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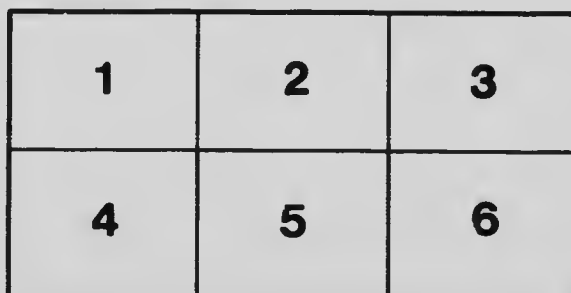
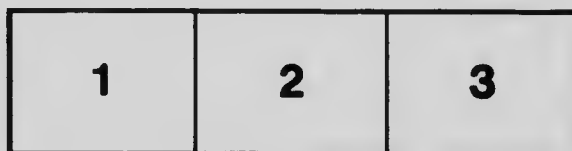
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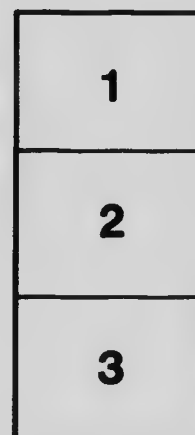
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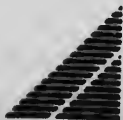
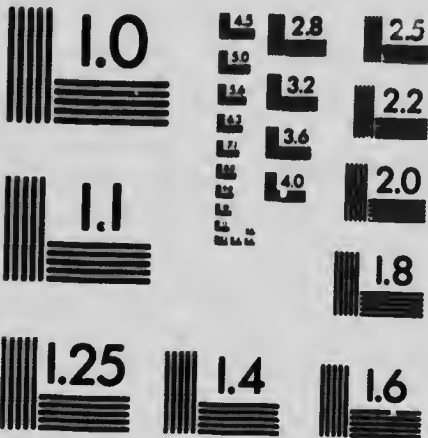
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**THE
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CARNINGHAM**

**BY
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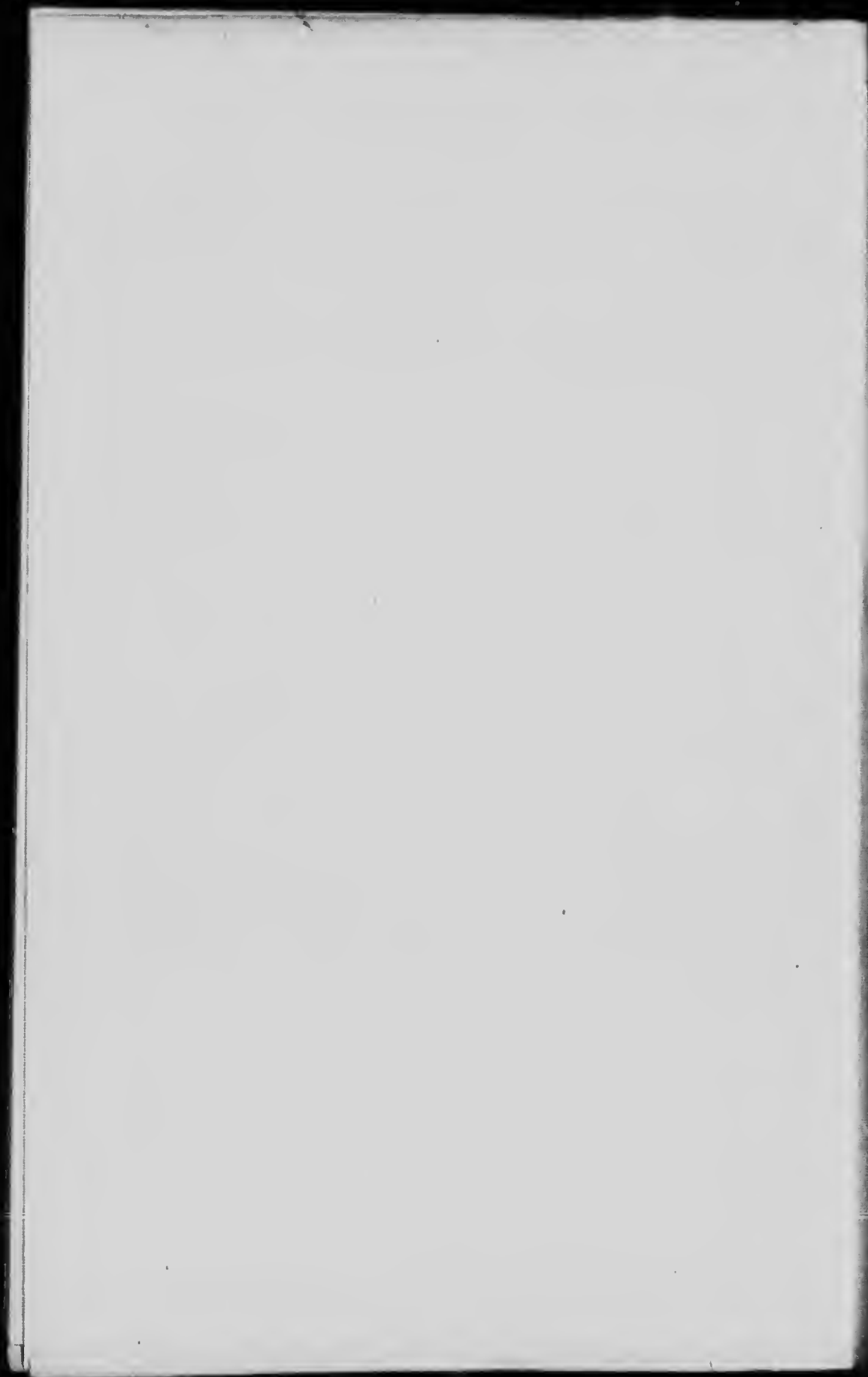
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CHAPTER I

A POST-GRADUATE LECTURE

“ To hear that little rattle-brained fountain bubble and sing,” observed Pat, stopping in a rapid walk and wheeling abruptly to the side of the road, “ one would think that there was no such thing as trouble in the world. Hear it :

‘ Gush-a-gurgle, cheerie, cheerie,
Summer’s coming, dearie, dearie.’ ”

“ Patience Carningham,” she said, indulging for good company’s sake in a little conversation with her inner self, “ there is no such thing as trouble in this world ! Are you on ? ”

The inner self agreed by bringing into action a set of muscles that sent her bounding over the fence and rolling in the heavy meadow-grass below.

“ You made me do it, you silly little fountain ! ” cried Pat, rolling her bright blue eyes fiercely upon the indifferent little stream that gushed under the rail fence with April enthusiasm. “ So now get busy and persuade me that there is no reckoning

coming to me, no Mumsie that'll be sorry I ran away from work, no small brothers wondering with all their eyes and mouths where the next loaf of bread is coming from, no old gimlet-eyed boss at the shop—no nothin' but masses of blue and green touched up with streaks of sunlight."

"Gush-a-gurgle, cheerie, cheerie,
Summer's coming, dearie, dearie,"

sang the stream persuasively.

Pat rolled over in her luxurious bed, and peeped out across the open country through the cracks in the rails. Like a golden ribbon the Rushholm Road wound out between beautifully wooded hills, climbing higher and higher, until it reached the picturesque village of Mount Carmel, that sat on the heights, behind which it dropped abruptly out of sight. In every open patch among the hills the farmers were drilling in the grain; while those who despaired of ever bringing the beautiful wilderness under cultivation had turned out their flocks and herds until they filled all the valleys with their gentle lowings.

A half-mile behind her, however, in sharp contrast to the peaceful, rural scene she contemplated, stood a large factory, situated on the extreme edge of the town, and backing aggressively into the very lap of the country. It was a gloomy, old-

fashioned structure, with dark walls and dingy windows. Its chimneys belched an evil smoke that befouled the serene blue of the air.

The girl disdained to consider the factory. She lowered her nose into the very roots of the springing grass and fancied she heard the clover sheaths bursting.

"It must be right! I don't feel a bit wicked for doing it! It's good for me! It's necessary for my course!" she murmured passionately, over and over again.

"Chug, chug, chug! B-r-r-r!"

Pat raised her head almost defiantly.

"But there is trouble—lots of it. Even the rich have it. Here's a young swell wanted to take his girl for a spin out to Rushholm to-day, and the old bus has gone contrary.—Lawsy! Isn't she a picture though? What a set of togs to wear out in the country mud!"

A young lady and gentleman were approaching the fountain, while the chauffeur on his back in the roadway took a bug's-eye view of the internal workings of the refractory machine.

"Machine actin' up?" Pat inquired, politely.

She had risen, and sat balancing herself on a round stone just inside the fence.

The man came to the fence, looked over to see who had spoken, and nodded.

"This means half an hour wasted on the road, Isobel," he muttered, pulling out his watch.

"Si, I don't mind if we never get there," returned the lady, producing a tiny silver cup and holding it under the mouth of the spring. "A half-hour in such a place, on the edge of such a grove, and on such a day! Cheer up! They won't be missing us at Rushholm."

"Rushholm! I have a picture of you getting to Rushholm!" observed Pat, blissfully oblivious to the fact that the remarks were not addressed to her.

The man preserved a gloomy silence; the lady idly dabbled her fingers in the stream.

"Do you know what that rig out there puts me in mind of?" asked Pat, ignoring the circumstance that the couple had partly turned their backs on her. "It puts me in mind of old Brassy——"

The gentleman started involuntarily.

"Old Brassy—that's Brasmore, the foreman over at the Wickins fur factory yonder." She gave her thumb a backward jerk. "He's built on the contrary plan—like lots of things. When you want him to do a thing, you've got to let on the exact opposite; and I was just thinking if you'd turn that machine square round, it would back you out to Rushholm and think it was spitin' you."

The man said "Humph!" by way of setting a period to the conversation, but the lady turned and

scrutinised with some interest the odd specimen of humanity before her.

"The queer little thing has been put to work too young," thought the rich girl, complacently contrasting her own fair, well-developed person with the uncouth form before her. "Her natural vivacity and spirit have been crushed out of her, or have taken this impudent bent of defying and talking back to her superiors. Poor child, she might have been quite pretty; but she has been made an old woman in her teens. Such claws of hands—and a low shoulder, I do declare!"

Aloud she said, "And what do you know of the firm of Wickins, Wholesale Furriers? Is that where you work?"

"Where I used to work," corrected Pat. "I had a little difference with the time-keeper this mornin'. I was a minute late, and old Vipe wouldn't let me in."

"Vipe?" smiled the lady.

"His name's Vipont," Pat explained; "but he's lean as a snake, and his head looks wet and slippery where he oils it to coax a covering over the bald spot. Lawsy! If he had a coat like yours, that hard green, scaly kind of cloth, he'd be complete."

The lady laughed heartily, feigning not to see the anxious glances her companion cast upon her, nor to hear the scraps of conversation designed to call her attention elsewhere. Here was a novelty in her

pleasure-satiated life. She would enjoy the fun of the moment. Perhaps her escort was amazed, for in her own sphere she passed as one who daintily eschewed poverty and misery and all such vulgarity rampant among the lower classes of society. But this wretched little work-girl was so queer, so amusing, so new. It could do her no harm to listen to a few more of her witticisms.

"So I guess I don't work there any more," Pat rattled on, vastly pleased with the chance to air her views. "I came out here for a sniff of the spring. You know by yourself, miss, how tough work goes at this time of the year when the days first come warm."

The lady Isobel smiled faintly. No, there was no dim, far-back experience within herself to enable her to estimate the hardness of working in a factory on an April day.

"At least Vipe ought to know," said Pat vigorously, "seeing we're on night-work two weeks before Easter to make up for the holiday. When you sit under a twelve-pound fur coat felling in linings till half-past ten or eleven on some of these steamy spring nights—say, the firm might forgive you for coming in late the next day."

The gentleman picked at an imaginary flaw in the sleeve of his coat.

"You are rather hard on the firm of Wickins," he

observed, with a noticeable effort at indifference. "No doubt you are paid for the extra time."

"If thanks is pay!" Pat flung back at him over her shoulder. "Brassy calls these rush orders little 'thank-you' jobs. And he doesn't give too much of that either."

The gentleman being silenced, Pat turned back to the lady.

"Vipe might sly us in if he liked. But we know a trick worth two of requestin' a favour of him. He's—he's what you might call *convulsive*."

"Child, you mean repulsive," suggested Isobel.

"Yes—ugly, and mean, and low, and disgusting, and everything you can't look at. For instance, there's moustaches and *moustaches*. He has the latter sort—four sickly white hairs parted carefully to right and left, and all dead and straight from being stroked. Most men would say they hadn't shaved, and be done with it."

Something twitched about the stranger's boyish mouth, but he kept his gravity with a painful effort.

The awful child continued her conversation with Isobel.

"Then he's got the long eyes—I mean they see a long way. If you were trying to bring in a pin on the quiet, he'd dart up his flat, oily head and hiss out, 'Parcel, miss!' And you'd have to leave it in his clutches till six o'clock. Ha, ha! Once I

fixed Vipe, though. I had brought in a bag of chocolates in plain sight, thinkin' no evil. You know by yourself, miss, when you're working all day in the lint, how a chocolate or a bit of gum will wet your throat. How could I think anybody would begrudge me that? As I passed the time-office, up came the little wet head, 'Parcel, miss!' I had to give it over. When I came for it at six o'clock, there wasn't one left in the bag. Now, that's the kind Vipe is! And he knew how many nickels I had to spend on candy. I didn't say much, but I laid low for him. I'm nasty when I'm riled. About a week later I brought in another bag of chocolates. 'Parcel, miss!' he shouts. I hands it over meek-like, too meek for any good if he'd stopped to think it over. He opens the bag and gulps one down before my very eyes. Ha, ha! It was filled with cayenne pepper! Dudley Warner, the cart-boy, got it for me—for you know I can get the kids around the shop to do anything for me. Since then Vipe and I have not been friends. He has been watching his chance. He knew it would come some of these days when I had been on night-work and overslept myself. Well, it came th' smornin'. Say, did you ever see a snake smile? I have, you bet."

During this recital the gentleman had raised an unwilling smile, incited, doubtless, by the lady's peals of mirth.

"Child, what is your name?" he inquired, curiously.

"My name is Patience Carningham—at least, I was christened Patience; but no one agrees with my mother's choice. I go mostly by Pat—in honour of my native country. Old Mr. Wickins nicknamed me 'Impatience,' and everybody caught on as if it was a huge joke. I never could see why. I've waited longer than most people to get some of the things I've wanted."

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen," replied Pat, glibly. "You know, we have to be fourteen by the Factory Act."

He knew.

"See here," he murmured, switching off the conversation abruptly, "you are from the country, Patience, or Impatience, or whatever you call yourself. You are used to freedom, space. That's why you object so strenuously to factory life. Conditions are not so bad as you would have us believe, and you should be careful what you say."

"From the country!" sniffed Pat. "I've been a shop-girl from the word 'Go!' Let me see! Did I say I was fourteen? I'm so used to saying that. I was fourteen for four years before I got to be fifteen. But the truth is I'm sixteen now, though I hate to own to it, being so small.

"But as I set out to say, I've had my rights in

other places. Rights, sir. The right to be treated with kindness and consideration, as a human among humans, though one is allowed to make ten dollars while another is grubbing for one—the right to be considered honest and interested in the work without an iron hand for ever on my shoulder. Need watching? I don't shirk! I started with the idea of supplying one table of hand-sewers, and now they've got me supplying two. Shirk! Look at me! I went into the cutting-room at Christmas, and I'm nearly used up at Easter."

The lady Isobel had been looking at her. Not one detail but was printed on her mind to tease her thoughts for many a day, to haunt her dreams for many a night. It was all so innocently pathetic. It was as if a woman, pent in that stunted body, waited a chance to spring to life, but was strangled back by the cruelty of the external conditions. There was about the girl an original touch that scorned the enormous bows and hair pads, the cheap jewellery, the gaudy, untasteful colours so often affected by her class, a touch that might develop in her a weird unusual beauty if it had half a chance to expand. But the wistful blue eyes, the thin, skilful-looking hands that clutched and unclutched like wires—Heavens! The rich girl had not known that such conditions were possible.

She threw her heavy fur off her shoulders. Per-

haps the day was warm, or perhaps she had never thought much before about the way in which the furs she wore were produced.

"I think old Si Wickins keeps the meanest set of men on his staff!" Quick to see her advantage, Pat pushed her argument.

"What makes you think so?" inquired the lady.

"Because I know so, I guess," replied Pat. "He gets them like himself, so they know how to grind out the most work for the least money."

"Why do you work for him?" the man turned at her. The mention of the proper name invariably stiffened him like starch.

"Why do the poor work for the rich?" responded the girl, wearily.

Again the young man stood silenced and abashed before her logic. She was right. In a small town where there were few manufacturing concerns, what chance of choice had the weak and poor, who must earn day by day every mouthful they put into their hungry stomachs? He saw clearly how in his native town, a pretty, prosperous place, boasting like many new-world towns of its liberty, fraternity, and equality, most of the working-class were at the mercy of its one great manufacturer as hopelessly as slaves beneath the whip of a driver.

In irritation he resorted to a threat.

"At least I warn you to be careful what you say about my—my—about old Mr. Wickins."

"You see, sir," said Pat, with small show of fear, "I've been bustin' all winter to say what I thought about him, and I never got a chance till now. No wonder my tongue wants to wag at both ends. I might 'a spoke more mild about him, though, considering he's about down and out, can't work any more, has to go away for his health if he wants to spin his life out for even a few months, and all that."

An ominous silence.

"I suppose you've heard the young man who was away all over Europe and the States studyin' factories is going to step into his place?" said Pat, casting her bright eyes from one to the other.

"The local paper has printed something to that effect," assented the lady.

"You've heard, too, how he's up and married one of Judge Mercer's girls?"

The paper had had that, too, it appeared.

"A bully match for him! But Heaven help the girl who marries into the Wickins family!" cried Pat, with fervour.

"The car is ready, sir," announced the chauffeur. The gentleman breathed a sigh of profound relief. The lady opened her purse and drew out a gold coin.

"I do not need it, thank you, miss," said Pat,

rising and drawing off proudly. "I wasn't talking to work on your sympathies. I've got three dollars and fifty-five cents coming to me at the factory. Besides, I'll find work. I'm too good a hand not to be snapped up in a trice."

"Take it," insisted the lady, touched as she had never before been touched by the sight of poverty. "It will help a little."

Pat shook her head till her braids switched in her face.

"I wasn't talking to make money," she repeated.

"But surely," urged Isobel, "there is something dear to your heart for which a little extra money would come in handy."

"There's my course," admitted Pat, unexpectedly.

"So you want to take a course, do you, child?"

"I am taking it," said Pat, with downcast eyes.

"But it doesn't need much money—or else I wouldn't be."

"That is strange. Any course that I ever heard of, whether in art, music, or business, required a great deal of money."

"Mine is none of those," said Pat, briefly. "It's just a lot of things I made up my mind to do for my own personal improvement. I didn't like to think of always staying like I am. I'm a fright. Don't you think so?"

"Chug, chug! B-r-r-r!"

The lady looked around. Her escort was seated in the car, impatient for a start. Yet with strange fascination she turned to finish her conversation.

"And what will you be when you have finished your course?"

"A beautiful lady," came the unexpected reply; "large and tall, with long waving hair, all natural too, and plump, white arms, and—and——" the quick blue eyes filled with tears—"one shoulder as high as the other."

"Oh!" gasped Isobel. "Do you think you can do it?"

The other was silent, ashamed to have confessed so much of her inner thoughts.

The rich girl put her hands on the shoulders of her more unfortunate sister.

"I would like to help you to it. Oh, do not think so unkindly of me! Remember me as one who did not know—did not understand."

She was gone, and Pat stood with closed eyes still feeling the pressure of those firm, white hands on her shoulders.

"Chug, chug! B-r-r-r!"

The Brassy-like machine snorted, puffed, backed contrarily, then raced away down the rough road as if bent on jerking the occupants out and landing them on their heads on the newly drying clods of the roadway.

Patience Carningham stood thoughtfully poking a stick into the spring, roiling its crystal depths. A mischievous imp danced in either eye.

"Lawsy!" she murmured. "Where did I get the nerve? The minute they puffed over the hill, I saw the Wickins crest on the front of the car. As if I could mistake that rig old Si used to run about in! Never saw this young chap before. He looks lots better than his father, but he'd have to get up early to be good enough for that sweet Isobel of his. The lecture won't hurt him from one who will soon be out of his clutches. But where *did* I get the nerve?"

CHAPTER II

THE FACTORY UNDERGOES A CHANGE OF POLICY

NEXT morning Patience Carningham was at the factory door with five minutes to fling in the face of her friend Vipont. But once again it was ordained that she should see the phenomenon of a snake smiling.

“ It’s up on the carpet for you ! ” grinned Vipe.

She was met at her machine by Brasmore, the foreman, who informed her with ill-concealed glee that she was wanted in the private office. Pat lifted her chin and stalked out to her doom between rows of silently sympathetic faces.

Mr. Silas P. Wickins, junior, sat in his father’s chair, a mere boy in looks, but suddenly weighted down with a man’s heavy responsibilities. Isobel, in street attire, stood looking out of the window in deep abstraction. As in a dream Pat noticed the office staff, Sales, the head book-keeper, silent as a mummy over his ledger, and Evan Webb, a cousin of Mrs. Wickins, who though still a very young man, had been promoted from one position of honour to

another because of his family connection. Clerks and office-boys passed busily in and out. Moreover, she felt rather than saw the presence of Vipe, who lingered exultingly just outside the door.

Presently her eyes of honest Irish blue came bravely to the level of her employer's. Neither appeared to have the slightest recollection of meeting before. The girl could not decide whether he was angry or only indifferent. He no longer picked at an imaginary flaw in his coat-sleeve. Here he was master.

"You wanted . . . , Mr. Wickins?" she inquired, taking the plunge. If she had expected help from Isobel, she might as well have asked the doorpost for sympathy as that erect, silent figure by the window.

"Yes—ah—I wanted you. I wish to inform you, Miss, er——"

How hesitating his voice! It was in exact contrast to his natural tone, which was crisp, brief, and decisive. Surely what he had to say was hard to frame in words. She longed to help him out and get it over.

"To inform you that—that——"

Then Isobel turned from the window, and Pat saw that her face was smiling.

"Don't torture the child. I know you said we ought to give her a scare for her impudence yester-

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day, but I, for one, cannot play off severe before her accusing eyes any longer. He wishes to inform you, my dear, that he is about to raise your wages."

Pat had had all sorts of faces "practised up" for the occasion—scornful poises of the head, lifted brows, curled lips—but in all her varied stock of grimaces she had nothing to meet this emergency. Her eyes filled with a blind rush of tears.

"I'm a brute!" she sobbed, covering her face with her hands.

"Patricia"—Mr. Wickins, like many others, could never bring himself to call her Patience, but shied around it with all sorts of nicknames until he finally settled on one to his liking—"Patricia, I wish to give you this reward for the good service you did the firm yesterday. I may say that your little lecture was more to the point than all I observed in my year of travel. You spoke with the authority of one who had been through it. Of course I knew that every word you were saying was true, though I felt at the time that you might have let me down a little more gently. However, this gentle lady Isobel has forgiven the house of Wickins, especially the youngest member of it, for sins he never committed, and, thanks to you, never will commit. She consented to go over the premises with me early this morning. I may say we found things much as you described them. Now, there are some

members of the new firm of Wickins and Co. who are not as experienced as they will be twenty years from now ; but they have no wish to run the factory along the old lines, and will from time to time try experiments calculated to reform the existing evils of the old system. As you are 'too good a hand not to be snapped up in a trice,' we have taken this earliest opportunity of allying you to our house. Thank you. Good morning."

Pat was a hardened little sinner, who expected kindness from nobody. At the unexpected touch of friendliness she melted like ice in the sun.

"I'm a brute!" she repeated, with fervour.

"Nonsense!" laughed Wickins ; and Sales and Evan Webb, working near, laughed too at the funny little thing who had such a unique personality that she had made a name for herself all over the premises. But some one out in the hall ground his teeth till they cracked.

"Patricia," smiled Isobel, drawing on her gloves as if satisfied that her work in the office was done for that morning, "if I were you I should be careful how I mentioned this to the others. Perhaps the next one who tried it might not get a rise by reprimanding the general manager."

CHAPTER III

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

"My goodness, Pat, but you're getting to be an awful size!"

The girl addressed looked up from her machine with a pleased smile. She had such a horror of being stunted that a substantial portion of her "course" had long consisted in hanging from the limbs of trees or anything resembling a horizontal bar, in the effort to stretch herself into a more elongated shape. But one glance at the speaker's teasing, sneering face convinced her that the words were not spoken as a compliment.

"Why don't you get a good, strong corset," continued Kitty Law, the forelady of the girls' department in the cutting-room, "and pull yourself in a little?"

"Why?" returned Pat coolly, though with an indignant glint in her sharp blue eyes. "Oh, I guess because—because I don't want to look like you when I get old."

Miss Law said "Indeed!" and bit her lip, while the blood slowly overran her sallow cheeks. She

should have known better than meddle with the lady at the first machine. That same young woman had answers for all occasions.

Miss Law had acquired the playful habit of amusing herself by pointing out the physical imperfections of the girls under her charge. She would allow no one the least claim to good looks but herself.

Truth to tell, Miss Law had very little room to criticise. Though she rejoiced in the name of "Kittens," and sportively endeavoured to act out the part, she was in reality very far from the soft, round, graceful, little creature she aimed to represent. Every part of Miss Kitty Law that was crushable was crushed; everywhere else she bulged. Consequently, although she was a very large woman, hands, feet, and waist were kept within moderate bounds; and consequently hands, feet, and waist were her constant theme of conversation. Woe betide the girl under her who measured an eighth of an inch too large in any of these three features.

"Do you really take a six-and-a-half glove?" she was fond of asking Pat. "I *can* wear a six."

Pat hardly knew what she took. She had never owned a pair of gloves. She was surer of belts.

"I like a comfortable, natural waist," she insisted, "and I am not ashamed of a belt measuring twenty-four inches."

"Twenty-four inches!" Miss Law screamed faintly. "Mine is *twenty-one*."

"If you would let it out a little," suggested Pat, sweetly, "I don't believe you would be troubled so much with heartburn. You know, when a person is hearty the stomach *has* to have room."

"Hearty!" shrieked Miss Law. "Hearty! The wing of a tiny chicken will support my delicate frame for days."

"I like to be hearty," said Pat, frankly. "We are all hearty at home. The only trouble we have is to get something to eat."

Miss Law invariably closed these discussions with the one disgusted statement:

"I detest all your new-fangled physical-culture notions. It is making a perfect slop of you. It makes any girl horrid, and mannish, and—and *healthy*. *And it makes me sick!*"

To which Pat would reply, mistaking her purposely:

"That sickness is nothing. It soon wears off when your soft, flabby muscles get used to it. I can't help wishing *for your own sake*, dear Miss Law, that you would try it."

These daily discussions, which caused the whole department to "take sides" with more or less fervour, did not tend to ameliorate the feeling with which the two leaders regarded one another. An-

other fact that caused the older woman to spit out more venom than usual was the unwelcome knowledge that she was steadily losing ground in the popular favour. The cutting-room to a man—to say nothing of the girls—stood ready to back up Patience Carningham, and to laugh at every sally she brought forth against her tantalising enemy. Add to this that several of the office men downstairs, with whom Miss Law liked to be on intimate terms, had become interested in the girl's fascinating personality and unconsciously at times did her little favours, or spoke to her kindly in the street, and the deadly hostility of the jealous forelady is explained. The result was an increase of the petty annoyances her superior position allowed her to inflict.

It maddened Miss Law that she was able to do Pat so little harm. Confident of her position, the girl went on her serene way, basking in the sunshine of popular favour, secure in the knowledge that she was the fastest and best machinist in the shop. Loftily superior to her enemy's poisoned sarcasm, she worked with a song in her heart and a smile on her lips. Every week she worked on piece-work saw a fatter pay-envelope thrust into her hand, and every week confirmed the fact that neither the critical Brasmore nor the nagging Miss Law could find a flaw in her work about which to pick a quarrel.

She was meditating happily along these lines one

morning, eyes looking afar into dreamland, a tender smile curving her full, childish lips, albeit her eager hands thrust the work under the needle at their usual speed, when she noticed Brasmore approaching with an overcoat. It was an expensive, fur-lined garment, ordered two weeks before by Mr. Simmons, a wealthy city man whom the firm was desirous of pleasing, and Pat's heart stood still when she saw that it had come back for repairs. She knew the foreman would be very angry with the one who had spoiled such an expensive article. She had put in the five pockets it contained. Was it possible *they* were wrong?

"Did you put in these pockets?" demanded Brasmore, with his boorish incivility.

"I did, sir." Pat eyed them sharply, but could see no reason for being ashamed of the workmanship. The cloth was heavy, and the flap pockets did look clumsy; but no one could have made them look better. She had bribed the presser to give them an extra hot iron.

"They're all wrong!"

"I told you, sir," said Pat, promptly, "that Mr. Simmons would not want those big flap pockets. It's not like his style. But you insisted, and, as the order was lost, I put them in."

"Well, you can take them out again. It's a rule of this shop that when a girl does a bad piece of

work she can stay at noon or night and fix it without extra pay."

"I'll not do it!"

The words seemed to have been shot out of a pistol. At any rate they had the effect of hot lead on the infuriated foreman.

"Do you think," cried Pat, hotly, "that I am going to stay here half the night ripping out those pockets, and like as not spoiling the entire coat in the process? Not much! It was *your* mistake. *You* made me put them in. And it is *you* who ought to stay half the night ripping them out without extra pay."

He jerked her shoulder.

"I'll report you to S. P. Wickins."

Pat's lip curled.

"Would you really? Remember it is no longer the old dragon who sits on the throne in the private office."

He wrenched her from her chair, as if to drag her by the shoulder across the room.

"Sir, take your hands off me!" she panted. "Go on—I will follow. No, I won't bolt. Do you think I am afraid that Mr. Wickins will not do me justice?"

"Pat's up on the carpet again!"

"Poor Pat!"

"She's so original—she can't help saying things."

This chorus of exclamations was showered on Miss Law, who had been absent from the room and was now demanding an explanation of the unwonted commotion.

"Original, indeed!" snapped the forelady of Pat's department. "If she'd learn to keep her originality to herself she'd get along better with her superiors."

And she lifted her chin to indicate that she was one of them.

"Poor Pat, indeed!" she burst out again. "For my part I hope it's down and out for the impudent little sis this time. There's been no end to trouble ever since that girl arrived. Wait. I'll go down to the office myself. I'll stick in my little say, and maybe help to accomplish what I so ardently desire to come to pass."

Miss Law threw her black sateen apron across the table, wet her handkerchief between her lips and wiped a streak of lint from her cheek, straightened her hair rats in the glass by the window, and strode out, her heels clacking with dire importance on the hardwood floor of the hall.

Pat's room-mates immediately suspended operations to indulge in a buzz of conversation. "Brassy" was also in the private office, whither he had conducted his refractory charge a quarter of an hour before. Vipe's long eyes were doing duty on the

private office keyhole instead of on the delinquents of the cutting-room as usual. All the cats being away, the mice indulged in play. The machinery of the cutting-room became so still that one could hear raised voices in the office downstairs.

"Poor Pat!" sighed the same voice which had spoken before.

It belonged to the Midget, a pale, stunted girl with a dry cough, with whom Pat always shared the chocolate and gum the errand-boy was continually giving her. Her means of slying them across to her favourite—right under Miss Law's nose, so that individual could smell them, but in no wise see them, much less lay hands on them—was the variety that constituted the Midget's spice of life. Sometimes the bag was kicked across the floor, sometimes thrown under the machine and rescued from whizzing bands by the deft use of scissors, sometimes Miss Law carried them across herself done up in a bundle of linings; but set adrift by Pat's unerring judgment, they never failed to reach their destination in fairly good condition.

"Poor Pat!" The sigh was echoed in genuine earnestness by every one in the room.

"It was contemptible!" scorned the presser. "Why couldn't Brasmore have settled it up here? Isn't business in rather a chaotic state when such things are carried down to the office?"

"They have nothing to do down there," came the answer from a distant corner. "Might as well squabble about an order as anything else. S. P. carries his head high, but he's not doing any business. They have only a few rush orders left by the old man."

"Pat's up against it good and proper this time," said Dud Warner, the errand-boy, as he filled his cheek with a huge chocolate bar which had been bought for the absent martyr. "She'll not come back. S. P. won't stand hearing complaints about her twice. She nearly finished it last time."

"It was such a little thing to march her down to the manager for," sighed the Midget, who had such a wholesome fear of S. P. Wickins, senior or junior, that she quaked when either came into the room on the most innocent errand.

"A little thing!" spoke up Margaret May, nicknamed "Chicken-face" by Pat, a tall, stooped, quiet girl who sat at the opposite table lining infinitesimal pieces of fur by hand. "Why, she defied old Brasmore to his face!"

"He's a beast!"

"I'm glad she did!"

"I admire her grit!"

"She was in the right!"

Thus sounded a chorus of voices in Pat's favour.

"Of course such conduct doesn't tend to make her beloved by her superiors," continued Margaret, who did not believe in quarrelling with her bread and butter, even if the slices were small and dry, and who was such a marvel of conscientiousness that she did not stop work when the boss and forelady were both out of the room.

"I wonder why they all hate Pat when we love her so much," whispered the Midget.

"Because she's a *person*, not a *machine*, like you, Midget. She demands air, and sun, and plenty of room for her development. Human machines, you know, ought not to complain, but just work on and on till they break down, like this one here labelled Margaret May. And as far as my knowledge of this shop goes, they never did complain before that unruly bit of mechanism known as Impatience Carningham came into this factory."

"But her complaints are always so just," the Midget replied to the presser. "Why, she nearly got them coaxed up to scrape the paint off the windows so we could see out to the hills beyond."

"That would have been nice," said the patient Margaret, looking up at the small, dirty, glazed windows through which one could but trace the faintest outline of trees and hills in the distant country. "We're too high up to be distracted by the rigs and people on the street, and I don't believe

it would hurt to let us see the tops of the trees and the sky."

"I think it's rotten of us to let Pat bear the blame every time," said Dud Warner, with masculine ferocity. "Why don't we all up and say we'll quit work if she has to go?"

"I'd be willing," said the Midget, with sudden bravery. "It would certainly be dismal working on here without her."

"Wait and see," cautioned the patient Margaret. "She'll turn up like a bad penny. This isn't the end of Pat."

Miss Kitty Law had opened the door on a stormy scene in the office. Book-keepers, stenographers, office-boys and all, had quit work as they had done upstairs, and had silently taken sides—which for the most part meant that they had extended their sympathy to the weaker side now threatened with such ignominious defeat. Evan Webb stood with his elbows on the window-sill, without pretence of hiding his interest in the proceedings, while even Sales looked off his book and sat biting the end of his pen.

The "weaker side" was standing like a block of stone, as coolly indifferent to the indignities Brasmore was heaving upon her as if she had, indeed, been an inanimate statue. At times she glanced out of the window (for here the large, clear glass revealed a scene of continual interest in the street below), and

seemed more interested in the passing show than in the long invective of the infuriated foreman. The amount of endurance in that frail body was a marvel.

Si Wickins, the boy manager, sat with slightly inclined head tapping his pencil on his desk. His shrewdly glancing eyes could watch both the girl and her accuser. He was very young for the trying position to which he had been prematurely called by the illness of his father. He had noticed a rather bold effort on the part of some of the factory foremen to "run" him. Brasmore headed the list. Brasmore had tacitly appointed himself dictator since the departure of the old man Wickins, who had ruled everybody with a rod of iron.

Now, S. P. Wickins, junior, had just enough of the old man in him to object to being run. If Mr. Brasmore told him he must do a certain thing, he would more likely than not do the opposite out of pure contrariness. That was the first point in Pat's favour. The second was the disgusting extreme to which the foreman had let his rage carry him. All the manhood in young Wickins, backed up by the stormy light in Webb's eyes and the unusual interest of Sales, rushed to the rescue of the helpless creature who was being stoned with the many stones of Brasmore's abuse. It was a revelation to S. P. that the men of the factory talked to the girls in

such language. So Pat's case was half won before she opened her lips.

"Well, Impatience," he said, still inclining his head and looking up at the girl out of the corners of his boyishly mischievous eyes; with an encouraging smile which Brasmore was in no wise intended to see, "you have been accused of defying the foreman, of refusing to do the work he laid out for you. This is a serious charge. Have you anything to say?"

The statue sprang into life. She would discuss the question with S. P. Wickins, if not with Brasmore.

"Mr. Wickins," she cried, seizing the heavy coat which lay on the floor between them, "what do you think of those great clumsy flap pockets on that coat?"

Wickins smiled vaguely. He knew so little about the kinds of pockets they put in the various coats.

"Ha, Si, we've got you there!" laughed Brasmore, clapping him on the back.

S. P. hated familiarity. Pat's case was three-quarters won.

"A large flap pocket is not necessarily clumsy if put in *correctly*," asserted Miss Law, thinking it time "to stick in her little say."

That was the unkindest cut of all to the proud child.

"Who is there dares say that I can't put in a flap pocket with anybody on the third floor?" screamed Pat, stung with the injustice of the accusation.

Then she caught S. P.'s eye again, and behind him those of Sales and Evan Webb. All were kindly, encouraging. She took a much-needed lesson in self-control.

"Put in correctly or not," she went on more calmly, "I knew Mr. Simmons didn't want them in his coat. A trim little fellow like he is, neat as a swallow. What's more, I heard him say so, and I saw it go down on the order."

"Why was the order not followed?" asked the manager, sharply. "The instructions concerning the ordered goods are always minutely carried out."

It appeared the order was lost.

"Ah!" He looked hard at Brasmore, who was not supposed to lose orders.

"We all thought we remembered parts of it," said Pat. "I was certain of the small, plain pockets, but they *made* me put in those great, clownish things."

"Well?"

"Well, it came back th' smornin'. And he," indicating Brasmore with an angry jerk of the head—"he up and accused me of putting them in wrong, and ordered me to rip them out and do them over again. I told him before the whole room that I would not—and I won't!"

"Patricia," said the young manager, rather enjoying the glare of two evil pairs of eyes, and the consciousness that a third pair gleamed at him through the door leading into the time office, "I believe you speak the truth as far as your excitement will allow. I have never had to suspect you of the shadow of an untruth, whatever else I hear of you. Go back to your work, child. I think I can settle the difficulty with Mr. Brasmore in a few minutes. Ah! Come right in, Mr. Vipont"—Pat's sudden opening of the door disclosed the flat head of the time-keeper on a level with the keyhole—"come right in. If the discussion interests you, we shall be glad to hear your opinion."

"Ah, yes, sir!—yes indeed! Very kind, I'm sure." And Vipont wriggled himself into a seat near the door.

"This is a most unseemly affair to be conducted in our office, Brasmore," said the manager, turning sternly on his foreman. "Bad enough upstairs, where I hear such scenes are unpleasantly common."

"If by settling the difficulty," fumed Brasmore, "you mean sending me back to work in the same room with that turbulent, vicious imp, I must inform you, young man, that the settlement is very far from being consummated. I will not tolerate her presence another hour. It simply means you

will have to choose between her and me"—he sucked in his moustache—"between her and me. Do you understand?"

Something stirred in the mind of the young manager. There came racing through his head a long list of abuses practised by this bully on those under him. Ought such a man to have a place in the model factory to be? Was he not rather an antiquated portion of the old system, now a hopeless clog to the wheels of progress? He felt Evan Webb take a step toward him for fear he would make the wrong decision; he felt the heat of Sales' slow-kindling eyes. Blind to the consequences of making an early enemy of this man, who knew so much of the firm's business, he took his resolution. He rose. Their eyes came to a level. For a second those of honest grey flashed like swords into the narrow slits that mirrored as narrow a soul.

"Then, Mr. Brasmore, I shall have the pleasure of wishing you 'Good morning.' You will find your cheque, with an advance one for another month, with my book-keeper, Mr. Sales."

Webb's hand came down in solid approval on the chief's shoulder. At all events the boy had proved himself master for the time being. Brasmore with a gasp opened his mouth, as if to take in the situation through that large orifice. Miss Law clattered up the stairs, praying to be forgotten.

Vipont expressed some whining sympathy for the fallen foreman.

"Mr. Vipont, have you a desire to leave me also?" Wickins inquired, crisply.

Vipont gave a little cough—weak, uncertain, like a cat's.

"Oh no, sir!—no, indeed! Now, what have I done, Mr. Wickins, that you should speak to me so?"

"Nothing, that's a fact," said S. P., drily. "Nothing at all. Go back to work, and endeavour to do something one way or another."

With an impending sense that this matter was not yet finished, the manager turned to his comrades. He had been up against it for a week—the first week of his life that he had really worked. And every day he waded into deeper water.

"Did you ever see a business run as this one is run?" he asked, wearily.

"I've seen worse under the old man," said Sales; drily. "There was always somebody leaving the office in a tantrum."

Si shot him a grateful look.

"A man can but do his best," he quoted, "as my grandsire did—no, neither my grandsire nor my sire did it, or I wouldn't have it so hard now."

"Did I do the right thing this morning?" he inquired again, after a moment's silence.

He felt a strong need of being braced up with some words of encouragement.

"You did the only possible thing," said Webb, glowing alternately with admiration for the brave little girl and loathing for her brutal accuser.

"I saw you were going to wipe the floor with me, Evan, if I did otherwise; so I suppose it was fear as much as anything that made me come to such a hasty decision."

Sales from his corner laughed drily, his rarely expressive laugh, which one might wait half a year to hear, and which never was heard unless he was greatly tickled.

"But what are you going to do with the cutting-room?" he demanded, with a careful eye to business. "It will be in a state of open rebellion."

"I propose sending Webb up there," said S. P., struck with sudden inspiration. "Our man of granite ought to reduce them to order if anybody can."

"I don't fancy they need much reducing to order," said Webb, easily recognising himself by that name.

"They are not a bad lot."

"Will you accept the position just vacated by Brasmore?" asked the manager.

"For the time being," agreed Webb. "But get a new man as soon as you can."

The machinery, animate and inanimate, redoubled

its speed at the approach of the representative of authority from below stairs, as if to impress the powers that be that it always worked at topnotch speed. Webb was a young man who neither trifled nor allowed trifling. He was away on business for the firm more than half the time, but had been around the office enough to inspire a wholesome respect in all who knew him. Yet he had a gravely kind face in spite of its sternly chiselled lines, and a just and equable manner, as many an underling in trouble had found out.

He crossed the room, passed Miss Law, who had approached with a simper to take his commands, and stopped before Pat's machine.

That delinquent had been indulging in a silent flow of tears.

"I'm a monster of iniquity," she confided to the Midget, "to ever give Mr. Wickins an anxious moment. Midge, he's an angel dropped from heaven! I'd rip the thousand old pockets and put them in again if he told me to."

Pat rubbed her hand across her eyes to look up with awe into the face of her demigod's representative. It had just dawned on her why Brasmore had not come back and why Mr. Webb was taking his place.

"Miss Patience," said Webb, in the courteous tone he naturally used toward women, "Mr. Wickins wishes you to rip the pockets of that repair coat.

He says it is a particular job which he would care to entrust to nobody else. He has given orders that you are not to be disturbed all day, and wishes you to do your best to finish it by night. Dudley will take it around to Mr. Simmons. You know it was a rush order."

Pat's answer was a radiant smile. When Mr. Webb went away, she beckoned to Dud. He came and stuffed a chocolate between her teeth, just as Miss Law turned her back.

"Dud," she whispered, "I can't get this done by six nor by seven. Will you wait?"

"Sure!" cried Dud. "I'll be hanging around somewhere."

"Guess you're like me," said Pat. "You know a good boss when you see one."

"And am entoirely willin' to help him out in a pinch," mimicked Dud, starting to sweep out the rags.

CHAPTER IV

BRASMORE TAKES HIS STAND

THE clock in the time-office was pointing to eight when Pat, weak and supperless, slid a huge box into the arms of the errand boy, who with several others came back for an hour or two after supper in the rush season.

Miss Kitty Law, doubtless bent on finishing a piece of work in the quiet hours of the evening, was just coming through the time-office accompanied by Vipont. Miss Law was usually accompanied by that gentleman, there being such a strange affinity between their utterly dissimilar natures that they had long ago agreed, if neither of them could get anybody else, they would "buckle up" when they got to a sensible age.

Pat, feeling for her coat in one of the dimly lighted cloakrooms, was forced to overhear a very interesting discussion taking place before the time-keeper's desk.

"Come, Kittens, forget it," said Vipont.

"Forget what?" snapped Miss Law.

"It. Whatever is putting you in such an unholy mood."

"I can't forget the way the young pup showed his teeth to-day," she burst out, hotly.

"Oh yes!—yes indeed! Very fine show!" squeaked Vipont.

"Why didn't we all turn on him?" snarled the forelady. "He couldn't have dismissed the three of us at once."

"Couldn't he?" te-he-ed her companion.

"You are always so fearful of losing your job. You are such a blamed coward," said the lady, affably.

"Oh yes!—yes indeed! Very well said!" giggled Vipont. "But I'd rather be a coward with a full stomach than a brave man with his sides flapping against his back. I would indeed."

"You are of the opinion that Mr. Brasmore will come to want because he has cut his connection with this excellent firm?"

"I am decidedly not of that opinion regarding Mr. Brasmore," said Vipont, getting up a faint sparkle of enthusiasm. "I am of the opinion that that gentleman can look out for number one."

"Have you heard anything?" demanded Miss Law.

The other nodded, lowering his voice, as if he feared the silent walls would listen.

"Quite a bit, Kittens."

"What?"

"Brasmore has acted without a moment's hesitation. He went down town, leased the vacant building on the opposite side of our street three blocks down, and announces that he will set up a rival fur factory, competing for the same business that the Wickins firm has heretofore considered its unmolested property."

"Gee-whizz! That's going some!"

"He can do it, too. He knows the business better than the trio of heady boys who have undertaken to run this concern."

"Are you going over to the new firm, Vipey dear?" asked his fair companion, archly.

"Not until he gets on his feet," said Vipont.

"No, no indeed! I take no risks. You know I have a widowed mother to support, and I am in very delicate health."

"Again I accuse you of being a coward," said the lady, playfully.

"But a coward with a full stomach," he agreed, cheerfully.

Pat tip-toed her way down the long hall to the street. Then she dashed across the road with her usual alacrity, only stopping to look into the cake-shop and wish she could take some cream puffs home for supper. The conversation, startling as

had been its disclosure, did not ruffle her inward satisfaction over the day's proceedings.

"Of course old Brassy will get bitten," she grinned, complacently. "Mr. Wickins cannot sail, for we'll all hang to him like leeches."

Then she burst out with a snatch of song, which seemed to her immensely suitable to the occasion.

"The overseer, he gave us trouble,
And he runned us round a spell;
So we locked him up in the smoke-house cellar,
With the key thrown in the well."

CHAPTER V

PROBLEMS

ISOBEL poured the coffee with a hand that trembled slightly.

"Of course you did just right!" she exclaimed, vibrating with sympathy. "Why didn't you dismiss the whole three, Si?"

"Miss Law is a great worker," he replied, "and Vipont is really a harmless old fellow. They say he is good to his mother, keeping her in every comfort. He needs an easy position as his health is poor. We will give him a trial. His love of listening can do little harm."

"At any rate you will get along better without that brutal foreman. Ugh! I remember the vulgar fellow, reeking with the odour of steam and moist fur."

"I am afraid we are all steeped in the same perfume."

Her husband held his hand, palm upward, across the breakfast-table, from which a faint whiff of raw fur floated up to her nostrils.

The dainty little lady recoiled ever so slightly.

"But, Si, is it absolutely necessary that they should have to live in and breathe that atmosphere?"

"Not at all necessary, my dear, with proper ventilation and modern sanitation. The factory was built thirty years ago, and while its masonry is unexcelled for solidity and durability, it is decidedly behind the times in equipment. I have in my mind a complete scheme of improvements, which would place our people on a level with any working people in the world; and, I believe, make them happy, healthy, and industrious, which means doubly valuable to me."

"Please outline the improvements," said Isobel, who made a pretty insistence on understanding those business problems which were of vital interest to her husband.

Standing on the border of pleasure, looking down the path of duty and responsibility, she knew as much about the cares of business as a child of six. She wanted Si to be just to his people, but she did hope the process wouldn't stint her.

"Well," he laughed, tapping his fork on the tablecloth and absently waiting for its silvery vibrations, "I would raise the roof, not only metaphorically, but actually. The cutting-room is torrid in summer and frigid in winter. A higher roof with an attic

above would protect it from the rays of the sun and give several hundred cubic feet more air space. Ventilation could be perfected by removing the small windows and replacing them with the large, modern glasses, giving double the light and cheer."

"Is that all?"

"Not all my dream, dearie, but probably all of the actuality. In my dream there is a model lunch-room and a rest- and reading-room for the girl employees. Oh, if I had the means, I shouldn't mind buying that field on the opposite slope and turning it into an athletic ground, where they could indulge in football and tennis during summer evenings, and tobogganing and skating in the winter. No man of wealth has ever done anything for this town in the way of outdoor sports. We need more open spaces badly. When I can do that I shall lay claim to being a greater philanthropist than the man who gives an equal amount to a hospital. For I shall prevent what he is trying to cure."

Isobel was thoughtfully silent. When she married Si Wickins a few months before, she had had small notion of being burdened with the cares of his working-people. They were to her mind part of an elaborate system of machinery, bound to turn out for her all the money she needed and whenever she needed it without grumbling. It seemed funny to think of their rights. She was rich, and they were

poor ; they must work, and she must spend. That's all there was to it. Isobel Mercer had come from a very proud and very honourable family. She had lived an extremely sheltered life, with every wish granted upon the asking. It was only since her marriage that she had begun to look at the different strata of human society with sympathetic eyes. She could not long remain indifferent to existing conditions when her husband was identified with every charitable scheme in the town. Nor did she wish to. She was not cruel, only ignorant. And she was very willing to learn. The story of little " Impatience " Carningham had been the first influence to arouse her latent sympathies ; but when her eyes were once opened, it seemed as if every other person she met had a claim on her charities.

" You speak particularly of the young girls, Si."

" Because their need is the most urgent. The men in the stock-rooms and offices are as well paid and as well treated as in other factories. Catch men staying where they are abused ! But with the young and untrained girls it is different. They have crowded in on us during the stringent times of last spring, willing and eager to work for from fifty cents to two dollars a week. Of course, these apprentices are supposed to be learning the trade, although few of them actually do, owing to one of Brasmore's methods of turning them off and getting on a new

set when they begin demanding higher wages. I may say that for a couple of years they are clear profit to the firm. Although they seem so willing to hurl themselves into early graves, I can never feel very comfortable in the conscience for allowing them to do so."

"To think many of them are girls about my own age," she murmured.

Allowing her time to meditate on the thought, he was silent till she spoke again.

"Is our factory worse than others?"

"A little—not much."

"Then, my dear boy, surely you are too conscientious."

"If that is possible."

"I wonder why your father, a veteran business man, allowed such conditions to exist from year to year?" she sighed.

"It costs money to be modern."

"But why did not the factory law compel him?"

"The old question: Why do reformatory laws not reform? It is so easy to outwit the stupid law, that one is sorely tempted at times. The inspector was through the factory to-day, and made no complaints, except that the fur clippings should be cleaned up more regularly, as the lint is very bad for throat troubles. Of course, he tacked up a long list of rules and regulations, about the fire-escapes,

about refuse left in the cellar, about spitting on the stairs, etc., but on the whole he carried away a very satisfactory report. Still I know—into my heart's core is the knowledge pressing with intolerable weight—that forty of my most profitable employees are under working age, that twenty per cent. in the cutting-room have throat or lung weakness because the air allowance is only half what it ought to be. I know the hours are too long and the wages too small. Yet they seldom complain. Oh, Isobel, the true spirit of martyrdom is among the poor! They cherish so little resentment against the ones who fatten off their very heart throbs. Pity me for the inheritance my father left me! I wish I might be the humblest tiller of the soil, so that other lives need not be sacrificed by my existence."

"In no position can one evade the universal law which makes us our brothers' keepers," said Isobel, gently.

"It was a coward's wish," he cried, pushing back his chair with grim resolution that sat oddly on his boyish face. "No, no. I am not allowed a choice. And, God help me, I will guard my brothers' interests well, whatever comes of it. But I do not deny that I am placed in a very trying position."

"Will your father never relent?"

"I have little hope of it. Isobel, that is what grieves me most of all. It is not so very long ago that

I was his 'little boy,' his only and beloved son, around whom all his hopes had taken root. But I early saw that I could never follow in the course he was marking out for me. It was a system of downright dishonesty. I do not understand yet how my father in his last years got so far off the path of honour and rectitude. His inordinate love of money seemed to tarnish all his manhood. As I say, I long foresaw the crisis. There came a time when I had to tell him my mind. You know how things have been going since."

"Will he cut you off without a penny?"

"He swore it with a great oath. It was to be as though I had never been born. Though he eat his heart out, he is not the man to change. Oh, the terrible scene of separation which left him a fainting, heart-broken, old man! I shall never forget it. If I could once get on my feet I could stand the loss of the money. The portion my mother left me came to about the worth of the factory. He gave me the choice of the factory property instead of the ready money. Otherwise it would have been sold, as he was past running it. I accepted what seemed like a good investment. But times are hard, and we are awfully tied up for ready money. The situation will drive me crazy if things don't brighten up before fall."

"What pleasure or profit can your father see in shutting himself up down there on his Rushholm

estate, without a friend to make him comfortable in his illness ? ”

“ It is beyond me.”

“ He doesn't seem to think much of your charitable schemes.”

“ Don't talk to me of charity,” cried the young man, warmly, “ when hundreds of workpeople are staring me in the face asking for justice. He himself posed as charitable—he has given his thousands many a time just for the name of it. But I will not hear the word while I have three hundred employees, with four hundred more at home depending on their efforts, kept down under the most miserable conditions, so they can hardly earn enough to keep body and soul together decently. It's an abomination in the sight of heaven. I don't know whether my plans for my employees can be worked profitably or not on the scant capital my father allowed me ; but I do know that I am going to sink or swim with them.”

“ I wish I could swim, and not be one of the sinkers tied to your neck,” ventured Isobel, laying her white fingers on his arm almost timidly. This man of stern business integrity was the other half of the mischievous boy, Si, with whom she was just getting acquainted.

“ I could do without some things I was planning to get——”

"Isobel, don't!" He flinched as if pricked by a lance in a sore spot. "My plans for economising must not touch you—must not rob you of any of your innocent pleasures. Has the pocket-book ever been empty when you came to it for an extra feather or frill?"

"Don't speak to me like that!" cried Isobel, sharply.

The boy, Si, took his young wife's face between his hands and held it to the morning light, which streamed in the windows of the elegantly appointed breakfast-room. Thus they stood, heart to heart, for several minutes. Neither had foreseen these troubles in the old, care-free days, but it was doing both of them good, drawing them very close together.

"Darling, you are worrying about my business difficulties. Oh, it grieves me to the heart! Why did I not have sense enough to keep it to myself?"

"It doesn't grieve me a bit!" she said, with new, sweet bravery. "Do you suppose I am not going to learn to swim with the rest of you?"

"Don't think about it any more. Doesn't Mrs. Fairbanks hold her reception to-day?"

"Si, I'm not made of candy!"

"Darling, you are my own sympathetic little comforter. But promise me you will go to Mrs. Fairbanks's reception, and be the loveliest creation there."

" Perhaps. But first send me up that funny little thing you nicknamed Impatience Carningham. I want to talk to her."

" What ? "

" Now, there you go. Can't let her off work a minute, I suppose."

" Not that exactly ; but we cannot show her any more favours without making her room-mates intensely jealous."

" Bother it all ! I did want to talk to her. She is so inspiring. She rouses me to all sorts of brave deeds. We can never forget that it was she who opened our eyes to the conditions we have since found so appalling. She knew what she was talking about, and I imagine when that young lady is satisfied, you will have a satisfied shop. Wait a minute ! I have a better plan. I am going to invite quite a few of the girls up here Saturday afternoon. You must not oppose me, Si. I mean to study them, to help them. They will open their hearts to me. Trust a girl to win the confidence of a girl."

Her husband regarded her doubtfully.

" What are you coming at ? " he asked.

" I am going to take my first strokes in swimming," she laughed.

He laughed, too. They were both very young. She ran upstairs, trilling a snatch of song, and he crossed the street, whistling like a boy.

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER PROBLEM

BUT if Isobel left one problem below when she parted with her husband in the hall, she only mounted the stairs to confront another which required if possible more delicate handling still. This second problem was Marian; and all unsuspecting that she was a difficulty on anybody's hands, Marian calmly slumbered the bright morning hours away in the beautiful guest-chamber to the right of the landing.

Marian Amberley, a distant cousin of Si and an intimate friend of Isobel Mercer's girlhood, was a beautiful orphan, whom the death of a debt-burdened father had thrown on the world two years previously under very unsatisfactory conditions. Marian's fortune was thought to be small, and Marian had not the slightest notion of augmenting it by working. She detested work—in fact, had been taught to look upon it as low and vulgar, and had been taught to consider that the be-all and end-all of her existence was to make a brilliant marriage, transferring from her parent to some other indulgent and doting man the care of her beautiful and expensive person.

Marian was the unique production of her environment. Everybody said: "Marian can't rough it. She must be shielded from the world. Her nature is so beautifully clinging." Nobody had ever thought her a burden. It is surprising how others will turn in and help keep those who will not support themselves.

Isobel was dead in love with her. She was sorry for her when she heard of her father's sudden death. She knew well what the removal of that dotting parent would mean to one so inexperienced, so charmingly helpless. It seemed quite reasonable that she should wish to be in the city, to participate in all the social whirl under the wing of her popular hostess. Isobel did not hesitate to accept the charge of such a costly protégé. There was really nothing for Marian to do but to make a good marriage. And when one had such a good-looking cousin as Evan Webb—well, Isobel did not pose as a matchmaker, but she couldn't help seeing things. Evan had raved over the girl's extraordinary beauty in the old days.

But so far the charming Marian had proved more of a domestic problem than anything. It was surprising how one person could cause so many "hitches" in the domestic machinery. Nothing was in order all over the house. A disorderly litter followed Marian as invariably as ripples follow the ship at sea. Although all the servants in the house

were doing double duty to make her comfortable, nothing was in its place, nothing went smoothly.

It was that side of the problem that Isobel, the dainty housekeeper, was considering as she hurried a couple of damp bath-towels off the polished balustrade and picked up a discarded belt from the floor in front of her visitor's door.

"Don't be angry, dear Isobel," called a languid voice from within the chamber. "That stupid Emily of yours——"

Isobel peeped in and discovered Marian in an easy-chair drawn up before the mirror, dreamily contemplating her face and arms in the glass. She was admiring without stint one feature after another—the coquettish, heavy-lidded hazel eyes, which at her will expressed everything or nothing at all, the vivid lips, the saucy curls of chestnut hair, which would insist on getting in her eyes, the full, ripe, voluptuous colour-scheme of her whole person. She only smiled when Isobel caught her.

"Up so early, Marian? It has just struck nine. You disgrace your name."

Marian shook her unbound hair off her face and distorted her pretty features with a yawn.

"It is you," she drawled, lazily, "who disgraces your sex by owling about at such unearthly hours, losing your beauty sleep and making yourself a common, brusque woman of business. Must take

breakfast with hubby! What an antiquated notion!"

"We have so many business plans to discuss," said Isobel, briefly.

Marian laughed outright.

"Business? Isobel, not you! Talking about those wretched working-people in the factory, I suppose. Really, you are getting nice—almost pious."

"I am the wife of the best man in town," said Isobel, proudly, "so cannot help getting my eyes opened to all the misery and poverty he is trying to relieve. Do you want to hear——"

"No, no!" interrupted Marion, throwing her plump arms above her head with another all-engulfing yawn. "I avoid discussions of all questions relating to poverty, dirt, and disease."

"But these are real nice people— just like our own acquaintances, you know, only a little poorer," explained Isobel, quoting Si, as she herself still felt very ignorant on the subject.

Marian raised her hand in protest.

"I have seen them."

It was Marian's vague theory that many scores of working-people had to be sacrificed to her interests annually, as the lower animals live to be slaughtered for our food and clothing. She dimly saw that both classes of creature were needed in the economy of

nature ; but she wished to know nothing of their life. Some one else could shear the sheep so long as she was clothed with the wool.

" I believe in our early girlhood we agreed that the avoidance of all disagreeable subjects was the wisest course," smiled Isobel, faintly, reflecting on what a lot of wisdom she had acquired since.

" I still know it to be the wisest thing," said Marian, more seriously than she was wont to speak. " Isobel, beware of trying to help the lower classes. They are a greedy and thankless set. They will ride over you if you give them the ghost of a chance."

" Marian," said Isobel, with sweet earnestness, " you talk as I used to talk—in my ignorance. I wish you could get acquainted with some of my husband's people. There, don't throw up your hands ! Si says they represent the best, most industrious, and often the most intelligent class in the city——"

" Si says many things. When you and yours are ruined through his stubbornness you will think of me."

Isobel calmly finished what she had set out to say.

" They are not a different order of beings, to be viewed through a spy-glass for fear they come too near. My husband doesn't aim to gain a great name for charity by giving any of them a gift. His wish

is merely to settle a few back debts with his fellow men. After that he purposes to work with them all on terms of equality. What better are Si and Evan Webb? Are they not themselves working-people to the utmost limit of their strength?"

"You talk very learnedly, my dear——"

"Hear me out. Are they all not just ourselves stripped of the advantage money can give? Are they not just you and I working in a factory?"

"You are not a bit nice," pouted Marian, curling her full red underlip. "I don't want even to imagine working in a factory. I should be dead in two days."

Isobel, not very sure of the ground herself, and seeing the utter uselessness of further argument at present, seated herself at a writing-desk beside the front window.

"Well, well, Marian, get Emily and finish your toilet before noon. I am writing an invitation to some of the girls in the shop for to-morrow afternoon. But, needless to say, you don't have to be present."

"Ugh! Give me a book and put me to bed."

Only the fine scratching of Isobel's pen was heard in the room for several minutes.

"Evan is the only sensible member of the family," exclaimed Marian, jumping up and ringing for the maid. "I wish you would ask him up, Isobel. Philanthropy makes a deadly dull house."

"My cousin has a standing invitation here," said Isobel, briefly.

"Then why doesn't he come?" frowned Marian.
"He knows I'm here."

"I'll tell you why. He, like my husband, is totally immersed in this problem of raising the condition of their working-people."

Marian groaned.

"Are the factory girls pretty?" she wanted to know instantly. "Who knows, he may intend to raise the condition of one of them by marriage."

"Marriage?" Isobel repeated the word ponderingly. "What a little goosey you are, Marian, for saying things on the spur of the moment. No, I have no fear of the boy doing that. That wouldn't be quite the thing, would it?"

"There!" exclaimed Marian, triumphantly.
"By that speech you admit that the poor are a different order of beings."

Isobel shook her head, unwilling to yield the point.

"Still," she murmured, with a smile which robbed her words of all sting, "with all your faults, Marian, I'd rather it was you that married my cousin."

"So would I," admitted Marian, complacently.

"The boy has nothing——"

"As my father often pointed out," laughed Marian.

"But he is a Mercer," proudly.

"There you go again! Family does count; and you, and Si, and Evan may spend your lives in trying to lift the lower classes, and you will reap nothing but miserable failure for your pains. It's not in the creatures to act differently."

"I don't know," frowned Isobel, in great indecision. "I confess I don't know where it is all going to end."

CHAPTER VII

AN INFORMAL LUNCHEON PARTY

NEXT day it ran around the factory like a chain of lightning that Mrs. Wickins would entertain the girls of the cutting-room at an informal luncheon party, on Saturday afternoon, at four o'clock, at her residence, 480, Thornbury Avenue.

Perhaps it was the wording of the note, perhaps it was the delicate violet-scented paper itself—for some reason or other the girls took fright. Isobel had spoken proudly of her ability to gain girlish confidences, but she had never dealt with girls of this class. Quick observers always, sometimes hasty, but generally just, as girls of their class usually are, they had long ago set her down as a "stiff."

Nor was this untrue of Isobel. She was naturally reserved, proud of her family and its social status; and while she might like to pet a clever, amusing little thing like Pat, and call it "doing good," she had yet to learn by that sympathy born of trouble that these people in her husband's factory were made of the same material as she was, with like aspirations, ambitions, doubts, and discouragements.

She spoke of "studying" them, as a scientist might examine a new species of insect. She had yet to learn to love them.

An informal luncheon party! What might that mean? Whoever heard of such a thing? What should a person wear at such a function? What should they say at table? How long should they stay?

"Ridiculous nonsense!"

"Catch me going!"

"She doesn't mean it!"

"It looks suspicious!"

Such were the comments as the letter went its rounds.

Only Patience Carningham pored over the perfumed scrap to the neglect of the coat-linings which lay across her machine ready for stitching. At last Miss Law snatched it from her and threw it among the rags under the table.

Unabashed, Pat looked up into the faces of her room-mates.

"Well, who's on?"

"Nobody," said Margaret May, stretching back her shoulders wearily. "She might as well ask us to fly to the moon as to go up there in the clothes we've got."

"She doesn't mean anything like that!" declared Pat.

"Are you going to butt in?" asked the Midget.

"Sure!"

To Pat, always eagerly looking for something to happen, it seemed that this might prove the golden gate to her land of dreams. Better to attempt a new thing and fail than never to try at all.

"I fancy she'll tell me lots of things that'll help me with my course. And you're going too, Midge. Yes, you are. She'd do you a world of good. Why, it was from her that I found out that you mustn't swap gum on account of the little bugs stickin' all around it. And she said, besides, that it was just as bad to swap air, and that people like you, Midge, had been swappin' air too long."

"It would be too stylish for me," shivered the Midget.

"Nonsense! She used big words, but just let me explain the note to you. Informal—now that, goosey, just means the opposite of stylish. It means you don't need to wear your best things, and when you get there you lounge around as comfortable as if you was home. At lunch you put your elbows on the table, or drink your tea out of your saucer, or— Oh, anything that will make you feel easy!"

"I see," said the Midget, wondering much where her companion had acquired her knowledge of high life. "But what are you going to wear, Pat?"

"Wear? Well, not my green gingham, I can tell

you! It's for formal occasions. There's no telling now, since I'm acquainted with Mrs. Wickins, how soon I may get a bid to a formal affair. Wouldn't I feel nice to have to go in the same dress I'd had on for an informal luncheon party?"

"But do you know how to use all the different courses at the table?" asked the Midget, her admiration and enthusiasm gaining impetus.

"Well, if you're dead sure you don't know what it is in the dish, say, 'No, thanks, I don't care for any.' It's better to go away hungry than to make a mistake. I don't go to get full. There's likely to be more dishes than eatables anyway."

"What do you do then?"

"Why, talk about who's getting married, or who's going to give a party, and after a few minutes get up and say, 'I've had a very pleasant evening, and I'll come again, thank you.' Then come away."

"Hark! Can that be the twelve o'clock horn?" cried the Midget. "Gracious, how your nonsense does make the time fly! It has been an *awful* short morning. I clean forgot that knife that works back and forth under my shoulder-blade."

Out through the time-office danced Pat, only stopping long enough to turn cheerfully and make a face at her friend Vipe, who hollered after her something about docking twenty cents off her pay if she didn't quit kicking up such a racket in the

halls. Out of the door she flew, like a bird whose cage has been accidentally left open, and raced away in the clear sunshine, switching her braids in her face as she ran. Pat always ran. She ran into work, ran out again; ran everywhere, with the alert expression of one who is looking for something glorious to happen every minute.

At the street corner she turned to say to the lagging Midget: "Be ready! I'll call for you at half-past three. Wear anything you've got clean—but *don't* forget your gloves. They're the mark of a lady."

In due time, after the slow clocks had run around to half-past three, Pat made her appearance at her friend's door. She was done up stiffly in a freshly laundered work-dress of blue and white print, which had for a touch of freshness a home-made collar of lace, crocheted by her mother's patient fingers. She carried the family parasol, and had gloves.

The Midget's mother came to the door. The Midget had brought on a nervous headache worrying about the whole affair, and so could not go. The mother was very sorry, etc., etc.

"Shoot her!" said Pat, piercing the woman's fabrication with one of her sharp glances. "That's not the reason she's staying at home."

"Well, for one thing, she had no gloves."

"No more had I," said Pat, holding her de-

cently clothed hands up for inspection, "until I mended this old pair of black ones mother keeps for funerals."

"Well, she allowed she had nothing to clean up with: no new bow for her hair, no tooth-powder, no boot-blackening—no nothin'."

"Tooth-powder!" cried Pat. "Doesn't she know that a nice, firm bit of wood-ash, just taken from the stove and cooled, will scrape off your teeth most elegant? And as for boot-blackening, hasn't she learned yet how to turn up a stove lid, and pour a little water on the fuzz that sticks to it, and apply it with a soft rag or brush, just like it says on the real boxes you buy? She's deathly slow. I put her wise to those two tricks the last time we wanted to go to the circus."

"Well, I guess she didn't want to go very badly," confessed the Midget's mother, driven into a corner; "and didn't like to hurt your feelings by telling you."

"Shoot her," said Pat, turning on her heel. "She's too foolish to talk about."

Into Thornbury Avenue strode Miss Patience Carningham, taking immense pleasure in imagining that *her* gloves were long, and kid, and white, and that it was her silk petticoat that was rattling when she passed a group of ladies on the corner. The size and appearance of Number four hundred and

eighty almost unnerved her. It took her fully five minutes to make up her mind to march up between the bronze lions that dozed sulkily on the gate-posts.

A smart maid answered her first ring.

"Well?" she said, and looked disdainfully at the trembling figure.

"Please, ma'am," said Pat, weakly, "I'm looking for the house of my friend, Mrs. Wickins."

"This is the house of Mrs. Wickins," replied the maid, beginning to close the door suspiciously.

"Then I guess I'm invited in," said Pat, squeezing through the space held gingerly ajar to admit her. It did not seem quite right to her mind that a guest should stand so in awe of a maid; so she added, walking into the drawing-room with a high head, "And you might just tell Mrs. Wickins that Miss Carningham has arrived."

The maid withdrew, leaving Miss Carningham the triumphant possessor of the field.

"Glory!" she ejaculated, as her foot sank into the carpet. "If you felt like sinking through the floor, you could hide in the nap of this carpet and nobody would ever find you."

Up and down the elegant room travelled her eyes, taking in everything. She might have a drawing-room some day, and want to know how to furnish it.

Finally her eyes rested on a bronze Psyche, holding up a group of electric-light bulbs.

"P-s-y-c-h-e, Spicy," she spelled triumphantly. "I've heard of her somewhere before. Oh, yes, Clark's drug store had her. Mr. Clark told me a rattlin' yarn about her life. She *was* a lively one. I don't wonder they called her Spicy. Now that's a proof that it pays to ask questions if you want to get along in this world. If I hadn't asked Mr. Clark about her I'd have been calling her Pikey, or Physic, or something."

Just here the soft swish of skirts, indicative of the genuine article of Pat's dreams, announced the hostess.

"My dear, where are the others?" she asked, in surprise.

This child seemed to bob up before her whenever she took a philanthropic turn. Impatience Carningham! It seemed she was the only phase of the poor problem with which Isobel was meant to deal.

"I couldn't get them to come, ma'am."

Isobel showed her disappointment, and Pat blushed for the whole cutting-room collectively. Their attitude seemed too foolish for words.

"Can't we have our informal luncheon party now?" she asked, eagerly.

"Indeed, we shall not let it interfere with our luncheon," smiled Isobel; "and the rest of the time shall be spent even more informally than we planned. Just take off your hat—and gloves"—there seemed

a danger that the visitor would not remove her gloves—"and come up to my own room. We'll have a chat about things that interest nobody but girls."

She seated her visitor in a low chair by the window, which seemed to say, "Take it easy," as one sank into its open arms; and standing back studied her attentively.

"Well, how is the course coming along?" she asked, feeling a strange eagerness to usher in the time when the brave youngster's desire "to be a human among humans" should be realised. "I don't believe I need to ask, for I can see a vast improvement."

"Can you? Oh, what?" cried Pat, flushing with pleasure.

"I was thinking what a lovely golden colour your hair is beginning to show, and how thick and healthy it is becoming."

"I *do* like my hair," sighed Pat, caressing her braids. "It has cost me a lot—bottle after bottle of vaseline, and enough coal-oil to light the house for a month."

Isobel did not smile, though she wanted to. Instead, she said soberly: "I shouldn't wonder if those simple remedies were better than some of the expensive toilet preparations. Too many of them have the name of destroying the hair-roots."

Presently Isobel left the room, and Pat sank back in her easy-chair, glad of the leisure to study the pictures, curtains, and drapes, and to dream how she should have her room some day in the future. When Mrs. Wickins re-emerged from the store-room at the end of the hall, it was with an armful of lovely apple-green silk, Pat's favourite colour, and decidedly her favourite material.

"I have here, Patricia," said Isobel, "a slightly worn underskirt which I had when I was a school-girl; and long ago grew out of. If you would care to try it on and see if it will fit you, you may have it for your own."

Pat slid out of her little faded blue-and-white work-dress like a snake sheds his skin in the fall.

"Skirts can be made to fit," she murmured, rubbing down the soft frills.

"But this one needs no making," laughed Isobel. "I declare it fits you like your skin!"

Pat danced up and down before the mirror, switching the tail of the apple-green skirt.

"One dream of my life realised!" she exclaimed, ecstatically. "I've always longed to have a bit of silk around me. Oh, do you think, dear Mrs. Wickins, if I keep on believing in them all my dreams will come true some day?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Isobel, regarding her with smiling lips. "I never did believe in the

maxim, 'Blessed are they who don't expect anything, for they never get disappointed.' No, if I were you I should keep right on expecting."

Pat regarded herself steadily in the best mirror she had ever been permitted to peep into.

"I'm awfully homely yet," she said, sadly. "It's slow work. I only gave myself till I was eighteen to complete my course, and here I am sixteen—and looking like this."

"I see you have not quite overcome that weakness in your right shoulder," said Isobel, scrutinising the child's naked neck with the authority of a doctor making an examination.

"No," admitted Pat, hitching the weak member up into place. "It comes from pushing the work through with my right arm—and how can I stop that?"

"Why, child, you need shoulder-braces, dumb-bells, practice on a horizontal bar."

"Those things cost money," said Pat, sagely, "so I go out and hang on an apple limb for ten minutes every morning instead. You can trust me for getting after it. I hate to be crooked. It's the blot on my course."

Isobel looked at the frail little body with a strange, new emotion.

"Take things as easy as you can, child," she said, pressing a five-dollar bill into the parcel she was

making of the green silk skirt. "Yes, yes, you must let me do it! I love you just as I would a sister if I had one."

She thought that sounded strange after she said it. A sister like this dear, queer little thing! No, she was not ready for such a close relationship yet. The child seemed to her more like a doll which needed a new dress.

Hastily she added, as she tucked away the bill, "It isn't much, but it will help a little with the rent."

Isobel had a vague notion that the months would roll around quickly when there was rent.

And Pat, who was rather independent by nature, allowed her to have her way, for she put it in such a manner that it would have seemed as rude to demur as to have refused to accept a Christmas present.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RENEWAL OF A FRIENDSHIP

A DROWSY voice was heard across the hall, scarcely audible in the room where Isobel and her guest sat talking.

"How many came to your party, Isobel?"

"Just one," replied the would-be hostess, reluctantly.

"I told you so!" With a snicker of satisfaction.

Then it sounded as if the owner of the voice turned over in bed.

"Who came in just then, Isobel?"

"Cousin Evan, I think."

The bed creaked as if some one had pitched out of it head first.

"Mercy! And I've wasted the whole afternoon over this silly old novel. What a fright I am! Send the maid up at once."

"Emily is out for an hour," replied Mrs. Wickins. "Sorry, but you will have to dress yourself, Marian."

"I can't!" wailed the voice from the other room.

"Patience, perhaps you could go and fasten her into her dress," suggested Isobel, as she descended the stair to see who had entered the lower hall.

Pat, crossing the landing to the room beyond, came face to face with the loveliest creature she had ever laid eyes on. Her beauty-loving senses seemed fairly intoxicated as she stood stupidly on the threshold, taking in the details of the elegant room, with its lovely occupant sitting in the middle of the floor, buried in a billow of muslin and laces. She moved her lips to announce her presence, but no words came.

"What do you know about dressing a lady?" scorned Marian, struggling with her long snarl of hair.

"I can fasten your things," said Pat, proud to be allowed to touch the feathery garments strewn over the chairs.

"Humph!" said Marian, ungraciously. "Well, if there is no one else to be had—get me into this as fast as you can."

Pat pulled, and pinched, and squeezed, until both she and her companion were red in the face.

"You're not a physical-culture girl," she remarked, pausing for breath.

"Well, I guess not!" said Marian, emphatically, as she rubbed in the powder to make her complexion

the clear pallor so much in vogue. "I hate to look healthy, don't you?"

"No-o. That is, I don't know."

The same idea as Miss Kitty Law had entertained, only rather more elegantly expressed. Pat was lost in perplexity. Up to this moment a superb, glowing health had been the goal of all her ambitions. For a moment she wavered before such an authority on the subject of beauty; then she said, with conviction,

"I liked you better before you finished your toilet."

Marian shrugged her shoulders and flounced out of the room.

A striking contrast the two girls presented as they descended the broad stairway side by side. Marian, in her rich, luxurious splendour, took up fully three-quarters of the stair with her flounces and frills. Pat, neat and trim as a young swallow, bright of eye and alert of manner, squeezed in at her side.

Marian was chagrined because "the little ninny hadn't sense to fall behind." She considered that it quite spoiled the effect of her draperies to have some one crowding at her elbow. To complete her resentment Evan Webb, standing at the foot of the stairs, took notice of Pat first.

"I am glad to see you here, Miss Patience," he said, with emphatic cordiality. "You know," turning

to Isobel, "this little girl has too much responsibility on her shoulders both at home and at work, and an afternoon of pleasure will do her good."

Marian pushed forward.

"Don't you notice me, Evan?"

He allowed her to come very near, looking gravely down into her eyes as she approached.

"It would be impossible for Miss Amberley to pass unnoticed in any company," he said, courteously.

How like him! You could never wring a compliment out of him unless you deliberately asked for it. But how valuable, how precious above the idle flattery of other men, was his lightest word.

"Well," she exclaimed, undecided between a laugh and a frown, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he murmured, turning away his unsmiling eyes. "It just struck me that you are changed—somehow—I cannot tell—"

Marian hitched up her dress impatiently.

"I changed my maid—that's what's the matter!"

Pat flushed warmly. She was loth to believe that such a beautiful creature could mean to cause any one pain, but she was becoming very uncomfortable in Miss Amberley's presence.

"Of course she can't help feeling how awfully poor and homely I am," murmured Pat's dry lips over and over again. "But if she could just hide the feeling same as Mrs. Wickins does."

"Do you know," said Marian, completely monopolising Webb and leaving Pat, in the absence of Isobel, to sit uncomfortably on the edge of one of the high-backed chairs in the dimmest corner of the drawing-room, "you are changed too, Evan?"

"I had hoped so," replied the young man, unexpectedly.

"It is not for the better, either," she insisted. "You, too, like Isobel and Si, are getting old, and dry, and pokey, over this poor problem you all hold so dear. There, don't thank me for the compliment. Do you not remember the old happy days before you came to the city?"

His dark eyes looked large and bright behind his clear, rimless glasses.

"They seem a long way back," he murmured.

"We could have them over again," urged the girl.

"If we cared to."

He was conscious that he was not supporting his part of the conversation very ably. He was under a restraint, hitherto unknown in the presence of Marian Amberley.

"I think you people down here are all going crazy over charity," exclaimed Miss Amberley, indignantly. "As I tell Isobel, you will have nothing but failure for your pains. The poor have no sense of honour. They impose on your good nature, kick you down, and walk over you to climb to a higher level."

Pat stirred uneasily, and Webb glanced in her direction out of the corner of one eyelid.

"I once remember," Miss Amberley rattled on, "my father giving one of his employees a treat of a gallon of oysters from our back door. The fellow announced all over the shop that he was going to have an oyster supper that night, and father was congratulating himself on doing a good deed—'Giving some of the poor devils a warm feed,' as he put it. About dark one of the guests came back to borrow a kettle, a few minutes later one ran in to get a quart of milk, then a youngster came over to ask the loan of a few soup-plates, and to cap it all they sent an invitation for our family to come to the treat—if we would bring our own spoons!"

She laughed heartily, but she laughed alone.

"One will find vulgarity and greed in all classes and conditions of men," said Evan Webb, with loosened tongue. "I have seen a rich man obtain a service from a poor man, and instead of thanking him, demand a heavier and a still heavier service."

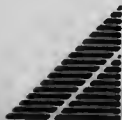
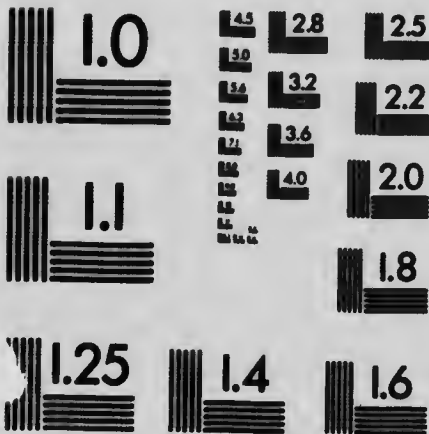
Pat stood up in her corner of the room. All the joy had gone out of her eyes, but they burned like stars in a dead black night.

"I don't know where Mrs. Wickins is," she said, with a little jerk in her voice. "But will you please tell her that I had to go? It is getting dark, and I have to go—that's all."



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The young man was on his feet instantly.

"Don't let the darkness bother you, Miss Patience," he said, kindly. "I, too, am going back down town after dinner. I will see that you reach home safely, if you will do us the honour of remaining. Believe me, you would hurt my cousin——"

Trained to obedience during work hours, Pat instantly sank back into her chair. When the conversation was resumed the young man saw that it was guided into safer channels.

When he seated himself again it was at the piano.

"Oh, do play!" exclaimed Miss Amberley. "You used to make me feel unutterable things with your weird, dreamy chords. I sometimes think if I had heard you play oftener I might have been a better girl."

"Will you sing?" he asked.

"I don't sing—you know."

"I happen to know you sing very well."

While she made trifling excuses, waiting to be coaxed, Webb turned abruptly to Pat.

"Little girl, do you sing?" he asked, sure of a simple and truthful answer.

"I sing most all the time around home," admitted Pat.

"Then come and try something and let me accompany you. Come! I love to do it."

Again she obeyed, greatly to the older girl's amuse-

ment. A trifle pale, but without hesitation, she came from her corner to the piano and sang with childish simplicity a few fragments she knew from an old song book. Her voice was the expression of her soul, pure and truthful, if untrained. Webb played on and on dreamily, while Marian Amberley sank back in her chair and gazed unwinkingly at the chandelier.

"Your verdict, Miss Marian! Do we not go well together?" inquired Webb, turning to Marian when they finished.

"Why did you stop?" cried Marian, with some very real tears in her glowing hazel eyes. "You were making me feel the unutterable things once more."

Webb was regarding her with intense admiration, which would not be concealed.

"The Marian of old!" he exclaimed.

"Then I could cry for ever," murmured Marian.

But her looks belied her words. Already the accustomed mocking smile was chasing away the tears.

The power of the music restored Pat to her accustomed brightness, and carried her successfully through a long and rather difficult dinner, during which Miss Amberley, seated opposite Mr. Webb, carried on most of the conversation without waiting for replies. She left four hundred and eighty, Thorn-

bury Avenue, walking on stilts, head and shoulders above every one she met in the streets. She was too full of ecstasy for speech, and her companion was too full of tender reminiscences. But none ever felt in Pat's presence that they had to talk nonsense to keep her amused, so, each half afraid of the other, they got along very nicely by both staring at the stars.

Marian Amberley's one remark over the guest of the day was indicative of many things passing in her mind. As she made it to her mirror no harm was done.

"That's the homeliest little monkey that ever dared approach me on terms of equality. And I had to make out I was interested in her! Well, no one can say that I didn't treat her handsomely. But I'll show him some of these days where he is to keep his new class of friends! That much I promise, on the word of Marian, the manslayer!"

CHAPTER IX

WEBB MAKES A CONVERT

MARIAN felt freakish. And when she felt that way she would turn the world upside down to have her whim. Wild as the wind, sweetly wooing and wheedling as the south wind, she would heed no restraint, brook no impediment to her untamed, untaught will. Like the south wind, too, her frolic usually ended in a storm.

Life at 480, Thornbury Avenue, was far too slow for Marian—business, always business, engrossing the men, and even Isobel inclining to the side of piety. The girl declared, in the privacy of her room to her faithful mirror, that it was like living in a pyramid with a set of mummies.

One afternoon, after moping about the house for a couple of hours, Marian went to the telephone and, calling up Captain George Gunn, one of her admirers whom she designated as a "hanger-on," intimated to him that she was just dying to go for a drive.

Half an hour later a proud, high-stepping bay and a smart buggy stood at the door. The captain, a

slim, sleek, well-groomed chap, with a long thin face that looked as if he might be some relation to the horses he loved, stood on the sidewalk thanking his stars for his present good fortune.

One felt rather fine to be seen out riding with Captain Gunn, President of the Royal Trotting Association, and a leading figure wherever horses were shown or raced. The captain never failed to leave on the outside world the impression of great wealth and perfect breeding.

Marian liked him for his treats. When with her he carried himself like an emperor, spent like a millionaire, and rhapsodised over pretty women like a poet. It kept the girl busy patching up her threadbare impecuniosity to keep even. But as the wit is usually well developed where the body will not work, Marian was a perfect little schemer, and always succeeded in carrying out any little part she wished to play for the moment to gain her point. Many a pretty fiction did she gently set afloat concerning her father's fortune—which, in truth, had all been lost in bankruptcy—and many a scheme was she forced to resort to, to get the requisite articles for her rather luxurious wardrobe.

Charmingly gowned as usual, and more softly, coaxingly, clingingly beautiful than ever, Miss Marian, on the afternoon in question, flounced into the carriage, sank into a pretty attitude beneath the

captain's left arm, and suggested the Rushholm road as her favourite route.

The Rushholm road was fast becoming the popular esplanade for motorists, bicyclists, horsemen, and pedestrians. It was a broad gravel road, flanked with cement sidewalk and bicycle track out as far as the river bridge, gradually losing itself in the meadows and forests of the open country, and cutting many an unexpected curve on its way to Rushholm. The district on either side of it was the city's latest annexation, and was rapidly building up with new brick houses and stores, and was being improved with electric lighting, sewerage, and sidewalks. One could no longer go out that way of a summer evening without meeting half the inhabitants of the town, taking an airing along the riverside. Usually the pedestrians got no farther than the river bridge, where they bought ice-cream at the corner store and returned home. Those driving generally ventured as far as Mount Carmel, a sleepy little village on the heights six miles out, while those motoring pushed on to Rushholm twenty miles away.

Captain Gunn was in his liveliest mood. He liked to pose as a wit, and when he was feeling up to the mark could be relied on to make fifty jokes to the hour. He was the only person in whose company Marian was silent, for the good reason that his voice was louder than hers.

When Captain Gunn didn't crack jokes he devised compliments—marvellous fabrications, fearfully and wonderfully made. While covering the first mile out of town he had likened Marian to a cloud, to a wayside lamb, to the gliding, smiling, treacherous river—to almost every object that met his eye. And often his flowing words rhymed like the most agreeable poetry.

Tiring after awhile of the sound of his voice, which was rather thin and metallic in spite of a lifelong effort to make it sound commanding, Marian began casting her dreamy, heavy-lidded eyes about her in search of something new.

"Who is that far ahead on the hill?" she interrupted, breaking a compliment in the middle with ruthless glee.

The captain looked grieved; and said he didn't know.

Marian gazed intently ahead at the solitary figure, striding energetically forward into the face of the setting sun, and murmured:

"As I live, that Carningham girl! The fates intend that our paths shall cross."

"She looks a most ordinary person," observed Gunn. "Who is she that you bother your pretty head about her?"

Marian opened her lips to reply, when she was struck speechless by another little side-scene being

enacted under her very eyes. Evan Webb was leaning idly on the middle pier of the river bridge, dead to his surroundings, lost to the world, his eyes dreamily following the solitary figure who now stood outlined in dark silhouette at the top of the distant hill.

The situation came upon Marian with the suddenness of a shock. Not being particularly anxious that Webb and the captain should meet under existing circumstances, she had to make her brain work rapidly to avert the overhanging calamity.

"Oh, captain, are you not going to stop for a box of chocolates at Newbury's?" she asked, as they drew near the bridge entrance.

Instantly the bay was pulled up in front of Newbury's, and the captain alighted, handing the reins to Marian.

"He is tired enough to stand still," he remarked, diving into the confectioner's.

All Marian asked of him was time to think. Her brain, though seldom put to the test, was capable of great activity.

Bother the luck! Why was Evan Webb there, instead of at his beloved work? Why had she told him that she never went out with any one else when he was away? Would he be angry if he saw her driving with the captain? Did she care if he was angry? How could she get rid of one or the

other of them? Which one did she want to get rid of?

And again: Why did he look so intently after that girl? Did he care for her—was he specially interested? Nonsense! What was there in his proud, ambitious soul to be attracted by that low-born and poverty-stricken child of the people? No, she had no fear of that, but she resented it that the girl should steal his thought, his time, even for a moment.

In her own heart—though she would have denied it flatly to a second party—she gave Patience Carningham the compliment of believing that she had not designedly walked out over the river bridge in the hope of falling in with young Webb. She was well aware that the girl had been in the habit of walking out on the Rushholm road before she knew any of her present acquaintances—before the road had become a popular drive-way, in fact. She had some idiotic notions about health, and was one of those vulgar physical culturists, as one could see by her gait.

But to Evan Webb she imputed no such infantile innocence. He was there by premeditated design. He openly confessed to an interest in the quaint doings and sayings of Miss Impatience. He admitted that he liked to make her big eyes light up by doing her some unexpected kindness. His eyes were dark with

absorbed interest as he gazed at the solitary figure on the hill. Marian knew from his looks that when he felt perfectly ready he would go to meet the girl, as she turned back, and stroll into the city with her, quite indifferent to any gossip that might be raised by his action. She knew, too, that though the little ignoramus said not more than a dozen words to him, he would be descanting next day, to herself and Isobel, on the depth and purity of her mind, on the sweet innocence of her ideas, on the bravery of her undaunted spirit.

Marian straightened herself. Her languid hazel eyes, opening wider, caught the changing blue-green-brown lights of the stream. Her full red underlip was gripped by her teeth.

"I'd like to spoil everybody's plan," she muttered, feeling like a whirlwind inside.

The confectioner's store was full to overflowing, and the captain was detained far beyond his expectation. Then he must have his cigar and his joke with a passing acquaintance, which extended his absence another three minutes. The horse, in spite of his master's fast driving, was by no means tired—was, in fact, scarcely warmed up to his task—and Marian's arms grew tired from his persistent sawing on the bit.

Presently, when a sheet of paper fluttered off the sidewalk under his feet, he took the bit in his teeth

and dashed off at a pace the girl was powerless to control. He was going at a good trot when he struck the river bridge.

Marian threw back her curly brown head and laughed. The horse had found the advantage she was too slow to see.

"What fun!" she breathed; and as she spoke she loosened the rein ever so slightly and let him dash on.

"Mr. Webb! Evan!" she cried. "Stop my horse. He is too much for me."

The instant he heard his name called Webb sprang to the horse's head. The bay stopped easily, and was brought to a standstill at the curbing.

"He is all right. You are just a bit nervous, Marian."

Marian shot a sidelong glance back over her shoulder.

"If you are just out for a walk, with nothing particular to do, Evan, will you not come and drive this fellow for me? Really, he scares me."

"Certainly, if you wish it."

He sprang up lightly to her side, gave the horse a loose rein, and gaily away they raced into the path of the dying sun. Captain Gunn, ignorant of what had taken place, was still parleying over several brands of chocolates in Newbury's ice-cream parlours. The shift of scene had all taken place inside of five minutes.

It did not appear to Evan Webb as an incongruity that Marian Amberley should be driving about alone, of her own free will, on a summer afternoon. If it had been anybody but Marian he might have paused to think. But Marian was likely to do anything, and she was particularly fond of horses. Moreover, Si was always hiring rigs for her and Isobel, that they might take the country air.

"Where did Si get this beauty?" he asked, the only question arising in his mind being that Si should start her off alone with such a spirited animal. "I wasn't aware that any of the livery stables owned such a valuable beast."

Marian murmured that she didn't know where it came from. The rig was just to be left at the gate at eight o'clock, and the groom would come and get it.

"It seems risky that they should let you drive such a mettled animal alone," he repeated, slightly puzzled.

She thrust out her saucy chin and laughed.

"But you have a way of taming all things to your will, Marian."

The girl cast her languorous eyes on him with an unspoken thanks for the compliment. Their hazel depths spoke just what she wanted to convey; no more. Her eyes, if the windows of her soul, were always so heavily curtained that they gave little

hint of what was going on inside. They withheld the real thought of her busy mind. She was experiencing unutterable things, yet her eyes merely said, "Thanks."

The predominant experience was one of intense ecstasy. Marian was enjoying herself largely. The thought of the man left behind somewhere on the road, the thought of the girl ahead somewhere in the shadows, shook her with spasms of silent mirth. They might rise up and condemn her later. Pshaw! The one who had duped them once could keep them duped.

It seemed some little prankish imp had espoused her cause and thrown into her hands the very cards she wanted to play next. Let the game go on. She had duped a couple of acquaintances to gain her point? What of it? She acknowledged to herself that before she was through she would dupe her acquaintances, nay, endanger her friends, nay, jeopardise her own immortal soul, but what she would conquer this strong, lordly, stiff-necked creature by her side and harness him to her chariot, to be driven at her own devil-may-care pace. A way of taming all things to her will! How long before he himself would be eating sugar out of her hand?

Webb, still looking intently ahead, perceived that the figure which had crowned the topmost hill had

taken a picturesque pose, in an attitude of contented restfulness on an old stile.

"If I were but an artist," he murmured, pointing with his whip.

Marian acknowledged the unconscious grace of the pose.

"She does look well at a distance," she admitted, carelessly.

"Marian," he sighed, lifting his hat and baring a massive brow to the cooling breeze, "if you could only become interested in people!"

"People? By that you mean the people—the common people? It is so tiresome to help carry other people's cares. I like to think of those who are fortunate, joyous, rich."

"It is because you do not know. Your tender heart does not realise the need."

His fine dark eyes lit up, as his tongue loosened on his favourite theme.

"Is there then so much in working for other people?" she breathed, as she listened to his eloquent appeal. "Your earnestness frightens me. Yet I know it must be lovely to do such things in the world. Evan, I am only a silly, wayward, untaught girl, but I do admire bravery, courage—the people who are doing things."

There was no doubting the sincerity of her words. Her pendulum-like nature had swung to the opposite

extreme. Pranks forgotten, her only wish was to be a saint.

"Do anything!" he exclaimed, as if quoting his motto. "One cannot be far out who does anything with all his might."

"And I have been taught to do nothing."

"Marian," said the young man, drinking in her beauty until his senses seemed drugged with the very sweetness of her presence, "what could you not do—with your charms?"

She nestled closer.

"Show me how."

He picked up the exquisite hand lying in her lap.

"Sweet task to be the teacher of such a pupil. Bless you, Marian, you have only to open your womanly heart. No mere man can teach you to be kind, to be winning. You know all the arts."

A soulful silence ensued.

He was thinking what a companion such a girl as Marian Amberley would make for any man who was ambitious to get along in the world. He was sure she could be taught. She was so lovable, so incapable of malice, of cruelty. She was ignorant, she was idle, she was given over to mischief, more from results of her environment than from her deliberate wish. What might she not become if she were moulded by his stronger nature into his perfect ideal of womanhood? Sweet task to lead her out

into larger usefulness, to see her flower-like mind open to the truth. As she sat so demurely by his side, at times glancing up timidly into his stormy, restless eyes, she looked not far from perfection. What if he fell into the course all his friends had marked out for him? What if he laid siege to Marian's heart?

When the horse slowed up at the hill he found that he had said nothing, though he had come perilously near to saying a great many things. Never had Marian's clinging, helpless, ignorant, untutored charms so appealed to his manhood. Never before had his level head so spun round with hopes and fancies to make the future rosy.

CHAPTER X

A COMPARISON THAT WAS ODIOUS

"How far out shall we go?" Webb asked.

"I supposed to Mount Carmel," Marian replied, glancing in the direction of the village that slept in the bosom of the hills a mile distant.

"Ah, yes. Then we can see the excavating for the city drainage canal, which begins at Carmel. There is a very light sand on some of these hill-sides, and I hear excavation has become a very perilous task."

"Yes, do stop," she laughed. "Let us see these dear, clean, sweet-smelling workmen, throwing the dirt high over their heads in the ditch."

"You do not care to see the brave fellows who risk their lives every hour they spend in those sandy trenches. They live in a grave already dug out by their own hand, and they do it willingly, without complaint, to benefit you and me and the whole city."

"They do it because they are poor and ignorant, and because they haven't brains enough to earn money in any better way," corrected Marian.

"Just another case of the magnificent heroism of the working-man," he insisted.

"You were to teach me, you know," said the girl, with interest dawning in her eyes as she peered over the embankment into the oozy, uneven bed of the drainage canal. "There are four men down there, and a boy who has probably followed his father in after-work hours. They don't look like heroes; but if you say they are, then they are, my teacher."

Guiding the horse to the side of the road, Webb stopped and took a full, comprehensive survey of the scene below. It was half-past six. All the toilers had deserted the field long ago. A mile or so up the line, where the rock in the Carmel ridge necessitated blasting, a group of workmen remained to set off the explosion. Immediately beneath their horse's feet four workmen still remained in the trench, fixing up with boards a slippery hill of sand, which threatened to fall in the night if they left it.

Webb took in the whole scene with interested eyes, admired the speed and accuracy of the work, and the way the workmen had surmounted the perilous difficulties of sand and rock. He was just about to touch up his horse and turn his head toward home when the blasts on the distant hill commenced to go off.

Instantaneous with the report there sounded right beneath their feet the crash of loosening planks and

the heavy thud of falling earth. Shaken from its balance by the dynamite shock, five hundred tons of wet sand caved in on the four workmen and the hapless boy who had followed his father into the trench.

The horse leaped into the air with all four feet, and Marian grabbed her companion in a spasm of helpless terror. Snatching Marian from the almost overturned buggy, he let the bay go to the winds, and in a moment was preparing to slide over the embankment into the opening where the men were buried.

Marian clung to him wildly, but he shook her off, knowing that she was not the least bit hurt.

"For God's sake, Marian!" he cried back, as he dropped out of sight into the yawning trench, "do your part! Go for help! Everything depends on you!"

Marian screamed down that he must not imperil himself for the sake of those wretched victims—that more earth was going to fall—and then all was still.

He grasped the first shovel he saw and sank into the open end of the muddy tunnel.

The last workman in the line, but lightly covered by the avalanche of sand, had already risen to his feet, stupefied and bruised, but with a wild determination in his eye.

" Gimme a shovel too, mate—whoever you are. We can't wait for help from the hill. The poor devils will smother long before we reach them."

They looked like two mud men—faces of mud, hair of mud—as they slung wet earth over their heads to the surface. And all the while, in the long minutes that passed like hours, they waited for a voice from the top—a voice of cheer, of help. But Marian lay on the bank, wringing her hands, and moaning, and sobbing, useless to render any service.

" It can't be done, mate," moaned the bruised, numbed labourer, as he staggered over his shovel. " There ain't the power in us to move them tons of dirt before the poor wretches beneath have gasped their last breath."

" It must be done ! " hissed Webb between tight teeth.

The labourer dropped in a faint of exhaustion at his feet.

" Does nobody see us ? " groaned Webb. " Will no one come ? More earth may fall and bury us all. God, where is Marian ? The only one who knows where we are ! What can she be doing ? "

Then, faintly at first, but quickly growing louder, came a shout of cheer over the edge of the embankment.

" Hold on, comrades ! Help is coming ! "

A moment later the four workmen from the scene

of the blasting tumbled into the trench and put their shoulders to the shovels.

Two minutes later, just as four unconscious forms were wrested from their living graves, old Dr. Hurd, the Rushholm doctor, who also made his daily rounds in the village of Mount Carmel, galloped his little broncho up to the scene of action.

He hastily examined the victims.

"All breathing," he said, with his gruff kindness.

"Can't kill a navvy."

But as he spoke his surly words he took up the boy in his arms as gently as a mother.

At the word of reassurance Webb sank on the bank, his strength quite spent in the tremendous effort of the past quarter-hour.

"Who did this thing?" he demanded, dizzily. "Brought help, I mean, and got the doctor here in this short space of time?"

"A certain young lady," said the gruff old doctor, "who had common sense enough in her head and speed enough in her heels to alarm the neighbourhood. She used her heels in getting to a house half a mile away, and she used her common sense in selecting a house where there was likely to be a telephone. That's how she got me and the rest of the crowd."

Webb's heart went out to Marian. How kind-hearted, how brave, how clever her action. He

climbed wearily up the embankment to get to her.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Said a bystander: "If you mean the one that blubbered, and moaned, and tried to go off in a faint till she saw that nobody was noticing her, she's over there by the fence; but if you mean the one that did the trick, why, she's before you."

Turning, Webb found himself face to face with Patience Carningham. She had advanced to him at the sound of his voice.

"I—I didn't know you till you spoke," she faltered.

He smiled ruefully through the mud.

"We all thank you, Patience," he said, with a catch in his voice. "It was a brave act."

"That it was!" said the bystander, heartily. "As brave in a young girl as your action was brave in a man."

Webb's flush could be seen through the mud.

"My part was nothing at all," he protested. "What man could do less?"

"Or what girl could have done otherwise?" asked Pat, simply. "I guess from my high perch on the hill I was the only one who saw the accident happen."

The bystander glanced at Marian, who was now approaching full of excuses and protests.

Webb didn't turn his head.

"Do you know, little girl," he said to Pat, "in spite of my mud I have a strong desire to shake hands with you?"

She held out both of her slim, ungloved hands.

He took them, crushed them in his own, carried them to his lips in a passion of feeling that obliterated all the surroundings and all the curious crowd.

"Little brave-heart! God bless you always!"

Then Marian intruded her presence between them.

"Forgive me! I could not help it! I never *thought* of getting help!"

Webb cherished no resentment toward Marian. If her demoralising fear had rendered her useless, he had nothing but pity for her state. But the fact remained that her helplessness might have sacrificed five lives that day.

"I wish," said the bystander, "I could have you all driven home. You look dead beat."

"I can walk," said Webb, briefly, "if the ladies could ride."

"Hold on! Here's my neighbour Bates, going into town with his market waggon. Will that do?"

"Yes, yes."

So it was arranged. Webb and the bystander went up the road to recover the horse, which had run away and was now grazing along the fence, and Farmer Bates tucked the two girls in his back seat

and jogged away toward town. The farmer said afterward that they were the only pair of "wimmen-folks" he ever saw who hadn't a word to say to each other.

In truth, although Marian disdained to hold conversation with her companion, Pat had no lack of good company in her own thoughts.

"What are you making a goose of yourself over?" she sternly demanded of her inner self. "The thought of those buried men has got your nerves all ajump, has it? You're tellin' lies. You can't fool me. You're jokin' like's if you had St. Vitus's dance because he picked up your hands and kissed them, and hugged them till they hurt. And in your wicked heart you're glad they had no gloves on, so they could feel the strength of his hands, and feel the gratitude he couldn't express tingle down his fingers into yours. Such happenings occur often in the lives of fine people, such as you've been dealing with lately—heroes bending over ladies' hands and all that. But, you little wretch, you'd better enjoy the pain of your bruised fingers while it lasts. An avalanche of sand doesn't fall in front of you every day—more's the pity!"

CHAPTER XI

TWO LETTERS

THE day after the accident Marian had two letters to write, both of which taxed her ingenuity to the utmost.

The first was to Captain Gunn, and ran thus :

“DEAR CAPTAIN,—

“I know you are very angry, so angry that you will not come to see me and hear me explain. Therefore I shall have to write and tell you how it all happened. I know you found the horse back in the stable when you arrived, and of course you surmised that it was brought back by a strange man who had no business with it. That strange man was only Isobel's cousin, Evan Webb ; and, Captain Gunn, if he had not been at hand at the critical moment, I might have been dashed to pieces on the stones at the side of the road. For you must know, oh neglectful one, that the horse took fright and became unmanageable while you were joking and smoking in the confectioner's shop. What can I think is your regard for me, when you would leave me ex-

posed to such a danger, without ever looking out to see where I had gone? Careless boy! Can I ever forgive you? Better come up some evening and see.

"MARIAN."

The second letter was addressed to Evan Webb, and was even more ingeniously constructed.

"MY DEAR EVAN,—

"I was really hurt when the horse jumped. The doctor who called this morning said so. Is it any wonder that I cried and could not run for help? If you are sorry for your coldness to me, come up and pet me through my convalescence. I am very forgiving.

Ever yours,

"MARIAN."

In this way she generously offered to forgive them both.

Gunn obediently called and received absolution. Webb, who was getting the day's proceedings pretty well thrashed out in his own mind, contented himself with calling her up twice a day and inquiring after the state of her health over the 'phone.

CHAPTER XII

THE KENT ORDER

THERE was a consultation in the private office. The general manager sat with his chair tilted forward, thrumming on his desk with his pen, a position he commonly assumed for thinking. Evan Webb sat with his feet propped up on the book-keeper's stool, also a position productive of great thoughts. Sales, impassive and silent as usual, stood writing at a high desk, his thin lips pressed tightly together, but his large, flat ears laid back as if to catch the drift of what went on behind him.

"When may we expect the Kent order?" asked S. P. Wickins.

Sales looked it up in an old book.

It came in on the twentieth of September last year, and on the first of October the year before."

"Then we may take it as a settled fact that their order reaches us in a few weeks?"

"I think we are justified in accepting that conclusion," said Evan Webb. "I do not believe they would allow any one else to touch their furs."

"I have been with the firm for nine years," said

Sales, "and the \$30,000 Kent order from the North-West has been a yearly occurrence."

"That ought to make things brighten up," smiled Webb.

"There are some others nearly as good," said the chief. "It's not just the money Kent's pay, but their class of goods makes the order of immense advertising advantage to us. It sounds big to say we do Kent's work. We're just in that position, being a young firm, where I believe all our winter work depends on it."

"It, with some smaller orders which depend more or less on the action of the Kent people, practically makes up our winter work," assented Sales.

"Well, then," cried S. P., jumping up and clapping his companions on the back, "since prospects look so much brighter, what's to hinder us from signing the agreement with Hobson Brothers for the improvements, and getting them rushed through before the cold weather?"

"What, indeed?" echoed Evan Webb, with equal enthusiasm.

"I think that the very fact that the largest of our orders is not in our hands yet should make it wise to delay the move for a few days." As he spoke Sales turned to regard them with that curiously blank expression which he could put into his dull, weary eyes at will, and which had earned him the

name of stupid from some men who did not know any better.

"Behold our conservative member!" laughed Evan Webb.

"But what could happen to the Kent order?" inquired S. P. "They are as prosperous as ever, as friendly as ever. We have received very satisfactory reports of last year's work.

"The Brasmore firm may snatch the prize from us."

Sales laughed drily as he made the suggestion, for the said firm had been trying to injure its more influential neighbour all summer without much result.

Webb took his feet from the chair and restored them to their accustomed level.

"Have you any more objections as formidable as that, Sales?" he inquired.

"Believe me, gentlemen," said Sales, "as anxious as either of you to see the improvements rushed through before the cold weather. Yet——"

"Then I think the agreement with Hobson Brothers may as well be signed," cut in the chief's decisive voice.

"Do you make agreement for the athletic field also?"

"By all means. Let us do the thing up right while we are at it. It will take only a few hundred

extra to get it into excellent shape for winter sports. What do you say, Sales ? ”

“ Perhaps,” drawled Sales, more stupidly than usual. “ But—— ”

S. P. did not hear. He was busy with the agreement that his secretary had just placed before him.

Thus the morning.

But that afternoon there was another consultation in the private office.

“ What now ? ” inquired Webb, appearing downstairs in answer to a sharp telephone ring. “ Have Hobson Brothers kicked up ? Changed their plans ? Suffering Samuel ! You look as solemn as if the Kent Company had withdrawn its \$30,000 order.”

Sales pushed over a letter and he read it.

“ By Jove ! It is from Kent’s ! What’s got into them ? They don’t seem to think we’re capable since the old man left us.”

“ It is by no means hopeless,” muttered S. P., trying to throw cheer into his voice. “ They want us to tender for it, that’s all. It’s just a big bluff to make us drop a little on our prices. The order is still as sure as if we had it in our hands.”

“ I’d rather we had it in our hands though,” said the careful Sales.

“ Could we lower our figure and make anything ? ” inquired Webb.

“ Yes. We could still make well,” replied Sales,

who was famous for having every profit and loss figure at the end of his tongue.

"But who else would compete for the work?" asked S. P., who had a slight vein of stubbornness in his nature and wasn't fond of changing his mind.

"Brasmore," suggested Sales.

"Confound Brasmore!" cried the exasperated Wickins.

"I move we dock off a few hundred anyway," said Sales. "We have had it our own way too long, the Kent people think. The profits were enormous in your father's time."

"I second the notion," cried Evan Webb.

"Just enough to make them think we're frightened," said Wickins, gloomily.

"Well, we are," responded Sales, calmly.

"I'm not. Speak for yourself."

"Better give in, Si," said Webb, pacifically. "It's two against one."

"Twenty-nine thousand it is then," agreed S. P., unwillingly. "Pshaw! There's no luck in such an uneven figure."

The methods of the careful Sales seemed to get on the chief's nerves that day.

"I believe I am getting an old foggy, too," he muttered, staring at his littered desk with unseeing eyes. "That man Sales irritates me beyond endurance when we have a big deal on. He almost per-

suades me that we are going to lose that Kent order ; and what a disaster that would be, considering we have all the expenses we can carry in connection with this improvement scheme."

For half an hour he sat plunged in thought.

"Just here," he muttered, "I am going to do something on my own hook. I'm going to make one powerful and final appeal to dad. He tied me up from the first with a bunch of back debts and too little capital. He is desperately sick with an illness from which his doctors say he can never recover. He must be softened. I hear he is turning to large schemes of charity—no doubt to ease his conscience. Could I make my request sufficiently appealing? I would not use one cent for private profit. All, all of it should be used in improving the condition of the people who helped him make his fortune. For instance, if he would hand over to me the \$25,000 he intends giving to the Royal Trotting Association! The sports are rich enough, and they are just hanging around to see him die. How can I make him see that mine is a better cause than any he intends to enrich with his legacies? I will make him see it—trust me, his own son."

The clocks struck five as he sealed the letter, carefully penned with his own hand, and threw it on the desk with his other mail. He felt better. It seemed to him it was sufficiently appealing—it could

not fail. He took down his hat, whistling with boyish optimism.

Webb came through the office with his hat on. Sales, still working, beckoned to him.

"I say, Webb, have we all got it firmly enough in our minds that there is nothing to be said about to-day's deal? If our figure should come to the ears of any rival firm it might be just the kind of information they would like to get hold of."

"Brasmore, for instance?" laughed Webb.

"Yes, Brasmore," drawled Sales, beginning to lock up. "Much as we despise the firm of Brasmore, there are those among us none too good to carry the news to him. Vipont, for instance, harmless old fellow as he seems, has six pairs of ears; and if he scents a mystery, he would extort a confession from the typewriter on which the letter was copied."

"Who would have the slightest inclination to tell it outside this office?" asked Wickins.

"Well, I thought I would just speak a word of caution," muttered Sales.

"Oh, that's all right, Sales," said S. P. "And now let's forget it for a few hours. I have tickets for the Pachmann recital in the National Hall this evening. You have a musical ear, Evan. Care to go?"

Webb hesitated.

"Come up and take dinner with us lest we forget that we are cousins."

Webb still beat around the bush.

"Marian up there yet?"

"To be sure," responded Si. "Likely to be. She has no permanent home, you know, and she is excellent company for Isobel."

"Si, tell them both I'd like to come, but I'm so plagued busy——"

"I hate to doubt the veracity of your statement, Evan, but——"

"You may take it or leave it," said Webb, briefly.

"Glad it's optional," murmured Si, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I tell you," said Webb, in more conciliatory tones, "I'll try to see you during the evening. Where are your seats?"

"Centre, fourth row, five, six, and seven."

Webb jotted the numbers down and put them in his pocket.

CHAPTER XIII

AN HOUR WITH PACHMANN

THE National Hall was slowly filling with a gay and fashionable throng. The recital was more or less a society affair, for the town was too small to attract a great artist unless the invitation was substantially backed up by the promise of the patronage of the rich. Several wealthy matrons had gone so far as to make themselves responsible for the floral decorations, which were both brilliant and extensive.

The Wickins party, holding prominent seats near the centre of the hall, arrived in good time. Marian, gorgeous in brilliant evening attire, occupied the centre seat. On her right lounged Captain George Gunn, who had discovered her after her arrival and had insisted on securing a seat by her side. On her left came Isobel and her husband, while on the other side of Mr. Wickins a vacant seat remained, which was being held by him for Evan Webb, should that gentleman be late in arriving.

It had always been amusement for Isobel to watch a fashionable crowd gather, and it was so long since her husband had taken time from business to indulge

in a social treat that she was enjoying herself with childish enthusiasm. Si, too, was a real boy when he condescended to throw off business responsibilities. They revelled in the brilliant colouring, the sheen of the multi-coloured lights, the beauty of the floral arrangement, and took great interest in the sudden appearance of friends and in the movements of the sleek ushers as they glided about, turning down seats and guiding parties to their several destinations.

Marian leaned back, twirling her rings rather sullenly. Everything was going rather stupidly, she thought. Captain Gunn's sallies of wit in her right ear were unendurable. What a small thing it took to amuse Si and Isobel! Had they never before seen lights, or flowers, or friends?

But with a resolute effort she brightened up when Evan Webb dropped into the seat next to Si, and with his unvarying courtesy proceeded to do his share for the entertainment of the party. Marian knew well that a sullen girl is never a popular girl. So, though she wasn't placed where she could hear all the remarks, she smiled and answered brightly when spoken to, and appeared much more lovely than when loudly monopolising the entire conversation as was her wont.

Suddenly Isobel broke off in the middle of a remark. Behind her sounded the faint swish of

silken skirts, followed immediately by a child's sleepy cry. Isobel caught her breath, turned sharply to see—

In the aisle, attired in the green gingham kept for formal occasions, obviously over the rattly, apple-green underskirt, stood Miss Patience Carningham, tightly grasping the hands of her two small brothers. Closely in the rear followed her mother and the Midget. When did Pat leave her friend, the Midget, out of her pleasures?

Isobel simply stared in dumb amazement. Where did they get the money? Her five dollars! Of course. The tickets were a dollar apiece; it would just go round. At first she was conscious of a feeling of indignation—which deepened into positive wrath as she met Marian's blazing face—against the "upstarts" (Marian's word again) who would take mean advantage of the kindness of their superiors. Then she relented, and prepared to enjoy the situation, as the male portion of the party appeared to be doing. Dimly she tried to understand the passionate desire "to be a human among humans" that had led the child to spend her precious money on a recital instead of on the rent. The rent can be paid any day, but a Pachmann recital comes but once a year.

The usher was glancing doubtfully at the two sleepy youngsters.

"Please, they're paid for," said Pat, pushing them into their places—which happened to be exactly in front of Isobel.

Admitting the force of her argument, the usher was dumb. Why might not the children enjoy the sonatas of Pachmann if they were disposed to be orderly and had paid the price like the rest? The worst they could do was to go to sleep.

Pat sank into her seat with a sigh of intense relief. It was evident she had had considerable difficulty in getting her company into their present array. It was plain that Mrs. Carningham had on one of the "funeral" gloves and Pat the other, each with a much poorer one which they held loosely in the other hand. Boots of all were brushed to the death, hair oiled into place with scented vaseline, every tooth in every head white and shining, albeit there was some evidence of "coal" around the children's mouths.

"Isn't it grand?" asked Pat, nudging the Midget. "Isn't it worth going without ten meals to see the fine dresses, and the flowers, and the man jiggling his hands over the keys like mad?"

The Midget, who with Mrs. Carningham was very much abashed by the brilliant company and on the point of flight, did not reply. In disgust Pat turned from them to her little brothers.

"Come, brace up, Jack! Richie, don't you start

noddin' your head like's you was catchin' flies! Lawsy! It's plain none of you is used to formal affairs."

Then she turned sideways, caught Isobel's eye, recognised her, and smiled radiantly; saw Marian, and though the smile froze, bowed with ready courtesy; turned farther and made a profound bow to the gentlemen, who had been regarding the whole scene with intense amusement.

Isobel leaned forward and passed a bon-bon box across.

"This," she whispered, "will help the boys to keep awake till the music starts."

Again Pat's adoring smile repaid her.

It was, indeed, a most brilliant evening. The appreciative audience went wild over its idol, demanding encore after encore. But in spite of it all there were several who failed to hear the music.

Among the number were the Carningham boys. In spite of Pat's pokes and prods the heavy heads sank lower and lower, until at length, with a deep sigh, she gathered them against her shoulders in motherly fashion, and busied herself in keeping them from snoring aloud.

"You gave them up for a bad job, I see," smiled Evan Webb, leaning over when the long programme was at last concluded.

Webb was another who had not heard the music.

When Pat was around she came first in point of entertainment for him. He had laughed with her jokes, sighed with her troubles, caught every shade of thought on her expressive face during the whole evening. She was, to his world-wearied mind, the freshest, brightest, bravest bit of humanity that ever danced over the horizon of his thoughts.

She blushed for the children.

"But did *you* enjoy it?" asked the young man, while he assisted a sleepy youngster to struggle into his overcoat.

"Trying my best," said Pat, earnestly. "Mother and Midge were so rude as to say right out that it was dry. I'm real sorry the youngsters went to sleep. But I'm not sorry I brought them. Now they've seen how it ought to go, and they'll never forget it. I think if I start to break them in while they're tender, they'll miss a lot of trouble that I'm going through now."

"Very wise," smiled Webb, in his grave, stately way. "But say, do all you people have to walk home down those lonely streets?"

His party were moving down the aisle, half waiting for him, Marian looking back over her shoulder.

Pat hesitated, and the young man jumped to the conclusion that they would walk home because there was not enough car-fare to enable them all to ride.

"Mother will ride home with the children,"

explained Pat, presently. "Midge and I will have to walk."

"Suppose you two come on the car with me."

"Please, Mr. Webb, I must walk," said Pat, earnestly. "I walk every night since Mrs. Wickins told me about exercise. I'm fond of pretending I'm a rich lady. They always walk with their chins up; so, you see, it helps me with my course, and straightens my low shoulder at the same time."

"I see," said Mr. Webb. "Then we'll walk."

"Dud, our errand-boy, may meet us outside," explained Pat, who, feeling the heat of Marian's blazing eyes on her, was very doubtful of the best course of procedure. Webb himself had no intention of making it easier for her. His amusement was running high, and the deeper into difficulties she floundered the more glorious, he thought, became the light in her eyes, and the more brilliant the blush of her cheeks.

"Dud?" he questioned, rather impatiently.

"He didn't have the price to go in, but he said he'd hang around and meet us in case we were afraid to go home."

The more Pat looked beseechingly into his face the more he laughed. Pat vowed then and there that she would never again be seen in the company of the worthy errand-boy whom Mr. Webb had laughed at.

"Suppose we let Dud walk ahead with Miss Midget, and we'll pretend that we are a rich lady and gentleman going leisurely home from a concert."

That cleared up difficulties.

"Now run along with Midge like a good boy, Dudley," Pat urged, when they found the worthy errand-boy hanging his bones over a post on the curbing.

Webb piloted the girl to the edge of the sidewalk, where his friends were just entering their automobile. He put the ladies in, easily succeeding in securing Marian's hand for the moment in spite of the persistent attentions of Captain Gunn. That hand, though the evening was one of autumn's balmiest, was as cold as ice.

"Are you not coming up this evening?" asked Isobel.

"Can't, thank you, my dear cousin. I am really very busy—in fact, shouldn't have come out at all."

He closed the door, lifted his hat, smiled to Marian, saw her whirled away into the night.

And Marian, with rosy nails biting into her soft palms, answered Captain Gunn's sallies, and actually smiled where the points of his jokes should have been.

Evan Webb drew Pat's arm within his own; and

the girl left it there, looking up into his grave, unsmiling face with that ecstatic confidence she displayed toward all whom she felt were helping to open the gates of her ideal world for her. That worshipping look of Pat's great blue eyes made any one tremble on whom it was cast. It had made Isobel tremble many a time—had made her fear lest she say the wrong word, give the wrong advice; had made her stop to wonder what would happen to the child if she were deceived, crossed; if her dreams fell broken to the ground, as dreams will. Now, with a strange heart-thrill, Evan Webb felt the same desire to shield this fragile wild-flower, so unexpectedly pure in its unfolding, from early and disastrous blight.

“Talking about the boys not having to learn all I did,” said Pat, confidentially, “I know they're farther on at six than I was at twelve. It's wonderful how they do improve. For instance, every day now they carry their rag dolls, and their paper dolls, and their mud cows, and their acorn cats, and all such living creatures, to the door, and hold them out for a few minutes to give them 'a fess air,' as Jack says. Now, when I was young, I remember the five of us—mother, and me, and the boys, and the baby that died—all slept in one room, two at the head, two at the foot, and the baby in the cradle. We had the windows nailed down tight to save what fire

we had and to get warm by our breaths. But last winter—didn't the wind go tearing through our upstairs! The youngsters got at last so they never squeaked. They'd get up and throw a mat or a couple of coats over their feet, but they'd never think of asking for the window to be put down."

"This fresh-air life is fine, isn't it?" said Evan Webb.

"Yes," sighed Pat. "Leastways it would be if you had enough blankets."

Then all of a sudden, forgetting the dignity of her position, she broke away and raced on ahead.

"Mr. Webb," she called back. "Do you see that tree? Now watch!"

Regardless of her "formal" clothes, she grasped a lower limb with one lean, muscular arm and swung slowly back and forth.

"Miss Patience," smiled her escort, when he caught up, "why did you do that? The Midget, that little embryo belle, would never do so for fear of disarranging her dress."

"The low shoulder," whispered Pat. "This right one, that pushes the work through. I promised Mrs. Wickins I'd get after it."

"So you swing on this tree whenever you pass beneath it?" her companion inquired.

"Exactly. It's my horizontal bar. And it's slowly and surely working a cure, though I didn't

know at the start what I was up against, or my heart would have failed entirely. Don't you think, take me all round, that I'm better looking than I used to be?"

"I think you are getting nicer every day, Miss Patience."

Pat was not fishing for compliments, neither was Evan Webb conscious that he was giving them. Each had expressed an honest and frank conviction.

"Now the Midget, whose get-up you were just admiring with the foolishness of a common man," said Pat, scornfully, "is nothing but a bundle of pads. She pads her shoulders and she pads her hips; she pads her blouse-fronts and she pads her hair. That's all there is to her. But when I get done with my course I'm going to be something worth looking at. I'm not going to turn myself into a camel by putting a hump where God intended a hollow. No thanks, you can depend upon it, it'll be all me and not a bundle of wires stuffed out with rags. Mrs. Wickins told me the difference between real girls and make-ups. I've taken her for my model, and I'll never stop until I get to be just like her."

"Are you trying all this while to be as tall as Mrs. Wickins?" smiled her companion. "Is that not a hopeless task?"

"I've made up my mind," and Pat's lips were compressed in a determined line that hid their full,

childish curves, "that I will grow tall, though every Carningham for a hundred years back was a little sawed-off five-footer. I've heard that a person can make their ribs stretch a little."

"And when you complete your self-imposed course, what will you call yourself?" asked the amused Webb.

"I hardly know. I shouldn't wonder if you could help me decide. I have thought of things till my head aches, but none of them will do. I did think of being a maid, after I heard what a good time Mrs. Wickins' maid, Emily, has, and saw how fine she looked in her white apron and cap. Then it came to me all in a minute that a maid is not treated as a human among humans. Why, I made her mind *me*, though I was trembling all over when I told her what to do. So, you see, I kind of lost my bearings. I don't know what to aim at."

"If you can't be a maid, be a matron," suggested Mr. Webb.

"I don't know what that is," said Pat.

"Well, a matron keeps house too, but she gets invitations to everything, has her own time, and may be just as fine a lady as she pleases."

"Could you help me to be a matron?" The wonderful eyes searched his face, adding their mute but eloquent appeal.

"Patience, I should love to."

"I might work very hard, and when I was ready there would be no one wanting me for their matron."

"Never fear," said Webb, encouragingly. "Just keep on growing into a perfect woman and trust me for the position. I'll look out for that."

Again she bestowed on him an adoring look that made his heart leap irregularly.

"How fond you are of my cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Wickins," he said, by way of a change of conversation.

"Fond? Well, I guess! They've done just everything for me, Mr. Webb. Before Mr. Wickins came home to take charge of the work I was a fright. You didn't know me then. I had to work, but I hated everybody. Mr. Webb, I hated *God*, because He tantalised me with all His blue sky and green fields so far away from my reach. I think I am part wild anyway. I just *have* to have air, and sunshine, and room. Then Mr. Wickins brought in shorter hours, and better pay, and cheered us up by opening all the windows. Mrs. Wickins taught me how to live outside more than half the time, by eating and sleeping on the porch, and I'm so happy I could sing all day long. I'm for ever singing so loud that Miss Law has to shut me up. I get happy so easily."

"If I know anything about it, you helped to bring in the glad day, Miss Patience. I have often

heard Mr. Wickins tell of the part you played in making him feel that the improvements were necessary. And Mrs. Wickins has said, 'When Patricia is satisfied you will have a satisfied shop.' Are you satisfied now?"

"I shall be when the athletic field is done."

"That may not be long."

"I suppose it depends on the Kent order," she remarked, with a sagacity born of former years' experience.

He started. Her remark brought back the day's business vividly.

"I suppose so," he agreed.

"I hear we have to tender for it," she continued. The shock was genuine now.

"How in the world did you hear?" he inquired.

"I heard Vipe tell Miss Law this afternoon. He came up on purpose, and seemed glad to have it to tell."

"By Jove! Sales will be crazy. But he doesn't know our figure, does he?"

"I don't think so. I guess he told all he knew."

"Naturally."

"Will Mr. Wickins lower it?" she asked. "I think he would make well enough if he threw off a thousand and be surer of getting it."

"Do you?" smiled Webb, amazed at her astuteness.

" Yes. Is that what he has done ? "

Pat was proud of the confidence reposed in her by different members of the firm, and more than sure that she was to be trusted to the death with firm secrets. Otherwise she would not have asked him to tell her.

He smiled down on her indulgently.

" Miss Patience, you are a good guesser."

She smiled, because she knew she had guessed correctly ; and he smiled ; because her bright, winning ways amused him. He didn't care much if the whole world knew what Sales was so anxious to keep. The firm had really no competitors worth fearing.

Pat left him at her own gate with a merry laugh and a happy expression of thanks, easily lapsing back into that weird, incomprehensible child he felt he knew so little about. At times she seemed quite grown up in her wisdom, and at other times she was almost infantile in her simplicity. He knew the time was rapidly approaching when a great change for weal or for woe would be wrought out in her nature. It was impossible that she should meet the hard conditions of the world much longer and continue to live in the ideal atmosphere she had built up all around her. She had kept her childhood a long time. What would her womanhood prove to be—the bitter renunciation of her high hopes, or the crowning of her purest ideals ?

CHAPTER XIV

WASTED ADVICE

"ISOBEL, when you are a little rattled you are stunning!" exclaimed Evan Webb, walking into his cousin's library and throwing his hat and gloves on the table.

"What makes you think I am rattled?" retorted Isobel, crisply.

"Because you are looking so beautiful," he insisted, sinking into a deep leather chair.

She looked at him with some asperity. She was, indeed, sparkingly, brilliantly, coldly beautiful that evening. Everything about her reminded one of a high-class diamond, cut and polished to the last degree. She seemed to be able to choose the colouring of her costume to suit her mood, and the cold, sparkling, electric blue of her dress seemed as much a part of her as her eyes.

"Compliments are quite out of place," she said, with withering scorn, "for I did call you in to give you a piece of my mind."

"I shall be glad to have a piece of your mind, if you think you can spare it."

"Your jokes are not a bit funny," said Isobel, tartly.

He took off his glasses and polished them leisurely.

"Then suppose we get down to business," he suggested, pleasantly. "Don't hesitate to speak your mind, I beg of you, Isobel. I love to have you berate me, because you really love me so well that we have a beautiful making-up time, which is worth all I am called upon to suffer."

Isobel looked at the big six-footer rather helplessly.

"You made a fool of yourself last night," she said, abruptly.

His face paled.

"Did you call me from the other side of the street to tell me that?" he wanted to know.

"I called to you as you were hurrying past," she replied, "because that is the only way we can get you to come in these days."

"Yes."

"I am alone," continued Isobel. "Marian is out with Captain Gunn. I hope we may talk freely."

"Yes."

She bit her lip and was silent. The subject in hand was hard to get at.

Presuming on her two years' seniority, she had played the mother to him ever since their childhood. She had secured his promotions in the Wickins' office,

and had been generally considerate of his welfare. Moreover, she reserved to herself the right to scold him to her heart's content. She was fond of telling him what he must do and must not do in a good-natured way, and as a rule he listened obediently, finding her counsel good to his soul. She was the only woman he knew intimately, and the goodness and purity of her motives had raised all womankind in his estimation. But if, as he had a strong presentiment, Isobel was going to take a hand in his love affairs, the young man feared she would have a very uneasy time of it.

"Don't you think you are pushing the 'poor problem' to the limit, Evan?"

"Why so, cousin? Are you getting tired of helping the poor?"

"I confess," said Isobel, crisply, "that lately the poor have themselves been closing all the legitimate avenues by which I might help them."

"Like every one else," said the young man, pointedly, "you would wish to throw a handful of crumbs to the poor devils and be done with them."

"Must you," she said, with sharp pain in her voice, "identify yourself so closely with those admittedly below you, that you become the talk of the town?"

He drew himself up.

" I wasn't aware——"

" Oh, well," Isobel hastened to correct, " perhaps it hasn't gone far outside our own family."

" What? What is the dreadful thing which you will not mention? You talk in riddles."

Then Isobel burst out hotly.

" That you meet that wretched child! That you seek her company in preference to that of your own people! That you take her to places——"

" Have I done all that?" he muttered, with exasperating coolness. " Dear cousin, you must be dreaming, or I am. Be this wretched child, whose name you will not mention, what she may, rich or poor, beautiful or otherwise, I assure you I have never done so much for any woman living."

" You know whom I mean and what I mean," said Isobel, in a low voice.

She still stood at the other side of the large library table, resting her hands on its polished surface. At her words he rose and faced her, their finger-ends touching on the table, their eyes on a level.

" Yes, I know whom you mean and what you mean, but I am here to tell you that I am not ashamed of the company I keep nor of the deeds I do."

Isobel recoiled. She had never made him angry before. It was almost impossible for any one to do so, his self-control was so perfect. The sudden

pallor of his face, the sudden tremor in his voice, frightened her. She hung her head.

"I have loved you so, dear boy," she whispered, brokenly. "I have loved you so."

He was around the table in a flash and had gathered her drooping form in his arms.

"Isobel," he murmured, "I don't think I am going to like your advice this time. Let's call it off; and part thus—friends."

"Oh," she whispered, clinging to him, "you will break my heart if you don't turn out as well as I planned for you."

"But, dear cousin," he protested, seating himself on the table and swinging his feet under it boyishly, "I am not plunging down a course of headlong ruin."

"You are allowing yourself to fall in love with that girl, whom we all petted and spoiled, and who now is going to turn out to be the viper warmed in our breasts."

He gazed at her with puzzled brows.

"Can it be that you are referring to that innocent little thing, Patience Canningham? She is hardly more than a child."

"A year will change her into a woman," said Isobel. "And she is extraordinarily good at scheming for her years."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"You work yourself into a rage for naught, my cousin."

"Then you do not love her?" she demanded.

An hour ago he could have honestly said that he had never thought about such a thing, but now he felt too obstinate to please Isobel by admitting it.

"Let me explain," he said. "During work hours I stand shoulder to shoulder with a young girl. I am called upon to talk to her, to plan with her; the only difference in our positions, so far as I can see, being that she works harder while I draw more pay. Without any plotting or planning on her part, though you will have it otherwise, this brave, bright little creature has become a sort of daily inspiration to me, the living embodiment of all that is high-souled, loyal, pure, and true. When she fails to appear in the mornings the day loses its brightness, when she is there with her sunny optimism, her undaunted courage, her free generosity, the sun shines in the old factory thirty days in the month.

"It is true, business men are said to have a double life, often failing to know at night those on whom they depend during the day. But Evan Webb is always Evan Webb—loyal, I hope, to his few friends, his own honour, his highest conception of right.

"I had no thought, dear cousin, of 'losing caste,' as you say, when I adopted the rule of knowing my co-workers on the street, in the evening, in a different

suit of clothes. It seems I have unexpectedly pulled the house down about my ears, though I had no idea that I was capable of kicking up such a racket. I have spoken to a working-girl to the neglect of an unworking-girl. Is that the charge preferred against me? Good heavens! A man can't help seeing the difference between a brave young plant, pushing its way to a level with the other stalks around it, and the snail that crawls up on it and lazily feeds off its very heart!"

"I have heard so much, so much," murmured Isobel. "Marian says you have pictures of her——"

"How does Marian know that?"

"I don't know, unless she looked in the pocket of the coat you left up here."

He switched from a vest pocket a small bit of cardboard, cut from a large piece on which had been printed the picture of a group of the cutting-room girls.

"It is no lie. There is one of them."

Isobel looked at it, fascinated against her will.

"Do you wonder that I almost say my prayers to that face?"

She handed it back, shaking her head.

"But if your innocent little friend is to become involved in a lot of senseless gossip on your account, wouldn't it be better for you to leave the child strictly alone?"

"Decidedly."

"That's just what I think," said Isobel, eagerly. "You should do a great deal for the girl's sake. Think what aspirations you may be stirring up in her innocent mind."

Again he laughed in her face.

"You are all wrong, woefully off the mark, when you fancy I am capable of stirring up in the little girl's heart aspirations I may never care to fulfil. I myself am perfectly well aware that I have never yet been able to touch her heart in the slightest degree."

"You have made the attempt then?"

He proceeded, as if he had not heard the interruption.

"I strongly suspect that her mind and soul, and all of her that cannot be kept down by poverty, are away above and beyond me in purity, truth, and love. She looks down on me from a height, and it is I—poor, lonely, hungry-hearted I—who look up and long for a nearer glimpse into the whitest, purest, loveliest soul ever clothed by woman's form."

A look of chill horror came slowly into Isobel's face.

"You've got it!" she shuddered, as if she had discovered that his body was covered with small-pox; and to his great astonishment she laid her head on the table and burst into tears.

"What is it now, Isobel?" he asked; patiently.

"If she only had some family!" she groaned.

"She has her mother and two small brothers, whom she defends with her frail arm," said Webb, warmly. "As far as I know they are all clean, industrious, God-fearing people, paying their way through the world, and living brave, sweet lives at home. What more can the word family mean?"

Still the brown head lay pillowed on the snowy arms. Isobel had received an all but mortal wound. He knew it took a tremendous wave of feeling to break up her reserve force.

"Sweet Isobel, my cousin, sister, mother, all in one! Do not think I value lightly the interest you take in me. To a lonely man, a priceless thing, indeed, is the disinterested affection of a trusted family friend. If I could just lead you to see, dearest cousin, that I am a man now, with my own way to carve in the world, with my own decisions to make——"

The chilly silence remained unbroken.

"Haven't you a word for me? I am going."

She made no response.

With a firm step he left her, closing the door after him.

CHAPTER XV

THE WIDENING OF THE BREACH

Two weeks had dragged away their weary round of days since the obstinate young man, Evan Webb, had voluntarily cut himself off from the family life that heretofore had meant so much to his lonely boarding-house existence. He had been sent north on business for the firm the next day after his visit to his cousin, and seemed to be lingering up there on the edge of civilisation, among strangers, rather than hastening eagerly home to friends and business, as was his former habit.

Isobel yearned for him like a mother. How readily would she have forgiven him anything, if he had only come home, had put his arms around her neck, willing to make up. "And Reuben returned unto the pit ; but, behold, Joseph was not in the pit ; and he rent his clothes." Oh, lost opportunities ! What can still their mocking voices ?

Waiting every day for him to come back and give her a chance to forgive him, Isobel gradually settled down to the ordinary affairs of life, to monotonous discussions of her husband's poor, to Marian's idle

plans for her own amusement, to Captain Gunn's inane witticisms.

Isobel's life had passed under a great cloud. Her husband became more and more engrossed in business, and as she would not go out alone, she missed most of the social affairs of the autumn which took up the time of Marian and the captain. While never forgetting for a moment that she was the wife of the best man in town, whose duty and pleasure it was to cheer, encourage, and aid, she was at present taking but a perfunctory interest in his far-reaching plans. She found herself rather badly bitten from her attempt at playing with the poor problem. She found it required more radical treatment than she had been willing to give it. It threatened to undermine her home and social life. It was demanding all of her husband—youth, health, joyousness. It was absorbing the money she had unquestioningly thrown on her back. It took her from her social pedestal. Worst of all, it alienated the affections of one who had before almost held her up for worship, and caused him to seek other gods of whom she did not approve. Isobel's heart was not in the work, and she was thoroughly wretched. She wanted to reach out for some decision. She was weary of being torn by her conflicting emotions.

Isobel had rather bitterly called a halt to examine into her position. She chided Marian less for her

lack of interest in philanthropy. She gave no more invitations to the factory girls to meet her in a social way. She was afraid to take one step forward or one step back. To step forward and walk unhesitatingly beside her husband meant cutting herself loose from the friends and the comfortable, care-free life of her girlhood. To step back might be to desert her husband when he was on the verge of a grand success. Praying blindly for light, she simply stood still and endured.

Without doubt Isobel was having the worst of the experiment. The men in the thick of the fight rather enjoyed the daily scrimmage. They could see their far-reaching reforms beginning to work, and were satisfied to wait for the successful finish. But Isobel, counsellor and adviser to them all, the only woman intimately bound up in the schemes, was forced to sit uselessly to one side and see her cherished plans topple one by one around her head.

"Surely some day we shall emerge from this cloud," she thought, bearing up bravely as discomforts thickened around her. "The day will come when we can be good and happy at the same time. Business will pick up. Money will not be so tight. We can have all we want without robbing the others. Si will regain his boyish lightheartedness, Evan will come to his senses and love some beautiful girl like

Marian, who is his equal, and home will be home once more."

With the thought of her erring cousin uppermost in her mind, she sat sorting her evening mail in the library, when she suddenly came upon a post card addressed to herself in his strong, blunt handwriting.

Hastily she looked it over.

"Why—what in the world is this? What does he mean? Marian!"

Marian, reading in the window-seat, crossed the room and leaned over her friend's shoulder. She picked up the card and read it aloud.

"MY DEAR COUSIN,—

"When you or yours undertake to circulate a report concerning me, will you kindly have some slight regard for the holy truth?"

"E. W."

"What does he mean?" demanded Isobel, again.

Marian's face grew hot.

"He is crazy," she said, briefly.

"He is very angry," said Isobel, in much agitation.

"Oh, I don't know," said Marian, lightly. "See the salutation, 'My dear Cousin,' and the card itself is very pretty."

Isobel examined everything on the card minutely. It did seem that her cousin, though deeply affronted over something unknown to her, had too much respect for her to leave off the small courtesies.

"But I don't understand," she persisted. "I have not circulated a false report about him."

No reply from the girl standing behind her.

Isobel turned sharply about.

"Have you?"

"I don't know that I have circulated a *false* report," said Marian, haughtily.

Her hostess, fully turned now, was looking searchingly into her face.

"Marian! Marian! You have done something. You have no discretion."

Marian's cheeks were blazing.

"Haven't I?" she said, tartly.

Isobel realised that if she made her fair charge angry she would never get the truth out of her.

"Child, tell me what you have been up to," she urged, more mildly. "What report could come to him three hundred miles north? He is almost beyond the bounds of civilisation. I thought there was nothing up there but furs."

"I, too, have friends beyond the bounds of civilisation," murmured Marian. "The people with whom he is dealing for furs are my friends."

"Yes?"

"Well, if you will have me spit it all out, Isobel, I wrote to them and told them to tease him to death about his little factory girl. They are people who can take it out of him if anybody can. They will not give him a minute's peace."

"I don't wonder that he is angry," said Isobel, her indignation rising afresh.

"Why so?" murmured Marian, suppressing a yawn with her hand.

Isobel was ready to shake her. But remembering her rôle of hostess, she curbed herself with magnificent control, and spoke evenly, deliberately.

"Can you not understand, Marian, what great harm the circulation of such a report would do him? He would be the laughing-stock of all his social set. And as he intimates in his brief note, it is false, false. A man amuses himself with many girls before he decides on one. He will have grown out of that wild fancy before now likely."

"It is to be hoped so," said Marian, curling her lip.

"He must know the source of these people's information."

"Likely."

"Will that cause him to think any more of you, Marian?"

The self-indulged Marian could not stand being taken to task for any of her faults.

"Do you suppose I care what such a conceited, stuck-up, stiff-starched dandy thinks of me?" she jerked out, crossly.

Isobel turned pale. She had allowed herself the privilege of berating her young cousin in times past, but she was never known to sit tamely by while another was picking flaws in his perfection.

"It is not so long since you cared," she said, in the low tone that, with her, always indicated extreme feeling.

"Evan Webb has turned out to be a conceited, stupid, blundering fool!" cried Marian, who, sad to say, often indulged in words too rude to pass her pretty lips.

Isobel had risen from her desk to face the girl whose torrent of abuse she was obliged to hear. It seemed strange thanks for her weeks of unvarying hospitality. Still she pitied Marian for the keen disappointment she had experienced since coming to the city. All her plans for pleasure and social advancement had been knocked on the head by the complications in the Wickins family. So Isobel, the perfect hostess and true lady always, bit her tongue to keep from uttering any hasty word for which she might afterward be sorry. She hoped by her silence to bring home to her guest the meanness and pettiness of her last words. But her sparkling blue eyes held veiled lightnings.

"I know what you are going to say," Marian burst out, backing toward the door. "So I will just save you the trouble by saying it myself. You think my remarks strange recompense for all you have done for me. Perhaps you are right, and if I have spoken my thoughts too openly, I suppose I ought to beg your pardon. But now, having uttered them, I shall not try to deny their truth. I have been bitterly disappointed in your home, your husband, and your mode of living, Isobel; and as for Evan Webb, with his killing piety, the fates have been kind in keeping us apart."

Isobel rather agreed with the last half of the statement. A kind fate was at work after all. It seemed shocking that jealousy could lead a girl, gentle and naturally kind-hearted, to indulge in such a petty revenge; but knowing that to be the deep motive for the outburst, Isobel instantly pitied and forgave.

Marian had opened the door.

"Of course I am going to leave, or I shouldn't have been able to unburden my mind so truthfully," she said, in a more light and natural tone. "I have many other friends who will value the privilege and be quick to see the advantage of having me with them for the fall and winter. When people think they are keeping me out of charity it is time to move. I do not need charity! Quite the reverse. I shall

bring a fortune to the family with whom I decide to reside permanently. Meanwhile, for what you've tried to do for me, thanks awfully, Isobel. You've been pretty decent, and you can't help the men you're tied up with."

During the whole outburst Isobel had not spoken a word. Her figure was rigid with control, her tongue was between her teeth. She heard Marian's heels click across the polished hall floor and then sound a muffled tattoo on the thick carpet of the stairs. Relaxing in every muscle she sank into a deep chair—the one in which Evan had reclined to hear out her lecture a few nights previous. And it was more a smile than a frown that slowly overspread her pale, delicate features. She couldn't shake the happy notion that light was breaking over her long night of doubt and uncertainty.

"Marian doesn't like us. Marian is angry, is going," she mused, looking over locked finger-tips into the leaping gas-fire of the grate. "What does it prove? That I have already cut away from the society whirl in which I thought myself immersed. All summer and fall I have taken so little interest in the doings of the fashionable world that poor Marian has had to go around alone. I am dead socially. Do I care? Would I be smiling, as I see myself doing in the opposite mirror, if I cared? No, no, no; it comes to me with a great wave of truth

that I would rather live with Si in a barn than with the most fashionable throng that others in kings' palaces. I love my husband and my cousin with every fibre of my being. I love their work. I believe in it. I have been living a half-and-half sort of existence, until they do not come to me for counsel as often as they used to do. They are trying to go forward alone. They are straining every nerve and trying every expedient consistent with honesty to reinstate me in the social whirl, where they think I belong. And now this little scene with Marian has convinced me that I do not want to regain that which I lost. Inconsistent creature that I am! What do I want? Just this. To stand shoulder to shoulder between those two, to hold up their hands when they sink down from weariness, to cheer, to encourage, to bless, until they make their names known to the end of the city as leaders in the promotion of civic morals. There's my creed. Oh, the peace, the joy of decision! I have taken several months to emerge from the fog of doubt and fear with which I began my career. But here it is, clear and definite before me. I thank Marian for helping me to it!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE JOY OF DECISION

A CURIOUS peace fastened on her, and she slept in the big chair, with her head on her arm like a child. There was no light in the room but that which flickered elusively around the grate. The silence of the big house was only broken once when three clocks struck ten simultaneously. There had been no evening meal prepared that night. Si, as usual, snatched a hasty meal down town and returned to work. Marian had ordered a private lunch in the dining-room, and Isobel had eaten nothing—a foolish habit she had fallen into when harassed with many cares. Because of less evening work the servants had finished early and gone to bed.

Si imagined himself alone as he bolted into the library and switched on a light near the door. Isobel was much too sound asleep to be disturbed by his step, and he advanced well into the room before he discovered her.

"She waits up for me," he frowned, throwing a bundle of papers on the table. "I wish she wouldn't."

The calm sleeper never stirred.

Si took a turn or two across the rug on the other side of the table, looking at her all the while.

"That is what nerves a man to deeds of desperation," he muttered, "To see her, who is dearer than life, unhappy, wanting things. I shall steal some of these days if I can't make money as fast as she can spend it."

He tip-toed to her chair, sat down on the broad arm, and gazed hungrily down into the pure, cold features.

"Tears? Yes, they are common now in those eyes I once fondly hoped I could make smile always. Shall I awake her, or does she hate my presence by this time—I who have disappointed her, who have shadowed her happy life? Well, she must be wakened. It is late. Isobel, my sweetheart! Isobel!"

With exceeding heart-hunger he laid his handsome boyish face against her cheek, and with eyes at close range watched her white lids quiver and dreamily unclose. A pale, vague smile wreathed her features; then she sleepily raised her white arms and tightened them about his neck. The strong man trembled under the embrace.

"I've been having such a beautiful dream, Si," she whispered.

He caught her arms and drew them closer. It

seemed he could not make them press tightly enough.

"What was it, dear?"

"You did something for me. Guess what it was."

With a sharp pain, well hidden under a jovial exterior, he began guessing everything he thought she cared for.

"I made a million unexpectedly?"

"How absurd!"

"I consented to plan for Europe next summer?"

"Not much!"

"I bought you a hundred dresses all at once?"

"Silly boy! That wouldn't make me happy!"

"Well, chick, what did I do for you?"

"You stayed home with me one evening, and oh, the lovely time we had!"

He stared at her.

"Oh!" he said at last. "And would that make you happy?"

"Far happier than any of the foolish things you thought of. I don't want the money, the holidays, the dresses you think you ought to give. I want a little bit of yourself."

"Oh!" he said again.

For several minutes the big clock on the shelf filled the silence with its ticking. Then he spoke again

"Your dream seems easy of fulfilment."

"It has never yet come true," she whispered, "though I have dreamed it every day for months."

"Poor child," he murmured, contritely. "What a fool I have been! What fools most men are! Letting our chase after the dollars make us grow crosser and uglier every day! This is our one excuse, we do it for your sake."

"I know it! I know it! And for my sake you will be able to stop it, even if it has got into your blood. Of course I want you to succeed, but I don't want you to go money mad. It isn't necessary to my happiness."

"Since when this change?" he demanded, trying to read the smile on her face.

"About an hour ago, I think," she laughed, recollecting the incidents of the early evening.

"It suits me, dear, it suits me!" he exclaimed, nestling down contentedly. "Where in the mischief do we men get the idea that our wives only want our money, and can do very well without our personal company?"

"From us women, I think," said she. "It's a pretty prevalent belief that the American woman chases the American man into his grave in her passion for the things money will buy."

"It is true he can deny her nothing."

"Nothing but his company," she said, pointedly.

"Well, this particular man cannot deny this particular woman even that," he smiled.

"If business must be done in the evening, bring it home—do it here, at this library table, and let me help you."

"You care so much to be burdened with my problems," he smiled.

"Don't mock me, Si. I am learning. I have come up out of great tribulation."

He rose, stretched back his shoulders wearily.

"I say, Isobel, is there anybody around could get me a bit of lunch? I forgot at six, and so have had nothing since noon."

Isobel jumped up with alacrity. It came to her that she had not eaten for many hours.

"There's myself, of course!"

They went to the kitchen together. He put on the kettle to make a cup of cocoa, and she found some biscuits and the remnant of a pie in the pantry.

Standing on either side of the kitchen table they partook of the jolliest meal the big, silent house had witnessed for many a day.

"Why, I forgot to tell you," exclaimed Isobel, suddenly. "Marian is going away."

He tried to look sorry, but only succeeded in drawing his face into an uncertain grimace.

She explained to him that their fair guest objected

to their method of housekeeping, that she was especially disappointed in the male portion of the family, and that she had decided to cast in her lot where she would be more highly appreciated.

He listened with lifted eyebrows.

"It's going to be lonely for you, isn't it?"

"Just so dreadfully lonely that you will have to stay in evenings and do your work at the library table."

"I agree, provided we always wind up with a lunch!"

"You man!" she laughed; and then in smothered tones, for her face was buried on his shoulder, she spoke the truth from her heart—the truth that had been struggling all evening for expression.

"I'm glad Marian is going! Glad, glad, glad!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE BREWING OF MISCHIEF

PATIENCE CARNINGHAM was drilling a few girls she had coaxed into different degrees of enthusiasm over her outdoor sports, at the side of the factory building, one bright September day. This class, which Pat fondly hoped would develop into an amateur hockey team by the winter, had taken vows to allow no fancy-work during noon-hours, but instead to devote so many minutes a day to some muscle-developing exercise.

Pat was getting red in the face in her enthusiasm over some muscle-making weight-lifting.

"Now, Midge, drink in the air in gulps! You need it in your business. Margaret May, I *wish* you wouldn't stand on one hip! It looks so slouchy for—for an athlete. Bertha Brown"—to a shy, new girl, who worshipped Pat, as only a new girl, full of mistakes that needed covering from the eyes of the forelady, could worship—"can't your soft arm lift an ounce?"

Miss Law passed across the yard on her way back from dinner. It was not customary for Miss Law

to stop and chat pleasantly with the girls. This time she did.

"Pat seems to be the alto of the quartette," she observed.

"Why?" they queried.

"Always mouthy, always repeating and saying over after other people."

Pat accepted the rebuke by lapsing into a moment's silence.

"I see Midge doesn't take much interest in such nonsense," said Miss Law, in evident relish at the small girl's awkward movements. "She has taken to herself a beau, and would much rather spend her time puffing her hair and fixing up her clothes."

"Yes, Dud has gone over to her head and ears," laughed Pat, with the utmost good-nature. It was notorious the effort the Midget had put forth all summer to take the errand-boy away from her best friend.

The Midget simpered and giggled, and declared that Dud Warner was only a "friend." It was true that she only valued him because he came handy for getting tickets for the five-cent shows, a class of entertainment she liked better than Pachmann recitals.

"At least Pat isn't jealous," laughed Margaret May.

"For why?" sneered Miss Law, with an evil

smile. "Isn't our Patricia fishing for larger game?"

Pat blushed furiously. She was maturing very fast during those autumn weeks, and she was far too clever not to know what her tormentor was driving at. How could any one say such a mean thing about her innocent, joyous friendship with Mr. Webb? It was not the first time mean things had been said either. The evil tongues of the gossips had taken all the pleasure out of that friendship long ago. It seemed like a dream from which she had long awakened.

Miss Law had assailed her from two different points. Sometimes she condemned the girl for being too free and bold in her manner toward men, till Pat turned cold to remember how innocently she had talked to her grave, stern companion on former occasions, and felt sure that she could never open her lips in his presence again. At other times, Miss Law told her that she was a little fool to imagine such a fine young man cared a straw for her, or that he was doing more than having a moment's amusement at her expense. At which times the girl tried to believe him the vile wretch he was described, and to avoid him as a helpless bird might seek to get out of the reach of a serpent by whose glittering eye it is being held spell-bound.

If these evil rumours had come to the ears of

young Webb; he did not appear to be affected by them. Just returned from his northern trip, he started in to work even more grave and earnest than ever, if possible more considerate in laying out the work for the younger girls. Pat still drew her inspiration from the back of that chiselled head, but at the risk of seeming unpardonably rude she had avoided speaking to him since the night of the Pachmann recital, and had often run two blocks out of her way when she saw she was going to encounter him on her evening walks. He made it easy for her. Rudely, too, he had shunned her, until she could see no smallest reason why anybody should connect their names even as acquaintances.

"Miss Law," she gulped in her aching throat, "you say what is not true. You—I was not fishing—so there!"

Miss Law was beginning to enjoy herself immensely.

Truth to tell, the lady who sneered had been fishing for some months for the same game; but with such poor tackle that the big fish still went free, and the lady in desperation was thinking of falling back on Vipont, who was still faithful with a love untinged by jealousy.

"Not true?" she scoffed. "Not true that a certain person pushed herself in at a concert and set herself down plump before another person, so he

would have to speak to her afterward? Not true that the same person hangs around the street-corners, pretending to take an evening walk, but in reality hoping she may meet the same somebody?"

Pat couldn't help cherishing a little pride over her friendship with Mr. Webb and the Wickins'; and the night of the Pachmann recital, in spite of its many drawbacks, stood out in her memory as a glorious glimpse of the ideal life upon which she so longed to enter. Pat's weakness was vanity, and there was just a little desire to have everybody know that the quiet, unapproachable young man had been good to her. But Miss Law was as thirsty for news as a blotting-paper is thirsty for ink, so Pat had never told her or the shop-girls a word, and wondered how she knew so much.

"You notice how he lays out her work," Miss Law continued, addressing Margaret May. "For more than a week she hasn't had a thing but the outside pockets in the ordered fur-lined garments. "Now, for piece-work, there's no job where you can make better money."

Pat made no contradiction of this. It was true.

Miss Law continued speaking to Margaret May, as if no third party were present.

"It wouldn't surprise me if our Pat became related to the firm one of these days."

"Yes?" drawled Margaret May, mildly amused.

"I hear he trusts her with the firm's secrets."

"How did you know that?" gasped Pat, her astonishment throwing her off her guard.

Miss Law leaned over in a silent fit of mirth.

"I believe you are sore because you can't get Mr. Webb yourself!" Pat flung the words angrily at her tormentor, with absolutely no thought of consequences. "There is only twenty years' difference in your age."

Miss Law, her hard black eyes fixed on the angry child, turned a peculiar, greenish-grey colour.

"No, I am *not* sore because I cannot get Mr. Webb myself. I do not want him, the conceited little pup!"

At that identical moment Mr. Webb himself came round the corner of the building. Pat sank limply against the wall, Miss Law stiffened, and the other girls tittered and passed on.

"Fine day, Miss Law," he said, looking squarely into the eye of the person nearest.

Miss Law, with a fine show of innocence, turned and walked with him into the building, but Pat had fled guiltily.

Miss Law met the girl in the hall, gave her a contemptuous glance, and left her cooling off and sorry. She herself lingered at the other end of the hall to regain her natural colour, which, however poor, was

better than the green-grey variety; then she went to seek Vipont, who always knew how to apply ointment to her lacerated feelings. The factory hands were coming in through the time-office. She waited, concealed in one of the cloak-rooms.

"That random shot of mine was a good one," she mused. "It seems she does know something about the firm's secret. I wonder if she can be worked? A chain is no stronger than its weakest link; and the news from her would be just as welcome as from S. P. himself. More welcome! A thousand times more welcome! I'd like to make her smart, the little rat!"

As the last step echoed down the hall to the work-rooms on the second and third floors, Miss Law sprang out before the astonished Vipont, clapping her hands in a very fit of excitement.

"Oh, oh indeed! I didn't know you were subject to conceptions," he said, staring at her dubiously.

"She knows it! She knows it!"

"Who knows what?" asked Vipont, still doubtful of the lady's mental condition.

"That Carningham imp knows what you would give your head to know."

"What? The firm's figure for the Kent order? Whether it is \$28,000 or \$29,000? It makes all the difference in the world."

"Just that."

"Who under the sun told *her*, Kittens?"

"Who else than her dear friend, Evan?"

"Ah, indeed! Then I was right. They were talking about it."

"What would you do without your ears, Vipey, dear?"

"Lands, Kit," with a laugh like the screech of a cork in a turpentine bottle, "I didn't expect to hear much that night. I was hanging about the door of the recital hall, and I happened to see them come out together. I had no thought of hearing anything but a few love-dovey compliments, which I knew it would be for you to get hold of."

"Do you think it's worth while taking all this trouble for Brasmore?" she asked, as if anxious to get down to business. "Will he ever repay us?"

"I think Brasmore stands a good chance of getting the Kent order anyway," he responded. "Why, he has been writing them letters all summer, explaining that the firm of Wickins has been sadly weakened by the removal of the old man, that the new Company is composed of inexperienced, incapable schoolboys, while the real wisdom and experience needed in handling their large order rests with himself, who has had such a long career as a competent and successful furrier."

"But it will depend on which firm puts in the lowest figures—and we haven't got S. P.'s figure yet."

" We know the kid knows it, don't we ? "

" We think we do. But—how—"

Miss Law lifted her eyes inquiringly to his. She had full confidence that when she was at her wits' end he would produce a scheme.

" Ah—er—will you get it out of her if I tell you how ? "

" Trust me."

He looked up at the transom over the large doors, the only open space where he could see the sky from his desk.

" We need a rain," he remarked, with provoking irrelevance.

" Don't be a fool," replied the lady.

" I say we need a rain."

" To find out what we want to know ? "

" Just so."

" Go on."

For half an hour, regardless of the fact that there was work to do upstairs, and that the mice of the cutting-room were playing while the cat, or " Kittens," was away—for half an hour the greasy head lay fondly close to the dry, buzzy one, and Vipe's lips breathed their venomous secret into her willing ears.

Finally she raised her head.

" If we succeed—what then ? "

" Why, all the rest is easy as a dream. We let

Brassy in ; he lowers his figure by a few hundred, gets it—then we don't work as underlings for these young snobs *any more!* Yes, Brasmore has promised. We become partners in the firm of Brasmore & Company. Mr. Vipont—that's me—becomes junior partner ; and Miss Kitty Law becomes—ah, lady-superintendent. Are you on ? ”

“ Yes,” sighed Miss Law. “ But I wish I hadn't made the child angry.”

“ Forget it—and she will. The little softy never could hold spite.”

“ It means so much, Vipey. I just tremble for my part of it.”

“ Shame, Kit!—shame! Isn't the position of lady-superintendent in the new firm worth risking a little for ? ”

Miss Law raised her eyes, and the hard glint came into them again.

“ That's right! Ah, now you are Vipey's own girl! Carry it through. Don't let your natural womanly tenderness spare any of them,” advised Vipont, bowing her out.

Then the man sat and gazed at the sky, half putting up a prayer for rain, but stopping in the act, awed for once by his own hypocrisy.

Pat was made to wonder that afternoon why she disliked Miss Law. The woman had so much responsibility, it was no wonder she was irritable at

times. She stood between the cutting-room and the firm, and when the girls did careless work it all came back on the forelady. Moreover, Pat reproached herself for letting the teasing of noon-hours take such a hold on her mind. A girl couldn't walk half a block with a boy without "having it rubbed in good and proper," as Dud would say. Everybody teased and was teased. Pat sometimes teased as much as the rest. The girl was very forgiving, and had a painfully tender conscience.

"I owe her an apology," she thought, losing time over her pockets by studying the elderly, careworn face frowning over her table of work.

Miss Law caught her eye and smiled—actually smiled. Pat blushed scarlet to think that she should be second to any one in forgiveness. Then Miss Law completed her fine show of good-will by bringing to her machine a set of very fine collars wanted for several ordered coats. They were very particular work, such as Pat's ambitious soul rejoiced in trying to make.

"I bring these to you, Patience," she said, as if she always used that dignified form of address, "because I can trust you with them."

Pat beamed.

"Dear Miss Law," she whispered, detaining her, "I am sorry for——"

"Tut, child, forget it," replied Miss Law, gra-

ciously, and smiled again, this time a real individual smile intended for Pat alone.

That was one of the girl's happy afternoons, for it took very little to make her optimistic soul rejoice. She was at peace with all the world—even Miss Law. The clock, which she usually described as having "the lags," ran around to five o'clock before she thought it was four. Before she had once thought of the day's monotony she was racing through the time-office to get her hat before the cloak-rooms got too full.

She heard Vipont's voice, which seemed to be raised in a general remark to all who hurried past him.

"It looks like rain."

And Miss Law's voice answered from the distant cloak-room: "Mercy! I hope not! I want to go out to-night."

It was too true. When Pat reached the door the first fine sheet of mist, betokening a disagreeable autumn night, met her in the face. Pat had never owned an umbrella of her own, so she always said cheerfully that she hated to carry an umbrella, it made her hands so cold. So she ducked under several whose owners might have been willing to hold theirs over her, and dashed for the other side of the street. The rain was coming on with sullen persistence, and before the girl reached home she was drenched through her thin clothing to the skin.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WEAKEST LINK

THE Carningham home, in spite of its poverty, was not devoid of cheerfulness and comfort. Although the bulk of Pat's small earnings had to go weekly for "sugar, bread, and coal-oil," the three persistent items on their grocery bill, it was evident that some artistic hand had arranged what simple furnishings the house contained. The curtain was festooned with lovely autumn leaves, and a couple of old pitchers on the sideboard were brilliant with wild asters and golden-rod. Several birch-bark picture-frames, also trophies of Pat's evening walks, hid the bareness of the walls. Moreover, some clever fingers had been at work on a couple of cushions, diligently pieced from the silk and satin scraps cut off the linings of the fur garments. Then, too, there was no home in the town where more real affection was displayed among the members of the family, and that alone seemed to shed a soft, mellow light over the rude furnishings and the fresh, cheerful faces of the inmates.

Patience, as the chief bread-winner, was always

accorded a royal welcome by those dependent on her efforts. Jack and Richie, inseparable always as q and u, raced to the door together, holding up round, rosy mouths.

"We's been good, Patty! We's been velly good a-day!"

"I should think a person ought to be good, when he is three years old," observed Richie's sedate elder brother.

But he who had only that day attained the dignity of three years was not yet feeling the weight of age as his brother thought he should.

"We didn't play with the fire while Mumsie was away, nor fall out of the back steps——"

"And we did some baking, because it was Richie's birthday," said Jack. "Mumsie left us some dough when she made cookies. My baking is good and fit to eat, but the black is Richie's. He says his is brown bread."

"And Mumsie made some ouch-ouch for my birthday treat to-night!" shouted the reckless curly-head.

"He means chow-chow," explained Jack. "If you say it fast it sounds like ouch-ouch."

"Yes, ouch-ouch what's good on top of bread!" reiterated Richie. "That's what I said."

"And the woman gave Mumsie a dollar—a whole dollar! For just one day, mind!" This from

Jack, who was beginning to realise the importance of money in the family.

"And she bought some *be-lon-ee* and we eated the *rines!*" piped up Richie's fresh voice.

Pat stroked his curly head fondly.

"So our baby is three years old to-day," she said.

He wriggled from under her hand, offended at the name she had called him.

"Patty, listen. I can say 'Thick thumb,' instead of 'Sick sum.' Now I'm a man for sure."

"Why, bless me," smiled his sister, humouring him, "our baby is gone. Do you think you will always talk so correctly, Richie?"

"I think tho," said Richie, proud of his th's. And he was most indignant when they both laughed.

"Never mind, Richie," said Pat, sinking into the rocker Jack had pulled up to the oven door. "Sister didn't forget that it was your birthday. Run into the hall and see what is on the bottom stair."

The two brothers immediately dragged to light a small basket of mixed fruit—four luscious peaches, a dozen bunches of red and white grapes, a handful of plums, and a bottom layer of rosy apples.

Richie shrieked out his delight in a fashion that to the mature Jack seemed most undignified in a man of three.

"He never tasted some of those kinds of fruit, but he doesn't need to carry on so," observed Jack.

"I never tasted red grapes myself, but if the water was running out of my mouth on to the floor I'd never let on."

"A little of your sister's spirit there," thought Pat.

Aloud she said, seeing him swallow hard: "Help yourself, Jack. I bring you these things because I want you to be familiar with all kinds of fine dishes when I take you out. You can say, 'We're used to all those things at home.'"

The two boys being quieted with a bunch of red grapes apiece, Pat began to set the table for supper.

"I think," she said, "that Mumsie will let us put the good dishes on the table to-night."

The "good dishes" consisted of a few pieces of a china tea-set that had been handed down to Pat from her maternal great-grandmother. The girl had never learned their exact value, but she knew they were rare, and treasured them with all the love a beauty-worshipping nature is capable of bestowing on such things. With careful poise she carried them one by one from the front room to the table, where she arranged them to suit herself on the humble board. The boys were buzzing about, giving her free suggestions for the adornment of the table, but their sister looked dreamily over their heads with thoughts that were far away.

"If only Mrs. Wickins, and Marian, and—and Mr. Webb could see them," she thought, proudly. "They haven't anything lovelier in their whole house."

Her eyes travelled higher, and rested on a picture in a little frame—an old and faded miniature of the great-grandmother who had first owned the precious ware.

"I love her," mused the girl, drawing her slight figure up to its full height. "She had a spirit that couldn't be broken. She loved all things beautiful and true. She lived up to the highest that was in her, and if she had not had a sick husband and all the trials of delicate health herself, she would have made a stir in the world—no doubt of that. Oh, the joy of being told I am like her! Her blood is dancing through my veins this minute. It brings me to the top like a cork plunged into water. I can't help my nature. It is not presumption to think my family as good as the best. I must believe in myself! And if my course doesn't bring me to a goal as sweet, as beautiful, as truly wonderful as was the end of that dear saint on the wall, I have missed the meaning of life."

The boys were clinging around her skirts, vaguely trying to read the feeling which beamed from her luminous eyes. For their sakes she came down to things mundane, wanted to know what Mumsie was

doing to-day, whether nursing some sick person or taking charge of somebody's baby.

They had just to wait till Mumsie came in from paying some urgent bill with her precious dollar, and then the feast-royal would begin. They had appetites, and they had something to appease those appetites. Happy condition! They had sometimes had the former without the latter.

"Gracious! Mercy on me!" exclaimed Mrs. Carningham, blowing in at the back door, carried along by the angry wind and driving rain. "I pity any poor creature that has to be out to-night!"

"They are very few," said Pat, stopping to look out of the window as she brought a plate of toast from the oven. "The street seems deserted."

"It is an *awful* night," repeated Mrs. Carningham, struggling to divest herself of her soaking boots.

"I know," said Pat. "It came up so suddenly. I just heard Vipe say as I came through the hall that it was going to rain, and when I got to the street it was coming down in sheets. And—oh, I am so sorry—Miss Law wanted to go out to-night."

"It's not always I hear you speaking so friendly of the forelady."

"It's my own fault that I have so much trouble with Miss Law," confessed Pat. "I tried being nice to her to-day, and she was just—just heavenly with me."

Scarcely had the words left the speaker's lips, when there came a loud and urgent knocking at the street door. Before Pat could spring forward to open it, it banged back with a thud under the weight of no less a personage than the subject of their conversation, Miss Kitty Law in the flesh.

"Land o' mercy! What a night!" she panted, sinking into the first chair in the front room, her hat swinging over one ear and her umbrella dripping a small river across the carpet.

"Ye-es," murmured Pat, wondering to what she was indebted for the honour of this visit.

"You wonder to see me," said Miss Law, making herself very much at home by taking off her coat and rubbers. "I told you, didn't I, that I had an errand across on this side of the town? It was of such a nature that it had to be done, so I set out early. I stumbled on till I came to the light in your house. But the night has so wrought on my nerves—always over sensitive, as you know—that I fear I cannot get home. If the storm passes over I shall try, but if it continues I am afraid you will have to keep me all night."

Pat uttered fervent prayer for the cessation of the rain. Miss Law their guest for the night! Miss Law, who boasted that their family had six dozen silver spoons, and two sets of old china, valued, if the collectors could find them, at several hundred

dollars, because they were handed down by her great-aunt, who had been related to a man who married George Washington's cousin! Miss Law to eat at their little table, where the nearest approach to silver spoons was three thinly plated ones taken out of breakfast-food packages! Miss Law to spread all the items of their poverty to the girls in the shop, where Pat had done her best to make a brave appearance and hide the nakedness of her existence! What could be done to avert such a calamity?

If Pat had had more worldly wisdom, she would have found out long ago that Miss Law was but a poor judge of beauty, and that her own fine artistic taste was a guide on which she might unfailingly rely. She should have known that the simple and harmonious surroundings of her humble home, with its circle of cheerful, love-lighted faces, formed one of the sweetest evening scenes to be found in the whole city. But the young girl was but a blind worshipper of truth and beauty. She was as yet much affected by the show of finery in the shops, and by the wonderful tales of the rich and fashionable that gained credence in the factory.

Miss Law's keen eyes were travelling rapidly around the room to get some story worth repeating to the girls. She found little suited to her purpose. Thanks to Richie's birthday, the table was plentifully supplied with good things. As for the china,



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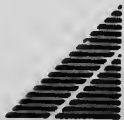
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she gazed at it in speechless wonder, easily recognising its genuineness. With a gentle sigh she turned from contemplation of the house to conversation.

"I got the notion—just my nerves, I expect—that some one was after me."

Pat, standing at the window since the entrance of her guest, had seen, or fancied she saw through the fog, half-concealed, half-revealed by the street light that struggled through the mist on the corner, a man hovering about suspiciously, collar pulled up and hat pulled down.

"Perhaps it wasn't your nerves," she ventured. "Was he a little man, about the size of Vipe?"

"Mercy, no!" shrieked Miss Law. "A great big man—with a horrible mouth!"

"Vipe has a horrible mouth," began Pat, and then stopped in consideration of her guest's intimate friendship with the worthy time-keeper.

But Miss Law, if she noticed it, passed over the break with great sweetness.

"I am not sorry the rain drove me in here to-night," she began, affably. "I have been intending for some time to pay you a call."

Pat wondered, but said nothing.

Mrs. Carningham had gone to the summer kitchen on an errand, the boys were out with her, clamouring to begin their long-delayed meal, so Pat entertained

her guest alone in the front of the house.' Her innocent mind, which never could distrust anybody who made the least show of kindness, began to reflect how kind it was of the forelady to hunt her up and make friends after the continued differences of their factory life.

"She is more generous than I thought," murmured the girl to herself. "She goes farther toward complete reconciliation than I would. The more shame to me for holding spite."

"I wanted to see you alone for ever so long. This night is providential after all."

Still Pat said nothing, but sat looking at her with eyes that would have made any but the strictly innocent tremble in their shoes.

"You dear little, queer little Impatience Carningham!" continued the forelady, with effusion. "I have been waiting many a day for a chance to congratulate you—to tell you what a lucky girl I think you are."

"I, lucky?" questioned Pat, in great astonishment.

"Oh, artless child! the love of a rich man is not to be despised by any girl; and, Pat, you are—you know—ah—poor, and he could do just everything for you."

"What are you saying? I don't understand!"

Miss Law, drawing her chair nearer, tapped her playfully under the chin.

"Come, dear, don't assume shyness with me, who have watched your pretty little flirtation with Evan Webb all summer. Of course at times before the other girls I have given you a little good-natured banter, which I hope you took in the spirit in which it was meant; but I am saying to you now what I was really longing to say to you from the first. You are certainly in luck. Of course you worked hard enough to attract his notice, but that you worked with some skill is proved by the strange, unaccountable fancy he has taken to you. Nobody in his own set can understand it. They say Mrs. Wickins is raging. If you notice she hasn't been so good to you lately. If you notice, too, he himself has dropped off of late also."

The girl drew a long, sharp breath.

"Now this I came out of my way to say—to give you warning as a friend. Don't you care what his folks think. Child, he's rich! He's the kind that will be richer. They've got that other girl up to the house to attract his notice——"

"Marian Amberley," said Pat, instantly.

Miss Law made a mental note. The name was one thing she had been wanting to know for some time.

"Now take my advice and nail him! I happen to know that he likes you best."

The girl was trembling from head to foot.

"Why do you tell me all this, Miss Law? I don't want him! I don't like him a bit—hardly. He is engaged to Marian Amberley, I think."

"I repeat," said Miss Law, calmly, "that he likes you best."

"What makes you think so?" murmured the girl, with blazing cheeks and downcast eyes. Deep down in her heart she was conscious that it felt pleasant to hear Miss Law rehearse her personal charms. Miss Law had shown herself a keen analyser of human nature when she undertook to flatter Pat's secret out of her. It was the undipped heel in her brave, Achilles-like make-up.

"What makes me think so? Oh, many things——"

"But why?" insisted Pat, driving recklessly on to her ruin.

The sad truth was that foolish little Pat was very susceptible to praise—even empty praise, verging on flattery. Her whole being craved for admiration, appreciation. Hitherto she had had little enough of it; but lately she seemed to be coming into her own. The thread of truth running through all of Miss Law's most extravagant statements puffed her to bursting with vainglory. For the moment she was carried to the heights. Everybody was talking about her advancement. It must be true. She must be a wonderful girl.

"Everybody's talking about it."

"Are they?"

"Now, for instance, imagine him trusting you with that secret concerning the Kent deal," continued the unctuous tones of the flatterer. "There is not one man in a thousand who would consider a girl capable of keeping silent about such a matter. And you have kept it so well. All we older heads have marvelled at you. Of course we knew from the first—Mr. Sales told us himself—that the figure went through for \$28,000 in round numbers——"

Instantly Pat started in to correct her.

"Twenty——"

But an interruption occurred in the shape of young Richie, who, advancing and laying his hand on the visitor's knee, said confidently: "I can say 'Thick thumb' now, instead of 'Sick sum.'"

Oh, the smallness of the instrument with which Providence sometimes hooks us back from an abyss of ruin! The flash of fear that came to the surface in Miss Law's face, as the innocent child leaned against her knee expecting approval, opened Pat's eyes. In an instant the reaction came. Foolish little Pat began to doubt. The deep-rooted distrust of Miss Law, the condescension of a call, her strange desire for confidences, her unqualified praise which Pat had never before been able to earn, looking at it leisurely, what did it all point to? Had she bit at

a cleverly baited hook? Or was Miss Law her sincere well-wisher, rejoicing in her friendship with Mr. Webb and her advancement in the shop? Perhaps the whole evening's work was a plot, got up by Vipont; for she could not help thinking that it was the worthy time-keeper whose figure she had discerned hanging around in the rain under the street lamp. This would explain why Miss Law had been so anxious to pass the night in their house. She wanted to get up a long, flattering conversation with her silly little victim, alone in the quiet of the evening, when confidences flow like water, and she had used the rain-storm as an excuse to come in. The woman lied when she said Mr. Sales had told. Absurd! Impossible! No, no; if the secret had come out it would have been through her miserable little self! She drew Richie to her and hugged him till he cried.

Miss Law, not at all sure that the field was lost, made one bold, final plunge to regain her position.

"Twenty-eight thousand! That was it, wasn't it? I'm so forgetful."

"Just as you say, Miss Law," replied the girl, coldly, her face still buried in Richie's curls.

Miss Law took a hasty departure soon after.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE TERMINAL

THE rain still fell in fitful sheets, and the sullen wind still swept with a roar around the street corner.

Miss Law, scarcely able to keep her feet, was blown down the sidewalk as far as Clark's drugstore. Grasping for the door she soon gained the warmth and light of the interior, and found Vipont, perched up on a high stool in the far corner, his lap full of small purchases he had gathered up for his sick mother, pulling at a long cigar and listening to the conversation—the more enjoyable because not intended for his ears—between Mr. Clark and a belated purchaser in the back room.

With monkeyish agility he sprang down.

"Well, my girl——"

"Take me home!" snapped Miss Law, crossly.

"How did you make out?"

"Not a word until I am out of this. I am perfectly wretched."

Perceiving that she was not in a very delectable humour, he took her arm—she being the best man

of the two on a dark night—and followed her obediently out of the store.

The terminal station was only two blocks away. Into it all the electric lines of the city and suburbs ran, so that at all hours one could conveniently get a car for any direction. Gathering up parcels, umbrellas, and skirts they made a dash for its hospitable doors.

Two drenched and wind-whipped mortals they entered the warm, elegant, commodious waiting room ten minutes too early for the car bound for their suburb. Thoroughly out of patience with the work of the evening and with her present incongruous appearance, Miss Law flung herself into a seat in the farthest corner and frowned out her displeasure on the hapless Vipont, who stood before her like a badly bedraggled bantam rooster.

“You told me to do it!” she snapped.

“Well, Kittens,” said her escort, patiently, “I am not infallible. I just thought it might work.”

“You got me to make a fool of myself,” she wailed.

“It’s quite true,” retorted Vipont, “that you have made a fool of yourself, but I didn’t make you do it. I might have known that you were not slick enough to work up the flattery to the proper pitch. I should have trusted nobody’s tongue but my own.”

“She wouldn’t have believed a word you told her,” she snorted, angrily.

"No? Then I should have been no worse off than you are at present."

Miss Law bit her lip.

"That Carningham kid, I could have squeezed his head into pulp."

At the name some one in the seat behind sat up and took notice. It was a pretty girl, brilliantly attired, who lounged in the next chair with her feet between two suit-cases. She bent forward, smiled, and tapped the arm of a sporty-looking gentleman, who seemed to be her escort.

Vipont and Miss Law had resumed their conversation.

"You still feel sure that the Carningham girl knows the exact figure?"

"Don't ask me that again. I told you I was sure."

"The difference of a few hundred dollars is a little thing to hold us up so long," sighed the man, who liked to talk in big numbers, though the question of a few hundred dollars would have made a vast difference to him at any time.

"It is of sufficient importance to upset our best laid plans," said the lady, gloomily.

"To be sure it is," admitted the other. "Brasmore wouldn't have to lower the figure fifty dollars to get the order. Kent's decision is hanging on a hair."

"Can you imagine the loss of \$30,000 ruining the firm?" smiled Miss Law. "The way they grab for that order shows what desperate straits they must be in."

"No; I cannot imagine \$30,000 ruining any reputable firm," responded Vipont. "Though no one will deny that it is a neat little sum for one retail house to pay out every fall for furs. In years past the firm has used that first big fall order as an advertisement on a large scale. Their challenge has been: If we can please Kent's, we can please the most fastidious buyer on the Continent. The withdrawal of the Kent order would cause many other houses to doubt our ability."

"As you have pointed out before," said the lady.

"To be or not to be," quoted Vipont, facetiously. "Whether we shall guess twenty-eight thousand and put it so low there is no profit left in it, or whether we shall guess twenty-nine thousand and lose it altogether."

A lovely head was thrust between the heads of the two plotters from over the back of the seat.

"The figure is twenty-nine thousand," a pair of rosy lips said distinctly.

When they turned as quickly as two mortals ever turned, the owner of the rosy lips was far away, moving after a man who lugged two suit-cases toward a car whose departure was just being announced.

"I am reminded that we have a car to catch," exclaimed Vipont, gathering up his parcels hurriedly.

"Sit down," said the lady. "What's a car?"

He resumed his seat obediently, just as the car for which they had been waiting so long thundered out into the darkness.

"That girl was Marian Amberley," she said, emphasising every word. "She seems to be going away. Look at her suit-cases."

No light broke over his countenance.

"Marian Amberley, Vipey dear, accompanied by Captain George Gunn—the man who has his name in the papers for managing all the races and sports. Oh, stupid! Haven't you heard of her? She stays up at the Wickins' mansion, and was going around with Evan Webb before she struck on to George Gunn."

The light broke.

"Is she at the outs with the Wickinses or at the ins," he wanted to know.

She linked together all the little news items she had collected about the case, and replied with sagacity,

"At the outs."

"Then she spoke the truth," squealed Vipont, jumping up. "Hurrah! Hurrah! My girl, we have all we want!"

CHAPTER XX

THE CYCLONE STRIKES

To Patience Carningham the next few days that passed by were like long æons of nightmare. In thinking over her conversation with Miss Law, on that memorable evening of wind and rain, there had settled over her mind a heavy fear that she had gone too far—that Miss Law had caught the words that crowded on her tongue. Miss Law's air of bland satisfaction confirmed this fear. She no longer took pains to be friendly; in truth, had not addressed her since that hour.

The firm waited for its winter work, dependent on several orders from the West, which in their turn depended on the action of the Kent people. A suspicion, difficult to allay, seemed to have got abroad among their customers that the firm was not doing much business, and was not as reliable as it might be. Twenty thousand dollars, ten thousand dollars, many lesser sums, all in their minds, but none in their hands. The whole Company held its breath in suspense. The first of October, by which time

the transaction was usually settled, had passed without a word.

The people who were employed on the rather extensive improvements were becoming urgent in their demands for money to complete the work. *Money!* The haggard members of the firm had the word flung at them from all sides, until their brains were beginning to work along in one narrow groove, thinking only how they could convert what commodities they owned into the precious coin they so sorely needed.

But if the faces of the men showed the strain under which they were labouring, the countenance of wretched little Pat was drawn in agonised lines. Every morning saw her worn to a thinner shadow. Evan Webb saw it, and said the child was pale from indoor work. Miss Law saw it, and gloated. No one else appeared to notice the change.

Pat slid into her chair mornings, stealing guiltily past S. P. Wickins or Mr. Sales, should she chance to meet them in the lower hall. Her merry voice was still; Miss Law did not have to reprimand her for sudden outbursts of song. Her eyelids were seldom raised, and the fever-spot never left her cheeks, unless in moments of sudden terror the blood all curdled around her heart, leaving her face like milk. Many times a day her heart almost jumped out of her body when any one approached who

might have authority to land her down in the private office. It was not like Pat to be nervous. Only consciousness of guilt could have rendered her so.

On the seventh day of her torture, which was the third of October on the calendar, about eleven o'clock in the morning, when Pat, eager to drown her thoughts in the roar of the machinery, was driving her work through frantically, she felt rather than saw that Vipont was approaching behind her chair. He passed her unnoticed, however, not even stopping to jerk the long braids that hung over the back of her chair; but something in his evil face as he approached Miss Law's table struck her cold with terror. Such a combination of malignity and triumph she had never seen. How could Miss Law smile up into such a countenance!

"Congratulations, Kittens," her straining ears heard.

"Why so?" cried Miss Law, half-rising from her chair in her excitement.

"S. P. has lost the Kent order."

"No!"

"I say yes!"

Miss Law put her hand to her heart. Like her nerves it was supposed to be weak.

"Who was the successful competitor?" she asked.

"Our friend B——. Ha, ha! The whole thing worked without a break anywhere. But don't squeal. You'll hear it all in time. They're crazy down in the office. There goes Webb rushing downstairs now. He's just heard the news. Oh, ha, ha! Very good, indeed!"

"Whatever goes up must come down again," smiled Miss Law, listening to Webb's retreating footsteps with something of her usual composure. "There are some young persons around here who have been flying mighty high."

Vipont walked away, his heels clacking to keep time to his diabolical laugh.

"Ha, ha! Very fine show! I could stand this all day long. Very fine show, indeed!"

Pat fumbled her work helplessly, giving her finger a thrust with her machine-needle in her blind, bewildering excitement. All that seemed clear was that they had lost the Kent order, because she told Miss Law, and because Miss Law told Vipont, and because Vipont told Brasmore. They had lost the Kent order through her, through her, through her, sang the blood in her brain. Oh, what a silly, flattered little dupe she had been!

Something in Pat's throat ceased working. She found herself breathing but unable to swallow. Her lips and tongue felt thick and numb. She

groped for her little drinking-cup, which always occupied the bottom machine drawer, and under the pretence of getting water made her escape from the room. But it was not till noon that her continued absence caused any alarm among her room-mates.

CHAPTER XXI

THE STICKING-PLACE

THOUGH the office staff felt one and all a sensation for all the world like being hit on the head with a sledge-hammer, they worked on mechanically through the most trying day of the young firm's history. On the floor in the midst of them lay the letter, like a virulent envelope full of small-pox bacteria which every one was afraid to handle. The routine of the day went on its listless round, the telephone rang and was answered, business questions were asked and replied to ; yet all had the funereal feeling that they were standing by the open grave into which their dead hope was being lowered.

Sales, his long back curved just a trifle more than usual, and his large, flat ears laid back to catch the drift of all the conversation that went on behind him, worked among his ledgers, showing less perturbation of spirits than any of them now that the worst had come to the worst. No one knew what was passing in his mind, but it was generally conceded that Sales couldn't show anything more than a multiplication-table.

Evan Webb, who divided his time pretty equally between the cutting-room and the office, stood dictating letters monotonously, as if the Company's winter work depended primarily on the circulars he was planning to get out. He was young, impetuous, and hopelessly angry at the turn affairs had taken.

S. P. Wickins seemed to have a mania for opening mail, and a large enough pile lay before him to inspire any man with the hope that something good might turn up. Perhaps there was some mistake. The Kent people might write again, confessing that they had mixed their letters. Smaller orders were expected in every day. Undoubtedly some of them lay before him. In event of the worst combination of calamities, there would be the letter from his father coming along any minute. He had every reason to hope good would come of that. The chief possessed a most optimistic temperament, and his oft-repeated motto was one that had worn well during the first trying year of his business career.

"Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail."

It was screwed to the last notch now ; but, pshaw ! something good was sure to happen to-day.

He seized a paper-knife and carved up several envelopes feverishly.

The first sheet he spread out was a bill from the lumber merchant for the supplies they were using

on the improvements. He did not even contemplate it, but he knew it was both heavy and urgent. Well, well, he thought impatiently, his father's cheque would straighten up all those things.

He opened the next letter. It was a bill from the foundry which had been putting in the latest furnace equipment. It was fully as long as the other, and as urgent. It he also laid aside to await the paternal cheque.

The third letter informed him with a politeness which was only equalled by its finality, that a small Eastern firm would not 'do business with them this year because they got lower prices elsewhere. That was the first effect arising from the trouble with the Kent order. Smaller firms were becoming suspicious of their ability. The financial world seemed to be quaking. He could get no solid ground for his feet. "That cheque!" he breathed between tight teeth. "That cheque!"

Clearly there was nothing of interest in the rest of the pile. They were evil-omened, all of them. He turned them over to his secretary. At three o'clock another mail would come in. Probably it would bring the letter with the Rushholm post-mark.

The three o'clock mail arrived, *and so did the letter!* It was in his father's own handwriting. He wondered a little at the writing, knowing his father always employed a secretary. Doubtless this heart-

to-heart talk from father to son was too personal, too sacred, for the eyes of a hireling. It was a full, fat epistle, which looked capable of containing a dozen cheques, beside a whole lot of loving advice. He took great pleasure in turning it over and examining it from every corner before opening it. He had expected only a brief note, if any. His father was not a man of words. His way of expressing forgiveness would be by the cheque. It was remarkably good of the old chap to unburden his bosom by a tender message as well.

He brushed his hand across his brow. A cold sweat had broken out on his face, as he tried to make himself believe all he wanted to come true.

With the chilly, intermittent fever of expectancy he cut the end and dug it out. He stared blankly, as the perspiration froze on his brow. The first glance revealed the fact that it contained no cheque!

The salutation arrested his eye.

"THE S. P. WICKINS COMPANY,
Wholesale Furriers.

"GENTLEMEN. . . ."

That struck the note of sympathy dominant throughout. It went on, page after page, in abusive tirade, telling the three gentlemen collectively, and at times switching off to the son personally, what the writer thought of people who did business along

their line, squandering what capital they had in so-called philanthropy, the misplaced kindness of broadening the minds of working-people, who were the better workers the more like animals they could be kept. The last two pages reiterated, with a pleasing variety of emphasis, that the old gentleman was done once and for ever with such a trio of fools; and that living or dying they need expect nothing from him, as he could find a better use for his money than making skating-rinks and furnishing reading-rooms for people who did better without knowing the existence of either luxury.

S. P. flung the letter on the floor and stamped—actually stamped on the hapless sheets. His companions, regarding him with some curiosity, doubtless made a good guess at the cause of his excitement; but he made no explanation, remembering that he had consulted no one in the writing of the letter. He seized his hat and went out, stumbling over piles of sash and dressed lumber, which had been unloaded in the hall for the repairs, and cursing them as he went. Sales, who raised his patient eyes as the door clicked savagely, reflected that he had gone to look up some ordered work from the retail shops. It was coming in quite plentifully, and might run them several days—perhaps weeks. Sales had forgotten it, but it flashed upon him as he muttered, with a chuckle: "Never saw the chief balked yet!"

CHAPTER XXII

A RACE WITH THE WIND

THE privacy of the office was that day molested by many visitors. Calamitous news travels so rapidly that almost before they knew what had happened themselves outsiders dropped in to offer condolences. That very afternoon several business friends came around, out of curiosity or sympathy (Sales would have it the former, as it was plain that they came straight from the Brasmore firm), to inquire after the Company's health. Sales growled about the noise disturbing his calculations, and to one and all returned the same answer : That the Company was in good health, that business was fine, that they were not looking for sympathy, and would be most happy to settle down to work if quiet and order could be restored. In this way rumour was blindfolded, gossip was gagged. The business world decided to reserve judgment. A few days would decide.

But there was one visitor whom Sales could not shake. It was Mrs. Carningham, who for an hour had stood in the hall waiting her turn after the men got

through. Coldness did not awe her, inattention did not drive her away. At last, just before the time for closing, Webb came downstairs, saw her, wondered what she had been waiting for so long, and beckoned her to his own desk.

"Mr. Webb," she burst forth, with all the excitement which had been gaining strength while it waited, "does any one know where my Pat is?"

Webb regarded her with a startled expression.

"She is upstairs——"

"Begging your pardon, sir, she's not!" wailed Mrs. Carningham.

Webb's expression seemed to convey a doubt.

"Send up and see," she urged.

He hastily made inquiries, and found it indeed true that Patience Carningham had left work about eleven o'clock and had not returned. Alarm began to take the place of incredulity in his face.

"But surely, Mrs. Carningham, you must have some idea—there must be some friend's place——"

"Patty wasn't in the habit of running to visit a friend during work hours," said her mother.

"Then what do you think she has done?" he demanded.

"I think she has gone and done something desperate," she wailed. "She hasn't been acting like herself for a week. She's taking on mighty hard over something."

Webb puzzled, and gradually there stole through his mind the remembrance of a night, and a talk, and a secret that had been better kept. His absolute faith in the girl had made him forget that he had told her heretofore. Was it through her that the calamity had come upon them all? Had some one taken advantage of a simple child—squeezed it out of her by cajolery or threats? He squared his shoulders. If so, he should be helping to bear the blame.

"Where *would* she go?" he demanded of the mother.

Mrs. Carningham lifted her heavy lids.

"I'm done, Mr. Webb. My head won't work thinking up reasons why she should leave home so mysteriously. There isn't any reason. Can you think of one?"

"No—er—let me think! This is awful!"

"Oh, Mr. Webb, think quick. I can't help picturing her wandering out to the Mount Carmel falls, or some awful place. It gives me the horrors to think of what might be happening while we stand here deliberating. Don't think! *Do something!*"

"What would you suggest that I do?"

"Send some one after her for the love of heaven! It's almost night, and it's cold with snow or sleet in the air, and she'll perish on the road—for she won't come home till she's brought, I feel that. Oh,

somebody take pity on me! Does no one care what becomes of little Patty? I can't go out myself and leave the children. I've been all around to the neighbours' houses, and—God help me!—looked in the old well at the bottom of the Barnes place——”

“Madam, hush!” murmured Webb, turning pale. “Trust me to do all that can be done. I will go myself; but you must give me time. Let me think. I do not know where to go.”

“Time, time to think!” gasped Mrs. Carningham. “And Pat lying cold and stiff maybe——”

“Stop!” he thundered, confronting her fiercely. “Woman, stop your complaints, or you will drive me mad. I am in no mood to hear them. I do not believe any one of these terrible things has happened to your daughter. She may be home before you get back. But if she is not, you may trust me for finding her. Say no more.”

She stood before him trembling and silent.

“Madam, come with me,” he said, more gently.

She followed him meekly out.

They were met at the door by the Carningham boys, who had run from home with bare heads to find their mother.

“Patty isn't home yet!” they cried together.

Webb appropriated to his own use Si's handy runabout automobile which stood at the curbing. He threw in some extra fur robes, for the evening

was raw and chilling, jumped in, waved his hand bravely, pulled down his cap and ducked his head to meet the bitter October wind, and drove the car toward the Rushholm road. It was the most travelled country thoroughfare, the one the strange little thing always used on her walking tours, and perhaps the recent letter from Rushholm had left the name in his mind. There was nothing to do but to go out on it a few miles, inquire of the people he met, and if wrong turn back and head another way.

Accordingly he accosted the first countryman he saw. He was a slow, composed sort of individual, who stood leaning against a low rail fence contemplating a large field of turnips and the possibility of their being nipped by the frost that very night, without one ambition stirring him to help the men get them out. Two boys, evidently hired help, worked with intermittent fits of industry at the other end of the field, but the owner took no notice of them beyond shouting out an occasional order at the top of his lungs. His whole appearance, to say nothing of the appearance of his weedy, tumble-down farm, was a mute attestation of this good man's slack disposition, while the twist in one of the rails, forming a natural seat, showed itself worn smooth and shiny from its master's meditations thereupon.

"Were you working in this field to-day about noon?" Webb inquired.

The farmer straightened his back, crawled through the fence, and came close to the car, evidently considering it something of an honour to be on intimate terms with the occupant of such a fine automobile. Finally he put a great muddy boot, reeking with the fresh odour of turnip-tops, on the fore hub.

"I'm not often workin' around noon," he grinned.

"Then let us say from one to two," said Webb, smiling with his rare patience, though he was inwardly wild to be going on. He saw that this man would take his own time though a shower of stars were falling around his feet. "You country people get dinner early," he added.

"To-day? Let's see," mused Farmer Goodsole. "Reckon I didn't take more'n half an hour noon-spell. I'm a busy man, and to-day is one of my busy days. Rowe, the dairyman, sent in a big order for turnips to be shipped out by local freight. So we're hauling straight into town from the field. Never saw the like of this yield of turnips. Now, did *you* ever see roots the size of them ones layin' over agin the fence?"

All of which seemed to the impatient Webb a trifle off the point. He checked the old fellow's garrulity with a sharp gesture.

"Did you happen to see a child, a young girl, walking on this road to-day?"

"A child? How old? Five, or mebbe six?"

"No, no! I should have said a young lady, but small for her age."

"Now, I bet you mean that funny little thing that comes tearing past here like mad most every night. She walks like a queen goin' to her throne."

Hope sprang into the young man's eyes.

"Did she pass to-day?"

"Wal, now, I'm just thinkin'. Did she, or didn't she? By Jiminy, I don't know. Was it last night or was it to-day she passed, singin' out, 'Hello, Mr. Goodsole!' Bless you, she knows us all, and often stops to talk when the young folks are at the potato diggin'."

Webb started up the machine, and Goodsole perforce took down his foot.

"You can't say then, Mr. Goodsole?"

"Wal, I can't for sure, though I incline to the belief that——"

"Yes?"

"That it was either to-day or yesterday she went along! But I'm not sure. Mebbe it was the day before."

Webb inclined his head, perhaps as a farewell salute, perhaps to meet the keen wind. The car flew away into the dusk, while Goodsole took up his position on his favourite rail and tried to think it out.

A mile farther on Webb overtook a boy with a large bundle of papers.

"Gimme a ride!" shouted the boy, with all the audacity peculiar to his age and sex.

Webb frowned him away, then brought the car to a standstill at his very feet.

"Do you take those papers to Rushholm?" he inquired.

The boy was already clambering in. His bare fingers were numb with the cold, and as he sank under the furry robes he eyed with great peacefulness the icy stretch of road over which he would have had to travel.

"To Rushholm?" piped the boy. "Gee whiz, mister, where are you from? Don't you know Rushholm is twenty miles from the city? No, I only go to Mount Carmel: that little village you see on the top of the hill. It's six miles out, and that's enough for me."

"Did you come in from Carmel to-day?"

The boy eyed him saucily, head on one side like a sparrow.

"Say, mister, where did *you* come from, and what's *your* business?" he asked.

"I am not idly curious," smiled Webb. "I simply wanted to know if you chanced to see a young girl walking on the highway toward Rushholm to-day."

"What! That daft young thing? We thought she might have escaped from some home."

" You saw her then ? "

" She passed the corner by the Carmel post-office just as I was starting out this afternoon. She was so pretty, yet so strange, with her hair flying, and her dress torn, and all crying——"

The paper-boy made his record speed to Mount Carmel that night. It lay before him only a couple of miles down the smooth road, and it seemed while he was looking he was there. His mouth was opened for talking, and he never got it shut till he was dumped at his own door. He tried to frame some word of thanks, but the car and its occupant seemed a mile away.

" Gee," he muttered. " I bet she's a desperate one, and he's a keeper out at the asylum, and he's afraid she'll be doing some damage before he gets her again. Anyway, he rides like the devil."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DRAGON'S LAIR

WHEN Patience Carningham left her machine, drinking-cup in hand, she had not the vaguest notion where she was going. But she was fully determined to go somewhere where those she had betrayed and ruined would never find her. Not that into her innocent mind entered a thought of self-destruction. No, she would just walk, and walk, and walk, away from the scene of the trouble and away from them in whose eyes she must appear a monster of ingratitude and faithlessness. How it would end she did not try to conjecture.

She threw her little cup into the sink below the tap, and with a sort of impish glee heard it break into a hundred pieces. She put on her hat and coat methodically, and drew on a pair of pretty woollen gloves, which she had been able to buy one week over and above the "sugar, bread, and coal-oil." She remembered, as in a dream, that she had been so fond of them.

She felt quite jaunty, reckless, wicked, as she

slipped down the front stairs. She had no fear of hindrance, of detention. Messenger-boys and errand-girls went out that way, and Pat herself was sometimes selected to go up to the retail stores and see about some detail of their ordered goods. The carpenters working on the repairs might have stopped her for a chat, but she broke through them and was gone. They smiled, saying it was her way, and forgot about it.

At the street corner she remembered saying, "And now where?" And her voice seemed to come from the frozen hills on the other side of the river.

There was no road that appealed to her for familiarity, for beauty, like the Rushholm road. She had a strong inclination to go out on it and say good-bye to all the things she had met and conversed with in her delightful summer walks. She would see again the great elm trees in Farmer Goodsole's last field, perhaps the genial farmer himself leaning on his smooth and shiny rail, to say nothing of the stray cats, and dogs, and cows around the dear, sleepy Carmel heights. Beyond that she had no plans, but she had an instinctive feeling that she was saying "Farewell" to every familiar object as she hurried past.

Scarcely was she out of town when she was overtaken by one of Farmer Goodsole's turnip waggons returning empty from the freight yard, from which

point they were shipping their roots to Rowe, the dairyman. She was invited to ride out a mile or two, if she cared to put up with the jolting of the lumber-waggon over the frozen roads.

With the idea strong upon her that she must be far from the town by night, she scrambled up, amazed the driver by saying never a word, and when the waggon turned in at the field got soberly down and turned to struggle up the heights toward Carmel, with the perverse sun playing hide-and-seek in her face from the ridge of forest ahead.

From Mount Carmel the road dropped abruptly, making as swift a decline on that side as it had made a steep ascent on the other. She could plainly see Rushholm, though it was still many miles distant. She stopped in a daze to consider. Rushholm was the home of Mr. Silas P. Wickins, senior. Therefore she disliked Rushholm. Why, then, was she headed that way?

While she sat thoughtfully on a boulder on the edge of the woods, her nimble wits came back to her all at once. It became clear that from the first she had been bent on going to Rushholm—to the house of Mr. Silas P. Wickins, senior, whom she both hated and feared. Why this strange desire to beard the old lion in his strongly defended den? The answer came readily. Because he had money—piles of it, stacks of it, mountains of it—and no one else in the

world seemed to have. He had stolen the money from every common person she knew—and was sitting on it.

She remembered that she had used to amuse him, sometimes even force him into a dry, unwilling laugh. She had also provoked him times without number, but he had never dismissed her; and once or twice, getting over his wrath and seeing the funny side of it, he had raised her wages a quarter, or fifty cents.

Perhaps she could amuse him still, get his attention by a few funny speeches, then, suddenly getting serious, make her appeal on behalf of the son he had loved so fondly but unwisely. He was sick and weak now. Where was the heart in him to stand out in his stubbornness against the forces of disease and death which gained on him day by day? Surely his heart would be softened. Surely his old love for his only child would arise at the first call, and assist her in demolishing the structure of selfishness he had reared about his life. Oh, if she could induce him to change his mind, could pave the way for a reconciliation—then, then there might be forgiveness for her. She rose and shook off the leaves she had been tearing to pieces in her meditations. It was a very different person who strode down the opposite slope of the Carmel hills to the one who came struggling up the opposite side, like a dazed, daft creature let loose from some house of refuge.

Pat was getting tired, but she was an excellent walker, and was conscious that she was able to do several more miles without excessive fatigue. She had little idea how the old man might spend his days in his secluded villa, but she judged, if he was sick, he would go to bed early, and that she must race ahead of the wind if she made her appeal that night. She started and ran down the entire slope of the hill, but at the foot lost an equal amount of time, nursing a sharp pain in her side that wouldn't let her breathe.

The short-lived October sun smiled a wan adieu and sank behind a blue snow-cloud on the horizon. The wind sprang up from nowhere, whipped her skirts about her cold knees, and stung her face with sharp edges of sleet, promising more. Her progress was retarded by half.

Then a true angel of light, despite his rough externals, the butcher in his cart, returning to Rush-holm after the rounds of the day, was outlined behind her at the top of the Carmel ridge. She waited for him, standing squarely in the road lest he go tearing past.

"Look out there!" cried the butcher, unwillingly pulling rein.

"Oh, may I have a ride, *please*?" said Pat, weakly.

"Well, I suppose so," rejoined the man, un-

graciously. "Just sit alongside that quarter of beef. A bit chilly, is it? Well, I won't be long goin'. Where do you want to be sot down?"

"At Rushholm Villa," she replied, wearily.

"What?"

She repeated it.

"God help you, child! Do you have to go there?"

She nodded.

"You know he's sick—like to die?"

She nodded again.

"You know how he's been carryin' on?"

"No-o."

"Then don't bother findin' out. Can't a man take your message in?"

"No-o," wearily.

Soberly she watched the twinkling lights come out like stars in different parts of the village. In a secluded grove of pines a cluster of such stars was illuminating a large, gloomy building. It was a ghostly, haunted sort of place, with no stir of life beyond the shudder of the night wind in the tops of the pines.

"That is Rushholm Villa," said the butcher.

"How do you g-get in?" she faltered.

He promised to show her a gate when they got past a jog in the road, and instructed her to follow up a long, dark avenue about a quarter of a mile.

"That can't fail to lead you to the front door," he said, "if you're brave enough to go in at the front door."

He stopped and set her down at the villa gates.

"Well, good luck to you!" he called, preparing to whip up his horse. "Go quiet, and don't wake up old Rumpus."

"Who?" faltered Pat.

"Rumpus, the dog. He'd tear you limb from limb if he was loose. And he ain't always tied at night either, though the Council did pass a law that he had to be, as women and children was afraid to walk along the road after dusk."

With which comforting assurance the butcher left Pat standing in the dark, and trembling so hard she was afraid the dog would hear her teeth rattle. How the wind sobbed in the pines! She wondered if the great angel of death hovered over the house, ready to receive his charge, and yet anxious to allow him a few more hours in which to repent.

"And darest thou, then,
To beard the lion in his den,
The dragon in his lair?"

It was a revised version of Scott she quoted. She was not sure that the last part was right, but she filled it in because it suited her to have it so. She was full of poetry, but generally more than half of her verse was original.

There is not much courage in an empty stomach and a blue, benumbed, shivering body. Pat wondered, as she dragged herself up the grassy edge of the gravel walk, why she feared the old man, whom she had accused face to face with holy glee in the old days of his tyranny at the factory. Now that he was sick, dying, what could he say, think, or do that she need be frightened of?

She realised, as she stood before the huge front doors, that it was going to be hard to get an audience. She could not trust to arousing the sympathy of a servant. No second-hand message would do. It was her own personality she relied on. She was willing to be angry, suppliant, accusant, or penitent, to suit the need; but no blundering servant should take in the message to the old man that she had come to beg money and forgiveness for his estranged son.

She glanced sharply at the upper windows. They were dark all round.

"They always said he wouldn't die in bed," she chattered, gazing at a red glow in a low window near at hand. "He's in his sitting-room, and alone. Now's my chance!"

Taking a bold grip of the heavy door-handle, she succeeded in noiselessly pushing the door ajar far enough to admit her spare figure. The red light glowed warmly just to the left of the hall. She

turned in, and found herself on the threshold of the dragon's lair.

It was a dreary room, presumably a library, for it was lined with dark, uninviting volumes, and had the latest number of several periodicals strewn on a table in the centre. A real old-fashioned wood fire crackled in the grate, for it was yet too early in the season for the steady heat of the furnace. There was no cheer in the room other than that temporarily suggested by the fire, and there was little to indicate that the owner was the possessor of wealth.

That owner, at present the sole occupant of the room, was leaning over the crackling fire as if to absorb all the heat into his attenuated frame. His wasted figure looked the size of a little child in the big chair. His haggard face showed not only a body miserably unwell, but a mind horribly ill at ease. The young girl who had known him so familiarly gave a shudder of surprise at the change.

"I was afraid of your dog, so I came right in——"

The old man had turned to scold his serving-man, William, for leaving open the hall door, and encountered the apparition of a child, offspring of Night and Storm, who stood on his threshold with flying hair and thin, wind-whipped garments.

"What?" he roared, in the old voice she knew so well and really feared so little.

" I say I was afraid of your dog, so I came right in without ringing."

There was a glorious blaze of colour on her cheeks and a brave light in her starry eyes, and as she advanced calmly to the grate to warm her hands the old man's eyes followed her in a wonder that was almost fear.

" Where was that dolt, William ? "

" I didn't call William," she said, sweetly, " for I wanted to talk to you yourself."

" Don't you know that I am not well enough to——"

It was the first admission he had made to anybody of the state of his health, and with the admission came a sinking sensation, verifying his words as it turned his face a ghastly green.

" I suppose you know who I am," said Pat, blandly.

" Too well," panted the wretched old man, as he laboured for his breath. " Too well, you young imp of Satan."

Her clear eyes laughed back their amusement.

" You used to call me that often. I missed it this summer."

He grunted.

" Do you remember how I used to amuse you sometimes ? "

"You don't any more. Tell me why you are here, and get out."

This was not getting on very fast. She saw that she must state her case, eliminating humour.

"Mr. Wickins, I have come twenty miles to ask you something."

"Humph!"

"Other people were afraid to come—because, well, because, you have such a way of saying things. But I know you better. I've seen your kind side, and I know you don't mean it, and——"

"Humph!"

A rare bit of diplomacy gone to the wall. She tried again, silently, coaxingly, laying her fingers on his coat-sleeve. Hers was a brave heart indeed.

"Mr. Wickins, it's about your little boy. When I tell you he is in trouble you will listen."

Ah, there she drew blood. He winced at that. His face underwent an instant's change. A gleam of feeling flickered across it; then it darkened, stiffened, froze. She could not know that that very same morning his feelings had been harrowed to the depths by the sending of a bitter letter to his son. All the old wounds had been bleeding afresh. His weakness would not endure much more.

"I hate him, hate him, *hate him!*" he cried, with the remnant of his strength. "Is he in trouble? I'm happy to know it. Happy—do you hear?"

"Is that the way you look when you are happy?" asked Pat.

He glowered at her.

"But laying jokes aside," she said. "We understand each other, and I know you don't mean all you say. You say such strange things and mean the opposite. Of course I know that you love him better than all the rest of the world rolled in a lump, and that you are dying by inches because he doesn't come to see you, and——"

"He wouldn't get in if he came!"

"That's some of your odd humour again," she told him.

"What trouble is he in?" asked the old man, hungry to know the details.

"Well," began his visitor more hopefully, "he is just a little short of ready money. No, he didn't waste it in anything dishonest, nor in gambling or speculating. And it wouldn't bother him long if this spell of hard times was over—but it isn't over."

"Nor likely to be for a few months."

"We all thought of that twenty-five thousand dollars you laid out to give to the sports of the Royal Trotting Association, which has that horse-faced Captain Gunn for a president, and wondered if you wouldn't like to change your mind and give it to help your little boy——"

"Don't say that!"

"What? 'Little boy?' Now you know you like it."

"I have had no little boy for many a long year," said the old man, in such a sad voice that Pat felt sorry for him. "I had one once—I wasted too much love on him—who as soon as he got big enough undertook to show his father how to do business."

"Oh, he loves you yet! You do not know how much. If you cannot send him money, send him one word of forgiveness!"

Only a superhuman monster could have resisted the eloquence of those pleading eyes.

The old man stared her in the face while he chose his words deliberately.

"You may take this word to him who was my son. Tell him that I would sooner have serpents twining around my neck than endure his embrace; that I would enjoy looking into the mouth of hell as much as into his eyes. Tell him that it is so long since I thought about him that I cannot even recall how he looks. Go, tell my *dear son* that!"

"Take the cruel words back!" shuddered Pat. "Say that you take them back, and I will try to forget them."

"On the contrary, I wish you to remember them accurately," he retorted.

"And about the \$25,000?" murmured Pat.

"I'll never give him another cent!"

"You haven't given him any," she reminded him, frankly. "He had to get what was coming to him from his mother, didn't he?"

The old man leaned forward and glared at her, as much as to say, "What else do you know about our family history?"

It was plain that this conversation was too much for his strength. The tide of life within him was ebbing away somewhere at an alarming rate. He gathered together his strength and spoke again.

"Will you get out, or shall I ring for William?"

Pat's anger blazed furnace-hot against such a paternal monstrosity.

"I suppose I may as well get out," she said, towering above him like a denunciatory Nathan. "Upon my word, you look awful to-night! I shouldn't wonder if you died before morning. *If you do, I hope God, your Father in heaven, will have just as much mercy on you as you have on your own child.* Good-night."

She turned back at the door and saw that the old man had fallen forward across the arm of his chair, with face peering into the grate. But she knew that he was neither dead nor dying, and knew from the footfall sounding on the stair that William would find him before he came to any harm.

Her strength was gone, used up in the tremendous effort of the day. Ugh! Now she remembered

that it was cold outside. She had forgotten while standing before the comfortable fire. The wind caught her dress and hair in the sudden fury of an animal which had temporarily lost its prey and then seized it again. She gave it little heed as she stood gazing about her vacantly. Clearly the thought had never entered her head what she should do after her message was delivered. She had entertained no thought of defeat. Now that it had overtaken her she felt stupid and numb, and such a daze was coming over her senses that she could not discern objects standing a few feet away on the lawn.

She saw the necessity of speedily reaching some shelter. But where? All behind her lay the sombre forest, vast and dark and fearsome; all before her lay the string of lights in strange houses. She had no courage to ask at any strange door for shelter. They might turn her away. The world was full of cruel people. She would not risk it.

How dark the night had grown! Where were the stars, the moon? Why did the trees all take legs and run towards the front gate? Were there a hundred dogs barking down at the stables, or only one? These questions bothered her vaguely for a minute, then she sank down limply on the gravel path, in a dreamy unconsciousness that answered with oblivion all the hard problems of life.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE THOUSANDTH CHANCE

"MRS. WILLIAMS, tell me all about it."

The portly mistress of Ivy Cottage, not yet recovered from the flurry caused by the abrupt entrance of her distinguished-looking guest, slicked up her hair with a broken bit of comb, clasped the divorced ends of her collar with a safety-pin, and came back to the centre of the room.

"Charlie, quit your noise," she commanded, with maternal authority.

Charlie, in body a grown man of eighteen, but in mind a child of six—one of those harmless, happy souls that never grow up—was sitting behind the stove, filling the air with the wailings of an old mouth-organ. He stopped, more of his own accord than because he feared his mother, and stared at the stranger with open mouth.

"Well, it's just this way, Mr.—er—er—Webb—is that what you called yourself? It seems she had actually had the spunk to go into the big house and ask the old fellow for something she wanted—the

dear only knows what it was. According to William's tell, the old tyrant ordered her out, and she went ; but not before she had had her say. That must have been about eight o'clock last night. We calculated, when we found her, that she had been lying on the ground about an hour. How did we happen on her ? Well, you see, the old man took a bad spell—the effect of the visit, but we didn't know it then, and I was kept at work up at the villa till well on to nine o'clock. You see, I live on part of the estate, and keep the dairy which supplies the villa with milk and butter. When at last he seemed to feel easier, and I was free to go home, I was that tired I took the risk of running into Rumpus, and cut through the shrubbery instead of going the longer way around the road. I hadn't gone fifty yards before I stumbled over her, lying on the edge of the little gravel path that runs back to the orchard ; but I'll guarantee that if I hadn't just happened to cut through under them evergreens, she'd a-laid there all night, and not been found by a party with lanterns."

"I hunted the rest of the night," confessed her visitor, with a wan smile. "I spent hours trying to get some one who knew the place to help me. I could get no one, for the illness of the old man was engaging all hands at the villa. Nobody had heard about her coming, much less about her going away.

They didn't appear to believe me. I fancy they thought I was an escaped lunatic."

"And only to think that it should be almost the close of another day before you heard that she was safely housed at our cottage! We do live a close life here, seeing almost nobody. Now I come to think of it, no one came in all morning but the doctor."

"Whom I met," said her visitor, briefly.

"Are you her brother then?" asked Mrs. Williams, her natural curiosity getting the upper hand.

The stranger raised his brows in a faint dissent.

"Just a friend likely," and the good woman nodded wisely.

"I wish to see her," he said.

Without a word she led him to a little spare room off the parlour. Charlie trotted at their heels, mouth-organ in hand.

"You mustn't bring your noise in here," said Webb, looking at him sternly through his glasses.

"Mercy me!" ejaculated Charlie, like a parrot who has but one stock phrase.

But he laid his mouth-organ on the shelf, more in awe of Webb's stiff-starchy manner than he had been of any stranger heretofore.

The room beyond the parlour was growing dusky, but no lamp was needed to reveal the small white

bed by the window and the languid little form stretched thereupon. The bottles, cups, and spoons, arranged with great precision on a small table, showed that already a careful nurse was on the track of the swift and relentless disease that had gripped its victim and brought her down to the gates of death without a moment's warning.

The young man gazed down into the fever-flushed face turning on the pillow; watched the careful nurse adjust a hot poultice over the right shoulder.

"I suppose it's pneumonia," he said, unsteadily.

"That's what the doctor calls it," said Mrs. Williams, longing to spare him the blow. "But them doctors don't always know."

"In this case he knows altogether too well," said the young man, bitterly.

Then, with tense white lips and clenched fists, he took a step nearer and hissed suddenly into her ear,

"If that child has to lose her life through the old fiend's criminal neglect, I swear I shall have his life as pay!"

"Yes," murmured Mrs. Williams, in awed tones.

"Yes, of course."

"I almost burst into his room last night to demand of him what he had done with her. They said I should have killed him. I wish now I had."

"Yes," murmured Mrs. Williams, again peacefully.

Intuition told her that he wanted to be alone till he gained control of his over-taxed nerves. She drew to her side her boy, whose monotonous repetition of "Mercy me! Mercy me!" had filled the intervals of conversation, and led him behind her from the room.

Webb took the low chair in the window, and sinking his head in his hands allowed some of the pain in his heart to escape in a smothered groan.

Quiet for the moment, she lay like a lily cut in the bud, a pure, fragile blossom sacrificed to the knife just as it was about to open. Disgraced, was she? The ruin of them all? If somebody had schemed that plot to turn her friends against her, the result was that her very need of friends, of sympathy, of comfort, made her doubly dear.

"Such a brave effort I have made at forgetting you, my white wonder! Such remarkable strength I displayed when I knew you were under my eye, within call at a moment's notice! Such deceptions as I have been practising on myself for the past month! Away with all delusions! In this solemn hour I know you to be mine—mine for time and for eternity!"

He picked up the little, listless hand and felt the thump of the pulse in the wrist. He gazed into the eyes, more wonderful than ever with their dry, feverish brilliancy; but try as he would to compel

their attention, he was rewarded by no ray of recognition.

The lines of agony took a deeper set around his mouth.

" Mine ? Did I say mine ? Vanity of vanities ! Just as I passionately declare that I will have her before all the world, stainless lily that she is, to hold close, to defend, to keep, she mocks me by threatening to set off on an endless voyage whither I cannot follow her. Oh, little white wonder, will nothing keep you down on the earth ? Must you soar to the skies to find your mate among the stars ? Have I fallen in love with one of the angels ? "

Bending his head with what submission his proud, strong soul could muster, he held still, while wave after wave of convulsive anguish swept down over his soul. Outside, the night still held a shudder of sleet, and the pines had begun their nightly wailing. The cold air, so imperative to the sufferer, drove in at the open window and set him all a-shiver. But without noticing it he still bowed his head to the fiercer mental storm, fighting for submission.

" God give me strength to meet the thing that looms ahead in my path now ! God give me strength ! "

Light as a snowflake a hand suddenly rested on his shoulder, and from out of the darkness a familiar voice pronounced his name. He noticed, too, that

Mrs. Williams, having lit a small lamp in the farthest corner of the room and shaded it heavily, was just withdrawing again to the kitchen. The light enabled him to make out the form and features of his cousin Isobel.

It is surprising how slight differences vanish in the face of a real trouble. He grasped her hand as if it was a strong support, and it is doubtful whether the remembrance of their little quarrel ever entered his head.

Sinking on one knee, Isobel passed her cool fingers over the brow of the sufferer, and peered into the bright, roving eyes as if she could never look long enough.

"Is she very sick?" she whispered.

"Blunt old Mr. Hurd has no hesitation in saying that her chances are one in a thousand."

"I shouldn't wonder if she took that thousandth chance!"

There was no foundation for her words, but he grasped at the comfort it held out hungrily. His fingers tightened over the hand he held till her diamond engagement ring drew blood on her little finger.

Just here the bright, roving eyes of the sufferer fastened on the new-comer. She drew herself away, trembling in every limb.

"Don't be angry with me! I didn't mean to

do any of it! I will go away!—I will go anywhere!"

"She doesn't trust either of us," Webb said, bitterly.

Isobel's gaze was still fastened on the sick girl's face. She had fancied her eyes her only really fine feature, but now that they were closed languidly after the effort of the moment, the rest of the face assumed the contour of a sleeping cherub. She was perhaps not beautiful, but she looked as innocent as if she had not been long from the skies, and would not be long in returning. She looked as if she had small connection with this dirty earth.

"How marvellously pure she is!" murmured Isobel.

The young man nodded briefly.

"I don't believe she ever thought an evil thought in her life."

Isobel's eyes left the girl's face and rested on his. Tracing his *journey* from the time it had been a mere amusement, then an interest, then an affection, at last the dominant necessity of his whole life, she tried to realise what he had been enduring for the past few months. She was scarcely more than a child; she was poor, she was in disgrace, yet every difficulty but fed the flame that consumed him. He was willing to wait till she grew up; he was willing to be patient till she learned to meet him on

his own ground ; but be near her he must. Though his love was the sad, impossible kind that never yet had brought him anything but pain, it had glorified all his stiff, stern nature, and softened it into the tenderness of a little child. His face, as he gazed on the frail bit of humanity about which he had wrapped his heart tendrils, seemed illumined as in a broad flash of light. With an emotion that was almost awe, Isobel watched him.

" I do not wonder that you love her," she whispered. " She is a spirit from the spirit world. She had bewitched us all."

Again he said nothing, though he felt to the full the comfort of her reconciliatory words.

" Too much spirit to stay on this earth," he sighed.

Isobel was on her feet, moistening the parched lips with a spoonful of water.

" Nonsense ! " she exclaimed. " She has spirit enough, to be sure, but it is a good, healthy, earthly spirit, that will fight for life to the last ounce of its resistance. I have a strong confidence that she will pull through this."

" My sweet comforter, you were always a good prophet. You almost make me hope."

" I do not believe God will let her die, just as she is about to enter into the possession of your love and all the joys it brings."

Evidently she was laying her mind on him till he believed in her belief.

"Perhaps," he whispered, "because in that agonising hour that is gone I gave her up to His higher will, He will give her back to me as He gave Isaac to Abraham."

"Believe it," she repeated, resolutely. "Do you suppose if you were stretched on that couch and she in your place as watcher, that she would ever let go of the Almighty until He answered her?"

"I cannot conceive of it," he said, in a low voice. "But she lives in the immediate presence of God. He answers her immediately."

"Then we cannot do less. You know, after medicine, prayer; after doctors, God."

Isobel, though always the tenderest consoler in times of trouble, had not always been able to speak so confidently of her faith in the unseen Power. The man, in his turn, perceived that she was being made perfect through suffering; that she was coming through her fiery trials like gold refined in the furnace.

"Now, here I am," she continued, in a more matter-of-fact tone, "intruding my presence on you and yours without invitation, when you wanted to be alone. But, Evan, in spite of all that has passed between us, or because of it, I just had to come."

"My comfort, we will not speak of the wretched weeks that are gone."

"But I had to speak of it—because I was to blame."

"Then," he smiled, "call yourself names as much as you please when you are alone, but not in my presence, for I won't stand it."

"You wonder how I got here? Paul Mortimer, the old man's secretary, keeps Si posted on many things. I just ran away from hubby as he was coming in from the office, caught a car, and stumbled over here in the dark. I must be going again inside the hour. You are remaining till a later car? Then you must take me back to the station by the short cut through the shrubbery. It is too far around the road."

He agreed.

"I have arranged that Patty's mother shall come out and nurse her. The boys are to be left with me, and Mrs. Carningham will be here on the last car this evening."

"Isobel, you're a trump!" exclaimed her companion, enthusiastically. "Everything goes smoothly when you take a hand."

"I'm a famous planner," she admitted.

The sufferer stirred, moaning for water. Isobel again sprang to her side, and moistened her lips with a cooling draught.

"I have just another plan," she whispered, standing between Pat and the light, for fear the unsettled mind might again take fright. "When this little girl is better, as I confidently expect she will be soon, we shall have to make some arrangement for giving her a good, long chance of building up to robust health. I make the suggestion that you lay the case before Mrs. Williams, and see if she will allow her the run of the farm during her convalescence. I can't imagine a better place to build up than this dairy farm."

"It is the old gentleman's property," objected Webb.

"What of it? He never comes near it. And they pay rent, which gives them the authority to do as they please."

Still Webb pondered.

"You can fix up the money part of it with Mrs. Williams," said Isobel. "Neither Patience nor her mother need know why the dairy-woman is so anxious to keep her through the winter. It's only natural that a woman in a lonely spot like this, with no company but a poor, half-witted boy, should be eager to have a bright young girl as companion for a while."

After planning briskly in the kitchen up to almost the minute of car time, Isobel had the satisfaction of seeing a bulky roll of bills pass from the hand of her cousin to the hand of Mrs. Williams.

"It seems too funny for me to be taking this money," said the dairywoman, gazing at it with the loving expression of one who hasn't handled much of it, "when one almost knows from the looks of the girl that—that she won't be needing it——"

"She will be better in the morning," persistently reiterated the prophet of good tidings.

"In case she does get around," said Mrs. Williams, still playing with the bills, "I'd take her and keep her for nothing. I've taken a wonderful notion to the little thing."

"I think you will find before you get through with a long and expensive treatment that you will need some of the wherewithal," smiled Webb, declining to take any of the money back.

They drew on their gloves and hurried away to catch the car, leaving the mistress of Ivy Cottage in a sad whirl of perplexity.

"Well, if it doesn't beat everything," she muttered, "the interest those fashionable people seem to be taking in that girl. What is she, or who is she? I'm sure I never heard of her before, but she must be something uncommonly nice to have got him where she's got him. I never saw a chap take on harder in my life. I'd give my head if I could coax her to live for his sake."

CHAPTER XXV

THE GUESTS OF THE VILLA

THE shrubby path was, indeed, a lonely and intricate one, seldom used after dark; but there was no denying that it was a short cut from Mrs. Williams's cottage to either the villa or to the station on the front road. Webb, pulling his hat well forward, ducked his head and dashed recklessly through the evergreens, while Isobel, clutching his arm, hung on for dear life and said nothing.

In spite of their seeming obedience to Mrs. Williams's careful instructions, they almost immediately lost the path. But still pushing forward in the direction of the village lights, they came presently, not into the stable-yard as directed, but into the apple-orchard.

"Are we lost?" asked Isobel.

Webb would not admit it.

"The station lights are just over yonder," he said, pointing. "We can cross the orchard and come out within a few yards of it. But there'll be burrs."

"Burrs or no burrs we must go forward," laughed Isobel. "I can't have more than five minutes to catch that car."

So through the orchard they went. The sward was smooth and level, and they were fairly lucky in avoiding burrs. The moon made weird, uncertain shadows among the intricate network of leafless boughs, while the apples on the ground looked as large as small pumpkins.

"What is that ahead?" whispered Isobel, scizing her companion's arm.

"Shadows," he laughed.

"A shadow implies a substance," she insisted. "And the substance forming those shadows is too irregular to be a tree trunk."

He stopped short.

"By Jove! A lady and a gentleman," he breathed. "We are intruding on some lover's walk."

"A kitchen-girl and her swain," Isobel whispered back. "See, the girl wears an apron."

"You are wrong about the kitchen-girl, though," objected Webb. "She carries herself with a magnificent air."

"So she does," admitted Isobel.

"To say nothing of the swagger of the man."

The couple, having gathered a few choice apples, moved leisurely on toward the gate leading into the

villa grounds, the man passing his arm about the girl's waist in true lover fashion.

"They seem to be thoroughly at home around the villa," murmured Isobel, hastening on.

"You were right about the apron," said her cousin, "though it was just a bit of frilling and lace, and looked more as if it belonged to a lady's house-toilet than to the outfit of a working-girl."

"Do you suppose the old gentleman ever entertains visitors at Rushholm?" Isobel wondered.

Webb thought it very unlikely.

As the headlight of the car was already coming around the curve, they dropped the conversation and made a dash for the station platform, meeting the car just as it came to a stop.

But as Webb was cutting through the villa grounds on his way back to Ivy Cottage, he heard the sound of a piano in one of the front rooms of the mansion, and fancied he discerned through the lacy curtains the figures of a man and a girl bending over their music. The girl still carried her shoulders magnificently, and the man still had his swagger.

The thing puzzled Webb.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CONVALESCENT

It was perhaps a great surprise to no one, except the worldly minded old doctor, when brave little Pat, after a few days of fierce battling for her life, passed the crisis and announced to all her friends her definite intention of getting well.

"By all the laws of nature she should have been dead a week ago," growled the old doctor, almost as if he was angry because his prediction had not come true. But no one had worked harder than he to prove his word false.

Very white and wan the girl rose from her couch and tried to resume the responsibilities of life.

"How soon shall I be able to go back to work?" was the first question. "I'm staying on here at somebody's expense—Mrs. Williams's, I guess. I ought to be at home earning my doctor's bill."

"Let work go to the dogs," said Mrs. Williams, who had received careful instructions how to proceed when that very natural question came up. "Listen, Patty, I have a proposal to make."

Both Pat and her mother did listen intently.

"I am a lonely woman," said Mrs. Williams, gazing at her only son with eyes full of unshed tears. "Stay with me a few weeks, till you feel perfectly strong. Nonsense! It is no burden. If you feel so you can turn in and help me with the housework sometimes to square up for your board."

Pat sat locking and unlocking her fingers in a state of nervous rapture.

"But mother and the boys?" she questioned.

"Mercy!" said Mrs. Carningham. "We're not to be considered. I am getting more and more to do at my nursing, and shall manage splendidly as long as I know the arrangement is for your benefit."

"I never hoped to stay in the country so long," breathed the girl, ecstatically.

Then another doubt confronted her.

"Do you suppose they will keep my place open at the shop, or— Oh, you know what I did!"

"Of course they will," said Mrs. Williams, positively. "Mr. Webb said so."

"Mr. Webb?" Pat repeated the name with a beautiful wave of colour surging into her pale cheeks.

"Was he out here?"

"He was down to Rushholm on business, and called to ask after you one evening."

The colour faded.

"It was very kind of him to call, and kinder still to offer to keep my place."

"Kind, indeed," said Mrs. Williams, composedly.

"He seemed a very kind young man."

So it came to pass that, while the busy round of life whirled on in the city, Patience Carningham, cut loose from it all, roamed like a colt over the large farm, nipping the choicest pasture she could find.

The boy Charlie, whom she promptly nicknamed "Mercy-me," and the dog Rumpus, who proved to be not nearly as bad as his reputation, soon became her constant companions, and an odd trio they made roving over the frozen stubble-fields, the surly dog, and the simple youth, with the pretty, pale-faced girl jealously guarded between them.

It could not be honestly said that Pat remained a "pretty, pale-faced girl" very long. The neighbours soon changed the epithet to "the pretty, rosy-cheeked girl," for in less than three weeks the free, healthful Rushholm breezes had wrought a noticeable change in her appearance. Her eyes lost a little of their hungry wistfulness, her cheeks became firm and rounded, her whole figure gained a buoyancy only vaguely hinted at before her illness.

She was just at the age to change rapidly. Every day seemed to discover new graces in her expanding nature. Her dauntless determination had partially

conquered the Carningham weakness, for she was growing tall. This effect was enhanced, no doubt, because, in recognition of the fact that she had grown older, she had twisted her plentiful gold-brown hair into a loose, low roll, and lowered her skirts a couple of inches.

Her old companions would scarcely have known her for the restless, impatient child who left them six weeks ago. She was completing her course with astounding rapidity. A human among humans! A beautiful lady, big and tall, with long, waving hair all her own! She thought it over with a suspicion of moisture in her eyes. Those days seemed very far away.

Soon she grew strong enough to walk out to the home of gruff old Dr. Hurd, to whom she felt she owed a great deal. The strange part of it was that he didn't seem to be wanting any pay for his unwearyed services, and when she tried to thank him, he invariably cut her off with the curt statement that he had been well rewarded, and wasn't deserving of any thanks.

Day after day, as long as the November weather remained fine enough, Pat travelled over the country roads in the doctor's buggy, learning to control his stubborn little pony and getting a vast amount of pleasure and health out of the experiment.

Sometimes they had to drive as far as Mount

Carmel, to attend to Farmer Goodsole's rheumatism. The worthy farmer insisted that his rheumatism came from too much hard work in the damp turnip-fields, and the doctor argued that it came from eating too much pork. Whatever the cause, the easily scared old fellow made an excellent patient, calling the doctor out every few days to prove to him that he was not getting worse.

From the Mount Carmel heights Pat could see the city, six miles below in the valley, and on clear days she could pick out the chimneys of the factory.

"Are you hankering to go back to it?" demanded Dr. Hurd, as he turned his horse's head back toward Rushholm one frosty evening.

"No, no! Not yet!" said the girl, turning her back on the city and stretching out her hands to the peaceful slopes and woody ridges beyond. "I was always a hawk, loving the freedom of the silent waste places."

"Then why were you looking, with all your soul in your eyes, down into that smoky valley?"

"I have friends down there who are dearer to me than life," said the girl, quietly.

"Ah! Yes, come to think of it, so you have, my dear, so you have! I know of one."

"You mean my mother?" questioned Pat, innocently.

"I mean the one who sends you the flowers,"

laughed Dr. Hurd, throwing back his shaggy head as if he had a huge joke.

"Why!" cried Pat, remembering certain great sheaves of chrysanthemums which had come in during her illness. "I—why, I thought you brought them. You have beautiful flowers in your hot-house. You did bring them, didn't you?"

"I carried them over from the station," grinned the old man.

"But the lilies—the sweet little bunches of lilies of the valley? Oh, you did send them!"

"Well, if you won't believe me——"

Scarcely another word could he get out of Pat that evening. The girl's thoughts seemed roving through dreamland, and the old doctor found enjoyment enough in silently watching her glowing face.

When at last he set her down at the gate of Ivy Cottage, she said, with the pretty semblance of a pout,

"I don't think you are a bit nice, Dr. Hurd, or you would tell me who sent those flowers."

"Has it taken you all this time to thrash that out?" laughed the old man, whipping up his pony.

"If you're that slow, you don't deserve to be told."

Mercy-me came gambolling down the lane playing train, his favourite game.

"Toot, toot! Out the way! The train's com-

ing!" he shouted, stamping along with a puff and a roar.

He had played it at six, when his mother first inspired in him a fear of the railroad tracks; he still played it at eighteen; no doubt would be playing it at sixty if he lived.

"Who's inside, Mercy-me?" asked Pat, in some surprise, seeing that a smart carriage and team were standing in Mrs. Williams's yard.

"Big man, fine lady," said Charlie, rushing on with a roar.

"A big man and a fine lady?"

"Haw."

Pat entered cautiously by way of the kitchen door, not being over-anxious to meet the big man and the fine lady, whoever they might be. She was surprised to encounter Mrs. Williams, leaning against the corner of the kitchen cupboard, indulging in an indignant storm of tears.

"I declare I was never so put out in my life!" cried the mistress of Ivy Cottage, wiping her eyes on her apron.

"Dear, dear Mrs. Williams," cried Pat, "what has happened?"

"You'd think I wasn't an independent woman, renting this farm by the year!" stormed Mrs. Williams, moving around the kitchen with an angry swish of skirts. "You'd think I was a slave, with

no freedom of body or soul, the way some people order me around. I declare I won't stand it!"

The girl looked at the closed door leading into the front room as if she could pierce the panels and see who was the cause of this unwonted disturbance.

"Who are they, and what do they want?" she demanded.

Mrs. Williams answered her own thought rather than the girl's question.

"When they get the run of things up at the big house I suppose I'll have to take their lip or get out at the end of the year. The old man isn't what you'd call an easy master, but there might be worse—there might be worse."

"What do they want?" repeated Pat.

"It's the young lady and her friend from the villa," said Mrs. Williams, more coherently. "They've come in here ordering up their supper. It seems they can't get a square meal up at the big house—nobody in particular in charge of the house-keeping just at present. And as the young lady says, they have a weakness for my pies and cakes, to say nothing of the butter and fresh milk."

Pat had seen at a distance the two young people in question, strolling about the villa grounds. But imagining they were guests of the old man, she had dropped the matter forthwith, as being none of her business.

"Never mind, Mrs. Williams," she exclaimed, buttoning a large working-apron over her walking-suit. "You bring out whatever you have, and I'll serve them. You don't need to appear. If you are pretty cool, perhaps they won't come again."

Carrying a fresh table-cloth in her hand she strode into the front room. On the sofa by the fire some one giggled very audibly, and wheeling in the direction of the voice Pat came face to face with Marian Amberley and Captain Gunn! They were the guests of the villa!

"Good evening," said Pat, non-committally.

Marian deigned no answer, and the captain responded by a brief nod.

So it came to pass, for the second time in her life, that Patience Carningham was called to wait upon Marian Amberley, as though they were two distinct orders of beings, the one born to serve, the other to command. The young girl had offered her services cheerfully to relieve the needs of the strangers, but before she got through she felt almost as indignant as Mrs. Williams, who was still sulking in the kitchen. When the pair, without a word of thanks, whipped up their horses and dashed down the lane, almost running over Mercy-me, who was still playing train, Pat threw herself into Mrs. Williams's arms and burst into angry, excited tears.

"They never spoke to me!" she flashed, "ex-

cept to ask me for more milk. And I know them both very well."

"Poor young Master Si," fretted the old woman, rocking back and forth in her chair. "It's him I'm thinking of, not us. The pretty, curly-headed lad who played about these lawns in his childhood, who was born the only son and heir of that grand old home! How all this carrying-on must grieve him! How hard he must be finding the path of duty!"

Instantly Pat dried her eyes to think of it. Her innocent mind refused to impute to the two visitors all the base schemes and plots Mrs. Williams went on to suggest.

"No, no; they do not aim to get the old man's money," she said, firmly. "You can never make me believe that."

"You'll believe it when you have to," retorted Mrs. Williams.

Pat took great comfort in the old man's shrewdness.

"He can see through that," she insisted. "You can't fool him."

"He's a weak, silly, flattered old dupe!" cried Mrs. Williams, her excitement running high. "He's got to leave his money to somebody, and he changes his mind about twice a week according to who's good to him."

"Isn't Miss Amberley a distant relative?"

"Yes; he's her great-uncle. Oh, it's all working out beautifully. The old man is more than willing to have it so. All she has to do is to keep him in a good humour."

"And he promised a small fortune to the Royal Trotting Association, of which Captain Gunn is president," mused Pat.

"A small fortune that will never get beyond Captain Gunn's pocket," said Mrs. Williams, hotly.

When Pat tried to go to sleep that night it seemed she was thinking about all her friends at once—of her mother and the boys in the distant home she had almost been able to see from the heights of Carmel, of Farmer Goodsole's rheumatism, of the crusty old doctor with his quips and cracks, of the one—whoever it was—that sent the flowers. Then, crowding all out, came the remembrance of Mr. and Mrs. Wickins and their troubles. That newly arisen complication was the one cloud in the bright sky of her convalescence.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN OLD MAN'S WOES

"MERCY-ME, what a fine climber you are!" praised Pat, anxious to have her simple-minded companion go farther up the hickory-nut tree.

"Haw," agreed Mercy-me.

She was sitting on the ground below, with brown-stained fingers busily pulling the shells from a heap of hickory-nuts in her lap. Mercy-me was doing his clumsy best to get to the higher and more heavily loaded branches.

It was one of November's pet days, just at the beginning of Indian summer. A mellow haze enveloped forest and meadow-land, and the sun shone lazily behind a curtain of smoke. On an oak close at hand a nut-hatch uttered a rasping note as he ran down the tree trunk. Chipmunks bobbed in and out, with their cheeks full of nuts. Rumpus, lying in the shade of the next tree, was actually bothered with flies.

"There is that dog Rumpus," spoke a voice from the other side of the fence. "Now I know why he will never stay home."

Looking up with a start Pat was made aware that old man Wickins was standing in the corner of the next field, regarding the operation of her nimble fingers with considerable amusement. She was quite surprised to see him so far from the house, for he was still very weak and ill.

"Well," he said, with a grim smile, "I didn't die that night you thought I ought to."

"No; but I nearly did."

"They blame me for your illness, and they blame you for mine. Shall we call it quits?"

"As you like," responded the girl, good-humouredly, "since we both got over it."

"Are you staying with Mrs. Williams now?"

"Yes."

"Were you not afraid to be so near the old dragon?"

"You don't run Mrs. Williams's house," retorted Pat.

"It's more than I can do to run my own at present," said the old man, sadly. "Much more than I can do."

Pat always felt sorry for him when he spoke in that sad, dejected manner. In spite of all his wealth he was but a poor, trembling, unhappy old mortal. She gave him the silent sympathy of her eloquent eyes.

"Little girl," he said, with more feeling than she

had thought it possible for him to display, "my best wish for you is that you may never live to be old.

"My next best wish for you," he continued, "is that you may never be rich."

"Why do you say that, sir?" asked Pat.

"Because of all wretched conditions in this wretched world the worst is being old and rich."

She somehow felt that his solemn words were true.

"How glad everybody will be when I die!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "How they all hasten on the day! How I'd like to give them a grand surprise by not dying!"

She had it on her tongue to say: "Go home and live with your son, and try if he will not give you every care, use every means to prolong your life, because he loves you better than your wealth."

But she held her peace, having respect for his weakness, because she knew how that subject agitated him.

"I think you fancy things that are not true," she ventured.

"What have I fancied that is not true?" he demanded.

"You think," she retorted, with spirit, "that everybody that comes around you wants your money."

"Is it not so?" he questioned. "Even you at

our last meeting wanted to fleece me of twenty-five thousand dollars."

Oh, then proudly stood she up.

"Not for myself!"

"Oh, you young imp of Satan, there's no telling what you would have done with it," teased the old man.

Pat turned on him indignantly.

"You'd better take that back!" she said, in a low voice.

He laughed a mirthless laugh.

"You hate me like poison, don't you?" he teased.

Her clear eyes held no hint of denial.

"Sir," she cried, "I find it hard to remember that you are old and ill, and that I may not provoke you too far. As I can't always hold my tongue, I shall not stay to listen. I am going. And because the nuts were gathered in your field I'll leave them here for fear you may need them and gather mine from Mrs. Williams's field across the way."

She dumped her apron at his feet.

"Come back," he called, "I want to talk to you. You are better than a tonic."

On she strode, chin high in the air.

"*Please* come back," he called, in weaker tones.

"I am sick. I need you."

She returned instantly.

"You must lean on me, sir," she exclaimed, sliding through the fence. "I will help you to the house."

"You don't hold spite long," he muttered.

"Life is too short for holding spite," said the girl, wisely.

"On the contrary," he replied, with the authority of one who knew from experience, "life is long, and holding spite makes it seem longer."

Down the lane came Marian Amberley, her hair flying in the wind, her light linen coat blowing open.

"Dear Uncle Si, why did you go so far away from the house? You can't think what a fright you have given me!"

"A little run will 'be good for your health, Mary-Ann," returned the old man, coolly. "You are far too lazy."

"Oh, I was not thinking of myself," she said, swallowing the name in silence. "But how are you to get back?"

"Walk," he said, shortly.

"Then take my arm."

Pat had dropped it.

"Are you going?" he asked, calmly ignoring Marian's little attentions.

"Yes, Mr. Wickins."

"Can't you say Uncle Si, too?" he mocked, imitating with great accuracy the cooing tones of Marian.

"Old Si, the dragon, comes a lot handier," she said, frankly.

Marian curled her full red lip and hurried him off.

"That girl says you're an old idiot," she said, trying to arouse his anger.

"Does she? I must look into it. She is generally right."

So, though she expected to see fire fly any minute, they parted the best of friends.

Pat retraced her steps to the corner of the fence where the old man had been standing.

"Get down out of the tree, Mercy-me," she called to the youth, who was still whipping the upper limbs. "I'll feel more comfortable getting nuts in the other field after this."

For several minutes she stood watching his clumsy efforts to reach the ground, then stooped to get through the hole in the fence.

"Why, what's this?" she exclaimed, picking something up off the ground.

Mercy-me, scurrying to her side, saw her unwrap a small, tight bit of paper, and discover a considerable sum of money hidden inside.

"Mercy-me!" said Mercy-me.

"You must go straight home by yourself, Charlie," she said, authoritatively, "while I run up to the villa with this package I've found."

"Haw."

"The old man has dropped it, and though it isn't mine, and he may be put out to be bothered with it, there is nothing else to be done but to take it back. I'd rather take a licking than go, too."

"Haw," said Charlie.

She reached the side door of the mansion shortly after old Mr. Wickins had passed through it with "Mary-Ann." She rang, and was admitted by William, who knew her well by this time.

The old man sat by the library fire looking over the evening paper.

"You dropped this in the field," cried Pat, advancing eagerly and holding out the folded paper.

He raised his eyes and looked at her over the two pairs of glasses which he used for reading.

"Ah, did you find my money?"

"You missed it already?" she questioned.

"I knew I had dropped it," he said, "but I scarcely expected to see it again."

"Sir," she cried, indignantly, "you knew I would be the first one to go back over that path!"

"Child, you have so little money."

"Just at present I haven't a cent," she said, cheerfully.

"And the way I reasoned it out was that you would think you needed it worse than I. You would say: 'He'll blame it on some of the hired men, or on Charlie Williams——'"

"If you left it there as a test of my honesty," she scorned, almost choking with indignation, "let me tell you it wasn't the slightest temptation."

"Your action proved that," he said, calmly.

"Sir," she cried, in a voice all broken up with anger, "you don't treat me fairly. I didn't think you would do as you have done!"

"Neither did I think you would do as you have done. Again we are quits."

Her glowing eyes burned him with their uncontrollable indignation.

"Child, child," he muttered, hoarsely, "you are too pure to live in this sin-cursed world. Why didn't you die the other day when you had a chance? I don't like to trust people—it's against my principles—but you almost make me believe that your integrity is absolutely incorruptible."

"I don't understand your big words," she told him.

"There's one thing though that you do understand to perfection," he said, wearily, "and that is how to upset my rest for the night. Go, child, go. I cannot stand your eyes!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS

EVAN WEBB had always thought Rushholm a pretty village. It struck him suddenly one day at work, while the balmy, Indian-summer breeze came in at the window laden with the odour of Carmel pines, that if he went out there oftener he would be much benefited. He wondered that it had never struck him before what made him so restless. He certainly needed country air.

That same evening, supperless and restless in his mind, he swung on to a Rushholm car at ten minutes after four, and by five o'clock swung off at the little station just beyond the villa gates.

Ivy Cottage was the prettiest little house in Rushholm, and standing on a gentle slope it caught the purest breezes that slid down from the Carmel ridge. Mrs. Williams was the finest character a hungry man could meet, and her table the prettiest sight a hungry fellow like himself could wish to lay eyes on. Surely there were reasons multiplied why he should bend his steps in the direction of Ivy Cottage.

As he neared the place it came to him suddenly that he was walking very fast. Of course his supper was before him, but that hardly warranted his walking so rapidly that the neighbours would take notice and think he was some messenger-boy carrying over a telegram. He slowed down to a more becoming pace.

As usual Mercy-me was playing train in the lane.

"Toot, toot! Out the way! Train's comin'!" he shouted, rushing wildly down to the road gate.

Showing little fear of the train, Webb intercepted him. It seemed good to see any one belonging to Ivy Cottage.

"Hello, Charlie! That you?"

"Haw," responded Charlie.

"Where are all the folks, Charlie?"

"Me home, maw milk," replied the boy, with a grin.

"You're home and your mother is milking? And the rest of the household?"

Charlie didn't understand.

"Mercy me!" he exclaimed, tearing away.

"Queer fish! Queer fish!"

"So he thinks me a queer fish," smiled Webb, pushing open the gate. "Well, I'll reserve my judgment of him for some future time."

Mrs. Williams was, indeed, milking the four sleek Holsteins which supplied the villa with milk and

butter. He could hear her in the barnyard admonishing Beauty to stand still, and exhorting old Bess to mind sharp and not set her foot in the pail.

The house was deserted. Not a sound but a cricket under the window-sill. The door stood most invitingly open, and after a moment's hesitation the young man crossed the veranda and entered the front room. He sat down to wait before the little organ in the corner, drawing weird minor chords from its yellow keys, which the little instrument gave him as if recognising a master hand. Still no one came, so he put his hat away on the nail, and picking up a readable-looking book marked with Pat's bookmark, sank leisurely down on one end of the sofa near the window.

He had not read a line when a quick step on the gravel of the lane caused him to look up. Closing the book with a snap, he continued to bend all his energies to the task of looking.

Pat was just coming back from a visit to Dr. Hurd, whither she had been sent by Mrs. Williams for a bottle of liniment for a stiff knee. A jaunty round cap sat lightly on the back of her golden-brown head, and a long ulster of bright navy blue enveloped her slight figure in clinging, graceful lines. A sprig of sweet briar, with its bright red berries, added a touch of vivid colour from the lapel of her coat.

She stopped by the gate to untie a knot of rope

for Mercy-me, and to pat the head of old Rumpus, who lay asleep in the gravel path.

The man in the front room rested his arms on the window-sill and watched the sweet, unthinking girl with a sure air of possession.

"She fulfils every promise of her childhood," he thought, proudly, noting the sweet dignity of the rolled hair and the long skirts. "She grows lovelier every day, as she grows more womanly. Good heavens! Did I vow that I wouldn't bother her with love as long as other fellows left her alone? Was it to-day I promised myself that? Did I reason it out that she is still very young, and to round out her nature perfectly needs to think of many other things before love? And was I wont to think myself rather a quiet, self-controlled chap, living up to what my reason proved to me to be the best course? Away with dull reason! I will have her now, this very night, to hold in my arms, to cherish in these outstretched arms that have so long ached with their emptiness. I will kiss her pure lips no man has ever kissed before. I will kiss her sweet face all over. I swear no girl was ever loved as she is loved. I never dallied with women. I never knew their charms. The tremendous force of all my love is going to sweep down over her to-night like an avalanche. I will make her love me, though her happy, innocent mind has retained no thought

of me other than a friend. My appeal will be so eloquent that she will have to love me all in a minute."

Pat, finished with Mercy-me, moved briskly up the lane. As usual the old doctor had put her in a very merry humour. A happy smile curved her full red lips, and she walked with a little skip that betokened great buoyancy of spirit. When she came up on the veranda the skip had become a decided dance.

The large, silent room was growing dusky, as the sun dropped behind the forest ridge. She walked right across it and over to the window before she noticed that a stranger was sitting on one corner of the sofa. He still sat as if looking out of the window, and she caught sight only of the back of his head, a smooth outline, like a piece of polished marble. She would have known it in a thousand.

"Mr. Webb!" she faltered.

He turned, rose, took both her hands in greeting.

"Patience, I am glad to see you."

He spoke the words very quietly—so quietly that he surprised himself, for he alone knew the tumult surging within.

Drawing a long breath the girl also replied very, very quietly:

"Not more glad than I am to see you, my kind, kind friend."

It was getting rather too dark for him to see her eyes, so he couldn't really tell how glad she was. Her tongue never did speak more than half when her eyes would do the work.

Unaccountably nervous, Patience came to the stove and stirred up the ashes preparatory to making a fire.

"Don't make a fire," he said, with the quiet authority his voice always carried. "It is quite warm."

She dropped the tongs instantly and went to the table.

"Don't set the table," he said, whimsically.

She dropped the cloth and picked up the lamp in the centre of the table, coming to the stove to strike a match.

"Don't light the lamp," said the same quiet voice from the corner of the sofa.

The girl dropped into a chair at the far side of the room and folded her hands in her lap.

"You might stop your activities a minute to talk to a man who has come twenty miles to see you," he murmured.

She didn't want him to think that she wasn't glad to see him. She started a polite conversation.

"I suppose you are out on business?"

"Of course. Always business for me."

"Rushholm is getting to be quite a bustling little

place," she observed, in a matter-of-fact tone that at another time would have made him smile.

He replied that it was not as dead as it had been.

"You were out one night on business when I was sick," she said, in a low voice.

"Was I? Oh, yes, I remember I called."

Pat had hoped that her illness had left more impression on him than that. She knew he was there the night they thought she was dying. If she had ever dared imagine in her heart of hearts that it might be he who sent the flowers, the thought of it withered as she looked at him out of the corners of her frightened eyes. He was leaning back in the low seat, one knee crossed over the other, arms folded tightly over his chest, only two lines of cuff showing in the twilight. The back of his head, outlined against the fading light of the window, appeared like a sculptured head, every hair in its place, the outline of the forehead broad and firm.

Conversation flagged between them. Pat had really had no practice in entertaining gentlemen callers, particularly one as hard to make talk as this one. She was growing desperate. She cast about in her mind for something to show him—the post-card album, or the views. She longed for Mrs. Williams.

They heard that lady finish exhorting the cows, strain the milk in the milk-house, and call Charlie

to help carry the can up to the villa. They heard the boy's reluctant consent. Then the last sound died away and left the cricket under the window-sill singing alone.

"Patience," said the sculptured marble at the other side of the room, "come over here, please."

With the habit of obedience still strong on her, she crossed the room and stood before him.

"Sit down," he murmured; and she sat down beside him on the sofa.

Looking down on her through his clear, rimless glasses, his heart completely failed him for the minute. How very calm she was! Not a finger twitched, not a muscle betrayed emotion. She sat there, with her hands in her lap, her eyes gazing through the open door out on the dusky lawn, perfectly composed, perfectly still. How different from the fierce passion within him, which was making his coat quiver! In the fancies of her busy brain was it possible he had no part—he who had thought his love must compel hers? What if she did not, had not, would not love him?

Better for him if he had known more of the ways of women. Better if he had paved the way by soft speeches, and moonlight rambles, and shy pressures of the hand. Suddenly he realised the value of those soft, sly approaches of love which he had before designated as flirting. Suddenly he realised the

hopelessness of taking that frail, tender little thing in his arms and commanding her to love him. After he had spent his passion she would calmly tell him in a word what she thought about it. Her answer would be simple and truthful, no doubt of that. But if it was not what he wanted to hear, the very simplicity and truthfulness of it would make it harder to bear.

Webb was a man who was usually sure of his ground, who won his way without question by the quiet authoritativeness of his manner. But in the presence of the girl he loved he was never sure of anything. His cool-headedness left him when he considered the risk of hearing his fate from those truthful lips.

The girl leaned forward slightly to look up into his face. She had never known Mr. Webb to act so strangely before. A fear smote her that something was wrong at home. Something had happened, somebody was sick, and he had undertaken the task of breaking the news. Then there rang through her mind the way she had left work. Perhaps it was his difficult task to tell her that she couldn't go back to the factory any more.

"Mr. Webb," she faltered, and he watched her pupils dilate till her eyes seemed black, "do you—do you have to tell me something?"

One strong arm crept around her in the darkness.

Pat braced herself. It must be something dreadful, when he sought to break the force of the blow by taking her in his arms.

"Don't mind it so terribly," she faltered, looking up timidly into his stormy face. "I am pretty strong."

His cheek, burning hot, swept hers, cold as ice, and she knew the arm that was holding her with a rigid grip was trembling to the finger-tips.

Her brave little head went down on his arm.

"Hold me tight and get it told!" she whispered.

Taking her at her word, he gripped her to his bosom, until he felt the wild leap of her frightened heart beat in unison with the heavy thump of his own.

"Sweet girl, listen. I have this to tell you—this. I have come from the city to see you because I cannot live in the city without you. The city has been under a cloud, enveloped in fog, smoke, gloom. I pined for the country till I had to come, and not alone for the country but for the treasure that I knew was hidden in the heart of these Rushholm woods. Lie still in my arms, darling—no, I will see your face! This I have to tell you. I love you, Pat—love you with every fibre of my being—love you till absence from you is madness of the brain. What's more, I mean to have you, to hold you where you are now. You shall love me! I will make you!"

Not being allowed to hide her face, the girl closed her eyes, and the full torrent of his words came down upon her, as a sudden summer tempest rains its fury against a tender wild flower that grows on some unprotected slope.

He glanced at her with fear in his eyes. She was so still. He could not see that the violence of his passion had struck her so suddenly that it almost crushed her.

"I did not mean—that last," he muttered, a tremor of uncertainty coming into his strong, sure voice. "Did I say I would make you love me? Forgive me, dear. My fear of losing you maddens me. I care so much, so much, and you do not care—you will not speak."

She wrenched her hands from his grasp and covered her face. Again he misunderstood her action. He knew he had done her many favours in times past, and that she was very grateful, and her reluctance in speaking seemed to prove to him that she did not care for him, but could not muster courage to tell him so.

"Child," he muttered, pulling himself together, "do not take it so hardly. It is not your fault if you do not love me. Say what is in your heart as kindly as you can. Like you I am pretty strong."

She clung to him convulsively, burying her head deeper and deeper against his arm.

"It is all too wonderful," she whispered.

"I know I am too abrupt," he murmured, contritely. "Better for me if I had lived in the Middle Ages, when I could have carried my lady off by main force to my castle and my heart. But if you were given time, do you think you could ever grow to think a little bit of me—just a little bit?"

She was peering at him shyly from the corner of the eye he could see. What a coquette she was getting to be after all, with her bright, soft hair in her eyes and her dense fringe of black lashes.

"Did you say you would make me love you?"

"I may have—in my folly," muttered the young man.

"Have I ever disobeyed you?"

"No."

"I'm not going to begin now."

He drew a long breath.

"Pat, what do you mean," he demanded. "I cannot have a merely obedient wife."

"No-o."

"I cannot have a merely grateful wife."

"No-o."

"I will have as much love as I give."

"Ye-es."

She suddenly lifted her hand and ran her fingers through his hair. It looked so funny to see it stand

up on end. It completed him as a picture of distraction.

He gave her a little impatient shake.

"Pat, you are teasing me—after the manner of girls. I am in no mood for trifling. If you love me, say so—kiss me of your own free will."

Her lips twitched with a sudden ripple of merriment.

"Oh, you stupid, stupid man!" she breathed. "Don't keep asking me for love and kisses. Just take them!"

Blindly he crushed her to him and rained kisses on her peaceful brow, her quivering eyelids, her flushed cheeks, her sweet, trembling lips.

"Mine!" he cried, triumphantly—"mine to cherish for evermore! God bless you, my darling! You have made me the happiest man on earth!"

But one thing troubled her, as she sat listening to the continued story he poured into her rosy ear with great eloquence now that the crisis was safely past. Raising her face, she bravely spoke one word in his ear.

"Marian?"

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Do not let the fear that you are usurping the place that should be Marian's trouble your head," he said. "I never loved Marian, though I once admired her. Many men's lips have pressed Marian's

perfect mouth, many men's arms have encircled her waist ; but my darling has never been kissed by any one but me, and I swear to her that I have kept my lips as pure as hers. I am hers alone, and never have, and never will love another woman on God's earth."

Pat dismissed the fickle Marian from the conversation, and introduced another name that had been ringing in her ears like the knell of her happiness.

"Isobel?"

Again he smiled, but tenderly, proudly.

"You do not know—how could you?—that during the first awful night of your illness my cousin stood over you, calling you back to life by her prayers and her gentle ministrations. I shall always consider that she begged you back from God for me. My only desire now is that you two shall meet and become the best of friends."

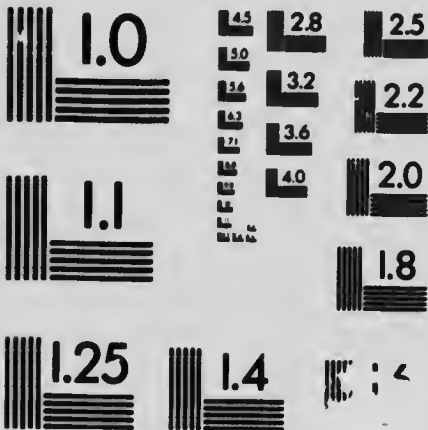
"If that could happen," breathed the girl, softly, "this earth would be too happy a place to live in. You shouldn't tell me so much at once, or my heart will burst with joy."

"But tell me, Pat," he urged, "did you never think of me before to-night? Did you never love me until I compelled you? I would like to think that I had not been suffering alone all those dreary months. Come, you little sphinx, confess that you



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didn't get off scot-free. When did you begin to love me?"

"The first time I saw the back of your head from where I sat at work," said Pat, truthfully.

"That will do," he cried. "That is worth all the torture you led me through."

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CHAPTER XXIX

THE WEARY AT REST

MRS. WILLIAMS was late in returning from the villa. Lights were lit in the cottage, and Pat had gone anxiously to the door several times to listen for her footstep.

At last she came in puffing, hair streaming down over her face, milk-can left behind in the road.

"The old man is dead!" she panted, sinking into a chair—"the old man is dead!"

"Old man dead!" puffed Charlie, bringing up the rear. "Mercy me!—mercy me!"

Pat went over to her kind hostess and put her arms around her neck.

"Do not cry so bitterly, dear Mrs. Williams," she pleaded. "It comes scarcely as a shock. We all knew it had to be some of these days."

"I cannot grieve for the old man," said Mrs. Williams. "You would be amazed at the look of peace on his face. He is glad to be away from it all—the people fighting over him before he was dead, and all that. But, oh, the woeful change his death

will make to us all! Poor young Master Si! My heart bleeds for him!"

"Si knows pretty well how things stand," said Webb. "Paul Mortimer, the old man's lawyer, kept him well informed. We in the city never failed to hear when a new will was made. I believe there have been four within the year. By the last one the bulk of the property, after rather extensive charities have been disposed of, goes to his grand-niece, Marian Amberley. Si knows this perfectly, and it will doubtless soften the blow to be so forewarned. But it always surprised me the tremendous amount of affection he still cherished toward his redoubtable parent. There must have been a considerable show of fondness in the old man before he quarrelled with his son."

"They were all in all to each other after the death of the boy's mother," said Mrs. Williams.

"Well, Si took his own course when he separated from his father," said Webb; "and as far as I know he has never regretted his decision. He will mourn the loss of his father more than the loss of his money, though, goodness knows, he needs the money; and it ought to be his."

"That Mary-Ann thing up at the house there—I hate her!" said Mrs. Williams, wrathfully. "I hate her and she hates me. She gave me a look like a thunder-cloud to-night when I spoke my mind

over some of the burial arrangements. I've been here so long I forget I'm not as good as some folks. That's one thing the old man would do, he'd let you have a fair say about things. He loved a ready tongue. But she'll soon let us know where we stand. There'll be some high-handed doings up at the villa from this on."

"Should I go up and see if there is anything I could do to help them?" wondered Webb.

"Captain Gunn is doing all that is necessary," said Mrs. Williams, scornfully.

"The same roof can never shelter Gunn and me at the same time," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders.

"But you might go up that way, find Mortimer, and take what news you can to Master Si," said the old woman, still thinking anxiously of the exiled son.

Webb looked at his watch.

"Mortimer will have communicated with him before now. Let me see. It happened nearly two hours ago. I shouldn't wonder if word reached Si before he left work."

Nevertheless, with some vague notion that he might make himself useful, Webb went up to the station through the villa grounds. He made no stop near the house, however, for he heard Captain Gunn at the back door, ordering the servants about un-

mercifully. Taking a short cut he retreated hastily toward the front gates.

Suddenly, from the darkness of the next row of trees, a woman's form emerged, and the familiar voice of Marian accosted him.

"So it is you, Evan," she said, gliding up to him like a beautiful dream. "I thought I saw you get off the five-o'clock car, and have been watching for you. I thought you might be coming to pay me a visit. Where did you go to, anyway?"

He evaded the question.

"I have heard of the trouble that has come to this house," he said. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"How funny! Anything you can do for me—for me whom the death of the old man makes the richest heiress in the county. What is there left for me to want?"

"You do not seem to be particularly happy over your good fortune," he remarked.

"Happy?" She repeated the word with a catch in her voice. "Is there such a word? I had forgot."

"Marian," he said, sternly, "do you expect to be happy as long as you pursue your present course?"

"No, no, no!" shuddered the girl. "There is no happiness for me. I am wretched, wretched!"

"You are under the influence of one of the most

unscrupulous men the city ever harboured," he said, hotly. "Break away from George Gunn, and regain the sweet, loving womanhood you seem to be willing to cast so lightly aside."

"I hate George Gunn!" she said, passionately. "I played with him once, but now he masters me. He swears I shall marry him, and I fear sometimes that I shall."

"If you have a care for your future peace, *don't*," he urged.

He had known this beautiful, care-free girl so long, he felt he might be the one to help her to a better mode of living. He knew there had been much good in her nature. He knew that it was her early training that had left her so weak in decision. He felt that she needed a strong friend to save her from plunging down a course of reckless folly from which there could be no hope of deliverance.

With a wild flash of passionate entreaty she flung herself upon him.

"Take me away, Evan! Take me from him, from the cursed money, from all the folly of my past life! Take me, take me with you!"

Though he had suggested that she make the change, he was puzzled to know how to help her to the fulfilment of it.

"I will go with you without a hat on my head or a coat on my back," she urged, trying to draw down

his stern, set face to her level. "I do not care where we go, or how we live, so long as I am with you—with you. You loved me not so long ago. Your heart was in your eyes when I drew near, and I read the adoration of your soul from a face that never lies. You have not forgotten the old happy days. Why not bring them back? You can make me as good as you wish. I have had enough of the follies of the world. Oh, my teacher, I would listen to you now! Let us go away somewhere—together—alone!"

The full import of her wild words was slowly seeping into his brain. He recoiled from her, disengaging the clinging hands.

"Marian," he pleaded, "do not make it so hard for me——"

"I know!—I know!" she wailed. "You still are infatuated with that poor, low-born——"

His face was fearful in its sudden anger.

"Only those are low-born who live below their God-given privileges. The others, being born with all happy chances within their reach, throw them all away for a life of selfish pleasure; they are the lowest of all."

"I perceive the little schemer has got you just where she wants you——"

His hand fell suddenly across her lips.

"You shall not finish the utterance of these lies

in my presence! You have already said too much about the one who is dearer than life to me, from whose pure presence I have just come! Infatuated I may be, trust I always shall be, with the purity, the sweetness, the love, that has lifted my life above the sordidness and selfishness of the driving world that roars about me. Marian, for the reason you yourself have given, I cannot take you with me. But if you are half the woman I think you are, you will brace up, take the stand that every good woman who knows you is longing to see you take, renounce your life of selfish indolence, and fight your way, as we all have to do, along the arduous road of duty."

With a moan she sank down at his feet upon the path.

He bent over her, reluctant to leave her thus.

"I will take you into the city—to Isobel. She will forgive and help you. Show me what more I can do and I will gladly do it."

"Isobel!" she cried, passionately. "An army could not drag me to Isobel!"

"Marian," he pleaded, "be a woman."

"As if," she flashed—"as if I could ever forget for one instant that I am a poor, weak, miserable, sinful woman! Oh, tell me anything else if you wish to imply the thought of endurance, strength!"

He touched her hair with his fingers. It was such soft hair.

" Good-bye, Marian."

It sounded like a parting for eternity.

She buried her face in her hands as he strode away, and far down the road he heard the echo of her exceeding bitter cry.

" Too late !—too late ! Though the fires of hell scorch me, I cannot draw back now ! Too late !—too late ! "

away,
of her

of hell
ate l—

CHAPTER XXX

CALAMITIES NEVER COME SINGLY

ALL night the lamp burned steadily in the office over Sales's desk. The book-keeper, looking as if he could never straighten up, toiled away like an automaton. S. P. Wickins sat beside him in a deep chair, patiently going over all the books with him. They had made no stop for supper. Isobel had telephoned to be allowed to send them a hot lunch, until she saw that mention of eating was an intrusion they would not tolerate.

They went over all the work of the summer and autumn. Surely the firm had put up a noble fight for its life, considering its curtailed capital and the fact that it had had such young and unexperienced men at the helm. Perhaps they had made a mistake in being too kind to their employees, but they were not willing to admit it yet. Neither were they willing to admit that this looked like the beginning of the end. They went through book after book, hunting up every old or possibly new customer; decided to advance what they could out of small

private resources to quiet the most clamorous debts, considered the advisability of borrowing if so be that any one would trust them with a loan; and by the breaking of morning opened the windows, let in the sweet breath of heaven, and took a measure of fresh courage.

Outside, during the early part of the evening, three faces had been pressed as closely as possible to the tantalising blind that veiled the proceedings of the private office from the curious eyes of the street. They were three hard faces, with eyes like weasels', and mouths drawn in tight lines of determination. One was a woman's; but it was the hardest of all. Finally they drew away, considering that the continued light told them all they wanted to know.

"Now's your time," advised Brasmore.

Vipont looked at his companion and then at Brasmore with some uncertainty showing in his pale eyes. Much as he enjoyed the intermediate steps, where listening and scheming brought all his powers to the front, he feared to take a final plunge—to commit himself definitely and irrevocably to a new policy.

"I wish—I wish, indeed," he whined, "that I knew just how nearly they are broke."

Brasmore retorted: "Doesn't this panic among the members of the firm tell its own story? What

good have your observations of the past few days been to you, Vipont? Didn't you yourself carry the report that they were about on their last legs?"

"Oh, yes, yes; of course. But, you see, Brasmore, I am not positively, *absolutely* sure which would be the best thing for *me*."

"I see, exactly," sneered Brasmore.

"Say, Brassy, are you plumb sure that you are going to be rushed *all* winter? What orders have you got?"

"You know I've got the Kent order?"

"That's old."

"And will get most of the orders out there which depend on the action of the Kent people?"

"Yes; and if you don't do the work to suit all those big firms, they'll turn on you like a pack of wolves."

"Vipey *dear*," said the lady, speaking for the first time, "what you want is a rail up your back."

"I'm cold, very cold. It's a deuced cold night—it is indeed," chattered Vipont.

Miss Law's sharp voice continued:

"Tell us what you will do for us, Brasmore, and let us come to terms."

Brasmore ushered them into his own office, adjoining his small factory, three blocks down on the other side of the street.

"You can call yourselves about what you please," he boasted, sucking in his moustache.

"I don't hanker for an empty name, if that's all you have to offer," whined Vipont.

"Now, Brasmore, be honest," rasped Miss Law. "You didn't do any rushing business here this last summer."

"Last summer's not next winter," bragged the head of the new firm.

"But, honest, you think the worst is over—you are on a good sound running basis now?" croaked Vipont.

"I believe it's safe, Vipey," grinned Brasmore, cheerily, "or, depend upon it, I wouldn't be trying to haul you out of your comfortable quarters. I know you like a good soft living."

"I've got my mother to think of, and I'm in very delicate health myself," whined Vipont.

"I don't see that you've got the necessary machinery to execute such big orders," said Miss Law, dubiously, as she glanced into the silent factory rooms. "In that respect you are decidedly behind the other firm. Who would run such machines as I see here near the door?"

"Dagoes," smiled Brasmore. "You get them for a song. Wickins makes his big mistake in hiring such an expensive class of labour. But, of course, if all goes as we plan this winter, the spring may see the installation of the improved machinery."

"I believe I'd rather wait till the spring to make the change," chattered Vipont, on the rack of doubt.

"You'll be out of work all winter," warned Brasmore.

"How do you make that out?"

"The Wickins firm will close down in a few days."

Vipont gave him a scared look.

"You are afraid to believe it? Mark my words, and when it happens think of me."

"I'm inclined to think you're right," wailed Vipont. "But if I was only sure!"

"Tell us what you will do for us, Brasmore," persisted Miss Law, who had a genius for practicality.

"You can call yourselves about whatever you please," repeated Brasmore. "I ain't particular."

And all of Miss Law's persistence, coupled with all of Vipont's whining, failed to elicit a more positive answer from the sphinx-like Brasmore, concerning the exact figures of their salary or the exact altitude of their dignity with the new firm. He hinted that he could make that part "suit all right;" and that he could hardly tell definitely "until things got under swing."

"Then shall we tell S. P. to-morrow morning?" asked Miss Law.

"Exactly," said Brasmore, rubbing his fat hands. "And come down here and start to work five

minutes later. How does that strike you for hustling?"

"Vipey *dear*, are you on?" asked the lady.

"Oh, dear me, I guess so—yes, I may say that I think so; but I wish I knew for sure which would turn out the best for *me*."

Accordingly before the seven o'clock horns had stopped blowing, while S. P. Wickins stood with bared head at an open window, letting the cool air rush over his tired eyes and thinking better things of the world in general, there entered his office two of his most sure supporters—as he supposed—two whom he had trusted with the work, because their long experience had made them reliable; two, who though he could have no admiration for their characters, were like a couple of gigantic *AR* machines which could be relied on for turning out a certain amount of manufactured goods every day.

He turned and looked at them in blank surprise. There was lightning in their eyes. Already it had snapped in his face and stung him.

"We've come to tell you, sir, that we're quittin'."

Evidently it had been agreed that it would look better for the gentleman to be spokesman, but before he had finished his first blundering sentence the lady took the words out of his mouth.

"I suppose you've been taking notice, Mr. Wickins, that there's been a lot of dissatisfaction

in the factory lately. Two or three young mutton-heads have been advanced over their superiors who have been there years longer, and who know the business from *a* to *z*; and even wee sissies, knee-high to a gnat, are allowed to butt in and speak their opinion as to how the work shall be done. We've been faithful all summer in the hope that you'd take notice and reward them that really had your interest at heart; but faithfulness doesn't seem to make any difference to some people. At last we've got to the end of our endurance. We won't stand for it, and we've come to tell you so."

S. P. still looked at them stupidly. Sales also turned in surprise, wondering if some new storm had arisen upstairs in the absence of Evan Webb.

"Is this something new? Some grievance which has lately arisen?" asked the manager.

"No," whined Vipont. "You did wrong when you dismissed Brasmore——"

"We shall not discuss that action," said S. P., stiffening.

When he straightened up so, even Miss Law stood in awe of him.

"Is there no way to adjust this slight misunderstanding?" he continued, throwing a grain of persuasion into his voice.

"Nothing," they averred together. "It is no

slight misunderstanding. It is a long season of unfair dealing we've been up against."

"You are aware that the firm needs your services just now more than at any other time?"

This was a great concession for the manager to make, and showed into what a corner he was driven.

The disaffected members simpered as if the confession pleased them highly, but neither showed signs of relenting.

"Will you not regret your hasty decision?" asked Mr. Wickins.

Miss Law assured him that even if things turned out poorly for them there would be very little to regret in connection with their present step.

The manager's boyish face tightened into the severe lines which had just lately become apparent under the stress of business.

"You are aware, I suppose, that I could not advance your wages farther than the end of the present week; also that—er—under the circumstances—there could be no references of character—er—given——"

They seemed aware of both these facts, and quite nerved to face the world without the aid of either additional salary or flattering references.

Coldly Mr. Wickins assigned them to Sales, and the book-keeper mixed with them in about five minutes, under the influence of a strong feeling of

disgust, which was about the only thing that could hurry his movements.

"Good morning," said Miss Law.

"Good morning," echoed Vipont, airily.

S. P. made no answer, and Sales grunted.

"If Webb were only here," groaned the manager, "he would keep the cutting-room in order; while little Pat, if in her place, could do most of the jobs that Miss Law boasts are especially difficult to see through."

"Unfortunately," said Sales, "they are both absent."

"Unfortunately," echoed S. P., drearily.

"That little bit of business down at Rushholm keeps Webb an unconscionable time," muttered Sales, drily.

"I could get him by long-distance 'phone," said Wickins.

"Would I do?" asked Sales.

"What do you know about the cutting-room?" asked S. P., incredulously.

"Nothing particular," smiled Sales; "but I can do my work up there and keep things in order for the rest of the day. If the work runs out we may have to close up shop to-day. It is Saturday—we can have that for our excuse—and before Monday something may have happened."

"Hope springs eternal——" quoted the discour-

aged manager ; but Sales, pattering away with a great volume in his hand, was already half-way up the stairs, and S. P. found himself leaning on his elbows, all his eyes and heart going after this strangely homely man, with his beauty so securely hidden on the inside of his make-up.

Sales did not find the once turbulent cutting-room very hard to keep in order. The cutters and machinists, pressers and hand sewers, who now were chosen from a much higher intellectual level than the class hired in that same factory a year ago, had taken an intelligent interest in the proceedings from the beginning, and had a pretty fair idea how matters stood. They had endorsed the improvement scheme with heart and voice. If the management had got into trouble over that they were more than willing to do their part to help them on their feet again. They so expressed themselves to Sales, when he came into the midst with his ponderous book and his kindly, absent-minded smile.

So, after discussing the matter in a friendly fashion with them all, Sales, later in the day, pattered downstairs in a beaming mood to say to the manager that the cutting-room worked like beavers; that all the employees were so glad that their two last tyrants were gone, and withal so sorry for the trouble of the managers, that they would work all night or every night, if needed; that they would go without

their full wages for awhile in the hope of being paid back after Christmas, when it was almost certain that business would pick up. It was a mighty nice message from a lot of employees who had been perfect rebels in the spring. Sales fairly slid down the banister to deliver it. But it was destined never to leave his lips.

Across his desk lay the chief, his handsome head buried in the papers, his hands clutching the roll-top with a grip strong enough to tear it off; and on the floor knelt Isobel, his wife, praying him to look up, to speak to her.

"Merciful God, madam!" cried Sales, crossing the office with a single stride. "Has he been seized with a stroke? Heart failure?"

She allowed him to lift her up.

"You try," she whispered, looking up with pitiful appeal into his kindly eyes. She, too, had utter confidence in this plain, silent man, who said so little and was capable of so much.

The young man seemed to realise that kindly voices were speaking around him. He roused himself, staggered to his feet, threw himself upon his friend's shoulder. The older man, asking for no explanations, patted his boyish head like a father.

"Ernest, this is too hard!"

The groan was at last torn from the white lips.

Isobel sobbed for joy to see the spirit again taking possession of that frozen face.

Sales had never before been called Ernest by his associates in the office. It seemed too heavenly kind to his lonely heart. He was always misunderstood, always left out, as those usually are who wear their beauty on the inside. But these people had always understood, trusted, loved him. He felt quite overwhelmed with the thought. He dashed his hand across his eyes right smartly.

"I don't understand——"

Isobel picked up a telegram and handed it to him.

"My father is dead!" moaned the boy on his breast. "O God, my father is dead!"

"Poor chappie! poor, wee chappie!" for Sales remembered him as a little lad running into the office after school-hours, and then the man who looked like a multiplication-table burst into tears.

Isobel took back the telegram which Sales held out to her, and read it again as her blinding tears fell upon . . .

"RUSHHOLM,

"December 1st.

"MR. S. P. WICKINS, JR.,

"480, Thornbury Avenue, City.

"Your father died at four p.m. to-day. We await your instructions.

"PAUL MORTIMER."

"It came just ten minutes ago," she explained.

"I brought it down myself, so there would be no delay."

"It is hard enough to have one's father die," said the young man, bitterly; "but to die *so*, without a relative near him; without a word to his only child; without allowing me to smooth his pillow—to—to make it easier for him! He was a good father to me in the old days. I am sorry I could not please him in everything. Ernest, Isobel, do not think that I mourn because the money slipped through my hands. I made up my mind to that before I disagreed with him. But I hoped—I hoped to the last minute for a word of reconciliation, for a summons to his dying bed."

"You will go to Rushholm?" asked Sales.

"By all means—at once." He was already bracing up, as a man must, whatever his grief. "He can no longer deny me the melancholy pleasure of being near him, though I am surprised that they await my instructions regarding the burial. Isobel, do you care to face the journey, too?"

"Not to-night, dear. I shall probably go out to-morrow."

"And you, Sales?" questioned the chief, making preparations for immediate departure.

"I shall lock up," said Sales.

"Just so. This gives us a reason for doing so for several days. But yourself?"

"Oh, I'll be here to-night."

"All night?"

"Likely? Why? Will you be wanting to look me up?"

"It had better be somebody's business to look you up," said Wickins, "or your bleached skeleton will be hanging over your desk when I get back."

"I'll do it," said Isobel. "I'll telephone twice this evening, and you must answer. *Mind, Mr. Sales!*"

"And if you telephone more than twice, I won't answer; *mind, Mrs. Wickins!*"

Then they passed out into the street, and Sales was left to hold the fort alone.

Isobel would have passed the dreary evening alone but for Mrs. Carningham, who stepped in to show her a cheery letter from Pat. Isobel was beginning to appreciate this brave, quiet woman who was winning success for herself as a nurse. She coaxed her to sit down and have a cup of tea.

Glancing at the clock, she saw it was after ten. She rang up the office, and was immediately answered by a slow, patient voice, which had a hint of exhaustion in it.

"You there yet, Mr. Sales? What's that—can't get through your work? I'm sorry for— Say, I wonder could you come up if we needed you very badly? Yes we do; we would like to have you

very much. We're all at sea when Si is away. We don't know on what to feed the horse he has in the stable. You don't either? Oh, you're a man and not afraid. Yes, so much needs to be done in the evenings that my husband always attended to. Oh, thank you very much! Yes, half an hour will do. Good-bye."

She turned with a beaming smile to Mrs. Carningham.

"Well, I've got him off that stool at last! I knew he would come if he thought he could help anybody. And it was hardly a fib either, for he will be useful. He will go pattering around, looking after things for all the world like Si would himself. And I hope when he gets done that he will go home and go to bed. It may save him from a spell of brain-fever."

Mrs. Carningham's eyes followed her alert figure admiringly.

"Have you just given up your life to looking after other people?" she wanted to know. "Without you everybody would be down and out."

Isobel turned lustrous eyes upon her.

"Don't begin to sympathise with me, or I shall faint in your arms!"

And Mrs. Carningham saw that the alert figure was swaying unsteadily, as it put up its brave fight against exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SURPRISE

S. P. WICKINS, accompanied by Evan Webb, who had turned around and come back with him when he encountered him at the station, entered the house of mourning about nine o'clock the same evening of the old gentleman's death.

The son went in without waiting for admission, and sought the room where the dead man was being prepared for burial. Everything about the halls was so familiar—the same furniture, the same pictures on the walls, even the picture of his mother in its ancient oak frame by the window. It was hard to realise that he was not at home.

But Captain Gunn, blustering around like the master of the establishment, soon contrived to intimate to him that his presence was an intrusion. He was not invited down to the late lunch Marian had ordered in the dining-room, nor was any reparation made for his comfort during the night. By eleven o'clock he was left alone with his dead, only his friend, Evan Webb, sitting statue-still at the other side of the room, to bear him company.

Presently Paul Mortimer looked in, having just been made aware that the son was in the house. He came forward and gripped his hand with the silent sympathy of a strong man of few words.

"Don't stay here all night, Si," he urged, kindly. "Come home with me."

Mortimer was a country lawyer who lived with his family in the village, only coming up to Rushholm Villa when commanded by the old man, whom he had served in a legal capacity.

But Si shook his head.

"I will stay here."

"Then order a room to be made ready for your use."

"I could not think of troubling them," responded the young man. "No, no, you must not have it done for me, Mortimer. If a bed were got ready, I could not use it—it would be like sleeping on spikes. Perhaps after awhile I may go out and walk under the trees."

Drearily passed the days that intervened between the death and the funeral of old Silas Wickins. The house was cold and dark, yet in certain rooms, filled with light and cheer, it was whispered that the young people, who so soon were to enter into full possession of everything, held nightly revels that were none too solemn. It was especially difficult for Captain Gunn to keep his face drawn down

into a becoming mournfulness. Was he not to marry the beautiful heiress, Marian Amberley, as soon as affairs were settled up and a suitable time had elapsed after the funeral to give the appearance of respect to the dead?

The young son, who had come to his own but was not received, was known to be around the house somewhere, but he gave them little trouble. He would have fared very poorly indeed, had it not been for kind Mrs. Williams, who saw that the necessities of life were offered him, and who was indefatigable in her efforts to get him to rest. She had the free run of the house, and many a little delicacy did she appropriate for him as it was under preparation in the kitchen.

At last the hour for the funeral arrived. The few friends gathered in the library, where the old man lay in his favourite spot between the fireplace and the window. Instead of sitting reading the paper, or nursing his pains by the hearth, he lay restfully on his pillow, his face slightly turned to one side, a look of deep peace on his haggard face. Above, on the wall, his pictured face, stern, relentless, suffering, reminded one of what he had been. It was a relief to drop one's eyes and remember him as he now was. No one could be sorry for him.

Marian Amberley, most handsomely gowned in clinging mourning robes, which enhanced her fair

beauty manifold, descended to the library with every nerve braced for the ordeal the next few hours would bring. She had not met the son during his three days' stay in the house. What use discussing affairs with him? Would either be constrained to change their minds—to conciliate, to patch up the rent that tore them apart?

When she swept in, the last one to enter before the hushed, waiting assembly, she saw that Si stood in the window at his father's head. She wavered a moment, then, obeying an impulse, crossed the room and glided near him to the place reserved for the chief mourners.

Their eyes met and hers fell—fell till they rested on the calm face of the dead, which seemed to mock at all earthly strife, all human bickering. A sudden sob shook her, and she sank down in the nearest chair, burying her face in her hands.

Si watched her grimly, scorning her false grief; but Evan Webb, following every motion of her tense figure, every expression of her deadly pale face, knew she was suffering an agony before which the sorrow of the bereaved son paled into nothingness. Hers were the pangs of the lost, who have gone so far that there is no turning back.

She declined to attend the funeral, and was left alone in the house with the servants. It was dark when the men returned from the distant cemetery.

Everybody was nervous, ill at ease. The ordeal of reading the will loomed before them. Delay was maddening. The sooner the better.

Everybody looked to Paul Mortimer, who had entered with the quiet authority of one who held affairs in the hollow of his hands.

"Do you wish it now?"

"Yes," answered Marian, in a low voice.

He looked at Si, and Si bowed his head.

With a firm step Mortimer entered the library, requested Marian to light up the gloomy room, and, placing chairs around the table, invited everybody interested to enter.

To a casual observer it would have been an interesting study to watch the position every one assumed to hear their fate. There was a suggestion of bracing about almost every figure.

Marian, having recovered from her emotion, sat on the sofa as rigid as if under the influence of a powerful drug. The fingers of her left hand were buried in the palm of Captain Gunn's right, as he lounged idly by her side, tapping one foot impatiently on the floor and indulging in a smothered whistle under his breath.

Si sank into his father's arm-chair at the head of the table, and propped his elbows on the polished surface. There was plenty of the bulldog in S. P.'s nature, and it was plain to be seen, if

there was anything to contest, he was there to contest it.

Evan Webb, as a mere spectator, a stick up Si's back so to speak, folded his arms tightly across his chest and stood leaning his head against the window-sill. His eyes often rested on the pictured face of the old man, that seemed to look down expectantly on them all.

Paul Mortimer had untied a thick packet and sat looking over the unfolded sheets with provoking leisure. All the spectators could see were the words across the back—"Will," and the scrawl of the old man's name.

Presently, clearing his throat, he spoke.

"There is one other person whom I should like to see present."

All stared.

"Will somebody be so kind as to fetch Miss Patience Carningham of Ivy Cottage?"

Webb sprang into life.

"In the name of high heaven, what for?"

"Because I request it," said the lawyer, with a quiet smile.

The young man glanced at the clock.

"She is not strong yet. She will be asleep by now. It is nearly nine."

"Would there be such a thing as waking her?" asked Mortimer, drily.

Webb seized his hat.

"Expect me back in twenty minutes," he muttered, disappearing into the hall.

Diving recklessly through the low evergreens of the shrubbery path that separated Rushholm Villa grounds from the dairy farm, he rushed on, fearing at times that he would fall from the dizziness that possessed him. What did the lawyer's words imply? A change in the will at the last moment of the old man's life? Had he not said he would surprise them all? But if there was a change, what had little innocent Pat, sleeping like a baby in the distant cottage, to do with it? He had never known how much he longed to see the girl he loved lifted above the sorrows of poverty until this sudden shadow of wealth fell over her. Then he laughed aloud at the thought of Pat with even a small portion of the old dragon's wealth. In case it should transpire that she had anything to do with it, how long would it take her to place every cent, where it honestly belonged, in the hands of the only son?

Mrs. Williams opened the door narrowly in response to his peremptory knock.

"Is it a madman, or a tramp? Why, bless me, is it you, Mr. Webb? I never knew you to make such a fuss before."

"Where is Patience?" he demanded.

"Been asleep for half an hour," she replied.

"Guess you'll have to wait till morning to see her."

"Wake her and get her dressed instantly," he commanded, in such a tone that Mrs. Williams perceived that he was very much in earnest.

"Lands o' mercy, Mr. Webb, what for?"

"I hardly know myself," he replied. "Mortimer insists that she shall be brought up to the villa to witness the reading of the will."

"Mercy me!" ejaculated Charlie, rolling out of bed at the sound of the conversation in the front room, and standing before them with his stiff hair on end, his feet bare and cold, and his nightshirt pulled open at the collar.

Webb laughed in spite of his many anxieties.

"Charlie," he said, "you may well say 'Mercy me!' Wiser heads than yours are puzzled over the tangle the eccentric old gentleman has left us to unravel."

"Haw," said Charlie, wisely.

Mrs. Williams had aroused Pat, who in an incredibly short time stood before him clothed and in her right mind. She wore a dark crimson lounging-robe, tied about her slender waist with a cord and tassel; her feet were thrust into house slippers, and her unbound hair tumbled in riotous confusion around her sweet face.

"What do you want?" she asked, blinking at the bright light.

"You!" he said, advancing and wrapping her in her blue ulster. "I am under oath to bring you dead or alive to the villa within the half-hour."

She shook back her hair and glanced down at her slippered feet.

"Not this way!"

"Come," he said. "An hour's preparation couldn't make my sleeping Psyche any more beautiful. Marian, with all her contrivances, is pale beside you."

Without a word she followed him down the lane, through the gap, and along the shrubbery path under the sweeping evergreens. At times his strong arms lifted her off her feet and carried her over some rough broken stretch. But he kept his word: the clocks just striking nine as he set her down at the side door of the mansion.

"I'm frightened," she shivered.

"Little girl," he whispered, with his hand on the door, "play your part bravely. This night may see him who has been so woefully wronged reinstated in his lawful place as heir to all this lordly estate. Something wonderful is going to happen. Mortimer's face is dark with mystery."

At the suggestion the colour returned to her face. She pushed open the door with her own hand, and entered with the *væ victis* of battle in her clear, daring eyes. Once again, like the offspring of

Night and Storm, she entered that familiar library, resolved to do her desperate part or die. She dearly loved a tussle, no matter how heavy the odds against her.

Paul Mortimer came forward and shook her hand with a ceremoniousness that made her feel very big. Mr. Wickins jumped up and gave her his arm-chair, getting another smaller one by her side for his own use. Webb took up his old position, leaning against the window-sill, but with his foot resting on the rung of the arm-chair. The two on the sofa did not appear to have changed their position by one inch.

The lawyer cleared his throat twice, then said, in a deep voice that filled the solemn silence like the striking of a clock in the dead of night :

“ We shall now proceed to read the will.”

It was dated at Rushholm, November 29th—just six days previous, as all observed with a thump of their hearts.

It began by proclaiming :

“ This is the last Will and Testament of me, Silas Portlaw Wickins, of the village of Rushholm, of the county of B—, and Province of Ontario, made this twenty-ninth day of November in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and —.

“ I revoke all former Wills or other testamentary

Dispositions by me at any time heretofore made and declare this only to be and contain my last Will and Testament.

“ I direct all my just debts, funeral and testamentary expenses, to be paid and satisfied by my executors hereinafter named as soon as conveniently may be after my decease.

“ I give, devise, and bequeath all my Real and Personal Estate of which I may die possessed in the manner following, that is to say : “

Here followed a long and detailed list, making provision for the distribution of small legacies to faithful servants and friends. By one of the clauses, William, his indefatigable serving-man, became independent for life ; by another, good Mrs. Williams became five thousand dollars richer all in a minute. The faithful country lawyer was also rewarded by a substantial sum.

But the estate of Rushholm, the numerous farms and houses scattered over the face of the country, the mortgages, stocks, and bonds, the bulk of the fortune, which every one knew totalled well on to a million of money !—what was to become of it ? These legacies, though both numerous and generous, left the fortune practically untouched.

The lawyer ran his eye around the room, then proceeded with the next item.

"To my 'little boy,' my dearly beloved and only son, Silas Portlaw Wickins, jr., I leave and bequeath the following:"

It is probable that no one at the first reading took in the different items which comprised the extensive list; but they clearly grasped the idea that the bulk of the fortune was being disposed of. It made mention of all the real estate of which the old man died possessed, including the coveted estate of Rushholm. It went into wearisome detail concerning stocks in different Companies of which the old man had been a prominent shareholder. It did not fail to include the dead man's personal insurance, which was heavy. Totalled up roughly, it brought the heir into possession of three-quarters of a million of money.

There was still another item over which the lawyer lingered with parting lips and smiling eyes.

"All the residue of my estate not hereinbefore disposed of, I give, devise, and bequeath in the manner hereafter set forth, to my one faithful, fearless, and incorruptible adviser, my dear friend, Patience Carningham, to be paid over to her at her coming of age. I direct that one half of the total amount, which shall be made up after other claims are settled, shall pass into her immediate possession, and the remaining half shall be distributed by her

in charities, according to her own discretion without hindrance or interference from any party."

Again there followed an itemised list which the lawyer droned out to the last syllable.

"I take it, my dear young lady," he exclaimed, with an enthusiasm he no longer cared to conceal, "that you are worth two hundred thousand dollars!"

Then remembering the dignity of his position, he finished reading what nobody listened to hear, since they had already heard all they wanted to know.

"And I nominate and appoint Paul Mortimer, lawyer, and Robert Bruce Hurd, physician, both of Rushholm, to be Executors of this my last Will and Testament.

"In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand this day and year first above written

"SILAS PORTLAW WICKINS.

"Signed, published, and declared by the said Silas Portlaw Wickins, the testator, as and for his last Will and Testament, in the presence of us, who both present together at the same time, in his presence, at his request, and in the presence of each other, have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses.

"PAUL MORTIMER.

"ROBERT BRUCE HURD."

Scarcely had the monotonous voice of Mortimer ceased, when Captain Gunn sprang up.

"That is a faked will!" he fumed, fairly frothing at the mouth.

Mortimer was ready for him.

"Lawson, another Rushholm lawyer who was present beside Dr. Hurd and myself, will answer any questions that may arise concerning its validity."

"The old fool was out of his head!"

"Dr. Hurd is also prepared to settle that question satisfactorily."

The captain turned on Si.

"You shall smart for this, sir—you and that pale-faced imp!"

Webb's fist came so near his eyes that the sleek little chap was glad to back up.

Banging the door he stalked from the room, muttering a confused jumble—a theme with variations—about contesting the will, making some people smart for their conduct, etc.

A guilty wraith of her former pompous self, Marian followed him, realising to the full that for her there was no turning back.

CHAPTER XXXII

ADJUSTMENTS

THE young man Si raised his head as the door closed on the two usurpers.

"This is a great surprise," he said, brokenly.

"Did he not say that he would surprise everybody?" cried the lawyer. "The plan he took to accomplish it was to make a will so perfect and so regular that not one of his friends would be left out. Meanwhile they all, thinking him angry with them for various reasons, imagined everything but the truth. How my heart bled to tell you, Si, the first night you came down! But I was under oath. It was to be his surprise. How he rejoiced in it the last days of his life, after he surrendered his pride! How he bound me again and again to keep it secret! I can't help thinking that he is looking down on us now with a smile of perfect satisfaction."

"This explains the look of peace on his face," murmured Webb, softly.

Si rose unsteadily.

"It numbs my senses," he muttered. "I can't think what I want to do first."

"The first thing I would do," said the lawyer, promptly, "is express thanks to the young lady who sits by your side. In my opinion you are much indebted to her for the sudden change in your fortunes. 'Mortimer,' he used to say, 'forbid the child to come into the grounds or the house! If she looks at me again I must relent!' Then, when he saw that there was no occasion for me to give such an order, as Miss Carningham never set foot on his property, he took to toddling out to the back of the farm in the hope of seeing her in Mrs. Williams's field. For months he seemed waiting for some influence which would force him to do his duty, but no one ever came along brave enough to express a candid opinion to his face but this young girl."

Pat looked up with childish sincerity as Mr. Wickins took both her hands and strove in vain to speak.

"I ought to have done something," she smiled, "considering all the trouble I have given you and your family since we first met."

"What trouble, Patience?" he began; then stopped and smiled in spite of himself at remembrance of all the escapades at the factory in which she had figured as chief actor. It seemed he had not had a minute's easy sleep since the day she first gave his conscience such a jolt.

"And more," cried Pat, jumping up and still giving him her hands, "you shall have the part of the money that is coming to me, be it little or much! Old Mr. Wickins was very kind, but I could not accept it; it would be said that I, like some others, came down here to see what I could get—and I didn't—you know I never——"

"We know, Patience," he smiled.

"Mr. Mortimer," she insisted, "must help me to give it to you, right away, before I go home. I couldn't sleep——"

"Not so fast, young lady," laughed Si. "I know you get the name of Impatience, but——"

"I am afraid you will have to sleep on it, Miss Patience," said the lawyer. "Remember you are still an infant in the eyes of the law, and will be constrained for some years to accept the advice of your trustees."

"You could help me, sir, if you would," said the girl, with reproachful eyes.

"But I don't intend to," said he, vigorously. "I know, as my old friend knew, that the money for charitable purposes could not be placed in more generous hands. As for the other, it is just a little gift in token of the old man's appreciation of what you did for him. Accept it gracefully, my dear. The care of the money will not fall very heavily on you for some time yet. We shall see if we can get

enough to defray your present expenses and let the bulk of it rest till you reach your majority."

"In the delightful years that intervene, after you have had a dip into all the arts and crafts you have always wanted to study, you may fill your pretty head with plans for helping those who are in trouble," said Mr. Wickins, kindly. "It is a problem very dear to your heart."

The girl bowed her head in acceptance of the new burden so unexpectedly thrust on her young shoulders.

"I expect it will be hard to spend it right," she sighed; "but I will do whatever you think is best. May I go now?"

Webb sprang forward and again placed the ulster about her slender shoulders. She followed him to the door, then turned and came back.

"Mr. Wickins, may I—please, may I—speak to Marian? She is—that is—oh, she didn't mean to be so wicked! She is sorry, sorry—I could see it in her face. Could you give me a word for her?"

"Go to her, child, by all means," he said, with prompt generosity. "Tell her to stay in the house. Tell her we are friends, that we are willing to help her——"

Pat was up the stairs before he finished. Within five minutes she returned with lagging steps.

"She is gone!" she announced, breathlessly.

"Captain Gunn and Miss Marian left on the last car," volunteered a servant.

Mr. Wickins came to the side door and peered over Pat's shoulder out into the starless night.

"I wonder where she went," he said, sadly. "So young, so beautiful, so weak—and now gone! God help her! We cannot."

Very silently Webb conducted home his precious charge, becoming ever more precious as every hour revealed new depths of sweetness and generosity in her nature. When he reached Ivy Cottage he wheeled her about to face himself, laying his hands heavily on her shoulders.

"My dignified young heiress, what are you going to do with me now?"

"What do you mean?" she faltered, trembling under his grasp.

"I am not as rich as you are," he said, with the stubbornness of a man. "And if you think you could do better—no matter what it cost me—I would free you——"

"You absurd boy!" she cried, twisting from under his grasp and throwing her soft arms about his neck. "Is your memory so short that you cannot recall the time when I was not so rich as you?"

"I am glad," he said, "that we plighted our troth when neither of us had very much of this world's

goods, else it might be said"—mocking her words of half an hour ago—"that I, like some others, came down here to see what I could get, and I didn't—you know I didn't."

"I know," she smiled.

"I am," said he, "a firm believer in money as a means of larger usefulness in this world, though I never regarded it as essential to happiness or success. I intend to have my share of it, as a strong man should. I rejoice to see a fortune in your generous hands. If you will but wait for me, I'll catch up to you some of these days, my proud heiress."

"I won't wear that burdensome title," she whispered, rebelliously. "Call me what you called me last night. Pet me a little. I'm nothing but a kid yet."

"My white wonder," he murmured, folding her close; "God help you to make the very best use of the new talent He has entrusted to your care!"

"Amen!" echoed Pat, fervently.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HOME TO STAY

It was Christmas morning. Pat, at last home in the bosom of her family, was being nearly torn to pieces by the caresses of the boisterous boys.

"It was mean of you to come home in the night, after we were asleep," cried Richie, tugging at her skirt to get her full attention. "Who brought you in from the big, dark country? Was it Santa Claus?"

"It must have been," smiled Pat, "since he left all these parcels you see on the table."

"Are they for us?" shouted young Richie, so loudly that he suffered a sharp rebuke from his elder brother.

"Most of them," replied his sister, putting a couple of parcels into his itching hands. "Some of them are for the poor children around the corner who didn't have any fire last night. They had no light in their window, either, and Santa Claus missed them, so you boys must run over before dinner and give them that big box on the floor."

"It's true that they had no light, but they did

have a fire, Patty," corrected Richie, excitedly. "Jack took them over a scuttle of coal."

"Thank God we have warmth to share with others this winter," said Pat, happily.

"He said I oughtn't to take so much," said the older boy, gravely; "but Mumsie told me that the poor old man that died gave you enough money to buy coal for all winter."

"So he did, Jack—so he did," said Pat, with misty eyes. "You may carry them another load as soon as you please."

All morning Pat was as busy as a bee sharing her Christmas joy with others who had not been as fortunate as herself. The energy of her nature, which formerly had been spent in her daily toil, was now bubbling out enthusiastically in new, far-reaching plans for the good of others.

The sudden cloud-burst of wealth which had so unexpectedly rained down upon her, had caused little change in the sweet simplicity of her nature. There was, to be sure, a quiet elegance about her appearance, a new confidence in her manner—the quiet assurance that wealth gives. There was a contented, abiding happiness which had quite replaced the old wistfulness of her face. But the glorious eyes were the same, the clear, brave voice was the same, and that meant that the soul within was the same.

In the afternoon Evan Webb called to take her for a walk. He had many new things to show her around town after her long absence, and his intention was to wind up at 480, Thornbury Avenue, and present her aresh to his cousin, who had not seen her since her good fortune came upon her.

"I want to see the factory first," she said. "Is it true that I shall hardly recognise it since the improvements have been completed?"

"It is indced a changed place," he replied. "The modern equipment makes work a pleasure."

"I want to go in!" she exclaimed, with sudden determination as they came before the great barred doors.

He went around to the back door and inserted into the lock a key which he always carried in his pocket.

Eagerly she ran ahead of him through the familiar time-office. She stopped at the time-keeper's desk to wait for him.

"Now, miss," she mimicked, in imitation of Vipont, "you have got yourself into trouble by coming late. Don't let it occur again if you want to keep your job."

"Vipont will never worry the employees of this factory again," smiled Webb, joining her.

"Why?" she questioned. "Is he gone?"

"Gone even from the city," he assured her.

"When the Brasmore firm failed he was thrown out of work and had to leave the city to seek employment in a distant town where he is not so well known. I hear he has married Miss Kitty Law and taken her in to fight along with his mother, who is said to be a woman of very questionable temper."

"When the Brasmore firm failed?" questioned Pat. "Did they fail? Didn't they get the Kent order and a lot more orders that should have been ours?"

"They did," he admitted.

"Through me," she faltered, with downcast eyes.

"That is one thing," said he, "that I wish to speak about. But let me finish telling you why the Brasmore firm failed. They made a sorry botch of the work with their little machines and their ignorant class of labourers. Before they were half through Kent came down on them like fury, took part of the work away from them, and begged us almost on his knees to finish it at any price. With his usual generosity Si promised to do so, though his father's fortune had put him far beyond the need of the work. The Brasmore firm closed down a few weeks later, and Vipont had the nerve to come whining around here and beg us to give him back his job."

"What did you say?" demanded Pat.

"Told him we couldn't see it that way at all. I

had the pleasure of telling him myself, and I used up my last ounce of strength that day in making it forcible enough."

"He is one man I could never like," said the girl, as though it troubled her innocent conscience somewhat. "I would like to say that he deserved a lot more than you gave him; still, I will not wish him ill. His case is in the hands of fate, who will yet balance the scales."

"He has his Kitty," murmured Webb. "Let us not wish him any more harm."

The girl laughed her clear, bright laugh.

"And now," he said, "I want to tell you how it happened that we did not lose the Kent order through you. I never understood clearly why you thought you disclosed the secret—you must tell me some time. However, here is the truth of the matter. The other day Isobel got a letter from Marian Amberley. You are surprised? Yes, it was she who brought disaster on us all—and not unthinkingly, but deliberately, to pay us for some fancied grudges. She confessed it all to Isobel: how meeting Miss Law, whom she knew slightly, in the terminal station one night, she whispered the secret into her willing ears, and Miss Law did the rest. Poor Marian! We cannot wish her any more harm than her present lot either! George Gunn left her as soon as he knew that she was not to get her money.

That, I take it, was a blessing, but the poor girl cannot see it so yet. Pat, it would grieve you to the heart! She writes that she is trying to work! Imagine! I know she is very broken in fortune and in health, and that Isobel has sent her money."

"I could have loved her easily if she had given me a chance," said the girl. "She was so beautiful."

Together they ascended the broad stairs, up two flights to the cutting-room. The stairs, a year ago befouled with lint, dust, rag-ends, and tobacco-juice, were clean and polished. At the top of the first flight Webb pointed out a large, commodious apartment set apart as the girls' lunch-room. It had comfortable chairs and lounges, and several books and papers were strewn on a large table in the centre.

But it was over the cutting-room that Pat broke into exclamations of enthusiasm.

Such high ceilings! Such large, clean windows! Six new machines! An elevator to lift bundles from the ground floor! Work would be play in such a room as this!

She dropped into the chair that stood before her old machine. She ran her hand almost affectionately along the steel bar. She threaded the needle.

"I want to come back to work—may I?"

Her companion shook his head.

"You don't need to work."

"Will you keep me in idleness until I soften into a useless namby-pamby creature like—like——"

"Marian," he finished, sadly. "That is, indeed too recent an example to be forgotten."

"I cannot tell you," she exclaimed, enthusiastically, "how much I admire the people who are doing things. I care not whether he be the head of the Government, putting his seal on a document of national importance, or a cobbler putting a patch on a shoe. Neither can I tell you how my mind stagnates when I have nothing to do. You must let me work at something."

"It would take more than one person of my size to keep you away from your beloved duty," he smiled. "But can you not feel that your new responsibilities are more important than the old routine of duties?"

"No. I seem to feel that I am set up above the honest toilers, looking down on their efforts without lending a hand. I warn you, sir, don't be surprised if I ask Mr. Wickins for my old machine, and walk in here some Monday morning prepared to start to work."

He looked at her quizzically.

"You think I won't do it? I tell you I am going to do something for my old friends."

A thought crossed her mind rapidly, almost taking her breath away.

"I should like to give all of old Mr. Wickins's money to broaden the opportunities of the girl who works! I should like to give the chance to girls like me who may have been longing to take a course!"

"I was hoping you would see it that way," he said, promptly. "And that, I take it, was the hope of the old gentleman himself. In spite of your enthusiasm the life of the shop-girl is not quite as ideal as it might be. They still suffer from the greed of selfish employers, from the confinement of indoors, from the grind of insufferably long hours. Raising the status, broadening the opportunities of the whole class, is a work that will bring rich rewards, and you are the person to take it up. Better think it over, and let some other person run your machine."

She stored it away in her mind for future rumination.

"If it means work—harder than I ever knew—engaging all my mind, soul, and strength—let me do it!"

"I want to see the athletic field now," she cried, jumping up abruptly. "The ice must be glorious to-day, and the rink should be full of skaters, for it is Christmas afternoon. See! There goes a group of the girls past the corner—Midge, and Margaret May, and all of them, I do declare! Let me run on ahead and speak to them while you lock up."

Webb followed downstairs at his leisure, going into the office for some trifle he wanted.

"You don't think much of her, do you?" queried the quizzical voice of Sales in his ear.

Webb started.

"You here, Sales? Can't you leave work on Christmas Day?"

"I asked you a question," said Sales, drily.

Webb met his friend's gaze frankly.

"Wouldn't you—if you were I?"

"I don't have to be you to appreciate her," said Sales, quietly. "My boy, before you came into the office that little girl struck me as being of different material than most mortals. If I had been a little better looking, not quite so grey over the temples—if there had been the ghost of a chance, I'm the man that might have given you the time of your life. It seems I am one of those who only stand and wait but there have been many times when I could have had her torn in pieces easier than give her up to anybody."

His gaunt figure shook and his dull eyes blazed with the fire of an unquenchable love. The younger man stood in his presence dumbfounded.

"Old chap, how could I know?"

"You couldn't know."

"Why didn't you go right in to win? I would have played fair—heaven knows——"

The other gripped his hand.

"It's all right, my boy—it's all right. I'm on my feet again. I never had a ghost of a chance. But if you had been anything less than you are, I believe I should have killed you. I tell you, it is a tribute to your worth that you are alive to-day!"

"Those lilies, those pure, sweet lilies of the valley, always and for ever lying among my regal chrysanthemums on her table—so you are the man who sent them! Oh, the black fits of jealousy they gave me!"

"Every day as I passed the florists'," said Sales, "they stood in the window, and her face peeped out from them, as plainly as I saw it a moment ago. I had to send them. You would not deny me that much."

"Come down to the ice," said Webb, trying to draw him away from work.

"Thank you. I believe I shall," said Sales, following with his eyes the group of girls who were just turning the corner.

"Going skating?" Pat had called, dancing into the midst of the girls.

"I suppose so," responded Margaret May, dull and listless as ever. "Nothing else to do."

"Have you learned to go alone yet?"

"No. My ankles pain too badly to try. I generally stand and watch."

Pat sniffed.

"Well, you are a slow crowd! Have you not taken advantage of all these jolly sports Mr. Wickins has provided for you?"

"No," said the stooping, languid Margaret; "I am too tired to exercise. When I get home I like to sit down and do a bit of fancy-work. It's all right for a big, strong girl like you, Pat."

"Big? Strong?" cried Pat. "Margaret May, do you remember me a year ago? Was I big and strong then? Or was I a poor, scrawny little thing, hating my work, myself, and everybody else? Tell me!"

"Oh, well, you' got a pull since then!"

"Yes, I pulled myself into shape for one thing! I hung on the limb of a tree for about two hundred hours, counting half an hour for every day in the year, and I've walked eight hundred miles all told, since I made up my mind to improve myself. That makes you open your eyes, all of you. I wish I could make you see that there would have been no 'pull' for me if I hadn't started and pulled myself."

"What would you have us do?" asked Margaret. "You used to have us doing fresh-air stunts and all such, before you left the factory, but I can't see that it did us any good."

"How long did you keep it up?" demanded Pat.

"I didn't keep it up at all after you left. I got right back into the old rut, wishing I was dead and buried and forgotten by this hard, cruel world."

"Will you try again?" asked Pat, eagerly. "To me it seems nothing short of a crime to let this chance for health and self-culture, opened up by Mr. Wickins, go past unimproved. It isn't your work that's killing you, Margaret May! It's the commonest disease of the age—imagination. Many a person has died with the imagination."

"But I can't skate," whimpered the ambitionless girl.

"You just *imagine* you can't!"

"Well, I won't go and fall down and make a show of myself. People would laugh."

"You just *imagine* they would!"

Margaret laughed, then sighed.

"If I just had you near me, Pat, I believe I might succeed in something."

Webb and Sales reached the landing almost as soon as the girls. Sales greeted Patience with his slow, quiet smile, and hoped she was well. The girl hardly knew what to say to him, he was so quiet.

"I don't know what is the matter with some of the girls," she complained, as she sat down on the landing and allowed Webb to adjust her skates.

"There is such a stiff, stand-off feeling. They don't seem to have the old confidence in me."

"They cannot forget what a big stride you took up the hill of fortune," said Sales. "They will not see that it was done by your own effort, but are always setting it down to favouritism. Jealousy is an affliction of small minds, Patience, and in that respect your mind is very large. Not only are you incapable of the feeling yourself, but you will not see it in others."

"Do they think a new dress makes any difference to me?" she tearfully asked.

"They think the world of you," Sales assured her, patting her on the shoulder in fatherly fashion. "Listen. This is what Margaret May said to me the day she heard you were coming home. 'What a great girl she is! She has the knack of making you feel that you are somebody, and that life is something. I wish I had her grit!'"

Pat flashed him a grateful look.

"Mr. Sales," she exclaimed, "I believe you just live to make people feel 'comfy' inside!"

Webb, looking at Sales narrowly, observed that his nails were biting the palms of his hands till they almost drew blood. But Pat thought him more slow and dull than usual, and wondered if he had any heart at all to be touched by kind words.

By this time a miscellaneous crowd had gathered on the ice. It was perfectly free to the whole town, and there was seldom an hour when it was entirely

deserted ; but during the holiday season every afternoon saw something of a crush. The town authorities had been so lax in providing open spaces in which to indulge in outdoor sports, that every citizen felt like moving a personal vote of thanks to the man who had supplied a need greater than enriching libraries or endowing schools. Every strong, healthy body, every fresh, enthusiastic voice, every glowing cheek and kindling eye was a tribute to the generosity of the Wickins firm, until it seemed their only enemies would be the doctors, who were said to be on the verge of starvation.

Pat's enthusiasm carried her away, as she was surrounded by one group of friends after another, who completely monopolised her in face of the fact that Webb was standing near the landing, clapping his hands together to keep warm.

"Didn't Mr. Sales skate?" she asked, when she was free to return.

"No," said Webb, "he can't skate."

He had turned slowly and was going up the hill, a solitary figure outlined against the wintry sky.

"Isn't Mr. Sales the funniest man?" said the girl, with puzzled brows. "I am half afraid of him."

"Sales is pure gold, without a trace of earthiness," said Webb, warmly. "I tell you, Pat, if anything should ever happen to me so I couldn't defend you,

promise me that you would go to Sales in any difficulty, and trust him as you would your mother. Others might prove false, but that man *never!*”

“Is there anything going to happen to you?” she laughed.

“I hope not,” he responded, scarcely knowing how deeply stirred he had been by the silent man’s confession. “I hardly know why I spoke as I did. But that’s my faith in Ernest Sales all the same!”

“I have met all my friends now but Mrs. Wickins,” said Pat, as they came up to 480, Thornbury Avenue.

“You seem to feel it something of an ordeal to become re-acquainted with my cousin.”

He threw open the door and led her to the threshold of the drawing-room, the freshest, sweetest, most innocent picture of girlhood that had graced that room since last she stood in that same spot at the corner of the piano, and in her simplicity sang songs to his accompaniment. He advanced to the other end of the room to meet his hostess, who was just entering.

“Mrs. Wickins,” he said, leading the charming stranger forward, “allow me to present my friend, Miss Carningham!”

There was a moment’s hesitation as the two girls looked at each other. Each had thought her bitter thoughts of the other in the days that were gone.

Each wondered how much the other was prepared to forgive. Each admired the other ardently, and longed for complete reconciliation.

Webb stepped back and looked at them anxiously. Si came to the door and peeped in expectantly.

"Is it possible," exclaimed Webb, impatiently, "that you two who have done all for each other that any two mortals could do, can still hunt up some misunderstanding——"

"No, my cousin," exclaimed Isobel, stepping forward; "it is quite impossible!"

And Evan Webb had the satisfaction of seeing the two he loved best in the world locked in each other's arms.

THE END

