Title: By the Light of the Soul: A Novel

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By the Light of the Soul

A Novel

By
Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

Author of
"The Debtor" "The Portion of Labor"
"Jerome" "A New England Nun"
Etc. etc.

Illustrations by
Harold M. Brett

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To Harriet and Carolyn Alden

Chapter I

Maria Edgham, who was a very young girl, sat in the church vestry beside a window during the weekly prayer-meeting.

As was the custom, a young man had charge of the meeting, and he stood, with a sort of embarrassed dignity, on the little platform behind the desk. He was reading a selection from the Bible. Maria heard him drone out in a scarcely audible voice: "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth," and then she heard, in a quick response, a soft sob from the seat behind her. She knew who sobbed: Mrs. Jasper Cone, who had lost her baby the week before. The odor of crape came in Maria's face, making a species of discordance with the fragrance of the summer night, which came in at the open window. Maria felt irritated by it, and she wondered why Mrs. Cone felt so badly about the loss of her baby. It had always seemed to Maria a most unattractive child, large-headed, flabby, and mottled, with ever an open mouth of resistance, and a loud wail of opposition to existence in general. Maria felt sure that she could never have loved such a baby. Even the unfrequent smiles of that baby had not been winning; they had seemed reminiscent of the commonest and coarsest things of life, rather than of heavenly innocence. Maria gazed at the young man on the platform, who presently bent his head devoutly, and after saying, "Let us pray," gave utterance to an unintelligible flood of supplication intermingled with information to the Lord of the state of things on the earth, and the needs of his people. Maria wondered why, when God knew everything, Leon Barber told him about it, and she also hoped that God heard better than most of the congregation did. But she looked with a timid wonder of admiration at the young man himself. He was so much older than she, that her romantic fancies, which even at such an early age had seized upon her, never included him. She as yet dreamed only of other dreamers like herself, Wollaston Lee, for instance, who went to the same school, and was only a year older. Maria had made sure that he was there, by a glance, directly after she had entered, then she never glanced at him again, but she wove him into her dreams along with the sweetness of the midsummer night, and the morally tuneful atmosphere of the place. She was utterly innocent, her farthest dreams were white, but she dreamed. She gazed out of the window through which came the wind on her little golden-cropped head (she wore her hair short) in cool puffs, and she saw great, plumy masses of shadow, themselves like the substance of

which dreams were made. The trees grew thickly down the slope, which the church crowned, and at the bottom of the slope rushed the river, which she heard like a refrain through the intermittent soughing of the trees. A whippoorwill was singing somewhere out there, and the katydids shrieked so high that they almost surmounted dreams. She could smell wild grapes and pine and other mingled odors of unknown herbs, and the earth itself. There had been a hard shower that afternoon, and the earth still seemed to cry out with pleasure because of it. Maria had worn her old shoes to church, lest she spoil her best ones; but she wore her pretty pink gingham gown, and her hat with a wreath of rosebuds, and she felt to the utmost the attractiveness of her appearance. She, however, felt somewhat conscience-stricken on account of the pink gingham gown. It was a new one, and her mother had been obliged to have it made by a dress-maker, and had paid three dollars for that, beside the trimmings, which were lace and ribbon. Maria wore the gown without her mother's knowledge. She had in fact stolen down the backstairs on that account, and gone out the south door in order that her mother should not see her. Maria's mother was ill lately, and had not been able to go to church, nor even to perform her usual tasks. She had always made Maria's gowns herself until this pink gingham.

Maria's mother was originally from New England, and her conscience was abnormally active. Her father was of New Jersey, and his conscience, while no one would venture to say that it was defective, did not in the least interfere with his enjoyment of life.

“Oh, well, Abby,” her father would reply, easily, when her mother expressed her distress that she was unable to work as she had done, “we shall manage somehow. Don't worry, Abby.” Worry in another irritated him even more than in himself.

“Well, Maria can't help much while she is in school. She is a delicate little thing, and sometimes I am worried about her.”

“Oh, Maria can't be expected to do much while she is in school,” her father said, easily. “We'll manage somehow, only for Heaven's sake don't worry.”

Then Maria's father had taken his hat and gone down street. He always went down street of an evening. Maria, who had been sitting on the porch, had heard every word of the conversation which had been carried on in the sitting-room that very evening. It did not alarm her at all because her mother considered her delicate. Instead, she had a vague sense of distinction on account of it. It was as if she realized being a flower rather than a vegetable. She thought of it that night as she sat in meeting. She glanced across at a girl who went to the same school—a large, heavily built child with a coarseness of grain showing in every feature—and a sense of superiority at once exalted and humiliated her. She said to herself that she was much finer and prettier than Lottie Sears, but that she ought to be thankful and not proud because she was. She felt vain, but she was sorry because of her vanity. She knew how charming her pink gingham gown was, but she knew that she ought to have asked her mother if she might wear it. She knew that her mother would scold her—she had a ready tongue—and she realized that she would deserve it. She had put on the pink gingham on account of Wollaston Lee, who was usually at prayer-meeting. That, of course, she could not tell her mother. There are some things too sacred for little girls to tell their mothers. She wondered if Wollaston would ask leave to walk home with her. She had seen a boy step out of a waiting file at the vestry door to a blushing girl, and had seen the girl, with a coy readiness, slip her hand into the waiting crook of his arm, and walk off, and she had wondered when such bliss would come to her. It never had. She wondered if the pink gingham might bring it to pass to-night. The pink gingham was as the mating plumage of a bird. All unconsciously she glanced sideways over the fall of lace-trimmed pink ruffles at her slender shoulders at Wollaston Lee. He was gazing straight at Miss Slome, Miss Ida Slome, who was the school-teacher, and his young face wore an expression of devotion. Maria's eyes followed his; she did not dream of being jealous; Miss Slome seemed too incalculably old to her for that. She was not so very old, in her early thirties, but the early thirties to a young girl are venerable. Miss Ida Slome was called a beauty. She, as well as Maria, wore a pink dress, at which Maria privately wondered. The teacher seemed to her too old to wear pink. She thought she ought wear black like her mother. Miss Slome's pink dress had knots of black velvet about it which accentuated it, even as Miss Slome's face was accentuated by the clear darkness of her eyes and the black puff of her hair above her finely arched brows. Her cheeks were of the sweetest red—not pink but red—which seemed a further tone of the pink of her attire, and she wore a hat encircled with a wreath of red roses. Maria thought that she should have worn a bonnet. Maria felt an odd sort of instinctive antagonism for her. She wondered why Wollaston looked at the teacher so instead of at herself. She gave her head a charming cant, and glanced again, but the boy still had his eyes fixed upon the elder woman, with that rapt expression which is seen only in the eyes of a boy upon an older woman, and which is primeval, involving the adoration and awe of womanhood itself. The boy had not reached the age when he was capable of falling in love, but he had reached the age of adoration, and there was nothing in little Maria Edgham in her pink gingham, with her shy, sidelong glances, to excite it. She was only a girl, the other was a goddess. His worship of the teacher interfered with Wollaston's studies. He was wondering as he sat there if he could not walk home with her that night, if by chance any *man* would be in waiting for her. How he hated that imaginary man. He glanced around, and as he did so, the door opened softly, and Harry Edgham, Maria's father, entered. He was very late, but he had waited in the vestibule, in order not to attract attention, until the people began singing a hymn, “Jesus, Lover of my Soul,” to the tune of “When the Swallows Homeward Fly.” He was a distinctly handsome man. He looked much younger than Maria's mother, his wife. People said that Harry Edgham's wife might, from her looks, have been his mother. She was a tall, dark, rather harsh-featured woman. In her youth she had had a beauty of color; now that had passed, and she was sallow, and she disdained to try to make the most of herself, to soften her stern face by a judicious arrangement of her still plentiful hair. She strained it back from her hollow temples, and fastened it securely on the top of her head. She had a scorn of fashions in hair or dress except for Maria. “Maria is young,” she said, with an ineffable expression of love and pride, and a tincture of defiance, as if she were defying her own age, in the ownership of the youth of her child. She was like a rose-bush which possessed a perfect bud of beauty, and her own long dwelling upon the earth could on account of that be ignored. But Maria's father was different. He was quite openly a vain man. He was handsome, and he held fast to his youth, and would not let it pass by. His hair, curling slightly over temples boyish in outlines, although marked, was not in the least gray. His mustache was carefully trimmed. After he had seated himself unobtrusively in a rear seat, he looked around for his daughter, who saw him with dismay. “Now,” she thought, her chances of Wollaston Lee walking home with her were lost. Father would go home with her. Her mother had often admonished Harry Edgham that when

Maria went to meeting alone, he ought to be in waiting to go home with her, and he obeyed his wife, generally speaking, unless her wishes conflicted too strenuously with his own. He did not in the least object to-night, for instance, to dropping late into the prayer-meeting. There were not many people there, and all the windows were open, and there was something poetical and sweet about the atmosphere. Besides, the singing was unusually good for such a place. Above all the other voices arose Ida Slome's sweet soprano. She sang like a bird; her voice, although not powerful, was thrillingly sweet. Harry looked at her as she sang, and thought how pretty she was, but there was no disloyalty to his wife in the look. He was, in fact, not that sort of man. While he did not love his Abby with utter passion, all the women of the world could not have swerved him from her.

Harry Edgham came of perhaps the best old family in that vicinity, Edgham itself had been named for it, and while he partook of that degeneracy which comes to the descendants of the large old families, while it is as inevitable that they should run out, so to speak, as flowers which have flourished too many years in a garden, whose soil they have exhausted, he had not lost the habit of rectitude of his ancestors. Virtue was a hereditary trait of the Edghams.

Harry Edgham looked at Ida Slome with as innocent admiration as another woman might have done. Then he looked again at his daughter's little flower-like head, and a feeling of love made his heart warm. Maria could sing herself, but she was afraid. Once in a while she droned out a sweet, husky note, then her delicate cheeks flushed crimson as if all the people had heard her, when they had not heard at all, and she turned her head, and gazed out of the open window at the plumed darkness. She thought again with annoyance how she would have to go with her father, and Wollaston Lee would not dare accost her, even if he were so disposed; then she took a genuine pleasure in the window space of sweet night and the singing. Her passions were yet so young that they did not disturb her long if interrupted. She was also always conscious of the prettiness of her appearance, and she loved herself for it with that love which brings previsions of unknown joys of the future. Her charming little face, in her realization of it, was as the untried sword of the young warrior which is to bring him all the glory of earth for which his soul longs.

After the meeting was closed, and Harry Edgham, with his little daughter lagging behind him with covert eyes upon Wollaston Lee, went out of the vestry, a number inquired for his wife. “Oh, she is very comfortable,” he replied, with his cheerful optimism which solaced him in all vicissitudes, except the single one of actually witnessing the sorrow and distress of those who belonged to him.

“I heard,” said one man, who was noted in the place for his outspokenness, which would have been brutal had it not been for his naïveté—“I heard she wasn't going to get out again.”

“Nonsense,” replied Harry Edgham.

“Then she is?”

“Of course she is. She would have come to meeting to-night if it had not been so damp.”

“Well, I'm glad to hear it,” said the man, with a curious congratulation which gave the impression of disappointment.

Little Maria Edgham and her father went up the village street; Harry Edgham walked quite swiftly. “I guess we had better hurry along,” he observed, “your mother is all alone.”

Maria tagged behind him. Her father had to stop at a grocery-store on the corner of the street where they lived, to get a bag of peaches which he had left there. “I got some peaches on my way,” he explained, “and I didn't want to carry them to church. I thought your mother might like them. The doctor said she might eat fruit.” With that he darted into the store with the agility of a boy.

Maria stood on the dusty sidewalk in the glare of electric light, and waited. Her pink gingham dress was quite short, but she held it up daintily, like a young lady, pinching a fold between her little thumb and forefinger. Mrs. Jasper Cone, with another woman, came up, and to Maria's astonishment, Mrs. Cone stopped, clasped her in her arms and kissed her. As she did so, she sobbed, and Maria felt her tears of bereavement on her cheek with an odd mixture of pity and awe and disgust. “If my Minnie had—lived, she might have grown up to be like her,” she gasped out to her friend. “I always thought she looked like her.” The friend made a sympathetic murmur of assent. Mrs. Cone kissed Maria again, holding her little form to her crape-trimmed bosom almost convulsively, then the two passed on. Maria heard her say again that she always had thought the baby looked like her, and she felt humiliated. She looked after the poor mother's streaming black veil with resentment. Then Miss Ida Slome passed by, and Wollaston Lee was clinging to her arm, pressing as closely to her side as he dared. Miss Slome saw Maria, and spoke in her sweet, crisp tone. “Good-evening, Maria,” said she.

Maria stood gazing after them. Her father emerged from the store with the bag of peaches dangling from his hand. He looked incongruous. Her father had too much the air of a gentleman to carry a paper bag. “I do hope your mother will like these peaches,” he said.

Maria walked along with her father, and she thought with pain and scorn how singular it was for a boy to want to go home with an old woman like Miss Slome, when there were little girls like her.

Chapter II

Maria and her father entered the house, which was not far. It was a quite new Queen Anne cottage of the better class, situated in a small lot of land, and with other houses very near on either side. There was a great clump of hydrangeas on the small smooth lawn in front, and on the piazza stood a small table, covered with a dainty white cloth trimmed with lace, on which were laid, in ostentatious neatness, the evening paper and a couple of magazines. There were chairs, and palms in jardinières stood on either side of the flight of wooden steps.

Maria's mother was, however, in the house, seated beside the sitting-room table, on which stood a kerosene lamp with a singularly ugly shade. She was darning stockings. She held the stocking in her left hand, and drew the thread through regularly. Her mouth was tightly closed, which was indicative both of decision of character and pain. Her countenance looked sallower than ever. She looked up at her husband and little girl entering. “Well,” she said, “so you've got home.”

“I've brought you some peaches, Abby,” said Harry Edgham. He laid the bag on the table, and looked anxiously at his wife. “How do you feel now?” said he.

“I feel well enough,” said she. Her reply sounded ill-humored, but she did not intend it to be so. She was far from being ill-humored. She was thinking of her husband's kindness in bringing the peaches. But she looked at the paper bag on the table sharply. “If there is a soft peach in that bag,” said she, “and there's likely to be, it will stain the table-cover, and I can never get it out.”

Harry hastily removed the paper bag from the table, which was covered with a white linen spread trimmed with lace and embroidered.

“Don't you feel as if you could eat one to-night? You didn't eat much supper, and I thought maybe—”

“I don't believe I can to-night, but I shall like them to-morrow,” replied Mrs. Edgham, in a voice soft with apology. Then she looked fairly for the first time at Maria, who had purposely remained behind her father, and her voice immediately hardened. “Maria, come here,” said she.

Maria obeyed. She left the shelter of her father's broad back, and stood before her mother, in her pink gingham dress, a miserable little penitent, whose penitence was not of a high order. The sweetness of looking pretty was still in her soul, although Wollaston Lee had not gone home with her.

Maria's mother regarded her with a curious expression compounded of pride and almost fierce disapproval. Harry went precipitately out of the room with the paper bag of peaches. “You didn't wear that new pink gingham dress that I had to hire made, trimmed with all that lace and ribbon, to meeting to-night?” said Maria's mother.

Maria said nothing. It seemed to her that such an obvious fact scarcely needed words of assent.

“Damp as it is, too,” said her mother.

Mrs. Edgham extended a lean, sallow hand and felt of the dainty fabric. “It is just as limp as a rag,” said she, “about spoiled.”

“I held it up,” said Maria then, with feeble extenuation.

“Held it up!” repeated her mother, with scorn.

“I thought maybe you wouldn't care.”

“Wouldn't care! That was the reason why you went out the other door then. I wondered why you did. Putting on that new pink gingham dress that I had to hire made, trimmed with all that lace and ribbon, and wearing it out in the evening, damp as it is to-night! I don't see what you were thinking of, Maria Edgham.”

Maria looked down disconsolately at the lace-trimmed ruffles on her skirt, but even then she thought how pretty it was, and how pretty she must look herself standing so forlornly before her mother. She wondered how her mother could scold her when she was her own daughter, and looked so sweet. She still felt the damp coolness of the night on her cheeks, and realized a bloom on them like that of a wild rose.

But Mrs. Edgham continued. She had the high temper of the women of her race who had brought up great families to toil and fight for the Commonwealth, and she now brought it to bear upon petty things in lieu of great ones. Besides, her illness made her irritable. She found a certain relief from her constant pain in scolding this child of her heart, whom secretly she admired as she admired no other living thing. Even as she scolded, she regarded her in the pink dress with triumph. “I should think you would be ashamed of yourself, Maria Edgham,” said she, in a high voice.

Harry Edgham, who had deposited the peaches in the ice-box, and had been about to enter the room, retreated. He went out the other door himself, and round upon the piazza, when presently the smoke of his cigar stole into the room. Then Mrs. Edgham included him in her wrath.

“You and your father are just alike,” said she, bitterly. “You both of you will do just what you want to, whether or no. He will smoke, though he knows it makes me worse, besides costing more than he can afford, and you will put on your best dress, without asking leave, and wear it out in a damp night, and spoil it.”

Maria continued to stand still, and her mother to regard her with that odd mixture of worshipful love and chiding. Suddenly Mrs. Edgham closed her mouth more tightly.

“Stand round here,” said she, violently. “Let me unbutton your dress. I don't see how you fastened it up yourself, anyway; you wouldn't have thought you could, if it hadn't been for deceiving your mother. You would have come down to me to do it, the way you always do. You have got it buttoned wrong, anyway. You must have been a sight for the folks who sat behind you. Well, it serves you right. Stand round here.”

“I am sorry,” said Maria then. She wondered whether the wrong fastening had showed much through the slats of the settee.

Her mother unfastened, with fingers that were at once gentle and nervous, the pearl buttons on the back of the dress.

“Take your arms out,” said she to Maria. Maria cast a glance at the window. “There's nobody out there but your father,” said Mrs. Edgham, harshly, “take your arms out.”

Maria took her arms out of the fluffy mass and stood revealed in her little, scantily trimmed underwaist, a small, childish figure, with the utmost delicacy of articulation as to shoulder-blades and neck. Maria was thin to the extreme, but her bones were so small that she was charming even in her thinness. Her little, beautifully modelled arms were as charming as a fairy's.

“Now slip off your skirt,” ordered her mother, and Maria complied and stood in her little white petticoat, with another glance of the exaggerated modesty of little girlhood at the window.

“Now,” said her mother, “you go and hang this up in the kitchen where it is warm, on that nail on the outside door, and maybe some of the creases will come out. I've heard they would. I hope so, for I've got about all I want to do without ironing this dress all over.”

Maria gazed at her mother with sudden compunction and anxious love. After all, she loved her mother down to the depths of her childish heart; it was only that long custom had so inured her to the loving that she did not always realize the warmth of her heart because of it. “Do you feel sick to-night mother?” she whispered.

“No sicker than usual,” replied her mother. Then she drew the delicate little figure close to her, and kissed her with a sort of passion. “May the Lord look out for you,” she said, “if you should happen to outlive me! I don't know what would become of you, Maria, you are so heedless, wearing your best things every day, and everything.”

Maria's face paled. “Mother, you aren't any worse?” said she, in a terrified whisper.

“No, I am not a mite worse. Run along, child, and hang up your dress, then go to bed; it's after nine o'clock.”

It did not take much at that time to reassure Maria. She had inherited something of the optimism of her father. She carried her pink dress into the kitchen, with wary eyes upon the windows, and hung it up as her mother had directed. On her return she paused a moment at the foot of the stairs in the hall, between the dining-room and sitting-room. Then, obeying an impulse, she ran into the sitting-room and threw her soft little arms around her mother's neck. “I'm real sorry I wore that dress without asking you, mother,” she said. “I won't again, honest.”

“Well, I hope you will remember,” replied her mother. “If you wear the best you have common you will never have anything.” Her tone was chiding, but the look on her face was infinitely caressing. She thought privately that never was such a darling as Maria. She looked at the softly flushed little face, with its topknot of gold, the delicate fairness of the neck, and slender arms, and she had a rapture of something more than possession. The beauty of the child irradiated her very soul, the beauty and the goodness, for Maria never disobeyed but she was sorry afterwards, and somehow glorified faults seem lovelier than cold virtues. “Well, run up-stairs to bed,” said she. “Be careful of your lamp.”

When Maria was in her own room she set the lamp on the dresser and gazed upon her face reflected in the mirror. That was her nightly custom, and might have been regarded as a sort of fetich worship of self. Nothing, in fact, could have been lovelier than that face of childish innocence and beauty, with the soft rays of the lamp illuminating it. Her blue eyes seemed to fairly give forth light, the soft pink on her cheeks deepened until it was like the heart of a rose. She opened her exquisitely curved lips, and smiled at herself in a sort of ecstasy. She turned her head this way and that in order to get different effects. She pulled the little golden fleece of hair farther over her forehead. She pushed it back, revealing the bold yet delicate outlines of her temples. She thought how glad she should be when her hair was grown. She had had an illness two years before, and her mother had judged it best to have her hair cut short. It was now just long enough to hang over her ears, curving slightly forward like the old-fashioned earlocks. She had her hair tied back from her face with a pink ribbon in a bow on top of her head. She loosened this ribbon, and shook her hair quite loose. She peeped out of the golden radiance of it at herself, then she shook it back. She was charming either way. She was undeveloped, but as yet not a speck of the mildew of earth had touched her. She was flawless, irreproachable, except for the knowledge of her beauty, through heredity, in her heart, which was older than she herself.

Suddenly Maria, after a long gaze of rapture at her face in the glass, gave a great start. She turned and saw her mother standing in the door looking at her.

Maria, with an involuntary impulse of concealment, seized her brush, and began brushing her hair. “I was just brushing my hair,” she murmured. She felt as guilty as if she had committed a crime.

Her mother continued to look at her sternly. “There isn't any use in your trying to deceive me, Maria,” said she. “I am ashamed that a child of mine should be so silly. To stand looking at yourself that way! You needn't think you are so pretty, because you are not. You don't begin to be as good-looking as Amy Long.”

Maria felt a cold chill strike her. She had herself had doubts as to her superior beauty when Amy Long was concerned.

“You don't begin to be as good-looking as your aunt Maria was at your age, and you know yourself how she looks now. Nobody would dream for a minute of calling her even ordinary-looking,” her mother continued in a pitiless voice.

Maria shuddered. She seemed to see, instead of her own fair little face in the glass, an elderly one as sallow as her mother's, but without the traces of beauty which her mother's undoubtedly had. She saw the thin, futile frizzes which her aunt Maria affected; she saw the receding chin, indicative at once of degeneracy and obstinacy; she saw the blunt nose between the lumpy cheeks.

“Your aunt Maria looked very much as you do when she was your age,” her mother went on, with the calm cruelty of an inquisitor.

Maria looked at her, her mouth was quivering. “Did I look like Mrs. Jasper Cone's baby that died last week when I was a baby?” said she.

“Who said you did?” inquired her mother, unguardedly.

“She did. She came up behind me with Mrs. Elliot when I was waiting for father to get the peaches, and she said her baby that died looked just like me; she had always thought so.”

“That Cone baby look like you!” repeated Maria's mother. “Well, one's own always looks different to them, I suppose.”

“Then you don't think it did?” said Maria. Tears actually stood in her beautiful blue eyes.

“No, I don't,” replied her mother, abruptly. “Nobody in their sober senses could think so. I am sorry poor Mrs. Cone lost her baby. I know how I felt when my first baby died, but as for saying it looked like you—”

“Then you don't think it did, mother?”

“It was one of the homliest babies I ever laid my eyes on, poor little thing, if it did die,” said Maria's mother, emphatically. She was completely disarmed by this time. But when she saw Maria glance again at the glass she laid hold of her moral weapons, the wielding of which she believed to be for the best spiritual good of her child. “Your aunt Maria was very much better looking than you at her age,” she repeated, firmly. Then, at the sight of the renewed quiver around the sensitive little mouth her heart melted. “Get out of your clothes and into your night-gown, and get to bed, child,” said she. “You look well enough. If you only behave as well as you look, that is all that is necessary.”

Chapter III

Maria fell asleep that night with the full assurance that she had not been mistaken concerning the beauty of the little face which she had seen in the looking-glass. All that troubled her was the consideration that her aunt Maria, whose homely face seemed to glare out of the darkness at her, might have looked just as she did when she was her age. She hoped, and then she hoped that the hope was not wicked, that she might die young rather than live to look like her aunt Maria. She pictured with a sort of pleasurable horror, what a lovely little waxen-image she would look now, laid away in a nest of white flowers. She had only just begun to doze, when she awoke with a great start. Her father had opened her door, and stood calling her.

“Maria,” he said, in an agitated voice.

Maria sat up in bed. “Oh, father, what is it?” said she, and a vague horror chilled her.

“Get up, and slip on something, and go into your mother's room,” said her father, in a gasping sort of voice. “I've got to go for the doctor.”

Maria put one slim little foot out of bed. “Oh, father,” she said, “is mother sick?”

“Yes, she is very sick,” replied her father. His voice sounded almost savage. It was as if he were furious with his wife for being ill, furious with Maria, with life, and death itself. In reality he was torn almost to madness with anxiety. “Slip on something so you won't catch cold,” said he, in his irritated voice. “I don't want another one down.”

Maria ran to her closet and pulled out a little pink wrapper. “Oh, father, is mother very sick?” she whispered again.

“Yes, she is very sick. I am going to have another doctor to-morrow,” replied her father, still in that furious, excited voice, which the sick woman must have heard.

“What shall I—” began Maria, but her father, running down the stairs, cut her short.

“Do nothing,” said he. “Just go in there and stay with her. And don't you talk. Don't you speak a word to her. Go right in.” With that the front door slammed.

Maria went tiptoeing into her mother's room, still shaking from head to foot, and her blue eyes seeming to protrude from her little white face. Even before she entered her mother's room she became conscious of a noise, something between a wail and a groan. It was indescribably terrifying. It was like nothing which she had ever heard before. It did not seem possible that her mother, that anything human, in fact, was making such a noise, and yet no animal could have made it, for it was articulate. Her mother was in fact both praying and repeating verses of Scripture, in that awful voice which was no longer capable of normal speech, but was compounded of wail and groan. Every sentence seemed to begin with a groan, and ended with a long-drawn-out wail. Maria went close to her mother's bed and stood looking at her. Her poor little face would have torn her mother's heart with its piteous terror, had she herself not been in such agony.

Maria did not speak. She remembered what her father had said. As her mother lay there, stretched out stiff and stark, almost as if she were dead, Maria glanced around the room as if for help. She caught sight of a bottle of cologne on the dresser, one which she had given her mother herself the Christmas before; she had bought it out of her little savings of pocket-money. Maria went unsteadily over to the dresser and got the cologne. She also opened a drawer and got out a clean handkerchief. She became conscious that her mother's eyes were upon her, even although she never ceased for a moment her cries of agony.

“What—r you do—g?” asked her mother, in her dreadful voice.

“Just getting some cologne to put on your head, to make you feel better, mother,” replied Maria, piteously. She thought

she must answer her mother's question in spite of her father's prohibition.

Her mother seemed to take no further notice; she turned her face to the wall. “Have—mercy upon me, O Lord, according to Thy loving kindness, according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies,” she shrieked out. Then the words ended with a long-drawn-out “Oh—oh—”

Had Maria not been familiar with the words, she could not have understood them. Not a consonant was fairly sounded, the vowels were elided. She went, feeling as if her legs were sticks, close to her mother's bed, and opened the cologne bottle with hands which shook like an old man's with the palsy. She poured some cologne on the handkerchief and a pungent odor filled the room. She laid the wet handkerchief on her mother's sallow forehead, then she recoiled, for her mother, at the shock of the coldness, experienced a new and almost insufferable spasm of pain. “Let—me alone!” she wailed, and it was like the howl of a dog.

Maria slunk back to the dresser with the handkerchief and the cologne bottle, then she returned to her mother's bedside and seated herself there in a rocking-chair. A lamp was burning over on the dresser, but it was turned low; her mother's convulsed face seemed to waver in unaccountable shadows. Maria sat, not speaking a word, but quivering from head to foot, and her mother kept up her prayers and her verses from Scripture. Maria herself began to pray in her heart. She said it over and over to herself, in unutterable appeal and terror, “O Lord, please make mother well, please make her well.” She prayed on, although the groaning wail never ceased.

Suddenly her mother turned and looked at her, and spoke quite naturally. “Is that you?” she said.

“Yes, mother. I'm so sorry you are sick. Father has gone for the doctor.”

“You haven't got on enough,” said her mother, still in her natural voice.

“I've got on my wrapper.”

“That isn't enough, getting up right out of bed so. Go and get my white crocheted shawl out of the closet and put it over your shoulders.”

Maria obeyed. While she was doing so her mother resumed her cries. She said the first half of the twenty-third psalm, then she looked again at Maria seating herself beside her, and said, in her own voice, wrested as it were by love from the very depths of mortal agony. “Have you got your stockings on?” said she.

“Yes, ma'am, and my slippers.”

Her mother said no more to her. She resumed her attention to her own misery with an odd, small gesture of despair. The cries never ceased. Maria still prayed. It seemed to her that her father would never return with the doctor. It seemed to her, in spite of her prayer, that all hope of relief lay in the doctor, and not in the Lord. It seemed to her that the doctor must help her mother. At last she heard wheels, and, in her joy, she spoke in spite of her father's injunction. “There's the doctor now,” said she. “I guess he's bringing father home with him.”

Again her mother's eyes opened with a look of intelligence, again she spoke in her natural voice. She looked towards the clothes which she had worn during the day, on a chair. “Put my clothes in the closet,” said she, but her voice strained terribly on the last word.

Maria flew, and hung up her mother's clothes in the closet just before her father and the doctor entered the room. As she did so, the tears came for the first time. She had a ready imagination. She thought to herself that her mother might never put on those clothes again. She kissed the folds of her mother's dress passionately, and emerged from the closet, the tears streaming down her face, all the muscles of which were convulsed. The doctor, who was a young man, with a handsome, rather hard face, glanced at her before even looking at the moaning woman in the bed. He said something in a low tone to her father, who immediately addressed her.

“Go right into your own room, and stay there until I tell you to come out, Maria,” said he, still in that angry voice, which seemed to have no reason in it. It was the dumb anger of the race against Fate, which included and overran individuals in its way, like Juggernaut.

At her father's voice, Maria gave a hysterical sob and fled. A sense of injury tore her heart, as well as her anxiety. She flung herself face downward on her bed and wept. After a while she turned over on her back and looked at the room. Not one little thing in the whole apartment but served to rack her very soul with the consideration of her mother's love, which she was perhaps about to lose forever. The dainty curtains at the windows, the scarf on the dresser, the chintz cover on a chair—every one her mother had planned. She could not remember how much her mother had scolded her, only how much she had loved her. At the moment of death the memory of love reigns triumphant over all else, but she still felt the dazed sense of injury that her father should have spoken so to her. She could hear the low murmur of voices in her mother's room across the hall. Suddenly the cries and moans ceased. A great joy irradiated the child. She said to herself that her mother was better, that the doctor had given her something to help her.

She got off the bed, wrapped her little pink garment around her, and stole across the hall to her mother's room. The whole hall was filled with a strange, sweet smell which made her faint, but along with the faintness came such an increase of joy that it was almost ecstasy. She turned the knob of her mother's door, but, before she could open it, it was opened from the other side, and her father's face, haggard and resentful as she had never seen it, appeared.

“Go back!” he whispered, fiercely.

“Oh, father, is mother better?”

“Go back!”

Maria went back, and again the tempest of woe and injury swept over her. Why should her father speak to her so? Why could he not tell her if her mother were better? She sat in her little rocking-chair beside the window, and looked out at the night. She was conscious of a terrible sensation which seemed to have its starting-point at her heart, but which pervaded her whole body, her whole consciousness. She was conscious of such misery, such grief, that it was like a weight and a pain. She knew now that her mother was no better, that she might even die. She heard no more of the cries and moans, and somehow now, the absence of them seemed harder to bear than they themselves had been. Suddenly she heard her mother's door open. She heard her father's voice, and the doctor's in response, but she still could not distinguish a word. Presently she heard the front door open and close softly. Then her father hurried down the steps, and got into the doctor's buggy and drove away. It was dark, but she could not mistake her father. She knew that he had gone for another doctor, probably Dr. Williams, who lived in the next town, and was considered very skilful. The other doctor was remaining with her mother. She did not dare leave her room again. She sat there watching an hour, and a pale radiance began to appear in the east, which her room faced. It was like dawn in another world, everything had so changed to her. The thought came to her that she might go down-stairs and make some coffee, if she only knew how. Her father might like some when he returned. But she did not know how, and even if she had she dared not leave her room again.

The pale light in the east increased, suddenly rosy streamers, almost like northern lights, were flung out across the sky. She could distinguish things quite clearly. She heard the rattle of wheels, and thought it was her father returning with Dr. Williams, but instead it was the milkman in his yellow cart. He carried a bottle of milk around to the south door. There was something horribly ghastly in that every-day occurrence to the watching child. She realized the interminable moving on of things in spite of all individual sufferings, as she would have realized the revolution of a wheel of torture. She felt that it was simply hideous that the milk should be left at the door that morning, just as if everything was as it had been. When the milkman jumped into his wagon, whistling, it seemed to her as if he were doing an awful thing. The milk-wagon stopped at the opposite house, then moved on out of sight down the street. She wished to herself that the milkman's horse might run away while he was at some door. The rancor which possessed her father, the kicking against the pricks, was possessing her. She felt a futile rage, like that of some little animal trodden underfoot. A boy whom she knew ran past whooping, with a tin-pail, after the milkman. Evidently his mother wanted some extra milk. The sun was reflected on the sides of the swinging pail, and the flash of light seemed to hurt her, and she felt the same unreasoning wrath against the boy. Why was not Willy Royce's mother desperately sick, like her mother, instead of simply sending for extra milk? The health and the daily swing of the world in its arc of space seemed to her like a direct insult.

At last it occurred to her that she ought to dress herself. She left the window, brushed her hair, braided it, and tied it with a blue ribbon, and put on her little blue gingham gown which she commonly wore mornings. Then she sat by the window again. It was not very long after that that she saw the doctor coming, driving fast. Her father was with him, and between them sat a woman. She recognized the woman at once. She was a trained nurse who lived in Edgham. “They have got Miss Bell,” she thought; “mother must be awful sick.” She knew that Miss Bell's wages were twenty-five dollars a week, and that her father would not have called her in except in an extreme case. She watched her father help out the woman, who was stout and middle-aged, and much larger than he. Miss Bell had a dress-suit case, which her father tugged painfully into the house; Miss Bell followed him. She heard his key turn in the lock while the doctor fastened his horse.

She saw the doctor, who was slightly lame, limp around to the buggy after his horse was tied, and take out two cases. She hated him while he did it. She felt intuitively that something terrible was to come to her mother because of those cases. She watched the doctor limp up the steps with positive malevolence. “If he is such a smart doctor, why doesn't he cure himself?” she asked.

She heard steps on the stairs, then the murmur of voices, and the sound of the door opening into her mother's room. A frightful sense of isolation came over her. She realized that it was infinitely worse to be left by herself outside, suffering, than outside happiness. She tried again to pray, then she stopped. “It is no good praying,” she reflected, “God did not stop mother's pain. It was only stopped by that stuff I smelled out in the entry.” She could not reason back of that; her terror and misery brought her up against a dead wall. It seemed to her presently that she heard a faint cry from her mother's room, then she was quite sure that she smelled that strange, sweet smell even through her closed door. Then her father opened her door abruptly, and a great whiff of it entered with him, like some ghost of pain and death.

“The doctors have neither of them had any breakfast, and they can't leave her,” he said, with a jerk of his elbow, and speaking still with that angry tone towards the unoffending child. “Can you make coffee?”

“I don't know how.”

“Good for nothing!” said her father, and shut the door with a subdued bang.

Maria heard him going down-stairs, and presently she heard a rattle in the kitchen, a part of which was under her room. She went out herself and stole softly down the stairs. Her father, with an air of angry helplessness, was emptying the coffee-pot into her mother's nice sink. Maria stood trembling at his elbow. “I don't believe that's where mother empties it,” she ventured.

“It has got to be emptied somewhere,” said her father, and his tone sounded as if he swore. Maria shrank back. “They've got to have some coffee, anyhow.”

Maria's father carried the coffee-pot over to the stove, in which a freshly kindled fire was burning, and set it on it, in the hottest place. Maria stealthily moved it back while he was searching for the coffee in the pantry. She did not know much, but she did know that an empty coffee-pot on such a hot place would come to ruin.

Her father emerged from the pantry with a tin-canister in his hand. “I've sent a telegram to our aunt Maria for her to come right on,” said he, “but she can't get here before afternoon. I don't suppose you know how much coffee your

mother puts in. I don't suppose you know about anything."

Maria realized dimly that she was a scape-goat, but there was such terrible suffering in her father's face that she had no impulse to rebel. She smelled of the canister which her father held out towards her with a nervously trembling hand. "Why, father, this is tea; it isn't coffee," said she.

"Well, if you don't know anything that a big girl like you ought to know, I should think you might know enough not to try to make coffee with tea," said her father.

Maria looked at her father in a bewildered sort of way. "I guess the coffee is in the other canister," said she, meekly.

"Why didn't you say so then?" demanded her father.

Maria was silent. It seemed to her that her father had gone mad. Harry Edgham made a ferocious stride across the kitchen to the pantry. Maria followed him. "I guess that is the coffee canister," said she, pointing.

"Why didn't you say so, then?" asked her father, viciously, and again Maria made no reply. Her father seized the coffee canister and approached the stove. "I don't suppose you know how much she puts in. I don't suppose you know anything," said he.

"I guess she puts in about a cupful," said Maria, trembling.

"A cupful! with coffee at the price it is now? I guess she doesn't," said her father. He poured the coffee-pot full of boiling water from the tea-kettle, then he tipped the coffee canister into his hand, and put one small pinch into the pot.

"Oh, father," ventured Maria. "I don't believe—"

"You don't believe what?"

"I don't believe that is enough."

"Of course it's enough. Don't you suppose your father knows how to make coffee?"

Her father set the coffee-pot on the stove, where it immediately began to boil. Then he carried back the canister into the pantry, and returned with a panful of eggs. "You can set the table, I suppose, anyhow?" said he. "You know enough to do as much as that?"

"Yes, I can do that," replied Maria, with alacrity, and indeed she could. Her mother had exacted some small household tasks from her, and setting the table was one of them. She hurried into the dining-room and began setting the table with the pretty blue-flowered ware that her mother had been so proud of. She seemed to feel tears in her heart when she laid the plates, but none sprang to her eyes. Somehow, handling these familiar inanimate things was the acutest torture. Presently she smelled eggs burning. She realized that her father was burning up the eggs, in his utter ignorance of cookery. She thought privately that she didn't believe but she could cook the eggs, but she dared not go out in the kitchen. Her father, in his anxiety, had actually reached ferocity. He had always petted her, in his easy-going fashion, now he terrified her. She dared not go out there.

All at once, as she was getting the clean napkins from the sideboard, she heard the front door open, and one of the neighbors, Mrs. Jonas White, entered without knocking. She was a large woman and carelessly dressed, but her great face was beaming with kindness and pity.

"I just heard how bad your ma was," she said, in a loud whisper, "an' I run right over. I thought mebbe—How is she?"

"She is very sick," replied Maria. She felt at first an impulse to burst into tears before this broadside of sympathy, then she felt stiff.

"You are as white as a sheet," said Mrs. White. "Who is burnin' eggs out there?" She pointed to the kitchen.

"Father."

"Lord! Who's up-stairs?"

"Miss Bell and the doctors. They've sent for Aunt Maria, but she can't come before afternoon."

Mrs. White fastened a button on her waist. "Well, I'll stay till then," said she. "Lillian can get along all right." Lillian was Mrs. White's eighteen-year-old daughter.

Mrs. White opened the kitchen door. "How is she?" she said in a hushed voice to Harry Edgham, frantically stirring the burned eggs, which sent up a monstrous smoke and smell. As she spoke, she went over to him, took the frying-pan out of his hands, and carried it over to the sink.

"She is a very sick woman," replied Harry Edgham, looking at Mrs. White with a measure of gratitude.

"You've got Dr. Williams and Miss Bell, Maria says?"

"Yes."

"Maria says her aunt is coming?"

"Yes, I sent a telegram."

“Well, I'll stay till she gets here,” said Mrs. White, and again that expression of almost childish gratitude came over the man's face. Mrs. White began scraping the burned eggs off the pan.

“They haven't had any breakfast,” said Harry, looking upward.

“And they don't dare leave her?”

“No.”

“Well, you just go and do anything you want to, Maria and I will get the breakfast.” Mrs. White spoke with a kindly, almost humorous inflection. Maria felt that she could go down on her knees to her.

“You are very kind,” said Harry Edgham, and he went out of the kitchen as one who beats a retreat before superior forces.

“Maria, you just bring me the eggs, and a clean cup,” said Mrs. White. “Poor man, trying to cook eggs!” said she of Maria's father, after he had gone. She was one of the women who always treat men with a sort of loving pity, as if they were children. “Here is some nice bacon,” said she, rummaging in the pantry. “The eggs will be real nice with bacon. Now, Maria, you look in the ice-chest and see if there are any cold potatoes that can be warmed up. There's plenty of bread in the jar, and we'll toast that. We'll have breakfast in a jiffy. Doctors do have a hard life, and Miss Bell, she ought to have her nourishment too, if she's goin' to take care of your mother.”

When Maria returned from the ice-box, which stood out in the woodshed, with a plate of cold potatoes, Mrs. White was sniffing at the coffee-pot.

“For goodness sake, who made this?” said she.

“Father.”

“How much did he put in?”

“He put in a little pinch.”

“It looks like water bewitched,” said Mrs. White. “Bring me the coffee canister. You know where that is, don't you?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Maria watched Mrs. White pour out the coffee which her father had made, and start afresh in the proper manner.

“Men are awful helpless, poor things,” said Mrs. White. “This sink is in an awful condition. Did your father empty all this truck in it?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Well, I must clean it out, as soon as I get the other things goin', or the dreen will be stopped up.” Mrs. White's English was not irreproachable, but she was masterful.

Maria continued to stand numbly in the middle of the kitchen, watching Mrs. White, who looked at her uneasily.

“You must be a good girl, and trust in the Lord,” said she, and she tried to make her voice sharp. “Now, don't stand there lookin' on; just fly round and do somethin'. I don't believe but the dinin'-room needs dustin'. You find somethin' and dust the dinin'-room real nice, while I get the breakfast.”

Maria obeyed, but she did that numbly, without any realization of the task.

The morning wore on. The doctors, one at a time came down, and the nurse came down, and they ate a hearty breakfast. Maria watched them, and hated them because they could eat while her mother was so ill. Miss Bell also ate heartily, and she felt that she hated her. She was glad that her father refused anything except a cup of coffee. As for herself, Mrs. White made her drink an egg beaten up with milk. “If you won't eat your breakfast, you've got to take this,” said she.

Mrs. White took her own breakfast in stray bites, while she was clearing away the table. She stayed, and put the house in order, until Maria's aunt Maria arrived. One of the physicians went away. For a short time Maria's mother's groans and wailings recommenced, then the smell of chloroform was strong throughout the house.

“I wonder why they don't give her morphine instead of chloroform?” said Mrs. White, while Maria was wiping the dishes. “It is dreadful dangerous to give that, especially if the heart is weak. Well, don't you be scart. I've seen folks enough worse than your mother git well.”

In the last few hours Maria's face had gotten a hard look. She no longer seemed like a little girl. After a while the doctors went away.

“I don't suppose there is much they can do for a while, perhaps,” remarked Mrs. White; “and Miss Bell, she is as good as any doctor.”

Both physicians returned a little after noon, and previously Mrs. Edgham had made her voice of lamentation heard again. Then it ceased abruptly, but there was no odor of chloroform.

“They are giving her morphine now, I bet a cooky,” Mrs. White said. She, with Maria, was clearing away the dinner-

table then. “What time do you think your aunt Maria will get here?” she asked.

“About half-past two, father said,” replied Maria.

“Well, I'm real glad you've got some one like her you can call on,” said Mrs. White. “Somebody that 'ain't ever had no family, and 'ain't tied. Now I'd be willin' to stay right along myself, but I couldn't leave Lillian any length of time. She 'ain't never had anything hard put on her, and she 'ain't any too tough. But your aunt can stay right along till your mother gits well, can't she?”

“I guess so,” replied Maria.

There was something about Maria's manner which made Mrs. White uneasy. She forced conversation in order to make her speak, and do away with that stunned look on her face. All the time now Maria was saying to herself that her mother was going to die, that God could make her well, but He would not. She was conscious of blasphemy, and she took a certain pleasure in it.

Her aunt Maria arrived on the train expected, and she entered the house, preceded by the cabman bearing her little trunk, which she had had ever since she was a little girl. It was the only trunk she had ever owned. Both physicians and the nurse were with Mrs. Edgham when her sister arrived. Harry Edgham had been walking restlessly up and down the parlor, which was a long room. He had not thought of going to the station to meet Aunt Maria, but when the cab stopped before the house he hurried out at once. Aunt Maria was dressed wholly in black—a black mohair, a little black silk cape, and a black bonnet, from which nodded a jetted tuft. “How is she?” Maria heard her say, in a hushed voice, to her father. Maria stood in the door. Maria heard her father say something in a hushed tone about an operation. Aunt Maria came up the steps with her travelling-bag. Harry forgot to take it. She greeted Mrs. White, whom she had met on former visits, and kissed Maria. Maria had been named for her, and been given a silver cup with her name inscribed thereon, which stood on the sideboard, but she had never been conscious of any distinct affection for her. There was a queer, musty odor, almost a fragrance, about Aunt Maria's black clothes.

“Take the trunk up the stairs, to the room at the left,” said Harry Edgham, “and go as still as you can.” The man obeyed, shouldering the little trunk with an awed look.

Aunt Maria drew Mrs. White and Maria's father aside, and Maria was conscious that they did not want her to hear; but she did overhear—“...one chance in ten, a fighting chance,” and “Keep it from Maria, her mother had said so.” Maria knew perfectly well that that horrible and mysterious thing, an operation, which means a duel with death himself, was even at that moment going on in her mother's room. She slipped away, and went up-stairs to her own chamber, and softly closed the door. Then she forgot her lack of faith and her rebellion, and she realized that her only hope of life was from that which is outside life. She knelt down beside her bed, and began to pray over and over, “O God, don't let my mother die, and I will always be a good girl! O God, don't let my mother die, and I will always be a good girl!”

Then, without any warning, the door opened and her father stood there, and behind him was her aunt Maria, weeping bitterly, and Mrs. White, also weeping.

“Maria,” gasped out Harry Edgham. Then, as Maria rose and went to him, he seized upon her as if she were his one straw of salvation, and began to sob himself, and Maria knew that her mother had died.

Chapter IV

Without any doubt, Maria's self-consciousness, which was at its height at this time, helped her to endure the loss of her mother, and all the sad appurtenances of mourning. She had a covert pleasure at the sight of her fair little face, in her black hat, above her black frock. She realized a certain importance because of her grief.

However, there were times when the grief itself came uppermost; there were nights when she lay awake crying for her mother, when she was nothing but a bereft child in a vacuum of love. Her father's tenderness could not make up to her for the loss of her mother's. Very soon after her mother's death, his mercurial temperament jarred upon her. She could not understand how he could laugh and talk as if nothing had happened. She herself was more like her mother in temperament—that is, like the New-Englander who goes through life with the grief of a loss grown to his heart. Nothing could exceed Harry Edgham's tenderness to his motherless little girl. He was always contriving something for her pleasure and comfort; but Maria, when her father laughed, regarded him with covert wonder and reproach.

Her aunt Maria continued to live with them, and kept the house. Aunt Maria was very capable. It is doubtful if there are many people on earth who are not crowned, either to their own consciousness or that of others, with at least some small semblance of glories. Aunt Maria had the notable distinction of living on one hundred dollars a year. She had her rent free, but upon that she did not enlarge. Her married brother owned a small house, of the story-and-a-half type prevalent in New England villages, and Maria had the north side. She lived, aside from that, upon one hundred dollars a year. She was openly proud of it; her poverty became, in a sense, her riches. “Well, all I have is just one hundred a year,” she was fond of saying, “and I don't complain. I don't envy anybody. I have all I want.” Her little plans for thrift were fairly Machiavellian; they showed subtly. She told everybody what she had for her meals. She boasted that she lived better than her brother, who was earning good wages in a shoe-factory. She dressed very well, really much better than her sister-in-law. “Poor Eunice never had much management,” Maria was wont to say, smoothing down, as she spoke, the folds of her own gown. She never wore out anything; she moved carefully and sat carefully; she did a good deal of fancy-work, but she was always very particular, even when engaged in the daintiest toil, to cover her gown with an apron, and she always held her thin-veined hands high. She charged this upon her niece Maria when she had her new black clothes. “Now, Maria,” said she, “there is one thing I want you to remember, here is nothin'—” (Aunt Maria elided her final “g” like most New-Englanders, although she was not deficient in education, and even prided herself upon her reading.) “Black is the worst thing in the world to grow shiny. Folks can talk all they want to about black bein' durable. It isn't. It grows shiny. And if you will always remember one thing when you are at home, to wear an apron when you

are doin' anything, and when you are away, to hold your hands high, you will gain by it. There is no need of anybody gettin' the front breadths of their dresses all shiny by rubbin' their hands on them. When you are at school you must remember and hold your school-books so they won't touch your dress. Then there is another thing you must remember, not to move your arms any more than you can help, that makes the waist wear out under the arms. There isn't any need of your movin' your arms much if any when you are in school, that I can see, and when you come home you can change your dress. You might just as well wear out your colored dresses when you are home. Nobody is goin' to see you. If anybody comes in that I think is goin' to mind, you can just slip up-stairs, and put on your black dress. It isn't as if you had a little sister to take your things—they ought to be worn out."

It therefore happened that Maria was dressed the greater part of the time, in her own home, where she missed her mother most, in bright-colored array, and in funeral attire outside. She told her father about it, but he had not a large income, and it had been severely taxed by his wife's almost tragic illness and death. Besides, if the truth were known, he disliked to see Maria in mourning, and the humor of the thing also appealed to him.

"You had better wear what your aunt says, dear. You feel just the same in your heart, don't you?" asked Harry Edgham, with that light laugh of his, which always so shocked his serious little daughter.

"Yes, sir," she replied, with a sob.

"Well, then, do just as your aunt says, and be a good little girl," said Harry, and he went hastily out on the porch with his cigar.

Nothing irritated him so much as to see Maria weep for her mother. He was one of those who wrestle and fight against grief, and to see it thrust in his face by the impetus of another heart exasperated him, although he could say nothing. It may be that, with his temperament, it was even dangerous for him to cherish grief, and, for that very reason, he tried to put his dead wife out of his mind, as she had been taken out of his life.

"Well, men are different from women," Aunt Maria said to her niece Maria one night, when Harry had gone out on the piazza, after he had talked and laughed a good deal at the supper-table.

Harry Edgham heard the remark, and his face took on a set expression which it could assume at times. He did not like his sister-in-law, although he disguised the fact. She was very useful. His meals were always on time, the house was as neatly kept as before, and Maria was being trained as she had never been in household duties.

Maria was obedient, under silent protest, to her aunt. Often, after she had been bidden to perform some household task, and obeyed, she had gone to her own room and wept, and told herself that her mother would never have put such things on her. She had no one in whom to confide. She was not a girl to have unlimited intimates among other girls at school. She was too self-centred, and, if the truth were told, too emulative.

"Maria Edgham thinks she's awful smart," one girl would say to another. They all admitted, even the most carping, that Maria was pretty. "Maria Edgham is pretty enough, and she knows it," said they. She was in the high school, even at her age, and she stood high in her classes. There was always a sort of moral strike going on against Maria, as there is against all superiority, especially when the superiority is known to be recognized by the possessor thereof.

In spite of her prettiness, she was not a favorite even among the boys. They were, as a rule, innocent as well as young, but they would rather have snatched a kiss from such a pretty, dainty little creature than have had her go above them in the algebra class. It did not seem fitting. Without knowing it, they were envious. They would not even acknowledge her cleverness, not even Wollaston Lee, for whom Maria entertained a rudimentary affection. He was even rude to her.

"Maria Edgham is awful stuck up," he told his mother. He was of that age when a boy tells his mother a good deal, and he was an only child.

"She's a real pretty little girl, and her aunt says she is a good girl," replied his mother, who regarded the whole as the antics of infancy.

The Lees lived near the Edghams, on the same street, and Mrs. Lee and Aunt Maria had exchanged several calls. They were, in fact, almost intimate. The Lees were at the supper-table when Wollaston made his deprecatory remark concerning Maria, and he had been led to do so by the law of sequence. Mrs. Lee had made a remark about Aunt Maria to her husband. "I believe she thinks Harry Edgham will marry her," she said.

"That's just like you women, always trumping up something of that kind," replied her husband. His words were rather brusque, but he regarded, while speaking them, his wife with adoration. She was a very pretty woman, and looked much younger than her age.

"You needn't tell me," said Mrs. Lee. "She's just left off bonnets and got a new hat trimmed with black daisies; rather light mourning, I call it, when her sister has not been dead a year."

"You spiteful little thing!" said her husband, still with his adoring eyes on his wife.

"Well, it's so, anyway."

"Well, she would make Harry a good wife, I guess," said her husband, easily; "and she would think more of the girl."

It was then that Wollaston got in his remark about poor Maria, who had herself noticed with wonder that her aunt had bought a new hat that spring instead of a bonnet.

"Why, Aunt Maria, I thought you always wore a bonnet!" said she, innocently, when the hat came home from the milliner's.

“Nobody except old women are wearing bonnets now,” replied her aunt, shortly. “I saw Mrs. Rufus Jones, who is a good deal older than I, at church Sunday with a hat trimmed with roses. The milliner told me nobody of my age wore a bonnet.”

“Did she know how old you really are, Aunt Maria?” inquired Maria with the utmost innocence.

Harry Edgham gave a little chuckle, then came to his sister-in-law's rescue. He had a thankful heart for even small benefits, and Aunt Maria had done a good deal for him and his, and it had never occurred to him that the doing might not be entirely disinterested. Besides, Aunt Maria had always seemed to him, as well as to his daughter, very old indeed. It might have been that the bonnets had had something to do with it. Aunt Maria had never affected fashions beyond a certain epoch, partly from economy, partly from a certain sense of injury. She had said to herself that she was old, she had been passed by; she would dress as one who had. Now her sentiments underwent a curious change. The possibility occurred to her that Harry might ask her to take her departed sister's place. She was older than that sister, much older than he, but she looked in her glass and suddenly her passed youth seemed to look forth upon her. The revival of hopes sometimes serves as a tonic. Aunt Maria actually did look younger than she had done, even with her scanty frizzes. She regarded other women, not older than herself, with pompadours, and aspiration seized her.

One day she went to New York shopping. She secretly regarded that as an expedition. She was terrified at the crossings. Stout, elderly woman as she was, when she found herself in the whirl of the great city, she became as a small, scared kitten. She gathered up her skirts, and fled incontinently across the streets, with policemen looking after her with haughty disapprobation. But when she was told to step lively on the trolley-cars, her true self asserted its endurance. “I am not going to step in front of a team for you or any other person,” she told one conductor, and she spoke with such emphasis that even he was intimidated, and held the car meekly until the team had passed. When Aunt Maria came home from New York that particular afternoon, she had an expression at once of defiance and embarrassment, which both Maria and her father noticed.

“Well, what did you see in New York, Maria?” asked Harry, pleasantly.

“I saw the greatest lot of folks without manners, that I ever saw in my whole life,” replied Aunt Maria, sharply.

Harry Edgham laughed. “You'll get used to it,” he said, easily. “Everybody who comes from New England has to take time to like New York. It is an acquired taste.”

“When I do acquire it, I'll be equal to any of them,” replied Aunt Maria. “When I lose my temper, they had better look out.”

Harry Edgham laughed again.

It was the next morning when Aunt Maria appeared at the early breakfast with a pompadour. Her thin frizzes were carefully puffed over a mystery which she had purchased the afternoon before.

Maria, when she first saw her aunt, stared open-mouthed; then she ate her breakfast as if she had seen nothing.

Harry Edgham gave one sharp stare at his sister-in-law, then he said: “Got your hair done up a new way, haven't you, Maria?”

“Yes, my hat didn't set well on my head with my hair the way I was wearing it,” replied Aunt Maria with dignity; still she blushed. She knew that her own hair did not entirely conceal the under structure, and she knew, too, why she wore the pompadour.

Harry Edgham recognized the first fact with simple pity that his sister-in-law's hair was so thin. He remembered hearing a hair-tonic recommended by another man in the office, and he wondered privately if Maria would feel hurt if he brought some for her. Of the other fact he had not the least suspicion. He said: “Well, it's real becoming to you, Maria. I guess I like it better than the other way. I notice all the girls seem to wear their hair so nowadays.”

Aunt Maria smiled at him gratefully. When her sister had married him, she had wondered what on earth she saw in Harry Edgham; now he seemed to her a very likeable man.

When Maria sat in school that morning, her aunt's pompadour diverted her mind from her book; then she caught Gladys Mann's wondering eyes upon her, and she studied again.

While Maria could scarcely be said to have an intimate friend at school, a little girl is a monstrosity who has neither a friend nor a disciple; she had her disciple, whose name was Gladys Mann. Gladys was herself a little outside the pale. Most of her father's earnings went for drink, and Gladys's mother was openly known to take in washing to make both ends meet, and keep the girl at school at all; moreover, she herself came of one of the poor white families which flourish in New Jersey as well as at the South, although in less numbers. Gladys's mother was rather a marvel, inasmuch as she was willing to take in washing, and do it well too, but Gladys had no higher rank for that. She was herself rather a pathetic little soul, dingily pretty, using the patois of her kind, and always at the fag end of her classes. Her education, so far, seemed to meet with no practical results in the child herself. Her brain merely filtered learning like a sieve; but she thought Maria Edgham was a wonder, and it was really through her, and her alone, that she obtained any education.

“What makes you always say ‘have went’?” Maria would inquire, with a half-kindly, half-supercilious glance at her satellite.

“What had I ought to say,” Gladys would inquire, meekly—“have came?”

“Have gone,” replied Maria, with supreme scorn.

“Then when my mother has came home shall I say she has gone?” inquired Gladys, with positive abjectness.

“Gladys, you are such a ninny,” said Maria. “Why don't you remember what you learn at school, instead of what you hear at home?”

“I guess I hear more at home than I learn at school,” Gladys replied, with an adoring glance at Maria.

Maria half despised Gladys, and yet she had a sort of protective affection for her, as one might have for a little clinging animal, and she confided more in her than in any one else, sure, at least, of an outburst of sympathy. Maria had never forgotten how Gladys had cried the first morning she went to school after her mother died. Every time Gladys glanced at poor little Maria, in her black dress, her head went down on a ring of her little, soiled, cotton-clad arms on her desk, and Maria knew that she was sorrier for her than any other girl in school.

Gladys had a sort of innocent and ignorant impertinence; she asked anything which occurred to her, with no reflection as to its effect upon the other party.

“Say, is it true?” she asked that very morning at recess.

“Is what true?”

“Is your father goin' to marry her?”

“Marry who?” Maria turned quite pale, and forgot her own grammar.

“Why, your aunt Maria.”

“My aunt Maria? I guess he isn't!” Maria left Gladys with an offended strut. However, she reflected on Aunt Maria's pompadour. A great indignation seized her. After this she treated Aunt Maria stiffly, and she watched both her and her father.

There was surely nothing in Harry Edgham's behaviour to warrant a belief that he contemplated marrying his deceased wife's sister. Sometimes he even, although in a kindly fashion, poked fun at her, in Maria's presence. But Aunt Maria never knew it; she was, in fact, impervious to that sort of thing. But Maria came to be quite sure that Aunt Maria had designs on her father. She observed that she dressed much better than she had ever done; she observed the fairly ostentatious attention which she bestowed upon her brother-in-law, and also upon herself, when he was present. She even used to caress Maria, in her wooden sort of way, when Harry was by to see. Once Maria repulsed her roughly. “I don't like to be kissed and fussed over,” said she.

“You mustn't speak so to your aunt,” said Harry, when Aunt Maria had gone out of the room. “I don't know what we should have done without her.”

“You pay her, don't you, father?” asked Maria.

“Yes, I pay her,” said Harry, “but that does not alter the fact that she has done a great deal which money could not buy.”

Maria gazed at her father with suspicion, which he did not recognize.

It had never occurred to Harry Edgham to marry Aunt Maria. It had never occurred to him that she might think of the possibility of such a thing. It was now nearly a year since his wife's death. He himself began to take more pains with his attire. Maria noticed it. She saw her father go out one evening clad in a new, light-gray suit, which he had never worn before. She looked at him wonderingly when he kissed her good-bye. Harry never left the house without kissing his little daughter.

“Why, you've got a new suit, father,” she said.

Harry blushed. “Do you like it, dear?” he asked.

“No, father, I don't like it half as well as a dark one,” replied Maria, in a sweet, curt little voice. Her father colored still more, and laughed, then he went away.

Aunt Maria, to Maria's mind, was very much dressed-up that evening. She had on a muslin dress with sprigs of purple running through it, and a purple ribbon around her waist. She made up her mind that she would stay up until her father came home, in that new gray suit, no matter what Aunt Maria should say.

However, contrary to her usual custom, Aunt Maria did not mention, at half-past eight, that it was time for her to go to bed. It was half-past nine, and her father had not come home, and Aunt Maria had said nothing about it. She appeared to be working very interestedly on a sofa-cushion which she was embroidering, but her face looked, to Maria's mind, rather woe-begone, although there was a shade of wrath in the woe. When the little clock on the sitting-room shelf struck one for half-past nine, Maria looked at her aunt, wondering.

“Why, I wonder where father has gone so late?” she said.

Aunt Maria turned, and her voice, in reply, was both pained and pitiless. “Well, you may as well know first as last,” said she, “and you'd better hear it from me than outside: your father has gone courtin'.”

Chapter V

Maria looked at her aunt with an expression of almost idiocy. For the minute, the term Aunt Maria used, especially as applied to her father, had no more meaning for her than a term in a foreign tongue. She was very pale. “Courtin',” she stammered out vaguely, imitating her aunt exactly, even to the dropping of the final “g.”

Aunt Maria was, for the moment, too occupied with her own personal grievances and disappointments to pay much attention to her little niece. “Yes, courtin',” she said, harshly. “I've been suspectin' for some time, an' now I know. A man, when he's left a widower, don't smarten up the way he's done for nothin'; I know it.” Aunt Maria nodded her head aggressively, with a gesture almost of butting.

Maria continued to gaze at her, with that pale, almost idiotic expression. It was a fact that she had thought of her father as being as much married as ever, even although her mother was dead. Nothing else had occurred to her.

“Your father's thinkin' of gettin' married again,” said Aunt Maria, “and you may as well make up your mind to it, poor child.” The words were pitying, the tone not.

“Who?” gasped Maria.

“I don't know any more than you do,” replied Aunt Maria, “but I know it's somebody.” Suddenly Aunt Maria arose. It seemed to her that she must do something vindictive. Here she had to return to her solitary life in her New England village, and her hundred dollars a year, which somehow did not seem as great a glory to her as it had formerly done. She went to the parlor windows and closed them with jerks, then she blew out the lamp. “Come,” said she, “it's time to go to bed. I'm tired, for my part. I've worked like a dog all day. Your father has got his key, an' he can let himself in when he gets through his courtin'.”

Maria crept miserably—she was still in a sort of daze—up-stairs after Aunt Maria.

“Well, good-night,” said Aunt Maria. “You might as well make up your mind to it. I suppose it had to come, and maybe it's all for the best.” Aunt Maria's voice sounded as if she were trying to reconcile the love of God with the existence of hell and eternal torment. She closed her door with a slam. There are, in some New England women, impulses of fierce childishness.

Maria, when she was in her room, had never felt so lonely in her life. A kind of rage of loneliness possessed her. She slipped out of her clothes and went to bed, and then she lay awake. She heard her father when he returned. The clock on a church which was near by struck twelve soon after. Maria tried to imagine another woman in the house in her mother's place; she thought of every eligible woman in Edgham whom her father might select to fill that place, but her little-girl ideas of eligibility were at fault. She thought only of women of her mother's age and staidness, who wore bonnets. She could think of only two, one a widow, one a spinster. She shuddered at the idea of either. She felt that she would much rather have had her father marry Aunt Maria than either of those women. She did not altogether love Aunt Maria, but at least she was used to her. Suddenly it occurred to her that Aunt Maria was disappointed, that she felt badly. The absurdity of it struck her strongly, but she felt a pity for her; she felt a common cause with her. After her father had gone into his room, and the house had long been silent, she got up quietly, opened her door softly, and crept across the hall to the spare room, which Aunt Maria had occupied ever since she had been there. She listened, and heard a soft sob. Then she turned the knob of the door softly.

“Who is it?” Aunt Maria called out, sharply.

Maria was afraid that her father would hear.

“It's only me, Aunt Maria,” she replied. Then she also gave a little sob.

“What's the matter?”

Maria groped her way across the room to her aunt's bed. “Oh, Aunt Maria, who is it?” she sobbed, softly.

Aunt Maria did what she had never done before: she reached out her arms and gathered the bewildered little girl close, in an embrace of genuine affection and pity. She, too, felt that here was a common cause, and not only that, but she pitied the child with unselfish pity. “You poor child, you are as cold as ice. Come in here with me,” she whispered.

Maria crept into bed beside her aunt, but she would rather have remained where she was. She was a child of spiritual rather than physical affinities, and the contact of Aunt Maria's thin body, even though it thrilled with almost maternal affection for her, repelled her.

Aunt Maria began to weep unrestrainedly, with a curious passion and abandonment for a woman of her years.

“Has he come home?” she whispered. Aunt Maria's hearing was slightly defective, especially when she was nervously overwrought.

“Yes. Aunt Maria, who is it?”

“Hush, I don't know. He hasn't paid any open court to anybody, that I know of, but—I've seen him lookin'.”

“At whom?”

“At Ida Slome.”

“But she is younger than my mother was.”

“What difference do you s'pose that makes to a man. He'll like her all the better for that. You can thank your stars he

didn't pitch on a school-girl, instead of the teacher.”

Maria lay stretched out stiff and motionless. She was trying to bring her mind to bear upon the situation. She was trying to imagine Miss Ida Slome, with her pink cheeks and her gay attire, in the house instead of her mother. Her head began to reel. She no longer wept. She became dimly conscious, after a while, of her aunt Maria's shaking her violently and calling her by name, but she did not respond, although she heard her plainly. Then she felt a great jounce of the bed as her aunt sprang out. She continued to lie still and rigid. She somehow knew, however, that her aunt was lighting the lamp, then she felt, rather than saw, the flash of it across her face. Her aunt Maria pulled on a wrapper over her night-gown, and hurried to the door. “Harry, Harry Edgham!” she heard her call, and still Maria could not move. Then she also felt, rather than saw, her father enter the room with his bath-robe slipped over his pajamas, and approach the bed.

“What on earth is the matter?” he said. He also laid hands on Maria, and, at his touch, she became able to move.

“What on earth is the matter?” he asked again.

“She didn't seem able to speak or move, and I was scared,” replied Aunt Maria, with a reproachful accent on the “I”; but Harry Edgham was too genuinely concerned at his little daughter's white face and piteous look to heed that at all.

He leaned over and began stroking her soft little cheeks, and kissing her. “Father's darling,” he whispered. Then he said over his shoulder to Aunt Maria, “I wish you would go into my room and get that flask of brandy I keep in my closet.”

Aunt Maria obeyed. She returned with the flask and a teaspoon, and Maria's father made her swallow a few drops, which immediately warmed her and made the strange rigidity disappear.

“I guess she had better stay in here with you the rest of the night,” said Harry to his sister-in-law; but little Maria sat up determinately.

“No, I'm going back to my own room,” she said.

“Hadn't you better stay with your aunt, darling?”

Harry Edgham looked shamefaced and guilty. He saw that his sister-in-law and Maria had been weeping, and he knew why, in the depths of his soul. He saw no good reason why he should feel so shamed and apologetic, but he did. He fairly cowered before the nervous little girl and her aunt.

“Well, let father carry you in there, then,” he said; and he lifted up the slight little thing, carried her across the hall to her room, and placed her in bed.

It was a very warm night, but Maria was shivering as if with cold. He placed the coverings over her with clumsy solicitude. Then he bent down and kissed her. “Try and keep quiet, and go to sleep, darling,” he said. Then he went out.

Aunt Maria was waiting for him in the hall. Her face, from grief and consternation, had changed to sad and dignified resignation.

“Harry,” said she.

Harry Edgham stopped.

“Well, sister,” he said, with pleasant interrogation, although he still looked shamefaced.

Aunt Maria held a lamp, a small one, which she was tipping dangerously.

“Look out for your lamp, Maria,” he said.

She straightened the lamp, and the light shone full upon her swollen face, at once piteous and wrathful. “I only wanted to know when you wanted me to go?” she said.

“Oh, Lord, Maria, you are going too fast!” replied Harry, and he fairly ran into his own room.

The next morning when Maria, in her little black frock—it was made of a thin lawn for the hot days, and the pale slenderness of her arms and neck were revealed by the thinness of the fabric—went to school, she knew, the very moment that Miss Ida Slome greeted her, that Aunt Maria had been right in her surmise. For the first time since she had been to school, Miss Slome, who was radiant in a flowered muslin, came up to her and embraced her. Maria submitted coldly to the embrace.

“You sweet little thing,” said Miss Slome.

There was a man principal of the school, but Miss Slome was first assistant, and Maria was in most of her classes. She took her place, with her pretty smile as set as if she had been a picture instead of a living and breathing woman, on the platform.

“You are awful sweet all of a sudden, ain't you?” said Gladys Mann in Maria's ear.

Maria nodded, and went to her own seat.

All that day she noted, with her sharp little consciousness, the change in Miss Slome's manner towards her. It was noticeable even in class. “It is true,” she said to herself. “Father is going to marry her.”

Aunt Maria was a little pacified by Harry's rejoinder the night before. She begun to wonder if she had been, by any chance, mistaken.

“Maybe I was wrong,” she said, privately, to Maria. But Maria shook her head.

“She called me a sweet little thing, and kissed me,” said she.

“Didn't she ever before?”

“No, ma'am.”

“Well, she may have taken a notion to. Maybe I was mistaken. The way your father spoke last night sort of made me think so.”

Aunt Maria made up her mind that if Harry was out late the next Sunday, and the next Wednesday, that would be a test of the situation. The first time had been Wednesday, and Wednesday and Sunday, in all provincial localities, are the acknowledged courting nights. Of course it sometimes happens that an ardent lover goes every night; but Harry Edgham, being an older man and a widower, would probably not go to that extent.

He soon did, however. Very soon Maria and her aunt went to bed every night before Harry came home, and Miss Ida Slome became more loving towards Maria.

Wollaston Lee, boy as he was, child as he was, really suffered. He lost flesh, and his mother told Aunt Maria that she was really worried about him. “He doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive,” said she.

It never entered into her heart to imagine that Wollaston was in love with the teacher, a woman almost if not quite old enough to be his mother, and was suffering because of her love for Harry Edgham.

One afternoon, when Harry's courtship of Ida Slome had been going on for about six weeks, and all Edgham was well informed concerning it, Maria, instead of going straight home from school, took a cross-road through some woods. She dreaded to reach home that night. It was Wednesday, and her father would be sure to go to see Miss Slome. Maria felt an indefinable depression, as if she, little, helpless girl, were being carried so far into the wheels of life that it was too much for her. Her father, of late, had been kinder than ever to her; Maria had begun to wonder if she ought not to be glad if he were happy, and if she ought not to try to love Miss Slome. But this afternoon depression overcame her. She walked slowly between the fields, which were white and gold with queen's-lace and golden-rod. Her slender shoulders were bent a little. She walked almost like an old woman. She heard a quick step behind her, and Wollaston Lee came up beside her. She looked at him with some sentiment, even in the midst of her depression. The thought flashed across her mind, what is she should marry Wollaston at the same time her father married Miss Slome? That would be a happy and romantic solution of the affair. She colored sweetly, and smiled, but the boy scowled at her.

“Say?” he said.

Maria trembled a little. She was surprised.

“What?” she asked.

“Your father is the meanest man in this town, he is the meanest in New Jersey, he is the meanest man in the whole United States, he is the meanest man in the whole world.”

Again the boy scowled at Maria, who did not understand; but she would not have her father reviled.

“He isn't, so there!” she said.

“He's going to marry teacher.”

“I don't see as he is mean if he is,” said Maria, forced into justice by injustice.

“I was going to marry her myself, if she'd only waited, and he hadn't butted in,” said Wollaston.

The boy gave one last scowl at the little girl, and it was as if he scowled at all womanhood in her. Then he gave a fling away, and ran like a wild thing across the field of golden-rod and queen's-lace. Maria, watching, saw him throw himself down prone in the midst of the wild-flowers, and she understood that he was crying because the teacher was going to marry her father. She went on, walking like a little old woman, and she had a feeling as if she had found a road in the world that led outside all love.

Chapter VI

Maria felt that she no longer cared about Wollaston Lee, that she fairly scorned him. Then, suddenly, something occurred to her. She turned, and ran back as fast as she could, her short fleece of golden hair flying. She wrapped her short skirts about her, and wormed through the barbed-wire fence which skirted the field—the boy had leaped it, but she was not equal to that—and she hastened, leaving a furrow through the white-and-gold herbage, to the boy lying on his face weeping. She stood over him.

“Say?” said she.

The boy gave a convulsive wriggle of his back and shoulders, and uttered an inarticulate “Let me alone”; but the girl persisted.

“Say?” said she again.

Then the boy turned, and disclosed a flushed, scowling face among the flowers.

“Well, what do you want, anyway?” said he.

“If you want to marry Miss Slome, why don't you, instead of my father?” inquired Maria, bluntly, going straight to the point.

“I haven't got any money,” replied Wollaston, crossly; “all a woman thinks of is money. How'd I buy her dresses?”

“I don't believe but your father would be willing for you to live at home with her, and buy her dresses, till you got so you could earn yourself.”

“She wouldn't have me,” said the boy, and he fairly dug his flushed face into the mass of wild-flowers.

“You are a good deal younger than father,” said Maria.

“Your father he can give her a diamond ring, and I haven't got more'n forty cents, and I don't believe that would buy much of anything,” said Wollaston, in muffled tones of grief and rage.

Maria felt a shock at the idea of a diamond ring. Her mother had never owned one.

“Oh, I don't believe father will ever give her a diamond ring in the world,” said she.

“She's wearing one, anyhow—I saw it,” said Wollaston. “Where did she get it if he didn't give it to her, I'd like to know?”

Maria felt cold.

“I don't believe it,” she said again. “Teacher is all alone in the school-house, correcting exercises. Why don't you get right up, and go back and ask her? I'll go with you, if you want me to.”

Wollaston raised himself indeterminately upon one elbow.

“Come along,” urged Maria.

Wollaston got up slowly. His face was a burning red.

“You are a good deal younger and better looking than father,” urged Maria, traitorously.

The boy was only a year older than Maria. He was much larger and taller, but although she looked a child, at that moment he looked younger. Both of his brown hands hung at his sides, clinched like a baby's. He had a sulky expression.

“Come along,” urged the girl.

He stood kicking the ground hesitatingly for a moment, then he followed the girl across the field. They went down the road until they came to the school-house. Miss Slome was still there; her graceful profile could be seen at a window.

Both children marched in upon Miss Slome, who was in a recitation-room, bending over a desk. She looked up, and her face lightened at sight of Maria.

“Oh, it's you, dear?” said she.

Maria then saw, for the first time, the white sparkle of a diamond on the third finger of her left hand. She felt that she hated her.

“He wants to speak to you,” she said, indicating Wollaston with a turn of her hand.

Miss Slome looked inquiringly at Wollaston, who stood before her like a culprit, blushing and shuffling, and yet with a sort of doggedness.

“Well, what is it, Wollaston?” she asked, patronizingly.

“I came back to ask you if—you would have me?” said Wollaston, and his voice was hardly audible.

Miss Ida Slome looked at him in amazement; she was utterly dazed.

“Have you?” she repeated. “I think I do not quite understand you. What do you mean by ‘have you,’ Wollaston?”

“Marry me,” burst forth the boy.

There was a silence. Maria looked at Miss Slome, and, to her utter indignation, the teacher's lips were twitching, and it took a good deal to make Miss Slome laugh, too; she had not much sense of humor.

In a second Wollaston stole a furtive glance at Miss Slome, which was an absurd parody on a glance of a man under similar circumstances, and Miss Slome, who had had experience in such matters, laughed outright.

The boy turned white. The woman did not realize it, but it was really a cruel thing which she was doing. She laughed heartily.

“Why, my dear boy,” she said. “You are too young and I am too old. You had better wait and marry Maria, when you are both grown up.”

Wollaston turned his back upon her, and marched out of the room. Maria lingered, in the vain hope that she might bring the teacher to a reconsideration of the matter.

“He's a good deal younger than father, and he's better looking,” said she.

Miss Slome blushed then.

“Oh, you sweet little thing, then you know—” she began.

Maria interrupted her. She became still more traitorous to her father.

“Father has a real bad temper, when things go wrong,” said she. “Mother always said so.”

Miss Slome only laughed harder.

“You funny little darling,” she said.

“And Wollaston has a real good disposition, his mother told my aunt Maria so,” she persisted.

The room fairly rang with Miss Slome's laughter, although she tried to subdue it. Maria persisted.

“And father isn't a mite handy about the house,” said she. “And Mrs. Lee told Aunt Maria that Wollaston could wipe dishes and sweep as well as a girl.”

Miss Slome laughed.

“And I've got a bad temper, too, when I'm crossed; mother always said so,” said Maria. Her lip quivered.

Miss Slome left her desk, came over to Maria, and, in spite of her shrinking away, caught her in her arms.

“You are a little darling,” said she, “and I am not a bit afraid of your temper.” She hesitated a moment, looking at the child's averted face, and coloring. “My dear, has your father told you?” she whispered; then, “I didn't know he had.”

“No, ma'am, he hasn't,” said Maria. She fairly pulled herself loose from Miss Slome and ran out of the room. Her eyes were almost blinded with tears; she could scarcely see Wollaston Lee on the road, ahead of her, also running. He seemed to waver as he ran. Maria called out faintly. He evidently heard, for he slackened his pace a little; then he ran faster than ever. Maria called again. This time the boy stopped until the girl came up. He picked a piece of grass, as he waited, and began chewing it.

“How do you know that isn't poison?” said Maria, breathlessly.

“Don't care if it is; hope it is,” said the boy.

“It's wicked to talk so.”

“Let it be wicked then.”

“I don't see how I am to blame for any of it,” Maria said, in a bewildered sort of way. It was the cry of the woman, the primitive cry of the primitive scape-goat of Creation. Already Maria began to feel the necessity of fitting her little shoulders to the blame of life, which she had inherited from her Mother Eve, but she was as yet bewildered by the necessity.

“Ain't it your father that's going to marry her?” inquired Wollaston, fiercely.

“I don't want him to marry her any more than you do,” said Maria. “I don't want her for a mother.”

“I told you how it would come out, if I asked her,” cried the boy, still heaping the blame upon the girl.

“I would enough sight rather marry you than my father, if I were the teacher,” said Maria, and her blue eyes looked into Wollaston's with the boldness of absolute guilelessness.

“Hush!” responded Wollaston, with a gesture of disdain. “Who'd want you? You're nothing but a girl, anyway.”

With that scant courtesy Wollaston Lee resumed his race homeward, and Maria went her own way.

It was that very night, after Harry Edgham had returned from his call upon Ida Slome, that he told Maria. Maria, as usual, had gone to bed, but she was not asleep. Maria heard his hand on her door-knob, and his voice calling out, softly: “Are you asleep, dear?”

“No,” responded Maria.

Then her father entered and approached the child staring at him from her white nest. The room was full of moonlight, and Maria's face looked like a nucleus of innocence upon which it centred. Harry leaned over his little daughter and kissed her.

“Father has got something to tell you, precious,” he said.

Maria hitched away a little from him, and made no reply.

“Ida, Miss Slome, tells me that she thinks you know, and so I made up my mind I had better tell you, and not wait any longer, although I shall not take any decisive step before—before November. What would you say if father should bring home a new mother for his little girl, dear?”

“I should say I would rather have Aunt Maria,” replied Maria, decisively. She choked back a sob.

“I've got nothing to say against Aunt Maria,” said Harry. “She's been very kind to come here, and she's done all she could, but—well, I think in some ways, some one else—Father thinks you will be much happier with another mother, dear.”

“No, I sha'n't.”

Harry hesitated. The child's voice sounded so like her dead mother's that he felt a sudden guilt, and almost terror.

“But if father were happier—you want father to be happy, don't you, dear?” he asked, after a little.

Then Maria began to sob in good earnest. She threw her arms around her father's neck. “Yes, father, I do want you to be happy,” she whispered, brokenly.

“If father's little girl were large enough to keep his house for him, and were through school, father would never think of taking such a step,” said Harry Edgham, and he honestly believed what he said. For the moment his old love of life seemed to clutch him fast, and Ida Slome's radiant visage seemed to pale.

“Oh, father,” pleaded Maria. “Aunt Maria would marry you, and I would a great deal rather have her.”

“Nonsense,” said Harry Edgham, laughing, with a glance towards the door.

“Yes, she would, father; that was the reason she got her pompadour.”

Harry laughed again, but softly, for he was afraid of Aunt Maria overhearing. “Nonsense, dear,” he said again. Then he kissed Maria in a final sort of way. “It will be all for the best,” he said, “and we shall all be happier. Father doesn't think any the less of you, and never will, and he is never going to forget your own dear mother; but it is all for the best, the way he has decided. Now, good-night, darling, try to go to sleep, and don't worry about anything.”

It was not long before Maria did fall asleep. Her thoughts were in such a whirl that it was almost like intoxication. She could not seem to fix her mind on anything long enough to hold herself awake. It was not merely the fact of her father's going to marry again, it was everything which that involved. She felt as if she were looking into a kaleidoscope shaken by fate into endless changes. The changes seemed fairly to tire her eyes into sleep.

The very next afternoon Aunt Maria went home. Harry announced his matrimonial intentions to her before he went to New York, and she said immediately that she would take the afternoon train.

“But,” said Harry, “I thought maybe you would stay and be at the—wedding, Maria. I don't mean to get married until the November vacation, and it is only the first of September now. I don't see why you are in such a hurry.”

“Yes,” replied Aunt Maria, “I suppose you thought I would stay and get the house cleaned, and slave here like a dog, getting ready for you to be married. Well, I sha'n't; I'm tired out. I'm going to take the train this afternoon.”

Harry looked helplessly at her.

“I don't see what Maria and I are going to do then,” said he.

“If it wasn't for taking Maria away from school, I would ask her to come and make me a visit, poor child,” said Aunt Maria, “until you brought her new ma home. I have only a hundred dollars a year to live on, but I'd risk it but I could make her comfortable; but she can't leave her school.”

“No, I don't see how she can,” said Harry, still helplessly. “I thought you'd stay, Maria. There is the house to be cleaned, and some painting and papering. I thought—”

“Yes, I'll warrant you thought,” said Aunt Maria, with undisguised viciousness. “But you were mistaken; I am not going to stay.”

“But I don't see exactly—”

“Oh, Lord, you and Maria can take your meals at Mrs. Jonas White's, she'll be glad enough to have you; and you can hire the cleaning done,” said Aunt Maria, with a certain pity in the midst of her disappointment and contempt.

It seemed to Maria, when her aunt went away that afternoon, as if she could not bear it. There is a law of gravitation for the soul as well as for the body, and Maria felt as one who had fallen from a known quantity into strangeness, with a horrible shock.

“Now, if she don't treat you well, you send word, and I'll have you come and stay with me,” whispered Aunt Maria at the last.

Maria loved Aunt Maria when she went away. She went to school late for the sake of seeing her off; and she was late in the geography class, but Miss Slome only greeted her with a smile of radiant reassurance.

At recess, Gladys Mann snuggled up to her.

“Say, is it true?” she whispered.

“Is what true?”

“Is your father goin' to get married to teacher?”

“Yes,” said Maria. Then she gave Gladys a little push. “I wish you'd let me alone,” she said.

Chapter VII

Extreme youth is always susceptible to diversion which affords a degree of alleviation for grief. Many older people have the same facility of turning before the impetus of circumstances to another view of life, which serves to take their minds off too close concentration upon sorrow, but it is not so universal. Maria, although she was sadly lonely, in a measure, enjoyed taking her meals at Mrs. Jonas White's. She had never done anything like it before. The utter novelty of sitting down to Mrs. White's table, and eating in company with her and Mr. Jonas White, and Lillian White, and a son by the name of Henry, amused her. Then, too, they were all very kind to her. They even made a sort of heroine of her, especially at noon, when her father was in New York and she, consequently, was alone. They pitied her, in a covert sort of fashion, because her father was going to get married again, especially Mrs. White and Lillian. Lillian was a very pretty girl, with a pert carriage of blond head, and a slangy readiness of speech.

“Well, she's a dandy, as far as looks and dress go, and maybe she'll make you a real good mother-in-law,” she said to Maria. Maria knew that Lillian should have said step-mother, but she did not venture to correct her.

“Looks ain't everything,” said Mrs. White, with a glance at her daughter. She had thought of the possibility of Harry Edgham taking a fancy to her Lillian.

Mr. Jonas White, who with his son Henry kept a market, thereby insuring such choice cuts of meat, spoke then. He did not, as a rule, say much at table, especially when Maria and her father, who in his estimation occupied a superior place in society, were present.

“Guess Mr. Edgham knows what he's about,” said he. “He's going to marry a good-looking woman, and one that's capable of supportin' herself, if he's laid up or anything happens to him. Guess she's all right.”

“I guess so, too,” said Henry White. Both nodded reassuringly at Maria, who felt mournfully comforted.

“Shouldn't wonder if she'd saved something, too,” said Mr. White.

When he and his son were on their way back to the market, driving in the white-covered wagon with “J. White & Son” on the sides thereof, they agreed that women were queer.

“There's your mother and Lillian, they mean all right,” said Jonas White, “but they were getting that poor young one all stirred up.”

Maria never settled with herself whether the Whites thought she had a pleasant prospect before her or the reverse, but they did not certainly influence her to love Miss Ida Slome any more.

Miss Slome was so kind to Maria, in those days, that it really seemed to her that she ought to love her. She and her father were invited to take tea at Miss Slome's boarding-house, and after tea they sat in the little parlor which the teacher had for her own, and Miss Slome sang and played to them. She had a piano. Maria heard her and her father talking about the place in the Edgham parlor where it was to stand. Harry stood over Miss Slome as she was singing, and Maria observed how his arm pressed against her shoulder.

After the song was done, Harry and Miss Slome sat down on the sofa, and Harry drew Maria down on the other side. Harry put his arm around his little daughter, but not as if he realized it, and she peeked around and saw how closely he was embracing Miss Slome, whose cheeks were a beautiful color, but whose set smile never relaxed. It seemed to Maria that Miss Slome smiled exactly like a doll, as if the smile were made on her face by something outside, not by anything within. Maria thought her father was very silly. She felt scorn, shame, and indignation at the same time. Maria was glad when it was time to go home. When her father kissed Miss Slome, she blushed, and turned away her head.

Going home, Harry almost danced along the street. He was as light-hearted as a boy, and as thoughtlessly in love.

“Well, dear, what do you think of your new mother?” he asked, gayly, as they passed under the maples, which were turning, and whose foliage sprayed overhead with a radiance of gold in the electric light.

Then Maria made that inevitable rejoinder which is made always, which is at once trite and pathetic. “I can't call her mother,” she said.

But Harry only laughed. He was too delighted and triumphant to realize the pain of the child, although he loved her. “Oh, well, dear, you needn't until you feel like it,” he said.

“What am I going to call her, father?” asked Maria, seriously.

“Oh, anything. Call her Ida.”

“She is too old for me to call her that,” replied Maria.

“Old? Why, dear, Ida is only a girl.”

“She is a good deal over thirty,” said Maria. “I call that very old.”

“You won't, when you get there yourself,” replied Harry, with another laugh. “Well, dear, suit yourself. Call her anything you like.”

It ended by Maria never calling her anything except “you,” and referring to her as “she” and “her.” The woman, in fact, became a pronoun for the child, who in her honesty and loyalty could never put another word in the place which had belonged to the noun, and feel satisfied.

Maria was very docile, outwardly, in those days, but inside she was in a tumult of rebellion. She went home with Miss Slome when she was asked, but she was never gracious in response to the doll-like smile, and the caressing words, which were to her as automatic as the smile. Sometimes it seemed to Maria that if she could only have her own mother scold her, instead of Miss Slome's talking so sweetly to her, she would give the whole world.

For some unexplained cause, the sorrow which Maria had passed through had seemed to stop her own emotional development. She looked at Wollaston Lee sometimes and wondered how she had ever had dreams about him; how she had thought she would like him to go with her, and, perhaps, act as silly as her father did with Miss Slome. She remembered how his voice sounded when he said she was nothing but a girl, and a rage of shame seized her. “He needn't worry,” she thought. “I wouldn't have him, not if he was to go down on his knees in the dust.” She told Gladys Mann that she thought Wollaston Lee was a very homely boy, and not so very smart, and Gladys told another girl whose brother knew Wollaston Lee, and he told him. After a little, Wollaston and Maria never spoke when they met. The girl did not seem to see the boy; she was more delicate in her manner of showing aversion, but the boy gazed straight at her with an insolent stare, as at one who had dared him. He told the same boy who had told him what Maria had said, that he thought Amy Long was the prettiest girl in school, and Maria was homely enough to crack a looking-glass, and that came back to Maria. Everything said in the school always came back, by some mysterious law of gravitation.

There was one quite serious difficulty involved in Aunt Maria's deserting her post, and that was, Maria was too young to be left alone in the house every night while her father was visiting his fiancée. She could not stay at Mrs. White's, because it was obviously unfair to ask them to remain up until nearly midnight to act as her guardian every, or nearly every, night in the week. However, Harry submitted the problem to Miss Slome, who solved it at once. She had, in some respects, a masterly brain, and her executive abilities were somewhat thrown away in her comparatively humble sphere.

“You must have the house cleaned,” said she. “Let the woman you get to clean stay over until you come home. She won't be afraid to go home alone afterwards. Those kind of people never are. I suppose you will get Mrs. Addix?”

“They tell me she is about the best woman for house-cleaning,” said Harry, rather helplessly. He was so unaccustomed to even giving a thought to household details, that he had a vague sense of self-pity because he was now obliged to do so. His lost Abby occasionally, he believed, had employed this Mrs. Addix, but she had never troubled him about it.

It thus happened that every evening little Maria Edgham sat guarded, as it were, by Mrs. Addix. Mrs. Addix was of the poor-white race, like the Manns—in fact, she was distantly related to them. They were nearly all distantly related, which may have accounted for their partial degeneracy. Mrs. Addix, however, was a sort of anomaly. Coming, as she did, of a shiftless, indolent family, she was yet a splendid worker. She seemed tireless. She looked positively radiant while scrubbing, and also more intelligent. The moment she stopped work, she looked like an automatic doll which had run down: all consciousness of self, or that which is outside self, seemed to leave her face; it was as if her brain were in her toiling arms and hands. Moreover, she always went to sleep immediately after Harry had gone and Maria was left alone with her. She sat in her chair and breathed heavily, with her head tipped idiotically over one shoulder.

It was not very lively for Maria during those evenings. She felt afraid to go to bed and leave the house alone except for the heavily sleeping woman, whom her father had hard work to rouse when he returned, and who staggered out of the door, when she started home, as if she were drunk. She herself never felt sleepy; it was even hard for her to sleep when at last her father had returned and she went to bed. Often after she had fallen asleep her heart seemed to sting her awake.

Maria grew thinner than ever. Somebody called Harry Edgham's attention to the fact, and he got some medicine for her to take. But it was not medicine which she needed—that is, not medicine for the body, but for the soul. What probably stung her most keenly was the fact that certain improvements, for which her mother had always longed but always thought she could not have, were being made in the house. A bay-window was being built in the parlor, and one over it, in the room which had been her father's and mother's, and which Maria dimly realized was, in the future, to be Miss Ida Slome's. Maria's mother had always talked a good deal about some day having that bay-window. Maria reflected that her father could have afforded it just as well in her mother's day, if her mother had insisted upon it, like Miss Slome. Maria's mother had been of the thrifty New England kind, and had tried to have her husband save a little. Maria knew well enough that these savings were going into the improvements, the precious dollars which her poor mother had enabled her father to save by her own deprivations and toil. Maria heard her father and Miss Slome talk about the maid they were to have; Miss Slome would never dream of doing her own work, as her predecessor had done. All these things the child dwelt upon in a morbid, aged fashion, and, consequently, while her evenings with Mrs. Addix were not enjoyable, they were not exactly dull. Nearly every room in the house was being newly papered and painted. Maria and Mrs. Addix sat first in one room, then in another, as one after another was torn up in the process of improvement. Generally the room which they occupied was chaotic with extra furniture, and had a distracted appearance which grated terribly upon the child's nerves. Only her own room was not touched. “You shall have your room all fixed up next year,” her father told her. “I would have it done now, but father is going to considerable expense as it is.” Maria assured him, with a sort of wild eagerness, that she did not want her room touched. It seemed to her that if the familiar paper which her mother had selected were changed for something else, and the room altered, that the last vestige of

home would disappear, that she could not bear it.

“Well,” said Harry, easily, “your paper will do very well, I guess, for a while longer; but father will have your room fixed up another year. You needn't think you are going to be slighted.”

That night, Maria and Mrs. Addix sat in Maria's room. The parlor was in confusion, and so was the dining-room and the guest-chamber; indeed, the house was at that time in the height of its repairs. That very day Maria's mother's room had been papered with a beautiful paper with a sheenlike satin, over which were strewn garlands of pink roses. Pink was Miss Slome's favorite color. They had a new hard-wood floor laid in that room, and there was to be a pink rug, and white furniture painted with pink roses; Maria knew that her father and Miss Slome had picked it out. That evening, after her father had gone, and she sat there with the sleeping Mrs. Addix, a sort of frenzy seized her, or, rather, she worked herself up to it. She thought of what her mother would have said to that beautiful new paper, and furniture, and bay-window. Her mother also had liked pink. She thought of how much her mother would have liked it, and how she had gone without, and not made any complaint about her shabby old furnishings, which had that very day been sold to Mrs. Addix for an offset to her wages, and which Maria had seen carried away. She thought about it all, and a red flush deepened on her cheeks, and her blue eyes blazed. For the time she was abnormal. She passed the limit which separates perfect sanity from mania. She had some fancy-work in her hands. Mrs. White had suggested that she work in cross-stitch a cover for the dresser in her new mother's room, and she was engaged upon that, performing, as she thought, a duty, but her very soul rebelled against it. She made some mistakes, and whenever she did she realized with a sort of wicked glee that the thing would not be perfect, and she never tried to rectify them.

Finally, Maria laid her work softly on the table, beside which she was sitting. She glanced at Mrs. Addix, whose heavy, measured breathing filled the room, then she arose. She took the lamp from the table, and tiptoed out. Maria stole across the hall. The room which had been her father's and mother's was entirely empty, and the roses on the satiny wall-paper gleamed out as if they were real. There was a white-and-silver picture-moulding. Maria set her lamp on the floor. She looked at the great bay-window, she looked at the roses on the walls. Then she did a mad thing. The paper was freshly put on; it was hardly dry. Maria deliberately approached the wall near the bay-window, where the paper looked somewhat damp; she inserted her slender little fingers, with a scratching of her nails under the edge, and she tore off a great, ragged strip. Then she took up her lamp and returned to her room.

Mrs. Addix was still asleep. She had begun to snore, in an odd sort of fashion, with deep, regular puffs of breath; it was like the beating of a drum to peace and rest, after a day of weary and unskilled labor unprofitable to the soul. Maria sat down again. She took up her work. She felt very wicked, but she felt better.

Chapter VIII

When Maria's father returned that night, he came, as usual, straight to the room wherein she and Mrs. Addix were sitting. Maria regarded her father with a sort of contemptuous wonder, tinctured with unwilling admiration. Her father, on his return from his evenings spent with Miss Ida Slome, looked always years younger than Maria had ever seen him. There was the humidity of youth in his eyes, the flush of youth on his cheeks, the triumph of youth in his expression. Harry Edgham, in spite of lines on his face, in spite, even, of a shimmer of gray and thinness of hair on the temples, looked as young as youth itself, in this rejuvenation of his affection, for he was very much in love with the woman whom he was to marry. He had been faithful to his wife while she lived, even the imagination of love for another woman had not entered his heart. His wife's faded face had not for a second disturbed his loyalty; but now the beauty of this other woman aroused within him long dormant characteristics, like some wonderful stimulant, not only for the body, but for the soul. When he looked in Ida Slome's beautiful face he seemed to drink in an elixir of life. And yet, down at the roots of the man's heart slept the memory of his wife; for Abby Edgham, with her sallow, faded face, had possessed something which Ida Slome lacked, and which the man needed, to hold him. And always in his mind, at this time, was the intention to be more than kind to his motherless little daughter, not to let her realize any difference in his feeling for her.

When he came to-night, he looked at the sleeping Mrs. Addix, and at Maria, taking painful stitches in her dresser cover, at first with a radiant smile, then with the deepest pity.

“Poor little soul,” he said. “You have had a long evening to yourself, haven't you?”

“I don't mind,” replied Maria. She was thinking of the torn wall-paper, and she did not look her father fully in the eyes.

“Has she been asleep ever since I went?” inquired Harry, in a whisper.

“Yes, sir.”

“Poor little girl. Well, it will be livelier by-and-by for you. We'll have company, and more going on.” Harry then went close to Mrs. Addix, sitting with her head resting on her shoulder, still snoring with those puffs of heavy breath. “Mrs. Addix,” he said.

Mrs. Addix did not stir; she continued to snore.

“Mrs. Addix!” repeated Harry, in a louder tone, but still the sleeping woman did not stir.

“Good Lord, what a sleeper!” said Harry, still aloud. Then he shook her violently by the shoulder. “Come, Mrs. Addix,” said he, in a shout; “I've got home, and I guess you'll want to be going yourself.”

Mrs. Addix moved languidly, and glanced up with a narrow slit of eye, as dull as if she had been drugged. Harry shook her again, and repeated his announcement that he was home and that she must want to go. At last he roused her, and she stood up with a dazed expression. Maria got her bonnet and shawl, and she gazed at them vaguely, as if she were so

far removed from the flesh that the garments thereof perplexed her. Maria put on her bonnet, standing on tiptoe, and Harry threw the shawl over her shoulders. Then she staggered out of the room with a mumbled good-night.

“Take care of the stairs, and do not fall,” Harry said.

He himself held the light for her, until she was safely down, and the outer door had closed after her.

“The fresh air will wake her up,” he said, laughing. “Not very lively company, is she, dear?”

“No, sir,” replied Maria, simply.

Harry looked lovingly at her, then his eyes fell on the door of the room which had been papered that day. It occurred to him to go in and see how the new paper looked.

“Come in with father, and let's see the improvements,” he said, in a gay voice, to Maria.

Maria followed him into the room. It would have been difficult to say whether triumphant malice and daring, or fear, prevailed in her heart.

Harry, carrying the lamp, entered the room, with Maria slinking at his heels. The first thing he saw was the torn paper.

“Hullo!” said he. He approached the bay-window with his lamp. “Confound those paperers!” he said.

For a minute Maria did not say a word. She was not exactly struggling with temptation; she had inherited too much from her mother's Puritan ancestry to make the question of a struggle possible when the duty of truth stared her, as now, in the face. She simply did not speak at once because the thing appeared to her stupendous, and nobody, least of all a child, but has a threshold of preparation before stupendous things.

“They haven't half put the paper on,” said her father. “Didn't half paste it, I suppose. You can't trust anybody unless you are right at their heels. Confound 'em! There, I've got to go round and blow 'em up to-morrow, before I go to the city.”

Then Maria spoke. “I tore that paper off, father,” said she.

Harry turned and stared at her. His face went white. For a second he thought the child was out of her senses.

“What?” he said.

“I tore that paper off,” repeated Maria.

“You? Why?”

The double question seemed to hit the child like a pistol-shot, but she did not flinch.

“Mother never had paper as pretty as this,” she said, “nor new furniture.” Her eyes met her father's with indescribable reproach.

Harry looked at her with almost horror. For the moment the child's eyes looked like her dead mother's, her voice sounded like her's. He continued gazing at her.

“I couldn't bear it,” said Maria. “She” [she meant Mrs. Addix] “was asleep. I was all alone. I got to thinking. I came in here and tore it off.”

Harry heaved a deep sigh. He did not look nor was he in the least angry.

“I know your poor mother didn't have much,” said he. He sighed again. Then he put his arm around Maria and kissed her. “You can have your room newly papered now, if you want it,” said he, in a choking voice. “Father will send you over to Ellisville to-morrow with Mrs. White, and you can pick out some paper your own self, and father will have it put right on.”

“I don't care about any,” said Maria, and she began to sob.

“Father's baby,” said Harry.

She felt his chest heave, and realized that her father was weeping as well as she.

“Oh, father, I don't want new paper,” she sobbed out, convulsively. “Mother picked out that on my room, and—and—I am sorry I tore this off.”

“Never mind, darling,” said Harry. He almost carried the child back to her own room. “Now get to bed as soon as you can, dear,” he said.

After Maria, trembling and tearful, had undressed and was in bed, her father came back into the room. He held a small lamp in one hand, and a tumbler with some wine in the other.

“Here is some of the wine your mother had,” said Harry. “Now I want you to sit right up and drink this.”

“I—don't want it, father,” gasped Maria.

“Sit right up and drink it.”

Maria sat up. The tumbler was a third full, and the wine was an old port. Maria drank it. Immediately her head began to swim; she felt in a sort of daze when her father kissed her, and bade her lie still and go right to sleep, and went out of the room. She heard him, with sharpened hearing, enter her mother's room. She remembered about the paper, and the new furniture, and how she was to have a new mother, and how she had torn the paper, and how her own mother had never had such things, but she remembered through a delicious haze. She felt a charming warmth pervade all her veins. She was no longer unhappy. Nothing seemed to matter. She soon fell asleep.

As for Harry Edgham, he entered the empty room which he had occupied with his dead wife. He set the lamp on the floor and approached the paper, which poor little Maria, in her fit of futile rebellion, had torn. He carefully tore off still more, making a clean strip of the paper where Maria had made a ragged one. When he had finished, it looked as if the paper had in reality dropped off because of carelessness in putting on. He gathered up the pieces of paper and stood looking about the room.

There is something about an empty room, empty except of memories, but containing nothing besides, no materialities, no certainties as to the future, which is intimidating to one who stops and thinks. Harry Edgham was not, generally speaking, of the sort who stop to think; but now he did. The look of youth faded from his face. Instead of the joy and triumph which had filled his heart and made it young again, came remembrance of the other woman, and something else, which resembled terror and dread. For the first time he deliberated whether he was about to do a wise thing: for the first time, the image of Ida Slome's smiling beauty, which was ever evident to his fancy, produced in him something like doubt and consternation. He looked about the room, and remembered the old pieces of furniture which had that day been carried away. He looked at the places where they had stood. Then he remembered his dead wife, as he had never remembered her before, with an anguish of loss. He said to himself that if he only had her back, even with her faded face and her ready tongue, that old, settled estate would be better for him than this joy, which at once dazzled and racked him. Suddenly the man, as he stood there, put his hands before his face; he was weeping like a child. That which Maria had done, instead of awakening wrath, had aroused a pity for himself and for her, which seemed too great to be borne. For the instant, the dead triumphed over the living.

Then Harry took up the lamp and went to his own room. He set the lamp on the dresser, and looked at his face, with the rays thrown upward upon it, very much as Maria had done the night of her mother's death. When he viewed himself in the looking-glass, he smiled involuntarily; the appearance of youth returned. He curled his mustache and moved his head this way and that. He thought about some new clothes which he was to have. He owned to himself, with perfect ingenuousness, that he was, in his way, as a man, as good-looking as Ida herself. Suddenly he remembered how Abby had looked when she was a young girl and he had married her; he had not compared himself so favorably with her. The image of his dead wife, as a young girl, was much fairer in his mind than that of Ida Slome.

“There's no use talking, Abby was handsomer than Ida when she was young,” he said to himself, as he began to undress. He went to sleep thinking of Abby as a young girl, but when once asleep he dreamed of Ida Slome.

Chapter IX

Harry and Ida Slome were to be married the Monday before Thanksgiving. The school would close on the Friday before.

Ida Slome possessed, along with an entire self-satisfaction, a vein of pitiless sense, which enabled her to see herself as others might see her, and which saved her from the follies often incident to the self-satisfied. She considered herself a beauty; she thought, and with reason, that she would be well worth looking at in her wedding-clothes, but she also told herself that it was quite possible that some remarks might be made to her disparagement if she had the wedding to which her inclination prompted her. She longed for a white gown, veil, bridesmaids, and the rest, but she knew better. She knew that more could be made of her beauty and her triumph if she curtailed her wish. She realized that Harry's wife had been dead only a little more than a year, and that, although still a beauty, she was not a young girl, and she steered clear of criticism and ridicule.

The ceremony was performed in the Presbyterian church Monday afternoon. Ida wore a prune-colored costume, and a hat trimmed with pansies. She was quite right in thinking that she was adorable in it, and there was also in the color, with its shade of purple, a delicate intimation of the remembrance of mourning in the midst of joy. The church was filled with people, but there were no bridesmaids. Some of Ida's scholars acted as ushers. Wollaston Lee was among them. To Maria's utter astonishment, he did not seem to realize his trying position as a rejected suitor. He was attired in a new suit, and wore a white rosebud in his coat, and Maria glanced at him with mingled admiration and disdain.

Maria sat directly in front of the pulpit, with Mrs. Jonas White and Lillian. Mrs. White had a new gown of some thin black stuff, profusely ornamented with jet, and Lillian had a new pink silk gown, and wore a great bunch of roses. The situation, with regard to Maria, in connection with the wedding ceremony and the bridal trip, had been a very perplexing one. Harry had some western cousins, far removed, both by blood and distance. Aunt Maria and her brother were the only relatives on his former wife's side. Aunt Maria had received an invitation, both from Harry and the prospective bride, to be present at the wedding and remain in the house with Maria until the return of the bridal couple from their short trip. She had declined in a few stilted words, although Harry had sent a check to cover the expenses of her trip, which was returned in her letter.

“The fact is, I don't know what to do with Maria,” Harry said to Ida Slome, a week before the wedding. “Maria won't come, and neither will her brother's wife, and she can't be left alone, even with the new maid. We don't know the girl very well, and it won't do.”

Ida Slome solved the problem with her usual precision and promptness.

“Then,” said she, “she will have to board at Mrs. White's until we return. There is nothing else to do.”

It was therefore decided that Maria was to board at Mrs. White's, although it involved some things which were not

altogether satisfactory to Ida. Maria could not sit all alone in a pew, and watch her father being married to his second wife, that was obvious; and, since Mrs. Jonas White was going to take charge of her, there was nothing else to do but to place herself and daughter in a position of honored intimacy. Mrs. Jonas White said quite openly that she was not in any need of taking boarders, that she had only taken Mr. Edgham and Maria to oblige, and that she now was to take poor little Maria out of pity. She, in reality, did pity Maria, for a good many reasons. She was a shrewd woman, and she gauged Miss Ida Slome pitilessly. However, she had to admit that she had shown some consideration in one respect. In the midst of her teaching, and preparations for her wedding, she had planned a lovely dress for Maria. It was unquestionable but the realization of her own loveliness, and her new attire had an alleviating influence upon Maria. There was a faint buzz of admiration for her when she entered the church. She looked as if enveloped in a soft gray cloud. Ida had planned a dress of some gray stuff, and a soft gray hat, tied under her chin with wide ribbons, and a long gray plume floating over her golden-fleece of hair. Maria had never owned such a gown, and, in addition, she had her first pair of kid-gloves of gray, to match the dress, and long, gray coat, trimmed with angora fur. She was charming in it, and, moreover, the gray, as her step-mother's purple, suggested delicately, if one so chose to understand a dim yet pleasing melancholy, a shade, as it were, of remembrance.

Maria had been dressed at home, under Mrs. White's supervision. Maria had viewed herself in the new long mirror in her mother's room, which was now resplendent with its new furnishings, and she admitted to herself that she was lovelier than she had ever been, and that she had Miss Ida Slome to thank for it.

“I will say one thing,” said Mrs. White, “she has looked out for you about your dress, and she has shown real good taste, too.”

Maria turned herself about before the glass, which reflected her whole beautiful little person, and she loved herself so much that for the first time it seemed to her that she almost loved Ida. She was blushing and smiling with pleasure.

Mrs. White sighed. “Well, maybe it is for the best,” said she. “One never knows about such things, how they will work out.”

Maria listened, with a degree of indignation and awe, to the service. She felt her heart swelling with grief at the sight of this other woman being made her father's wife and put in the place of her own mother, and yet, as a musical refrain is the haunting and ever-recurrent part of a composition, so was her own charming appearance. She felt so sure that people were observing her, that she blushed and dared not look around. She was, in reality, much observed, and both admired and pitied.

People, both privately and outspokenly, did not believe that the step-mother would be, in a way, good to the child by the former marriage. Ida Slome was not exactly a favorite in Edgham. People acquiesced in her beauty and brilliancy, but they did not entirely believe in her or love her. She stood before the pulpit with her same perfect, set smile, displaying to the utmost the sweet curves of her lips. Her cheeks retained their lovely brilliancy of color. Harry trembled, and his face looked pale and self-conscious, but Ida displayed no such weakness. She replied with the utmost self-poise to the congratulations which she received after the ceremony. There was an informal reception in the church vestry. Cake and ice-cream and coffee were served, and Ida and Harry and Maria stood together. Ida had her arm around Maria most of the time, but Maria felt as if it were an arm of wood which encircled her. She heard Ida Slome addressed as Mrs. Edgham, and she wanted to jerk herself away and run. She lost the consciousness of herself in her new attire.

Once Harry looked around at her, and received a shock. Maria's face looked to him exactly like her mother's, although the coloring was so different. Maria was a blonde, and her mother had been dark. There was something about the excitement hardly restrained in her little face, which made the man realize that the dead wife yet lived and reigned triumphant in her child. He himself was conscious that he conducted himself rather awkwardly and foolishly. A red spot burned on either cheek. He spoke jerkily, and it seemed to him that everything he said was silly, and that people might repeat it and laugh. He was relieved when it was all over and he and Ida were in the cab, driving to the station. When they were rolling rapidly through a lonely part of the road, he put his arm around his new wife, and kissed her. She received his kiss, and looked at him with her set smile and the set sparkle in her beautiful eyes. Again the feeling of almost terror which he had experienced the night when Maria had torn the paper off in her mother's room, came over him. However, he made an effort and threw it off.

“Poor little Maria looked charming, thanks to you, dearest,” he said, tenderly.

“Yes, I thought she did. That gray suit was just the thing for her, wasn't it? I never saw her look so pretty before,” returned Ida, and her tone was full of self-praise for her goodness to Maria.

“Well, she will be a great deal happier,” said Harry. “It was a lonesome life for a child to lead.”

Harry Edgham had not an atom of tact. Any woman might have judged from his remarks that she had been married on account of Maria; but Ida only responded with her never-changing smile.

“Yes,” said she, “I think myself that she will be much happier, dear.” Privately she rather did resent her husband's speech, but she never lost sight of the fact that a smile is more becoming than a frown.

Maria remained boarding at Mrs. Jonas White's until her father and his new wife returned. She did not have a very happy time. In the first place, the rather effusive pity with which she was treated by the female portion of the White family, irritated her. She began to consider that, now her father had married, his wife was a member of her family, and not to be decried. Maria had a great deal of pride when those belonging to her were concerned. One day she retorted pertly when some covert remark, not altogether to her new mother's laudation, had been made by Lillian.

“I think she is perfectly lovely,” said she, with a toss of her head.

Lillian and her mother looked at each other. Then Lillian, who was not her match for pertness, spoke.

“Have you made up your mind what to call her?” she asked. “Mummer, or mother?”

“I shall call her whatever I please,” replied Maria; “it is nobody's business.” Then she arose and went out of the room, with an absurd little strut.

“Lord a-massy!” observed Mrs. Jonas White, after she had gone.

“I guess Ida Slome will have her hands full with that young one,” observed Lillian.

“I guess she will, too,” assented her mother. “She was real sassy. Well, her mother had a temper of her own; guess she's got some of it.”

Mr. Jonas White and Henry were a great alleviation of Maria's desolate estate during her father's absence. Somehow, the men seemed to understand better than the women just how she felt: that she would rather be let alone, now it was all over, than condoled with and pitied. Mr. Henry White took one of the market horses, hitched him into a light buggy, and took Maria out riding two evenings, when the market was closed. It was a warm November, and the moon was full. Maria quite enjoyed her drive with Mr. Henry White, and he never said one word about her father's marriage, and her new mother—her pronoun of a mother—all the way. Mr. Henry White had too long a neck, and too large a mouth, which was, moreover, too firmly set, otherwise Maria felt that, with slight encouragement, she might fall in love with him, since he showed so much delicacy. She counted up the probable difference in their ages, and estimated it as no more than was between her father and Her. However, Mr. Henry White gave her so little encouragement, and his neck was so much too long above his collar, that she decided to put it out of her mind.

“Poor little thing,” Mr. Henry White said to his father, next day, “she's about wild, with mother and Lill harping on it all the time.”

“They mean well,” said Mr. White.

“Of course they do; but who's going to stand this eternal harping? If women folks would only stop being so durned kind, and let folks alone sometimes, they'd be a durned sight kinder.”

“That's so,” said Mr. Jonas White.

Maria's father and his bride reached home about seven on the Monday night after Thanksgiving. Maria re-entered her old home in the afternoon. Miss Zella Holmes, who was another teacher of hers, went with her. Ida had requested her to open the house. Ida's former boarding-house mistress had cooked a large turkey, and made some cakes and pies and bread. Miss Zella Holmes drove around for Maria in a livery carriage, and all these supplies were stowed in beside them. On the way they stopped at the station for the new maid, whose train was due then. She was a Hungarian girl, with a saturnine, almost savage visage. Maria felt an awe of her, both because she was to be their maid, and they had never kept one, and because of her personality.

When they reached home, Miss Zella Holmes, who was very lively and quick in her ways, though not at all pretty, gave orders to the maid in a way which astonished Maria. She was conscious of an astonishment at everything, which had not before possessed her. She looked at the kitchen, the dining-room, the sitting-room, the parlor, all the old apartments, and it was exactly as if she saw old friends with new heads. The sideboard in the dining-room glittered with the wedding silver and cut-glass. New pictures hung on the sitting-room and parlor walls, beside the new paper. Wedding gifts lay on the tables. There had been many wedding gifts. Miss Zella Holmes flew about the house, with the saturnine Hungarian in attendance. Maria, at Miss Holmes's bidding, began to lay the table. She got out some new table-linen, napkins, and table-cloth, which had been a wedding present. She set the table with some new china. She looked, with a numb feeling, at her mother's poor old blue-and-white dishes, which were put away on the top shelves.

“I think it would be a very good idea to pack away those dishes altogether, and put them in a box up in the garret,” said Miss Holmes. Then she noticed Maria's face. “They will come in handy for your wedding outfit, little girl,” she added, kindly and jocosely, but Maria did not laugh.

Every now and then Maria looked at the clock on the parlor shelf, that was also new. The old sitting-room clock had disappeared; Maria did not know where, but she missed the face of it as if it had been the face of a friend. Miss Holmes also glanced frequently at the new clock. There arose a fragrant odor of warming potatoes and gravy from the kitchen.

“It is almost time for them,” said Miss Holmes.

She was very much dressed-up, Maria thought. She wore a red silk gown with a good many frills about the shoulders. She was very slight, and affected frills to conceal it. Out of this mass of red frills arose her little, alert head and face, homely, but full of vivacity. Maria thought her very nice. She would have liked her better for a mother than Ida. When Miss Zella Holmes smiled it seemed to come from within.

At last a carriage came rapidly up to their door, and Miss Holmes sprang to open it. Maria remained in the dining-room. Suddenly an uncanny fancy had seized her and terrified her. Suppose her father should look different, like everything else? Suppose it should be to her as if he had a new head? She therefore remained in the dining-room, trembling. She heard her father's voice, loud and merry. “Where is Maria?” Still, Maria did not stir. Then her father came hurrying into the room, and behind him she who had been Ida Slome, radiant and triumphant, in her plum-colored array, with the same smile with which she had departed on her beautiful face. Harry caught Maria in his arms, rubbed his cold face against her soft little one, and kissed her.

“How is father's little girl?” he asked, with a break in his voice.

“Pretty well, thank you,” replied Maria. She gave a helpless little cling to her father, then she stood away.

“Speak to your new mother, darling,” said Harry.

“How do *You do*?” said Maria, obediently, and Ida said, “You darling,” and then kissed her exactly as if she had been an uncommonly well-constructed doll, with a clock-work system which fitted her to take such a part with perfect accuracy.

Harry watched his wife and daughter rather anxiously. He seized the first opportunity to ask Maria, aside, if she had been well, and if she had been happy and comfortable at Mrs. White's. Then he wound up with the rather wistful inquiry:

“You are going to love your new mother, aren't you, darling? Don't you think she is lovely?”

Ida had gone up-stairs with Miss Holmes, to remove her wraps.

“Yes, sir, I think She is lovely,” replied Maria.

Chapter X

Ida Edgham was, in some respects, a peculiar personality. She was as much stronger, in another way, than her husband, as her predecessor had been. She was that anomaly: a creature of supreme self-satisfaction, who is yet aware of its own limits. She was so unemotional as to be almost abnormal, but she had head enough to realize the fact that absolute unemotionlessness in a woman detracts from her charm. She therefore simulated emotion. She had a spiritual make-up, a panoply of paint and powder for the soul, as truly as any actress has her array of cosmetics for her face. She made no effort to really feel, she knew that was entirely useless, but she observed all the outward signs and semblance of feeling more or less successfully. She knew that to take up her position in Harry Edgham's house like a marble bust of Diana, which had been one of her wedding-presents, would not be to her credit. She therefore put herself to the pace which she would naturally be expected to assume in her position. She showed everybody who called her new possessions, with a semblance of delight which was quite perfect. She was, in reality, less deceptive in that respect than in others. She had a degree of the joy of possession, or she would not have been a woman at all, and, in fact, would not have married. She had wanted a home and a husband; not as some women want them, for the legitimate desire for love and protection, but because she felt a degree of mortification on account of her single estate. She had had many admirers, but, although no one ever knew it, not one offer of marriage, the acceptance of which would not have been an absurdity, before poor Harry Edgham. She was not quite contented to accept him. She had hoped for something better; but he was good-looking, and popular, and his social standing, in her small world, was good. He was an electrical engineer, with an office in the city, and had a tolerably good income, although his first wife's New England thrift had compelled him to live parsimoniously.

Ida made up her mind from the first that thrift, after the plan of the first woman, should not be observed in her household. Without hinting to that effect, or without Harry's recognizing it, she so managed that within a few weeks after her marriage he put an insurance on his life, which would insure her comfort in case she outlived him. He owned his house, and she had herself her little savings, well invested. She then considered that they could live up to Harry's income without much risk, and she proceeded to do so. It was not long before the saturnine Hungarian, who could have provided a regiment of her own countrymen with the coarse food of her race, but seemed absolutely incapable of carrying out American ideas of good cookery, was dismissed, and a good cook, at a price which at first staggered Harry, installed in her place. Then a young girl was found to take care of the bedrooms, and wait on table, attired in white gowns and aprons and caps.

Ida had a reception two weeks after her return from her bridal trip, and an elaborate menu was provided by a caterer from New York. Maria, in a new white gown, with a white bow on her hair, sat at one end of the dining-table, shining with cut-glass and softly lighted with wax-candles under rose-colored shades in silver candlesticks, and poured chocolate, while another young girl opposite dipped lemonade from a great cut-glass punch-bowl, which had been one of the wedding-presents. The table was strewn with pink-and-white carnations. Maria caught a glimpse now and then of her new mother, in a rose-colored gown, with a bunch of pink roses on her breast, standing with her father receiving their guests, and she could scarcely believe that she was awake and it was really happening. She began to take a certain pleasure in the excitement. She heard one woman say to another how pretty she was, “poor little thing,” and her heart throbbed with satisfaction. She felt at once beautiful and appealing to other people, because of her misfortunes. She turned the chocolate carefully, and put some whipped-cream on top of each dainty cup; and, for the first time since her father's marriage, she was not consciously unhappy. She glanced across the table at the other little girl, Amy Long, who was dark, and wore a pink bow on her hair, and she was sure that she herself was much prettier. Then, too, Amy had not the sad distinction of having lost her mother, and having a step-mother thrust upon her in a year's time. It is true that once when Amy's mother, large and portly in a blue satin which gave out pale white lights on the curves of her great arms and back, and whose roseate face looked forth from a fichu of real lace pinned with a great pearl brooch, came up behind her little daughter and straightened the pink bow on her hair, Maria felt a cruel little pang. There was something about the look of loving admiration which Mrs. Long gave her daughter that stung Maria's heart with a sense of loss. She felt that if her new mother should straighten out her white bow and regard her with admiration, it would be because of her own self, and the credit which she, Maria, reflected upon her. Still, she reflected how charming she looked. Self-love is much better than nothing for a lonely soul.

That night Maria realized that she was in the second place, so far as her father was concerned. Ida, in her rose-colored robes, dispensing hospitality in his home, took up his whole attention. She was really radiant. She sang and played twice for the company, and her perfectly true high soprano filled the whole house. To Maria it sounded as meaningless as the trill of a canary-bird. In fact, when it came to music, Ida, although she had a good voice, had the mortification of realizing that her simulation of emotion failed her. Harry did not like his wife's singing. He felt like a traitor, but he could not help realizing that he did not like it. But the moment Ida stopped singing, he looked at her, and fairly wondered that he had married such a beautiful creature. He felt humble before her. Humility was not a salutary condition of mind for him, but this woman inspired it now, and would still more in the future. In spite of his first wife's scolding, her quick temper, he had always felt himself as good as she was. The mere fact of the temper itself had served

to give him a sense of equality and, perhaps, superiority, but this woman never showed temper. She never failed to respond with her stereotyped smile to everything that was said. She seemed to have no faults at all, to realize none in herself, and not to admit the possibility of any one else doing so.

Harry felt himself distinctly in the wrong beside such unquestionable right. He even did not think himself so good-looking as he had formerly done. It seemed to him that he looked much older than Ida. When they went out together he felt like a lackey in attendance on an empress. In his own home, it came to pass that he seldom made a remark when guests were present without a covert glance at his wife to see what she thought of it. He could always tell what she thought, even if her face did not change and she made no comment neither then nor afterwards, and she always made him know, in some subtle fashion, when he had said anything wrong.

Maria felt very much in the same way at first, but she fought involuntarily against it. She had a good deal of her mother in her. Finally, she never looked at Ida when she said anything. She was full of rebellion although she was quiet and obedient, and very unobtrusive, in the new state of things.

Ida entertained every Tuesday evening. There was not a caterer as at the first reception, but Ida herself cooked dainty messes in a silver chafing-dish, and Maria and the white-capped little maid passed things. It was not especially expensive, but people in Edgham began to talk. They said Harry was living beyond his means; but Ida kept within his income. She had too good a head for reckless extravagance, although she loved admiration and show. When there were no guests in the house, Maria used to go to her own room early of an evening, and read until it was time to go to bed. She realized that her father and Ida found her somewhat superfluous, although Ida never made any especial effort to entertain her father that Maria could see. She was fond of fancy-work, and was embroidering a silk gown for herself. She embroidered while Harry read the paper. She did not talk much. Maria used to wonder that her father did not find it dull when he and She were alone together of an evening. She looked at him reading his paper, with frequent glances of admiration over it at his beautiful wife, and thought that in his place, she should much prefer a woman like her mother, who had kept things lively, even without company, and even in a somewhat questionable fashion. However, Harry and Ida themselves went out a good deal. People in Edgham aped city society, they even talked about the “four hundred.” The newly wedded pair were frequent guests of honor at dinners and receptions, and Ida herself was a member of the Edgham's Woman's Club, and that took her out a good deal. Maria was rather lonely. Finally the added state and luxury of her life, which had at first pleased her, failed to do so. She felt that she hated all the new order of things, and her heart yearned for the old. She began to grow thin; she did not sleep much nor sleep well. She felt tired all the time. One day her father noticed her changed looks.

“Why, Maria is getting thin!” said he.

“I think it is because she is growing tall,” said Ida. “Everybody seems thin when they are growing tall. I did myself. I was much thinner than Maria at her age.” She looked at Maria with her invariable smile as she spoke.

“She looks very thin to me,” Harry said, anxiously.

He himself looked thin and older. An anxious wrinkle had deepened between his eyes. It was June, and the days were getting warm. He was anxious about Ida's health also. Ida was not at all anxious. She was perfectly placid. It did not seem to her that an overruling Providence could possibly treat her unkindly. She was rather annoyed at times, but still never anxious, and utterly satisfied with herself to that extent that it precluded any doubt as to the final outcome of everything.

Maria continued to lose flesh. A sentimental interest in herself and her delicacy possessed her. She used to look at her face, which seemed to her more charming than ever, although so thin, in the glass, and reflect, with a pleasant acquiescence, on an early death. She even spent some time in composing her own epitaph, and kept it carefully hidden away in a drawer of her dresser, under some linen.

Maria felt a gloomy pride when the doctor, who came frequently to see Ida, was asked to look at her; she felt still more triumphant when he expressed it as his opinion that she ought to have a change of air the moment school closed. The doctor said Maria was running down, which seemed to her a very interesting state of things, and one which ought to impress people. She told Gladys Mann the next day at school.

“The doctor says I'm running down,” said she.

“You do look awful bad,” replied Gladys.

After recess Maria saw Gladys with her face down on her desk, weeping. She knew that she was weeping because she looked so badly and was running down. She glanced across at Wollaston Lee, and wondered if he had noticed how badly she looked, and yet how charming. All at once the boy shot a glance at her in return; then he blushed and scowled and took up his book. It all comforted Maria in the midst of her langour and her illness, which was negative and unattended by any pain. If she felt any appetite she restrained it, she became so vain of having lost it.

It was decided that Maria should go and visit her aunt Maria, in New England, and remain there all summer. Her father would pay her board in order that she should not be any restraint on her aunt, with her scant income. Just before Maria went, and just before her school closed, the broad gossip of the school came to her ears. She ascertained something which filled her at once with awe, and shame, and jealousy, and indignation. If one of the girls began to speak to her about it, she turned angrily away. She fairly pushed Gladys Mann one day. Gladys turned and looked at her with loving reproach, like a chidden dog. “What did you expect?” said she. Maria ran away, her face burning.

After she reached her aunt Maria's nothing was said to her about it. Aunt Maria was too prudish and too indignant. Uncle Henry's wife, Aunt Eunice, was away all summer, taking care of a sister who was ill with consumption in New Hampshire; so Aunt Maria kept the whole house, and she and Maria and Uncle Henry had their meals together. Maria loved her uncle Henry. He was a patient man, with a patience which at times turns to fierceness, of a man with a brain

above his sphere, who has had to stand and toil in a shoe-factory for his bread and butter all his life. He was non-complainant because of a sort of stern pride, and a sense of a just cause against Providence, but he was very kind to Maria; he petted her as if she had been his own child. Every pleasant night Uncle Henry took Maria for a trolley-ride, or a walk, and he treated her to ice-cream soda and candy. Aunt Maria also took good care of the child. She showed a sort of vicious curiosity with regard to Maria's step-mother and all the new household arrangements, which Maria did not gratify. She had too much loyalty, although she longed to say all that she thought to her aunt, being sure of a violent sympathizer.

“Well, I'll say one thing, she has fixed your clothes nice,” said Aunt Maria.

“She didn't do it, it was Miss Barnes,” replied Maria. She could not help saying that much. She did not want Aunt Maria to think her step-mother took better care of her wardrobe than her own mother had done.

“Good land! She didn't hire all these things made?” said Aunt Maria.

“Yes'm.”

“Good land! I don't see how your father is going to stand it. I'd like to know what your poor mother would have said?” said Aunt Maria.

Then Maria's loyalty came to the front. After all, she was her father's wife, and to be defended.

“I guess maybe father is making more money now,” said she.

“Well, I hope to the land he is,” said Aunt Maria. “I guess if She (Aunt Maria also treated Ida like a pronoun) had just one hundred dollars and no more to get along with, she'd have to do different.”

Maria regained her strength rapidly. When she went home, a few days before her school begun, in September, she was quite rosy and blooming. She had also fallen in love with a boy who lived next to Aunt Maria, and who asked her, over the garden fence, to correspond with him, the week before she left.

It was that very night that Aunt Maria had the telegram. She paid the boy, then she opened it with trembling fingers. Her brother Henry and Maria were with her on the porch. It was a warm night, and Aunt Maria wore an ancient muslin. The south wind fluttered the ruffles on that and the yellow telegram as she read. She was silent a moment, with mouth compressed.

“Well,” said her brother Henry, inquiringly.

Aunt Maria's face flushed and paled. She turned to Maria.

“Well,” she said, “you've got a little sister.”

“Good!” said Uncle Henry. “Ever so much more company for you than a little brother would have been, Maria.”

Maria was silent. She trembled and felt cold, although the night was so warm.

“Weighs seven pounds,” said Aunt Maria, in a hard voice.

Maria returned home a week from that day. She travelled alone from Boston, and her father met her in New York. He looked strange to her. He was jubilant, and yet the marks of anxiety were deep. He seemed very glad to see Maria, and talked to her about her little sister in an odd, hesitating way.

“Her name is Evelyn,” said Harry.

Maria said nothing. She and her father were crossing the city to the ferry in a cab.

“Don't you think that is a pretty name, dear?” asked Harry, with a queer, apologetic wistfulness.

“No, father, I think it is a very silly name,” replied Maria.

“Why, your mother and I thought it a very pretty name, dear.”

“I always thought it was the silliest name in the world,” said Maria, firmly. However, she sat close to her father, and realized that it was something to have him to herself without Her, while crossing the city. “I don't know as I think Evelyn is such a very silly name, father,” she said, presently, just before they reached the ferry.

Harry bent down and kissed her. “Father's own little girl,” he said.

Maria felt that she had been magnanimous, for she had in reality never liked Evelyn, and would not have named a doll that.

“You will be a great deal happier with a little sister. It will turn out for the best,” said Harry, as the cab stopped. Harry always put a colon of optimism to all his happenings of life.

The next morning, when Ida was arrayed in a silk negligée, and the baby was washed and dressed, Maria was bidden to enter the room which had been her mother's. The first thing which she noticed was a faint perfume of violet-scented toilet-powder. Then she saw Ida leaning back gracefully in a reclining-chair, with her hair carefully dressed. The nurse held the baby: a squirming little bundle of soft, embroidered flannel. The nurse was French, and she awed Maria, for she spoke no English, and nobody except Ida could understand her. She was elderly, small, and of a damaged blond

type. Maria approached Ida and kissed her. Ida looked at her, smiling. Then she asked if she had had a pleasant summer. She told the nurse, in French, to show the baby to her. Maria approached the nurse timidly. The flannel was carefully laid aside, and the small, piteously inquiring and puzzled face, the inquiry and the bewilderment expressed by a thousand wrinkles, was exposed. Maria looked at it with a sort of shiver. The nurse laid the flannel apart and disclosed the tiny feet seeming already to kick feebly at existence. The nurse said something in French which Maria could not understand. Ida answered also in French. Then the baby seemed to experience a convulsion; its whole face seemed to open into one gape of expostulation at fate. Then its feeble, futile wail filled the whole room.

“Isn't she a little darling?” asked Ida, of Maria.

“Yes'm,” replied Maria.

There was a curious air of aloofness about Ida with regard to her baby, and something which gave the impression of wistfulness. It is possible that she was capable of wishing that she had not that aloofness. It did not in the least seem to Maria as if it were Ida's baby. She had a vague impression, derived she could not tell in what manner, of a rosebud laid on a gatepost. Ida did not seem conscious of her baby with the woodeny consciousness of an apple-tree of a blossom. When she gazed at it, it was with the same set smile with which she had always viewed all creation. That smile which came from without, not within, but now it was fairly tragic.

“Her name is Evelyn. Don't you think it is a pretty name?” asked Ida.

“Yes'm,” replied Maria. She edged towards the door. The nurse, tossing the wailing baby, rose and got a bottle of milk. Maria went out.

Maria went to school the next Monday, and all the girls asked her if the baby was pretty.

“It looks like all the babies I ever saw,” replied Maria guardedly. She did not wish to descry the baby which was, after all, her sister, but she privately thought it was a terrible sight.

Gladys Mann supported her. “Babies do all look alike,” said she. “We've had nine to our house, and I had ought to know.”

At first Maria used to dread to go home from school, on account of the baby. She had a feeling of repulsion because of it, but gradually that feeling disappeared and an odd sort of fascination possessed her instead. She thought a great deal about the baby. When she heard it cry in the night, she thought that her father and Ida might have sense enough to stop it. She thought that she could stop its crying herself, by carrying it very gently around the room. Still she did not love the baby. It only appealed, in a general way, to her instincts. But one day, when the baby was some six weeks old, and Ida had gone to New York, she came home from school, and she went up to her own room, and she heard the baby crying in the room opposite. It cried and cried, with the insistent cry of a neglected child. Maria said to herself that she did not believe but the French nurse had taken advantage of Her absence, and had slipped out on some errand and left the baby alone.

The baby continued to wail, and a note of despair crept into the wail. Maria could endure it no longer. She ran across the hall and flung open the door. The baby lay crying in a little pink-lined basket. Maria bent over it, and the baby at once stopped crying. She opened her mouth in a toothless smile, and she held up little, waving pink hands to Maria. Maria lifted the baby out of her basket and pressed her softly, with infinite care, as one does something very precious, to her childish bosom, and at once something strange seemed to happen to her. She became, as it were, illuminated by love.

Chapter XI

Maria had fallen in love with the baby, and her first impulse, as in the case of all true love, was secrecy. Why she should have been ashamed of her affection, her passion, for it was, in fact, passion, her first, she could not have told. It was the sublimated infatuation half compounded of dreams, half of instinct, which a little girl usually has for her doll. But Maria had never had any particular love for a doll. She had possessed dolls, of course, but she had never been quite able to rise above the obvious sham of them, the cloth and the sawdust and the paint. She had wondered how some little girls whom she had known had loved to sleep with their dolls; as for her, she would as soon have thought of taking pleasure in dozing off with any little roll of linen clasped in her arms. It was rather singular, for she had a vivid imagination, but it had balked at a doll. When, as sometimes happened, she saw a little girl of her own age, wheeling with solemnity a doll in a go-cart, she viewed her with amazement and contempt, and thought privately that she was not altogether bright. But this baby was different. It did not have to be laid on its back to make its eyes close, it did not have to be shaken and squeezed to make it vociferous. It was alive, and Maria, who was unusually alive in her emotional nature, was keenly aware of that effect. This little, tender, rosy thing was not stuffed with sawdust, it was stuffed with soul and love. It could smile; the smile was not painted on its face in a doll-factory. Maria was so thankful that this baby, Ida's baby, did not have Her smile, unchanging and permanent for all observers and all vicissitudes. When this baby smiled it smiled, and when it cried it cried. It was honest from the crown of its fuzzy head to the soles of its little pink worsted socks.

At the first reception which Ida gave after the baby came, and when it was on exhibition in a hand-embroidered robe, it screamed every minute. Maria was secretly glad, and proud of it. It meant much to her that *her* baby should not smile at all the company, whether it was smiling in its heart or not, the way She did. Maria had no room in her heart for any other love, except that for her father and the baby. She looked at Wollaston Lee, and wondered how she could ever have had dreams about him, how she could ever have preferred a boy to a baby like her little sister, even in her dreams. She ceased haunting the post-office for a letter from that other boy in New England, who had asked her to correspond over the garden fence, and who had either never written at all, or had misdirected his letter. She wondered how she had thought for a moment of doing such a thing as writing to a boy like that. She remembered with disgust how overgrown

that boy was, and how his stockings were darned at the knees; and how she had seen patches of new cloth on his trousers, and had heard her aunt Maria say that he was so hard on his clothes on account of his passion for bird-nesting, that it was all his mother could do to keep him always decent. How could she have thought for a moment of a bird-nesting sort of boy? She was so thankful that the baby was a girl. Maria, as sometimes happens, had a rather inverted system of growth. With most, dolls come first, then boys; with her, dolls had not come at all. Boys came first, then her little baby sister, which was to her in the place of a doll, and the boys got promptly relegated to the background.

Much to Maria's delight, the French nurse, whom she at once disliked and stood in awe of, only remained until the baby was about two months old, then a little nurse-girl was engaged. On pleasant days the nurse-girl, whose name was Josephine, wheeled out the baby in her little carriage, which was the daintiest thing of the kind to be found, furnished with a white lace canopy lined with rose-colored silk. It was on these occasions that Maria showed duplicity. On Saturdays, when there was no school, she privately and secretly bribed Josephine, who was herself under the spell of the baby, to go home and visit her mother, and let her have the privilege of wheeling it herself. Maria had a small sum every week for her pocket-money, and a large part of it went to Josephine in the shape of chocolates, of which she was inordinately fond; in fact, Josephine, who came of the poor whites, like Gladys Mann, might have been said to be a chocolate maniac. Maria used to arrange with Josephine to meet her on a certain corner on Saturdays, and there the transfer was made: Josephine became the possessor of half a pound of chocolates, and Maria of the baby. Josephine had sworn almost a solemn oath to never tell. She at once repaired to her mother's, sucking chocolates on the way, and Maria blissfully wheeled the baby. She stood in very little danger of meeting Her on these occasions, because the Edgham Woman's Club met on Saturday afternoon. It often happened, however, that Maria met some of the school-girls, and then nothing could have exceeded her pride and triumph. Some of them had little brothers or sisters, but none of them such a little sister as hers.

The baby had, in reality, grown to be a beauty among babies. All the inflamed red and aged puckers and creases had disappeared; instead of that was the sweetest flush, like that of just-opened rosebuds. Evelyn was a compact little baby, fat, but not overlapping and grossly fat. It was such a matter of pride to Maria that the baby's cheeks did not hang the least bit in the world, but had only lovely little curves and dimples. She had become quite a connoisseur in babies. When she saw a baby whose flabby cheeks hung down and touched its bib, she was disgusted. She felt as if there was something morally wrong with such a baby as that. Her baby was wrapped in the softest white things: furs, and silk-lined embroidered cashmeres, and her little face just peeped out from the lace frill of a charming cap. There was only one touch of color in all this whiteness, beside the tender rose of the baby's face, and that was a little knot of pale pink baby-ribbon on the cap. Maria often stopped to make sure that the cap was on straight, and she also stopped very often to tuck in the white fur rug, and she also stopped often to thrust her own lovely little girl-face into the sweet confusion of baby and lace and embroidery and fur, with soft kisses and little, caressing murmurs of love. She made up little love phrases, which she would have been inexpressibly ashamed to have had overheard. “Little honey love” was one of them —“Sister's own little honey love.” Once, when walking on Elm Street under the leafless arches of the elms, where she thought she was quite alone, although it was a very bright, warm afternoon, and quite dry—it was not a snowy winter—she spoke more loudly than she intended, and looked up to see another, bigger girl, the daughter of the Edgham lawyer, whose name was Annie Stone. Annie Stone was large of her age—so large, in fact, that she had a nickname of “Fatty” in school. It had possibly soured her, or her over-plumpness may have been due to some physical ailment which rendered her irritable. At all events, Annie Stone had not that sweetness and placidity of temperament popularly supposed to be coincident with stoutness. She had a bitter and sarcastic tongue for a young girl. Maria inwardly shuddered when she saw Annie Stone's fat, malicious face surveying her from under her fur-trimmed hat. Annie Stone was always very well dressed, but even that did not seem to improve her mental attitude. Her large, high-colored face was also distinctly pretty, but she did not seemed to be cognizant of that to the result of any satisfaction.

“Sister's little honey love!” she repeated after Maria, with fairly a snarl of satire.

Maria had spirit, although she was for the moment dismayed.

“Well, she is—so there,” said she.

“You wait till you have a few more little honey loves,” said Annie Stone, “and see how you feel.”

With that Annie Stone went her way, with soft flounces of her short, stout body, and Maria was left. She was still defiant; her blood was up. “Sister's little honey love,” she said to the baby, in a tone so loud that Annie Stone must have heard. “Were folks that didn't have anything but naughty little brothers jealous of her?” Annie Stone had, in fact, a notorious little brother, who at the early age of seven was the terror of his sisters and all law-abiding citizens; but Annie Stone was not easily touched.

“Sister's little honey love,” she shouted back, turning a malignant face over her shoulder. She had that very morning had a hand-to-hand fight with her naughty little brother, and finally come out victorious, by forcing him to the ground and sitting on him until he said he was sorry. It was not very reasonable that she should be at all sensitive with regard to him.

After Annie Stone had gone out of sight, Maria went around to the front of the little carriage, adjusted the white fur rug carefully, secured a tiny, white mitten on one of the baby's hands, and whispered to the baby alone. “You *are* sister's little honey love, aren't you, precious?” and the baby smiled that entrancing smile of honesty and innocence which sent the dimples spreading to the lace frill of her cap, and reached out her arms, thereby displacing both mittens, which Maria adjusted; then, after a fervent kiss, she went her way.

However, she was not that afternoon to proceed on her way long uninterrupted. For some time Josephine, the nurse-girl, had either been growing jealous, or chocolates were palling upon her. Josephine had also found her own home locked up, and the key nowhere in evidence. There would be a good half-hour to wait at the usual corner for Maria. The wind had changed, and blew cold from the northwest. Josephine was not very warmly clad. She wore her white gown

and apron, which Mrs. Edgham insisted upon, and which she resented. She had that day felt a stronger sense of injury with regard to it, and counted upon telling her mother how mean and set up she thought it was for any lady as called herself a lady to make a girl wear a summer white dress in winter. She shivered on her corner of waiting. Josephine got more and more wroth. Finally she decided to start in search of Maria and the baby. She gave her white skirts an angry switch and started. It was not very long after she had turned her second corner before she saw Maria and the baby ahead of her. Josephine then ran. She was a stout girl, and she plunged ahead heavily until she came up with Maria. The first thing Maria knew, Josephine had grabbed the handle of the carriage—two red girl hands appeared beside her own small, gloved ones.

“Here, gimme this baby to once,” gabbled Josephine in the thick speech of her kind.

Maria looked at her. “The time isn't up, and you know it isn't, Josephine,” said she. “I just passed by a clock in Melvin & Adams's jewelry store, and it isn't time for me to be on the corner.”

“Gimme the baby,” demanded Josephine. She attempted to pull the carriage away from Maria, but Maria, although her strength was inferior, had spirit enough to cope with any poor white. Her little fingers clutched like iron. “I shall not give her up until four o'clock,” said she. “Go back to the corner.”

Josephine's only answer was a tug which dislodged Maria's fingers and hurt her. But Maria came of the stock which believed in trusting the Lord and keeping the powder dry. She was not yet conquered. The right was clearly on her side. She and Josephine had planned to meet at the corner at four o'clock, and it was not quite half-past three, and she had given Josephine half a pound of chocolates. She did not stop to reflect a moment. Maria's impulses were quick, and lack of decision in emergencies was not a failing of hers. She made one dart to the rear of Josephine. Josephine wore her hair in a braided loop, tied with a bow of black ribbon. Maria seized upon this loop of brown braids, and hung. She was enough shorter than Josephine to render it effectual. Josephine's head was bent backward and she was helpless, unless she let go of the baby-carriage. Josephine, however, had good lungs, and she screamed, as she was pulled backward, still holding to the little carriage, which was also somewhat tilted by the whole performance.

“Lemme be, you horrid little thing!” she screamed, “or I'll tell your ma.”

“She isn't my mother,” said Maria in return. “Let go of my baby.”

“She is your ma. Your father married her, and she's your ma, and you can't help yourself. Lemme go, or I'll tell on you.”

“Tell, if you want to,” said Maria, firmly, actually swinging with her whole weight from Josephine's loop of braids. “Let go my baby.”

Josephine screamed again, with her head bent backward, and the baby-carriage tilted perilously. Then a woman, who had been watching from a window near by, rushed upon the scene. She was Gladys Mann's mother. Just as she appeared the baby began to cry, and that accelerated her speed. The windows of her house became filled with staring childish faces. The woman, who was very small and lean but wiry, a bundle of muscles and nerve, ran up to the baby-carriage, and pulled it back to its proper status, and began at once quieting the frightened baby and scolding the girls.

“Hush, hush,” cooed she to the baby. “Did it think it was goin' to get hurted?” Then to the girls: “Ain't you ashamed of yourselves, two great girls fightin' right in the street, and most tippin' the baby over. S'posin' you had killed him?”

Then Josephine burst forth in a great wail of wrath and pain. The bringing down of the carriage had increased her agony, for Maria still clung to her hair.

“Oh, oh, oh!” howled Josephine, her head straining back. “She's most killin' me.”

“An' I'll warrant you deserve it,” said the woman. Then she added to Maria—she was entirely impartial in her scolding —“Let go of her, ain't you shamed.” Then to the baby, “Did he think he was goin' to get hurted?”

“He's a girl!” cried Maria in a frenzy of indignation. “He is not a boy, he is a girl.” She still clung desperately to Josephine's hair, who in her turn clung to the baby-carriage.

Then Gladys came out of the house, in a miserable, thin, dirty gown, and she was Maria's ally.

“Let that baby go!” she cried to Josephine. She tugged fiercely at Josephine's white skirt.

“Gladys Mann, you go right straight into the house. What be you buttin' in for!” screamed her mother. “You let that girl's hair alone. Josephine, what you been up to. You might have killed this baby.”

The baby screamed louder. It wriggled around in its little, white fur nest, and stretched out imploring pink paws from which the mittens had fallen off. Its little lace hood was awry, the pink rosette was cocked over one ear. Maria herself began to cry. Then Gladys waxed fairly fierce. She paid no attention whatever to her mother.

“You jest go round an' ketch on to the kid's wagin,” said she, “an' I'll take care of her.” With that her strong little hands made a vicious clutch at Josephine's braids.

Maria sprang for the baby-carriage. She straightened the lace hood, she tucked in the fur robe, and put on the mittens. The baby's screams subsided into a grieved whimper. “Did great wicked girls come and plague sister's own little precious?” said Maria. But now she had to reckon with Gladys's mother, who had recovered her equilibrium, lost for a second by her daughter's manœuvre. She seized in her turn the handle of the baby-carriage, and gave Maria a strong push aside. Then she looked at all three combatants, like a poor-white Solomon.

“Who were sent out with him in the first place, that's what I want to know?” she said.

“I were,” replied Josephine in a sobbing shout. Her head was aching as if she had been scalped.

“Shet up!” said Gladys's mother inconsistently.

“Did your ma send her out with him?” she queried of her.

“He is not a boy,” replied Maria shiftily.

“Yes, she did,” said Josephine, still rubbing her head.

Gladys, through a wholesome fear of her mother, had released her hold on her braids, and stood a little behind.

Mrs. Mann's scanty rough hair blew in the winter wind as she took hold of the carriage. Maria again tucked in the white fur robe to conceal her discomfiture. She was becoming aware that she was being proved in the wrong.

“Shet up!” said Mrs. Mann in response to Josephine's answer. There was not the slightest sense nor meaning in the remark, but it was, so to speak, her household note, learned through the exigency of being in the constant society of so many noisy children. She told everybody, on general principles, to “shet up,” even when she wished for information which necessitated the reverse.

Mrs. Mann was thin and meagre, and wholly untidy. The wind lashed her dirty cotton skirt around her, disclosing a dirtier petticoat and men's shoes. The skin of her worn, blond face had a look as if the soil of life had fairly been rubbed into it. All the lines of this face were lax, displaying utter lassitude and no energy. She, however, had her evanescent streaks of life, as now. Once in a while a bubble of ancestral blood seemed to come to the surface, although it soon burst. She had come, generations back, of a good family. She was the run out weed of it, but still, at times, the old colors of the blossom were evident. She turned to Maria.

“If,” said she, “your ma sent her out with this young one, I don't see why you went to pullin' her hair fur?”

“I gave her a whole half-pound of chocolates,” returned Maria, in a fine glow of indignation, “if she would let me push the baby till four o'clock, and it isn't four o'clock yet.”

“It ain't more than half-past three,” said Gladys.

“Shet up!” said her mother. She stood looking rather helplessly at the three little girls and the situation. Her suddenly wakened mental faculties were running down like those of a watch which has been shaken to make it go for a few seconds. The situation was too much for her, and, according to her wont, she let it drop. Just then a whiff of strong sweetness came from the house, and her blank face lighted up.

“We are makin' 'lasses candy,” said she. “You young ones all come in and hev' some, and I'll take the baby. He can get warm, and a little of thet candy won't do him no harm, nuther.” Mrs. Mann used the masculine pronoun from force of habit; all her children with the exception of Gladys were boys.

Maria hesitated. She had a certain scorn for the Manns. She eyed Mrs. Mann's dirty attire and face. But she was in fact cold, and the smell of the candy was entrancing. “She said never to take the baby in anywhere,” said she, doubtfully.

Josephine having tired of chocolate, realized suddenly an enormous hunger for molasses candy. She sniffed like a hunting hound. “She didn't say not to go into Mrs. Mann's,” said she.

“She said anywhere; I heard her tell you,” said Maria.

“Mrs. Mann's ain't anywhere,” said Josephine, who had a will of her own. She rushed around and caught up the baby. “She's most froze,” said she. “She'll get the croup if she don't get warmed up.”

With that, Josephine carrying the baby, Maria, Gladys, and Mrs. Mann all entered the little, squalid Mann house, as hot as a conservatory and reeking with the smell of boiled molasses.

When Josephine and Maria and the baby started out again, Maria turned to Josephine.

“Now,” said she, “if you don't let me push her as far as the corner of our street, I'll tell how you took her into Mrs. Mann's. You know what She'll say.”

Josephine, whose face was smeared with molasses candy, and who was even then sucking some, relinquished her hold on the carriage. “You'll be awful mean if you do tell,” said she.

“I will tell if you don't do what you say you'll do another time,” said she.

When they reached home, Ida had not returned, but she came in radiant some few minutes later. She had read a paper on a famous man, for the pleasure and profit of the Edgham Woman's Club, and she had received much applause and felt correspondingly elated. Josephine had taken the baby up-stairs to a little room which had recently been fitted up for a nursery, and, not following her usual custom, Ida went in there after removing her outer wraps. She stood in her blue cloth dress looking at the child with her usual air of radiant aloofness, seeming to shed her own glory, like a star, upon the baby, rather than receive its little light into the loving recesses of her own soul. Josephine and also Maria were in a state of consternation. They had discovered a large, sticky splash of molasses candy on the baby's white embroidered cloak. They had washed the baby's sticky little face, but they did not know what was to be done about the cloak, which lay over a chair. Josephine essayed, with a dexterous gesture, to so fold the cloak over that the stain would be for the time concealed. But Ida Edgham had not been a school-teacher for nothing. She saw the gesture, and immediately took up the cloak herself.

“Why, what is this on her cloak?” said she.

There was a miserable silence.

“It looks like molasses candy. It is molasses candy,” said Ida. “Josephine, did you give this child molasses candy?” Ida's voice was entirely even, but there was something terrible about it.

Maria saw Josephine turn white. “She wouldn't have given her the candy if it hadn't been for me,” said she.

Ida stood looking from one to the other. Josephine's face was white and scared, Maria's impenetrable.

“If you ever give this child candy again, either of you,” said Ida, “you will never take her out again.” Then she went out, still smiling.

Josephine looked at Maria with enormous gratitude.

“Say,” said she, “you're a dandy.”

“You're a cheat!” returned Maria, with scorn.

“I'm awful sorry I didn't wait on the corner till four o'clock, honest.”

“You'd better be.”

“Say, but you be a dandy,” repeated Josephine.

Chapter XII

Maria began to be conscious of other and more vital seasons than those of the old earth on which she lived—the seasons of the human soul. Along with her own unconscious and involuntary budding towards bloom, the warm rush of the blood in her own veins, she realized the budding progress of the baby. When little Evelyn was put into short frocks, and her little, dancing feet were shod with leather instead of wool, Maria felt a sort of delicious wonder, similar to that with which she watched a lilac-bush in the yard when its blossoms deepened in the spring.

The day when Evelyn was put into short frocks, Maria glanced across the school-room at Wollaston Lee, and her innocent passion, half romance, half imagination, which had been for a time in abeyance, again thrilled her. All her pulses throbbed. She tried to work out a simple problem in her algebra, but mightier unknown quantities were working towards solution in every beat of her heart. Wollaston shot a sidelong glance at her, and she felt it, although she did not see it. Gladys Mann leaned over her shoulder.

“Say,” she whispered, “Wollaston Lee is jest starin' at you!”

Maria gave a little, impatient shrug of her shoulders, although a blush shot over her whole face, and Gladys saw distinctly the back of her neck turn a roseate color.

“He's awful stuck on you, I guess,” Gladys said.

Maria shrugged her shoulders again, but she thought of Wollaston and then of the baby in her short frock and she felt that her heart was bursting with joy, as a bud with blossom.

Ida, meantime, was curiously impassive towards her child's attainments. There was something pathetic about this impassiveness. Ida was missing a great deal, and more because she did not even know what she missed. However, she began to be conscious of a settled aversion towards Maria. Her manner towards her was unchanged, but she became distinctly irritated at seeing her about. When anything annoyed Ida, she immediately entertained no doubt whatever that it was not in accordance with the designs of an overruling Providence. It seemed manifest to her that if anything annoyed her, it should be removed. However, in this case, the way of removal did not seem clear for a long time. Harry was undoubtedly fond of Maria. That did not trouble Ida in the least, although she recognized the fact. She was not a woman who was capable of jealousy, because her own love and admiration for herself made her impregnable. She loved herself so much more than Harry could possibly love her that his feeling for Maria did not ruffle her in the least. It was due to no jealousy that she wished Maria removed, at least for a part of the time. It was only that she was always conscious of a dissent, silent and helpless, still persistent, towards her attitude as regarded herself. She knew that Maria did not think her as beautiful and perfect as she thought herself, and the constant presence of this small element of negation irritated her. Then, too, while she was not in the least jealous of her child, she had a curious conviction that Maria cared more for her than she herself cared, and that in itself was a covert reproach. When little Evelyn ran to meet her sister when she returned from school, Ida felt distinctly disturbed. She had no doubt of her ultimate success in her purpose of ridding herself of at least the constant presence of Maria, and in the mean time she continued to perform her duty by the girl, to that outward extent that everybody in Edgham pronounced her a model step-mother. “Maria Edgham never looked half so well in her own mother's time,” they said.

Lillian White spoke of it to her mother one Sunday. She had been to church, but her mother had remained at home on account of a cold.

“I tell you she looked dandy,” said Lillian. Lillian was still as softly and negatively pretty as ever. She was really charming because she was not angular, because her skin was not thick and coarse, because she did not look anæmic, but perfectly well fed and nourished and happy.

“Who?” asked her mother.

“Maria Edgham. She was togged out to beat the band. Everything looked sort of fadged up that she had before her own mother died. I tell you she never had anything like the rig she wore to-day.”

“What was it?” asked her mother interestedly, wiping her rasped nose with a moist ball of handkerchief.

“Oh, it was the handsomest brown suit I ever laid my eyes on, with hand-embroidery, and fur, and a big picture hat trimmed with fur and chrysanthemums. She's an awful pretty little girl anyhow.”

“She always was pretty,” said Mrs. White, dabbing her nose again.

“If Ida don't look out, her step-daughter will beat her in looks,” said Lillian.

“I never thought myself that Ida was anything to brag of, anyway,” said Mrs. White. She still had a sense of wondering injury that Harry Edgham had preferred Ida to her Lillian.

Lillian was now engaged to be married, but her mother did not feel quite satisfied with the man. He was employed in a retail clothing establishment in New York, and had only a small salary. “Foster Simpkins” (that was the young man's name) “ain't really what you ought to have,” she often said to Lillian.

But Lillian took it easily. She liked the young man very much as she would have liked a sugar-plum, and she thought it high time for her to be married, although she was scarcely turned twenty. “Oh, well, ma,” she said. “Men don't grow on every bush, and Foster is real good-lookin', and maybe his salary will be raised.”

“You ain't lookin' very high,” said her mother.

“No use in strainin' your neck for things out of your own sky,” said Lillian, who had at times a shrewd sort of humor, inherited from her father.

“Harry Edgham would have been a better match for you,” her mother said.

“Lord, I'd a good sight rather have Foster than another woman's leavin's,” replied Lillian. “Then there was Maria, too. It would have been an awful job to dress her, and look out for her.”

“That's so,” said her mother, “and then the two sets of children, too.”

Lillian colored and giggled. “Oh, land, don't talk about children, ma!” said she. “I'm contented as it is. But you ought to have seen that young one to-day.”

“What did Ida wear?” asked Mrs. White.

“She wore her black velvet suit, that she had this winter, and the way she strutted up the aisle was a caution.”

“I don't see how Harry Edgham lives the way he does,” said Mrs. White. “Black velvet costs a lot. Do you s'pose it is silk velvet?”

“You bet.”

“I don't see how he does it!”

“He looks sort of worn-out to me. He's grown awful old, I noticed it to-day.”

“Well, all Ida cares for is herself. *She* don't see he's grown old, you can be sure of that,” said Mrs. White, with an odd sort of bitterness. Actually the woman was so filled with maternal instincts that the bare dream of Harry as her Lillian's husband had given her a sort of motherly solicitude for him, which she had not lost. “It's a shame,” said she.

“Oh, well, it's none of my funeral,” said Lillian, easily. She took a chocolate out of a box which her lover had sent her, and began nibbling it like a squirrel.

“Poor man,” said Mrs. White. Tears of emotion actually filled her eyes and mingled with the rheum of her cold. She took out her moist ball of handkerchief again and dabbed both her eyes and nose.

Lillian looked at her half amusedly, half affectionately. “Mother, you do beat the Dutch,” said she.

Mrs. White actually snivelled. “I can't help remembering the time when his poor first wife died,” said she, “and how he and little Maria came here to take their meals, poor souls. Harry Edgham was just the one to be worked by a woman, poor fellow.”

Lillian sucked her chocolate with a full sense of its sweetness. “Ma, you can't keep track of all creation, nor cry over it,” said she. “You've got to leave it to the Lord. Have you taken your pink pellet?”

“Poor little Maria, too,” said Mrs. White.

“Good gracious, ma, don't you take to worryin' over her,” said Lillian. “Here's your pink pellet. A young one dressed up the way she was to-day!”

“Dress ain't everything, and nothin' is goin' to make me believe that Ida Slome is a good mother to her, nor to her own child neither. It ain't in her.”

Lillian, approaching her mother at the window with the pink pellet and a glass of water, uttered an exclamation. “For

the land's sake, there she is now!” she said. “Look, ma, there is Maria in her new suit, and she's got the baby in a little carriage on runners. Just look at the white fur-tails hanging over the back. Ain't that a handsome suit?”

Mrs. White gazed out eagerly. “It must have cost a pile,” said she. “I don't see how he does it.”

“She sees you at the window,” said Lillian.

Both she and her mother smiled and waved at Maria. Maria bowed, and smiled with a sweet irradiation of her rosy face.

“She's a little beauty, anyhow,” said Lillian.

“Dear child,” said Mrs. White, and she snivelled again.

“Ma, either your cold or the stuff you are takin' is making you dreadful nervous,” said Lillian. “You cry at nothin' at all. How straight she is! No stoop about her.”

Maria was, in fact, carrying herself with an extreme straightness both of body and soul. She was conscious to the full of her own beauty in her new suit, and of the loveliness of her little sister in her white fur nest of a sledge. She was inordinately proud. She had asked Ida if she might take the child for a little airing before the early Sunday dinner, and Ida had consented easily.

Ida also wished for an opportunity to talk with Harry about her cherished scheme, and preferred doing so when Maria was not in the house. For manifest reasons, too, Sunday was the best day on which to approach her husband on a subject which she realized was a somewhat delicate one. She was not so sure of his subservience when Maria was concerned, as in everything else, and Sunday was the day when his nerves were less strained, when he had risen late. Ida did not insist upon his going to church, as his first wife had done. In fact, if the truth was told, Harry wore his last winter's overcoat this year, and she was a little doubtful about its appearance in conjunction with her new velvet costume. He sat in the parlor when Ida entered after Maria had gone out with Evelyn. Harry looked at her admiringly.

“How stunning you do look in that velvet dress!” he said.

Ida laughed consciously. “I rather like it myself,” said she. “It's a great deal handsomer than Mrs. George Henderson's, and I know she had hers made at a Fifth Avenue tailor's, and it must have cost twice as much.”

Ida had filled Harry with the utmost faith in her financial management. While he was spending more than he had ever done, and working harder, he was innocently unconscious of it. He felt a sense of gratitude and wonder that Ida was such a good manager and accomplished such great results with such a small expenditure. He was unwittingly disloyal to his first wife. He remembered the rigid economy under her sway, and owned to himself, although with remorseful tenderness, that she had not been such a financier as this woman. “You ought to go on Wall Street,” he often told Ida. He gazed after her now with a species of awe that he had such a splendid, masterful creature for his wife, as she moved with the slow majesty habitual to her out of the room, the black plumes on her hat softly floating, the rich draperies of her gown trailing in sumptuous folds of darkness.

When she came down again, in a rose-colored silk tea-gown trimmed with creamy lace, she was still more entrancing. She brought with her into the room an atmosphere of delicate perfume. Harry had stopped smoking entirely nowadays. Ida had persuaded him that it was bad for him. She had said nothing about the expense, as his first wife had been accustomed to do. Therefore there was no tobacco smoke to dull his sensibilities to this delicate perfume. It was as if a living rose had entered the room. Ida sank gracefully into a chair opposite him. She was wondering how she could easily lead up to the subject in her mind. There was much diplomacy, on a very small and selfish scale, about Ida. She realized the expediency of starting from apparently a long distance, to establish her sequences in order to maintain the appearance of unpremeditativeness.

“Isn't it a little too warm here, dear?” said she, presently, in the voice which alone she could not control. Whenever she had an entirely self-centred object in mind, an object which might possibly meet with opposition, as now, her voice rang harsh and lost its singing quality.

Harry did not seem to notice it. He started up immediately. The portières between the room and the vestibule were drawn. He had, in fact, felt somewhat chilly. It was a cold day, and he had a touch of the grip. “I will open the portières, dear,” he said. “I dare say you are right.”

“I noticed it when I first came in,” said Ida. “I meant to draw the portières apart myself, but going out through the library I forgot it. Thank you, dear. How is your cold?”

“It is nothing, dear,” replied Harry. “There is only a little soreness in my throat.”

He resumed his seat, and noticed the fragrance of roasted chicken coming through the parted portières from the kitchen. Harry was very fond of roasted chicken. He inhaled that and the delicate perfume of Ida's garments and hair. He regarded her glowing beauty with affection which had no taint of sensuality. Harry had more of a poetic liking for sweet odors and beauty than a sensual one.

Harry Edgham in these days had a more poetic and spiritual look than formerly. He had not lost his strange youthfulness of expression; it was as if a child had the appearance of having been longer on the earth. His hair had thinned, and receded from his temples, and the bold, almost babyish fulness of his temples was more evident. His face was thinner, too, and he had not much color. His mouth was drawn down at the corner, and he frowned slightly, as a child might, in helpless but non-aggressive dissent. His worn appearance was very noticeable, in spite of his present happy mood, of which his wife shrewdly took advantage.

Ida Edgham did not care for books, although she never admitted that fact, but she could read with her cold feminine

astuteness the moods and souls of men, with unerring quickness. Those last were to her advantage or disadvantage, and in anything of that nature she was gifted by nature. Ida Edgham might have been, as her husband might have been, a poet, an adventuress, who could have made the success of her age had she not been hindered, as well as aided, by her self-love. She had the shrewdness which prognosticates as well as discerns, and saw the inevitableness of the ultimatum of all irregularities in a world which, however irregular it is in practice, still holds regularity as its model of conduct and progression. Ida Edgham would, in the desperate state of the earth before the flood, have made herself famous. As it was, her irregular talents had a limited field; however, she did all she could. It always seemed to her that, as far as the right and wrong of things went, her own happiness was eminently right, and that it was distinctly wrong for her, or any one else, to oppose any obstacle to it. She allowed the pleasant influences of the passing moment to have their full effect upon her husband, and she continued her leading up to the subject by those easy and apparently unrelated sequences which none but a diplomat could have managed.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, when Harry resumed his seat. “The air is cold but very clear and pleasant out to-day,” she continued.

“It looks so,” said Harry.

“Still, if I were you, I think I would not go out; it might make your cold worse,” said Ida.

“No, I think it would be full as well for me to stay in to-day,” replied Harry happily. He hemmed a little as he spoke, realizing the tickle in his throat with rather a pleasant sense of importance than annoyance. He stretched himself luxuriously in his chair, and gazed about the warm, perfumed, luxurious apartment.

“You have to go out to-morrow, anyway,” said Ida, and she increased his sense of present comfort by that remark.

“That is so,” said Harry, with a slight sigh.

Lately it had seemed harder than ever before for him to start early in the black winter mornings and hurry for his train. Then, too, he had what he had never had before, a sense of boredom, of ennui, so intense that it was almost a pain. The deadly monotony of it wearied him. For the first time in his life his harness of duty chafed his spirit. He was so tired of seeing the same train, the same commuters, taking the same path across the station to the ferry-boat, being jostled by the same throng, going to the same office, performing the same, or practically the same, duties, that his very soul was irritated. He had reached a point where he not only needed but demanded a change, but the change was as impossible, without destruction, as for a planet to leave its orbit.

Ida saw the deepening of the frown on his forehead and the lengthening of the lines around his mouth.

“Poor old man!” said she. “I wish I had a fortune to give you, so you wouldn't have to go.”

The words were fairly cooing, but the tone was still harsh. However, Harry brightened. He regarded this lovely, blooming creature and inhaled again the odor of dinner, and reflected with a sense of gratitude upon his mercies. Harry had a grateful heart, and was always ready to blame himself.

“Oh, I should be lost, go all to pieces, if I quit work,” he said, laughing. “If I were left a fortune, I should land in an insane asylum very likely, or take to drink. No, dear, you can't teach such an old bird new tricks; he's been in one tree too long, summer and winter.”

“Well, after all, you have not got to go out to-day,” remarked Ida, skilfully, and Harry again stretched himself with a sense of present comfort.

“That is so, dear,” he said.

“I have something you like for supper, too,” said Ida, “and I think George Adams and Louisa may drop in and we can have some music.”

Harry brightened still more. He liked George Adams, and the wife had more than a talent for music, of which Harry was passionately fond. She played wonderfully on Ida's well-tuned grand piano.

“I thought you might like it,” said Ida, “and I spoke to Louisa as I was coming out of church.”

“You were very kind, sweetheart,” Harry said, and again a flood of gratitude seemed to sweeten life for the man.

Ida took another step in her sequence.

“I think Maria had better stay up, if they do come,” said she. “She enjoys music so much. She can keep on her new gown. Maria is so careful of her gowns that I never feel any anxiety about her soiling them.”

“She is just like—” began Harry, then he stopped. He had been about to state that Maria was just like her mother in that respect, but he had remembered suddenly that he was speaking to his second wife.

However, Ida finished his remark for him with perfect good-nature. She had not the slightest jealousy of Harry's first wife, only a sort of contempt, that she had gotten so little where she herself had gotten so much.

“Maria's own mother was very particular, wasn't she, dear?” she said.

“Very,” replied Harry.

“Maria takes it from her, without any doubt,” Ida said, smoothly. “She looked so sweet in that new gown to-day, that I

would like to have the Adamses see her without her coat to-night; and Maria looks even prettier without her hat, too, her hair grows so prettily on her temples. Maria grows lovelier every day, it seems to me. I don't know how many I saw looking at her in church this morning."

"Yes, she is going to be pretty, I guess," said Harry, and again his very soul seemed warm and light with pleasure and gratitude.

"She *is* pretty," said Ida, conclusively. "She is at the awkward age, too. But there is no awkwardness about Maria. She is like a little fairy."

Harry beamed upon her. "She is as proud as punch when she gets a chance to take the little one out, and they made a pretty picture going down the street," said he, "but I hope she won't catch cold. Is that new suit warm?"

"Oh yes! it is interlined. I looked out for that."

"You look out for my child as if she were your own, bless you, dear," Harry said, affectionately.

Then Ida thought that the time for her carefully-led-up-to coup had arrived. "I try to," said she, meekly.

"You *do*."

Ida began to speak, then she hesitated, with timid eyes on her husband's face.

"What is it, dear?" asked he.

"Well, I have been thinking a good deal lately about Maria and her associates in school here."

"Why, what is the matter with them?" Harry asked, uneasily.

"Oh, I don't know that there is anything very serious the matter with them, but Maria is at an age when she is very impressible, and there are many who are not exactly desirable. There is Gladys Mann, for instance. I saw Maria walking down the street with her the other day. Now, Harry, you know that Gladys Mann is not exactly the kind of girl whom Maria's own mother would have chosen for an intimate friend for her."

"You are right," Harry said, frowning.

"Well, I have been thinking over the number of pupils of both sexes in the school who can be called degenerates, either in mind or morals, and I must say I was alarmed."

"Well, what is to be done?" asked Harry, moodily. "Maria must go to school, of course."

"Yes, of course, Maria must have a good education, as good as if her own mother had lived."

"Well, what is to be done, then?"

Then Ida came straight to the point. "The only way I can see is to remove her from doubtful associates."

"Remove her?" repeated Harry, blankly.

"Yes; send her away to school. Wellbridge Hall, in Emerson, where I went myself, would be a very good school. It is not expensive."

Harry stared. "But, Ida, she is too young."

"Not at all."

"You were older when you went there."

"A little older."

"How far is Emerson from here?"

"Only a night's journey from New York. You go to sleep in your berth, and in the morning you are there. You could always see her off. It is very easy."

"Send Maria away! Ida, it is out of the question. Aside from anything else, there is the expense. I am living up to my income as it is."

"Oh," said Ida—she gave her head a noble toss, and spoke impressively—"I am prepared to go without myself to make it possible for you to meet her bills. You know I spoke the other day of a new lace dress. Well, that would cost at least a hundred; I will go without that. And I wanted some new portières for my room; I will go without them. That means, say, fifty more. And you know the dining-room rug looks very shabby. I was thinking we must have an Eastern rug, which would cost at least one hundred and fifty; I thought it would pay in the end. Well, I am prepared to give that up and have a domestic, which only costs twenty-five; that is a hundred and twenty-five more saved. And I had planned to have my seal-skin coat made over after Christmas, and you know you cannot have seal-skin touched under a hundred; there is a hundred more. There are three hundred and seventy-five saved, which will pay for Maria's tuition for a year, and enough over for travelling expenses." Nothing could have exceeded the expression of lofty virtue of Ida Edgham when she concluded her speech. As for her own selfish considerations, those, as always, she thought of only as her duty. Ida established always a clear case of conscience in all her dealings for her own interests.

But Harry continued to frown. The childish droop of his handsome mouth became more pronounced. “I don't like the idea,” he said, quite sturdily for him.

“Suppose we leave it to Maria,” said Ida.

“I really think,” said Harry, in almost a fretful tone, “that you exaggerate. I hardly think there is anything so very objectionable about her associates here. I will admit that many of the children come from what we call the poor whites, but after all their main vice is shiftlessness, and Maria is not very likely to become contaminated with that.”

“Why, Harry, my dear, that is the very least of their vices.”

“What else?”

“Why, you know that they are notoriously light-fingered.”

“My dear Ida, you don't mean to say that you think Maria—”

“Why, of course not, Harry, but aside from that, their morals.”

Harry rose from his chair and walked across the room nervously.

“My dear Ida,” he said, “you are exaggerating now. Maria is simply not that kind of a girl; and, besides, I don't know that she does see so much of those people, anyway.”

“Gladys Mann—”

“Well, I never heard any harm of that poor little runt. On the other side, Ida, I should think Maria's influence over her for good was to be taken into consideration.”

“I hope you don't mean Maria to be a home missionary?” said Ida.

“She might go to school for a worse purpose,” replied Harry, simply. “Maria has a very strong character from her mother, if not from her father. I actually think the chances are that the Mann girl will have a better chance of getting good from Maria than Maria evil from her.”

“Well, dear, suppose we leave it to Maria herself,” said Ida. “Nobody is going to force the dear child away against her will, of course.”

“Very well,” said Harry. His face still retained a slightly sulky, disturbed expression.

Ida, after a furtive glance at him, took up a sheet of the Sunday paper, and began swaying back and forth gracefully in her rocking-chair, as she read it.

“How foolish all this sentiment about that murderer in the Tombs is,” said she presently. “They are actually going to give him a Christmas-tree.”

“He is only a boy,” said Harry absently.

“I know that—but the idea!”

Just then Maria passed the window, dragging little Evelyn in her white sledge. Ida rose with a motion of unusual quickness for her, but Harry stopped her as she was about to leave the room.

“Don't go out, Ida,” he said, with a peremptoriness which sat strangely upon him.

Ida stared at him. “Why, why not?” she asked. “I wanted to take Evelyn out. You know Josephine is not here.”

“She is getting out all right with Maria's help; sit down, Ida,” said Harry, still with that tone of command which was so foreign to him.

Ida hesitated a second, then she sat down. She realized the grace and policy of yielding in a minor point, when she had a large one in view. Then, too, she was in reality rather vulnerable to a sudden attack, for a moment, although she was always as a rule sure of ultimate victory. She was at a loss, moreover, to comprehend Harry's manner, which was easily enough understood. He wished to be the first to ascertain Maria's sentiments with regard to going away to school. Without admitting it even to himself, he distrusted his wife's methods and entire frankness.

Presently Maria entered, leading little Evelyn, who was unusually sturdy on her legs for her age. She walked quite steadily, with an occasional little hop and skip of exuberant childhood.

She could talk a little, in disconnected sentences, with fascinating mistakes in the sounds of letters, but she preferred a gurgle of laughter when she was pleased, and a wail of woe when things went wrong. She was still in the limbos of primitivism. She was young with the babyhood of the world. To-day she danced up to her father with her little thrill of laughter, at once as meaningless and as full of meaning as the trill of a canary. She pursed up her little lips for a kiss, she flung frantic arms of adoration around his neck. She clung to him, when he lifted her, with all her little embracing limbs; she pressed her lovely, cool, rosy cheek against his, and laughed again.

“Now go and kiss mamma,” said Harry.

But the baby resisted with a little, petulant murmur when he tried to set her down. She still clung to him. Harry

whispered in her ear.

“Go and kiss mamma, darling.”

But Evelyn shook her head emphatically against his face. Maria, almost as radiant in her youth as the child, stood behind her. She glanced uneasily at Ida. She held the white fur robes and wraps which she had brought in from the sledge.

“Take those things out and let Emma put them away, dear,” Ida said to her. She smiled, but her voice still retained its involuntary harshness.

Maria obeyed with an uneasy glance at little Evelyn. She knew that her step-mother was angry because the baby would not kiss her. When she was out in the dining-room, giving the fluffy white things to the maid, she heard a shriek, half of grief, half of angry dissent, from the baby. She immediately ran back into the parlor. Ida was removing the child's outer garments, smiling as ever, and with seeming gentleness, but Maria had a conviction that her touch on the tender flesh of the child was as the touch of steel. Little Evelyn struggled to get to her sister when she saw her, but Ida held her firmly.

“Stand still, darling,” she said. It was inconceivable how she could say darling without the loving inflection which alone gave the word its full meaning.

“Stand still and let mamma take off baby's things,” said Harry, and there was no lack of affectionate cadences in his voice. He privately thought that he himself could have taken off the child's wraps better than his wife, but he recognized her rights in the matter. Harry remembering his first wife, with her child, was in a state of constant bewilderment at the sight of his second with hers. He had always had the masculine opinion that women, in certain primeval respects, were cut on one pattern, and his opinion was being rudely shaken.

“Call Emma, please,” said Ida to Maria, and Maria obeyed.

When the maid came in, Ida directed her to take the child up-stairs and put on another frock.

Maria was about to follow, but Harry stopped her. “Maria,” said he.

Maria stopped, and eyed her father with surprise.

“Maria,” said Harry, bluntly, “your mother and I have been talking about your going away to school.”

Maria turned slightly pale and continued to stare at him, but she said nothing.

“She thinks, and I don't know but she is right,” said Harry, with painful loyalty, “that your associates here are not just the proper ones for you, and that it would be much better for you to go to boarding-school.”

“How much would it cost?” asked Maria, in a dazed voice. The question sounded like her own mother.

“Father can manage that; you need not trouble yourself about that,” replied Harry, hurriedly.

“Where?” said Maria, then.

“To a nice school where your mother was educated.”

“My mother?”

“Ida—to Wellbridge Hall.”

“How often should I come home and see you and Evelyn? Every week?”

“I am afraid not, dear,” said Harry, uneasily.

“How long are the terms?” asked Maria.

“Only about twelve weeks,” said Ida.

Maria stood staring from one to the other. Her face had turned deadly pale, and had, moreover, taken on an expression of despair and isolation. Somehow, although the little girl was only a few feet from the others, she had a look as if she were leagues off, as if she were outside something vital, which removed her, in fact, to immeasurable distances. And, in fact, Maria had a feeling which never afterwards wholly left her, of being outside the love of life in which she had hitherto dwelt with confidence.

“Maybe you would like it, dear,” Harry said, feebly.

“I will go,” Maria said, in a choking voice. Then she turned without another word and went out of the room, up-stairs to her own little chamber. When there she sat down beside the window. She did not think. She did not seem to feel her hands and feet. It was as if she had fallen from a height. The realization that her father and his new wife wanted to send her away, that she was not wanted in her home, stunned her.

But in a moment the door was flung open and her father entered. He knelt down beside Maria and pulled her head to his shoulder and kissed her, and she felt with a sort of dull wonder his face damp against her own.

“Father's little girl!” said Harry. “Father's own little girl! Father's blessing! Did she think he wanted to send her away? I

rather guess he didn't. How would father get along without his own precious baby, when he came home at night. She shan't go one step. She needn't fret a bit about it."

Maria turned and regarded him with a frozen look still on her face. "It was She that wanted me to go?" she said, interrogatively.

"She thought maybe it would be best for you, darling," said Harry. "She means to do right by you, Maria; you must try to think so."

Maria said nothing.

"But father isn't going to let you go," said Harry. "He can't do without his little girl."

Then Maria's strange calm broke up. She clung, weeping, to her father, as if he were her only stay. Harry continued to soothe her.

"Father's blessing!" he whispered in her ear. "She was the best little girl that ever was. She is just like her own dear mother."

"I wish mother was back," Maria whispered, her whisper stifled against his ear.

"Oh, my God, so do I!" Harry said, with a half sob. For the minute the true significance of his position overwhelmed him. He felt a regret, a remembrance, that was a passion. He realized, with no disguise, what it all meant: that he a man with the weakness of a child in the hands of a masterly woman, had formerly been in the leading-strings of love for himself, for his own best good, whereas he was now in the grasp of the self-love of another who cared for him only as he promoted her own interests. In a moment, however, he recovered himself. After all, he had a sense of loyalty and duty which amounted to positive strength. He put Maria gently from him with another kiss.

"Well, this won't bring your mother back, dear," he said, "and God took her away, you know, and what He does is for the best; and She means to do her duty by you, you know, dear. She thought it would be better for you, but father can't spare you, that's all there is about it."

Chapter XIII

It was an utter impossibility for Ida Edgham to be entirely balked of any purpose which she might form. There was something at once impressive and terrible about the strength of this beautiful, smiling creature's will, about its silence, its impassibility before obstacles, its persistency. It was as inevitable and unswervable as an avalanche or a cyclone. People might shriek out against it and struggle, but on it came, a mighty force, overwhelming petty things as well as great ones. It really seemed a pity, taking into consideration Ida's tremendous strength of character, that she had not some great national purpose upon which to exert herself, instead of such trivial domestic ones.

Ida realized that she could not send Maria to the school which she had proposed. Her strength had that subtlety which acknowledges its limitations and its closed doors, and can look about for other means and ways. Therefore, when Harry came down-stairs that Sunday afternoon, his face working with emotion but his eyes filled with a steady light, and said, with no preface, "It's no use talking, Ida, that child does not want to go, and she shall never be driven from under my roof, while I live," Ida only smiled, and replied, "Very well, dear, I only meant it for her good."

"She is not going," Harry said doggedly.

Harry resumed his seat with a gesture of defiance which was absurd, from its utter lack of any response from his wife. It was like tilting with a windmill.

Ida continued to sway gently back and forth, and smile.

"I think if the Adamses do come in to-night we will have a little salad, there will be enough left from the chicken, and some cake and tea," she observed presently. "We won't have the table set, because both the maids have asked to go out, but Maria can put on my India muslin apron and pass the things. I will have the salad made before they go, and I will make the tea. We can have it on the table in here." Ida indicated, by a graceful motion of her shoulder, a pretty little tea-table loaded with Dresden china.

"All right," replied Harry, with a baffled tone. He felt baffled without knowing exactly why.

Ida took up another sheet of the *Herald*, a fashion page was uppermost. She read something and smiled. "It says that gowns made like Maria's new one are the most fetching ones of the season," she said. "I am so glad I have the skirt plaited."

Harry made a gesture of assent. He felt, without in the least knowing why, like a man who had been completely worsted in a hand-to-hand combat. He felt humiliated and unhappy. His first wife, even with her high temper and her ready tongue, had never caused him such a sense of abjectness. He had often felt angry with her, but never with himself. She had never really attacked his self-respect as this woman did. He did not dare look up from his newspaper for a while, for he realized that he should experience agony at seeing the beautiful, radiant face of his second wife opposite him instead of the worn, stern, but altogether loving and single-hearted face of his first. He was glad when Maria came down-stairs, and looked up and greeted her with a smile of reassuring confidence. Maria's pretty little face was still tear-stained, although she had bathed it with cold water. She also took up a sheet of the Sunday paper.

"Did you see Alice Lundy's new hat in church to-day, dear?" Ida presently asked her, and her manner was exactly as if nothing had occurred to disturb anybody.

Maria looked at her with a sort of wonder, which made her honest face almost idiotic.

“No, ma'am,” said she.

Maria had been taught to say “yes, ma'am” and “no, ma'am” by her own mother, whose ideas of etiquette were old-fashioned, and dated from the precepts of her own childhood.

“It is a little better not to say ma'am,” said Ida, sweetly. “I think that expression is not used so much as formerly.”

Maria looked at her with a quick defiance, which gave her an almost startling resemblance to her own mother.

“Yes, ma'am,” said she.

Harry's mouth twitched behind his paper. Ida said no more. She continued to smile, but she was not reading the paper which she held. She was making new plans to gain her own ends. She was seeking new doors of liberty for her own ways, in lieu of those which she saw were closed to her, and by the time dinner was served she was quite sure that she had succeeded.

The next autumn, Maria began attending the Elliot Academy, in Wardway. The Elliot Academy was an endowed school of a very high standing, and Wardway was a large town, almost a city, about fifteen miles from Edgham. When this plan was broached by Ida, Maria did not make any opposition; she was secretly delighted. Wollaston Lee was going to the Elliot Academy that autumn, and there was another Edgham girl and her brother, besides Maria, who were going.

“Now, darling, you need not go to the Elliot Academy any more than to the other school she proposed, if you don't want to,” Harry told Maria, privately, one Saturday afternoon in September, shortly before the term began.

Ida had gone to her club, and Harry had come home early from the city, and he and Maria were alone in the parlor. Evelyn was having her nap up-stairs. A high wind was roaring about the house. A cherry-tree beside the house was fast losing its leaves in a yellow rain. In front of the window, a hydrangea bush, tipped with magnificent green-and-rosy plumes, swayed in all its limbs like a living thing. Somewhere up-stairs a blind banged.

“I think I would like to go,” Maria replied, hurriedly. Then she jumped up. “That blind will wake Evelyn,” she said, and ran out of the room.

She had colored unaccountably when her father spoke. When she returned, she had a demure, secretive expression on her face which made Harry stare at her in bewilderment. All his life Harry Edgham had been helpless and bewildered before womenkind, and now his little daughter was beginning to perplex him. She sat down and took up a piece of fancy-work, and her father continued to glance at her furtively over his paper. Presently he spoke of the academy again.

“You need not go if you do not want to,” he repeated.

Then again Maria's delicate little face and neck became suffused with pink. Her reply was not as loud nor more intelligible than the murmur of the trees outside in the wind.

“What did you say, darling?” asked Harry. “Father did not understand.”

“I would like to go there,” Maria replied, in her sweet, decisive little pipe. A fresh wave of color swept over her face and neck, and she selected with great care a thread from a skein of linen floss.

“Well, she thought you might like that,” Harry said, with an air of relief.

“Maud Page is going, too,” said Maria.

“Is she? That will be nice. You won't have to go back and forth alone,” said Harry.

Maria said nothing; she continued her work.

Her father turned his paper and looked at the stock-list. Once he had owned a hundred shares of one of the Industrials. He had long since sold out, not at a loss, but the stock had risen since. He always noted it with an odd feeling of proprietorship, in spite of not owning any. He saw with pride that it had advanced half a point.

Maria worked silently; and as she worked she dreamed, and the dream was visible on her face, had any one been astute enough to understand it. She was working a lace collar to wear with a certain blue blouse, and upon that flimsy keystone was erecting an air-castle. She was going to the Elliot Academy, wearing the blue blouse and the lace collar, and looking so lovely that Wollaston Lee worshipped her. She invented little love-scenes, love-words, and caresses. She blushed, and dimples appeared at the corners of her mouth, the blue light of her eyes under her downcast lids was like the light of living gems. She viewed with complacency her little, soft white hands plying the needle. Maria had hands like a little princess. She cast a glance at the toe of her tiny shoe. She remembered how somebody had told her to keep her shoulders straight, and she threw them back with a charming motion, as if they had been wings. She was entirely oblivious of her father's covert glances. She was solitary, isolated in the crystal of her own thoughts. Presently, Evelyn woke and cried, and Maria roused herself with a start and ran up-stairs. Soon the two came into the room, Evelyn dancing with the uncertain motion of a winged seed on a spring wind. She was charming. One round cheek was more deeply flushed than the other, and creased with the pillow. Her yellow hair, fine and soft and full of electric life, tossed like a little crest. She ran with both fat little hands spread palms outward, and pounced violently upon her father. Harry rolled her about on his knee, and played with her as if she had been a kitten. Maria stood by laughing. The child was fairly screaming with mirth.

A graceful figure passed the window, its garments tightly wrapped by the wind, flying out like a flag behind. Harry set the little girl down at once.

“Here is mamma coming,” said he. “Go to sister and she will show you the pictures in the book papa brought home the other day.”

Evelyn obeyed. She was a docile little thing, and she had a fear of her mother without knowing why. She was sitting beside Maria, looking demurely at the pictures which her sister pointed out to her, when Ida entered.

“See the horsey running away,” said Maria. Then she added in a whisper, “Go and kiss mamma, baby.”

The child hesitated, then she rose, and ran to her mother, who stooped her radiant face over her and kissed her coolly.

“Have you been a good little girl?” asked she. Ida was looking particularly self-satisfied to day, and more disposed consequently to question others as to their behavior.

“Yeth,” replied Evelyn, without the slightest hesitation. A happy belief in her own merits was an inheritance from her mother. As yet it was more charming than otherwise, for the baby had unquestionable merits in which to believe. Harry and Maria laughed.

“Mamma is very glad,” said Ida. She did not laugh; she saw no humor in it. She turned to Harry. “I think I will go in on the early train with you to-morrow, dear,” she said. “I want to see about Maria's new dress.” Then she turned to Maria. “I have been in to see Miss Keeler,” said she, “and she says she can make it for you next week, so you can have it when you begin school. I thought of brown with a touch of blue and burnt-orange. How would you like that?”

“I think that would be perfectly lovely,” said Maria with enthusiasm. She cast a grateful look at her step-mother, almost a look of affection. She was always very grateful to Ida for her new clothes, and just now clothes had a more vital interest for her than ever. She took another stitch in her collar, with Evelyn leaning against her and kicking out first one chubby leg, then the other, and she immediately erected new air-castles, in which she figured in her brown suit with the touches of burnt-orange and blue.

A week later, when she started on the train for Wardway in her new attire, she felt entirely satisfied with herself and life in general. She was conscious of looking charming in her new suit of brown, with the touches of blue and burnt-orange, and her new hat, also brown with blue and burnt-orange glimpses in the trimmings. Wollaston Lee got on the same car and sat behind her. Maud Page, the other Edgham girl who was going to the academy, had a cousin in Wardway, and had gone there the night before. There were only Maria, Wollaston, and Edwin Shaw, who sat by himself in a corner, facing the other passengers with a slightly shamed, sulky expression. He was very tall, and had blacked his shoes well, and the black light from them seemed to him obtrusive, the more so because his feet were very large. He looked out of the window as the train left the station, and saw a very pretty little child with a fluff of yellow hair, carrying a big doll, climbing laboriously on a train on the other track, with the tender assistance of a brakeman. She was in the wake of a very stout woman, who stumbled on her skirts going up the steps. Edwin Shaw thought that the child looked like Maria's little sister, but that she could not be, because the stout woman was a stranger to him. Then he thought no more about it. He gazed covertly at Maria, with the black sparkles of his shoes continuing to disturb him. He admired Maria. Presently he saw Wollaston Lee lean over the back of her seat and say something to her, and saw her half turn and dimple, and noticed how the lovely rose flushed the curve of her cheek, and he scowled at his shiny shoes.

As for Maria, when she felt the boy's warm breath on her neck, her heart beat fast. She realized herself on the portals of an air-castle.

“Well, glad you are going to leave this old town?” said Wollaston.

“I am not going to leave it, really,” replied Maria.

“Oh, of course not, but you are going to leave the old school, anyhow. I had got mighty tired of it, hadn't you?”

“Yes, I had, rather.”

“It's behind the times,” said the boy; and, as he spoke he himself looked quite up to the times. He had handsome, clearly cut features and black eyes, which seemed at the same time to demand and question. He had something of a supercilious air, although the expression of youthful innocence and honesty was still evident on his face. He wore a new suit as well as Maria, only his was gray instead of brown, and he wore a red carnation in his button-hole. Maria inhaled the clovy fragrance of it. At the next station more passengers got into the train, and Wollaston seized upon that excuse to ask to share Maria's seat. They talked incessantly—an utterly foolish gabble like that of young birds. An old gentleman across the aisle cast an impatient glance at them from time to time. Finally he arose stiffly and went into the smoker. Their youth and braggadocio of innocence and ignorance, and the remembrance of his own, irritated him. He did not in the least regret his youth, but the recollection of the first stages of his life, now that he was so near the end, was like looking backward over a long road, which had led to absurdly different goals from what he had imagined. It all seemed inconceivable, silly and futile to him, what he had done, and what they were doing. He cast a furious glance at them as he passed out, but neither noticed it. Wollaston said something, and Maria laughed an inane little giggle which was still musical, and trilled through the car. Maria's cheeks were burning, and she seldom looked at the boy at her side, but oftener at the young autumn landscape through which they were passing. The trees had scarcely begun to turn, but here and there one flamed out like a gold or red torch among the green, and all the way-sides were blue and gold with asters and golden-rod. It was a very warm morning for the season. When they stopped at one of the stations, a yellow butterfly flew in through an open window and flitted airily about the car. Maria removed her coat, with the solicitous aid of her companion. She cast a conscious glance at the orange and blue on her sleeves.

“Say, that dress is a stunner!” whispered Wollaston.

Maria laughed happily. “Glad you like it,” said she.

Before they reached Wardway, Wollaston's red carnation was fastened at one side of her embroidered vest, making a discord of color which, for Maria, was a harmony of young love and romance.

“That is the academy,” said Wollaston, as the train rolled into Wardway. He pointed to a great brick structure at the right—a main building flanked by enormous wings. “Are you frightened?” he asked.

“I guess not,” replied Maria, but she was.

“You needn't be a bit,” said the boy. “I know some of the boys that go there, and I went to see the principal with father. He's real pleasant. I know the Latin teacher, Miss Durgin, too. My Uncle Frank married her cousin, and she has been to my house. You'll be in her class.” Wollaston spoke with a protective warmth for which Maria was very grateful.

She had a very successful although somewhat confused day. She was asked this and that and led hither and yon, and so surrounded by strange faces and sights that she felt fairly dizzy. She felt more herself at luncheon, when she sat beside Maud Page in the dining-hall, with Wollaston opposite. There was a restaurant attached to the academy, for the benefit of the out-of-town pupils.

When Maria went down to the station to take her train for home, Maud Page was there, and Wollaston. There was a long time to wait. They went out in a field opposite and picked great bunches of golden-rod, and the girls pinned them on their coats. Edwin Shaw was lingering about the station when they returned, but he was too shy to speak to them. When the train at last came in, Maria, with a duplicity which shamed her in thinking of it afterwards, managed to get away from Maud, and enter the car at the same time with Wollaston, who seated himself beside her as a matter of course. It was still quite light, but it had grown cold. Everything had a cold look—the clear cowslip sky, with its reefs of violet clouds; even the trees tossed crisply, as if stiffened with cold.

“Hope we won't have a frost,” said Wollaston, as they got off at Edgham.

“I hope not,” said Maria; and then Gladys Mann ran up to her, crying out:

“Say, Maria, Maria, did you know your little sister was lost?”

Maria turned deadly white. Wollaston caught hold of her little arm in its brown sleeve.

“When was she lost?” he asked, fiercely, of Gladys. “Don't you know any better than to rush right at anybody with such a thing as that? Don't you be frightened, Maria. I'll find her.”

A little knot of passengers from the train gathered around them. Gladys was pale herself, and had a strong sense of the sadness of the occasion, still she had a feeling of importance. Edwin Shaw came lumbering up timidly, and Maud Page pressed quickly to Maria's side with a swirl of her wide skirts.

“Gladys Mann, what on earth are you talking about?” said she, sharply. “Who's lost?”

“Maria's little sister.”

“Hm! I don't believe a word of it.”

“She is, so there! Nobody has seen a sign of her since morning, and Maria's pa's most crazy. He's been sending telegrams all round. Maria's step-mother, she telegraphed for him to come home, and he come at noon, and he sent telegrams all round, and then he went himself an hour ago.”

“Went where?”

“Back to New York. Guess he's gone huntin' himself. Guess he thought he could hunt better than policemen. Maria's step-mother don't act scared, but I guess she is, awful. My mummer says that folks that bear up the best are the ones that feel things most. My mummer went over to see if she could do anything and see how she took it.”

“When was she lost?” gasped Maria. She was shaking from head to foot.

“Your step-mother went down to the store, and when she got back the baby was gone. Josephine said she hadn't seen her after you had started for Wardway. She took her doll with her.”

“Where?” gasped Maria.

“Nobody knows where,” said Gladys, severely, although the tears were streaming down her own grimy cheeks. “She wouldn't be lost, would she, if folks knew where she was? Nothin' ain't never lost when you know where it is unless you drop it down a well, and you 'ain't got no well, have you, Maria Edgham?”

“No,” said Maria. She was conscious of an absurd thankfulness and relief that she had no well.

“And there ain't no pond round here big enough to drown a baby kitten, except that little mud-puddle up at Fisher's, and they've dragged every inch of that. I see 'em.”

All this time Edwin Shaw had been teetering on uncertain toes on the borders of the crowd. He remembered the child with the doll whom he had seen climbing into the New York train in the morning, and he was eager to tell of it, to make himself of importance, but he was afraid. After all, the child might not have been Evelyn. There were so many little, yellow-haired things with dolls to be seen about, and then there was the stout woman to be accounted for. Edwin never doubted that the child had been with the stout woman whom he had seen stumbling over her voluminous skirts up the

car steps. At last he stepped forward and spoke, with a moist blush overspreading his face, toeing in and teetering with embarrassment.

“Say,” he began.

The attention of the whole company was at once riveted upon him. He wriggled; the blood looked as if it would burst through his face. Great drops of perspiration stood upon his forehead. He stammered when he spoke. He caught a glimpse of Maria's blue-and-orange trimmings, and looked down, and again the black light of his shoes, which all the dust of the day had not seemed to dim, flashed in his eyes. He came of a rather illiterate family with aspirations, and when he was nervous he had a habit of relapsing into the dialect in common use in his own home, regardless of his educational attainments. He did so now.

“I think she has went to New York,” he said.

“Who?” demanded Wollaston, eagerly. His head was up like a hunting hound; he kept close hold of Maria's little arm.

“Her.”

“Who?”

“Her little sister-in-law.” Edwin pointed to Maria.

Gladys Mann went peremptorily up to Edwin Shaw, seized his coat-collar, and shook him. “For goodness sake! when did she went?” she demanded. “When did you see her? If you know anythin', tell it, an' not stand thar like a fool!”

“I saw a little girl jest about her size, a-carryin' of a doll, that clim on the New York train jest as we went out this mornin',” replied Edwin with a gasp, as if the information were wrung from him by torture. “And she was with a awful fat woman. Leastways—”

“A fat woman!” cried Wollaston Lee. “Who was the fat woman?”

“I hadn't never saw her afore. She was awful fat, and was a steppin' on her dress.”

Wollaston was keen-witted, and he immediately grasped at the truth of the matter.

“You idiot!” he said. “What makes you think she was with the stout woman—just because she was climbing into the train after her?”

“Little girls don't never go to New York alone with dolls,” vouchsafed Edwin, more idiotically than ever. “Leastways—”

“If you don't stop saying leastways, I'll punch your head,” said Wollaston. “Are you sure the child was Maria's little sister?”

“Looked like her,” said Edwin, shrinking back a little. “Leastways—”

“What was she dressed in?” asked Maria, eagerly.

“I didn't see as she had nothin' on.”

“You great gump!” said Gladys, shaking him energetically. “Of course she had something on.”

“She had a big doll.”

“What did she have on? You answer me this minute!” said Gladys.

“She might have had on a blue dress,” admitted Edwin, with a frantic grasp at his memory, “but she didn't have nothin' on her, nohow. Leastways—”

“Oh!” sobbed Maria, “she did wear her little blue dress this morning. She did! Was her hair light?”

“Yes, it were,” said Edwin, quite positively. “Leastways—”

“It was Evelyn,” sobbed Maria. “Oh, poor little Evelyn, all alone in New York! She never went but once with Her and me, and she wouldn't know where to go. Oh, oh!”

“Where did she go when she went with your step-ma and you?” demanded Gladys, who seemed to have suddenly developed unusual acumen. Her face was streaming with tears but her voice was keen.

“She went to Her cousin's, who lives in an apartment in West Forty-ninth Street,” said Maria.

“She'd try to go there again,” said Gladys. “Did she know the woman's name?”

“Yes, she did.”

“You bet she did. She was an awful bright kid,” said Gladys. “Now, I tell you what, Maria, I shouldn't a mite wonder if your step-ma had had a telegram from her cousin by this time, that she was to her house. You'd better jest run home an' see.”

“She was only her third cousin,” said Maria, “and She hardly ever heard from her. It was only the other day I heard Her

say that she didn't know but she had left New York. I don't think Her cousin liked her very well."

"What was the cousin's name?"

"She called her Alice, but her name was Mrs. George B. Edison."

"That's jest where the kid has went," said Gladys. "You go right home, M'ria. We'll go with you, and I'll bet a cooky you'll find that your step-ma has had a telegram."

Maria hesitated a moment; then she started, Wollaston Lee still keeping close hold of her arm. Gladys was on the other side.

Chapter XIV

When Maria reached home, she pushed open the front door, which was unlocked, and rushed violently in. Wollaston and Gladys followed her, after a slight hesitation, but remained standing in the vestibule. When Maria had come in sight of the house, she had perceived the regular motion of a rocking female head past the parlor light, and she knew that it was Ida. Ida nearly always occupied a rocking-chair, and was fond of the gentle, swaying motion.

"There she is, rocking just as if the baby wasn't lost," Maria thought, with the bitterest revulsion and sarcasm. When she opened the door she immediately smelled tea, the odor of broiling beefsteak and fried potatoes. "Eating just as if the baby wasn't lost," she thought. She rushed into the parlor, and there was Ida swaying back and forth in her rocking-chair, and there were three ladies with her. One was Mrs. Jonas White; one was a very smartly dressed woman, Mrs. Adams, perhaps the most intimate friend whom Ida had in Edgham; one was the wife of the minister whose church the Edghams attended, Mrs. Applegate, or, as she was called, Mrs. Dr. Applegate—her husband had a degree. Her sister had just died and she was dressed in the deepest mourning; sitting in the shade in a corner, she produced a curious effect of a vacuum of grief. Mrs. Adams, who was quite young and very pretty, stout and blond, was talking eagerly; Mrs. Jonas White was sniffing quietly; Mrs. Applegate, who was ponderously religious, asked once in a while, in a subdued manner, if Mrs. Edgham did not think it would be advisable to unite in prayer.

Ida made no reply. She continued to rock, and she had a curious set expression. Her lips were resolutely compressed, as if to restrain that radiant smile of hers, which had become habitual with her. She looked straight ahead, keeping her eyes fastened upon a Tiffany vase which stood on a little shelf, a glow of pink and gold against a skilful background of crimson velvet. It was as if she were having her photograph taken and had been requested by the photographer to keep her eyes fixed upon that vase.

"The detective system of New York is so lax," said Mrs. Adams. "I do wish there was more system among them and among the police. One would feel—" She heaved a deep sigh.

Mrs. Jonas White sobbed audibly.

"Do you not think, dear friends, that it would be a good plan to offer up our voices at the Throne of Grace for the dear child's return?" asked Mrs. Applegate in a solemn voice, albeit somewhat diffidently. She was a corpulent woman, and was richly dressed, in spite of her deep mourning. A jet brooch rimmed with pearls, gleamed out of the shadow where she sat.

Ida continued to rock.

"But," said Mrs. Adams, "a great many children are lost every year and found. Sometimes the system does really work in a manner to astonish any one. I should not be surprised at any minute to see Mr. Edgham or a policeman walking in with her. But—well—there is so much to be done. The other night, when Mr. Adams and I went in to hear Mrs. Fiske, we drove eight blocks after the performance without seeing one policeman."

"I suppose, though, if you had been really attacked, a dozen would have sprung out from somewhere," said Mrs. White, in a tearful voice. Mrs. White could not have heard Satan himself assailed without a word in his defence, such was the maternal pity of her heart.

"That was what Mr. Adams said," retorted Mrs. Adams, with some asperity, "and I told him that I would rather the dozen policemen were in evidence before I was shot and robbed than after. I had on all my rings, and my diamond sunburst."

"Do you not think, dear friend, that it would be a good plan to offer up our voices at the Throne of Grace for the safe restoration of the dear child?" asked Mrs. Applegate again. Her voice was sonorous, very much like her husband's. She felt that, so far as in her lay, she was taking his place. He was out of town.

It was then that Maria rushed into the room. She ran straight up to her step-mother. The other women started. Ida continued to rock, and look at the Tiffany vase. It seemed as if she dared not take her eyes from it for fear of losing her expression. Then Maria spoke, and her voice did not sound like her own at all. It was accusatory, menacing.

"Where is my little sister?" she cried. "Where is she?"

Mrs. Jonas White rose, approached Maria, and put her arms around her caressingly. "You poor, dear child," she sobbed, "I guess you do feel it. You did set a heap by that blessed little thing, didn't you?"

"She is in the hands of the Lord," said Mrs. Applegate.

"If the police of New York were worth anything, she would be in the police station by this time," said Mrs. Adams, with

a fierce toss of her pretty blond head.

“We know not where His islands lift their fronded palms in air; we only know we cannot drift beyond His love and care,” said Mrs. Applegate, with a solemn aside. Tears were in her own eyes, but she resolutely checked her impulse to weep. She felt that it would show a lack of faith. She was entirely in earnest.

“Mebbe she *is* in the police-station,” sobbed Mrs. White, continuing to embrace Maria. But Maria gave her a forcible push away, and again addressed herself to her step-mother.

“Where is she?” she demanded.

“Oh, you poor, dear child! Your ma don't know where she is, and she is so awful upset, she sets there jest like marble,” said Mrs. White.

“She isn't upset at all. You don't know her as well as I do,” said Maria, mercilessly. “She thinks she ought to act upset, so she sits this way. She isn't upset.”

“Oh, Maria!” gasped Mrs. White.

“The child is out of her head,” said Mrs. Adams, and yet she looked at Maria with covert approval. She was Ida's intimate friend, but in her heart of hearts she doubted her grief. She had once lost by death a little girl of her own. She kept thinking of her little Alice, and how she should feel in a similar case. It did not seem to her that she should rock, and look at a Tiffany vase. She inveighed against the detectives and police with a reserve meaning of indignation against Ida. It seemed to her that any woman whose child was lost should be up and generally making a tumult, if she were doing nothing else.

The Maria, standing before the beautiful woman swaying gently, with her eyes fixed upon the pink and gold of the vase, spoke out for the first time what was in her heart of hearts with regard to her.

“You are a wicked woman,” said she; “that is what you are. I don't know as you can help being wicked. I guess you were made wicked; but you *are* a wicked woman. Your mouth smiles, but your heart never does. You act now as if you were sorry,” said she, “but you are not sorry, the way my mother would have been sorry if she had lost me, the way she would have been sorry if Evelyn had been her little girl instead of yours. You are a wicked woman. I have always known it, but I have never told you so before. Now I am going to tell you. Your own child is lost, you let her be lost. You didn't look out for her. Yes, your own child is lost, and you sit there and rock!”

Ida for a moment made no reply. The other women, and Gladys and Wollaston in the vestibule, listened with horror.

“You have had beefsteak and fried potatoes cooked, too,” continued Maria, sniffing, “and you have eaten them. You have been eating beefsteak and fried potatoes when your own child was lost and you did not know where she was!” It might have been ridiculous, this last accusation in the thin, sweet, childish voice, but it was not. It was even more terrible than anything else.

Ida turned at last. “I hate you,” she said slowly. “I have always hated you. You have hated me ever since I came into this house,” she said, “though I have done more than your own mother ever did for you.”

“You have not!” cried Maria. “You have got nice clothes for me, but my own mother loved me. What are nice clothes to love? You have not even loved Evelyn. You have only got her nice clothes. You have never loved her. Poor papa and I were the only ones that loved her. You never even loved poor papa. You saw to it that he had things to eat, but you never loved him. You are not made right. All the love in your heart is for your own self. You are turned the wrong way. I don't know as you can help it, but you are a dreadful woman. You are wicked. You never loved the baby, and now you have let her be lost. She is my own little sister, and papa's child, a great deal more than she is anything to you. Where is she?” Maria's voice rang wild. Her face was blazing. She had an abnormal expression in her blue eyes fixed upon her step-mother.

Ida, after her one outburst, gazed upon her with a sort of fear as well as repulsion. She again turned to the Tiffany vase.

Mrs. White, sobbing aloud like a child, again put her arms around Maria.

“Come, come,” she said soothingly, “you poor child, I know how you feel, but you mustn't talk so, you mustn't, dear! You have no right to judge. You don't know how your mother feels.”

“I know how She doesn't feel!” Maria burst out, “and She isn't my mother. My mother loves me more way off in heaven than that woman loves Her own child on earth. She doesn't feel. She just rocks, and thinks how She looks. I hate Her! Let me go!” With that Maria was out of the room, and ran violently up-stairs.

When she had gone, the three visiting women looked at one another, and the same covert expression of gratified malice, at some one having spoken out what was in their inmost hearts, was upon all three faces. Ida was impassive, with her smiling lips contracted. Mrs. Applegate again murmured something about uniting in prayer.

Maria came hurrying down-stairs. She had in her hand her purse, which contained ten dollars, which her father had given her on her birthday, also a book of New York tickets which had been a present from Ida, and which Ida herself had borrowed several times since giving them to Maria. Maria herself seldom went to New York, and Ida had a fashion of giving presents which might react to her own benefit. Maria, as she passed the parlor door, glanced in and saw her step-mother rocking and staring at the vase. Then she was out of the front-door, racing down the street with Wollaston Lee and Gladys hardly able to keep up with her. Wollaston reached her finally, and again caught her arm. The pressure of the hard, warm boy hand was grateful to the little, hysterical thing, who was trembling from head to foot, with a strange rigidity of tremors. Gladys also clutched her other sleeve.

“Say, M'ria Edgham, where be you goin'?” she demanded.

“I'm going to find my little sister,” gasped out Maria. She gave a dry sob as she spoke.

“My!” said Gladys.

“Now, Maria, hadn't you better go back home?” ventured Wollaston.

“No,” said Maria, and she ran on towards the station.

“Come home with me to my mother,” said Wollaston, pleadingly, but a little timidly. A girl in such a nervous strait as this was a new experience for him.

“She can go home with me,” said Gladys. “My mother's a heap better than Ida Slome. Say, M'ria, all them things you said was true, but land! how did you darse?”

Maria made no reply. She kept on.

“Say, M'ria, you don't mean you're goin' to New York?” said Gladys.

“Yes, I am. I am going to find my little sister.”

“My!” said Gladys.

“Now, Maria, don't you think you had better go home with me, and see mother?” Wollaston said again.

But Maria seemed deaf. In fact, she heard nothing but the sound of the approaching New York train. She ran like a wild thing, her little, slim legs skimming the ground like a bird's, almost as if assisted by wings.

When the train reached the station, Maria climbed in, Wollaston and Gladys after her. Neither Wollaston nor Gladys had the slightest premeditation in the matter; they were fairly swept along by the emotion of their companion.

When the train had fairly started, Gladys, who had seated herself beside Maria, while Wollaston was in the seat behind them, heaved a deep sigh of bewilderment and terror. “My!” said she.

Wollaston also looked pale and bewildered. He was only a boy, and had never been thrown much upon his own responsibility. All that had been uppermost in his mind was the consideration that Maria could not be stopped, and she must not go alone to New York. But he did not know what to think of it all. He felt chaotic. The first thing which seemed to precipitate his mentality into anything like clearness was the entrance of the conductor. Then he thought instinctively about money. Although still a boy, money as a prime factor was already firmly established in his mind. He reflected with dismay that he had only his Wardway tickets, and about three dollars beside. It was now dark. The vaguest visions of what they were to do in New York were in his head. The fare to New York was a little over a dollar; he had only enough to take them all in, then what next? He took out his pocket-book, but Gladys looked around quickly.

“She's got a whole book of tickets,” she said.

However, Wollaston, who was proud, started to pay the conductor, but he had reached Maria first, and she had said “Three,” peremptorily. Then she handed the book to Wollaston, with the grim little ghost of a smile. “You please keep this,” said she. “I haven't got any pocket.”

Wollaston was so bewildered that the possession of pockets seemed instantly to restore his self-respect. He felt decidedly more at his ease when he had Maria's ticket-book in his innermost pocket. Then she gave him her purse also.

“I wish you would please take this,” said she. “There are ten dollars in it, and I haven't any pocket.” Wollaston took that.

“All right,” he said. He buttoned his gray vest securely over Maria's pretty little red purse. Then he leaned over the seat, and began to speak, but he absolutely did not know what to say. He made an idiotic remark about the darkness. “Queer how quick it grows dark, when it begins,” said he.

Maria ignored it, but Gladys said: “Yes, it is awful queer.”

Gladys's eyes looked wild. The pupils were dilated. She had been to New York but once before in her life, and now to be going in the evening to find Maria's little sister was almost too much for her intelligence, which had its limitations.

However, after a while, Wollaston Lee spoke again. He was in reality a keen-witted boy, only this was an emergency into which he had been surprised, and which he had not foreseen, and Maria's own abnormal mood had in a measure infected him. Presently he spoke to the point.

“What on earth are you going to do when you get to New York, anyhow?” said he to Maria.

“Find her,” replied Maria, laconically.

“But New York is a mighty big city. How do you mean to go to work? Now I—”

Maria cut him short. “I am going right up to Her cousin's, on West Forty-ninth Street, and find out if Evelyn is there,” said she.

“But what would make the child want to go there, anyhow?”

“It was the only place she had ever been in New York,” said Maria.

“But I don't see what particular reason she would have for going there, though,” said Wollaston. “How would she remember the street and number?”

“She was an awful bright kid,” said Gladys, with a momentary lapse of reason, “and kids is queer. I know, 'cause we've got so many of 'em to our house. Sometimes they'll remember things you don't ever think they would. My little sister Maud remembers how my mother drowned five kittens oncet, when she was in long clothes. We knowed she did, 'cause when the cat had kittens next time we caught her trying to drown 'em herself. Kids is awful queer. Maud can't remember how to spell her own name, either, and she's most six now. She spells it M-a-u-d, when it had ought to be M-a-u-g-h-d. I shouldn't be one mite surprised if M'ria's little sister remembered the street and number.”

“Anyway, she knew her whole name, because I've heard her say it,” said Maria. “Her cousin's name is Mrs. George B. Edison. Evelyn used to say it, and we used to laugh.”

“Oh, well, if she knew the name like that she might have found the place all right,” said Wollaston. “But what puzzles me is why she wanted to go there, anyway?”

“I don't know,” said Maria.

“I don't know,” said Wollaston, “but it seems to me the best thing to do would be to go directly to a police-office and have the chief of police notified, and set them at work; but then I suppose your father has done that already.”

Maria turned upon him with indignation. “Go to a police-station to find my little sister!” said she. “What would I go there for?”

“Yes, what do you suppose that kid has did?” asked Gladys.

“What would I go there for?” demanded Maria, flashing the light of her excited, strained little face upon the boy.

Maria no longer looked pretty. She no longer looked even young. Lines of age were evident around her mouth, her forehead was wrinkled. The boy fairly started at the sight of her. She seemed like a stranger to him. Her innermost character, which he had heretofore only guessed at by superficial signs, was written plainly on her face. The boy felt himself immeasurably small and young, manly and bold of his age as he really was. When a young girl stretches to the full height of her instincts, she dwarfs any boy of her own age. Maria's feeling for her little sister was fairly maternal. She was in spirit a mother searching for her lost young, rather than a girl searching for her little sister. Her whole soul expanded. She fairly looked larger, as well as older. When they got off the train at Jersey City, she led the little procession straight for the Twenty-third Street ferry. She marched ahead like a woman of twice her years.

“You had better hold up your dress, M'ria,” said Gladys, coming up with her, and looking at her with wonder. “My, how you do race!”

Maria reached round one hand and caught a fold of her skirt. Her new dress was in fact rather long for her. Ida had remarked that morning that she would have Miss Keeler shorten it on Saturday. Ida had no wish to have a grown-up step-daughter quite yet, whom people might take for her own.

The three reached the ferry-boat just as she was about to leave her slip. They sat down in a row midway of the upper deck. The heat inside was intense. Gladys loosened her shabby little sacque. Maria sat impassible.

“Ain't you most baked in here?” asked Gladys.

“No,” replied Maria.

Both Gladys and Wollaston looked cowed. They kept glancing at each other and at Maria. Maria sat next Gladys, Wollaston on Gladys's other side. Gladys nudged Wollaston, and whispered to him.

“We've jest got to stick close to her,” she whispered, in an alarmed cadence. The boy nodded.

Then they both glanced again at Maria, who seemed quite oblivious of their attention. When they reached the other side, Wollaston, with an effort, asserted himself.

“We had better take a cross-town car to the Sixth Avenue Elevated,” he said, pressing close to Maria's side and seizing her arm again.

Maria shook her head. “No,” she said. “Where Mrs. Edison lives is not so near the Elevated. It will be better to take a cross-town car and transfer at Seventh Avenue.”

“All right,” said Wollaston. He led the way in the run down the stairs, and aided his companions onto the cross-town car. He paid their fares, and got the transfers, and stopped the other car. He was beginning to feel himself again, at least temporarily.

“Well, I think the police-station is the best place to look, but have your own way. It won't take long to see if she is there now,” said Wollaston. He was hanging on a strap in front of Maria. The car was crowded with people going to up-town theatres. Some of the ladies, in showy evening wraps, giving glimpses of delicate waists, looked curiously at the three. There was something extraordinary about their appearance calculated to attract attention, although it was difficult to say just why. After they had left the car, a lady with a white lace blouse showing between the folds of a red cloak, said to her escort: “I wonder who they were?”

“I don't know,” said the man, who had been watching them. “I thought there was something unusual.”

“I thought so, too. That well-dressed young woman, and that handsome boy, and that shabby little girl.” By the “young woman” she meant Maria.

“Yes, a queer combination,” said the man.

“It wasn't altogether that, but they looked so desperately in earnest.”

Meantime, while the lights of the car disappeared up the avenue, Maria, Wollaston, and Gladys Mann searched for the house in which had lived Ida Edgham's cousin.

At last they found it, mounted the steps, and rang the bell. It was an apartment-house. After a little the door opened of itself.

“My!” said Gladys, but she followed Wollaston and Maria inside.

Wollaston began searching the names above the rows of bells on the wall of the vestibule.

“What did you say the name was?” he asked of Maria.

“Edison. Mrs. George B. Edison.”

“There is no such name here.”

“There must be.”

“There isn't.”

“Let me see,” said Maria. She searched the names. “Well, I don't care,” said she. “It was on the third floor, and I am going up and ask, anyway.”

“Now, Maria, do you think—” began Wollaston.

But Maria began climbing the stairs. There was no elevator.

“My!” said Gladys, but she followed Maria.

Wollaston pushed by them both. “See here, you don't know what you are getting into,” said he, sternly. “You let *me* go first.”

When they reached the third floor, Maria pointed to a door. “That is the door,” she whispered, breathlessly.

Wollaston knocked. Immediately the door was flung open by a very pretty young woman in a rose-colored evening gown. Her white shoulders gleamed through the transparent chiffon, and a comb set with rhinestones sparkled in the fluff of her blond hair. When she saw the three she gave a shrill scream, and immediately a very small man, much smaller than she, but with a fierce cock of a black pointed beard, and a tremendous wiriness of gesture, appeared.

“Oh, Tom!” gasped the young woman. “Oh!”

“What on earth is the matter, Stella?” asked the man. Then he looked fiercely at the three. “Who are these people?” he asked.

“I don't know. I opened the door. I thought it was Adeline and Raymond, and then I saw these strange people. I don't know how they got in.”

“We came in the door,” said Gladys, with some asperity, “and we are lookin' for M'ria's little sister. Be you her ma-in-law's cousin?”

“I don't know who these people are,” the young woman said, faintly, to the man. “I think they must be burglars.”

“Burglars, nothin'!” said Gladys, who had suddenly assumed the leadership of the party. Opposition and suspicion stimulated her. She loved a fight. “Be you her ma-in-law's cousin, and have you got her little sister?”

Wollaston looked inquiringly at Maria, who was very pale.

“It isn't Her cousin,” she gasped. “I don't know who she is. I never saw her.”

Then Wollaston spoke, hat in hand, and speaking up like a man. “Pardon us, sir,” he said, “we did not intend to intrude, but—”

“Get out of this,” said the man, with a sudden dart towards the door.

His wife screamed again, and put her hand over a little diamond brooch at her throat. “I just know they are sneak-thieves,” she gasped. “Do send them away, Tom!”

Wollaston tried to speak again. “We merely wished to ascertain,” said he, “if a lady by the name of Mrs. George A.—”

“B.” interrupted Gladys.

“B. Edison lived here. This young lady's little sister is lost, and Mrs. Edison is a relative, and we thought—”

The man made another dart. “Don't care what you thought,” he shouted. “Keep your thoughts to yourself! Get out of here!”

“Do you know where Mrs. George B. Edison lives now?” asked Wollaston, courteously, but his black eyes flashed at the man.

“No, I don't.”

“No, we don't,” said the young woman in pink. “Do make them go, Tom.”

“We are perfectly willing to go,” said Wollaston. “We have no desire to remain any longer where people are not willing to answer civil questions.”

Maria all this time had said nothing. She was perfectly overcome with the conviction that Ida's cousin was not there, and consequently not Evelyn. Moreover, she was frightened at the little man's fierce manner. She clung to Wollaston's arm as they retreated, but Gladys turned around and deliberately stuck her tongue out at the man and the young woman in rose. The man slammed the door.

The three met on the stoop of the house two people in gay attire.

“Go up and see your friends that don't know how to treat folks decent,” said Gladys. The woman looked wonderingly at her from under the shade of a picture hat. Her escort opened the door. “Ten chances to one they had the kid hid somewhere,” said Gladys, so loudly that both turned and looked at her.

“Hush up,” said Wollaston.

“Well, what be you goin' to do now?” asked Gladys.

“I am going to a drug-store, and see if I can find out where Maria's relatives have moved to,” replied Wollaston. He walked quite alertly now. Maria's discomfiture had reassured him.

They walked along a few blocks until they saw the lights of a drug-store on the corner. Then Wollaston led them in and marched up to the directory chained to the counter.

“What's that?” Gladys asked. “A Bible?”

“No, it's a directory,” Maria replied, in a dull voice.

“What do they keep it chained for? Books don't run away.”

“I suppose they are afraid folks will steal it.”

“My!” said Gladys, eying the big volume. “I don't see what on earth they'd do with it when they got it stole,” she remarked, in a low, reflective voice.

Maria leaned against the counter and waited.

Finally, Wollaston turned to her with an apologetic air. “I can't find any George B. here,” he said. “You are sure it was B?”

“Yes,” replied Maria.

“Well, there's no use,” said Wollaston. “There is no George B. Edison in this book, anyhow.”

He came forward, and stood looking at Maria. Maria gazed absently at the crowds passing on the street. Gladys watched them both.

“Well,” said Gladys, presently, “you ain't goin' to stand here all night, be you? What be you goin' to do next? Go to the police-station?”

“I don't see that there is any use,” replied Wollaston. “Maria's father must have been there by this time. This is a wild-goose chase anyhow.” Wollaston's tone was quite vicious. He scowled superciliously at the salesman who stepped forward and asked if he wanted anything. “No, we don't, thank you,” he said.

“What be you goin' to do?” asked Gladys, again. She looked at the soda-fountain.

“I don't see anything to do but to go home,” said Wollaston. “There is no sense in our chasing around New York any longer, that I can see.”

“You can't go home to-night, anyhow,” Gladys said, quite calmly. “They've took off that last train, and there ain't more'n ten minutes to git down to the station.”

Wollaston turned pale, and looked at her with horror. “What makes you think they've taken off that last train?” he demanded.

“Ain't my pa brakeman when he's sober, and he's been real sober for quite a spell now.”

Wollaston seized Maria by the arm. “Come, quick!” he said, and leaving the drug-store he broke into a run for the Elevated, with Gladys following.

“There ain't no use in your runnin',” said she. “You know yourself you can't git down to Cortlandt Street, and walk to the ferry in ten minutes. I never went but oncet, but I know it can't be did.”

Wollaston slackened his pace. “That is so,” he said. Then he looked at Maria in a kind of angry despair. He felt, in spite of his romantic predilection for her, that he wished she were a boy, so he could say something forcible. He realized his utter helplessness with these two girls in a city where he knew no one, and he again thought of the three dollars in his pocket-book. He did not suppose that Maria had more than fifty cents in hers. Then, too, he was worldly wise enough to realize the difficulty of the situation, the possible danger even. It was ten o'clock at night, and here he was with two young girls to look out for.

Then Gladys, who had also worldly wisdom, although of a crude and vulgar sort, spoke. “Folks are goin' to talk like the old Harry if we stay in here all night,” said she, “and besides, there's no knowin' what is a safe place to go into.”

“That is so,” said Wollaston, gloomily, “and I—have not much money with me.”

“I've got money enough,” Maria said, suddenly. “There are ten dollars in my pocket-book I gave you to keep.”

“My!” said Gladys.

Wollaston brightened for a moment, then his face clouded again. “Well, I don't know as that makes it much better,” said he. “I don't quite see how to manage. They are so particular in hotels now, that I don't know as I can get you into a decent one. As for myself, I don't care. I can look out for myself, but I don't know what to do with you, Maria.”

Gladys made a little run and stepped in front of them. “There ain't but one thing you can do, so Maria won't git talked about all the rest of her life, and I kin tell you what it is,” said she.

“What is it?” asked Wollaston, in a burst of anger. “I call it a pretty pickle we are in, for my part. Ten chances to one, Mr. Edgham has got the baby back home safe and sound by this time, anyway, and here we are, here is Maria!”

“There ain't but one thing you can do,” said Gladys. Her tone was forcible. She was full of the vulgar shrewdness of a degenerate race, for the old acumen of that race had sharpened her wits.

“What! in Heaven's name?” cried Wollaston.

The three had been slowly walking along, and had stopped near a church, which was lighted. As they were talking the lights went out. A thin stream of people ceased issuing from the open doors. A man in a clerical dress approached them, walking quite rapidly. He was evidently bound, from the trend of his steps, to a near-by house, which was his residence.

“Git married,” said Gladys, abruptly. Then, before the others realized what she was doing, she darted in front of the approaching clergyman. “They want to git married,” said she.

The clergyman stopped and stared at her, then at the couple beyond, who were quite speechless with astonishment. He was inconceivably young for his profession. He was small, and had a round, rollicking face, which he was constantly endeavoring to draw down into lines of asceticism.

“Who wants to get married?” asked the clergyman.

“Them two,” replied Gladys, succinctly. She pointed magisterially at Wollaston and Maria.

Wollaston was tall and manly looking for his age, Maria's dress touched the ground. The clergyman had not, at the moment, a doubt as to their suitable age. He was not a brilliant young man, naturally. He had been pushed through college and into his profession by wealthy relatives, and, moreover, with his stupidity, he had a certain spirit of recklessness and sense of humor which gave life a spice for him.

“Want to get married, eh?” he said.

Then Wollaston spoke. “No, we do not want to get married,” he said, positively. Then he said to Gladys, “I wish you would mind your own business.”

But he had to cope with the revival of a wonderful feminine wit of a fine old race in Gladys. “I should think you would be plum ashamed of yourself,” she said, severely, “after you have got that poor girl in here; and if she stays and you ain't married, she'll git talked about.”

The clergyman approached Wollaston and Maria. Maria had begun to cry. She was trembling from head to foot with fear and confusion. Wollaston looked sulky and angry.

“Is that true—did you induce this girl to come to New York to be married?” he inquired, and his own boyish voice took on severe tones. He was very strong in moral reform.

“No, I did not,” replied Wollaston.

“He did,” said Gladys. “She'll get talked about if she ain't, too, and the last train has went, and we've got to stay in New York all night.”

“Where do you come from?” inquired the young clergyman, and his tone was more severe still.

“From Edgham, New Jersey,” replied Gladys.

“Who are you?” inquired the clergyman.

“I ain't no account,” replied Gladys. “All our folks git talked about, but she's different.”

“I suppose you are her maid,” said the clergyman, noting with quick eye the difference in the costumes of the two girls.

“Call it anything you wanter,” said Gladys, indifferently. “I ain't goin' to have her talked about, nohow.”

“Come, Maria,” said Wollaston, but Maria did not respond even to his strong, nervous pull on her arm. She sobbed convulsively.

“No, that girl does not go one step, young man,” said the clergyman. He advanced closely, and laid a hand on Maria's other arm. Although small in body and mind, he evidently had muscle. “Come right in the house,” said he, and Maria felt his hand on her arm like steel. She yielded, and began following him, Wollaston in vain trying to hold her back.

Gladys went behind Wollaston and pushed vigorously. “You git right in there, the way he says, Wollaston Lee,” said she. “You had ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Before the boy well knew what he was doing he found himself in a small reception-room lined with soberly bound books. All that was clear in his mind was that he could not hinder Maria from entering, and that she must not go into the house alone with Gladys and this strange man.

A man had been standing in the doorway of the house, waiting the entrance of the clergyman. He was evidently a servant, and his master beckoned him.

“Call Mrs. Jerrolds, Williams,” he said.

“What is your name?” he asked Maria, who was sobbing more wildly than ever.

“Her name is Maria Edgham,” replied Gladys, “and his is Wollaston Lee. They both live in Edgham.”

“How old are you?” the clergyman asked of Wollaston; but Gladys cut in again.

“He's nineteen, and she's goin' on,” she replied, shamelessly.

“We are neither of us,” began Wollaston, whose mind was in a whirl of anger of confusion.

But the clergyman interrupted him. “I am ashamed of you, young man,” he said, “luring an innocent young girl to New York and then trying to lie out of your responsibility.”

“I am not,” began Wollaston again; but then the man who had stood in the door entered with a portly woman in a black silk tea-gown. She looked as if she had been dozing, or else was naturally slow-witted. Her eyes, under heavy lids, were dull; her mouth had a sleepy, although good-natured pout, like a child's, between her fat cheeks.

“I am sorry to trouble you, Mrs. Jerrolds,” said the clergyman, “but I need you and Williams for witnesses.” Then he proceeded.

Neither Wollaston nor Maria were ever very clear in their minds how it was done. Both had thought marriage was a more complicated proceeding. Neither was entirely sure of having said anything. Indeed, Wollaston was afterwards quite positive that Gladys Mann answered nearly all the clergyman's questions; but at all events, the first thing he heard distinctly was the clergyman's pronouncing him and Maria man and wife. Then the clergyman, who was zealous to the point of fanaticism, and who honestly considered himself to have done an exceedingly commendable thing, invited them to have some wedding-cake, which he kept ready for such emergencies, and some coffee, but Wollaston replied with a growl of indignation and despair. This time Maria followed his almost brutally spoken command to follow him, and the three went out of the house.

“See that you treat your wife properly, young man,” the clergyman called out after him, in a voice half jocular, half condemnatory, “or there will be trouble.”

Wollaston growled an oath, the first which he had ever uttered, under his breath, and strode on. He had released his hold on Maria's arm. Ahead of them, a block distant, was an Elevated station, and Maria, who seemed to suddenly recover her faculties, broke into a run for it.

“Where be you goin'?” called out Gladys.

“I am going down to the Jersey City station, quick,” replied Maria, in a desperate voice.

“I thought you'd go to a hotel. There ain't no harm, now you're married, you know,” said Gladys, “and then we could have some supper. I'm awful hungry. I ain't eat a thing sence noon.”

“I am going right down to the station,” repeated Maria.

“The last train has went. What's the use?”

“I don't care. I'm going down there.”

“What be you goin' to do when you git there?”

“I am going to sit there, and wait till morning.”

“My!” said Gladys.

However, she went on up the Elevated stairs with Maria and Wollaston. Wollaston threw down the fares and got the tickets, and strode on ahead. His mouth was set. He was very pale. He probably realized to a greater extent than any of them what had taken place. It was inconceivable to him that it had taken place, that he himself had been such a fool. He felt like one who has met with some utterly unexplainable and unaccountable accident. He felt as he had done once when, younger, he had stuck his own knife, with which he was whittling, into his eye, to the possible loss of it. It seemed to him as if something had taken place without his volition. He was like a puppet in a show. He looked at Maria, and realized that he hated her. He wondered how he could ever have thought her pretty. He looked at Gladys Mann, and felt murderous. He had a high temper. As the train approached, he whispered in her ear,

“Damn you, Gladys Mann, it's a pretty pickle you have got us into.”

Gladys was used to being sworn at. She was not in the least intimidated.

“Do you s'pose I was goin' to have M'ria talked about?” she said. “You can cuss all you want to.”

They got into the train. Wollaston sat by himself, Gladys and Maria together. Maria was no longer weeping, but she looked terrified beyond measure, and desperate. A horrible imagination of evil was over her. She never glanced at Wollaston. She thought that she wished there would be an accident on the train and he might be killed. She hated him more than he hated her.

They were just in time for a boat at Cortlandt Street. When they reached the Jersey City side Wollaston went straight to the information bureau, and then returned to Gladys and Maria, seated on a bench in the waiting-room.

“Well, there *is* a train,” he said, curtly.

“'Ain't it been took off?” asked Gladys.

“No, but we've got to wait an hour and a half.” Then he bent down and whispered in Gladys's ear, “I wish to God you'd been dead before you got us into this, Gladys Mann!”

“My father said it had been took off,” said Gladys. “You sure there is one?”

“Of course I'm sure!”

“My!” said Gladys.

Wollaston went to a distant seat and sat by himself. The two girls waited miserably. Gladys had suffered a relapse. Her degeneracy of wit had again overwhelmed her. She looked at Maria from time to time, then she glanced around at Wollaston, and her expression was almost idiotic. The people who were on the seat with them moved away. Maria turned suddenly to Gladys.

“Gladys Mann,” said she, “if you ever tell of this—”

“Then you ain't goin' to—” said Gladys.

“Going to what?”

“Live with him?”

“Live with him! I hate him enough to wish he was dead. I'll never live with him; and if you tell, Gladys Mann, I'll tell you what I'll do.”

“What?” asked Gladys, in a horrified whisper.

“I'll go and drown myself in Fisher's Pond, that's what I'll do.”

“I never will tell, honest, M'ria,” said Gladys.

“You'd better not.”

“Hope to die, if I do.”

“You *will* die if you do,” said Maria, “for I'll leave a note saying you pushed me into the pond, and it will be true, too. Oh, Gladys Mann! it's awful what you've done!”

“I didn't mean no harm,” said Gladys.

“And there's a train, too.”

“Father said there wasn't.”

“Your father!”

“I know it. There ain't never tellin' when father lies,” said Gladys. “I guess father don't know what lies is, most of the time. I s'pose he's always had a little, if he 'ain't had a good deal. But I'll never tell, Maria, not as long as I live.”

“If you do, I'll drown myself,” said Maria.

Then the two sat quietly until the train was called out, when they went through the gate, Maria showing her tickets for herself and Gladys. Wollaston had purchased his own and returned Maria's. He kept behind the two girls as if he did not belong to their party at all. On the train he rode in the smoking-car.

The car was quite full at first, but the passengers got off at the way-stations. When they drew near Edgham there were only a few left. Wollaston had not paid the slightest attention to the passengers. He could not have told what sort of a man occupied the seat with him, nor even when he got off. He was vaguely conscious of the reeking smoke of the car, but that was all. When the conductor came through he handed out his ticket mechanically, without looking at him. He stared out of the window at the swift-passing, shadowy trees, at the green-and-red signal-lights, and the bright glare from the lights of the stations through which they passed. Once they passed by a large factory on fire, surrounded by a shouting mob of men, and engines. Even that did not arrest his attention, although it caused quite a commotion in the car. He sat huddled up in a heap, staring out with blank eyes, all his consciousness fixed upon his own affairs. He felt as if he had made an awful leap from boyhood to manhood in a minute. He was full of indignation, of horror, of shame. He was conscious of wishing that there were no girls in the world. After they had passed the last station before reaching Edgham he looked wearily away from the window, and recognized, stupidly, Maria's father in a seat in the forward part of the car. Harry was sitting as dejectedly hunched upon himself as was the boy. Wollaston recognized the fact that he could not have found little Evelyn, and realized wickedly and furiously that he did not care, that a much more dreadful complication had come into his own life. He turned again to the window.

Maria, in the car behind the smoker, sat beside Gladys, and looked out of the window very much as Wollaston was doing. She also was conscious of an exceeding horror and terror, and a vague shame. It was, to Maria, as if she had fallen through the fairy cobweb of romance and struck upon the hard ground of reality with such force that her very soul was bleeding. Wollaston, in the smoker, wished no more devoutly that there were no girls in the world, than Maria wished there were no boys. Her emotions had been, as it were, thrust back down her own throat, and she was choked and sickened with them. She would not look at nor speak to Gladys. Once, when Gladys addressed a remark to her, Maria thrust out an indignant shoulder towards her.

“You needn't act so awful mad,” whispered Gladys. “I ain't goin' to tell, and I was doin' it on your account. My mother will give it to me when I git home.”

“What are you going to tell her?” asked Maria, with sudden interest.

“I'm goin' to tell her I've been out walkin' with Ben Jadkins. She's told me not to, and she'll lick me for all she's wuth,” said Gladys, angrily. “But I don't care. It's lucky father 'ain't been through this train. It's real lucky to have your father git drunk sometimes. I'll git licked, but I don't care.”

Maria, sitting there, paid no more attention. The shock of her own plight had almost driven from her mind the thought of Evelyn, but when a woman got on the train leading a child about her age, the old pain concerning her came back. She began to weep again quietly.

“I don't see what you are cryin' for,” said Gladys, in an accusing voice. “You might have been an old maid.”

“I don't believe she is found,” Maria moaned, in a low voice.

“Oh, the kid! You bet your life she'll turn up. Your pa 'll find her all right. I didn't know as you were cryin' about that.”

When they reached Edgham, Maria and Gladys got off the train, Wollaston Lee also got off, and Harry Edgham, and from a rear car a stout woman, yanking, rather than leading, by the hand, a little girl with a fluff of yellow hair. The child was staggering with sleep. The stout woman carried on her other arm a large wax-doll whose face smiled inanely over her shoulder.

Suddenly there was a rush and cry, and Maria had the little girl in her arms. She was kneeling beside her on the dusty platform, regardless of her new suit.

“Sister! Sister!” screamed the child.

“Sister's own little darling!” said Maria, then she began to sob wildly.

“It's her little sister. Where did you get her?” Gladys asked, severely, of the stout woman, who stood holding the large doll and glowering, while Harry Edgham came hurrying up. Then there was another scream from the baby, and she was in her father's arms. There were few at the station at that hour, but a small crowd gathered around. On the outskirts was Wollaston Lee, looking on with his sulky, desperate face.

The stout woman grasped Harry vehemently by the arm. “Look at here,” said she. “I want to know, an' I ain't got no time to fool around, for I want to take the next train back. Is that your young one? Speak up quick.”

Harry, hugging the child to his breast, looked at the stout woman.

“Yes,” he replied, “she is mine, and I have been looking for her all day. Where—Did you?”

“No, I didn't,” said the stout woman, emphatically. “*She* did. I don't never meddle with other folks' children. I 'ain't never been married, and I 'ain't never wanted to be. And I 'ain't never cared nothin' about children; always thought they was more bother than they were worth. And when I changed cars here this mornin', on my way from Lawsons, where I've been to visit my married sister, this young one tagged me onto the train, and nothin' I could say made anybody believe she wa'n't mine. I told 'em I wa'n't married, but it didn't make no difference. I call it insultin'. There I was goin' up to Tarrytown to-day to see my aunt 'Liza. She's real feeble, and they sent for me, and there I was with this young

one. I had a cousin in New York, and I took her to her house, and she didn't know any better what to do than I did. She was always dreadful helpless. We waited till her husband got home. He runs a tug down the harbor, and he said take her to the police-station, and mebbe I'd find out somebody had been tryin' to find her. So my cousin's husband and me went to the station, and he was so tuckered out and mad at the whole performance that I could hear him growlin' cuss words under his breath the whole way. We took her and this great doll down to the station, and we found out there who she was most likely, and who she belonged to. And my cousin's husband said I'd got to take her out here. He looked it up and found out I could git back to New York to-night. He said he wouldn't come nohow." Suddenly a light flashed on the woman. "Say," she said, "you don't mean to say you've been on the train yourself all the way out from New York?"

"Yes, I came out on the train," admitted Harry, meekly. "I am sorry—"

"Well, you'd better be," said the woman. "Here I've traipsed out here for nothin' this time of night. I call you all a set of numskulls. I don't call the young one very bright, either. Couldn't tell where she lived, nor what her father's name was. Jest said it was papa, and her name was peshious, or some such tomfoolery. I advise you to tag her if she is in the habit of runnin' away. Here I ought to have been up in Tarrytown, and I've been foolin' round in New York all day with your young one and this big doll." With that the stout woman thrust the doll at Maria. "Here, take this thing," said she. "I've had enough of it! There ain't any sense in lettin' a child of her size lug around a doll as big as that, anyhow. When does my train come? Hev I got to cross to the other side? My cousin's husband said it would be about twenty minutes I'd have to wait."

"I'll take you round to the other side, and I cannot be grateful enough for your care," began Harry, but the woman stopped him again.

"I suppose you'll be willin' to pay my fare back to New York; that's all I want," said she. "I don't want no thanks. I 'ain't no use for children, but I ain't a heathen."

"I'll be glad to give you a great deal more than your fare to New York," Harry said, in a broken voice. Evelyn was already fast asleep on his shoulder. He led the way down the stairs towards the other track.

"I don't want nothin' else, except five cents for my car-fare. I can get a transfer, and it won't be more'n that," said the woman, following. "I've got enough to git along with, and I ain't a heathen."

Harry, with Evelyn asleep in his arms, and Maria and Gladys, waited with the stout woman until the train came. The station was closed, and the woman sat down on a bench outside and immediately fell asleep herself.

When the train came, Harry thrust a bank-note into the woman's hand, having roused her with considerable difficulty, and she stumbled on to the train over her skirts just as she had done in the morning.

Harry knew the conductor. "Look out for that woman," he called out to him. "She found my little girl that was lost."

The conductor nodded affably as the train rolled out.

Wollaston Lee had gone home when the others descended the stairs and crossed to the other track. When Harry, with Evelyn in his arms, her limp little legs dangling, and Maria and Gladys, were on their way home, the question, which he in his confusion had not thought to put before, came.

"Why, Maria, where did you come from?" he asked.

"From New York," replied Maria, meekly.

"Her and me went up to her ma-in-law's cousin's, on Forty-ninth Street, to find the kid," Gladys cut in, glibly, "but the cousin had moved."

Harry stared at them. "Why, how happened you to do such a thing?" he asked.

"I couldn't wait home and not do anything," Maria sobbed, nervously.

"Her ma-in-law's cousin had moved," said Gladys.

"How did you find your way?"

"I had been there before," sobbed Maria. She felt for her father's hand, and grasped it with a meaning of trust and fear which he did not understand.

"Well, you must never do such a thing again, no matter what happens," he said, and held the poor little girl's hand firmly. "Thank God father's got you both back safe and sound."

Gladys made an abrupt departure on a corner.

"Good-night, M'ria!" she sung out, and was gone, a slim, flying figure in the gloom.

"Are you afraid to go alone?" Harry called after her, in some uncertainty.

"Land, no!" came cheerily back.

"How happened she to be with you?" asked Harry.

"She was down at the station when I came home from Wardway," replied Maria, faintly. Her strength was almost gone. She could hardly stagger up the steps of the house with her father, he bearing his recovered child, she bearing her

secret.

Chapter XV

Ida was still to be seen rocking when Harry, with Evelyn and Maria, came in sight of the house. The visiting ladies had gone. Josephine, with her face swollen and tear-stained, was standing watching at a window in the dark dining-room. When she saw the three approaching she screamed:

“Oh, Mis' Edgham, they've found her! They're comin'! They've got her!” and rushed to open the door.

Ida rose, and came gracefully to meet them with a sinuous movement and a long sweep of her rose-colored draperies. Her radiant smile lit up her face again. She looked entirely herself when Harry greeted her.

“Well, Ida, our darling is found,” he said, in a broken voice.

Ida reached out her arms, from which hung graceful pendants of lace and ribbons, but the sleepy child clung to her father and whimpered crossly.

“She is all tired out, poor little darling! Papa's poor little darling!” said Harry, carrying her into the parlor.

“Josephine, tell Annie to heat some milk at once,” Ida said, sharply.

Annie, whose anxious face had been visible peeping through the dark entrance of the dining-room, hastened into the kitchen.

“Josephine, go right up-stairs and get Miss Evelyn's bed ready,” ordered Ida. Then she followed Harry into the parlor and began questioning him, standing over him, and now and then touching the yellow head of the child, who always shrank crossly at her touch.

Harry told his story. “I had the whole police force of New York on the outlook, although I did not really think myself she was in the city, and there papa's precious darling was all the time right on the train with him and he never knew it. And here was poor little Maria,” added Harry, looking at Maria, who had sunk into a corner of a divan—“here was poor little Maria, Ida, and she had gone hunting her little sister on her own account. She thought she might be at your cousin Alice's. If I had known that both my babies were wandering around New York I should have been crazy. When I got off the train, there was Maria and that little Mann girl. She was down at the station when she got home from Wardway, Maria says, and those two children went right off to New York.”

“Did they?” said Ida, in a listless voice. She had resumed her seat in her rocking-chair.

“Edwin Shaw said he thought he saw Evelyn getting on the New York train this morning,” said Maria, faintly.

“She is all used up,” Harry said. “You had better drink some hot milk yourself, Maria. Only think of that child and that Mann girl going off to New York on their own accounts, Ida!”

“Yes,” said Ida.

“Wollaston Lee went, too,” Maria said, suddenly. A quick impulse for concealment in that best of hiding-places, utter frankness and openness, came over her. “He got off the train here. You know he began school, too, at Wardway this morning, and he and Gladys both went.”

“Well, I'm thankful you had him along,” said Harry. “The Lord only knows what you two girls would have done alone in a city like New York. You must never do such a thing again, whatever happens, Maria. You might as well run right into a den of wild beasts. Only think of that child going to New York, and coming out on the last train, with that Mann girl; and Wollaston is only a boy, though he's bright and smart. And your cousin has moved, Ida.”

“I thought she had,” said Ida.

“And to think of what those children might have got into,” said Harry, “in a city like New York, which is broken out all over with plague spots instead of having them in one place! Only think of it, Ida!”

Harry's voice was almost sobbing. It seemed as if he fairly appealed to his wife for sympathy, with his consciousness of the dangers through which his child had passed. But Ida only said, “Yes.”

“And the baby might have fallen into the worst hands,” said Harry. “But, thank God, a good woman, although she was coarse enough, got hold of her.”

“Yes, we can't be thankful enough,” Ida said, smoothly, and then Josephine came in with a tray and a silver cup of hot milk for Evelyn.

“Is that all the milk Annie heated?” asked Harry.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, tell Annie to go to the sideboard and get that bottle of port-wine and pour out a glass for Miss Maria; and, Josephine, you had better bring her something to eat with it. You haven't had any supper, have you, child?”

Maria shook her head. “I don't want any, thank you, papa,” said she.

“Is there any cold meat, Josephine, do you know?”

Josephine said there was some cold roast beef.

“Well, bring Miss Maria a plate, with a slice of bread-and-butter, and some beef.”

“Have you had any supper yourself, dear?” Ida asked.

“I declare I don't know, dear,” replied Harry, who looked unutterably worn and tired. “No, I think not. I don't know when I could have got it. No, I know I have not.”

“Josephine,” said Ida, “tell Annie to broil a piece of beefsteak for Mr. Edgham, and make a cup of tea.”

“Thank you, dear,” poor Harry said, gratefully. Then he said to Maria, “Will you wait and have some hot beefsteak and tea with papa, darling?”

Maria shook her head.

“I think she had better eat the cold beef and bread, and drink the wine, and go at once to bed, if she is to start on that early train to-morrow,” Ida said.

“Maybe you are right, dear,” Harry said. “Hurry with the roast beef and bread and wine for Miss Maria, Josephine, and Annie can see to my supper afterwards.”

All this time Harry was coaxing the baby to imbibe spoonfuls of the hot milk. It was hard work, for Evelyn was not very hungry. She had been given a good deal of cake and pie from a bakery all day.

However, at last she was roused sufficiently to finish her little meal, and Maria drank her glass of wine and ate a little of the bread and meat, although it seemed to her that it would choke her. She was conscious of her father's loving, anxious eyes upon her as she ate, and she made every effort.

Little Evelyn had recently had her own little room fitted up. It was next to Maria's; indeed, there was a connecting door between the two rooms. Evelyn's room was a marvel. It was tiny, but complete. Ida had the walls hung with paper with a satin gloss, on which were strewn garlands of rose-buds. There was a white matting and a white fur rug. The small furniture was white, with rose-bud decorations. There was a canopy of rose silk over the tiny bed, and a silk counterpane of a rose-bud pattern.

After Evelyn had finished her hot milk, her father carried her up-stairs into this little nest, and Josephine undressed her and put her to bed. The child's head drooped as helplessly as a baby's all the time, she was so overcome with sleep. When she was in bed, Ida came in and kissed her. She was so fast asleep that she did not know. She and Harry stood for a moment contemplating the little thing, with her yellow hair spread over the white pillow and her round rose of a face sunken therein. Harry put his arm around his wife's waist.

“We ought to be very thankful, dear,” he said, and he almost sobbed.

“Yes,” said Ida. To do her justice, she regarded the little rosy-and-white thing sunk in slumber with a certain tenderness. She was even thankful. She had been exceedingly disturbed the whole day. She was very glad to have this happy termination, and to be able to go to rest in peace. She bent again over the child, and touched her lips lightly to the little face, and when she looked up her own was softened. “Yes,” she whispered, with more of womanly feeling than Harry had ever seen in her—“yes, you are right, we have a great deal to be thankful for.”

Maria, in the next room, heard quite distinctly what Ida said. It would once have aroused in her a contemptuous sense of her step-mother's hypocrisy, but now she felt too humbled herself to blame another, even to realize any fault in another. She felt as if she had undergone a tremendous cataclysm of spirit, which had cast her forever from her judgment-seat as far as others were concerned. Was she not deceiving as never Ida had deceived? What would Ida say? What would her father say if he knew that she was—? She could not say the word even to herself. When she was in bed and her light out, she was overcome by a nervous stress which almost maddened her. Faces seemed to glower at her out of the blackness of the night, faces which she knew were somehow projected out of her own consciousness, but which were none the less terrific. She even heard her name shouted, and strange, isolated words, and fragments of sentences. She lay in a deadly fear. Now was the time when, if her own mother had been alive, she would have screamed aloud for some aid. But now she could call to no one. She would have spoken to her father. She would not have told him—she was gripped too fast by her sense of the need of secrecy—but she would have obtained the comfort and aid of his presence and soothing words; but there was Ida. She remembered how she had talked to Ida, and her father was with her. A dull wonder even seized her as to whether Ida would tell her father, and she should be allowed to remain at home after saying such dreadful things. There was no one upon whom she could call. All at once she thought of the maid Annie, whose room was directly over hers. Annie was kindly. She would slip up-stairs to her, and make some excuse for doing so—ask her if she did not smell smoke, or something. It seemed to her that if she did not hear another human voice, come in contact with something human, she should lose all control of herself.

Maria, little, slender, trembling girl, with all the hysterical fancies of her sex crowding upon her, all the sufferings of her sex waiting for her in the future, and with no mother to soften them, slipped out of bed, stole across her room, and opened the door with infinite caution. Then she went up the stairs which led to the third story. Both maids had rooms on the third story. Josephine went home at night, and Hannah, the cook, had gone home with her after the return of the wanderers, and was to remain. She was related to Josephine's mother. She knocked timidly at Annie's door. She waited, and knocked again. She was trembling from head to foot in a nervous chill. She got no response to her knock. Then she called, “Annie,” very softly. She waited and called again. At last, in desperation, she opened the door, which was not locked. She entered, and the room was empty. Suddenly she remembered that Annie, kind-hearted as she was, and a

good servant, had not a character above suspicion. She remembered that she had heard Gladys intimate that she had a sweetheart, and was not altogether what she should be. She gazed around the empty, forlorn little room, with one side sloping with the slope of the roof, and an utter desolation overcame her, along with a horror of Annie. She felt that if Annie were there she would be no refuge.

Maria turned, and slipped as silently as a shadow down the stairs back to her room. She looked at her bed, and it seemed to her that she could not lie down again in it. Then suddenly she thought of something else. She thought of little Evelyn asleep in the next room. She opened the connecting door softly and stole across to the baby's little bed. It was too small, or she would have crept in beside her. Maria hesitated a moment, then she slid her arms gently under the little, soft, warm body, and gathered the child up in her arms. She was quite heavy. At another time Maria, who had slender arms, could scarcely have carried her. Now she bore her with entire ease into her own room and laid her in her own bed. Then she got in beside her and folded her little sister in her arms. Directly a sense of safety and peace came over her when she felt the little snuggling thing, who had wakened just enough to murmur something unintelligible in her baby tongue, and cling close to her with all her little, rosy limbs, and thrust her head into the hollow of Maria's shoulder. Then she gave a deep sigh and was soundly asleep again. Maria lay awake a little while, enjoying that sense of peace and security which the presence of this little human thing she loved gave her. Then she fell asleep herself.

She waked early. The thought of the early train was in her mind, and Maria was always one who could wake at the sub-recollection of a need. Evelyn was still asleep, curled up like a flower. Maria raised her and carried her back to her own room and put her in her bed without waking her. Then she dressed herself in her school costume and went down-stairs. She had smelled coffee while she was dressing, and knew that Hannah had returned. Her father was in the dining-room when she entered. He usually took an earlier train, but this morning he had felt utterly unable to rise. Maria noticed, with a sudden qualm of fear, how ill and old and worn-out he looked, but Harry himself spoke first with concern for her.

“Papa's poor little girl!” he said, kissing her. “She looks tired out. Did you sleep, darling?”

“Yes, after a while. Are you sick, papa?”

“No, dear. Why?”

“Because you did not go on the other train.”

“No, dear, I am all right, just a little tired,” replied Harry. Then he added, looking solicitously at Maria, “Are you sure you feel able to go to school to-day?—because you need not, you know.”

“I am all right,” said Maria.

She and her father had seated themselves at the table. Harry looked at his watch.

“We shall neither of us go if we don't get our breakfast before long,” he said.

Then Hannah came in, with a lowering look, bringing the coffee-pot and the chops and rolls.

“Where is Annie?” asked Harry.

“I don't know,” replied Hannah, with a toss of her head and a compression of her lips. She was a large, solid woman, with a cast in her eyes. She had never been married.

“You don't know?” said Harry, helping Maria to a chop and a roll, while Hannah poured the coffee.

“No,” said Hannah again, and this time her face was fairly malicious. “I don't know how long I can stand such doin's, and that's the truth,” she said.

Hannah had come originally from New England, and had principles, in which she took pride, perhaps the more because they had never in one sense been assailed. Annie was a Hungarian, and considered by Hannah to have no principles. She was also pretty, in a rough, half-finished sort of fashion, and had no cast in her eyes. Hannah privately considered that as against her.

Harry began sipping his coffee, which Hannah had set down with such impetus that she spilled a good deal in the saucer, and he looked uneasily at her.

“What do you mean, Hannah?” he asked.

“I mean that I am not used to being throwed in with girls who stays out all night, and nobody knows where they be, and that's the truth,” said Hannah, with emphasis.

“Do you mean to say that Annie—”

“Yes, I do. She wa'n't in, and they do say she's married, and—”

“Hush, Hannah, we'll talk about this another time,” Harry said, with a glance at Maria.

Just then a step was heard in the kitchen.

“There she is now, the trollop,” said Hannah, but she whispered the last word under her breath, and she also gave a glance at Maria, as one might at any innocent ignorance which must be shielded even from knowledge itself.

Annie came in directly. Her pretty, light hair was nicely arranged; she was smiling, but she looked doubtful.

Hannah went with a flounce into the kitchen. Annie had removed her hat and coat and tied on a white apron in a second, and she began waiting exactly as if she had come down the back stairs after a night spent in her own room. Indeed, she did not dream that either Harry or Maria knew that she had not, and she felt quite sure of Hannah's ignorance, since Hannah herself had been away all night.

Maria from time to time glanced at Annie, and, although she had always liked her, a feeling of repulsion came over her. She shrank a little when Annie passed the muffins to her. Harry gave one keen, scrutinizing glance at the girl's face, but he said nothing. After breakfast he went up-stairs to bid Ida, who had a way of rising late, good-bye, and he whispered to her, “Annie was out all last night.”

“Oh, well,” replied Ida, sleepily, with a little impatience, “it does not happen very often. What are we going to do about it?”

“Hannah is kicking,” said Harry, “and—”

“I can't help it if she is,” said Ida. “Annie does her work well, and it is so difficult to get a maid nowadays; and I cannot set up as a moral censor, I really cannot, Harry.”

“I hate the example, that is all,” said Harry. “There Hannah said, right before Maria, that Annie had been out.”

“It won't hurt Maria any,” Ida replied, with a slight frown. “Maria wouldn't know what she meant. She is not only innocent, but ignorant. I can't turn off Annie, unless I see another maid as good in prospect. Good-bye, dear.”

Harry and Maria walked to the station together. Their trains reached Edgham about the same time, although going in opposite directions. It was a frosty morning. There had been a slight frost the night before. A light powder of glistening white lay over everything. The roofs were beginning to smoke as it melted. Maria inhaled the clear air, and her courage revived a little—still, not much. Nobody knew how she dreaded the day, the meeting Wollaston. She could not yet bring herself to call him her husband. It seemed at once horrifying and absurd. The frosty air brought a slight color to the girl's cheeks, but she still looked wretched. Harry, who himself looked more than usually worn and old, kept glancing at her, as they hastened along.

“See here, darling,” he said, “hadn't you better not go to school to-day? I will write a note of explanation myself to the principal, at the office, and mail it in New York. Hadn't you better turn around and go home and rest to-day?”

“Oh no,” replied Maria. “I would much rather go, papa.”

“You look as if you could hardly stand up, much less go to school.”

“I am all right,” said Maria; but as she spoke she realized that her knees fairly bent under her, and her heart beat loudly in her ears, for they had come in sight of the station.

“You are sure?” Harry said, anxiously.

“Yes, I am all right. I want to go to school.”

“Well, look out that you eat a good luncheon,” said Harry, as he kissed her good-bye.

Maria had to go to the other side to take her Wardway train. She left her father and went under the bridge and mounted the stairs. When she gained the platform, the first person whom she saw, with a grasp of vision which seemed to reach her very heart, although she apparently did not see him at all, was Wollaston Lee. He also saw her, and his boyish face paled. There were quite a number waiting for the train, which was late. Maud Page was among them. Maria at once went close to her. Maud asked about her little sister. She had heard that she was found, although it was almost inconceivable how the news had spread at such an early hour.

“I am real glad she's found,” said Maud. Then she stared curiously at Maria. “Say, was it so?” she asked.

“Was what true?” asked Maria, trembling.

“Was it true that you and Wollaston Lee and Gladys Mann all went to New York looking for your sister, and came out on the last train?”

“Yes, it is true,” replied Maria, quite steadily.

“What ever made you?”

“I thought she might have gone to a cousin of Hers who used to live on Forty-ninth Street, but we found the cousin had moved when we got there.”

“Gracious!” said Maud. “And you didn't come out till that last train?”

“No.”

“I should think you would be tired to death, and you don't look any too chipper.” Maud turned and stared at Wollaston, who was standing aloof. “I declare, he looks as if he had been up a week of Sundays, too,” said she. Then she called out to him, in her high-pitched treble, which sounded odd coming from her soft circumference of throat. Maud's voice ought, by good rights, to have been a rich, husky drone, instead of bearing a resemblance to a parrot's. “Say, Wollaston Lee,” she called out, and the boy approached perforce, lifting his hat—“say,” said Maud, “I hear you and Maria eloped last night.” Then she giggled.

The boy cast a glance of mistrust and doubt at Maria. His face turned crimson.

“You are telling awful whoppers, Maud Page,” Maria responded, promptly, and his face cleared. “We just went in to find Evelyn.”

“Oh!” said Maud, teasingly.

“You are mean to talk so,” said Maria.

Maud laughed provokingly.

“What made Wollaston go for, then?” she asked.

“Do you suppose anybody would let a girl go alone to New York on a night train?” said Maria, with desperate spirit. “He went because he was polite, so there.”

Wollaston said nothing. He tried to look haughty, but succeeded in looking sheepish.

“Gladys Mann went, too,” said Maria.

“I don't see what makes you go with a girl like that anywhere?” said Maud.

“She's as good as anybody,” said Maria.

“Maybe she is,” returned Maud. Then she glanced at Wollaston, who was looking away, and whispered in Maria's ear: “They talk like fury about her, and her mother, too.”

“I don't care,” Maria said, stoutly. “She was down at the station and told me how Evelyn was lost, and then she went in with me.”

Maud laughed her aggravating laugh again.

“Well, maybe it was just as well she did,” she said, “or else they would have said you and Wollaston had eloped, sure.”

Maria began to speak, but her voice was drowned by the rumble of the New York train on the other track. The Wardway train was late. Usually the two trains met at the station.

However, the New York train had only just pulled out of sight before the Wardway train came in. As Maria climbed on the train she felt a paper thrust forcibly into her hand, which closed over it instinctively. She sat with Maud, and had no opportunity to look at it all the way to Wardway. She slipped it slyly into her Algebra.

Maud's eyes were sharp. “What's that you are putting in your Algebra?” she asked.

“A marker,” replied Maria. She felt that Maud's curiosity was such that it justified a white lie.

She had no chance to read the paper which Wollaston had slipped into her hand until she was fairly in school. Then she read it under cover of a book. It was very short, and quite manly, although manifestly written under great perturbation of spirit.

Wollaston wrote: “Shall I tell your folks to-night?”

Wollaston was not in Maria's classes. He was older, and had entered in advance. She had not a chance to reply until noon. Going into the restaurant, she in her turn slipped a paper forcibly into his hand.

“Good land! look out!” said Maud Page. “Why, Maria Edgham, you butted right into Wollaston Lee and nearly knocked him over.”

What Maria had written was also short, but desperate. She wrote:

“If you ever tell your folks or my folks, or anybody, I will drown myself in Fisher's Pond.”

A look of relief spread over the boy's face. Maria glanced at him where he sat at a distant table with some boys, and he gave an almost imperceptible nod of reassurance at her. Maria understood that he had not told, and would not, unless she bade him.

On the train going home that night he found a chance to speak to her. He occupied the seat behind her, and waited until a woman who sat with Maria got off the train at a station, and also a man who had occupied the seat with him. Then he leaned over and said, ostentatiously, so he could be heard half the length of the car, “It is a beautiful day, isn't it?”

Maria did not turn around at all, but her face was deadly white as she replied, “Yes, lovely.”

Then the boy whispered, and the whisper seemed to reach her inmost soul. “Look here, I want to do what is right, and—honorable, you know, but hang me if I know what is. It is an awful pickle.”

Maria nodded, still with her face straight ahead.

“I don't know how it happened, for my part,” the boy whispered.

Maria nodded again.

“I didn't say anything to my folks, because I didn't know how you would feel about it. I thought I ought to ask you first. But I am not afraid to tell, you needn't think that, and I mean to be honorable. If you say so, I will go right home with you and tell your folks, and then I will tell mine, and we will see what we can do.”

Maria made no answer. She was in agony. It seemed to her that the whisper was deafening her.

“I will leave school, and go to work right away,” said the boy, and his voice was a little louder, and full of pathetic manliness; “and I guess in a year's time I could get so I could earn enough to support you. I mean to do what is right. All is I want to do what you want me to do. I didn't know how you felt about it.”

Then Maria turned slightly. He leaned closer.

“I told you how I felt,” she whispered back.

“You mean what you wrote?”

“Yes, what I wrote.”

“You don't want me to tell at all?”

“Never, as long as you live.”

“How about her?”

“Gladys?”

“Yes, confound her!”

“She won't tell. She won't dare to.”

Wollaston was silent for a moment, then he whispered again. “Well,” he said, “I want to do what you want me to and what is honorable. Of course, we are both young, and I haven't any money except what father gives me, but I am willing to quit school to-morrow and go to work. You needn't think I mean to back out and show the white feather. I am not that kind. We have got into this, and I am ready and willing to do all I can.”

“I meant what I wrote,” whispered Maria again. “I never want you to tell, and—”

“And what?”

“I wish you would go and sit somewhere else, and not speak to me again. I hate the very sight of you.”

“All right,” said the boy. There was a slight echo of rancor in his own voice, still it was patient, with the patience of a man with a woman and her unreason. All his temper of the night before had disappeared. He was quite honest in saying that he wished to do what was right and honorable. He was really much more of a man than he had been the day before. He was conscious of not loving Maria—his budding boy-love for her had been shocked out of life. He was even repelled by her, but he had a strong sense of his duty towards her, and he was full of pity for her. He saw how pale and nervous and frightened she was. He got up to change his seat, but before he went, he leaned over her and whispered again: “You need not be a mite afraid, Maria. All I want is what will please you and what is right. I will never tell, unless you ask me to. You need not worry. You had better put it all out of your mind.”

Maria nodded. She felt very dizzy. She was glad when Wollaston not only left his seat, but the car, going into the smoker. She heard the door slam after him with a sense of relief. She felt a great relief at his assurance that he would keep their secret. Wollaston Lee was a boy whose promises had weight. She looked out of the window and a little of her old-time peace seemed to descend upon her. She saw how lovely the landscape was in the waning light. She saw the new moon with a great star attendant, and reflected that it was over her right shoulder. After all, youth is hard to down, and hope finds a rich soil in it. Then, too, a temporization to one who is young means eternity. If Wollaston did not tell, and Gladys did not tell, and she did not tell, it might all come right somehow in the end.

She looked at the crescent of the moon, and the great depth of light of the star, and her own affairs seemed to quiet her with their very littleness. What was little Maria Edgham and her ridiculous and tragic matrimonial tangle compared with the eternal light of those strange celestial things yonder? She would pass, and they would remain. She became comforted. She even reflected that she was hungry. She had not obeyed her father's injunction, and had eaten very little luncheon. She thought with pleasure of the good dinner which would be awaiting her. Then suddenly she remembered how she had talked to Her. How would she be treated? But she remembered that Ida could not have said anything against her to her father, or, if she had done so, it had made no difference to him. She considered Ida's character, and it seemed to her quite probable that she would make no further reference to the subject. Ida was averse even to pursuing enmities, because of the inconvenience which they might cause her. It was infinitely less trouble to allow birds which had pecked at her to fly away than to pursue them; then, too, she always remained unshaken in her belief in herself. Maria's tirade would not in the least have disturbed her self-love, and it is only a wound in self-love which can affect some people. Maria was inclined to think that Ida would receive her with the same coldly radiant smile as usual, and she was right. That night, when she entered the bright parlor, glowing with soft lights under art-shades, Ida, in her pretty house-gown—scarlet cashmere trimmed with medallions of cream lace—greeted her in the same fashion as she had always done. Evelyn ran forward with those squeals of love which only a baby can accomplish. Maria, hugging her little sister, saw that Ida's countenance was quite unchanged.

“So you have got home?” said she. “Is it very cold?”

“Not very,” replied Maria.

“I have not been out, and I did not know,” Ida said, in her usual fashion of making commonplaces appear like brilliances.

“There may be a frost, I don't know,” Maria said. She was actually confused before this impenetrability. Remembering the awful things she had said to Her, she was suddenly conscience-stricken as she saw Ida's calm radiance of demeanor. She began to wonder if she had not been mistaken, if Ida was not really much better than she herself. She knew that is she had had such things said to her she could not have appeared so forgiving. Such absolute self-love, and self-belief, was incomprehensible to her. She had accused Ida of more than she could herself actually comprehend. She began to think Ida had a forgiving heart, and that she herself had been the wicked one, not She. She responded to everything which Ida said with a conciliatory air. Presently Harry came in. He was late. He looked very worn and tired. Ida sent Josephine up-stairs to get his smoking-jacket and slippers, and Maria thought She was very kind to her father. Evelyn climbed into his arms, but he greeted even her rather wearily. Ida noticed it.

“Come away, darling,” she said. “Papa is tired, and you are a heavy little lump of honey,” Ida smiled, entrancingly.

Harry looked at her with loving admiration, then at Maria.

“I tell you what it is, I feel pretty thankful to-night, when I think of last night—when I realize I have you all home,” said he.

Ida smiled more radiantly. “Yes, we ought to be very thankful,” she said.

Maria made up her mind that she would apologize to her if she had a chance. She did not wish to speak before her father, not because she did not wish him to know, but because she did not wish to annoy him, he looked so tired. She had a chance after dinner, when Josephine was putting Evelyn to bed, and Harry had been called to the door to speak to a man on business.

“I am sorry I spoke as I did to you,” she said, in a low voice, to Ida.

They were both in the parlor. Maria had a school-book in her hand, and Ida was embroidering. The rosy shade of the lamp intensified the glow on her beautiful face. She looked smilingly at Maria.

“Why, my dear,” she said, “I don't know what you said. I have forgotten.”

Chapter XVI

Now commenced an odd period of her existence for Maria Edgham. She escaped a transition stage which comes to nearly every girl by her experience in New York, the night when Evelyn was lost. There is usually for a girl, if not for a boy, a stage of existence when she flutters, as it were, over the rose of life, neither lighting upon it nor leaving it, when she is not yet herself, when she does not comprehend herself at all, except by glimpses of emotions, as one may see one facet of a diamond but never the complete stone. Maria had, in a few hours, become settled, crystallized, and she gave evidence of it indisputably in one way—she had lost her dreams. When a girl no longer dreams of her future she has found herself. Maria had always been accustomed to go to sleep lulled by her dreams of innocent romance. Now she no longer had them, it was as if a child missed a lullaby. She was a long time in getting to sleep at all, and she did not sleep well. She no longer stared over the page of a lesson-book into her own future, as into a crystal well wherein she saw herself glorified by new and strange happiness. She studied, and took higher places in her classes, but she did not look as young or as well. She grew taller and thinner, and she looked older. People said Maria Edgham was losing her beauty, that she would not be as pretty a woman as she had promised to make, after all. Maria no longer dwelt so long and pleasurably upon her reflection in the glass. She simply arranged her hair and neck-gear tidily and went her way. She did not care so much for her pretty clothes. A girl without her dreams is a girl without her glory of youth. She did not quite realize what was the matter, but she knew that she was no longer so fair to see, and that the combination of herself and a new gown was not what it had been. She felt as if she had reached the last page of her book of life, and the *ennui* of middle age came over her. She had not reached the last page; she was, of course, mistaken; but she had reached a paragraph so tremendous that it seemed to her the climax, as if there could be nothing beyond it. She was married—that is, she had been pronounced a wife! There was, there could be, nothing further. She was both afraid of, and disliked, the boy who had married her. There was nothing ahead that she could see but a commonplace existence without romance and without love. She as yet did not dwell upon the possible complications which might arise from her marriage. It simply seemed to her that she should always live a spinster, although the marriage ceremony had been pronounced over her. She began to realize that in order to live in this way she must take definite steps. She knew that her father was not rich. The necessity for work and earning her own living in the future began to present itself. She made up her mind to fit herself for a teacher.

“Papa, I am going to teach,” she told her father one afternoon.

Ida had gone out. It was two years after her marriage, and Maria looked quite a woman. She and her father were alone. Evelyn had gone to bed. Maria had tucked her in and kissed her good-night. Josephine was no longer a member of the family. In a number of ways expenses had been retrenched. Harry would not admit it, and Ida did not seem aware of it, but his health was slowly but surely failing. That very day he had consulted a specialist in New York, taking his turn in the long line of waiting applicants in the office. When he came out he had a curious expression on his face, which made more than one of the other patients, however engrossed in their own complaints, turn around and look after him. He looked paler than when he had entered the office, but not exactly cast down. He had rather a settled expression, as of one who had come in sight, not of a goal of triumph, but of the end of a long and wearisome journey. In these days Harry Edgham was so unutterably weary, he drove himself to his work with such lashes of spirit, that he was almost incapable of revolt against any sentence of fate. There comes a time to every one, to some when young, to some when

old, that too great a burden of labor, or of days, renders the thought of the last bed of earth unterrifying. The spirit, overcome with weariness of matter, droops earthward with no rebellion. Harry, who had gotten his death-sentence, went out of the doctor's office and hailed his ferry-bound car, and realized very little difference in his attitude from what he had done before. He had still time before him, possibly quite a long time. He thought of leaving Ida and the little one and Maria, but he had a feeling as if he were beginning the traversing of a circle which would in the end bring him back, rather than of departure. It was as if he were about to circumnavigate life itself. Suddenly, however, his forehead contracted. Material matters began to irritate him. He thought of Maria, and how slight a provision he had made for her. His life was already insured for the benefit of Ida. Ida would have that and her widow's share. Little Evelyn would also have her share of his tiny estate, which consisted of nothing more than his house and lot in Edgham and a few hundreds in the bank, and poor Maria would have nothing except the paltry third remaining. When Maria, sitting alone with him in the parlor, announced her intention of fitting herself for a teacher, he viewed her with quick interest. It was the evening of the very day on which he had consulted the specialist.

“Let me see, dear,” he returned; “how many years more have you at the academy?”

“I can graduate next year,” Maria replied, with pride. This last year she had been taking enormous strides, which had placed her ahead of her class. “At least, I can if I work hard,” she added.

“I don't want you to work too hard,” Harry said, anxiously.

“I am perfectly well,” said Maria. And she did in reality look entirely well, in spite of her thinness and expression of premature maturity. There was a wiriness about her every movement which argued, if not actual robustness, the elasticity of bending and not breaking before the stresses of life.

“Let me see, you will be pretty young to teach, then,” said Harry.

“I think I can get a school,” Maria said.

“Where?”

“Aunt Maria said she thought I could get that little school near her in Amity. The teacher is engaged, and she said she thought she would get married before so very long. She said she thought she must have almost enough money for her wedding outfit. That is what she has been working for.”

Harry smiled a little.

“Aunt Maria said she was to marry a man with means, and she was working quite a while in order to buy a nice trousseau,” said Maria. “Aunt Maria said she was a very high-spirited young lady. But she said she thought she had been engaged so long that she would probably not wait more than a year longer, and she could get the school for me. Uncle Henry is one of the committee, you know.”

“You are pretty young to begin teaching,” Harry said, thoughtfully.

“Aunt Maria said she thought I did not look as young as I really was, and there wouldn't be any difficulty about it,” said Maria. “She said she thought I would have good government, and Uncle Henry thought so, too, and Aunt Eunice.”

Aunt Eunice was Maria's Uncle Henry's wife. Maria had paid a visit to Amity the summer before, renewing her acquaintance with her relatives.

“Well, we will see,” said Harry, after a pause. Then he added, somewhat pitifully: “Father wishes there was no need for his little girl to work. He wishes he had been able to put more by, but if—”

Maria looked at her father with quick concern.

“Father, what is the matter with you?” she asked. “I don't care about the working part. I want to work. I shall like to go to Amity, and board with Aunt Maria, and teach, except for leaving you and Evelyn, but—what is the matter with you, father?”

“Nothing is the matter. Why?” asked Harry; and he tried to smile.

“What made you speak so, father?”

Maria had sprung to her feet, and was standing in front of her father, with pale face and dilated eyes. Her father looked at her and hesitated.

“Tell me, father; I ought to know,” said Maria.

“There is nothing immediate, as far as I know,” said Harry, “but—”

“But what?”

“Well, dear, nobody can live always, and of course you can't realize it, young as you are, and with no responsibilities; but father is older, and sometimes he can't help thinking. He wishes he had been able to save a little more, in case anything happened to him, and he can't help planning what you would do if—anything happened to him. You know, dear,” Harry hesitated a little, then he continued—“you know, dear, that father had his life insured for—Ida, and I doubt if—I am older, you know, now, and those companies don't like to take chances. I doubt if I could, or I would have an additional insurance put on my life for you. Then Ida would have by law her share of this property, and Evelyn her share, and all you would have would be a very little, and—Well, father can't help thinking that perhaps it would be wise

for you to make some plans so you can help yourself a little, but—it almost breaks father's heart to think that—his—little girl—" Poor Harry fairly broke down and sobbed.

Maria's arm was around his neck in a moment, and his poor gray head, which had always been, in a way, the head of an innocent boy, was on her young girl breast. She did not ask him any more questions. She knew. "Poor father!" she said. Her own voice broke, then she steadied it again with a resolute effort of her will. There was a good deal of her mother in Maria. The sight of another's weakness always aroused her own strength. "Father," she said, "now you just listen to me. I won't hear any more talk of anything happening to you. You have not eaten enough lately. I have noticed it. That is all that ails you. You have not had enough nourishment. I want you to go to-morrow to Dr. Wells and get some of that tonic that helped you so much before, and, father, I want you to stop worrying about me. I honestly want to teach. I want to be independent. I should, if you were worth a million. It does not worry me at all to think I am not going to have enough money to live on without working, not at all. I want you to remember that, and not fret any more about it."

For answer, Harry sobbed against the girl's shoulder. "It seems as if I might have saved more," he said, pitifully, "but—I have had heavy expenses, and somehow I didn't seem to have the knack that some men have. I made one or two investments that didn't turn out well. I didn't say anything about them to—Ida."

"I sha'n't say a word, father," Maria responded, quickly.

"Well, I thought maybe—if they turned out all right, I might have something to leave you, but—they didn't. There's never any counting on those things, and I wasn't on the inside of the market. I thought they were all right. I meant it for the best."

Maria stroked the gray head, as her mother might have done. "Of course you did, father," said she. "Now, don't you worry one bit more about it. You get that tonic. You don't look just right, and you need something to give you an appetite; and don't you ever have another thought as far as I am concerned. I have always wanted to teach, or do something to make myself independent."

"You may marry somebody who will look out for you after father has gone," half whimpered Harry. His disease and his distress were making him fairly childish, now he realized a supporting love beside him.

Maria quivered a little. "I shall never marry, father," she said.

Harry laughed a little, even in the midst of his distress. "Well, dear, we won't worry about that now," he said; "only, if you ever do marry, I hope you will marry a good, honest man who can take care of you."

"I never shall marry," Maria said again. There was an odd inflection in her voice which her father did not understand. Her cheeks burned hot against his, but it was not due to the modesty of young girlhood, which flees even that which it secretly desires. Maria was reflecting upon her horrible deception, how every day and every minute of her life she was deceiving her father, but she dared not tell him. She dared less now than ever, in the light of her sudden conviction concerning his ill-health. Maria had been accustomed so long to seeing her father look tired and old that the true significance of it had not struck her. She had not reflected that her father was not in reality an old man—but scarcely past middle age—and that there must be some disease to account for his appearance. Now she knew; but along with the knowledge came the conviction that he must not know that she had it, that it would only add to his distress. She kissed him, and took up the evening paper which had fallen from his knees to the floor.

"Suppose I read to you, father?" she said.

Harry looked gratefully at her. "But you have to learn your lesson."

"Oh, I can finish that in school to-morrow. I don't feel like working any more to-night, and I do feel like reading the paper."

"Won't it tire you, dear?"

"Tire me? Now, father, what do you take me for?" Maria settled herself in a chair. Harry leaned back his head contentedly; he had always like to be read to, and lately reading to himself had hurt his eyes. "Now, what shall I read, father?" she said.

Poor Harry, remembering his own futile investments, asked for the stock-list, and Maria read it very intelligently for a young girl who knew nothing about stocks.

"Once I owned some of that stock," said Harry, proudly.

"Did you, father?" Maria responded, admiringly.

"Yes, and only look where it is now! If I could only have held on to it, I might have been quite a rich man."

Harry spoke, oddly enough, with no regret. Such was the childishness of the man that a possession once his never seemed wholly lost to him. It seemed to him that he had reason to be proud of having made such a wise investment, even if he had never actually reaped any benefit from it.

"I don't see how you knew what to invest in," Maria said, fostering his pride.

"Oh, I had to study the stock-lists and ask brokers," Harry replied. He looked brighter. This little reinstatement in his self-esteem acted like a tonic. In some fashion Ida always kept him alive to his own deficiencies, and that was not good for a man who was naturally humble-minded. Harry sat up straighter. He looked at Maria with brighter eyes as she continued reading. "Now *that* is a good investment," said he—"that bond. If I had the money to spare I would buy one of

those bonds to-morrow morning.”

“Are bonds better than stocks, father?” asked Maria.

“Yes,” replied Harry, importantly. “Always remember that, if you have any money to invest. A man can afford to buy stocks, because he has better opportunities of judging of the trend of the market, but bonds are always safer for a woman.”

Maria regarded her father again with that innocent admiration for his wisdom, which seemed to act like a nerve stimulant. A subtle physician might possibly have reached the conclusion, had he been fully aware of all the circumstances, that Ida, with her radiant superiority, her voiceless but none the less positive self-assertion over her husband, was actually a means of spiritual depression which had reacted upon his physical nature. Nobody knows exactly to what extent any of us are responsible for the lives of others, and how far our mere existences may be derogatory to our fellow-beings. Harry was visibly brighter.

“You don't look half as tired as you did, father,” Maria said.

“I don't feel so tired,” replied Harry. “It has rested me to hear you read. Remember what I have told you, dear, about bonds—always bonds, and never stocks, for a woman.”

“Yes, father,” said Maria. Then she added, “I am going to save all I can when I begin to earn.”

“Your aunt Maria will only ask you enough board to make it possible for her to pay the bills? You know she has only a hundred a year to live on. Of course your uncle Henry lets her have her rent free, or she couldn't do it, but she is a fine manager. She manages very much as your mother did.” As he spoke, Harry looked around the luxurious apartment and reflected that, had his first wife lived, he himself could have saved, and there might have been no need for this little, delicate girl to earn her own living. He sighed, and the weary look settled over his face again.

Maria rose. “Father,” said she, “Annie has gone out, and so has Hannah, and I am going out in the kitchen and make a cup of that thick chocolate that you like, for you.”

“It is too much trouble, dear.”

“Nonsense!” said Maria. “I would like to do it, and it won't take a minute. There is a good fire in the range.”

While Maria was gone, Harry sat gazing out of the window. He had always now, when he looked out of a window, the sensation of a man who was passing in rapid motion all the old familiar objects, all the landmarks of his life, or rather—for one never rids one's self of that particular optical delusion—it was as if they were passing. The conviction of one's own transit is difficult to achieve. Harry gazed out of the window, and it was to him as if the familiar trees which bordered the sidewalk, the shrubs in the yard, the houses which were within view, were flitting past him in a mad whirl. He was glad when Maria entered with the chocolate, in his own particular cup, and a dainty plate of cheese sandwiches.

“I thought perhaps you could eat a sandwich, father,” she said. “I don't believe you had anything decent for lunch in New York.”

“I didn't have much,” said Harry. He did not add, what was the truth, that lately he had been stinting himself on his luncheons in the effort to save a little more of his earnings. He ate nearly all the sandwiches, and drank two cups of chocolate, and really looked much better.

“You need more nourishment, father,” said Maria, with a wise, maternal air, which was also half accusatory, and which made Harry think so strongly of his first wife that he regarded Maria as he might have regarded her mother.

“You grow more and more like your own mother, dear,” he said.

“Well, I am glad of that,” replied Maria. “Mother was a good woman. If I can only be half as good as mother was.”

“Your mother *was* a good woman,” said Harry, reflectively; and as he spoke he seemed to feel the arms of strong, almost stern, feminity and faithfulness which had encompassed his childlike soul for so many years. He owned to himself that Maria's mother had been a much more suitable wife for him than this other woman. Then he had a little qualm of remorse, for Ida came in sight, richly dressed and elegant, as usual, with Evelyn dancing along beside her. Mrs. Adams was with her. Mrs. Adams was talking and Ida was smiling. It was more becoming to Ida to smile than to talk. She had discovered long since that she had not so very much to say, and that her smiles were better coin of her little realm; she therefore generally employed them in preference.

Maria got up hastily and took the tray and the chocolate-cups. “I guess Mrs. Adams is coming in,” said she.

“You didn't make enough chocolate to give them?” Harry said, hesitatingly.

“No,” replied Maria, and her tone was a little curt even to her father. “And I used up the last bit of chocolate in the house, too.” Then she scudded out of the room with her tray and passed the front door as the sound of Ida's latch-key was heard in the lock. Maria set her tray on the kitchen-table and hurried up the back stairs to her own room. She entered it and locked both doors, the one communicating with the hall and the one which connected it with Evelyn's room. She had no sooner done so than she heard the quick patter of little feet, and the door leading into Evelyn's room was tried, then violently shaken. “Let me in, sister; let me in,” cried the sweet little flute of a voice on the other side. Evelyn could now talk plainly, but she still kept to her baby appellation for her sister.

“No, darling, sister can't let you in now,” replied Maria.

“Why not? Let me in, sister.”

“Sister is going to study,” said Maria, in a firm voice. “She can't have Evelyn. Run down-stairs, darling; run down to mamma.”

“Evelyn don't want mamma. Evelyn wants sister.”

“Papa is down there, too. Put on your clothes, like a nice girl, and show papa how smart you can be; then run down.”

“Evelyn can't button up her dress.”

“Put everything on but that, then run down, and mamma can do it for you.”

“Let me in, sister.”

“No, dear,” Maria said again. “Evelyn can't come in now.”

There came a little whimper of grief and anger which cut Maria's heart, but she was firm. She could not have even Evelyn then. She had to be alone with the knowledge she had just gained of her father's state of health. She sat down in her little chair by the window; it was her own baby chair, which she had kept all these years, and in which she could still sit comfortably, she was so slender. Then she put her face in her hands and began to weep. She had never wept as she did then, not even when her mother died. She was so much younger when her mother died that her sensibilities had not acquired their full acumen; then, too, she had not had at that time the awful foretaste of a desolate future which tinctured with bitter her very soul. Somehow, although Maria had noticed for a long time that her father did not look as he had done, it had never occurred to her that that which had happened to her mother could happen to her father. She had been like one in a house which has been struck by lightning, and had been rendered thereby incredulous of a second stroke. It had not occurred to her that whereas she had lost her mother, she could also lose her father. It seemed like too heavy a hammer-stroke of Providence to believe in and keep her reason. She had thought that her father was losing his youth, that his hair turning gray had much to do with his altered looks. She had never thought of death. It seemed to her monstrous. A rage against Providence, like nothing which she had known before, was over her. Why should she lose everything? What had she done? She reviewed her past life, and she defended herself like Job, with her summary of self-righteousness. She had always done right, so far as she knew. Her sins had been so petty as hardly to deserve the name of sins. She remembered how she had once enjoyed seeing her face in her looking-glass, how she had liked pretty, new dresses, and she could not make that seem very culpable. She remembered how, although she had never loved her step-mother, she had observed, except on that one occasion when Evelyn was lost, the utmost respect and deference for her—how she had been, after the first, even willing to love her had she met with the slightest encouragement. She could not honestly blame herself for her carefully concealed attitude of disapproval towards Ida, for she said to herself, with a subtlety which was strange for a girl so young, that she had merited it, that she was a cold, hard, self-centred woman, not deserving love, and that she had in reality been injurious for her father. She was convinced that, had her own mother lived, with her half-censorious yet wholly loving care for him, he might still have preserved his youth and his handsome boyishness and health. She thought of the half-absurd, half-tragic secret which underlay her life, and she could not honestly think herself very much to blame for that. She always thought of that with bewilderment, as one might think of some dimly remembered vagary of delirium. Sometimes it seemed to her now that it could not be true. Maria realized that she was full of self-righteousness, but she was also honest. She saw no need for her to blame herself for faults which she had not committed. She thought of the doctrine which she had heard, that children were wholly evil from their birth, and it did not seem to her true. She could *say* that she had been wholly evil from her birth, but she felt that she should, if she did say so, tell a lie to God and herself. She honestly could not see why, for any fault of hers, her father should die. Then suddenly her mind gave a leap from her own standing-point to that of her father. She suddenly reflected that it was not wholly her own grief for his loss which was to be considered, but her father's grief at quitting the world wherein he had dwelt so long, and his old loves of life. She reflected upon his possible fear of the Unknown into which he was to go. There was in Maria's love for her father, as there had been in her mother's, a strong element of the maternal. She thought of her father with infinite pity, as one might think of a little child about to go on a long, strange journey to an unknown place, all alone by himself. It seemed to her an awful thing for God to ask one like her father to die a lingering death, to realize it all fully, what he had to do, then to go off by himself, alone. She remembered what she had heard from the pulpit on Sundays, but somehow that Unknown seemed so frightfully wide and vast for a soul like her father's, which had always been so like the soul of a child, to find her mother in. Then she got some comfort from the memory of her mother, of her great strength. It seemed to her that her mother, wherever she was, would not let her father wander alone very long. That she would meet him with that love and chiding which is sometimes the very concert-pitch of love itself, its key-note, and lead him into those green pastures and beside those still waters of the Psalmist. Maria, at that moment, got more comfort from her memory of the masterliness of her mother, whom she had known, than from her conception of God, towards whom her soul reached out, it is true, but whom it no more comprehended than a flower comprehends the sun. The very love of God needs a human trellis whereby His creatures can reach Him, and Maria now climbed towards a trust in Him, by the reflection of her mother's love, and strength in spite of love.

Then racking pity for herself and her own loss, and rage because of it, and a pity for her father which almost roused her to a fury of rebellion, again swept away every other consideration.

“Poor father! poor father!” she sobbed, under her breath. “There he is going to die, and he hasn't got mother to take care of him! *She* won't do anything. She will try not to smile, that is all. And I can't do anything, the way mother could. Father don't want me to even act as if I knew it; but if mother were alive he would tell her, and she would help him.” Then Maria thought of herself, poor, solitary, female thing travelling the world alone, for she never thought, at that time, of her marriage being anything which would ever be a marriage in reality, but as of something which cast her outside the pale of possibilities and made her more solitary still, and she wept silently, or as silently as she could; once in awhile a murmur of agony or a sob escaped her. She could not help it. She got up out of her little chair and flung herself on the floor, and fairly writhed with the pain of her awful grief and sense of loss. She became deaf to any sound;

all her senses seemed to have failed her. She was alive only to that sense of grief which is the primeval sense of the world—the grief of existence itself and the necessity of death and loss.

All at once she felt a little, soft touch, and another little, weeping, human thing, born like herself to all the awful chances of love and grief, flung itself down beside her.

Maria had locked her doors, but she had forgotten her window, which opened on an upper balcony, and was easily accessible to any one climbing out of the hall window. Evelyn had been listening at her door and had heard her sobs. Knowing from experience that her sister meant what she said, she had climbed out of the hall window, scudded along the little balcony, and into Maria's window. She flung herself down on the floor, and wept so violently that Maria was alarmed.

“Why, baby, darling, what is it? Tell sister,” she said, hushing her own sobs.

The child continued to sob. Her whole little frame was shaken convulsively.

“Tell sister,” whispered Maria.

“I'm cryin' 'cause—'cause—” panted the child.

“Because what, darling?”

“Because you are crying, and—and—”

“And what?”

“'Cause I 'ain't got anything to cry for.”

“Why, you precious darling!” said Maria. She hugged the child close, and all at once a sense of peace and comfort came over her, even in the face of approaching disaster. She sensed the love and pity which holds the world, through this little human key-note of it which had struck in her ears.

Chapter XVII

Harry Edgham's disease proved to be one of those concerning which no physician can accurately calculate its duration or termination. It had, as diseases often have, its periods of such utter quiescence that it seemed as if it had entirely disappeared. It was not a year after Harry had received his indeterminate death sentence before he looked better than he had done for a long while. The color came back to his cheeks, his expression regained its youthful joyfulness. Everybody said that Harry Edgham was quite well again. He had observed a certain diet and taken remedies; then, in the summer, he took, for the first time for years, an entire vacation of three weeks, and that had its effect for the better.

Maria began to be quite easy with regard to her father's health. It seemed to her that, since he looked so well, he must be well. Her last winter at the Lowe Academy was entirely free from that worriment. Then, too, Wollaston Lee had graduated and begun his college course, and she no longer had him constantly before her eyes, bringing to memory that bewildering, almost maddening experience of theirs that night in New York. She was almost happy, in an odd, middle-aged sort of fashion, during her last term at the academy before her graduation. She took great pride in her progress in her studies. She was to graduate first of her class. She did not even have to work very hard to accomplish it. Maria had a mind of marvellous quickness of grasp. Possibly her retentive powers were not entirely in proportion, but, at all events, she accomplished much with comparatively little labor.

Harry was very proud of her. The evening before her graduation Ida had gone to New York to the theatre and Evelyn was in bed, and Maria dressed herself in her graduation gown, which was charming—Ida had never neglected her, in respect to dress, at least—and came down to show herself to her father. He would not be able to be present at the graduation on account of an unusual press of business. Maria came so lightly that she almost seemed to float into the room, with her fine white draperies trailing behind her and her knots of white ribbon fluttering, and stood before her father.

“Father,” said she, “I want you to see the way I'll look to-morrow. Isn't this dress pretty?”

“Lovely,” said Harry. “It is very becoming, too,” he added.

Indeed, Maria really looked pretty again in this charming costume. During the last few months her cheeks had filled out and she had gotten some lovely curves of girlhood. Her eyes shone with a peculiar brilliancy, her red lips trembled into a smile, her hair, in a fluff above her high forehead, caught the light.

Maria laughed gayly. “Take care, father, or you will make me vain,” she said.

“You have some reason to be,” Harry said, honestly. “You are going to graduate first in your class, and—well, you are pretty, dear—at least you are to father, and, I guess, to other folks.”

Maria blushed. “Only to father, because he is partial,” she said. Then she went up to him and rubbed her blooming cheek against his. “Do you know what makes me happier than anything else?” she said—“happier than graduating first, happier than my pretty dress, happier than anything?”

“No. What, dear?”

“Feeling that you are well again.”

There was an almost imperceptible pause before Harry replied. Then he said, in his pleasant voice, which had never grown old, “Yes, dear; I am better, dear, I think.”

“Think,” Maria said, gayly. “Why, you are well, father. Don't you know you are well?”

“Yes, I think I am better, dear.”

“Better? You are well. Nobody can look as young and handsome as you do and be ill, possibly. You are well, father. I know you can't quite get what that horrid old croaking doctor told you out of your mind, but doctors don't know everything. You are well, and that makes me happier than anything else in the world.”

Harry laughed a little faintly. “Well, I dare say you are right, dear,” he said.

“Right?—of course I am right,” said Maria. Then she danced off to change her gown.

After she had gone, Harry rose from the chair; he had been sitting beside the centre-table with the evening paper. He walked over to the window and looked out at the night. It was bright moonlight. The trees were in full leaf, and the shadows were of such loveliness that they fairly seemed celestial. Harry gazed out at the night scene, at the moon riding through the unbelievable and unfathomable blue of the sky, like a crystal ball, with a slight following of golden clouds; he gazed at the fairy shadows which transformed the familiar village street into something beyond earth, and he sighed. The conviction of his approaching dissolution had never been so strong as at that moment. He seemed fairly to see his own mortality—that gate of death which lay wide open for him. Yet, all at once, a sense of peace and trust almost ineffable came over him. Death seemed merely the going-out into the true open, the essence of the moonlight and the beauty. It seemed the tasting and absorbing the food for his own spiritual hunger, which had been upon him from birth, that which had always been just out of his reach. When Maria returned in her pink gingham school-gown, she found her father seated beside the table as he had been when she left. He looked up at her with a bright smile which somehow chilled her, although she tried to drive the conviction of the chill from her mind. She got a new book from the case, and proposed reading aloud to him.

“Hadn't you better go to bed, dear?” said Harry. “You will have a hard day to-morrow.”

“No; I am going to sit up with you till She comes home,” said Maria, “and we might as well amuse ourselves.” She began to read, and Harry listened happily. But Maria, whenever she glanced over her book at her father's happy face, felt the same undefinable chill.

However, when Ida came home and they had a little supper of sardines and crackers, she did not think any more of it. She went to bed with her head full of the morrow and her new gown and the glories awaiting her. She tried not to be vain, but was uncomfortably conscious that she was glad that she was first in her class, instead of some other girl or instead of a boy. Maria felt especially proud of ranking ahead of the boys.

The next day was, as she had anticipated, one of happy triumph for her. She stood on the stage in her lovely dress and read her valedictory, which, although trite enough, was in reality rather better in style than most valedictories. She received a number of presents, a tiny gold watch from her father among them, and a ring with a turquoise stone from Ida, and quantities of flowers. The day after the graduation Maria had her photograph taken, with all her floral offerings around her, with a basket of roses on her arm and great bouquets in her lap and on a little photographic table beside her. The basket of roses was an anonymous offering. It came with no card. If Maria had dreamed that Wollaston Lee had sent it, she would never have sat for her photograph with it on her arm. But she did not think of Wollaston at all that day. He was completely out of her mind for the time, swallowed up in her sense of personal joy and triumph. Wollaston had not graduated first in his class in the academy the year before. A girl had headed that class also. Maria had felt a malicious joy at the fact, at the time, and it was entirely beyond her imagination now that Wollaston, who had seemed to dislike her, although she was forced to admit that he had been exceedingly honorable, had sent roses to her. She suspected that one of the teachers, a young man who had paid, in a covert and shamefaced way, a little attention to her, had sent the basket. She thought the roses lovely, and recognized the inadvisability of thanking this teacher, since he had not enclosed his card. She did not like him very well—indeed, she felt a certain repugnance to him—but roses were roses, and she was a young girl.

“Who gave you the basket of roses, dear?” her father asked when she was displaying her trophies the day after her graduation.

Maria blushed. “I don't know,” said she; “there wasn't any card with them.” As she spoke she seemed to see the face of the young history teacher, Mr. Latimer, with his sparse, sandy beard, and she felt how very distasteful he was to her, even if gilded, so to speak, by roses.

“I think some enamoured boy in her class who was too shy to send his card with his floral offering was the one,” Ida said to Harry when Maria had gone out. She laughed a softly sarcastic laugh.

Harry looked at her uneasily.

“Maria is too young to get such ideas into her head,” he said.

“My dear,” said Ida, “you forget that such ideas do not get into girls' heads; they are born in them.”

“I presume one of the other girls sent them,” said Harry, almost angrily.

“Perhaps,” replied Ida, and again she laughed her soft, sarcastic laugh, which grated terribly on Harry. It irritated him beyond measure that any boy should send roses to this little, delicate, fair girl of his. For all he had spoken of her marriage, the very idea of confiding her to any other man than himself made him furious. Especially the idea of some

rough school-boy, who knew little else than to tumble about in a football game and was not his girl's mental equal, irritated him. He went over in his mind all the boys in her class. The next morning, going to New York, Edwin Shaw, who had lost much of his uncouthness and had divorced himself entirely from his family in the matter of English, was on the train, and he scowled at him with such inscrutable fierceness that the boy fairly trembled. He always bowed punctiliously to Maria's father, and this morning Maria was with her father. She was to have a day off: sit in her father's office and read a book until noon, then go to lunch with him at a French restaurant, then go to the matinée. She wore a festive silk waist, and looked altogether lovely, the boy thought.

“Who is that great gawk of a fellow?” asked Harry of Maria.

“Edwin Shaw. He was in my class,” replied Maria, and she blushed, for no earthly reason except that her father expected her to do so. Young girls are sometimes very ready, even to deceit, to meet the emotional expectations of their elders. Harry then and there made up his mind that Edwin Shaw was the sender of the basket of roses.

“He comes of a family below par, and he shows it,” he said, viciously, to Maria. He scowled again at Edwin's neck, which was awkwardly long above his collar, but the boy did not see it. He sat on the opposite side of the car a seat in advance.

Harry said again to Maria, when they had left the train, and Edwin, conscious of his back, which he was straightening, was striding in front of them, what a great gawk of a fellow he was, and how he came of a family below par. Maria assented indifferently. She did not dream of her father's state of mind, and, as for Edwin Shaw, he was no more to her than a set of car-steps, not so much, because the car-steps were of obvious use.

That very night, when Maria and her father reached home after a riotous day in the city, there was a letter in the post-office from Aunt Maria, to the effect that there was no doubt that Maria could have the school in Amity in the fall. The teacher who had held the position was to be married in a few weeks. The salary was not much—Amity was a poor little country village—but Maria felt as if she had expectations of untold wealth. She was sorry at the prospect of leaving her father and Evelyn, but the idea of self-support and independence, and taking a little of the burden from her father, intoxicated her. Maria had the true spirit of the women of her race. She liked the feel of her own muscles and nerves of individuality and self-reliance. She felt a head taller after she had read her aunt's letter.

“She says she will board me for four dollars a week,” she said. “I shall have quite a lot of money clear.”

“Well, four dollars a week will recompense her, and help her, too,” said Harry, a little gloomily. To tell the truth, he did not in the least like the idea of Maria's going to Amity to teach. Nothing except the inner knowledge of his own failing health could have led him to consent to it. Ida was delighted at the news, but she concealed her delight as well as her annoyance under her smiling mask, and immediately began to make plans for Maria's wardrobe.

“Whatever I have new I am going to pay you back, father, now I am going to earn money,” Maria said, proudly.

After she went up-stairs to bed that night, Evelyn, who was now a slim, beautiful little girl, rather tall for her age, and going to a private school in the village, came into her room, and Maria told Evelyn how much she was going to do with the money which she was to earn. Maria, at this time, was wholly mercenary. She had not the least ambition to benefit the young. She was, in fact, young herself, but her head was fairly turned with the most selfish of considerations. It was true that she planned to spend the money which she would earn largely upon others, but that was, in itself, a subtle, more rarefied form of selfishness.

“I remember Aunt Maria's parlor carpet was worn almost threadbare, and I mean to buy her a new one with the very first money I earn,” Maria said to little Evelyn; and she thought, as she met Evelyn's beautiful, admiring eyes, how very kind and thoughtful she, Maria, would be with her wealth.

“I suppose Aunt Maria is very poor,” Evelyn remarked, in her charming little voice.

“Oh, very. She lives on a hundred dollars a year.”

“Will you get enough to eat?” asked Evelyn, anxiously.

“Oh yes. I shall pay her four dollars a week, and if she got along with only a hundred a year, only think what she can do with that. I know Aunt Eunice, Uncle Henry's wife, hasn't a good dress, either. I think I shall buy a brown satin for her.”

“How awful good you are, sister!” said little Evelyn, and Maria quite agreed with her. The conviction of her own goodness, and her forthcoming power to exercise it, filled her soul with a gentle, stimulating warmth after she was in bed. The moonlight shone brightly into her room. She gazed at the bright shaft of silver it made across all her familiar possessions, and, notwithstanding her young girl dreams were gone, she realized that, although she had lost all the usual celestial dreams and rafters of romance which go to make a young girl's air-castle, she had still left some material, even if of less importance.

She spent, on the whole, a very happy summer. Her father looked entirely well; she was busy in preparations for her life in Amity; and, what relieved her the most, Wollaston Lee was not at home for more than five days during the entire vacation. He went camping-out with a party of college-boys. Maria was, therefore, not subjected to the nervous strain of seeing him. During the few days he was at home he had his chum with him, and Maria only saw him twice—once on the street, when she returned his bow distantly and heard with no pleasure the other boy ask who that pretty girl was, and once in church. She gave only the merest side-glance at him in church, and she was not sure that he looked at her at all, but she went home pale and nervous. A secret of any kind is a hard thing for a girl to bear about with her, and Maria's, which was both tragic and absurd, was severer than most. At times it seemed to her, when she looked in her glass, that all she saw was the secret; it seemed to her, when other people looked at her, that it was all they saw. It was one reason for her readiness to go to Amity. She would there be out of reach of people who could in any way have penetrated her

secret. She would not run the risk of meeting Wollaston; of meeting his father and mother, and wondering if he had, after all, told; of meeting Gladys Mann, and wondering if she had told, and knowing that she knew.

Maria, in these last months, saw very little of Gladys, who had sunken entirely into the lower stratum of society in which she belonged. Gladys had left school, where she had not learned much, and she went out cleaning and doing house-work, at seventy-five cents a day. Sometimes Maria met her going to and fro from a place of employment, and at such times there was fear in Maria's face and a pathetic admiration and reassurance in the other girl's. Gladys had grown hard and large as to her bones and muscles, but she did not look altogether well. She had a half-nourished, spiritually and bodily, expression, which did not belie the true state of affairs with her. She had neither enough meat nor enough ideality. She was suffering, and the more because she did not know. Gladys was of the opinion that she was, on the whole, enjoying life and having a pretty good time. She earned enough to buy herself some showy clothes, and she had a lover, a “steady,” as she called him. It is true that she was at times a little harassed by jealousy concerning another girl who had a more fully blown beauty than she, and upon whom she sometimes suspected her lover was casting admiring eyes.

It was at this time that Gladys, whose whole literature consisted of the more pictorial of the daily papers, wrote some badly spelled and very pathetic little letters, asking advice as to whether a girl of her age, who had been keeping steady company with a young man of her lover's age, whom she dearly loved, should make advances if he seemed to exhibit a preference for another girl, and she inquired pitifully of the editor, as of some deity, as to whether she thought her lover did really prefer the other girl to her. These letters, and the answers, were a source of immense comfort to Gladys. Sometimes, when she met Maria, they made her feel almost on terms of equality with her. She doubted if Maria, smart as she was, had ever really appeared in the papers. She wrote her letters under different names, and even sent them from neighboring towns, and walked long distances, when she felt that she wanted to save car-fare, to post them. Once Maria met her as she was walking along with an evening paper in her hand, reading the reply to one of her letters, and Maria wondered at the expression on Gladys's face. She at once pitied, feared, and detested Gladys. She doubted if she were a good girl; she herself, like a nun without even dreams, seemed living in another sphere, she felt so far removed. She was in reality removed, although Gladys, if the truth were told, was not so bad, and she got some good advice from the answers in response to her letters, which restrained her. Still, her view of everything was different. She was different. Black was not as black to her as to Maria; a spade was not so truly a spade. She recognized immorality as a fact, but it did not seem to her of so much importance. In one sense she was more innocent even than Maria, for she had never felt the true living clutch of vice on her soul, even in imagination; she could not. The devil to her was not of enough consequence to enable her to sin in the truest sense of the word. All her family were immoral, and a constant living in an atmosphere of immorality may, in one sense, make one incapable of spiritual sin. One needs to fully sense a sin in order to actually commit it. Gladys could hardly sense sin as Maria could. Still she had a sense of proud virtue after reading the paragraphs of good advice in reply to her letters to the paper, and she felt that it placed her nearer Maria's level. On the occasion when Maria met her reading the paper, she even spoke.

“Hullo, M'ria!” said she.

“Good-evening,” Maria replied, politely and haughtily.

But Gladys did not seem to notice the haughtiness. She pressed close to Maria.

“Say!” said she.

“What?” asked Maria.

“Ain't you ever goin' to—?”

“No, I am not,” replied Maria, deadly pale, and trembling from head to foot.

“Why don't you write to this paper and ask what you had better do?” said Gladys. “It's an awful good plan. You do git awful good advice.”

“I don't wish to,” replied Maria, trying to pass, but Gladys stood in her way.

“But say, M'ria, you be in an awful box,” said she. “You can't never marry nobody else without you get locked up, you know.”

“I don't want to,” Maria said, shortly.

“Mebbe you will.”

“I never shall.”

“Well, if you do, you had better write to this paper, then you can find out just what to do. It won't tell you to do nothin' wrong, and it's awful sensible. Say, M'ria.”

“Well, what?”

“I 'ain't never told a living soul, and I never shall, but I don't see what you are goin' to do if either you or him wants to git married to anybody else.”

“I am not worrying about getting married,” said Maria. This time she pushed past Gladys. Her knees fairly knocked together.

Gladys looked at her with sympathy and the old little-girl love and adoration. “Well, don't you worry about me tellin',” said she.

Chapter XVIII

Maria began her teaching on a September day. It was raining hard, but there was all about an odd, fictitious golden light from the spray of maple-leaves which overhung the village. Amity was a typical little New England village—that is, it had departed but little from its original type, although there was now a large plant of paper-mills, which had called in outsiders. The outsiders were established by themselves on a sort of Tom Tidler's ground called “Across the River.” The river was little more than a brook, except in spring, when, after heavy snows, it sometimes verified its name of the Ramsey River. Ramsey was an old family name in Amity, as Edgham was in Edgham. Once, indeed, the little village had been called Ramsey Four Corners. Then the old Ramsey family waned and grew less in popular esteem, and one day the question of the appropriateness of naming the village after them came up. There was another old family, by the name of Saunders, between whom and the Ramseys had always been a dignified New England feud. The Saunders had held their own much better than the Ramseys. There was one branch especially, to which Judge Josiah Saunders belonged, which was still notable. Judge Josiah had served in the State legislature, he was a judge of the superior court, and he occupied the best house in Amity, a fine specimen of the old colonial mansion house, which had been in the Saunders family for generations. Judge Saunders had made additions to this old mansion, conservative, modern colonial additions, and it was really a noble building. It was shortly after he had made the additions to his house, and had served his first term as judge of the superior court, that the question of changing the name of the village from Ramsey Four Corners to Saunders had been broached. Meetings had been held, in which the name of our celebrated townsman, the Honorable Josiah Saunders, had been on every tongue. The Ramsey family obtained scant recognition for past merits, but a becoming silence had been maintained as to their present status. The only recognized survivors of the old house of Ramsey at that time were the widow, Amelia Ramsey, the wife of Anderson Ramsey, deceased, as she appeared in the minutes of the meetings, and her son George, a lad of sixteen, and the same who, in patched attire, had made love to Maria over the garden fence when she was a child. It was about that time that the meetings were taking place, and the name of the village had been changed to Amity. It had been held to be a happy, even a noble and generous thought, on the part of Josiah Saunders. “Would that in such wise, by a combination of poetical aspirations and practical deeds, all differences might be adjusted upon this globe,” said the *Amity Argus*, in an account of the meeting. Thenceforth, Ramsey Four Corners became Amity, and the most genteel of the ladies had Amity engraved on their note-paper.

Mrs. Amelia Ramsey and George, who had suffered somewhat in their feelings, in spite of the poetical adjustment of the difference, had no note-paper. They were poor, else Amity might never have been. They lived in a house which had been, in its day, as pretentious as the Saunders mansion. At the time of Maria's first visit to Amity it had been a weather-beaten old structure, which had not been painted for years, and had a curious effect as of a blur on the landscape, with its roof and walls of rain and sun stained shingles and clapboards, its leaning chimneys, and its Corinthian pillars widely out of the perpendicular, supporting crazily the roofs of the double veranda. When Maria went to Amity to begin teaching, the old house had undergone a transformation. She gazed at it with amazement out of the sitting-room window, which faced it, on the afternoon of her arrival.

“Why, what has happened to the old Ramsey house?” she asked her aunt Maria.

“Well, in the first place, a cousin died and left them some money,” replied Aunt Maria. “It was a matter of ten thousand dollars. Then Amelia and George went right to work and fixed up the house. It was none of my business, but it seemed dreadful silly to me. If I had been in their place, I'd have let that old ramshackle of a place go to pot and bought a nice little new house. There was one they could have got for fifteen hundred dollars, on this side of the river; but no, they went to work, and they must have laid out three thousand clear on that old thing.”

“It is beautiful!” said Maria, regarding it with admiration.

“Well, I don't think it's very beautiful, but everybody to their liking,” replied Aunt Maria, with a sniff of her high, transparent nostrils. “For my part, I'd rather have a little, clean new house before all the old ones, that folks have died in and worried in, in creation.”

But Maria continued to regard the renovated Ramsey house with admiration. It stood close to the street, as is the case with so many old houses in rural New England. It had a tiny brick strip of yard in front, on which was set, on either side of the stoop, a great century-plant in a pot. Above them rose a curving flight of steps to a broad veranda, supported with Corinthian pillars, which were now upright and glistening with white paint, as was the entire house.

“They had it all fixed up, inside and out,” said Aunt Maria. “There wasn't a room but was painted and papered, and a good many had to be plastered. They did not get much new furniture, though. I should have thought they'd wanted to. All they've got is awful old. But I heard George Ramsey say he wouldn't swap one of those old mahogany pieces for the best new thing to be bought. Well, everybody to their taste. If I had had my house all fixed up that way, I should have wanted new furniture to correspond.”

“What is George Ramsey doing?” asked Maria, with a little, conscious blush of which she was ashamed. Maria, all her life, would blush because people expected it of her. She knew as plainly as if she had spoken, that her aunt Maria was considering suddenly the advantages of a possible match between herself and George Ramsey. What Aunt Maria said immediately confirmed this opinion. She spoke with a sort of chary praise of George. Aunt Maria had in reality never liked the Ramseys; she considered that they felt above her, and for no good reason; still, she had an eye for the main chance. It flashed swiftly across her mind that her niece was pretty, and George might lose his heart to her and marry her, and then Mrs. Amelia Ramsey might have to treat her like an equal and no longer hold her old, aristocratic head so high.

“Well,” said she, “I suppose George Ramsey is pretty smart. They say he is. I guess he favors his grandfather. His father wasn't any too bright, if he was a Ramsey. George Ramsey, they say, worked his way through college, used to be bell-boy or waiter or something in a hotel summers, unbeknown to his mother. Amelia Ramsey would have had a conniption fit if she had known that her precious boy was working out. She used to talk as grand as you please about George's being away on his vacation. Maybe she did know, but if she did she never let on. I don't know as she let on even to

herself. Amelia Ramsey is one of the kind who can shut their eyes even when they look at themselves. There never was a lookin'-glass made that could show Amelia Ramsey anything she didn't want to see. I never had any patience with her. I believe in being proud if you've got anything to be proud of, but I don't see any sense in it otherwise. Anyhow, I guess George is doing pretty well. A distant relation of his mother, an Allen, not a Ramsey, got a place in a bank for him, they say, and he gets good pay. I heard it was three thousand a year, but I don't believe it. He ain't much over twenty, and it ain't likely. I don't know jest how old he is. He's some older than you."

"He's a good deal older than I," said Maria, remembering sundry confidences with the tall, lanky boy over the garden fence.

"Well, I don't know but he is," said Aunt Maria, "but I don't believe he gets three thousand a year, anyhow."

The next morning Maria, on her way to school in the rain, passing under the unconquerable golden glow of the maples, cast a surreptitious glance at the old Ramsey house as she passed. It had been wonderfully changed for the better. Even the garden at the side next her aunt's house was no longer a weedy enclosure, but displayed an array of hardy flowers which the frost had not yet affected. Marigolds tossed their golden and russet balls through the misty wind of the rain, princess-feathers waved bravely, and chrysanthemums showed in gorgeous clumps of rose and yellow and white. As she passed, a tidy maid emerged from the front door and began sweeping out the rain which had lodged in the old hollows of the stone stoop, worn by the steps of generations. The rain flew before her plying broom in a white foam. The maid wore a cap and a wide, white apron. Maria reflected that the Ramseys had indeed come into palmier days, since they kept a maid so attired. She thought of George Ramsey with his patched trousers, and again the old feeling of repulsion and wonder at herself that she could have had romantic dreams about him came over her. Maria felt unutterably old that morning, and yet she had a little, childish dread of her new duties. She was in reality afraid of the school-children, although she did not show it. She got through the day very creditably, although that night she was tired as she had never been in her life, and, curiously enough, her sense of smell seemed to be the most affected. Many of her pupils came from poor families, the families of operatives in the paper-mills, and their garments were shabby and unclean. Soaked with rain, they gave out pungent odors. Maria's sense of smell was very highly developed. It seemed to her that her very soul was permeated, her very thoughts and imagination, with the odor of damp, unclean clothing, of draggled gowns and wraps and hats and wet leather. She could not eat her supper; she could not eat the luncheon which her aunt had put up for her, since the school being a mile away, it was too far to walk home for the noonday dinner in the rain.

"You 'ain't eat hardly a mite of luncheon," Aunt Maria said when she opened the box.

"I did not feel very hungry," Maria replied, apologetically.

"If you don't eat, you'll never hold out school-teaching in the world," said Aunt Maria.

She repeated it when Maria scarcely tasted her supper, although it was a nice one—cold ham, and scrambled eggs, scrambled with cream, and delicious slabs of layer-cake. "You'll never hold out in the world if you don't eat," said she.

"To tell the truth," replied Maria, "I can smell those poor children's wet clothes so that it has taken away all my appetite."

"Land! you'll have to get over that," said Aunt Maria.

"It seems to me that everything smells and tastes of wet, dirty clothes and shoes," said Maria.

"You'll have to learn not to be so particular," said Aunt Maria, and she spoke with the same affectionate severity that Maria remembered in her mother. "Put it out of your mind," she added.

"I can't," said Maria, and a qualm of nausea came over her. It was as if the damp, unclean garments and the wet shoes were pressed close under her nostrils. She looked pale.

"Well, drink your tea, anyhow," said Aunt Maria, with a glance at her.

After supper Aunt Maria, going into the other side of the house to borrow some yeast, said to her brother Henry that she did not believe that Maria would hold out to teach school. "She has come home sick on account of the smells the very first day," said she, "and she hasn't eat her supper, and she scarcely touched her luncheon."

Henry Stillman laughed, a bitter, sardonic laugh which he had acquired of late years. "Oh, well, she will get used to it," he replied. "Don't you worry, Maria. She will get used to it. The smell of the poor is the smell of the world. Heaven itself must be full of it."

His wife eyed him with a half-frightened air. "Why, don't talk so, Henry!" she said.

Henry Stillman laughed, half sardonically, half tenderly. "It is so, my dear," he said, "but don't you worry about it."

In these days Henry Stillman, although always maintaining his gentle manner towards children and women, had become, in the depths of his long-suffering heart, a rebel against fate. He had borne too long that burden which is the heaviest and most ignoble in the world, the burden of a sense of injury. He knew that he was fitted for better things than he had. He thought that it was not his own personal fault that he did not have them, and his very soul was curdling with a conviction of wrong, both at the hands of men and God. In these days he ceased going to church. He watched his wife and sister set out every Sunday, and he stayed at home. He got a certain satisfaction out of that. All who realize an injury have an amount of childishness in acts of retaliation. He, Henry Stillman, actually had a conviction that he was showing recrimination and wounding fate, which had so injured him, if only with a pin-prick, by staying away from church. After Maria came to live with them, she, too, went to church, but he did not view her with the same sardonic air

that he did the older women, who had remained true to their faith in the face of disaster. He looked at Maria, in her pretty little best gowns and hats, setting forth, and a sweet tenderness for her love of God and belief sweetened his own agnosticism. He would not for the world have said a word to weaken the girl's faith nor to have kept her away from church. He would have urged her to go had she manifested the slightest inclination to remain at home. He was in a manner jealous of the girl's losing what he had himself lost. He tried to refrain from airing his morbid, bitter views of life to his wife, but once in a while he could not restrain himself as now. However, he laughed so naturally, and asked Maria, who presently came in, how many pupils had been present, and how she liked school-teaching, that his wife began to think that he had not been in earnest.

“They are such poor, dirty little things,” Maria said, “and their clothes were wet, and—and—” A look of nausea overspread her face.

“You will get used to that,” said her uncle, laughing pleasantly. “Eunice, haven't we got some cologne somewhere?”

Eunice got a bottle of cologne, which was seldom used, being a luxury, from a closet in the sitting-room, and put some on Maria's handkerchief. “You won't think anything about it after a little,” said she, echoing her husband.

“I suppose the scholars in Lowe Academy were a different class,” said Aunt Maria, who had seated herself as primly as ever, with her hands crossed but not touching the lap of her black gown. The folds of the skirt were carefully arranged, and she did not move after having once seated herself, for fear of creasing it.

“They were clean, at least,” said Maria, with a little grimace of disgust. “It does seem as if people might be clean, if they are poor.”

“Some folks here are too poor to buy soap and wash-cloths and towels,” her uncle said, still not bitterly. “You must take that into account, Maria. It takes a little extra money even to keep clean; people don't get that into their heads, generally speaking, but it is so.”

“Well, I haven't had much money,” said Aunt Maria, “but I must say I have kept myself in soap and wash-rags and towels.”

“You might not have been able to if you had had half a dozen children and a drinking husband, or one who was out of work half the time,” her brother said.

An elderly blush spread over his sister's face. “Well, the Lord knows I'd rather have the soap and towels and wash-rags than a drunken husband and half a dozen dirty children,” she retorted, sharply.

“Lucky for you and the children that you have,” said Henry. Then he turned again to his niece, of whom he was very fond. “It won't rain every day, dear,” he said, “and the smells won't be so bad. Don't worry.”

Maria smiled back at him bravely. “I shall get used to it,” she said, sniffing at the cologne, which was cheap and pretty bad.

Maria was in reality dismayed. Her experience with children—that is, her personal experience—had been confined to her sister Evelyn. She compared dainty little Evelyn with the rough, uncouth, half-degenerates which she had encountered that morning, sitting before her with gaping mouths of stupidity or grins of impish impudence, in their soiled, damp clothing, and her heart sank. There was nothing in common except youth between these children, the offspring of ignorance and often drunken sensuality, and Evelyn. At first it seemed to her that there was absolutely no redeeming quality in the whole. However, the next morning the sun shone through the yellow maple boughs, and was reflected from the golden carpet of leaves which the wind and rain of the day before had spread beneath. The children were dry; some of them had become ingratiating, even affectionate. She discovered that there were a number of pretty little girls and innocent, honest little boys, whose mothers had made pathetic attempts to send them clean and whole to school. She also discovered that some of them had reasonably quick intelligence, especially one girl, by name Jessy Ramsey. She was of a distant branch of the old Ramseys, and had a high, spiritual forehead, from which the light hair was smoothly combed in damp ridges, and a delicate face with serious, intent blue eyes, under brows strangely pent for a child. Maria straightway took a fancy to Jessy Ramsey. When, on her way home at night, the child timidly followed in her wake, she reached out and grasped her tiny hand with a warm pressure.

“You learned your lessons very well, Jessy,” she said, and the child's face, as she looked up at her, grew positively brilliant.

When Maria got home she enthused about her.

“There is one child in the school who is a wonder,” said she.

“Who?” asked Aunt Maria. She was in her heart an aristocrat. She considered the people of Amity—that is, the manufacturing people (she exempted her own brother as she might have exempted a prince of the blood drawn into an ignoble pursuit from dire necessity)—as distinctly below par. Maria's school was across the river. She regarded all the children below par. “I do wish you could have had a school this side of the river,” she added, “but Miss Norcross has held the other ten years, and I don't believe she will ever get married, she is so mortal homely, and they like her. Who is the child you are talking about?”

“Her name is Ramsey, Jessy Ramsey.”

Aunt Maria sniffed. “Oh!” said she. “She belongs to that Eugene Ramsey tribe.”

“Any relation to the Ramseys next door?” asked Maria.

“About a tenth cousin, I guess,” replied Aunt Maria. “There was a Eugene Ramsey did something awful years ago, before I was born, and he got into state-prison, and then when he came out he married as low as he could. They have never had anything to do with these Ramseys. They are just as low as they can be—always have been.”

“This little girl is pretty, and bright,” said Maria.

Aunt Maria sniffed again. “Well, you'll see how she'll turn out,” she said. “Never yet anything good came of that Eugene Ramsey tribe. That child's father drinks like a fish, and he's been in prison, and her mother's no better than she should be, and she's got a sister that everybody talks about—has ever since she was so high.”

“This seems like a good little girl,” said Maria.

“Wait and see,” said Aunt Maria.

But for all that Maria felt herself drawn towards this poor little offspring of the degenerate branch of the Ramseys. There was something about the child's delicate, intellectual, fairly noble cast of countenance which at once aroused her affection and pity. It was in December, on a bitterly cold day, when Maria had been teaching in Amity some two months, when this affection and pity ripened into absolute fondness and protection. The children were out in the bare school-yard during the afternoon recess, when Maria, sitting huddled over the stove for warmth, heard such a clamor that she ran to the window. Out in the desolate yard, a parallelogram of frozen soil hedged in with a high board fence covered with grotesque, and even obscene, drawings of pupils who had from time to time reigned in district number six, was the little Ramsey girl, surrounded by a crowd of girls who were fairly yelping like little mongrel dogs. The boys' yard was on the other side of the fence, but in the fence was a knot-hole wherein was visible a keen boy-eye. One girl after another was engaged in pulling to the height of her knees Jessy Ramsey's poor, little, dirty frock, thereby disclosing her thin, naked legs, absolutely uncovered to the freezing blast. Maria rushed bareheaded out in the yard and thrust herself through the crowd of little girls.

“Girls, what are you doing?” she asked, sternly.

“Please, teacher, Jessy Ramsey, she 'ain't got nothin' at all on under her dress,” piped one after another, in accusing tones; then they yelped again.

Tears of pity and rage sprang to Maria's eyes. She caught hold of the thin little shoulder, which was, beyond doubt, covered by nothing except her frock, and turned furiously upon the other girls.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!” said she; “great girls like you making fun of this poor child!”

“She had ought to be ashamed of herself goin' round so,” retorted the biggest girl in school, Alice Sweet, looking boldly at Maria. “She ain't no better than her ma. My ma says so.”

“My ma says I mustn't go with her,” said another girl.

“Both of you go straight into the school-house,” said Maria, at a white heat of anger as she impelled poor little Jessy Ramsey out of the yard.

“I don't care,” said Alice Sweet, with quite audible impudence.

The black eye at the knot-hole in the fence which separated the girls' yard from the boys' was replaced by a blue one. Maria's attention was attracted towards it by an audible titter from the other side.

“Every one of you boys march straight into the school-house,” she called. Then she led Jessy into a little room which was dedicated to the teacher's outside wraps. The room was little more than a closet, and very cold. Maria put her arm around Jessy and felt with horror the little, naked body under the poor frock.

“For Heaven's sake, child, why are you out with so little on such a day as this?” she cried out.

Jessy began to cry. She had heretofore maintained a sullen silence of depression under taunts, but a kind word was too much for her.

“I 'ain't got no underclothes, teacher; I 'ain't, honest,” she sobbed. “I'd outgrowed all my last year's ones, and Mamie she's got 'em; and my mother she 'ain't got no money to buy any more, and my father he's away on a drunk. I can't help it; I can't, honest, teacher.”

Maria gazed at the little thing in a sort of horror. “Do you mean to say that you have actually nothing to put on but your dress, Jessy Ramsey?” said she.

“I can't help it, honest, teacher,” sobbed Jessy Ramsey.

Maria continued to gaze at her, then she led her into the school-room and rang the bell furiously. When the scholars were all in their places, she opened her lips to express her mind to them, but a second's reflection seemed to show her the futility of it. Instead, she called the geography class.

After school that night, Maria, instead of going home, went straight to Jessy Ramsey's home, which was about half a mile from the school-house. She held Jessy, who wore a threadbare little cape over her frock, by the hand. Franky Ramsey and Mamie Ramsey, Jessy's younger brother and sister, tagged timidly behind her. Finally, Maria waited for them to come up with her, which they did with a cringing air.

“I want to know,” said Maria to Mamie, “if you are wearing all your sister's underclothes this winter?”

Mamie whimpered a little as she replied. Mamie had a habitual whimper and a mean little face, with a wisp of flaxen hair tied with a dirty blue ribbon.

“Yes, ma'am,” she replied. “Jessy she growed so she couldn't git into 'em, and mummer—”

The boy, who was very thin, almost to emaciation, and looked consumptive, but who was impishly pert, cut in.

“I had to wear Jessy's shirts,” he said. “Mamie she couldn't wear them 'ere.”

“So you haven't any flannel shirts?” Maria asked of Mamie.

“I'm wearin' mummer's,” said Mamie. “Mummer's they shrunk so she couldn't wear 'em, and Jessy couldn't nuther.”

“What is your mother wearing?” asked Maria.

“Mr. John Dorsey he bought her some new ones,” replied Mamie, and a light of evil intelligence came into the mean little face.

“Who is Mr. John Dorsey?” asked Maria.

“Oh, he's to our house considerable,” replied Mamie, still with that evil light, which grew almost confidential, upon her face.

The boy chuckled a little and dug his toes into the frozen earth, then he whistled.

The Ramsey house was the original old homestead of the family. It was unspeakably decrepit and fallen from a former high estate. The old house presented to Maria's fancy something in itself degraded and loathsome. It seemed to partake actually of the character of its inmates—to be stained and swollen and out of plumb with unmentionable sins of degeneration. It was a very poisonous fungus of a house, with blotches of paint here and there, with its front portico supported drunkenly on swaying pillars, with its roof hollowed about the chimney, with great stains here and there upon the walls, which seemed like stains of sin rather than of old rains. Maria marched straight to the house, leading Jessy, with Mamie and Franky at her heels. She knocked on the door; there was no bell, of course. But Franky pushed past her and opened the door, and sang out, in his raucous voice:

“Hullo, mummer! Mummer!”

Mamie echoed him in her equally raucous voice, full of dissonances. “Mummer! Mummer!”

A woman, large and dirty, but rather showily clad, with a brave display of cheap jewelry, appeared in the doorway of a room on the right, from which also issued a warm, spirituous odor, mingled with onions and boiling meat. The woman, who had at one time been weakly pretty, and even now was not bad-looking, stared with a sort of vacant defiance at Maria.

“It's teacher, mummer,” volunteered Mamie.

Franky chuckled again, and again whistled. Franky's chuckles and whistles were characteristic of him. He often disturbed the school in such fashion.

Maria had a vision of a man in his shirt-sleeves, smoking beside a red-hot stove, on which boiled the meat and onions. She began at once upon her errand.

“How do you do, Mrs. Ramsey?” said she.

The woman mumbled something inarticulate and backed a little. The man in the room leaned forward and rolled bloodshot eyes at her. Maria began at once. She had much of her mother's spirit, which, when it was aroused, balked at nothing. She pointed at Jessy, then she extended her small index-finger severely at Mrs. Ramsey.

“Mrs. Ramsey,” said she, and she stood so straight that she looked much taller, her blue eyes flashed like steel at the slinking ones of the older woman, “I want to inquire why you sent this child to school such a day as this in such a condition?”

Mrs. Ramsey again murmured something inarticulate and backed still farther. Maria followed her quite into the room. A look of insolent admiration became evident in the bloodshot eyes of the man beside the stove. Maria had no false modesty when she was righteously incensed. She would have said just the same before a room full of men.

“That child,” she said, and she again pointed at Jessy, shivering in her little, scanty frock—“that child came to school to-day without any clothing under her dress; one of the coldest days of the year, too. I don't see what you are thinking of, you, her own mother, to let a child go out in such a condition! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

Then the woman crimsoned with wrath and she found speech, the patois of New England, instead of New Jersey, to which Maria was accustomed, and which she understood. This woman, instead of half speaking, ran all her words together in a coarse, nasal monotone.

“Hadn't nothin' to put on her,” she said. “She'd outgrowed all she had, hadn't nothin', mind your own business, go 'long home, where you b'long.”

Maria understood the last words, and she replied, fiercely, “I am not going home one step until you promise me you'll get decent underwear for this child to wear to school,” said she, “and that you won't allow her to go out-of-doors in this condition again. If you do, I'll have you arrested.”

The woman's face grew redder. She made a threatening movement towards Maria, but the man beside the stove unexpectedly arose and slouched between them, grinning and feeling in his pocket, whence he withdrew two one-dollar notes.

“Here,” he said, in a growling voice, which was nevertheless intended to be ingratiating. “Go 'n' buy the young one somethin' to go to school in. Don't yer mind.”

Maria half extended her hand, then she drew it back. She looked at the man, who exhaled whiskey as a fungus an evil perfume. She glanced at Mrs. Ramsey.

“Is this man your father?” she asked of Jessy.

Immediately the boy burst into a peal of meaning laughter. The man himself chuckled, then looked grave, with an effort, as he stood extending the money.

“Better take 'em an' buy the young one some clothes,” he said.

“Who is this man?” demanded Maria, severely, of the laughing boy.

“It's Mr. John Dorsey,” replied Franky.

Then a light of the underneath evil fire of the world broke upon Maria's senses. She repelled the man haughtily.

“I don't want your money,” said she. “But”—she turned to the woman—“if you send that child to school again, clothed as she is to-day, I will have you arrested. I mean it.” With that she was gone, with a proud motion. Laughter rang out after her, also a scolding voice and an oath. She did not turn her head. She marched straight on out of the yard, to the street, and home.

She could not eat her supper. She had a sick, shocked feeling.

“What is the matter?” her aunt Maria asked. “It's so cold you can't have been bothered with the smells to-day.”

“It's worse than smells,” replied Maria. Then she told her story.

Her aunt stared at her. “Good gracious! You didn't go to that awful house, a young girl like you?” she said, and her prim cheeks burned. “Why, that man's livin' right there with Mrs. Ramsey, and her husband winking at it! They are awful people!”

“I would have gone anywhere to get that poor child clothed decently,” said Maria.

“But you wouldn't take his money!”

“I rather guess I wouldn't!”

“Well, I don't blame you, but I don't see what is going to be done.”

“I don't,” said Maria, helplessly. She reflected how she had disposed already of her small stipend, and would not have any more for some time, and how her own clothing no more than sufficed for her.

“I can't give her a thing,” said Aunt Maria. “I'm wearin' flannels myself that are so patched there isn't much left of the first of 'em, and it's just so with the rest of my clothes. I'm wearin' a petticoat made out of a comfortable my mother made before Henry was married. It was quilted fine, and had a small pattern, if it is copperplate, but I don't darse hold my dress up only just so. I wouldn't have anybody know it for the world. And I know Eunice ain't much better off. They had that big doctor's bill, and I know she's patched and darned so she'd be ashamed of her life if she fell down on the ice and broke a bone. I tell you what it is, those other Ramseys ought to do something. I don't care if they are such distant relations, they ought to do something.”

After supper Maria and her aunt went into the other side of the house, and Aunt Maria, who had been waxing fairly explosive, told the tale of poor little Jessy Ramsey going to school with no undergarments.

“It's a shame!” said Eunice, who was herself nervous and easily aroused to indignation. She sat up straight and the hollows on her thin cheeks blazed, and her thin New England mouth tightened.

“George Ramsey ought to do something if he is earning as much as they say he is,” said Aunt Maria.

“That is so,” said Eunice. “It doesn't make any difference if they are so distantly related. It is the same name and the same blood.”

Henry Stillman laughed his sardonic laugh. “You can't expect the flowers to look out for the weeds,” he said. “George Ramsey and his mother are in full blossom; they have fixed up their house and are holding up their heads. You can't expect them to look out for poor relations who have gone to the bad, and done worse—got too poor to buy clothes enough to keep warm.”

Maria suddenly sprang to her feet. “I know what I am going to do,” she announced, with decision, and made for the door.

“What on earth are you going to do?” asked her aunt Maria.

“I am going straight in there, and I am going to tell them how that poor little thing came to school to-day, and tell them they ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

Before the others fairly realized what she was doing, Maria was out of the house, running across the little stretch which intervened. Her aunt Maria called after her, but she paid no attention. She was at that moment ringing the Ramsey bell, with her pretty, uncovered hair tossing in the December wind.

“She will catch her own death of cold,” said Aunt Maria, “running out without anything on her head.”

“She will just get patronized for her pains,” said Eunice, who had a secret grudge against the Ramseys for their prosperity and their renovated house, a grudge which she had not ever owned to her inmost self, but which nevertheless existed.

“She doesn't stop to think one minute; she's just like her father about that,” said Aunt Maria.

Henry Stillman said nothing. He took up his paper, which he had been reading when Maria and his sister entered.

Meantime, Maria was being ushered into the Ramsey house by a maid who wore a white cap. The first thing which she noticed as she entered the house was a strong fragrance of flowers. That redoubled her indignation.

“These Ramseys can buy flowers in midwinter,” she thought, “while their own flesh and blood go almost naked.”

She entered the room in which the flowers were, a great bunch of pink carnations in a tall, green vase. The room was charming. It was not only luxurious, but gave evidences of superior qualities in its owners. It was empty when Maria entered, but soon Mrs. Ramsey and her son came in. Maria recognized with a start her old acquaintance, or rather she did not recognize him. She would not have known him at all had she not seen him in his home. She had not seen him before, for he had been away ever since she had come to Amity. He had been West on business for his bank. Now he at once stepped forward and spoke to her.

“You are my old friend, Miss Edgham, I think,” he said. “Allow me to present my mother.”

Maria bowed perforce before the very gentle little lady in a soft lavender cashmere, with her neck swathed in laces, but she did not accept the offered seat, and she utterly disregarded the glance of astonishment which both mother and son gave at her uncovered shoulders and head. Maria's impetuosity had come to her from two sides. When it was in flood, so to speak, nothing could stop it.

“No, thank you, I can't sit down,” she said. “I came on an errand. You are related, I believe, to the other Ramseys. The children go to my school. There are Mamie and Franky and Jessy.”

“We are very distantly related, and, on the whole, proud of the distance rather than the relationship,” said George Ramsey, with a laugh.

Then Maria turned fiercely upon him. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” said she.

The young man stared at her.

Maria persisted. “Yes, you ought,” she said. “I don't care how distant the relationship is, the same blood is in your veins, and you bear the same name.”

“Why, what is the matter?” asked George Ramsey, still in a puzzled, amused voice.

Maria spoke out. “That poor little Jessy Ramsey,” said she, “and she is the prettiest and brightest scholar I have, too, came to school to-day without a single stitch of clothing under her dress. It is a wonder she didn't die. I don't know but she will die, and if she does it will be your fault.”

George Ramsey's face suddenly sobered; his mother's flushed. She looked at him, then at Maria, almost with fright. She felt really afraid of this forcible girl, who was so very angry and so very pretty in her anger. Maria had never looked prettier than she did then, with her cheeks burning and her blue eyes flashing with indignation and defiance.

“That is terrible, such a day as this,” said George Ramsey.

“Yes; I had no idea they were quite so badly off,” murmured his mother.

“You ought to have had some idea,” flashed out Maria.

“We had not, Miss Edgham,” said George, gently. “You must remember how very distant the relationship is. I believe it begins with the fourth generation from myself. And there are other reasons—”

“There ought not to be other reasons,” Maria said.

Mrs. Ramsey looked with wonder and something like terror and aversion at this pretty, violent girl, who was espousing so vehemently, not to say rudely, the cause of the distant relatives of her husband's family. The son, however, continued to smile amusedly at Maria.

“Won't you sit down, Miss Edgham?” he said.

“Yes, won't you sit down?” his mother repeated, feebly.

“No, thank you,” said Maria. “I only came about this. I—I would do something for the poor little thing myself, but I

haven't any money now, and Aunt Maria would, and Uncle Henry, and Aunt Eunice, but they—”

All at once Maria, who was hardly more than a child herself, and who had been in reality frightfully wrought up over the piteous plight of the other child, lost control of herself. She began to cry. She put her handkerchief to her face and sobbed helplessly.

“The poor little thing! oh, the poor little thing!” she panted, “with nobody in the world to do anything for her, and her own people so terribly wicked. I—can't bear it!”

The first thing she knew, Maria was having a large, soft cloak folded around her, and somebody was leading her gently to the door. She heard a murmured good-night, to which she did not respond except by a sob, and was led, with her arm rather closely held, along the sidewalk to her own door. At the door George Ramsey took her hand, and she felt something pressed softly into it.

“If you will please buy what the poor little thing needs to make her comfortable,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” Maria replied, faintly. She began to be ashamed of her emotion.

“You must not think that my mother and I were knowing to this,” George Ramsey said. “We are really such very distant relations that the name alone is the only bond between us; still, on general principles, if the name had been different, I would do what I could. Such suffering is terrible. You must not think us hard-hearted, Miss Edgham.”

Maria looked up at the young fellow's face, upon which an electric light shone fully, and it was a good face to see. She could not at all reconcile it with her memory of the rather silly little boy with the patched trousers, with whom she had discoursed over the garden fence. This face was entirely masterly, dark and clean-cut, with fine eyes, and a distinctly sweet expression about the mouth which he had inherited from his mother.

“I suppose I was very foolish,” Maria said, in a low voice. “I am afraid I was rude to your mother. I did not mean to be, but the poor little thing, and this bitter day, and I went home with her, and there was a dreadful man there who offered me money to buy things for her—”

“I hope you did not take it,” George Ramsey said, quickly.

“No.”

“I am glad of that. They are a bad lot. I don't know about this little girl. She may be a survival of the fittest, but take them all together they are a bad lot, if they are my relatives. Good-night, Miss Edgham, and I beg you not to distress yourself about it all.”

“I am very sorry if I was rude,” Maria said, and she spoke like a little girl.

“You were not rude at all,” George responded, quickly. “You were only all worked up over such suffering, and it did you credit. You were not rude at all.” He shook hands again with Maria. Then he asked if he might call and see her sometime. Maria said yes, and fled into the house.

She went into her aunt Maria's side of the house, and ran straight up-stairs to her own room. Presently she heard doors opening and shutting and knew that her aunt was curiously following her from the other side. She came to Maria's door, which was locked. Aunt Maria was not surprised at that, as Maria always locked her door at night—she herself did the same.

“Have you gone to bed?” called Aunt Maria.

“Yes,” replied Maria, who had, indeed, hurriedly hustled herself into bed.

“Gone to bed early as this?” said Aunt Maria.

“I am dreadfully tired,” replied Maria.

“Did they give you anything? Why didn't you come into the other side and tell us about it?”

“Mr. George Ramsey gave me ten dollars.”

“Gracious!” said Aunt Maria.

Presently she spoke again. “What did they say?” she asked.

“Not much of anything.”

“Gave you ten dollars?” said Aunt Maria. “Well, you can get enough to make her real comfortable with that. Didn't you get chilled through going over there without anything on?”

“No,” replied Maria, and as she spoke she realized, in the moonlit room, a mass of fur-lined cloak over a chair. She had forgotten to return it to George Ramsey. “I had Mrs. Ramsey's cloak coming home,” she called.

“Well, I'm glad you did. It's awful early to go to bed. Don't you want something?”

“No, thank you.”

“Don't you want me to heat a soapstone and fetch it up to you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well, good-night,” said Aunt Maria, in a puzzled voice.

“Good-night,” said Maria. Then she heard her aunt go away.

It was a long time before Maria went to sleep. She awoke about two o'clock in the morning and was conscious of having been awakened by a strange odor, a combined odor of camphor and lavender, which came from Mrs. Ramsey's cloak. It disturbed her, although she could not tell why. Then all at once she saw, as plainly as if he were really in the room, George Ramsey's face. At first a shiver of delight came over her; then she shuddered. A horror, as of one under conviction of sin, came over her. It was as if she repelled an evil angel from her door, for she remembered all at once what had happened to her, and that it was a sin for her even to dream of George Ramsey; and she had allowed him to come into her waking dreams. She got out of bed, took up the soft cloak, thrust it into her closet, and shut the door. Then she climbed shivering back into bed, and lay there in the moonlight, entangled in the mystery of life.

Chapter XIX

The very next day, which was Saturday, and consequently a holiday, Maria went on the trolley to Westbridge, which was a provincial city about six miles from Amity. She proposed buying some clothing for Jessy Ramsey with the ten dollars which George Ramsey had given her. Her aunt Eunice accompanied her.

“George Ramsey goes over to Westbridge on the trolley,” said Eunice, as they jolted along—the cars were very well equipped, but the road was rough—“and I shouldn't wonder if he was on our car coming back.”

Maria colored quickly and looked out of the window. The cars were constructed like those on steam railroads, with seats facing towards the front, and Maria's aunt had insisted upon her sitting next to the window because the view was in a measure new to her. She had not been over the road many times since she had come to Amity. She stared out at the trimly kept country road, lined with cheap Queen Anne houses and the older type of New England cottages and square frame houses, and it all looked strange to her after the red soil and the lapse towards Southern ease and shiftlessness of New Jersey. But nothing that she looked upon was as strange as the change in her own heart. Maria, from being of an emotional nature, had many times considered herself as being in love, young as she was, but this was different. When her aunt Eunice spoke of George Ramsey she felt a rigid shiver from head to foot. It seemed to her that she could not see him nor speak to him, that she could not return to Amity on the same car. She made no reply at first to her aunt's remark, but finally she said, in a faint voice, that she supposed Mr. Ramsey came home after bank hours at three o'clock.

“He comes home a good deal later than that, as a general thing,” said Eunice. “Oftener than not I see him get off the car at six o'clock. I guess he stays and works after bank hours. George Ramsey is a worker, if there ever was one. He's a real likely young man.”

Maria felt Eunice's eyes upon her, and realized that she was thinking, as her aunt Maria had done, that George Ramsey would be a good match for her. A sort of desperation seized upon her.

“I don't know what you mean by likely,” Maria said, impertinently, in her shame and defiance.

“Don't know what I mean by likely?”

“No, I don't. People in New Jersey don't say likely.”

“Why, I mean he is a good young man, and likely to turn out well,” responded Eunice, rather helplessly. She was a very gentle woman, and had all her life been more or less intimidated by her husband's and sister-in-laws' more strenuous natures; and, if the truth were told, she stood in a little awe of this blooming young niece, with her self-possession and clothes of the New York fashion.

“I don't see why he is more *likely*, as you call it, than any other young man,” Maria returned, pitilessly. “I should call him a very ordinary young man.”

“He isn't called so generally,” Eunice said, feebly.

They were about half an hour reaching Westbridge. Eunice by that time had plucked up a little spirit. She reflected that Maria knew almost nothing about the shopping district, and she herself had shopped there all her life since she had been of shopping age. Eunice had a great respect for the Westbridge stores, and considered them distinctly superior to those of Boston. She was horrified when Maria observed, shortly before they got off the car, that she supposed they could have done much better in Boston.

“I guess you will find that Adams & Wood's is as good a store as any you could go to in New York,” said Eunice. “Then there is the Boston Store, too, and Collins & Green's. All of them are very good, and they have a good assortment. Hardly anybody in Amity goes anywhere else shopping, they think the Westbridge stores so much better.”

“Of course it is cheaper to come here,” said Maria, as they got off the car in front of Adams & Wood's.

“That isn't the reason,” said Eunice, eagerly. “Why, Mrs. Judge Saunders buys 'most everything here; says she can do enough sight better than she can anywhere else.”

“If the dress Mrs. Saunders had on at the church supper was a sample, she dresses like a perfect guy,” said Maria, as they entered the store, with its two pretentious show-windows filled with waxen ladies dressed in the height of the fashion, standing in the midst of symmetrically arranged handkerchiefs and rugs.

Maria knew that she was even cruelly pert to her aunt, but she felt like stinging—like crowding some of the stings out of her own heart. She asked herself was ever any girl so horribly placed as she was, married, and not married; and now she had seen some one else whom she must shun and try to hate, although she wished to love him. Maria felt instinctively, remembering the old scenes over the garden fence, and remembering how she herself had looked that very day as she started out, with her puffy blue velvet turban rising above the soft roll of her fair hair and her face blooming through a film of brown lace, and also remembering George Ramsey's tone as he asked if he might call, that if she were free that things might happen with her as with other girls; that she and George Ramsey might love each other, and become engaged; that she might save her school money for a trousseau, and by-and-by be married to a man of whom she should be very proud. The patches on George Ramsey's trousers became very dim to her. She admired him from the depths of her heart.

“I guess we had better look at flannels first,” Eunice said. “It won't do to get all wool, aside from the expense, for with that Ramsey woman's washing it wouldn't last any time.”

She and her aunt made most of their purchases in Adams & Wood's. They succeeded in obtaining quite a comfortable little outfit for Jessy Ramsey, and at last boarded a car laden with packages. Eunice had a fish-net bag filled to overflowing, but Maria, who, coming from the vicinity of New York, looked down on bags, carried her parcels in her arms.

Directly they were seated in the car Eunice gave Maria a violent nudge with her sharp elbow. “He's on this car,” she whispered in her ear, with a long hiss which seemed to penetrate the girl's brain.

Maria made an impatient movement.

“Don't you think you ought to just step over and thank him?” whispered Eunice. “I'll hold your bundles. He's on the other side, a seat farther back. He raised his hat to me.”

“Hush! I can't here.”

“Well, all right, but I thought it would look sort of polite,” said Eunice. Then she subsided. Once in a while she glanced back at George Ramsey, then uneasily at her niece, but she said nothing more.

The car was crowded. Workmen smelling of leather clung to the straps. One, in the aisle next Maria, who sat on the outside this time, leaned fairly against her. He was a good-looking young fellow, but he had a heavy jaw. He held an unlighted pipe in his mouth, and carried a two-story tin dinner-pail. Maria kept shrinking closer to her aunt, but the young man pressed against her all the more heavily. His eyes were fixed with seeming unconsciousness ahead, but a furtive smile lurked around his mouth.

George Ramsey was watching. All at once he arose and quietly and unobtrusively came forward, insinuated himself with a gentle force between Maria and the workman, and spoke to her. The workman muttered something under his breath, but moved aside. He gave an ugly glance at George, who did not seem to see him at all. Presently he sat down in George's vacated seat beside another man, who said something to him with a coarse chuckle. The man growled in response, and continued to scowl furtively at George, who stood talking to Maria. He said something about the fineness of the day, and Maria responded rather gratefully. She was conscious of an inward tumult which alarmed her, and made her defiant both at the young man and herself, but she could not help responding to the sense of protection which she got from his presence. She had not been accustomed to anything like the rudeness of the young workman. In New Jersey caste was more clearly defined. Here it was not defined at all. An employé in a shoe-factory had not the slightest conception that he was not the social equal of a school-teacher, and indeed in many cases he was. There were by no means all like this one, whose mere masculine estate filled him with entire self-confidence where women were concerned. In a sense his ignorance was pathetic. He had honestly thought that the pretty, strange girl must like his close contact, and he felt aggrieved that this other young man, who did not smell of leather and carried no dinner-pail, had ousted him. He viewed Maria's delicate profile with a sort of angry tenderness.

“Say, she's a beaut, ain't she?” whispered the man beside him, with a malicious grin, and again got a surly growl in response.

Maria finally, much to her aunt's delight, said to George that they had been shopping, and thanked him for the articles which his money had enabled them to buy.

“The poor little thing can go to school now,” said Maria. There was gratitude in her voice, and yet, oddly enough, still a tinge of reproach.

“If mother and I had dreamed of the true state of affairs we would have done something before,” George Ramsey said, with an accent of apology; and yet he could not see for the life of him why he should be apologetic for the poverty of these degenerate relatives of his. He could not see why he was called upon to be his brother's keeper in this case, but there was something about Maria's serious, accusing gaze of blue eyes, and her earnest voice, that made him realize that he could prostrate himself before her for uncommitted sins. Somehow, Maria made him feel responsible for all that he might have done wrong as well as his actual wrong-doing, although he laughed at himself for his mental attitude. Suddenly a thought struck him. “When are you going to take all these things (how you ever managed to get so much for ten dollars I don't understand) to the child?” he asked, eagerly.

Maria replied, unguardedly, that she intended to take them after supper that night. “Then she will have them all ready for Monday,” she said.

“Then let me go with you and carry the parcels,” George Ramsey said, eagerly.

Maria stiffened. “Thank you,” she said, “but Uncle Henry is going with me, and there is no need.”

Maria felt her aunt Eunice give a sudden start and make an inarticulate murmur of remonstrance, then she checked herself. Maria knew that her uncle walked a mile from his factory to save car-fare; she knew also that she was telling what was practically an untruth, since she had made no agreement with her uncle to accompany her.

“I should be happy to go with you,” said George Ramsey, in a boyish, abashed voice.

Maria said nothing more. She looked past her aunt out of the window. The full moon was rising, and all at once all the girl's sweet light of youthful romance appeared again above her mental horizon. She felt that it would be almost heaven to walk with George Ramsey in that delicious moonlight, in the clear, frosty air, and take little Jessy Ramsey her gifts. Maria was of an almost abnormal emotional nature, although there was little that was material about the emotion. She dreamed of that walk as she might have dreamed of a walk with a fairy prince through fairy-land, and her dream was as innocent, but it unnerved her. She said again, in a tremulous voice, that she was very much obliged, and murmured something again about her uncle Henry; and George Ramsey replied, with a certain sober dignity, that he should have been very happy.

Soon after that the car stopped to let off some passengers, and George moved to a vacant seat in front. He did not turn around again. Maria looked at his square shoulders and again gazed past her aunt at the full orb of the moon rising with crystalline splendor in the pale amber of the east. There was a clear gold sunset which sent its reflection over the whole sky.

Presently, Eunice spoke in her little, deprecating voice, which had a slight squeak.

“Did you speak to your uncle Henry about going with you this evening?” she asked.

“No, I didn't,” admitted Maria, reddening, “but I knew he would be willing.”

“I suppose he will be,” said Eunice. “But he does get home awful tuckered out Saturday nights, and he always takes his bath Saturday nights, too.”

Eunice looked out of the window with a slight frown. She adored her husband, and the thought of that long walk for him on his weary Saturday evening, and the possible foregoing of his bath, troubled her.

“I don't believe George Ramsey liked it,” she whispered, after a little.

“I can't help it if he didn't,” replied Maria. “I can't go with him, Aunt Eunice.”

As they jolted along, Maria made up her mind that she would not ask her uncle to go with her at all; that she would slip out unknown to Aunt Maria and ask the girl who lived in the house on the other side, Lily Merrill, to go with her. She thought that two girls need not be afraid, and she could start early.

As she parted from her aunt Eunice at the door of the house, after they had left the car (Eunice's door was on the side where the Ramseys lived, and Maria's on the Merrill side), she told her of her resolution.

“Don't say anything to Uncle Henry about going with me,” said she.

“Why, what are you going to do?”

“I'll get Lily Merrill. I know she won't mind.”

Maria and Lily Merrill had been together frequently since Maria had come to Amity, and Eunice accounted them as intimate. She looked hesitatingly a second at her niece, then she said, with an evident air of relief:

“Well, I don't know but you can. It's bright moonlight, and it's late in the season for tramps. I don't see why you two girls can't go together, if you start early.”

“We'll start right after supper,” said Maria.

“I would,” said Eunice, still with an air of relief.

Maria took her aunt's fish-net bag, as well as her own parcels, and carried them around to her aunt Maria's side of the house, and deposited them on the door-step. There was a light in the kitchen, and she could see her aunt Maria's shadow moving behind the curtain, preparing supper. Then she ran across the yard, over the frozen furrows of a last year's garden, and knocked at the side-door of the Merrill house.

Lily herself opened the door, and gave a little, loving cry of surprise. “Why, is it you, dear?” she said.

“Yes. I want to know if you can go over the river with me to-night on an errand?”

“Over the river? Where?”

“Oh, only to Jessy Ramsey's. Aunt Eunice and I have been to Westbridge and bought these things for her, and I want to carry them to her to-night. I thought maybe you would go with me.”

Lily hesitated. “It's a pretty lonesome walk,” said she, “and there are an awful set of people on the other side of the river.”

“Oh, nonsense!” cried Maria. “You aren't afraid—we two together—and it's bright moonlight, as bright as day.”

“Yes, I know it is,” replied Lily, gazing out at the silver light which flooded everything, but she still hesitated. A light in

the house behind gave her a background of light. She was a beautiful girl, prettier than Maria, taller, and with a timid, pliant grace. Her brown hair tossed softly over her big, brown eyes, which were surmounted by strongly curved eyebrows, her nose was small, and her mouth, and she had a fascinating little way of holding her lips slightly parted, as if ready for a loving word or a kiss. Everybody said that Lily Merrill had a beautiful disposition, albeit some claimed that she lacked force. Maria dominated her, although she did not herself know it. Lily continued to hesitate with her beautiful, startled brown eyes on Maria's face.

“Aren't you afraid?” she said.

“Afraid? No. What should I be afraid of? Why, it's bright moonlight! I would just as soon go at night as in the daytime when the moon is bright.”

“That is an awful man who lives at the Ramseys'!”

“Nonsense! I guess if he tried to bother us, Mrs. Ramsey would take care of him,” said Maria. “Come along, Lily. I would ask Uncle Henry, but it is the night when he takes his bath, and he comes home tired.”

“Well, I'll go if mother will let me,” said Lily.

Then Lily called to her mother, who came to the sitting-room door in response.

“Mother,” said Lily, “Maria wants me to go over to the Ramseys', those on the other side of the river, after supper, and carry these things to Jessy.”

“Aren't you afraid?” asked Lily's mother, as Lily herself had done. She was a faded but still pretty woman who had looked like her daughter in her youth. She was a widow with some property, enough for her Lily and herself to live on in comfort.

“Why, it's bright moonlight, Mrs. Merrill,” said Maria, “and the Ramseys live just the other side of the river.”

“Well, if Lily isn't afraid, I don't care,” said Mrs. Merrill. She had an ulterior motive for her consent, of which neither of the two girls suspected her. She was smartly dressed, and her hair was carefully crimped, and she had, as always in the evening, hopes that a certain widower, the resident physician of Amity, Dr. Ellridge, might call. He had noticed her several times at church suppers, and once had walked home with her from an evening meeting. Lily never dreamed that her mother had aspirations towards a second husband. Her father had been dead ten years; the possibility of any one in his place had never occurred to her; then, too, she looked upon her mother as entirely too old for thoughts of that kind. But Mrs. Merrill had her own views, which she kept concealed behind her pretty, placid exterior. She always welcomed the opportunity of being left alone of an evening, because she realized the very serious drawback that the persistent presence of a pretty, well-grown daughter might be if a wooer would wish to woo. She knew perfectly well that if Dr. Ellridge called, Lily would wonder why he called, and would sit all the evening in the same room with her fancy-work, entirely unsuspicious. Lily might even think he came to see her. Mrs. Merrill had a measure of slyness and secrecy which her daughter did not inherit. Lily was not brilliant, but she was as entirely sweet and open as the flower for which she was named. She was emotional, too, with an innocent emotionlessness, and very affectionate. Mrs. Merrill made almost no objection to Lily's going with Maria, but merely told her to wrap up warmly when she went out. Lily looked charming, with a great fur boa around her long, slender throat, and red velvet roses nestling under the brim of her black hat against the soft puff of her brown hair. She bent over her mother and kissed her.

“I hope you won't be very lonesome, mother dear,” she said.

Mrs. Merrill blushed a little. To-night she had confident hopes of the doctor's calling; she had even resolved upon a coup. “Oh no, I shall not be lonesome,” she replied. “Norah isn't going out, you know.”

“We shall not be gone long, anyway,” Lily said, as she went out. She had not even noticed her mother's blush. She was not very acute. She ran across the yard, the dry grass of which shone like a carpet of crisp silver in the moonlight, and knocked on Maria's door. Maria answered her knock. She was all ready, and she had her aunt Eunice's fish-net bag and her armful of parcels.

“Here, let me take some of them, dear,” said Lily, in her cooing voice, and she gathered up some of the parcels under her long, supple arm.

Maria's aunt Maria followed her to the door. “Now, mind you don't go into that house,” said she. “Just leave the things and run right home; and if you see anybody who looks suspicious, go right up to a house and knock. I don't feel any too safe about you two girls going, anyway.”

Aunt Maria spoke in a harsh, croaking voice; she had a cold. Maria seized her by the shoulders and pushed her back, laughingly.

“You go straight in the house,” said she. “And don't you worry. Lily and I both have hat-pins, and we can both run, and there's nothing to be afraid of, anyway.”

“Well, I don't half like the idea,” croaked Aunt Maria, retreating.

Lily and Maria went on their way. Lily looked affectionately at her companion, whose pretty face gained a singular purity of beauty from the moonlight.

“How good you are, dear,” she said.

“Nonsense!” replied Maria. Somehow all at once the consciousness of her secret, which was always with her, like some

hidden wound, stung her anew. She thought suddenly how Lily would not think her good at all if she knew what an enormous secret she was hiding from her, of what duplicity she was guilty.

“Yes, you are good,” said Lily, “to take all this trouble to get that poor little thing clothes.”

“Oh, as for that,” said Maria, “Mr. George Ramsey is the one to be thanked. It was his money that bought the things, you know.”

“He is good, too,” said Lily, and her voice was like a song with cadences of tenderness.

Maria started and glanced at her, then looked away again. A qualm of jealousy, of which she was ashamed, seized her. She gave her head a toss, and repeated, with a sort of defiance, “Yes, he is good enough, I suppose.”

“I think you are real sweet,” said Lily, “and I do think George Ramsey is splendid.”

“I don't see anything very remarkable about him,” said Maria.

“Don't you think he is handsome?”

“I don't know. I don't suppose I ever think much about a man being handsome. I don't like handsome men, anyway. I don't like men, anyway, when it comes to that.”

“George Ramsey is very nice,” said Lily, and there was an accent in her speech which made the other girl glance at her. Lily's face was turned aside, although she was clinging close to Maria's arm, for she was in reality afraid of being out in the night with another girl.

They walked along in silence after that. When they came to the covered bridge which crossed the river, Lily forced Maria into a run until they reached the other side.

“It is awful in here,” she said, in a fearful whisper.

Maria laughed. She herself did not feel the least fear, although she was more imaginative than the other girl. At that time a kind of rage against life itself possessed her which made her insensible to ordinary fear. She felt that she had been hardly used, and she was, in a measure, at bay. She knew that she could fight anything until she died, and beyond that there was nothing certainly to fear. She had become abnormal because of her strained situation as regarded society. However, she ran because Lily wished her to do so, and they soon emerged from the dusty tunnel of the bridge, with its strong odor of horses, and glimpses between the sides of the silver current of the river, into the moon-flooded road.

After the bridge came the school-house, then, a half-mile beyond that, the Ramsey house. The front windows were blazing with light, and the sound of a loud, drunken voice came from within.

Lily shrank and clung closely to Maria.

“Oh, Maria, I am awfully afraid to go to the door,” she whispered. “Just hear that. Eugene Ramsey must be home drunk, and—and perhaps the other man, too. I am afraid. Don't let's go there.”

Maria looked about her. “You see that board fence, then?” she said to Lily, and as she spoke she pointed to a high board fence on the other side of the street, which was completely in shadow.

“Yes.”

“Well, if you are afraid, just go and stand straight against the fence. You will be in shadow, and if you don't move nobody can possibly see you. Then I will go to the door and leave the things.”

“Oh, Maria, aren't you afraid?”

“No, I am not a bit afraid.”

“You won't go in, honest?”

“No, I won't go in. Run right over there.”

Lily released her hold of Maria's arm and made a fluttering break for the fence, against which she shrank and became actually invisible as a shadow. Maria marched up to the Ramsey door and knocked loudly. Mrs. Ramsey came to the door, and Maria thrust the parcels into her hands and began pulling them rapidly out of the fish-net bag. Mrs. Ramsey cast a glance behind her at the lighted room, through which was visible the same man whom Maria had seen before, and also another, and swung the door rapidly together, so that she stood in the dark entry, only partly lighted by the moonlight.

“I have brought some things for Jessy to wear to school, Mrs. Ramsey,” said Maria.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Ramsey mumbled, doubtfully, with still another glance at the closed door, through which shone lines and chinks of light.

“There are enough for her to be warmly clothed, and you will see to it that she has them on, won't you?” said Maria. Her voice was quite sweet and ingratiating, and not at all patronizing.

Suddenly the woman made a clutch at her arm. “You are a good young one, doin' so much for my young one,” she

whispered. “Now you'd better git up and git. They've been drinkin'. Git!”

“You will see that Jessy has the things to wear Monday, won't you?” said Maria.

“Sure.” Suddenly the woman wiped her eyes and gave a maudlin sob. “You're a good young one,” she whimpered. “Now, git.”

Maria ran across the road as the door closed after her. She did not know that Mrs. Ramsey had given the parcels which she had brought a toss into another room, and when she entered the room in which the men were carousing and was asked who had come to the door, had replied, “The butcher for his bill,” to be greeted with roars of laughter. She did, indeed, hear the roars of laughter. Lily slunk along swiftly beside the fence by her side. Maria caught her by the arm. Curiously enough, while she was not afraid for herself, she did feel a little fear now for her companion. The two girls hurried until they reached the bridge, and ran the whole length. On the other side, coming into the lighted main street of Amity, they felt quite safe.

“Did you see any of those dreadful men?” gasped Lily.

“I just caught a glimpse of them, then Mrs. Ramsey shut the door,” said Maria.

“They were drunk, weren't they?”

“I shouldn't wonder.”

“I do think it was an awful place to go to,” said Lily, with a little sigh of relief that she was out of it.

The girls went along the street until they reached the Ramsey house, next the one where Maria lived. Suddenly a man's figure appeared from the gate. It was almost as if he had been watching.

“Good-evening,” he said, and the girls saw that he was George Ramsey.

“Good-evening, Mr. Ramsey,” responded Maria. She felt Lily's arm tremble in hers. George walked along with them. “I have been to carry the presents which I bought with your money,” said Maria.

“Good heavens! You don't mean that you two girls have been all alone up there?” said George.

“Why, yes,” said Maria. “Why not?”

“Weren't you afraid?”

“Maria isn't afraid of anything,” Lily's sweet, little, tremulous voice piped on the other side.

George was walking next Maria. There was a slight and very gentle accusation in the voice.

“It wasn't safe,” said George, soberly, “and I should have been glad to go with you.”

Maria laughed. “Well, here we are, safe and sound,” she said. “I didn't see anything to be much afraid of.”

“All the same, they are an awful set there,” said George. They had reached Maria's door, and he added, “Suppose you walk along with me, Miss Edgham, and I will see Lily home.” George had been to school with Lily, and had always called her by her first name.

Maria again felt that little tremor of Lily's arm in hers, and did not understand it. “All right,” she said.

The three walked to Lily's door, and had said good-night, when Lily, who was, after all, the daughter of her mother, although her little artifices were few and innocent, had an inspiration. She discovered that she had lost her handkerchief.

“I think I took it out when we reached your gate, Mr. Ramsey,” she said, timidly, for she felt guilty.

It was quite true that the handkerchief was not in her muff, in which she had carried it, but there was a pocket in her coat which she did not investigate.

They turned back, looking along the frozen ground.

“Never mind,” Lily said, cheerfully, when they had reached the Ramsey gate and returned to the Edgham's, and the handkerchief was not forthcoming, “it was an old one, anyway. Good-night.”

She knew quite well that George Edgham would do what he did—walk home with her the few steps between her house and Maria's, and that Maria would not hesitate to say good-night and enter her own door.

“I guess I had better go right in,” said Maria. “Aunt Maria has a cold, and she may worry and be staying up.”

Lily was entirely happy at walking those few steps with George Ramsey. He had pulled her little hand through his arm in a school-boy sort of fashion. He left her at the door with a friendly good-night, but she had got what she wanted. He had not gone those few steps alone with Maria. Lily loved Maria, but she did not want George Ramsey to love her.

When Lily entered the house, to her great astonishment she found Dr. Ellridge there. He was seated beside her mother, who was lying on the sofa.

“Why, mother, what is it—are you sick?” Lily cried, anxiously, while the doctor looked with admiration at her face, glowing with the cold.

“I had one of my attacks after supper, and sent Norah for Dr. Ellridge. I thought I had better,” Mrs. Merrill explained, feebly. She sighed and looked at the doctor, who understood perfectly, but did not betray himself. He was, in fact, rather flattered.

“Yes, your mother has been feeling quite badly, but she will be all right now,” he said to Lily.

“I am sorry you did not feel well, mother,” Lily said, sweetly. Then she got her fancy-work from her little silk bag on the table and seated herself, after removing her wraps.

Her mother sighed. The doctor's mouth assumed a little, humorous pucker.

Lily looked at her mother with affectionate interest. She was quite accustomed to slight attacks of indigestion which her mother often had, and was not much alarmed, still she felt a little anxious. “You are sure you are better, mother?” she said.

“Oh yes, she is much better,” the doctor answered for her. “There is nothing for you to be alarmed about.”

“I am so glad,” said Lily.

She took another stitch in her fancy-work, and her beautiful face took on an almost seraphic expression; she was thinking of George Ramsey. She hardly noticed when the doctor took his leave, and she did not in the least understand her mother's sigh when the door closed. For her the gates of love were wide open, but she had no conception that for her mother they were not shut until she should go to heaven to join her father.

Chapter XX

The next evening Maria, as usual, went to church with her two aunts. Henry Stillman remained at home reading the Sunday paper. He took a certain delight in so doing, although he knew, in the depths of his soul, that his delight was absurd. He knew perfectly well that it did not make a feather's weight of difference in the universal scheme of things that he, Henry Stillman, should remain at home and read the columns of scandal and politics in that paper, instead of going to church, and yet he liked to think that his small individuality and its revolt because of its injuries at the hands of fate had its weight, and was at least a small sting of revenge.

He watched his wife adjust her bonnet before the looking-glass in the sitting-room, and arrange carefully the bow beneath her withered chin, and a great pity for her, because she was no longer as she had been, but was so heavily marked by time, and a great jealousy that she should not lose the greatest of all things, which he himself had lost, came over him. As she—a little, prim, mild woman, in her old-fashioned winter cape and her bonnet, with its stiff tuft of velvet pansies—passed him, he caught her thin, black-gloved hand and drew her close to him.

“I'm glad you are going to church, Eunice,” he said.

Eunice colored, and regarded him with a kind of abashed wonder.

“Why don't you come, too, Henry?” she said, timidly.

“No, I've quit,” replied Henry. “I've quit begging where I don't get any alms; but as for you, if you get anything that satisfies your soul, for God's sake hold on to it, Eunice, and don't let it go.” Then he pulled her bonneted head down and kissed her thin lips, with a kind of tenderness which was surprising. “You've been a good wife, Eunice,” he said.

Eunice laid her hand on his shoulder and looked at him a second. She was almost frightened. Outward evidences of affection had not been frequent between them of late years, or indeed ever. They were New-Englanders to the marrow of their bones. Anything like an outburst of feeling or sentiment, unless in case of death or disaster, seemed abnormal. Henry realized his wife's feeling, and he smiled up at her.

“We are getting to be old folks,” he said, “and we've had more bitter than sweet in life, and we have neither of us ever said much as to how we felt to each other, but—I never loved you as much as I love you now, Eunice, and I've taken it into my head to say it.”

Eunice's lips quivered a little and her eyes reddened. “There ain't a woman in Amity who has had so good a husband as I have all these years, if you don't go to meeting,” she replied. Then she added, after a second's pause: “I didn't know as you did feel just as you used to, Henry. I didn't know as any man did. I know I've lost my looks, and—”

“I can seem to see your looks, brighter than ever they were, in your heart,” said Henry. He colored himself a little at his own sentiment. Then he pulled her face down to his again and gave her a second kiss. “Now run along to your meeting,” he said. “Have you got enough on? The wind sounds cold.”

“Yes,” replied Eunice. “This cape's real thick. I put a new lining in it this winter, you know, and, besides, I've got my crocheted jacket under it. I'm as warm as toast.”

Eunice, after she had gone out in the keen night air with her sister-in-law and her niece, reflected with more uneasiness than pleasure upon her husband's unwonted behavior.

“Does it seem to you that Henry looks well lately?” she asked the elder Maria, as they hurried along.

“Yes; why not?” returned Maria.

“I don't know. It seems to me he's been losing flesh.”

“Nonsense!” said Maria. “I never saw him looking better than he does now. I was thinking only this morning that he was making a better, healthier old man than he was as a young man. But I do wish he would go to meeting. I don't think his mind is right about some things. Suppose folks do have troubles. They ought to be led to the Lord by them, instead of pulling back. Henry hasn't had anything more to worry him, nor half as much, as most men. He don't take things right. He ought to go to meeting.”

“I guess he's just as good as a good many who do go to meeting,” returned Eunice, with unwonted spirit.

“I don't feel competent to judge as to that,” replied Maria, with a tone of aggravating superiority. Then she added, “‘By their works ye shall know them.’”

“I would give full as much for Henry's chances as for some who go to meeting every Sunday of their lives,” said Eunice, with still more spirit. “And as for trials, they weigh heavier on some than on others.”

Then young Maria, who had been listening uneasily, broke in. She felt herself a strong partisan of her Aunt Eunice, for she adored her uncle, but she merely said that she thought Uncle Henry did look a little thin, and she supposed he was tired Sunday, and it was the only day he had to rest; then she abruptly changed the whole subject by wondering if the Ramseys across the river would let Jessy go to church if she trimmed a hat for her with some red velvet and a feather which she had in her possession.

“No, they wouldn't!” replied her aunt Maria, sharply, at once diverted. “I can tell you just exactly what they would do, if you were to trim up a hat with that red velvet and that feather and give it to that young one. Her good-for-nothing mother would have it on her own head in no time, and go flaunting out in it with that man that boards there.”

Nothing could excel the acrimonious accent with which Aunt Maria weighed down the “man who boards there,” and the acrimony was heightened by the hoarseness of her voice. Her cold was still far from well, but Aunt Maria stayed at home from church for nothing short of pneumonia.

The church was about half a mile distant. The meeting was held in a little chapel built out like an architectural excrescence at the side of the great, oblong, wooden structure, with its piercing steeple. The chapel windows blazed with light. People were flocking in. As they entered, a young lady began to play on an out-of-tune piano, which Judge Josiah Saunders had presented to the church. She played a Moody-and-Sankey hymn as a sort of prologue, although nobody sang it. It was a curious custom which prevailed in the Amity church. A Moody-and-Sankey hymn was always played in evening meetings instead of the morning voluntary on the great organ.

Maria and her two aunts moved forward and seated themselves. Maria looked absently at the smooth expanse of hair which showed below the hat of the girl who was playing. The air was played very slowly, otherwise the little audience might have danced a jig to it. Maria thought of the meetings which she used to attend in Edgham, and how she used to listen to the plaint of the whippoorwill on the river-bank while the little organ gave out its rich, husky drone. This, somehow, did not seem so religious to her. She remembered how she had used to be conscious of Wollaston Lee's presence, and how she had hoped he would walk home with her, and she reflected with what shame and vague terror she now held him constantly in mind. Then she thought of George Ramsey, and directly, without seeing him, she became aware that he was seated on her right and was furtively glancing at her. A wild despair seized her at the thought that he might offer to accompany her home, and how she must not allow it, and how she wanted him to do so. She kept her head steadfastly averted. The meeting dragged on. Men rose and spoke and prayed, at intervals the out-of-tune piano was invoked. A woman behind Maria sang contralto with a curious effect, as if her head were in a tin-pail. There were odd, dull, metallic echoes about it which filled the whole chapel. The woman's daughter had some cheap perfume on her handkerchief, and she was incessantly removing it from her muff. A man at the left coughed a good deal. Maria saw in front of her Lily Merrill's graceful brown head, in a charming hat with red roses under the brim, and a long, soft, brown feather. Lily's mother was not with her. Dr. Ellridge did not attend evening meetings, and Mrs. Merrill always remained at home in the hope that he might call.

After church was over, Maria stuck closely to her aunts. She even pushed herself between them, but they did not abet her. Both Eunice and Aunt Maria had seen George Ramsey, and they had their own views. Maria could not tell how it happened, but at the door of the chapel she found herself separated from both her aunts, and George Ramsey was asking if he might accompany her home. Maria obeyed her instincts, although the next moment she could have killed herself for it. She smiled, and bowed, and tucked her little hand into the crook of the young man's offered arm. She did not see her aunts exchanging glances of satisfaction.

“It will be a real good chance for her,” said Eunice.

“Hush, or somebody will hear you,” said Maria, in a sharp, pleased tone, as she and her sister-in-law walked together down the moonlit street.

Maria did not see Lily Merrill's start and look of piteous despair as she took George's arm. Lily was just behind her. Maria, in fact, saw nothing. She might have been walking in a vacuum of emotion.

“It is a beautiful evening,” said George Ramsey, and his voice trembled a little.

“Yes, beautiful,” replied Maria.

Afterwards, thinking over their conversation, she could not remember that they had talked about anything else except the beauty of the evening, but had dwelt incessantly upon it, like the theme of a song.

The aunts lagged behind purposely, and Maria went in Eunice's door. She thought that her niece would ask George to

come in and she would not be in the way. Henry looked inquiringly at the two women, who had an air of mystery, and Maria responded at once to his unspoken question.

“George Ramsey is seeing her home,” she said, “and the front-door key is under the mat, and I thought Maria could ask him in, and I would go home through the cellar, and not be in the way. Three is a company.” Maria said the last platitude with a silly simper.

“I never saw anything like you women,” said Henry, with a look of incredulous amusement. “I suppose you both of you have been making her wedding-dress, and setting her up house-keeping, instead of listening to the meeting.”

“I heard every word,” returned Maria, with dignity, “and it was a very edifying meeting. It would have done some other folks good if they had gone, and as for Maria, she can't teach school all her days, and here is her father with a second wife.”

“Well, you women do beat the Dutch,” said her brother, with a tenderly indulgent air, as if he were addressing children.

Aunt Maria lingered in her brother's side of the house, talking about various topics. She hesitated even about her stealthy going through the cellar, lest she should disturb Maria and her possible lover. Now and then she listened. She stood close to the wall. Finally she said, with a puzzled look to Eunice, who was smoothing out her bonnet-strings, “It's queer, but I can't hear them talking.”

“Maybe he didn't come in,” said Eunice.

“If they are in the parlor, you couldn't hear them,” said Henry, still with his half-quizzical, half-pitying air.

“She would have taken him in the parlor—I should think she would have known enough to,” said Eunice; “and you can't always hear talking in the parlor in this room.”

Maria made a move towards her brother's parlor, on the other side of the tiny hall.

“I guess you are right,” said she, “and I know she would have taken him in there. I started a fire in there on purpose before I went to meeting. It was borne in upon me that somebody might come home with her.”

Maria tiptoed into the parlor, with Eunice, still smoothing her bonnet-strings, at her heels. Both women stood close to the wall, papered with white-and-gold paper, and listened.

“I can't hear a single thing,” said Maria.

“I can't either,” said Eunice. “I don't believe he did come in.”

“It's dreadful queer, if he didn't,” said Maria, “after the way he eyed her in meeting.”

“Suppose you go home through the cellar, and see,” said Eunice.

“I guess I will,” said Maria. “I'll knock low on the wall when I get home, if he isn't there.”

The cellar stairs connected with the kitchen on either side of the Stillman house. Both women flew out into the kitchen, and Maria disappeared down the cellar stairs, with a little lamp which Eunice lit for her. Then Eunice waited. Presently there came a muffled knock on the wall.

“No, he didn't come in,” Eunice said to her husband, as she re-entered the sitting-room.

Suddenly Eunice pressed her ear close to the sitting-room wall. Two treble voices were audible on the other side, but not a word of their conversation. “Maria and she are talking,” said Eunice.

What Aunt Maria was saying was this, in a tone of sharp wonder:

“Where is he?”

“Who?” responded Maria.

“Why, you know as well as I do—George Ramsey.” Aunt Maria looked sharply at her niece. “I hope you asked him in, Maria Edgham?” said she.

“No, I didn't,” said Maria.

“Why didn't you?”

“I was tired, and I wanted to go to bed.”

“Wanted to go to bed? Why, it's only a little after nine o'clock!”

“Well, I can't help it, I'm tired.” Maria spoke with a weariness which was unmistakable. She looked away from her aunt with a sort of blank despair.

Aunt Maria continued to regard her. “You do act the queerest of any girl I ever saw,” said she. “There was a nice fire in the parlor, and I thought you could offer him some refreshments. There is some of that nice cake, and some oranges, and I would have made some cocoa.”

“I didn't feel as if I could sit up,” Maria said again, in her weary, hopeless voice. She went out into the kitchen, got a little lamp, and returned. “Good-night,” she said to her aunt.

“Good-night,” replied Aunt Maria. “You are a queer girl. I don't see what you think.”

Maria went up-stairs, undressed, and went to bed. After she was in bed she could see the reflection of her aunt's sitting-room lamp on the ground outside, in a slanting shaft of light. Then it went out, and Maria knew that her aunt was also in bed in her little room out of the sitting-room. Maria could not go to sleep. She heard the clock strike ten, then eleven. Shortly after eleven she heard a queer sound, as of small stones or gravel thrown on her window. Maria was a brave girl. Her first sensation was one of anger.

“What is any one doing such a thing as that for?” she asked herself. She rose, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and went straight to the window next the Merrill house, whence the sound had come. She opened it cautiously and peered out. Down on the ground below stood a long, triangle-shaped figure, like a night-moth.

“Who is it?” Maria called, in a soft voice. She was afraid, for some reason which she could not define, of awakening her aunt. She was more afraid of that than anything else.

A little moan answered her; the figure moved as if in distress.

“Who is it? What do you want?” Maria asked again.

A weak voice answered her then, “It's I.”

“Who's I? Lily?”

“Yes. Oh, do let me in, Maria.” Lily's voice ended in a little, hysterical sob.

“Hush,” said Maria, “or Aunt Maria will hear you. Wait a minute.” Maria unlocked her door with the greatest caution, opened it, and crept down-stairs. Then she unlocked and opened the front door. Luckily Aunt Maria's room was some feet in the rear. “Come quick,” Maria whispered, and Lily came running up to her. Then Maria closed and locked the front door, while Lily stood trembling and waiting. Then she led her up-stairs in the dark. Lily's slender fingers closed upon her with a grasp of ice. When they were once in Maria's room, with the door closed and locked, Maria took hold of Lily violently by the shoulders. She felt at once rage and pity for her.

“What on earth is the matter, Lily Merrill, that you come over here this time of night?” she asked. Then she added, in a tone of horror, “Lily Merrill, you haven't a thing on but a skirt and your night-gown under your shawl. Have you got anything on your feet?”

“Slippers,” answered Lily, meekly. Then she clung to Maria and began to sob hysterically.

“Come, Lily Merrill, you just stop this and get into bed,” said Maria. She unwound Lily's shawl, pulled off her skirt, and fairly forced her into bed. Then she got in beside her. “What on earth is the matter?” she asked again.

Lily's arm came stealing around her and Lily's cold, wet cheek touched her face. “Oh, Maria!” she sobbed, under her breath.

“Well, what is it all about?”

“Oh, Maria, are—are you—”

“Am I what?”

“Are you going with him?”

“With whom?”

“With George—with George Ramsey?” A long, trembling sob shook Lily.

“I am going with nobody,” answered Maria, in a hard voice.

“But he came home with you. I saw him; I did, Maria.” Lily sobbed again.

“Well, what of it?” asked Maria, impatiently. “I didn't care anything about his going home with me.”

“Didn't he come in?”

“No, he didn't.”

“Didn't you—ask him?”

“No, I didn't.”

“Maria.”

“Well, what?”

“Maria, aren't you going to marry him if he asks you?”

“No,” said Maria, “I am never going to marry him, if that is what you want to know. I am never going to marry George Ramsey.”

Lily sobbed.

“I should think you would be ashamed of yourself. I should think any girl would, acting so,” said Maria. Her voice was a mere whisper, but it was cruel. She felt that she hated Lily. Then she realized how icy cold the girl was and how she trembled from head to feet in a nervous chill. “You'll catch your death,” she said.

“Oh, I don't care if I do!” Lily said, in her hysterical voice, which had now a certain tone of comfort.

Maria considered again how much she despised and hated her, and again Lily shook with a long tremor. Maria got up and tiptoed over to her closet, where she kept a little bottle of wine which the doctor had ordered when she first came to Amity. It was not half emptied. A wineglass stood on the mantel-shelf, and Maria filled it with the wine by the light of the moon. Then she returned to Lily.

“Here,” she said, still in the same cruel voice. “Sit up and drink this.”

“What is it?” moaned Lily.

“Never mind what it is. Sit up and drink it.”

Lily sat up and obediently drank the wine, every drop.

“Now lie down and keep still, and go to sleep, and behave yourself,” said Maria.

Lily tried to say something, but Maria would not listen to her.

“Don't you speak another word,” said she. “Keep still, or Aunt Maria will be up. Lie still and go to sleep.”

It was not long before, warmed by the wine and comforted by Maria's assertion that she was never going to marry George Ramsey, that Lily fell asleep. Maria lay awake hearing her long, even breaths, and she felt how she hated her, how she hated herself, how she hated life. There was no sleep for her. Just before dawn she woke Lily, bundled her up in some extra clothing, and went with her across the yard, home.

“Now go up to your own room just as still as you can,” said she, and her voice sounded terrible even in her own ears. She waited until she heard the key softly turn in the door of the Merrill house. Then she sped home and up to her own room. Then she lay down in bed again and waited for broad daylight.

Chapter XXI

When Maria dressed herself the next morning, she had an odd, shamed expression as she looked at herself in her glass while braiding her hair. It actually seemed to her as if she herself, and not Lily Merrill, had so betrayed herself and given way to an unsought love. She felt as if she saw Lily instead of herself, and she was at once humiliated and angered. She had to pass Lily's house on her way to school, and she did not once look up, although she had a conviction that Lily was watching her from one of the sitting-room windows. It was a wild winter day, with frequent gusts of wind swaying the trees to the breaking of the softer branches, and flurries of snow. It was hard work to keep the school-house warm. Maria, in the midst of her perturbation, had a comforted feeling at seeing Jessy Ramsey in her warm clothing. She passed her arm around the little girl at recess; it was so cold that only a few of the boys went outside.

“Have you got them on, dear?” she whispered.

“Yes'm,” said Jessy. Then, to Maria's consternation, she caught her hand and kissed it, and began sobbing. “They're awful warm,” sobbed Jessy Ramsey, looking at Maria with her little, convulsed face.

“Hush, child,” said Maria. “There's nothing to cry about. Mind you keep them nice. Have you got a bureau-drawer you can put them in?—those you haven't on? Don't cry. That's silly.”

“I 'ain't got no bureau,” sobbed Jessy. “But—”

“Haven't any,” corrected Maria.

“Haven't any bureau-drawer,” said the child. “But I got a box what somethin'—”

“That something,” said Maria.

“That something came from the store in, an' I've got 'em—”

“Them.”

“Them all packed away. They're awful warm.”

“Don't cry, dear,” said Maria.

The other children did not seem to be noticing them. Suddenly Maria, who still had her arm around the thin shoulders of the little girl, stooped and kissed her rather grimy but soft little cheek. As she did so, she experienced the same feeling which she used to have when caressing her little sister Evelyn. It was a sort of rapture of tenderness and protection. It was the maternal instinct glorified and rendered spiritual by maidenhood, and its timid desires. Jessy

Ramsey's eyes looked up into Maria's like blue violets, and Maria noticed with a sudden throb that they were like George Ramsey's. Jessy, coming as she did from a degenerate, unbeautiful branch of the family-tree, had yet some of the true Ramsey features, and, among others, she had the true Ramsey eyes. They were large and very dark blue, and they were set in deep, pathetic hollows. As she looked up at Maria, it was exactly as if George were looking at her with pleading and timid love. Maria took her arm sudden away from the child.

“Be you mad?” asked Jessy, humbly.

“No, I am not,” replied Maria. “But you should not say ‘be you mad’; you should say are you angry.”

“Yes'm,” said Jessy Ramsey.

Jessy withdrew, still with timid eyes of devotion fixed upon her teacher, and Maria seated herself behind her desk, took out some paper, and began to write an exercise for the children to copy upon the black-board. She was trembling from head to foot. She felt exactly as if George Ramsey had been looking at her with eyes of love, and she remembered that she was married, and it seemed to her that she was horribly guilty.

Maria never once looked again at Jessy Ramsey, at least not fully in the eyes, during the day. The child's mouth began to assume a piteous expression. After school that afternoon she lingered, as usual, to walk the little way before their roads separated, so to speak, in her beloved teacher's train. But Maria spoke quite sharply to her.

“You had better run right home, Jessy,” she said. “It is snowing, and you will get cold. I have a few things to see to before I go. Run right home.”

Poor little Jessy Ramsey, who was as honestly in love with her teacher as she would ever be with any one in her life, turned obediently and went away. Maria's heart smote her.

“Jessy,” she called after her, and the child turned back half frightened, half radiant. Maria put her arm around her and kissed her. “Wash your face before you come to school to-morrow, dear,” she said. “Now, good-bye.”

“Yes'm,” said Jessy, and she skipped away quite happy. She thought teacher had rebuffed her because her face was not washed, and that did not trouble her in the least. Lack of cleanliness or lack of morals, when brought home to them, could hardly sting any scion of that branch of the Ramseys. Lack of affection could, however, and Jessy was quite happy in thinking that teacher loved her, and was only vexed because her face was dirty. Jessy had not gone a dozen paces from the school-house before she stopped, scooped up some snow in a little, grimy hand, and rubbed her cheeks violently. Then she wiped them on her new petticoat. Her cheeks tingled frightfully, but she felt that she was obeying a mandate of love.

Maria did not see her. She in reality lingered a little over some exercises in the school-house before she started on her way home. It was snowing quite steadily, and the wind still blew. The snow made the wind seem as evident as the wings of a bird. Maria hurried along. When she reached the bridge across the Ramsey River she saw a girl standing as if waiting for her. The girl was all powdered with snow and she had on a thick veil, but Maria immediately knew that she was Lily Merrill. Lily came up to her as she reached her with almost an abject motion. She had her veiled face lowered before the storm, and she carried herself as if her spirit also was lowered before some wind of fate. She pressed timidly close to Maria when she reached her.

“I've been waiting for you, Maria,” she said.

“Have you?” returned Maria, coldly.

“Yes, I wanted to see you, and I didn't know as I could, unless I met you. I didn't know whether you would have a fire in your room to-night, and I thought your aunt would be in the sitting-room, and I thought you wouldn't be apt to come over to my house, it storms so.”

“No, I shouldn't,” Maria said, shortly.

Then Lily burst out in a piteous low wail, a human wail piercing the wail of the storm. The two girls were quite alone on the bridge.

“Oh, Maria,” said Lily, “I did want you to know how dreadfully ashamed I was of what I did last night.”

“I should think you would be,” Maria said, pitilessly. She walked on ahead, with her mouth in a straight line, and did not look at the other girl.

Lily came closer to her and passed one of her arms through Maria's and pressed against her softly. “I wanted to tell you, too,” she said, “that I made an excuse about—that handkerchief the other night. I thought it was in my coat-pocket all the time. I did it just so he would go home with me last.”

Maria looked at her. “I never saw such a girl as you are, Lily Merrill,” she said, contemptuously, but in spite of herself there was a soft accent in her voice. It was not in Maria's nature to be hard upon a repentant sinner.

Lily leaned her face against Maria's snow-powdered shoulder. “I was dreadfully ashamed of it,” said she, “and I thought I must tell you, Maria. You don't think so very badly of me, do you? I know I was awful.” The longing for affection and approbation in Lily's voice gave it almost a singing quality. She was so fond of love and approval that the withdrawal of it smote her like a frost of the spirit.

“I think it was terribly bold of you, if you want to know just what I think,” Maria said; “and I think you were very deceitful. Before I would do such a thing to get a young man to go home with me, I would—” Maria paused. Suddenly

she remembered that she had her secret, and she felt humbled before this other girl whom she was judging. She became conscious to such an extent of the beam in her own eye that she was too blinded to see the mote in that of poor Lily, who, indeed, was not to blame, being simply helpless before her own temperament and her own emotions.

“I know I did do a dreadful thing,” moaned Lily.

Then Maria pressed the clinging arm under her own.

“Well,” said she, as she might have spoken to a child, “if I were you I would not think any more about it, Lily, I would put it out of my mind. Only, I would not, if I were you, and really wanted a young man to care for me, let him think I was running after him.”

As she said the last, Maria paled. She glanced at Lily's beautiful face under the veil, and realized that it might be very easy for any young man to care for such a girl, who had, in reality, a sweet nature, besides beauty, if she only adopted the proper course to win him, and that it was obviously her (Maria's) duty to teach her to win him.

“I know it. I won't again,” Lily said, humbly.

The two girls walked on; they had crossed the bridge. Suddenly Lily plucked up a little spirit.

“Say, Maria,” said she.

“What is it, dear?”

“I just happened to think. Mother was asked to tea to Mrs. Ralph Wright's to-night, but she isn't going. Is your aunt going?”

“Yes, I believe she is,” said Maria.

“She won't be home before eight o'clock, will she?”

“No, I don't suppose she will. They are to have tea at six, I believe.”

“Then I am coming over after mother and I have tea. I have something I want to tell you.”

“All right, dear,” replied Maria, hesitatingly.

When Maria got home she found her aunt Maria all dressed, except for her collar-fastening. She was waiting for Maria to attend to that. Her thin gray-blond hair was beautifully crimped, and she wore her best black silk dress. She was standing by the sitting-room window when Maria entered.

“I am glad you have come, Maria,” said she. “I have been standing quite awhile. You are late.”

“Yes, I am rather late,” replied Maria. “But why on earth didn't you sit down?”

“Do you suppose I am going to sit down more than I can help in this dress?” said her aunt. “There is nothing hurts a silk dress more than sitting down in it. Now if you will hook my collar, Maria. I can do it, but I don't like to strain the seams by reaching round, and I didn't want to trail this dress down the cellar stairs to get Eunice to fasten it up.” Aunt Maria bewailed the weather in a deprecating fashion while Maria was fastening the collar at the back of her skinny neck. “I never want to find fault with the weather,” said she, “because, of course, the weather is regulated by Something higher than we are, and it must be for our best good, but I do hate to wear this dress out in such a storm, and I don't dare wear my cashmere. Mrs. Ralph Wright is so particular she would be sure to think I didn't pay her proper respect.”

“You can wear my water-proof,” said Maria. “I didn't wear it to-day, you know. I didn't think the snow would do this dress any harm. The water-proof will cover you all up.”

“Well, I suppose I can, and can pin my skirt up,” said Aunt Maria, in a resigned tone. “I don't want to find fault with the weather, but I do hate to pin up a black silk skirt.”

“You can turn it right up around your waist, and fasten the braid to your belt, and then it won't hurt it,” said Maria, consolingly.

“Well, I suppose I can. Your supper is all ready, Maria. There's bread and butter, and chocolate cake, and some oysters. I thought you wouldn't mind making yourself a little stew. I couldn't make it before you came, because it wouldn't be fit to eat. You know how. Be sure the milk is hot before you put the oysters in. There is a good fire.”

“Oh yes, I know how. Don't you worry about me,” said Maria, turning up her aunt's creaseless black silk skirt gingerly. It was rather incomprehensible to her that anybody should care so much whether a black silk skirt was creased or not, when the terrible undertone of emotions which underline the world, and are its creative motive, were in existence, but Maria was learning gradually to be patient with the small worries of others which seemed large to them, and upon which she herself could not place much stress. She stood at the window, when her aunt at last emerged from the house, and picked her way through the light snow, and her mouth twitched a little at the absurd, shapeless figure. Her Aunt Eunice had joined her, and she was not so shapeless. She held up her dress quite fashionably on one side, with a rather generous display of slender legs. Aunt Maria did not consider that her sister-in-law was quite careful enough of her clothes. “Henry won't always be earning,” she often said to Maria. To-day she had eyed with disapproval Eunice's best black silk trailing from under her cape, when she entered the sitting-room. She had come through the cellar.

“Are you going that way, in such a storm, in your best black silk?” she inquired.

“I haven't any water-proof,” replied Eunice, “and I don't see what else I can do.”

“You might wear my old shawl spread out.”

“I wouldn't go through the street cutting such a figure,” said Eunice, with one of her occasional bursts of spirit. She was delighted to go. Nobody knew how this meek, elderly woman loved a little excitement. There were red spots on her thin cheeks, and she looked almost as if she had used rouge. Her eyes snapped.

“I should think you would turn your skirt up, anyway,” said Aunt Maria. “You've got your black petticoat on, haven't you?”

“Yes,” replied Eunice. “But if you think I am going right through the Main Street in my petticoat, you are mistaken. Snow won't hurt the silk any. It's a dry snow, and it will shake right off.”

So Eunice, at the side of Aunt Maria, went with her dress kilted high, and looked as preternaturally slim as her sister-in-law looked stout. Maria, watching them, thought how funny they were. She herself was elemental, and they, in their desires and interests, were like motes floating on the face of the waters. Maria, while she had always like pretty clothes, had come to a pass wherein she relegated them to their proper place. She recognized many things as externals which she had heretofore considered as essentials. She had developed wonderfully in a few months. As she turned away from the window she caught a glimpse of Lily Merrill's lovely face in a window of the opposite house, above a mass of potted geraniums. Lily nodded, and smiled, and Maria nodded back again. Her heart sank at the idea of Lily's coming that evening, a sickening jealous dread of the confidence which she was to make to her was over her, and yet she said to herself that she had no right to have this dread. She prepared her supper and ate it, and had hardly cleared away the table and washed the dishes before Lily came flying across the yard before the storm-wind. Maria hurried to the door to let her in.

“Your aunt went, didn't she?” said Lily, entering, and shaking the flakes of snow from her skirts.

“Yes.”

“I don't see why mother wouldn't go. Mother never goes out anywhere, and she isn't nearly as old as your aunts.”

Lily and Maria seated themselves in the sitting-room before the stove. Lily looked at Maria, and a faint red overspread her cheeks. She began to speak, then she hesitated, and evidently said something which she had not intended.

“How pretty that is!” she said, pointing to a great oleander-tree in flower, which was Aunt Maria's pride.

“Yes, I think it is pretty.”

“Lovely. The very prettiest one I ever saw.” Lily hesitated again, but at last she began to speak, with the red on her cheeks brighter and her eyes turned away from Maria. “I wanted to tell you something, Maria,” said she.

“Well?” said Maria. Her own face was quite pale and motionless. She was doing some fancy-work, embroidering a centre-piece, and she continued to take careful stitches.

“I know you thought I was awful, doing the way I did last night,” said Lily, in her sweet murmur. She drooped her head, and the flush on her oval cheeks was like the flush on a wild rose. Lily wore a green house-dress, which set her off as the leaves and stem set off a flower. It was of some soft material which clung about her and displayed her tender curves. She wore at her throat an old cameo brooch which had belonged to her grandmother, and which had upon its onyx background an ivory head as graceful as her own. Maria, beside Lily, although she herself was very pretty, looked ordinary in her flannel blouse and black skirt, which was her school costume.

Maria continued taking careful stitches in the petals of a daisy which she was embroidering. “I think we have talked enough about it,” she said.

“But I want to tell you something.”

“Why don't you tell it, then?”

“I know you thought I did something awful, running across the yard and coming here in the night the way I did, and showing you that I—I, well, that I minded George Ramsey's coming home with you; but—look here, Maria, I—had a little reason.”

Maria paled perceptibly, but she kept on steadily with her work.

Lily flushed more deeply. “George Ramsey has been home with me from evening meeting quite a number of times,” she said.

“Has he?” said Maria.

“Yes. Of course we were walking the same way. He may not really have meant to see me home.” There was a sort of innate honesty in Lily which always led her to retrieve the lapses from the strict truth when in her favor. “Maybe he didn't really mean to see me home, and sometimes he didn't offer me his arm,” she added, with a childlike wistfulness, as if she desired Maria to reassure her.

“I dare say he meant to see you home,” said Maria, rather shortly.

“I am not quite sure,” said Lily. “But he did walk home with me quite a number of times, first and last, and you know we

used to go to the same school, and a number of times then, when we were a good deal younger, he really did see me home, and—he kissed me good-night then. Of course he hasn't done that lately, because we were older."

"I should think not, unless you were engaged," said Maria.

"Of course not, but he has said several things to me. Maybe he didn't mean anything, but they sounded—I thought I would like to tell you, Maria. I have never told anybody, not even mother. Once he said my name just suited me, and once he asked me if I thought married people were happier, and once he said he thought it was a doubtful experiment for a man to marry and try to live either with his wife's mother or his own. You know, if he married me, it would have to be one way or the other. Do you think he meant anything, Maria?"

"I don't know," said Maria. "I didn't hear him."

"Well, I thought he spoke as if he meant it, but, of course, a girl can never be sure. I suppose men do say so many things they don't mean. Don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose they do."

"Do you think he did, Maria?" asked Lily, piteously.

"My dear child, I told you I didn't hear him, and I don't see how I can tell," repeated Maria, with a little impatience. It did seem hard to her that she should be so forced into a confidence of this kind, but an odd feeling of protective tenderness for Lily was stealing over her. She reached a certain height of nobility which she had never reached before, through this feeling.

"I know men so often say things when they mean nothing at all," Lily said again. "Perhaps he didn't mean anything. I know he has gone home with Agnes Sears several times, and he has talked to her a good deal when we have been at parties. Do you think she is pretty, Maria?"

"Yes, I think she is quite pretty," replied Maria.

"Do you think—she is better-looking than—I am?" asked Lily, feebly.

"No, of course I don't," said Maria. "You are a perfect beauty."

"Oh, Maria, do you think so?"

"Of course I do! You know it yourself as well as I do."

"No, honest, I am never quite sure, Maria. Sometimes it does seem to me when I am dressed up that I am really better-looking than some girls, but I am never quite sure that it isn't because it is I who am looking at myself. A girl wants to think she is pretty, you know, Maria, especially if she wants anybody to like her, and I can't ever tell."

"Well, you can rest easy about that," said Maria. "You are a perfect beauty. There isn't a girl in Amity to compare with you. You needn't have any doubt at all."

An expression of quite innocent and naïve vanity overspread Lily's charming face. She cast a glance at herself in a glass which hung on the opposite wall, and smiled as a child might have done at her own reflection. "Do you think this green dress is becoming to me?" said she.

"Very."

"But, Maria, do you suppose George Ramsey thinks I am so pretty?"

"I should think he must, if he has eyes in his head," replied Maria.

"But you are pretty yourself, Maria," said Lily, with the most open jealousy and anxiety, "and you are smarter than I am, and he is so smart. I do think he cares a great deal more for you than for me. I think he must, Maria."

"Nonsense!" said Maria. "Just because a young man walks home with me once you think he is in love with me." Maria tried to speak lightly and scornfully, but in spite of herself there was an accent of gratification in her tone. In spite of herself she forgot for the moment.

"I think he does, all the same," said Lily, dejectedly.

"Nonsense! He doesn't; and if he did, he would have to take it out in caring."

"Then you were in earnest about what you said last night?" said Lily, eagerly. "You really mean you wouldn't have George Ramsey if he asked you?"

"Not if he asked every day in the year for a hundred years."

"I guess you must have seen somebody else whom you liked," said Lily, and Maria colored furiously. Then Lily laughed. "Oh, you have!" she cried, with sudden glee. "You are blushing like anything. Do tell me, Maria."

"I have nothing to tell."

"Maria Edgham, you don't dare tell me you are not in love with anybody?"

“I should not answer a question of that kind to any other girl, anyway,” Maria replied, angrily.

“You are. I know it,” said Lily. “Don't be angry, dear. I am real glad.”

“I didn't say I was in love, and there is nothing for you to be glad about,” returned Maria, fairly scarlet with shame and rage. She tangled the silk with which she was working, and broke it short off. Maria was as yet not wholly controlled by herself.

“Why, you'll spoil that daisy,” Lily said, wonderingly. She herself was incapable of any such retaliation upon inanimate objects. She would have carefully untangled her silk, no matter how deeply she suffered.

“I don't care if I do!” cried Maria.

“Why, Maria!”

“Well, I don't care. I am fairly sick of so much talk and thinking about love and getting married, as if there were nothing else.”

“Maybe you are different, Maria,” admitted Lily, in a humiliated fashion.

“I don't want to hear any more about it,” Maria said, taking a fresh thread from her skein of white silk.

“But do you mean what you said?”

“Yes, I do, once for all. That settles it.”

Lily looked at her wistfully. She did not find Maria as sympathetic as she wished. Then she glanced at her beautiful visage in the glass, and remembered what the other girl had said about her beauty, and again she smiled her childlike smile of gratified vanity and pleasure. Then suddenly the door-bell rang.

Lily gave a great start, and turned white as she looked at Maria. “It's George Ramsey,” she whispered.

“Nonsense! How do you know?” asked Maria, laying her work on the table beside the lamp, and rising.

“I don't know. I do know.”

“Nonsense!” Still Maria stood looking irresolutely at Lily.

“I know,” said Lily, and she trembled perceptibly.

“I don't see how you can tell,” said Maria. She made a step towards the door.

Lily sprang up. “I am going home,” said she.

“Going home? Why?”

“He has come to see you, and I won't stay. I won't. I know you despised me for what I did the other night, and I won't do such a thing as to stay when he has come to see another girl. I am not quite as bad as that.” Lily started towards her cloak, which lay over a chair.

Maria seized her by the shoulders with a nervous grip of her little hands. “Lily Merrill,” said she, “if you stir, if you dare to stir to go home, I will not go to the door at all!”

Lily gasped and looked at her.

“I won't!” said Maria.

The bell rang a second time.

“You have got to go to the door,” said Maria, with a sudden impulse.

Lily quivered under her hands.

“Why? Oh, Maria!”

“Yes, you have. You go to the door, and I will run up-stairs the back way to my room. I don't feel well to-night, anyway. I have an awful headache. You go to the door, and if it is—George Ramsey, you tell him I have gone to bed with a headache, and you have come over to stay with me because Aunt Maria has gone away. Then you can ask him in.”

A flush of incredulous joy came over Lily's face.

“You don't mean it, Maria?” she whispered, faintly.

“Yes, I do. Hurry, or he'll go away.”

“Have you got a headache, honest?”

“Yes, I have. Hurry, quick! If it is anybody else do as you like about asking him in. Hurry!”

With that Maria was gone, scudding up the back stairs which led out of the adjoining room. She gained her chamber as

noiselessly as a shadow. The room was very dark except for a faint gleam on one wall from a neighbor's lamp. Maria stood still, listening, in the middle of the floor. She heard the front door opened, then she heard voices. She heard steps. The steps entered the sitting-room. Then she heard the voices in a steady flow. One of them was undoubtedly a man's. The bass resonances were unmistakable. A peal of girlish laughter rang out. Maria noiselessly groped her way to her bed, threw herself upon it, face down, and lay there shaking with silent sobs.

Chapter XXII

Maria did not hear Lily laugh again, although the conversation continued. In reality, Lily was in a state of extreme shyness, and was, moreover, filled with a sense of wrong-doing. There had been something about Maria's denial which had not convinced her. In her heart of hearts, the heart of hearts of a foolish but loving girl, who never meant anybody any harm, and, on the contrary, wished everybody well, although naturally herself first, she was quite sure that Maria also loved George Ramsey. She drooped before him with this consciousness when she opened the door, and the young man naturally started with a little surprise at the sight of her.

“Maria has gone to bed with a headache,” she faltered, before George had time to inquire for her. Then she added, in response to the young man's look of astonishment, the little speech which Maria had prepared for her. “Her aunt has gone out, and so I came over to stay with her.” Lily was a born actress. It was not her fault that a little accent of tender pity for Maria in her lonely estate, with her aunt away, and a headache, crept into her voice. She at the moment almost believed what she said. It became quite real to her.

“I am sorry Miss Edgham has a headache,” said George, after a barely perceptible second of hesitation, “but, as long as she has, I may as well come in and make you a little call, Lily.”

Lily quivered perceptibly. She tried to show becoming pride, but failed. “I should be very happy to have you,” she said, “but—”

“Well, it *is* asking you to play second fiddle, and no mistake,” laughed George Ramsey, “for I did think I would make Miss Edgham a little call. But, after all, the second fiddle is an indispensable thing, and you and I are old friends, Lily.”

He could not help the admiration in his eyes as he looked at Lily. She carried a little lamp, and the soft light was thrown upon her lovely face, and her brown hair gleamed gold in it. No man could have helped admiring her. Lily had never been a very brilliant scholar, but she could read admiration for herself. She regained her self-possession.

“I don't mind playing second fiddle,” said she. “I should be glad if I could play any fiddle. Come in, Mr. Ramsey.”

“How very formal we have grown!” laughed George, as he took off his coat and hat in the icy little hall. “Why, don't you remember we went to school together? What is the use?”

“George, then,” said Lily. Her voice seemed to caress the name.

The young man colored. He was of a stanch sort, but he was a man, and the adulation of such a beautiful girl as this touched him. He took the lamp out of her hand.

“Come in, then,” he said; “but it is rather funny for me to be calling on you here, isn't it?”

“Funnier than it would be for you to call on me at my own house,” said Lily, demurely, with a faint accent of reproach.

“Well, I must admit I am not very neighborly,” George replied, with an apologetic air. “But, you see, I am really busy a good many evenings with accounts, and I don't go out very much.”

Lily reflected that he had come to call on Maria, in spite of being busy, but she said nothing. She placed Maria's vacant chair for him beside the sitting-room stove.

“It is a hard storm,” she said.

“Very. It is a queer night for Miss Edgham's aunt to go out, it seems to me.”

“Mrs. Ralph Wright has a tea-party,” said Lily. “Maria's aunt Eunice has gone, too. My mother was invited, but mother never goes out in the evening.”

After these commonplace remarks, Lily seated herself opposite George Ramsey, and there was a little silence. Again the expression of admiration came into the young man's face, and the girl read it with delight. Sitting gracefully, her slender body outlined by the soft green of her dress, her radiant face showing above the ivory cameo brooch at her throat, she was charming. George Ramsey owned to himself that Lily was certainly a great beauty, but all the same he thought regretfully of the other girl, who was not such a beauty, but who had somehow appealed to him as no other girl had ever done. Then, too, Maria was in a measure new. He had known Lily all his life; the element of wonder and surprise was lacking in his consciousness of her beauty, and she also lacked something else which Maria had. Lily meant no more to him—that is, her beauty meant no more to him—than a symmetrical cherry-tree in the south yard, which was a marvel of scented beauty, humming with bees every spring. He had seen that tree ever since he could remember. He always looked upon it with pleasure when it was in blossom, yet it was not to him what a new tree, standing forth unexpectedly with its complement of flowers and bees, would have been. It was very unfortunate for Lily that George had known her all his life. In order really to attract him it would be necessary for him to discover something entirely new in her.

“It was very good of you to come in and stay with Miss Edgham while her aunt was gone,” said George.

He felt terribly at a loss for conversation. He had, without knowing it, a sense of something underneath the externals which put a constraint upon him.

Lily had one of the truth-telling impulses which redeemed her from the artifices of her mother.

“Oh,” said she, “I wanted to come. I proposed coming myself. It is dull evenings at home, and I did not know that Maria would go to bed or that you would come in.”

“Well, mother has gone to that tea-party, too,” said George, “and I looked over here and saw the light, and I thought I would just run in a minute.”

For some unexplained reason tears were standing in Lily's eyes and her mouth quivered a little. George could not see, for the life of him, why she should be on the verge of tears. He felt a little impatient, but at the same time she became more interesting to him. He had never seen Lily weeping since the time when she was a child at school, and used to conceal her weeping little face in a ring of her right arm, as was the fashion among the little girls.

“This light must shine right in your sitting-room windows,” said Lily, in a faint voice. She was considering how pitiful it was that George had not had the impulse to call upon her, Lily, when she was so lovely and loving in her green gown; and how even this little happiness was not really her own, but another girl's. She had not the least realization of how Maria was suffering, lying in her room directly overhead.

Maria suffered as she had never suffered before. George Ramsey was her first love; the others had been merely childish playthings. She was strangling love, and that is a desperate deed, and the strangler suffers more than love. Maria, with the memory of that marriage which was, indeed, no marriage, but the absurd travesty of one, upon her, was in almost a suicidal frame of mind. She knew perfectly well that if it had not been for that marriage secret which she held always in mind, that George Ramsey would continue to call, that they would become engaged, that her life might be like other women's. And now he was down there with Lily—Lily, in her green gown. She knew just how Lily would look at him, with her beautiful, soft eyes. She hated her, and yet she hated herself more than she hated her. She told herself that she had no good reason for hating another girl for doing what she herself had done—for falling in love with George Ramsey. She knew that she should never have made a confidant of another girl, as Lily had made of her. She realized a righteous contempt because of her weakness, and yet she felt that Lily was the normal girl, that nine out of ten would do exactly what she had done. And she also had a sort of pity for her. She could not quite believe that a young man like George Ramsey could like Lily, who, however beautiful she was, was undeniably silly. But then she reflected how young men were popularly supposed not to mind a girl's being silly if she was beautiful. Then she ceased to pity Lily, and hated her again. She became quite convinced that George Ramsey would marry her.

She had locked her door, and lay on her bed fully dressed. She made up her mind that when Aunt Maria came she would pretend to be asleep. She felt that she could not face Aunt Maria's wondering questions. Then she reflected that Aunt Maria would be home soon, and a malicious joy seized her that Lily would not have George Ramsey long to herself. Indeed, it was scarcely half-past eight before Maria heard the side-door open. Then she heard, quite distinctly, Aunt Maria's voice, although she could not distinguish the words. Maria laughed a little, smothered, hysterical laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

It was, in fact, ludicrous. Aunt Maria entered the sitting-room, a grotesque figure in her black skirt bundled up under Maria's waterproof, which was powdered with snow. She wore her old black bonnet, and the wind had tipped that rakishly to one side. She stared at Lily and George Ramsey, who both rose with crimson faces.

“Good-evening,” Lily ventured, feebly.

“Good-evening, Miss Stillman,” George said, following the girl's lead. Then, as he was more assured, he added that it was a very stormy night.

George had been sitting on one side of the stove, Lily on the other, in the chairs which Maria and Lily had occupied before the young man's arrival. They had both sprung up with a guilty motion when Aunt Maria entered. Aunt Maria stood surveying them. She did not return their good-evenings, nor George's advance with regard to the weather. Her whole face expressed severe astonishment. Her thin lips gaped slightly, her pale eyes narrowed. She continued to look at them, and they stood before her like culprits.

“Where's Maria gone?” said Aunt Maria, finally, in a voice which seemed to have an edge to it.

Then Lily spoke with soft and timid volubility. “Maria said her head ached so she thought she had better go to bed, Miss Stillman,” she said.

“I didn't hear anything about any headache before I went away. Must have come on mighty sudden,” said Aunt Maria.

“She said it ached very hard,” repeated Lily. “And when the door-bell rang, when Mr. Ramsey came—”

“It's mighty queer she should have had a headache when George Ramsey rang the door-bell,” said Aunt Maria.

“I guess it must have ached before,” said Lily, faintly.

“I should suppose it must have,” Aunt Maria said, sarcastically. “I don't see any reason why Maria's head should begin to ache when the door-bell rang.”

“Of course,” said Lily. “I suppose she just felt she couldn't talk, that was all.”

“It's mighty queer,” said Aunt Maria. She stood quite immovable. She was so stern that even her rakishly tipped bonnet did not seem at all funny. She looked at Lily and George Ramsey, and did not make a movement to remove her wraps.

Lily took a little, faltering step towards her. “You are all covered with snow, Miss Stillman,” she said, in her sweet voice.

“I don't mind a little snow,” said Aunt Maria.

“Won't you take this chair?” asked George Ramsey, pointing to the one which he had just vacated.

“No, thank you,” replied Aunt Maria. “I ain't going to sit down. I've got on my best black silk, and I don't ever sit down in it when I can help it. I'm going to take it off and go to bed.”

Then George Ramsey immediately made a movement towards his coat and hat, which lay on the lounge beside Lily's wraps. “Well,” he said, with an attempt to laugh and be easy, “I must be going. I have to take an early car to-morrow.”

“I must go, too,” said Lily.

They both hustled on their outer garments. They said good-evening when they went out, but Aunt Maria did not reply. She immediately took off Maria's water-proof and her bonnet, and slipped off her best black silk gown. Then she took the little lamp which was lighted in the kitchen and went up-stairs to Maria's room. She had an old shawl over her shoulders, otherwise she was in her black quilted petticoat. She stepped softly, and entered the spare room opposite Maria's. It was icy cold in there. She set the lamp on the bureau and went out, closing the door softly. It was then quite dark in the little passageway between the spare room and Maria's. Aunt Maria stood looking sharply at Maria's door, especially at the threshold, which was separated from the floor quite a space by the shrinkage of the years. The panels, too, had their crevices, through which light might be seen. It was entirely dark. Aunt Maria opened the door of the spare room very softly and got the little lamp off the bureau, and tiptoed down-stairs. Then she sat down before the sitting-room stove and pulled up her quilted petticoat till her thin legs were exposed, to warm herself and not injure the petticoat. She looked unutterably stern and weary. Suddenly, as she sat there, tears began to roll over her ascetic cheeks.

“Oh, Lord!” she sighed to herself; “to think that child has got to go through the world just the way I have, when she don't need to!”

Aunt Maria rose and got a handkerchief out of her bureau-drawer in her little bedroom. She did not take the one in the pocket of her gown because that was her best one, and very fine. Then she sat down again, pulled up her petticoat again, put the handkerchief before her poor face, and wept for herself and her niece, because of a conviction which was over her that for both the joy of life was to come only from the windows of others.

Chapter XXIII

Lily Merrill, going home across the yard through the storm, leaning on George Ramsey's arm, gave a little, involuntary sob. It was a sob half of the realization of slighted affection, half of shame. It gave the little element of strangeness which was lacking to fascinate the young man. He had a pitiful heart towards women, and at the sound of the little, stifled sob he pressed Lily's arm more closely under his own.

“Don't, Lily,” he said, softly.

Lily sobbed again; she almost leaned her head towards George's shoulder. She made a little, irresistible, nestling motion, like a child.

“I can't help it,” she said, brokenly. “She did look at me so.”

“Don't mind her one bit, Lily,” said George. He half laughed at the memory of Aunt Maria's face, even while the tender tone sounded in his voice. “Don't mind that poor old maid. Neither of us were to blame. I suppose it did look as if we had taken possession of her premises, and she was astonished, that was all. How funny she looked, poor thing, with her bonnet awry!”

“I know she must think I have done something dreadful,” sobbed Lily.

“Nonsense!” George said again, and his pressure of her arm tightened. “I was just going when she came in, anyway. There is nothing at all to be ashamed of, only—” He hesitated.

“What?” asked Lily.

“Well, to tell you the truth, Lily,” he said then, “it does look to me as if Miss Edgham's headache was only another way of telling me she did not wish to see me.”

“Oh, I guess not,” said Lily.

“For some reason or other she does not seem to like me,” George said, with rather a troubled voice; but he directly laughed.

“I don't see any reason why she shouldn't like you,” Lily said.

They had reached Lily's door, and the light from the sitting-room windows shone on her lovely face, past which the snow drifted like a white veil.

“Well, I think she doesn't,” George said, carelessly, “but you are mighty good to say you see no reason why she shouldn't. You and I have always been good friends, haven't we, Lily, ever since we went to school together?”

“Yes,” replied Lily, eagerly, although she did not like the word friends, which seemed to smite on the heart. She lifted

her face to the young man's, and her lips pouted almost imperceptibly. It could not have been said that she was inviting a kiss, but no man could have avoided kissing her. George Ramsey kissed her as naturally as he breathed. There seemed to be nothing else to do. It was one of the inevitables of life. Then Lily opened the door and slid into the house with a tremulous good-night.

George himself felt tremulous, and also astonished and vexed with himself. He had certainly not meant to kiss Lily Merrill. But it flashed across his mind that she would not think anything of it, that he had kissed her often when they were children, and it was the same thing now. As he went away he glanced back at the lighted windows, and a man's shadow was quite evident. He wondered who was calling on Lily's mother, and then wondered, with a slight shadow of jealousy, if it could be some one who had come to see Lily herself. He reflected, as he went homeward through the storm, that a girl as pretty as Lily ought to have some one worthy of her. He went over in his mind, as he puffed his cigar, all the young men in Amity, and it did not seem to him that any one of them was quite the man for her.

When he reached home he found his mother already there, warming herself by the sitting-room register. She had gone to the tea-party in a carriage (George would not have her walk), but she was chilled. She was a delicate, pretty woman. She looked up, shivering, as George entered.

“Where have you been, dear?” she asked.

George laughed, and colored a little. “Well, mother, I went to see one young lady and saw another,” he replied.

Just then the maid came in with some hot chocolate, which Mrs. Ramsey always drank before she went to bed, and she asked no more questions until the girl had gone; then she resumed the conversation.

“What do you mean, dear?” she inquired, looking over the rim of the china cup at her son, with a slight, anxious contraction of her forehead.

“Well, I felt a little lonely after you went, mother, and I had nothing especial to do, and it occurred to me that I would go over and call on our neighbor.”

“On young Maria Edgham?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Well, I suppose it was a polite thing for you to do,” said his mother, mildly, “but I don't quite care for her has I do for some girls. She is so very vehement. I do like a young girl to be gentle.”

“Well, I didn't see her, mother, in either a gentle or vehement mood,” said George. “As nearly as I can find out, she had a premonition who it was when I rang the door-bell, and said she had a headache, and ran up-stairs to bed.”

“Why, how do you know?” asked his mother, staring at him. “Her aunt was at the tea. Who told you?”

“Lily Merrill was there,” replied George, and again he was conscious of coloring. “She had come to stay with Maria because her aunt was going out. She answered my ring, and so I made a little call on her until Miss Stillman returned, and was so surprised to see her premises invaded and her niece missing that I think she inferred a conspiracy or a burglar. At all events, Lily and I were summarily dismissed. I have just seen Lily home.”

“Lily Merrill is pretty, and I think she is a nice, lady-like girl,” said Mrs. Ramsey, and she regarded her son more uneasily than before, “but I don't like her mother, George.”

“Why, what is the matter with Lily's mother?”

“She isn't genuine. Adeline Merrill was never genuine. She has always had her selfish ends, and she has reached them by crooks and turns.”

“I think Lily is genuine enough,” said George, carelessly, putting another lump of sugar in his cup of chocolate. “I have seen more brilliant girls, but she is a beauty, and I think she is genuine.”

“Well, perhaps she is,” Mrs. Ramsey admitted. “I don't know her very well, but I do know her mother. I know something now.”

“What?”

“I know you don't like gossip, but if ever a woman was—I know it is a vulgar expression—but if ever a woman was setting her cap for a man, she is setting hers for Dr. Ellridge. She never goes anywhere evenings, in the hope that he may call, and she sends for him when there is nothing whatever the matter with her, if he doesn't. I know, because Dr. Ellridge's wife's sister, Miss Emmons, who has kept house for him since his wife died, told me so. He goes home and tells her, and laughs, but I know she isn't quite sure that the doctor won't marry her.”

“Miss Emmons is jealous, perhaps,” said George. “Perhaps Mrs. Merrill is really ill.”

“No, the doctor says she is not, and Miss Emmons is not jealous. She told me that as far as she was concerned, although she would lose her home, she should be glad to see the doctor married, if he chose a suitable woman; but I don't think she likes Mrs. Merrill. I don't see how anybody can like a woman who so openly proclaims her willingness to marry a man before he has done her the honor to ask her. It seems shameless to me.”

“Perhaps she doesn't,” George said again. Then he added, “It would be rather hard for Lily if her mother did marry the doctor. He is a good man enough, but with his own three girls, the oldest older than Lily, she would have a hard time.”

George looked quite sober, reflecting upon the possible sad lot of poor Lily if her mother married the second time.

“Adeline Merrill wouldn't stop for such a thing as the feelings of her own daughter, if she had her mind set on anything,” said his mother, in her soft voice, which seemed to belie the bitterness of her words. She was not in reality bitter at all, not even towards Mrs. Merrill, but she had clearly defined rules of conduct for gentlewomen, and she mentioned it when these rules were transgressed.

“Well, mother dear, I can't see that it is likely to make much difference to either you or me, anyway,” said George, and his mother felt consoled. She told herself that it was not possible that George thought seriously of Lily, or he would not speak so.

“Miss Stillman is very eccentric,” she remarked, departing from the subject. “I offered to bring her home with me in the carriage. I knew you would not mind the extra money. She has such a cold that I really wondered that she came at all in such a storm; but, no, she seemed fairly indignant at the idea. I never saw any one so proud. I asked Mrs. Henry Stillman, but she did not like to have her sister-in-law to go alone, so she would not accept, either; but Miss Stillman walked herself, and made her sister walk, too, and I am positive it was because she was proud. Do you really mean you think young Maria did not want to see you, George?”

“It looked like it,” George replied, laughing.

“Why?” asked his mother.

“How do I know, mother dear? I don't think Miss Edgham altogether approves of me for some reason.”

“I should like to know what reason she has for not approving of you,” cried his mother, jealously. She looked admiringly at her son, who was handsome, with a sort of rugged beauty, and whose face displayed strength, and honesty not to be questioned. “I would like to know who Maria Edgham thinks she is. She is rather pretty, but she cannot compare with Lily Merrill as far as that goes, and she is teaching a little district school, and from what I have seen of her, her manners are subject to criticism. She is not half as lady-like as other girls in Amity. When I think of the way she flew in here and attacked us for not clothing those disreputable people across the river, just because they have the same name, I can't help being indignant. I never heard of a young girl's doing such a thing. And I think that if she ran off when the bell rang, because she thought it was you, it was certainly very rude. I think she virtually ascribed more meaning to your call than there was.”

“Lily said she had a headache,” said George, but his own face assumed an annoyed expression. That version of Maria's flight had not occurred to him, and he was a very proud fellow. When he went up-stairs to his own room he continued wondering whether it was possible that Maria, remembering their childish love-affair, could have really dreamed that he had called that evening with serious intentions, and he grew more and more indignant at the idea. Then the memory of that soft, hardly returned kiss which he had given Lily came to him, and now he did not feel vexed with himself because of it. He was quite certain that Lily was too gentle and timid to think for a minute that he meant anything more than their old childish friendship. The memory of the kiss became very pleasant to him, and he seemed to feel Lily's lips upon his own like a living flower which thrilled the heart. The next morning, when he took the trolley-car in front of his house, Maria was just passing on her way to school. She was wading rather wearily, yet still sturdily, through the snow. It had cleared during the night, and there were several inches of drifted snow in places, although some portions of the road were as bare as if swept by a broom of the winds.

Maria, tramping through the snow, which was deep just there, merely glanced at George Ramsey, and said good-morning. She had plenty of time, if she had chosen to do so, to express her regrets at not seeing him the evening before, for the car had not yet reached him. But she said nothing except good-morning, and George responded rather curtly, raising his hat, and stepping forward towards the car. He felt it to be unmistakable that Maria wished him to understand that she did not care for his particular acquaintance, and the sting which his mother had suggested the evening before, that she must consider that his attentions were significant, or she would not take so much trouble to repulse them, came over him again. He boarded the car, which was late, and moving sluggishly through the snow. It came to a full stop in front of the Merrill house, and George saw Lily's head behind a stand of ferns in one of the front windows. He raised his hat, and she bowed, and he could see her blush even at that distance. He thought again, comfortably, that Lily, remembering their childish caresses, could attach no importance to what had happened the night before, and yet a thrill of tenderness and pleasure shot through him, and he seemed to feel again the flower-like touch of her lips. It was a solace for any man, after receiving such an unmistakable rebuff as he had just received from Maria Edgham. He had no conception of the girl plodding through the snow to her daily task. He did not dream that she saw, instead of the snowy road before, a long stretch of dreary future, brought about by that very rebuff. But she was quite merciless with herself. She would not yield for a moment to regrets. She accepted that stretch of dreary future with a defiant acquiescence. She bowed pleasantly to the acquaintances whom she met. They were not many that morning, for the road was hardly passable in places, being overcurved here and there with blue, diamond-crested, snowlike cascades, and now presenting ridges like graves. Half-way to the school-house, Maria saw the village snow-plough, drawn by a struggling horse and guided by a red-faced man. She stood aside to let it pass. The man did not look at her. He frowned ahead at his task. He was quite an old man, and bent, but with the red of youth brought forth in his cheeks by the frosty air.

“Everybody has to work in some way,” Maria thought, “and very few get happiness for their labor.”

She reflected how soon that man would be lying stiff and stark under the wintry snows and the summer heats, and how nothing which might trouble him now would matter. She reflected that, although she herself was younger and had presumably longer to live, that the time would inevitably come when even such unhappiness as weighed her down this morning would not matter. She continued in the ineffectual track which the snow-plough had made, with a certain pleasure in the exertion. All Maria's heights of life, her mountain-summits which she would agonize to reach, were spiritual. Labor in itself could never daunt her. Always her spirit, the finer essence of her, would soar butterfly-like

above her toiling members.

It was a beautiful morning; the trees were heavily bent with snow, which gave out lustres like jewels. The air had a very purity of life in it. Maria inhaled the frosty, clear air, and regarded the trees as one might have done who was taking a stimulant. She kept her mind upon them, and would not think of George Ramsey. As she neared the school-house, the first child who ran to meet her, stumbling through the snow, was little Jessy Ramsey. Maria forced herself to meet smilingly the upward, loving look of those blue Ramsey eyes. She bent down and kissed Jessy, and the little thing danced at her side in a rapture.

“They be awful warm, my close, teacher,” said she.

“My clothes are very warm, teacher,” corrected Maria, gravely.

“My clothes are very warm, teacher,” said Jessy, obediently.

Maria caught the child up in her arms (she was a tiny, half-fed little thing), and kissed her again. Somehow she got a measure of comfort from it. After all, love was love, in whatever guise it came, and this was an innocent love which she could admit with no question.

“That's a good little girl, dear,” she said, and set Jessy down.

Chapter XXIV

Maria did not go home for the Christmas holidays. She was very anxious to do so, but she received a letter from Ida Edgham which made her resolve to remain where she was.

“We should be so very glad to have you come home for the holidays, dear,” wrote Ida, “but of course we know how long the journey is, and how little you are earning, and we are all well. Your father seems quite well, and so we shall send you some little remembrance, and try to console ourselves as best we can for your absence.”

Maria read the letter to her aunt Maria.

“You won't go one step?” said Aunt Maria, interrogatively.

“No,” said Maria. She was quite white. Nobody knew how she had longed to see her father and little Evelyn, and she had planned to go, and take Aunt Maria with her, defraying the expenses out of her scanty earnings.

“I wouldn't go if you were to offer me a thousand dollars,” said Aunt Maria.

“I would not, either,” responded Maria. She opened the stove door and thrust the letter in, and watched it burn.

“How your father ever came to marry that woman—” said Aunt Maria.

“There's no use talking about that now,” said Maria, arousing to defence of her father. “She was very pretty!”

“Pretty enough,” said Aunt Maria, “and I miss my guess if she didn't do most of the courting. Well, as you say, there is no use talking it over now. What's done is done.”

Aunt Maria watched Maria's pitiful young face with covert glances. Maria was finishing a blouse which she had expected to wear on her journey. She continued her work with resolution, but every line on her face took a downward curve.

“You don't need to hurry so on that waist now,” said Aunt Maria.

“I want the waist, anyway,” replied her niece. “I may as well get it done.”

“You will have to send the Christmas presents,” said Aunt Maria. “I don't very well see how you can pack some of them.”

“I guess I can manage,” said Maria.

The next day her week of vacation began. She packed the gifts which she had bought for her father and Evelyn and Ida, and took them to the express office. The day after that she received the remembrances of which Ida spoke. They were very pretty. Aunt Maria thought them extravagant. Ida had sent her a tiny chatelaine watch, and her father a ring set with a little diamond. Maria knew perfectly well how her father's heart ached when he sent the ring. She never for one moment doubted him. She wrote him a most loving letter, and even a deceptive letter, because of her affection. She repeated what Ida had written, that it was a long journey, and expensive, and she did not think it best for her to go home, although she had longed to do so.

Ida sent Aunt Maria a set of Shakespeare. When it was unpacked, Aunt Maria looked shrewdly at her niece.

“How many sets of Shakespeare has she got?” she inquired. “Do you know, Maria?”

Maria admitted that she thought she had two.

“I miss my guess but she has another exactly just like this,” said Aunt Maria. “Well, I don't mean to be ungrateful, and I know Shakespeare is called a great writer, and they who like him can read him. I would no more sit down and read all those books through, myself, than I would read Webster's Dictionary.”

Maria laughed.

“You can take this set of books up in your room, if you want them,” said Aunt Maria. “For my part I consider it an insult for her to send Shakespeare to me. She must have known I had never had anything to do with Shakespeare. She might just as well have sent me a crown. Now, your father he has more sense. He sent me this five-dollar gold-piece so I could buy what I wanted with it. He knew that he didn't know what I wanted. Your father's a good man, Maria, but he was weak when he married her; I've got to say it.”

“I don't think father was weak at all!” Maria retorted, with spirit.

“Of course, I expect you to stand up for your father, that is right. I wouldn't have you do anything else,” Aunt Maria said approvingly. “But he was weak.”

“She could have married almost anybody,” said Maria, gathering up the despised set of books. She was very glad of them to fill up the small bamboo bookcase in her own room, and, beside, she did not share her aunt's animosity to Shakespeare. She purchased some handkerchiefs for her aunt, with the covert view of recompensing her for the loss of Ida's present, and Aunt Maria was delighted with them.

“If she had had the sense to send me half a dozen handkerchiefs like these,” said she, “I should have thanked her. Anybody in their senses would rather have half a dozen nice handkerchiefs than a set of Shakespeare. That is, if they said just what they meant. I know some folks would be ashamed of not thinking much of Shakespeare. As for me, I say what I mean.” Aunt Maria tossed her head as she spoke.

She grew daily more like her brother Henry. The family traits in each became more accentuated. Each posed paradoxically as not being a poser. Aunt Maria spoke her mind so freely and arrogantly that she was not much of a favorite in Amity, although she commanded a certain measure of respect from her strenuous exertions at her own trumpet, which more than half-convinced people of the accuracy of her own opinion of herself. Sometimes Maria herself was irritated by her aunt, but she loved her dearly. She was always aware, too, of Aunt Maria's unspoken, but perfect approbation and admiration for herself, Maria, and of a certain sympathy for her, which the elder woman had the delicacy never to speak of. She had become aware that Maria, while she repulsed George Ramsey, was doing so for reasons which she could not divine, and that she suffered because of it.

One afternoon, not long after Christmas, when Maria returned from school, almost the first words which her aunt said to her were, “I do hate to see a young man made a fool of.”

Maria turned pale, and looked at her aunt.

“George Ramsey went past here sleigh-riding with Lily Merrill a little while ago,” said Aunt Maria. “That girl's making a fool of him!”

“Lily is a nice girl, Aunt Maria,” Maria said, faintly.

“Nice enough, but she can't come up to him. She never can. And when one can't come up, the other has to go down. I've seen it too many times not to know. There's sleigh-bells now. I guess it's them coming back. Yes, it is.”

Maria did not glance out of the window, and the sleigh, with its singing bells, flew past. She went wearily up to her own room, and removed her wraps before supper. Maria had a tiny coal-stove in her room now, and that was a great comfort to her. She could get away by herself, when she chose, and sometimes the necessity for so doing was strong upon her. She wished to think, without Aunt Maria's sharp eyes upon her, searching her thoughts. Emotion in Maria was reaching its high-water mark; the need for concealing, lest it be profaned by other eyes, was over her. Maria felt, although she was conscious of her aunt's covert sympathy for something that troubled her which she did not know about, and grateful for it, that she should die of shame if Aunt Maria did know. After supper that night she returned to her own room. She said she had some essays to correct.

“Well, I guess I'll step into the other side a minute,” said Aunt Maria. “Eunice went to the sewing-meeting this afternoon, and I want to know what they put in that barrel for that minister out West. I don't believe they had enough to half fill it. Of all the things they sent the last time, there wasn't anything fit to be seen.”

Maria seated herself in her own room, beside her tiny stove. She had a pink shade on her lamp, which stood on her little centre-table. The exercises were on the table, but she had not touched them when she heard doors opening and shutting below, then a step on the stairs. She knew at once it was Lily. Her room door opened, after a soft knock, and Lily glided gracefully in.

“I knew you were up here, dear,” she said. “I saw your light, and I saw your aunt's sitting-room lamp go out.”

“Aunt Maria has only gone in Uncle Henry's side. Sit down, Lily,” said Maria, rising and returning Lily's kiss, and placing a chair for her.

“Does she always put her lamp out when she goes in there?” asked Lily with innocent wonder.

“Yes,” replied Maria, rather curtly. That was one of poor Aunt Maria's petty economies, and she was sensitive with regard to it. A certain starvation of character, which had resulted from the lack of material wealth, was evident in Aunt Maria, and her niece recognized the fact with exceeding pity, and a sense of wrong at the hands of Providence.

“How very funny,” said Lily.

Maria said nothing. Lily had seated herself in the chair placed for her, and as usual had at once relapsed into a pose which would have done credit to an artist's model, a pose of which she was innocently conscious. She cast approving

glances at the graceful folds of crimson cashmere which swept over her knees; she extended one little foot in its pointed shoe; she raised her arms with a gesture peculiar to her and placed them behind her head in such a fashion that she seemed to embrace herself. Lily in crimson cashmere, which lent its warm glow to her tender cheeks, and even seemed to impart a rosy reflection to the gloss of her hair, was ravishing. To-night, too, her face wore a new expression, one of triumphant tenderness, which caused her to look fairly luminous.

“It has been a lovely day, hasn't it?” she said.

“Very pleasant,” said Maria.

“Did you know I went sleigh-riding this afternoon?”

“Did you?”

“Yes; George took me out.”

“That was nice,” said Maria.

“We went to Wayland. The sleighing is lovely.”

“I thought it looked so,” said Maria.

“It is. Say, Maria!”

“Well?”

“He said things to me this afternoon that sounded as if he did mean them. He did, really.”

“Did he?”

“Do you want me to tell you?” asked Lily, eying Maria happily and yet a little timidly.

Maria straightened herself. “If you want to know what I really think, Lily,” she said, “I think no girl should repeat anything a man says to her, if she does think he really means it. I think it is between the two. I think it should be held sacred. I think the girl cheapens it by repeating it, and I don't think it is fair to the man. I don't care to hear what Mr. Ramsey said, if you want the truth, Lily.”

Lily looked abashed. “I dare say you are right, Maria,” she said, meekly. “I won't repeat anything he said if you don't think I ought, and don't want to hear it.”

“Is your new dress done?” asked Maria, abruptly.

“It is going to be finished this week,” said Lily. “Do you think I am horrid, proposing to tell you what he said, Maria?”

“No, only I don't care to hear any more about it.”

“Well, I hope you don't think I am horrid.”

“I don't, dear,” said Maria, with an odd sensation of tenderness for the other, weaker girl, whom she had handled in a measure roughly with her own stronger character. She looked admiringly at her as she spoke. “Nobody can ever really think you horrid,” she said.

“If they did, I should think I was horrid my own self,” said Lily, with the ready acquiescence in the opinion of another which signified the deepest admiration, even to her own detriment, and was the redeeming note in her character.

Maria laughed. “I declare, Lily,” said she, “I hope you will never be accused of a crime, for I do believe even if you were innocent, you would side with the lawyer for the prosecution.”

“I don't know but I should,” said Lily.

Then she ventured to say something more about George Ramsey, encouraged by Maria's friendliness, but she met with such scanty sympathy that she refrained. She arose soon, and said she thought she must go home.

“I am tired to-night, and I think I had better go to bed early,” she said.

“Don't hurry,” Maria said, conventionally; but Lily kissed Maria and went.

Maria knew that her manner had driven Lily away, but she did not feel as if she could endure hearing her confidences, and Lily's confidences had all the impetus of a mountain stream. Had she remained, they could not have been finally checked. Maria moved her window curtains slightly and watched Lily flitting across the yard. She saw her enter the door, and also saw, quite distinctly the shadow of a man upon the white curtain as he rose to greet her when she entered. She wondered whether the man was Dr. Ellridge, or George Ramsey. The shadow looked like that of the older man, she thought, and she was not mistaken.

Lily, on entering the sitting-room, found Dr. Ellridge with her mother, and her mother's face was flushed, and she had a conscious simper. Lily said good-evening, and sat down as usual with her fancy-work, after she had removed her wraps, but soon her mother said to her that there was a good fire in her own room, and she thought that she had better go to bed early, as she must be tired, and Dr. Ellridge echoed her with rather a foolish expression.

“I don't think you ought to sit up late working on embroidery, Lily,” he said. “You are looking tired to-night. You must let me prescribe for you a glass of hot milk and bed.”

Lily looked at both of them with wondering gentleness, then she rose.

“There is a good fire in the kitchen,” said her mother, “and Hannah will heat the milk for you. You had better do as Dr. Ellridge said. You are going out to-morrow night, too, you know.”

Lily said good-night, and went out with a smouldering disquiet in her heart. When she asked Hannah out in the kitchen to heat the milk for her, because Dr. Ellridge said she must drink it and then go to bed, the girl, who had been long with the family and considered that she in reality was the main-spring of the house, eyed her curiously.

“Said you had better go to bed?” said she. “Why, it isn't nine o'clock!”

“He said I looked tired, Hannah,” said Lily faintly.

Hannah, who was a large, high-shouldered Nova Scotia girl, with a large, flat face obscured with freckles, sniffed. Lily heard her say quite distinctly as she went into the pantry for the milk, that she called it a shame when there were so many grown-up daughters to think of, for her part.

Lily knew what she meant. She sat quite pale and still while the milk was heating, and then drank it meekly, said good-night to Hannah and went up-stairs.

She could not go to sleep, although she went at once to bed, and extinguished her lamp. She lay there and heard a clock down in the hall strike the hours. The clock had struck twelve, and she had not heard Dr. Ellridge go. The whole situation filled her with a sort of wonder of disgust. She could not imagine her mother and Dr. Ellridge sitting up until midnight as she might sit up with George Ramsey. She felt as if she were witnessing a ghastly inversion of things, as if Love, instead of being in his proper panoply of wings and roses, was invested with a medicine-case, an obsolete frock-coat, and elderly obesity. Dr. Ellridge was quite stout. She wondered how her mother could, and then she wondered how Dr. Ellridge could. Lily loved her mother, but she had relegated her to what she considered her proper place in the scheme of things, and now she was overstepping it. Lily called to mind vividly the lines on her mother's face, her matronly figure. It seemed to her that her mother had had her time of love with her father, and this was as abnormal as two springs in one year. Shortly after twelve, Lily heard a soft murmur of voices in the hall, then the front door close. Then her mother came up-stairs and entered her room.

“Are you asleep, Lily?” she whispered, softly, and Lily recognized with shame the artificiality of the whisper.

“No, mother, I am not asleep,” she replied, quite loudly.

Her mother came and sat down on the bed beside her. She patted Lily's cheeks, and felt for her hand. Lily's impulse was to snatch it away, but she was too gentle. She let it remain passively in her mother's nervous clasp.

“Lily, my dear child, I have something to tell you,” whispered Mrs. Merrill.

Lily said nothing.

“Lily, my precious child,” said her mother, in her strained whisper. “I don't know whether you have suspected anything or not, but I am meditating a great change in my life. I have been very lonely since your dear father died, and I never had a nature to live alone and be happy. You might as well expect the vine to live without its tree. I have made up my mind that I shall be much happier, and Dr. Ellridge will. He needs the sympathy and love of a wife. His daughters do as well as they can, but a daughter is not like a wife.”

“Oh, mother!” said Lily. Then she gave a little sob. Her mother bent over and kissed her, and Lily smelled Dr. Ellridge's cigar, and she thought also medicine. She shrank away from her mother, and sobbed convulsively.

“My dear child,” said Mrs. Merrill, “you need not feel so badly. There will be no change in your life until you yourself marry. We shall live right along here. This house is larger and more convenient than the doctor's. He will rent his house, and we shall live here.”

“And all those Ellridge girls,” sobbed Lily.

“They are very nice girls, dear. Florence and Amelia will room together; they can have the southeast room. Mabel, I suppose, will have to go in the best chamber. Perhaps, by-and-by, Dr. Ellridge will finish off another room for her. I don't quite like the idea of having no spare room. But you will keep your own room, and you will be all the happier for having three nice sisters.”

“I never liked them,” sobbed Lily. It really seemed to her that she was called upon to marry the Ellridge girls, and that was the main issue.

“They are very nice girls,” repeated Mrs. Merrill, and there was obstinacy in her artificially sweet tone. “Everybody says they are very nice girls. You certainly would not wish your mother to give up her chance of a happy life, because you have an unwarrantable prejudice against the poor doctor's daughters.”

“You have been married once,” said Lily, feebly. It was as if she made a faint remonstrance because of her mother, who had already had her reasonable share of cake, taking a second slice. She had too sweet a disposition to say bitter things, but the bitterness of the things she might have said was in her heart.

“I suppose you think because I am older it is foolish,” said her mother, in an aggressive voice. “Wait till you yourself are

older and you may know how I feel. You may find out that you cannot give up all the joys of life because you have been a few years longer in the world. You may not feel so very different from what you do now.” Mrs. Merrill's voice rang true in this last. There was even a pathetic appeal to her daughter for sympathy. But Lily continued to sob weakly, and did not say any more.

“Well, good-night, my dear child,” Mrs. Merrill said finally. “You will feel very differently about all this later on. You will come to see, as I do, that it is for the best. You will be much happier.” Mrs. Merrill kissed Lily again, and went out. She closed the door with a slight slam.

Lily knew that her mother was angry with her. As for herself, she considered that she had never been so unhappy in her whole life. She thought of living with the Ellridge girls, who were really of a common cast, and always with Dr. Ellridge at the head of the table, dictating to her as he had done to-night, in his smooth, slightly satirical way, and her whole soul rose in revolt. She felt sure that Dr. Ellridge was not at all in love with her mother, as George Ramsey might be in love with herself. All the romance had been sucked out of them both years before. She called to mind again her mother's lined face, her too aggressive curves, her tightly frizzed hair, and she knew that she was right. She remembered hearing that Dr. Ellridge's daughters were none of them domestic, that he had hard work to keep a housekeeper, that his practice was declining. She remembered how shabby and mean his little house had looked when she had passed it in the sleigh with George Ramsey, that very day. She said to herself that Dr. Ellridge was only marrying her mother for the sake of the loaves and fishes, for a pretty, well-kept home for himself and his daughters. Lily had something of a business turn in spite of her feminity. She calculated how much rent Dr. Ellridge could get for his own house. That will dress the girls, she thought. She knew that her mother's income was considerable. Dr. Ellridge would be immeasurably better off as far as this world's goods went. There was no doubt of that. Lily felt such a measure of revolt and disgust that it was fairly like a spiritual nausea. Her own maiden innocence seemed assaulted, and besides that there was a sense of pitiful grief and wonder that her mother, besides whom she had nobody in the world, could so betray her. She was like the proverbial child with its poor little nose out of joint. She lay and wept like one. The next morning, when she went down to breakfast, her pretty face was pale and woe-begone. Her mother gave one defiant glance at her, then spooned out the cereal with vehemence. Hannah gave a quick, shrewd glance at her when she set the saucer containing the smoking mess before her.

“Her mother has told her,” she thought. She also thought that she herself would give notice were it not for poor Miss Lily.

Lily's extreme gentleness, even when she was distressed, was calculated to inspire faithfulness in every one. Hannah gave more than one pitying, indignant glance at the girl's pretty, sad face. Lily did not dream of sulking to the extent of not eating her breakfast. She ate just as usual. She even made a remark about the weather to her mother, although in a little, weeping voice, as if the weather itself, although it was a brilliant morning, were a source of misery. Mrs. Merrill replied curtly. Lily took another spoonful of her cereal.

She remained in her own room the greater part of the day. In the afternoon her mother, without saying anything to her, took the trolley for Westbridge. Lily thought with a shiver that she might be going over there to purchase some article for her trousseau. The thought of her mother with a trousseau caused her to laugh a little, hysterical laugh, as she sat alone in her chamber. That evening she and her mother went to a concert in the town hall. Lily knew that Dr. Ellridge would accompany her mother home. She wondered what she should do, what she should be expected to do—take the doctor's other arm, or walk behind. She had seen the doctor with two of his daughters seated, when she and her mother passed up the aisle. She knew that the two daughters would go home together, and the doctor would go with her mother. She thought of George Ramsey. Now and then as the concert proceeded she twisted her neck slightly and peered around, but she saw nothing of him. She concluded that he was not there. But when the concert was over, and she and her mother were passing out the door, and Dr. Ellridge was pressing close to her mother, under a fire of hostile glances from his daughters, Lily felt a touch on her own arm. She turned, and saw George Ramsey's handsome face with a quiver of unutterable bliss. She took his arm, and followed her mother and Dr. Ellridge. When they were out in the frosty air, under a low sky sparkling with multitudinous stars traversed by its mysterious nebulous highway of the gods, this poor little morsel of a mortal, engrossed with her poor little troubles, answered a remark of George's concerning the weather in a trembling voice. Then she began to weep unreservedly. George with a quick glance around, drew her around a corner which they had just reached into a street which afforded a circuitous route home, and which was quite deserted.

“Why Lily, what in the world is the matter?” he said. There was absolutely nothing in his voice or his heart at the time except friendliness and honest concern for his old playmate's distress.

“Mother is going to be married to Dr. Ellridge,” whispered Lily, “and he and his three horrid daughters are all coming to live at our house.”

George whistled.

Lily sobbed quite aloud.

“Hush, poor little girl,” said George. He glanced around; there was not a soul to be seen. Lily's head seemed to droop as naturally towards his shoulder as a flower towards the sun. A sudden impulse of tenderness, the tenderness of the strong for the weak, of man for woman, came over the young fellow. Before he well knew what he was doing, his arm had passed around Lily's waist, and the pretty head quite touched his shoulder. George gave one last bitter thought towards Maria, then he spoke.

“Well,” he said, “don't cry, Lily dear. If your mother is going to marry Dr. Ellridge, suppose you get married too. Suppose you marry me, and come and live at my house.”

Chapter XXV

The next morning, before Maria had started for school, Lily Merrill came running across the yard, and knocked at the side door. She always knocked unless she was quite sure that Maria was alone. She was afraid of her aunt. Aunt Maria opened the door, and Lily shrank a little before her, in spite of the wonderful glowing radiance which lit her lovely face that morning.

“Good-morning, Miss Stillman,” said Lily, timidly.

“Well?” said Aunt Maria. The word was equivalent to “What do you want?”

“Has Maria gone?” asked Lily.

“No, she is getting dressed.”

“Can I run up to her room and see her a minute? I have something particular I want to tell her.”

“I don't know whether she'd want anybody to come up while she's dressing or not,” said Aunt Maria.

“I don't believe she'd mind me,” said Lily, pleadingly. “Would you mind calling up and asking her, please, Miss Stillman?”

“Well,” said Aunt Maria.

She actually closed the door and left Lily standing in the bitter wind while she spoke to Maria. Lily heard her faintly calling.

“Say, Maria, that Merrill girl is at the door, and wants to know if she can come a minute. She's got something she wants to tell you.”

Then Aunt Maria opened the door. “I suppose you can go up,” she said, ungraciously. The radiance in Lily's face filled her with hostility, she did not know why.

“Oh, thank you!” cried Lily; and ran into the house and up the stairs to Maria's room.

Maria was standing before the glass brushing her hair, which was very long, and bright, and thick. Lily went straight to her and threw her arms around her and began to weep. Maria pushed her aside gently.

“Why, what is the matter, Lily?” she asked. “Excuse me, but I must finish my hair; I have no more than time. What is the matter?”

“Nothing is the matter,” sobbed Lily, “only—Oh Maria I am so happy! I have not slept a wink all night I was so happy. Oh, you don't know how happy I am!”

Maria's face turned deadly white. She swept the glowing lengths of her hair over it with a deft movement. “Why, what makes you so happy?” she asked, coolly.

“Oh, Maria, he was in earnest, he was. I am engaged to George.”

Maria brushed her hair. “I am very glad,” she said, in an unfaltering voice. She bent her head, bringing her hair entirely over her face, preparatory to making a great knot on the top of her head. “I hope you will be very happy.”

“Happy!” said Lily. “Oh, Maria, you don't know how happy I am!”

“I am very glad,” Maria repeated, brushing her hair smoothly from her neck. “He seems like a very fine young man. I think you have made a wise choice, Lily.”

Lily flung herself into a chair and looked at Maria. “Oh, Maria dear,” she said, “I wish you were as happy as I. I hope you will be some time.”

Maria laughed, and there was not a trace of bitterness in her laugh. “Well, I shall not cry if I never am,” she said. “What a little goose you are, Lily, to cry!” She swept the hair back from her face, and her color had returned. She looked squarely at Lily's reflection in the glass, and there was an odd, triumphant expression on her face.

“I can't help it,” sobbed Lily. “I always have cried when I was very happy, and I never was so happy as this; and last night, before he—before George asked me—I was so miserable I wanted to die. Only think, Maria, mother is going to marry Dr. Ellridge, and he and his three horrid girls are coming to live at our house. I don't know how I could have stood it if George hadn't asked me. Now I shall live with him in his house, of course, with his mother. I have always liked George's mother. I think she is sweet.”

“Yes, she is a very sweet woman, and I should think you could live very happily with her,” said Maria, twisting her hair carefully. Maria had a beautiful neck showing above the lace of her underwaist. Lily looked at it. Her tears had ceased, and left not a trace on her smooth cheeks. The lace which Maria's upward-turned hair displayed had set her flexible mind into a new channel.

“Say, Maria,” she said, “it is to be a very short engagement. It will have to be, on account of mother. A double wedding would be too ridiculous, and I want to get away before all those Ellridges come into our house. Dr. Ellridge can't let his house before spring, and so I think in a month, if I can get ready.” Lily blushed until her face was like the heart of a rose.

“Well, you have a number of very pretty dresses now,” said Maria. “I should think you could get ready.”

“I shall have to get a wedding-dress made, and a tea-gown, and one besides for receiving calls,” said Lily. “Then I must have some underwear. Will you go shopping with me in Westbridge some Saturday, Maria?”

“I should be very glad to do so, dear,” replied Maria.

“That is a very pretty lace on your waist,” Lily said, meditatively. “I think I shall get ready-made things. It takes so much time to make them one's self, and besides I think they are just as pretty. Don't you?”

“I think one can buy very pretty ready-made things,” Maria said. She slipped on her blouse and fastened her collar.

“I shall be so much obliged to you if you will go,” said Lily. “I won't ask mother. To tell you the truth, Maria, I think it is dreadful that she is going to marry again—a widower with three grown-up daughters, too.”

“I don't see why,” Maria said, dropping her black skirt over her head.

“You don't see why?”

“No, not if it makes her happy. People have a right to all the happiness they can get, at all ages. I used to think myself that older people were silly to want things like young people, but now I have changed my mind. Dr. Ellridge is a good man, and I dare say your mother will be happier, especially if you are going away.”

“Oh, if she had not been going to get married herself, I should rather have lived at home, after I was married,” said Lily. She looked reflectively at Maria as she fastened her belt. “It's queer,” she said, “but I do believe my feeling so terribly about mother's marrying made George ask me sooner. Of course, he must have meant to ask me some time, or he would not have asked me at all.”

“Of course,” said Maria, getting her hat from the closet-shelf.

“But he walked home with me from the concert last night, and I couldn't help crying, I felt so dreadfully. Then he asked me what the matter was, and I told him, and then he asked me right away. I think maybe he had thought of waiting a little, but that hastened him. Oh, Maria, I am so happy!”

Maria fastened on her hat carefully. “I am very glad, dear,” she said. She turned from the glass, and Lily's face, smiling at her, seemed to give out light like a star. It might not have been the highest affection which the girl, who was one of clear and limpid shadows rather than depths, felt; it might have had its roots in selfish ends; but it fairly glorified her. Maria with a sudden impulse bent over her and kissed her. “I am very glad, dear,” she said, “and now I must run, or I shall be late. My coat is down-stairs.”

“Don't say anything before your aunt Maria, will you?” said Lily, rising and following her.

“No, of course, if you don't want me to.”

“Of course it will be all over town before night,” said Lily, “but someway I would rather your aunt Maria did not hear it from me. She doesn't like me a bit.” Lily said the last in a whisper.

Both girls went down-stairs, and Maria took her coat from the rack in the hall.

Aunt Maria opened the sitting-room door. She had a little satchel with Maria's lunch. “Here is your luncheon,” said she, in a hard tone, “and you'd better hurry and not stop to talk, or you'll be late.”

“I am going right away, Aunt Maria,” said Maria. She took the satchel, and kissed her aunt on her thin, sallow cheek.

“Good-morning, Miss Stillman,” said Lily, sweetly, as she followed Maria.

Aunt Maria said nothing at all; she gave Lily a grim nod, while her lips were tightly compressed. She turned the key in the door with an audible snap.

“Well, good-bye, dear,” said Lily to Maria. “I hope you will be as happy as I am some day, and I know you will.”

Lily's face was entirely sweet and womanly as she turned it towards Maria for a kiss, which Maria gave her.

“Good-bye, dear,” she said, gently, and was off.

Nobody knew how glad she was to be off. She had a stunned, shocked feeling; she realized that her knees trembled, but she held up her head straight and went on. She realized that worse than anything else would be the suspicion on the part of any one that Lily's engagement to George Ramsey troubled her. All the time, as she hurried along the familiar road, she realized that strange, shocked feeling, as of some tremendous detonation of spirit. She bowed mechanically to people whom she met. She did not fairly know who they were. She kept on her way only through inertia. She felt that if she stopped to think, she would scarcely know the road to the school-house. She wondered when she met a girl somewhat older than herself, just as she reached the bridge, if that girl, who was plain and poorly dressed, one of those who seem to make no aspirations to the sweets of life, if she had ever felt as she herself did. Such a curiosity possessed her concerning it that she wished she could ask the girl, although she did not know her. She dreaded lest Jessy Ramsey should run to meet her, and her dread was realized. However, Maria was not as distressed by it as she thought. She stooped and kissed Jessy quite easily.

“Good-morning, dear,” she said.

A shock of any kind has the quality of mercy in that it benumbs as to pain. Maria's only realization was that something monstrous had happened, something like mutilation, but there was no sting of agony. She entered the school-house and

went about her duties as usual. The children realized no difference in her, but all the time she realized the difference in herself. Something had gone from her, some essential part which she could never recover, not in itself, no matter what her future life might be. She was shorn of her first love, and that which has been never can be again.

When Maria reached the bridge on her way home, there was Lily waiting for her, as she had half expected she would be.

“Maria, dear,” said Lily, with a pretty gesture of pleading, “I had to come and meet you, because I am so happy, and nobody else knows, except mother, and, somehow, her being pleased doesn't please me. I suppose I am wicked, but it makes me angry. I know it is awful to say such a thing of my own mother, but I can't help feeling that she thinks now she can have my room for Mabel Ellridge, and won't have to give up the spare chamber. I have nobody to talk to but you, Maria. George won't come over before evening, and I am scared to go in and see his mother. I am so afraid she won't like me. Do you think she will like me, Maria dear?”

“I don't see why she should not,” replied Maria. Lily had hold of her arm and was nestling close to her.

“Don't you, honest?”

“No, dear. I said so.”

“You don't mind my coming to meet you and talk it over, do you, Maria?”

“Of course I don't! Why should I?” asked Maria, almost angrily.

“I thought you wouldn't. Maria, do you think a blue tea-gown or a pink one would be prettier?”

“I think pink is your color,” said Maria.

“Well, I rather like the idea of pink myself. Mother says I shall have enough money to get some nice things. I suppose it is very silly, but I always thought that one of the pleasantest things about getting married, must be having some pretty, new clothes. Do you think I am very silly, Maria?”

“I dare say most girls feel so,” said Maria, patiently.

As she spoke she looked away from the other girl at the wintry landscape. There was to the eastward of Amity a low range of hills, hardly mountains. These were snow-covered, and beneath the light of the setting sun gave out wonderful hues and lights of rose and blue and pearl. It was to Maria as if she herself, being immeasurably taller than Lily and the other girls whom she typified, could see farther and higher, even to her own agony of mind. It is a great deal for a small nature to be pleased with the small things of life. A large nature may miss a good deal in not being pleased with them. Maria realized that she herself, in Lily's place, could have no grasp of mind petty enough for pink and blue tea-gowns, that she had outgrown that stage of her existence. She still liked pretty things, but they had now become dwarfed by her emotions, whereas, in the case of the other girl, the danger was that the emotions themselves should become dwarfed. Lily was typical, and there is after all a certain security as to peace and comfort in being one of a kind, and not isolated.

Lily talked about her bridal wardrobe all the way until they reached the Ramsey house; then she glanced up at the windows and bowed, dimpling and blushing. “That's his mother,” she said to Maria. “I wonder if George has told her.”

“I should think he must have,” said Maria.

“I am so glad you think she will like me. I wonder what room we shall have, and whether there will be new furniture. I don't know how the up-stairs rooms are furnished, do you?”

“No, how should I? I was never up-stairs in the house in my life,” said Maria. Again she gazed away from Lily at the snow-covered hills. Her face wore an expression of forced patience. It really seemed to her as if she were stung by a swarm of platitudes like bees.

Lily kissed her at her door. “I should ask if I couldn't come over this evening, and sit up in your room and talk it over,” said she, “but I suppose he will be likely to come. He didn't say so, but I suppose he will.”

“I should judge so,” said Maria.

When she entered the sitting-room, her aunt, who was knitting with a sort of fierce energy, looked up. “Oh, it's you!” said she. Her face had an expression of hostility and tenderness at once.

“Yes, Aunt Maria.”

Aunt Maria surveyed her scrutinizingly. “You don't mean to say you didn't wear your knit jacket under your coat, such a bitter day as this?” said she.

“I have been warm enough.”

Aunt Maria sniffed. “I wonder when you will ever be old enough to take care of yourself?” said she. “You need to be watched every minute like a baby.”

“I was warm enough, Aunt Maria,” Maria repeated, patiently.

“Well, sit down here by the stove and get heated through while I see to supper,” said Aunt Maria, crossly. “I've got a hot beef-stew with dumplings for supper, and I guess I'll make some chocolate instead of tea. That always seems to me to

warm up anybody better."

"Don't you want me to help?" said Maria.

"No; everything is all done except to make the chocolate. I've had the stew on hours. A stew isn't good for a thing unless you have it on long enough to get the goodness out of the bone."

Aunt Maria opened the door leading to the dining-room. In winter it served the two as both kitchen and dining-room, having a compromising sort of stove on which one could cook, and which still did not look entirely plebeian and fitted only for the kitchen. Maria saw through the open door the neatly laid table, with its red cloth and Aunt Maria's thin silver spoons and china. Aunt Maria had a weakness in one respect. She liked to use china, and did not keep that which had descended to her from her mother stored away, to be taken out only for company, as her sister-in-law thought she properly should do. The china was a fine Lowestoft pattern, and it was Aunt Maria's pride that not a piece was missing.

"As long as I take care of my china myself, and am not dependent on some great, clumsy girl, I guess I can afford to use it," she said.

As Maria eyed the delicate little cups a savory odor of stew floated through the room. She realized that she was not hungry, that the odor of food nauseated her with a sort of physical sympathy with the nausea of her soul, with life itself. Then she straightened herself, and shut her mouth hard. The look of her New England ancestresses who had borne life and death without flinching was on her face.

"I will be hungry," Maria said to herself. "Why should I lose my appetite because a man who does not care for me is going to marry another girl, and when I am married, too, and have no right even to think of him for one minute even if he had been in earnest, if he had thought of me? Why should I lose my appetite? Why should I go without my supper? I will eat. More than that, I will enjoy eating, and neither George Ramsey nor Lily Merrill shall prevent it, neither they nor my own self."

Maria sniffed the stew, and she compelled herself, by sheer force of will, to find the combined odor of boiling meat and vegetables inviting. She became hungry.

"That stew smells so good," she called out to her aunt, and her voice rang with triumph.

"I guess it *is* a good stew," her aunt called back in reply. "I've had it on four hours, and I've made dumplings."

"Lovely!" cried Maria. She said to herself defiantly and proudly, that there were little zests of life which she might have if she could not have the greatest joys, and those little zests she would not be cheated out of by any adverse fate. She said practically to herself, that if she could not have love she could have a stew, and it might be worse. She smiled to herself over her whimsical conceit, and her face lost its bitter, strained look which it had worn all day. She reflected that even if she could not marry George Ramsey, and had turned the cold shoulder to him, he had been undeniably fickle; that his fancy had been lightly turned aside by a pretty face which was not accompanied by great mental power. She had felt a contempt for George, and scorn for Lily, but now her face cleared, and her attitude of mind. She had gained a petty triumph over herself, and along with that came a clearer view of the situation. When Aunt Maria called her to supper, she jumped up, and ran into the dining-room, and seated herself at the table.

"I am as hungry as a bear," said she.

Aunt Maria behind her delicate china teacups gave a sniff of satisfaction, and her set face softened. "Well, I'm glad you are," said she. "I guess the stew is good."

"Of course it is," said Maria. She lifted the cover of the dish and began ladling out the stew with a small, thin, silver ladle which had come to Aunt Maria along with the china from her mother. She passed a plate over to her aunt, and filled her own, and began eating. "It is delicious," said she. The stew really pleased her palate, and she had the feeling of a conqueror who has gained one of the outposts in a battle. Aunt Maria passed her a thin china cup filled with frothing chocolate, and Maria praise that too. "Your chocolate is so much nicer than our cook used to make," said she, and Aunt Maria beamed.

"I've got some lemon-cake, too," said she.

"I call this a supper fit for a queen," said Maria.

"I thought I would make the cake this afternoon. I thought maybe you would like it," said Aunt Maria, smiling. Her own pride was appeased. The feeling that Maria, her niece whom she adored, had been slighted, had rankled within her all day. Now she told herself that Maria did not care; that she might have been foolish in not caring and taking advantage of such a matrimonial chance, but that she did not care, and that she consequently was not slighted.

"Well, I s'pose Lily told you the news this morning?" she said, presently. "I s'pose that was why she wanted to see you. I s'pose she was so tickled she couldn't wait to tell of it."

"You mean her engagement to Mr. Ramsey?" said Maria, helping herself to more stew.

"Yes. Eunice came in and told before you'd been gone half an hour. She'd been down to the store, and I guess Lily's mother had told it to somebody there. I s'pose Adeline Merrill is tickled to death to get Lily out of the way, now she's going to get married herself. She would have had to give up her spare chamber if she hadn't."

"It seems to me a very nice arrangement," said Maria, taking a spoonful of stew. "It would have been hard for poor Lily, and now she will live with Mr. Ramsey and his mother, and Mrs. Ramsey seems to be a lovely woman."

“Yes, she is,” assented Aunt Maria. “She was built on a different plan from Adeline Merrill. She came of better stock. But I don't see what George Ramsey is thinking of, for my part.”

“Lily is very pretty and has a very good disposition,” said Maria. “I think she will make him a good wife.”

Aunt Maria sniffed. “Now, Maria Edgham,” said she, “what's the use. You know it's sour grapes he's getting. You know he wanted somebody else.”

“Whom?” asked Maria, innocently, sipping her chocolate.

“You know he wanted you, Maria Edgham.”

“He got over it pretty quickly then,” said Maria.

“Maybe he hasn't got over it. Lily Merrill is just one of the kind of girls who lead a man on when they don't know they're being led. He is proud, too; he comes of a family that have always held their heads high. He wanted you.”

“Nonsense!”

“You can't tell me. I know.”

“Aunt Maria,” said Maria, with sudden earnestness, “if you ever tell such a thing as that out, I don't know what I shall do.”

“I ain't going to have folks think you're slighted,” said Aunt Maria. She had made up her mind, in fact, to tell Eunice after supper.

“Slighted!” said Maria, angrily. “There is no question of slight. Do you think I was in love with George Ramsey?”

“No, I don't, for if you had been you would have had him instead of letting a little dolly-pinky, rosy-like Lily Merrill get him. I think he was a good match, and I don't know what possessed you, but I don't think you wanted him.”

“If you talk about it you will make people think so,” said Maria, passionately; “and if they do I will go away from Amity and never come back as long as I live.”

Aunt Maria looked with sharp, gleaming eyes at her niece. “Maria Edgham, you've got something on your mind,” said she.

“I have not.”

“Yes, you have, and I want to know what it is.”

“My mind is my own,” said Maria, indignantly, even cruelly. Then she rose from the table and ran up-stairs to her own room.

“You have gone off without touching the lemon-cake,” her aunt called after her, but Maria made no response.

Lemon-cake was an outpost which she could not then take. She had reached her limit, for the time being. She sat down beside her window in the dark room, lighted only by the gleam from the Merrill house across the yard and an electric light on the street corner. There were curious lights and shadows over the walls; strange flickerings and wavings as of intangible creatures, unspoken thoughts. Maria rested her elbows on the window-sill, and rested her chin in her hands, and gazed out. Presently, with a quiver of despair, she saw the door of the Merrill house open and Lily come flitting across the yard. She thought, with a shudder, that she was coming to make a few more confidences before George Ramsey arrived. She heard a timid little knock on the side door, then her aunt's harsh and uncompromising, “No, Maria ain't at home,” said she, lying with the utter unrestraint of one who believes in fire and brimstone, and yet lies. She even repeated it, and emphasized and particularized her lie, seemingly with a grim enjoyment of sin, now that she had taken hold of it.

“Maria went out right after supper,” said she. Then, evidently in response to Lily's low inquiry of where she had gone and when she would be home, she said: “She went to the post-office. She was expecting a letter from a gentleman in Edgham, I guess, and I shouldn't wonder if she stopped in at the Monroes' and played cards. They've been teasing her to. I shouldn't be surprised if she wasn't home till ten o'clock.”

Maria heard her aunt with wonder which savored of horror, but she heard the door close and saw Lily flit back across the yard with a feeling of immeasurable relief. Then she heard her aunt's voice at her door, opened a narrow crack.

“Are you warm enough in here?” asked Aunt Maria.

“Yes, plenty warm enough.”

“You'd better not light a lamp,” said Aunt Maria, coolly; “I just told that Merrill girl that you had gone out.”

“But I hadn't,” said Maria.

“I knew it; but there are times when a lie ain't a lie, it's only the truth upside-down. I knew that you didn't want that doll-faced thing over here again. She had better stay at home and wait for her new beau. She was all prinked up fit to kill. I told her you had gone out, and I meant to, but you'd better not light your lamp for a little while. It won't matter after a little while. I suppose the beau will come, and she won't pay any attention to it. But if you light it right away she'll think you've got back and come tearing over here again.”

“All right,” said Maria. “I'll sit here a little while, and then I'll light my lamp. I've got some work to do.”

“I'm going into the other side, after I've finished the dishes,” said Aunt Maria.

“You won't—”

“No, I won't. Let George Ramsey chew his sour grapes if he wants to. I sha'n't say anything about it. Anybody with any sense can't help knowing a man of sense would have rather had you than Lily Merrill. I ain't afraid of anybody thinking you're slighted.” There was indignant and acrid loyalty in Aunt Maria's tone. She closed the door, as was her wont, with a little slam and went down-stairs. Aunt Maria walked very heavily. Her steps jarred the house.

Maria continued sitting at her window. Presently a new light, a rosy light of a lamp under a pink shade, flashed in her eyes. The parlor in the Merrill house was lighted. Maria saw Lily draw down the curtain, upon which directly appeared the shadows of growing plants behind it in a delicate grace of tracery. Presently Maria saw a horse and sleigh drive into the Merrill yard. She saw Mrs. Merrill open the side-door, and Dr. Ellridge enter. Then she watched longer, and presently a dark shadow of a man passed down the street, of which she could see a short stretch from her window, and she saw him go to the front door of the Merrill house. Maria knew that was George Ramsey. She laughed a little, hysterical laugh as she sat there in the dark. It was ridiculous, the two pairs of lovers in the two rooms! The second-hand, warmed-over, renovated love and the new. After Maria laughed she sobbed. Then she checked her sobs and sat quite still and fought, and presently a strange thing happened, which is not possible to all, but is possible to some. With an effort of the will which shocked her house of life, and her very soul, and left marks which she would bear to all eternity, she put this unlawful love for the lover of another out of her heart. She closed all her doors and windows of thought and sense upon him, and the love was gone, and in its place was an awful emptiness which yet filled her with triumph.

“I do not love him at all now,” she said, quite aloud; and it was true that she did not. She rose, pulled down her curtains, lighted her lamp, and went to work.

Chapter XXVI

Maria, after that, went on her way as before. She saw, without the slightest qualm, incredible as it may seem, George Ramsey devoted to Lily. She even entered without any shrinking into Lily's plans for her trousseau, and repeatedly went shopping with her. She began embroidering a bureau-scarf and table-cover for Lily's room in the Ramsey house. It had been settled that the young couple were to have the large front chamber, and Mrs. Merrill's present to Lily was a set of furniture for it. Mrs. Ramsey's old-fashioned walnut set was stowed away. Maria even went with Mrs. Merrill to purchase the furniture. Mrs. Merrill had an idea, which could not be subdued, that Maria would have liked George Ramsey for herself, and she took a covert delight in pressing Maria into this service, and descanting upon the pleasant life in store for her daughter. Maria understood with a sort of scorn Mrs. Merrill's thought; but she said to herself that if it gave her pleasure, let her think so. She had a character which could leave people to their mean and malicious delights for very contempt.

“Well, I guess Lily's envied by a good many girls in Amity,” said Mrs. Merrill, almost undisguisedly, when she and Maria had settled upon a charming set of furniture.

“I dare say,” replied Maria. “Mr. Ramsey seems a very good young man.”

“He's the salt of the earth,” said Mrs. Merrill. She gave a glance of thwarted malice at Maria's pretty face as they were seated side by side in the trolley-car on their way home that day. Her farthest imagination could discern no traces of chagrin, and Maria looked unusually well that day in a new suit. However, she consoled herself by thinking that Maria was undoubtedly like her aunt, who would die before she let on that she was hit, and that the girl, under her calm and smiling face, was stung with envy and slighted affection.

Lily asked Maria to be her maid of honor. She planned to be married in church, but George Ramsey unexpectedly vetoed the church wedding. He wished a simple wedding at Lily's house. He even demurred at the bridal-gown and veil, but Lily had her way about that. Maria consented with no hesitation to be her maid of honor, although she refused to allow Mrs. Merrill to purchase her dress. She purchased some white cloth, and had it cut and fitted, and she herself made it, embroidering it with white silk, sitting up far into the night after school. But, after all, she was destined not to wear the dress to Lily's wedding and not to be her maid of honor.

The wedding was to be the first week of Maria's spring vacation, and she unexpectedly received word from home that her father was not well, and that she had better go home as soon as her school was finished. Her father himself wrote. He wrote guardedly, evidently without Ida's knowledge. He said that, unless her heart was particularly set upon attending the wedding, he wished she would come home; that her vacation was short, at the best, that he had not seen her for a long time, and that he did not feel quite himself some days. Maria read between the lines, and so did her aunt Maria, to whom she read the letter.

“Your father's sicker than he lets on,” Aunt Maria said, bluntly. “You'd better go. You don't care anything particular about going to that Merrill girl's wedding. She can get Fanny Ellwell for her maid of honor. That dress Fanny wore at Eva Granger's wedding will do for her to wear. Your dress will come in handy next summer. You had better go home.”

Maria sat soberly looking at the letter. “I am afraid father is worse than he says,” she said.

“I know he is. Harry Edgham wasn't ever very strong, and I'll warrant his wife has made him go out when he didn't feel equal to it, and she has had stacks of company, and he must have had to strain every nerve to meet expenses, poor man! You'd better go, Maria.”

“Of course, I am going,” replied Maria.

That evening she went over and told Lily that she could not be her maid of honor, that her father was sick, and she would be obliged to go home as soon as school closed. George Ramsey was calling, and Lily's face had a lovely pink radiance. One could almost seem to see the kisses of love upon it. George acted a little perturbed at sight of Maria. He remained silent during Lily's torrent of regrets and remonstrances, but he followed Maria to the door and said to her how sorry he was that her father was ill.

“I hope it is nothing serious,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Maria. “I hope not, but I don't think my father is very strong, and I feel that I ought to go.”

“Of course,” said George. “We shall be sorry to miss you, but, if your father is ill, you ought to go.”

“Do you think one day would make any difference?” said Lily, pleadingly, putting up her lovely face at Maria.

“It would mean three days, you know, dear,” Maria said.

“Of course it would,” said George; “and Miss Edgham is entirely right, Lily.”

“I don't want Fanny Ellwell one bit for maid of honor,” Lily said, poutingly.

Maria did not pay any attention. She was thinking anxiously of her father. She realized that he must be very ill or he would not have written her as he had done. It was not like Harry Edgham to deprive any one of any prospective pleasure, and he had no reason to think that being maid of honor at this wedding was anything but a pleasure to Maria. She felt that the illness must be something serious. Her school was to close in three days, and she was almost too impatient to wait.

“Ida Edgham ought to be ashamed of herself for not writing and letting you know that your father was sick before,” said Aunt Maria. “She and Lily Merrill are about of a piece.”

“Maybe father didn't want her to,” said Maria. “Father knew my school didn't close until next Thursday. If I thought he was very ill I would try to get a substitute and start off before.”

“But I know your father wouldn't have written for you to come unless he wasn't well and wanted to see you,” said Aunt Maria. “I shouldn't be a mite surprised, too, if he suspected that Ida would write you not to come, and thought he'd get ahead of her.”

Aunt Maria was right. In the next mail came a letter from Ida, saying that she supposed Maria would not think she could come home for such a short vacation, especially a she had to stay a little longer in Amity for the wedding, and how sorry they all were, and how they should look forward to the long summer vacation.

“She doesn't say a word about father's being ill,” said Maria.

“Of course she doesn't! She knew perfectly well that if she did you would go home whether or no; or maybe she hasn't got eyes for anything aside from herself to see that he is sick.”

Maria grew so uneasy about her father that she engaged a substitute and went home two days before her vacation actually commenced. She sent a telegram, saying that she was coming, and on what train she should arrive. Evelyn met her at the station in Edgham. She had grown, and was nearly as tall as Maria, although only a child. She was fairly dancing with pleasurable expectation on the platform, with the uncertain grace of a butterfly over a rose, when Maria caught sight of her. Evelyn was a remarkably beautiful little girl. She had her mother's color and dimples, with none of her hardness. Her forehead, for some odd reason, was high and serious, like Maria's own, and Maria's own mother's. Her dark hair was tied with a crisp white bow, and she was charmingly dressed in red from head to foot—a red frock, red coat, and red hat. Ida could at least plead, in extenuation of her faults of life, that she had done her very best to clothe those around her with beauty and grace. When Maria got off the car, Evelyn made one leap towards her, and her slender, red-clad arms went around her neck. She hugged and kissed her with a passionate fervor odd to see in a child. Her charming face was all convulsed with emotion.

“Oh, sister!” she said. “Oh, sister!”

Maria kissed her fondly. “Sister's darling,” she said. Then she put her gently away. “Sister has to get out her trunk-check and see to getting a carriage,” she said.

“Mamma has gone to New York,” said Evelyn, “and papa has not got home yet. He comes on the next train. He told me to come and meet you.”

Maria, after she had seen to her baggage and was seated in the livery carriage with Evelyn, asked how her father was. “Is father ill, dear?” she said.

Evelyn looked at her with surprise. “Why, no, sister, I don't think so,” she replied. “Mamma hasn't said anything about it, and I haven't heard papa say anything, either.”

“Does he go to New York every day?”

“Yes, of course,” said Evelyn. The little girl had kept looking at her sister with loving, adoring eyes. Now she suddenly cuddled up close to her and thrust her arm through Maria's. “Oh, sister!” she said, half sobbingly again.

“There, don't cry, sister's own precious,” Maria said, kissing the little, glowing face on her shoulder. She realized all at once how hard the separation had been from her sister. “Are you glad to have me home?” she asked.

For answer Evelyn only clung the closer. There was a strange passion in the look of her big eyes as she glanced up at her sister. Maria was too young herself to realize it, but the child had a dangerous temperament. She had inherited none of her mother's hard phlegmaticism. She was glowing and tingling with emotion and life and feeling in every nerve and vein. As she clung to her sister she trembled all over her lithe little body with the violence of her affection for her and her delight at meeting her again. Evelyn had made a sort of heroine of her older sister. Her imagination had glorified her, and now the sight of her did not disappoint her in the least. Evelyn thought Maria, in her brown travelling-gown and big, brown-feathered hat, perfectly beautiful. She was proud of her with a pride which reached ecstasy; she loved her with a love which reached ecstasy.

“So father goes to New York every day?” said Maria again.

“Yes,” said Evelyn. Then she repeated her ecstatic “Oh, sister!”

To Maria herself the affection of the little girl was inexpressibly grateful. She said to herself that she had something, after all. She thought of Lily Merrill, and reflected how much more she loved Evelyn than she had loved George Ramsey, how much more precious a little, innocent, beautiful girl was than a man. She felt somewhat reassured about her father's health. It did not seem to her that he could be very ill if he went to New York every day.

“Mamma has gone to the matinée,” said Evelyn, nestling luxuriously, like a kitten, against Maria. “She said she would bring me some candy. Mamma wore her new blue velvet gown, and she looked lovely, but”—Evelyn hesitated a second, then she whispered with her lips close to Maria's ear—“I love you best.”

“Evelyn, darling, you must not say such things,” said Maria, severely. “Of course, you love your own mother best.”

“No, I don't,” persisted Evelyn. “Maybe it's wicked, but I don't. I love papa as well as I do you, but I don't love mamma so well. Mamma gets me pretty things to wear, and she smiles at me, but I don't love her so much. I can't help it.”

“That is a naughty little girl,” said Maria.

“I can't help it,” said Evelyn. “Mamma can't love anybody as hard as I can. I can love anybody so hard it makes me shake all over, and I feel ill, but mamma can't. I love you so, Maria, that I don't feel well.”

“Nonsense!” said Maria, but she kissed Evelyn again.

“I don't—honest,” said Evelyn. Then she added, after a second's pause, “If I tell you something, won't you tell mamma—honest?”

“I can't promise if I don't know what it is,” said Maria, with her school-teacher manner.

“It isn't any harm, but mamma wouldn't understand. She never felt so, and she wouldn't understand. You won't tell her, will you, sister?”

“No, I guess not,” said Maria.

“Promise.”

“Well, I won't tell her.”

Evelyn looked up in her sister's face with her wonderful dark eyes, a rose flush spread over her face. “Well, I am in love,” she whispered.

Maria laughed, although she tried not to. “Well, with whom, dear?” she asked.

“With a boy. Do you think it is wrong, sister?”

“No, I don't think it is very wrong,” replied Maria, trying to restrain her smile.

“His first name is pretty, but his last isn't so very,” Evelyn said, regretfully. “His first name is Ernest. Don't you think that is a pretty name?”

“Very pretty.”

“But his last name is only Jenks,” said Evelyn, with a mortified air. “That is horrid, isn't it?”

“Nobody can help his name,” said Maria, consolingly.

“Of course he can't. Poor Ernest isn't to blame because his mother married a man named Jenks; but I wish she hadn't. If we ever get married, I don't want to be called Mrs. Jenks. Don't people ever change their names, sister?”

“Sometimes, I believe.”

“Well, I shall not marry him unless he changes his name. But he is such a pretty boy. He looks across the school-room at me, and once, when I met him in the vestibule, and there was nobody else there, he asked me to kiss him, and I did.”

“I don't think you ought to kiss boys,” said Maria.

“I would rather kiss him than another girl,” said Evelyn, looking up at her sister with the most limpid passion, that of a child who has not the faintest conception of what passion means.

“Well, sister would rather you did not,” said Maria.

“I won't if you don't want me to,” said Evelyn, meekly. “That was quite a long time ago. It is not very likely I shall meet him anywhere where we could kiss each other, anyway. Of course, I don't really love him as much as I do you and papa. I would rather he died than you or papa; but I am in love with him—you know what I mean, sister?”

“I wouldn't think any more about it, dear,” said Maria.

“I like to think about him,” said Evelyn, simply. “I like to sit whole hours and think about him, and make sort of stories about us, you know—how me meet somewhere, and he tells me how much he loves me, and how we kiss each other again. It makes me happy. I go to sleep so. Do you think it is wrong, sister?”

Maria remembered her own childhood. “Perhaps it isn't wrong, exactly, dear,” she said, “but I wouldn't, if I were you. I think it is better not.”

“Well, I will try not to,” said Evelyn, with a sigh. “He told Amy Jones I was the prettiest girl in school. Of course we couldn't be married for a long time, and I wouldn't be Mrs. Jenks. But, now you've come home, maybe I sha'n't want to think so much about him.”

Maria found new maids when she reached home. Ida did not keep her domestics very long. However, nobody could say that was her fault in this age when man-servants and maid-servants buzz angrily, like bees, over household tasks and are constantly hungering for new fields.

“We have had two cooks and two new second-girls since you went away,” Evelyn said, when they stood waiting for the front door to be opened, and the man with Maria's trunk stood behind them. “The last second-girl we had stole”—Evelyn said the last in a horrified whisper—“and the last cook couldn't cook. The cook we have now is named Agnes, and the second-girl is Irene. Agnes lets me go out in the kitchen and make candy, and she always makes a little cake for me; but I don't like Irene. She says things under her breath when she thinks nobody will hear, and she makes up my bed so it is all wrinkly. I shouldn't be surprised if she stole, too.”

Then the door opened and a white-capped maid, with a rather pretty face, evidently of the same class as Gladys Mann, appeared.

“This is my sister, Miss Maria, Irene,” said Evelyn.

The maid nodded and said something inarticulate.

Maria said “How do you do?” to her, and asked her to tell the man where to carry the trunk.

When the trunk was in Maria's old room, and Maria had smoothed her hair and washed her face and hands, she and Evelyn sat down in the parlor and waited. The parlor looked to Maria, after poor Aunt Maria's sparse old furnishings, more luxurious than she had remembered it. In fact, it had been improved. There were some splendid palms in the bay-window, and some new articles of furniture. The windows, also, had been enlarged, and were hung with new curtains of filmy lace, with thin, red silk over them. The whole room seemed full of rosy light.

“I wish you would ask Irene to fix the hearth fire,” Evelyn had said to Maria when they entered the room, which did seem somewhat chilly.

Maria asked the girl to do so, and when she had gone and the fire was blazing Evelyn said:

“I didn't like to ask her, sister. She doesn't realize that I am not a baby, and she does not like it. So I never ask her to do anything except when mamma is here. Irene is afraid of mamma.”

Maria laughed and looked at the clock. “How long will it be before father comes, do you think, dear?” she asked.

“Papa comes home lately at five o'clock. I guess he will be here very soon now; but mamma won't be home before half-past seven. She has gone with the Voorhees to the matinée. Do you know the Voorhees, sister?”

“No, dear.”

“I guess they came to Edgham after you went away. They bought that big house on the hill near the church. They are very rich. There are Mr. Voorhees and Mrs. Voorhees and their little boy. He doesn't wear long stockings in the coldest weather; his legs are quite bare from a little above his shoes to his knees. I should think he would be cold, but mamma says it is very stylish. He is a pretty little boy, but I don't like him; he looks too much like Mr. Voorhees, and I don't like him. He always acts as if he were laughing at something inside, and you don't know what it is. Mrs. Voorhees is very handsome, not quite so handsome as mamma, but very handsome, and she wears beautiful clothes and jewels. They often ask mamma to go to the theatre with them, and they are here quite a good deal. They have dinner-parties and receptions, and mamma goes. We had a dinner-party here last week.”

“Doesn't father go to the theatre with them?” asked Maria.

“No, he never goes. I don't know whether they ask him or not. If they do, he doesn't go. I guess he would rather stay at home. Then I don't believe papa would want to leave me alone until the late train, for often the cook and Irene go out in the evening.”

Maria looked anxiously at her little sister, who was sitting as close to her as she could get in the divan before the fire. “Does papa look well?” she asked.

“Why, yes, I guess so. He looks just the way he always has. I haven't heard him say he wasn't well, nor mamma, and he hasn't had the doctor, and I haven't seen him take any medicine. I guess he's well.”

Maria looked at the clock, a fine French affair, which had been one of Ida's wedding gifts, standing swinging its pendulum on the shelf between a Tiffany vase and a bronze. “Father must be home soon now, if he comes on that five-clock train,” she said.

“Yes, I guess he will.”

In fact, it was a very few minutes before a carriage stopped in front of the house and Evelyn called out: “There he is! Papa has come!”

Maria did not dare look out of the window. She arose with trembling knees and went out into the hall as the front door opened. She saw at the first glance that her father had changed—that he did not look well. And yet it was difficult to say why he did not look well. He had not lost flesh, at least not perceptibly; he was not very pale, but on his face was the expression of one who is looking his last at the things of this world. The expression was at once stern and sad and patient. When he saw Maria, however, the look disappeared for the time. His face, which had not yet lost its boyish outlines, fairly quivered between smiles and tears. He caught Maria in his arms.

“Father's blessed child!” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh, father,” half sobbed Maria, “why didn't you send for me before? Why didn't you tell me?”

“Hush, darling!” Harry said, with a glance at Evelyn, who stood looking on with a puzzled, troubled expression on her little face. Harry took off his overcoat, and they all went into the parlor. “That fire looks good,” said Harry, drawing close to it.

“I got Maria to ask Irene to make it,” Evelyn said, in her childish voice.

“That was a good little girl,” said Harry. He sat down on the divan, with a daughter on each side of him. Maria nestled close to her father. With an effort she kept her quivering face straight. She dared not look in his face again. A knell seemed ringing in her ears from her own conviction, a voice of her inner consciousness, which kept reiterating, “Father is going to die, father is going to die.” Maria knew little of illness, but she felt that she could not mistake that expression. But her father talked quite gayly, asking her about her school and Aunt Maria and Uncle Henry and his wife. Maria replied mechanically. Finally she mustered courage to say:

“How are you feeling, father? Are you well?”

“I am about the same as when you went away, dear,” Harry replied, and that expression of stern, almost ineffable patience deepened on his face. He smiled directly, however, and asked Evelyn what train her mother had taken.

“She won't be home until the seven-thirty train,” said Harry, “and there is no use in our waiting dinner. You must be hungry, Maria. Evelyn, darling, speak to Irene. I hear her in the dining-room.”

Evelyn obeyed, and Harry gave his orders that dinner should be served as soon as possible. The girl smiled at him with a coquettish air.

“Irene is pleasanter to papa than to anybody else,” Evelyn observed, meditatively, when Irene had gone out. “I guess girls are apt to be pleasanter to gentlemen than to little girls.”

Harry laughed and kissed the child's high forehead. “Little girls are just as well off if they don't study out other people's peculiarities too much,” he said.

“They are very interesting,” said Evelyn, with an odd look at him, yet an entirely innocent look.

Maria was secretly glad that this first evening She was not there, that she could dine alone with her father and Evelyn. It was a drop of comfort, and yet the awful knell never ceased ringing in her ears—“Father is going to die, father is going to die.” Maria made an effort to eat, because her father watched her anxiously.

“You are not as stout as you were when you went away, precious,” he said.

“I am perfectly well,” said Maria.

“Well, I must say you do look well,” said Harry, looking admiringly at her. He admired his little Evelyn, but no other face in the world upon which he was soon to close his eyes forever was quite so beautiful to him as Maria's. “You look very much as your own mother used to do,” he said.

“Was Maria's mamma prettier than my mamma?” asked Evelyn, calmly, without the least jealousy. She looked scrutinizingly at Maria, then at her father. “I think Maria is a good deal prettier than mamma, and I suppose, of course, her mamma must have been better-looking than mine,” said she, answering her own question, to Harry's relief. But she straightway followed one embarrassing question with another. “Did you love Maria's mamma better than you do my mamma?” she asked.

Maria came to her father's relief. “That is not a question for little girls to ask, dear,” said she.

“I don't see why,” said Evelyn. “Little girls ought to know things. I supposed that was why I was a little girl, in order to learn to know everything. I should have been born grown up if it hadn't been for that.”

“But you must not ask such questions, precious,” said Maria. “When you are grown up you will see why.”

Harry insisted upon Evelyn's going to bed directly after dinner, although she pleaded hard to be allowed to sit up until her mother returned. Harry wished for at least a few moments alone with Maria. So Evelyn went off up-stairs, after teary kisses and good-nights, and Maria was left alone with her father in the parlor.

“You are not well, father?” Maria said, immediately after Evelyn had closed the door.

“No, dear,” replied Harry, simply.

Maria retained her self-composure very much as her mother might have done. A quick sense of the necessity of aiding her father, of supporting him spiritually, came over her.

“What doctor have you seen, father?” she asked.

“The doctor here and three specialists in New York.”

“And they all agreed?”

“Yes, dear.”

Maria looked interrogatively at her father. Her face was very white and shocked, but it did not quiver. Harry answered the look.

“I may have to give up almost any day now,” he said, with an odd sigh, half of misery, half of relief.

“Does Ida know?” asked Maria.

“No, dear, she does not suspect. I thought there was no need of distressing her. I wanted to tell you while I was able, because—” Harry hesitated, then he continued: “Father wanted to tell you how sorry he was not to make any better provision for you,” he said, pitifully. “He didn't want you to think it was because he cared any the less for you. But—soon after I married Ida—well, I realized how helpless she would be, especially after Evelyn was born, and I had my life insured for her benefit. A few years after I tried to get a second policy for your benefit, but it was too late. Father hasn't been well for quite a long time.”

“I hope you don't think I care about any money,” Maria cried, with sudden passion. “I can take care of myself. It is *you* I think of.” Maria began to weep, then restrained herself, but she looked accusingly and distressedly at her father.

“I had to settle the house on her, too,” said Harry, painfully. “But I felt sure at the time—she said so—that you would always have your home here.”

“That is all right, father,” said Maria.

“All father can do for his first little girl, the one he loves best of all,” said Harry, “is to leave her a little sum he has saved and put in the savings-bank here in her name. It is not much, dear.”

“It is more than I want. I don't want anything. All I want is you!” cried Maria. She had an impulse to rush to her father, to cling about his neck and weep her very heart out, but she restrained herself. She saw how unutterably weary her father looked, and she realized that any violent emotion, even of love, might be too much for his strength. She knew, too, that her father understood her, that she cared none the less because she restrained herself. Maria would never know, luckily for her, how painfully and secretly poor Harry had saved the little sum which he had placed in the bank to her credit; how he had gone without luncheons, without clothes, without medicines even how he had possibly hastened the end by his anxiety for her welfare.

Suddenly carriage-wheels were heard, and Harry straightened himself. “That is Ida,” he said. Then he rose and opened the front door, letting a gust of frosty outside air enter the house, and presently Ida came in. She was radiant, the most brilliant color on her hard, dimpled cheeks. The blank dark light of her eyes, and her set smile, were just as Maria remembered them. She was magnificent in her blue velvet, with her sable furs and large, blue velvet hat, with a blue feather floating over the black waves of her hair. Maria said to herself that she was certainly a beauty, that she was more beautiful than ever. She greeted Maria with the most faultless manner; she gave her her cool red cheek to be kissed, and made the suitable inquiries as to her journey, her health, and the health of her relatives in Amity. When Harry said something about dinner, she replied that she had dined with the Voorhees in the Pennsylvania station, since they had missed the train and had some time on their hands. She removed her wraps and seated herself before the fire.

When at last Maria went to her own room, she was both pleased and disturbed to find Evelyn in her bed. She had wished to be free to give way to her terrible grief. Evelyn, however, waked just enough to explain that she wanted to sleep with her, and threw one slender arm over her, and then sank again into the sound sleep of childhood. Maria lay sobbing quietly, and her sister did not awaken at all. It might have been midnight when the door of the room was softly opened and light flared across the ceiling. Maria turned, and Ida stood in the doorway. She had on a red wrapper, and she held a streaming candle. Her black hair floated around her beautiful face, which had not lost its color or its smile, although what she said might reasonably have caused it to do so.

“Your father does not seem quite well,” she said to Maria. “I have sent Irene and the cook for the doctor. If you don't mind, I wish you would get up and slip on a wrapper and come into my room.” Ida spoke softly for fear of waking Evelyn, whom she had directly seen in Maria's bed when she opened the door.

Maria sprang up, got a wrapper, put it on over her night-gown, thrust her feet into slippers, and followed Ida across the hall. Harry lay on the bed, seemingly unconscious.

“I can't seem to rouse him,” said Ida. She spoke quite placidly.

Maria went close to her father and put her ear to his mouth. “He is breathing,” she whispered, tremulously.

Ida smiled. “Oh yes,” she said. “I don't think it anything serious. It may be indigestion.”

Then Maria turned on her. “Indigestion!” she whispered. “Indigestion! He is dying. He has been dying a long time, and you haven't had sense enough to see it. You haven't loved him enough to see it. What made you marry my father if you didn't love him?”

Ida looked at Maria, and her face seemed to freeze into a smiling mask.

“He is dying!” Maria repeated, in a frenzy, yet still in a whisper.

“Dying? What do you know about it?” Ida asked, with icy emphasis.

“I know. He has seen three specialists besides the doctor here.”

“And he told you instead of me?”

“He told me because he knew I loved him,” said Maria. She was as white as death herself, and she trembled from head to foot with strange, stiff tremors. Her blue eyes fairly blazed at her step-mother.

Suddenly the sick man began to breathe stertorously. Even Ida started at that. She glanced nervously towards the bed. Little Evelyn, in her night-gown, her black fleece of hair fluffing around her face like a nimbus of shadow, came and stood in the doorway.

“What is the matter with papa?” she whispered, piteously.

“He is asleep, that is all, and breathing hard,” replied her mother. “Go back to bed.”

“Go back to bed, darling,” said Maria.

“What is the matter?” asked Evelyn. She burst into a low, frightened wail.

“Go back to bed this instant, Evelyn,” said her mother, and the child fled, whimpering.

Maria stood close to her father. Ida seated herself in a chair beside the table on which the lamp stood. Neither of them spoke again. The dying man continued to breathe his deep, rattling breath, the breath of one who is near the goal of life and pants at the finish of the race. The cook, a large Irishwoman, put her face inside the door.

“The doctor is comin' right away,” said she. Then in the same breath she muttered, looking at poor Harry, “Oh, me God!” and fled, doubtless to pray for the poor man's soul.

Then the doctor's carriage-wheels were heard, and he came up-stairs, ushered by Irene, who stood in the doorway, listening and looking with a sort of alien expression, as if she herself were immortal, and sneered and wondered at it all.

Ida greeted the doctor in her usual manner. “Good-evening, doctor,” she said, smiling. “I am sorry to have disturbed you at this hour, but Mr. Edgham has an acute attack of indigestion and I could not rouse him, and I thought it hardly wise to wait until morning.”

The doctor, who was an old man, unshaven and grim-faced, nodded and went up to the bed. He did not open his medicine-case after he had looked at Harry.

“I suppose you can give him something, doctor?” Ida said.

“There is nothing that mortal man can do, madam,” said the doctor, surlily. He disliked Ida Edgham, and yet he felt apologetic towards her that he could do nothing. He in reality felt testily apologetic towards all mankind that he could not avert death at last.

Ida's brilliant color faded then; she ceased to smile. “I think I should have been told,” she said, with a sort of hard indignation.

The doctor said nothing. He stood holding Harry's hand, his fingers on the pulse.

“You surely do not mean me to understand that my husband is dying?” said Ida.

“He cannot last more than a few hours, madam,” replied the doctor, with pitilessness, yet still with the humility of one who has failed in a task.

“I think we had better have another doctor at once,” said Ida. “Irene, go down street to the telegraph operator and tell him to send a message for Dr. Lameth.”

“He has been consulted, and also Dr. Green and Dr. Anderson, not four weeks ago, and we all agree,” said the doctor, with a certain defiance.

“Go, Irene,” said Ida.

Irene went out of the room, but neither she nor the cook left the house.

“The madam said to send a telegram,” Irene told the cook, “but the doctor said it was no use, and I ain't goin' to stir out a step again to-night. I'm afraid.”

The cook, who was weeping beside the kitchen table, hardly seemed to hear. She wept profusely and muttered surreptitiously prayers on her rosary for poor Harry's soul, which passed as day dawned.

Chapter XXVII

Maria had always attended church, and would have said, had she been asked, that she believed in religion, that she believed in God; but she had from the first, when she had thought of such matters at all, a curious sort of scorn, which was half shame, at the familiar phrases used concerning it. When she had heard of such and such a one that “he was serious,” that he had “experienced conviction,” she had been filled with disgust. The spiritual nature of it all was to her mind treated materially, like an attack of the measles or mumps. She had seen people unite with the church of which her mother had been a member, and heard them subscribe to and swear their belief in articles of faith, which seemed to her monstrous. Religion had never impressed her with any beauty, or sense of love. Now, for the first time, after her father had died, she seemed all at once to sense the nearness of that which is beyond, and a love and longing for it, which is the most primitive and subtlest instinct of man, filled her very soul. Her love for her father projected her consciousness of him beyond this world. In the midst of her grief a strange peace was over her, and a realization of love which she had never had before. Maria, at this period, had she been a Catholic, might have become a religious devotee. She seemed to have visions of the God-man crowned with thorns, the rays of unutterable and eternal love, and sacred agony for love's sake. She said to herself that she loved God, that her father had gone to him. Moreover, she took a certain delight in thinking that her own mother, with her keen tongue and her heart of true gold, had him safe with her. She regarded Ida with a sort of covert triumph during those days after the funeral, when the sweet, sickly fragrance of the funeral flowers still permeated the house. Maria did not weep much after the first. She was not one to whom tears came easily after her childhood. She carried about with her what seemed like an aching weight and sense of loss, along with that strange new conviction of love and being born for ultimate happiness which had come to her at the time of her father's death.

The spring was very early that year. The apple-trees were in blossom at an unusual time. There was a tiny orchard back of the Edgham house. Maria used to steal away down there, sit down on the grass, speckled with pink-and-white petals, and look up through the rosy radiance of bloom at the infinite blue light of the sky. It seemed to her for the first time she laid hold on life in the midst of death. She wondered if she could always feel as she did then. She had a premonition that this state, which bordered on ecstasy, would not endure.

“Maria does not act natural, poor child,” Ida said to Mrs. Voorhees. “She hardly sheds a tear. Sometimes I fear that her father's marrying again did wean her a little from him.”

“She may have deep feelings,” suggested Mrs. Voorhees. Mrs. Voorhees was an exuberant blonde, with broad shallows of sentimentality overflowing her mind.

“Perhaps she has,” Ida assented, with a peculiar smile curling her lips. Ida looked handsomer than ever in her mourning attire. The black softened her beauty, instead of bringing it into bolder relief, as is sometimes the case. Ida mourned Harry in a curious fashion. She mourned the more pitifully because of the absence of any mourning at all, in its truest sense. Ida had borne in upon her the propriety of deep grief, and she, maintaining that attitude, cramped her very soul because of its unnaturalness. She consoled herself greatly because of what she esteemed her devotion to the man who was gone. She said to herself, with a preen of her funereal crest, that she had been such a wife to poor Harry as few men ever had possessed.

“Well, I have the consolation of thinking that I have done my duty,” she said to Mrs. Voorhees.

“Of course you have, dear, and that is worth everything,” responded her friend.

“I did all I could to make his home attractive,” said Ida, “and he never had to wait for a meal. How pretty he thought those new hangings in the parlor were! Poor Harry had an æsthetic sense, and I did my best to gratify it. It is a consolation.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Voorhees.

If Ida had known how Maria regarded those very red silk parlor hangings she would have been incredulous. Maria thought to herself how hard her poor father had worked, and how the other hangings, which had been new at the time of Ida's marriage, could not have been worn out. She wanted to tear down the filmy red things and stuff them into the kitchen stove. When she found out that her father had saved up nearly a thousand dollars for her, which was deposited to her credit in the Edgham savings-bank, her heart nearly broke because of that. She imagined her father going without things to save that little pittance for her, and she hated the money. She said to herself that she would never touch it. And yet she loved her father for saving it for her with a very anguish of love.

Ida was manifestly surprised when Henry's will was read and she learned of Maria's poor little legacy, but she touched her cool red lips to Maria's cheek and told her how glad she was. “It will be a little nest-egg for you,” she said, “and it will buy your trousseau. And, of course, you will always feel at perfect liberty to come here whenever you wish to do so. Your room will be kept just as it is.”

Maria thanked her, but she detected an odd ring of insincerity in Ida's voice. After she went to bed that night she

speculated as to what it meant. Evelyn was not with her. Ida had insisted that she should occupy her own room.

“You will keep each other awake,” she said.

Evelyn had grown noticeably thin and pale in a few days. The child had adored her father. Often, at the table, she would look at his vacant place, and push away her plate, and sob. Ida had become mildly severe with her on account of it.

“My dear child,” she said, “of course we all feel just as you do, but we control ourselves. It is the duty of those who live to control themselves.”

“I want my papa!” sobbed Evelyn convulsively.

“You had better go away from the table, dear,” said Ida calmly. “I will have a plate of dinner kept warm for you, and by-and-by when you feel like it, you can go down to the kitchen and Agnes will give it to you.”

In fact, poor little Evelyn, who was only a child and needed her food, did steal down to the kitchen about nine o'clock and got her plate of dinner. But she was more satisfied by Agnes bursting into tears and talking about her “blissed father that was gone, and how there was niver a man like him,” and actually holding her in her great lap while she ate. It was a meal seasoned with tears, but also sweetened with honest sympathy. Evelyn, when she slipped up the back stairs to her own room after her supper, longed to go into her sister's room and sleep with her, but she did not dare. Her little bed was close to the wall, against which, on the other side, Maria's bed stood, and once Evelyn distinctly heard a sob. She sobbed too, but softly, lest her mother hear. Evelyn felt that she and Maria and Agnes were the only ones who really mourned for her father, although she viewed her mother in her mourning robes with a sort of awe, and a feeling that she must believe in a grief on her part far beyond hers and Maria's. Ida had obtained a very handsome mourning wardrobe for both herself and Evelyn, and had superintended Maria's. Maria paid for her clothes out of her small earnings, however. Ida had her dress-maker's bill made out separately, and gave it to her. Maria calculated that she would have just about enough to pay her fare back to Amity without touching that sacred blood-money in the savings-bank. It had been on that occasion that Ida had made the remark to her about her always considering that house as her home, and had done so with that odd expression which caused Maria to speculate. Maria decided that night, as she lay awake in bed, that Ida had something on her mind which she was keeping a secret for the present. The surmise was quite justified, but Maria had not the least suspicion of what it was until three days before her vacation was to end, when Ida received a letter with the Amity post-mark, directed in Aunt Maria's precise, cramped handwriting. She spoke about it to Maria, who had brought it herself from the office that evening after Evelyn had gone to bed.

“I had a letter from your aunt Maria this morning,” she said, with an assumed indifference.

“Yes; I noticed the Amity post-mark and Aunt Maria's writing,” said Maria.

Ida looked at her step-daughter, and for the first time in her life she hesitated. “I have something to say to you, Maria,” she said, finally, in a nervous voice, so different from her usual one that Maria looked at her in surprise. She waited for her to speak further.

“The Voorhees are going abroad,” she said, abruptly.

“Are they?”

“Yes, they sail in three weeks—three weeks from next Saturday.”

Maria still waited, and still her step-mother hesitated. At last, however, she spoke out boldly and defiantly.

“Mrs. Voorhees's sister, Miss Angelica Wyatt, is going with them,” said she. “Mrs. Voorhees is not going to take Paul; she will leave him with her mother. She says travelling is altogether too hard on children.”

“Does she?”

“Yes; and so there are three in the party. Miss Wyatt has her state-room to herself, and—they have asked me to go. The passage will not cost me anything. All the expense I shall have will be my board, and travelling fares abroad.”

Maria looked at her step-mother, who visibly shrank before her, then looked at her with defiant eyes.

“Then you are going?” she said.

“Yes. I have made up my mind that it is a chance which Providence has put in my way, and I should be foolish, even wicked, to throw it away, especially now. I am not well. Your dear father's death has shattered my nerves.”

Maria looked, with a sarcasm which she could not repress, at her step-mother's blooming face, and her rounded form.

“I have consulted Mrs. Voorhees's physician, in New York,” said Ida quickly, for she understood the look. “I consulted him when I went to the city with Mrs. Voorhees last Monday, and he says I am a nervous wreck, and he will not answer for the consequences unless I have a complete change of scene.”

“What about Evelyn?” asked Maria, in a dry voice.

“I wrote to your aunt Maria about her. The letter I got this morning was in reply to mine. She writes very brusquely—she is even ill-mannered—but she says she is perfectly willing for Evelyn to go there and board. I will pay four dollars a week—that is a large price for a child—and I knew you would love to have her.”

“Yes, I should; I don't turn my back upon my own flesh and blood,” Maria said, abruptly. “I guess I shall be glad to have her, poor little thing! with her father dead and her mother forsaking her.”

“I think you must be very much like your aunt Maria,” said Ida, in a cool, disagreeable voice. “I would fight against it, if I were you, Maria. It is not interesting, such a way as hers. It is especially not interesting to gentlemen. Gentlemen never like girls who speak so quickly and emphatically. They like girls to be gentle.”

“I don't care what gentlemen think,” said Maria, “but I do care for my poor, forsaken little sister.” Maria's voice broke with rage and distress.

“You are exceedingly disagreeable, Maria,” said Ida, with the radiant air of one who realizes her own perfect agreeableness.

Maria's lip curled. She said nothing.

“Evelyn's wardrobe is in perfect order for the summer,” said Ida. “Of course she can wear her white frocks in warm weather, and she has her black silk frocks and coat. I have plenty of black sash ribbons for her to wear with her white frocks. You will see to it that she always wears a black sash with a white frock, I hope, Maria. I should not like people in Amity to think I was lacking in respect to your father's memory.”

“Yes, I will be sure that Evelyn wears a black sash with a white frock,” replied Maria, in a bitter voice.

She rose abruptly and left the room. Up in her own chamber she threw herself face downward upon her bed, and wept the tears of one who is oppressed and helpless at the sight of wrong and disloyalty to one beloved. Maria hardly thought of Evelyn in her own personality at all. She thought of her as her dead father's child, whose mother was going away and leaving her within less than three weeks after her father's death. She lost sight of her own happiness in having the child with her, in the bitter reflection over the disloyalty to her father.

“She never cared at all for father,” she muttered to herself—“never at all; and now she does not really care because he is gone. She is perfectly delighted to be free, and have money enough to go to Europe, although she tries to hide it.”

Maria felt as if she had caught sight of a stone of shame in the place where a wife's and mother's heart should have been. She felt sick with disgust, as if she had seen some monster. It never occurred to her that she was possibly unjust to Ida, who was, after all, as she was made, a being on a very simple and primitive plan, with an acute perception of her own welfare and the means whereby to achieve it. Ida was in reality as innocently self-seeking as a butterfly or a honey-bee. She had never really seen anybody in the world except herself. She had been born humanity blind, and it was possibly no more her fault than if she had been born with a hump.

The next day Ida went to New York with Mrs. Voorhees to complete some preparations for her journey, and to meet Mrs. Voorhees's sister, who was expected to arrive from the South, where she had been spending the winter. That evening the Voorheeses came over and discussed their purchases, and Miss Wyatt, the sister, came with them. She was typically like Mrs. Voorhees, only younger, and with her figure in better restraint. She had so far successfully fought down an hereditary tendency to avoirdupois. She had brilliant yellow hair and a brilliant complexion, like her sister, and she was as well, even better, dressed. Ida had purchased that day a steamer-rug, a close little hat, and a long coat for the voyage, and the women talked over the purchases and their plans for travel with undisguised glee. Once, when Ida met Maria's sarcastic eyes, she colored a little and complained of a headache, which she had been suffering with all day.

“Yes, there is no doubt that you are simply a nervous wreck, and you would break down entirely without the sea-voyage and the change of scene,” said Mrs. Voorhees, in her smooth, emotionless voice and with a covert glance at Maria. Ida had confided to her the attitude which she knew Maria took with reference to her going away.

“All I regret—all that mars my perfect delight in the prospect of the trip—is parting with my darling little Paul,” Mrs. Voorhees said, with a sigh.

“That is the way I feel with regard to Evelyn,” said Ida.

Maria, who was sewing, took another stitch. She did not seem to hear.

The next day but one Maria and Evelyn started for Amity. Ida did not go to the station with them. She was not up when they started. The curtains in her room were down, and she lay in bed, drawing down the corners of her mouth with resolution when Maria and Evelyn entered to bid her good-bye. Maria said good-bye first, and bent her cheek to Ida's lips; then it was Evelyn's turn. The little girl looked at her mother with fixed, solemn eyes, but there were no tears in them.

“Mamma is so sorry she cannot even go to the station with her darling little girl,” said Ida, “but she is completely exhausted, and has not slept all night.”

Evelyn continued to look at her, and there came into her face an innocent, uncomplaining accusation.

“Mamma cannot tell you how much she feels leaving her precious little daughter,” whispered Ida, drawing the little figure, which resisted rigidly, towards her. “She would not do it if she were not afraid of losing her health completely.” Evelyn remained in her attitude of constrained affection, bending over her mother. “Mamma will write you very often,” continued Ida. “Think how nice it will be for you to get letters! And she will bring you some beautiful things when she comes back.” Then Ida's voice broke, and she found her handkerchief under her pillow and put it to her eyes.

Evelyn, released from her mother's arm, regarded her with that curiosity and unconscious accusation which was more pitiful than grief. The child was getting her first sense, not of loss, for one cannot lose that which one has never had, but

of non-possession of something which was her birthright.

When at last they were on the train, Evelyn surprised her sister by weeping violently. Maria tried to hush her, but she could not. Evelyn wept convulsively at intervals all the way to New York. When they were in the cab, crossing the city, Maria put her arm around her sister and tried to comfort her.

“What is it, precious?” she whispered. “Do you feel so badly about leaving your mother?”

“No,” sobbed the little girl. “I feel so badly because I don't feel badly.”

Maria understood. She began talking to her of her future home in Amity, and the people whom she would see. All at once Maria reflected how Lily would be married to George Ramsey when she returned, that she should see George's wife going in and out the door that might have been the door of her own home, and she also had a keen pang of regret for the lack of regret. She no longer loved George Ramsey. It was nothing to her that he was married to Lily; but, nevertheless, her emotional nature, the best part of her, had undergone a mutilation. Love can be eradicated, but there remains a void and a scar, and sometimes through their whole lives such scars of some people burn.

Chapter XXVIII

Evelyn was happier in Amity, with Maria and her aunt, than she had ever been. It took a little while for her to grow accustomed to the lack of luxury with which she had always been surrounded; then she did not mind it in the least. Everybody petted her, and she acquired a sense of importance which was not offensive, because she had also a sense of the importance of everybody else. She loved everybody. Love seemed the key-note of her whole nature. It was babyish love as yet, but there were dangerous possibilities which nobody foresaw, except Henry Stillman.

“I don't know what will become of that child when she grows up if she can't have the man she falls in love with,” he told Eunice one night, after Maria and Evelyn, who had been in for a few moments, had gone home.

Eunice, who was not subtle, looked at him wonderingly, and her husband replied to her unspoken question.

“That child's going to take everything hard,” he said.

“I don't see what makes you think so.”

“She is like a harp that's overstrung,” said Henry.

“How queer you talk!”

“Well, she is; and if she is now, what is she going to be when she's older? Well, I hope the Lord will deal gently with her. He's given her too many feelings, and I hope He will see to it that they ain't tried too hard.” Henry said this last with the half-bitter melancholy which was growing upon him.

“I guess she will get along all right,” said Eunice, comfortably. “She's a pretty little girl, and her mother has looked out for her clothes, if she did scoot off and leave her. I wonder how long she's going to stay in foreign parts?”

Henry shook his head. “Do you want to know how long?” he said.

“Yes. What do you mean, Henry?”

“She's going to stay just as long as she has a good time there. If she has a good time there she'll stay if it's years.”

“You don't mean you think she would go off and leave that darling little girl a whole year?”

“I said years,” replied Henry.

“Land! I don't believe it. You're dreadful hard on women, Henry.”

“Wait and see,” said Henry.

Time proved that Henry, with his bitter knowledge of the weakness of human nature, was right. Ida remained abroad. After a year's stay she wrote Maria, from London, that an eminent physician there said that he would not answer for her life if she returned to the scene wherein she had suffered so much. She expressed a great deal of misery at leaving her precious Evelyn so long, but she did not feel that it was right for her to throw her life away. In a postscript to this letter she informed Maria, as if it were an afterthought, that she had let the house in Edgham furnished. She said it injured a house to remain unoccupied so long, and she felt that she ought to keep the place up for her poor father's sake, he had thought so much of it. She added that the people who rented it had no children except a grown-up daughter, so that everything would be well cared for. When Maria read the letter to her aunt the elder woman sniffed.

“H'm,” said she. “I ain't surprised, not a mite.”

“It keeps us here quartered on you,” said Maria.

“So far as that goes, I am tickled to death she has rented the house,” replied Aunt Maria. “I had made up my mind that you would feel as if you would want to go to Edgham for your summer vacation, anyway, and I thought I would go with you and keep house, though I can't say that I hankered after it. The older I grow the more I feel as if I was best off in my own home, but I would have gone. So far as I am concerned I am glad she has let the house, but I must say I ain't surprised. You mark my words, Maria Edgham, and you see if what I say won't come true.”

“What is it?”

“Ida Slome will stay over there, if she has a good time. She's got money enough with poor Harry's life insurance, and now she will have her house rent. It don't cost her much to keep Evelyn here, and she's got enough. I don't mean she's got enough to traipse round with duchesses and earls and that sort, but she's got enough. Those folks she went with have settled down there, haven't they?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Maria. “Mr. Voorhees was an Englishman, and I believe he is in some business in London.”

“Well, Ida Slome is going to stay there. I shouldn't be surprised if Evelyn was grown up before she saw her mother again.”

“I can't quite believe that,” Maria said.

“When you get to be as old as I am you will believe more,” said her aunt Maria. “You will see that folks' selfishness hides the whole world besides. Ida Slome is that kind.”

“I think she is selfish myself,” said Maria, “but I don't believe she can leave Evelyn as long as that.”

“Wait and see,” said Aunt Maria, in much the same tone that her brother had used towards his wife.

Maria Stillman was right. Evelyn remained in Amity. She outgrew Maria's school, and attended the Normal School in Westbridge. Maria herself outgrew her little Amity school, and obtained a position as teacher in one of the departments of the Normal School, and still Ida had not returned. She wrote often, and in nearly every letter spoke of the probability of her speedy return, and in the same breath of her precarious health. She could not, however, avoid telling of her social triumphs in London. Ida was evidently having an aftermath of youth in her splendid maturity. She was evidently flattered and petted, and was thoroughly enjoying herself. Aunt Maria said she guessed she would marry again.

“She's too old,” said Maria.

“Wait till you're old yourself and you won't be so ready to judge,” said her aunt. “I ain't so sure she won't.”

Evelyn was a young lady, and was to graduate the next year, and still her mother had not returned. She was the sweetest young creature in the world at that time. She was such a beauty that people used to turn and stare after her. Evelyn never seemed to notice it, but she was quite conscious, in a happy, childlike fashion, of her beauty. She resembled her mother to a certain extent, but she had nothing of Ida's hardness. Where her mother froze, she flamed. Two-thirds of the boys in the Normal School were madly in love with her, but Evelyn, in spite of her temperament, was slow in development as to her emotions. She was very childish, although she was full of enthusiasms and nervous energy. Maria had long learned that when Evelyn told her she was in love, as she frequently did, it did not in the least mean that she was, in the ordinary acceptation of the term. Evelyn was very imaginative. She loved her dreams, and she often raised, as it were, a radiance of rainbows about some boy of her acquaintance, but the brightness vanished the instant the boy made advances. She had an almost fierce virginity of spirit in spite of her loving heart. She did not wish to touch her butterflies of life. She used to walk between her aunt and Maria when they were coming out of church, so that no boy would ask leave to go home with her. She clung to the girls in her class for protection when she went to any entertainment. Consequently her beautiful face, about which clustered her dark, fine hair like mist, aroused no envy. The other girls said that Evelyn Edgham was such a beauty and she did not know it. But Evelyn did know it perfectly, only at that time it filled her with a sort of timidity and shame. It was as if she held some splendid, heavy sword of victory which she had not the courage to wield. She loved her sister better than anybody else. She had no very intimate friend of her own sex with whom she fell in love, after the fashion of most young girls. That might have happened had it not been for her sister, whom Evelyn thought of always as excelling everybody else in beauty and goodness and general brilliancy. Maria, when nearing thirty, was, in fact, as handsome as she had ever been. Her self-control had kept lines from her face. She was naturally healthy, and she, as well as Evelyn, had by nature a disposition to make the most of herself and a liking for adornment. Aunt Maria often told Eunice that Maria was full as good-looking as Evelyn, if she was older, but that was not quite true. Maria had never had Evelyn's actual beauty, her perfection as of a perfect flower; still she was charming, and she had admirers, whom she always checked, although her aunt became more and more distressed that she did so. Always at the bottom of Maria's heart lay her secret. It was not a guilty secret. It was savored more of the absurd of tragedy than anything else. Sometimes Maria herself fairly laughed at the idea that she was married. All this time she wondered about Wollaston Lee. She thought, with a sick terror, of the possibility of his falling in love, and wishing to marry, and trying to secure a divorce, and the horrible publicity, and what people would say and do. She knew that a divorce would be necessary, although the marriage was not in reality a marriage at all. She had made herself sufficiently acquainted with the law to be sure that a divorce would be absolutely necessary in order for either herself or Wollaston Lee to marry again. For herself, she did not wish to marry, but she did wonder uneasily with regard to him. She was not in the least jealous; all her old, childish fancy for him had been killed by that strenuous marriage ceremony, but she dreaded the newspapers and the notoriety which would inevitably follow any attempt on either side to obtain a divorce. She dreamed about it often, and woke in terror, having still before her eyes the great, black letters on the first pages of city papers. She had never seen Wollaston Lee since she had lived in Amity. She had never even heard anything about him except once, when somebody had mentioned his name and spoken of seeing him at a reception, and that he was a professor in one of the minor colleges. She did not wish ever to repeat that experience. Her heart had seemed to stand still, and she had grown so white that a lady beside her asked her hurriedly if she were faint. Maria had thrown off the faintness by a sheer effort of will, and the color had returned to her face, and she had laughingly replied with a denial. Sometimes she thought uneasily of Gladys Mann. The clergyman who, in his excess of youthful zeal, had performed the ceremony was dead. She had seen his obituary notice in a New York paper with a horrible relief. He had died quite suddenly in one of the pneumonia winters. But Gladys Mann and her possession of the secret troubled her. Gladys Mann, as she remembered her, had been such a slight, almost abortive character. She asked herself if she could keep such a secret, if she would have sense enough to do so. Gladys had married, too, a man of her own sort, who worked fitfully, and spent most of his money in carousing with John Dorsey and her father.

Gladys had had a baby a few months after her marriage, and she had had two more since. The last time Maria had been in Amity was soon after Gladys's first baby was born. Maria had met her one day carrying the little thing swathed in an old shawl, with a pitiful attempt of finery in a white lace bonnet cocked sidewise on its little head, which waggled over Gladys's thin shoulder. Gladys, when she saw Maria, had colored and nodded, and almost run past her without a word.

It was just before the beginning of Evelyn's last year at school when Maria received a letter from Gladys's mother. It was a curious composition. Mrs. Mann had never possessed any receptivity for education. The very chirography gave evidence of a rude, almost uncivilized mind. Maria got it one night during the last of August. She had gone to the post-office for the last mail, and all the time there had been over her a premonition of something unwonted of much import to her. The very dusty flowers and weeds by the way-side seemed to cry out to her as she passed them. They seemed no longer mere flowers and weeds, but hieroglyphics concerning her future, which she could almost interpret.

“I wonder what is going to happen?” she thought. “Something is going to happen.” She was glad that Evelyn was not with her, as usual, but had gone for a drive with a young friend who had a pony-carriage. She felt that she could not have borne her sister's curious glances at the letter which she was sure would be in the post-office box. It was there when she entered the dirty little place. She saw one letter slanted across the dusty glass of the box. It was not a lock box, and she had to ask the postmaster for the letter.

“Number twenty-four, please,” she said.

The postmaster was both bungling and curious. He was a long time finding the box, then in giving her the letter. Maria felt dizzy. When at last he handed it to her with an inquisitive glance, she almost ran out of the office. When she was out-doors she glanced at the post-mark and saw it was Edgham. When she came to a lonely place in the road, when she was walking between stone-walls overgrown with poison-ivy, and meadowsweet, and hardhack, and golden-rod, she opened the letter. Just as she opened it she heard the sweet call of a robin in the field on her left, and the low of a cow looking anxiously over her bars.

The letter was written on soiled paper smelling strongly of tobacco, and it enclosed another smaller, sealed envelop. Maria read:

“Deer Miss,—I now tak my pen in hand to let you no that Gladys she is ded. She had a little boy bon, and he and she both died. Gladys she had been coffin for some time befoar, and jest befor she was took sick, she give me this letter, and sed for me to send it to you if ennything happened to her.
“Excuse hast and a bad pen. Mrs. Mann.”

Maria trembled so that she could hardly stand. She looked hastily around; there was no one in sight. She sank down on a large stone which had fallen from the stone wall on the left. Then she opened the little, sealed letter. It was very short. It contained only one word, one word of the vulgar slang to which poor Gladys had become habituated through her miserable life, and yet this one word of slang had a meaning of faithfulness and honor which dignified it. Maria read, “Nit.” and she knew that Gladys had died and had not told.

Chapter XXIX

It is frequently a chain of sequences whose beginnings are lost in obscurity which lead to events. The principal of the Normal School in Westbridge, which Evelyn attended and in which Maria taught, had been a certain Professor Lane. If he had not gone to Boston one morning when the weather was unusually sultry for the season, and if an east wind had not come up, causing him, being thinly clad, to take cold, which cold meant the beginning of a rapid consumption which hurried him off to Colorado, and a year later to death; if these east winds had not made it impossible for Wollaston Lee's mother, now widowed, to live with him in the college town where he had been stationed, a great deal which happened might not have come to pass at all. It was “the wind which bloweth where it listeth, and no man knoweth whence it cometh and whither it goeth,” which precipitated the small tragedy of a human life.

The Saturday before the fall term commenced, Evelyn came home from Westbridge, where she had been for some shopping, and she had a piece of news. She did not wait to remove her hat, but stood before Maria and her aunt, who were sewing in the sitting-room, with the roses nestling against the soft flying tendrils of her black hair. It was still so warm that she wore her summer hat.

“What do you think!” said she. “I have such a piece of news!”

“What is it, dear?” asked Maria. Aunt Maria looked up curiously.

“Why, Professor Lane has had to give up. He starts for Colorado Monday. He kept hoping he could stay here, but he went to a specialist, who told him he could not live six months in this climate, so he is starting right off. And we are to have a new principal.”

“Who is he?” asked Maria. She felt herself trembling, for no reason that she could define.

“Addie Hemingway says he is a handsome young man. He has been a professor in some college, but his mother lives with him, and the climate didn't agree with her, and so he had resigned and was out of a position, and they have sent right away for him, and he is coming. In fact, Addie says she thinks he has come, and that he and his mother are at Mrs. Land's boarding-house; but they are going to keep house. Addie says she has heard he is a young man and very handsome.”

“What is his name?” asked Maria, faintly.

Evelyn looked at her and laughed. “The funniest thing about it all is,” said she, “that he comes originally from Edgham, and you must have known him, Maria. I don't remember him at all, but I guess you must. His name is Lee, and his first

name—I can't remember his first name. Did you know a young man about your age in Edgham named Lee?”

“Wollaston?” asked Maria. She hardly knew her own voice.

“Yes; that is it—Wollaston. It is an odd name. How queer it will seem to have a handsome young man for principal instead of poor old Professor Lane. I am sorry, for my part; I liked Professor Lane. I went to the book-store in Westbridge and bought a book for him to read on the journey, and left it at the door. I sent in my remembrances, and told the girl how sorry I was that Professor Lane was not well.”

“That was a good girl,” said Maria. “I am glad you did.” She was as white as death, but she continued sewing steadily.

Evelyn went to the looking-glass and removed her hat, and readjusted her flying hair around her glowing face. She did not notice her sister's pallor and expression of shock, almost of horror, but Aunt Maria did. Finally she spoke.

“What on earth ails you, Maria Edgham?” she said, harshly. When Aunt Maria was anxious, she was always harsh, and seemed to regard the object of her solicitude as a culprit.

Evelyn turned abruptly and saw her sister's face, then she ran to her and threw her arms around her neck and pulled her head against her shoulder. “What is it? What is it?” she cried, in her sobbing, emotional voice, which any stress aroused.

Maria raised her head and pushed Evelyn gently away. “Nothing whatever is the matter, dear,” she said, firmly, and took up her work again.

“Folks don't turn as white as sheets if nothing is the matter,” said Aunt Maria, still in her harsh, accusing voice. “I want to know what is the matter. Did your dinner hurt you? You ate that lemon-pie.”

“I feel perfectly well, Aunt Maria,” replied Maria, making one of her tremendous efforts of will, which actually sent the color back to her face. She smiled as she spoke.

“You do look better,” said Aunt Maria doubtfully.

“Yes, you do,” said Evelyn.

“Maybe it was the light,” said Aunt Maria in a reassured tone.

“There isn't much light to see to sew by, I know that,” Maria said in an off-hand tone. “I believe I will take a little run down to the post-office for the night mail. Evelyn, you can help Aunt Maria get supper, can't you, dear?”

“Of course I can,” said Evelyn. “But are you sure you are well enough to go alone?”

“Nonsense!” said Maria, rising and folding her work.

“Do you think anything is the matter with sister?” Evelyn asked Aunt Maria after Maria had gone.

“Don't ask me,” replied Aunt Maria curtly.

“Aunt Maria!”

“Well?”

“Professor Lane isn't married. You don't suppose sister—”

“What a little goose you are, Evelyn Edgham!” cried Aunt Maria, almost fiercely turning upon her. “Do you suppose if Maria Edgham had wanted any man she couldn't have got him?”

“I suppose she could,” said Evelyn meekly. “And I know Professor Lane is so much older, but he always seemed to like sister, and I didn't know but she felt badly because he was so ill.”

“Stuff!” said Aunt Maria. “Come, you had better set the table. I have got to make some biscuits for supper. They won't be any more than done by the time Maria gets back.”

“Did you think she looked so very pale?” asked Evelyn, following her aunt out of the room.

“No, I didn't think she looked pale at all when I came to look at her,” said Aunt Maria, sharply. “She looked just as she always does. It was the light.”

Aunt Maria unhesitatingly lied. She knew that her niece had been pale, and she believed that it was on account of Professor Lane. She thought to herself what fools girls were. There Maria had thrown away such a chance as George Ramsey, and was very likely breaking her heart in secret over this consumptive, old enough to be her father.

Evelyn also believed, in her heart of hearts, that her sister was in love with Professor Lane, but she took a more sentimental view of the matter. She was of the firm opinion that love has no age, and then Professor Lane had never seemed exactly old to her, and he was a very handsome man. She thought of poor Maria with the tenderest pity and sympathy. It almost seemed to her that she herself was in love with Professor Lane, and that his going so far away to recover his health was a cruel blow to her. She thought of poor Maria walking to the post-office and brooding over her trouble, and her tender heart ached so hard that it might have been Maria's own.

But Maria, walking to the post-office, realized not so much an ache in her heart as utter horror and terror. She asked

herself how could she possibly continue teaching in that school if Wollaston Lee were principal; how could she endure the daily contact with him which would be inevitable. She wondered if he could possibly have known that she was teaching in that school when he accepted the position. Such a deadly fear was over her that her class-room and the great pile of school buildings seemed to her fancy as horrible as a cage of wild beasts. She felt such a loathing of the man who was legally, although not really, her husband, that the loathing itself filled her with shame and disgust at herself. She told herself that it was horrible, horrible, that she could not endure it, that it was impossible. She was in a fairly desperate mood. She had a sudden impulse to run away and leave everybody and everything, even Evelyn and her aunt, whom she loved so well. She felt pitiless towards everybody except herself. She took out her pocket-book and counted the money which it contained. There were fifteen dollars and some loose change. The railroad station was on a road parallel to the one on which she was walking. An express train flashed by as she stood there. Suddenly Maria became possessed of one of those impulses which come to everybody, but to which comparatively few yield in lifetimes. The girl gathered up her skirts and broke into a run for the railroad station. She knew that there was an accommodation train due soon after the express. She reached the dusty platform, in fact, just as the train came in. There were no other passengers from Amity except a woman whom she did not know, dragging a stout child by the arm. The child was enveloped in clothing to such an extent that it could scarcely walk. It stumbled over its voluminous white coat. Nobody could have told its sex. It cast a look of stupid discomfort at Maria, then its rasped little face opened for a wail. “Shet up!” said the mother, and she dragged more forcibly at the podgy little arm, and the child broke into a lop-sided run towards the cars.

Maria had no time to get a ticket. She only had time for that one glance at the helpless, miserable child, before she climbed up the steep car-steps. She found an empty seat, and shrugged close to the window. She did not think very much of what she was doing. She thought more of the absurdly uncomfortable child, over-swathed in clothing, and over-disciplined with mother-love, she could not have told why. She wondered what it would be like to have an ugly, uninteresting, viciously expostulating little one dragging at her hand. The mother, although stout and mature-looking, was not much older than she. It seemed to her that the being fond of such a child, and being happy under such circumstances, would involve as much of a vital change in herself as death itself. And yet she wondered if such a change were possible with all women, herself included. She gazed absently at the pale landscape past which the train was flying. The conductor had to touch her arm before he could arouse her attention, when he asked for her ticket. Then she looked at him vacantly, and he had to repeat his “Ticket, please.”

Maria opened her pocket-book and said, mechanically, the name of the first station which came into her head, “Ridgewood.” Ridgewood was a small city about fifteen miles distant. She had sometimes been there shopping. She gave the conductor a five-dollar bill, and he went away, murmuring something about the change. When he returned with the rebate-slip and the change, he had to touch her shoulder again to arrest her attention.

“Change, miss,” said the conductor, and “you can get ten cents back on this at the station.”

Maria took the change and the slip and put them in her pocket-book, and the conductor passed on with a quick, almost imperceptible backward glance at her. Maria sat very still. The child who had got on at Amity began to wail again, and its outcries filled the whole car. To Maria it seemed like the natural outburst of an atmosphere overcharged with woe, and the impotent rage and regret of the whole race, as a cloud is charged with electricity. She felt that she herself would like to burst into a wild wail, and struggle and wrestle against fate with futile members, as the child fought against its mother with its fat legs in shoes too large, and its bemittened hands. However, she began to get a certain comfort from the rapid motion. She continued to stare out of the window at the landscape, which fast disappeared under the gathering shadows. The car lamps were lit. Maria still looked, however, out of the window; the lights in the house windows, and red and green signal-lights, gave her a childish interest. She forgot entirely about herself. She turned her back upon herself and her complex situation of life with infinite relief. She did not wonder what she would do when she reached Ridgewood. She did not think any more of herself. It was as if she had come into a room of life without any looking-glasses, and she was no longer visible to her own consciousness. She did not look at the other passengers. All that was evident to her of the existence of any in the car besides herself was the unceasing wail of the child, and its mother's half-soothing, half-scolding voice. She did not see the passengers who boarded the train at the next station beyond Amity, and that Wollaston Lee was one of them. Indeed, she might not at once have recognized him, although the man retained in a marked degree the features of the boy. Wollaston had grown both tall and broad-shouldered, and had a mustache. He was a handsome fellow, well dressed, and with an easy carriage, and he had an expression of intelligent good-humor which made more than one woman in the car look at him. Although Maria did not see him, he saw her at once, and recognized her, and his handsome face paled. The ridiculous complexity of his position towards her had not tended to make him very happy. He had kept the secret as well as Maria; for him, as for her, a secret was a heavy burden, almost amounting to guilt. He continued to glance furtively at her from time to time. He thought that she was very pretty, and also that there was something amiss with her. He, as well as the girl, had entirely gotten over his boyish romance, but the impulse to honorable dealing and duty towards her had not in the least weakened.

When the train stopped at Ridgewood he rose. Maria did not stir. Wollaston stopped, and saw the conductor touch Maria, and heard him say, “This is your station, lady.”

Maria rose mechanically and followed the conductor through the car. When she had descended the steps Wollaston, who had gotten off just in advance, stood aside and waited. He felt uneasy without just knowing why. It seemed to him that there was something strange about the girl's bearing. He thought so the more when she stood motionless on the platform and remained there a moment or more after the train had moved out; then she went towards a bench outside the station and sat down. Wollaston made up his mind that there was something strange, and that he must speak to her.

He approached her, and he could hear his heart beat. He stood in front of her, and raised his hat. Maria did not look up. Her eyes seemed fixed on a fringe of wood across the track in which some katydids were calling, late as it was. That wood, with its persistent voices of unseen things, served to turn her thought from herself, just as the cry of the child had done.

“Miss Edgham,” said Wollaston, in a strained voice. It suddenly occurred to him that that was not the girl's name at all, that she was in reality Mrs. Lee, not Miss Edgham.

Maria did not seem to see him until he had repeated her name again. Then she gave a sudden start and looked up. An electric light on the platform made his face quite plain. She knew him at once. She did not make a sound, but rose with a sudden stealthy motion like that of a wild, hunted thing who leaves its covert for farther flight. But Wollaston laid his hand on her shoulder and forced her gently back to her seat. There was no one besides themselves on the platform. They were quite alone.

“Don't be afraid,” he said. But Maria, looking up at him, fairly chattered with terror. Her lips were open, she made inarticulate noises like a frightened little monkey. Her eyes dilated. This seemed to her incredibly monstrous, that in fleeing she should have come to that from which she fled. All at once the species of mental coma in which she had been cleared away, and she saw herself and the horrible situation in which her flight had placed her. The man looked down at her with the utmost kindness, concern, and pity.

“Don't be afraid,” he said again; but Maria continued to look at him with that cowering, hunted look.

“Where are you going?” asked Wollaston, and suddenly his voice became masterful. He realized that there was something strange, undoubtedly, about all this.

“I don't know,” Maria said, dully.

“You don't know?”

“No, I don't.”

Maria raised her head and looked down the track. “I am going on the train,” said she, with another wild impulse.

“What train?”

“The next train.”

“The next train to where?”

“The next train to Springfield,” said Maria, mentioning the first city which came into her mind.

“What are you going to Springfield for so late? Have you friends there?”

“No,” said Maria, in a hopeless voice.

Wollaston sat down beside her. He took one of her little, cold hands, and held it in spite of a feeble struggle on her part to draw it away. “Now, see here, Maria,” he said, “I know there is something wrong. What is it?”

His tone was compelling. Maria looked straight ahead at the gloomy fringe of woods, and answered, in a lifeless voice, “I heard you were coming.”

“And that is the reason you were going away?”

“Yes.”

“See here, Maria,” said Wollaston, eagerly, “upon my honor I did not know myself until this very afternoon that you were one of the teachers in the Westbridge Academy. If I had known I would have refused the position, although my mother was very anxious for me to accept it. I would refuse it now if it were not too late, but I promise you to resign very soon if you wish it.”

“I don't care,” said Maria, still in the same lifeless tone. “I am going away.”

“Going where?”

“To Springfield. I don't know. Anywhere.”

Wollaston leaned over her and spoke in a whisper. “Maria, do you want me to take steps to have it annulled?” he asked. “It could be very easily done. There was, after all, no marriage. It is simply a question of legality. No moral question is involved.”

A burning blush spread over Maria's face. She snatched her hand away from his. “Do you think I could bear it?” she whispered back, fiercely.

“Bear what?” asked the young man, in a puzzled tone.

“The publicity, the—newspapers. Nobody has known, not one of my relatives. Do you think I could bear it?”

“I will keep the secret as long as you desire,” said Wollaston. “I only wish to act honorably and for your happiness.”

“There is only one reason which could induce me to give my consent to the terrible publicity,” said Maria.

“What is that?”

“If—you wished to marry anybody else.”

“I do not,” said Wollaston, with a half-bitter laugh. “You can have your mind easy on that score. I have not thought of such a thing as possible for me.”

Maria cast a look of quick interest at him. Suddenly she saw his possible view of the matter, that it might be hard for him to forego the happiness which other young men had.

“I would not shrink at all,” she said, gently, “if at any time you saw anybody whom you wished to marry. You need not hesitate. I am not so selfish as that. I do not wish your life spoiled.”

Wollaston laughed pleasantly. “My life is not to be spoiled because of any such reason as that,” he said, “and I have not seen anybody whom I wished to marry. You know I have mother to look out for, and she makes a pleasant home for me. You need not worry about me, but sometimes I have worried a little about you, poor child.”

“You need not, so far as that is concerned,” cried Maria, almost angrily. A sense of shame and humiliation was over her. She did not love Wollaston Lee. She felt the same old terror and disgust at him, but it mortified her to have him think that she might wish to marry anybody else.

“Well, I am glad of that,” said Wollaston. “I suppose you like your work.”

“Yes.”

“After all, work is the main thing,” said Wollaston.

“Yes,” assented Maria, eagerly.

Wollaston returned suddenly to the original topic. “Were you actually running away because you heard I was coming?” he said.

“Yes, I suppose I was,” Maria replied, in a hopeless, defiant sort of fashion.

“Do you actually know anybody in Springfield?”

“No.”

“Have you much money with you?”

“I had fifteen dollars and a few cents before I paid my fare here.”

“Good God!” cried Wollaston. Then he added, after a pause of dismay, almost of terror, during which he looked at the pale little figure beside him, “Do you realize what might have happened to you?”

“I don't think I realized much of anything except to get away,” replied Maria.

Wollaston took her hand again and held it firmly. “Now listen to me, Maria,” he said. “On Monday I shall have to begin teaching in the Westbridge Academy. I don't see how I can do anything else. But now listen. I give you my word of honor, I will not show by word or deed that you are anything to me except a young lady who used to live in the same village with me. I shall have to admit that.”

“I am not anything else to you,” Maria flashed out.

“Of course not,” Wollaston responded, quietly. “But I give you my word of honor that I will make no claim upon you, that I will resign my position when you say the word, that I will keep the wretched, absurd secret until you yourself tell me that you wish for—an annulment of the fictitious tie between us.”

Maria sat still.

“You will not think of running away now, will you?” Wollaston said, and there was a caressing tone in his voice, as if he were addressing a child.

Maria did not reply at once.

“Tell me, Maria,” said Wollaston. “You will not think of doing such a desperate thing, which might ruin your whole life, when I have promised you that there is no reason?”

“No, I will not,” Maria said.

Wollaston rose and went nearer the electric light and looked at his watch. Then he came back. “Now, Maria, listen to me again,” he said. “I have some business in Ridgewood. I would not attend to it to-night but I have made an appointment with a man and I don't see my way out of breaking it. It is about a house which I want to rent. Mother doesn't like the boarding-house at Westbridge, and in fact our furniture is on the road and I have no place to store it, and I am afraid there are other parties who want to rent this house, that I shall lose it if I do not keep the appointment. But I have only a little way to go, and it will not keep me long. I can be back easily inside of half an hour. The next train to Amity stops here in about thirty-seven minutes. Now I want you to go into the waiting-room, and sit there until I come back. Can I trust you?”

“Yes,” said Maria, with a curious docility. She rose.

“You had better buy your ticket back to Amity, and when I come into the station, I think it is better that I should only bow to you, especially if others should happen to be there. Can I trust you to stay there and not get on board any train

but the one which goes to Amity?”

“Yes, you can,” said Maria, with the same docility which was born of utter weariness and the subjection to a stronger will.

She went into the waiting-room and bought her ticket, then sat down on a settee in the dusty, desolate place and waited. There were two women there besides herself, and they conversed very audibly about their family affairs. Maria listened absently to astonishing disclosures. The man in the ticket-office was busy at the telegraph, whose important tick made an accompaniment to the chatter of the women, both middle-aged, and both stout, and both with grievances which they aired with a certain delight. One had bought a damaged dress-pattern in Ridgewood, and had gone that afternoon to obtain satisfaction. “I set there in Yates & Upham's four mortal hours,” said she, in a triumphant tone, “and they kep' comin' and askin' me things, and sayin' would I do this and that, but I jest stuck to what I said I would do in the first place, and finally they give in.”

“What did you want?” asked the other woman.

“Well, I wanted my money back that I had paid for the dress, and I wanted the dressmaker paid for cuttin' it—it was all cut an' fitted—and I wanted my fares back and forth paid, too.”

“You don't mean to say they did all that?” said the other woman, in a tone of admiration.

“Yes, sir, they did. Finally Mr. Upham himself came and talked with me, and he said he would allow me what I asked. I tell you I marched out of that store, when I'd got my money back, feelin' pretty well set up.”

“I should think you would have,” said the other woman, in an admiring tone. “You do beat the Dutch!”

Then the women fell to talking about the niece of one of them who had been jilted by her lover. “He treated her as mean as pusley,” one woman said. “There he'd been keepin' company with poor Aggie three mortal years, comin' regular every Wednesday and Sunday night, and settin' up with her, and keepin' off other fellers.”

“I think he treated her awful mean,” assented the other woman. “I don't know what I would have said if it had been my Mamie.”

Maria detected a covert tone of delight in this woman's voice. She realized instinctively that the woman had been jealous that her companion's niece had been preferred to her daughter, and was secretly glad that she was jilted. “How does she take it?” she asked.

“She just cries her eyes out, poor child,” her friend answered. “She sets and cries all day, and I guess she don't sleep much. Her mother is thinkin' of sendin' her to visit her married sister Lizzie down in Hartford, and see if that won't divert her mind a little.”

“I should think that would be a very good idea,” said the other woman. Maria, listening listlessly, whirled about herself in the current of her own affairs, thought what a cat that woman was, and how she did not in the least care if she was a cat.

Wollaston Lee was not gone very long. He bowed and said good-evening to Maria, then seated himself at a little distance. The two women looked at him with sharp curiosity. “It would be the best thing for poor Aggie if she could get her mind set on another young man,” said the woman whose niece had been jilted.

“That is so,” assented the other woman.

“There's as good fish in the sea as has ever been caught, as I told her,” said the first woman, with speculative eyes upon Wollaston Lee.

It was not long before the train for Amity arrived. Wollaston, with an almost imperceptible gesture, looked at Maria, who immediately arose. Wollaston sat behind her on the train. Just before they reached Amity he came forward and spoke to her in a low voice. “I have to go on to Westbridge,” he said. “Will there be a carriage at the station?”

“There always is,” Maria replied.

“Don't think of walking up at this hour. It is too late. What—” Wollaston hesitated a second, then he continued, in a whisper, “What are you going to tell your aunt?” he said.

“Nothing,” replied Maria.

“Can you?”

“I must. I don't see any other way, unless I tell lies.”

Wollaston lifted his hat, with an audible remark about the beauty of the evening, and passed through into the next car, which was a smoker. The two women of the station were seated a little in the rear across the aisle from Maria. She heard one of them say to the other, “I wonder who that girl was he spoke to?” and the other's muttered answer that she didn't know.

Contrary to her expectations, Maria did not find a carriage at the Amity station, and she walked home. It was late, and the village houses were dark. The electric lights still burned at wide intervals, lighting up golden boughs of maples until they looked like veritable branches of precious metal. Maria hurried along. She had a half-mile to walk. She did not feel afraid; a sense of confusion and relief was over her, with another dawning sense which she did not acknowledge to

herself. An enormous load had been lifted from her mind; there was no doubt about that. A feeling of gratitude and confidence in the young man who had just left her warmed her through and through. When she reached her aunt's house she saw a light in the sitting-room windows, and immediately she turned into the path the door opened and her aunt stood there.

“Maria Edgham, where have you been?” asked Aunt Maria.

“I have been to walk,” replied Maria.

“Been to walk! Do you know what time it is? It is 'most midnight. I've been 'most crazy. I was just goin' in to get Henry up and have him hunt for you.”

“I am glad you didn't,” said Maria, entering and removing her hat. She smiled at her aunt, who continued to gaze at her with the sharpest curiosity.

“Where have you been to walk this time of night?” she demanded.

Maria looked at her aunt, and said, quite gravely, “Aunt Maria, you trust me, don't you?”

“Of course I do; but I want to know. I have a right to know.”

“Yes, you have,” said Maria, “but I shall never tell you as long as I live where I have been to-night.”

“What?”

“I shall never tell you were I have been, only you can rest assured that there is no harm—that there has been no harm.”

“You don't mean to ever tell?”

“No.” Maria took a lamp from the sitting-room table, lighted it, and went up-stairs.

“You are just like your mother—just as set,” Aunt Maria called after her, in subdued tones. “Here I've been watchin' till I was 'most crazy.”

“I am real sorry,” Maria called back. “Good-night, Aunt Maria. Such a thing will never happen again.”

Directly Maria was in her own room she pulled down her window-shades. She did not see a man, who had followed at a long distance all the way from the station, moving rapidly up the street. It was Wollaston Lee. He had seen, from the window of the smoker, that there was no carriage waiting, had jumped off the train, entered the station, then stolen out and followed Maria until he saw her safely in her home. Then the last trolley had gone, and he walked the rest of the way to Westbridge.

Chapter XXX

The next morning, which was Sunday, Maria could not go to church. An utter weariness and lassitude, to which she was a stranger, was over her. Evelyn remained at home with her. Evelyn still had the idea firmly fixed in her mind that Maria was grieving over Professor Lane. It was also firmly fixed in Aunt Maria's mind. Aunt Maria, who had both suspicion and imagination, had conceived a reason for Maria's mysterious absence the night before. She knew that Professor Lane was to take a night train from Westbridge. She jumped at the conclusion that Maria had gone to Westbridge to see him off, and had missed the trolley connection. There were two trolley-lines between Amity and Westbridge, and that accounted for her walking to the house. Aunt Maria was mortified and angry. She would have been mortified to have her niece so disturbed over any man who had not proposed marriage to her, but when she reflected upon Professor Lane, his sunken chest, his skinny throat, and his sparse gray hair, although he was yet a handsome man for his years, she experienced a positive nausea. She was glad when Evelyn came down in the morning and said that Maria had called to her, and said she did not want any breakfast and did not feel able to go to church.

“Do you think sister is going to be sick, Aunt Maria?” Evelyn said, anxiously. Then her sweet eyes met her aunt's, and both the young and the old maid blushed at the thought which they simultaneously had.

“Sick? No,” replied Aunt Maria, crossly.

“I guess I will stay home with her, anyway,” Evelyn said, timidly.

“Well, you can do jest as you are a mind to,” said Aunt Maria. “I'm goin' to meetin'. If folks want to act like fools, I ain't goin' to stay at home and coddle them.”

“Oh, Aunt Maria, I don't think sister acts like a fool,” Evelyn said, in her sweet, distressed voice. “She looks real pale and acts all tired out.”

“I guess she'll survive it,” said Aunt Maria, pouring the coffee.

“Don't you think I had better make some toast and a cup of tea for her, if she does say she doesn't want any breakfast?”

“Maria Edgham is old enough to know her own mind, and if she says she don't want any breakfast I'd let her go without till she was hungry,” said Aunt Maria. She adored Maria above any living thing, and just in proportion to the adoration she felt angry with her. It was a great relief to her not to see her.

“Aren't you going up-stairs and see if you think sister is sick?” Evelyn asked, as Aunt Maria was tying her bonnet-

strings.

“No, I ain't,” replied Aunt Maria. “It's all I can do to walk to church. I ain't goin' to climb the stairs for nothin'. I ain't worried a mite about her.”

After Aunt Maria was gone Evelyn made a slice of toast, placed it on a pretty plate, and made also some tea, which she poured into a very dainty cup. Then she carried the toast and tea on a little tray up to Maria's room.

“Please sit up and drink this tea and eat this toast, sister,” she said, pleadingly.

“Thank you, dear,” said Maria, “but I don't feel as if I could eat anything.”

“It's real nice,” said Evelyn, looking with a childish wistfulness from her sister to the toast. Maria could not withstand the look. She raised herself in bed and let Evelyn place the tray on her knees. Then she forced herself to drink the tea and eat the toast. Evelyn all the time watched her with that sweet wistfulness of expression which was one of her chief charms. Evelyn, when she looked that way, was irresistible. There was so much anxious love in her tender face that it made it fairly angelic. Evelyn's dark hair was tumbling about her face like a child's, in a way which she often wore it when at home when there was no company. It was tied with a white ribbon bow. She wore a black skirt and a little red breakfast-jacket faced with white. As her sister gradually despatched the tea and toast, the look of wistfulness on her face changed to one of radiant delight. She clapped her hands.

“There,” she said, “I knew you would eat your breakfast if I brought it to you. Wasn't that toast nice?”

“Delicious.”

“I made it my own self. Aunt Maria was cross. Don't you think it is odd that any one who loves anybody should ever be cross?”

“It often happens,” said Maria, laying back on her pillows.

“Of course, Aunt Maria loves us both, but she loves you especially; but she is often cross with you. I don't understand it.”

“She doesn't love me any better than she does you, dear,” said Maria.

“Oh yes, she does; but I am not jealous. I am very glad I am not, for I could be terribly jealous.”

“Nonsense, precious!”

“Yes, I could. Sometimes I imagine how jealous I could be, and it frightens me.”

“You must not imagine such things, dear.”

“I have always imagined things,” said Evelyn. Her face took on a very serious, almost weird and tragic expression. Maria had as she had often had before, a glimpse of dangerous depths of emotion in her sister's character.

“That is no reason why you should always imagine,” she said, with a little, weary sigh.

Directly the look of loving solicitude appeared on Evelyn's face. She went close to her sister, and laid her soft, glowing cheek against hers.

“I am so sorry, dearest,” she said. “Sorry for whatever troubles you.”

“What makes you think anything troubles me?”

“You seem to me as if something troubled you.”

“Nothing does,” said Maria. She pushed Evelyn gently away and sat up. “I was only tired out,” she said, firmly. “The breakfast has made me feel better. I will get up now and write some letters.”

“Wouldn't you rather lie still and let me read to you?”

“No, dear, thank you. I will get up now.”

Evelyn remained in the room while her sister brushed her hair and dressed. “I wonder what kind of a man the new principal will be?” she said, looking dreamily out of the window. She had, in fact, already had her dreams about him. As yet she had admitted men to her dreams only, but she had her dreams. She did not notice her sister's change of color. She continued to gaze absently out of the window at the autumn landscape. A golden maple branch swung past the window in a crisp breeze, now and then a leaf flew away like a yellow bird and became a part of the golden carpet on the ground. “Addie Hemingway says he is very handsome,” she said, meditatively. “Do you remember him, sister—that is, do you remember how he looked when he was a boy?”

“As I remember him he was a very good-looking boy,” Maria said.

“I wonder if he is engaged?” Evelyn said.

Suddenly her soft cheeks flamed.

“I don't see what that matters to you,” Maria retorted, in a tone which she almost never used towards Evelyn—“to you

or any of the other girls. Mr. Lee is coming to teach you, not to become engaged to his pupils."

"Of course I know he is," Evelyn said, humbly. "I didn't mean to be silly, sister. I was only wondering."

"The less a young girl wonders about a man the better," Maria said.

"Well, I won't wonder, only it does seem rather natural to wonder. Didn't you use to wonder when you were a young girl, sister?"

"It does not make it right if I did."

"I don't think you could do anything wrong, sister," Evelyn returned, with one of her glances of love and admiration. Suddenly Maria wondered herself what a man would do if he were to receive one of those glances.

Evelyn continued her little chatter. "Of course none of us girls ever wondered about Professor Lane, because he was so old," she said. Then she caught herself with an anxious glance at her sister. "But he was very handsome, too," she added, "and I don't know why we shouldn't have thought about him, and he wasn't so very old. I think Colorado will cure him."

"I hope so," Maria said, absently. She had no more conception of what was in Evelyn's mind with regard to herself and Professor Lane than she had of the thought of an inhabitant of Mars. Ineffable distances of surmise and imagination separated the two in the same room.

Evelyn continued: "Mr. Lee isn't married, anyway," she said. "Addie said so. His mother keeps house for him. Wasn't that a dreadful thing in the paper last night, sister?"

"What?" asked Maria.

"About that girl's getting another woman's husband to fall in love with her, and get a divorce, and then marrying him. I don't see how she could. I would rather die than marry a man who had been divorced. I would think of the other wife all the time. Don't you think it was dreadful, sister?"

"Why do you read such things?" asked Maria, and there was a hard ring in her voice. It seemed to her that she was stretched on a very rack of innocence and ignorance.

"It was all there was in the paper to read," replied Evelyn, "except advertisements. There were pictures of the girl, and the wife, and the man, and the two little children. Of course it was worse because there were children, but it was dreadful anyway. I would never speak to that girl again, not if she had been my dearest friend."

"You had better read a library book, if there is nothing better than that to read in a paper," said Maria.

"There wasn't, except a prize-fight, and I don't care anything about prize-fights, and I believe there were races, too, but I don't know anything about races."

"I don't see that you know very much about marriage and divorce," Maria said, adjusting her collar.

"Are you angry with me, sister? Don't you want me to fasten your collar?"

"No, I can fasten it myself, thank you, dear. No, I am not angry with you, only I do wish you wouldn't read such stuff. Put the paper away, and get a book instead."

"I will if you want me to, sister," replied Evelyn.

Chapter XXXI

The Monday when the fall term of the academy at Westbridge opened was a very beautiful day. The air was as soft as summer, but with a strange, pungent quality which the summer had lacked. There was a slightly smoky scent which exhilarated. It was a scent of death coming from bonfires of dead leaves and drying vegetation, and yet it seemed to presage life. When Maria and Evelyn went out to take the trolley for Westbridge, Maria wore a cluster of white chrysanthemums pinned to her blouse. The blouse itself was a very pretty one, worn with a black plaited skirt. It was a soft silk of an old-rose shade, and it was trimmed with creamy lace. Maria had left off her mourning. Evelyn looked with a little surprise at Maria's blouse.

"Why, you've got on your pink blouse, sister," she said.

Maria colored softly, for no ostensible reason. "Yes," she said.

"You don't generally wear it to school."

"I thought as long as it was the first day," Maria said, in a slightly faltering tone. She bent her head until her rose-wreathed hat almost concealed her face. The sisters stood in front of the house waiting for their car. Evelyn made a sudden little run back into the yard.

"You hold the car!" she cried.

"I don't know that they will wait; you must not stop," Maria called out. But the car had just stopped when Evelyn returned, and she had a little cluster of snowberries pinned in the front of her red gown. She looked bewitchingly over them at Maria when they were seated side by side in the car.

“I guess I was going to wear flowers as well as some other folks,” she whispered with a soft, dark glance at her sister from under her long lashes. Maria smiled.

“You don't need to wear flowers,” she said.

“Why not as well as you?”

“Oh, you are a flower yourself,” Maria said, looking fondly at her.

Indeed, the young girl looked like nothing so much as a rose, with her tenderly curved pink cheeks, the sweet arch of her lips, and her glowing radiance of smiles. Maria looked at her critically, then bade her turn that she might fasten a hook on her collar which had become unfastened.

“Now you are all right,” she said.

Evelyn smiled. “Don't you think these snowberries are pretty with this red dress?” she asked.

“Lovely.”

“I wonder what the new principal will be like,” Evelyn said, musingly, after riding awhile in silence.

“I presume he will be very much like other young men. The main thing to consider is, if he is a good teacher,” Maria said.

“What makes you cross, sister?” Evelyn whispered plaintively.

“I am not cross, only I don't want you to be silly.”

“I am not silly. All the girls are wondering, too. I am only like other girls. You can't expect me to be just like you, Maria. Of course you are older, and you don't wonder, and then, too, you knew him when he was a boy. Is he light or dark?”

“Light,” Maria replied, looking out of the window.

“Sometimes light children grow dark as they grow older,” said Evelyn. “I hope he hasn't. I like light men better than dark, don't you, Maria?”

“I don't like one more than another,” said Maria shortly.

“Of course I know you don't in one way. Don't be so cross,” Evelyn said in a hurt way. “But almost everybody has an opinion about light and dark men.”

Maria looked out of the window, and Evelyn said no more, but she felt a sorrowful surprise at her sister. Evelyn was so used to being petted and admired that the slightest rebuff, especially a rebuff from Maria, made her incredulous. It really seemed to her that Maria must be ill to speak so shortly to her. Then she remembered poor Professor Lane, and how in all probability Maria was thinking about him this morning, and that made her irritable, and how she, Evelyn, ought to be very patient. Evelyn was in reality very patient and very slow to take offence. So she snuggled gently up to her sister, until her slender, red-clad shoulder touched Maria's, and looked pleasantly around through the car, and again wondered privately about the new principal.

They had a short walk after leaving the car to the academy. As they turned into the academy grounds, which were quite beautiful with trees and shrubs, a young man was mounting the broad flight of granite steps which led to the main entrance. Evelyn touched Maria agitatedly on the arm. “Oh, Maria,” said she.

“What?”

“Is that—he?”

“I think so. I saw only his back, but I should think so. I don't see what other young man could be going into the building. It was certainly not the janitor, nor Mr. Hughes” (Mr. Hughes was the music-teacher) replied Maria calmly, although she was pale.

“Oh, if that was he, I think he is splendid,” whispered Evelyn.

Maria said nothing as the two proceeded along the fine gravel walk between hydrangeas, and inverted beech-trees, and symmetrically trimmed firs.

“He is light,” Evelyn said, meditatively. “I am glad of that.” As she spoke she put her hand to her head and adjusted her hair, then her hat. She threw back her shoulders. She preened herself, innocently and unconsciously, like a little bird. Maria did not notice it. She had her own thoughts, and she was using all her power of self-control to conceal her agitation. It seemed to her as she entered the building as if her secret was written upon her face, as if everybody must read as they ran. But she removed her coat and hat, and took her place with the other assistants upon the platform in the chapel of the academy where the morning exercises were held. She spoke to the other teachers, and took her usual seat. Wollaston was not yet there. The pupils were flocking into the room, which was picturesque with a dome-shaped ceiling, and really fine frescoed panels on the walls. Directly opposite the platform was a large oriel-window of stained glass, the gift of the founder. Rays of gold and green and blue and crimson light filtered through, over the assembling school. Maria saw Evelyn with her face turned towards the platform eagerly watching. She was not looking at Maria, but was evidently expecting the advent of the new principal. It did not at that time occur to Maria to attribute any serious meaning to the girl's attitude. She merely felt a sort of impatience with her, concerning her attitude, when she

herself knew what she knew.

Suddenly a sort of suppressed stir was evident among those of the pupils who were seated. Maria felt a breeze from an open door, and knew that Wollaston had entered. He spoke first to her, calling her by name, and bidding her good-morning, then to the other teachers. The others were either residents of Westbridge, or boarded there, and he had evidently been introduced to them before. Then he took his seat, and waited quietly for the pupils to become seated. It lacked only a few minutes of the time for opening the school. It was not long before the seats were filled, and Maria heard Wollaston's voice reading a selection from the Bible. Then she bent her head, and heard him offering prayer. She felt a sort of incredulity now. It seemed to her inconceivable that the boy whom she had known could be actually conducting the opening exercises of a school with such imperturbability and self-possession. All at once a great pride of possession seized her. She glanced covertly at him between her fingers. The secret which had been her shame suddenly filled her with the possibility of pride. Wollaston Lee, standing there, seemed to her the very grandest man whom she had ever seen. He was undoubtedly handsome, and he had, moreover, power. When he had finished his prayer, and had begun his short address to the scholars, she glanced at him again, and saw what splendid shoulders he had, how proudly he held his head, and yet what a boyish ingenuousness went with it all. Maria did not look at Evelyn at all. Had she done so, she would have been startled. Evelyn was gazing at the new principal with the utmost unreserve, the unreserve of awakened passion which does not know itself because of innocence and ignorance. Evelyn, gazing at the young man, had never been so unconscious of herself, and at the same time she had never been so conscious. She felt a life to which she had been hitherto a stranger tingling through every vein and nerve of her young body, through every emotion of her young soul. She gazed with wide-open eyes like a child, the rose flush deepened on her cheeks, her parted lips became moist and deep crimson, pulses throbbed in her throat. She smiled involuntarily, a smile of purest delight and admiration. Love twofold had awakened within her emotional nature. Love of herself, as she might be seen in another's eyes, and love of another. And yet she did not know it was love, and she felt no shame, and no fright, nothing but rapture. She was in the broad light of the present, under the direct rays of a firmament of life and love. Another girl, Addie Hemingway, who was no older than Evelyn, but shrewd beyond her years, with a taint of coarseness, noticed her, and nudged the girl at her right. “Just look at Evelyn Edgham,” she whispered.

The other girl looked.

“I suppose she thinks she'll catch him, she's so awful pretty,” whispered Addie maliciously.

“I don't think she is so very pretty,” whispered back the other girl, who was pretty herself and disposed to assert her own claims to attention.

“She thinks she is,” whispered back Addie. “Just see how bold she looks at him. I should think she would be ashamed of herself.”

“So should I,” nodded the other girl.

But Evelyn had no more conception of the propriety of shame than nature itself. She was pure nature. Presently Wollaston himself, who had been making his address to his pupils with a vague sense of an upturned expanse of fresh young faces of boys and girls, without any especial face arresting his attention, saw Evelyn with a start which nobody, man or woman, could have helped. She was so beautiful that she could no more be passed unnoticed than a star. Wollaston made an almost imperceptible pause in his discourse, then he continued, fixing his eyes upon the oriel-window opposite. He realized himself as surprised and stirred, but he was not a young man whom a girl's beauty can rouse at once to love. He had, moreover, a strong sense of honor and duty. He realized Maria was his legal wife. He was, although he had gotten over his boyish romance, which had been shocked out of him at the time of his absurd marriage, in an attitude of soul which was ready for love, and love for his wife. He had often said to himself that no other honorable course was possible for either Maria or himself: that it was decidedly best that they should fall in love with each other and make their marriage a reality. At the same time, something more than delicacy and shyness restrained him from making advances. He was convinced that Maria not only disliked but feared him. A great pity for her was in his heart, and also pride, which shrank from exposing itself to rebuffs. Yet he did not underestimate himself. He considered that he had as good a chance as any man of winning her affection and overcoming her present attitude towards him. He saw no reason why he should not. While he was not conceited, he knew perfectly well his advantages as to personal appearance. He also was conscious of the integrity of his purpose as far as she was concerned. He knew that, whenever she should be willing to accept him, he should make her a good husband, and he recognized his readiness and ability to love her should she seem ready to welcome his love. He, however, was very proud even while conscious of his advantages, and consequently easily wounded. He could not forget Maria's look of horror when she had recognized him the Saturday before. A certain resentment towards her because of it was over him in spite of himself. He said to himself that he had not deserved that look, that he had done all that mortal man could do to shield her from a childish tragedy, for which he had not been to blame in any greater degree than she. He said to himself that she might at least have had confidence in his honor and his generosity. However, pity for her and that readiness to do his duty—to love her—were uppermost. The quick glance which he had given Maria that morning had filled him with pleasure. Maria, in her dull-rose blouse, with her cluster of chrysanthemums, with her fair, emotional face held by sheer force of will in a mould of serenity, with her soft yellow coils of hair and her still childish figure, was charming. After that one glance at Evelyn, with her astonishing beauty, he thought no more about her. When his address was finished the usual routine of the school began.

He did not see Maria again all day. She had her own class-room, and at noon she and Evelyn ate their luncheon together there. Evelyn did not say a word about the new principal. She was very quiet. She did not eat as usual.

“Don't you feel well, dear?” asked Maria.

“Yes, sister,” replied Evelyn. Then suddenly her lips quivered and a tear rolled down the lovely curve of her cheek.

“Why, Evelyn, precious, what is the matter?” asked Maria.

“Nothing,” muttered Evelyn. Then suddenly, to her sister's utter astonishment, the young girl sprang up and ran out of the room.

Maria was sure that she heard a muffled sob. She thought for a second of following her, then she had some work to do before the afternoon session, and she also had a respect for others' desires for secrecy, possibly because of her long carrying about of her own secret. She sat at her table with her forehead frowning uneasily, and wrote, and did not move to follow Evelyn.

Evelyn, when she rushed out of the class-room, took instinctively her way towards a little but dense grove in the rear of the academy. It was a charming little grove of firs and maples, and there were a number of benches under the trees for the convenience of the pupils. It was rather singular that there was nobody there. Usually during the noon-hour many ate their luncheons under the shadow of the trees. However, the wind had changed, and it was cool. Then, too, the reunions among the old pupils were probably going on to better advantage in the academy, and many had their luncheons at a near-by restaurant. However it happened, Evelyn, running with the tears in her eyes, her heart torn with strange, new emotion which as yet she could not determine the nature of, whether it was pain or joy, found the grove quite deserted. The cold sunlight came through the golden maple boughs and lay in patches on the undergrowth of drying golden-rod and asters. Under the firs and pines it was gloomy, and a premonition of winter was in the air. Evelyn sat down on a bench under a pine-tree, and began to weep quite unrestrainedly. She did not know why. She heard the song of the pine over her head, and it seemed to increase her apparently inconsequent grief. In reality she wept the tears of the world, the same which a new-born child sheds. Her sorrow was the mysterious sorrow of existence itself. She wept because of the world, and her life in it, and her going out of it, because of its sorrow, which is sweetened with joy, and its joy embittered with sorrow. But she did not know why she wept. Evelyn was cast on very primitive moulds, and she had been very unrestrained, first by the indifference of her mother, then by the love of her father and sister and aunt. It was enough for Evelyn that she wished to weep that she wept. No other reason seemed in the least necessary to her. In front of where she sat was a large patch of sunlight overspreading a low growth of fuzzy weeds, which shone like silver, and a bent thicket of dry asters which were still blue although withered.

All at once Evelyn became aware that this patch of sunlight was darkened, and she looked up in a sweet confusion. Her big, dark eyes were not in the least reddened by her tears; they only glittered with them. Her lips, slightly swollen, only made her lovelier.

Directly before her stood the new principal, and he was gazing down at her with a sort of consternation, pity, and embarrassment. Wollaston was in reality wishing himself anywhere else. A woman's tears aroused in him pity and irritation. He wished to pass on, but it seemed too impossible to do so and leave this lovely young creature in such distress without a word of inquiry. He therefore paused, and his slightly cold, blue eyes met Evelyn's brilliant, tearful ones with interrogation.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked. “Shall I call any one? Are you ill?”

Evelyn felt hurt and disturbed by his look and tone. New tears welled up in her eyes. She shook her head with a slight pout. Wollaston passed on. Evelyn raised her head and gazed after him with an indescribable motion, the motion of a timid, wild thing of the woods, which pursues, but whose true instinct is to be pursued. Suddenly she rose, and ran after him, and was by his side.

“I am ashamed you should have seen—” she said, brokenly. “I was crying for nothing.”

Wollaston looked down at her and smiled. She also was smiling through her tears. “Young ladies should not cry for nothing,” he said, with a whimsical, school-master manner.

“It seems to me that nothing is the most terrible thing in the whole world to cry for,” replied Evelyn, with unconscious wisdom, but she still smiled. Again her eyes met the young man's, and her innocently admiring gaze was full upon his, and that happened which was inevitable, one of the chain of sequences of life itself. His own eyes responded ardently, and the girl's eyes fell before the man's. At the same time there was no ulterior significance in the man's look, which was merely in evidence of a passing emotion to which he was involuntarily subject. He had not the slightest thought of any love, which his look seemed to express for this little beauty of a girl, whose name he did not even know. But he slackened his pace, and Evelyn walked timidly beside him over the golden net-work of sunlight in the path. Evelyn spoke first.

“You came from Edgham, Mr. Lee,” she said.

Wollaston looked at her. “Yes. Do you know anybody there?”

Evelyn laughed. “I came from there myself,” she said, “and so did my sister, Maria. Maria is one of the teachers, you know.”

Evelyn wondered why Mr. Lee's face changed, not so much color but expression.

“Oh, you are Miss Edgham's sister?” he exclaimed.

“Yes. I am her sister—her half-sister.”

“Let me see; you are in the senior class.”

“Yes,” replied Evelyn. Then she added, “Did you remember my sister?”

“Oh yes,” replied Wollaston. “We used to go to school together.”

“She cannot have altered,” said Evelyn. “She always looks just the same to me, anyway.”

“She does to me,” said Lee, and there was in inflection in his voice which caused Evelyn to give a startled glance at him. But he continued, quite naturally, “Your sister looks just as I remember her, only, of course, a little taller and more dignified.”

“Maria is dignified,” said Evelyn, “but of course she has taught school a long time, and a school-teacher has to be dignified.”

“Are you intending to teach school?” asked Lee, and even as he asked the question he felt amused. The idea of this flower-like thing teaching school, or teaching anything, was absurd. She was one of the pupils of life, not one of the expounders.

“No, I think not,” said Evelyn. Then she said, “I have never thought about it.” Then an incomprehensible little blush flamed upon her cheeks. Evelyn was thinking that she should be married instead of doing anything else, but that the man did not consider. He was singularly unversed in feminine nature.

A bell rang from the academy, and Evelyn turned about with reluctance. “There is the bell,” said she. She was secretly proud although somewhat abashed at being seen walking back to the academy with the new principal. Addie Hemingway was looking out of a window, and she said to the other girl, the same whom she had addressed in the chapel:

“See, Evelyn Edgham has got him in tow already.”

That night, when Maria and Evelyn arrived home, Aunt Maria asked Evelyn how she liked the new principal. “Oh, he's perfectly splendid,” replied Evelyn. Then she blushed vividly. Aunt Maria noticed it and gave a swift glance at Maria, but Maria did not notice it at all. She was so wrapped in her own dreams that she was abstracted. After she went to bed that night she lay awake a long time dreaming, just as she had done when she had been a little girl. Her youth seemed to rush back upon her like a back-flood. She caught herself dreaming of love-scenes in that same little wood where Wollaston and Evelyn had walked that day. She never thought of Evelyn and the possibility of her thinking of Wollaston. But Evelyn, in her little, white, maiden bed, was awake and dreaming too. Outside the wind was blowing and the leaves dropping and the eternal stars shining overhead. It seemed as if so much maiden-dreaming in the house should make it sound with song, but it was silent and dark to the night. Only the reflection of the street-lamp made it evident at all to occasional passers. It is well that the consciousness of human beings is deaf to such emotions, or all individual dreams would cease because of the multiple din.

Chapter XXXII

Evelyn, as the weeks went on, did not talk as much as she had been accustomed to do. She did not pour her confidences into her sister's ears. She never spoke of the new principal. She studied assiduously, and stood exceedingly well in all her classes. She had never taken so much pains with her pretty costumes. When her mother sent her a Christmas present of a Paris gown, she danced with delight. There was to be a Christmas-tree in the academy chapel, and she planned to wear it. Although it was a Paris gown it was simple enough, a pretty, girlish frock of soft white cloth, with touches of red. “I can wear holly in my hair, and it will be perfectly lovely,” Evelyn said. But she came down with such a severe cold and sore throat at the very beginning of the holidays that going to Westbridge was out of the question. Evelyn lamented over the necessity of her staying at home like a child. She even cried.

“I wouldn't be such a baby,” said Aunt Maria. At times Aunt Maria could not quite forgive Evelyn for being Ida Slome's child, especially when she showed any weakness. She looked severely now at poor Evelyn, in her red house-wrapper, weeping in her damp little handkerchief. “I should think you were about ten,” she said.

Evelyn wiped her eyes and sniffed. Her throat was very sore, and her cold was also in her head. Her pretty lips were disfigured with fever-sores. Her eyes were inflamed.

“You wouldn't want to go looking the way you do, anyhow,” said Aunt Maria, pitilessly.

After Aunt Maria went out of the room, Maria, who was putting some finishing-touches to the gown which she herself was to wear to the Christmas-tree, went over to her sister and knelt down beside her. “Poor darling,” she said. “Don't you want me to stay at home with you?”

Evelyn pushed her away gently, with a fresh outburst of tears. “No,” she said. “Don't come so close, Maria, or you will catch it. Everybody says it is contagious. No, I wouldn't have you stay at home for anything. I am not a pig, if I am disappointed. But Aunt Maria need not be so cross.”

“Aunt Maria does not mean to be cross, sweetheart,” said Maria, stroking her sister's fluffy, dark head. “Are you sure that you do not want me to stay home with you, dear?”

“Perfectly sure,” replied Evelyn. “I want you to go so you can tell me about it.”

Evelyn had not the slightest idea of jealousy of Maria. While she admired her, it really never occurred to her, so naïve she was in her admiration of herself, that anybody could think her more attractive than she was and fall in love with her, to her neglect. She had not the least conception of what this Christmas-tree meant to her older sister: the opportunity of seeing Wollaston Lee, of talking with him, of perhaps some attention on his part. Maria was to return to Amity on the last trolley from Westbridge. It was quite a walk from the academy. She dreamed of Wollaston's escorting her to the trolley-line. She dressed herself with unusual care when the day came. She had a long, trailing gown of a pale-blue cloth and a blue knot for her yellow hair. She also had quite a pretentious blue evening cloak. Christmas afternoon a long box full of pale-yellow roses arrived. There was a card enclosed which Maria caught up quickly and concealed without any one seeing her. Wollaston had sent her the roses. Her heart beat so hard and fast that it seemed

the others must hear it. She bent over the roses. “How perfectly lovely!” she said.

Aunt Maria took up the box and lifted the flowers out carefully. “There isn't any card,” she said. “I wonder who sent them?” All at once a surmise seized her that Professor Lane, who was said to be regaining his health in Colorado, had sent an order to the Westbridge florist for these flowers. Simultaneously the thought came to Evelyn, but Eunice, who was in the room, looked bewildered. When Maria carried the roses out to put them in water, she turned to her sister-in-law. “Who on earth do you suppose sent them?” she whispered.

Aunt Maria looked at her, and formed Professor Lane's name noiselessly with her lips, giving her at the same time a knowing nod. Eunice looked at Evelyn, who also nodded, although with a somewhat disturbed expression. She still did not feel quite reconciled to the idea of her sister's loving Professor Lane.

“I didn't know,” said Eunice.

“Nobody knows; but we sort of surmise,” said Aunt Maria.

“Why, he's old enough to be her father,” Eunice said.

“What of that, if he only gets cured of his consumption?” said Aunt Maria. She herself felt disgusted, but she had a pleasure in concealing her disgust from her sister-in-law. “Lots of girls would jump at him,” said she.

“I wouldn't have when I was a girl,” Eunice remarked, in a mildly reminiscent manner.

“You don't know what you would have done if you hadn't got my brother,” said Aunt Maria.

“I would never have married anybody,” Eunice replied, with a fervent, faithful look. As she spoke, she seemed to see Henry Stillman as he had been, when a young man and courting her, and she felt as if a king had passed her field of memory to the exclusion of all others.

“Maybe you wouldn't have,” said her sister-in-law, “but nowadays girls have to take what they can get. Men ain't so anxious to marry. When a man had to have all his shirts and dickeys made he was helpless, to say nothing of his pants, but nowadays he can get everything ready-made, and it doesn't make so much difference to him whether he gets married or not. He can have a good deal more for himself, if he's an old bachelor.”

“Maybe you are right,” said Eunice, “but I know when I was a girl Maria's age I wouldn't have let an old man like Professor Lane, with the consumption, too, tie my shoes. Do you suppose he really sent her the roses?”

“Who else could have sent them?”

“They must have cost an awful sight of money,” said Eunice, in an awed tone. Then she stopped, for Maria re-entered the room with the roses in a tall vase. She wore some of them pinned to the shoulder of her blue gown that evening. She knew who had sent them, and it seemed to her that she did not overestimate the significance of the sending. When she started for Westbridge that evening she was radiant. She had the roses carefully pinned in tissue-paper to protect them from the cold; her long, blue cloak swept about her in graceful folds, she wore a blue hat with a long, blue feather.

“Why didn't you wear a head tie?” asked Aunt Maria. “Ain't you afraid you will spoil that hat if you take it off? The feather will get all mussy.”

“I shall put it in a safe place,” replied Maria, smiling. She blushed as she spoke. She knew perfectly well herself why she wore that hat, because she thought Wollaston might escort her to the trolley, and she wished to appear at her best in his eyes. Maria no longer disguised from herself the fact that she loved this man who was her husband and not her husband. She knew that she was entirely ready to respond to his advances, should he make any, that she would be happier than she had ever been in her whole life if the secret which had been the horror of her life should be revealed. She wondered if it would not be better to have another wedding. That night she had not much doubt of Wollaston's love for her. When she entered the car, and saw besides herself several young girls prinked in their best, who were also going to the Christmas-tree, she felt a sort of amused pride, that all their prinking and preening was in vain. She assumed that all of them had dressed to attract Wollaston. She could not think of any other man whom any girl could wish to attract. She sat radiant with her long, blue feather sweeping the soft, yellow puff of her hair. She gave an affect of smiling at everybody, at all creation. She really felt for the first time that she could remember a sense of perfect acquiescence with the universal scheme of things, therefore she felt perfect content and happiness. She thought how wonderful it was that poor Gladys Mann, lying in her unmarked grave this Christmas-time, should have been the means, all unwittingly, of bringing such bliss to herself. She thought how wonderful that Evelyn's loss should have been the first link in such a sequence. She thought of Evelyn with a sort of gratitude, as if she had done something incalculable for her. She also thought of her as always with the utmost love and pride and tenderness. She reflected with pleasure on the gift which she herself had hung on the tree for Evelyn, and how pleased the child would be. It was a tiny gold brooch with a pearl in the centre. Evelyn was very fond of ornaments. Maria did not once imagine of the possibility that Evelyn could have any dreams herself with regard to Wollaston. She did not in reality think of Evelyn as old enough to have any dreams at all which need be considered seriously, and least of all about Wollaston Lee. She nodded to a young man, younger than herself, who was in Evelyn's class at the academy, who sat across the aisle, and he returned the nod eagerly. He was well grown, and handsome, and looked as old as Maria herself. Presently as the car began to fill up, he crossed the aisle, and asked if he might sit beside her. Maria made room at once. She smiled at the young fellow with her smile which belonged in reality to another man, and he took it for himself. Perhaps nothing on earth is so misappropriated as smiles and tears. The seat was quite narrow. It was necessary to sit rather close, in any event, but presently Maria felt the boy's broad shoulder press unmistakably against hers. She shrank away with an imperceptible motion. She did not feel so much angry as amused at the thought that this great boy should be making love to her, when all her heart was with some one else, when she could not even give him a pleasant look which belonged wholly to him. Maria leaned against the window, and gazed out at the flying shadows. “I am glad it is so pleasant,” she said in a

perfectly unconcerned voice.

“Yes, so am I,” the boy replied, but his voice shook with emotion. Maria thought again how ridiculous it was. Then suddenly she reflected that this might not be on her account but Evelyn's. She thought that the boy might be trying to ingratiate himself with her on her sister's account. She felt at once indignation and a sense of pity. She was sure that Evelyn had never thought of him. She glanced at the boy's handsome, manly face, which, although manly, wore still an expression of ingenuousness like a child's. She reflected that if Evelyn were to marry when she were older, that perhaps this was a good husband for her. The boy came of one of the best families in Amity. She turned towards him smiling.

“Evelyn was very much disappointed that she could not come to-night,” she said.

The boy brightened visibly at her tone.

“She has a very severe cold,” Maria added.

“I am sorry,” said the boy. Then he said in a low tone whose boldness and ardor were unmistakable, that it did not make any difference to him who was there as long as she was. Maria could scarcely believe her ears. She gave the boy a keen, incredulous glance, but he was not daunted. “I mean it,” he said.

“Nonsense,” said Maria. She looked out of the window again. She told herself that it was annoying but too idiotic to concern herself with. She made up her mind that when they changed trolleys she would try to find a seat with some one else. But when they changed she found the boy again beside her. She was quite angry then, and made no effort to disguise it. She sat quite still, gazing out of the window, shrugged against it as closely as she was able to sit, and said nothing. However, her face resumed its happy smile when she thought again of Wollaston, and the boy thought the smile meant for him. He leaned over her tenderly.

“I wish I could have a picture of you as you look to-night,” he said.

“Well, I am afraid that you will have to do without it,” Maria said shortly. Still the boy remained insensible to rebuff.

“What are you carrying, Miss Edgham?” he asked, looking at her roses enveloped in tissue paper.

“Some roses which a friend sent me,” Maria replied.

Then the boy colored and paled a little. He jumped at once to the conclusion that the friend was a man. “I suppose you are going to wear them,” he said pitifully.

“Yes, I am,” replied Maria.

The boy in his turn sat as far away as possible in his corner of the seat, and gazed ahead with a gloomy air.

When they reached the academy grounds he quite deserted Maria, who walked to the chapel with one of the other teachers, who entered at the same time. She was a young lady who lived in Westbridge. Maria caught the pale glimmer of an evening gown under her long, red cloak trimmed with white fur, and reflected that possibly she also had adorned herself especially for Wollaston's benefit, and again she felt that unworthy sense of pride and amusement. The girl herself echoed her thoughts, for she said soon after Maria had greeted her:

“I saw Mr. Lee and his mother starting.”

“Did you?” returned Maria.

“Don't you think he is very handsome?” asked the girl in a sentimental tone which irritated.

“No,” said Maria sharply, although she lied. “I don't think he is handsome at all. He looks intelligent and sensible, but as for handsome—”

“Oh, don't you think so?” cried the other. Then she caught herself short, for Wollaston Lee, with his mother on his arm, came up. They said good-evening, and all four passed in.

The platform of the chapel was occupied by a great Christmas-tree. The chapel itself was trimmed with evergreens and holly. The moment Maria entered, after she had removed her hat in a room which was utilized as a dressing-room, and pinned her roses on her shoulder, she became sensible of a peculiar intoxication as of some new happiness and festivity, of a cup of joy which she had hitherto not tasted. The spicy odor of the evergreens, even the odor of oyster-stew from a room beyond where supper was to be served, that, and cake, and the sweetness of her own roses, raised her to a sense of elation which she had never before had. She sat with the other teachers well towards the front. Wollaston was with his mother on the right. Maria saw with a feeling of relief the people with whom the Lees had formerly boarded presently enter and sit with them. She thought that Wollaston would be free to walk to the trolley with her if he so wished. She felt surer and surer that he did so wish. Once she caught him looking at her, and when she answered his smile she felt her own lips stiff, and realized how her heart pounded against her side. She experienced something like a great pain which was still a great joy. Suddenly everything seemed unreal to her. When the presents were distributed, it was still so unreal that she did not feel as pleased as she would have done with the number for poor little Evelyn at home. She hardly knew what she received herself. They were the usual useless and undesirable tokens from her class, and others more desirable from the other lady teachers. Wollaston Lee's name was often called. Again Maria experienced that unworthy sensation of malicious glee that all this was lavished upon him when he was in reality hers and beyond the reach of any of these smiling girls with eyes of covert wistfulness upon the handsome young principal.

After the festivities were over, Maria adjusted her hat in the dressing-room and fastened her long, blue cloak. She wrapped her roses again in the tissue-paper. They were very precious to her. The teacher whom she had met on

entering the academy was fastening her cloak, and she gazed at Maria with a sort of envious admiration.

“You look like a princess, all in blue, Miss Edgham,” said she. Her words were sweet, but her voice rang false.

“Thank you,” said Maria, and went out swiftly. She feared lest the other teacher attach herself to her, and the other teacher lived on the road towards the trolley. When Maria went out of the academy, that which she had almost feared to hope for happened. Wollaston stepped beside her, and she heard him ask if he might walk with her to the trolley.

Maria took his arm.

“Mother is with the Gleasons,” said Wollaston. His voice trembled.

Just then the boy who had sat with Maria on the car coming over walked with a defiant stride to her other side.

“Good-evening, Mr. Lee,” he said, lifting his hat. “Good-evening, Miss Edgham,” as if that was the first time that evening he had seen her. Then he walked on with her and Wollaston, and nothing was to be done but accept the situation. The young fellow was fairly belligerent with jealous rage. He had lost his young head over his teacher, and was doing something for which he would scorn himself later on.

Wollaston pressed Maria's hand closely under his arm, and she felt her very soul thrill, but they all talked of the tree and the festivities of the evening, with an apparent disregard of the terrible undercurrent of human emotions which had them all in its grasp. Wollaston carried Maria's presents and Evelyn's. When they reached the trolley-line, and he gave them to her, she managed to whisper a thank you for his beautiful roses, and he pressed her hand and said good-night. The boy asked with a mixture of humility and defiance if he could not carry her parcels (he himself had nothing but three neckties and a great silk muffler, which he did not value highly, as he was well stocked already, and he had thrust them into his pockets). “No, thank you,” said Maria, “I prefer to carry them myself.” She was curt, but she was so lit up with rapture that she could not help smiling at him as she spoke, and he again sat in the same car-seat. She hardly spoke a word all the way to Amity, but he walked to her door with her, alighting from the car at the same time she did, although he lived half a mile farther on.

“You will have to walk a half mile,” Maria observed, when he handed her off and let the car go on.

“I like to walk,” the boy said, fervently.

Maria had her latch-key. She opened the door hurriedly and ran in. She was half afraid that this irrepressible young man might offer to kiss her. “Good-night,” she said, and almost slammed the door in his face.

Aunt Maria had left a light burning low on the hall table. Maria took it and went up-stairs. She gathered up the skirt of her gown into a bag to hold the presents, hers and Evelyn's.

When she entered her own room and set the lamp on the dresser, she was aware of a little, nestling movement in the bed, and Evelyn's dark head and lovely face raised itself from the pillow.

“I came in here,” said Evelyn, “because I wanted to see you after you came home. Do you mind?”

“No, darling, of course I don't mind,” replied Maria.

She displayed Evelyn's presents, and the girl examined them eagerly. Maria thought she seemed disappointed even with her own gift of the brooch which she had expected would so delight her.

“Is that all?” Evelyn said.

“All?” laughed Maria. “Why, you little, greedy thing, what do you expect?”

To her astonishment Evelyn began suddenly to cry. She sobbed as if her heart would break, and would not tell her sister why she was so grieved. Finally, Maria having undressed and got into bed, her sister clung closely to her, still sobbing.

“Evelyn, darling, what is it?” whispered Maria.

“You'll laugh at me.”

“No, I won't, honest, precious.”

“Honest?”

“Yes, honest, dear.”

“Were those all the presents I had?”

“Yes, of course, I brought you all you had, dear.”

Evelyn murmured something inarticulate against Maria's breast.

“What is it, dear, sister didn't hear?”

“I hung a book on the tree for him,” choked Evelyn, “and I thought maybe—I thought—”

“Thought what?”

“I thought maybe he would—”

“Who would?”

“I thought maybe Mr. Lee would give me something,” sobbed Evelyn.

Maria lay still.

Evelyn nestled closer. “Oh,” she whispered, “I love him so! I can't help it. I can't. I love him so, sister!”

Chapter XXXIII

There was a second's hush after Evelyn had said that. It seemed to Maria that her heart stood still. A sort of incredulity, as of the monstrous and the super-human seized her. She felt as one who had survived a railroad accident might feel looking down upon his own dismembered body in which life still quivered. She could not seem to actually sense what Evelyn had said, although the words still rang in her ears. Presently, Evelyn spoke again in her smothered, weeping voice. “Do you think I am so very dreadful, so—immodest, to care so much about a man who has never said he cared about me?”

“He has never said anything?” asked Maria, and her voice sounded strange in her own ears.

“No, never one word that I could make anything of, but he has looked at me, he has, honest, sister.” Evelyn burst into fresh sobs.

Then Maria roused herself. She patted the little, soft, dark head.

“Why, Evelyn, precious,” she said, “you are imagining all this. You can't care so much about a man whom you have seen so little. You have let your mind dwell on it, and you imagine it. You don't care. You can't, really. You wait, and by-and-by you will find out that you care a good deal more for somebody else.”

But then Evelyn raised herself and looked down at her sister in the dark, and there was a ring in her voice which Maria had never before heard. “Not care,” she said—“not care! I will stand everything but that. Maria, don't you dare tell me I don't care!”

“But you don't know him at all, dear.”

“I know him better than anybody else in the whole world,” said Evelyn, still in the same strained voice. “The very minute I saw him I loved him, and then it seemed as if a great bright light made him plain to me. I do love him, Maria. Don't you ever dare say I don't. That is the only thing that makes me feel that I am not ashamed to live, the knowing that I do love him. I should be dreadful if I didn't love him—really love him, I mean, with the love that lasts. Do you suppose that if I only felt about him as some of the other girls do, that I would have told you? I *do* love him!”

“What makes you so sure?”

“What makes me so sure? Why, everything. I know there is not another man in the whole world for me that can possibly equal him, and then—I feel as if my whole life were full of him. I can't seem to remember much before he came. When I look back, it is like looking into the dark, and I can't imagine the world being at all without him.”

“Would you be willing to be very poor, to go without pretty things if you—married him, to live in a house like the Ramsey's on the other side of the river, not to have enough to eat and drink and wear?”

“I would have enough to eat and drink and wear. I would have as much as a queen if I had him,” cried Evelyn. “What do you think I care about pretty things, or even food and life itself, when it comes to anything like this? Live in a house like the Ramsey's! I would live in a cave. I would live on the street, and I should never know it was not a palace. Maria, you do know that I love him, don't you?”

“Yes, I know that you think you do.”

“No, say I do.”

“Yes, I know you do,” Maria said.

Then Evelyn lay down again, and wept quietly.

“Yes, I love him,” she moaned, “but he does not love me. You don't think he does, do you? I know you don't.”

Maria said nothing. She was sure that he did not.

“No, he does not. I see you know it,” Evelyn sobbed, “and all I cared about going to the Christmas-tree and wearing my new gown was on account of him, and I sent a beautiful book. I thought I could do that. All the girls in the senior class gave him something, and I have been saving up every cent, and he never gave me anything, not even a box of candy or flowers. Do you think he gave any of the other girls anything, Maria?”

“I don't think so.”

“I can't help hoping he did not. And I don't believe it is so very wicked, because I know that none of the other girls can possibly love him as much as I do. But, Maria—”

“Well?”

“I do love him enough not to complain if he really loved some other girl, and she was good, and would make him happy. I would go down on my knees to her to love him. I would, Maria, honest.” Evelyn was almost hysterical. Maria soothed her, and evaded as well as she was able her repeated little, piteous questions as to whether she thought Mr. Lee could ever care for her. “I know I am pretty,” Evelyn said naïvely. “I really think I must be prettier than any other girl in school. I have heard so, and I really think so myself, but being pretty means so little when it comes to anything like this with a man like him. He might love Addie Hemingway instead of me, so far as looks were concerned, but I don't think Addie would make him very happy—do you, Maria?”

“No, dear. I am quite sure he will never think of her. Now try and be quiet and go to sleep.”

“I cannot go to sleep,” moaned Evelyn, but it was not very long before she was drawing long, even breaths. Her youth had asserted itself. Then, too, she had got certain comfort from this baring of her soul before the soothing love of her sister.

As soon as Maria became sure that Evelyn was soundly asleep she gently unwound the slender, clinging arms and got out of bed, and stole noiselessly into Evelyn's own room, which adjoined hers. She did not get into bed, but took a silk comfortable off, and wrapped it around her, then sat down in a low chair beside the window. It seemed to her that if she could not have a little while to think by herself that she should go mad. The utterly inconceivable to her had happened, and the utterly inconceivable fairly dazzles the brain when it comes to pass. Maria felt as if she were outside all hitherto known tracks of life, almost as if she were in the fourth dimension. The possibility that her own sister might fall in love with the man whom she had married had never entered her mind before. She had checked Evelyn's wonder concerning him, but she had thought no more of it than of the usual foolish exuberance of a young girl. Now she believed that her sister really loved Wollaston. She recalled the fears which she had had with regard to her strenuous nature. She did not believe it to be a passing fancy of an ordinary young girl. She recalled word for word what Evelyn had said, and she believed. Maria sat awhile gazing out of the window at the starlit sky in a sort of blank of realization, of adjustment. She could not at first formulate any plan of action. She could only, as it were, state the problem. She gazed up at the northern constellations, at the mysterious polar star, and it seemed to steady her mind and give it power to deal with her petty problem of life by its far-away and everlasting guiding light. The window was partly open, and the same pungent odor of death and life in one which had endured all day came in her nostrils. She seemed to sense heaven and earth and herself as an atom, but an atom racked with infinite pain between the two.

“There is the great polar star,” she said to herself, “there are all the suns and stars, here is the earth, and here am I, Maria Edgham, who am on the earth, but must some day give up my mortal life and become a part of it, and part of the material universe and perhaps also of the spiritual. I am as nothing, and yet this pain in my heart, this love in my heart, makes me shine with my own fire as much as the star. I could not be unless the earth existed, but it is of such as myself that the earth is made up, and without such as myself it could not shine in its place in the heavens.”

Maria began to attach a certain importance to her individual existence even while she realized the pettiness of it, comparatively speaking. She was an infinitesimal part, but the whole could not be without that part. Suddenly the religious instruction which she had drank in with her mother's milk took possession of her, but she had a breadth of outlook which would have terrified her mother. Maria said to herself that she believed in God, but that His need of her was as much as her need of Him. She said to herself that without her tiny faith in Him, her tiny speck of love for Him, He would lack something of Himself. Then all at once, in a perfect flood of rapture, something which she had never before known came into her heart: the consciousness of the love of God for herself, of the need of God for herself, poor little Maria Edgham, whose ways of life had been so untoward and so absurd that she almost seemed to herself something to be laughed at rather than pitied, much less loved. But all at once the knowledge of the love of God was over her. She gazed up again at the great polar star overlooking with its eternal light the mysteries of the north, and for the first time in her whole life the primitive instinct of worship asserted itself within her. Maria rose, and fell on her knees, and continued to gaze up at the star which seemed to her like an eye of God Himself, and love seemed to pervade her whole being. She thought now almost lightly of Wollaston Lee. What was any earthly love to love like this, which took hold of the beginning and end of things, of the eternal? A resolution which this sense of love seemed to inspire came over her. It was a resolution almost grotesque, but it was sacred because her heart of hearts was in it, and she made it because of this love of God for her and her new sense of worship for something beyond the earth and all earthly affections which had taken possession of her. She rose, undressed herself, and went to bed. She did not say any prayer as usual. She seemed an incarnate prayer which made formulas unnecessary. Why was it essential to say anything when she was? At last she fell asleep, and did not wake until the dawn light was in the room. She did not wake as usual to a reunion with herself, but to a reunion with another self. She did not feel altogether happy. The resolution of the night before remained, but the ecstasy had vanished. She was not yet an angel, only a poor, human girl with the longings of her kind, which would not be entirely stifled as long as her human heart beat. But she did what she had planned. Maria had an unusually high forehead. It might have given evidence of intellect, of goodness, but it was not beautiful. She had always fluffed her blond hair over it, concealing it with pretty waves. This morning she brushed all her hair as tightly back as possible, and made a hard twist at an ugly angle at the back of her head. By doing this she did not actually destroy her beauty, for her regular features and delicate tints remained, but nobody looking at her would have called her even pretty. Her delicate features became pronounced and hardened, her nose seemed sharpened and elongated, her lips thinner. This display of her forehead hardened and made bold all her face and made her look years older than she was. Maria looked at herself in the glass with a sort of horror. She had always been fond of herself in the glass. She had loved that double of herself which had come and gone at her bidding, but now it was different. She was actually afraid of the stern, thin visage which confronted her, which was herself, yet not herself. When she was fully dressed it was worse still. She put on a gray gown which had never been becoming. It was not properly fitted. It was short-waisted, and gave her figure a short, chunky appearance. This chunky aspect, with her sharp face and strained back hair, made her seem fairly hideous to herself. But she remained firm. Her firmness, in reality, was one cause of the tightening and thinning of her lips. She hesitated when about to go down-stairs. She had not heard Evelyn go down. She wondered whether she had better wait until she went, or go into her room. She finally decided upon the latter course. Evelyn was standing in front of her dresser brushing her hair. When Maria entered she

threw with a quick motion the whole curly, fluffy mass over her face, which glowed through it with an intensity of shame. Evelyn, when she awoke that morning, felt as if she had revealed some nakedness of her very soul. The girl was fairly ill. She could not believe that she had said what she remembered herself to have said.

“Good-morning, dear,” said Maria.

Evelyn did not notice her changed appearance at all. She continued to brush away at the mist of hair over her face. “Oh, sister!” she murmured.

“Never mind, precious, we won't say anything more about it,” said Maria, and her voice had maternal inflections.

“I ought not,” stammered Evelyn, but Maria interrupted her.

“I have forgotten all about it, dear,” she said. “Now you had better hurry or you will be late.”

“When I woke up this morning and remembered, I felt as if I should die,” Evelyn said, in a choked voice.

“Nonsense,” said Maria. “You won't die, and it will all come out right. Don't worry anything about it or think anything more about it. Why don't you wear your red dress to school to-day? It is pleasant.”

“Well, perhaps I had better,” Evelyn said. She threw back her hair then, but still she did not look at Maria.

She arranged her hair and removed her little dressing-sack before she looked at Maria, who had seated herself in a rocking-chair beside the window. Aunt Maria always insisted upon getting breakfast without any assistance. The odor of coffee and baking muffins stole into the room. Evelyn got her red dress from the closet and put it on, still avoiding Maria's eyes. But at last she turned towards her.

“I am all ready to go down,” she said, in a weak little voice; then she gave a great start, and stared at Maria.

Maria bore the stare calmly, and rose.

“All right, dear,” she replied.

But Evelyn continued standing before her, staring incredulously. It was almost as if she doubted Maria's identity.

“Why, Maria Edgham!” she said, finally. “What is the matter?”

“What do you mean, dear?”

“What have you done to yourself to make you look so queer? Oh, I see what it is! It's your hair. Maria, dear, what have you strained it off your forehead in that way for? It makes you look—why—”

Then Maria lied. “My hair has been growing farther and farther off my forehead lately,” said she, “and I thought possibly the reason was because I covered it. I thought if I brushed my hair back it would be better for it. Then, too, my head has ached some, and it seemed to me the pain in my forehead would be better if I kept it cooler.”

“But, Maria,” said Evelyn, “you don't look so pretty. You don't, dear, honest. I hate to say so, but you don't.”

“Well I am afraid the pretty part of it will have to go,” said Maria, going towards the door.

“Oh, Maria, please pull your hair over your forehead just a little.”

“No, dear, I have it all fixed for the day, and it must stay as it is.”

Evelyn followed Maria down-stairs. She had a puzzled expression. Maria's hair was diverting her from her own troubles. She could not understand why any girl should deliberately make herself homely. She felt worried. It even occurred to wonder if anything could be the matter with Maria's mind.

When the two girls went into the little dining-room, where breakfast was ready for them, Aunt Maria began to say something about the weather, then she cut herself short when she saw Maria.

“Maria Edgham,” said she, “what on earth—”

Maria took her place at the table. “Those gems look delicious,” she observed. But Aunt Maria was not to be diverted.

“I don't want to hear anything about gems,” said she. “They are good enough, I guess. I always could make gems, but what I want to know is if you have gone clean daft.”

“I don't think so,” replied Maria, laughing.

But Aunt Maria continued to stare at her with an expression of almost horror.

“What under the sun have you got your hair done up that way for?” said she.

Maria repeated what she had told Evelyn.

“Stuff!” said Aunt Maria. “It will make the hair grow farther back straining it off your forehead that way, I can tell you that. You don't use common-sense, and as for your headache, I guess the hair didn't make it ache. It's the first I've heard of it. You look like a fright, I can tell you that.”

“Well, I can't help it,” said Maria. “I shall have to behave well to make up.”

“Maria Edgham, you don't mean to say you are going to school looking as you do now!”

Maria laughed, and buttered a gem.

“You look old enough to be your own grandmother. You have spoiled your looks.”

“Looks don't amount to much,” said Maria.

“Maria Edgham, are you crazy?”

“I hope not.”

“I told sister she didn't look so pretty,” said Evelyn.

“Look so pretty? She looks like a homely old maid. Your nose looks a yard long and your chin looks peaked and your mouth looks as if you were as ugly as sin. Your forehead is too high; it always was, and you ought to thank the Lord that he gave you pretty hair, and enough of it to cover up your forehead, and now you've gone and strained it back just as tight as you can and made a knot like a tough doughnut at the back of your head. You look like a crazy thing, I can tell you that.”

Maria said nothing. She ate her breakfast, while Aunt Maria and Evelyn could not eat much and were all the time furtively watching her.

Aunt Maria took Evelyn aside before the sisters left for school, and asked her in a whisper if she thought anything was wrong with Maria, if she had noticed anything, but Evelyn said she had not. But she and Aunt Maria looked at each other with eyes of frightened surmise.

When Maria had her hat on she looked, if anything, worse.

“Good land!” said Aunt Maria, when she saw her. “Well, if you are set on making a spectacle of yourself, I suppose you are.”

After the girls had gone she went into the other side of the house and told Eunice. “There she has gone and made herself look like a perfect scarecrow,” she said. “I wonder if there is any insanity in her father's family?”

“Did she look so bad?” asked Eunice, with a stare of terror at her sister-in-law.

“Look so bad! She looked as old and homely as you and I every bit.”

Maria made as much of a sensation on the trolley as she had done at home. The boy who had persecuted her the night before with his attentions bowed to Evelyn, and glanced at her evidently with no recognition. After a while he came to Evelyn and asked where her sister was that morning. Maria laughed, and he looked at her, then he fairly turned pale, and lifted his hat. He mumbled something and returned to his seat. Maria was conscious of his astonished and puzzled gaze at her all the way. When she reached the academy the other teachers—that is, the women—assailed her openly. One even attempted to loosen by force Maria's tightly strained locks.

“Why, Miss Edgham, you fairly frighten me,” she said, when Maria resisted.

Maria realized the amazement of the pupils when they entered her class-room, the amazement of incredulity and almost disgust. Everybody seemed amazed and almost disgusted except Wollaston Lee. He did, indeed, give one slightly surprised glance at her, then he seemed to notice nothing different in her appearance. The man's sense of duty and honor was so strong that in reality his sense of externals was blunted. He had a sort of sublime short-sightedness to everything that was not of the spirit. He had been convinced the night previous that Maria was beginning to regard him with favor, and being convinced of that made him insensible to any mere outward change in her. She looked to him, on the whole, prettier than usual because he seemed to see in her love for himself.

When the noon intermission came he walked into her class-room, and invited Maria and Evelyn to go with him to a near-by restaurant and lunch.

“I would ask you to go home with me,” he said, apologetically, to Maria, “but mother has a cold.”

Maria turned pale. She wondered if he had possibly told his mother. Then she remembered how he had promised her not to tell without her permission, and was reassured. Evelyn blushed and smiled and dimpled, and cast one of her sweet, dark glances at him, which he did not notice at all. His attention was fixed upon Maria, who hesitated, regarding him with her pale, pinched face. Evelyn took it for granted that Mr. Lee's invitation was only on her account, and that Maria was asked simply as a chaperon, and because, indeed, he could not very well avoid it. She jumped up and got her hat.

“It will be perfectly lovely,” she said, and faced them both, her charming face one glow of delight.

But Maria did not rise. She looked at the basket of luncheon which she had begun to unpack, and replied, coldly, “Thank you, Mr. Lee, but we have our luncheon with us.”

Wollaston looked at her in a puzzled way.

“But you could have something hot at the restaurant,” he said. The words were not much, but in reality he meant, and Maria so understood him, “Why, what do you mean, after last night? You know how I feel about you. Why do you

refuse?”

Maria took another sandwich from her basket. “Thank you for asking us, Mr. Lee,” she said, “but we have our luncheon.”

Her tone was fairly hostile. The hostility was not directed towards him, but towards the weakness in herself. But that he could not understand.

“Very well,” he said, in a hurt manner. “Of course I will not urge you, Miss Edgham.” Then he walked out of the room, hollowing his back and holding his head very straight in a way he had had from a boy when he was offended.

Evelyn pulled off her hat with a jerk. She looked at Maria with her eyes brilliant with tears. “I think you were mean, sister,” she whispered, “awful mean; so there!”

“I thought it was better not to go,” Maria replied. Her tone was at once stern and pitiful. Evelyn noticed only her sternness. She began to weep softly.

“There, he wanted me, too,” she said, “and of course he had to ask you, and you knew—I think you might have, sister.”

“I thought it was better not,” repeated Maria. “Now, dear, you had better eat your luncheon.”

“I don't want any luncheon.”

Maria began to eat a sandwich herself. There was an odd meekness and dejectedness in her manner. Presently she laid the half-eaten sandwich on the table and took out her handkerchief, and shook all over with helpless and silent sobs.

Then Evelyn looked at her, her pouting expression relaxed gradually. She looked bewildered.

“Why, what are you crying for?” she asked, in a low voice.

Maria did not answer.

Presently Evelyn rose and went over to her sister, and laid her cheek alongside hers and kissed her.

“Don't, sister,” she whispered. “I am sorry. I didn't mean to be cross. I suppose you were right not to go, only I did want to.” Evelyn snivelled a little. “I know he was hurt, too,” she said.

Maria raised her head and wiped her eyes. “I did not think it was best,” she said yet again. Then she looked at Evelyn and tried to smile. “Don't worry, precious,” she said. “Everything will come out all right.”

Evelyn gazed wonderingly at her sister's tear-stained face. “I don't see what you cried for, and I don't see why you wouldn't go,” she said. “The scholars will see you have been crying, and he will see, too. I don't see why you feel badly. I should think I was the one to feel badly.”

“Everything will come out all right,” repeated Maria. “Don't worry, sister's own darling.”

“Everybody will see that you have been crying,” said Evelyn, who was in the greatest bewilderment. “What did make you cry, Maria?”

“Nothing, dear. Don't think any more about it,” said Maria rising. She took a tumbler from the lunch-basket. “Go and fill this with water for me, that is a dear,” she said. “Then I will bathe my eyes. Nobody would know that you have been crying.”

“That is because I am not so fair-skinned,” said Evelyn; “but I don't see.”

She went out with the tumbler, shaking her head in a puzzled way. When she returned, Maria had the luncheon all spread out on the table, and looked quite cheerful in spite of her swollen eyes. The sisters ate together, and Evelyn was very sweet in spite of her disappointment. She was in reality very sweet and docile before all her negatives of life, and always would be. Her heart was always in leading-strings of love. She looked affectionately at Maria as they ate the luncheon.

“I am so sorry I was cross,” she said. “I suppose you thought that it would look particular if we went out to lunch with Mr. Lee.”

“Yes, I think it might have,” replied Maria.

“Well, I suppose it would,” said Evelyn with a sigh, “and I know all the other girls are simply dying for him, but he asked us, after all.” Evelyn said the last with an indescribable air of sweet triumph. It was quite evident that she regarded the invitation as meant for herself alone, and that she took ineffable delight in it in spite of the fact that it had been refused. She kept glancing out of the window as she ate. Presently she looked at her sister and laughed. “There he is coming now,” she said, “and he is all alone. He didn't take anybody else to luncheon.”

Chapter XXXIV

Wollaston Lee, approaching the academy on his return from his solitary lunch, was quite conscious of being commanded by the windows of Maria's class-room. He was so conscious that his stately walk became almost a strut. He felt resentment at Maria. He could not help it. He had not been, in fact, so much in love with her, as in that attitude of receptivity which invites love. He felt that she ought to be in love, and he wooed not only the girl but love itself.

Therefore resentment came more readily than if he had actually loved. He had been saying to himself, while he was eating his luncheon which mortified pride had rendered tasteless, that if it had not been for the fact of his absurd alliance with Maria she was the last girl in the world to whom he would have voluntarily turned, now that he was fully grown, and capable of estimating his own character and hers. He said to himself that she was pretty, attractive, and of undeniable strength of character, and yet that very strength of character would have repelled him. He was not a man who needed a wife of great strength of character, of consistent will. He himself had sufficient. His chances of happiness would have been greater with a wife in whom the affections and emotions were predominant; there would have been less danger of friction. Then, too, his wife would necessarily have to live with his mother, and his mother was very like himself. He said to himself that there would certainly be friction, and yet he also said that he could not abandon his attitude of readiness to reciprocate should Maria wish for his allegiance.

Now, for the first time, Wollaston had Evelyn in his mind. Of course he had noticed her beauty, and admired her. The contrary would not have been possible, but now he was conscious of a distinct sensation of soothed pride, when he remembered how she had smiled and dimpled at his invitation, and jumped up to get her hat.

“That pretty little thing wanted to come, anyhow. It is a shame,” he thought. Then insensibly he fell to wondering how he should feel if it were Evelyn to whom he were bound instead of her sister. It did not seem possible to him that the younger sister, with her ready gratitude and her evident ardor of temperament, could smile upon him at night and frown the next morning as Maria had done. He considered, also, how Evelyn would get on better with his mother. Then he resolutely put the thought out of his mind.

“It is not Evelyn, but Maria,” he said to himself, and shut his mouth hard. He resumed his attitude of obedience to duty, but one who is driven by duty alone almost involuntarily balks in spirit.

Wollaston was conscious of balking, although he would not retreat. When he saw Maria again after the exercises of the day were closed, and he encountered her as she was leaving the academy, she looked distinctly homely to him, and yet such was the honor of the man that he did not in the least realize that the homeliness was an exterior thing. It seemed to him that he saw her encompassed with the stiffness of her New England antecedents, as with an armor, and that he got a new and unlovely view of her character. On the contrary, Evelyn's charming, half-smiling, half-piteous face turned towards him seemed to afford glimpses of sweetest affections and womanly gentleness and devotion. Evelyn wished to say that she was sorry that they were obliged to refuse his invitation, but she did not dare. Instead, she gave him that little, half-smiling, half-piteous glance, to which he responded with a lighting up of his whole face and lift of his hat. Then Evelyn smiled entirely, and her backward glance at him was wonderfully alluring, yet maidenly, almost childish. Wollaston, on his way home, thought again how different it would be if Evelyn, instead of Maria, were his wife. Then he put it out of his head resolutely.

The next morning Maria arranged her hair as usual. She had comprehended that something more than mere externals were needful to change the mind of a man like Wollaston, and she gave up the attempt, it must be acknowledged, with a little pleasure. Feminine vanity was inherent in Maria. Nobody knew what the making herself hideous the day before had cost her.

“Oh, I am so glad you have done up your hair the old way,” Evelyn cried, when she saw her, and Aunt Maria remarked that she was glad to see that she had not quite lost her common-sense.

Maria began herself to think that she had not evinced much sense in her procedure of the day before. She had underestimated the character of the man whom she had married, and had made herself ridiculous for nothing. The boy who was infatuated with her, when he saw her on the trolley that morning, made a movement to go forward and speak to her, then he sat still with frequent puzzled glances at her. He was repelled if Wollaston was not. This changing of the face of a woman in a day's time filled him with suspicion. He looked hard at Maria's soft puff of hair, and reflected that it might be a wig; that anyway he was not so much in love as he had thought, with a girl who could look as Maria had done the day before.

When Maria reached the academy, the teachers greeted her with enthusiasm. One who was given to exuberance fairly embraced her.

“Now you are my own beautiful Miss Edgham again,” said she.

Wollaston, during the opening exercises, only glanced once at her, then he saw no difference. But he did look at Evelyn, and when she turned her lovely face away before his gaze and a soft blush rose over her round cheeks he felt his pulses quicken. But he did not speak a word to Maria or Evelyn all day.

When Evelyn went home that night she was very sober. She would not eat her supper, and Maria was sure that she heard her sobbing in the night. The next morning the child looked pale and wan, and Aunt Maria asked harshly if she were sick. Evelyn replied no quickly. When she and Maria were outside waiting for the trolley, Evelyn said, half catching her breath with a sob even then:

“Mr. Lee didn't speak a word to me all day yesterday. I know he did not like it because we didn't go to lunch with him.”

“Nonsense, dear,” said Maria. Then she added, with an odd, secretive meaning in her voice: “Don't worry, precious.”

“I can't help it,” said Evelyn.

When the term was about half finished it became evident to Maria that she and Evelyn must call upon Mrs. Lee, Wollaston's mother. She had put it off as long as she could, although all the other teachers had called, and Aunt Maria had kept urging her to do so.

“She is going to think it is awful funny if you don't call,” she said, “when you used to live in the same place, too.”

In reality, Aunt Maria, now that George Ramsey had married, was thinking that Wollaston might be a good match for Maria, and she wished to prevent her marriage with Professor Lane should he return from Colorado cured.

At last Maria felt that she was fairly obliged to go, and one Saturday afternoon she and Evelyn went to Westbridge for the purpose. Wollaston and his mother lived in an exceedingly pretty house. Mrs. Lee had artistic taste, and the rooms were unusual though simple. Maria looking about, felt a sort of homesick longing. She realized how perfectly a home like this would have suited her. As for Evelyn, she looked about with quick, bright glances, and she treated Mrs. Lee as if she were in love with her. She was all the time wondering if Wollaston would possibly come in, and in lieu of him, she played off her innocent graces with no reserve upon his mother. Wollaston did not come in. He had gone to the city, but when he came home his mother told him of the call.

“Those Edgham girls who used to live in Edgham, the one who teaches in your school, and her sister, called this afternoon,” said she.

“Did they?” responded Wollaston. He turned a page of the evening paper. It was after dinner, and the mother and son were sitting in a tiny room off the parlor, from which it was separated by some eastern portières. There was a fire on the hearth. The two windows, which were close together, were filled up with red and white geraniums. There was a red rug, and the walls were lined with books. Outside it had begun to snow, and the flakes drifted past the windows filled with red and white blossoms like a silvery veil of the storm.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Lee. Then she added, with a keen although covert glance at her son: “I like the younger sister.”

“She is considered quite a beauty, I believe,” said Wollaston.

“Quite a beauty; she is a perfect beauty,” said his mother with emphasis. “It seemed to me I never had seen such a perfectly beautiful, sweet girl. I declare, I actually wanted to take her in my arms. Anybody could live with that girl. As for her sister, I don't like her at all.”

Mrs. Lee was very like her son. She had the same square jaw and handsome face, which had little of the truly feminine in it. Her clear blue eyes surveyed every new person with whom she came in contact in her new dwelling place, with impartial and pitiless scrutiny. When she liked people she said so. When she did not she also said so, and, as far as she could, let them alone. When she spoke now, she looked as if Maria's face was actually before her. She did not frown, but her expression was one of complete hostility and unsparing judgment.

“Why don't you like her?” asked her son, with his eyes upon his paper.

“Why don't I like her? She is New England to the backbone, and one who is New England to the backbone is insufferable. She is stiff and set in her ways. She would go to the stake for a fad, or send her nearest and dearest there.”

“She is a very good teacher, and the pupils like her,” said Wollaston. He kept his voice quite steady.

“She may be a very good teacher,” said his mother. “I dare say she is. I can't imagine anybody not learning a task which she set them, but I don't like her.”

“She is pretty—at least, she is called so,” said Wollaston. Then he added, with an impulse of loyalty: “I think myself that she is very pretty.”

“I don't call her at all pretty,” said his mother. “She has a nose which looks as if it could pierce fate, and she sets her mouth as though she was deciding the laws of the universe. It is all very well in a man, that kind of a face, but I can't call it pretty in a woman.”

Wollaston glanced at his mother, and an expression of covert amusement was on his face as he reflected that his mother herself answered her own description of poor Maria, and did not dream of it. In fact, the two, although one was partly of New England heritage, and the other of a wholly different, more southern State, they were typically alike. They could meet only to love or quarrel; there could never be neutrality between them. Wollaston said no more, but continued reading his paper. He did not in reality sense one word which he read. He acknowledged to himself that he was very unhappy. He was caught in a labyrinth from which he saw no way of escape into the open. He realized that love for Maria had become almost impossible—that is, spontaneous love—even if she should change her attitude towards him. He realized a lurking sense of guilt as to his sentiments towards Evelyn, and he realized also that his mother and Maria could never live together in peace. Once Mrs. Lee took a dislike, her very soul fastened upon it as with a grip of iron jaws. Doubtless if she knew that her son was in honor bound to Maria she would try to make the best of it, but the best of it would be bad enough. He wondered while he sat with the paper before his face what Maria's real attitude towards him was. He could not understand such apparent inconsistencies in a woman of his mother's type, and he had been almost sure that one night that Maria loved him.

Chapter XXXV

Maria, after that call, faced her future course more fully than ever. She had disliked Mrs. Lee as much as Mrs. Lee had disliked her. Only the fact that she was Wollaston's mother made her endurable to her.

“Isn't Mrs. Lee perfectly lovely?” said Evelyn, when she and Maria were on their way home.

“Yes,” Maria answered, but she did not think so. Mrs. Lee shone for her only with reflected glory.

“I wonder where Mr. Lee was?” Evelyn murmured, timidly.

“I don't know,” Maria said with an absent air. “We did not go to call on him.”

“Of course we didn't,” said Evelyn. “Don't be cross, sister.”

“I am not in the least cross,” Maria answered with perfect truth.

“I didn't know but you were, you spoke so,” said Evelyn. She leaned wearily against her sister, and looked ahead with a hollow, wistful expression.

Evelyn had grown thin and lost much of her color. Aunt Maria and Eunice talked about it when they were alone.

“I wonder if there is any consumption in her mother's family?” Aunt Maria said.

“I wonder,” said Eunice. “I don't like the way she looks.”

“Well, don't say anything about it to Maria, for she will worry herself sick,” said Aunt Maria. “She sets her eyes by Evelyn.”

“Don't you think she notices?”

“No, she hasn't said a word about it.”

But Aunt Maria was wrong. Maria had noticed. That afternoon, returning from Westbridge, she looked anxiously down at her sister.

“Don't you feel well, dear?” she asked.

“Perfectly well,” Evelyn replied languidly, “only I am a little tired.”

“Perhaps it is the spring weather,” said Maria.

Evelyn nodded. It was the beginning of the spring term, and spring came like a flood that year. The trees fairly seemed to burst forth in green-and-rosy flames, and the shrubs in the door-yards bloomed so boldly that they shocked rather than pleased.

“I like the spring to come slowly, so one does not feel choked with it,” Evelyn said after a little, as she gazed out of the window. “There are actually daisies in that field. They have come too soon.” Evelyn spoke with an absurd petulance which was unusual with her.

Maria laughed. “Well, dear, we can't help it,” she said.

“If this world is for people, and not the people for this world, it seems to me we ought to be able to help a little,” said Evelyn with perfectly unconscious heresy. “There it rained too much last week, and this week it is too hot, and the apple blossoms have come too soon after the cherry blossoms. It is like eating all your candy in one big pill.”

Maria laughed again, but Evelyn sighed wearily. The car was very hot and close.

“I shall be thankful when we get home,” Evelyn said.

“Yes, you will feel better when you get home and have some supper,” said Maria.

“I don't want any supper,” said Evelyn.

“If you don't eat any supper you cannot study this evening.”

“I must study,” said Evelyn with a feverish light in her eyes.

“You can't unless you eat.”

“Well, I will drink some milk,” said Evelyn. She was studying very hard. She was very ambitious, both naturally and because of her feeling for Wollaston Lee. It seemed to her that she should die if she did not stand well in her class. Evelyn had received so little notice from Wollaston that she had made up her mind that he did not care for her, and the conviction was breaking her heart, but she said to herself that she would graduate with honors that she might have that much, that she must.

The graduating with honors would have been easy to the girl, for she had naturally a quick grasp of knowledge, but her failing health and her almost unconquerable languor made it hard for her to work as usual. However, she persisted. It became evident that she would stand first among the girls of her class, and only second to one boy, who had a large brain and little emotion, and was so rendered almost impregnable. Ida sent Evelyn a graduating costume from Paris, and the girl brightened a little after she had tried it on. She could not quite give up all hope of being loved when she saw herself in that fluffy white robe, and looked over her slender shoulder at her graceful train, and reflected how she would not only look pretty but acquit herself with credit. She said to herself that if she were a man she should love herself. There was about Evelyn an almost comical naïveté and truthfulness.

Ida also sent Maria a gown for the graduating exercises. Hers was a pale blue, very pretty, but not as pretty as Evelyn's. The night after the gowns came Maria was startled by a sudden rush into her room when she was almost asleep, and Evelyn nestling into her arms and sobbing out that she was sorry, she was sorry, but she could not help it.

“Can't help what, darling?” said Maria.

“Can't help being glad that my dress is so much prettier than yours,” wept Evelyn. “I am sorry, sister, but I can't help it, and I am so ashamed I had to come in and tell you.”

Maria laughed and kissed her. “Sister is very glad yours is the prettiest,” she said.

“Oh, I am so sorry I am so selfish,” sobbed Evelyn. Then she added, in a tiny whisper, “I know now he won't ever think of me, but I can't help being glad I shall look nice for him to see, anyway.”

Evelyn was asleep long before her sister. Maria lay awake, with the little, frail body in her arms, realizing with horror how very frail and thin it was. Evelyn was of the sort whom emotion can kill. She was being consumed like a lamp which needed oil. Love was for the girl not only a need but a condition of life. Maria was realizing it. At the same time she said to herself that possibly after school was over and Evelyn could rest she might regain her strength. There seemed to be no organic trouble. The local physician had been consulted, and said that nothing whatever was the matter, yet had gone away with a grave face after prescribing a simple tonic. The fact was that life was flickering low, as it sometimes does, with no ostensible reason which science could grasp. Evelyn was beyond science. She was assailed in that citadel of spirit which overlooks science from the heights of eternity. No physician but fate itself could help her.

All this time, while Maria was suffering as keenly as her sister, her suffering left no evidence. She had inherited from her mother a tremendous strength of will, which sustained her. She said to herself that she had her work to do, that her health must not fail. She said that probably Wollaston did not care for her, although she could not help thinking that she had the power to make him care, and that she would be lacking in all that meant her true and best self should she give way to her unhappiness and let it master her. She therefore mastered it. In those days to Maria, who had a ready imagination, her unhappiness seemed sometimes to assume a material shape like the fabulous dragon. She seemed to be fighting something with tooth and claw, a monstrous verity; but she fought, and she kept the upper hand. Maria did not lose flesh. She ate as usual, she retained her interest in her work, and all the time whenever a moment of solitude came she renewed the conflict. She thought as little as possible of Wollaston; she avoided even looking at him. He thought that he really was an object of aversion to her. He began to question the advisability of his retaining his position another year. He told himself that it was hardly fair to Maria to subject her to such annoyance, that it was much easier for him to obtain another position than it was for her. He wanted to ask her with regard to it, but in the days before commencement she so manifestly shrank from even looking at him that he hardly liked to approach her even with a question which concerned her own happiness.

Wollaston in those days used sometimes to glance at Evelyn, and notice how very thin and delicate she looked, and an anxiety which was almost paternal was over him. He used almost to wish that she was not so proficient in her studies. One day, meeting her in the vestibule when no one was in sight, he could not resist the impulse which led him to pat her little, dark, curly head and say, in a voice broken with tenderness:

“Don't study too hard, little one.”

Evelyn gave an upward glance at him and ran away. Wollaston stood still a moment, dazed. He was not naturally a conceited man. Then, too, he had always regarded himself as so outside the pale that he doubted the evidence of his own senses. If he had not been tied to Evelyn's sister he would have said to himself, in a rapture, that that look of the young girl's meant, could mean, only one thing: that all her innocent heart was centred upon himself. It would have savored no more of conceit that the seeing his face in a mirror. He would simply have thought it the truth. But now, since he was always forgetting that other women did not know the one woman's secret, and looked upon him as an unmarried man, and therefore a fit target for their innocent wiles, the preening of their dainty dove plumage, he said to himself that he must have been mistaken. That Evelyn had looked at him as she had done only because she was nervous and overwrought, and the least thing was sufficient to disturb her equilibrium.

However, he was very careful not to address Evelyn particularly again, but that one little episode had been sufficient for the girl to build another air castle upon. That night when she went home she was radiant with happiness. Her color had returned, smiles lit her whole face. Ineffable depths of delight sparkled in her eyes. It seemed almost a sacrilege to look at the young girl, whose heart was so plainly evident in her face. Maria looked at her, and felt a chill in her own heart.

“Something must have happened,” she said to herself. She thought that Evelyn would tell her, but she did not; she ate her supper with more appetite than she had shown for many a week. Her gayety in the evening, when some neighbors came in, was so unrestrained and childlike that it was fairly infectious. They sat out on the front door-step. It had been a warm day, and the evening cool was welcome and laughter floated out into the street. It was laughter over nothing, but irresistible, induced because of the girl's exuberant mood. She felt that night as if there was no meaning in the world except happiness and fun. George Ramsey, going home about nine o'clock, heard the laughter, and shrugged his shoulders rather bitterly. Lily had made him such a good wife, according to the tenets of wifehood, that he had apparently no reason to complain. She was always perfectly amiable and affectionate, not violently affectionate, but with the sort of affection which does not ruffle laces nor disarrange hair, and that he had always considered the most desirable sort of affection in the long-run. She and his mother got on very well also—that is, apparently. Lily, it was true, always had her way, but she had it so gently and unobtrusively that one really doubted if she were not herself the conceder. She always looked the same, she dressed daintily, and arranged her fair hair beautifully. George did not own to himself that sameness irritated him when it was such charming sameness. However, he did sometimes realize, and sternly put it away from him, a little sting when he happened to meet Maria. He had a feeling as if he had gone from a waxwork show and met a real woman.

To-night when he heard the peals of laughter from the front door of the Stillman house he felt the sting again, and an unwarrantable childish indignation as if he had been left out of something and slighted. He was conscious of wishing when he reached home that his wife would greet him with a frown and reproaches; in fact, with something new, instead of her sweet, gentle smile of admiration, looking up from her everlasting embroidering, from where she sat beside the sitting-room lamp. George felt furious with her for admiring him. He sat down moodily and took up the evening paper. His mother was not there. She had gone to her room early with a headache.

Finally, Lily remarked that it was a beautiful night, and it was as exactly what might have been expected from her flower-like lips as the squeaking call for mamma of a talking doll. George almost grunted a response, and rattled his paper loudly. Lily looked at him with a little surprise, but with unfailing love and admiration. George had sometimes a feeling that if he were to beat her she would continue to admire him and think it lovely of him. Lily had, in fact, the soul of an Oriental woman in the midst of New England. She would have figured admirably in a harem. George, being Occidental to his heart's core, felt an exasperation the worse because it was needfully dumb, on account of this adoration. He thought less of himself because his wife thought he could do no wrong. The power of doing wrong is, after all, a power, and George had a feeling of having lost that power and of being in a negative way wronged. Finally he spoke crossly to Lily over his newspaper.

“Why do you stick so to that everlasting fancy-work?” said he. “Why on earth don't you sometimes run out of an evening? You never go into the next house nowadays.”

Lily arose directly.

“We will go over there now if you wish,” said she. She laid down her work and smoothed her hair with her doll-like gesture, which never varied.

George looked at her surlily and irresolutely.

“No, I guess we had better not to-night,” he said.

“I had just as lief, dear.”

George rose, letting his paper slide to the floor.

“Well,” he said, “they are all out on the front door-step, and I think some of the neighbors are there, too. We might run over a moment. It is too hot to stay in the house, anyway.”

But when George and Lily came alongside the Stillman house the laughter was hushed, and there was a light in Aunt Maria's bedroom, and lights also in the chambers behind the drawn curtains.

“We are too late,” said George. “They have gone to bed.”

“I think they have,” replied Lily, looking up at the lighted bedroom windows. Then she added, “I will go over there any evening you wish, dear,” and looked at him with that unfailing devotion which unreasonably angered him.

He answered her quite roughly, and was ashamed of himself afterwards.

“It is a frightfully monotonous life we lead anyhow,” said he, as if she, Lily, were responsible for it.

“Suppose we go away a week somewhere next month,” said Lily.

“Well, I'll think of it,” said he, striding along by her side. Even that suggestion, which was entirely reasonable, angered him, and he felt furious and ashamed of himself for being so angered.

Lily was constantly making him ashamed of himself for not being a god and for feeling unreasonable anger when she did nothing to provoke it. Once in a while a man likes to have a reasonable cause for resentment in order to prove himself in the right.

“Well, I am ready to go whenever you wish to do so, dear,” said Lily. “My wardrobe is in order.”

“Well, we'll see,” George grunted again, as he and Lily retraced their steps.

They sat down again in the sitting-room, and Lily took up her embroidery, and he read a murder case in his paper.

Meanwhile, Maria, after putting out her lamp, was lying awake in bed thinking that Evelyn would come in and make some confidence to her, but she did not come. Maria felt horribly uneasy. She could not understand her sister's sudden change of mood, and yet she did not for a moment doubt Wollaston. She said to herself that as far as she was concerned she would brave the publicity if Wollaston loved Evelyn, but she recalled as exactly as if she had committed them to heart what Evelyn had said with regard to divorce and the horror which she had expressed of a divorced man or woman remarrying. Then she further considered how much worse it would be if the divorced man married her own sister. That course seemed to her impossible. She imagined the horrible details, the surmises, the newspaper articles, and she said to herself that even if she herself were willing to face the ordeal it would be still more of an ordeal for Wollaston and Evelyn. She said to herself that it was impossible; then she also said to herself, with no bitterness, but with an acquiescence in the logic of it, that it would be much better for them all if she, Maria, should die.

Chapter XXXVI

Evelyn's return of appetite and spirits endured only a few days. Then she seemed worse than she had been before. In fact, Wollaston, thinking that he had done wrong in yielding for only a second to his impulse of tender protection and admiration for the young girl, went too far in the opposite direction. In order to make amends to Maria, himself, and Evelyn, he was actually rude, almost brutal. He scarcely spoke to Evelyn. On one occasion he even reprimanded her severely in a class for a slight mistake. Evelyn turned pale, and gave him a glance like that of some pretty, little, harmless animal which has nothing except love and devotion in its heart, and whose very mistakes are those of love and over-anxiety to please. Wollaston was struck to the heart by the look, but he did not relax one muscle of his stern face.

“I think Mr. Lee treated you mean, so there,” Addie Hemingway said to Evelyn when they had left the room.

Evelyn said nothing. Her face continued pale and shocked. It was inconceivable to her that anybody, least of all Mr. Lee, could have spoken so to her.

“He's treating you like a child,” Addie Hemingway continued. “Mr. Lee has no right to speak so to seniors.” Addie's words were in themselves sympathetic, but there was an undertone of delight at the other girl's discomfiture in her voice which she could not eliminate. In reality she was saying to herself that Evelyn Edgham, in spite of her being so pretty, had had to meet a rebuff, and she exulted in it.

Evelyn still said nothing. She left Addie abruptly and joined Maria in her class-room. It was the noon-hour. Maria glanced anxiously at her sister as she entered.

“Why, darling, what is the matter?” she cried.

“Nothing,” replied Evelyn. An impulse of loyalty seized her. She would not repeat, not even to Maria, the unkind words which Mr. Lee had used towards her.

“But you look so pale, dear,” said Maria.

“It was warm in there,” said Evelyn, with a quiet, dejected air unusual to her.

Maria could not get any admission that anything was wrong from her. Evelyn tried to eat her luncheon, making more of an effort than usual, but she could not. At last she laid her head down on her sister's table and wept with the utter abandon of a child, but she still would not tell what caused her tears.

After that Evelyn lost flesh so rapidly that it became alarming. Maria and her aunt wondered if they ought to allow her to go through the strain of the graduation exercises, but neither dared say anything about it to her. Evelyn's whole mind seemed fastened upon her graduation and the acquitting of herself with credit. She studied assiduously. She often used to go into the spare chamber and gaze at her graduating dress, which was spread out on the bed there covered with a sheet.

“She's so set on that graduation and wearing that dress,” Aunt Maria said to Eunice Stillman, her sister-in-law, one day when she was alone with her in her parlor and heard Evelyn's light step overhead. “She goes in there almost every day and looks at it.”

Eunice sighed. “Well, I wish she looked better,” said she.

“So do I. It seems to me that she loses every day.”

“Did you ever think—” began Eunice. Then she stopped and hesitated.

“Think what?”

“If—anything happened to her, that that dress—”

“Oh, for the land sake, stop, Eunice!” cried Aunt Maria, impatiently. “Ain't I had it on my mind the whole time. And that dress looks just as if it was laid out there.”

“Do you think Maria notices?”

“Yes, she's just as worried as I am. But what can we do? Maybe if Evelyn gets through the graduation she will be better. I shall be thankful when it's over, for my part.”

“How that child's mother could have gone off and left her all this time I don't see,” Eunice said. “If I were in her place and anything happened to her, I should never forgive myself.”

“Trust Ida Slome to forgive herself for most anything,” Aunt Maria returned, bitterly. “But as far as that goes, I guess the child has had full as good care here as she would have had with her ma.”

“I guess so, too,” said Eunice; “better—only I should never forgive myself.”

That was only a week before the graduation day, which was on a Wednesday. It was a clear June day, with a sky of blue, veiled here and there with wing-shaped clouds. It was quite warm. Evelyn dressed herself very early. She was ready long before it was time to take the car. Evelyn, in her white graduating dress, was fairly angelic. Although she had lost so much flesh, it had not affected her beauty, only made it more touching. Her articulations and bones were so fairy-like and delicate that even with her transparent sleeved and necked dress there were no unseemly protuberances. Her slenderness, moreover, was not so apparent in her fluffy gown. Above her necklace of pink corals her lovely face showed. It was full of a gentle and uncomplaining melancholy, yet that day there was a tinge of hope in it. The faintest and most appealing smile curved her lips. She looked at everybody with a sort of wistful challenge. It was as if she said: “After all, am I not pretty, and worthy of being loved? Am I not worthy of being loved, even if I am not, and I have all my books in my head, too?”

Maria had given her a bouquet of red roses. When Evelyn in her turn came forward to read her essay, holding her red roses, with red roses of excitement burning on her delicate cheeks, there was a low murmur of admiration. Then it was that Maria, in her blue gown, seated among the other teachers, caught the look on Wollaston Lee's face. It was unmistakable. It was a look of the utmost love and longing and admiration, the soul of the man, for the minute, was plainly to be read. In a second, the look was gone, but Maria had seen. “He is in love with her,” she told herself, “only he is so honorable that he chokes the love back.” Maria turned very pale, but she listened with smiling lips to Evelyn's essay. It was very good, but not much beyond the usual rate of such productions. Evelyn had nothing creative about her,

although she was even a brilliant scholar. But the charm of that little flutelike voice, coming from that slight, white-clad beauty, made even platitudes seem like something higher than wisdom.

When Evelyn had finished there was a great round of applause and a shower of flowers. She returned again and again, and bowed, smiling delightedly. She was flushed with her triumph. She thought that even Mr. Lee must be pleased with her, if he did not love her, and be proud to have such a pupil.

That evening there was to be a reception for the teachers, and the graduating-class, at Mr. Lee's house. Evelyn and Maria had planned to go to one of the other teacher's, who lived in Westbridge, have supper, and go from there to the reception. But when the exercises were over, and they had reached the teacher's home, Evelyn's strength gave way. She had a slight fainting fit. The teacher, an elderly woman who lived alone, gave her home-made wine and made her take off her dress, put on one of her own wrappers, and lie down and rest until the last minute, in the hope that she would be able to go to the reception. But it became evident that the girl was too exhausted. When Maria and the teacher were fastening her dress again, she fainted the second time. The teacher, who was a decisive woman, spoke.

“There is no sense whatever in this child's leaving this house to-night,” said she. “Maria, you go to the reception, and I will stay and take care of her.”

“No,” said Maria. “If Evelyn is not able to go, I think we had better take the trolley at once for home.” Maria was as decided as the other teacher. When the white-clad graduates and the teachers were gathering at Wollaston Lee's, she and Evelyn boarded the trolley for Amity. Evelyn still held fast to her bouquet of red roses, and Maria was laden with baskets and bouquets which had been strewn at her shrine. Evelyn leaned back in her seat, with her head resting against the window, and did not speak. All her animation of the morning had vanished. She looked ghastly. Maria kept glancing furtively at her. She herself looked nearly as pale as Evelyn. She realized that she was face to face with a great wall of problem. She was as unhappy as Evelyn, but she was stronger to bear unhappiness. She had philosophy, and logic, and her young sister was a creature of pure emotion, and at the same time she was so innocent and ignorant that she was completely helpless before it. Evelyn closed her eyes as she leaned against the window-frame, and a chill crept over her sister as she thought that she could not look much different if she were dead. Then came to Maria the conviction that this sister's life meant more than anything else in the world to her. That she could bear the loss of everything rather than that, and when she too would not be able to avoid the sense of responsibility for it. If she had not been so headlong and absurdly impetuous years ago, Evelyn might easily have been happy and lived.

When they reached home, Aunt Maria, who had come on an earlier car, was already in her bedroom and the front-door was fastened and the sitting-room windows were dark. Maria knocked on the door, and presently she heard footsteps, then Aunt Maria's voice, asking, with an assumption of masculine harshness, who were there.

“It is only I and Evelyn,” replied Maria.

Then the door was opened, and Aunt Maria, in her ruffled night-gown and cap, holding a streaming lamp, stood back hastily lest somebody see her. “Come in and shut the door quick, for goodness sake!” said she. “I am all undressed.”

Maria and Evelyn went in, and Maria closed and locked the door.

“What have you come home for?” asked Aunt Maria. “Why didn't you go to the reception, and stay at Miss Thomas's, the way you said you were going to, I'd like to know?”

“Evelyn didn't feel very well, and I thought we'd better come home,” replied Maria, with a little note of evasion in her voice.

Aunt Maria turned and looked sharply at Evelyn, who was leaning against the wall. She was faint again, and she looked, in her white dress with her slender curves, like a bas-relief. “What on earth is the matter with her?” asked Aunt Maria in her angry voice, which was still full of the most loving concern. She caught hold of Evelyn's slight arm. “You are all tired out, just as I expected,” she said. “I call the whole thing pure tomfoolery. If girls want to get educated, let them, but when it comes to making such a parade when they are all worn out with education there is no sense in it. Maria, you get her up-stairs to bed.”

Evelyn was too exhausted to make any resistance. She allowed Maria to assist her up-stairs and undress her. When her sister bent over her to kiss her good-night, she said, soothingly, “There now, darling; go to sleep. You will feel better now school is done and you will have a chance to rest.”

But Evelyn responded with the weakest and most hopeless little sob.

“Don't cry, precious,” said Maria.

“Won't you tell if I tell you something?” said Evelyn, raising herself on one slender arm.

“No, dear.”

“Well—he does—care a good deal about me. I know now. I—I met him out in the grove after the exercises were over, and—there was nobody there, and he—he caught hold of my arms, and, Maria, he looked at me, but—” Evelyn burst into a weak little wail.

“What is it, dear?”

“Oh, I don't know what it is, but for some reason he thinks he can't tell me. He did not say so, but he made me know, and—and oh, Maria, he is going away! He is not coming back to Westbridge at all. He is going to get another place!”

“Nonsense!”

“Yes, it is so. He said so. Oh, Maria! you will think I am dreadful, and I do love you and Aunt Maria and Uncle Henry and Aunt Eunice, but I can't help minding his going away where I can never see him, more than anything else in the world. I can't help loving him most. I do feel so very badly, sister, that I think I shall die.”

“Nonsense, darling.”

“Yes, I shall. And I am not ashamed now. I was ashamed because I thought so much about a man who did not care anything about me, but now I am not ashamed. I am just killed. A person is not to blame for being killed. I am not ashamed. I am killed. He is going away, and I shall never see him again. The sight of him was something; I shall not even have that. You don't know, sister. I don't love him for my own self, but for himself. Just the knowing he is near is something, and I shall not even have that.” Evelyn was too weak to cry tumultuously, but she made little, futile moans, and clung to Maria's hand. Maria tried to soothe her, and finally the child, worn out, seemed to be either asleep or in the coma of exhaustion.

Then Maria went into her own room. She undressed, and sat down beside the window with a wrapper over her night-gown. Now she had to solve her problem. She began as she might have done with a problem in higher algebra, this problem of the human heart and its emotions. She said to herself that there were three people. Evelyn, Wollaston and herself, three known quantities, and an unknown quantity of happiness, and perhaps life itself, which must be evolved from them. She eliminated herself and her own happiness not with any particular realization of self-sacrifice. She came of a race of women to whom self-sacrifice was more natural than self-gratification. She was unhappy, but there was no struggle for happiness to render the unhappiness keener. She thought first of Evelyn. She loved Wollaston. Maria reasoned, of course, that she was very young. This first love might not be her only one, but the girl's health might break under the strain, and she took into consideration, as she had often done, the fairly abnormal strength of Evelyn's emotional nature in a slight and frail young body. Evelyn was easily one who might die because of a thwarted love. Then Maria thought of Wollaston, and, loving him as she did, she acknowledged to herself coolly that he was the first to be considered, his happiness and well being. Even if Evelyn did break her heart, the man must have the first consideration. She tried to judge fairly as to whether she or Evelyn would on the whole be the best for him. She estimated herself, and she estimated Evelyn, and she estimated the man. Wollaston Lee was a man of a strong nature, she told herself. He was capable of self-restraint, of holding his head up from his own weaknesses forever. Maria reasoned that if he had been a weaker man she would have loved him just the same, and in that case Evelyn would have been the one to be sacrificed. She thought that a girl like Evelyn would not have been such a good wife for a weak man as she herself, who was stronger. But Wollaston did not need any extraneous strength. On the contrary, some one who was weaker than he might easily strengthen his strength. It seemed to her that Evelyn was distinctly better for the man than she. Then she remembered the look which she had seen on his face when Evelyn began her essay that day.

“If he does not love her now it is because he is bound to me,” she thought. “He would most certainly love her if it were not for me.”

Again it seemed to Maria distinctly better that she should die, better—that is, for Evelyn and the man. But she had the thought, with no morbid desire for suicide or any bitterness. It simply seemed to her as if her elimination would produce that desirable unknown quantity of happiness.

Elimination and not suicide seemed to her the only course for her to pursue. She sat far into the night thinking it over. She had great imagination and great daring. Things were possible to her which would not have been possible to many—that is, she considered things as possibilities which would have seemed to many simply vagaries. She thought of them seriously, with a belief in their fulfilment. It was almost morning, the birds had just begun to sing in scattering flute-like notes, when she crept into bed.

She hardly slept at all. She heard the gathering chorus of the birds, in a half doze, until seven o'clock. Then she got up and dressed herself. She peeped cautiously into Evelyn's room. The girl was sleeping, her long, dark lashes curled upon her wan cheeks. She looked ghastly, yet still lovely. Maria looked at her, and her mouth compressed. Then she turned away. She crept noiselessly down the stairs and into the kitchen where Aunt Maria was preparing breakfast. The stove smoked a little and the air was blue.

“How is she?” asked Aunt Maria, in a hushed voice.

“She is fast asleep.”

“Better let her sleep just as long as she will,” said Aunt Maria. “These exhibitions are pure tomfoolery. She is just tuckered out.”

“Yes, I think she is,” said Maria.

Aunt Maria looked keenly at her, and her face paled and lengthened.

“Maria Edgham, what on earth is the matter with *you?*” she said. “You look as bad as she does. Between both of you I am at my wit's end.”

“Nothing ails me,” said Maria.

“Nothing ails you? Look at yourself in the glass there.”

Maria stole a look at herself in a glass which hung over the kitchen-table, and she hardly knew her own face, it had gathered such a strange fixedness of secret purpose. That had altered it more than her pallor. Maria tried to smile and say again that nothing ailed her, but she could not. Suddenly a tremendous pity for her aunt came over her. She had not thought so much about that. But now she looked at things from her aunt's point of view, and she saw the pain to which the poor old woman must be put. She saw no way of avoiding the giving her the pain, but she suffered it herself. She

went up to Aunt Maria and kissed her.

Aunt Maria started back, and rubbed her face violently. “What did you do that for?” said she, in a frightened voice. Then she noticed Maria's dress, which was one which she seldom wore unless she was going out. “What have you got on your brown suit for this morning?” said she.

“I thought I would go down to the store after breakfast and get some embroidery silk for that centre-piece,” replied Maria.

As she spoke she seemed to realize what a little thing a lie was, and how odd it was that she should realize it, who had been brought up to speak the truth.

“Your gingham would have been enough sight better to have worn this hot morning,” said Aunt Maria, still with that air of terror and suspicion.

“Oh, this dress is light,” replied Maria, going out.

“Where are you going now?”

“Into the parlor.”

Aunt Maria stood still, listening, until she heard the parlor door open. She was still filled with vague suspicion. She did not hear quite as acutely as formerly, and Maria had no difficulty about leaving the parlor unheard the second after she entered it, and getting her hat and coat and a small satchel which she had brought down-stairs with her from the hat-tree in the entry. Then she opened the front door noiselessly and stole out. She went rapidly down the street in the direction of the bridge, which she had been accustomed to cross when she taught school in Amity. She met Jessy Ramsey, now grown to be as tall as herself, and pretty with a half-starved, pathetic prettiness. Jessy was on her way to work. She went out by the day, doing washings. She stopped when she met Maria, and gave a little, shy look—her old little-girl look—at her. Maria also stopped. “Good-morning, Jessy,” said she. Then she asked how she was, if her cough was better, and where she was going to work. Then, suddenly, to Jessy's utter amazement and rapture, she kissed her. “I never forget what a good little girl you were,” said she, and was gone. Jessy stood for a moment staring after her. Then she wiped her eyes and proceed to her scene of labor.

Maria went to the railroad station. She was just in time for a train. She got on the rear car and sat in the last seat. She looked about and did not see anybody whom she knew. She recalled how she had run away before, and how Wollaston had brought her back. She knew that it would not happen so again. She was on a through train which did not stop at the station where he had found her. When the train slowed up a little in passing that station, she saw the bench on the platform where she had sat, and a curious sensation came over her. She was like one who has made the leap and realizes that there is nothing more to dread, and who gets even a certain abnormal pleasure from the sensation. When the conductor came through the car she purchased her ticket for New York, and asked when the train was due in the city. When she learned that it was due at an hour so late that it would be impossible for her to go, as she had planned, to Edgham that night, she did not, even then, for the time being, feel in the least dismayed. She had plenty of money. Her last quarter's salary was in her little satchel. The train was made up of Pullmans only, and it was by a good chance that she had secured a seat. She gazed out of the large window at the flying landscape, and again that sense of pleasure in the midst of pain was over her. The motion itself was exhilarating. She seemed to be speeding past herself and her own anxieties, which suddenly appeared as petty and evanescent as the flying telegraph-poles along the track. “It has to be over some time,” she reflected. “Nothing matters.” She felt comforted by a realization of immensity and the continuance of motion. She comprehended her own atomic nature in the great scheme of things. She had never done so before. Her own interests had always loomed up before her like a beam in the eye of God. Now she saw that they were infinitesimal, and the knowledge soothed her. She leaned her head back and dozed a little. She was awakened by the porter thrusting a menu into her hands. She ordered something. It was not served promptly, and she had no appetite. There was some tea which tasted of soap.

Chapter XXXVII

There were very few people in this car, for the reason that there had recently been a terrible rear-end collision on the road, and people had flocked into the forward cars. There were three young girls who filled the car with chatter, and irritated Maria unreasonably. They were very pretty and well dressed, and with no reserve. They were as inconsequently confidential about their own affairs as so many sparrows, but more intelligible. One by one the men left and went into the smoker, before this onslaught of harsh trebles shrieking above the roar of the train, obtruding their little, bird-like affairs, their miniature hoppings upon the stage of life, upon all in the car.

Finally, there were none left in the car except Maria, these young girls, an old lady, who accosted the conductors whenever they entered and asked when the train was due in New York (a tremulous, vibratory old lady in antiquated frills and an agitatedly sidewise bonnet, and loose black silk gloves), and across the aisle a tiny, deformed woman, a dwarf, in fact, with her maid. This little woman was richly dressed, and she had a fine face. She was old enough to be Maria's mother. Her eyes were dark and keen, her forehead domelike, and her square, resigned chin was sunken in the laces at her throat. Her maid was older than she, and waited upon her with a faithful solicitude. The little woman had some tea, which the maid produced from a small silver caddy in a travelling-bag, and the porter, with an obsequious air, brought boiling water in two squat, plated tea-pots. It was the tea which served to introduce Maria. She had just pushed aside, with an air half of indifference, half of disgust, her own luke-warm concoction flavored with soap, when the maid, at her mistress's order, touched the bell. When the porter appeared, Maria heard the dwarf ask for another pot of boiling water, and presently the maid stood beside her with a cup of fragrant tea.

“Miss Blair wishes me to ask if you will not drink this instead of the other, which she fears is not quite satisfactory,” the maid said, in an odd, acquired tone and manner of ladyism, as if she were repeating a lesson, yet there seemed nothing

artificial about it. She regarded Maria with a respectful air. Maria looked across at the dwarf woman, who was looking at her with kindly eyes which yet seemed aloof, and a half-sardonic, half-pleasant smile.

Maria thanked her and took the tea, which was excellent, and refreshed her. The maid returned to her seat, facing her mistress. They had finished their luncheon. She leaned back in her chair with a blank expression of face. The dwarf looked out of the window, and that same half-pleasant, half-sardonic smile remained upon her face. It was as if she regarded all nature with amused acquiescence and sarcasm, at its inability to harm her, although it had made the endeavor.

Maria glanced at her very rich black attire, and a great pearl cross which gleamed at her throat, and she wondered a little about her. Then she turned again to the flying landscape, and again that sense of unnatural peace came over her. She did not think of Evelyn and Wollaston, or her aunts and uncle, whom she was leaving, except with the merest glance of thought. It was as if she were already in another world.

The train sped on, and the girls continued their chatter, and their high-shrieking trebles arose triumphant above all the clatter. It was American girlhood rampant on the shield of their native land. Still there was something about the foolish young faces and the inane chatter and laughter which was sweet and even appealing. They became attractive from their audaciousness and their ignorance that they were troublesome. Their confidence in the admiration of all who saw and heard almost compelled it. Their postures, their crossing their feet with lavish displays of lingerie and dainty feet and hose, was possibly the very boldness of innocence, although Maria now and then glanced at them and thought of Evelyn, and was thankful that she was not like them.

The little dwarf also glanced now and then at them with her pleasant and sardonic smile and with an unruffled patience. She seemed either to look up from the depths of, or down from the heights of, her deformity upon them, and to hardly sense them at all. None of the men returned until a large city was reached, where some of them were to get off. Then they lounged into the car, were brushed, took their satchels, and when the train reached the station swung out, with the unfailing trebles still in their ears.

Before the train reached New York, all the many appurtenances had vanished from the car. The chattering girls also had alighted at a station, with a renewed din like a flock of birds, and there were then left in the rear car only Maria, the dwarf woman, and her maid.

It was not until the train was lighted, and she could no longer see anything from the window except signal-lights and lighted windows of towns through which they whirled, that Maria's unnatural mood disappeared. Suddenly she glanced around the lighted car, and terror seized her. She was no longer a very young girl; she had much strength of character, but she was unused to the world. For the first time she seemed to feel the cold waters of it touch her very heart. She thought of the great and terrible city into which she was to launch herself late at night. She considered that she knew absolutely nothing about the hotels. She even remembered, vaguely, having heard that no unattended woman was admitted to one, and then she had no baggage except her little satchel. She glanced at herself in the little glass beside her seat, and her pretty face all at once occurred to her as being a great danger rather than an advantage. Now she wished for her aunt Maria's face instead of her own. She imagined that Aunt Maria might have no difficulty even under the same adverse circumstances. She looked years younger than she was. She thought for a moment of going into the lavatory and rearranging her hair, with a view to making herself look plain and old, as she had done before, but she recalled the enormous change it had made in her appearance, and she was afraid to do that lest it should seem a suspicious circumstance to the conductors and her fellow-passengers. She glanced across the aisle at the dwarf woman, and their eyes met, and suddenly a curious sort of feeling of kinship came over the girl. Here was another woman outside the pale of ordinary life by physical conditions, as she herself was by spiritual ones. The dwarf's eyes looked fairly angelic and heavenly to her. She saw her speak in a whisper to her maid, and the woman immediately arose and came to her.

“Miss Blair wishes me to ask if you will be so kind as to go and speak to her; she has something which she wishes to say to you,” she said, in the same parrot-like fashion.

Maria arose at once, and crossed the aisle and seated herself in the chair which the maid vacated. The maid took Maria's at a nod from her mistress.

The little woman looked at Maria for a moment with her keen, kind eyes and her peculiar smile deepened. Then she spoke. “What is the matter?” she asked.

Maria hesitated.

The dwarf looked across at her maid. “She will not understand anything you say,” she remarked. “She is well trained. She can hear without hearing—that is her great accomplishment.”

Still Maria said nothing.

“You got on at Amity,” said the dwarf. “Is that where you live?”

“Yes.”

“What is your name?”

Maria closed her mouth firmly.

The dwarf laughed. “Oh, very well,” said she. “If you do not choose to tell it, I can. Your name is Ackley—Elizabeth Ackley. I am glad to meet you, Miss Ackley.”

Maria paled a little, but she said nothing to disapprove this extraordinary statement.

“My name is Blair—Miss Rosa Blair,” said the dwarf. “I am a rose, but I happened to bloom outside the pale.” She laughed gayly, but Maria's eyes upon her were pitiful. “You are also outside the pale in some way,” said Miss Blair. “I always know such people when I meet them. There is an affinity between them and myself. The moment I saw you I said to myself: she also is outside the pale, she also has escaped from the garden of life. Well, never mind, child; it is not so very bad outside when one becomes accustomed to it. I am. Perhaps you have not had time; but you will have. What is the matter?”

“I am running away,” replied Maria then.

“Running away! From what?”

“It is better for me to be away,” said Maria, evading the question. “It would be better if I were dead.”

“But you are not,” said the dwarf, with a quick movement almost of alarm.

“No,” said Maria; “and I see no reason why I shall not live to be an old woman.”

“I don't either,” said Miss Blair. “You look healthy. You say, better if you were dead—better for whom, yourself or others?”

“Others.”

“Oh!” said Miss Blair. She remained quietly regardful of Maria for a little while, then she spoke again. “Where are you going when you reach New York?” she asked.

“I was going out to Edgham, but I shall miss the last train, and I shall have to go to a hotel,” replied Maria, and she looked at the dwarf with an expression of almost childish terror.

“Don't you know that it may be difficult for a young girl alone? Have you any baggage?”

Maria looked at her little satchel, which she had left beside her former chair.

“Is that all?” asked Miss Blair.

“Yes.”

“You must certainly not think of trying to go to a hotel at this time of night,” said the dwarf. “You must go home with me. I am entirely safe. Even your mother would trust you with me, if you have one.”

“I have not, nor father, either,” replied Maria. “But I am not afraid to trust you for myself.”

A pleased expression transfigured Miss Blair's face. “You do not distrust me and you do not shrink from me?” she said.

“No,” replied Maria, looking at her with indescribable gratitude.

“Then it is settled,” said the dwarf. “You will come home with me. I expect my carriage when we arrive at the station. You will be entirely safe. You need not look as frightened as you did a few moments ago again. Come home with me to-night; then we will see what can be done.”

Miss Blair turned her face towards the window. Her big chair almost swallowed her tiny figure, the sardonic expression had entirely left her face, which appeared at once noble and loving. Maria gazed at her as she sat so, with an odd, inverted admiration. It seemed extraordinary to her she should actually admire any one like this deformed little creature, but admire her she did. It was as if she suddenly had become possessed of a sixth sense for an enormity of beauty beyond the usual standards.

Miss Blair glanced at her and saw the look in her eyes, and a look of triumph came into her own. She bent forward towards Maria.

“You are sheltering me as well as I am sheltering you,” she said, in a low voice.

Maria did not know what to say. Miss Blair leaned back again and closed her eyes, and a look of perfect peace and content was on her face.

It was not long before the train rolled into the New York tunnel. Miss Blair's maid rose and took down her mistress's travelling cloak of black silk, which she brushed with a little, ivory brush taken from her travelling-bag.

“This young lady is going home with us, Adelaide,” said Miss Blair.

“Yes, ma'am,” replied the maid, without the slightest surprise.

She took Maria's coat from the hook where it swung, and brushed it also, and assisted her to put it on before the porter entered the car.

Maria felt again in a daze, but a great sense of security was over her. She had not the slightest doubt of this strange little creature who was befriending her. She felt like one who finds a ledge of safety on a precipice where he had feared a sheer descent. She was content to rest awhile on the safe footing, even if it were only transient.

When they alighted from the train at the station a man in livery met them and assisted Miss Blair down the steps with obsequiousness.

“How do you do, James?” said Miss Blair, then went on to ask the man what horses were in the carriage.

“The bays, Miss Blair,” replied the man, respectfully.

“I am glad of that,” said his mistress, as she went along the platform. “I was afraid Alexander might make a mistake and put in those new grays. I don't like to drive with them at night very well.” Then she said to Maria: “I am very nervous about horses, Miss Ackley. You may wonder at it. You may think I have reached the worst and ought to fear nothing, but there are worsts beyond worsts.”

“Yes,” Maria replied, vaguely. She kept close to Miss Blair. She realized what an agony of fear she should have felt in that murky station with the lights burning dimly through the smoke and the strange sights and outcries all around her.

Miss Blair's carriage was waiting, and Maria saw, half-comprehendingly, that it was very luxurious indeed. She entered with Miss Blair and her maid, then after a little wait for baggage they drove away.

When the carriage stopped, the footman assisted Maria out after Miss Blair, and she followed her conductress's tiny figure toiling rather painfully on the arm of her maid up the steps. She entered the house, and stood for a second fairly bewildered.

Maria had seen many interiors of moderate luxury, but never anything like this. For a second her attention was distracted from everything except the wonderful bizarre splendor in which she found herself. It was not Western magnificence, but Oriental; hangings of the richest Eastern stuffs, rugs, and dark gleams of bronzes and dull lights of brass, and the sheen of silken embroideries.

When Maria at last recovered herself and turned to Miss Blair, to her astonishment she no longer seemed as deformed as she had been on the train. She fitted into this dark, rich, Eastern splendor as a misformed bronze idol might have done. Miss Blair gave a little, shrewd laugh at Maria's gaze, then she spoke to another maid who had appeared when the door opened.

“This is my friend Miss Ackley, Louise,” she said. “Take her to the west room, and call down and have a supper tray sent to her.” Then she said to Maria that she must be tired, and would prefer going at once to her room. “I am tired myself,” said Miss Blair. “Such persons as I do not move about the face of the earth with impunity. There is a wear and tear of the soul and the body when the body is so small that it scarcely holds the soul. You will have your supper sent up, and your breakfast in the morning. At ten o'clock I will send Adelaide to bring you to my room.” She bade Maria good-night, and the girl followed the maid, stepping into an elevator on one side of the vestibule. She had a vision of Miss Blair's tiny figure with Adelaide moving slowly upward on the other side.

Maria reflected that she was glad that she had her toilet articles and her night-dress at least in her satchel. She felt the maid looking at her, although her manner was very much like Adelaide's. She wondered what she would have thought if she had not at least had her simple necessaries for the night when she followed her into a room which seemed to her fairly wonderful. It was a white room. The walls were hung with paper covered with sheafs of white lilies; white fur rugs—wolf-skins and skins of polar bears—were strewn over the polished white floor. All the toilet articles were ivory and the furniture white, with decorations of white lilies and silver. In one corner stood a bed of silver with white draperies. Beyond, Maria had a glimpse of a bath in white and silver, and a tiny dressing-room which looked like frost-work. When the maid left her for a moment Maria stood and gazed breathless. She realized a sort of delight in externals which she had never had before. The externals seemed to be farther-reaching. There was something about this white, virgin room which made it seem to her after her terror on the train like heaven. A sense of absolute safety possessed her. It was something to have that, although she was doing something so tremendous to her self-consciousness that she felt like a criminal, and the ache in her heart for those whom she had left never ceased. The maid brought in a tray covered with dainty dishes of white and silver and a little flask of white wine. Then, after Maria had refused further assistance, she left her. Maria ate her supper. She was in reality half famished. Then she went to bed. Nestling in her white bed, looking out of a lace-curtained window opposite through which came the glimpse of a long line of city lights, Maria felt more than ever as if she were in another world. She felt as if she were gazing at her past, at even her loves of life, through the wrong end of a telescope.

The night was very warm but the room was deliciously cool. A breath of sweet coolness came from one of the walls. Maria, contrary to her wont, fell asleep almost immediately. She was exhausted, and an unusual peace seemed to soothe her very soul. She felt as if she had really died and gotten safe to Heaven. She said her prayers, then she was asleep. She awoke rather late the next morning, and took her bath, and then her breakfast was brought. When that was finished and she was dressed, it was ten o'clock, and the maid Adelaide came to take her to her hostess. Maria went down one elevator and up another, the one in which she had seen Miss Blair ascend the night before. Then she entered a strange room, in the midst of which sat Miss Blair. To Maria's utter amazement, she no longer seemed in the least deformed, she no longer seemed a dwarf. She was in perfect harmony with the room, which was low-ceiled, full of strange curves and low furniture with curved backs. It was all Eastern, as was the first floor of the house. Maria understood with a sort of intuition that this was necessary. The walls were covered with Eastern hangings, tables of lacquer stood about filled with squat bronzes and gemlike ivory carvings. The hangings were all embroidered in short curve effects. Maria realized that her hostess, in this room, made more of a harmony than she herself. She felt herself large, coarse, and common where she should have been tiny, bizarre, and, according to the usual standard, misformed. Miss Blair had planned for herself a room wherein everything was misformed, and in which she herself was in keeping. It had been partly the case on the first floor of the house. Here it was wholly. Maria sat down in one of the squat, curved-back chairs, and Miss Blair, who was opposite, looked at her, then laughed with the open delight of a child.

“What a pity I cannot make the whole earth over to suit me,” she said, “instead of only this one room! Now I look

entirely perfect to you, do I not?”

“Yes,” Maria replied, looking at her with wonder.

“It is my vanity room,” said Miss Blair, and she laughed as if she were laughing at herself. Then she added, with a little pathos, “You yourself, if you had been in my place, would have wanted one little corner in which you could be perfect.”

“Yes, I should,” said Maria. As she spoke she settled herself down lower in her chair.

“Yes, you do look entirely too tall and straight in here,” said Miss Blair, and laughed again, with genuine glee. “Beauty is only a matter of comparison, you know,” said she. “If one is ugly and misshapen, all she has to do is to surround herself with things ugly and misshapen, and she gets the effect of perfect harmony, which is the highest beauty in the world. Here I am in harmony after I have been out of tune. It is a comfort. But, after all, being out of tune is not the worst thing in the world. It might be worse. I would not make the world over to suit me, but myself to suit the world, if I could. After all, the world is right and I am wrong, but in here I seem to be right. Now, child, tell me about yourself.”

Maria told her. She left nothing untold. She told her about her father and mother, her step-mother, and Evelyn, and her marriage, and how she had planned to go to Edgham, get the little sum which her father had deposited in the savings-bank for her, and then vanish.

“How?” asked Miss Blair.

Maria confessed that she did not know.

“Of course your mere disappearance is not going to right things, you know,” said Miss Blair. “That matrimonial tangle can only be straightened by your death, or the appearance of it. I do not suppose you meditate the stereotyped hat on the bank, and that sort of thing.”

“I don't know exactly what to do,” said Maria.

“You are quite right in avoiding a divorce,” said Miss Blair, “especially when your own sister is concerned. People would never believe the whole truth, but only part of it. The young man would be ruined, too. The only way is to have your death-notice appear in the paper.”

“How?”

“Everything is easy, if one has money,” said Miss Blair, “and I have really a good deal.” She looked thoughtfully at Maria. “Did you really care for that young man?” she asked.

Maria paled. “I thought so,” she said.

“Then you did.”

“It does not make any difference if I did,” said Maria, with a little indignation. She felt as if she were being probed to her heart-strings.

“No, of course it does not,” Miss Blair agreed directly. “If he and your sister have fallen in love, as you say, you have done obviously the only thing to do. We will have the notice in the papers. I don't know quite how I shall arrange it; but I have a fertile brain.”

Maria looked hesitatingly at her. “But it will not be telling the truth,” she said.

“But what did you plan to do, if you told the truth when you came away?” asked Miss Blair with a little impatience.

“I did not really plan anything,” replied Maria helplessly. “I only thought I would go.”

“You are inconsequential,” said Miss Blair. “You cannot start upon a train of sequences in this world unless you go on to the bitter end. Besides, after all, why do you object to lying? I suppose you were brought up to tell the truth, and so was I, and I really think I venerate the truth more than anything else, but sometimes a lie is the highest truth. See here. You are willing to bear all the punishment, even fire and brimstone, and so on, if your sister and this man whom you love, are happy, aren't you?”

“Of course,” replied Maria.

“Well, if you tell a lie which can hurt only yourself, and bless others, and are willing to bear the punishment for it, you are telling the truth like the angels. Don't you worry, my dear. But you must not go to Edgham for that money. I have enough for us both.”

“I have nearly all my last term's salary, except the sum I paid for my fare here,” Maria said, proudly.

“Well, dear, you shall spend it, and then you shall have some of mine.”

“I don't want any money, except what I earn,” Maria said.

“You may read to me, and earn it,” Miss Blair said easily. “Don't fret about such a petty thing. Now, will you please touch that bell, dear. I must go and arrange about our passage.”

“Our passage?” repeated Maria dully.

“Yes; to-day is Thursday. We can catch a Saturday steamer. We can buy anything which you need ready-made in the way of wearing-apparel, and get the rest on the other side.”

Maria gasped. She was very white, and her eyes were dilated. She stared at Miss Rosa Blair, who returned her stare with curious fixedness. Maria seemed to see depths within depths of meaning in her great dark eyes. A dimness swept over her own vision.

“Touch the bell, please, dear,” said Miss Blair.

Maria obeyed. She touched the bell. She was swept off her feet. She had encountered a will stronger than any which she had ever known, a will which might have been strengthened by the tininess of the body in which its wings were bent, but always beating for flight. And she had encountered this will at a moment when her own was weakened and her mind dazed by the unprecedented circumstances in which she was placed.

Chapter XXXVIII

Three days later, when they were on the outward-bound steamer, Miss Rosa Blair crossed the corridor between her state-room, which she occupied with her maid, to Maria's, and stood a moment looking down at the girl lying in her berth. Maria was in that state of liability to illness which keeps one in a berth, although she was not actually sea-sick.

“My dear,” said Miss Blair. “I think I may as well tell you now. In the night's paper before we left, I saw the death-notice of a certain Maria Edgham, of Edgham, New Jersey. There were some particulars which served to establish the fact of the death. You will not be interested in the particulars?”

Maria turned her pale face towards the port-hole, against which dashed a green wave topped with foam. “No,” said she.

“I thought you would not,” said Miss Blair. “Then there is something else.”

Maria waited quiescent.

“Your name is on the ship's list of passengers as Miss Elizabeth Blair. You are my adopted daughter.”

Maria started.

“Adelaide does not remember that you were called Miss Ackley,” said Miss Blair. “She will never remember that you were anything except my adopted daughter. She is a model maid. As for the others, Louise is a model, too, and so is the coachman. The footman is discharged. When we return, nobody in my house will have ever known you except as Elizabeth Blair.” Miss Blair went out of the state-room walking easily with the motion of the ship. She was a good sailor.

The next afternoon Maria was able to sit out on deck. She leaned back in her steamer-chair, and wept silently. Miss Blair stood at a little distance near the rail, talking to an elderly gentleman whom she had met years ago. “She is my adopted daughter Elizabeth,” said Miss Blair. “She has been a little ill, but she is much better. She is feeling sad over the death of a friend, poor child.”

It was a year before Maria and Miss Blair returned to the United States. Maria looked older, although she was fully as handsome as she had ever been. Her features had simply acquired an expression of decision and of finish, which they had not before had. She also looked more sophisticated. It had been on her mind that she might possibly meet her step-mother abroad, but she had not done so; and one day Miss Blair had shown her a London newspaper in which was the notice of Ida's marriage to a Scotchman. “We need not go to Scotland,” said Miss Blair.

The day after they landed was very warm. They had gone straight to Miss Blair's New York house; later they were to go to the sea-shore. The next morning Maria went into Miss Blair's vanity room, as she called it, and a strange look was on her face. “I have made up my mind,” said she.

“Well?” Miss Blair said, interrogatively.

“I cannot let him commit bigamy. I cannot let my sister marry—my husband. I cannot break the laws in such a fashion, nor allow them to do so.”

“You break no moral law.”

“I am not so sure. I don't know where the dividing-line between the moral and the legal comes.”

“Then—?”

“I am going to take the train to Amity this noon.”

Miss Blair turned slightly pale, but she regarded Maria unflinchingly. “Very well,” said she. “I have always told you that I would not oppose you in any resolution which you might make in the matter.”

“It is not because I love him,” said Maria. “I do love him; I think I always shall. But it is not because of that.”

“I know that. What do you propose doing after you have disclosed yourself?”

“Tell the truth.”

“And then what?”

“I shall talk the matter over with Wollaston and Evelyn, and I think they can be made to see that a quiet divorce will straighten it all out.”

“Not as far as the man's career is concerned, if he marries your sister, and not so far as your sister is concerned. People are prone to believe the worst, as the sparks fly upward.”

“Then they will,” Maria said, obstinately. “I have made up my mind I dare not undertake the responsibility.”

“What will you do afterwards, come back to me?” Miss Blair said, wistfully. “You will come back, will you not, dear?”

“If you wish,” Maria said, with a quick, loving glance at her.

“If I wish!” repeated Miss Blair. “Well, go if you must.”

Maria did not reach Amity until long after dark. Behind her on the train were two women who got on at the station before Amity. She did not know them, and they did not know her, but they presently began talking about her. “I saw Miss Maria Stillman at the Ordination in Westbridge, Wednesday,” said one to the other. This woman had a curiously cool, long-reaching breath when she spoke. Maria felt it like a fan on the back of her neck.

The other woman, who was fat, responded with a wheezy voice. “It was queer about that niece of hers, who taught school in Westbridge, running away and dying so dreadful sudden, wasn't it?” said she.

“Dreadful queer. I guess her aunt and sister felt pretty bad about it, and I s'pose they do now; but it's a year ago, and they've left off their mourning.”

“Of course,” said the other woman. “They would leave it off on account of—”

Maria did not hear what followed, for a thundering freight-train passed them and drowned the words. After the train passed, the fat woman was saying, with her wheezy voice, “Mr. Lee's mother's death was dreadful sudden, wasn't it?”

“Dreadful.”

“I wonder if he likes living in Amity as well as Westbridge?”

“I shouldn't think he would, it isn't as convenient to the academy.”

“Well, maybe he will go back to Westbridge after a while,” said the other woman, and again her breath fanned Maria's neck.

She wondered what it meant. A surmise came to her, then she dismissed it. She was careful to keep her back turned to the women when the train pulled into Amity. She had no baggage except a suit-case. She got off the train, and disappeared in the familiar darkness. All at once it seemed to her as if she had returned from the unreal to the real, from fairy-land to the actual world. The year past seemed like a dream to her. She could not believe it. It was like that fact which is stranger than fiction, and therefore almost impossible even to write, much less to live. Miss Rosa Blair, and her travellings in Europe, and her house in New York, seemed to her like an Arabian Night's creation. She walked along the street towards her aunt's house, and realized her old self and her old perplexities. When she drew near the house she saw a light in the parlor windows and also in Aunt Maria's bedroom. Aunt Maria had evidently gone to her room for the night. Uncle Henry's side of the house was entirely dark.

Maria stole softly into the yard, and paused in front of the parlor windows. The shades were not drawn. There sat Evelyn at work on some embroidery, while opposite to her sat Wollaston Lee, reading aloud. In Evelyn's lap, evidently hampering her with her work, was a beautiful yellow cat, which she paused now and then to stroke. Maria felt her heart almost stand still. There was something about it which renewed her vague surmise on the train. It was only a very few minutes before Wollaston laid down the paper which he had been reading, and said something to Evelyn, who began to fold her work with the sweet docility which Maria remembered. Wollaston rose and went over to Evelyn and kissed her as she stood up and let the yellow cat leap to the floor. Evelyn looked to Maria more beautiful than she had ever seen her. Maria stood farther back in the shadow. Then she heard the front door opened, and the cat was gently put out. Then she heard the key turn in the lock, and a bolt slide. Maria stood perfectly still. A light from a lamp which was being carried by some one, flitted like a will-o'-the-wisp over the yard, and the parlor windows became dark. Then a broad light shone out from the front chamber windows through the drawn white shade, and lay in a square on the grass of the yard. The cat which had been put out rubbed against Maria's feet. She caught up the little animal and kissed it. Then she put it down gently, and hurried back to the station. She thought of Rosa Blair, and an intense longing came over her. She seemed to suddenly sense the highest quality of love: that which realizes the need of another, rather than one's own. The poor little dwarf seemed the very child of her heart. She looked up at the stars shining through the plumy foliage of the trees, and thought how many of them might owe their glory to the radiance of unknown suns, and it seemed to her that her own soul lighted her path by its reflection of the love of God. She thought that it might be so with all souls which were faced towards God, and that which is above and beyond, and it was worth more than anything else in the whole world.

She questioned no longer the right or wrong of what she had done, as she hurried on and reached the little Amity station in time for the last train.

THE END

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