That 's what I want to know about," she said, a suppressed hysteria in the words. "Your death was published. Speak more quietly."

The necessity for caution seemed pleasant to him. She divined that he felt it made them comrades, creatures of one stripe. A brilliant smile went over his face and one eye flickered knowingly. "That was all a mistake. But I can talk better after I 've had something to eat. Have n't you any hospitality for the unexpected guest?"

She pressed her hands to her head, pulling back her whirling thoughts to the necessities of the moment.

"I 'm hardly ever hungry," he continued. "But I could dally with a little of that ambrosia. This is my lunch hour. That 's how I managed to come."

He put his hat on the sofa and lifted a small chair. There was the perfection of secretiveness in the action as he tiptoed around the table and placed it where John had sat. That was unbearable. She felt herself sicken.

"Sit around — there."

"This is all right," he murmured, in his most liquid tone.

But she bent over and with shaking hands cleared a space on the opposite side of the table. "Sit *there.*"

He smiled musingly as he obeyed, then, leaning on his elbow, watched her without speaking. A gnome-like, gray look had come to her face. Twitchings like those at the beginning of palsy passed over her at times. Suffering was trying to throw her and she was fighting it. It occurred to him that if a woman had been called away from a watch beside the dead to the duty of feeding the living she would have looked as Fanny did. He was sorry for her; just as sorry as he was for himself — even a little more. As he watched her, the excitement of the unfamiliar and unexpected diminished. Her trembling hands serving him food, the feeling of guilt and penitence on his side, of anguish and self-control on hers, made the situation like many they had lived through together. The past was back. It was the old story.

When the plate was before him and a glass of sauterne poured out, Fanny, with a frantic, yet still circumspectly silent abandon, sank into a chair a little distance from the table, and pressing her shut fists to her mouth, cried in a deep, stifled way against them.

"I 'm awfully sorry, Fanny," Steven said tenderly. He sat back, and his chin sank. These words, too, were familiar; how often he had said them! "Truly I am. This is tough on you. I 'm awfully sorry, little girl."

She made an angry gesture bidding him be silent, and remained gazing with bitter eyes into space. But when she became aware that he was watching her forlornly, she spoke. "Eat your lunch, please," she said sharply, and turned her face away.

"I should have stayed dead — that 's it," he sighed. "But you see it had to happen."

He drained the glass of wine eagerly. Then, without allowing the liquid to make the faintest, trickling sound, refilled it rapidly and without spilling a drop, although his watchful eyes never left her drooped head. He put an inquisitive fork into the sweetbread and after a taste he took another forkful eagerly.

"I ought to make a wish," he said. "It 's about three years since I 've tasted anything like this. Sweetbreads and I came to 'the parting of the ways' some time ago." He took another delicate gulp of the wine. "It 's not unpleasant — this being a ghost!" he said.

She now turned a dull face to him. A feeling that she was stone or lead was beginning to creep over her, helping her. She must finish with him, get rid of him, and then — think. So far he had been only piteous, without seeking to win her pity. He seemed also malleable, kindly, disinterested. He would not betray her nor seek to regain her. To do either would be to resurrect a dead man "wanted" by the police. But even if this had not been so, she felt sure he would not have tried to hurt or antagonize her. He had never been vindictive. Cruelty was an integrant part of him, but it had been smothered in adoring words and seductively winning caresses. He had kissed her most tenderly when hurting her most deeply. Therein had lain his power. Thereby he had won from her forgiveness and passionate love unto the seventy times seven. But there would be one inevitable result to this interview, she knew. He would want money. Knowing Steven King, she knew that. He dared not molest Esray Heath, but she could. She could tap the golden sap from that princely tree for him. She was sure that for that reason alone he regarded this encounter as a Godsend.

He looked about for cigarettes and found John's. As he took one, he gave her a wine-mellowed smile that deepened the dreamy charm of his face. "The Englishman and I have the same taste in tobacco — as in other things."

The words brought Fanny to her feet. "Don't say anything more like that!"

"Oh, don't be a prude," he said amiably. "I did n't mean to be nasty."

"Let us get finished with this." She sat down nearer him. "You want something, of course. What can I do for you — now?"

"Fanny!" he said reproachfully, puffing some of the Turkish tobacco through his nostrils.

"Having been the curse of my life," she said in a curbed, intense voice, "having turned me, ignorantly, into a thief, having died and now come back to take my last chance of happiness from me! — *what can I do for you?*"

He laid down the cigarette and put his elbows on the table. "If you don't watch out," he said, smiling, "you 'll get crow's-feet from frowning that way."

She looked sharply at the bottle of sauterne. It was empty.

"Oh, I admit I helped myself to the last golden drop. Can you blame me? I 'm warm for the first time in weeks. Now, see here, dear —" At her look, he said: "I beg your pardon — old habits stick. Don't suppose I 'm boozy. I 'm not. The stuff has made me human, that 's all. And don't think it 's necessary to say hard things to me. It is n't." A sorrowful croon had crept into his voice. "You might sit there and hurl every synonym for rascal and wretch at me, Fanny, and I could go you one better. I 've been a beast and a brute to you. When I know this myself, why waste your energy? I know so well my own dry rot that an insult from you — or any one else — would have to be inserted under the skin for me to feel it."

"You certainly disarm criticism," said Fanny, and the feeling that the Irish call "cold comfort" went over her. She had wrecked herself for this man — yes — but about him there was the charm that was compelling. It was there, even now, undying. Any inexperienced woman that he had sought to win would surely have helplessly loved him. In this lay life's pardon for the egregious folly of her seventeenth year.

"Now you 're talking sensibly," Steven said. "I do disarm criticism. I know myself. I remember you told me once that in a soul like mine nothing could take root — that it was a fluid element, full of rootless things. I never forgot that. And you were right. But to be fair, Fanny," he pleaded, his worn coat-sleeves crossed on the table as they were frequently nowadays upon rum-smelling bars; "all that 's not really my fault. Some flowers are poisonous from the seed. I was. What I *am* to blame for is this: that I did n't let you alone. I knew I was letting you in for an awful life. I should have let you alone." He sighed and picked up the cigarette again. "I loved you terribly. But I was a yellow dog to marry you. I knew it then. I say it now."

She shrugged his self-recriminations from her and sat up straight, matter-of-fact, resentful. "How did the report of your death get about?" she asked. "You were able to arrange even that."

"No," he said as tenderly as before, not seeming to notice her contempt, "that was almost entirely an accident. I knew they were after me when I heard of their getting you." Before her steady eyes, his own had to falter. "That nearly broke my heart. Truly! I almost went back to you, Fanny, to stand the whole business, tell the truth and say how you had no hand in it — "

"*Nearly — almost!*" she said in a smothered but raging tone that seemed to fling him into a scales and weigh him. "I don't want to hear your excuses. How did the report of your death get about?"

He tapped the cigarette daintily against the plate's edge and settled deeply and more comfortably in his chair.

"They wanted men for coal mines in Colorado. I had seen ads. about it in the papers for weeks. When I knew the game was up, I got into old clothes and made for them. As I'd imagined, I had n't been working a day before I was so black I was splendidly disguised. In my leisure moments, when I should have been sleeping, I took a hand at cards. There was always a makeshift of a game on, for there were a few fellows there, newcomers like myself, that I could see were only mining because they'd gone 'stony.' One of them was a Cuban, named Morales. We looked a good deal alike, — hair alike, and height. One day we sat down alone to piquet. We'd been drinking a little and felt gay and we had n't a cent left, so we made a silver watch of mine and a good coat of mine — the only decent garment I'd brought, by the way — and a copper cigar case of his the stakes. He won. He took my watch and my coat, but as I needed a coat, he gave me his old one. It was sheer luck that kept me from going down into the mine that last trip. I had noticed a fearful lot of coal dust in the galleries; it was piled on the floor of the mine and would rise in clouds. Now I've not been a rolling stone for nothing. Instead of gathering a nice little overcoat of moss by standing still, I've gathered a lot of information. I've a sponge-like intelligence that sucks up all the particles that come its way. You used to say," he smiled, "that I knew something about everything. I happened to know a good bit about coal dust. I did n't like it. I had a theory that it was that, and not fire damp, that caused explosions. Coal dust mixed with air and heated to a great temperature becomes gunpowder of another formula. You see the dust is the carbon or charcoal of gunpowder," he said, warming to the narrative, "the mine air supplies the oxygen which saltpeter gives to gunpowder; and for the hot, easy burning sulphur of gunpowder, the dust explosion substitutes its own intense heat. Well, I knew all this, and I 'd watched out. Just the same, I 'd have gone that last day if I had n't awakened in the dirty shanty with my throat so sore that I could scarcely swallow, my head feeling like a bonfire. I got up before the others and hid in a woodshed until the rest had gone. It happened we 'd just been paid, and as I 'd been there more than a month I thought I might safely try something else. I lit out, and in a town ten miles off I fitted out as a pedler. Funny thing," he smiled cosily, "that I happened to be selling a woman a pair of brass earrings for about thirty-five dollars when she asked me if I 'd heard of the explosion in the 'Lucky Lad' mine and of the entombment of the men. *Not one of those who 'd gone down on that last trip had come back!* I saw what a narrow squeak I 'd had, but I did n't realize just how good my luck was, until nearly a month later; I was then in a big town with about three hundred dollars, profits from peddling, in my pockets, and there I read of the miners' bodies being brought out — what was left of them. Pretty ghastly reading. To my amazement — and then my gratitude — I read that *my* body was among those found. The coat and watch, the height and general figure of the Cuban, had been recognized as mine; the face might have been any one's."

After this he sat back and gazed at Fanny, his brow furrowed, his eyes cloudy with dumb entreaties. She was hopeless, bitter, hard. Her eyes looked past him and down, as if into an abyss. Having told her how he had come to be published as dead, he saw that her interest in him was finished. She would not want to hear how he had battled after that, the odds terrific, but without once beating him until health went and he had begun to wrestle with a spectre. No. She was thinking of herself; not of his sufferings — only of hers, caused by him.

"Why did you send me that counterfeit money?" she asked, when a long pause had hung between them. Her voice was quiet, but its stillness had a quality that wiped him out. "Was it sheer deviltry?"

He was genuinely hurt. "You think as badly of me as that?" he demanded.

"You sent it to me when you knew I needed money so badly that I had even sold my wedding ring, when you knew I was so nervous and sad after a ravaging illness that facts had not their right proportion to me and that I would have no suspicion of the truth. You asked me to send you a locked box whose contents I knew nothing about — a box with counterfeiting tools in it. You knew that if this were found in my possession, particularly with me arranging to express it to you as you directed me to do, it would be enough to convict me — "

"*If* found out," he interposed.

"And why did you suppose it would n't be found out?" she asked, the memories that thronged upon her changing her tone to fury.

"I 've always been lucky. I 've always taken chances — "

"No, no! You 've made *other people* take the chances!"

"I hoped. I 'm naturally sanguine — "

"Sanguine!" she echoed. Her look lampooned him as a cheat. "Without pity! No conscience — not the vestige of one! Oh, Steven King, what you did to me!" Her arms rose and fell in concluding despair. "What you did to me!"

He sat back, pulling at his pointed beard, and studied her. He told himself he was quite an unusual man, for he could see that her point of view was most natural. He admitted its justice. He did not excuse himself. Without doubt, he thought, something very big had been raddled in him. Some intrinsic, curdling poison in his make-up had made the wrong thing a magnet to him.

What a pity! He dwelt on his many good qualities — amiability, cheerfulness, generosity, a certain distorted loyalty, a respect for morality in other people — especially women. And yet without hesitation, how he had inevitably chosen the false measures and weights of life, the back stairs and the secret doors! Yes, pretense was as natural to him as sleep, and lies were his language. Respectability and poverty were to him unlinkable — although he might, as a millionaire, have made morality attractive. As he told himself all this, a decadent admiration of his own impartiality grew strong in him. Not many men would so frankly have said: "I am base."

"Well, Fanny," he murmured, with thoughtful pensiveness; "all that 's past and done with now. Don't let 's pick and quarrel about it. What 's the use? I should have kept you out of that business that time, as I 'd always done out of any deal I was in. But honestly, when I thought of you hard up, hundreds of miles away from me, I felt terribly. It seemed a shame not to send you some of that good-looking green stuff — really it *was* handsome money! Why, do you know," he said, with pride as natural as if he were speaking of a meritorious accomplishment, "it took a trained eye or a magnifying glass to detect anything off! There was just a *leetle* grayness in the geometric lathe work surrounding the numeral — that was all! Even the fragments of silk thread seemed to be woven in the paper; of course they could n't be, for that is done by a secret Government process. As to the vignette on the left hand side —!" He was continuing triumphantly but stopped and sat limply back, conscious through his enthusiasm of the cold, overwhelming denunciation of her look. "I thought I'd pull out of the whole thing in time," he went on tonelessly, "and that you and I'd get away safely to Europe — together. You'd never been there, and you know how I wanted to take you, little girl," he said caressingly. "I did n't mean to hurt you. I had the biggest hopes. Why the very men I went in with, in Seattle, had been making barrels of money at that game for a whole year! Well, it's over. I'm on the square now and have been for a long time. I admit my faults. I don't pretend to explain them. I enjoyed being crooked. I did — that's flat. But I've quit. I've had enough. It's all right when you're in the twenties. I'm almost forty, and I'm sick." He stood up and gazed at her with such powerful appeal, with such a distorted confession of distaste and fright on his ghastly face, rigor touched her flesh and she forgot everything else as she listened. "I'm dying. That's the truth. I've got to die — soon!" He came nearer to her. "Make it easy for me the little time I'm here."

"Money," she said in a breath.

"Look at me — that 's enough! About six months ago a doctor gave me a year — with care." He gave a chuckle that made it necessary to stifle a cough. "Subtract those six months *with the care that 's given a homeless dog* tacked on to them, and then how much time have I left? You see I won't bother you long. But you get me some money from your sister, and, by God, I 'll *live* what 's left of it!" He bent close to her. "I 'll be clean and clothed, and I 'll die decently!" Here he touched her with the extreme tip of one finger, conveying the finest possible insinuation. "I don't know that I 've made it clear that I 'll never bother you or upset your plans. I 'm dead — *now!* Understand? Arrange your life — marry — anything you like — just as if I had n't turned up. Count me out. *Understand?*"

She whirled a chair between them. "Don't —!" It was a confused little cry of abomination. "You rat! Oh, go away, go away, you *rat!*"

He flushed. "That 's a nice thing to say, upon my word — when I 'm trying to show you that I have your interests at heart, that I 'm just as sorry for you as I can be." He looked with injured, saintly reproach at the back of her head. "Do I get the money?" he asked tenderly.

"I 'll do what I can." She faced him, shivering, sick. "I want you to go this minute."

"Get me something worth while. Will you?"

"How much?"

"A few thousands." A fear that he had been too modest immediately followed the words and gave his face a mendacious peakedness that to Fanny was a look into his soul. "Five — if you can. I 've just one pal who knows I 'm still on deck — a good old pal, out in Colorado." The blood jumped into his sunken cheeks. "He 's fond of me, and he could tip me off to a good thing — strictly on the level — but such a *good* little thing. Why, it 's just like picking money as you 'd pick fruit off a tree! He 's told me all about it. It 's just the nicest little chance in the world — big profits just for putting in a few thousands — just like turning over your hand." He had grown so excited his mouth shook. "He 'd let me in. I 'd be on Easy Street for — for as long as I last."

She drew back from him still further. "I 'm not sure I can do it."

"Your sister knows you 're here?"

"Yes."

"Well, she 'd do anything for you, and you know it," he insisted.

"She may not have so much at hand," Fanny said in a rapid, lifeless tone. "Esray is very close about actual money. But — I 'll try."

"She can get it for *you*," he insisted.

"I 've said I 'd try," she said in a flat, clear tone of contempt.

"When will you see her?"

"To-night, I hope."

"When shall I come back?"

"In a few days."

"No." He was awkward with eagerness. "Let 's get this done. Get her here to-night — sure. Settle it then. Anyway, try to. I 'll get the Englishman's books to-morrow, and I 'll come in here, pretending I 've forgotten my receipt book. That 'll make it all hunky if he 's in the way. If you have the money, you can slip it to me, some way — and the thing 's done. Is that a go?"

"Yes," she said.

He took up his cap but still vacillated, moving off a few steps and then returning. A blue tinge went over his face, he scratched his head, fumbled with his hands, and his eyes flickered with anxiety. "Have you — any — loose change on hand?" At last it was out, and the question was like the first plunge into cold water. He went on with assurance now. "I hate to ask you, but I want to get a suit of clothes. God — when I look down at myself I feel like jumping into the river."

She went to her desk, took out almost all that was left of Claudia's last gift and handed it to him without speaking.

As he counted it, the pink came again into the pit of his cheeks. "Forty. You 're a brick. This makes me feel alive!" He reached the door. As he opened it, he looked back at her standing by the table. "You 're sure I 'm not robbing you?" he asked in courteous concern.

She frowned and wearily turned her head away. He slipped out and the door was closed without the faintest sound.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STAIRWAY INTO THE FUTURE

CLAUDIA had lunched at Delmonico's with two women friends, and afterward had gone for a drive around the park and along the river. Tired of talking and seeming gaiety; tired of the glare; with heaviness and dismay on her spirit, she had come home. After bathing and getting into a sheer, white gown on which embroidery and lace had ousted all but angles of the groundwork fabric, she had come into a big, almost denuded room that was shaded by awnings and blooming with flowers. Her arms hung over the sides of a big chair in completest relaxation, her head drooped; through her half-closed eyes she saw the tops of trees in the park and the orange-colored, twilight sky above them. There were at least ten servants in the partially-opened house, yet it was profoundly still — just as still as her own unexpectant blood and seemingly as empty as her life.

She was trying to see her future. It evaded her; it is impossible to give outlines to a vacuum. And yet she might live to be old. What was she to do with all the days that might be left her? This was a drab-colored, mouthing thought. Gradually these future days to her fancy took on the form of stairways, many of them, that must be trodden, up and down, the minutes and hours making thousands and thousands of little steps — but they led nowhere. A spot of pain burned in her heart as she faced her uselessness. And yet her reason and philosophy reared themselves to fight such a waste of herself as being cruelly unfair. If compensation dogs the steps of every loss, where was hers? It must be somewhere, it might be near her, if only she could see it. Those thousands and thousands of steps must be made to lead somewhere.

What do people think of — women especially — when they sit alone in the twilight? Who can tell? Thought like the genii of fable leaps, in seconds, everywhere, over time and distance, backwards, forwards, sometimes making dark, forgotten corners fill with flame, making the minutiæ of dead years take on reality, color, speech. Her memory went back to her lost voice, an old grief long in its shroud; nothing could spring from that. Nothing could blossom from the husk of her marriage. If life dealt cruelly with Fanny, the time might come when she would be needed again by her; but, unselfishly, she would be glad if happiness made Fanny forever independent of her. She gave generously to charity; but the personal contact with poverty and pain that was part of settlement work would always appal her and make her an incubus. Woman's suffrage, socialism, and other new beliefs and struggles interested her, but not vitally. The emptiness continued to gape at her.

It was then in a curious, quivering way, as if a small gold needle were piercing the skeins of dolorous thought, that the idea of work first came to her. Work! Not the pursuit of some whimsey or fad and called by that name, but the real thing; work for head and hands. The little gold needle went deeper, and the skeins of thought spread wider so that light began to creep in. The tree-tops and the sky faded. Claudia, mesmerized, went out in spirit among the successful soldiers in the war of life.

She saw herself parted from Ezra and the owner of a small fortune on which by her own efforts she could build — something. What? Her thoughts went back again to her distant girlhood, to the small house in Locust City where she had been, not only a prospective prima donna, but housekeeper, dressmaker and milliner for the family. She saw herself creating pretty frocks for Fanny from odds and ends of many colors. She remembered how she had turned an old overcoat of her father's, relined it, had, in fact, made a new garment of it. She recalled how she had once made a really charming party gown for herself from a pair of old net curtains. Her spirit freshened over the memories and she began to see where they led her.

She had always had the love and understanding of clothes that can make a poor woman look charmingly dressed. But, besides this, she had had the constructive talent, the mathematical eye for effect and detail, the sense of vision that leaps beyond the prevailing fashion and divines what is sure to be evolved from it. At the present time, rich as she was, she seldom left a gown as its creator had made it; her own hands would ruthlessly tear down and redrape, give an original effect by some twist or hitch, by taking off or putting on the exact something needed for perfection.

If she became a business woman, then? If, like several English women of the highest class, she curtained her personality behind an "Angèle" or "Eugénie," and created clothes that would be as beautiful as flowers? She tasted the elixir of starting, arranging herself, her house, her work-women. She could feel the thrill that makes of every experiment a quickening force. The burden of life with Ezra while she hung on, waiting for more money than he was willing to give, became suddenly a spiritless and odious thing.

She started up and began to pace the room in her sweeping, graceful way, her hands clutched together and pressed to her heart. The stairways led somewhere now, and to a world where there would be no pleasure-less pleasure, no melancholy killing of time. The thought of this hard work, with critical issues at stake, was as reviving as rain upon a sun-weary garden. She had had enough of sun. There was rapture in the thought of storm and wind across bare places, over which she would have to build her own shelter.

"Madame — if you please — ?"

She came out of her dream. Her maid stood at the door.

"Madame, some one wishes to speak to you on the telephone."

"Take the message, Julie," she said without interest, and continued her walk, thinking.

"Lawson tried to do so, madame, and then I, but the lady would not give her name and said she must speak to you. She insisted on this, madame."

"Fanny!" Her dream scurried before the thought.

She darted down the hall to her bedroom. Here she shut the door and went to the receiver on the table beside her bed. She knelt before it. To keep the suspense out of her voice she almost whispered:

"Hello. This is Mrs. Heath — herself. Who wants her?"

"I do." She knew the hesitating, hopeless voice. "You understand?"

"Perfectly. Where are you now?"

"I came to a drug-store to telephone."

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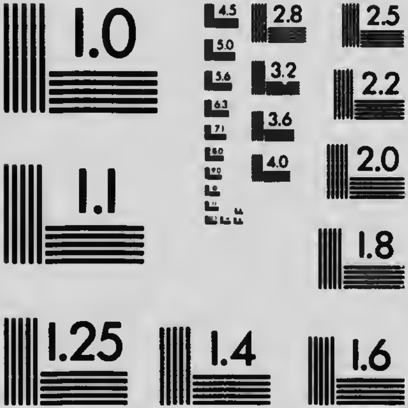
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"Is there a booth?"

"No."

"You want me at once?"

"Yes."

"Are you ill?"

"No."

"Has something —" Her heart-beats were now fluttering in her throat; "— important — serious — happened?"

"Yes — serious — but not what you think. You won't be long?"

"At once!"

"Good-by."

"Good-by!" She did not dare add a word of love, promise, comfort. With a crowd of servants in the house, who could tell what listening ears there might be?

With nervous carefulness, Claudia left her brougham as far away as the west side of Washington Square, and walked to the house. The hall was in dusk, but light came through Mrs. Murray's open door. It framed a picture that, even as she passed rapidly up, left its vivid impression and fitted in with her previous desire for usefulness and her hazily forming plans for work. Mrs. Murray stood under the hanging lamp, samples of chiffon in long strips waving like pennants as her fingers fluttered among them; they were of twenty shades — the grays of doves, the yellows of daffodils, blush-rose, apple-green, flame color, orange and gold. Mrs. Murray's pale, pointed face and dreaming eyes were bent above them like a poet's in the thrall of inspiration. The picture took its place in a back niche of Claudia's memory to be considered later.

It was a gray and silent Fanny that pulled open the door and stood before her for a few moments like the stone figure of a woman. The cheek she kissed was cold and smooth like the flesh of the dead. The eyes that met her own were dark, dry, empty pits.

She put her hands fiercely on Fanny's shoulders. "Fanny, my darling. Tell me, dear —!" She bustled her to a chair and sat beside her protectingly, watching for life to come to that stricken face. But Fanny, having gone to the depths during lonely hours, having with tears faced Fate while her spirit shrieked her agony at it, was now mercifully to remain cold and dull, hopeless, painless, seeing what she had to do clearly and doing it with exactness.

"I needed you, you see, even sooner than you thought, Clo. You'll think me a hound, crying to you and cringing to you, when I want your help." She said this with motionless eyes and hands crushed together in her lap in a deep, tense way, as if in order to keep sane and active she must nurture and conserve all her forces. "You 'll be sure of it when I tell you that I must have money — thousands. That 's why I 've sent for you. I want five thousand dollars, if you can get it for me, so that I can hand it all over to Steven King."

Claudia's hand went uncertainly to her forehead. She bent a new gaze on Fanny's face, one sharp with fear.

"Don't look at me that way. I 'm telling you the truth. A man — an ordinary expressman — brought my typewriter. He was Steven. That report of his death in the mine explosion was a mistake — just his coat and watch on another man." She raised a rigid finger and pointed to the table, her dark, empty gaze following it. "He stood there — sat there — in rags almost — and sick — very sick. He talked — and ate. He 's coming to-morrow — for the money."

The most vigorous and conclusive thought of Claudia's life held her silent for a moment after this. When she spoke her voice had an iron quality. "So that inquisition is to begin again? Is it? *Is it?*" She put her hands on Fanny's arms and pulled her up. "No! No!"

Fanny drew back from her in an exhausted, fumbling way. "Please don't talk about it. Try to get the money — so I can give it to him — and then he 'll go away."

"My plan is much simpler," Claudia flashed with the air and voice of one who takes a gripping hold of a situation. "You 'll come with me, *now*. You 'll get into a dark dress and come right along. You 'll go to a hotel for the present. There is n't going to be any repetition of Mr. Steven King. I 'll see to that. He 'll keep quiet about you for the best of reasons — to save himself. As for you — you 're going to disappear."

She tried to unbutton the white gown which Fanny still wore, but with weak yet decided fingers Fanny took her by the wrists and held her away from her.

"Don't waste time, Clo. He 's sick, and I 've got to give him this money."

"Let him go his way as if he had n't run across you. You owe him nothing," Claudia said passionately.

Fanny sat down like one tired by a long journey. Her eyes were on the spot at which she had previously pointed, as if she still saw there the ghost's face and the rags.

"I 've got to help him, Clo, if I can. If you won't or can't do what I ask, then I must wait here and tell him so." There was not a flicker of feeling in her mask-like face, but her voice was as sad as the sea, as she added: "He 's dying, Clo. No doubt of that. It 's in his face. I 'd like to give him this money."

Claudia's defenses fell. There was no fighting

Fanny in this. Here was the destructible part of marriage — the wraith of old tenderness, old interest, which endures though law or fate has made the contract void. The eternal woman from the depths of her eternal pity was speaking of what had been her own. A little question tipped with venomous humor prodded Claudia in a knowing way: would she not feel this necessity to mother even Ezra if he came to her, a derelict, in trouble and sick?

"'Mary, pity women, but we 're long in learning,'" was Claudia's startled and humbled thought. In a sweet, sudden way she put her arms closely about Fanny. "You know, dear, that the money does n't count. If you want it I 'll get it for you, some way. If *you* want it," she said, and stroked the pale face that looked up at her with dumb but strong desire. "You do. Yes, I see."

"He is coming to-morrow afternoon."

Claudia was now eager to assure and comfort her. "I 'll have to sell some bonds. It ought not to take long — if Ezra keeps out of the way. I 'll get here as soon as I can. By the early afternoon, probably."

"Thank you, Clo. I knew you would." After a silence, she said, without looking at Claudia: "I 'll go away with you, afterward. You understand? I 'll go at once, wherever you like. This morning I said I would n't. But if you wish it, there 's nothing to keep me, now."

Claudia smiled — a humble, miserable smile, hazy with tears. So she was to have Fanny; her life was to be full as she had ached to have it. She knew then the bitterness that can come from an answered prayer. She meant it from her soul when she said: "I 'm glad I can help you; sorry that you need me. I wish I could bring this morning back! But don't be frightened. Don't look so. Steven won't betray you. You know he can't."

"It is n't that." Fanny kneaded Claudia's hand stupidly as she tried to express the confusion of her soul. "You see, Clo, I was happy. I think it made me drunk. Such happiness and great grief are alike in one way; they confuse the real. I drifted into a dream here. It was so quiet, so soothing; the days, one so like the other, were little hammers that pounded and pounded on the nails of the fear I felt at first, until all the points were soft. And then, I loved Jack — and he loved me — and this lifted me up so that I felt supreme and it gave me a feeling of almost insolent belief in my sovereign luck! You remember I told you?" She sat nodding over the thought. "But Steven's coming back has shown me — just — where — I stand. I 'd almost forgotten all the puddles of feeling I 'd waded through with him while trying to hold him up, to save him — all the raw edges, the dark corners." She looked up with blank helplessness. "How he flung me back, stole my dream, made me see! Oh, how I hate what I am."

Claudia half-caressed, half-shook her in angry pain. "You 're morbid, and no wonder. Purity can be hurt, but no fortuitous thing can stain it. Suffering, injustice — are not guilt."

"I 've said all that to myself, but the results remain. There is n't a moment of safety for me. Not a sure corner anywhere. I 'm a hunted rat. The prison's taint is on me, through remembrance of it." Her soul seemed to cry out weakly and run astray in a futile effort to hide from calamity. "I was so happy," she whimpered; "I forgot. I must n't forget again. I 'm a burden, Clo, but will you take me? I can't go back to prison. The thought makes me — *die.*"

Claudia soothed her, did all manner of little restful things for her, and persuaded her to lie on the couch. Her eyes from sleeplessness were like dark, scorched stones set deeply in the sockets.

"Does he — ?" Claudia's look toward the big doors completed the sentence.

"No." Fanny's eyes closed. "We won't speak of him, Clo — not of him — to-day."

Claudia went away soon after this, but not until she had gained Fanny's consent to her telling Mrs. Murray to come up and stay with her until she would try to sleep.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TIDE EBBS

"DARLING: — It 's two o'clock. Lunch is over. I 'm alone with a pipe and my thoughts. They are all of you. I 've started this letter six times, Fanny. I want to tell you how I love you, and I can't. If I were a poet, I could. But as I 'm not, I would need to have you where I could *look* at you and let you find it all out for yourself.

"It's twenty-two hours to a dot since I've seen you. That's monstrous! I left you at four yesterday and except for a white hand through a window, that I was permitted to kiss, I seem to have dreamed you. Did I kiss you yesterday? — or did I dream it? *Do* you love me, or am I an ass, fancying things? Oh, it 's hard to wait. But I understand. You feel ill and your sister (my enemy) is entrenched with you. If I did not understand her point of view so well with one side of my brain, how I 'd hate her! But I do understand, dear. She 's a wise woman who weighs values after the manner of the world. You are throwing away your terribly precious self to marry a loose end like me. This is a fact as hard as a nail, and I can fancy her driving it in. Only — don't listen to her! Marry me anyway. Oh, Fanny darling, *if only as charity, marry me!* (I 'll try to make you never regret it.)

"I 've had the strangest desires since yesterday. I want to be an anarchist and kill all millionaires and take their money — so I can give it to you; or I want to save one of them from a Broadway car and be adopted by him as a son — just so that I can give everything I get to you. You see my principles wabble; but my love does n't!

" When I own you, I 'll take such care of you that the headaches you have now will never torture you. I have dreams of my Arizona ranch with you, my darling. You lead a dull, shut-in life here — not the right sort. But some day, Fanny, in air like wine, over immense pink and purple distances, we 'll ride and ride.

" I am just leaving for a walk. If your sister is not with you at the moment, may I see you — just for a little while, on my way out? I can go down through your house. Fergus will hand this in and wait for an answer. If I can't see you — then good-by, dearest, for a little while.

" Jack."

Fanny read this while Fergus waited outside the window. The hand holding the paper sank to her side and she stood looking down — with her drooped eyelids and pensive head, a strangely lovely picture of meditation. She had tried to be resolutely dull and non-resisting, to think of John as already of the past and far away. By holding to this desolate fancy she had hoped for strength to do the things that would make it actual. But as she read the letter, she saw him, felt him, with an overpowering appeal, beside her — saw, too, the procession of gray, sad, empty days to come. A powerful, melancholy passion swept over her as the sea heaves — the heavy under sea that only the tempests touch.

" Tell Mr. Cross to come in, Fergus."

John found her sitting at the table, leaning on it, her hands crossed over her eyes. Her face bore out the ficof bodily illness. She seemed to have grown old overnight, and yet with her youthful air so undying through the quick havoc, that she suggested a worn child rather than a woman suffering. She scarcely looked at him as he entered. He kissed her pale lips quietly. To his questions and enfolding anxiety she was impassive.

"No, I'm not very ill at all, dear," she said. "Nerves. Don't talk about it. We have only a few moments. I wanted to see you. Sit over there — will you? — with the light on your face. I want to see you. Don't mind my staring. Sit over there."

He laughed as he obeyed her, although her face troubled him. "Not much to look at," he said, and watched her with a gentle, deep tenderness that tore her with pain.

"Are you off for a long walk?" she asked. (He would never know that the question was set to a requiem that only she heard: "Going clean out of my life! Not a promise, nor a hope, nor a good-by!")

"Yes, I've got to keep moving. In fact, I'm quite excited. I've had a piece of unsettling news. You remember, Fanny, I told you yesterday that the colonel I'd served under in India was in Washington with my cousin. They're coming to New York to-morrow to lunch with the President and a few others at the Waldorf, and will stop here on their way. The colonel writes that he 's sure I 'd have been asked to the luncheon, but he fancies the President thinks I 've been uncivil — my refusal of reward — the medal of honor — and all that sort of thing."

"And I think you have," said Fanny. ("This is like knowing the hour of one's death and watching it creep nearer." So her heart was saying to him, and he did not know it. "But, oh — the living ache, and the missing that must go on upon the same earth with you!")

"I daresay I have seemed a boor," John admitted, while thinking how curiously like dark flowers her absorbed eyes were in her pale face that the apple-green light through the curtains helped to make unearthly. "I 'm sorry — but all that newspaper, deifying rot got on my nerves horribly. I realized only to-day that a personal letter from the President last week has not been answered."

"Inexcusable!" She did not give much thought to what they were saying. She was watching his rippling hair and whimsical mouth and the simple, regretful, anxious expression that made him seem very young. (She loved him — and this was the last time!)

"You see, dear," John tried to explain, "I did n't want anything. After saying that dozens of times, and still not being let alone, I 'm afraid I got petulant, for you know I 've been half-sick even lately. And then, you," he smiled, "sent everything else, good, bad and indifferent, out of my head. You know you did — and I 'm glad you did — but it takes some of the blame from me, you must admit." He gave a big, uneasy shrug. "Perhaps you 'd like to hear what the colonel says." He took out a letter. "Yes — here we are:

> "We were talking of the Philippine situation yesterday, and the President spoke of you. I think his sensitive, American pride has construed your indifference to American rewards for what you have done as a patronizing, English attitude. This is what he said to me: 'Mr. Cross puts it out of our army's power to recognize his valor in the slightest way. I regret this — particularly since I have learned of his youthful downfall in India. It would have been a great pleasure to have shown him that the spirit of the United States is the merciful and the hopeful one — that we feel here that failures like his go deeper than men's understanding of them — that acts are eloquent — and that his accomplishments in the Philippines have been as giants that have carried him on their shoulders. I can only regret that he would have none of me or mine.'"

John shoved the letter back in his pocket. "He completely misunderstands — but I 'm to blame. I 'm genuinely fond of this country. And what he says about its giving a man a chance is true. See how 'The Lantern's' attack on me fell flat, except to bring out several most generous editorials in other papers! And then the far west — oh, a man breathes *big,* there! Why, such a land, with such skies and space and breeze and sun, with such freedom and simplicity abounding everywhere, is God's Clearing House! Who would n't be made over there? Who could help living again? Nevertheless, I see how I have left myself open to this criticism. I feel an ass, my dear."

Fanny dared not have him remain much longer. Steven might appear any moment. She felt sick in a drained, cold way; her soul was at low-water. "It was n't like you, Jack, to be so — so rude," she said, and the reproach was as tender as if the words had been of love.

"Oh, yes, it was!" he said, with flagellating vigor. "I can be a curt brute when I want to be. I did n't mean to be in this case, but underneath I was angry and sullen at not being let alone, and that nasty mood was really the cause of it."

"And so your old friends are coming to-morrow." (Where would she be then?) "I 'm so happy for you. Your old colonel! What seeing him will mean to you!"

"*There 's* a curious thing," said John, and he looked like a contrite schoolboy. "I think I must have a thoroughly nasty disposition — "

"No, no."

"Yes, I tell you — for while I 'll be off my head to see Colonel Onslow, it 's really my cousin that I 'm waiting for. He 'll be very friendly, but I 'll keep thinking of the last words I heard him speak: 'Go to the other side of the world. Hide. Change your name. Die as soon as you can.' " Fanny saw that for a moment he had forgotten her. " I did n't follow any of his humane suggestions but the first. To-morrow I shall watch him eat dirt and the absolutely demoniacal joy with which I anticipate that spectacle makes me sure I am going to gloat. I know the symptoms." He grinned at her helplessly. " If that is n't a nasty disposition — what is it? I ask you."

" Yes, you are bloodthirsty." It amazed her that she could smile at him as she stood up. " Nevertheless — curious as it is — I like you."

He took her in his arms. " Can't you manage something stronger? Can't you ' take on ' a little about me? Don't you ever feel that you 'd like to eat me up — body and bones? " Without letting her reply, he lifted her hand and minutely examined it. " What a small, sensitive hand you have, dear, and what a teeny-tiny little finger! Do you suppose," he asked, frowning gaily into her shadowy, self-communing eyes, " that speck of flesh and rosy nail has the impudence to consider itself — a *limb?* " He bit on it carefully. " It looks like a sweet. I 've a good mind to bite it off."

Fanny passed her hand in the tenderest way along his cheek. (The shadow was growing heavy around him. Soon he would vanish in it. It was ghastly to play her part with her eyes on that shadow, but she did.) "We talk a lot of silly stuff, Jack dear," she said. "Are we sillier than other people in love?"

"How can any one tell?" he asked, his eyes dancing. "No one hears them at it." He suddenly enveloped her in a wild caress. "Fanny, you are too sweet! You ought to be suppressed! A censor ought to cross you out! Any one harboring you ought to be sent to Siberia! It 's terribly hard to be alone with you like this and not — kill you!"

He would have drawn away from her then with a sigh of exuberant happiness, but as he gazed at her a cold, terrifying sort of joy halted him. Her head, with hair disordered, had fallen back, her eyes were almost shut. She had the pallor that comes when all the blood has rushed to the heart. She breathed faintly, quickly, like one spent after a frightful strain. Her arms crept up about his neck and closed there with a quiet fixedness that was as authoritative as death. In a paroxysm that was blind, imperious, her lips sought his. Her kiss engulfed them both. There was a quality in it that was fearful. Without being able to name it, John felt its devouring despair. A memory dizzied him: a Celtic folk-tale of dead women of the sea, who filled with a brief, spurious life, rise at dead of night to bruise bitter, heart-breaking kisses upon the lips of drowning men, and then sink into the sea to die again.

As the long kiss ended, Fanny lay heavily against him. When he drew down her arms, she swayed. He lifted her to a chair and she turned from him, hiding her face, but not before he had seen that her eyes were staring and her teeth were set. He knelt beside her and touched her cheek with his lips, and she began to weep in a shaken, defeated way that scorched him like an unmeant invasion of another's privacy.

"Something has happened to trouble you. You 'd rather I 'd go?" She nodded, her hands clasped over her face. He kissed the hands. "Is there anything I can do, dear?" She shook her head. "Don't worry. Nothing matters but us, my darling. Just keep thinking of me as I will of you, and nothing else will mean anything." His hand trailed over her hair. "We 'll get married, dear — to-morrow — if you say so. I wish you 'd agree to this. I think you need me to look after you."

She heard his steps go to the door and the door close, and lay there as if she were dead, except for the line of tears that kept spreading between the space of her fingers and winked in the light.

John returned from his walk at about five o'clock to find Fergus waiting for him with an anxious face. His thoughts flashed at once to Fanny, to that last kiss, his last sight of her face. These things had troubled him every moment since. He felt suddenly afraid, as he pushed back his straw hat and wiped his forehead. "What 's wrong?" he asked.

"I hope you won't mind, Mr. Cross, but I could n't see anything else to do," Fergus said, in a cautiously quiet whisper. "It was this way — a man came in with this package to you — "

Relief quivered over John's face as he looked at the labelled bundle on the table. "Yes, from the customs. Fellow wretchedly dressed and sick?"

"Sick indeed, sir, terrible sick — but he had on good clothes — nice and new — " Fergus paused. "Well, the long and short is, that you can see him for yourself, sir. He 's lying in my room, now."

John stepped up briskly. "Bad turn — eh?"

Fergus opened the door cautiously, and in the shadow on a small cot John saw the man of the previous day. He was high on pillows and turned on his side. His face was stretched upward; bluish hollows were in the cheeks. His new coat hung on a chair close to the bed, his waistcoat and collar were loosened. He looked younger and even thinner; the fresh linen and the trimmed hair had produced this effect. He did not stir or look at them and John motioned Fergus to close the door.

"What happened? Did he faint?"

"No, sir. He carried in the package and sat down, looking terrible frightened." Fergus spoke guardedly.

"He took a holt of himself like this," he said, bending over and clutching his hands upon his chest, "and he asked me for some water. I gave it to him and he took a powder. 'Just let me sit still a minute,' he says. I offered to get a doctor, but he looked scared to death at the idea. 'Not on your life. This is nothing. It lasts a little while and goes — if I keep quiet.' He kept sitting there and at last struggled up. But when he got to the head of the stairs, he hunched back against the wall. 'I 've got to go — there 's something I 've got to do. I 've got to go!' he said, and almost broke down crying. 'And — I can't,' he says, just like a baby, and fell, all crumpled in a heap. I helped him up, and he says in a gasping whisper: 'Let me lie down somewhere for a few minutes and I 'll be able to go on. Don't get any doctor,' he says, as if he hated them. He was as cold as ice and his lips were as blue as his coat. The poor chap 's a consumptive and his heart 's pretty nearly gone, too. Well, I just helped him to my bed and there he is now."

"Have you spoken to him since?"

"I gave him water once, and a little later a spoonful of brandy."

"Let him stay quietly there. When he awakens, if he 's not better, you can go for that Cuban doctor on the other side of the street and he can get him to a hospital."

John made himself comfortable with the package of books from England. They were mostly works on English politics and economics. He had seen them advertised months before and in a gust of home longing had sent for them. But between the paragraphs of brilliant and solid logic, the thought of Fanny would creep to him. He would stop reading to dream of her — the urge and glamor of his passionate love; his poignant, protecting tenderness; his anxiety for her good.

Fergus had gone out to get some needed things for the dinner, and John put his book aside. He sat forward, and pressing his hands to his forehead, closed his eyes. The thought of his future with Fanny absorbed him completely. His desire for Arizona made pictures of it start up before him — so true, they seemed to have substance and sound: the great spaces; the great canyons; the gorgeous color stains on the wondrous skies that in the stillness of the evening said always, serenely, imperially: "I am eternal. Men come and go beneath me; age replaces age; cities smoulder; seas go dry. I am the same as in the beginning — the eternal skies." He saw himself and Fanny on their horses' backs, pausing to gaze up at the wonder and glory blazing to the rim of the earth. He felt himself draw close to her, his arm going about her as she turned her awed, sweet face to his kiss —

But the dream dissolved sharply. He sprang up as if struck and stood listening. He could have sworn that a voice had called the one word "Fanny!" — a muffled, plaintive call, yet distinct. It was not fancy. The name had been uttered. But the dusk and quiet remained perfect, and he came to the conclusion that since the word had been spoken, it must of course have come from his own lips. There was no other solution. He was masculine and material enough not to relish such unconscious self-surrender to a dream, and self-assertion made him light both lamp and candles. Instantly the reassuring brightness sent his thoughts by force of contrast to the man lying in the dark room. He opened the door cautiously, stepped in, and closed it as softly. After the light the shadow was solid; he saw only bulk.

"Can I do anything for you?" He asked this very quietly. If awake, the man would answer. If asleep, the question was too faint to arouse him.

No reply came. But John remained listening. A little clock ticked in a crisp, busy way. It seemed curiously loud. There was no other faintest vibration in that stillness; listen as he would, there was not a breath from the bed. The clock seemed ticking in a vault. John went out, picked up one of the candles, and standing on the threshold, raised it so that the flame waved from ceiling to floor and played on the bed.

The man was facing the door. He had strained forward, his head sagging over the pillow's edge. One hand was clutching his coat upon the chair. He was smiling and he was dead.

Fanny's bag had been packed since three o'clock. She was in her gray street dress; her outdoor things were ready. She had tried many times to write her farewell to John, but from the vacant paper only a broken phrase stared back at her. At every sound from the hall she had jolted nervously to the door and had stood there, waiting for a knock — Claudia's — Steven's. When it had not come, she had strayed back, her eyes seeking the clock — always seeking the clock that was registering these seconds, solemn with destiny. She had never read a clock's face as she read it this day.

Four struck and five came, and her room continued as heavily quiet as an empty church. There was a seething world, but it was outside her walls and doors. It was her portion to wait, to wait, in stillness, in dumbness. More steps sounded on the stairs; there was more listening at the door. The steps passed on; voices were heard like faint echoes in distance; no one knocked; nothing happened.

By seven o'clock Fanny was tortured with nervousness. Claudia might have been unavoidably delayed for several reasons, but with money to be had for the coming, Steven's absence was confounding. It was, in some way, significant. She felt this. Her thoughts flew about with the wildness of bats in the light, blindly seeking refuge somewhere from vague, threatening evils. The silence and peace of her room, its sequestered quality, began to madden her. Claudia had not come with the money. Steven had not come to get it. And before her was the wrench of lasting renunciation.

Her face was wild. Her twisting hands were the expression of a struggle against hysteria. The four walls seemed closing upon her. She pulled frantically at the door, as if something were behind her that would prevent her escape, and almost fell into the hall. As she bent over the banisters, she could feel her muscles jolting, her knees sinking. By the greatest wrench of her will she beat off the thickness of collapse. Gradually, as sounds floated to her, her brain quieted. Some one on the street laughed. A hand organ at a distance was droning out airs from "The Bohemian Girl." Twangs that told of life came from the violin-maker's rooms. She heard the clang of an ambulance bell.

Instead of growing fainter by distance, this last sound came to a sudden stop on a crashing note outside her own door, or so it seemed. She leaned farther over the banisters, but the darkening street as far as she could see was clear. A line of children began to straggle by, all running, but to something that was beyond her vision. A woman hurriedly entered the hall and ran into Mrs. Murray's; after a moment Fanny saw her return with the dressmaker and they went out; Mrs. Murray wore no hat; they seemed looking at something only a few steps away; after lingering within sight, they moved off saunteringly in the direction that the running children still took. Something had happened — but what did it matter? Claudia had not come. Steven had not come. Fanny began pacing in the narrow space. All the veins in her body seemed to be in her head and over-full of throbbing blood. It must be near eight and still she was alone — waiting — in suspense. Moments like these are more searing to imaginative natures than any other. The most positive evil or sorrow has not the harrowing quality that goes with watching and waiting in loneliness and fear. Human helplessness and terror combine to create shadowy horrors that only the most malignant destiny could inflict.

As Fanny paused in her bewildered pacing, she heard Mrs. Murray and the woman who had sought her, return. They were talking volubly, and she bent down at the head of the stairs to listen.

"You never know!" Mrs. Murray was exclaiming. "T'ch! T'ch! We 're here to-day and in a minute it 's all over. I would n't stop to see him carried into that ambulance for all the Vanderbilts' money — no, thank you!"

"Mrs. Murray?" Fanny called.

She looked up. "Oh, is that you, Mrs. Barrett?" She said good-by to her friend and went up the stairs. "Feeling better?" she asked, peering at her, when close to the top.

"Yes, but I — I felt a little lonely and I came out here."

Mrs. Murray's excitement was evident. She kept looking down at the street. "Did Mr. Cross tell you?" she asked.

"What?"

"Why, a young man — a poor, nice fellow who brought some package or other to Mr. Cross — *died in there.*" She did not notice that Fanny's face became set like wax, while life centered in the eyes with their listening look. "I asked Fergus about it when the ambulance came. He was out on the steps and talking to a policeman. Oh, it was terrible, poor fellow! A nice-looking man, he was, they said, and dressed in nice clothes. He had to lie down in Mr. Cross's. Mr. Cross thought he was asleep in Fergus's bed — but when he looked — there he was — dead!"

"Did he bring books from the custom-house to Mr. Cross?" Such effort was necessary to speak it seemed to Fanny that she had to prod her voice through a wall of lead.

"That was it," Mrs. Murray chirruped. "How did you know?"

"Are you sure that was the man — are you sure — ?"

"Fergus said so. It's made you nervous! I don't wonder — so close to you. I tell you what, Mrs. Barrett, we never know — !"

Mrs. Murray's reflections on the uncertainty of life slipped past Fanny. She murmured something confused as an excuse and shot into her room. Betrayal, danger, seemed already to have descended upon her. Self-preservation was at bay in her. She locked the door and went out on the balcony. The last hint of twilight was gone. Most of the windows opposite, in which people lounged and smoked, remained dark, but both of John's were brilliantly lighted, and yellow flares from them lay like twin motionless searchlights on the dim back-yard and white fence. Fanny dropped to her knees and peeped through the bamboo curtains.

John, and a young man in white linen clothes that she recognized as an ambulance surgeon, were bending over a paper on a table. Farther off, in the shadow of a doorway, she saw the winking of buttons on the coat of a policeman — and once her eyes fell upon him they could not leave him. She felt herself harden and hold in her breath. She lost sense of everything except the terrible consciousness of this man, who moved about with authority and who was there in relation to Steven. When he went out of her sight, into the bedroom, the dread snapped and she fell back against the wall, her hands clutching her knees. She was not aware of making a sound, but a moan of consternation had broken from her and reached Fergus, who, carrying a chair to clear space, had come close to the window. He stepped out cautiously, his face anxious.

"Mrs. Barrett!" he murmured with protective reproof, and lifted her. "Who told you?" he continued, gently pushing her toward her own window. "Mr. Cross hoped you'd not hear of it at all. Go in, Mrs. Barrett, and don't let it worry you. It's not for you to see or think of. A poor fellow it was that just happened to come to the end of his road in Mr. Cross's. That's all. We did what we could for him. But his time had come."

"They say he was the man — who brought books from the customs —"

"So he did. That was him, the poor fellow!"

"Very sick — dark hair with gray — very blue eyes —?" The words in dry jolts scratched her throat.

"That was him, ma'am. Poor soul. He died easy! Just lay down without a word —"

"He did n't talk — with Mr. Cross? You don't know anything —?"

"Not a thing did he say — the creature! He just lay down without a word and went to his sleep."

Fanny made her way back. But she could not remain in her rooms. She felt the need to *see* who would come to her door. She returned to the hall. Her terror changed into a heavy hopelessness. She felt a nonentity in the grip of things. She had loved; had believed herself powerful enough to ignore and forget what lay back of her; had defiantly planned to build a secure and lovely future. And here she was, waiting in cold dread of what might turn the next corner, of what might come up the stairs. The memory of the policeman's buttons winking in the light menaced her. The law, that Terror without personality, supreme, remorseless, had touched Steven and so flung its shadow over her. Like a blown leaf, not knowing from which direction the next rush of the storm would come to scurry it on, she stood there, a gray figure against the gray wall.

There Claudia found her when, close to nine o'clock, she arrived, hurried, anxious and worn-out, after a day that had been full of irritations and delays. Fanny drew her silently into the room, and in whispers, in the darkness, told her what had happened.

"Well, dear," Claudia said, "it's for the best." She kissed Fanny and could feel her shivering. "Fate has taken a helping hand here. Don't you see? When you can forget that Steven came back at all," she murmured comfortingly, "things will be just as they were. You are free!"

She could feel Fanny, in a passionate, decided way, leave her side. She heard her close and lock the window. There was the crackle of a match and she lighted the lamp. Her face was revealed in the light. At sight of it Claudia's heart seemed to turn over — it was so small and peaked and jaded, the strained look of the hunted in the eyes. She came back to Claudia with rapid, small steps, unlike her own, stood close to her, looking over her shoulder toward the locked door.

"I 'm not going to stay here; I feel — I don't know what I feel." The words were a dribbling cry. "If they should find out that he — was Steven — and I here — so close! It 's all different, now. I can't stay. I 'm all ready to go. We 'll lock up; I 'll write Mrs. Murray later and tell her she can have the furniture — all my things." She hurried to where her hat and coat lay across the bag.

As she pinned on her hat, a loud voice, a strange one, was heard in John's room, as if giving some brief, trenchant direction. Fanny paused; her uplifted arms fluttered down. She swayed and grasped the chair.

"The police! They 're there still." She went to the doors and pressed her ear to the division spanned by the huge, rusty bolt. The voice did not come again and she came back feebly to Claudia. "Take me away — now." There was a sound from the hall. Fanny stiffened, her fingers digging into Claudia's arm, her eyes, black and wide in dread, fastened on the door. "Perhaps when we go out — ?" she whispered. Holding fast to each other, like two people preparing to sink together in a wreck, they scarcely breathed.

"What makes you like this?" Claudia ventured to say after a silent, nerve-racking moment. "Try to feel as you did yesterday morning. Things have settled back just as they were then."

"Oh, no — oh, no," Fanny muttered. "I was a happy fool! Hide me wherever you can, Clo. I 've got to go. You can take me — can't you?"

As answer, Claudia kissed her and held up her jacket. "Are you going to write — something — some explanation to Mr. Cross?"

Her mouth twitched. "No, I can't."

Claudia picked up the bag. Fanny had paused by the table to put out the light. It was then that a gentle but distinct knocking sounded on the double doors. A long look of panic hung between them. As the knocking continued, Claudia made a commanding gesture to Fanny to answer it.

"Speak naturally — as if nothing had happened," she whispered.

Fanny went to the doors and lay against them. "Who 's knocking?"

"Jack. To say good night. Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

“I can scarcely hear you. Are you better, dear?”

“Yes, much better.”

“Is your sister still with you?”

“Yes.”

“Let me see you early to-morrow?”

She moved her face hopelessly against the door. “To-morrow!” she said.

“Good night, my darling. I hope you ’ll rest well. Have you missed me — a little?”

“[illegible]y, very much.”

“Good night, then.”

“Good night, Jack.” She spoke clearly for the first time, and then, as the tears came, she pressed her lips to the wood and said without sound, over and over: “Good night, my dear! Oh, Jack, my love, good-by — good-by.”

Claudia came across the room and led her gently away. The lamplight was turned out. Hand in hand they groped through the darkness to the door, into the empty hall, down the stairs rapidly, and into the street, where the shadows soon swallowed them like the other particles of the moving show.

CHAPTER XX

THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY

THE hotel selected by Claudia was one of the enormous, stone battlements near Central Park. She was known there, and was able to overstep its rule against guests without baggage and women alone. One of its big, airy rooms overlooking the Plaza was given to her.

As the cab had rolled up the empty avenue that shone between a double row of lights like the floor of a deserted ballroom, the fear that had subordinated Fanny, bringing her close to prostration, gradually diminished. The acres of streets and later the huge, bright hotel — a world by itself — the precise, immaculate bedroom in leafy, summer cretonnes, and without a touch of any one's personality, all helped to strip reality from the terror that had edged so near her. A husk-like repose settled upon her.

Claudia ordered supper for them both, and Fanny ate a little. She also obediently took a trional powder in a drink of hot milk. It was one o'clock before Claudia, assured that she was sleeping, stole away, meaning to return early in the morning. And the sleep lasted almost three hours, until one of those alarms of the spirit that tear like a storm through the unconscious body, brought Fanny to her elbow, quivering, cold, her look into the darkness a call for help. The day's history had slipped from her. Her eyes searched for the big, double doors with John beyond them. She could not see them! What place was this? And why——? The electric haze that came up from the street had by this time disclosed in a ghostly way the unfamiliar outlines to her. She knew — and the feeling of security that came was planted in pain. What she had come to love was gone forever. She had entered a raw, new block of life. Bereavement deepened into agony, and for hours she lay there facing a horror ahead of her, her arms held out to John, her heart aching for him.

When she could endure her thoughts no longer, she left the tossed bedclothes and went to the window. She was spent; she seemed going out like a guttering candle. It was close to morning and she ached to see the light — to see the comfortable dawn at whose entrance the cruel exaggerations of the darkness would vanish and things appear in sane and simple outlines! And when, kneeling there, the thickness broke into the grays of the morning, their healing, quieting touch passed over Fanny's spirit, filling her gradually with the calm courage that accepts. While the future remained desolate in enduring loneliness, her terror of the previous day seemed hysteria — a childish panic. Sheer fright had so disorganized her that she had scampered like a rat from a sinking ship, leaving everything behind her in disarray.

She shut her eyes upon the mauve and pink creeping up the sky — an introductory orchestration to the sunrise — and took a mental journey into Greenwich Village. In a few hours John would try to see her. She saw Fergus tapping at her windows; later, John calling her through the big doors; Mrs. Murray clicking her thimbled finger on the door in the hall; Piff astonished, inquiring. To all of this knocking, calling, mewing, there would be waiting — silence. Days might pass before that scrap of letter she had begun and forgotten to destroy, would be found. She could see it lying on the table; she could see John lift it. It would be like a broken cry, like a wave of her hand, or the gleam of her flying skirt:

"Dear Jack: — This is to say good-by. When — "

She could see him reading it over and over in stupid pain. She could see him looking about her deserted room, entering his own again, listening still to every step, to every sound, and then brooding again over the bit of paper:

"Dear Jack: — This is to say good-by. When — "

She had not been able to finish that letter. She remembered having reasoned in a loose, perplexed way that the finality of her departure would be the more pointed, if unexplained. After an intermission of days, when she had left New York, and could keep her whereabouts secret, she had meant to write him her last word.

Thinking of this now she winced in a hot feeling of humiliation and remorse. A compassion for John that stood out curiously clear of every other emotion, pierced her. Herself forgotten, she saw only him, and she defended him against herself. He had been unfairly treated. She had turned the screw unnecessarily. The situation between them was different from what it had been, earlier, when she had meant to go away abruptly with Claudia. By promise their lives had passed into each other's keeping. For her to disappear as she had planned was nothing but cold robbery of her lover's rights. She had crawled out of a desperate situation in a wholly selfish, ignoble way.

The silver sun, set in shafts of glory, sailed into view. It changed the high buildings to hills of snow and the windows to oblong jewels. Fanny drank life from it. Her face was lifted, etherealized, and stamped with a new resolution.

The clocks belonging to one of the many small churches in Greenwich Village were striking nine.

Fanny stepped from a Sixth Avenue car and went down the street whose turning would take her close to her home. It had seemed very early when, but a short time before, she had her coffee in the hotel's dining-room; she had been almost alone in the big, shady place where the waiters, without the professional dignity with which they would later plaster themselves, were wheeling about wagonettes of drenched, wet roses and filling the table vases. She had found Fifth Avenue only rubbing its eyes; the shops just opening everywhere. But this remote section of the town was already as busy as a village at noontime.

The new peace continued with her. She was not afraid. Even here, the spot where Steven had passed so recently — a menace, a tragedy, a burning memory — the city seemed her friend. She meant to go to her own rooms first, discover if her absence had been noticed, feed Piff if he were in sight, and when the day was started in this orderly manner, have John come to her, and for the last time. She had left a carefully worded letter for Claudia at the hotel, saying where she had gone and that she would return during the morning. She felt a new mastery of the situation and a strength to do bravely what must be done.

To reach her own house she would have to pass John's. As she neared it, the thought that she was to see him again shivered her calm into a joy that was a strange compound of despair, unselfishness, and desperation. It made her thankful to Fate that he had come into her life at all, though she was to pay dearly for that happiness. She was a beggar gladdened by food for the moment, though conscious of hungry to-morrows. There was tumult in her heart-beats; her cheeks burned to the air. In a sadness that was glad, and a gladness that was sad, she hurried on.

When only a dozen yards from the house, Fergus appeared on his own steps. He stood still, and she saw that his look up and down the street was a nervous one. When his eyes fell on her, his whole long body twitched, as if the sight of her had flung him completely off his balance. Then followed a startling thing, during which she could not speak or resist. He lunged toward her, his face hardened to a fierce tensity, and without a word thrust his arm under hers, propelling her forward so rapidly she was fairly swung up the steps and into John's house. Even in the lower hall he would not let her pause. At that she did try to forcibly draw back.

"What is this, Fergus?" she demanded.

"Don't speak at all, ma'am!" he urged in a whisper. "Be quiet and quick. Step up here into this turn, where you can't be seen from the street."

He whisked her to the angle by the turn of the stairs, just below John's rooms, and placed himself so that he shielded her, yet by a glance backward could see the street door. The sweat was stippled upon his face; his big, hairy hands kept opening and closing.

"You should n't have come back, Mrs. Barrett — not in the daytime. 'T would have been best to let Mr. Cross know where to find you — but, oh, you should n't have come back!" At the drifting up of a sound, he twisted his head to look at the door.

Fanny had sickened. She knew what was near her. Its cold breath, its shadow were upon her. "Tell me exactly."

"It was in the morning paper — all about who the man was — the man who died. And you did n't see it?"

"It said more than that," she declared, in a distraught whisper.

"Just who he was, ma'am," Fergus insisted, "was all that was published." He looked away from her. "But we heard afterward that a letter had been found in his pocket — 't was to a friend of his in Colorado and was all ready to post. And there it told — "

"About me," she said, as he stopped.

"About his chancing upon you here, ma'am — and who you were — and the money he was to get from you." His eyes were full of tears as he turned pleadingly to her. "And so, you see, Mrs. Barrett, you must n't go into your own place, for the man is there now — "

"A detective?" She knew that she had asked this clearly, and yet the harsh word hurt her as if some one else had unexpectedly spoken it.

"'T was him that told about you," Fergus nodded. "He came very early this morning. When he got no answer, he had your door quietly opened. He came out on the balcony. He talked first to me and then to Mr. Cross. No one else knows as yet." He had been speaking rapidly, with sharp lunges of his head toward the doorway. "Now you see why you can't go home? Stay here quiet, just a minute, ma'am, till I make sure that all 's safe."

She stayed quiet. All but her mind seemed to have died. A gray figure against a gray wall, she waited as before, but this time there was not the mercy of a doubt to help her. Her hands were open and as heavy as stones; the curves of her face had gone into lines. She was gazing at a vision: This was a narrow, barred door. An oblong space scooped out of whitewashed stone was seen dimly through it; there was a pallet in the space, a basin with a faucet, a candle on a stool; on the door there was a big square of pasteboard with a number printed upon it. So clear was every detail the unmistakeable prison smell accompanied the picture — that soul-deadening mixture of damp, chilliness, of stone and iron, whitewash and disinfectants.

"Oh," she sighed. "Oh, oh!" It was the feeble protest of one aghast.

Her hands were jolting up to her face when they were sharply caught. John was bending over her. He almost lifted her, as in silence he drew her up and into his room. The door closed, he took her into his arms. The ground was sliding from beneath her feet.

"Now — you know!" she said. The words had a downward, sighing, final note.

"My poor Fanny!" His gaze was a thing to rest in. When she would have spoken, he crushed her mouth against his heart. "Don't speak now," he whispered, his lips upon her ear. "But don't be afraid, dear. Try not to be afraid."

CHAPTER XXI

PLANS

FERGUS was sent to watch the street. John locked his door. He drew Fanny to the corner farthest from her own room and the closed, shaded windows. Her heart was beating in the sharp, crowding way that accompanies fright, when the approach of danger is watched and resistance to it has turned into a frenzied instinct. John's room had become her city of refuge. He knew about her, and loved her no less. She surrendered herself to his direction. There was not much to add to what he knew. What was necessary she told him as briefly as possible.

"And this is why you gave me that strange, haunting kiss yesterday, Fanny, and why you cried after it, my darling. No wonder it saddened me all day — made me think of a lovers' parting at the gallows. It was despair, and you thought it a last good-by."

"I meant it so," she said. Her dark, sad gaze was like a perplexed child's. "At first, Jack, after you spoke to me about shutting out ugly memories, I made up my mind never to let you know of my disgrace. I meant to marry you and live in Arizona with you. But my husband's coming back roused me to the dangers about me; in fact, I grew morbidly nervous and afraid. Then I saw that marrying you as I had planned, would be unfair. And so I went away last night, as I did, to spare you — but also to spare myself. When I thought of it all in the still, still dawn, I became so sorry for you, I could n't desert you so. I had to come back to tell you the truth before leaving you." She made a cup of her palms about his face as, sitting before her, he bent close to her. "That it has to be — has to be," she said in bitter wonder.

A defiant contraction touched John's mouth and his brows met sharply. He drew down her hands and clutched them. "You really think that?" he said in a slow, quiet way.

She shrank from the struggle that his look presaged. She had not strength for it. "Oh, don't let us cheat ourselves."

"You really believe that to-day finishes everything between you and me?" he demanded.

"One way — or the other — for if I escape, I shall disentangle my life from yours." The words were determined, though they ran together and thickened on her tongue, though her eyes lingered in deep-reaching love over every bit of his face.

"Disentangle your life from mine," John persisted, a note of curiosity in his voice. He smiled in angry wonder. “You think that's possible?”

“My unlucky life! You must stand clear of it.”

At a sound floating in from her room, they grew rigid, the look of the hunted upon their faces. They did not speak until silence had fallen again.

“I have walked into a trap,” Fanny said, in a small voice of fear.

John held her to him comfortingly and whispered: “No. As long as you got in here without being seen, it was really a clever move. My rooms were thoroughly searched this morning. Besides, the man saw my amazement on finding and reading your unfinished letter to me. He's only in your rooms on the chance of your creeping back to get something or sending a messenger. It won't occur to him that you'd come to me, like this.”

He went to the folding doors and laid his ear against the middle seam. Returning, he answered the steady question of her face with a smile. “All right — heard a paper rustle, smelt his pipe — devilish bad one,” he added. He sat down briskly, took one of her hands and pressed it to his face. “Now, listen, dear. My plan is this: After a while I'll go out on the balcony and speak to the detective. I may even ask him to come in here for a drink — don't be frightened — it would be a wise thing to do. You could hide in the wardrobe in Fergus's room. When I 'd got rid of him again, I 'd go out and get your sister on the telephone and arrange your getting to her after dark. It will all be easily done, you 'll see. I 'm taking charge of you and you have only to obey me."

Fanny had drooped against his arm. She seemed melting away in weakness. A man who meant the Law was but twenty feet away from her, waiting for her. Over and over the picture of this figure marked by menace and patience would swim before her, and everything would drop into dread and chaos. She tried to hold to the determination that had brought her back, but where before it had seemed a strong rope to sustain her, it was now filtering away as if made of mist. John's confident words, the tender touches of his hands, were the real things. She had become as vague as the good-by she had meant to speak.

"You are as my own heart," John was saying. "Never tell me again what you did just now. *We are to keep together.*"

"But the worst may come, Jack." The words were bravely spoken. "Be prepared for it."

"Put that idea away from you. Believe that it won't happen. The chances are all with us. Trust me! In a few weeks you 'll be far away from New York, and I 'll either be with you or preparing to follow you."

She looked at him adoringly yet with bitter regret.

"It is n't fair to you. I know this. Let me do what is right."

"You would n't wilfully rob me? Would you?"

"Rob you . "

"Of yourself."

"But I 'm not worth what you 'd lose. I 'm not, really. Suppose I do get safely away with Claudia and you join me, what comes after? Have you thought of the only sort of life possible to me — hiding — fearing — afraid to take a step out of a routine — afraid of every new place?"

"You are my life," he said in a patient, conclusive way.

"Oh, Jack, Jack, my dear — you 'd always be anxious about me. The life would cramp you, starve you — "

"Why don't you speak of the important thing?" he demanded, with tender, stormy eyes. "This body that I love — these little hands, your eyes, your lips — the you that 's beyond them; the spirit that makes your smile the loveliest thing I 've ever seen; your thoughts; your voice speaking them. The incarnate *you!* My love, my mate, for whom I 'd gladly give my life." He knelt before her and laid tenacious hands upon her shoulders. "These are not words, Fanny," he said, with the throb in his voice that told of depths. "With you, no matter where or how, I 'll have what I must have — to live. The mass of other, smaller things are needless."

He waited for her reply, but no words could have held it. Her eyes were alight in her ghostly face. She bent her head with a sweet gravity and kissed him humbly.

"Let me tell you what I plan for us, my darling," he continued, in a whisper of delight. "Carefully, cleverly, we 'll get out of the States. There are sailing ships that go from here to the other side of the world. In a wandering way we 'll journey till we reach Ceylon. Ceylon! It 's only a word to you, dearest, the name of a far-off place, but it holds everything we need: peace, work, beauty, contentment. And I know one spot well — Kandy. It 's a quiet, beautiful place, among hills. There are big tea plantations around it in which I could buy shares. Woods would shelter us and the sea cut us off. We 'd be happy there. You 'd be safe with me, and never, never be afraid."

Wrapped in each other though they were, watchfulness for a sound that might threaten them was as sensitive as the antennæ of an insect. It was this that drew their eyes to the door leading to the hall, as two rushing steps were heard on the stairs, followed by a faint, rapid knock and then Fergus's voice in an excited whisper.

"Mr. Cross — Mr. Cross!"

John gave Fanny's hands a reassuring crush and opened the door.

Fergus was out of breath. Anxiety and a frantic delight blazed in his eyes. "They 've come, sir — the colonel and Sir Frederic! The cab 's just stopping — !"

John had forgotten them — their coming wiped clean out by the things nearer to his heart.

"What 'll we do, sir?"

There was but one thing to do. Fanny had risen by her chair. Not a word was spoken as John took her hand, drew her to Fergus's room, and without looking at her, so cautiously was his gaze darting from the window to the door, pushed her in and dropped the curtain.

She found herself in a square space lighted by a small window. It was impeccably clean, and like John's, bare and soldierly. An army cot, folded, stood against one wall. The rest of the place was taken up by a table covered with sewing materials, pressing irons, brushes and a heap of clothes.

In a deep angle made by two walls and close to the doorway there was a camp lounging-chair of cane and crash. In this safe little nook, should the curtain be blown or even pushed aside, Fanny could not be seen. She crept in a stealthy way into the chair, leaned her head back and loosely folded her cold hands. The hour was like a violent sea with no rest between the crashing waves. Her senses went into a whirling confusion that was punctuated by one question as if it ticked in the air: "How will it end?"

She heard the visitors arrive. Every sound from the other room was plain, even the softest, spoken word.

CHAPTER XXII

VISITORS

COLONEL ONSLOW was rosy and round-faced, with silky, gray hair that curled a little. One would understand why his intimates had changed his name of Adolphus to "Dolly."

Sir Frederic Cross was tall, bony, serious, reserved. His light gray eyes were cool, sharp and irritatingly contented. There was a resemblance between him and John. The resolution in John's cleanly-moulded face had become intolerance in Sir Frederic's, where every line seemed to have been dug with wires. John's gay, mocking humor, without a sting, coming and going in his smile, had become a settled sneer around his cousin's lips.

Both men, as they were going on to the President's luncheon, were dressed for the afternoon in light gray frock coats, rigidly correct as is the Briton's custom for a "function," whether he is in Belgravia, at the Pole, or the Equator.

As Fergus, saluting, held the door open for them, John's teeth were set. The last time he had seen these men! The pain and pity that had been in his colonel's face; the scorn and hard wrath that had been in his cousin's; the dumb shame in his own. A disorganizing weakness went over him. For a few seconds the room wheeled and he could feel his lips grow cold.

But he was racked by more than the invasion of these scorching memories. This palmy hour, long-desired, was the hour of danger to what he loved best on earth. The men before him were not plainer to his sight than Fanny, hiding; the detective, watching.

All this was inward, violently held under. He stood by the table, smiling, his head up. His visitors, almost as sharply alive as he to the contrast of this meeting against their long-ago parting, were also outwardly composed. All three were Englishmen; out of the set faces their eyes shone in suffusing kindness, there was a fierce, prolonged gripping of hands, but what they *said* was the conventional shield against expressed emotion:

"This is good of you, Jack!" from Sir Frederic.

"Jack, my dear boy!" from the colonel.

"How are you, Fred?" from John. "Colonel, you 've not changed a bit — fit as a fiddle!"

They smoked for a while. Twenty unimportant things were touched upon. Colonel Onslow laughed a great deal — too much to be quite sincere. Not a word had been said of what all were thinking when through the curtains the stocky form of the detective showed upon the balcony. As he hesitated before the window, John excused himself, sprang up and pushed back the long, bamboo strings. He looked frankly, eagerly into the man's face.

"You 've news!" he declared.

The man ducked his head and looked around John's shoulder into the room. "No, I —"

"No news of any sort?" John asked, as if in badly restrained anxiety, his eyes reading the man's face: "Good or bad?"

"No, I heard a lot of talking in here. Just as a matter of business thought I 'd have a look in."

"Oh, that 's all?" John asked absently. "We probably did make a good bit of noise — old friends of mine from England. Do you care to come in and satisfy yourself?" and he held the window-door wide open.

It may have been Sir Frederic's stare through his monocle at him that made the sharp-eyed, podgy little man uncomfortable. He tried to draw himself up assertively but ended by lounging back to Fanny's windows. "All right — don't matter," he said.

John remained where he was, his back to the others until he heard the detective re-enter the other room. His friends, without asking a question, were sharply watching him. They saw that he fell into a chair in a suddenly relaxed way that told of nervous strain, saw his hand shake as he poured out some liquor and drank it.

As they had heard what had been said, John felt some explanation necessary. "There 's been a little trouble in the next house. Detectives are about — watching — every one."

It was then that Sir Frederic broke the ice with a curt, apologetic sound meant for a laugh. "Jack, you know, really, it 's too queer to come upon you in a neighborhood like this! You don't belong to it."

"It 's an old neighborhood and an odd one," said John serenely. "I 'd rather fit into it than into a plate-glassed, steam-heated skyscraper."

"But it 's done for, shabby, no more suggests you than Soho or the Surrey side of the Thames."

"I know what you mean." The mocking mischief of John's smile had returned. "You 're thinking of me as I was — in scarlet and gold. But since those days I 've known worse places than this. Lord! — have n't I!"

Colonel Onslow put down his cigar. His face had been working nervously, its ruddy color grown dim. He reached across the table, and his fingers closed around John's arm.

"That 's it," he said quietly, with trembling force. "But those worse places belong to the past. That 's what we 've come to say: we want you back, and as you used to be." He looked steadily into John's face, where an attentive softness showed. "Do you understand? We *want* you! *England* wants you!" and he held out his hand.

John took it, and in a dreamy voice that came from his heart, and yet somehow contained a denial, he said: "Thank you, Colonel."

"Why do you say it that way?" Sir Frederic asked sharply.

"I mean you 're to come back to the army — to your own regiment," the colonel added.

A long silence followed. Both men could see that while John's open eyes rested on them, he no longer saw them. They thought he was thinking of India, but they were wrong. His consciousness was busy with the barren years, when he trudged sweating and sick through poisonous swamps, and always in the company of a dream. The dream was always the same — it was glorious — and it had come true to-day. In it he was to redeem himself; these two men, so vitally concerned in his life, were to find him, offer to return to him all he had lost; and he was to refuse them. Even in the beginning the wish to right himself just for the doing of it, without reckoning of any sort, had been constantly with him. Every hour since had strengthened this, until to-day it was a fanatical, almost vindictive determination.

"Surely you don't refuse?" Sir Frederic asked at last, slowly.

The soul came back to John's blank eyes and he smiled. "I refuse," he said quietly; "I absolutely refuse."

"But you can't understand!" Colonel Onslow cried out, rising in one of the little, pettish storms of anger remembered so well by John that he felt an inclination to spring up and fling his arm lovingly around his shoulder. "You are to be offered reinstatement. Really," said the colonel, pacing away a few steps, coming back and pettishly tapping his small foot in its perfect boot, "I can't imagine a man in your position, Jack, refusing such a thing unless he were out of his senses — raving!"

"I can't help that, Colonel. The fact remains: you have offered me the greatest thing possible; I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and I cannot take it. I have refused everything of the sort. I refuse — even this."

"Why? Tell me why!"

"My debt was to myself," John said, with a stark sort of simplicity.

"But surely a sincere recognition of — "

"You know I 've paid that debt, Colonel. I know it That 's all I want. Don't urge gifts upon me for it That would spoil it." It was a wonderful moment

Delight was mixed with the sharp flavor of old grief. *His dream had come true.*

Yet he was intensely conscious that Fanny, hearing all this, would believe, no matter what he said, that it was loyalty to her needs which made his decision what it was. Besides, it must be wretched for her to be shut off, alone and nervous. Her sister might come, too, and though Fergus had returned to sentry duty at the street door, he might not be able to keep Mrs. Heath from being seen by a possible watcher. If he could close this interview quickly, he would — although the sight of these men, the words they spoke, were things that made long shut-away feelings sensitize and fairly ache for speech.

"You 'd better give me up, Colonel," he said, laughing and rising. "Give me up as a bad job. Perhaps I *am* a fool. Fools are the most obstinate people on earth. At any rate, you 're going to be in New York for a few days, and we 'll meet as often as you like; so don't let 's talk of this any more, now — "

"What else is there to talk of?" the colonel demanded. "This is what brought me from England — what I 've come to New York to say." He put his hand on John's arm and looked up at him in wonder and trouble. "You 've brooded on all this so long, Jack; it 's made you morbid. Your refusal is a morbid one. It is, believe me. Why, it can't be that you won't let me tell the President at the luncheon to-day that you 're going back to take your old place in the army at home! Jack, tell me I can say that."

Sir Frederic, in a meaning silence, had been studying John closely, had watched the gravity of his face deepen, the increasing signs of nervousness in the moistening of the lips, in the restlessness of hands and eyes.

"No, you must n't say that, Colonel. Nothing can change my decision." John's tone was clear and flat, a hard barrier back of it from which every argument would rebound.

The colonel sat down suddenly with the look of a child near tears. "I 'm disappointed in you," he said; "grievously disappointed."

"But I understand it," Sir Frederic said crisply.

"You do?" the colonel pouted. "Then you 're cleverer than I am."

John was sitting on the edge of the table, a few feet from Sir Frederic, who was tilted back in his chair with arms folded and light eyes narrowed. There was just enough self-sufficiency and judgment in that look to recall to John the last time his cousin had faced him. The thought sent all others whirling. His attention upon him became concentrated and there was violence in it. He wanted these men to go. From every point of view it was wise to bring their visit to an end. But the wish to express himself mounted steadily to his head as strong as inebriety or hysteria. It was Sir Frederic who had spoken the last time; *he* had been mute. During the long years of exile between, he had continued mute. Was he to keep his lips closed now — now when he had the right to speak?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE OLD SCAR

"IT 'S merely this, I think," Sir Frederic said in his sleek yet positive voice; "Jack has been good enough to bury resentment for the old — misfortune. He was never a good hater — far too good-natured for that. But the occurrence has queered us with him, Colonel; has even queered England for him." He saw a dark flush show suddenly on John's face, that passing, left it yellow-pale. He saw the heavy, hard, *remembering* look deepen in his eyes. "It is n't only pride that makes him refuse; he 's lost his taste for us. Is n't that so, Jack?"

"Of course," John said flatly, and straight at his cousin. "I was given a knockout blow in England. That 's sure to dislocate a man's point of view and make him always see crookedly those who have bludgeoned him and the place where the hurt was given." A smile that was reckless, insolent, twitched his face as he looked from one to the other and said with a deep contempt: "And that, my dear cousin, my dear Colonel — is what your court-martial did for *me*."

"Ah," said Sir Frederic nodding slowly, his tone convinced; "you have not forgotten."

"I have not!" said John.

"And you never will."

"I never will!" He sprang up so that he faced the two men. "Putty, or pulp, or stone might come out of such a thing without the impression of it being cut in — burned in — but not nerves and memory." His voice was unsteady. He plunged his hands into his pockets, and in a restive excitement he did not try to control, paced between them. "I have not forgotten," he said grimly. "I have not and never can forget it."

An awkward silence followed, and then Colonel Onslow spoke very softly. "Your sense of fairness ought to come in here and help you, my dear Jack. Your case looked black. Do you mind if I touch on these things?" he asked.

John gave a shrug of permission and sat down in a big, East Indian chair, bending forward, his hands tensely shut.

"I've thought of it so much," the colonel went on, a trembling tenderness in his tone, "and it's been a mystery that has confounded me every time. But in justice I must say I cannot reproach myself for my part in it. On that most unfortunate day of your life, when a most unexpected but — as we afterward learned — carefully and diabolically planned uprising among the natives threatened to wipe us out, you did not obey orders. Your men were waiting for your word to advance — and you did n't speak it. Instead of making for the hill, you never pulled up till you were more than a mile from the spot. The men who had followed you said that when you stopped you seemed stupid — you turned about — you seemed collecting your wits — that you burst into tears like a child — and rode furiously back. You found the dead and the wounded all about you, — the rest of the regiment, what was left of them, returning after the charge."

The big room was so quiet it gave back sighing echoes of the colonel's voice. John, sitting rigidly, was like a man carved out of rock, but with bright eyes that quivered. Sir Frederic, except for a touch of thoughtful regret, might have been sitting in the window of his club on Pall Mall.

"I must say all this as a plea for myself, Jack. You made no defense. Not a word of explanation did you even try to give! You were stolid, hopeless. You were a mute!" The little colonel rose and then sat again sharply, his fist coming down with a jar upon the table. "Why did n't you speak? — tell the truth? If you 'd said —!" He paused and flourished his fingers vaguely.

"Said what?"

"Said you were ill — touched by the sun —"

"I was n't."

"Said something — *anything* — rather than let it be assumed that you were afraid!"

John came out of his graven quiet then. "Ah, but that 's just where the whole incomprehensible misery lay," he said slowly. "I *was* afraid."

Colonel Onslow looked at him pleadingly. A contraction of haughty distaste passed over Sir Frederic's face.

"No, Jack, no," the colonel murmured; "I can never believe that, now. You 've shown that you 're not the stuff that cowards — "

"Coward?" John caught up the word. "For years I never saw my name written without seeing those six letters beside it. It was my title, given me by your court-martial. Every one I 'd known was branding me with it; my cousin broke my sword and directed that I either change my name or kill myself or do both — all because of it. At night I went to sleep with it and it was waiting for me when I awoke. A coward?" He murmured it broodingly. They felt how often he had spoken it over and over to himself, just that way. "Then why did n't I hang myself," he asked, with a violent sharpness that startled them, as he looked from one to the other, "like any white-livered sneak of a Tommy Atkins, found hiding when his comrades were blazing away like soldiers and hell? You want to know. I 'll tell you!" He stood up and gently tapped his forehead. "Because here I had my answer. Every time I said I was a coward, I was told 'No — no — *no!*' Do you see?" He was a little beside himself as he flung back his head with a loud, light-hearted laugh. "No, my good Colonel! No, my noble cousin! And this is where I do question you both, and others like you. I am a case in point. When a man does what I did, no other evidence of cowardice ever having touched him, he 's done for. You break him. You send him home in disgrace."

"Naturally, as you did not show that it was something for which you were not responsible, sickness — " Sir Frederic began, in a crisp tone of self-defense.

"But it should have been considered just that — " John broke in hotly; "something for which I was *not* responsible — sickness!"

"You say it was — fear," came confusedly from the colonel.

"Why should all sickness be considered of the body? Why must the attack that cripples always be supposed to come from material things? What of the will — the spirit — the incomprehensible part of us? Is that immune from a malady? I was afraid that day, I tell you, but how, or why, I don't know. I had never known the feeling before. I 've never felt its brassy taste in my mouth since. But just for a flash, an overpowering love of life with a terrifying certainty that death was but a few yards from me, came down on me as if the mountains had crashed upon my head. I became jelly without a will — "

"But," said Sir Frederic blandly, "you rode away — "

"Without knowing it — I swear this! When the paralysis had passed, I was aghast. I went back for a chance to fight; I 'd have been glad to die. My God," he said, the old, wild confusion and distress in his face, "I was n't given the chance!"

"You should have said this then!" the colonel exclaimed furiously.

"Who 'd have believed me? A coward trying to crawl out of a situation he could n't justify! You had your hard and fast rules; I 'd broken them. Besides, I was too dazed to grope for some reason, some defense. Clear understanding did n't come till afterward, and very slowly, as I grew to know myself, as I squared my account with myself." John went to the table and pressed his palms upon it. His serious eyes looked without rancor at his listeners. When he spoke, his voice had a winning, reasoning note:

"Courage and fear are supposed to be as far apart as the poles. But they 're not. They lie close — oh, very close — in the mind of a man! A hair's breadth can divide them — one, electrical second. The balance is a delicate and a dreadful one. I 've been damned for cowardice and praised for bravery, so I know. The brave man goes on, shaking with fear; you 've done it yourselves! Well, if he masters the fear, well and good; if it throws him for just a moment, he 's lost. The difference is so little sometimes, it could dance on a needle's point, but the consequences — *you know what they are!*"

His next words were so slow, tender and solemn, the two who heard them were to think of them often. "Constitutional cowardice is one thing, and the informed military intelligence should be able to detect it; but the quick contempt and ruthless judgment for the first attack of fear in a young soldier are brutal — wrong. Clean through they 're wrong! And future years will do away with this fanatical intolerance."

With these words John cast off old memories. His smile was bright. His pale face flashed with affection. "Well, we 've had it all out," he said. He shook hands with the colonel and then with his cousin. "You did what you had to do and what you thought right; the *system* that makes such a thing right is what I hate, not you. Besides, I did n't go under in spite of it. I 'm glad I 'm alive, and I 've a future that attracts me. Don't take it ill because it is n't the future you offer." He looked at them with such kind, candid eyes they both recalled him as a boy. "I 've said some things that were bitter; that was to be expected. But I 'm glad I 've seen you, and I thank you from my heart."

The disappointment on the faces of his visitors was flagrant. They could not understand him. An Englishman — and able to do without England when he might return, rehabilitated. An officer — and not eager to seize the rank that had been taken from him, ruthlessly, as he had said. They were plainly wounded and perplexed until the colonel's next words awoke the exile's craving in John's heart:

"But England, Jack?" He came close to John, and big tears rolled down his face. "No matter what the rest of the world gives to an Englishman, England has something that 's all her own. We ache for it as we broil in India. We build shacks in the snow in northwest Canada, aching for it. We prosper elsewhere, perhaps marry, rear families elsewhere, but we [illegible] get *that* — the something that is England." He put one arm around John, a little lower than his shoulders, as he could not quite reach them. "Don't you see it? Don't you feel it?"

"I do, I do," said John, with the wistfulness of a homesick schoolboy.

"Devon — your old home?"

"Yes. It 's here, in the room. Colonel, I see it."

"And London? There 's only one London —!"

John's arm shot out and he gripped the colonel's shoulder. "Don't you believe that I 've sickened for London? Why, often on the ground near the rice swamps — out there — in the greasy broil — I 've closed my eyes and rolled in hansoms along by St. James Park where the Tommies were drilling and bugling — on to Piccadilly and the crush — into the little, twisting streets of Mayfair with the window-boxes full of flowers. I 've smelled it as I smell it now — the smoky air churned over and over till it 's dead and thick. I 've heard the bells pealing from St. Martin's. I 've bathed and dressed at the club and gone on to dinner in the long twilight. Only one London! Ah — ha — you 're right there! She has n't missed me from her millions, but I 've ached through me, many a time, at the thought of the thousands of miles that stretched between us." He did not know how his longing made every ringing word tell. "And now believe this!" he said. "Although it will be a long time before I see England, *I 'm just as much an Englishman as you are.* No matter what another country may mean to me, England is *home.*"

They were gone. John was standing with the handle of the door in his hand, the dreaminess still in his gaze. He was about to turn the key, and then cross to Fergus's room to bring Fanny out, when the curtains shook and she stood before him.

"I —" he began, but her look silenced him.

Her eyes blazed like stars in her chalk-white face; they were a fanatic's. Her smile held a raging triumph — both greeting and farewell.

"Fanny?" The word came stumblingly from John. He went toward her, but she moved quickly so that the table was between them.

She stood there, quivering, commanding. She was a flame; a sword. "You 're going back to England, Jack!" she called out, in a high, ringing tone that seemed to detach itself from her and quiver like a separate entity between them. "You are going back! *To England! To the Army!*"

Fear had puckered his heart. "Be careful. Speak quietly." This was all he could say in a low, shaken voice, but with fury in it.

The bright, anomalistic triumph persisted in Fanny's long gaze. She wheeled with a startling unexpectedness and beat upon the big doors with the knuckles of both fists — a loud summons. "I 've had it out with myself," she said fiercely, as she turned and rested against them. "In there —" she pointed to the room she had left, "everything became clear and simple. You are going home. You are not going to destroy yourself for me. You are going home."

CHAPTER XXIV

"GOOD-BY, MY CAPTAIN"

THE chaos of one demented showed in John's face. When the strain broke, the icy thrill of stark fright crept over him. His gaze darted past Fanny to the floor of the balcony that showed beneath the partially-lowered blind; he seized her by the arms and drew her half-way across the room, distracted commands coming from him in spurts: "Go into the hall — go up a flight of stairs — hide — I'll be able to explain —!"

The detective was already at the window. John's arms fell abjectly. He looked at Fanny with such deep agony and reproach that the tears came in a charging flood and choked her. She flung her arms around him.

"Go back to your beautiful life, dear," she said. "My darling, I could n't take it from you. I could n't rob you of it. Go back to England! You called it home — it *is* your home."

"What have you done, Fanny? What have you done?" he murmured hopelessly, tightening his arms about her.

The detective was now in the room, by the window. His tongue was silent, his eyes doing duty for both. He was willing to wait for the explanation to come, the nature of which he clearly foresaw. Meanwhile his right hand had fastened on something in the pocket of his coat.

"Don't look at me that way, Jack," Fanny pleaded in choking whispers. "Don't be sorry for me. I saw it all so clearly, suddenly, as I listened to your colonel and your cousin. Dearest, that 's the life to which you belong. If I 'd not come across your path to hamper you, you 'd have rejoiced to-day. Your own country, Jack! Your old regiment! Oh, do you think I could let you give them up for me, to hide and suffer with me? I could n't. I love you too much." She shook John's arms frantically, her look fairly calling for life to come to the still, gray face that drooped over her. "It would n't have been fair! And I 'd always have been afraid that one day I 'd see the regret in your face. Jack," and she smiled, "you may not believe it — but it 's true — *I want to go back.* Let me finish it — have done with it," she cried. "The law made a mistake, but I can't help that. The only thing I can do is to pay what they 've said I must pay — *pay, and be free!* Really," she said, her swimming eyes full of glory, "I 'm happier, now that I 've made up my mind to this, than I 've been since I escaped. Two years —

perhaps a little more — they 'll soon pass. And when they 're over — ? " she faltered.

The detective had crossed the room and stood only a few feet from them.

" When they 're over ? " John repeated, in the dumb pain that still paralyzed him.

" Oh," she sighed, and clung to him as if her body were drowning with her soul, " will I see you then ? Will I see you then ? "

His answer was a look of worship that plunged into her, and then he kissed her. When anguish, passion, tenderness, pity and long farewell join forces in a kiss, the spirit tastes death. Such a kiss was John's.

" Good-by, my Captain ! " Fanny said in rapturous despair. She turned unsteadily, John's arms still about her, and met the waiting, currant-like eyes of the detective. " I am Mrs. Barrett. Take me, please."

CHAPTER XXV

THE PETITIONER

A DOGGING apprehension hung about Claudia from the moment she discovered that Fanny had left the hotel and ventured back into the old neighborhood. She dared not follow her. She thought it unwise to wait at the hotel where she was so conspicuously known. Her alarm was only of a cloudy sort, as the small paragraph in the morning paper, disclosing King's identity, had not been seen by her. She was more irritated than afraid, yet so nervous in her longing to have Fanny safely settled at Jamestown, that she found herself crying like a thwarted child.

She hurried home. The telephone focused her attention. Over that the next message from Fanny would come. After having herself made ready for a large luncheon that Esray had arranged to give to the visiting prince at Sherry's, she dismissed her maid, shut all the doors of her own rooms, and sat down to wait close to the small table where the telephone stood.

But the silence continued here as in the rest of the empty, shadowy house. Her thoughts would whip her up to the window; to the door; back to the telephone. As the time passed, she began to wonder if she could keep her engagement with Esray. Unless she heard satisfactorily from Fanny, she could not go. There are some things that the most perfect worldly training cannot carry us through, and Esray's luncheon, while she was in this heating and chilling anxiety about her sister, represented a rank impossibility to Claudia.

She was due at Sherry's at a quarter to two. It was almost half-past one when the telephone's bell rasped through the room. She jolted in every muscle and lurched toward it, its clangor seeming to come from her own pulled nerves. The voice she heard was strange to her.

"This is Mrs. Heath's house? Ask her to come to the 'phone, please."

It was an Englishman who spoke. She knew it was John Cross, and tried not to be frightened.

"This is Mrs. Heath, speaking."

"This is John Cross."

"Yes?"

There was a pause, and then: "I 'm sorry to have to distress you," said the guarded voice that for all its control had a hard quiver in it.

"Fanny —?" It was a breath over lips that seemed turned to ashes.

"Has been — been found — taken —"

"Oh, oh!"

"Can you come to her at once?"

"Yes — yes, I will. Where —?"

"Everything's been done very quietly. No one in the neighborhood knew exactly what happened. Your identity need not be suspected. I'm telephoning you from a public place. So far there's a chance of keeping it out of the papers. Come down at once to Police Headquarters —"

"Oh!" she moaned. *"There!"*

He gave the address and added: "Come by the elevated train and quietly dressed. Don't delay. I'll go back to Fanny and wait for you. Good-by."

The chiffon gown that she wore had to be changed to a dark, linen walking suit. As her maid obeyed her quiet, rapid directions, while wondering at her mask-like face, she scrawled in unsteady writing this note to Esray:

> "I cannot come. Fanny has been hiding in New York for months. I had leased a cottage in Jamestown and meant to put her there, but to-day she was arrested and is now at Police Headquarters. I'm going to her. The utmost care will be taken to keep everything quiet and I hope it will be successful. You will want to see me afterward. I'll come back as soon as I can."

She sealed this and sent it to Sherry's by a footman. A cab took her to the elevated train and as soon as might be she was mounting the steps of the strange and ominous building. A man in gray, pacing nervously just within, stepped over the doorway to her. Even through the distorting mesh of her veil she saw how distress had marked him — his exhausted face, wild eyes and trembling hands.

He lifted his hat but did not speak her name. "Fanny is with the matron. I 'm going to see if something can't be done." His voice was fagged, with a distracted harshness running through it.

"You have a plan, Mr. Cross?" Claudia asked, swaying before him. "There 's hope —?"

"A chance," he said, as he helped her to rest against the railing. "Just — one — chance." The words were difficult, his lips almost shut.

He hurried to a cab, waiting. Claudia was left looking after him, the appeal of the humbled in her eyes. This was her introduction to the man who had been the object of her intolerance and mockery. Truly at times life feeds us the bitter bread that makes for wisdom.

No one at the Waldorf seemed to know that the President was lunching there. Blank faces, shrugs, noncommittal replies met John's questions. They thought him a newspaper interviewer.

"Friends of mine are lunching with him," John insisted.

The Swiss and German clerks, who had the composure of princes, almost smiled at this. They looked at his damp hair, wilted côllar, his eyes bloodshot like a spent runner's. They continued their shrugs.

"I 'm not asking to be allowed to go to the President," John said courteously, as courtesy was wise, and subduing the frenzied longing to rush roughshod over these liars who delayed him even by a moment. "But he is here, and this card must be sent to him at once." He wrote around his name: "Craves a few moments with the President on a most vital matter — every moment precious."

The middlemen capitulated sufficiently to dispatch this by a messenger, while eyeing him curiously as he paced before them. Five minutes, so long they seemed a misnamed hour, went by, before a clerical-faced, slim young man came to him. This was the President's secretary.

"The President will see you. Please come this way," he said, and John, followed by a mild stare from the sceptical princes, went with him into a white and gold elevator.

"Is the President still at luncheon?" John asked. He shrank from facing the others, particularly the colonel and his cousin.

"It 's almost over. The President will see you for a few moments in the room adjoining," the polite young man said, and after a walk of many turns left him in the silent, crimson parlor of a suite.

Newspapers, hats and canes were strewn about there. Men's voices and laughter came from beyond the closed door. The scene was plain to John, yet remote, for his mind was flaming with the picture of Fanny going out of the sun and liberty, giving herself exaltedly to Injustice that he might be able to soar.

When out of his staggering pain and black despair the thought had come to him that he might go to the President and beg as a favor for Fanny's sake the reward he had flouted for himself, it had seemed God-given. Not for a second had he weighed it, nor analyzed it, nor hesitated about it. He had seized upon it with the talons of his agony. He thought nothing of the fact that by it he was effacing the deep, dear wish for stark independence demanded by his rooted pride and the resentment of his healed self-respect. What did these things matter? Humbling himself had not the toothed-edge that under any other conditions would have made it painful. What did his pride matter — or the President — or the whole unimportant earth? He could keep Fanny from prison — or he could not. Life had resolved itself into these two facts, and before their blinding strength nothing else could exist. So great griefs neutralize small ones. When the wind of misfortune has emptied the heart, who cares that a stray leaf left to blow across it is faded or dead? Who cares?

When the President entered, there was the briefest glimpse of men, smoke and flowers behind him. He closed the door sharply and came impulsively toward John, his hand held out like a comrade's.

"Mr. Cross, I 'm glad at last —" He stopped. His smiling eyes grew suddenly serious and went into narrow, gleaming lines.

John's hand met his in silence. He stood like a rock, but with quivering lips, the film of blood upon his sight.

"You 're in trouble," the President said, with the emphatic concern that implies helpfulness.

"Great trouble, sir," John replied in a thick, sore tone. "I 'm sorry I had to disturb you, but it was n't a matter to wait."

"That 's all right. Don't think about that. What 's the matter? You look pretty desperate."

"I am. I 'm beside myself — I feel insane." He controlled himself so that his voice was muffled, but the sweat ran down his face, his hands twitched and his bloodshot eyes were wild. "You said, sir, that you 'd like to do something for me. In your last, very kind letter you said you were sorry that I had refused —"

"I was. You made it very clear that talk of recognition, promotion, were fairly disagreeable —"

"Not now!" John broke in, such anguish in the words it hurt to hear it. "Not now, sir. I want something from you now."

"I 'm glad to hear it."

"It 's not any of the things you imagine — something very different and very, very great. Will you give it to me?"

"If I can," the President said, the words as telling as a bullet on its way, "I will."

"Mr. President, I want to keep the woman I love from being sent back to prison. It was a crime to put her there in the first place. I want that woman's pardon." This was a whisper of terrified prayer. "Give me that. Give me that. If you 'll listen while I sketch the bare outlines of the story, sir, you 'll see why I ask you; and then if you 'll come with me to her, I know you 'll be convinced. Help me!" John ended piteously — the cry of a drowning man. "I am here, a beggar."

The President sat down and pointed to a chair. "It won't take very long," he said kindly, yet with business-like crispness. "Sit down, Mr. Cross, and tell me about it."

CHAPTER XXVI

MISS ONDERDONK'S DAY

A NOVEMBER morning. The people were housed in Greenwich Village. Preciseness and quiet hung over it. The bright sun and sharp, high winds made it seem very much like the March day on which Fanny had come to live in the parlor of the old house.

Miss Onderdonk was thinking of that day as a cab carried her from Washington Square, westward across Sixth Avenue, still westward along Waverly Place and so on, to the very heart of the tangle of streets. But when the driver checked his horse, she made a twittering motion of confusion with her head and blinked questioningly from the window. Could this be her old home? It was not as she remembered it. The street, too, seemed different. Could things have changed so in scarcely three years? Or was the change in herself? That must be it, for she had seen some of the world's wonders since, and it was probably her enlarged vision that made the once shy little street seem so defiantly dingy and the old house so patiently sad.

Her new drab silk gave out a crisp rustle as she stepped from the cab. She told the driver to wait. First she would find Mrs. Murray. She had thought often of the hard-working little dressmaker who had loved poetry and flowers and music. She would hear the news of the place from her first, and then go up to her old rooms and see the reticent stranger with the lovely, sad face and dreaming eyes, for whom, in imagination, she had often since coined a dozen different histories.

Mrs. Murray's business sign and sheet of colored fashions were not in the first floor window. Perhaps she was now sufficiently popular to be conservative. Conservative, too, was the closed door of her room that used to stand half open in a neighborly fashion. Nevertheless, Miss Onderdonk felt a cosy feeling of anticipation as she knocked. She drew back as the door was opened unwillingly and she saw a stranger — a tall, old woman in black, her gray head held high, a quaint silk pelisse drawn around her, her hands guarded by old, black kid gloves. To Miss Onderdonk's inquiry for Mrs. Murray she shrugged, replied languidly in French that she did not know the person, begged her pardon, and politely shut her out.

There was less spring to Miss Onderdonk's step as she went up the stairs to the parlor floor. By a wave of light that flowed down to her, she knew the familiar door into the hall must be standing open; a little nearer and a swashing sound to the lilt of "Under the Bamboo Tree" reached her. At the top of the stairs she came to a standstill. The big room was empty; painters and kalsominers stood on planks and ladders, their busy brushes flapping like wet, landed fish. The men paid no attention to her, the song continued, and she stood looking dreamily in at the roomy oblong where eleven years of her life had been spent. The chilliness and strangeness of the sight were completed by the fact that the dividing doors, whose dark, ancient shine had made one of the happy touches of the room, had been pushed back, showing that what had been John Cross's home was also vacant except for the same white, overalled men with their swaying arms.

Ah, no wonder the old house from the outside had seemed changed. It *was* changed! The soul had gone out of it. She had not noticed if the old violin maker's instruments still filled the long front windows upon the balcony. Was he, too, gone? She felt a touch of hysterical relief when, at her fluttering knock, his door was pulled back and he was before her, beaming, his spectacles pushed up on his forehead. He drew them into place, peered at her, and gave a long, clucking sound of delight:

"So-o-o-o? My good friend! So well, so fine, so grand! *Wilkommen!*"

"Oh, Mr. Freitag, I'm glad *you're* here," Miss

Onderdonk said, her twilighty smile going over her gentle face.

He ushered her to a seat among the big 'cellos standing at fatigued angles against the walls. In a few moments she was sharing his ten o'clock coffee with him — ink-black it was and frothy with a ripe, yellow cream — while from a corner of the spacious room came, like a fitting accompaniment to their reminiscent talk, a workman's "tap-tap" on resonant wood and occasionally a deep, sad "plung." Miss Onderdonk spoke briefly of herself; told of her life in California with her rich aunt, and that she was now on her way to Europe with her.

"We 're at the Holland House," she said, stirring the creamy coffee that her delicate nerves warned her against drinking, "and I could n't resist tearing down here for a peep at the old place. But oh, Mr. Freitag, I feel like Rip Van Winkle after the twenty years' sleep. Where has everybody gone? — Mrs. Murray? — and the pretty woman who took my rooms? — and the Englishman next door? Strange that all should have vanished. Do you know anything about them?"

Oh, yes, he knew a great deal, and yet — somehow — not all there was to know, of that he felt sure. He talked for twenty minutes — hands going, head moving, forefinger touching her now and then, confidentially. From his German-streaked English she gained the following facts:

Mrs. Barrett had become friends with the English soldier. The Irish servant used to do her marketing as he did his master's. He had seen Mr. Cross visit her several times. She had only one other visitor that he had ever seen — a lady — and oh, very nice! Her face he did not know because of her veil, but her walk! Never had Mr. Freitag seen a walk so beautiful!

"As a swan swims — so she walked," he cried, making undulating movements with his hands. Mrs. Murray was his authority that this lady's dresses were very wonderful and expensive, and that she must be very rich. "Paris," Mrs. Murray had said, "Paris is streaked all over her like butter on bread. She 's the Rue de la Paix and Paquin and the styles from 'Chic Parisien' all rolled into one!" He did not know this, himself. But certain it was that a perfume as if from ghosts of flowers was left in the hall a long time after she had passed through. Then — suddenly one day — everything was disturbed.

"Pish!" cried Mr. Freitag. "It was like all going into a boiling pot together. First it was a man who died suddenly in Mr. Cross's place — just a stranger, a poor fellow who brought some package there, you understand? Next morning we read in the paper how he had been a swindler — confidence man — and all such things, and that the police had thought him dead. Well," he shrugged, "then began the funny things — which I do not know — nor why — but I will tell you just what I see and hear. Next day, just after I am reading in the paper what I told you, comes a man and gets the janitor to open Mrs. Barrett's door. Why to open it?" He even touched Miss Onderdonk's knee excitedly. "*She has gone!* Where?" He gave a huge, helpless shrug. "No one knows — not even Mrs. Murray — not even Mr. Cross. Without a word, she has gone! So I hear! The man hangs around. Everything is quiet. I see nothing, till along at about twelve o'clock that morning comes Mrs. Murray into me, here, all excited. A cab had come to Mr. Cross's door. And had I seen who went away in it? No, I had not seen — I was busy with my eating. Then she tells me that Mrs. Barrett went away in it with Mr. Cross and the strange man who had been hanging around. She must have come back that morning and gone into Mr. Cross's — and what do I make of it all? I make nothing! Then Mrs. Murray goes on something fierce — hugs herself and dances even! She feels sure it means a *secret marriage;* that the man who had been hanging around had been a cruel relation that Mrs. Barrett was scared of, and because of him she had always kept her door locked — but that she had given him the slip, and had married Mr. Cross and then snapped her fingers at him. This is Mrs. Murray. But me, I don't know."

"Oh," said Miss Onderdonk, still stirring the coffee that had grown cold, "how adorable! I felt sure from the moment I saw Mrs. Barrett that something romantic would happen."

"Wait," cried Mr. Freitag. "More comes yet. Fergus — the Irish — he stays here all alone. He locks up Mrs. Barrett's rooms. He don't say a word about what is, or why — but he looks very sick."

"Did you like him?" asked Miss Onderdonk.

"Him?" cried Mr. Freitag. "Fergus? He was the nicest Irish that I ever know! Well, he says nothing. If Mr. Cross comes again I do not see him. Mrs. Barrett I know does *not* any more come up those stairs. What has happened I do not know, but finished it surely is."

Mr. Freitag sat back and waved his arms slowly to express a lapse of time. "It is," he continued in a hushed voice, "perhaps a month when a beautiful automobile stops here at my door. 'Gott!' I cried to Gus, 'is it a princess who comes to me to have me try to pick up a Strad or an Amati for her somewhere?' I am as excited as Mrs. Murray was the other time. But the princess was not for me; she disappeared into the house. After an hour I see her come out, step into the automobile and disappear. Out in the hall I hear a noise like a fire and in Mrs. Murray rushes. She throws her arms around me and kisses me." He nods violently. "Sure she does — *kisses* me! — and this is what she tells me. The 'princess' is Mrs. Barrett's sister. She was getting a divorce from her rich husband and was going to start a magnificent business, to have made such dresses as was never before — *wunderschön!* She comes to ask Mrs. Murray to be her manager and have a share of the profits. I am still all surprise when there is again a noise in the hall like another fire; and now it is Fergus and he is dressed like the wax figures in the tailor stores on Broadway! Why is this? I will tell you. He is going straight up to Grace Church where Mrs. Barrett and Mr. Cross are going to get married that very day — *not before,* you see? — so what all meant then, I do not know! And then Mrs. Murray say that the lady in the automobile was also going to the wedding and that she had said Mrs. Barrett wanted Mrs. Murray to be sure to come, too. And so, after she and Fergus both talk — *mein Gott!* — until my ears wiggle like St. Vitus! — then Mrs. Murray rushes off to put on her Sunday clothes. Like crazy with joy she is."

He sat back, fell into silence, and concluded with a touch of delicate melancholy: "Two weeks more and all are gone! Since then people have moved in and out. Next week a kindergarten opens in the two back parlors. Ah, what will you? It is life. To grow old is to see changes — as the sea upon the sands of the shore!"

"I don't suppose you know where Mrs. Murray is now?" Miss Onderdonk asked.

Mr. Freitag made an impressive gesture of assurance, took a large, glazed card from a desk and handed it to her. One word ran across the center: "Seraphina." An address and a telephone number, very small, were in the lower, left-hand corner.

"Seraphina?" Miss Onderdonk asked, puzzled.

"That," said Mr. Freitag, with such a laugh as one gives at the grown-up antics of a child, "is the decoration of the late Mrs. Murray. What do you think — hey?"

When Miss Onderdonk said good-by to him, she added: "I 'll see you, surely, when I come back from Europe next year, as I pass through New York."

"Perhaps." He took her gray-gloved hand in both of his and gently patted it. "Perhaps, my friend."

"But you 'll always be faithful to the old house, won't you?"

"To the end!"

The spirit of adventure was so strong still in Miss Onderdonk that she was in a nervous flutter until her cab set her down before a smart house in the Fifties, near Fifth Avenue. Nothing hinted that it was not an exclusive home except the small brass plate on one of the gate-posts that bore the word "Seraphina" in unobtrusive lettering. She was admitted by a handsome young footman, who passed her to another, and he to a tall, black-satined woman who looked at Miss Onderdonk in her new drab silk as if she felt a gentle sorrow for her, and who "feared — greatly feared — that it would be impossible to see Seraphina without an appointment." However, she sent up Miss Onderdonk's card and permitted her to wait in a room rich with ancient, rose brocade and old French furniture of ivory-tinted wood and cane. From here she could see the twisting stairway in the shaded, middle hall, and this she watched as a child does a magic lantern, expectant of what would come down those stairs to meet her. From her simple standpoint, she was having a fascinating experience. And at last a figure did float slowly down the stairs. Having gained the floor, it seemed to move without feet to Miss Onderdonk, until the light through the yellow lace fell upon it.

"Mrs. — Murray?" Miss Onderdonk faltered.

"S'sh!" she said imperiously and gave a cautious look over her shoulder toward the black-satined woman who lingered in the hall. She extended one hand as if she were flabbily discarding it, having no possible interest in it. "Howda?" she cooed. "S'awfully sweet of you, muhda!"

Miss Onderdonk began slowly to take her in. Her hair, that had always suggested wads of ink-black satin, had lost its heavy wave and was built into a gossamer, puffy structure; her skin was of a solid, creamy whiteness; she wore a little fleck of black plaster near the corner of a mouth that was redder than it used to be. She was wrapped — not dressed — in a smoke-colored chiffon, so limp it seemed damp; hoops of big, rough pearls dangled from her ears; a pound of gold clanked from a chain at her waist in the shape of vanity box, memorandum book, pencil, etc. She was Mrs. Murray, yet no more as she had been than a diamond is the carbon, a book the paper and rags that went to its making. A disappointed, lonesome feeling went over Miss Onderdonk and intensified, as Mrs. Murray let fall a few colorless sentences in an accent meant to be English but which was sometimes hybrid and fearful.

"Have n't we been having the most frightful wawther? First sunny day in weeks." Here she gave a look over her shoulder at the black-satined figure that still hovered outside, apparently busy at something.

"Mr. Freitag told me where I'd find you," Miss Onderdonk said limply.

"Rawly?" said Mrs. Murray, and looked over her shoulder again.

The head of the loiterer could be seen disappearing down a short flight of stairs. Mrs. Murray sprang up nimbly and flung her arms around Miss Onderdonk. "Get that miserable face off of you!" she said, the little dressmaker of Greenwich Village back in her voice and radiant in her smile. "I made you just sick, did n't I? You see it 's this way," she confided, "all these women here are jealous of me because Mrs. Heath gives me full charge. Three of them are broken-down swells, old friends of hers that she 's given jobs to. So you can understand how I just got to throw lugs! I got to go their crawl one better." She finished by giving a momentary imitation of the black-satined attendant so perfectly that Miss Onderdonk went into a gale of laughter. "To look as if you 've got nervous prostration and are just about ready for a sanitarium, is the fashionable caper."

A voluble account of the "business" followed. It was conducted in this beautiful house that was as hushed as a convent, no hint being given of the hive of workers under its roof. In fact, as Miss Onderdonk listened, she realized it was no "business" in the usual understanding of the word at all, but a latter-day, mysterious art which, instead of making gowns, conceived, evolved, originated and then *built* them. Mrs. Heath was as augustly secluded as an empress, seen only by inflexible appointment at rare intervals. She would spend whole days in the "studio" at the top of the house experimenting with banks of chiffon of rainbow hues, laces, satins and jewelled nets, to create new tints; to reconstruct, and "go one better" the ideas of the great Parisian dictators.

"The shade called 'fire through ice,' that was one of the hits last winter, was Mrs. Heath's discovery," said Mrs. Murray proudly. "She just throws herself into her work body and soul — almost forgets to sleep or eat *while in the grip of Inspiration.* I was in Paris with her all this summer and last. Oh, Miss Onderdonk," she said, suddenly her old wondering, pathetically desiring self, "can you imagine me in the Rue de la Paix? *Me?* I never let on — kept up that half-dead-and-alive air — but the first time I struck it, I wanted to do a cake-walk right in front of Paquin's!"

"And now tell me," said Miss Onderdonk, her eyes beginning to twinkle, "something about Mrs. Heath's sister — that charming young creature to whom I rented my rooms? I only saw her that once, for a few hours, but she made such an impression on me! Mr. Freitag told me she had married the Englishman who came to live next door. Is she happy?"

"Happy?" Mrs. Murray demanded; "Miss Onderdonk! Happy? Did n't you ever see Mr. Cross?"

"No. I left shortly after he came, you know, and he was very ill."

"Then," said Mrs. Murray, shaking her turreted head, "you never saw the grandest man! Any woman could have fallen in love with Mr. Cross. He was just made for women to love and trust and rely on — and I guess the woman *is* happy that got hold of his heart and was able to keep it all for herself. That 's what his wife has done. I never knew just what her other marriage was like," Mrs. Murray confided, "nor her history, but oh, Miss Onderdonk, that pale, little thing must have gone through a lot. When they were married, she was so white and thin you 'd have thought she was dying; and it would have done you good and yet made you cry to see the way Mr. Cross kept looking down at her as they stood at the altar. It was just as if he wanted to pick her up in his arms and hold her there as if she was a little, sick lamb. He took her right out to Arizona, where he 'd bought a big ranch. Mrs. Heath has showed me pictures of it, with them on horseback on a high hill and all around them the sunset. Miss Onderdonk, it looks like Heaven! And oh," she added, with a delighted gurgle, "maybe you don't know that Mrs. Cross writes stories!"

"What do you mean?" Miss Onderdonk cried, quivering with romantic interest. "Stories?"

"Why, a novel of hers has just been published; she began it in the old house. It 's about a shipwreck somewhere at the ends of the earth — full of romance, and spots of it awfully funny. It 's called 'In Desert Places.'"

Miss Onderdonk wrote the name in her memorandum book. "This is too fascinating! And think of it having been started in my old rooms. That will make me enjoy it all the more. I 'll get it at the hotel and read it on the ship."

"Do you remember Fergus, Mr. Cross's man?" Mrs. Murray asked cosily.

"Yes, I saw him — a big, honest-looking fellow."

"Well, he 's now high muck-a-muck out on the ranch. He writes to me sometimes and gets me to send him a certain kind of tobacco and detective stories — the last one was 'The Burglar's Fate, or The Secret of the Burning Barn.'" She gave a patronizing, good-humored sniff. "I sort of got a little *mashed* on him once, Miss Onderdonk. How funny that is, as I look back. Dear Fergus, he seems so crude to me now, after the French!"

Their talk changed to Miss Onderdonk's plans. Mrs. Murray became excited when she heard she was to be away a year and spend the following summer in London. "Then maybe some day on Bond Street you 'll run into Mrs. Cross," she cried. "And she 's such a simple, unaffected dear, I bet she 'd tuck you under her arm and whirl you off to have tea with her in one of those darling tea shops."

"Naturally, they 'll often want to see London in the season."

"Not that at all, my dear. I did n't tell you the very latest news of them — *le dernier mot* — as the French say. Mrs. Heath had a letter from her sister yesterday that delighted her. Mr. Cross has decided to go home and settle in England. He 's thinking of entering Parliament — but he *may* go back to his old regiment. Which he 'll do, remains to be seen."

Mrs. Murray's healthy, good-by hug was vibrating around Miss Onderdonk's shoulders as they came down to the reception room. But the presence of several fish-tailed, black-satined duchesses and two footmen worked a miracle in her again.

"S' good of you to look me up — rawly! Come again when you return from Paree."

"If I can," said Miss Onderdonk, trying not to feel disconcerted by Mrs. Murray's sudden debilitation.

"*Nous verrons,*" Mrs. Murray drawled. She was smiling sadly, her eyelids sinking as if she were about to faint. "*Bon voyage,* muhda!"

Miss Onderdonk settled back in her cab. "A delightful day!" she said aloud. "And all these romantic happenings came out of my advertisement to rent my rooms." Her gentle face was as bright as a woman's going to meet her lover. "It 's just like a story," she said with deep content.

THE END.

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