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Title: The Blood Red Dawn

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Release date: April 1, 2004 [EBook #11875]
Most recently updated: December 26, 2020

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLOOD RED DAWN ***

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The
BLOOD RED DAWN
by
CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

1920

To My Mother

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Book I

CHAPTER I

The pastor's announcement had been swallowed up in a hum of truant inattention, and as the heralded speaker made his appearance upon the platform Claire Robson, leaning forward, said to her mother:

"What?... Did you catch his name?"

"A foreigner of some sort!" replied Mrs. Robson, with smug sufficiency.

For a moment the elder woman's sneer dulled the edge of Claire's anticipations, but presently the man began to speak, and at once she felt a sense of power back of his halting words, a sudden bursting forth of bloom amid the frozen assembly that sat ice-bound, refusing to be melted by the fires of an alien enthusiasm. She could not help wondering whether he felt how hopeless it would be to force a sympathetic response from his audience. In ordinary times the Second Presbyterian Church of San Francisco could not possibly have had any interest in Serbia except as a field for foreign missionaries. Now, with America in the war and speeding up the draft, these worthy people were too much concerned with problems nearer their own hearthstones to be swept off their feet by a specific and almost inarticulate appeal for an obscure country, made only a shade less remote by the accident of being accounted an ally.

Claire, straining at attention, found it hard to follow him. He talked rapidly and with unfamiliar emphasis, and he waved his hands. Frankly, people were bored. They had come to hear a concert

and incidentally swell the Red Cross fund, but they had not reckoned on quite this type of harangue. Besides, an appetizing smell of coffee from the church kitchen had begun to beguile their senses. And yet, the man talked on and on, until quite suddenly Claire Robson began to have a strange feeling of disquiet, an embarrassment for him, such as one feels when an intimate friend or kinsman unconsciously makes a spectacle of himself. She wished that he would stop. She longed to rise from her seat and scream, to create an outlandish scene, to do anything, in short, that would silence him. At this point he turned his eyes in her direction, and she felt the scorch of an intense inner fire. Instinctively she lowered her glance.... When she looked up again his gaze was still fixed upon her. She felt her color rise. From that moment on she had a sense that she was his sole audience. He was talking to her. The others did not matter. She still did not have any very distinct idea what it was all about, but the manner of it held her captive. But gradually the mists cleared, he became more coherent, and slowly, imperceptibly, bit by bit, he won the others. Yet never for an instant did he take his eyes from *her*. When he finished, a momentary silence blocked the final burst of applause. But Claire Robson's hands were locked tightly together, and it was not until he had disappeared that she realized that she had not paid him the tribute of even a parting glance.

The pastor came back upon the platform and announced that refreshments would be served at the conclusion of the next number. A heavy odor of coffee continued to float from the church kitchen. A red-haired woman stepped forward and began to sing.

Already Claire Robson dreaded the ordeal of supper. The fact that tables were being laid further disturbed her. This meant that she and her mother would have to push their way into some group which, at best, would remain indifferent to their presence. When coffee was served informally things were not so awkward. To be sure, one had to balance coffee-cup and cake-plate with an amazing and painful skill, but, on the other hand, table-less groups did not emphasize one's isolation. Claire had got to the point where she would have welcomed active hostility on the part of her fellow church members, but their utter indifference was soul-killing. She would have liked to remember one occasion when any one had betrayed the slightest interest in either her arrival or departure, or rather in the arrival and departure of her mother and herself.

The solo came to an end, and the inevitable applause followed, but before the singer could respond to the implied encore most of the listeners began frank and determined advances upon the tables. The concert was over.

Mrs. Robson rose and faced Claire with a look of bewilderment. As usual, mother and daughter stood irresolutely, caught like two trembling leaves in the backwater of a swirling eddy. At last Claire made a movement toward the nearest table. Mrs. Robson followed. They sat down.

The scattered company speedily began to form into congenial groups. There was a great deal of suddenly loosened chatter. Claire Robson sat silently, rather surprised and dismayed to find that she and her mother had chosen a table which seemed to be the objective of all the prominent church members. The company facing her was elegant, if not precisely smart, and there were enough laces and diamonds displayed to have done excellent service if the proper background had been provided. Claire was further annoyed to discover that her mother was regarding the situation with a certain ruffling self-satisfaction which she took no pains to conceal. Mrs. Robson bowed and smirked, and even called gaily to every one within easy range. There was something distasteful in her mother's sudden and almost aggressive self-assurance.

Gradually the company adjusted itself; the tables were filled. The only moving figures were those of young women carrying huge white pitchers of steaming coffee. Claire Robson settled into her seat with a resignation born of subtle inner misery. Across her brain flashed the insistent and pertinent questions that such a situation always evoked. Why was she not one of these young women engaged in distributing refreshments? Did the circles close automatically so as to exclude her, or did her own aloofness shut her out? What was the secret of these people about her that gave them such an assured manner? No one spoke to her with cordial enthusiasm.... It was not a matter of wealth, or brains, or prominent church activity. It was not even a matter of obscurity. Like all large organizations, the Second Presbyterian Church was made up of every clique in the social calendar; the obscure circle was as clannish and distinctive in its way as any other group. But Claire Robson was forced to admit that she did not belong even to the obscure circle. She belonged nowhere—that was the galling and oppressive truth that was forced upon her.

At this point she became aware that one of the most prominent church members, Mrs. Towne, was making an unmistakably cordial advance in her direction. Claire had a misgiving.... Mrs. Towne was never excessively friendly except for a definite aim.

"My dear Miss Robson," Mrs. Towne began, sweetly, drooping confidentially to a whispering posture, "I am so sorry, but I shall have to disturb you and your mother!... It just happens that this table has been reserved for the elders and their wives.... I hope you'll understand!"

For a moment Claire merely stared at the messenger of evil news. Then, recovering herself, she managed to reply:

"Oh yes, Mrs. Towne! I understand perfectly.... I am sure we were very stupid.... Come, mother!"

Mrs. Robson responded at once to her daughter's command. The two women rose. By this time the task of securing another place was quite hopeless. Claire felt that every eye in the room was turned upon them. Picking their way between a labyrinth of tables and chairs, they literally were

stumbling in the direction of an exit when Claire felt a hand upon her arm. She turned.

"Pardon me," the man opposite her was saying, "but may I offer you a place at our table?"

Claire said nothing; she followed blindly. Her mother was close upon her heels.

The table was a small one, and only two people were occupying it—the man who had halted Claire, and a woman. The man, standing with one hand on the chair which he had drawn up for Mrs. Robson, said, simply:

"My name is Stillman, and of course you know Mrs. Condor—the lady who has just sung for us."

Claire gave a swift, inclusive glance. Yes, it was the same woman who had attempted to beguile a weary audience from its impending repletion; at close range one could not escape the intense redness of her hair or the almost immoral whiteness of the shoulders and arms which she was at such little pains to conceal.

"Stillman?" Mrs. Robson was fluttering importantly. "Not the old Rincon Hill family?"

"Yes, the old Rincon Hill family," the man replied.

Mrs. Robson sat down with preening self-satisfaction. Wearily the daughter dropped into the seat which Mrs. Condor proffered. The name of Ned Stillman was not unfamiliar to any San Franciscan who scanned the social news with even a casual glance, and Claire had a vague remembrance that Mrs. Condor also figured socially, but in a rather more inclusive way than her companion. At all events, it was plain that her mother, with unerring feminine insight, had placed the pair to her satisfaction. Already the elder woman was contriving to let Stillman know something of *her* antecedents. *She* was Emily Carrol, also of Rincon Hill, and of course he knew her two sisters—Mrs. Thomas Wynne and Mrs. Edward Finch-Brown! As Stillman returned a smiling assurance to Mrs. Robson's attempts to be impressive, a young woman in white arrived with ice-cream and messy layer-cake. Unconsciously Claire Robson began to smile. She could not have said why, but somehow the presence of Ned Stillman and Mrs. Condor at a table spread with such vacuous delights seemed little short of ridiculous. They did not fit the picture any more than her beetle-browed, red-lipped Serbian who.... She turned deliberately and swept the room with her glance. Of course he had gone. It was not to be expected that *he* would descend to the level of such puerile feasting. A sudden contempt for everything that only an hour ago seemed so desirable rose within her, and, in answer to the young woman's query as to whether she preferred coffee to ice-cream, she answered with lip-curling aloofness:

"Neither, thank you.... I am not hungry."

Stillman looked at her searchingly. She returned his gaze without flinching.

Claire Robson did not sleep that night. She lay for hours, quite motionless, staring into the gloom of her narrow bedroom, her mind ruthlessly shaping formless, vague intuitions into definite convictions. She could not put her finger upon the precise reason for her inquietude. Was it chargeable to so trivial a circumstance as a stranger's formal courtesy or had something more subtle moved her? If the depths of her isolation had been thrown into too high relief by the almost shameful sense of obligation she felt toward Stillman for his courtesy, what was to be said of the uniqueness of the solitary position which the Serbian awarded her by singling her out for a sympathetic response? Could it be that a vague pity had stirred him, too? Had things reached a point where her loneliness showed through the threadbare indifference of her glance? In short, had both men been won to gallantry by her distress? In one case, at least, she decided that there was a reasonable chance to doubt. And that doubt quickened her pulse like May wine.

But the humiliation of her last encounter with chivalry stuck with profound irritation. She recalled the scene again and again. She remembered her contemptuous silence before Stillman's obvious suavities, the high, assured laugh which his companion, Mrs. Condor, threw out to meet his quiet sallies, the ruffling satisfaction of her mother, chattering on irrelevantly, but with the undisguised purpose of creating a proper impression. How easily Stillman must have seen through Claire's muteness and the elder woman's eager craving for an audience! And all the time Mrs. Condor had been laughing, not ill-naturedly, but with the irony of an experienced woman possessing a sense of humor.

And at the end, when the four had left the church together, to be whirled home in Stillman's car, the sudden nods and smiles and farewells that had blossomed along the path of her mother's exit! Claire could have laughed it all away if her mother had not betrayed such eagerness to drink this snobbish flattery to the lees....

Claire's father had never entered very largely into her calculations, but to-night her readjusted vision included him. Stubborn, kind, a bit weak, and inclined to copying poetry in a red-covered album, he had been no match for the disillusionments of married life. Her mother's people had felt a sullen resentment at his downfall—he had taken to drink and died ingloriously when Claire was still in her seventh year. Claire, influenced by the family traditions, had shared this resentment. But now she found herself wondering whether there was not a word or two to be said in his behalf. Her father had been a cheap clerk in a wholesale house when he had married. The uncertain Carrol fortunes were waning swiftly at the time, and Emily Carrol had been thrown at him with all the panic that then possessed a public schooled in the fallacy that marriage was a woman's only career. The result was to have been expected. Extravagance, debts, too much family, drink, death—the sequence was complete. He had been captured, withered, cast aside, by

a tribe that had not even had the decency to grant his memory the kindness of an excuse.

Wide-eyed and restless, Claire Robson felt a sudden pity for her father. Tears sprang to her eyes; it overwhelmed her to discover this new father so full of human failings and yet so full of human provocation. In her twenty-four years of life she had never shed a tear for him, or felt the slightest pang for his failure. If she had ever doubted the Carrol viewpoint, she had never given her lack of faith any scope. She had taken their cast-off prejudices and threadbare convictions as docilely as she had once received their stale garments. She had shrunk from spiritual independence with all the obsequious arrogance of a poor relation at a feast. Her diffidence, her self-consciousness, her timidity, were the outward forms of an inbred snobbery. It was curious how suddenly all this was made clear to her....

At length she fell into a troubled sleep.... When she awoke the room's outlines were reviving before the advances of early morning. For the first time in her life she caught the poetry of the new day at first hand. For years she had reveled vicariously in the delights of morning. But it had always been to her a thing apart, a matter which the writers of romantic verse beheld and translated for the benefit of late sleepers. It never occurred to her that the day crawling into the light-well of her Clay Street flat was lit with precisely the same flame that colored the far-flung peaks of the poet's song. And instantly a phrase of the Serbian's harangue came to her—blood-red dawn! He had repeated these words over and over again, and somehow under the heat of his ardor and longing for his native land this hackneyed phrase took on its real and dreadful value. In the sudden sweep of this vital remembrance, Claire Robson rose for a moment above the fretful drip of circumstance.... *Blood-red Dawn!*... She threw herself back upon her bed and shuddered....

She rose at seven o'clock, but already the morning had grown pallid and flecked with gray clouds.

An apologetic tap came at the door, and the voice of Mrs. Robson repeating a formula that she never varied:

"Better hurry, Claire. If you don't you'll be late for the office!"

CHAPTER II

As Claire stepped out into the cold sunlight of early November, she smiled bitterly at the exaggeration of last night's mood. After the first hectic flush of dawn there is nothing so sane and sweet and commonplace as morning. The spectacle of Mrs. Finnegan, who lodged in the flat below, slopping warm suds over the thin marble steps, added a final note of homeliness, which divorced Claire completely from heroics.

"Well, Miss Robson, so you really got home, last night," broke from the industrious neighbor as she straightened up and tucked her lifted skirts in more securely. "I thought you never would come!... A package came from New York for you. The man nearly banged your door down. I had Finnegan put it on your back stoop.... It's from that cousin of yours, I guess. I was so excited about it I kept wishing you'd get home early so that I could get a peep at all the pretty things. But I'll run up just as soon as I get through with the breakfast dishes."

Claire smiled wanly. "It was very good of you to take all that trouble, I'm sure, Mrs. Finnegan!"

"Oh, bother my trouble!" Mrs. Finnegan responded. "I just knew how crazy I'd be about a box. I guess we women are all alike, Miss Robson. Anyway, your mother and I are!"

Mrs. Finnegan bent over her task again with a quick exasperated movement, and Claire passed on. Her neighbor's abrupt rebuke gave Claire a renewed sense of exclusion. She had meant to be warmly appreciative, but she knew now that she had been only coldly polite. But, as a matter of fact, the prospect of delving through a box of Gertrude Sinclair's discarded finery moved her this morning to a dull fury. She felt suddenly tired of cast-offs, of compromise, of all the other shabby adjustments of genteel poverty. And by the time she reached the office of the Falcon Insurance Company her soul was seething with a curious and unreasonable revolt. The feminine office force seemed seething also, but with an impersonal, quivering excitement. Nellie Whitehead had been dismissed!

This Nellie Whitehead, the stenographer-in-chief, was big, vigorous, blond—vulgar, energetic, vivid; and Miss Munch, her assistant, a thin, hollow-chested spinster, who loafed upon her job so that she might save her sight for the manufacture of incredible yards of tating, never missed an opportunity to lift her eyes significantly behind her superior's back.

"And what do you suppose?" Miss Munch was querying as Claire stepped into the dressing-room. "She told Mr. Flint to go to hell!... Yes, positively, she used those very words. And I must say he was a gentleman throughout it all. He told her gently but firmly that her example in the office wasn't what it should be and that in justice to the other girls...."

Claire turned impatiently away. The fiction of Mr. Flint's belated interest in the morals of his feminine office force was unconvincing enough to be irritating. For a man who never missed an opportunity to force his attentions, he was showing an amazingly ethical viewpoint. On second thought, Claire remembered that Miss Munch was never the recipient of Mr. Flint's attentions, which to the casual eye might have seemed innocent enough—on rainy days gallantly bending his

ample girth in a rather too prolonged attempt to slip on the girls' rubbers, insisting on the quite unnecessary task of incasing them in their jackets and smoothing the sleeves of their shirt-waists in the process, flicking imaginary threads where the feminine curves were most opulent. Not that Mr. Flint was a wolf in sheep's clothing; he played the part of sheep, but he needed no disguise for his performance; he merely lived up to a sort of flock-mind consciousness where women were concerned.

The group clustered about Miss Munch broke up at the approach of Mr. Flint, who gave a significant glance in the direction of Claire Robson, intent upon her morning work. But the excitement persisted in spite of the scattered auditors, and the fact was mysteriously communicated that Miss Munch's interest in the event was chargeable to her hopes. It seemed impossible to Miss Munch that any one but herself could succeed to the vacant post of stenographer-in-chief.

At precisely eleven o'clock the buzzer on Claire Robson's desk hummed three times. This announced that she was wanted by Mr. Flint. She gathered her note-book and pencils and answered the call.

Mr. Flint was busy at the telephone when Claire entered the private office. She seated herself at the flat oak table in the center of the room.

Mr. Flint's office bore all the conventional signs of business—commissions of authority from insurance companies, state licenses in oak frames, an oil-painting of Thomas Sawyer Flint, the founder of the firm, over a fireplace that maintained its useless dignity in spite of the steam-radiator near the window. On his desk was the inevitable picture of his wife framed in silver, a hand-illuminated platitude of Stevenson, an elaborate set of desk paraphernalia in beaten brass that bore little evidence of service. In two green-glazed bowls of Japanese origin, roses from Mr. Flint's garden at Yolanda scattered faint pink petals on the Smyrna rug. These flowers were the only concession to esthetics that Mr. Flint indulged. In spite of a masculine distaste for carrying flowers, hardly a day went by when he did not appear at the office with a huge harvest of blossoms from his country home.

Claire was bending over, intent on picking up the crumpled rose-petals, when Mr. Flint finally spoke. She straightened herself slowly. Her unhurried movements had a certain grace that did not escape the man opposite her. She tossed the bruised leaves into a waste-basket and reached for her pencil. Her heart was pounding, but she faced Mr. Flint with a clear, direct gaze.

"Miss Robson, of course you've heard all about the rumpus," Mr. Flint was saying. "I had to fire Miss Whitehead.... I think you can fill the bill."

Claire rose without replying. Mr. Flint left his seat and crossed over to her.

"I hope," he said, flicking a thread from her shoulder, "that you're game.... Some girls, of course, don't care a damn about getting on ... especially if there's a Johnny somewhere in sight with enough cash in his pocket for a marriage license."

"I am very much taken by surprise," Claire faltered. "You see, the change means a great deal to me."

Mr. Flint moved closer. His manner was intimate and distasteful. "Sometimes I think we business men ought to get more of a slant on our employees.... You know what I mean, not exactly bothering about how many lumps of sugar they take in their coffee, or their taste in after-dinner cheese ... but, well, just how often they have to resole their boots and turn the ribbons on their spring bonnets.... Now, in Miss Whitehead's case.... But of course you're not interested in Miss Whitehead."

"Why, I wouldn't say that," stammered Claire. Then, as she reached for her shorthand book she said, more confidently: "To be quite frank, Mr. Flint, I liked Miss Whitehead tremendously. She was so alive ... and vivid."

Flint beamed. "Do you know why I picked you instead of that Munch dame?... It's because you had all the frills of a woman and none of the nastiness. For instance, you wouldn't be bothered in the least if I took a notion to overload the office with another pretty girl.... I've watched you for some time. It has taken me six months to make up my mind to fire Miss Whitehead and boost you into her job."

He stood with an air of condescending arrogance, his thumbs bearing down heavily on his trousers pockets, his broad fingers beating a self-satisfied tattoo upon his thighs. Claire shrank nearer the table. "You mean, Mr. Flint, that you dismissed Miss Whitehead merely to give me her position?"

Flint smiled. "Well, now you're coming down to brass-headed tacks. I'm not keen on spelling out the whys and wherefores of anything I do.... But one thing is certain enough—if Miss Munch had been the only available candidate I *could* have stood Miss Whitehead.... There ain't much question about that."

"Oh, Mr. Flint! I'm sorry!"

He gave a wide guffaw. "That only makes you all the more of a corker!" he answered, rubbing his hands together in narrow-eyed satisfaction.

She escaped into the outer office, flushed, but with her head thrown back in an attitude of instinctive defense, and the next instant she literally ran into the arm of a man.

"Why, Miss Robson, but this *is* pleasant! I'm just dropping in to see Mr. Flint."

She drew back. Mr. Stillman stood smiling before her.

Greetings and questions flowed with all the genial ease of one who is never quite taken unawares. Claire, outwardly calm, felt overcome with inner confusion. She passed rapidly to her desk and sat down.

Miss Munch was upon her almost instantly.

"Do *you* know Ned Stillman?" Miss Munch asked, veiling her real purpose.

"Yes," replied Claire, with uncomfortable brevity.

"I have a cousin who was housekeeper for his wife's father.... You know about his wife, of course."

Claire lifted her clear eyes in a startled glance that was almost as instantly converted into a look of challenge.

"Yes," she lied.

Miss Munch hesitated, then plunged at once into the issue uppermost in her mind. "It's too bad you've had to be bothered with Flint's dictation, Miss Robson. It just happens I'm writing up a long home-office report, otherwise I'm sure he wouldn't have annoyed you."

Claire Robson fixed Miss Munch with a coldly polite stare. "You've made a mistake, Miss Munch. Mr. Flint has given me no dictation." The speech in itself was nothing, but Claire's tone gave it unmistakable point. Miss Munch grew white and then flushed. She turned away without a word, but Claire Robson knew that in a twinkling of an eye she had gained not only an enemy, but an uncommon one.

That night Claire took an unusually long way round on her walk home. Her path from the Falcon Insurance Company's office on California Street to the Clay Street flat was never a direct one, first, because there were hills to be avoided, and, second, because Claire found the streets at twilight too full of charm for a rapid homeward flight. The year was on the wane and the November days were coming to an early blackness. Claire reveled in the light-flooded dusk of these late autumn evenings. To her, the city became a vast theater, darkened suddenly for the purpose of throwing the performers into sharper relief. Most clerks made their way up Montgomery Street toward Market, but Claire climbed past the German Bank to Kearny Street. She liked this old thoroughfare, struggling vainly to pull itself up to its former glory. The Kearny Street crowd was a varying quantity, frankly shabby or flashily prosperous, as far south as Sutter Street, suddenly dignified and reserved for the two blocks beyond. To-night Claire missed the direct appeal of the streets lined with bright shops. They formed the proper background for her broodings, but they scarcely entered into her mood. She could not have said just what flight her mood was taking, or upon just which branch her thought would alight. She was confused and puzzled and vaguely uneasy. She had a sense that somehow, somewhere, a door had been opened and that a strong, devastating wind was clearing the air and bringing dead things to ground in a disorderly shower. She was stirred by twilights of uneasiness. It was almost as if the monotonous truce of noonday had been darkened by a huge, composite, masculine shadow, made up in some mysterious way of the ridiculous Serbian and his blood-red dawn, and this man Stillman, who had a wife, and Flint, with hands so ready to flick threads from her sloping shoulders. Yesterday her outlook had been peaceful and unhappy; to-day she felt stimulation of an impending struggle. She was afraid, and yet she would not have turned back for one swift moment. And suddenly the words of Mrs. Finnegan recurred, "I guess we women are all alike." Were they?

At which point she came upon a pastry-shop window and she went in and bought a half-dozen French pastries. The thought of her mother's pleasure at this unusual treat brought her in due time smiling to her threshold.

Mrs. Robson was not in her accustomed place at the head of the stairs; about half-way up the long flight her voice sounded triumphantly:

"Oh, Claire, do hurry and see what Gertrude has sent! Everything is perfectly lovely."

Claire quickened her pace and gained the cramped living-room. Thrown about in a sort of joyous disorder, Gertrude Sinclair's finery quite lit up the shabbiness. Hats, plumes, scraps of vivid silks, gilded slippers, a spangled fan—their unrelated vividness struck Claire as fantastic as a futurist painting. Her mother seemed suddenly young again. Claire wondered whether, after the toll of sixty-odd years, she could be moved to momentary youth by the mere sight of the prettiness that was quickening her mother's pulse.

Mrs. Robson held up a filmy evening gown of black net embroidered with a rich design of dull gold. "Isn't this heavenly?" she demanded. "And it will just fit you, Claire. I think Gertrude has spread herself this time."

"Yes, on finery, mother. But didn't she send anything sensible? What possessed her to load us

up with a lot of things we can never possibly get a chance to wear?"

Claire had not meant to be disagreeable, but there was rancor in her voice. Mrs. Robson cast aside the dress with the carelessness of a spoiled favorite; she always adapted her manner to the tone of her background.

"Claire Robson!" she cried, good-naturedly. "You're a regular old woman! I'm sure *I* haven't much to be cheerful about, but I just won't let anything down me!... If I wanted to, I could give up right now. Where would we have been, I'd like to know, if I hadn't held my head up? Goodness knows, *my* folks didn't help me. If they had had their way, I'd been out manicuring people's nails and washing heads for a living. And *you* in an orphan-asylum! That's what my people did for me! As it is, they shoved you out to work. What chance have you of meeting nice people? No, Claire, I don't care how they have treated me, but they might have given you a chance. I'll never forgive them for that!... I thought last night when I was talking to Mrs. Condor and watching you and Mr. Stillman how nice it would have been if.... Oh, that reminds me! Who do you think has been here to-day?... Mrs. Towne! She came to apologize about asking us to move our seats the other night. *She* knows the Stillmans well. The old people were pillars of the Second Church in the 'sixties. I fancy he is dancing about that Mrs. Condor's heels a bit. Of course, as Mrs. Towne said, *she* wouldn't be likely to make herself a permanent feature of Second Church entertainments. But now in war-times *anything* is possible. Mrs. Towne was telling me all about Stillman and his wife. I *should* have remembered, but somehow I forgot. Get your things off and I'll tell you all about it."

Claire handed her mother the package of pastries. "I heard about it to-day," she said, coldly.

"But Mrs. Towne knows the whole thing from A to Z," insisted Mrs. Robson, genially.

"I'm not interested in the details," Claire returned, doggedly.

Mrs. Robson's face wore a puzzled, almost a harried, expression. Claire moved away. Her mother gave a shrug and renewed her efforts to drag further finery from the mysterious depths of the treasure-box. Her daughter cast a last incurious glance back. The glow on Mrs. Robson's face, which Claire had mistaken for youth, seemed now a thing hectic and unpleasant, and gave an uncanny sense of a skeleton sitting among gauds and baubles.

A feeling of isolation swept Claire, such as she had never experienced. The person who should have been closest suddenly had become a stranger.... She went into her room and closed the door.

CHAPTER III

The following week Claire was surprised to find a letter on her desk at the office. The few written favors that came her way usually were addressed to the Clay Street flat, so that she was puzzled by this innovation and the unfamiliar handwriting. Glancing swiftly at the signature, she was surprised to see the name "Lily Condor," scrawled loosely at the foot of the note. It seemed that Mrs. Condor was giving a little musicale in Ned Stillman's apartments on the following Friday night, and, if one could believe such a thing, the lady implied that the evening would scarcely be complete without the presence of Claire Robson—or, to put it more properly, Claire Robson and her *mother*.

As Claire had scarcely said a half-dozen words to Mrs. Condor on the night of the Red Cross concert, this invitation seemed little short of extraordinary. But, as Claire thought it over, she recalled that there had been some general conversation about music, in which she had admitted a discreet passion for this form of entertainment, even going so far as to confess that she played the piano herself upon occasion. Her first impulse, clinched by the familiar feminine excuse that she had nothing suitable to wear, was to send her regrets. At once she thought of the scorned finery that Gertrude Sinclair had included in her last box, and the more she thought about it the more convinced she became that she had no real reason for refusing. But a swift, strange regret that her mother had been included in the invitation took the edge off her anticipations. She tried to dismiss this feeling, but it grew more definite as the morning progressed.

For days Claire had been striking at the shackles of habit with a rancor bred of disillusionment. She had been on tiptoe for new and vital experiences, and yet, for any outward sign, her life bid fair to escape the surge of any torrential circumstance. Particularly, at the office, things had gone on smoothly. The other clerks had accepted Claire's advancement without either protest or enthusiasm. Even Miss Munch had veiled her resentment behind the saving trivialities of daily intercourse. She had gone so far as to introduce Claire to her cousin, a Mrs. Richards, who had come in at the noon hour for a new tatting design. This cousin was a large, red-faced woman, with an aggressively capable manner. She had the quick, ferret-like eyes of Miss Munch and the loose mouth of a perpetual gossip.

"She's the one I told you about the other day," Miss Munch had explained later—"the housekeeper for *your friend* Stillman's father-in-law." She gave nasty emphasis to this trivial speech.

Flint had been direct and business-like almost to the point of brusqueness. But Claire knew that such moods were not unusual, so she took little stock in the ultimate significance of his restrained manner.

Perhaps the most indefinable change had come over Claire's home life. Her mother's unflinching string of trivial gossip, formerly not without a certain interest, now scarcely held her to even polite attention. Indeed, her self-absorbed silence, while Mrs. Robson poured out the latest news about Mrs. Finnegan's second sister's husband's mother—who was suddenly stricken with some incurable disease, made all the more mysterious by the fact that its nature was not divulged—was so apparent that her mother, goaded on to a mild exasperation, would ask, significantly:

"What's the matter, Claire? Have you a headache?"

Mrs. Robson was never so happy as in the discovery of some one with a mysterious disease, particularly if the victim's relatives were loath to discuss the issue.

"They think they fool me!" she would say, triumphantly, to Claire, "but I guess I know what ails her.... Didn't her mother, and her uncle, and her sister's oldest child die of consumption? I tell you it's in the family. The last time I saw her she nearly coughed her head off."

Not that Mrs. Robson was unsympathetic; brought face to face with suffering, she blossomed with every impulsive tenderness, but her experiences had confirmed her in pessimism, and every fresh tragedy testified to the soundness of her faith. Her pride at diagnosing people's ills and pronouncing their death-sentences was almost professional. And she had an irritating way of making comments such as this:

"Well, Claire, I see that old Mrs. Talbot is dead at last!... I knew she wouldn't live another winter. They'll feel terribly, no doubt; but, of course, it is a great relief."

Or:

"Why, here is the death notice of Isaac Rice! I thought he died *years* ago. My, but he was a trial! What a blessing!"

This was the type of conversation that Claire was finding either empty of meaning or illuminating to the point of annoyance. What amazed her was the fact that she had remained blind so long to the slightest of the conversational food upon which she had been fed.

Claire did not tell her mother about the invitation to Mrs. Condor's musical evening.

"I'll wait," she said to herself. "Thursday will be time enough." Although why delay would prove advantageous was not particularly apparent.

On Wednesday night at the dinner-table, Mrs. Robson, as if still puzzled at her daughter's altered mood, said, rather cautiously:

"There's to be a reception at the church on Friday night."

"For whom?" inquired Claire, with pallid interest.

"I didn't quite catch the name.... Some woman back from France. She's been nursing in one of the British hospitals. She's to get Red Cross work started at the church. It seems San Francisco is a bit slow over taking up the work, but, then, you know, we're poked off here in a corner and I suppose we don't quite realize yet.... Anyway, Mrs. Towne wants us to help with the coffee. She says you should have been in the church-work long ago. You look so self-contained and efficient.... I told her we would be there at half past seven and get the dishes into shape."

Claire's heart beat violently. "Friday night? I'm sorry, mother; I have another engagement."

"Another engagement? Why, Claire, how funny! You never said anything about it. I don't know what to say to Mrs. Towne."

Claire felt calm again. "Just tell her the truth."

"But she'll think so strange that I didn't know ... that I...."

"You shouldn't have spoken for me until you found out whether I was willing."

"Willing! *Willing!* I didn't suppose you'd be anything else. I've been trying to get you in with the right people at the church for the last fifteen years. I've tried so hard...."

"Yes, mother, I know," said Claire, patiently. "But don't you see? That's just it. You've tried too hard."

Mrs. Robson began to whimper discreetly. "How you do talk, Claire! I declare I don't know what to make of it. I suppose you're bitter about Mrs. Towne the other night. I felt so at first, but I can see now we were at the wrong table. And, after all, everything came out beautifully. We sat with Mr. Stillman, and that had a very good effect, I can tell you. Especially when everybody saw us leave with him. Why, it brought Mrs. Towne to her feet."

"Yes, and that's the humiliating part of it."

"Well, Claire, when you've lived as long as I have you won't be so uppish about making compromises," flung back Mrs. Robson. "Of course, if you've got another engagement, you've got another engagement, but if...."

"I wouldn't have gone, anyway. I'm through with that sort of thing."

"Why, Claire, how can you! It's your duty, *now!*--with your country at war—and ... and ... Even that dreadful Serbian the other night made *that* plain."

"I'll go with you to church on Sundays, of course, but—"

"What am *I* to do?" wailed Mrs. Robson. "At least you might think of me! I've not had much pleasure in my life, goodness knows, and now just as I...."

Mrs. Robson broke off abruptly on a flood of tears. Two weeks ago these tears would have overwhelmed Claire. As it was, she sat calmly stirring her tea, surprised and a little ashamed of her coldness. The truth was that Claire Robson was feeling all the fanatical cruelty that comes with sudden conviction. The forms of her new faith had hardened too quickly and left outlines sharp and uncompromising.

For years Claire had found shelter from the glare of middle-class snobbery beating about her head, by shrinking into her mother's inadequate shadow as a desert bird shrinks into the thin shadow of a dry reed by some burned-out watercourse. Now a full noon of disillusionment had annihilated this shadow and given her the courage of necessity. And there was something more than courage—there was an eagerness to stand alone in the commonplace words with which she sought to temper her refusal to assist at the coming church reception:

"I can't see any good reason, mother, why you shouldn't go and help Mrs. Towne.... What have my plans to do with it?"

To which her mother answered:

"I do so hate to be seen at such places alone, Claire."

Claire made no reply. She did not want to give her mother's indecision a chance to crystallize into a definite stand. She knew by long experience that if this happened it would be fatal. But in a swift flash of decision Claire made up her mind for one thing—she would either go to Mrs. Condor's evening alone or she would send her regrets.

CHAPTER IV

By a series of neutral subterfuges and tactful evasions Claire Robson won her point—she went to the Condor musicale at Ned Stillman's apartments alone, and on that same night her mother wended a rather grudging way to the Second Presbyterian Church reception.

Acting under her mother's advice, Claire timed her arrival for nine o'clock, an hour which seemed incredibly late to one schooled in the temperate hour of church socials. Mrs. Condor herself opened the door in answer to Claire's ring.

"Oh, my dear, but I *am* glad to see you!" burst from the elder woman as she waved her in. But she did not so much as mention the absence of Mrs. Robson, and Claire was divided between a feeling of wounded family pride, and gratification at the intuition which had warned her to leave her mother to her own devices. More people arrived on Claire's heels, and in the lively bustle she was left to shed her wraps in one of the bedrooms. Her heart was pounding with reaction at her outwardly self-contained entrance. She let her rather shabby cloak slip to the floor, revealing a strange, new Claire resplendent in the gold-embroidered gown that had once so stirred her rancor. For a brief instant she had an impulse to gather the discarded wrap securely about her and make a quick exit. A swooning fear at the thought of meeting a roomful of people assailed her. But there succeeded a courage born of the realization that they all would be strangers. With a sense of bravado she stepped out into the entrance hall again.

Ned Stillman came forward. She halted and waited for him. His face had lit with a sudden pleasure, which told Claire that for once in her life her presence roused positive interest. He inquired after her health, why her mother had not come, whether the abominable fog was clearing. His easy formality put her, as usual, completely at ease.

It was only when he asked her, with the most inconsequential tone in the world, "whether she could read music at sight" that a sinking fear came over her. And yet she found courage enough to be truthful and say yes.

"That's fine!" he returned. "Our accompanist hasn't come yet and we want to start off with a song or two."

From this moment on the evening impressed itself on Claire in a series of blurred hectic pictures.... She knew that Stillman was leading her toward the piano, but the living-room and its toned lights gave her a curious sense of unreality. She seated herself before the white keyboard and folded her hands with desperate resignation while she waited for Stillman to dictate the next move.

"My dear Mrs. Condor," Stillman explained, as that lady came up to them, "we sha'n't have to wait for Flora Menzies. Miss Robson will accompany you."

Claire sat unmoved. She was beyond so trivial a sensation as anxiety. Stillman drifted away; Mrs. Condor began to run through the sheet music lying on the piano.

"Of course you know Schumann, Miss Robson. Shall we start at once? How is the light? If you

moved your stool a little—so. There, that's better."

Claire did not reply. She looked at the music before her. She was conscious that it was a piece she knew, although its name registered no other impression. She began to play. The opening bars almost startled her. She felt a hush fall over the noisy room. Her fingers stumbled—she caught the melody again with staggering desperation. Mrs. Condor was singing.... The room faded; even the sound of Mrs. Condor's voice became remote. Claire had a desire to laugh.

All manner of strange, disconnected thoughts ran through her head. She remembered a doll she had broken years ago and buried with great pomp and circumstance, a pink parasol that had been given her as a child, the gigantic and respectable wig which had incased the head of her old German music-teacher, Frau Pfaff. And as she played on and on the music further evoked the memory of this worthy lady who had given her services in exchange for lodgings in an incredibly small hall bedroom, with certain privileges at the kitchen stove. And pictures of this irritating woman rose before her, stewing dried fruit, or preparing sour beef, or borrowing the clothes boiler for a perennial wash. What compromises her mother had made to give her child the gentle accomplishments that Mrs. Robson associated with breeding! It came to Claire that it was almost cruel to have denied this mother a share in the triumphs of that evening. And with that, she realized that Mrs. Condor had ceased singing. A hum broke loose, followed by applause. Claire grew faint. Her head began to swirl. She clutched the piano stool and by sheer terror at the thought of creating a scene she managed to keep her consciousness as she felt Mrs. Condor's hand upon her shoulder and heard a voice that just missed being patronizing:

"My dear, you did it beautifully."

Claire longed to burst into tears....

The concert was over shortly after eleven o'clock. Besides Mrs. Condor, there had been a 'cellist, very masculine in his looks but rather forceless in his playing, and a young, frail girl who brought great breadth and vigor to her interpretations at the piano. But Claire was really too excited for calm enjoyment. Supper followed—creamed minced chicken and extraordinarily thin sandwiches, and a dry, pale wine that Claire found at first rather distasteful. Claire sat with a little group composed of Mrs. Condor, Ned Stillman, a fashionable young man, Phil Edington, who frankly confessed boredom at all things musical except one-steps and fox-trots, and two or three artistic-looking souls who pretended to be quite shocked by young Edington's frankness.

Conversation veered naturally to the subject of the war. Edington had tried for a commission in an officers' training-camp and failed. He was extraordinarily frank about it all, and good-natured at the chaffing that Mrs. Condor and Stillman threw at him.

"I'm going to wait now and be drafted," he announced. "As long as I failed to make a high grade I want to begin at the bottom and see the whole picture."

Claire rather waited for a word from Stillman as to his convictions on the subject. Of course one could see that he was over the draft age, still.... For the most part she was silent, but happy and content. By contributing her share to the evening's entertainment she had justified her presence. Wine as a factor in midnight suppers was a new but not a revolutionary experience to Claire Robson, but she gasped a bit when the maid passed cigarettes to the ladies. And yet she felt a delicious sense of being a party to something quite daring and *outré*, although she did not have either courage or skill to enjoy one of the slender, gold-tipped delights.

The time for departure finally came. Claire rose reluctantly. Mrs. Condor, slipping one arm in Phil Edington's and the other in Claire's, sauntered with them toward the entrance hall.

"I say," ventured Edington as Stillman caught up to the group. "What's the matter with just us four dropping down to the Palace for a whirl or two?"

Claire stared. She had not grown used to the novelty of being included, but any instinctive objections to the plan were promptly silenced by Mrs. Condor's enthusiastic approval.

They arrived at the Palace Hotel shortly before midnight. The Rose Room was crowded. All the tables seemed filled, and Claire had a moment of disappointment caused by the fear that their party would be unable to gain admittance. But young Edington's presence soon set any uneasiness on that score at rest, and a place was evolved with deftness and despatch. The novelty of the situation to Claire was nothing compared with her matter-of-fact acceptance of it. She was neither self-conscious nor timid. Her three companions had a way of tacitly including her in even their trivial chatter that was unmistakable, though hard to define. She felt that she was one of them, and she blossomed in this strange new warmth like a chilled blossom at the final approach of a belated spring. All evening her starved sense of self-importance had been feeding greedily upon the compliments that had come her way. There had been her mother's rather apologetic words of approval at her appearance, to begin with, then Mrs. Condor's appreciation at the piano, and finally a word dropped by one of the women who had shared a mirror with her at the hour of departure.

"How do you manage your hair, Miss Robson?" the other had said, digging viciously at her shifting locks with a hairpin. "I do declare you're the only woman in the room that looks presentable."

But it was Edington's words to Stillman while they stood waiting for the hotel attendants to prepare the table that brought a quickened beat to her heart. The conversation was low and not

meant for her ears, but her senses were too sharpened to miss Edington's furtive words as he whispered to Stillman:

"Where did ... amazing.... Miss Robson?"

Claire did not catch the reply which must have also been something of a query, but she heard Edington continue.

"Well ... a little too silent, I must admit.... No, I don't dislike 'em that way ... but I'm afraid of them."

Stillman answered with a low laugh.

They sat down. Edington ordered wine. The crowd at the tables was rather a mixed one. There was plenty of elaborate gowning among the groups of formal diners who had prolonged their feasting into the supper hour, but many casuals, drifting in for a few drinks and a dance or two, robbed the scene of its earlier brilliance.

The orchestra struck up a one-step. Claire denied Stillman the dance, explaining that she knew none of the new steps, and he whirled away with Mrs. Condor. Edington, robbed of his chance, pouted unashamed.

"I say, Miss Robson, can't you do a one-step—really? There isn't anything to it! Come on—try; I'll pull you through."

Claire's knowledge of dancing was instinctive, but not a matter of much practice, yet his distress was so comic that she relented. She wondered if he could feel her trembling as they swung into the dance. She stumbled once or twice from timidity, but Edington guided unerringly. Half-way round she suddenly struck the proper swing.

"There—that's it," cried Edington, enthusiastically. "Now you've got it! Fine!"

His praise mounted to her brain like a heady wine, and suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, all the repressed youth within her awoke with a sweet and terrible joy.... They danced madly, perfectly, the rhythm entering into them like something at once fluid and flaming. Her ecstasy awoke a vague response in her partner, who bent forward as he kept repeating, monotonously:

"And you said you couldn't, Miss Robson! Fancy, you said you couldn't!"

The music stopped abruptly with a crash. Some of the dancers made their way leisurely back among the tables, but the most of them wandered about the polished floor, clapping insistent hands for an encore. In this brief interlude, groups arrived and departed. The musicians lifted their instruments to chin and lip, struck an opening chord; couples began to whirl and glide. Claire Robson, palpitant and eager, followed Edington's lead, but almost at the first moment of their rhythmic flight they came crashing into the overcoated bulk of a man cutting across the corner of the ballroom in an attempt at a swift exit. A smothered protest escaped Edington, and Claire detached herself from her partner long enough to see the offender bow very low and hear his apology in a voice and manner that seemed curiously familiar:

"I beg your pardon. Pray forgive me! I should have known better."

In the twinkling of an eye the interrupted dancers were sweeping on again, and the apologetic stranger, hat in hand, turning for a farewell look at the pair. Claire Robson felt an up-leap of the heart; a fresh ecstasy quickened her. It was the Serbian!

They finished the dance almost opposite their table and were met by a patter of applause from Mrs. Condor and Stillman, who were already seated.

Claire was flaming with embarrassment as she faced Stillman.

"I hope you'll understand, Mr. Stillman," she faltered. "But Mr. Edington seemed willing to risk my ignorance."

Mrs. Condor turned Claire's plaintive apology into a covert attack upon Stillman's courage, but Stillman rescued Claire from further confusion by laughing back:

"Well, I'll have my revenge on Edington. I'll grant him all the one-steps, but he can't have any of the waltzes, Miss Robson."

The waiter began to pour out the champagne. Claire settled back in her seat with a feeling of delightful languor. The dance had released all the pent-up emotions that a night of vivid sensations had called into her life. She had come into the Rose Room of the Palace Hotel quivering in the leash of a restrained enjoyment; it had taken the quick lash of opportunity to send her spirits hurtling forward in wild and headlong abandon. She lifted her wine-glass in answer to the upraised glasses of her companions, and the thought flashed over her that it would be impossible for her to have quite her old vision again. In every life there are culminating moments of joy or sorrow which either clear or dim the horizon, and Claire felt that such moment was now hers.

Stillman rose promptly in his seat at the first strains of the waltz, which proved to be the next number. Claire stepped out upon the floor with confidence.

She did not need any word of reassurance this time to tell her that her dancing was more than

acceptable, and, true to her brief experience with Stillman, he refrained from voicing the obvious. They had begun the dance promptly and for the first whirl about they had the floor almost to themselves. Claire's discreet sidelong glances detected many approving nods in their direction; people were noticing them and making favorable comment.... The floor filled, but even in the crowd Claire had a sense that she and her partner were standing out distinctly.

The very nature of the waltz contrasted sharply with the one-step. There was less abandon and more art. The first dance had expressed a primitive emotion; the present slow and measured whirl a discriminating sensation. And slowly, under the spell of Stillman's calm and yet strangely glowing manner, Claire recovered her poise. All night she had been inhaling every fresh delight rapturously with the closed eyes and open senses that one brings to the enjoyment of blossoms heavy with perfume. It took Stillman's influence to rob the hours of their swooning delight by recapturing her self-consciousness. Things became at once orderly and reasonable. And as he led her back to their table she felt the flame within cease its flarings and become steady, with a pleasurable glow. For a moment she felt uneasy, as if she were being trapped by something sweetfully insidious. Slowly, almost cautiously, she withdrew her arm from his. He made no comment; it was doubtful if he really noticed her recoil.

Long past its appointed time the hall light in the Robson flat continued to burn dimly. Mrs. Robson, sleepless and a bit anxious, waited alertly for the sound of Claire's key in the door. The welcome click came finally, succeeded by the unmistakable slam of an automobile door and the sharp, quick note of a machine speeding up.

"She's come home in Stillman's car," flashed through Mrs. Robson's mind, as she sat up in bed. At that moment Mrs. Finnegan's cuckoo clock, sounding distinctly through the thin flooring, warbled twice with a voice of friendly betrayal. "Mercy! it's two o'clock!" she muttered. "I wonder if Mrs. Finnegan is awake?... I do hope she heard the automobile!..."

Seated at the foot of her mother's bed, Claire tried her best to give a satisfactory report of the evening, but she found that she had overlooked most of the details that her mother found interesting. Who was there? What did Mrs. Condor wear? Did they have an elaborate spread?—the questions rippled on in an endless flow.

Under the acceleration of Claire's recital, Mrs. Robson found her experiences at the church reception left far behind. Even with scant details, Claire had managed to evolve a fascinating picture of a life robbed sufficiently of puritanism to be properly piquant. There was a tang of the swift, immoral, fascinating 'seventies in Claire's still cautious reference to champagne and cigarettes. It was impossible for any San Franciscan who had lived through those splendid madcap bonanza days to deny the lure of gay wickedness. At least it was hard to keep one's eyes on a prayer-book while the car of pleasure rattled by. And a coffee-and-cake social was, after all, a rather tame experience in the face of beverages more sparkling and eatables distinctly enticing.... Of course, if Claire had been introduced to any of these questionable delights by anybody short of a survivor of the Stillman clan, Mrs. Robson might have had a misgiving. As it was, she was not above a certain forewarning sense that made her say with an air of inconsequence as Claire finished her recital:

"Mrs. Towne tells me that there is a chance that Mr. Stillman's wife may get well. She's in a private sanitarium, at Livermore, you know." She stopped to draw up the bedclothes higher. "I do hope it's so!... But I'm always skeptical about *crazy* people ever amounting to anything again. Seems to me they're better off dead."

CHAPTER V

For Claire Robson, there followed after the memorable Condor-Stillman musicale a period of slack-water. It seemed as if a deadly stagnation was to poison her existence, so sharp and emphasized was her boredom. On the other hand, Mrs. Robson seemed to have contrived, from years of living among arid pleasures, the ability to conserve every happiness that she chanced upon to its last drop. Claire's invitation to be one of a distinguished group fed her vanity long after her daughter had outworn the delights of retrospection. The memory of this incident filled Mrs. Robson's thoughts, her dreams, her conversation. Gradually, as the days dragged by, bit by bit, she gleaned detached details of what had transpired, weaving them into a vivid whole, for the entertainment of herself and the amazement of her neighbor, Mrs. Finnegan.

Formerly Mrs. Finnegan's information regarding what went on in exclusive circles was confined to society dramas on the screen and the Sunday supplement. The personal note which Mrs. Robson brought to her recitals was a new and pleasing experience. After listening to the authentic gossip of Mrs. Robson, Mrs. Finnegan would return to her threshold with a sense of having shared state secrets. On such occasions Mrs. Robson's frankness had almost a challenge in it; she exaggerated many details and concealed none.

"Yes," she would repeat, emphatically, "they served cigarettes along with the wine. They *always* do."

"Well, Mrs. Robson," Mrs. Finnegan inevitably returned, "far be it from me to criticize what your daughter's friends do. But I don't approve of women smoking."

As a matter of fact, neither did Mrs. Robson, but she felt in duty bound to resent Mrs. Finnegan's narrow attacks upon society.

"Well, Mrs. Finnegan, that's only because you're not accustomed to it. Now, if you had ever...."

"Did Claire smoke?"

"Why, of course *not!* How can you ask such a thing? I hope I've brought my daughter up decently, Mrs. Finnegan."

And with that, Mrs. Robson would deftly switch to a less exciting detail of the Condor-Stillman musicale, before her neighbor had a chance to pick flaws in her logic. But sooner or later the topic would again verge on the controversial. Usually at the point where the scene shifted from Ned Stillman's apartments to the Palace Hotel, Mrs. Finnegan's pug nose was lifted with tentative disapproval, as she inquired:

"How many did you say went down to the Palace?"

"Only four—Mr. Stillman, Claire, Mrs. Condor, and a young fellow named Edington."

"I suppose *that* Mrs. Condor was the chaperon. Finnegan knows her well! She used to hire hacks when Finnegan was in the livery business years ago. She's a gay one, I can tell you. When only the steam-dummy ran out to the Cliff House...."

"That's nothing. Everybody who was anybody had dinners at the Cliff House in those days. I remember how my father...."

"Yes, Mrs. Robson, maybe you do! But I'll bet *you* never went to such a place without your husband ... and ... with a *strange* man."

Mrs. Robson never had, and she would tell Mrs. Finnegan so decidedly. This always had the effect of switching the subject again and Mrs. Robson found her desire to know the real details of Mrs. Condor's questionable gaieties offered up on the altar of class loyalty. For it never occurred to Mrs. Robson to doubt that her social exile had nothing to do with the inherent rights of her position.

When everything else in the way of an irritating program failed to rouse Mrs. Robson's dignified ire, her neighbor fell back upon the fact that Stillman was a married man. Mrs. Finnegan really worshiped Mrs. Robson to distraction, but she had a natural combative tendency that was at odds with even her loyalty.

"Mr. Stillman is a married man," Mrs. Finnegan would insist, doggedly. "And I don't approve of married men taking an interest in young girls. Who knows?—he may spoil your daughter's chances."

This statement always had the effect of dividing Mrs. Robson against herself. She resented Mrs. Finnegan's insinuations concerning Stillman, because it was not in her nature to be anything but partizan, and at the same time she was mollified by her neighbor's recognition of the fact that Claire had such things as chances. She always managed cleverly at this point by saying, patronizingly:

"Why, how you talk, Mrs. Finnegan! Mr. Stillman is just like an old friend. Not that we've known *him* so long ... but the family, you know ... they're old-timers. Everybody knows the Stillmans! Really one couldn't want a better friend."

Thus did Mrs. Robson take meager and colorless realities and expand them into things of blossoming promise. She was almost creative in the artistry she brought to these transmutations. In the end she convinced *herself* of their existence and she was quite sure that Mrs. Finnegan shared equally in the delights of her fancy.

Meanwhile November passed, and the first weeks of December crowded the old year to its death. November had been shrouded in clammy fogs, but no rain had fallen, and everybody began to have the restless feeling engendered by the usual summer drought in California prolonged beyond its appointed season. The country and the people needed rain. Claire, always responsive to the moods of wind and weather, longed for the cleansing flood to descend and wash the dust-drab town colorful again. She awoke one morning to the delicious thrill of the moisture-laden southeast wind blowing into her room and the warning voice of her mother at her bedroom door calling to her:

"You'd better put on your thick shoes, Claire! We're in for a storm."

She leaped out of bed joyously and hurried with her dressing.

As she walked down to work the warm yet curiously refreshing wind flung itself in a fine frenzy over the gray city. Dark-gray clouds were closing in from the south, and in the east an ominous silver band of light marked the sullen flight of the sun. People were scampering about buoyantly, running for street-cars, chasing liberated hats, battling with billowing skirts. It seemed as if the promise of rain had revived laughter and motion to an extraordinary degree. At the office this ecstasy of spirit persisted; even Miss Munch came in hair awry and blowsy, her beady eyes almost laughing.

Mr. Flint had not been to the office for two days. A sniffing cold had kept him at home. Claire

had rather looked for him to-day, and had prepared herself for a flood of accumulated dictation. But the threat of dampness evidently dissuaded him, for the noon hour came and went and Mr. Flint did not put in an appearance. At about three o'clock in the afternoon a long-distance call came on the telephone for Miss Robson. Claire answered. Flint was on the other end of the wire. He wanted to know if she could come at once over to Yolanda and take several pages of dictation. His cold was uncertain and he might not get out for the rest of the week. He realized that it was something of an imposition on her good nature, but she would be doing him a great favor if.... She interrupted him with her quick assent and he finished:

"I'll have the car at the station, and of course you'll stay for dinner."

Claire hung up the receiver and looked at her watch. It was just half after three. The next ferryboat connecting at Sausalito with the electric train for Yolanda left at three-forty-five. She had no time to lose; it was a good ten minutes' walk from the office to the ferry and little to be gained by taking a street-car. She managed her preparations for departure successfully, but in the end she had to ask Miss Munch to telephone her mother. Miss Munch assented with an alarmingly sweet smile.

Claire walked briskly down California Street toward the ferry-building. No rain had fallen, but the air was full of ominous promise. The wind was even brisker than it had been in the morning, and its breath almost tropically moist.

"At sundown it will simply pour," thought Claire, as she exchanged fifty cents for a ticket to Yolanda.

She presented her ticket at the entrance to the waiting-room and passed in. The passageway to the boat was already open; she went at once and found a sheltered corner outside on the upper deck. A strong sea was running and already the ferryboat was plunging and straining like a restless bloodhound in leash. The air was full of screaming gulls and the clipped whistling of restless bay craft. Claire was so intent on all this elemental agitation that she took no notice of the people about her, but as the boat slid lumberingly out of the slip she was recalled by a voice close at hand saying:

"Why, Miss Robson, who would think of seeing you here at this hour!"

Claire turned and discovered Miss Munch's cousin sitting beside her, intent on the inevitable tating.

"Oh, Mrs. Richards, how stupid of me! Have you been here long?"

"About ten minutes. But I get so interested in my work I never have eyes for anything else. How do you put in the time? A trip like this is so tiresome!"

Claire delved into her bag and brought out knitting-needles and an unfinished sock.

"I'm trying a hand at this," she admitted, holding her handiwork up ruefully. "But I'm afraid I'm not very skilful."

Mrs. Richards inspected the sock with critical disapproval.

"Oh, well," she encouraged, "you'll learn ... practice makes perfect. I've just finished a half-dozen pairs. I suppose I'm laying myself out for a roast doing tating in public *these* war days! But it's restful and I'm not one to pretend. As long as my conscience is clear I can afford to be perfectly independent.... You don't make this trip every night, do you?"

"Oh my, no! I'm going over to Mr. Flint's to take some dictation. He's home sick."

"I saw Mrs. Flint and the children coming *off* the boat just as I got on." Mrs. Richards's voice took on a tone of casual directness.

"You know Mrs. Flint?"

"My dear girl, a trained nurse knows everybody—and everything about them, too. You never get a real line on people until you live with them. I've never nursed any of the Flint family, but I wouldn't have to to get their reputation—or perhaps I should say, old Flint's."

"*Old* Flint's?" echoed Claire.

"Well, of course he isn't so awfully old, but men like him always give that impression. They're so awfully wise—about *some* things. I *was* so relieved when Gertie didn't get that dreadful Miss Whitehead's place. Being in the general office is bad enough, but in his *private* office...." Mrs. Richards lifted and dropped her tating-filled hands significantly.

Claire felt the blood rush to her face. "I'm in the private office, Mrs. Richards.... No doubt you forgot it."

"Well now, you know I *had* ... for the moment. But with a girl like you it's different. Some women can handle men, but Gertie would be so helpless!"

The humor of Mrs. Richards's remark saved the situation for Claire. She changed the subject deliberately. But somehow, with the conversation forced from the particular to the general, Miss Munch's cousin lost interest, and by the time the boat had passed Alcatraz Island Claire was deep in her thoughts again and the other woman following the measured flight of the tating-shuttle

with strained attention.

The boat was romping through the stiff sea like a playful porpoise, dipping and plunging. A half-score of adventuresome gulls were still following in the foam-churned wake. In the face of all the pitching about, Mrs. Richards had quite a battle to direct her shuttle to any efficient purpose, and Claire was almost amused at the grim determination she brought to the performance.

Presently a warning whistle from the ferryboat betrayed the fact that they were nearing Sausalito. Mrs. Richards began to gather up her numerous bundles, and Claire and she made their way down the narrow stairs to the lower deck. Their progress was slow and uncertain. The southeaster was tearing across the open spaces and bending everything before it; the lumbering boat dipped sideward in a stolid encounter with its adversary.

"Mercy! What a night!" gasped Mrs. Richards, clutching at Claire's arm.

A gust of wind struck them with its force just as they reached the lower deck. Mrs. Richards staggered and wrestled vainly with tatting-bag and bundles and a refractory skirt. For the moment both women were stalled in a desperate effort to retain their equilibrium.

"Come!" gasped Claire. "Let's get over there in the shelter of that automobile."

They made the leeward side of the automobile in question, and while Mrs. Richards began to recover her roughly handled dignity Claire turned her attention to the car. It was a huge dark-red affair, evidently fresh from the shop. Claire knew none of the fine points of automobiles, but this one had unmistakable evidences of distinction. She was peering in at its opulent depths when who should surprise her but Ned Stillman.

"My dear Miss Robson!" he cried, in a tone of delight, as he faced her from the opposite side of the car. "What do you think of it?"

"Yours?" she queried.

"Just out of the shop to-day. I couldn't wait until it cleared. I just had to get out with it. And this kind of weather always puts me up on my toes. Where are you going—to Ross? If you are, don't bother with the train. Come along with me."

He circled about the machine and came up to her with a frank, outstretched hand. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" he murmured as Mrs. Richards came into view.

Claire began an introduction, but Mrs. Richards cut in with her odd, challenging way.

"Oh, I know Mr. Stillman! But I guess he's forgotten *me*. It's been some years, of course. At Mr. Faville's—your *wife's* father's house."

Stillman paled for the briefest of moments, but he recovered himself cleverly. "Mrs. Richards—of course! How do you do? It *has* been some years."

"I'm going to Mr. Flint's—at Yolanda," said Claire, "to take some dictation. He's been ill, you know."

"Ill? No, I hadn't heard it. Nothing serious, I hope."

"Not serious enough to keep Mrs. Flint at home, anyway," volunteered Mrs. Richards, in her characteristically disagreeable way.

"Mrs. Richards saw Mrs. Flint and the children coming off the boat...."

"As I got on," interrupted the lady again.

"Oh, indeed, is that so?" Claire fancied that Stillman's tone held something more than polite acceptance of what he had just heard. "I can take you ladies to Yolanda if you'd like a spin in the open better than a stuffy ride in the train."

"Thank you," Mrs. Richards returned, "but I get off at Sausalito. I've no doubt Miss Robson will be delighted."

"I think I'd better not," said Claire. "Mr. Flint is sending his car to the train for me. I shouldn't want to change my program and cause confusion. But I'd like nothing better! The air is so bracing!"

"You can excuse *me*!" put in Mrs. Richards, moving toward the forward deck. "It's going to pour in less than ten minutes. I'm not one of those amphibious creatures who like to get wringing wet just for the fun of it!"

Stillman lifted his hat. Claire stood for a moment undecided whether to follow Mrs. Richards or remain for a chat with Stillman.

"I'm an awful fool, I suppose," Stillman smiled at Claire, "bringing the car out on a night like this. But the truth is Edington promised to catch this boat and I wanted him to try out the new plaything. I might have known he wouldn't make it. We're running over for dinner with Edington's sister."

At this moment the boat crashed clumsily against the Sausalito ferry-slip, and in the sudden confusion of landing Claire was swept along without further ado.

She looked back. Stillman waved a genial good-by to her. She felt glad that he was behind her, in a vague, impersonal, thoroughly inexplicable way.

CHAPTER VI

Claire was disappointed that Mrs. Flint was not to be at home. She had caught glimpses of her now and then coming into the office and she was interested in the hope of seeing her at closer range. Mrs. Flint was a rather frumpish individual, who always gave the impression of pieced-out dressmaking.

"She must subscribe to the *Ladies' Home Journal*," Nellie Whitehead had commented one day. "You know that 'go-up-into-the-garret-and-get-five-yards-of-grandmother's-wedding-gown' column. Well, she's a walking ad for it. She's no raving beauty, but if she would throw out her chest and chuck those flat-heeled clogs of hers, and put a marcel wave in her hair, maybe the old man would sit up and take notice."

To which Miss Munch had replied:

"Well, she's a mighty sweet woman, anyway!" in a tone calculated to freeze the irrepressible Nellie Whitehead into silence.

"Who says she isn't? And at that, a good tailor-made suit and a decent-looking hat won't spoil her disposition any...."

The children, too, were what Nellie Whitehead had termed "perfect guys." On warm days Mrs. Flint would drag these two daughters of hers into the office, dressed in plaid suits and velveteen hats; and when a cold north wind blew it seemed inevitable that they would appear in gay and airy costumes up to their knees, with impossible straw bonnets trimmed with daisies and faded cornflowers, reminiscent of the white-leghorn-hat era.

"Men don't marry women for their clothes," Miss Munch used to say, challengingly, to Nellie.

"Oh, don't they, indeed! Well, I've lived longer than sixteen and a half years and I've noticed that it's the up-to-the-minute dame that gets away with it and holds onto it every time, just the same. And any woman silly enough to work the rag-bag game when her husband can afford seven yards of taffeta and a Butterick pattern is a fool!"

Claire knew women who looked dowdy on dress-parade and yet managed to be quite charming in their own houses. She was wondering whether this might not be Mrs. Flint's case; anyway, she had hoped for a chance to decide this point, and now Mrs. Flint was not at home.

As she settled into her matting-covered seat in the train she began to wonder just who *would* be home at the Flint establishment. And she thought suddenly of the disagreeable emphasis that Mrs. Richards had seen fit to give the fact that Mrs. Flint was bound cityward. At this stage she became lost in discovering so many points of contact between Mrs. Richards and her cousin, Miss Munch. Then the train started with a quick lurch, and a view of the rapidly darkening landscape claimed her utterly.

Claire always took a childish delight in watching the panorama of the countryside unroll swiftly before the space-conquering flight of a train. And to-night the quick close of the December day warned her to make the most of her opportunity. The wind was whipping the upper reaches of the bay into a shallow fury, and the water in turn was beating against the slimy mud and swallowing it up in gray, futile anger. This part of the ride just out of Sausalito was always more or less depressing unless a combination of full tide and vivid sunshine gave its muddy stretches the enlivening grace of sky-blue reflections. Worm-eaten and tottering piles, abandoned hulks, half-swamped skiffs, all the water-logged dissolution of stagnant shore lines the world over, flashed by, to be succeeded by the fresher green of channel-cut marshes. The hills were wind-swept, huddling their scant oak covering into the protecting folds of shallow canons. At intervals, clumps of eucalyptus-trees banded together or drew out in long, thin, soldier-like lines.

Presently it began to rain. There was no preliminary patter, but the storm broke suddenly, hurling great gray drops of moisture against the windows. Claire withdrew from any further attempt to watch the whirling landscape. It was now quite dark, the short December day dying even more suddenly under a black pall of lowering clouds.

She began to have distinctly uncomfortable thoughts about her visit to the Flints'. But the more uncomfortable her thoughts became, the more reason she brought to bear for conquering them. Surely one was not to be persuaded into a panic by any such person as Mrs. Richards! And by the time the brakeman announced the train's approach to Yolanda, Claire had recovered her common sense. What of it if Mrs. Flint had gone to town? There must be other women in the household—at least a maid. It was absurd! The train stopped and Claire got off.

Flint's car was waiting, and Jerry Donovan, the chauffeur, stood with a dripping umbrella almost at Claire's elbow as she hopped upon the platform.

As they swished through the inky blackness, Claire said to Jerry, with as inconsequential an air as she could muster:

"I thought I saw Mrs. Flint get off the boat in town. But I guess I was mistaken. She wouldn't be

leaving Mr. Flint alone ... when he's ill."

"Ill?" Jerry chuckled. "Well, he ain't dead by a long shot. Just a case of sniffles, and a good excuse for hitting the booze. He's in prime condition, I can tell you."

Claire had never seen Flint in "prime condition," but she had it from Nellie Whitehead that there were moments when the gentleman in question could "go some," to use her predecessor's precise terms.

"About twice a year," Nellie had once confided to Claire, "the old boy starts in to cure a cold. I helped him cure one ... but *never* again!"

Jerry's observations aroused fresh anxiety, but they did not settle the issue for Claire. She felt that she could not turn back at the eleventh hour. There was nothing else for her to do but go through with the game. Yet she still hoped for the best.

"*Did* Mrs. Flint go to town to-day?" she finally asked, point-blank.

"Sure thing," said Jerry, swinging the car past the Flint gateway.

Claire refused to be totally lacking in faith.

"There must be a maid," flashed through her mind, as Jerry stopped the car and swung down to help her out.

A Japanese boy threw open the door as they scrambled up the rain-soaked steps. But the fine, orderly, Colonial interior reassured Claire. The few country homes she had seen had been of the rambling, unrelated bungalow type, with paneled redwood walls either stained to a dismal brown or quite frankly left to their rather characterless pink. This home was different. Even the pungent oak logs crackling in the fireplace did so with indefinable distinction. The general tone of the surroundings was as little in keeping with the patchwork personality of its mistress as one could imagine. It was as if the singular completeness of Mrs. Flint's home left no time nor energy for a finished individuality. Claire got all this in the briefest of flashes, just a swift, inclusive glance about the entrance hall and through the doorways leading into the rooms beyond. Particularly did she sense the severe opulence of the dining-room, twinkling at a remoter distance than the living-room—its perfectly polished silver, its spotless linen, its wonderfully blue china, not to mention the disconcerting fact that the table in the center was laid for but two.

And then Flint himself came forward with a very red face and an absurdly cordial greeting.

"Well, I began to wonder whether you'd risk it. This will be a storm and no mistake.... Here, let me have your coat. Come, you're quite wet.... Shall you warm up on a hot toddy or something cooler—a cocktail?"

She felt his hand sliding down her arm as she released the coat to his too-eager fingers. "Oh no, Mr. Flint! Thank you, nothing. It's only a bit of rain on the surface. I'm quite dry."

"Quite dry!" He echoed her words with a guffaw. "Well, then, we'll have to moisten you up. I always say everything's a good excuse for a drink. If you're cold you take a drink to warm up; if you're warm you take one to cool off. You dry out on one, and you wet up on one. I don't know of any habit with so many good reasons back of it. I'm dry, too.... We'll have a Bronx! That's a nice, ladylike drink."

Claire weighed her reply. She did not want to strike the wrong note; she wanted to let him have a feeling that she was accepting everything in a normal, matter-of-fact way, as if she saw nothing extraordinary in the situation.

"You're very kind, but really you know ... if I'm to get my dictation straight...."

"Well, perhaps there won't be any dictation. We're not slaves, you and I. Maybe it will be much pleasanter to sit before the fire and listen to the storm. What do you say to that?"

She turned from him deliberately, under the fiction of fluffing up her hair before a gilt mirror near the door. She was thinking quickly and with a tremendous, if concealed, agitation. "Why," she laughed back, finally, "that *would* be pleasant. But I came to take dictation, Mr. Flint. And women ... women, you know, are so funny! If they make up their minds to one thing, they can't switch suddenly to another idea."

He was paying no attention to her remark, a remark which she felt would have fallen flat in any event, since it was so palpably studied.

"The living-room is in there," he said, pointing. "Make yourself at home."

She went in and sat before the fire. Flint disappeared. She tried hard to analyze the situation. It was unthinkable that Mr. Flint had deliberately planned this piece of foolishness. He must have had some idea of work when he had telephoned her; perhaps he still had. It was his way of being facetious, she argued, this fine pretense that it was all to be a pleasant lark, or it may have been his idea of hospitality. Of course he had been drinking, but she took comfort in the thought that there must be instinctive standards in a man like Flint that even whisky could not swamp. At least he must respect his wife—surely it was not possible for Flint, drunk or sober, to offer such an affront to *her*; however little he respected the women in his employ. She dismissed Mrs. Richards's exaggerated insinuations with their well-deserved contempt, but she could not thrust

aside quite so readily the eye-lifting tone with which Stillman had met the announcement of Mrs. Flint's absence from home.

This was the first time that Claire had seen Stillman since the musicale. She had thought a great deal about him and particularly about his problem. She felt a great desire to know everything—all the details of the unfortunate circumstance that had driven his wife into a madhouse, and yet whenever her mother broached the subject Claire changed the topic with curious panic. She seemed to dread the hard, almost triumphant manner that her mother assumed in tracking misfortune to its lair and gloating over it. She began to wonder whether Stillman would be swinging back to the city on a late boat ... or would the storm keep him at Edington's sister's home all night?

She was in the midst of this speculation when Flint came into the room.

"We'll eat early and have that off our minds," he announced. His manner was brusque and business-like again. Claire felt reassured.

But she was disturbed to find a cocktail at her place at the table.

"Well, here's glad to see you!" Flint raised his glass and tilted it ever so slightly in her direction. Claire lifted the cocktail to her lips and set it down untasted. "What's the matter? Getting unsociable again?"

"No, Mr. Flint. I don't care for cocktails."

"Oh, all right! We'll send down-cellar and get some wine."

"Thank you, not for me."

"I suppose you don't care for wine, either?" His voice had a bantering quality, with a shade of menace in it. "Or maybe the right party isn't here. I've noticed that makes a difference. Females are damned moral with the wrong fellow."

His attack was so direct and insolent that Claire missed the trepidation that might have come with a more covert move. She was no longer uncertain. There was a sharp relief in realizing that all the cards were on the table. She felt also that there was no immediate danger. Flint was far from sober, but he was in his own home. She had the conviction that he was merely skirmishing, testing the strength or weakness of the line he hoped to penetrate. Her reply was rather more of a challenge than she could have imagined herself giving under such a circumstance.

"And if I were to tell you that I don't care for wine, Mr. Flint?"

He threw open his napkin with a flourish. "You'd be telling me a damned lie! You drink wine at the Palace with Stillman and Edington."

She had felt that he was going to say some such thing and for a moment it amused her. It was so ridiculous to find this rather wan and wistful indiscretion assuming damaging proportions. But a nasty fear succeeded her faint amusement. Could it be possible that Stillman had gossiped?

"Who told you?" she demanded.

"Oh, don't be afraid; it wasn't Stillman! You're like all women, you moon about sentimentalizing over Ned until it makes a man like me sick! I like Ned; I always have. But even when we went to college together it was the same way. Everybody ... yes, even the men ... always gave him credit for a high moral tone. Not that he ever took it.... I'll say that for him.... Ned Stillman didn't tell me, for the simple reason that he didn't have to. Nobody told me. I go to the Palace myself under pressure, and I've got two eyes. As a matter of fact, there isn't any reason why Edington or Stillman or the waiter who drew the corks shouldn't have mentioned it. A glass of wine is no crime. But the thing that makes me hot is to see any one pretending. If you drink with Stillman, you haven't any license to refuse a glass with me."

There was something more than wine-heated rancor back of his harangue. Claire guessed instinctively that he both loved and hated Stillman with a curious confusion of impulses. It was a feeling of affection torn by the irritating superiority of its object. One gets the same thing in families ... among children. It was at once subtle and extremely primitive.

"My dear Mr. Flint, this isn't quite the same thing. I've work to do for one thing and, and...."

"And ... and.... Why don't you say it? You're alone with me and all that sort of rubbish! Want a chaperon, I suppose. Mrs. Condor, for instance.... Good Lord!"

Claire dipped her spoon into the steaming bouillon-cup in front of her. She was growing quite calm under the directness of Flint's attack.

"It isn't the same," she reiterated, stubbornly. "I've work to do, Mr. Flint."

"I tell you that you haven't!" Flint brought his fist down upon the table.

"Well, then, why did you send for me?"

"I had something to say to you.... Gad! one can't talk in that ramping office of mine. We've never even settled the matter of an increase in salary for you. By the way, how much money do you get?"

Claire had never seen any man look so crafty and disagreeable. He gave her the impression of a petty tyrant about to bestow largess upon an obsequious and fawning slave.

"Sixty-five dollars a month."

"Well, I don't exactly know.... I've been trying to figure out just how valuable you are to me, Miss Robson. Or, rather, how valuable you're likely to be." He thrust aside his soup and leaned heavily upon the table. "That's why I invited you over to-night. I wanted to see you at a little closer range. You live with your mother, don't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Flint."

"You ... you support your mother, I believe?"

"Yes, Mr. Flint."

"Well, sixty-five dollars don't leave much margin for hair ribbons and the like, does it, now?"

"No, Mr. Flint."

"No, Mr. Flint.... Yes, Mr. Flint...." he mocked. "Good Lord! can't you cut that school-girl-to-her-dignified-guardian attitude. I'm human. Dammit all, I'm as human as your friend Ned Stillman. I'll bet you don't yes-sir and no-sir him.... You know, that night I saw you at the Palace you quite bowled me over. I'd been thinking of you as a shy, unsophisticated young thing. But you were hitting the high places like a veteran. Even old lady Condor didn't have anything on you. Except, of course, that she looks the part. By the way, where did you meet Stillman?"

"At ... at a church social," Claire stammered.

"At a church social! Say, I wasn't born yesterday. Ned Stillman doesn't go to church. Tell me something easy."

"It was really a Red Cross concert. He went with Mrs. Condor," Claire found herself explaining in spite of her anger. "We sat at the same table when the ice-cream was served."

Flint was roaring with exaggerated laughter. Even Claire could not restrain a smile. What made the statement so ridiculous, she found herself wondering. Was she unconsciously reflecting Flint's attitude or had she herself changed so tremendously in the last few weeks?

"Stillman at a church social! But that *is* good! And eating ice-cream.... How long ago did all this happen, pray?"

"Sometime in November."

He stopped his senseless guffawing and looked at her keenly. "Where did you get the church-social habit?"

"I ... why, I guess I formed it early, Mr. Flint. As you say, sixty-five dollars a month doesn't leave much for hair ribbons or anything else. Going to church socials is about the cheapest form of recreation I can think of."

The bitterness of her tone seemed to pull Flint up with a round turn. "Well, we're going to get you out of this silly church-social habit. Dammit all, Stillman isn't the only possibility in sight. That's just what I wanted to get at—your viewpoint. I take an interest in you, Miss Robson—a tremendous interest. Good Lord! I can dance one-steps and fox-trots and hesitations as well as anybody! I danced every bit as well as Ned Stillman when we went to dancing-school together. But he always got most of the applause. He *has* an air, I don't deny that, but he's working it overtime.... And he's not in any better position for being friendly to you than I am—*he's* married."

The talk was sobering him a little. Claire was amazed to find that she did not feel indignant. His tone was offensive, but at least it was forthright. Besides, she had known instinctively that some day he would force the issue, and she was rather glad to get it settled. And she began to hope that she could persuade him skilfully against his warped convictions. She was trembling inwardly, too, at the thought that she might make a false step and find herself out of a position. Positions were not easy to land these days. She knew a half-score of girls who had tramped the town over in a desperate effort to find a vacancy. Two or three months without salary meant debts piling up, clothes in ribbons, and no end of hectic worries.

"I think you've got a decidedly wrong impression of my friendship for Mr. Stillman," she said, after some deliberation. "I really know him only slightly. He was good enough, or rather I should say Mrs. Condor was good enough, to include me in a little musical evening. That was on the night you saw me at the Palace. We dropped down for a dance or two after the music was over. I'd never been to such a place before, and I dare say I'll never go again. It was just one of those experiences that come to a person out of a clear sky. It's over as quickly as a shower."

"Oh, don't you worry! There'll be other showers. I'm going to see to that. You know, the more I talk to you the more amazing you are.... Fancy your graduating from dinky church things into Stillman musicales, and Palace dansants, and young Edington, and old lady Condor, all of a sudden ... and getting away with it as if you were an old hand at the game. Say, if you're that apt I'll give you a post-graduate course in high life that'll make your hair curl forty-seven ways. I don't mean anything vulgar or common ... *you* understand. I'm a gentleman, Miss Robson, at that."

He stopped for a moment to ring the bell for the Japanese boy. Claire maintained a discreet silence. She had a feeling that it would be just as well to let him take his full rein. The servant came in and cleared away the empty bouillon-cups. Fish was served.

Flint took one taste of the fish and shoved it away impatiently. "You know, a fellow like me gets awfully bored at all this sort of thing." He swept the room with an inclusive gesture. "Not that my wife isn't the best little woman in the world, but *you* know. She's got standards and convictions and all that sort of rot. I can't bundle *her* off for dinner and a little lark at the Red Paint or Bonini's or some other Bohemian joint like them.... You know what I mean, no rough stuff ... but a good feed, and two kinds of wine, and a cigarette with the small black. Just gay and frivolous.... Of course I can get any number of girls to run around and help eat up all the nourishment I care to provide. But, good Lord! that isn't it! I'm looking for somebody with human intelligence. Not that I want to discuss free verse and the Little Theater movement. But I like to feel that if I took such a crazy notion the person sitting opposite me could qualify for a good comeback.... I like my home and everything, but.... Oh, well, what's the use in pretending? I'm just as human as your friend Ned Stillman and I've got just as keen an eye for class."

He sat back in his seat with an air of satisfaction, waiting for Claire's reply. She had been calm enough while he talked, but under the tenseness of his silent expectancy she felt her heart bound.

"Dammit all! Why don't you say something?" he blurted out. "I know, you need a little wine. I'm going down-stairs and pick out the best in the cellar ... *myself*."

She did not attempt to dissuade him; as a matter of fact, she felt relieved to be left alone for a moment. She must leave as soon as dinner was over. She began to wonder about the trains. The storm was raging outside. She could hear the frenzied trees flinging their branches about and a noisy flood of rain against the windows. She spoke to the Japanese boy as he was carrying away Flint's unfinished fish course.

"Do you know what time the next train leaves?"

He laid the tray on the serving-table. "Please.... I telephone. Please!" He bobbed at her absurdly and went out into the hall. She listened. He was ringing up the station-master. He came back promptly.

"Please," he began, sucking in his breath, "please ... no train to-night."

"No train to-night? Why, what do you mean?"

"Please ... very much water. Train track washed out. No train to-night. To-morrow morning, maybe."

"Oh, but I must go home to-night! I really must! I...."

She broke off suddenly, realizing the futility of her protest.

"To-morrow morning," replied the Japanese, blandly. "All right to-morrow morning. You stay here.... I fix a place. You see.... I fix a very nice place for young lady."

He went out with the tray and Claire rose and walked to the window. Flint broke into the room noisily. She turned—he had two dusty bottles in his hand, and an air of triumph.

"Mr. Flint, it seems that there has been a washout. I understand that no trains are running. What can I do? I must get back; really I...."

"Who says so?" Flint laid the bottles down with an irritating calmness.

"The station-master. Your ... your servant just telephoned for me."

"Oh, well, *we* should worry! Sit down."

"Mr. Flint, really, I must.... You know I can't.... I...."

"Sit *down*!"

His tone was a dash of cold water thrown in the face of her rising hysteria. She sat down. Flint ignored the bottles on the table and, crossing over to the Sheraton sideboard, poured himself a stiff drink of whisky. His hair-towsled condition stood out sharply against the precise background.

He made no further comment, but he began to open the bottles of wine deliberately. Then he rummaged in the china-closet for the wine-glasses and set four, two at his place and two at Claire's, upon the table.

"White wine with the entree and red wine with the roast," he muttered. And he poured out the white wine without further ado.

The servant came in with creamed sweetbreads. Claire forced herself to make a pretense of eating, although her appetite had long since deserted her. She was thinking, and thinking hard.

She should never have come, in the first place—at least she should have turned back upon the strength of Jerry's announcement. But she saw now, with a clearness that surprised her, that the

situation had really challenged her imagination. She had been too calm, too collected, too well-poised, full of smug over-confidence. She had read in the current novels of the day how hysterically unsophisticated heroines conducted themselves in tight corners and she had followed their writhings with ill-concealed impatience. She never had really put herself in their place, but she had had a vague notion that they carried on absurdly. Her fear all evening had been not what Mr. Flint would do or say or even suggest—she had been anxious merely to have the impending storm over, the air cleared, and her position in the office assured upon a purely business-like basis. She had really welcomed the forced issue; for weeks her mind had been entertaining and dismissing the idea that Mr. Flint had any questionable motives in yielding Nellie Whitehead's place to her. With this fleeting trepidation had come the realization of her dependence, the importance her sixty-five dollars a month in the scheme of things, the compromises that she might be forced into accepting in order to insure its continuance; not definite and soul-searing compromises, it was true, but petty, irritating trucklings which wear down self-esteem.

It had been the primitive violence of Flint's commanding, "Sit down!" to thrust the issue from the economic to the elemental. For the first time in her life Claire was face to face with unstripped masculine brutality. She had wondered why women of a lower order took men's blows without striking back, without at least escaping from further torment. But she was beginning to see, as her spirits tried to rise reeling from Flint's verbal assault, the fawning submission, half admiration, half fear, that could follow a frank, hard-fisted blow. And she had a terror, sitting there trying to thrust food between her trembling lips, that the sheer physical force of the male opposite her might shatter in one blow a will that could have withstood any amount of spiritual or material attrition. She had never seen Flint so clearly as at this moment; in fact, she had never seen him *at all*. Formerly, he had been a conventionalized masculine biped in a blue-serge covering who paid her salary and struck attitudes that were symbols of predatory instincts rather than an indication that such instincts existed. Life had, after all, been peopled by the precisely labeled puppets of a morality play; they came on, and declaimed, and made gestures—but they remained abstractions, things apart from life, mere representations of the vices and virtues they impersonated. She had entertained this idea particularly with regard to Flint. She had felt that the day would come when he and she would occupy the stage together. He would speak his part with a great flourish of the hands and much high-sounding emphasis, and when he had finished she would reply with a carefully worded retort, setting forth the claims and rewards of virtue. Thus it would continue, argument succeeding argument, a declamatory give and take, dignified, passionless, theatrical.

They were occupying the stage now, it was true, but there was something warm and human and ragged about the performance. Flint was not a mere spiritless allegory in red-satin doublet and hose to give flame to his conventionality. Instead, she saw sitting opposite her a ponderous, quick-breathing, drunken male, handsome in a coarse, rough-hewn way, speaking in the quick, clipped speech of passion and striking her to the ground with the energy of his stage business. She was afraid, almost for the first time in her life, with a primitive, abandoned fear. And suddenly her vista of womanhood narrowed to include the ugly foreground of life that youth had looked over in its eager, far-flung scanning of the horizon beyond. Suddenly she felt all the oppression and sorrow of the sex bear down upon her and mark her with its relentless finger. Because she was a woman she would pay for every joy with a corresponding sorrow; receive a blow for every caress; know courage and fear with equal intimacy.... She stopped eating and she began to realize with a vivid terror that Flint was looking at her fixedly and beginning to speak.

"What's the matter with the sweetbreads? Don't you like 'em?... And the wine?... Say, I'm going to get peeved in a minute. You don't suppose we serve this French-restaurant style of meal every day do you? I should say *not!* That's another one of the *frau's* convictions. Plain living at home so as to set the right example to the *girls!*" Flint threw his head from side to side, mincing out his last statement. "Gad! I'm tired of setting a good example!... And even Sing gets tired. Chinks, you know, like to cook a bang-up meal once in a while. They like a chance to show their speed and put in all the fancy trimmings."

His mood, during this speech, had changed with drunken facility from irritability to good humor. Claire, still attempting to marshal her wits, picked up her fork again and murmured:

"Oh, you have a Chinese cook, then? I had no idea.... The Japanese boy, you know. They say that the two never get along."

"That's a fairy-tale. Besides, it's next to impossible, these days, to get a Chinese second-boy. And the missus *won't* hire a girl." He winked broadly. "Can't get one ugly enough, I guess. Sing's a wonder. I copped him from the Tom Forsythes. *You* know—young Edington's in-laws. They've never quite forgiven me. Though they *will* come back and tuck away one of his dinners occasionally."

Claire's mind closed nimbly over Flint's statement. "The—the Tom Forsythes of Ross?" she asked.

He nodded and tossed a glass of wine off in one gulp. The Tom Forsythes of Ross ... Edington's sister ... Ned Stillman! The sequence of ideas flashed through Claire's mind with flashing detachment. She leaned back in her seat and raised the wine-glass in obvious pretense to her lips. Flint was watching her keenly: an ugly gleam was in his eyes.

"Well, Miss Robson, you might just as well make up your mind to finish that glass of wine first as last. We're not going to have the next course until you do."

She measured him deliberately. She knew now that it was to be a fight to a finish. She was honestly afraid and full of the courage of realization.

"I've had enough as it is, Mr. Flint. Besides, we must either be getting to work or figuring how I am to make the boat at Sausalito. I suppose you could send me in the car ... with Jerry."

"Oh, with Jerry? So that's it!... No, not on your life! He's too good-looking a boy for a job like that. No, Miss Robson, you are going to stay *right* here.... Now, understand me, I'm not a damn fool! You seem to have an idea that because I've had a glass or two that I've lost my reason. You're an attractive girl and all that, Miss Robson, and I am interested in you! But please don't flatter yourself that I'm staking everything on a throw like this. As a matter of fact, I'll see that you are properly chaperoned. We've plenty of neighbors. You've got the best excuse in the world for staying here and...."

"But, my dear Mr. Flint, can't you see, I...."

"No, I can't. I want you to stay *here*. My reasons are as good as yours. Now let's get that off our mind and enjoy the meal."

His manner struck her protests to the ground again. She was no longer fearing the immediate outcome, in fact, she never had, but she knew that if he broke her to his will now, all the safeguards, all the chaperons, all the conventions in the world wouldn't save her from ultimate consequences. This was the try-out that was to establish her pace in the final contest; she would stand or fall upon the record she made at this moment. For she was trying out something more than Flint's temper, something greater than a mechanical adjustment of human relationships—she was trying out *herself*. She sat for some moments, thinking hard, one hand fingering the slender base of the wine-filled glass in front of her, the other dropped in pensive limpness at her side. Flint had cleared the space in front of him of everything but his two wine-glasses. He had slipped down in his seat and his two bloodshot eyes were fixing her with a level stare.

She stirred finally and rose.

He was on his feet in an instant.

"I'm going to telephone," she said, calmly.

"Telephone ... where?... What's the idea?"

"Mr. Flint," she answered, a bit wearily, "at least I'm a guest in your house, am I not?"

He settled back in his seat with a grunt of acquiescence. She stood dazed for a moment, surprised at the chance that had put such telling words into her mouth. She had been fingering timidly for the key to his chivalry; quite by accident she had hit upon it in the shape of this appeal to her expectations of him in the rôle of host. She could have lied, of course, and told him that she wished to telephone her mother, but she had not yet been cornered sufficiently to resort to so distasteful a weapon.... As she left the room she found herself wondering whether Stillman had by any chance left the Tom Forsythes. She looked at the clock. It was not quite eight o'clock. She felt reassured, yet she was tremendously frightened.... Especially as she realized that the telephone was in the entrance hall within earshot of the dining-room....

She was decidedly more frightened when she got back from her telephoning, and looked at Flint. He was clutching at the table with both hands, his body tilted slightly forward, his lips ominously thin.

"You telephoned to the Tom Forsythes, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you asked for Stillman.... Did you get him?"

"Yes."

"What did you want with him?"

"If you heard that much, I guess you heard the rest, Mr. Flint."

Claire stood at her place at the table. She decided not to sit. Flint bore down on both hands until things began to creak.

"Yes, I heard everything, but, dammit all, I couldn't believe my own ears. You're like every woman I ever knew ... you don't play fair. You appeal to my instinct as host and then you go and outrage every privilege you've got me to concede. You're a pretty guest, you are! And I sit here and let you 'play me for a fool.' Let you ring up Ned Stillman and ask him to fetch you away from *my* house in *his* car!" He stopped and took a deep breath; his words were no longer passionate; instead, they were precise and cool and venomous. "Understand me, young lady, I'm through with you. I wouldn't care, if I thought you were really virtuous. But you're too clever for a virtuous woman.... Oh, I dare say you subscribe to the letter of the law, all right. For instance, you take care not to run around with married men whose incumbrances are in plain view of the audience.... Oh, I've seen lots of clever women in my time, but in the end they always took too much rope. Remember, you'll have your bluff called some day."

He pushed back his chair noisily and rose. The Japanese servant came bobbing along.

"Clear away the things!" Flint bellowed. "We're through!... Good night, Miss Robson, and a pleasant journey to you—you and your *immaculate* friend Stillman."

He left the room with a melodramatic flourish.... Presently Claire heard him mounting the stairs.

"He's drunk!" flashed through her mind, as if the idea had just struck her. "Of course, he must be drunk, otherwise he wouldn't have dared to...."

She went out into the entrance hall and put on her hat.

CHAPTER VII

Midway between Yolanda and Sausalito Stillman's machine died with disconcerting suddenness. The rain was coming down in sheets. Stillman got out.

"It's no use," he announced, lifting himself back into his seat. "I can't do anything in this deluge."

This was the first word that had been said since he and Claire had left Flint's.

"The worst will be over in a few moments," replied Claire, easily. But she was far from reassured.

The deluge was *not* over in a few moments. It kept up with an ever-increasing violence, until it seemed that even the stalled car would be compelled to yield to its force. Claire had never seen it rain harder; the storm had a vindictive fury that reminded her of the dreadful tempest in "King Lear."

Stillman maintained his usual well-bred calm and smoked cigarettes while he chattered. He touched on every conceivable subject but the one uppermost in Claire's mind, until she began to wonder whether delicacy or contempt veiled his conversation. A half-hour passed ... an hour ... two. Still the rain swept from the sullen sky. Twice Stillman made a futile attempt to remedy the trouble with his engine, and twice he retired defeated to the shelter of the car. Claire was relieved that she was in the company of a man who did not emphasize the monotonous hours by indiscriminate raillery against the tricks of chance. At first he dismissed the situation with the most casual of shrugs; later he acknowledged his annoyance by an expression of regret at his companion's discomfort, but he stopped there.

As the hours went on, with no abatement of the storm's devastating energy, Claire grew less and less pleased at the prospect. She began to wonder whether the shelter of Flint's roof had not been, after all, the discreet thing. Was not her headlong flight in company with Stillman more open to criticism than the frank acceptance of her employer's hospitality? But these vagrant questions were the spawn of a colorless spirit of social expediency which fastens itself on weak natures, and in Claire's case they died still-born. She had been too well schooled in loneliness to lean heavily on the crooked stick of public opinion. Accustomed to standing alone, she had something of the spiritual arrogance that goes with independence. People could think what they liked. And it was more a realization of her mother's anxiety than any thought of self which made her suggest to Stillman that they might get out and walk into Sausalito.

"I think the last boat leaves there at twelve-thirty," she finished. "Surely we could make it if we keep going."

Stillman thrust his arm out into the drenching rain, and withdrew it instantly. "I'm afraid that's out of the question, so long as the rain keeps up, Miss Robson," he said, in a tone of implied objection. "Perhaps if it should stop...."

Claire settled back in her seat. Stillman was right. The storm was too furious to be lightly braved.

It was eleven o'clock before a quick veering of the wind brought a downpour so violent that what had gone before seemed little better than a rather weak rehearsal.

"It will clear presently," Stillman assured Claire. "Southeaster always break up in a flurry like this from the west."

In ten minutes the stars were peeping brilliantly through rents in the torn clouds. Pungent odors floated up from the rain-trampled stubble of the hillsides, the air was cleared of its stifling oppressiveness, the first storm of the season was over.

Both Claire and Stillman clambered out at the first signs of the storm's exhaustion. Stillman switched on his pocket-light and began to investigate the trouble with the engine. His decision was swift and conclusive.

"It's hopeless," he announced, turning to Claire with a slight grimace. "We're stalled absolutely and no mistake. I guess we'd better strike out and walk. No doubt we'll get a lift into Sausalito before we've gone very far, but I dare say it's well to be on the safe side."

They rolled the machine to one side of the roadway and struck out hopefully. The rain had made a thin chocolate ooze of the highway, and before they had gone a hundred yards their shoes

were slimy with mud. It appeared that Stillman had been something of an aimless wanderer for many years, and as he talked on and on, giving detached glimpses of the remote places he had visited, Claire had a curious sense of futility.

She read between his clipped and vivid sentences the tragedy of a personality worsted by the soft hands of circumstances. This man might have done things. As it was he was an idler. He gave her the impression of a man waiting vaguely for opportunity—like some traveler pacing restlessly up and down a railway station platform in expectation of the momentary arrival of a delayed train. She tried to imagine him as she felt sure he must once have been—youthful, eager, ardent, a man of charming enthusiasms that just missed being extravagances, who could bring zest to his virtues as well as to his follies.

"Surely," she thought, "something more than inclination must have pushed him into this deadly stagnation."

And at once Miss Munch's insinuating question leaped up to answer:

"You know about his wife, of course!"

Were men put out of countenance by such impersonal tricks of fortune? Impersonal?... this domestic tragedy?... Yes, Claire felt that it must be, otherwise the man tramping at her side would have wrestled so passionately against fate as to have come away at least spattered with the mud of defeat. No, Stillman was not defeated, he was merely arrested, restrained, held for orders.

He had been in London when the war broke out. He had stayed long enough to watch the stolid, easy-going British public awake to the seriousness of the encounter, coming home after the first air raids.

"I didn't mind being killed," he laughed, in explanation of his sudden flight. "But I didn't like being so frightfully messed up in the process. I want a chance to strike back when I'm cornered. The Zeppelin game was too much like a rabbit-drive to suit me."

As he spoke of these experiences, Claire listened with a quickening of the spirit. The prospect of finding Stillman vibrant was too stirring to be denied. But he was still sober on this colossal subject of war ... a bit judicial, always well poised. He had his sympathies, but they did not appear vitalized by extravagances of feeling. Yet here and there Claire was conscious of truant warmths, like brief flashes of sunlight through a somber forest.

"And the draft—what do you think of that?" The question rose to her lips as if his answer might unlock the door to something deeper in the way of convictions.

He began with a shrug that chilled her; then his reply broke with sudden refreshment:

"It helps ... some of us. There are many who can't decide for themselves. The obvious duty isn't always the correct one. In my case...."

He did not stop speaking suddenly, but his voice trailed off into a dim region of musing. They both fell silent. But Claire knew. There was that haunting hope, almost like a fear, that his wife might some day get better. That was what he was waiting for! It might come to-morrow ... next week ... in a year ... never! But when it did come he felt that he must be there, ready. She wondered whether he loved his wife very much, and she found herself hoping that he did.... It would help, somehow ... yes, if that were so his sacrifice gained point. On the other hand.... She put the thought away with a quick thrust, feeling that she had no right to such a speculation, and presently she was aware that they were swinging into Sausalito.

Stillman looked at his watch. Twelve-thirty-five ... just five minutes late for the boat! She could see that he was disturbed.

"I thought sure we'd get a lift," he railed, tossing aside a mangled cigar. "This *is* luck!... I guess we'll have to rout out the Sherwins. It's something of a pull up the hill, but any safe port in a storm, you know."

"The Sherwins?"

"Another one of the Edington girls. They have a bungalow at the very dizziest point in Sausalito."

But Claire objected and held firm. "I couldn't think of it, Mr. Stillman. No, really!... Please don't insist."

They agreed on a lodging for Claire in a freshly painted but otherwise rather decrepit lodging-house, just north of the ferry-slip. Its chief advantage was that it seemed quite too stagnant to be anything but respectable, and the suppressed grumbling of the old shrew whom they routed out confirmed their estimate. She didn't approve of couples who dragged God-fearing old women out of bed at unholy hours in the morning, and it was only the generous tip from Stillman and the assurance that he intended looking elsewhere for quarters for himself that reconciled her to her loss of sleep and the compromise with her convictions.

For a good half-hour Claire sat with folded hands peering out from her room upon the damp hillside to the west. From across the street came the bawdy thumping of a mechanical piano and the swish of a sluggish tide. Her encounter with Sawyer Flint had forced the door of her virginal

seclusion and thrust her at once into the primitive and elemental open. She felt like one who was coming out of voluntary exile to the pathos of a deferred heritage. Before her stretched the eagle's horizon, but she had only the fledgling's strength of wing. She longed for the faith and courage and daring to take life at its word, longed with all the dangerous fierceness of one who had fed too long upon the husks of existence. And, longing, she fell asleep, sitting in a chair before the open window, without thought or preparation....

The morning broke cloudless. All traces of the night's fury were obliterated as completely as sorrow from the face of a smiling child. The sun touched the open spaces with a tender, caressing warmth, but the shadows held a keen-edged chill.

Claire decided upon an early boat to town.

"I'll be less likely to meet any of the California Street crowd," she said to herself, as she picked her brief way toward the ferry.

The boat was crowded, especially the lower cabin. It was the artisans' boat and the air was heavy with the smoke of pipe-tobacco. Claire passed rapidly to the dining-room. Perched upon the high revolving chairs surrounding a horseshoe counter, a score or more of soft-shirted men sat devouring huge greasy doughnuts and gulping coffee. The steward, taking note of Claire's hesitation, came forward and led her to a seat at one of the side tables. She was about to take advantage of the chair which he had drawn out for her when she heard her name called. She turned. Miss Munch's cousin, Mrs. Richards, was sitting alone at the table just behind. Claire's first feeling was one of relief—she was glad to discover an acquaintance. She thanked the steward for his trouble and abandoned the proffered seat for the one opposite Mrs. Richards. Almost at once she regretted her impulsive decision.

"I didn't know you intended staying at Flint's all night," Mrs. Richards began, fixing Claire with a challenging gaze.

"I didn't intend to," returned Claire, her voice sharpened slightly.

Mrs. Richards took the lid off the sugar-bowl and powdered her grapefruit sparingly. "Have they a nice home?" she questioned.

"Yes, very nice."

"They gave you an early start, didn't they?... It's almost impossible to get servants these days to consider such a thing as serving breakfast much before eight o'clock."

Claire glanced at the bill of fare. Mrs. Richards's tone was a trifle too eager. "I suppose it is," Claire assented, placing the menu-card back in its place between the vinegar and oil cruets.

Mrs. Richards remained unabashed at her vis-à-vis's palpable indirectness. "I guess I'm old-fashioned, but, servants or no servants, I don't believe I could let a guest of mine leave the house without breakfast. It seems to me that if I'd been Mrs. Flint I'd have gotten up and made you a cup of coffee myself."

Claire's growing annoyance was swallowed up in a feeling of faint amusement. "Perhaps Mrs. Flint wasn't home," she said, beckoning the waiter.

"Oh!" Mrs. Richards exclaimed with shocked brevity.

It was not until the arrival of Claire's order of toast and coffee that Mrs. Richards found her voice again.

"This business of wives staying from home all night gets me," Mrs. Richards hazarded, boldly. "Why, I never remember the time when my mother remained away overnight ... not under *any* circumstances. My father expected her to be there, and she always *was*."

Claire distributed bits of butter over the surface of her toast. She felt that in justice to the Flint family it was not right for her to give Mrs. Richards's dangerous tongue any further scope, however tempting was the prospect of leaving such venomous inquisitiveness ungratified.

"I think you misunderstood me, Mrs. Richards. I didn't say that Mrs. Flint remained away from home last night. As a matter of fact I didn't stay at Yolanda, so I don't know anything about it."

"Oh!" faintly escaped Mrs. Richards for the second time that morning, but Claire was conscious that there was more incredulity than surprise registered in the lady's tone.

"As a matter of fact," Claire continued, stung to incautious exasperation, "I spent the night in Sausalito."

Mrs. Richards met this information with a disarmingly bland smile. "I didn't know you had friends in Sausalito," she said, letting a spoonful of coffee trickle back into her cup.

"I haven't. I spent the night in a lodging-house ... on the water-front...."

"My dear Miss Robson, really I... Why, I hope you don't think I was inquisitive!"

It was the simplicity of the challenge that made it impossible to be ignored. Claire knew that she was trapped, but she was angry enough to decide on some reservation.

"The storm put the track between Yolanda and Sausalito out of commission," Claire found herself snapping back too eagerly at her tormentor. "We tried to make the last boat by auto, but we got stalled and missed it. We had to walk a good half of the way."

"I shouldn't think that would have done Mr. Flint's cold any good," Mrs. Richards said, drawlingly.

"Mr. Flint's cold?... I don't quite see what that has to do with it."

"Oh, you said 'we' I somehow got the impression...."

"No, Mrs. Richards, you've misunderstood me again." Claire threw a cool, even glance at her antagonist. "I made the trip from Yolanda to Sausalito in Mr. Stillman's car."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Richards for a third time, and in this instance her voice was warm with gratification.

Claire directed her attention to her plate of buttered toast and her cup of coffee. She was chagrined to think that she had fallen so easily into Mrs. Richards's very obvious traps. Not that it mattered. She was quite sure that the truth could not harm Stillman, and she was equally sure that her position in life was too obscure to stand out conspicuously against the darts of Mrs. Richards's vindictive tongue. But she had the pride of her reticences and she did not like to surrender these privileges at the point of insolent curiosity. The two continued to eat in silence.

It was Mrs. Richards who finished first, and she dipped her fingers hurriedly into the battered metal finger-bowl which the Japanese bus-boy thrust before her.

"Do you mind if I go along?" she inquired of Claire, with an air of polite triumph. "I think I'll go forward where I can get a quick start ... before the crowd gets too thick. I've got a million errands to do before nine o'clock. And I *do* want to run into the office before Gertie settles down to work. I haven't seen her for a week and I've got *more* things to tell her!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Why, Miss Claire, how could you! Where have you been? And your mother in such a bad way!" Mrs. Finnegan broke into sudden tears.

Claire, fumbling in her bag for the front-door key, looked up. Mrs. Finnegan had swung open the door to the Robson flat and she stood like a vision of disaster upon the threshold.

"What has happened?" Claire's voice rose with a note of swift apprehension.

"Your mother ... she's paralyzed! She was taken last night. The doctor says it would have happened, anyway. But I say it was worry, that's what it was. With you away all night and never a word!"

Claire climbed the stairs in silence, aware that Mrs. Finnegan was following at a discreet distance. Already the house seemed permeated with an atmosphere of tragedy and gloom in spite of the morning light pouring in unscreened at every window. Mrs. Robson's room was the only exception to this unusual excess of cold radiance—unusual, because it was one of Mrs. Robson's prides to keep her window-shades lowered to a uniform and genteel distance.

Until Claire came face to face with her mother she almost had fancied that her neighbor was indulging in a crude and terrible joke, but one look sufficed. Mrs. Robson lay staring vacantly at the ceiling; she could not move, she could not speak, and her spirit showed through the veiled light in her eyes like a mysterious spot of sunshine in a shaded well. Above a swooning sense of calamity Claire felt the strength of a tender pretense struggling to communicate its vague hope to the stricken form. She raised the window-shade slightly and sat down upon the bed.

"Why, mother, what's all this?" she began, in a tone of gentle banter, as she stroked the helpless hands. "Were you worried? I'm so sorry! I asked Miss Munch to let you know. Didn't she?... I went over to Mr. Flint's to take dictation. The storm washed out the track. I tried to make the boat in Mr. Stillman's car, but we broke down and missed it.... I had to stay all night in Sausalito."

Mrs. Robson, stirring faintly, attempted to speak. Claire turned helplessly to Mrs. Finnegan. "I can't make out what she is trying to say."

Mrs. Finnegan bent an attentive ear. "It's about Stillman," she explained. "Your mother don't understand why...."

The speaker stopped with significant discretion. It was plain to Claire that *nobody* understood, and she felt a dreary futility as she answered both her mother and Mrs. Finnegan with:

"It's a long story. Some other time, when ... when you're feeling better."

A look of gray disappointment crossed Mrs. Robson's face. Mrs. Finnegan's upper lip seemed shaped suddenly with a suspicion that died almost as quickly as it began. There was a ring at the bell. "That's the doctor," said Mrs. Finnegan, and she left to open the door.

The doctor chilled Claire with his steely nonchalance as she stood apart while he went through

the usual forms of a professional visit that was obviously futile. She followed him to the front door. He answered her eager inquiries with the cold triumph of authority.

"How long will she last?... Well, Miss Robson, that is hard to say. She might go off to-night. Then, again, she might live twenty years. She'll scarcely get any better, though. No, a nurse isn't essential, unless you can afford one. But you ought to have another woman about. If you have any relatives you'd better send for them and let them help out."

Claire did not find the doctor's announcement that her mother might die at once nearly so brutal as his assurance that she had an equal chance for existing twenty years. *Twenty years!* Claire closed the door and sank upon the steps overwhelmed.

But there was scant leisure on this first dreadful day of Mrs. Robson's illness for theatrical exuberances. Claire, unaccustomed to the routine of household duties, took a thousand unnecessary steps. She tried to work calmly, to bring an acquired philosophy to her tasks, but she went through her paces with a feverish, though stolid, anxiety. The long night which followed was inconceivably a thing of horror. Her wakeful moments were dry-eyed with despair, and when she slept it was only to come back to a shivering consciousness.

Mrs. Finnegan found her next morning fresh from an attempt to rouse her mother into accepting a few swallows of milk, which had ended in pathetic and miserable failure. She had thrown herself in an abandon of grief across the narrow kitchen table, and the coffee from an overturned cup was trickling in a warm, thick stream to the floor. But the paroxysm did her good. She rose to the kindly caresses of her neighbor like a flower beaten to earth but refreshed by a relentless torrent. After this, custom and habit began to reassert themselves in spite of the crushing weight of circumstance. She 'phoned to the office. Mr. Flint had returned, they told her. She explained her trouble to the cashier. "I'll try to be back the first of the week," she finished, in a burst of illogical hope.

Later in the day Mrs. Robson's two sisters arrived in answer to Claire's summons. Claire's impulse to send for them had been purely instinctive—an atrophied survival of clan-spirit that persisted beyond any real faith in its significance. Perhaps she had a feeling that her mother wished it; certainly she had no illusions as to the manner in which the unwelcome news of Mrs. Robson's illness would be received by these two self-centered females.

It was Mrs. Thomas Wynne who came in first, bundled mysteriously in her furs and holding a glass of wine jelly as a conventional symbol of the rôle of Lady Bountiful which she had for the moment assumed. Claire could almost fancy how conspicuously she had contrived to carry this overworked badge of the humanities, and the languid drawl of her voice as she explained to her friends *en route*:

"So sorry I can't stop and chat. But, as you see, I'm running along to a sick-room.... Oh no, nothing serious, I hope! Just my sister.... Mrs. Ffinch-Brown? Oh, dear no! A younger sister. I don't think you know her. She's had a great deal of trouble and hasn't been about much for a number of years."

Mrs. Thomas Wynne had the trick of intrenching a stubborn family pride by throwing back her head and daring all comers to uncover any of the Carrol clan's shortcomings. But her selfishness had at least the virtue of a live-and-let-live attitude that contrasted with the futile aggressiveness of Mrs. Edward Ffinch-Brown. She asked Claire no questions concerning her life or her prospects; she did not even pry very deeply into the chances that her sister had for an ultimate recovery. Her philosophy seemed to be founded on the knowledge that uncovered cesspools were bound to be unpleasant, and, since she had no desire to assist in their purification, she was quite content to keep them properly screened. She came and deposited her wine jelly and patted her sister's hand and went away again without leaving even a ripple in her wake. As she departed she gave further proof of her insolent insincerity by calling back at Claire:

"Remember, Claire, if there is anything I can do, just let me know."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown's visit was scarcely more comforting, but decidedly more exciting. She had not the suavity of her indifferences. Mrs. Robson's untimely tilt with fate irritated her, and she took no pains to conceal this fact.

"I suppose your mother is just as she's always been—a creature of nerves," she said, as she dropped into a seat for a preliminary session with Claire before venturing upon the unwelcome sight of her stricken sister. "I don't know why it is, but she seems to be one of those people who always has had something the matter with her. Poor Emily! Well, I suppose we are all made differently."

When she entered the sick-room she found fault with the arrangement of the bed, the manner in which the covers slipped off, the uncovered glass of medicine on the bureau.

"You should braid your mother's hair, too. And why don't you pull the window down from the top?"

Claire stood in sullen silence while her aunt vented a personal annoyance on the nearest objects. But when Mrs. Ffinch-Brown's ill-natured ministrations brought a dumb but protesting misery to the sufferer's face, Claire found the courage to say, as gently as she could:

"Why bother, Aunt Julia? Mother is really too sick now to care much about appearances?"

This was just what Claire's aunt had hoped for. It gave her a chance for escape without any strain upon her conscience. She did not remain long after what she was pleased to consider a rebuff.

"Well, Claire, I see I can't be of much help," she announced as she powdered her nose before the shabby hat-rack mirror and drew on her gloves.... After she was gone Claire found a five-dollar bill on the living-room table. She opened the gilt-edged copy of Tennyson that, together with a calf edition of Ouida's *Moths*, had stood for years as guard over the literary pretensions of the household, and thrust the money midway between its covers. Doubtless a time was coming when she would find it necessary to use this money, but the present moment was too charged with the giver's resentful benevolence to make such a compromise possible.

For three consecutive days Mrs. Ffinch-Brown swooped down upon the Robson household and gave vent to her pique. She had been divorced so long from these melancholy relations of hers that she had really forgotten their existence, and she displayed all the rancor of a woman who discovers suddenly a moth hole in the long undisturbed folds of a treasured cashmere shawl. Her precisely timed visits had not the slightest suspicion of attentiveness back of them, and Claire guessed almost at once that they were more in the nature of assaults carried on in the hope that she would meet enough opposition to insure an honorable retreat. Unlike Mrs. Thomas Wynne, Aunt Julia inquired minutely into family matters, insisted on knowing Claire's plans, and was aggressively free with advice.

"You ought to be making plans, Claire," she said, at the conclusion of her second visit. "You can't go on like this. I'd like to be able to do more, but of course I can't spare much time. And next week you'll have to be getting into harness again. You'd better think it over."

And on the next day, finding that Claire obviously had *not* thought it over, she threw out a hint that was little save a thinly veiled threat. She came in with a more genial manner than she was accustomed to waste upon the desert air of penury, and Claire, well schooled in reading the significance of proverbial calms, had a misgiving.

"I've been talking to Miss Morton ... about your mother," Mrs. Ffinch-Brown began, without bothering to lead up to the subject. "You know Alice Morton.... Well, your mother does, anyway. I bumped into her yesterday, quite by accident ... at a Red Cross meeting. It seems she's one of the directors of The King's Daughters' Home for Incurables!" Claire was sitting opposite her aunt, nervously fingering a paper-cutter. Mrs. Ffinch-Brown eyed her niece sharply, and with an obvious determination to drive her thrusts home before her victim recovered from the first vicious stabs she continued: "It seems they haven't a great deal of room out there, but she thinks she could arrange things. They'll raise the price to two thousand dollars after the fifteenth of the month, so I thought that—"

"Oh, not quite yet, Aunt Julia!... Mother has a chance. Surely...."

"Now, Claire, don't get hysterical. You're a business woman and *you* ought to be practical if any of us are. The price to-day is one thousand dollars. Think of it! Care for life in a ward with only *three* others! Now I can't ask your uncle for any more than is necessary in a case like this. If we make up our mind promptly we can save just one thousand dollars."

For the moment Claire felt the harried desperation of a cornered animal. She had never seen anything more disagreeable than her aunt's sidelong glance. She felt herself rise from her seat with cold dignity.

"I'm afraid, Aunt Julia, I can't make up my mind as quickly as you wish. It isn't so simple as it seems. I'm not above a plan like this if I'm convinced it's necessary. But somehow.... Oh, I know what you're thinking—you're thinking that beggars shouldn't be choosers. Well, I'm not quite a beggar yet. But when I am, I won't choose.... I'll promise you that."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown rose also. She was in a position to triumph in any case, and she was washing her hands of the situation with eager satisfaction. "Oh, indeed! I'm glad you can say that *now*. But you weren't always so independent. I suppose it never occurs to you to thank me for what I did when you were younger."

Claire felt quite calm. The events of the past twenty-four hours had wrung her emotions dry. "Yes, Aunt Julia," she said, with an air of cool defiance, "it occurred to me many times.... Perhaps if I'd had any choice...."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown grew pale. "It's plain that I'm wasting my time here!" she sneered.

Claire went with her aunt to the door....

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown did not cross the threshold of the Robson home again, and when on the following day Claire saw the figure of Mrs. Thomas Wynne outlined against the lace-screened front door she let the bell ring unanswered.

The dismissal of the last of the Carrol clan from any participation in the Robson destinies gave Claire a feeling at once independent and solitary. There had been a vague hope that this crisis might germinate some stray seeds of kinship, shriveled by the drought of uneventful years. But the poisonous nettles of memory were the only harvest that had sprung from the presence of Mrs. Robson's sisters, and Claire was glad to uproot the arid product of their shallowness.

The week came to a close with a rush of visitors. Suddenly it seemed as if everybody knew of Mrs. Robson's illness. Fellow church members, old school friends, casual acquaintances began to ring the front-door bell insistently. Knowing her mother's instinctive craving for recognition, it struck Claire that it was the height of irony to see this belated crowd come swarming in on the heels of calamity at the moment when Mrs. Robson was unable to so much as see them. Mrs. Robson would have so liked to sit in even a threadbare pump and receive the homage of her visitors, but fate had been scurvy enough to withhold this scant triumph.

Nellie Whitehead breezed in on Saturday afternoon just as Mrs. Finnegan's cuckoo clock cooed the stroke of three; immediately the air began to move out of adversity's tragic current. It was impossible to be wholly without hope under the impetus of Nellie Whitehead's flaming good humor.

"I'm all out of breath," she began, as she flopped into the first chair that came handy. "I keep forgetting I ain't sweet sixteen any more and never been kissed. I hate to walk slow, though. Don't you? Say, but you *are* up against it, ain't you! I saw that Munch dame on the street and she nearly broke her old neck trying to catch up with me. I wondered what was the matter, because she ain't usually so keen about flagging *me*. But, *you* know, she never misses a trick at spilling out the calamity stuff, especially if it isn't on her.... 'Oh, Miss Whitehead,' she called out before I had a chance to beat it, 'have you heard about Miss Robson's mother?' ...When she got through I fixed her with that trusty old eye of mine and I said, 'I suppose you see her quite often.' And what do you think the old stiff said? 'Oh, I'd like to, Miss Whitehead, but I really haven't had time. You know I'm doing all Mr. Flint's dictation now.' And she had the nerve to try and slip me a hint that she was going to keep on doing it. But I just said to myself: 'You should kid yourself that way, old girl! When Flint picks a bloomer like you to ornament the back office it will be because his eyesight's failed him.' ...By the way, how do you manage to stand him off—with religious tracts or a hat-pin?"

She hardly waited for Claire's reply, but plunged at once into another monologue.

"Do you know what I'm up to? I got my eye on the swellest fur-lined coat you ever saw ... at Magnin's. But you can bet I'm going to keep my eye on it until after the holidays. They want a hundred and a quarter for it now, but they'll be glad to take sixty-five when the gay festivities are over, or I miss my guess. I go in every other day to have a look at it, and when the girl's back is turned I hang it back in the case myself—'way back where everybody else will overlook it. Oh, I know the game all right. I did the same thing with a three piece suit last summer. But I say, All is fair in war and the high cost of living. Maybe you think I haven't had a time scraping the wherewithal for that coat together. But I brought the total up to seventy the other day by getting Billy Holmes to slip me a ten in advance for Christmas. I never trust a man to invest in anything for me if I can help it. They usually run to manicure sets in satin-lined cases or cut-glass cologne-bottles. Billy Holmes?... Oh, you know him! He ran the reinsurance desk at the Royal for years. They put him on the road last week. He's *some* live wire. And what's better, he has no incumbrances. I'll tell you what it is, Robson, I'm getting kind of tired of the goings. I'm just about ready to settle down by the old steam-radiator. And as long as I've got eyesight enough to look the field over, I've decided on a traveling-man or a sea-captain. They'll be sticking around home just about often enough to suit me.... Not that I'm a man-hater, but I've never had 'em for a steady diet and I'm not going to begin to get the habit this late day."

Nellie Whitehead stayed about an hour, and, as Claire opened the front door upon her friend's departure the letter-man thrust an envelope into her hands. She opened it hastily and turned suddenly white.

"Well, Robson, what's wrong now?" inquired Nellie.

"Flint ... he's let me out ... Miss Munch was right!"

CHAPTER IX

On the selfsame Saturday of Claire's dismissal from the office ranks of the Falcon Insurance Company Ned Stillman was the recipient of an early telephone message from Lily Condor. It appeared that Flora Menzies, the young woman who usually accompanied her in her vocal flights, had been laid low with pneumonia and she wanted Stillman to persuade Claire Robson to succeed to the honorary position.

"She did so famously on that night of our musicale," Lily Condor had explained, "and Flora won't be in shape again for a good three months. Of course, there isn't anything in it but glory. I'm just one of those 'sweet charity' artists. But I think she is a dear, and I know that *you* have influence."

Stillman pretended to be annoyed at Mrs. Condor's assumption that his word would carry any weight in the matter, but as a matter of fact he felt pleased in secret masculine fashion. Chancing to pass Flint's office at the noon hour, he dropped in. It happened that Miss Munch was standing near the counter, and she answered his inquiries with suave eagerness.

"Oh, Miss Robson isn't with us any more. She hasn't been here for over a week—not since her mother was taken sick. Oh, I thought you knew. You're Mr. Stillman, aren't you? I've heard my cousin, Mrs. Richards, speak of you. Miss Robson went over to Mr. Flint's on that night of the

storm and she missed the boat or something—you know! And when she got home next morning she found that her mother had worried herself into a stroke. They say she is quite helpless.... I'm sure I don't know what she intends doing. We mailed her check yesterday. It's always hard to land another position when one is dismissed."

Stillman escaped quickly. Miss Munch's venom was a thing too crude and unconcealed to face with indifference. Her emphatic "you know" was pregnant with innuendo and malice. Still, it did not occur to Stillman that he had any part in Claire Robson's misfortune. But he did know from Miss Munch's tone that the unfortunate situation, growing out of the automobile ride from Yolanda to Sausalito, had received due recognition at the hands of those who made a business of blowing out bubbles of scandal from the suds of chance. It was useless for him to deny that Claire Robson from the first had been of more or less interest. She seemed to rise in such a detached fashion from her environment.

He had to admit, as later he sat in the cloistered silences of his club library and blew contemplative smoke-rings into the air, that a certain idle curiosity had been the mainspring of his concern for her. He had been like a boy who captured a strange butterfly and clapped it under a glass tumbler where he could watch how easily it would adapt itself to its new surroundings. But, having caught the butterfly and held it a brief captive, the dust from its wings still lingered upon the hands that imprisoned it. He had made the mistake of imagining that one is always master of casual incidents. To meet a young woman by the most trivial chance, to extend a brief courtesy to her, these were matters which hold scarcely the germs of a menacing situation, not menacing to him, of course—they never could be menacing to him; he was still thinking of things from the viewpoint of Claire Robson.

To tell the truth, he was annoyed at having been mixed up in Claire's flight from the Flint household. Had Flint been a complete stranger he would not have minded so much. He was still divided by the appeal to his chivalry and the sense of loyalty that a man feels to the masculine friends of his youth. In her telephone message Claire had put the matter very casually—the track was washed out and she was wondering whether he contemplated returning to town that evening. But he guessed at once what lay back of her matter-of-fact boldness. He had guessed so completely that he had decided not only to return to town, but to start at once.

He wondered now whether he had answered the appeal because a woman was in a desperate situation or because that woman was Claire Robson. All through the dinner hour at the Tom Forsythes he had thought about her, had speculated vaguely what mischance or effrontery had been responsible for her ill-timed visit to Flint's. He remembered trying to decide whether the young woman was extraordinarily deep or extraordinarily simple and frank. He did not like to concede that he could be influenced by anything so transparently malicious as Mrs. Richards's statements regarding the absence of Mrs. Flint, but he was bound to admit that they did nothing to render the situation less innocent; what had particularly annoyed him was the fact that he should have given the matter a second thought. To begin with, it was none of his business and he was not a man who presumed to judge or even speculate on other people's indiscretions. Claire Robson was no sheltered schoolgirl. She was a full-grown woman, in the thick of business life. Such women were not taken unawares. He had just dismissed the whole affair from his mind on this basis when Claire's telephone message came to him. Even now he marveled at the sense of satisfaction that her appeal had given. But he had found no savor in a situation that compelled him to interfere in Flint's program. Such a move on his part was contrary to his standards, to his training in comradeship, to all his acquired philosophy. He had the well-bred man's distaste for getting into a mess. He abhorred scenes and conspicuous complications.

He had come through the incident with steadily waning enthusiasm and a decision to wash his hands in the future of all such unprofitable trifling. But the sudden knowledge that the young woman was in desperate trouble revived his interest. He had no idea how serious Mrs. Robson's illness was or whether Claire had any hopes for a new position. But Miss Munch's words had been significant. Claire had been *dismissed*, and Stillman knew enough about present business stagnation to conclude that for the time, at least, Claire Robson faced a bleak outlook. He realized the indelicacy of any definite move on his part, but it occurred to him that it might be well to talk the situation over with some one—preferably a woman. As he tossed his cigar butt aside, Lily Condor appealed to him as just the person for the emergency. Therefore he looked her up without further ado.

He found her at home, curled up among the cushions of a davenport that did service as a bed when the scenes were shifted. She was living in a tiny apartment consisting of one room and a kitchenette that gave Stillman the impression of a juggler's cabinet. Nothing in this room was ever by any chance what it seemed. Things that looked like doors led nowhere; bits of stationary furniture usually yielded to the slightest pressure and revealed strange secrets. He had seen Mrs. Condor deftly construct a card-table out of an easy-chair, and he had no doubt that the oak table in the center of the room could have been converted into a chiffonier or a chaise-louge at a given signal.

In repose, it struck Stillman that Mrs. Condor seemed very much like a purring cat. He had never seen her quite so frankly behind the scenes, robbed of both her physical and mental make-up. She was one of those women in middle age who adapt themselves to the tone of their background and while she contrived to strike a fairly vivid note, she took care not to be discordant. She was clever enough to realize that her talents were not sensational and that she could only hope for an indifferent success as a professional. But in the rôle of a gracious amateur

she disarmed criticism and forced her way into circles that might otherwise have been at some pains to exclude her. For, if the truth were known, there had been certain phases of Mrs. Condor's earlier life which were rather vaguely, and at the same time aptly, covered by Mrs. Finnegan's term of "gay." A perfectly discreet woman, for instance, would have made an effort to live down her flaming hair and almost immorally dazzling complexion, but Mrs. Condor had been much more ready to live *up* to these conspicuous charms. In fact, she had lived up to them pretty furiously, until time began to take a ruthless toll of her contrasting points. From the concert-platform she still seemed to discount, almost to flout, the years, but in secret she yielded unmistakably to their pressure.

It was this yielding, pliant attitude that struck Stillman as he came upon her almost unawares on that early December afternoon, a yielding, pliant attitude which gave a curious sense of tenacity under the surface. And he thought, as he dropped into the chair she indicated, that she was a woman who gained strength in these moments of relaxation.

"Fancy your catching me like this!" she said, "I thought when the bell rang that you were my dressmaker.... If you want a highball you'll have to wait on yourself. Phil Edington brought an awfully good bottle of Scotch last night. I declare I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have a youngster or two on my staff. Old men are such bores, anyway, and, as a matter of fact, they never waste time on any woman over thirty. Well, I don't blame them. We're a sorry, patched-up mess at best.... Tell me, did you get hold of Miss Robson?"

"I dropped in, but she wasn't at the office," Stillman replied, tossing his hat on the center-table.

Mrs. Condor withdrew to the relaxation of her innumerable sofa pillows again. "Wasn't at the office? How thrilling! Is she one of the Sultan's favorites?... I've heard Sawyer Flint was an easy mark if you know how to work him. Miss Robson didn't strike me that way, though. But I ought to have known that silent women are always cleverer than they appear."

Stillman caught the barest suggestion of a sneer in Mrs. Condor's tone—the sneer of a woman relinquishing a stubborn hold upon the gaieties.

"Well, I guess Miss Robson didn't know how to work him, as a matter of fact," Stillman said, quietly. "She lost her job to-day. I'm a little bit worried about her.... I came here on purpose to talk the situation over with you."

His directness brought Lily Condor out of her languidness with a sharp turn. She wriggled up and sat erectly on the edge of the davenport, one slippered foot dangling just above the other. "Why, Ned Stillman, what an old fraud you are! I didn't fancy you were interested in *anybody*. I didn't think that you.... Oh, well, throw me a cigarette and let me hear the worst in comfort!"

He opened his cigarette-case and leaned over toward her. She made her choice. He struck a match and she put her hand tightly on his wrist as she bent over the flame and slowly drew in her breath. Even after she had released her grasp his flesh still bore the imprint of the rings on her fingers. For a moment he had an impulse to bow himself out of her presence without further explanation, but already she seemed to have a proprietary interest in him. Her smile was full of friendly malice.

He ended by telling her everything, in spite of the conviction that he had approached the wrong person.

"Of course," she hazarded, boldly, when he had finished, "you mean to help her out."

Her presumption annoyed but rather refreshed him. "I'd like to do something, but, hang it all, what can be done?"

"What can be done? If that isn't like a man! Or I should say, a *gentleman*!... Why don't you plunge in boldly and damn the consequences?... It's just your sort that sends women into the arms of men like Flint. You're so busy keeping an eye on the proprieties that you miss all the danger signals."

Her tone was extraordinarily familiar, and, to a man who rather prided himself upon his ability to keep people at arm's-length, it was not precisely agreeable. Yet he knew that it would be folly to give any hint of his irritation.

"Well," he contrived to laugh back at her, "so far as I can see, Miss Robson's problems are quite too simple. After all, it's largely a question of money.... I can't go and throw gold in her lap as if she were some beggar on a street corner."

"You mean, I suppose, that you are afraid to risk the outraged dignity of this ward of yours. I think that's a lovely name for her. Don't you?... You're acquiring such a benevolent old attitude. The only thing to be done, I fancy, is to adopt some transparent ruse—some sort of Daddy-Long-Legish deception." She closed her eyes thoughtfully—"Hiring her as my accompanist, for instance." She rose to dispense Scotch and soda. Stillman sat in thoughtful silence, while Mrs. Condor talked to very trivial purpose. She seemed suddenly to have grown tired of the subject of Claire Robson. The arrival of the expected dressmaker broke in upon the rather one-sided tête-à-tête.

"You'll have to go," Lily Condor announced with an intimate air of dismissal to Stillman. "It would never do to let a mere man in on the secrets of the sewing-room."

At the door he hesitated awkwardly over his good-by. "I was wondering," he said, "whether you were serious about ... about hiring Miss Robson as your accompanist. You know I think the plan has possibilities."

She threw back her head and smiled with hard satisfaction. "I've been trying to figure if you had killed your imagination. Think it over."

She gave him the tips of her fingers. He returned their languid pressure and departed.

As he drifted down the hall he heard her calling, half gaily, half derisively, after him:

"Don't decide on anything rash now.... Sleep over it!..."

He thought it over for three days and when he called on Lily Condor again he found her divorced from her languishing mood. She was dressed for dinner down-town, and he had to confess she had made the most of what remained of her flaming hair and dazzling complexion.

He felt that she guessed the reason for his visit, although she took care to let him force the issue.

"About Miss Robson," he said, finally, "I've concluded to take you at your word."

Lily Condor smoothed out her gloves and laid them aside. "Take me at *my* word? You're welcome to the suggestion, if that is what you mean. As a matter of fact I wasn't serious."

He was annoyed to feel that he was flushing. He could not fathom her, but he had a conviction that she *had* been serious and that this attitude was a mere pose. "Nevertheless, I think it can be managed," he insisted. "And I want you to help me."

She listened to his plan. "What you will call a Daddy-Long-Leggish pretense," he explained to her with an attempt at facetiousness. "You to do the hiring and ... and yours truly to provide the wherewithal. Until things look up a bit. Of course then ... why, naturally, when things look up a bit for her...."

But Lily remained lukewarm. She wasn't quite sure that it would be ... oh, well, he knew what she meant! It seemed too absurd to think that he had given an ear to anything so extravagant. She would like to be of service to Miss Robson, of course, but, after all, she felt that it was taking an unfair advantage of the girl.

"If she's everything you say she is, she'd resent it all tremendously," she put forth as a final objection.

"But she isn't to know! That's the point of the whole thing," he explained, with absurd simplicity.

"Oh, my dear man, she isn't to know, but she *will*, ultimately. You don't suppose the secret of a woman's meal-ticket is hidden very long, do you? And, besides, you couldn't offer her enough to live on. That would be absurd on the very face of it."

"Oh, well, I could offer her enough to help out a bit, anyway, and half a loaf you know...."

He broke off, amazed at the determination her opposition had crystallized. She looked at him sharply and rose.

"I must be running along," she commented as she drew on her gloves. "I tell you, I'll go call on Miss Robson—some day this week. A woman can always get a better side-light on a situation like this. There are so many angles to be considered. She must have relatives. You wouldn't want to make a false move, would you, now?"

He was too grateful to be suspicious at this sudden compromise with her convictions.

"You're tremendously good," he stammered. "It *will* be a favor. And any time that I can...."

"You can be of service to me right now," she interrupted, gaily. "Order me a taxi ... that's a good boy! I always do so like to pull up at a place in style."

Stillman paid Lily Condor a third visit that week—this time in answer to the lady's telephone message. She had been to see Claire Robson and her report was anything but rosy.

"Her mother's perfectly helpless and will be for the rest of her life," Lily volunteered almost cheerfully. "And, frankly, I don't see what is going to become of them. It seems that Mrs. Robson is a sister of Mrs. Tom Wynne and that dreadful Ffinch-Brown woman. They both have about as much heart as a cast-iron stove. Miss Robson didn't say so in words, but I gathered that she had called both of them off the relief job. I almost cheered when I realized that fact. I threw out a hint about there being a possibility of my needing an accompanist. I said Miss Menzies was ill and perhaps ... and I intimated that there was something more than glory in it."

"And what did Miss Robson say to that?"

"Oh, she was more self-contained than one would imagine under the circumstances. She said she would like to think it over. She put it that way on the score of leaving her mother alone nights. But, believe me, that young lady is more calculating than she seems. Of course I didn't

mention terms or anything like that. I left a good loophole in case you had changed your mind."

For the moment Stillman was almost persuaded to tell Lily Condor that he *had* changed his mind. Not that he had lost interest in Claire, but already he had another plan and there was something disagreeably presumptuous in Mrs. Condor's tone. He never remembered having taken anybody into his confidence regarding a personal matter. The trouble was that he had begun the whole affair under the misapprehension that it was a most *impersonal* thing. He still tried to look at it from that angle, but Lily Condor's manner seemed bent on forcing home the rather disturbing conviction that he had a vital interest in the issue. She had cut in upon his reserve and he would never quite be able to recover the lost ground. He felt that she sensed his revulsion, for almost at once she adroitly changed the subject and it did not come to life again during the remainder of his call.

But when he was leaving she thrust an idle finger into the lapel of his coat and said:

"I think it's awfully good of you, Ned, to be human enough to want to do something for others. I watched you as a young man, and when you married...." His startled look must have halted her, for she released her hold upon him and finished with a shrug.

He said good-by hastily and escaped. But he wondered, as he found his way out into the street, how long it would be before Mrs. Condor would acquire sufficient boldness to discuss with him what and whom she chose.

CHAPTER X

Christmas Day came and went with a host of bitter-sweet memories for Claire Robson. Not that she could look back on any holiday season with unalloyed happiness, but time had drawn the sting from the misfortune of the old days. Through the mist of the years outlines softened, and she was more prone to measure the results by the slight harvest that their efforts had brought. For instance, they had never been too poor to deny themselves the luxury of a tree. And a tree to Mrs. Robson meant none of the scant, indifferent affairs that most of the neighbors found acceptable strung with a few strands of dingy popcorn and pasteboard ornaments. No, the Robson tree was always an opulent work of art, freighted with bursting cornucopias and heavy glass balls and yards of quivering tinsel. The money for all this dazzling beauty usually came a fortnight or so before the eventful day in the shape of a ten-dollar bill tucked away in the folds of Gertrude Sinclair's annual letter to Mrs. Robson. As Claire had grown older she had grown also impatient of the memory of her mother squandering what should have gone for thick shoes and warm plaid dresses upon the ephemeral joys of a Christmas tree. But now she suddenly understood, and she felt glad for a mother courageous enough to lay hold upon the beautiful symbols of life at the expense of all that was hideously practical. Shoes wore out and plaid dresses finally found their way to the rag-bag, but the glories of the spirit burned forever in the splendor of all this truant magnificence, and the years stretched back in a glittering procession of light-laden fir-trees.

Then some time between Christmas and New-Year came the Christmas pantomime at the Tivoli, with its bewildering array of scantily clad fairies and dashing Amazons and languishing princes in pale-blue tights; to say nothing of the Queen Charlottes consumed between acts through faintly yellow straws. How Claire would mark off each day on the calendar which brought her nearer to this triumph! And what a hurry and bustle always ensued to get dinner over and be fully dressed and down to the box-office before even the doors were opened, so that they could get first choice of the unreserved seats which sold at twenty-five cents. Then there would ensue the long, tedious wait in the dimly lighted cavern of the playhouse, smelling with a curious fascination of stale cigars and staler beer, and the thrill that the appearance of the orchestra produced, followed by the arrival of all the important personages fortunate enough to afford fifty-cent seats, which gave them the security to put off their appearance until the curtain was almost ready to rise. And when the curtain really did rise upon the inevitable spectacle of villagers dancing upon the village green! And Mrs. Robson carefully picked out in the chorus the stout sister of a former servant who had worked for her mother! And the wicked old witch swept from the wings on the traditional broomstick! From that moment until the final transformation scene, when scintillating sea-shells yielded up one by one their dazzling burdens of female loveliness and a rather Hebraic Cupid descended from an invisible wire to wish everybody a happy New-Year in words appropriately rhymed, there was no halt to the wonders disclosed. With what sharp and exquisite reluctance did Claire remain glued to her seat, refusing to believe that it was all over! Even at this late date Claire had only to close her eyes to revive the delights of these rather covert excursions into the realm of fancy—covert, because a Tivoli pantomime had not precisely the sanction of such a respectable organization as the Second Presbyterian Church. Mrs. Robson, while not definitely encouraging Claire to wilful dishonesty, always managed to warn her daughter by saying:

"I wouldn't tell any one about going to the Tivoli, Claire, if I were you ... unless, of course, they should ask about it."

Claire, in mortal terror lest any indiscretion on her part would put a stop to this annual lapse into such delightful immoralities, held her peace in spite of her desire to spread abroad the beauties which she had beheld. She had a feeling that all the participants in the pantomime must of necessity be rather wicked and abandoned creatures, and half the pleasure she had felt in

viewing them arose from a secret admiration at the courage which permitted human beings to be so perfectly and desperately sinful. Although she was almost persuaded that perhaps it did not take quite such bravado to be wicked in blue-spangled gauze and satin slippers as it did to lapse from the straight and narrow path in a gingham dress and resoled boots.

The only thrill that the present Christmas Day produced came in the shape of a pot of flaming poinsettias bearing the card of Ned Stillman. These were the first flowers that Claire ever remembered having received. It pleased her also to realize that Stillman had been delicate to the point of this thoroughly unpractical gift, especially as he had every reason to assume that something more substantial would have been acceptable. She was confident that by this time he had heard through Mrs. Condor of her mother's illness and her loss of position. Claire was still puzzled at Mrs. Condor's visit. For all that lady's skill at subterfuge, there were implied evasions in her manner which Claire sensed instinctively. And then Claire was not yet inured to the novelty of being in demand. To have been forced by circumstance upon Mrs. Condor as an accompanist was one thing; to be desired by her in a moment of cold calculation was quite another; and there had been more uncertainty than caution in Claire's plea for time in which to consider the offer. But as the days flew by it became more and more apparent to Claire that she was in no position to indulge in idle speculation. She had long since given up the hope of fulfilling the demands of a regular office position, even if one had been open to her. Mrs. Finnegan's enthusiasm to be neighborly and helpful was more a matter of theory than practice, and it did not take Claire many days to decide that she had no right to impose upon a good nature which was made up largely of ignorance of a sick-room's demands. Claire's final check from Flint was dwindling with alarming rapidity; indeed, she was facing the first of the year with the realization that there would be barely enough to pay the next month's rent, let alone to settle the current bills. She had no idea what Mrs. Condor intended paying, but she fancied that it must be little enough. Surely Mrs. Condor did not receive any great sum for her singing and there must be any number of gratuitous performances. She decided quite suddenly, the day after Christmas, to take Mrs. Condor at her word, and she was a bit disturbed at both the lady's reply and the manner of it.

"Oh," Mrs. Condor had drawled rather disagreeably, "I thought you'd given up the idea. I spoke to somebody else only this morning. But, of course, I'm not certain about how it will turn out. I'll keep you in mind and if the other falls through.... By the way, how is your mother? I keep asking Ned Stillman every day what the news is, but he never knows anything. All men are alike ... unless they've got some special interest. Sometimes I marvel that he looks me up so regularly, but then I've known him ever since.... But there, I'll be telling more than I should! Do come and see me. I'm always in in the morning.... Yes, I can imagine you do have a lot to do. I'm so sorry you didn't call up sooner. But one never can tell. Good-by.... I hope you'll have a happy New Year."

Claire hung up the receiver. Well, she had lost an opportunity to turn an easy dollar or two and she had no one to thank but herself. Why had she delayed in accepting Mrs. Condor's offer?

Fortunately the unexpected arrival of Nellie Whitehead cut short any further repinings. Claire was frankly glad to see her and at once she thought, "She has come to show me her new coat."

But Nellie Whitehead was incased in a wrap that showed every evidence of a good six months' wear.

"My new coat?" the lady echoed, in answer to Claire's question. "There ain't no such animal. Somebody else copped it. I didn't shove it back far enough the last time I took a look at it, I guess. Oh, well, I should worry! I can get along very well without it...."

When Nellie Whitehead rose to leave, dusk had fallen and Claire was fumbling for matches to light the hall gas, when she felt her friend's hand close over hers. There followed the cold pressure of several coins against Claire's palm and the voice of her visitor sounding a bit tremulous in the dusk.

"You'll need some extra money, Robson, or I miss my guess."

Claire fell back with a gesture of protest. "Why, Nellie Whitehead, how could you? It's your coat money, too! Well, *I* never!"

And with that they both burst into tears.... When Claire recovered herself she found that Nellie Whitehead had escaped. She lit the gas and opened her palm. Four twenty-dollar gold pieces glistened in the light.

Next morning Claire received a telephone message from Mrs. Condor. The position of accompanist was hers at forty dollars a month if she desired it.

"It won't be hard," Mrs. Condor had finished, reassuringly. "Some weeks I've something on nearly every night. And then again there won't be anything doing for days.... How can I afford to pay so much? Well, my dear, that is a secret. But don't worry, you'll earn it...."

And toward the close of the week there came another surprise for Claire in the shape of a letter from Stillman, which ran:

MY DEAR MISS ROBSON.—I am going to take a little flier at the bean market.

That was my father's business and I know a few things about it—at least to the extent of recognizing the commodity when the sack is opened. Do you fancy you could arrange to give me a few hours a week at the typewriter? If so, we can get together and arrange terms.

Cordially,

EDWARD STILLMAN.

"At last," flashed through Claire's mind, "he's going in for something worth while."

This time she decided promptly. Over the telephone she made an appointment with Stillman, in his apartments, for beginning work on the second Wednesday in January.

CHAPTER XI

Shortly after the first of the year Claire received her initial summons from Lily Condor—they were to appear at a concert in the Colonial Ballroom of the St. Francis for the Belgian relief. Mrs. Condor had intimated that the affair was to be smart, and so it proved. It was set at a very late and very fashionable hour, and all through the program groups of torpid, though rather audible, diners kept drifting in. Claire was not slow to discover that Lily Condor was first on the bill, and she remembered reading somewhere in a newspaper that among professionals the first and last place were always loathsome positions. Judging from the noise and confusion that accompanied their efforts, Claire could well understand why this was so, and she expected to find Lily Condor resentful. But to her surprise Mrs. Condor merely shrugged her shoulders and said:

"What difference does it make? They don't come to listen, anyway. Besides, I always open the bill. I like to get it over quickly."

But Claire had reason to suspect, as she followed the remainder of a very excellent program, that the choice of position did not rest with Mrs. Condor. Claire began to wonder how much money Mrs. Condor received for an effort like this. And she became more puzzled as she gathered from the conversation of the other artists about her that the talent had been furnished gratuitously.

"I understand," she heard a woman in front of her whisper to her companion, "that Devincenzi, the 'cellist, is the only one in the crowd who is getting a red cent. But he has a rule, you know—or is it a contract? I'm sure I don't know. At any rate, they say that the Ffinch-Browns donated his fee.... The Ffinch-Browns? Don't you know them?... See, there they are ... over there by the Tom Forsythes. She has on turquoise pendant earrings.... Oh, they're ever so charitable! But they do say that she is something of a...."

Claire lost the remainder of this stage whisper in a rather tremulous anxiety to catch a glimpse of her aunt before she moved. Claire had to acknowledge that at a distance her aunt gave a wonderful illusion of arrested youth as she stood with one hand grasping the collar of her gorgeous mandarin coat. But Claire was more interested in the turquoise pendants than in her aunt. She had never seen the jewels before, but she had heard about them almost from the time she was able to lisp.

"They're mine," Mrs. Robson had repeated to Claire again and again. "My father bought them for me when I was sixteen years old. I remember the day distinctly, and how my mother said: 'Don't you think, John, that Emily is a little young for anything like this? I'll keep them for her until she is twenty.' I nearly cried myself sick, but of course mother was right, *then*.... But like everything else, I never got my hands on them again. And what is more, Julia Carrol Ffinch-Brown knows that they are mine as well as anybody, because she stood right alongside of me when I handed them over to mother. Not that I care.... It's the principle of the thing!"

Claire felt disappointed in the pendants. They seemed so insignificant—to fall very far short of her mother's passionate description of them, and she began to wonder which was the more pathetic, Mrs. Robson's exaggerated notion of their worth or the pettiness that gave Aunt Julia the tenacity to hold fast to such trivial baubles.

Ned Stillman was in the audience, also. Claire saw him sitting off at the side. Indeed, she spotted him on the very moment of her entrance upon the stage. She had been nervous until his friendly smile warmed her into easy confidence; and though, while she played, her back had been toward him, she felt the glow of his sympathy. As Lily Condor and she swept back upon the stage for their rather perfunctory applause, and still more perfunctory bouquets provided by the committee, Claire could see him gently tapping his hands in her direction, and she was surprised when the usher handed her a bouquet of dazzling orchids.

"They must be for you," Claire said, innocently enough, to Mrs. Condor. "I don't find any name on them."

"That shows that you've got a discreet admirer, at any rate," Lily Condor returned with that bantering sneer which Claire was just beginning to notice. And the thought struck her at once that Stillman had sent the flowers. She was pleased, but also a little annoyed to think he had so

deliberately ignored Mrs. Condor.

The Flints were there, too; Flint looked uncomfortable and warm in his scant full-dress suit and his wife frankly ridiculous in a low-cut gown that exhibited every angle of a hopelessly scrawny neck. Claire did not see them until she was leaving the stage, and she smiled as she saw Flint lean over and pick up the opera-glasses from his wife's lap. But this was not all. In a far corner sat Miss Munch and her cousin, Mrs. Richards, their ferret eyes darting busily about and their tongues clicking even more rapidly. Doubtless Flint had invested in a number of tickets at the office for business reasons and passed them around for any of the office force who felt a desire to see society at close range.

Claire had not meant to stay beyond one or two numbers following her own appearance, but she kept yielding to Mrs. Condor's insistent suggestions that she "stay for just one more," until she discovered, to her dismay, that it was past midnight. The last artists were taking their places upon the stage. Claire resigned herself to the inevitable and sat out the remainder of the performance. She was making a quick exit into the dressing-room when she came face to face with her aunt. Mrs. Ffinch-Brown betrayed her confusion by the merest lift of the eyebrows, and she stepped back as if to get a clearer view of her niece, as she said with an air of polite surprise:

"You—*here?*"

Claire carried her head confidently. "I was on the program," she returned, consciously eyeing the turquoise pendants.

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown rested a closed fan against her left ear as if to screen at least one of the earrings from Claire's frank stare. "Oh, how interesting! I must have missed you—I came in late. It's rather odd. I thought I knew everybody on the program.... I helped arrange it."

"Well," Claire smiled, "I wasn't what you would call one of the head-liners. I played Mrs. Condor's accompaniments."

"That accounts for it ... my not knowing, I mean. I dare say your mother is better, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Claire met her aunt's thrust calmly. "No, mother is worse, if anything. As a matter of fact, I'm here...."

She broke off abruptly, realizing suddenly that she had left her orchids behind. She turned to discover Stillman making his leisurely way toward her. He had the orchids in his hand.

"My dear Miss Robson," he said, gently, "Mrs. Condor came very near appropriating your flowers."

She could feel the color rising to her forehead. "I see you came to my rescue again," she said, simply, taking them from him. "I think you know Mr. Stillman, Aunt Julia."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown forced a too-sweet smile as she gave Stillman a nod of recognition. "Fancy any girl forgetting so much gorgeousness!" she exclaimed with an attempt at lightness, but Claire caught the covert rancor in her voice, and as her aunt made a movement of escape she put out a restraining hand and said:

"I wanted you to know, Aunt Julia, that I'm here merely as a matter of business. Mrs. Condor has hired me to play her accompaniments."

Mrs. Ffinch-Brown shook off Claire impatiently. "*Hired* you!" she sneered. "How extraordinary!"

And with that she swept past, giving Stillman a glance of farewell.

Claire turned to Stillman. "What must you think of me? Leaving my flowers behind. Confess—it was you who sent them.... I was in such a rush to get away, though. I shouldn't have stayed so long. My mother is alone.... Of course there are neighbors just below and they will look in on her, but just the same...."

His smile reassured her. "Are you forgetting about to-morrow?" he asked. "Remember we are to begin business promptly at two o'clock. I hired a typewriting-machine yesterday. I'm really thrilled at the idea of—of going into business."

She looked at him steadily as she gave him her hand: "My dear Mr. Stillman," she said, quite frankly, "you are very kind."

He answered by pressing her hand warmly and she covered her face with the purple orchids. They were interrupted by Lily Condor sweeping rather arrogantly toward them.

"Haven't you gone yet?" she asked Claire. "I thought you were in a hurry! I hope you've persuaded Ned to get us a taxi. I hate street-cars at this hour." And in answer to Claire's embarrassed protest that she had never given such a thing a thought, Mrs. Condor finished: "Well, I've given it a thought, and don't you forget it. Come, Ned, is it a go?"

Claire fancied that a flicker of annoyance passed over Stillman's face as he answered, with a dry laugh:

"You might at least have given me time to prove my gallantry."

"I'm not taking any chances," was the prompt reply.

Claire turned away. What had contrived to give Mrs. Condor this disagreeable air of assurance toward Ned Stillman, she found herself wondering. It had not been apparent at the Condor-Stillman musicale....

She arrived home dismayed to find the front room illuminated, but the rattle of the departing taxi brought Mrs. Finnegan to the top of the stairs with a laughing apology.

"I just looked in to see how your mother was, Miss Claire, and I found a book on the front-room table"—Mrs. Finnegan held up Ouida's *Moths*—"and I got so interested in it that I just naturally forgot to go home. Finnegan's out, anyway. I was telling him about your good fortune. And all he said was: 'Well, it beats me how an old crow like Mrs. Condor gets paid for singing. I remember five years ago, when she wasn't so uppish, we had her for a benefit performance of the Native Sons, and she didn't get paid then. Her singing may be over my head. Anyway, it didn't get to my ears.' But Finnegan is always like that. He just likes to contradict. I got back at him. I said, 'Well, if she can afford to pay Miss Claire forty a month for playing the piano, she must get a good piece of money every time she opens her mouth.' ...Mercy, look at the orchids! Well, you must have had a swell time. I'll bet you wouldn't like to tell who sent them.... There wasn't any card? That's not saying you don't know, Miss Claire.... I hope you won't think I'm a meddler, but I'm an older woman and.... Well, just you keep a sharp eye on the feller that sends you orchids, Miss Claire."

She went down-stairs without further ado. Claire put the orchids in water and set them on a sill near an open window. She did not feel in the least resentful of Mrs. Finnegan's warnings. She was too confident to be anything but faintly amused at her neighbor's middle-class anxiety. But Finnegan's skepticism concerning Mrs. Condor annoyed her and she remembered the disagreeable words of her aunt:

"*Hired* you? How extraordinary!"

"Two o'clock *sharp*!" The memory of Stillman's air of delicate banter as he emphasized the hour for beginning his business venture struck Claire ironically the more she pondered his words. She had a feeling that there was something farcical in the prospect, and yet there seemed nothing to do but to go through with the preliminaries. She presented herself, therefore, at the appointed time at the Stanford Court apartments.

She found Stillman quite alone, his hands blue-black with the smudge from a refractory typewriter ribbon which he was vainly endeavoring to adjust. It took some time for him to get his hands clean again, and Claire sharpened her pencils while she waited. But there really proved to be nothing to do.

"I'm all up in the air over this bean business," Stillman confessed, nonchalantly. "The government, you know ... they're taking over all that sort of thing ... regulating food and prices. Of course, in that case...."

Claire felt an enormous and illogical relief. "Then you really won't need me," she ventured.

"Oh, quite the contrary.... I have a certain amount of business, of a sort. And I'm tired of dropping checks along the trail of public stenographers.... Suppose we talk terms. We haven't fixed on any salary, yet."

Claire felt a rising impatience. His subterfuge seemed too childish and obvious. "That will depend on how much of my time you expect, Mr. Stillman."

"Well, three times a week, anyway ... to start with. Say Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from two to five.... I was thinking that something in the neighborhood of fifteen dollars a week would be fair."

He turned a very frank gaze in her direction and she quizzically returned his glance.

"That's rather ridiculous, don't you think?" she said, trying to disguise her furtive annoyance. "You can hire a substitute through any typewriting agency on the basis of three dollars a day."

"Yes, and I can buy two cigars for a nickel, but I shouldn't want to smoke them."

She clicked the keys of her machine idly. "That is hardly a fair comparison. You can get any number of competent girls for three dollars."

He rested his chin on his upturned palm. "But, my dear Miss Robson, I happen to want *you*."

She thought of any number of cheap, obvious retorts that might have been flung back at his straightforward admission, but instead she said, with equal frankness:

"That's just what I don't understand."

He threw her a puzzled look and the usual placid light in his eyes quickened to resentful impatience.

"Is that a necessary part of the contract, Miss Robson?"

She caught her breath. His tone of annoyance was sharp and unexpected. There was a suggestion of Flint's masculine arrogance in his voice. She felt how absurd was her cross-

examination of him, of how absurd, under the circumstances, would have been her cross-examination of anybody ready and willing to give her work to do and an ample wage in the bargain, and yet, for all the force of his reply, she knew it to be a well-bred if not a deliberate evasion.

"You mean it is none of my business, don't you?" she contrived to laugh back at him.

His reply was a further surprise. "Yes, precisely," he said, with an ominous thinning of the lips.

She rose instinctively to meet this thrust and she was conscious that even Flint had never managed so to disturb her. She glanced about hastily as if measuring the room in a swift impulse toward escape. Stillman had chosen the dining-room for a temporary office, and upon the polished surface of the antique walnut table the typewriter struck an incongruous note; indeed, it was all incongruous, particularly Stillman and his assumed business airs. Yes, it was absurd for her to either cross-examine or protest, but it was equally absurd for him to pay her such an outlandish sum for nine hours a week.

"He's doing it for me," she thought, not without a sense of triumph. Then, turning to him, she said, a bit awkwardly:

"I guess there isn't any use to dissuade you, Mr. Stillman. If you say fifteen dollars a week, I sha'n't argue with you."

He smiled back at her, all his former suavity regained. She slid into her seat again. Her mind was recalling vividly the one other time in her life when she had grappled vigorously with the masculine spirit of domination, and come away victorious. This time she had been defeated and she had impulses toward relief and fear. She looked up suddenly and trapped a solicitous glance from Stillman that rather annoyed her. And it struck her, as she mentally compared Stillman with most of the men of her acquaintance, how far he could have loomed above them if he had had the will for such a performance. As it was he fell somewhat beneath them in a curious, indefinable way. Had he been too finely tempered by circumstances or had the flame of life lacked the proper heat for fusing his virtues effectively? For the moment she found Flint's forthright insolence more tolerable than Stillman's sterile deference. Suddenly she began to think of home, not with any sense of security, but as something unpleasant, dark, disquieting....

CHAPTER XII

Toward six o'clock one afternoon in late February Ned Stillman, making his way from the business district at California and Montgomery Streets toward his club, suddenly remembered a forgotten luncheon engagement for that day with Lily Condor.

"Well," he muttered at once, "I'm in for it now! I guess I might as well swing out and see her and get the thing over with."

It was curious of late how often he was given to muttering. Previously, petty annoyances had not moved him to these half-audible and solitary comments which he had always found contemptuously amusing in others. He wondered whether this new trick was the result of his business ventures, his sly charities, or his approach toward the suggestive age of forty. Associating the name of Lily Condor with his covert charities, he was almost persuaded that they lay back of this preposterous habit. And the more he thought about it the more he muttered and became convinced that Lily Condor was usually the topic of these vocal self-communings.

Ned Stillman had always prided himself upon his sense of personal freedom concerning the trivial circumstances of life. Of course, like any man of sensibility, he was bound by the chains that deeper impulses forge, but he had never been hampered by any restraints directed at his ordinary uprisings and downittings. In short, he had answered the beck and nod of no man, much less a woman, and he was not finding Lily Condor's growing presumptions along this line altogether agreeable.

He would not have minded so much if there was any personal gratification in yielding to the lady's whip-hand commands. There are certain delights in self-surrender which give a zest to slavery, but there is no joy in being held a hostage. Looking back, Stillman marveled at the indiscretion he had committed when he handed over not only his reserve, but Claire Robson's reputation into the safekeeping of Lily Condor. Had he ever had the simplicity to imagine that a woman of Mrs. Condor's stamp would constitute herself a safe-deposit vault for hoarding secrets without exacting a price? Well, perhaps he had expected to pay, but a little less publicly. He had not looked to have the lady in question ring every coin audibly in full view and hearing of the entire market-place, and yet, if his experience had stood him in good stead, he must have known that this was precisely what she would do. Stillman's hidden gratitude, his private beneficences, did not serve her purpose, but the spectacle of him in the rôle of her debtor was a sight that went a long way to establishing a social credit impoverished by no end of false ventures.

Her command for him to take her to luncheon—and it had been a command, however suavely she had managed to veil it—bore also the stamp of urgency. Usually she was content to lay all her positive requests to the charge of mere caprice, but on this occasion she took the trouble to intimate that there was a particular reason for wanting to see him. It did not take him long to conclude that this particular reason had to do with Claire Robson. That was why he yielded with

a better grace than he had been giving to his troublesome friend's disagreeable pressure.

Stillman knew that while Lily Condor was not precisely jealous of the younger woman, she was distinctly envious—with the impersonal but acrid envy of middle age for youth. The episode of the orchids still rankled. He had to admit that in this instance his course had been tactless, but he had ignored Mrs. Condor as a challenge to the presumption which he had already begun to sense. She, while seeming definitely to evade the real issue, had answered the challenge and he had paid for his temerity a hundredfold. She had reminded him again and again in deft but none the less positive terms that she was keeping a finger on the mainspring of any advantage that came her way. Sometimes Stillman wondered whether she would really be cattish enough to betray his confidence and bring Claire Robson crashing down under the weight of the questionable position into which his indiscretion had forced her. Would she really have the face to publish abroad the pregnant fact that Ned Stillman was providing what she had been pleased to designate as a meal-ticket for a young woman in difficulty? For himself he cared little, except that he always shrank instinctively from appearing ridiculous.

He had been thinking a great deal of late as to the best course to pursue in ridding himself and Claire of this menacing incubus. He had a feeling that Claire, having exhausted the novelties of her position as accompanist to Lily Condor, was beginning to find the affair irksome.

The business venture had progressed in quite another direction from his original intention. Suddenly, without knowing how it had all come about, he found his plans clearly defined. The government needed him. Somehow, it had never occurred to him that he could be of service at a point so far from the center of war activities. He had been a good deal of an idler, it was true, but the seeds of achievement were merely lying in fallow soil.

At first, he had been stung into action more by Claire's accusing attitude than anything else. She used to come every other afternoon at the appointed time and almost challenge him by her reproachful silence to do something, if only to provide her with an illusion. It was as if she said:

"See, I have given in to you. I know that you are doing this for me, and I am deeply grateful. But won't you please make the situation a little less transparent? Won't you at least justify me in the eyes of those who are watching our little performance?..."

It had all ended by his offering his services to the Food Administration. He knew something of his father's business. He felt that he had a fair knowledge of beans, and he could learn more. He merely asked a trial, and it surprised him to find what a sense of humility suddenly possessed him. He was really overjoyed when a place was assured him. But he had to admit that his acceptance was not accorded any great enthusiasm. The newspapers mentioned it in a scant paragraph that was not even given a prominent place. He had received greater recognition for a brilliant play upon the golf-links! Well, in such stirring times he was nobody. He did not complain, even to himself, but the knowledge subconsciously rankled.

He hired an office down-town, joined the Commercial Club, religiously attended every meeting that had to do with food conservation, hunted out, absorbed, appropriated all the economic secrets that served his purpose.... Suddenly he found himself engrossed, enthusiastic, *busy!* Finally Claire said to him one day:

"Don't you think I ought to come to you every afternoon?"

"If you can arrange it," he almost snapped back at her.

She did arrange it, how he took no pains to inquire, and a little later she said again:

"You ought to have some one here all day. I guess you will have to look for another stenographer."

He remembered how menacingly he had darted at her. She was dressed for the street, on her way home, and she had halted at the door.

"Do you want to desert the work that you've inspired?" he demanded.

"Inspired?... By *me*?" Her voice took on a note of triumph.

"You didn't fancy that *I* inspired it, did you?" he sneered at her.

His vehemence confused her. "I hadn't thought.... Really, you know.... Well, as you say.... But, of course, it is absurd when you can get any number of girls to...."

"But suppose I want *you*?" he demanded of her for a second time.

She left without further reply.

When she was gone he found himself in a nasty panic. It was as if the lady who had called him to her lists had suddenly decided upon a new defender.

"Is she tired of it all ... or is there some one else? Can it be possible that Flint...."

He had stopped short, amazed to find his mind descending to such a vulgar level. What had come over him? And he began to fancy things as they once had been—empty, purposeless days, and nights that found him too bored to even sleep. It seemed incredible that he could go back to them again. What lay at the bottom of his sudden deep-breathed satisfaction with life? For an

instant, the truth which he had kept at bay with his old trick of evasion swept toward him.

"No ... no," he muttered. "Oh no!... That would be too absurd!"

But when he had gone to the mirror to brush his hair before venturing on the street he found thick beads of perspiration on his forehead and his hand shook as he lifted the comb.

The next day he told Claire that in the future her salary would be twenty dollars a week. He stood expecting her to rail against the increase, to try to put him to rout by explaining that she had received less for a full day's work at Flint's. But to his surprise she thanked him and went on with her work.

It was shortly after this that he began to haunt the various performances in which Lily Condor and Claire appeared. He always contrived to slip in during the first number, which as a rule happened to be Mrs. Condor's offering, and he sat in a far corner where nobody but that lady could have chanced upon him. But he never knew her to fail in locating him, or to miss the opportunity to sit out the remainder of the program at his side, or to suggest crab-legs Louis at Tait's, particularly if Claire were determined upon an early leave-taking. The effect of all this was not lost upon the general public, and it was not long before men of Stillman's acquaintance used to remark facetiously to him over the lunch-table:

"What's new in beans to-day?... Are *reds* still a favorite?"

Stillman would throw back an equally cryptic answer, thinking as he did so:

"What a wiggling I must be getting over the teacups! I guess I'll cut it all out in the future."

But he usually went no farther than his impulsive resolves.

Sometimes he wondered what Claire thought of his faithful appearance. Did she fancy that he came to bask in the smiling impertinences of Lily Condor?

As he made his way to a street-car on this vivid February afternoon, he called to mind that of late Claire had been bringing a fagged look to her daily tasks. He hoped again that Mrs. Condor's desire to see him had to do with Claire—more particularly with her dismissal as accompanist. Miss Menzies had quite recovered and there was really no reason for Claire to continue in her service. It struck him as he pondered all these matters how strange it was to find him concerned about these feminine adjustments—he who had always stared down upon trivial circumstances with cold scorn.

He arrived at Lily Condor's apartments almost upon the lady's heels. Her hat was still ornamenting the center-table and her wrap lay upon a wicker rocker, where, with a quick movement of irritation, it had been cast aside.

Her greeting was not reassuring. "Oh...." she began coldly. "Isn't this rather late for lunch?"

"I'm really very sorry," Stillman returned as he took a chair, "but to be frank, I quite forgot about you."

"Well," she tried to laugh back at him, "there isn't any virtue as disagreeable as the truth. I expected you would at least attempt to be polite enough to lie."

"I hope you were not too greatly inconvenienced," he said, in a deliberate attempt to ignore her irritation.

"I waited two hours, if that is what you mean. But then, *my* time isn't particularly valuable."

He rose suddenly. "I've told you that I was sorry," he began coldly, reaching for his hat. "But evidently you are determined to be disagreeable. I fancied you wanted to see me about something urgent, so I came almost as soon as I remembered."

She snatched the discarded wrap from its place on the wicker rocker as she glared at him. "You're in something of a hurry, it seems.... Well, I sha'n't detain you. The truth is there's a pretty kettle of fish stewed up over this young woman, Claire Robson.... I want you to tell her that she can't play at the Café Chantant next Friday night."

"Want *me* to tell her? I don't see where I come in.... Why don't you tell her yourself?"

"Because I don't choose to.... Besides, I think you might do it a little more delicately. I can't tell her brutally that she isn't wanted."

"Isn't wanted? Why, what do you mean?"

"The committee informs me that she isn't the sort of person they are accustomed to have featured in their entertainments. It seems that Mrs. Flint...."

"Mrs. Sawyer Flint?"

"Precisely."

"What is her objection?"

"Do you really want me to tell you?"

"Why not?"

"It appears that some time last fall Miss Robson tried to get her husband into a compromising position. She came over to the house one night when Mrs. Flint was away. Flint promptly ordered her out. It seems she went ... to be quite frank ... with *you*. And what is more, she...."

"It isn't necessary for you to go any farther. Tell me, do you mean to say that you believe this thing? Didn't you lift a hand to defend her?"

Lily Condor narrowed her eyes. "Oh, come now, Ned Stillman, don't be a fool! You know as well as I do that I'm hanging on to my own reputation by my finger-nails. I'm not taking any chances. As to whether it is so ... well, if I were to tell the committee everything I know it wouldn't help her cause any. I could wreck her reputation like that," she snapped her fingers, "with one solitary fact. If she hasn't wrecked it already with her senseless chatter.... Only last week her aunt, Mrs. Finch-Brown, said to me: 'So you're hiring my niece! I must say that is handsome of you!' You were sitting talking to Claire and she looked deliberately at you when she said it. Remember how I warned you, last December. I told you then that the secret of a woman's meal-ticket was never hidden very long."

During this speech Mrs. Condor's voice had dropped from its original tone of petty rancor to one of petulant self-justification. Stillman knew at once that her ill-temper had caught her off-guard and she was already trying to crawl slowly back into his favor. She had meant, no doubt, to soften her news over a glass or two of chilled white wine which she had counted on sipping during the noon hour. She might even then have gone farther and decided to cast her fortunes with Stillman and Claire if she had seen that her advantage lay in that direction. He was not sure but that she still had some such notion in her mind. But he felt suddenly sick of her past all hope of compromise, and he was determined to be rid of her once and for all.

"No doubt," he said, frigidly, "you will be glad to be relieved of Miss Robson's presence permanently. I take it that you don't consider her association exactly ... well ... shall we say discreet?"

Her eyes took on a yellow tinge as she faced him. She must have sensed the finality of his tone, the well-bred insolence that his query suggested.

"Discreet?" she echoed. "Well, I wouldn't say that that was quite what I meant. Desirable—that would be better. I don't find her association desirable.... I don't *want* her, in other words."

He had never been so angry in his life. Had she been a man he would have struck her. He felt himself choking. "My dear Mrs. Condor," he warned, "will you be good enough to take a little more respectful tone when you speak of Miss Robson?"

"Oh, indeed! And just what are your rights in the matter? You're not her brother ... you're surely not her husband. And I didn't know that it was the fashion for a...." His look stopped her. She trembled a moment, tossed back her head, and finished, defiantly, "Yes, that is what I want to know, what *are* your rights?"

He took a step toward her. Instinctively she retreated.

"A woman like you wouldn't understand even if I were to tell you," he flung at her.

She covered her face with both hands.

He left the room.

He himself was trembling as he reached the street—trembling for the first time in years. As a child he had been given to these fits of emotional tremors, but he had long since lost the faculty for recording physically his intense moments. Or had he lost the faculty for the intense moments themselves, he found himself wondering, as he walked rapidly toward his home. The evening was warm with the perfume of a bit of truant summer that had somehow escaped before its time to hearten a winter-weary world against the bitter assaults of March. Birds of passage sang among the hedges, the sun still cast a faint greenish glow in the extreme west.

His first thought was of the cowering woman he had just left. He had meant to lash her keenly with his verbal whiplashes, but he had not expected to find her quite so sensitive to his cutting scorn. He remembered the gesture with which she had lifted her hand as if to screen herself from his insults. There was a whole life of futile compromise in just the manner of that gesture, a growing helplessness to give straightforward thrusts, a pitiful admission of defeat. But he knew that this surrender was temporary—a quick lifting of the mask under a relentless pressure. Tomorrow, in an hour, in ten minutes, Lily Condor would be her dangerous self again, lashed into the fury of a woman scorned. For a moment he did not know whether to be relieved or dismayed at the prospect of Mrs. Condor for an enemy. How much would she really dare?

He thought with a lowering anger of Flint. He had been ready to concede everything but this former friend in the rôle of a cheap and nasty gossip. No—gossip was a pale, sickly term. Flint was a malignant toad, a nauseous mud-slinger, a deliberate liar. He had heard of men who had justified themselves with vile tales to their insipid, disgustingly virtuous wives, but he had not counted such among his acquaintances. By the side of Flint, Lily Condor loomed a very paragon of the social amenities.

Stillman was conscious that his mental process was keyed to the highest pitch of melodrama. It was not usual for him to indulge in mental abuse. He had never quite understood the dark and

moving processes of red-eyed anger. There had been something absurd in the theatrical hauteur of his manner in this last scene with Mrs. Condor—that is, if it were measured by his own standards. His growing detachments from life had claimed him almost to the point of complete indifference. But now, suddenly, as if Fate had dealt him an insulting blow upon the face with her bare palm, he felt not only rage, but a sense of its futility, its impotence.

"Flint!" he thought again. And immediately he spewed forth the memory of this man in a flood of indiscriminate epithets.

Later, in the refuge of his own four walls and under the brooding solace of an after-dinner cigar, he lost some of the intensiveness of his former humor. But the force of the vehemence which had shaken him filled him with much wonder and some apprehension. He was too much a man of experience to deny questions when they were put to him squarely by circumstances.

"You're not her brother ... you're surely not her husband. And I didn't know it was the fashion for a...."

Lily Condor's clipped question struck him squarely now. Just what were his expectations concerning Claire Robson? The thought turned him cold. Essentially he was of Puritan mold, but he had always had a theory that love of illicit pleasures must have been uncommonly strong in a people who found it necessary to fight the flesh so uncompromisingly. Battling with the elements upon the bleak shores of New England contributed, no doubt, to the gray and chastened spirits that these grim folks had won for themselves; spirits that colored and sometimes seeded swiftly under the softer skies of California. San Francisco was full of these forced blooms consumed and withered by the sudden heat of a free and traditionless life. He knew scores of old-timers—his father's friends—who had been gloriously wrecked by the passion with which they met freedom's kiss. They had pursued pleasure with an energy overtrained in wrestling with the devil and had paid the penalty of all ardent souls lacking the prudence of weakness. There was at once something fine and unlawful about the spirit of adventure: it implied courage, impatience of restraint, wilfulness—in short, all the virtues and vices of strength. He had felt at times the heritage of this strength, shorn of its power by the softness of a wilderness that had been wooed instead of conquered. His forefathers had found California a waiting, gracious bride, but there had been almost a suggestion of the courtesan in the lavishness of this land's response to the caresses of the invaders.

There was something fantastic in the memory of his father, fresh from the austere dawns of the little fishing village of Gloucester, transplanted suddenly to the wine-red sunsets of the Golden Gate. He felt that his father must have had the courage for substance-wasting without the temptation. Most men in those early days had plunged unyoked into the race—Ezra Stillman brought his bride, and therefore his household goods, with him, and unconsciously custom drew its restraining rein tight. Ezra Stillman came from a long line of salt-seasoned tempters of the sea; their virtues had been rugged and their vices equally robust; sin with them had been gaunt, sinewy, unlovely; there was nothing insinuating and soft about the lure of pleasure in that silver-nooned environment. Ezra had been the first of this long line to turn his back upon the sea, and the land had rewarded him lavishly as if determined to make his capture complete. Yet, he was not landsman enough to wrest a living direct from the soil; instead, he set up his booth in the market-place of the town and trafficked in spoils of the field, in full view of the impatient ships tugging at their anchor-chains. While others dug for gold, or garnered the yellowing grain, or built railroads, Ezra Stillman sat in his modest office and sold beans and potatoes and onions, playing the rôle of merchant, husband, and father with genial and unsensational success—a man of potential lawlessness, robbed of all wolfish tendencies by the sobering influence of domestic responsibility, after the manner of a shepherd-dog broken to guard the flock.

Ned Stillman used to wonder how much of this smoldering lawlessness had been transmitted to him; for was not there an added heritage from his thin-lipped mother who came of as hardy and masterful a stock as her husband?

Smoldering lawlessness—to-night the phrase struck him sharply. He had failed at many points, but he had held uncompromisingly to his duty, almost with a fury of self-conscious puritanical fanaticism. His wife ... yes, he had always done his duty by her—more than his duty. Then, what was to prevent him from gathering such flowers as he might.... Up to a point he could still play the game squarely. *Up to a point!*

He turned in futile anger and weariness from such thoughts to the tinkling refuge of the evening paper.... Ah, the Russian Ballet was opening at the Valencia Theater on Friday night! A fragrant memory of Paris blew in upon the breath of this announcement—Paris, eternally young and as eternally glamorous! And glancing swiftly at the next column, he chanced upon a full account of this tiresome Café Chantant business that had occasioned so much bother ... *for the benefit of the French Tobacco Fund*—France again!

Suddenly he grew thoughtful.

"A box for the Ballet and a table for the Café Chantant.... I'll ask Edington and his sister ... that ought to make things look right.... Gad! how the old ladies will stare!"

He threw the paper down and, as he chuckled, little malicious gleams darted from his eyes. He would show them, all of them! And as for *her*... What did he expect?... He wanted her, wanted

her, *wanted her!* And yet.... Smoldering lawlessness.... Yes ... he would chance everything now, even that.

CHAPTER XIII

The Russian Ballet opened with what was called on the program, "A ballet comi-dramatic by Waroslav Nijinsky, entitled '*Till Eulenspiegel*.'" It would have been more to the point to have scheduled it as a pantomime; at least, such a course would have proved somewhat illuminating to an audience a little in the dark concerning the nature of the entertainment to be set before it. San Francisco, schooled in the memory of hectic opera seasons with their inevitable pirouetting, tarlatan-skirted ballets, had come to the performance with a rather set notion as to what it had a right to expect. True, barefoot dancers by the score had swept in upon the town, and it had been ravished by the combined charms of Pavlova and Mordkin, but all of these novelties at least had ministered to an unsophisticated desire to see the principals starred in big type on the program and constantly in the limelight. Therefore when the curtain fell upon a ballet that was neither danced nor postured, and with the leading dancer of the troupe remaining in the picture instead of an arresting and flamboyant spot upon it, there was little wonder that the applause was at once perfunctory and puzzled.

Neither the dancers nor their new art was any novelty to Ned Stillman. He had seen both in Paris, and again in New York. But he had to confess that this third view was proving the most enjoyable of all, and he was amused and a trifle supercilious at the air of frank disapproval throughout the audience. Indeed, he became so interested in analyzing his fellow-townsmen's attitude that momentarily he forgot his box party was a challenge to any and all who cared to interest themselves in discovering his guests.

So far he had not been conscious of a single pair of opera-glasses turned their way and he began to feel at once cheated, but, if the truth were told, a trifle relieved. He knew almost as soon as he had committed to the venture that it was cheap and in bad taste, and yet he could not bring himself to the point of acknowledging his mistake. He had an uncomfortable feeling also that Claire Robson was facing the ordeal of a box with silent heroism, not that she was a woman vulgar enough to dread a conspicuous position in itself, but because she had an instinctive sense of what was fitting. He had not mentioned a box party when he had first asked her. He merely had said:

"How would you like a night off Friday?"

"A night off? I'm scheduled for a turn with Mrs. Condor."

"Well, and if she should be willing to let you go?"

She had assented eagerly, and when he mentioned the Russian Ballet she gave a cry of delight.

"Edington and his sister, Mrs. Forsythe, are going, too," he explained, rather hastily. "I.... I got a box this morning."

"A box?" Her voice had risen dubiously.

"There's nothing else left that is decent," he had lied to her.

But he saw that she was far from happy at the prospect, although she was too proud to voice any further protests.

Curiously enough, even Phil Edington had demurred.

"A box? What's the big idea? Why don't you get some seats in the orchestra?... Oh, I don't care a rap! Do as you want, but I thought that perhaps...."

At that point he had begun to grow irritated; he decided obstinately that his guests would either go in a box or remain at home.

Well, they had come in a box, and the audience appeared to be ignoring them. He had expected something more brilliant in the way of an assembly, but the house was dressed, on the whole, rather illy for the occasion, as San Francisco audiences quite often are. To begin with, the Valencia Theater was out of the beaten path, and a heavy rain was falling. This had the effect of making the prudent and frugal, who were denied the comfort of either limousines or taxis, decide on street costume instead of evening fripperies. Only the very smartest people could afford to ignore the elements, and even these were obliged to withstand the chill of a draughty playhouse by snuggling close into their opera cloaks and thus concealing the bare throats and flashing jewels that a more comfortable environment might have disclosed. On the whole, he was disappointed. One of his reasons for deciding upon a box was to give Claire the treat of a scintillating audience seen from a perfect vantage-point. But he had forgotten that his native town rarely dazzled the spectators except for grand opera at staggering prices, and even then there were always plenty of recalcitrant males in their business suits to spoil the picture. San Francisco had not yet reached the point where its men consciously and as a whole dressed for the occasion; there was still the sneer of effeminacy directed at those who insisted on taking seriously the matter of suitable raiment.

To-night Claire had made an effort at extreme simplicity. She was in severe black, open slightly

at the throat, and a large artificial pink rose added a single note of color. Having no jewels, she wore none, and her hair fell away from her brow in a grace utterly natural and charming. He had always thought of her hair vaguely as dark—to-night, standing just behind her where the light searched out its half-tones, he discovered glinting bits that ran all the way from burnished copper to shining gold. During the first number she sat slightly forward, intent on letting no detail escape. When the curtain fell upon the whimsical Till dangling from a gibbet in the medieval market-place, Stillman leaned forward and said:

"What do you think of it?"

He did not realize how much it meant to have her strike just the proper note, until his heart bounded with satisfaction at her frank and unstudied answer:

"I really don't know, Mr. Stillman. It's so different. You see, I was looking for something more...."

She stopped suddenly as if it occurred to her that, after all, she could not say precisely just what she had been looking for. "But it's tremendously interesting, of course," she hastened to add.

He glowed even at her eagerness to make him understand that she was finding her very indecision a joy.

"Yes, it was the same with me ... at first," he reassured her. "I've seen this all before, you know ... abroad and in New York. Not precisely this act, but something along the same lines."

"I almost missed placing Nijinsky," she hesitated. "It was all rather mystical and vague.... And those subdued lights.... I wish I could see it all again, now that I've caught my breath. It ... it rather...."

"Dazzles one," supplemented Stillman, leaning nearer and nearer.

A tremor ran through her and he realized with a start that his breath was falling heavily upon her bare neck. He drew back. Mrs. Forsythe had stopped in a casual survey of the house to fix upon an object of interest. She dropped the glasses into her lap as she turned toward Stillman:

"Who can that be, down there in the lower box, staring so at us?" she asked, indicating the position with an exaggerated glance.

Stillman stood up.

"The man with the bald head?" he heard Claire volunteer. "Why, that is Mr. Flint—Mr. Sawyer Flint."

"Why, yes, of course," he caught Mrs. Forsythe drawing in a tone of self-confessed stupidity. "Anybody ought to know him."

"Or his wife," broke in Edington. "One can't miss her.... Now, *she's* getting the habit. I declare everybody seems to be interested. I guess it's you, Miss Robson. You must be the attraction."

"The orchestra has come back," Stillman announced, deliberately. "What's next?"

"*Papillons*,' a ballet in one act," Edington called out, reading from his program.

"Music by Robert Schumann," supplemented Mrs. Forsythe.

"Ah, now we shall see the wonderful Bolm!" Stillman said to Claire. "They say he's the finest pantomimist on the stage." She turned slightly toward him with a movement of appeal. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Just Flint," she answered, grasping his wrist in a swift, backward gesture. "He keeps on staring."

"What? Shall we change places?"

"No. That would be too.... It's no matter. What did you say the star's name was?... There, the curtain is going up!"

Stillman fell back, but as he did so he took a sweeping survey of the lower box. Flint was still staring, and his wife was doing a great deal of vehement talking and head-shaking to the other women sharing their hospitality.

"*Papillons*" proved more in the conventional manner and it was charmingly danced by a score of pretty girls in early-eighteenth-century costume, and wonderfully acted by Bolm in the character of Pierrot. The audience warmed unmistakably at this number, and, the draughts somewhat subsiding, a few venturesome ladies decided to shed their wraps. Chatter became more general and less controversial; the house began to look about, taking note of itself, assuming the critical airs of a peacock staring at its own reflection. Opera-glasses circled the occupants of the boxes, and Stillman tried to single out all those who let their gaze linger an insolent length of time upon his party. But the occupants of Flint's box kept casting furtive glances in Claire's direction, and Flint himself continued to look up every now and then, reaching for the glasses, which always seemed in his wife's possession, every time he did so. Stillman felt his anger rising. He knew that Claire was annoyed, but she had recovered her poise and began to

talk enthusiastically about the second number.

"I understood that better." She smiled at Stillman. "I know the music, too. That always helps a great deal, don't you think?... What a tragic face Bolm has! I thought his gesture of remorse at having broken the butterfly's wing wonderfully expressive. Didn't you? The costumes were quaint and lovely. Oh, I can't tell you how glad I am that I came!"

"*La Princesse Enchantée*," a duet featuring Nijinsky, came next, and a gorgeous spectacle entitled "Cleopatra" concluded the performance. By this time the audience had recovered its good-nature and it poured forth into the violent shower with much animation and no end of laughter. Stillman had ordered his car for eleven o'clock, but through some mischance it was at least fifteen minutes late in appearing. This meant that his party stood huddled in a little group by the box-office railing, and every one who passed gave them either casual or pointed glances. Claire, lacking a suitable wrap, looked rather disconsolate and dowdy in a long black ulster. Stillman felt annoyed. As luck would have it, the Flints were for some reason in the same predicament. They had swept bravely past to their intended swift departure, only to find the call for their car unanswered, and had fallen back on the opposite side of the foyer. Over the sea of faces the two groups stood and unconsciously glared at one another—at least Stillman glared for his party, and Flint, sensing his friend's antagonism, returned the compliment with added insolence.

Stillman's car came first.

Mrs. Forsythe, starting on ahead with Edington, called a gay farewell across the now empty entrance-way to Mrs. Flint. The latter responded with freezing politeness. Stillman gave Claire his arm. Flint broke into a laugh and turned with a shrug to his wife.

Stillman heard the laugh and stopped short. He released Claire's arm and left her standing almost in the drip of the awnings as he turned and walked rapidly toward Flint.

"Will you be good enough to quit staring?" he said distinctly. "Your attentions to my party have been extremely annoying all evening."

Flint looked at first stunned, then rather frightened. Stillman was conscious that Edington had come up to him and was pulling at his coat sleeve.

Mrs. Forsythe and Claire were just stepping into the machine when the two men followed. Stillman took his place beside Claire and he felt the trembling pressure of her body as he reached over and slammed the door. Mrs. Forsythe made no comment.... It was Edington who broke the silence.

"That Russian stuff may be art," he broke out, "but I'll take a George M. Cohan rag-time revue any day!"

Stillman's brush with Flint was only the beginning of a series of misadventures. At the Café Chantant it happened that the Flint table was next to the Stillman party. Flint had recovered his bravado and he ordered another table in unmistakable tones. It followed that every one in the room turned their attention to the late-comers, and it was not long after Flint had been escorted in triumph to a remote location that Stillman became aware how many eyes were being turned at him and Claire Robson.

Presently Lily Condor sang, accompanied by Miss Menzies. Stillman knew that she had sighted them with her usual keen eye, but he also saw that she was determined to ignore Claire's friendly glances. When she finished she swept from the improvised platform and walked deliberately past Stillman, seating herself at the table which the Flints had deserted. Miss Menzies followed. Claire, turning after them with a wistful look of recognition, bowed to Lily Condor as she took her seat. The lady stared coldly ahead and beckoned a waiter. Claire blushed.

"What do you suppose," she said in a low voice to Stillman. "Are you quite sure it was all right ... my deserting Mrs. Condor to-night? Perhaps I ought to have rung her up myself. But you said...."

Stillman ordered wine. Edington chattered flippantly. Dancing commenced. Stillman pushed back his chair and said to Claire:

"Shall we begin?"

She rose in answer, and they swung into a one-step. He could feel her trembling under the glances which he realized were coming from every part of the room. What was she imagining, he wondered. As they circled about for the second time, Stillman became conscious that some one was walking across the floor in a deliberate attempt to waylay them. He stopped. Mrs. Finch-Brown stood before them. She had a deceitfully sweet smile on her lips and her small eyes were full of malicious determination.

"My dear Mr. Stillman ... will you excuse me?" she said. "I want a word with Claire ... about something important. Otherwise I shouldn't have interrupted. You'll understand."

He released Claire and she went to the edge of the dancing-space. Mrs. Finch-Brown turned her back upon Stillman, but Claire's face was unshielded from his gaze. Whatever Mrs. Finch-Brown was saying, Claire made no reply. The younger woman paled a trifle, Stillman thought, but

otherwise she gave no sign. She returned to Stillman and they finished the dance. As he held her hand, he could feel her pulse beating with something more than the exertion of dancing.

Edington had been taking a turn himself with his sister.

"Did you know," he volunteered by way of conversation, "that there had been a devil of a row among the women running this show? Sis says that she understands they almost pulled one another's hair in committee over some performer that Mrs. Flint didn't think desirable. That woman and her prejudices are a scream! I'll bet it was some pretty girl caught making eyes at the old man. Well, here's looking at you!"

They all lifted their glasses. Claire's hand trembled.

After that things grew more and more confused. He was wondering what Mrs. Finch-Brown had found to say to her niece, and staring at Claire, when she leaned over toward him with a gesture of apology and said:

"I don't want to break up your party, Mr. Stillman, but really I think I must be going. My mother, you know.... She wasn't so well to-day. It doesn't seem right for me to stay here enjoying myself ... under the circumstances."

It had ended in their all leaving, Mrs. Forsythe pleading boredom and Edington insisting that he had planned to get home fairly early to go over his draft questionnaire.

"When you see me again, Miss Robson, it's just possible that I'll be a very grand party in uniform," Edington had announced, lightly, as they rose from the table.

In the coat-room he said to Stillman:

"You ought to go slow, Ned.... That Miss Robson is a nice girl."

"Slow? What do you mean?"

"Just what I say.... She's a nice girl, I tell you—a damned nice girl!"

Stillman smiled disagreeably.... He remembered a time when he would have resented Edington's cryptic insinuations, but now he merely smiled, a wide smile, which a betraying mirror duplicated unpleasantly. At the departure of Edington and his sister he turned to Claire significantly:

"Are you really ready to go home?"

She turned a very candid gaze upon him. "No, I can't say that I am."

"Where shall it be, then?"

"Anywhere," she answered, almost passionately. "Anywhere at all."

"Let's go to Tait's ... *first!*"

She assented indifferently, and presently Tait's was an accomplished pilgrimage. They had chosen to go up-stairs to the Pavo Real. At this hour there was still a fair crush going through the motions of dancing upon a crowded floor and the scene assaulted Stillman's perceptions with a suggestion of flashy squalor. It seemed an impossible place in which to indulge a mood, but he suffered the steward to find them a small table in a far corner. He ordered a Bénédictine and brandy for himself, Claire compromised on a crème de menthe, frappéed. The pale green of this last rather innocuous drink shone out like a bit of liquid jade against the black of Claire's gown as she bent over for a momentary sip. To Stillman there had always been a heavy-lidded suggestion about the stilly-green beauty of jade, a beauty glamorous with the Orient, white-heated as noon and as cold as the yellow glances of the moon. And, sitting there, he remembered the family tradition of a Stillman in the days when the first ships had come from China, their holds bursting with strange treasures and the haunting odors of sandalwood, a Stillman who brought a slave-girl back to affront and shock the staid provincials of his native town.... Presently the green liquid was gone and only the cool, white trickle of melting ice remained in the tiny glass opposite his. Claire moved this symbol of spent delights to one side.

"I suppose you know," she said, calmly, "why I left the Palace Hotel to-night."

He was not sure.

"My aunt asked me to leave.... She was very polite about it ... and very cutting. It appears I'm not quite their sort."

"No?" Stillman found himself laughing uneasily. "How gratified you must be!"

She put out a hand across the table, laying it lightly on his arm.

"Listen. It's really nothing to be flippant about.... Not that I care, in a way. But really, you know, you should have told me about—about that little arrangement with Mrs. Condor."

"Ah, then they dragged that in, too!" escaped him. "Your aunt must be a rapid talker!"

"Oh, it doesn't take long to cover the ground when one female relation decides to be nasty to another.... And, then, I'm not quite a fool—*now*.... Understand, I'm not blaming you ... but it would

have been fairer if I had known."

He leaned forward eagerly. "Would you, in that case, have...."

"It's possible," she broke in suddenly. "Of course I've suspected something from the first ... and ... well, as a matter of fact...." She shrugged and reached again for her frappé, sliding a cherry from the crumpled straw, drooping over the glass's rim, toward her mouth. Stillman found the gesture charming, but he was not sure whether her answer suited him or not. Of course, she had seen through and accepted the transparencies of his first business ruse. But she also had subtly urged its justification. In this case.... In other words, she *might* accept gratuities under pressure! He felt that he was narrowing his spiritual eyes as he watched her cutting the bright red of the cherry with her white lips.

"And then," she went on, suddenly, touching the soft ice in the glass before her with a shrinking finger, "aside from everything else, what you planned to-night was stupid.... How could you have imagined that I cared."

"That *you* cared!" He felt that he was laughing with sneering bitterness. "Do you always think of *yourself*? How about me? What if *I* cared? It's possible, you know—just possible!"

She brought her hands suddenly up in a movement of clasped defense. He hung on her reply with white-lipped eagerness.

"Possible?..." she echoed. "They say anything is possible, but ... somehow men...."

She threw him a glance of thinly veiled mockery. His tension relaxed. She had merely parried the blow and he felt disappointed.

"I realize now," she went on, "what a frightful nuisance I've been.... The first time we met.... I was in trouble then, I remember. That sort of thing grows to be a habit.... You meant it for the best, of course, but this time you pushed me in pretty far ... I mean into your debt. I wish I knew how I could repay you."

"I'm willing to accept a deferred payment," he chaffed. "I'll take your note.... I'm very patient at waiting."

She looked at him clearly, almost too clearly, as if in one flashing moment she saw behind the mask of his banter.... He began to wonder ... had he hoped to have her flinch, recoil, or was this cool calm more acceptable?

"I see," she was saying, "you're determined to plunge me in deeper and deeper, until one day ... well, one day I'll be a bankrupt, won't I?"

He leaned across the trivial width of the table and he put two burning hands upon her icy-cold fingers. "Ah, but think how rich *I* shall be!"

She said nothing. She did not even draw back from his scorching touch. But this time she lowered her eyes, twisting in her left hand the crumpled straw divested of its gaudy sweetmeat.... She was a tired woman, he could see that plainly—a tired woman ... considering. And he was not even moved to pity.

"Come," he said, roughly. "Let's get out of *this* ghastly hole."

She rose with a fluttering movement that gave him the impression of a trapped bird. They made their way out in silence. A great primitive eagerness struck down every acquired virtue within him. He put his hand at her elbow and held it tight. He felt that she had clenched her fist.

In the doorway she shrank back suddenly as he stood waiting to lift her into the flaming yellow taxi answering their call. He retraced his steps.

"What.... Are you ill?"

"No ... for the moment I thought I saw.... Really it's of no consequence!"

He narrowed his eyes upon her. She was lying ... it was of consequence! He felt very ugly.... A man had just brushed past and now he stood with a finger upon the elevator bell, waiting.

Claire darted out and gained the taxi.... Stillman followed. As he swung open the door for her he felt her almost leap into its depths. Once inside, she faced him, barring the eagerness of his entrance with a defiant arm.

"Go away!" she cried, in a sudden terror. "Go away! Can't you see?... It's all over, I tell you!"

"All over?" He squared himself doggedly.

"Yes," she said, thickly. "Go away.... You had better go ... to ... *to your wife!*"

He fell back as if she had given him a sharp push. His hat had fallen to the ground. He stooped to pick it up. He heard the door slam and saw the taxi shoot forward into the sadly glamorous beauty of the night.... He was alone!

He strode back into the café entrance. The man was still waiting before the door of the tardy elevator. Stillman went up and put an insinuating hand upon his shoulder. The man turned.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Stillman stammered. "I thought you were.... I see I am mistaken. Pray forgive me!"

A flash of white teeth answered Stillman's apology. The door of the elevator opened. The stranger entered.

Stillman turned away. Where had he seen that face before? Where?... Oh yes, the Serbian who had....

He felt cold.... The whole thing was absurd. Yet, she had seen some one who.... He lit a cigarette.... Suddenly he laughed a smothered, choking, unpleasant laugh.

He decided to go home.

Book II

CHAPTER I

"It ain't exactly what you would call a society job, Robson, but it will pay the milkman and the baker, and that's something."

Nellie Whitehead kicked off a shoe that she had unbuttoned, resting her unshod foot upon a chair as she sighed with luxurious satisfaction.

Claire Robson began to draw down the shades. A cold March rain was falling outside and Claire felt that her shabby living-room seemed less bleak with the night shut out. For the past three weeks Nellie Whitehead had been the only point of contact with the outside world and Claire had grown to listen eagerly for the three quick rings at the door-bell which announced her solitary visitor. There was something about Nellie Whitehead which usually revived Claire's drooping spirits to an extraordinary degree, but to-night she felt no reaction to the slightly acrid optimism of her friend.

"A job?" Claire questioned, incredulously, seating herself. "I'm ready for anything in reason. Only.... Well, the truth is, the Finnegans are moving. I heard about it to-day. I'll have to hire some one to look after mother, and...." Her hands lifted and dropped in hopeless resignation.

"It ain't an office job," pursued Miss Whitehead; "it's playing the piano. You know that little friend I told you about who sings at Tait's?... Well, she had an offer to sing in the same place. But of course she's in pretty soft where she is."

Nellie Whitehead was not given to indirectness, and Claire had a feeling that for some reason her friend was finding it advisable to lead up to her project rather cautiously.

"I'm ready for anything," she repeated.

Nellie Whitehead settled back comfortably. "I suppose I might just as well quit beating around the bush. You see, it isn't such a snap for the real professional ... otherwise it wouldn't be going begging. It's ... it's in a Greek café on Third Street."

A Greek café on Third Street! Claire Robson stared in amazement at her friend. For a moment she had a feeling that Nellie Whitehead must be joking. Claire Robson had heard of such places. Professional reformers always found them a perennial source of exploitation when the vice crop in other quarters failed, and every now and then the newspapers discovered, to their horror, that young and tender girls were being hired to serve Turkish coffee and almond syrup to the patrons of the Greek coffee-houses. Indeed, Claire had once listened to an eager young woman describe for the young people's section of the Home Missionary Society all the pitfalls to the weaker sex which lurked in this godless section of the community where men drank thick coffee and smoked cigarettes and even kissed pretty girls on provocation. Claire had never been prone to pass snap judgment, but the very word Greek had an outlandish sound, and it seemed quite possible that everything that had been said about the evils of the Greek quarter must have some basis. Even the term Greek labor which she chanced upon again and again in the daily news was full of sinister suggestion. And she had a flashing picture of this café in search of a pianist crowded with heavily-booted, sweating humanity fresh from construction-camps and fields.

"Well ... I don't know," she finally faltered. "I fancy they won't find *my* playing to their taste."

Nellie Whitehead sat up challengingly. "You mean you don't find playing in a Greek café to *your* taste.... As a matter of fact, I'm not keen about suggesting such a thing to you. But lots of girls make a living that way, and even if they don't move in select circles they're pretty human."

"Oh, it isn't the café side of it," Claire protested; "it's the ... the...."

"The Greek side of it, eh? Well, as a matter of fact, Robson, I guess a Greek café ain't any worse than what my little friend calls 'one of them gilded vice-cages....' And even at that, any girl who lasted six weeks in the private office of Sawyer Flint, Esquire, has run up against as much fancy roller-skating as she's apt to. If you managed to keep your balance on a slippery floor like that, I

guess you'll be good for a spin on the asphalt pavement any day in the week. It may be a little bit rougher, but it ain't a bit more dangerous. In fact, I shouldn't wonder whether there wasn't a good deal more elbow room."

Nellie Whitehead leaned back again and closed her eyes. Claire was silent. There was no logical answer to her friend's shrewd estimate, but prejudice dies hard and Claire was still in the bondage of a vague distrust for the unknown.

"Good Lord! I know how you feel!" Miss Whitehead went on with a sudden genial air of understanding. "I remember when I had my first Italian dinner at Lombardi's. I thought the man who invited me had a grudge against my appetite. Honest, in those days if you mentioned spaghetti most folks thought you were talking about a deadly disease. And now...." Nellie Whitehead finished with an eloquent and descriptive sweep of hands.

Claire put a thoughtful finger to her lips and was silent. After all, what did it matter where she worked or what she did? She felt a dangerous indifference, a negative contempt for life.

"I guess you're right," she said, finally, with a sudden hardening of voice that made Nellie Whitehead look up quickly. "One can get accustomed to almost anything. Where did you say the café was?"

Claire went next morning before nine o'clock to look up the Greek café on Third Street. It was a raw, blustering, traditional March day, and she pulled her shabby cloak about her in a vain attempt to shut out a chill which seemed somehow to be clutching at her very heart. It was years since she had ventured south of Market, and she was surprised to find its old atmosphere quite vanished. She remembered the section of the town beyond Mission Street as a squalid mass of tumbledown houses out of which issued a perennial stream of shawl-cloaked women carrying empty white pitchers to the nearest corner grocery and retracing their steps with the pitchers half hidden in the folds of the aforesaid shawls, from which dripped betraying flecks of foam. Third Street was now by no means an opulent thoroughfare, but it had the virtue of a certain cheap newness. The frowsy women were no more. It was undeniably a street of men, stretching out in a succession of lodging-houses, saloons, and cheap eating-places. Past Howard Street the Greek coffee-houses began. Claire looked in at them curiously. In the drowse of morning they seemed very lifeless and still. She noted, as she passed, the prim rows of marble-topped tables with their old-fashioned call-bells for signaling the waiter, the window-plants turning sickly green faces toward the sun, the line of Oriental water-pipes setting in their racks over the coffee-shelves. One café seemed very much like another, and in spite of the extreme simplicity of their equipment they contrived to shed an air fascinating and strange.

Claire hurried on, eager to be through with the suspense of this plunge into bizarre life which she could not realize would ever be her portion. She was carrying the whole thing through in a spirit of bravado, and she was conscious that her hopes leaned unmistakably toward finding the position filled or her qualifications not up to the mark. Her glimpses into the coffee-houses led her to expect that the café she was in search of might be some such place. She was surprised then to come upon a totally different institution in the shape of what appeared to be a saloon as she halted before the number that corresponded to the address on the card she was carrying. Café Ithaca—she read the sign twice before venturing through the swinging doors.

A long mahogany-colored bar ran the full length of the room; small tables fully set for a meal filled the rest of the floor space. Claire decided at once upon retreat. But suddenly at the back of the room a green curtain parted and a man came toward her. He had a pale, round face and a mass of black hair that reminded Claire of pictures of John the Baptist.

"I am looking for the proprietor," Claire began, desperately.

The man brought his right hand toward his heart, letting his head fall in salutation. Claire took courage.

"I understand ... it seems you are looking for a pianist." The man stared and bowed again. "To play.... Do you understand ... I play?" She began instinctively to make the proper descriptive motions with her fingers.

"Ah, yes! Thank you ... thank you!" The man continued to keep his hand over his heart and to bow deeply.

The sound of hammering floated from the space screened by the green curtains. The man called to some one. A waiter appeared. The two conversed long and volubly. Finally the waiter, turning to Claire, said, in excellent English:

"Mr. Lycurgus does not understand very well. What is it you want?"

"I hear he is looking for a pianist," Claire returned.

"Oh yes. In the back ... the piano is there."

The three passed through the screened opening and Claire found herself in a huge room still in the process of being put into shape as a café in the American fashion.

"Mr. Lycurgus," the waiter explained to Claire, "is fixing up a swell place here. He bought a piano yesterday. After a while, when he gets a permit, we shall have dancing. We want now

somebody to play ... from six o'clock to twelve."

Claire sat down to the piano. It was new and had a good tone. She ran over a simple negro melody. The proprietor smiled and bowed again. "Thank you! Thank you!" he kept repeating. Then he and the waiter began to talk again. Claire waited.... She had to admit that the prospects were not so terrible. And she rather liked Mr. Lycurgus with his sweeping and naïve bows and his thick clustering black hair.

Finally the waiter turned to her and said:

"Do you sing?"

"Yes ... a little." And she made good her words with a sentimental trifle that her mother had taught her years ago.

The waiter and the proprietor talked again.

"He thinks you will do, and he will pay you twenty dollars a week," the waiter finally announced.

Claire rose from the piano stool.

"Thank you ... thank you!" said the proprietor.

"Thank *you*," replied Claire, at a loss for anything better to say.

"Can you begin to-night?"

Claire hesitated. "Yes," she answered.

And as she said it she had a feeling that she suddenly had been transported miles from all the familiar scenes and faces that had previously made up her life.

She returned to the café promptly at six o'clock. But on this first night there was really nothing to do. The carpenters were still busily laying a tiny hardwood dancing-floor and a smell of fresh paint enveloped everything. Claire contented herself with sitting idly at the piano and peering through the green-curtained entrance into the saloon. The situation was still an extraordinary one for her and she had not yet grasped it. The tables in the saloon proper were crowded with diners, all men, and a huge orchestration was grinding out strange and unfamiliar melodies. She was not near enough to get any estimate of the diners as individuals, but she had to confess that the composite impression they made was far from unpleasant. They ate frankly and with despatch as men in groups, undisturbed by feminine companionship, do the world over. She noticed two things particularly—they all had extraordinary thick black hair and their white teeth flashed pleasantly when they smiled.

At eight o'clock the proprietor came in and stood before her. The waiter was behind him. Mr. Lycurgus in halting English was inviting her to have something to eat. She was not hungry, but she decided to see what sort of cheer the Café Ithaca provided.

The waiter cleared away some tools which the workmen had scattered on a side-table and began to lay the cloth. Claire sat down and Mr. Lycurgus took a place opposite her. Anchovies and ripe olives with a bitter but fascinating taste came first, followed by a delicious soup flavored with lemon. Claire began to feel hungry. The waiter explained the ingredients of the soup to her as she was finishing the last mouthful.

"Chicken broth and the white of egg with paste and a dash of lemon," he announced. Then he set a huge portion of boiled lamb before her, stewed up with rice and lettuce leaves. It was plain that they were providing something extra in the way of fare for her.

Mr. Lycurgus, who had eaten earlier in the evening, seemed to be keeping her company from a sense of naïve and charming hospitality. Claire tried to think of what to say to him. Finally she hit upon a subject.

"What part of Greece do you come from?" she asked.

He was uncertain as to her question, but the waiter translated it quickly. Mr. Lycurgus began to talk. Claire did not understand one-half of what he was saying, but she was conscious that she had struck the proper note. He had come from Athens, he explained to her, and immediately he launched into lyrical praise of his native city. Claire assumed an air of interest, asked more questions. The waiter brought salad, and fried chicken, and a curd cheese, and finally a cup of thick Turkish coffee. Mr. Lycurgus was called outside to join some patrons in a drink. He left Claire with his hand upon his heart and his head thrown forward in a suggestion of perfect surrender that was almost Oriental. The waiter also grew friendly. It appeared that he came from the mountain districts of Greece—from shepherd stock. He described the Greek mountains to her.

"Birds and flowers and sweet smells!" he told her. He had been a bootblack in New York, at first. But he liked San Francisco better. He talked about America and democracy.

"We Greeks, you understand, we come from a free people." And he began to revive the glories of ancient Greece. It was plain to Claire that these people were living in retrospection, harking

back to a racial past very much in the fashion of her mother trying to gather warmth from the memory of a former opulence.

Claire rose from the table, amazed at the extent of the meal which she had been tempted to eat. But it had all been so frank and friendly and lacking any savor of condescension. She did not make the mistake of fancying that just this thing would be a regular occurrence, but there was a certain beauty about the humanness of this welcome that had been given her, as if the rite of breaking bread had suddenly made her a part of a large family.

Since there was nothing to do, she left early, at ten o'clock. The waiter followed her to the door.

"In a day or two things will be different," he assured her.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Demetrio—the same as Jimmy." He threw back his head, smiling.

She said good night and started off. Third Street was crowded. There was scarcely a woman in sight. Men, men everywhere. And yet she felt not the slightest fear. All evening she had felt detached, remote, cut off from the past, as one is cut off from a familiar view by a sharp turn in the road. But as she swung into Market Street and crossed over to the north side again the chill of reality swept over her. She was coming back to familiar scenes, familiar problems, familiar griefs. She began to think about her mother's hopeless condition, the fact that Mrs. Finnegan was preparing to move away.

"She's tired of having mother on her hands so often," flashed through Claire's mind. "She's moving to get out of it gracefully. Why did I permit such a thing?"

Her cheeks burned with the shame of it. She would have to talk to Nellie Whitehead about getting some one to come in and sit with her mother at night. Nellie Whitehead would know of somebody; she always was equal to any emergency.... She needed to have her shoes resoled, and her gloves were in a dreadful state. Well, fortunately, she would not have to keep up much of an appearance now. Twenty dollars a week—eighty dollars a month—she began to lay out plans for its expenditure. She owed two months to the butcher, and even the grocery bill had been long overdue. And there was Nellie Whitehead—she should have paid Nellie back. But there seemed always to have been something else more pressing. She thought all these things out swiftly, darting from one subject to another in a feverish anxiety to fill her mind with food for impersonal thought.

When she got home she found a letter awaiting her. It bore a special-delivery stamp and the envelope was in Stillman's handwriting. She felt suddenly weak and she sat down.... She sat staring at the envelope a long time before she gathered courage to open it. When she did, a thin blue slip of paper fluttered out. It was a check for twenty dollars, payment for the last week she had spent in Stillman's service. There was no other word from him, just this brief symbol of what his decision was in regard to her.

She rose to her feet. She did not move, she stood staring ahead....

Presently she heard her mother call. She started guiltily.

"What am I wasting time here for?" she asked herself, with a strange fierceness. She saw Stillman's blue check lying on the table. She caught it up and tore it into bits.

Her mother's voice sounded again, this time querulously.

Claire Robson pushed her sagging hair from her forehead and went into her mother's room.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Finnegan moved on the first of April. Claire, having by this time decided that she was more or less committed to her new life, got track of a Miss Proll, a middle-aged seamstress, who went out by the day, to come and occupy the little hall bedroom, so that Mrs. Robson was no longer alone in the house nights.

Claire had been ten days at the Café Ithaca and the experiment was losing its strangeness. There had been very little piano-playing to do. The new rooms at the rear of the saloon were an experiment that the regular patrons of the café had not yet accepted enthusiastically, and the looked-for patronage from the bastard American bohemianism was still a matter of hope and conjecture. The regular diners clung rather shyly to their old quarters opposite the bar, and Claire had to be content with making a long-range estimate of them. But she grew more and more friendly with Jimmy, and even Lycurgus got beyond the point of clasping his right hand over his heart every time he approached her.

Obviously the Café Ithaca was not one of the ordinary Greek cafés that vice-crusaders railed against. Claire discovered this quite early. To a superficial observer the Ithaca was nothing more nor less than an American saloon, and, as such, was too well established an institution to merit sensational disclosures. But it was the cafés in which the men of the quarter gather to drink coffee, and almond or cherry soda, and to listen to "outlandish" music, that aroused the suspicion of Puritans. To their line of reasoning Greeks who drank in saloons were *frankly* immoral; those

who hid behind a screen of sweetened coffee and innocuous syrups were immoral in a subtle and dangerous way that challenged all the resources of virtue. As a matter of fact, the spectacle of full-grown men indulging in any pleasure so innocent as coffee-drinking without being coerced into it was quite too much of an affront for those who won virtue only at the point of battle. Indeed, even Claire had something of this same distrust as she nightly passed these masculine forgoing places and caught glimpses through the unscreened windows of men dancing together between tables with strange solemnity. She, too, had her suspicions, very much in the manner of an adult who finds an unexplainable childish silence cause for distrust. Her training and her own experiences had confirmed her in the faith that males either singly or in groups were not to be lightly regarded. But she was willing to concede one point which most of the others left out—she was not sure that she saw any essential differences between these swarthy males who found grenadine syrup or coffee to their taste and the less vivid masculine bipeds who pretended that ice-cream and layer cake was an exciting experience. And she remembered having seen the same sidelong glances directed at the young women serving refreshments at a church social that she saw nightly cast at the waitresses who placed little cups of sweetened coffee upon the cold marble-topped tables of the Greek cafés.

It was in her midnight walks through the quarter that Claire got the rush of sudden new lights and values. Alone on the streets after twelve o'clock was a new experience, but any timidity was swallowed up in the sense of personal freedom which she seemed to achieve. She could have boarded a car almost from the Ithaca's doors, and, by transferring, arrived at her Clay Street flat without taking more than a dozen steps; but on the first night she had overlooked this possibility and the habit of walking up to Market Street became fixed. In this brief flight she saw not only men, but men of every conceivable stamp and condition. And it struck her how unified these masculine types were, how little they differed in the mass from men that previously she had seen detached, or superficially divided, from their kind by the varied intrusions of women. It seemed to her now that the other sex presented a solid front which womankind was always attempting to break through, and retreating sooner or later, according to the vigor of the masculine defense. For she had a sudden conviction that each woman battled singly and alone, but that men somehow braced themselves collectively for the struggle. Men were not really ever vanquished—a solitary man falling by the wayside did not spell defeat for the main body. But women—somehow women were always routed, routed as a whole because they insisted on playing the game in solitary aloofness. She found men presenting this same unbroken front to all the tilts of fortune and women as consistently attempting to hold every trick of fate at bay single-handed. But what she could not determine was the relative values of these contrasting attitudes, which was the more soul-stirring performance.

At the beginning of the second week of Claire's new life, a handful of the Café Ithaca's regular patrons, wishing to indulge in a little celebration, ordered a table laid in the new dining-room. This broke the ice, and there followed no end of dinners and banquets and evening suppers. But so far the patrons were confined to residents of the Greek quarter, and it puzzled Claire to discover that there were never by any chance women present. She questioned Jimmy about this.

"Greek women stay home," he replied, emphatically.

Claire had begun by playing simple and sprightly things on the piano. The patrons responded by applauding her politely, but she could see that they were really not finding her offerings entertaining. When the wheezy orchestrion started up with Greek airs they were much more alert and appreciative. She gave an ear to these melodies, and one night she surprised a company of diners by picking out the national anthem on the piano. The result was unexpected. She was bombarded by a shower of silver coins—mostly half-dollar pieces. She rose in her seat, bowing her thanks for the applause, while Jimmy scrambled after the coins and Lycurgus came forward with his hand over his heart. She drew back with a gesture of instinctive refusal as Jimmy poured the money upon the keyboard of the piano. But she ended by accepting it—there seemed nothing else to do.

After this she mastered other Greek airs. She learned in time all the slow, melancholy melodies that never failed to set the feet of dancers shuffling. And upon the tiny hardwood floor that had been laid in the hope of luring rag-time patrons to the Café Ithaca there was nightly a handful of men moving with graceful precision in the steps of their ancient folk-dances. Jimmy, smiling his satisfaction at Claire, would lean over the piano and say:

"Look, Miss Robson! Now they are dancing an old shepherd dance. They have danced it so in my part of the country for the last thousand years. It is a dance of greeting. The two men have not seen each other for five years."

Thus it was with everything—symbols running through the every-day experiences of these people like a thread of gold through the woof and warp of some drab garment. They were a people not only living in a past, but carrying this past with them as they stormed the outposts of modern life, and for all their naïve Christian piety, which they seemed to practise with a comfortable emotional fervor, they had retained the courage to meet the deposed gods of another day with a friendly and affectionate smile. They still danced the old pagan dances on feast-days of the saints, and ranged pictures of the gods side by side with the holy icons of the church.

Claire was in a mood to appreciate all these strange experiences; they removed her so completely from all the soul-crushing memories that were ever struggling to fasten themselves upon her. And every night when the street-car crossed over to the south side of the city she shed her cares like one dropping a dripping coat upon the threshold of a warm room. Between the

hours of six and twelve she gathered courage from forgetfulness. But, although she had entered more or less gracefully into the demands of this new life, there were times when the clutch of custom still laid its hand upon her. For one thing, she could never quite get used to her Sunday night appearance at the café. This setting of Sunday as a day different and apart was too much of an instinct to be lightly dismissed. It had been one of Mrs. Robson's pet hobbies.

"Why should I go to the theater or dance on Sunday?" Claire remembered hearing her mother argue time and again with Mrs. Finnegan. "I can do those things any other day in the week."

Claire had a feeling that her mother's convictions upon this matter had become largely a question of good form rather than of religious belief. She knew in her own case that she could find no logic with which to bolster her emphatic distaste for this café life on Sunday night, and yet it was only another proof of the inflexibility of custom.

There were times, too, when she would halt before the swinging doors of the Café Ithaca, incapable of realizing that she, Claire Robson, was a café entertainer in the Greek quarter. At these moments she could not imagine anything more removed from the hopes or even the fears which she had held for her future. In her glimpses into life with Stillman and Lily Condor, from the lofty vantage-ground of prejudice, she had looked down upon these women who sang or danced or played their way into the torpid affections of an eating and drinking public. Once at the conclusion of an indifferent concert, Stillman had whirled Claire and Mrs. Condor and Edington out to one of the beach resorts. Claire had been struck by all the tawdry gaiety of that evening, the flagging spirits of the dancers reinforced by sloppy highballs, the rattle and bang of the "jazz" orchestra, the rapacious horde of entertainers moving from table to table, wrestling dimes and quarters and half-dollars from the open-handed assembly. She recalled the contemptuous way in which the silver gratuities were flung at what seemed to Claire these professional fawners.

Her impulse to refuse the money that had been hurled at her on that night when she had essayed the Greek national anthem carried the sting of memories with it. But there was something open-hearted and childlike about this latter performance that robbed it of unpleasantness.

She was looking forward with more or less trepidation to the day when the San Francisco public in its search for a new sensation would swoop down upon the Café Ithaca. In a flash she saw all the beach-resort atmosphere duplicated—the wine-bloomy dancers, the loose-jointed music, the shower of small change falling significantly at the feet of red-lipped entertainers. Already she had received a preliminary warning of its approach from Nellie Whitehead.

"Don't be surprised, Robson, if you see me and Billy Holmes skate into your joint some night. Billy knows a young Greek doctor. He promised to blow himself for a dinner in our honor any time we say the word. You'd better bone up on your rag-time. *We* don't know any Greek shepherd dances."

Claire took the hint and "boned up" on her rag-time—or, rather, began for the first time in her life really to attempt to play it. And one night, true to her word, Nellie Whitehead came. Early in the evening a table had been set for four, and Lycurgus had gone to the flower-stands in front of Lotta's fountain and bought pink and white carnations for a centerpiece. Claire had wondered at the reason for all this special preparation, but she made no inquiries. Nellie Whitehead breezed in at about seven without any escort.

"Why don't they have a decent sign out? I almost went by the place," she railed, as she released Claire from a hearty embrace. "The men will be here in a minute. But I came on ahead for a chat. It's that doctor I was telling you about ... he's giving the feed. He isn't a Greek at all ... he's a Serbian or something. But, good Lord! What's the difference? They all look alike to me. Only, this one seems more human ... his hair doesn't fuzz out as much as some of them.... The fourth place? Why, that's been set for you!... You can't spare the time? Now, don't you worry, little one; it's all been arranged. This doctor fellow has some kind of a pull with the management. If he wants the head entertainer to dine with him, all he has to do is to say so."

"A Serbian!" Claire found herself mentally exclaiming. "Can it be possible that...."

And true to the commonplace and thoroughly unexplainable thing called "chance" it *was* possible. For when Billy Holmes arrived at seven-thirty with his Serbian friend, Dr. George Danilo, Claire felt herself scarcely surprised, although for a moment she grew suddenly cold.

Claire had never met Billy Holmes, but she knew him by sight—a bluff, genial, open-handed man with hair thinning about the temples and a rather swaggering walk. He was just the proper foil for Danilo's thick-haired, beetle-browed, red-lipped personality.

After the first chill of surprise, Claire somehow recovered herself. She wondered whether Danilo remembered that tense moment six months ago when he had pulled his audience out of a slough of indifference by fixing his passionate gaze upon her. She had an impulse to ask, but there was something vaguely disturbing about him. Was she fascinated, or repelled, or overwhelmed? She gave it up. But sitting opposite him, so close that she could have touched his hand if she had dared, she grew to feel that when he smiled nothing else really mattered. It was plain that Lycurgus was his abject slave.

As the dinner progressed, Claire found that she was to be relieved of her post at the piano by the continuous rumblings of the orchestrion. Between courses, Nellie Whitehead and Billy

Holmes danced, while Claire and the doctor talked—that is, she let him talk—about himself and his work and his native land. It was this last topic that flamed him most completely. Claire listened parted-lipped as he poured out the history of Serbia's wrongs. He pictured his country ravaged, broken, desolate, buffeted like a shuttlecock between the rackets of fate. His own people were scattered like chaff. His mother—he merely raised his hand at the mention of her name and let it fall again.

Boldly, with swift, sure strokes, he gave her glimpses of far-flung horizons, community griefs, national sorrows, the bleeding of people *en masse*. She had experienced something of this before, six months ago, when he had harangued the Second Presbyterian Church into grudging applause, but now, to-night, he was within reach, warm and personal and palpitant.

"I am going back ... in the fall ... to ... to...."

He stopped, fumbling for the proper word, as one not to the language born sometimes does.

She felt a great courage sweep over her. She wanted him to remember.

"Yes," she cried, "I know! To a blood-red dawn! You are going back to a blood-red dawn!"

How he smiled! "Ah," escaped him. "Then you remembered, too!... You were the only one at first in the whole room who listened.... I had never spoken to quite such a crowd before.... I saw you twice ... after. Once you were dancing. The second time you were alone ... in a doorway.... But to-night, here.... I was not prepared to find you here and so...."

She was both pleased and annoyed. Why had she not waited for him to spur *her* memory?

Presently Lycurgus brought champagne. It appeared that this was a very special date, although every one had forgotten it except the Greek.

"A year ago ... thank you ... thank you ... a year ago is the war for America."

"A year ago since we went into the war!" exclaimed some one. "Can it be possible?"

There followed toasts to Greece, and Serbia, and America, and President Wilson, and finally to Danilo.

"That Danilo," Lycurgus informed the party—"that Danilo—he saved my life. Now he can have everything I own. If I were dead, nothing would be of any use. So now I give him everything ... you understand?—everything!"

Claire stared—she was not yet accustomed to the Oriental extravagances which crept so naturally into the speech of Lycurgus.

Altogether it was a happy time, in spite of the shadow of world-wide tragedy that lay in wait just beyond the truant light of personal cheer.

"You've made a hit, Robson!" Nellie Whitehead assured her at the conclusion of the evening. "But how in Heaven's name could you listen to all that Serbia stuff?... Dope about the little, old U.S.A. is good enough for me.... But say, he isn't so bad-looking. If I didn't have Billy on my staff I do believe...." She finished with a wink and gave Claire a playful shove.

On her way home that night Claire said to herself, "I'll have to look up some books on Serbia at the library."

CHAPTER III

Two days after Nellie Whitehead's invasion of the Café Ithaca a group of insurance special agents came for dinner. There were six of them in the party and they were accompanied by as many women. Calling loudly for Lycurgus, the spokesman of the party explained their wishes:

"The same kind of a feed that you gave our friend Holmes the other night, and all the fancy drinks.... You know us!"

Mr. Lycurgus bowed deeply and began to scurry about. Claire started a tune on the piano.

"Oh, none of that sad stuff!" called out one of the party. "Give us a little jazz!"

Claire obeyed to the best of her ability. They scrambled up and began to dance. Appetizers were brought.... They downed them greedily and called for more.

"Give us another dance while we're waiting," they demanded of Claire.

She sat at her post all evening, grinding out tunes. The party continued to eat and drink and dance until long past eleven o'clock. As they were leaving one of the men threw Claire a dollar. It would have been quite as easy for him to have walked over and laid it on the piano. But he threw it at her instead and Claire remembered again the beach resorts and the contemptuously flung bits of silver.

"She's a rotten jazz-player at that!" she heard one of the women say as the party opened the side door and disappeared, followed by the bobbing figure of Lycurgus.

Jimmy was in great spirits.

"This is the life—eh, Miss Robson? I cleaned up nearly two dollars. These countrymen of yours—they spend the money! Now we shall see plenty of good times."

For two or three days a reaction set in and Jimmy was disconsolate. As for Claire, she found herself welcoming the return to the simpler life of the quarter. Already she was resenting the intrusion of the outside world. But Saturday night another crop of San Franciscans in search of novelty made the acquaintance of the Café Ithaca, and after that there was no stemming the tide.

Gradually the Greek patrons retired to their former positions in the old barroom, the Greek tunes on the orchestrion were discarded for popular successes from the vaudeville houses, and the thin line of men dancing symbolically upon the maple floor as Claire played for them became almost a memory.

Mr. Lycurgus began to talk about hiring entertainers, enlarging the dancing-space, getting in an orchestra. Claire figured on dismissal. She knew that as a rag-time performer she was not a success, and her only wonder was that Lycurgus did not let her go at once. She voiced her fears to Jimmy one day.

"Oh, you should worry!" was Jimmy's comment as he flicked a fly with his towel. "The boss he likes you!"

Claire smiled. She was becoming accustomed to these naïve and simple explanations of conduct. Lycurgus liked her and therefore he would continue to retain her. The question of ability was secondary. Lycurgus liked her because she asked him questions about his native land and listened when he answered, because she had learned the Greek anthem on the piano, because she had played peasant dances for his countrymen. The Greek patrons liked her for the same reason, and it was no longer a novelty for her to see Jimmy coming toward her with slices of sesame seed and honey, or a bit of sugar-dusted pastry for her delight, the gift of one of the diners on the other side of the green curtains.

She had heard in former days such slighting references to the morality of foreigners in general that she was surprised to find how contemptuously some of these Greek patrons of the Café Ithaca referred to American women. There was no mistaking the quality of the smiles which they threw after the spectacle of men who permitted their wives to indulge in public dancing.

"In my country," Jimmy had explained to her, "we do not even touch a woman's hand when we dance with her. We give her the end of our handkerchief instead of our fingers."

And another time he said:

"What is the matter with American mothers, Miss Robson? Last night my wife found a boy and girl sitting on our door-steps long after ten o'clock. She opened the door and said to them, 'Have you no home?' It is like that all over. Young girls go about like men. I do not think that is right!"

Claire found herself blushing, and at once she remembered the eager social-settlement worker who had pleaded before the Home Missionary Society for funds "to help these wards of the nation to a keener appreciation of our institutions." She wondered what the effect would be if Jimmy were to address this organization.

One night, exhausted by six hours of continuous playing for a hilarious crowd of Americans, Claire crept into one of the coffee-houses and sat down. She was really too tired to go home, and, besides, she had a sudden desire for contrasts while the atmosphere which her own kind had brought to the Greek quarter was already fresh. The appearance of a woman in the coffee-house, other than the waitresses, was unusual, but Claire was surprised to find only the most casual of glances directed her way. A man waited on her. She ordered Turkish coffee. On a raised platform an orchestra was performing; in the clear space just below a half-dozen men were dancing one of the folk-dances Claire was beginning to know so well. The music had the sad, minor quality of highland music the world over, and in addition there was an Oriental strain which recalled certain themes that Rimsky-Korsokov had captured and woven into the Scheherazade suite. On the ochestraion at the Café Ithaca these tunes had been more or less clipped of their wild freedom—adapted to the scale of another set of musical conventions, and Claire had sensed their novelty, but not their lack of precise musical form. Even to-night Claire thought not only the music, but the way in which it was presented, quite outlandish, but as she sat sipping her sweetened coffee the notes and the rhythm gradually assumed a coherence, and unconsciously her own feet began to tap the floor.

She looked about the room. It was crowded and the air was thick with cigarette smoke and the odd, pungent aroma from the Oriental water-pipes. Claire had studied Greek history in her high-school days, and she had always held a classical picture of Greek life—flowing garments, marble courtyards, gods and goddesses made flesh. It came to her sharply, as she sat in the coffee-house, that the real flavor had a distinct tang of the Orient and that the picture spread before her was more suggestive of the *Arabian Nights* than anything else she could call to mind. She tried to fancy the men about her clothed in soft silks, with jeweled turbans on their heads and slippers curving into sharp points. One of the musicians began to sing in a low, monotonous, whining voice, striking the strings of his zither-like instrument with long, graceful strokes. A girl bearing a tray of grenadine syrup and a box of cigars passed her table. This girl had features extraordinarily regular, and her skin was very clear and firm and provocative. Claire could see

that she was a favorite and that she left a vague unrest in her wake.

"This," flashed through her mind, "is the danger that they speak of. This is the sort of thing that makes these coffee-houses...."

Abruptly she stopped the course of her thoughts. The memory of Flint's office suddenly recurred. She pictured this girl in a business environment.

"It would be the same!" she finished to herself, shrugging as she did so.

And she became aware that the girl was something of a danger herself, in a fascinating, ruthless, primitive way—a trap set by nature for inscrutable ends. She thought of herself, and a company of pallid, crushed women who passed milestone after milestone with the lagging footsteps that would never know either victory or defeat—a company of wan, pallid women who went on and on without even the respite of an occasional falling by the wayside, women sacrificing everything, even life itself, to the arid joy of standards fixed and immovable.... The girl emptied her tray and passed Claire again. This time she swaggered consciously as if she realized the measure that another of her kind was taking. Claire felt a sudden envy for all the instinctive courage back of the challenge which this palpitating creature was throwing out. She leaned forward to the next table and said to a man sitting there:

"This girl who has just passed ... is she Greek?"

The man rolled a cigarette insolently, and said in almost the precise words of Jimmy:

"Greek? I should say not! Greek women stay home!"

He looked squarely at Claire as he said it, and she rose at once.

"They should thank God that they have a home to stay in," she said, passionately.

The man stared, shrugged, and laughed. Claire went out into the street. She did not know why she had spoken. The words had risen to her lips like a cry of pain at the pressure of relentless fingers against a new-found wound. Until this moment Claire had always fancied that *she* had a home. Now she knew that it took something more than a refuge, walled in from the elements, to rise to such a dignity. And in a flash she felt that this mysterious and indefinable something was the lattice upon which the tendrils of a woman's soul climbed toward the light. It was possible, of course, to push forward over the ramparts of life without this aid, but it took all the vigor of a wild unfolding of the spirit.... She remembered very few flashes of beauty in her mother's life, but those few were the blossoming of efforts to create a home for her child, a shield from the wind and weather to only the shallow vision, but something infinitely more when the surface of things was scratched. Mrs. Robson's spirit had climbed the lattice of her sacrifice, but it was not possible for Claire to follow; like all children, she had outgrown the narrow confines that had served her mother's need.

The night was clear and beautiful, touched with the mystery of spring. Claire fancied that the crowds surging up and down Third Street seemed more restless, more full of desire, more vaguely hopeful of wresting soul-stirring experiences from life. There were many uniforms in the crush, and men wearing them stood out clearly, striking a note of youth at once vibrant and pathetic. But the older men seemed touched with a faded resignation, like spent pilgrims who see the glistening spires of some holy city in a far distance which they never can hope to attain. And somehow Claire's youth rose up and went out to meet the vision which these weary souls so poignantly glimpsed. She longed herself for these far-flung, golden-topped, opulent duties swimming in the purple twilight of remoteness. She was tired of the drabness and clutter of crowded foregrounds. Ah, how easy it would be to take up a march with the ugly highways of effort veiled by the softness of a slanting sun!

She was hurrying across Mission Street when she felt an arm laid gently upon her shoulder. She turned—Danilo stood behind her, smiling.

"Ah, you are late!" he said.

"I was too tired to go home at once," she admitted. "I dropped into one of the coffee-houses to see the sights."

He stepped back to the curb. She followed him. "I have my car half-way up the block," he explained to her. "I walked to the corner to get cigarettes. Which way do you go?"

She told him.

"I will take you home, then. I am going in that direction myself. I am to look in on a patient at the Stanford Court apartments."

"At the Stanford Court apartments?" Claire was conscious that her tone betrayed a surprise bordering on incredulity.

He smiled back at her indulgently as he led the way to his car. "A man who got caught in an automobile smash-up early this evening. I was on the spot and he has asked me to finish the matter. He is rich, so I am very attentive." He laughed, showing his white teeth. "I am taking him out something to make him sleep, otherwise he will have a bad night."

Claire forced her interest to the point of inquiring, "Was he seriously hurt?"

"Oh, not at all! He rode into a street-car and got a nasty blow—on the head. But, of course, one can never tell. He is a countryman of yours. Perhaps you have heard of him. His name is Stillman."

Claire did not reply. She was surprised into silence. She had fancied that the Greek quarter would close the door on any vistas of her former life.

"I understand that he made a million dollars last week by a trick of fortune," Danilo went on vivaciously. "Shares in a copper-mine ... or something quite as wonderful.... I must interest him in the cause."

"The cause?... What cause?" Claire inquired.

"Why—why, the Serbian cause, of course! You do not mean to tell me that you have forgotten our talk already?"

They had reached the car, and Danilo lifted Claire in.

"No, I haven't forgotten. As a matter of fact, I've been intending to look up some books on Serbia."

His eyes were glowing. "No!... Did you, really? I tell you—I shall bring you some books tomorrow."

"If you only would!... Yes, I'm sure that would be very kind of you."

CHAPTER IV

The next evening when Claire arrived at the Café Ithaca she found that the inevitable had happened. Lycurgus had engaged a staff of entertainers. There were two women, a "professor" who played rag on the piano, and a man with an assortment of percussion instruments, including drums, which he managed to manipulate with extraordinary dexterity.

"We're just trying this as a kind of lay-off," explained one of the women to Claire, with professional hauteur. "We've been doing all the best places, and we're that worn out! What's your line?"

"I play the piano," returned Claire.

The woman shifted a gilt hairpin, sweeping the room as she did so with a critical glance.

"Well, I shouldn't think they'd need more 'n one good rag-player here," she announced, with impartial candor.

"They don't," said Claire. "I'm pretty bad at it myself."

"Oh, I'm sure I didn't mean nothing personal," threw back the other, surprised and mollified by Claire's modest claims. "I guess you must have *some* sort of class! Otherwise you wouldn't figure at *all*!"

Jimmy explained the new condition to Claire. "The boss wants you to play Greek tunes. I told you not to worry."

Things moved rather furiously this first night, and the noise and bang lured some of the Greek patrons into the back room. The women sang dreadfully—the big blonde who had talked to Claire, in a deafening, female baritone; the other woman with the painful self-consciousness of one struggling to retain the remnants of a voice that had once had promise. This second woman had large, appealing brown eyes that seemed always on the verge of tears, especially when she sang.

"She's got two kids and a sick sister to support," Claire's blond friend volunteered during a pause in the evening's entertainment. "Kit's had some pretty tough goings, all right, but then I guess we ain't none of us been brought up in steam-heated go-carts. I've taken three fliers at getting married myself, so I ought to qualify for a certificate from that old trouble school. Oh, I'm nothing if not game! A gentleman friend said to me only last night, 'Say, Madge, what I like about you is that you're always ready to take a chance.' And I am—otherwise I wouldn't be here. What rake-off does the old boy give you on the drinks you sell?"

"Drinks I sell?" echoed Claire. "Why, I don't sell drinks."

"Oh, come now, don't get haughty! Of course you don't draw 'em out at the spigot. You're there with the big suggestion, ain't you, when the boys don't know whether to order beer or White Rock?"

"No, I can't say that I am. You see, we haven't been running much of a café here so far."

"Well, I should say you haven't! You've been running a Childs restaurant. But you just watch me wake 'em up!" And with that Madge crossed over to a table in the corner where six Greeks were having cognac and Turkish coffee, and she sat down.... Presently Jimmy flew in with three bottles of beer. Madge waved a triumphant hand to Claire, who had just begun to play a Greek shepherd dance.

"Didn't I tell you I'd wake 'em up?" she called out, gaily.

Claire saw Lycurgus coming toward her, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"Ah, Miss Robson, that girl ... *she* knows how! I guess now we do a good business, eh?"

Claire threw him a warped smile as she began to play. But in spite of the fact that a score or more of the old patrons were within earshot, there was no attempt at folk-dancing.

"This is the end!" thought Claire, as she yielded her place to the "professor."

At that moment Doctor Danilo came in.

"Improvements?" he half questioned, lifting his eyebrows significantly to Claire. "Let us sit down and have coffee."

He had brought her two books on Serbia—a brief history and a sketch of modern conditions. Claire bent forward attentively as he opened first one and then the other, explaining the pictures, tracing the war's progress on the inevitable maps. Finally she said:

"Did you interest your patient?"

"Scarcely. He was not in good condition to-day. But then one never can tell. Knocks upon the head are full of possibilities. He is indifferent. If he were not an American, I would think him in love. But Americans, really, they never have time for foolishness."

He sat with Claire until long after midnight. When she arose to leave he insisted upon taking her home in his car.

The next evening Madge said to her:

"No wonder you don't waste your time on the other guys around here! Folks who can make home-runs don't figure on stealing any bases."

There followed a hectic period of prosperity for the Café Ithaca. At once it seemed that everybody in San Francisco knew of it and was determined to lay violent hands upon its cut-to-measure gaiety. The entertainers were changed rapidly. Madge departed one evening in a blaze of wrath because some "fresh guy" laughed at her friend Kit's painful attempts at song. Kit threw herself upon a chair in the dressing-room and sobbed her heart out.

"Don't you care, Kit, he wasn't no gentleman!" It had been pathetic to discover what comfort these two women managed to extract from so frugal a solace.

So this was the gay and frivolous life of the café entertainer at close range! It never really had occurred to Claire to fancy that most of these women were meeting the responsibilities of life with a ghastly smile. Even Madge had her duties. There was a crippled child in some hospital, the sad spawn of a weak relation, that Madge was sponsoring. Claire had heard of this quite by accident one night when Madge's temper caught her off guard. A party of vaudeville performers had come in for a midnight frolic, and in the course of the hilarity one of the women stood up on her chair and sang a tear-starting ballad about a gray-haired mother and a family mortgage and a wayward son who seemed to continue his course merely to provide a becoming background for his mother's silver hair. Quantities of loose change had met this effort, and the lady gathered up the scant folds of her very red dress as she bent over and picked up every coin, to the last penny.

"Can you beat that?" Madge had demanded fiercely of Claire. "I'm getting kinder tired of the way Lycurgus lets this foreign talent walk away with the goods. I don't care for myself, but I need every extra dime I pick up." And she had explained to Claire about this warped fragment of humanity and her responsibility. "I'm its god-mother, and I come through with all the extra money I rake in."

After that Claire found the insolently flung coins assuming new values.

But all the entertainers were not cast in the heroic mold of self-sacrifice. Claire discovered that there was just as much heartlessness, and greed, and middle-class smugness among these people as there was in any other walk of life. In short, Claire was learning something about the law of average, learning to be unsurprised by a flash of gold in the dullest panful, or as equally unmoved when some dazzling bit proved dross.

She began to wonder how long she could stand the new atmosphere of the Café Ithaca. There was a certain irony in discovering herself on the verge of rout by the intrusion of her own countrymen. There was no doubt that a corroding influence was eating out the simplicity of the old life of the quarter. In the coffee-houses the alien customs still persisted, and the men danced their dances of greeting with all the old fervor, sipping their grenadine syrup and Turkish coffee between-times, but in the Café Ithaca rag-time was king, and the Greeks were learning that it was neither necessary nor desirable to leave untouched the fingers of their female partners.

"That, in itself, means nothing," Danilo had said to Claire one evening, as they sat discussing the subject; "but it is dangerous for a people to lose its symbols ... unless there is offered something better, and I cannot say...."

He swept the room with a significant glance.

Claire had to admit that nothing better had been offered, nor anything quite so good. She had

practically nothing to do, now. Once in a while some Greek asked her to play one of the old folk tunes, but her efforts fell upon irresponsive ears. She knew, also, that some of the entertainers resented her professional aloofness. Not that she consciously stood apart from them. But they were quick to measure the difference in her attitude, the fact that she appeared to have very little to do, and that she was not expected to cajole the unattached male frequenters into buying drinks. She could not have said just why this last service was not insisted upon, now that she had so little opportunity to earn her salary, but she concluded it was one of those intangible situations which continually put to rout the theory that cold logic sways the world. Measured by every practical standard, Claire should have either earned her way or been dismissed; but Lycurgus for some mysterious reason saw fit to ignore the claims of expediency in Claire's case.

Danilo had become a frequent—almost a nightly—visitor at the Café Ithaca. He came with books for Claire, about Serbia, about the war, about the place America was playing in the struggle. In the intervals she contrived to learn something about Stillman. His accident had kept him indoors longer than the doctor had expected. It appeared that these two suddenly had become warm friends.

"I find he has been to my country," Danilo told her one night. "He has been everywhere; but why not? One must pass the time in some way.... 'You are a waster,' I said to him yesterday."

"And what did he say to that?" Claire asked, eagerly.

"He said: 'I am a reaction.... I come of a people who lived hard. The race is resting up after the struggle. For over three hundred years we have been subduing the wilderness. That is why we are willing to let the others step in and do the work.' But he is not quite fair to himself, now.... I understand that he is doing great things for his own government. His friends say he is quite changed.... He is a fine man. Already I think of him as a brother."

Claire glimpsed a new Stillman in these fragments which the doctor brought her. It was the man-to-man Stillman, without artifice and reservations. And she had an added sense of masculine unity, of the impenetrable circle that men draw about their conduct, so far as the other sex is concerned. She found that he had been moved to even deeper revelations under the sympathetic intriguing of one of his own kind. He even told the doctor about his wife.

"I do not think he is a man who has many confidants," Danilo explained. "I do not know why he tells these things to me. Perhaps my profession has something to do with it. It is not such a great step from physical to spiritual confessions. And then I am really not a part of his intimate circle. He has nothing to fear from finding himself betrayed in his own house, so to speak. But there is one thing I have not yet learned. And what is more, I do not think I shall—from *him*. There is a woman, somewhere. But a man like Stillman does not speak of the thing near his heart."

She felt herself tremble. The doctor leaned forward.

"I am talking too much about this patient of mine," he laughed. "I'm stirring your imagination. I keep forgetting that I have my own hand to play."

Claire drew back. His dark eyes were lit with sudden fire. She trembled again, but this time like a blade of dry grass caught in the hot wind-eddies of a near-by blaze.

"Ah, doctor! You are like them all!" suddenly escaped her.

"*All?*" His voice quivered with indignation. She had never seen any one so wounded. For a moment she was stunned. She did not reply.

He rose with a quick, nervous movement.

"I must be going," he said, harshly. "A doctor, you know ... yes, a doctor's time is never his own."

She knew that he was lying. His face had lost its glowing color, his full lips had thinned. She had never experienced anything like this before. It was not the grossness of Flint nor the restrained ardor of Stillman; it was desire charmed by the hope of virtue and angered at the possibility of finding this hope a mirage. And it was something even more exacting than this—it was desire allied to egotism, a wish to be first in the field.... So it had come ... at last! It had come and she felt afraid!...

On her way home that night she thought it all over. Yes, somehow, with joy covering her parted lips tempestuously, she had the will to think calmly on one point. To-morrow she would tell Danilo that she knew Stillman. She *must* tell him. She had not meant to be deceitful, but for some reason it was not easy for her to discuss even casual masculine relationships with Danilo. It would be hard, but she must tell him ... everything! *Everything?*... Even about that last night when.... Well, perhaps there were some things that still belonged to her.... some secrets that were her very own.

Danilo stayed away from the Café Ithaca for two days. He came in again, smiling. But he did not mention Stillman's name, and Claire's resolution to tell him that she knew his patient was put to rout. Instead, he talked about Claire's personal fortunes with a direct and puzzling sympathy. He wanted to know everything—about herself, her prospects, her mother. Claire found it impossible to resent his inquisitiveness. There was something bland and childlike about it. At the conclusion of their talk he said:

"I should like to call on your mother, sometime. Not professionally ... just as a friend."

He arrived at the Clay Street flat the next afternoon. Claire had prepared her mother for the visit.

"A new doctor," she had explained, without going into any further details. Mrs. Robson had got to a point where she asked no questions.

He stepped laughingly into Mrs. Robson's cramped bedroom, and as she turned her face broke into a smile. It was the first laugh and the first smile that this dreary room had seen for months. He talked about the weather, became interested in a picture that hung on the wall, told an amusing story that he had chanced upon that morning. It was as if a window suddenly had been opened to a cleansing breeze.

After that he came every day. He was never empty-handed. He brought flowers, or sweetmeats from the Greek quarter, or delicate morsels that he picked up in the markets. Mrs. Robson grew to watch for his coming. He called her "Little Mother" in the Russian fashion. She would smile warmly as she listened to him linger caressingly over this term of endearment. He seemed to have the greatest respect for Mrs. Robson, but he was brutally indifferent to the poor little seamstress, Miss Proll, whom he ran into once or twice as he was leaving the house.

"These spinsters!" he would say with scorn, as she passed him on the stairs.

He seemed to concede anything to a woman who had fulfilled the obligations of motherhood, but he found nothing to excuse the lack.

His visits quite transformed the atmosphere of the Robson household. It was incredible that ten minutes a day in the thrall of a personality, hearty and masculine, could so change the anemic current of gloom that had encompassed these women. Mrs. Robson began to take a fragmentary interest in life. Indeed, if it had not been for the noncommittal words of the doctor in answer to Claire's inquiries regarding her mother's chance for improvement, she would have been misled into hoping for better days.

It was plain that Danilo's own hearthstone was a tradition, something stretching back into a misty past, and that he was finding a stimulation in crossing the threshold of this far Western home. All his life had been spent in wanderings. There was a touch of the nomad about him. He had starved in Paris, studied relentlessly in Berlin, and walked the streets of New York penniless. He had lived in hospitals, and wretched rooming-houses, and cold, impersonal hotels. The first years of his youth had been surrendered ruthlessly to his profession. There was a shade of cruelty in the pictures which he drew of his relentless ardor for learning, in those soul-thirsty days. One would have thought that all these years of wandering had taken the edge off any national feeling, but he seemed suddenly to have flamed with the old folk-consciousness, as some bare twig bursts into a white heat of bloom with the coming of spring. Now all the fury that moved him to assault the ramparts of learning was being poured out in the prospect of personal sacrifice for his native land. He was caught up in this cloud of fire and transfigured. When he spoke of these things Claire felt awe. She had never yet beheld a man gripped by an emotional enthusiasm.

"You are wondering, no doubt," he would say again and again, "why I have not gone back ... before! But it seemed best ... to wait. My country will need men of my profession, later.... Later, I shall do things. I shall bind up wounds. Ah, it had not been easy to persuade myself to wait. It is never easy. To move with the crowd, that is easy ... even when the crowd moves to certain death. But to sit and wait for your appointed time ... with people sneering beneath their smiles ... no, that is not easy!"

Once she asked him about his parents. His father, it appeared, had been a professor of Greek in the university at Belgrade; his mother from peasant stock, the daughter of a prosperous landed proprietor. He seemed more proud of this peasant stock than of his father's high breeding. Claire was puzzled. To her American ears the very word peasant savored of unequality, of a certain checkmated opportunity.

"My father saw my mother during the season of fruit blossoms. He was traveling through the country after an illness, and my mother was standing in her father's orchard, among the flowering plum-trees. My father was no longer a young man, but it was the spring of the year!" he finished, with an eloquent gesture.

Now his father was dead. His mother ... he did not know. He had received no tidings for months. But it appeared that news of his people had always been infrequent. It was not precisely neglect—Claire was sure that the memory of these kinsfolk was always with him, something almost too real and tangible to call for confirmation in the shape of a formal exchange of greetings.

"Next fall, if she is still alive, I shall see this mother of mine," he finished.

Claire had a picture of him enfolding, unashamed, a stooping, wrinkled peasant woman in his eager arms—a peasant woman with a gaudy kerchief on her head. But she was surprised when on the next day he brought a picture of his mother to her.

She had a grave, handsome face, and her costume was at once simple and fashionable. And she was anything but bowed with age.

"And here are my two brothers and a sister!"

Claire took the photographs from him. "Oh, then there are others!"

"Others? Did you fancy that my mother was an American?" He laughed....

One afternoon early in May he came in with an unusual amount of bundles.

"See, Little Mother!" he called out, gaily, to Mrs. Robson. "To-day is my name-day and we shall have a feast!"

Mrs. Robson stared faintly.

"Ah, you do not understand! It is St. George's Day—the saint for whom I am named. In my country there would be a celebration, I can tell you!"

He was brimming over with good spirits. He had brought a chicken, a small tub of bitter, ripe olives, and three bottles of red wine and a ceremonial cake. He had even invested in a cheap icon, and a tiny glass swinging-lamp to burn before it, and he set the holy image up in a corner of the dining-room, much to Mrs. Robson's weak dismay. Even Claire felt a measure of disapproval at this act, as if acquiescence made her subscribe to something that she had no faith in. Danilo really had prepared all this good cheer for Mrs. Robson, and he moved a couch from the living-room into the dining-room and carried Mrs. Robson in.

He had flowers for the center of the table, too; not the flamboyant blossoms of the florist shops, but a shy little bouquet of wild bloom that he had picked only that morning in the sand-hills near Ingleside, where he had gone to see a sick countryman.

"He lives in the most wretched hut imaginable," he told them. "But such a view! Upon a hillside, and the whole Pacific Ocean at his feet. He leases a patch of land from the water company, and grows violets and purple cabbages and rows of pale-green lettuce. It is extraordinary how much he accomplishes in such a small space. And he is in love ... it is too absurd!... with a little short, squat Italian girl whose father has the bit of land adjoining. She is pretending to be indifferent, the little baggage! And he has taken to his bed and fancies he has an incurable disease. After all, there is nothing so foolish as a man when he takes the notion!"

He helped lay the cloth, tugging in sly, boyish fashion at his end until he brought the smiles to Claire's grave face.

"There, that is better! Now you look as if it were a feast-day!... Come, do you realize that I am thirty-two to-day? Perhaps that is why you look so sad!... Yes, there is no mistake, I am getting old. Wait, I will show you how I wish that chicken cooked."

And he rushed Claire off her feet and into the kitchen. His spirits were contagious. Claire found herself singing, and she heard her mother's laugh echoing like a faint tinkling bell through the gloom of some sunless street.

By five o'clock the feast was over. For the first time since her illness Mrs. Robson had been tempted beyond the mere duty of eating. She had even had some wine—about a half-glassful which Danilo had held for her to sip. He had fed her, too, with an unobtrusive, almost matter-of-fact tenderness which carried no suggestion of her helplessness.

As he was leaving he said to Claire:

"There will be no end of celebrating at the Ithaca to-night. I shall see you there. I am going to dinner with my rich patient.... You remember ... Stillman. He asked me to have a meal at the St. Francis. I suppose we shall have champagne.... Perhaps, if he is in the humor, I shall bring him down to the café."

Claire went back into the dining-room and began to clear away the litter. She had an impulse to telephone Lycurgus and tell him that she could not come to the café that night. To face Stillman seemed impossible. The afternoon had been so full of cheer, so simple and pleasant. Was it all to end in some dreary complication? Why was it her lot to always feel these sharp reactions whenever she surrendered to happiness? But the more she thought about excusing herself to Lycurgus the more distasteful such a course seemed. To-night was a feast-night, and there would, doubtless, be a company of the old patrons looking forward to the familiar dances and national tunes. No, there was nothing to do but go through with it.

She debated over what to wear. So far, she had appeared at the café in the simplest of street costumes. Perhaps that was why she had always been able to maintain a certain air of standing out of the gaudy current of café life. But she felt to-night it might be a graceful act if she went in braver apparel, a tribute to these people who had been her friends. And suddenly she remembered that Lycurgus's given name was George. Then it was a feast-day for him, too! She threw Gertrude Sinclair's discarded finery on the bed and ran through it. Here was the black gown that she had worn at the Russian Ballet, and the gold-embroidered costume that had done such service during her nights with Mrs. Condor. She passed them by and looked at a pale-blue scrap of a dress, and a lacy trifle all white with a wide pink sash, and a barbaric-looking spangled affair that she had never had quite the courage to wear. She would wear it to-night and startle these friends of hers. She would wear it to-night and play her new rôle to the limit. A café entertainer? Well, and why not?

She put the dress on and found herself startled by the effect. She had drawn back her hair in the exaggerated simplicity that was the mode, allowing two formal ringlets to escape and curl their suggestive way just below either temple. At the corner of one eye a beauty patch gave her glance a sinister coquettishness. She could not have imagined herself so changed. The gown was a shimmering blue-green mass, cut very low, and with the narrowest of shoulder-straps. For a moment Claire had a misgiving. What could she be thinking of to hazard such a costume? But there succeeded a tempestuous wish to be daring, to try her feminine lure to its utmost power, to dazzle for once in her life. And Danilo? What would he think of her? *He* would be surprised!

She put on her shabby coat and wound a black-lace scarf about her hair. Then she looked into the glass again. Now she might be the old Claire of church social days, for any outside sign to the contrary. She had worn this very cloak and scarf on the night when she had first seen Danilo, less than six months ago! She pushed aside her lace head-covering, and the beauty patch and the intriguing ringlets peeped out. Six months ago she would have been incapable of this deliberate accentuation of her personality. She would not have lacked the desire, perhaps, but she would have been without the skill to accomplish it. What had been taking place in her soul? She had a feeling, as she stared at herself in the glass, that defiance lay back of most of the broken rules of life. She was defiant—*defiant!* She brought her fist down upon the bureau, and it came to her that she had put this dress on, not to please her Greek friends, not to honor Lycurgus, not to surprise Danilo! No, she had put it on because she hoped to see Stillman at the Café Ithaca. She had put it on out of sheer bravado. She could not bear to have Stillman feel that she was in that place under protest, playing the game half-heartedly. No, she wanted him to think that she liked the life, that she had no regrets, that she was proud and self-contained and reliant. She wanted to wound him.

Outside, the evening was clear and cool. A wind had been blowing all day—the first trade-wind of the season. Presently, she thought, summer would be upon them with its misty, tremulous nights and its wind-swept days. She knew little of the traditional summer of the calendar, warm and opulent. San Francisco had a trick of ignoring climatic rules, playing the coquette with the sun, drawing a veil from the sea across its gray-green face. But Claire had always liked these wayward summer months, liked the swift changes, the salty tang in the air, the voice of the wind in the afternoon among the eucalyptus-trees. There was a certain robust melancholy about all these things, a wind-clean virility.

As she rode down Third Street it seemed to her that the sidewalks were less crowded than usual. The younger men were already off to war. Only a broken few remained, and summer was beckoning these afield, luring them from the paved streets with glib, false promises. By the end of October they would be drifting back again, disillusioned, betrayed by the wanton countryside, seeking to forget all the fine things that had been their springtime hope. They would be drifting back to the mercenary embraces of the town, like embittered lovers turning to the husks of hired caresses for their solace. But spring would come again, and all the old hope and faith and courage with it. Was not life, after all, a succession of springs luminous with promise, and summers whose harvests must, of necessity, fall far short of all the brave anticipations? What summer could possibly yield the marvelously golden fruits of spring's devising?

And, thinking of these things, Claire had a passionate wish that spring might be forever stayed; that life might be a keen, virgin hope, unrealized, but ever ardent, and blinded with the light of fancy.

CHAPTER V

Claire was late in arriving at the Café Ithaca. But in the excitement of preparing a feast her absence had been overlooked. It turned out that St. George's Day was a very special day indeed. Three large banquet-tables had been set, and the general public, by a printed sign at the door, received the news that it was excluded.

The company was just preparing to sit down as Claire entered. Concealed by the folds of the green curtain which screened the saloon, she stood and glanced curiously about. The walls had been transformed into a green bower of wild huckleberry, the tables strewn with fern fronds and red carnations. It seemed that all the old patrons were there, either as hosts or guests, and a strange mixture of outsiders had been bidden to the feast. A few of the Greeks who had married American girls had brought their wives with them, and, of course, among the strangers, the women and men were about evenly divided. A Greek orchestra of three pieces was tuning up.

"They will not need me!" flashed through Claire's mind.

She felt relieved. All at once it seemed quite impossible for her to face this assembly, in the bizarre costume which had tempted her beyond discretion. As she stepped aside, Lycurgus saw her. He inclined his head and put his hand to his heart. It was plain that the formality of the occasion had revived his old manner.

"Ah, Miss Robson! I have been waiting!" He bowed again as he spoke.

"Oh, I am sorry! Shall you want me to play?... I thought perhaps...."

"To play?... You are not to play to-night. This is my name-day, and to-night you are to sit with

me."

She was to be a guest, then! A feeling of swift pleasure came over her at the realization that these people had taken thought of such a graceful courtesy.

She went into the dressing-room and took off her wrap. The other entertainers had been in before her and the scraps of their finery were strewn about, a powder-box was overturned, a jar of lip rouge uncovered. She knew that Lycurgus was waiting for her, so she did not add many calculated touches to her toilet; but as she tucked a strand of rebellious hair back into place it struck her that her lips were somewhat pale for so vivid a costume. She put her finger into the rouge-pot and deftly drew it across her mouth. Suddenly it seemed as if her whole personality were flaming. She restrained an impulse to rub her lips pale again, and she went into the café.

It was Jimmy who first saw her. He was carrying a tray of masticas and he stopped as if arrested by an apparition. He set the tray down upon a serving-table, and said:

"Whew, Miss Robson! What have you done? You are a different girl! I did not know you. My, but the other women will be sore!" He chuckled gleefully, and returned to his task.

At this moment Lycurgus came up to her.

"Miss Robson!... Thank you!... Thank you!..." he kept repeating, in almost inarticulate amazement. "Come, you shall sit next to me *now!*"

And to her dismay he routed out his intended guest of honor, a countryman who seemed not to mind the change in position in the least, and set Claire in the place at his right.

The company began to eat. Claire glanced about. The other entertainers were sitting at a solitary table near the piano.

"Can it be possible," thought Claire, "that Lycurgus expects them to go through their parts to-night?"

Almost at once her query was answered, for the piano tinkled and a little French Jewess named Doris, a new acquisition, got up and began to sing. But everybody was too busy eating to give very much attention to any other form of entertainment, and the song ended in apathetic fizzle. Claire's hands came together in instinctive applause. This solitary clapping only emphasized the general indifference, and Claire was rewarded by a malignant glance from Doris which seemed to say:

"You don't need to trouble yourself applauding *me!* I can get my songs over without your help, thank you!"

When the Jewess seated herself all the other entertainers glared at Claire also.

"They're hurt," said Claire to herself as she dropped her eyes. And she felt the same regret she had experienced on the night when Stillman had sent orchids to her and ignored Mrs. Condor.

Presently the Greek orchestra started up, swinging into a brave chanting rhythm that started the men dancing. At first there were but three dancers in the swaying line, but gradually the list grew and soon a score were upon their feet. The music continued with hypnotic monotony, and the thread of men moved through the growing complications of the dance like a gliding serpent.

Soup was brought on; the music stopped. A general scurry took place as the men scampered to their seats again. The entertainer's table was animated by sneering laughter. After the soup, the rag-time orchestra had its inning, and the Americans in the company danced with an air of sophisticated superiority. Then came more songs from the entertainers—received with a favor and warmth which grew as the dinner progressed. Thus the events of the evening succeeded one another, an incongruous mixture of New and Old World customs and diversions.

Claire was relieved to discover that no one expected her to dance. She was beginning to feel conscious of her costume, and it was less embarrassing to brave the thing out in solitary grandeur by Lycurgus's side than to attract the attention of the entire dancing-floor.

Lycurgus beamed upon every one and introduced Claire to all comers with an affectionate enthusiasm. Put to the necessity of exercising his English, he had developed quite a vocabulary in the last few weeks.

"Ah, this is my friend, Miss Robson!" he would announce. "Thank you! Thank you! She has a dress made just for this ... my name-day! And so I sit here where I can see her always.... All the night! She is a girl, I can tell you! In two days she learns the Greek hymn, upon the piano! For me, mind you! For me and no one else!... And you should hear her play for the dance.... Not to-night! No, some other time! She is my guest to-night.... She has had a dress, yes, sir ... yes, sir—made just for to-night. She has never worn it before! I tell you I am somebody. Eh? Thank you! Thank you!"

Claire longed to escape, to hide herself in some screened corner. Had she come in simpler clothes she would have found Lycurgus's delight childlike and winning, but she felt embarrassed under the appraising glances which his words called forth. The men measured her with frank pleasure; the women with cold, disturbed disapproval.

At eleven o'clock the green curtains parted, and Danilo came in. Claire felt a sudden faintness that just missed being nausea.... She looked down at her plate.... When she glanced up again Danilo was making his way toward some vacant seats at one of the side-tables, and Stillman was following.

"Ah!" cried Lycurgus. "There is Danilo! Excuse me!... Thank you! Thank you!" and with that he rose and rushed over to Danilo.

The two men embraced, kissing each other on either cheek. Stillman stood apart, a thin, tolerant smile on his lips. Claire had an absurd feeling of wishing to fly to Danilo's defense. The greeting over, Lycurgus drew Danilo to one side. He pointed in Claire's direction, waving his hands and chuckling audibly. He was telling Danilo about Claire's dress. She blushed and tried to look in another direction; but as her gaze hurriedly swept the room for an object on which to fix her attention, she became aware that Stillman was looking at her. His glance was not startled, nor disturbed, nor even surprised. Instead, he seemed to be looking clear through her. She shivered, and unconsciously began to feel about her shoulders in a futile effort to locate some scrap of covering with which to screen her bare arms and breast. She was trembling violently. A woman sitting opposite threw her a crêpe scarf with an air of triumph that seemed to say:

"Well, you can see, now, what comes of such foolishness ... such indecency! You might have known you would catch cold."

Claire had the impulse to toss the proffered covering back to its owner, but she took it meekly, instead.

Stillman slowly withdrew his gaze. Claire transferred her glance to Danilo and Lycurgus. The doctor was assenting perfunctorily to his friend's animated harangue. He smiled at Claire, but she had a feeling that it was scarcely a smile of approval. She lifted the scarf above her, and as her bare arms stood out whitely against the glare, she fancied that she saw Stillman turn and fix her with a wounded, almost harried stare. Even Danilo's pallid smile faded. Claire dropped the covering on her shoulders and her arms sank down. Danilo was introducing Stillman to Lycurgus. Claire began to make a pretense of eating.

"I must get away from all this!" she kept repeating to herself, as she thrust the food between her lips. "I must get away from this life, or else...."

And suddenly she began to wonder whether her position at Flint's was still open to her. She threw back her head and laughed as the realization of what she had been thinking flashed over her. The woman who had loaned her the scarf stared. Claire went on eating more calmly.

She kept expecting Danilo to bring Stillman over and introduce him. A feeling of curiosity mingled with fright possessed her. But as the evening progressed it became apparent that this part of the feast-day was the men's part. Danilo was being constantly caught up by groups of his male friends, toasted and wined and embraced with fervor. As for Lycurgus, he did not return to his seat after greeting Danilo, and Claire discovered that she was sitting quite alone—even the men on her left had deserted the table for the noisier delights of the barroom. She caught glimpses of Stillman, mingling perfunctorily with Danilo's comrades. He wore his thin, tolerant smile during the whole evening. Was he disgusted, or amused, or merely indulgent? He did not look again in Claire's direction. She felt cold and sick and miserable.

Presently she saw Danilo come out of the telephone-booth. His eyes caught hers and he walked over and dropped into Lycurgus's seat beside her.

"I wanted you to meet my friend ... but now I have been called away to a patient—a dying woman. Did you see us come in together? I am sure he thinks this all very queer."

She had an impulse to tell him then that she knew Stillman and that an introduction was unnecessary. But he rose quickly, tossing a clean napkin in her direction as he said:

"You must have been eating cherries. Your lips are all red."

She picked up the napkin and covered her lips. She had never been so humiliated in her life. He stood watching her as she rubbed her mouth clean again.

"Ah, now you look better!" he said, simply, as she tried to smile.

He said good-by and left her. She watched him shake hands with Stillman. Evidently Stillman had decided to remain. She looked down at the napkin and the red stain upon it. The woman opposite her was eying the discarded napkin with a look of contempt.

Claire heard some one pull back the chair that Danilo had just deserted. She looked up. Stillman was sitting down beside her. At this moment the woman opposite rose.

"Are you leaving?" Claire felt herself say.

The woman nodded. Claire slowly unwound the scarf from her shoulders and returned it, murmuring her thanks. The woman left the table. Claire could feel the chill of Stillman's glance sweeping over her bare shoulders and her white breast. When he spoke she felt no surprise at his words—she knew at once what he would say.

"I didn't expect to see *you* here!"

"I thought you had experience enough to be prepared for anything!"

He looked at her sharply. "Well, there are some things.... Are you a guest?"

Then Danilo had not spoken of her—pointed her out!... She toyed with a fern frond. "For tonight, only. Otherwise I earn my living here."

He was ghastly pale. "*Here?*"

"Oh, don't be alarmed! It's respectable enough. I play the piano. It really isn't gay at all. It's very stupid and dull when you get used to it."

She was conscious that her tone was hard-lipped, playing up to her costume.

"Every night? Is it possible that you come here every night, in this kind of a place, and play?... Good God! No wonder...."

His eyes swept her again. She dropped her glance.

"No wonder you can dress yourself in this fashion!" was what she knew he meant to imply. She threw back her head defiantly.

"You're mistaken," she said, coldly. "These people are very good to me. As for playing the piano.... well, I've done that before. Only, then I was exhibited on a *raised* platform!"

She knew that every word was wounding him, and yet she could not alter her mood. She was heart-sick, and defiant, and bitter.

"And do you think that all this is quite fair to ... to your friends?"

"I have to earn my living, don't I?"

He brushed a cigarette stub off the table. "Last month I made a fortune. I cleaned up something over a million dollars. And still I must sit here and watch ... watch these Greeks fling money in your face!"

He swept the room with an angry gesture. Claire followed the swift flight of his hand. One of the entertainers had finished singing and the usual shower of coins was falling on the hard floor. His lips were quivering with indignation.

"Oh, *I'm* not a favorite! They don't bombard me in any such fashion. Once in a while, perhaps, but...." She raised her hands slightly.

"Once in a while!" he echoed, with a bitter laugh, "Then they *do* throw money at you! You ... you take all this from strangers, but from me ... from me, who...." He brought his fist down upon the table.

She put her hand upon his. "I give these people pleasure and they repay me as they can.... There is one thing about a *flung* coin—it is frank and open and honest."

He glanced down. "And insulting, too," he muttered. "God knows there have been times enough when I forgot myself.... I'm a man, after everything is said and done. The mistakes I made were never deliberate ... calculating. I *did* want to serve you!"

"What did you expect me to do?" she asked, more gently.

"I don't know. But I fancy it was almost anything but this. It seems that almost anything else would be better."

"Even taking dictation from Flint?"

He winced.

"Oh, I know what you are thinking," she went on, passionately. "You're thinking that it is this life that has given me the courage to be hard and bitter—to dress myself in this ... to paint my lips red." She held up the rouge-stained napkin and shrugged. "But you forget Flint and Mrs. Condor and all the nastiness of the life that you seem to think desirable simply because it is familiar.... I wouldn't go back to it now even if I could. I'd rather take a chance here where they throw money frankly in your face and then promptly forget about it; where they don't demand anything of you beyond just the passing moment. Where one hasn't any standards to live up to and cheat for. Yes, cheat for! Not that these people haven't standards—they're full of them. But they don't expect *me* to live up to them. I can be as virtuous or as immoral as I choose. They are willing to leave my soul in my own keeping!"

He shaded his face. "Just think," he said, as he raised his eyes to her again. "I made a million dollars last month, and I am more helpless than the meanest person here with ten cents in his pocket. If I were poor and miserable and struggling, I could at least come and sit opposite you and throw my last penny at you. I could throw my last coin at your feet and go away happy, knowing that I must starve to-morrow, because of you. Why is it that others may do what I—"

She stopped him with a quick gesture. "You know why," she said, simply.

He drew back as if she had dealt him a blow in the face. Claire felt an impulse to rise and flee. Her defiance had spent itself and she was growing weak and tremulous. She glanced about—

Lycurgus was coming toward them.

"Ah, Mr. Stillman—thank you! Thank you!" Lycurgus's voice rang out across the table. "I see you are here ... with Miss Robson. Did you see her dress? For me ... she wears this dress just for me to-night, because it is my name-day. She has never worn it before. She is some girl, I can tell you!" Suddenly he bent across the table and, laying his hand upon Claire's cold fingers, he ran his palm the full length of her arm.

She shook him off as she rose. But he continued to smile with wine-heated indulgence. "For me," he repeated again. "She wears this beautiful dress for me only!"

Claire glanced down at Stillman. His face was gray, his hands clenched at his side. Lycurgus moved away.

"Good night," she said to Stillman.

He roused himself. "Then you are going?... Which way?... I have my car here."

"Some other time," she repeated, mechanically. "I am not afraid. I do this every night, you must remember."

He stood up. "I should be very glad indeed, but if you do not...."

"No, I would rather be alone."

He bowed. "And your mother—how is she?"

"A little better, thank you. We have a new doctor."

"Is that so? Remember me to her, will you?"

She said good night again, and escaped. The dressing-room was crowded with women. Claire found her coat and scarf; she stepped out into the café and slipped them on. Stillman had gone.

The Greek orchestra had started another tune and Lycurgus was leading the dance, this time with great animation. Claire left unnoticed by the side door. The night air was still sharp and rather cutting, and the stars twinkled brilliantly overhead. The chill had driven most people indoors. Third Street was as good as deserted.

She felt very cold, and she decided not to walk to Market Street, but to take a car. Her spangled dress seemed suddenly to have grown heavy. She longed to throw herself prone upon her narrow bed and let the dull longing at her heart escape in a flood of tears....

She crawled up the long flight of stairs to her cheerless home. The stillness was broken by the faint breathing of the little faded seamstress and the heavy snores of her mother. She caught the flicker of a light from the dining-room. She tiptoed toward it. The tiny lamp before Danilo's icon was still burning fitfully. She stepped into the room. Something mysterious and peaceful seemed to flood her soul.

Danilo?... Until this moment she had not thought of him. Here upon the table lay the simple flowers that he had plucked for his feast. She bent over to smell them. They were full of wild, uncultured perfume.

And suddenly his face rose before her and she heard the precise tones of his voice as he had said:

"You must have been eating cherries. Your lips are red."

She tossed aside her coat and her lace scarf, and her imprisoned hair came trembling in a wayward flood about her shoulders.

She sat down before the table and clasped her hands. In the dimness the holy image seemed to grow palpitant and alive. Hot tears were gathering in her eyelashes. She bowed her head.

The light in the lamp gave one brave flicker and went out. Claire Robson dropped her head upon the table and sobs shook her.

CHAPTER VI

At four o'clock in the morning Stillman turned his car about and began to return to San Francisco. He did not feel tired, but he was chilled through. About him, in the faint mist of early dawn, the prune-orchards of the Santa Clara Valley stretched out in faintly green lines toward the foothills.

He had a sudden longing for companionship. If only Danilo were there to flame him with vicarious enthusiasm! Danilo!... What was there about Danilo that never failed to melt the cold forms of indifference and weary contempt? Was it the man himself, his intensity for a cause, or the mere novelty of the unique atmosphere which he radiated that had tempted Stillman beyond the pale boundaries of a formal acquaintanceship? Last night's celebration, for instance, had held very little that was traditionally appealing to a man of Stillman's upbringing, and yet he had been tricked into accepting the curious forms through which a totally strange people expressed

themselves. In his travels abroad he had always enjoyed the spectacle of foreign life, but he had scarcely felt any desire to enter into it. He found the position of onlooker agreeable, and he was not indifferent to the merit of other traditions, but he had lacked the naïveté to surrender to their spell. When he was with Danilo it was different; the Serbian seemed to be a crucible which fused the most diverse elements, investing everything in life with simplicity and coherence. In Danilo's presence Stillman found himself capable of the most amazing confidences. He could speak out boldly about his hopes, his fears, even his shortcomings. He could discuss the magnitude of his fortune, his carefully guarded indiscretions, his domestic tragedy.

And now, at this moment, as Stillman rode back to San Francisco in the faintly spreading dawn, he had a vague feeling that if Danilo had been at his side he would have poured out his soul and yielded up the most precious secret of his heart. Well, perhaps it was best that Danilo was safely out of range. It was not that he felt any precise mistrust concerning Danilo; all his uncertainty had to do with the strange, hard, coldly flaming Claire that he had glimpsed in that terrible moment when he had first come upon her, seated next to Lycurgus at the Café Ithaca. He had never felt so impotent, so helpless as he had felt at that moment. He remembered, now, every detail of her costume: the blue-green iridescence that ran through every palpitation of her figure, the black, sinister patch near her eye, the brilliant red of her lips. And against all this color the amazing whiteness of her tapering arms had stood out too clearly. He had seen her arms bared before, to the elbow, but never boldly stripped clear to the shoulders. And her hair—that hair which always had graced her head with such unaffected artlessness—she seemed suddenly to have found the need to overdo, to strain for effective simplicity. Her words to him had not helped matters. It was not the memory of her defiance that left him cold; it was the indifference in her voice that froze his heart. She was indifferent—she no longer cared!

He began now to feel not only cold, but weary. What had possessed him to leave the Café Ithaca and flee down the peninsula like a thief in the night? To ride ... ride furiously, madly, that had been his first impulse. Just motion! It seemed that he could find no other outlet for his tumult. But now the leaping flames of emotion had died. He was burned out.

The dawn grew rosier; meadowlarks began to sing; groups of blackbirds rose in ardent, wheeling flights. The mist upon the hills parted and revealed pastoral secrets. But all this full-blooded pageantry left him unmoved.

He thought about his wife; not indirectly, evasively, as had been his habit, but with ruthless honesty. The bulletins from the sanatorium had grown less hopeful. Still, there was always the possibility that the mental fog would clear and leave her at the mercy of a wan sanity. Stillman could imagine nothing more terrible than this return to a chill, stark reason. It would be as if some smiling hillside had paid the toll of a devastating freshet, and was left a scarred and naked waste that a belated sun could never clothe again. And always there would be the sleeping and waking fear that the torrents would descend again with even greater fury. Now, at least, she had the warmth of her hallucinations to make life tolerable. What would be left her when these mirages melted into the dreary void of actual life?... For a moment it seemed to Stillman that reality was the greatest of all tragedies to face. The visions of youth, the ecstasies of the witless, the crooning dreams of old age—how they softened the relentless glare of things as they were! How they lured the traveler past the soul-killing monotonies, the bleak disillusionments!

He left the orchards behind, and came into the region of pretty, artless homes surrounded by gardens spilling their fragrance into the lap of morning. To the west the land dimpled with laughing hills, green and tremulous in the young light. Eucalyptus-trees bent gravely in the chance breezes or stood erectly still where the calm of dawn remained inviolate. Stillman received the impression of nature's calm contentment and took issue with it. He was in no mood to be snared by the false promise of morning.

He began now to think about himself, and immediately all his raillery at fate died. What had he ever done to prove his claim to happiness? Had he ever wrestled with God for a blessing? He thought of Danilo, remembering all the details of the doctor's hard-fisted battle with circumstances—starving days, shivering nights. There must be a full-blooded joy in giving fate blow for blow; in having to fight for every narrow foothold upon the ledge of fortune! Well, the heights had been his without the toil of scaling, and he had looked down upon the promised land with indifference. What had he been doing all these years, all these months, all these weeks? He had done his duty, perhaps; but scarcely more. Widows who cast their mite into the Lord's treasury did this much. He had never thought of spilling the wine from his brimming cup upon the parched lips of the thirsty, and he had measured the meal of obligation with too finely balanced a scale. Now had come a time when his greatest wish was to be prodigal, and the hands that should have received his outpouring were tied grimly. What would not he have given to see the fruits of his inheritance replenishing the scant store of the woman he loved! And yet, as he had said, the veriest beggar could do more—could fling his penny at the feet of Claire Robson and go on his starving way with a smile. Perhaps a man more trained in outwitting circumstances would have found a way out of the difficulty, but Stillman could see only blind alleys leading from every desire of his heart.... Danilo's ardent face rose before him. Here was a man who could no doubt feel the ecstasy of personal passion and yet have abundant thrill for bigger things. He had conquered a profession and now he was to surrender to the outpouring of the spirit upon the altars of his native land. *His native land!* Just what did an expression like this mean to Ned Stillman?—a smiling country untouched by the stress of nature, and only remotely disturbed by the grim expediency of war; a sky-blue birthright that yielded up the easy harvests which had reduced him to such sleek impotence. He felt suddenly tricked, cheated, as one does who looks

back upon indulgent parents with a feeling of accusing scorn. Danilo's native land had made demands, forced the chains of loyalty in the white-heated fires of necessity. Danilo loved his Serbia because he had wept with her—because the claims of mutual tears are stronger than the claims of mutual laughter. Stillman felt loyal to the land of his birth. And he had worked hard, too. He had made sacrifices, of a kind, and he was prepared to do more. Yes, he would go the limit ... the absolute limit. He had every reason to be grateful for his inheritance, and yet, Danilo, penniless and tempered in the fires of a frugal birthright, had the best of the bargain....

Stillman was nearing San Francisco now. The landscape had the moth-eaten look that landscapes do when they make the transition from countryside to paved streets. But at least the morning air was still fresh, as yet unpolluted by the foul breath of drudgery and toil. He began to wonder vaguely whether Danilo would be stirring so early. He felt a sudden desire to see him. Well, why not? He remembered the doctor's address—a cheap lodging-house on Third Street. He had never favored Danilo before with a visit. It seemed absurd to burst in upon a man at the ungodly hour of six o'clock. But he had a wish to outrage his own sense of conventionality.

He found Danilo up and stirring. The room was clean and unincumbered with personal effects. A few photographs upon the bureau, a panorama of Belgrade, an American and a Serbian flag intertwined—these were all the evidences of occupation. Danilo himself was in a gay-flowered dressing-gown and he moved toward the door with a graceful gliding movement as he said:

"Why, my dear fellow, you look ill! What can be the matter?"

Stillman sank into a chair. It had needed just this word of sympathy to upset his poise utterly.

"I don't know," he answered. "I felt suddenly dizzy when I opened the door. Forgive me for breaking in on you at such an hour!"

Danilo answered with a laugh, and brought out cigarettes. Stillman took one. They began to smoke.

"I can't think what is the matter with me," Stillman began, awkwardly.

Danilo seated himself. "I can. You're in love. You are afraid to talk about it.... Ah yes, I knew that I was not wrong! You are blushing like a school-boy. Tell me, what is her name?"

Stillman breathed heavily. He made no answer.

Danilo rose. "Ah, my friend, forgive me!" he said, quickly. "I didn't realize it was...."

Stillman made a little gesture of appeal. "I didn't myself until.... God, it's all so horrible!"

"Your wife, you mean?... Well, perhaps there could be a way out."

"No, there's no way out!... What would you do if you saw the woman you loved going down ... down ... down, and you were powerless to save her?"

"A question of money or morals?"

"Money first of all...."

"That ought not to be much of a problem in your case."

"Ah, you don't understand! Oh no! can't you see? In this case it would be impossible!"

"Then it *is* a question of morals.... I know. Sometimes these things happen—how do you say it?—in the best of regulated families. If I were in your position and it happened to the woman.... Well, in my country it is all very simple. We call the man out and shoot him. Here ... I suppose here you tell your troubles to a policeman, do you not?"

Stillman darted a swift, searching look at Danilo.

"Not always.... Sometimes we commit the indiscretion of telling our friends."

Danilo rose quickly. He went over and put his hand caressingly on Stillman's shoulder.

"*Indiscretion*, my brother?" he queried. "Ah, you do not know me, even yet! Well, we are companions in misery, if it comes to that. But in my case I do not think I shall need the pistol. I shall marry the girl. And that will end everything."

Stillman pressed Danilo's hand. "A girl of your own people?"

"No—one of your American girls.... Some day, when it is all settled, I shall invite you to meet her.... I came very near letting you see her last night. But it happened otherwise, and I am as well pleased." He laughed, showing his teeth pleasantly. "I do not want you as a rival, my brother. That would be a nasty business between friends."

Stillman rose. "My dear Danilo, I wish you every happiness," he said. He wanted to say more, to sound a warmer note, but the words would not shape themselves. But Danilo seemed to divine his intent.

"And you, brother.... No, I shall not mock you with a return of the compliment. But I shall hope that it will all come right for you, somehow. That this woman you love shall be worthy of a good man. At least, then you will have your faith. Cold comforts are better than none at all!"

Stillman smiled grayly. "And what is to become of the Serbian project, now that you are to be...."

"My dear fellow, marriage is not the end of everything. A man still has his duties—his enthusiasms! Everything will go on as I have planned it."

"You said she was an American.... Perhaps she will object to being left...."

"Left?... Why, she will go with me! Remember, I am marrying a wife, and, naturally, a wife does what her husband—"

"Oh, of course, of course! That goes without saying." Stillman laughed disagreeably. "Really, I must be running along. I am tired. I have been riding all night."

"I am afraid my name-day celebration was disturbing," Danilo said, giving Stillman his hand.

"Life is so full of unexpected turns," Stillman ventured as he swung open the door. "I didn't think that your life and my life were touched by the same currents."

"Are they?"

"Remotely ... by the merest chance."

Danilo looked puzzled. "Chance is like a deep pool; you never know what ghastly thing it will yield up."

Stillman narrowed his eyes. He began to remember things. Again he heard the sharp slam of a taxi door, again he felt his cheeks burn as he leaned forward to pick up his hat, again he laid an inquisitive hand upon the shoulder of a slim, beetle-browed figure standing with one finger upon the call-bell of an elevator. And again that figure turned, fixing him with a red-lipped smile.... Yes, at this moment, standing before Danilo, it all came back.

"An American girl.... So he is to marry an American girl!... I wonder if...."

For a moment he felt the hot coals of smoldering lawlessness flare within him. But a chill followed ... a bleak, dead, lifeless chill of resignation. He put out his hand.

"I hope everything good for you, my friend," he said, sadly. "Everything good for you ... and ... and this woman you are to marry."

CHAPTER VII

"It is as I thought ... he is in love. He admitted as much to me this morning.... What do you think of him?"

Danilo, standing before the kitchen window of the Robson home, looked out across the dreary stretch of back yards and dizzy back stairways.

Claire stopped folding a dish-towel as she gave Danilo a sharp glance. Here was the opportunity that she had longed for. Now she could tell him simply and naturally that she had seen Stillman before, that she knew him, had worked for him, in fact. But, instead, a sudden awkward silence fell.... Something at once definite and intangible had come between these two.

Danilo fingered his hat and remembered a pressing engagement.

Claire followed him to the door.

"My patient died last night—the old woman I was called away to attend. I thought of you all the while, wondering how you would get home. Indeed, at one o'clock I went back for you, but you had gone."

"That was very kind," Claire returned, still moved by a vague resentment. "I got home as usual ... on the street-car. I do it nearly every night, you know."

Danilo looked at her squarely. "But last night was different. You—you—well, to be frank, you were not dressed for the street."

She had been expecting some such thing and she decided to meet the issue nonchalantly. "Oh, but you didn't see me leave! I was the most dowdy and respectable thing imaginable. A shabby coat and a dingy lace scarf work wonders. I assure you nobody looked twice at me."

Danilo frowned, and he stepped back upon the threshold as he said:

"Nobody would have looked at you even once if I had been along.... I do not want you to dress again as you did last night."

"No?" she gasped.

"No. It makes me.... Well, perhaps you would not understand, now. But later—later you will see why I take the trouble.... As a matter of fact, I would have brought my friend Stillman over to meet you, but I decided to wait for another time ... when you were more like yourself. I wanted him to see you at your best.... I hope my words do not offend you. But you have no brother and...."

He finished with a shrug. His words did not offend her—they struck deeper, so deep that all her pride rose to meet the issue with a smiling acceptance of his rebuke. "*Offended?* Oh, my dear, no! You are frank about it, at all events." She forced a laugh. "I shall try to be good in the future."

He did not succumb to her strained mirth. He merely looked at her with a note almost disapproving as he gravely said good-by.

She went up-stairs into her mother's room. Mrs. Robson sat propped up in the position that Claire always helped her assume for the doctor's daily visit. Mrs. Robson's dull eyes brightened. She began her illusive mumblings. Claire dropped at attentive ear to her mother's words.

"The doctor," Mrs. Robson was saying, "he should not come every day. It—it is too expensive."

"I am not paying him, mother."

"Oh.... Then he is not coming to see me?"

"Why, of course he is coming to see you, mother! What else would...."

Mrs. Robson shook her head. "I've been thinking, Claire.... Of course, he is not just what I had hoped.... But he is a kind man, Claire. I don't know, but perhaps...."

She tried to lift her helpless hands and draw her daughter's head toward her lips. Claire met the effort half-way.

"He is a kind man, Claire, a kind man," Mrs. Robson kept repeating.

Claire's heart gave a sudden leap.

"We shall see, mother. We shall see."

One night toward the end of the week Claire Robson had a surprise. In the midst of all the cut-to-measure gaiety of the Café Ithaca who should walk in the side door but Sawyer Flint. Claire stared frankly. Instinctively Flint fell back with a quick screening movement, not only obvious, but futile. His companion proved to be Lily Condor. Claire, who was sitting idly at the piano, turned away her head and began to play. The spectacle of Flint and Mrs. Condor together was not unexpected; Nellie Whitehead had brought her the news of this latest alliance not two weeks before.

"They go poking about to all the cheap joints where they're sure nobody will get a line on them. Billy Holmes and I saw them at the Fior d'Italia last Saturday."

Nellie Whitehead had said other things, too, complimentary to neither her former employer nor his latest boon companion....

Claire did not look up again until she had finished the piece she was playing. Flint and Lily Condor had retreated to an obscure corner where they seemed to be sitting in rather furtive discomfort. Claire was human enough to enjoy her triumph. She knew that the two were taking mental stock of the defenses that they might be called upon to use.

Mrs. Condor looked older; her hair was losing its luster, and her complexion showed unmistakable first-aid signs. There were about her mouth, too, lines of spiritual rather than of physical fag, forerunners of a complete let-down. Claire could but feel a measure of pity for this woman. She knew enough to realize that in accepting the attentions of Sawyer Flint Lily Condor had reached the ghastly plains of unrestrained compromise. At least there had been always something bold and arresting about Mrs. Condor's indiscretions; she had not been given to shielding her improprieties behind the screen of cheap delights. She reminded Claire of some harried animal snatching joys at the expense of security. After Flint washed his hands of her, what then?

Flint was making compromises, too. Lily Condor was not the woman he would have picked for a dining companion if the field had been open to his choice. Flint liked to exhibit his quarry rather openly and with a swagger. But Lily was no conquest to brag of, and Claire could see that already his attitude was anything but deferential. She had a feeling that Mrs. Condor would have been willing to take the chance of dining with Sawyer Flint in the fashionable restaurants of San Francisco, and that these shifts to less smart entertainments were more a matter of Flint's lack of pride in his adventure rather than his companion's desire to be furtive. And as for the discretion of sneaking in and out of badly lighted side entrances—even this was questionable. After all, Flint and Lily Condor could have played an open game to much better purpose, and Claire was sensible that they both were aware of this fact—the lady to her inward chagrin.

Flint ordered a salad and then rose and went out into the barroom. Mrs. Condor, divesting herself of wraps, deliberately caught Claire's eye and beckoned her. Claire left the piano stool.

"Claire Robson!" began Mrs. Condor, boldly. "Fancy—*you* here!"

Claire looked at her with uncomfortable directness. "All my friends are surprised," she answered, simply.

This reply left Mrs. Condor without any conversational lead. But she was not inclined to retreat in the face of blocked advance. "I heard somewhere," Lily lied, glibly, "that you were doing

cabaret work, but of course it never dawned on me to find you in the Greek quarter. How is it—very dreadful?"

Claire waved her hand. "You can see for yourself," she said.

"Oh, I dare say it is human enough. By the way, I suppose you're very sore at me. But really, you know—"

"Sore at *you*! Why, my dear Mrs. Condor, I am sore at nobody. Why should I be?"

"Well, I thought perhaps.... Oh, well, what is the use of pretending? You know what I'm talking about."

"If you mean that silly tempest about the Café Chantant, please dismiss it from your mind. I've done so long ago. You were put in an awkward position and I don't blame you. You had to choose, of course, between me and your friend, Mrs. Flint. I can't fancy any sane person doing differently."

Claire had never thought she could put so much cool insolence into a speech. Lily Condor stared, fidgeted, tried to laugh. "*Mrs. Flint!* Well, my dear, you know as well as I do that she's impossible. I really feel sorry for Sawyer. He likes a little gaiety now and then ... just.... Well, you know what I mean!"

"Yes ... he told me all about it the night I went over to take dictation. 'No rough stuff, but a good feed, and two kinds of wine, and a cigarette with the small black.' That was the way he put it, as I remember. It all sounded very gay and exciting then. But I've seen a good deal since, and now it all strikes me as quite dull."

Mrs. Condor was measuring Claire with a puzzled air. "Claire, you're getting bitter, I'm afraid. I'm sorry to see that. I'm old enough, Heavens knows, but I try to get peevish. As a matter of fact, you played your cards all wrong. You had Ned Stillman going south. Do you know why I called you over to my table to-night?"

Claire looked at her purring adversary from head to foot. "Yes, you wanted to make sure that I wouldn't spread the news to Mrs. Flint about seeing you here—with her husband. You needn't worry. The news won't get to Mrs. Flint through me. I've got other things on my mind."

Claire moved away. Flint was coming back. He had the effrontery to bow to her, but she stared at him coldly and resumed her seat at the piano. Presently she was conscious that Flint had called the waiter. And a little later she saw Flint and Lily Condor go out the side door.

Flint came back to the Café Ithaca the following night, alone. It was after the dinner hour and there was a little lull between gaieties. The entertainers sat huddled about the piano, but Claire was sitting in a far corner, at one of the obscure tables. Since the St. George's Day celebration the other performers had treated her with cool contempt, making pointed remarks about "up-stage" airs and the people who indulged in them. Claire felt that it was only a matter of time, now, that she would be forced to leave. Lycurgus had taken to drinking more and more heavily and he had begun to intimate that perhaps it would be a fairer proposition if Claire got in between numbers and hustled drinks with the rest of them. He was still appreciative of the costume she had worn at his feast, but she was finding it difficult to explain why she did not appear in it every night.

Lycurgus saw Flint come in, and, scenting a generous patron, scurried up to him obsequiously.

"Thank you—thank you! Where will you sit?"

Flint swept the room with his glance. "Over there," he said, loudly, pointing to where Claire was sitting.

She was on her feet in an instant, but Flint bore down upon her swiftly. "Here! Don't be in such a hurry! I've got something to say to you."

She shrugged wearily and resumed her seat. Lycurgus discreetly retreated.

Flint threw aside his overcoat and took a chair opposite her.

"What'll you have?" he demanded, beckoning the waiter.

"Nothing," she answered.

Flint ordered a cognac.

"Old friend Condor tells me that you insulted her last night. I'm glad of it. I'm sick of her. I'm sick of everything. Cheer up! Have one with me, won't you?... I say, but you are a nice little tombstone to be ornamenting a place like this. What's the matter, don't you like me?"

Claire continued to stare dumbly at him. He had been drinking, she could see that plainly, and she felt a remnant of the mixed fascination and fear that she had experienced during that memorable hour at his dinner-table.

"No, you don't like me," he mused audibly, with an air of drunken melancholy, as if the thought had just struck him. "That's why I'm running around with the old girl ... just out of spite.... Say,

but this is a hell of a place for you to be in! On the square it is ... nothing but dirty, drunken Greeks and painted females! Bah! this isn't any place for you! What I wanted to say is this—any time you want your job back you can have it. It's there waiting for you. And there ain't any strings on it, either.... I played you a mean trick and I acknowledge it. Now I ask you, on the level, ain't that fair enough?... I ain't the man to go crawling on all-fours, begging people's pardon. But you've been pretty game and I take my hat off to you! I take my hat off to anybody that's game, see? Anybody at all ... anybody that's game.... Well, what you staring at? I know I'm losing my hair, but I don't have to have *you* tell me that.... Is it a go? Your job back and everything nice and comfortable again?"

Suddenly Claire felt sorry for him. She was beginning to feel sorry for any one stripped of his illusions. And she had a conviction that this man before her had treasured illusions that were no less poignant merely because they were vulgar. He seemed sincere in spite of his befuddled state. Somehow, somewhere, it had come upon him that he had done her a grave injustice and he was offering her such reparation as his lights allowed. *Her job back and everything nice and comfortable again!* How simple and naïve and masculine! Everything—all the bitter, soul-stirring experiences of the past months to be swept aside by the simple formula of restoring her to her old berth! It was absurd enough for laughter, but tears trembled very near the surface of such a revelation. Yes, it took a man to have the courage of any faith so direct and artless!

"I'm afraid," she said, looking at him clearly, "that it wouldn't be possible ... to have the slate wiped clean again. And besides.... I have to earn my living now at night, Mr. Flint. I have my mother to look after in the daytime, you know."

She spoke so gently that she surprised even herself. And it came upon her that she had no reason to feel any rancor against the man before her. It was he that had given her the first opportunity to cross swords with life. And it struck her with added force that she would not recall one moment of the last six months even if she could.

He did not receive her reply with much grace. His fist came down upon the table as he said:

"You always were damn full of excuses.... You worked in the daytime for Ned Stillman.... But you can't get rid of me as quickly as you once did. This is a public place and I'll come here and sit every night and order up drinks until you change your mind."

Claire rose in her seat. "Sit down!" he commanded, thickly. "Sit down, or by God! I'll start something!"

His voice had risen so that the entertainers grouped about the piano heard him. Lycurgus came forward.

"Thank you! Thank you!... What is the matter?"

"This dame here," Flint cried, sweeping a sneering finger in Claire's direction, "she's about as alive as a broiled pork chop. I come in here for a good time and I can't even get her to drink with me. What kind of a dump is this, anyway?"

A swooning fear came over Claire. What if Danilo were suddenly to come in the side door? She looked in the direction of the entertainers. They were smiling broadly. Lycurgus rubbed his hands together and fawned.

"Thank you!... Thank you! What is it, Miss Robson? If the gentleman wants to buy a drink, surely...."

Claire saw Doris, the French Jewess, coming toward them. "Did I hear something about some one wanting to buy a drink?" She turned a wide smile upon Flint. "Here, let me sit down!" she demanded of Claire, who moved away.

Claire walked in the direction of the dressing-room. Lycurgus followed her.

"Miss Robson, thank you! Thank you! You see how it is? You spoil my trade! Everybody else ... they dress gay ... plenty of color! They order drinks. I am your friend, but you can see...."

"Yes, yes," she answered, hurriedly. "I see. It is all my fault. I shall go home now, and not come back."

"Not come—*never?*" Lycurgus brought his hand forward in the old familiar gesture. "Oh, Miss Robson, why do you make me so sorrowful? For just a drink.... You would not even have to taste it! Ah, I do not understand these American women!"

She escaped swiftly and put on her things. As she passed out through the café again, shrill laughter followed her through the door. She hurried along Third Street. At the crossing of Howard Street she was aware that some one had come up to her. She turned. It was Sawyer Flint. His face was very red and his eyes almost swallowed in rolls of puffy flesh.

"I'm drunk," he said, thickly. "I know that. You don't have to tell me I'm drunk!... What was the matter? Did I spill the beans? I spilled the beans, I know. You don't have to tell me I spilled the beans. You lost your job, eh? On my account you lost it? Well, do you know I don't give a damn if you did? That ain't any place for you.... That other dame ... she thought I was going to buy *her* a drink. Well, she had another thought coming. I don't buy drinks for any of them. I buy for you or not at all.... *For you or not at all!* I think I'll go out and see old lady Condor now. I want to get rid

of her. No time like the present. That's my motto—no time like the present! You don't have to tell me I made you lose your job. *I* know! But I don't give a damn. Do you understand? Matter of fact, that's the only decent thing I've done for twenty years. And remember, whenever you want your job back.... You know, just because you're game. I take my hat off to anybody...."

He gave a sudden lurch and Claire escaped.

She thought at first of going directly home, but she discovered that it was only nine o'clock and she dreaded to think of listening to the pallid chatter of Miss Proll, the little seamstress. Then she would be forced to invent an excuse for her early home-coming and she had grown tired of inventing excuses.

She decided to look up Nellie Whitehead. She found her at home, wielding an electric iron and in a state of comfortable disorder from her straggling hair down to her frayed Japanese straw slippers.

"Well, Robson, how goes it?" Nellie said, testing the heated iron with a moist finger. "Don't tell me you've lost your job!"

"That's what I came to do," Claire returned as she threw her hat and coat to one side.

Miss Whitehead with fine discrimination changed the subject. "I'm going to get married next week," she announced.

"To ... to Billy Holmes?"

"The same. I sat down and figured things out the other day. This talk about the independence of females may be all to the good, but I know how independent I am now and how independent I'll be in twenty years from now. Just about as independent as a barn-yard fowl. There's an old girl down where I work now, and she's getting on the ragged edge of fifty, and what do you suppose her joy in life consists of? Saving her dimes up so she will have enough money to dig into an old people's home when she's sixty-five. Ain't that a glowing prospect? Oh, she'll be independent, all right. Anybody is who is a guest of a public institution. Say, I'll bet the old people's home has more rules than a hockey-game. Of course, I suppose a man can lay down a lot of rules for his frau's conduct, too, but the man who marries me will have the fun of laying 'em down and that's about all.... So you've lost your job? Why don't you sign up a marriage contract? You're not waiting to fall in love, are you? It's too bad old friend Stillman has incumbrances. You and he would make a go of it! He's a pretty good kid, all right. He's got his drawbacks, like the rest of 'em, but there must be something fair about a man who stays by a rotten game.... Whatever became of that Serbian doctor, Robson?... Strikes me you've kept pretty mum about him. Billy told me the other day he saw him coming out of your house. On the square, why don't you flag *him*?"

Claire tried to smile. "Well, at least wait until he asks me!" she replied.

And they began to discuss Nellie Whitehead's trousseau.

CHAPTER VIII

In the Robson flat the lights were still burning when Claire got home. Especially in her mother's room there was an unusual brilliance for so late an hour. Claire was frightened. She scrambled up the stairs. Danilo was leaving the sick-room. "What?..." gasped Claire. "Has anything...."

He smiled mysteriously and shook his head. She went in.

She found her mother propped up and looking more animated than at any time since her illness. Her eyes were glowing and two faint spots burned on either cheek.

"Claire!... Claire!" she whispered, excitedly. "Danilo...."

"Yes!"

"It seems.... He wants to marry you, Claire.... He came to me because ... it appears that is the custom in his country."

Claire felt the room whirling.

"Well, mother?"

"He is a kind man, Claire," she heard her mother say.

She went out into the hall. Danilo was standing calm and confident at the head of the stairs.

"Your mother ... has she told you?"

"Yes."

"You are not ready—is that it?"

"I...." She gave a startled look and fell back a trifle. Then more quietly she finished: "Let us go somewhere.... This.... I cannot talk to you here!"

They went down together ... out into the night. She wondered what she would say ... what was there to talk about?... This was the moment she had been waiting for all her life—the moment that every woman waited for ... and still it appeared that it was a matter for calm discussion. Perhaps the formality of Danilo's procedure had robbed the incident of its surge and sweep.... She did not know.... All she knew was that she was trembling.... Afraid?... Well, perhaps ... a trifle. Was it always so?

At the first corner they came upon Danilo's car. Danilo halted.

"No ... no ... let us walk!" she protested.

He yielded to her humor with a gracious shrug. She slipped her arm into his and as quickly withdrew it—he was trembling, too!...

They walked down Clay Street in silence. Instinctively Claire turned toward the quickened pulse of the town. They passed through the gaudy shops of Chinatown into the Latin quarter.... Crossing Broadway, they came upon a flight of steps that lost their way in the white fog which shrouded Telegraph Hill.

"Shall we go up?" said Danilo.

Claire turned for a moment and looked back at the light-blurred city.

"Yes," she answered, as she gave a little shiver.

She took his arm and they began to climb; the city fell beneath them, a faintly luminous outline growing more and more remote. Dimmed by the sad and mysterious tears of evening, the squalid hillside lost its harshness; the cold street-lamps mellowed to gold in the still, thick air.

They reached the crest of the hill. A breeze from the west showered them with a flurry of moisture. They looked up. A wind-tortured tree was bending wearily forward, its dripping leaves trembling before the night's breath. The sound of an accordion rose above the muffled moaning of fog-whistles.

The street had ended suddenly in rout and was running away in a disorderly succession of aimless paths.

"Where shall we go now?" asked Danilo, as he halted.

"Toward the music," Claire replied, vaguely.

He listened a moment. "It is over on the east side of the hill somewhere," he announced.

They dipped down. The way became more ragged and full of shifting rocks. The air was warmer, screened from the sea's breath by the yellow hilltop. The sound of the music grew nearer and nearer. A tawny light sprang up just ahead; snatches of laughter reached them. Then, quite suddenly, they came to an abrupt and jagged ledge.

"See, down there!" cried Danilo.

Claire looked. Just below them in a bowl-like depression that had once been the clearing for an old-fashioned garden she saw black figures swaying rhythmically about a bonfire. Danilo, taking a newspaper out of his overcoat pocket, spread it on the ground. They sat down.

The curtain rises on villagers dancing on the village green. Claire remembered the old formula with which the printed synopsis of the Christmas pantomime inevitably began. It had been to her nothing but an empty phrase like the "once upon a time" of a folk-tale. Claire had never seen a village; she had seen only cities and country towns, peopled by individuals too self-conscious to do anything so naïve and simple as to dance open and unashamed upon the bare earth.

The bonfire blazed up suddenly and the dim figures became more tangible and alive. Claire could even see their faces. Remnants of a feast were scattered about—blue-black mussel-shells, soiled tamale-husks, brown crusts of Italian bread that had been baked in huge round loaves. The music stopped. The girls detached themselves from their partners. Jugs of wine were now lifted up. The men drank with heads thrown back, smacking their lips in greedy satisfaction. The women, standing apart, began to smooth out their dresses and straighten their hats. Somebody came forward to the women carrying a demijohn and tin cups. The women drank coquettishly, tossing the last mouthful out upon the camp-fire. Then the music began again.

Claire leaned forward, her lips parted with a spiritual hunger she could not define. She felt Danilo's hand slowly closing over hers; she made no attempt to withdraw it. As she sat there watching these women surrendering to their transient joys she felt a strange envy, mixed with profound pity. These women danced to-night; they would dance to-morrow night ... for a week, or a month, or a year, as the case might be, but finally the reckoning would come. But at least they danced! At least they would have their memories!

One brown wisp of a girl stood out from all the rest. She was not so deep-bosomed and broad of hips as the other women, and she danced airily, darting here and there like a blue-winged swallow. Her partner, too, was taller and thinner-flanked than the other men. Her head was tilted back and her man bent forward as if to imprison her very breath in the snare which his smile had set. Whenever the music stopped they drank from the same tin cup, and when the dance began again they whirled off like two leaves in the clutch of the autumn breeze.

Claire bent forward eagerly; a movement of her foot sent a detached stone tumbling over the cliff into the midst of the dancers. They all halted, looked up in surprise. Then the young woman, catching a glimpse of Claire and Danilo, waved a welcome.

"Come!" she called, gaily. "Come and have a dance!"

The music, which had ceased for a brief instant, started up.

"Shall ... shall we go down?" asked Claire.

"Yes.... Why not?"

They circled down the hillside hand in hand.

When they came up to the bonfire wine was being poured and thick slices of bread passed about. The little brown girl came forward, showing her white teeth.

"Here, Tony! This way with the wine!" she cried.

Her partner answered her call. He had two tin cups and a demijohn in his hand. He filled both cups to the brim, passing one to Claire and one to the girl at his side. Both women took a sip; the girl handed the cup back to her companion.

"You, too!" she said to Claire. "You and your man! You are like us ... lovers! You must drink so ... from the same cup."

Claire looked at Danilo. He put out his hand and took the cup from her.... They brought bread next, not sliced, but in a huge brown loaf. The youth broke through the crisp crust and gave them each a piece. It seemed to Claire as if she were partaking of some strange and beautiful sacrament. She looked away from the firelight—the fog had grown whiter and more dense, and the city below them had ceased to exist. It was as if care had died and this pallid mist were a winding-sheet that would forever screen its ghastly face.

The music started up once more. The little brown girl and her lover whirled away.

"Come," said Danilo, as he drew Claire gently toward him.

She tossed aside her hat, throwing it with joyful abandon upon the top of a stunted rose-hedge which bent to receive it. They began to dance, simply, beautifully, naturally, their feet planted firmly upon the yellow clay, their quick, ardent breaths further whitening the evening air.

"Claire! Claire!" Danilo bent over, in the fashion of the lean-flanked youth, toward her parted lips. "Claire, do you hear me?... I love you!"

"Yes," she answered, smiling back at him, "I hear you!"

"From the same cup, Claire ... joy or sorrow! We shall drink always from the same cup."

"Yes, joy or sorrow! Joy or sorrow!" she repeated after him.

"When we mounted the stairs to-night, Claire, we did not know that we were climbing to happiness."

"Let us stay up here always.... Let us never go down."

"Always, Claire, always. We shall never return."

The music stopped. They, too, stopped, out of breath and bewildered. The musician was folding up his accordion.

"Ah," cried the little brown girl, running up to them, "it is over too soon! But we cannot dance all night. There is work to-morrow."

"Yes," assented Claire, slowly. "You are right."

The wine-jugs were lifted and the wine-cups filled for the last time. Danilo took a perfunctory sip and passed his cup to Claire; she put it to her lips—this time the wine had a bitter taste. She thrust the drink from her at arm's-length and poured a red flood upon the tawny, sun-baked ground.

Already the company was departing. Claire and Danilo stood apart and watched them go. They dipped down the hillside, fading into the mists like a company of devout and penitent pilgrims. The fire had sunk to a heap of red embers.

"We must be going, too," said Claire.

They made their way back to the flight of steps. The west wind had risen sharply, and the fog parted in the breeze. The city was emerging from its gloom like a bejeweled woman dropping a scarf from her gleaming shoulders.

"Must ... must we really go back?" Claire asked, suddenly, as she drew away from the first downward step.

He took her hand. "Are you afraid ... with me?" he said, gently.

She pressed his hand. "Can it be over so soon?"

"Over? It has just begun, Claire. Have you forgotten?... From the same cup!"

"Joy or sorrow," she repeated.

He led her back a short distance. They withdrew into the shelter of a twisted acacia that seemed determined to escape from the imprisonment of its squalid garden. She leaned against the fence.

"Ah, Claire!" she heard him say, and she felt the shadow of his upraised arms fall upon her, "can you not picture our life together?... All the brave things to do and accomplish?... This is as I have always dreamed it—to share even my workday with my wife. To share my poverty with her. To share my aspirations. Come, what is your answer?"

She raised her brimming eyes to his. "Yes," she answered.

He put his fingers to her temples and drew her face toward him. "My wife!" he said, simply. And he let his lips fall upon her hair.

What had she come to talk about? Problems?... her mother?... her duties?... How absurd, when nothing else mattered but just this ... nothing else in the whole wide world!

They walked slowly to the brow of the hill.

"If every one could be as happy!" escaped her.

"Ah yes," he murmured, "but there is an end even to sorrow.... To-day my friend Stillman's sorrow ended ... his wife is dead."

CHAPTER IX

It was decided that Claire and Danilo were to be married some time in August. Danilo was for rushing off for a license at once, but Claire pleaded the usual feminine lack of suitable apparel. Upon the question of finances in the mean time, Danilo was extraordinarily frank:

"I might as well give up my lodgings in that wretched Third Street hotel and come here. Cannot you shoo Miss Proll into another corner and let me have the hall bedroom?"

Claire was on the point of reflecting, but Danilo finished, simply:

"You must live for the next three months, you must remember."

And so the thing was decided.

Mrs. Robson was a bit disturbed at this arrangement. The excitement of Claire's prospects had revived in her all her old sense of social expediency.... She wasn't quite sure that people did such things. She could not remember one instance where anybody of her acquaintance had permitted their daughter's fiancé to share the same roof, and she was emphatic in her disapproval of allowing Danilo to foot the bills. But Claire reminded her that Danilo came of different stock and had other standards. At this, Mrs. Robson surrendered, but Claire could see that her mother's old distrust for things "foreign" was ready to flare up at the first provocation.

Miss Proll, established in a corner of the living-room, pleaded for the honor of preparing the trousseau. Claire consented, as she said, with a rueful laugh:

"You won't have much to work on."

But a surprise was in store for Claire. In Mrs. Robson's room there had stood for years a huge black trunk concealed under a discarded portière. Claire had guessed that it was full of relics and memories of the Carrol family's former grandeur, but she had never felt the slightest interest in exploring these melancholy fragments of other days. But it proved otherwise. There were memories, plenty of them, but they had to do with the touching struggle of a mother who had provided against the day of what she felt to be her daughter's greatest need. The trunk was full of every conceivable material that a bride would find necessary for a brave showing—yards of silk, bolts of linen, quantities of lace.

"I didn't want my daughter to be a make-over bride," Mrs. Robson explained to Miss Proll, who stood by Claire as she threw up the trunk's heavy lid. "I wanted her to have everything fresh and new ... except perhaps my wedding-dress."

Claire, blinded by tears, drew out the heavy white-satin gown, slightly yellowed by the years. She held it up.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Robson continued to drawl, thickly. "I'm afraid it won't do. They dress differently now ... fluffy, light things. I guess...."

But Claire had silenced her with a kiss. Miss Proll's cheeks were glowing with vicarious nuptial excitement as she lifted the corded-satin skirt in her capable fingers and said:

"Oh, you won't know this when I get through with it!"

There was the veil Mrs. Robson had worn, too, and the artificial orange-blossoms, hoarded carefully in tissue-paper, even the thick, white kid gloves of a bygone day.

"But mother ... all these other things ... how ever did you manage?"

Mrs. Robson smiled and shook her head. She was in no mood for explanations; she was standing before the altar of all her sacrifices, and it was glowing with the light of fulfilment.

From the moment that the old black trunk was opened a suppressed excitement ran quivering through the house. Miss Proll, scorning fatigue, plied her needle after her regular workday with all the enthusiasm of a bride-elect. Her joys in the preparations softened Danilo, who had always expressed a contempt for her solitary state.

Then there was shopping to do of a trivial sort. It seemed that scarcely a day went by without a request from Miss Proll for some trifling but highly important reinforcement to the regular treasure-chest. Claire, slipping on her things to run down to the shops, felt the delicious thrill of a truant spendthrift.

"For myself," she said one day to Danilo, "I would much rather be married in just a street dress. But mother would be—"

"A street dress!" Danilo echoed, incredulously. "No, your mother is right! I am marrying a bride, remember!"

And she discovered that a wedding to Danilo meant everything the term implied—orange wreaths, and veils, and huge cakes ... and a feast. There was nothing colorless nor sophisticated about such a ceremony to him.

Meanwhile, Nellie Whitehead married Billy Holmes. Claire and Danilo were among those bidden to see the knot tied. It happened at the noon hour in the vestry of St. Luke's Church, and a score or more of relations and friends gathered about and sniffled during the performance. Claire, always moved by the sonorous solemnity of the Anglican Prayer-book, was really touched by it all, in spite of her Presbyterian training, and even Nellie Whitehead emerged from the ordeal tremulously. There followed the usual kissing of the bride and the Anglo-Saxon ignoring of the groom, a bit of half-hearted rice-throwing, and the thing was over. No feast, no rejoicing, no laughter.

Danilo was puzzled and disapproving.

"Why did they not say mass for the dead and be done with it?" he snorted.

Two days later he came in for dinner and announced:

"Now you shall see a real wedding!"

It appeared that two prominent members of the Greek colony were to be married on the following Sunday night, and there was to be a feast at the Café Ithaca. Claire had not been near her old haunts since the night when she had dismissed herself. There had been really no excuse. Danilo had brought her the money due from Lycurgus for the half-week she had served him. At first she had an impulse to ask Danilo to excuse her. She did not feel sure that she cared to see the Ithaca again, and she was equally undecided about the wedding. But in the end she made up her mind to go. At the last moment Danilo was called out suddenly to a sick-bed. This meant that they were late for the ceremony at the church. But they arrived in time to see the bride and groom making their triumphal exit from the altar. The air was musky and warm with incense and burning candles, and for all its cheapness the church assumed a blue-veiled atmosphere of mystery for the occasion. Outside, the steps were thronged with the curious, and, instead of hastening coyly to the waiting taxicab, the bride graciously stood for a moment in the doorway so that all the beauty-hungry mob below her could catch a satisfying glimpse of her young loveliness. There was a simple and generous pride about this little by-play that made it very charming to Claire.

Danilo and Claire swung on a passing car and arrived at the Ithaca almost with the bridal party. A pushing, eager mob of children blocked the side entrance and even spilled over into the banquet-hall upon the heels of the bride. The room was arranged as it had been for the St. George's Day celebration and the public was excluded. Lycurgus, catching sight of Claire, came forward with his old sweeping manner, murmuring his clipped congratulations. Doris, spying her from a far corner, rushed up with an impulsive kiss. It seemed as if everybody was ready to sink all animosities and feuds before the glamour of Claire's new estate.

The feast began. Claire looked about; many of the seats were not taken. She remarked the fact to Danilo.

"Oh, they will fill up presently," he replied.

And it turned out that the wedding-supper was not a matter of cool calculation—so many places for so many guests—but that the feast was spread beyond the known partakers.

"Suppose some of the guests should bring their friends?" Claire inquired of Danilo. "One must look to that. It would not do to turn any away."

A feast then was a feast, a thing to be eaten, it did not matter so much by whom; indeed, strangers were better than no guests at all. There was something biblical about it, and Claire thought at once of the parable in the New Testament which began:

"A certain rich man made a great supper...." And ended: "Go out into the highways and hedges

and *compel* them to come in, *that my house may be filled.*"

"This," thought Claire, "is the real hospitality ... the real democracy."

And it struck her forcibly that for the first time in her life she sensed in a flash the meaning of equality and fraternity. In a Greek restaurant, at a celebration of one of the sacraments of autocracy and authority, she had come upon the underlying principles that she had been taught to murmur mechanically since childhood.

Looking through the narrow aperture of a particular occasion, she had an illuminating glimpse of larger issues, unessential differences, and essential things in common that separated and bound the world together. Danilo ceased to be from a people apart and peculiar. His people would be her people, not merely because she was to become his wife, but because they would make claims upon her sympathy and her love. The table of life was spread for certain feasts that could exclude nobody.

She had been expecting some outlandish notes to be struck in the celebration, but it all passed off with a certain joyous solemnity. The supper was delicious, the wine abundant, the bride girlish and pleasantly conscious of her importance and the beauty of her snow-white veil. The groom had a place, too, it seemed, in the general spectacle—an unheard-of thing in Claire's experience. And in addition to the bride's cake there was a special cake brought in for the bachelors' table. It was curious to discover that the unattached males were quite content to sit at a board of their own without the leaven of feminine companionship.

Later in the evening the entertainers sang, and, of course, it was inevitable that there would be dancing. Danilo and Claire left at midnight. The feast was by no means ended, but Danilo had an early start scheduled for the next day, and Claire was not unwilling to escape before the spirit of the occasion staled.

On the way home Danilo said:

"There, that is what I call getting married! Your people go about it as if it were something to be ashamed of. You have another word for it ... well-bred, that is how you say it. But we should all be natural once in a while.... I suppose you will not care to have a feast?"

Claire glanced at him sharply before replying. He looked so wistful, so like a boy trembling before the possibility of finding his fears confirmed, that her lips broke into a smile as she said:

"I think it would be lovely. Let us do just whatever you would like."

He rewarded her with a flaming kiss upon her hand. He had never asked Claire for her lips; there was a certain austerity about his attitude that at times filled her with strange awe.

Every day with unfailing regularity Claire made a resolution.

"I shall tell Danilo that I know Stillman."

But it was easier to rehearse the scene than to carry it out. It all seemed so simple in prospect. There was something awkward about forcing the subject, and when Danilo opened the way with some casual reference to his friend, Claire always had a feeling that the moment seemed almost too opportune.

One night she decided to make the plunge and hazard the truth. Danilo had run in for a moment between professional visits. He had a trick of snatching at these fragments of companionship, and Claire was getting used to his unexpected appearance at all hours of the day.

"I've.... I've something I want to tell you," she blurted out suddenly, as she stood before him.

Her melodramatic hesitancy must have made him apprehensive, for he returned, with an uneasy laugh:

"You're not tired of your bargain already, are you?"

"No ... but.... Well, I hope you won't think it strange.... The truth is...."

She stopped in confusion. He gave her a look of puzzled sympathy. It was plain that she was disturbed, and unhappy.

He laid his hand lightly upon her shoulder. "Well, if you're not tired, what does the rest matter? Unless, of course, there is some one else.... In that case...." He had stopped breathing and his lips were parted anxiously.

"How absurd you are!" She found herself laughing at him.

After that the thing seemed impossible, and finally the moment that she had been expecting and dreading came. Danilo said to her one morning, as he was leaving:

"What night next week will be convenient for you to go out to dinner? I want you to meet Mr. Stillman."

"To meet Mr. Stillman?... Must I?"

He flushed. "Well, it never occurred to me that you would object. I have spoken about it to

him."

"Oh, of course! Naturally for the moment I felt surprised. How would Tuesday night do?"

Tuesday night did perfectly. Danilo decided on dinner at the St. Francis. Claire was admonished to dress her prettiest.

They had set the hour at seven-thirty, but at the last moment a telephone message came to the hotel that Stillman was detained. Danilo decided upon going into the dining-room and waiting there rather than in the lobby.

Stillman came in at eight o'clock. Claire saw him standing in the entrance to the dining-room, greeting a woman friend. He looked very well, she thought.

Danilo was for rushing up and escorting Stillman in triumph to Claire's side, but she restrained him. Presently Stillman detached himself from his feminine acquaintance and he stepped into the room. He caught Danilo's beckoning finger; his face lit with a rare smile. Claire knew that he had not yet glimpsed her.

It was not until he was almost upon them that Claire noticed him start almost imperceptibly. Then she heard Danilo's voice ringing out warmly:

"Ah, so there you are!... Claire, this is the Mr. Stillman that you have heard me speak of so often.... Does he come up to your hopes?"

Claire inclined her head gently.

"You forget.... I have seen Mr. Stillman before," she chided.

"Oh yes ... at the Ithaca. I had forgotten," Danilo replied as he waved his guest into a seat.

As for Stillman, he said nothing, but Danilo went on with vivacity:

"You see, my brother, it is as I told you—I shall not need a pistol."

"A pistol!" echoed Claire, in a nervous attempt to break the strain of Stillman's silence. "And what use could you have for a pistol, pray?"

"That was for the other man in the case," Stillman said, suddenly, looking up.

A quick flush overspread Danilo's face.

Claire did not know whether Stillman's tone was ironical or bitter, or just thoughtless. But as she turned to help herself to the olives which the waiter held out to her she had a feeling that the last door to the necessary understanding between herself and Danilo concerning Stillman had been suddenly closed.

CHAPTER X

Meanwhile, among the countless war charities that loomed upon the local horizon the name of Serbia began to be heard. There had been fêtes and kermesses for starving Belgians, and lectures on Poland, and concerts for English widows and orphans, and grand-opera benefits for the Italians, but so far Serbia seemed to have made either a very faint outcry or to have been pushed into the background by more spectacular petition. But an erstwhile famous dancer adopting the famous Red Cross cap and gown in the interest of Danilo's birthplace, there began to be a decided interest in that little country. A permanent organization for Serbian relief was formed, and Danilo was made president.

There followed accounts in the daily press about Danilo; his picture was published; his name even wandered into the social columns. Then, one day, when news was slack and space abundant, an enterprising female reporter discovered that Danilo's father had been a descendant of a famous Serbian king, or archbishop, or some such imposing creature, and Danilo's reputation, social and professional, was made. It seemed that civilization, although perfectly ready to dispense with the empty formulas of state, was still hovering with a certain fascination about the flickerings from the untrimmed lamps of the nobility. It appeared that any descendant of royalty must of necessity have a romance hidden away in the folds of his figurative ermine, and so it was not long before Danilo's secret was made public, in a good half-column of social chatterings, together with a photograph of the bride-elect. Suddenly San Francisco seemed to have discovered, or rather the press did for it, that Miss Claire Robson was "talented, accomplished, and a pronounced favorite of the younger set." Claire, reading the glowing account, remembered that brides always were "pronounced favorites with the younger set," whenever through accident or design their names became mixed with the socially elect. And not only was she herself all these things, but her mother before her "had been a member of the exclusive Southern set of the 'seventies," and her two aunts, Mrs. Thomas Wynne and Mrs. Edward Finch-Brown, were still "most prominent in social activities." Altogether the alliance was the most distinguished and romantic affair imaginable. Only one figure in the drama came out indifferently, and that was Claire's father. Claire was merely the daughter of the late Mr. William Robson, and the recital of this melancholy fact was accomplished with the haste of a regretful discretion.

Danilo was as pleased as a child.

"See," he would cry to Claire, "we are in the paper again! That is a fine thing for Serbia! Now San Francisco will know that such a place exists."

Every day for a week there was fresh gossip concerning Claire in the newspapers. Quite in the American fashion, not even the glamour of Danilo's ancestors could secure for him the amount of space given to the woman he was to marry. The discovery was made that Miss Robson was "a talented musician ... a pianist of no mean ability ... a familiar figure to concert-goers ... an enthusiastic Red Cross worker...." Indeed, it transpired that she offered her talents gratuitously upon the altar of charity. In spite of the money spent upon a distinguished musical education, she asked nothing better than to turn her abilities to the account of the distressed. It went without saying that she was in perfect sympathy with her prospective husband's plans for the relief of his native land, so much so that she was scorning all pre-nuptial entertainment so that her time might be free for the broader demands of philanthropy. It was all very smart and entertaining, and the real facts of the case were concealed with a dexterous skill. It would, of course, have been the height of impropriety to set in the column of a young bride's virtues the facts that she had supported an invalid mother for six strenuous months, that she had served her employers well, that she was modest and virtuous, and withal courageous in the face of adversity! No, the truth would have made dull reading for the rank and file who snatch romance and fiction between gulps of morning coffee.

But the public's interest in kings and archbishops, and Serbian relief, and Claire Robson went the way of all satisfied curiosity, and just at the moment when it seemed that Danilo had ceased to be of any concern this same enterprising reporter made another discovery. Danilo's father may have sprung from a line of kings, but his mother was a product of the backbone of every nation —*the common people*. Now there were more columns of interesting speculation. Democracy came into its own. Here was an alliance between exclusive privilege and fundamental rights, abstractions made flesh by the glib vagaries of the daily press. And the result, of course, was Danilo, a sort of demigod who had combined all the virtues of both classes. Chief among the items of interest, the most incredible to a democratic community, seemed to be the fact that his same Danilo was not only unashamed of his peasant stock, but proud of it. But then, he had been basking in the warmth of the free and untrammelled institutions of America for at least five years, and he had learned, no doubt, to revise his standards. Indeed, it was due to the influence of American life, to say nothing of his charming American bride-to-be, that he was bending all his endeavors toward a rehabilitated Serbia. And it was hinted that there was even a possibility that this adopted son of the Golden West might one day sit in the presidential chair of an enlightened and enfranchised Serbian state. With this burst of tentative prophecy, the hectic imaginings of the daily press concerning George Danilo, Claire Robson, and their ancestors went out like a spent candle.

But the dust raised by all this journalistic flight lingered long after the bustle and noise of the performance had subsided. Danilo sensed it in an ever-widening circle of wealthy patients, and Claire in a rush of interested visitors. Almost her first caller proved to be her pastor, Doctor Stoddard. He came in one Saturday afternoon. Miss Proll had returned home early, and the living-room was a confusion of dressmaking, so Claire ushered the reverend gentleman into the dining-room. Almost the first thing that engaged his attention was the holy image and swinging lamp before it that Danilo had set up on his name-day. He walked over and examined it rather cautiously. Then he sat down with the air of one determined to meet the devil without delay or compromise.

"The gentleman you are to marry," he said, looking squarely at the icon as he spoke, "I presume he is ... I take it that he is of a different faith."

"Doctor Danilo is a Greek Catholic," Claire answered.

There was an awkward pause in which it appeared that Doctor Stoddard was marshaling all his wits for a serious encounter. Finally he said:

"I hope he is not insisting on your partaking of his communion."

"We have never even discussed the thing. Really, I hardly know what his views are. As a matter of fact, it makes no difference."

"Makes no difference!... Why, my dear Miss Robson, it would seem to me that it ought to make a very great difference. You don't mean to say that you would sacrifice every conviction upon the altar of love?"

Claire, who had been standing, took a seat. "My dear Doctor Stoddard, have you really ever met a woman seriously in love?"

The gentleman coughed and began to polish his finger-nails upon the glossy surface of his coat-sleeve.

"I have been in the ministry for over thirty years." He stopped a moment, measuring Claire for a supreme thrust as he finished with a certain pompous satisfaction. "And you forget, Miss Robson, I am myself a married man!"

Here was simple, conceited, masculine faith again! Claire could not restrain a smile as she changed the subject. But it came to her as she did so that there was something at once pathetic

and terrible about so bland an assurance. She thought of Stillman and quite unconsciously she found herself mentally repeating:

"I must tell Danilo in the morning."

Doctor Stoddard continued to make other polite inquiries, but in the end the original question came to the fore again.

"I hope," he hazarded, upon leaving, "that you *will* ponder seriously the spiritual side of your marriage. One should think twice before deserting the faith of one's fathers. I cannot fancy that Doctor Danilo will expect you to make the supreme sacrifice of being married out of your own fold."

After he had gone she felt uncomfortable. She had lost all sense of the authority with which Doctor Stoddard felt himself invested, but in an intangible way he did remain the symbol of those things unseen which made faith in life possible. And somehow his presence revived the old hopes as well as the exquisite spiritual fears of childhood. She had not been trained to refresh a soul wearied by sophistication by the simple act of lighting a taper before a holy image, and she knew that this never could be her portion. But Doctor Stoddard's presence itself gave her a very real idea of what Danilo had felt when he had set up his little name-day altar in the Robson dwelling. One could deny the precise terms of one's inbred faith, but it would still remain the most tangible clue to a larger hope—the slender thread which guided one through the maze.

Only one other person raised the question of what form of ceremony Claire had decided upon for her wedding, and curiously enough that person was Nellie Whitehead Holmes.

"I say, Robson," she flung out one day, "I hope you ain't going to stand for any three-ringed circus stuff when you get hitched. Just you insist on a straight old-fashioned get-away ... in plain English."

Claire made no reply and, Nellie, searching her friend's face sharply, said, with no attempt to conceal her panic:

"You ain't thinking of changing your religion, are you?"

Claire smiled. "Well, why not? I'm changing my name. And after all..."

"Claire Robson, don't be a fool!... Why, I wouldn't change my religion for the best man in the world!"

"No? And just what is your religion, Nell?"

"Why, I'm an Episcopalian! You ought to know that! You went to my wedding. You didn't think Holmes had any say about that, did you? Well, I guess not! No, sirree, I wouldn't change my religion for *anything!*"

Danilo was very busy now and Claire really saw little of him. He took an early breakfast, almost on the run, and it was seldom that he came in at the dinner hour. But somehow the atmosphere of the Robson flat was tremulous with his presence.

The month of June passed, unusually clear and unusually warm for early summer in San Francisco. Claire never remembered a time when she had been busier. There was the housework to do and sewing to be accomplished and her mother to attend to. Not that Mrs. Robson was making any great demands, but Claire found herself surrendering every spare moment to the invalid. At such times Claire had a shuddering sense of keeping a watch for the coming of that thief which was to rob her of the last link binding her to her old life. It was plain that Mrs. Robson was failing fast. Complications were developing, the end could not be far off.

At night she took long walks while Miss Proll sewed feverishly. The old gray city was like an old intimate friend and she was saying good-by to it as passionately as if it had been a warm and living personality. She would stand for long stretches upon the heights, watching the twilight lay its cloak gently upon the town's curving limbs. And as night came on apace, the hills would twinkle with the shameless gauds of evening. What a wanton, fascinating city it was! And how she loved it!... All her life she had taken it for granted, as one takes for granted the familiar things that grow commonplace by constant association. And yet for all this new-found appreciation of her native city, she longed to leave it, she wanted to hold the memory of its beauty as an ever-living thing, and she was afraid to trust to the narrowing vision of bitter years. Sometimes in these glowing moments she thought of Stillman, trying to dismiss the picture of his face, sneering and cold before the realization that she was soon to be lost to him forever. She had not seen him since that night when Danilo had invited him to dinner at the St. Francis. He had recovered his old genial manner after the first lapse, but she knew that the flimsy robes of pretense were at best an indifferent covering for the wounds which were staining his pale contentment. She did not like to remember that evening. It smacked of subterfuge and unworthiness.

She should have told Danilo—she must tell him to-morrow—that was the thought that flashed over her every time she came face to face with the question. But somehow to-morrow never came.

"I must tell him to-morrow!... I must tell him to-morrow!" It became a stereotype formula which

she repeated as one repeats a monotonous prayer in the hope of dulling a keen sensation of guilt. She was in the grip of one of those simple situations that grow complicated, through concealment. That was the trouble, it was almost too simple, and she could find no convincing argument to explain why she had been silent so long.

During the days when the papers had been full of her engagement to Danilo she found her heart beating anxiously every time she opened the newspaper to the society column. What if a hint of her friendship for Stillman were to be blazoned forth there? It was just as likely that some such airy fiction as this would grace the feast of gossip:

"Miss Robson is an unusually graceful dancer and she and Mr. Ned Stillman were the sensation of the St. Francis supper dancers all last season."

If it were so curiously awkward to approach Danilo with the truth at first hand, what could she say if, hearing the facts of the case from other sources, Danilo were to suddenly demand an explanation? She could not say:

"It never occurred to me that it would matter...." Or, "I really didn't think you would be interested."

One night Danilo came home, his lips parted in flushed pleasure, his black eyes glowing.

"Have you heard what has happened? *Somebody* has donated a million dollars to the Serbian cause."

"*Somebody?*" echoed Claire, but her heart stood still as she said it.

"Well, it is not for general publication, but of course you can guess who has done this thing.... There is only one man in San Francisco who *would* do it."

Claire said nothing. But the old determination seized her.

"*Now*, I must tell him in the morning!" she thought.

But when next morning came Danilo had risen early and departed.

CHAPTER XI

A million dollars for the Serbian cause! The newspapers came out with the news in bold headlines, and interest in Danilo and his fiancée grew keen again. It seemed incredible that a sane person could have given a million dollars to any cause and withhold his name! It was a method of procedure that was neither modern nor business-like nor sound, and after the fury and fun of speculation had died the daily press grew a bit peevish at their balked opportunity to exploit the donor. And not only had a million dollars been left like a love-child at the door-step of charity, but there had been no provision made for the manner of its disbursement. Dr. George Danilo was to have absolute and discretionary power in spending this huge sum, and nothing further appeared to be suggested or demanded.

Only one person ventured to hint to Claire Robson that they were in possession of the secret, and this one person was Nellie Holmes.

"You can't fool me, Robson!" Nellie said, searching Claire with her shrewd, kindly eyes. "I know who slipped that million dollars into the poor-box. It was friend Stillman. You don't have to tell me! And it ain't because he cares a whoop about Serbia or Dr. George Danilo, Esquire, either."

Claire paled and then flushed. "Really, Nell, you mustn't! That isn't fair to...."

"Fair nothing! Danilo must have two eyes and a nose, and if...."

Claire cut her short with a quick gesture. "You don't understand. Danilo doesn't know. I mean, I never have told him that ... that I even knew Ned Stillman."

A low whistle escaped Nellie Holmes. "My God! Robson, but you were a fool!"

"I know, but I mean to soon. As soon as I...."

"Look here, Robson, it's too late now! You'll just have to take a chance. There are some things that cold storage improves, but a secret like that ain't one of them. Now, with Billy it would be different. He'd take my word because he knows that there are some things I wouldn't be mean enough to lie about. But your friend ... well, he's in love up to his eyes. And a man like that is dangerous. It wouldn't take much to bring him up to boiling-point. And you'd better not turn on the blue-flame at this stage of the game."

But Claire was determined that she would get free of this figurative blood-clot which was paralyzing her will, and that night when Danilo came home she made up her mind to speak out. It was one of the nights when Danilo had denied all other demands, so that he might have dinner with Claire, and after the coffee she settled back in her seat and said:

"You have really never told me who gave that million dollars."

"But you know?"

"Well, after a fashion. It.... I presume it was Stillman."

This was not as she had planned the scene and she had a feeling that she was making slight progress.

"Yes, you are right! I have never had anything in my life so touching! Isn't it wonderful, Claire? This is a tribute to me, you understand. After all, he can have no real interest in Serbia."

She drew back in her seat. His face was eager and full of simple faith and enthusiasm.

"It is very curious," Danilo went on. "He could have given it to some other cause. He is very fond of Belgium, for instance. But he picked Serbia. Are you not proud of me, Claire?"

He held his hand out to her across the table. She gave him her fingers and he pressed them warmly.

"Why do you not tell me that you are proud of me?" he insisted, as she stared at him with silent, almost frightened eyes. "Do you not think that a man who can inspire the gift of a million dollars for his native land has reason to be conceited?"

"Every reason ... every reason," she forced herself to murmur.

"And, as you say in America, it is a very good ad. Why, checks are simply pouring in! And there is to be a concert given next week. I was talking to some of the ladies about it to-day. One of them knew you well. She said you played accompaniments for her last winter. Mrs.... Mrs...."

"Mrs. Condor?" Claire asked, faintly.

"Yes, that is her name! She is going to open the program. And she was saying how nice it would be if you would consent to play for her. You know I never would have thought of that. I told her yes! Of course! You would be delighted."

Claire stared. Lily Condor's audacity was arresting enough in all conscience, but Danilo's calm disposition of the matter rankled. Had it not occurred to him that she might have something to say about such an arrangement?

"Well, really, you know," she began to stammer, in spite of a wish to give her words an air of finality. "I don't think that I...."

"Nonsense!" he returned, genially. "It has all been decided upon. In fact, we have had the announcements put in the hands of the printer already. Mrs. Condor said you had played the same program before, so what was the use in delaying? Remember," he finished, with a laugh, "you are to be my wife, and in my country the first thing a wife learns is obedience."

It was impossible for her to explain her objections—they involved too many issues—and she could not discuss Danilo's viewpoint without seeming to be turning an inconsequential matter to very serious account. But she did gather courage to say:

"Next time I wish you would speak to me before you make plans of that kind."

Danilo frowned.

Lily Condor again! Claire pondered this unexpected circumstance all next day. She had been hearing scraps of gossip from time to time concerning the lady through Nellie Holmes, enough to indicate that her social position was bordering on total eclipse. Capturing Danilo's patronage was a daring and characteristic stroke, but Claire felt that Lily knew that any such move was essentially futile. Was Mrs. Condor indulging a mere whim or was a subtle revenge back of her latest move?

Claire had quickly abandoned all hope of denying her services in the face of Danilo's obvious displeasure. But the prospect of having to face the situation filled her with dread. There was no telling where the issue would lead. What if Mrs. Condor were to acquaint Danilo with the secret which Claire had been withholding? Nellie Holmes was right, as usual—there were some things that cold storage did not improve. It was too late now to indulge in the selfish luxury of a confession.

She felt sorry, too, in a way, for Lily Condor. There was a pathetic note in the lady's very boldness. After all, what did it matter? Mrs. Condor had lived a hard, reckless life, but who could say what spiritual pressure had driven her down the barren highway of her pitiless pleasures? For Claire had learned another thing, one must have wealth to be a spendthrift, and she was discovering that the greatest spiritual bankrupts were those who had the courage to dare magnificently and lose. And so she sat down and wrote Lily Condor a little note, which read:

I understand that I am to play for you next week. When shall I see you and talk over the program?

And on the same night she wrote to Ned Stillman:

I must see you and have a talk—perhaps for the last time.

Three days later she met Stillman at mid-afternoon in an obscure Italian restaurant near the

foot of Columbus Avenue. She had been somewhat humiliated by the prospect of this covert meeting, but when the final moment came she felt suddenly calm. As in the old days, his presence engendered confidence. He threw out a golden circle of light like some mellow lamp that disdained a searching brilliance, but was content to soften rather than to betray the secrets of its surroundings.

He ordered coffee and a pale amber liqueur and for a few moments they talked about things that were of the least possible moment. He seemed a little older, a little less suave and assured; it was as if the hands of his spirit were trembling a trifle as they lifted life's cup.

"I have wanted to see you," he said, finally, when the stock of subterfuge was exhausted. "There were so many things that remained unsaid."

"Perhaps it was as well," she faltered.

He touched her hand. "Ah no! There is such a thing as a corroding silence.... I have learned in the past months!"

He, too! She felt her pulses quickening, but she could not speak, she could only clench her fist under the impulsive pressure of his fingers.

"What are your plans for the future?" she asked, suddenly.

He shrugged. "I had hoped to get away into the thick of it.... But it seems that my duty is to stick by the home guns. Or, at least, so they tell me. That's gratifying, of course ... to know that one accomplishes the appointed task. The armies must be fed, and California is an opulent storehouse. There's lots to do here.... Still.... Well, you understand, don't you?"

"Yes.... I think I do. I've heard you've done magnificently. And I've felt proud of you because, after all, in a way, we started on that road together."

He leaned forward. "It was you who first inspired it.... And I've been tremendously grateful. I've thrown down a rotten card or two in the course of it all ... but it isn't always easy to play a straight, clean game. But now that everything is over and you ... you are going to try your luck with the very best fellow in the world. It was hard for me to figure it that way at first, but when I saw it right ... well, I wanted to help in some way ... to do something really big for you both."

"That million dollars to the cause," she assented. "That was magnificent. Danilo is touched ... you must know that."

He swept the table with an impatient gesture. "Ah yes, I suppose he is ... but it isn't the personal tribute I should have liked ... for you.... Forgive me for speaking this way! But to-day for the last time ... surely you will let me say a few things that are near my heart. That last night we were together—alone—well, that was a dangerous moment for me. There are times when a man lifts up the precious cup that holds his ideal and brings it crashing down into shattered fragments on the floor. I raised my glass high that night for its destruction, and you ... you.... Ah, well, I'm getting a bit too poetical ... but *you* know!... The point is I want you to absolve me ... to wash me clean ... to forget that night."

She stirred slightly. "I have the same favor to ask," she murmured. "When you met me at the Ithaca ... my words to you were all very unworthy.... And I have put you since in an awkward position. It's hard for me to explain just why I haven't told Danilo.... I suppose some day I shall ... but now, well, I've decided to let it rest as it is for the present. It's all absurd and pointless and feminine.... But Danilo *is* different! One can't tell him certain things, easily."

He drew his liqueur-glass toward him and looked down into its amber depths with the air of a man catching his breath.

"Different!..." he returned, musingly. "Yes, you are right. He is a flame that warms everything that comes in contact with him. But I fancy he can wither, too."

"Yes, he can.... That's the reason why...."

He looked at her squarely.

"Claire ... do you mind if I call you 'Claire'?... I am afraid we *are* playing with fire."

It was past six o'clock when Claire left the restaurant. The warm spell of June was over, and a high ocean fog was drifting in on the breath of the west wind. People hurried by muffled in overcoats and furs, their straw hats incongruously accenting the almost wintry gloom. But Claire was in no mood to take account of wind and weather.

This last intimate meeting with Stillman was full of irony. For the first time they had met and talked of what was close to their hearts with perfect frankness, and it was to be the last time! He had even spoken about his dead wife, in a perfectly natural, simple way, as if Claire had known her all her life.

They had said farewell while the waiter was busying himself clearing away their empty glasses. It seemed better so. But as Stillman took her hand he said:

"Try not to forget me, Claire—completely."

"I shall never forget," she answered.

She left him standing there while the waiter bowed over the generous tip which lay upon the stained table-cloth.... At the door she turned for a last look. He was smiling at her, but it was a twisted smile.... She opened the door and went out....

When she arrived home Danilo was standing in the hall, slipping on his overcoat. She had a fear that he would make some comment about her late home-coming, but he said nothing—he merely nodded to her as he reached for his hat. She stood puzzled at his silence; there was something ominous about it, and her brain started guiltily as she thought, "Could it be possible that he has seen us together this afternoon?"

She began to take off her wraps. "Are ... are you going out?" she asked.

He stared at her. "Yes."

"Some one is ill.... I mean have you a sudden call?"

"Yes."

She did not know why she persisted in questioning him.

"You will be out late, then?"

"Yes.... I may not come home at all."

She moved nearer. The hall light struck him squarely. His look frightened her. There was not a bit of color in his face, and his lips were thinned as upon that first night when he had risen in his seat at the Café Ithaca and betrayed his love for her.

"What is the matter?" she demanded, with desperate boldness. "You.... Something *must* have gone wrong?"

He started back as if she had struck him a blow. "It is nothing. I am not feeling well. That Serbian relief is getting on my nerves.... Money, money pouring in ... and they do not care about the cause, either! It is just the fashion, that is all!... Bah! Sometimes I hate the whole pretense!... I would like to find *one* honest person!"

She shrank back. He walked past her quickly and he began to descend the stairs. Half-way down he halted and called up to her:

"Your *friend*, Mrs. Condor, was in to see me to-day.... She will be here to-morrow to talk over the program."

Claire ran to the head of the stairs. But the door slammed decisively.

"*Your friend, Mrs. Condor,*" Claire mused. "What a nasty tone!"

CHAPTER XII

Danilo did not come home that night, but Claire was not disturbed. Morning brought the usual sanity. She was convinced now that Danilo's manner of the night before was more a matter of her own mood and interpretation than anything else. But she was determined on one thing: she would ask Mrs. Condor quite frankly to say nothing to Danilo about Stillman. Claire was still undecided about the whole question. She had seen that Stillman was against the fine-spun theories back of her silence, but she had not yet acquired the masculine directness of conduct that made it easy for her to be either ruthless or perfectly just.

Mrs. Condor came in shortly after two o'clock. She was dressed with extraordinary lack of spirit for her, in a black street dress that just escaped being dowdy, and her face was incased in a thick, ugly veil.

"Well, my dear Claire," she said, as she threw back her veil with something of her old spirit, "but this is good of you!"

The warmth of tone repaid Claire's effort to be generous.

"There is no use in us wasting time talking about the program," she went on. "You play everything I'm going to sing. I don't know anything new. I'm getting too old to learn other tricks. You know, of course, what I've come for? To see all your pretty clothes. I'm still soft about such things."

Claire took her into the front room.

"You see," she said, "there isn't anything very grand."

"Oh, but Claire! What does it matter? You are in love.... If I were a woman in love I wouldn't change places with the Empress of India. I was jealous of you, Claire, once ... jealous because I thought you *were* in love ... because I thought you *could* be.... Ah! You didn't think that *I* cared for Ned Stillman?... Oh, I liked his attentions, perhaps—every woman likes attention. And I was envious of your youth, and nasty because my nerves were frayed.... But deep down I was jealous of your ability to fall in love with somebody.... Believe me, Claire, the bitterest moment of any

woman's life is when she wakes up and finds that she loves no one. At least that was the bitterest moment of my life.... I've tried to bring that feeling back again! But trying doesn't do any good. It either comes or it stays away, and that's all there is to it.... Oh, I've been *loved*, Claire, but that isn't the same."

Claire, who had been folding her wedding-dress, stopped and looked up in surprise.

"I don't wonder you look at me that way!" Lily Condor resumed. "I've played a rotten game, but I've never acknowledged it to myself, much less to any one else.... Don't misunderstand me—I'm not crawling around on my hands and knees sniffing like a repentant sinner.... I hate repentant sinners! But I've been cheap and small and nasty. *Petty*—that's the word! You may not believe it, but pettiness isn't a part of my original make-up. I've acquired it ... like a false complexion.... I started in life with three things—a clear skin, quantities of very red hair, and a decent feeling for others. Well, I lost them all—so I powdered my cheeks and touched up my hair and filled in the chinks in my disposition with a hard glaze. Oh, I'm not excusing myself! Some people are willing to sit back and let time and misfortune do their worst, but I wasn't one of them. I kept on fighting.... I didn't win, but it hardened me. Fighting always does!"

Claire dropped her wedding-gown upon the couch and she said, very gently:

"Yes ... I know.... I've tasted something of that myself."

"I know you have.... I realized it that night at the café when you had the courage of your bitterness and insulted me. I was furious, of course! I wanted to strike back, to kick and scream and claw the air. And as a matter of fact, I did ... after we ... Flint and I ... got home. He let me rave without saying a word. Oh, he's a clever brute in his way, that man! And when I'd had it all out he got up and he said: 'Take a look at yourself in the glass. If that doesn't cure you, nothing will.' And he walked deliberately out.... I went over to the mirror after he had gone, and I took a look, a long, hard look.... Next night he came and pounded on my door—he was drunk. 'I did what you told me last night,' I called to him. 'Go away! I'm cured!' But of course I wasn't!... I've looked in the glass every day since.... I don't know just what possessed me to go and offer my services to Doctor Danilo. A flash of the old distemper, I fancy. I wanted to create a stir. I smiled when he disposed of you with so much confidence. I thought: 'Wait until my lady hears; then there will be some fun!... This will be the first difference, the first quarrel,' I was mean enough to imagine.... Then, your note came.... My dear Claire, for once in my life I was without a weapon.... Why didn't you strike back and give me a chance to fight?"

"Well, to be frank, I wanted to ... at first. But I was afraid."

"Of what ... of *me*?"

"Oh, not that! But Danilo ... he.... You see, he is a foreigner. He has other ideas about women and their place in the scheme of things. It isn't exactly a feeling that he's superior, but marriage to him is a partnership ... a partnership with a senior member. And senior members—well, they don't relish having their authority questioned. I'm explaining it very clumsily. But you understand I...."

"*Afraid*, Claire?... So soon? You must be very much in love to ... to...."

Claire drew a deep breath. "And I've a favor to ask of you.... I hope you won't say anything to Danilo about.... The truth of the matter is, I have never mentioned Ned Stillman's name to him."

Well, she had said it and she stood staring, wondering at the look of dismay that seemed to have fastened itself in an arrested flight upon Mrs. Condor's face.

"You mean that ... that Danilo knows nothing—absolutely nothing? I thought he was a friend of Ned's? Why, it isn't possible that...."

"He knows nothing," Claire repeated, desperately. "I mean to tell him, of course, but just now...."

Lily Condor tapped her lips with an uneasy finger. "You should have warned me sooner, Claire.... I said something yesterday. It was a trifle, but I remember now how he stared."

"Yes, yes. What was it?"

"I said: 'You're a lucky man, Doctor Danilo. If Ned Stillman hadn't been married you wouldn't have carried off your prize so easily.' It was stupid of me, one of those indelicate things we say for want of sense enough to hold our tongues. I felt for a moment that I had displeased him, but I had no idea.... But, really, it's just possible that he didn't get my meaning, that...."

Claire shook her head. "I must tell him now—*everything*."

She did not see Danilo for two days. He came in finally at five o'clock one afternoon to look up some surgical instruments that he was in need of. She was busy in the kitchen when she heard him come up the stairs. She went quickly to his door and tapped upon it.

"Mother has not been so well," she began, without waiting for his greeting. "I have been longing to see you."

He followed her into Mrs. Robson's room. The patient hardly stirred. Her usual interest in

Danilo seemed to be eclipsed. Danilo looked grave.... When Claire and he were in the hall again he turned to her and said:

"I suppose you are prepared?... Everything will soon be over."

His tone was dry, professional. He seemed to be making a deliberate effort to wound. Had he been sympathetic Claire would have been overcome, but there was something about the scene which chilled her emotions. She felt that the time to speak had come.

"You have guessed, also," she began, "that I have wanted to see you about other things, too. There are some things which I should like to explain ... to...."

He shrugged contemptuously. "Explanations are dull affairs. At least I find them so. And they usually never explain."

She was stunned. She had thought always of Danilo in terms of warmth, even of passion. She had never imagined him capable of such steely malevolence.

"I have made a mistake," she went on, desperately. "I am willing to admit that, but...."

"No, not a mistake, Claire. Mistakes are never deliberate."

She could almost feel herself grow pale. "Have you come to any decision?" she asked.

"Decision?"

"Well, I suppose that you will wish to be released ... that our ... that everything between us is finished."

His eyes flashed. "*Finished!* It isn't as simple as all that. Oh no! A bargain with me is a bargain. When I make a deal it either goes through or else there is a reckoning.... But I don't act as hastily as one might imagine. I believe in sifting things. When I play a game I know every card I hold." He looked at her steadily. "I am still looking over my hand!"

She leaned against the wall, overcome by a sudden faintness. He passed her deliberately and went into his room. When he came out she had recovered herself.

"About mother?" she said, with a display of calmness. "What am I to expect?"

"There is no immediate danger. But in two weeks' time at the most.... However, I shall look in again this afternoon. And every morning. You may count on that."

"Then you have decided to lodge somewhere else?"

"Yes ... for the present."

She let him go without further questions.

The week passed in an atmosphere of arrested events. It seemed to Claire as if the currents of life had become ominously frozen, that they were storing up a sinister flood in the icy chains of apprehension. Danilo came twice a day to see Mrs. Robson. He was excessively polite, unbending, professional. Claire was powerless before such premeditated cruelty. The night of the concert drew near. Danilo never so much as mentioned it. Finally Claire gathered the courage to telephone Mrs. Condor.

"I suppose," she said, "that everything is going according to schedule. Really, I haven't had a chance to talk to Danilo about it. He has been so busy."

The upshot of this telephone message was that Mrs. Condor called in the afternoon.

"Confess!" she said to Claire. "Things have gone wrong."

"He won't allow me to explain.... It is horrible! I don't know what to do! And my mother is dying!... How much do you fancy he knows?"

"Everything or nothing! It is hard to say. But you must keep a stiff upper lip now. No faltering!... Be as dignified as you can. Men like that are dangerous! It may be that he is merely suffering, that he can't speak out yet! When he does...." She gave a significant shrug.

Claire folded and unfolded her handkerchief, crumpled it into a ball, tore at it with her firm finger-nails.

"Words ... insults ... anything would be better than this silence. I have never been so frightened."

Mrs. Condor's visit relieved the strain somewhat, but Claire was still strung with a tense emotion that found expression in a restless physical activity. She even helped Miss Proll with the sewing, although there were moments when the absurdity of all this preparation struck her with a force which almost brought the laughter to her lips. But this wedding-trousseau had become a passion with Miss Proll. Claire could not conceive of halting its preparation.

Once it struck her that there was a decided impropriety about appearing in a concert, with her mother so near the gate of life's solution. *Impropriety?* She pondered the word. And at once a

revulsion swayed her. She was sick of all these pallid phrases of expediency. One could act indifferently or harshly or irreverently at such a crisis, but it was too dreadful and austere a circumstance for so smug an indiscretion as impropriety. She knew what her mother would have advised on a like occasion.

"I wouldn't, if I were you, Claire. People might think it strange."

This formula, then, was all that was left of the pomp and circumstance of death—of even the glowing pageantry of life; love and hate and desire reduced to colorless shadows blown monotonously about the lantern of existence by the steady heat waves of public opinion!

It would have been so easy to excuse herself, to say to Danilo:

"You see it is impossible for me to play next Friday night. Please make other arrangements."

In reality, she was waiting for him to release her, and, since he seemed determined to make her cry for quarter, all her pride rose to meet the issue courageously. It was pride that lifted her head above the choking dust of misfortune—arrogant, blind, magnificent human pride.

"...keep a stiff upper lip."

Claire Robson did not need this admonition from Mrs. Condor.

There were also moments of hectic retrospection. Incidents old but vital came surging over Claire in a flood-tide. Looking back, it seemed as if no circumstance was too trivial but that it yielded up some fragment which fitted into the intricate pattern of her life. She had thought of this life of hers always in terms of uneventfulness, mistaking mere incident for emotional experience. But she was surprised to discover what depths she had sounded, what heights she had scaled in the solitary excursions that her spirit had chanced.

People came and went like noonday ghosts—Mrs. Finnegan, Nellie Holmes, Mrs. Towne, Doctor Stoddard. Claire felt their personalities moving about her, but the wings of Death cast too heavy a shadow for her to do more than sense their presence.

Only Danilo's passionately sneering face had the faculty of bringing Claire up with a round turn to a sudden realization that she had escaped only temporarily into a world of unrealities. It was as if the payment on a note had been suspended with refined cruelty—the day of reckoning futilely postponed.

When she thought of him it was with a quickening of the heart, a swooning fear, a feeling of dreadful nausea. *Afraid!* She knew the meaning of this word now.

Lily Condor ran in again the day before the concert.

"I called at Danilo's office to-day," she said, "just out of sheer curiosity.... I don't know ... perhaps it would be just as well if we didn't go through with this farce of doing a turn to-morrow night.... What do you think? I could pretend that I was ill?"

"Why?... What is it? Do you think...."

"I don't like his look. He was most polite.... I think he could have killed me."

"Nonsense!" Claire returned, boldly. "You're drawing on your imagination. I want to do it.... I have a reason."

She realized the absurdity of such a statement as soon as Mrs. Condor had departed. A *reason!* And her mother was dying—*dying!* What would people think? Unconsciously the old question framed itself.

Danilo came in as usual, close upon the heels of Mrs. Condor.

"Your mother is slightly better," he said to Claire. "She may last another month."

Claire tried to ignore the insolence of his brevity.

"I wish you would do me a favor," she ventured, boldly. "I've been trying to get Nellie Holmes on the telephone all day.... Would you mind asking her if she could come and stay with mother to-morrow night from eight o'clock to about ten? I hate to leave Miss Proll all the responsibility."

He merely bowed his acquiescence. She felt her cheeks burning. He had done none of the things she had expected him to do—asked none of the questions. At least she had expected him to say:

"Oh, then you have decided to appear to-morrow?"

No, he had insulted her with his silence, pretending to be neither surprised nor shocked. But his attitude confirmed her in the determination to carry out her part of the program.

On Friday morning the society columns of the newspapers were twittering with the fact of Claire Robson's appearance upon the concert stage in aid of her fiancé's native land. This was the last time the public would have a chance to view her as Miss Robson. In fact, it might be the last time that San Francisco would have a chance to view her publicly at all! These statements carried an air of civic calamity that must have appalled every shop-girl who thrilled to their

romantic suggestion. Previously Claire had been able to smile over the transparent fiction of the daily press concerning her obscure self, but now she caught a suggestion of irony, of bitter cruelty, of withering scorn running through all this silly chatter. She felt that it had been inspired by Danilo; between the lines she could almost shape his sneering lips, thin and pallid where they had once been full and scarlet.

That morning when he came to see his patient his eyes were burning like livid coals, his cheeks were sunken, his hand shook as he drew back the covers to look at Mrs. Robson's gray face. And as Claire watched him she saw a tear roll down the full length of his cheek and drop unashamed upon the rumpled linen. She felt a great longing then, a yearning to go up and put her hands upon his cheeks and draw his face to hers and to sit while he knelt beside her and poured out his full grief in a cleansing flood. But, instead, she stood proudly aloof and the golden moment of opportunity was swallowed up.

"I will not come this afternoon," he said, at parting. "You may expect a taxi at eight-thirty."

She felt an impulse to put out her hand to him. But again she could not rise to such humility.

She watched him go slowly down the steps with the weak tread of one consumed by a fever. He had changed completely overnight. He gave one look back before he closed the door—the look of a wounded beast staggering through a welter of heart's blood.

Claire Robson brought her hands quickly up to her eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

"What would I wear if I were you?"

Miss Proll, echoing Claire's question, swept the array of finery upon the bed with a critical eye and finally drew forth the iridescent peacock-blue dress with which Claire had startled even the patrons of the Café Ithaca.

Claire shook her head. "It's cut rather too low," she said.

But Miss Proll would not listen to any such argument. "I've a black-lace shawl ... my mother's. If you put that about your shoulders...."

Claire allowed herself to be persuaded. She had very little heart in the adventure, anyway, and Miss Proll seemed to be taking such a tremulous joy in being daring by proxy. In the end the results justified the choice. The black-lace shawl tempered the gown's wanton splendor, and, lacking any exaggeration of hair or complexion, Claire's personality glowed warmly but without flare. She emerged neither the Claire of church-social evenings nor Café Ithaca midnights, but a Claire tempered into the crucible of both these divergent experiences.

Nellie Holmes, answering the message sent through Danilo, arrived in time to put one or two deft touches to the general effect, a twist here and a soft pat there, that added a chic note to Miss Proll's rather prim efforts.

"Well, Robson," she said, standing off critically, "but you *do* give swell clothes a chance, don't you? Friend Danilo ought to throw his chest out about twelve inches when he gets his eyes on you to-night. By the way, what is the matter with *him*? He looks like a sick kitten that's been rained on. I never *did* see such a sad comedian. The face he's wearing these days ain't much of a compliment to you."

The taxicab came promptly at half past eight.

Claire went in to say good-by to her mother. But Mrs. Robson merely opened her eyes, and closed them again.

"I don't think she knows me," Claire faltered. "I wonder whether I ought to go? What do you think, Nell? The whole thing seems such a farce!"

Her passionate exclamation brought a questioning lift of the eyebrows to Nellie Holmes's face. "What do you mean, Robson? Your mother is all right.... I don't think Danilo would let you leave if.... Tell me, have you and Danilo...."

"No. I'm just tired, Nell. Let me go and have it over with."

She released herself from her friend's implied embrace and went down to the waiting taxi.

She met Lily Condor in the hallway of the St. Francis, almost at the door of the dressing-room.

"I've just taken a look in at the audience," Mrs. Condor said. "The place is packed. Even the real people have come early to-night. It's plain that you're the attraction."

Claire tried to turn this observation off with a laugh, but she knew in her heart that Lily Condor was right. The newspaper chatter had had its effect.

Mrs. Condor swept on the stage a little ahead of Claire at precisely fifteen minutes past nine. A patter of applause greeted her. But a moment later Claire came into view, and a clapping of

hands, out of all proportion to her position as accompanist, rippled through the room. Claire stood for the briefest of moments facing the throng, bending slightly forward in acknowledgment of the recognition given her. But in that short time it seemed that she had taken note of every familiar face in the crowd below—Stillman, Flint without his wife, and, farther back, Miss Munch and Mrs. Richards, Mrs. Finnegan and "the old man," Doctor Stoddard, Mrs. Towne, even Lycurgus and a half-score of the Ithaca patrons, including a few of the old entertainers headed by Doris, the French Jewess. They were all applauding heartily, except Miss Munch and her cousin.

"What irony!" flashed through Claire's mind as she took her seat before the piano.

Six months ago she had been starving for just the recognition that was now her portion. Tonight she found applause empty of any real meaning. And the presence of these people who had colored her life made her feel as if all the joys and hopes and fears of her existence had been suddenly made flesh and were sitting in judgment upon her. She began to play.

Presently Lily Condor's voice came to her—remote, unreal, a thin, clear stream of song like the trickling of some screened fountain.

"Mrs. Condor is singing well to-night," she thought.

At the end of three numbers the applause was still insistent, but Mrs. Condor denied the clamor with a smiling shake of the head. Flowers began to be handed up—orchids and roses and carnations and flamboyant peonies. Claire passed Mrs. Condor a share of the bloom and together they bowed their acknowledgments. They came back upon the stage for a fourth and last time. It was then that Claire caught glimpses of others whose presence had escaped her—her two aunts, Billy Holmes sitting alone, and back, far back, standing with his hands folded in a sort of dreadful resignation, Danilo, his lips still pallid and the hollows in his cheeks showing up even in the distance.

"You did beautifully," Claire said to Mrs. Condor as they gained the cloak-room.

"Yes ... I know.... Because I realized that it was for the last time.... I'm through."

She tossed Claire's flowers upon a lounge and went back to hear the next number.

Claire looked over the cards attached to the bouquets. The orchids were from Stillman, roses from Nellie Holmes, a flaming bunch of carnations from Lycurgus, and—she looked twice at the card—the peonies bore Flint's name.... Not a sign from Danilo!

She decided to go home. She looked about for the attendant in charge of the wraps, and discovered that the room was empty. The sound of a violin floated from the concert platform. She went out and glanced down the passageway. The maid was standing in a screened position by the entrance to the hall, listening. Claire went back and sat down upon the lounge beside her flowers, and as she did so Danilo stepped into the room. She rose with a quick movement of protest.

"Really—you mustn't!" she objected. "This is the ladies' dressing-room."

He ignored her with a malignant smile; he did not speak. But he walked rapidly toward the heap of flowers and began to snatch at the attached cards with sudden fury.

"Stillman!" he sneered. "Holmes—Lycurgus—*Flint!*" He looked at her with glittering eyes. "Then it *is* so!"

"What do you mean?"

"*Flint!*" he cried. He tore the card into bits and flung them to the ground. "So we men are all alike? Well, you ought to know! You have had experience enough. What a fool I have been! *What a fool!* Well, I am not like the rest of them!"

She drew away. His brow had curdled with bitter intensity. He took her arm in a firm grip and drew a pistol from his pocket.

"Do you see that?" He held the weapon up to her. "I bought that yesterday to call the man out and shoot him.... Then I heard that there was another. Well, in my country we do not waste more than one bullet."

His eyes fell upon her with a mad fury, yet she faced him calmly, almost unafraid.

"Why don't I scream?" she asked herself. "He intends to kill me ... here! And yet I am not even trying to...."

And suddenly she discovered that he had a great black smudge on his nose. She wanted to laugh.

"In my country we do not waste more than one bullet!" he was repeating.

"Yes ... I heard you. You don't have to shout! I'm not deaf!" she could hear herself saying.

He lifted the pistol higher, on a level with her mouth. She could see by the glitter in his eyes that he was in the grip of a dreadful frenzy.

"Temporary insanity! That will be his defense!" she thought at once.

And she pictured herself lying before him in a crimson pool, saw a black, surging crowd pushing into the dressing-room from the hotel corridors, felt herself lifted up tenderly by some one. Would Ned Stillman pick her up? Or perhaps *Flint?*... She imagined the trial—Danilo pale and grief-worn, incapable of caring whether he lived or died, oblivious to his surroundings. Temporary insanity ... that would be his lawyer's plea.... The black smudge was still there ... it was too ridiculous! She fumbled with her free hand and, lifting the edge of Miss Proll's lace shawl deliberately, wiped the spot from the tip of Danilo's nose.

At that moment she heard a sharp report, glass came crashing to the floor.

"Well, at least his face is clean!" flashed through her mind.... She felt herself sinking backward....

"Yes, a pistol-shot!" the maid was reiterating. Claire opened her eyes. She was lying upon the lounge and the flowers had been thrown unceremoniously upon the floor and were being trampled underfoot. The orchids, crushed and abandoned, looked particularly sorry. She had an impulse to rise and rescue them.

"Nonsense!" It was Lily Condor's voice. "She merely fainted. What you heard must have been falling glass. She struck the mirror as she fell."

An enormous relief came over Claire. She closed her eyes again. "Where is Danilo?" she asked herself.... Suddenly she remembered every detail of what had gone before—the pistol, the black smudge, the sharp report, the crash of falling glass. It was the black smudge on Danilo's nose that had saved her. She realized that now. What a ridiculous thing life was, anyway! And what trivial circumstances determined its issues! The wrong seats at a church social had yielded her Stillman. A black smudge upon the nose of an emotionally shaken man had snatched her from death. What grotesque impulse had moved her to reach forward at the critical moment and flick the tip of Danilo's nose with Miss Proll's lace shawl? *Miss Proll's lace shawl!* Suppose she had not worn it? Would she have attempted to remove the speck with a bare finger? She doubted it. Then even Miss Proll's lace shawl had played its part! It was all very puzzling; the pattern of life became too intricate, too full of flaming colors that in the weaving seemed of dullest drab.... The muffled talking about her began again.

"Excuse me for troubling you," she heard Mrs. Condor say, "but Claire here.... I have looked all over for Danilo.... Oh, nothing serious!... Her mother.... A little old maid? It must be the dressmaker who.... Yes, bring her in, by all means."

Claire roused herself. She was sitting on the edge of the couch when Ned Stillman came through the door with Miss Proll. Claire understood at once. She rose to her feet. Lily Condor started toward her.

"Oh no—really, I am quite all right. What is the matter? Is my mother...."

"Yes," answered Miss Proll. "You had better come at once."

Stillman went to call a taxicab. Mrs. Condor helped Claire into her wrap. In less than five minutes they were all standing at the curb, ready to step into the vibrating car. Stillman lifted the ladies in. He was drawing back when Claire thrust her head out and said:

"Won't you please come, too? I am not sure about Danilo, and...."

He climbed in, slamming the door.

Claire went into her mother's room alone. Nellie Holmes was bending anxiously over the sufferer.

"You have come in time," Nellie was saying as she yielded her place to Claire.

Mrs. Robson looked up bewildered. For a moment her dull eyes roamed restlessly about as if in search of some missing thing. Finally, with a great effort the words shaped themselves. Claire listened attentively.

"Danilo ... where is Danilo?"

"Yes ... in a moment.... Presently."

Mrs. Robson closed her eyes with a smile of satisfaction. It was her last conscious moment. Slowly she fell into a stupor.... Toward midnight she died.

It was all very simple, Claire thought afterward. Much simpler than living.

CHAPTER XIV

It was not until people on the street began to stare that Danilo discovered that he had come away from the hotel without his hat. He felt no discomfort, but he was annoyed at being an object of curiosity. As a matter of fact, he was curiously devoid of any emotional excitement; instead, his wits seemed to have been sharpened by a cool cunning. All his powers of reasoning were reduced

to one impulse—flight. He decided that he must walk on and on without a halt. His escape from the hotel had been extraordinarily easy. He merely had shoved his smoking pistol into his hip pocket and walked calmly out. If he had attempted to run, or looked about excitedly, or even slunk by the liveried flunky at the revolving door, all would have been lost. But he had done none of these things and he was feeling a certain arrogance at the thought of his bravado. But he realized that he must get a covering for his head. It was ridiculous to be sauntering along the street hatless. He beckoned a youth who stood near the curb, smoking a cigarette.

"I should like to buy your cap," he said, simply.

The young man stared, then broke into a laugh. "All right!" he replied, quickly, as if it were the best to humor a madman. "But it will cost you money."

"How much?"

"Two dollars."

Danilo gravely counted out the money. The youth drew back, instinctively clapping a hand upon his head.

"Come!" cried Danilo, roughly. "It will not do for you to trifle with me. You set your price. Here is the money. I want that cap!"

The youth turned pale and attempted to run. Danilo grasped him firmly by the shoulder.

"Give me that cap!" insisted Danilo.

The youth obeyed, trembling from head to foot. One or two passers-by halted, stared a moment, and passed on, shrugging their shoulders indifferently.

"Thank you," said Danilo. "You have done me a great favor. Here is the two dollars. May God reward you." As he said this he made the sign of the cross in midair above the boy's head. The boy cowered and began to whimper. Danilo put on the cap and walked away.

He felt more at ease now; no one was paying the slightest attention to him. He decided to go into a saloon and buy something to drink. The bartender, stout and genial and Irish, passed him the bottle of whisky. Danilo's hand shook as he poured out his drink. The Irishman eyed him quizzically.

"I have just had an unpleasant experience," Danilo began, apologetically, as he spilled some of the whisky. "I saw a woman shot." The barkeeper seemed unimpressed. Danilo felt annoyed. "At the St. Francis Hotel ... in the dressing-room, off the Colonial Ballroom.... She had been fooling a man. I was so excited I walked out of the hotel without my hat.... This cap—I bought it from a boy on the street. Is it not droll?"

The Irishman put the cork in the whisky-bottle and set it in its place under the bar.

"The man was a fool!" he said, bluntly. "I'd like to see myself take a chance at swinging for the likes of any woman."

"Oh, you are mistaken!" Danilo returned, mildly. "The man who shot this woman will not swing."

"Oh, well, if she gets better, of course...."

Danilo leaned forward. "Better?... Oh no, my friend, she is dead, quite dead. He aimed at her mouth.... I saw her fall.... But the man will not swing. He is not that kind. He will shoot himself first."

"It is all the same," returned the barkeeper. "He was a fool!"

"You do not know what you are talking about!" Danilo cried, hotly.

"Neither do you!" said the other, with an indulgent laugh.

Danilo gulped the whisky in silence and went out with a morose air.

"A fool?... A fool?..." he kept repeating.

The issue was at once irritating and impersonal. He felt as if the barkeeper had affronted the whole masculine sex. A man was a fool for allowing himself to be taken in, he was quite ready to grant that. But no man was a fool for collecting the full toll of feminine duplicity. Now this man, in the dressing-room of the St. Francis Hotel, who had shot down a woman....

Danilo halted. Why, the man was he—himself! Somehow it had never occurred to him. He had the same feeling that comes in dreams, when one is in some mysterious way both the actor and the audience. He had been in the picture and out of it. It was all very puzzling.

He tried to review the incidents of the evening. Nothing was very clear. The sound of a pistol-shot was the most vivid memory; then somebody had fallen.... The woman was dead—it could not be otherwise! Why had he walked away so calmly? He should have stayed. After all, he was a physician and he had acted unprofessionally. It was a physician's place to remain and serve, even in the face of utter hopelessness. Well, he had come away and it was too late to turn back. He was very tired. He looked about him. He had drifted down to the water-front.

He went into a cheap lodging-house and paid for a room. The place was frowzy and ill-smelling, but he did not care. He threw himself upon the bed. The dreamlike quality of what had transpired still persisted. He had added another rôle to the drama, that of physician. He had been the murderer, the spectator, the physician. But he could not get under the skin of the victim. He seemed to be able to recall every detail but her face—the blue-green dress, the black-lace shawl, the white tapering arm upraised as she flicked the end of his nose. It was then, as the murderer, he had pulled the trigger.... In the rôle of frightened spectator he had walked out of the hotel.... As physician he had remembered his duty and chided himself.... He took a cigarette from his pocket and began to smoke. He lay there for hours, thinking, thinking. But he could not see the victim's face....

Suddenly toward morning he sat up.

"Ah, I have it! The woman was Claire.... Yes, it is Claire who is dead!..."

He fell back with the satisfaction of one who has solved an irritating puzzle.

He awoke at noon. He was neither surprised nor dazed at finding himself in a strange environment. Sleep had settled all the dust-clouds of thought. He remembered everything perfectly. He was a murderer, and he had killed a woman because he had not been wise or prudent enough to content himself with the fruits of a tempered, frugal passion. He did not rouse himself. He had no wish except to lie still and think.

Looking back, he could see that he always had felt uncertain about Claire. Somehow she was not altogether a virginal type. She was a woman who, lacking any concrete experiences, would mentally create stimulating situations. Even now he admired her, but love was mysteriously killed. Yet he had loved her last night! And never so ardently, so completely as at that moment when he had brought his pistol upon a level with her lips and done his worst.

But this morning he seemed swept clean of all feeling, love and hate and enthusiasm, every sensation killed utterly—dead! Could it be possible that Claire Robson had absorbed every hope, every expectation, making of them a living thing in her own image that died with her? Had she betrayed not only him, but all his visions? What had become of the far-flung horizons which he had always seen so clearly? One black cloud had eclipsed them all.

He remembered the serene blueness of the day on which that black cloud had sprung out of the south, a misty-white fledgling of the sky that grew with the hours until the sun was wrapped in a dull gloom. How quickly Mrs. Condor's words had expanded and drawn every drifting rumor to their confirmation! He had heard it all—everything. It amazed him to discover how easily the truth was uncovered. *Uncovered?* No, it had lacked even the virtue of concealment; it lay, noxious and festering and unscreened, a rich feast for the scandalmongers circling vulture-like above. But his flight toward happiness had been like the eagle's, too swift and lofty and disdainful for such unlovely sights; eagerly, blindly he had passed them by. He recalled with a shudder the morning that he had gone and bought the pistol. This he had intended for Stillman. But the very thought of it had cut him to the heart. It was only when he had reflected on that million dollars for the Serbian cause that he found himself submerged in bitterness. This was the crowning insult, the culminating deception! The wage of Claire Robson's shame offered in the guise of a free gift! No wonder that the donor withheld his name!

"In my country it is all very simple—we call the man out and shoot him!"

How poignantly these words had come back to Danilo in his agony! But it had not been simple.... He wondered if he were losing the naïve directness of his forefathers. There had been moments when he was almost persuaded that it was not his affair, after all. Claire Robson did not belong to him; she never had. There was no logic in exacting a price from any one who had taken unclaimed property. But there had been insolence and trickery back of the performance.... *A million dollars for the Serbian cause!* Not only he, but his country, was to have been smirched by the patronage of these two moral derelicts. The purity of his passion for Claire Robson had sharpened his sense of human delinquency and given him the uncompromising judgments of virtue.... Well, he had decided upon Stillman. Some one must pay the price and the woman he loved did not yet seem foul enough for the sacrifice.... Then it was that his ferretings had hunted out the Flint story. From that moment he had been gripped by a blind fury. His thoughts had grown black, formless, devastating. He had been deliberately betrayed—the woman he loved did not exist, not even potentially. It was not a question of what might have been. One did not gather figs from thistles. And above all this angry tumult within him there rose something cool and malevolent and sinister, the fruits of wounded vanity and outraged pride.... And now it was all over. He wondered whether he would be capable of an emotion again. Would he continue to think without the respite of being able to feel, to lie and stare unmoved at the mangled form of his dead hopes? At the sound of the pistol he had closed his eyes upon the horrid sight which he knew must follow. Blood was nothing to him, but the vision of Claire's shattered loveliness was too terrible to face. How easy it was to screen the senses from ugliness! Why was it not possible to shut the inner vision as completely?

He lay for hours, thinking, thinking! He could do nothing else.

Night came on again. Danilo was still thinking. A tray of untasted food sent in by a water-front

chop-house drew a half-score of buzzing flies toward the varnished bureau. He lay, still inert, but disquiet had begun to succeed the first hours of emotional exhaustion. And he felt ill, also. His throat was burning and his breathing labored and choked.

"I must have caught cold last night," he thought, "running about without a hat."

Physical discomfort was swinging him back into the paths of every-day experiences. He even had a fleeting impulse to prescribe for himself.

A fever set in. He began to dream.... It seemed to him that Claire was moving about the room, waiting on him, serving him. She had on the peacock-blue dress, but the shawl was gone and her white shoulders and tapering arms gleamed coldly in the uncertain light. "Ah," thought he, "her lips will be red!" He raised his eyes to her face, but he saw only something vague and gray and formless. "She has wrapped her face in a veil," he said, aloud. "What delicacy! She does not wish to remind me of last night.... Yes, that is it!... Last night I pointed my pistol at her mouth. But her mouth was not red last night ... not before I closed my eyes.... Her lips were red once, but she wiped them clean again, for me.... Why did she do this thing for me? *I was not her love?*" And suddenly the peacock-blue dress was gone and Claire became a gray figure from head to foot, a gray figure with two red lips. Nothing else was visible. She began to move toward him. He tried to turn from her, to lift his body up, to fling himself downward upon his face. But he could not move. She came nearer.... Her lips were widening with every step. She halted by the bed ... she bent over ... she kissed him. Her lips were warm and moist and horrible. He gave a deep, groan and woke up.

He fell asleep again. Now he dreamed of Serbia—his country, a beautiful woman, golden in the morning light. She lay smiling like a blossom in the dawn and her long hair was spread out on either side. Then suddenly a leprous sun beat down upon her and she tried to lift her arms to screen herself from its fury, but could not. Flies gathered, her body grew loathsome, her lips black. Then, coming down a dust-stung road, he saw a gray figure—a gray figure with two smiling red lips showing through a rent in its drab winding-sheet. And his beloved country stirred faintly and gave a deep cry. The gray figure stopped, bent over gently, and, taking two strands of the flowing hair in its wan hands, drew a covering over the festering body.... He looked again. The gray figure was holding out her hands to him! He went toward it joyfully. And at that moment the gray winding-sheet fell away and Claire stood before him, smiling. He dropped on his knees beside her.... He could feel himself being lifted up. "Claire—always Claire!" he cried.... He awoke again, sobbing.

Once he dreamed of Stillman, covered with the lizard-like scales of a million dollars, a venomous creature that darted hither and thither and finally grew confused with the personality of Flint and became a two-headed monster.... In the end the reptile sat calmly down before the cheap varnished bureau and consumed Danilo's untasted meal.

Thus they came and went, dream succeeding dream.

He was roused finally by a voice calling for him to get up. He opened his eyes. The hotel clerk stood at the side of his bed. The tray of untasted food still lay upon the bureau.

"What is the matter," the hotel clerk was saying. "Are you drunk?"

Danilo stirred. "No.... I have been ill. What time is it?"

"Do you realize that you have been here three nights? It is Monday morning. I began to think you had committed suicide."

"No.... Everything is all right. Presently I shall get up."

The man went out, whistling, carrying the tray with him. Danilo felt weak and helpless, but he drew himself to his feet and fell back into a chair.

Monday morning! He had been there since Friday, then. His patients—what about his patients? He felt suddenly irritated at himself for this professional lapse. Suppose some of his patients had died meanwhile? The possibility brought a cold sweat to his forehead. He thought of the young mother whose bedside he had quitted to appear at the Serbian Relief concert; a child who had been run over by a street-car; the last man he had operated on; Mrs. Robson.

"I must see them all, once again," he muttered. "After that...." He shrugged.

For three nights he had slept in his clothes. He had not even removed the pistol from his hip pocket. He stood up and drew it from its place. There was something fascinating and sinister about its cold gleam. The words of the hotel clerk came to him—"I began to think you had committed suicide!"

He put the pistol back in its hiding-place—he had duties, duties. He kept repeating this as he tried to gather strength for a supreme effort. He was extraordinarily weak, and the fever still lit his eyes and burned the vivid red of his lips to a dull, dry purple. He washed himself, tried to brush his clothes, ran his trembling fingers through his hair. It was an hour before he felt able to venture on the street.

It was a dull morning. The fog had mixed itself with the city's smoke, floating like an enormous and malignant black bird whose poised body shut out the sun. Danilo shivered. He still felt very weak.

He decided to go and call on Mrs. Robson. Not until then had he thought of Claire in any concrete, personal way. Would he see her? He remembered now that she was dead. But the thought that he would see her still persisted. Death and Claire Robson were terms that he could repeat, but not really sense. It was only when he had swung off the car at Larkin Street and turned the corner at Clay Street that the horrid realization struck him with relentless force. A hearse was drawn up to the curb in front of the Robson flat and a knot of curious people were watching the pallbearers lift a flower-smothered casket down the shallow steps. He did not go any farther, but stood, motionless, watching the somber pageant.... Presently everything was settled; the hearse began to move forward, followed by three limousines. The procession came toward Danilo. The hearse passed the corner. Instinctively he removed his hat....

When it was all over he turned deliberately toward town.

"Claire is dead," he repeated. "What does the rest matter?"

Suddenly his professional consciousness, the last link that bound him to reality, had snapped.

He went back to his lodgings—the old lodgings on Third Street, where he had been staying for a week.

"Where have you been for three days?" asked the proprietor. "At least a dozen people have been looking for you."

Danilo smiled grimly and said nothing.

"The police are on my trail!" he thought.

He went up to his room and began to pack. There was really very little to assemble; most of his wardrobe still remained at the Robson flat. After he had finished he sat down. He seemed incapable of forming any plan. What should he do? Where should he go? What did it matter? His thought moved in an irritating circle.... Once he rose to his feet and drew the pistol from his pocket. He looked at it a long time. Finally he laid it on the bureau. A beam of sunlight played upon the polished barrel. Its glint irritated Danilo. He moved the weapon out of the light.... Presently he heard the chimes from St. Patrick's Church. He knew now that it was noon.... He began to count the money in his pocket. Seven dollars and forty cents! How far would that take him? How much nearer would seven dollars and forty cents carry him to Serbia?... He began to laugh.

The telephone tinkled. Danilo hesitated, then walked calmly over and took down the receiver. The voice of the hotel clerk said:

"This is the office. Mr. Stillman is down-stairs."

"Mr. Stillman? Oh yes, of course. Tell him to come up."

This was the end! Well, what was he to do? Stand calmly and let Judas betray him into the hands of his enemies? He fancied Stillman's entrance into the room, the cool cordiality of his manner, the advance with outstretched hands. At that moment the police would dart swiftly forward! Danilo had seen it all a thousand times at the moving-picture shows. The trick was as old as Gethsemane and as young as the screen drama!

He picked up the pistol. This was to have been Stillman's portion. Well, it was not too late! The outlaw's instinct to barricade himself and defy everybody up to the last moment came over him. A knock sounded upon the door.... He flung himself about, bracing his body against the bureau. The pistol was grasped firmly in his hand; he had but to raise it to cover his visitor successfully. He moistened his lips.

"Come in!" The words snapped out with a command that was also a menace.

The door swung back. Stillman stood upon the threshold. Danilo felt his senses reeling. He tried to lift the pistol. He had grown frightfully weak.

"George!" Suddenly Stillman's voice rang out.

The word echoed through the room. It was the first time that Stillman had ever called Danilo by his Christian name. A great yearning came over Danilo, a sense of futility, the feeling that everything, even life itself, was a horrible mistake!

"George!" Stillman was crying to him again, like a brother from the depths of his heart.

Danilo roused himself with a supreme effort, crouched low, narrowed his eyes. Claire was dead! What did it matter?... No, it was too late. He lifted the pistol slowly but surely. Stillman gave one startled look and, throwing his head back, seemed to say:

"Why don't you shoot? I am waiting."

Danilo looked down at the shining weapon. It was on a level with his own heart. *Claire was dead!* Deliberately he turned the muzzle upon himself.... The noise of the shot sounded far away. He felt Stillman's arms enfold him.

"What have you done? What have you done?... My God! but this *is* a mistake!"

He heard Stillman's voice trembling with passionate protest. He opened his eyes.

"My brother!" he said, and he lifted his hand to Stillman's wet brow.... "My brother!" he felt himself murmur once more.... Suddenly he was swallowed up in a merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER XV

"I have tried to get you by telephone without success. Danilo is asking for you. I shall call with the machine at three-thirty."

Claire Robson dismissed the messenger-boy. Her heart was beating quickly. She folded the note and climbed up-stairs. *Danilo is asking for you....* What tragedy and pathos lay in these simple words! She had been waiting for just this moment ever since Stillman had said to her:

"We have found Danilo ... in his old lodgings. Can you guess what has happened?"

She had known at once. Had intuition or the look in Stillman's eyes betrayed the dreadful secret? Since then only scant messages had come to her from the sick-room. Danilo still lay in his Third Street lodgings; his doctors had been afraid to risk moving him. Stillman had not left his side. Claire begged to be allowed to go to him, to see him if only for the briefest of moments, but Stillman had been obdurate.

"He must have no excitement. The doctor would not hear of such a thing. No, you must wait."

"But *you* are with him.... Do you realize...."

"Yes."

She said no more ... but she had suffered! Three long, unending days! And now he had asked for her. She could not define the emotion which moved her. Was it relief, or fear, or a sad hope? She dressed herself long before the appointed time, in a cool, pleasant-looking white-serge suit that had been intended for the trousseau. Miss Proll, coming upon her in the hall, gave a disapproving glance.

"I couldn't wear black!" Claire explained. "I simply couldn't!..."

"Ah yes, of course! You are right."

Her lips quivered when she finally faced Stillman.

"You are in white, I see," he said, with an air of gentle approval. "I am glad of that! It makes everything seem more cheerful."

They went down the stairs in silence. Stillman lifted her into the car—she could feel his hand tremble. After they had started she looked searchingly at Stillman's face. All his cool complacency was gone, his mouth had the parted expression of a man whose lips could not quite shape the truths that had been revealed to him, and his eyes shone like one who had been walking with visions. This was the look, Claire fancied, that shepherds fresh from solitary upland pastures must have, or a man who had walked into the shrapnel fire and come out unscathed, or a young mother fresh from the crowning experience of her life....

At the door of Danilo's room they met a priest coming out. He bowed gravely to Stillman and passed on without speaking. They went in. A thick, pleasant odor of incense had killed the smell of antiseptics for the moment. The nurse was washing her hands, an icon opposite the bed reflected unsteady flickerings from the tiny lamp in front of it.

"You may stay five minutes," the nurse whispered, and passed out.

Claire stood back and let Stillman go up to the bed. She had a sudden feeling that she was a stranger, that her presence made no difference, that these two men were sufficient to themselves. She could not see Danilo's face, but she had never imagined anything more gentle and tender than the hand which she saw Stillman lay upon the sufferer's forehead.... Presently Stillman turned about and beckoned to her. She went forward. She felt that her heart would burst.... Suddenly she was face to face with Danilo! He looked at her and smiled. She sat down upon the bed.

She could feel Danilo's hand searching for hers. "Claire ... fancy ... *you!*"

He closed his eyes without another word. They sat in silence.

Stillman stood the whole time, bending over, his gentle hand hovering above Danilo's black hair.... The nurse came back.

"Come," said Stillman.

Claire suffered him to withdraw her hand from Danilo's tight clasp. She rose. Danilo opened his eyes again. His lips began to move. She brought her ear on a level with his trembling mouth.

"Claire ... will you marry me now?"

"Yes," she answered.

He gave a contented sigh and turned his face to the wall. Stillman and Claire went out....

"He is making a brave fight," Stillman said at parting. "The bullet pierced the lung. But there are other complications. Bronchitis has developed. One can never tell."

She could not speak. She did not even say good-by to him.

"I shall call again for you to-morrow."

She acknowledged his words with a brief nod.

When she got home she filled the swinging-lamp in front of Danilo's name-day icon with oil and lit a floating taper. Miss Proll, who had been watching her curiously, looked puzzled. Her glance seemed to imply:

"Can it be that you believe in such foolishness?"

Claire found that it was impossible to answer a question at once so simple and so profound. There was every reasonable argument in the calendar to support Miss Proll's skepticism, but Claire was learning that life upon a reasonable basis was apt to be intolerable. It was the irrational, the impulsive, the imprudent moments that gave existence color and swift movement.

"Claire ... will you marry me now?... " Danilo's words came back to her with all their beautiful and daring simplicity. A child acknowledging a fault, and trembling upon the threshold of a joy that was likely to be denied in consequence, would have used the same tone. This was the manner of petition that must swerve even a God of Wrath from his vengeance, she thought, that could wring showers of mercy from the most pitilessly blue skies.

She thought of Stillman, too—this new Stillman, forged in the flame of a perilous spiritual experience, still glowing and warm. He had never seemed so human as at that moment when she had stood apart and watched his hands fluttering above the head of the man they both loved.... *Loved?* Yes, he loved Danilo—as Lycurgus loved him, as her mother had loved him. "Where is Danilo?" This had been Mrs. Robson's last question—her last words.

She could not fancy her mother calling for Stillman. It was not given to many to be a flint upon which the sparks of affection are readily struck.

She went every day with Stillman and sat for five minutes at Danilo's bedside, and on the third day Danilo, opening his eyes wide, said to her in a clear voice, so that even Stillman could hear:

"Claire, will you marry me to-morrow?"

Instinctively her eyes met Stillman's; he bowed his head for a moment, and she could see that his hands were clenched.

"If you wish it," she answered.

Danilo turned to Stillman. "My brother, do you think it will be possible?"

Stillman smiled doubtfully. "To-morrow? That is rather soon ... but when you are a little stronger...."

Danilo's face fell. At that moment the doctor came in.

It was not possible. The doctor would not hear to such a thing, and he scolded Danilo gently as one scolds a sick child.

That night Danilo's fever increased. He was restless; nothing pleased him. The doctor said next day to Stillman:

"I don't understand ... something must have irritated him. He is troubled mentally."

"It is the wedding. I'm afraid he has set his heart upon it."

"Nonsense! Doctor Danilo has had enough professional experience to know that.... Why, my dear fellow, he is a full-grown man, you must remember."

"Yes, and at heart a child.... He is like all big people."

Two more days dragged by. Danilo grew no better; in fact, he was worse, if anything.

"I can't make it out," the doctor admitted. "Physically he seems everything that one could hope for, but his mind is straining at something.... Perhaps, after all, you are right. Well, I fancy we will have to risk the excitement."

When they told Danilo he fell back upon his pillow and his face grew suddenly white.

"To-morrow!" he murmured. "Fancy!... No, it cannot be true!"

By the time Claire came he was glowing with a strange, new animation.

"Claire! Claire!" he cried. "Think, we are to be married to-morrow! And you are to wear your wedding-dress ... a real wedding-dress ... the veil and all!... Only there will be no feast. What a pity!... But no matter, when I get well again then we will have a feast, Claire. Unless...." his voice grew suddenly almost inaudible—"unless I die of joy, Claire!... of joy!"

Stillman turned away. She fell on her knees beside the white bed.

"There, there!" she said, soothingly. "You mustn't get so excited. You mustn't think about it!"

He closed his eyes. "Claire, I cannot wait until to-morrow. Will you kiss me, *now*?"

And for the first time their lips met.

They had planned a daytime wedding at first, but it transpired that the priest in charge of the Greek church had been called out of town and would not be back until evening. When Danilo heard this he said:

"What is the difference? A priest is a small matter! Cannot Claire's minister...."

But Claire was wiser. "No," she said. "Let us wait for the priest."

And so it was settled for eight o'clock that evening.

At the news, Miss Proll quivered with excitement. "To think that it would all end this way.... But I am so glad that you are to wear your wedding-dress."

Nellie Holmes flew over in great haste. "And who is to marry you? A priest?... Well, I suppose it is best to humor a sick man, but I don't know—somehow it seems too outlandish, all that incense and chanting and everything!... And I'm coming to the wedding! Don't forget that. You can't shut me out.... Remember, I introduced you. Come now, buck up! Don't look so anxious—it's a painless ceremony. And you'll be a stunning-looking bride, Robson.... I tell you, friend Danilo is going to be mighty glad that he was such a bad shot."

In the midst of all the excitement Claire suddenly remembered Mrs. Condor. She rang her up.

"I am to be married to-night," she said. "Would you like to come and go with us?"

"No, Claire. But if I might see you before you start...."

It was a busy day and almost before Claire realized it was time to dress.

At eight o'clock they heard the toot of Stillman's car, and to Claire's surprise Stillman himself broke in upon them. She was all dressed and ready.... He came up the stairs with a jaunty air. "This is Danilo's idea!" he cried out. "It seems in his country a friend is always sent to fetch the bride.... A *Dever* they call him.... I couldn't persuade him to let you come alone and in peace. He said: 'My brother, let me have an Old World custom or two.... You Americans have nothing worthy of the name, except that abominable rice-throwing and old shoes.'"

"A *Dever*!" ejaculated Nellie Holmes, in mildly scandalized tones. "Well, I *never*!"

It did seem rather ridiculous. Stillman's personality somehow didn't fit the office. But the incident gave a touch of forced gaiety to the occasion—a peg on which to hang the jester's cloak.

Claire and Miss Proll and Nellie Holmes went down first to the car, Mrs. Condor and Stillman followed.

When Lily Condor reached the curb Claire leaned out to her farewell embrace.

"Claire ... Claire ... how foolish we've all been!"

"How foolish we are still," Claire whispered back. "Thank God for that!..."

Presently they were off. The yellow street-lamps seemed to Claire to be melting into a continuous ribbon of gold. She had expected to succumb to all manner of emotions and vivid thoughts, but instead her mind seized upon a childish memory.

"Once upon a time," she thought, "there lived in a certain city...." Stillman was looking at her.... "And there came riding through the streets a prince.... And so they were married and.... How foolish we are still.... Thank God for that.... Thank God for that!"

"Come!" Stillman was saying. "We have arrived."

They had propped Danilo up as much as they dared and he lay, clean-shaven and hollow-eyed, but burning with a fire that showed through his transparent pallor like a candle set in a paper lantern. The priest had arrived promptly, and already an altar had been contrived and set up before the bed, an altar white and gleaming. Holy images were scattered about, reflecting the pale flicker of swinging lamps, and through the haze of smoke from the censer the harsh outlines of the room took on a soft, shadowy remoteness. "I had better cover my face," Claire said as she stood upon the threshold of the room.

Miss Proll drew the veil down for her and they went in. The room was crowded with men, mostly Danilo's countrymen. Lycurgus was there, and Jimmy. Claire felt faint. She clutched at Stillman's arm. "Why, I had no idea!" she said ... "so many people!"

"He wished it so.... Have courage!"

She threw her head back. "Yes," she answered.

They led her to his side. He touched her inert fingers gently. She felt crushed at the passionate purity of his deference. She wanted to fling herself forward on her face.... Danilo turned toward the priest. "Come!" he called, a bit impatiently. "Let us begin."

Claire thought the priest would never end. She had fancied that the ceremony would be cut short for Danilo's benefit, but apparently Danilo had asked for every detail, every symbol. They even exchanged crowns after the fashion of the Greek Catholic ritual. The incense grew thicker, the tapers before the holy icons flared more and more brightly, the sonorous chant of the priest droned on and on and it seemed to Claire as if his fingers were raised continuously in midair for the sign of the cross. She thought of her mother. How scandalized her mother would have been—at the altar, at the curling incense, particularly at the sign of the cross!

Finally it was all over. Danilo, pale to a point of swooning, his black hair clustering moistly about his pillow, lay with arms outstretched like an ivory crucifix, against which Claire pressed her pallid lips.... He did not stir at her touch, but a slight color played about his cheek-bones and one hand trembled.... She drew away.... She could hear the feet of the spectators moving toward the door. She continued to kneel beside the bed. Danilo's hand was in her hair now.... Presently she felt some one touch her shoulder. She rose. The nurse stood behind her. The room was empty. She began to weep silently, almost without emotion. Nellie Holmes and Miss Proll were coming back. They led her out....

Standing in the hall, they waited until the nurse called them in again. Danilo had recovered his animation and his eyes were wide open and glowing.

"Ah, and so we are to have a feast, after all! Not I, of course ... but you shall tell me of it tomorrow!... Come, has he said nothing about it?"

Stillman laughed. "At the Ithaca," he explained to Claire. "I made arrangements to-day."

"A feast ... not really?" she stammered.

A slight cloud passed over Danilo's face. "There! She does not approve, my brother.... I was afraid of that."

"I was surprised," she said, gravely. "And then you are not to be with us."

Danilo smiled. "When I am well again.... You see, one cannot have too many excuses for a feast." He gave Stillman his hand. "My brother, what should we do without you?"

The Ithaca was crowded. The long tables had been set, and the usual decorations, fern fronds and carnations, made splashes of green and red color upon the table-cloths. Lycurgus came forward, bowing in his old manner.

"Ah, that Mr. Stillman," he whispered to Claire, "he is a man, I can tell you! Thank you! thank you!... He says nothing about prices. Only a feast ... the best to be had! And everybody invited.... I have worked myself all day in the kitchen.... You shall see!... And you are a beautiful bride! Never have I seen one more beautiful!... That Danilo is a lucky man ... and you have made him happy. Let us pray God everything goes right."

A feeling of chill had succeeded Claire's poignant emotion, but now she felt warmed—everything was so simple, so natural, so lacking in all pretense. Lycurgus led Claire to the bride's seat, Stillman followed with Nellie Holmes and Miss Proll. A little ripple of applause ran up and down the tables, but the company was still a little uncertain of what was most fitting to do. A wedding-feast without the groom was hard to sense. But presently mastic was served and the first toast drunk.... After that, constraint was banished.

Now for the first time it came upon Claire that she was at her own wedding-feast, and that Stillman was sitting beside her. It was almost as if he had yielded her up to some austere duty, as if the feast that had been spread for him was one not so much of joy as of renunciation—a last supper in the upper chamber of his heart's desire. Before her lay Stillman's tribute—a wonderful golden basket of white roses. She had never seen roses so white. What a touching thing this feast was, after all! What a long distance Stillman had traveled in order to appreciate the significance of such a childlike thing, of sensing just what it meant to Danilo! And suddenly she felt how beautiful and how tragic life was, how cleansed and scarred by the windstorms of emotion! Life was like a landscape answering sunshine and cloud in its season, always beautiful, always incomplete, veiled sometimes in the mists of morning and again palpitant and fully revealed in the noonday sun, unchanging and yet never quite the same....

In the midst of the feast champagne was served, and the guests began to move from table to table with their glasses lifted high and their lips smiling out good will. The men stopped shyly opposite Claire's seat and for the most part toasted her silently, but here and there a patron who had danced to the old tunes that she had once played clasped her by the hand and called gaily to her. Finally a young woman came forward.

"You do not remember me," she said to Claire. "But you were here, at my wedding-feast.... Do you remember?... I hope your husband will soon be well!"

Her *husband!* It took a woman to voice this new estate with calm simplicity. This was the first

time the phrase had been used. She turned to Stillman. He looked away.

Now came music and dancing—Old World music and long lines of men swaying to its rhythm. Lycurgus insisted upon Stillman joining them. Claire wondered at him as he rose. It was purely a formality, and Stillman had nothing to do beyond walk through his part, but Claire marveled that he could have been persuaded. Nellie Holmes railed audibly, and even Miss Proll shook her head. But Claire's inner vision pierced beyond the incongruity of Stillman's performance. And she knew that he had done this thing because he understood. The fruits of a crucial instance lay beneath the surface of his smiling acceptance of the situation. When he was seated again, flushed and somewhat embarrassed for all his nonchalance, she said, softly:

"If Danilo could have seen you he would have been very happy."

The bride's cake was brought on. Claire went through the formality of cutting the first piece, and then Lycurgus bore it away to a serving-table. The company rose to their feet with upraised glasses. It was Stillman's glass that touched Claire's.

They left soon after this last formality. Lycurgus had gathered a box of sweetmeats and dainties for Danilo, and a bottle of champagne. Stillman and Claire stopped at the hotel. But the nurse denied them admittance to the sick-room.

"He is tired, as you can imagine," she explained. "And to tell the truth, he has more fever than is good."

"I wonder if we did the right thing, after all?" Claire asked Stillman as they went toward the elevator.

"We must believe so," he answered, gravely.

CHAPTER XVI

The next day was Sunday. Claire went to church. She had thought at first of spending a holy hour wrapped in the misty-blue atmosphere of Danilo's faith, of seeking out the little Greek house of worship on Seventh Street and lighting a taper for the man who had made her his wife. But in the end impulse drew her to the church of her fathers, and, sitting in the harsh, untuned light of Doctor Stoddard's meeting-house, she caught moments of cold, austere beauty, veiled and mystic with the incense of her rich experience.

She saw familiar faces about her—faces that had once had the power to draw the fire of her envy, or fill her soul with fluttering dismay, or warm her heart with their patronizing smiles. Could it be possible that there had been a day when her hopes had flown no farther than the promise of a foothold among this group bending their heads in self-satisfied prayer? For a moment the cold rebellion of her childhood had brought to the surface a feeling of fluttering scorn for them, but almost as quickly she repented her rancor. What did she know concerning the fires that lit their inner life—the faiths that supported, the sins that colored, the griefs that cleansed? How many months had passed since she had sat in cankerous silence and envied the very girls passing coffee and cake at a church social? Was it the fault of these people that she had tuned her desires to so faint and tinkling an ambition?

The star of Bethlehem no longer burned in flickering gaslight above the choir-loft, but as Claire prayerfully lifted up her eyes she could feel its almost forgotten presence. It was the one beautiful memory of the religious life of her girlhood. It had burned in sensuous beauty far above all the cold form, the ugly repressions, the wan renunciations. It had made her eager and parted-lipped, and passionate for all the brooding joys of existence. Such a star had led wise men to the feet of living revelation, but was it not also possible that such a star had lit the dim myrtle-hedged pathway in Eden down which the first courageous pair had walked to self-respect and freedom? Was it not possible that God had veiled his face in admiration instead of anger, leaving a yearning eye thus bared to the night?

And suddenly her thoughts flew to Danilo and that wonderful night when they had pledged their love in thin red wine. During the week she had climbed the tawny slopes of Telegraph Hill and stood in the glare of noonday above the fret of the town. The deserted garden where they had danced their love dance was still there, a little more ragged, a little more rock-strewn, a little more smothered under the litter of accomplished feasts. In the yellow light of midday it lay a ravished husk, its dancing feet stilled, its music a wan memory, its young ardent loves hidden like nightingales in the cool forests of the day. The strains of the wine-cup made hectic flushes upon its saffron face, and the showering petals of its lingering roses drifted in a melancholy flood before the betraying west wind. She was glad that she had seen it so, glad that the first picture was impossible to duplicate, to repeat. Life was meant to be a progression.

Presently her musings leaped to wider stretches. The world was trembling upon the threshold of peace, and, about her, people whispered sad hopes and held their breath in a silent terror of expectation. Something remote, intangible, ominous, hung in the air. She felt a great yearning for love and life and service, a reaching out to meet the kiss of fellowship half-way. And in this hour of consecration the figure of Danilo rose before her. She had never loved him so completely as she did at this moment when the memory of his irrational and human folly swept her like a waking dream.

"And now may the grace of God..." Doctor Stoddard's voice was ringing out in the impressive moment of the benediction. Claire bowed her head.... Was not life, after all, a succession of springs luminous with promise, and summers whose harvests must of necessity fall far short of all the brave anticipations?... What summer could possibly yield the marvelously golden fruits of spring's devising?

That afternoon Stillman came to the Robson flat early.

"I'm afraid," he began, "that they will not let us see Danilo to-day."

"What?... Was it the excitement?"

"No.... Septic pneumonia has developed. You know he was in a bad condition when.... He had bronchitis then."

She turned pale.... He pressed her hand.

"I am going back with you," she said, calmly, as he made a protesting gesture.

He did not dissuade her further.

When they arrived at the hotel Danilo was unconscious. The priest had just left and the fragrance of incense hung like a mysterious presence. Upon the table a candle burned feebly....

The nurse, worn out, left the room at midnight. Claire sat calm and dry-eyed at the bedside, holding Danilo's limp hand in hers.... He was very cold, she thought.... Suddenly a low, wailing, mournful sound broke the somber stillness. Claire sat rigid.

"A siren!" flashed through her mind.

And, in a twinkling, bits of broken noises, raucous with dry-throated joy, broke forth—whistles ... the clanging of bells ... the hoarse cheers of people ... the quick gasp of windows flung open to the night.

Danilo stirred. "Claire ... I hear ... yes, I hear ... a noise—a great noise."

"Yes ... yes...." she soothed. "Be quiet.... Everything will soon be right."

He turned away from her with a weary sigh. She went to the window. So it had come ... at last ... *peace!* Below her, in the streets, a great composite, black creature danced and sang and wept and rioted. It beat the air with sticks, and flung its thousand arms up in gestures of abandon, and called upon its new god with passionate supplications. It was a monster at once terrifying, sublime, ridiculous! Claire shuddered. And as she stood there she had a sense of doubt and faith and tenderness and brutality, such as comes only in swift moments of revelation. She knew now that life could be as horrible and as beautiful as it dared. The monster below was a genial monster for the moment, but who could predict what *might* come if suddenly—Instinctively she covered her eyes with a tremulous hand.... Below her the monster danced and sang and laughed for hours and hours, and for hours and hours she stood spellbound watching its turbulent antics.

Gradually a light began to quicken the east ... the morning star flickered and died ... the clouds grew wrathful. Was it Danilo who called?

She went over to the bed. His eyes were open and shining. He knew her now.

"Lift me ... up," he faltered. "Lift me up...."

She drew his wasted form upward. A smile was on his lips.... Below, the monster still bellowed.

"Did you know, dearest, that it had come?" she questioned. "It is finished.... Peace has come!"

She went over and pushed back the curtain so he might glimpse the morning. How red, how very red the sky had grown!

"Yes," she said again. "Peace has come. Now we can go back ... to your people ... and bind up wounds.... Life has begun for us...."

He put out his arms. She went to him.

"Dawn—*blood-red dawn!*" he muttered. "See...."

She felt a sudden terrifying limpness of his body. She drew back. He slipped from her soft caress, opened his eyes wide, drew in one long fluttering breath. And, suddenly it was morning!...

When she raised her eyes Stillman was beside her.

"Everything is over," she said.

He lifted her up. "No—not everything.... We must see to it that he lives on ... in *us!*"

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