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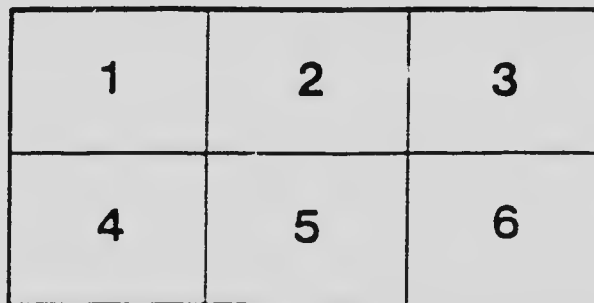
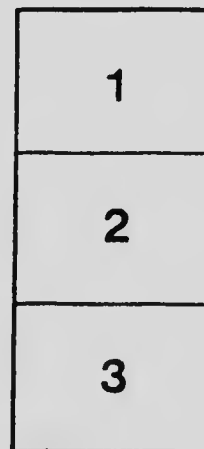
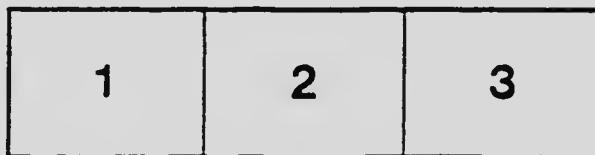
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"THE world sets us down in the heart of a great city, solemn, round-eyed country girls in the midst of Gotham. We have no kin, no money, no anything but a wild desire for happiness. If we take what is offered us, we are parasites—or worse. If we refuse the flesh-pots, we are idiots. My father left me the world to make a living in, but he didn't stop to show me how to make it. Living isn't simply three meals a day, and a place to sleep."

—Rita Charles.

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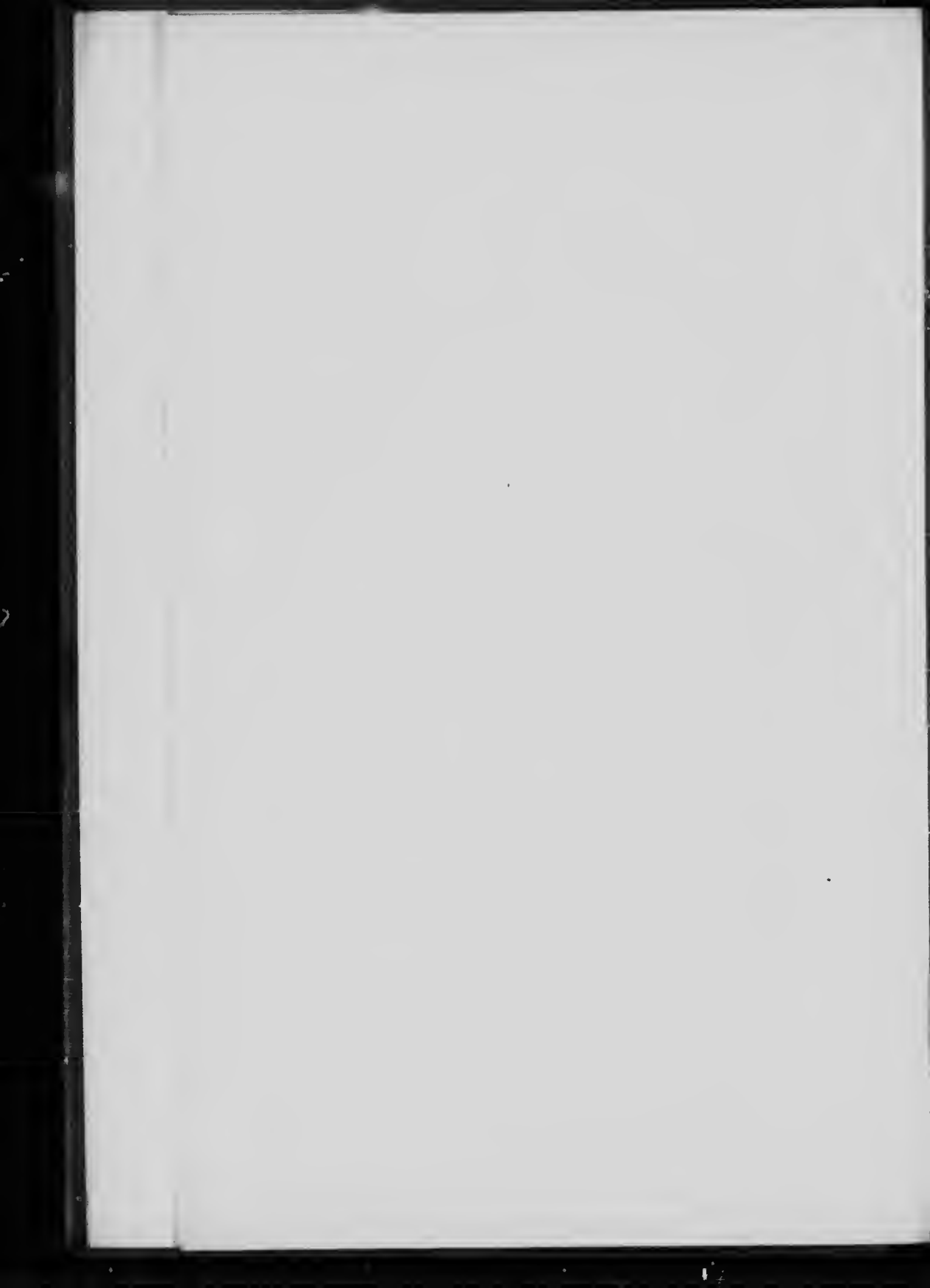
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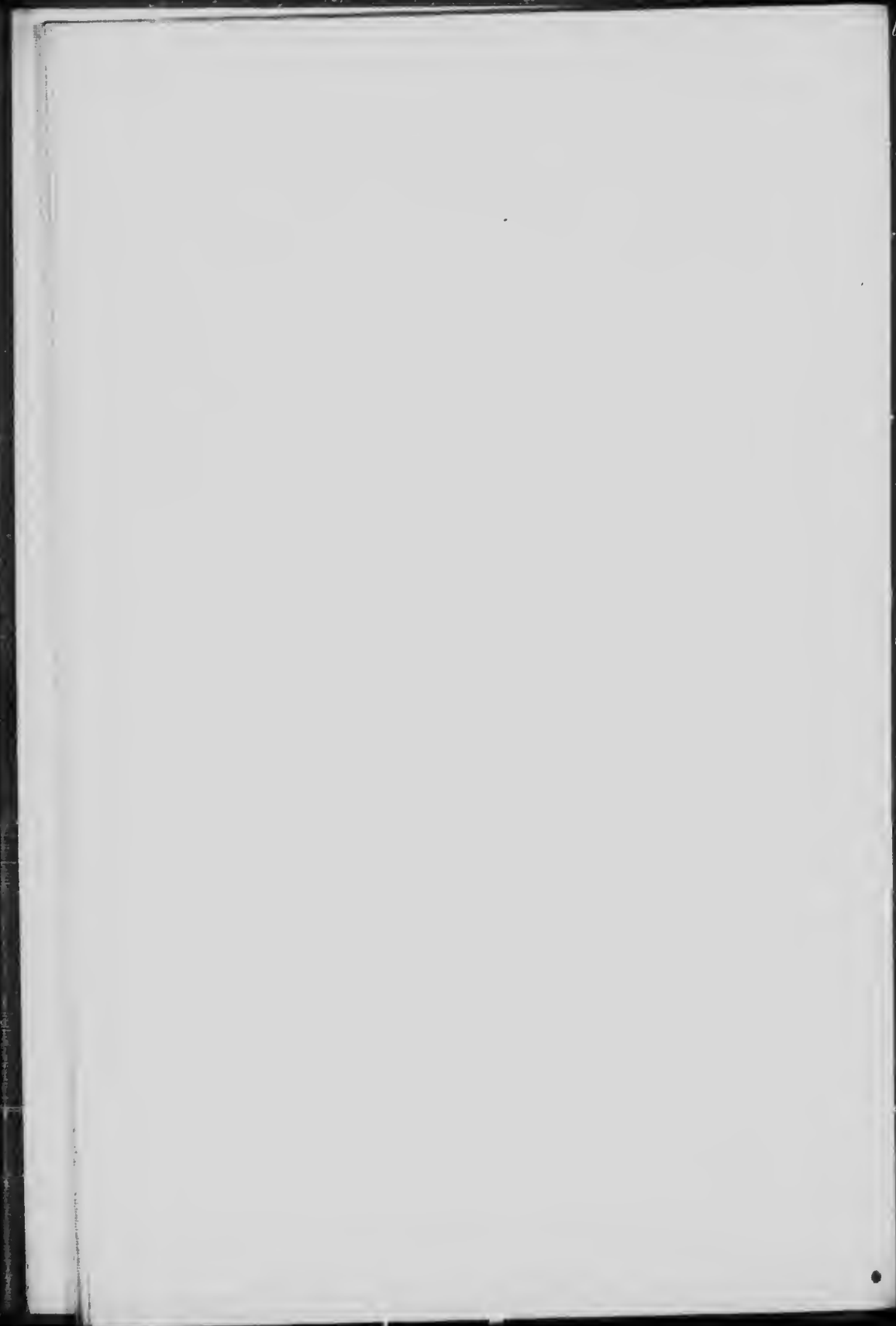
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TO
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THE WORLD TO LIVE IN

I

THE impossible had come to pass!

As in a dream, Rita kissed the bride, gave her hand to the groom in that frank, almost boyish way she had, and turned and smiled in a rather dazed fashion at the young assistant rector of the Cathedral of St. David-on-Avenue, who, while performing the ceremony, had permitted his gaze to wander to her even at such a time as when his words were addressed to the bride.

"Doctor Mathewson will attend to the certificate." His voice attracted; he had a singularly pleasant voice, Rita decided.

Then he shook hands again all around, and Sally wiped away a tear because she was so foolishly happy, and Rita fusseu over her and hugged her a little, jealously, for Sally Cole had been the only girl friend for whom she had cared two pins, and the happy couple were ready to leave the church.

"Good-by, good luck," said the young divine, following the bridal party to the door. Then his glance sought Rita's, and he shook hands for the third time.

"Good morning, Miss Charles."

"Good morning, Mr. Varian." Her world was still

topsy-turvy; she blinked her dark eyes, but not because of the sunlight flooding the street.

A battleship gray motorcar waited at the curb. Sally kissed Rita for the last time, promising to write and write and write; Sartoris handed his bride into the limousine, and they were whirled away to the Grand Central Station, leaving Rita alone on the pavement, waving a half-hearted Godspeed.

She had never thought it would happen; at least, it never could happen again!

Rita turned slowly south on Fifth Avenue, her heart and face not in keeping with the brilliant sunshine of a late February morning. Already a hint of spring was in the air, there was almost a caressing touch to the breeze which came in from the Bay, though the day was cold and there was snow still heaped high on the hills in the suburbs. Westchester, where Sartoris had taken Sally and Rita the other Sunday, to see his dogs and his home, was practically snow-bound, yet even in the country one had found a promise of spring in both air and sunshine.

The shop windows would have further made good this promise with their tempting wares if Rita had had thought or eyes for such things. But frills and feathers counted for nothing to-day, and she passed world-famous ateliers without a glance or a sigh. If she had thought, it would have been to remember that it was Sally who in the future would go to Carlier for hats, and Lucile for gowns, while she, Rita Charles, spent eight hours a day at her stenographer's desk in the offices of the U. S. A. & B.

Still in a dream, and only half awake to the world around her, Rita was swept along in the noon crowds

toward the Waldorf. Sally Cole had married Robert Sartoris. Such a thing had never happened before in the history of the company—and, of course, it never could happen again. But it shouldn't have happened at all—it shouldn't have happened at all! To be sure, Rita was glad for Sally, but—it upset her house of cards, swept away conventions and traditions with a single wave of the hand, and became a general disturbance, an upheaval, which Rita didn't fancy, chiefly because it broke every rule in the Tin-Pan sisterhood's category. Good Heavens! If such a condition became prevalent, what was going to happen to them?—to herself?

She was stopped at Thirty-fourth Street while a steady stream of vehicles turned in and out of the Avenue, and it was here, at the corner, that she heard her name spoken by a man in a low, scarlet raceabout.

"Hello! . . . Good morning!"

Rita glanced up.

"How do you do?" she nodded rather than spoke.

From the car's depth there grinned up at her an under-sized, blond young man, with thin hair over a bad forehead and a frankly receding chin. Rita knew him at least by sight since she was his father's stenographer. J. Temple Olverson was on the company's payroll, and spent a few hours each day lounging in old John T.'s office, but it would have been the merest folly to call him an asset to any business. Rita would have hurried on the moment the traffic was open, but young Olverson brought the low red car up to the curb and climbed down.

"How are you?" he said, offering to shake hands.

He was smartly dressed, although this was to his

tailor's credit rather than his own. Rita admired well-groomed men, so that she almost forgot the personality of J. T. in studying his clothes.

"I've been granted a day off," she explained presently, feeling the awkwardness of the situation, as well as his sharp little eyes upon her. "You know Miss Cole was married to Mr. Sartoris to-day, and I was bridesmaid. . . . Oh-h, very quiet—at the rectory."

Olverson nodded. He knew all about Sartoris and Sally.

"Where to now?"

"Home." He found her glance as tantalizing as the Mona Lisa's. Something about her all at once intrigued him; he wanted to stop, to talk.

"Let me give you some lunch," he begged, on the spur of the moment.

Rita shook her head, meeting his glance with a smile. She was tall and slim, a young person of much wholesome charm, and more excellent taste, a girl whose beauty—which was not to be denied!—counted for little, after the first meeting, because of her wonderful personality. To-day she was dressed in modish black, with a small hat which fitted close to her dark hair, while at her waist she wore some violets, the gift of Robert Sartoris. The very handsome muff and stole she carried, too, were gifts from the grateful man to whom little Sally Cole had just been married, for Sartoris never forgot—and he said he would never forget—that it was Rita Charles who had first introduced him to Sally—Sally, a very wretched, very pretty little typist then. No wonder Rita sighed and appeared dazed.

Just the same, Olverson found her very pleasing.

Such a thought had never occurred to him before, though he had seen her day after day in his father's office. But, then, Rita had never dressed like this at the U. S. A. & B.—stenographers don't. At work little J. T. had always avoided her, having the average man's apathy for a heralded clever woman. To-day he glanced across at the Waldorf, and found it none too smart for this beautiful, radiant girl.

"Come over and have lunch with me—do. I've had nothing to eat since dinner last night," he added, slyly.

Again that provoking shake of the head, that tantalizing smile.

"No. Of course not!"

"And why?" he blurted out crudely.

"I only go to luncheon or dinner or theater with my friends."

"What am I? Am I not your friend, Miss Charles?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Olverson," Rita told him, with a sigh.

"What then?" he demanded boldly.

"You're my employer's son. I'm a stenographer—you're J. T. Olverson, junior." She said it primly.

"What rot!" he muttered, though he flushed a little as if secretly pleased.

"No, it isn't," Rita returned, smiling again. "Your father wouldn't like it at all if he heard I had accepted a luncheon invitation from you, and he'd be quite right. Oh, I know! That's it—I do know. Robert Sartoris is Robert Sartoris, and he has no prophet. . . . Now I must run along."

He didn't catch her meaning; at least a part of her

speech was Sanskrit to him, but he did want her to go into the Waldorf with him.

"The Gov'nor needn't know anything about it. . . ."

"Oh! Then you admit he wouldn't like it," laughed Rita.

He was silent, frowning down at the pavement. Suddenly he glanced up to say:

"You go out with Chalvey and Vonnegut—I've seen you at the theater with Harrison Chalvey—you and he and Sartoris and that girl he's just married."

"Do you mean Miss Cole?" Rita asked quietly.

Olverson colored and stammered an apology.

"Because she is the girl Mr. Sartoris has just married, you know. And," added Rita mischievously, "come to think of it, she was his father's stenographer."

Little Olverson drew a long breath.

"I say, Miss Charles, why is it that you dislike me so much?" he asked, with a mingling of boyish chagrin and cupidity.

"Dislike you? Dear me——!"

"Yes. I mean it. If you go around with Chalvey and Nick Vonnegut——"

"But I'm not their fathers' stenographer!"

"Still, they are—they——" He stopped, either feigning or feeling confusion.

"Yes, go on," said Rita, enjoying the moment.

He was going to say that Chalvey and Vonnegut were the sons of rich men, like himself, and that it was only chance that made Rita Charles old John T.'s stenographer instead of some one's else. Rita guessed what he meant, what he had wanted to say. Although at first she had been half-tempted to accept his invi-

tation, now nothing under the sun would have persuaded her to go. Looking at him, from under her thick lashes, her ever-active brain had seized upon a very wonderful idea. It *had* happened before—once. J. Temple Olverson was hopelessly dull and commonplace, born with too little chin and forehead, but . . . he was his father's son.

Rita held out her hand, anxious to say good-by at what seemed to her the psychological moment, but just then, another car, caught in the steady flow at the corner, came to a stop directly before them.

"How's your conduct?" said a boyish voice, close to her ear.

"Nicko!" Purposely she called Vonnegut by his given name, a thing she only did outside of the office, or when they were alone together. But now she put aside caution for effect, and Olverson scowled—as she guessed he would do. "My conduct is most excellent, Nicko!" she cried. "Why weren't you at the wedding, pray?" A gay little note of camaraderie crept into her voice.

"I saw the happy pair off at Grand Central," Nick Vonnegut said, grinning. "Looked for you——"

She shook her head.

"Parting is not sweet sorrow to me, Nicko. We parted at the church—which sounds like the title of a popular song, I know. Well——" She turned and held out her hand to Olverson. "Good morning," she said primly, her manner toward him in marked contrast to that delightful, intimate gaiety she had for Vonnegut. "Of course I shall be at my desk tomorrow at nine, quite ready for work."

Her dismissal of him, as she turned to Nick, left

little Olverson speechless. He could only stare, while Vonnegut, climbing out of the car, offered to take Rita to the four points of the compass, if she so desired.

"You're a treasure, not necessarily from Heaven, but a treasure, just the same, Nicko," she said softly.

There was a last, brief smile for J. T., Vonnegut nodded curtly, and man and girl got into the low blue car, that type of car which is so familiar to the streets of New Haven.

"Home," whispered Rita, once out of earshot. Deliberately she had left young Olverson to conjure up pictures of luncheon with cocktails with Vonnegut, while all the time she had planned to go straight home.

The navy-blue car turned south on the Avenue, leaving Olverson and the raceabout still at Thirty-fourth Street. It is true that he had said nothing at parting, but Rita was not ill-pleased with her morning's work. She smiled up at Vonnegut without coquetry, in that frank, boyish way which had won for her so many worth-while friendships, and prepared for confession.

"I think I was never so glad to see anybody before in all my life, Nicko! . . ."

He smiled grimly.

"Well, what's the answer?—go on. . . . Was that little beast annoying you?"

"He is a little beast, Nicko."

Vonnegut hesitated before he said, "Well, you know me, Al." He laughed at the slang.

"Still, he must be worth his weight in gold," mused Rita.

Nicko didn't reply at once. He couldn't turn his head in this heavy traffic of the lower Avenue in order

to read the answer which he felt surely was in Rita's dark eyes.

"What did you think of the wedding?" he managed, after a silence.

"I thought it never could happen. There's the rub, Nicko."

He risked a brief, surprised glance.

"You see, drawing-rooms and stenographers' offices don't run together."

"Oh, Lord! Why, Rita——"

"Don't grow excited, laddie. It is true. *You* only marry *us* in beautifully jacketed novels and George Broadhurst plays. I'm not complaining, and I suppose it should be a sop to us for the rest of our days that Robert Sartoris did marry Sally. But then who could resist Sally! . . . I think, Nicko, it might happen again, though—if the girl played her cards well, and the man was a fearfully big dub. What do you say?"

The car stopped at the door of her boarding-house, and now that he was free, Nick Vonnegut turned and glared down at Rita's serene face with so fierce an expression that it brought a smile.

"Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you've got!"

"Look here, Rita——!"

"Oh, grandmother, what big teeth you've got!"

"If I thought you were contemplating . . . that boulder Olverson—— Good Lord, Rita!" Vonnegut made an expressive gesture with his lean, artist's hands. "Drawing-rooms and stenographers' offices don't run together—always; you're right." And he added, under his breath, "Allah be praised!"

Refusing to discuss it with him, here and now, Rita only smiled, and still smiling, she waved him a *gay au revoir*, and disappeared into the house.

II

It was the light-hearted Nicko who had dubbed Mrs. Orpington's establishment the Château Prunella, and who drew and sent to Rita the crest—three prunes rampant. The house, a four-story brownstone-front, was located midway of a block in West Twenty-third Street, and flanked by cinema palaces, shops, and other boarding and lodging settlements. Rita Charles had been living there two years. She didn't like it; she didn't like the woman, Mrs. Orpington, or the people she met in her house, but she stayed there just the same, saying little, complaining not at all, quiet and dignified. She occupied a bed-room on the third floor, a room mentioned in the advertisements as "spacious," and when she was in the house, and not at her meals, Rita kept to her own domain. The oldest boarder couldn't remember having seen her down in the parlor.

It would have been pleasanter, of course, in a small flat, and, indeed, many girls on the same salary at the U. S. A. & B. boasted with pride of their bachelor apartments, and even supported a mother or an aunt. But Rita didn't belong to this class of girlhood. She paid Mrs. Orpington ten dollars a week, and every other penny of her salary of twenty-five dollars she spent on herself, for clothes.

Hers was not a type unusual to New York, although Rita was unusual of her class. Coming from a small

town in Pennsylvania, she had lived in Gotham for six years now, and was the best of native daughters, as are all girls who are born outside of the metropolis, and enter its gates in early youth. Had she been compelled to live her life over, Rita would have left Grand Central Station with the fixed intention of going on the stage. By heart she belonged to that class of women; she lived on the surface, for to-day only, and old age and sickness and death seemed very far away. On the stage she would have been a chorus girl, or a minor actress, chosen for her prettiness, for she hadn't the genius to rise above, or superior to, the mob. Rita knew this, but she wasn't thinking of the future when she cast longing eyes at the calcium's glare. Sufficient unto the day, ran her creed; for the rest, the stage promised many pleasant hours.

Now, at twenty-five, she had given up all thought of work other than that which she was doing. Rita knew—none better!—that she was too old now to try her luck in the theater. At thirty a Broadway hour is passé; twenty is a better age, and eighteen is not too young. So she put away the idea and decided to make the most of her life—which in her scheme of things meant to get all she could lay her hands on. But . . . she must remember the obligations of rank; she was not Broadway.

There were no relations to prove troublesome; a few cousins back in Pennsylvania, but they didn't count. Her mother had died when she was a small child, and her father, a cobbler and a dreamer, had given up the struggle a month before Rita had come to New York. He left nothing behind him when he died, not even sorrowing relatives, for his daughter

was a little glad to be free to live her own life as she saw it. When they told her that her father had left her penniless, and the minister's wife offered her a home "until she got a chance to look around," the girl refused all aid, even a position to teach in the kindergarten. This last provoked a distant cousin, who possibly feared that Rita would become a charge on her hands.

"But you must do something, some kind of work," she cried. "Your father left you no money, no anything but this world to make a living in! You must go to work, Margaret."

Rita felt no burning desire to earn her own living, but she did want to live, to live fully, each day, and not stagnate, here, among a lot of rustics. She believed in herself, and her eyes turned to New York. At the end of the month, then, she stepped from the train at Grand Central.

That eventful day seemed ages ago, now. She rang the bell and waited patiently in the vestibule until the little slavey appeared from below-stairs to open the door, peering first through the lace curtain, as was her habit.

"Back a'ready!" The little maid stepped aside to let Rita pass into the house. "Why, I'd 'a' thunk the groom hisself would have wanted to pick you up and carry you right off, Miss Rita! Which ain't no dirty dig at Miss Sally, a-tall, a-tall; but you . . . are so swell——!" The slavey settled her own blouse and sighed. "There's a 'phone number for you. It's that classy Lerayn Arms, so I left the paper stickin' in the mirror—to give the tabbies a bone to gnaw on at dinner. You certain'y got their nannies, Miss Rita."

"A dreadful person, eh, Ida?"

"I believe some of 'em think you've got sompin' on that Theda Bara, miss."

Rita retraced her steps, and taking the soiled slip of paper from the glass in the hall-rack, turned again toward the stairs.

"Roast beef for dinner—*an'* ice-cream," whispered Ida, with a nod and a wink.

"All right; I'll be down." Then Rita stopped, and leaning over the rail, said: "I'm going out at six. If you find time to slip up and do my hair——"

"I'd like to see anybody try to stop me!" emphasized the girl. Then she clasped her hands, rolled her eyes, and sighed in the most approved screen manner. "Maybe I didn't do sompin' with Miss Sally's hair! Do you think *he* noticed?"

"Mr. Sartoris? Noticed Sally's hair? Of course!"

Ida sank down on the seat beneath the hall-rack and wiped the corners of her weak blue eyes with her apron.

"Gawd, he's one lovely man!" she breathed. "I've seen 'em all, and I think Miss Sally's gen'l'man friend—husbin!—husbin!—I think he's got sompin' on Francis X. Bushman hisself! Two-bits every time I opened the door for him, Miss Rita! And a overcoat like the hero in the 'Trials of Theresa.' Now, Miss Sally, sweet an' pretty as she was, couldn't hold a can'le to you." She paused dramatically, hands on hips.

"Oh, Ida! I haven't two-bits to my name."

"I don't care. I don't want it. I scorn wealth—like *Imogene*, in 'More Sinned Against Than Usual.' At least, I scorn it 'cept just enough to see my favorites on the screen. I mean what I say about you, Miss

Rita. You—you're just . . . you. I go to the movies night after night, and I try to find somebody like you, but I can't—I can't a-tall, a-tall." She turned a flushed and earnest face to Rita. "You're—different. You're just you."

The little slavey's devotion moved Rita strangely, and she didn't want to be stirred out of her habitual calm, Heaven knows. Emotion she must put out of her life, if she meant to make something out of that life, if she wished to succeed. She had decided today . . . to succeed. So she repaid Ida with a low, cynical laugh, a laugh which mocked and checked, and disappeared up the stairs.

Her room was surprising until one took into consideration that Christmas comes once a year, and that birthdays still have their advantages if properly exploited. Year after year, on the twenty-fifth day of December, and the first of June, Rita Charles' friends presented her with "useful" gifts, until at last the room was furnished in excellent taste. A day-bed stood half-hidden by a handsome Watteau screen, and the deep-cushioned chairs and the full-length divan were covered with the same apple-green tapestry. Between the windows a dressing-table groaned beneath its load of silver and cut-glass scent bottles, while a phonograph, topped by a marble Vici, occupied a place of honor. Everything had been given to her—the scent in the bottles, the records for the talking-machine, the dozens of gloves in their boxes—everything! Often an article was exchanged. One or two of the shops knew her, and were glad to be accommodating to the extent of "matching" furniture or coverings. Upon one occasion a tea-table had been exchanged for

a footrest, for Rita never received company in her room, and the tea-table was superfluous. Once she had accepted from dealers the cash equivalent for a hall clock. Usually, winter and summer, there were fresh flowers in her room. To-day she unpinned her corsage bouquet and arranged the violets in a Venetian glass with a care and tenderness which bespoke her love of flowers.

Rita Charles was a pal. Her mission was to make life less weary for the gilded youth of her acquaintance. Incidentally it paid. There were those in West Twenty-third Street who, seeing the motors at the door, and the florists' boxes that came by messenger, called her a tinpanner. Possibly this was a better title for her after all, at least in the argot of the real New Yorker.

"You know," she ventured once, in explaining her title to Sally Cole, at the time Sally first came to Mrs. Orpington's, from somewhere up-State—"you know, while I am only a 'poor working girl' with an allowance of fifteen dollars a week to dress on, the best is none too good for little Margaret. That's why I'm a tinpanner. . . . What? . . . Oh! a Tin-Pan girlie is a young person who works for her living, as I do, but who, instead of being contented to go around with the men of her own class—book-keepers, bank clerks, petty salesmen—accepts invitations from, and makes friendships with, only those men who keep a valet and drive their own car."

"Like—John T. Olverson?" gasped Sally, thinking at once of Rita's employer, who was vice-president of the U. S. A. & B.

"No. Like J. T., junior," corrected Rita, smiling.

"When I go to the theater it is in the choicest seats, and when I go out to dinner it is at the smartest places in town—at least, the smartest Broadway places. Each to his kind, Sally—and you know it would prove rather embarrassing—probably to the head-waiter—if Harry Chalvey and I were to walk into the Ritz, and be seated at the table next to Chalvey's mother and sister."

"But why?" little Sally Cole had demanded hotly.

"Why? Because the Chalvey women and I are of different worlds—which sounds like something Marie Corelli wrote in the dark ages, I know, but—well, that's it." Rita was smiling, but cynical. "It is a social distinction, and not a moral one, I believe, so save your pretty blushes for the stronger sex. Really, I don't mind. They are very boring, these 'best people,' or their men wouldn't come to us to play around. It's not bad; it's worth it. They—the men—understand. I often think that we are a sort of half-way station between the society pets of Fifth Avenue and the houris of Central Park West and the Drive. Do you see? Clear as mud, darling! But why on earth should I go to a cheap vaudeville show with some 'gen'l'man friend' in a ready-to-wear suit, when it is just as simple to have a box at the Winter Garden, with an escort in evening clothes?"

"But—is it right?" faltered Sally.

It must have been "right," reflected Rita, afterwards, since Sally had married Robert Sartoris. Sally Cole had been Sartoris *père's* stenographer, and Sartoris *père* was one of the heads of the company and almost unbelievably rich. His son had first glimpsed Sally in the office, and had met her in West Twenty-

third Street, thanks to Rita, who also loaned Sally her first long gloves to wear to the theater with him. But that could never happen again, of course. Rita reared no such castles in Spain for herself. She was no modern Cinderella. She was a pal, a tinpanner, if you like, yes. . . .

But Sally Cole's marriage had made a difference; it must make a difference! Rita frowned. The men whom she and her kind knew were always wealthy, at least moderately so, and rich men are not invariably bad men, popular fiction to the contrary. They were, for the most part, human beings, too. They knew, for example, that Madam Grundy would never permit them to do a theater, a cabaret, or a dinner, with a girl whom they had met in their mother's drawing-room—without a chaperon. They might attend a Saturday matinée—with Auntie in the dim background, knitting; or else "slum" some dancing-place—with Mrs. Sister and Mr. Brother-in-law in attendance, to take all the joy out of living. On Sunday evening they could invite Daughter to dinner at the Ritz or the Plaza—by including Papa and Mamma in the invitation. It was all very tiresome; certainly it was compromising—unless matrimony were contemplated. Now, with Rita Charles—and girls of her kind—all a fellow had to do was to call up on the phone, make a date, send the car along, and meet her in the lobby!

"Although if they don't meet you you needn't be surprised," Rita had told Sally. "I have known men to break their engagements with less concern than they break their eggs at breakfast. We 'understand'—that's our part. Yes, I guess we do."

"No man would ever break a second engagement

with me!" flashed Sally, with story-book indignation.

"Oh, yes, he would, my dear," said Rita easily. "That is, if you were a tinpanner and he was Fifth Avenue. It isn't nice, of course, but, then, neither is cheap vaudeville. If you bring them to book, they straightway become offended—they know where we stand even if we do try to forget it while we're rolling up the Avenue in ten thousand dollars' worth of car. Playthings, Sally. They call us pals because it sounds pleasanter—and it also keeps before us that truly beautiful word—Platonic. I suppose you know, Sally, they make love to us in a mild, sexless sort of way at times—and not so mild, either, if you prefer it otherwise. It's always up to the girl, don't forget that. But . . . never by any chance do they marry us."

Yet Robert Sartoris had married Sally, and it seemed scarcely fair in Sally, thought Rita.

The unwritten law of the Tin-Pan sisterhood was that wedding-bells weren't to enter into their scheme of things. Playthings, toys. It was really a game in which the man staked his company, and his wealth, against the girl's beauty and entertainment. While her point of view had changed perceptibly in her six years in New York, Rita Charles to-day was in all other aspects the same girl who had left the little Pennsylvania town when her father bequeathed her the world to live in.

Mrs. Orpington served her dinner in the middle of the day, which certainly wasn't to the convenience of all of her "paying guests," but at the same time was most considerate of the Orpington pocketbook. Rita, who was seldom at home at noon, ate her roast beef and "trimmings" in silence. There were only a few per-

sons at table, and these few she had nothing in common with. They regarded her suspiciously, with hostile eyes, while her indifference must have been manifest across the cloth. Once or twice, Mrs. Orpington, from the head of the table, inquired about the wedding and hoped aloud that dear Sally would never regret the step she had taken—"although goodness knows how she ever can, him being a Sartoris born and bred, a gentleman if there ever was one—and there are so few of us left!" Another time her chatter would have amused Rita, for a keen sense of humor had often helped her over the rough places; but to-day she was in no frame of mind for her silly mouthings and empty pretenses, and she left the dining-room before the ice-cream was served—much to Ida's horror.

"I've got a headache, I'm going to try to sleep," she whispered to the slavey, as she passed her at the door. "If you can manage to slip upstairs for a few minutes at five o'clock——"

"You kin count on me 'like the girl counted on the hero in 'Parted at the Altar,' miss——"

"Ida!" brayed Mrs. Orpington.

"Yes, mum." The little slavey continued her duties at table.

In her room Rita undressed, put on a warm quilted kimono, and flung herself down wearily on the day-bed. But sleep was out of the question, and an endless procession of men—Sartoris, little Olverson, Nicko, Harrison Chalvey—passed in review before her heavy eyes, like circus horses before the ring-master. Only—was it her hand that held the whip? Rita didn't know, but the whole performance was uncanny; it

was unbearable. She must try not to think, now, or she would be a fright by six o'clock. Rousing herself, she started the phonograph, and with the haunting sweetness of Puccini's "La Bohême" ringing in her ears, Rita again wooed sleep. At five o'clock Ida would come up, stealing away from duties below-stairs, and help her to dress; at six she would be dressed and waiting. On her dresser, among the silver and crystal, was the bit of soiled paper with the telephone number which Ida had jotted down. Rita recognized the number. It was the call of Harrison Chalvey's studio-apartment in the Sixties. To paraphrase Mary Stuart, Rita felt that it must be written on her heart.

III

SHE awoke with a start. Raising herself on her elbow, Rita saw that the hands of the clock pointed to half after five. The phonograph was still playing, and moving happily about the room, she had a glimpse of Ida, laying out her clothes upon the divan.

"Did the music wake you up?" asked the slavey, carefully spreading a wistaria dinner-frock over the Watteau screen.

Rita stretched luxuriously, regardless of consequences. She felt refreshed, and pleasantly anticipated the evening with Chalvey, a warm flush creeping into her cheeks, so that Ida, staring, marveled. Quick to resent emotion of any kind, since it had been checked so effectually in herself by reason of her associates, Rita spoke sharply, questioning Ida as to telephone messages. There had been none all afternoon. Ida, not deceived for a moment by the brusque tone, continued calmly with her task of arranging Rita's wardrobe. Next to having pretty things yourself, it is best to be allowed to fondle them, to get them out and put them away again. She was Rita's self-appointed maid, and since her eye was unerring, and her judgment very nearly perfect, she was permitted to have her way in many instances. However, in Ida the accuracy of the adage of the shoemaker's child was proven afresh, for the little maid, who could do so much for others, presented a droll and woebegone picture herself. Colors

clashed, skirt and blouse seemed never on amicable terms, and her hair was in unbecoming ringlets—"like Pickford's," it is true, but in Ida's case serving merely to emphasize sharpness of features and sallowness of skin.

Rita sank down on a low chair before the dressing-table, and Ida came over and took down her hair. It was glorious hair, but it owed much of its beauty to Ida's care and cleverness, for the girl was a genius in her line, and when she dressed her hair Rita felt that the Fifth Avenue shops could have served her no better. To-night Ida's nimble fingers moved skillfully through the brown tresses, combing, brushing, plaiting. She might do her own hair "like" this screen actress or the other one, but with Rita Ida held to the slogan that "she was she," and "different," with most satisfactory results. Without looking up, she said presently:

"Did you mind me startin' the Victriola, miss?"

"No. . . . Because I know you are careful of the records, Ida."

"You hev to be—with the prices on 'em!" declared the slavey. "Now the operas—Miss Carrie's crazy about the operas. She can hear 'em through the wall. That one that woke you up, now. Lors, you should hear her tear that off! It sounds so real you hev to look at the Victriola to see which of 'em is doin' the singing."

Rita took the record which Ida had fetched and regarded it with drawn brows. It proved to be Puccini's "La Bohême," the Musetta Waltz, and the singer was world famous.

"She sings—that?" puzzled Rita.

"Only better—real life-like and everything."

Rita returned the record without comment, and when the girl came back from the cabinet this time, she had brought another disc with her, which she offered almost shyly.

"Here's a classy little thing she warbles swell."

It was Calve's rendition of the Habanera from "Carmen." Rita knew the opera, but here was a situation of which she knew nothing, and somehow she felt a strange awe as she turned the record over in her hands, and listened to Ida's chatter. These were unfamiliar waters, and Rita didn't like the unknown, the unusual; she was mistress only when she could touch bottom when she cared to. She hadn't dreamed, for instance, that right next door, in that narrow hall-room, there was a young woman who listened to her music through the wall, and who sang Puccini and Bizet. Such thoughts irritated, stirred one, because they were out of the ordinary, and in Rita's world one mustn't stop to think, especially of other people.

"Wouldn't you like to hear Miss Carrie sing it onct?" ventured Ida, waiting for what seemed to her the psychological moment.

But Rita had made it a rule never to encourage friendships with people in the house, and she shook her head, hoping to dismiss the subject.

"Whenever she wants to hear any of the music, you may play it for her, Ida," she added, after a pause.

"Miss Carrie wants to hear it all the time!" spoke up the slavey boldly. "Lors, she's got no taste for nothing else—for movies. She said she didn't care two pins whether Francis X. Bushman was married or not— Gawd! No, it's nothing but music, opera.

You see, she's sick in bed yet, and I guess it kind o' gets lonesome, layin' there by yourself so much. I always play opera for her, cleaning the halls, and carryin' towels and water. Now, that 'Boheem' is good for down and back, and I kin sweep Miss Brockley's room while the Spanish thing is reeling off. Them things is good to know. I say to Miss Carrie when I hear 'er take that last high note, I know that there room ought to be done. You can't dilly-dally with a Victriola markin' time."

Against her better judgment Rita asked, "Who is this girl, anyway, Ida? What's wrong with her?"

Ida began to wind the long brown plait around the shapely head, and a gleam of satisfaction crept into her pale-blue eyes.

"Her name's Miss Carrie Billings, miss, and she comes from the West, just where bein' a dark secret, I guess, like *Millicent's*, in 'More Sinned Against Than Usual.' Leastways, she don't say—Miss Carrie don't. An' she's just sick—out o' spirits, I guess, and down in the mouth. Can't be flush, can she, livin' in the third hall? Yet her things is good, old but good. She was onct in a show——"

"Oh!" murmured Rita, disappointed. There was no romance in a stranded actress, which, come to think of it, was just as well. Rita had little time for others, as Ida could testify. Ever since she came to the Château Prunella, Rita had been going to interest some of her wealthy friends in the little slavey, but her plans had gone for naught. When the time came for speaking there was herself to think of.

Just before six o'clock a special messenger came with a box of American Beauties from Chalvey. Rita

was dressed and waiting for a telephone call or else a car, with or without the gentleman, and she looked very lovely in the wistaria gown. Her clothes were good—they had to be—and stood minute inspection, or the glare of daylight, but nobody knew but Rita Charles herself what they had cost, both in money and in sacrifice.

When Ida came limping up the three flights of stairs from the basement with the roses, Rita said, without taking them from their box:

"You may give them to your sick friend, next door. I think I don't like red with this frock."

"Oh, Miss Rita! . . . You're goin' to send 'em to Miss Carrie!"

"No. You are."

"But she'll be crazy to think they come from you, Miss Rita."

Rita's brows went up a trifle, and under her glance the slavey collapsed, digging her foot into the rug, with eyes downcast.

"Well, miss, she likes you——"

"She doesn't know me," interposed Rita crisply.

"She's heard so much about you." Ida's tone was pleading. "You see, she heard you in the hall, talkin' to me, when the door happened to be open. She likes her door open, Miss Carrie does. With voices and smells and all, comin' upstairs, she's less lonesome, I guess. And I . . . kinda told her about you. Lemme say they're from you, Miss Rita. They'll be twict as welcome. I remember in 'The Sins of Sarah'——"

Rita shook her head. She didn't do such things; New Yorkers don't. Ida could either take the flowers

or leave them, but there must be no message, no mentioning of her name.

"Miss, you try to make yourself out what you ain't," declared the little maid, taking a stand. "You seem to be glad when the knockers in the parlor get their hammers out, but let a person try to put 'em wise to the real you——"

"The real me!"

"Yes, miss. Really and truly you're the kindest——"

Rita protested with a quickly lifted hand. Her voice was like ice.

"Switch off the light. Listen! There's the car. I suppose the jury is gathered in the front parlor? Well——" Her face hardened; she went toward the door. "As your favorite subtitle would have it, exit haughtily. Good?" She laughed, but not the kind of laugh which Carrie Billings had come to listen for in the halls.

Once again Harrison Chalvey had not come himself, but sent his car, an immense limousine with his crest on the doors. As Rita came down the stairs, she sighted Mrs. Orpington stationed in the dining-room door, and guessed that the parlor was filled with the lady's "paying guests," assembled there to see her off. Rita's comings and goings were a topic of much interest to the Château Prunella, and the mere sight of the Chalvey car, minus Mr. Chalvey, would furnish the household with food for gossip for an entire week.

The landlady advanced to meet Miss Charles.

"Going out, my dear?" she cooed.

"Yes, to dinner, Mrs. Orpington." Rita was al-

ways mockingly explanatory, though it must be confessed that her method was without effect in Twenty-third Street.

"Dinner! I call it supper here—we did down to home, in Virginia," Mrs. Orpington purred. "If you came of an old, decayed family like me—— But then, I guess my table ain't so many alongside the Waldorf, Miss Charles."

"I prefer the chef at the Ritz," Rita returned, with her tongue in her cheek; and she hurried on, leaving the woman gasping for breath, and the parlor tingling with excitement.

"Did you hear her? She doesn't deny that she frequents such places!" cried Miss Brockly, the school-teacher, with righteous indignation.

"Really, if my maw knew about some of the folks here in my boarding-house, I don't know what she'd do," sighed the blonde demonstrator for a complexion cream, a young woman who stood all day in drug-store windows, and department store aisles, and had massaged her cheeks until the skin was as rough as a piece of shoe leather.

The school-teacher looked at her and laughed—rudely. She was insanely jealous of Rita, but she detested the professional blonde, as one woman will detest another of her sex, who, like herself, is unable to rise from her present surroundings.

"In the argot of dear Mrs. Orpington's little maid, 'you should worry,' Miss St. Clair," she said distinctly.

The blonde's sweetness seemed to curdle. "Never mind the Bostonese, I get you, dearie," she retorted. "Bee-lieve me, I do!"

Then the landlady, fearing a battle royal, announced supper in her loudest voice, and the parlor rose as one man and charged upon the dining-room.

Out on the steps, Harrison Chalvey's chauffeur stood waiting for Rita.

"Good-evening, Miss Charles," he said, touching his cap. "Mr. Chalvey sent his regrets, and he will meet you in the corridor at the Astor."

"Very well, Tompkins," Rita nodded, without emotion.

He opened the door for her and helped her into the pearl-gray luxuriousness of the car, a car as large as a Pullman drawing-room, with foot-rests and cushions and electric lights, and fresh flowers in crystal cornucopiæ. It was for such things as these that Rita's heart beat madly; it was for such things as these that she strangled her pride, stilled the small voice of conscience, and remained deaf, dumb, and blind. She loved beautiful things, craved luxury from her very soul. Even Chalvey's indifference to her finer feelings, and self-respect, couldn't quite kill the joy and abandon of the moment.

Arriving, Tompkins climbed out and, while Rita remained seated in the car, he hurried into the hotel in search of his master. This was a pretty piece of acting, and five minutes later, when he returned, alone, Rita was not surprised.

"Mr. Chalvey must be detained, miss, for he is not in the hotel," he murmured solicitously. "Yes, he's due now, Miss Charles. Will you wait here——?"

Another example of fine acting. Rita smiled grimly in the dark.

"No, I'll go into the hotel to wait. You may go, Tompkins. Good-night."

"Thank you, miss. Good-night."

The motorcar turned north on Broadway, and Rita ran across the pavement and disappeared into the hotel. At half-past six the long, narrow corridor was thronged. People frankly stared at her, but Rita was used to stares, even to innuendos, in hotel lobbies and parlors. She found a chair and an evening paper, preparing for a long vigil. She knew Chalvey, and the class of men he represented, and for the rest, she was merely a pal.

The newspapers were full of Robert Sartoris' marriage to Sally Cole, one of the "yellows" giving quite a spread to the story on the front page. There was a picture of Sally—which no one would recognize—and a badly blurred snapshot of the couple at Grand Central Station. And, was that . . . Nicko? Yes, the photographer had caught Vonnegut, wishing them Godspeed. Rita's teeth came down in her full lower lip.

"Scavenger!" she muttered.

Thank Heaven, they hadn't snapped Chalvey, however. Nicko wouldn't care. He'd laugh—laugh, too, at the "sob sister" turned loose on the story, with instructions to get the "human interest" side of the case. That meant personalities. Well, the penny novelettes had never dreamed more extravagantly!

"Harry may never turn up after reading this rot," Rita decided, with a cynical smile.

Chalvey did keep the engagement, however—an hour late. At half-past seven he appeared at the end

of the corridor, a man of average size, average looks, intelligence, habits. There was nothing unusual about him in any way, shape, or form, and this is as Chalvey himself would have wished it. To be different from his class, the class he represented and stood for, was something he dreaded as most men do the plague. His features were regular, the lips thin, the eyes cold; he had a tailor who was a genius, and a pocketbook which was never flat. He saw Rita almost at once, picking her out from all those other waiting women, but he didn't hurry his step as he came down to meet her.

He shook hands—for the benefit of the crowd; he whispered that she looked charming—from force of habit, Rita thought. No apology for his lateness, no explanations, and the girl was supposed to greet him with a welcoming smile—which she did—while all the time she was tired and hungry, and, yes, a little indignant. But not too indignant. Being of the Tin-Pan sisterhood, she smothered her real feelings, herself, and smiled, smiled, smiled.

Not that she wasn't glad to see him. There were times when Rita felt that she would wait throughout Eternity for a sight of Harry Chalvey. But to-night his attitude hurt. She was all nerves; events had come too fast for her to-day.

"Did my flowers reach you in time?" he asked, with narrowed brows, seeing that she wore none.

"Yes, and thanks for your thoughtfulness, Harry. But roses are not for this frock, and it is easier for you to suit your flowers to my dresses than it is for me—eh, dear lad?"

She touched his arm lightly; she was very beautiful; but he continued to regard her coldly, critically. And all the time she must smile like a Christmas doll!

"Shall we have dinner?" he proposed abruptly.

IV

HARRISON CHALVEY was one of Rita's oldest friends. That is, they had been playing around together for the last three years, off and on. They were off when Harry was engaged to be married to a pretty Lenox débutante, and on, when the young woman's family broke off the engagement—not because of Miss Charles, however. Off during the time his father had cut his allowance because of his son's great extravagance, and on again, after his mother died and left him her small fortune, which had come to her from her people, the Philadelphia Biddles. Chalvey was sincerely fond of Rita. Laughingly he used to say that she spoiled him for other girls, but there was more truth in this than the man himself realized. It was no laughing matter.

Rita didn't waste much thought over their relationship. Tinpanners cannot afford wrinkles, and worry only brings lines, not realization of dreams. On the other hand, he had never deceived her on the subject, so that even in her innermost heart she never hoped for things to be other than they were at present. Some day Harry would get married, and then—good-by.

"I didn't see you down-town to-day," he said, when they were seated at table, and he had drunk his cocktail.

"I had a holiday; I didn't go down-town to-day,"

Rita told him, ready to smile or to weep at the given cue.

He looked up quickly, the suspicion of a frown in his clear, steady eyes.

"You mean you went to Bob's wedding?"

"Yes. I am almost Sally's only girl friend in New York."

Chalvey was silent, and Rita guessed from his expression that his best friend's marriage was scarcely a pleasant subject with him. So Sally and Bob had upset Harry's scheme of things, too!

"His people there?" he asked, after a moment, looking up.

"No." The smile broadened on Rita's lips until she was afraid he would see it. "You know Bob's mother and sisters are in Europe. They cabled Sally, and there is a possibility they will all meet in Japan next year. A year!" She sighed. "Sally expects to be gone a year! Mrs. Sartoris and her daughters have been very sweet to Sally," she added as an after thought.

Chalvey's frown refused to come off.

"Pretty, but dull, frightfully dull," he growled, attacking his oysters.

Rita didn't contradict him, nor argue the point, though she had her own opinion as to Sally's stupidity. However, it didn't do to provoke him—to provoke any man!—too far. Rita would miss the gray limousine, and Tompkins, more than she ever could any girl friend, fond though she was of Sally.

At dessert, while Rita was eating a *pêche Melba*, and Chalvey, sitting opposite her, had fallen into a brooding silence, Nicholas Vonnegut came down the

room and stopped at their table. It occurred to Rita that Harry greeted the younger man with surprising warmth, although they were friends, men in the same clubs, and society, and saw much of each other both in the business and social worlds. Nicko, however, had never been out on a party with them, the old, happy foursomes of the past spring and autumn, when Bob Sartoris was falling in love with little Sally Cole, and manning himself for the step he had taken to-day. Vonnegut had no part in these merry times, but they had all met at his place on Washington Square, where Nicko aimed at Du Maurier's bohemia, with more or less flattering results.

"Sit down while I run off to telephone, Nick," Chalvey cried, jumping up. "Rita, you'll excuse me? I've just thought of something important which won't keep. Nick's got the right idea, hasn't he?" He turned to Rita, nodding. "Pretty models and Russian cigarettes."

Vonnegut dropped into the chair his friend had vacated, and Chalvey hurried away to the telephone-booths.

"Well, how goes it?" Nicko asked, watching Rita nibble daintily at the fresh peach on her plate.

"Always the same, old son. *Punchinello* smiles and smiles and smiles."

The hotel orchestra was playing "Pagliacci." Vonnegut caught the strain, and nodded, but he was quick to change the conversation. There were many things he would have said, for, living a butterfly existence himself, as he did, he believed that life held something more for Rita than this, a Tin-Pan sisterhood, but he felt, too, that this was not the time, at

Chalvey's dinner, to speak of such things. But he knew: Nicko was permitted to peep beneath the surface. Rita was often dissatisfied, yet she "smiled and smiled and smiled."

"Lucky chap!" He was referring to Chalvey.

"Oh, but I'm the lucky one," Rita replied, in character. "I loathe the chef—and it's a downright sacrilege to use the word!—at the Château, Nicky. We only get peaches there in July, and I only care for them in February. I'm afraid you boys spoil me dreadfully." She smiled prettily, again the actress.

It was on the end of Nicko's tongue to say that he quite agreed with her; that they did spoil her—for other men, men of her own class, men from whom she must pick a husband, in time. But such a thought put into words constituted nothing less than *lèse-majesté*. Men have a code of honor constantly on tap when dealing with each other, a code which promptly flies to pieces when a woman is their adversary. In a happy moment Vonnegut had insisted that his sex must hang together in order to keep from hanging separately.

Chalvey returned, still frowning. Between thumb and forefinger he held two bits of colored pasteboard which he regarded ruefully.

"Here's the devil to pay, Rita! I've got to get up to the Plaza right away—some sort of directors' meeting." He flung the tickets down on the table. "I'm no end sorry. Another time—something big, eh? I suppose these tickets will be of no use to you? You said you'd like to see the play——"

Rita showed a pretty concern for him, in her calm, reassuring way.

"Run along, of course, Harry; don't mind me," she said. "It is too bad!" She appealed to Vonnegut, who found himself nodding. "Run—Nicko will find me a taxi——"

Chalvey appeared relieved.

"All right, then. I'll phone you to-morrow." He was in a great hurry and stopped only long enough to sign the waiter's check.

He was gone!

Presently Rita glanced up at Vonnegut, but he, who had been watching her with a certain curious expression, hastily turned away. However much he might feel incensed at Chalvey's conduct, it was not for him to censure one of his own kind, nor to question his actions with one of Rita's class. Knowing very well what was going on in his mind, Rita's heart filled with a fierce and unspoken scorn, a scorn even for Nicko, but her lips were smiling, she was *Punchinello* to the fall of the curtain.

"Don't bother; all I need is a taxi," she told Nicko, after an awkward pause. "You'll miss the whole first act of your play, which is quite the best, you know."

Vonnegut stirred uneasily, keenly alive to the situation.

"What a rotten shame that both Harry and myself——"

"Business is business," she returned calmly, "and a Tin-Pan girl is . . . just that."

"Good Lord, Rita!" He was frankly shocked, for she had never allowed bitterness to creep into her speech before to-night.

With Nicko she could be almost quite honest, because she had less to lose.

"But, you know, business is . . . business," he said, after a moment.

"Nicko, dear, I see more business in one day than you do in one year—a hundred years!" she said, not unkindly.

He nodded.

"What will you do with these tickets?" He wanted to help.

Rita flicked them aside.

"Of course I cannot go to the theater alone—in this costume."

"I should say you can't! . . . Damn!"

At that moment, in the doorway, Rita caught a glimpse of a familiar face, and she turned eagerly to Vonnegut, calling his attention to the man who stood peering into the dining-room.

"It is Temple Olverson!" she said.

Nicko turned around, and the man lounging there, nodded.

"It is!" cried Rita, the color rising to her cheeks. She bent her lovely head, her lips murmuring, "How do you do?"

Deliberately Vonnegut had turned his back on little J. T., who, now, was making straight for their table, and his voice was threaded with anger, almost indignation, when he spoke again.

"Good Lord, you don't play around with that man, do you, Rita?"

"No-o-o. Not exactly, Nicko."

"I saw you talking to him this morning in front of the Waldorf." It was an accusation.

She laughed.

"I was caught in the flotsam and jetsam of the crossing, and Temple Olverson happened along in his car. Of course I am acquainted with him, since I am employed in his father's office. Isn't he one of your set?"

"If that's a dig, he's no friend of mine—remember that," said Nicko.

"I'm very dense about some things, your things, social things," Rita murmured, avoiding his eyes.

Olverson was just a few tables' length away from them, and Vonnegut, without lowering his voice, or leaning forward, said distinctly:

"I think I shouldn't have anything to do with Olverson if I were you, Rita."

The words were scarcely out before he regretted them. What a blunder! A tinpanner may accept invitations from whom and where she pleases, and no other man, simply because she has been his guest, on previous occasions, has the right to make comment. It is his privilege to cut her acquaintance, if he feels she is indiscreet, but he may not criticise her actions and remain friends. This is one of the unwritten laws of the clan.

Before Nick Vonnegut could mutter an apology, however, Olverson was beside him, and he rose to his feet, remaining thus, while little J. T. shook hands with Rita in his wholly officious manner, which made the other man long to punch him.

"Dining à deux—great little idea, what?" He looked at Vonnegut, and Nicko thought his left eyelid fluttered. "I trust I'm not interrupting a charming tête-à-tête, Miss Charles?"

To his surprise, Rita welcomed him warmly.

"No. Mr. Vonnegut has another engagement, and he is just hurrying away—aren't you, Nicko? I shall be ready myself in just one little minute." She placed the two theater tickets on the cloth, face up, and sighed. It was an unsportsmanlike thing to do, and she blushed at her own crude methods, but to-night she was a little desperate, wholly reckless of the consequences. "I am quite disappointed," she announced. "All the week I have been living just to see Miss Barrymore to-night, and now—well, now I'm not going to."

"My, my, that's too bad!" echoed young Olverson, feeling his way cautiously.

"Isn't it? . . . Nicko, hadn't you better run along? Don't wait for me—now that Mr. Olverson is here. You know the first act——"

"I know all about the first act," returned Vonnegut slowly, but he got up and took his departure just the same.

Rita gave her attention to little J. T.

"Have you seen Miss Barrymore's new piece?"

Olverson might truthfully have said that he didn't even know Miss Barrymore had a new vehicle; in fact, he scarcely remembered who Miss Barrymore was. His taste ran to musical revues, and his happy hunting-ground lay at Broadway and Fiftieth Street.

"No, I haven't seen it," he replied. "However, I've been promising myself to go for some time. They say it is quite—quite——" He didn't know whether to say "funny" or "tragic," so he compromised by ending lamely, "They say it is quite—unusual."

"Not half as unusual as you are!" thought Rita, looking after Nicko's retreating figure.

Nicko didn't like Olverson, but then few men did. If Rita hadn't wanted to let him see that other men, other rich men, prized her society more dearly than Harrison Chalvey, she would never have called him over to the table. But Harry must be "shown." True, she was a tinpanner, but she was also a woman. Often her friends seemed to overlook this fact.

Rita was not in love with Vonnegut. She knew that such a thing would be worse than folly, for Nicko was more the pal, and less the lover than any man she knew. He was engaged to be married to a cousin who was now somewhere in Europe with Mrs. Sartoris' party, and while he seldom spoke of this girl to Rita, she had gathered that he was very fond of her.

"Then—you are free for to-night?" Olverson said, interrupting her train of thought.

"Yes. I am going straight home. After all, I suppose it is best—I've had a busy day. But you may put me into a taxi, if you will." She smiled up at him.

Together they strolled toward the door. Rita was nearly half a head taller than he, but she was also many, many times poorer.

"Look here, Miss Charles, how about your going to see this little show with me?" young J. T. asked suddenly, and with what he fancied rare daring. "That's about the only way I'll ever get there, you know. And they say the star has—has . . . a wonderful personality." He liked the sound of this, and repeated it. "Yes, a wonderful personality."

Rita smiled discreetly.

"Are you perfectly sure I won't be upsetting your evening—too?" she said, with a glance from her dark eyes which set his nerves tingling. "For you know I can go another time with Harry or Nicko, and you——"

"No! Say, what's the sense of that?—waiting!" His voice rose to a shrill note. "You know me. It isn't like I'm a stranger and everything. Sure, we're going!"

She drew a little sigh of relief, as of Paradise Regained.

"If I were perfectly sure the—the office wouldn't object, Mr. Olversc——"

He gave a little grunt of pleasure.

"You let me take care of—the office," he said, with an intimacy that amused her. He twisted Chalvey's tickets into a ball, and sent it spinning across the lobby. Then he rushed off to the hotel broker to arrange for new seats.

She had won, yet all sense of victory was blunted by the self-disgust which swept her from head to foot. What was it she was contemplating, anyway?

V

RITA began to play "unfair" when she deliberately set to work to entangle young Olverson, and she knew it. Now she was guilty of something which heretofore she had passed up with a laugh and a shrug. Other girls, even tinpanners, might set their nets to snare infants, but not Rita Charles. No cheating, no renegeing, four-square and above-board: she knew the rules and she abode by them. She had been pardonably proud of her record, and now—— There was no doubt about it; she had set out to capture little J. T.

Quite likely she would never have thought of such a thing had it not been for Sally, Sally the first of the sisterhood to cross the rubicon and land safely on the shores of matrimony. It was perceptible that Olverson wasn't Bob Sartoris; Rita had an idea that young Olverson was a sneak as well as a precious idiot, but she believed she was backed with that sort of experience which would prove even his match, when it came to cunning, and a show-down. Rita was very tired of the Château Prunella, and Mrs. Orpington and her family-tree—which the irrepressible Nicko declared was a rubber-plant! Rita was sick unto death of the pale school-teacher, and the brilliant cold-cream demonstrator, and even of sick Carrie Billings of whom Ida chattered night and day. Twenty-third Street was very dull, unspeakably horrid and common-

place. If she married little J. T., probably his father would buy her off, pay her to give his son and heir a divorce. Well, money dripped golden words in Rita's ears, these dark days.

Olverson rushed her pretty hard after that night at the Empire, when he went to sleep over Miss Barrymore's new play. But so infatuated was he that he even sat through Shakespeare, and procured seats for a "damned unpleasant thing" with Nazimova in the leading rôle. Not only did J. T. find Rita Charles very lovely and charming, but he discovered in her an enigma which he couldn't solve. However, Olverson no more believed in tinpanners than New York does in fairies.

Right at the beginning he made one great mistake which almost settled him for all time. Rita's fingers itched to get at his wolfish ears. Had she told Nicko or Chalvey—— But then she couldn't; her kind don't tell. If they resented a man's methods, then they cut the man. Temple Olverson had sent Rita a magnificent diamond ring—"in memory of a pleasant evening"—the day after their visit to the Empire.

Rita never took jewelry from men, not even at Christmas-time, and her friends understood without having to be told it. Vonnegut would no more have sent her a diamond than he would have offered such a trinket to Chalvey's sister, while Harry would have bought a ring as quickly for Nick's cousin, who was doing Red Cross work in France. Either Olverson didn't know, or else he didn't care. There could be no doubt about his grosser sensibilities, or that he was wholly lacking in finesse. The bauble left Rita speechless with anger and self-disgust. The fellow

would never have dared to send her such a thing if she had not coquetted with him in a vulgar fashion which she would scorn to employ with Chalvey or Vonnegut. She knew the fault was her own, but that only served to emphasize the hurt. Oh, she would make him pay, some day!

The ring was returned by special messenger, and when next he telephoned, Ida gleefully followed instructions and refused him Rita.

"She says she's not to home to you, if you please," and J. T. almost could see the impish red tongue extended.

"Not at home to whom?" he demanded.

"Why, to you!" snapped Ida impudently, and straightway rang off.

It was only to be expected that Rita should see him at the office next morning. On an average, Olverson, junior, spent about three hours a day at the U. S. A. & B., and he had scarcely glanced at his father's private stenographer, who, during work hours, was as a grub to the butterfly of her Broadway nights. J. T. had come to think of "Miss Charles" as a rather tall and silent girl, who understood legal phrases better than he did himself. She was seldom without a pad and pencil in her hands, or else with a typewriter under her quick fingers. "Miss Charles" was clever; he detested clever women, they were frumps. And then he saw her that morning of Bob's wedding at the Waldorf corner, and she was a raving Fifth Avenue beauty! The same night found her dining at the Astor—wearing a great little frock. J. T. was stunned, and enraptured.

When the ring came back he was genuinely sur-

prised. For a moment he was fairly indignant, thinking possibly she didn't realize its value. For if she did, why, what was she thinking about, she, a twenty-five dollar stenographer? The diamond cost three hundred; he wasn't cheap. Ask the girls in the roof shows—they knew. What did Rita Charles think she was, anyway?

"Chalvey might kick," ran his thoughts; "or, it may be only a trick—to incite——"

But after he had calmed down, and telephoned to Twenty-third Street a half-dozen times without succeeding in reaching her, young Olverson came to the conclusion that perhaps, after all, he had acted too hastily. Yet she dined with Harry Chalvey, and called Vonnegut by a ridiculous, intimate name.

The following morning he arrived an hour early at the office, only to find his father there ahead of him.

"Why, my dear Temple!" blurted out old John T., surprised but pleased. Then he looked again at his watch and coughed gently in his palm, a palm as soft and pink as a baby's.

"I thought possibly you'd need me to-day," said the young man, and his shifty little eyes sought Rita, waiting patiently with pad and pencil. "I—want to do something. Isn't there anything I can do? Perhaps I can help Miss—Miss Charles, yes—perhaps I can help Miss Charles with the letters, father."

Olverson, *père*, was delighted. He had always hoped to see a son of his follow in his footsteps at the U. S. A. & B., and heretofore Temple had displayed about as much aptitude for business as a kitten does for grand opera. Like the kitten, little J. T.

would rather play than work. But now things were coming round; his boy had grown to manhood. Gladly he assigned to him Miss Charles and the letters, wholly ignorant of the fact that Temple was thoroughly incapable of understanding either. Rita preceded him into the smaller office, still carrying pencil and paper, and sitting down, near the desk, waited demurely to begin work.

"Miss Charles—Rita——!" Young Olverson dropped down in the nearest chair and made an effort to capture her hand. "There, don't go!" he pleaded, in a frightened voice, as she withdrew her fingers from his damp palm. "I—I—— Listen: don't run away."

"I have no intention of running away," she retorted, speaking quietly.

"I've been a fool," he murmured gloomily, as he caught a glimpse of her calm, determined face.

Rita remained silent.

"I—I ought to have known better," he groaned, turning away.

"Yes. But it seems you didn't, and since it was your first offense, since you scarcely knew me—knew me as other men do—I am going to forgive you. I am going to forget that you ever sent me such a gift. But if ever again——"

"Rita——!" He made a fresh effort to secure her hand, her cool, slim, capable fingers.

"Miss Charles," she corrected in her prim, office voice. "Don't let it occur again, Mr. Olverson. I have known Mr. Vonnegut and Mr. Chalvey for years. Do you think for one minute——"

"No, of course not!" he interposed hurriedly. "My mistake."

Rita sighed sentimentally, and looked at the end of her pencil, a pretty trick gleaned from the stage.

"Three years!" she murmured, in a voice which left Olverson all ears. "For three years my friends have sent me flowers enough to stack a greenhouse, enough candy to go into business with, and fruit that would last an hotel a week. I am sorry you did that—what you did, Mr. Olverson. You will remember that I said at first I was afraid our friendship was out of the question. I'm not going to say you don't understand me—for the fault is my own, if you don't. After the way in which I accepted your hospitality the other night——"

"Oh, don't—don't be so hard on a fellow," he pleaded, his eyes searching her face. "I did make a rotten mistake, but it doesn't happen again, believe me. I know, now. I guess I'm so used to—to the—other kind, Miss Charles, that I don't know exactly how to keep step with you. You're kind; if you'll help a fellow—— It shan't occur again. And the ring was so blamed good-looking——!"

There was a note in his voice which surprised her; could she have seen, there was a thought in his head which would have surprised her more.

"The ring was magnificent!" Rita agreed warmly. "But then, so are the moon and the rainbow, and you know what they tell us as kiddies, when we cry for the one, and go in search of the pot of gold, at the end of the other. But I'm waxing sentimental, and we have these letters to do. Please, Mr. Olverson." She poised her pencil in a business-like way, but J. T.

had caught the color in her speech a moment before, so that her words became almost a caress.

He tried to make another engagement with her for that night, dazzled her with a list of a dozen Broadway attractions, mentioned this restaurant and that cabaret, without dreaming it was all a twice-told tale to Rita Charles, and that she might go anywhere from the Metropolitan Opera to the Palace by merely saying the word. However, Rita felt that she couldn't stand any more of Temple Olverson just then, and she put him off with some trivial excuse which only served to incite him further, holding out the small, cold hope that he might find her at home some evening after six.

"To-morrow, then!" he flashed, but Rita replied that she could make no further engagements until she looked up her list for the week.

Twenty-third Street grew more unbearable daily. Rita had expected Chalvey, or anyway Nicko, to telephone to her, but all during the long, monotonous evenings there came no inquiry for Miss Charles, until it seemed that her friends had deserted her. Rita couldn't telephone to a man, with the parlor full of inquisitive, gossiping tabbies. In the past, when she wanted to speak to Chalvey or Vonnegut she used to walk up to the drug-store, at the corner, but the last time, after calling Harry at the Harvard Club, the anemic little clerk had looked at her so strangely, and even followed her down to the front door, that Rita made up her mind never to enter the place again.

Such nights as she spared from her favorite cinema-shows, her duties below-stairs ended for the time, Ida

would climb up to Rita's room and spend hours working with her hair.

"It's finer 'n Miss Carrie's," the slavey said; "on'y hers is red, and red is the color of 'vamps.' Did y' ever see Theda Bara in 'Du Barry,' Miss Rita? It's from the Bible—leastways, everybody's dressed up—that kind—and they go around sayin' 'thee' and 'thou.' I wonder if that's bein' strictly neutral, these days?"

"I've never seen 'Du Barry,' Ida."

"Neither has Miss Carrie." She shook her head over the two of them. "Why don't you and her be friends, Miss Rita?"

"We haven't time for friendships in New York," laughed Rita, and the cynical note which had become so prevalent of late crept into her voice. "Like letter-writing, friendship went out with the crinoline."

"Yes, m'm. Folks phone now," said Ida ingenuously.

"Yes. And only men are necessary as friends, and they so often don't know the meaning of the word."

Rita sat still, dozing under the magnetism of the slavey's brush as it moved in perfect rhythm through the thick dark hair.

"Do you ever play the phonograph for Miss—Miss Billings any more?" Rita asked, on the spur of the moment, as her glance wandered to the Victrola.

"Every blessed day!" Ida cried proudly. "It's Schumann-Heink, now—this." She darted away, only to return with *My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice*, from "Samson and Delilah." "Miss Carrie don't speak the lingo, but she gets me to put the record on so she kin hear how the lady sings, how the voice is drawn through the nose, she says. Well, I of'en heard of

folks singin' through their noses, but it seems to me a little high, at three dollars a song." Ida deposited the record with a sigh, and took up the comb.

"Evidently Miss Billings appreciates music more than we do," commented Rita, finding herself interested in spite of herself.

"Oh, lors, yes! Music is to her what hair an' movies is to me, and Broadway is to you, miss!"

It seemed, then, that even to this poor, ignorant little creature Rita was associated for all time with theaters and restaurants—with tinpanning. Suddenly she felt a little sorry for herself, a trifle angry with the world. It wasn't really her fault. She was like a squirrel in a cage, placed in the cage against her will, and sent whirling round and round by a master's hand. It seemed useless to struggle. Rita felt that she had been set down in the world empty-handed, and told to scratch. Whose fault, then, if she picked the fattest worms?

"The world sets us down in the heart of a great city, solemn, round-eyed country girls in the midst of Gotham. We have no kin, no money, no anything but a wild desire for happiness. If we take what is offered us, we are parasites—or worse! If we refuse the flesh-pots, we are idiots. "Rather let me the world to make a living in, but don't stop to show me how to make it. Living isn't simply three meals a day and a place to sleep" she thought bitterly.

Living, to Rita, had come to mean expensive motor cars, choice theater seats, and the newest dining and supper places. Living meant gowns, not just something to cover one's self with; sables and not dyed

rabbit. Sally and her husband had given Rita her furs, and the frocks were not paid for yet, nor for many days yet; but it was such things that made the world a place to live in for Rita Charles. Also, it was such things which made the school-teacher, and the cream demonstrator dislike her so heartily, and which kept her from seeking friendships among Mrs. Orpington's paying-guests. Carrie Billings interested Rita more than she cared to confess, even to herself, because she shrank from opening the door which separated her room, and from going in to see the sick girl, as afraid, because the sick girl might have judged her before hand, unheard, a habit peculiar to New York. Rita had wrapped herself in a magnificent cloak of indifference, but underneath this mantle there was a sensitive nature which cringed and recoiled and suffered.

She was glad when Ida had finished her hair for the night and left her alone. Rita wanted to be alone, to think. For the first time in her five-and-twenty years of life she was a little disgusted, more than a trifle sick at the thought of what she had set out deliberately to do.

She had played fair with others, with Nick Vonnegut and Harry Chalvey. She had some code of honor. But Olverson——! He seemed such an apology for a man. The temptation was not to be set aside lightly. It was Sally's fault, too, for if Sally hadn't married Bob—— But then, Olverson wasn't Bob Sartoris, and Sally had been innocent of intrigue. Rita sighed, tossed, and turned. She supposed old J. T. would come around with some settlement, some inducement to permit his son to free himself of an unwelcome alli-

ance. Rita harbored no delusions. While the vice-president of the U. S. A. & B. might cherish a very warm regard for her as a stenographer, she knew that under no circumstances could she ever hope for the same place in his affections as the life-long partner of little Olverson, junior. The boy was a sneak and a simpleton, but he was also his father's son, while she was a . . . tinpanner . . .

"Just that," she nodded bitterly, in the dark. "And 'all the king's horses, and all the king's men' couldn't set Humpty Dumpty up again. Humpty Dumpty!"

She tossed, wide awake, until nearly daylight, and then, dropping off in a fitful sleep, she dreamed unpleasantly. She was a wolf, come to devour a helpless lamb. Looking again, she saw that the lamb's head was human, and that its face was the face of little J. T. She supposed, then, that she was the wicked wolf. But even as she looked, the lamb's features changed, and lo! he became the wolf himself. This discovery made her laugh so loudly that she awakened with a start.

Jumping out of bed, she glanced at her watch. It was eight o'clock, and she was due down-town at nine. She began to put on her uniform-like dress of black and white, still pondering over the facts of the night before. Strangely enough the dream bothered her not at all. Granted that she was a wolf, Heaven and all the world knew that little Olverson was no lamb. Though come to think of it, the lamb had changed its face in the end.

Ida met her at the foot of the stairs with a package which had just been delivered. It was a box of the month's phonograph records, which either Chalvey

or Vonnegut had sent her, as was their custom. She didn't stop to open it, but hurried into the dining-room, drinking the cup of hot coffee which Mrs. Orpington had ready, standing.

"You may unpack the records when you get time, and see if there is anything to interest Miss Billings," she told Ida, who had followed her into the dining-room.

Outside in the hall Rita found her passage blocked by a tall, rather broad-shouldered man, who had just come down the stairs.

"I beg your pardon," said he, stepping aside.

Rita didn't bother to glance up; the men she met at the Château Prunella weren't worth it, she insisted.

"Granted," she murmured, which was the approved formula in Twenty-third Street.

It was not until she was out on the front steps that Rita realized, all at once, that the voice in the hall was strangely familiar.

VI

FOR the next ten days Rita lived in a whirl of excitement, the telephone ringing continuously, from six o'clock until long after nine, and her friends, old and new, showering her with invitations. Upon one occasion, Harrison Chalvey drove up to the Orpington door in a low, mustard-colored car. To be sure, he didn't enter the house, but remained seated in the car until Rita appeared on the steps, but even this was an improvement on meeting her in an hotel or theater lobby, and besides a tinpanner may not be too particular. However, it furnished more food for the parlor brigade, and Miss Lillian St. Clair and Miss Florence Brockly held a debating society from different ends of the long room, whenever the "guests" were assembled, after supper.

"Why don't you never bring your gentlemen friends in to meet the folks, my dear?" cooed Mrs. Orpington, not without malicious intent, after the Chalvey episode. "I'm sure you're welcome an' all to the drawing-room—both of 'em! And I'm sure the ladies would be glad to glimpse at close quarters a mere male that didn't look like an also-ran in a Keystone comedy. Give 'em a treat."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Orpington, but Mr. Chalvey refuses to come in and wait," Rita said. "Besides, the ladies in the parlor have business of their own."

"Business, yes, but not gentlemen friends," returned Mrs. Orpington grimly.

Rita moved away, refusing to be drawn into argument, and Mrs. Orpington entered the "drawing-room" majestically, like a grand opera prima donna invading vaudeville.

"She says he refuses to come in; maybe some o' you can guess why," she emphasized, settling herself in the patent rocker, and calling Queenie, the white poodle, to her knee.

"He don't want to be seen, I guess," ventured the cold-cream demonstrator, giggling.

The school-teacher had guessed the same thing, or made her conscience believe she had, but since Miss St. Clair had scooped her theory, she felt in duty bound to disagree. While Miss Brockly felt herself to be "superior" to the Tin-Pan sisterhood, she was fiercely envious of Rita, and regarded her comings and goings with contemptuous eyes. But, so paradoxical was her nature, she held in greater contempt, if possible, the blonde Lillian, who neither came nor went.

"That can't be it," Florence Brockly declared, with splendid scorn, and better logic, though she failed to realize this. "Since he sends in his card even when the chauffeur comes alone, Mr. Chalvey can't be trying to keep in the dark. He's not hiding from us, my dear. Why should he?"

"Good-night!" muttered the lady of the cold-cream, when speech returned to her. Things were coming to a pretty pass when Romans failed to stand and fall together.

They took a fiendish delight in keeping count of the

number of telephone calls that were received for Miss Charles, of the boxes of flowers that were sent her, of baskets of fruit, even of letters. Since they were obliged to be away from the house all day, and their curiosity knew no bounds, Miss St. Clair once ventured to bribe Ida to keep them informed of the rise and fall of the Charles barometer in their absence. And at nightfall, after first collecting her half-dollar fee, the slavey gravely informed the cold-cream lady that Rita had received one hundred telephone messages, and a truck-load of bonbons, not to speak of such trifles as flowers, fruit, books, and the Metropolitan Tower. After that Ida was left in peace, to be forgotten at Christmas, a threat, however, which had long since lost its sting, since few of the paying-guests lingered at the Château Prunella from February to December.

Little J. T. was forever at Rita's heels these days, both at the office and out of hours. His attentions were conspicuous; Rita often looked at the elder Olverson and wondered. The better she got to know the son, the more intimate they became, the less she liked him, and yet she kept on, continued the game because she was sick of the office, loathed Twenty-third Street and everybody in it. But . . . J. T. was such a little sneak! Rita began to feel that he, too, was playing a waiting game, but she only smiled to herself and made no sign. At the crisis she believed she would be a match even for his cunning.

It was a morning following on the heels of an evening spent at theater and supper with young Olverson that old John T. invited Miss Charles to come to him in his private office for five minutes, before

she left for the day. Rita went with a sort of subconscious feeling of what she might expect. It had been a difficult day. The weather had turned warm again, and spring was in the very air, invading Wall Street and leaving a trail of disaster in its wake. It proved to be a strenuous task to get work out on time, even with the generous force which the U. S. A. & B. always provided, for, with the first breath of spring, all New York seems to experience a healthy aversion for asphalt pavements and stuffy offices. Rita had been kept occupied since arriving, at nine o'clock. Now, at five, she entered John T. Olverson's sanctum with a nervous headache, which dulled her senses and left her easy prey for the old capitalist.

"I shall detain you only a minute, Miss Charles," said he, motioning her to be seated, and continuing with some letters for a moment or two longer.

Rita sat down.

"About Miss O'Neill, now—I believe that is the name of the young lady who succeeded Miss Cole, isn't it?" He glanced up at last, adjusting his glasses on his high, fine nose. "It has been called to my attention, Miss Charles, that Miss O'Neill is making a serious mistake by dressing the way she does, during her business hours in this office. I would like you to speak to her. The success of the bonding department doesn't depend on her—her waists, you might point out, Miss Charles."

"Her—waists?" Having seen Miss O'Neill, she knew exactly to what he had reference, although it pleased her to force him to a more detailed explanation.

"Yes. They are . . . quite lacey. Perhaps you

have noticed them?" The black Olverson eyes under the white Olverson hair held her, fascinated.

Rita bowed her head. "Lingerie waists! Of course some one must speak to Miss O'Neill."

Straightway a fat smile came into play, changing his expression entirely, but Rita preferred the grim mouth, the steely glitter of cold, black eyes.

"I see we understand each other, Miss Charles. . . ."

Mr. Olverson swung around in his chair, and picked up a letter to sign it, but Rita waited, knowing the interview had not yet ended. John T. had not sent for her in his private office to speak about a stenographer's shirtwaists, especially when Miss O'Neill was not in his department, but under the Sartoris eye and thumb.

Presently he swung back to find Rita still waiting patiently in the big chair. Putting up his pink, babyish palm, Mr. Olverson coughed gently, like a stage father.

"I am sorry we had to lose Miss Cole," he said, looking just across Rita's head. "Miss Cole was a most excellent young woman, and I sometimes think young Bob Sartoris owes the company a settlement for taking her away from us, even to make her his wife. But then I suppose I am scarcely in sympathy with that young man's actions. It sets a bad example. I am old-fashioned, Miss Charles, and the Olversons are an old family. For example, in addition to such *mésalliances*, I thoroughly disapprove of dancing at midnight cabarets—such as one finds at the Grande Prix. I think you appreciate my position, Miss Charles?"

Some one had seen her with little J. T. at the new

roof show, seen them dancing together, and this some one had carried the news to the elder Olverson. He disapproved; some families would never welcome a stenographer . . . no matter how beautiful she might be. Rita longed to laugh in the old financier's face, to tell him frankly just what she thought of his son, just what a mean sort he was, what a sneak, a coward. Neither she nor any self-respecting girl, would ever glance at him if it weren't for his father's money. She was very tired, and her nerves were all shot to pieces, and now to have to listen to this!

There was one small ray of satisfaction. The father must see, blind as parents are, that it was merely a question of money with Rita Charles. Mr. Olverson must realize that she wanted not the man, but his wealth. It was a small triumph, but sweet, because she felt that secretly he knew. She wouldn't waste a glance on little J. T. if the Olverson millions weren't behind him!

The father must have sensed the working of her mind, for he rose suddenly, a little flushed, and said:

"I suppose the Sartoris family made the best of the bargain, when Robert Sartoris married Miss Cole. Understand me, I am not saying a word detrimental to the lady herself; it is her class I object to, and then, only upon occasion, of course. We have girls enough, Heaven knows! . . . Well, Master Bob was independent of his family, so, if the family doesn't come around——"

"But they have come around," prompted Rita in her quiet voice.

"To be sure they have!" He looked at her keenly

for a moment; then continued: "She is a friend of yours, I think? You were at the wedding."

"Yes."

John T. Olverson bowed profoundly, and moved toward the door.

"All families aren't the same, however, nor are all sons independent of their fathers. . . . You will speak to Miss O'Neill, then? Thank you. Good-night."

Rita's wrath was none the less bitter because she realized that the elder Olverson had done only what most men would do to protect their sons from the hands of an adventuress. An adventuress! That sounded suspiciously like Ida's favorite picture-plays, but it was true; she was that. Neither a character in a book, nor in a play, but she had schemed in much the same way, laid her nets to entangle the "young millionaire" in much the same fashion that is popular with the patrons of celluloid romance.

"The horrid little beast!" she said between her teeth, her thoughts reverting to young Olverson. She felt that she must wash her hands of him, that she couldn't keep up a pretense of friendship which was abhorrent to all her finer sensibilities, even though it promised a release from her present surroundings. The temptation was strong, but the man himself filled her with secret loathing, and she realized all over again that Nicko and Chalvey had spoiled her for other men. Chalvey! She dared not think of Harry and little J. T. in the same breath.

The days were growing longer, and the twilight lingered in the steel-ribbed canyons when Rita hurried through Wall Street to the Subway. At the corner,

waiting for her, she came upon Temple Olverson, in his low, red car. He was disguised with huge goggles, but there was no mistake about it; it was he, on the alert.

"Hello!" he cried, jumping out and blocking her path. "Hop in; there's something I want to tell you, Rita. What's the rub?—has the old boy been raking you over the coals? Isn't he the cheerful old party, though! Never mind, pet; over a nice little dinner——"

Rita attempted to shake him off.

"Let me go, Temple," she said pettishly. "Your father didn't promise me an increase of salary, if that's what you mean."

"He's a hundred miles behind the procession! . . . Jump in!"

"All the same, he's acquainted with the dansants at the Grande Prix, and some one has spoken to him about our tête-à-tête dinners. It's all off, Temple, if I want to remain at the U. S. A. & B. Maybe your father is not so far in the rear as he looks."

Little J. T. growled angrily, like a snarling dog.

"I'd like to know who the damn' polly is. I'd give something pretty to know, all right."

Weary, heart-sick, Rita said nothing, and suddenly he turned, and opening the door of the car, pushed her gently forward, up the step, and then leaped in beside her. Then he grinned.

"We can't stand talking all night on the pavement, girlie."

"Especially since your father's car passes this corner on its way up-town," thought Rita, but she held her peace. Aloud she said: "I shouldn't be here with

you, Temple, after—after what has happened to-day. Your father made himself perfectly clear. I suppose it is as much as my position is worth, if somebody saw us now."

"You should worry," said J. T. elegantly.

"I do."

"You needn't. Rita, I wouldn't see you lose—you know that, don't you?"

There was a note in his voice which aroused a fresh interest, and Rita, silent, found herself waiting for his next words.

"I won't see you lose, I won't see you lose, honey-girl," he said, as the car leaped forward under his touch. "You know you're the greatest little girl in the world, Rita, and Temple 'd give his good right arm—eh? eh, sweetie? If the Gov'nor knew you better he'd—he'd go crazy over you, too—I suppose you know you've got me crazy, pet? Do you? Don't you? How about getting married, just you and me, and keeping it dark from all the prowling pollies for a while? Like it? Great little idea, honey-girl?"

Something icy clutched at her heart. She was surprised out of speech, stunned, helpless. She had never expected . . . this . . . from little J. T. Then suspicion got the upper hand; he must be up to some of his beastly little tricks. It was scarcely possible that he would marry her in the face of family opposition. There was something behind all this, but what?

"Will you marry me, Rita?" he asked again, afraid to take his hands from the wheel, his eyes from the heavy traffic ahead. "Honest to God, you'll never regret it, honey——"

The girl was glad the man couldn't see her face,

which was the color of ashes, while her lips moved loosely, oddly.

"When?" she managed to stammer at last.

"Why, now! The sooner the better. Honest to——"

"Where?"

"You say, sweetie—that's the bride's privilege, that's my sweetie's privilege. You say."

"Well . . . there's a clergyman up at the house where I live in Twenty-third Street," she began cautiously, watching him the while.

"Good! We'll go there. Listen, petty, just you and me—— Isn't it great stuff? We'll go—everywhere!—just Temple and his honey-girl. You sure got me going, Rita. Hurry up, Mr. Parson-man!"

After that she felt there could be no question of his faith—unless he happened to back down at the last minute. She told him to drive to Mrs. Orpington's, to the Château—Nicko's Château—and at once he turned the car in the direction of West Twenty-third Street. When they slowed down at the door, her heart was at rest. He must be sincere, he was quite in earnest—matrimony! Then it could happen again! What a revenge, what a glorious triumph over old John T., to come down to the office in the morning and tell him—just to tell him . . . the truth. . . .

"Jump out, girlie!"

His hand touched her, and Rita cringed in spite of herself, leaping to the pavement without his aid. But young Olverson didn't seem to notice; he was pushing toward the house-door.

"Trot out your Amen-chappy," said he.

VII

ALWAYS Rita Charles had been satisfied that she would not end her days in harness, and when she said harness, she meant not only the offices of the vice-president of the U. S. A. & B., but likewise the three make-shift rooms of an up-town flat, as the wife of a clerk or some petty tradesman. Rita lived in a future of delicate rose-color. Certainly she was cut out for other things than poverty and toil, the toil of the housewife, and the poverty of the lower middle classes. She had taken to motor cars and opera boxes as a duckling takes to water! And she had never ridden in an automobile before she came to New York, while back in her home town the natives thought the last word in music had been spoken when any one mentioned "The Bohemian Girl."

Last night there had come a chance to escape from her present surroundings, to solidify her future once and for all time . . . and she had let it slip by. By devious methods, not always legitimate, she had led little Olverson up to the very altar . . . and then side-stepped the issue. At the last moment she had refused to marry him! That seemed a little difficult to understand, now, in the hard, cold light of day, but last night, when his hand touched hers, when she felt his breath fan her cheek, Rita knew that she couldn't

marry him, not for the wealth of the world. So that she sent him away, rushing into the house and closed the door in his face, even while he was clamoring loudly for parson and witness. He'd been drinking hard all day. . . .

Rita experienced no little satisfaction in the knowledge that Temple Olverson had asked her to marry him; but it was a sweeter triumph to remember that she had not accepted him then and there. His proposal had been like balm to her wounded pride, but her dismissal was as a glass of spring water after a night of champagne. She had sent him away! She had turned down a million of money! People wouldn't believe it—she scarcely believed it herself, this morning. Rita felt less an adventuress, more a heroine. Righteous indignation seized her against those who had smiled and dubbed her companion. . . .

It is said that no other young woman in the world so readily adapts herself to the situation at hand as does the American-born. She may start in a hovel and end in a palace, where she conveniently forgets her humble beginning, and adds another feather in her royal husband's cap. Rita had been born over a cobbler's shop and had completed her education after a single year in the high school, but she knew, thanks to the Sunday Supplements which found their way even to the little Pennsylvania town, how to dress her hair in the smartest New York mode, which implement at table to save for the ice, and when to shake hands and when not to. Also, she figured out that Broad-

way ran, criss-cross, north and south, through the heart of Manhattan, that the Waldorf stood at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street, there was a Subway station at Times Square, and the Empire Theater housed Mr. Charles Frohman's attractions. She was a cunning little parrot. . . .

Rita dabbled a little in values, too—and found them confusing. For instance, at home, Mr. Chauncey Olcott was considered the greatest living actor, and folks spoke respectfully of one William Shakespeare, as the finest playwright and poet—of his time; but New York soon showed her the error of her ways—William, after all, was the live one. She knew better now, but she was still learning, still the parrot. Shaw and Ibsen were no longer “modern”; Peacock Alley wasn't what it used to be. She preferred taxicabs, once the height of her ambition, only to the Subway or the Elevated. Dimly she recalled having heard of such actresses as Anna Held and Mrs. Leslie Carter a very long time ago.

Rita had never hoped to marry either Nick Vonnegut or Harrison Chalvey, but she accepted gracefully what they were willing to give of their time, and in the way of entertainment, and she kept her eyes and ears alert. However, neither did she dream for an instant of marrying any one of the men employed at the U. S. A. & B., in the same capacity as herself. Better an old maid than that! Nor did she put much faith in the old Alger methods—even though she had never read Horatio. As the down-trodden and the

oppressed believe the Lord will provide, so Rita came to feel about herself and her future. Some day something would happen. For the rest, she moved prettily from castle to castle—in Spain.

On the following day, which was Sunday, Rita didn't rise for breakfast; there were few in Twenty-third Street that did—and Mrs. Orpington, as became a "hostess" with a houseful of "paying guests," didn't expect it! From eight o'clock until noon, Ida was kept busy running out for Sunday papers, which the inmates of the Chateau Prunella perused in their beds. There was a big dinner at one-thirty, with dessert—Harlequin ice-cream.

Promptly at nine, Ida slipped up to the third-floor front with Rita's two favorite metropolitan journals, together with a glass of milk and two graham wafers. Rita was . . . Rita—the Cæsars were never more. While she sat up in bed, partaking of this feast, the slavey waited in the background, so that she might smuggle the glass back to the kitchen when Rita was through with it. Wafers and milk, served with Sunday editions of the newspapers, began and ended with the third-floor front.

"It's one grand day," sighed Ida, her nose pressed flat against the pane. "I s'pose you're dated up for sompin' pleasant-like, this afternoon. Well, I don't wonder, I'm sure. Like the hero said to the girl in 'The Trials of Theresa,' 'You are more beautifuller 'n dawn.' An' gitting up at five o'clock, as I do, Miss Rita, that ain't no kid—bee-lieve me, I know!"

"Ida, you spoil me. You make me feel like a screen darling, with you to chorus my subtitles. I'm not *Theresa* at all, at all—far from it." Rita spoke without glancing up from the Art Section of the paper.

The little maid turned and twisted the empty glass in her red, scarred hands, hands that scrubbed and washed, cooked and swept, and withal dressed hair so wonderfully.

"No; you're not *Theresa*—yet," she said significantly. "One at a time lasts longer, as the sayin' is. Miss Sally, now——"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"I always held as Miss Sally couldn't hold a can'le to you—and look what she got! A grand an' lovely man like Mr. Robert Sartoris——!"

Rita thought of little J. T., and the Olverson fortune, which only yesterday she had refused to share. No, she was not *Theresa*, but she might have been, might have ended in a shower of rice, and with orange blossoms decoration, like Ida's celluloid heroine; like—like Sally Cole!

The slavey set the glass down on the window-sill, and turned to the phonograph.

"Kin I?"

"People will murder you." Their glances met, and the two girls smiled. They appreciated the humor of the wrath of the late sleepers.

Ida make a grimace, and started the Schumann-Heink record.

"She's going to be as great as her—the one that's

singing, some day." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder toward the thin partition which divided the third-floor front from the third-floor hall. "Oh, Miss Rita, you just ought to hear her do that *Boheem* waltz! It's the grandest thing—almost a hes'tation! Comes straight out of her nose and everything! . . . You've never thought much about going next door to see her, miss?"

Lazily Rita opened her dark eyes, hoping that they flashed deeper indignation than she felt.

"Of course I haven't, Ida," she declared, although that is exactly what she had been thinking of when the little maid suggested it to her. Rita resented what she termed outside interference. She must live her life as she saw fit. It became ridiculous to visit Carrie Billings now. "Don't forget my hair, will you? And you make take those violets there on the table, if you want them. Write down any phone messages—tell them who you are, Ida; you're my Boswell."

Ida filled the empty milk glass full of water, placed the violets in it, and started next door to Miss Billings.

"I don't know what you mean, *Boswell*," she confessed, from the door. "But comin' from you, it can't be no dirty dig, so I guess I'm it. Thank you, Miss Rita."

There was hardly space in the hall-room for the bed, and Ida, and the enormous bunch of violets, but the slavey stuck them, in the milk glass, topsy-turvey on the window-sill, and then gave her attention to the invalid. Carrie and Ida were kindred spirits. What-

ever her history, Miss Billings had never found life cast in the pleasant places which made Rita Charles a character among her associates in Twenty-third Street. Carrie's face told of days of suffering; she was little more than skin and bones and long red hair.

"She's singin' out o' her nose—the madame-person—hear?" Ida greeted Miss Billings affectionately with, "An' are you feelin' better, honey? Lookit the vi'lets Miss Rita sent you—an' she tol' me to put on the record you like—although I was that scared it'd wake up the second-floor front—the ole bear! Miss Rita just scorned his fussiness—for all the world like *Theresa*, you know. . . . Ain't your hair one mess, though! Set up for a minute. Red hair shows black on the screen—I seen it in a movie magazine."

Carrie Billings sat up in bed while Ida plaited her thick red hair in two long ropes which fell to her waist. She was very white, very weak, and equally unlovely, growing stronger, now, however, and the doctor had promised that she might go out very soon, almost the first fine day. This morning was most pleasant and spring-like, but the convalescent was still too weak to walk down to Madison Square.

"I don't know how to thank Miss Charles," Carrie said, as she listened to Schumann-Heink's voice, which came distinctly through the wall. "I don't know how I'd ever have got through this illness without her music and her kindness, Ida. So unexpected, too—that helps a lot. I came here hoping for nothing, ill,

discouraged—— But I have found so much—you and her——!”

“There’s nobody like Miss Rita, if you ask me,” declared Ida stanchly. “Say, I’ll just set that record again as I chase back down-stairs. . . . Dinner with ice-cream at one-thirty, sharp!”

At noon the front parlor at the Chateau Prunella began to fill with the paying guests, all of them coming straight from their beds but Florence Brockly, the school teacher, who had been to church, and the newest inmate, who was a clergyman. Sunday finery assaulted the Orpington red plush; coats and neckpieces were draped across the chair-backs; the piano top was littered with gloves and handkerchiefs; the air was redolent with a dozen different perfumes. Miss St. Clair, the cold-cream demonstrator, was going to a vaudeville performance with a “perfectly grand fella she had met out in Minnesota, two years ago, when she was sellin’ breakfast-food to the Swedes for Hawaiian adornment.” The airy, fairy Lillian was dressed in a costume which some few actresses reserve for the footlights, and she had her hair powdered, a mode which originated in Paris, she explained.

“Well, did he get over this morning, dearie?” she cried, greeting Miss Brockly effusively as she came in from church.

Floss was tremendously proper directly after service, and she frowned upon the vaudeville vocabulary which tripped from the St. Clair tongue.

“He did,” she retorted grimly. “The sermon was

about painted ladies," and she cast a wrathful glance at the demonstrator's cheeks.

Miss St. Clair swung around on the piano stool and struck the opening bars of "God Save the King," while the haberdasher's clerk, who was reading a Philadelphia newspaper, laughed loudly, to encourage the comedienne further. Not that Lillian required encouragement. . . . Miss Brockly put down her prayer-book and hymnal with a prunes and prisms expression, and taking off her hat, placed it on top of the piano until after dinner. She wasn't going out; she didn't approve of Sunday entertainment; but she hadn't time to take her outdoor garments up to her room before the dinner-bell rang, since in Twenty-third Street one appreciated the wisdom of the early bird with the worm.

"It was really a beautiful sermon," said she, stopping to arrange her scanty tresses before the mirror which rose majestically between the two windows. "My dear, why don't you try some of that Gaby Dyeless Hair-stain?" she asked slyly, with a snicker at the demonstrator's powdered coiffure. "I see it advertised in all the papers, and endorsed by well-known, if notorious, professional beauties. I would if I were you—honest."

Miss St. Clair continued her playing, now breaking into a popular trot which threatened, to the literary inclined, to be more trot than popular.

"Honest, if you were me, honey, you wouldn't know whether the papers this morning were advertising

hair-dyes or go-carts," said Lillian, without turning around. "I was up to the Tokio last night with that grand fella I met out in Minnesota, two years ago. He says he's never forgotten me—just like that. I'll introduce you to him if you like, Floss—that's the kind of Good Samaritan I am. Maybe you can make good with him, who knows? You seem to be rather out of it, and I wouldn't have the poor Swede for a gift, 'cept to buzz around with—honest to John, I wouldn't."

They were still at it, tooth and nail, as the gentleman from Philadelphia put it, when the first bell sounded and the stampede for the dining-room began. But, after all, the book agent was first at table—he'd been waiting in the hall, Miss St. Clair announced out loud.

Rita Charles gave them all a chance to be seated and served before she came down from her room. This was neither indifference nor unselfishness on her part. Ida brought in the dishes from the kitchen, and frequently Rita had come down to dinner a full half-hour after the others had left the room, and been provided with all white meat of the chicken. The Recording Angel, and Ida, alone knew how this was done; for the rest, in the phraseology of the Château Prunella, Rita should worry.

She was going out with Chalvey in his car, and she was dressed all but her hat and top-coat, a slim, fashionable figure in a black velvet suit which the installment man was still collecting for, and for which he would continue to collect for many moons to come.

At her waist she had fastened a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley, which a special messenger had delivered to her an hour ago, and the picture she made was not only beautiful but aristocratic. That was what Chalvey liked best about her—she looked exquisite, expensive. As she came down the stairs, she heard the street door rattle, as if some one were trying to get in without a key. Ida was kept busy, without a moment to turn her head, and seeing this, Rita went forward and opened the door. "Thank you," she heard a man say, and looked up, for she recognized the voice. It was the one she had heard in the hall the other morning, when she was late for the office.

A pair of serious gray eyes met hers, and Rita found herself smiling in joyous anticipation, as if greeting an old, old friend. How well she remembered those eyes, recalled the broad shoulders, the fine, straight nose and the rather large, sensitive mouth!

"Mr. Varian!" she cried, holding out her hand.

"I thought you must have forgotten me," said the young assistant of St. David's-on-Avenue. "It seems to me that we met here in the hall before, a day or two ago, but you hurried away without speaking. And, come to think of it, I wasn't positive it was you, Miss Charles."

"It was I," she smiled.

For a second they continued to look at each other, smiling and saying nothing. Each was surprised to find the other here. The man wondered why in the world Mrs. Robert Sartoris' bosom friend was staying

in a Twenty-third Street boarding-house, while the girl puzzled her brain at the strangeness of finding Anthony Varian here, of all places.

Boyishly, Varian came forward with his explanation.

"I'm living with Mrs. Orpington for a week or so, until the new rectory is ready for me—at least, it will be a good-as-new rectory when the roof's mended and the painting's done. I could have stood the paints, but in bad weather the rain soaked in through my bed-room ceiling. I have been appointed rector of St. David's Chapel, around in Twentieth Street." He announced his appointment with a simple pride which Rita liked at once. His manner rather than his words promised great things for Twentieth Street.

"I hadn't heard," she murmured.

Except to one of the very smart congregations, at Easter, when she went in very much the same spirit that her townfolk, back in Pennsylvania, attended the circus every year, Rita hadn't been inside of a church since coming to New York. But as she talked to Anthony Varian, and watched the pride and faith in his kindly eyes, it occurred to her suddenly that St. David's Chapel could be a very pleasant place, especially in time of trouble. And she seemed to know so much trouble, now. . . .

"I live here, too," she said, after a short silence, "but I'm what they call a 'permanent,' I'm afraid. The other morning I was in such a hurry that it seemed I hadn't time even to apologize to the person I had so

nearly upset. But then, one becomes used to being upset, in New York, I believe. Please forgive me."

Varian laughed with her, but his eyes wore a more mystified expression than before. He didn't read fashionable gossip. He knew who Robert Sartoris was because his family held a pew at St. David's, and he didn't know the lady whom Sartoris had married for the reason that her family didn't worship at his church. But it was supposed that Robert Sartoris had married some girl in his own set; that his wife had picked her only attendant . . . not from a Twenty-third Street boarding-house.

VIII

"By the way, I'm leaving town to-morrow, Rita," said Harrison Chalvey, as the car sped up Riverside Drive with Grant's Tomb silhouetted against a blue, spring-like sky. "I am going to South America—on business," he added, after a moment.

Rita's heart stood still. The wonder of it was that she didn't exclaim, for the suddenness of it found her wholly unprepared. He was going away—Harry! Somehow, until this minute she never realized what he meant to her. But he had become so closely associated with her life that she had grown to accept him as a matter of course, some one to lighten irksome hours, to come to, spiritually, at least, in moments of trial and stress. He was her all—and he announced his departure *en passant!* It was with effort she answered along approved Tin-Pan lines, in the formula of a pal.

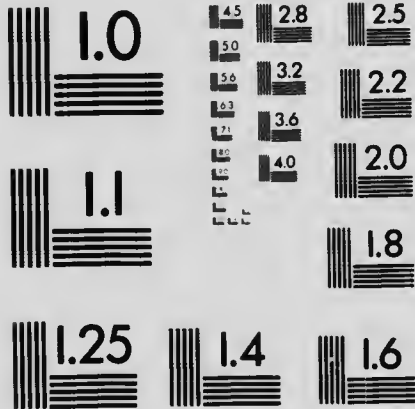
"How perfectly horrid of you! South America! But we shall miss you dreadfully, old chap! However, New York in April and May isn't especially alluring, is it? Just where, Harry?"

"Oh-h, I shall be moving about—here, there, the other place." He spoke vaguely. "Things are going to pot, down there, and you know the company ought to be getting its share of the business. Well, I'm It."



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"I'm quite peeved at you and the company," said Rita, in character, and then lapsed into silence.

Chalvey was driving his roadster, a low mustard-color, imported car which he was fond of handling himself. Rita, sitting at his side, looked very smart and lovely in her velvet costume, but because of her motor-veil, he couldn't see her face. It had gone a clayey-white at his first words, and she bit her full underlip until the blood came, striving to master her emotion. He was going away—to-morrow! He should have told her before; purposely he had kept the news from her, and she hadn't the right to resent it. A tinpanner who poses as a pal has no right to anything!

From time to time, as they whirled along the Drive, out into the open country, she stole timid little glances at the man beside her. He was not really handsome; his face was cold and proud. She knew him to be selfish; upon occasion he could be cruel, even, but . . . she loved him! Rita felt in that moment that she had always loved Harrison Chalvey—hopelessly, because she knew in her heart that he would never consider her for a second in his general scheme of life. He liked her, of course. He must like her a great deal, since he was with her so much, but his manner proved conclusively that it wasn't love which brought him so often to her side.

Of course, according to her name and game, Rita had no right to expect more than this from him. Never by word or look had he led her to believe

that he regarded her in any other light than that of friend. And yet she loved him!

She found herself wondering what she would ever do without him, never meeting him in the elevators or the corridors at the office, never riding by his side, like this, in his pleasant car under a blue sky, never seeing him at all . . . at all! She knew now how it was with her, and how it must be after he had gone. The sound of his voice across miles of wire had cheered her blackest day; a box of flowers, hurriedly sent, had brought a lilt to her voice which made work seem play. He was selfish, he was hard, he was cold. He kept his emotions in check, and ignored the facts that she was desirable and lovely. She recalled the night he had kept her waiting for him in the public corridor at the Astor, and how he had gone off and left her to get home as best she could, afterwards. Well, Rita knew that she would go on waiting for him for a hundred years, if he would only come and speak to her at the end.

South America! What did that mean? He said business, but Rita was familiar enough with the wheels within wheels at the U. S. A. & B. to know that Harrison Chalvey was not the type of man to place in charge in Latin America. Neither he nor they—the Latins—would have understood each other. In her heart, Rita believed he could have heard the Crack o' Doom without the turning of a hair. It must be a pleasure trip; he was not even honest with her! He was going away for mere selfish enjoyment! Why,

she wouldn't have left New York without him for the happiness of paradise!

Her heart beat quickly, as she turned her head slightly and studied his face, from the shelter of her veil. He wore goggles, but she could see his mouth, half-hidden by a short, dark mustache. The lips were very thin, very straight. That denoted selfishness, according to Ida, who possessed a penny book relating to such analysis. Yet Harry became the beginning and the end of all things to Rita, just then. . . . Why hadn't he told her before about South America? His stenographer must have known, the very office boys, everybody but her. Then he said "by the way," as if he were announcing a new enamel for his car.

"It was decided rather in a hurry," he said at that moment, awkwardly, as if in answer to her thoughts.

She started guiltily.

"You mean——?"

"This South American business."

"It will be rather jolly, of course."

"Possibly," he returned without great enthusiasm.

"Some of the fellows down there are very decent. Nick Vonnegut——"

"Is Nicko going with you?" she cried, alarmed at the prospect of losing all of her friends at one sweep.

"No. Said he couldn't get away. I'm not sure if he referred to the grisettes of Washington Square, or the filing department of the U. S. A. & B. Anyway, he was quite serious." Chalvey laughed.

"Treason! I'm sure Nick takes beautiful care of his

department," said Rita, in her prim little voice. But she wasn't even thinking of Vonnegut, and she scarcely knew which department he dilly-dallied with.

Chalvey let the car out a notch, but kept his eyes on the open road which stretched along in front of them like a silver ribbon in the pale sunlight.

"Awfully decent chap, Nick Vonnegut." His eyes never left the road.

"He's been very charming to me—all of my friends are splendid!" said Rita, suddenly alert.

"Including little Olverson?"

"He's just a boy," purred Rita, with a smile which Chalvey didn't see.

Harry said something under his breath which sounded to her like "Such a little sneak," but of course it couldn't have been. Chalvey wouldn't speak disparagingly of a man of his own class to a mere tin-panner.

"Where did you ever meet that fellow?" he asked, on the spur of the moment, as they reached the summit of a little hill, and took the descent. "I don't remember ever bringing him——"

"You didn't." She thought she understood now. "I am his father's stenographer," she replied quietly. "Business before pleasure." And she smiled.

Chalvey said he had forgotten.

"I don't like him," he admitted, as if compelled to speak the truth for once about an associate. "I don't see how you tolerate the man, Rita."

"We are merely friends—pals, if you will," she re-

turned, all at once tired of the game. It was impossible to arouse Harry's jealousy; men are only jealous where they love. "It's very dull in Twenty-third Street, if you haven't a 'beau'—and somehow I haven't. Like the lady in the poem, I've been 'passed by.' J. T. has taken me several times to the theater; our taste is similar—Barrymore, Adams, Faversham."

Harrison Chalvey gave a short, amused laugh under his breath, but he ventured no comment. As Rita had expected, it was impossible to draw him out to some sort of declaration, to pique him with Olver-son's name. With drooping plumage, she leant back in the car, her eyes fixed on the open road, silent and weary.

Coming back to town in the early dusk, they dined at a semi-fashionable hotel on Central Park, Chalvey pleading that he would have to say good night earlier than usual since he had so much to look after before sailing in the morning. Rita had hoped for a long evening together. The weather was cool, but she would have liked to dine *a deux* at Travers Island, a place of happy memories of the past summer. Old, dead ghosts must have risen up to confront them there. Under a sickle moon, within sound of the waves, he must have let down the bars and become all man. She loved him! . . . Probably he realized this, and therefore suggested a public hotel for their last dinner together.

In the palm-banked corridor, after she had disposed of her dust-coat and motor-veil, and he had been

valeted by the hotel's man, they met again, and Chalvey regarded her so coldly, so critically, that it seemed as if an icy hand had been laid on her shoulder.

"What's the matter, Harry?" she laughed nervously. "Isn't my hat on straight, or does the powder show on my pure Greek?"

"Nothing wrong," he made answer, in his low, level tones. "You are always correct."

"Flatterer!" she scoffed, but her heart leaped with joy even at such faint praise.

The dinner hour was dull, each seemingly on guard, and acting a rôle foreign to their natural inclinations. Rita must be gay—"Punchinello, Punchinello!" her heart kept beating. Never a voluble man, Chalvey, to-night, was unusually quiet. There were long periods of silence, in which the waiter came and went, placed dishes before them, and fetched others away, when the chatter of the room came to them like rain on a roof at night, and the orchestra, playing the Waiting Scene from "Butterfly," made a fitting accompaniment to their thoughts. Chalvey was an epicure, but now he ate too little and drank too much. Rita was always afraid of his periods of hard drinking. When she glanced up, his eyes were on her, but his lips were closed. All at once she could stand this farce no longer; she sat back in her chair, and signified her desire to go home.

It was colder, now, out of doors, with the sun down, and Rita shivered slightly, involuntarily, as he lifted her into the seat beside his own.

"What is it?" he asked, speaking a trifle thickly.

"Oh, quite all right, thanks!" She flashed him a wan smile.

"Chilly?"

"Sun-down is dispiriting."

"It's never cold and disagreeable in—Buenos Ayres, for instance." He seemed to be waiting for something; she could feel his glance on her flesh. "It's the next best bet after Paris, they say." Chalvey attempted to speak lightly, but he only succeeded in being hoarse.

Rita's lips curled a little scornfully. "The next best bet!" That was her portion, that was to be her concession in life—the next best, always the next best! Some latent pride stirred her to action; she laughed, and the spell was broken. But if Harry had dared, if she had displayed the slightest sign of weakening—what?

Fifteen minutes later he stopped the car at the door of the Château Prunella, and getting out first, slowly carefully, helped Rita down, and went with her up the stoop to the front door.

"Well?" he said, awkwardly for him, and looked at her.

Here was that unaffected, boyish frankness which was perhaps Rita's greatest charm.

"Good-by and bon voyage, dear chap. . . ."

He took her two hands, gripped them, dropped them, while he echoed, "Good-by."

All at once panic seized her. It couldn't be that he was really going, now, like this! With a hand-

shake! Why must he seem so indifferent, so cold? She couldn't bring herself to believe that this was the real Harry, the real man! She—surely, she was—desirable! Then she pulled herself together. If he had spoken one little word of affection, even, she would have been in his arms. But instead, he talked, if not exactly of "cabbages and kings," at least not of love, of human passions and desires.

"Send me a gorgeous postcard once in a blue moon, Harry. Our little maid is saving them, and one from South America—'furrin parts'——"

"I'll send you the cards."

"Good-by, Harry." She gave his hand a mannish shake; then, dropped it, quickly, like a live coal. His palm was damp and cold.

"Good-by, Rita." His voice was dull. Was he still . . . waiting?

She turned to go into the house, he backed away from her, and down the steps. This was final! A second later the roadster had darted east, toward Broadway.

He was gone!

Perhaps she would never see him again!

Without asking her to write, without acquainting her with the name of his steamer! It was cruel! He was like nails! Terror seized her, the old panic, a fear of being left alone, of lonesomeness; she rushed out on the top step, calling his name.

"Can I be of any service?" asked a man's voice, and

Anthony Varian came out of the house, and followed her out on the steps.

Rita gave way to shaken, hysterical laughter.

"Why, the idiot's gone off with my—my muff!" she cried, and rushing past him, she fled upstairs to her room, locking and bolting the door.

There she fell sobbing on her knees beside her bed, so that next door, Carrie Billings sat up and listened, wondering, waiting, yet afraid to enter into Rita's grief.

IX

THAT Sunday night, in her dark, chilly room, Rita Charles sobbed as if her heart would break, low, hoarse cries, there on her knees, with her head buried in the bed. She wondered how she could ever go on living, how she could ever stand the weary grind of the office again. She even fell to pitying herself, which is the greatest agony of all, for later on it returns a hundred-fold.

Through the thin walls, Carrie Billings heard the convulsive sobbing, and got up out of bed, creeping to Rita's door. But it was locked, and thinking better of it, the invalid returned to her room and crept in between the sheets. Which was just as well, since the person who had seen Rita that night would have a very poor chance of seeing her ever again. For on the morrow she was thoroughly ashamed of her weakness, and a little disgusted with herself for having given way to her emotion. Sufficient unto the day—that was the song of the Tin-Pan heart.

But that night——!

Perhaps it was self-loathing, too, which brought the keenest pain, and made it so hard to bear. In spite of her six years in New York, Rita hadn't wholly forgotten her early training, and to think she had given her love unasked, even undesired——! Merely a hand-

shake and good-by! She was a precious idiot to care . . . and yet she did.

In the morning her head ached furiously, and her eyes resembled burnt holes in a blanket. She swallowed two cups of coffee, took some aspirin, and arrived a half-hour late at the office. But when the elder Olverson saw her face, he suddenly forgot that Mr. Lecompt's girl had had to come to him to assort the morning's mail.

How the day dragged! Little J. T. wandered in at noon and hung around until his father's sharp demand of what he wanted sent him hurrying away to another part of the building. As he dashed out of the door, he flashed Rita a look which she found herself returning. Why not? Harry didn't care—and it was pleasant to know that somebody did, even when you didn't care for the person. Why not? It didn't mean that she would think less of Harry, miss him less, love him less, and it might be that the Olverson millions would gild many a gray day. Old John T. would seek by hook or crook to free his son from such a person as herself, but then a clever lawyer ought to be able to force him to pay a good price for that freedom. Why not?

During her lunch-hour, she got the morning papers and turning to the marine news, tried to learn the name of the steamer on which Chalvey had sailed. But a dozen leviathans had cleared the port of New York that day, and Rita didn't even know the line he had chosen.

Five o'clock came after a day of wretchedness. She was as nervous as a kitten as she almost ran from the office to the elevators. Then the cage dropped to the floor below, stopped, and Nick Vonnegut entered. They were alone together save for the operator, but observing the code of her world, he who called her silly nicknames outside of the powerful U. S. A. & B., now merely raised his hat and wished her good-night, when they left the car at the street level.

Rita longed to cast prudence to the winds and run after him, begging for just a word, the name of Harry's steamer. Then something, probably pride, for she had forgotten caution, held her back, and she hurried to the Subway at the corner, while Vonnegut rolled away in his car.

Upon arriving home, Rita found that little Olver-son had sent her a box of American Beauties, another of candy, and a special messenger letter. Rita gave the candy to Ida, sent the flowers to Carrie Billings, and stuck the letter in her desk, unopened. All during dinner she listened for the telephone, hoping the bell would summon her to listen to Vonnegut's voice. But at eight o'clock no word had come from him, and she gave him up.

Preferring a book to the parlor, where Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair were entertaining the room, inclusively, and the Philadelphia clerk and the Chicago book agent, respectively, with their lively chatter, Rita started upstairs to her room. Lillian St. Clair sat, as usual, at the piano, and she accompanied Florence

Brockly's remarks with fitting tunes from popular songs. This performance kept the room in an uproar, and the drummer and the clerk urged the two ladies on and on until they very nearly crossed the rubicon of decency in order to win a laugh.

Half-way up the first flight, Rita met Anthony Varian, coming down. He had to stop to allow her to pass him.

"Is there a party?" he asked, referring to the uproar from the parlor.

"No, nothing unusual," Rita replied, with a cryptic smile.

He seemed mystified, yet he smiled, too.

"Awfully jolly young people here. By the way," he added, as she was about to hurry on, "don't you want to help me out of the worst possible fix, Miss Charles? I am asking you to do this because—because of that morning at St. David's, you know. . . . They have sent me down here to the Chapel to try to make something out of it for the poor in the neighborhood. We want a parish house where both the young people and the old folk can go for recreation—later on we shall aim to have a room for dancing, another with a billiard table, and a library, of course. Just now I have only the Chapel, and I am trying to gather together the young folk in the basement several nights a week. It—it is not the easiest thing to do——"

"Oh, I can appreciate that," interposed Rita gently,

thinking of the classes she had seen in the vicinity of his church.

"Later on, when the parish house is ready, I have great hopes of success, but now——" Anthony Varian shook his head and smiled ruefully. "One of the greatest drawbacks to my weekly gatherings now is that I have nobody to play the piano. We hold a sort of song service first, and voices, our voices, without music——"

"Can none of the girls play?" Rita asked, aroused and interested.

"Not by note. Most of them play the street songs, but when it comes to reading music——" He shook his head again.

"That's too bad," observed Rita, and she thought of Miss Brockly, who did read music, and of Miss St. Clair, who didn't.

"I am going to ask you if you can spare us one evening a week, Miss Charles," said Varian then, although he was a little hurt at her silence. Somehow he had thought that she would understand, that he wouldn't be obliged to put his wish into mere words like this.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she cried, with genuine dismay. She hadn't thought of that.

"Will you?" he asked, after a short silence. "It will mean a great deal both to them and to me."

"I'm sorry," she repeated, and then, hurriedly: "I haven't touched a piano for years; and I doubt very

much if I could do what you wish. There is Miss Brockly, now——”

She stopped short at the hurt expression in his gray eyes, and leaned far over the baluster, as if something in the hall below had attracted her attention. Really, she only wanted to get away from those eyes.

“I’m no end sorry,” she said for the third time, and turned to go up the next flight to her room. “I’m sure Miss Brockly will help you—the school teacher, you know. Some people are just born to help, and Florence is one of them. Now, I——” An expressive gesture ended her sentence.

“Thank you,” Anthony Varian said, as she paused; “I will ask Miss Brockly, as you suggest.”

He continued down to the first floor, and Rita crept up the last flight to her room. Flinging open the door, she switched on the light, and set the phonograph playing a rollicking comic opera medley, but even that couldn’t shut out the memory of his words, with their real disappointment. How grieved he had been, how pained he seemed at her refusal! His eyes nearly reproached her. Well, she couldn’t be bothered with settlement work, playing a piano while the riff-raff of the neighborhood sang . . . hymns. Hymns! She hadn’t played a hymn since her arrival in New York; she doubted very much if she could play one now. Long ago, at home, in Pennsylvania, she had sung in the choir, had occupied her spare moments with church-work, and been considered a shining light in the com-

munity; but that was so long ago as to seem more like a dream than reality.

Curling herself up on the day-bed, she closed her eyes and attempted to concentrate her mind on the music issuing from the phonograph. The record started off with the opening chorus from an operetta she had heard only a short time ago with Harry Chalvey. It had been an evening of pleasure, unmarred by the tiniest cloud; he had complimented her on her appearance, and he had spoken to her of his business affairs, a thing which always pleases and flatters a woman. But she couldn't bear to listen to that music now, with Harrison out on the Atlantic, and she alone in a boarding-house bed-room. Rita glanced at the clock—exactly eight-fifteen. A few blocks up Broadway, the curtain had just risen, and a stage filled with men and girls were singing the very tune which her phonograph played, singing just as they had sung that night, when she went with him.

She sprang up and the music stopped with a dull bl-r-r-r! It was unbearable! Then she threw herself down on the couch again, and buried her hot face in the cushions.

A little later some one knocked on her door, and when she didn't answer directly, Ida's voice called her name—softly, so that other persons on that floor mightn't hear her, and send her away to fetch ice-water, or clean towels, or matches.

Rita unlocked the door, springing back in her old position before Ida could enter the room.

"Home to-night, miss?" asked the little slavey sympathetically.

Rita nodded.

"I'm really tired out——"

"Not too tired, though, to make a hit wit' the parson," grinned Ida, her back turned to her hostess, while she busied herself at the phonograph. "Lordy, you must 'a' went big wit' him all right, Miss Rita!"

"Why?" Only the voice was listless.

"You met him on the stairs, didn't you? . . . Well, he came back in the dinin' room for a drink, when he saw me crumbin' the cloth, and he wanted to know who you was—described you to a T an' all, Miss Rita! Lors, if Almighty Floss and St. Clair knew that, they's be ready to tear you to pieces, the way *they* been makin' up to him! St. Clair stops the jazzin' when he comes in the parlor, and Brockly has bought herself a near-gold cross to wear round her skinny old neck."

"The idea!" Rita caught herself saying.

"H'm, they don't bluff him a little bit," grinned Ida. "They might be a pair o' canceled postage stamps for all the attention he pays to 'em. But you——!"

She paused dramatically, and while it went against Rita's ethics, she was finally forced to ask what Mr. Varian had said.

"He wanted to know who you was!" crowed Ida.

Rita smiled a trifle bitterly and said more to herself than to the girl, "I suppose he couldn't get over finding

me here after meeting me first at Robert Sartoris' wedding."

"I don't know 'bout that," spoke up Ida; "but he did ask if you were on the stage——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Rita, and she glanced at her reflection in the silver mirror which lay at her hand. "Do I look like an actress, Ida?" she asked, rather wistfully.

"Not a bit of it! Most o' your clothes is black, miss!"

Rita nodded, silent. The phonograph was playing the Calve record from "Carmen," and next door sick Carrie Billings had her ear to the wall. Presently Rita said:

"What did you tell Mr. Varian—about me?"

"I said you was the only real lady in the house—and that's no dirty dig at Miss Carrie, either, 'cause she's sick! He seemed pleased, too, when I told him you wasn't no actress—'pretty, but private,' I told him, meanin' you didn't act, but lived like other folks. I didn't say you was down to the U. S. A. & B., although he seemed to kinda wait for me to finish up wit' what you did do. Ain't he grand lookin', in spite he ain't got a limousine with a silver initial on the door? Every time I see him, Miss Rita, I think of that swell Early Williams in 'The Christian.'"

Rita didn't answer directly. She caught herself wishing Ida had told Anthony Varian about the U. S. A. & B. She wished, too, that she didn't loathe playing hymns at the parish house.

"If he ever asks where I am employed, Ida——"

"Don't you care, miss?"

"No. . . . Why should I?"

"I was thinkin' of makin' you a manicurist, or sompin' swell like that——"

"Don't!"

"It's the U. S. A. & B., then?"

"Yes—yes, certainly."

The slavey went slowly toward the door, her high spirits drooping under the influence of such commonplace existence. There was plenty of Sunday Supplement and celluloid romance in Ida's brain, and she had planned to make her idealized Miss Rita something more exciting than a mere stenographer. Maybe a manicurist—which, to Ida, came next to the stage. But instead of relying on her—— A mere stenographer!

"Gawd, some folks is queer!" she sighed, not in anger but with deep regret, as she crept back to the kitchen.

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X

THERE was something about Mrs. Orpington's slavey which struck one as being very genuine, and this despite her lack of education and the very evident defects both in her moral and mental training. Born on the lower East Side, of the people and for the people, Ida was a good friend and a better hater. Of her friends, Rita Charles came first; there was something akin to adoration in her affection for this young woman. But Carrie Billings at times pressed Rita hard for first place, especially when Rita was so cold and unresponsive.

The fact that Rita would have nothing to do with the invalid was the blackest mark Ida had against her. There was no reason why she should have refused to meet Carrie; she offered none; Rita simply said she didn't care about making friendships in the house. This struck Ida as being mere poppycock, and she fully appreciated the New York idea, too. Rita would send the invalid flowers, candy and fruit; she allowed Ida to play the phonograph all day long if she wanted to, and Ida even had a sneaking idea that Rita had purchased a record with her own money which Miss Billings had expressed a desire to the little maid to hear. But when it came to going next door, or to inviting next door in to see her——

"It ain't just fair," Ida opined.

Carrie Billings, however, had been receiving affectionate messages all along from Miss Charles, which her neighbor had never sent, and she was frankly anxious to meet Rita. Carrie was much better now; well enough to sit up at the window, and watch the first green appear in the front yards across the street. The doctor said that she might go out for a little while during the daytime, and he suggested a drive. The gripe had left Carrie very white, and as weak as a kitten; what she needed most were good food and sunshine, almost unknown quantities at the Château Prunella. Next Thursday afternoon, which was Ida's day off, the little maid had promised to take her as far as Madison Square, and even this brief excursion was looked forward to with much pleasure. But the drive—the drive! Ida thought about this part of the doctor's prescription with grave misgivings. How was Miss Carrie going driving unless——? And how was she ever going to get strong and well again unless——? It is very doubtful if Ida were afraid of anything or anybody as she was of Rita Charles' cold, calm gaze, and hard, colorless voice, and yet she went to Rita.

"Miss Carrie's getting well and all," she said, and since she believed in hay-making in season she set the Schumann-Heink record in motion. "It must be swell in the Park, these days, Miss Rita—ridin' in a auto or a carriage, huh?"

"Swell, indeed!" Rita retorted, dropping into Ida's

phraseology. She sighed; she missed Chalvey and his car these spring days. "So your little friend is well again?—that's pleasant news! Things do turn out right sometimes, don't they?"

"Sure! . . . Doc Arnold says she ought to be out in the air and sunshine a lot, now—says she's got to get strong, or next time it'll be pneumonia. W'at's came of that swell blue car, with the silver initial on the side, Miss Rita?"

"Mr. Chalvey has gone to South America. . . . Watch the record, Ida!"

Ida deftly slipped out Schumann-Heink and substituted Calve.

"Oh-h!" she cried, as she saw the blue car become even more of an impossibility. "But you must hev some friends who've got autos, miss?" she gasped.

Rita turned so unexpectedly that the brush fell from Ida's fingers. As usual, she was doing Miss Charles' hair.

"See here, what's all this about automobiles?" she demanded. "Do you want to go for a ride in one——?"

"No! . . . No, not me, miss. The L's my speed. It's Miss Carrie I was thinking 'bout."

"The girl—next door?"

"Yes. She's weak as Brockly's soprano, Miss Rita. It'd mean such a lot to her—a drive once in a while through the park. Doc Arnold ordered drives——"

"And you want me to ask a gentleman to take Miss Billings out in his car?"

Ida gasped somewhat. In every-day language it sounded so audacious, so "cheeky." No wonder Miss Rita had a way of looking hard and speaking cold. What would Miss Carrie look like riding in an automobile, maybe a car with a crest, with a gentleman such as came to see Miss Rita? Especially if Miss Carrie had to wear her winter's coat——!

"I know Miss Carrie's not swell," she hazarded at last. "But Gawd knows she needs drivin', Miss Rita. Couldn't the auto just come with the motorman?" Although, come to think of it, even Tompkins, the Chalvey chauffeur, was far grander than Miss Carrie.

It surprised Rita to hear herself say she would see what could be done, and her wonderment increased when, next day, she telephoned to Nick Vonnegut.

"Hello, Nicko! . . . Rita. . . . Got an old machine you're contemplating sending to the junk heap, Nicko? . . . Automobile, of course! And while you're about it, I shall want a chauffeur, too. You observe that I asked for an old car and not for your Yale roadster, young man. . . . *Will* you, Nicko? Bless your darling heart!"

He had said that he would without questioning her once!

"You see, there's a young woman at my boarding-house who has been very ill, and now that she is better, nothing short of a motorcar will make her wholly well." She hated to have Vonnegut think she was playing the good angel, but certainly some explanation was due him. "If you will send one of your less

beloved cars up, with a driver—don't forget him——! Nick, I'm positive you think I'm blessed with the greatest amount of nerve, and I am; only—I wouldn't ask it for myself, and she—is very deserving——”

“Shucks, Rita, what's a little thing like a Buick between old friends?” he asked in his gay, boyish voice. “I'll send this afternoon. . . . Miss Billings?—thanks! . . . It would have been stranger still if you hadn't asked me, you know.”

“You're an ace, Nicky,” she cried, in her mellowest tones. “You must hear all about Carrie Billings, some day.”

“I'll buy her life's history—send her down with it,” he retorted, and then he said good-by and hung up.

A moment later the telephone bell rang again, even before Rita had time to leave the booth, and when she went back to answer the call, she found Vonnegut was still there on the line.

“Look here, when are you going to do a theater and supper with me again, Rita?” he demanded. “Great Scott, it seems like an eternity——”

“Well, Nicky, it's your fault. I can't 'phone you and invite you to a party—on my salary,” she laughed.

“That's right, rub it in. How about Wednesday?—that's to-morrow.”

“Lovely! Suits me down to the ground.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“Anywhere! . . . Have you seen the new show at the Garden?”

"No. Well, we'll go there. Till to-morrow. Be good."

Again he rang off, and again Rita walked away, but the day had changed from gray to rose for her. She went in to take dictation from old John T. with a smile in her eyes and a lilt in her voice. His sharp, rapid tones no longer irritated; she could take his notes as quickly as he could give them, legal phrases, Latin and so on. And she got up from his desk, and went to her machine without the customary sigh of relief, when at last he had finished.

"Did you speak to Miss O'Neill, Miss Charles?" asked Mr. Olverson, suspicious of her gaiety.

She hadn't and he knew she hadn't—not was she going to! All the same she replied that she had, and he thanked her. But if he thought this gentle reminder would bring her back with a jolt, into the narrow path, he was mistaken, for no such insidious person as little J. T. could spoil her joy to-day. Carrie Billings was going to have her drive, and Vonnegut had invited her for theater and supper. It seemed quite like old times; she began to plan her costume.

Just before Rita was ready to leave for the day, little Olverson crept into her own private corner, and seizing her hands, he began to whisper in her ear, believing she would not make an outcry with his father just a few feet away. But when he attempted to squeeze her fingers, she promptly boxed his cheek, and then walked away before he had recovered from his astonishment. The consequence was that he tele-

phoned to her before she had reached home, and he called her the second time while she was at the supper table.

The paying guests only heard one side of the conversation across the wires, and since Rita was no amateur at the game, they had better stopped their ears for all the good it did them.

Temple began by calling her a little devil—which he meant as a compliment. He said that he adored a girl with spirit, and ended by proposing marriage again, this time at the telephone. When Rita refused him point-blank, he invited her to a dancing-café up on Columbus Circle, and when she pleaded a previous engagement, he commenced to shout and created such a disturbance that she hung up.

"That's the kind of medicine he thrives on," she said to herself. She felt that she retained a firmer grip on him, since she treated his invitations, and even his offer of marriage, so lightly. Now, if the worse came to the worst, she could call on him, and probably marry him, too. Perhaps she would . . . some day.

As she left the dining room, she whispered to Ida to come up to her room when she had finished her work; and then she went out in the hall to meet Anthony Varian and Florence Brockly, with their heads together, over a hymnal.

"Miss Brockly is familiar with all the Episcopal music—I am fortunate," said Varian. "Both she and Miss St. Clair have promised to come down to our first

visitors' evening to-night. Won't you come too, Miss Charles?"

"Oh, I'm sorry——" she began, when he cut her short with a merry laugh. "That seems to be your favorite cry," he told her. "I'll forgive you this time, but you must come down and see how we're getting on. Miss Brockly has succeeded in teaching the girls a few Easter carols——"

"Miss Charles must have little time for such things as Easter carols, Mr. Varian," interposed Florence Brockly gently. "She is so popular, so greatly in demand—although she may be able to teach those syncopated dances, if you wish the young people to take up such things. Animal dances, I think they are called—am I right, Miss Charles?"

"Quite right, kitty, kitty," returned Rita, with grim humor. "Indeed I'll be happy to teach the trot and the one-step, if you are thinking of permitting them in your recreation hall, Mr. Varian."

"Good! I'll call on you certainly, Miss Charles," he declared.

Rita fairly ran up to her room, and locking herself in, threw herself down on the bed, in the dark, and remained there until Ida rapped her up. The day had been so color-of-rose before Florence Brockly had spoiled it all with her jealous tongue. All at once Rita discovered that she didn't want Anthony Varian to get a wrong impression of her—though he was nothing to her, of course!

"Oh, Miss Rita, she went out to-day!" shouted

Ida, bursting in at the door. "I took Miss Carrie up to the Square, and then we walked round as far as Mr. Varian's church——"

"Did you see Mr. Varian?"

"Yes, miss. And Miss Carrie went in and played on the organ, and on the piano and sang. Mr. Varian said it was just grand! If we wasn't in a church, I guess he'd 'a' clapped! Oh, Miss Carrie sings swell—through her nose like the record lady! I wish you'd hear her, once——"

"I've got the automobile," said Rita, interrupting. "It will come to-morrow afternoon, Wednesday, and again on Thursday, when you are to go with Miss Billings. But you're not to say that I——"

"Not?" . . . Oh, Miss Rita——"

"Not one word about me. A gentlemen sent the car, do you understand? And I wonder why Miss Billings couldn't play at the Chapel instead of Florence Brockly?" The thought kept recurring for the rest of the evening.

XI

THERE was excitement in the very air at the Château Prunella when Rita arrived home, at half-past five. The landlady herself, and Miss Brockly, had seen the Vonnegut car arrive, and Mrs. Orpington, indeed, had assisted Ida in getting Carrie Billings from her room to the machine. Both ladies were waiting on the front stoop, when the invalid returned from her drive through the park.

"Where'd she get that auto from, Ida?" whispered Mrs. Orpington, seizing the slavey's arm, in the dark hall.

"Who sent it?" queried Florence Brockly, in superior tones.

"The Metropolitan Opera House," returned the little maid grimly. "Miss Carrie's hand and glove wit' all them stars up there, and Mistah Caruso hisself just begged her to take it—said it was simply eatin' its head off in the garage all day. And——" triumphantly—"the Schumann-Heink lady, who sings through her nose, is sending *her* auto Thursday!"

The school-teacher turned angrily to the landlady.

"Mrs. Orpington," she declared, "your maid has strange ideas as to what constitutes humor."

But Mrs. Orpington had rushed forward to receive an armful of cushions from the chauffeur, hoping he

would let fall his master's name. He didn't, however, nor did Miss Billings.

Miss Brockly told Miss St. Clair of the invalid's drive, so that by the time Rita arrived home, Twenty-third Street was agog with the news. As Rita stopped at the telephone booth to see if there were any messages for her, the teacher and the demonstrator strolled up arm-in-arm, humming lightly under their breaths.

"It was really a great treat for the poor dear," said Almighty Floss, as they hovered in Rita's vicinity. "You should have seen her eyes when she returned—like twin stars! And her cheeks——!"

"Like they'd been massaged with Yama Cream," interposed Lillian St. Clair. "I can well believe she was just nuts about it! Now, a flivver means nothing in our—in *my* gay life, Flo."

Miss Brockly seriously objected to the diminutive, and the expression "nuts," of course, was coarse. Miss Brockly tried above all things to appear "elegant" and she never tired of assuring one that she was a "lady." Really, at times Miss St. Clair tried her sorely!

"I had just come in, and was going up to my room for a cup of tea, when I heard the siren; at the same moment, Mrs. Orpington and her maid came hurrying up from the pantry, I presume," Miss Brockly continued, with a sickly wink. "And from the *exquisite* automobile, which had just driven up to the door, came an elegantly uniformed chauffeur, asking for Miss Carrie Billings. You could have knocked me down

with a feather, because I never had heard that the Astorbilts were her cousins."

"Are they?" asked Miss St. Clair, taking her cue like a professional.

"They are indeed! Mrs. Astorbilt had sent the car for dear Miss Billings' use—and she is to have the use of it every day! I call that handsome of her, don't you?"

"Huh, handsome is as handsome does, as the old lady said when she kissed the cow," echoed Lillian spitefully.

Rita glanced up from the telephone list.

"Did Martha Astorbilt send Carrie the olive limousine, or the new French town-car, which she just received from abroad?" she inquired anxiously.

The other two ladies exchanged looks. All at once Miss St. Clair began to grin. It was such a joke on Florence! She didn't like Rita Charles, who refused to have anything to do with her, but then neither did she cherish any great love for Miss Brockly, whom she dubbed a punkstick, in her heart. It was good to witness Miss Brockly being sat on by "that girl!"

"Which was it anyhow, Floss?" she demanded, greedy to the last ounce.

"I'm sure I don't know!" returned Miss Brockly, and without waiting for Miss St. Clair, she fled.

Rita looked after her and smiled.

"Who told her that about Mrs. Astorbilt's car?" she said.

"Nobody! She made it up—and you called her

bluff," the demonstrator grinned. "Believe me, Florence has got an imagination that would make one of them 'Elsie' Books sound like Elinor Glyn. Some little fictionist—what?"

Rita was going out to dinner, and afterwards to the theater with Nick Vonnegut, and, as usual, she had instructed Ida by telephone as to her clothes. So, when she entered her room, everything was put out, ready to be slipped on. Rita used to think if she ever were rich enough she certainly must secure Ida for maid. . . .

A little later, Ida came creeping up, risking life and limb in order to dress Rita's hair. In her hands she carried a florist's box, a thick, square box tied with white and violet ribbons, which generously gave a clue to its contents.

"Oh, miss, if you'd been here to see! Miss Carrie went crazy over that auto!" The slavey enthused, not without a trace of awe in her tones. "You never seen a kid so pleased at Christmas! And it's done her a world o' good—she's starved for her supper! . . . She ast me if you——"

"If I what?" cut in Rita coldly.

"If you sent the auto, if it was your doings. She said there was nobody else but you—and she couldn't see why you had gone to so much trouble for her! If you'll let me tell her, Miss Rita——"

"If you betray me, I'm done—and the car will never come again for her, either!"

Ida sighed as she plaited the thick brown hair.

"You're such a funny sort, miss," said she.

"Funny?"

"Yes, just that!" She had grown suddenly bold. "W'y d' y' always want to hide the good things you do?"

"I don't attempt to hide the bad ones, do I?"

Ida was silent. Under her skillful fingers the thick braids were wound round and round until they covered Rita's head completely, and burnished with much brushing, became like satin wings on a plover. Ida possessed pure genius for hair culture. Her own head was a frowsy mop, but Carrie Billings' and Rita's were silent but eloquent testimonials to her art.

"I done *her* hair in a turban," said Ida, standing off to note the effect. Her hobby was never far from her thoughts. "Th' new way, you know, miss—I seen it on *Sarah*, in 'The Sins of Sarah,' at Proctor's, the other night. You look sweller this way——"

"Ida," interposed Rita, watching her in the glass, "do you think I am—very wicked?—bad——?"

"Not as bad as you think you are, or as you'd like others to think," snapped the slavey. "There's plenty o' folks right in this house that's got sompin' on you when it comes to downright wickedness. An' meanness is worse'n bein' bad, to *my* mind. You wasn't never mean, Miss Rita. . . . I think you're—hard, though."

"Hard?" mused Miss Charles.

"Yes. . . . You'll let Miss Carrie enjoy your phonograph; you'll see to it that she gets her drives,

as the doctor ordered; you send her flowers an' candy an' fruit—but you won't let me tell her as they come from you, and you won't step in the next room and visit wit' her for five minutes! She'd go daft about *that!* . . . That's why I think you're hard, Miss Rita." Ida was positive, a little anxious, but determined to speak out for once.

"I haven't time for friendships—for friendships which can't give me anything, that is," said Rita, after a moment, and with a trace of bitterness, although she laughed. "A man friend may develop, a woman can't. Miss Billings and I would only fall over each other's feet."

Ida busied herself tidying up the room, and neither young woman spoke again until the gown was hooked, and the evening wrap on Rita's shoulders; then the slavey moved toward the door.

"Lors, you're not bad, Miss Rita," she burst out suddenly. "You ain't foolin' nobody but yourself. Of course Almighty Floss an' Airy, Fairy talk—talk cause you wear better clothes than they do, an' cause you ride in an auto, when they take the trolley or hoof it. You ought to know womenfolks—I do!"

"But don't you think I wear very nice clothes for a girl who earns her own living the way I do?" persisted Rita.

"Lors, the instalment men come here every week and collect from 'most everybody in the house—includin' Mis' Orpington herself! . . . Can't I tell Miss Carrie?"

"I haven't time, now. . . . Listen—who's that?"

Ida ran to the window and threw up the sash. Three stories below in the street an automobile had pulled up to the door, and while the occupant got out, the chauffeur amused himself by sounding the siren, long, shrill, uncanny shrieks.

"It's came!" cried Ida, and she drew in her head and shut down the window. "Gawd, how he do carry on, miss! I hope he ain't stewed."

Rita didn't think that he was. Nick Vonnegut didn't drink to excess. Had it been Harrison Chalvey, now——

Leaving Ida to turn out the lights, Rita ran lightly downstairs, looking neither to her right nor left, and hoping to avoid meeting any of her fellow-boarders. It was a little early for them to have left the table. At this hour the dining-room held first place in the hearts of Mrs. Orpington's paying guests. Therefore, she was surprised when she saw a man on the flight just below her. Rita slackened her pace, and then he turned, glancing up over the rail. It was Anthony Varian.

"Good evening," he said, his face lighting up. "Are you late, too?"

"I'm going out," Rita replied, hoping somehow that he wouldn't wait, but go on into the dining-room.

"How about my recreation rooms?" he asked, stopping short, and waiting for a definite answer.

She smiled the pretty, bewildered smile of the stage ingenue.

"What do you mean, Mr. Varian?"

"When are you coming to see them?"

"Oh-h! . . . Just as soon as I possibly can."

"That doesn't mean to-night, does it?" he said, with a laugh. And he deliberately waited for her, so that she could do nothing else than join him on the landing. "Why, how very—fine you are!" he cried; and Rita saw his eyes narrow as she came into the circle of light, and he caught a glimpse of her smart gown and wrap.

"I'm going to dinner with an old friend, a friend from the office," she half explained, half challenged. "Please excuse me—the car is at the door now."

Varian bowed and stepped aside, silent; and she passed on down the stairs alone, gathering up her skirts and almost running to the front door, once she had gained the lower hall.

"Good-by! Give my love to Martha Astorbilt, Miss Charles," the lady of the complexion cream called after her.

Rita was in too great a hurry to make the usual retort humorous even if she had deigned to notice the implied insult. Straight down the steps she ran, across the pavement, and toward the waiting car. With one satin-shod foot on the step, she glanced up and into the eyes of little Olverson.

"Hop right in, sweetie!" he crowed in a none too steady voice. He took hold of her arm and tried

to lift her into the car. As she felt his touch, and realized her mistake, a great anger, a sudden fury, seized Rita and she turned and struck him squarely across the face with her open palm. He let out an awful yell, and the chauffeur came running, so that in a moment a crowd would have collected had not a man acted promptly. Before she realized what had happened, Anthony Varian had drawn her arm through his, and was walking her briskly up the street and away from the confusion in front of the door.

"Never mind; it's quite all right," he said reassuringly, after she had failed at several attempts at explanation.

Rita was a little breathless, still indignant, and she suffered him to lead her toward the corner without protest.

"I made a mistake," she gasped at last. "The fault was as much mine as any one's, I suppose. It was the wrong car, you see. I felt so sure of its being Mr. Vonnegut that I didn't bother to look, and then—this other man caught hold of my arm."

"Do you know him?" asked Varian.

"Yes," she replied, after the briefest pause. And she added, "I think he couldn't have been in his right senses."

"He was intoxicated," Varian said shortly.

Something in his voice prompted Rita to attempt to find excuses for little Olverson, not so much for his sake, as for her own. She kept wondering what Anthony Varian could think about it all—was it possible

he had her slap the little beast's face? At least he realized that J. T. had been drinking.

"His father—his people—have spoiled him," she began presently. "Really, he is a very charming boy when—when he is quite himself. I have known him for ever so long, and of course when he saw me come down the steps to-night, he imagined I was coming to get in his car. And since I hadn't expected him, and did expect Mr. Vonnegut——"

She stopped and glanced up at him, but all the encouragement he had to offer was expressed in his next words:

"I am glad I happened along at that time."

Rita didn't echo his gratitude, although she, too, was just as well pleased that he had been able to rescue her from a curious mob, and possibly the police. From this safe distance she looked back over her shoulder; the crowd had scattered and young Olverson and his car taken themselves off.

"I think I will return to the house, now," she said, withdrawing her arm from his. "Thank you so much, Mr. Varian."

They had stopped at the corner and he faced her, standing hat in hand under the purple glare from an arc lamp.

"Come around to the rooms with me to-night, Miss Charles," he said. "Give us a chance. If you're bored, you need never come again——"

"I'm sorry," she replied, shaking her head. "I am

going out to dinner and to the theater. You know, I have promised——”

“Yes.”

“And I am coming—really—sometime.”

He hesitated, and grew thoughtful.

“You are going out to dine, then?”

“Yes. . . . One must do something.”

“Yes, one must do something, and men must have playthings. Miss Charles, why do you know such men as Vonnegut and Olverson?” He asked it vigorously.

“You know them?” she faltered, with a sinking sensation.

“Them and their families. They were my parishioners when I was assistant at St. David’s.”

Rita was silent for a brief moment. Raising her eyes, she said: “You know them—then you know that they are rich; and, knowing that, you still ask me *why?*”

“I don’t believe that of you,” Varian told her quietly, meeting her glance with a smile. “I refuse to believe it.”

“It is true!”

He shook his head, still smiling.

“It is true,” she insisted, undecided whether to be angry or be pleased. “I am sick and tired of everything and everybody but the Lady on the Dollar. Her I adore! Money, and what it will buy! I don’t object so greatly to little Olverson’s drinking if he only pays the checks.” She said it flippantly, and with a studied touch of abandon.

"Are you trying to deceive yourself?" Varian asked.

"Of course I prefer a man who is as presentable going home as when he started out——"

"You know you're not deceiving me at all, Miss Charles. Do you remember the morning I first saw you, at Robert Sartoris' wedding?"

"Sally met Sartoris the same way I met Nicko Vonnegut or little J. T.—at the office." It was a direct challenge.

"Robert is one man in a hundred," Varian said with a quiet dignity.

Rita knew this, she had always known it. She wondered what he would say if he learned about Harrison Chalvey. Possibly Anthony Varian knew him already. With all her love for Harry, Rita knew that he wouldn't bear criticism, and she felt suddenly weak and ill, desperately tired of it all.

Ready to go, she first held out her hand.

"Good night, and thank you, again," said she.

The hall door was locked, and, while she had a key, in the excitement of the moment Rita became confused and pressed the electric bell. Miss St. Clair flew to open the door, and when she saw Rita, she giggled unpleasantly, and ran back into the drawing-room. At the stairs Ida appeared, sleepily, from the lower regions of the big house.

"Did you get your message, miss?" she yawned.

Rita stopped short, waiting.

"No. What is it?"

"A moment after you went out the door, Chelsea

3XX called up and said as how he wouldn't be able to see you to-night——”

“Oh!” Rita's hand went up to her bare throat; then she began to laugh. “Yes, I received that message, thanks,” she said, and dragged herself off up the stairs. Chelsea 3XX was Nicko's studio. Vonnegut had “stood her up,” too!

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XII

THAT night, as Rita undressed, flinging her Tin-Pan finery on chairs and screen, dinnerless since Nicko had failed her, and she had too much pride to go down to the dining room now, she felt that she fairly hated Vonnegut and all his kind. She called him—and them—selfish, cruel, inhuman. Just the same, she knew that these men played the game according to rule, and that if she didn't like it no one could keep her in it. In her humiliation, she cried that she would wash her hands of the lot, and of the life; and yet when she received a special from Vonnegut the next day she straightway forgot everything, put on her smartest clothes, and went off with him in his motor-car.

"One will put up with a great deal for the sake of a decent meal and an orchestra chair," Rita reflected, with a cryptic smile; and yet she possessed self-pride to a degree.

It so happened that Nick and Rita lingered on the front steps for a minute or two while the chauffeur lit the lamps, and did something to the machinery, and it was then that the door opened, and Anthony Varian and Florence Brockly came out of the house. The rector and the teacher were going to a young folks' gathering in the Chapel rooms, and Miss Brockly's arms were full of Easter carols. When she saw Vonnegut, she broke into a high, affected giggle, and half

bowed, and then put out one hand toward Anthony Varian, as if for protection.

The two men nodded; they had met before, far uptown, and under somewhat different circumstances. Miss Brockly hoped for an introduction, but none was forthcoming, Rita continuing her talk with Vonnegut just as if they were alone. Varian's jaws set themselves grimly, and catching Miss Brockly's arm, he piloted her around the two, and so on down the steps to the pavement.

"Good-by, Miss Charles," cried Floss, regretful to the last. She admired Nick Vonnegut immensely, having watched him many a night from behind the parlor curtains. Then, as Nick lifted his hat without turning, "Good evening, Mr. Vonnegut!"

"What's Varian doing here?" asked Nick, when he and Rita were alone.

"He has been given a chapel in the neighborhood," she explained, "and he is living at Mrs. Orpington's until the rectory roof is repaired, I believe. . . . You know him?"

"Yes," returned the other shortly, and he showed no further inclination to discuss the clergyman.

Not one word had he to say about last night. He offered no excuse, no explanation. But he gave Rita a delightful evening, and, while he never made love to her seriously, Nicko was never the cold, impersonal sort of creature Harrison Chalvey stood for. He told her that she was looking simply great, and he kissed her, quick, boy-like, when he said good night, and—forgot her completely before his car had turned the corner of Broadway. Nick Vonnegut admired Rita sincerely, and he pitied her just as much. He thought

it was "pretty tough" that such a charming girl had to work in a stuffy office all day, and live in a "hole" like the Château Prunella. Nicko secretly respected her for being what his kind calls a "good" girl, but, just the same, he thought her very foolish to entertain such scruples. Had she been as beautiful as Helen, or as pure as gold-leaf, she was a girl he never would have married, come what might. His people were Dutch New York, and he had a long list of traditions to live up to and marry with.

Rita was tempted to tell him about little Olverson, but on second thought, decided to hold her peace. It was just as possible that Nick would begin to find excuses for the rake as it was that he would sympathize with her. Men had to stand by each other, especially if the other was of the same caste. . . .

It was hard—and ludicrous.

Rita was surprised, on the other hand, that little J. T. didn't mention the affair to her himself. Never by word or sign did he show himself aware that such a thing had ever happened as an Olverson being slapped by a stenographer. The flowers continued to come, the candy, and once a basket of champagne; and he telephoned to her nearly every night, pleading for an evening, trying to tempt her with hectic descriptions of new plays, and imported dancers at the different cabarets.

"You're awful mean to a fellow, you know, Rita," he muttered, like a spoiled child when she put him off again and again. "You got me going, and you don't care a rap how I feel, do you?"

"I'm dead spent when I get home from the office," Rita would insist.

Then he told her he would see to it that she got an assistant, to lighten her work, to which Rita replied that if he did, she would hand in her resignation on the spot, and seek employment with another corporation. Little J. T. gave her the benefit of the doubt and he didn't ask his father for a stenographer of his own.

April came, with tulips and hyacinths in the squares. The town was spring-mad—lazy, impudent, uninhabitable. New Yorkers desired above all things to get away from their beloved little island; out-of-towners were pouring in on every train. The roof-gardens began to dress up. Coney was throbbing with signs of activity, while the managers were slapping together summer shows with casts which looked imposing on paper. Spring in New York is far worse than summer, for by August one is resigned to one's fate and no longer minds the blazing sun and yielding asphalt streets. But in April, with the crocuses and violets, Manhattan is mad to get away.

Rita told herself she hated the town she really loved so well, fairly loathed Fifth Avenue and the Waldorf corner. Wall Street had never seemed so dull, so unpromising before. She hadn't heard from Chalvey since he sailed for South America, and of late Vonnegut had talked of going to France, with a fellow-artist, to be gone until October. Summer usually was frightful, a nightmare in New York, but not so bad as things were this year. Now Rita seemed to be living on the brink of a volcano; it wasn't one-half as bad after you had been tumbled in. Why shouldn't she marry Temple Olverson and end it all?

Olverson was almost the one faithful friend she

had left these days. Harrison Chalvey no longer counted, and Nicko was beginning to make numerous and elaborate excuses for not running around to theaters and restaurants as often as in former days. There was nothing decent left in town to see; the chefs had all gone to the summer capitals. And he didn't care for the road-houses, refusing to dance at the Holly Arms or kindred resorts. Why shouldn't she marry little Olverson?

That she could marry him any time she wished to was a belief which Rita hugged fondly to her breast. Some day, when things got to the breaking point, she would call in J. Temple and wed him. Things seemed pretty near the breaking point now.

But if Vonnegut neglected her these early spring days, he didn't forget to send his old town-car for the use of the invalid at Mrs. Orpington's. Long ago he had forgotten her very name; the girl didn't interest him in the smallest way; it cost him little to have his car and his man call each day in Twenty-third Street, less effort, in fact, than it did to revoke the order, given over a month ago.

And Carrie Billings began to show the great benefit derived from the daily trips through the Park and out the Yonkers road. She had taken on weight, and her face was getting round, with a pretty color in her cheeks. That which signified so little to Nicholas Vonnegut meant almost life itself to her.

Strange as such a thing seems, neither she nor Rita had yet spoken a word, or even exchanged the time of day with each other. Living under the same roof, side by side on the same floor, the two girls would not have known each other had they met away

from the house. Ida had tried her best to bring them together, but always Rita had offered some trivial excuse when she didn't refuse point-blank, and after a time, Carrie stopped wishing aloud that she and her neighbors were friends. Ida thought she was beginning to forget Rita—folks forget so soon in New York! But the other girl was only a little hurt, and more than a little surprised. If Miss Charles hadn't sent the fruit and flowers and candy, hadn't played the phonograph especially for her benefit, Carrie would have understood this indifference; but it seemed as if Rita even had gone out of her way in order to be neighborly. Why, then, didn't she come in to see her, since she was able to be up and around? Or why did Ida return with word that Miss Rita was busy, whenever she was sent to ask if it was convenient for Carrie to pay her a visit?

There was no "mystery" to it at all, nothing "back of it," or anything of the kind. In the beginning, Rita had refused to concern herself about a sick young woman, and later, when she had become interested in spite of herself, a sort of principle, together with a natural stubbornness, kept the two apart.

She knew, however, that Carrie played the organ on Sunday mornings, and for vespers, at the Chapel of St. David's. During the week Florence Brockly "obliged," but the services belonged to Miss Billings. On Easter she was to sing—"grand opera," Ida explained. Anthony Varian was trying to persuade Rita to come to his church on Easter Sunday; all of the ladies at the Château now attended services at the Chapel but Miss Charles, it seemed. Even the cream

demonstrator magnanimously had offered to sing in the choir.

"You won't come to see the rooms in the new parish house; but you must be there Easter Sunday," Varian said. "Oh, not to hear me, or even to see my success, but to hear Carrie Billings sing. I have spoken to the choir master at the Cathedral about her, and I feel almost sure she will be engaged by them in the fall."

"Has she really such a wonderful voice?" asked Rita, a little incredulous.

"With training and experience, she ought to go straight to the Metropolitan itself! If you have never heard her sing——" He stopped short; again he was pleading with her against a meretricious world.

"Some people have everything," Rita interposed, with a sigh of self-pity.

"Yes, that is so; some people have everything," replied Anthony Varian gravely. "Here is a raw, ignorant country girl, without money, without friends, without health, and without a spark of beauty—yet I think I am safe in predicting that she will succeed in spite of 'everything.' For one thing, she is happy. You aren't that, Miss Charles."

Rita made a nervous little gesture with her two hands, half-angry, half-afraid.

"Oh, as to that!" Then the old spirit flared up. "I think you have no right to speak to me like this, Mr. Varian. You are not my pastor, you know. And I am happy, as happy as one can be, that is, in such a mad-house as Mrs. Orpington's. Of course I prefer Westchester in the spring, and Maine or Europe for the summer, but after them Twenty-third Street holds first place in my heart. I'm not unhappy—only bored!

In a little while all my friends will have left New York, and what will poor Robin do then, poor thing?"

Anthony Varian leaned anxiously toward her, trying to draw her gaze to his.

"Do you know the next line?" he asked. Then, without waiting for her answer: "'He will hide in the barn, to keep himself warm, and put his head under his wing, poor thing!'" Now he relaxed and smiled. "Won't you come to my 'barn' when all your friends have left town?"

"But I don't want to keep warm—in summertime," pouted Rita, with a graceful shrug of her shoulders. He was silent.

"And besides, I think it is very horrid of you to call your new parish house a barn," she added, with a trace of coquetry.

"I want you to come, Miss Charles," he said, looking at her squarely. "Oh, I'm not offering you 'salvation,' but—well, come and see. You've got to give us a trial."

Easter was late that year. Rita was half-persuaded to go to the Chapel for Sunday morning services. All this time she had remained away only to be contrary—she was contrary! And unbelievably childish in many things and ways. She didn't profess any faith, and back in Pennsylvania her folks were Baptists; since coming to New York, she had formed the habit of attending vespers at St. David's, or St. John's, when it didn't interfere with any engagement. Sunday, however, is so short when one is a toiler! Surely each minute is only a second long, each hour a minute, and the day made up only of twelve instead of twenty-four hours! If one had nothing to do from one week

to another, church was all very well, a pleasant diversion; but when Sunday is the one whole day one has! Rita said her prayers each night and was contented.

Then Ida came along with a very wonderful piece of news. Carrie Billings had sung for the Greenwood people, and they had engaged her on the spot for their summer opera company in Boston.

"She's goin' to Bosting, she's goin' to open in 'Carmen,' and she's goin' to take a stage name!" cried the excited slavey. "Ain't you glad?—oh, Miss Rita, ain't it *scrumptious?*"

XIII

THE crisis was reached, as far as Twenty-third Street was concerned, with the announcement that Ida was to accompany Carrie Billings to Boston. Mrs. Orpington broke the news herself at dinner, the forum of her paying guests. From being a poor little Cinderella, Ida suddenly had become almost a personage, basking as she did in the reflected greatness of her friend and patron. Mrs. Orpington treated her with affectionate kindness, and the day after her plans were made public, she was invited to sit upon the landlady's right at table in the future, and a new slavey was installed.

"Miss Lewis will be my companion as well as my maid," declared Carrie Billings, who undoubtedly understood boarding-houses even if she had only met Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair the day before. "You are all very kind, and it is very sweet of you to wish to give us a party before we go, but I must save my strength, and besides we have lots of things to do between now and Sunday—haven't we, Ida?"

"'Deed we have, Carrie," returned the girl, speaking the given name, as instructed, for the benefit of the Château.

They were to leave Twenty-third Street sometime Sunday, since Carrie was to start rehearsing in Boston on Monday morning. It seemed quite like a fairy tale to Rita, pondering over it, on her day-bed, with the phonograph playing a waltz. Dreams do come

true—and that old fable about bread cast upon the water! What a chance for Ida and her half-starved heart! Rita sincerely liked the girl, but she would never have had the courage to introduce her as her friend to that gaping crowd at Orpington's.

Carrie was to make her *début* as *Fasquita* in "Carmen" and while she didn't look the part—off stage, at least—her managers must have possessed great faith in her to permit her to sing the rôle in the Hub and at the opening of the season. The company, it seemed, was merely a popular price summer organization, with all the operas given in English, but just the same it was a splendid opportunity for the young woman, a page from Hans Andersen set down in this topsy turvy world.

There was a great deal of speculation as to her stage name before it was finally given out, for a stage name had been mentioned, and stage names are so delightfully romantic. At birth, another labels us with something of their choosing, but at *début* we ourselves are allowed to do our worst, and most times we do.

There were so many names! Mrs. Orpington declared she had always fancied Queenie, which happened to be the name of her white poodle, while Almighty Floss was for "something simple," and kept mentioning Anne and Jane—which are Broadway's favorites just now, so she must not be given a medal just because she didn't side with the landlady. On the other hand, Miss St. Clair had a decided preference for "Frenchy" names, and suggested Mimi or Blanche. Poor tall, thin, raw-boned, red-haired Carrie! Her gratitude must have been stronger than her sense of humor when she decided on Caroline

Charida. All her trunks and cards read simply "Charida." This caused a fresh commotion when the landlady discovered that the last three letters spelled the former slavey's name.

"That's what I call the milk o' human kindness, ladies," she said to Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair, and apparently overcome, she dropped down in a chair and called to the white poodle to come to mamma.

But Miss Brockly had made a second discovery, and one of scarcely less importance than Mrs. Orpington's.

"The first four letters of the name are nothing more or less than the first three in her own—Caroline," she averred. "Of course there's an *h*, but the *h* is silent, as in many Latin words."

"As in nuts, for instance," suggested Miss St. Clair grimly.

Ida's going filled Rita with a sort of nervous alarm, for after all, the little slavey had been her one friend in the house, and almost the one friend of her own sex in the city. She knew that she would be very lonely without her. One by one old ties were cutting loose, like rats deserting a scuttled ship. Somehow, Rita had always thought of Ida slaving away in Twenty-third Street until she had settled, and was ready to have her come with her—as maid, not as maid and companion. And now Ida was leaving Rita behind!

For a week, Rita remained at home at nights, shutting herself up in her room, and refusing herself even to Ida. On Sunday she paid the extra quarter which enabled her to have her dinner served in her

room, and this was the way she avoided Carrie Billings to the end.

At five o'clock Sunday afternoon, however, the new prima donna and her companion-maid climbed up the two flights of stairs to Miss Charles' room, and sought admission by knocking on the door.

"We've come to say good-by," cried Ida. "Miss Billings is here, Miss Rita."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, but—I'm just dressing," replied Rita, through the closed door. "It was lovely of you to bother, Miss Billings. May I wish you all kinds of success——?"

"Ain't you goin' to open up?" asked Ida bluntly.

There was a little silence and then Rita said: "I am dressing."

Carrie spoke, a sort of finality in her rich mezzo tones:

"Good-by, Miss Charles. Thank you very much for your good wishes, and for your many other kindnesses to me while I was ill. I had hoped to tell you how much your kindness meant——" her voice broke, and she finished: "Maybe some day you will understand how much I appreciate all you have done."

Rita sank down on the day-bed and clutched her hands, waiting. She would liked to have gone out in the corridor, hugged and kissed the other woman, and maybe indulged in a good, old-fashioned cry. She would like to have asked her to write, to let her know how she made out in her great venture, to have petted and primped and pampered, and caressed and cautioned and cried, as two girls are fond of doing when one of them is about to go forth on a long journey. But instead—it was like this!

Rita was merely being stubborn, although she called it pride; merely refusing to surrender at the last moment—a “death bed repentance,” she dubbed it cynically. Rita had refused to bother with Carrie Billings, in the first place, because she “had no time for sick people.” Later, she had become interested in the girl in spite of herself, and now—well, she had to stand by her colors to the last. It was her code.

“Good-by, Ida,” she cried at last. “I am sure you will be very happy. Good-by, Miss Billings, and good luck!”

“Thank you. Good-by,” said Carrie quietly.

“Thanks. Good-by,” echoed the new companion-maid, but Rita felt that Ida’s nose was in the air, and probably the tip of her tongue was visible between her lips, as she marched away downstairs.

For a long time Rita sat there on the side of the couch, thinking. What a world to live in! How drab everything appeared, even the sunshine! Work and sleep and eat, but mostly work. Eight hours a day, six days a week, and twenty-five dollars! What was it all for—what for? She might marry little Olverson—she tried to remember his telephone number, with a view to having Ida call him up. Then she recalled the unpleasant fact that Ida would never again ‘phone for her, valet her, worship her in silence like a faithful dog. She had been fond of Ida! It cut her a little to think that if ever the slavey’s dreams came true, it would be because somebody else had played the rôle of fairy god-mother. What a topsy-turvy place the world was, how fortunate or hapless its people! Some inherited wealth, a favored few were born with a gift, such as Carrie’s voice, and others, like

Ida, had the knack of making friends; but she—she had nothing! No wealth, no gift, no friends, only the world to make a living in, and little J. T. as a possibility. So she philosophized like a catchpenny Minerva.

The night was warm and sweet with the breath of growing green things in the Square. Rita wandered out after supper and somehow found herself in Twentieth Street, opposite the Chapel of St. David's, a little red-brick church covered with ivy; the parish house was next door, freshly painted and with a light above the entrance; next to that came the rectory, unfinished yet as to roof. An organ was playing, the rhythm somewhat faulty, somewhat marred by a "hesitation" in every third measure, but Rita stopped to listen. How well she remembered the hymn!

"Rejoice ye pure in heart,
Rejoice, give praise and sing!"

It seemed only yesterday that she had heard those words, that simple but exalted melody, and yet how far away yesterday was! And the little "Pennsylvania Dutch" town, and the Baptist tabernacle! Here in New York, years later, they were sounding the same note of praise.

"Rejoice ye pure in heart,
Rejoice, give praise and sing!"

Rita crept inside the iron gates and up the church steps. She peeped in, guiltily, like a person ashamed. It was very small within, but comfortably filled. Silently Rita pressed through the door and sank down

in the last pew. A man was reading from the Gospel according to St. John, a fine young voice, a splendid voice, firm in its belief. She blinked her eyes and looked around, things becoming discernible only after a time, for the building was dimly lighted.

Rita was familiar with the Episcopal service since she had attended churches of that denomination chiefly since coming to New York. This was because she had liked the character of the congregations at St. James' and Grace. Here she heard the same words, witnessed the same form, but with a difference in the worshippers. And Anthony Varian had welcomed the change which brought him here!

The man was saying . . . Rita listened.

There were candles burning on the altar, and the clergyman wore a long black vestment. She looked again—he was Varian.

Afterwards she never remembered what it was he had said, or any part of the service. Presently the organ pealed out again, with the "hesitation" in every third measure. Rita fancied it must be Florence Brockly, Almighty Floss, who played so "hesitatingly" on Mrs. Orpington's piano "Southern Roses" for Miss St. Clair and Mr. Smiley to waltz to. She wondered if Lillian St. Clair were anywhere in the church, and then recalled some one's having said that she sung in the choir—possibly with a "dip" on every third word.

Rita hurried away before the choristers sang their final "Amen." She didn't want Lillian or Florence to find her in church—nor Anthony Varian to know she was there, of course! She caught herself thinking of his vigorous voice as she walked back to Twenty-

third Street, and, though she could recall every intonation, she couldn't remember even his text. . . . He looked odd, but she didn't dislike him in his vestments.

When Rita reached the house, Mrs. Orpington was sitting on the top step, although she was obliged to wear a cerise sweater, and the white poodle was shivering in spite of its knitted coat. Rita would have gone in without a word had not the landlady called to her. It was important.

"Somebody 'phoned you almost the minute you closed the door," she bustled importantly. "Of course, not being in your secrets, as Ida was, I didn't know the gen'l'man's voice—though I wil' say it was very ree-fined. And he wouldn't leave his name, but only his number, and I don't rec'lect what I done with that."

"It doesn't make any great difference," returned Rita.

This answer was so unexpected that Mrs. Orpington put down her dog and pricked up her ears. Suspicion is every New York boarding-mistress' middle name.

"Can't you *guess* who it was, Miss Charles?" she asked, almost breathlessly.

"Perhaps, if I tried, but it isn't that important," Rita retorted, moving away.

"I'm so sorry——"

"If it is urgent, the party will call again. Anyway, I am too tired to go out to-night."

"Step in the drawing-room, if you wish—I'm sure you're welcome," cried Mrs. Orpington. "There's the piano—try a little music. The young ladies will be

home shortly from church. Ain't it wonderful what a handsome, bachelor preacher can do when it comes to saving souls? I'm sure there's some folks I could name who never knew they had 'em before—souls of course!"

Rita ventured no reply, and went into the house. Since Ida, by this time, had become a thing of the past, she went herself to the basement to get a pitcher of ice-water. Already she missed the little slavey; she'd even miss the records which Carrie Billings had liked to hear through the thin wall. With the pitcher in her hand, she started back to the stairs, when she saw the door open and a man enter from the street. He was Anthony Varian. Rita drew back, but too late. He came toward her and held out his hand.

"Well?" he asked.

Rita knew by his voice that he had seen her in the last pew of the Chapel.

XIV

"I WAS out of sorts, with myself and the world, and when I found myself in Twentieth Street, I suddenly remembered I had promised to see your church some time, and so I just peeped in," explained Rita. "And—and I don't feel so wretched now," she added, with a pert nod. "There, that's an unsolicited testimonial!"

"I was glad to see you," Varian said.

"But you weren't supposed to!"

"I saw you the moment you came in and sat down," he reiterated. Rita glanced around the dingy room and suddenly sat down, placing the water-pitcher on the table. Varian remained standing, his back against the door, facing her. There was no light, the dining-room being closed after supper, but a sickly flare from the hall gas kept the room from utter darkness so that they could see each other's features.

"You know I'm not of your church," said she presently, as if seeking to make conversation. "As a child, I was shipped each Sunday to the Baptist tabernacle, but I guess I'm just nothing at all now. Sometimes I used to go to St. David's to vespers, during Lent—not this year——" She stopped abruptly.

She had been nowhere this year, with Harrison Chalvey in South America and Vonnegut and Olverson greedy only for enjoyment. Chalvey, a man of many moods, had taken her first to St. David's. This was in the nature of an experiment, Rita felt sure,

since he was forever seeking out new sensations, and she, a tinpanner, at vespers, might prove interesting. The thought brought a rush of color to her cheeks.

"Do you know Harrison Chalvey?" she asked Varian, on the spur of the moment.

"Yes. The Chalveys are in St. David's parish," said the man who had been assistant rector there.

Rita nodded.

"Harison is at the office," she explained, calling the U. S. A. & B. the office, as most of the people did who were employed there. "He is in South America at present," she added.

"The family is both proud and wealthy," Varian mused thoughtfully, avoiding her glance.

She smiled a little bitterly at his tone. Evidently he didn't understand the order of the Tin-Pan sisterhood. No need to tell her Chalvey was proud—or affluent. She had learned all that at first hand.

"We played around a great deal last winter," she said, in a sudden spirit of mischief. "Our tastes are very much alike; we saw a number of plays together, and heard the Puccini operas at the Metropolitan. I had never heard Farrar until I went with him to a performance of 'Butterfly.' I think we never missed a Farrar night after that."

"I am very fond of music," he said simply; "whether it be opera at the Metropolitan, or—or——"

"Or Mrs. Orpington's pi-ano," suggested Rita, and then they both laughed.

Music brought to mind Carrie Billings, and Rita turned to Varian with a question.

"What do you think of Miss Billings and her Boston engagement?"

"I think it is a splendid opportunity, and I am exceedingly glad for her," he returned promptly.

She was mildly surprised. At home the very word stage was as a red flag to a bull. And this from a clergyman!

"Then you approve of her going into opera?" Rita asked, ready for argument, her very voice carrying a challenge.

"Approve! I encouraged her!" Anthony Varian declared. "That girl has a future. And I think she can stand the strain now, thanks to Mr. Vonnegut's car."

Rita was silent. After a brief silence he asked:

"What made you inquire if I approved, Miss Charles? Don't you?" His gray eyes twinkled whimsically.

"Why, of course I do, but you——"

"Yes. But I——?" he encouraged, as she stopped.

"You are a clergyman," she answered, in tones almost mocking.

"Am I less a human being because of that?" he said, with a faint smile.

She sat looking at her hands which lay folded in her lap.

"I didn't know," she confessed at last. "At home, even the congregation doesn't look upon going on the stage from your point of view, I fancy." She hesitated, then rushed madly on: "I don't know much about clergymen, and I feel awkward when I talk to one—like I should whisper, as they do back in Pennsylvania, at births or funerals. We don't mention opera either, back home. I thought you would be

horrified at Miss Billings' departure. Somehow, I'm glad you aren't!"

"So am I," he said, with eyes twinkling. "I should be exceedingly sorry for myself if I found fault with a young woman for marketing her gifts. I suppose you concede that Carrie Billings' voice is a gift?"

"Oh, I do! . . . I have thought seriously of going on the stage myself," she announced, watching him from under her long lashes.

His reply came without hesitation.

"I should be extremely sorry to see you do anything of the kind."

"Why? If Miss Billings——"

"You possess neither her ability nor endurance," he interposed.

"You mean I am weak?" She rather resented his words.

"I mean there are too many who never get anywhere," Varian said. "I feel that the stage is not your forte."

Rita laughed a bit, reached out and poured herself a glass of water, drinking it thirstily.

"How well you put my case!" she said. "There are too many who never get anywhere! I am one of the many, Mr. Varian. What would you advise me to do?"

He shook his head. "I can't advise you, Miss Charles. I wish I could, but——" He looked at her searchingly. "There are your people——"

"Oh! They see the world through the holes in a Dutch cheese," she shrugged. "And I don't ask you as—as my pastor, but as—my friend."

"Then as a friend I am going to advise you first

of all to give up some of your intimate friends," Varian said decisively.

"That means Olverson, junior——"

"It means all those men. I don't speak in innuendos. Vonnegut, Chalvey, are mighty good men's men, or as men with girls who are not of your—of your . . . class——"

"Not tinpanners, you mean." A cynical smile twisted her lips.

"Not—Twenty-third Street," he corrected. "Miss Charles, they are only millstones you will find impossible to lay aside some day when you wish to be rid of them. They will always turn up when least desired. You see, they have what the world calls nothing to lose while you—— And it's a road that leads only to bacchanalia and the moment, not to the church-door and to-morrow. What are you going to do to-morrow?"

"Work eight hours in a stuffy office," she answered flippantly.

"And the next day?"

"Same thing over again, and so on, world without end, amen."

He leaned toward her. "Don't you hope for anything else, anything more?"

"Hope!" There was tragedy in her voice, in her eyes. Her whole life long had been one of endless hoping, mixed with vain regrets. In that moment he saw her soul bared.

Varian waited a few seconds before he spoke again.

"What is there for you to hope for outside of the stuffy office eight hours a day?" he asked gently.

She shook her head, and he answered for her: "Marriage!"

At this Rita laughed, albeit her mirth didn't ring true.

"Do you believe that is woman's whole existence?" she mocked. "Is there nothing for us but marriage in this world?"

"Yes, there is something else besides marriage," he replied gravely. "And it is that which I want to save you from—disappointed, disillusioned old age, alone. There is nothing so bitter, and so hopeless. That is where Vonnegut and Olverson and Chalvey are towing you."

"I think," she said, with a quiver in her voice, and half rising to her feet, "I think you are talking rather strangely, Mr. Varian."

"It is not my words, but your conscience, Miss Charles. I don't mean that you haven't strength of character, nor that these men haven't consciences—like yourself. I mean they are only trifling, playing, wasting your time and theirs; and a woman hasn't the years to fool away that a man has. Any one of these three gentlemen will be charming, devoted to you for—one, two, three, maybe five years, and in the end he will marry some other woman! Such friendships lead nowhere—unless it is to a stone wall. When they are ready to quit and settle down, they will have left you with your looks a little faded, your pride a little wounded, and your faith a little dulled. A woman hasn't the time to trifle away that a man has. After thirty you will find it harder to attract men, harder every year, both men like Harrison Chalvey and men who work with you side by side in the office."

"I couldn't marry a person like that!" she burst out, with a shudder.

"It will be more difficult every year—for you to reconcile yourself to such a man for your husband; and for them to consider you as a possible mate!"

"Why, I earn as much as any male stenographer in the company—any man excepting the heads, and those positions are filled by rich men's sons who do the work for something to keep them occupied! I couldn't begin to live on twenty-five dollars or thirty dollars!"

"Hundreds of thousands do in New York. Of course that won't permit a motorcar and an opera box. When the time comes to give up those luxuries, what are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to give them up," she replied, with a sort of quiet defiance.

He thought she was thinking of Robert Sartoris, who had married her little friend, Sally Cole, herself a stenographer.

"It never can happen again," he said gently.

She started. Those were her own words. Then she remembered little Olverson and smiled, but strangely enough, she experienced no sense of triumph. There was little glory in confessing that he had asked her to marry him.

"What has made you so wise?" she queried almost rudely.

Varian flushed, more at her tone than at her words.

"The years I spent at St. David's Church as assistant rector," he confessed gently. "There I came in contact constantly with such men as—your friends, and there I saw frequently such girls as yourself.

Robert Sartoris is the only man I have ever known who—married——”

“A tinpanner,” finished Rita.

“Yes.”

Still she didn't tell him of young Temple Olver-son.

“You must stop,” he said firmly. He held out his hand. “There must be many of us who don't boast automobiles or opera boxes and yet aren't so bad that you need shudder and turn away.”

Rita got up to go.

“I feel sometimes that my life is a—a failure,” she said. “I don't know what to do. I can't see a patch of blue in the gray sky of my future. Unfortunately, I have a champagne appetite with no one to pay the checks. My father left me only the world to live in——”

“And mine,” he told her simply.

Rita took up her pitcher of ice-water and turned to go up the stairs. Anthony Varian didn't follow her, but remained there at the door. Second thoughts urged him to wait a little longer, just a little longer, and he heeded the call.

“Good night,” she said abruptly, and disappeared without another word or even a backward glance.

XV

WITH the sunshine of a new day, Rita's mind was made up. She would steer the ship into more peaceful waters before the rats discovered that the craft was worthless and attempted to abandon it.

All along she had known in her own heart that the very things which her mother-in-law had brought home to her with so great a fuss were true. She knew where she was drifting, she could almost see the reef on which sooner or later her future must be wrecked. And yet she had clung to the life with both hands, greedily hating which were always eager to grasp at pleasure. It seemed like entering a nunnery, deliberately to put all these things away from her—motor-cars, opera tickets, orchestra chairs, dinners, flowers, jewelry, gifts at Christmas, and on her birthday; but there was some little satisfaction in the thought that it was far easier to turn her back on them now than to have them turn their backs upon her later on. That it would come to that, she believed firmly, cherishing no sugar-coated illusions.

It was going to be hard. What to do with herself out of office hours became a problem which remained unanswered. Rita couldn't imagine herself spending an evening in the Orpington drawing room, with Florence Brockly and Lillian St. Clair at the piano, and the Chicago book-agent and the Philadelphia clerk sprawling in the patent rockers. Nor

did she fancy a game of Hearts with the landlady and her intimates in the "boudoir." Very shortly, now, the nights would be too warm to remain indoors, and there remained only the choice of sitting on the front stoop or—or what? Nothing! Last summer she had spent several nights a week dancing at Hunter Island or some suburban resort, going to and fro in a prize-winning roadster. It was going to be hard—she knew it!

Vonnegut was going to France very shortly, and Rita saw and heard very little of this engaging young man; this, with Harrison Chalvey already away, left only little Olverson to avoid. Rita didn't waste much thought on J. T., except to wish, when the days were grayest, that she could make up her mind to marry him. She couldn't—even with Bradstreet or Dun before her. There was something about him, some look in his eyes, some peculiar touch of his hands, which nauseated her. During the first week of her change of heart, he telephoned to her repeatedly, since she managed to avoid a tête-à-tête with him at the office, but each time she put him off with some excuse which was like tissue.

She would have been glad to give some of her evenings to the almost nightly classes held in the new parish house, not that she was interested in the work, but that anything was better than sitting at home alone. However, Miss St. Clair and Miss Brockly successfully nipped this impulse in the bud before it had a chance to burst into flower. One night when they were in the parlor, and Rita was in the hall at the telephone, lingering there because she had nothing better to do, and perhaps hoped that some-

thing might come along to divert her mind, Lillian St. Clair said, loud enough for Rita to hear:

"Say, is it true that Lady Charles is goin' to take a Bible class or somethin' round the corner?"

"Oh, dear, no!" emphasized Almighty Floss. "Mr. Varian hasn't even a flivver, you goose!"

"And he can't dress hair, neither!" shouted the book-agent—at which sally the room rocked with delight.

Rita crept quietly up the stairs. Come what might she couldn't offer her services to Anthony Varian now, however much that would have been preferable to a lonely room.

The following night she was called from the dinner table to speak to Nick Vonnegut at the telephone. He wanted to say good-by; yes, he was leaving on Friday—he hadn't an idea how long he would be gone. He was pretty much done up, and he had a notion that Southern France would set him on his feet again.

Rita could have laughed aloud. Vonnegut, born with a golden spoon in his mouth, and who never had done a harder day's work in his life than to paint pretty girls in classical draperies! At the office he came and went as he pleased; now he was running off to the French Riviera to remain as long as he fancied. He was of such little real importance that his absence would never be noticed. Why, she did more work in one week than Nicko Vonnegut did in a whole year! Yet he was done up!

"Can't we go somewhere to-night, a sort of farewell party?" he demanded, after she had talked gay nonsense with him for ten minutes.

"I'm afraid not," she replied, eyes and lips scornful.

"Dinner——?"

"I've had my dinner."

"Theater——?"

"Haven't we seen everything in town, Nicky?" she laughed.

"By jinks, you're right there! But, say, it's warm enough for a spin out on the Yonkers road, isn't it? I'll have my car around, and come right down——"

"Wait, Nicko!" she said, then. "I—I'm afraid I can't go with you—to-night."

"But I'm leaving Friday. I shan't be able to see you again for Heaven knows when——!"

"I'm sorry for that, old son, but——"

He was silent, and resentful. Then he said:

"It isn't that Olverson ass, is it?"

"Oh, no," she cried earnestly, glad she could answer truthfully.

"He's such a rotter," he returned, half in explanation.

She maintained a waiting silence.

"Well, then, it's good-by now, like this?" he asked presently. "Scurvy trick, Rita. Half suspect there's a rival in the field—curses!"

"I'm afraid it's good-by, Nicky. I'm sorry, too."

"Well. I've got a hundred and one things to do before Friday, of course." After all, he wasn't heart-broken.

"Of course! . . . Send me a lovely lady on a post-card from dear, delightful Paris, won't you? And don't forget me. And don't fall in love with the

French sirens! Remember little old New York wakes up every September. Good-by, Nicko!"

"Au 'voir, Rita. . . . Consider yourself kissed a hundred times over, old pet."

"Good! And the same returned to you, chappie—with interest."

He laughed; then she heard the click as he hung up. Vonnegut too had gone, deserted her. That she had already made up her mind to desert him didn't help a bit. Rita crept up to her room, feeling very wretched.

Sitting there at the window, with the New York night-clatter coming up to her, the old weariness, the old bitterness returned. A fever possessed her to get out in the street, join the crowds on the sidewalks, blink back at the lights on Broadway. It was all so very dull sitting here alone, so heart and soul wearying. It occurred to her that perhaps after all she was a little fool not to have gone with Nick Vonnegut—just to-night, once more three dollar seats and a twenty dollar supper, a smooth-running car and an escort who was groomed liked a magazine hero. For after to-night there would remain to her—what?

Life was short and uncertain at best; she was an idiot deliberately to put away from her the small enjoyment which came her way. Why bother about to-morrow when one might never see it? They had frightened her with old woman's stories; suddenly she recalled how the elders had terrorized the young folk into "getting religion" at the revivals, back home. They had preached hell-fire. Well, Anthony Varian had done the same thing; he had been far too clever to attempt to drive her with the old-time ideas, but

nevertheless he had held up before her eyes that damnation of every woman—lonely old age! And she had determined to “turn over a new leaf,” like they do in books and plays. It was laughable!

Rita comforted herself with the same delusion that every girl has hugged to her breast since the beginning of time—she could take care of herself. Possibly she could—with the men she knew. It wasn't that Anthony Varian feared she couldn't take care of herself, but that he knew that no cow can graze luxuriously all day in a field of garlic and clover without the good housewife's butter tasting of the picnic. The garlic wouldn't spoil the butter irrevocably, but all the same the fastidious would pass it by. Anthony Varian never forgot the day when he first saw Rita Charles, at the Sartoris-Cole wedding.

She turned on the phonograph and throwing herself down on the couch, picked up a magazine, slowly turning the pages given over to advertisements. Next she looked at the pictures, for only on rare occasions did she read the fiction. When she had time for such things, she read the dramatic notes and book criticisms, the art news and the society column; everything she read she aimed to put to some personal benefit.

It was while she was still glancing at the pictures, that the new slavey knocked loudly on her door, at the same time crying her name at the top of her shrill young voice.

Rita rose and turned the key in the lock.

“Th' parson desires to see you—on the next landing, *if* you please,” loftily announced the girl, a becurled and befrilled damsel called Eloise.

“Very well. Thank you.”

She went back and shutting off the Victrola, prepared for the rendezvous. Rita didn't think it odd that he should arrange a meeting with her on the stairs; it wasn't—in a Twenty-third Street boarding house with the parlor full of gaping people.

Varian, dressed for the street, was waiting for her; she noticed that he wore a spring top-coat, for the nights were still chilly at times, and he carried his hat and stick in his hand. Although he wasn't as handsome as Nick, nor as distinguished looking as Chalvey, there was strength in his very pose. Beside Olverson he would have towered like a giant among Gulliver's pigmies.

"Come around to the parish house with me to-night," he cried, without preliminaries, when she joined him. "There's going to be a dance, the first since Easter and the Sewing Club is treating to ice-cream. I promise you there'll be no sermon and no collection. So come!"

She shook her head slowly.

"Why?" he demanded, then with boyish directness. "I heard you at the telephone; that is why I thought——"

"I can't go; it's out of the question," she interposed, all at once sullen, as she remembered the conversation between Florence and Lillian.

He was disappointed and he showed it. Rita turned away from his eyes; it was as if she had slapped his cheek.

"I'm very tired," she murmured, half to herself.

He said nothing, eyes still accusing.

"Some other time," she promised in a low voice.

"I—I suppose you will have plenty going from here without me."

"Yes, the others are going, but that's not you," he said, as if measuring his words.

"Another time," she repeated, and sighed.

Rita knew that she was acting foolishly, stubbornly, and she felt ashamed of herself for such childishness. But for Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair, she might have gone and even enjoyed herself—she knew it! The old stubbornness, the unreasonableness of her nature, the very thing which had dissuaded her from making friends with Carrie Billings, now kept her from accepting Anthony Varian's friendship. She was always doing the things she shouldn't do, always ready to draw back in her shell like a turtle. To-night she regretted her attitude toward Carrie Billings; perhaps in the future Varian, too, would go away.

Her better self was warped, and the milk of human kindness almost dry. She had come to worship only wealth, to respect only position. Long before her cobbler father had died and she had come to New York she had looked down on the townspeople and despised them. Here in New York she rode roughshod over her fellow-boarders and only put up with Vonnegut's whims and Chalvey's drunkenness because of their affluence. Varian she knew to be her superior in pretty much everything, but since he hadn't the golden halo which crowned these other men's actions she resented his interference to live her life as she saw best. The more eager he grew to set her right, the more determined she became to oppose him at every step. Rita didn't want to be "saved"—a thought which never entered Anthony's head.

"I must be getting along," he said presently, glancing at his watch. "You know," he added suddenly, looking up, "you won't have to bother to fuss up—my girls and boys are working-folk."

"As I am!" she echoed. Then the memory of how she had appeared the night he rescued her from little Olverson flashed through her mind, and she flushed. A low-cut evening gown, a corsage bouquet of violets and orchids and a fur-trimmed coat. "*As I am!*"

Possibly, however, her words tempted him to another proposal, for he said:

"We are going to have an illustrated lecture at the rooms next week: 'A Journey Through Palestine.' Will you go with me?"

"What night?" she asked quickly.

"Wednesday. Will that suit you?"

"Oh, bother! I have an engagement," she replied, on the spur of the moment.

He smiled a little as he said:

"I suppose Thursday would suit you no better?"

She had lied, deliberately, and she thought he suspected it. Not that she cared—much—but . . .

Footsteps on the stairs startled her, and she turned and without a word hurried back to her own floor and room. But before she had time to close the door, she heard the book agent's loud cheery voice calling to the rector.

"The ladies sent me back to see if you had slipped down the fire-escape!" he laughed, as if he had said something brilliant. "Sure, everybody's ready! Is it a no-tango party, doc?"

"Maybe, Smiley, maybe," answered Varian, and went to join him.

Rita closed her door very gently. They were all going to the dance at the parish house, even the book-agent and the department store clerk. Coming quietly into the house, Anthony Varian had made friends at every hand; only she kept aloof. . . .

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XVI

If Rita had set out deliberately to entangle young Olverson further in her net, she could not have gone about it in a better way. Seeing her as he did every day, and then only under his father's eyes, while she herself denied him the much coveted engagement at night, it was not long before he worked himself up to a fine frenzy of excitement and impatience. For little J. T. was not a good waiter.

Had he been, things might have turned out very differently, for Rita was very tired of the people at Mrs. Orpington's, thoroughly sick of her lonely room, and longing desperately for the fleshpots again. With Chalvey and Vonnegut out of town, she would, in time, have turned to Temple Olverson for relief from the awful monotony of Twenty-third Street; and had she once accepted his advances, there is little doubt of the ultimate result.

Things had gone from bad to worse with Rita. She missed not only the gaiety of the moment, the theaters, the restaurants, and the motor-trips, but she missed, too, the hundred and one little things which had come to mean so much to her. No more flowers, candy, fruits, books, phonograph records; evidently Nicko had neglected to renew her magazine subscriptions, for suddenly several of the periodicals stopped coming at once. A new frock she had bought for the suburban resorts, she had never had on; it would go

out of fashion most likely before she ever had a chance to wear it, yet the installment collector came every Monday.

On Saturday afternoon she would walk out Fifth Avenue and look at the smart new models with a sinking heart. What was the use of looking since she no longer went any place where she could possibly display such clothes? She recalled how quick Harrison had been to approve of this or that, not in words but by a glance, and she remembered how Nick had said that nobody had better taste than she—and “nobody” included the fiancée, of course. Now there was no one to care, no one to please. She went about in her black and white uniform-like dress without attracting a second glance. Even little J. T. was better than nobody.

A long letter from Ida, in Boston, further added to her loneliness. Ida spelled badly, but her enthusiasm was genuine. Miss Carrie had made a success in “Carmen”—and she inclosed a half-dozen newspaper clippings to prove her assertion. Ida wrote that they were living in rooms on Commonwealth Avenue, that she called Miss Carrie “madame” at the theater, and that she was taking lessons in English at her patroness’ suggestion.

The same mail had brought Anthony Varian a letter from Carrie Billings herself, and that night he stopped Rita in the hall to tell her bits of news about the embryo prima donna and Ida.

“Then there is no doubt about her success?” Rita asked.

“None. I think she has a bright future,” he declared.

"It seems that almost every one has a bright future," she replied, with a smile.

"Except yourself—isn't that what you mean?" he said. "Good gracious, little woman, don't begin to pity yourself. That's the unpardonable sin in my eyes. Self pity——"

"I'm not indulging in such luxury as self pity," she interposed, and her voice trembled. "It is only . . . regret. I have found it is best always to follow one's heart. No one else can tell you what to do, or what not to do—the heart knows."

"Yes, the heart knows," Varian replied. "But don't we make the heart keep time to the tune our feet want to dance by?"

Rita bit her under-lip, saying nothing.

"The heart knows, only we don't know our heart, quite often," he continued quietly. "A street organ can drown conscience's voice, but all the same the street organ doesn't sound the sweeter tune. I was very eager to come down here to St. David's Chapel, because the work uptown was not work, but play, and the berth was one that must have unfitted me for the big things I want to do. I have met many discouraging features in Twentieth Street—and you must know that Mrs. Orpington's household is a very different world from the rooms I occupied off Fifth Avenue. But I am glad I am here if only because of the opportunity it has afforded me to know several persons. One of them is Caroline Billings; another the little maid Ida. There are two women I believe in."

"Don't you believe in all women?" Rita asked flippantly.

"I want to," he said.

She flushed and looked away.

"Miss Billings has made great plans for Ida's future," he went on. "In this letter to me she writes that Ida is going to school, a private class—and Miss Billings is not receiving a fortune in summer opera, and she might have done without a maid. However—her plan is to set Ida up in business—a—a beauty parlor, I suppose you'd call it."

"No one can dress hair like Ida!" cried Rita eagerly, and then instantly regretted the words. This was another's gratitude, not her own.

"Then I suppose I should say a hair-dressing establishment," Anthony Varian continued, tactfully, refusing to notice anything unusual. "How splendid of Miss Billings! But somehow I feel sure that Ida is worthy of the faith which her friend has in her future."

"Ida is ignorant, but quick."

"I know you believe she will succeed in this venture!"

"Why not? Others get by with less skill and taste."

It was discouraging, almost like beating one's head against a stone wall, and yet he was willing to suffer the bruises if he only could heal the heart. Rita's indifference was but a sham, come from living a life of pretense. Saddened he was, but not deterred.

"And now about that Palestine evening next Wednesday?" Varian asked, with the boyish enthusiasm she had come to associate with him. "It's going to be a tremendously interesting event, and, besides it's for a billiard-table for the boys' club. Will you go to Palestine with me?"

She shook her head, her lips in a thin, straight line
"Not on Wednesday."

"That's hard luck," Varian said, only partially concealing his disappointment. "I had hoped you might arrange it. It's not just a motion picture, you know——"

"Does the character of the entertainment alter my plans for the evening, do you think, Mr. Varian?"

He turned a dull brick-red, for her words stung like a whip. Once he glanced at her, and she looked so cold, so indifferent—and withal so miserable. . . .

"Try and come some time, then," he said, once more speaking lightly, as if nothing were amiss. "There's to be a series—Rome, Jerusalem, Palestine, Greece, The boys and I shall expect you one night at least. Try, won't you?"

She said she would—and didn't mean it.

A clock somewhere boomed eight. Rita threw down the magazine—with last winter's styles—and went to the window which was open, letting in the night sounds and the light breeze. Below, a little group sat on the steps and laughed and chatted—Lillian St. Clair, Florence Brockly, the book-agent and the neckwear clerk. Presently Mr. Varian would come out on his way to the parish house, and Almighty Floss would join him—to play for the boys or girls whichever night it happened to be. Then the cold-cream demonstrator would call to the "perfect thirty-eight" next door to come over and take Miss Brockly's place, and the "fun" would be resumed. Rita smiled to herself. Possibly if she went down at once, the others would permit her to take Florence's place. . . . And Anthony Varian advised her to seek

friends with men and women in her own . . . sphere of life!

She came in and commenced to dress, a navy coat-suit in deference to the weather. Rita had made it a rule never to go out alone at night. In her six years in New York it is doubtful if she had ever ventured even half a dozen blocks by herself after night-fall. Often she went to some rendezvous or else returned from one, alone, but then it was always in a taxicab, or Vonnegut's or Chalvey's private car, and she had felt perfectly safe. To-night she was starting forth without an escort—even at the other end.

At first she tried to tell herself that it was a great adventure, just what the beautiful heroines were forever doing in the magazine stories, but as she went along, afraid to loiter, afraid even to stop to look in the shop windows, she found little that was romantic in her outing. Each time a man glanced at her she felt her heart jump madly; each time she heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind she quickened hers until she was almost running up Broadway.

She was on the point of stopping in one of old down-town theaters given over to motion-pictures, when she felt a hand on her arm and heard a man's voice close to her ear. It sickened her. The newspapers had been filled with "yellow" stories of late and she knew New York night life so little after six years in the city.

Without glancing around, she tried to shake off the man and get into the theater. Provincial enough to be frightened, she was yet too sophisticated to cry out, to make a scene. Above all things, she dreaded most the newspapers. Once to have her name con-

nected with such an affair, even though innocent, would kill her for all time she knew with such men as Nick and Harrison. They couldn't afford to be seen in public with a girl who made herself conspicuous in the papers.

"Rita!" said the man then, refusing to lose her in the crowd.

She turned, relieved almost to the point of tears. Her welcome must have surprised young Olverson, for he held her off at arms' length for a second, as if suspicious of his reception.

"What's up, kid?" he asked, and his voice came thickly.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Temple!"

He glared angrily round the lobby and shouted in a loud voice:

"Anybody been getting fresh with you? Anybody been getting fresh with my girl?"

"Oh, Temple, hush!"

"Well, I want to know."

"I was only afraid. I—I came out with one of the young ladies at the house, and somehow I lost her——"

"I'll protect you, sweetie!" he declared grandly.

"Take me home, please, Temple."

Olverson took hold of her elbow and piloted her across the thronged sidewalk to a waiting automobile.

"There," he said. "Papa's got you—don't cry!"

XVII

It did not take Rita long to realize that Olverson had been drinking, but even when he clasped her hand with his wet, cold palm, she said nothing. His protection—it was an outward protection, at least from other men—and the shelter of his car compelled her to overlook many things which at another time she never would have countenanced. His endearing names, while nauseous, were still preferable to the leer in a strange man's eyes.

Five minutes later, when her nerves had ceased jumping and her heart seemed quite normal again, she glanced from the window and saw that they were riding up Broadway instead of toward Twenty-third Street.

"Temple, I want to go home," she told him, in that flat, cold voice which seldom failed in effect.

"Oh, the night's young, lovey!" he cried hilariously.

"Take me home at once or—or I shall tell your father to-morrow morning!"

"My papa's gone to the country, hurrah, hurrah!" he sang, and Rita suddenly remembered that the elder Olverson had left for Maine that afternoon to be gone a week. And a week is a long time, many times seven days when one is angry.

"Where are we going—will you tell me that?" she asked next, in somewhat mollified tones.

"To Hunter Island, pet."

"Why, Temple! I can't go there in these clothes!"

"Wha's matter with them clothes, kiddie?" he demanded indignantly. "I think they're beau'ful clothes! Anybody says they ain't beau'ful clothes 'll get their map changed by me—map changed by me, little N. G. . . . Is that wha' you call me, lovey?"

"Temple, I'm going to tell the man to take us back to Twenty-third."

"No, you're not, you li'l possum, you! An' if you don't behave yourself papa won't buy you no ginger pop. . . . You li'l possum, you!"

"Oh, Temple, you're positively hopeless!" Rita cried, laughing a little as she dodged his arms. "I'm going to take you home. If your father knew——"

"My papa's gone to—country——"

"I know. . . . Why is the chauffeur stopping here?"

The car had drawn in at the entrance to a smart hotel of the semi-theatrical type, and already the doorman was running forward to meet them. At Rita's words, Olverson hit on the glass with his stick, and when the man turned his head, motioned for him to go on.

"But the night's shung," he whimpered, turning to Rita.

"It is, and so are you, frightfully young. I won't be seen with you when you're in this condition. Tomorrow night——"

"Oh, come on an' go to Richie's, then!" he pleaded, beginning to get cross.

"What's Richie's?—and where?" she demanded suspiciously.

"A quiet li'l place where nobody can shee your—clo'es."

"I don't want to go there, Temple. If you don't tell your man to take me home, I—I'll open the window and call for help."

Olverson laughed slyly.

"Victor—Victor can drive like hell," he said.

Rita sighed. She wasn't afraid, but she was fast losing her patience with him and it was all she could do to smother an inclination to box his ears. Out of the corners of her eyes she glanced at him—a lean, under-sized, drunken little rat.

"Come on, Temple, take me home," she coaxed presently. "To-morrow we'll go to the Garden, if you like. It's after nine."

"Th' night's shung——"

She closed her lips in a thin hard line and said nothing. After waiting a moment, Olverson ventured a second remark.

"Wanta get home to shee th' parson, eh?"

"The—who?"

"Th' parson—li'l Tony. I know th' li'l rascal. Up at St. David's struttin' round in a black night-gown! I saw him—you li'l possum, you!"

A thought flashed quickly through her brain.

"Did you see Mr. Varian to-night?" she asked, striving to keep a note of eagerness from her voice.

"Shure!"

"Where?"

"At your li'l home, sweet home, pretty. He was shtandin' on the steps wit' an old chromo, but he didn't have his black night-gown on——"

"Oh, Temple!"

"Well?" he demanded sullenly.

"You're so—silly!"

"Shilly! Shilly, am I? At my time o' life she calls me shilly! Oh, my God, she calls me——"

"What did you say to Mr. Varian?" she cried, shaking him to rouse him.

She was taller than he, and he blinked up at her sleepily.

"Beatin' me up, lovey?" he asked.

"No. Waking you up."

"I'm no' ashleep."

"Then answer me. What did you say to Mr. Varian?"

"I ashked him where my li'l possum was—that's all, everything."

"That was sufficient," she said, half under her breath.

She was so quiet after that that a bit of her misery must have penetrated even his soddened brain, for he staggered upright and hit the glass window a blow with his stock which cracked it from side to side. When the chauffeur looked round, he commanded him to turn and drive downtown.

"Home! Home!" he shrilled like a hoarse raven.

"Why did you want to see me to-night?" Rita asked, as they swung south on Broadway.

"I want to marry you," he answered rather sullenly. "That's th' kind o' chap I am—a marryin' boy. All wool an' a yard wide." His hand sought his inside coat pocket. "I got the papers—itsh all fixed, li'l possum, while papa's gone to th'—hurrah!"

Rita took the legal-looking document from him with hands which trembled so they scarcely could open

it. As she leaned forward to read by the light from a corner arc lamp, she saw that she had guessed correctly. He had secured a marriage license.

"Why did you do this?" she asked presently, holding fast to the paper and half-inclined to tear it into bits.

"My papa's gone——"

"Oh, you hopeless idiot!" she stormed, tears springing to her eyes. "Oh, you sorry excuse for a man! You—you ninny!"

Instead of resenting this outburst of righteous indignation, little Olverson began to snap his fingers feebly, at the same time swaying his body uncertainly in syncopated measure.

"Stop that!" commanded Rita.

"Won't!" he grinned. "I'm a li'l pic'ninny—you shaid so yourself. Alexander's rag-time band. 'Come on an' hear, come on an' hear'——"

She caught and shook him fiercely like a terrier does a rat, and his voice rose shrilly, so shrilly, indeed, that the chauffeur glanced round to make sure that nothing demanding interference had happened. Seeing him, Rita signaled for him to drive on—"Home!" she said.

"But we can't go home till we're married, little pet," chirped Olverson. "Married by a parson in a black night-gown. I know a li'l rascal——"

"I shall never marry you!" she cried, but even while she spoke the words the thought occurred to her that it mightn't be such a bad move after all. Olverson, *père*, of course, would pay handsomely for his son's release. It couldn't be worse than the lonely bedroom at Mrs. Orpington's. At that moment the

car gave a sudden jerk, and Temple was sent flying into her arms, an opportunity which he grasped to pinch her cheek playfully. His hot breath, his wet hands, the nearness of his body, sickened Rita, and she angrily wiped the spot where his fingers had been. She couldn't marry this man.

In his corner of the automobile, Olverson reclined drunkenly against the cushions, watching her with his fish-like eyes, occasionally sucking in his breath, or stopping to whimper like a punished dog. He seemed to grow worse instead of better, and Rita lowered the window on her side, hoping that the fresh air would revive him somewhat before they arrived in Twenty-third Street. For she anticipated trouble when she attempted to leave him at the door of the Château.

They turned the corner out of Broadway, rolling smoothly west toward the Orpington stoop. He was so very quiet now, breathing so heavily and with his eyes closed, that Rita fancied he must be asleep. She gave a sigh of relief as the car slowed down at the door of the house.

Almost before the engine had stopped Anthony Varian rushed down to the car, and pulled open the door. At the same minute little Olverson sat up, very much awake.

"Come!" said Varian, holding out his hand to Rita.

"Wharsh your night gown, th' black one, you li'l rascal, you?" cried J. T., catching sight of the rector.

Rita took Varian's hand and leaped lightly to the sidewalk. Then he turned to speak to the chauffeur.

"Take Mr. Olverson home and see to it that he goes to bed, Victor," he said to the man who evidently recognized him. He touched his hat and nodded.

"Put who to bed?" shrilled Temple. "Shay, shay, Varian, I'm a li'l pic'ninny—Rita shays so. Alexander's band; 'come on an' hear, come on an' hear'——"

Anthony Varian, without ceremony, slammed to the door.

"Home, Victor!" he said, and the car turned out and away toward Broadway.

Silently Rita followed Anthony Varian into the house, and without loitering in the halls, she hurried back to the stairs and started up to her own room. Now that Olverson had been got rid of her nerves seemed to have deserted her. She could hardly stand, her lips moved piteously. One thing alone she couldn't understand, and that was why Temple Olverson had allowed her to depart without creating a disturbance. Even a coward grows brave under the influence of drink, and she felt that it couldn't be Varian's size alone which had protected her from the little man.

On the second landing she heard her name called and paused. Varian had followed her, and quickly joined her.

"You are not—hurt?" he asked, and his voice seemed uncertain and strained.

"No. . . . Frightened—a little."

"You shouldn't have gone out with him in that condition——"

"I didn't! I met him. That is, I didn't go out to keep an appointment, but ran into him on Broadway. He didn't seem so—so bad then, and I was glad to see him because I had never been out at night before by myself and I felt as timid as—as 'the little girl from down to home.' I went with him willingly

enough, and he promised to bring me home. And then he wouldn't."

"He wouldn't?" Varian's brow darkened.

"Yet he did. You see, he isn't himself to-night——"

"I can't see that that is any improvement over his usual self!" Varian was uncompromising.

"Possibly not, but——"

"He came here for you just after you went out," Varian said then. "I saw him—and saw his condition. I have been waiting at the window ever since for you to return."

She glanced up, then down, quickly.

"But Palestine? Wasn't that to-night?" she faltered.

"Yes. I sent word I couldn't be there."

"Oh! And your boys and girls? They must have been terribly disappointed!"

"I wasn't thinking of them. Rita, if he hadn't brought you back safely——"

"Why, I'm not a child!" she scoffed faintly. "And this is New York!"

He sighed and leaned his tall, athletic body against the wall.

"I know these men better than you do," he said wearily. "I have been thrown with their kind for many years uptown."

Rita resented his tone, the unspoken words which she fancied were there. She moved uneasily, while her lips curled.

"Safe!" she laughed. "Why, he wanted me to marry him—begged me—had the license all ready!"

"Temple Olverson wanted to marry you?" cried Varian, suddenly straightening up.

"Well, we weren't married," Rita replied, with a little shrug.

He was silent for a brief second before he said, very gently:

"Temple Olverson is married already, Rita. He was married while at college—to a waitress, I think. And there has never been a divorce, although his family are doing everything possible to have one granted. If I had only known how intimate you were——"

"It was scarcely intimacy!" she cried. Then, in a calmer voice: "How very dreadful!" And she shuddered. "But—but wouldn't they punish him, if he were to—to marry again—now?"

"Young Olverson is one of those rich men's sons who has depended on his parents' wealth and his family's influence to get him out of every scrape from his cradle-days up," said Anthony Varian. "The courts would have punished him, of course, but not so thoroughly as the world would have punished . . . the woman."

XVIII

IN June the public schools closed for the summer, and, since Miss St. Clair was taking her vacation at the same time, she and Miss Brockly departed for Atlantic City for a stay of several weeks. No trip to the Pole or around the world ever evoked such preparations. That all Manhattan didn't know of their destination wasn't the ladies' fault. For weeks before their departure every mail brought them a flood of hotel literature; they never sat down to a meal that the virtues and defects of the different houses weren't thrashed to a standstill. Mrs. Orpington only knew that "none of 'em had anything on her, when it came to settin' a table." The book-agent had never been to Atlantic, and fancied Asbury—which was "classier," besides being more healthful; the rest of the boarders listened more than they ate—which was just as satisfactory to their landlady.

"You always go to Atlantic, Miss Charles," cried Mrs. Orpington one day. "I never thought o' that before. Why can't you tell these ladies a nice place to stop?—or would you rather not recommend——?"

"I always go to Waldon Hall," Rita said with her usual unobtrusiveness.

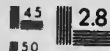
"An' how often have you been to the shore?" inquired Airy, Fairy in her best "society" manner.

Rita said she didn't know exactly; probably a dozen



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times in the last five years, and then only on her summer leave did she remain longer than over the week-end.

"You've been there that often and always gone to the same hotel!" demanded Miss Brockly, aghast, as if Rita had confessed to a cardinal sin.

"Yes. Why not? It is a very good one," Rita smiled.

"But half the fun of goin' to a hotel is to go to a different one each time!" cried the cream demonstrator glibly. "I b'lieve in trying them all—then you can decide which is best yourself. Let's send for further pa'tic'lars to Castle Zenda, Floss? It's got the swellest paper—look at them little gold anchors and all!"

Rita was beginning to think with longing of her own vacation, though she didn't especially fancy being at the resort while her fellow-boarders were there. It had also occurred to her that Twenty-third Street might be a little less impossible without the two musical sirens. For with their going, of course, the clerk and the book-agent would be obliged to seek other fields of amusement, and she herself might be able to get a little fresh air on the front stoop without being surrounded by ribaldry. She would wait until August, she decided.

It didn't occur to her then that it would prove quite a different thing nowadays, packing her trunks and wiring to Waldon Hall, from what it had in the past. In former summers, Dick Vonnegut and Harrison Chalvey had always managed to be at the shore at the same time, and her expenses never amounted to more than her hotel bill; for while neither of these

men would have attempted to settle that, they nevertheless provided her railroad ticket and Pullman seat, and of course she had no need of spending money when in their company. Atlantic City would have been a very different story without Nicko or Harry to touch it with their golden wands.

Directly after Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair left the Orpington domicile, Rita began to save for her own vacation. In other years her expenses during her two weeks' stay had never been beyond seventy-five dollars, and when she required a new wardrobe for the trip, she hadn't hesitated to pawn a piece of her jewelry.

Rita Charles was one of those people who rob Peter to pay Paul. It is highly probable that she had never been entirely free of debt since she arrived in New York. Earning twenty-five dollars a week, she spent fifty; her obligations at times assumed such vast proportions that it became ludicrous to contemplate. And she did laugh herself, as she figured out that at the rate she was going, she would owe every second shop which would allow her credit at the end of ten years! But at the end of ten years she wouldn't care if they did close down on her; fashions would no longer interest her—she would be thirty-five!

It takes a long time to pay for a hundred dollar frock at the rate of ten dollars a week. In fact, the garment has become passé long before the debt is wiped clean. And a girl must have more than one evening frock if she hopes to do the theaters and restaurants with such men as Nick Vonnegut and Harrison Chalvey. After they both had gone away, Rita purchased no more finery, but even then she owed

several hundred dollars. Putting aside the money for her summer vacation meant shutting down on some of the instalment men until September.

Such young women never give a thought to the future. Rita never "bothered her head" about such things as old age, sickness, even death. She had not a penny put by, no sick benefits, not even life insurance, that anchor of the poor and hopeless, small weekly premiums. She danced fast to the tune of the minute. Once, back in Pennsylvania, she had looked forward to twenty as old age; then, coming to New York, she realized that one is young at thirty, and now, after six years of Manhattan, she set the limit at thirty-five. Of course there are many professional women of forty who bear up well even in the cold, searching light of day, but Rita knew that she couldn't hope to retain the rose-bloom which was a principal attraction so late in life. But knowing this, and knowing that her beauty was her stock in trade, she gave no serious thought to the morrow. "Sufficient to the day" was written conclusively of Rita Charles and the Tin-Pan sisterhood.

She spoke to Olverson, *père*, the next day, acquainting him with the time she preferred for her annual two weeks' leave. In the offices where a number of girls were employed, vacations were settled by drawing, months ago; but Rita, heretofore, had only to speak to her chief to be granted any time which might suit her. It was, then, something of a shock when old John T. replied that he wasn't so sure she could be spared just at that time in August.

"July would suit me much better, Miss Charles," he said, without looking at her. "I shall be obliged

if you will arrange your leave for the middle of July this year."

Whatever reply she might have made at another time, she didn't to-day, with little J. T. lounging in a convenient chair. It suddenly flashed through her brain that possibly the boy's father knew more than he permitted her to see. He had warned her away from Temple—and she had given no heed. All at once she remembered the talk about the new stenographer of the lacey waists, who wasn't deemed necessary to the company's success. No one is indispensable.

"The second and third weeks in July will suit me nicely, Mr. Olverson," she replied, after the briefest pause. "I'll arrange for a substitute to-morrow."

It was a much simpler task to arrange for a young woman to take her place during her vacation than it was to arrange for the funds with which to make that vacation a possibility. She had just three weeks in which to get ready, and no money to get ready with. That meant the pawn shops again. Formerly she had taken Ida, a sort of reed of respectability on which to lean, but now Ida was chaperoning another, and she was alone. Rita didn't relish the task, nor the parting with another bauble, as likely as not never to be redeemed.

"I shall be going away the second week in July," she told Mrs. Orpington, who of course would have to be paid for holding her room until her return to New York.

"A little early, ain't you, Miss Charles, this year?" smiled the landlady, in whose bosom Rita always called forth an odd mixture of awe and indignation.

"Ye-es, a little," the girl replied. "I'm tired."

"Stoppin' as usual at Waldon Hall, I guess?"

"Oh, yes! At least, I fancy so."

"It would be grand if you could be there with Floss Brockly and Lillian St. Clair—although, of course"—apologetically—"I know if you strip Lil of her clothes there ain't much class left. . . . Huh? Beg pardon?"

Rita paused at the stairway.

"I merely said I was going away for rest and quiet," she murmured.

It seemed odd to be getting her own clothes ready, and to have to pack her trunks herself. At every step she missed Ida. Ida! She had never answered her letter—she must do it. And send her some cards from Atlantic; and bring her home a box of salt water taffy and a lace collar or two. Then she remembered that Ida was no longer the down-trodden slavey, who considered herself fortunate in falling heir to cast-off dresses and restaurant favors. Ida now was a companion. Fairy godmothers alone forgot the existence of one Rita Charles.

It happened that Anthony Varian and Rita were thrown a good deal together these long June days. With the school-teacher and the cream-demonstrator out of town, the book agent and the salesman appeared less frequently on the scene—which in this instance happened to be the front stoop. Sometimes Varian and Rita were fortunate enough to have this paradise all to themselves.

It happened this way a few nights before the 'ay set for Rita's departure for Atlantic City. It was very hot and close, and she felt that it couldn't be

so bad away from New York just now. Sitting there, side by side, and watching the cars creep by towards the ferries, Rita realized as never before how dreadfully uninteresting New York could be in summer. Even the electrical display in front of the cinema palaces seemed less brilliant and more sluggish. It must be deliciously cool down by the sea on such a night.

"I shall be glad to get away from the heat and the glare," she said suddenly, with a little sigh.

"To get away—where?" Varian frowned.

"I am going on my vacation—even I have a vacation, you know. . . . To the seashore—Atlantic City."

Varian was silent for a moment or two. Another car changed by, this one crowded with passengers, many of whom were going down to the ferries to escape the heat, on the river.

"With whom are you going?" he asked, as if the question had been there some time.

"Alone."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Nobody will steal me—no such luck. Two weeks from the day I start, I shall be back at the U. S. A. & B.—and then the treadmill again until next year. I shall be glad to go—b'lieve me, as Ida used to say. Why are you frowning?"

"I don't like the idea of your going to Atlantic City alone," he returned quietly.

Rita opened wide her eyes, then smiled when she had intended to display anger.

"I am over twenty-one," she shrugged.

"That may be——"

"Oh, dear, don't say that! You are careless with

your cue. You should say 'I don't believe you,' or 'Impossible!' . . . As a matter of fact I am twenty-five."

"It's the heart that counts, not the years. And you have a small-town heart under a New York surface. Why must you go alone?"

"We face every crisis alone, don't we? We are born alone, we die alone; so why shouldn't I——"

"Don't be flippant," he begged.

She smiled faintly. To-night she felt like a rudderless boat, and she realized that the sea is both deep and wide.

"Come and go round to the parish house with me," Varian suggested, after a short silence.

"Do your invitations include only the parish house and Holy Land lectures? Why the parish house on a night like this?"

He looked at her steadily, thoughtfully, before he replied. Then he too put a question.

"Why do you always refuse to go anywhere with me?" said he.

"I don't! It is you who don't invite me to go anywhere!" Rita protested, in a spirit of mischief.

"I must have asked you a hundred times to come with me—and to a hundred places!"

"But not a hundred different places. Always the same; your footsteps ever follow the same tracks. I don't like lectures and magic lanterns, nor dancing-classes in a church basement. I'm afraid, I'm very much afraid, that it isn't a small-town heart I have in this body of mine, after all, but a two-dollar heart. I don't fancy cheap vaudeville, nor moving-pictures, nor Sunday School entertainments. For nearly six

years I have seen and heard the best the world has to offer—for that is what we get here in New York. You see I am frank, I am honest, even shameless, eh? And I'm very much afraid I would have said 'yes' had your invitation been for Miss Barrymore or the Follies instead of—Palestine. Now will you stop persecuting me, will you let me live my own life, in my own way?"

There was a note of recklessness in the last words, and after they were spoken she sat there, not without a shade of curiosity, waiting for his answer. But this was so long in coming that she was compelled to make sure that he was still there, or there, had heard her.

"Do you really believe what you have just said?" he cried, catching her glance.

She nodded violently.

"But it isn't true," he protested.

"It is true enough. I'll admit I am often very lonely, but I would rather sit alone in my room than merry-make in your parish-house among a lot of shrewish school-teachers and hand-painted demonstrators!"

"Rita," he said, "your tongue is sharp enough to sting your own lips."

Although the color mounted from her chin to brow, she greeted this remark with a mocking little laugh.

"You know you are not speaking the truth when you say such things!" Varian insisted. "And since I know it, why do you say them? You are not heartless at all; neither are you jealous of Florence Brockly's success at the parish house. But you are insincere—you are insincere with yourself because you are

deceiving nobody but yourself. And that is a grave mistake. But, then, you are only another very foolish virgin, after all."

"Is this a sermon you are trying out on me?" she demanded impertinently.

"No."

"Why do you wish to 'save' me?—I suppose all this does come under the heading of salvation?"

He seemed to hesitate before he replied.

"Do you care to know why I am interested in you and your future?" he said at last.

"I will give two-bits to your pet charity to hear the solemn truth!"

"Good! The reason, then, I am trying to make you see the folly of your ways is that—I love you," Varian said.

XIX

RITA'S heart stood still for a full beat and her hands went out, clutching at the cold brownstone steps. Across the street it seemed as if a shower of stars had descended upon a madly prancing world which rocked and swayed before her hot, tired eyes. Then a cold chill shook her, but at the same minute her power of speech returned—thank goodness for that!

"Are you spoofing me?" she asked, with a jeer.

"No. I mean it."

"You—love me? Forgive my maidenly hesitation—modesty—what you will——"

"I forgive your spoofing."

Rita coughed politely behind her palm in exact imitation of Mrs. Orpington on rent day.

"Am I, then, to take your declaration of love as a proposal of marriage?"

"No."

"Oh! If I only had a witness now—or does the law require two? At least if Miss Schoolmarm were hidden inside that window you'd have to find a new organist by next Sunday. You love me, but you don't want to marry me—m'm h'm. Sounds sort of familiar—like Mr. Chambers at one-thirty-five or Mrs. Leslie Carter of yesteryears. Is it possible that St. Anthony is barred with the same stick used on Mr. Nick Vonmont and Mr. Harrison Chalvey?—not to mention little Olverson!"

"Isn't it merely possible that St. Anthony is a bit more careful in selecting a wife than these men are in buying a car?"

"A sort of you-can't-control-your-heart-but-you-can-your-wedding-certificate, eh?"

Varian was silent, afraid to continue, and yet her words stung the blood to his face.

"You needn't be puffed up about it, you know," she resumed, a moment later; "for you aren't the only man who doesn't want to marry me. I have been frowned upon by the best families in New York. Take Papa Olverson now——"

"You—mean Temple?"

"Papa was speaking for Temple. He reminded me upon one occasion, after I had been seen about town in J. T.'s company, that there were some few families left who wouldn't receive a poor little typist into their midst with just the same warmth the Sartoris clan had exhibited when Robert brought home pretty Sally Cole."

"The brute!"

"O-hh! Just because you have . . . your black night-gown on is no reason why you should say naughty words."

"Rita, drop this pose! Stop this shamming! You know, and you know that I know! You can't throw dust in cupid's eyes any longer. I think I have loved you ever since that day you came to St. David's with Robert Sartoris and Sally. Do you remember?"

"I shall never forget it! Every time I turned around you shook my hand, and said good-by, all over again."

"At least you do remember!"

"My poor wrist forbade my forgetting in a hurry!"

He smiled in spite of himself. She nursed her hand—and her left one!—so tenderly.

"Rita, don't you think you—could——?" A new note of eagerness crept into his voice.

"Could?" she repeated, frowning. "Oh! are you still trying to 'save' me?"

"Yes, if you will have it that way. From yourself."

She seemed to consider.

"I suppose that all men are human wolves, St. Anthony?"

"Those who aren't geese—and nine-tenths of the sex appear to be that."

"You win, the majority wins!"

"It is you I am afraid for," Varian said, with a quick frown. "I know myself, and I know you—but not your other self."

"Then am I a Lady Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde?" she teased.

"Say rather a woman and a fraud. I don't believe you to be hard and cold, although I look around and see no one who has been able to thaw your heart but poor little slavey. I had hoped that I, too, might win your confidence—and they say that love begets love. You deliberately wrap yourself in your shell, there is always a card 'not at home' on your door. You have denied your heart so many friendships lived so long in yourself and for yourself, that the question arises will you know his knock when your master comes your way. . . ."

"But if he is to be my master, why should he knock?" Rita demanded, but suddenly her lips were

clayey-white and her eyes refused to meet his. "I think we are having a taste of much ado about nothing," she added, with an effort. "You don't want to marry me, and I don't want to marry you."

"It is for your sake that I hesitate, Rita," said Varian.

"Consider the thought returned," she smiled. "And now leave me to my tinpanhood. You are wise in avoiding the issue, oh, St. Anthony! You know I wouldn't be happy for all my golden heart, don't you? You are afraid the housewife Rita wouldn't get along with the cabaret Rita—and the cabaret wouldn't agree with the parish house, that apple-of-your-eye parish house! I shall always approach it with seven bendings and seven knockings, like the chappie did in the classics. Some day, when I am very, very rich, I shall donate you a splendid organ, with colored pretties reaching clear to the ceiling; and Almighty Floss shall play it—with a dip at every third measure. The woman who hesitates has won! See what a large class you have now, and I feel sure it is because Florence Brockly's music makes them feel so at home! It's rather like Coney without carfare or steamboat tickets!"

Looking straight at her, Anthony's lips curved in a faint smile, and his voice took on a new and tender note.

"Rita, you'd care for it—immensely—after awhile." She shook her head slowly.

"I'm afraid not," she returned, serious for the moment.

"I'm sure—in time!" he emphasized.

"No—no."

"At the end of a year!"

Thereupon she laughed, really to relieve the situation.

"But why should you care whether I learn to like it or not since you don't want to marry me?" she cried. "Really, I don't understand. You intrigue one, as they say over the cocktails."

He chose to ignore her levity.

"That little place in Twentieth Street is almost my whole life," Varian said. "I planted the seed, I want to watch them grow."

"There's a string to every prize, it seems," Rita flaunted, placing her hand over her heart, stage fashion. "Pardon me for referring to you as a prize, St. Anthony—of course I wasn't speaking from experience. Really, you are in a very novelish situation, aren't you?—torn between love for your trust, and love—but not marriage!—for an office Delilah. I'm sorry I 'came into your life'—isn't that the way they say it on the silversheet? Ida would know. Ida would come back with a quotation from 'Sinful Sarah,' or some other celluloid classic. But Ida is no longer with us. So, think twice of Floss, and good-night."

Varian rose with her, very pale, very tense.

"Wait!" he said.

Rita turned; and, after a glance at his face, leaned against the doorway, her hands behind her, her lips set in a scornful little smile.

"Shoot!" she echoed mockingly.

Varian hesitated only for a moment, and then the words were not just what he had intended them to be.

"Has—young Olverson annoyed you lately?"

"Oh, my dear, did you call me back for that?" she

cried, with a tragic gesture of her hands. "Has little J. T. annoyed me of late? No-o! Sorrowfully I must confess that he has not. And I should dearly love to be annoyed these hot June nights—to the tune of a roof-garden or a suburban dancing-place, you know. But instead, I spend my nights on the front stoop, or in my own luxurious apartment—and rush to a mirror every time I hear a motor siren. Alas, those happy days!"

He attempted to take her hand, but she promptly slipped it behind her again, and leaning on it, grinned.

"Rita, won't you give up this thing——?"

"Are you speaking so disrespectfully of Temple-lamb?"

"Give up these men—if not for your sake, then for mine!"

"Ah, dear man, they've given me up, I'm afraid," she cried. "Nick and Harry are overseas, and little Olverson is faithless. Only my debts and my phonograph remain."

"What can the future hold for you?"

"I'm not very strong about the future, Tony Varian, but I'm wearing my heart away for September. New shows, new restaurants, new styles—and the wandering ones from abroad. . . . Or when you spoke of the future, is it possible that you meant—hereafter?"

"You know I meant nothing of the kind! Why do you ridicule me so?"

"Why do you continue to persecute me the way you do?" she asked lightly, in turn, but there was a serious note below the surface.

"Do I, Rita?" He had caught the soul-cry, quick

to detect her every changing mood. "If you'd only trust yourself to me——"

"Oh, what's the use?" she said, with a shrug and a gesture. "What's the use of anything?"

"It's the difference between earth and heaven."

"I'm very earthy. . . . It's not a bad world to live in—if you live your own way."

"Only you're not living your own way——"

"You mean you are trying to make me live your way! Well, it's no use. I have been very happy in the past, and there is no reason why I shouldn't be as happy again . . . when the snow flies and the town's born-again! Ah, there's no place like this place, when the summer buyers have left us, and the natives have returned! Don't bother about me, don't spoil my winter with your horrid croaking—please! I am simply existing until September. Then—ah, then!" Her arms went out with pretty abandon.

"Chalvey and Vonnegut will simply use you again, simply play with you as they do with their cars, their clubs, their money. And like them, you will be forgotten when your hour is past."

She made him a gamin-like grimace.

"Fair exchange fears no lawsuit! And after all, my sole duty in life is to amuse—and be amused. You are right for once, St. Anthony—we are simply toys, we tinpanners, called on to make life gay for these rich men's sons. But in the phraseology of the day, I, for one, should worry. They take me to plays and restaurants, shower me with all kinds of favors—save one! . . . You're right, Tony!—orange blossoms; go to the head of the class! . . . And in return for large favors, I am supposed to be lively

and entertaining, look pretty and act as if I hadn't a care in the world. It is true they will telephone to me five minutes before curtain-time and make an engagement—which they will break after I'm all groomed without even explaining why. That's it—when they want you, you must be on hand; and when they don't—shut your eyes and ask no questions. I never do. But then I'm wise—and I love the life."

Varian struck one palm fiercely with the fist of the other hand.

"Such a life is degrading," he said, very low, as if ashamed. "I am surprised that a girl of your stamina can endure it!"

"Don't you find me—well, charming?—at times, at times, of course!"

"You know it, Rita."

"Don't you, then, give these men credit for being as human as you are? As appreciative?"

"But there are other girls they know—forgive me, but girls of their own station."

She turned on him with a new fierceness, an intensity of feeling which he didn't know she possessed.

"So there are—girls of their own kind! That is exactly why they come to us! Do you think Nick Vonnegut ever enjoyed himself as much with that forty-second cousin of his that he is to marry some day, as he has done with me—me? I mean it! They marry them, but *they* never get to know their . . . as we do, Anthony Varian! Because we are only stenographers, models—not chorus, tinpanhood doesn't embrace the stage!—because we are only *that*—they marry *them*; but it is to us their thoughts turn first and oftenest."

"The world is run by deeds not dreams," said Varian gently. "That these men do marry the other girls is the humiliating part, I think."

"Do you?" she jeered, but her eyes were weary, her face grown haggard. "Isn't it something to be first—even in thought? Or, being a man, probably you don't understand a girl's point of view. . . . They come to us out of sorts and go away—cured, smiling—little brain doctors. Possibly Miss Knickerbocker has bored poor Cholly to death at a tea or a musicale; well, we listen to his plans and ambitions even if it takes all evening—men like women who want to hear of their achievements. And to listen to foolish chatter is small return for a season of gayety."

"Is it? The gayety is for a season, you confess, while you will be here after it is forgotten by you, and you are forgotten by him."

Rita beat her hands softly together.

"Maybe you're right—I don't know," she sighed. "But, after two dollar shows, imported limousines, and Claridge suppers, can one come down to fifty-cent vaudeville, ice cream sodas at the corner drug-store, and the subway or L? I confess I can't. But then I'm of the Tin-Pan clan at heart."

A last little look of defiance she cast him, but Anthony Varian chose to let it go unchallenged, and a moment later she had disappeared, stirred in spite of herself, but head erect, eyes forward to the death.

XX

It was as if Rita Charles saw Tin-Pan heaven through gray glasses. She had her old room at Waldon Hall, with an intimate balcony overlooking the ocean; the weather was ideal, the water temperature just right, and the Boardwalk was crowded every hour in the twenty-four, and yet she wasn't happy. She felt that what she missed wasn't only Chalvey or Vonnegut. Alone for the first time at the seashore, she kept mostly to her hotel, avoiding any acquaintance with the people around her, and seeking entertainment in books. If she had had the money she would have sent for Ida—now for a companion; but the hundred dollars she had secured on a trinket would only defray her own expenses.

Morning after morning, she sat on the wide piazza which overlooked ocean and boardwalk, and watched the people, or yawned over a novel. The idleness fretted her; she wasn't used to inertia. She wouldn't go in bathing alone, and the afternoon concerts occupied her for only a few hours each day. At night she had gone twice to hear the band on the pier . . . where she had slipped into a chair next to some comfortable, elderly people, hoping she would be suspected of being of their party.

Toward the end of the week, in sheer desperation, she went to call on Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair

at a house with an imposing name on New York Avenue. Rita knew they were returning to the city on Sunday night, and she felt if she couldn't possibly stand them, her duration would be of but short season. For the moment, however, they might offer some divertissement.

Their hotel was back from the beach in a narrow, crowded street like a city thoroughfare, and the house itself was far from being inviting to one of Rita's fastidious taste. The small porch was uncomfortably set with rockers, and filled with women and children all of whom watched the girl with avaricious eyes. Since the door was wide open, she walked into the lobby, and up to the desk.

A fresh-looking youth glanced up from a baseball chart to snap out, "All full up!" After which he paid her no further attention.

Rita opened her chatelaine.

"I have come to see Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair," she said, in that crystal-clear voice of hers. "Have my card sent up, please."

The youth gasped, took her in from white kid shoes to white Neapolitan hat, and disappeared. Rita glanced about for a place to sit down, but everything movable had been carried out on the porch, and only red plush furniture remained. Rita didn't fancy red plush in July.

"This is the kind of place I would be in but for my Tin-Pan regalia," she said, with deep disgust. A trio of children had followed her as far as the door, and were peering in at her. One, more venturesome, toddled over to the desk and she was obliged to move away to avoid his dirty hands catching at her white

skirt. "I don't wonder Floss is so backbiting, after this," she sighed. "It must be horrid to live at such a place when one comes away from stuffy rooms in town for a holiday."

It was fully ten minutes before the youth returned. The ladies were getting ready to go in bathing; would Miss Charles go with them, or should they get dressed and come to her?

"Where are my—my friends?" asked Rita, the color stealing up in her cheeks.

"In their room."

"May I go up?"

"Sure thing!"

There was no elevator. After climbing three flights, she came out on a narrow passageway with countless doors on either side. The girls occupied No. 411.

Rita knuckled sharply on the door.

"Is that you?" cried Miss Brocky, excitement in her voice.

"Rita Charles, yes."

Miss St. Clair unfastened the door.

"Come right in," she said. "My, you look swell! Glad to see you. How's Twenty-third and the Mother Hen?"

"Don't get that skirt of yours against the furniture," warned Florence, sharply. "They're rather careless with their cleaning here. Are you going bathing? Do come with us. It's rather good fun." Her voice softened; her eyes almost pleaded with Rita.

"I hadn't intended to," said Rita. "But don't let me interfere with your plans. I just—called——"

"We're very glad to see you," returned Florence Brocky. She glanced at Miss St. Clair. "Suppose

we don't go in this morning? Let's go up on the Steel Pier instead?"

"Sure!" nodded the demonstrator. "I'm that easy to please, you can give me garlic for Sunday evening supper. I'm the original sunshine cutie, I am!"

While the girls got into their white suits, Rita sat at the window which gave on a side-yard, and tried not to let her aversion show in her face. The small room was up under the roof, with little light and less ventilation; the two of them were in a chamber scarcely larger than her bathroom at Waldon Hall! It seemed a miracle that both of them were able to dress at the same time. Rita never knew how they managed it—or slept in the one bed!

"How do you like your hotel?" asked Lillian St. Clair, stopping to powder her nose a chalky-white. "Fine meals, here, beat old Orpington all to hollow."

"Yes, and there's a very genteel set at this house," added Florence Brockly. "We're so glad we didn't go to Castle Zenda—the porch there is quite small and no rockers! We've met some very refined people, indeed."

"Some swell feilows, believe me, Miss Charles," cried the cream demonstrator. "Honest, I'm dancing my heart away! There's one chap from Trenton—I'll introduce you 'cause I'm going home Sunday. Some lad!"

"Are you at Waldon Hall?" asked Florence suddenly. "I was telling the people at our table that we had a friend stopping there. I want you to meet them. . . . Ready, Lily?"

Miss St. Clair was, and, locking the door behind

them, they descended the narrow staircase to the lobby.

Many of the boarders were getting ready to go in the ocean, while others, shivering, were already coming out. Everywhere people were chasing around jangling keys. Rita was led proudly through the lobby and out on the porch where she "met" a dozen or more ladies, all of whom shook hands and assured her gravely that they were "pleased to meet her."

"This is our little New York friend who's stoppin' at Waldon Hall," Miss St. Clair would always explain.

"We have apartments at the same address," Florence Brockly would add, "in New York, you know."

It slowly dawned upon Rita that they were showing her off, and they were proud of her acquaintance, of her clothes, her manner, her appearance. And she did what she could, straightway falling into their plans, calling them by their given names, endearing them, laughing, chatting, shaking hands—and all the time thinking how fatal it must prove back at the Château Prunella. Anyway, they should have their hour here, almost their last, it was true but still if she could do it, their farewell should be in the nature of a demonstration.

Presently Lillian uttered a little squeal of delight.

"There's that fellow I was telling you about, now," she said, catching Rita's arm and frankly pointing. "He's a perfect devil—an' the swellest little dancer—! Come here, Mutt!" she called; and then to Rita, "His name is Meekins, but I call him Mutt 'cause he's such a cutie. . . . I want you to meet my friend, Miss Charles, Mr. Meekins. She's some little waltzer herself, believe me, so don't get chesty. . . . My Gawd,

how that boy kin dance, though!" she added sotto voce, to nobody in particular.

Harold Meekins proved to be a young man who wore his very shiny hair brushed straight back from his forehead, while his trousers appeared at least two sizes too large for him. On his left hand he displayed a gold ring set with three red stones, and on his right hand was its twin, only in green. From lapel to pocket was swung a watch chain with an elephant tusk charm, and he was decorated with various club and social emblems. He had "some kid," and his easy manners proclaimed him to be "some devil." Rita impressed him favorably.

"Where you cuties off?" he asked, after he had shaken hands with Rita, laughed playfully with Miss St. Clair, and loudly complimented Miss Brocky on her "nifty" little dress.

"Up on the Steel, angel-child," retorted Miss St. Clair. "Get your hat and follow mother."

"No, don't get your hat, Mr. Meekins," cried Almighty Floss quickly. "He wants to get good and brown before he goes home. What you, Mr. Meekins? Then people will know he's back to the shore!"

"You said it. Come on, Miss Rita," he returned.

They filed down the porch and up the avenue to the Boardwalk, where they started toward the pier four abreast, laughing, shouting, and generally "carrying-on." Rita felt her cheeks flush without the sun's rays. She detested such exhibitions. People were obliged either to get out of their way, or else be bumped into. This was not "fun" to her. The marching arm-in-arm turned her faint lest she should meet some one from Waldon Hall—it had been a

great mistake hunting up Lillian St. Clair and Floss!

"We'll all go on the Million Dollar to-night," cried the cream demonstrator suddenly. "Get that swell friend o' yours for Miss Rita, Mutt. My, he's one petty-lamb, believe me! These Trenton boys don't dip like us, Miss Rita, but you'll soon get used to 'em—and they all shake a real wicked hoof!"

"Don't count on me, please," interposed Rita hurriedly. "I shan't be able to go with you to-night."

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Meekins. "Well, I guess, yes! Sure, bring him along! More the merrier."

"Bring—whom?" asked Rita, puzzled.

"Your gold-dust twin, of course!"

"Your gen'l'man friend, he means," explained Miss St. Clair.

"I'm going to a concert with some ladies at the hotel," Rita told them, cheerfully lying to avoid their party.

"Oh, chuck the hens!" said Mr. Meekins, in disgust. "If it's a reg'lar guy bring him along, but skirts——!"

"Do come, it's our last night in Atlantic," pleaded Florence Brockly.

Finally Rita consented.

"What shall I wear?" she whispered at parting.

"Oh, your best, of course!" cried Lillian St. Clair, tossing her head.

But Florence knew better.

"The men won't be in evening clothes, you know. Don't wear a low-cut gown—or—or too grand. We're just working folk, at home or abroad," she added, unable to resist the thrust.

"And where shall I meet you?" asked Rita—she

didn't want them crowding the porches or the lobby at Waldon Hall. Neither did she like the idea of venturing out alone. "Can't you stop by for me, Florence?" she said to the school teacher. "Then we could take a chair——"

"I'll come!" cried Mr. Meekins.

"Well, indeed you won't, then!" snapped Miss St. Clair. "She didn't ask you and don't want you. Besides, I do! Mind your maw, Muttie!"

"Gee, ain't it hell to be pop'lar?" demanded Mr. Meekins of the world at large, stretching his arms and bowing his legs.

"I'll stop for you at seven-thirty, Miss Charles," said Florence, in a quiet voice.

"But I shan't have finished dinner so early!" Rita cried.

Mr. Meekins and Miss St. Clair shouted at this—and resumed their playful boxing. Miss Brockly flushed, half in anger, as she saw the expression in Rita's eyes.

"Eight, then, let's say. . . ."

"All right. I'll be ready," Rita promised.

She walked slowly back to Waldon Hall in the noon heat. The ocean gleamed quicksilver, there was scarcely a breath of air, fishermen said a storm was brewing.

There was a telegram for Miss Charles. The young man at the desk produced it with a flourish. Rita went over and sat down in one of the wicker chairs to read it.

Briefly it said:

Will see you tonight at dinner.
Chalvey.

XXI

RITA never knew how she got out of the chair and to the elevator and finally to her room, but once there, she threw herself face-down on the bed, and clutching at the covers, held very still. She was afraid to think, almost afraid to move. As a child, in moments of stress, she had held her breath until black in the face; she caught herself repeating the trick now. It was like coming out of an anesthetic; an awful nausea seized her. And through it all her heart beat madly, racing along at painful speed and keeping time to the words: "*To-night at dinner!*"

He was coming to-night—she would see Harry to-night! And she had believed him to be in far-away Buenos Aires!

She started up, murmuring his name, her first thought, woman-like, flying to self-adornment. What should she wear? She must look her best. Harry was coming, Harry was coming, Harry—was—coming——! Tears, hot and salt, like the brine of the sea, rushed to her eyes; she began to sob, at first softly, like a little, tired child, and then long, heart-breaking hysteria. She had been so alone, she had suffered so much, wanted him so badly and so often! He had left her with scarcely a word; now he was returning with a line on a telegram. But he was coming back, coming back to-night!

His brief message left her in a fever of excitement.

She could find nothing, do nothing for herself. The very thought of dressing her own hair left her a wreck. Oh, for Ida, and the Watteau screen! If she only had a new gown, something which he had never seen before, and which might tempt him to praise. Harry praised so seldom—it would be doubly sweet upon his return.

Finally she chose a summery white frock and put on all of her jewelry—which consisted of two rings, a bracelet set with sapphires, and a necklace of white corals. Everything else she had pawned—and she was still in debt! A dollar went to the hotel maid, who was called in to valet her, and a half-dollar was expended on a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley, yesterday's flowers, bought from a Boardwalk vendor. Not knowing at what hour he might arrive, she went down to the lounge to wait. Scarcely was she seated when he came towards her. He had seen her first.

Rita stood up, then sat down again, quickly. How thin he looked, and brown! Was that a streak of gray in his hair? She began to fancy all sorts of extravagant things before he reached her side and held her hand in his own lean grasp.

“. . . Good to see you again, Rita!”

The voice was calm, cold, and she had expected—what? She replied mechanically, glancing away. He was glad to see her again! If he had caught her in his arms, then and there, she wouldn't have cried out, wouldn't have minded. What more natural? If his heart was attuned to hers—but then, Harrison Chalvey was not that kind of man. He was glad to see her again, and he shook hands!

He looked around, shrugged, and laughed.

"Quite like old times, eh?"

"Quite." Her voice was flat.

He led her out on the piazza, out to the farthest point which touched the Boardwalk, and had an unobstructed view of the ocean. No mean little shops nestled under them, here. They might have been on the deck of a steamer. To the west, the sky flamed with orange and purple, but the sea and the east were gray. Fog hung low on the horizon; the wind held the tang of salt water.

"When did you arrive?" Rita asked, with an effort, following an awkward silence.

Chalvey selected chairs, and they sat down.

"At four o'clock," he replied, and reached for his cigarettes.

"I hadn't heard you were home. In my mind's eye, I pictured you still in the tropical sunset, playing at love with dark-browed señoritas. Isn't that the usual 'Soldiers of Fortune' stuff?"

He refused to meet her jest; both words and eyes were serious.

"I got in last night. They told me at Twenty-third Street you were here—I came down this morning."

"You're a nice child, Harry. . . . Are we in for a blow to-night?"

"I don't know." He seemed scarcely interested in the weather. "New York seemed unusually dead, even for July," he added.

"I'm afraid you'll find it dull. Better run away again, Harry."

This was making conversation with a vengeance. Rita sensed the triviality of their remarks, but was

powerless to amend matters even if she had had the heart to attempt such a task. And she hadn't. Words seemed to stick in her throat; the gay camaraderie of the past had fled.

From out of the grayness of the gathering night, Chalvey's next words came abruptly.

"Why didn't you tell me you were ill? . . ."

"But I haven't been ill!" she protested. What she didn't tell him was that he had left no address, that she could have written him only at his clubs even if she had been dying. The thought brought with it a flush of resentment—he treated her . . . that way! "I haven't been ill; Mrs. Orpington couldn't have told you so."

"No. But—you look pale."

She laughed. "It must be this hideous old frock, or the heat." Oh, the inanity of this hour. "Of course, you know that Nicko had run off, too? He sailed—ages ago, and I felt quite properly deserted."

Chalvey nodded.

"I had a line from him at Nice."

"Which suggests carnivals, just as Detroit does flivvers." Rita tried the flippant note, and found that it jarred. What was wrong? There was a difference in this man sitting at her side—what was it? "New York has been just another ant hill, alive with millions and millions of workers, since you boys ran off to play. I have forgotten how to trot—or, rather, they don't trot any longer, I hear. You see, I have been nowhere, seen no one, old Maggie-Sit-by-the-Fire."

"Olverson?" It was a question.

"Oh, Papa objects. Naughty, naughty. Bad for

little boys. Not for ages, Harry. I think I shall 'hie me to a nunnery,' like the poor heroine did in the golden days."

They had dinner together, with that air of insincerity, of evasion, still upon them. It pleased Rita, however, to be seen with Harrison Chalvey in the lobbies and the dining-room, for she knew that many of the guests at the hotel had speculated as to her position since her arrival at Waldon Hall, alone and seemingly without friends. There was something distinguished about Harry, something reassuring in his friendship. And that was what Rita wanted above all things—adjustment; she was sick of pretense, of sham, of shadows.

"Perhaps I was getting used to things, when Harry returns and upsets my apple-cart," she reflected. They entered the music-laden, rose-lighted atmosphere of the restaurant, and once more Rita knew she was on the tread-mill, doomed to run round and round and round. . . .

Chalvey told her nothing about himself—why he had returned to America out of season, how long he intended to remain; and she asked him nothing, having gained wisdom through experience. At eight o'clock, while they were still at table, Florence Brockly arrived, and a boy came in search of Rita.

"It is one of the young women from Mrs. Orpington's," she explained, glancing at the printed name on the card. "The school-teacher—we were going on a pier to dance to-night."

"Send her away," Chalvey said curtly.

They finished dinner and rose from the table.

"Come with me," said Rita, and led the way.

Florence Brockly, a rather shabby little figure in that nest of paradise birds, was sitting in a far corner of the lobby, and Rita and Chalvey had joined the restless crowd in the room before she saw them, and rose, coming forward to meet them. It was the act of a servitor, and Rita felt the color rise to her cheeks. Not to have saved her life could she have made the meeting otherwise, and yet socially they were equals.

"What a snob I am!" she murmured, and then came the old, recurring thought—sham, sham! Though it was Florence herself who got into the uniform of a domestic at the sight and sound of Waldon Hall.

"I am so sorry, but Mr. Chalvey is only down for the week-end," Rita declared, forgetting, or else ignoring the fact that Miss Brockly herself was returning home on Sunday. "You won't mind too much, will you, Florence, if I postpone our dancing date?"

"Why, no, that's all right," stammered the little school-teacher, staring at the man with whom she had just shaken hands—Airy, Fairy would never believe that!

"I'll see you to-morrow, then—I'll telephone to your hotel," Rita promised, after which she whispered something to Chalvey, and he escorted Miss Brockly out of the lobby and put her into a rolling-chair, giving the man his fare before he left.

"Where shall I tell him?" he asked politely, and Almighty Floss replied, still gasping, like a minnow left high and dry on the beach, "The Million Dollar, please." Chalvey repeated the directions, bowed, and disappeared into the hotel.

"I didn't know you associated with those people," he said to Rita, upon his return. He seemed displeased, and brushed his hands together lightly, as if ridding them of something unbecoming. "Who is she?"

"Florence Brockly, a public school-teacher. You must have seen her in Twenty-third Street. . . . I was very lonely, and I don't scrape acquaintances with people at hotels," she announced, with her usual frank decision.

At this speech the cloud lifted, he began to find himself, his old self, and even to smile. And Rita, watching, recalled a phrase which she had used to Anthony Varian, one night in June, on the front steps at Mrs. Orpington's. ". . . We get to know their men. . . ." How true!

Toward nine o'clock she got a soft white coat, and they started up the Boardwalk in spite of the ominous storm-signals in sky and on sea. Angry clouds piled high the east; giant white-caps rode in to the beach, breaking with a stinging spray; far off sounded the faint musketry of thunder. Rita wasn't afraid of a storm—except for her clothes, she decided whimsically; and force of habit is such that when she was with Harrison Chalvey, clothes became a secondary consideration. He had expressed a desire to walk.

They started out. Either the merry-makers and holiday crowds had all kept to their hotels, or else reached their destinations long ago, for the Boardwalk was as nearly deserted as Rita ever remembered seeing it. In the wind the lights swung drunkenly, and her white lace scarf floated out and away, and had

to be rescued by Chalvey—at which performance she laughed delightedly.

“You looked so—so un-Harryish, running and scooping that way,” she explained. “It is—positively—*fierce!*” she panted, winding the recaptured lace around her throat. “But you would come!”

“Do you want to go back to the hotel?” he asked, stopping short.

“No-o!”

“If you do——”

“I do not! Come! You look like Mr. Poe’s *Raven*, standing there, black and croaking against the night.”

They pushed on, and now the thunder drew nearer, while the sky was cut from time to time with vivid lightning. It became almost an impossibility to talk; the wind seemed bent on beating the breath out of them. Presently, even the rolling-chairs had disappeared; they were further up the island than Rita ever recalled having been, somewhere near the Inlet.

Then, without apology, the rain came down like a cloudburst from an angry heaven. They hadn’t thought it was so near. A few feet away rose a pavilion, open and alone, but Chalvey seized Rita’s arm and almost carried her to that poor shelter. By standing directly in the middle of the thing one could escape all but the spray of the rain, and there they clung, he silent, Rita half-hysterical with laughter.

“What’s the matter?”

“I was thinking of all the pains I had taken to make myself smart, only to spend the evening alone in an open pavilion!” she cried.

"What a brute I am to drag you here! You're not afraid?"

"Oh, no, Harry! You know——"

He did. In his heart, he called her game, a pal, instead of which she was merely careless in the face of possible danger since she thought she had so little to lose.

"If you don't catch cold——" he said, once.

She laughed back at him.

"I never catch cold, but sometimes my nose gets red—horrid thought!"

Again they were silent. More rain, more wind, thunder, lightning and breaking sea.

"Quite all right?"

"Right as right, Harry." The storm seemed to soothe her; the fury of the elements sent her spirits soaring. For instance, she could laugh at Harry scurrying after her scarf.

"If things could only remain like this always!"

The exclamation, coming almost like a prayer, startled her, but habit is such that she made ready to laugh it away, when, instead, she sneezed.

"That's not a red nose. . . ."

"You're catching cold." Chalvey looked around for some means of escape. "How selfish I am, to bring you here like this!"

Her white coat was buttoned lightly across her chest, but not satisfied, he turned up her collar, and drew the big lapels together at her throat. Rita noticed that his fingers seemed all thumbs—they bungled, and even trembled.

"You are shivering," she said, and touched his hands with her slim, cool fingers.

By way of an answer, he caught her hands and held them tightly within his own. Surprised, Rita raised her eyes and their glances met in silence. Then, before she could make the next move, she felt his arms steal around her body, while he drew her close, whispering her name in tones she had never dreamed were his to utter. He bent his head. . . .

It was odd, that she, at such a moment, should see only the unusual side of the situation, that she should try to analyze the conditions which had brought this thing to pass. Harry had never made love to her before, never attempted to caress her; she had believed him cold. Yet now she was in his arms, his lips were pressed to hers, and he swayed with passion, no longer held in check, but free to answer the call of the heart. Rita had often dreamed of such a moment. Now it had come—and she was carefully considering the cause! There was no thrill, no rapture. She fancied actors must feel this way in a tense scene in a play.

"Rita," Chalvey cried, holding her off a little and gazing down in her white, wet face. "I am mad about you—you have driven me insane! I have thought about nothing but you for months—ever since I left New York. Your charm and sweetness have brought me back to America. I love you so much, Rita, so very much, my darling!"

She drew a long, deep breath, and in the darkness she smiled a little. It was very pleasant to be loved so well, pleasant, even while it was disappointing. Rita didn't try to understand herself, then; she knew that when his telegram arrived she had wept with joy, while the very thought of seeing him again had

swept her from her feet. She had loved him so well, long, and he had kept so aloof! To-night he pleaded—with little more effect than a printed page would have exercised for her. It was strange. Possibly it was because she felt so wet and uncomfortable, and her sense of humor made itself heard even above the voice of love, or the anger of the storm. She didn't know. Harry was here; she was safe in his arms; but the moment was oddly stripped of the rose and gold of romance.

"Rita, say that you care a little, my darling," came his voice, interrupting her thoughts.

"I have always loved you, Harry, I guess," she mused. And how she had loved him the night he told her he was sailing on the morrow!

"I have always loved you, too, my dear," he said, and now he seemed satisfied, and at rest.

This surprised her, left her dubious. Trying to withdraw her hands, Rita moved back, searching his face with her honest eyes.

"Does that seem strange?" he asked quickly, as if divining what was passing in her mind. "It is true, nevertheless. I think I have cared from the first time we ever met—cared too much to let you know, or for my own peace of mind."

"Why?" she asked then, with a little curious catch in her voice.

"I—— My people, you see, had other plans, Rita."

She nodded. "You mean it wouldn't have done for you to have married me?"

He couldn't deny it.

"Sartoris had just married . . . Sally Cole. My mother was especially bitter, resentful. And I cared

too much for her to hurt her—the same as I cared too much for you—to injure you, Rita ”

She smiled an odd, crooked little smile which in the darkness he couldn't see.

“And now my mother has decided to make her home in the future with my sister, Lady Hoskins, in England. My life is my own—and yours. Forget the past——”

She couldn't forget the past which held such moments of sweetness, moments of unrequited love, it is true, but at least love.

“You've always cared! So you've always cared!” she said, in a low, wondering tone.

“Always!”

“Before you went to South America, in the spring?”

“Yes. Always. That is why I went away—so suddenly.”

“I see.” She nodded thoughtfully. “To get away from me.”

“I felt that I couldn't stand seeing you any longer, and yet remain silent. It was either go or speak.”

“And you went!”

“My darling, I wanted to be fair to all,” he said.

“I'm not blaming you, Harry; I would have done the same thing, I suppose. You tried to forget me at Buenos Aires—but you came back after all.” Her head went up, her eyes flashed black with the emotion of the moment, and she caught her breath, sharply. “You shouldn't have gone, Harry; you shouldn't have gone—at least, not that way,” she said in a ringing voice. “That night—with scarcely a handshake—and I half-wild with the pain of losing you! You shouldn't have gone!”

"Hush! Hush! I am here, I have come back to you."

"But you went—like that——!"

"Everything is the same," he cried. "Listen, Rita! Forgive me. I have come back. Everything is the same. Say it, say it, my darling—everything is the same . . ."

Long years at the U. S. A. & B., and the gay camaraderie which she enjoyed with men of Harrison Chalvey's stamp, left Rita in a frame of mind not incapable of accepting, or appreciating, their point of view. Much of that which Harry had confessed to she agreed with whole-heartedly. She understood. But even that understanding couldn't change her entire nature, nor alter the fact that he had made a mistake, and let slip through his fingers the golden moment of their lives.

"Yes, everything is the same," she echoed, and she even smiled. "But . . . there should have been some word, some sign. If I had known that night—God, how I loved you that night, my dear!"

He held her close, kissing her lips, her brow. She said nothing, did nothing, like a marble statue in his embrace.

"You will marry me, Rita?"

"Yes, I'll marry you, Harrison," she promised quietly.

XXII

CHALVEY had pleaded for an early wedding, and while Rita's sense of humor warned her that a delay of any kind might prove fatal, still she was in no great hurry to set the date. So it was decided that nothing definite should be done until she returned to New York, at the end of two weeks. Nothing definite, that is, but that she wasn't to return to the U. S. A. & B., and she watched Harry send a telegram off to the elder Olverson with unfeigned pleasure. Chalvey merely announced Miss Charles' resignation—nothing more. Rita laughed many times in secret when she thought of the old man's feelings upon receiving it. Possibly he would blame little J. T.

The next morning the skies were as blue as Italy's, and only the seaweed along the beach bespoke last night's storm. It was good to live—just to be alive. Rita had doubted so often of late the goodness of living. She sang as she dressed, and came down to breakfast in a charming frame of mind . . . to find Anthony Varian waiting for her in the lobby.

It was the first time she had seen him when he didn't wear some outward sign of his calling, and the man struck her most agreeably as he advanced to meet her with the spring of a boy in some light flannels. He was not as handsome as Nick Vonnegut, who resembled a magazine hero, nor so distinguished looking as Harrison Chalvey, who seemed all ancestors, but he was nice to look at, all strength and activity. An-

thony Varian was as virile as the New York winters which Rita loved so well.

"It does seem that surprises never come singly!" she cried, with welcome in her voice, holding out to him both her hands.

Her greeting brought a light to his eyes and a smile to his lips.

"How fine you're looking again, Rita! Trust Father Neptune to set a chap up, eh?" He stood grinning down on her like a great, care-free school-boy, with tasks left behind him, on a glorious holiday. "Though really I'm only down for the day," he explained. "I arrived last night, during the storm, but they said you were out. By golly, I'd like to make it a month instead of a day! You know you are looking bully!"

"Father Neptune," she said, bobbing her head little-girl fashion.

"Right-o!"

"Or maybe it's this frock which you've never seen before?" she teased.

"Nothing wrong with that frock!" he insisted scornfully.

"Isn't paid for," she ventured archly.

"Oh, that!" Handsomely he swept her indebtedness aside.

Rita laughed. "I believe your visit is not professional after all," she declared.

"My party. . . . Had breakfast?"

"No. You?"

"Not yet. Waiting for you—and an invitation."

"Come along, then; I'm famished!"

Rita led the way to the table which she and Chalvey

had occupied at dinner the night before. And strangely enough, it wasn't until that moment that she remembered Harry. He was stopping at an hotel next door, thereby doing homage to Mrs. Grundy. It amused Rita to think of what he would say, or at least conclude, when he came over to meet her at eleven o'clock and found Varian there in the same hotel. She laughed, for Chalvey had lost all power to make her cry, nowadays.

"Tell me about New York?" she demanded suddenly, turning her eyes on Varian's face.

"Hot," he answered, and moved his broad shoulders in a manner which in a woman would be called a shrug. In Anthony it became youth triumphant, and Rita leaned a little forward as if there was something sweet and brief which she must not miss.

"You tell me about the seashore," he said.

She lifted her head, and sighed.

"The wash of the waves on the beach makes me homesick for the sound of the 'L.' I miss the hot streets, the crowded trains, the weary throngs. I miss the prunes at Mrs. Orpington's—and the Mother Hen herself. I miss ill-kept Broadway, and its well-kept denizens. In short, I miss New York. If it weren't for the weather, Manhattan Isle would be all the paradise I'm looking for—or ever hope to see! Almighty Floss is here, and the Airy, Fairy One as well—I went to see them yesterday. The Lily Maid spends most of her time sitting on the beach, in the sun, while a devoted swain called Meekins pours seawater over her head. It beats peroxide, I believe."

Varian laughed. "I'm glad you went to see the girls," he said.

"I was lonesome," she pouted. "And they know impossible men! I only went to see them because I was bored to death."

He only laughed some more.

"Evidently you don't believe in letting your left hand know what your right hand does."

"Don't let's quarrel, Tony." She threw him a lazy smile. "They are quite dreadful—you know it."

"I'm not quarreling, I'm merely telling you what's what. Probably they never had your advantages, Rita."

"What?" She laughed merrily. "It was a little cunning, and a pretty face, which set me down at Waldon Hall instead of in their wretched hut. Tony, my dad left me the world to live in—not a penny, not even a decent frock or a high school education! Parrot-like, I learned the rest when I came to New York. But let's talk about pleasant things, and not about the Flossies and Lillians and Ritas. You know, I don't want to quarrel with you to-day."

"I thank my stars for that," he laughed.

"And I quite adore you when you're a regular man."

"A—what?"

"Not in your vestment, and without your hindsided-backwards collar," she explained airily. "That's Ida—I often think of Ida."

He flushed a little, and then she laughed and teased him with her two forefingers.

"I thought we weren't going to quarrel," he said, half-provoked in spite of himself.

"Then don't you 'fuss' with me. Honest injun, you're awf'ly nice in that suit of flannels. Why are you a parson anyway, Tony?"

"Why are you . . . you, Rita?"

She flushed at the hidden meaning in his voice, yet his eyes, so grave and tender, kept back the hot flow of words which she meant to pour out. And she never spoke irreverently of his cloth again. In some dim way she perceived that Anthony Varian's calling was in truth a part of himself.

"I heard from Carrie Billings," he said presently. Somehow they found it difficult to speak of Carrie as Madame Charida, although one addressed her letters that way, of course. "Her Boston season seems to be promising great things. She has sung in 'Aïda' and in 'Martha,' as well as in 'Carmen,' and—funny thing—the papers all speak of her as a dramatic soprano, though Twenty-third Street thought it was a mere contralto. Now that her season is over, she is coming back to New York to study. If you knew how glad I am for her——"

"I believe I do know," Rita said softly. "And what about Ida?"

"Ida has been at school. Carrie writes that she will accompany her to New York in September."

They had finished their breakfast, and rising, they strolled out on the piazza, finding chairs in the cool of the gayly striped awnings. A boy, an Italian, came up with a basket of flowers—Varian chose a bunch of little white roses and presented them to Rita. A second youth, a Greek, approached their chairs with the morning papers. Anthony was about to send him away, when Rita intervened.

"Smoke and read—I know you're dying to." Saying this, she leaned forward and selected two or three New York dailies, while Varian tossed the lad a coin.

"I'd much rather miss my coffee than my *Times*," she added, laughing. "Here, I'll go halves with you."

There was something very sweet, Varian thought, about "going halves" with Rita with the morning papers, an intimacy that was new and thrilling. He couldn't read. He smoked a cigarette and over the page watched her as she skimmed through the news, first turning to the shopping bargains. Presently she glanced up and found him regarding her, all smiles.

"What is it?" she asked, wrinkling her nose like a rabbit.

"I don't for the life of me know, but—it's mighty . . . *right*," Anthony replied with boyish candor.

"What is, Tony?"

"Sitting here this way with you."

She blushed, an old-fashioned, un-New Yorkish blush, and then, because she realized she had done it, she pretended anger.

"You are very rude," she said. "If you insist upon staring at me so—as if I were a person with a head too little or an arm too many—I shall have to find another chair."

But he was not deceived, and a moment later she was laughing with him again.

"What would you like best to do this morning?" he asked. "It must be very best and special and all that, because I have only one morning, you see. You say."

"No, you." She entered spiritedly into the game of boy and girl and make-believe.

"Bathing? Aw, come on in, the water's fine!"

Rita clapped her hands and uttered soft little shrieks

of delight. "Oh, goody! I'm so glad you came today, nice, big boy."

"I'm glad, too—nice, spunky girl," he answered, in kind.

She consulted her wrist-watch—it was ten-thirty. Chalvey was coming at eleven. Rita hadn't forgotten him, but she had managed to keep him from her thoughts during breakfast, even while he sat there at the table like a death's head at a feast. Chalvey! . . . It occurred to her that possibly she could avoid him all day long. Anthony was remaining only for the day—perhaps she could manage it, perhaps she could give the day wholly to him. And he need not know, just then, that she had promised to be Harrison's wife. Of course she was going to marry Chalvey—then she wouldn't have to pinch and scrape, pawn and run into debt; but that day was far off, oh, quite far off. Yes, the next few hours belonged to Tony. He should have them without interruption; they were his, come what might.

"We bathe from the hotel, you know," she said, as they rose and went towards the door. "Shall we get ready now? I'm wild to get out in those breakers. Hurry, please. I'll meet you downstairs in half-an-hour."

Varian promised. After he had hurried off, Rita went to the telephone and called Harrison Chalvey's hotel.

She said she was feeling out of sorts, and that she thought she would remain in her room until it was time to dress for dinner—yes, she would try to have dinner with him. Why, that was a lovely thought! Of course she would go to the Traymore with him.

She must have caught a cold from the wetting last night—which, perhaps, was preferable to a red nose, come to think of it. No, she didn't need a doctor. She knew how to take care of herself—all she required now was rest and quiet. Indeed, he had better not come over this morning—or send flowers; time enough for flowers if the worst came to the worst. It was merely a silly cold. Yes, at dinner. At the Traymore; she'd appear in her best bib and tucker.

Under ordinary circumstances Rita didn't object seriously to prevaricating—few women do; but she hated herself for that lie to Chalvey. She would falsify unblushingly to enemies, or for friends, but her code had been always to play fair with a pal. Harry had been her pal, and was to be her husband, and yet with a lie she set him aside for another man. Though necessary, her treatment was shabby.

"It serves him right for coming down yesterday instead of to-morrow," was the thought she comforted herself with. And Harrison himself would have been happier if he had delayed his trip one day.

A few minutes to eleven, Rita came out of her bathhouse to find Varian waiting for her. She looked smaller in her smart black suit; the man looked bigger, stronger, younger. He seemed so full of play, so boyish and care-free, that she gazed at him dumb-founded. Catching her hands, he raced her across the hot sand to the water's edge, where she gave vent to a breathless "Ouch!" and lifted one foot, shivering, from the ankle-deep sea.

"If you duck me, Tony——! If you dare!" she warned.

He replied that if she really were the spunky little

girl he thought her to be she wouldn't mind the ducking; and presently she had grown accustomed to the first chill of the water, and they waded out to meet the breakers. For half-an-hour they jumped and laughed like children on a holiday. He was so strong! He lifted her clear of each wave, floated her on the breast of the baby swells, and held fast to her hand while she kicked and pranced, filling her eyes, and his, with the salt spray. Then she wanted to see him swim, but Anthony refused to leave her alone, and when she insisted, and he struck out, beyond the breakers, she grew nervous and alarmed for his safety, and shouted his name so loudly that the bathers near her turned and smiled.

"Call him back, please!" she said to a man.

So he swam after Varian and called him back—thereupon the three of them laughed uproariously.

"It was so horrid, out there," Rita insisted.

"You made me go," Varian replied, looking at her tenderly.

They waded back to the beach, and strolled along, side by side, seeking a place in the sun. It was the noon hour and the sands were thronged with people, both in bathing-costumes and gay, summer attire. Rita ran on ahead, settling at last upon a place which struck her fancy.

"Here, here!" she cried, and so they dropped down, Varian stretched at full length so that he could look up and see her eyes.

Seizing a handful of sand, Rita tossed it into the air.

"Look out for what goes up!" she cried. But instead of descending on Anthony, most of it fell upon

a gentleman sitting in one of the beach chairs, just a few feet away. He brought out his handkerchief, flicking the sand from his trousers.

"Sorry!" cried Rita, glancing up.

The man in the chair was Harrison Chalvey.

XXIII

JUST for a second Rita was nonplused, but certainly there was no trace of fear in the action which prompted her next move. She knew, for instance, that the two men were acquainted at least through Varian's assistantship at St. David's-on-Avenue, but she believed, too, that Chalvey didn't know of her friendship for the clergyman. Her wits were gathered quickly, knowing both men the way she did, and realizing that a scene was to be avoided above all things. She had played unfair with both of them!

"Hello, Harry!" she cried, striking just the right note. "Do you know Mr. Varian? . . . Of course you don't, though——"

"Mr. Chalvey and I have met before," spoke up Anthony, little suspecting Rita's ruse. "I thought you were in South America," he added, addressing Harrison.

"Got back early in the week. . . . How is your cold, Rita?"

"One of the old tabbies back at the hotel prescribed a cold sea bath, so I tried the ocean as being the nearest thing to the Polar regions——"

She stopped, their eyes met.

"I'm glad to know you have improved so much since this morning," said Chalvey, disentangling himself from his chair. "Shall I see you at dinner?"

"Oh, yes! Seven-thirty. The lovely new grill-room at the Traymore."

Chalvey raised his hat, grasped his stick and newspapers, and sauntered off down the beach. Rita got up on her knees and watched him anxiously for several minutes without speaking. Then she laughed, a spiteful little laugh, and gave her hand to Anthony Varian, who helped her to her feet.

"He's the biggest old maid!" she declared, shaking out the sand from her skirt. Really, she was angry, angry because she knew that she was at fault, and had played unfair. "The only time he is fit to associate with is when he is drinking—and then he's a dub!"

Varian's jaw snapped, but he said nothing, and all at once it occurred to Rita that she wasn't so tremendously clever after all. She hadn't completely hoodwinked either one of them; each man was torn with black suspicion.

"Harrison Chalvey came down on Thursday," she said presently, in a sort of explanation.

"Had you an engagement with him this morning?" Varian asked pointedly.

"Yes," she acknowledged, after the briefest pause, raising eyes to his.

"And you broke it?"

"Yes." She flashed defiance. "When I left you to get ready for the water, I—I 'phoned him, pleading illness."

"I am sorry." His face grew dark, the boy had fled.

"Sorry?" she echoed.

"Why did you do it, Rita?"

All at once she seemed to collapse, anger, defiance taking wing.

"Why did I do it?" she repeated, with a wan little smile. "Because I shall have only one day with you, Tony—and God alone knows how many days with Harry Chalvey! I am going to marry him."

What she had expected she couldn't have put into words, perhaps, but she knew it wasn't silence, so poignant as almost to be felt. He frightened her, for she was woman enough to know that Varian loved her dearly, too much, certainly, to risk bringing her to unhappiness through marriage.

"Why, Tony——!" she cried, clasping his arm.

"What is it?" he demanded, looking at her in a dazed way.

"Don't—don't look that way. People will notice! What is the matter?"

"Why——! I guess I was thinking. So you're going to marry Harrison Chalvey!"

"Yes. . . . You see, it *can* happen again—again and again, I guess, if the girl's clever."

"But, Rita——"

"Don't preach, Tony."

He passed his hand wearily before his eyes.

"I can't believe it," said Varian. "You knew that I——"

She laughed a hard, jarring chuckle.

"I can't marry a parish-house—and Chalvey is tremendously wealthy. At least it is better than old Olverson or his young cub. Chances like this come only once in a lifetime. A Broadway beauty could scarcely do better, could she?"

"Few professional beauties do worse!" he retorted spiritedly.

"What?" she demanded, drawing back, aroused.

They had stopped at the edge of the Boardwalk, in the cool of its shade, and within a few feet of them hurried hundreds, thousands, of persons to mid-day dinner or luncheon. It was a strange spot for a heart-to-heart tragedy, and the actors wore most unusual costumes—two things which Rita often recalled in after years. But now the laughter had gone out of their lives, and only grim tragedy remained. They were dreadfully in earnest, youth face-to-face with its first crisis, and in some dim way they seemed to divine it.

"If you mean there is some reason, some special reason, some secret reason, why I shouldn't marry Harrison Chalvey——" She waited expectantly, but Anthony shook his head.

"There is no reason other than that which you already know. Chalvey is not an inebriate, but he drinks too much at times. And, you don't love him, Rita."

"I did once," she returned reminiscently. "He was heaven and earth, and all that in them is to me. I did, Tony—tremendously! But . . . I guess his treatment battered down my self-respect, and when I discovered that was gone, I—I found my love for him had sagged, too. But—money—— And he is quite mad about me. Oh, you're a man; you don't know; but—I don't love any one else—of course!"

"Rita!"

"I don't, I don't!" She closed her eyes, like a little girl, and shook her head vigorously.

Anthony drew a short, quick breath, and took a step towards her. "Why, then, didn't you tell me

of your engagement this morning?" he demanded.

"Would you have gone bathing with me, then?" she flashed.

"Not unless Chalvey were along, no!"

"Well, I didn't want him. He's a muff in the water—only decent on champagne," and she broke into unsteady laughter.

He refused to smile with her.

"And knowing this you're bent on marrying the man!"

"He's more than mere man, he's Croesus!"

Varian was silent, and conscious for the first time that passersby were regarding them with some concern, Rita turned on her heel, expecting him to follow her.

"We can't remain here quarreling all day. Suppose we get into some clothes. I'll see you at luncheon—when we can quarrel some more."

"No."

She came back a step, eyes and lips questioning.

"Did you call?"

"I shan't see you at lunch, Rita," he told her. "I shall never see you again, if you persist in holding to this engagement."

The old imperious look came back in her dark eyes and her mouth became a straight, cruel line.

"I shall certainly do as I please. I shall live my own life in my own way, without interference from any quarter. Do as you wish, Mr. Varian."

"Rita, don't be so—hard. You're not, really, you know."

"I might retort by saying don't be so—soft!"

"Think what you are doing."

"Think! I've been praying for such a windfall ever since I can remember, but I scarcely thought my prayers would bear such satisfactory fruit."

"Satisfactory?" Varian challenged.

"Yes, just that," Rita cried, stung to fury. "Harrison Chalvey is wealthy, and that is the kind of love I feed on. You may see me again, or not, as you please—no, as I please! Go back to your beloved parish-house, and preach your hell-fire to a lot of puerile men, and tired, silly women. I know better. And I'm going to live my own life in my own way. Good-by!"

"Is that all you have to say?" he asked tersely.

"Everything!" She made a little sweeping gesture with her hands.

He bowed and moved away. "Good-by," he echoed, and was gone.

Being a true daughter of Eve, Rita fully expected Varian to telephone to her some time during the afternoon, and she didn't allow their quarrel to interfere with her appetite at luncheon in the least.

All afternoon she waited in the lobby, and on the porches, for Anthony. He wasn't in the dining-room when she left the table, but since the lunch-hour covered a comfortable space of time, she took it for granted that he would appear some time before the room closed. And of course he would join her afterwards to have it out. Therefore, when at five o'clock he hadn't put in an appearance, she threw prudence to the winds and gave her card to the youth at the desk with instructions to find Mr. Varian. The young

man, when he heard the name, looked up and smiled his apologies.

"Mr. Varian has gone, Miss Charles—very likely he left while you were at lunch. No, he didn't stop for luncheon."

Rita thanked him mechanically, and moved away from the desk. So he had really gone; it was good-by!

She strolled out on the piazza, out to the foremost point, where they had sat this morning, and under the gay awnings, she found a chair, sinking into it, alone with her thoughts. At first she was very angry with Anthony—it was childish to behave in such a manner! If he had really cared he would have stayed to talk things over, to square himself. Not that all the talking-to in the world could have kept her from marrying Chalvey—she merely wished to be reminded that she was making a great sacrifice in holding to her engagement. There seems to be a certain satisfaction in being told that one is about to become very unhappy through one's own fault, a morbid pleasure to be gained from dwelling upon the fact that one might have avoided these pitfalls. Rita was sure that she would never be supremely happy with Harrison Chalvey, and it would have been comforting to discuss her future with Anthony because her mind was made up beforehand!

Then, without warning, her anger shifted from Varian to Chalvey. Harry was such a muff beside the other man! Suddenly she felt towards him very much as she had felt towards several clerks at the U. S. A. & B., young men who had dared to ask her to go with them to the Grand Central Palace to dance, or

to a vaudeville show at one of the small-time houses. How superior she had felt to them! How superior, now, she felt Varian to be to Chalvey!

Perhaps it wasn't only her woman's vanity which led Rita to believe she could marry Anthony if she as much as crooked her little finger in his direction. True, he had never offered himself; indeed, he had said that he didn't want to marry her, but just the same she glanced fondly at her little finger and smiled. She could; Tony loved her. However, Rita didn't dare to dwell too long on that thought; she was going to marry Chalvey, of course, who was quite mad about her!

There was some little satisfaction in the thought that this cold, proud man loved her so devotedly, loved her, even, in spite of himself. In her heart of hearts she had never hoped to marry Harrison Chalvey; and when she believed him to be indifferent, she had cared for him in a way which had left her hopeless in the face of his desertion. But, it must be as she had told Anthony; Harry's coldness, his indifference, in time had chilled her love. She was living on pleasant memories, when he appeared, unexpectedly, from South America. There had been one over-powering joy at the mere thought of seeing him again, and then . . . this. The tables were turned, and now he had become her slave. Well, she must manage to get some enjoyment out of slave-driving; there was nothing else left to her, it seemed.

At six o'clock she came in and went up to her room to dress for dinner. Purposely she delayed her appearance in the lounge until half-past seven, when she believed Harrison would be there on tenter-hooks,

having waited for the better part of thirty minutes. She was, then, surprised, even alarmed, to find that he was nowhere in sight, nor had the desk-clerk answered any inquiries from him. Rita sat down to wait, and presently eight o'clock chimed. At this shock, she rose and went to the telephone-booth.

After a long time, or what seemed to her nerves to be a cruelly long time, she heard Chalvey's voice.

"Why, where in the world, Harry——!" She wasn't sure of which note to strike. First, she was the pal of happy Château Prunella days, and then she became the indignant fiancée. "I'm waiting for you to take me to dinner!"

"I am sorry for that—there has been a mistake," Chalvey replied suavely. "I told the man at the desk here to send a message to you at Waldon Hall regretting my absence this evening. When I returned from my stroll on the beach this morning, I found the Van Vleets had arrived. I dined with them."

"This is unpardonable!" she flashed, trembling with indignation.

"My dear Rita, how was I to know you wouldn't be down with another cold this evening?" he asked blandly.

"I am dressed and waiting for you, Harry."

"Oh! Then Varian has returned to town!"

"You insult me," she cried. "I won't remain to listen to any more."

"You have yourself to blame if you lay yourself open to insult, my dear," replied Chalvey. "Good-by!"

As she caught the click of the receiver as he rang off, a sort of panic seized her. She called shrilly

his name, jerking the hook of the instrument up and down in quick, nervous grasp. Her indignation melted like winter's snow before an April sun; she grew limp and cold.

"You cut me off, Central!" she cried to the girl. "Give me my number again—at once! . . . Page Mr. Harrison Chalvey, please—quickly!"

A few minutes later she heard his suave voice again.

"That wretched girl cut me off," she said, ready to shift the blame, and make-up. "I'm so sorry about to-night, Harry. I waited, you know. Now I shall have to eat my dinner all alone, I suppose." She paused, but he offered no solution to her problem, and so she went on. "You know I didn't get your message, or else—or else——" Still he said nothing. His conduct angered her so that she longed to box his ears, and yet she was highly appreciative of her position. She had resigned from old Olverson's employ, and had driven Anthony from her—she couldn't afford to quarrel with Chalvey. "What did you say, dear?" she asked, when the silence became painful.

"I said nothing, but as a matter of fact, concluding you had other plans for to-night, and not caring to be *de trop*, I have accepted Miss Van Vleet's invitation to a private dance here in the hotel. I will call you in the morning. Good-night."

Like a person in à trance, Rita groped her way out of the booth and towards the elevators. It seemed there were still . . . slaves and . . . slaves.

XXIV

HARRISON CHALVEY had only taken a chance, and after he had come from the telephone he was a little dubious as to the outcome of his maneuver, for there were no such people as the Van Vleets at the hotel. But he was still smarting under her treatment of this morning, and bitterly resentful of the fact that she had deceived him in order to go bathing with Varian. Chalvey would have ridiculed the idea that he was jealous of Anthony, or that he could be jealous of him, but the fact remained that he regarded the young clergyman with distinctly hostile eyes, and because of him, put in a very uncomfortable day.

It had never occurred to Chalvey that Rita might not care for him, that his money might make a difference in the long run. To his credit be it said that even now the possibility of her marrying him for his wealth and position never implanted itself strongly in his mind; although it was brought home to him, too, that Rita was not altogether indifferent to other men. Apparently she was not insensible to Anthony Varian, and she showed a tendency to kick over the traces, besides. Harry thought he might as well take the ribbons in hand now as later on. But the evening he spent alone was every bit as dull as Rita's, fully dressed on her bed.

She had begun to fear him. The race had just commenced, but already he let her feel the whip.

Above all things, Rita, now, wanted to make him suffer. When she was a greedy little tinpanner, thankful for the crumbs that fell from her more fortunate sisters' table, she had accepted his favor or neglect as a matter of course. But in those far-off days she was a tinpanner, and she had loved him hopelessly. Now, she was his fiancée, and he had confessed his adoration. There was a difference—which he didn't seem able to grasp. Rita only wished that she might dare to make him understand it, but she didn't—yet. There on her bed, far up above the noise and the lights of the city, she raged and planned revenge. Oh, he should pay, some day.

But she wasn't so sure of his affections now, not half as sure as she would like to be. He disregarded his engagement with her, and went to a dance with another woman! And she had been so positive, so mockingly positive of him only a few short hours ago! Rita felt that she had been cheated, robbed; and she had—of her confidence and self-love.

By morning she was quite prepared for anything. After tossing, wide-awake, half the night, she rose and dressed early, seating herself beside the telephone. When his call came, it required all of her strength to choke back a cry of relief, and on the piazza, half-an-hour later, there was little of the shrew, and much of the tamed, that greeted him. And Chalvey himself was well contented to let things rest. There was no raking in half-burned ashes.

Harrison was not slow to see that Rita had changed her tactics overnight. A cold and selfish man, he had thawed at a glimpse of her sweetness and charm, and while he loved her better than he had ever loved

any human thing before, he was not willing to spend his days dancing to the tunes which her fancy dictated. It was here that Rita made her mistake. It was her other self that had won him in the first place, the self that was gentle yet gay, proud yet self-effacing; when she attempted the upper-hand with him, she was showing him a side which he had never seen before—and didn't wish to see again. Chalvey wasn't clever, but he began to doubt the wisdom of having placed his heart at Rita's feet.

They enjoyed their day together, for each respected the other a little more. Rita was no longer so sure, either of herself or of Chalvey's affections, and Harry persuaded himself that it was some indisposition on her part which accounted for her behavior of yesterday; neither of them mentioned Anthony Varian.

While they were out on one of the piers, the Grand March from "Aïda," played by an Italian Band, awakened in Rita's breast memories of other days, of Carrie Billings and the phonograph, of Ida. It was strange, perhaps, how Rita's heart went out to Ida. Miss Billings was playing the rôle of fairy godmother which she had always reserved for herself, but there must be something, something she could do for the former slavey. Impulsively Rita turned to Chalvey.

"Do you remember having seen a little maid at the house?—at Mrs. Orpington's, I mean, of course!"

He didn't, he recalled no one in Twenty-third Street. He only knew the place was impossible from every standpoint. A maid was less than a door-plate to Harry.

"What about her?" he asked, putting down his paper, and interested because she was.

"I'd like to have her spend a week with me, Harry," she told him.

"If you require a maid, get an experienced French woman," he said tersely.

"I want Ida to come as my guest," said Rita, flushing.

"Oh!" And he glanced down again at the papers he had been reading. "You know," he ventured gently, a moment later, "you are no longer living in a Twenty-third Street boarding-house, Rita, and you are quite a different person now from what you were as old Olverson's stenographer. You realize that, don't you think? As soon as they return to town, you must meet my friends; my cousin, Mrs. Goulding, will give a dance for you. Isn't that better?"

The thought of meeting Maud Golding was very sweet, but Rita held, undaunted, to her course.

"Ida has been very nice to me. I thought you'd understand. I don't want to hug memories of Twenty-third Street, or the U. S. A. & B. all through life, but I should feel very mean and small if I could forget Ida's faithfulness. She is at school now, in Boston and we will keep away from your friends—the Van Vleets."

Behind his newspaper Chalvey smiled.

"Very well, then; have her down for a week," he said good-naturedly. "I will give you a check to send to her when we return to the hotel. I, too, hope we shan't forget our indebtedness."

Rita, smiling, shook her head.

"It isn't . . . indebtedness, exactly."

"Well, have it your way, my dear." He threw her an amused little look and resumed his perusal of the

stock market. "Evidently you believe with Goldsmith in the 'luxury of doing good.'"

"I don't know about Goldsmith," confessed Rita archly; "but I believe in Ida."

But Chalvey let her understand pretty plainly that he expected her to cut off from all old ties when once she was his wife. He even inquired about her relatives, and was frankly relieved when she told him she had neither parents nor brothers and sisters, and that she had held no communication with her cousins back in Pennsylvania since coming to New York. Harry was placing Rita on his throne with him, but there is no record of Cophetua gathering her kinsfolk to be his courtiers.

Rita mailed the check for one hundred dollars to Carrie Billings, in Boston, inviting Ida to spend a week with her in Atlantic City before she returned to New York. It was a courteous, but formal note, and Madame Charida replied in kind. Ida would arrive on the twenty-fifth.

Rita found herself looking forward with child-like eagerness to the little slavey's coming. Although she never guessed it, it was but another sign of her heart's desire for companionship with her own sex. She had no girl-friends; she had never made any since coming to New York; only little Sally Cole, and now Sally was Mrs. Robert Sartoris. Carrie Billings had interested her in spite of herself, but Carrie she had steadily refused to know, and so there remained only Ida. Ida would not be unwelcome.

Chalvey took the opportunity to run up to New York to put his house in order while Ida was with Rita at Waldon Hall. He spoke vaguely of settle-

ments, and Rita wondered if he planned to make her independent—and hoped so. Since money meant so much to her, and Harrison Chalvey was so wealthy, her fingers fairly itched to have the spending of his fortune, and a private income of her own would be something at once delightful and reassuring. There is nothing so stimulating to a woman as the knowledge of being independent, and Rita was all woman.

Chalvey had brought one of his cars and a chauffeur down to the shore for her use, and on the afternoon she expected Ida, Rita dressed herself in a white flannel suit, with dust-coat, and drove to the station in the low rakish blue car, a car not unlike Nick Vonnegut's Yale raceabout, which certainly ought to conjure up pleasant memories for Ida. That was it, she wanted to talk about other days with Ida. She felt, suddenly, very old, for only the old live in the past, and for some reason Rita's heart feared the future. She wanted to talk about the joyous winter-time, about the telephone calls, the florists' boxes, the arrival of Nicko's car, or Harry's, and the flutter and bickering of the "paying guests" in the front parlor. It wasn't so bad, that time. The Château Prunella itself, the Mother Hen, Almighty Floss, Airy, Fairy—she was turning her back on them all. They had known her condemnation, but now she gave them her thoughts. Could she, twelve months from to-day, look back upon the past year with the same kindly forbearance? She would be Harrison Chalvey's wife.

When the train pulled in at the station, Rita left the car and pressed eagerly forward, hoping to catch the first glimpse of the girl. And then she appeared, followed by a porter loaded down with her parapher-

nalía. Rita was prepared for a change, but . . . was this Ida?

In the first place, the girl seemed taller and thinner which afterwards Rita discovered was due to the fact that Ida now held her head up and her shoulders back; also she wore clothes that were made for her, and the quaint little hobbledohoy had disappeared forever. Rita desired this—expected it, of course; but somehow this wasn't . . . Ida. Quietly dressed, silent, since she had learned the wisdom of silence in time of indetermination, Ida followed her friend into the automobile, she herself giving the directions for her luggage. It all left Rita a little helpless; certainly her world was topsy-turvy nowadays!

Yes, Ida had changed. Just what she had hoped for Rita could never explain even to herself, but she knew that she was disappointed, cruelly depressed, by this change. It wasn't the old Ida, the quaint little, lovable slavey whom she had cared the most for of any of Mrs. Orpington's household. Rita had planned long days together talking over old times—did Ida remember this?—could she ever forget that? Whether Ida did remember, or could forget, seemed to matter very little; the girl intended to obliterate the past and she was doing it. All her talk centered on the future, her future. She was planning to open a shop in Boston, a sort of beauty parlor, where her cunning fingers could weave tresses into dollars.

"Then you're going to leave Miss Billings?" Rita asked, surprised.

"Oh, yes," returned Ida, calmly. "I have myself to think of, you know. Madame Charida has been very kind to me, but of course that was because I

had done so much for her when she was ill at Mrs. Orpington's."

A wistful look came into Rita's dark eyes, and she shook her head, softly, as if to herself.

"Kind to you because you were kind to her! Do you think so?" she said.

"I am sure of it!" Ida replied. "With less care, Caroline would have died last winter. I sacrificed myself and my work to wait on her. Now that she has won a place for herself, it is only right that she should give me a helping hand. Of course she isn't a recognized starlet, or anything of the kind, but she is on the right road, and there seems little doubt as to her future fame and fortune. I shall have to wait a little while until I can start out even in a small way, but sooner or later I shall be settled myself, you know."

The grim determination, the hard, cold tones when she spoke of Carrie's long siege of last winter, left Rita quite speechless. Ambition seemed to have curbed the sweetness of Ida's nature, and a greed, a sort of cunning greed, for success, had come to her head like strong wine. They left the table and coming up on the porch, Rita led the way to the tea-room. Ida, of the pots and pans, was at home, here, among the Sèvres, too. A few months of discipline, of guidance and resolution, seemingly had fitted the girl for any emergency. Ida furnished no grounds for blushing, but often Rita felt like weeping for her. When they were seated, she said, as if the words had formed themselves:

"I can scarcely believe it! You are changed so much, Ida!"

The girl neither smiled nor flushed, which, to Rita, watching, seemed a bad sign. Without looking up, Ida replied:

"I find you changed, too, you know."

Was this a challenge? Rita leaned forward anxiously.

"How? In what way?"

"In almost every way, I think. You seem . . . more resigned. I remember you as a sort of splendid tigress, marching up and down Mrs. Orpington's third-floor front . . . to the music of a phonograph. I return to find you either satisfied with the cage and the music, or else you are no longer the tigress——"

"But—what?" Rita cried eagerly, as she hesitated.

"I was going to say you had fallen in love," Ida finished significantly.

Rita sugared her tea, and nibbled at a biscuit, and presently, when she raised her eyes, she found Ida staring at her with almost the old-time interest.

"What has happened to you, Miss Rita?" she puzzled, giving her the old, familiar title.

"I don't know, but you're right; I have changed," Rita answered, with a sigh.

"You were always ready to fight——"

"And now the fight's gone out of me!"

"Something like that, yes. It seems as if the woman you'd pictured as *Carmen* had turned out to be only *Micala*."

"That's picturesque at least," smiled Rita.

"No, it's Boston." And for a moment Ida was gamin-like, the old Ida. "Being thrown so much with musical . . . speak their language. . . . *men* was,

then; but now, looking back, it seems you must have been of her stripe."

Nodding softly, her eyes on Ida's face, Rita said in a wistful voice:

"Those were happy days."

Instantly Ida congealed, the half-mischievous air vanishing as if by magic.

"Naturally my humble beginning is not altogether a pleasant subject with me. . . ."

"I am not reminding you of your humble beginning, Ida, but trying to recall those days which if more humble were, perhaps . . . happier——?" She waited, but Ida refused to unbend. "My beginnings were not unlike your own——"

"But you were able to rise!"

The bitterness of her tones brought Rita up sharply. For the first time she seemed to divine what was in the girl's soul. Her hand went out across the tea-table, sought Ida's fingers, found them cold and unresponsive.

"I want to be your friend, Ida. I stand ready to help you. But nobody can help you if you won't help yourself. You are always on the offensive——"

"—— came within an ace of being cheated by life."

"And in consequence you are cold and suspicious——of everybody——of me! You mean that . . . the world would have left you in Mrs. Orpington's kitchen. Ida, I always planned a future for you, even when I couldn't plan one for myself. And Carrie Billings——"

"Carrie would have died, in her little hall-room, alone, but for me. I fetched and carried, slaved, lied, stole——"

"But without thought of reparation; because you loved her. And she has not proved ungrateful. Ida, better the—the kitchen in Twenty-third Street than—than this."

"Than this?" questioned Ida, turning shrewd eyes on Rita.

"This bitter, suspicious present."

There was silence, partly hostile on Ida's side.

"I hope you are not in trouble?" she said politely, but even as she said it, her eyes smiled for her thoughts traveled back to the smart blue car and the liveried chauffeur and besides, here she was quartered in an exclusive hotel, wearing beautiful clothes and apparently with no end of money at her command.

Rita caught a glimpse of the smile, and hastened to acquaint her with her new position without delay.

"I am going to marry Mr. Chalvey. . . ."

For the first time since her arrival Ida appeared startled out of her pose. Her mouth fairly flew open; just for a second she couldn't collect her speech, her elegant new speech.

"The rich one?" she gasped, brows drawn.

"The—rich one?" Rita echoed, enjoying herself for the first time that afternoon.

"There was a Harrison Chalvey that used to telephone to you at Mrs. Orpington's. He was very wealthy——"

"Was he? It is the same man."

Ida lapsed into silence again, allowing her tea to get cold, and her lettuce sandwich to become soggy.

"There was another, a clergyman," she said presently, with a show of cunning; "he used to want you

to play the organ in his church—or something. Whatever became of him?"

Rita laughed and rose.

"Didn't you say Mr. Chalvey was wealthy?" she shrugged.

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XXV

Just at first Rita regretted having brought Ida down to Waldon Hall, and a dozen times the first day she racked her brain for some plan by which she might get rid of her. Ida had fallen in love with a certain highly ambitious young woman, and she didn't hesitate to let you know it. Her songs were all sung in the first person singular, and the world, even Madame Charida herself, had become but a chorus for her. Always she talked about what she was going to do, and how. The proposed shop was to be in the Back Bay district of Boston, and Carrie was going to see to it that she was patronized liberally by the artists from the Opera House. About this time Rita was acquainted with a secret in Caroline Charida's professional life—she had been engaged for a number of rôles with the Boston Company for the coming season.

"I only trust she will make a success of it," Ida said dubiously. "Of course she was a sensation with the Greenwood forces, but this is not summer stock, and Carrie has only her voice. She will have to make the most of that, for she has neither Garden's dramatic sense nor Cavalieri's beauty."

"Then you believe that Madame Charida will not make good?" Rita asked, curious to test the girl's loyalty.

Ida pursed her lips, no doubt in exact imitation of

some musical authority whom she had met in the Hub.

"Her middle register is superb, but nowadays a soprano must stand comparison with Galli-Curci, and Carrie has no flute-like head tones. But then, she was contented to be a contralto, back in Twenty-third Street."

Rita made no reply to this discourse because she was a little afraid to trust herself, but there arose before her the picture of an ignorant, half-starved slavey whose heart was not yet warped with selfishness, and who almost wept over the gift of a few withered violets. Surely the slavey had nursed and cared for poor Carrie Billings for no other reason than that she possessed a heart, and the sick girl was alone and penniless. There could have been no thought of reparation, then. But now Ida was changed, selfish to the core—the whole world was selfish! Rita saw it as a mighty army rushing to the top of a high precipice, struggling to get ahead, trampling under foot the weak, and at last, at the summit, balancing themselves perilously to retain their places. The little slavey had joined the onslaught.

Rita wished she had never asked her down to Waldon Hall. How much pleasanter it would have been to remember her through life as the girl who climbed three flights of stairs with a glass of water for a fever patient; how much better to recall the times she had wound the old "Victriola" for the invalid, next door! But Ida had come, touched by civilization's hand. There was not one in a thousand who wouldn't say that she had benefited a hundredfold by Carrie's

benevolence, yet Rita knew that her heart had turned to stone and that her eyes were blinded by gold.

When Harry returned, Ida's visit was to end, and she was to go up to New York; but Chalvey had been gone a week, and except for a brief note, announcing his arrival in town, Rita had heard nothing from him. But his silence did not alarm her; it was even a relief. Had Chalvey remained, and she had seen him, day after day, for that week, Rita would have broken her engagement in all likelihood, for she was in a highly nervous condition, at once excitable and depressed.

She felt as if she had been living in an artificial atmosphere, in a house of cards which some hand was threatening to pull down with a single effort. The world was gray, and its people creatures of shadows. The golden apples on the platter which Chalvey had placed within her reach turned out to be Dead Sea fruit. Ida was a delusion and a snare. Rita thought longingly of the old mad, glad days at Mrs. Orpington's, and she ventured to recall the U. S. A. & B. with a little thrill of happiness. There had been joy in combat with Olverson *père*; there had been joy, even, in provoking his young cub. She had nearly burned her fingers, there, but no matter. It was over, it was done with; she was Margaret-Sit-by-the-Fire, now; frivolous Rita had fled.

All the world was tinted pleasantly with rose-color, then, and the only to-morrows which she had had to look forward to were those crowded with jolly engagements. Nicko Vonnegut and Harrison, and little J. T., too, if she chose—dinners and shows and suppers and cabarets. The thrill remained like the scent of dead roses, but Rita found herself looking back on

them with the feeling one has for a buried friend. Things had been so lovely—and then Anthony Varian came! Could it be that it was this man who had pointed out the flaws in every jewel she treasured?

Rita didn't know—at least, she said she didn't know. But she discovered that Varian had his place in her thoughts, both waking and sleeping, and she knew that his memory soothed her nerves and brightened her days. While she had never heard a word from him since the day they had parted on the beach, Rita felt that somehow he must understand, and therefore must be patient with her. Anthony must understand even where she didn't understand herself!

Most of their days she and Ida spent together in the open. Occasionally they went in bathing, but Ida preferred to spend the mornings on the pier, where, while the band played familiar airs from the operas, she could pour over her books. The girl read all of the time. Rita was startled to hear her confess one day that she was twenty-three years old; for some reason, back in Twenty-third Street, she had looked upon her as a child. She was surprised, too, at her choice of books.

"Do you like Dickens and Scott and Thackeray?" Rita asked, frankly curious.

"No," Ida answered, quite as frankly. "I don't like them at all, but they are what everybody is supposed to know. I find, to succeed, one must do not as one likes, but as one should. Down in my heart I prefer Corelli and Hall Caine and Mr. Chambers, but the others will stand me in better stead, and so I read them. You will understand better after you are Mrs. Harrison Chalvey." She was quite serious,

Rita smiled, but she was interested.

"Just what do you mean, Ida?" she asked.

"It may be that Mrs. Harrison Chalvey will want to read Dickens and Scott and Thackeray, but because she is Mrs. Chalvey, she won't be permitted to," Ida answered coolly. "Mrs. Chalvey will be expected to know—well, what I don't know, and what isn't necessary for me to know; I shall only run a beauty-parlor. But you—— The queer Scandinavian things, I guess."

Rita laughed lightly.

"So you have it figured out in your own way!"

"No. The world did the figuring long ago, and it has been passed on to us as gospel. We can take it or leave it, as we like, but if we decide to leave it, look out! We can't play. That is what I have learned. So I am reading 'David Copperfield.'"

"But surely you enjoy *David!*"

Ida flashed her the ghost of a smile, a smile which reminded Rita of their yesterdays at Mrs. Orpington's.

"'Types' are no treat to me, being Ida, and having lived at the Château Prunella," confessed the girl dryly. "But where some people say, 'Aren't they quaint?' I say, 'Aren't they true!' and I run a mile to avoid them. We had 'atmosphere' a-plenty in Twenty-third Street, too." She paused to laugh, and for the first time without bitterness. "Because we did, I guess, I prefer 'high sassiety.' I loath a mirror; naturally I would," and she wrinkled her nose like a rabbit, a droll little trick of yesterday.

Rita thought she detected a trace of a sense of humor here, and straightway her spirits rose. The old Ida she would have taken to her heart, and held her

close. Rita didn't believe in miracles, any more than she believed Ida to be wholly happy in her new estate, and for the first time she ceased resenting the girl's visit, and looked forward to the future with something akin to hope in her heart. Ida, the ambitious, was not the same merry, happy-go-lucky creature as Ida, the slavey, and while Rita wouldn't have flung her down among the pots and pans again, she did hope for something which would prove an awakening to the girl, and would set her right. It seemed to Rita that there was so much that was wrong nowadays; her own life was all askew. Looking back it seemed that the simpler days were happier days.

She tried to interest Ida in her old cinema idols.

"What have become of 'Sinful Sara,' and 'Theresa's Trials'?" she wanted to know. "I was always so interested in *Theresa*, while *Sara* intrigued me keenly! Every incident was a scenario, and every speech a sub-title, in those old days at Mrs. Orpington's. Always you were comparing me to the screen sirens—and to their disadvantage!—do you remember? We must be very gay and festive and take in the movies some night soon, Ida! Even Mr. Thackeray has succumbed," she added slyly. "You knew his 'Vanity Fair' had been screened?"

But Ida refused to wax enthusiastic over her old love. She was grown up, now, with neither the time nor inclination for the silver-sheet. Instead she poured over books which she didn't enjoy, and prepared herself rigidly for a future day which held little happiness but much affluence.

Gray days followed gold. Towards the last of the week it began to rain, a fine, steady drizzle which

kept the hotel-guests indoors, and sent a damp, musty chill through the big house. A log-fire was lighted in the parlor, and here women gathered with books and fancy-work. Bridge-tables were set up in the lobby; some of the younger people danced. Rita had always detested the seashore in rainy weather, and she had made it a rule, too, not to fraternize with the other women in the house. In the old days this rule had been established not without some reflection, for Rita had always felt that her position was more or less a false one, and friendships formed in the summertime might prove unfortunate back in town later on. She was staying at an expensive and exclusive hotel, sacred to the "old families," and she herself was a stenographer. From her dress, her manner, the money at her command, she might have been of independent fortune. Rita had no desire to explain her real status to these people, and so she had avoided them. This self-imposed isolation had not proved unendurable in the past, thanks to magazines and novels, but now she was forced to face this situation with Ida as her vis-à-vis. And Ida was no longer Ida.

It was going to be burdensome. Ida, out in the open air, with sunshine and movement all around, could be endured, but Ida, shut up within four walls of a room, with no escape possible, was going to prove a very different proposition.

"I wish I had never asked her down," Rita said to herself again and again. "She is a greedy little pig, self-centered, ungrateful, and with it all, discontented."

But Ida displayed no haste to leave Waldon Hall,

and the two girls commenced their solitary confinement in their rooms the first day after luncheon, when the dowagers and the débutantes took possession of the main floor. Ida opened her books, and religiously waded through Charles Dickens. Rita, recalling that she had had no letter from Chalvey for the better part of a week, set down to write to him at his club. She had nothing to say, and found no joy in saying it, but Harry mustn't be allowed to forget that she existed, while away in New York, and probably his return would send Ida back to town.

Suddenly Rita glanced up from the letter and found herself looking into a mirror which was hung above the desk. At the same moment, Ida, across the room, raised her eyes from her book, and the girls' reflections appeared, side by side, in the glass. Rita drew back with a low, startled cry. There was something in her face, and in Ida's, which said that at heart they were . . . akin.

XXVI

A FEW days later Temple Olverson's card was brought to Rita, and surprised yet wholly indifferent to his message, she went down to the parlor to see him. The rain of the past several days had stopped that morning, and the sun struggled weakly through the clouds, sending up a steady steam from the soaked Boardwalk which already re-echoed with the tread of many feet. Rita was alone when Olverson appeared, Ida having gone to pay a visit to a local dentist, with the damp weather of the past week to thank for the aching molar. Rita had offered to go with her, for of late there was better understanding between the two girls; but Ida, sensibly, had kept the engagement alone.

"I don't mind your seeing me in curl-papers or in last year's hat, but I do object to a witness to my greeting with my dentist," she said, with that hard brilliancy which Rita had come to associate with her of late.

This wasn't the Ida whom she knew and loved, but it was an Ida whom she understood better, thanks to the incident of the looking-glass. For they were both playing at the same game, with the same prize at stake—dollars and cents. In her heart Rita realized that she no more wanted to marry Harrison Chalvey than Ida wanted to read—yes, Dickens and Scott and Thackeray; Harry, like the books, was but the means

to an end, and that end, money. She had been accusing Ida of being a coldly mercenary little wretch, while all the time she had been guilty of the same sin herself!

This thought made her even more tolerant of little J. T., and she greeted him not unkindly, almost in the manner of a friend. He was a sneak, a little rat, but she had always felt a certain superiority to him which stood her in good stead in moments such as this, as if she were favoring him with an audience at all. The boy looked dissipated and thin; he was not even well-groomed. Rita offered him a chair and hoped that the rocking-chair brigade, with novels and knitting, hadn't noticed his condition.

"I come as my father's ambassador," he announced, quite humbly for him. "The Gov'nor says you have sent in your resignation—you are leaving the company. Rita, I hope the fault isn't mine."

"You mean that your father thinks it is?" she asked, reflecting on his changed speech and manner.

"Something like that, yes," he said.

"It isn't, then?" she retorted, and lapsed into thoughtful silence.

For the present she wished to keep secret the news of her betrothment to Harison Chalvey. Recalling the talk occasioned by little Sally Cole's marriage to Bob Sartoris, Rita wished to be spared this gossip, at least as long as possible. She had said then it never could happen again. Well, it was about to happen again, but there was little sweetness, little triumph in the thought. Even the breaking of the news to Olverson *père* became as Dead Sea fruit. She shrank from the publicity as from a physical hurt.

"I am tired, I am *out of* sorts, I am going to make a change," she told J. T. It was not unlikely that he was ignorant of Chalvey's return from South America; she would send him back to his father with *some* manufactured story that would throw the U. S. A. & B. off her trail. "I am resting here with Miss Lewis—probably you remember her? She lives at Mrs. Orington's, too," she offered, by way of explanation. *He* was out of the question, of course, that he would associate "Miss Lewis" with the slavey Ida in Twenty-third Street, but Rita had deliberately adopted *this* plan in order to clear up any suspicion that might linger in *his* mind.

Temple said he didn't recall Miss Lewis, and his manner showed plainly that he wasn't interested in Miss Lewis. Now his eyes sought Rita's with an impudence which could be almost felt, like a caress, but he was still able to guard his tongue and choose his words.

"Like it down here?" he asked.

"Yes. There is a smattering of Broadway on the Boardwalk, you know," she returned.

"Oh, you Broadway!" he chuckled.

"Well, Fifth Avenue is empty without having emptied itself here," she smiled.

'Some people in town. Had dinner with the Gov'nor at Sherry's last week—you'd have thought it was mid-season from the appearance of the place. New York's a fine little summer resort, all right.'

"Not for me." She smiled and shook her head.

"You make things dull for yourself, Rita. Just because some of your friends are out of town—"

We went to the Midnight Frolic afterwards and had a barrel of fun!"

"'We'? Who?" she asked, though she was scarcely interested, and said it more to make conversation than anything else.

"Oh, the Gov'nor didn't go—he backed out. But we had met the Van Vleets——"

"The who?" The name arrested her attention, and she looked up, frowning.

"The Van Vleets—Paul and Kitty, and Martha. Kitty is Mrs. Paul, and Martha is his sister, you know. They were passing through New York on their way from Canada to their place up on the Hudson. Awful toffs—sort o' thirty-second cousins to Harrison Chalvey—but rather good fun. And the new Frolic is a riot!"

Rita felt her way cautiously.

"Van Vleet—it is rather an unusual name. . . ."

"Paul's and Martha's father used to boast that there were only five of them in New York, and the Gov'nor used to answer 'Thank God.' But that was some time back," Temple hastened to add; "and the younger generation is quite regular and everything."

Rita smiled.

"I've seen portraits of Martha Van Vleet in the newspapers, of course, and it seems to me I've seen a picture of their place in Canada, too——"

"They haven't got a place in Canada—they were visiting Kitty's people there—a two months' visit." He grinned from ear to ear until he resembled a death's head. "The Van Vleets are long on everything, visits included, but the long green, you know."

He laughed feebly at his own witticism. "Guess you saw a picture of their place on the Hudson."

"Probably it was. I forget now. But what surprised me, Temple, was your saying they had been in Canada. I am sure I saw Martha Van Vleet's name mentioned as one of the patronesses of a dance given at the Vendome Hotel here."

"Not Martha's!" He scoffed at the idea. "They don't know Atlantic City's on the map. Besides, it was last week I met them in New York. They had just come down from Canada that morning, and they were going out to Tarrytown the next day. Doubt if they had the pennies to blow in on Atlantic, between you and me, Rita."

Rita nodded slowly.

"I must have been mistaken, or perhaps the paper was. Thank you, Temple. We do love the tittle-tattle of the smart world, we girls."

Presently he reached for his hat and stick, and Rita walked with him out on the piazza. The sun glared hotly, and the sea, as calm as a mirror, resembled burnished brass. Little J. T. blinked weakly at the reflection, and walked around the porch to the side entrance which opened on a shaded avenue. There was a little lawn between the street and the hotel, and down here, in the driveway, a motorcar had stopped and with superb poise a young woman was getting out of it. Rita, looking over the porch-rail with young Olverson, saw that she was Ida.

"Here is my chum, Miss Lewis, now," she said.

But after a brief glance at Ida, little J. T.'s eyes returned to the car, and the chauffeur, which he re-

garded with staring, speculative gaze. At last, as if satisfied, he addressed Rita again.

"See here: why can't we have a few parties, Rita, now that I'm here?" There appeared a new note in his voice, an intimacy which she was quick to recognize, and as quick to resent, but she held her peace for the present.

"I don't know. . . ."

"Lots of doings. New show at the Apollo this week. Been to the Submarine Grill at the Traymore?"

Rita gave way to a cryptic smile. "No, I haven't been to the Traymore, Temple," she said.

"Good! Neither have I. When?"

"Oh, Temple!" She broke into a little laugh. "You do work fast!"

"'Waste not, want not'—learned that at school."

"Call me up."

"You bet your life I will!"

"Here is Ida." Rita turned and greeted the girl with surprising warmth until it was taken into consideration that her efforts were to mystify this impudent young man. Ida bore up well under the introduction; if she remembered little Olverson, it was apparent that he didn't remember her.

"Sit with one ear towards the phone," were his last words, as he took himself off down the steps.

Rita smiled an *au'voir*, but her features were stony as she joined Ida, and walked with her back to the lobby. Ida sensed that something was wrong, but she refrained from questioning her, and in turn Rita forgot all about the troublesome tooth. She stopped at the sound-proof telephone booths, while Ida continued up to their room, alone.

A moment later Rita was talking to the desk-clerk at the Vendome Hotel.

"I want to inquire if Miss Martha Van Vleet of New York is registered at your house?"

There was a wait, then:

"No, Miss Van Vleet isn't here."

"But she was there!" cried Rita, in character. "She was there last week. Wasn't she? Look, please."

A longer wait this time, and then the same reply. It wasn't altogether unexpected, but Rita's brow grew dark as she listened to the desk-clerk's voice.

"No; nobody here by that name--Van Vleet, yes. No such party registered in the past two weeks. . . . You're welcome, I'm sure."

He had deceived her! That was the first thought that flashed through Rita's brain. She came from the booth, and walked to the elevator, like a person in a trance. The why and the wherefore didn't present itself, then; she didn't stop to question the reason for Chalvey's deliberate falsehood. He had lied to her, that was all sufficient. It was resentment, and not jealousy, which stirred her to thoughts of avenging herself on Harry. Rita had never been jealous of the unknown Miss Van Vleet; suspicion, then, played little part in the anger which she felt towards Chalvey.

"I'll make him pay; I'll give him kind for kind," she reflected, riding up to her floor.

It mattered nothing to her whether the responsible person was of his world, or the half-world, the thing that counted being that Harry had broken an engagement with her, and then stooped to a falsehood. He

had done this so clumsily that unconsciously her short upper-lip curled with scorn. For him to think that he could hoodwink her so easily! She didn't know what he had done with his evening; she didn't care; but she would take pains to let him know that she had discovered his deception, and could play the same game herself. Since, little by little, her affection for Harrison Chalvey had grown less, and since she believed that he was madly in love with her, Rita entertained little doubt but that her first move would bring him quickly to terms. He would come suing for peace, and he should have it—at a price. Again she felt the whip in her hand, sure of the outcome.

At that moment her heart was stripped of all love for the man whom she had promised to marry, and this utter lack of love, of faith, accounted for the vindictiveness which had entered into her soul. The desire to hurt was uppermost; God knows there would be hurt enough for her in the years to come, as his wife, she thought. He wanted her, while she wanted only his money; there was a perceptible difference.

When she entered their room, Rita found Ida dressing for dinner, although it was early and she had already changed her costume since luncheon. Rita, full of her own problems, paid her scant attention, but sat down at the desk where she tore open the letter she had penned to Chalvey, and read it through before commencing another one. This time she would have much to say about little J. T., and incidently she would inquire after Harry's friends, the Van Vleets, with whom Olverson had dined last week in New York. Rita told herself that she didn't care two pins whether this fetched Chalvey or not,

but in her heart she had little doubt as to the result of her letter.

As she sealed and directed this new communication, Rita noticed in the mirror above the desk that Ida was dressed, and had stopped to put on her hat.

"Going out before dinner?" she questioned, though with small show of interest.

Ida was in a flutter of nervous excitement, and had put on too much powder in an effort to tone down the deep flush on her cheeks.

"I'm going out to dinner," she said, fumbling with her hat. "Whom do you think I met down near the railway station on Atlantic Avenue?"

But Rita was staring down at the square, cream-color envelope which she had just directed to Harrison Chalvey at the Athena Club, New York.

"What did you say about the tooth, Ida?" she ventured, still engrossed with her own affairs.

Ida's head went up, and she drew her lips together in a thin, scornful line. Rita was ridiculous; she would tell nothing, and serve her right, too.

"I'm to see him again to-morrow at eleven o'clock. . . ."

But even that Rita didn't hear. Ida barked a brief farewell, and took herself off. But scarcely had the door closed upon her, before the telephone bell rang out, and feverishly Rita sprang to take the message.

"Miss Charles, yes. . . . Oh, Temple! . . . How's *your* conduct, this time? . . . Not a thing. No, nothing. . . . Well, what have you to propose that sounds attractive?"

XXVII

EVEN while she dressed, and before she started out, it seemed to her ridiculous, even childish, that she should stoop to this form of retaliation and spend the evening with Temple Olverson. To be sure Harrison would resent any show of friendship between her and little J. T.—Rita recalled that he had never liked the fellow. Neither had she, for that matter, but he suited her purpose at present, and so she made herself especially smart—which would bring home to Temple afresh what he had lost in forfeiting her good opinion, last winter, in New York. That opinion, by the way, had suffered no change, nor would it, for Rita regarded young Olverson with the deepest contempt, but now he served her end. Chalvey detested him; that was sufficient.

When Temple called at six o'clock he was in better shape than he had been that afternoon, and Rita, who was fastidious as to a man's grooming, experienced a feeling of relief. But his appearance gave the lie to the statement that he had come down to the shore as his father's ambassador, to learn the reason of Rita's resignation. He must have brought a complete wardrobe with him, with the fixed intention of playing around. He had seen a barber, a masseur, and a valet, since his last visit, a few hours ago, and he had the air of a sleek young rat, even to the watchful, suspicious eyes.

At first he was on his good behavior, which, somehow, only served to make Rita more distrustful, and she drew down the corners of her lips, and stepped forth, with something of the feeling of a person watching a play. She wasn't a principal in the drama, but a spectator, and it was going to be rather good fun. Never for a moment did any misgiving, any fear of him, enter her mind. Her sense of superiority, which was always paramount when with Olver-son, lent to her the feeling that she would be able to deal with any situation that might present itself. Despite past experiences, Rita very nearly believed in the power of a "flash from a good woman's eye." There was much of the child in her heart, although she would have ridiculed the possibility, and insisted that she was as sophisticated as her beloved Times Square.

"You sure are a little life-saver," said Temple, with complimentary intent, as they left the hotel together. "What in the world would I have done without you to-night? Answer me that—*what?* Just dried right up and died. . . . Here! Chair, boy! . . . I'll tell you what we'll do, little girl. We'll take a nice long ride in this land gondola, and get up a nice little appetite, eh? I suppose you're still on the wagon?"

"Right-o! Go to the head of your class." She even smiled at his steady chatter, which fell like rain on a tin roof, and was not unpleasant after a large dose of Ida's society.

He handed her into the rolling-chair and got in beside her. They moved down the Walk, Chelseaward.

"Right and everything?"

"Yes."

"And we're going to have a nice evening, comfy and all?"

"Of course we are."

"Seen any of the boys lately?"

"The boys'?" She raised her brows, looking mystified.

"Well, you had as many trailing you as a Follies' coryphee, you know." He affected a playful tone. "Good Lord, I didn't stand any show at all! Oh, I don't blame you! Guess if I were a girl I'd give me the cold shoulder, too." He was very cheerful about it, and even laughed. "I'm a strange rabbit. Providence, or whoever it is that shapes our ends—you know your poets, Rita; I don't, praise Allah!—well, whoever the potter I was caught by a careless hand. Like the small boy, God damn' near ruint me. I look at the pretty boys in the ready-to-wear clothing advertisements, and I say to Bramwell, I say, 'I want to look like that, Brammy.' But Bramwell's only a tailor, not a magician, I guess. Now, you—you do look like those things you see in the magazines."

"What kind of things, Temple?" she laughed.

"Oh, you know. They tell a girl how to look like a Lucile model on a Woolworth income. Written by a woman, of course. By gad, when they say women haven't got a sense of humor——! It's either that or a damn' mean disposition, Rita. 'How To Look Like Elsie Ferguson on a Dollar Ninety-eight a Week'—you've seen 'em. Believe me, I get many a good fat laugh without turning to Mark Twain or George Ade or those guys."

"I believe you do, Temple," she confessed, quite seriously. In that moment it occurred to her that

little Olverson wasn't exactly the nonentity she had always set him down as being; there must be something to him with such a father. He was drinking himself to death, traveling the pace that kills, but his was a lively, quick-witted exit. All at once Rita paid him the compliment of regarding him with serious intent, and the result was not altogether pleasant. "Where are we going?" she asked, suddenly conscious of strange surroundings.

"Huntin' up an appetite," he returned blithely.

"Well, I'm famished now."

"Well, I've got a fat pocketbook." But he told the chair boy to turn around and take them back to the Traymore.

Twilight faded, and against the gray of sky and sea, out on the horizon, a steamer's smoke was flung like a black smudge. Birds, flying low, appeared; the electrical display on piers and advertising signs dimmed the crescent moon. As always, loiterers lined the railings of the Boardwalk, either gazing out at the ocean, or else watching the sand artists at work. The blare of a brass band, and the raucous voices of ballyhoo-men rose above the roar of the surf and the night-sounds beside the sea. Men, women, and children, swept by to meals or rendezvous. Smart shop-girls and overdressed dowagers, old men with stealthy glance and youths with crying shoes, moved back and forth like ants upon their hill. Yesterday's valley lilies and to-day's ragged robins lay side-by-side in the vendors' trays. The popping of soda corks, the aroma of roasting pop-corn, the wail of a merry-go-round, the incessant cry of the side-show barkers, and

the pigeon English of the dark-skinned auctioneers, assaulted eye and ear and nostril.

"At last," breathed Rita, with a sense of relief, as they arrived within sight of their destination.

Little J. T. grinned rather sheepishly.

"D' you know, I like it; but that's me. Say, it's a great game, this!"

"What?" she questioned, as she stepped lightly from the chair.

"This thing called life. And the fellow who doesn't play it for all it's worth, well, he's a damn' fool," announced Temple cheerfully. He flipped the boy a generous tip, and stood beside Rita, grinning largely, as if the world had been created for his special benefit. "All set? Let's go!" He escorted her grandly into the hotel.

But at dinner he took too much to drink; he usually did; and Rita viewed the result of his thirst not with fear, but with anger and resentment. Though she might have known what would happen! J. T. always got tight. Her old feeling of preëminence asserted itself. She was not afraid of a drunken man, but he offended her fastidiousness, and she longed to take Temple by the back of the neck and shake him for the miserable little rat he was.

"You know you're rather decent when you keep sober, Temple!" she cried, aroused. "I might have known how the evening would terminate."

"Terminate nothing," he grinned. "Quit your kiddin', Rita—the evening's young!"

"Now, not another drink—do you understand?"

"All right, sweetness. Have it your way. That's

the kind of fellow I am. You can twist me around your little finger, Rita. Say, go on and do it!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Do what?"

"Twist me around your little finger. Look here, hon, I'd go on bread and water for life for you. No; no, wouldn't. Bread—cut the water. I'd go on bread for life . . . sweetness."

"No, you wouldn't, Temple. When you can't keep sober for two hours!"

"I'm such an ass when I'm sober, Rita. Everybody says so. The majority rules. Waiter, some——!"

"No, Temple! I mean it."

"No, waiter. The lady means it. . . . No kiddin', Rita; I could go straight for you. See? I'm sober and everything! Fine young ass, too, eh? But, Rita——"

"Temple, if you're going to make love to me——"

"I'm going to do whatever you want, pet."

"'Pet'?"

"Rita! I'm going to do whatever you want, Rita. But I'm hoping you want a drunken old no-account——"

"I don't."

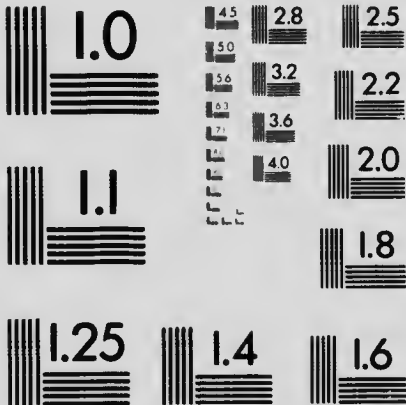
He sat up straight and addressed her seriously, with little trace of the inebriate.

"I was only fooling. Want to please, be amusing, that's all. Everybody says I'm greater fun when I'm tight. We strive to please. What fazes me, you know, is that you're so pally with all the boys but little J. T. Sure, it's true! Take St. Nick—beg pardon; Mr. Vonnegut."



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"Nicko's in Europe—I haven't seen him for months."

"He's tied up with a cousin or something. There's Chalvey."

"Harry went to South America in April," she answered.

"What did he send you—a monkey or a coffee plantation?"

"Nothing, not even a post-card." And her eyes darkened and her mouth twisted wryly.

"The stingy old thing! Ain't men hell? I tell you, you'd better take me—I won't live long. I'll get a doctor's certificate to prove— In a little while you'll be the widow of J. T.—which isn't so bad—for you, of course. Me—well, that's another story. Think how hot that would make the Gov'nor and all! Gad, I hope I can get a peep at him, when you break the news—if you do, of course! Will you, hon? Now, look: we can keep it a secret and everything until I 'pass to my reward'—isn't that the way they put it in the poems? Well, will you? Think what fun it'd be—for you, for you, of course!—to walk into the office gosh-darn grand and all, some morning, and cut the pie on the Gov'nor's desk! If I grab me a harp, I'll strike up a jazz tune—sort o' scene music, like in a reg'lar show, eh? Even if you don't like me, think how much less you must like J. T., senior! Bet he'd register high jinks if you told him you were my widow, Rita."

A cryptic smile played around the corners of Rita's mouth.

"Would he believe me, Temple?"

"Well, I'm no prophet, hon. Be a sport and take a chance—that's the idea."

The smile deepened.

"Not to-night, thanks. Some other time."

"Aw, shucks! Why, I might throw a fit quitting the altar-rail, you know. George B. is right—you never can tell."

The smile never left her face; eyes and lips mocked him.

"What I do know is that we must be toddling along," she said. "Pay your check and let's get out in the open air."

"Right-o!" He called the waiter and settled with him. "Chair? I think a little ozone would do J. T. good. Of course, other things have done him good and plenty, too, but of them we will speak at another time. And, cutie, you're letting slip through your fingers a golden opportunity. Better think it over. When have you had the chance before to become a rich and dashing widow? Lord, she won't even bury me!"

In spite of his jocular manner, young Olverson was more than half in earnest, and Rita had only to pretend to accept him seriously in order to bring about a proposal of marriage. And she little doubted but that he would have the audacity to carry such a ceremony through. J. T. didn't know that Rita was acquainted with his past adventure in matrimony, and so she had only to smile to herself and keep her own counsel. Thanks to Anthony Varian, she had heard of the mésalliance of his college days, and at the psychological moment she would let Temple know that she knew of it, too. But at present it suited her purpose to re-

man silent on the subject. It even amused her to speculate as to how far he would go in contracting a second marriage. This was her sword of Damocles; the blow rested entirely with himself.

So she got into another rolling-chair with him, and rode by his side for the second time down the Boardwalk, past the hotels, and into the cottage section. She hoped that somebody had seen her with Olverson, some one who knew Chalvey and would be pretty certain to acquaint him of the fact. There must have been a great many men in New York, both at the U. S. A. & B. and at the clubs, who were familiar with her and Harry's friendship, and who, if they saw her with another man, especially if that man be Temple Olverson, would make it a point to see that Harry heard. Good! That is what she wanted. And she would neither deny any accusations, nor offer any explanations; there were the Van Vleets to remember. She lifted her head proudly, and—felt a rain-drop in the region of her nose.

"Why, it's raining!" she cried.

XXVIII

It was as if the heavens, suddenly overwhelmed with Mother Earth's folly and extravagance, wept, without warning, fat, copious tears all over the gingerbread landscape. Sweethearts, laughing, squealing, skipped to cover; the more dignified appeared less dignified, and became angry; parents swept their offspring before them like frightened hares; in a twinkling pavilions and shelters were packed with damp, perspiring humanity.

"I don't fear my complexion, Temple, but my best bib and tucker won't be fit for the rag-bag in just two minutes!" ejaculated Rita, hands out, as if to fight off the rain. "Since Heaven has failed me, who will protect the 'woiking goil'?"

"I will! More, I'll buy you a drink, sweetness!" Olverson thought the shower was very good fun, and got great sport from watching the exasperated and hurrying crowd. "Beat it, mother!" he called to a blowy, waddling matron; and, "Chase yourself, kid; it's water; d'you think you're Annette's sister?" he shrilled after a self-possessed young houri, who calmly continued on her way. "Never mind the frocks and frills, old pet," he said, siding up to Rita. "Plenty more where they came from. . . . Oh, there aren't? Boy!" He turned to the colored chair-pusher. "Get us over to the Castle—in double-quick time!"

It all happened so quickly that Rita hadn't time to

protest even had such a thought crossed her mind. The old adage of any port in a storm held good, and she found herself inside the Castle before she had a chance even to look where she was going. And had she looked, Rita wouldn't have hesitated—the Castle meant absolutely nothing to her but a place of shelter.

Set back from the Boardwalk, and isolated, with a stretch of yellow sand, out of which grew occasional tufts of rank grass, the Castle had the appearance of a ramshackle country hotel, lost between the bijou cottages to the south and the huge caravansaries to the north. Rita never remembered having been this far down the Boardwalk before, but had she passed the Castle, she would have given it scarcely a second glance, for it presented the drab and dingy façade of a building fast falling into decay. This impression was borne out by the general appearance of the first floor—a long, narrow corridor running through the middle of the house, dimly lit by sickly gas-jets, and smelling strongly of stale beer. A few people had sought refuge in this hall, huddled close together near the door, and exhaling an odor of wet clothes. Rita pushed through them, followed closely by Olverson, and stopping a little distance down the hall, she drew a deep breath and looked around her.

"What a strange place!" she whispered.

"Not at all, only vile," little J. T. announced, in a voice loud enough for those people in the hallway to hear him. He brushed aside a pair of swinging-doors to the right, and looked into a dim and fly-blown bar-room. Through similar doors to the left, he glimpsed a pool-door, with mixed patronage, a

white man and a negro dawdling over an uninteresting game.

"Well, hon, at least I show you life," grinned Temple, his gaze reverting to Rita.

A large man in an apron and shirtsleeves appeared and spoke to Olverson.

"Dining-room for ladies upstairs," he announced, jerking his thumb toward the narrow staircase.

J. T. winked at Rita.

"*Cherchez la femme*—or should it be . . . *les dames*? Do you speak French?" he asked, turning to the waiter.

"Nope!"

"Ah! Then I am among friends." Temple turned to Rita, still grinning. "Know Brodie?"

"Yes, I'm game; come on. Anywhere to get out of this," she nodded.

Cackling like a goose, Olverson led the way to the stairs, smiling broadly at the women, irrespective of age, and with that stare and insolence for his own sex that made men instinctively long to hit him. Rita followed close behind—"like Theda Bara viewing royalty," he chirped. "You should have been a Ziegfeld chorister at least, Rita—you're so gosh-darn gracious and all."

"I'm not gracious, I'm only wet and half-gassed," she retorted, pausing at the top step. On this floor there were electric lights, with rose shades, and Rita's feet stepped upon a carpet. She looked at Olverson and laughed "Temple, did you—" She stopped, her eyes on his little, rat-like face.

"Did I—what, Rita?"

"Nothing!" She made a little moue, and prepared

to follow him. "I feel like *Theresa*, but then you know nothing of her 'Trials.' We must watch out for a poisoned needle."

"Thank you, I don't indulge." He stopped before a curtained doorway, and swept the portière aside, in droll imitation of the screen hero. "Pretty?"

Rita found herself looking into a small, private dining-room. She concluded that there must be three such rooms across the front of the house. Shaded lights flooded the place with soft, rose shimmer, and there was a warmth and cosiness about it all that was very welcome after the pouring rain, or even the steaming humanity below-stairs. J. T. had stepped aside for Rita, and over her shoulder she glanced at him and smiled, and this smile brought the blood to his cheeks and made him shuffle his feet, though it scarcely served to deprive him of the power of speech.

"Pretty—what?"

"*Pretty what* is good," she said, and crossed the threshold.

Olverson stood with the table between them, without offering to go to her assistance, as she stopped to divest herself of hat and coat. There was a little mirror above the mantelpiece, and a reproduction of an Anna Held Fencing Girl occupied space on the opposite wall. But the table linen was spotless, and the silver the waiter brought in was rather good. Rita laughed throatily, breaking the suspense.

"Temple, you know you intrigue me!"

"Good God! Do I? What's that?"

"Joshua—*was* it Joshua who commanded the sun to stand still? Well. . . . Had you anything to do with this shower to-night?"

"No, hon! What's the matter now?"

She sank down on the little gilt chair and drummed idly on the cloth with slim, cool fingers. Whether J. T. knew of the character of the Castle or not, she, of course, couldn't tell, but at least he had had nothing to do with the rain. That they had been caught in the downpour directly opposite this place was an act of Heaven, not Olverson. Had she believed him to be guilty, Rita would have spoken to him quite plainly, and afterwards never spoken to him again probably. She was not the sort to be victimized by any man, and certainly not by such a man as little Olverson, whom she felt to be her inferior in every way. She had the superior brain, she had even the superior physical strength. She was not afraid of him; she could take care of herself, at the Castle as well as at home. What irritated her for a moment or two was the thought that J. T. had arranged this tête-à-tête at this resort.

But this idea was dismissed presently as she reflected that certainly Temple had nothing to do with the storm. Nor had he inveigled her into coming upstairs to the private dining-room. Rita wouldn't have absolved young Olverson from concocting such a scheme, but she did feel that in this instance he was blameless. They had just tumbled into the place willy nilly. This thought, that chance and not J. T., had brought them together here, under most compromising conditions, so amused Rita that her brow cleared, and she dimpled and laughed outright. With all his wealth and cunning he had been able to devise nothing so jeopardizing to her reputation as Nature itself

had done. Raising her dark eyes, she feigned a laughing shyness.

"I know I shouldn't be here alone with you——"

"Stuff and nonsense, girly! You'd think I was an ogre! You'd think little J. T. was an ogre and everything!" He opened wide his eyes, and pouted like a chastised small boy. Then the waiter appeared with champagne and sandwiches, and straightway Olverson became the bully. Everything was wrong; the wine was sent back; the service was vile, and the man moved like a snail.

It had long been a rule with Rita never to touch stimulants, chiefly because of her association with the U. S. A. & B., common-sense telling her that a girl in her position could not be seen around town drinking, even occasionally, and hope to continue in the company's employ. The company insisted on temperance in its men; the rule could not be broken by the young women on its pay-roll. At first, fear of losing her position had brought her to the point of total abstinence, and then, later on, she had—it was useless to deny it!—some quite unpleasant experiences with parties where even moderation was howled down. Harrison Chalvey took too much to drink; and Olverson, of course. Now, when the champagne made its reappearance, he helped himself, brushing the waiter away, and gulped down two glasses without stopping.

"If that is what you are going to do, I am going home—at once, alone," she told him. She had asked for coffee; the air was chilly, and the draperies seemed to catch and hold the moisture, so that she shivered once or twice, in her damp clothes.

J. T. set down his glass.

"Afraid?" he leered.

"No, Temple, frankly, I'm not afraid," she declared. "But I'm fast becoming disgusted. You're not a pretty sight when you've had too much—there's a mirror; look! Every time I go out with you——"

She stopped. It was her own fault. She knew what would happen—it had happened before. Suddenly she pushed back her coffee, almost untasted, and rose to her feet. What an idiot she was! What a little fool! Why should she suffer this humiliation, and put up with his uncouth speech and manners? There was no need for it! After all, she was going to marry another man. The lesson she was going to administer to Chalvey all at once became a paltry and childish thing. Revenge was worse, even wicked. She acted like a creature in a book or play, and she had always believed in her saneness, even her fairness. She was fair neither to herself nor to the world; with something like horror, it suddenly burst upon her that she was growing bitter, vicious, vindictive. What had come over her? What was she doing, and why? She looked at little J. T. with speculative eyes, and knew that she hated him. But then she detested everything and everybody, herself included. How could she be at peace with the world, when her own heart didn't know the meaning of the word?

"I'm going back to my hotel." Her words were flat, colorless.

Olverson emptied another glass, and lurched toward her, across the little room.

"The night's young——"

"You're tight."

"Eh?" He paused, head lowered, and looked at her from behind his lashes.

"You've had too much to drink, and I'm going home, Temple." She reached for her hat and coat, found they were still damp, and held them in her hands, before her. "You can get me a chair or not, as you like," she added, starting towards the door.

"Wait!"

She paused in the doorway at the sound of his voice.

"I'm not drunk a-tall! It's a damn' lie!"

She said nothing. People were coming from one of the other rooms, she stepped back and let the portière screen her.

"Chalvey gets drunk—you go out with him!" came the accusing voice of Olverson. "You go out with him—and lie about him! You don't love me, that's what." Tears filled his eyes. "You don't lie about me."

"What do you mean?" Rita asked, coming back to the table. Her tone was dangerous, but little Olverson didn't know that. Now his voice rose shrill with anger.

"You said he was in South America!"

She felt the color leave her cheeks.

"You know Mr. Chalvey went to Buenos Aires for the company." She tried to make her voice indignant, but sensed her utter failure.

"You said Vonnegut was in France!"

"I haven't even heard from Nicko since he sailed." At least, this was true.

Olverson waved his hands above his head and croaked evilly, "Like hell!" He took a quick step in her direction, but was checked by something in her

eyes which he didn't like. "Aw, come on! You can't fool me, cutie," he whined. "Why, I saw Vonnegut's chauffeur driving that girl friend of yours this afternoon! What d'you make out of that? He drove her up to the hotel in ten thousand dollars' worth o' car, and you have the cheek to say Vonnegut's in France. Listen, baby girl, I'm a reasonable fellow——"

Rita's voice trembled.

"Harrison Chalvey would kill you for this!"

"Harry!" He was frankly puzzled. "I don't get you, dearie. Now, listen: of course I'm not as decorative maybe as Nick, but I've got cute li'l ways. I'm not unreasonable. We strive to please. Good God! What do you want, pet? You won't be my widow——!"

The footsteps had paused outside of the door; Rita wondered if the waiter were listening. This possibility kept her chained in the room; in spite of her brave words, a scene was to be avoided above all things.

That she didn't leave him, without argument, J. T. accepted as a hopeful sign for his cause. After all, she was only like other girls whom he had known. In the past his acquaintances had been confined to Broadway, but Rita was quite worth while, and for all her fine speeches she was, at heart, a sister to the midnight houris, he decided. Their language was the language of motors and jewels and Central Park West apartments; it was a language, too, which young Olverson spoke with a glib tongue.

"I'm not a bad fellow, honey. . . ."

Rita tried the old tricks of "silencing him with a

word"; of "bringing him to the dust, with a glance of righteous indignation," but the result, which was always so satisfying between book-covers, was scarcely what she had hoped for, now. He didn't "cringe," he didn't "humbly beg her pardon, and sneak away"; instead, he grinned, expectantly, like a sleek cat before a rat-hole.

"About Roberts, the chauffeur," she found herself saying, hurriedly; "he is now in Mr. Chalvey's employ. Nick Vonnegut has gone to France—I haven't heard from him since he sailed. Mr. Chalvey left Roberts and the car here for my use—I am going to marry Harrison Chalvey next month. Anything more you have to say—or wish to know—please say it to him. The outcome, I believe, would prove interesting."

Little Olverson merely swayed and laughed.

"Oh, what a silly lie!" he jeered. "Chalvey's goin' the pace in New York—saw him just before I left the old town, sweetness. He was buzzin' around with one of the swiftest little baby dolls——! Say, that don't look like weddin' bells within the month, does it? If you knew Lovey Beresford as I do——! Good Lord, why the bull? Old pals like we are—eh? I'm the most remarkable chap——!"

He got no further, and Rita, surprised at the abrupt ending, glanced up and caught the expression on his face. Now he seemed to "shake, totter and crumble," in approved best-seller fashion. His jaw dropped; the corners of his weak mouth twitched unpleasantly; one hand stole up and he drew his finger around the edge of his collar. He looked frightened, and was near collapse.

"I think we have some interesting data here——"
A man was speaking.

Rita turned quickly at the sound of the voice, and beheld a woman and two men who had stepped into the room, and by their manner, which was frankly imputative, held her a prisoner.

XXIX

APPEARANCES, she knew, were against her. Summer showers have little weight against disreputable resorts like the Castle at Ventnor. And Rita Charles was of the Tin-Pan sisterhood.

All of this flashed through her mind as she took in the picture of the calm, determined woman, and the two business-like men, who could be only detectives or lawyers by their professional manner. One of them was writing something down in a small red book. Rita grew faint with shame, not alarm. She knew that she was innocent, as innocent as Ida's favorite *Theresa* of yesteryears, but she knew, too, that appearance was what counted here, and . . . the Castle was unspeakable! It was run for vice, and by vice; one caught within its walls was utterly damned. She recalled the shabby ground-floor, the sickly gas-jets, the bar, the pool-room with its mixed patronage; then the steep, narrow flight of stairs, and . . . profligacy. The thick carpets, the heavy draperies, the rose lights mocked and jeered. She knew, and yet she had remained here with him. Rita raised her hands to her burning cheeks, and then, as quickly, she was cold, shivering, and stood there unable to speak.

Speech was not necessary to these intruders' plans, however. They looked, and turned to go. Just at first Rita didn't understand their purpose, and except that J. T. was cowed into silence, and she felt mis-

erably ashamed, and condemned, their appearance on the scene meant little to her. Then came the thought of . . . raid. She glanced at Olverson, but his eyes were fastened on the woman, and the fear that they held was not occasioned by any fear of newspaper notoriety. Little J. T. could well have boasted that he had figured in raids in more depraved resorts than the Castle. He was afraid of the woman! Rita couldn't bring herself to turn around and face her squarely, but she did catch a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. She was tall, thin, and unlovely, very white, with red hair and grim mouth.

As the party turned to go out, Olverson seemed to find his voice.

"Honest to God——!" he burst out. His hands went toward her, as if to stop the tall, thin woman; his tones were unmistakably pleading.

She paused and looked at him coldly, questioning him with her too-pale eyes.

"You don't understand——" he gasped.

"I think I don't care to understand any more." The woman's voice was richly beautiful, but Rita felt the significance of the words, and she colored deeply. For the first time, too, she thought of herself, of the picture she made, without hat and coat, sitting across a wine-stained cloth, with a drunken man, in a private dining-room at the Castle! Rita bowed her head; she couldn't face them, nor had she the strength to cross the room.

"I'd like to have a little talk with you—with your lawyers——" Olverson had followed the woman to the door in his anxiety to detain her.

"There is nothing you can say to me or to my lawyers." The beautiful voice was crystal-cold.

"Yes, there is. You think——"

One of the men interrupted him.

"We don't *think*, we *know*, now," he said.

"That's a damn lie!" Temple flew up, for all the world like a bantam against a mastiff. "I'm speaking to her," he growled, turning to the woman. "Listen: it isn't what you think at all——"

He stopped, but she showed neither an inclination to question him further, nor to turn and go away, leaving him unheard. She merely waited. Rita thought she looked like a woman who has waited a long time.

"We came in here to get out of the rain——"

With the room before their eyes, the Castle in entirety, his words became ridiculous. Rita felt stirred to anger.

"Hush!" she told J. T.

"Yes, hush," said the woman. "That is very good advice." She nodded to Rita. "Hush!"

There was silence, poignant in its message, and then the woman and the two men quietly withdrew. Rita could hear them going down the stairs. She turned to look at Olverson, and found him busy with the champagne.

"What did they want?"

His glass crashed to the floor; he looked at Rita with blood-shot eyes.

"Honest to God——! . . . I'm sorry. I'd give a million——!"

"Sorry?" Rita came towards him.

"She—I—— We're in for a peck o' trouble, Rita. I'll do my part; I'll stand by you——"

"What do you mean, Temple?" His manner alarmed her. He was on the verge of collapse; she could stand his oaths better. "Who was that woman?"

"Rita! . . . Honest to——"

"Who is she?"

He covered his lips with the palm of his hand, crouching back, afraid; but whether it was fear of her, or of the situation, Rita didn't know.

At last the words came:

"A girl I married, once——"

His wife! It seemed incredible. In the first place, the woman looked many years his senior. Could this be the girl about whom Anthony Varian had told her, the waitress whom he had married at college? She showed her unbelief, for Temple muttered doggedly:

"I was only a kid—and it was all so long ago——!"

Rita thought quickly.

"And those men with her——! It's a divorce she's after?"

"I'm afraid so. Honest to God, Rita——!"

"Never mind." She brushed him aside.

"I'll stick. I'll fight this thing. Or—you can run away to Europe—anywhere!"

"No. What for?"

"Better go away for a while until things are settled."

"I won't go away. Why should I?" But even as she pronounced the words, her courage failed her. She was clever enough to know that the woman and her detectives had secured much unpleasant evidence.

"So this is it!" She threw a quick little glance around the room. "I am sought as a co-respondent!"

"Yes, but don't you see if you run off and hide——? She doesn't know who you are! She doesn't care—the papers will say an unnamed woman! If you keep out of sight for a month or two." Olverson was really trying to help her. "I'm damn' sorry, Rita. I hadn't an idea——! Why, I hadn't heard of her for—years, I was going to say. I—I liked to forget her."

"No doubt you did," Rita retorted dryly. But she couldn't reproach him, couldn't even crush him with her anger, for she knew—she had known for months of his marriage!

But, strange as it may seem, Rita, while often thinking of Olverson's marriage, never gave a thought to Olverson's wife. She always held the knowledge of his marriage over his head as a weapon to strike with at the psychological moment, but instead the wound had been inflicted on herself. And she knew that she deserved it.

"I always meant to tell you."

"What?" She looked up.

"And I was only kiddin', of course—about us getting married, you know."

Rita wasn't so sure; she shook her head.

"It's an awful mess." He shook his head regretfully. "I'm pretty sure you won't be named, Rita—for the very good reason that she doesn't know your name! Besides, divorces are not so easily gotten in Jersey. Of course, it looked—rotten—" He stopped, and coughed behind his hand. "If you'll run away for a while, I'm sure nobody will ever be the wiser."

"But I can't run away," she said simply. "There's Harrison."

"Harrison?"

"I am going to marry Harrison Chalvey."

His glance was incredulous.

"On the level, Rita?"

"If you mean . . . is it true——" She nodded yes.

"Good Lord!" The idea seemed to stun him. He sat down, looking at her, helpless and silent.

All of her life, fortunately, Rita had been able to think and act for herself. Back in the little Pennsylvania town of her childhood, she had rebelled and struck out for New York; once in New York she had eschewed the shops and gone to work in an office, she had avoided her fellow-clerks who showed a tendency to matrimony and sought the acquaintance of men like Chalvey. This she had done alone and unaided, and marriage with Chalvey was within her grasp when, thanks to herself, she had come a cropper with little Olverson. Yes, it was her own fault. Rita wasted no tears over that. All at once her spirits rose; the scent of battle spurred her on. Alone and unaided she would get out of this muddle, too. She was innocent; she would not surrender Harry without a struggle. She knew, of course, that Chalvey would never marry her if she let her name become familiar to a sensation-loving public as the co-respondent in a divorce-suit. He would never marry her, probably, if he learned of her visit to the Castle with J. T. But he mustn't know; there was no one who must know! Rita felt that she could trust Olverson to maintain discreet silence on that point. In his own strange way the boy had a certain code of honor; and then,

his physical fear of Chalvey might be considered, too. Yes, again she would beat them, the great odds which were against her and her kind.

She put on her hat and coat and started to leave the room.

"Hello! . . . Where?"

"I'll telephone to you in the morning. Better let me go back to my hotel alone," Rita said.

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XXX

THE rain had stopped, and a translucent moon hung over the ocean, when Rita ventured forth from the Castle alone, and without pausing to find a rolling-chair in such a vicinity, pushed north on the Boardwalk, in the direction of Waldon Hall. It was close upon midnight and the crowd had in no way thinned, both men and women, alone, in pairs, and in little parties, walking up and down, back and forth, with something of the restlessness of caged animals. The hunter and the hunted rubbed shoulders, but after the experience she had just been through, Rita felt that she was comparatively safe anywhere. A few blocks above the Castle she found a chair-stand, and presently she was rolling towards her hotel, indifferent alike to nature and humanity.

She didn't know what she would do, she had scarcely any definite plan at present. Of course she divined that nothing must be allowed to estrange her and Chalvey. She thought of him without a trace of tenderness, but hard, commonsense told her that in marriage with him she would at least find an anchorage, and she had been drifting so long and so futilely. It all came of an aimless life, a restless heart. She felt that she was constantly seeking, and while Harry was not what she had sought, he was a man who would demand certain conventionalities in his wife, and she would be forced to cease her trifling and get down to the business of life.

Though it wasn't trifling, exactly, Rita knew. She had played at living because she was afraid of life's actualities; since she couldn't have whole portions, she had toyed with halves. After all, Harry had turned out to be but a second-best.

"But he can save me," she reflected, on the slow ride homeward. "He can save me, and I've got to be saved at once. After marriage, if I dare to break the laws, *his* laws, he will shoot me; and because I know he would do it, I will not break them. No doubt I shall be miserable, and fast lose my youth and prettiness, but at least I shall behave myself. At present I'm like a small boy, making faces at a caged bear, only *my* bear is the world, Mrs. Grundy, the conventions. Really, like the small boy, I'm afraid of the bear, but, too, I believe it is confined. Which is true, but just the same I can't go on forever defying it. Bears will growl and show their teeth, and that is unpleasant. Yes, I shall marry Harrison, and take to lace caps and embroidery work."

What she meant, of course, was that she would marry Harrison Chalvey if she could. More than a week had passed without a line from him. She had written him a rather impertinent letter, and now little J. T. spoke of his playing around with girls from the theaters, with Lovey Beresford. Did his silence and his attention to the Follies hour indicate a change of heart? On top of this uncertainty came Temple Olverson's wife. If Rita were ever connected with her divorce, she knew that her life, as far as Chalvey was concerned, was ended for all time. He would never marry a woman touched by the breath of scandal. Rita understood the divorce courts well enough

to know that no one, no matter how innocent, could hope to come through them unscathed. She must marry Harrison, if she could.

"I shall do something terrible, next, if I don't," she mused. Rita really felt this; her restlessness, her unhappiness would drive her upon the shoals before long, and then her life would be shipwrecked beyond repair. She didn't love Harry, but he was her salvation. She would scheme and lie to keep him.

"If I could only be myself; if I only dared!" she said once. But she had always been play-acting, it seemed. She thought of *Punchinello*—"Smile, *Punchinello*, and the world will cry bravo!" She had laughed, even when her heart was breaking; she supposed she could laugh again. "And I shall have to laugh a whole lot, when I am Harry's wife . . . to keep from crying," she reflected.

Rita found a telephone message in her room from Ida, saying she would be late. Rita had no desire to see Ida, to talk with her. She would be sure to condemn, and the possibility of losing the Chalvey fortune would send her certainly into a frenzy. In fancy Rita could see the curl of her lips, the flash of her eyes. Hooking your fish, and then, for a mere whim, tossing it back in the sea!

"She'll say I need a guardian." No, Rita didn't want to meet Ida.

She took a dose of chloral, and went to bed. . . .

The sun was streaming in at the open windows, before she came to realize time and place and conditions again. Sitting up in bed, still a little stupid from the effects of the narcotic, Rita saw what she believed to be Ida, ransacking trunk and drawers.

"Hello! . . . I must have overslept myself. . . . What are you doing? The floor looks like an expectant visit from the washerlady, back at Madam Orpington's. I'm feeling quite ragged this morning. I wonder if I could have a cup of coffee—like a screen heroine, in bed?"

Ida went to the telephone and gave the order. Then she returned and resumed her packing—Rita saw now that she was packing a suitcase.

"I'm going to New York," the girl explained. "Caroline wanted me to go with her last night, but of course I wouldn't leave you—like that."

"My dear Ida, it was quite all right to go if you wanted to, and Madame Charida needed you. Please don't consider me." Rita threw off the covers, found her mules under the bed, and started towards the bathroom. While the water was running into the tub, she reappeared in the doorway. "If you're in a hurry, Ida, you had better have your breakfast sent up, and I'll finish packing while you steal a bite." Her voice was sympathetic and kindly; Ida dropped the waist she was folding, and looked up, startled.

"Thanks, but . . . I can get along very well. . . ."

"I didn't know Madame Charida was in Atlantic City."

"I didn't either, until I met her yesterday downtown. You may remember I said something— But you were so busy." Ida frowned, and refolded the waist.

"When you came from the dentist—yes, I remember, now." Rita nodded.

"She came down with a—a man—on business; and directly the business was settled, she returned to New

York. It's been lovely here with you, but Caroline needs me now——”

“Please don't consider me. I'm sorry you felt that you couldn't return with your friend last night.” Rita stepped into the bathroom and turned off the water. “Better order your breakfast with my coffee,” she called through the closed door.

When she came from her bath, the tray had been sent up, and Ida was waiting for her, having finished with her packing. Rita felt refreshed, and in much better spirits, and as she sank down in the chair which Ida placed for her, there was a suggestion of latent strength and fine courage which argued illy for an adversary. Really, Rita was little afraid, now, in the bright light of morning; she felt sure of herself, and was satisfied that she would be able to overcome any obstacles and bring Harry back to her side.

“Such a lovely morning, and you must run away from it all!” she cried, helping herself to two lumps of sugar.

“If Caroline didn't feel that she needed me——” There was regret in Ida's voice, but at the same time she felt her importance. “Something happened last night which may be the means of changing Madame Charida's whole life,” she ventured mysteriously, leaning towards Rita across the cloth. “Really, it was I who suggested it——”

“You?” Rita was flatteringly interested.

“I. Caroline confessed that she had never thought of it, but it seemed to me the sensible thing to do. I know I'd never remain tied to a man like that.” Ida was quite scornful at the very thought of such a thing.

“A man like—what?” Rita asked, amused.

"Her husband. It seems that Caroline was married several years ago, when a girl, back home, to a man who has proved thoroughly worthless. She detested him; she wanted to be free; but—fancy it—she never thought of a divorce. I tell you, I spoke to her pretty plainly!" Ida wagged her head. Rita felt that she was often vindictive, and men, since they played no part in her own life, came in for her deepest contempt. Ida was at that reconstruction period when it was difficult to choose a mate.

"And so she is going to get a divorce!" Rita smiled, though the last word jarred.

"Well, she's going to try!" Ida was emphatic. "Last night she caught him with the goods, although the state laws are very unfair."

"'Caught him with the goods!' Oh, Ida, Ida, that's not good Bostonese!"

"I know, but . . . I get so mad——! And she did, too—just that. You see, she'd been trailing him for some time—had a private detective on his tracks. I told her, you know, since she could get a divorce, and wanted one, she was foolish not to go after it. Two days ago, the detective followed her husband to Atlantic City——"

"Who is he, Ida?" Rita interposed quietly.

"The husband?" Ida flushed as she was forced to confess the truth. "I don't know," she said. "Caroline has never told me, and of course I have respected her silence. But he's a cad, a beast, you may be sure! Didn't he leave her to starve almost at Orpington's last winter?"

"He may have been in the same boat himself. Oh,

I'm not taking up for him! . . . So she . . . caught him with the goods—right?"

"Last night." Ida nodded. "The detective who had followed him here thought he had cornered him at last, and he telegraphed to Caroline to come down at once. She didn't even send a wire to me, but took the first train. The detective had been shadowing her husband all day. Last night they followed him and a girl to a most disreputable resort on the Boardwalk, a place called the Castle——"

"The—what, Ida?"

"The Castle. Caroline didn't give me any of the details, but I know she and the detective, with another witness, burst in upon the girl and man in a private dining-room, on the second floor of this awful place. I didn't go. Caroline asked me to remain at the hotel—in her apartment—in case they telephoned—— And right afterwards she and the detective took the first train back to New York. But I do know they caught him. And I'm that glad!" Her eyes snapped with satisfaction. All the world was something to be stepped on, and kicked, to Ida.

Rita sat very still, gazing down at her coffee spoon.

"I suppose there is no doubt of the girl's guilt?" she asked at last.

"What?" Ida fairly bristled.

Rita ventured to ask another question.

"What does Madame Charida look like?"

Ida hesitated.

"She's not especially beautiful——"

"Tall, thin, with pale eyes and red hair?"

"Yes. Not pretty, but——"

"You don't know her husband's name?"

"No."

"Nor who the girl was they found at the—the Castle?"

"No. They didn't stop to bother about her name but I guess they can get it."

"I guess they can, Ida. She was I."

Ida believed that she was being jeered at, and hot ugly flushes mantled her cheeks and brow. Instinctively she rose to her feet, her hands gripped tightly before her.

"If you're going to laugh——"

"I am not." Rita, too, stood up, very calm and determined. "It was I. The girl whom she saw at the Castle was I. We—the man and I—had run in out of the rain——"

"You know him!"

"Yes."

"But——"

"You know him, too. He has been to Twenty-third Street often. Fancy! and she upstairs—ill and penniless! You shook hands with him yesterday, Ida. . . . I didn't know he was Carrie Billings' husband!"

"Lors! . . . I'm sure I don't know who——"

"J. Temple Olverson."

There was silence, poignant in its significance, and yet, so closely akin are tragedy and comedy, that Rita, even while she faced annihilation, found herself smiling.

"It's like a play—one of your celluloid romances——"

But Ida couldn't smile. She was stirred to the depths of her nature, shaken, and suddenly afraid. There was in her glance at once horror, anxiety, com-

passion. Something of the old adoration lit up her eyes, too, and she put out sturdy hands, as if to protect her. In that moment it was as if the past few months were blotted out, and they resumed their old relationship. When Ida, moist-eyed, choked back, "Miss Rita!" the transformation became complete.

"Whatever will you do, miss?"

Rita shook her head. "What can I do?"

"It ain't fair!" She was divided in her love, in her loyalty. "Oh, Miss Rita, this is awful! And Mr. Olverson, you say?"

"Yes. He used to come in Twenty-third Street—"

"I remember. And Carrie sick upstairs at the time, as you say! So he's her husband! She never said who he was. Olverson! He's very rich?"

"His father is, yes. I knew he had married a—a girl while he was away at college, but who would have dreamed——!"

"Ain't it the truth! Never mind. Sit down. Here—drink this coffee. Don't you worry, miss." She was the little maid again, serving, worshiping; even much of the old speech returned. "Oh, Miss Rita!"

"I had never seen Carrie Billings; she had never met me. It was my own fault. You remember, Ida—I would never go next door——"

"Well, she was sick, of course."

"That wasn't the reason." Rita shook her head. "Really, there was no reason, no sound, sane reason. I just . . . wouldn't. . . ."

"She wanted to know you." Ida's voice was regretful rather than filled with reproach. "She didn't know, I feel sure, Miss Rita. You don't think——?"

"No, I don't think she recognized me, Ida. As you

say, how could she? We never met in Twenty-third Street. At the Castle last night she saw only a disheveled young woman across a wine-stained cloth from a man whom she knew to be a degenerate."

"When she does know——"

Rita turned away.

"What's the use?" she demanded, with a little gesture of her hands. "Of course I am innocent—I feel quite like your old friend in 'More Sinned Against Than Usual'—*Imogene*, yes, that was her name. What happened to *Imogene*?—I forget. Well, this is how matters stand, Ida. I am the mysterious woman found closeted at the Castle with Temple Olverson; I am the unnamed co-respondent. I am also Harrison Chalvey's fiancée. A pretty market I've brought my pigs to, Ida!"

"You mean," said the girl, watching Rita's face anxiously, "that Mr. Chalvey'll—get mad? Maybe he won't know—maybe you can keep it from him." A gleam of cunning crept into Ida's eyes. "It isn't like you had done something wrong, Miss Rita——"

"Yes, but I have done something wrong, Ida. Mr. Chalvey has good reason to—to—get mad, yes."

"He won't want to marry you, you mean!"

It was as if Ida had replaced on her head the Tin-Pan regalia, an order which Rita gladly would forget, and she smiled faintly.

"Yes, I mean he won't want to marry me," she said.

Ida doubled up her fists, ready to slay innumerable enemies who came threatening Rita's future.

"Don't let him find out."

Rita looked at her steadily. After a brief pause she said,

"I'm not sure we can keep him from finding out—at least, some time. One lie begets another. Like a snow-ball they gather force with each movement. I—I *would* stoop to perversion," she confessed; "I'm not too . . . good, I guess—only afraid. No, the jig's up!"

But Ida refused to confess defeat. On the verge of tears, she began to wring her hands, sensing a sort of surrender to the inevitable in Rita's words.

"It ain't fair! Listen—we'll go to Caroline herself——"

Rita had thought of this, too.

"But that wouldn't be fair, Ida. She wants her divorce if she can get it; she has waited years. After all, there is no reason why my position, my appeal, should influence her to alter her plans. I was found at the Castle with her husband——"

"You didn't know he was her husband, miss!"

Rita's voice sank to a mere whisper.

"I knew he was somebody's husband. I knew Temple Olverson was married, Ida."

Ida's jaw dropped. Silence.

"But," she cried, recovering, "you didn't know he was *her* husband! It wasn't like you were hurting *her*! And the rain, not your own free will, sent you into the place. It's all as clear as daylight to me, Miss Rita. A person would have to have a very bad mind to make harm out of that. I'm sure Miss Carrie will understand. She's got to—with Mr. Chalvey himself at stake! Oh, Lors!" Ida seemed overcome at the mere thought of the Chalvey millions, and dropped

down weakly, fanning herself with her handkerchief. "Caroline will have to drop the case. I'm sure the detectives can find another co-respondent. She can't refuse you. Why, there's the motor!"

"The motor?" Rita didn't grasp her meaning at all.

"Yes, the motorcar." Ida showed signs of fight again. "Last spring, when she was just getting over her illness, didn't you send an auto every day to take her driving, like the doctor ordered? I remember, if you don't. Maybe Carrie Billings wouldn't be here to-day, getting ready for a season of opera and everything, if it hadn't been for your kindness. And she knows it—believe me, she does! Often she's said to me—Well, then——! If Carrie knows the meaning of gratitude——"

"Ida!"

"I mean it, Miss Rita. You come and go up to New York with me at once——"

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

Silently they measured each other with their eyes.

"It may mean . . . losing Mr. Chalvey, if you don't," ventured Ida, at last.

Rita crossed to the dressing-table and began to twist her hair into a simple knot, minus all frills and curls.

"I wouldn't ask Miss Billings to raise her hand in my behalf if my very life were at stake," she said, with a quiet finality that left Ida stunned and speechless.

XXXI

A LITTLE while ago it had seemed a very simple matter to go to Carrie Billings, to explain things to her, and then throw herself on the singer's mercy. Rita had felt that if she explained things properly there could be no misunderstanding on Madame Charida's part, and that in common fairness she would be compelled to drop a case which threatened a girl's good name. Surely she would see that Rita was innocent of any wrong-doing; her engagement to Harry Chalvey precluded the possibility of any intention on her part of entangling little J. T., for Chalvey was both wealthier and finer in every respect. While Rita had acted foolishly, she had not been wicked, and when she realized this, Carrie Billings could hardly refuse to squash the case.

Rita had never pleaded with any woman, but she would have gone to Carrie. As Ida pointed out, really her marriage to Harrison Chalvey was at stake. Rita couldn't let Harry go without an effort. With all her friends deserting her—Varian estranged, Nicko in Europe, young Olverson taboo—Rita felt that in losing Chalvey, she lost pretty much everything that made life worth while. Not that the man himself made life worth while any longer, but his money, his position did. If she quarreled with Harry, and he walked off in a huff, Rita would be left quite alone, with the choice of seeking new friends, via the Tin-

Pan route, or else resorting to the Orpington parlor for companionship.

"I must go to Carrie Billings," was the first thought that came to Rita. Chalvey was her trump card, and her last one. She wouldn't give him up without a struggle.

And then Ida reminded her of old scores, of past kindnesses, and straightway Rita's lips were sealed. She couldn't have pleaded with Carrie Billings, not for her life itself. And it wasn't exactly kindness that had prompted Rita to ask Vonnegut for the motorcar, that day. She had been hard and cold, she had always acted with the contrariness of a child where Carrie was concerned. She had refused to bother with her—that was it exactly—bother with her. The lonely invalid had expressed a desire for her friendship, and she had replied to Ida that she had time neither for sick people nor impecunious friendships—one hadn't, in New York. Of course, faithful Ida hadn't conveyed this message to Carrie, but the weight of it hung heavily on Rita's conscience. Altogether, these things made it impossible for her to go to Carrie Billings and state her case, to plead for leniency.

Rita felt the old hardness stealing into her heart.

"I won't; I'll die, first!" she said, and straightway put out of mind all thought of appeal to Caroline. But she didn't surrender Harry Chalvey so easily. She would fight for him; she would . . . lie.

She walked excitedly around the room, still in negligée, and then halted at the window. Sky and sea were hazy—she noticed that, standing there; and the air was warm, without freshness. Early bathers were going down to the surf; children played in the sand

with pails and shovels, watched over by a young person in silk stockings and with a fondness for Tingling Tales. Rita felt that she had never appreciated this life, her life before, with its security and pleasant small diversions. Now, she stood upon the edge of a precipice, and the slightest misstep would send her over the side. It was her own fault, she had no one to blame for her predicament but herself. But . . . she mustn't go over the side!

"I'll fight," she said—not Carrie, but Harrison Chalvey. The thought of battle brought the color back to her cheeks, and she returned to Ida, who had quite finished her packing, with a smile that was most reassuring in its significance.

Ida, catching it, started perceptibly.

"What is it? . . ."

"I'm not back at the U. S. A. & B. yet, Ida."

"You mean—you'll go with me——!"

Rita thought over her plans before answering.

"Yes, I'll go up to New York with you, Ida," she decided at last, and the dark eyes flashed defiance.

"But not to Madame Charida——"

"Oh, Miss Rita!"

"I'll find Harry Chalvey, first——"

"And then——"

"And then I'll marry him."

Their glances met, and at the unspoken question in Ida's eyes, Rita nodded. She would go to Harry and marry him before there was any possibility of his learning of her connection with the Olverson divorce case. Once married, once legally his wife—Well, Rita was not in love with Chalvey any longer, though the fault, she felt, was his.

There are moments of intense relief in our lives when we feel as if we have just crossed some important bridge in the nick of time; and looking back at the death and destruction on the opposite shore there is born within us a pæan of thanksgiving. Rita experienced a feeling as if she were viewing a wreck from the shelter of a protecting peak, when, arriving at the conclusion to marry Harrison Chalvey first, and let him find out afterwards, if needs be, she prepared for the journey to New York. It was painful to contemplate what her life must be without Harry, now. This thought recurred with annoying frequency; not for a second was she permitted to forget how greater appeared the necessity of holding Chalvey. The thought of Sally Cole and Bob Sartoris spurred her on. Yes, she would marry him; she would show them all that it could happen again.

With her mind fully made up, Rita sent for her chauffeur to come to her on the porch directly after lunch. They both stood during the brief interview, speaking in undertones.

"You were in Mr. Nicholas Vonnegut's employ at one time, I believe?" she said, on the spur of the moment, recalling J. T.'s words.

"Yes, Miss Charles," the man replied respectfully.

"Then possibly you remember me," she said quietly.

"Yes, madam."

Rita hesitated, then:

"I sent for you about Mr. Chalvey. He has been gone nearly two weeks, and reports, disquieting reports, have reached me——" She looked at him, finding it more difficult than she had expected. "I thought perhaps——" she finished lamely.

"I understand, madam. I telephoned yesterday to Mr. Chalvey's apartment, and later to the Athena Club and the Atlas; but nobody there seems to have seen him. I was going to ask permission to run up to town this afternoon——"

"Then you think——?" She stopped, and frowned. "You think you could——could find him, then?"

"I could try, Miss Charles. I kind of know his . . . haunts——"

Rita nodded vigorously.

"Very well, Roberts. Have the car ready in an hour. Miss Lewis and I will go up to New York with you. It is important that I should see Mr. Chalvey."

They had just enough money between them to settle their bills at Waldon Hall, though in order to do this they would have nothing left for railroad fares, which made the automobile highly necessary. Ida stood solidly behind Rita in every move; little by little she was becoming more and more the old Ida of the Château Prunella.

"Better send Madame Charida a wire stating you will join her at dinner," said Rita, counting out the change to pay for the message.

But Ida returned the money with the announcement that the telegram could go collect. Gradually, without the words being spoken, it was borne home to Rita that here, in the crisis of her life, she, and not Caroline Billings, was first.

XXXII

It was eight o'clock when they arrived in New York. They had run into a storm somewhere in Jersey, and when they reached the city they found the asphalt streets still steaming from the thunder shower, although at this hour the clouds had broken and a handful of stars blinked sleepily in the sky. Rita's and Ida's clothes were soaked. The car was without top, and at Ida's urging, Rita had refused to let Roberts seek shelter from the rain. Both girls seemed to divine the same thing—Rita must reach New York that night.

How familiar things looked! Coming up from the ferry Rita sat upright in the car and gazed at the well-remembered landmarks along Twenty-third Street with eyes that were often wistful. Already the front steps were alive with their nightly human freight. A soda fountain at Eighth Avenue resembled a bargain-sale mob. A street piano, before the open door, played selections from "Il Trovatore," and some half-grown girls performed a jazz dance to the music of Signor Verdi, on the sidewalk. Rita wondered idly if they could be Anthony Varian's girls, from the parish house.

At Sixth Avenue, Ida got out of the car and mounted innumerable steps to the elevated, which would take her up to Madame Charida's hotel at Herald Square. She would telephone to Rita from the hotel the moment she arrived, she promised.

"And not a word about me, mind, Ida," Rita warned her.

But the girl held her ground here.

"I think Carrie ought to know. Some day she may find out, remember. And then she'd wonder. Let me tell her it was you. Silence only creates suspicion, and after all you are as innocent as—as——"

Rita looked down in her earnest face, and smiled.

"As innocent as the girl in 'More Sinned Against Than Usual,' yes, Ida." She held her hand for a second or two before letting it go. "Tell her, then; all right. But—I can manage very well without her intervention."

Rita told Roberts to drive her first to Mrs. Orpington's, where she knew she could change her wet clothes and get something to eat, for neither she nor the chauffeur had touched food since luncheon. And it seemed like a real home-coming as the automobile slowed down at the door of the Château—there was the same quartet on the front stoop, the same music issuing from the parlor windows. Florence Brockly jumped up, almost upsetting the book agent who shared her rug, when Rita descended from the car.

"Why, it's Miss Charles!" she cried.

"I'm a 'picture from *Puck*,'" laughed Rita, with unusual graciousness, pausing at the steps. "Where is Mrs. Orpington, please? We were caught in the rain. I want to change my clothes, and Roberts, the chauffeur, will want some dinner. Is she downstairs?"

"Mrs. Orpington has gone to the movies," answered Florence. "And I'm not sure you'll find Eloise in the house. When the cat's away, you know."

"Ain't it the truth?" grinned the haberdasher's clerk,

finding his tongue at Rita's unexpected affability.

"Say, the Mother Hen's got a mash—what d'you know about that?" whispered Miss St. Clair—at which the four rocked with laughter. "It's the Lord's truth, Miss Rita!" the cream demonstrator went on, as if somebody had denied it. "A new boarder—just come in. He's taken her to the Fifth Avenue to-night. Can you beat it?"

"Kin you even tie it?" demanded the book agent. "Bee-lieve me, the Mother Hen's a real chicken, nowadays."

"Well," observed Rita, with a smile, "I suppose we all fall."

But she moved towards the open door. She was tired and wet and hungry. She wanted to get into some dry clothes first; then, if she could find Eloise, the new girl, she would have something to eat in the dining-room. Otherwise the money which Ida had refused for her telegram would have to go for supper at a near-by lunch-room.

As she turned to go indoors, Miss Brockly spoke her name, following her.

"Wait a minute, Miss Charles. I'll just go with you. Maybe I can find that rascally maid, and if not, I know where they keep the key to the ice-box. . . . Why, you've got a good drenching!"

"I came up from Atlantic City in Mr. Chalvey's car, and we were caught in the storm. You haven't seen Mr. Chalvey, I suppose?—he hasn't 'phoned?"

"No-o. A Mr. Olverson did. Mrs. Orpington told him you were at Waldon Hall. I wasn't sure you wanted him to know——"

"Oh, it didn't make any difference, I suppose," said Rita, suddenly very tired.

Florence gave her a little shove toward the stairs.

"Get into some dry clothes and then come down to the basement, I'll see what I can scare up," she laughed.

Rita's feet seemed shackled as she climbed the long flights. These stairs! She recalled suddenly how she had met Anthony Varian at this very step, and how they had quarreled—about everything! Once, about here, he had asked her to go with him to a stereopticon lecture on the Holy Land, and she had refused—lied, invented ridiculous excuses! Of course he had seen through her wretchedly thin ruses; she believed she had come out and told him that she had no great affection for Palestine, hers was a two-dollar heart—she cared only for Miss Barrymore and Mr. Otis Skinner and the big musical revues. That was unparadonable, and she wondered now that Anthony Varian had ever approached her again. But he had; he had asked her to come to his parish house again and again. . . . Rita wondered where he was to-night. . . .

Turning the key in the lock, she pushed open the door of her bed-room with her foot, a trick caught from Ida. How hot and stuffy was the air! Rita went to the windows and raised the sashes even before she turned on the light. Even then it was little better. And some people lived and slept in this atmosphere! . . . She must lose no time in finding Harry.

Here it was, her room, her home for nearly four of the six years she had lived in New York. It was quite like greeting an old, old friend to come into it again. There stood the Victrola, here the Watteau

screen, the silver littered dressing-table, the comfortable day-bed, the deep leather Morris chair. Against the plain gray paper hung her favorite water colors, a Whistler, several bits from Nicko's brush, including the famous three prunes rampant, the crest of the Orpington household. "Dear Nicko!" she breathed softly. Rita stood there, gazing at the loved and familiar objects with eyes that filled like a stage heroine's. She had been wildly happy here, as well as wretched—she wondered if she were ever going to be happy again.

With softened tread, as if she were among things holy, she went to the wardrobe and began putting out fresh clothes. Everything worth while she had taken with her to the seashore, there were only a few rags left at home. Finally she rooted out a brown silk creation, at one period designated as her "best," but in latter years set aside as an intended present to Ida. Fancy offering Ida that frock now!

Rita put it on, thinking that it made her appear older—she hoped no one would see her in it, and of course by morning her other clothes would be dry. A little pressing, and her smart linen suit would be quite all right again, but—she'd miss Ida, the old Ida, on the job.

"Brown is for frumps," she murmured to her reflection in the old silk dress; and switching off the lights, she went downstairs.

Eloise not having been unearthed, Florence Brockly had set out a substantial meal herself for Rita, and the weary girl sank gratefully into a chair and permitted the faded little teacher to wait on her to her heart's content. This was not "Almighty Floss";

there was something almost maternal in the Brockly voice and manner, an humbleness which found a real joy in serving.

"I suppose it's the parish house influence," mused Fita, and her thoughts turned to Anthony Varian with genuine regret.

"I gave your chauffeur something to eat while you were upstairs," Florence said, pointing to a stack of dishes at the far end of the table. "Mr. Smiley watched the car while he came in. . . . It's not very tempting, I'm afraid. Friday is fish day, Mrs. Orpington says. Not that Friday cuts any very great figure with most of us, but it gives her an excuse to set us down to a no-meat dinner, you know."

Rita smiled.

"The same as she used to give us 'something light' on Thursdays because Thursday was Ida's day out."

"Isn't it so?" laughed Miss Brockly, and she helped Rita to more potato salad and set the milk jar conveniently at hand.

Rita was silent for a few minutes. There was something she wanted to ask, and couldn't. However, she gathered the courage to say:

"How is everybody?"

"Oh, fine! We're always the same, here at Orpington's."

"Do you ever hear from Mr.—Mr.— What is his name? You know—the dancing gentleman whom you met at the shore."

"Meekins. . . . Lillian does. At least, he sends her an occasional post-card, now. At first it was a letter every day. That's the way it goes. She's very tired of complexion creams, and no wonder—five years

of it!" Florence sighed wearily, suddenly off her guard.

Shrewdly Rita turned the subject into other channels.

"And how do you like Eloise after Ida?"

The school teacher brightened.

"The limit, positively the limit! She wears our clothes, and receives her company on the front stoop. Once, when a friend of Lilly's came to call, he stopped for ten minutes, talking to the maid before he discovered who she was. But Mrs. Orpington says servants are so hard to get! She's talking about taking lessons on the parlor piano—Eloise, not the Mother Hen."

Rita glimpsed an opening and went cautiously toward it.

"What do the 'paying guests' say to that?"

"Say? . . . I believe the men joke with her behind our backs, Miss Charles!"

"Not all of them—Mr. Varian!" Rita offered this with a smile.

"Oh, Mr. Varian's gone," answered Florence, with a quiet finality. "The rectory roof is finished at last, and he's moved in. A fearfully big house for just one man." A deep flush mantled her pale cheek as she said it.

Anthony had left Twenty-third Street! It wouldn't be at all difficult to turn one's back on Mrs. Orpington and her paying guests now. Rita sighed, and stretched out her hand for the milk.

It was this moment which Harrison Chalvey chose for his entrance. Pausing at the door, he peered into the room for a moment with owlsh, blinking eyes,

looking first at Rita, and then at Florence Brockly, with something akin to cunning on his face. Florence moved back, withdrawing from the scene, but Rita rose hurriedly to her feet, and advanced to his side.

"Why, Harry——!"

"Didn't expect to see me, eh?" he leered into her face.

"But—down in the basement——!"

"All hide-aways look the same to me."

She saw his condition, and turned to Florence with a mute appeal. Directly the school teacher dropped everything, and disappeared quietly from the room.

"I've been worried to death about you, Harry," Rita cried, when they were alone together. "Do you realize it has been nearly two weeks since I've heard from you? My dear, that isn't fair! So this afternoon I had Roberts bring me up to town——"

"In the car?"

"Yes."

He laughed boisterously, so loud and long that Rita was afraid they would hear him out of the front stoop. Glancing over her shoulder, she made sure that Florence had closed the door behind her.

"I see you riding all that distance in a roadster!" Chalvey jeered. He caught hold of her arm, holding on to her so that she couldn't get away from him, and his fingers bruised her flesh. "What's the use of lying about it?" he demanded, adding insult to her injuries. "'Fess up that you've been in town for a couple of days—maybe a week."

"Harry! You know that isn't true. We left Atlantic City right after lunch and have only just arrived. There was a storm. You may ask Roberts," she add-

ed, drawing herself up; "although I beg of you not to let him suspect that you doubt me."

"Never mind the dramatics. Roberts knows women."

She began to tremble with an indignation which swept her from head to feet. It surprised, and frightened her, too, to find that he could be coarse as well as brutal. She hadn't suspected this trait.

"Then perhaps Roberts' answer will convince you," she retorted, with a voice that shook.

"Oh, cut it! And Roberts is a man for all he wears livery. Any man would lie for a pretty woman."

Rita drew back, paling. The insult cut like a whip. If she had obeyed the dictates of her heart at that moment she would have turned and left him then and there. In that moment she fairly loathed him. But the magic of his name, his exalted position and princely income, stilled the wee, small voice, and she weakened, making another effort to appease him.

"You will be sorry for this to-morrow, Harry. And it's only because I know you don't mean it—— Why, how can you say such things to me! I tell you I came here to New York to find you——because I was worried——! You hadn't sent me a line! I was frightened!"

"A likely story," he scoffed. "Did you come to this house to find me?"

He leaned forward; she could feel his breath on her cheek. With a supreme effort, she freed herself from his grasp, warding him off with her hands. She thought if he touched her again she must strike him.

"Did you come to Twenty-third Street to find me? —did you?" he repeated, watching her slyly.

"No, but——"

"Ah!"

"I came here first to get some dry clothes. We were caught in a storm over in Jersey——"

"'We'?"

"Yes, Harrison, we—Ida Lewis, your chauffeur, and I."

A brief silence followed. Chalvey swayed forward, reaching out to catch her arm, but fortunately he missed her. And, as if to frustrate further attempts, Rita moved back, putting the table between them.

"You came to New York, and to this house with but one idea, Rita," he said distinctly; "and that was to see that preaching-fellow—Varian. You lied for him down at the shore, a few weeks ago, and you are lying again, now. While I was away—occupied—you came to see him!"

His voice challenged her, but she turned from the thought of taking up the glove which he had thrown down. An open rupture was to be avoided; if she could pacify him——

"You'll be sorry for this to-morrow. You know you are behaving outrageously! When you're not yourself——"

"Sorry? For what?" he demanded, his voice rising shrilly. "So I'm not myself, am I? That's rich!" He commenced to laugh. "If I'm as outrageous as all that, why don't you call on Varian——?"

"Mr. Varian no longer lives here, Harry," she cried, striving to keep her temper.

"Oh! Then he forgot to send you his change of address, eh? Well, that's easily remedied. Here, you!" He called to an imaginary girl, Florence,

probably. "Where's Varian gone? Quick! This lady——"

He looked at Rita and grinned. She was silent, only her lips moving, her fingers twitching. But her silence served only to infuriate him further.

"I'm going to tell you right now and here, Rita, what I want and what I expect to get," Chalvey spat out, shaking an unsteady forefinger in her face. "It is folly for you—or any woman!—to try to trick me. I have known that man Varian for years—too good-looking for a parson. My suspicions were aroused when I saw him with you on the beach——"

"He didn't know I was engaged to you."

"That's it! Defend your lover," he shouted, beside himself with rage and jealousy. "Fool that I am to offer my name to you!"

"No, Harrison," she said, turning suddenly, "I am the fool ever to have listened to you. But I was blinded by your money, by the Chalvey millions, the ease and luxury they promised, and I let my greed get the better of my heart—for that no longer belongs to you! I am the fool! . . . Well, now I am done. Listen to me: I am through. Take your ring, please, and go—leave me alone. I am tired of being insulted, sworn at, questioned like a child. Oh, yes! I know quite well what I am doing. I realize—everything! I am up to my ears in debt; I have resigned my position with the U. S. A. & B., and I loathe the idea of going to work in a strange office. It is a lot to throw over, the Chalvey fortune, but—I guess I can't swallow the pill despite its gilding. Please go."

There was a short silence. Fascinated, Chalvey gazed back at Rita, who sank wearily down in a chair,

turning her face away. Somehow, the very sight of him standing there was more than she could bear.

"Rita," he said, his voice dropping to a frightened whinny, "Rita, you don't mean that? I apologize——"

"Go—please go!" She didn't even turn her head.

"It can't be that . . . you doubt my love!"

"You have strange ways of showing your love, Harry."

"I have been half mad with jealousy, Rita! Ever since that day on the beach—I could think of nothing but you and him—Varian. It seemed that you must care—a lot! For a week, now, I have been walking this block, watching. Then, to-night, I saw my car and Roberts standing at the door. I knew you were in the house, and I thought that he——"

"Hush! Hush!"

"You don't know what it means to love so deeply."

"Don't I?" She looked at him with an odd little smile. On the spur of the moment she said, "Harry, I once cared for you in exactly that way."

"Rita!"

"It is true. You were my . . . all!" She confessed it without flinching. "When you said good-by, and sailed away to South America—without a handshake, scarcely——"

"I couldn't trust myself to say good-by," he told her in a whisper.

Rita shook her head, lips and eyes unyielding.

"I cared so much that night that one word . . . and I'd have followed you to the ends of the earth. But . . . you didn't say it. You were—afraid to trust yourself, yes. I know. I wasn't fit to mate with a Chalvey——"

"There was my mother, Rita."

She drew a deep little breath and sank back again in her chair.

"Well, you have succeeded in killing my love—for all time. It is the very kindest thing that I can do—to give you back your ring. You are surprised—I wonder at myself; and yet I do it. . . . Don't try to 'explain.' There are some things which can only be made worse, and never better. So you have been watching this house for a week! Spying! On me!"

"You must have cared for Varian!" he cried, stung to a last retort. "You must have cared!"

She didn't reply, waiting with bowed head for him to go. At that moment, it occurred to Rita that once the door closed upon Harrison Chalvey forever all her trouble, her unhappiness would be over. It would mean another office, another Olverson, perhaps, but it would also mean freedom to live her own life in her own way, to choose her friends, and to discard them.

"I haven't played fair with you, exactly," she said impulsively, addressing him for the last time. "For I didn't love you, even at the moment I promised to be your wife. I had loved you—that you know. And then, suddenly, like a pricked bubble, it was gone. And since then you have forfeited even my respect and liking. I thought I could stand a good many hard jolts in exchange for the spending of your millions, Harry, but my womanhood balks at you, yourself, first of all."

She said this in sorrow rather than in anger, and it was borne upon Chalvey the utter futility of further

words. He could have fought anger; her pity left him cold and helpless.

"At least I am honest with you at the end. I meant to deceive you, to go through with this, but I—— Yes, at least I am honest now. And your mother will be glad. . . . A tinpanner!"

Somehow he found the door, his way out of the house, his way down the street. . . .

XXXIII

IT meant a clean slate and a fresh beginning; Rita knew that. After six years in New York she must start all over again. But there would be a difference, too—the old incentive to climb would be gone. Six years ago Rita Charles had come to New York with the avowed intention of advancing herself on the social ladder, not a step or two, but just as far as she could go. Presently she learned just where friendship with such men as Vonnegut, Chalvey, and Sartoris led—face-to-face with a stone wall. She could go just so far and no farther, but in these pleasant platonic fields it was not impossible for her to enjoy the world's flesh-pots. She had accepted this condition, had come to resign herself to her fate, when Robert Sartoris had crossed the barrier and married pretty Sally Cole.

Sally's marriage, of course, had upset all of Rita's calculations, and tossed every tradition of the Tin-Pan sisterhood to the four winds. And Rita, who had been contented to remain a pal, had scented all at once the possibilities of becoming a wife.

Though, "It never can happen again," she repeated dully, even while she was busy perfecting her plans.

Just the same, she began to practice her wiles on young Olverson, and presently she had Harry himself at her feet. In her wildest flights of fancy she had never pictured anything even remotely approaching this—marriage with Chalvey. Now, she pondered over

the fact that she had refused him, refused the spending of his fortune, and the protection of his name. Why?

"Why?" she asked herself aloud.

It wasn't only because she no longer loved Harrison Chalvey, for Rita said she could get along without love, if necessary. Marriage, from the viewpoint of a small town, hadn't presented an entirely idealistic picture, and Rita had come to New York with not a few of the earmarks of an egotist. Due to her home life, and her early associates, upon her arrival in the metropolis she had become at once self-centered and all-sufficient. A sense of superiority swept her along; she was different, she would succeed. There was Florence Brockly, and there was Lillian St. Clair, and there was Ida—they were clods, all of them. In her heart Rita knew that their birth and breeding were scarcely inferior to her own. She was the daughter of a country cobbler! But she was also a cunning little parrot, quick to learn, eager, ambitious, and pretty. While these other girls plodded along, she fought her way to a higher plane, to something better. Or was it better? Rita stopped short. With all she had attained, surely she had missed something, too! The fruit in her hands was Dead Sea Apples.

Love had come and gone, but Harry had done something more than that. He had awakened love in her breast, and then completely killed it, but he had left behind a sort of latent self-respect. In the old days, the days dedicated to Plato, he had trampled under foot her pretty swagger, her dignity, and Rita had pocketed her pride for the sake of his friendship and what it offered. He had left her stripped of self-respect. But he had gone too far; his arrogance had

over-stepped all bounds. She had rebelled, and in rebellion found that which she had lost. A clean slate was in her hands once more.

"I can never go back to the old life, the Tin-Pan routine again," she said, with a shudder.

But what to do? Rita approached her to-morrows with a level head and steady nerves. Above all she must not lose her head. Of course there could be no going back for her; Nicko Vonnegut, little J. T., and Harry were dead, and they had no disciples. "Play-time past," she thought, and actually she smiled as she thought it. Old Margaret-Sit-by-the-Fire! Was "Rita" quite too, too frivolous, you know? This was no old-time conversion which swept her from head and feet, and figuratively made her roll up her sleeves. Rita didn't feel humbled any more than she sensed defeat. Once again she stood stripped for battle; the world owed her a living!

"Though I could have wintered in his Fifth Avenue palace, and opened the Newport place in July without once threatening the Chalvey Lares and Penates," she reflected. Then she grinned, *à la gaminc*. "I can take dictation, along with the best of 'em, too!"

Just at first she planned to leave Twenty-third Street, and hide herself in some neighborhood where her Tin-Pan past was not known. In new surroundings the absence of motorcars, of evening frocks, of telephone calls, florists' boxes, special messengers would pass without comment. She would be simply Miss Charles—Margaret, preferably. It was not impossible to live comfortably on twenty-five dollars. Books helped wonderfully, and she could afford a play occasionally. Somewhere uptown, or down . . .

And then she burst out laughing; she knew that she was going to stay right here at the Château—though she must remember to burn Nicko's scandalous drawing; prunes were her portion, too, now.

"I won't run away, I won't hide; I'll even go down in the parlor—beg pardon—drawing-room, when my furniture has been moved out."

Rita lost no time, but began making over her life the very next morning. Ida telephoned to her before ten o'clock.

"I'm coming right down. What I wanted to say is, Caroline wants to come with me. I said I'd ask you. Well, can she?"

Rita's lips twitched.

"Great grief! can't she?"

"Well, may she, then?" But Ida laughed a little.

For a moment Rita was grave. Then she said decisively,

"Yes. Please ask her to come, Ida."

Alone, she set to work cleaning her room, busying herself with broom and dust-cloths. It was a new experience, and while she felt, if only to be in character, that she ought to like it, she knew that she didn't, at all.

"My change of heart is not complete yet, I guess," she said to herself. "At least I can't enthuse over housework. And my hands are all blistered!" She looked at them ruefully. But when Ida appeared, coming up the stairs, Rita was still sweeping feverishly.

Seeing that Ida was alone, Rita stopped short, leaning on the broom.

"Where?" she questioned mutely, with her eyes.

Ida came in, closed the door to keep the dust from the halls, and opened the windows to let it out in the street.

"Better let it alone," she said briefly. "You just stir up the dirt. . . . Oh! Caroline? My dear, before she could get away there came a telephone call from the opera people and she had to go right over for an interview. It may mean a few weeks in Pittsburgh—the singer they had engaged is ill. She was so sorry; you believe that."

Rita's eyes met Ida's and saw that she spoke the truth.

"Yes, I believe she wanted to come."

"She has always wanted to come, I think," said Ida, with a little sigh. "You don't know, Miss Rita. You've always meant something—something . . . big, I guess, to Caroline. When I told her about the— the Castle, she broke down and cried. And Carrie's not the crying kind, either."

"Cried!"

"Yes. To think that you might come to harm through her. I didn't have to tell her—she knew you were innocent——"

"Was I?" Rita asked wistfully.

"Why, miss——"

"I knew Temple Olverson was married."

"But not to Caroline!" insisted Ida stoutly. "You always did do that, though—tried to make-believe you were bad."

"As 'bad as Theda Bara,' you used to say, Ida." A little smile played around Rita's lips.

"Lors, she's not bad, either; it's make-believe, too. Caroline understood. She telephoned to her lawyers

and then to the detective, and had them come to her—last night. She wasn't taking any chances. She told them face-to-face what she wanted done, though there weren't grounds for a divorce, exactly according to Jersey law. So there'll never be any danger of Mr. Chalvey——" Something in Rita's face stopped her; she came across the room, all concern. "Does he—know already?" she gasped.

"No." Rita shook her head. "But it's all over between us. I have given him back his ring—like a well-regulated heroine. It's quite all over between us."

And Ida, in an awed, small voice repeated, "It's quite all over between 'em!" Then she roused herself to ask, "It wasn't—Carrie? She'd just naturally die, I guess——"

"No, it wasn't Carrie, it was I—it was he—ourselves. I am going back to work, Ida, and—I guess I must sell all my things—my furniture—my silver—to pay my bills."

Which is what she did. Her mind once made up, she lost no time. There were articles of furniture such as the day-bed, the desk, and the chairs which were both artistic and expensive; an inventory showed that she had more than five hundred dollars' worth of phonograph records, while the machine itself had cost another two hundred when new; yet the sum realized was pitifully small. The silver, all marked, was practically of no value; the Watteau screen wasn't genuine. She couldn't bear to part with her pictures—pictures and books are a part of one; the bed, too, she kept. When the sale was consummated, and the money in her hand, Rita found that she had enough

to settle all of her debts but one. She couldn't pay back the hundred dollars which Chalvey had given her to bring Ida down to Atlantic City. That money had to be returned. A last piece of jewelry, a real sacrifice, raised the amount, and put her square with the world.

"The king is dead, long live the king!" she greeted Ida's horror-stricken face with. Rita didn't like her dismantled roan herself; tears were perilously close to the surface. For a moment, as she gazed around at this devastation, the old what's-the-use spirit threatened. Hadn't she been foolish, quixotic? All her pretty things! Then she suddenly dimpled and laughed outright. "We're going to the movies to-night, Ida, you and I. *Theresa's* 'Trials' may be over, and *Sarah's* 'Sins' forgiven, but there's something rare on tap, somewhere, I'll be bound. What! can't you 'register' joy, Ida?"

Ida made sundry little passes with her hands.

"Gimme air," she breathed in all seriousness. "Let me think."

"That," cried Rita gayly, "is Friend Heroine herself!"

But this new life was far from being all cakes and ale. The change in Rita was not completed in a twinkling, as if by a fairy's wand. There were dull days and deadlier evenings, when she hungered for the flesh-pots and asked herself again and again the old question—Why? At such times self-respect counted very little beside frocks that came off of a rack, and entertainment in the small-time variety houses which flourished in the Twenty-third Street district. Rita found herself longing for expensive, exquisite gowns,

and orchestra chairs at a Broadway première, more than once, in the days that followed.

There were one or two little jaunts with Ida, and then that young woman took herself off to join Madame Charida in Pittsburgh. After all, Carrie never got to see Rita. But before the singer left to keep her engagement, she wrote a very sweet and appealing letter, which was so at odds with her personal appearance that Rita was surprised and awed. She didn't show the letter even to Ida, but Ida—and the Château—were permitted to gaze upon the bouquet of valley lilies which accompanied the note.

"I am so abashed," wrote Caroline. "Please believe me when I say that I have forgotten that night by the sea for all time. . . ."

No, there was nothing to fear from Caroline Charida. Harry would never hear of the Castle episode through her. This reflection supplied Rita with much food for thought, and there were times, dull, gray times, when she was sorely tempted to call Chalvey on the telephone. It was not at all improbable but that she could bring him back.

"At least we could remain friends," ran her thoughts.

She played with the idea. Taking down the telephone directory, she looked up Harrison's number in the Sixties—"just to see if she really remembered it." She really did.

"Why not friends?" she mused.

But in her heart she knew very well that friendship was impossible. After what had been, there could be no middle ground for them; her love for him was

cold; whether his had spent its passion or not, she couldn't tell, but at least the past was dead.

"If I call him, things must continue where we left off, that night down in the basement; there can be no going back and beginning all over again," she reasoned within herself.

And his whims, his insults, his oaths, she could never stand again. The very memory of them left a bad taste in the mouth.

"I am done," she said, and put Harrison Chalvey resolutely from her.

In the week which followed Temple Olverson telephoned to her. He began by explaining that he had waited for her to call him, and later he had learned that she had left Waldon Hall. He had followed her to New York to learn just what was what, he averred.

Rita didn't want to see J. T., even to explain things to him, and so she told him briefly over the wire what had happened. That is, she assured him that Madame Charida had dropped her case, and that she had gone to Pittsburgh to fill an engagement. Rita thought the Castle incident had ended more happily than they had hoped for.

The moment Olverson heard this he gave forth a fat chuckle, and immediately tried to make an engagement with her for dinner and the theater.

"Oh, come on—please!" he coaxed, when her silence led him to believe he had blundered. "Be a sport! I'm a summer widower, Rita. Listen! I want to talk to you about——"

Rita hung up. There was nothing more little J. T. could say to her.

And so, she was left with the choice of her dismantled room, and the front stoop. It must be confessed that the Orpington stoop was very gay, these mid-summer evenings. Mr. Smiley and Mr. Tippett, and Miss Brockly and Miss St. Clair were as congenial a quartet as could be found along the length of Twenty-third Street. Often their jests reached Rita at her window. And if there was nothing subtle in their conversation, if, at times, their pleasantries were slightly risqué, their wholeheartedness, their joy of living, seemed none the less diminished because of that. Once, sorely tried, and fiendishly tempted to call Chalvey by the familiar number which kept ringing in her ears, Rita had slipped down and joined the merry party on the steps. The book agent was in the middle of a story, and she spoiled it for him. Everybody insisted on her taking their place. Presently the merriment sank to a whisper, and then . . . silence. They were flattered, perhaps, by her presence, but they were scarcely made more comfortable. Rita realized that she must not come down on the front stoop again.

The moment of parting with Ida once more was a further wrench, for Ida was almost the old Ida these days. Rita's trouble had softened her. At first she had been shocked; it was sacrilege to carry off the well-known and greatly loved furniture. She wept to see Rita in the dismantled room; that Rita, of her own free will, should remain indoors night after night, or else seek diversion in the cheaper theaters, gave her much to think about. If Rita were in earnest about breaking with Harry Chalvey, why, surely there was some one else——!

"There is no one else," interposed Rita, quietly. And then, quite gayly, "A burnt child dreads the fire—once bitten, twice shy—a word to the wise—oh, choose your own adage, my dear!" She tried always to be very gay with Ida.

But Ida wouldn't be gay with Rita. She went to join Madame Charida a thoughtful, chastened young person.

"So I can never think of you entirely surrounded by violets and suppers and theaters again!" she lamented, at parting. "Oh, Miss Rita, it isn't fair!"

"I think it was the violets and the suppers and the theaters that weren't fair, Ida," said Rita wistfully. "This is the real I whom you see before you——"

"No!" protested Ida passionately.

Rita smiled, and gave her hands a last, fond pressure.

"Well, at least the other wasn't—the one with the halo of violets and suppers and theaters."

A few days later, Rita sensed that all wasn't well with the Quartet; in fact, it had ceased to be a quartet, and had become, over night as it were, a trio. Florence Brockly occupied the top step alone.

"Has Mr. Tippet gone to Philadelphia, to visit his people?" Rita asked Miss St. Clair, interested.

The Airy, Fairy One only stared for a minute or two. Then she gave her suspiciously blond head a toss, and laughed.

"You mean . . . Floss? Oh, Lord, no! He's right in our midst, the merry cut-up! The truth is," she continued, without lowering her voice, "Tippy's rushing Eloise, now—sure, the maid! Floss is such a dead one!"

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XXXIV

AUGUST was hot. Even the surface cars, crawling down to the ferries, seemed to feel the stifling heat which pervaded Twenty-third Street and turned the asphalt paving into a lava-like substance. The few sickly looking trees in the gardens of the tall, brown-stone row dropped their leaves and stood as naked and as ashamed as in a January blow. The shop lights burned feebly; "Il Trovatore," on the street pianos, became a joyless thing.

Even the Château Prunella appeared dejected. It is quite true that the Mother Hen still patronized the cheap shows in the neighborhood, accompanied by the new boarder; and Lillian and Mr. Smiley still had much to whisper about in dim halls; "Tippy" was still "rushing" Eloise—who had mastered "The Maiden's Prayer," on the parlor piano; but . . . things were not as they used to be.

"I'll be glad when school opens again," said Florence Brockly, moving through the house like a shadow.

Chancing to hear this declaration, Rita thought she understood how Floss felt about the autumn session; it would mean getting back in the familiar groove again. She had experienced that feeling herself until she went out and secured a position as stenographer with another corporation. If the Wincora Trust was not the U. S. A. & B., it was its sister. Even her salary and hours were identical. Rita Charles moved from Wall Street to Broad Street without changing a

hair. But that her Tin-Pan days were over, was brought forcibly home to her when a young man in the bonding department asked permission to call upon her in Twenty-third Street. It had been so long since any man had "asked permission to call!" Especially a twenty-five dollar-a-week clerk! Their tribe at the U. S. A. & B. knew better. On the spur of the moment Rita told him that he might come.

"I've got a friend, a girl friend, if you want to bring along a—a gentleman friend," she added, in the phraseology of the Château. She was thinking of Florence no longer Almighty Floss, but Floss, the Dead One when she invited Mr. Clark to bring a friend. Yes, it was quite likely that she had descended to match-making.

Mr. Clark made his first appearance alone. Except for the fact that he was not a very robust looking individual, he was far from being an unacceptable young man, with rather thin, fair hair, a Palm Beach suit, and an absence of jewelry—especially desirable after the conspicuous gypsy rings of Mr. Meekins and his clan. Miss St. Clair saw him from the parlor window, and sprang to answer his ring ahead of Eloise.

"Miss Charles?" Lillian said she would go and see—Miss Charles had so many dates, though not so many of late as once upon a time. To Mrs. Orpington, in the hall, she whispered, "Well, Lady Charles has got a man to come into the house at last! I don't smell no gasoline on his clothes, though."

Rita was on the third flight, and Lillian, green for every move, raced up and met her on the stairs.

"There's a gentleman in the parlor askin' for you."

At least, I understood him to say Miss Charles, though he's got a tub-suit on, and I couldn't find his limousine."

Rita took herself off to Florence Brockly's room, and in answer to her "come!" turned the knob and entered.

"Two of the boys from the office are downstairs and I want you to come down and meet them," Rita said, choosing to ignore the surprised look which came into the girl's eyes.

"But—I'm not dressed to meet gentlemen!" cried Florence, half rising from the rocking-chair by the window, and dropping Lord Tennyson to the floor.

"Well, then, get into something and come down—*instantly*, as they say in Texas!" insisted Rita. "I'll just run down and shoo Lillian off the grass—she's developing unmistakable signs of wanting to play."

The door banged on her guest. Literally Florence gasped, but she spent the next three minutes in deciding between her pink voile and a wash-skirt with georgette waist. The voile won out; somebody had told her once that the pink gave her a becoming color.

Down in the parlor Rita greeted Mr. Clark with a pretty concern.

"But you didn't say you were coming to-night!"

"I thought you said any night."

"Did I? You see, Florence and I—Miss Brockly—You didn't bring a friend?"

"Well, I don't know any of the fellows at my boarding-house very intimately, yet. Just moved in last week. If you and Miss . . . Brockly are going out——"

Rita was silent, head on one side like an inquiring sparrow.

"If you don't mind my cutting in on your party, what's the matter with the three of us going somewhere?" Mr. Clark demanded.

"Lovely!" applauded Rita, and disappeared into the hall to meet Florence.

"There's only one!" she told her tragically.

"Oh!" Miss Brockly's feathers drooped.

"But yours!" whispered Rita, with a little hysterical laugh. "The man I asked for me—for myself—"
A dainty shrug finished the sentence. "This is the other one, the one asked for you! Oh, well, I guess he can take care of two girls for once."

Mr. Allen Clark was satisfied that he could. The three left the house together.

"Will some one kin'ly tell me if Lady Charles has joined the Automat Society, or is Floss Brockly gone on the jazz at her time o' life?" demanded Lillian St. Clair of the world at large, watching them from the front stoop. "Set Florence down on the Biltmore Roof and she'd eat the scented lozenge intended for her finger glass! Honest to John——!"

"Say, honest to John, what do you know about scented lozenges and finger glasses?" chuckled Mr. Smiley, unfeelingly.

Said Mr. Clark, stopping at the elevated station at Sixth Avenue,

"Like the water?"

"Crazy about it!"—from Rita.

"What do you say to a sail over the Staten Island, then?"

"Lovely! Won't that be wonderful, Florence?"

"Yes, I think I'd like it," nodded Miss Brockly, looking pretty and helpless in the pink voile.

So they climbed the stairs and took a train down to South Ferry. Rita and Florence sat together, and Mr. Clark sat opposite to them. Just at first Florence was a little suspicious of Rita, and her high spirits, and felt that she must be guying Mr. Clark, who was "kindness itself." But Rita wasn't acting—she loved it!

When they got on the ferry, Mr. Clark, as became an old hand, directed them where to go.

"Upstairs, and front, ladies. Never mind the chairs—sit in mine. I'll manage all three!"

When they were sitting around, found him struggling with three chairs, two of which would always come undone at every moment he had captured successfully their fellow. She gazed at him with a little joyous cry.

"I'll carry my own chair!"

He protested, but she was firm. Then, with her chair under her arm, and Mr. Clark more at his ease with just the two, the three of them were swept along with the crowd to the deck. Here they paused, breathing hard, to look around for a "good place." Florence thought she would sit near the rail, and near the rail they squatted.

But when they started to move, Rita had to stand up so that she could see everything. There was a pale moon; there was no breeze; but one could smell the sea. In mid-stream, looking back, Manhattan with its giant sky-scrapers, pierced with innumerable fiery eyes, resembled a fairy-land, something set down by the touch of a spirit-wand. Long, low, dark ob-

jects, with tiny lights aloft, men-of-war, were anchored in the bay. This was Brooklyn, and that New York, and out there was the Statue of Liberty—Mr. Clark was explaining the trip to Florence. Rita preferred to pick out these points of interest for herself, just as surely as Mr. Clark preferred to point them out, and Miss Brockly preferred to have him point them out. It had been a long time since any man was so solicitous of the Brockly comfort. Now, she had been expected to keep Mr. Tippett amused!

They docked at St. George all too soon, and left the boat slowly, almost regretfully, as if Staten Island promised little. They scorned a trolley car; Mr. Clark said they would walk up the hill, if the ladies didn't mind, and view the harbor from the heights of Tompkinsville. Here were quiet streets, luxuriant gardens, pretty homes and attractive buildings in which there were apartments to let. Overhead the stars seemed very close; the scent of dying roses filled the atmosphere, as they wound their way through semi-private paths, and down long flights of steps to the water's edge again. From the roadway, Rita looked up at Tompkinsville and thought that it resembled the pictures she had seen of some terraced town in Italy. She lingered for a last glimpse after Florence and Mr. Clark had gone on ahead to the ferry.

Back on the boat, Florence—she that was once Almighty Floss—began to shiver, and she said she felt sure there was a draught somewhere on the upper-deck. Mr. Clark was equally sure that she would have to get out of that draught. He drew himself up to his five feet three and glared around, as if challenging the elements. Of course he was not very

tall, but then neither was Napoleon, reflected Miss Brockly; and he had beautiful manners. He confessed, too, that his mother was a Virginian by birth. Florence loved the South! She suspected, too, that Mr. Allen Clark, probably because of his size, was a faithful follower of the cave-man hero, as viewed on the screen. She didn't attempt to carry her chair into the cabin; she let Mr. Clark assist her over the door-sill.

Rita followed them into the saloon, but when they had settled themselves, comfortably, near the wheel, and when she heard Florence ask Mr. Clark to tell her something about Virginia, she felt somehow that she would never be missed, and slipped out on deck again. She was not afraid alone. For one thing, Rita was not the type of girl to meet with adventure on a South Ferry boat, and this despite the fact that she was undeniably pretty, and looked most attractive in her white dress and rose sweater. She stood cool, and calm, and aloof. Unattached males, passing to and fro, looked at her and then looked away again. They sensed her beauty and her individuality, which at times such as this took on some of the singleness of spirituality; they admired, but refrained from despoiling this beauty.

That she should be here, that she should be honestly enjoying this few-penny trip, didn't strike Rita as being in any way unusual or surprising. Always she had said that she could adapt herself to any condition or circumstance. She had first opened her dark eyes in a little room over a cobbler's shop, and she had dined at world-famous resorts, with the representatives of great names—who had asked her to wed

them! Here, on the crowded deck of this ferry-boat, Rita was happier than often she had been in Harrison Chalvey's car, with all New York a ball to kick at. In other summers, Long Beach, Hunter Island, the Boston Post Road and the more *outré* roof gardens had known her; now she ferried to Staten Island and back, and planned to go again! It would be the height of folly to state that she preferred an ice cream cone to the shore dinner she had ordered in the past; but she didn't refuse the cone. That was Rita.

Standing there at the rail, watching the ragged skyline of her beloved New York, she was conscious presently of some one at her elbow, some one who had come up behind her, and stopped. She turned around with a little look of surprise in her dark eyes, and found beside her Anthony Varian. The meeting was so unsuspected that at first she had nothing to say, standing there with the strained expression of a child, who fears punishment and begs forgiveness. She recalled their last meeting, and their last farewell. What would be Anthony's attitude toward her now? She knew that she had behaved abominably in the past.

But his smile was all kindness and welcome. She thought she saw the old, boyish eagerness in his eyes. When her hand was in his, her lips relaxed and she found her tongue. There was a laughing shyness in her glance.

"It's rather like Mr. Shakespeare, isn't it?" she said softly, with that whimsical note he knew so well. "Although there are but two of us, of course, and one, at least, is not a witch—the masculine is wizard. Well—'When shall we'—two—'meet again?'—remember?"

There's more, but it has nothing to say about the South Ferry. It's been a long time!" She said it with her hand in his, with much of her old-time boyish frankness.

"You're not—alone?" This seemed to concern him chiefly.

"No. Florence and a friend, Mr. Clark, are inside."

He smiled again, not at her, but at the world, it seemed to Rita. With some of the wonderment of a child, she said, on the spur of the moment,

"You're happy; you're always boyishly happy—when you aren't fighting mad."

Now he laughed.

"Well, you don't exactly resemble Niobe yourself, you know. As for my pugilistic tendencies, well—aren't the things we want worth fighting for? I think so. But I'm not fighting mad to-night, even though I have been dining with some friends aboard a man-o'-war."

"Then you must have everything you want, to-night," Rita said, all the pretty gayety gone. "Of course! Why not?"

"I often ask myself the same thing—Why not?" he returned, with a retrospective smile. "I haven't discovered the answer yet, however." His head went up, his chin out. "Often come over to Staten Island?" he said, studying the skyline with steady gray eyes.

"Never before." She shook her head. Then, with an effort, "I hadn't dreamed that anything so delicious as this ferry existed around New York! South Ferry

meant only a name on the subway trains to me before Mr. Clark proposed it."

"Mr. Clark?" He turned; his brows met in a frown.

"Yes. He's in the saloon with Florence Brockly."

"Oh!" Anthony's brow cleared.

There was an awkward moment, awkward, at least, for Rita, who sought to avoid a lengthy silence between them. For his part, Varian didn't seem to notice it. He was looking at the New York skyline again, and whistling softly a bit of street song, but instinctively Rita knew that he was not unconscious of her presence, of her nearness. There was nothing strained or unnatural in their position to him. Rita's thoughts raced back to what he had said on the porch at Waldon Hall, when they had shared the morning papers—"You look so right . . . there!" Was that why he whistled now such a merry little song? And yet he said that he fought for what he wanted, and to-night the fight was all gone out of him! Rita wondered. . . .

"You know I'm back in Twenty-third Street again—with Mrs. Orpington, yes," she said hastily, really to cover up the silence which she feared. "And I've resigned from the U. S. A. & B.—it seems very odd! You know, I've been there ever since I first came to New York. But they're very fine at the Wincora Trust, and . . . there are less juniors and in-laws and more rock-ribbed work."

She glanced at him secretively from behind her dark lashes as she made this confession, but Varian offered no comment, continuing his song, and Rita expressed her disappointment in a little sigh. She

had thought he would want to know about Harrison Chalvey, and she had paved the way quite nicely for him to ask—instead of which he whistled! A nameless sort of terror seized her, and she clutched the boat's rail to steady herself. "Why?" she questioned mutely. "Why was it that he didn't ask for news of Chalvey?"

Deep down in her heart, tucked away out of sight and sound, there drowsed the not unpleasant thought that Anthony Varian loved her. He had said so! He loved her—she had only to raise her little finger and call. At rare intervals, Rita had remembered this thought, and brought it forth to play with, as a child plays with a reliable though inexpensive toy. There had been so many wonderful toys for her amusement! There were Nicko, and Harry, and little J. T., and not a one of them came empty-handed. Anthony offered only himself. And so she had regulated him to second place, and enjoyed the motors, the theater parties, the perfect little suppers which these other men proffered. But all the time, deep within her, she knew that Varian cared.

His love seemed scarcely significant until the probability presented itself that it was not impossible for her to forfeit it. She had been so sure! Careless, because of this surety, she had turned her back on him and gone to play at more exciting games; but now she was tired of this strenuous sport, satiated, disillusioned. She came back to drowse over her simple toy—and couldn't find it!

What had happened? She glanced at Varian with questioning eyes, and he felt her glance, turned his head, and smiled.

"You've missed a lot, you know," he said, referring to her first trip to Staten Island on the ferry. "Why, it's my yacht—and *their* yacht, too," nodding toward the happy-go-lucky crowd, now herding to the front of the boat, since they were within sight of the dock. "It's got to be a habit with me o' summer nights, this South Ferry. Or, if I prefer motoring, for a change, y' know, I take a bus and go out the Drive to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street. You've never done that, either, I suppose?"

She shook her head.

"No, you're right; there's much I've missed."

All at once there was a sob in her voice, and she turned hastily away. Surprised, Anthony cut short his merry little tune, and looked at her with eyes which showed the perplexity of his soul.

"Rita!" His tenderness cut like a whip.

She put up both hands, her face averted, as if to escape from his kindly eyes. But she couldn't escape from the sound of his voice.

"There is nothing I wouldn't do to save you a moment's pain."

His tones carried conviction. There was nothing of the strutting, mouth screen-hero here. He meant what he said—there was nothing he wouldn't do to save her a moment's pain! And yet she had been hurting him in return almost from the minute of their first meeting!

"I'm not worth your . . . bother," she whispered.

"It isn't bother, it's caring, Rita," he said, under cover of the confusion of docking. "I know that I have no right to say these things to you; I have no way of knowing that they are not distasteful to you,

and yet—God help me!—they are true. I love you. I will go on loving you until the very end of time, until our hearts shall have ceased to beat, and loving will mean nothing at all. If this be sin, then a sinner am I—I love you. I want you to know it; I want you to know that I must go on loving you—even though you are affianced to another man. We can't be friends, Rita. Coming over on the boat together has been very sweet, and I've liked to stand here close to you, and whistle my little street song, and watch the lights of my beloved New York, and dream. I've dreamed many wonderful dreams about you, Rita—about you and me. And I like best to think how we shared the morning papers, once. . . . But that time is past. Probably I shall never see you again, for your life will be lived uptown, in a very different environment. What I want you always to remember is that I care—that there is nothing I wouldn't do to save you a moment's pain."

Varian stopped, exhausted, swept by passion. She could feel his eyes, his words reëchoed through her brain—he cared! The little street song which she almost hated in her jealousy, all at once became the *leit motif* of his dreams, his dreams of her and of him. Her heart leapt with a sort of sharp ecstasy. There, within reach, lay her missing toy.

His next words were politely conventional ones.

"Would you like me to take you to find your friends?"

"Please." But the lilt in her voice made him turn and stare.

"Rita!" he said, only half understanding.

But now she was shy, like a young bride, and

wanted to run away, to be alone, to think. He cared! And she was free! He didn't know; she had only to say—— The thought was so exquisite that she had to hug it to her; she couldn't let it go. Happiness, new-born, made her selfish. For a moment she couldn't share it even with him. Hurrying ahead, she paused in the doorway of the brightly-lighted cabin, and across a sea of faces, she saw Florence beckoning to her—really, Floss was the taller, taller than Mr. Allen Clark, you know. Rita waved back; yes, she was coming.

Anthony caught her; she felt the light touch of his fingers on her arm, as he sought to protect her from the laughing, jostling crowd. But she didn't mind the crowd; she laughed with the others. When she reached Florence and Mr. Clark, and Florence got over her astonishment at seeing Anthony, and while Mr. Clark was being introduced, Rita stood star-eyed and speechless, though she hummed a snatch of song under her breath. Varian caught the song, and looked at her; it was the merry little thing which he had whistled, which had drifted into his study through the open window, from a street piano, probably.

“I want to be an old-fashioned wife,
In the good, old-fashioned way.
To honor and obey, from my home I'll never stray.
When days are dark and stormy,
There will be but one man for me,
I'll be sitting, with my knitting,
In the good, old-fashioned way.”

“Rita!”

He caught her hand, but she broke away, laughing

a little, and darting past him like an elf-child.

"Not now," she called back to him.

But there was promise in her voice, and he followed, dumbly wondering, blindly hoping. He would have followed on foot this way to her fiddling half across the world and back. She had placed Florence Brockly and Mr. Clark between them, Florence and the young man who walked with their heads together, oblivious of all others; but Anthony could see her profile, and the rose of her sweater, in the crowd. The white plume of Henry of Navarre was never more inspiring.

At the elevated station they all stopped. Evidently Mr. Clark didn't expect Anthony to trail along uptown with them. After all it was his party. Anthony looked at Rita, and she found herself shaking her head no. But when hope died, and his features sobered, she leaned toward him, whispering something for his ear alone.

"Wait. Wait. I've broken with Harry Chalvey. I—I must have time. I'm all wrong somewhere inside; I'm cold, and hard, and bad-hearted. I feel like a very poor swimmer, out beyond his depth, but I'm struggling—oh, how I'm struggling to get back to shore!"

"Let me help you!" he cried.

"Not now." She shook her head. "I won't come to you now, Anthony, when I'm bruised and beaten——"

His boyish laugh rang out.

"Stuff and nonsense! That's just it—you're not bruised and beaten!"

"I can't bring you the dregs. Wait! Hear me

out," she begged, when he would have stopped her. "What I want most, what I am fighting for, is . . . my self-respect. I seem to have forfeited it. I have broken with Harrison Chalvey, true; but—he would have broken with me—in time—when he knew, I'm sure. I won't come to you in sackcloth, Anthony, and to-night I am a very motley person. Give me time, for your sake and for mine."

Varian looked at her, and thought he understood. And while he would have followed her half across the world and back, he wasn't loath to being alone just then, to walk through the quiet, downtown streets, and dream. It was coming true!

He stood on the platform and waved until the roaring train was out of sight.

XXXV

It was a pathetic, almost child-like letter that Rita received from Ida during the first week of Madame Charida's engagement in Pittsburgh. Ida had been "thinking," and the gist of her composition was that she had about decided to "give up all worldly pleasures," and enter a nunnery. She had reached the conclusion that "life was something more than a mere money-making scheme." It was the kind of letter that romantic school girls of sixteen often write after indulging in a period of "sad" books or plays. Rita couldn't keep back a smile as she read, although every word breathed sincerity, and she realized, too, that she herself was responsible in part for this change in the girl. She was Ida's "sad" story. It was she who first had shown Ida the road to ambition; now it was she who made her write that the world was drab. But Ida's discoveries didn't trouble Rita too much. She believed that she exercised some of the old influence over the girl, and, for the rest, the world wasn't drab at all!

"I've been thinking," Ida wrote in a round, laborious hand. "Of course we ought to put our best foot foremost, and make the most of our lives and all that, but, I think, really, I was happier back at Mrs. Orpington's. I belong among the pots and pans, I guess. Here I am the fish out of water. Life is something more than a mere money-making scheme,

Miss Rita; and so I have about decided to give up worldly pleasures and enter a nunnery. Or, if you prefer, I will come to you and wait on you hand and foot until my dying day. I don't want the shop and all, now. . . ."

To which Rita replied:

"You know you are not a cinema heroine, Ida, and besides, neither *Theresa* nor *Imogene* ended their days in a convent. You are not 'More Sinned Against Than Usual,' and neither am I. Certainly you must go ahead with your shop. The shop, you know, we first planned back 'among the pots and pans' at Mr. Orpington's, and after all of our dreams, and Miss Billings' kindness, it would be nothing short of tragedy if you failed now. You can't fail—go ahead. But life is more than a mere money-making scheme, Ida: you are right there. Which doesn't mean that you mustn't over-charge the Back Bay dowagers at all, at all. Just be . . . human, yourself. This crying for the moon will strain your voice, rack your nerves, and leave you wretched. I know—for I have left off crying. . . . But above all things go ahead with those plans for the shop. . . ."

Eventually Ida changed her mind about the nunnery, and eventually she accompanied Caroline to Boston, where she set to work to establish her beauty parlor. Future letters grew more cheerful, kindlier in tone, so that Rita came to believe that her own near-tragedy was not without effect in helping to "humanize" Ida.

According to the rocking-chair brigade, Rita should have been prostrated over the wholesale desertion of

Mr. Allen Clark, and the base treachery of Florence Brockly, these days; but somehow or other Rita didn't look the part of a heart-broken heroine. Often she smiled to herself, tender little smiles born of growing contentment and peace of mind, and it was not unusual for the third floor to hear her whistling softly to herself when in her room, a gay little song known to the street pianos. The Château looked and wondered, but was not indisposed toward this changeling. Madame Orpington invited her into her "boudoir," to play Hearts with the new boarder and herself; it was whispered about that one of Queenie's new puppies was to be called Marguerite, in her honor; Miss St. Clair offered her a generous sample of complexion cream—"Not that you need it, dearie!" she hastily supplemented. "But even if you only leave it layin' on your dressing-table, it kind of lends a note of elegance, as the sayin' is." Eloise, the new maid, instinctively sociable, offered to play her new "piece," "The Maple Leaf Waltz," "any time at all" for her. Twenty-third Street was flatteringly attentive all at once.

"Though it isn't Twenty-third Street that has experienced a change of heart, it is I," mused Rita.

Only Florence seemed to avoid her, and when they met, on the stairs, or in the dining-room, Miss Brockly flushed the color of her voile dress and found speech difficult.

"Floss is conscience stricken," volunteered Lillian. "She feels guilty 'cause she copped your beau."

There was sarcasm in the voice, and Rita felt that she would have to feel her way cautiously.

"What do you mean—copped my beau?" she asked. "Oh, Allen Clark."

"Honest to John, you'd think he was Francis X. Bushman, all the fuss she makes over the poor half-pint! She thinks she's grabbed him away from you—see? Now, I know better, of course; I know you wouldn't have the little angleworm for a gift!" Miss St. Clair sniffed contemptuously.

All at once Rita understood, and above all things she realized that Florence's feelings must be spared. It was exactly what she had hoped for; they were playing her game, Floss and Mr. Allen Clark! No, she wouldn't have him—for a gift or anything, and Rita smiled softly at certain thoughts which intruded. However, Floss couldn't be expected to know this. In her eyes Allen Clark straightway became a Sir Galahad, a Bayard, a Rochester, a—Lillian had said it—a Mr. Bushman.

"Well, you know we usually wait until a gift is offered to us before we think of turning it down," she explained to Miss St. Clair. "It is perfectly true that I did know Mr. Clark first, but it is just possible that Florence knows him best. What about it?"

An excitable flush mantled Lillian's cheeks.

"She says they have so much in common—his mother was born in Virginia and she corresponds with a girl in Norfolk. They talk about the Sunny South like it was the Holy Grail! Well, I hope she gets him—she couldn't, the parson, you know."

"'The parson'?"

"Mr. Varian. She sat up nights studyin' the Bible until her talk sounded like a scene in 'Ben Hur.' But she didn't get him; she didn't fool Anthony Varian a little bit. Now she's lost interest in Palestine and eats, breathes, and sleeps Virginia. She says Na-

poleon was a little man—well, so is Jeff in the comic supplements.”

In spite of the fact that she had laid aside her Tin-Pan regalia, it was not unusual for Rita to be called to the telephone these days. Eloise was kept busy, chiefly of an evening. Little J. T. had reappeared, in no respect crushed or chastened; two new plays had opened recently, and he had heard that the show in Churchill's was a pippin. He was as lonesome as a lost pup, and would Rita have a heart and give him another chance? Rita wouldn't. She laughed when she said it, but instinctively Olverson felt that she meant exactly what she said—she wouldn't see him again.

“All right, little lady,” he retorted, not without a cheery note in his voice. “I hope you'll reach the prunes stage and then maybe you'll miss your little Temple-lamb. What's the matter, haven't you got the Galli-Curci redhead buffaloed any longer? Honest to John, sweetness, I believe you're passing up something big, something big, kiddo.”

“Meaning yourself?”

“Well, I hate to talk about myself, Rita, but—you know me, pet.”

“Yes, I know you, Temple,” she smiled. “Somehow, I was hoping you were going to turn over a new leaf——”

“What d' y' mean—new leaf?” he chuckled. “Say, honest, this isn't any movie scenario, you know, lady. If you want to get upstage, and crawl into your shell, all right. I can't help it, I guess. But I've sat through that fellow Ibsen for you, honey, and if a chap can prove his love in stronger terms—— Oh,

well! Have it your way. I guess I won't be put to doing the hara-kiri for love of you—sorry. Still know a little pet or two waiting to call me daddy."

"Good-by," said Rita, without trace of indignation.

"Good-night!" J. T. went his way rejoicing. He was irrepressible.

Although he never attempted to see her, it became almost a nightly occurrence for Anthony Varian to telephone to Rita, and while his cry was always the same, he never grew weary or discouraged.

"Time almost up? I'm waiting patiently, but I'm not Job, remember, and it's frightfully long, Rita."

She loved him. She no longer denied even to herself that she cared, any more than she ever doubted his affections, but the time of waiting wasn't over; she wasn't ready to go to him yet.

"I'm sort of . . . battle-scarred still," she thought, and she wouldn't go to Anthony until she was whole.

But just what she was waiting for Rita didn't know until, one evening, Harrison Chalvey's card was brought up to her room between thumb and finger of the mourning-rimmed, rose-polished hand of Eloise. He was waiting downstairs. Rita could scarcely believe the girl's words. She had to look again to make sure of the name. Surely the world was topsy-turvy when Harry Chalvey waited in the Orpington parlor for her! She recalled their yesterdays. He had refused to come into the house; indeed, when he had come to Twenty-third Street at all, he had waited in his car, and sent the chauffeur to the door.

"What did he say?" she asked Eloise, making up her mind to be prepared for anything.

"*He* didn't say anything but just asked for you, but,

oh, them paying guests!" The eyes and hands of Eloise went heavenward. "Of course everything stopped *short* when he walked in. I wish you could 'av seen 'em! It was rich!"

Something of the old scorn and contempt for her fellow-lodgers entered Rita's soul; her lips curled; she sprang to the stairs. The Château parlor after supper frequently was "rich." But if everything had stopped at his entrance, everything was "going" now, for his benefit. Mrs. Orpington herself lingered in the doorway of her "boudoir," beaming benevolently upon the "drawing-room," as if to reassure Mr. Chalvey that she was present and all was well within her walls. Lillian occupied the piano-stool; to show her intelligence she was playing "The Anvil Chorus," and faithfully carrying out the scriptural advice to the effect of not permitting the right hand to know what the left was doing. Under the central chandelier Florence Brockly paused to fit a pair of white silk gloves. She was waiting for Mr. Clark, but she had bowed most graciously to Mr. Chalvey. When had he returned from the shore? Miss St. Clair, who was without any such delightfully intimate questions, continued with Verdi, fortissimo. Into this hurly-burly Rita came like a spirit from another world; claimed Harry, and carried him away with her.

"Well?" she questioned, once in the hall.

"I want to talk to you. . . ."

She hesitated.

"Suppose we go downstairs in the basement——"

"Not there!" he pleaded, while a flush colored his white skin.

She understood, even felt a little sorry.

"There's only the back yard then, I guess. . . ."

Once, in the dim long ago, when Twenty-third Street had boasted quality, the yards of these brown-stone front dwellings were pleasant, green oases, with inviting arbors, grass-bordered walks, and laburnum trees. The garden of the Château still boasted the laburnums, but the arbor was used chiefly to store ash cans nowadays, and the grass had overgrown the brick-paved walk. Rita and Chalvey had to step over innumerable empty milk bottles to get out of the basement door, and a yowling cat greeted them from the back fence, but an old rustic bench still hung together in this devastation, and Rita halted here.

Chalvey preferred to stand. He was plainly ill at ease and fumbled for his cigarettes. His first words came almost in a whisper.

"Rita, I'm so heartily ashamed——!"

She sat down suddenly, and looked at him, waiting.

"What must you think of me?" he asked, after a pause.

"Well, it's over now, Harry." The old name fell familiarly from her lips.

"But that's just it—it isn't over!" he cried, with a hopeful eagerness which he didn't attempt to disguise. "I was in the wrong, Rita. I behaved outrageously. But—surely it is only love that begets jealousy, and I was jealous. I am not apologizing for my attitude—which was nearly unpardonable—— But, Rita, you do forgive me?"

Her face was thoughtful in the moonlight.

"Yes, I suppose I do forgive you, Harry," she said presently. "Although, to be perfectly frank, I was

not blameless. Somehow, all my life long I seem to have been doing those things which I ought not to have done—which sounds like the Litany." She laughed awkwardly. "No, Harry," she continued, "I am not blameless. I suppose I did incite and provoke you, but . . . you see I had ceased to love you, and a dead affection can be very cruel."

He turned toward her with pleading gesture.

"Don't say that!"

"That?"

"Surely you care a little!"

Her voice was low but firm. "Harry, I no longer care—even a little," she told him.

There followed a breathless silence, and Chalvey came over and sat down beside her on the bench.

"You can't mean it," he persisted.

"Yes."

"When I care so much——! Rita, I am sorry; I apologize. I will spend the rest of my life—— You can't mean that everything is at an end between us! It can't be! Listen: I have been brutal. After that night—and—and I had taken too much to drink, perhaps—— Well, after that night, I rushed away into the country, away from you, and I thought I would forget; I told myself that I must forget. But I can't. I am in the wrong, but I have come back to make amends, and there is nothing I won't do . . . if you'll only forget and forgive."

He was a proud man and she knew what it cost him to humble himself this way to her, but her mind was made up, and there was no sign of weakening in her face.

"There is nothing you can do, Harry. . . ."

"You mean that you won't forgive me?"

She thought a little.

"Yes, I forgive you," she said at last, and offered her hand.

He didn't take it at once, but sat there looking at her.

"It's over between us!"

"Yes."

"You won't . . . be my wife!"

"No."

He got up and crossed the little garden, standing with his back to her.

"What shall I do with my life now?" he asked simply, when at last he found the strength to face her again.

"I am sorry." It was all she could say. Pity stirred her, but her heart remained unmoved. Harrison Chalvey had ceased to be a factor in her life.

"There is one thing more I want to tell you, however," Rita continued, after a brief pause. "I am being honest with you now, Harry, and—I wasn't wholly honest, that night in the basement, you know. I had come to New York to find you, and—and marry you—at once! I had left Atlantic City with the fixed intention of marrying you that same evening. It had to be *quick!* Afterwards, the two of us would have regretted the step all the rest of our lives, for I didn't love you even then. It was . . . your money."

He made a little gesture with his hands, quick, nervous, repugnant.

"I—had got into some trouble down at the shore, and I was afraid you might hear of it," she went on, meeting his glance frankly. "I was afraid if you heard of it, you wouldn't want to marry me——"

"No!" burst from his lips.

"Wait! I was afraid I was to be named as co-respondent in a divorce case."

She saw his jaw dropped, the terse expression which came over his features.

"I don't believe it," he said promptly.

"But if it were true? If a wife had found me in the private dining-room of a disreputable resort with her husband? Would you still want to marry me then, Harrison?"

"I—I can't believe it!" he stammered, flushing under her steady gaze.

"But you must believe it! Answer my question—would you?"

"I'd . . . have to hear the case. I'd want to know—everything, of course."

"Of course! But you were to hear nothing. I had planned to marry you first, and let you hear the details later on, from—from just any source."

Chalvey drew a short, quick breath.

"I don't believe you. I refuse to believe you would do such a thing, Rita. Moreover, I believe the whole thing is mere supposition, a story to point a moral——"

"No. It is true. I want you to know just how black I am, just how—how base. It is true, every word of it. I—I had discovered about the Van Vleets——"

"Rita! . . . Jealousy——! Anthony Varian——!"

She nodded gravely.

"I know. . . . Well, I had discovered that you had deceived me there, and I was determined to be avenged, to square accounts with you. Oh, I know

it sounds childish, bookish, but—— Well, Temple Olverson came down to the shore, and he asked me to go to dinner with him. I—I detest the man. But to even things up—with you—— We went. It rained, and we sought shelter in a crazy old barn 'way down on the Boardwalk, which afterwards turned out to be . . . not quite nice. Olverson didn't know; I mean, it wasn't a trap—we must be fair, Harry. No, we just ran in out of the storm, and since we had to wait until the rain was over, we went upstairs, where there were these private dining-rooms. I know I shouldn't have stopped, but—well, I did—that's I, you know. . . . His wife had put detectives on Olverson's tracks, and of course they had to find him tête-à-tête with me in that awful place. It—it was almost funny, Harry, until I remembered you."

He frowned, but ventured no remark.

"Then, when I did remember you, I realized that if I intended to marry you at all, I must marry you at once, before you learned of my connection with the Olverson scandal," Rita continued. "We hadn't enough money left for railway tickets after paying our hotel bills, so Ida Lewis and I came up to New York in the car. That is all. I mean it—— I would have married you that night without telling you a word of what had happened at Atlantic City."

Chalvey moved uneasily. In the moonlight Rita saw the deep frown between his eyes, the whole indecision of the cold, white face.

"But you were innocent——"

"That wouldn't have saved me if the facts of the case had got out."

"You should have come to me with the truth, Rita."

"Would you still have wanted to marry me?" she asked quietly.

He turned aside, and she saw the quick closing of his eyes, the setting of thin, cruel lips. He couldn't answer her question.

"So you see," cried Rita, with a lilt in her voice, and rising from the bench, "you see, I am really incorrigible. No, I am not honest." She looked at him squarely. "I would have deceived you then, and I guess I would have gone on deceiving you until—until Death us did part . . . which is more Litany. No?—well—— Harry, I'm an awful young person——" She stopped and shook herself. "No, I'm not that, either. This isn't the time for frivolity. I'm just . . . cold and bad-hearted—where I don't love. But I am honest with you, at the end, my dear. All my life I have wanted money, money and what it buys. It means something to relinquish the Chalvey fortune, but I have done it, for your good and mine."

"No!" he protested hotly.

"Yes." She was firm in her belief, in her purpose.

"Give me a chance, Rita."

"Harry, I'm sorry."

Silence.

He turned away, and then retraced his steps, eyes and hands pleading.

"Rita! This is caddish, but . . . there is much money, you know. There is nothing you may not have——"

"But I don't love you."

"I'll chance it," he said stubbornly.

Rita stood before him in a sort of breathless suspense, hands clasped, eyes anxious.

"You mean . . . you are asking me to marry you in spite of—in spite of everything?"

"I want you for my wife, Rita; yes, in spite of everything," he said.

Then she raised her head, and breathed a deep, long sigh.

"You have given me back my self-respect, Harry!" she cried, with a glad ringing note. "I am no longer bruised and broken. I am no longer struggling to get back to shore—I am there! I am myself at this moment for the first time in many long moons. My poor Harry, you don't know what you've done!"

He looked, and as he looked, a grim smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"I can guess . . ."

The starry eyes grew tender, and he couldn't stand that, not that expression for another man. He drew himself together, bowed, and fled over the empty milk bottles through the basement door.

XXXVI

THE little street around the corner seemed like another world, coming into it from the glare and bustle of blowzy Twenty-third Street. Before Rita's wistful eyes stretched a long, dark row of red-brick houses, spotless and demure, like a file of Quaker spinsters, and in the middle of the block, set in a small, green rectangle, rose the Chapel of St. David's. Directly opposite the church was the parish-house, but the rectory was next to the Chapel, with the side windows looking out on the small, pleasant oasis. From across the street, Rita gazed at the scene with a certain feeling of awe. This quiet, out-of-the-world nook spelled contentment. Here she stood at journey's end, done with meretricious things.

There was a light in the downstairs windows of the rectory. Almost without hesitation she crossed the street, went up the steps, and rang the bell. It tinkled pleasantly through the house with an old-fashioned sound. Anthony Varian himself opened the door to her.

"It is I, Rita," she said, meeting his glance. "I thought perhaps you'd understand. . . ."

Anthony nodded. Taking her by the hand, he led her into the house, into his study, and placed a chair for her. His smile was all kindness and welcome, such a warm, comfortable sort of smile that Rita, following him with her eyes, sank back with a purely luxuriant sigh.

"I have waited so long, Rita," he said.

But when he came toward her with arms outstretched, she suddenly stopped him with a little significant gesture, and then, nervously, rose to her feet. She had almost forgotten; of course he must hear about the Castle.

"Don't be too kind—yet," she stammered. "Really, I would like to keep this for another time, but I can't; you must know the worst with the best now, at once. Oh, Tony, don't you see?—that is I!" Her dark eyes were tragic pools. "I am forever trying to escape, to evade . . . somehow——"

"But you don't. You come out and take your medicine gamely, with the best of them." He was still smiling. "That is you, the real you; whether you want to pay or not, you do—you have!"

"Yes, I think I have," she confessed, with a sober little nod. "And after that I must tell you about the Castle—although I don't want to, at all."

"The—Castle?" Varian looked up with keener interest as she pronounced the name.

"Yes. It all happened last month at Atlantic City. I went to a place called the Castle, with Temple Olverson, and—and his wife and her agents came in and caught us. Only her goodness and mercy saved me from probable scandal, for she was seeking grounds for a divorce, and . . . she found them."

With the last words, Rita turned away, as if unable to meet his eyes. Through silence that was poignant, she remained there in his study, waiting, secure in the belief that he was just.

"I know. . . . Never mind."

Her eyes opened wide with surprise.

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"Tony!"

"Yes," he told her gravely, "I know all about that night."

"But—how?" she asked, with an odd feeling of helplessness.

Varian seemed to hesitate. Then he said, tersely, "Olverson."

Rita could scarcely believe her ears.

"Temple Olverson told you——!"

"Well, first he wrote to me."

"Oh!" Her hands went up to her eyes. "How cowardly, Anthony! He did it to hurt——"

"I think he did," said Varian, squaring his shoulders. "When I received his letter, I went out to look for him, and——"

"And?" she faltered, glancing up.

A boyish grin overspread his face. "I think his valet had to send for a doctor—afterwards," Anthony confessed.

Rita sat down again, quietly. Minutes sped by. Together they waited. Presently, raising her eyes to his face, she caught his smile, the old, comfortable, boyish smile which belonged so completely to him.

"What is it?" she asked, all at once hungry for the sound of his voice.

"It's just that you look so—so *right*, sitting there in my chair," he said.

There was no longer any doubt about it—Varian understood.

THE END

