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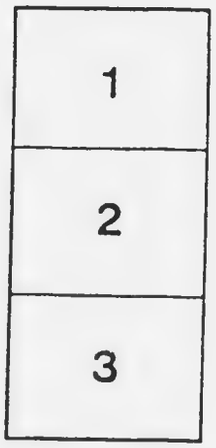

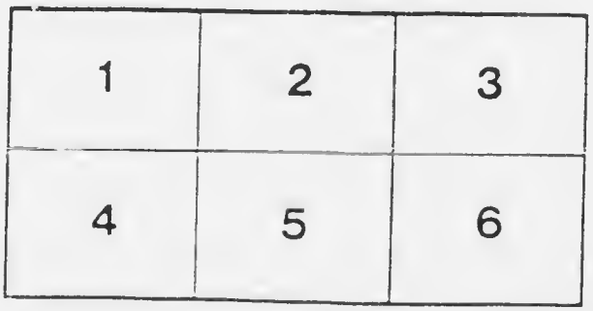

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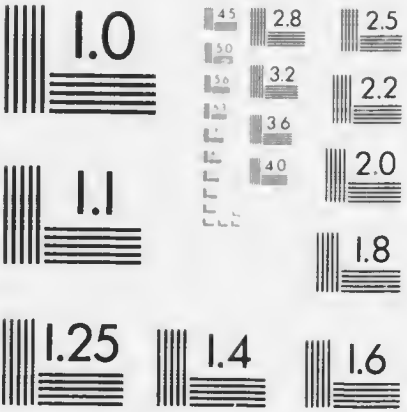

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MARTHA AND CUPID

MARTHA AND CUPID

CHAPTER I

"BY ADVICE OF COUNSEL"

AS Sam Slawson turned the corner of the Avenue he saw, some yards ahead of him, what caused a scowl as grim as that on a tragic mask to overcast his otherwise prepossessing features.

And yet there was nothing baleful in the appearance of the man on whom Sam's eyes were fixed. On the contrary, his erect figure was particularly well set-up, trigly dressed. His gait had a stylish swing, his hat a knowing tilt. Every line of him indicated positive characteristics—determination, direction, alertness—attributes all, that supposedly make for success.

Sam Slawson, physically a young giant, vaguely realized he stood dwarfed in effect beside Peter Gilroy when they were together, for though Peter actually measured less than Sam by several inches, his head was held higher, his shoulders squarer,

he had an air of self-assurance that seemed to add more than a cubit to his height.

"He's going to see Martha," Sam meditated, slackening his pace. "Of course he's going to see Martha. And he's got in ahead of me, as usual."

He was so sure Peter was going to see Martha that there was really no necessity of hanging back to prove it, yet Sam stood still and waited—waited for Gilroy to turn in at the area entrance of the house where Martha Carrol, parlor-maid, was "living out."

Gilroy turned in, descended the few steps that led from the street-level down to the basement courtyard and rang the basement bell.

Sam heard the bell. A moment later he heard the iron grated gate click open, then swing to again with a sharp, metallic clang. He sighed. He could picture to himself the sort of thing taking place inside the grated gate.

Probably Delia the "flip" kitchen-maid was ushering Gilroy hospitably into the servants' sitting-room, his air of having come a-courting arousing in her quick, vicarious sensations of excitement and coquetry.

"Ho, Mr. Gilroy, you here again!"

"Shoor! Any objection?"

"Aintchu awful! I s'pose you come to see Ma—," a pause, an effort to look arch, and then—"*ria!*"

"That's right. I've come to see Ma—ria. Keep on the right side of the cook and you'll have luck—is my maxim."

"I think you're purfickly turrible."

"Now, you know you don't really think any such thing. You know you think I'm perfectly all ri-ight."

His provocative, masculine confidence played on her easy emotions.

"What d'you care if I do? Nobody cares anything about *me*. I'm no account in this house. A body needs to've lived out in the fam'ly ever since she was twelve, an' her mother before her, to have any show here. I bet I wouldn't be raised from kitchen-maid to parlor, with two days out a week, an' all my evenin's free, an' big wages besides, for all I could do. Ho! Nobody'd be treated like that in this house 'xceptin' Martha."

"Now, don't you go and be jealous, kid. The green-eyed monster and pretty girls like you don't gee, see? Come, cheer up! Here's a quarter to buy you a ribbon to put in your bonny brown hair, like the song says. By the way—skip now and

tell Martha I'm here, will you? That's a good girl!"

"Whatchu do if I told you she's a-went to her mother's."

"But she ain't. Tell her I'm here."

At the mandatory note suddenly audible in Gilroy's voice, Delia quit her ineffectual venture at flirtation, despairing (for the time being) of cutting Martha out, and dismally did as she was bidden.

Sam had been present more than once when scenes like this had been enacted. He could imagine it in all sorts of variations, to his own self-torture. Delia never tried to "carry on" with him. Delia thought he was "a chump." He had overheard her say so to Maria, the cook. Undoubtedly she had also mentioned it to Martha. He forgot where he was, and stood staring blankly at the massive façade of the Granville's house where Martha lived, until a strolling policeman rapped him smartly on the shoulder, advising him to pass on.

"No loitering 'round here, young feller. Get a move on!"

Being so sweetly urged, Sam got the desired move on which, in due time, brought him back to his own door, to spend an evening of mild

martyrdom with "Ma," his only surviving parent whom he had housed and supported since he was fourteen, the other eight Slawson brothers and sisters, married or single, having other plans—plans with which Ma's presence did not coincide.

As it happened, the "flip" Delia had actually summoned Martha at Gilroy's command and Martha, tall, straight, handsome, her splendid young figure showing to advantage in her uniform of black, tight-fitting frock, set off by crisp white apron, collar, cuffs, and cap, had, in due time, come down.

"Did you get my letter?" Gilroy inquired abruptly.

Martha seemed to cogitate. "Now, lemme see," she weighed it, "did I, or didn't I? It's very confusin', havin' the large correspondence I got. I sometimes think I'll have to get a seckerterry like Mrs. Granville."

"O, I say, Martha, quit your fooling. I'm in earnest. Did you get it?"

"You mean, the letter tellin' about——"

"Uh-huh! The chance Tim Murphy gimme. I tell you it's great, Martha! Great! I'm gettin' in on the ground floor, an' that means I'll hit it rich some day! By jiminy, girl, I'll be able to put velvet under your feet!"

"Cotton-back, or silk?" inquired Martha.

Peter gave a petulant ejaculation.

"'Cause if it's cotton-back, 'thank you, thank you, sir,' she sayed, 'your kindness I nev-er shall for-get,' but I don't like the feel of it, an' what'd be the use under my feet anyhow?"

"You're a—divil, Martha!" observed Gilroy.

"Now, what do you think of that! When quality meets, compliments fly. An' talkin' about compliments—what's a jew-no? I s'pose the woods is full of 'em, but I never happened to run acrost one. Somethin' in the sheeny-line, eh?"

"Who's been callin' you a Juno?"

"I didn't say no one has."

"But it's so, all the samee."

"Well, I won't deceive you. Last Tuesday I was 'on the door'—it bein' Slater's afternoon off, an' a certain party who shall be nameless said to Mrs. Granville—referrin' to your humble servant, as the sayin' is, which I ain't—'You don't mean to say that is Martha—in the hall? I wouldn't have known her. Why, she's a perfect jew-no. She wears her cap like a tarara.'"

"Curse him!"

"Not by no means. Far from it. He'd used to know me by sight years ago when he was callin' at Mrs. Underwood's, before Miss Frances

was married. I always liked'm, if he did think I was a clumsy lump in them days. An' I like him now just as good. I know what a tarara is, Mrs. Granville wearin' one to protect her from cold-in-the-head opera nights. But jew-no gets me!"

"I bet I know who the 'party' is. Captain Stafford. An' I tell you what it is, Martha, that gen'lman better look out for himself. Mr. Granville'll catch on to it some fine day that the captain's flutterin' 'round the flame again, an' he won't like it for a cent. I know Mr. Granville. I ain't been his handy-man for nothin'. No matter if he did come out ahead, he knows it was nip an' tuck at one time between him and Captain Stafford for the lady, an' no man likes his rival hangin' around like I hear this one is startin' in to do."

"Goodness, gracious me! 'Oh, grandmother, what great ears you got!' said little Red Ridin' Hood!" Martha observed blandly. "Your ears hear more things than ever's been said, don't they?"

"They heard the Captain ringin' the front-door bell as I come in, all right," responded Gilroy, disregarding her irony. "He's upstairs this minute, in the drawin'-room, an' you know it.

But that ain't my funer'l. What I say is, the madam's company ain't no business passing personal remarks on you. It ain't good for a girl—flatterin' her like that."

Martha shrugged. "What harm is it, I should like to know? Pity if somebody's company wouldn't flatter me. My own don't."

"What with the way the madam spoils you, Martha, and the things her company says, your head'll be turned."

"Well, s'posin' it is. The more ways I can look, the better I am off. If I don't like to see how I got left in one direction, I can watch out for what's comin' to me in another. But I got somethin' to keep my mind off the present, anyhow."

"Do you want to keep your mind off the present, Martha?" Peter put the question to her with as much sentimental emphasis as he dared employ.

"Me? Why should I? It might be worse."

Gilroy brought his open hand down upon his knee with an impatient slap. "You're the dickens and all for keepin' a feller guessin'," he said. "Here I been keepin' company with you now, for—lemme see, how long is it? Two years, I bet. I been keepin' company with you now for

two years steady, an' I'll be blamed if I know this minute if you're really goin' to have me or not."

"I ain't like to say what I'll have before I get the refusal of it," said Martha.

"O, come now! That's too thin! You can't shassay out of it like that. You know I'm dead gone on you, Martha. I've tried a hundred times, if I've tried once, to get right down to tin tacks an' ask you to marry me, but——"

"Hark! That the airy-bell? Now, who's comin', I wonder?"

Gilroy choked back his exasperation with difficulty. He craned forward to look through the grated window into the courtyard, dusky now with early, evening shadows.

"Maria's brother, 't appears like," he ventured.

"O," said Martha.

"You lookin' for anybody?" Peter caught at the faint drop in her voice with instant suspicion.

"Nobody special. Sam Slawson said he might be along, but I ain't lookin' for him. If a girl'd be lookin' for all the men says they want to come see her, she'd be cross-eyed in no time, peerin' out into nothin' at all, both ways for Sunday, watchin' their backs vanishin' in the distance."

"Well, if you want to know," Gilroy let out with a cutting laugh. "Maybe you might have seen Sam Slawson's back vanishing in the distance along around the time I come in. He was right behind me. I saw him out of the tail of my eye, but I didn't let on. I guess he thought better of it and didn't want to push himself. Likely he's waiting patiently about outside. Want me to go see? Maybe I could in-dooce him to come in."

"My name's Martha—not Mary," remarked Miss Carrol.

Peter looked up inquiringly. "Well, what's that got to do——?"

"Only, I don't happen to be the party that's noted for her crush on lambs. I don't like'm waitin' patiently about, blockin' up the gangway. If Sam Slawson, or any other fella, wants to come to see me, he can. But if he's the kind you got to in-dooce, why,—he can go to it, for all *I* care."

Gilroy laughed. He could appreciate what he called "Martha's tongue," when it was not engaged in sword-practice against himself.

"O, Sam's all right," he observed with an air of easy patronage. "The trouble with Sam is, he's too good-natured. He's the kind that

lets folks get the best of him. He won't buck up and show a fist. Nowadays, if a man wants to rise in the world, he's got to hit out, good and lively, at anything that stands in his way. And when he's once got it thrown down he must use it to climb up on. That mayn't sound like sweet singin', but it's the right tune all the samee, and don't you forget it."

Martha seemed to meditate. "I suppose Sam is a kind of a chump," she said after a pause. "I never thought of it till Delia said so, the other day, but ever since my attention was drew to it, I can see he is a kind of a chump."

"He's his own worst enemy," Peter confided cheerfully. "Now, there was that time Tim Murphy gave him the chance to make an honest penny, on the strict Q. T. First-off Sam was all for it, but then he had to go snoopin' in where he had no business, askin' questions, an' tellin' Murphy if the thing wasn't open an' aboveboard, on the square, he wouldn't stand for it. That sort of talk gets a man like Murphy nervous. First thing Sam knew, Murphy turned him down. Sam might have had lots of good things comin' his way, like I've got, if he'd stood in right with Murphy. Now Murphy wouldn't let him train with the rest of we boys in the ward, not if Sam

crawled to beg him on his knees. That's the kind of a hairpin Murphy is. If he's down on a feller, he's down."

"That's the kind of thing I like in a man," said Martha. "I mean, holdin' out, no matter what, when oncet he's made his mind up. You let me know if Sam crawls back to Murphy, will you?"

Peter crossed his legs with great complacency. "To give the devil his due, Sam ain't crawled yet. If he'd wanted to, he'd 'a' done it before this. That's just what I mean about Sam. He's the sort of blind, pig-headed honest that can't look out for their own interests. There's no doin' with him at all. You can't make him see things any way but the way he sees it. Down to the office the other day I heard Mr. Granville tell him to his face, he'd never get on in this world."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Martha.

"Those were his very words—an' Mr. Granville's a keen one, he is. He'll be judge soon, an' don't you forget it. Those were his very words —'You'll never get on in this world, Sam,' saysee."

"Now what do you think o' that! Ain't it too bad! Mr. Granville bein' the keen l'yer he

is, o' course what he says goes. There's no gettin' away from it. I should think Sam's heart would be broke. What didee say?"

"Nothing. Just looked."

"P'raps Sam thinks the kind o' folks that don't get on in this world stand a good chance of goin' up head in the next."

Gilroy laughed. "To think that wouldn't help me much. It's what I'd call cussed cold comfort. The kind gives you a regular north-pole, arctic chill. If I was you, I wouldn't hand it out to Sam. He might take it you was stringing him, and that would hurt his feelings, for—I'll give you the straight tip, Sam's awful fond of you, Martha!"

"No!"

"You mean to say you ain't on to it?" queried Peter. "Why, I'll go further, and tell you this: I bet he would of told you so long ago if it hadn't been for two what-you-might-call obstacles."

"Two?" repeated Martha.

Peter nodded, checking them off impressively on the palm of his left hand with the stubby forefinger of his right.

"His mother and—I!"

"Well, now, what do you think of that?"

Gilroy shook a rueful head. "He sure is handicapped, Sam is."

"I should — think — as much!" Martha brought out with slow distinctness.

"Not many fellers would have the spunk to come around at all, if they were up against it, like he is," Gilroy continued. "You mustn't blame Sam, Martha."

"I'm not blamin' 'm," said Martha.

As Peter walked down the street somewhat later, his self-complacent whistle could be heard clearly for blocks through the silence of the night. He felt pleased with himself, thoroughly satisfied. His generosity toward Sam had made him, if possible, even more "solid" with Martha. Gilroy liked to feel the warm inner glow that accompanies an act of virtue. He did not reflect that he had, gradually, ceased to respond, with an outer suffusion, to acts of an opposite nature. He thought very well of himself, and he felt others thought well of him, so he was "in all right" all around. There was no doubt in his mind that he was going to succeed. Why shouldn't he succeed? He whistled continuously from Martha's door to his own.

Meanwhile, in the course of her climb upstairs to her own room, Martha paused at Mrs.

Granville's boudoir, the door of which stood ajar. She did not knock for admittance, but a voice from within answered as promptly as if she had.

"Is that you, Martha?"

"Yes'm."

"Come in!"

Softly Martha tiptoed into the fragrant, dimly-lit chamber, to the accompaniment of a chiming clock that uttered eleven long notes in melody. It was a wonder-place of rare and beautiful objects, but Martha saw one only and made straight for it.

Young Mrs. Granville (always "Miss Frances" to Martha's heart) smiled the girl a welcome from where she had thrown herself upon a cushioned couch in the shadow.

"You haven't been waiting up for me again, Martha?"

"No'm. Peter Gilroy was downstairs. The way that fella sticks you'd think his mother'd been a porous plaster." For once "Miss Frances" did not laugh at Martha's foolery.

"I wouldn't want you to sit up for me," she said, following her own thought. "Hortense is there, of course, and it is her place—but——"

"Certaintly," said Martha. "Hortense is your

maid. I ain't interferin' with her dooties, much less her privilidges. But I been used to stoppin' on my way to bed to see you're all right, Miss Frances—I should say, Mrs. Granville. I been used to it for years—ever since the both of us was hardly more than childern in your mother's house. God bless her! I couldn't break myself off of a habit like that. Seems to me I can hear her voice now. 'I wisht you'd see if Miss Frances is all right before you go to bed, Martha.' D'you think I could lay my head on the pilla, an' sleep so[illegible] while the same roof covers us, if I hadn't done it? No, ma'am! I should say madam."

"I think I'd like to feel your hands on my head, Martha."

"Yes'm!"

In the pause that followed, as Martha patiently stroked and stroked, two tears slipped from under "the madam's" closed lids and hung upon her cheeks, until she raised a surreptitious hand and brushed them impatiently away. Martha saw, but made no comment. She did not need the evidence of tears to tell her when Miss Frances was troubled.

"I wonder why I like your touch on my head better than Hortense's," mused Mrs. Granville,

speaking because, with this great friendly presence beside her, she was afraid of a silence that would threaten her self-control and lead her on to "say things." "Hortense's fingers are as light as feathers, and yours——"

"Mine comes down like a thousand o' brick. I know it. Your brother Arthur told me once when I was cleanin' his room an' broke one of his bricky-braws on'm—'You got a hand like the hand o' fate, Martha,' an' I know it. I remember when first I come to live at your mother's, your brother Arthur he was hantin' the kitchen one day, 'count o' smellin' fresh chocolate-cake, an' he see me. 'Ho!' saysee, pointin' his finger—'What's that?' 'The new kitchen-maid, Mr. Arthur,' says Joanna, which she was cook at the time. 'This is Martha Carrol, Hannah's girl that was your mother's cook, an' got married from this house. She's kitchen-maid now.' 'Maid!' says Mr. Arthur. 'That ain't no *maid*—that's an elephant!' An' true for him I *was* a big, bunglin' lump of a thing an' am yet."

Mrs. Granville shook her head.

"Naughty boy! If my dear mother had known— What I was thinking is this, I wouldn't for worlds have you meddle with my hair, but

when I'm a little tired—like this—I want *you*—not Hortense."

Martha pondered the puzzle for a space.

"'Taint Hortense's fault," she brought out at last. "I guess it's just that even a French lady's-maid, smart as they are, ain't learned the trick o' untanglin' the little snarls that sometimes gets way back into your head, back o' the roots o' the hair. The only thing that'll smooth them out is—somebody that loves you."

Mrs. Granville laid her hand for a second on Martha's hand.

"You sometimes say such true things, Martha. I wonder where you learned them."

"Prob'ly from your mother. She took a lot o' pains with me. I never see any one so pationate as her. An' me such a dunce I never could learn from books. Mr. Arthur used to say I certaintly did have the gift o' the gab, or words to that effect, an' I will say for'm that if the Lord saw fit to cut down on my share o' worldly goods an' suchlike, he didn't stint me on tongue. Mr. Arthur was remarkin' oncet I talked too much, an' your mother told'm, 'Well, p'raps that's so. But with all her faults I love her still.' 'With all her faults *I'd* love her *stiller*,' saysee. I never forgot it. 'Twas awful smart o' Mr. Arthur.

Your mother told me oncet—'Martha, if you must talk so much I think I must try to learn you to talk sense,' and try she did, sure enough. If I know anything it's her I have to thank for it."

"I wonder if you are thinking of leaving me," said Mrs. Granville irrelevantly.

"Leavin' you, miss—I mean, ma'am—I should say, madam! Who said I was thinkin' o' leavin' you, I should like to know."

"No one said so, but of course I know you have—what you call followers—beaus. And some day you will be deciding which one to take for a husband."

"Now don't you go for to fret about my husband, Miss Frances, dear. Wait till the time comes when I have one itself. Then let him do the frettin'—he'll have cause."

"But it is right that you should marry some day. Only—not quite yet, please, Martha. Don't leave me quite yet. I don't feel I can spare you—and—be careful. Don't make a mistake as—as so many foolish girls do. Don't marry the wrong one."

"Well, I'm only a ignorant thing, for all your mother (God bless her for a good an' wise lady!) tried to learn me knowledge, an' what she called a vocabberlerry. I don't know much, but if you

keep your eye out, you catch on to some things in spite o' yourself. An' I often thought, lookin' at the gener'l run o' married folks, that the wedded estate ain't all it's cracked up to be. Gettin' a husband is kinder like buyin' a hat. The one you take, when you get it home, you mostly wisht you'd got the other one. I might get caught up that way myself—there's no tellin'—but it appears to me, as I look at it now, that if I did, I wouldn't sit down before the lookin'-glass an' gawk at myself an' pull a long face, till I'd cry for rage at sight of my ugly mug. Nothin' becomes you when you're like that. Nothin' looks good to you when you have to wipe away the tears to see it."

"No, nothing looks good to you then——" said her listener wistfully.

"I don't s'pose anything you'd draw, be they husbands or be they hats, turns out all you'd hoped for," continued Martha. "If I found I'd got a poor bargain with a man, same's I sometimes have with what Hortense calls a 'shappo,' I'd do pretty much with him what I done with it. I'd give a sly pull to his brim, or a pinch to his crown, or I'd stick in another feather, or tweak out a bow—in a way o' speakin'. But I'd try make'm match up to what I wanted, without lettin' on I

was makin' 'm over, you understand. There's nothin' they hate more'n to think you'd like to change the style o' them. It hurts their feelin's, till you'd be surprised. An' if I seen I couldn't make it a go, I wouldn't stop before I put in some good licks on myself. The trouble ain't always with your choice. There maybe's a kink in yourself. You may be too plain, or you may be too fussy. It needn't take you long to find out. Then you can put a crimp in your hair, to furnish your face, or you can 'try an' look pleasant,' like the picture-men say. But there's all sorts of ways to make a bad matter better, same's to make it worse. I tell you, though, what I wouldn't do——"

"Well?"

"I wouldn't have the thing I'd refused first-off hangin' 'round where I could be forever comparin' him—I mean it—with what I'd took. It's too risky. Comparin' ain't no earthly help if the place you got your goods from won't exchange accommodatin' for a customer, or else take it off your hands an' give you your money back. An'—er—marriage is that kind of a shop, or, leastwise, it has the name if not the fame o' so bein'.

"Now take me, for instance. S'pose I married Pete an' then found I had a hankerin' for Sam. D'you s'pose I'd dare take any chances on him

comin' 'round, remindin' me of happier days? Not on your life. A burnt child hadn't oughter meddle with edged tools. A blister's enough, let alone unnecessary cuts. That's the way I feel about it, an' that's why I just as lives stay single—for the present."

The door opened and closed noiselessly. Mr. Granville came forward.

"He certaintly is good lookin'," thought Martha, for the thousandth time. "That is, if you like 'frozen dainties,' as it says in the cook-books. There's two things Mr. Granville reminds me of every time I look at'm. One's as if he'd swallowed the church an' hung his hat on the steeple, the other is a rat-tearier dog about the eyes an' mouth. Just the same huntin', thin-nosed, sharp-fangled appearance he has about'm. As if, no matter how you tried to dodge'm, he'd run you down at last, an' then—'may God have mercy on your soul!' as the marriage-service says—or is it the death sentence?"

Martha was, if anything, rather a favorite with Mr. Granville. He called her "the Irrepressible," regarding her less in the light of a subordinate than as some sort of family functionary for whom special rules and concessions must be made. He did not resent her garrulity, for Mar-

tha "knew her place" and never "presumed" unless by tacit permission. He did not resent her presence now, nor attempt to dismiss her. He greeted her, after greeting his wife, and his manner was hardly more cordial to the one than to the other.

"Martha and I have been discussing marriage," Mrs. Granville informed him with an attempt at a smile.

"Ah—discussing——"

Martha's look was benign.

"Mrs. Granville done the *dis,* an' I done the *cussin',*" she said, adding, to herself, "Anythin' to break the ice, as the fella said when he skated on a thin place an' fell through."

"Is Martha going to be married?"

The question pounced out of a pause with an unexpectedness that brought an irresistible answer.

"Yes, sir—no, sir—yes, siree, sir!" For once Martha was disconcerted.

"Martha has two admirers," Miss Frances explained. "You know them, Lester—Peter Gilroy and Samuel Slawson. You made openings for them in the office, don't you remember—when we were engaged—because I asked it?"

"So. Gilroy is a helpful fellow."

"Ain't Sam Slawson satisfactory?" Martha inquired.

"Tolerably."

"Both are courting Martha," Mrs. Granville took it up again. "I don't want her to make a blunder. Won't you advise her, Lester? I know mother would be anxious to have her take no foolish step in such a vital matter. Mother was very—fond—of Martha."

Mr. Granville disposed of his long person with great deliberation in an ample chair.

"Perhaps the best advice in such a case is the advice Punch once gave a correspondent, 'Don't!'"

Martha felt the temples she was stroking throb painfully beneath her fingers.

"No wonder!" she s[illegible] "Punch did certaintly have it tough with Judy, an' that's a fac'. Still, if the truth was known, she had troubles of her own. It was six o' one an' half a dozen of the other—as it gener'ly is. But Punch done well to tell the co-respondent 'don't,' all the same."

"Please advise her, Lester," repeated Mrs. Granville hurriedly.

"You like both men—Gilroy and Slawson?" came from the arm-chair, like the snap of some strong spring.

"Yes, sir."

"Any preference?"

"I like one for some things, an' one for others."

"Which do you like for—a husband?"

"That's it. I couldn't tell till I try, an' then maybe I'd be wrong. If they'd only leave us take a sample, now—or send it home on approval. But the way things is, how's a body goin' to be sure she's suited. You might see another style you like even more. Best look around some before you decide, I think, considerin' it's for better, for worse, till death you do part, unless you're rich an' can afford to go to that place out West where they give you a divorce while you wait."

Mr. Granville cleared his throat.

"My wife asks me to advise you, Martha. See you profit by my advice. I do not generally give it for the asking."

"No, sir."

"Gilroy is a smart chap—likely to make his mark. He's clever, he's active, he's far-seeing. He's what we call a useful fellow. He will thrive in business. If he should lose one place a dozen others would stand open to him. I dare say if he lost one—girl, he could have a dozen others in her place, just as good. He will be rich, in his

way, some day. Able to give his wife a good home.

"On the other hand, Sam Slawson is honest and industrious. But he loses chances to advance himself. As I have told him, he will never get on in this world. Too many visions—too many—scruples. He's easy-going, uncalculating. He does not look out for himself. Any woman who marries him will have her hands full. He needs somebody to look after him—see that Tom, Dick, and Harry don't cheat him out of his boots."

A perceptible period of time passed after the dry voice ceased speaking. Then Mrs. Granville addressed Martha.

"My husband thinks Gilroy would be the better match," she said.

"I'm sure he would be," Martha assented readily. "As he says, Sam's good-hearted an' honest. You couldn't help likin' 'm. He reminds you of one o' them Saint Barnardses dogs that your mother used to tell about, that goes out in the snow up the mountains for to resquer folks from freezin' an' save their lives. But he certaintly ain't much on the make, an' that's a fac'. Look at his brothers an' sisters, the way they impose on'm. Saddlin' him,—the youngest of'm all—with the mother that's too pious to cook'm

a square meal, when he's earned it by the sweat o' his brow. No, there ain't no doubt of it, Peter's the best match of the two—as matches goes."

"But there is one thing to remember," observed Mr. Granville with great quietness, but even greater point, "whichever man you marry don't imagine you and the other can keep up a relation on the Platonic basis, Martha. It won't do."

"Certaintly not, sir." Martha acquiesced amiably.

"I'm afraid Martha does not know what Platonic means."

Young Mrs. Granville's voice had a tremor in it that made it sound like the voice of an aged person.

"If Martha does not know what Platonic means, let her look it up in the dictionary. Let her look it up now."

"Yes, sir," said Martha, and left the room.

It was a full fortnight before she saw either of her "beaus" again. Delia was charged with a message to each when next he should appear at the area-gate.

"The madam is sick. Martha's with her. She can't come down."

But at last arrived an evening when she could come down.

"It's good for sore eyes to see you again, Martha," said Sam Slawson, who for once in his life had got in ahead of Gilroy.

"Well, I do' know if that's a compliment or not. It certaintly sounds as if I was a dose."

Sam smiled. "You know that ain't what I mean. But if you was a dose, and bitter at that, I'd 'take' you, Martha, an' thank God for the chance."

"O, come now, Sam Slawson. Don't let's get back on that old subjec' the first go-off. You been askin' me to have you on the average o' three times an evenin' ever since we first got acquainted. Can't you think o' some other topic o' conversation? Seems to me I'm kinder familiar with that, an' familiar-rarity breeds contemp', or so the sayin' is."

"It don't breed it, if you care, Martha."

"What's the news? I been shut up so long I don't know a thing's been goin' on, an' you feel kinder out of it when you're like that."

"Well, one thing is, I guess we're in for a war with Spain. The papers say Commodore Dewey's been ordered to Manila."

"On account o' the Cubeeans. Yes, I know.

I've heard about that. Captain Stafford has took his troops down. Nearly two weeks ago he went —let's see, Peter was here two weeks ago come Tuesday, an' it was the next day—Captain Stafford was sent to Cuba. I hope to goodness he don't get yella fever or nastolger or any o' them awful topical diseases you catch in the south. I like Captain Stafford. He's a honorable gen'l'man if he ain't got as much money as some."

"Say, Martha," ventured Sam timidly—"Talking about Captain Stafford, I think I ought to tell you that they're saying——"

Martha reared her head with dignity.

"If you mean they're sayin' he come back because he was oncet in love with Miss Frances, an' can't get over it—well, s'pose it's true. S'pose he did come back? She sent'm away again an' I know it—'cause I took'm the letter an' she wasn't made to write it either. She done it because she knew 'twas right. An' if you've nothin' better to do than repeat silly gossip about two purfec'ly good ladies an' gen'l'men, you better go home an' not detain me, who won't listen to it."

"I meant no harm," protested Sam.

"So the fella said that threw a burnin' match into a tank o' karrysene."

"Forgive me, Martha. I didn't say it to gos-

sip All I meant was to have you know the sort of talk that's going the rounds. I thought seeing they make such a kind of pet of you here, I thought you might throw out a hint or a warning or something, where it'd do the most good."

"Throwin' out hints an' warnin's never does no good. First thing you know they hit the wrong party an' make no end of trouble. If you want to do something, do it—square from the shoulder, straight for the bull's-eye. But don't throw out hints or warnin's."

"Say, Martha—I'll follow your advice. I want to do something, so here it goes, straight from the shoulder, square for the bull's-eye. I love you. Will you marry me?"

Miss Carrol sat silent for a moment under the blow, gazing straight before her with eyes of unusual gravity.

"I'll tell you something, Sam," she said presently. "I s'pose you know that Peter gimme the refusal of'm too. Well, it's been kinder troublesome havin' the couple of you proposin' to me so constant at the same time, for there's no doubt about it, you both have good points, as men goes. The other night Miss Frances got talkin' to me about it, an' the end was she in-dooced Mr. Granville to gimme the benefit o' his regal advice—free

grates, for nothin', as the sayin' is. Nacherly I'd ought to act accordin' to what he told me."

"What did he tell you?" Sam's voice was a trifle husky.

Martha visibly braced to the effort. "I'll be open and aboveboard with you, Sam. I owe it to you. You mayn't like what I say, but it's got to be told one time or other, first or last."

"Well?"

"Mr. Granville said Peter's a winner. He says he's bound to get there. He says anybody'd give Peter a job any time, he's so smart an' pushin'. Seemed like he couldn't get enough singin' Peter's praises. An' that means somethin', I can tell you, comin' from Mr. Granville—considerin'."

This time it was Sam who braced.

"Peter deserves it," he said ungrudgingly. "Peter's good for all the praise Mr. Granville gave him."

"Glad to hear you say so," Martha responded. "Then after he got through throwin' bokays at Peter, Mr. Granville started in on you."

"Throwing 'bokays'?"

"We-ell, not eggsac'ly. He said you was a good enough fella, but kinder chicken-hearted an' retirin'—the sort, if another party got in ahead

of'm would turn 'round an' go home without even takin' his chance ringin' the doorbell on his own account. Mr. Granville says a fella like that'll never get on in this world. He says the woman that marries him will have her work cut out for her. He says if Peter lost his job he'd get another without turnin' a hand, which it would be the same with a wife. But if you get bounced —well, the fat'd be in the fire for sure."

Sam pondered. "That's about right," he admitted, shaking his head sadly. "That's about the size of it."

"Certaintly it is," said Martha.

"I can see how things look to you, Martha," he continued. "The way Mr. Granville put them, I know just how they seem. And he's not far wrong. I never thought of it that way before. I guess I was too taken up caring for you, to mind anything else much. I set such store by you, it blinded me to everything besides. I knew Gilroy was a hustler and all that, but I kept telling myself—'hustling ain't all there is in the world,' and I just plastered myself up with the thought that a feller who loved a girl like I love you would have to make something of himself in the end—he couldn't help it. Now I can see what a big chump I've been. You must have laughed in your sleeve

at me, but I will say you never showed it. You've been awful nice to me, Martha. I wish I had more to offer you. I wish I had more of a show alongside of Gilroy. But I don't blame you one bit for choosing him. He can give you what I couldn't and—you ought to have the best, Martha."

Martha continued looking at him with her fine, direct gaze. "Certaintly I'd oughter," she said with composure. "I'm awful sorry to disappoint you, Sam, but you see how it is, don't you? Peter says he'll put velvet under my feet, whatever good that'll do me. And it'll be comfortable to know I've no call to worry about the way I'll be provided for. I'll be well looked after. Peter's a real catch!"

Sam nodded. "Shoor," he acquiesced.

"An' you," continued Martha— "Mr. Granville says the girl that takes you will have her hands full——"

Sam winced.

"So—I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm real sorry to disappoint you, Sam. But I've thought it over careful and serious, an' if all Mr. Granville says is true, I don't see but what it's up to me to—marry you—'cause Peter can shift for himself."

CHAPTER II

THE TIME OF HER LIFE

AS they approached the tenement building in which her mother lived, Martha Carrol stopped short.

"Say, Sam," she addressed her colossal companion, "I guess I better go in alone. I guess you better go along home by yourself."

Sam Slawson regarded her with a troubled, doubtful look.

"Why, I thought—your mother—liked me," he protested, puzzled.

"So she does," returned Martha with brisk acquiescence, "but there's a difference between likin' an' likin'. The way a woman likes a fella likes her daughter is quite another pair o' shoes from the way she likes the same party when told her daughter's goin' to marry'm. See? An' as that's what I'm aimin' to do at the present moment I guess you better folla the crowd an' keep movin', an' let me step up alone, till I find out how she takes it."

Still Sam lingered.

"I'll wait for you down here," he said in his slow, ruminative fashion.

Martha shook her head. "Doncher, Sam. Take my advice. You run home, like a good little boy, an' tell your own mother. I'm quite willin' to give you the first joy o' that job, an' don't you forget it!"

As she spoke Martha wheeled about, turning into the dusky entrance before which they stood. The next moment her tall, erect figure was lost to sight in the shadows of the hallway.

She and Sam had taken advantage of this first mild evening of early Spring to ride downtown in an open trolley-car. Now, the close air of the unventilated house caught at Martha's throat. Her nostrils dilated disgustedly. "It's like openin' a can o' somethin' you wouldn't like, in the first place, that's just on the turn!" she muttered, as she mounted the stair. "I certaintly do wish I had the price to put mother in a better place than this, her'n the childern. They ought to be in a better place, an' yet——"

From within the closed door on whose knob she presently laid her hand a confused chorus issued, whistling, singing, a sudden burst of boisterous laughter, a note of good-natured pro-

test. Martha turned the knob, opened the door. For one second the chorus dropped, then rose again fortissimo.

"Hi, mother! here's Martha!"

"Marsa, Marsa, see my new dess!"

Martha clapped her hands over her ears. "For goodness' sake!" she exclaimed, pretending to scowl at the children clinging to her skirts, "Clear out, the whole of you. I haven't long to stay. I come to talk to mother. I declare, a body can't hear herself think with the row you're raisin'. Here's a quarter. Run along, the raft of you, an' get yourselves ice-cream cones or somethin' to stop your mouths. Take aholt of Rebecca's hand, Ruth, an' let Bobby lift you over the crossin's like a lady. Janey, you go along with'm. You ain't too grown-up for ice-cream cones yet, if you are goin' on sixteen, an'd like to make out you're a young lady."

"If Janey's goin' on sixteen, I bet I know how old *you* are," Bobby sang out challengingly.

Martha laughed.

"Lizzie Connors, she says you're an old maid," Rebecca cut in with resentment—resentment against Martha as well as against Lizzie.

"True for Lizzie. So I am. An old parlor-

maid. What did you think I was? A young cook?"

Rebecca regarded such flippant dodging of grave issues with serious disapproval.

"Lizzie means *you ain't married,*" she shot forth bluntly, with intent to kill.

"My, my! Now what do you think o' that!" ejaculated Martha.

Bobby eyed her slyly. "Say, how old are you, anyhow, Martha?" he plied with insinuating suavity.

"As old as my tongue, an' a little older than my teeth."

"Lizzie Connors's got one big sister married, an' another one goin' to be. Lizzie says when you're an old maid, it shows nobody'll have you."

Rebecca controlled an inclination to cry. It is hard to hear your family stigmatized, to bleed and die in its defense, only to have it treat the matter with easy indifference. She was not at all taken in by Martha's mock solemnity.

"You don't say so! Ain't that too bad. The next time you see Lizzie just you tell her you told me what she said, an' say I felt simply awful about it. Say I wondered wouldn't Lizzie's sister gimme the loan of one of her steadies—a little one she

mightn't be usin' much at the time, till I'd see if, maybe, I couldn't take a turn out of'm, while I'm waitin' for a fella of my own."

Mrs. Carrol, rolling down her sleeves, came forward to seat herself in the "grand" base-rocker Martha had given her. Her tall, well-proportioned figure was a matured model of Martha's Amazonian own. It was easy to see in the mother what the daughter would develop into in the years to come—straight, massive, strong, steady, carrying on her broad shoulders, as if it were a feather-weight, the burden of the universe.

"Quit teasin' your sister, childern dear," the mother said in the rich north-country brogue that all her years in America had not banished from her tongue,—"Quit teasin' your sister, an' leave us be, the way we'd have a minute of quiet by ourselves, an' I'd hear what she's come to tell me, the da'."

Mild as was her accent, the youngsters knew what they knew, and got themselves off without further parley.

As soon as they were well out of the way, Mrs. Carrol turned to Martha, "I'm ready for ye now."

"Then—Rebecca needn't be fashin' herself any

more about Lizzie Connors. She'll soon be havin' a married sister of her own," said Martha.

For a moment there was silence. The mother and daughter regarded each other steadily from level eyes. What was going on in the deep bosom of either it was impossible to tell.

"Well, well, now what do you think of that!" Mrs. Carrol let fall at last with quiet impersonality.

"I come to tell you as soon as I fairly knew myself. I only made up my mind last night. Too late to be askin' would she let me out to have a word with you," explained Martha.

Mrs. Carrol recrossed her folded arms, settling herself more solidly in the base-rocker which sighed beneath her weight. "I'm thinkin' Miss Frances, I should say, Mrs. Granville, will be sorry to lose ye," she ruminated.

"That's what she said. But she said it was time I was settlin' down in a home of my own. I'd waited long enough, she said. I told her I was in no hurry. If she'd any use for me, I'd just as lief call it off. Said she: 'We're the same age, Martha. The two of us grew up together under my dear mother's roof, an' well I know the store she set by you. 'Twas her valued your mother more than any cook she ever had,

so when your mother was married it was from our house, the same as if she was one of our own family.' "

Mrs. Carrol nodded. " 'Twas the true word she spoke. A grand weddin' I had. The tabl' alone was a picture to behold. An' me in a silk dress, brand-new out of the store, pearl-gray it was wit' lines o' white, an' lace to me neck an' hands. Little I thought that da' I'd so soon be partin' wit' it. But the times was hard, an' 'twas better sell the dress, itself, than see you childern lack, the way you'd be comin' thick an' fast, the lot of youse, so work as I would, I couldn't keep ye clad an' fed. An' your poor father never lucky, but always meanin' as well as the best, till he was took wit' his mortal sickness an' died ere ever little Ruth was born, five years ago come Shrove Chuesda'. The other eight has had a better chance than you, Martha. 'Tis often I think 'twas a pity I'd to put ye out to service so young. Miss Frances was naught but a baby at twelve, an' you the same age, doin' scullery-work in her mother's kitchen, for that we'd need of your wages at home. Well, well! "

Martha heard her mother out with respectful attention, although she knew the old tale by heart. The moment the musing voice had ceased,

she took up her own narrative where she had dropped it.

"Miss Frances said, 'I'd never stand in the way of your marryin', for that's the natural state,' said she. 'An' girls will do it, no matter what.' I knew well enough she was thinkin' how she'd slipped up on it with *himself* on her own account, so I gave my tongue the whip an' let it run, to take her mind off her sorra. An' I had her smilin' in no time, in spite of herself. I told her the girls wasn't the only ones to blame. I said, for every bride, blushin' behind her delusion veil, there's got to be a bridegroom was barefaced enough to pop the question in the first place. I said, 'the girls be contented enough if the fellas had never been born, to upset us with their blarney. What you don't know won't worry you.' Then Miss Frances said, 'Well, Martha, what my dear mother done for yours, I will do for you. I'll give you your weddin' from this house, the same as if you was a blood relation. You may ask your fam'ly an' friends, an' *his* fam'ly an' friends. They shall all see you married with ceremony,' said she."

The quick Irish blood mounted to Mrs. Carrol's face. "Married with ceremony!" she quoted touchily. "Sure, she'd not be thinkin' a daughter

o' mine would be married without it. The way she'd be jumpin' over a broomstick, like a gipsy, itself."

"She didn't mean that at all, mother," Martha reassured her. "She meant style—she'd give me a stylish send-off, so they'd all be wonderin' at the pumps an' vanity of me. But I'd have to be married right off."

"Why for?"

"Because she's goin' abroad in a month's time."

"Will *himself* stay behind?"

"No, that's the trouble. Mr. Granville'll take her. She said if I didn't want to be married right off, she'd give me the price of the weddin' in money, an' I could take my choice, for she wouldn't urge me, she said."

"Well, well!" ejaculated Mrs. Carrol.

"It's my choice between a hundred dollars an' the time of my life!"

Mrs. Carrol breathed deep over the wonder of it. "A hunderd dollars! An' what would *himself* be sayin' to that?" she asked with proud relish.

"You mean Mr. Granville?"

"I mean *himself*."

Martha was silent.

"What would Peter Gilroy be sayin' to that?" her mother persisted.

"Very little," said Martha.

"Eh?"

"Very little. Savin' your presence—just 'damn!'"

Mrs. Carrol's placid countenance underwent a telling change. "You mean," she stammered slowly, "you—don't—mean——?"

"I'm goin' to marry Sam Slawson," Martha helped her out charitably.

It took her mother a perceptible space to rally from the shock.

"Well, well!" she said. "Well, well!"

"I thought you liked Sam," Martha ventured at last.

"So I did. So I do. I like'm good enough. I've nothin' against'm. He's a good-natured young fella, an' better-lookin' than Gilroy, I'll say that for'm. But 'twas Gilroy I always thought as you'd marry. He's been keepin' company wit chu as long as Sam, if not longer. It's been nip an' tuck between'm which'd get you. But I'd kinda got used to thinkin' 'twas Pete you'd marry. Gilroy is bound for to make his way, Martha."

Martha nodded. "Sure! That's one o' the

reasons why I didn't take'm. I couldn't be certain I'd like his way after he'd made it."

"Would you be sure you'd like Sam Slawson's better, do you think?"

"He ain't like to make any," replied Martha promptly.

Mrs. Carrol sighed. "Then he'll be your poor father over again," she brought out with a wistful inflection.

"Yes, I'm allowin' for that," Martha observed. "I ain't any great shakes on figurin', so it's took me longer'n it might—well, we'll say Lizzie Connors' sisters, for instance, to do my little sum. But I guess I got it now as good as I'm ever likely to. I added up Peter, an' I substracted Sam, an' I divided'm both by each other, an' multiplied what they come to by myself, and in the end I just got the same answer every time. Sam was it. I'd rather take my chances with Sam poor than Gilroy rich. Same's I guess Miss Frances would be glad, if she had it to do over again, to take her chances with Captain Stafford, rather than Mr. Granville. Or you with father, rather than Ryan, an' all his money, an' bein' a boss-contractor an' alderman to boot (which I wish to goodness some one would, good an' thora, the cocky old rogue!)"

For a moment after Martha ceased speaking there was no sound in the room but the regular breathy protest of the base-rocker springs, under Mrs. Carrol's steady swaying.

"I can see you're disappointed, mother," Martha observed at last. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you'd set your heart on Gilroy."

Mrs. Carrol very deliberately changed the position of her arms again, this time folding the right over the left, instead of the left over the right.

"It's not to say 'set my heart on Gilroy,' she corrected mildly. "Only I was thinkin', if you could make up your mind to'm once, it would be a great thing, the way you'd likely be settled for life, an' no more fret about gettin' along for anny of us."

A shadow passed over Martha's face. "I thought of that myself," she admitted. "O' course, if I marry I can't live out, like I'm doin' now, but I can take jobs by the day an' I will, an' by this an' by that I'll manage to look out for you an' the childern, the same's I've been doin' right along.

Mrs. Carrol shook her head. "It'll be different," she objected. "It can't help but be different. You think that way now, but when you're married you'll have your own to look out for.

An' with Gilroy there'd be no need o' your raisin' your hand to do a stroke o' work outside your own door. Gilroy has a good head on his shoulders. He'll do fine alone."

"That's just what I thought," assented Martha. "He'll do fine alone. So what's the use me marryin' 'm? There's no good rubbin' butter on a fat goose."

"Certaintly not. But marryin' ain't like orderin' a dress-pattren home on approval, the way you could send it back if it didn't suit. You got your husband for keeps. When you go to the altar with a man, you're tyin' a knot with your tongue you can't undo with your teeth."

"Sure!" said Martha. "That's why I ain't hurried decidin'. I figured it out 'twas better do my thinkin' before than after."

"An' the end of it is—Sam?" queried the mother.

"The end of it is—Sam," the daughter averred.

Mrs. Carrol bowed as if to the inevitable. "Well, well!" she murmured. "It's himself is the lucky lad!"

"'Himself' is always 'the lucky lad.' Any fella gets a decent, well-meanin' girl stand up with'm is a lucky lad. And any girl gets a decent, well-meanin' man stand up with her is lucky, the

same. It's six o' one an' half a dozen of the other. It's up to both parties to make a marriage go. One alone can't do it. The two o' them has to pull together, an' do it fair. I never see a couple yet dancin', where the girl expected the man to haul her 'round the room without touchin' her toes to the floor. Nor playin' games, where the fella'd look to his pardner to do all the work, an' him have only the sport. But marryin'! One o' the couple is as likely as not to want to sit back easy, an' have the whole load pulled by the other party. It's a skin game, as I see it played nowadays, an' I don't wonder it turns out a failure nine times outa eight. What's honest an' honorable in one sort o' combine, is honest an' honorable in another. Anyhow, that's the way I look at it, an' I'm goin' to play my hand just as fair an' open as I know how—like I would if I was playin' for fun. I'm makin' my choice with the free mind God give me. Whatever happens, it's nobody's fault but my own. It's up to me to make the best of it, even if it ain't quite as good as I expected, an' I mean to try to do my share an' not expect Sam to work the happiness-factory all alone by 'mself, with me a dead weight hanging on to'm, cloggin' the machinery. By the way, before I go back—how's Ruth's ankle? Did you take her to

the doctor like you was sayin' you would when I was here last?"

Mrs. Carrol nodded. "I did, an' he said she'd have to go under a operation. It's a queer thing's the matter wit' her. He wrote it down on a piece of paper the way I wouldn't be forgettin' it. Wait till I show you. Here it is. *Serus*—I guess he left out some letters an' it's *serious* he meant—Serious Penostettis. Now what do you think o' that! A child her age havin' the Serious Penostettis. You'd think she'd the wit of a woman grown."

A mist had gathered to trouble Martha's vision. She rose and went to the window, peering out into the dusk. When she faced her mother again her eyes were unclouded, her manner as contained as ever.

"It'll break her heart to be away from you, poor kid! Couldn't she have the operation at home? I'd rather pay more, so's the young one wouldn't want for anything."

Mrs. Carrol shook her head. "The surgeon said it's to the dispensary she must go. He said, before he could know for certain 'twas the serious trouble is in her leg, he'd to send some of her blood they took to the Health Department, the way they'd examine it there to see was the sick-

ness somethin' else—worse. He told me the fellas at the Health Department would examine her blood for nothin', but if it should be done another way it would 'cost like Sam Hill!'—his very words. He said she'd be better looked after at the dispensary than at home, for there they'd the nurses an' all to their hands. It'll cost a pretty penny as it is. Three dollars a week for the bed she'll lay on——"

"I'll pay it," said Martha.

The children were just sauntering back from their treat when they spied the big sister on the doorstep. In the vague shadows behind her, a more substantial shadow loomed.

"Hi, it's Sam Slawson!" shouted Bobby, darting forward on the run. "Hullo, Sam!"

Sam laid a good-comradely hand on the boy's shoulder. "Hullo yourself!"

"I'm glad you decided to come home," Martha observed. "I kinda thought you'd took a train for Boston or somewheres, the raft of you, you were gone so long. Tired are you, Ruth? Did the ice-cream taste good?"

Sam Slawson bent, picked up the child, and perched her on his shoulder. "I know a little girl who's going to ride upstairs."

"Say, Rebecca," said Martha, detaining that

abused young person when the others had started to swarm after Sam. "Say, the next time you see Lizzie Connors you can tell her I been thinkin' over what she said, an' I come to the conclusion I better get a move on before it's too late. Sam Slawson's willin' to help me out, seein' you feel so bad about me bein' an old maid. It's mighty good-natured o' Sam, considerin'. We're goin' to be married, him an' me, together, the two of us. Now, what do you think o' that for a sister willin' to oblige?"

Rebecca's face glowed. "Really? Truly?" she questioned skeptically. "Ask Sam," Martha advised.

Rebecca did not ask Sam. She was convinced by the new note in Martha's voice.

"Then we'll have a weddin'—same's Lizzie Connors'?" Rebecca demanded eagerly.

"Sure!" said Martha. "We'll have a weddin'. But not on your life it won't be like Lizzie Connorses. I'm goin' to have a weddin' that is a weddin'! The grandest thing ever you saw. Just you wait! I'll show you something!"

Though she spoke in jest, the idea of a grand wedding really took hold of Martha—took hold of her with a curious compelling force of which she was not in the least aware.

Her young life had been one of rigid self-denial growing out of her sense of responsibility to the family at home for every cent she could earn. She regarded it as a matter of course that she should hand over her wages to her mother at the end of every month. It never occurred to her to question the arrangement, nor to depart from it. It was not a cause for complaint, any more than it was a cause for complaint that she was "big" when other girls her age were delicately built and slender; that she was doing scullery-work in the kitchen when "Miss Frances," the only little daughter of the house, whose birthday fell but a month later than her own, was treated as a baby, cuddled and coddled and never by any chance obliged to do what displeased her. Such a condition of affairs was, apparently, life. Martha took life very philosophically. She accepted her portion ungrumblingly.

But this question of her wedding bore a different relation to her. It was a special dispensation. A personal benefit falling to her share with no reference whatsoever to any other individual. *A hundred dollars or the time of her life!* She accepted the situation as she had those of less pleasing aspect, without question or cavil. But gradually she found herself consulting

the newspapers for reports of society doings in which Spring weddings conspicuously figured. Industriously studying the Sunday Supplements, picturing Easter Brides in full regalia. Little by little her imagination responded to the stimulus and she saw herself, a white-robed vision, shimmering, queenly, passing slowly up the dim church aisle in bridal robe and veil.

"But, Martha," Mrs. Granville protested, "you haven't decided what you want to do. Time is flying and if you wish to have your wedding here we must begin preparations at once. Remember, I sail in a fortnight."

"Yes'm, Miss Frances, but you see, I sorta couldn't make up my mind while my little sister's so sick in the hospital. A body couldn't compose herself or take a relish in anything much, with one of the fam'ly bed-fast."

"Then perhaps I'd better give you the money outright. Is that what you would like, Martha, to have the money in your pocket to spend on your wedding as you like?"

"Yes'm," said Martha.

Every detail of the wedding as it suggested itself to Martha's mind Rebecca conscientiously reported to Lizzie, and Lizzie's proud spirit was chastened by the knowledge that one moving in so

magnificent an orbit should condescend to shed some of her effulgence on her.

Every time Martha came home she had some new and still more elaborate program to reveal. The children gathered about listening open-mouthed to her superb plans. No fairy-tale could have held their imaginations so captive. The grand satin dress she was to wear, the "delusion veil"! Martha described them so graphically Janey could fairly see their sheen and shimmer, with her eyes shut.

A couple of times Mrs. Carrol ventured to suggest that, while they were talking, the weeks were flying, and before they knew it Mrs. Granville would be on her journey, "the way the weddin' couldn't be in her house, surely, when it's to be closed up itself." And once she made so bold as to hint that even the princely sum of one hundred dollars would hardly meet such lavish expenditures as Martha had in mind.

"Never you worry," returned Martha. "I only expect to be married oncet, and if it does take a bit more than the hunderd, why I don't care. I'm going to have the time of my life, an' don't you forget it! I told Mrs. Granville I'd rather wait than not get all that's comin' to me, an' when you rush a thing through, like I'd 'a' had

to rush my weddin', if I tried get it out of the way before she leaves, I'd be losin' the best o' the game. So she gimme the hunderd, like she said she would, an' when the time comes I'll maybe hire a hall somewheres, if this is too small for all the crowd I'm goin' to invite. Besides, Ruth'll be home then, walkin' around as good as now. I wouldn't want to be married with the poor kid languishin' in the hospital, sick-a-bed with the doctor."

"They give me what they called 'a statement' this mornin', for the time she's been there already. It's fifteen dollars. Would ye believe the way the time does be flyin'! An' she'll be there longer still, till I pay'm more yet," mourned the mother.

Martha retired to a corner of the room, out of the range of Bobby's prying eyes, where after certain incursions into the hidden recesses of her underwear she brought forth a roll of bills.

"You ain't breakin' into the money Miss Frances give you for your weddin'?" Mrs. Carrol asked, watching anxiously.

Martha laughed. "Sure I'm not. You couldn't extract a cent o' that from me if you was to gimme laughin'-gas. No. I'm just borra'in' it off'n myself till I get aholt of my wages at the end o' the month, to pay myself back."

The mother took the money reluctantly. The wages Martha referred to would be the last coming to her from the girl's "situation." Mrs. Carrol had no great faith in "goin' out by the da' for a young married woman." She saw her main source of income seriously affected, if not entirely cut off. Even if Janey left school and took a place, the lack would not be supplied.

That night, when Alderman Dan Ryan dropped in, as he frequently did, for "a bite and a sup" with the widow Carrol, he found her in a singularly compliant mood, extraordinarily amenable to reason. He reasoned.

"You better be looking out for yourself, for if you don't, one thing is certain, your children won't look out for you. A mother can support ten children, but ten children can't support one mother. You know me, and I know you. You've had troubles of your own, and so've I. I got the green to pay for a good home, and you can gimme the good home. Come now, it's a bargain, and if you'll have the best of it, why, I've no kick coming. I'm generous, I am. I'll do well by you and by your children. Not many men would say as much, let alone do it. But there's nothing mean about me. I got an open hand.

I'm a free spender. No pockets in the shroud! That's the way I put it: no pockets in the shroud!"

Martha opposed the match with less vehemence than Mrs. Carrol had expected. The girl remembered her mother's good-natured acceptance of Sam, in the face of her obvious disappointment, and it would have softened her, even if her new sense of woman's immemorial right to choose "her own man" had not tended to make her lenient in the first place. But her own feeling was that while, of course, her mother was "free to marry the fella if she wanted'm," it was manifestly impossible she should want him.

"I'd far rather give up marryin' Sam for the present, an' take another place, than you'd swalla Ryan for the sake o' your salt, which he's too much pork for a shillin', as it is."

"You've no call to say that, Martha," her mother reproved her. "He never done you anny harm. And he'll look out for the childern. He's passed me his word on that. 'Tis few men would saddle themselves with such a raft."

Martha cogitated. "It's all right if you like'm," she said. And Mrs. Carrol replied in the same words and tone she had used in speaking of Sam: "I like'm good enough. He's a good-

natured fella, an' free wit' his money. He'll be kind to the childern."

"Then I tell you what," Martha returned, drawing her chair closer to her mother's, bending forward to give her words special emphasis, "I tell you what, you got to have a decent weddin'. Nothin' fancy, you understand, like mine's goin' to be, but a quiet, genteel blow-out, with a bite o' somethin' sweet, an' a mouthful o' cider or lemonade to wash it down, so's a body'll know it from a funer'l. If you're startin' to do the thing at all, let's do it right."

The mother shook her head. "There's too manny ways for to use the money, if I had it," she said wistfully. "I'd a tony weddin' oncet, when I was young, like yourself. I'll never forget it. Now, I'll be satisfied if we have the feastin' afterwards, as ye might sa', the way the childern'll get three good square meals a da', to keep'm nourished the time they're growin'."

"If you're only marryin' for the childern, we'd all better turn to an' have some style about us, earnin' better money. Miss Janey can shake some of her fine young lady airs an' settle down to business livin' out, or workin' in a shop somewheres, instead o' goin' to the high school, the same as she was Miss Rocky-Carnegie. Ellen

can take another situation where she'll bring home more, an' Jimmy can hand over all his wages in the future, like a little man, an' like me before'm. If we can't do one way we'll do another, but we could make out to get along without your marryin' Ryan, unless you're so dead stuck on'm you can't help it."

Mrs. Carrol was just in time to control a gesture that would have betrayed her. "I'm goin' to marry Ryan," she averred. "I passed'm me word, an' I'll hold by it. An' don't you be for upsettin' the childern, Martha. They're eatin' their white bread now. Leave'm make the best of it. They'll have to chew the dry crusts soon enough, same as the rest of us, if they live an' luck."

"Well, then, I'm goin' to see you married like you should be," said Martha.

"Where'll the money be comin' from?"

"I d'know. But it'll be comin' from somewheres, an' don't you forget it."

"Not outa your hunderd?"

Martha's chin went up. "Not if I know it. This is the time the others can pony up, for a change. That hunderd, every red cent of it, is goin' for my weddin'. It was given to me for that purpose, an' I'm goin' to use it for it. For oncet

in my life I'm goin' to splurge myself for all I'm worth, an' take everything's comin' to me."

"You're right, Martha," approved her mother.

It seemed wisest all around, but especially in the view of the elaborate nuptials ahead, that the simpler wedding should be despatched with as much promptness as possible.

"It'll get us outa the way, an' leave Martha free for to give all her attention to her own grand ball," Mrs. Carrol explained to the willing Ryan. Ryan grinned and nodded across the supper-table. And later, when Martha came in, he approached her with easy complaisance and a significantly outstretched hand. Ryan's bland face, beneath the tilted brim of his square-topped "derby," oozed patronage.

"You mother's been telling me you and Sam Slawson are fixing to give a ball. Here's just a little something to set it rolling. Just a starter. Something to begin on. Plenty more where this comes from. You can get what's needed and call on me for more when this is gone. Nothing mean about me. I'm open-handed, I'll say that much for myself. I spend freely. No pockets——"

"What's that?" Martha inquired, jerking her head in the direction of the hand, then without waiting for an answer: "Say, Mister Ryan," she

spoke with extreme quietness but unmistakable point, "say, Mister Ryan, don't you try any of your ward-politics games on me. You ain't my candidate, nor ever was. But my mother's puttin' you into office, an' what she says goes. Only, us two—you an' me—better understand each other right off an' then there won't be any trouble. You got a strut on you like a turkey-cock full o' pepper, because you think you're rich. You got an idea money takes the trick every time, an' all you got to do is put your nickel in the slot to pull off anything or anybody you have a mind to. Now, let me tell you a little secret. When you marry my mother you're goin' to get as good as you give, an' don't you forget it! She ain't goin' to be beholden to you for nothin'. It'll be an even deal between you, an' so don't you try to buy up me or Sam, for we ain't on sale. Nor don't you try to be chesty with my mother or with the childern. As for me, what I get I can pay for, or I don't get it, see? You can't take a hand at any ball o' mine, without me givin' you a bat you won't forget in a hurry. Don't you set out to do nothin' but act right by my mother an' the kids or—well, you see the size o' me. I ain't a little fairy, am I? I lived out ever since I was twelve an' I done the sorta light horse-work, as

I call it, that the lady-help goin' the rounds nowadays is too dainty to lift their hands to. So, even if I hadn't 'a' been born that way in the first place, I'd 'a' got a muscle on me like John L. Sullivan's. You got to treat my mother an' the childern right, an' no braggin' an' castin' up about it, either, or—you an' me'll have a little sluggin'-match, which you'll never live to tell the tale. That's that. Now, if you like you can call it off. I guess my mother won't mind. Only, don't you ever offer again to put *me* up for any runnin' expenses ain't any of your affairs to foot, compreney?"

Mr. Ryan's pomposity fell away from him in folds, till his spirit seemed to stand before her stripped, naked. He hid his hand—the hand she had spurned—in his pocket. When he drew it out again it was empty. He raised it awkwardly to shift his hat to a less rakish angle on his forehead.

"Try takin' it off, in the house, when you're speakin' to a lady," suggested Martha amiably.

As if acting under hypnosis Ryan obeyed.

"You—you're a holy terror, Martha," he stammered weakly.

Martha favored him with a judicial gaze. "I like you better this minute than ever I done before," she confessed candidly. "You're a kinda

big windbag, o' course, but when a body squeezes you, you don't squeal. There's something in that. I hope you'll like the weddin' I'm fixin' for my mother. It'll be plain but genteel. I invite you to be present."

"Thank you!" said Ryan.

"Also, you can come to mine—an' bring your wife." Her graciousness was equal even to this. "You can come to mine, which it'll be a differnt pair o' shoes from yours, I can tell you. But you couldn't expect the stylish layout your second try you'd get your first, now could you?"

"I could not," Ryan conceded.

Such being the case, Martha proceeded to "do the thing up brown." Once Mrs. Granville had sailed and the house was closed, the girl found herself free to come home, whereafter there were no more hitches or delays.

Society, in loftier strata than the Carrols', appears to extract pleasurable excitement from "a crush." The fact that the little rooms were crowded to suffocation did not in the least interfere with the general enjoyment.

Ryan, relieved and exhilarated after the vows had been taken, bade everybody "whoop it up!" and Martha, presiding as mistress of ceremonies, saw to it that they did.

The Slawsons were out in full force, as were the Ryans and those of the Carrol connection who did not stand upon their dignity and refuse to come on grounds of general and particular disapprobation.

"Ma" Slawson, occupying a seat of honor, treated with every consideration, did her best to wet-blanket the whole affair in her own dry way. Whenever "the next wedding on the carpet" was joyously referred to, and she was congratulated as being the mother of the prospective happy man, she whimpered out her wish that "Martha hada took Gilroy instead o' Sam."

"Never you mind her, Martha!" Andy Slawson advised cordially. "The rest of us are good and glad you've took Sam. You're the girl to make a man of him, if anybody can."

Martha reared a proud head.

"Sam don't need me or any girl to make a man of'm. He's a man without any assistance from nobody. An' what's more, he's about the only man—the only real man I have the pleasure to be acquainted with."

"My, but you're touchy, Martha!" laughed Nora-Andy indulgently. "When you're married to Sam as long as I am to Andy, you won't stand up for him so almighty stiff."

Andy beamed approval on Martha.

"I like you for it," he averred heartily, and then and there confided to her what he called "the chance of a lifetime to make big money." A man he knew would "let him in on the ground floor" of a grand scheme for the price of a bite of bread and a mouthful of milk. The difficulty was he happened not to have the price by him at present, though he would have it, and plenty more, by the end of the week. The man, however, wouldn't hold the chance open that long. He demanded "spot cash." It would be "a sin before God" to let such a chance slip through his fingers, for the lack of a few dollars, which he'd pay back with a fat lump of his profits in a fortnight's time."

"Do you think Ryan would let me have the loan of it, if you told him 'twas sure money?" asked Andy.

"He prob'ly would, only I wouldn't tell'm," returned Martha. "I ain't askin' no favors of Ryan."

Nora-Andy tossed her head. "It's no favor anybody is askin' you to ask. If Ryan let Andy turn over a bit of cash for'm, till it's be swelled to twice or three times its size in a couple of weeks, I guess there'd be no call to speak of it as 'a favor,' excepting on Ryan's side."

"All the same, I'll ask you not to mention it to'm," said Martha.

"Well, Martha," Ryan addressed her after the last guest had gone, "you give us a bang-up wedding, and no doubt about it. Your mother has been telling me it's all your doing. I certainly am obliged to you."

"Don't mention it!" returned Martha. "If my mother is pleased, that's all I ask."

Mrs. Ryan's face flushed emotionally. "I never looked for to have such a grand weddin'—again," she confessed simply.

Martha laughed. "It's nothin' to what I'll have myself. This was good enough, an' I'm glad you like it, but when my own time comes, I'll know how to do it better."

Her own time did not seem to come as punctually as, at first, she had expected.

May passed, then June, and still Martha was unready. Then one hot evening—to be exact it was the second of July—Sam took a stand.

"Say, Martha, I'm tired waiting. I want you to marry me. I don't care about the wedding. I want you!"

"All right, Sam."

"When'll you marry me?"

"Whenever you say."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, if you choose. But we couldn't be married without a license. We better get the license to-morrow."

"And then?"

"I'll marry you next day—the Fourth. That'll be a good day. We'll come in for a celebration at the city's expense."

"D'you mean it, Martha?"

"I mean it, Sam."

Mr. and Mrs. Ryan, with the rest of the family, were "to make a day of it at Coney." Martha had begged off in the beginning.

"It's Sam's holiday. He'll like to go off somewheres quiet. There's been a whole lot of hullabaloo lately, an' likely more to folla, an' Sam feels kinda he'd relish a day off in the country, all alone by himself—I mean, with only me along."

"That's right. You go off with'm where he wants you to, Martha," concurred the mother, out of the wisdom of her ripe experience.

The Fourth dawned noisy and hot. Martha rose early to get the picnickers' huge luncheon-baskets packed, then saw the merry crowd safely off, calling cheerful good-bys to them over the banisters as long as they were within sound of her voice. Nothing in her face or manner be-

trayed her, even to her mother. She was her usual composed, entirely competent self, even when Sam appeared. It was Sam who moved as if in a dream, silent, mastered by an emotion too deep for outward expression.

They went uptown and were married. At the close of the ceremony, the minister's wife, who had consented to act as witness, shook Martha kindly by the hand.

"I hope you'll be happy, my dear!" she said maternally.

Martha's look was one of quiet confidence. "Thank you, ma'am. So do I hope so. If I ain't it'll be my own fault. I got a good man."

They took refuge from the breathless heat and the glare of the sun on the asphalt, in the first trolley they could hail. Riding to the end of the line they took another car. Then still another.

They ate their luncheon under green trees, birds winging above them in the blue, insects humming over the scented grass. Sam looked at the ring on Martha's finger, and swallowed hard. He could hardly see to take the great sandwich she offered him. Martha, too, looked at the ring.

"It's an awful nice one, Sam!" she said. "Good an' heavy an' narra, like Mrs. Granville's, same's I like'm. It musta cost you a lot."

Sam dismissed the subject with a silent shake of the head.

"An' all I got for you, for your weddin' present, was them pair o' measly old suspenders. I wanted to get a real tony pair, but the ones I liked come to twenty-five cents more'n these, so I couldn't get'm, for these took all I had."

Sam's eyes met hers in a long look.

"All you had—out of the hundred dollars Mrs. Granville gave you?"

"That, an' my wages too," confessed Martha serenely. "You see, first-off there was little Ruth. Thank God she's well now, but the hospital an' all took a good slice o' money. An' then there was mother's weddin'. That cost some too, an' Ellen an' Jimmy didn't see their way to help me out on it. An' mother had to be married tabble-dote, or whatever they call it, to keep Ryan where he'd never be able to cast it up to her. With a man like you it wouldn't matter. But Ryan's got a sorta natural growth o' vanity on'm, you'd have to keep shavin' it down, or it'd be croppin' up fresh all the time, an' givin'm too much chin. An' then—well—a little sum I lent a party kinda's got lost in the shuffle. I knew it would when I lent it, so I've myself to blame for takin' the risk. Any-

how, it's never come back to me an', there's no chance now it ever will, an' so——"

"But the happiness you took in your wedding! The time of your life!" lamented Sam.

"I'm havin' it now," said Martha.

CHAPTER III

HER HUSBAND'S FAMILY

SAM and Martha Slawson had been married precisely a fortnight when Sam, returning home after a long, hot working-day "on the job" in "lawyer Granville's" office, found Martha waiting for him at their door, a look on her face as arresting as a raised forefinger.

"What's the matter?" he inquired at once.

"O, nothin' much. A kinda surprise, in a way. But nothin' that won't wait for you to eat your dinner before you hear it."

"I'd rather hear it right off. What's happened?"

Martha began to "dish up."

"I like these rooms first-rate, Sam," she addressed him over her shoulder, as she plied briskly back and forth between stove and table. "I certaintly do like'm first-rate. For just we two they're awful snug an' cozy."

Sam, standing before the sink, dashing cold

water vigorously over his head and forearms, made no response.

Martha continued, "An' yet, I suppose a real flat'd be handier, specially if we'd another in fam'ly. Flat 's made so convenient now. I never see the like, the thoughtful way they're buildin' 'm these days. There's a young married party—a sorta poor-relation o' Mrs. Granville's—she's got a real tony apartment up in the eighties, on the west side. She don't like the west side. I heard her tellin' Miss Frances—I should say, Mrs. Granville—that nothin' about her husban's losin' his fortune was harder on her than the havin' to move to the west side."

"What's the matter with the west side?" asked Sam, energetically falling to work upon his heaped plateful of corned beef and cabbage.

"Nothin' 's the matter with it, exceptin' the swells, in what they call 'the court end o' the town,' turns up their noses at it. Miss Katherine Ronald ast me oncet, as English as Johnny Bull 'mself, though she was born an' brought up in this same little town—says she, 'It's ver-ry sunny over they-ar, isn't ut?'—the same as if 'ut' was the other end o' the world, or the Lord had made the east side shady, to go with some o' the nobs livin' there on money they ain't earned. I told

her, 'Yes, it was gener'ly sunny on the west side of a shiny day,' an' I never cracked a smile to give it away I was laughin' at her. But what I was goin' to say is, there's real decent, respectable flats you can live in these days, if you have the price. The one Miss Frances's cousin's moved into, you wouldn't believe it, the convenient way them rooms's laid out. The maid's room is just between the kitchen an' the dining-room. Ain't that tasty—for the maid? If she wants to, there's nothin' in the world to pervent her from layin' abed mornin's while she stirs the oatmeal with one hand an' sets the table with the other. The man planned that flat, you can take it from me, he was the workin'-girl's friend."

Sam raised his eyes to look at her. His level brows flickered uncertainly a moment, then settled into a puzzled knot. He did not speak, however, and Martha proceeded without prodding.

"I went up to see mother to-day. It's fairly surprisin' the comfortable way she's fixed. It'd do your heart good to watch the sun pourin' in her windas, when she ain't pulled the awnin's down to keep it out. What do you think o' that! Awnin's! Ryan certaintly is doin' noble by her an' the childern. You'd think he was a fairy step-father, the way he spoils the young 'uns. Mother

says he hands over the money brave as a lion an' never a grunt out of'm, at the end of the week, if the bills's large. Mother looks ten years younger, since ever she married'm, an' Ruth's as fat as butter."

Sam nodded appreciation.

"Queer how us two, mother an' me, hit the bull's-eye on husban's, ain't it? An' neither of us much of a shot, when you come to look at us. I always said it was better be born lucky than rich, an' I believe it. Many mightn't fancy Ryan in the first place. But oncet you got'm trimmed down good an' thora, he'll sit up an' beg, or roll over an' play dead dog, like a little man. Mother wants you to come up an' see'm, now they're settled. She says it'd do you good to get out into the open air oncet, into a place where the rooms are so you can swing a cat in'm, to say nothin' o' windas lettin' in the cool breeze, when there is any."

Sam laid down his knife and fork.

"I thought you liked these rooms, Martha?" he brought out after a pause. "You said you did, when we took them. That's only two weeks ago, if it's as much. Have you soured on them already?"

Apparently Martha was too occupied with

something she had poised on the ice in the refrigerator, which had to be removed with great care, to answer.

"I made you a bit o' cold jelly, Sam," she informed him presently. "It's somethin' Miss Frances's grand chef-cook showed me how. He calls it a 'frozen dainty.' He says you'd relish it in hot weather. I don't know as mine's so dainty—(it run over the form an' got mixed with a couple o' other things before I scooped it up an' put it back), but it's frozen all right, all right, for I just cracked the dish gettin' it part company with the ice. Wanta try some?"

Without waiting for an answer she served him a heaping saucerful. He made no attempt to touch it.

"Ain't you even goin' to try it, Sam?" Martha questioned.

Sam swallowed hard.

"I'm wondering about what you said," he returned gravely.

Martha's spoon stopped midway between her plate and her lips.

"Said?"

"Well, if you didn't exactly say it, you meant it, I guess. You don't like these rooms any more. They look pretty poor to you, after your mother's

place. I didn't think you'd get discontented so soon, Martha. You knew you were marrying a poor man when you took me, and turned down Peter Gilroy. But I thought you knew what you were doing and would be satisfied with what I could give you."

"So I am, Sam, but——"

"I know as well as you this place here is stuffy and hot and close, but it's all I can make out to pay for."

"Sure it is, Sam—only——"

Sam rose to his feet, pushed his chair back carefully, replaced it with equal orderliness, and before Martha's bewildered wits had had time to collect themselves, had caught up his cap and gone out, downstairs, into the street.

Martha gazed blankly at the door through which he had passed.

"My, but ain't he touchy!"

The sigh that followed was barely audible. Martha turned to and "did up" her dishes with despatch. She had no more than finished, when there was a tap on the door. Without turning from the cupboard she called in no uncertain voice:

"Come in!"

The door swung open, a tall figure came for-

ward into the room. Martha looked around, her eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"Hullo, Dennis!" she greeted him, her tone losing some of its ring.

Dennis Slawson's eyes, traveling quickly about the room's limited area, halted as they reached Martha and riveted themselves on her face.

"I guess you weren't expecting to see me again so soon," he threw out tentatively.

Martha leaned back against the cupboard frame, seeming to meditate.

"Well, considerin' how lately we met—" she returned with good-nature. "Sit down, now you're here, won't you?"

Dennis took a chair.

"I said to Sarah this afternoon as soon as you left,"—he broke off suddenly. "Where's himself?"

"Out for a stroll. It's kinda hot indoors these nights."

Her perfect poise seemed, for some reason, to abash Dennis, seemed to make the awkward pause that followed peculiarly his own, in no sense hers He fathered it with a clumsy cough.

"I bet you went and did what we warned you not to. I bet you gave it to him straight, and he

got up on his ear and walked off in a rage. That's Sam all over. Say, ain't I right?"

Martha folded her arms across her bosom and contemplated her burly brother-in-law without flinching.

"You are—not!" she averred at last. "But if you wanta know what I did, I'll tell you what I did. I took the good advice you an' Sarah handed out to me this afternoon so generous. I tried to 'break it to'm gently!' Break it to'm! I didn't get in the first crack before he was up an' off like a shot from a shovel. Sarah told me, 'Take the advice of a old married woman with experience.' An' you told me, 'Take the advice of his own brother, which I know Sam like a book.' An', more fool I, I done what you said, an'—slipped up on it fierce, an'—well, here I am!"

"And—he ain't?"

"He certainly ain't."

"He's gone off, then?"

"He certaintly has gone off."

Dennis Slawson weighed the situation.

"He'll come back," he comforted her presently.

Martha laughed.

"You bet your life he'll come back. I ain't hurryin' 'm none, mind you. I'll give'm till ten

o'clock to come back by 'mself. An' then, well, if he ain't in by ten, why, I'll just wanda out an' kinda fetch'm. Oh, I ain't worryin' any about his comin' back."

"Sam always was a queer dick," Dennis volunteered. "You'd never know what was going on in his mind. He'd stand for what the rest of us would kick like the mischief at, and then when you'd think you had him where you wanted him, he'd take offense at an innocent word you dropped, maybe, and go off in a dumb rage you wouldn't see the equal of in a day's travel. Sam has the worst disposition in the family. He's sullen. The surly kind, that if you once rouse him—look out for yourself! I'm sorry for you, Martha, but you got a handful when you got Sam."

Martha's broad shoulders shrugged in a way Dennis felt was distinctly unflattering.

"I thank you kindly for your advice, which I wish I could give it back to you, by the same token," she said serenely. "It was no good to me. An' you can have your con*do*-lence back without me even takin' a turn outa it. I don't see anythin' the matter with Sam, exceptin' he's got a fam'ly's put on'm an' put on'm, till the poor fella's so fairly loaded up to the muzzle with

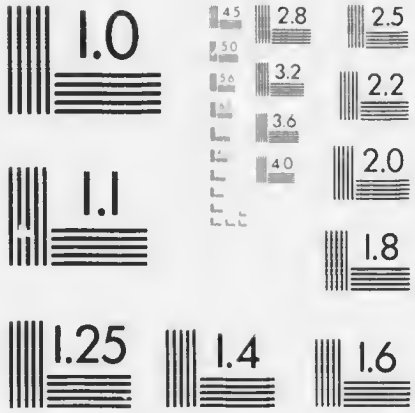
what the rest of you won't shoulder, no wonder he'd go off with a bang oncet in a while."

Dennis rose, flushed and angry. "I came to tell you——" he began, but Martha calmly talked him down.

"Sam an' me's been married two weeks, an' *in all that time* he's never give me a cross word or a black look. I'm no angel, an' don't you forget it. I ain't had the schoolin' Sam has, nor I ain't the head he has. I'm hasty an' I'm clumsy, an' anybody thinks my cookin' is a joke'd better guess again. But you'd never know it from Sam. Sam took me for what I am, like I took him. If I got a handful when I got my husband, like you tell me I done, why, all I got to say is—thank God for the size of my fist, Dennis Slawson, for you can't get too much of a good thing! The trouble to-night was I made a fool of myself tryin' to be the kind I ain't. I tried be tackful, like Sarah. I tried to pass bad advice off on the poor fella. Sam ain't used to tack from me. He don't know what to make of it. When I have anythin' to say, I let'm have it, straight between the eyes. That's my kinda tack. An' it works, an' don't you forget it. If, the minute Sam'd popped his head inside the door I'd 'a' said, 'Looka here, Sam, Dennis an' Sarah backed down on Ma.

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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They had her two weeks, an' they soured on the job. They're goin' to heave her back on you who've looked out for her ever since you was a kid, God help you! you bein' the only one o' the Slawson push ever did think they'd a duty to the mother bore'm'—if I'd 'a' aimed that shot at'm the minute he showed his face in the door, why, the suddent shock would 'a' knocked'm silly, an' while he was helpless, so to speak, I coulda got in my fine work about me havin' took a real flat, which I'm goin' to pay for it outa what I'll earn goin' out by the day, so's we'll have a corner to put Ma in, oncet we get her. That woulda give him all he could swalla in one big gullup, an' then I coulda handed'm out a slice o' orange, as you'd say, to take the taste outa his mouth. As it is, he thinks I soured on these rooms, an' that's a pill kinda chokes'm to get it down, an' I don't blame'm. I know what he's doin' this minute. Walkin' 'round the streets, grievin' his heart out, because he can't give me a tony flat like mother's, when all I'd ever ask is just what we got right here, in these two rooms, if it wasn't for the want of a place to lay Ma's head on."

Dennis's fingers clutched at the brim of his hat, as they itched to clutch at Martha. Nothing would have pleased him better than to "wipe up

the floor" with her. His method with the sex was simple and direct, the method of the primordial male. Deprived of his right to "chastise" her properly, h. turned and stalked out of the room.

Martha looked after him unregretfully.

"The next time he'll know better'n run down Sam to me," she mused. "Dennis thinks all a man's got to do is shoot out his jaw at a woman an', as Ma says, 'the fear'll be in her heart, she won't have a limb to move.' But I'm not Sarah's kind, to be sidlin' 'round the men, like an ash-puss, an' get my way with'm, without their knowin' it. Dennis is a bully, but he got the worst of it this time."

She was mistaken.

The clock on the shelf above her tubs reverberated to the force of nine loud, metallic strokes. According to Martha's calculations an hour remained to Sam, before she would go out and fetch him. Hardly ten minutes of the allotted space had passed, when her alertly listening ears caught the sound of slow steps mounting the unsteady staircase.

"That's himself, the poor fella!" she ruminated. "All tired out with his hard day's work an' the heat, an' then me atop of it, handin' 'm

'tack' after Sarah's receet, which it might better 'a' been a club, an' done with it. I'll make believe busy myself settin' a stitch in his stockin's, to save his face, as if I never missed'm, or knew he'd been gone."

So, when the door was pushed gently open, Martha, bending industriously over her work, did not lift her eyes to see who stood on the threshold. It was only at the sound of a hesitating cough, manifestly not Sam's, that she raised her head and, looking up, saw Ma's angular little figure silhouetted against the shadows of the outer entry.

Martha was on her feet in an instant.

"By the great horn spoon! What brings you here this time o' night, Ma?" she interrogated.

Mrs. Slawson drew the forefinger of an ungloved hand across her upper lip.

"'Twas Dennis an' Sarah brought me down," she whimpered. "After youse was gone this afternoon, himself decided they wouldn't wait for to bring me next week when they go visit Sarah's cousin in Jersey, but they'd be off to-morra, an' take no chances o' their plans bein' upset. So Sarah packed my things, an' her an' Dennis brought me down here as soon as we'd our supper et—sooner, by the same token, for I hadn't me fill, nor anyways near, when they hurried me off.

An' the childern left do up the dishes, at that! Sarah says to himself as we fared along——

"'It's you better go up first to Sam an' Martha's, Dennis. An' leave me an' Ma wait for you in the hallway below, till we'd see what the two o' them'd say to you, the way Ma'd be visitin' 'm so much earlier than Martha expected.'

"So up come Dennis. An' himself an' you was forever colloguin', till the knees o' me felt like bread itself, that they'd crumble beneath me. Sarah says: 'Sit ye down on the stairs, an' rest your bones,' says she. An' well it was for me I done her biddin', for never a step did Dennis come down till the feet o' me woulda dropped off wit' the weariness, an' me standin'. An' when he did come he was mad as mad! Whatever did you say to him, Martha, to raise the wrath of'm like he'd look ready to slay you? Says he to Sarah:

"'Come along home, an' be quick about it. Lemme outa this! To-morra, the first thing, we'll be off to Jersey.' An' then he bid me make me way upstairs alone, for that saysee: 'My foot shall never darken Martha Slawson's door again,' he says, 'till she's went down on her two knees, an' begged my forgiveness, for the way she's turned her tongue on me this night.'"

Martha laughed.

"I hope he won't hold his breath waitin' till I do," she observed with composure. "If he'd said one knee, I mighta considered it. But my two knees! There's only a couple o' things I ever go down on my two knees for, an'—neither of them's Dennis. But that don't help me out o' the nice little hole he's put me in. Where I'm goin' to stow you to sleep, when all Sam an' me's got is the one bed between us, an' not an inch o' room to spread another if we had it, is a question. I wonder, now, could I make out to rig up somethin' on the ironin'-table, which when I turn the top back it's a kinda sofa. Though, bein' plain wood, not so soft as some. We wouldn't any of us be needin' much coverin' a hot night like this. If I put all the blankets an' things belongs to our bed on the ironin'-table, I wonder could you make out to sleep any on it."

"I could not!" announced Ma stoutly, without hesitation. "I'm lost wit'out me night's rest, the same as me cuppertee evenin's, before I go to bed. Now, if you'll just wet me a good heapin' teaspoon, till I comfort meself wit' a mouthful, I'll settle down in the bed inside, and not a sound will ye hear outa me till mornin'."

Martha pondered.

"But Sam"—she said, more to herself than to Ma. "What's to become of Sam?"

Ma's resource was equal to the occasion.

"Leave'm spread a shawl or somethin' atop o' the tubs, an' once he's stretched his limbs there, it's not another thing he'll know till the dawn."

When Sam, returning, thrust open his own door, shortly after ten, the first thing that met his gaze was a shakedown bed made up on the tubs. His wife was invisible. It needed no more to arouse his sensitive fears. That Martha had gone into their room closing the door against him seemed obvious. For a moment he stood facing the barrier between them, a sort of creeping horror making his flesh sick, a helpless trembling in all his joints. Then, suddenly, the nightmare passed, for Martha stood in the doorway, her face the face of the woman who loved him. The quick revulsion of feeling, following after what had gone before, brought him down as if with the force of a blow. He dropped upon the nearest chair, his head bowed on its back. Martha laid a large, calming hand on his shoulder.

"Say, Sam, brace up! Ma's back! Dennis an' Sarah told me this afternoon you'd got to take her again, but they didn't say they'd bring her

down to-night. That bright idea struck'm later, an' that's what they done. She's in our room, in our bed this minute, composin' herself to sleep, beggin' not to be disturbed."

Sam's face was tragic.

"That makes me a liar to you, Martha," he brought out at last, breathing hard on the effort. "I promised you, of my own accord, Ma shouldn't live with us. I promised you that when you said you'd marry me."

"Sh! Don't speak so loud! Certaintly you did," returned Martha. "But promises don't hold when you're up against circumstances over which you have no control, like Dennis an' Sarah. You meant all right, Sam. It's the others—the whole bunch o' them—that's to blame. God knows you've took care o' Ma your share, ever since you was a little shaver. They shirked the job, like they're shirkin' it now. But that's no reason for us worryin'. Our conscience is clear, so sit up an' have some style about you, an' I'll tell you some more. I'll tell you what I done after they told me about Ma, an' this time I'll tell you straight—an' no beatin' about the bush, or tryin' to skate about graceful, like I done at supper, an' fell down an' got a bump I won't forget in a hurry. When

Dennis an' Sarah told me we got to have Ma, I knew it was no good tryin' to tuck her away here. We couldn't do it. Not Ma. So I just walked my little self over to a Real Estate place, an' got the fella show me some three-room flats that it wouldn't break my back to shoulder the rent. An' I took the best o' the pick, an' paid down my little deposit, an' then, bein' in the neighborhood, as you might say, I strolled into Mrs. Granville's cousin's who's so poor she's got to live in a apartment-house with three grand Ethiopeans in the hall, pullin' the elevator, an' stickin' little steppers on a rubber toob, in somethin' telefoams upstairs somebody's in the hall, an' will she see'm? She's got me hired for days' work twice a week, to help out with the rough cleanin' the delicate young lady she's got for a maid ain't a taste for. An' Mrs. Ronald wants me go there too. So, be this an' be that, my time'll be about all engaged. There'll be no worry about the rent. Now what do you think o' that!"

Sam shook his head dumbly.

It was not altogether the unaccommodating nature of tubs to masquerade as downy beds of ease that caused "himself" to lie awake and staring all through the night. Nor yet the vision of Martha painfully huddled against the resisting

corner of the ironing-table Ma had scorned. Sam Slawson was an honest man. His conscience told him he had acted the part of a cheat to Martha, in marrying her to the dingy fate which was all his somber vision could see stretching before them, as his contribution to their common future. It was not for nothing he had come home that night nervously on edge, open to the first suggestion of disaster. He had learned, on good authority, that it was only a matter of a couple of months before he would lose his job.

"I'm telling you as a friend," Peter Gilroy had confided, with officious zeal. "You better be looking out for another place. I happen to know Mr. Granville is only waiting to come back from his trip abroad to make a lot of changes in the office. You're down as one of them. I thought I better give it to you straight, us being friends, than let it come on you unexpected, when you wouldn't be prepared."

Sam had thanked him in his characteristic monosyllabic fashion, and gone about his business the rest of the day in a sort of dumb nightmare of despair. He justified his determination to withhold the news from Martha by quoting to himself her familiar words, "What you don't know won't worry you."

"When I get a new job will be time enough to tell her I've lost my old one."

And then, on the top of this, had come the misunderstanding about the rooms, Ma's advent, the news that Martha had taken a three-roomed flat, and was going out "by the day" to pay for it. He could not tell her, in the face of all this. He would tell her when the moving was over, and they were settled. But they moved and were settled and still the confession did not come.

Martha watched him silently through all the varying phases of his close-mouthed misery, when she would have given the world to comfort him with a word.

"The poor fella!" she confided to her mother at last. "You'd be sorry for'm, to see the secret way he takes on. But if a body tried to help'm, his feelin's'd be everlastin'ly hurt, so the cure'd be worse than the disease. If you happen to hear of anybody wantin' a good, decent chap ain't smart enough to get money he ain't worked for, why, think o' Sam, will you?"

A fortnight or so after this gentle hint had been dropped into Mrs. Ryan's ear, her husband called Sam up on the telephone.

"Say, how'd you like to try your hand bossing a gang of my men?"

Sam, instantly suspicious, did not answer at once. Then, "How did you know I was looking for a place?" he asked.

"I didn't. Are you? This job's open. I just naturally thought of you, you being Martha's husband and me liking her so much. If you want the job, it's yours."

"I do," said Sam.

That night he confessed to Martha.

"It would have been hard on you any time, to have me out of place," he explained, with the elation of one referring to a danger happily escaped. "But now, being as you are, it would be cruel hard. What luck though, Ryan's just happening to hit on me for that job! What luck! Ain't you glad things have turned out as they have? And, now it's over, you don't mind my having kept the worry from you, do you?"

"Certaintly not!" Martha assured him. "Don't you ever tell me anythin' you don't wanta. If it's any comfort to you to think I don't know, for goodness' sake take it."

Sam cogitated. "If I didn't want a boy so bad, I'd hope the baby'd be a girl, Martha, so it'd be like you."

Martha bowed ceremoniously to the tribute, but before she could respond in words Ma, who

had made one of her mysterious, soundless entrances into the room when neither of them was aware, spoke in her stead.

"The Slawsons never did begin wit' a girl. They always begun wit' a boy, accordin' to Scripture. But you may look for a girl, Sammy, an' that's what you may look for. I'd never expect annythin' else, the way Martha is contrairy, an' does the things like she wants to herself, an' nary a thought o' what annywan else is wantin' at all."

Martha laughed. "Poor Ma! You certaintly got a dose when you got me for a daughter-in-law. I'm sorry I don't suit you better. We all have our trials in this world, an' I'm yours."

"Well, I'm not complainin'," averred the old woman meekly. "But in my da' 'twas the wife did the husban's biddin' an' not himself hers, like the two of youse here."

Again Martha laughed.

"We can't all of us be playin' 'Oats, peas, beans,'" she said. "While some parties is singin', 'Now you're married, you must obey,' others is playin' 'Clap in, clap out,' or 'Goin' to Reno—I should say Jerusalem.'"

Ma shook her head despondently over the cup of tea Martha set before her.

"In my time the home a man could give his

woman was good enough for her. But look at yourself, goin' out by the da', for to pay for this. The way you must live in a gra-and flat, wit' three rooms into it, when the old one was respectable enough for annybody, an' fine an' cozy as you'd need. I never slep' more comfortable in me life than the night I spent in it. But there's no satisfaction at all wit' the wives these days. They're always strivin' for somethin' better."

"That's the way they get it," said Martha.

"The girls want to begin where the parents left off."

"Then it's up to the parents not to leave off."

"It's only of themselves the girls do be thinkin'. Not of their husbands at all. A wife should think of himself before annywan else."

"The ones that do learn him to do the same."

Ma braced her spine for a supreme summing up.

"Shame on ye, Martha Carrol, that don't know your duty to a good, steady man."

Sam laid his hand on Martha's shoulder. "I've no fault to find with my wife, Ma. And, for the matter of that, you've none either. She's all right, Martha is!"

Shufflingly Ma got to her feet. Poising her teacup carefully, she took herself off, the picture of virtue undervalued.

"I couldn't blame you if you felt disappointed, Martha," Sam said, when she was gone. "You're not getting what you expected. I couldn't blame you if you didn't like my mother."

"What's yours is mine," said Martha. "We got to like our own."

Sam gave her a look.

His new job seemed at first to be the very thing for Sam. The particular niche into which his personality and capabilities fitted to a T. He controlled his men with quiet authority, and got more work out of them than any other boss Ryan had ever hired with twice his bluster.

"'Twas a good day's work when I took him on," the contractor told his wife, and she, naturally being pleased, told it again to Martha, who was more pleased still and told it yet again to Sam, in whose ears praise rang sweet and who, forthwith, spurred his spirit to greater effort. The open air and exercise agreed with him. All through the Autumn and early Winter he flourished famously. Then came a spell of penetrating cold and damp, which unaccustomed Sam did not know how to protect himself against. He had a sharp attack of grip, fought through it dog-

gedly, and was back "on the job" before he was fit.

In January, his cold still hanging on, Martha insisted he should see a doctor. The doctor's advice was brief but decided. "Give up your job. You can't stand the exposure."

"Well, what do you think o' that!" exclaimed Martha when Sam repeated the fateful words to her. "Who'd ever 'a' thought you were that delicate, to look at you! But don't you get downhearted. If we can't do one way, we'll do another. I've all the work I can get away with, so we won't starve, nor yet go bare, an' while that's the case I call us well off."

Winter passed, Spring came. Martha was still at the helm.

"In my da'," observed Ma, "it wouldn't 'a' been thought well of for a body to be flyin' in the face o' Providence, the same as you're doin' this minute, when it's safe at home you'd oughta be, an' home you'd oughta stay, instead o' goin' out to days' work, an' maybe injurin' the boy ere ever he's born."

It was the last of May. The morning was hot. Martha had evidently got out the wrong side of the bed, for the sound of Ma's insistent sing-song, the sight of her pious mouth, set her all on edge.

"O, dry up!" she exploded crossly.

Ma stared open-mouthed, too amazed to retort. Sam's eyes fixed themselves on his wife's face in a quiet, steady gaze. Martha tried to shrug herself free from the burden of it, and when she could not, turned upon him.

"I know what's in your mind about me, for talkin' up so to Ma. But I don't care. I'm tired an' sick bein' found fault with. I've swallowed all I'm goin' to stand. I give you notice, both of you. If you don't like me an' my ways, you can go where you'll find another you like better."

Ma rose to pass stiffly from the room. Her reproachful sniff, her look of taking up her martyr's cross and carrying it with Christian fortitude, were not lost on Martha. But it was the expression of boyish bewilderment in Sam's eyes that hurt her so she struck out fiercely, with a sort of quick, muscular recoil from the pain it inflicted.

"That's right! Stare at me! I don't care! I mean what I say! I'm tired an' sick workin' like a dog, only to be nagged an' hounded till I'm clean crazy. . . . I wish you'd take your mother an' the both of you clear out an' leave me be. I'm sick o' the whole Slawson family."

She had risen as she spoke, taken up her straw

hat and was putting it on, before Sam found words.

"You're surely not going out to-day, Martha."

"Why ain't I?"

"You're not fit."

"I'm goin' all the same."

Sam made no effort to oppose her. Perhaps he did not believe she actually meant what she said. But when, some moments later, he made his way downstairs, intending to follow and bring her back, she was nowhere to be seen.

. . . . . .

It was somewhat after Martha's usual hour for coming home from work, and Sam was beginning to grow anxious in good earnest, when he heard the stairs creak under ascending feet, and went to the hall-door to receive and welcome his wife.

A boy in uniform stood in the entry.

"Telegram!"

Sam read the brief message, tossed it on the table for Ma, and without a word, without his hat, without his dinner, plunged downstairs and into the street.

Half an hour later he was standing, weak and shaken, very misty about the eyes, beside Martha's screen-encircled cot in a hospital lying-in ward.

Her face seemed strange to him in its unaccustomed pallor, the dark hair curling in damp tendrils above the temples. One finely-formed, work-hardened hand lay upon the turned-back sheet, white against the white of the linen.

After a moment Martha unclosed her eyes, looked up, tried to smile.

"Are you mad at me, Sam?"

Dumbly he shook his head.

"It's no cinch," she whispered, with more of an effort than she would ordinarily have used to scrub a floor. "But we won out, the both of us—the kid an' me. Only . . . I'm afraid . . . you ain't gettin' what you expected. . . . It's like Ma said. . . . I got my own way. . . . I couldn't blame you if you felt disappointed. It ain't . . . your *boy*. I couldn't blame you if you didn't like . . . my . . . girl."

Sam bent to touch the damp forehead with his lips.

"What's yours is mine. We got to like our own," he quoted with tender raillery.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHORISTER INVISIBLE

WHEN Mr. Frank Ronald made Sam Slawson superintendent of his country estate, and the family went to New Hampshire to live, Martha said to her husband:

"One thing I do feel kinda sorry about is young Sam's having to give up singin' in the surplus choir. First place, it stood'm a good fifty cents a week, outside o' funer'ls an' feast-days. An' then, it done'm a lotta good. Sammy ain't a bad young fella, as young fellas goes, but no boy his age—fourteen in his stockin' feet—is naturally the sorta white-robed, angel-kinda-lookin' objeck walks up the church aisle Sunday mornin's, chantin' to beat the band, with a face on'm like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. There's a lotta talk about childhood bein' holy. I tell you what it is, I find the holiness hasta strike *in,* in youngsters. It certaintly don't strike out. Now, I always felt if Sammy could only sport them angel-togs, an' that angel-look long

enough they'd be bound to get in their fine work, in the end.

Sam's eyebrows went up in a look of mild inquiry when Martha paused. She wrestled with a needleful of cranky thread until it yielded, then took off her thimble and blew into it vigorously before putting it on again.

"You mean you'd like young Sam to grow up an angel-child? The sort of picture-book boy caroling hallelujahs, he looks in the chancel every Sunday?" her husband put to her, with a touch of the scorn men invariably show for what they conceive to be womankind's ideal of masculinity.

Martha negatived his question with an emphatic headshake.

"No, I don't mean no such thing. Sammy couldn't be an angel-child, if he tried with both feet, seein' you an' me's his fathers an' mothers. He's got all that's comin' to'm in the way o' cussedness. He's a boy every day in the week, believe *me*. That's why I'm kinda sorry he's had to quit on the church-choir job, Sundays. That white 'rubdynwee' (as Mrs. Sherman calls it) an' the lookin'-inta-heaven, goo-goo eyes goes with it, woulda worked back into'm, if he could only 'a' stuck to'm long enough. Don't *you* worry about young Sam growin' too good. A pinch o' angel

along with your son's natural share o' the other party wouldn't harm him a mite."

Sam senior smiled his characteristic slow smile.

"Young Sam'll come out all right," he assured Martha comfortingly. "You'll see, he'll come out all right."

"You bet, I'll see he comes out all right," was the quiet rejoinder.

Young Sam was, at the moment, pleasantly engaged in hectoring his sister.

"Girls are no good! I wouldn't be a girl for anything you could gimme. Look at the way a man can earn money. Girls can't earn money like men can."

"When I'm out of school, like Cora is, I'm going to earn money," Francie stated simply.

"How you going to do it?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to earn a lot and a lot."

"What'd you do with it if you had it?" Martha asked, interested at once, for Francie, the least self-assertive of all the children, made few claims and, so far as her mother knew, had no vaulting ambitions.

"I'd buy presents for everybody, that's what I'd do. I mean, the kind of things they'd really like, not just something I'd conjured up myself out

of odds and ends, that they'd have to say *thank you* for, because I made them."

Martha smiled.

"You're a keen one," she inwardly commented, pretending to busy herself elsewhere, that her grown-up presence might not check any self-revelation on the "young-un's" part. "You're a keen one, for all you're so quiet."

"What'd you get *me,* if you had the price," young Sam put the question with shameless egotism.

"What'd you want?"

"Oh, several things. A hocky-stick, for one, and a rifle for another. Or a full-rigged jack-knife. There's lots of ways you could please a man, if you insist on blowing in your good cash on your only brother."

Francie mused.

"I'd get Cora a near-silk slip, the kind she wants for her new white dress. And I'd get Sabina a pencil-box, with A. W. Faber's pencils in it, and a rubber and a pen and a pen-knife for school. And, O, I'd get father some slippers to wear evenings when he comes in tired. And I'd get Ma a new shoulder-throw, and—" her voice dropped to a whisper that would have been inaudible to any but the practised ear of Martha—

"I'd get mother a shirtwaist, ready-made, out of the store, with embroidery on it, and, maybe, some lace 'round the neck and sleeves."

Young Sam widened his already ample mouth with fore and middle fingers outstretched. He let forth a long, derisive whistle.

"Well, what's the matter with that?" Francie queried crestfallen, waking from her dream of rapture to the realization that, somehow, she had made herself ridiculous.

"Nothing's the matter with it, only where do you come in on the game? If you spread yourself on the rest of the folks, what'd you have?"

Francie stared.

"Why, I'd have the fun of giving the things."

Sam junior thrust his hands in his trousers side-pockets and tilted aggravatingly back and forth on heels and toes.

"Little Goody Two-Shoes! Ain't you pious? Just like one of those mother's darlings you read about that die young and's buried with a marble headstone to her feet!" he taunted mercilessly, adding a string of jargon he knew was her special dread and abhorrence: "Ping-tung! Whoop-da! A'-there-to-pup!"

Tears rose to Francie's eyes. "I think you're real mean," she retorted weakly.

"Well, all I got to say is, when the time comes, don't you spring any of your home-made neckties on me, out of your old cast-off rag-bag pickings. I've told you what I want. Now it's up to you. Get busy!"

"Doncher fash yourself over your brother's nonsense," Martha advised, emerging from the pantry just as young Sam disappeared through the kitchen doorway. "He don't mean no harm. It's just the nature o' boys to tease. Boys's like nutmeg graters. You'd bark your fingers handlin'm, if you don't look out. But they got a good little kernel hid away inside'm under cover somewheres, if you've the wit to find it."

The good little kernel in her own particular boy it troubled Martha more and more to find during the weeks that followed.

The fact that he came from the city gave him a sense of supremacy over the other "fellows" in the neighborhood—the "natives" with whom he associated. His step developed a swagger, his chin an audacious tilt.

He was alert to fetch and carry for Mr. Frank Ronald, but when any lesser authority commanded him his grubby forefinger went up to expose his eyeball, impudently indicating there was no green there.

Sam senior talked gravely of thrashings which Sam junior knew would never materialize.

Martha dropped warning hints that if there wasn't a change for the better she'd "take matters into her own hands and give someone a lickin' he'd remember to the longest day he lived."

"You better touch me once! Who cares for a woman, anyhow?" the object of her maternal solicitude muttered beneath his breath.

Martha stopped short in her work.

"What say?" she demanded impellingly.

Sammy looked up and met her eyes.

"I said, yes'm," he answered with meekness.

Martha did not remove her gaze until she had measured him from head to heel.

"I'm glad to hear it!" she observed affably. "I wouldn't like any misunderstandin' to come up between us, like come up between certain parties I know . . . a boy and his mother which shall be nameless. The boy he up an' started in to give his mother back-talk an' . . . well, I won't tell you what happened. It might spoil your appetite for your dinner. But this much I will say—you can take it from me, what that poor young fella got for his impidence would surprise you."

Sammy's exit from the room was accomplished

with what grace he could muster, but though the outer man seemed calm, the inner was insurgent. No self-respecting male could be expected to stand up under such treatment as he received from his family. Every hand was turned against him. He retired to his favorite haunt, a hidden corner in the barn-loft, to chew the bitter cud of conscious misprizal in solitude.

Meanwhile "the big house" was the scene of sudden and mysterious happenings.

If young Sam had been at home he would have had no more than a vague sense of unusual "goings-on." What was he that he should be taken into anyone's confidence?

His mother could have told him (only of course she wouldn't) that the Ronald family skeleton had not only emerged from its closet, but had stretched its weary bones and found rest at last.

Young Sam had often wondered where Radcliffe Sherman's father was. Once he had asked Martha.

"There never was a father in that family," she had returned briefly.

Gay Mrs. Sherman, a leader in fashionable New York society, carried off the situation with a confidence that insured her against question.

But now the mystery was cleared. A broken-

down, miserable man, old before his time, had appeared at the Inn. He "answered to the name of Allan," as Martha put it, but there his self-identification ended. It was only after his sudden death—of heart-disease—that he was discovered to be Mrs. Sherman's husband . . . Mr. Frank Ronald's brother-in-law.

Quick on the heels of this event followed Mrs. Sherman's departure, bag and baggage, mother and maid accompanying her, for abroad, and Miss Claire Lang's coming over to the Lodge to stay . . . turning Sammy out of his room and bed, it may incidentally be mentioned. Not that Sammy would have minded being turned out for Miss Claire. He adored her, had been consumed with burning jealousy when she went to stay at Radcliffe Sherman's ("to learn him to grow up a big an' han'some gen'lman like his uncle Frank," Martha had explained) and entertained a secret plan of marrying her when he grew up to be a man and had earned so much money he wouldn't know what to do with it, like Mr. Frank Ronald himself.

The link between these events and young Sam was not so slight as may appear. When the boy returned to the house after his all-day absence Francie said:

"Mother's been looking for you. So've we all. All over the place ever since morning."

If Sammy wondered why, he forbore to ask. Dignity must be maintained even at the cost of curiosity. Besides, he knew Francie would tell. Francie was a "blab."

"Mr. Ronald feels awful bad about Mr. Sherman being dead," she presently vouchsafed, "and mother said if he'd like you to, you'd sing at his funeral."

"How'd she know I would?"

Francie stared. "Why, of course you would."

"Of course I wouldn't."

"Not if Mr. Ronald ast you?"

"Not if the mayor and the governor and the President ast me. I'm through doing things for folks that don't know a good thing when they see it. I'm done with the whole of you . . . the whole darn push!"

His mother, from the doorway, regarded him calmly.

"Go up an' dress you!" she dropped with easy unconcern. "Francie, you stop downstairs till your brother goes up an' dresses him. That funer'l's at four o clock to-morra. He ain't no more time'n he needs to practise over his hymns with Miss Claire."

The neighborhood's Summer colony was largely recruited from fashionable New York society. Though this disappeared with the coming of frost every Autumn, the Episcopal church it had built and pledged itself to support remained open for divine worship all the year 'round.

Young Sam Slawson, white-surpliced, heavenly-voiced, singing *Pilgrims of the Night, Crossing the Bar*, and *O Paradise!* at poor Allan Sherman's funeral, moved some of the more emotional to tears. After a decent interval they waited on Mr. Ronald in a body respectfully soliciting his contribution toward a fund they were raising for the creation and maintenance of a vested choir for St. Martin's in the Mountains. Mr. Ronald quietly informed them he had already arranged for such a fund on his own account, "In memory of my brother."

Before Martha was fairly aware she saw her wish for young Sam realized. He was again in a position to benefit by the introactive influences of a "white rubdynwee an' the lookin'-inta-heaven, goo-goo eyes goes with it."

All through the rest of the Summer and during the Autumn "Slawson's Sammy" worked with Mr. Woodruff, the choirmaster, imported from New York, in the interests of the new enterprise.

He literally "beat up" volunteers, initiating them with mysterious rites into the fellowship of surpliced choristers. And all the while he was a man whose dearest hopes had been shattered, whose tenderest feelings had been outraged.

Mr. Ronald had married Miss Claire Lang! Had married her and taken her off with him on a trip around the world.

It was December before Richard was himself again, and then it was only the prospect of Christmas that really took his mind off his sorrow.

"Christmas," announced Mr. Woodruff at the last rehearsal but one before the great event, "Christmas is not a season, it is an attitude of heart. It is not a day, it is a feeling. Now, let us see if we can't sing our hymns and anthems as if we really understood what Christmas means."

The silence that had lasted while the choirmaster spoke did not outlive his words. The instant he paused, it gave way to a shuffling of feet, surreptitious cracking of knuckles, coughs, cuffs, sniffs, and, as a sort of reckless, triumphant finale, a shrill, prolonged whistle.

"Order!" commanded the choirmaster.

Looking down on the cluster of stolid young faces before him, he thought that, if the boys only

knew it, his own "attitude of heart" was anything but Christmas-like.

"They're a tough lot! Unruly little Hessians! I'm a fool to moralize to them. Not a word I say gets under their skins. And that Sammy Slawson is the ringleader. Come to order, Slawson! We are all waiting for you!"

It so happened that Sammy was not in this case the chief offender. Something in the choirmaster's slip of the eye struck the boys as irrepressibly laughable. A half-smothered snicker went the rounds and an ironical voice whispered: "Hit 'im again, he has no friends!"

Mr. Woodruff recognized the moment as crucial. His discipline hung in the balance. If he did not maintain it now, he might never be able to command it again. Without stopping to reason out or sift the case, he brought his fist down smartly on his desk.

"Order, I say! Slawson, you're excused from morning drill. If you go to pieces to-morrow night at our song-service, don't blame me. I'm here to rehearse you, but if you make it impossible it is not my fault."

Sammy gathered up his effects with well-feigned composure and slowly sauntered from the room. Once outside the door his air of unconcern for-

sook him. His pale face flushed, his eyes grew bright and abnormally big. He made directly for home.

His appearance caused some disturbance in the group gathered about the kitchen-table. Cora rose with a very conscious air and hummed herself out of the room. Ma doubled her apron over her lap, obviously with the purpose of hiding something underneath. Francie whisked in and out of her chair, opened her lips to speak, then clapped her hand over her mouth with no apparent object but to arouse and pique his curiosity. Sammy felt the sting of solitude in a crowd. He was deliberately shut out and away from his own share in the home-confidences.

He saw his mother shake a cautioning head in Francie's direction, before she turned to him.

"I thought you was at your singin'."

"I was."

"Well, why ain't you there now, then? The practisin' ain't over, is it? You told me yourself, to-day an' to-morra'd be the most important of all, seein' to-morra night's Christmas eve, an' your song-service'll be then, same as it was down home."

Sammy's shoulders hunched up expressively, in-

dicating his lack of interest and responsibility in the whole business.

"What made you come away?" his mother plied him with exasperating persistency.

"I don't feel good."

"What ails you?"

"Nothin' . . ."

"That's easy cured. Get busy. You walk your body back to that choir-practice double-quick, d'you hear me, young fella?"

Before Sammy could protest, Francie broke in, unable to contain herself a second longer.

"What do you think?"

"I d'know."

"Miss Claire . . . I mean Mrs. Ronald . . . mother she got a letter from her to-day And she sent Cora and Sabina and me five dollars in it. 'Tain't a Christmas present, she says. It's to spend the way we want to. Now, what do you think of that!"

The muscles in Sammy's neck thickened visibly.

"Did she send me any?"

"No."

His jaws set.

"She said the men in the fam'ly would get what was comin' to'm Christmas day outa the box her an' Mr. Ronald packed for us, which it was

bound to get here prompt," Martha explained, to take the edge off his disappointment. "But she said, bein' a girl herself she knew a little extra wouldn't come amiss to your sisters, for spendin' money 'round this time."

His sense of injury was rapidly getting the better of young Sam. He swallowed hard, manfully trying to brave it out.

"Just think! Fi-ive dollars!" exulted Francie.

Sammy gulped. "You don't mean . . . five dollars for *each of you?*"

"Yes, I do. Five for Cora 'n' five for Sabina 'n' five for me. To spend the way we want to, on anything we like."

Sammy, in extremity, clutched at the first straw within reach to make good his loss. "You said —if you had money to burn—you'd bl-blow me to something I'd like. What you going to gimme, hey?"

Francie's face fell.

"I told you once already I don't want any of your old patched-up duds. D'you remember?"

His mother paused in her passing back and forth between oven and pantry.

"Say, young fella, while we're at it, s'pose you tell us what you're goin' to give your sister, for a change. You got five dollars, and more too,

on your own account, outa your surplus singin'. While you're waitin' to hear what Francie's goin' to do with her money, give us all a surprise-party an' tell us what you're plannin' to get Francie for her Christmas. Let's hear you tell, till we see will she like it."

The end had come. Endurance had been taxed to the breaking-point. Sammy flung his books on the table with a crash.

"What's the matter with everybody, I should like to know!" he roared, shaking from head to foot with rage and shame. "Everybody is down on me! Everybody lays for me, to gimme a biff when they can. Nobody's got a show in this house only girls. If father had any gimp to him he'd kick, the way we're put on . . . him and me. It's up to him. If he wants to stand for it he can, but I'm no tame cat. I'm sick an' tired of being treated like a dog, just 'cause I ain't a girl. Men's got some rights. Tell you what it is, I'm done with you all—the whole darn push!"

The violence of his outburst swept him before it as a leaf in a gale. The room fairly whistled and wheeled with the onrush of his whirlwind passion.

Ma, cowering back in her corner, whimpered

weakly, Francie, saucer-eyed with surprise and alarm, clutched her chair with both hands, while Cora, hearing the hubbub, appeared in the doorway, pausing petrified on the threshold before the spectacle of Sammy transformed into a sort of human volcano in eruption. Only Martha stood firm, calmly waiting for the explosion to subside. Instead of subsiding it waxed more fast and furious, until at last, caught up as in a maelstrom, Sammy spun 'round and 'round, sobbing, shouting, shaking, a poor bit of humanity at the mercy of a great elemental force which he had not learned to control.

From some hidden recess of his mind sprung the vision of a hero's escape, as vividly described on the film of some seemingly-forgotten "movie." It acted as a stimulus. He grabbed up his father's clasp-knife which happened to lie open on the mantelshelf, waved it melodramatically about his head and, whooping "Revenge! Revenge!" shot bodily from the room. A moment later were heard his heavy steps on the floor above, then his quick descent of the stairs, and last the chug-chug of his motorcycle (a recent gift from Mr. Ronald). Then silence.

Martha folded her arms across her bosom.

"Well, what do you think o' that!"

When Sam senior came in to his noonday dinner he found a red-eyed family. All had been crying save his wife.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired.

It was Martha who answered.

"Sammy thinks he ain't had a square deal, or somethin', here. He's soured on us 'cause he feels his own folks don't appreciate him. He's gone off to seek his fortune, where he won't be up against such a hard lot as us."

She spoke lightly, but there was a look in her eyes that went to big Sam's heart. To banish it he answered jestingly:

"It's a poor time to choose for chucking your job. You're too late for the ball in the place you left, and too early for it in the place you're going to. If I was setting out to change my situation, I wouldn't select two days before Christmas to do it in. I'd wait to see what I'd draw, in the way of presents, and then skip."

The girls and Ma brightened visibly under the influence of "father's" uncharacteristic levity, but Martha's serious mood was not to be so lightly dispelled. She and Sam seemed to have changed places.

"Don't fret, mother!" he tried to comfort her. "Our young man'll think better of it by sundown.

He ain't used to being very far away from his mammy after dark."

"And, father," Francie broke in plaintively, "think of his feeling so, when we got such lovely things for him! We never had such a nice Christmas as this was going to be. Ma's been knitting him a sweater—a beauty! And Cora's hemmed him a silk muffler, and's soon's Miss Claire's money came I sent to Burbank for the best hockey-stick they had in the store!"

"You'll see, your brother'll be back before night, child, like little Bo-peep's sheep your mother used to tell you about. Won't he, mother?" said "easy" Sam.

Martha nodded. She did not think it necessary to explain before them all that she had discovered the boy's bank (holding his precious savings) broken open, emptied; his hooks in the closet, his drawer in the dresser, bare. He might be back before dark, as his father foretold, but the way things pointed it certainly didn't look like it. She went about her work less buoyantly than usual, trying to make up for her inner lack of gusto by an added air of outward energy.

"If he don't show up by dark I'll go an' fetch'm back myself," she told her heart as, behind locked doors, she made the living-room gay with Christ-

mas decorations and spread the wonderful table that was to hold the gifts their newly-acquired prosperity made possible, that to her eyes looked a princely array.

Evening came and no Sammy. She thought of her "little fella" out in the cold and the dark, alone. Or worse than alone, in the company, perhaps, of those who might "lead him astray."

For the first time in his experience big Sam saw "mother" exhibit signs of nervousness. The sight stiffened his lips into a line of uncharacteristic severity.

"No, I won't go out after him, and neither will you, Martha," he declared with new-born decision. "Sammy's got to have a lesson. He needs to learn a thing or two. You womenfolks are too soft to deal with him. He knows he can wind you 'round his little finger. Let him get what's coming to him once, and he'll be the better for it all the rest of his life."

Martha's broad chest fell on a long-drawn breath.

"I don't know what's struck'm lately to get such a grouch. Nothin' nobody does'd please'm. His temper's as crooked as a dog's hind leg. His face was so red this mornin' you coulda lit your pipe at it."

"And yet you have 'the faith to believe,' as they say up here, there's the making of an angel in him?" Sam mocked with gentle irony.

Martha swallowed the jibe unresentfully. "I have the faith to believe there's the *making of* an angel in all of us"—she rejoined. "But that ain't sayin' we look like our pattren when we get through. God knows I'd make a poor show 'longside o' the lop-sidedest angel ever flapped a wing. But I know, the way I feel inside me sometimes, that if I measured up as I'd oughta, you wouldn't have so much difficulty reco'nizin' the model, as you do now. The thing gets *me,* is thinkin' it'd be easier for the young 'uns to show what they're made of, if their mother wasn't such a kinda miscut. I tell you what it is, Sam, Christmas is a sorta tough time for mothers, if they stop to think about it. I mean the way there's only been one of us ain't fell down on her job since the world began."

"I wish I had that young man here," remarked big Sam irrelevantly. "I mean Sammy, of course."

"You wouldn't make anything by lickin' 'm, Sam," pleaded the mother. "The little fella means all right, 'way back in his heart."

"I'd like what he means 'way back in his heart

to come out and show once," said big Sam grimly.

"There's worse than him, even so. And . . ." Martha's breath came hard. "And anyhow, I wanta know I have'm safe home."

She took a step toward the door.

"Stay where you are, Martha."

"Sam . . . it's nine o'clock!"

"And if it was ten . . . or twelve!"

"Sam . . . it's . . . *Christmas!*"

She waited a moment, looking to see him yield to this strongest plea of all. He stood firm. It was she who yielded.

It was well on toward noon when Sammy's wheel flashed up the hill beyond Milby's Corners. The intervening space he had passed in moody solitude, hidden away in a refuge of his own discovering, where he sometimes went when the barn-loft haunt was inaccessible. The black pall that enveloped him had lifted ever so little under the influence of the crisp air and flashing sunlight.

He had left the house without any definite intention beyond making his escape from detestable conditions, plunging "the whole darn push," as it deserved to be plunged, into depths of remorse on his account. But gradually the sharp, resisting

current his speed created, began to stiffen his muscles. He felt his jaws congeal. He tried to sound a self-assuring whistle and failed, his chin seemed to have solidified. He dismounted.

"Maybe it'd warm me up to walk!" he argued with himself.

It was only then he noticed the unfamiliarity of the road, the absence of any landmark he could by any possible chance recognize. He had no idea where he wanted to go, but that was not to say he relished having no idea where he was.

Pushing, tugging his heavy machine up the rest of the hill set the blood to racing through his veins. He began to feel less desperate. Life took on a more cheerful aspect. It was no longer inevitable that he become a solitary wanderer over the face of the earth, forever banished from the land of his birth. He had had vague notions of Australia as a likely refuge for a man misunderstood, undervalued. Now it occurred to him that possibly California might be far enough away. In any case, there was no reason he knew of why he shouldn't pause to take breath when he came to the top of the hill.

Evidently the same sort of reasoning had moved, or more literally halted, someone else.

A horse and empty buggy were drawn up at

the side of the road. The horse was untethered, a blanket had been thrown across his back. Sammy drew his own conclusions, smiling to himself with proud complacence at his power of deduction. He stood and waited confidently for the owner of the "rig" to appear. He had not long to wait. From the other side of the stone wall a hearty voice hailed him.

"Hullo there!"

"Hullo yourself!"

Sammy wheeled about to face Mr. Woodruff. . . . Mr. Woodruff, genial, smiling, loaded down with spruce and hemlock boughs.

"Good work!" exclaimed the choirmaster. "glad to see you! I was just wondering how I'd get this over without spilling it. Lend a hand, will you?"

Not a syllable about past misdemeanors. Not a hint to recall the late unpleasantness.

His wheel propped against a nearby boulder, Sammy sprang to the rescue. For an hour and more he and Mr. Woodruff worked like beavers.

"The people up here have no idea what our Christmas song-service is going to be like, have they? I suggested to some of the fellows to help me gather greens, but I could see they weren't very keen about it, so I started out to do it alone."

"One buggyful won't make much of a show," Sammy pronounced authoritatively.

"Right you are. But my purpose is to come back again and again, through the afternoon and to-morrow if necessary. Your mother promised she'd help decorate the church . . . she and your father and the girls. Mr. Ronald told me, before he went away, that I could always depend on your mother. He said she was a brick."

"She is!" The words were out before Sammy had time to think.

"Your father's busy to-day, else he would be helping now. The horses are in use on the farm somewhere. But I'm to have them to-morrow, he's promised me. And, many hands make light work. I don't expect to be short on holly and hemlock. What troubles me is that I haven't enough fellows to climb ladders and tie garlands . . . not enough little angels to sit up aloft and do the overhead decorating."

"I'll help," said Sammy.

It could make no vital difference if he deferred his journey for a day. Besides it would be "sort of mean" to leave Mr. Woodruff in the lurch at the last minute, with no one to get away with the solo parts in "Silent Night, Holy Night!",

"When Shepherds Watched Their Flocks," and all the rest of it.

He could see the little Gothic church as it would appear if Mr. Woodruff took St. Vincent's "down home" as a model.

The aisles would be arched over with spruce and hemlock boughs. The pillars would be wreathed with garlands of green. From their capitals but one or two electric lights would peep, through the screening foliage, like real stars. The place would be dim, fragrant, mysterious; the air full of rich, harmonious echoes from out of the great hidden organ flanking the choir. Then, into the soft, melodious gloom would come the choristers, each with a tall lit candle in his hand, so that, as the singing band progressed, it was with light as well as song, until at last the chancel would be a blaze of glory, resounding with praise.

Clearly, it would never do to miss this!

When his craft was loaded to the gunwales Mr. Woodruff turned a grateful face toward young Sam.

"I don't know what I should have done without you!"

Sammy grimaced, awkward with pleasure.

"You won't fail to show up to-morrow for rehearsal—it's the last, you know."

"Oh, no, sir, I won't forget!"

"You see, I depend on you, Slawson, to help me with my job here. These fellows are new to the business. They don't understand the duties of a church-singer. A choir's like a regiment, in a way. There's got to be order and obedience. There's got to be one at the head to keep discipline. You could make things about half again as easy for me, if you'd act as my aide. Will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your hand on it!"

The two clasped in silence. The next moment Mr. Woodruff had scrambled to his seat in the buggy, making a place for himself, somehow, in and among the branches with which the carriage was crammed. He paused before starting the horse.

"Coming my way?"

Sammy's hand was on his wheel. "No, sir! That is, I . . . I . . ." His soul was in a state of conflict. He could not proceed.

He stood looking after the buggy until it became a mere speck at the far turn of the road, 'way at the bottom of the hill.

He had pledged his word to stand by the choirmaster. He'd have to go back in the end. But

he couldn't do it yet. Not yet. He mounted his wheel with a leap and dashed forward in the direction of Burbank, twenty-five miles away What was that Mr. Woodruff had said this morning about Christmas not being a day, or a season? What did he mean by "an attitude of heart"? He had told the boys Christmas was a *feeling*. . . . Young Sam raised his voice and sent a wild whoop echoing out into space. Could it be possible that the heart inside him was beginning to celebrate?

Ten! Eleven! Midnight!

Big Sam dared not glance at Martha. He had grown to dread the look on her face. Well, if she was going to take it this way. . . . He rose to consult the clock, though it had just struck twelve.

"I wouldn't 'a' thought so much about it, but he had your clasp-knife. An' he was in the sorta blind rage you wouldn't know what he'd do with it," Martha let fall, unconsciously speaking her thoughts aloud.

"Hush!" cautioned big Sam suddenly.

"What is it?"

"The gate. I heard someone at the gate."

"He couldn't get in unless you went out an' unlocked for'm."

Martha's voice vibrated curiously, giving her

words the sound less of a statement than of an appeal.

"If he wants to come in, he'll have to ring or . . . skin through the hedge," said Sam.

Again they waited in silence, as they had been doing most of the night, ever since the girls and Ma had gone to bed.

They waited so long, in fact, that at last Martha shook her head.

"I guess we're stung. It wasn't him at all."

The next moment was heard a footstep on the porch.

Big Sam went to the door and swung it wide. The words on his lips were ready to utter, but they remained unspoken.

How could one demand of a haggard, travel-worn waif, out of whose grimy face shone two eyes luminous with a sort of ecstatic rapture, . . . "Well, young fellow, what have you got to say for yourself? This is a pretty time of night! . . ."

Big Sam tried to speak. The syllables slipped away into the Land of Unspoken Folly, and he never regretted them. He just stood and held the door wide, as if he were welcoming his son in out of the night.

Martha appeared in the kitchen doorway, the

lamp held high above her head. Somehow it flashed across young Sam's brain that she looked like the big statue on Bedloe's Island, "down home" . . . Liberty Enlightening the World.

"I been to Burbank," he confessed readily. "It was late when I got there. . . . I stopped on the way to help Mr. Woodruff cut trees for the church . . . and when I got there, I didn't think what I was about until . . . till . . . the places began to shut up."

"What places?" asked Sam senior mildly, with a cadence none but Martha would have interpreted as piteous.

"Why, the stores. Where I was. When I saw they was all shutting up, I thought I'd better be getting back. Only, I'd forgot the gasoline for my wheel and . . . 'bout halfway home it give out. . . ."

"And you walked the rest of the way home . . . on your two feet? Twelve miles through the night . . . and you never out after dark in the country before?"

A touch of awe mingled with the pride and reproach in Martha's voice.

Sam turned to his boy. "Here, son, sit down to your supper."

There was that in their speech to the lad that

made eloquent dialogue between husband and wife.

For answer, Sammy darted out from under his father's hand. He was gone but a couple of minutes. When he returned he had his wheel with him. Strapped to it, at every conceivable and inconceivable point, were packages, big, little, and medium-sized.

"For the love o' Mike!" gasped Martha.

Sammy bent to the task of untying the cords, trying to appear manly and unconcerned. His fingers trembled with eagerness.

Several times big Sam besought him to take his supper, but there was no room in the boy's large ecstasy for so petty an act as eating.

Again and again, as he displayed his treasures, Martha shot a look at her man, a look that really was a searchlight thrown out to illuminate his dull apperception. And all the while Sammy was exulting:

"Looka that! The best they had in the store! D'you think Cora'll like *that?*" or, "See this! Ain't it a daisy? Cost two dollars and a half! What do you s'pose Francie'll say when she knows it's for her?" . . . all the while the same searchlight pointed its index-finger back, to underscore a mother's faith in the unseen spirit of good

that lay concealed in the poor little turbulent soul of her boy.

"But say," Martha laid a detaining hand on Sammy's shoulder. "Say, if you spent so much on your sisters an' . . . the rest of us . . . where does your Christmas come in? What did you get yourself?"

Sammy looked up, the same new-born, unfamiliar, inscrutable light in his eyes.

"I didn't think about myself," he said joyously.

CHAPTER V

THE LADY OF THE HOUSE

AS the door closed on Cora's departing figure Martha looked at her husband, a quizzical glint in her eye.

"It's a poor family can't support one lady!" she observed laconically.

Sam shook his head.

"You may think it's a joke," he took her up with unrelaxed gravity, "but I don't see where the laugh comes in. In this life you get things on your plate that you've got to swallow, but it's rubbing it in to expect you'd smack your lips over them."

Martha's gaze rested on her man with large maternal indulgence. "Doncher care, Sam!" she said, as if she were soothing an injured child.

His grievance resisted such easy placating.

"You may relish it, but *I* don't," he continued, "having a girl who considers herself above her folks. Cora's not content unless she's trying to copy her betters."

For a long moment Martha was silent, obviously occupied with the task of making a point clear to herself, in order that she might make it clear to Sam.

"There's no harm trying to copy your betters," she elucidated at length, "the great thing's findin' out who really *is* your betters. Cora's got aholt o' the wrong end o' the stick. That's where her trouble comes in."

Sam weighed her words. "Well, you'll bear me out, it was never with my approval she went to Mrs. Sherman in the first place. If it had been Miss Claire now—(Mrs. Ronald, I should say) it would have been different. Miss Claire's a lady from the ground up. But Mrs. Sherman—with all her money, Mrs. Sherman's——" Sam's headshake filled in the ellipsis with eloquence.

"Those few weeks Cora went over to the big house, when Eugenie had tonsillitis, did more mischief than we can undo in years. Sitting sewing in her room, doing her hair, and all the rest of it, a girl gets kind of intimate with her lady, and I could see from the way Cora acted when she got home Mrs. Sherman was getting in her fine work, all right."

"It ain't fair to lay all the blame on Mrs. Sherman," Martha corrected him, in the cause

of strict justice. "Cora's been what you might call a high-stepper ever since she was born. The best wasn't too good for her. She always had notions above her station, about dress an' livin' an' suchlike. But I never worried my head much. 'Because,' thinks I, 'give her time, an' age'll bring her sense.'"

"I wish it was doing it," lamented Sam.

Martha smiled. "Doncher get downhearted, Sam. Nineteen ain't as old as it might be, even so."

"I know, but, by the same token, nineteen ain't so young as it might be, either. I tell you what it is, when Cora gets married I pity her husband!"

Martha's chin went up with a jerk.

"The way you men hang together's a caution! Here are you now, wastin' your sympathy on Cora's husband, when she's a whole houseful of women-relations right in the same house with her. Besides, for all you know, she'll never have a husband."

"A good-looking, strapping girl like Cora?"

"Well, as far as I can see, her followers ain't wearin' the doorsill down—not to any great extent."

Sam removed his pipe from between his lips

long enough to suggest: "There's Theron Cowles."

"I'd forgot Theron Cowles."

"He's a good boy, solid and steady. I hope he won't get out of the notion of Cora while she's down with her Uncle Dennis in New York, gallivanting about with the Cheap-Johns her Aunt Sarah'll pick out for her. Sarah was always a great hand at match-making. And all her matches turn out . . ."

"Punk," supplied Martha.

"Theron is nobody's fool," Sam continued. "I've watched him and I know. We'd be lucky to have such a fine chap marry our girl. But with the notions she's got, she'll look higher."

"To a stovepipe hat, you mean? Well, Cora's not the first'll have gone through the woods with her nose in the air, only to pick up with a crooked stick in the end," an observation which did not have as soothing an effect upon Sam's perturbed spirit as might have been expected.

As the days went by Martha found her thoughts reverting to what her husband had laid before her. The idea of Cora's being "too big for her boots" was no novel one to her. Its application to the girl's own future was.

"It's easy enough for a mother put up with her

children's figaries, so long's she's the only one gets stung. It's when they bounce back onto the kids 'mselves the mothers feel like lettin' out a groan. I don't mind Cora's little airs an' graces. She likes pretty things an' high-toned folks an' stylish ways o' livin'. An' if that's her taste, her taste it is. I'm the last one to say a word against'm, for I like'm myself. They're good in their way, but they ain't the best. It's the best I want for my girl."

It was obvious from the tone of her letters that Cora thought she was getting "the best" in New York. Uncle Dennis had a house of his own. She dwelt at length on the way Uncle Dennis's house was furnished; the way Aunt Sarah shopped for the girls; the way the girls "went to everything" and had crowds of beaus. "Elegant fellows . . . perfect gentlemen. I wish you could see their clothes!" Aunt Sarah kept servants. Aunt Sarah changed her dress every afternoon: the girls called it "dressing for dinner." Uncle Dennis was never allowed to sit at table in his shirtsleeves, "like father does." They danced evenings to the Victrola. It was an elegant Victrola. It had cost three hundred dollars. Uncle Dennis was terribly well off. Why hadn't father gone into the contracting, the same as Uncle

Dennis? Aunt Sarah said if a man had any gimp, and got in right with the ward, there was no end to the money he could make. Several of the girls' "gentlemen friends" were, apparently, "in with the ward." . . . The girls liked some of Cora's clothes. The ores Mrs. Sherman had given her, and her mother had made over for her. The rest they thought "country" . . . "Uncle Dennis says it's too bad father has had to go to the backwoods to live. Uncle Dennis says a man has no chance to advance himself in the backwoods. He just ends up where he began, like any stick-in-the-mud. Aunt Sarah says she guesses mother likes the country better than the city. It's more mother's style. It kind of made me mad when Aunt Sarah said that. I don't s'pose she meant anything by it, but it sounded real mean."

"Mean?" commented Martha. "Sure it ain't mean. It's just—Sarah."

For some time Sam listened to the reading of Cora's letters in thoughtful silence. Then he struck.

"Say, mother, I've had about as much of this as I'm going to stand. You tell Cora to come down off her high horse. Tell her she might thank her stars if she was half as good-looking, or half as smart, or half as anything else as you.

You tell her I say so. Let her put that in her pipe and smoke it."

"Why, Sam," said Martha "ain't you touchy!"

"The cheek of her!" Sam exploded with uncharacteristic heat. "To think she can hand her mother out tips. She, that can't hold a candle to you, nor ever could, if she only had the sense to see it."

Martha shook a tolerant head.

"Leave her be. Doncher fash yourself over her, father. Cora's eating her white bread now. She'll come to the hard crusts soon enough. If, when her time comes, she don't break a tooth, gnawin' on'm, I won't say a word."

And so the letters, with their undercurrent of easy patronage, clumsy side-thrusts, and unconscious revelations of Cora's sense of superiority, continued to come, and though they "riled" Sam more and more, Martha read them without the slightest trace of discomfiture.

Up to this time, Francie had always attended the neighborhood gatherings as under Cora's wing, secure in the knowledge of her sister's capacity to cope with circumstances, satisfied to shine in her reflected glory. When the elder girl went away Francie, feeling the ground cut from

under her feet, tried to evade whatever "doings" she was asked to attend.

"Thank you ever so much, but . . ." she started to decline. Martha cut her short.

"Sure she'll go. Of course you'll go, Francie. She's kinda timid without her sister, but that's all notions, an' she'll soon get over her shyness, if she sails right in an' goes where she's invited."

Alone, Martha admonished her seriously.

"You can't be a little old woman before your time. What's the matter with you to be such a 'fraid-cat? You're as good as the next one. All you have to do is lift your head and speak up like a lady when you're spoken to, an' you'll get along fine as silk. Besides, I want you to go for me. I'd have nothin' to amuse me, if it wasn't for you girls goin' out sometimes, an' comin' home an' tellin' me about it."

So Francie went, and after it was discovered that she was a natural-born wall-flower, content to sit quietly in the background while others had the fun, they left her to her own resources, taking it for granted that since she was "dumb" she must be blind also.

"Well, what kinda time did you have?" her mother asked casually, locking up, as she always did, after the last late-comer had been admitted.

Francie paused halfway up the stairs.

"O, very nice," she answered politely, in the tepid tone of indifference.

Martha followed her above without further question. But later, when she was unhooking the party-dress (a service the girls customarily performed for each other), the reticent tongue was loosed.

"Mother . . . I want to tell you something."

"Tell away."

"Do you know . . ."

Pause.

"Do I know . . . what?"

"Do you know, Theron Cowles used to like Cora a lot?"

"Used to? You mean, he don't like her no more?"

"No, not just that. I guess he likes her all right. But . . . I wish she hadn't gone away."

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing much. Only, you see, when Cora's home, Theron goes with her all the time."

Inwardly Martha's eager spirit was chafing at the delay.

"For the love o' Mike!" she mentally ejaculated, "hurry up your horses!" Never an

outward sign did she give of her impatience, however. Just waited for Francie to unbosom herself as she felt moved to do, without the least attempt to prod her.

The next observation was deeply suggestive.

"I don't like Bessie Kirkland very much."

"Why doncher?"

"It's no fair, the way she acts. She goes and takes other girls' fellows away from them."

"Now what do you think o' that!" said Martha.

"Howard Chalmers was terribly fond of Gertrude Clough and . . . and . . . do you know what Bessie did? Somehow she made trouble between them, and now they don't keep company any more. They don't even speak. She took Howard away from Gertrude.

"How'd she 'take' 'm?"

"I don't know."

"Where was Gertrude when she was doin' it?"

"Right here."

"You mean to say Gertrude just stood alongside an' let her beau be grabbed off'n her by another girl an' never lifted a hand?"

"I don't suppose she knew what to do."

"Then she deserves to lose'm!" Martha asseverated.

"But, mother," Francie's tone bordered on the tearful, "isn't it awful for a girl to behave so? To go behind another one's back and—and—be a traitor to her."

Martha did not reply at once. When she did, it was with a careful choosing of words, as if she were deliberately selecting such as would wound the least.

"Yes, it is awful," she admitted slowly. "But it's the sorta thing everybody meets with every once in a while all through life. The only way is, when you're stung, keep a stiff upper lip, an' don't let the poison get inta your system. You can keep it out if you wanta."

"But, mother . . ."

"First or last everybody comes across such people. *I* have, an' your father has, an' . . ."

Francie's face lost none of its gloom.

"Yes, I suppose so," she admitted reluctantly, "but that don't comfort me any. I never thought my life or Cora's was going to be like yours and father's. Your life and father's seem to me so kind of . . . kind of . . . *doleful*"—the word was out at last.

Martha looked up, a curious ghost of her own humorous smile flitting across her face. "O, does it? Well, now, what do you think o' that!

You certaintly have took a rise outa me this time. I never supposed that was the kinda figga we cut, your father an' me. I thought we managed to make as cheerful a show as most. But doncher worry about us, my dear. We ain't no kick comin', either of us. You can ask him an' see."

The light of amusement, now complete, in her mother's eye was utterly lost on the literal Francie.

"I'm not worrying about you," she made haste to explain. "It's . . . it's Cora I'm . . ."

"Worryin' about? What ails Cora?"

"Bessie never liked Howard so much as she liked Theron. Anybody could see that. She just went after Howard because he's better-looking and smarter than John Turner, the one's been keeping company with her ever since they were tiny bits of things, and she knew she had no show with Theron when Cora was around. But now Cora's gone. . . ."

"She's gettin' in her fine work with Theron?"

Francie nodded, relieved that at last the truth was out.

Martha's broad bosom lifted as she breathed it in, as on a deep, long inhalation. She folded her arms across her chest.

"What makes you think Cora'd care? Seems to me Cora's doin' some fancy side-steppin' on her

own account. If she goes off, down to the city, cavortin' about with all sorts o' strange young Lord Tomnoddies, why, I don't see why there's any call to reserve her place with Theron here. She can't occupy two seats at once . . . one at one show and one at another. I ain't no use for parties, 'don't know whether I will or not, but will you please hold a chair for me, in case I might.' An' when you done it, an' made yourself disliked tellin' the crowd you're keepin' it for a friend, they never show up at all, an' you get the name o' bein' a liar along with the shame o' makin' a nuisance o' yourself. That Bessie-one has a perfect right to make hay while the sun shines, so long's Cora left her a free field to do it in."

"Cora didn't know," wailed Francie. "Cora thought Bessie was all right. She thought she was John Turner's girl, and so she is. And she ought to stick to him, oughtn't she? But she likes Theron better. And she knows Theron likes Cora. And Cora . . ."

"What makes you think Cora likes Theron back?"

Francie's eyes grew wide. It was as if it had never entered her head that Cora or anyone else should not "like Theron back."

Martha could have told her, that for the sec-

ond time this evening she had taken "a rise out . her." What she read in those wide, unsuspecting eyes caused her own to fall. When she spoke it was in a peculiarly gentle voice.

"And you'd like to see that your sister's fella's kep' for her, the way she'll have the refusal of'm when she comes home?"

Francie nodded.

For a long time Martha pondered it in silence. When she spoke again, it was in the business-like tone of a lawyer cross-examining a witness.

"You say this Bessie-one would chuck a fella's been sparkin' her on the level ever since she was a youngster? That she gives encouragement to'm when she can't do no better, but the first chance she gets she ups an' tries to get away with a chap belongs to a friend o' hers?"

Again Francie nodded.

"Why, that girl's a born body-snatcher," observed Martha meditatively. "And you think Cora'd really care if she got back an' found her . . . found Theron had changed his mind?"

Francie's answer did not come at once, but when it did it was conclusive.

"I *know* she would."

"How d'you know?"

"She couldn't *help* it."

Martha's only comfort was that the girl did not realize what her admission implied. But there it was. The words had been spoken.

"Why don't *you* step in an' try your hand savin' her fella for your sister?"

With a quick, startled look Francie shrank back, as if to escape the touch of the crude suggestion.

"Never you mind my nonsense," Martha's return to her own matter-of-fact tone was instantaneous, carrying perfect conviction. "Never you mind my nonsense. I was only foolin'. An' now, get a move on, child. It ain't far off midnight. Quick! Undress you an' go to bed. An' doncher fret your heart out over Cora an' her love-affairs. Cora'll have her innings someway, never you fear. Her kind always does. It's . . . it's a different sort o' girl from her gets eternally left, worse luck! Good-night to you!"

Again and again, during the weeks that followed, Francie sighed for her sister's return, unable to endure the thought of all she was missing. The village seemed to have taken on a new lease of life. Never before had there been so many, such various festivities.

The ball was set rolling by big Sam Slawson's inviting all the "young folks" to a moonlight

straw-ride. Followed a barn-dance, a candy-pull, tableaus. There was no end to the list of amusements.

"Mother's starting in to renew her youth, ain't you, mother?" big Sam inquired, his large gaze fixed on his wife half-quizzically, half-questioningly.

"Well, why wouldn't I be renewin' it?" Martha took him up promptly. "It was a perfeckly good youth, wasn't it? A body'd get stale keepin' inside her four walls all the time. It does you good to get a breath o' fresh air sometimes, an' a squint at what's goin' on about you."

"Seems to me you've taken an uncommon fancy to that young Kirkland girl, Jessie, Bessie . . . what'shername? What makes you favor her so much? You had her sitting next to you on the straw-ride. She had the place of honor pouring chocolate at the head of the table, the night of the barn-dance. Won't the other girls get jealous?"

"I guess not," said Martha.

If Cora's visit was not extended, neither was it curtailed. She stayed in the city as long as she had planned to stay, no longer. Sam went to meet her at Burbank Junction with the motor-runabout. He told Martha, before he left home, that he "would apologize to Miss Cora when he

saw her, for not having brought Mrs. Ronald's limousine.

"I'll say I'm sure Mrs. Ronald would have given me the loan of it if she had realized who it was I was going to fetch."

"Doncher, Sam," Martha shook a disapproving head at him. "Doncher start in the first thing to plague her, before she's had a chance to get warm in the place again. No matter if she *is* chesty, she's our own. Doncher let her feel we ain't glad to get her back."

But even without her admonition Sam would have foreborne. Unobserving of minutiæ as he generally was, he saw the instant he set eyes on the girl that some sort of telling change had taken place in her.

"Did you have enough to eat at your uncle's?" he inquired bluntly, while he stood looking in at her over the car door, as he waited for the baggage-man to search out and surrender her trunk.

Cora smiled at the strange question. "Of course I did. Why do you ask?"

"It seems to me you are looking a bit spare."

"I weigh as much as I did when I went to the city."

"Well, if you haven't lost weight, you certainly

haven't put on any flesh. I don't think your mother'll let you go away from home in a hurry, if you come back looking as if you were half-fed."

Sam was unequal to a diagnosis more subtle than this. He continued, following up his first impression:

"Well, I guess you'll be glad to get back to the good home-table, even if they did give you your fill in New York. You can set your mouth for fried liver and bacon for supper. Your mother ordered it special because you like it."

It was dusk when they reached the Lodge, dark and cold and very still. For once in her life Cora was glad her father was not loquacious. The journey home from the junction had been made almost without words on either side. She would be glad to see her mother, of course, but no one on earth could guess how she dreaded her stream of questions, the sharp detective practice of her keen, deep-searching eyes.

The sound of Sam's motor-horn brought Martha to the big gate. In the light from the electric globes surmounting the two granite gate-posts, Cora saw that mother had on her best, Sunday-go-to-meeting dress. What Martha saw was not so superficial.

"Here, Sammy, take your sister's bag, an' stop your shoutin'! Sabina, doncher hang onto Cora like that—you're a great heavy girl now—you ain't a baby no more. Childern, there's too much noise! We're not deaf. Now, Cora, come along in an' warm you. It's chilly ridin'. There's a roarin' fire'll do your heart good. I guess you ain't seen such logs in New York."

So much her mother said before drawing Ma with her into the kitchen beyond, disposing quietly of Sammy and Sabina, and leaving Cora to thaw out in the genial fire-glow with gentle Francie for company.

"What ails her, mother?" asked Sam, puzzled, when hours after the two of them were left in solitude downstairs, the rest having long since gone to bed. 'Mother' was going the rounds, seeing the locks were fast, covering up the embers, making all safe and sound for the night.

"She'll never tell you," returned Martha.

"Will she tell you?"

"P-o'ly not. She'd think I 'wouldn't understand. Cora's a good girl, but as I told you before she thinks she's kinda thrown away on the likes of us. Whatever's happened to her. . . ."

In his eagerness Sam plunged in without giving her a chance to finish her sentence.

"Then you think something *has* happened to her?"

Martha had the intent air of one casting out a long line to bring in a special catch. "O' course somethin's happened to her. Something's all the time happenin' to all of us. Sometimes it happens in a lump, sometimes it happens gradual. That's the only difference. If you really ask me what I think, I truthfully tell you I think Cora's got it in the lump—an' it's caught her right in the neck, as the sayin' is. An' if you ask me why I think so, I'll tell you because she has the look of it. She looks like she'd had to come off'n her perch too sorta suddent-like for comfort or neatness. She looks like she got a hard swat, missed her footin', an' slipped up in a mud-puddle. It'll take her a while to feel free of the spatters and tidied up, fresh and starchy, same as she was before. It goes hard with the youngsters the first time they get thrown down. By-an'-bye, as we grow older, we don't mind so much. We either break the shock plasterin' ourselves up with soft-soap, or we get callous-like an' don't feel the bruise. Cora's got all she can do to keep her chin up, I can see that. We got to be pationate with her for a while. The worst you could make one like Cora suffer'd be if you took down her pride."

"But it's just that that would do her good," Sam contended.

Martha shook her head.

"It all depends. People are like dress-goods. If you're A1 mater'al to begin with, you won't show thin while there's a thread of you left. Your color'll hold, an' your quality'll last, no matter how much wear an' tear you've had. But shoddy goods! It wouldn't pay you to try to get the spots out. You'd only make a worse botch of it. Cora's always wanted to be a fine lady. Now she's got the chance of her life to prove, is she the genu-*ine* article or only a poor imitation?"

"When Theron blew in to supper, I thought she'd be pleased. But if she was, she didn't show it. I think Theron felt strange. I think that was the reason he left so early."

Martha's response bewildered her husband.

"You can take it from me, Sam Slawson, it's goin' to pay you not to 'think' too much, where the young folks's concerned. Just you content yourself attendin' strickly to your own business, which, if you do it good an' thora, is enough to take up all of anyone's time an' attention. You leave the young folks be, like I'm goin' to."

"Why, you . . . *you!* . . ." Sam found it difficult to express his surprise at her effrontery.

. . . "You're the one that's been running the whole young folks's shebang lately. They think they can't get on unless Mrs. Slawson is paddling their canoe for them. I tell you, it's a caution, the way you've come out!"

"An' now it'll be another caution, the way I'll go in," said Martha. "You keep your eye on me, an' you'll see me fade away, same as the vanishin' lady at the vaudeville show. I'm done with my stunt, an' now it's me for the simple life again."

"Your *stunt?*" queried Sam.

"Come along up. It's late," said Martha. "Time little boys was abed an' asleep."

Nothing that Cora said or did during the months that followed tended to throw the least light on her particular situation, as her mother had roughly sketched it. She spoke in a general way of having had a good time, answered all Ma's questions with what seemed like perfect candor, and if she did not volunteer any information beyond, neither did she have the appearance of holding anything back. And yet, Martha knew she was holding something back.

Once or twice Francie strove to express herself confidentially to her mother, vaguely conceiving that she was under bond to account for

her sister's singular behavior to Theron, in the light of the preference she herself had claimed Cora entertained for him.

"Never you mind about that," Martha reassured her. "I don't doubt your word she likes'm or, leastwise, did like'm. Girls get notions sometimes. She may have changed her mind. You never can tell. If Theron cares about her enough he won't let go. He'll hang on till he finds out for sure, and if he don't hang on, why, that'll prove he don't care enough—an' there you are! It ain't our funer'l, anyhow."

Nor did it prove Cora's and Theron's funeral.

They were married the following Autumn. It was a "grand" wedding. Personally conducted by Mrs. Ronald, generously financed by her husband—Martha's beloved "Mr. Frank."

"It's a caution the way we have the elegant weddin's in our fam'ly," Mrs. Slawson mused, in the first quiet moment following the bridal couple's departure after the ceremony.

"First, there was mother's an' father's. You've heard me tell how Mrs. Underwood give mother a layout you wouldn't see matched in a day's travel. An' then, there was mother's again, the second time she was married, after father

died—to Ryan. An' then there was yours an' mine, Sam, that Miss Frances. . . ."

"Do you call ours 'grand'?" Sam ventured mildly.

Martha threw a look at him. "I do that! Not the same kinda grand as Cora's, maybe, but grand the way I liked it. Walkin' up the church-aisle, togged up in a white dress with a fool tail . . . I should say a tool veil . . . is just Cora's style. It ain't mine. We gener'ly get what's comin' to us."

"Do you think," Sam brought it out only after considerable effort, "Do you think her heart is set on him, Martha? That's the only thing worries me. I'm not dead sure Cora is as fond of Theron as he is of her."

To his surprise Martha did not "sit down on him."

"If she is, or if she isn't, it's not for me to say. Cora is a close-mouthed one. You'd never know what's goin' on in her mind, much less in her heart. If Theron is satisfied, that's all we have to do with it. One thing, you can take it from me . . . Cora won't have played him any low-down trick. She won't have let'm go it blind."

"But you'd think, even if a girl was naturally

close-mouthed, she'd let out a little . . . to her mother . . . around the time she was going to get married. Don't girls generally talk to their mothers? . . ."

For the first time Sam saw a suspicious moisture suffuse Martha's eyes. A moment, and all was clear again.

"When a girl gets ready to trust her mother, that's the time for the mother to listen. Cora ain't got ready yet. P'raps she never will. Either way about, I ain't complainin'. I can bide my time as long as she can hers."

But the time passed, weeks growing into months, months into a year, and still the girl kept her own counsel.

Once or twice, during the long, tedious period of suspense, when the two sat together in Cora's pretty living-room, stitching away patiently at the tiny garments that were to cover the scrap of humanity the whole world seemed at a standstill, waiting breathlessly to welcome, Martha's covertly watching eyes caught a look in Cora's face that went to her heart.

"It's the mother in her waking up."

Then, early one evening, toward the end, came the hour Martha had been looking for.

"Mother," said Cora, drawing her chair very

close to the other's, so their knees fairly touched, as they sat facing each other . . . "Mother, there's something I'd like to say to you before . . . before . . . while I have time."

"Say away," encouraged Martha without looking up, appearing to fix all her attention on the corner she was turning.

"Isn't it funny how you can have got your growth, and be as tall as you ever will be . . . and yet, not be grown-up at all?"

"Sure."

"When I went to New York I was an awful kid."

Martha stroked her seam down carefully with her needle-point, and waited.

"And it's just as funny how folks that seem like what you are yourself . . . I mean, they look like you, and walk and talk and breathe like you, and eat just the same . . . they're no more like you, really, than . . . than if they were out of another country . . . no, not even that! Born on another world."

"Certaintly."

"I know we're awfully plain folks . . . our family. I never could bear to give in to it when I was . . . *home* . . . But now I don't care. It used to make me mad as hops the way I never

could make us anything different. I'd want to scream sometimes . . . seeing father sit down to table in his shirtsleeves, when Mr. Ronald wouldn't do it for all the world. I hated Ma's brogue, and the children's noisy ways and . . ."

"My clackin' away bad grammar to beat the band," supplied Martha with perfect equanimity.

"But there was one thing I always knew. I always knew I could *count on* my folks. We're square. We mean to do the fair thing by other folks. You could trust us. Till I went to New York I never knew everybody wasn't like that. I took it for granted they were our own kind."

Martha stitched away with unflagging industry.

"Lots is," she brought out cheerfully.

Cora's hand upon her knee trembled visibly. She shook her head.

"Lots aren't." Then, after a moment, she followed it up, still more lucidly, with amplification.

"Uncle Dennis and Aunt Sarah aren't. Nor the girls. They're just as different from anything I ever dreamed of, as . . . as . . . They had me down there. They gave me my food and drink. I don't want to say anything against them."

"That's right," said Martha.

"I used to think Ma lived with us because father was her favorite. But . . . but . . . did you know Ma's always lived with us because . . . *none of the rest would have her?* They don't *want* her! Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Seems to me, now you speak of it, I have heard o' such a thing," admitted her mother.

Cora's muscles were tense with suppressed feeling. She gazed into Martha's face, watching for the sudden shock of surprise she was sure must follow her awful revelation. When it did not come the girl leaped to the conclusion she had not made her meaning clear. . . .

"Not want . . . their own mother!" she insisted.

Martha reared a proud head.

"Ma don't need to look to nobody for the sup an' the bite she puts in her mouth. She's a home of her own as good as the best of them . . . if it ain't so stylish as some. She's no call to say 'thank you' to nobody for what they wouldn't be glad to give her . . . an' I'd tell'm so to their faces."

For a long unhurried minute the two sat in silence. Then Cora took up her thread again.

"When I first went down there, I thought it was all perfectly elegant. It seemed wonderful

to have your own relations living like that, in a whole house, with servants and a player-piano and . . . everything. The girls are terribly stylish. The fellows that come to the house . . . you'd never know them from Mr. Ronald, by the looks of their clothes. First-off, I thought they were really like him . . . I mean, grand and rich and . . . refined."

Martha nodded her complete understanding of the mistake.

"There was one . . . the stylishest of all . . . he was fearfully good-looking. Uncle said he had a 'fat city job' and 'loads of luck coming to him.' He was nicer to me than anybody ever was before. He was different from anybody I'd ever known before. He sent me flowers, and candy . . . and *books*. You'd think the clothes he wore were right out of the store—never a spot or a sign of wear on them . . . and a straight crease right down the front of the pants . . . just like Mr. Frank's. His hands were nice, too . . . and his nails. He kept reminding me of Mr. Ronald all the time—in his looks and his ways and everything he did. I guess that was what started me liking him. I did like him . . . a whole lot. At first I couldn't believe he liked me back . . . it was too much luck . . . but when

Uncle and Aunt and the girls began teasing me, I . . . I let myself go and just was happy and proud and . . . *grateful.* I thought I was going to have the things I'd always dreamed about . . . a handsome husband with lots of money, so I could be like Miss Claire is . . . and live in the city and see all that's going on, and be able to do for my folks. I'll never forget the way I felt. It was as if I'd got into fairyland and found my prince, for fair. I thought of . . . the fellows up here . . . and they couldn't hold a candle to him. I called them ' clumsy hayseeds ' in my mind."

" Did the fella come to time? " Martha asked the question as if it were quite immaterial whether he did or not.

Cora nodded a mute affirmative. Evidently there was something tongue-tying in the admission. It took her a while to recover her speech.

" Everything went right for a month or so, and then . . . well, I wouldn't have married him after what I found out, if he'd been the President himself, all covered with gold. He told me to ' come down off my perch.' He said I had ' hi-falutin notions,' and when Uncle found out he sided with the . . . fellow. He called me a chump and said, right before everybody, that I could thank my stars for a chance like I had, to

marry somebody with enough sense to come in when it rained. He said you couldn't be 'too d—— particular' in this world, and I'd better show some sense and not be such a fussy young fool. I wanted terribly much to look at it their way, because I'd thought such a lot of the fellow. But somehow I couldn't. I could only see it the way . . . you and father would have seen it."

"Was it then you come home?" asked Martha.

"No. I stayed my time out because you'd have thought strange if I'd left earlier than I meant to, and I was afraid to face a lot of questions. I was as sick and sore as if I'd been beaten. There wasn't a bit of my flesh that didn't ache so, you'd think I couldn't bear it. I'd liked him such a lot . . . and he was so awful! Somehow the shame of what he was seemed to smutch me. I thought I couldn't be very nice myself if I'd liked the kind he was."

"You didn't like the kind he was," corrected Martha. "You liked the kind you *thought* he was. That's about as far as any of us gets."

"Then I didn't want to come home before I had to, because . . . there was Theron. I just couldn't face him when I knew the way I'd treated him in my heart. I'd gone back on him. I'd set

the other one over him . . . and the other wasn't fit to black his boots! When Gertrude wrote me that Bessie was trying her arts on Theron I'd thought: 'Let her. She's welcome to him. I've better down here.' How could I expect Theron to be true to me when I . . .? Don't you see how it was?"

"But Theron was true to you." Martha's voice was magnificently steady.

Cora raised her eyes until they met and fixed her mother's.

"Yes, I know Theron was true to me. And . . . and, what's more, I think I know why."

"Theron's a good boy. One of the best."

"Surely. Nobody knows that better than I do. If he wasn't he wouldn't have told me that he might have gone over to Bessie. He said he did like her some, first-off, and he might have got to liking her more if . . . if he hadn't seen the kind she was. I asked him how he got to see it, and he said he didn't know. But I guess I know. I've put two and two together and the answer is . . . *You*. You never butted in to the young folks' affairs before. It came to me like a flash of lightning one day when I was wondering . . . that you did it to . . . to save my beau for me. It's true. You did it for that, didn't you?"

"Now what do you think o' that!" Martha exclaimed as if to scout the preposterous idea.

Cora shook her head. "You could fool Francie, but you can't fool me. I know what you did. I only don't know how you did it."

She waited for her mother to enlighten her.

"Francie's heart was broke thinkin' Bessie was bewitchin' your fella away from you. So, as Bessie had a perfeckly good beau of her own, an' no business meddlin' with other girls' followers anyhow, I just . . ."

"What?"

"Kinda kep' her occupied alongside me, where she'd be harmless to the unsuspectin', an' Satan couldn't find some mischief still—or noisy either . . . for her idle hands to do. First-off I thought I'd *sic* Francie on Theron. But then I thought 'No! Francie ain't got much gimp. She's a shy little thing.' An' second, if it so happened she'd make a hit with'm, why, there you'd be as bad off as ever . . . an' he was yours to begin with. So, the only thing left was just sail in an' take a turn at'm myself. I was pretty clumsy at first. It's a long time since I was a girl, an' had followers o' my own, an' my hand's kinda out. But, as I went on, it all sorta come back to me gradual, and you'd be surprised how good we got along."

"Theron can't get over it, how much he likes you. Theron thinks you're wonderful. He told me right off, he was terribly gone on you. I'd better make up my mind to that. I told him I was willing. He couldn't like my mother too much to suit me."

Martha bowed ceremoniously.

"'Thank you, thank you, sir,' she sayed. 'Your kindness I never shall forget!' All the same mother isn't goin' to take any chances. Wives get funny notions sometimes. There's nothin' queerer than a wife . . . exceptin' a husband."

"Theron never held it against me for a minute . . . what I told him about New York."

"So you did tell him? . . . I was wonderin' . . ."

"Why, of course I told him. Wouldn't you have?"

Martha gave the question time to sink in.

"Me? Well, no. I don't s'pose I would. But I'm glad *you* did."

"So am I."

"Well, now you got him, see you keep him, an' don't you give him away."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean this . . ." said Martha . . . "You

were speakin' a while ago about likin' the kinda fella that one down home . . . I mean, in the city . . . was. I told you you didn't like the thing he was. You liked the thing you thought he was. That rule works both ways. We all like the ones we do like, not for what they are, but for what we think they are. Theron thinks you're the greatest ever. It's up to you to keep him thinkin' it . . . To *be* it. You always wanted to be a fine lady. Now's your chance to make good. We can all be what we want to, if we want to hard enough."

Dreamily Cora watched her mother fold up the square of flannel she had been exquisitely faggoting, take off her thimble and drop it in her workbag.

"It's time I was gettin' home. They won't know what's got into me, stayin' out so late," said Martha.

"It's my fault," Cora confessed. "I've kept you. I've unloaded my troubles on you. I always did. Everybody always does. I . . . I . . ." the difficult words fairly choked her, but she brought them out gallantly, one by one, until her penance was complete . . . "I've been a naughty girl to you. A troublesome, bad daughter. Will . . . will you forgive me?"

Martha gathered up the square of flannel and placed it in Cora's lap.

"You'll find a mother don't 'forgive,'" she answered soberly, "she just . . . understands."

After many days it came, the hour of mortal struggle.

Martha, holding the torch high, saw her girl pass down to the very brink of the Valley of the Shadow . . . saw and suffered and conquered.

"Doncher want to kiss your little son?"

Cora's heavy lids lifted. Her eyes met Martha's.

"I want to . . . kiss . . . my mother . . . first."

CHAPTER VI

THE SILVER BRIDE

THE sound had been repeated twice before Martha, busy upstairs, was convinced that someone actually was knocking.

"You'd be runnin' your feet off, if you answered the door every time you thought you heard a rap. What with the furniture warpin', this hot weather, lettin' out reports like the crack o' doom, an' acorns fallin' on the roof, there's no end to the false alarms," she told herself as she made her way downstairs.

The kitchen floor reverberated beneath her solid tread. She crossed it and laid her hand on the latch of the screen-door.

"For the love o' Mike!" came in a gasp from between her astonished lips.

The man on the porch raised his hat. He did not speak.

"Peter Gilroy!" Martha enunciated.

For once her presence of mind deserted her. She stood motionless, gazing blankly into the face

confronting hers through the wire network of the screen-door.

"Ain't you going to ask me inside?"

The question brought her to herself with a start.

"Sure! Come along in! Sit down! You might as well kill a body as surprise her to death. Whoever'd have thought of seein' you again after . . ."

"Twenty-five years," Gilroy supplied dryly His slow, incisive speech had the effect of italicizing his words. He did not remove his eyes from Martha's face even while, with great deliberation, he lifted his hat, drew a handkerchief from his coat-pocket and passed it over his face and brow. He was minutely conscious of himself, his appear ance, his possessions. He hoped she saw that his hat was a fine Panama, his handkerchief cambric and immaculate, his suit of faultless cut and material.

"Warm, ain't you?" asked Martha, taking in all the details without seeming to see anything.

"Hot!" Gilroy returned succinctly.

"I'll get you a bottle of ginger-ale."

"Never drink it. Have you any milk?"

"Sure . . . but . . ."

"I'll say thank you for a glass of that."

"But milk won't be good for you when you're so 'het-up,' as they say hereabouts."

"There's no harm in a glass of milk. I drink it all the time. I've got what I've got . . . I am where I *am* in the world, just because I've stuck to milk and kept away from liquor."

"But when you're so overheated . . ."

Gilroy shrugged. There was no mistaking his meaning. Without further ado Martha betook herself to the chill-room whence she appeared a moment later with a bottle of ice-cold milk. What time she got a tumbler from the cupboard and set it before her guest she plied him with friendly questions.

"How did you get here from the Junction? . . . Trolley or hack?"

There was decided hauteur in Gilroy's raised eyebrows, the brief pause prefacing his answer.

"Motor . . . I hired one and drove over."

"Then what, in the name o' common sense makes you so hot? It couldn't 'a' been warm motorin' . . ."

"I made the man stop at the bottom of the hill. I wanted to come on up by myself . . . alone. I didn't know the thing they call a *hill* here in any other part they'd call a mountain."

Martha smiled. "No wonder you're dead

beat. You must 'a' had a climb. . . . An' your shover was a chump not to tell you you were takin' your life in your hands mountin' 'Break-neck' in the full heat of the day."

"Now you speak of it, I remember the fellow did say . . ." Gilroy took a deep draught of the rich, frosty cream.

"Sip it! Sip it, man!" warned Martha anxiously.

For answer he drained the glass.

"Say, who's doing this?" he demanded with jaunty insolence.

"The Lord knows I ain't," Martha gave back good-humoredly. "You wouldn't catch me bein' such a fool. But you're the same old Peter. Nobody can tell you nothin'. You know it all, like you always did."

Gilroy poured himself another tumblerful.

"Yes, I'm the same old Peter," he returned, the thin-lipped grimace that passed for a smile curling the corners of his mouth. "The same old Peter. And you? . . . It was a notion I had to see for myself if you were the same old Martha that brought me here."

Again Martha smiled. "Well, now you see me, what do you think?"

He looked her critically over, his sharp eyes

taking in every detail of her neat, plain dress, her clean, wholesome person.

"You've grown heavier," he inventoried, "and your hair has some gray in it, but otherwise . . . I can't see as you've changed much. Of course twenty-five years'd tell on anybody."

"Right you are! It's up to us not give'm the chance to tell anything we wouldn't like repeated. They're welcome to whatever they can *get* on me. I'm the mother o' four childern, the grandmother o' two, an' proud of it! We ain't got much, but what we got's our own. That's my record. I'm contented."

"You're easily satisfied."

Martha allowed the slur to pass, not because she had no retort ready, but because, 'way down in her heart, she was sorry for Peter.

"I used to think, in the old days, you had a lot of ambition."

"You thought right!"

"You never looked like a girl who would take second-best for choice."

"Sure I wouldn't."

Gilroy looked about the room with eyes of shrewd appraisal.

"They give you rather tidy lodgings here, don't they? But I suppose the rent of a little place like

this, so far out in the country, wouldn't mount up to much in the year, would it?"

Martha shook her head. "Dear, no. You could get it for a song."

"And *you* sing the song, I bet!"

"Certaintly I do. If you rec'lect anythin' about me at all, you must remember, I always did have a voice . . . like a *bird!*"

The flush on Gilroy's face faded. A furrow appeared between his brows.

"I can't help thinking it's a shame you are buried in a place like this, where there's no life, no chance to *do* anything. You're too smart a woman to be wasting your days cooped up in the backwoods."

For a fraction of a second Martha's patience was on the point of giving way. She got herself in hand in time to spare him the "tongue-lashin'" he deserved. Peter's hide was certainly thick, but nevertheless she knew if she once set out to do it she could make him wince. She preferred to change the subject.

"I don't need to ask how the world has treated you. You got things all your own way, aintchu? Lots of money and no end of *pull.*"

Gilroy's trim figure, which had sagged somewhat in his chair, braced up with a sudden effort. The

flush upon his face was gone, but beads of moisture still stood out upon his white forehead. He squared his chest.

"So far as money is concerned, and pull, I'm all right . . . a-all *right!*" his voice was bland with self-esteem. "I suppose I'd be called a rich man. God knows I wish I hadn't so much when it comes income-tax time. And as to pull. . . . Well, there're some who think I'm the man to apply to when there are favors to be handed out."

His fingers gripped the arms of Sam's chair with a tension that made the knuckles white.

"Your folks are well an' thrivin'?" Martha asked with exaggerated interest, to cover the fact that she was beginning to feel uneasy about him. "We don't get much New York news up here. Once in a while someone sends us a home paper, or one of the folks writes a letter, but lots goes on we don't know anything about, even so."

"My mother died . . . let's see . . . five years after you married. That's twenty-five years ago. . . ."

"Come Fourth of July," assisted Martha.

"My mother's been dead twenty years. My sister, Mary . . . she that married Sullivan . . . she took typhoid fever and died in hospital . . . I think it was the year they told me your second

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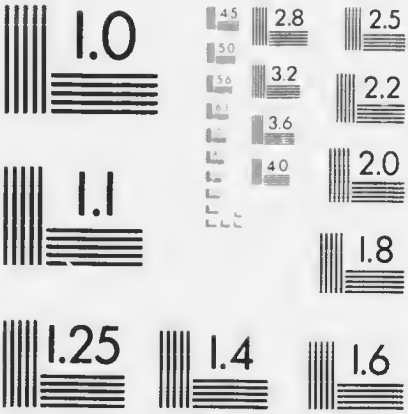

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child was born. Sullivan never treated her right, so when she went I packed him off to Porto Rico. All I know of him now is he don't like the climate. They'd no children, praise be!"

"Didn't you have a brother? . . . Martin? Where's he?"

"Martin was operated on for appendicitis the same year you left New York to come up here. He never came out from the ether. That was . . . that was . . . ten years ago. There's times I feel . . . times I feel . . . I'll go . . . the same way . . . appendicitis."

"Never you fear," Martha reassured him. "You'll prob'ly go o' somethin' quite different . . . not half so stylish."

"Martin had no fam'ly." . . . It took Gilroy a minute or two to bring it out. "He'd been fairly lucky. All he left came to me."

If Martha was impressed she certainly did not show it. Even in the midst of his physical distress Peter had a sensation of distinct disappointment at Martha's failure to rise to the occasion.

"As an old man up here says, 'Them as has got, gits,'" she quoted cheerfully, hastening to add with apparent irrelevance: "Say, you were in luck to find anyone home. I come within an ace o' goin' off with the raft o' them on a all-day picnic

over to what we call 'Cat-Rocks,' fifteen miles away. First-off, I planned to go along, but then I thought it'd give me a good chance to pick up the house, an' do a whole lot o' little things I'm kinda behind with, if I stayed back. So I begged off. The whole fam'ly's went. Sam an' Ma . . . you remember Ma Slawson, doncher? An' the three childern. I call'm childern, though Francie's twenty-two now, an' Sammy's as tall as his father, an' Sabina's got to the age where she thinks about nothin', as I tell her father, but ribbons an' beaus. An' Cora an' her two kids, an' Miss Claire's little Priscilla, an' the Ballard twins. . . ."

Gilroy frowned with the effort to straighten out the ramifications for himself.

"What relation's Miss Claire, and where do the Ballard twins come in?"

Martha laughed. "I don't wonder you ask. We got so used to includin' 'm in the fam'ly, we don't stop to think strangers might get mixed up on it. Miss Claire is Mrs. Ronald, an' her little Priscilla, eight years old, is as much at home over here, to the lodge, as she is at the big house. The Ballard twins belong to Dr. an' Mrs. Ballard, from Boston. The little fellas's five years old, an' as smart as they make'm. The doctor is that proud o' them he can hardly see straight. He's

a terrible swell himself. Folks come to'm from all over the country to be cured, but he never put on any airs, till them two boys o' his come along. If it wasn't for their sensible mother they'd be spoiled for fair, but she keeps'm right up to the mark till they're a credit to her. . . . I say, looka here, Peter, what do you think of a cup o' good, hot ginger-tea? I'm afraid that cold milk ain't sittin' right on your stummick."

She brewed the tea and he gulped it down, but her watchful eye saw no sign of improvement in his condition, and after a pause she spoke again.

"Say, Peter, doncher think I better call in the doctor to take a look at you? If he ain't out on his beat . . . I should say, his rounds . . . I can have'm here in a jiffy. He's a good doctor, Dr. Driggs is; he'll know what to do the minute he claps his eye on you."

By this time Gilroy was too agonized to argue the case, even to suggest, as she knew he would have done ordinarily, that she make "a bargain" beforehand. As it happened she could not have made the bargain in any case, for Dr. Driggs was reported "out." No one knew where he was, no one cared to undertake to say when he would be back.

Martha hung up the receiver, her brows drawn together in an anxious frown.

Peter's groans grew, momently, more and more blood-curdling. Clearly it was a desperate case, needing desperate remedy.

She took down the receiver again and called up Dr. Ballard. What time she waited for a reply she went over in her mind the absurdity of the thing she was doing . . . summoning a renowned specialist, one whose services were obtainable only in cases of exceptional gravity, where expense was no object . . . "for a shriveled-up little tightwad, with a case of colly-wobbles."

"Well, it ain't the first time I made a fool o' myself, an' I guess it won't be the last. Dr. Ballard won't hold it against me, I know that much, an' if he gets Peter straightened out from the double-bow-knot he's tyin' 'mself inta, I won't care if the doctor does think I'm that cheeky you'd say I had the mumps an' then some. . . . Hello! . . . This Dr. Ballard's house? Is he in? . . . Tell'm Mrs. Slawson's on the wire . . . danglin' . . . will you, please?"

A few moments later, Peter, blear-eyed with pain, saw her charging toward him, her face that of a conqueror.

"Say, Peter, quit your howlin' for a minute

while I tell you somethin'. You can take up the howlin' again just where you left off when I'm done, if you wanta. I got Dr. Ballard for you. He's comin' right along an' you can take it from me, if anyone can knock spots outa that pain you got, it's himself. But he says get your clo'es off an' putcher in bed before he comes."

Peter demurred, shivering, moaning.

"Come along now," commanded Martha martially, an urgent hand on his shoulder. "You can lean on me, if you can't walk alone. Or, if you're too far gone for that, even, I'll pick you up an' carry you. But believe *me,* you're goin' inta that room, an' be in that bed accordin' to specifications, by the time the doctor gets here. What he says goes!"

Gilroy's brain, numb with suffering, could still grasp the fact that it was Martha who was speaking. He pulled himself together and followed her, his feet so heavy they scuffed along the floor, his head so light he fairly babbled.

Thus it was that when Sam and the rest came back from their picnic, they found the place turned into a hospital where "mother" presided as chief-nurse, and the great Dr. Ballard, as simply, with as matter-of-course an air as if he were the newest

of young internes, sat beside his patient, watching his symptoms, until the worst was over.

So it was, too, that day after day passed and still Peter stayed on, at first too weak to be moved, then, in his heart, glad that he was a slow convalescent. It was something entirely new in his experience, this being tended by ones not paid for their service. It was something to think about, to muse upon. His keen eyes, trained to pierce through the thin shell of outward appearance, to the inner kernel of things, probed the acts of those about him and discovered nothing but simple sincerity . . . no significant reserves, no sinister undercurrents. He could not comprehend it. It bothered him so he grew testy with everyone, but especially with Dr. Ballard and Martha.

In very blunt fashion he asked Dr. Ballard one day what his bill amounted to.

Dr. Ballard did not answer at once. Gilroy watched him with growing apprehension. Plainly the bill was excessively large, or the doctor's powers of computation correspondingly small. Either way about, Peter trembled for his pocket-book.

"My bill . . .?" Dr. Ballard brought out at length. "Why, it is a little difficult to set a price on a job like this, because it's something quite out of my ordinary line. I'm not a general practi-

tioner, you know. I rarely attend a case nowadays except in consultation. It's on Mrs. Slawson's account I took this. I'm under heavy obligation to her for services rendered me and members of my family. . . . When she asked me to come to you, I came without any thought of compensation. But, since you ask about my bill . . . Let's see, I was here on an average of twice a day, for the first three days. That makes six visits. Six visits at fifty dollars a visit . . ."

Peter gasped. His eyes fairly started out of his head.

"Makes three hundred dollars," continued Dr. Ballard nonchalantly. "Six days more, one visit daily, makes another three hundred. And for the first night . . . I'd have to charge . . . well . . . if I were charging you up for my time according to my regular rates . . . I'd have to charge you for detentions that first night. You recollect, you wouldn't let me go. You said you didn't mind paying my price if I'd only stay and stop the . . . blankety-blank pain. I stayed and I stopped it. I fulfilled my part of the contract. Considering you're a friend of Mrs. Slawson I'll let you off easy. Give me a thousand and we'll call it square."

Gilroy sank back against his pillows, stunned,

quivering, speechless. There was a moment of tense silence.

Dr. Ballard rose and stood beside his patient, looking down at him out of quizzical eyes.

"What you really need, Mr. Gilroy," he observed, "is a strong mental purgative. Your system is clogged up with poisonous stuff you ought to get rid of. Unless you do get rid of it, you'll see yellow in everything to the end of your days."

"What do you mean?" Peter gasped painfully.

"Think it out for yourself. This is a good time to do it in . . .' while you're resting,' as Martha says," and the doctor moved away, leaving a mystified patient behind.

Peter Gilroy had always considered himself particularly astute . . . "as smart as they make 'em." How, otherwise, could he have held the position he had held for so long . . . the position of right-hand-man to Judge Granville, one of the keenest magistrates on the bench to-day. How could he have amassed the tidy little fortune he had amassed, on the comparatively modest salary he officially drew. He knew he had the reputation with "some" of being "tricky." He did not call himself tricky. He was just "up and coming," an entirely different proposition. He was decidedly proud of himself. The idiosyncrasies others

criticised he privately applauded. It was his boast that he never forgot a friend, nor forgave an enemy.

It would have been going too far to say he looked on Martha as an enemy, but certainly he had never forgiven her for "turning him down" in favor of Sam Slawson. He had never understood himself where Martha was concerned, any more than he had ever understood her where he was.

He had met Martha Carrol before Sam Slawson ever laid eyes on her. She was his, Gilroy's, girl. That is, he was known to be "keeping company" with her. He had never looked on Sam as a rival because that would have implied a sense of his own inadequacy, and such a sense Gilroy had not. He had watched Slawson's fondness with the tolerant eye of an amused proprietor, rather pleased, than otherwise, to see another vainly coveting what belonged to him. And then, suddenly, the unexpected had happened. Martha had chosen Sam.

Peter never had believed, he did not believe now that her choice was based on simple preference. He felt that in some way he had piqued or angered her, driving her to revenge herself on him according to the fool way women proverbially have. As

he had undervalued his feeling for her, so he overvalued hers for him. He had found he could not forget her. He believed she secretly cherished him. His motive in coming to see her after the lapse of so many years was simple enough. He wanted the satisfaction of showing her what she had lost. . . . A man of means. A man of mind. His injured self-esteem ached to feel the balm her look of regret would bring. But, up to date, the look had not materialized.

Gilroy was undismayed. It would come. It could not help but come. If Martha was proud as Lucifer, she nevertheless had eyes in her head. She could see the difference between himself and Sam: the life she was leading and that she might have led. Money . . . and the lack of it.

"I can't get used to the idea of you being cooped up here in this out-of-the-way place, while life's going on without you and you ain't 'in it.' Any other woman, it wouldn't so much matter. But *you!* You're just thrown away on this bunch and that's all there is to it!"

Martha regarded him with untroubled eyes.

"I never thought of it that way. I mean, that because a body wasn't in the thick o' things, life was gettin' by her. I never felt I was thrown away. I don't believe anything ever is thrown

away so long as you can take a turn out of it. I don't believe we're any thriftier'n God. *We* don't throw away things till we're pretty sure there's nothin' left of'm any more. An' I betcher He don't either. If I'm thrown away it's because I ain't no more use. An', that bein' the case, the city's no better for a scrap-heap than the country. I may be thick-headed, but that's the way I feel about it."

"Well, I always thought you were meant for better things."

"Better things? What, for instance?"

Peter had the grace to flush. "Oh, I don't know. Just everything, I guess. I s'pose you've been here so long now, you don't realize how dead it all seems to a man fresh from the city. The truth is, Martha, I thought a lot of you once, and it jars me like the mischief to see you settled down the way you are. I'm disappointed in you. I expected you'd make a ten-strike. When you were a girl I thought you were a live wire. But the way you're satisfied with missing the good of life is a caution! It looks to me as if you'd lost all your 'vim and bounce,' as the advertisement says . . . being willing to let the world go on without raising a finger to take a hand in the game."

"That's me all over," said Martha amiably. "You struck your head on the nail this time, Peter, an' no mistake!"

In spite of the moribund condition of his environment Gilroy was in no haste to desert it. His attack, much more serious than he himself suspected, had left him languid and nerveless. He found it pleasant to lie in the hammock, underneath spreading green boughs, while the tranquil days slipped past, requiring nothing of him but quiescence. From this point of vantage he gradually got another view of Martha in her relation to life. His brain being what it was, the light broke slowly, but if his mind was not open, neither was it hermetically sealed, and once a ray had actually penetrated, another and another followed suit. He even became aware, without being told, that something festive was in the air, something Martha was not supposed to know about until the time was ripe.

Martha, evidently, could not be hoodwinked.

"They're goin' to have great doin's over to the big house on the Fourth," she confided to Peter. "They always have fireworks, an' ice-cream an' cake, an' suchlike, an' invite the neighbors in to share'm, but this year I guess they're plannin' somethin' extra. You see, the Fourth o' July is

the day Lord Ronald an' Miss Claire got engaged on, an' this year it's the tenth anniversary. Now, what do you think o' that! The way time flies! It seems like yesterday! They ain't countin' on me rememberin' it, an' I guess they don't want me to give'm a cake or nothin'. But when little Martha gets left recollectin' dates like that, it'll be a colder day than the Fourth o' July, you can take it from me."

So busy was she with her own preparations, her plan to steal a march on those who were trying to outwit her, that the great day actually arrived and she was still in working garb when Ma's droning voice broke through her preoccupation.

"There goes a team . . . a white horse. Wonder who 'tis. Can't get more'n a glimpse of annybody. There's a woman wit' a little gurrl. O, I guess I know who *she* is. Prob'ly she as was a Fullum. There's Mrs. Miller that lives down the road on the way to Milby's Corners. Who's that? Here comes a team . . . two teams. There's another team. Don't know if that's a Bugbee, or not. It's a female woman dressed in white, annyhow. They're all goin' to the big house. An' us only invited the last thing, like it was to fill in for somebody that disappointed."

"Quit your grumblin', Ma, an' be glad you was asked at all. You been all prinked up since daybreak, so there's nothin' to detain you here, if you want to be *on the job,* to open the ball dancin' the fantango with Peter. Say, Peter, take Ma over to the big house, will you? What's become o' the rest o' them, I'm sure I don't know. Francie an' Sammy an' big Sam. They just lit out an' not so much as a 'Good-by! I'm goin'!' to let me know they was off. I'll have my dress changed in a jiffy, an' then I'll folla you. They needn't hold up the party for *me* . . . tell'm to try to enjoy 'mselves till I appear, which it'll be as soon as I've me ball-gown on, an' me French maid has done me hair."

Thoughtful Francie had laid her things out on the bed, she discovered. Personally, she would have preferred her black dress to the white one the child had selected, but rather than disappoint her, she decided to wear the white.

"If she wants me to be a summer-girl, a summer-girl I'll be," she mocked at herself in the mirror. "I suppose I'm no worse off than lots o' others my age. Some're girls an' some're not, same's myself!" And so, she innocently fell into the trap that had been set for her.

The grounds were well filled when at last she

made her way across the lawn. But it was not the sight of so many people that brought Martha to a sudden standstill. It was the sense, sweeping over her in a tide of quick illumination, that they were all here in honor of her. In a second she was surrounded. Neighbors pressed about her, with outstretched hands, congratulations, loving thanks for benefits received. She hardly heard the words they said, for her pounding heart. She scarcely saw their kind faces for her tear-blurred eyes. But Peter heard. Peter saw. It seemed to him there was not one soul in the whole assemblage, high or low, who did not acknowledge himself in debt to Martha. Rich and poor, she had served them all, had somehow knit her life into theirs.

Long before Mr. Ronald called the company to order, hushing the happy clamor that all might hear what he had to say about this humble woman in whom Peter had declared himself disappointed . . . long before that, Gilroy had got a mighty jolt. He had been brought face to face with realities, an entirely new, unsuspected view of the things that constitute life. He felt as if the world had turned a somersault and he and his theories, instead of being "on top," as he had hitherto fatuously supposed, were underneath, fit only to

be a sort of doormat on which souls like Martha might wipe their feet.

It was all very naïve, very sentimental, but that was precisely what the Ronalds and the Ballards had intended it should be. For once in her life Martha was to taste the flavor of gratitude at its sweetest.

They told what she had done for them and theirs. They invited the neighbors to do likewise.

"After which experience-meeting," Mr. Ronald said smiling, "you are all cordially invited to salute the Silver Bride (who, by the way, is really pure gold) and inspect the wedding-presents sent to her and the bridegroom by their loving friends . . . which are on view in the dining-room. I mean the presents are on view, not the friends."

"Can you beat it!" whispered Martha to Sam. "Why, it's the time of my life."

"The time of your life . . . postponed twenty-five years," Sam answered wistfully.

"Which is just what makes it such a big, thumpin' lump now. It's the time of my life with the accumulated interest added, like they do in the bank," Martha returned.

Peter, meanwhile, standing as he thought alone, suddenly staggered beneath a sounding blow on

his shoulder and turned around to find Dr. Ballard beside him.

"Hullo! You're a prize patient! A credit to your physician!" the doctor hailed him cordially.

Peter readjusted his temper quickly, trying to tune himself to the prevailing key of the happy company. He managed to smile while his shoulder-blade still ached with the force of the other's greeting. "You're just the man I want to see," he stammered. "I'm going back to the city to-morrow, and before I go I'd like to settle my account with you. I make it a rule never to have outstanding bills."

Dr. Ballard's eyes, puzzled for a moment, cleared as his mind grasped Peter's meaning.

"Oh, yes, I remember! My bill . . ." he repeated lightly.

Peter's jaw fell. He had thought he was equal to parting with his money. He had tried to prepare himself for the wrench. He had studied his check-book and mentally subtracted a thousand dollars from "Balance brought forward," but he had not been able to do it actually. Now he realized that all along he had hoped Dr. Ballard would "let him off that check." Evidently Dr. Ballard had no intention of doing it.

"A thousand dollars . . ." Gilroy brought out at last . . . "It's big money!"

Dr. Ballard's eyes grew serious.

"Big money," he repeated. "Sure, it's big money. That's what we get for being experts . . . you and I, isn't it?"

"Experts?"

"Certainly. I've no doubt you're modest, but business is business, and now we're talking, man to man, we may as well be honest about ourselves and admit that we are specialists in our own lines . . . 'you in your little corner and I in mine,' as the Sunday-School hymn says."

Peter shook his head. "I'm no specialist," he protested. "I'm just a sort of clerk in Judge Granville's office. I don't see where you got the idea of me drawing big money. My salary for the year hardly does more than double the amount of your bill."

"Your salary, yes! But how about perquisites? That's where you're a specialist, Mr. Gilroy. I don't ask how much your perquisites mount up to, but I'd like to warrant they do much more than double the figure you mention. Come now, don't they?"

"If you think I'm a rich man . . ." stammered Peter, and stopped.

Dr. Ballard flung back his head with an impatient movement. "I'm not talking of rich or poor . . . those are purely relative terms, that may or may not mean anything. The fact of the matter is, you pay the penalty of being a public man . . . you have a record which those who run . . . no, those who stand still, as we up here in the country do . . . may read. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do . . . I'll make a bargain with you. If you tell me, on your word of honor, that you would suffer deprivation if you paid me my thousand dollars I'll let you off . . . I'll charge it up to 'Benevolence' on my books and let it go. There! That's fair, isn't it?"

Gilroy nodded.

"Well?" urged Dr. Ballard.

Peter choked with the attempt to speak. But words were too difficult, they would not come.

"What is it to be? My regular terms or . . . consideration to the poor?"

"I'll pay," gasped Peter.

Again Dr. Ballard's hand descended on Gilroy's shoulder, this time in honest friendliness of feeling.

"Good!" he cried. "Now I'll tell you something. I've no charge at all against you. Nobody but Mrs. Slawson could have induced me to take your case. It was because she called up that I

came to you. Under the circumstances I can't take your money. I never have had any intention of taking it. What I do want, however, is to see you cured. I mean, cured of the trouble you've got in your inside . . . pocket. I tell you what it is, that pocket-book of yours would be a deal healthier if you'd let it have a couple of good hemorrhages, in a good cause. The old-fashioned 'cupping' wasn't bad practice in cases of intensified congestion. Have you ever considered where your money will go when you have no further use for it, Mr. Gilroy?"

Peter stared. "You mean . . . I'm going to . . . die?" he brought out breathlessly.

"Sure! So'm I. So are the rest of this pleasant company." The blood returned to Gilroy's cheeks.

"I've not made a will, if that is what you mean," he said with quick relief.

"Why haven't you?"

"I've nobody to leave to."

For a moment Dr. Ballard hesitated. Then he brought it out point-blank. "What's the matter with Martha?"

"Martha?" Peter stammered.

"You cared for her once, didn't you? You care for her now. I know you do, man. You

can't hide it. It does you credit . . . to care for such a woman as that. I respect you for it. Well, if you've no one else who'd naturally inherit, why don't you do the best thing you ever did in your life and make a will in favor of Martha Slawson? I leave it to you, could you think of a better heir?"

Gilroy made no reply, but the doctor was content. He had planted his suggestion. He was confident, in the end, the man would act on it. He was not a physician for nothing. He knew the nature of his patient's mind.

Later that evening Peter and Martha were standing on the lawn, waiting for Sam and the children to come home with the last relay of gifts.

"I'm going to-morrow, Martha," Gilroy said, "but before I go . . . while we have time, I want to tell you that I've made up my mind what I'm going to do with my money after I'm through with it."

"It's none o' my business," said Martha.

"That's just where you're wrong," Peter assured her. "It precisely *is* your business. I'm going to make it your business. You've stood by me like a brick. There's times when I haven't

been all I should be to you, and you've never laid it up against me. I kind of see things different from what I used to, and . . . I just as lief tell it to your husband . . . I think just as much of you as I ever did. I kept track of you all these years. I've never forgot and I know everything's happened to you . . . all you've gone through. You haven't had things easy, Martha. In spite of the way you'd never complain, I know there've been times when things looked pretty dark. Well, what I want to say is, that's all over now. I used to tell you that if you married me I'd put velvet under your feet. When you didn't marry me I was so mad I wanted to put other things . . . things that'd hurt. I'm over that now. I don't feel so any more. I meant what I said in the old days. If you'd have married me I would have put velvet under your feet, but . . ."

Martha glanced up into his eyes, then quickly away . . . up at the star-lit sky above their heads . . . down to the close-clipped turf on which they stood.

"What's the matter with the velvet under'm now?" she said.

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