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[Illustration: "LOOK AT ME, MARGARET."]

### **REVELATIONS OF A WIFE**

The Story of a Honeymoon

**BY**

**ADELE GARRISON**

1915, 1916, 1917

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# INTRODUCTION

Probably it is true that no two persons entertain precisely the same view of marriage. If any two did, and one happened to be a man and the other a woman, there would be many advantages in their exemplifying the harmony by marrying each other—unless they had already married some one else.

Sour-minded critics of life have said that the only persons who are likely to understand what marriage ought to be are those who have found it to be something else. Of course most of the foolish criticisms of marriage are made by those who would find the same fault with life itself. One man who was asked whether life was worth living, answered that it depended on the liver. Thus, it has been pointed out that marriage can be only as good as the persons who marry. This is simply to say that a partnership is only as good as the partners.

"Revelations of a Wife" is a woman's confession. Marriage is so vital a matter to a woman that when she writes about it she is always likely to be in earnest. In this instance, the likelihood is borne out. Adele Garrison has listened to the whisperings of her own heart. She has done more. She has caught the wireless from a man's heart. And she has poured the record into this story.

The woman of this story is only one kind of a woman, and the man is only one kind of a man. But their experiences will touch the consciousness—I was going to say the conscience—of every man or woman who has either married or measured marriage, and we've all done one or the other.

**PIERRE RAVILLE.**

Revelations of a Wife

## I

**"I WILL BE HAPPY! I WILL! I WILL!"**

Today we were married.

I have said these words over and over to myself, and now I have written them, and the written characters seem as strange to me as the uttered words did. I cannot believe that I, Margaret Spencer, 27 years old, I who laughed and sneered at marriage, justifying myself by the tragedies and unhappiness of scores of my friends, I who have made for myself a place in the world's work with an assured comfortable income, have suddenly thrown all my theories to the winds and given myself in marriage in as impetuous, unreasoning fashion as any foolish schoolgirl.

I shall have to change a word in that last paragraph. I forgot that I am no longer Margaret Spencer, but Margaret Graham, Mrs. Richard Graham, or, more probably, Mrs. "Dicky" Graham. I don't believe anybody in the world ever called Richard anything but "Dicky."

On the other hand, nobody but Richard ever called me anything shorter than my own dignified name. I have been "Madge" to him almost ever since I knew him.

Dear, dear Dicky! If I talked a hundred years I could not express the difference between us in any better fashion. He is "Dicky" and I am "Margaret."

He is downstairs now in the smoking room, impatiently humoring this lifelong habit of mine to have one hour of the day all to myself.

My mother taught me this when I was a tiny girl. My "thinking hour," she called it, a time when I solved my small problems or pondered my baby sins. All my life I have kept up the practice. And now I am going to devote it to another request of the little mother who went away from me forever last year.

"Margaret, darling," she said to me on the last day we ever talked together, "some time you are going to marry—you do not think so now, but you will—and how I wish I had time to warn you of all the hidden rocks in your course! If I only had kept a record of those days of my own unhappiness, you might learn to avoid the wretchedness that was mine. Promise me that if you marry you will write down the problems that confront you and your solution of them, so that when your own baby girl comes to you and grows into womanhood she may be helped by your experience."

Poor little mother! Her marriage with my father had been one of those wretched tragedies, the knowledge of which frightens so many people away from the altar. I have no memory of my father. I do not know today whether he be living or dead. When I was 4 years old he ran away with the woman who had been my mother's most intimate friend. All my life has been warped by the knowledge. Even now, worshipping Dicky as I do, I am wondering as I sit here, obeying my mother's last request, whether or not an experience like hers will come to me.

A fine augury for our happiness when such thoughts as this can come to me on my wedding day!

Dicky is an artist, with all the faults and all the lovable virtues of his kind. A week ago I was a teacher, holding one of the most desirable positions in the city schools. We met just six months ago, two of the most unsuited people who could be thrown together. And now we are married! Next week we begin housekeeping in a dear little apartment near Dicky's studio.

Dicky has insisted that I give up my work, and against all my convictions I have yielded to his wishes. But on my part I have stipulated that I must be permitted to do the housework of our nest, with the occasional help of a laundress. I will be no parasite wife who neither helps her husband in or out of the home. But the little devils must be busy laughing just now. I, who have hardly hung up my own nightgown for years, and whose knowledge of housekeeping is mightily near zero, am to try to make home happy and comfortable for an artist! Poor Dicky!

I don't know what has come to me. I worship Dicky. He sweeps me off my feet with his love, his vivid personality overpowers my more commonplace self, but through all the bewildering intoxication of my engagement and marriage a little mocking devil, a cool, cynical, little devil, is constantly whispering in my ear: "You fool, you fool, to imagine you can escape unhappiness! There is no such thing as a happy marriage!"

Dicky has just 'phoned up from the smoking room to ask me if my hour isn't up. How his voice clears away all the miasma of my miserable thoughts! Please God, Dicky, I am going to lock up all my old ideas in the most unused closet of my brain, and try my best to be a good wife to you! I will be happy! I will! I WILL!

## II

### THE FIRST QUARREL

"I'll give you three guesses, Madge." Dicky stood just inside the door of the living room, holding an immense parcel carefully wrapped. His hat was on the back of his head, his eyes shining, his whole face aglow with boyish mischief.

"It's for you, my first housekeeping present, that is needed in every well regulated family," he burlesqued boastfully, "but you are not to see it until we have something to eat, and you have guessed what it is."

"I know it is something lovely, dear," I replied sedately, "but come to your dinner. It is getting cold."

Dicky looked a trifle hurt as he followed me to the dining room. I knew what he expected—enthusiastic curiosity and a demand for the immediate opening of the parcel, I can imagine the pretty enthusiasm, the caresses with which almost any other woman would have greeted a bridegroom of two weeks with his first present.

But it's simply impossible for me to gush. I cannot express emotion of any kind with the facility of most women. I worshipped my mother, but I rarely kissed her or expressed my love for her in words. My love for Dicky terrifies me sometimes, it is so strong, but I cannot go up to him and offer him an unsolicited kiss or caress. Respond to his caresses, yes! but offer them of my own volition, never! There

is something inside me that makes it an absolute impossibility.

"What's the menu, Madge? The beef again?"

Dicky's tone was mildly quizzical, his smile mischievous, but I flushed hotly. He had touched a sore spot. The butcher had brought me a huge slab of meat for my first dinner when I had timidly ordered "rib roast," and with the aid of my mother's cook book and my own smattering of cooking, my sole housewifely accomplishment, I had been trying to disguise it for subsequent meals.

"This is positively its last appearance on any stage," I assured him, trying to be gay. "Besides, it's a casserole, with rice, and I defy you to detect whether the chief ingredient be fish, flesh or fowl."

"Casserole is usually my pet aversion," Dicky said solemnly. Look not on the casserole when it is table d'hote, is one of the pet little proverbs in my immediate set. Too much like Spanish steak and the other good chances for ptomaines. But if you made it I'll tackle it—if you have to call the ambulance in the next half-hour."

"Dicky, you surely do not think I would use meat that was doubtful, do you?" I asked, horror-stricken. "Don't eat it. Wait and I'll fix up some eggs for you."

Dicky rose stiffly, walked slowly around to my side of the table, and gravely tapped my head in imitation of a phrenologist.

"Absolute depression where the bump called 'sense of humor' ought to be. Too bad! Pretty creature, too. Cause her lots of trouble, in the days to come," he chanted solemnly.

Then he bent and kissed me. "Don't be a goose, Madge," he admonished, "and never, never take me seriously. I don't know the meaning of the word. Come on, let's eat the thing-um bob. I'll bet it's delicious."

He uncovered the casserole and regarded the steaming contents critically. "Smells scrumptious," he announced. "What's in the other? Potatoes au gratin?" as he took off the cover of the other serving dish. "Good! One of my favorites."

He piled a liberal portion on any plate and helped himself as generously. He ate heartily of both dishes, ignoring or not noticing that I scarcely touched either dish.

For I was fast lapsing into one of the moods which my little mother used to call my "morbid streaks" and which she had vainly tried to cure ever since I was a tiny girl.

Dicky didn't like my cooking! He was only pretending! Dicky was disappointed in the way I received the announcement of his present! Probably he soon would find me wanting in other things.

As I took our plates to the kitchen and brought on a lettuce and tomato salad with a mayonnaise dressing over which I had toiled for an hour, I was trying hard to choke back the tears.

When I brought on the baked apples which I had prepared with especial care for dessert, Dick gave them one glance which to my oversensitive mind looked disparaging. Then he pushed back his chair.

"Don't believe I want any dessert today. The rest of the dinner was so good I ate too much of it. Eat yours and I'll undo your surprise."

"Whatever in the world?" I began as Dicky lifted the lid and revealed a big Angora cat. Then my voice changed. "Why, Dicky, you don't mean—" But Dicky was absorbed in lifting the cat out.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he said admiringly. But I was almost into the dining room.

"I suppose she is," I replied faintly, "but surely you do not intend her for me?"

"Why not?" Dicky's tone was sharper than I had ever heard it. He set the cat down on the floor and she walked over to me. I pushed her away gently with my foot as I replied:

"Because I dislike cats—intensely. Besides, you know cats are so unsanitary, always carrying disease —"

"Oh, get out of it, Madge," Dicky interrupted. "Forget that scientific foolishness you absorbed when you were school ma'am-ing. Besides, this cat is a thoroughbred, never been outside the home where she was born till now. Do you happen to know what this gift you are tossing aside so nonchalantly would have cost if it hadn't been given me by a dear friend? A cool two hundred, that's all. It seems to me you might try to get over your prejudices, especially when I tell you that I am very fond of cats and like to

see them around."

Dicky's voice held a note of appeal, but I chose to ignore it. My particular little devil must have sat at my elbow.

"I am sorry," I said coldly, "but really, I do not see why it is any more incumbent on me to try to overcome my very real aversion to cats than it is for you to try to do without their society."

"Very well," Dicky exclaimed angrily, turning toward the door. "If you feel that way about it, there is nothing more to be said."

Then Dicky slammed the living room door behind him to emphasize his words, went down the hall, slammed the apartment door and ran down the steps.

Back in the living room, huddled up in the big chair which is the chief pride of the woman who rents us the furnished apartment, I sat, as angry as Dicky, and heartsick besides. Our first quarrel had come!

But the cat remained. What was I to do with her? There is no cure for a quarrel like loneliness and reflection. Dicky had not been gone a half-hour after our disagreement over the cat before I was wondering how we both could have been so silly.

I thought it out carefully. I could see that Dicky was accustomed to having his own way unquestioned. He had told me once that his mother and sister had spoiled him, and I reflected that he evidently expected me to go on in the same way.

On the other hand, I had been absolutely my own mistress for years, the little mother in a way being more my child than I hers. Accustomed to decide for myself every question of my life I had no desire, neither had I intention of doing, any clinging vine act with Dicky posing at the strong oak.

But I also had the common sense to see that there would be real issues in our lives without wasting our ammunition over a cat. Then, too, the remembrance of Dicky's happy face when he thought he was surprising me tugged at my heart.

"If he wants a cat, a cat he shall have," I said to myself, and calling my unwelcome guest to me with a resolute determination to do my duty by the beast, no matter how distasteful the task, I was just putting a saucer of milk in front of her when the door opened and Dicky came in like a whirlwind.

"How do you wear sackcloth and ashes?" he cried, catching me in his arms as he made the query. "If you've got any in the house bring 'em along and I'll put them on. Seriously, girl, I'm awfully sorry I let my temper out of its little cage. No nice thing getting angry at your bride, because she doesn't like cats. I'll take the beast back tomorrow."

"Indeed, you'll do no such thing," I protested. "You're not the only one who is sorry, I made up my mind before you came back not only to keep this cat, but to learn to like her."

Dicky kissed me. "You're a brick, sweetheart," he said heartily, "and I've got a reward for you, a peace offering. Get on your frills, for we're going to a first night. Sanders was called out of town, had the tickets on his hands, and turned them over to me. Hurry up while I get into my moonlights."

"Your what?" I was mystified.

"Evening clothes, goose." Dicky threw the words over his shoulder as he took down the telephone receiver. "Can you dress in half an hour? We have only that."

"I'll be ready."

As I closed the door of my room I heard Dicky ask for the number of the taxicab company where he kept an account. Impulsively, I started toward him to remonstrate against the extravagance, but stopped as I heard the patter of rain against the windows.

"I'll leave this evening entirely in Dicky's hands," I resolved as I began to dress.

### III

Our taxi drew into the long line of motor cars before the theatre and slowly crept up to the door. Dicky jumped out, raised his umbrella and guided me into the lobby. It was filled with men and women, some in elaborate evening dress, others in street garb. Some were going in to their seats, others were gossiping with each other, still others appeared to be waiting for friends.

The most conspicuous of all the women leaned against the wall and gazed at others through a lorgnette which she handled as if she had not long before been accustomed to its use. Her gown, a glaringly cut one, was of scarlet chiffon over silk, and her brocaded cape was half-slipping from her shoulder. Her hair was frankly dyed, and she rouged outrageously.

I gazed at her fascinated. She typified to me everything that was disagreeable. I have always disliked even being in the neighborhood of her vulgar kind. What was my horror, then, to see her deliberately smiling at me, then coming toward us with hand outstretched.

I realized the truth even before she spoke. It was not I at whom she was smiling, but Dicky. She was Dicky's friend!

"Why, bless my soul, if it isn't the Dicky-bird," she cried so loudly that everybody turned to look at us. She took my hand. "I suppose you are the bride Dicky's been hiding away so jealously." She looked me up and down as if I were on exhibition and turning to Dicky said. "Pretty good taste, Dicky, but I don't imagine that your old friends will see much of you from now on."

"That's where you're wrong, Lil," returned Dicky easily. "We're going to have you all up some night soon."

"See that you do," she returned, tweaking his ear as we passed on to our seats.

I had not spoken during the conversation. I had shaken the hand of the woman and smiled at her.

But over and over again in my brain this question was revolving:

"Who is this unpleasant woman who calls my husband 'Dicky-bird,' and who is called 'Lil' by him?"

But I love the very air of the theatre, so as Dicky and I sank into the old-fashioned brocaded seats I resolutely put away from my mind all disturbing thoughts of the woman in the lobby who appeared on such good terms with my husband, and prepared to enjoy every moment of the evening.

"Well done, Madge," Dicky whispered mischievously, as, after we had been seated, I let my cloak drop from my shoulders without arising. "You wriggled that off in the most approved manner."

"I ought to," I whispered back. "I've watched other women with envious attention during all the lean years, when I wore tailor-mades to mill and to meeting."

Dicky squeezed my hand under cover of the cloak. "No more lean years for my girl if I can help it," he murmured earnestly.

Dicky appeared to know a number of people in the audience. A half-dozen men and two or three women bowed to him. He told me about each one. Two were dramatic critics, others artist and actor friends. Each one's name was familiar to me through the newspapers.

"You'll know them all later, Madge," he said, and I felt a glow of pleasure in the anticipation of meeting such interesting people.

Dicky opened his program, and I idly watched the people between me and the stage. A few seats in front of us to the left I caught sight of the woman who had claimed Dicky's acquaintance in the lobby. She was signaling greetings to a number of acquaintances in a flamboyant fashion. She would bow elaborately, then lift her hands together as if shaking hands with the person she greeted.

"Who is she, Dicky?" I tried to make my voice careless. "I did not catch her name when you introduced us."

"You'll probably see enough of her so you won't forget it," returned Dicky, grinning. "She's one of the busiest little members of the 'Welcome to Our City Committee' in the set I train most with. She won't rest till you've met all the boys and girls and been properly lionized. She's one of the best little scouts going, and, if she'd cut out the war paint and modulate that Comanche yell she calls her voice there would be few women to equal her for brains or looks."

"But you haven't told me yet what her name is," I persisted.

"Well, in private life she's Mrs. Harry Underwood—that's Harry with her—but she's better known all

over the country as the cleverest producer of illustrated jingles for advertising we have. Remember that Simple Simon parody for the mincemeat advertisement we laughed over some time ago, and I told you I knew the woman who did it? There she is before you," and Dicky waved his hand grandiloquently.

"Lillian Gale!" I almost gasped the name.

"The same," rejoined Dicky, and turned again to his program, while I sat in amazed horror, with all my oldtime theories crumbling around me.

For I had read of Lillian Gale and her married troubles. I knew that Harry Underwood was her second husband and that she had been divorced from her first spouse after a scandal which has been aired quite fully in the newspapers. She had not been proved guilty, but her skirts certainly had been smirched by rumor. According to the ideas which had been mine, Dicky should have shrunk from having me ever meet such a woman, let alone planning to have me on terms of intimacy with her.

What should I do?

When the curtain went down on the first act I turned to Dicky happily, eager to hear his comments and filled with a throng of thoughts to wipe away any remembrance from his mind of the unhappiness that had promised to mar my evening, and which I feared he had read in my eyes. But just as I opened my lips to speak, he interrupted me with a startled exclamation:

"Sit down, Lil. Hello, Harry."

Dicky was on his feet in an instant and Lillian Gale was seated next to me with Dicky and her husband leaning over us before I had fully realized that the woman, the thought of whom had so disturbed my evening, was so close to me.

"I want you to know Mrs. Graham, Harry," Dicky said.

I glowed inwardly at the note of pride in his voice and looked up to meet a pair of brilliant black eyes looking at me with an appraising approval that grated. He was a tall, good looking chap, with an air of ennui that sat oddly on his powerful frame. I felt sure that I would like Lillian Gale's husband as little as I did the woman herself.

I was glad when the lights dimmed slowly, that the second act was about to begin. Mrs. Underwood rose with a noisy rustling of draperies. She evidently was one of those women who can do nothing quietly, and turning to me said, cordially:

"Be sure to wait for us in the lobby when this is over. We have a plan," and before I had time to reply she had rustled away to her own seat, her tall husband following at some little distance behind her, but apparently oblivious of her presence as if she were a stranger.

I didn't much enjoy the second act, even though I realized that it was one of the best comedy scenes I had ever seen, both in its lines and its acting; but I had a problem to settle, and I longed for the quiet hour in my own room which my mother had trained me to take every day since childhood.

Of course, I realized that Lillian Gale meant to have us join them for a supper party after the theatre. The invitation would be given to us in the lobby after the last act. Upon the way that I received that invitation must depend my future conduct toward this woman. I could not make one of the proposed party and afterward decline to know her. My instincts all cried out to me to avoid Lillian Gale. She outraged all my canons of good taste, although even through my prejudices I had to admit there was something oddly attractive about her in spite of her atrocious make-up.

But, on the other hand, she and her husband appeared to be on most intimate terms with Dicky. Would I seriously offend him if I refused to treat his friends with friendliness equal to that which they seemed ready to shower upon me?

"Would you like to walk a bit, Madge?" Dicky's voice started me into a recollection of my surroundings. I had been so absorbed in the problem of whether I should or should not accept Lillian Gale as an intimate friend that I did not know that the curtain had fallen on the second act, nor did I know how the act had ended. My problem was still unsolved. I welcomed the diversion of a turn in the fresher air of the lobby.

As we passed up the aisle I felt a sudden tug, then an ominous ripping. The floating chiffon overdrapery of my gown had caught in a seat. As Dicky bent to release me his face showed consternation. Almost a length of the dainty fabric trailed on the floor.

I have schooled my self-repression for many a weary year. I feared my gown, in which I had taken



such pride, was ruined, but I would not let any one know I cared about it. I gathered it up and smiled at Dicky.

"It really doesn't matter," I said. "If you'll leave me at the woman's dressing room I think I can fix it up all right."

Dicky drew a relieved breath. His heartily murmured, "You're a thoroughbred for sure, Madge," rewarded me for my composure. I was just woman enough also to be comforted by the whispered comments of two women who sat just behind the seat which caused the mischief.

"Isn't that a shame—that exquisite gown?" and the rejoinder. "But isn't she game? I couldn't smile like that—I'd be crying my eyes out"

Dicky left me at the door of the dressing room, pressing a coin slyly into my hand. "You'll tip the maid," he explained, and I blessed him for his thoughtfulness. I had been too absorbed in my gown to think of anything else.

An obsequious maid provided me with needle, thimble and thread. She offered to mend the tear for me, but I had a horror of being made conspicuous by her ministrations.

"If you'll let me have a chair in a corner I shall do very nicely," I told her, and was at once snugly ensconced near one of her mirrors behind the very comfortable rampart of an enormously fat woman in an exaggerated evening gown, who was devoting much pains and cosmetics to her complexion. She looked as if she intended to remain at the particular mirror all the intermission. I hoped she would stay there, in spite the dagger's looks she was receiving from other complexion repairers who coveted her place, for she was an effectual shield from curious eyes.

To my joy I found that the gown was not ruined, and that it could be repaired without much expense or trouble. Even the temporary mending I was doing disguised the break. I was so interested in the mending that I was completely lost to my surroundings, but the sound of a familiar name brought me to with a jerk.

"Did you see the Dicky-bird and his marble bride?" A high-pitched yet rather sweet voice asked the question, and a deep contralto answered it.

"Yes, indeed, and I saw the way Lillian Gale was rushing them. For my part I don't think that's quite clubby of Lil. Of course she's got into the way of thinking she has a first mortgage on the Dicky-bird, but she might give that beautiful bride a chance for her life before she forecloses."

"What's the secret of Lil's attraction for Dicky Graham, anyway?" the soprano voice queried. "She's a good seven years older than he is, and both her past and her youth are rather frayed at the edges, you know."

"Oh! love's young dream, and the habit of long association," returned the contralto. "I've heard that Lil was Dicky's first love. She was a stunner for looks 19 years ago, and Dicky was just young enough to be swept off his feet."

"That must have been before Lil married that unspeakable Morten, the fellow she divorced, wasn't it?" interrupted the soprano.

"Yes, it was," the contralto answered. "I don't know whether Dicky has been half in love with Lil all these years or not, but he certainly has been her best friend. And now comes the news of his marriage to somebody the crowd never heard of."

"Well, I think Lil may say good-by to her Dicky-bird now," returned the first speaker. "That bride is quite the prettiest piece of flesh and blood I've seen for many days."

"She is all of that," agreed the other, "She holds all the best cards, but you'll find she is too statuesque and dignified to play them. I saw her face tonight when Lil was talking to her. She is not accustomed to Lil's kind, and she does not like her friendship with Dicky."

"You can't blame her for that," interrupted the soprano. "I am sure I would not like to see my husband dancing attendance on Lillian Gale."

"No, of course not," the contralto replied; "but she will be just fool enough to show Dicky her feelings, and Dicky, who is the soul of loyalty to his friends, will resent her attitude and try to make it up to Lil and Harry by being extra nice to them. It's too bad. But then, these marble statue sort of women always sacrifice their love for their pride or their fool notions or propriety."

"It will be as good as a play to watch the developments," the soprano commented. "Come on, we'll be too late for the curtain."

I felt suddenly faint, and the room appeared to whirl around me. The maid touched me on the arm.

"Are you ill, madame? Here!" and she held a glass of water to my lips. I drank it and motioned her away.

"I'll be all right in a moment," I murmured. "Thank you, but I am quite well."

So this was what marriage would mean to me, a contest with another woman for my husband's love! A fierce anger took possession of me. One moment I regretted my marriage to Dicky, the next I was fiercely primitive as any savage woman in my desire to crush my rival. I could have strangled Lillian Gale in that moment. Then common sense came back to me. What was it that woman had said? I had all the best cards in my hand? Well! I would play them. I felt sure that Dicky loved me. I would not jeopardize that love for a temporary pride. I would eliminate Lillian Gale from Dicky's life, but I would bide my time to do it.

## IV

### DIVIDED OPINIONS

If anybody wishes an infallible recipe for taking the romance out of life, I can recommend washing a pile of dishes which have been left over from the day before, especially if there be among them a number of greasy pots and pans. Restoring order to a badly cluttered room is another glamour destroyer, but the first prize, I stoutly affirm, goes to the dishes.

An especially aggravating collection of romance shatterers awaited me the morning after our visit to the theatre, and my first encounter with Lillian Gale.

Dicky took a hurried breakfast and rushed off to the studio, while I spent a dreary forenoon washing the dishes and putting the apartment to rights. I dreaded the discussion with Dicky at luncheon. I had insisted before my marriage that I must either do most of the housework, or keep up some of my old work to add to our income. To have a maid, while I did nothing to justify my existence save keep myself pretty and entertain Dicky, savored too much to me of the harem favorite.

A mother of small children, a woman with a large house, one who had old people to care for, or whose health was not good, was justified in having help. But for me, well, strong, with a tiny apartment, and just Dicky, to employ a maid without myself earning at least enough to pay for the extra expense of having her—it was simply impossible. I had been independent too long. The situation was galling.

The postman's ring interrupted my thoughts. I went to the door, receiving a number of advertisements, a letter or two for Dicky, and one, addressed in an unfamiliar handwriting, to myself. I opened it and read it wonderingly.

"My dear Mrs. Graham:

"Our club is planning a course in history for the coming year. We need an experienced conductor for the class, which will meet once a week. Your name has been suggested to us as that of one who might be willing to take up the work. The compensation will not be as large as that given by the larger clubs for lectures, as we are a small organization, but I do not think you will have to devote much of your time to the work outside of the weekly meeting.

"Will you kindly let me know when I can meet you and talk this over with you, if you decide to consider it?

"Yours very truly,

"HELEN BRAINERD SMITH,

"Secretary Lotus Study Club,

"215 West Washington Avenue."

Had the solution to my problem come? Armed with this I could talk to Dicky at luncheon without any fears.

The receipt of the letter put me in a royal good humor. I did not care how little the compensation was, although I knew it would be far more than enough to pay the extra expense of having a maid, an expense which I was determined to defray.

Teaching or lecturing upon historical subjects was child's play to me. I had specialized in it, and had been counted one of the most successful instructors in that branch in the city. Woman's club work was new to me, but the husband of one of my friends had once conducted such a course, and I knew I could get all the information I needed from him.

I thought of Dicky's possible objections, but brushed the thought aside. He had objected to my going on with my regular school work and I realized that the hours which I would have been compelled to give to that work would have conflicted seriously with our home life. But here was something that would take me away from home so little.

\* \* \* \* \*

"About that servant question," I began, after Dicky was comfortably settled and smiling over his cigar. "I will employ one, a first-class, really competent housekeeper, if you will make no objection to this."

I opened the letter and handed it to him. He read it through, his face growing angrier at every line. When he had finished he threw it on the floor.

"Well, I guess not," he exclaimed. "I know that club game; it's the limit. There's nothing in it. They'll pay only a beggarly sum, and you'll be tied to that same afternoon once a week for a year. Suppose we had something we wanted to do on that day? We would have to let it go hang."

"I suppose if we had something we wanted to do on a day when you had a commission to execute you would leave your work and go," I answered quietly.

"That's entirely different," returned Dicky. "I'm responsible for the support of this family. You are not. All you have to do is to enjoy yourself and make home comfortable for me."

We were interrupted by the door bell. Dicky went to the door while I hastily dropped the portiers between the living room and the dining room. I heard Dicky's deep voice in greeting.

"This is good of you, Lil," and Lillian Gale came into the room with outstretched hand.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have come so soon," she said, "but you see I am bound to know you, even if Dicky does spirit you away when we want you to join us."

She threw him a laughing glance as she clasped my hand.

"I am so glad you have come," I said cordially, but inwardly I fiercely resented her intrusion, as I deemed it.

But what was my horror to hear Dicky say casually:

"You've come at a most opportune time, Lil. Madge has had an offer from some woman's club to do a lecturing stunt on history, her specialty, you know, and she wants to take it. I wish you'd help me persuade her out of it."

"I cannot imagine why we should trouble Mrs. Underwood with so personal a matter," I heard myself saying faintly.

Mrs. Underwood laughed boisterously. "Why, I'm one of the family, my dear child," she said heartily. Then she looked at me keenly.

"I might have known that one man would have no chance with two women," Dicky growled. His tone held capitulation. I knew I had won my battle. But was it my victory or this woman's I so detested?

"Don't let this man bully you," she advised half-laughingly. "He's perfectly capable of it. I know him. By all means accept the offer if you think it's worth while. All these husbands are a bit archaic yet, you know. They don't realize that women have joined the human race."

"Come, Dicky-bird," she rattled on as she saw his darkening face. "Don't be silly. You'll have to give in. You're just 50 years behind the times, you know."

During the remainder of Mrs. Underwood's brief call she ignored Dicky, and devoted herself to me. There is no denying the fact that she has great charm when she chooses to exercise it. Dicky, however, appeared entirely oblivious of it, sitting in moody silence until she rose to go.

"You ought to preserve that grouch," she carelessly advised, as he stood holding the door open for her. "Carefully corked in a glass jar, it ought to keep to be given to your grandchildren as a horrible example."

Dicky grinned reluctantly and bowed low as she passed out of the room with a cordial adieu to me, but no sooner had the door closed behind her than he turned to me angrily.

"Look here, Madge," he exclaimed, "are you really in earnest about taking that blasted position?"

"Why! of course I am," I answered. "It seems providential, coming just as you insist upon having the maid. I can engage one with a clear conscience now."

Dicky sprang to his feet with a muttered word that sounded suspiciously like an oath, and began to walk rapidly up and down the room, his hands behind his back, and his face dark with anger. Up and down, up and down he paced, while I, sitting quietly in my chair, waited, nerving myself for the scene I anticipated.

When it came, however, it surprised me with the turn it took. Dicky stopped suddenly in his pacing, and coming swiftly over to me, dropped on one knee beside my chair and put his arms around me.

"Sweetheart," he said softly, "I don't want to quarrel about this, nor do I wish to be unreasonable about it. But, really, it means an awful lot to me. I don't want you to do it. Won't you give it up for me?"

I returned Dicky's kiss, and held him tightly as I answered:

"Dear boy, I'll think it over very carefully. If I possibly can, I will do as you wish. But, remember, I say if I can. I haven't made you a definite promise yet."

"But you will, I know; that's my own dear girl. Good-by. I'll have to rush back to the studio now."

Dicky's tone was light and confident as he rose. Life always has been easy for Dicky. I heard him say once he never could remember the time when he didn't get his own way.

## V

### "ALWAYS YOUR JACK"

As soon as Dicky had left the house I cleared away the dishes and washed them and prepared a dessert for dinner. Then, finding the want advertisements of the Sunday papers, I looked carefully through the columns headed "Situations Wanted, Female."

I clipped the advertisements and fastened each neatly to a sheet of notepaper. Then I wrote beneath each one: "Please call Thursday or Friday. Ask for Mrs. Richard Graham, Apartment 4, 46 East Twenty-ninth street."

I addressed the envelopes properly, inserted the answers in the envelopes, sealed and stamped them, then ran out to the post box on the corner with them. I walked back very slowly, for there was nothing more that needed to be done, and I could put off no longer the settling of my problem.

I locked the door of my room, pulled down the shade and, exchanging my house dress for a comfortable negligee, lay down upon my bed to think things out.

I tried to put myself in Dicky's place, and to understand his reasons for objecting to my earning any money of my own. I sat upright in bed as a thought flashed across my brain. Was that the reason? Were his objections to this plan of mine what he pretended they were? Did he really fear that I might have unpleasant publicity thrust upon me, and that some of our pleasure plans might be spoiled by the weekly lecture engagement? Or was he the type of man who could not bear his wife to have money or

plans or even thoughts which did not originate with him?

I resolved to find out just what motive was behind his objections. If he were willing that I should try to earn money in some other way I would gladly refuse this offer. But if he were opposed to my ever having any income of my own the issue might as well come now as later.

A loud ringing at the doorbell awakened me.

For a moment I could not understand how I came to be in bed. Then I remembered and throwing off my negligee and putting on a little afternoon gown, I twisted up my hair into a careless knot and hurried to the door. The ring had been the postman's. The afternoon newspapers lay upon the floor. With them was a letter with my former name upon it in a handwriting that I knew. It had been forwarded from my old boarding house. The superscription looked queer to me, as if it were the name of some one I had known long ago.

"Miss Margaret Spencer," and then, in the crabbed handwriting of my dear old landlady, "care of Mrs. Richard Graham."

I opened the letter slowly. It bore a New Orleans heading, and a date three days before.

"Dear little girl:

"A year is a long time between letters, isn't it? But you know I told you when I left that the chances were Slim for getting a letter back from the wild territory where I was going, and I found when I reached there that 'slim' was hardly the word. I wrote you twice, but have no hope that the letters ever reached you. But now I am back in God's country, or shall be when I get North, and of course, my first line is to you. I am writing this to the old place, knowing it will be forwarded if you have left there.

"I shall be in New York two weeks from today, the 24th. Of course I shall go to my old diggings. Telephone me there, so that I can see you as soon as possible. I am looking forward to a real dinner, at a real restaurant, with the realest girl in the world opposite me the first day I strike New York, so get ready for me. I do hope you have been well and as cheerful as possible. I know what a struggle this year must have been for you.

"Till I see you, dear, always your

**"JACK."**

I finished the reading of the letter with mingled feelings of joy and dismay. Joy was the stronger, however. Dear old Jack was safe at home. But there were adjustments which I must make. I had my marriage to explain to Jack, and Jack to explain to Dicky. Nothing but this letter could have so revealed to me the strength of the infatuation for Dicky which had swept me off my feet and resulted in my marriage after only a six months' acquaintance. Reading it I realized that the memory of Jack had been so pushed into the background during the past six months that I never had thought to tell Dicky about him.

"You've made a great conquest," said Dicky that evening when we were finishing dinner, "Lil thinks you're about the nicest little piece of calico she has ever measured—those were her own words. She's planning a frolic for the crowd some night at your convenience."

"That is awfully kind of her. Where did you see her." I prided myself on my careless tone, but Dicky gave me a shrewd glance.

"Why, at the studio, of course. Her studio is on the same floor as mine, you know. Atwood and Barker and she and I are all on one floor, and we often have a dish of tea together when we are not rushed."

I busied myself with the coffee machine until I could control my voice. How I hated these glimpses of the intimate friendship which must exist between my husband and this woman!

"I suppose we ought to have them all over some night," I said at last, "but I'll have to add a few things to our equipment, and wait until I get a maid."

"That will be fine," Dicky assented cordially, pushing back his chair. "Did the papers come? I'll look them over for a little. Whistle when you're ready and I'll wipe the dishes for you."

He strolled into the living room, and I suddenly remembered that I had laid my letter from Jack on the table, with its pages scattered so that any one picking them up could not help seeing them.

I had forgotten all about the letter. I had meant to show it to Dicky after I had explained about Jack. It was not quite the letter for a bridegroom to find without expectation. I realized that.

I could not get the letter without attracting his attention. I waited, every nerve tense, listening to the sounds in the next room. I heard the rustling of the newspaper; then a sudden silence told me his attention had been arrested by something. Would he read the letter? I did not think so. I knew his sense of honor was too keen for that, but I remembered that the last page with its signature was at the top of the sheets as I laid them down. That was enough to make any loving husband reflect a bit.

How would Dicky take it? I wondered. I was soon to know. I heard him crush the paper in his hand, then come quickly to the kitchen. I pretended to be busy with the dishes, but he strode over to me, and clutching me by the shoulder with a grip that hurt, thrust the letter before my face, and said hoarsely:

"What does this mean?"

The last words of Jack's letter danced before my eyes, Dicky's hand was shaking so.

"Till I see you, dear. Always Jack."

Dicky's face was not a pleasant sight. It repulsed and disgusted me. Subconsciously I was contrasting the way in which he calmly expected me to accept his friendship for Lillian Gale, and his behavior over this letter. Five minutes earlier I would have explained to him fully. I resolved now to put my friendship for Jack upon the same basis as his for Mrs. Underwood.

So I looked at him coolly. "Have you read the letter?" I asked quietly.

"You know I have not read the letter," he snarled. "It lay on the papers. I could not help but see this—this—whatever it is," he finished lamely, "and I have come straight to you for an explanation."

"Better read the letter," I advised quietly. "I give you full permission."

I could have laughed at Dicky, if I had been less angry. He was so like an angry, curious child in his eagerness to know everything about Jack.

"You have no brother. Is this man a relative?"

"No," I returned demurely.

"An old lover then, I suppose a confident one, I should judge by the tone of the letter. Won't it be too cruel a blow to him when he finds his dear little girl is married?"

Dicky's tone fairly dripped with irony. "He will be surprised certainly," I answered, "but as he never was my lover, I don't think it will be any blow to him."

"Who is he, anyway? Why have you never told me about him? What does he look like?"

Dicky fairly shot the questions at me. I turned and went into my room. There I rummaged in a box of old photographs until I found two fairly good likenesses of Jack. I carried them to the kitchen and put them in Dicky's hands. He glared at them, then threw them on the table.

"Humph! Looks like a gorilla with the mumps," he growled. "Who is this precious party, then, if he is not a lover or a relative?"

"He is an old and dear friend. His friendship means as much to me as—well—say Lillian Gale's means to you."

Dicky stared at me a long, long look as if he had just discovered me. Then he turned on his heel.

"Well, I'll be—" I did not find out what he would be, for he went out and slammed the door.

I sat down to a humiliating half-hour's thought. It isn't a bad idea at times to "loaf and invite your soul," and then cast up account with it. My account looked pretty discouraging.

Dicky and I had been married a little over two weeks. Two weeks of idiotically happy honeymooning, and then the last three days of quarrels, reconciliations, jealousies, petty bickerings and the shadow of real issues between us.

Was this marriage—heights of happiness, depths of despair, with the humdrum of petty differences between?

# VI

## A MAID AND MODEL

The chiming of the clock an hour after Dicky had gone to the studio after our little noon dinner next day warned me that I was not dressed and that the cooks whose advertisements I had answered might call at any minute. I dressed and arranged my hair. Just as I put in the last hairpin the bell rang.

Two women, covertly eyeing each other with suspicion, stood in the hallway when I opened the door. To my invitation to come in each responded "Thank you," and the entrance of both was quiet. When they sat down in the chairs I drew forward for them I mentally appraised them for a moment.

One was a middle-aged woman of the strongly marked German type. Clean, trig, grim, she spelled efficiency in every line of her body. The other, a tall Polish girl, of perhaps 22, was also extremely neat, but her pretty brown hair was blown around her face and her blue eyes were fairly dancing with eagerness, in contrast to the stolid expression of the other woman. As I faced them, the older woman compressed her lips in a thin line, while the girl smiled at me in friendly fashion.

"You came in answer to the advertisements?" I queried.

The older woman silently held forth my letter and two or three other papers pinned together. I saw that they were references written in varying feminine chirography. Her silence was almost uncanny.

"Oh, yes, Misses," the Polish girl exclaimed. "I put my—what do you call it? My—"

"Advertisement," I suggested, smiling. Her good-nature was infectious.

"Oh, yes, ad-ver-tise-ment, in the paper, Sunday. Today your letter came, the first letter. I guess hard times now. Nobody wants maids. I come right queeck. I can do good work, very good. I have good references. You got maid yet?"

"Not yet," I answered, and turned to the other woman.

According to all my theories and my training I should have chosen the older woman. Efficiency always has been an idol of mine. It was my slogan in my profession. It is my humiliation that I seem to have none of it in my housework. The German woman evidently was capable of administering my household much better than I could do it. Perhaps it was because of this very reason that I found myself repelled by her, and subtly drawn by the younger woman's smiling enthusiasm.

"Have you much company, and does your husband bring home friends without notice?" The older woman's harsh tones broke in.

The questions turned the scale. From the standpoint of strict justice, the standard from which I always had tried to reason, she was perfectly justified in asking the questions before she took the place. But intuition told me that our home life would be a dreary thing with this martinet in the kitchen.

"That will not trouble you," I said, "for I do not believe I wish your services. Here is your car fare, and thank you for coming."

The woman took the car fare with the same stolidity she had shown through the whole interview. "I do not think I would like you for a madam, either," she said quietly as she went out.

The Polish girl bounced from her seat as soon as the door was closed.

"She no good to talk to you like that," she exclaimed. "She old crank, anyway. You not like her. See me—I young, strong; I cook, wash, iron, clean. I do everything. You do notting. I cook good, too; not so much fancy, but awful good. My last madam, I with her one year. She sick, go South yesterday. She cry, say 'I so sorry, Katie; you been so good to me.' I cry, too. Read what she say about me."

I could read between the lines of the rather odd letter of recommendation the girl handed me. I had dealt with many girls of Katie's type in my teaching days. I knew the childish temper, the irritating curiosity, the petty jealousy, the familiarity which one not understanding would deem impertinence, with which I would have to contend if I engaged her. But the other applicant for my work, the grim vision who had just left, decided me. I would try this eager girl if her terms were reasonable—and they were.

As I preceded her into the kitchen I had a sudden qualm. I knew Dicky's fastidious taste, and that

underneath all his good-natured unconventionality he had rigid ideas of his own upon some topics. I happened to remember that nothing made him so nervous and irritable as bad service in a restaurant. His idea of a good waiter was a well-trained automaton with no eyes or ears. How would he like this enthusiastic, irrepressible girl? It was too late now, however. I was committed to a week of her service.

I had a luxurious afternoon. Katie in the kitchen sang softly over her work some minor-cadenced Polish folk-song, and I nestled deep in an armchair by the sunniest window, dipped deep into the pages of magazines and newspapers which I had not read. I realized with a start that I was out of touch with the doings of the outside world, something which had not happened to me before for years, save in the few awful days of my mother's last illness. I really must catch up again.

I was so deep in a vivid description of the desolation in Belgium that I did not hear Dicky enter. I started as he kissed me.

"Headache better, sweetheart?" he added, lover-like remembering and making much of the slight headache I had had when he left that morning. "It must be, or you wouldn't be able to read that horror." He closed the magazine playfully and drew me to my feet.

"I am perfectly well," I replied, "and I have good news for you. We have a maid, a trifle rough in her manner, but one who I think will be very good."

"That's fine," Dicky said heartily. "I'd much rather come home to find you comfortably reading than scorching your face and reddening your hands in a kitchen."

"Say, Missis Graham!"

Katie came swiftly into the room, and I heard an exclamation of surprise from Dicky.

"Why, Katie, wherever did you come from?"

But Katie, with a scream of fear, her face white with terror, backed into the kitchen. I heard her opening the door where she had put her hat and cloak, then the slamming of the kitchen door.

I looked at Dicky in amazement. What did it all mean?

He caught up his hat and dashed to the front door.

"Quick, Madge!" he called. "Follow her out the kitchen door as fast as you can. I'll meet you at the servant's entrance! I wouldn't let her get away for a hundred dollars!"

I obeyed Dicky's instructions, but with a feeling of disgust creeping over me. I have always hated a scene, and this performance savored too much of moving picture melodrama to suit me.

I hurried down the two flights of stairs and on toward the servant's entrance. I was almost there when Katie came flying back, almost into my arms.

"Oh, Missis Graham," she moaned.

"You kind lady. I pay it all back. I always have it with me. Don't let him put me in prison. I work, work my fingers to the bone for you. If you only not let him put me in prison."

Dicky came up behind us. As she saw him she shrank closer to me in a pitiful, frightened way, and put out both her hands as if to push him away.

"Don't be frightened, Katie," he said. "Come to the house and tell me about it."

"Bring her into the living room and get her quieted before I talk to her," suggested Dicky, as he disappeared into his room after I had got her upstairs.

Bewildered and displeased at this bizarre situation which had been thrust upon me, I ushered Katie into the living room and removed her hat and coat. She trembled violently.

I went to the dining room and from a decanter in the sideboard poured a glass of wine and, bringing it back, pressed it to her lips. She drank it, and the color gradually came back to her face and the twitching of her muscles lessened.

When she was calmer I took her hands in mine and, looking her full in the face in the manner which I had sometimes used to quiet an hysterical pupil, I said slowly:

"Listen to me, Katie. You are not going to be put in prison. Mr. Graham will not harm you in the least. But he wishes to talk to you, and you must listen to what he has to say."



Her answer was to seize my hand and cover it with tearful kisses. I detest any exhibition of emotion, and this girl's utter abandonment to whatever grief or terror was hers irritated me. But I tried not to show my feelings. I merely patted her head and said:

"Come, Katie, you must stop this and listen to Mr. Graham."

Katie obediently wiped her eyes and sat up very straight.

"I am all right now," she said quaveringly. "He can come. I tell him everything."

Still very nervous but calmer than she had been, Katie remained quiet when I raised my voice to reach Dicky waiting in the adjoining room.

"Oh, Dicky," I called, "you may come now."

Dicky drew a low chair in front of the couch where we sat.

"Tell me first, Katie," he said kindly, "why do you think I want to put you in prison? Because of the money? Never mind that. I want to talk to you of something else."

But Katie was hysterically tugging at the neck of her gown. From inside her bodice she took a tiny chamois skin bag, and ripping it open took out a carefully folded bill and handed it to Dicky.

"I never spend that money," she said. "I never mean to steal it. But I had to go away queeck from your flat and I never, never dare come back, give you the money. After two month, send my cousin to the flat, but he say you move, no know where. There I always keep the money here. I think maybe some time I find out where you live and write a letter to you, send the money."

Dicky took the bill and unfolded it curiously. A brown stain ran irregularly across one-half of it.

"Well, I'll be eternally blessed," he ejaculated, "if it isn't the identical bill I gave her. Ten-dollar bills were not so plentiful three years ago, and I remember this one so distinctly because of the stain. The boys used to say I must have murdered somebody to get it, and that it was stained with blood."

He turned to Katie again.

"The money is nothing, Katie. Why did you run away that day? I never have been able to finish that picture since."

Katie's eyes dropped. Her cheeks flushed.

"I 'shamed to tell," she murmured.

Dicky muttered an oath beneath his breath. "I thought so," he said slowly, then he spoke sternly:

"Never mind being ashamed to tell, Katie. I want the truth. I worked at your portrait that morning, and then I had to go to the studio. When I came back you had gone, bag and baggage, and with, the money I gave you to pay the tailor. I never could finish that picture, and it would have brought me a nice little sum."

My brain was whirling by this time. Dicky in a flat with this ignorant Polish girl paying his tailor bills, and posing for portraits. What did it all mean?

"Where did you go?" Dicky persisted.

Katie lifted her head and looked at him proudly.

"You know when you left that morning, Mr. Lestaire, he was painting, too? Well, Mr. Graham, I always good girl in old country and here. I go to confession. I always keep good. Mr. Lestaire, he kiss me, say bad tings to me. He scare me. I afraid if I stay I no be good girl. So I run queeck away. I never dare come bade. That Mr. Lestaire he one bad man, one devil."

Dicky whistled softly.

"So that was it?" he said. "Well that was just about what that pup would do. That was one reason I got out of our housekeeping arrangements. He set too swift a pace for me, and that was going some in those days."

He turned to Katie, smiling.

"You see you don't have to be afraid any more. I'm a respectable married man now, and it's perfectly

safe for you to work here. Mrs. Graham will take care of you. Run along about your work now, that's a good girl."

Katie giggled appreciatively. Her mercurial temperament had already sent her from the depths to the heights.

"The dinner all spoiled while I cry like a fool," she said. "You ready pretty soon. I serve."

She hastened to the kitchen, and I turned to Dicky inquiringly.

"I suppose you think you have gotten into a lunatic asylum, Madge. Of all the queer things that Katie should apply for a job here and that you should take her."

"I didn't know you ever kept house in a flat before, Dicky."

"It was a very short experience," he returned, "only three months. Four of us, Lester, Atwood, Bates and myself pooled our rather scanty funds and rented a small apartment. We advertised for a general housekeeper, and Katie answered the advertisement. She had been over from Poland only a year at a cousin's somewhere on the East side, and she used to annoy us awfully getting to the flat so early in the morning and cleaning our living room while we were trying to sleep. But she was a crack-a-jack worker, so we put up with her superfluous energy in cleaning. Then one day I discovered her standing with a letter in her hand looking off into space with her eyes full of misery. She had heard of some relative."

"Of course you wanted to paint her," I suggested.

"You bet," Dicky returned. "The idea came to me in a flash. You can see what a heroic figure she was. I had her get into her Polish dress—she had brought one with her from the old country—and I painted her as Poland—miserable, unhappy Poland. Gee! but I'm glad you happened to run across her. We'll put up with anything from her until I get that picture done."

Try as I might I could not share Dicky's enthusiasm. I knew it was petty, but the idea of my maid acting as Dicky's model jarred my ideas of the fitness of things.

But I had sense enough to hold my peace.

## VII

### A FRIENDLY WARNING

I know of nothing more exasperating to a hostess than to have her guests come to her home too early. It is bad enough to wait a meal for a belated guest, but to have some critical woman casually stroll in before one is dressed, or has put the final touches—so dear to every housewifely heart—on all the preparations, is simply maddening.

I am no exception to the rule. As I heard the voices of Lillian Gale and her husband and I realized that they had arrived at 3:30 in the afternoon, when they had been invited for an evening chafing dish supper, I was both disheartened and angry.

But, of course, there was but one thing to do, much as I hated to do it. I must go into the living room and cordially welcome these people. As I slipped off my kitchen apron I thought of the hypocrisy which marks most social intercourse. What I really wanted to say to my guests was this:

"Please go home and come again at the proper time. I am not ready to receive you now."

I had a sudden whimsical vision of the faces of Dicky and the Underwoods if I should thus speak my real thoughts. The thought in some curious fashion made it easier for me to cross the room to Lillian Gale's side, extend my hand and say cordially:

"How good of you to come this afternoon!"

"I know it is unpardonable," Lillian's high pitched voice answered. "You invited us for the evening, not for the afternoon, but I told Harry that I was going to crucify the conventions and come over early, so I would have a chance to say more than two words to you before the rest get here."

Harry Underwood elbowed his wife away from my side with a playful push, and held out his hand. His brilliant, black eyes looked down into mine with the same lazy approving expression that I had resented when Dicky introduced me to him at the theatre.

I cudgelled my brain in vain for some airy nothing with which to answer his nonsense. I never have had the gift of repartee. I can talk well enough about subjects that interest me when I am conversing with some one whom I know well, but the frothy persiflage, the light banter that forms the conversation's stock in trade of so many women, is an alien tongue to me.

"You are just as welcome as Mrs. Underwood is," I said heartily at last. Fortunately he did not read the precisely honest meaning hidden in my words.

"Come on, Harry, into my room," urged Dicky, taking him by the arm. "I've got a special brand cached in there, and had to hide it so mein frau wouldn't drink it up."

I suppose my face reflected the dismay I felt at this intimation that the women would begin drinking so early. I feared for the repetition of the experience of Friday evening. But the laws of conventions and hospitality bound me. I felt that I could not protest. Mrs. Underwood apparently had no such scruples. She clutched Dicky by the arm and swung him around facing her.

"Now, see here, my Dicky-bird," she began, "you begin this special bottle kind of business and I walk out of here. I should think you and Harry would have had enough of this the other evening. We came over here today for a little visit, and tonight we'll sit on either the water wagon or the beer wagon, just as Mrs. Graham says. But you boys won't start any of these special drinks, or I'll know the reason why."

"Oh, cut it out, Lil," her husband said, not crossly, but mechanically, as if it were a phrase he often used. But Dicky laughed down at her, although I knew by the look in his eyes that he was much annoyed.

"All right, Lil," he said easily. "I suppose Madge will fall in gratitude on your neck for this when she gets you into the seclusion of her room. You haven't any objection to our having a teenty-weenty little smoke, have you, mamma dear?"

"Go as far as you like," she returned, ignoring the sneers.

As I turned and led the way to my room, I was conscious of curiously mingled emotions. Relief at the elimination of the special bottle with its inevitable consequences and resentment that Dicky should so weakly obey the dictum of another woman, battled with each other. But stronger than either was a dawning wonder. From the conversation I had overheard in the theatre dressing-room and trifling things in Mrs. Underwood's own conduct, I had been led to believe that she was sentimentally interested in Dicky, and that some time in the future I might have to battle with her for his affections. But her speech to him which I had just heard savored more of the mother laying down the law to a refractory child than it did of anything approaching sentiment. Could it be, I told myself, that I had been mistaken?

Our husbands looked exceedingly comfortable when we rejoined them, for they were smoking vigorously and discussing the merits of two boxers Mr. Underwood had recently seen. As we entered the room both men, of course, sprang to their feet, and I had a moment's opportunity to contrast their appearance.

Dicky is slender, lithe, with merry brown eyes and thick, brown hair, with a touch of auburn in it, and just enough suspicion of a curl to give him several minutes' hard brushing each day trying to keep it down. Harry Underwood, taller even than Dicky, who is above the medium height, is massive in frame, well built, muscular, with black hair tinged with gray, and the blackest, most piercing eyes I have ever seen. I was proud of Dicky as I stood looking at them, while Lillian exchanged some merry nonsense with Dicky, but I also had to acknowledge that Harry Underwood was a splendid specimen of manhood.

As if he had read my thoughts, his eyes caught mine and held them. To all appearances he was listening to the banter of Dicky and his wife, but there was an inscrutable look in his eyes, an enigmatical smile upon his lips, as he looked at me that vaguely troubled me. His glance, his smile, seemed significant somehow, as if we were old friends who held some humorous experience in common remembrance. And I had never seen him but once before in my life.

I shrugged my shoulders, ever so slightly. It is a habit of mine when I am displeased, or wish to throw off some unpleasant sensation of memory. I was almost unconscious of having used the gesture. But Harry Underwood crossed the room as if it had been a signal, and stood looking down quizzically at me.

"Little lady," he began, "you shouldn't hold a grudge so well. It doesn't harmonize with your eyes and

your mouth. They were meant for kindness, not severity. If there is any way that I can show you I am humbled to the dust for coming here I'll do any penance you say."

"You must be mistaken, Mr. Underwood." I strove to control my voice. "I have no grudge whatever against you, so you see you are absolved in advance from my penance."

"Will you shake hands on it?" He put out his large, white, beautifully formed hand and grasped mine before I had half extended it.

I felt myself flushing hotly. Of all the absolutely idiotic things in the world, this standing hand in hand with Harry Underwood, in a formal pact of friendship or forgiveness or whatever he imagined the hand-clasp signified, was the most ridiculous. He was quick enough to fathom my distaste, but he clasped my hand tighter and, bending slightly so that he could look straight into my eyes he said, lazily smiling:

"You are the most charming prevaricator I know. You come pretty near to hating me, little lady. But you won't dislike me long. I'll make a bet with myself on that."

"Hold that pose just a minute. Don't move. It's simply perfect."

Lillian Underwood's merry voice interrupted her husband's declaration. With clever mimicry she struck the attitude of a nervous photographer just ready to close the shutter of his camera. Dicky stood just behind her too, also smiling, but while Lillian's merriment evidently was genuine, I detected a distaste for the proceedings behind Dicky's smile, which I knew was forced.

Lillian slipped in an imaginary plate, then springing to one side stood pretending to clasp the bulb of the shutter in her hand, while she counted: "One, two, three, four, five—thank you!"

"Now if you will just change your expressions," she rattled on. "Harry, why don't you take both her hands? Then if Mrs. Graham will smile a little we will have a sentimental gem, or if she makes her expression even a trifle more disapproving than it is I can label it, 'Unhand me, villain.'"

"I never take a dare," returned her husband, and snatched my other hand. But I was really angry by this time, and I wrenched my hands away with an effort and threw my head a trifle haughtily, although fortunately I was able to control my words:

"Do you know, people, that there will be no food for you tonight unless I busy myself with its preparations immediately? Mrs. Underwood, won't you entertain those boys and excuse me for a little while?"

I went into the dining room and put on the kitchen apron I had taken off when I heard the voices of my early guests. Almost immediately Lillian appeared arrayed in the apron I had given her. She came up to the table and surveyed it with appraising eyes.

"I am glad of this chance to speak with you alone, for I want to explain to you about him."

She stopped with an embarrassed flush. I gazed at her in amazement. Lillian Underwood flustered! I could not believe my eyes.

"You are not used to us or our ways, or I shouldn't bother to tell you this. But I can see that you are much annoyed at Harry, and I don't blame you. But you mustn't mind him. He is really harmless. He falls in love with every new face he sees, has a violent attack, then gets over it just as quickly. You are an entirely new type to him, so I suppose his attack this time will be a little more prolonged. He'll make violent love to you behind my back or before my face, but you mustn't mind him. I understand, and I'll straighten him out when he gets too annoying."

The embarrassed flush had disappeared by this time. She was talking in as cool and matter-of-fact manner as if she had been discussing the defection of a cook.

My first emotion was resentment against my husband.

Why, I asked myself passionately, had Dicky insisted upon my friendship with these people? Suppose they were his most intimate friends? I was his wife, and I had nothing whatever in common with them. Knowing them as well as he did, he must have known Harry Underwood's propensities. He must also have known the gossip that connected his own name with Lillian's. He should have guarded me from any contact with them. I felt my anger fuse to a white heat against both my husband and Lillian.

An ugly suspicion crossed my mind. Lillian Gale's absolute calmness in the face of her husband's wayward affections was unique in my experience of women. Was the secret of her indifference, a lack of interest in her own husband or an excess of interest in mine? Did she hope perhaps to gain ground

with Dicky with the development of this situation? Was her warning to me only part of a cunningly constructed plan, whereby she would stimulate my interest in Harry Underwood?

I was ashamed of my thoughts even as they came to me. Lillian Gale seemed too big a woman, too frank and honest of countenance for such a subterfuge. But I could not help feeling all my old distrust and dislike of the woman rush over me. I had a struggle to keep my voice from being tinged with the dislike I felt as I answered her:

"I am sure you must be mistaken, Mrs. Underwood. Such a possibility as that would be unspeakably annoying. We will not consider it."

"I think you will find you will have to consider it," she returned brusquely, with a curious glance at me. "But we do not need to spoil our afternoon discussing it."

## VIII

### A TRAGEDY AVERTED

It was well after 7 o'clock when the ringing of the door bell told me that the Lesters had come. Dicky welcomed them and introduced me to them. Mrs. Lester was a pretty creature, birdlike, in her small daintiness, and a certain chirpy brightness. I judged that her mentality equalled the calibre of a sparrow, but I admitted also that the fact did not detract from her attractiveness. She was the sort of woman to be protected, to be cherished.

"I'm afraid I shall be very dull tonight. I am so worried about leaving the baby. She's only six months old, you know, and, I have had my mother with me ever since she was born until two weeks ago, so I have never left her with a maid before. This girl we have appears very competent, says she is used to babies, but I just can't help being as nervous as a cat."

"Are you still worrying about that baby?" Mrs. Underwood's loud voice sounded behind us. "Now, look here, Daisy, have a little common sense. You have had that maid over a year; she has been with your mother and you since the baby was born; there's a telephone at her elbow, and you are only five blocks away from home. Wasn't the child well when you left?"

"Sleeping just like a kitten," the proud mother answered. "You just ought to have seen her, one little hand all cuddled up against her face. I just couldn't bear to leave her."

Over Lillian Gale's face swept a swift spasm of pain. So quickly was it gone that I would not have noticed it, had not my eyes happened to rest on her face when Mrs. Lester spoke of her baby. Was there a child in that hectic past of hers? I decided there must be.

"Why don't you telephone now and satisfy yourself that the baby is all right, and instruct the maid to call you if she sees anything unusual about her?" I queried.

"Tell her you are going to telephone every little while. Then she will be sure to keep on the job," cynically suggested Mrs. Underwood.

"Oh, that will be just splendid," chirped Mrs. Lester. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Graham. Where is the telephone?"

"Dicky will get the number for you," said Mrs. Underwood, ushering her into the living room. I heard her shrill voice.

"Oh, Dicky-bird, please get Mrs. Lester's apartment for her. She wants to be sure the baby's all right."

Then I heard a deeper voice. "For heaven's sake, Daisy, don't make a fool of yourself. The kid's all right." That was Mr. Lester's voice, of course. Neither the tones of Dicky nor Harry Underwood had the disagreeable whining timbre of this man's.

Lillian's retort made me smile, it was so characteristic of her.

"Who unlocked the door of your cage, anyway? Get back in, and if you growl again tonight there will

be no supper for you."

We all laughed and I went to help Katie put the finishing touches to our dinner. When I returned Mrs. Lester was seated in an armchair in the corner as if on a throne, with Harry Underwood in an attitude of exaggerated homage before her.

I felt suddenly out of it all, lonely. These people were nothing to me, I said to myself. They were not my kind. I had a sudden homesickness for the quiet monotony of my life before I married Dicky. I thought of the few social evenings I had spent in the days before I met Dicky, little dinners with the principals and teachers I had known, when I had been the centre of things, when my opinions had been referred to, as Lillian Gale's were now.

I went through the rest of the evening in a daze of annoyance and regret from which I did not fully emerge until we were all at the dinner table, with Dicky officiating at the chafing dish. Then suddenly Mrs. Lester turned to me, her face filled with nervous fears.

"Oh, Mrs. Graham, I don't believe I can wait for anything. I am getting so nervous about baby. I know it's awful to be so silly, but I just can't help it."

"Daisy!" Her husband's voice was stern, his face looked angry. "Do stop that nonsense. We are certainly not going home now."

His wife seemed to shrink into herself. Her pretty face, with its worried look, was like that of a little girl grieving over a doll. I felt a sudden desire to comfort her.

"I think you are worrying yourself unnecessarily, Mrs. Lester," I said in an undertone. We were sitting next each other, and I could speak to her without her husband overhearing. "When you telephoned the maid an hour ago, the baby was all right, wasn't she?"

"Yes, I know," she returned dejectedly. "But I have heard such dreadful things about maids neglecting babies left in their care. Suppose she should leave her alone in the apartment, and something should catch fire and—"

"See here, Daisy!" Lillian Gale joined our group, coffee cup in hand. "Drink your coffee and your cordial. Then pretty soon, if you feel you really must go, I'll gather up Harry and start for home. Then you can make Frank go."

"You are awfully good, Lillian." Mrs. Lester looked gratefully up at the older woman. "I know I am as silly as I can be, but you can't know how I am imagining every dreadful thing in the calendar."

"I know all about it," Mrs. Underwood returned shortly, almost curtly, and walked away toward the group of men at the other side of the apartment.

"I never knew that she ever had a child." Mrs. Lester's eyes were wide with amazement as they met mine.

"Neither did I." Purposely I made my tone non-committal. From the look in Lillian Gale's eyes when Mrs. Lester told us in my room of the way the baby looked asleep, I knew that some time she must have had a baby of her own in her arms.

But I detest gossip, no matter how kindly—if, indeed, gossip can ever be termed kindly. I could not discuss Mrs. Underwood's affairs with any one, especially when she was a guest of mine.

"But she must have had a baby some time," persisted little Mrs. Lester. Her anxiety about her own baby appeared to be forgotten for the moment. "It must have been a child of that awful man she divorced, or who divorced her. I never did get that story right."

I looked around the room. How I wished some one would interrupt our talk. I could not listen to Mrs. Lester's prattle without answering her, and I did not wish to express any opinion on the subject.

As if answering my unspoken wish, Harry Underwood rose and came toward me.

"Were you looking for me?" he queried audaciously.

I had a sudden helpless, angry feeling that this man had been covertly watching me. Annoyed as I was, I was glad that he had interrupted us, for his presence would effectually stop Mrs. Lester's surmises concerning his wife.

"Indeed I was not looking for you," I replied spiritedly. "But I am glad you are here. Please talk to Mrs. Lester while I go to the kitchen. I must give some directions to Katie."

"Of course that's a terribly hard task"—he began, smiling mischievously at Mrs. Lester.

But he never finished his sentence. A loud, prolonged ringing of the doorbell startled us all. It was the sort of ring one always associates with an urgent summons of some sort.

"Oh! my baby. I know something's happened to the baby and they've come to tell me."

Mrs. Lester's words rang high and shrill. They changed to a shriek as Dicky opened the door and fell back startled.

For past him rushed a girl with a fear-distorted face holding in her arms a baby that to my eyes looked as if it were dead.

But I had presence of mind enough to quiet Mrs. Lester's hysterical fears.

"That is not your baby," I said sharply, grasping her by the arm. "It is the child from across the hall!"

There is nothing in the world so pitiful to witness as the suffering of a baby.

We all realized this as the maid held out to us the tiny infant, rigid and blue as if it were already dead.

"Is the baby dead?" she gasped, her face convulsed with grief and fear. "My madam is at the theatre, and the baby has been fretty for two hours, and just a minute ago he stiffened out like this. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" she began to sob.

"Stop that!" Lillian Gale's voice rang out like a trumpet. "The baby is not dead. It is in a convulsion. Give it to me and run back to your apartment and bring me some warm blankets."

Of the six people at our little chafing dish supper, so suddenly interrupted, she was the only one who knew what to do. I had been able to, quiet Mrs. Lester's hysteria by telling her at once that the baby was not her own, as she had so widely imagined, but was helpless before the baby's danger.

Lillian's orders came thick and fast. She dominated the situation and swept us along in the fight to save the baby's life until the doctor, who had been summoned, arrived.

The physician was a tall, thin, young man, with a look of efficiency about him. He looked at the baby carefully, laid his hand upon the tiny forehead, then straightened himself.

"Is there any way in which the child's parents can be found?" Mr. Underwood evidently had told him of the nature of the seizure and the absence of the parents on the way up.

Lillian Gale's face grew pale under her rouge.

"There is danger, doctor?" she asked quietly

"There is always danger in these cases," he returned quietly, but his words were heard by a wild-eyed woman in evening dress who rushed through the open door followed by a man as agitated as she.

I said an unconscious prayer of thankfulness.

The baby's mother had arrived.

It seemed a week, but it was in reality only two hours later when Lillian Gale returned from the apartment across the hall, heavy eyed and dishevelled, her gown splashed with water, her rouge rubbed off in spots, her whole appearance most disreputable.

"The baby?" we all asked at once.

"Out of any immediate danger, the doctor says. The nurse came an hour ago, but the child had two more of those awful things, and I was able to help her. The mother is no good at all, one of those emotional women whose idea of taking care of a baby is to shriek over it."

Her voice held no contempt, only a great weariness. I felt a sudden rush of sympathetic liking for this woman, whom I had looked upon as an enemy.

"What can I get you, Mrs. Underwood?" I asked. "You look so worn out."

"If Katie has not thrown out that coffee," she returned practically, "let us warm it up."

I felt a foolish little thrill of housewifely pride. A few minutes before her appearance I had gone into the kitchen and made fresh coffee, anticipating her return. Katie, of course, I had sent to bed after she

had cleared the table and washed the silver. I had told her to pile the dishes for the morning.

"I have fresh coffee all ready," I said. "I thought perhaps you might like a cup. Sit still, and I'll bring it in."

Harry Underwood sprang to his feet. "I'll carry the tray for you."

I thought I detected a little quiver of pain on Mrs. Underwood's face. Her husband had expressed no concern for her, but was offering to carry my tray. Truly, the tables were turning. I had suffered because of the rumors I had heard concerning this woman's regard for Dicky. Was I, not meaning it, to cause her annoyance?

"Indeed you will do no such thing," I spoke playfully to hide my real indignation at the man. "Dicky is the only accredited waiter around this house."

"Card from the waiters' union right in my pocket," Dicky grinned, and stretched lazily as he followed me to the kitchen.

We served the coffee, and Lillian and her husband went home. As the door closed behind them Dicky came over to me and took me in his arms.

"Pretty exciting evening, wasn't it, sweetheart?" he said. "I'm afraid you are all done out."

He drew me to our chair and we sat down together. I found myself crying, something I almost never do. Dicky smoothed my hair tenderly, silently, until I wiped my eyes. Then his clasp tightened around me.

"Tonight has taught me a lesson," he said. "Sometimes I have dreamed of a little child of our own, Madge. But I would rather never have a child than go through the suffering those poor devils had tonight. It must be awful to lose a baby."

I hid my face in his shoulder. Not even to my husband could I confess just then how the touch of the naked, rigid little body of that other woman's child had sent a thrill of longing through me for a baby's hands that should be mine.

## **IX**

### **THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN**

"Well, we are in plenty of time."

We were seated, Dicky and I, in the waiting room of the Long Island railroad a week after my dinner party that had almost ended in tragedy. Dicky had bought our tickets to Marvin, the little village which was to be the starting point of our country ramble, and we were putting in the time before our train was ready in gazing at the usual morning scene in a railroad station.

There were not many passengers going out on the island, but scores of commuters were hurrying through the station on their way to their offices and other places of employment.

"You don't see many of the commuters up here," Dicky remarked. "There's a passage direct from the trains to the subway on the lower level, and most of them take that. Some of the women come up to prink a bit in the waiting room, and some of the men come through here to get cigars or papers, but the big crowd is down on the train level."

I hardly heard him, for I was so interested in a girl who had just come into the waiting room. I had never seen so self-possessed a creature in my life. She was unusually beautiful, with golden hair that was so real the most captious person could not suspect that hair of being dyed. Her eyes were dark, and the unusual combination of eyes and hair fitted a face with regular features and a fair skin. I had seen Christmas and Easter cards with faces like hers. But I had never seen anyone like her in real life, and I am afraid I stared at her as hard as did everyone else in the waiting room.

"By jove!" Dicky drew in a deep breath. "Isn't she the most ripping beauty you ever saw?"

His eyes were following her lithe, perfect figure as she walked down the waiting room. I have never



seen a pretty girl appear so utterly unconscious of the glances directed toward her as she did. But with a woman's intuition I knew that underneath her calm exterior she was noticing and appraising every admiring look she received. I could not have told how I knew this, but I did know it.

She sat down a little distance from us, and Dicky frankly turned quite around to stare at her.

"I wonder if she's going on our train," he mused. "By George, I never saw anything like her in my life."

I looked at him in open amazement, tinged not a little with resentment. He was with me, his bride of less than a month, for our first day's outing since our marriage, and yet his eyes were following this other woman with the most open admiration. I felt hurt, neglected, but I was determined he should not think me jealous.

"Yes, isn't she beautiful," I said as enthusiastically as I could. "I never have seen just that combination of eyes and hair."

"It's her features and figure that get me. I'd like to get a glimpse of her hands and feet. Perhaps she will sit near us in the train. If she does, I promise you I am going to stare at her unmercifully."

As luck would have it, just as we seated ourselves in the train, the girl we had seen in the railway station came through the door with the same air of regal unconsciousness of her surroundings that she had shown while running the gauntlet of the admiring and critical eyes in the waiting room.

She carried in her hand a small traveling bag, which, while not new, had received such good care that it was not at all shabby. She spent no time in selecting a seat, but with an air of taking the first one available sat down directly opposite Dicky and me, depositing her bag close to her feet.

As she sat down she calmly crossed her knees, something which I hate to see a woman do in a public place.

"Gee, she has the hands and the feet all right!"

Dicky has a trick of mumbling beneath his breath, so that no one can detect that he is talking save the person whose ear is nearest to him. It is convenient sometimes, but at other times it is most embarrassing, especially when he is making comments upon people near us.

"I don't blame her for elevating one foot above the other," Dicky rattled on. "Not one woman in a thousand can wear those white spats. She must have mighty small, well-shaped tootsies under them."

The girl sat looking straight ahead of her. The crossing of her knees revealed a swirl of silken petticoat, and more than a glimpse of filmy silk stockings.

Her shoes were patent leather pumps, utterly unsuitable for a trip to the country. Over them she wore spats of the kind affected by so many girls.

I had a sudden remembrance of times in my own life when a new pair of shoes was as impossible to attain as a whole wardrobe. I had a sudden intuition that the unsuitable pumps were like the rest of her clothes, left over from some former affluence. She had bravely made the best of them by covering them with spats, which I knew she could obtain quite cheaply at some bargain sale.

"Looks like ready money, doesn't she?" mumbled Dicky in my ear.

I did not answer, and suddenly Dicky stared at me.

"A trifle peeved, aren't you?" Dicky's voice was mocking. But he saw what I could not conceal, that tears were rising to my eyes. I was able to keep from shedding them, and no one but Dicky could possibly have guessed I was agitated.

He changed his tone and manner on the instant.

"I know I have been thoughtless, sweetheart," he said earnestly, "but I keep forgetting that you are not used to my vagaries yet. Tell me honestly, would you have been so resentful if I had been interested in some old man with chin whiskers as I was in the beautiful lady?"

A light broke upon me. How foolish I had been. I looked at Dicky shamefacedly.

"You mean—"

"That she's exactly the model I've been looking for to pose for those outdoor illustrations Fillmore

wants. One of the series is to be a girl on a step ladder, picking apple blossoms. She is to be on her knees, and one foot is to be stretched out behind her. The picture demands a perfect foot and ankle, and this girl has them. Her features and hair, too, are just the type I want. She would know how to pose, too. You can see that from her air as she sits there. And that's half the battle. If they do not have the faculty of posing naturally they could never be taught."

I felt much humiliated, and I was very angry, but I must remember, I told myself, that I had married an artist. I foresaw, however, many complications in our lives together. If every time we took a trip anywhere, Dicky was to spend his time planning to secure the services of some possible model I could see very little pleasure for me in our outings.

But I knew an apology was due Dicky, and I gathered courage to make it.

"I am sorry to have annoyed you, Dicky," I said at last. "But I did not dream that you were looking at her as a possible model."

"And looked at from any other standpoint it was rather raw of me," admitted Dicky. "But let's forget it. She'll probably drop off the train at Forest Hills or Kew Gardens, she looks like the product of those suburbs, and I'll never see her again."

But his prediction was not fulfilled.

"Marvin!"

The conductor shouted the word as the train drew up to one of the most forlorn looking railroad stations it was ever my lot to see.

Dicky and I rose from our seats, he with subdued excitement, I with a feeling of depression. For the girl who had claimed so much of our attention was getting off at Marvin after all.

I remembered the bargain I had made with my conscience.

"What do you know about that?" Dicky exclaimed, as he saw her go down the aisle ahead of us. "She also is getting off here. I wonder who she is?"

"Listen, Dicky," I said rapidly. "Walk ahead, see in which direction she goes, and ask the station master if he knows who she is. I know something which I will tell you when you have done that. Perhaps you may have her for a model, after all."

Dicky gave me one swift glance of mingled surprise and admiration, then did as I asked. As I followed him down the aisle and noted the eagerness with which he was hurrying, I felt a sudden qualm of doubt. Was I really doing the wisest thing?

I waited quietly on the station platform until Dicky rejoined me.

"Her name's Draper," he said. "The station agent doesn't know much about her, except that she visits a sister, Mrs. Gorman, here every summer. He never saw her here in the winter before. I got Mrs. Gorman's address, 329 Shore Road, called Shore Road because it never gets anywhere near the shore. Much good the address will do me, though. Queer she doesn't take the bus. It must be a mile to her sister's home. She's probably one of those walking bugs."

"She didn't take the bus because she could not afford it," I said quietly.

Dicky stared at me in amazement.

"How do you know?" he said finally. "Do you know her? No, of course you don't. But how in creation —"

"Listen, Dicky," I interrupted. "I've turned too many dresses of my own not to recognize makeshifts when I see them. Everything that girl has on except her stockings and gloves has been remodelled from her old stuff. Her pumps are not suitable at all for walking; they are evening pumps, of a style two years old at that. But she has covered them with spats, so that no one will suspect that she wears them from necessity, not choice."

"Well, I'll be—" Dicky uttered his favorite expletive. "It takes one woman to dissect another. She looked like the readiest kind of ready money to me. Why, say, if what you say is true, she ought to be glad to earn the money I could pay her for posing. I could get her lots of other work, too."

"Perhaps she wouldn't like to do that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing? What's wrong with it?" Dicky asked belligerently. "Oh, you mean figure posing! She wouldn't have to do that at all if she didn't want to. Plenty of good nudes. It's the intangible, high-bred look and ability to wear clothes well that's hard to get."

We had walked past the unpainted little shack that but for the word "Marvin" in large letters painted across one end of it would never have been taken for a railroad station. Without looking where we were going we found ourselves in front of an immense poster on a large board back of the station. The letters upon it were visible yards away.

"Marvin," it read, "the prettiest, quaintest village on the south shore. Please don't judge the town by the station."

He took my arm and turned me away from the billboard toward a wide, dusty road winding away from the station to the eastward.

"But, Dicky," I protested. "I thought you wanted to see about securing that girl as a model."

"Oh, that can wait," said Dicky carelessly.

My heart sang as I slipped my arm in Dicky's. It was going to be an enjoyable day after all.

## **X**

### **"GRACE BY NAME AND GRACE BY NATURE"**

"What's the matter, Madge? Got a grouch or something?"

Dicky faced me in the old hall of the deserted Putnam Manor Inn, where we had expected to find warmth and food and the picturesqueness of a century back. Instead of these things we had found the place in the hands of a caretaker. Dicky had asked to go through the house on the pretence of wishing to rent it.

"I haven't a bit of a grouch." I tried to speak as cheerfully as I could, for I dreaded Dicky's anger when I told him my feeling upon the subject of going over the house under false pretences. "But I don't think it is right for us to go through the rooms. The woman wouldn't have let us come in if you hadn't said we wished to rent it. It's deception, and I wish you wouldn't insist upon my going any further. I can't enjoy seeing the rooms at all."

Dicky stared at me for a moment as if I were some specimen of humanity he had never seen before. Then he exploded.

"Another one of your scruples, eh? By Jove, I wonder where you keep them all. You're always ready to trot one out just in time to spoil any little thing I'm trying to do for your pleasure or mine."

"Please hush, Dicky," I pleaded. I was afraid the woman in the next room would hear him, he spoke in such loud tones.

"I'll hush when I get good and ready." I longed to shake him, his tone and words were so much like those of a spoiled child. But he lowered his tone, nevertheless, and stood for a minute or two in sulky silence before the empty fireplace.

"Well! Come along," he said at last. "I'm sure there is no pleasure to me in looking over this place. I've seen it often enough when old Forsman had it filled with colonial junk, and served the best meals to be found on Long Island. It's like a coffin now to me. But I thought you might like to look it over, as you had never seen it. But for heaven's sake let us respect your scruples!"

I knew better than to make any answer. I wished above everything else to have this day end happily, this whole day to ourselves in the country, upon which I had counted so much. I feared Dicky would be angry enough to return to the city, as he had threatened to do when he found the inn closed. So it was with much relief that after we had gone back into the other room I heard him ask the caretaker if there were some place in the neighborhood where we could obtain a meal.

"Do you know where the Shakespeare House is?" she asked.

"Never heard of it," Dicky answered, "although I've been around here quite a bit, too."

"It's about six blocks further down toward the bay," she said, still in the same colorless tone she had used from the first. "It's on Shore Road. The Germans own it. Mr. Gorman, he's a builder, and he built an old house over into a copy of Shakespeare's house in England. Mrs. Gorman is English. She serves tea there on the porch in the summer, and I've heard she will serve a meal to anybody that happens along any time of the year, although she doesn't keep a regular restaurant. That's the only place I know of anywhere near. Of course, down on the bay there's the Marvin Harbor Hotel. You can get a pretty good meal there."

"Thank you very much," said Dicky, laying a dollar bill down on the table near us.

I had a sudden flash of understanding. Dicky meant all the time to recompense the woman in this way for allowing us to see the house. But the principle of the thing remained the same. Why could he not have told her frankly that he wished to look at the house and given her the dollar in the beginning?

I did not ask the question, however, even after we had left the old mansion and were walking down the road. I felt like adopting the old motto and leaving well enough alone.

I did not speak again until we had turned from the street down which we were walking into a winding thoroughfare labelled "Shore Road." Then a thought which had come to me during our walk demanded utterance.

"Dicky," I said quietly, "wasn't Gorman the name of the woman of whom the station master told you, and didn't she live on Shore Road?"

Dicky stopped short as if he had been struck.

"Of course it was," he almost shouted. "What a ninny I was not to remember it. She's the sister of that stunning girl we saw in the train. Isn't this luck? I may be able to get that girl to pose for me after all."

But I did not echo his sentiments. Secretly I hoped the girl would not be at her sister's home.

"This surely must be the place, Dicky," I said as we rounded a sudden turn on Shore Road and caught sight of a quaint structure that seemed to belong to the 16th century rather than the 20th.

Dicky whistled. "Well! What do you want to know about that?" he demanded of the horizon in general, for the little brown house with its balconies projecting from unexpected places and its lattice work cunningly outlined against its walls was well worth looking at. But our hunger soon drove us through the gate and up the steps.

A comely Englishwoman of about 40 years answered Dicky's sounding of the quaintly carved knocker. He lifted his hat with a curtly bow.

"We were told at Putnam Manor that we might be able to get dinner here," he began. "We came down from the city this morning expecting that the inn would be open. But we found it closed and we are very hungry. Would it be possible for you to accommodate us?"

"I think we shall be able to give you a fairly good dinner," she said with a simple directness that pleased me. "My husband went fishing yesterday and I have some very good pan fish and some oysters. If you are very hungry I can give you the oysters almost at once, and it will not take very long to broil the fish. Then, if you care for anything like that, we had an old-fashioned chicken pie for our own dinner. There is plenty of it still hot if you wish to try it."

"Madam," Dicky bowed again, "Chicken pie is our long suit, and we are also very fond of oysters and fish. Just bring us everything you happen to have in the house and I can assure you we will do full justice to it."

She smiled and went to the foot of the staircase, which had a mahogany stair rail carved exquisitely.

"Grace," she called melodiously. "There are two people here who will take dinner. Will you show them into my room, so they can lay aside their wraps?"

Without waiting for an answer, she motioned us to the staircase.

"My sister will take care of you," she said, and hurried out of another door, which we realized must lead to the kitchen.

Dicky and I looked at each other when she had left us.

"The beautiful unknown," Dicky said in a stage whisper. "Try to get on the good side of her, Madge. If I can get her to pose for that set of outdoor illustrations Fillmore wants, me fortune's made, and hers, too," he burlesqued.

I nudged him to stop talking. I have a very quick ear, and I had heard a light footstep in the hall above us. As we reached the top of the stairs the girl of whom we were talking met us.

I acknowledged unwillingly to myself that she was even more beautiful than she had appeared on the train. She was gowned in a white linen skirt and white "middy," with white tennis shoes and white stockings. Her dress was most unsuitable for the winter day, although the house was warm, but with another flash of remembrance of my own past privations, I realized the reason for her attire. This costume could be tubbed and ironed if it became soiled. It would stand a good deal of water. Her other clothing must be kept in good condition for the times when she must go outside of her home.

But if she had known of Dicky's mission and gowned herself accordingly she could not have succeeded better in satisfying his artistic eye. He stared at her open-mouthed as she spoke a conventional word of greeting and showed us into a bedroom hung with chintzes and bright with the winter sunshine.

She was as calm, as unconsciously regal, as she had been on the train. I knew, however, that she was not as indifferent to Dicky's open admiration as she appeared. The slightest heightening of the color in her cheek, a quickly-veiled flash of her eyes in his direction—these things I noticed in the short time she was in the room with us.

Was Dicky too absorbed in his plan or his drawings to see what I had seen? His words appeared to indicate that he was.

"Gee!" He drew a long breath as we heard Miss Draper—the name I had heard the 'bus driver give her—going down the stairs. "If I get a chance to talk to her today I'm going to make her promise to save that rig to pose in. She's the exact image of what I want. And graceful! 'Grace by name and grace by nature.' The old saw certainly holds good in her case."

I did not answer him. As I laid aside my furs and removed my hat and coat I felt a distinct sinking of the heart. I knew it was foolish, but the presence of this girl in whom Dicky displayed such interest took all the pleasure out of the day's outing.

"This is what I call eating," said Dicky as he helped himself to a second portion of the steaming chicken pie which Mrs. Gorman had placed before us. The oysters and the delicious broiled fish which had formed the first two courses of our dinner had been removed by her sister a few moments before.

Dicky had not been so absorbed in his meal, however, as to miss any graceful movement of Miss Draper's. The admiring glances which he gave her as she served us with quick, deft motions were not lost upon me. I knew that she was not oblivious of them either, although her manner was perfect in its calm, indifferent courtesy.

When it came time for dessert Mrs. Gorman bore the tray in on which it was served, a cherry roly-poly, covered with a steaming sauce.

"You're in luck," she said with a naive pride in her own culinary ability, as she served the pudding. "I don't often make this pudding, and my canned cherries from last summer are getting scarce. But my sister came home unexpectedly this morning, and this pudding is one of her favorites. So I made it for dinner. I thought perhaps it would cheer her up."

Miss Draper who entered at that moment with the coffee and a bit of English cheese that looked particularly appetizing, appeared distinctly annoyed at her sister's reference to her. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashed a warning glance at Mrs. Gorman.

"I am sure this pudding would cheer anybody up," said Dicky genially, attacking his.

"It is delicious," I said, and, indeed, it was. "I have tasted nothing like this since I was a child in the country."

Mrs. Gorman beamed at the praise. She evidently was a hospitable soul.

"Would you like the recipe for it?" she asked.

"Indeed she would," Dicky struck in. "If you can teach Katie to make this," he turned to me, "I'll stand treat to anything you wish."

"What a rash promise," I smiled at Dicky, then turned to Mrs. Gorman. "I should be very glad to have the recipe," I said.

"Here," Dicky passed a pencil and the back of an envelope over the table.

So, while Mrs. Gorman dictated the recipe, I dutifully wrote it down.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Gorman," I said as I finished writing.

"You are very welcome, I am sure," she said heartily. "You are strangers here, aren't you? I've never seen you around here before."

"This is my wife's first visit to this village," Dicky struck into the conversation. I realized that he welcomed this opportunity of beginning a conversation with Mrs. Gorman and her sister, so that he might lead up to his request for Miss Draper's services as a model.

"I have been in the village frequently," went on Dicky. "I used to sketch a good deal along the brook to the north of the village."

"Then you are an artist!" We heard Miss Draper's voice for the first time since she had shown us to the room above. Then her tones had been cool and indifferent. Now her exclamation was full of emotion of some sort.

"An artist!" echoed Mrs. Gorman, staring at Dicky as if he were the President.

There was a little strained silence, then Miss Draper picked up the serving tray and hurried into the kitchen. Mrs. Gorman wiped her eyes as she saw her sister's departure.

"You mustn't think we're queer," she said at length. "But I suppose your saying you are an artist brought all her trouble back to Grace, poor girl." Mrs. Gorman's eyes threatened to overflow again.

"If it wouldn't trouble you too much, tell us about it." Dicky's voice was gentle, inviting. "Perhaps we could help you."

"I don't think anybody can help." Mrs. Gorman shook her head sadly. "You see, ever since Grace was a baby, almost, she has wanted to draw things. I brought her up. I was the oldest and she the youngest of 12 children, and our mother died soon after she was born. I was married shortly afterward, and from the time she could hold a pencil in her hand she has drawn pictures on everything she could lay her hands on. In school she was always at the head of her class in drawing, but there was no money to give her any lessons, so she didn't get very far. Since she left school she has been planning every way to save money enough to go to an art school, but something always hinders."

Mrs. Gorman paused only to take breath. Having broken her reserve she seemed unable to stop talking.

"She went into a dressmaking shop as soon as she left school—I had taught her to sew beautifully—thinking she could earn money enough when she had learned her trade to have a term in an art school. But her health broke down at the sewing, and I had her home here a year."

I remembered the remarkable appearance of costly attire Miss Draper had achieved when we saw her in the station. This, then, was the solution. She had made them all herself.

"Then she got another position—"

Miss Draper came into the room in time to hear Mrs. Gorman's last words. She walked swiftly to her sister's side, her eyes blazing.

"Kate," she said, her voice low but tense with emotion. "Why are you troubling these strangers with my affairs?"

Before Mrs. Gorman could answer Dicky interposed.

"Just a minute, please," he said authoritatively. "As it happens, Miss Draper, I am in a position to make a proposition to you concerning employment which will provide you with a comfortable income, and at the same time enable you to pursue your studies."

Mrs. Gorman uttered an ejaculation of joy, but Miss Draper said nothing, only looked steadily at him. "This girl has had lessons in a hard school," I said to myself. "She has learned to distrust men and to doubt any proffered kindness."

"I have been commissioned to do a set of illustrations," Dicky went on, "in which the central figure is a young girl in the regulation summer costume, such as you have on. I have been unable to find a satisfactory model for the picture. If you will allow me to say so, you are just the type I wish for the drawings. If you will pose for them I will give you \$50 and buy you a monthly commutation ticket from Marvin, so that you will have no expense coming or going. There are several artist friends of mine who have been looking for a model of your type. I think you could safely count upon an income of \$40 or \$50 a week after you get started. I know there are several other drawings I have in mind in which I could use you."

Mrs. Gorman had attempted to speak two or three times while Dicky was explaining his proposition, but Miss Draper had silenced her with a gesture. Now, however, she would not be denied. "A model!" she shrilled excitedly. "You're not insulting my sister by asking her to be a model, are you? Why, I'd rather see her dead than have her do anything so shameful—"

"Kate, keep quiet. You do not know what you are talking about." Miss Draper's voice was low and calm, but it quieted her older sister immediately.

"I take it you do not mean—figure posing." She hesitated before the word ever so slightly.

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind," I hastened to reassure her. "It's the ability to wear clothes well with a certain air, that he especially wants."

"And what do you mean by an opportunity to go on with my studies?"

The girl was really superb as she faced Dicky. With the prospect of more money than I knew she had ever had before, she yet could stand and bargain for the thing which to her was far more than money.

"Show me some of your drawings," Dicky spoke abruptly.

She went swiftly upstairs, returning in a moment with two large portfolios. These she spread out before Dicky on the table, and he examined the drawings very carefully.

I felt very much alone; out of it. For all Dicky noticed, I might not have been there.

"Not bad at all," was Dicky's verdict. "Indeed, some of them are distinctly good. Now I'll tell you what I will do," he said, turning to Miss Draper. "Until you find out what time you can give to an art school, I will give you what little help I can in your work. If you can be quiet, and I think you can, you may work in my studio at odd times, when you are not posing. What do you think of it?"

"Think of it?" Miss Draper drew a long breath. "I accept your offer gladly. When shall I begin?"

"I will drop you a postal, notifying you a day or two ahead of time," he returned.

We went out of the house and down the path to the gate before Dicky spoke.

"That was awfully decent of you, Madge, to square things with Mrs. Gorman like that. I appreciate it, I assure you."

"It was nothing," I said dispiritedly. I felt suddenly tired and old. "But I wish you would do something for me, Dicky."

"Name it, and it is yours," Dicky spoke grandiloquently.

"Take me home. We can see the harbor another time. I really feel too tired to do any more today."

Dicky opened his mouth, evidently to remind me that my fatigue was of sudden development, but closed it again, and turned in silence toward the railroad station.

We had a silent journey back. Neither Dicky nor I spoke, except to exchange the veriest commonplaces. We reached home about 5 o'clock to Katie's surprise.

"I'll hurry, get dinner," she said, evidently much flurried.

"We're not very hungry, Katie," I said. "Some cold meat and bread and butter, those little potato cakes you make so nicely, some sliced bananas for Mr. Graham and some coffee—that will be sufficient."

For my own part I felt that I never wished to see or hear of food again. The silent journey home, added to the events of the day, had brought on one of my ugly morbid moods.

# XI

## "I OWE YOU TOO MUCH"

"Bad news, Dicky?"

We were seated at the breakfast table, Dicky and I, the morning after our trip to Marvin, from which I had returned weary of body and sick of mind. Tacitly we had avoided all discussion of Grace Draper, the beautiful girl Dicky had discovered there and engaged as a model for his drawings, promising to help her with her art studies. But because of my feeling toward Dicky's plans breakfast had been a formal affair.

Then had come a special delivery letter for Dicky. He had read it twice, and was turning back for a third perusal when my query made him raise his eyes.

"In a way, yes," he said slowly. Then after a pause. "Read it." He held out the letter.

It was postmarked Detroit. The writing reminded me of my mother; it was the hand of a woman of the older generation.

I, too, read the letter twice before making any comment upon it. I wondered if Dicky's second reading had been for the same purpose as mine—to gain time to think.

I was stunned by the letter. I had never contemplated the possibility of Dicky's mother living with us, and here she was calmly inviting herself to make her home with us. For years she had made her home with her childless daughter and namesake, Harriet, whose husband was one of the most brilliant surgeons of the middle West.

I knew that Dicky's mother and sister had spoiled him terribly when they all had a home together before Dicky's father died. The first thought that came to me was that Dicky's whims alone were hard enough to humor, but when I had both him and his mother to consider our home life would hardly be worth the living.

I knew and resented also the fact that Dicky's mother and sisters disapproved of his marriage to me. In one of Dicky's careless confidences I had gleaned that his mother's choice for him had been made long ago, and that he had disappointed her by not marrying a friend of his sister.

I felt as if I were in a trap. To have to live and treat with daughterly deference a woman who I knew so disliked me that she refused to attend her son's wedding was unthinkable.

"Well!"

In Dicky's voice was a note of doubt as he held out his hand for his mother's letter. I knew that he was anxiously awaiting my decision as to the proposition it contained, and I hastened to reassure him.

"Of course there is but one thing to be done," I said, trying hard to make my tone cordial.

"And that is?" Dicky looked at me curiously. Was it possible that he did not understand my meaning?

"Why, you must wire her at once to come to us. Be sure you tell her that she will be most welcome."

I felt a trifle ashamed that the welcoming words were such a sham from my lips. Dicky's mother was distinctly not welcome as far as I was concerned. But my thoughts flew swiftly back to my own little mother, gone forever from me. Suppose she were the one who needed a home? How would I like to have Dicky's secret thoughts about her welcome the same as mine were now?

"That's awfully good of you, Madge." Dicky's voice brought me back from my reverie. "Of course I know you are not particularly keen about her coming. That wouldn't be natural, but it's bully of you to pretend just the same."

I opened my mouth to protest, and then thought better of it. There was no use trying to deceive Dicky. If he was satisfied with my attitude toward his mother, that was all that was necessary.

I poured myself another cup of coffee, when Dicky had gone to the studio, drank it mechanically, and touched the bell for Katie to clear away the breakfast things.

I did not try to disguise to myself the fact that I was extremely miserable. The day at Marvin, on which I had so counted, had been a disappointment to me on account of the attention Dicky had paid to



Miss Draper. I reflected bitterly that I might just as well have spent the afternoon with Mrs. Smith of the Lotus Club, discussing the history course which she wished me to undertake for the club.

The thought of Mrs. Smith reminded me of the promise I had made her when leaving for Marvin that I would call her up on my return and tell her when I could meet her. I resolved to telephone her at once.

I felt a thrill of purely feminine triumph as I turned away from the telephone. I knew that Mrs. Smith would have declined to see me if she had consulted only her inclinations. That she still wished me to take up the leadership of the study course gratified me exceedingly, and made me thank my stars for the long years of study and teaching which had given me something of a reputation in the work which the Lotus Club wished me to undertake.

But when we met at a little luncheon room, Mrs. Smith and I managed to get through the preliminaries pleasantly.

"Now as to compensation," she said briskly. "I am authorized to offer you \$20 per lecture. I know that it is not what you might get from an older or richer club, but it is all we can offer."

I was silent for a moment. I did not wish her to know how delighted I was with the amount of money offered.

"I think that will be satisfactory for this season, at least," I said at last.

"Very well, then. The first meeting, of course, will be merely an introduction and an outlining of your plan of study, so I will not need to trouble you again. If you will be at the clubrooms at half after one the first day, I will meet you, and see that you get started all right. Here comes our luncheon. Now I can eat in peace."

Her whole manner said: "Now I am through with you."

But I felt that I cared as little for her opinion of me as she evidently did of mine for her.

Twenty dollars a week was worth a little sacrifice.

Lillian Underwood's raucous voice came to my ears as I rang the bell of my little apartment. It stopped suddenly at the sound of the bell. Dicky opened the door and Mrs. Underwood greeted me boisterously.

"I came over to ask you to eat dinner with us Sunday," she said. "Then we'll think up something to do in the afternoon and evening. We always dine Sunday at 2 o'clock, a concession to that cook of mine. I'll never get another like her, and if she only knew it I would have Sunday dinner at 10 o'clock in the morning rather than lose her. I do hope you can come."

"There's nothing in the world to hinder as far as I know," said Dicky.

"I am so sorry," I turned to Lillian as I spoke. My dismay was genuine, for I knew how Dicky would view my answer. "But I could not possibly come on Sunday. I have a dinner engagement for that day which I cannot break."

"A dinner engagement!" Dicky ejaculated at last. "Why, Madge, you must be mistaken. We haven't any dinner engagement for that day."

"You haven't any," I tried to speak as calmly as I could. "There is no reason why you cannot accept Mrs. Underwood's invitation if you wish. But do you remember the letter I received a week ago saying an old friend of mine whom I had not seen for a year would reach the city next Sunday and wished an engagement for dinner? There is no way in which I can postpone or get out of the engagement, for there is no way I can reach my friend before Sunday."

I had purposely avoided using the words "he" or "him," hoping that Dicky would not say anything to betray the identity of the "friend" who was returning from the wilds. But I reckoned without Dicky. Either he was so angry that he recklessly disregarded Mrs. Underwood's presence or else his friendship with her was so close that it did not matter to him whether or not she knew of our differences.

"Oh, the gorilla with the mumps!" Dicky gave the short, scornful, little laugh which I had learned to dread as one of the preliminaries of a scene. "I had forgotten all about him. And so he really arrives on Sunday, and you expect to welcome him. How very touching!"

Dicky was fast working himself into a rage. Lillian Gale evidently knew the signs as well as I did, for she hurriedly began to fasten her cloak, which she had opened on account of the heat of the room.

"I really must be going," she murmured, starting for the door, but Dicky adroitly slipped between it and her.

"Talk about your romance, Lil," he sneered, "what do you think about this one for a best seller?"

"Oh, Dicky!" I gasped, my cheeks scarlet with humiliation at this scene before Mrs. Underwood, of all people. But Dicky paid no more attention to me than if I had been the chair in which I was sitting.

"Beautiful highbrow heroine," he went on, "has tearful parting with gallant hero more noted for his size than his beauty. He's gone a whole year. Heroine forgets him, marries another man. Now he comes back, heroine has to meet him and break the news that she is another's. Isn't it romantic?"

Lillian looked at him steadily for a moment, as if she were debating some course of action. Then she suddenly squared her shoulders, and, advancing toward him, took him by the shoulders and shook him slightly.

"Look here, my Dicky-bird," she said, and her tones were like icicles. "I didn't want to listen to this, and I beg your wife's pardon for being here, but now that you've compelled me to listen to you, you're going to hear me for a little while."

Dicky looked at her open-mouthed, exactly like a small boy being reproved by his mother.

"You're getting to be about the limit with this temper of yours," she began. "Of course I know you were as spoiled a lad as anybody could be, but that's no reason now that you are a man why you should kick up a rumpus any time something doesn't go just to suit your royal highness."

"See here, Lil!" Dicky began to speak wrathfully.

"Shut up till I'm through talking," she admonished him roughly.

If I had not been so angry and humiliated I could have laughed aloud at the promptness with which Dicky closed his mouth.

"You never gave me or the boys a taste of your rages simply because you knew we wouldn't stand for them. I'll wager you anything you like that Mrs. Graham never knew of your temper until after you had married her. But now that you're safely married you think you can say anything you like. Men are all like that."

She spoke wearily, contemptuously, as if a sudden disagreeable memory had come to her. She dropped her hands from his shoulders.

"Of course, I've no right to butt in like this," she said, as if recalled to herself. "I beg pardon of both of you. Good-by," and she dashed for the door.

But Dicky, with one of his quick changes from wrath to remorse, was before her.

"No you don't, my dear," he said, grasping her arm. "You know I couldn't get angry with you no matter what you said. I owe you too much. I know I have a beast of a temper, but you know, too, I'm over it just as quickly. Look here."

He flopped down on his knees in an exaggerated pose of humility, and put up his hands first to me and then to Lillian.

"See. I beg Madge's pardon. I beg Lillian's pardon, everybody's pardon. Please don't kick me when I'm down."

Lillian's face relaxed. She laughed indulgently.

"Oh, I'll forgive you, but I imagine it will take more than that to make your peace with your wife! It would if you were my husband. 'Phone me about Sunday. Perhaps Mrs. Graham can come over after dinner and meet you there. Good-by."

She hurried out to the door, this time without Dicky's stopping her. Dicky came toward me.

"If I say I am very, very sorry, Madge?" he said, smiling apologetically at me.

"Of course it's all right, Dicky," I forced myself to say.

Curiously enough, after all, my resentment was more against Lillian than against Dicky. Probably she

meant well, but how dared she talk to my husband as if he were her personal property, and what was it he "owed her" that made him take such a raking over at her hands?

## XII

### LOST AND FOUND

"Margaret!"

"Jack!"

It was, after all, a simple thing, this meeting with my cousin-brother that I had so dreaded. Save for the fact that he took both my hands in his, any observer of our meeting would have thought that it was but a casual one, instead of being a reunion after a separation of a year.

But this meeting upset me strangely. I seemed to have stepped back years in my life. My marriage to Dicky, my life with him, my love for him, seemed in some curious way to belong to some other woman, even the permission to meet him in this way, which I had wrested from Dicky, seemed a need of another. I was again Margaret Spencer, going with my best friend to the restaurant where we had so often dined together.

And yet in some way I felt that things were not the same as they used to be. Jack was the same kindly brother I had always known, and yet there seemed in his manner a tinge of something different. I did not know what. I only knew that I felt very nervous and unstrung.

As I sank into the padded seat and began to remove my gloves I was confronted by a new problem.

My wedding ring, guarded by my engagement solitaire, was upon the third finger of my left hand. Jack would be sure to see them if I kept them on.

I told myself fiercely that I did not wish Jack to know I was married until after we had had this dinner together. With my experience of Dicky's jealousy I had not much hope that Jack and I would ever dine together in this fashion again.

On the other hand, I had a strong aversion to removing my wedding ring even for an hour or two. Besides being a silent falsehood, the act would seem almost an omen of evil. I am not generally superstitious, but something made me dread doing it.

However, I had to choose quickly. I must either take off the rings or tell Jack at once that I was married. I was not brave enough to do the latter.

Taking my silver mesh bag from my muff, I opened it under the table, and, quickly stripping off my gloves, removed my rings, tucked them into a corner of the bag and put gloves and bag back in my muff. Jack, man-like, had noticed nothing.

Now to keep the conversation in my own hands, so that Jack should suspect nothing until we had dined.

The waiter stood at attention with pencil pointed over his order card. Jack was studying the menu card, and I was studying Jack.

It was the first chance I had had to take a good look at this cousin-brother of mine after his year's absence. Every time I had attempted it I had met his eyes fixed upon me with an inscrutable look that puzzled and embarrassed me. Now, however, he was occupied with the menu card, and I stared openly at him.

He had changed very little, I told myself. Of course he was terribly browned by his year in the tropics, but otherwise he was the same handsome, well-set-up chap I remembered so well.

I knew Jack's favorite dish, fortunately. If he could sit down in front of just the right kind of steak, thick, juicy, broiled just right, he was happy.

"How about a steak?" I inquired demurely. "I haven't had a good one in ages."

"I'm sure you're saying that to please me," Jack protested, "but I haven't the heart to say so. You can imagine the food I've lived on in South America. But you must order the rest of the meal."

"Surely I will," I said, for I knew the things he liked. "Baked potatoes, new asparagus, buttered beets, romaine salad, and we'll talk about the dessert later."

The waiter bowed and hurried away. "You're either clairvoyant, Margaret or—"

"Perhaps I, too, have a memory," I returned gayly, and then regretted the speech as I saw the look that leaped into Jack's eyes.

"I wish I was sure," he began impetuously, then he checked himself. "I wonder whether we are too early for any music?" he finished lamely.

"I am afraid so," I said.

"It doesn't matter anyway. We want to talk, not to listen. I've got something to tell you, my dear, that I've been thinking about all this year I've been gone."

I did not realize the impulse that made me stretch out my hand, lay it upon his, and ask gently:

"Please, Jack, don't tell me anything important until after dinner. I feel rather upset anyway. Let's have one of our care-free dinners and when we've finished we can talk."

Jack gave me a long curious look under which I flushed hot. Then he said brusquely, "All right, the weather and the price of flour, those are good safe subjects, we'll stick to them."

The dinner was perfect in every detail. Jack ate heartily, and although I was too unstrung to eat much I managed to get enough down to deceive him into thinking I was enjoying the meal also.

The coffee and cheese dispatched, I leaned back and smiled at Jack. "Now light your cigar," I commanded.

"Not yet. We're going to talk a bit first, you and I."

I felt that same little absurd thrill of apprehension. Jack was changed in some way. I could not tell just now. He took my fingers in his big, strong hand.

"Look at me, Margaret."

Jack's voice was low and tense. It held a masterful note I had never heard. Without realizing that I did so, I obeyed him, and lifted my eyes to his.

What I read in them made me tremble. This was a new Jack facing me across the table. The cousin-brother, my best friend since my childhood, was gone.

I did not admit to myself why, but I wished, oh! so earnestly, that I had told Jack over the telephone of my marriage during his year's absence in the South American wilderness, where he could neither send nor receive letters.

I must not wait another minute, I told myself.

"Jack," I said brokenly, "there is something I want to tell you—I'm afraid you will be angry, but please don't be, big brother, will you?"

"There is something I'm going to tell you first," Jack smiled tenderly at me, "and that is that this big brother stuff is done for, as far as I'm concerned. In fact, I've been just faking the role for two or three years back, because I knew you didn't care the way I wanted you to. But this year out in the wilderness has made me realize just what life would be to me without you. I've been kicking myself all over South America that I didn't try to make you care. I've just about gone through Gehenna, too, thinking you might fall in love with somebody while I was gone. But I saw you didn't wear anybody's ring anyway, so I said to myself, 'I'm not going to wait another minute to tell her I love her, love her, love her.'"

Jack's voice, pitched to a low key anyway, so that no one should be able to hear what he was saying, sank almost to a whisper with the last words.

I sat stunned, helpless, grief-stricken.

To think that I should be the one to bring sorrow to Jack, the gentlest, kindest friend I had ever known!

"Oh, Jack, don't!" I moaned, and then, to my horror, I began to cry. I could not control my sobs, although I covered my face with my handkerchief.

"There, there, sweetheart, I'll have you out of this in a jiffy," Jack was at my side, helping me to rise, getting me into my coat, shielding me from the curious gaze of the other diners.

"Here!" He threw a bill toward the waiter. "Pay my bill out of that, get us a taxi quick, and keep the change. Hurry."

"Yes, sir—thank you, sir." The waiter dashed ahead of us. As we emerged from the door he was standing proudly by the open door of a taxi.

"Where to, sir?" The chauffeur touched his cap.

"Anywhere. Central Park." Jack helped me in, sat down beside me, the door slammed and the taxi rolled away.

The only other time in my life Jack had seen me cry was when my mother died. Then I had wept my grief out on his shoulder secure in the knowledge of his brotherly love. As the taxi started, he slipped his arm around me.

"Whatever it is, dear, cry it out in my arms," he whispered.

But at his touch I shuddered, and drew myself away. I was Dicky's wife. This situation was intolerable. I must end it at once. With a mighty effort, I controlled my sobs and, wiping my eyes, sat upright.

"Dear, dear boy," I said. "Please forgive me. I never thought of this or I would have told you over the telephone."

"Told me what?" Jack's voice was harsh and quick. His arm dropped from my wrist.

There was no use wasting words in the telling. I took courage in both hands.

"I am married, Jack," I said faintly. "I have been married over a month."

"God!" The expletive seemed forced from his lips. I heard the name uttered that way once before, when a man I knew had been told of his child's death in an automobile accident. It made me realize as nothing else could what Jack must be suffering.

But he gave no other sign of having heard my words, simply sat erect, with folded arms, gazing sternly into vacancy, while the taxi rolled up Fifth avenue.

Huddled miserably in my corner, I waited for him to speak. I had summoned courage to tell him the truth, but I could not have spoken to him again while his face held that frozen look. It frightened and fascinated me at the same time.

A queer little wonder crossed my mind. Suppose I had known of this a year ago. Would I have married Jack, and never known Dicky? Would I have been happier so?

Then there rushed over me the realization that nothing in the world mattered but Dicky. I wanted him, oh how I wanted him! Jack's suffering, everything else, were but shadows. My love for my husband, my need of him—these were the only real things.

I turned to Jack wildly.

"Oh, Jack, I must go home!"

"Margaret." Jack's voice was so different from his usual one that I started almost in fear.

"Yes, Jack."

"I don't want you to reproach yourself about this. I understand, dear. The right man came along, and of course you couldn't wait for me to come back to give my sanction."

"Oh! Jack! I ought to have waited: I know it. You have been so good to me"

"I've been good to myself, being with you," he returned tenderly. "But I almost wish you had told me over the telephone. You would never have known how I felt, and it would have been better all around"

He bent toward me, and crushed both my hands in his, looking into my face with a gaze that was in

itself a caress.

"Now you must go home, little girl, back to—your—husband." The words came slowly.

"When shall I see you again, Jack?" I knew the answer even before it came.

"When you need me, dear girl, if you ever do," he replied. "I can't be near you without loving you and hating your husband, whoever he may be, and that is a dangerous state of affairs. But, wherever I am, a note or a wire to the Hotel Alfred will be forwarded to me, and, if the impossible should happen and your husband ever fail you, remember, Jack is waiting, ready to do anything for you."

My tears were falling fast now. Jack laid his hand upon my shoulder.

"Come, Margaret, you must control yourself," he said in his old brotherly voice. "I want you to tell me your new name and address. I'm never going to lose track of you, remember that. You won't see me, but your big brother will be on the job just the same."

I told him, and he wrote it carefully down in his note-book. Then he looked at me fixedly.

"You would better put your engagement and wedding rings back on," he said. "Of course I realize now that you must have taken them off when you removed your gloves in the restaurant, with the thought that you did not want to spoil my dinner by telling me of your marriage. But you must have them on when you meet your husband, you know."

How like Jack, putting aside his own suffering to be sure of my welfare. I put my hand in my muff, drew out my mesh bag and opened it.

"Jack!" I gasped, horror-stricken, "my rings are gone!"

"Impossible!" His face was white. He snatched my mesh bag from my grasp. "Where did you put them? In here?"

Jack turned the mesh bag inside out. A handkerchief, a small coin purse, two or three bills of small denominations, an envelope with a tiny powder puff—these were all.

"Are you sure you put them in here?"

"Yes." I could hardly articulate the word, I was so frightened.

"Have you opened your bag since?"

I thought a moment. Had I? Then a rush of remembrance came to me.

"I took out a handkerchief when I cried in the restaurant."

"You must have drawn them out then, and either dropped them there, or they may have been caught in the handkerchief and dropped in the taxi." We searched without success and Jack's face darkened as he ordered the chauffeur to speed back to Broquin's. "We must hurry, dear. This is awful. If you have lost those rings, your husband will have a right to be angry."

Neither of us spoke again until the taxi drew up in front of the restaurant. Then Jack said almost curtly:

"Wait here. I don't think it will be necessary for you to go inside, and it might be embarrassing for you."

He fairly ran up the steps and disappeared inside the door.

So anxious was I to know what would be the result of his inquiry that I leaned far forward in the machine, watching the door of Broquin's for Jack's return.

I did not realize my imprudence in doing this until I heard my name called jovially.

"Well! well, Mrs. Graham, I suppose you are on your way to our shack. Won't you give me the pleasure of riding with you?"

Hat in hand, black eyes dancing in malicious glee, I saw standing before me, Harry Underwood, of all people!

At that instant Jack came rushing out of the restaurant and up to the taxi.

"It's no use, Margaret. They can't find them anywhere."

"Jack, I want you to meet Mr. Underwood, a friend of my husband's," I said hastily, hoping to save the situation. "Mr. Underwood, my cousin, Mr. Bickett."

The two men shook hands perfunctorily.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Bickett," Harry Underwood said, in his effusive manner. "Have you lost anything valuable? Can I help in any way?"

"Nothing of any consequence," I interrupted desperately.

"Oh, yes, I see, nothing of any consequence," he replied meaningly. His eyes were fixed upon my ungloved left hand, which showed only too plainly the absence of my rings.

"But don't worry," he continued. "Your Uncle Dudley is first cousin to an oyster. Wish you luck. So long," and lifting his hat he strolled on up the avenue.

Jack was consulting his note-book. I heard him give the address of my apartment to the driver. "Drive slowly," he added.

"Who was that man?" he demanded sternly. "He is no one you ought to know."

"I know, Jack," I said faintly. "I dislike him, I even dread him, but he and his wife are old friends of Dicky's and I cannot avoid meeting him."

"He will make trouble for you some day," Jack returned. "I don't like him, but there is nothing I can do to help you. I've messed things enough now."

"What shall I do, Jack?" I wailed. All my vaunted self-reliance was gone. I felt like the most helpless perfect clinging vine in the world.

"We're going straight to your home to see your husband," he said. "You will introduce me to him and then leave us. I shall explain everything to him."

"Oh, Jack," I said terrified, "he has such an uncertain temper, and, besides, he isn't at home. He was to take dinner at the Underwoods at 2 o'clock."

"Well, we must go there, then," returned Jack. "Put on your gloves, then the absence of the rings won't be noticed until I have a chance to explain about them."

I picked up the gloves and unfolded them. Something glittering rolled out of them and dropped into my lap.

"Oh, Jack, my rings!" I fairly shrieked. Then for the first time in my life I became hysterical, laughing and sobbing uncontrollably.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night I told Dicky the whole story—not one word did I keep back from him—and when I came to the loss of my rings and the meeting with Harry Underwood, there developed a scene that I cannot even now bring myself to put down on paper. But at last Dicky managed to control himself enough to ask what I had told Harry Underwood.

"I told him that my rings had not been lost, that my gloves were too tight and that I had removed them to put on my gloves."

"Good!" Dicky's voice held a note of relenting. "That's one thing saved, any way. Wonder your conscience would let you tell that much of a lie."

His sneer aroused me. I had been speaking in a dreary monotone which typified my feeling. Now I faced him, indignant.

"See here, Dicky Graham, don't you imagine it would have been easier for me to lie about all this? I didn't need to tell you anything. Another thing I want you to understand plainly and that is my reason for not telling Jack at first that I was married.

"If I had had a real brother, you would have thought it perfectly natural for me to have waited for his return before I married. Now, no brother in the world could have been kinder to me than was Jack Bickett. We were indebted to him for a thousand kindnesses, for a lifetime of devotion. I never should have married without first telling him about it. Do you wonder that realizing this I delayed in every way

the story of my marriage until I could find a suitable opportunity? I give you my word of honor that I did not dream he cared, and I expect you to believe me."

I walked steadily toward the door of my bedroom. I had not reached it, however, before Dicky clasped me in his arms, and I felt his hot kisses on my face.

"I'm seventeen kinds of a jealous brute, I know, sweetheart," he whispered, "but the thought of that other man, who seems to mean so much to you, drives me mad. I'm selfish, I know, but I'm mad about you."

I put my arms around his neck. "Don't you know, foolish Dicky," I murmured, "that there's nobody else in the world for me but just you, you, you?"

## XIII

### "IF YOU AREN'T CROSS AND DISPLEASED"

Today my mother-in-law!

That was my thought when I awoke on the morning of the day which was to bring Dicky's mother to live with us.

I am afraid if I set down my exact thoughts I should have to admit that I had a distinct feeling of rebellion against the expected visit of Dicky's mother.

If it were only a visit! There was just the trouble. Then I could have welcomed my mother-in-law, entertained her royally, kept at top pitch all the time she was with us, guarded every word and action, and kept from her knowledge the fact that Dicky and I often quarrelled.

But Dicky's mother, as far as I could see, was to be a member of our household for the rest of her life. She herself had arranged it in a letter, the calm phrases of which still irritated me, as I recalled them. She had taken me so absolutely for granted, as though my opinion amounted to nothing, and only her wishes and those of her son counted.

But suddenly my cheeks flamed with shame. After all, this woman who was coming was my husband's mother, an old woman, frail, almost an invalid. I made up my mind to put away from me all the disagreeable features of her advent into my home, and to busy myself with plans for her comfort and happiness.

I hurried through my breakfast, for I wanted plenty of time for the last preparations before Dicky's mother should arrive. Dicky had gone to his studio for a while and then would go over to the station in time to meet her train, which was due at 11:30.

As I started to my room I heard the peal of the doorbell.

"I will answer it, Katie," I called back, and went quickly to the entrance. A special delivery postman stood there holding out a letter to me. As I signed his slip, I saw that the handwriting upon the letter was Jack's.

What could have happened? I dreaded inexpressibly some calamity.

Only something of the utmost importance, I knew, could have induced my brother-cousin to write to me. He was too careful of my welfare to excite Dicky's unreasoning jealousy by a letter, unless there was desperate need for it.

Finally, I sat down in an arm-chair by the window, and breaking the seal, drew out the letter.

"Dear Cousin Margaret:

"I have decided, suddenly, to go across the pond and get in the big mix-up. You perhaps remember that I have spoken to you frequently of my friend, Paul Caillard who has been with me in many a bit of ticklish work. He was with me in South America, and like me, heard of the war for the first time when he got out of the wilderness. He is a Frenchman, you know, and is going back to offer his services to the engineering corps."



"And I am going with him, Margaret. I think I can be of service over there. Paul Caillard is the best friend I have. As you know you are the only relative I have in the world, and you are happily and safely married, so I feel that I am harming no one by my decision.

"We sail tomorrow morning on the Saturn. It will be impossible for me to come to your home before then. So this is good-by. When I come back, if I come back, I want to meet your husband and see you in your home.

"And now I must speak of a little matter of which you are ignorant, but of which you must be told before I go. Before your mother died, I had made my will, leaving her everything I possessed, for you and she were all the family I had ever known. After her death I changed her name to yours. If anything should happen to me, my attorney, William Faye, 149 Broadway, will attend to everything for you. He is also my executor.

"Most of what I have, would have come to you by law, anyway, Margaret, for you are 'my nearest of kin'—isn't that the way the law puts it? But you might have some unpleasantness from those Pennsylvania cousins of ours, so I have protected you against such a contingency.

"And now, Margaret, good-by and God bless you.

"Your affectionate cousin, Jack."

I finished the letter with a numb feeling at my heart. It seemed to me as if one of the foundations of my life had given away.

When Jack had left me after that miserable reunion dinner where he had been hurt so cruelly by the news of my marriage during his year's absence, he had said—ah, how well I remembered the words—"I shall not see you again, dear girl, unless you need me, if you ever do. I can't be near you without loving you and hating your husband, whoever he may be, and that is a dangerous state of affairs. But wherever I am, a note or a wire to the Hotel Alfred will be forwarded to me, and if the impossible should happen, and your husband, ever fail you, remember Jack is waiting, ready to do anything for you."

I had not expected to see Jack for months, perhaps years, but the knowledge of his faithfulness, of his nearness, had been of much comfort to me. And now he was going away, probably to his death.

The most bitter knowledge of all, was that which forced itself upon my mind. Jack was going to the war because he was unhappy over my marriage. He had not said so, of course, in the letter which he knew my husband must read, but I knew it. The remembrance of his face, his voice, when I told him of my marriage was enough. I did not need written words to know that perhaps I was sending him to his death!

I glanced at the clock—11:15. Only three-quarters of an hour till the train which was bringing my mother-in-law to our home was due! She would be in the house within three-quarters of an hour! Would I have time to dress, go after the flowers and cream we needed for luncheon and be back in time to welcome her?

Common sense whispered to omit the flowers, and send Katie for the cream. But one of my faults or virtues—I never have been able to decide which—is the persistence with which I stick to a plan, once I have decided upon it. I made up my mind to take a chance on getting back in time.

I made my purchases and on my way back I stepped into the corner drug store and telephoned Jack. He would not hear of my seeing him sail, and he would not promise to write me. Then there was a long silence. I wondered what he was debating with himself.

"I am going to let you in on a little secret," he said at last. "I have provided myself with the means of knowing how you fare, and I suppose I ought to let you have the same privilege. You know Mrs. Stewart, who keeps the boarding house where you and your mother lived so many years?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, she and I are going to correspond. Now, understand, Margaret, I am going to send no messages to you. I want none from you. Remember, you are married. Your husband objects to your friendship with me. I will do nothing underhand. But if anything happens to you I shall know it through Mrs. Stewart, and she will always know where I am and what I am doing."

"That is some comfort," I returned earnestly. "What time does the Saturn sail tomorrow?"

"At 10 o'clock. But, Madge, you must not come."

"I know," I returned meekly enough, although a daring plan was just beginning to creep into my brain. "And I will say good-by now, Jack. Good-by, dear boy, and good luck."

My voice was trembling, and there was a tremor in the deep voice that answered.

"Good-by, dear little girl. God bless and keep you." The next moment I was stumbling out of the booth with just one thought, to get home and bathe my eyes and pull myself together before the arrival of my mother-in-law.

I was just outside the drug store, and had realized that I'd left my purchases in the telephone booth, when I heard my name called excitedly.

From the window of a taxicab Dicky was gesturing wildly, while beside him a stately woman sat with a bored look upon her face.

My mother-in-law had arrived!

"Madge! What under the heavens is the matter?"

Dicky sprang out of the taxicab, which had drawn up before the door of the drug store, and seized my arm.

"Nothing is the matter," I said shortly. "I went out to get some cream for Katie's pudding and some flowers. I stopped here in the drug store to get some of my headache tablets, and left the flowers and cream. Some dust blew in my eyes. I suppose that's what makes you think I have been crying."

"That's you, all over," Dicky grumbled. "Risk not being at home to greet mother in order to have a few flowers stuck around. Here, come on and meet mother, and I'll go in and get your flowers." He took my arm and made a step toward the taxicab.

"No, no," I said hastily. "I know exactly where I left them. I won't be a minute."

Luckily the flowers and cream were where I had left them. I detest the idea of arranging any part of one's toilet in public, but I did not want the critical eyes of Dicky's mother to see my reddened eyes, and roughened hair, which had been slightly loosened in my hurry.

There was a mirror near the telephone booth at the back of the store. I took off my fur cap, smoothed back my hair and put on the cap again. From my purse I took a tiny powder puff and removed the traces of tears. Then I fairly snatched my parcels and hurried to the door. Dicky was just entering the store as I reached it. His face was black. I saw that he was in one of his rages.

"Look here, Madge," he said, and he made no pretense of lowering his voice, "do you think my mother enjoys sitting there in that taxicab waiting for you? She was so fatigued by her journey that she didn't even want to have her baggage looked after, something unusual for her. That is the reason we got here so early. And now she is positively faint for a cup of tea, and you are fiddling around here over a lot of flowers."

If he had made no reference to his mother's faintness, I should have answered him spiritedly. But I remembered my own little mother, and her longing when fatigued for a cup of hot tea.

"I'm awfully sorry, Dicky," I said meekly. "You see you arrived before I thought you would. I'll get the tea for her the moment we reach the house."

But Dicky was not mollified. He stalked moodily ahead of me until he reached the open door of the taxicab. Then his manner underwent a sudden change. One would have thought him the most devoted of husbands to see him draw me forward.

"Mother," he said, and my heart glowed even in its resentment at the note of pride in his voice, "this is my wife. Madge, my mother."

Mrs. Graham was leaning back against the cushions of the taxicab. If she had not looked so white and ill I should have resented the look of displeasure that rested upon her features.

"How do you do?" she said coldly. "You must pardon me, I am afraid, for not saying the usual things. I have been very much upset."

The studied insolence of the apology was infinitely worse than the coldness of her manner. I waited for a moment to control myself before answering her.

"I am afraid that you are really ill," I said as cordially as I could. "I am so sorry to have kept you waiting, but I did not expect you quite so soon, and I had some errands."

"It doesn't matter," she said indifferently. Her manner put me aside from her consideration as if I had been a child or a servant. She turned to Dicky.

"Are we almost there, dear?"

The warmth of her tones to him, the love displayed in every inflection, set out in more bitter contrast the coldness with which she was treating me.

"Right here now," as the taxi drew up to the door of the apartment house. There was a peculiar inflection in Dicky's voice. I stole a glance at him. He was gazing at his mother with a puzzled look. I fancied I saw also a trace of displeasure. But it vanished in another minute as he sprang to the ground, paid the driver and helped his mother and me out.

She leaned heavily on his arm as we went up the stairs to the third floor upon which our apartment was.

At the door, Katie, who evidently had heard the taxicab, stood smiling broadly.

"This is Katie, mother," Dicky said kindly. "She will help take care of you."

"How do you do, Katie?" The words were the same, but the tones were much kinder than her greeting to me.

Dicky assisted her into the living room. She sank into the armchair, and Dicky took off her hat and loosened her cloak. She leaned her head against the back of the chair, and her face looked so drawn and white that I felt alarmed.

"Katie, prepare a cup of strong tea immediately," I directed, and Katie vanished. "Is there nothing I can do for you, Mrs. Graham?" I approached her chair.

"Nothing, thank you. You may save the maid the trouble of preparing that tea if you will. I could not possibly drink it. I always carry my own tea with me, and prepare it myself. If it is not too much trouble, Dicky, will you get me a pot of hot water and some cream? I have everything else here."

I really felt sorry for Dicky. He caught the tension in the atmosphere, and looked from his mother to me with a helpless caught-between-two-fires-expression. With masculine obtuseness he put his foot in it in his endeavor to remedy matters.

"Why do you call my mother Mrs. Graham, Madge?" he said querulously. "She is your mother now as well as mine, you know."

"I am nothing of the kind." His mother spoke sharply. "Of all the idiotic assumptions, that is the worst, that marriage makes close relatives, and friends of total strangers. Your wife and I may learn to love each other. Then there will be plenty of time for her to call me mother. As it is, I am very glad she evidently feels as I do about it. Now, Dicky, if you will kindly get me that hot water."

"I will attend to it," I said decidedly "Dicky, take your mother to her room and assist her with her things. I will have the hot water and cream for her almost at once."

In the shelter of the dining room, where neither Dicky nor his mother nor Katie could see or hear me, I clenched my hands and spoke aloud.

"Call *her* mother! Give that ill-tempered, tyrannical old woman the sacred name that means so much to me. *Never* as long as I live!"

Dicky met me at the door of the dining room and took the tray I carried. It held my prettiest teapot filled with boiling water, a tiny plate of salted crackers, together with cup, saucer, spoon and napkin.

"Say, sweetheart," he whispered, "I want to tell you something. My mother isn't always like this. She can be very sweet when she wants to. But when things don't go to suit her she takes these awful icy 'dignity' tantrums, and you can't touch her with a ten-foot pole until she gets over them. She was tired, from the journey, and the fact that you kept her waiting in the taxicab made her furious. But she'll get over it. Just be patient, won't you, darling?"

If the average husband only realized how he could play upon his wife's heart-strings with a few loving words I believe there would be less marital unhappiness in the world. A few minutes before I had been fiercely resentful against Dicky's mother. And my anger had reached to Dicky, for I felt in some vague way that he must be responsible for his mother's rudeness.

But the knowledge that he, too, was used to her injustice and that he resented it when directed against me made all the difference in the world. I reached up my hand and patted his cheek.

"Dear boy, nothing in the world matters, if *you* aren't cross and displeased."

## XIV

### A QUARREL AND A CRISIS

"Can you give me a few minutes' time, Dicky? I have something to tell you."

Dicky put down the magazine with a bored air. "What is it?" he asked shortly.

Involuntarily my thoughts flew back to the exquisite courtesy which had always been Dicky's in the days before we were married. There had been such a delicate reverence in his every tone and action. I wondered if marriage changed all men as it had changed my husband.

I went to my room and brought the letter back to Dicky. He read it through, and I saw his face grow blacker with each word. When he came to the signature, he turned back to the beginning and read the epistle through again. Then he crumpled it into a ball and threw it violently across the room.

"See here, my lady," he exploded. "I think it's about time we came to a show-down over this business. When I found that first letter from this lad, I asked you if he were a relative, and you said 'No.' Then you hand me this touching screed with its 'nearest of kin' twaddle, and speaking of leaving you a fortune. Now what's the answer?"

"Oh, hardly a fortune, Dicky," I returned quietly. "Jack has only a few thousand at the outside."

I fear I was purposely provoking, but Dicky's sneering, insulting manner roused every bit of spirit in me.

"A few thousand you'll never touch as long as you are my wife," stormed Dicky. "But you are evading my question."

"Oh, no, I'm not," I said coolly. "That real relationship between Jack and myself is so slight as to be practically nothing. He is the son of a distant cousin of my mother's. Perhaps you remember that on the day you made the scene about the letter you had just emphasized your very close friendship for Mrs. Underwood in a fashion rather embarrassing to me. I resolved that, to speak vulgarly, 'what was sauce for the gander,' etc., and that I would put my friendship for Jack upon the same basis as yours for Mrs. Underwood. So when you asked me whether or not Jack was a relative I said 'No.'"

"That makes this letter an insult both to you and to me," Dicky said venomously, his face black with anger.

I sprang to my feet, trembling with anger.

"Be careful," I said icily. "You don't deserve an explanation, but you shall have one, and that is the last word I shall ever speak to you on the subject of Jack. His letter is the truth. I am his 'nearest of kin,' save the cousins in Pennsylvania of whom he speaks. He was orphaned in his babyhood and my mother's only sister legally adopted him, and reared him as her own son. We were practically raised together, for my mother and my aunt always lived near each other. Jack was the only brother I ever knew. I the only sister he had.

"When my aunt died she left him her little property with the understanding that he would always look after my mother and myself. He kept his promise royally. My mother and I owed him many, many kindnesses. God forbid that I ever am given the opportunity to claim Jack's property. But if he should be killed"—I choked upon the word—"I shall take it and try to use it wisely, as he would have me do."

"Very touching, upon my word," sneered Dicky, "and very interesting—if true." He almost spat the words out, he was so angry.

"It does not matter to me in the least whether you believe it or not," I returned frigidly.

Dicky jumped up with an oath. "I know it doesn't matter to you. Nothing is of any consequence to you but this"—he ripped out an offensive epithet. "If he is so near and dear to you, it's a wonder you don't want to go over and bid him a fond farewell."

I was fighting to keep back the tears. As soon as I could control my voice I spoke slowly:

"The reason why I did not go is because I thought you might not like it. God knows, I wanted to go."

I walked steadily to my room, closed the door and locked it and fell upon the bed, a sobbing heap.

"Where are you going?" Dicky's voice was fairly a snarl as I faced him a little later in my street costume.

"I do not know," I replied truthfully and coldly. "I am going out for the rest of the afternoon. Perhaps you will be able to control yourself when I return."

It was not the most tactful speech in the world. But I was past caring whether Dicky were angry or pleased. I am not very quick to wrath, but when it is once roused my anger is intense.

"You know you are lying," he said loudly. "You are going to see this precious-cousin-brother-lover, whichever he may be."

My fear that Katie or his mother would hear him overcame the primitive impulse I had to avenge the insolent words with a blow, as a man would.

"You will apologize for that language to me when I come back," I said icily. "I do not know whether I shall go to bid Jack good-bye or not. I have no idea what I shall do, save that I must get away from here for a little while. But if you have any sense of the ordinary decencies of life you will lower your voice. I do not suppose you care to have either your mother or Katie overhear this edifying conversation."

"Much you care about what my mother thinks," Dicky rejoined, and this time his voice was querulous, but decidedly lower. "Fine courteous treatment you're giving her, leaving her like this when she has been in the house but a couple of hours."

"Your mother has shown such eagerness for my society that no doubt she will be heartbroken if she awakens and finds that I am not here."

"That's right, slam my mother. Why didn't you say in the first place you couldn't bear to have her in the same house with you?"

"Dicky, you are most unjust," I began hotly, and then stopped horror-stricken.

"What is the matter, my son?" The incisive voice of my mother-in-law sounded from the door of her room.

"Go back to bed, mother," Dicky said hastily. "I'm awfully sorry we disturbed you."

"Disturbing me doesn't matter," she said decidedly, "but what you were saying does. I heard you mention me, and I naturally wish to know if I am the subject of this very remarkable conversation."

I know now where Dicky gets the sneering tone which sets me wild when he directs it against me. His mother's inflection is exactly like her son's. The contemptuous glance with which she swept me nerved me to speak to her in a manner which I had never dreamed I would use toward Dicky's mother.

"Mrs. Graham," I said, raising my head and returning her stare with a look equally cold and steady, "my husband"—I emphasized the words slightly—"and I are discussing something which cannot possibly concern you. You were not the subject of conversation, and your name was brought in by accident. I hope you will be good enough to allow us to finish our discussion."

My mother-in-law evidently knows when to stop. She eyed me steadily for a moment.

"Dicky," she said at last, and her manner of sweeping me out of the universe was superb, "in five minutes I wish to speak to you in my room."

"All right, mother." Dicky's tone was unsteady, and as his mother's door closed behind her I prepared

myself to face his increased anger.

"How dared you to speak to my mother in that fashion?" he demanded hoarsely.

When I am most angry, a diabolically aggravating spirit seems to possess me. I could feel it enmeshing me.

"Please don't be melodramatic, Dicky," I said mockingly, "and if you have quite finished, I will go."

"No, you won't, at least not until I have told you something," he snarled.

He sprang to my side, and seized my shoulder in a cruel grip that made me wince.

"We'll just have this out once for all," he said. "If you go out of this door you go out for good. I don't care for the role of complacent husband."

The insult left me deadly cold. I knew, of course, that Dicky was so blinded by rage and jealousy that he had no idea of what he was saying. But ungovernable as I knew his temper to be, he had passed the limits of my forbearance.

"I will answer that speech in 10 minutes," I said and walked into my room again.

For I had come to a decision as startling as it was sudden. I hastily threw some most necessary things into a bag. Then I put a ten-dollar bill of the housekeeping money into my purse, resolving to send it back to Dicky as soon as I could get access to my own tiny bank account, the remnant of my teaching savings. Into a parcel I placed the rest of the housekeeping money, my wedding and engagement rings and the lavalliere which Dicky had given me as a wedding present. I put them in the back of the top drawer of my dressing table, for I knew if I handed them to Dicky in his present frame of mind he would destroy them. Then I walked steadily into the living room, bag in hand.

Dicky was nowhere to be seen, but I heard the murmur of voices in his mother's room. I went to the door and knocked. Dicky threw it open, his face still showing the marks of his anger.

"You will find the housekeeping money in the top drawer of my dressing table," I said calmly. "I will send you my address as soon as I have one, and you will please have Katie pack up my things and send them to me."

I turned and went swiftly to the door. As I closed it after me, I thought I heard Dicky cry out hoarsely. But I did not stop.

## **XV**

### **"BUT I LOVE YOU"**

With my bag in my hand, I fairly fled down the stairs which led from our third floor apartment to the street. I had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do. Only one idea possessed me—to put as much space as possible between me and the apartment which held my husband and his mother.

Reaching the street, I started to walk along it briskly. But, trembling as I was from the humiliating scene I had just gone through, I saw that I could not walk indefinitely, and that I must get to some place at once where I could be alone and think.

"Taxi, ma'am?"

A taxi whose driver evidently had been watching me in the hope of a fare rolled up beside me.

I dived into it gratefully. At least in its shelter I would be alone and safe from observation for a few minutes, long enough for me to decide what to do next.

"Where to, ma'am?"

I searched my memory wildly for a moment. Where to, indeed! But the chauffeur waited.

"Brooklyn Bridge," I said desperately.

"Very well, ma'am," and in another minute we were speeding swiftly southward.

As I cowered against the cushions of the taxi, with burning cheeks and crushed spirit, I realized that my marriage with Dicky was not a yoke that I could wear or not as I pleased. It was still on my shoulders, heavy just now, but a burden that I realized I loved and could not live without.

And I had thought to end it all when I dashed out of the apartment!

I knew that I could have done nothing else but walk out after Dicky uttered his humiliating ultimatum. But I also knew Dicky well enough to realize that when he came to himself he would regret what he had done and try to find me. I must make it an easy task for him.

So I decided my destination quickly. I would go to my old boarding place, where my mother and I had lived and where I had first met Dicky. My kindly old landlady, Mrs. Stewart, was one of my best friends. Without telling too broad a falsehood, I could make her believe I had come to spend the night with her. The next day, I hoped, would solve its own problems.

"This is the bridge entrance, ma'am." The chauffeur's voice broke my reverie. I had made my decision just in time.

How fortunate it was that I had chosen the Brooklyn Bridge destination! I had only to walk up the stairs to the elevated train that took me within three squares of Mrs. Stewart's home.

"Bless your heart, child, but I am glad to see you!" was Mrs. Stewart's hearty greeting. Then she glanced at my bag. I hastened to explain.

"Mr. Graham's mother is with us, so I haven't any scruples about leaving him alone," I said lightly. "It's so far over here I thought I would stay the night with you, so that we could have the good long visit I promised you when I was here last."

"That's splendid," she agreed heartily, "and I'll wager you can't guess who's here."

My prophetic soul told me the answer even before I saw the tall figure emerge from an immense easy chair which had effectually concealed him.

I was to bid Jack good-bye after all.

Mrs. Stewart closed the door behind her softly as Jack came over to my side.

"What is the matter, Margaret?" he said tensely.

"Nothing at all." I told the falsehood gallantly, but it did not convince Jack.

"You can't make me believe that, Margaret," he said gravely. "I know you too well. Tell me, have you quarrelled with your husband?"

Jack has played the elder brother role to me for so long that the habit of obedience to him is second nature to me.

"Yes," I said faintly.

"Over me?" The question was quick and sharp.

I nodded.

"You showed him my letter? Of course, I wished you to do so."

"Yes."

"How serious is the quarrel? I see you have a bag with you."

"It depends upon my husband's attitude how serious it is," I replied. "He made an issue of my not doing something which I felt I must do. Then he lost his temper and said things which if they are to be repeated, will keep me away forever!"

I saw Jack's fists clench, and into his eyes there flashed a queer light. I knew what it was. Before he knew I was married he had told me of his long secret love for me. That he was fighting the temptation to let the breach between Dicky and me widen, I knew as well as if he had told me.

Another moment, however, and he was master of himself again.

"Sit down," he commanded tersely, and when I had obeyed he drew a chair close to my side.

"My poor child," he said tenderly, "I know nothing about your husband, so I cannot judge this quarrel. But I am afraid in this marriage game you will learn that there must be a lot of giving up on both sides. Now I know you to be absolutely truthful. Tell me, is there any possibility that the overtures for a reconciliation ought to come from you?"

"He told me that if I went out of the door, I must go out of it for good," I said hotly, and could have bitten my tongue out for the words the next moment.

Jack drew a long breath.

"Did he think you were going to see me?"

"I believe he had that idea, yes."

"Is he the sort of a man who always says what he means or does he say outrageous things when he is angry that he does not mean in the least?"

"He has a most ungovernable temper, but he gets over the attacks quickly, and I know he doesn't mean all he says."

"That settles it." Jack sprang up, and going to a stand in the corner took his hat and coat and stick.

"What are you going to do, Jack?" I gasped.

"I am going to find your husband and send him after you," he said sternly.

"Jack, you mustn't," I said wildly.

"But I must," he returned firmly. "You have quarrelled over me. I could not cross the water leaving you in an unsettled condition like this."

He came swiftly to my side, and took my hands firmly in his.

"Margaret, remember this, if I die or live, all I am and all I have is at your service. If I die there will be enough, thank heaven, to make you independent of any one. If I live—"

He hesitated for a long moment, then stooped closer to me.

"This may be a caddish thing to do, but it is borne in upon me that I ought to tell you this before I go. I hope the settling of this quarrel will be the beginning of a happier life for you. But if things should ever get really unbearable in your life, bad enough for divorce, I mean, remember that the dearest wish of my life would be fulfilled if I could call you wife. Good-by, Margaret. God bless and keep you."

I felt the touch of his lips against my hair.

Then he released me and went quickly out of the room.

It was hard work for me to obey Mrs. Stewart's command to eat the supper that she soon brought me on a tray. Every nerve was tense in anticipation of the meeting between Dicky and Jack, which I could not avoid, and which I so dreaded. What was happening at my home while I sat here, my hands tied by my own foolish act?

I did not realize that Mrs. Stewart's suspense was also intense until the door bell rang and she ran to answer it.

I stole to the door and noiselessly opened it just enough to be able to hear the voices in the lower hall. I heard the hall door open and then a sound of a voice that sent me back to my chair breathless with terrified happiness.

Dicky had arrived!

He ran up the stairs, two steps at a time, and knocked at the door of the room in which I sat.

"Come in," I said faintly.

I felt as if my feet were shod with lead. Much as I loved him, great as was my joy at seeing him, I could no more have stirred from where I was sitting than I could have taken wings and flown to him.

There was no need for my moving, however. Dicky has the most abominable temper of any person I



know, but he is as royal in his repentance as in his rages.

He crossed the room at almost a bound, his eyes shining, his face aglow, his whole handsome figure vibrant with life and love.

"Sweetheart! sweetheart!" he murmured, as he folded me in his arms, "will you forgive your bad boy this once more? I have been a jealous, insulting brute, but I swear to you—"

I put up my hand and covered his lips. I had heard him say something like this too many times before to have much faith in his oath. Besides, there is something within me that makes me abhor anything which savors of a scene. Dicky was mine again, my old, impulsive, kingly lover. I wanted no promises which I knew would be made only to be broken.

It was a long time before either of us spoke again, and then Dicky drew a deep breath.

"I have a confession to make about your cousin, Madge," he began, carefully avoiding my eyes, "and I might as well get it over with before we go home. Mother's probably asleep, but she might wake up, and then there would be no chance for any talk by ourselves."

"Don't tell me anything unless you wish to do so, Dicky," I replied gently. "I am content to leave things just as they are without question."

"No," Dicky said stubbornly, "it's due you and it's due your cousin that I tell you this. I don't often make a bally ass of myself, but when I do I am about as willing a person to eat dirt about it as you can find."

I never shall get used to Dicky's expressions. The language in which he couched his repentance seemed so uncouth to me that I mentally shivered. Outwardly I made no sign, however.

"When he came to the apartment," Dicky went on, "I was just about as nearly insane as a man could be. I had no idea where you had gone and I had just had the devil's own time with my mother and Katie over your sudden departure."

"What did your mother say to all this?"

I asked the question timorously.

Dicky laughed. "Well! of course she didn't go into raptures over the affair," he said, "but I think she learned a lesson. At least I endeavored to help her learn one. I read the riot act to her after you left."

"Oh! Dicky!" I protested, "that was hardly fair?"

"I know it," he admitted shamefacedly. "I am afraid I did rather take it out on the mater when I found you had really gone. But she deserved a good deal of it. You have done everything in your power to make things pleasant for her since she came, and she has treated you about as shabbily as was possible."

"Oh! not that bad, Dicky," I protested again, but I knew in my heart that what he said was true. His mother had treated me most unfairly. I could not help a little malicious thrill of pleasure that he had finally resented it for me.

"Just that bad, little Miss Forgiveness," Dicky returned, smiling at me tenderly.

My heart leaped at the words. When Dicky is in good humor he coins all sorts of tender names for me. I knew that to Dicky our quarrel was as if it had never happened.

"I'll give you a pointer about mother, Madge," Dicky went on. "When you see her, act as if nothing had happened at all, it's the only way to manage her. She can be most charming when she wants to be, but every once in a while she takes one of those silent tantrums, and there is no living with her until she gets over it."

I didn't make any comment on this speech, fearing to say the wrong thing.

"But I didn't start to tell you about Katie." Dicky switched the subject determinedly. "I might as well get it off my chest. When your cousin came in and introduced himself the first thing I did was to attempt to strike him."

"Oh, Dicky, Dicky," I moaned, horrified, "what did he do?"

Dicky's lips twisted grimly.

"Just put out his hand and caught my arm, saying with that calm and quiet voice of his:

"I shall not return any blow you may give me, Mr. Graham, so please do not do anything you will regret when you recover yourself!"

"I realized his strength of body and the grip he had on my arm and even my half-crazed brain recognized the power of his spirit. I came to, apologized, and we had a long talk that made me realize what a thundering good fellow he must be.

"I don't see why you never fell in love with him," Dicky continued. "He's a better man than I am," he paraphrased half wistfully.

"But I love YOU," I whispered.

Across Dicky's face there fell a shadow. I realized that thoughtlessly I had wounded him.

## XVI

### INTERRUPTED SIGHT-SEEING

"Margaret!" My mother-in-law's tone was almost tragic. "Richard has gone off with my trunk checks."

"Why, of course, he has," I returned, wondering a little at her anxious tone. "I suppose he expects to give them to an expressman and have the trunks brought up this morning."

"Richard never remembered anything in his life," said his mother tartly. "Those trunks ought to be here before I leave for the day."

"Oh, I don't think it would be possible for them to arrive here before we have to start, even if Dicky gives them to an expressman right away, as I am sure he will do."

It seemed queer to be defending Dicky to his mother, but I felt a curious little thrill of resentment that she should criticise him. I sometimes may judge Dicky harshly myself, but I don't care to hear criticism of him from any other lips, even those of his mother.

"Richard will carry those checks in his pocket until he comes home again, if he is lucky enough not to lose them," said his mother decidedly. "I wish you would telephone him at his studio and remind him that they must be looked after."

Obediently I went to the telephone. I knew Dicky had had plenty of time to get to the studio, as it was but a short walk from our apartment.

"Madison Square 3694," I said in answer to Central's request for "number."

When the answer came I almost dropped the receiver in my surprise. It was not Dicky's voice that came to my ears, but that of a stranger, a woman's voice, rich and musical.

"Yes?" with a rising inflection, "this is Mr. Graham's studio. He has not yet reached here. What message shall I give him, please, when he comes in?"

"Please ask him to call up his home." Then I hung up the receiver and turned from the telephone, putting down my agitation with a firm hand until I could be alone.

"Dicky has not yet reached the studio," I said to his mother calmly. "I think very probably he has gone first to see an expressman about your trunks. If you will pardon me I have a few things to attend to before we start on our trip. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you." Mrs. Graham's tone was still the cold, courteous one that she used in addressing me. "I suppose I can ring for Katie when I am ready to have my dress fastened?"

"Oh! by all means," I returned. I thought bitterly of the little services I used to perform for my own mother. How gladly I would anticipate the wants of Dicky's mother if she would only show me affection instead of the ill-concealed aversion with which she regarded me.

My mother-in-law went into her room, and I, walking swiftly to mine, closed and locked the door behind me. I threw myself face downward on the bed, my favorite posture when I wished to think things out.

The voice of the woman at the studio haunted me. It was strange, but familiar, and I could not remember where I had heard it.

What was a woman doing in Dicky's studio at this time in the morning, anyway? I knew that Dicky employed feminine models, but I also knew that he always made it a point to be at the studio before the model was due to arrive.

"I suppose I am an awful crank," he had laughed once, "but no models rummaging among my things for mine."

I knew that Dicky employed no secretary, or at least he had told me that he did not. I had heard him laughingly promise himself that when his income reached \$10,000 a year he would hire one.

All at once the solution to the mystery dawned upon me. The rich, musical voice belonged to Grace Draper, the beautiful girl whom Dicky had seen first on a train on our memorable trip to Marvin.

Why hadn't Dicky told me that she was at the studio? The question rankled in the back of my brain.

That was not my main concern, however. What swept me with a sudden primitive emotion, which I know must be jealousy, was the picture of that beautiful face, that wonderful figure in daily close companionship with my husband.

Suppose she should fall in love with Dicky! To my mind I did not see how any woman could help it. Would she have any scruples about endeavoring to win Dicky's love from me?

My common sense told me that this was the veriest nonsense. But I could no more help my feelings than I could control the shape of my nose.

The ring of the telephone bell put a temporary end to my speculations. I pulled myself together in order to talk calmly to Dicky, for I knew it must be he who was calling.

"Madge, is this you? Whatever has happened?"

"Nothing is the matter," I said quickly, "but you have your mother's trunk checks, and she is anxious about them."

"By Jove!" Dicky's voice was full of consternation. "I forgot everything about those trunk checks until this minute. I should have attended to them yesterday, but"—he hesitated, then finished lamely—"I didn't have time."

I felt my face flush as though Dicky could see me. The reason why he did not have time to see to his mother's trunks on the day of her arrival, touched a subject any allusion to which would always bring a flush to my face.

I was still too shaken with the varying emotions I had experienced the day before to bear well any reference to them, no matter how casual. Fortunately, Dicky was too much taken up with his own remissness to notice my silence.

"I'll go out this minute and attend to them," he said. "Try to keep the mater's mind diverted from them if you can. Better get her away on your sight-seeing trip as soon as possible."

Having thus shifted his responsibilities to my shoulders, Dicky blithely hung up the receiver. I turned to his mother.

"Well!" she demanded.

"He is going out now to attend to the trunks," I said.

"There! I knew he had forgotten them," she exclaimed, with a little malicious feminine triumph running through her tones. "When will they be here?"

"Not before noon at the earliest," I repeated Dicky's words in as matter-of-fact way as possible. "Probably not until 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon. We might as well start on our trip. Katie is perfectly capable of attending to them."

Then she said, "How soon will you be ready?"

"I am afraid it will be half an hour before I can start," I said apologetically.

"That will be all right," my mother-in-law returned good humoredly. She was evidently much pleased at the prospect of the trip.

"It's wonderful! Wonderful!" she said as the full view of New York harbor burst upon our eyes when we came out of the subway and rounded the Barge office into Battery Park.

"Wait a moment. I want to fill my soul with it."

I felt my heart warm toward her. I have always loved the harbor. Many treasured hours have I spent watching it from the sea wall or from the deck of one of the Staten Island ferries. To me it is like a loved friend. I enjoy hearing its praises, I shrink from hearing it criticised. Mrs. Graham's hearty admiration made me feel more kindly toward her than I had yet done.

Neither of us spoke again for several minutes. My gaze followed my mother-in-law's as she turned from one marvel of the view to another.

At last she turned to me, her face softened. "I am ready to go on now," she said. "I have always loved the remembrance of this harbor since I first saw it years ago."

We walked slowly on toward the Aquarium, both of us watching the ships as they came into the bay from the North river. The fussy, spluttering little tugs, the heavily laden ferries, the lazy fishing boats, the dredges and scows—even the least of them was made beautiful by its setting of clear winter sun and sparkling water.

"How few large ocean steamers there seem to be!" commented my mother-in-law, as a large ocean-going vessel cast off its tug and glided past us on its way out to sea. "I suppose it is on account of the war," she continued indifferently.

At this moment I heard a comment from a passing man that brought back to me the misery of the day before.

"I guess that's the Saturn," he said to his companion as they walked near us. "She was due to sail this morning. Got a lot of French reservists on board. Poor devils! Anybody getting into that hell over there has about one chance in a million to get out again."

Forgetful of my mother-in-law's presence, indeed, of everything else in the world, I turned and gazed at the steamer making its way out to sea. I knew that somewhere on its decks stood Jack, my brother-cousin, the best friend my mother and I had ever known. When he had come back from a year's absence to ask me to be his wife he had found that I had married Dicky. Then he had announced his intention of joining the French engineering corps.

What had that man said just now? Not one chance in a million! I felt as if it were my hand that was pushing him across the ocean to almost certain death.

When I could no longer see the Saturn as she churned her way out to sea, I turned around quickly with a sense of guilt at having ignored my mother-in-law's presence, and then a voice sounded in my ear.

"You don't seem delighted to see me. I am surprised at you."

Harry Underwood towered above me, his handsome face marred by the little, leering smile he generally wears, his bold, laughing eyes staring down into my horrified ones.

I do not believe that ever a woman of a more superstitious time dreaded the evil eye as I do the glance of Harry Underwood.

How to answer him or what to do I did not know. He evidently had been drinking enough to make himself irresponsible.

He did not give me time to ponder long, however, "Who is your lady friend," he burlesqued. "Introduce me."

A man less audacious than Harry Underwood would have been daunted by the picture my mother-in-law presented as he turned toward her. Her figure was drawn up to its extreme height, and she was surveying him through her lorgnette with an expression that held disgust mingled with the curiosity an explorer might feel at meeting some strange specimen of animal in his travels.

"Mrs. Graham, this is Mr. Underwood," I managed to stammer. "Mr.

Underwood, Mrs. Graham, Dicky's mother."

My mother-in-law may overawe ordinary people, but Harry Underwood minded her disdain no more than he would have the contempt of a stately Plymouth Rock hen. She had lowered the lorgnette as I spoke, and he grabbed the hand which still held it, shaking it as warmly as if it belonged to some long-lost friend.

"Well! Well!" he said effusively. "But this is great. Dear old Dicky's mother!" He stopped and fixed a speculating stare upon her. "You mean his sister," he said reprovingly to me. "Don't tell me you mean his mother. No, no, I can't believe that."

He shook his head solemnly. Evidently he was much impressed with himself. If I had not been so miserable I could have smiled at the idea of Harry Underwood trying on the elder Mrs. Graham the silly specious flatteries he addressed to most women. My mother-in-law did not deign to answer him. Her manner was superb in its haughty reserve, although I could not say much for her courtesy. As he released her hand she let it drop quietly to her side and stood still, gazing at him with a quiet, disdainful look that would have made almost any other man wince.

But it did not bother Harry Underwood in the least. He gave her a shrewd appraising look and then turned to me with an air of dismissal that was as complete as her ignoring of him.

"Say!" he demanded, "aren't you a bit curious about what brought me down here? You ought to be. The funniest thing in the world, my being down here."

His silly repetitions, his slurred enunciation, his slightly unsteady figure made me realize with a quick horror that the man was more intoxicated than I supposed. How to get away from him as quickly as possible was the problem I faced. I decided to humor him as I would any other insane person I dreaded.

"I am never curious," I responded lightly. "I suppose, of course, that you are here to visit the Aquarium, as we are. Good-by."

"No you don't—goin' to take you and little lady here on nice ferry trip," he announced genially. "Sorry, yacht's out of commission this morning, but ferry will do very well."

I have not much reason to like my mother-in-law, but I shall always be grateful to her for the way she cut the Gordian knot of my difficulties.

"Young man, you are impertinent and intoxicated," she said haughtily. "Please step aside."

And taking me firmly by the arm my mother-in-law walked steadily with me toward the door of the women's rest room. Her manner of conducting me was much the same as the matron of a reformatory would use in taking a charge from one place to another, but I was too relieved to care. The leering face of Harry Underwood was no longer before my eyes, and his befuddled words no longer jarred upon my ears. Those were the only things that mattered to me for the moment. In my relief I felt strong enough to brave the weight of my mother-in-law's anger, which I was very sure was about to descend upon me.

## **XVII**

### **A DANGER AND A PROBLEM**

Safe in the shelter of the Aquarium rest room my mother-in-law faced me. Her eyes were cold and hard, her tones like ice, as she spoke.

"Margaret! What is the meaning of this outrageous scene to which you have just subjected me? Am I to understand that this man is typical of your associates and friends? If so, I am indeed sorrier than ever that my son was ever inveigled into marrying you."

For the moment I had a primitive instinct to scream and to smash things generally, a sort of Berserk rage. The insult left me deadly cold. Fortunately we were alone in the room, but I lowered my voice almost to a whisper as I replied to her:

"Mrs. Graham," I said. "I never in my life knew there was a man like Mr. Underwood until I married

your son. He and his wife, Lillian Gale, are your son's most intimate friends. He has almost forced me to meet them time and again against my own inclinations. Of course, after what you have just said, there can be no further question of our trip together. If you will kindly wait here I will telephone your son to come and get you at once."

I started for the door, but a little gasping cry from my mother-in-law stopped me. She was feebly beating the air with her hands, her eyes were distended, and her cheeks and lips had the ashen color which I had learned to associate with my own little mother's frequent attacks.

Filled with remorse, I flew to her side and lowered her gently into an arm chair which stood near. Snatching her handbag I opened it and took out a little bottle of volatile salts which I knew she carried. I pressed it into her hands, and then took out a tiny bottle of drops with a familiar label. They were the same that my mother had used for years. Taking a spoon which I also found in the bag, I measured the drops, added a bit of water from the faucet in the adjoining room, and gave them to her. As I came toward her I heard her murmuring to herself:

"Lillian Gale! Lillian Gale!" she was saying. "How blind I've been."

Even in my anxiety for her condition I found time to wonder as to the significance of her exclamations. Evidently the name of Lillian Gale was familiar to her. From her tones also I knew that it was not a welcome name. What was there in this past friendship of Dicky and Mrs. Underwood to cause his mother so much emotion? I remembered the comments I had heard at the theatre about my husband's friendship with this woman.

All my old doubts and misgivings which had been smothered by the very real admiration I had felt for Lillian Gale's many good qualities revived. What was the secret in the lives of these two? I felt that for my own peace of mind I must know.

The color was gradually coming back to my mother-in-law's face. I stood by her chair, forgetting her insults, remembering nothing save that she was old and a sick woman.

"Is there anything I can get for you?" I asked as I saw the strained look in her eyes die out.

"Nothing, thank you," she said. Then to my surprise she reached up her hand, took mine in hers, and pressed it feebly. I could not understand her quick transition from bitter contempt to friendly warmth. Evidently something in my words had startled her and had changed her viewpoint. But I put speculation aside until some more opportune time. The imperative thing for me was to minister to her needs, mentally and physically.

"How do you feel now?" I asked.

"Much better, thank you," she replied. Then in a tone I had never heard from her lips before: "Come here, my child."

I could hardly credit my own ears. Surely those gentle words, that soft tone, could not belong to my husband's mother, who, in the short time she had been an inmate of our home, had lost no opportunity to show her dislike for me, and her resentment that her son had married me.

But I obeyed her and came to her side. She put up her hand and took mine, and I saw her proud old face work with emotion.

"I was unjust to you a few moments ago, Margaret," she said, "and I want to beg your pardon."

If she had not been old, in feeble health and my husband's mother, I would have considered the words scant reparation for the contemptuous phrases with which she had scourged my spirit a few moments before.

But I was sane enough to know that the simple "I beg your pardon" from the lips of the elder Mrs. Graham was equivalent to a whole torrent of apologies from any ordinary person. I knew my mother-in-law's type of mind. To admit she was wrong, to ask for one's forgiveness, was to her a most bitter thing.

So I put aside from me every other feeling but consideration of the proud old woman holding my hand, and said gently:

"I can assure you that I cherish no resentment. Let us not speak of it again."

"I am afraid we shall have to speak of it, at least of the incident which led me to say the things to you I did," she returned. I saw with amazement that she was trying to conquer an emotion, the reason for which I felt certain had something to do with her discovery that the Underwoods were Dick's friends.

"I have a duty to you to perform," she went on, "a very painful duty, which involves the reviving of an old controversy with my son. I beg that you will not try to find out anything concerning its nature. It is far better that you do not."

I felt smothered, as if I were being swathed in folds upon folds of black cloth. What could this mystery be, this secret in the past friendship of my husband and Lillian Gale, the woman whom he had introduced to me as his best friend, and into whose companionship and that of her husband, Harry Underwood, he had thrown me as much as possible.

A hot anger rose within me. What right had anyone to deny knowledge of such a secret, or to discourage me in any attempt to find out its nature. I resolved to lose no time in probing the unworthy thing to its depths.

My mother-in-law's next words crystallized my determination.

"I think I ought to see Richard at once," she said. "I am sorry to give up our trip. I had quite counted upon seeing some of old New York today, but I wish to lose no time in seeing him. Besides, I do not think I am equal to further sightseeing."

"It will be of no use for you to go home," I said smoothly, "for Richard will not be there, and he has left the studio by now, I am sure. He has an engagement with an art editor this afternoon. We may not be able to look at the churches you wished to see, but you ought to have some luncheon before we go home. I will call a cab and we will go over to Fraunces's Tavern, one of the most interesting places in New York. You know Washington said farewell to his officers in the long room on the second floor."

The first part of my sentence was a deliberate falsehood. I had no reason to believe Dicky would not be at his studio all day, but I had resolved that no one should speak to my husband on the subject of the secret which his past and that of Lillian Gale shared until I had had a chance to talk to him about it.

I do not know when a simple problem has so perplexed me as did the dilemma I faced while sitting opposite my mother-in-law at lunch in Fraunces's Tavern.

With the obstinacy of a spoiled child the elder Mrs. Graham was persisting in sitting with her heavy coat on while she ate her luncheon, although our table was next to the big, old fireplace, in which a good fire was burning. Indeed, it was the table's location, which she had selected herself, that was the cause of her obstinacy. She had construed an innocent remark of mine into a slur upon her choice, and had evidently decided to wear her coat to emphasize the fact that in spite of the fire she was none too warm, and there she had sat all through lunch with her heavy coat on.

As I watched the beads of perspiration upon her forehead, and her furtive dabbing at them with her handkerchief, I realized that something must be done. I saw that she would soon be in a condition to receive a chill, which might prove fatal.

Suddenly her imperious voice broke into my thoughts.

"Where is the Long Room of which you spoke? On the second floor?"

"Yes. Would you like to see it?"

"Very much." She rose from her chair, crossed the dining room into the hall and ascended the staircase, and I followed her upward, noting again, with a quick remorsefulness, her slow step, the way she leaned upon the stair rail for support and her quickened breathing as she neared the top. It was a little thing, after all, I told myself sharply, to subordinate my individuality and cater to her whims. I resolved to be more considerate of her in the future. But my native caution made me make a reservation. I would yield to her wishes whenever my self-respect would let me do so. I had a shrewd notion that a person who would cater to every whim of my husband's mother would be little better than a slave.

She spent so much time over the old letters in Washington's handwriting, the snuff boxes and keys and coins with which the cases were filled that I was alarmed lest she should over-tire herself. But I did not dare to venture the suggestion that she should postpone her inspection until another time.

But when I saw her shiver and draw her cloak more closely about her, I resolved to brave her possible displeasure.

"I am afraid you are taking cold," I said, going up to her. "Do you think we had better leave the rest of these things for another visit?"

Her face as she turned it toward me frightened me. It was gray and drawn, and her whole figure was

shaking as with the ague.

"I am afraid I am going to be ill," she said faintly. "I am so cold."

I put her in a chair and dashed down the stairs.

"Please call a taxi for me at once, and bring some brandy or wine upstairs," I said to the attendant. "My mother-in-law is ill."

As the taxi hurried us homeward I became more and more alarmed at her condition. Her very evident suffering now heightened my fears.

"Are we nearly there?" she said faintly. "I am so cold."

"Only a few blocks more." I tried to speak reassuringly. Then I ventured on something which I had wanted to do ever since we left the tavern, but which my mother-in-law's dislike of being aided in any way had prevented.

I slipped off my coat, and, turning toward her, wrapped it closely around her shoulders, and took her in my arms as I would a child. To my surprise she huddled closer to me, only protesting faintly:

"You must not do that. You will take cold."

"Nonsense," I replied. "I never take cold, and we are almost there."

"I am so glad," she sighed, and leaned more heavily against me.

As I felt her weight in my arms and realized that she was actually clinging to me, actually depending upon me for help and comfort, I felt my heart warm toward her.

I have never worked faster in my life than when I helped my mother-in-law undress before the blazing gas log, put her nightgown and heavy bathrobe around her and immersed her feet in the foot bath of hot mustard water which Katie had brought to me.

As I worked over her I came to a decision. I would get her safe and warm in bed, leave Katie within call, then slip out and telephone Dicky from the neighboring drug store. I did not dare to send for a physician against my mother-in-law's expressed prohibition. On the other hand, I knew that Dicky would be very angry if I did not send for one.

The hot footbath and the steaming drink which I had given her when she first came in, together with the warmth of the gas log seemed to make my mother-in-law more comfortable. As I dried her feet and slipped them into a pair of warm bedroom slippers she smiled down at me.

"At least I am not cold now," she said.

"Don't you think you had better come and lie down now?" I asked.

"Yes, I think it would be better," she asserted, and with Katie and me upon either side, she walked into her room and got into bed.

I slipped the bedroom slippers off, put one hot water bag to her feet and the other to her back, covered her up warmly and lowered the shade.

Her eyes closed immediately. I stood watching her breathing for two or three minutes. It was heavier, I fancied than normal. As I went out of the room I spoke in a low tone to Katie, directing her to watch her till I returned.

As I descended the stairs all the doubts of the morning rushed over me. It was long after 2 o'clock, the hour when Dicky usually returned to the studio. I had jumped at the conclusion that Dicky was lunching with Grace Draper, the beautiful art student who was his model and protégé.

It was not so much anger that I felt at Dicky's lunching with another woman as fear. I faced the issue frankly. Grace Draper was much too beautiful and attractive a girl to be thrown into daily intimate companionship with any man. I felt in that moment that I hated her as much as I feared her. I hoped that it would not be her voice which I would hear over the 'phone. I felt that I could not bear to listen to those deep, velvety tones of hers.

But when I reached the drug store and entered the telephone booth, it was her voice which answered my call of Dicky's number.

"Yes, this is Mr. Graham's studio," she said smoothly. "No, Mr. Graham is not here, he has not been



here since 11 o'clock. Pardon me, is this not Mrs. Graham to whom I am speaking?"

"I am Mrs. Graham, yes," I replied, trying to put a little cordiality into my voice. "You are Miss Draper, are you not?"

"Yes," she replied. "Mr. Graham wished me to give you a message. He was called away to a conference with one of the art editors about 11 o'clock. He expected to lunch with him and said he might not be in the studio until quite late this afternoon."

"Have you any idea where he is lunching or where I could reach him?" I asked sharply.

"Why! no, Mrs. Graham, I have not. Is there anything wrong?"

"His mother has been taken ill and I am very much worried about her. If Mr. Graham comes in or telephones will you ask him to come home at once, 'phoning me first if he will."

"Of course I will attend to it. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Nothing, thank you, you are very kind," I returned, and there was genuine warmth in my voice this time.

For the discovery that I had been mistaken in my idea of Dicky's luncheon engagement made me so ashamed of myself that I had no more rancor against my husband's beautiful protégé.

I laughed bitterly at my own silliness as I turned from the telephone. While I had been tormenting myself for hours at the picture I had drawn of Dicky and his beautiful model lunching vis-a-vis, Dicky had been keeping a prosaic business engagement with a man, and his model had probably lunched frugally and unromantically on a sandwich or two brought from home.

## XVIII

### "CALL ME MOTHER—IF YOU CAN"

"Will you kindly tell me who is the best physician here?"

"Why—I—pardon me—" the drug store clerk stammered. "Wait a moment and I'll inquire. I'm new here."

"The boss says this chap's the best around here." He held out a penciled card to me. "Dr. Pettit. Madison Square 4258."

"Dr. Pettit!" I repeated to myself. "Why! that must be the physician who came to the apartment the night of my chafing dish party, when the baby across the hall was brought to us in a convulsion."

A sudden swift remembrance came to me of the tact and firmness with which the tall young physician had handled the difficult situation he had found in our apartment. He was just the man, I decided, to handle my refractory mother-in-law. So I called him up and he promised to call as soon as his office hours were over.

My feet traveled no faster than my thoughts as I hurried back to my own apartment and the bedside of my mother-in-law. I dreaded inexpressibly the conflict I foresaw when the autocratic old woman should find out that I had sent for a physician against her wishes.

As I entered the living room Katie rose from her seat at the door of my mother-in-law's room.

"She not move while you gone," she said. "She sleep all time, but I 'fraid she awful seeck, she breathe so hard."

I went lightly into the bedroom and stood looking down upon the austere old face against the pillow. It was a flushed old face now, and the eyelids twitched as if there were pain somewhere in the body. Her breathing, too, was more rapid and heavy than when I had left her, or so I fancied.

My inability to do anything for her depressed me. By slipping my hand under the blankets I had ascertained that the hot water bags were sufficiently warm. There was nothing more for me to do but

to sit quietly and watch her until the physician's arrival.

I wanted to bring Dr. Pettit to her bedside before she should awaken. Then I would let him deal with her obstinate refusal to see a physician. But how I wished that Dicky would come home.

As if I had rubbed Aladdin's lamp, I heard the hall door slam, and my husband came rushing into the room.

"What is the matter with mother?" Dicky demanded, his face and voice filled with anxiety.

I sprang to him and put my hand to his lips, for he had almost shouted the words.

"Hush! She is asleep," I whispered. "Don't waken her if you can help it."

"Why isn't there a doctor here?" he demanded fiercely.

"Dr. Pettit will be here in a very few moments," I whispered rapidly. "Your mother said she would not have a physician, but she appeared so ill I did not dare to wait until your return to the studio. I telephoned you, and when Miss Draper said she did not know where to get you, I 'phoned to Dr. Pettit on my own authority."

"You don't think mother is in any danger, do you, Madge?"

"Why, I don't think I am a good judge of illness," I answered, evasively, unwilling to hurt Dicky by the fear in my heart. "The physician ought to be here any minute now, and then we will know."

A sharp, imperative ring of the bell and Katie's entrance punctuated my words. Dicky started toward the door as Katie opened it to admit the tall figure of Dr. Pettit.

"Ah, Dr. Pettit I believe we have met before," Dicky said easily. "When Mrs. Graham spoke of you I did not remember that we had seen you so recently. I am glad that we were able to get you."

"Thank you," the physician returned gravely. "Where is the patient?"

"In this room." Dicky turned toward the bedroom door, and Dr. Pettit at once walked toward it. I mentally contrasted the two men as I followed them to my mother-in-law's room. There was a charming ease of manner about Dicky which the other man did not possess. He was, in fact, almost awkward in his movements, and decidedly stiff in his manner. But there was an appearance of latent strength in every line of his figure, a suggestion of power and ability to cope with emergencies. I had noticed it when he took charge of the baby in convulsions who had been brought to my apartment by its nurse. I marked it again as Dicky paused at the door of his mother's room.

"I don't know how you will manage, doctor." He smiled deprecatingly. "My mother positively refuses to see a physician, but we know she needs one."

"You are her nearest relative?" Dr. Pettit queried gravely, almost formally. His question had almost the air of securing a legal right for his entrance into the room.

"Oh, yes."

"Very well," and he stepped lightly to the side of the bed and stood looking down upon the sick woman.

He took out his watch, and I knew he was counting her respirations. Then, with the same impersonal air, he turned to Dicky.

"It will be necessary to rouse her. Will you awaken her, please? Do not tell her I am here. Simply waken her."

Dicky bent over his mother and took her hand.

"Mother, what was it you wished me to get for you?"

The elder Mrs. Graham opened her eyes languidly.

"I told you quinine," she said impatiently. As she spoke, Dr. Pettit reached past Dicky. His hand held a thermometer.

"Put this in your mouth, please." His air was as casual as if he had made daily visits to her for a fortnight.

But the elder Mrs. Graham was not to be so easily routed. She scowled up at him and half rose from her pillow.

"I do not wish a physician. I forbade having one called. I am not ill enough for a physician."

Dr. Pettit put out his left hand and gently put her back again upon her pillow. It was done so deftly that I do not think she realized what he had done until she was again lying down.

"You must not excite yourself," he said, still in the same grave, impersonal tone, "and you are more ill than you think. It is absolutely necessary that I get your temperature and examine your lungs at once."

As if the words had been a talisman of some sort, her opposition dropped from her. Into her face came a frightened look.

"Oh, doctor, you don't think I am going to have pneumonia, do you?"

I was amazed at the cry. It was like that of a terrified child. Dr. Pettit smiled down at her.

"We hope not. We shall do our best to keep it away. But you must help me. Put this in your mouth, please."

My mother-in-law obeyed him docilely. But my heart sank as I watched the physician's face.

Suddenly she cried out, "Richard! Richard, if I am in danger of pneumonia, as this doctor thinks, I want a trained nurse here at once, one who has had experience in pneumonia cases. Margaret means well, but threatened pneumonia with my heart needs more than good intentions."

"Of course, mother," Dicky acquiesced. "I was just about to suggest one to Dr. Pettit."

"But, doctor," Dicky said anxiously when we followed him into the living room, "where are we to find a nurse?"

"Fortunately," Dr. Pettit rejoined, "I have just learned that absolutely the best nurse I know is free. Her name is Miss Katherine Sonnot, and her skill and common sense are only equalled by her exquisite tact. She is just the person to handle the case, and if you will give me the use of your 'phone I think I can have her here within an hour."

"Of course," assented Dicky, and led the way to the telephone.

I did not hear what the physician said at first, but as he closed the conversation a note in his voice arrested my attention.

"You are sure you are not too tired? Very well. I will see you here tonight. Good-by."

Woman-like, I thought I detected a romance. The tenderness in his voice could mean but one thing, that he admired, perhaps loved the woman he had praised so extravagantly.

After he went away, promising to return in the evening, I busied myself with the services to my mother-in-law he had asked me to perform, and then sat down to wait for Miss Sonnot. Dicky wandered in and out like a restless ghost until I wanted to shriek from very nervousness.

But the first glimpse of the slender girl who came quietly into the room and announced herself as Miss Sonnot steadied me. She was a "slip of a thing," as my mother would have dubbed her, with great, wistful brown eyes that illumined her delicate face. But there was an air of efficiency about her every movement that made you confident she would succeed in anything she undertook.

I have always been such a difficult, reserved sort of woman that I have very few friends. I did not understand the impulse that made me resolve to win this girl's friendship if I could.

One thing I knew. The grave, sweet face, the steady eyes told me. One could lay a loved one's life in those slim, capable hands and rest assured that as far as human aid could go it would be safe.

"Keep her quiet. Above all things, do not let her get excited over anything."

Miss Sonnot was giving me my parting instructions as to the care of my sick mother-in-law before taking the sleep which she so sorely needed, on the day that Dr. Pettit declared my mother-in-law had passed the danger point. Thanks to her ministrations I had been able to sleep dreamlessly for hours. Now refreshed and ready for anything, I had prepared my room for her, and had accompanied her to it that I might see her really resting.

She was so tired that her eyes closed even as she gave me the admonition. I drew the covers closer about her, raised the window a trifle, drew down the shades, and left her.

As I closed the door softly behind me, I heard the querulous voice of the invalid:

"Margaret! Margaret! Where are you?"

As I bent over my husband's mother she smiled up at me. Her illness had done more to bridge the chasm, between us than years of companionship could have done. One cannot cherish bitterness toward an old woman helplessly ill and dependent upon one. And I think in her own peculiar way she realized that I was giving her all I had of strength and good will.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, returning her smile.

"I want something to eat, and after that I want to have a talk with Richard. Where is he?"

"He is asleep," I answered mechanically. In a moment my thoughts had flown back to the day my mother-in-law and I had met Harry Underwood in trip Aquarium, and she had discovered he was Lillian Gale's husband.

What was it Dicky's mother had said that day in the Aquarium rest room?

"I have a duty to you to perform," she had declared, "a very painful duty, which involves the reviving of an old controversy with my son. I beg that you will not try to find out anything concerning its nature. It is better far that you do not."

She had wished to go home at once and talk to Dicky. I had persuaded her to go first to Fraunces's Tavern for luncheon. There she had been taken ill, and in the days that had intervened between that time and the moment I leaned over her bedside she and we around her had been fighting for her life. There had been no opportunity for a confidential talk between mother and son. And I was determined that there should be none yet.

In the first place, she was in no condition to discuss any subject, let alone one fraught with so many possibilities of excitement. In the second place, I was determined that no one should discuss that old secret with my husband before I had a chance to talk to him concerning it.

"Well, you needn't go to sleep just because Richard is."

My mother-in-law's impatient voice brought me back to myself. I apologized eagerly.

I have never seen any one enjoy food as my mother-in-law did the simple meal I had prepared for her. She ate every crumb, drank the wine, and drained the pot of tea before she spoke.

"How good that tasted!" she said gratefully as she finished, sinking back against my shoulder. I had not only propped her up with pillows, but had sat behind her as she ate, that she might have the support of my body.

"I think I can take a long nap now," she went on. "When I awake send Richard to me."

I laid her down gently, arranged her pillows, and drew up the covers over her shoulders. She caught my hand and pressed it.

"My own daughter could not have been kinder to me than you have been," she said.

"I am glad to have pleased you, Mrs. Graham," I returned. I suppose my reply sounded stiff, but I could not forget the day she came to us, and her contemptuous rejection of Dicky's proposal that I should call her "Mother."

She frowned slightly. "Forget what I said that day I came," she said quickly. "Call me Mother, that is, if you can."

For a moment I hesitated. The memory of her prejudice against me would not down. Then I had an illuminative look into the narrowness of my own soul. The sight did not please me. With a sudden resolve I bent down and kissed the cheek of my husband's mother.

"Of course, Mother," I said quietly.

It must have been two hours at least that I sat watching the sick woman. She left her hand in mine a

long time, then, with a drowsy smile, she drew it away, turned over with her face to the wall, and fell into a restful sleep. I listened to her soft, regular breathing until the sunlight faded and the room darkened.

I must have dozed in my chair, for I did not hear Katie come in or go to the kitchen. The first thing that aroused me was a voice that I knew, the high-pitched tones of Lillian Gale Underwood.

"I tell you, Dicky-bird, it won't do. She's got to know the truth."

As Mrs. Underwood's shrill voice struck my ears, I sprang to my feet in dismay.

My first thought was of the sick woman over whom I was watching. Both Dr. Pettit and the nurse, Miss Sonnot, had warned us that excitement might be fatal to their patient.

And the one thing in the world that might be counted on to excite my mother-in-law was the presence of the woman whose voice I heard in conversation with my husband.

I rose noiselessly from my chair and went into the living room, closing the door after me. Then with my finger lifted warningly for silence I forced a smile of greeting to my lips as Lillian Underwood saw me and came swiftly toward me.

"Dicky's mother is asleep," I said in a low tone. "I am afraid I must ask you to come into the kitchen, for she awakens so easily."

Lillian nodded comprehendingly, but Dicky flushed guiltily as they followed me into the kitchen. Katie had left a few minutes before to run an errand for me.

Dicky's voice interrupted the words Lillian was about to speak to me. I hardly recognized it, hoarse, choked with feeling as it was.

"Lillian," he said, "you shall not do this. There is no need for you to bring all those old, horrible memories back. You have buried them and have had a little peace. If Madge is the woman I take her for she will be generous enough not to ask it, especially when I give her my word of honor that there is nothing in my past or yours which could concern her."

"You have the usual masculine idea of what might concern a woman," Lillian retorted tartly.

But I answered the appeal I had heard in my husband's voice even more than in his words.

"You do not need to tell me anything, Mrs. Underwood," I said gently, and at the words Dicky moved toward me quickly and put his arm around me.

I flinched at his touch. I could not help it. It was one thing to summon courage to refuse the confidence for which every tortured nerve was calling—it was another to bear the affectionate touch of the man whose whole being I had just heard cry out in attempt to protect this other woman.

Dicky did not notice any shrinking, but Mrs. Underwood saw it. I think sometimes nothing ever escapes her eyes. She came closer to me, gravely, steadily.

"You are very brave, Mrs. Graham, very kind, but it won't do. Dicky, keep quiet." She turned to him authoritatively as he started to speak. "You know how much use there is of trying to stop me when I make up my mind to anything."

She put one hand upon my shoulder.

"Dear child," she said earnestly, "will you trust me till tomorrow? I had thought that I must tell you right away, but your splendid generous attitude makes it possible for me to ask you this. I can see there is no place here where we can talk undisturbed. Besides, I must take no chance of your mother-in-law's finding out that I am here. Will you come to my apartment tomorrow morning any time after 10? Harry will be gone by then, and we can have the place to ourselves."

"I will be there at 10," I said gravely. I felt that her honesty and directness called for an explicit answer, and I gave it to her.

"Thank you." She smiled a little sadly, and then added: "Don't imagine all sorts of impossible things. It isn't a very pretty story, but I am beginning to hope that after you have heard it we may become very real friends."

Preposterous as her words seemed in the light of the things I had heard from the lips of my husband's

mother, they gave me a sudden feeling of comfort.

## XIX

### LILLIAN UNDERWOOD'S STORY

"Well, I suppose we might as well get it over with."

Lillian Underwood and I sat in the big tapestried chairs on either side of the glowing fire in her library. She had instructed Betty, her maid, to bring her neither caller nor telephone message, until our conference should be ended. The two doors leading from the room were locked and the heavy velvet curtains drawn over them, making us absolutely secure from intrusion.

"I suppose so." The answer was banal enough, but it was physically impossible for me to say anything more. My throat was parched, my tongue thick, and I clenched my hands tightly in my lap to prevent their trembling.

Mrs. Underwood gave me a searching glance, then reached over and laid her warm, firm hand over mine.

"See here, my child," she said gently, "this will never do. Before I tell you this story there is something you must be sure of. Look at me. No matter what else you may think of me do you believe me to be capable of telling you a falsehood when I make a statement to you upon my honor?"

Her eyes met mine fairly and squarely. Mrs. Underwood has wonderful eyes, blue-gray, expressive. They shone out from the atrocious mask of make-up which she always uses, and I unreservedly accepted the message they carried to me.

"I am sure you would not deceive me," I returned quickly, and meant it.

"Thank you. Then before I begin my story I am going to assure you of one thing, upon—my—honor."

She spoke slowly, impressively, her eyes never wavering from mine.

"You have heard rumors about Dicky and me; you will hear things from me today which will show you that the rumors were justified in part, and yet—I want you to believe me when I tell you that there is nothing in any past association of your husband and myself which would make either of us ashamed to look you straight in the eyes."

I believed her! I would challenge anyone in the world to look into those clear, honest eyes and doubt their owner's truth.

There was a long minute when I could not speak. I had not known the full measure of what I feared until her words lifted the burden from my soul.

Then I had my moment, recognized it, rose to it. I leaned forward and returned the earnest gaze of the woman opposite to me.

"Dear Mrs. Underwood," I said. "Why tell me any more? I am perfectly satisfied with what you have just told me. Be sure that no rumors will trouble me again."

Her clasp of my hand tightened until my rings hurt my flesh. Into her face came a look of triumph.

"I knew it," she said jubilantly. "I could have banked on you. You're a big woman, my dear, and I believe we are going to be real friends."

She loosened her clasp of my hands, leaned back in her chair and looked for a long, meditative moment at the fire.

"You cannot imagine how much easier your attitude makes the telling of my story," she began finally.

"But I just assured you that there was no need for the telling," I interrupted.

"I know. But it is your right to know, and it will be far better if you are put in possession of the facts."

It is an ugly story. I think I had better tell you the worst of it first."

I marvelled at the look that swept across her face. Bitter pain and humiliation were written there so plainly that I looked away. Then my eyes fell upon her strong, white, shapely hands which were resting upon the arms of the chair. They were strained, bloodless, where the fingers gripped the tapestried surface.

When she spoke, her voice was low, hurried, abashed. "Seven years ago," she said, "my first husband sued me for divorce, and named Dicky as a co-respondent."

I sprang from my seat.

"Oh, no, no, no," I cried, hardly knowing what I said. "Surely not. I remember reading the old story when you were married to Mr. Underwood, three years ago—I've always admired your work so much that I've read every line about you—and surely Dicky's name wasn't mentioned. I would have remembered it when I met him, I know."

"There, there." She was on her feet beside me and with a gentle yet compelling hand put me back in my chair. Her voice had the same tone a mother would use to a grieving child. "Dicky's name wasn't mentioned when the story was printed the last time, because at the time the divorce was granted, Mr. Morten withdrew the accusation that he had made against him."

"Why?" The question left my lips almost without volition. I sensed something tragic, full of meaning for me behind the statement she had made.

She did not answer me for a minute or two.

"I can only answer that question on your word of honor not to tell Dicky what I am going to tell you," she said. "It is something he suspects, but which I would never confirm."

She paused expectantly. "Upon honor, of course," I answered simply.

She rose and moved swiftly toward one of the built-in bookcases. I saw that she put her hand upon one of the sections and pulled upon it. To my astonishment it moved toward her, and I saw that behind it was a cleverly constructed wall safe. She turned the combination, opened the door and took from the safe an inlaid box which, as she came toward me, I saw was made of rare old woods.

She sat down again in the big chair and looked at the box musingly, tenderly. I leaned forward expectantly. Again I had the sense of tragedy near me.

Drawing the key from her dress she opened the box and took from it a miniature, gazed at it a minute, and then handed it to me.

"Oh, Mrs. Underwood," I exclaimed. "How exquisite."

The miniature was of the most beautiful child I had ever seen, a tiny girl of perhaps two years. She stood poised as if running to meet one, her baby arms outstretched. It was a picture to delight or break a mother's heart.

I looked up from the miniature to the face of the woman who had handed it to me.

"Yes," she answered my unspoken query, "my little daughter; my only child. She is the price I paid for Dicky's immunity from the scandal which the unjust man that I called husband brought upon me."

My first impulse was one of horror-stricken sympathy for her. Then came the reaction. A flaming jealousy enveloped me from head to foot.

"How she must have loved Dicky to do this for him!" The thought beat upon my brain like a sledge hammer.

"Don't think that, my dear, for it isn't true." I had not spoken, but with her almost uncanny ability to divine the thoughts of other people she had fathomed mine. "I was always fond of Dicky, but I never was in love with him."

"Then why did you make such a sacrifice?" I stammered.

"Why! There was absolutely no other way," she said, opening her wonderful eyes wide in amazement that I had not at once grasped her point of view. "Dicky was absolutely innocent of any wrongdoing, but through a combination of circumstances of which I shall tell you, my husband had gathered a show of evidence which would have won him the divorce if it had been presented."

"He bargained with me: I to give up all claim to the baby. He to withdraw Dicky's name, and all other charges except that of desertion. Thus Dicky was saved a scandal which would have followed and hampered him all his life, and I was spared the fastening of a shameful verdict upon me. Of course, everybody who read about the case and did not know me, believed me guilty anyway, but my friends stood by me gallantly, and that part of it is all right. But every time I look at that baby face I am tempted to wish that I had let honor, the righting of Dicky, everything go by the boards, and had taken my chance of having her, even if it were only part of the time."

Her voice was rough, uneven as she finished speaking, but that was the only evidence of the emotion which I knew must have her stretched upon the rack.

Right there I capitulated to Lillian Underwood. Always, through my dislike and distrust of her, there had struggled an admiration which would not down, even when I thought I had most cause to fear her.

But this revelation of the real bigness of the woman caught my allegiance and fixed it. She had sacrificed the thing which was most precious to her to keep her ideal of honor unsullied. I felt that I could never have made a similar sacrifice, but I mentally saluted her for her power to do it.

I realized, too, the reason for Dicky's deference to Mrs. Underwood, which had often puzzled and sometimes angered me. Once when she had given him a raking over for the temper he displayed toward me in her presence, he had said:

"You know I couldn't get angry at you, no matter what you said; I owe you too much."

I had wondered at the time what it was that my husband "owed" Mrs. Underwood. The riddle was solved for me at last.

I am not an impetuous woman, and I do not know how I ever mustered up courage to do it. But the sight of Lillian Underwood's face as she looked at her baby's picture was too much for me. Without any conscious volition on my part I found my arms around her, and her face pressed against my shoulder.

I expected a storm of grief, for I knew the woman had been holding herself in with an iron hand. But only a few convulsive movements of her shoulders betrayed her emotion and when she raised her face to mine her eyes were less tear-bedewed than my own.

Something stirred me to quick questioning.

"Oh, is there a chance of your having her again?"

"I am always hoping for it," she answered quietly. "When her father married again, several years ago—that was before my marriage to Harry—I hoped against hope that he would give her to me. For he knew—the hound—knew better than anybody else that all his vile charges were false."

Her eyes blazed, her voice was strident, her hands clasped and unclasped. Then, as if a string had been loosened, she sank back in her chair again.

"But he would not give her to me," she went on dully, "and he could not even if he would. For his mother, who has the child, is old and devoted to her. It would kill her to take Marion away from her."

"You saw my pink room?" she demanded abruptly.

I nodded. The memory of that rose-colored nest and the look in my hostess's eyes when on my other visit she had said she had prepared the room for a young girl was yet vivid.

"I spent weeks preparing it for her when I heard of her father's remarriage," she said, "When I finally realized that I could not have her, I lay ill for weeks in it. On my recovery I vowed that no one else but she or I should ever sleep there. I have another bedroom where I sleep most of the time. But sometimes I go in there and spend the night, and pretend that I have her little body snuggled up close to me just as it used to be."

The crackling of the logs in the grate was the only sound to be heard for many minutes.

With her elbow resting on the arm of her chair, her chin cupped in her hand, her whole body leaning toward the warmth of the fire, she sat gazing into the leaping flames as if she were trying to read in them the riddle of the future.

I patiently waited on her mood. That she would open her heart to me further I knew, but I did not wish to disturb her with either word or movement.

"I might as well begin at the beginning." There was a note in her voice that all at once made me see



the long years of suffering which had been hers. "Only the beginning is so commonplace that it lacks interest. It is the record of a very mediocre stenographer with aspirations."

That she was speaking of herself her tone told me, but I was genuinely surprised. Mrs. Underwood was the last woman in the world one would picture as holding down a stenographer's position.

"I can't remember when I didn't have in the back of my brain the idea of learning to draw," she went on, "but it took years and years of uphill work and saving to get a chance. I was an orphan, with nobody to care whether I lived or died, and nothing but my own efforts to depend on. But I stuck to it, working in the daytime and studying evenings and holidays till at last I began to get a foothold, and then when I had enough to put by to risk it I went to Paris."

Her voice was as matter of fact as if she were describing a visit to the family butcher shop. But I visualized the busy, plucky years with their reward of Paris as if I had been a spectator of them.

"Of course, by the time I got there I was almost old enough to be the mother, or, at least, the elder sister of most of the boys and girls I met, and I had learned life and experience in a good, hard school. Some of the youngsters got the habit of coming to me with all their troubles, fancied or real. I made some stanch friends in those days, but never a stancher, truer one than Dicky Graham.

"Tell me, dear girl, when you were teaching those history classes, did any of your boy pupils fall in love with you?"

I answered her with an embarrassed little laugh. Her question called up memories of shy glances, gifts of flowers and fruit, boyish confidences—all the things which fall to the lot of any teacher of boys.

"Well, then, you will understand me when I tell you that in the studio days in Paris Dicky imagined himself quite in love with me."

There was something in her tone and manner which took all the sting out of her words for me. All the jealousy and real concern which I had spent on this old attachment of my husband for Mrs. Underwood vanished as I listened to her. She might have been Dicky's mother, speaking of his early and injudicious fondness for green apples.

"I shall always be proud of the way I managed Dicky that time." Her voice still held the amused maternal note. "It's so easy for an older woman to spoil a boy's life in a case like that if she's despicable enough to do it. But, you see, I was genuinely fond of Dicky, and yet not the least bit in love with him, and I was able, without his guessing it, to keep the management of the affair in my own hands. So when he woke up, as boys always do, to the absurdity of the idea, there was nothing in his recollections of me to spoil our friendship.

"Then there came the early days of my struggle to get a foothold in New York in my line. There were thousands of others like me. Six or seven of the strugglers had been my friends in Paris. We formed a sort of circle, "for offence and defence," Dicky called it; settled down near each other, and for months we worked and played and starved together. When one of us sold anything we all feasted while it lasted. I tell you, my dear, those were strenuous times but they had a zest of their own."

I saw more of the picture she was revealing than she thought I did. I could guess that the one who most often sold anything was the woman who was so calmly telling me the story of those early hardships. I knew that the dominant member of that little group of stragglers, the one who heartened them all, the one who would unhesitatingly go hungry herself if she thought a comrade needed it, was Lillian Underwood.

"And then I spoiled my life. I married."

"Don't misunderstand me," she hastened to say. "I do not mean that I believe all marriages are failures. I believe tremendously in married happiness, but I think I must be one of the women who are temperamentally unfitted to make any man happy."

Her tone was bitter, self-accusing.

"You cannot make me believe that," I said stoutly. "I would rather believe that you were very unwise in your choice of husbands."

She laughed ironically.

"Well, we will let it go at that! At any rate there is only one word that describes my first marriage. It was hell from start to finish."

The look on her face told me she was not exaggerating. It was a look, only graven by intense suffering.

"When the baby came my feeling for Will changed. He had worn me out. The love I had given him I lavished upon the child. Will's mother came to live with us—she had been drifting around miserably before—and while she failed me at the time of the divorce, yet she was a tower of strength to me during the baby's infancy. I was very fond of her and I think she sincerely liked me. But Will, her only son, could always make her believe black was white, as I later found out to my sorrow.

"With the vanishing of the hectic love I had felt for Will, things went more smoothly with me. I worked like a slave to keep up the expenses of the home and to lay by something for the baby's future. My husband was away so much that the boys and girls gradually came back to something like their old term of intimacy. I never gave the matter of propriety a thought. My mother-in-law, a baby and a maid, were certainly chaperons enough.

"Afterward I found out that my husband, equipped with his legal knowledge, had set all manner of traps for me, had bribed my maid, and diabolically managed to twist the most innocent visits of the boys of the old crowd to our home to his own evil meanings.

"Then came the crash. Dicky came in one Sunday afternoon and I saw at once that he was really ill. You know his carelessness. He had let a cold go until he was as near pneumonia as he could well be. A sleet storm was raging outside, and when Dicky, after shivering before the fire, started to go back to his studio, Will's mother, who liked Dicky immensely, joined with me in insisting that he must not go out at all, but to bed. Dicky was really too ill to care what we did with him, so we got him into bed, and I took care of him for two or three days until he was well enough to leave.

"Of course, the greater part of his care fell on me, for Will's mother was old and not strong. I am not going to tell you the accusations which my unspeakable husband made against me, or the affidavits which the maid was bribed to sign about Dicky and me. You can guess. Worst of all, Will's mother turned against me, not because of anything she had observed, but simply because her son told her I was guilty.

"'I never would have thought it of you, Lillian,' she said to me with the tears streaming down her wrinkled, old face. 'I never saw anything out of the way, but of course Will wouldn't lie. And I loved you so.'

"Poor old woman. Those last few words of affection made it easier for me to give the baby up to her when the time came. She idolizes Marion. She gives her the best of care, and I do not think she will teach her to hate me as Will would.

"But there has never been a moment since I kissed Marion and gave her into the arms of her grandmother that I have not known exactly how she was treated," she said. "I have made it my business to know, and I have paid liberally for the knowledge. You see, about the time of the divorce Mr. Morten had a legacy left him, so that life has been easy for him financially. His mother had always kept a maid. Every servant she has had has been in my employ. There has scarcely been a day since I lost my baby that from some unobserved place I have not seen her in her walks. I know every line of her face, every curve of her body, every trick of movement and expression. I shall know how to win her love when the time comes, never fear."

Her voice was dauntless, but her face mirrored the anguish that must be her daily companion.

One thing about her recital jarred upon me. This paying of servants, this furtive espionage was not in keeping with the high resolve that had led the mother to "keep her word" to the man who had ruined her life. And yet—and yet—I dared not judge her. In her place I could not imagine what I would have done.

One thing I knew. Never again would I doubt Lillian Underwood. The ghost of the past romance between my husband and the woman before me was laid for all time, never to trouble me again. Remembering the sacrifice she had made for Dicky, considering the gallant fight against circumstances she had waged since her girlhood, I felt suddenly unworthy of the friendship she had so warmly offered me.

I turned to her, trying to find words, which should fittingly express my sentiments, but she forestalled me with a kaleidoscopic change of manner that bewildered me.

"Enough of horrors," she said, springing up and giving a little expressive shake of her shoulders as if she were throwing a weight from them. "I'm going to give you some luncheon."

"Oh, please!" I put up a protesting hand, but she was across the room and pressing a bell before I could stop her.

I thought I understood. The grave of her past life was closed again. She had opened it because she wished me to know the truth concerning the old garbled stories about herself and Dicky. Having told me everything, she had pushed the grisly thing back into its sepulchre again and had sealed it. She would not refer to it again.

One thing puzzled me, something to which she had not referred—why had she married Harry Underwood? Why, after the terrible experience of her first marriage, had she risked linking her life with an unstable creature like the man who was now her husband?

I put all questionings aside, however, and tried to meet her brave, gay mood.

## **XX**

### **LITTLE MISS SONNOT'S OPPORTUNITY**

My mother-in-law's convalescence was as rapid as the progress of her sudden illness had been. By the day that I gave my first history lecture before the Lotus Study Club she was well enough to dismiss Dr. Pettit with, one of her sudden imperious speeches, and to make plans that evening for the welcoming and entertaining of her daughter Harriet and her famous son-in-law Dr. Edwin Braithwaite, who were expected next day on their way to Europe, where Doctor was to take charge of a French hospital at the front.

That night I could not sleep. The exciting combination of happenings effectually robbed me of rest. I tried every device I could think of to go to sleep, but could not lose myself in even a doze. Finally, in despair, I rose cautiously, not to awaken Dicky, and slipping on my bathrobe and fur-trimmed mules, made my way into the dining-room.

Turning on the light, I looked around for something to read until I should get sleepy.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Graham? Are you ill?"

Miss Sonnet's soft, voice sounded just behind me. As I turned I thought again, as I had many times before, how very attractive the little nurse was. She had on a dark blue negligee of rough cloth, made very simply, but which covered her night attire completely, while her feet, almost as small as a child's, were covered with fur-trimmed slippers of the same color as the negligee. Her abundant hair was braided in two plaits and hung down to her waist.

"You look like a sleepy little girl," I said impulsively.

"And you like a particularly wakeful one," she returned, mischievously. "I am glad you are not ill. I feared you were when I heard you snap on the light."

"No, you did not waken me. In fact, I have been awake nearly an hour. I was just about to come out and rob the larder of a cracker and a sip of milk in the hope that I might go to sleep again when I heard you."

"Splendid!" I ejaculated, while Miss Sonnot looked at me wonderingly. "Can your patient hear us out here?"

"If you could hear her snore you would be sure she could not," Miss Sonnot smiled. "And I partly closed her door when I left. She is safe for hours."

"Then we will have a party," I declared triumphantly, "a regular boarding school party."

"Then on to the kitchen!" She raised one of her long braids of hair and waved it like a banner. We giggled like fifteen-year-old school girls as we tiptoed our way into the kitchen, turned on the light and searched refrigerator, pantry, bread and cake boxes for food.

"Now for our plunder," I said, as we rapidly inventoried the eatables we had found. Bread, butter, a can of sardines, eggs, sliced bacon and a dish of stewed tomatoes.

"I wish we had some oysters or cheese; then we could stir up something in the chafing dish," I said mournfully.

"Do you know, I believe I have a chafing dish recipe we can use in a scrap book which I always carry with me," responded Miss Sonnot. "It is in my suit case at the foot of my couch. I'll be back in a minute."

She noiselessly slipped into the living room and returned almost instantly with a substantially bound book in her hands. She sat down beside me at the table and opened the book.

"I couldn't live without this book," she said extravagantly. "In it I have all sorts of treasured clippings and jottings. The things I need most I have pasted in. The chafing dish recipes are in an envelope. I just happened to have them along."

She was turning the pages as she spoke. On one page, which she passed by more hurriedly than the others, were a number of Kodak pictures. I caught a flash of one which made my heart beat more quickly. Surely I had a print from the same negative in my trunk.

The tiny picture was a photograph of Jack Bickett or I was very much mistaken.

What was it doing in the scrap book of Miss Sonnot?

I put an unsteady hand out to prevent her turning the page.

It was Jack Bickett's photograph. I schooled my voice to a sort of careless surprise:

"Why! Isn't this Jack Bickett?"

She started perceptibly. "Yes. Do you know him?"

"He is the nearest relative I have," I returned quickly, "a distant cousin, but brought up as my brother."

Her face flushed. Her eyes shone with interest.

"Oh! then you must be his Margaret?" she cried.

As the words left Miss Sonnot's lips she gazed at me with a half-frightened little air as if she regretted their utterance.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Graham," she said contritely; "you must think I have taken leave of my senses. But I have heard so much about you."

"From Mr. Bickett?" My head was whirling. I had never heard Jack speak the name of "Sonnot." Indeed, I would never have known he had met her, save for the accidental opening of her scrap book to his picture when she and I were searching for chafing dish recipes.

"Oh! No, indeed. I have never seen Mr. Bickett myself."

A rosy embarrassed flush stole over her face as she spoke. Her eyes were starry. Through my bewilderment came a thought which I voiced.

"That is his loss then. He would think so if he could see you now."

She laughed confusedly while the rosy tint of her cheeks deepened.

"I must explain to you," she said simply. "I have never seen Mr. Bickett, but my brother is one of his friends. They used to correspond, and I enjoyed his letters as much as Mark did. I think his is a wonderful personality, don't you?"

"Naturally," I returned, a trifle dryly. The little nurse was revealing more than she dreamed. There was romantic admiration in every note in her voice. I was not quite sure that I liked it.

But I put all selfish considerations down with an iron hand and smiled in most friendly fashion at her.

"Isn't it wonderful that after hearing so much of each other we should meet in this way?" I said heartily. "If only our brothers were here."

Miss Sonnet's face brightened again. "Is Mr. Bickett in this country?" she asked, her voice carefully nonchalant. "I have not heard anything about him for two or three years."

"He sailed for France a week ago," I answered slowly. "He intends to join the French engineering corps."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Miss Sonnot spoke slowly, and there was a note almost of reverence in her voice.

"That is just what he would do," and then, impetuously, "how I envy him!"

"Envy him?" I repeated incredulously.

"Yes, indeed." Her voice was militant, her eyes shining, her face aglow. "How I wish I were a man ever since this war started! I am just waiting for a good chance to join a hospital unit, but I do not happen to know any surgeon who has gone, and of course they all pick their own nurses. But my chance will come. I am sure of it, and then I am going to do my part. Why! my great-grandfather was an officer in Napoleon's army. I feel ashamed not to be over there."

\* \* \* \* \*

I saw very little of Dicky's sister and her husband during the week they spent in New York before sailing for France. True, Harriet spent some portion of every day with her mother, but she ate at our table only once, always hurrying back to the hotel to oversee the menu of her beloved Edwin.

Reasoning that in a similar situation I should not care for the presence of an outsider, I left the mother and daughter alone together as much as I could without appearing rude. I think they both, appreciated my action, although, with their customary reserve, they said very little to me.

Dr. Braithwaite came twice during the week to see us, each time making a hurried call. Harriet appeared to wish to impress us with the importance of these visits from so busy and distinguished a man. But the noted surgeon himself was simple and unaffected in his manner.

One thing troubled me. I had done nothing, said nothing to further Miss Sonnot's desire to go to France as a nurse. She had left us the day after Dicky's sister and brother-in-law arrived, left with the admiration and good wishes of us all. The big surgeon himself, after watching her attention to his mother-in-law upon the day of arrival, made an approving comment.

"Good nurse, that," he had said. I took the first opportunity to repeat his words to the little nurse, who flushed with pleasure. I knew that I ought to at least inquire of the big surgeon or his wife about the number of nurses he was taking with him, but there seemed no fitting opportunity, and—I did not make one.

I did not try to explain to myself the curious disinclination I felt to lift a hand toward the sending of Miss Sonnot to the French hospitals. But every time I thought of the night she had told me of her wish I felt guilty.

Jack was already "somewhere in France." If Miss Sonnot entered the hospital service, there was a possibility that they might meet.

I sincerely liked and admired Miss Sonnot. My brother-cousin had been the only man in my life until Dicky swept me off my feet with his tempestuous wooing. My heart ought to have leaped at the prospect of their meeting and its possible result. But I felt unaccountably depressed at the idea, instead.

The last day of the Braithwaites' stay Harriet came unusually early to see her mother.

"I can stay only a few minutes this morning, mother," she explained, as she took off her heavy coat. "I know," in answer to the older woman's startled protest. "It is awful this last day, too. I'll come back toward night, but I must get back to Edwin this morning. He is so annoyed. One of his nurses has fallen ill at the last moment and cannot go. He has to secure another good one immediately, that he may get her passport attended to in time for tomorrow's sailing. And he will not have one unless he interviews her himself. I left him eating his breakfast and getting ready to receive a flock of them sent him by some physicians he knows. I must hurry back to help him through."

Miss Sonnet's opportunity had come! I knew it, knew also that I must speak to my sister-in-law at once about her. But she had finished her flying little visit and was putting on her coat before I finally forced myself to broach the subject.

"Mrs. Braithwaite"—to my disgust I found my voice trembling—"I think I ought to tell you that Miss Sonnot, the nurse your mother had, wishes very much to enter the hospital service. She could go tomorrow, I am sure. And I remember your husband spoke approvingly of her."

My sister-in-law rushed past me to the telephone.

"The very thing!" She threw the words over her shoulder as she took down the receiver. "Thank you so much." Then, as she received her connection, she spoke rapidly, enthusiastically.

"Edwin, I have such good news for you. Dicky's wife thinks that little Miss Sonnot who nursed mother could go tomorrow. She said while she was here that she wanted to enter the hospital service. Yes. I thought you'd want her. All right. I'll see to it right away and telephone you. By the way, Edwin, if she can go, you won't need me this forenoon, will you? That's good. I can stay with mother, then. Take care of yourself, dear. Good-by."

She hung up the receiver and turned to me.

"Can you reach her by 'phone right away, and if she can go tell her to go to the Clinton at once and ask for Dr. Braithwaite?"

I paid a mental tribute to my sister-in-law's energy as I in my turn took down the telephone receiver. I realized how much wear and tear she must save her big husband.

"Miss Sonnot!" I could not help being a bit dramatic in my news. "Can you sail for France tomorrow? One of Dr. Braithwaite's nurses is ill, and you may have her place, if you wish."

There was a long minute of silence, and then the little nurse's voice sounded in my ears. It was filled with awe and incredulity.

"If I wish!" and then, after a pregnant pause, "Surely, I can go. Where do I learn the details?"

I gave her full directions and hung up the receiver with a sigh.

She came to see me before she sailed, and after she had left me, I went into my bedroom, locked the door, and let the tears come which I had been forcing back. I did not know what was the matter with me. I felt a little as I did once long before when a cherished doll of my childhood had been broken beyond all possibility of mending. Unreasonable as the feeling was, it was as if a curtain had dropped between me and any part of my life that lay behind me.

## **XXI**

### **LIFE'S JOG-TROT AND A QUARREL**

Life went at a jog-trot with me for a long time after the departure for France of the Braithwaites and Miss Sonnot.

My mother-in-law missed her daughter, Mrs. Braithwaite, sorely. I believe if it had not been for her pride in her brilliant daughter and her famous son-in-law she would have become actually ill with fretting. I found my hands full in devising ways to divert her mind and planning dishes to tempt her delicate appetite.

Because of her frailty and consequent inability to do much sightseeing, or, indeed, to go far from the house, Dicky and I spent a very quiet winter.

Our evenings away from home together did not average one a week. And Dicky very rarely went anywhere without me.

"What a Darby and Joan we are getting to be!" he remarked one night as we sat one on each side of the library table, reading. His mother, as was her custom, had gone to bed early in the evening.

"Yes! Isn't it nice?" I returned, smiling at him.

"Ripping!" Dicky agreed enthusiastically. Then, reflectively, "Funniest thing about it is the way I cotton to this domestic stunt. If anyone had told me before I met you that I should ever stand for this husband-reading-to-knitting-wife sort of thing I should have bought him a ticket to Matteawan, pronto."

He stopped and frowned heavily at me, in mimic disapproval.

"Picture all spoiled," he declared, sighing. "You are not knitting. Why, oh, why are you not knitting?"

"Because I never shall knit," I returned, laughing, "at least not in the evening while you are reading. That sort of thing never did appeal to me. Either the wife who has to knit or sew or darn in the evening is too inefficient to get all her work done in daylight, or she has too much work to do. In the first case, her husband ought to teach her efficiency; in the second place, he ought to help do the sewing or the darning. Then they could both read."

"Listen to the feminist?" carolled Dicky; then with mock severity: "Of course, I am to infer, madam, that my stockings are all properly darned?"

"Your inference is eminently correct," demurely. "Your mother darned them today."

What I had told him was true. His mother had seen me looking over the stockings after they were washed, and had insisted on darning Dicky's. I saw that she longed to do some little personal service for her boy, and willingly handed them over.

Dicky threw back his head and laughed heartily. Then his face sobered, and he came round to my side of the table and sat down on the arm of my chair.

"Speaking of mother," he said, rumpling my hair caressingly, "I want to tell you, sweetheart, that you've made an awful hit with me the way you've taken care of her. Nobody knows better than I how trying she can be, and you've been just as sweet and kind to her as if she were the most tractable person on earth."

He put his arms around me and bent his face to mine.

"Pretty nice and comfy this being married to each other, isn't it?"

"Very nice, indeed," I agreed, nestling closer to him.

My heart echoed the words. In fact, it seemed almost too good to be true, this quiet domestic cove into which our marital bark had drifted. The storms we had weathered seemed far past. Dicky's jealousy of my brother-cousin, Jack Bickett; my unhappiness over Lillian Underwood—those tempestuous days surely were years ago instead of months.

Now Jack was "somewhere in France," and I had a queer little premonition that somewhere, somehow, his path would cross that of Miss Sonnot, the little nurse, who had gone with Dr. Braithwaite's, expedition, and who for years had cherished a romantic ideal of my brother-cousin, although she had never met him.

Lillian Underwood was my sworn friend. With characteristic directness she had cut the Gordian knot of our misunderstanding by telling me, against Dicky's protests, all about the old secret which her past and that of my husband shared. After her story, with all that it revealed of her sacrifice and her fidelity to her own high ideals, there never again would be a doubt of her in my mind. I was proud of her friendship, although, because of my mother-in-law's prejudice against them, Dicky and I could not have the Underwoods at our home.

Our meetings, therefore, were few. But I had an odd little feeling of safety and security whenever I thought of her. I knew if any terrible trouble ever came to me I should fly to her as if she were my sister.

My work at the Lotus Study Club was going along smoothly. At home Katie was so much more satisfactory than the maids I had seen in other establishments that I shut my eyes to many little things about which I knew my mother-in-law would have been most captious.

But my mother-in-law's acerbity was softened by her weakness. We grew quite companionable in the winter days when Dicky's absence at the studio left us together. Altogether I felt that life had been very good to me.

So the winter rolled away, and almost before we knew it the spring days came stealing in from the South, bringing to me their urgent call of brown earth and sprouting things.

I was not the only one who listened to the message of spring. Mother Graham grew restless and used all of her meagre strength in drives to the parks and walks to a nearby square where the crocuses were just beginning to wave their brave greeting to the city.

The warmer days affected Dicky adversely. He seemed a bit distraught, displayed a trifle of his earlier

irritability, and complained a great deal about the warmth of the apartment.

"I tell you I can't stand this any longer," he said one particularly warm evening in April, as he sank into a chair, flinging his collar in one direction and his necktie in another. "I'd rather be in the city in August than in these first warm days of spring. What do you say to moving into the country for the summer? Our month is up here the first, anyway, and I am perfectly willing to lose any part of the month's rent if we only can get away."

"But, Dicky," I protested, "unless we board, which I don't think any of us would like to do, how are we going to find a house, to say nothing of getting settled in so short a time?"

To my surprise, Dicky hesitated a moment before answering. Then, flushing, he uttered the words which brought my little castle of contentment grumbling about me and warned me that my marital problems were not yet all solved.

"Why, you see, there won't be any bother about a house. Miss Draper has found a perfectly bully place not far from her sister's home."

"Miss Draper has found a house for us!"

I echoed Dicky's words in blank astonishment. His bit of news was so unexpected, amazement was the only feeling that came to me for a moment or two.

"Well, what's the reason for the awful astonishment?" demanded Dicky, truculently. "You look as if a bomb had exploded in your vicinity."

He expressed my feeling exactly. I knew that Miss Draper had become a fixture in his studio, acting as his secretary as well as his model, and pursuing her art studies under his direction. But his references to her were always so casual and indifferent that for months I had not thought of her at all. And now I found that Dicky had progressed to such a degree of intimacy with her that he not only wished to move to the village which she called home, but had allowed her to select the house in which we were to live.

I might be foolish, overwrought, but all at once I recognized in Dicky's beautiful protégé a distinct menace to my marital happiness. I knew I ought to be most guarded in my reply to my husband, but I am afraid the words of my answer were tipped with the venom of my feeling toward the girl.

"I admit I am astonished," I replied coldly. "You see, I did not know it was the custom in your circle for an artist's model to select a house for his wife and mother. You must give me time to adjust myself to such a bizarre state of things."

I was so furious myself that I did not realize how much my answer would irritate Dicky. He sprang to his feet with an oath and turned on me the old, black angry look that I had not seen for months.

"That's about the meanest slur I ever heard," he shouted. "Just because a girl works as a model every other woman thinks she has the right to cast a stone at her, and put on a how-dare-you-brush-your-skirt-against-mine sort of thing. You worked for a living yourself not so very long ago. I should think you would have a little Christian charity in your heart for any other girl who worked."

"It strikes me that there is a slight difference between the work of a high school instructor in history, a specialist in her subject, and the work of an artist's model," I returned icily. "But, laying all that aside, I should have considered myself guilty of a very grave breach of good taste if I had ventured to select a house for the wife of my principal, unasked and unknown to her."

"Cut out the heroics, and come down to brass tacks," Dicky snarled vulgarly. "Why don't you be honest and say you're jealous of the poor girl? I'll bet, if the truth were known, it isn't only the house she selected you'd balk at. I'll bet you wouldn't want to go to Marvin at all for the summer, regardless that I've spent many a comfortable week in that section, and like it better than any other summer place I know."

Through all my anger at Dicky, my disgust at his coarseness, came the conviction that he had spoken the truth. I was jealous of Grace Draper, there was no use denying the fact to myself, however strenuously I might try to hide the thing from Dicky. I told myself that I hated Marvin because it held this girl, that instead of spending the summer there I wished I might never see the place again.

I was angrier than ever when the knowledge of my own emotion forced itself upon me, angry with myself for being so silly, angry with Dicky for having brought such provocation upon me! I let my speech lash out blindly, not caring what I said:



"You are wrong in one thing—right in another. I am not jealous of Miss Draper. To tell you the truth, I do not care enough about what you do to be jealous of you. But I would not like to live in Marvin for this season—I never counted in my list of friends a woman who possesses neither good breeding nor common sense, and I do not propose to begin with Miss Draper."

Dicky stared at me for a moment, his face dark and distorted with passion. Then, springing to his feet, he picked up his collar and tie and went into his room. Returning with fresh ones, he snatched his hat and stick and rushed to the door. As he slammed it after him I heard another oath, one this time coupled with a reference to me. I sank back in the big chair weak and trembling.

"Well, you have made a mess of it!" My mother-in-law's voice, cool and cynical, sounded behind me. I felt like saying something caustic to her, but there was something in her tones that stopped me. It was not criticism of me she was expressing, rather sympathy. Accustomed as I was to every inflection of her voice, I realized this, and accordingly held my tongue until she had spoken further.

"I'll admit you've had enough to make any woman lose her control of herself," went on Dicky's mother, with the fairness which I had found her invariably to possess in anything big, no matter how petty and fussy she was over trifles. "But you ought to know Richard better than to take that way with him. Give Richard his head and he soon tires of any of the thousand things he proposes doing from time to time. Oppose him, ridicule him, make him angry, and he'll stick to his notion as a dog to a bone."

She turned and walked into her own room again. I sat miserably huddled in the big chair, by turn angry at my husband and remorseful over my own hastiness.

"Vot I do about dinner, Missis Graham?" Katie's voice was subdued, sympathetic and respectful. I realized that she had heard every word of our controversy. The knowledge made my reply curt.

"Keep it warm as long as you can. I will tell you when to serve it."

Katie stalked out, muttering something about the dinner being spoiled, but I paid no heed to her. My thoughts were too busy with conjectures and forebodings of the future to pay any attention to trifles.

The twilight deepened into darkness. I was just nerving myself to summon Katie and tell her to serve dinner when the door opened and Dicky's rapid step crossed the room. He switched on the light, and then coming over to me, lifted me bodily out of my chair.

"Was the poor little girl jealous?" he drawled, with his face pressed close to mine. "Well, she shall never have to be jealous again. We won't live in Marvin, naughty old town, full of beautiful models. We'll just go over to Hackensack or some nice respectable place like that."

At first my heart had leaped with victory. Dicky had come back, and he was not angry. Then as his lips sought mine, and I caught his breath, my victory turned to ashes. The regret or repentance which had driven my husband back to my arms had not come from his heart but from the depths of a whiskey glass.

## XXII

### AN AMAZING DISCOVERY

It was two days after our quarrel over Grace Draper and her selection of a summer home for us before Dicky again broached the subject of leaving the city for the summer.

"By the way," he said, as carelessly as if the subject had never been a bone of contention between us, "that house I was speaking of the other night; the one Miss Draper thought we would like, has been rented, so we will have to look for something else."

I had no idea how he had managed to get rid of taking the house after his protégé had gone to the trouble of hunting one up, nor did I care. I told myself that as the girl's insolent assurance in selecting a house for me had been put down I could afford to be magnanimous. So I smiled at Dicky and said with an ease which I was far from feeling:

"But there must be other places in Marvin that are desirable. That day we were out there I caught glimpses of streets that must be beautiful in summer."

Into Dicky's eyes flashed a look of tender pleasure that warmed me. Taking advantage of his mother's absorption in her fish he threw me a kiss. I knew that I had pleased him wonderfully by tacitly agreeing to go to Marvin, and that our quarrel was to him as if it had never been. I wish I had his mercurial temperament. Long after I have forgiven a wrong done to me, or an unpleasant experience, the bitter memory of it comes back to torment me.

"That's my bully girl!" was all Dicky said in reply, but when the baked fish had been discussed and we were eating our salad he looked up, his eyes twinkling.

"This green stuff reminds me that if I'm going to get my garden sass planted this year or you want any flower beds, we'll have to get busy. Can you run out to Marvin with me tomorrow morning and look around? We ought to be able to find something we want. Real estate agents are as thick as fleas around that section."

We made an early start the next morning, Mother Graham, with characteristic energy, spurring up Katie with the breakfast, and successfully routing Dicky from the second nap he was bound to take. I had been up since daylight, for it was a perfect spring morning, and I was anxious to be afield.

As we neared the entrance of the Long Island station I thought of the first trip we had taken to Marvin, and the unpleasantness which had marred the day, and I plucked Dicky's sleeve timidly.

"Dicky!" I swallowed hard and stopped short.

He adroitly swung me across the street into the safety of the runway leading down into the station before he spoke.

"Well, what's on your conscience?" He smiled down at me roguishly. "You look as if you were going to confess to a murder at least."

"Not that bad," I smiled faintly. "But oh, Dicky, if I promise to try not to say anything irritating today, will you promise not to, either?"

"Sure as you're born," Dicky returned cheerfully. "Don't want to spoil the day, eh?"

"It's such a heavenly day," I sighed. "I feel as if I couldn't stand it to have anything mar it."

As we sat in the train that bore us to Marvin Dicky outlined some of his plans for the summer.

"There are two or three of the fellows who come down here summers who I know will be glad to go Dutch on a motor boat," he said. "We can take the bulliest trips, way out to deserted sand islands, where the surf is the best ever. We'll take along a tent and spend the night there sometime, or we can stretch out in the boat. Then we must see if we can get hold of some horses. Do you ride? Think of it! We've been married months, and I don't know yet whether you ride or not!"

"No, I don't ride, but oh, how I've always wanted to!" I returned with enthusiasm. Then, with a sudden qualm, "But all that will be terribly expensive, won't it?"

"Not so awful," Dicky said, smiling down at me. "But even if it is, I guess we can stand it. I've had some cracking good orders lately. We'll have one whale of a summer."

My heart beat high with happiness. Surely, with all these plans for me, my husband's thoughts could not be much occupied with his beautiful model. As he lifted me down to the station platform at Marvin I looked with friendliness at the dingy, battered old railroad station which I remembered, at the defiant sign near it which trumpeted in large type, "Don't judge the town by the station," and the winding main street of the village, which, when I had visited Marvin before, Dicky had wished to show me.

Upon that other visit our first sight of Grace Draper and Dicky's interest in her had spoiled the trip for me. I had insisted upon going back without seeing some of the things Dicky had planned to show me, and I had disliked the thought of the town ever since. But with Dicky's loving plans for my happiness dazzling me, I felt a touch of the glamour with which he invested the place in my eyes. I caught at his hand in an unwonted burst of tenderness.

"Let's walk down that old winding street which you told me about last winter," I said. "I've wanted to see it ever since you spoke about it."

"We'll probably motor down it instead," he grinned. "There's a real estate office just opposite here, and I see the agent's flivver in front of the door, where he stands just inside his office. The spider and the fly, eh, Madge? Well, Mr. Spider, here are two dear little flies for you!"

"Oh, Dicky!" I dragged at his arm in protest. "Don't spoil our first view of that street by whirling through it in a car. Let's saunter down it first and then come back to the real estate man."

"You have a gleam of human intelligence, sometimes, don't you?" Dicky inquired banteringly. Then he took my arm to help me across the rough places in the country road.

We had almost reached the door of the office when Dicky caught sight of a plainly dressed woman coming toward us. I heard him catch his breath, his grasp on my arm tightened, and with an indescribable agile movement he fairly bolted into the real estate office, dragging me with him.

"I'll explain later," he said in my ear. "Just follow my lead now."

As he turned to the rotund little real estate agent, who came forward to greet us, a look of surprise on his round face, I looked through the window at the woman from whose sight he had dodged.

Then I felt that I needed an explanation, indeed.

For the woman whose eyes my husband so evidently wished to avoid was Mrs. Gorman, Grace Draper's sister.

\* \* \* \* \*

So I was to live in a house of Grace Draper's choosing, after all!

This was the thought that came most forcibly to me when Mr. Brennan, the owner of the house Dicky had impetuously decided to rent, told us that Miss Draper had looked over the place for an artist friend, and that she would have taken it only for finding another house nearer her own home.

I was so absorbed in my own thoughts that I did not at first notice Dicky's embarrassment when Mr. Brennan asked him if he knew Grace Draper. It was only when the man, who had all the earmarks of a gossiping countryman, repeated the question, that I realized Dicky's confusion.

"Did you say you knew her?"

"Yes, I know her; she works in my studio," remarked Dicky, shortly.

"Oh!" The exclamation had the effect of a long-drawn whistle. "Then you probably were the artist friend she spoke of."

"I probably was." Dicky's tone was grim. I knew how near his temper was to exploding, and the look which I beheld on the face of Mr. Birdsall, the little real estate agent, galvanized me into action.

"Dear, what do you suppose led Grace to think we would like that other place better than this?" I flashed a tender little smile at Dicky. "Of course we would like to be nearer her, but this is not very far from her home, and it is so much better, isn't it?"

Dicky took the cue without a tremor.

"Why, I suppose she thought you would find this house too big for you to look after," he replied in a matter-of-fact way.

"That was awful dear and thoughtful of her," I murmured, careful to keep my voice at just the right pitch of friendliness toward the absent Grace, "but I don't think this will be too much, for we can shut up the rooms we don't need."

I had the satisfaction of seeing the puzzled looks of Mr. Brennan and Mr. Birdsall change into an evident readjustment of their ideas concerning my husband and Grace Draper. But I did not relax my iron hold upon myself. I knew if I dared let myself down for an instant angry tears would rush to my eyes.

"When did you say we could move in?" I turned to Mr. Brennan, determined to get away from the subject of Grace Draper as quickly as possible.

"Today, if you want it."

"No," returned Dicky, "but we will want it soon. When do you think we can move?" He turned to me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I spent three busy days at the Brennan place. There was much to be done both inside and outside the house. After the first day, Katie did not return with me, as my mother-in-law needed her in the

apartment. But I engaged another woman with the one I had for the work in the house and put the grinning William in charge of an old man I had secured to clean up the grounds and make the garden.

I soon found that I had a treasure in Mr. Jones, who was a typical old Yankee farmer, a wizened little man with chin whiskers. He could only give me a day or two occasionally, as he was old and confided to me that he was subject to "the rheumatics." But while I was there he ploughed and harrowed and planted the garden, cleared the rubbish away, and made me innumerable flower beds, keeping an iron hand over the irresponsible William, whose grin gradually faded as he was forced to do some real work for his day's wages.

A riotous and extravagant hour in a seed and bulb store resulted in my getting all the flower favorites I had loved in my childhood. I also bought the seeds of all vegetables which Dicky and I liked, and a few more, and put them in Mr. Jones's capable hands.

If there was a variety of vegetables or flower seeds which looked attractive in the seedman's catalogue, and which remained unbought, it was the fault of the salesman, for I conscientiously tried to select every one. I planned the location of a few of the beds, and then confided to Mr. Jones the rest of the outdoor work, knowing that he could finish it after my return to the city.

Mr. Birdsall, the agent, was very tractable about the kitchen, sending men the second day to paint it. So at the end of the third day, when I turned the key in the lock of the front door, I was conscious that the house was as clean as soap and water and hard work could make it, that the grounds were in order, and the growing things I loved on their way to greet me.

I fancy it was high time things were accomplished, for in some way I had caught a severe cold. At least that was the way I diagnosed my complaint. My throat seemed swollen, my head ached severely, and each bone and muscle in my body appeared to have its separate pain. When I reached the apartment I felt so ill that I undressed and went to bed at once.

"You must spray your throat immediately," my mother-in-law said in a businesslike way, "and I suppose we ought to send for that jackanapes of a doctor."

Even through my suffering I could not help but smile at my mother-in-law's reference to Dr. Pettit, who had attended her in her illness. She had summarily dismissed him because he had forbidden her to see to the unpacking of her trunks when she was barely convalescent, and we had not seen him since.

"I'm sure I will not need a physician," I said, trying to speak distinctly, although it was an effort for me to articulate. "Wait until Dicky comes, anyway."

For distinct in my mind was a mental picture of the look I had detected in Dr. Pettit's eyes upon the day of his last visit to my mother-in-law. I remembered the way he had clasped my hand in parting. The feeling was indefinable. I scored myself as fanciful and conceited for imagining that there had been anything special in his farewell to me or in the little courtesies he had tendered me during my mother-in-law's illness. But I told myself again, as I had after closing the door upon his last visit, that it were better all around if he did not come again.

"If you wait for Richard, you'll wait a long time," his mother observed grimly. "He called up a while ago, and said he had been invited to an impromptu studio party that he couldn't get away from, and that he would be home in two or three hours. But I know Richard. If he gets interested in anything like that he won't be home until midnight."

I do not pretend either to analyze or excuse the feeling of reckless defiance that seized me upon hearing of Dicky's absence. I reflected bitterly that I had taken all the burden of seeing to the new home, and was suffering from illness contracted because of that work, while Dicky was frolicking at a studio party, with never a thought of me.

I know without being told that Grace Draper was a member of the frolic. And here I was suffering, yet refusing the services of a skilled physician because I fancied there was something in his manner the tolerance of which would savor of disloyalty to Dicky!

I turned to my mother-in-law to tell her she could summon the physician, but found that I could hardly speak. My throat felt as if I were choking.

"The spray!" I gasped.

Thoroughly alarmed, Mother Graham assisted me in spraying my throat with a strong antiseptic solution. Then I gave her the number of Dr. Pettit's office, and she called him up. I heard her tell him to make haste, and then she came back to me. I saw that she was frightened about the condition of my

throat, but the choking feeling gave me no time to be frightened. I kept the spray going almost constantly until the physician came. It was the only way I could breathe.

Dr. Pettit must have made a record journey, for the door bell signalled his arrival only a few moments after Mother Graham's message.

He gave my throat one swift, shrewd glance, then turned to his small valise and drew from it a stick, some absorbent cotton and a bottle of dark liquid. With swift, sure movements he prepared a swab, and turned to me.

"Open your mouth again," he said gently, but peremptorily.

I obeyed him, and the antiseptic bathed the swollen tonsils surely and skilfully.

As I swayed, almost staggered, in the spasm of coughing and choking which followed, I felt the strong, sure support of his arm touching my shoulders, of his hand grasping mine.

"Now lie down," he commanded gently, when the paroxysm was over. He drew the covers over me himself, lifted my head and shoulders gently with one hand, while with the other he raised the pillows to the angle he wished. Then he turned to my mother-in-law.

"She has a bad case of tonsilitis, but there is no danger," he said quietly, utterly ignoring her rudeness at the time of his last visit. "I will stay until I have swabbed her throat again. She is to have these pellets," he handed her a bottle of pink tablets, "once every fifteen minutes until she has taken four, then every hour until midnight. Let her sleep all she can and keep her warm. I would like two hot water bags filled, if you please, and a glass of water. She must begin taking these tablets as soon as possible."

As my mother-in-law left the room to get the things he wished, Dr. Pettit came back to the bedside and stood looking down at me.

"Where is your husband?" he asked, a note of sternness in his voice.

I shook my head. I was just nervous and sick enough to feel the question keenly. I could not restrain the foolish tears which rolled slowly down my cheeks.

Dr. Pettit took his handkerchief and wiped them away. Then he said in almost a whisper:

"Poor little girl! How I wish I could bear the pain for you!"

## XXIII

### "BLUEBEARD'S CLOSET"

My recovery from the attack of tonsilitis, thanks to Dr. Pettit's remedies, was almost as rapid as the seizure had been sudden. My mother-in-law, forgetting her own invalidism, carried out the physician's directions faithfully. The choking sensation in my throat gradually lessened, until by midnight I was able to go to sleep.

I have no idea when Dicky came home from his "impromptu studio party." His mother, whose deftness, efficiency and unexpected tenderness surprised me, arranged a bed for him on the couch in the living room, and I did not hear him come in at all.

"My poor little sweetheart!" This was his greeting the next morning. "If I had only known you were ill the old blow-out could have gone plump. It was a stupid affair, anyway. Had a rotten time."

"It doesn't matter, Dicky," I said wearily, and closed my eyes, pretending to sleep. I knew Dicky was puzzled by my manner, for I could feel him silently watching me for several minutes. Then evidently satisfied that I was really sleeping he tiptoed out of the room, and a little later I heard him depart for his studio, first cautioning his mother to call him if I needed him.

I spent a most miserable day after Dicky had left, in spite of my mother-in-law's tender care and Katie's assiduous attentions. The studio party, of which I was sure Grace Draper was a member, rankled as did anything connected with this student model of Dicky's. The memory of the village gossip

concerning her friendship for my husband which I had heard in Marvin troubled me, while even Dicky's solicitude for my illness seemed to my overwrought imagination to be forced, artificial.

His exclamation, "My poor little sweetheart!" did not ring true to me. I felt bitterly that there was more sincerity in Dr. Pettit's low words of the day before: "Poor little girl, I wish I could bear this pain for you!" than in Dicky's protestations.

How genuinely troubled the tall young physician had been! How resentful of Dicky's absence from my bedside! How tender and strong in my paroxysms of choking! I felt a sudden added bitterness toward my husband that the memory of my suffering should have blended with it no recollection of his care, only the tender sympathy of a stranger.

But in two days I was my usual self again, ready for the arduous tasks of moving and settling.

Mother Graham and I spent a hectic day in the furniture and drapery shops, buying things to supplement her furniture and mine, which we had arranged to have sent to the Brennan house in Marvin. I found that her judgment as to values and fabrics was unerring. But her taste as to colors and designs frequently clashed with mine. Save for the fact that she became fatigued before we had finished our shopping, there would have been no individual touch of mine in our home. As it was, I was not sorry that she found herself too indisposed to go with me the second day, so that I had a chance to put something of my own individuality into the new furnishings.

Another two days in Marvin with the aid of a workman unpacking and arranging the crated furniture and our purchases, and the new home was ready to step into.

We were a gay little party as we went together through the house inspecting all the rooms. When we came to Dicky's, he barred us out.

"Now, remember, no stealing of keys and peering into Bluebeard's closet," said Dicky gayly, as he closed and locked the door of his room.

"You flatter yourself, sir." I swept him a low bow. "I really haven't the slightest curiosity about your old room."

"Sour grapes," he mocked, and then impressively, "And no matter what packages or furniture come here for me they are not to be unwrapped. Just leave them on the porch, or in the library until I come home."

"I wouldn't touch one of them with a pair of tongs," I assured him.

"See that you don't," he returned, hanging the key up, and hastily kissing me. "Now I've got to run for it."

He hurried down the stairs and out of the front door. I stood looking after him with a smile of tender amusement.

The day after Dicky's purchases arrived he rose early.

"No studio for me today," he announced. "Can you get hold of that man who helped you clean up here? I want an able-bodied man for several hours today."

"I think so," I returned quietly, and going to the telephone, soon returned with the assurance that William-of-the-wide-grin would shortly be at the house.

"That's fine," commented Dicky. "And now I want you and mother to get out of the way after breakfast. Go for a walk or a drive or anything you are not around. I want to surprise you this afternoon. I'll bet that room will make your eyes stick out when you see it."

I had a wonderful tramp through the woods, enjoying it so much that it was after four o'clock when I finally returned home. Dicky greeted me exuberantly.

"Come along now," he commanded, rushing me upstairs. "Come, mother!"

The elder Mrs. Graham appeared at the door of her room, curiosity and disapproval struggling with each other in her face. But curiosity triumphed. With a protesting snort she followed us to the door of the locked room. Dicky unlocked the door with a flourish and stood aside for us to enter.

I gasped as I caught my first sight of the transformed room. Dicky had not exaggerated—it was wonderful.

The paper had been taken from the walls, and they and the ceiling had been painted a soft gray with just a touch of blue in its tint. The woodwork was ivory-tinted throughout, while the floor was painted a deeper shade of the gray that covered the walls.

Almost covering the floor was a gorgeous Chinese rug with wonderful splashes of blue through it. I knew it must be an imitation of one costing a fortune, but I realized that Dicky must have paid a pretty penny even for the counterfeit, for the coloring and design were cleverly done.

The blue of the rug was reproduced in every detail of the room. The, window, draperies, of thin, Oriental fabric, had bands of Chinese embroidered silk cunningly sewed on them. These bands carried out in the azure groundwork and the golden threads the motif of the rug. The cushions, which were everywhere in evidence, were made of the same embroidered silk which banded the window draperies, while blue strips of the same material were thrown carelessly over a teakwood table and, a chest of drawers.

A chaise lounge of bamboo piled with cushions stood underneath the windows, which commanded a view of the rolling woodland and meadows I had found so beautiful. Three chairs of the same material completed the furnishings of the room, save for a wonderful Chinese screen reaching almost from the ceiling to the floor, which hid a single iron bed, painted white, of the type used in hospitals, a small bureau, also painted white, and a shaving mirror.

"Don't want any junk about my sleeping quarters," Dicky explained, as I looked behind the screen.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he demanded at last, in a hurt tone, as I finished my inspection of the walls, which were almost covered with the originals of Dicky's best magazine illustrations, framed in narrow, black strips of wood.

"It is truly wonderful, Dicky," I returned, trying to make my voice enthusiastic.

I could have raved over the room, for I did think it exquisitely beautiful, had not my woman's intuition detected that another hand than Dicky's had helped in its preparation.

Only a woman's cunning fingers could have fashioned the curtains and the cushions I saw in profusion about the room. I knew her identity before Dicky, after pointing out in detail every article of which he was so proud, said hesitatingly:

"I wish, Madge, you would telephone Miss Draper and ask her to run over tomorrow and see the room. You see, I was so anxious to surprise you that I did not want to have you do any of the work, and she kindly did all of this needlework for me. I know she is very curious to see how her work looks."

"Of course, I will telephone Miss Draper if you wish it, Dicky, but don't you think you ought to do it yourself? She is your employee, not mine, and I never have seen her but twice in my life."

I flatter myself that my voice was as calm as if I had not the slightest emotional interest in the topic I was discussing. But in reality I was furiously angry. And I felt that I had reason to be.

"Now, that's a nice, catty thing to say!" Dicky exploded wrathfully. "Hope you feel better, now you've got it off your chest. And you can just trot right along and telephone her yourself. Gee! you haven't been a martyr for months, have you?"

When Dicky takes that cutting, ironical tone, it fairly maddens me. I could not trust myself to speak, so I turned quickly and went out of the room which had become suddenly hateful to me, and found refuge in my own.

My exit was not so swift, however, but that I overheard words of my mother-in-law's, which were to remain in my mind.

"Richard," she exclaimed angrily, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You act like a silly fool over this model of yours. What business did you have asking her to do this needlework for you in the first place? You ought to have known Margaret would not like it."

I did not hear Dicky's reply, for I had reached my own room, and, closing and locking the door, I sat down by the window until I should be able to control my words and actions.

For one thing I had determined. I would not have a repetition of the scenes which Dicky's temper and my own sensitiveness had made of almost daily occurrence in the earlier months of our marriage. I could not bring myself to treat Grace Draper with the friendliness which Dicky appeared to wish from me, but at least I could keep from unseemly squabbling about her.

But my heart was heavy with misgiving concerning this friendship of Dicky's for his beautiful model, as I opened my door and went down the hall to Dicky's room. My mother-in-law's voice interrupted me.

"Come in here a minute," she said abruptly, as she trailed her flowing negligee past me into the living room.

As I followed her in, wondering, she closed the door behind her. I saw with amazement that her face was pale, her lips quivering with emotion.

"Child," she said, laying her hand with unwonted gentleness on my shoulder. "I want you to know that I entirely disapprove of this invitation which Richard has asked you to extend. Of course, you must use your own judgment in the matter, and it may be wise for you to do as he asks. But I want to be sure that you are not influenced by anything I may have said in the past about not opposing Richard in his whims.

"He is going too far in this thing," she went on. "I cannot counsel you. Each woman has to solve these problems for herself. But it may help you to know that I went through all this before you were born."

She turned swiftly and went up to her room again.

Dicky's father! She must mean her life with him! In a sudden, swift, pitying gleam of comprehension, I saw why my mother-in-law was so crabbed and disagreeable. Life had embittered her. I wondered miserably if my life with her son would leave similar marks upon my own soul.

## XXIV

### A SUMMER OF HAPPINESS THAT ENDS IN FEAR

I do not believe I shall ever know greater happiness than was mine in the weeks following Grace Draper's first visit to our Marvin home. Many times I looked back to that night when I had lain sobbing on my bed, fighting the demon of jealousy and gasped in amazement at my own folly.

That evening had ended in Dicky's arms on our moonlight veranda, and ever since he had been the royal lover of the honeymoon days, which had preceded our first quarrel. I wondered vaguely sometimes if he had guessed the wild grief and jealousy which had consumed me on that night, but if he had any inkling of it he made no sign.

Grace Draper had gone out of our lives temporarily.

If I had needed reassurance as to Dicky's real feeling for her, the manner in which he told me the news of her going would have given it to me.

"Blast the luck," he growled one evening, after reading a manuscript which he had been commissioned to illustrate. "Here's something I'll need Draper for, and she's 200 miles away. I ought to have known better than to let her go."

The tone and words were exactly what he would have used if the girl had been a man or boy in his employ. Even in my surprise at his news, I recognized this, and my heart leaped exultantly. I was careful, however, to keep my voice nonchalant.

"Why, has Miss Draper gone away?" I asked.

"Oh, that's so, I didn't tell you," he returned carelessly, looking up from the manuscript. "Yes, she went away two days ago. She has a grandmother, or aunt, or old party of some kind, down in Pennsylvania, who is sick and has sent for her. Guess the old girl has scads of coin tucked away somewhere, and Draper thinks she'd better be around when the aged relative passes in her checks. Bet a cooky she won't die at that, but if she's going to, I wish she'd hurry up about it. I need Draper badly, and she won't be back until the old girl either croaks or gets better."

Under other circumstances, the callousness of this speech, the coarseness of some of the expressions, the calling of Miss Draper by her surname, would have grated upon me. But I was too rejoiced both at the girl's departure and the matter of fact way in which Dicky took it to be captious about the language in which he couched the news of her going.



"Grace Draper is gone, is gone." The words set themselves to a little tune, which lilted in my brain. I felt as if the only obstacle to my enjoyment of our summer in the country had been removed.

How I did revel in the long, beautiful summer days! Dicky appeared to have a great deal of leisure, in contrast to the days crowded with work, which had been his earlier in the spring.

"Each year I work like the devil in the spring so as to have the summer, June especially, comparatively free," he exclaimed one day when I commented on the fact that he had been to his studio but twice during the week.

I had dreamed in my girlhood of vacations like the one I was enjoying, but the dream had never been fulfilled before. Dicky had fixed up a tennis court on the, grassy stretch of lawn at the left of the house, and we played every day. Two horses from the livery were brought around two mornings each week, and, after a few trials, I was able to take comparatively long rides with Dicky through the exquisite country surrounding Marvin.

Our motor boat trips were frequent also, although Dicky found that it was more convenient to rent one when he wished it than to enter into any ownership arrangement with any one else.

Automobile trips, in which his mother joined us, long rambles through the woods and meadows which we took alone, little dinners at the numberless shore resorts, all these made a whirl of enjoyment for me unlike anything I had ever known.

I was careful to cater to my mother-in-law's wishes in every way I could. Either because of my attentions or of the beautiful summer days, she was much softened in manner, so that there was no unpleasantness anywhere.

"This is the bulliest vacation I ever spent," Dicky said one evening, after a long tramp through the woods. It was one of the frequent chilly evenings of a Long Island summer, when a fire is most acceptable. Katie had built a glorious fire of dry wood in the living room fireplace, and after dinner we stretched out lazily before it, Mother Graham and I in arm chairs, Dicky on a rug with cushions bestowed comfortably around him.

"I am naturally very glad to hear that," I said, demurely, and Dicky laughed aloud.

"That's right, take all the credit to yourself," he said, teasingly. Then as he saw a shadow on my face, for I never have learned to take his banter lightly, he added in a tone meant for my ear alone:

"But you are the real reason why it's so bully, old top."

The very next day, Dicky and I went for a long walk.

We had nearly reached the harbor, when I saw Dicky start suddenly, gaze fixedly at some one across the road, and then lift his hat in a formal, unsmiling greeting. My eyes followed his, and met the cool, half-quizzical ones of Grace Draper. She was accompanied by a tall, very good-looking youth, who was bending toward her so assiduously that he did not see us at all.

"Why! I didn't know Miss Draper had returned," I said, wondering why Dicky had kept the knowledge from me.

"I didn't know it myself," Dicky answered, frowning. "Queer, she wouldn't call me up. Wonder who that jackanapes with her is, anyway."

Dicky was moody all the rest of the trip. I know that he has the most easily wounded feelings of any one in the world, and naturally he resented the fact that the beautiful model, whom he had befriended and who was his secretary and studio assistant, had returned from her trip without letting him know she was at home.

If I only could be sure that pique at an employee's failure to report to him was at the bottom of his sulkiness! But the memory of the good-looking youth who hung over the girl so assiduously was before my eyes. I feared that the reason for Dicky's moody displeasure was the presence of the unknown admirer of his beautiful model.

Of course, all pleasure in the day's outing was gone for me also, and we were a silent pair as we wandered in and out through the sandy beaches. Dicky conscientiously, but perfunctorily, pointed out to me all the things which he thought I would find interesting, and in which, under any other circumstances, I should have revelled.

In my resolution to be as chummy with Dicky as possible, I determined to put down my own feelings

toward Grace Draper. But it was an effort for me to say what I wished to Dicky. We had chatted about many things, and were nearly home, when I said timidly:

"Dicky, now that Miss Draper is back, don't you think you and I ought to call on her and her sister, and have them over to dinner?"

Dicky frowned impatiently:

"For heaven's sake, don't monkey with that old cat, Mrs. Gorman. She is making trouble enough as it is."

He bit his lip the next instant, as if he wished the words unsaid, and, for a wonder, I was wise enough not to question him as to the meaning of the little speech. But into my heart crept my own particular little suspicious devil—always too ready to come, is this small familiar demon of mine—and once there he stayed, continually whispering ugly doubts and queries concerning the "trouble" that Mrs. Gorman was making over her sister's intimate studio association with my husband.

My constant brooding affected my spirits. I found myself growing irritable. The next day after Dicky and I had seen Miss Draper and her attendant cavalier on the road to Marvin harbor, Dicky made a casual reference at the table to the fact that she had returned to the studio and her work as his secretary and model.

"She said she called up the studio when she got in, and again yesterday morning, but I was not in," he said. I realized that the girl had cleverly soothed his resentment at her failure to notify him that she had returned from her trip.

Whether it was the result of my own irritability or not I do not know, but Dicky seemed to grow more indifferent and absent-minded each day. He was not irritable with me, he simply had the air of a man absorbed in some pursuit and indifferent to everything else.

Grace Draper's attitude toward me puzzled me also. She preserved always the cool but courteous manner one would use to the most casual acquaintance, yet she did not hesitate to avail herself of every possible opportunity to come to the house. Then, two or three times during the latter part of the summer, I found that she had managed to join outings of ours. Whether this state of affairs was due to Dicky's wishes or her own subtle planning I could not determine.

I struggled hard with myself to treat the girl with friendliness, but found it impossible. My manner toward her held as much reserve as was compatible with formal courtesy. Of course, this did not please Dicky.

Dicky was also developing an unusual sense of punctuality. I always had thought him quite irresponsible concerning the keeping of his appointments, and he never had any set time for arriving at his studio. But he suddenly announced one morning that he must catch the 8:21 train every morning without fail.

"The next one gets in too late," he said, "and I have a tremendous amount of work on hand."

The explanation was plausible enough, but there was something about it that did not ring true. However, the solution of his sudden solicitude for punctuality did not come to me until Mrs. Hoch, one of my neighbors, called with her daughter, Celie, and enlightened me.

"We just heard something we thought you ought to know," Celie began primly, "so Ma and I hurried right over, so as to put you on your guard."

"Yes," sighed Mrs. Hoch, rocking vigorously as she spoke, "everybody knows I'm no gossip. I believe if you can't say nothing good about nobody, you should keep your mouth shut, but I says to Celie as soon as I heard this, 'Celie,' says I, 'it's our duty to tell that poor thing what we know.'"

I started to speak, to stop whatever revelation she wished to make, but I might as well have attempted to stem a torrent with a leaf bridge.

"We've heard things for a long time," Mrs. Hoch went on, "but we didn't want to say nothin', 'specially as you seemed such friends, her runnin' here and all. But we noticed she hain't been comin' lately, and then our Willie, he hears things a lot over at the station, and he says it's common talk over there that your husband and that Draper girl are planning to elope. They take the same train every morning together, come home on the same one at night, and they are as friendly as anything."

"Mrs. Hoch," I snapped out, "if I had known what you were going to say, I would not have allowed you to speak. Your words are an insult to my husband and myself. You will please to remember never to say

anything like this to me again."

Mrs. Hoch rose to her feet, her face an unbecoming brick red. Her daughter's black eyes snapped with anger.

"Come, Celie," the elder woman said, "I don't stay nowhere to be insulted, when all I've tried to do is give a little friendly warning to a neighbor."

Mother and daughter hurried down the path, chattering to each other, like two angry squirrels.

"Horrid, stuck-up thing," I heard Celie say spitefully, as they went through the fence. "I hope Grace Draper does take him away from her. She's got a nerve, I must say, talkin' to us like that. I don't believe she cares anything about her husband, anyway."

She might have changed her mind had she seen me fly to my room as soon as she was safely out of sight, lock the door, and bury my face in the pillows, that neither my mother-in-law nor Katie should hear the sobs I could not repress.

"Dicky! Dicky! Dicky!" I moaned. "Have I really lost you?"

Of course I knew better than to believe the statement of the elopement. I had seen and heard enough of village life to realize how the slightest circumstance was magnified by the community loafers. That Dicky and the girl took the same train, going and coming from the city, was a fact borne out by my own observations. I had remarked Dicky's regularity in catching the 8:21 in the mornings, something so opposed to his usual unpunctual habits, and wondered why. Now I had the solution.

I told myself, dully, that I was not surprised; that I had really known all along something like this was coming. My thoughts went back to the night, a few weeks before, when I had suffered a similar paroxysm of grief over Dicky's evident interest in the girl. Then all my doubts and fears had been swept away in Dicky's arms on the moonlit veranda. I caught my breath as I realized in all its miserable certainty the impossibility of any such tender scene now. Dicky and I seemed as far apart emotionally as the poles.

But the determination I had reached that other night, before Dicky's voice and caresses dispelled my doubts, I made my own again. There was nothing for me to do but to wait quietly, with dignity, until I was absolutely certain that Dicky no longer loved me. Then I would go out of his life without scenes or recriminations. I would not lift a finger to hold him.

By the time I had gained control of myself once more, Dicky came home.

"Letter for you," he said, "from the office of your old principal."

He tossed it into my lap, eyeing it and me curiously. I knew that his desire to know what was in it had made him remember to give it to me. His mother, who had opened her door at his step, came forward eagerly. I opened the letter, to find an offer of my old school position. My principal wrote that the woman who was appointed to the position had been suddenly taken ill and could not possibly fill it. He asked me to write him my decision at once, as it was within a few days of the opening of the school.

Mechanically, I read it aloud. My brain was whirling. I wondered if, perhaps, this was the way out for me. If Dicky really did not love me any longer, I ought to accept this position, even if by taking it I broke my agreement with the Lotus Study Club.

I did not like the thought of leaving the women who had thus honored me, but, on the other hand, if Dicky and I were to come to the parting of the ways, I could not refuse this rare chance to get back into the work I had left for his sake.

I decided to be guided by his attitude. If he were opposed to my course, I would know that my actions had ceased to be resentful to him, and I would accept the position. But if he showed willingness at the proposition—

I did not have long to wait. As I lifted my eyes to his face, when I had finished reading the letter I saw the old familiar black frown on his face. I never had thought that my heart would leap with joy at the sight of Dicky's frown, but it did. Before either of us could say anything, his mother spoke:

"Isn't it splendid? You are a most fortunate woman, Margaret, to be able to step back into a position like that. If it had come earlier, when my health was so poor, you could not have taken it. Now you can accept it, for I am perfectly able to run the house. You, of course, will write your acceptance at once."

She paused. I knew she expected me to reply. But I closed my lips firmly. Dicky should be the one to

decide this. He did it with thoroughness.

"I thought we settled all this rot last spring," he said. "Mother, I don't want to be disrespectful, but this is my business and Madge's, not yours. You will refuse, of course, Madge."

He turned to me in the old imperious manner. Months before I should have resented it. Now I revelled in it. Dicky cared enough about me, whether from pride or love, to resent my going back to my work.

"If you wish it, Dicky," I said quietly. He turned a grateful look at me. Then his mother's voice sounded imperiously in our ears.

"I think you have said quite enough, Richard," she said, with icy dignity. "Will you kindly telegraph Elizabeth that I shall start for home tomorrow? I certainly shall not stay in a house where I am flouted as I have been this morning."

## XXV

### PLAYING THE GAME

The big house seemed very lonely to me after my mother-in-law's abrupt departure. I had not dreamed that I could possibly miss the older woman's companionship, especially after her hateful behavior concerning my refusal of the school position.

But when she had left, in dignified dudgeon, for a visit with her daughter, Elizabeth, I realized that I had come to like her, to depend upon her companionship more than I had thought possible. If the country had not been so beautiful I would have proposed going back to the city. But the tall hedges inclosing the old place were so fresh and green, the rolling woodland view from my chamber window so restful, my beds of dahlias, cosmos, marigolds and nasturtiums so brilliant that I could not bring myself to leave it.

If I had not had the vague uneasiness concerning Dicky I could have been perfectly happy in spite of the loneliness. But my uneasiness concerning Dicky's friendship with Grace Draper was deepening to real alarm and anger. I had nothing more tangible than the neighborhood gossip, which I had so thoroughly repulsed when it was offered me by Mrs. Hoch and her daughter. But Dicky was becoming more and more distraught, and when he would allow nothing to keep him from taking the morning train on which Miss Draper traveled to the studio, I remembered that when we had first come to Marvin he had taken any forenoon train he happened to choose.

The second morning after his mother's departure, Dicky almost missed kissing me good-by in his mad haste to catch his train. He rushed out of the door after a most perfunctory peck at my cheek, and I saw him almost running down the little lane bordered with wild flowers that led "across lots" to the railroad station.

"I cannot bear this any longer," I muttered to myself, clenching my hands, as I saw the Hochs, mother and daughter, watching him from their screened porch, and imagined their satirical comments on his eagerness to make the train.

I sat listlessly on the veranda for an hour. Then the ringing of the telephone roused me. As I took down the receiver I heard the droning of the long distance operator: "Is this Marvin, 971?" and at my affirmative answer the husky voice of Lillian Underwood.

"Hello, my dear." Her voice had the comforting warmth which it had held for me ever since the memorable day when by her library fire we had resurrected the secret which her past life and Dicky's shared. We had buried it again, smoothed out all our misunderstandings in the process and been sworn friends ever since.

"Oh, Mrs. Underwood!" My voice was almost a peal of joy. "I am so glad to hear your voice."

"Are you very busy? Is there anything you cannot leave for the day?"  
She was direct as usual.

"Only the dog and cat and Katie," I answered.

"Good. Then what train can you get into town, and where can I meet you? I want you to lunch with me. I have something important to talk over with you."

I hastily consulted my watch. "If I hurry I can catch the 10:21. Where can I see you? The train reaches the Pennsylvania at 11 o'clock."

"I'll be in the woman's waiting room at the Pennsylvania, not the Long Island; the main waiting room. Look for me there. Good-by."

As soon as I caught sight of Lillian I knew that something was the matter, or she would not look at me in that way. Impulsively I laid my hand on hers.

"Tell me, Mrs. Underwood, is anything the matter?"

She imprisoned my hand in both of hers and patted it.

"Nothing that cannot be helped, my dear," she said determinedly. "Now I am going to forbid asking another question until we have had our luncheon. I decline to discuss the affairs of the nation or my own on an empty stomach, and my breakfast this morning consisted of the juice of two lemons and a small cup of coffee."

"Why?" I asked mechanically, although I knew the answer.

"The awful penalty of trying to keep one's figure," she returned lightly. "But I certainly am going to break training this noon. I am simply starved."

Her tone and words were reassuring, although I still felt there was something behind her light manner which intimately concerned me. But I had learned to count on her downright honesty, and her words, "Nothing that cannot be helped, my dear," steadied me, gave me hope that no matter what trouble she had to tell me, she had also a panacea for it.

We discussed our luncheon leisurely. Under the influence of the bracing air, the beautiful view, the delicious viands, I gradually forgot my worries, or at least pushed them back into a corner of my brain.

As we lingered over the ices, Lillian leaned over the table to me.

"Will you do me a favor?" she asked abruptly.

"Try me," I smiled back at her.

"Ask me to your home for a week's stay. I have an idea you need my fine Italian hand at work about now."

I looked at her wonderingly, then I began to tremble.

"Don't look like that," she commanded sharply. "Nothing dreadful is the matter, but that Dicky bird of yours needs his wings clipped a bit, and I think I am the person to apply the shears."

So there was something wrong with Dicky after all!

"Of course, it's that Draper cat," said Lillian Underwood, and the indignation in her voice was a salve to my wounded pride.

"Then you know," I faltered.

"Of course, I know, you poor child; know, too, how distressed you have been, although Dicky doesn't dream that I gathered that from his ingenuous plea for the lady."

My brain whirled. Dicky making an ingenuous plea to Lillian Underwood for his protégé, Grace Draper! I could not understand it.

"If Dicky has spoken of my feeling toward Miss Draper, even to you," I began stormily, feeling every instinct outraged.

"Don't, dear child." Mrs. Underwood reached her firm, cool hand across the table, and put it over my hot, trembling fingers. "You can't fight this thing by getting angry, or by jumping at conclusions. Now, listen to me."

There was a peremptory note in her voice that I was glad to obey. I resolved not to interrupt her again.

"Don't misunderstand me," she went on, "and please don't be angry when I say you are about as able to cope with the situation as a new born baby would be. That's the reason why I want you to let me come down and be a big sister to you. Will you?"

"Of course. You know I will," I returned. "But won't Dicky resent—"

"Dicky won't dream what I'm doing," she retorted tartly, "and when he does wake up I'll take care of him."

Always the note of domination of Dicky! Always the calm assumption, which I knew was justified, that no matter what she did he would not, remain angry at her! It spoke much for the real liking I felt for Lillian Underwood that the old resentment I felt for this condition of things was gone forever. I knew that she was my friend even more than Dicky's, and her history had revealed to me to what lengths she would go in loyalty to a friend.

"You see," she went on, "If the Draper woman were the ordinary type of model there would be no problem at all. Dicky has always been a sort of Sir Galahad of the studios and he had been too proud to engage in even a slight flirtation with any girl in his employ. He is very sincerely in love with you, too, and that safeguards him from any influence that is not quite out of the ordinary.

"But I tell you this Draper girl is a person to be reckoned with. She is hard as nails, beautiful as the devil, and I believe her to be perfectly unscrupulous. She is as interested in Dicky as she can be in any one outside herself, and I think she would like to smash things generally just to gratify her own egotism."

"You mean—" I forced the words through stiff lips.

"I mean she is trying her best to make Dicky fall in love with her, but she isn't going to succeed."

"But I am afraid she has succeeded!" The wail broke from me almost without my own volition.

"Why?" The monosyllable was sharp with anxiety.

I knew better than to keep my part of the story from her. I told her of Dicky's growing coldness to me, his anxiety to get the train upon which Miss Draper traveled, the neighborhood gossip, his determination not to have me meet her sister. I also laid bare the coldness with which I had treated the girl, and my determination never to say a word which would lead Dicky to believe I was jealous of her.

When I had finished Lillian leaned back in her chair and laughed lightly.

"Is that all?" she demanded. "I thought you had something really serious to tell me. If you'll do exactly as I tell you we'll beat this game hands down."

"I'll do just as you say," I responded, although it humiliated me to be put in the position of trying to beat any game, the stake of which was my husband's affections.

"Well, then, that is settled," she said, rising. "Now, for the first gun of the campaign. Call Dicky up, tell him you just lunched with me, and you are ready to go home any time he is."

"Oh, I can't do that," I said. "I couldn't bear to feel that he might prefer to take the train with her."

Lillian came to my side, gripped my shoulder hard, and looked into my eyes grimly.

"See here," she said, "are you going to be a baby or a woman in this thing?"

I swallowed hard. I knew she was right.

"I'll do whatever you wish," I responded meekly.

So I called Dicky on the telephone, and after explaining my unexpected presence in town, arranged to meet him at the station and go home with him.

"Sounds as if we were going to dine with Friend Husband," said Lillian, as I hung up the receiver.

"Yes, we are going home by trolley from Jamaica. It ought to be a beautiful trip. Dicky must have been thinking of such a trip before, for he told me there was a train to Jamaica at five minutes of four which connects with the trolley, and he usually gets mixed on the schedule of the trains from Marvin."

"What's that?" Lillian stopped short, then turned the subject. "How would you like to go down to the station on top of a bus?" she asked, "or would you prefer a taxi?"

"The bus by all means," I returned.

"I see we are kindred souls," she said. "I dote on a bus ride myself."

We were within a few blocks of the railroad station when she said:

"I hope I am mistaken, but I think Miss Draper will be a member of your trolley trip home, and I want you to be prepared to act as if it were the thing you most desired."

"If you are right, I will not go," I said, a cold fury at my heart. "I will take the next train home."

"You will do no such thing." Lillian's voice was imperative. "You promised you would let me be your big sister in this thing, and you've got to let me run it my way!"

"See here, my dear," her tones were caressing now. "You must use the weapons of a woman of the world in this situation, not those of an unsophisticated girl. The primitive woman from the East Side would waltz in and destroy the beauty of any lady she found philandering, however innocently, with her spouse. The proud, sensitive, inexperienced woman would have done just what you have contemplated, go home alone and ignore the wanderers. But, my dear, you must do neither of those things. You cannot afford to play in Draper's hand like that."

"Tell me what I must do," I said wearily.

"In a minute. First let me put you right on one question. Dicky is not in love with this girl yet. If he were, he would not wish any meeting between you and her. He is interested and attracted, of course, as any impressionable man with an eye for beauty would be if thrown in constant companionship with her. And, forgive me, but I am sure you have taken the wrong tack about it.

"You must dissemble, act a part, meet her feminine wiles with sharper weapons. Now you have been cold to her, avoided seeing her when possible, and while not quarreling with Dicky about her, yet evidencing your disapproval of her in many little ways."

"It is quite true," I answered miserably.

"Then turn over a new leaf right now. You may be sure at this minute that Dicky is worrying more over your attitude toward this trip than he is over Miss Draper's dimples. He expects you to have a grouch. Give him a surprise. Greet the lady smilingly, express your pleasure at having her companionship on your trip, but manage to register delicately your surprise at her being one of the party. No, better leave that part to me. You do the pleasant greeting, I'll put over the catty stuff. But on your honor, until I see you again, will you put down your feelings and cultivate Grace Draper, letting your attitude change slowly, so Dicky will suspect nothing?"

"I'll try," I said faintly.

"You'll do it," she returned bluntly. "I want her to be almost a member of the family by the time I get there."

\* \* \* \* \*

The trip by trolley with my husband and Grace Draper through the beautiful country lying between Jamaica and Hempstead will always remain in my memory as a turning point in my ideas of matrimony and its problems.

Lillian Underwood's talk with me had destroyed all my previous conceptions of dignified wifely behavior in the face of a problem like mine.

So all during the journey home through the fragrant September air, I paid as much attention to my role of calm friendliness as any actress would to a first night appearance. Remembering Lillian's advice to make the transition gradual from the frigid courtesy of my former meetings with Grace Draper to the friendly warmth we had planned for our campaign, I adopted the manner one would use to a casual but interesting acquaintance.

I kept the conversational ball rolling on almost every topic under the sun. But I found that the burden of the talk fell on my shoulders. The girl was plainly uneasy and puzzled at my manner. Dicky's thoughts I could not fathom, I caught his eyes fixed on me once or twice with admiration and a touch of bewilderment in them, but he said very little.

It was a wonderful night; warm, with the languor of September, fragrant with the heavy odors of ripening fruit and the late autumn blossoms. There was no moon, but the long summer twilight had not yielded entirely to the darkness and the stars were especially bright.

A night for lovers, for vows given and returned, it was this, if ever a night was. What a wonderful journey this would have been for me if only this other woman was not on the other side of my husband! Then with savage resentment I realized that she might also be thinking what possibilities the evening would have held for her if I had not been a third on the little journey.

Whatever Dicky was thinking I dared not guess. Whatever it was, I was sure that his thoughts were not dangerously charged with emotion as were mine and Grace Draper's. I was fiercely glad of his irresponsibility for the first time.

"Come on, girls. Here's Crest Haven. I've got a brilliant idea. We'll get one of these open flivvers they have at the station and motor to Marvin luxuriously. Beats waiting for the train all hollow."

I opened my lips to protest against the extravagance, then closed them without speaking, flushing hotly at the danger I had escaped. Nothing would have so embarrassed Dicky and delighted Miss Draper as any display of financial prudence on my part.

"Oh, Mr. Graham, how wonderful!" Miss Draper gave the impression of finding her voice mislaid somewhere about her, and deciding suddenly to use it. "This is just the night for a motor ride."

Her voice matched the night, cooing, languorous, seductive. I knew if she had voiced her real thoughts she would have willed that I be dropped anywhere by the roadside, so that she might have the enchanting solitude of the ride with Dicky.

A daring thought flashed into my brain as we stepped into the taxi. Why not pretend to play into her hand? It would prove to both Dicky and her that I was indifferent to their close friendship. And I was secretly anxious to see what way Dicky would reply to my proposition.

"Dear," I said with emotion, I fancy just the right note of conjugal tenderness in my voice. "Won't you drop me at the house first before you take Miss Draper home? I'm afraid I am getting a headache. I've had a rather strenuous day with Lillian, you know, and I really am very tired. You will excuse me, I am sure, Miss Draper. I'll try never to quit like this again. But my headaches are not to be trifled with."

"I am so sorry." Her voice was conventional, but I caught the under note of joy. "Of course I will excuse you."

"Are you sure the ride over there wouldn't do your head good, Madge?"

"Oh, no, Dicky, I feel that I must get home quickly. But that does not need to affect your plans. Katie is at home. I do not need you in the least. Go right along and enjoy your ride. I only wish I felt like doing it, too."

I fairly held my breath the rest of the ride. Dicky had not replied to my suggestion. What would he do when we reached the house?

The taxi sped along over the smooth roads, turned up the driveway at the side of the house and halted before the steps of the veranda. Dicky sprang out, gave his hand to me, and then turned to the driver.

"Take this lady to Marvin," he said. "She will tell you the street. How much do I owe you?"

"One dollar and a half."

I knew the charge was excessive, but I also knew enough to hold my tongue about it. Dicky paid the man and spoke to the girl inside.

"Good night, Miss Draper. You see you will have to enjoy the ride for both of us."

"Oh, Dicky!" I protested, but with a fierce little thrill of triumph at my heart. "This is a shame. Honestly, I do not need you. Go on over with Miss Draper."

"Of course he will do no such thing." The girl spoke with finality. I could imagine the storm of jealous rage that was swaying her. "There is nothing else for Mr. Graham to do but to stay with you." Her tone added, "You have compelled him to do so against his will."

She leaned from the cab. Her face looked ethereally beautiful in the faint light. I knew she meant to make Dicky regret that he could not accompany her.

"Good night," she said sweetly. "I am so sorry you do not feel well. I sincerely hope you will be better



in the morning."

But as the taxi rolled away, my heart beating a triumphant accompaniment to the roll of its wheels, I knew she was wishing me every malevolent thing possible.

I was glad she could not guess the bitter taste in my cup of victory. Long after Dicky was asleep, I lay on my porch bed looking out at the stars and debating over and over the question:

"Did Dicky refuse to accompany Grace Draper to her home because of consideration for me, or because he was afraid to trust himself alone with her?"

## XXVI

### A VOICE THAT CARRIED FAR

"Ah! Mrs. Graham, this is an unexpected pleasure."

Dr. Pettit's eyes looked down into my own with an expression that emphasized the words he had just uttered. His outstretched hand clasped mine warmly, his impressive greeting embarrassed me a bit, and I turned instinctively toward Dicky to see if he had noticed the young physician's extraordinarily cordial greeting.

But this I had no opportunity to discover, for as I turned, a taxi drew up to the curb where the Underwoods—who had come down to spend the promised week with us—Dicky and I were waiting for the little Crest Haven Beach trolley and Dicky sprang to meet Grace Draper and the Durkees—Alfred Durkee and his mother, who completed our party for the motor boat trip.

"I am very glad to see you, Dr. Pettit," I murmured conventionally, then hurriedly: "Pardon me a moment, I must greet these guests. I will be back."

When I turned again to him after welcoming Grace Draper with forced friendliness, and the Durkees with the real warmth of liking I felt for them, I found him talking to Lillian.

Dr. Pettit, it appeared, was waiting for the same car we wished to take, and no one looking at our friendly chatting group would have known that he did not belong to the party.

It was when we were all seated comfortably in the trolley, bowling merrily along over the grass-strewn track, that Lillian voiced a suggestion which had sprung into my own mind, but to which I did not quite know how to give utterance.

"Look here," she said brusquely, "I'm not the hostess of this party, but I'm practically one of the family, so I feel free to issue an invitation if I wish. Dr. Pettit, what's the matter with you joining our party for the day? Dicky here has been howling for another man to help lug the grub all morning. Unless you are set on a solitary day that man 'might as well be you'"—she punctuated the parody with a mocking little moue.

I had a sneaking little notion that Dicky would have been glad of the opportunity to box Lillian's ears for her suggestion. I do not think he enjoyed the idea of adding Dr. Pettit to the party, but, of course, in view of what she had said there was nothing for him to do but to pretend a cordial acquiescence in her suggestion.

"That's the very thing," he said, with a heartiness which only I, and possibly Lillian, could dream was assumed. "Lil, you do occasionally have a gleam of human intelligence, don't you?"

"I do hope that you have no plan that will interfere with coming with us," he said to the physician. "We have a big boat chartered down here at the beach, and we're going to loaf along out to one of the 'desert islands' and camp for the day."

"That sounds like a most interesting program," said the young physician. His voice held a note of hesitation, and he looked swiftly, inquiringly, at me and back again. It was so carelessly done that I do not think any one noticed it, but I realized that he was waiting for me to join my voice to the invitation.

"Well, Dr. Pettit," Dicky came up at this juncture, "out for the day?"

His tone was cordial enough, but I, who knew every inflection of Dicky's voice, realized that he did not relish the appearance of Dr. Pettit upon the scene.

"Yes, I'm going down to the shore for a dip," the young physician returned. And then without the stiff dignity which I had seen in his professional manner, he acknowledged the introductions which I gave him to Grace Draper and the Durkees.

"I trust you will think it interesting enough to make it worth your while to join us," I said demurely, lifting my eyes to his and catching a swift flash of something which might be either relief or triumph in his steely gray ones.

"Indeed, I shall be very glad to accompany you," he said, smiling.

Our boat, a large, comfortable one, built on lines of usefulness, rather than beauty, slipped over the dancing blue waters of the bay like an enchanted thing. A neat striped awning was stretched over the rear of the boat beneath which we lounged at ease.

The boat sped on as lazily as our idle conversation, and finally we came in sight of a gleaming beach of sand, with seaweed so luxuriantly tangled that it looked like small clumps of bushes, with the calm, still water of the bay on one side, and the lazily rolling surf on the other.

"Behold our desert island!" Dicky exclaimed dramatically, springing to his feet.

Jim ran the boat skilfully up on the beach and grounded her. Harry Underwood stepped forward to assist me ashore, but Dr. Pettit, with unobtrusive quickness, was before him.

As I laid my hand in that of the young physician, Harry Underwood gave a hoarse stage laugh. "I told you so," he croaked maliciously; "I knew I had a rival on my hands."

As Harry Underwood uttered his jibing little speech, Dicky raised his head and looked fixedly at me. It was an amazed, questioning look, one that had in it something of the bewilderment of a child. In another instant he had turned away to answer a question of Grace Draper's.

I felt my heart beating madly. Was Dicky really taking notice of the attentions which Harry Underwood and Dr. Pettit were bestowing upon me? I had not time to ponder long, however, for Lillian Underwood seized my arm almost as soon as we stepped on shore and walked me away until we were out of earshot of the others.

"Did you see Dicky's face," she demanded breathlessly, "when Harry and that lovely doctor of yours were doing the rival gallant act? It was perfectly lovely to see his lordship so puzzled. That doctor friend of yours was certainly sent by Providence just at this time. Just keep up a judicious little flirtation with him and I'll wager that before the week's out Dicky will have forgotten such a girl as Grace Draper exists."

If it had not been for the memory of Lillian's advice ringing in my ears, I think I should have much astonished Dr. Pettit and Harry Underwood when they started into the surf with me.

The whole situation was most annoying to me. And, besides, it was so unutterably silly! I might have been any foolish school girl of seventeen, with a couple of immature youths vying for my smiles, for any reserve or dignity there was in the situation.

My fingers itched to astonish each of the smirking men with a sound box on the ear. But my fiercest anger was against Dicky. If he had been properly attentive to me, Mr. Underwood and Dr. Pettit would have had no opportunity, indeed would not have dared, to pay me the idiotic compliments, or to offer the silly attentions they had given me.

But Dicky and Grace Draper were romping in the surf, like two children, splashing water over each other, and running hand in hand toward the place far out on the sand—for it was low tide—where they could swim.

They might have been alone on the beach for anything their appearance showed to the contrary. And yet as I gazed I saw Dicky look past the girl in my direction, with a quick, furtive, watching glance.

As they went farther into the surf, he sent another glance over his shoulder toward me.

As I caught it, guessing that in all his apparent interest in Grace Draper he was yet watching me and my behavior, something seemed to snap in my brain.

I would give him something to watch!

With a swift movement I slipped a little bit away from the two men by my side, and, filling my hands with water, splashed it full into the face of Harry Underwood.

"Dare you to play blind man's buff," I said gayly, sending another handful into Dr. Pettit's face, and then slipping adroitly to one side I laughed with, I fancy, as much mischief as any hoyden of sixteen could have put into her voice, at the picture the men made trying to get the salt water out of their eyes.

I had no compunctions on the score of their discomfort, for I felt that I had a score to settle with each of them. The way in which each took my rudeness, however, was characteristic of the men.

Harry Underwood's face grew black for a minute, then it cleared and he laughed boisterously.

"You little devil," he said, "I'll pay you for that. Ever get kissed under water? Well, that's what will happen to you before this day is over."

Dr. Pettit's face did not change, but into his gray eyes came a little steely glint. He said nothing, only smiled at me. But there was something about both smile and eyes that made me more uncomfortable than Harry Underwood's bizarre threat.

I was so unskilled in this game of banter and flirtation that I was at a loss what to say. Recklessly I grasped at the first thing which came into my mind.

"You'll have to catch me first," I said, daringly, and turning, ran swiftly out toward the open sea. I am only a fair swimmer, but the sea was unusually calm, so that I went much farther than I otherwise would have dared.

When I found the water getting too deep for walking I started swimming. As I swam I looked over my shoulder. The two men were following me, both swimming easily. Dr. Pettit was in the lead, but Harry Underwood, with powerful strokes, was not far behind him. I concluded that Dr. Pettit had been the swifter runner, but that the other man was the better swimmer.

As I saw them coming toward me, I realized that I had given them a challenge which each in his own way would probably take up. I was dismayed. I felt that I could not bear the touch of either man's hand.

In another moment my punishment had come.

Dr. Pettit overtook me, stretched out his hand, just touched me with a caressing, protecting little gesture, and said in a low tone, "Don't be afraid, little girl: If you will accord me the privilege, I will see that your friend does not get a chance of fulfilling his threat."

I knew that he intended his words for my ear alone, but he had not counted on Harry Underwood's quick ear. That gentleman swam lazily toward us, saying as he passed us, with a malicious little grin:

"Better go slow upon that protecting-heroine-from-villain stunt. I see Friend Husband is getting a bit restless."

He forged on into the surf, with long, powerful strokes that yet had the curious appearance of indolence which invests every action of his.

Startled at his words, I looked toward the place where I had last seen Dicky romping in the waves with Grace Draper.

The girl was swimming by herself. Dicky, with rapid strokes, was coming toward us.

"For the love of heaven, Madge!" he said, angrily, as he came up to us. "Haven't you any more sense than to come away out here? This sea is calm, but it is treacherous, and you are farther out than you have ever gone before. Come back with me this minute."

The sight of Grace Draper swimming by herself gave me an inspiration. The game which Lillian had advised me to play was certainly succeeding. I would keep it up.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" I demanded, assuming an indignation I did not feel. "Dr. Pettit was saying nothing to me that could possibly interest you." I felt a little twinge of conscience at the fib, but I had too much at stake to hesitate over a quibble. "As for casting sheep's eyes, as you so elegantly express it, you've been doing so much of it yourself that I suppose it is natural for you to accuse other people of it."

"Now what do you mean by that?" Dicky demanded, staring at me with such an innocent air that I could have laughed if I had not been thoroughly angry at his silly attempt to misunderstand me.

"Don't be silly, Dicky," I said, pettishly; "I can swim perfectly well out here and even if anything should happen, Dr. Pettit and Mr. Underwood are surely good swimmers enough to take care of me." I could not resist putting that last little barbed arrow into my quiver, for Dicky, while a good swimmer, even I could see, was not as skillful as either Mr. Underwood or Dr. Pettit.

Dicky waited a long moment before answering, then he spoke tensely, sternly:

"Madge, answer me, are you coming back with me now, or are you not?"

The tone in which he put the question was one which I could not brook, even at the risk of seriously offending Dicky. An angry refusal was upon my lips when Harry Underwood's voice saved me the necessity of a reply.

"There, there, Dicky-bird, keep your bathing suit on," he admonished, roughly; "of course, she'll go back, we'll all go back, a regular triumphal procession with beautiful heroine escorted by watchful husband, treacherous villain and faithful friend." He grinned at Dr. Pettit, and we all swam back to shallower water, Dr. Pettit and Mr. Underwood gradually edging off some distance away from Dicky and me.

I could not help smiling at the ludicrous aspect we must have presented. Dicky must have been watching me narrowly, for he suddenly growled:

"To the devil with Grace Draper!" Dicky cried, and his voice was louder, carried farther than he realized. "I'm not bothering about her. She's getting on my nerves anyway; but you happen to be my wife, and what you do is my concern, don't you forget that, my lady."

## XXVII

### "HOW NEARLY I LOST YOU!"

Dicky and I had been so engrossed in our quarrel that we had not noticed our proximity to Grace Draper. Whether she had purposely approached us or not, I could not tell. At any rate, when, after Dicky's outburst of jealous anger against Dr. Pettit and my retort concerning his model, he had cried out loudly, "To the devil with Grace Draper! I'm not bothering about her. She's getting on my nerves anyway," I heard a choking little gasp from behind me, and, turning swiftly, saw the girl standing quite near to us.

Except when excited, Grace Draper never has any color, but the usual clear pallor of her face had changed to a grayish whiteness. I had reason enough to hate the girl, I had schemed with Lillian to save Dicky from her influence, but in that moment, as I gazed at her, I felt nothing but deep pity for her.

For all the poise and pretence of the girl was stripped from her. She was a ghastly, pitiable sight, as she stood there, her big eyes fixed on Dicky, her breath coming unevenly in shuddering gasps.

Then she glanced at me and her eyes held mine for a moment, fascinated; then, with a little shrug of her shoulders, she turned away, and I knew that the danger of Dicky's realizing her agitation was passed.

"What are you looking at so earnestly?" Dicky demanded.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned swiftly, following my gaze, and catching sight of the retreating back of Grace Draper.

"Good Lord!" he gasped in consternation. "Do you suppose she heard what I said?"

"Oh, I'm sure she didn't," I replied mendaciously.

Dicky looked at me curiously. Whether he believed me or not I do not know. At any rate, he did not press the question.

Neither did he again refer to Dr. Pettit, to my sincere relief.

We made a merry picnic of our impromptu luncheon, and after it, when we were dried by the sun, we spent a comfortable lazy two hours lounging on the beach.

If I had not seen Grace Draper's blanched face and the terrible look in her eyes when she had heard Dicky's exclamation of indifference toward her, I would not have dreamed that her heart held any other emotion except that of happy enjoyment of the day. She laughed and chatted as if she had not a care in the world, directing much of her conversation to me. It crossed my mind that for some reason of her own she was trying to make it appear to every one that we were on especially friendly terms.

It was after one of Dicky's periodical trips to Jim's fire, which Harry Underwood did not allow him to forget, and his report that the dinner would be shortly forthcoming, that Grace Draper rose and said carelessly: "Suppose we all have another dip before dinner; there won't be time before we leave for a swim afterward, and the water is too fine to miss going in once more. What do you say, Mrs. Graham? Will you race me?"

I saw Lillian's quick little gesture of dissuasion, and through me there crept an indefinable shrinking from going with the girl, but the men were already chasing each other through the shallow water, and I did not wish to humiliate my guest by refusing to go with her.

"It can hardly be called a race," I answered quietly, "for you swim so much better than I, but I will do my best."

I followed her into the water with every appearance of enjoyment, and exerted every ounce of my strength to try to keep up with her rush through the waves.

I knew she was not exerting her full strength, for she is a magnificent swimmer, but I found that I had all I could do to keep pace with her. She seemed to be bent on showing off her skill to me, or else she was, trying to test my nerves by teasing me.

I knew that she was able to swim under the water when she chose, but that did not accustom me to the frequent sudden disappearances which she made, or to her equally sudden reappearances above the surface of the water.

She would dash on ahead of me a few yards, then her head would disappear beneath the waves. The next thing I knew she would bob up almost at my side. There was a fascination about this skill of hers which gripped me. I was so engrossed in watching her that I did not realize how far out we had gone until at one of her quick turns, I, following her, caught a glimpse of the beach.

To my overwrought imagination it seemed miles away. I suddenly felt an overwhelming terror of the cloudless sky, the rolling waves, even of the girl who had brought me out so far.

I looked wildly around for her, but could not see her anywhere. Evidently she was indulging in one of her underwater tricks. I turned blindly toward the shore. As I did so I felt a sudden jerk, a quick clutch at my foot, a clutch that dragged me down relentlessly.

I remembered gasping, struggling, fighting for life, with an awful sensation of being sunk in a gulf of blackness. I fancied I heard Lillian Underwood's voice in a piercing scream. Then I knew nothing more.

The next thing I remember was a voice. "There, she's coming out of it. Let me have that brandy," and then I felt a spoon inserted between my teeth and something fiery trickled gently drop by drop in my throat. The voice was that of Dr. Pettit.

With a gasp as the pungent liquid almost strangled me, I opened my eyes to find that the physician's arm was supporting my shoulder and his hand holding the spoon to my lips.

"Oh, thank God, thank God," some one groaned brokenly on the other side of me, and I turned my eyes to meet Dicky's face bent close to mine and working with emotion.

"She is all right now," the physician said, reassuringly. "She will suffer far more from the shock than from any real damage by her immersion. Get her into the tent." He turned to Mrs. Underwood and said: "Rub her down hard, and if there are any extra wraps in the party put them around her. Give her a stiff little dose of this." He handed Lillian the brandy flask. "Then bring her out into the sunshine again. She'll be all right in a little while."

Dicky picked me up in his arms as the physician spoke, as if I had been a child, and strode with me toward the improvised tent Dr. Pettit had indicated.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, suppose I had lost you," he said brokenly, and then, manlike, reproachfully even in the intensity of his emotion: "What possessed you to go out so far? If it hadn't been for Grace Draper being on hand when you went down, you would never have come back. Harry and I were too far away when Lil screamed to be of any use. But by the time we got there Miss Draper had you by the hair

and was towing you in."

My brain was too dazed to comprehend much of what Dicky was saying, but one remark smote on my brain like a sledge hammer.

Grace Draper had saved my life! Why, if I had any memory left at all, Grace Draper had—

Lillian came forward swiftly and placed a restraining finger on my lips.

"You mustn't talk yet," she admonished; then to Dicky, "Run away now, Dicky-bird, and give Mrs. Durkee and me a chance to take care of her." Little Mrs. Durkee's sweet, anxious face was close to Lillian's. "Yes, Dicky," she echoed, "hurry out now."

Dicky waited long enough to kiss me, a long, lingering, tender kiss that did more to revive me than the brandy, and then went obediently away while Mrs. Durkee and Lillian ministered to me as only tender and efficient women can.

When I was nearly dressed again, Lillian turned to Mrs. Durkee: "Would you mind getting a cup of coffee for this girl?" she asked. "I know Jim and Katie have some in preparation out there."

"Of course," Mrs. Durkee returned, and fluttered away.

She had no sooner gone than Lillian gathered me in her arms with a protecting, maternal gesture, as if I had been her own daughter restored to her.

"Quick," she demanded fiercely, "tell me just what happened out there when you went under. Did you get a cramp or what?"

I waited a moment before answering. The suspicion that had come to my brain was so horrible that I did not wish to utter it even to Lillian.

"I think it must have been the undertow," I said feebly. "I felt something like a clutch at my feet dragging me down."

Lillian's face hardened. Into her eyes came a revengeful gleam.

"Undertow!" she ejaculated, "you poor baby! Your undertow was that Draper devil's calculating hand!"

I stared at Lillian, horrified.

"But Lillian," I protested, faintly, "how is it that they all say she saved my life? If she really tried to drown me why didn't she let me go?"

"Got cold feet," returned Lillian, laconically. "You see she isn't naturally evil enough deliberately to plan to kill you. I give her credit for that with all her devilishness, but something happened today between her and Dicky. I don't know what it was that drove her nearly frantic. I saw her look at you two or three times in a way that chilled my blood. I didn't like the idea of your going out there with her, but I didn't see any way of stopping you.

"Now, there's one thing I want you to promise me," she went on, hurriedly. "Although I know you well enough to know it's something you would do anyway without a promise. I don't want you to hint to anyone, even Dicky, what you know of the Draper's attempt to put you out of commission. It's the chance I've been looking for, the winning card I needed so badly. I won't need to stay a week with you, my dear, as I thought when I first planned my little campaign to get Dicky out of the Draper's clutches. I can go home tonight if I wish to, with my mission accomplished."

"Why, what do you mean?" I asked.

"Just this," retorted Lillian, "that I'm going to spring the nicest little case of polite blackmail on Grace Draper before the day is over that you ever saw.

"I shall need you when I do it, so be prepared, although you won't need to say anything.

"But here comes Mrs. Durkee with the coffee. Do you think, after you drink it, you'll feel strong enough to have me tackle Grace Draper?"

I shivered inwardly, but bent my head in assent. Lillian had proved too good a friend of mine for me

to go against her wishes in anything.

After I had drunk the steaming coffee, with Mrs. Durkee looking on in smiling approval, Lillian made another request of the cheery little woman.

"Would you mind asking Miss Draper to come here a moment?" she said quietly. "Mrs. Graham wants to thank her, and then do hunt up that husband of mine and tell him to rig up some sort of couch for Mrs. Graham, so she can lie down while we have our dinner. We can all take turns feeding her."

As Mrs. Durkee hurried out, eager to help in any way possible, Lillian turned to me grimly.

"That will keep her out of the way while we have our seance with the Draper. Now brace up, my dear; just nod or shake your head when I give you the cue."

It seemed hours, although in reality it was only a moment or two before Grace Draper parted the improvised sail curtains and stood before us. I think she knew something of what we wished, for her face held the grayish whiteness that had been there when she heard Dicky's impatient words concerning her. But her head was held high, her eyes were unflinching as she faced us.

"Miss Draper," Lillian began, her voice low and controlled, but deadly in its icy grimness, "we won't detain you but a moment, for we are going to get right down to brass tacks.

"I know exactly what happened out there in the surf a little while ago. I was watching from the shore, and saw enough to make me suspicious, and what I have learned from Mrs. Graham has confirmed my suspicions." She glanced toward me.

"You felt a hand clutch your foot and then drag you down, did you not, Madge?"

I nodded weakly, conscious only of the terrible burning eyes of Miss Draper fixed upon me.

"It is a lie," Miss Draper began, fiercely, but Lillian held up her hand in a gesture that appeared to cow the girl.

"Don't trouble either to deny or affirm it," she said icily. "There is but one thing I wish to hear from your lips; it is the answer to this question: Will you take the offer Mr. Underwood made you, to get you that theatrical engagement, and, having done this, will you keep out of Dicky Graham's way for every day of your life hereafter? I don't mind telling you that if you do this I shall keep my mouth closed about this thing; if you do not, I shall call the rest of the party here now and tell them what I know."

"Mr. Graham will not believe you," the girl said through stiff lips. Her attitude was like the final turning of an animal at bay.

"Don't fool yourself," Lillian retorted caustically. "I am Mr. Graham's oldest friend. He would believe me almost more quickly than he would his wife, for he might think that his wife was prejudiced against you.

"I am not a patient woman, Miss Draper. Don't try me too far. Take this offer, or take the consequences."

The girl stood with bent head for a long minute, as Lillian flared out her ultimatum, then she lifted it and looked steadily into Mrs. Underwood's eyes.

"Remember, I admit nothing," she said defiantly, "but, of course, I accept your offer. There is nothing else for me to do in the face of the very ingenious story which you two have concocted between you."

She turned and walked steadily out of the tent.

Her words, the blaze in her eyes, the very motion of her body, was magnificently insolent.

"She's a wonder!" Lillian admitted, drawing a deep breath, as the girl vanished. "I didn't think she had bravado enough to bluff it out like that."

"And now my dear," Lillian spoke briskly, "just lean your head against my shoulder, shut your eyes, and try to rest for a little; I know that sand with a rain coat covering doesn't make the most comfortable couch in the world, but I think I can hold you so that you may be able to take a tiny nap."

What Dicky surmised concerning the events of the afternoon, I do not know. He must have known that the girl was madly in love with him. Something had happened to put an end to the infatuation into

which he had been slipping so rapidly.

Had he become tired of the girl's open pursuit of him? Had he guessed to what lengths her desperation had driven her? Had the shock of my narrow escape from drowning startled him into a fresh realization of his love for me?

I felt too weak even to guess the solution of the riddle. All I wanted to do was to nestle close to Dicky's side, to be taken care of and petted like a baby.

The ride home through the sunset was a quiet one. To me it was one of the happiest hours of my life.

Dicky, fussing over me as if I were a fragile piece of china, sat in the most sheltered corner of the boat, and held me securely against him, protecting me with his arm from any sudden lurch or jolt the boat might give.

Seemingly by a tacit agreement, the others of the party left us to ourselves. They talked in subdued tones, apparently unwilling to spoil the wonderful beauty of the twilight ride home with much conversation.

When the boat landed, Harry Underwood, at Dicky's suggestion, telephoned for taxis to meet the little trolley, upon which we journeyed from the beach to Crest Haven. One of these bore the Durkees and Grace Draper to their homes; the other was to carry Harry and Lillian, with Dicky and me, to the old Brennan house.

Dr. Pettit, who was to take a train back to the city, came up to us after we were seated in the taxi:

"I would advise that you go directly to bed, Mrs. Graham," he said, with his most professional air. "You have had an unusual shock, and rest is the one imperative thing."

I felt that common courtesy demanded that I extend an invitation to the physician to call at our home when next he came to Marvin, but fear of Dicky's possible displeasure tied my tongue. I could not do anything to jeopardize the happiness so newly restored to me.

To my great surprise, however, Dicky impulsively extended his hand and smiled upon the young physician:

"Thanks ever so much, old man," he said cordially, "for the way you pulled the little lady through this afternoon. Don't forget to come to see us when next you're in Marvin."

I was tucked safely into Dicky's bed, which he insisted on my sharing, saying that he could take care of me better there than in my own room, when he gave me the explanation of his cordiality.

"I'm not particularly stuck on that doctor chap," he said, tucking the coverlet about me with awkward tenderness, "but I'm so thankful tonight I just can't be sour on anybody."

"Sweetheart, sweetheart!" He put his cheek to mine. "To think how nearly I lost you!" And my heart echoed the exclamation could not speak aloud:

"Ah! Dicky, to think how nearly I lost YOU."

## **XXVIII**

### **A DARK NIGHT AND A TROUBLED DAWN**

"How many more trains are there tonight?"

Lillian Underwood's voice was sharp with anxiety. My voice reflected worry, as I answered her query.

"Two, one at 12:30, and the last, until morning, 2 o'clock."

"Well, I suppose we might as well lie down and get some sleep. They probably will be out on the last train."

"You don't suppose," I began, then stopped.



"That they've slipped off the water wagon?" Lillian returned grimly. "That's just what I'm afraid of. We will know in a little while, anyway. Harry will begin to telephone me, and keep it up until he gets too lazy to remember the number. Come on, let's get off these clothes and get into comfortable negligees. We probably shall have a long night of worry before us."

I obeyed her suggestion, but I was wild with an anxiety which Lillian did not suspect. My question, which she had finished for me, had not meant what she had thought at all. In fact, until she spoke of it, that possibility had not occurred to me.

It was a far different fear that was gripping me. I was afraid that Grace Draper had failed to keep the bargain she had made with Lillian to keep out of Dicky's way, in return for Lillian's silence concerning the Draper girl's mad attempt to drown me during our "desert island picnic."

Whether or not my narrow escape from death had brought Dicky to a realization of what we meant to each other, I could not tell. At any rate, he never had been more my royal lover than in the five days since my accident. Indeed, since that day he had made but one trip to the city beside this with Harry Underwood, the return from which we were so anxiously awaiting. When the men left in the morning they had told us not to plan dinner at home, but to be ready to accompany them to a nearby resort for a "shore dinner," as they were coming out on the 5 o'clock train. No wonder that at 10:30 Lillian and I were both anxious and irritated.

Dicky's behavior toward me, since death so nearly gripped me, certainly had given me no reason to doubt that his infatuation for Grace Draper was at an end. But no one except myself knew how apparently strong her hold had been on Dicky through the weeks of the late summer, nor how ruthless her own mad passion for him was. Had she reconsidered her bargain? Was she making one last attempt to regain her hold upon Dicky?

The telephone suddenly rang out its insistent summons. I ran to it, but Lillian brushed past me and took the receiver from my trembling hand.

I sank down on the stairs and clutched the stair rail tightly with both hands to keep from falling.

"Yes, yes, this is Lil, Harry. What's the matter?"

"Seriously?"

"Where are you?"

"Yes, we were coming, anyway. Yes, we'll bring Miss Draper's sister. Don't bother to meet us. We'll take a taxi straight from the station."

Staggering with terror, I caught her hand, and prevented her putting the receiver back on its hook.

"Is Dicky dead?" I demanded.

"No, no, child," she said soothingly.

"I don't believe it," I cried, maddened at my own fear. "Call him to the 'phone. Let me hear his voice myself, then I'll believe you."

She took the receiver out of my grip, put it back upon the hook, and grasped my hands firmly, holding them as she would those of a hysterical child.

"See here, Madge," she said sternly, "Dicky is very much alive, but he is hurt slightly and needs you. We have barely time to get Mrs. Gorman and that train. Hurry and get ready."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dicky's eager eyes looked up from his white face into mine. His voice, weak, but thrilling with the old love note, repeated my name over and over, as if he could not say it enough.

I sank on my knees beside the bed in which Dicky lay. I realized in a hazy sort of fashion that the room must be Harry Underwood's own bed chamber, but I spent no time in conjecture. All my being was fused in the one joyous certainty that Dicky was alive and in my arms, and that I had been assured he would get well. I laid my face against his cheek, shifted my arms so that no weight should rest against his bandaged left shoulder, which, at my first glimpse of it, had caused me to shudder involuntarily.

"If you only knew how awful I felt about this," Dicky murmured, contritely, and, as I raised my eyes to look at him, his own contracted as with pain.

"It's a fine mess I've brought you into by my carelessness this summer, but I swear I didn't dream—"

I laid my hand on his lips.

"Don't, sweetheart," I pleaded. "It is enough for me to know that you are safe in my arms. Nothing else in the world matters. Just rest and get well for me."

He kissed the hand against his lips, then reached up the unbandaged arm, and with gentle fingers pulled mine away.

"But there is one thing I must talk about," he said solemnly, "something you must do for me, Madge, for I cannot get up from here to see to it. It's a hard thing to ask you to do, but you are so brave and true, I know you will understand. Tell me, is that poor girl going to die?"

"I—I don't know, Dicky," I faltered, salving my conscience with the thought that he must not be excited with the knowledge of Grace Draper's true condition.

"Poor girl," he sighed. "I never dreamed she looked at things in the light she did, but I feel guilty anyhow, responsible. She must have the best of care, Madge, best physicians, best nurses, everything. I must meet all expenses, even to the ones which will be necessary if she should die."

He brought out the last words fearfully. Little drops of moisture stood on his forehead. I saw that the shock of the girl's terrible act had unnerved him.

Nerving myself to be as practical and matter-of-fact as possible, I wiped the moisture from his brow with my handkerchief and patted his cheek soothingly.

"I will attend to everything," I promised, "just as if you were able to see to it. But you must do something for me in return; you must promise not to talk any more and try and go to sleep."

"My own precious girl," he sighed, happily, and then drowsily—

"Kiss me!"

I pressed my lips to his. His eyes closed, and with his hand clinging tightly to mine, he slept.

How long I knelt there I do not know. No one came near the room, but through the closed door I could hear the hushed hurry and movement which marks a desperate fight between life and death.

I felt numbed, bewildered. I tried to visualize what was happening outside the room, but I could not. I felt as if Dicky and I had come through some terrible shipwreck together and had been cast up on this friendly piece of shore.

I knew that later I would have to face my own soul in a rigid inquisition as to how far I had been to blame for this tragedy. I had been married less than a year, and yet my husband was involved in a horrible complication like this.

But my brain was too exhausted to follow that line of thought. I was content to rest quietly on my knees by the side of Dicky's bed, with his hand in mine and my eyes fixed on his white face with the long lashes shadowing it.

At first I was perfectly comfortable, then after a while little tingling pains began to run through my back and limbs.

I dared not change my position for fear of disturbing Dicky, so I set my teeth and endured the discomfort. The sharpness of the pain gradually wore away as the minutes went by, and was succeeded by a distressing feeling of numbness extending all over my body.

Just as I was beginning to feel that the numbness must soon extend to my brain, the door opened and some one came quietly in.

My back was to the door, and so careful were the footsteps crossing the room that I could not tell who the newcomer was until I felt a firm hand gently unclasping my nervous fingers from Dicky's. Then I looked up into the solicitous face of Dr. Pettit.

"How is it that you have been left alone here so long?" he inquired indignantly, yet keeping his voice to the professional low pitch of a sick room. He put his strong, firm hands under my elbows, raised me to my feet and supported me to a chair, for my feet were like pieces of wood. I could hardly lift them.

"How long have you been kneeling there?" he demanded. "You would have fainted away if you had

stayed there much longer."

"I do not know," I replied faintly, "but it doesn't matter. Tell me, is my husband all right, and how badly is he hurt?"

"He is not hurt seriously at all," the physician replied. "The bullet went through the fleshy part of his left arm. It was a clean wound, and he will be around again in no time."

He walked to Dicky's bed, bent over him, listened to his breathing, straightened, and came back to me.

"He is doing splendidly," he said, "but you are not. You are on the point of collapse from what you have undergone tonight. You must lie down at once. If there is no one else to take care of you, I must do it."

I felt as if I could not bear to answer him, even to raise my eyes to meet his. I do not know how long the intense silence would have continued. Just as I felt that I could not bear the situation any longer, Lillian Underwood came into the room, bringing with her, as she always does, an atmosphere of cheerful sanity.

"What is the matter?" she asked. Her tone was low and guarded, but in it there was a note of alarm, and the same anxiety shown from her eyes as she came swiftly toward me.

"Mrs. Graham is in danger of a nervous collapse if she does not have rest and quiet soon," Dr. Pettit returned gravely. "Will you see that she is put to bed at once? Mr. Graham will do very well for a while alone, although when you have made Mrs. Graham comfortable, I wish you would come back and sit with him."

Lillian put her strong arms around me and led me through the door into the outer hall.

"But who is with Miss Draper?" I protested faintly, as we started down the stairs toward the first floor.

"Her sister and one of the best trained nurses in the city," Lillian responded. "Besides, Dr. Pettit will go immediately back to her room."

"But Dicky, there is no one with Dicky," I said, struggling feebly in an attempt to go back up the stairs again.

"Don't be childish, Madge." The words, the tone, were impatient, the first I had ever heard from Lillian toward me. But I mentally acknowledged their justice and braced myself to be more sensible, as she guided me to her room, and helped me into bed.

I found her sitting by my bedside when I opened my eyes. Through the lowered curtains I caught a ray of sunlight, and knew that it was broad day.

"Dicky?" I asked wildly, staring up from my pillows.

Lillian put me back again with a firm hand.

"Lie still," she said gently. "Dicky is fine, and when you have eaten the breakfast Betty has prepared and which Katie is bringing you, you may go upstairs and take care of him all day."

"But it is daylight," I protested. "I must have slept all night. And you? Have you slept at all?"

"Don't bother about me," she returned lightly. "I shall have a good long nap as soon as you are ready to take care of Dicky."

"But I meant to sleep only two or three hours. I don't see how I ever could have slept straight through the night."

I really felt near to tears with chagrin that I should have left Dicky to the care of any one else while I soundly slept the night through.

Lillian looked at me keenly, then smiled.

"Can't you guess?" she asked significantly.

"You mean you put something in the mulled wine to make me sleep?"

"Of course. You have been through enough for any one woman. Dicky was in no danger, and I had no

desire to have you ill on my hands."

I flushed a bit resentfully. I was not quite sure that I liked her high-handed way of disposing of me as if I were a child. Then as I felt her keen eyes upon me I knew that she was reading my thoughts, and I felt mightily ashamed of my childish petulance.

"You must forgive my arbitrary way of doing things," she resumed, a bit formally.

I put out my hand pleadingly. "Don't, Lillian," I said earnestly. "I'll be good, and I do thank you. You know that, don't you?"

Her face cleared. "Of course, goosie," she answered. "But I must help you dress. Your breakfast will be here in a moment."

I sprang out of bed before she could prevent me, and gave her a regular "bear hug."

"Help me dress!" I exclaimed indignantly. "Indeed, you will do no such thing. I feel as strong as ever, and I am going to put you to bed before I go to Dicky. But tell me, how is—"

She spared me from speaking the name I so dreaded.

"Miss Draper is no worse. Indeed, Dr. Pettit thinks she has rallied slightly this morning. She is resting easily now, has been since about 3 o'clock, when Dr. Pettit went home."

I was hurrying into my clothes as she talked. "Have you found out yet how it happened?" I asked.

"I know what Harry does," she answered. "He says that yesterday the girl appeared as calm, even cheerful, as ever, went with him to the manager's office, performed her dancing stunt as cleverly as she did the other night, and in response to the very good offer the manager made her, asked for a day to consider it. As she was leaving the office, she asked Harry if Dicky were in his studio, saying she had left there something she prized highly and would like to get it. Something in the way she said it made Harry suspicious. Of course, I had told him confidentially of her attempt to drown you, so he remarked nonchalantly that he was also going to the studio. He said she seemed nonplussed for a moment, then coolly accepted his escort.

"They went to the studio, and Harry stuck close to Dicky, never permitting the Draper girl to be alone with him for a minute. After a few moments she bade them a commonplace goodby and left, but she must have stayed near by and cleverly shadowed them when they left.

"At any rate, she appeared at the door of our house shortly after Harry and Dicky had entered—Harry wanted to get some things before coming out to Marvin again—and asked Betty to see Dicky. Unfortunately, Harry was in his rooms and did not hear the request, so that Dicky went into the little sitting room off the hall with her, and Betty says the girl herself closed the door. What was said no one knows but Dicky and the girl.

"Harry heard a shot, rushed downstairs, and found Dicky, with the blood flowing from his arm, struggling with the girl in an attempt to keep her from firing another shot. Harry took the revolver away, unloaded and pocketed it, and could have prevented any further tragedy only for Dicky's growing faint from loss of blood.

"Harry turned his attention to Dicky, and the girl picked up a stiletto, which Harry uses for a paper cutter—you know he has the house filled with all sorts of curios from all over the world—and drove it into her left breast. She aimed for her heart, of course, and she almost turned the trick. I imagine she has a pretty good chance of pulling through if infection doesn't develop. The stiletto hadn't been used for some time, and there were several small rust spots on it. But here comes your breakfast."

Her voice had been absolutely emotionless as she told me the story. As she busied herself with setting out attractively on a small table the delicious breakfast Katie had brought, I had a queer idea that if it were not for the publicity that would inevitably follow, Lillian would not very much regret the ultimate success of Grace Draper's attempt at self-destruction.

## XXIX

"BUT YOU WILL NEVER KNOW—"

I do not believe that ever in my life can I again have an experience so horrible as that which followed the development of infection in the dagger wound which Grace Draper had inflicted upon herself after her unsuccessful attempt to shoot Dicky.

Against the combined protest of Dicky and Lillian, I shared the care of the girl with the trained nurse whom Lillian's forethought had provided and Dicky's money had paid for.

The reason for my presence at her bedside was a curious one.

At the close of the third day following the girl's attempt at murder and self-destruction, Lillian came to the door of the room where I was reading to Dicky, who was now almost recovered, and called me out into the hall.

"Madge," she said abruptly, "that poor girl in there has been calling for you for an hour. We tried every way we could think of to quiet her, but nothing else would do. She must see you. I imagine she has made up her mind she's going to die and wants to ask your forgiveness or something of that sort."

"I will go to her at once," I said quietly. As I moved toward the door my knees trembled so I could hardly walk.

Lillian came up to me quickly and put her strong arm around me.

We went down the hall to a wonderful room of ivory and gold, which I knew must be Lillian's guest room. In a big ivory-tinted bed the girl lay, a pitiful wreck of the dashing, insolent figure she had been.

Her face was as white as the pillows upon which she lay, while her hands looked utterly bloodless as they rested listlessly upon the coverlet. Only her eyes held anything of her old spirit. They looked unusually brilliant. I wondered uneasily if their appearance was the result of their contrast to her deathly white face or whether the fever which the doctor dreaded had set in.

She looked at me steadily for a long minute, then spoke huskily—I was surprised at the strength of her voice.

"Of course I have no right to ask anything of you, Mrs. Graham," she said, "but death, you know, always has privileges, and I am going to die."

I saw the nurse glance swiftly, sharply, at her, and then go quietly out of the room.

"She's hurrying to get the doctor," the girl said, with the uncanny intuition of the very sick, "but he can't do me any good. I'm going to die and I know it. And I want you to promise to stay with me until the end comes. I shall probably be unconscious, and not know whether you are here or not, but I know you. You're the kind that if you give a promise you won't break it, and I have a sort of feeling that I'd like to go out holding your hand. Will you promise me that?"

Her eyes looked fiercely, compelling, into mine. I stepped forward and laid my hand on hers, lying so weak on the bed.

"Of course I promise," I said pitifully.

There was a quick, savage gleam in her eyes which I could not fathom, a gleam that vanished as quickly as it came. I told myself that the look I had surprised in her eyes was one of ferocious triumph, and that as my hand touched hers she had instinctively started to draw her hand away from mine, and then yielded it to my grasp.

"All right," she said indifferently, closing her eyes. "Remember now, don't go away."

"Dicky! Dicky! what have I done that you are so changed? How can you be so cold to me when you remember all that we have been to each other? Don't be so cruel to me. Kiss me just once, just once, as you used to do."

Over and over again the plaintive words pierced the air of the room where Grace Draper lay, while Dr. Pettit and the nurse battled for her life.

The theme of all her delirious cries and mutterings was Dicky. She lived over again all the homely little humorous incidents of their long studio association. She went with him upon the little outings which they had taken together, and of which I learned for the first time from her fever-crazed lips.

"Isn't this delicious salad, Dicky?" she would cry. "What a magnificent view of the ocean you can get from here? Wouldn't Belasco envy that moonlight effect?"

Then more tender memories would obsess her. To me, crouching in my corner, bound by my promise to stay in the room, it seemed a most cruel irony of fate that I should be compelled to listen to this unfolding of my husband's faithlessness to me within so short a time of our tender reconciliation.

I do not think Dr. Pettit knew I was in the room when he first entered it, anxious because of his imperative summons by the nurse. Lillian's guest room had the alcove characteristic of the old-fashioned New York houses, and she and I were seated in that.

The physician bent over the bed, carefully studying the patient. Through his professional mask I thought I saw a touch of bewilderment. He studied the girl's pulse and temperature, listened to her breathing, then turned to the nurse sharply.

"How long has she been delirious?"

"Since just after I called you," the girl replied.

"Did you notice anything unusual about her before that? You said something over the telephone about her talking queerly."

The nurse looked quickly over to the alcove where Lillian and I sat. Dr. Pettit's eyes followed her glance. With a quick muttered exclamation he strode swiftly to where we sat and towered angrily above us.

"What does this mean?" he asked imperatively. "Why are you here listening to this stuff? It is abominable."

"I agree with you, Dr. Pettit. It is abominable, but she made Madge promise to stay," Lillian said quietly. She made an almost imperceptible gesture of her head toward the bed, and her voice was full of meaning. He started, looked her steadily in the eyes, then nodded slightly as if asserting some unspoken thought of hers.

"Dicky darling," the voice from the bed rose pleadingly, "don't you remember how you promised me to take me away from all this, how we planned to go far, far away, where no one would ever find us again?"

Dr. Pettit turned almost savagely on me.

"Promise or no promise," he said, "I will not allow this any longer. You must go out of this room and stay out."

I stood up and faced him unflinchingly.

"I cannot, Dr. Pettit," I answered firmly. "I must keep my promise."

"Then I will get your release from that promise at once," he said and strode toward the bed.

I watched him with terrified fascination. Had he gone suddenly mad? What did he mean to do?

As Dr. Pettit turned from Lillian and me, and strode toward the bed where the sick girl lay, apparently raving in delirium, I called out to him in horror.

"Oh, don't disturb that delirious, dying girl!"

I made an impetuous step forward to try to stop him when Lillian caught my arm and whirled me into a recess of the alcove.

"You unsuspecting little idiot," she said, giving me a tender little shake that robbed the words of their harshness, "can't you see that that girl is shamming?"

For a moment I could not comprehend what she meant; then the full truth burst upon me. If what Lillian said were true, if the girl was pretending delirium that she might utter words concerning Dicky's infatuation for her which would torture me, then it was more than probable, almost certain, in fact, that there was no word of truth in her pretended delirious mutterings.

Dicky was not faithless to me, as I had feared during the tortured moments in which I had listened to, the girl's ravings.

The joy of the sudden revelation almost unnerved me. I believe I would have swooned and fallen had

not Lillian caught me.

"Listen," she said in my ear, pinching my arm almost cruelly to arouse me, "listen to what Dr. Pettit is saying, and you'll see that I am right."

My eyes followed hers to the bed where Dr. Pettit stood gazing down upon the seemingly unconscious girl and speaking in measured, merciless fashion.

"This won't do, my girl," he was saying, and his tone and manner of address seemed in some subtle fashion to strip all semblance of dignity from the girl and leave her simply a "case" of the doctor's, of a type only too familiar to him.

"It *won't* do," he repeated. "You are simply shamming this delirium, and you are lessening your chances for life every minute you persist in it. I'm sorry to be hard on you, but I'm going to give you an ultimatum right now. Either you will release Mrs. Graham from her promise at once and quit this nonsense, or I shall call an officer, report the truth of this occurrence, and you will be arrested not only upon a charge of attempted suicide, but of attempted murder.

"Of course, you will then be removed to the jail hospital, where I am afraid you may not enjoy the skilful care you are getting now. And, if you live, the after effects of these charges will be exceedingly unpleasant for you."

My heart almost stopped beating as I listened to the physician's relentless words.

Suppose Dr. Pettit was mistaken and the girl should be really delirious, after all. But just as I had reached the point of torturing doubt hardly to be borne, the girl stopped her delirious muttering, opened her eyes and looted steadily up at the physician.

"You devil," she said, at last, with quiet malignity. "You've called the turn. I throw up my hands."

"I thought so." This was the physician's only response. He stood quietly waiting while the girl gazed steadily, unwinkingly at him.

"Tell me," she said at last, coolly, "am I going to die?"

"I do not know," the physician returned, as coolly. "You have a slight temperature, and I am afraid infection has developed. But I can tell you that your performance of the last hour or two has not helped your chances any. You must be perfectly quiet and obedient, conserve every bit of strength if you wish to live."

"How about that very chivalric threat you made just now," the girl retorted, sneeringly. "If I live, are you going to have me arrested for this thing?"

"Not if you behave yourself and promise to make no more trouble," the physician replied gravely.

There was another long silence. The girl lay with eyes closed. The physician stood watching her keenly. Presently she opened her eyes again.

"Call Mrs. Graham over here," she said peremptorily.

"What are you going to say to her?" the physician shot back.

"That's my business and hers," Miss Draper returned, with a flash of her old spirit. "If you want a release from that promise you'd better let her come over here, otherwise I'll hold her to it."

Disregarding Lillian's clutch upon my arm I moved swiftly to the side of the bed and looked down into the sick girl's eyes, brilliant with fever.

"Did you wish to speak to me?" I asked gently.

"Yes," she said abruptly, "I release you from your promise, and you are free to believe or not what I have said during my—delirium."

She emphasized the last word with a little mocking smile. The same smile was on her lips as she added, slowly, sneeringly:

"But you will never know, will you, Madgie dear, just how much of what I said was false and how much true?"

Her eyes held mine a moment longer, and the malignance in their feverish brightness frightened me. Then she closed them wearily.

As I turned away from her bedside I realized that she had prophesied only too truthfully. There would be times in my life when I would believe Dicky only. But I was also afraid there would be others when her words would come back to me with intensified power to sear and scar.

## XXX

### THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED

Grace Draper did not die. Thanks to the assiduous care of Dr. Pettit and the two trained nurses Dicky had provided she gradually struggled up from the "valley of the shadow of death" in which she had lain to convalescence.

As soon as she was able to travel she went to the home of the relative in the country whom she had visited in the summer. One of the nurses went with her to see that she was settled comfortably, and upon returning reported that she was getting strong fast, and in a month or two more would be her usual self again.

Neither Dicky nor I had seen her before she left. Indeed, Dicky appeared to have taken an uncontrollable aversion to the girl since her attempt to kill him and herself and disliked hearing even her name mentioned. As for me, I had a positive dread of ever looking into the girl's beautiful false face again.

It was Lillian who made all the necessary arrangements both for the girl's stay in her own home and her transfer to the country.

But between the time of my mother-in-law's arrival at our house in Marvin and the departure of Grace Draper from Lillian's home lay an interval of a fortnight in which what we all considered the miraculous happened. My mother-in-law grew to like Lillian Underwood.

For the first three or four days after the ultimatum which I had given her that she should respect our guests if she stayed in our house she was like a sulky child. She kept to her room, affecting fatigue, and demanding her meals be carried up to her by Katie.

Of course Lillian and Harry wanted to go away at once, but Dicky and I overruled them. I was resolved to see the thing through. I felt that if my mother-in-law did not yield her prejudices at this time she never would, and that I would simply have to go through the same thing again later.

Lillian saw the force of my reasoning and agreed to stay, although I knew that the sensitive delicacy of feeling which she concealed beneath her rough and ready mask made her uncomfortable in a house which held such a disapproving element as my mother-in-law.

Then, one day the little god of chance took a hand. Harry and Dicky had gone to the city. It was Katie's afternoon off, and she and Jim, who had become a regular caller at our kitchen door, had gone away together.

Mother Graham was still sulking in her room, and Lillian was busy in Dicky's improvised studio with some drawings and jingles which were a rush order.

The day was a wonderful autumn one, and I felt the need of a walk.

"I think I will run down to the village," I said to Lillian. "This is the day the candy kitchen makes up the fresh toasted marshmallows. I think we could use some, don't you?"

"Lovely," agreed Lillian enthusiastically.

"I don't think Mother Graham will come out of her room while I'm gone," I went on. "Just keep an eye out for her if she should need you."

"She'd probably bite me if I offered her any assistance," returned Lillian, laughing, "but I'll look out for her."

But when I came back with the marshmallows, after a longer walk than I had intended, I found Lillian sitting by my mother-in-law's bedside, watching her as she slept. When she saw me she put her finger



to her lips and stole softly out into the hall.

"She had a slight heart attack while you were gone, and I was fortunate enough to know just what to do for her. It was not serious at all. She is perfectly all right now and"—she hesitated and smiled a bit—"I do not think she dislikes me any more."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" I exclaimed, ecstatically hugging her. "Everything will come out all right now."

During the rest of the Underwoods' stay it seemed as if my words had come true. The ice once broken, my mother-in-law's heart thawed perceptibly toward Lillian.

By the time the day came when Harry and Lillian left us to go back to their apartment the elder Mrs. Graham had so far gotten over her prejudices as to bid Lillian a reluctant farewell and express a sincere wish that she might soon see her again.

Toward Harry Underwood my mother-in-law's demeanor remained rigid. She treated him with formal, icy politeness which irritated Dicky, but appeared greatly to amuse Mr. Underwood. He took delight in paying her the most elaborate attentions, laying fresh nosegays of flowers at her plate at each meal. If he had been a lover besieging a beautiful girl's heart he could not have been more attentive, while he was absolutely impervious to all the chilling rebuffs she gave him.

I think that the touch of malice which is always a part of this man's humor was gratified by the frigid annoyance which the elder Mrs. Graham exhibited toward his attentions. At any rate, he kept them up until the very hour of his departure.

It was when he happened to be alone with me on the veranda a few moments before the coming of the taxi which was to bear them to their homeward train that he gave me the real explanation of his conduct.

"Tell me, loveliest lady," he said, with the touch of exaggeration which his manner always holds toward me, "tell me, haven't I squared up part of your account with the old girl this last week?"

"Why, what do you mean?" I stammered.

"Don't pretend such innocence," he retorted. "If you want me to tell you in so many words, I beg leave to inform you that I've been doing my little best to annoy your august mother-in-law to pay her off for her general cussedness toward you, and, incidentally, me."

"But she hasn't been cross to me," I protested.

"Not the last three or four days perhaps, but I'll bet you've had quite a dose since she came to live at your house, and you'll have another if she ever finds out my wicked designs upon you." He smiled mockingly and took a step nearer to me. "Don't forget you owe me a kiss," he said, with teasing maliciousness, referring to the time when he had threatened to "kiss me under water." "Don't you think you had better give in to me now?"

Dicky's step in the hall prevented my rebuking him as I wished. I told myself that, of course, his persistent reference to that kiss was simply one of mockery and I also admitted to myself that as much as I loved Lillian I was glad that her husband was to be no longer a guest in our house.

## **XXXI**

### **A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER**

"Well, my dear, what are you mooning over that you didn't see me come in? I beg your pardon, Madge, what is the matter? Tell me."

Lillian Underwood stood before me a week after her visit to us. Lillian, whose entrance into the small reception room of the Sydenham, at which we had an appointment, I had not even seen. She stood looking down at me with an anxious, alarmed expression in her eyes.

"There is nothing the matter," I returned, evasively.

"Don't tell me a tarradiddle, my dear," Lillian countered smoothly. "You're as white as a sheet, and I

can see your hands trembling this minute. Something has happened to upset you. But, of course, if you'd rather not tell me—"

There was a subtle hint of withdrawal in her tone. I was afraid that I had offended her. After all, why not tell her of the stranger who had so startled me?

"Look over by the door, Lillian," I said, in a low voice, "not suddenly as if I had just spoken to you about it, but carelessly. Tell me if there is a man still standing there staring at us."

Lillian whistled softly beneath her breath, a little trick she has when surprised.

"Oh-h-h!" she breathed, and turning, she looked swiftly at the place I had indicated.

"I see a disappearing back which looks as though it might belong to a 'masher.' I just caught sight of him as he turned—well set-up man about middle age, hair sprinkled with gray, rather stunning looking."

"Yes, that is the man," I returned, faintly, "but, Lillian, I'm sure he isn't an ordinary 'masher.' He had the strangest, saddest, most mysterious look in his eyes. It was almost as if he knew me or thought he did, and I have the most uncanny feeling about him, as if he were some one I had known long ago. I can't describe to you the effect he had upon me."

"Nonsense," Lillian said, brusquely, "the man is just an ordinary common lady-killer of the type that infests these hotels, and ought to be horsewhipped at sight. You're getting fanciful, and I don't wonder at it. You've had a terrible summer, with all that trouble the Draper caused you, and I imagine you haven't been having any too easy a time with dear mamma-in-law, I'm mighty glad you're going to get away with Dicky by yourself. A week in the mountains ought to set you up wonderfully, and you certainly need it when you start weaving mysterious tragedies about the commoner garden variety of 'masher.'"

Lillian's rough common sense steadied me, as it always does. I felt ashamed of my momentary emotion.

"I fancy you're right, Lillian," I said nonchalantly. "Let's forget about it and have some lunch. Where shall we go?"

"There's a bully little tea room down the street here," she said. "It's very English, with the tea cozies and all that sort of frills, and some of their luncheon dishes are delicious. Shall we try it?"

"By all means," I returned, and we went out of the hotel together.

Although I looked around furtively and fearfully as we left the hotel entrance, I could see no trace of the man who had so startled me. Scoring myself for being so foolish as to imagine that the man might still be keeping track of me, I put all thought of his actions away from me and kept up with Lillian's brisk pace, chatting with her gayly over our past experience in buying hats and the execrable creations turned out by milliners generally.

The tea room proved all that Lillian had promised. Fortunately, we were early enough to escape the noon hour rush and secure a good table near a window looking out upon the street.

"I like to look out upon the people passing, don't you?" Lillian said, as she seated herself.

"Yes, I do," I assented, and then we turned our attention to the menu cards.

"I'm fearfully hungry," Lillian announced. "I've been digging all morning. Oh! it's chicken pie here today." Her voice held all the glee of a gormandizing child. "I don't think these individual chicken pies they serve here can be beaten in New York," she went on. "You know the usual mess—potatoes and onions, and a little bit of chicken mixed up with a sauce they insult with the name gravy. These are the real article—just the chicken meat with a delicious gravy covering it, baked in the most flaky crust you can imagine. What do you say to those, with some baked potatoes, new lima beans, sliced tomatoes and an ice for dessert?"

"I don't think it can be improved upon," I said, gayly, and then I clutched Lillian's arm. "Look quickly," I whispered, "the other side of the street!"

Lillian's eyes followed mine to the opposite side of the street, where, walking slowly along, was the man I had seen in the hotel. He did not once look toward the tea room, but as he came opposite to it he turned from the pavement and crossed the street leisurely toward us.

"Oh! I believe he is coming in," I gasped, and my knees began to tremble beneath me.

"Suppose he is," Lillian snapped back. Her tone held a contemptuous impatience that braced me as nothing else could. "The man has a right to come in here if he wishes. It may be a mere coincidence, or he may have followed you. You're rather fetching in that little sport rig, my dear, as your mirror probably told you this morning. Unless he obtrudes himself there is nothing you can do or say, and if he should attempt to get fresh—well, I pity him, that's all."

Lillian's threatening air was so comical that I lost my nervousness and laughed outright at her belligerency. The laugh was not a loud one, but it evidently was audible to the man entering the door, for he turned and cast a quick, sharp look upon me before moving on to a table farther down the room. The waitress indicated a chair, which, if he had taken it, would have kept his back toward us. He refused it with a slight shake of the head, and passing around to the other side of the table, sat down in a chair which commanded a full view of us.

Lillian's foot beat a quick tattoo beneath the table. "The insolent old goat," she murmured, vindictively. "He'd better look out. I'd hate to forget I'm a perfect lady, but I'm afraid I may have to break loose if that chap stays around here."

"Oh, don't say anything to him, Lillian," I pleaded, terribly distressed and upset at the very thought of a possible scene. "Let's hurry through our luncheon and get out."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," Lillian said. "Don't think about the man at all, just go ahead and enjoy your luncheon as if he were not here at all. I'll attend to his case good and plenty if he gets funny."

In spite of Lillian Underwood's kindly admonition I could not enjoy the delicious lunch we had ordered. The presence of a mysterious man at the table opposite ours robbed the meal of its flavor and me of my self-possession.

I could not be sure, of course, that the man had purposely followed me from the little reception room of the Sydenham, where I had waited for Lillian. There I had first seen him staring frankly at me with such a sad, mysterious, tragic look in his eyes that I had been most bewildered and upset by it. But his appearance at the tea room within a few minutes of our entering it, and his choice of a chair which faced our table indicated rather strongly that he had purposely followed me.

Whether or not Lillian's flashing eyes and the withering look she gave him deterred him from gazing at me as steadily as he had at the hotel I had no means of knowing. At any rate, he did not once stare openly at me. I should have known it if he had, for his position was such that unless I kept my eyes steadily fixed upon my plate, I could not help but see him. He was unobtrusive, but I received the impression that he was keeping track of every movement in the furtive glances he cast at us from time to time.

Although he had ordered after us, his meal kept pace with our own. In fact, he called for his check, paid it and left the restaurant before we did. As he passed out of the door I drew a breath of relief and fell to my neglected lunch.

"I hope I've seen the last of him," I said vindictively.

Lillian did not answer. I looked up surprised to see her chin cupped in her hands, in the attitude which was characteristic of her when she was studying some problem, her eyes following the man as he made his way slowly down the street, swinging his stick with a pre-occupied air. She continued to stare after him until he was out of sight, then with a start, she came back to herself.

"You were right, Madge, and I was wrong," she said reflectively, still as if she were studying her problem; "that man is no 'masher.'"

I looked up startled. "What makes you think so?" I asked breathlessly.

"I don't know," she returned, "but he either thinks he knows you, or you remind him of some dead daughter, or sister—or sweetheart, or—oh, there might be any one of a dozen reasons why he would want to stare at you. I think he's harmless, though. He probably won't ever try to speak to you—just take it out in following you around and looking at you."

"Oh," I gasped, "do you think he's going to keep this up?"

"Looks like it," Lillian returned, "but simply ignore him. He has all the ear-marks of a gentleman. I don't think he will annoy you. Now forget him and enjoy your ice, and then we'll go and get that hat."

Under Lillian's guidance the selection of the hat proved an easy task.

Lillian bade me good-by at the door of the hat shop.

"You don't need me any longer, do you?" she asked, "now that this hat question is settled?"

"No, no, Lillian," I returned, "and I am awfully grateful to you for giving me so much of your time."

"Til Wednesday, then," Lillian said, "good-by."

I had quite a long list in my purse of small purchases to be made. At last even the smallest item on my list was attended to, and, wearied as only shopping can tire a woman, I went over to the railroad station. In my hurry of departure in the morning I had forgotten my mileage ticket, so that I had to go to the ticket office to purchase a ticket to Marvin.

I had forgotten all about the man who had annoyed me in the reception room of the Sydenham, and the little English tea room, so, when I turned from buying my ticket to find him standing near enough to me to have heard the name of Marvin, I was startled and terrified.

He did not once glance toward me, however, but strolled away quickly, as if in finding out the name of my home town he had learned all he wished.

I was thoroughly upset as I hurried to my train, and all through my hour's journey home to Marvin the thought of the man troubled me. What was the secret of his persistent espionage? The coincidences of the day had been too numerous for me to doubt that the man was following me around with the intention of learning my identity.

When the train stopped at Marvin I was aghast to see the mysterious stranger alight from it hurriedly and go into the waiting room of the station. I thought I saw his scheme. From the window of the station he could see me as I alighted, and either ascertain my identity from the station agent or from the driver of whatever taxi I took.

I had only felt terror of the man before, but now I was thoroughly indignant. "The thing had gone far enough," I told myself grimly. Instead of getting off the train I passed to the next car, resolving to stop at the next village, Crest Haven, and take a taxi home from there.

The ruse succeeded. As the train sped on toward Crest Haven I had a quiet little smile at the way I had foiled the curiosity of the mysterious stranger.

I debated for some time whether or not I ought to tell Dicky of the incident. I had so much experience of his intensely jealous temperament that I feared he might magnify and distort the incident.

Finally I temporized by resolving to say nothing to Dicky unless the man's tracking of me reached the point of attempting to speak to me. But the consciousness of keeping a secret from Dicky made me pre-occupied during our dinner.

Dicky reached home an hour after I did, and all through the dinner hour I noticed him casting curious glances at me from time to time.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as after dinner he and I went out to the screened porch to drink our coffee.

"Why, nothing," I responded guiltily. "Why do you ask?"

"You act as if you thought you had the responsibility of the great war on your shoulders," Dicky returned.

"I haven't a care in the world," I assured him gayly, and arousing myself from my depression I spent the next hour in gay, inconsequential chatter in an attempt to prove to Dicky that I meant what I said.

In the kitchen I heard the voices of Jim and Katie. They were raised earnestly as if discussing something about which they disagreed. Presently Katie appeared on the veranda.

"Plees, Missis Graham, can you joost coom to kitchen, joost one little meenit."

"Certainly, Katie," I replied, rising, while Dicky mumbled a half-laughing, half-serious protest.

"I'll be back in a minute, Dicky," I promised, lightly.

It was full five before I returned, for Jim had something to tell me, which confirmed my impression that the mysterious stranger's spying upon me was something to be reckoned with.

"I didn't think I ought to worry you with this, Mrs. Graham, but Katie thinks you ought to know it, and

what she says goes, you know." He cast a fatuous smile at the girl, who giggled joyously. "To-night, down at Crest Haven, I overheard one of the taxi drivers telling another about a guy that had come down there and described a woman whom he said must have gotten off at Crest Haven and taken a taxi back to Marvin. The description fitted you all right, and the driver gave him your name and address. He said he got a five spot for doing it."

My face was white, my hands cold, as I listened to Jim, but I controlled myself, and said, quietly:

"Thank you, Jim, very much for telling me, but I do not think it amounts to anything."

## **XXXII**

### **"THE DEAREST FRIEND I EVER HAD"**

Dinner with Dicky in a public dining room is almost always a delight to me. He has the rare art of knowing how to order a perfect dinner, and when he is in a good humor he is most entertaining. He knows by sight or by personal acquaintance almost every celebrity of the city, and his comments on them have an uncommon fascination for me because of the monotony of my life before I met Dicky.

But the very expression of my mother-in-law's back as I followed her through the glittering grill room of the Sydenham told me that our chances for having a pleasant evening were slender indeed.

"Well, mother, what do you want to eat?" Dicky began genially, when an obsequious waiter had seated us and put the menu cards before us.

"Please do not consider me in the least," my mother-in-law said with her most Christian-martyr-like expression. "Whatever you and Margaret wish will do very well for me."

Dicky turned from his mother with a little impatient shrug.

"What about you, Madge?" he asked.

"Chicken a la Maryland in a chafing dish and a combination salad with that anchovy and sherry dressing you make so deliciously," I replied promptly. "The rest of the dinner I'll leave to you."

My mother-in-law glared at me.

"It strikes me there isn't much left to leave to him after an order of that kind," she said, tartly.

"You haven't eaten many of Dicky's dinners then," I said audaciously, with a little moue at him. "He orders the most perfect dinners of any one I know."

"Of course, with your wide experience, you ought to be a critical judge of his ability," my mother-in-law snapped back.

Her tone was even more insulting than her words. It tipped with cruel venom her allusion to the quiet, almost cloistered life of my girlhood.

I drew a long breath as I saw my mother-in-law adjust her lorgnette and proceed to gaze through it with critical hauteur at the other diners. I hoped that her curiosity and interest in the things going on around her would make her forget her imaginary grievances, but my hope was destined to be short lived.

It was while we were discussing our oysters, the very first offered of the season, that she spoke to me, suddenly, abruptly:

"Margaret, do you know that man at the second table back of us? He hasn't taken his eyes from you for the last ten minutes."

My heart almost stopped beating, for my intuition told me at once the identity of the gazer. It must be the man whose uncanny, mournful look had so distressed me when I was waiting for Lillian Underwood in the little reception room at the Sydenham the preceding Monday, the man who had followed us to the little tea room, who had even taken the same train to Marvin with me.

I felt as if I could not lift my eyes to look at the man my mother-in-law indicated, and yet I knew I must glance casually at him if I were to avert the displeased suspicion which I already saw creeping into her eyes.

When my eyes met his he gave not the slightest sign that he knew I was looking at him, simply continued his steady gaze, which had something of wistful mournfulness in it. I averted my eyes as quickly as possible, and tried to look absolutely unconcerned.

"I am sure he cannot be looking at me," I said, lightly. "I do not know him at all."

I hoped that my mother-in-law would not notice my evasion, but she was too quick for me.

"You may not know him, but have you ever seen him before?" she asked, shrewdly.

"Really, mother," Dicky interposed, his face darkening, "you're going a little too far with that catechism. Madge says she doesn't know the man, that settles it. By the way, Madge, is he annoying you? If he is, I can settle him in about two seconds."

"Oh, no," I said nervously, "I don't think the man's really looking at me at all; he's simply gazing out into space, thinking, and happens to be facing this way. It would be supremely ridiculous to call him to account for it."

My mother-in-law snorted, but made no further comment, evidently silenced by Dicky's reproof.

I may have imagined it, but it seemed to me that Dicky looked at me a little curiously when I protested my belief that the man was simply absorbed in thought and not looking at me at all.

When we were dallying with the curiously moulded ices which Dicky had ordered for dessert, I saw his eyes light up as he caught sight of some one he evidently knew.

"Pardon me just a minute, will you?" he said, turning to his mother and me, apologetically, "I see Bob Simonds over there with a bunch of fellows. Haven't seen him in a coon's age. He's been over across the pond in the big mixup. Didn't know he was back. I don't want any more of this ice, anyway, and when the waiter comes, order cheese, coffee and a cordial for us all."

He was gone in another instant, making his way with the swift, debonair grace which is always a part of Dicky, to the group of men at a table not far from ours, who welcomed him joyously.

My mother-in-law's eyes followed mine, and I knew that for once, at least, we were of one mind, and that mind was full of pride in the man so dear to, us both. He was easily the most distinguished figure at the table full of men who greeted him so joyously. I knew that his mother noted with me how cordial was the welcome each man gave Dicky, how they all seemed to defer to him and hang upon his words.

Then across my vision came a picture most terrifying to me. It was as if my mother-in-law and I were spectators of a series of motion picture films. Toward the table, where Dicky stood surrounded by his friends, there sauntered the mysterious stranger, who had attracted my mother-in-law's attention by his scrutiny of me.

But he was no stranger to the men surrounding Dicky. Most of them greeted him warmly. Of course, I was too far away to hear what was said, but I saw the pantomime in which he requested an introduction to Dicky of one of his friends!

Then I saw the stranger meet Dicky and engage him in earnest conversation. I did not dare to look at my mother-in-law. I knew she was gazing in open-mouthed wonder at her son, but I hoped she did not know the queer mixture of terror and interest with which I watched the picture at the other table.

For it was no surprise to me when, a few minutes later, Dicky came back toward our table. With him, talking earnestly, as if he had been a childhood friend, walked the mysterious stranger. I told myself that I had known it would be so from the first.

From the moment I had first seen this man's haunting eyes gazing at me in the reception room of the Sydenham I had felt that a meeting with him was inevitable. How or where he would touch my life I did not know, but that he was destined to wield some influence, sinister or favorable, over me, I was sure, and I trembled with vague terror as I saw him drawing near.

"Mother, may I present Mr. Gordon? My wife, Mr. Gordon."

Dicky's manner was nervous, preoccupied, as he spoke. His mother's face showed very plainly her resentment at being obliged to meet the man upon whose steady staring at me she had so acidly commented a few minutes before.

For my own part, I was so upset that I felt actually ill, as the eyes of the persistent stranger met mine. How had this man, who had so terrified me by his persistent pursuit and scrutiny, managed to obtain an introduction to Dicky?

Dicky made a place for the man near me, and signalled the waiter.

"I know you have dined," he said, courteously, "but you'll at least have coffee and a cordial with us, will you not?"

"Thank you," Mr. Gordon said, in a deep, rich voice, "I have not yet had coffee. If you will be so kind, I should like a little apricot brandy instead of a cordial."

Dicky gave the necessary order to the waiter, and we all sat back in our chairs.

I, for one, felt as though I were a spectator at a play, waiting for the curtain to run up upon some thrilling episode. For the few minutes while we waited for our coffee, Dicky had to carry the burden of the conversation. His mother, with her lips pressed together in a tight, thin line, evidently had resolved to take no part in any conversation with the stranger. I was really too terrified to say anything, and, besides the briefest of assents to Dicky's observations, the stranger said nothing.

There was something about the man's whole personality that both attracted and repelled me. With one breath I felt that I had a curious sense of liking and admiration for him, and was proud of the interest in me, which he had taken no pains to conceal. The next moment a real terror and dislike of him swept over me.

I waited with beating heart for him to finish his coffee. It seemed to me that I could hardly wait for him to speak. For I had a psychic presentiment that before he left the table he would make known to us the reason for his rude pursuit of me.

His first words confirmed my impression:

"I am afraid, Mrs. Graham," he said, courteously, turning to me, as he finished his coffee, "that I have startled and alarmed you by my endeavor to ascertain your identity."

I did not answer him. I did not wish to tell him that I had been frightened; neither could I truthfully deny his assertion. And I wished that I had not evaded my mother-in-law's query concerning him.

He did not appear to heed my silence however, but went on rapidly:

"It is a very simple matter, after all," he said. "You see, you resemble so closely a very dear friend of my youth, in fact, the dearest I ever had, that when I caught sight of you the other day in the reception room of the Sydenham, it seemed as if her very self stood before me."

There was a vibrant, haunting note in his voice that told me, better than words, that, whoever this woman of his youth might have been, her memory was something far more to him than of a mere friend.

"I could not rest until I found out your identity, and secured an introduction to you," he went on. "You will not be offended if I ask you one or two rather personal questions, will you?"

"Indeed, no," I returned mechanically.

Mr. Gordon hesitated. His suave self-possession seemed to have deserted him. He swallowed hard twice, and then asked, nervously:

"May I ask your name before you were married, Mrs. Graham?"

"Margaret Spencer," I returned steadily.

There was a cry of astonishment from Dicky. Mr. Gordon had reeled in his chair as if he were about to faint, then, with closed eyes and white lips, he sat motionless, gripping the table as if for support.

"Do not be alarmed—I am all right—only a momentary faintness, I assure you."

Mr. Gordon opened his eyes and smiled at us wanly.

I knew that Dicky was as much relieved as I at our guest's return to self-command. That he was resentful as well as mystified at the singular behavior of Mr. Gordon I also gleaned from his darkened face, and a little steely glint in his eyes.

"I hope that you will forgive me," Mr. Gordon went on, and his rich voice was so filled with regret and humility that I felt my heart soften toward him.

"I trust you have not gained the impression that my momentary faintness had anything to do with your name," he said. "My attack at that time was merely a coincidence. I am subject to these spells of faintness. I hope this one did not alarm you."

He looked at me directly, as if expecting an answer.

"I am not easily alarmed," I returned, trying hard to keep out of my voice anything save the indifferent courtesy which one would bestow upon a stranger, for the atmosphere of mystery seemed deepening about this stranger and me. I did not believe he had spoken the truth, when he said that my utterance of my maiden name, in response to his question, had nothing to do with his faintness. I was as certain as I was of anything that it was the utterance of that name, the revelation of my identity thus made to him, that caused his emotion. I sat thrilled, tense, in anticipation of revelations to follow.

Mr. Gordon's voice was quiet, but a poignant little thrill ran through it, which I caught as he spoke again.

"Was not your mother's name Margaret Bickett and your father's, Charles Spencer?" he asked.

"You are quite correct." I forced the words through lips stiffened by excitement.

I saw Dicky look at me curiously, almost impatiently, but I had no eyes, no ears, save for the mysterious stranger who was quizzing me about my parents.

One of Mr. Gordon's hands was beneath the table; as he was sitting next to his I saw what no one else did—that the long, slender, sensitive fingers pressed themselves deeply, quiveringly, into the palm at my affirmation of his question. But except for that momentary grip there was no evidence of excitement in his demeanor as he turned to me.

"I thought so," he said quietly. "I have found the daughter of the dearest friends I ever had. Your resemblance to your mother is marvelous. I remember that you looked much like her when you were a tiny girl."

"You were at our home in my childhood, then?" I asked, wondering if this might be the explanation of my uncanny notion that I had sometime in my life seen this man bending over his demitasse as he had done a few minutes before.

"Oh, yes," he said, "your mother, as I have told you, was the dearest friend I ever had. And your father was my other self—then—"

His emphasis upon the word "then" gave me a quick stab of pain, for it recalled the odium with which every one who had known my childhood seemed to regard the memory of my father.

I, myself, had no memories of my father. My mother had never spoken of him to me but once, when she had told me the terrible story of his faithlessness.

When I was four years old he had run away from us both with my mother's dearest friend, and neither she, nor any of his friends, had ever heard of him afterward. I had always felt a sort of hatred of my unknown father, who had deserted me and so cruelly treated my mother, and the knowledge that this man was an intimate of his turned me faint.

But if Mr. Gordon's inflection meant anything it meant that even if he had been my father's "other self," my mother's desertion had aroused in him the same contempt for my father that all the rest of our little world had felt. I felt my indefinable feeling of repulsion against the man melt into warm approval of him. He had loved the mother I had idolized, had resented her wrongs, and I felt my heart go out to him.

"I cannot tell you what this finding of your wife means to me," said Mr. Gordon, turning to Dicky. The inflection of his voice, the movement of his hand, spelled a subtle appeal to the younger man.

"I have been a wanderer for years," the deep, rich voice went on. "I have no family ties"—he hesitated for a moment, with a curious little air of indecision—"no wife, no child. I am a very lonely man. I wonder if it would be asking too much to let me come to see you once in a while and renew the memories of my youth in this dear child?"

He turned to me with the most fascinating little air of deferential admiration I had ever seen.



But I looked in vain for any answer to his appeal in Dicky's eyes. My husband still retained the air of formal, puzzled courtesy with which he had brought Mr. Gordon to our table and introduced him to us. I could see that the mysterious stranger's appeal to be made an intimate of our home did not meet with Dicky's approval.

I could not understand the impulse that made me turn toward the stranger and say, earnestly: "I shall be so glad to have you come to see us, Mr. Gordon. I want you to tell me about my mother's youth."

## XXXIII

### "MOTHER" GRAHAM HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

It may have been the preparation we were making for an autumn vacation in the Catskills, or it may have been that Dicky was becoming more the master of himself, that he did not voice to me the very real uneasiness with which I knew he viewed Robert Gordon's attitude toward me. But whatever may have been the cause, the fact is that during the preparations for our trip and during the vacation itself in the gorgeous autumn-clad mountains Dicky did not refer to Robert Gordon.

It was my mother-in-law who brought his name up the day of our return. She had moved from the hotel where we had left her in the city to the house at Marvin, and when we arrived there her greeting of me was almost icy. As soon as we had taken off our wraps, she explained her departure from the hotel without any questioning from us.

"I never have been so insulted and annoyed in my life," she began abruptly, "and it is all your fault, Richard. If you never had brought the unspeakable person over he would not have had the chance to annoy me. And as for you, Margaret, I cannot begin to tell you what I think of your conduct in leading your husband to believe you had never seen the man before—"

"For heaven's sake, mother!" Dicky exploded, his slender patience evidently worn to its last thread by his mother's incoherence, "what on earth are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend ignorance," she snapped. "You introduced the man to me yourself the night before you went on your trip. You cannot have forgotten his name so soon."

"Robert Gordon!" Dicky exclaimed in amazement.

"Yes, Robert Gordon!" his mother returned grimly. "And let me tell you, Richard Graham, that if you do not settle that man he will make you the laughing stock and the scandal of everybody. The way he talks of Margaret is disgusting."

Dicky's face became suddenly stern and set.

"He didn't exhibit his lack of good taste the first time he came over to my table in the dining room," my mother-in-law went on. "But the second time he sat down with me he began to talk of Margaret in the most fulsome, extravagant manner. From that time his sole topic of conversation was Margaret, the wonderful woman she had grown into, the wonderful attraction she has for him. You would have thought him a man who had discovered his lost sweetheart after years of wandering. Imagine the lack of decency and good taste the man must have to say such things to me, the mother of Margaret's husband!"

"Is that all you have to say, mother?" he asked.

She looked at him in amazement.

"Are you lost to all decency that you do not resent such extravagant praise and admiration of your wife from the lips of another man?" she demanded, and then in the same breath went on rapidly:

"Richard, you are perfectly hopeless! The man may have been in love with Margaret's mother, I do not doubt that he was, but have you never heard of such men falling in love with the daughters of the women they once loved hopelessly?"

"Don't make the poor man out a potential Mormon, mother!" Dicky jibed.

"Jeer at your old mother if you wish, Richard," his mother went on icily, "but let me tell you that Mr. Gordon is madly in love with Margaret and if you do not look out you will have a scandal on your hands."

"You are going a bit too far in your excitement, mother," Dicky said sternly. "You may not realize it, but you are insinuating that there might be a possible chance of Madge's returning the man's admiration."

"I am not insinuating anything," his mother returned, white-lipped with anger, "but I certainly think Margaret owes both you and me an explanation of the untruth she told us at the supper table the night you introduced Mr. Gordon to us."

I sprang to my feet with my cheeks afire.

"Mother Graham, I have listened to you with respect as long as I can," I exclaimed. "Whatever else you have to say to my husband about me you can say in my absence. If he at any time wishes an explanation of any action of mine he has only to ask me for it."

White with rage I dashed out of the room, up the stairs and into my own room, locking the door behind me. In a few minutes Dicky's step came swiftly up the stairs; his knock sounded on my door.

"Madge, let me in," he commanded, but the note of tenderness in his voice was the influence that hurried my fingers in the turning of the key.

As I opened the door he strode in past me, closed and locked the door again, and, turning, caught me in his arms.

"Don't you dare to cry!" he stormed, kissing my reddened eyelids. "Aren't you ever going to get used to mother's childish outbursts? You know she doesn't mean what she says in those tantrums of hers. She simply works herself up to a point where she's absolutely irresponsible, and she has to explode or burst. You wouldn't like to see a perfectly good mother-in-law strewn in fragment all over the room, simply because she had restrained her temper, would you?" he added, with the quick transition from hot anger to whimsical good nature that I always find so bewildering in him.

I struggled for composure. My mother-in-law's words had been too scathing, her insult too direct for me to look upon it as lightly as Dicky could, but the knowledge that he had come directly after me, and that he had no part in the resentment his mother showed, made it easy for me to control myself.

"I ought to remember that your mother is an old woman, and an invalid, and not allow myself to get angry at some of the unjust things she says," I returned, swallowing hard. "So we'll just forget all about it and pretend it never happened."

"You darling!" Dicky exclaimed, drawing me closer, and for a moment or two I rested in his arms, gathering courage for the confession I meant to make to him.

"Dicky, dear," I murmured at last, "there is something I want to tell you about this miserable business, something I ought to have told you before, but I kept putting it off."

Dicky held me from him and looked at me quizzically, "'Confession is good for the soul,'" he quoted, "so unburden your dreadful secret."

He drew me to an easy chair and sat down, holding me in his arms as if I were a little child. "Now for it," he said, smiling tenderly at me.

"It isn't so very terrible," I smiled at him reassured by his tenderness. "It is only that without telling you a deliberate untruth, that I gave both you and your mother the impression I had never seen Mr. Gordon before that night at the Sydenham."

"Is that all?" mocked Dicky. "Why, I knew that the moment you spoke as you did that night! You're as transparent as a child, my dear, and besides, your elderly friend let the cat out of the bag when he said he feared he had annoyed you by trying to find out your identity. I knew you must have seen him somewhere."

"You don't know all," I persisted, and then without reservation I told him frankly the whole story of Mr. Gordon's spying upon me. I omitted nothing.

When I had finished, Dicky's face had lost its quizzical look. He was frowning, not angrily, but as if puzzled.

"Don't think I blame you one bit," he said slowly; "but it looks to me as if mother's dope might be

right, as if the old guy is smitten with you after all."

"I cannot hope to make your understand, Dicky," I began, "how confused my emotions are concerning Mr. Gordon. I think perhaps I can tell you best by referring to something about which we have never talked but once—the story I told you before we were married of the tragedy in my mother's life."

"I believe you told me that neither your mother nor you had ever heard anything of your father since he left." Dicky's voice was casual, but there was a note in it that puzzled me.

"That is true," I answered, and then stopped, for the conviction had suddenly come to me that while I had never seen nor heard from my father since he left us—indeed, I had no recollection of him—yet I was not sure whether or not my mother had ever received any communication from him. I had heard her say that she had no idea whether he was living or dead, and I had received my impression from that. But even as I answered Dicky's question there came to my mind the memory of an injunction my mother had once laid upon me, an injunction which concerned a locked and sealed box among her belongings.

I felt that I could not speak of it even to Dicky, so put all thought of it aside until I should be alone.

"I do not think I can make you understand," I began, "how torn between two emotions I have always been when I think of my father. Of course, the predominant feeling toward him has always been hatred for the awful suffering he caused my mother. I never heard anything to foster this feeling, however, from my mother. She rarely spoke of him, but when she did it was always to tell me of the adoration he had felt for me as a baby, of the care and money he had lavished on me. But while with one part of me I longed to hear her tell me of those early days, yet the hatred I felt for him always surged so upon me as to make me refuse to listen to any mention of him.

"But since she went away from me the desire to know something of my father has become almost an obsession with me. My hatred of his treachery to my mother is still as strong as ever, but in my mother's last illness she told me that she forgave him, and asked me if ever he came into my life to forget the past and to remember only that he was my father. I am afraid I never could do that, but yet I long so earnestly to know something of him.

"So now you see, Dicky," I concluded, "why Mr. Gordon has such a fascination for me. He knew my father and my mother—from his own words I gather that he was the nearest person to them. He is the only link connecting me with my babyhood, for Jack Bickett, my nearest relative, was but a young boy himself when my father left, and remembered little about it. I don't want to displease you, Dicky, but I would so like to see Mr. Gordon occasionally."

Dicky held me close and kissed me.

"Why, certainly, sweetheart," he exclaimed. "Whenever you wish I'll arrange a little dinner down-town for Mr. Gordon. What do you think about inviting the Underwoods, too? They could entertain me while you're talking over your family history."

"That would be very nice," I agreed, but I had an inward dread of talking to Robert Gordon with the malicious eyes of Harry Underwood upon me. Indeed, I felt intuitively that if ever Mr. Gordon were to reveal the history of his friendship for my mother to me, it would be when no other ears, not even Dicky's, were listening.

Dicky kissed me again and then he rose and went out of the room quickly, closing the door behind him. I waited until I heard his footsteps descending the stairs before turning the key in the lock. Then I went directly to a little old trunk which I had kept in my own room ever since my mother's death, and, kneeling before it unlocked it with reverent fingers.

## **XXXIV**

### **A MESSAGE FROM THE PAST**

It was my mother's own girlhood trunk, one in which she had kept her treasures and mementoes all her life. The chief delight of my childhood had been sitting by her side when she took out the different things from it and showed them to me.

Dear, thoughtful, little mother of mine! Almost the last thing she did before her strength failed her utterly was to repack the little trunk, wrapping and labeling each thing it contained, and putting into it only the things she knew I would not use, but wished to keep as memories of her and of my own childhood.

"I do not wish you to have to look over these things while your grief is still fresh for me," she had said, with the divine thoughtfulness that mothers keep until the last breath they draw. "There is nothing in it that you will have to look at for years if you do not wish to do so—that is, except one package that I am going to tell you about now."

She stopped to catch the breath which was so pitifully short in those torturing days before her death, and over her face swept the look of agony which always accompanied any mention by her of my father.

"In the top tray of this trunk," she said, "you will find the inlaid lock box that was your grandmother's and that you have always admired so much. I do not wish to lay any request or command upon you concerning it—you must be the only judge of your own affairs after I leave you—but I would advise you not to open that box unless you are in desperate straits, or until the time has come when you feel that you no longer harbor the resentment you now feel toward your father."

The last words had come faintly through stiffened white lips, for her labor at packing and the emotional strain of talking to me concerning the future had brought on one of the dreaded heart attacks which were so terribly frequent in the last weeks of her life. We had never spoken of the matter afterward, for she did not leave her bed again until the end.

At one time she had motioned me to bring from her desk the old-fashioned key ring on which she kept her keys. She had held up two, a tiny key and a larger one, and whispered hoarsely: "These keys are the keys to the lock box and the little trunk—you know where the others belong." Then she had closed her eyes, as if the effort of speaking had exhausted her, as indeed it had.

In the wild grief which followed my mother's death there was no thought of my unknown father except the bitterness I had always felt toward him. I knew that the terrible sorrow he had caused my mother had helped to shorten her life, and my heart was hot with anger against him.

I had never opened the trunk since her death. The exciting, almost tragic experiences of my life with Dicky had swept all the old days into the background. I could not analyze the change that had come over me. As I lifted the lid of the trunk and took from the top tray the inlaid box which my mother's hands had last touched, my grief for her was mingled with a strange new longing to find out anything I could concerning the father I had never known.

"For my daughter Margaret's eyes alone."

The superscription on the envelope which I held in my hand stared up at me with all the sentience of a living thing. The letters were in the crabbed, trembling, old-fashioned handwriting of my mother—the last words that she had ever written. It was as if she had come back from the dead to talk to me.

With the memory of my mother's advice, I hesitated for a long time before breaking the seal. With the letters pressed close against my tear-wet cheeks I sat for a long time, busy with memories of my mother and debating whether or not I had the right to open the letter.

I certainly was not in desperate straits, and I could not conscientiously say that I no longer harbored any resentment toward the father of whom I had no recollection. I felt that never in my life could I fully pardon the man who had made my mother suffer so terribly. But the longing to know something of my father, which I had felt since the coming into my life of Robert Gordon, had become almost an obsession, with me.

"Little mother," I whispered, "forgive me if I am doing wrong, but I must know what is in this letter to me."

With trembling fingers I broke the seal and drew out the closely written pages which the envelope contained.

"Mother's Only Comfort," the letter began, and at the sight of the dear familiar words, which I had so often heard from my mother's lips—it was the name she had given me when a tiny girl, and which she used until the day of her death—tears again blinded my eyes.

"When you read this I shall have left you forever. It is my prayer that when the time comes for you to read it, it will be because you have forgiven your father, not because you are in desperate need. How I wish I could have seen you safe in the shelter of a good man's love before I had to go

away from you forever!"

"Safe in the shelter of a good man's love," I repeated the words thoughtfully. Had my mother been given her wish when she could no longer witness its fulfilment? I was angry and humiliated at myself that I could not give a swift, unqualified assent to my own question. A "good man" Dicky certainly was, and I was in the "shelter of his love" at present. But "safe" with Dicky I was afraid I could never be. Mingled always with my love for him, my trust in him, was a tiny undercurrent of uncertainty as to the stability of my husband's affection for me.

As I turned to my mother's letter again, there was a tiny pang at my heart at the thought that by my marriage with Dicky I had thwarted the dearest wish of my little mother's heart.

For between the lines I could read the unspoken thought that had been in her mind since I was a very young girl. "Safe in the shelter of a good man's love" meant to my mother only one thing. If she had written the words "safe in the shelter of Jack Bickett's love," I could not have grasped her meaning more clearly.

But my mother's wish must forever remain ungranted. Jack was "somewhere in France," and for me, safe or not safe, stable or unstable, Dicky was "my man," the only man I had ever loved, the only man I could ever love. "For better or worse," the dear old minister had said who performed our wedding ceremony, and my heart reaffirmed the words as I bent my eyes again to the closely written pages I held in my hands.

"Because you have always been so bitter, Margaret, against your father, and because it has always caused me great anguish to speak of him, I have allowed you to rest under the impression that I had never heard anything concerning him since his disappearance, and that I do not know whether he be living or dead. The last statement is true, for years ago I definitely refused to receive any communication from him, but I must tell you that I believe him to be living, and that I know that living or dead he has provided money for your use if you should ever wish to claim it.

"The address he last sent me, and that of the firm of lawyers who has the management of the property intended for you, are sealed in envelopes in this box. In it also are all the things necessary to establish your identity, my marriage certificate, your birth record, pictures of your father and of me, and of the three of us taken when you were two years old, before the shadow of the awful tragedy that came later had begun to fall."

I sprang from my chair, dropping the pages of the letter unheeded in the shock of the revelation they brought me. My father had planned for me; had provided for me; had tried to communicate with my mother! He must have been repentant; he was not all the heartless brute I had thought him. As though a cloud had been lifted, from my life and a weary weight had rolled from my heart, I turned again to mother's letter.

"Remember, it is my last wish, Margaret, that if your father be living, sometime you may be reconciled, to him. I have been weak and bitter enough during all these years to be meanly comforted by your stanch championship of me, and your detestation of the wrong your father did me. But death brings clearer vision, my child, and I cannot wish that your father's last years,—if, indeed, he be living—should be desolated by not knowing you. I want you to know that there were many things which, while they did not extenuate your father, yet might in some measure explain his action.

"I was much to blame—I can see it now, for not being able to hold his love. You are so much like me, my darling, that I tremble for your happiness if you should happen to marry the wrong kind of man. I have wondered often if the story of my tragedy, terrible as it is for me to think of it, might not help you. And yet—it might do more harm than good. At any rate, I have written it all out, and put it with the other things in the box. I feel a curious sort of fatalism concerning this letter. It is borne in upon me that if you ever need to read it you will read it. It will help you to understand your father better. It may help you to understand your husband; although, God grant, knowledge like mine may never come to you.

"Of one thing I am certain, you will never have anything to do with the woman who abused my friendship and took your father from me. I cannot carry my forgiveness far enough, even in the presence of death, to bid you go to him if she be still a part of his life.

"I can write no more, my darling. I want you to know that you have been the dearest child a mother could have, and that you have never given me moment's uneasiness in my life. God bless and keep you.

**"MOTHER."**

I did not weep when I had finished the letter. There was that in its closing words that dried my tears. I put the pages reverently in the envelope, laid it in the old box, closed and locked the lid, and replaced it in the trunk. For my mother's bitter mention of the woman who had stolen my father from her had brought back the old, wild hatred I had felt for so many years.

"Whatever Robert Gordon can tell me of you, mother darling, I will gladly hear," I whispered, as I locked her old trunk, "but I never want to hear him talk of the woman who so cruelly ruined your life."

## XXXV

### THE WORD OF JACK

"O, pray do not let me disturb you."

Mother Graham drew back from the open door of the living room with a little affected start of surprise at seeing me sitting before the fire. Her words were courteous, but her manner brought the temperature of the room down perceptibly.

She had managed to keep out of my way in clever fashion since the scene of the day before, when she had attacked me concerning the interest taken in me by Robert Gordon.

"You are not disturbing me in the least," I said, pleasantly, "I was simply watching the fire. Jim certainly has outdone himself in the matter of logs this time."

"Yes, he has," she admitted, grudgingly, as she came forward slowly and took the chair I proffered her. "I only hope he doesn't set the house afire with such a blaze. I must tell Richard to speak to him about it."

Always the pin prick, the absolute ignoring of me as the mistress of the house. I could not tell whether she had deliberately done it, or whether long usage to dominance in a household had made her speak as she did unconsciously.

I made no reply, and, for a long time, we sat staring at the fire until Dicky's entrance came as a welcome interruption.

I went sedately to the door to meet him, although I was so glad to see him that a dance step would more appropriately have expressed my feelings, and returned his warm kiss and greeting. He kept my hand in his as he came down to the fire, not even releasing it when he kissed his mother, who still maintained the rigid dignity with which she surrounded herself when displeased.

"Well," Dicky said, manfully ignoring any hint of unpleasantness, "this is what I call comfortable, coming home to a fire and a welcome like this on a dreary day."

There was a note of forced jollity in his voice that made me look up quickly into his eyes. As they looked into mine, I caught a glimpse of something half-hidden, half-revealed, something fiercely sombre, which frightened me.

"What had happened," I asked myself, with a little clutch at my heart, "to make Dicky look at me in this way?" I had a longing to take him away where we could be alone.

I was glad when my mother-in-law rose stiffly from her chair.

"If you are too much occupied, Margaret," she remarked, icily, "I will go and tell Katie that Richard is here, and that she may serve dinner immediately."

She swept out of the room majestically, and as the door closed after her Dicky caught me in his arms and clasped me so closely that I was frightened.

"Tell me you love me," he said tensely, "better than anybody in the world or out of it." His eyes were glowing with some emotion I could not understand. I felt my vague uneasiness of his first entrance deepen into real foreboding of something unknown and terrible coming to me.

"Why, of course, you know that, sweetheart," I replied. "There is no one for me but just you! But what is the matter? Something must be the matter."

"Where did you get that idea?" he evaded. "I just wanted to be sure, that's all. Wait here for me—I'll dash up and get some of the dust off in a jiffy before dinner."

I spent an anxious interval before, he came down, for, despite his denials, I felt that something out of the ordinary must have happened to cause his queer, passionate outburst.

When he returned to, the living room, it was with no trace of any emotion, and throughout the dinner, while not so given to conversation as usual, he showed no indication that he was at all disturbed.

But I was very glad when the dinner was over, and we returned to the living-room fire. And when, after a few minutes, my mother-in-law yawned sleepily and went to her room, I drew a deep breath of relief.

Dicky drew my chair close to his, and we sat for a long time looking at the leaping flames, only occasionally speaking.

It was at the end of a long silence that Dicky turned toward me, with eyes so troubled that all my fears leaped up anew. I sprang to my feet.

"What is it, Dicky?" I entreated, wildly. "Oh! I know something terrible is the matter!"

He rose from his chair, and clasped my hands tightly.

"I suppose I'd better tell you quickly, dear," he replied. "Your cousin, Jack Bickett, is reported killed."

"Killed!" I repeated faintly. "Jack Bickett killed! Oh, no, no, Dicky; no, no, no!"

I heard my own voice rise to a sort of shriek, felt Dicky release my hands and seize my shoulders, and then everything went black before me, and I knew nothing more.

When I came to myself, I was lying on the couch before the fire, with my face and the front of my gown dripping with water, the strong smell of hartshorn in the room, and Dicky with stern, white face, and Katie in tears, hovering over me.

Dicky was trying to force a spoon between my teeth when I opened my eyes. He promptly dropped it, and the brandy it contained trickled down my neck. I raised my hand to wipe it away, and Dicky uttered a low, "Thank God!"

"Oh, she no dead, she alive again!" Katie cried out, and threw herself on her knees by my side, sobbing.

"Get up, Katie, and stop that howling!" Dicky spoke sternly. "Do you want to get my mother down here? Go upstairs at once and prepare Mrs. Graham's bed for her. I will carry her up directly. Are you all right now, Madge?"

His tone was anxious, but there was a note of constraint in it, which I understood even through the returning anguish at Dicky's terrible news, which was possessing me with returning consciousness.

He believed that my feeling for my brother-cousin, Jack Bickett, was a deeper one than that which I had always professed, a sisterly love for the only near relative I had in the world. This was the reason for his sudden, passionate embrace of me when he entered the house, his demand that I tell him I loved him better than anybody in the world or out of it.

He had been jealous of Jack living, he would still be jealous of him dead! But as the realization again swept over me that Jack, steadfast, manly Jack, the only near relative I had, was no longer in the same world with me, that never again would I see his kind eyes, hear his deep, earnest voice, all thoughts of anything else but my loss fled from me, and I gave a little moan.

I felt Dicky's arm which was around my shoulders shrink away instinctively, then tighten again. He turned my face against his shoulder, and, gathering me in his arms, lifted me from the couch.

"Oh, Dicky, I am sure I can walk," I protested faintly.

He stopped and looked at me fixedly.

"Don't you want my arms around you?" he asked, and there was that in his voice which made me answer hastily:

"Of course I do, but I am afraid I am too heavy."

"Let me be the judge of that," he returned sternly, and forthwith carried me up the stairs, down the hall, and laid me on the bed in my own room.

"Now you must get that wet gown off," he said practically. "Katie emptied nearly a gallon of water over you in her fright."

He smiled constrainedly, and I made a brave effort to return the smile, but I could not accomplish it. Indeed, I was glad to be able to keep back the tears, which I knew instinctively would hurt him.

He undressed me as tenderly as a woman could have done, and, wrapping a warm bathrobe over my nightdress, for I was shivering as if from a chill, tucked me in between the blankets of my bed. Then he drew a chair to the bedside and sat down.

"Are you sure you are all right now?" he asked. "Your color is coming back."

"Perfectly sure," I returned, "and I am so sorry to have made you so much trouble."

"Don't say that," he returned, a trifle sharply. "It is so meaningless. Try to sleep a little, can't you?"

"Not yet, Dicky," I returned. "I am feeling much better, however. Of course, the shock was terrible at first, for, as you know, Jack was the only brother I ever knew. But I am all right now and I want you to tell me how you learned the news."

"Mrs. Stewart telephoned to me," he said. "It seems your cousin gave her as the 'next of kin,' to be notified in case of his death, and she received the notice this morning. There was nothing but the usual official notification."

I caught my breath, stifling the moan that rose to my lips. Somewhere in France lay buried the tenderest heart, the manliest man God ever put into the world. And I had sent him to his death. Despite the comforting assurance Jack had written me, just before his departure for France, that his discovery of my marriage, with the consequent blasting of the hope he had cherished for years, had not been the cause of his sailing, I knew he would never have left me if I had not been married.

I think Dicky must have read my thoughts in my face, for, after a moment, he said gently, yet with a tenseness which told me he was putting a rigid control over his voice:

"You must not blame yourself so harshly. Your cousin would probably have gone to the war even if—circumstances had been different."

There was that in Dicky's voice and eyes which told me that he, too, was suffering. I gathered my strength together, made a supreme effort to put the sorrow and remorse I felt behind me until I could be alone. I knew that I must strive at once to eradicate the false impression my husband had gained as a result of my reception of the news of my brother-cousin's death.

So I forced my lips to words which, while not utterly false, yet did not at all reveal the truth of what I was feeling.

"I know that, Dicky," I returned, and I tried to hold my voice to a conversational tone. "He went with his dearest friend, a Frenchman, you know. I had nothing to do with his going. It isn't that which makes me feel as I do. It is because his death brings back my mother's so plainly. He was always so good to her, and she loved him so much."

Dicky bent his face so quickly to mine that I could not catch his expression. He kissed me tenderly, and, kneeling down by the side of the bed, gathered my head up against his shoulder.

"Cry it all out, if you want to, sweetheart," he said, and I fancied the tension was gone from his voice. "It will do you good."

So, "cry it out" I did, against the blessed shelter of my husband's shoulder. And the tears seemed to wash away all the shock of the news I had, heard, all the bitter, morbid remorse I had felt, all the secret wonder as to whether I might have loved and married my brother-cousin if Dicky had not come into my life. There was left only a sane, sisterly sorrow for a loved brother's death, and a tremendous surge of love for my husband, and gratitude for his tenderness.

"Try to sleep if you can," he said.

I tried to obey his injunction, but I could not. I could see the hands of my little bedroom clock, and after the longest quarter of an hour I had ever known I turned restlessly on my pillow.

"It's no use, Dicky," I said, "I cannot go to sleep. I would rather talk. Tell me, did Mrs. Stewart's voice



sound as if she were much upset? She is an old woman, you know, and she was very fond of Jack."

Dicky hesitated, and a curious, intent expression came into his eyes.

"Yes, I think she was pretty well broken up," he answered, "but the thing about which she seemed most anxious was that you should not lose any time in attending to the property your cousin left. I believe he wrote you concerning his disposition of it before he sailed."

I looked up, startled. Dicky's words brought something to my mind that I had completely forgotten. I was the heiress to all that Jack possessed, not great wealth, it is true, but enough to insure me a modest competence for the rest of my life.

"Do you object to my taking this money, Dicky?" I asked, and my voice was tense with emotion.

"Object!" the words came from Dicky's mouth explosively, then he jumped to his feet and paced up and down the room rapidly for a moment or two, his jaw set, his eyes stern. When he stopped by the bed he had evidently recovered his hold on himself, but his words came quickly, jerkily, almost as if he were afraid to trust himself to speak.

"You are in no condition to discuss this tonight," he said, dropping his hand on my hair, "we will speak of it again tomorrow, when you have somewhat recovered. Now you must try to go to sleep. I shall have to call a physician if you don't."

I lay awake for hours, debating the problem which had come to me. I saw clearly that Dicky did not wish me to take this bequest of Jack's. Indeed, I knew that he expected me to refuse it, and that he would be bitterly disappointed if I did not do so.

My heart was hot with rebellion. It seemed like a profanation of Jack's last wish, like hurling a gift into the face of the dead, to do as Dicky wished.

And yet—Dicky was my husband. I had sworn to love and honor him. I knew that he felt sincerely, however wrongly, that my acceptance of Jack's gift would be a direct slap at him. I felt as if my heart were being torn in two, with my desire to do justice both to the living and the dead. It was not until nearly daylight that the solution of my problem came to me. Then I fell asleep, exhausted, and did not awaken until Dicky came into the room, dressed for the journey which he took daily to the city.

"I wouldn't disturb you, sweetheart," he said, "only it's time for me to go in to the studio, and I did not want to leave you without knowing how you are."

"Oh, have I slept so late?" I returned, contritely, springing up in bed.

Dicky put me back with a firm hand.

"Lie still," he commanded, gently. "Katie will bring you up some breakfast shortly, and there is no need of your getting up for hours."

He bent down to kiss me good-by. There was a restraint in both his voice and his caress that told me he was still thinking of the conversation of the night before. I put my arms about his neck and drew his face down to mine.

"Sweetheart," I whispered, "I want to tell you what I've decided about Jack's property."

"Not now," Dicky interrupted hurriedly.

"Yes, now," I returned decidedly. "I am going to accept it"—I gripped his hands firmly as I felt them drawing away from mine, "but I am not going to use any of it for myself. I will see that it all goes to the orphaned kiddies of the soldiers with whom Jack fought."

Dicky started, looked at me a bit wildly, then stooped, and, gathering me to him convulsively, pressed a long, tender kiss upon my lips.

"My own girl!" he murmured. "I shall not forget that you have done this for me!"

"AND YET—"

"What's the big idea?"

Dicky looked up from the breakfast table with a mildly astonished air as I came hurriedly into the room dressed for the street, wearing my hat, and carrying my coat over my arm.

"I'm going into town with you," I returned quietly.

"Shopping, I suppose." The words sounded idle enough, but I, who knew Dicky so well, recognized the note of watchfulness in the query.

"I shall probably go into some of the shops before I return," I said carelessly, "but the real reason of my going into the city is Mrs. Stewart. I should have gone to see her yesterday."

Dicky frowned involuntarily, but his face cleared again in an instant. It was the second day after he had brought me the terrible news that Jack Bickett, my brother-cousin, was reported killed "somewhere in France." I knew that Dicky, in his heart, did not wish me to go to see Mrs. Stewart, but I also knew that he was ashamed to give voice to his reluctance.

When Dicky spoke at last, it was with just the right shade of cordial acquiescence in his voice.

"Of course you must go to see her," he said, "but are you sure you're feeling fit enough? It will try your nerves, I imagine."

Far better than Dicky could guess I knew what the day's ordeal would be. Mrs. Stewart had been very fond of my brother-cousin. With my mother, she had hoped that he and I would some day care for each other. With her queer partisan ideas of loyalty, when Dicky had been so cruelly unjust to me about Jack, she had wished me to divorce Dicky and marry Jack, even though Jack himself had never whispered such a solution of my life's problem. That she believed me to be responsible for his going to the war I knew. I dreaded inexpressibly the idea of facing her.

But when, after a rather silent trip to the city with Dicky, I stood again in Mrs. Stewart's little upstairs sitting-room, I found only a very sorrowful old woman, not a reproachful one.

"I thought you'd come today," she said, and her voice was tired, dispirited. I felt a sudden compunction seize me that my visits to her had been so few since Jack's going.

"I couldn't have kept away," I said, and then my old friend dropped my hand, which she had been holding, and, sinking into a chair, put her wrinkled old hands up to her face. I saw the slow tears trickling through her fingers, and I knelt by her side and drew her head against my shoulder, comforting her as she once had comforted me.

Mrs. Stewart was never one to give way to emotion, and it was but a few moments before she drew herself erect, wiped her eyes, and said quietly:

"I'll show you the cablegram."

She went to her desk, and drew out the message, clipped, abbreviated in the puzzling fashion of cablegrams:

"Regret inform you, Bickett killed, action French front. Details later."

(Signed) "CAILLARD."

"Caillard? Caillard?" Where had I heard that name? Then I suddenly remembered. Paul Caillard was the friend with whom Jack had gone across the ocean to the Great War. I examined the paper carefully.

"I thought Dicky said you received the usual official notification," I remarked.

"That's what I told him," she replied. "That's it."

"But this isn't an official message," I persisted.

"Why isn't it?"

I explained the difference haltingly, and spoke of the wonderful system of identification in the French

army, with every man tagged with a metal identification check.

"You will probably receive the official notification in a few days," I commented.

A queer, startled expression flashed into her face. She opened her mouth, as if to speak, and then, looking at me sharply, closed it again. Reaching out her hand for the cablegram, she folded it mechanically, as if thinking of something far away, then going to her desk, put it away, and stood as if thinking deeply for two or three minutes, which seemed an hour to me.

At last I saw her body straighten. She gave a little shake of her shoulders, as if rousing herself, and, turning from the desk, came toward me. I saw that she held in her hand a bundle of letters.

"I understand that you and Jack made some fool agreement that he was not to write to you, and that you were not even to read his letters to me. I'm not expressing my opinion about it, but now that he's gone, I'm going to turn these letters over to you. I'm not blind, you know. Most of them were all really written to you, even if I did receive them. Poor lad! It seems such a pity he should be struck down just as a little happiness seemed coming his way."

She put the letters in my hands, and, turning swiftly, went out of the room. I knew her well enough to realize that she would not return until I had read the messages from Jack. But what in the world did she mean by her last words?

I drew a big, easy chair to the fireside, and began to read the missives. Some were short, some were long, but all were filled with a quiet courage and cheerfulness that I knew had illuminated not only Jack's letters to his old friend, but his life and the lives of others wherever he had been. Every one of them had some reference to me—an inquiry after my health, an injunction to Mrs. Stewart to be sure to keep track of my happiness, a little kodak print or other souvenir marked "For Margaret if I do not come back."

I felt guilty, remorseful, that I had seen so little of Mrs. Stewart since his departure. My own affairs, especially my long, terrible summer's experience with Grace Draper, had shut everything else from my mind.

One letter in particular made my eyes brim with sudden tears. The first of it had been cheery, with entertaining little accounts of the few poor bits of humor which the soldiers in the trenches extracted from their terrible every day round. Along toward the end a sudden impulse seemed to have swept the writer's pen into a more sombre channel.

"I have been thinking much, dear old friend," he wrote, "of the futility of human desires. Life in the trenches is rather conducive to that form of mediation, as you may imagine. You know, none better, how I loved Margaret, how I wanted to make her my wife—I often wonder whether if I had not delayed so long, 'fearing my fate too much,' I might not have won her. But thoughts, like that are worse than useless.

"Instead, there has come to me a clearer understanding of Margaret, a better insight into the golden heart of her. If she had never met the other man, or some one like him, I believe I could have made her happy, kept her contented. But I realize fully that having met him there could never be any other man for her but him. Her love for him is like a flame, transforming her. I could never have called forth such passion from her. I see clearly now how foolish it was in me to have hoped it. There was nothing in the humdrum, commonplace brotherly affection which she thought I gave her to arouse the romance which I know slumbers under that calm, cold exterior of hers.

"Sometimes I query, too, whether my love for Margaret had that flame-like quality which characterizes her love for her husband. Margaret has always been so much a part of my life that my love for her began I could not tell when, and grew and strengthened with the years. There never has been any other woman but Margaret in my life. Even if I should ever come out of this living hell, which I doubt, I do not believe there ever will be another.

"And yet—"

"I have just been summoned for duty. Good-by, dear friend, until the next time. Lovingly yours, Jack Bickett."

I laid the letter aside with a queer little startled feeling at my heart.

Those two little words, "and yet," at the end of Jack's letter gave me much food for thought. Was it possible that before his death Jack had realized that his love for me was not the consuming passion he had thought it, but partook more of the fraternal affection that I had had for him?

I hoped for Jack's sake that this was so.

"And yet—"

I ran through the rest of the letters rapidly. One, the third from the last, arrested my attention sharply.

"Such a pleasant thing happened to me today," Jack wrote, "one of the unexpected gleams of sunlight that are so much brighter because of the general gloom against which they are reflected.

"I was given a week's furlough last Saturday and went up to Paris with my friend, Paul Caillard. He had a friend in a hospital on the way there, headed by Dr. Braithwaite, the celebrated surgeon of Detroit."

I caught my breath. As well as if I had already read the words, I knew what was coming.

"At an unexpected turn in the corridor I almost knocked over a little nurse who was hurrying toward the office. She looked up at me startled, out of the prettiest brown eyes I ever saw, and then stopped, staring at me as if I had been a ghost. I stared back, frankly, for her face was familiar to me, although for the moment I could not tell where I had seen her before.

"Then, half-shyly, she spoke, and her voice matched her eyes.

"You are Mr. Bickett, are you not, Mrs. Graham's cousin?"

"For a moment I did not realize that 'Mrs. Graham' was Margaret. But that gave me no clue to the identity of the girl. Then all at once it came to me.

"I know you now,' I said. 'You are Mark Earle's little sister, Katherine.'"

So they had met at last, Jack Bickett, my brother-cousin, and Katherine Sonnot, the little nurse who had taken care of my mother-in-law, and whom I had learned to love as a dear friend.

Was I glad or sorry, I wondered, as I picked up Jack's letter again that I had crushed any feeling I might have had in the matter, and had spoken the word to Dr. Braithwaite that resulted in Katharine's joining the eminent surgeon's staff of nurses? It seemed a pity to have these two meet only to be torn apart so soon by death.

"I cannot begin to tell you how delighted I was when we recognized each other. You can imagine over here that to one American the meeting with another American, especially if both have the same friends, is an event. Luckily, Miss Sonnot was just about to have an afternoon off when we met, and if she had an engagement—which she denied—she was kind enough to break it for me. I need not tell you that I spent the most delightful afternoon I have had since coming over here.

"You can be sure that I at once exerted all the influence I had through my friend, Caillard, and his friend in the hospital to secure as much free time for Miss Sonnot as possible for the time I was to be on furlough. It is like getting home after being away so long to talk to this brave, sensible, beautiful young girl—for she deserves all of the adjectives."

In the two letters which were the last ones numbered by Mrs. Stewart, Jack spoke again and again of the little nurse. Almost the last line of his last letter, written after he returned to the front, spoke of her.

"Little Miss Sonnot and I correspond," he wrote, "and you can have no idea how much good her letters do me. They are like fresh, sweet breezes glowing through the miasma of life in the trenches."

I folded the letters, put them back into their envelopes, and arranged them as Mrs. Stewart had given them to me. When she came back into the room she found me still holding them and staring into the fire.

"Did you read them all?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Don't you think those last ones sounded as if he were really getting interested in that little nurse?" she demanded.

There was a peculiar intonation in her voice which told me that in her own queer little way she was trying to punish me for my failure to come to see her oftener with inquiries about Jack. She evidently

thought that my vanity would be piqued at the thought of Jack becoming interested in any other woman after his life-long devotion to me.

But I flatter myself that my voice was absolutely non-committal as I answered her.

"Yes, I do," I agreed, "and what a tragedy it seems that he should be snatched away from the prospect of happiness."

The words were sincere. I was sure.

And yet—

## XXXVII

### A CHANGE IN LILLIAN UNDERWOOD

"Well, children, have you made any plans for Dicky's birthday yet?"

I nearly fell off my chair in astonishment at the friendliness in my mother-in-law's tones. She had been sulky ever since we had come home from our autumn outing in the Catskills, a sulkiness caused by her resentment of what she chose to consider the indiscreet interest taken in me by Robert Gordon, the mysterious millionaire whom I had discovered to be an old friend of my parents. I shrewdly suspected, however, that her continued resentment was more because Dicky chose to take my part in the matter against her, than because of any real feeling toward Mr. Gordon.

Nearly a year's experience, however, had taught me how best to manage my mother-in-law. When she indulged herself in one of her frequent "tantrums" I adopted a carefully courteous, scrupulously formal attitude toward her, and dismissed her from my mind. Thus I saved myself much worry and irritation, and deprived her of the pleasure of a quarrel, something which I knew she would be glad to bring on sometimes for the sheer pleasure of combat.

Her question was so sudden, her cordiality so surprising, that I could frame no answer. Instead I looked helplessly at Dicky. To tell the truth, I rather distrusted this sudden amiability. From past experiences, I knew that when Mother Graham made a sudden change from sulkiness to cheerfulness, she had some scheme under way.

Dicky's answer was prompt.

"That's entirely up to Madge, mother," he said, and smiled at me.

Although his mother tried hard she could not keep the acerbity out of her tones as she turned to me. She always resented any deference of Dicky to my opinion.

"Well, as Richard has no opinion of his own, what are your plans, Margaret?"

"Why, I have made none so far," I stammered, wishing with all my heart that I had made some definite plan for Dicky's birthday. I could see from my mother-in-law's manner that she had some cherished scheme in mind, and my prophetic soul told me that it would be something which I would not particularly like.

"Good," she returned. "Then I shall not be interfering with any plan of yours. I have already written to Elizabeth asking them to come out here for a week's visit. This is an awful shack, of course, but it is the country, and the children will enjoy the woods and brooks and fields, even if it is cold."

Dicky turned to her abruptly, his brow stormy, his eyes flashing.

"Mother, do you mean to say that you have already written to Elizabeth without first consulting Madge as to whether it would be convenient?"

I trod heavily on his toes under the table in the vain hope that I would be able to stop him from saying the words which I knew would inflame his mother's temper. Failing in that, I hastened to throw a sentence or two of my own into the breach in the desire to prevent further hostilities.

"Dicky, stop talking nonsense!" I said sharply. "I am sure Mother Graham," turning to my mother-in-law who sat regarding her son with the most traditional of "stony stares," "we shall be delighted to have your daughter and her family. You must tell me how many there are so we can arrange for beds and plenty of bedding. This is a rather draughty house, you know."

"I am better aware of that than you are," she returned, ungraciously making no response to my proffer of hospitality. Then she turned her attention to Dicky.

"Richard," she said sternly, "I have never been compelled to consult anybody yet, before inviting guests to my home, whether it be a permanent or a temporary one. I am too old to begin. I do not notice that you or Margaret take the trouble to consult me before inviting your friends here."

Dicky opened his mouth to reply, but I effectually stopped him, by a swift kick, which I think found a mark, for he jumped perceptibly and flashed me a wrathful look. I knew that he was thinking of the strenuous objection his mother had made to our entertaining the Underwoods, and to the proposed visit of Robert Gordon to our home. But I knew also that it was no time to rake up old scores. I foresaw trouble enough in this proposed visit of my relatives-in-law whom I had never seen, without having things complicated by a row between Dicky and his mother.

There was trouble, too, in all the housecleaning, the re-arrangement of our rooms and in the laying in of a stock of provisions to meet the requirements of the menu for each meal that Mother Graham insisted upon deciding in advance to please her daughter and the children. And then, the day they were to arrive, she received a special delivery letter calmly announcing that they were not coming. But my annoyance was forgotten in Mother Graham's very apparent and utter disappointment.

When I broke the news to Dicky he suggested that we have a party anyway, and Mother Graham sweetly acquiesced in our plans to invite the Underwoods.

Lillian's voice over the telephone, however, made me forget all my contentment, and filled me with misgiving. It was tense, totally unlike her usual bluff, hearty tones, and with an undercurrent in it that spelled tragedy.

"What is the trouble, Lillian?" I asked, as soon as I had heard her greeting; "I know something is the matter by your voice."

"Yes, there is," she replied, "but nothing of which I can speak over the 'phone. Tell me, are you going to have any strangers there tomorrow?"

How like Lillian the bluff, honest speech was! Almost any other woman would have hypocritically assured me that nothing was the matter. But not Lillian Underwood!

"Nobody but the Durkees," I assured her. "They have already promised to be here. But, Lillian, you surely must get here as soon as you can. I shall be so worried until I see you. If you don't get here early tomorrow morning I shall come in after you."

"You couldn't keep me away, you blessed child, if you are going to have no strangers there," Lillian returned. "I don't mind the Durkees. But I need you, my dear, very much. Now I must tell you something, don't be shocked or surprised when you see me, for I shall be somewhat changed in appearance. Run along to Dicky now. I'll be with you some time tomorrow forenoon. Good-by."

I almost forgot to hang up the telephone receiver in my bewilderment. What trouble could have come to Lillian that she needed me? She was the last person in the world to need any one, I thought—she, whose sterling good sense and unfailing good-nature had helped me so many times. And what change in her appearance did she mean when she cautioned me against being shocked and surprised at seeing her?

My anxiety concerning Lillian stayed with me all through the evening. I awoke in the night from troubled dreams of her to equally troubled thoughts concerning her. And my concern was complicated by a message which Dicky received the next forenoon.

We had barely finished breakfast when the telephone rang and Dicky answered.

"Hello," I heard him say. "Yes, this is Graham. Oh! Mr. Gordon! how do you do?"

My heart skipped a beat.

"Why! that's awfully kind of you," Dicky was saying, "but we couldn't possibly accept, because we have guests coming ourselves. We expect to have a regular old-fashioned country dinner here at home. But, why do you not come out to us? Oh, no, you wouldn't disturb any plans at all—they've been

thoroughly upset already. We had planned to have my sister and her family, six in all, spend this holiday with us, but yesterday we found they could not come. So we're inviting what friends we can find who are not otherwise engaged to help us eat up the turkey. You will be more than welcome if you will join us. All right, then. Do you know about trains? Yes, any taxi driver can tell you where we are. Good-by."

I did not dare to look at my mother-in-law as Dicky came toward us after answering Robert Gordon's telephone message.

I think Dicky was a trifle afraid, also, of his mother's verdict, for his attitude was elaborately apologetic as he explained his invitation to me.

"Your friend, Gordon, has just gotten in from one of those mysterious voyages of his to parts unknown," he said. "He was delayed in reaching the city, only got in last night, too late to telephone us. Seems he had some cherished scheme of having us his guests at a blowout. Wouldn't mind going if we hadn't asked these people here, for they say his little dinners are something to dream about, they're so unique. Of course, there was nothing else for me to do but to invite him out. I thought you wouldn't mind."

In Dicky's tone there was a doubtful inflection which I read correctly. He knew of my interest in the elderly man of mystery who had known my parents so well, and I was sure that he thought I would be overjoyed because he had extended the invitation.

I was glad that I could honestly disabuse his mind of this idea, for I had a curious little feeling that Dicky disliked more than he appeared to do the attentions paid to me by Mr. Gordon.

It was less than an hour before the taxi bearing the first of our guests swung into the driveway and Lillian and Harry Underwood stepped out.

Lillian's head and face were so swathed in veils that I did not realize what the change in her appearance of which she had warned me was until I was alone with her in my room, which I intended giving up to her and her husband while they stayed. Then, as she took off her hat and veils, I almost cried out in astonishment—for at my first, unaccustomed glance, instead of the rouged and powdered face, and dyed hair, which to me had been the only unpleasant things about Lillian Underwood, the face of an old woman looked at me, and the hair above it was gray!

There were the remnants of great youthful beauty in Lillian's face. Nay, more, there were wonderful possibilities when the present crisis in her life, whatever it might be, should have passed. But the effect of the change in her was staggering.

"Awful, isn't it?" she said, coming up to me. "No, don't lie to me," as she saw a confused, merciful denial rise to my lips. "There are mirrors everywhere, you know. There's one comfort, I can't possibly ever look any worse than I do now, and when my hair gets over the effect of its long years of dyeing, and my present emotional crisis becomes less tense I probably shall not be such a fright. But oh, my dear, how glad I am to be with you. I need you so much just now."

She put her head on my shoulder as a homesick child might have done, and I felt her draw two or three long, shuddering breaths, the dry sobs which take the place of tears in the rare moments when Lillian Underwood gives way to emotion. I stroked her hair with tender, pitiful fingers, noticing as I did so what ravages her foolish treatment of her hair had made in tresses that must once have been beautiful. Originally of the blonde tint she had tried to preserve, her locks were now an ugly mixture of dull drab and gray. As I stood looking down at the head pillowed against my shoulder I realized what this transformation in Lillian must mean to Harry Underwood.

He it was who had always insisted that she follow the example of the gay Bohemian crowd of which he was a leader, and disguise her fleeting youth, with dye and rouge. It was to please him, or, as she once expressed it to me, "to play the game fairly with Harry" that she outraged her own instincts, her sense of what was decent and becoming, and constantly made up her face into a mask like that of a woman of the half-world. No one could deny that it disguised her real age, but her best friends, including Dicky and myself, had always felt that the real mature beauty of the woman was being hidden.

"Of course, this is terribly rough on Harry," Lillian said at last, raising her head from my shoulder, and speaking in as ordinary and unruffled a tone as if she had not just gone through what in any other woman would have been a hysterical burst of tears.

"It really isn't fair to him, and under any other conditions in the world I would not do it. He's pretty well cut up about it, so much so that he cannot always control his annoyance when he is speaking about it. But I know you will overlook any little outbreaks of his, won't you? He wanted to come down here

with me, you know he's always anxious to see you, or I would have run away by myself."

Her tone was anxious, wistful, and my heart ached for her. I could guess that when Harry Underwood could not "control his annoyance" he could be very horrid indeed. But I winced at her casual remark that her husband was always anxious to see me. Harry Underwood held in restraint by his very real admiration for his brilliant wife had been annoying enough to me. I did not care to think what he might be when enraged at her as I knew he must be now.

Nothing of my feeling, however, must I betray to the friend who had come to me for help and comfort. I drew closer the arms that had not yet released her.

"Dear girl," I said softly, "don't worry any more about your husband or anything else. Just consider that you've come home to your sister. I'm going to keep you awhile now I've got you, and we'll straighten everything out. Don't even bother to tell me anything about it until you are fully rested. I can see you've been under some great strain."

"No one can ever realize how great," she returned. "You see—"

What revelation she meant to make to me I did not then learn, for just at that moment a knock sounded on the door, and in answer to my "come in," Katie appeared and announced the arrival of the Durkees and Richard Gordon.

## **XXXVIII**

### **"NO—NURSE—JUST—LILLIAN"**

"Tell me, Madge," Dicky's tone was tense, and I recognized the note of jealous anger which generally preceded his scenes, "are you going to have that old goat take you out to dinner? Because if you are—"

He broke off abruptly, as if he thought an unspoken threat would be more terrifying than one put into words. I knew to what he referred. As hostess, I, of course, should be escorted in to dinner by the stranger in our almost family party, Robert Gordon, who was also the oldest man present. Ordinarily, Dicky would have realized that his demand to have me change this conventional arrangement was a most ill-bred and inconsiderate thing. But Dicky sane and Dicky jealous, however, were two different men.

Always before this day Dicky had regarded with tolerant amusement the strange interest shown in me by the elderly man of mystery who had known my mother. But the magnificent chrysanthemums which Mr. Gordon had brought me, dozens of them, costing much more money than the ordinary conventional floral gift to one's hostess ought to cost, had roused his always smouldering jealousy to an unreasoning pitch.

Fear of hurting Robert Gordon's feelings was the one consideration that held me back from defying Dicky's mandate. Experience had taught me the best course to pursue with Dicky.

"If, as I suppose, you are referring to Mr. Gordon, it may interest you to know that I have not the faintest intention of going in to dinner with him," I retorted coolly. "Lillian wants to talk with him about South America, and I shall have your friend, Mr. Underwood, as my escort."

"Gee, how happy you'll be," sneered Dicky, but I could see that he was relieved at my information. "You're so fond of dear old Harry, aren't you?"

"To tell you the truth, I have to fight all the time against becoming too fond of him," I returned mockingly. "He can be dangerously fascinating, you know."

Dicky laughed in a way that showed me his brainstorm over Robert Gordon had been checked. But there was a startled look in his eyes which changed to a more speculative scrutiny before he moved away.

"Oh, old Harry's all right," he said. "He's my pal, and he never means anything, anyway." But I noticed that he said it as if he were trying to convince himself of the truth of his assertion.

When I told Harry Underwood that he was to take me in to dinner, and we were leading the way into



the dining room, his brilliant black eyes looked down into mine mockingly, and he said:

"You see it is Fate. No matter how you struggle against it you cannot escape me."

"Do I look as if I were struggling?" I laughed back, and saw a sudden expression of bewilderment in his eyes, followed instantly by a flash of triumph.

Everything that was cattishly feminine in me leaped to life at that look in the eyes of the man whom I detested, whom I had even feared. I could read plainly enough in his eyes that he thought the assiduous flatteries he had always paid me were commencing to have their result, that I was beginning to recognize the dangerous fascination he was reputed to have for women of every station. I had a swift, savage desire to avenge the women he must have made suffer, to hurt him as before dinner he had wounded Lillian.

So instead of turning an impassive face to Mr. Underwood's remark, I listened with just the hint of an elusive mischievous smile twisting my lips.

"No, you don't look very uncomfortable. You look"—he caught his breath as if with some emotion too strong for utterance, and then said a trifle huskily:

"Will you let me tell you how you look to me?"

I had to exercise all my self-control to keep from laughing in his face. He was such a poseur, his simulation of emotion was so melodramatic that I wondered if he really imagined I would be impressed by it.

A spirit of mischievous daring stirred in me.

"Don't tell me just now," I said softly. "Wait till after dinner."

"Afraid?" he challenged.

"Perhaps," I countered.

He gave my hand lying upon his arm a swift, furtive pressure and released it so quickly that there was no possibility of his being observed. I had no time to rebuke him, had I been so disposed, for we had almost reached our places at the table.

I do not remember much of the dinner over which Mother Graham, Katie and I had worked so assiduously. That everything went off smoothly, as we had planned, that from the Casaba melons which were served first to the walnuts of the last course, everything was delicious in flavor and perfect in service I was gratefully but dimly aware.

For I felt as if I were on the brink of a volcano. Not because of Harry Underwood's elaborate show of attention to me to which I was pretending to respond, much to the disgust of my mother-in-law, but on account of the queer behavior of Robert Gordon.

Lillian, who was making a pitifully brave attempt to bring to the occasion all the airy brightness with which she was wont to make any gathering favored by her presence a success, secured only the briefest responses from him, although he had taken her out to dinner. Sometimes he made no answer at all to her remarks, evidently not hearing them.

He watched me almost constantly, and so noticeable was his action that I saw every one at the table was aware of it. It was a gaze to set any one's brain throbbing with wild conjectures, so mournful, so elusive it was. The fantastic thought crossed my mind that this mysterious elderly friend of my dead mother's looked like a long famished man, coming suddenly in sight of food.

By the time the dinner was over I was intensely nervous. Katie served us our coffee in the living room, and when I took mine my hand trembled so that the tiny cup rattled against the saucer. I rose from my chair and walked to the fireplace, set the cup upon the mantel and stood looking into the blazing logs Jim had heaped against the old chimney. My guests could not see my face, and I hoped to be able to pull myself together.

"Ready to have me tell you how you look to me, now?" said Harry Underwood's voice, softly, insidiously in my ear.

I started and moved a little away from him, which brought me nearer to the fire. The next moment I was wildly beating at little tongues of flame running up the flimsy fabric of my dress.

I heard hoarse shouts, shrill screams, felt rough hands seize me, and wrap me in heavy, stifling cloth,

which seemed to press the flames searingly down into my flesh, and then for a little I knew no more.

It seemed only a moment that I lost consciousness. When I came back to myself I was lying on the couch with Lillian Underwood's deft, tender fingers working over me. From somewhere back of me Dicky's voice sounded in a hoarse, gasping way that terrified me.

"For God's sake, Lil, is she—"

Lillian's voice, firm, reassuring, answered:

"No, Dicky, no, she's pretty badly burned, I fear, but I am sure she will be all right. Now, dear boy, get your mother to her room and make her lie down. Mrs. Durkee and I can take care of Madge better with you all out of the way. Did you get a doctor, Alfred?"

"Coming as soon as he can get here," Alfred Durkee replied.

"Good," Lillian returned. "Now everybody except Mrs. Durkee get out of here. Katie, bring a blanket, some sheets, and one of Mrs. Graham's old nightdresses from her room. I shall have to cut the gown."

Even through the terrible scorching heat which seemed to envelop my body I realized that Lillian, as always, was dominating the situation. I could hear the snip of her scissors as she cut away the pieces of burned cloth, and the low-toned directions to Mrs. Durkee, which told me that Lillian already had secured our first aid kit and was giving me the treatment necessary to alleviate my pain until the physician should arrive.

I am sorry to confess it, but I am a coward where physical pain is concerned. I am not one of those women who can bear the torturing pangs of any illness or accident without an outcry. And, struggle as I might, I could not repress the moan which rose to my lips.

"I know, child." Lillian's tender hands held my writhing ones, her pitying eyes looked into mine; but she turned from me the next moment in amazement, for Robert Gordon, the mysterious man who had loved my mother, appeared, as if from nowhere, at her side, twisting his hands together and muttering words which I could not believe to be real, so strange and disjointed were they. I felt that they must be only fantasies of my confused brain.

"Mr. Gordon, this will never do," Lillian said sternly. "I thought I had sent every one out of the room except Mrs. Durkee."

"I know—I am going right away again. But I had to come this time. Is she going to die?"

"Not if I can get a chance to attend to her without everybody bothering me. I am very sure she is not seriously injured. Now, you must go away."

Mr. Gordon fled at once. And Lillian, and Mrs. Durkee worked so swiftly and skillfully that when the physician, a kindly, elderly practitioner from Crest Haven arrived, my pain had been assuaged.

By his direction I was carried to my own room. I must have fainted before they moved me, for the next thing I remember was the sound of the doctor's voice.

"There is nothing to be alarmed over," the physician was saying to a shadowy some one at the head of my bed, a some one who was breathing heavily, and the trembling of whose body I could feel against the bed. "Of course, the shock has been severe, and the pain of moving her was too much for her. But she is coming round nicely. You may speak to her now."

The shadowy some one moved forward a little, resolved itself to my clearing sight as my husband. He knelt beside the bed and put his lips to my uninjured hand.

"Sweetheart! Sweetheart!" he murmured, "my own girl! Is the pain very bad?"

"Not now," I answered faintly, trying to smile, but only succeeding in twisting my mouth into a grimace of pain. The flames had mercifully spared my hair and most of my face, but there was one burn upon one side of my throat, extending up into my cheek, which made it uncomfortable for me to move the muscles of my face.

"Don't try to talk," Dicky replied. "Just lie still and let us take care of you. Lil will stay, I know, until we can get a nurse here, won't you, Lil?"

As a frightened child might do, I turned my eyes to Lillian, beseechingly.

"No—nurse—just—Lillian," I faltered.

Lillian stooped over me reassuringly.

"No one shall touch you but me," she said decisively, and then turning to the physician, said demurely:

"Do you think I can be trusted with the case, doctor?"

"Most assuredly," the physician returned heartily. "Indeed, if you can stay it is most fortunate for Mrs. Graham. Good trained nurses are at a premium just now, and great care will be necessary in this case to prevent disfigurement!"

A quick, stifled exclamation of dismay came from Dicky.

"Is there any danger of her face being scarred?" he asked worriedly.

"Not while I'm on the job," Lillian returned decisively, and there was no idle boasting in her statement, simply quiet certainty.

But there was another note in her voice, or so it seemed to my feverish imagination, a note of scorn for Dicky, that he should be thinking of my possible disfigurement when my very life had been in question but a moment before.

A sick terror crept over me. Did my husband love me only for what poor claims to pulchritude I possessed? Suppose the physician should be mistaken, and I be hideously scarred, after all, as I had seen fire victims scarred, would I see the love light die in his eyes, would I never again witness the admiring glances Dicky was wont to flash at me when I wore something especially becoming?

I had often wondered since my marriage whether Dicky's love for me was the real lasting devotion which could stand adversity. I knew that no matter how old or gray or maimed or disfigured Dicky might become he would be still my royal lover. I should never see the changes in him. But if I should suddenly turn an ugly scarred face to Dicky would he shrink from me?

An epigram from one of the sanest and cleverest of our modern humorists flashed into my mind. Dicky and I had read it together only a few weeks before.

"Heaven help you, madam, if your husband does not love you because of your foibles instead of in spite of them."

Did all women have this experience I wondered, and then as Lillian's face bent over me I caught my breath in an understanding wave of pity for her.

This was what she was undergoing, this experience of seeing her husband turn away his eyes from her, as if the very sight of her was painful to him.

Dicky would never do that, I knew. He had not the capacity for cruelty which Harry Underwood possessed. But I was sure it would torture me more to know that he was disguising his aversion than to see him openly express it.

## **XXXIX**

### **HARRY CALLS TO SAY GOOD-BY**

Lillian Underwood kept her promise to Dicky that I should suffer no scar as the result of the burns I received when my dress caught fire on the night of my dinner.

Never patient had a more faithful nurse than Lillian. She had a cot placed in my room where she slept at night, and she rarely left my side.

I found my invalidism very pleasant in spite of the pain and inconvenience of my burns. Everyone was devoted to my comfort. Even Mother Graham's acerbity was softened by the suffering I underwent in the first day or two following the accident, although I soon discovered that she was actually jealous because Lillian and not she was nursing me.

"It is the first time in my life that I have ever found my judgment in nursing set aside as of no value,"

she said querulously to me one day when she was sitting with me while Lillian attended to the preparation of some special dish for me in the kitchen.

"Oh, Mother Graham," I protested, "please don't look at it that way. You know how careful you have to be about your heart. We couldn't let you undertake the task of nursing me, it would have been too much for you."

"Well, if your own mother were alive I don't believe any one could have kept her from taking care of you," she returned stubbornly.

There was a wistful note in her voice that touched and enlightened me. Beneath all the crustiness of my mother-in-law's disposition there must lie a very real regard—I tremulously wondered if I might not call it love—for me.

My heart warmed toward the lonely, crabbed old woman as it had never done before. I put out my uninjured hand, clasped hers, and drew her toward me.

"Mother dear," I said softly, "please believe me, it would be no different if my own little mother were here. She, of course, would want to take care of me, but her frailness would have made it impossible. And I want you to know that I appreciate all your kindness."

She bent to kiss me.

"I'm a cantankerous old woman, sometimes," she said quaveringly, "but I am fond of you, Margaret."

She released me so abruptly and went out of the room so quickly that I had no opportunity to answer her. But I lay back on my pillows, warm with happiness, filled with gratitude that in spite of the many controversies in which my husband's mother and I had been involved, and the verbal indignities which she had sometimes heaped upon me, we had managed to salvage so much real affection as a basis for our future relations with each other.

The reference to my own little mother, which I had made, brought back to me the homesickness, the longing for her which comes over me often, especially when I am not feeling well. When Lillian returned she found me weeping quietly.

"Here, this will never do!" she said kindly, but firmly. "I'm not going to ask you what you were crying about, for I haven't time to listen. I must fix you up to see two visitors. But"—she forestalled the question I was about to ask—"before you see one of them I must tell you that Harry and I have about come to the parting of the ways."

"The parting of the ways!" I gasped. "Harry and you?"

Lillian Underwood nodded as calmly as if she had simply announced a decision to alter a gown or a hat, instead of referring to a separation from her husband.

"It will have to come to that, I am afraid," she said, and looking more closely at her I saw that her calmness was only assumed, that humiliation and sadness had her in their grip.

"I have always feared that when the time came for me to be 'my honest self' instead of a 'made-up daisy'"—she smiled wearily as she quoted the childish rhyme—"Harry would not be big enough to take it well. Of course I could and would stand all his unpleasantness concerning my altered appearance, but the root of his actions goes deeper than that, I am afraid. He dislikes children, and I fear that he will object to my having my little girl with me. And if he does—"

Her tone spelled finality but I had no time to bestow upon the probable fate of Harry Underwood. With a glad little cry, I drew Lillian down to my bedside and kissed her.

"Oh! Lillian!" I exclaimed, "are you really going to have your baby girl after all?"

She nodded, and I held her close with a little prayer of thanksgiving that fate had finally relented and had given to this woman the desire of her heart, so long kept from her.

I saw now, and wondered why I had not realized before the reason for Lillian's sudden abandonment of the rouge and powder and dyed hair which she had used so long. Once she had said to me, "When my baby comes home, she shall have a mother with a clean face and pepper and salt hair, but until that time, I shall play the game with Harry."

And so for Harry's sake, for the man who was not worthy to tie her shoes, she had continued to crucify her real instincts in an effort to hide the worst feminine crime in her husband's calendar—

advancing age.

"When will she come to you?" I asked, and then with a sudden remembrance of the only conditions under which Lillian's little daughter could be restored to her, I added, "then her father is—"

"Not dead, but dying," Lillian returned gravely, "but oh, my dear, he sent for me two weeks ago and acknowledged the terrible wrong he did me. I am vindicated at last, Madge—at last."

Her voice broke, and as she laid her cheek against my hand, I felt the happy tears which she must have kept back all through the excitement of my accident. How like her to put by her own greatest experiences as of no consequence when weighed against another's trouble!

I kissed her happily. "Do you feel that you can tell me about it?" I asked.

"You and Dicky are the two people I want most to know," she returned. "Will confessed everything to me, and better still, to his mother. I would have been glad to have spared the poor old woman, for she idolizes her son, but you remember I told you that although she loved me, he had made her believe the vile things he said of me. It was necessary that she should know the truth, if after Will's death I was to have any peace in my child's companionship.

"Marion loves her grandmother dearly, and the old woman fairly idolizes the child, although her feebleness has compelled her to leave most of the care of the child to hired nurses. There is where I am going to have my chance with my little girl. I never shall separate her from her grandmother while the old woman lives, but from the moment she comes to me, no hireling's hand shall care for her—she shall be mine, all mine."

Her voice was a paean of triumphant love. My heart thrilled in sympathy with hers, but underneath it all I was conscious of a strong desire to have Harry Underwood reconciled to this new plan of Lillian's. The calmness with which she had spoken of their parting had not deceived me. I knew that Lillian's pride, already dragged in the dust by her first unhappy marital experience, would suffer greatly if she had to acknowledge that her second venture had also failed. I tried to think of some manner in which I could remedy matters. Unconsciously Lillian played directly into my hands.

"But here I am bothering you with all of my troubles," she said, "when all the time gallant cavaliers wait without, anxious to pay their devoirs."

Her voice was as gay, as unconcerned, as if she had not just been sounding the depths of terrible memories. I paid a silent tribute to her powers of self-discipline before answering curiously.

"Gallant cavaliers?" I repeated. "Who are they?"

"Well, Harry is at the door, and Mr. Gordon at the gate," she returned merrily. "In other words, Harry is downstairs, waiting patiently for me to give him permission to see you, while Mr. Gordon took up quarters at a country inn near here the day after your accident and has called or telephoned almost hourly since. He begged me this morning to let him know when you would be able to see him. If Harry's call does not tire you, I think I would better 'phone him to come over."

"Lillian!" I spoke imperatively, as a sudden recollection flashed through my mind. "Was I delirious, or did I hear Mr. Gordon exclaim something very foolish the night of my accident?"

She looked at me searchingly.

"He said, 'My darling, have I found you only to lose you again?'" she answered.

"What did he mean?" I gasped.

"That he must tell you himself, Madge," she said gravely. "For me to guess his meaning would be futile. Shall I telephone him to come over, and will you see Harry for a moment or two now?"

"Yes! to both questions," I answered.

"Well, lady fair, they haven't made you take the count yet, have they? By Jove, you're prettier than ever."

Ushered by Lillian, Harry Underwood came into my room with all his usual breeziness, and stood looking down at me as I lay propped against the pillows Lillian had piled around me. It was the first time I had seen him since the night of our dinner, when with the wild idea of punishing Dicky for his foolishness regarding elderly Mr. Gordon I had carried on a rather intense flirtation with Harry Underwood.

I had been heartily sorry for and ashamed of the experiment before the dinner was half over, and many times since the accident which interrupted the evening I had wondered, half-whimsically, whether my dress catching fire was not a "judgment on me." I had deeply dreaded seeing Mr. Underwood again, but as I looked into his eyes I saw nothing but friendly cheeriness and pity.

Lillian drew a chair for him to my bedside, and for a few moments he chatted of everything and nothing in the entertaining manner he knows so well how to use.

"You may have just three minutes more, Harry," Lillian said at last. "Stay here while I go down to telephone. Then you will have to vamoose. Mr. Gordon is coming over, and I can't have her too tired."

Her husband gave a low whistle, and I saw a quick look of understanding pass between him and Lillian. I did not have time to wonder about it, however, for Lillian went out of the room, and the moment she closed the door he said tensely:

"Tell me you forgive me. If I had not teased you that night you would not have moved toward the fire, and your dress would not have caught. Why! you might have been killed or horribly disfigured. I've been suffering the tortures of Hades ever since. But you will forgive me, won't you? I'll do any penance you name."

Through all the extravagance of his speech there ran a deeper note than I had believed Harry Underwood to be capable of sounding. As his eyes met mine and I saw that there was something as near suffering in them as the man's self-centred careless nature was capable of feeling I saw my opportunity.

"Yes, I'll forgive you—everything—if you'll promise me one thing, which will make me very happy."

He bit his lip savagely—I think he guessed my meaning—but he did not hesitate.

"Name it," he said shortly.

"Don't hurt Lillian any more about the change in her appearance or object to her having her child with her," I pleaded.

He thought a long minute, then with a quick gesture he caught my uninjured hand in his, carried it to his lips, and kissed it, then laid it gently back upon the bed again.

"Done," he said gruffly. "It won't bother me much for awhile anyway. Your friend Gordon, wants me to go with him on a long trip to South America. I'm the original white-haired boy with him just now for some reason or other, and it's just the chance I have wanted to look up the theatrical situation down there. Perhaps I can persuade the old boy to loosen up on some of his bank roll and play angel. But anyway I'm going to be gone quite a stretch, and when I come back I'll try to be a reformed character. But remember, wherever I am 'me art is true to Poll.'"

He bowed mockingly with his old manner, and walked toward the door, meeting Lillian as she came in.

"So long, Lil," he said carelessly. "I'm going for a long walk. See you later."

She looked at him searchingly. "All right," she answered laconically, and then came over to me.

"Mr. Gordon will be here in a half-hour," she said. "Please try to rest a little before he comes."

She lowered the shades, and my pillows, kissed me gently, and left the room. But I could neither rest nor sleep. The wildest conjectures went through my brain. Who was Robert Gordon, and why was he so strangely interested in me?

## **XL**

### **MADGE FACES THE PAST AND HEARS A DOOR SOFTLY CLOSE**

It seemed a very long time to me, as I tossed on my pillows, beset by the problem that even the name Robert Gordon always presents to me, before Lillian came back to my room. But when she entered she said that Mr. Gordon would soon arrive and that I must be prepared to see him, so she bathed my

hands and face and gave me an egg-nog before propping me up against my pillows to receive my visitor.

"Of course you will stay with me, Lillian, while he is here," I said.

She smiled enigmatically. "Part of the time," she said.

But when Mr. Gordon came, bringing with him an immense sheaf of roses, she left the room almost at once, giving as an excuse her wish to arrange the flowers.

My visitor's eyes were burning with a light that almost frightened me as he sat down by my bedside and took my hand in his.

"My dear child," he said, and though the words were such as any elderly man might address to a young woman, yet there was an intensity in them that made me uncomfortable. "Are you sure everything is all right with you?"

"Very sure," I replied, smiling. "If Mrs. Underwood would permit me to do so, I am certain I could get up now."

"You must not think of trying it," he returned sharply, and with a note in his voice, almost like authority, which puzzled me.

"Thank God for Mrs. Underwood!" he went on. "She is a woman in a thousand. I am indebted to her for life."

I shrank back among my pillows, and wished that Lillian would return to the room. I began to wonder if Mr. Gordon's brain was not slightly turned. Surely, the fact that he had once known and loved my mother was no excuse for the extravagant attitude he was taking.

He saw the movement, and into his eyes flashed a look so mournful, so filled with longing that I was thrilled to the heart. The next moment he threw himself upon his knees by the side of my bed, and cried out tensely:

"Oh, my darling child, don't shrink from me. You will kill me. Don't you see? Can't you guess? I am your father!"

My father! Robert Gordon my father!

I looked at the elderly man kneeling beside my bed, and my brain whirled with the unreality of it all. The "man of mystery," the "Quester" of Broadway, the elderly soldier of fortune, about whose reputed wealth and constant searching of faces wherever he was the idle gossip of the city's Bohemia had whirled—to think that this man was the father I had never known, the father, alas! whom I had hoped never to know.

Everything was clear to me now—the reason for his staring at me when he first caught sight of me in the Sydenham Hotel, his trailing of my movements until he had found out my name and home, the introduction he obtained to Dicky, and through him to me, his emotion at hearing my mother's name, his embarrassing attentions to me ever since—the explanation for all of which had puzzled me had come in the choking words of the man whose head was bowed against my bed, and whose whole frame was shaking with suppressed sobs.

I felt myself trembling in the grip of a mighty surge of longing to gather that bowed gray head into my arms and lavish the love he longed for upon my father. My heart sang a little hymn of joy. I, who had been kinless, with no one of my own blood, had found a father!

And then, with my hand outstretched, almost touching my father's head, the revulsion came.

True, this man was my father, but he was also the man who had made my mother's life one long tragedy. All my life I had schooled myself to hate the man who had deserted my mother and me when I was four years old, who had added to the desertion the insult of taking with him the woman who had been my mother's most intimate friend. My love for my mother had been the absorbing emotion of my life, until she had left me, and because of that love I had loathed the very thought of the man who had caused her to suffer so terribly.

My father lifted his head and looked at me, and there was that in his eyes which made me shudder. It was the look of a prisoner in the dock, waiting to receive a sentence.

"Of course, I know you must hate the very sight of me, Margaret," he said brokenly. "I had not meant to tell you so soon. But I have to go away almost at once to South America, and it is very uncertain

when I shall return. I could not bear to go without your knowing how I have loved and longed for you.

"Never so great a sinner as I, my child," the weary old voice went on, "but, oh, if you could know my bitter repentance, my years of loneliness."

His voice tore at my heart strings, but I steeled myself against him. One thing I must know.

"Where is the person with whom—" I could not finish the words.

"I do not know." The words rang true. I was sure he was not lying to me. "I have not seen or heard of her in over twenty years."

Then the association had not lasted. I had a sudden clairvoyant glimpse into my father's soul. My mother had been the real love of his life. His infatuation for the other woman had been but a temporary madness. What long drawn out, agonized repentance must have been his for twenty years with wife, child and home lost to him!

I leaned back and closed my eyes for a minute, overwhelmed with the problem which confronted me. And then—call it hallucination or what you will—I heard my mother's voice, as clearly as I ever heard it in life, repeating the words I had read weeks before in the letter she had left for me at her death.

"Remember it is my last wish, Margaret, that if your father be living sometime you may be reconciled to him."

I opened my eyes with a little cry of thanksgiving. It was as if my mother had stretched out her hand from heaven to sanction the one thing I most longed to do.

"Father!" I gasped. "Oh, my father, I have wanted you so."

He uttered a little cry of joy, and then my father's arms were around me, my face was close to his, and for the first time since I was a baby of four years I knew my father's kisses.

A smothered sound, almost like a groan, startled me, and then the door slammed shut.

"What was that?" I asked. "Is there any one there?"

My father raised his head. "No, there is no one there," he said. "See, the wind is rising. It must have been that which slammed the door. I think I would better shut the window."

He moved over to the window, which Lillian had kept partly ajar for air, and closed it. Then he returned to my bedside.

"There is one thing I must ask you to do, my child," he said hesitatingly, "and that is to keep secret the fact that instead of being Robert Gordon, I am in reality Charles Robert Gordon Spencer, and your father. Of course your husband must know and Mrs. Underwood, as her husband is going with me to South America. But I should advise very strongly against the knowledge coming into the possession of any one else.

"I cannot explain to you now, why I dropped part of my name, or why I exact this promise," he went on, "but it is imperative that I do ask it, and that you heed the request. You will respect my wishes in this matter, will you not, my daughter?"

It was all very stilted, almost melodramatic, but my father was so much in earnest that I readily gave the promise he asked. With a look of relief he took a package from his pocket and handed it to me.

"Keep this carefully," he said. "It contains all the data which you will need in case of my death. Rumor says that I am a very rich man. As usual rumor is wrong, but I have enough so that you will always be comfortable. And for fear that something might happen to you in my absence I have placed to your account in the Knickerbocker money enough for any emergency, also for any extra spending money you may wish. The bank book is among these papers. I trust that you will use it. I shall like to feel that you are using it. And now good-by. I shall not see you again."

He kissed me, lingeringly, tenderly, and went out of the room. I lay looking at the package he had given me, wondering if it were all a dream.



## WHY DID DICKY GO?

"Margaret, I have the queerest message from Richard. I cannot make it out."

My mother-in-law rustled into my room, her voice querulous, her face expressing the utmost bewilderment.

"What is it, mother?" I asked nervously. It was late afternoon of the day in which Robert Gordon had revealed his identity as my father, and my nerves were still tense from the shock of the discovery.

"Why, Richard has left the city. He telephoned me just now that he had an unexpected offer at an unusual sum to do some work in San Francisco, I think, he said, and that he would be gone some months. If he accepted the offer he would have no time to come home. He said he would write to both of us tonight. What do you suppose it means?"

"I—do—not—know," I returned slowly and truthfully, but there was a terrible frightened feeling at my heart. Dicky gone for months without coming to bid me good-by! My world seemed to whirl around me. But I must do or say nothing to alarm my mother-in-law. Her weak heart made it imperative that she be shielded from worry of any kind.

I rallied every atom of self-control I possessed. "There is nothing to worry about, mother," I said carelessly. "Dicky has often spoken recently about this offer to go to San Francisco. It was always tentative before, but he knew that when it did come he would have to go at a minute's notice. You know he always keeps a bag packed at the studio for just such emergencies."

The last part of my little speech was true. Dicky did keep a bag packed for the emergency summons he once in a while received from his clients. But I had never heard of the trip to San Francisco. But I must reassure my mother-in-law in some way.

"Well, I think it's mighty queer," she grumbled, going out of the room.

"You adorable little fibber!" Lillian said tenderly, rising, and coming over to me. Her voice was gay, but I who knew its every intonation, caught an undertone of worry.

"Lillian!" I exclaimed sharply. "What is it? Do you know anything?"

"Hush, child," she said firmly. "I know nothing. You will hear all about it tomorrow morning when you receive Dicky's letters. Until then you must be quiet and brave."

It was like her not to adjure me to keep from worrying. She never did the usual futile things. But all through my wakeful night, whenever I turned over or uttered the slightest sound, she was at my side in an instant.

Never until death stops my memory will I forget that next morning with its letters from Dicky.

There was one for my mother-in-law, none for me, but I saw an envelope in Lillian's hand, which I was sure was from my husband, even before I had seen the shocked pallor which spread over her face as she read it.

"Oh, Lillian, what is it?" I whispered in terror.

"Wait," she commanded. "Do not let your mother-in-law guess anything is amiss."

But when Mother Graham's demand to know what Dicky had written to me had been appeased by Lillian's offhand remark that country mails were never reliable, and that my letter would probably arrive later, the elder woman went to her own room to puzzle anew over her son's letter, which simply said over again what he had told her over the telephone.

When she had gone Lillian locked the door softly behind her, then coming over to me, sank down by my bedside and slipped her arm around me.

"You must be brave, Madge," she said quietly. "Read this through and tell me if you have any idea what it means."

I took the letter she held out to me, and read it through.

"Dear Lil," the letter began. "You have never failed me yet, so I know you'll look after things for me now.

"I am going away. I shall never see Madge again, nor do I ever expect to hear from her. Will you look out for her until she is free from me? She can sue me for desertion, you know, and get her divorce. I will put in no defence.

"Most of her funds are banked in her name, anyway. But for fear she will not want to use that money I am going to send a check to you each month for her which you are to use as you see fit, with or without her knowledge. I am enclosing the key of the studio. The rent is paid a long ways ahead, and I will send you the money for future payments and its care. Please have it kept ready for me to walk in at any time. Mother always goes to Elizabeth's for the holidays, anyway. Keep her from guessing as long as you can. I'll write to her after she gets to Elizabeth's.

"I guess that's all. If Madge doesn't understand why I am doing this I can't help it. But it's the only thing to do. Yours always. DICKY."

The room seemed to whirl around me as I read. Dicky gone forever, arranging for me to get a divorce! I clung blindly to Lillian as I moaned: "Oh, what does it mean?"

"Think, Madge, Madge, have you and Dicky had any quarrel lately?"

"Nothing that could be called a quarrel, no," I returned, "and, not even the shadow of a disagreement since my accident."

"Then," Lillian said musingly, "either Dicky has gone suddenly mad—"

She stopped and looked at me searchingly. "Or what, Lillian," I pleaded. "Tell me. I am strong enough to stand the truth, but not suspense."

"I believe you are," she said, "and you will have to help me find out the truth. Now remember this may have no bearing on the thing at all, but Harry saw Grace Draper talking to Dicky the other day. He said Dicky didn't act particularly well pleased at the meeting, but that the girl was, as Harry put it, 'fit to put your eyes out,' she looked so stunning. But it doesn't seem possible that if Dicky had gone away with her he would write that sort of a note to me and leave no word for you."

"Fit to put your eyes out!" The phrase stung me. With a quick movement, I grasped the hand mirror that lay on the stand by my bed, and looked critically at the image reflected there. Wan, hollow-eyed, with one side of my face and neck still flaming from my burns, I had a quick perception of the way in which my husband, beauty-lover that he is, must have contrasted my appearance with that of Grace Draper.

Lillian took the mirror forcibly from me, and laid it out of my reach.

"This sort of thing won't do," she said firmly. "It only makes matters worse. Now just be as brave as you possibly can. Remember, I am right here every minute."

I could only cling to her. There seemed in all the world no refuge for me but Lillian's arms.

The weeks immediately following Dicky's departure are almost a blank memory to me. I seemed stunned, incapable of action, even of thinking clearly.

If it had not been for Lillian, I do not know what I should have done. She cared for me with infinite tenderness and understanding, she stood between me and the imperative curiosity and bewilderment of my mother-in-law, and she made all the arrangements necessary for my taking up my life as a thing apart from my husband.

It seemed almost like an interposition of Providence that two days after Dicky's bombshell, his mother received a letter from her daughter Elizabeth asking her to go to Florida for the rest of the winter. One of the children had been ordered south by the family physician, and Dicky's sister was to accompany her little daughter, while the other children remained at home under the care of their father and his mother. Mother Graham dearly loves to travel, and I knew from Lillian's reports and the few glimpses I had of my mother-in-law that she was delighted with the prospect before her.

How Lillian managed to quiet the elder woman's natural worry about Dicky, her half-formed suspicion that something was wrong, and her conviction that without her to look after me I should not be able to get through the winter, I never knew.

I do not remember seeing my mother-in-law but once or twice in the interval between the receipt of

Dicky's letter and her departure. The memory of her good-by to me, however, is very distinct.

She came into the room, cloaked and hatted, ready for the taxi which was to take her to the station. Katie was to go into New York with her, and see her safely on the train. Her face was pale, and I noticed listlessly that her eyelids were reddened as if she had been weeping. She bent and kissed me tenderly, and then she put her arms around me, and held me tightly.

"I don't know what it is all about, dear child," she said. "I hope all is as it seems outwardly. But remember, Margaret, I am your friend, whatever happens, and if it will help you any, you may remember that I, too, have had to walk this same sharp paved way."

Then she went away. I remembered that she had said something of the kind once before, giving me to understand that Dicky's father had caused her much unhappiness. Did she believe too, I wondered, that Dicky was with Grace Draper, that his brief infatuation for the girl had returned when he had seen her again?

For days after that, I drifted—there is no other word for it—through the hours of each day. When it was absolutely necessary for Lillian to know some detail, which I alone could give her, she would come to me, rouse me, and holding me to the subject by the sheer force of her will, obtain the information she wished, and then leave me to myself, or rather to Katie again. Katie was my devoted slave. She waited on me hand and foot, and made a most admirable nurse when Lillian was compelled to be absent.

When I thought about the matter at all, I realized that Lillian was preparing to have me share her apartment in the city when I should be strong enough to leave my home. Harry Underwood had gone with my father to South America for a trip which would take many months, so I made no protest. I knew also, because of questions she had made me answer, that she had arranged with the Lotus Study Club to have an old teaching comrade of mine, a man who had experience in club lectures, take my place until I should be well enough to go back to the work.

In so far as I could feel anything, the knowledge that I was still to have my club work gratified me. The twenty dollars a week which it paid me, while not large, would preserve my independence until I could gain courage to go back to my teaching.

For one feeling obsessed me, was strong enough to penetrate the lethargy of mind and body into which Dicky's letter had thrown me. I spoke of it to Lillian one day.

"Do—not—use—any—of—Dicky's—money," I said slowly and painfully.  
"My—own—bank—book—in—desk."

She took it out, and I also gave her the bank book and papers my father had given me the day before he left for South America.

"Keep—them—for—me," I whispered, and then at her tender comprehending smile, I had a sudden revelation.

"Then—you—know—" Astonishment made my voice stronger.

"That Robert Gordon is your father?" she returned briskly. "Bless you, child, I've suspected it ever since I first heard of his emotion on hearing the names of your parents. But nobody else knows, I didn't think it necessary to tell your mother-in-law or Katie, unless, of course, you want me to do so."

Her smile was so cheery, so infectious, that I could not help but smile back at her. There was still something on my mind, however.

"This house must be closed," I told her. "Try to find positions for Katie and Jim."

"I'll attend to everything," she promised, and I did not realize that her words meant directly opposite to the interpretation I put upon them, until after myself and all my personal belongings had been moved to Lillian's apartment in the city, and I had thrown off the terrible physical weakness and mental lethargy which had been mine.

"I had to do as I thought best about the house in Marvin, Madge," she said firmly. "I thoroughly respect your feeling about using any of Dicky's money for your own expenses, but you are not living in the Marvin house. It is simply Dicky's home, which as his friend, commissioned to see after his affairs, I am going to keep in readiness for his return, unless I receive other instructions from him. Jim and Katie will stay there as caretakers until this horrible mistake, whatever it may be, is cleared up. Thus your home will be always waiting for you."

"Never my home again, I fear, Lillian," I said sadly.

There is no magic of healing like that held in the hands of a little child. It was providential for me that, a short time after Lillian took me to the apartment which had been home to her for years, her small daughter, Marion, was restored to her.

The child's father died suddenly, after all, and to Lillian fell the task of caring for and comforting the old mother of the man who had done his best to spoil Lillian's life. She brought the aged and feeble sufferer to the apartment, established her in the bedroom which Lillian had always kept for herself, and engaged a nurse to care for her. When I recalled Lillian's story, remembered that her first husband's mother without a jot of evidence to go upon had believed her son's vile accusations against Lillian, my friend's forgiveness seemed almost divine to me. I am afraid I never could have equaled it. When I said as much to Lillian, she looked at me uncomprehendingly.

"Why, Madge!" she said. "There was nothing else to do. Marion's grandmother is devoted to her. To separate them now would kill the old woman. Besides her income is so limited that she cannot have the proper care unless I do take her in."

"I thought you said Mr. Morten had a legacy about the time of his second marriage."

"He did, but most of it has been dissipated, I imagine, and what there is left is in the possession of his wife, a woman with no more red blood than a codfish. She would let his mother starve before she would exert herself to help her, or part with any money. No, there is nothing else to do, Madge. I'll just have to work a little harder, that's all, and that's good for me, best reducing system there is, you know."

The sheer, indomitable courage of her, taking up burdens in her middle age which should never be hers, and assuming them with a smile and jest upon her lips! I felt suddenly ashamed of the weakness with which I had met my own problems.

"Lillian!" I said abruptly, "you make me ashamed of myself. I'm going to stop grieving—as much as I can—" I qualified, "and get to work. Tell me, how can I best help you? I'm going back to my club work next week—I am sure I shall be strong enough by then, but I shall have such loads of time outside."

My friend came over to me impetuously, and kissed me warmly.

"You blessed child!" she said. "I am so glad if anything has roused you. And I'm going to accept your words in the spirit in which I am sure they were uttered. If you can share Marion with me for awhile, it will help me more than anything else. I have so many orders piled up, I don't know where to begin first. Her grandmother is too ill to attend to her, and I don't want to leave her with any hired attendant, she has had too many of those already."

"Don't say another word," I interrupted. "There's nothing on earth I'd rather do just now than take care of Marion."

Thus began a long succession of peaceful days, spent with Lillian's small daughter. She was a bewitching little creature of nine years, but so tiny that she appeared more like a child of six. I had taught many children, but never had been associated with a child at home. I grew sincerely attached to the little creature, and she, in turn, appeared very fond of me. Lillian told her to call me "Aunt Madge," and the sound of the title was grateful to me.

"Auntie Madge, Auntie Madge," the sweet childish voice rang the changes on the name so often that I grew to associate my name with the love I felt for the child. This made it all the harder for me to bear when the child's hand all unwittingly brought me the hardest blow Fate had yet dealt me.

It was her chief delight to answer the postman's ring, and bring me the mail each day. On this particular afternoon I had been especially busy, and thus less miserable than usual. I heard the postman's ring, and then the voice of Marion.

"Auntie Madge, it's a letter for you this time."

I began to tremble, for some unaccountable reason. It was as though the shadow of the letter the child was bringing had already begun to fall on me. As she ran to me, and held out the letter, I saw that it was postmarked San Francisco! But the handwriting was not Dicky's.

I opened it, and from it fell a single sheet of notepaper inscribed:

"She laughs best who laughs last. Grace Draper."

I looked at the thing until it seemed to me that the characters were alive and writhed upon the paper.

I shudderingly put the paper away from me, and leaned back in my chair and shut my eyes. Then Marion's little arms were around my neck, her warm, moist kisses upon my cheek, her frightened voice in my ears.

"Oh! Auntie Madge," she said. "What was in the naughty letter that hurt you so? Nasty old thing! I'm going to tear it up."

"No, no, Marion," I answered. "I must let your mother see it first. Call her, dear, won't you, please?"

When Lillian came, I mutely showed her the note. She studied it carefully, frowning as she did so.

"Pleasant creature!" she commented at last. "But I shouldn't put too much dependence on this, Madge. She may be with him, of course. But you ought to know that truth is a mere detail with Grace Draper. She would just as soon have sent this to you if she had not seen him for weeks, and knew no more of his address than you."

"But this is postmarked San Francisco," I said faintly.

Lillian laughed shortly. "My dear little innocent!" she said, "it would be the easiest thing in the world for her to send this envelope enclosed in one to some friend in San Francisco, who would re-direct it for her."

"I never thought of that," I said, flushing. "But, oh! Lillian, if he did not go away with her, what possible explanation is there of his leaving like this?"

"Yes, I know, dear," she returned. "It's a mystery, and one in the solving of which I seem perfectly helpless. I do wish someone would drop from the sky to help us."

## **XLII**

### **DAYS THAT CREEP SLOWLY BY**

It was not from the sky, however, but from across the ocean that the help Lillian had longed for in solving the mystery of Dicky's abandonment of me, finally came. It was less than a week after the receipt of Grace Draper's message, that Lillian and I, sitting in her wonderful white and scarlet living room, one evening after little Marion had gone to bed, heard Betty ushering in callers.

"Betty must know them or she wouldn't bring them in unannounced," Lillian murmured, as she rose to her feet, and then the next moment there was framed in the doorway the tall figure of Dr. Pettit. And with him, wonder of wonders! the slight form, the beautiful, wistful, tired face of Katharine Sonnot, whose ambition to go to France as a nurse I had been able to further.

"My dear, what has happened to you?" Katherine exclaimed solicitously. "I received no answer to my letter saying I was coming home, so when I reached New York, I went to Dr. Pettit. He thought you were at Marvin, but when he telephoned out there, Katie said you had had a terrible accident, and that you had left Marvin. I was not quite sure, for she was half crying over the telephone, but I thought she said 'for keeps.'"

She stopped and looked at me with a hint of fright in her manner. I knew she wanted to ask about Dicky's absence, and did not dare to do so.

"Everything you heard is true, Katherine," I returned, a trifle unsteadily, as her arms went around me warmly. I was more than a trifle upset by her coming, for associated with her were memories of my brother-cousin, Jack Bickett, who had gone to the great war when he had learned that I was married, and of whose death "somewhere in France," I had heard through Mrs. Stewart.

"Where is your husband?" Dr. Pettit demanded, and there was that in his voice which told me that he was putting an iron hand upon his own emotions.

Now the stock answer which Lillian and I returned to all inquiries of this sort was "In San Francisco upon a big commission." It was upon my lips, but some influence stronger than my will made me change it to the truth.

"I do not know," I said faintly. "He left the city very abruptly several weeks ago, sending word in a letter to Mrs. Underwood that he would never see me again. It is a terrible mystery."

Dr. Pettit muttered something that I knew was a bitter anathema against Dicky, and then folded his arms tightly across his chest, as if he would keep in any further comment. But I had no time to pay any attention to him, for Katherine Sonnot was uttering words that bewildered and terrified me.

"Oh! how terrible!" she said. "Jack will be so grieved. He had so hoped to find you happy together when he came home."

Was the girl's brain turned, I wondered, because of grief for my brother-cousin's death? I had known before I secured the chance for her to go to France that she was romantically interested in the man who had been her brother's comrade, although she had never seen him. And from Jack's letters to Mrs. Stewart, I had learned of their meeting in the French hospital, and of the acquaintance which promised to ripen—which evidently had ripened—into love.

I looked at her searchingly, and then I spoke, hardly able to get the words out for the wild trembling of my whole body.

"Jack grieved?" I said. "Why! Jack is dead! We had the notice of his death weeks ago from his friend, Paul Caillard."

I saw them all look at me as if frightened. Dr. Pettit reached me first and put something under my nostrils which vitalized my wandering senses. I straightened myself and cried out peremptorily.

"What is it, oh! what is it?"

I saw Katherine look at Dr. Pettit, as if for permission, and the young physician's lips form the words, "Tell her."

"No, dear. Jack isn't dead," she said softly. "He was missing for some time, and was brought into our hospital terribly wounded, but he is very much alive now, and will be here in New York in two weeks."

I felt the pungent revivifier in Dr. Pettit's hand steal under my nostrils again, but I pushed it aside and sat up.

"I am not at all faint," I said abruptly, and then to Katherine Sonnot. "Please say that over again, slowly."

She repeated her words slowly. "I should have waited to come over with him," she added, "for he is still quite weak, but Dr. Braithwaite had to send some one over to attend to business for the hospital. He selected me, and so I had to come on earlier."

So it was true, then, this miracle of miracles, this return of the dead to life! Jack, the brother-cousin on whom I had depended all my life, was still in the same world with me! Some of the terrible burden I had been bearing since Dicky's disappearance slipped away from me. If anyone in the world could solve the mystery of Dicky's actions, it would be Jack Bickett.

Dr. Pettit's voice broke into my reverie. I saw that Lillian and Katherine Sonnot were deep in conversation. The young physician and I were far enough away from them so that there was no possibility of his low tones being heard. He bent over my chair, and his eyes were burning with a light that terrified me.

"Tell me," he commanded, "do you want your husband back again. Take your time in answering. I must know."

There was something in his voice that compelled obedience. I leaned back in my chair and shut my eyes, while I looked at the question he had put me fairly and squarely.

The question seemed to echo in my ears. I was surprised at myself that I did not at once reply with a passionate affirmative. Surely I had suffered enough to welcome Dicky's return at any time.

Ah! there was the root of the whole thing. I had suffered, how I had suffered at Dicky's hands! As my memory ran back through our stormy married life, I wondered whether it were wise—even though it should be proved to me that Dicky had not gone away with Grace Draper—to take up life with my husband again.

And then, woman-like, all the bitter recollections were shut out by other memories which came thronging into my brain, memories of Dicky's royal tenderness when he was not in a bad humor, of his voice, his smile, his lips, his arms around me, I knew, although my reason dreaded the knowledge, that

unless my husband came back to me, I should never know happiness again.

I opened my eyes and looked steadily at the young physician.

"Yes, God help me. I do!" I said.

Dr. Pettit winced as if I had struck him. Then he said gravely:

"Thank you for your honesty, and believe that if there be any way in which I can serve you, I shall not hesitate to take it."

"I am sure of that," I replied earnestly, and the next moment, without a farewell glance, a touch of my hand, he went over to Katherine, and, in a voice very different in volume than the suppressed tones of his conversation to me, I heard him apologize to her for having to go away at once, heard her laughing reply that after the French hospitals she did not fear the New York streets, and then the door had closed after the young physician, whose too-evident interest in me had always disturbed me.

I hastened to join Lillian and Katherine. I did not want to be left alone. Thinking was too painful.

"Just think!" Katherine said as I joined them, "I find that I'm living only a block away. I'm at my old rooming place—luckily they had a vacant room. Of course, I shall be fearfully busy with Dr. Braithwaite's work, but being so near, I can spend every spare minute with you—that is, if you want me," she added shyly.

"Want you, child!" I returned, and I think the emphasis in my voice reassured her, for she flushed with pleasure, and the next minute with embarrassment as I said pointedly:

"I imagine you have some unusually interesting and pleasant things to tell me, especially about my cousin."

But, after all, it was left for Jack himself to tell me the "interesting things." Katherine became almost at once so absorbed in the work for Dr. Braithwaite that she had very little time to spend with us. There was another reason for her absence, of which she spoke half apologetically one night, about a week after her arrival.

"There's a girl in the room next mine who keeps me awake by her moaning," she said. "I don't get half enough sleep, and the result is that when I get in from my work I'm so dead tired I tumble into bed, instead of coming over here as I'm longing to do. The housekeeper says she's a student of some kind, and that she's really ill enough to need a physician, although she goes to her school or work each morning. I've only caught glimpses of her, but she strikes me as being rather a stunning-looking creature. I wish she'd moan in the daytime, though. Some night I'm going in there and give her a sleeping powder. Joking aside, I'm rather anxious about her. Whatever is the matter with her, physical or mental, it's a real trouble, and I wish I could help her."

The real Katherine Sonnot spoke in the last sentence. Like many nurses, she had a superficial lightness of manner, behind which she often concealed the wonderful sympathy with and understanding for suffering which was hers. I knew that if the poor unknown sufferer needed aid or friendship, she would receive both from Katherine.

It was shortly after this talk that I noticed the extraordinary intimacy which seemed to have sprung up between Katherine and Lillian. I seemed to be quite set aside, almost forgotten, when Katherine came to the apartment. And there was such an air of mystery about their conversation! If they were talking together, and I came within hearing, they either abruptly stopped speaking, or shifted the subject.

I was just childish and weak enough from my illness to be a trifle chagrined at being so left out, and I am afraid my chagrin amounted almost to sulkiness sometimes. Lillian and Katherine, however, appeared to notice nothing, and their mysterious conferences increased in number as the days went on.

There came a day at last when my morbidness had increased to such an extent that I felt there was nothing more in the world for me, and that there was no one to care what became of me. I was huddled in one of Lillian's big chairs before the fireplace in the living room, drearily watching the flames, through eyes almost too dim with tears to see them. I could hear the murmur of voices in the hall, where Katherine and Lillian had been standing ever since Katherine's arrival, a few minutes before. Then the voices grew louder, there was a rush of feet to the door, a "Hush!" from Lillian, and then, pale, emaciated, showing the effects of the terrible ordeal through which he had gone, my brother-cousin, Jack Bickett, who, until Katherine came home, I had thought was dead, stood before me.

"Oh! Jack, Jack. Thank God! Thank God!"

As I saw my brother-cousin, Jack Bickett, whom I had so long mourned as dead, coming toward me in Lillian Underwood's living room, I stumbled to my feet, and, with no thought of spectators, or of anything save the fact that the best friend I had ever known had come back to me, I rushed into his arms, and clung to him wildly, sobbing out all the heartache and terror that had been mine since Dicky had left me in so cruel and mysterious a manner.

I felt as a little child might that had been lost and suddenly caught sight of its father or mother. The awful burden that had been mine lifted at the very sight of Jack's pale face smiling down at me. I knew that somehow, somehow, Jack would straighten everything out for me.

"There, there, Margaret." Jack's well-remembered tones, huskier, weaker by far than when I had last heard them, soothed me, calmed me. "Everything's going to come out all right. I'll see to it all. Sit down, and let me hear all about it."

There was an indefinable air of embarrassment about him which I could not understand at first. Then I saw beyond him the lovely flushed face of Katharine Sonnot, and in her eyes there was a faintly troubled look.

I read it all in a flash. Jack was embarrassed because I had so impetuously embraced him before Katherine. I withdrew myself from his embrace abruptly, and drew a chair for him near my own.

"Are you sure you are fully recovered?" I asked, and I saw Jack look wonderingly at the touch of formality in my tone.

"No, I cannot say that," he returned gravely, "but I am so much better off than so many of the other poor chaps who survived, that I have no right to complain. Mine was a body wound, and while I shall feel its effects on my general health for years, perhaps all my life, yet I am not crippled."

His tone was full of thankfulness, and all my pettiness vanished at the sudden, swift vision of what he must have endured. The next moment he had turned my thoughts into a new channel.

"Margaret," he said gravely, "I am terribly distressed to hear from Katherine that your husband has gone away in such a strange manner."

So she had already told him! The little pang of unworthy jealousy came back, but I banished it.

"Now, there must be no more time lost," he went on. "You have had no man to look after things for you, but remember now, your old brother, Jack, is on the job. First, I must know everything that occurred on that last day. Did you notice anything extraordinary in his demeanor on that last morning you saw him?"

This was the old Jack, going directly to the root of the matter, wasting no time on his own affairs or feelings, when he saw a duty before him. I felt the old sway of his personality upon me, and answered his questions as meekly as a child might have done.

"He was just the same as he had been every morning since my accident," I returned.

"H-m." Jack thought a long minute, then began again.

"Tell me everything that happened that day, every visitor you had; don't omit the most trifling thing," he commanded.

He listened attentively as I recalled Harry Underwood's visit, and Robert Gordon's. At my revelation that Robert Gordon had said he was my father, his calm, judicial manner broke into excitement.

"Your father!" he exclaimed, and then, after a pause; "I always knew he would come back some day. But go on. What happened when he told you he was your father?"

I went on with the story of my struggle with my own rancor against my father, of my conviction that I had heard my mother's voice urging my reconciliation with him, of my father's first embrace and kisses, even of the queer smothered sound like a groan and the slamming of a door which I had heard. Then I told him of my father's gift of money to me, which I had not yet touched, but I noticed that toward the last of my narrative Jack seemed preoccupied.

"Did your husband come home to Marvin at all that day?" he asked.

"No, he never came back from the city after he had once gone in, until evening."

"But are you sure that this day he did not return to Marvin?" he persisted. "How do you know?"



"Because no one saw him," I returned, "and he could hardly have come back without someone in the house seeing him."

He said no more, as Lillian and Katherine came up just then, and the conversation became general.

To my great surprise, I did not see him again after that first visit. Katherine explained to me that he had been called out of town on urgent business, but the explanation seemed to me to savor of the mysterious excitement that seemed to possess everybody around me.

Finally one morning, Lillian came to me, her face shining.

"I want you to prepare to be very brave, Madge," she said. "There is some one coming whom I fear it will tax all your strength to meet."

"Dicky!" I faltered, beginning to tremble.

"No, child, not yet," she said, her voice filled with pity, "but someone who has done you a great wrong, Grace Draper."

## **XLIII**

### **"TAKE ME HOME"**

"Grace Draper coming to see me!"

My echo of Lillian's words was but a trembling stammer. The prospect of facing the girl the thread of whose sinister personality had so marred the fabric of my marital happiness terrified me. Her message to me, posted in San Francisco, where Dicky was, flaunted its insolent triumph again before my eyes:

"She laughs best who laughs last."

That she had intended me to believe she was with Dicky, I knew, whether her boast were true or not. But how was it that she was coming to see me? Lillian put a reassuring hand upon my shoulder as she saw my face.

"Pull yourself together, Madge," she admonished me sharply. "Let me make this clear to you. Grace Draper is not in San Francisco now. Whether she has been, or what she knows about Dicky she has refused so far to say. She has finally consented to see you, however."

"But, how?" I murmured, bewildered.

"Do you remember the girl of whom Katherine spoke when she first came, the girl who moaned at night in the room next hers?"

"Oh, yes! And she was—?"

"Grace Draper. I do not know what made me think of the Draper when Katherine spoke of the girl, but I did, although I said nothing about it at the time. A little later, however, when the girl became really ill and Katherine was caring for her as a mother or a sister would have done, I told our little friend of my suspicion. Of course, Katherine watched her mysterious patient very carefully after that, and when she became ill enough to require a physician's services, Katherine managed it so that Dr. Pettit was called, and he recognized the girl at once.

"Ever since then, Katherine has been working on the substitute for honor and conscience which the Draper carries around with her—but she was hard as nails for a long time. She is terribly grateful to Katherine, however, as fond of her as she can be of anyone, and she has finally consented to come here. Don't anger her if you can help it."

When, a little later, Grace Draper and I faced each other, it was pity instead of anger that stirred my heart. The girl was inexpressibly wan, her beauty only a worn shadow of its former glory. But there was the old flash of defiant hatred in her eyes as she looked at me.

"Please don't flatter yourself that I have come here for your sake," she said, with her old smooth insolence. "But this girl here"—she indicated Katherine—"took care of me before she knew who I was.

She just about saved my life and reason, too, when there was nobody else to care a whit whether I lived or died. Even my sister's gone back on me. So when I saw how much it meant to her to find out the truth about your precious husband, I promised her I'd come and tell you the little I knew."

She drew a long breath, and went on.

"In the first place, I didn't go to San Francisco with Dicky Graham, although I'm glad if my little trick made you think so for awhile. I didn't go anywhere with him except into a café for a few minutes, the day he left New York. It was just after he got back from Marvin, and he was pouring drinks into himself so fast that he was pretty hazy about what had happened, but I made a pretty shrewd guess as to his trouble."

She turned to me, and I saw with amazement that contempt for me was written on her face.

"You!" she snarled, "with your innocent face, and your high and mighty airs, you must have been up to something pretty disgraceful, to have your husband feel the way he did that day he started for San Francisco! He had to go out to Marvin unexpectedly that morning, almost as soon as he had arrived in the city. What or who he found there, you know best."

"Stop!" said Lillian authoritatively, and for a long minute the two women faced each other, Grace Draper defiant, Lillian, with all the compelling, almost hypnotic power that is hers when she chooses to exercise it.

The accusation which the girl had hurled at me stunned me as effectually as an actual missile from her hand would have done. What did she mean? And then, before my dazed brain could work itself back through the mazes of memory, there came the whirl of a taxi in the street, an imperative ring of the bell, a tramp of masculine footsteps in the hall, and then—my husband's arms were around me, his lips murmuring disjointed, incoherent sentences against my cheek.

"Madge! Madge! little sweetheart!—no right to ask forgiveness—deserve to lose you forever for my doubt of you—been through a thousand hells since I left—"

Over Dicky's shoulder I saw Jack's dear face smiling tenderly, triumphantly, at me, realized that he must have started after Dicky as soon as he had heard my story of my husband's inexplicable departure—and the light for which I had been groping suddenly illuminated Grace Draper's words.

"So you saw my father embrace me that day!" I exclaimed, and at the words the face of the girl who had caused me so much suffering grew whiter, if possible, and she sank into a chair, as if unable to stand.

"Yes." A wave of shamed color swept my husband's face, his words were low and hurried. "But you must believe this one thing,—I had made up my mind to come back and beg your forgiveness, indeed, I was just ready to start for New York, when your cousin found me and brought me the true explanation of things.

"I—I—couldn't stand it any longer without you, Madge. I must have been mad to go away like that. You won't shut me out altogether, will you, sweetheart?"

I had thought that if Dicky ever came back me I should make him suffer a little of what he had compelled me to endure. But, as I looked from the white, drawn face of the girl, who I was sure still counted Dicky's love as a stake for which no wager was too high, to the anxious faces of the dear friends who had helped to bring him back to me, I could do nothing but yield myself rapturously to the clasp of my husband's arms.

"I couldn't have stood it much longer without you, Dicky," I whispered, and then, forgetting everything else in the world but our happiness, my husband's lips met mine in a long kiss of reconciliation.

A half choked little cry startled me, and I saw Grace Draper get to her feet unsteadily and start for the door, with her hands outstretched gropingly before her, almost as if she were blind. Katherine Sonnot hurried to her, and then Jack spoke to me for the first time since he had brought Dicky into the room.

"Good-by, Margaret, until I see you again," he said hurriedly.  
"Good-by, Dicky, I must go to Katherine."

"Good-by, old chap," Dicky returned heartily, and in his tone I read the blessed knowledge that my cherished dream had come true, that my husband and my brother-cousin were friends at last. And from the look upon Jack's face as his eyes met Katharine's, I knew that he, too, had found happiness.

I saw the trio go out of the room, the girl who had wronged me, and the friends who had helped me. Then my eyes turned to the truest, most loyal friend of all, Lillian, who stood near us, frankly weeping with joy. I put out my hand to her, and drew her also into Dicky's embrace. How long a cry it had been since the days when I was wildly jealous of her old friendship with Dicky!

"Will you come away with me for a new honeymoon, sweetheart?" Dicky asked, tenderly, after awhile, when Lillian had softly slipped away and left us alone together.

Into my brain there flashed a sudden picture of the homely living room in the Brennan house at Marvin, with the leaping fire, which I knew Jim would have for us whenever we came, with Katie's impetuous welcome. I turned to Dicky with a passionate little plea.

"Oh! Dicky," I said earnestly, "take me home."

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK REVELATIONS OF A WIFE \*\*\*

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