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APRON-STRINGS

by

ELEANOR GATES

Author of
The Poor Little Rich Girl, Etc.

*A story for all mothers who have daughters
and for all daughters who have mothers*

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Publishers

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DEAR ANN WILDE,—

It seems to me that there are, broadly speaking, three kinds of mothers. First, there is the kind that does not plan for, or want, a child, but, having borne one, invariably takes the high air of martyrdom, feeling that she has rendered the supreme service, and that, henceforth, nothing is too good for her. Second, there is the mother who loves her own children devotedly, and has as many as her health and the family purse will permit, but who is fairly indifferent to other women's children. Last of all, there is

the mother who loves anybody's children—everybody's children. Where the first kind of mother finds "young ones" a bother, and the second revels in a contrast of her darlings with her neighbors' little people (to the disparagement of the latter), the third never fails to see a baby if there is a baby around, never fails to be touched by little woes or joys; belongs, perhaps, to a child-study club, or helps to support a kindergarten, or gives as freely as possible to some orphanage. And often such a woman, finding herself childless, and stirred to her action by a voice that is Nature's, ordering her to fulfill her woman's destiny, makes choice from among those countless little ones who are unclaimed; and if she happens not to be married, nevertheless, like a mateless bird, she sets lovingly about the building of a home nest.

This last kind is the best of all mothers. Not only is the fruit of her body precious to her, but all child-life is precious. She is the super-mother: She is the woman with the universal mother-heart.

You, the "Auntie-Mother" to two lucky little girls, are of this type which I so honor. And that is why I dedicate to you this story—with great affection, and with profound respect.

Your friend,
ELEANOR GATES.

New York, 1917.

APRON-STRINGS

CHAPTER I

"I tell you, there's something funny about it, Steve,—having the wedding out on that scrap of lawn." It was the florist who was speaking. He was a little man, with a brown beard that lent him a professional air. He gave a jerk of the head toward the high bay-window of the Rectory drawing-room, set down his basket of smilax on the well-cared-for Brussels that, after a disappearing fashion, carpeted the drawing-room floor, and proceeded to select and cut off the end of a cigar.

"Something wrong," assented Steve. He found and filled a pipe.

The other now dropped his voice to a whisper. "'Mrs. Milo,' I says to the old lady, 'give me the Church to decorate and I'll make it look like something.' 'My good man,' she come back,—you know the way she talks—'the wedding will be in the Close.'"

"A stylish name for not much of anything," observed Steve. "The Close! Why not call it a yard and be done with it?"

"English," explained the florist. "—Well, I pointed out that *this* room would be a good place for the ceremony. I could hang the wedding-bell right in the bay-window. But at that, *click* come the old lady's teeth together. 'The wedding will be in the Close,' she says again, and so I shut my mouth."

"Temper."

"Exactly. And why? What's the matter with the Church? and what's the matter with this room?—that they have to go outdoors to marry up the poor youngsters. What's worse, that Close hasn't got the best reputation. For there stands that orphan basket, in plain sight——"

"It's *no* place for a wedding!"

"Of course not!—a yard where of a night poor things come sneaking in——"

A door at the far end of the long room had opened softly. Now a voice, gentle, well-modulated, and sorrowfully reproving, halted the protesting of the florist, and paralyzed his upraised finger. "That will do," said the voice.

What had frozen the gesture of his employer only accelerated the movements of Steve. Recollecting that he was in his shirt-sleeves, he snatched the pipe from his mouth, seized upon the smilax basket, and sidled swiftly through the door leading to the Close.

"Goo—good-morning, Mrs. Milo," stammered the florist, putting his cigar behind his back with one large motion that included a bow. "Good-afternoon. I've just brought the festoons for the wedding-

bower." Once more he jerked his head in the direction of the bay-window, and edged his way toward it a step or two, his fluttering eyelids belieing the smile that divided his beard.

Mrs. Milo, her background the heavy oak door that led to the library, made a charming figure as she looked down the room at him. She was a slender, active woman, who carried her seventy years with grace. Her hair was a silvery white, and so abundant that it often gave rise to justified doubt; now it was dressed with elaborate care. Her eyes were a bright—almost a metallic—blue. Despite her age, her face was silkily smooth, and as fair as a girl's, having none of those sallow spots which so frequently mar the complexions of the old. Her cheeks showed a faint color. Her nose was perhaps too thin, but it was straight and finely cut. Her mouth was small, pretty, and curved by an almost constant smile. Her hands were slender, soft, and young. They were not given to quick movements. Now they hung touching the blue-gray of her morning-dress, which, with ruffles of lace at collar and wrists, had the fresh smartness of a uniform.

"You are smoking?" she inquired. That habitual smile was on her lips, but her eyes were cold.

"Just—just a dry smoke,"—with a note of injured innocence.

"Your cigar is in your mouth," she persisted, "and yet you're not smoking."

At that, the florist took a forward step. "And my teeth are in my mouth," he answered boldly, "but I'm not eating."

Another woman might have shrunk from the impudence of his retort, or replied angrily. Mrs. Milo only advanced, with slow elegance, prepared again to put him on the defensive. "Why do I find you in this room?" she demanded.

"I'm just passing through—to the lawn."

"Do not pass through again."

"Well, I'd like to know about that," returned the florist, argumentatively. "When I mentioned passing through the Church, why, the Rector, he says to me——"

Mrs. Milo lifted a white hand to check him. "Never mind what Mr. Farvel said," she admonished sharply; then, with quick gentleness, "You know that he has lived here only little more than a year."

"Oh, I know."

"And I have lived here fifteen years."

"True," assented the florist. "But I was talking with Miss Susan about passing through the Church, and Miss Susan——"

The blue eyes flashed. And once more Mrs. Milo advanced. "Never mind what my daughter told you," she commanded, but without raising her voice. "I am compelled to make this Rectory my home because Miss Milo does the secretarial work of the parish. And what kind of a home should I have if I allowed the place to be in continual disorder?"

There was a pause, the two facing each other. Then the look of the florist fell. "I'll go in by way of the Church, madam," he announced. And turned away with a stiff bow.

"One moment." The order was curt; but as he brought up, and turned about once more, Mrs. Milo spoke almost confidentially. "As you very well know," she reminded, her face slightly averted, "there is a third entrance to the Close."

The florist saw his opportunity. "Oh, yes," he declared; "—the little white door where the ladies come of a night to leave their orphans."

That brought Mrs. Milo about. And the color deepened in her cheeks. It was the red, not only of anger, but of modesty. "The women who desert their infants in that basket," she replied (again that sorrowful intonation), "are not ladies."

The florist was highly pleased with results. "That may be so," he went on, with renewed boldness; "but for my ladders, and my plants, the little white door is too small, and so——" He stopped short. His jaw dropped. His eyes widened, and fixed themselves in undisguised admiration upon a young woman who had entered the room behind Mrs. Milo—a lankish, but graceful young woman, radiant in a gown of shimmering satin, her fair hair haloed by carefully carried lengths of misty tulle. "And so," resumed the florist, absent-mindedly, "and so—and so——"

Mrs. Milo moved across the carpet to a sofa, adjusted a velvet cushion, and seated herself. "Go and do your work," she said sharply. "It must be finished this afternoon. And remember: I don't want to see you in this room again."

"Very well, madam." With a smile and a bow, neither of which was intended for Mrs. Milo, the florist recovered his self-possession, threw wide his hands in a gesture that was an eloquent tribute to the shining apparition at the farther end of the room, and backed out.

"Ha-a-a!" sighed Mrs. Milo—with gratification in her triumph over the decorator, and with a sense of comfort in that cushioned corner of her favorite sofa. She settled her slender shoulders against the velvet.

Now the satin gown crossed the carpet, and its wearer let fall the veiling which she had upborne on her outstretched arms. "Mrs. Milo," she began.

"Oh!" Mrs. Milo straightened, but without turning, and the fear that the other had heard her curt dismissal of the florist showed in the quick shifting of her look. When she spoke again, her voice was all gentleness. "Yes, my dear new daughter?" she inquired.

Hattie Balcome cocked her head to one side, extended a satin-clad foot, threw out her hands with fingers extended, and struck a grotesque pose. "Turn—and behold!" she bade sepulchrally.

Mrs. Milo turned. "A-a-a-ah!" Then having given the wedding-gown a brief scrutiny, "Er—yes—hm! It's quite pretty."

"Quite pretty!" repeated Hattie. She revolved once, slowly. "What's the matter with it?"

"We-e-e-ell," began Mrs. Milo, appraising the gown at more length; "isn't it rather simple, my dear,—for a girl whose father is as wealthy as yours? Somehow I expected at least a little real lace."

Hattie laughed. "What on earth could I do with real lace in the mountains of Peru?"

"Peru!" Instantly Mrs. Milo's face grew long. "Then—then my son has finally decided to accept the position in Peru." Now she took her underlip in her teeth; and her lashes fluttered as if to keep back tears.

"But you won't miss him terribly, will you? As it is you don't have him—you don't see such a lot of him."

"Of course, as you say, I don't have him—except for a couple of weeks in the summer, when Sue has her vacation, and we all go to the Catskills. Then at Christmastime he comes here for a week. Sue has never asked permission to have Wallace live at the Rectory—"

"Except of Mr. Farvel."

"Mr. Farvel didn't have to be asked. He and Wallace are old friends. They met years ago—once when Wallace went to Canada with a boy chum. And Canada's the farthest he's ever been, so—"

"It was I who decided on Peru," said the girl, almost defiantly. "The very day he proposed to me he told me about the big silver mine down there that wants a young engineer. And I said Yes on one condition: that Wallace would take me as far away from home as possible."

The elder woman rose, finger on lip. "Sh!" she cautioned, glancing toward the door left open by the florist. "Oh, we don't want any gossip, Hattie!"

Hattie lifted her eyebrows. "We don't want it," she agreed, "but we shall get it. They'll all be asking one another, 'Why not the Church? or the drawing-room? Why the yard?'" She nodded portentously.

Mrs. Milo came nearer. "They'll never suspect," she promised. "Outdoor weddings are very fashionable."

"Maybe. But what I can't understand is this: Dad's heart is set on this marriage. He wants to get me out of the way." Then as Mrs. Milo's expression changed from a gratified beam to a stare of horror, "Oh, don't be shocked; he has his good reasons. But as I'm going, why can't he make a few concessions, instead of trying to spoil the wedding?"

"Spoil, dear?" chided the elder woman. "The wedding will be beautiful in the Close."

Hattie's brown eyes swam with sudden tears. "Perhaps," she answered.

"But just for this one time, why can't my father and mother——"

"Please, Hattie!" pleaded Mrs. Milo. "We must be discreet!" Then to change the subject, "My dear, let me see the back."

Once more Hattie revolved accommodatingly. Close to the door leading to the lawn was a door which led, by a short passage, to the little, old Gothic church which, long planted on its generous allowance of grounds, had defied—along with an Orphanage that was all but a part of the Church, so near did the two buildings stand—the encroachment of new, tall, office structures. As Hattie turned about, she kept her watch on the door leading to the Church.

"It's really very sweet," condescended Mrs. Milo. "But—you mustn't let Wallace get a glimpse of this dress before tomorrow." She shook a playful finger. "That would be bad luck. Now,—what does Susan think of it?" She seated herself to receive the verdict.

Hattie wagged her head in mock despair. "Oh," she complained, "how I've tried to find out!"

All Mrs. Milo's playfulness went. She stood up, her manner suddenly anxious. "Isn't she upstairs?" she asked.

One solemn finger was pointed ceilingward. "I have even paged the attic!"

Mrs. Milo hastened across the room. "Why, she must be upstairs," she cried. "I sent her up not an hour ago."

"Well, the villain has just naturally come down."

"Susan! Susan!"—Mrs. Milo was calling into the hall leading to the upper floors of the Rectory. "Look in the vestibule, Hattie."

"Perhaps she has escaped to the Orphanage." Hattie gave a teasing laugh over her shoulder as she moved to obey.

Mrs. Milo had abandoned the hall door by now, and was fluttering toward the library. "Orphanage?" she repeated. "Oh, not without consulting me. And besides there's so much to be done in this house before tomorrow.—Susan! Susan!" She went out, calling more impatiently.

As Hattie disappeared into the vestibule, that door from the passage, upon which she had kept a watch, was opened, slowly and cautiously, and the tousled head of a boy was thrust in. Seeing that the drawing-room was vacant, the boy now threw the door wide, disclosing nine other small heads, but nine more carefully combed. The ten were packed in the narrow passage, and did not move forward with the opening of the door. Their freshly washed faces were eager; but they contented themselves with rising on tiptoe to peer into the room. About them, worn over black cassocks, hung their spotless cottas. Choir boys they were, but on every small countenance was written the indefinable mark of the orphan-reared.

Now he of the tousled hair stole forward across the sill. And boldly signaled the others. "St!—Aw, come on!" he cried. "What're you 'fraid of! Didn't the new minister tell us to wait in here?"

The choir obeyed him, but without argument. As each cotta-clad figure advanced, eyes were directed toward doors, and hands mutely signed what tongues feared to utter. One boy came to the sofa and gingerly smoothed a velvet pillow; whispering and pointing, the others scattered—to look up at a painting of a bishop of the Anglican Church, which hung above the mantel, to open the Bible on the small mahogany table that held the center of the room, to touch the grand piano with moist and marking finger-tips, and to gaze with awe upon two huge and branching candlesticks that flanked a marble clock above the hearth.

Now a husky whisper broke the unwonted silence of the choir; and an excited, finger directed all eyes to the painting of the Bishop: "Oh, fellers! Fellers!" He rallied his companions with his other arm. "Look-ee! Look-ee! That's Momsey's father!"

"Momsey's father!" It was the tousled chorister, and he plowed his way forward through the gathering choir before the hearth. "What're you talkin' about? Momsey's father wasn't a minister."

But the other was not to be gainsaid. "Yes, he was," he persisted; "and it's him."

"Aw, that's a Bishop,—or somethin'. There's Momsey's father." Beside the library door stood a small writing-desk. Atop it, in a wooden frame, was a photograph. This was now caught up, and went from hand to hand among the crowding boys. "That's him, and he's been dead twenty years."

"Let me see!" A shining tow-head wriggled up from under the arms of taller boys, and a freckled hand

captured the picture. "Why, he looks like Momsey!"

The tousled songster seized the photograph in righteous anger. "Sure!" he cried, waving it in the face of the tow-headed boy; "you don't think she takes after her mother, do y'?"

A chorus of protests, all aimed at the tow-head, which was turned defensively from side to side.

"Y' know what *I* think?" demanded the tousled one. He motioned the others to gather round. "I don't believe the old lady is Momsey's mother at a-a-all!"

"Oo-oo-oo!" The choir gasped and stared.

"No, I don't," persisted the boy. "I believe that years, and years, and years ago, some nice, poor lady come cree-ee-eepin' through the little white door, and left Momsey—in the basket!"

Nine small countenances beamed with delight. "You're right!" the choir clamored. "You're right! You're dead right!" White sleeves were waved joyously aloft.

Now the heavy door to the library began to swing against the backs of two or three. The choir did not wait to see who was entering. Smiles vanished. Eyes grew frightened. Like one, the boys wheeled and fled. The door into the passage stood wide. They crowded through it, and halted only when the last cotta was across the sill. Then, like a flock of scared quail, they faced about, panting, and ready for further flight.

One look, and ten musical throats emitted as many unmusical shouts of laughter. While the tousle-headed boy, swinging the photograph which he had failed to restore to its place, again set foot upon the Brussels of the drawing-room. "Oh! Oh!" he laughed. "Oh, golly, Dora, you scared me!"

With all the dignity of her sixteen years, and with all the authority of one who has graduated from the ranks of an Orphanage to the higher, if rarer, air of a Rector's residence, Dora surveyed with shocked countenance the saucy visages of the ten. On occasions she could assume a manner most impressive—a manner borrowed in part from a butler who had been installed, at one time, by a wealthy and high-living incumbent of St. Giles, and in part from ministers who had reigned there by turns and whose delivery and outward manifestations of inward sanctity she had carefully studied during the period of her own labor in the house. Now with finger-tips together, and with the spirit of those half-dozen ecclesiastics sounding in her nasal sing-song, she voiced her stern reproof:

"My dear brothers!"

"Aw," scoffed a boy, "we ain't neither your brothers."

"I am speaking in the broad sense," explained Dora, with the loftiness of one who addresses a throng from a pulpit. Then shaking a finger, "'The wicked flee when no man pursueth'—Proverbs, twenty-eighth chapter, and first verse."

"We're not wicked," denied the boy. "Mr. Farvel told us to come."

"We're goin' to rehearse for the weddin'," chimed in the tow-headed one.

Dora let her look travel from face to face, the while she shook her head solemnly. "But," she reminded, "if Mrs. Milo finds you here, only a miracle can save you!"

"Aw, I'm not afraid of her,"—the uncombed chorister advanced bravely. "She's only a boarder. And after this, I'm goin' to mind just Mr. Farvel."

Something like horrified pity lengthened the pale face of Dora. "Little boys," she advised, "in these brief years since I left the Orphanage, I've seen ministers come and ministers go. But Mrs. Milo"—she turned away—"like the poor——" Her ministerial gesture was eloquent of hopelessness.

The boys in the passage stared at one another apprehensively. But their leader was flushed with excitement and wrath. "Dora," he cried, hurrying over to check her going, "do you know what I wish would happen?"

She turned accusingly. "Oh, Bobbie! What a sinful thought!"

"But I wasn't wishin' *that*!"

"Drive it out of your heart!" she counseled, with all the passion of an evangelist. "Drive it out of your heart! Remember: she can't live forever. She ain't immortal. But let her stay her appointed time,"—this

last with the bowed head proper to the sentiment, so that two short, tight braids stood ceilingward.

The stifled exclamations of the waiting ten brought her head up once more. From the vestibule, resplendent in shining satin and billows of tulle, had appeared a vision. The choir gazed on it in open-mouthed wonder. "Oh, look! The bride! Mm! Ain't it beautiful!"

Hattie was equal to the occasion. Dropping all the tulle into place, she walked from bay-window to table and back again, displaying her finery. "Isn't it pretty?" she agreed. "See the veil. And look!"

Head on one side, the ever-philosophical Dora watched her. And Hattie, halting, turned once around for the benefit of all observers, but with an inviting smile toward the girl, as to a sister-spirit who would be certain to appreciate.

Dora lifted gingham-clad shoulders in a weary shrug. "Can a maid forget her ornaments?" she quoted; "or a bride her attire?"

"Well, I like that!" cried Hattie.

Quickly Dora extended a hand with a gesture unmistakably cleric. "Jeremiah," she explained; "—second chapter, and thirty-second verse."

But Hattie was not deceived. She rustled forward. "Yes!" she retorted. "And Hattie Balcome, first chapter, and first verse, reads: 'Can a maid forget her *manners*?'"

Dora was suddenly all meekness. "If she forgets her duties," she answered, "she shall flee from Mrs. Milo—and the wrath to come!" Whereupon, with a bounce and a giggle, neither of which was in keeping with her spoken fears, she went out, banging the library door.

Hattie turned, and here was the choir at her back, engrossed in the beauties of her apparel. She gave the little group a friendly nod and a smile. "So you are the boys," she commented.

Bobbie was quick to explain. "We're some of the boys," he said. "There's about fifty more of us, and pretty near fifty girls, too, over in the Orphanage."

"But—aren't you all rather big to be left in a basket?"

"Oh, not all of us are left in the basket." Bobbie shook his rumpled mop with great finality.

"No." It was a smaller boy. "Just the fellers that never had any mothers or fathers."

"Like me," piped a chorister from the rear.

"And me," put in the tow-headed boy.

Hattie looked them over carefully. "Which," she inquired, "is the one that is borrowed from his aunt?"

The group stirred. A murmur went from boy to boy. "Mm! Yes! That one! Oh, him!"

"That's Ikey Einstein," explained Bobbie. "And he's in the Church right now. You see, he's borrowed on account of his won-der-ful voice. Momsey says Ikey's got a song-bird in his throat."

Once more the group stirred, murmuring its assent. It was the testimony of a choir to its finest songster—a testimony strong with pride.

At that same moment, sounding from beyond the heavy door that gave to the Church, came a long-drawn howl of mingled rage and woe. "Wa-ah!"—it was the voice of a boy; "oh, wa-a-a-ah!"

Bobbie lifted a finger to point. "That," said he proudly, "is Ikey now." He motioned the choir into the bay-window, and Hattie followed.

The wails increased in volume. The door at the end of the passage swung open; and into sight, amid loud boo-hoos, pressed a squirming trio. There were two torn and dirty boys, their faces streaked with tears, their hands vainly trying to grapple. And between the two, holding to each by a handful of cassock, and by turns scolding and beseeching the quarreling pair, came Sue Milo.

Strangers saw Sue Milo as an attractive, middle-aged woman, tall, and full-figured, whose face was expressive and inclined toward a high color, whose shining brown hair was well grayed at the temples, and whose eyes, blue-gray, and dark-lashed, were wide and kindly.

Strangers marked her for a capable, dependable woman, too; and found suited to her the adjective

"motherly." This for the same reason which moved new acquaintances instinctively to address her as "Mrs." For Sue Milo, at forty-five, bore none of the marks of the so-called typical spinster.

But a curious change of attitude toward her was the experience of that man or woman who came to know her even casually. Though at a first meeting she seemed to be all of her age, with better acquaintance she appeared to grow rapidly younger. So that it was not strange to hear her referred to as "the Milo girl," and not infrequently she was included at gatherings of people who were still in their twenties. In just what her youthfulness lay it was hard to define. At times an expression of the eye, a trick of straight-looking, or perhaps the lifting and turning of the chin, or a quick bringing together of the hands,—all these were girlish. There was that about her which made her seem as simple and unaffected as a child.

Yet capable and dependable she was—as any crisis at Rectory or Orphanage had proven repeatedly. And when quick decisions were demanded, all turned as if with one accord to Sue. And she was as quick to execute. Or if that was beyond her power, she roused others to action. It was a rector of St. Giles who once applied to her a description that was singularly fitting: "She is," he said, "like a ship under full sail."

Just now she was a ship in a storm.

"Aw, you did said it!" cried the wailing Ikey, pointing at his adversary a forefinger wrapped in a handkerchief. "You did! You did! I heard you said it!"

"I never! I never!" denied his opponent. "It ain't so! Boo-hoo!"

Sue gave them an impartial shake. "That will do!" she declared, trying hard to speak with force, while her eyes twinkled. "—Ikey, do you hear me?—Put down that fist, Clarence!—Now, be still and listen to me!" With another shake, she quieted them; whereupon, holding each at arm's length, she surveyed them by turns. "Oh, my soul, such little heathen!" she pronounced. "Now what do you think I am? A fight umpire? Do you want to damage each other for life?"

Clarence was all snuffles, and rubbed at the injured arm. But Ikey had no mind to be blamed undeservedly. He squared about upon Sue with flashing eye. "But, Momsey, he *did* said it!" he repeated.

Sue tightened her grip on his cassock. "And, oh, my soul, such grammar!" she mourned. "'He did said it!' You mean, He do said—he do say—he done—oh, now you've got *me* twisted!"

"Just de same, he called it to me," asserted Ikey.

"I never, I tell you! I never!"

"Ah! Ah!" Once more Sue struggled to hold them apart. "And what, Mr. Ikey, did he call you?"

"He calls me," cried the insulted Ikey, "—he calls me a pie-faces!—Ach!"

"And what did you call him?"

"I didn't call him not'ing!" answered Ikey, beginning to wail again at the very thought of his failure to do himself justice; "not—von—t'ing!"

"But"—with a wisdom born of long choir experience—"you must have said something."

"All I says," chanted Ikey, "—all I says is, 'You can't sing. What you do is——'" And lowering and raising his head, he emitted a long, lifelike bray.

"Yah!" burst forth the enraged Clarence, struggling to clutch his hated fellow.

"Wa-a-a-ah!" wept Ikey, who had struck out and hurt his already injured digit. "You donkey!—donkey!"

Breathing hard, Sue managed to keep them apart; to bring them back to their proper distance. "Look at them!" she said with fine sarcasm. "Oh, look at Ikey Einstein!—Where's your handkerchief?"

Weeping, he indicated it by a duck of the chin.

At such a point of general melting, it was safe to release combatants. Sue freed the two, and took from Ikey's pocket a square of cotton once white, but now characteristically gray, and strangely heavy. "Here, put up that poor face," she comforted. But at this unpropitious moment, the handkerchief, clear

of the pocket, sagged with its holdings and deposited upon the carpet several yellowish, black-spotted cubes. "Dice!" exclaimed Sue, horrified. "Dice!—Ikey Einstein, what do you call yourself!"

Pride stopped Ikey's tears. He thrust out his underlip and waved a hand at the scattered cubes. "Momsey," he answered stoutly, "don't you know? Why, ever since day before yesterdays, I am a t'ree-card-monte man!"

"You're a three-card-what?"

Unable longer to restrain their mirth, that portion of the choir that was in the bay-window now whooped with delight. And Sue, turning, beheld ten figures writhing with joy.

"So!" she began severely. The ten sobered, and their cottas billowed in a backward step. "So here you are!—where you have no business to be!"

Bobbie, the spokesman, ventured to the rescue of his mates. "But, Momsey—"

"Now! No excuses! You all know that you do not come into this drawing-room, to track up the carpet—look at your feet! And to pull things about, like a lot of red Indians! And finger-print the mahogany! And, oh, how disappointed I am in you! To disobey!"

"But the minister——" piped up the tow-headed boy.

"That's right!" she retorted sarcastically. "Blame it on Mr. Farvel! As if you don't know the regulations!"

"But this is Mr. Farvel's house," urged Bobbie.

"A-a-ah!—Now that makes it worse! Now I know you've deliberately ignored my mother's wishes! And if she finds you out, and, oh, I hope she does, don't you come to me to save you from punishment? Depend upon it, I shan't lift my little finger to help you! No! Not if it's bread and water for a week! Not if you——"

A door slammed. From the library came the sound of quick steps. Then a voice was upraised: "Susan! Susan!"

The red paled in Sue's cheeks. "Oh!" She threw out both arms as if to sweep the entire choir to her. "Oh, my darlings!" she whispered hoarsely. "Oh! Oh, mother mustn't see you! Go! Hurry!" As they crowded to her, she thrust them backward, through the door to the passage. "Oh, quick! Bobbie! My dears!"

Eight were crammed into the shelter of the passage. Four pressed against their fellows but could not get across the sill in time. These Sue swept into a crouching line at her back—as the library door opened, and Mrs. Milo came panting into the room.

As mother and daughter faced each other, Hattie, seated quietly in the bay-window, smiled at the two—so amazingly unlike. It was as if an aristocratic, velvet-footed feline were bristling before a great, good-tempered St. Bernard. In a curious way, too, and in a startling degree, each woman subtracted sharply from the other. In the presence of Sue, Mrs. Milo's petiteness became weakness, her dainty trimness accentuated her helplessness, her delicate coloring looked ill-health; while Sue, by contrast, seemed over-high as to color, almost boisterous of voice, and careless in dress.

Mrs. Milo's look was all reproof. "Susan Milo," she began, "where have you been?"

Sue was standing very still—in order not to uncover a vestige of boy. She smiled, half wistfully, half mischievously. "Just—er—in the Church, mother." She had her own way of saying "mother." On her lips it was no mere title, lightly used. Her very prolonging of the "r" gave the word all the tender meanings—undivided love, and loyalty, protection, yet dependence. She spoke it like a caress.

Mrs. Milo recognized in her daughter's tone an apology for something. Quick suspicion took the place of reproof. "And what were you doing in the Church?"—with a rising inflection.

"Well, I—I was sort of—poking around."

"St!"—an exclamation of impatience. Then, "Churches are not made to poke in."

Now there came to Sue that look that suggested a little girl, and a naughty little girl at that. She turned on her mother a beguiling smile. "I—I was—er—poking in the vestry," she explained.

Mrs. Milo observed that the bay-window held a young person in white satin, who was sitting very still, and was all attention. She managed a faint returning smile, therefore, and assumed a playful tone. "The vestry is not a part of your duties as secretary," she reminded. "And there's so much to do, my daughter,—the decorations, the caterer, the——"

"I know, mother. I shan't neglect a thing." Sue swayed a little, to the clutch of a small hand dragging at her skirt.

"And as I've said before, I prefer that you'd take all of Mr. Farvel's dictation in the library; I don't want you hanging about in the vestry unless I'm with you.—Will you please pay attention to what I'm saying?"—this with much patience.

Over one arm, folded, Sue carried a garment of ministerial black. This she now unfolded and spread, the better to hide the boy crouching closest at her back. "Oh, yes, mother dear," she admitted reassuringly. "Yes."

"And what is that you have?" The tone might have been used to a child.

Hurriedly Sue doubled the black lengths. "It's—it's just a vestment," she explained, embarrassed.

"Please." Mrs. Milo held out a white hand.

To go forward and lay the vestment in that hand meant to disclose the presence of the hiding quartette. With quick forethought, Sue leaned far forward in what might be mistaken for a bow, tipped her head gaily to one side, and stretched an arm to proffer the offending garment. "Here, motherkins! It's in need of mending."

Mrs. Milo tossed the vestment to the piano. "What has your work—your accounts and statements and stenography—what have they to do with the Rector's mending?" she demanded.

"Well, mother, I used to mend for the last minister."

"Oh, my daughter!" mourned Mrs. Milo.

"Ye-e-e-s, mother?"—fearful that the boys were at last discovered.

"Do you mean to say that you see no difference in mending for a single man? a young man? an utter stranger?"

Sue heaved a sigh of relief. "Mother darling," she protested fondly; "hardly a stranger."

"We'll not discuss it," said her mother gently; then taking a more judicial attitude, "Now, I'll speak to those boys."

Long experience had shown Sue Milo that there were times when it was best to put off the evil moment, since at any juncture something quite unforeseen—such as an unexpected arrival—might solve her difficulty. This was such an occasion. So with over-elaborate care, she proceeded to outline the forthcoming program of the morning. "You see, mother, we're to rehearse—choir and all. They'll march from the library, right across here——" She indicated the route of procession.

But long experience had taught Mrs. Milo that procrastination often robbed her of her best opportunities. She pointed a slender finger to the carpet in front of her. "The boys," she said more firmly.

One by one, Sue brought them forward—Bobbie in the lead, then the tow-headed boy; this to conceal the unfortunate state of Ikey and the war-like Clarence. "Here they are, mother!" she announced gaily. "Here are our fine little men!"

Neither cheerful air nor kindly adjective served to pacify Mrs. Milo's anger at sight of the four intruders. Her nostrils swelled. "What are you doing here?" she questioned, with a mildness contradicted by her look; "—against my strict orders."

Bobbie, the ever-ready, strove to answer, swallowed, paled, choked, and turned appealingly to Sue; while the remaining three, with upraised eyes, beseeched her like dumb things.

"Absolutely necessary, mother," declared Sue. She gave each boy a reassuring pat. "As I was saying, they march from the library, preceding the bride——"

But Mrs. Milo was not listening. There was that still white figure in the bay-window, observing the scene intently. She bestowed a pleasant nod upon the quartette. "You may go now, boys," she said

cooingly; "I'll speak to you later."

Bobbie found his voice. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you!"—and took one long step churchward. The tow-headed boy moved with him.

This left unshielded the erstwhile contesting twain. Mrs. Milo's look seemed to fall upon them like a blow. "Oh! Oh!" she cried in horror, pointing.

As one, Ikey and Clarence began rubbing tell-tale streaks from their countenances with their rumpled cottas, and pressing down their upstanding hair.

"No! No-o-o!" cried Mrs. Milo. "That photograph! What are you doing with it?"

In sudden panic, Bobbie shifted the photograph from hand to hand; tried to force it into the hands of the tow-headed boy, then bent to consign it to the carpet.

Sue was beforehand. She caught the picture away from the small trembling hand, and smiled upon her mother. "Oh—I—I was just going to look at it," she explained. "Thank you, Bobbie.—Isn't it good of father! So natural, and—and——"

Mrs. Milo was not deceived. "Give it to me," she said coldly. And as Sue obeyed, "Now, go, boys. Dora, poor child, works so hard to keep this drawing-room looking well. We can't have you disarrange it. Come! Be prompt!"

Sue urged the four passageward. "They were just going, mother.—Don't touch the woodwork; use the door knob."

And now, when it seemed that even Ikey and Clarence might escape undetected, Mrs. Milo gave another cry. "Oh, what's the matter with those two?" she demanded.

There was no long term of orphanage life to quiet the young savage in Ikey. And with his much-prized voice, he was even accustomed to being listened to on more than musical occasions. Now he bolted forward, disregarding Sue's hand, which caught at him as he passed. "Missis," began the borrowed soloist, meeting Mrs. Milo's horrified gaze with undaunted eye, "Clarence, he is jealousy dat I sing so fine."

To argue with Sue, or to subdue her, that was one thing; to come to cases with Ikey was quite another. He had an unpleasant habit of threatening to betake himself out and away to his aunt, or to go on strike at such dramatic times as morning service. Therefore, it seemed safer now to ignore the question of torn and muddied cottas, and seize upon some other pretext for censure. "What kind of language is that?" questioned Mrs. Milo, gently chiding. "'He is jealousy!'"

"Yes, quaint, isn't it, mother?" broke in Sue. "Really quaint." And to Ikey, "Not jealousy—jealous."

Ikey bobbed. Before him, like a swathed candle, he upheld his sore finger.

"Please, Susan!" begged Mrs. Milo, with a look which made her daughter fall back apologetically. And to Ikey, "How did you come by that wound?"

The truth would not do. And the truth was even now on the very tip of Ikey's heedless tongue. Sue gave him a little sidewise push. "Mother dear," she explained, "it was accidental."

Aghast at the very boldness of the statement, Ikey came about upon the defender. "Ac-ci-den-tal!" he cried; "dat he smashes me in de hand? Oh, Momsey!"

"Sh! Sh!" implored Sue.

But the worst had happened. Now, voice or no voice, aunt or no aunt, Ikey must be disciplined. Mrs. Milo caught him by a white sleeve. "Ikey Einstein!" she breathed, appalled.

"Yes, Missis?"

"Please don't 'Missis' me! What did you call my daughter?"

"I—I mean Miss Milo."

"What did you call my daughter?"

"Mother," pleaded Sue, "it slipped out."

"Do not interrupt me."

"No, mother."

"Answer me, Ikey."

"I says to her, Momsey."

Mrs. Milo glared at the boy, her breast heaving. There was more in her hostile attitude toward him than the fact that he bore signs of a fracas, or that he had dared in her hearing to let slip the "Momsey" he so loved to use. To her, pious as she was (but pious through habit rather than through any deep conviction), the mere sight of the child was enough to rouse her anger. She resented his ever having been taken into the choir of St. Giles, no matter how good his voice might be. She even resented his having a voice. He was "that little Jew" always, and a living symbol "in our Christian church" of a "race that had slain the Lord." And it was all this which added to his sin in daring to look upon her daughter with an affection that was filial.

"Ikey Einstein,"—she emphasized the name—"haven't you been told never to address Miss Susan as 'Momsey'?"

"He forgot," urged Sue. "But he won't ever——"

"You're interrupting again——"

"Excuse me."

"How do you expect these boys to be obedient when you don't set them a good example?" Her sorrowful smile was purely muscular in its origin.

"I am to blame, mother——"

Mrs. Milo returned to the errant soloist. "And you were willfully disobeying, you wicked little boy!"

A queer look came into Ikey's eyes. His angular face seemed to draw up. His ears moved under their eaves of curling hair. "Ye-e-es, Missis," he drawled calmly.

Mrs. Milo was a judge of moods. She knew she had gone far enough. She assumed a tone of deepest regret. "Ungrateful children!" she said, distributing her censure. "Think of the little orphans who don't get the care you get! Think——" And arraigning the sagging Clarence, "Don't lean against Miss Milo."

Ikey grinned. Experience had taught him that when Mrs. Milo permitted herself to halt a scolding, she would not resume it. Furthermore, a loud, burring bell was ringing from somewhere beyond the Church, and that summons meant the choirmaster, a personage who was really formidable. Before Sue, he raised that candle-like finger.

"Practice," announced Mrs. Milo, pointing to the passage.

Three boys drew churchward on sluggish feet. But Sue held Ikey back. "His finger hurts," she comforted. "Come! We'll get some liniment."

"Susan!"—gently reproving again. "There's liniment in the Dispensary."

Up, as before a teacher, came Ikey's well hand. "Please, Missis, de Orphan medicine, she is not a speck of good."

Sue added her plea. "No, mother, she is not a speck."

Mrs. Milo shook her head sadly. "You're not going to help these children by coddling them," she reminded. And to Ikey, "Let Nature repair the bruise." She waved all four to go.

"Out of here, you little rascals!" Sue covered her chagrin by a laugh. "Oh, you go that way,"—this to Ikey, who was treading too close upon the heels of the still mourning Clarence. She guided the wounded chorister toward the Close.

Ikey took his banishment with a sulky look at Mrs. Milo. "Nature," she had recommended to him. He did not know any such person, and resented being turned over to a stranger.

Mrs. Milo saw the look. "Wait!" And as he halted, "Is that your handkerchief, Sue?"

"Why—why—er—I think so."

"Kindly take it."

Gently as this was said, it was for Ikey the last straw. As Sue unwound the square of linen, he emitted a heart-rending "Ow!" and fell to weeping stormily. "Oh, boo-hoo! Oh! Oh! Oh, dis is wat I gets for singin' in a Christian choir!" With which stinging rebuke, he fled the drawing-room.

"Now, Susan." Mrs. Milo folded her hands and regarded her daughter sorrowfully.

"Yes, mother?"

"Haven't I asked you not to allow those boys to call you Momsey?"

"Yes, mother, but——"

The white-clad figure in the bay-window stirred, rose, and came forward, and Hattie ranged herself at Sue's side, the whole movement plainly one of defense.

Her bridal raiment afforded Sue an excuse for changing the subject. "Oh, mother, look! How lovely!"

"Don't evade my question," chided the elder woman.

Sue reached for her mother's hand. "Ah, poor little hungry hearts," she pleaded. "Those boys just long to call somebody mother."

Mrs. Milo drew her hand free. "Then let them call me mother," she returned.

"Hup!" laughed Hattie, hastily averting her face.

Sue turned to her, mild wonder in her eyes. "Oh, mother's the best mother in the world," she declared; "—and the sweetest.—And you love the boys, don't you, dear?"

Mrs. Milo was watching Hattie's lowered head through narrowed eyes. "I love them—naturally," she answered, with a note of injury.

"Of course, you do! You're a true mother. And a true mother loves anybody's baby. But—the trouble is"—this with a tender smile—"you—you don't always show them the love in your heart."

"Well," retorted her mother, "I shan't let them make you ridiculous.—Momsey!"

From the Church came the sound of boyish laughter, mingled with snatches of a hymn. The hymn was Ikey's favorite, and above all the other voices sounded his—

"O Mutter Dear, Jaru-u-u-usalem——"

Sue turned her head to listen. "They know they've got a right to at least one parent," she said, almost as if to herself. "Preferably a mother."

"But you're an unmarried woman!"

"Still what difference does that make in——"

"Please don't argue."

"No, mother,"—dutifully.

"To refer to yourself in such a way is most indelicate. Especially before Hattie."

There was no dissembling in the look Hattie Balcome gave the older woman. The young eyes were full of comprehension, and mockery; they said as plainly as words, "Here is one who knows you for what you are—in spite of your dainty manners, your gentle voice, your sweet words." Nor could the girl keep out of her tone something of the dislike and distrust she felt. "Well, Mrs. Milo!" she exclaimed. "I think it's a terrible pity that Sue's not a mother."

"Oh, indeed!"—with quick anger, scarcely restrained. "Well, the subject is not appropriate to unmarried persons, especially young girls. Let us drop it."

"Mother!"—And having diverted Mrs. Milo's resentful stare to herself, Sue now deliberately swung the possibility of censure her way in order to protect Hattie. "Mother, shouldn't a woman who hasn't children fill her arms with the children who haven't mothers? Why shouldn't I mother our orphan boys and girls?"

"I repeat: The subject is closed. And when the wedding is over, I don't want the boys in here again."

Sue blinked guiltily. "But—er—hasn't Mr. Farvel told you?"

"Told me what?"

"Of—of his plan."

"Plan?"

"Oh, it's a splendid idea!"

"Really,"—with fine sarcasm.

"Every day, five orphans in to dinner."

Mrs. Milo was aghast. "Dinner? *Here?*"

"As Ikey says, 'Ve vill eat mit a napkins.'"

Mrs. Milo could not find words for the counter-arguing of such a monstrous plan. "But,—but, Sue," she stammered; "they—they're *natural!*"

A hearty laugh. "Natural, dear mother? I hope they are."

"You—know—what—I—mean."

"Well, I can't tell them from other children with the naked eye. And they're just as dear and sweet, and just as human—if not a little more so."

"You have your duty to the Rectory."

"But what's this Rectory here for? And the Church, too, for that matter?"

"For worship."

"And how better can we worship than——"

Seeing that she was losing out in the argument, Mrs. Milo now resorted to personalities. "Darling," she said gently, "do you know that you're contradicting your mother?"

"I'm sorry."

"The children are given food, clothes, and religious instruction."

"But not love!—Oh, mother, I must say it! We herd them out there in that great building, just because their fathers and mothers didn't take out a license to be parents!"

Shocked, Mrs. Milo stepped back. "My daughter!"

"Can we punish those poor little souls for that? And, oh, how they'd relish a taste of home life!"

Her position decidedly weakened—and that before watchful Hattie—Mrs. Milo adopted new tactics. "Of course, I have nothing to say," she began. "I am only here because you hold this secretaryship. You don't have to make me feel that I'm an intruder, Sue. I feel that sharply enough." There was a trace of tears in her voice. "But even as an intruder, I have a certain responsibility toward the Rectory—all the greater, perhaps, because I'm a guest. Many a day I tire myself out attending to duties that are not mine. And I do——" She interrupted herself to point carpet-ward. "Please pick up that needle. Dora must have overlooked it this morning. What is a needle doing in here? Thank you." Then as she spied that mocking look in Hattie's eyes once more, "Well, I'm not going to see the place pulled to pieces!"

There was scorn written even in Hattie's profile. Sue came quickly to her mother's defense. "I get mother's viewpoint absolutely," she declared stoutly. "We've lived here a long time. Naturally, you see ——" Then, with a shake of the head, "But this is Mr. Farvel's home."

Mrs. Milo laughed—a low, musical, well-bred laugh. "His home?" she repeated, raising delicate brows.

"And he can do as he chooses. If we oppose——"

"I shall oppose." It was said cheerfully. "So let him dismiss you. I've never touched your father's life insurance, and I can get along nicely on his pension. And you're a first-class secretary—rector after

rector has said that. So you can easily find another position."

"You find another job, Sue," interposed Hattie, "and my mother will invite your mother to Buffalo to live. I'll bequeath my room." She laughed.

Mrs. Milo ignored her. "But while I am forced to live here, I shall protect the Rectory. Furthermore, I shall tell Mr. Farvel so." She turned toward the library.

"Oh, mother, no!" Sue followed, and caught at her mother's arm. "Not today! There's a dear, sweet mother!"

"Sue!" cried Hattie. Her look questioned the other anxiously.

But Mrs. Milo felt no concern for the minister. She freed herself from Sue's hold. "You seem very much worried about him," she returned jealously, staring at Sue.

"You think he's unhappy?" persisted Hattie.

"There!" exclaimed Sue. "You see, mother? Hattie's worried, too. It's natural, isn't it, Hattie?"

"Well, it's all nonsense," pronounced Mrs. Milo. "He isn't unhappy. Wallace has known him longer than we have, and he says Mr. Farvel has always been like that."

Sue patted her mother's cheek playfully. "Then let's not make him any sadder," she said. "Everything must be 'Bless you, my children' around this place today. We don't want any 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes.'" She gave her parent a hearty kiss.

Mrs. Milo was at once mollified. "I hope," she went on gently, "that Mr. Farvel didn't have to know why Hattie is being married here instead of in Buffalo."

Sue made a comical face. "I explained," she began roguishly, "that the Rectory is—er—neutral territory."

"Neutral," repeated Hattie, with a hint of bitterness.

Once more a jealous light had crept into Mrs. Milo's blue eyes. "Why should you give Mr. Farvel the confidences of the family?" she demanded.

"I had to." Sue threw up helpless hands. "Mr. Balcome refused to walk down the aisle with Mrs. Balcome after the ceremony. That meant no Church. Then he refused to have her stand beside him in here. But he can't refuse to gather on the lawn!"

"Sue," said Hattie, "you have a trusting nature."

"But what's he afraid of?" Sue asked. "She wouldn't bite him."

"*Who wouldn't bite who?*"

The three turned toward the vestibule door. A large person was entering—a lady, in an elaborate street gown of a somewhat striking plum-color, crowned by an ample hat with spreading, fern-like plumes. About her throat was a veritable cascade of white crêpe collar; and against the crêpe, carried high, and appearing not unlike a decoration, was a tiny buff-and-black dog.

"Ah, my dear!" cried Mrs. Milo, warmly.

Sue chuckled. "I was just remarking, Mrs. Balcome," she replied, "that you wouldn't bite Hattie's father."

Mrs. Balcome, her face dyeing with the effort, set down the tiny dog upon the cherished Brussels. "Don't be so sure!" she cautioned. She had a deep voice that rumbled.

Hattie pointed a finger at Sue. "Ah-h-a-a-a!" she triumphed.

"Ah-h-a-a-a-a!" mocked her mother. Then coming closer, and looking the wedding-dress over critically, "Rehearsing, eh, in your wedding-dress! What would Buffalo think if it saw you!" With which rebuff, she sank, blowing, upon the couch, and drew Mrs. Milo down beside her.

"Oh, why didn't you have your parents toss up?" asked Sue.

"Pitchforks?" inquired Hattie.

"No! To see which one would be unavoidably called out of town."

"Oh, I've tried compromise," said the girl, wearily.

"Well, ABC mediation never was much of a success up around Buffalo," went on Sue, her eyes twinkling with fun. "Ho-hum! The Secretary of State"—she indicated herself—"will see what she can do." And strolling to the sofa, "Mrs. Balcome, hadn't we better talk this rehearsal over with the head of the house?"

Mrs. Balcome swept round. "Talk?" she cried. "Talk? Why, I never speak to him."

Sue gasped. "Wha-a-at?"

"Never," confirmed Hattie. "And he never talks to her—except through me."

Sue was incredulous. "You mean——" And pantomimed, pointing from an imaginary speaker to Hattie; from Hattie to a second speaker; then back.

"Exactly."

Sue pretended to be overwhelmed. She sank to a chair. "Oh, that sounds wonderful!" she cried. "I want to try it!"

"That new job you're looking for," suggested Hattie. "You know I resign tomorrow."

Sue rose and struck an absurd attitude. "Behold Susan Milo, the Human Telephone!" she announced. And to Hattie's mother, "Where is Mr. Balcome?"

By now, Mrs. Balcome had entirely recovered her breath. "Where he is," she answered calmly, "or what he does, is of no importance to me." She picked at the crêpe cascade.

Sue exchanged a look with her mother. "Well—er—he'll be here?" she ventured.

Mrs. Balcome lifted her ample shoulders. "I don't know, and I don't care." She fell to caressing the dog.

Sue nodded understandingly to Hattie. "The Secretary of State," she declared, "is going to have her hands full." Whereupon the two sat down at either side of the center table, leaned their arms upon it, and gave themselves up to paroxysms of silent laughter.

CHAPTER II

Not far away, in an upper room, two men were facing each other across a table—the wide, heavy work-table of the Rectory "study." The "study" was a south room, and into it the May sun poured like a warm stream, to fade further the green of the "cartridge" paper on the walls and the figures of the "art-square" that covered the floor, and to bring out with cruel distinctness the quantities of dust that Dora was allowed to disturb not more frequently than once a week. For the "study" was a place sacred to the privacy of each succeeding clergyman. And here, face to face, Alan Farvel and the bridegroom-to-be were ending a long, grave conversation—a prenuptial conversation invited by the younger man.

Wallace Milo was twenty-eight, and over-tall, so that he carried himself with an almost apologetic drooping stoop, as if he were conscious of his length and sought to make it less noticeable. It was an added misfortune in his eyes that he was spare. In sharp contrast to his sister, he was pale—a paleness accentuated by his dark hair, which was thick, and slightly curly, and piled itself up in an unconquerable pompadour that added to his height. Those who saw Mrs. Milo and Sue together invariably remarked, "Isn't the devotion of mother and daughter perfectly beautiful!" Just as surely did these same people observe, when they saw brother and sister side by side, "There are two children who look as if they aren't even related."

Alan Farvel, though only a dozen years the senior of Wallace, had the look and the bearing of a man much older than forty. His face was deep lined, and his hair was well grayed. But his eyes were young; blue and smiling, they transformed his whole face. It was as if his face had registered the responsibilities and worries that his eyes had never recognized.

He was speaking. "I know exactly how you feel, Wallace. I think every decent chap feels like that the day before he marries. He wants to look back on every year, and search out every mean thought, and every unworthy action—if there is one. But"—he reached to take the other's hand—"you needn't be blaming yourself, old man. Ha-ha-a-a! Don't I know you! Why, bless the ridiculous boy, you couldn't do a downright bad thing if you wanted to! You're the very soul of honor."

Wallace got to his feet—started, rather, as if there was something which Farvel's words had all but driven him to say, but which he was striving to keep back. Resolutely he looked out of the window, swaying a little, with one hand holding to the edge of the table so tightly that his finger-ends were bloodless.

"The very soul of honor," repeated Farvel, watching the half-averted face.

Wallace sank down. "Oh, Alan," he began huskily, "I'll treat her right—tenderly and—and honorably. I love her—I can't tell you how I love her."

Farvel did not speak for a moment. Then, "Everybody loves her," he said, huskily too.

"Oh, not the right way—not her parents, I mean. They haven't ever considered her—you know that. She hasn't had a home—or happiness." He touched his eyes with the back of a hand.

"Make her happy." Farvel's voice was deep with feeling. "She's had all the things money can buy. Now—give her what is priceless."

"I will! I will!"

"Faithfulness, and unselfish love, and tenderness when she's ill, and—best of all, Wallace,—peace. Don't ever let the first quarrel—"

"Quarrel!"

"I fancy most men don't anticipate unpleasantness when they marry. But this or that turns up and marriage takes forbearance." He rose. "Now, I've been talking to you as if you were some man I know only casually—instead of the old fellow who's so near and dear to me. I know your good heart, your clean soul—"

Wallace again stood. "Oh, don't think I'm an angel," he plead. "I—I—" Once more that grip on the table. He shut his jaws tight. He trembled.

"Now, this will do," said Farvel, gently. "Come! We'll go down and see how preparations are going forward. A little work won't be a bad thing for you today." He gave the younger man a playful pull around the end of the table. "You know, I find that all bridegrooms get into a very exaggerated state of self-examination and self-blame just before they marry. You're running true to form." He took Wallace's arm affectionately.

As they entered the drawing-room, Mrs. Milo uprose from the sofa, hands thrown wide in a quick warning. "Oh, don't bring him in!" she cried, looking for all the world like an excited figurine.

"It's bad luck!" chimed in Mrs. Balcome, realizing the state of affairs without turning.

The younger women at the table had also risen, and now Hattie came forward to meet the men, smiling at Farvel, and picking out the flounces of her gown to invite his approval.

"Oh, you shouldn't see it till tomorrow," complained Mrs. Milo, appealing to her son.

Farvel laughed. "How could it bring anyone bad luck?" he demanded; "—to see such a picture." He halted, one arm about Wallace's shoulder.

"Do you like it?" cried Hattie. "Do you really? Oh, I'm glad!"

Sue, puzzled, was watching Farvel, who seemed so unwontedly good-spirited, even gay. "Why, Mr. Farvel," she interposed; "I—I—never thought you noticed clothes—not—not anybody's clothes." She looked down at her own dress a little ruefully. It was of serge, dark, neat, but well worn.

"Well, I don't as a rule," he laughed. "But this creation wouldn't escape even a blind man." Hands in pockets, and head to one side, he admired the slowly circling satin-and-tulle.

Before Sue, on the table, was a morning newspaper; behind her, on the piano, the vestment which Mrs. Milo had thrown down. Quickly covering the garment with the paper, Sue caught up both and

made toward the hall door.

"Susan dear!" Her mother smiled across Mrs. Balcome's trembling plumes. "Where are you going?"

"Er—some—some extra chairs," ventured Sue. "I thought—one or two——"

Mrs. Milo crossed the room leisurely. The trio absorbed in the wedding-gown were laughing and chatting together. Mrs. Balcome had rushed heavily to the bay-window in the wake of the poodle, who, from the window-seat, was barking, black nose against the glass, at some venturesome sparrows. Quietly Mrs. Milo took paper and vestment from Sue and tucked them under an arm. "We have plenty of chairs," she said sweetly.

"Yes," assented Sue, obediently; "yes, I—I suppose we have." Her eyes fell before her mother's look. Again it was as if a small child had been surprised in naughtiness.

Now from the Church sounded the voices of the choir. The burring bell had summoned to more, and still more, practice of tomorrow's music, and a score of boys, their song coming loud and clear from the near distance, were rendering the Wedding March from "Lohengrin."

A curious, and instant, change came over Farvel. His laughter stopped; he retreated, and fumbled with one hand at his hair. "Oh, that—that——" he murmured under his breath.

"Alan!" Wallace went to him.

"It's nothing," protested Farvel. "Nothing."

Sue made as if to open the library door. It was plain that, ill or troubled, Farvel was eager to get away.

"Wait," said her mother.

Wallace turned the clergyman toward the door leading to the Church. "Come, old man," he urged. "Let's go right in. That's best."

Farvel permitted himself to be half-led. But he paused part way to look back at the quartette of ladies standing, silent and watchful, at the center of the room. "It's all right," he assured them, smiling wanly at Hattie. He tried to speak casually. "Let me know when you're ready to rehearse." Wallace had reached out to draw Farvel through the door. It closed behind them.

Sue made as if to follow the two men. But once more her mother interposed. "Susan!" And then in explanation, "I wouldn't—they'll want to be alone."

Now, as if silenced by an order, the choir stopped in the middle of a bar.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Balcome. "Positively tragic!" She gathered up the dog and sank upon the sofa.

"Of course, you saw what did it," observed Mrs. Milo.

"What?" asked Hattie, almost challengingly.

"The wedding-march." And when that had sunk in, "Wallace knew. Didn't you hear what he said? He wanted Mr. Farvel to—to conquer the—the—whatever it was he felt. I'll wager" (Mrs. Milo permitted herself to "wager" under the stress of excitement, never to "bet") "that he's broken his engagement, or something of that sort."

Hattie stared resentfully.

"Engagement?" repeated Sue.

Mrs. Milo's blue eyes sparkled with triumph. "Well, it wouldn't surprise me," she declared.

Sue's color deepened. "Why, of course, he isn't," she answered defensively. "He'd say so—he wouldn't keep a matter like that secret. It isn't like him—a whole year."

Her mother smiled at her fondly. "There's nothing to get excited about, my daughter."

"But, mother, it's absurd."

Mrs. Milo strolled to a chair and seated herself with elaborate care. "Well, anyway," she argued, "he carries a girl's picture in his pocket."

In the pause that followed, a telephone began to ring persistently from the direction of the library. But Sue seemed not to hear it. "A picture," she said slowly. And as her mother assented, smiling, "And—and what did he say when he showed it to you?"

Mrs. Milo started. "Well,—er—the fact is," she admitted, "he didn't exactly show it to me."

"Oh." It was scarcely more than a breath.

Mrs. Milo tossed her head. "No," she added tartly, a trifle ruffled by what the low-spoken exclamation so plainly implied. "If you must know, it fell out of his bureau drawer."

Mrs. Balcome threw out a plump arm across the bending back of the sofa and touched a sleeve of the satin gown covertly. "Hm!" she coughed, with meaning.

But Hattie only moved aside irritably. Of a sudden, she was strangely pale.

Dora entered. "Miss Susan, a telephone summons," she announced.

"Yes—yes,"—absent-mindedly.

When she was gone, Mrs. Milo rose and hastened to Dora, who seemed on guard as she waited, leaned against the library door. "Who is telephoning?" she asked.

Dora's eyes narrowed—to hide their smile. "Oh, Mrs. Milo," she answered, intoning gravely, "the fourth verse, of the thirteenth chapter—or is it the ninth?—of Isaiah." With face raised, as if she were still cudgeling her brain, she crossed toward the vestibule.

"Isaiah—Isaiah," murmured Mrs. Milo. Then, as Dora seemed about to escape, "Dora!—I wouldn't speak in parables, my child, when there are others present." She smiled kindly.

"It is the soloist telephoning," explained Dora; then, so deliberately as almost to be impudent, "A *girl*."

Mrs. Milo showed instant relief. "Oh, the soloist! Such a dear girl. She sang here a year or so ago. Yes,—Miss Crosby."

Dora out, Mrs. Balcome turned a look of wisdom upon her hostess. "I see," she insinuated, "that we're very much interested in the new minister."

Like that of a startled deer, up came Mrs. Milo's head. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"If he isn't engaged already, prepare for wedding Number Two."

"*Wedding?*"

Mrs. Balcome tipped forward bulkily. "Sue," she nodded.

Mrs. Milo got to her feet. "Sue! What're you talking about? Why, she never even speaks of marriage."

"Well, maybe she—thinks."

"She doesn't think, either. She has her work, and—and her home."
Mrs. Milo was fairly trembling.

"How do you know she doesn't think? It's perfectly natural."

"I know. And please don't bring up the subject in her presence."

"Why, my dear!" chided Mrs. Balcome, amazed at the passion flaming in the blue eyes.

"And don't tease her about Mr. Farvel." That voice so habitually well modulated became suddenly shrill.

"Don't you like him?"—soothingly.

"Not well enough to give my daughter to him."

"Well," simpered Mrs. Balcome, all elephantine playfulness, "we mustn't expect perfection in our son-in-laws. Though Wallace is wonderful— isn't he, Hattie?"

Hattie's back was turned. "I—I suppose so," she answered, low.

"You suppose so!" Mrs. Balcome was shocked. "I must say, Hattie, you're taking this whole thing very

calmly—very. And right in front of the boy's mother!"

"Sue is perfectly contented,"—it was Mrs. Milo once more—"perfectly happy. And besides, she's a little older than Mr. Farvel." This with a note of satisfaction.

Mrs. Balcome stroked the dog. "What's a year or two," she urged.

"Not in a man's life. But in a woman's, a year is like five—at Sue's time of life."

"Those make the happiest kind of marriages," persisted Mrs. Balcome; "—the very happiest."

Again Mrs. Milo's voice rose stridently. "Please drop the subject," she begged.

Mrs. Balcome struggled up. "Oh, very well. But you know, my dear, that a woman finds her real happiness in marriage. Because after all is said and done, marriage——"

"Mr. John Balcome," announced Dora, appearing from the vestibule.

As if knocked breathless by a blow, Mrs. Balcome cut short her sentence, went rigid, and clutched the loose coat of the poodle so tightly that four short legs stood out stiff, and two small eyes became mere slits.

Mrs. Milo met the emergency. "Oh, yes, Dora," she said sweetly; and flashed her guest a look of warning.

"Till rehearsal," went on Dora, in a mournful sing-song, "Mr. Balcome prefers to remain on the sidewalk."

Mrs. Milo pretended not to understand. "Oh, we don't mind his cigar," she protested. "Ask him in." And as the girl trailed out, "I do hope your husband won't say anything to that child. She takes the Scriptures so—so literally."

Hattie crossed to her mother. "Shan't I carry Babette upstairs?" she asked.

"No!" Mrs. Balcome jerked rudely away.

"But she annoys father."

"Why do you think I brought her?"

"Oh!—Well, in that case, please don't let me interfere." She went out, banging a door.

"Now! Now!" pleaded Mrs. Milo, lifting entreating hands.

Balcome entered. He was a large man, curiously like his wife in type, for he had the same florid stoutness, the same rather small and pale eye. His well-worn sack suit hung on him loosely. He carried a large soft hat in one hand, and with it he continually flopped nervously at a knee. As he caught sight of the two women, he twisted his face into a scowl.

Mrs. Milo, all smiles, and with outstretched hands, floated toward him in her most graceful manner. "Ah, Brother Balcome!" she cried warmly.

Balcome halted, seized her left hand, gave it a single shake, dropped it, and stalked across the drawing-room head in air. "Don't call me brother," he said crossly.

Dora, going libraryward, stopped to view him in mingled reproof and sorrow.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Eh? Eh?"

She shook her head, put her finger-tips together, and directed her gaze upon the ceiling. "'For ye have need of patience,'" she quoted.

"Well, of all the impudent——" began Balcome, giving his knee a loud "whop" with the hat.

"Hebrews," interrupted Dora; "—Hebrews, tenth chapter, and thirty-sixth verse."

Balcome nodded. "I guess you're right," he confided. "Patience. That's it." And to Mrs. Milo, "Say, when do we rehearse this tragedy?"—Whereat Dora cupped one hand over her mouth and fled the room.

Mrs. Balcome was stung to action. "Hear that!" she cried, appealing to Mrs. Milo. "A father, of his daughter's wedding!"

"Oh, sh!" cautioned Mrs. Milo.

Balcome glared. "Let me tell you this," he went on, as if to the room in general, "if Hattie's going to act like her mother, she'd better stop the whole business today." He sat down.

"Now, Brother Balcome,"—this pleadingly.

"Don't call me *brother!*" shouted Mr. Balcome.

That shout, like a shot, brought Mrs. Balcome down. She plumped upon the sofa. "Oh, now you see what I have to bear!" she wailed. "Now, you understand! Oh! Oh!" She buried her face in the coat of the convenient Babette.

Mrs. Milo hastened to her, soothing, imploring. And Balcome rose, to pace the floor, flapping at his knee with each step.

"Now, you see what *I* have to bear," he mocked. "My only daughter marries, and her mother brings that hunk of hydrophobia to rehearsal."

At this critical juncture, with Mrs. Balcome's weeping gaining in volume, a gay voice sounded from the library—"Toot-toot-toot-toot-toot-toot-toot!" The library door opened, disclosing Sue. She let the doorway frame her, and waited, inviting attention. She was no longer in her simple work-dress. Silk and net and lace—this was her bridesmaid's gown.

Balcome's face widened in a grin. "By Jove, you look fine!"

"Thanks to you!"

"Shush! Shush!" He shook hands. "Not married yet?"

Mrs. Milo, busily engaged in quieting Mrs. Balcome, lifted her head, but without turning.

"*I?*" laughed Sue.

"Understand there's a good-looking parson here."

A quick smile—toward the door leading to the Church. Sue fell to arranging her dress. "Mm, yes," she answered, a little absent-mindedly; "yes, there is—one here."

"Oh, marry! Marry! Marry!" scolded Mrs. Milo. "I think people are marry crazy."

Balcome laughed. "I believe you!—Sue, why don't you capture that parson?"

Mrs. Milo rose, taking a peep at the tiny watch hidden under the frill at a wrist. "Susan," she said sweetly, "will you see what the florist is doing?"

"Oh, he's all right, mother dear. He——"

"Do you want your mother to do it?"

"Oh, no, mother. No." All gauze and sheen, like a mammoth butterfly, Sue hurried across the room.

"I must save my strength for tomorrow," explained Mrs. Milo, and turned with that benevolent smile. The next moment she flung up her hands. "Susan!"

Sue halted. "Ah-ha-a-a-a!" she cried triumphantly. "I thought it'd surprise you, mother! Isn't it lovely? Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it an improvement over that old gray satin of mine?" She came back to stroll to and fro, parading. "As Ikey says, 'Ain't it peaches?'"

"Tum-tum-tee-tum," hummed Balcome, in an attempt at the wedding-march.

"Susan! Stop!" ordered Mrs. Milo. "Where, if you please, have you come by such a dress?"

Even Mrs. Balcome was listening, having forgotten her own troubles in the double interest of the promised quarrel and the attractive costume.

Sue arraigned Mr. Balcome with a finger. "Well, this nice person told Hattie to order it for me from her dressmaker."

"To land that parson," added Balcome, wickedly.

"He gave me two," went on Sue, turning a chin over one shoulder in a vain attempt to get a glimpse of her back. "The other one is wonderful! I'm—I'm keeping the other one."

"Keeping the other one?" repeated her mother.

Sue tried the other shoulder. "Well, I—I might need it for something special," she explained.

"Will you please stop that performance?" demanded her mother. "My daughter, the dress is ridiculous!"

Sue stared. "Ridiculous?"

"Showy—loud."

"But—but it's my bridesmaid's dress."

"I tell you, it's unsuited—a woman of forty-five! Please go and change."

"Oh, come now," put in Balcome, a little sharply. "You never think of Sue as being forty-five." Then with a large wave of the hand in Sue's direction, "What do you want to make her feel older than she is for?"

"I had *no* such intention," retorted Mrs. Milo, coldly—and righteously. "On the contrary, I think Susan is well preserved."

"Preserved!" gasped Sue, both hands to her head.

"Preserved grandmother!" scoffed Balcome. "Sue looks like a bride herself. Sue, when that parson gets his eye on you——"

Mrs. Milo saw herself outdone. Her safety lay in harassing him. "Speaking of eyes, Mr. Balcome," she said sweetly, "it strikes me that yours look as if you'd been up all night."

Mrs. Balcome rose to the stimulus. "Susan!" she summoned.

"Yes, dear lady?"

"You will kindly ask my husband——"

"Go ahead, Mrs. Balcome," invited Sue, resignedly. And, turning an imaginary handle, "Ting-a-ling-ling!"

Mrs. Milo, beaming with satisfaction, made her way daintily to the passage door. "I think I'll call the choir," she observed, and disappeared.

Like a war steed pawing the earth with impatient hoof, Mrs. Balcome tapped the carpet. Her eye was set, her mouth was pursed. Though her dress was of some soft material, she seemed fairly to bristle. "How long has Hattie's father been in town?" she demanded.

"But you don't care," reminded Sue.

"How long?" persisted the other.

With comical gravity, Sue turned upon Balcome. "How long has Hattie's father been in town?" she echoed. And as he held up all the fingers of one hand, "Oh, two—or three—or four"—a cautious testing of Mrs. Balcome's temper.

That lady's ample bosom rose and fell tempestuously. "And I've had everything to do!" she complained; "—everything! Why haven't we seen him before?"

"Mister Man," questioned Sue, "why haven't we seen you before?"

Balcome rubbed his hands together, chuckling. "Yes, why? Why?"

"Business, Mrs. Balcome," parried Sue; "—press of business."

"Business!" cried the elder woman, scornfully. "Huh!—and where is he staying?"

"But you said yourself, 'Where he is, or what he does'——" Then as Mrs. Balcome rotated to stare at her resentfully, "Where is 'he' staying, Mr. Balcome?"

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!" bellowed Balcome. Leaning, he imparted something to Sue in a whisper.

"Where?" persisted his wife.

"He's at the Astor," declared Sue, and was swept with Balcome into a gale of mirth.

"Don't treat this as a joke, my dear Susan," warned Mrs. Balcome.

"Oh, joke, Sue! Joke!" cried Balcome, flapping at Sue with his hat.

"If there's one thing I like to see in a woman it's a sense of humor."

"Your husband appreciates your sense of humor," chanted Sue, returning to her telephoning.

"If there's one thing I like to see in a man," returned Mrs. Balcome, "it's a sense of decency."

"Your wife admires your sense of decency," continued the transmitter.

"She talks about decency"—Balcome spoke confidentially—"and she brings a pup to rehearsal."

"She brings a darling doggie to rehearsal," translated Sue.

By now, Mrs. Balcome was serenity itself. "A pup at rehearsal," she observed, "is more acceptable than one man I could name."

"Aw," began Balcome, reaching, as it were, for a suitable retort.

Sue put up imploring hands. Hattie had just entered, having changed from her wedding-dress. "Now, wait! This line is busy," she declared. And to Hattie, "Oh, my dear, why didn't you arrange for two ceremonies!"

"Do you mean bigamy?" inquired the girl, dryly, aware of the atmosphere of trouble.

"I mean one ceremony for father, and one for mother," answered Sue.

Both belligerents advanced upon her. "Now, Susan," began Mrs. Balcome. And "Look-a here!" exclaimed Balcome.

The sad voice of Dora interrupted. From the vestibule she shook a mournful head in a warning. "Someone is calling," she whispered. "It's Miss Crosby."

Like two combatants who have fought a round, the Balcomes parted, retiring to opposite corners of the room. Dora, having satisfied herself that quiet reigned, went out.

Hattie stifled a yawn. "What is Miss Crosby going to sing, Sue?" she asked indifferently.

"O Perfect Love."

Balcome wheeled with a resounding flop of the hat. "O Perfect What?" he demanded.

"Love, Mr. Balcome,—L-O-V-E."

"Ha-a-a!" cried Balcome. "I haven't heard that word in years!"

Mrs. Balcome, stung again to action, swept forward to a renewed attack. "He hasn't heard the word in years!" she scolded. And Balcome, scolding in concert with her, "I don't think I'd recognize it if I saw it."—"Through whose fault, I'd like to know?"—her voice topped her husband's.

"Please!" A changed Sue was speaking now, not playfully or facetiously, or even patiently: her face was grave, her eyes were angry. "Mrs. Balcome, kindly take your place in the Close, to the left of the big door. Mr. Balcome, you will follow the choir." She waved them out, and they went, both unaccountably meek. Those who knew Sue Milo seldom saw this phase of her personality. Sue, the yielding, the loving, the childlike, could, on occasions, shed all her softer qualities and become, of a sudden, justly vengeful, full of wrath, and unbending. Even her mother had, at rare intervals, seen this phenomenon, and felt respect for it.

Just now, having opened the passage door for the choir, Mrs. Milo had scented something wrong, and was cautioning the boys in a whisper. They came by twos across the room, curving their line a little to pass near to Sue, and looking toward her with troubled eyes. This indeed was a different Sue, in that strange dress, standing so tensely, with averted face.

When the last white gown was gone, Hattie laid her hand on Sue's arm. "It's all right," she said gently. "Don't you care."

Sue did not speak or move.

"Dear Sue," pleaded the girl.

Sue turned. In her look was pity for all that Hattie had borne of bitterness and wrangling. And as a mother gathers a stricken child to her breast, so she drew the other to her. "Oh, Hattie!" she murmured huskily. "Go—go far. Put it all behind you forever! From now on, Hattie, they can't hurt you any more—can't torture you any longer. From now on, happiness, Hattie, happiness!" She dropped her head to Hattie's shoulder.

"There! There!" soothed the younger woman, tenderly. Someone was entering—a girl with a music-roll under an arm. Nodding to the newcomer, she covered the situation by ostentatiously tidying Sue's hair.

CHAPTER III

"Dear Miss Crosby, I'm so glad to see you again!"

Mrs. Milo came hurrying across the drawing-room to greet the soloist.

Miss Crosby shook hands heartily. She was smartly dressed in a wine-colored velveteen, the overshirt skirt of which barely reached to the tops of her freshly whitened spats. Her wide hat was tipped to a rakish angle. She was young (twenty-eight or thirty at most, but she looked less) and distinctly pretty. Her features were regular, her face oval, if too thin—with the thinness of one who is underfed. And this appearance of being poorly nourished showed in her skin, which was pallid, except where she had touched it on cheeks and chin with rouge. A neck a trifle too long and too lean was accentuated by a wide boyish collar of some starched material. But her eyes were fine—not large, but dark and lustrous under their black brows and heavy lashes. Worn in waves that testified to the use of the curling-iron, her yellow hair was in striking contrast to them. But this bright tint was plainly the result of bleaching. And both hair and rouge served to emphasize lines in her face that had not been made by time—lines of want, and struggle, and suffering; lines of experience. These showed mostly about her mouth, a thin mouth made more pronounced by the cautious use of the lip-stick.

"My dear," beamed Mrs. Milo, "are you singing away as hard as ever?"

"Oh, I have a great many weddings," declared the other, with a note that was somewhat bragging.

Mrs. Milo looked down at the long, slender, ungloved hand still held in one of hers. "Ah," she went on, playfully teasing, "but I see you're not always going to sing at other girls' weddings."

Miss Crosby pulled her hand free, and thrust it behind her among the folds of her skirt. "Well,—I—I——" She gave a sudden frightened look around, as if seeking some way of escape.

Sue was quick to her rescue. "Don't you want to wait with the choir?" she asked, waving a hand. "—You, too, Hattie."

Mrs. Milo seemed not to notice the singer's confusion. And when the latter disappeared with Hattie, she appealed to Sue, beaming with excitement. "Did you notice?" she asked. "A solitaire! She's engaged to be married!"

"Married!" echoed Sue, and shook her head.

"Oh, yes. You're thinking of the Balconies. Well, now you see why I've never felt too badly about your not taking the step."

"You mean that most marriages——?"

"It's a lottery—a lottery." Mrs. Milo sighed.

"But your marriage—yours and father's——"

"My marriage was a great exception—a very great exception."

"And there's Hattie and Wallace," went on Sue. "Oh, it would be too terrible——"

"There are few men as good as my son," said Mrs. Milo, proudly; "—you darling boy!" For Wallace had entered the room.

He came to them quickly. His pale face was unwontedly anxious.

"Is anything wrong?" questioned Sue.

"No," he declared. But his whole manner belied his words. "Only—only there'll be a change tomorrow—an outside minister."

"*What?*" exclaimed Mrs. Milo. And to Sue, "Didn't I tell you!"

"But if Mr. Farvel doesn't wish to officiate," she argued.

Her brother caught at the suggestion. "Exactly," he said. "He doesn't wish."

"What's the matter with him?" demanded Mrs. Milo, harshly.

"He has a reason," explained Wallace, in a tone that was meant to cut off further inquiry.

"A reason? Indeed! And what is it? Isn't dear Hattie to be consulted?"

Wallace put out his hands imploringly. "Hattie won't care," he argued. "And, oh, mother, let's not worry her about it!"

Mrs. Milo smiled wisely. "I've always said," she reminded, turning to Sue, "that there's something about Mr. Farvel that—well——" She shrugged.

Wallace's hands were opening and shutting almost convulsively. "Mother," he begged, "can I see Sue alone?"

Mrs. Milo's eyes softened with understanding. "My baby, of course." She kissed him fondly and hurried out to join Mrs. Balcome. His request was a familiar one. He called upon his sister not infrequently for financial help, and to his mother it was a point greatly in his favor that he shrank from asking for money in the presence of any third person.

His mother gone, Wallace turned to Sue. She had the same thought concerning the nature of what was troubling him; for he looked harassed—worn and pathetically helpless. He was more stooped than usual. The sight of him touched Sue's heart.

"Well, old brother," she said tenderly, putting a hand on his arm. "Is the bridegroom short of cash? Now that would never do. And you know I'm always ready——"

"Not that," he answered; "—not this time. I'm all right. It's—Alan."

"He's not happy!"

"No." Wallace glanced away. "But it's—it's an old story."

"Can I help him?"

He shook his head. "Nobody can do anything. We'll just change ministers."

She struggled against the next question. "It's about a—a girl?"

As if startled, he stared at her. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, I—I don't know." She laughed a little, embarrassed. "But most men at his age——"

"Well, it is about a girl," he admitted. "She disappeared—oh, nine or ten years ago."

"I—see."

"But don't say anything to Hattie about it. She likes Farvel. And—and she isn't any too enthusiastic about marrying me."

A smile came back into Sue's gray eyes. "My dear brother!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I'm not blind."

Sue addressed the room. "Our young mining-engineer," she observed with mock gravity, "'he is jealousy'."

Wallace was trembling. "I love her," he said half-brokenly; "I love her better than anything else in the world! But—but did you see her look at him? when she had her wedding-dress on, and he and I came in?"

"Wallace!"—pity and reproof mingled in Sue's tone. Again she laid a hand on his sleeve. "Oh, don't let doubt or—or anything enter your heart now—at this wonderful hour of your life—oh, Wallace, when you're just beginning all your years with her! Your marriage must be happy! Marriages can be happy—I know it! They're not all like her mother's. But don't start wrong! Oh, don't start wrong!" There were tears in her eyes.

Farvel came in from the Church. He was himself again, and slammed the door quite cheerily.

Wallace turned almost as if to intercept him. "I've fixed everything, old man," he said quickly. "It's all right."

"But I can officiate as well as not," urged Farvel, passing the younger man by and coming to Sue. "I don't want you to think I'm notional."

"She won't," declared Wallace, before Sue could speak. "I've explained."

"Ah." Farvel nodded, satisfied. "You—you know, then. Well, I've always wanted you to know."

She tried to smile back at him, to find an answer.

Her brother was urging Farvel to go. "You'll find someone to marry us, won't you?" he begged. "Right away, Alan?"

"Oh, I understand," said Farvel. "I'd be a damper, wouldn't I?"

"Oh, no! Not that!"

Farvel laid a hand on Wallace's shoulder. "He feels as bad about it as I do, dear old fellow!" he said.

The other moved away a step, and as if to take Farvel with him. "Yes, Alan. Yes. But don't talk about it today. Not today."

Farvel crossed to the sofa and sat down. "I know," he admitted. "But today—this wedding—I don't—I can't seem to get her out of my mind." Then as if moved by a poignant thought, he bent his head and covered his face with both hands.

Sue was beside him at once. And dropped to a knee. "Oh, I wish I could help you," she said comfortingly.

Farvel did not look up. He began to speak in a muffled voice. "What did I do to deserve it?" he asked brokenly. "That's what I ask myself. What did I do?"

"Nothing!" she answered. "Nothing! Oh, don't blame yourself." Her hand went up to touch one of his.

He uncovered his face and looked at her. He seemed to have aged all at once. "Oh, forgive me," he pleaded. "I don't want to worry you."

A gasping cry came from a door across the room. Mrs. Milo had entered, and was standing staring at the two in amazement and anger. "Susan Milo!" she cried.

"Oh!" Without rising, Sue began to pick up bits of smilax dropped from the florist's basket. "Yes, mother?" she replied inquiringly.

Mrs. Milo hurried forward. "What *are* you doing on your knees?"

"Mother dear," returned Sue, "did you ever see anything like smilax to get all over the place?" Her voice trembled like the voice of a child caught in wrongdoing. "One little bit here—one little bit there —"

"Get up," ordered her mother, curtly. And as Sue rose, "What's the matter with you, Mr. Farvel? Are you sick?"

"Mother!"—it was a low appeal.

Farvel rose, a trifle wearily. "No," he answered, meeting the angry look of the elder woman calmly. "I am not sick."

Mrs. Milo turned to vent her wrath upon Sue. "I declare I don't know what to think of you," she scolded. "Down on the carpet, making an exhibition of yourself!"

Sue's look beseeched Farvel. "Don't stay for rehearsal," she said. "Find another clergyman."

"That's best," he answered; "yes."

Mrs. Milo broke in upon them, not able to control herself. "Where's your dignity?" she demanded of Sue. "Acting like a romantic schoolgirl—a great, overgrown woman."

Farvel bowed to Sue with formality, ignoring her mother. "You're very kind," he said. "I'm grateful." With Wallace following, he went out by the door leading to the Church.

Instantly Mrs. Milo grew more calm. She seated herself with something of a judicial air. "Now, what's this all about?" she asked. "You know that I don't like a mystery."

Sue came to stand before her mother. And again her attitude was not that of one woman talking to another, but that of a child, anxious to excuse a fault. "Well,—well," she began haltingly, "someone he cared for—disappeared."

"Cared for," repeated Mrs. Milo, instant relief showing in her tone. "Ah, indeed! A girl, I suppose?"

"Y-y-yes."

Still more pleased, her mother leaned back, smiling. "And she disappeared, did she? Well, I don't wonder he's so secret about it. Ha! ha!"—that well-bred, rippling laugh.

Sue stared down at her. "You mean——" she asked; "you mean——"

Mrs. Milo lifted her eyebrows. "My daughter," she answered, "don't you know that there's only one reason why a girl drops out of sight?"

In amazement Sue fell back a step. "Mother!" she cried. Then turned abruptly, and went out into the Close.

Mrs. Milo stood up, on her face conscious guilt for her suspicion and her lack of charity. But she was appalled—almost stunned. Never in all her life before had her daughter left her in such a way. "I declare!" burst forth the elder woman. "I declare!" Then following Sue a few steps, and calling after her through the open door, "Well, what fills that basket out there? And what fills our Orphanage?" And more weakly, but still in an effort to justify herself, "What—what other reason can you suggest, I'd like to know! And—and it's just plain, common sense!" She came back to stand alone, staring before her. Then she sank to a chair.

Wallace returned. "Where's Sue, mother?" he asked.

"What?—Oh, it's you, darling? She—she stepped out."

"Out?"

"Into the Close."

"Oh." He hurried across the room.

Mrs. Milo fluttered to her feet. "I—I can't have that choir in the library any longer," she declared decisively. And left the room.

Sue entered in answer to her brother's call, and came straight to him. She had forgotten her anger by now; her look was anxious.

"Sue, let's go ahead with the rehearsal," he begged.

"Wallace,"—she gripped both of his wrists, as if she were determined to hold him until she had the answers she sought—"you knew her—that girl?"

He averted his eyes. "Why, yes."

She spoke very low. "Was she—sweet?"

"Yes; sweet,"—with a note of impatience.

"Light—or dark?"

"Rather dark." Again he showed irritation.

"Was she—was she pretty?"

"She was beautiful."

Her hands fell. She turned away. "And she dropped right out of his life," she said, as if to herself. Then coming about suddenly, "Why, Wallace? You don't know?"

"I—do—not—know." He dragged at his hair with a nervous hand.

She lowered her voice again. "Wallace,—she—she didn't have to go?"

Her brother made a gesture of angry impatience. "Oh, I'm disappointed in you!" he cried. "I thought you were different from other women. But you're just as quick to think wrong!"

She brought her hands together; and a look, wistful and appealing, gave to her face that curiously childlike expression. "Well, influence of the basket," she admitted ruefully, and hung her head.

He thrust his hands into his pockets sulkily, and turned his back.

Mrs. Balcome came puffing in. "Say, you know dear Babette is getting very tired," she announced pettishly. "And I wish——"

As if in answer to her complaining, there came a burst of song. The library door swung wide. And forward, with serene and uplifted faces, came the choir, singing the wedding-march. Each cotta swayed in time.

Balcome and Hattie followed the procession, the former scolding. "Well, are we rehearsing at last, or what are we doing?" he demanded as he passed Sue.

Mrs. Balcome shook with laughter. "Fancy anybody being such a dolt as to rehearse without a minister!" she scoffed.

The choir filed out, and their song came floating back from the Close. Miss Crosby entered and went to Sue. "Miss Milo, don't I sing before the ceremony?" she asked.

Sue roused herself with a shake of the head and a helpless laugh. "Well, you see how much *I* know about weddings," she answered. "Now, I'm going to introduce the bridegroom." Wallace was beside Hattie, leaning over her with anxious devotion, and whispering. Sue pulled at his sleeve. "Wallace," she said, "you haven't met Miss Crosby." And to Miss Crosby as he turned, a little annoyed at being interrupted, "This is the lucky man."

Miss Crosby's expression was one of polite interest. Wallace, trying to smile, bowed. Then their eyes met——

"A-a-a-aw!" It was a strange, strangling cry—like the terrified cry of some dumb thing, suddenly cornered. Miss Crosby's mouth opened wide, her eyes bulged. Upon her dead white face in startling contrast stood out the three spots of rouge.

"Laura!" gasped Wallace.

For a moment they stood thus, facing each other. Then with a rush the girl went, her arms thrown out as if to fend off any who might seek to detain her. She pulled the door to the vestibule against herself as if she were half-blinded, stumbled around it, slammed it shut behind her, and was gone.

CHAPTER IV

With Clare Crosby's sudden departure, the group in the Rectory drawing-room stood in complete silence for a moment, astonished and staring. Wallace, with his hands to his face, was like a man half-stunned.

Outside in the Close, the choir, having come to a halt, was rendering the Wedding March with great

gusto—proof positive that the choirmaster, at least, made an audience for the twelve. Above the chorus of young voices pealed that one most perfect—the bird-sweet voice of Ikey Einstein, devoid of its accent by some queer miracle of song. It dipped and soared with the melody, as sure and strong and true as a bugle.

"Well!" It was Mrs. Milo who spoke first—Mrs. Milo, who could put so much meaning into a single word. Now she expressed disapproval and amazement; more: that one exclamatory syllable, as successfully as if it had been an extended utterance, not only hinted, but openly avowed her belief in the moral turpitude of the young woman who had just reeled so blindly through the door.

"Wallace!" Sue went to her brother.

"Now, what's the row!" demanded Balcome, irritably, looking around for his hat, which Hattie had taken from him in order to make him more presentable for the rehearsal.

"I suppose *I've* done something," ventured Mrs. Balcome, plaintively.

Mrs. Milo hastened to the door leading to the lawn, spied the choirmaster, waved a wigwag at him with her handkerchief, and shut the door. The singing stopped.

She came fluttering back. Always, when something unforeseen and unpleasant happened, it was Mrs. Milo's habit to accept the occurrence as aimed purposely at her and her happiness. So now her attitude was one of patient forbearance. "I told you, Hattie," she reminded; "—bad luck if Wallace saw you in your wedding-dress today."

Wallace had slipped to a seat on the sofa, leaning his head on a hand, and shaking like a man with a chill. Now, at mention of Hattie's name, he sprang up, went to her, getting between her and his mother, and putting an arm about the girl as if to protect her. "It has nothing to do with Hattie," he declared, his eyes blazing. "Nothing, I tell you! And you're trying to make trouble!"

"If you please," interrupted Sue, quietly, "you're speaking to your mother."

But Mrs. Milo was amply able to take care of herself—by the usual method of putting any opponent instantly on the defensive. "So it has nothing to do with Hattie?" she returned. "Well, perhaps it has something to do with *you*."

Wallace's tall figure stiffened, as if from an electric shock. His lips drew back from his clenched teeth in something that was like a grin.

Hattie took a long step, freeing herself from his arm.

"Or perhaps"—Mrs. Milo's glance had traveled to Sue—"perhaps it has something to do with Mr. Farvel."

"I won't discuss Alan behind his back," retorted Wallace, hotly.

"A-a-a-ah!"—this with a gratified nod. She felt that she had forced the knowledge she wanted, namely that the going of the soloist had something to do with the clergyman. "Well,"—smiling—"I think I have an idea." With a beckon to Mrs. Balcome, she made toward the hall.

Mrs. Balcome came rolling after, the dog worn high against the crêpe cascade. "Perhaps it's just as well that Miss Crosby went," she observed from the door. "Of course, we could screen her with palms. But I think she'd take away from Hattie tomorrow. She's *much* too pretty—much."

"Puh!" snorted Balcome. He went to slam the door after her.

Now, Hattie turned upon Wallace with sudden intensity. "What has Miss Crosby to do with Mr. Farvel?" she demanded.

"But does it make any difference, Hattie?" put in Sue, quickly; "—as long as it isn't your Wallace. It doesn't, of course. Mr. Farvel has his own personal affairs, and they're no business of ours—none whatever. Are they? No. And Miss Crosby is charming, and pretty, and—and sweet." Now she in turn faced round upon her brother. "But—but what *has* Miss Crosby to do with Mr. Farvel?"

"Does it make, any difference to you?" countered Hattie.

"Of course not, Hattie!—Foolish question nine million and nine!—Wallace, she's—she's not—the girl? You know."

He reddened angrily. "She is not!" he exploded. But as Sue, showing plain distrust in his answer,

turned toward the passage as if to go in search of Farvel, he caught at her arm almost fiercely—and fearfully. "Oh, no! Not yet!" he begged. "Please, Sue!"

"I believe he ought to know," she declared.

"Do you want him to give up this Church?" he cried. And as she came back slowly, "Oh, trust me, Sue! It's something I can't tell you. But I'm right about it.—Sh!" For Mrs. Milo had re-entered, on her countenance unmistakable signs of triumphant pleasure.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed that lady, as she hurried forward. "I thought there was something queer about that Crosby girl!"

"Why, mother dear!" expostulated Sue. "I've heard you say she was such a lady—so refined——"

"Please don't contradict me!"

"I beg your pardon."

Mrs. Milo glanced from one to another of the little group, saving her news, preparing for a good effect. "Mrs. Balcome and I have just solved the Farvel mystery," she announced. "We looked at that photograph in the bureau again, and—it's Miss Crosby's picture."

"Haw-haw!" roared Balcome, with a scornful flop of the hat.

Sue went close to her brother. "Then she is the girl who disappeared," she said under her breath.

"Well—yes."

"And she'll go again! She'll be lost!" She started toward the hall.

"Susan!" cried her mother, peremptorily. And as Sue halted, "We want nothing to do with that girl. Come back."

"What harm could come of my going?" argued Sue.

"That is not the question."

"Mother, I don't like to oppose you, but in this case——"

"I shall not allow it," said her mother, decisively.

"Then I must go against your wishes." Sue opened the door.

"I forbid it, I tell you!" That note of shrillness now appeared in Mrs. Milo's voice.

"Oh, mother!" Sue came back a little way. "Don't treat me like a child!"

Now Mrs. Milo became all gentleness once more. She put a hand on Sue's arm. "Your mother is the best judge of your actions," she reminded. "And she wants you to stay."

Sue backed. "No; I'm sorry," she answered. "In all my life I can't remember disobeying you once. But today I must." Again she started.

"My daughter!" Mrs. Milo's voice broke pathetically. "You—you mean you won't respect my wishes?"

Checked by that sign of tears so near, again Sue halted, but without turning. "I want to help her," she urged, a little doggedly.

"But your mother," went on Mrs. Milo, "—my feelings—my love—are you going to trample them under foot?"

"Oh, not that!"

Mrs. Milo fell to weeping. "Oh, what do you care for my peace of mind!" she mourned. "For my heartache!"

It brought Sue to her mother's side. "Why! Why!" She put an arm about the elder woman tenderly.

Mrs. Milo dropped to a chair. "This is the child I bore!" she sobbed. "I've devoted my whole life to her! And now—oh, if your dear father knew! If he could only see——" Words failed her. She buried her face in her handkerchief.

Sue knelt at her side. "Oh, mother! Mother!" she comforted. "Hush, dear! Hush!"

"I'm going to be ill," wept Mrs. Milo. "I know I am! My nerves can't stand it! But it's just as well"—mournfully. "I'm in your way. I can see that. And it's t-t-t-time that I died!" She shook convulsively.

Commands, arguments, appeals, tears—how often Mrs. Milo and her daughter went through the several steps of just such a scene as this. Exactly that often, Sue capitulated, as she capitulated now, with eyes brimming.

"Ah, don't say that, mother," she pleaded. "You'll break my heart! You're my whole life—with Wallace away, why I've got nobody else in the whole world!" And looking up, "Wallace, you go."

Instantly Mrs. Milo's weeping quieted.

"Today?" asked her brother, impatiently.

"Yes, now! Right away!" Sue got to her feet.

"Oh, Sue, there's no rush!"

Mrs. Milo, suddenly dry-eyed, came to her son's rescue. "And why should Wallace go?" she asked. "Mr. Farvel is the one."

"No! No!" he cried, scowling at her. "I won't have Alan worried."

"Mm!" commented Mrs. Milo, ruffled at having her good offices so little appreciated. "You're very considerate."

"I understand the matter better than anyone else," he explained, trying to speak more politely. "Alan can't even bear to talk about it. So—I'll go."

Sue turned to Balcome. "And you go with him," she suggested.

"But why?"—again it was a nervous, frightened protest.

Sue nodded toward Hattie, standing so slim and still beside her father. "So my little sister will feel all right about it," she explained. "Because nothing, Wallace, must worry her. It's her happiness we want to think of, isn't it?—dear Hattie's."

"Oh, yes! Yes!"

"The address—I'll write it down." She bent over the desk.

Wallace went to Hattie. "Good-by," he said, tremulously. "I'll be right back." He leaned to kiss her, but she turned her face away. His lips brushed only her cheek.

Sue thrust the address into his hand. "Here. And, oh, Wallace, be very kind to her!"

"Of course. Yes. I'll do what I can." But he seemed scarcely to know what he was saying. He fingered the card Sue had given him, and watched Hattie.

Urging him toward the vestibule, Sue glanced down at her bridesmaid's dress, then searchingly about the room—for a hat, a wrap. "And bring them together—won't you?" she went on, taking Balcome's arm. At the door, she crowded in front of him.

"Susan," challenged her mother.

"Yes, mother,"—coming short, with a whimsically comical look that acknowledged discovery and defeat.

"They can find their way out. Come back."

Sue came. "But I could go with them, and not see Miss Crosby." Once more that note of childlike pleading. "I could just wait near by."

"Wait here, Susan.—Oh, I realize that you could be there and back before I'd know it."

Sue laughed. "Oh, she's a smart little mother!" she said fondly. "Yes, she is!"

"She knows your tricks," retorted Mrs. Milo, wisely. "You'd even trapse out in that get-up.—Please

don't fidget while I'm talking."

Seeing that it was impossible for her to get away, Sue sat down resignedly. "Well, as Ikey says," she observed, "'sometimes t'ings go awful fine, und sometimes she don't.'"

Now, Farvel came breezing in. "I've found a minister, Miss Milo," he announced. Then realizing that something untoward had happened, "Why,—where's Wallace?"

"He has followed Miss Crosby," answered Mrs. Milo, speaking the name with exaggerated distinctness.

"Miss Crosby?" Farvel was puzzled.

"Miss—*Clare*—Crosby."

He turned to Sue, and she rose and came to him—smiling, and with a certain confidential air that was calculated either to rescue him from a catechism or to result in her own banishment from the room. "Do you know that you haven't dictated this morning's letters?" she asked. And touching him on the arm, "Shan't we go into the library now?"

"Susan," purred Mrs. Milo.

"Yes, mother." But Sue, halting beside Farvel, continued to talk to him animatedly, in an undertone.

"Will you kindly see that Dora understands about dinner preparations?"

"Hattie, do you mind ringing?"

Mrs. Milo held up a slender hand to check Hattie. "Susan," she went on, patiently, "do you want your mother to do the trotting after the servants?"

"No, mother. But Mr. Farvel's letters——"

Now that quick, mechanical smile, and Mrs. Milo tipped her head to one side as she regarded the clergyman in pretty concern. "Mr. Farvel is in no mood for dictation," she declared gently; "and—I am quite exhausted, as you know." But as Sue hurried away, not lifting her eyes, lest she betray how glad she was to be dismissed, her mother rose—and there was no appearance of the complained-of exhaustion. Her eyes shone with eagerness. They fastened themselves on Farvel's face. "That Miss Crosby," she began; "—she came, recognized Wallace, gave a cry—and ran."

Farvel listened politely. Mrs. Milo was so prone to be dramatic. There was scarcely a day that some warning of Wolf! Wolf! did not ring through the Rectory. "Well, what seemed to be the matter?" he asked.

"I thought you might know,"—with just a trace of emphasis on the You.

"I don't," he assured her, quietly.

"Then why not go yourself—and get the facts?"

"Wallace didn't ask me."

There was something in the tone of his reply that brought the blood to her cheeks. She replied to it by making her own tone a little chiding. "But as my boy's oldest friend," she reminded.

Farvel laughed. "Friend?" he repeated. "He's more like a younger brother to me. But that doesn't warrant my intruding on him, does it?"

Mrs. Milo lifted her eyebrows. "I hope," she commented, with something of that same sorrowful intonation which characterized the speech of Dora, "—I hope there's no reason why you shouldn't meet this Crosby girl."

Farvel stared at her. "I?" he demanded, too astonished by her daring to be angry. "Why—why——"

At this juncture the library door opened and Dora entered, to set the room to rights apparently, for she gave a critical look about, arranged the writing-desk, and put a chair in place.

"Dora," said Mrs. Milo, "you saw Miss Susan?"

Dora lifted pale eyes. "Oh, yes," she answered, "but only a fleeting glimpse."

"Glimpse?" repeated Mrs. Milo, startled.

"From the rear portal"—with an indefinite wave of the hand—"she turned that way."

"Oh! She went! To that Crosby girl! And I forbade her!—Mr. Farvel, come!"

"But I'm not wanted," urged the clergyman.

"Why do you hold back? Don't I want you?"

Farvel pondered a moment, his look on Hattie, standing in the bay-window, now, alert but motionless. "Well, I'll come," he said at last.

"Dora!" cried Mrs. Milo, as she fluttered hallward; "my bonnet!"

Dora had gone by the same door through which she had come. Hattie and Farvel were alone. She turned and came to stand beside him. "Why do you suppose—" she commenced; and then, more bluntly, "What was the matter with Miss Crosby?"

Farvel studied her face for a moment, his own full of anxious sympathy. "I can't imagine," he said, finally; "but whatever it is you may be sure of one thing—Wallace isn't to blame."

Hattie's look met his. "It's queer, isn't it?" she said; "but that—well, that doesn't seem to be troubling me at all." Then for no reason whatever, she put out her hand. He took it, instantly touched. Her eyes were glistening with tears. She turned and went out into the Close.

Farvel stood for a moment gazing after her. Then remembering his promise to Mrs. Milo, he hastened in the direction of his study.

As the hall door shut after him, the library door swung wide, and Dora came bouncing in, waving an arm joyously. "Your path is clear!" she announced.

At her back was Sue, looking properly guilty, and scrambling into a coat that would hide the bridesmaid's dress. "Just what did you tell mother?" she inquired.

"I said you went that way,"—with a jerk of the head that set the tight braids to bobbing.

"Oh, what did you tell her that for!" mourned Sue. "It's the way I must go!"

"It is the truth," said Dora, solemnly, "and, oh, Miss Susan,"—chanting—"a lying tongue is but for a moment."

"I know," answered Sue, exasperated; "'a lying tongue is but for a moment,' and 'deceitful men shall not live out half their days,' but, Dora, this is a desperate case. So you find my mother and tell her that—that I'm probably downstairs in the basement,—er—er—well, I might be setting the mouse-trap." And giving Dora an encouraging push in the direction of the hall, Sue disappeared on swift foot into the vestibule.

CHAPTER V

Miss Mignon St. Clair was affectionately, and familiarly, known as Tottie. About thirty, and thus well past the first freshness of youth, she was one of that great host of women who inadvertently and pathetically increase the look of bodily and nervous wear and tear by the exaggerated use of cosmetics—under the comforting delusion that these have just the opposite effect. With her applications of liquid-white and liquid-red, Tottie invariably achieved the almost grotesque appearance of having dressed in the dark.

In taking as it were a final stand against the passing of her girlhood, Miss St. Clair had gone further than most. First, in very desperation, she had colored her graying mouse-tinted hair a glowing red; and then, as a last resort, had heroically, but with mistaken art, bobbed it.

The effect, if weird, added to the lady's striking appearance. With glasses, and an unbelted Mother Hubbard gown made out of antiqued gold cloth, she might have passed for a habitu  of the pseudo-artistic colony that made its headquarters not far away from her domicile. But such was her liking for

jewelry, and plenty of it, and for gowns not loose but clinging, that, invariably equipped with an abundant supply of toothsome gum, she looked less the blue-stocking, or the anarchistic reformer, than what she aimed to resemble—a flaming-tressed actress (preferably of the vampire type), a shining "star."

But such are the tricks of Fate, that Tottie, outwardly and in spirit the true "artiste," was—as a plain matter of fact—a landlady, who kept "roomers" at so much per week.

Her rooming-house was one of those four-story-and-basement brownstone-front affairs with brownstone steps (and a service-entrance under the steps) that New York put up by the thousands several decades ago, and considered fashionable.

The house, therefore, was like every other house on the block. But to the observant passerby, one thing identified it. The basements of its neighbors were given over to various activities—commercial and otherwise. There were basements that were bakeries, or delicatessen shops, or dusty second-hand-book stores, or flower stalls. And not a few were used still for their primary purpose—the housing, more or less comfortably, of humans. The St. Clair house was distinguished by the fact that its front room on the basement level (the servants' living-room of better days) was rented for the accommodation of a "hand" laundry.

Often Miss St. Clair felt called upon to apologize for that laundry—at least to explain its presence. "Some of my friends say, 'Oh, my dear, a *laundry!*' But as I say, 'You can't put high-class people in the basement; and high-class people is the only people I'll have around. Furthermore, I can't leave the basement empty. And ain't cleanness next to goodness? And what's cleaner'n a laundry? Besides, it's handy to have one so close.'"

The interior of the building was typical. Its front-parlor, the only room not "let," was high-ceilinged and of itself marked the house as one that had been pretentious in its day. It boasted the usual bay-window, a marble fireplace and a fine old chandelier with drop-crystal ornaments—all these eloquent of the splendor that was past. Double doors led to the back-parlor, which was the dining-room of earlier times.

There was the characteristic hall, with stairs leading down under stairs that led up, these last to rooms shorn of their former glory, and now graduated in price, and therefore in importance, first, by virtue of their outlook—their position as to front or rear; and, second, in reference to their distance above the street. The front stairs ended in a newel post that supported a bronze figure holding aloft a light—a figure grotesquely in contrast to the "hall stand," with its mirror and its hat hooks and its Japanese umbrella receptacle.

The pride of Miss St. Clair's heart was that "front-parlor." And upon it she had "slathered" a goodly sum—with a fond generosity that was wholly mistaken, since her purchases utterly ruined the artistic value of whatever the room possessed of good. She had papered its walls in red (one might have said with the idea of matching the background with her hair); but the paper bore a conventional pattern—in the same tone—which was so wrought with circles and letter S's that at a quick glance the wall seemed fairly to be a-crawl. And she had hung the bay-window with cheap lace curtains, flanked at either side by other curtains of a heavy material and a flashy pattern.

The fireplace had suffered no less than the window. On its mantel was the desecrating plaster statuette of a diving-girl—tinted in various pastel shades; this between two vases of paper flowers. And above the fireplace, against the writhing wall paper, hung a chromo entitled "The Lorelei"—three maidens divested of apparel as completely as was the diving-girl, but hedged about by a garish gold frame.

However, it was in the matter of furniture that Miss St. Clair had sinned the most. This furniture consisted of one of those perpetrations, one of those crimes against beauty and comfort, that is known as a "set." It comprised a "settee," a "rocker," an armchair, and a chair without arms—all overlaid with a bright green, silky velour that fiercely fought the red wall paper and the landlady's hair.

At this hour of the morning, the room was empty, save for a bird and a rag doll in long dresses. A sash of the bay-window was raised, and the cheap lace curtains were blowing back before a light breeze. Against the curtains, swinging high out of the way of the breeze, was a gilded cage of generous size, holding a green-and-yellow canary.

The other occupant of the room was propped up carefully on the chair without arms. To its right, hanging from the chair back, was a little girl's well-worn coat; to its left, suspended from an elastic, was an equally shabby hat. And the pitiful condition of doll, coat, and hat was sharply accentuated by the background of the chair's verdant nap.

The doll's eyes were shoe buttons, of an ox-blood shade. They stared redly at the chirping canary.

The stairs creaked, and a woman came bustling down—a youngish woman with "rural" written in her over-long, over-full skirt, her bewreathed straw hat, and her three-quarters coat that testified to faithful service. Her face showed glad excitement. She pulled on cotton gloves as she came, and glanced upward over a shoulder.

"Tottie!—Tottie!"

"Hoo-hoo!" Miss St. Clair was in a jovial mood.

"Somebody's at the front door." The velour rocker held a half-dozen freshly wrapped packages, spoil of an earlier shopping expedition. Mrs. Colter gathered the packages together.

The bell began to ring more insistently, and with a certain rhythm. Tottie came down, in a tea-gown that was well past its prime, and that held the same relation to her abundant jewelry that marble fireplace and crystal chandelier sustained to her ornate furniture. "Don't go for just a minute, Mrs. Colter," she suggested, rotating her chewing-gum, and adjusting a flowered silk shawl.

There was a boy at the front door, a capped and uniformed urchin with a special delivery letter. "Miss Clare Crosby live here?" he inquired. Behind his back, in his other hand, the butt of a cigarette sent up a fragrant thread of smoke.

"You bet,"—and Miss St. Clair relieved him of the letter he proffered. He went down the steps at an alarming gait, and she came slowly into the parlor, studying the letter, feeling it inquiringly.

"I'm goin' to finish my tradin'," informed Mrs. Colter. "It'll be six months likely before I git down to N'York again."

"You oughta let Clare know when you're comin'," declared Tottie, holding the letter up to the light.

"Oh, well, I won't start home till she gits in. You know there's trains every hour to Poughkeepsie." Having gathered her bundles together, Mrs. Colter carried them into the back-parlor.

Left alone, Tottie lost no further time. To pry the letter open and unfold it was the swift work of a thumb and finger made dexterous by long use of the cigarette. "*Great news, my darling!*" she read. "*The firm says—*"

But Mrs. Colter was returning. "I'll be back from the store in no time," she announced as she came; "only want to git a bon-bon spoon and a pickle fork." Then calling through the double doors, "Come, Barbara!"

Tottie, having returned the letter to its envelope and resealed it, now set it against the diving-girl on the mantelpiece. "What you doin'?" she inquired; "blowin' the kid's board money?"

"Board money!" cried Mrs. Colter. "Why, Miss Crosby ain't paid me for two weeks.—Barbara!"

"Yes," answered a child's voice.

"Well, she's behind with me a whole month," returned Tottie, "and you know I let her have a room here just to be accommodatin'. The stage is my perfession, Mrs. Colter. Oh, yes, I've played with most all of the big ones. And as I say, I don't have to take roomers. Why, I rented this house just so's I could entertain my theatrical friends."

Mrs. Colter took out and put back her hatpins. "It must be grand to be a' actress!" she observed longingly.

"Well, it ain't so bad. For one thing, you can pick a name you like. Now, I think mine is real swell. 'What'll we call y'?' says my first manager. Y' see, my own name wouldn't do, specially as I'm a dancer—Hopwell; ain't that fierce? Tottie Hopwell! I never could live that down. So I says to him, 'Well, call me Mignon—Mignon St. Clair.'"

Mrs. Colter gazed at her hostess wide-eyed. "Oh, it's grand!" she breathed. "—Barbara, *come!*"

"I'm coming."

On flagging feet, the child came out. She was small—not over nine at the most—with thin little legs, and a figure too slender for her years. Her dress was a gingham, very much faded. One untied lace of her patched shoes whipped from side to side as she walked.

But it was not the poorness of her dress that made her a pathetic picture as she halted, looking at Mrs. Colter. It was her face—a grave, little face, thin, and lacking childish color. Upon it were a few stray, pale freckles.

Yet it was not a plain face, and about it fell her hair, brown and abundant, in gleaming curls and waves. Her eyes were lovely—large, and a dark, almost a purplish, blue. They were wise beyond the age of their owner, and sad. They told of tears shed, of wordless appeal, but also of patient endurance of little troubles. Her brows had an upward turn at the center which gave her a quaint, questioning look. Her mouth was tucked in at either corner, lending a wistful expression that was habitual.

"Barbara, come, hurry," urged Mrs. Colter, holding out the child's hat.

But Barbara hung back. "Where's Aunt Clare?" she asked.

"I tell you, Aunt Clare ain't home yet."

Now, Barbara retreated. "Oh, I want to stay here, to see her. Please, please."

"Look how you act!" complained Mrs. Colter, helplessly.

Tottie came to the rescue. "Say, I'll keep a' eye on the kid."

"Oh, will you?" cried Mrs. Colter, gratefully.

"Sure. Leave her."

"That's mighty nice of you.—And you be a good girl, Barbara."

"I will," promised the child, settling herself upon the settee with a happy smile.

A bell rang. "Ah, there she is now!" exclaimed Mrs. Colter, and as Barbara sprang up, she ran to her and hastily tidied the gingham dress.

But Tottie was giving a touch to her appearance at the hall mirror. "Nope," she declared over a shoulder. "She's got a key."

Though she heard the bell again, and it was now ringing impatiently, Mrs. Colter was not convinced. She knelt before Barbara, straightening a washed-out ribbon that stood up limply above the brown curls. "Now, come! Quiet!" she admonished.

Out of the pocket of the gingham, Barbara had brought a small and withered nosegay. There were asters in it, and a torn and woeful carnation. "See!" she cried. "I'm going to give Aunt Clare all these."

Tottie was gone to admit the visitor. Mrs. Colter lowered her voice. "Yes, honey," she agreed. "And you're goin' to tell your Aunt Clare what a nice place we've got in Poughkeepsie, and how much you like it, and——" The outer door had opened. She whispered an added suggestion.

There was a young man at the front door—a man with a quick, nervous manner. He wore clothes that were unmistakably English, and *pince-nez* from which hung a narrow black ribbon. And he carried a cane. As he took off his derby to greet the landlady with studied courtesy, his hair showed sparse across the top of his head. His mustache worn short, was touched with gray.

"She's out yodelin' somewheres, Mr. Hull," informed Tottie, filling the doorway inhospitably, but unconsciously.

Hull's face fell. "Well,—well, do you mind if I wait for her?" he asked.

"Oh, come in. Come in."

He came, with a stride that was plainly acquired in uniform. His cane hung smartly on his left arm. He carried his head high.

It was Tottie's conviction that he was the son of a nobleman—perhaps even of a duke; and that he was undoubtedly an erstwhile officer in the King's service. She was respectful to Hull, even a little awe-struck in his presence. He had a way of looking past her when he spoke, of treating her as he might an orderly who was making a report. With him, she always adopted a certain throaty manner of speaking,—a deep, honey huskiness for which a well-known actress, who was a favorite of hers, was renowned, and which she had carefully practiced. How many times of a Sunday, cane in hand, had she seen him come down that street to her steps, wearing a silk hat. Sometimes for his sake alone she wished that she could dispense with that laundry.

"Then she didn't get my letter," said Hull.

"Can't say," answered Tottie, taking her eyes from the mantelpiece.

Hull spied the envelope. "No; here it is. You see, I didn't think I could follow it so soon."

Mrs. Colter had risen, and was struggling with her veil.

"Mrs. Colter, this is Miss Crosby's fy-an-see," introduced Tottie.

"And, Barbara, this is goin' to be your Uncle Felix."

Hull sat, and Barbara came to him, putting out a shy hand. "Ah! So this is the little niece!" he exclaimed. "Well! Well!—When did you come down, Mrs. Colter?"

"Left Poughkeepsie at six-thirty this mornin'. And now I must be runnin' along—to see if I can find that pickle fork."

Barbara had been studying the newcomer more frankly. Emboldened by his smile, she brought forward the nosegay. "See what I've got for Aunt Clare," she whispered.

Hull patted the crumpled blossoms. "You're a thoughtful little body," he declared. And as Mrs. Colter started out, "Could I trouble you, I wonder?" He got up. "I mean to say, will you buy something for the little niece?"

"Oh, ain't that nice of him!" cried Mrs. Colter, appealing to Tottie.

Hull was going into a pocket to cover his confusion at being praised.

"A—a pinafore, for instance," he suggested, "or a—a——"

"A coat," pronounced Tottie. "Look at that one! It's fierce!"

With the grave air of a little old lady, Barbara interposed. "I need shoes worse," she declared. "See." She put out a foot.

"Yes, shoes," agreed Hull. He pressed a bill into Mrs. Colter's hand. There were tears in her mild eyes. She did not trust herself to speak, but nodded, smiling, and hurried away. He sat again, and drew the child to him.

Tottie, leaned against the mantelpiece once more, observed the two with languid, but not unkindly, interest. "I wonder why the kid's father and mother don't do more for her," she hazarded.

Hull frowned. "It makes my blood boil when I think how that precious pair have loaded the child onto Miss Crosby," he answered.

"Pretty bony," agreed Tottie.

"And she's so brave about it—so uncomplaining. Why, any other girl would have put her niece into an orphanage."

The rooming-house keeper grinned. "Well, she did think of it," she said slyly. "But they turned her down. Y' see, Barbara—ain't a' orphan."

Now Barbara lifted an eager face. "My mother's in Africa, and my father's in Africa," she boasted.

"Out o' sight, pettie, out o' mind."

Hull took one of the child's hands in both of his. "You've got a mighty fine auntie, little girl," he said with feeling. "Just the best auntie in the whole world."

Barbara nodded. "And I love her," she answered, "best of everybody 'cept my mother."

Tottie threw up both well-powdered arms. "Hear that!" she cried. "Except her mother! And Clare says the kid ain't seen the mother since she was weaned!"

Hull shook his head. "Isn't it strange!" he mused; "—the difference between members of the same family! There's one sister, neglecting her own child—and a sweet child. And here's another sister, bearing the burden."

But Barbara was quick to the rescue of the absent parent under criticism. "Aunt Clare says that some day my mother's coming back from Africa," she protested. "And then I'm going to be with her all the time—every day."

"I s'pose the kid'll live with you and Clare when you marry," ventured Tottie.

"No. Clare doesn't want me to have the expense. Says it isn't fair. But—I'll get in touch with that father."

Again the child interposed, recognizing the note of threatening. "Maybe my father won't come with my mother," she declared. "Because he hunts lions."

Tottie laughed. "Well, he'd better cut out huntin' lions," she retorted, "and hunt you some duds." Then to Hull, "I wonder what they're up to, 'way out there. What is it about 'em that's so secret?"

"That's not my affair," reminded Hull, bluntly. He got up, dropping the child's hand.

Feeling herself dismissed, but scarcely knowing at what or whom this stranger was directing his ill-temper, Barbara retreated, and to the doll, sitting starkly upon the green chair. "Come on, Lolly-Poppins," she whispered tenderly, and taking the doll up in her arms, went back to the corner of the settee to rock and kiss it, to smooth and caress it with restless little hands.

Tottie sidled over to Hull, lowering her voice against the child's overhearing her. "Y' know what *I* think?" she demanded.

"What?"

"I think the pair of 'em is in j-a-l-e,"—she spelled the word behind a guarding hand.

Hull ignored the assertion. "Where is Miss Crosby singing today?" he asked curtly.

Tottie went back to the hearth. "Search me," she declared. "It looks like your future bride, Mr. Hull, don't tell nobody nothin'. What's *your* news?"

Barbara had settled down, Lolly-Poppins in the clasp of both arms. She crooned to the doll, her eyes closed.

"Oh, I haven't any," answered Hull. Then more cordially, "But I got a raise today."

"Grand! The Northrups, ain't it?"

"Chemists," said Hull, going to look out of the window.

"Well, money's your friend," declared Tottie, philosophically. "Me for it!"

A door-latch clicked. Someone had entered the hall.

"That's her!"

"Don't tell her Barbara's here. It'll be a jolly surprise."

Tottie agreed, and with a quick movement caught the silk shawl from her own shoulders and covered the child.

CHAPTER VI

Clare ran all the way, with scared eyes, and heaving breast, and a hand clutching the rim of the tilted hat. And only when she reached the corner nearest home did she slow a little, to look behind her as if she feared pursuit. Then finding herself breathless, she stepped aside for a moment into the entrance of an apartment house, and there, under the suspicious watch of a negro elevator boy, pretended to hunt for something in her music-roll.

As she waited, she remembered that there was some laundry due her in the basement. That must be collected. She walked on, having taken a second look around, and darted under the front steps to make her inquiry. She promised to call for the articles in ten minutes by way of the back stairs; then slowly ascended the brownstone steps, glancing up the street as she climbed, but as indifferently as possible.

Once inside the storm door, she listened. Someone might be telephoning—they knew her number at

the Rectory. Or Tottie might have a visitor, which would interfere with plans.

She heard no sound. Letting herself in noiselessly, she tiptoed to the parlor door and opened it softly.

"Hello-o-o-o!" It was Hull, laughing at the surprise they had for her.

"Felix!" She halted, aghast.

"Well, aren't you glad to see me?"

"Oh, yes! Yes!"—but her face belied her. She tugged at her hat, seeking, even in her nervousness, to adjust it becomingly.

"What're y' pussy-footin' around here for?" questioned Tottie, sharply.

"I'm not.—Tottie, can I see Mr. Hull alone?"

"Sure, dearie. As I say, don't never git your ear full of other folks's troubles—*and* secrets." She went out, with a backward look at once crafty and resentful.

With a quick warning sign to Hull, Clare ran to the door, bent to listen a moment, holding her breath, then ran to him, leading him toward the window. "Felix," she began, "go back to Northrups. I'll 'phone you in an hour."

He had been watching her anxiously. "What is it? Something wrong?"

"Yes! Yes! My—my brother and sister—in Africa." She got his hat from where he had laid it on the rocker.

"In trouble?" he persisted, studying her narrowly.

"Yes,—in trouble. And I don't want to see any reporters—not one!"

"That's all right"—he spoke very gently—"I'll see them."

Her face whitened. "Oh, no! There isn't anything to say. Felix, I'll just leave here, and they won't be able to find me. And you go now——" She urged him toward the door.

He stood his ground. "You're not giving me the straight of this," he asserted, suddenly severe.

"I am, I tell you! I am!" Her face drew into lines of suffering. She entreated him, clasping his arm with her trembling hands.

He freed himself from her hold. "If I thought you were lying——"
Then, roughly, "I hate a liar!"

"Oh, but I'm not lying! Honest I'm not! Oh, believe me, and go!—Felix!"

He forbore looking at her. "Very well," he said coldly, and started out.

She followed him to the door. "And don't come back here, will you?
Promise you won't!"

"I shan't come back," he promised.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" Then in tearful appeal, seeing his displeasure, "Oh, Felix, I love you!" The poignancy of her cry made him relent suddenly, and turn. He put an arm about her, and she clung to him wildly. "Oh, Felix, trust me! Oh, you're all I've got!"

"But there's something I don't understand about this," he reminded more kindly.

"I'll explain later. I will! You'll hear from me soon."

Again he drew away from her. "Just as you say,"—resentfully.

The front door shut behind him, Clare called up the stairs. "Tottie!
Tottie!" She listened, a hand pressing her bosom.

"A-a-a-all right!"

Clare did not wait. Running back into the front-parlor, she stood on a chair in the bay-window, and worked at the hook holding the bird-cage. "Well, precious!" she crooned. "Missy's little friend! Her

darling pet! Her love-bird! How's the sweet baby?" The cage released, she stepped down and hurried across the room.'

"Aunt Clare!"—first the clear, glad cry; next, a head all tumbled curls.

"Barbara!" Clare came short. Then, as Tottie sauntered in, "Oh, what's this young one doing here?"

Barbara had risen, discarding the doll and the shawl, and gone to Clare. Now, feeling herself rebuffed, she went back to the settee, watching Clare anxiously.

"Waitin' for you," answered Tottie, taking up her shawl.

"Aunt Clare!" pleaded the child, softly.

"Oh! Oh!" mourned Clare. She set the cage on the table.

Barbara bethought herself of the gift. Out of the sagging pocket of the gingham, she produced the tightly-made bouquet. "See!" she cried, holding out the flowers with a smile. "For you, Aunt Clare!"

But Clare brushed them aside, and fetched the child's hat. "Where's that Colter woman?" she demanded angrily.

Tottie lolled against the mantel, studying Clare and enjoying her gum. "Huntin' pickle forks," she replied.

"Aunt Clare!" insisted Barbara, again proffering the drooping nosegay.

"Here! Put this on!"—it was the coat. Clare took one small arm and directed it into a sleeve.

"Do I have to go?" asked Barbara, plaintively.

"Now don't make a fuss!"—crossly. "Stand still!" Then taking the bouquet away and letting it drop to the floor, "Here! Here's the other sleeve." The coat went on.

"Are you coming with me?" persisted Barbara, brightened by the thought.

But Clare did not heed. "When'll she be back?" She avoided looking at Tottie. "—Let me button you, will you?"—this with an impatient tug at the coat.

"Can't say," answered Tottie, with exasperating indifference.

"Tottie, I'm going to move."

At that, the landlady started, suddenly concerned. "Move?" she echoed incredulously.

Clare ran to a sewing-machine that stood against the wall behind the settee. "Today," she added; "—now."

"Where you goin'?"

"To—to Jersey."

Barbara, coated and hatted, and with Lolly-Poppins firmly clasped in her arms, followed the younger woman. "Aunt Clare——"

"Jersey!" scoffed Tottie. "You sure don't mean Jersey *City*."

Clare covered her confusion by hunting among the unfinished work on the machine. "Yes,—Jersey City," she challenged.

Tottie's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Must be pretty bad," she observed. "Pretty bad."

Barbara, planted squarely in Clare's path, again importuned. "Am I going too, Aunt Clare?"

"No! Sit down! And keep *quiet*!"

The child obeyed. There was comfort in Lolly-Poppins. She lifted the doll to her breast, mothering it.

"What's happened, pettie?" inquired Tottie.

"Nothing—nothing." Clare folded a garment.

"Nothin'—but you're movin' to Jersey City.—Ha!"

"Well, most of my singing is across the River now, so it's more convenient."

"Mm!"—it implied satisfaction. Then carelessly, "Say, here's a letter for you." And as Clare took it, tearing it open, "Glad nothin' 's gone wrong.—Is that good news?"

Clare thrust the letter into her dress. "Oh, just another singing engagement," she answered. And went back to the heap of muslin on the sewing-machine.

Tottie's face reddened beyond the circumference of her rouge spots. She took a long step in Clare's direction, and laid a hand on her arm. "Now, look here!" she said threateningly. "You're lyin' about this move!"

"I'm not! I'm not!"

"Somebody's been knockin' me."

"No. Nonsense!" Clare tried to free her arm.

But Tottie only held her the tighter. "Then why are you goin'?"

"I've told you.—Please, Tottie!" Again she strove to loosen the other's grip, seeing which Barbara, fearing for her Aunt Clare, cast aside her doll and ran to stand beside the younger woman, trembling a little, and ready to burst into tears.

"Aw, you can't fool me!" declared Tottie.

"I don't want to!"

Tottie thrust her face close to Clare's. "You've got your marchin' orders!"

"What do you—you mean?" The other choked; her look wavered.

"You're on the run."

"I am not! No!"

Tottie's voice lowered, losing its harshness, and took on a wheedling tone. "But you never have to run," she informed slyly, "if you've got the goods on somebody." She winked.

"I—I haven't."

"Stick—and fight—and *cash in*."

"Tottie!" Clare stared, appalled.

"O-o-o-oh!"—sneeringly. "Pullin' the goody-goody stuff, eh?"

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Auntie Clare!" With the cry of fear, Barbara came between them, catching at the elder woman's arm.

Tottie loosed her hold and went back to the mantel to lean and look. Clare drew out a drawer of the small center-table, searched it, and laid a hand-mirror beside the cage.

"What'll be your new address?"

"I'll send it to you."

The landlady began to whine. "Ain't that just my rotten luck! Another room empty!—you know you oughta give me a week's notice."

"Oh, I'll pay you for it," answered Clare, bitterly.

"Well, I don't want to gouge you, dearie. And I don't know what I'll do when you're gone. I've just learned to love you.—And with summer comin' on, goodness knows how I'm goin' to rent that back-parlor. It's hard to run a respectable house and keep it full. Now as I say, if I was careless, I——"

But what Miss St. Clair might have been moved to do under such conditions was not forthcoming, for now steps were heard, climbing to the front door. Next, a man's voice spoke. Then the bell rang.

"Wait! Wait!" As she warned Tottie, Clare crossed to the bay-window at a run.

"Maybe here's a new roomer," suggested the hopeful landlady.

But Clare had pressed aside the heavy curtain framing the window until she could command the stoop. Two men were waiting there. "Oh!" she breathed, almost reeling back upon Tottie. "Oh, don't let 'em in! Don't! I can't see anybody! Say I'm gone! Oh, please, Tottie! I'm gone for good." She was beside Barbara again, and was almost lifting the child from the floor by an arm. Then she reached for the bird-cage.

"Friends of yours?" questioned Tottie. She also peeked out.

"No! No!"—and to Barbara, "Come! Don't you speak! Don't open your mouth! Not a word!" Taking the child with her, she fled into her own room, closing the door.

The bell rang again, but Tottie took her time. Going to the fireplace, she turned "The Lorelei" to the wall; then slipping the shawl from her shoulders, she draped it carelessly over the plaster statuette of the diving-girl. After which she stepped back, appraised the effect, and went to open the front door to a large, ill-tempered man in a loose sack suit, and a young man, tall and white to ghastliness, whose nostrils quivered and whose mouth was scarcely more than a blue line.

"Good-morning," began Balcome, entering without being asked.

"Won't you step in?" begged Tottie, pointedly.

The door to the back-parlor had opened to a crack. And a face distorted with fear looked through the narrow opening. Clare heard the invitation, and the entering men. She shut the door softly.

Tottie followed her visitors. This was a transformed Tottie—all airs and graces, with just the touch of the dramatic that might be expected from a great "star." Indeed, she paused a moment, framed by the doorway, and waited before delivering her accustomed preamble. She smiled at the elder man, who returned a scowl. She bestowed a brighter smile on Wallace, who failed to see it, but licked at his lips, and smoothed his throat, like a man suddenly gone dry. Then she entered, slowly, gracefully, allowing the teagown to trail.

"As I say," she began, turning her head from side to side with what was intended to be a pretty movement, "—as I say, it's a real joy to room your theatrical friends. Because they fetch y' such swell callers."

Balcome, with no interest in this information, aimed toward Wallace a gesture that was meant to start the matter in hand.

Wallace rallied his wits. "Is Miss—er—Crosby at home?" he asked.

"Miss Crosby," repeated Tottie, with her very best honey-huskiness; "oh, she don't rent here no more."

He reddened in an excess of relief.

"She don't?" mocked Balcome, glaring at the teagown.

"Nope," went on the landlady, mistaking his attention for a compliment, and simpering a little, with a quick fluttering of her lids; "took all her stuff.—Hm!" Now she let her eyes play side-wise, toward that double door behind Balcome.

He took the hint. "I see."

"And, oh, I'm goin' to miss her! Her first name bein' Clare, and my last name bein' St. Clair, I always feel, somehow, that she's a sorta relation."

Balcome went nearer to the double door. "And you don't know where she's living now?" He raised his voice a little. Then with Wallace gaping in amazement, he put a hand into a pocket and brought out several bills. He gave these a flirtatious wave before Tottie's eyes. "You don't know?"

"Say, y' don't expect me to tell y', do y'?" she inquired, also raising her voice. Those eyes sparkled with greed.

"Of course I expect you to tell me," Balcome mocked again, sliding the bills into a coat pocket.

"Well, she didn't leave her new address." Out came a beringed hand.

"Didn't she?" Once more Balcome displayed the money.

"No, she said she'd send it." Then pointing toward the double door, her fingers closed on the bribe.

Wallace gulped, looking about him at the carpet, like a creature in misery that would lie down.

Balcome was taking a turn about the room. "So she's gone," he said. "Too bad! Too bad! And no address." Presently, as he came close to the door again, he gave one half of it a sudden, wrenching pull. It opened, and disclosed Clare, crouched to listen, one knee on the floor.

"No! Don't!" It was Tottie, pretending to interfere.

"O-o-oh!" Clare scrambled to her feet. But contrary to what might have been expected, she almost hurled herself into the room, shut the door at her back, and stood against it.

Tottie addressed herself angrily to Balcome. "Say, look-a here! This ain't the way out!"

"My mistake," apologized Balcome. Then with a look at Wallace that was full of meaning, he retired to the hearth, planted his shoulders against the mantel at Tottie's favorite vantage point, and surveyed Clare. "We thought you were gone," he remarked good-naturedly. He bobbed at her, with a flop of the big hat against his leg.

She made no reply, only waited, breathing hard, her eyes now on Wallace, now on Tottie. To the former, her glance was a warning.

He understood. "We'd—we'd like to see Miss Crosby alone," he said curtly, for by another wave of the hat Balcome had given him the initiative.

"Yes—go, Tottie."

Miss St. Clair turned, her gown trailing luxuriously. "I seem to be in the way today," she laughed, with an attempt at coquetry. Then to Clare, "I'm your friend, pettie. If you need me——"

The younger man could no longer contain himself. "Oh, she told us you were here!" he cried.

"Tottie!"

"It's a lie!—a lie!" She swept past him, her face ugly with resentment. And to Clare, "Don't you let this feller put anything over on you, kid."

"All right, madam! All right!" Wallace's fingers twitched. He was ready to thrust her from the room.

She went, with a backward look intended to reduce him; and shut the door. As he followed, opening the door to find that she was actually gone, and leaning out to see her whereabouts farther along the hall, she broke into a raucous laugh.

"Rubber!" she taunted. "Rubber!"

When he had shut the door again, and faced about, he kept hold of the knob, as if supported by it. "I—I felt you'd like to know, Miss Crosby," he commenced, forcing himself to speak evenly, "that Mr. Farvel is over there at the Rectory."

"Oh!" She put a hand to her head, waited a moment, then—"I—I thought—maybe when—I saw you."

"I knew that was why you left." He was more at ease now, and came toward her. "Do you want to see him?"

"No! No!" She put out both hands, pleadingly. "I don't want anything to do with him! I don't want him to know I'm in New York. Promise me! Promise!"

Wallace looked down. "Well,—it isn't my affair," he said slowly.

Mrs. Colter bustled in, a package swinging from one hand by a holder. "Oh, excuse me!" she begged, coming short.

Clare ran to her in a panic. "Oh, go! Go!" she ordered almost fiercely. "Go home! Don't wait! Hurry!" Then as Mrs. Colter, scared and bewildered, attempted to pass, "No! Go 'round! Go 'round!"

"Yes," faltered the other, dropping and picking up her bundle as Clare shoved her hallward; "yes." She fled.

"Close the door!" cried Clare. And as Wallace obeyed, she again went to stand against the panels of

the double door. She seemed in a very fever of anxiety. "Please go now, Wallace," she begged. "Please! I'm much obliged to you for coming. It was kind. But if you'll go——" Her voice broke hysterically.

He glanced at Balcome, and the elder man nodded in acquiescence. "We'll go," said Wallace. "I'm glad to have seen you again." He moved away, and Balcome went with him. "But I hoped I could do something for you——"

"There's nothing,"—eagerly. "If you'll just go."

"Well, good-by, then."

"Good-by. Good-by, Mr. Balcome."

"Good-by," grumbled Balcome.

Wallace's hand was on the knob when a child's voice piped up from beyond the door—a voice ready to tremble into tears, and full of pleading. "But I want to kiss her," it cried.

Clare fairly threw herself forward to keep the two men from leaving. "Wait! Wait!" she implored in a whisper.

"She's busy, I tell you!"—it was Mrs. Colter. "Now come along."

Something brushed the outer panels; then, "Good-by, Aunt Clare!" piped the little voice again.

"Come! Come!" scolded Mrs. Colter.

Now a sound of weeping, and whispers—Mrs. Colter entreating obedience, and making promises; next, a choking final farewell—"Good-by, Aunt Clare!"

"Good-by," answered Clare, hollowly.

As the weeping grew louder, and the outer door shut, Wallace went toward the bay-window, slowly, as if drawn by a force he could not master. He put a shaking hand to a curtain and moved it aside a space. Then leaning, he stared out at the sobbing child descending the steps.

When he turned his face was a dead white. His look questioned Clare in agony. "Who—— That—that—your niece?" he stammered.

"She's my sister's little girl," answered Clare, almost glibly. She was recovering her composure, now that Barbara was out of the house.

"A-a-ah!" Wallace took out a handkerchief and wiped at his face. Then without looking at Clare, "Isn't there something I can do for you?"

"No. No, thank you. I've got relatives here with me. I'm all right." She took a chair by the table, and began to play with the mirror, by turns blowing on it, and polishing it against the folds of her dress.

He watched her in silence for a moment. It was plain that she was anxious to detain them until she felt certain that the child had left the block and was out of sight. He helped her plan. Standing between them, Balcome vaguely sensed that they had an understanding and resented it. His under lip pushed out belligerently.

"I wish you'd let me know if there is anything," said the younger man, his tone conventionally polite.

"Yes. I'll—I'll write." She controlled a sarcastic smile.

"In care of the Rectory," he directed. "Will you? I want to help you in any way I can. I mean it."

Now Clare rose. "Good-by," she said pleasantly. "I'm sorry I rushed out the way I did today. But—you understand." She extended a hand.

"Of course," he answered, scarcely touching the tips of her fingers. "Yes."

"I wish you the best of luck." She bowed, and again to Balcome.

Balcome returned the bow sulkily. And turning his back as if to leave, gave a quick glance round in time to see her make the other a warning sign.

At this juncture, the hall door swung wide, and Tottie appeared, head

high with suppressed excitement, and face alive with curiosity.
"Here's another caller, Miss Crosby," she announced. At her back was Sue.

Clare retreated, frowning.

Sue, breathless from hurrying, and embarrassed, halted, panting and smiling, in the doorway. "Oh, dear! This dress never was meant for anything faster than a wedding-march!"—this with that characteristic look—the look of a child discovered in naughtiness, and entreating forgiveness.

"Say, ain't you pop'lar!" broke in Tottie, shaking her head at Clare in playful envy. And to Sue, "Y' know, all my theatrical friends 're just crazy about her. They'll hate to see her go."

"Go?" repeated Sue, sobering.

"Tottie!" cried Clare, angrily. "Please! Never mind!" Peremptorily she pointed her to leave.

Tottie, having accomplished her purpose, grinned a good-natured assent. "All right, dearie,"—once more she was playing the fine lady, for the edification of this new arrival so well worth impressing. "I call this my rehearsal room," she informed, with a polite titter. "Pretty idea, ain't it? Well,"—with a sweeping bow all around—"make yourselves to home." She went out, one jeweled hand raised ostentatiously to her back hair.

There was a moment's pause; then Sue held out an impulsive hand to the younger woman. "Oh, you're not going to leave without seeing him," she implored.

"Who do you mean?"—sullenly.

"Alan Farvel."

Clare's eyes flashed. "Does he know you came?"

"No."

Clare turned to Wallace. "Does your sister know my real name?" she asked.

His pale face worked in a spasm. He coughed and swallowed. "N-n-no," he stammered.

"Now—just—wait—a—minute!" It was Balcome. He approached near enough to Wallace to slap him smartly on the shoulder with the hat. "You—told—me——"

"What does it matter?" argued the other. "One name's as good as another."

Balcome said no more. But he exchanged a look with Sue.

She glanced from Clare to Wallace, puzzled and troubled. Then, "I—I—don't know what this is all about," she ventured, "and I don't want to know. I just want to tell you, Miss Crosby, that—that he grieves for you—terribly. Oh, see him again! Forgive him if he's done anything! Give him another chance!"

"You're talking about something you don't understand," answered Clare, rudely.

Sue shook her head. "Well, I think I know a broken heart when I see one," she returned simply.

To that, Clare made no reply. "These gentlemen are going," she said.
"And I wish you'd go too."

"Then I can't help him—and you?"

In sudden rage, Clare came toward her, voice raised almost to a shout. "Help! Help! Help!" she mocked. "I don't want help! I want to be let alone!—And I can't waste any more time. You'll have to excuse me!" She faced about abruptly and disappeared into her own room, banging the door.

Sue lowered her head, and knitted her brows in a look of defeat that was almost comical. "Well," she observed presently, "as Ikey says, 'Always you can't do it.'"

Seeing the way clear for himself, her brother's attitude became more sure. "I'm afraid you've only made things worse," he declared.

Balcome flapped his hat. "We had her in pretty good temper—for a woman."

Thus championed, the younger man grew even bolder. "And I thought you were going to keep out of this," he went on; "you promised mother——"

Now of a sudden, Sue lost that manner at once apologetic and childlike. "When did you know Miss Crosby?" she demanded of Wallace, sharply. "How long ago?"

"The year I met Alan.—I was eighteen."

"And *you* didn't have anything to do with this trouble? You're not responsible in any way?"

"Now why are you coming at me?" expostulated her brother. There was an unpleasant whine in his voice.

But Balcome failed to note it. "By golly!" he complained. "Women are all alike!"

"I'm coming at you," explained Sue, "because I know Alan Farvel. And I don't believe he could do any woman such a hurt that she wouldn't want to see him again, or forgive him. That's why."

"But you think *I* could! I must say, you're a nice sister!"

"*I* must say that your whole attitude today has been curious, to put it mildly."

"If I don't satisfy your woman's curiosity, you get even by putting me in the wrong." Again there was that unpleasant whine.

"No. But Mr. Farvel was relieved when he thought you had told me about this matter. And the fact is, you haven't told me at all."

He was cornered. His tall figure sagged. And his eyes fell before his sister's. "I—I," he began. Then in an outburst, "It's Hattie I'm thinking of! Hattie!"

"Ah, as if *I* don't think of Hattie!" Sue's voice trembled. "I want to think you've had nothing to do with this. I couldn't bear it if anything hurt her—her happiness—with you."

Outside, the stairs creaked heavily. Then sounded a *bang, bang*, as of some heavy thing falling. Next came Tottie's voice, shrill, and strangely triumphant: "Hey there! You're tryin' to sneak! Yes, you are! And you haven't paid me!"

Sue understood. She opened the hall door, and took her place beside Clare as if to defend her. The latter could not speak, but stood, a pathetic figure, holding to a suitcase with one hand, and with the other carrying the bird-cage.

"Get back in there!" ordered Tottie, beginning to descend from the upper landing.

Clare obeyed, Sue helping her with the suitcase. "I'll send the money," she pleaded. "I—I meant to. Oh, Tottie!"

Tottie was down by now, scowling and nursing a foot, for she had slipped. She made "shooing" gestures at Clare.

"How much does Miss Crosby owe you?" asked Sue, getting between Clare and the landlady.

"Sixteen dollars—and some telephone calls."

"Let me——" It was Wallace. He ran a hand into a pocket.

Sue warned him with a look. "Mr. Balcome will lend it," she said.

Balcome did not wait to be asked. From an inside coat pocket he produced a black wallet fat with bills, and pulled away the rubber band that circled it.

Tottie viewed the wallet with greedy eyes. "And there's some laundry," she supplemented; "and Mrs. Colter's lunch today—just before you come in, Clare,—and Barbara's."

Clare implored her to stop by a gesture. "Twenty," she said to Balcome. "I'll pay it back."

Sue took the bills that Balcome held out, and gave them to Tottie. "Keep the change," she suggested, anxious to get the woman away.

Tottie recovered her best air. "Wouldn't mention such small items," she explained, "but it's been a bad season, and I haven't had one engagement—not one. As I say,—"

"Don't apologize. I can tell a generous woman when I see one." This with a hearty smile.

Tottie simpered, shoved the money under the lace of her bodice, and backed out—as a bell began to ring somewhere persistently.

Clare had set down the suitcase and the cage. As Sue closed the door and turned to her, the sight of that lowered head and bent shoulders brought the tears to her eyes. "You want to get away?" she asked gently; "you want to be lost again?"

The other straightened. "What if I do!" she cried, angrily. "It's my own business, isn't it? Why don't you mind yours?"

"Now look here!" put in Balcome, advancing to stand between the two. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Miss Milo came with the kindest intentions in the world—"

"No, no," pleaded Sue. And to Clare, "I'm going. I haven't wanted to make you unhappy. And, oh, if you're alone—"

"Rot!" interrupted Balcome, impatiently. "She's got relatives right here in the house." He shuffled his feet and swung his hat.

"I have not!"

Balcome puffed his cheeks with astonishment and anger, and appealed to Wallace. "Didn't she say so?" he demanded. "And that child called her Aunt Clare."

"A—child," repeated Sue, slowly. "A—child?"

"My—my brother's little girl."

"A-a-a-ah!" taunted Balcome. "And ten minutes ago, it was her sister's little girl." He laughed.

"My sister-in-*law*!"—she fairly screamed at him. "Oh, I wish you'd go—all of you! How dare you shove your way in here! Haven't I suffered enough? And you hunt me down! And torture me! Torture me!" Wildly, she made as if to drive them out, pushing Sue from her; gasping and sobbing.

"Wallace!—Mr. Balcome!" Backing out of Clare's reach, Sue took the two men with her.

"Go!—Go!—Go!" It was hysteria, or a very fair imitation of it.

Then of a sudden, while her arms were yet upraised, she looked past the three who were retreating and through the door now opening at their back. Another trio was in the hall—Tottie, important and smiling; Mrs. Milo, elbowing her way ahead of the landlady to hear and see; and with her, Farvel, grave, concerned, wondering.

"More visitors!" hailed Tottie.

"Susan, I distinctly told you—"

Clare's look fastened on Farvel. She went back a few steps unsteadily, until the door to her own room stopped her. There she hung, as it were, pallid and open-mouthed.

And Farvel made no sound. He came past the others until he stood directly in front of the drooping, suffering creature against the panels. His look was the look of a man who sees a ghost.

Wallace, with quick foresight, had closed the hall door against Tottie. But the others had no thought except for the meeting between Farvel and Clare. Mrs. Milo, quite within the embrasure of the bay-window, looked on like a person at an entertainment. Her glance, plainly one of delight, now darted from Farvel to Clare, from Clare to Sue.

With Balcome it was curiosity mixed with hope—the hope that here was what would completely absolve Wallace, who was waiting, all bent and shaken.

Sue stood with averted eyes, as if she felt she should not see. Her face was composed. There was something very like resignation in the straight hanging down of her arms, in the bowed attitude of her figure.

Thus the six for a moment. Then Farvel crumpled and dropped to the settee. "Laura!" he said, as if to himself; "Laura!"

"Oh, it's all over! It's all over!" she quavered.

CHAPTER VII

On those rare occasions of stress when Mrs. Milo did not choose to feel that the unforeseen and unpleasant was aimed purposely at herself and her happiness, she could assume another attitude. It was then her special boast that she was able invariably to summon the proper word that could smooth away embarrassments, lessen strain, and in general relieve any situation: she knew how to be tactful; how to make peace: she had, she explained, that rare quality known as "poise."

Now with Clare Crosby swagging against the double door of Tottie's back-parlor, watching Farvel through despairing eyes, and admitting with trembling lips her own defeat; with Farvel seemingly overcome by being brought thus suddenly face to face with the soloist, Mrs. Milo experienced such complete satisfaction that she seized upon this opportunity as one well calculated to exhibit strikingly her judgment, balance, and sagacity; her good taste and pious gentleness.

"Ah, Mr. Farvel!" she cried, in that playfully teasing tone she was often pleased to affect. "Aren't you glad you came?—Oh, I guessed your little secret! I guessed you were interested in Miss Crosby!"

At the sound of her own name, Clare took her eyes from Farvel and turned them upon Mrs. Milo—turned them slowly, as a sick person might—with effort, and an almost feeble lifting of the head. Her look once focused, she began, little by little, to straighten, to stand more firmly on her feet; she even reached to flatten the starched collar, which had upreared behind her slender throat.

Mrs. Milo went twittering on: "Where you're concerned, trust us to be anxious, dear Mr. Farvel. That's how we came to guess. *Isn't it*, my daughter?"

Sue did not move. "Yes, mother," she answered obediently; "yes."

Farvel got up. "Mrs. Milo," he began, "I intend to be quite frank with you all. And I feel I ought to tell you that this young woman——"

"Alan!"

It was Clare who protested, almost in a scream, and with a forward start which Wallace also made—involuntarily.

Farvel shook his head and threw out both hands in a helpless gesture. "They'd better hear all about it," he said.

"You listen to me!" she returned. "This is nobody's business but ours. Do you understand? Just ours."

Mrs. Milo interrupted, with an ingratiating smile. "Still, Mr. Farvel is the Rector of our Church. Naturally, he wishes to be quite above-board"—she laid emphasis on the words—"even in his personal affairs."

"No!" Clare came past Farvel, taking her stand between him and Mrs. Milo almost defensively. "No, I tell you! No! No! No!"

Sue went to her mother. "Miss Crosby is right," she urged quietly. "This is a private matter between her and Mr. Farvel. It goes back quite a way in their lives, doesn't it?" She turned to the clergyman. "Before you came to the Rectory, and before mother and I knew you? So it can't be anything that concerns us, and we haven't any right to know"—this as Mrs. Milo seemed about to protest again. "I'm right, mother. And we're going—both of us."

"We-e-e-ll,"—it was Farvel, uncertain, and troubled.

"Alan, not now," broke in Wallace; "—later."

"May I have another word?" inquired Mrs. Milo, with an inflection that said she had so far been

utterly excluded from voicing her opinions. "Mr. Farvel,—"

But Clare did not wait for the clergyman to give his permission. "I say no," she repeated defiantly. And to Farvel, "Please consider me, will you? I'm not going to have a lot of hypocrites gossiping about me!"—this with a pointed stare at the elder woman.

"And, Alan, you said yourself,"—it was Wallace again—"there'll be talk. You don't want that."

Balcome, standing behind Wallace, suddenly laid a hand on his arm. "Say, what's *your* part in this trouble?" he demanded. "You seem excited."

"Why—why—I haven't any part."

Balcome shrugged, and flopped the big hat. "Not any, eh?" he said. "Hm!" By a lift of his eyebrows, and a jerk of the head, he invited Farvel to take a good look at Wallace.

Farvel seemed suddenly to waken. He shook a pointed finger. "You knew she was alive!" he declared.

"He didn't! He did not!" Again Clare was fiercely on the defense.

"No! On my honor!" vowed Wallace.

Sue made a warning gesture. "Listen, everybody," she cautioned. "Suppose we go back to the Rectory." And to Clare, "You and Mr. Farvel can talk with more privacy there."

A quick hand touched her. "Susan," whispered Mrs. Milo.

She had support in her protest. "*I'm* not going back to any Rectory," Clare asserted.

"Back?" repeated Farvel, astonished. "*Back?* Then you—you were the soloist?"

"Yes.—Oh, *why* did I go! Why didn't I ever find out! Milo—it isn't a common name. And I might have known! I'm a fool! A fool! But I needed the engagement. And I'd been there before, and I thought it was all right."

"What has 'Milo' to do with it?" asked Sue.

"This—this: I knew that Wallace knew Alan. So—so when I saw Wallace there, I was sure Alan was there. And I left. That's all." She went back to the chair by the table and sat.

"You walked right into my house!" marveled Farvel; "—after all the years I've searched for you!"

"Ha! ha!—Just my luck!" She crossed her feet and folded her arms.

There was a pause.

Wallace was plainly in misery, at times holding his breath, again almost blowing, like a man after a run. He shifted uneasily. The sweat stood out on his white temples, and he brushed the drops into his hair.

Of a sudden, Farvel turned to him. "Why didn't you tell me it was Laura?" he demanded. "You saw her there—you came here—why didn't you ask me to come?"

"Well," faltered Wallace, "I—I don't know why I didn't. I'm sorry. It was just—just——" His voice seemed to go from him. He swallowed.

Now, Farvel's manner changed. His face darkened, and grew stern. "There's something here that I don't understand," he said, angrily.

Clare sprang up. "Oh, drop it, will you?" she asked rudely; "—before all this crowd."

Farvel turned on her fiercely. "No, I won't drop it! I want this thing cleared up!" And to Wallace again, "For ten years you know how I've searched. And in the beginning, you know better than anyone else in the whole world how I suffered. And yet today, when you found Laura, you failed to tell me—*me*, of *all* persons!" His voice rose to a shout. "Why, it's monstrous!"

"And I want this thing cleared up, too," put in Balcome. "Wallace, you're going to marry my daughter. Why did you lie to me about this young woman's name?"

Mrs. Milo went to take her place beside her son. "Do you mean," she demanded, "that you're both trying to find my dear boy at fault?—to cover someone else's wrongdoing." She stared at Farvel defiantly.

"Please, mother!" Wallace pushed her not too gently aside. Then he faced the other men, his features working with the effort of control. "Well, it—it was for—for Miss Crosby's sake," he explained. "I knew she didn't want to be found—I knew it because she was so scared when she saw me, and ran. And—and then Hattie; you know Hattie's never cared an awful lot for me. And I was afraid—I was afraid she might—she might wonder——" He choked.

"*Hattie*," repeated Balcome.

A strange look came into Farvel's eyes. "What has Miss Balcome to do with it?" he asked.

"Nothing! Nothing!"—it was Clare. She gave Wallace a warning glance.

"I thought it might worry her," he added, weakly.

Farvel seemed to sense a falsehood. "You can't convince me," he said. "You've known the truth all along—ever since she went away. And you know why she went.—Don't you? *Don't* you?" Again his voice rose. He advanced almost threateningly.

"No! No! I swear it!"

"No!" echoed Clare.

"This is disgraceful!" cried Mrs. Milo, appealing to Balcome.

"Oh, go home, mother!" entreated her son, ungratefully.

Sue added her plea. "Yes, let's all go. Because you're all speaking pretty loud, and our hostess is a lady of considerable curiosity. Come—let's return to the Rectory."

"Susan!" stormed Mrs. Milo. Then, more quietly, "Please think of your mother's wishes. Mr. Farvel and Mr. Balcome are right. Let us clear up this matter before we return."

Clare burst into a loud laugh. "Ha-a-a! Talk about curiosity!" she mocked. And went back to her chair.

Sue reddened under the taunt. "Well, I, for one, don't wish to know your private affairs," she declared. "So I'm going."

"Susan!—You may leave the room if you desire to do so. But you will remain within call."

"I'd rather go home, mother."

"You will obey me."

"Very well."

"Mm!" Mrs. Milo, plainly gratified, seated herself in the rocker.

"If there's anything I can do for you, Miss Crosby, just ask me." Sue forbore looking at Farvel. She was pale again now, as if with weariness. But she smiled.

Clare did not even look round. Beside her was the canary, his shining black eyes keeping watch on the group of strangers as he darted from cage bottom to perch, or hung, fluttering and apprehensive, against the wires of his home. Clare lifted the cage to her knee and encircled it with an arm.

Balcome caught Sue's eye, made a comical grimace, and patted her on the arm. "As this seems to concern my girl," he explained, "I'm here to stay." He dropped into a chair by the hearth.

Sue went out.

Clare was quite herself by now. She disdained to look at anyone save Farvel, and the smile she gave him over a shoulder was scornful.

"Well, shoot!" she challenged. "Let's not take all day."

"Why did you leave without a word?" he asked.

"You mean today?—I told you."

"I mean ten years ago."

"Well, if you want to know, I was tired of being cooped up, so I dug out."

"Cooped up!" exclaimed Farvel, bitterly.

"I guess you know it! And Church! Church! Church! And prayers three times a day! And a small town! Oh, it was *deadly!*"

"No other reason?" asked Farvel, coldly.

She got up, suddenly impatient. "I've told you the truth!" she cried. Then more quietly, seeing how white and drawn he looked, "I'm sorry it worried you." She set the cage on a chair near the double door.

"Worried!" echoed Farvel, bitterly. "Ha! ha!" And with significance, "And who was concerned in your going?"

"That's a nice thing for you to insinuate!" she returned hotly.

"I beg your pardon."

Mrs. Milo fell to rocking nervously. She was enjoying the situation to the full; still—the attitude of Farvel toward this young woman was far from lover-like; while her attitude toward him was marked by hatred badly disguised. Hence an unpleasant and unwelcome thought: What if this "Laura" turned out to be only a relative of the clergyman's!

Farvel's apology moved Clare to laughter. "Oh, that's all right," she assured him, impudently; "I understand. The more religious people are, you know, the more vile are their suspicions"—this with a mocking glance at Mrs. Milo.

The green velour rocker suddenly stood still, and Mrs. Milo fairly glared at the girl. Clare, seeing that she had gained the result she sought, grinned with satisfaction, and resumed her chair.

Farvel had not noticed what passed between the two women. He was watching Wallace. "And you ——" he began presently.

The younger man straightened, writhed within his clothes as if he were in pain, and went back to his stooping position once more—all with that swiftness which was so like the effect of an electrical current. "Alan," he whispered.

"—What had you to do with it?" went on the clergyman.

Clare scoffed. "Wallace had nothing to do with it," she declared. "What in the dickens is the matter with you?"

"Nothing to do with it?" repeated Farvel. Then, with sudden fury, "Look at him!" He made for Wallace, pushing aside a chair that was not in his way.

"Alan! Stop!" Clare rose, and Mrs. Milo rose, too.

"Come now, Wallace," Farvel said more quietly. "I want the truth."

Mrs. Milo hastened to her son. "Darling, I know you haven't done anything wrong," she said, tenderly. "This 'friend' is trying to shift the blame. Stand up for yourself, my boy. Mother believes in you."

Wallace's chin sank to his breast. At the end of his long arms, his hands knotted and unknotted like the hands of a man in agony.

"My dearest!" comforted his mother. His suffering was evidence of guilt to Balcome and Farvel; to her it was grief, at having been put under unjust suspicion.

He lifted a white face. His eyes were streaming now, his whole body trembling pitifully. "Oh, what'll I do!" he cried. "What'll I do!" He tottered to the chair that Farvel had shoved aside, dropped into it, and covered his face with both hands.

"My boy! My boy!"

"Don't act like a baby!" Clare came to him, and gave him a smart slap on the shoulder. "Cut it out! You haven't done anything."

"Just a moment," interrupted Farvel. He shoved her out of the way as impersonally as he had the chair. Then, "What do you mean by 'What'll do'?" he demanded. And to Clare, pulling at his arm, "Let me alone, I tell you. I'm going to know what's back of this!—*Wallace Milo!*"

Slowly Wallace got up. His cheeks were wet. His mouth was distorted, like the mouth of a woeful small boy. His throat worked spasmodically, so that the cords stood out above his collar.

Clare defended him fiercely. "What've you got into your head?" she asked Farvel. "You're wrong! You're dead wrong!—Wallace, tell him he's wrong!"

Wallace shook his head. "No," he said, striving to speak evenly; "no, I won't. All these years I've suffered, too. I've wanted to make a clean breast of it a million times—to get it off my conscience. Now, I can. I"—he braced himself to go on—"I was at the Rectory so much, Alan. I think that's how—it started. And—and she was nice to me, and I—I liked her. And we were almost the same age. So—" He could go no further. With a gesture of agonized appeal, he sank to his knees. "Oh, Alan, forgive me!" he sobbed. "Forgive—"

There could be no doubt of his meaning—of the character of his confession. Farvel bent over him, seizing an arm. "Get on your feet!" he shouted. "Get up! Get up, I tell you! I'm going to knock you down!"

"Oh, help! Help!" wept Mrs. Milo, appealing to Balcome, who came forward promptly.

"Farvel!" he admonished. He got between the two men.

Clare was dragging at Farvel. "Blame me!" she cried. "I was older! Blame me!"

Farvel pushed her aside. "Don't try to shield him!" he answered. "He's a dog! A dog!"

A loud voice sounded from the hall. It was Tottie, storming virtuously. "I won't have it!" she cried. "This is my house, and I won't have it!"

Another voice pleaded with her—"Now wait! Please!"

"I'm goin' in there," asserted the landlady. She came pounding against the hall door, opened it, and entered, her bobbed hair lifting and falling with the rush of her coming. "Say! What do you call this, anyhow?" she demanded, shaking off the hand with which Sue was attempting to restrain her.

"Keep out of here," ordered Balcome, advancing upon her boldly.

She met him without flinching. "I won't have no knock-down and drag-out in my house!" she declared. "This is a respectable—"

"Oh, I'm used to tantrums," he retorted. And without more ado, he forced Miss St. Clair backward into the hall, followed her, and shut himself as well as her out of the room.

"I'll have you arrested for this!" she shrilled.

"Oh, shut up!"

Their voices mingled, and became less audible.

"You can't blame her," said Sue. "Really, from out there, it sounded suspiciously like murder." She stared at her brother. He was not kneeling now, but half-sitting, half-lying, in an awkward sprawl, at Farvel's feet, much as if he had thrown himself down in a fit of temper.

Farvel turned to her. His face was set. His eyes were dull, as if a glaze was spread upon them. His hands twitched. But he spoke quietly. "Get this man out of here," he directed, "or I *shall* kill him."

"Oh, go! Go!" pleaded Mrs. Milo.

"Go!" added Clare. She threw herself into the chair at the table, put her arms on the cloth, and her face in her arms.

Sue ran to Wallace, took his arm and tugged at it, lifting him. He stumbled up, still weeping a little, but weakly. As she turned him toward the hall, he put an arm across her shoulders for support.

Mrs. Milo followed them. She was not in the dark as to the nature of her son's tearful admission. But she had no mind to blame him. Resorting to her accustomed tactics, she put Farvel in the wrong. "I

never should have trusted my dear boy to you," she cried. "I thought he would be under good influences in a clergyman's house. Only eighteen, and you make him responsible!"

The door opened, and Balcome was there. He looked at Wallace not unkindly. "Pretty tough luck, young man," he observed.

At sight of Balcome, Mrs. Milo remembered the wedding. "Oh!" she gasped. And turning about to Farvel in a wild appeal, "Oh, Hattie! Think of poor Hattie! Won't you forget yourself in this? Won't you help us to keep it all quiet? Oh, we mustn't ruin her life!" She returned to the rocker, her fingers to her eyes, as if she were pressing back the tears.

Balcome had come in, closing the door. He crossed to Farvel, his big, blowzy face comical in its gravity. "Mr. Farvel," he said, "whatever concerns that young man concerns my—little girl." He blinked with emotion. "So—so that's why I ask, who is this young woman?"

Before Farvel could reply, Clare lifted her head, stood suddenly, and stared Balcome from his disheveled hair to his wide, soft, well-worn shoes. "Oh, allow me, Alan!" she cried. "You know, they're just about to burst, both of 'em!"—for Mrs. Milo was peering at her over a handkerchief, the blue eyes bright with expectancy. "If they don't know the worst in five seconds, there'll be an explosion sure!" She laughed harshly. Then with mock ceremony, and impudently, "Mr. Balcome,—and *dear* Mrs. Milo, permit me to introduce myself. I am your charming clergyman's beloved bride." She curtsied.

No explosion could have brought Mrs. Milo to her feet with more celerity. While Balcome stumbled backward, the red of his countenance taking on an apoplectic greenish tinge.

"*Bride?*" he cried.

"*Wife?*" gasped Mrs. Milo, hollowly.

But almost instantly the blue eyes lighted with a smile. She put back her bonneted head to regard Clare from under lowered lashes. "Ah!" she sighed in relief. No longer was there need to fear publicity for her son; here was a situation that insured against it.

"Yes, you feel better, don't you?" commiserated Clare, sarcastically.
"—Tuh!"

Balcome was blinking harder than ever. "Well, I'll be damned!" he vowed under his breath.

By now Mrs. Milo's smile had grown into a clear, joyous, well-modulated laugh. "Oh, ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!—Wife!" she exulted. "That is most interesting! Hm!—And it changes everything, doesn't it?"—this to no one in particular. She reseated herself, studying the floor thoughtfully, finding her glasses meanwhile, and tapping a finger with them gently. "Hm!—Ah!—Yes."

Balcome replied to her, and with no idea of sparing her feelings. "Yes, that puts quite a different face on things," he agreed; "—on what Wallace has done. The home of his best friend!"

"Let's not talk about it!" begged Farvel.

"All right, Mr. Farvel," answered Balcome, soothingly. "But my Hattie's happiness—that's what I'm thinking of." He came nearer to Clare now. "And before I go," he said to her, "I'd like to ask you one more question."

"Oh, you would!" she retorted ironically. "Well, I'm not going to answer any more questions. I've got a lot to do. And I want to be let alone." She made as if to go.

"Wait!" commanded Farvel.

She flushed angrily. "Well? Well? Well?" she demanded, her voice rising.

"We shan't trouble you again," assured the clergyman, more kindly.

"Then spit it out!" she cried to Balcome. "I want to know," began Balcome, eyeing her keenly, "just whose child that is?"

It was Farvel's turn to gasp. "Child?" he echoed.

Mrs. Milo straightened against the green velours. "A child?" she said in turn.

"You know who I mean," declared Balcome, not taking his look from

Clare. "That little girl who called you Auntie."

She tried to speak naturally. "That—that—she's a friend's child—a friend's child from up-State."

"You told us she was your sister's child," persisted Balcome.

She took refuge in a burst of temper. "Well, what if I did? I'm liable to say anything—to you!"

There was a pause. Farvel watched Clare, but she looked down, not trusting herself to meet his eyes. As for Balcome, he had reached a conclusion that did not augur well for the happiness of his daughter. And his gaze wandered miserably.

Curiously enough, not a hint occurred to Mrs. Milo that this new turn of affairs might have some bearing on her son. She found her voice first. "Ah, Mr. Balcome," she said sadly, nodding as she put away her glasses, "it's just as I told Sue: it's always the same story when a girl drops out of sight!"

"Oh, is that so!" returned the younger woman, wrathfully. "Well, it just happens, madam, that I was married."

"Laura!" entreated Farvel. "You mean—you mean the child is—ours?"

She tossed her head. "Is it bad news?" she asked.

Farvel's shoulders were shaking. "A-a-a-ah!" he murmured. He fumbled for a handkerchief, crumbled it, and held it against his face.

"My dear Mrs. Farvel," began Mrs. Milo, in her best manner, "believe me when I say that I'm very glad to hear all this. I know what the temptations of this great city are, and naturally——" She got up. "A reunited family, Mr. Farvel," she said, smiling graciously. "Oh, Susan will be so pleased!" She fluttered toward the door, "So pleased!"

Clare gave a hissing laugh. "Oh, how that news will scatter!" she exclaimed. And flounced into her chair.

Mrs. Milo was calling into the hall. "Susan! Susan dear!"

"On guard!" Sue was part way up the stairs, seated.

"Just a moment, my daughter." Leaving the door wide, Mrs. Milo came fluttering back. "It really didn't surprise me," she declared, with a wise nod at Balcome. "I half guessed a marriage."

"Hope for the worst!" mocked Clare.

Sue came in, with a quick look around. "Are you ready to go, mother?"

"You bet, mother is *not* ready to go,"—this Clare, under her breath.

"My dear," said her mother, sweetly, "we have called you in to tell you some good news."

Sue smiled. "I could manage to bear up under quite a supply of good news." Farvel was brushing at his eyes. His face was averted, but she guessed that he had been crying.

"First of all, Susan, Miss Crosby is——"

"Now, mother, does Miss Crosby want——"

"Wa-a-ait! Please! It is something she wishes you to know.—Am I right?" This with that characteristic smile so wholly muscular.

"Right as the mail!" assured Clare, ironically again, and borrowing an expression learned from Hull.

"Ah! Thank you!—Susan, Miss Crosby is not Miss Crosby at all. She is married.—I'm so glad your husband has found you, my dear."

"Found? You—you don't mean——" There was a frightened look in Sue's eyes.

Her mother misunderstood the look. "Yes, lucky Mr. Farvel," she said, beaming. Then with precision, since Sue seemed not to comprehend, "Mrs.—Alan—Farvel."

"I—see."

"Didn't I practically guess that Mr. Farvel was married?"

"Married,"—it was like an echo.

"And I was right!"

"Yes, mother,—yes—you're—you're always right."

"Mr. Farvel, we congratulate you!—Don't we, dear?"

"Congratulations."

Something in Sue's face made Farvel reach out his hand to her. She took it mechanically. Thus they stood, but not looking at each other.

Once more Mrs. Milo was playfully teasing. "Why shouldn't we all know that you had a wife?" she twittered. It was as if she had added, "You bad, bad boy!"

"Yes," said Sue. "Why not? Rectors do have them. There's no canon against it." She laughed tremulously, and dropped his hand.

Clare tossed her head. "There ought to be!" she declared.

At that, Mrs. Milo threw out both arms dramatically. "Oh! Oh, dear!" she cried. "I've just thought of something!"

"I'll bet!" Clare turned, instantly apprehensive.

"Save it, mother!" begged Sue, eager to avert whatever might be impending; "—save it till we get home. Come! Mr. and Mrs. Farvel will have things to talk over." And to the clergyman, "We'll take Mr. Balcome and go on ahead."

"Now wait!" bade Mrs. Milo, gently. "Why are you so impetuous, daughter? Why don't you listen to your mother? Why do you take it for granted that I want to make Mrs. Farvel unhappy?"—this in a chiding aside.

"I don't, mother."

"Indeed, I am greatly concerned about her. She believed her husband dead, poor girl. And now"—with a sudden, disconcerting turn on Clare—"what about your engagement?"

"I'm—I'm not engaged!" As she sprang up, the girl pressed both hands against the wine-colored velveteen of her skirt, hiding them. "I never said I was! Oh, I wish you'd mind your own business!"

"Mother! Mother!" pleaded Sue. "It was you who said it. Not Miss—Mrs. Farvel. Don't you remember?"

"How *could* I be engaged?" She was emboldened by Sue's help. "I knew he wasn't—dead."

Farvel laughed a little bitterly. "You mean, no such luck, don't you, Laura?" he asked. "Well, then,—I've got some good news for you."

"What? What?"—with a sudden, eager movement toward him.

"When five years had passed, and no word had come from you, though we all felt that you were alive, your brother—in order to settle the estate—had you declared legally dead. And naturally, that—that ___"

"I'm free!" She put up both hands, and lifted her face—almost as if in prayerful thanksgiving. "I'm free! I'm free!" Then she gave way to boisterous laughter, and fell to walking to and fro, waving her arms, and turning her head from side to side. "I'm dead, but I'm free! Oh, ha! ha! ha!—Well, that *is* good news! Free! And *you're* free!"

"No, I am not free," he said quietly. "But it doesn't matter."

"You are free," she protested. "Anyhow, I'm not going to let any of that nonsense stand in my way. And don't you—church or no church. Life's too short." Her manner was hurried. She caught at Farvel's arm. "We're both free, Alan, so there's nothing more to say, is there? Except, good-by. Good-by, Alan, ___"

Mrs. Milo interrupted. "But the child," she reminded. "Your daughter?"

"Daughter?" Sue turned to Balcome, questioning him, and half-guessing.

"Yes, my dear. Isn't it lovely? Mr. and Mrs. Farvel have a little girl."

"That's the one," Balcome explained, as if Clare was not within hearing. He jerked his head toward the hall. "The one that called her Auntie."

"Auntie?" Mrs. Milo seized upon the information. "You surely don't mean that the child calls her own mother Auntie?"

Clare broke in. "I'll tell you how that is," she volunteered. "You see"—speaking to Sue—"I've never told her I'm her mother. She thinks her mother's in Africa; her father, too. Because—because I've always planned to give her to some good couple—a married couple. Don't you see, as long as Barbara doesn't know, they could say, 'We are your parents.'"

"But you couldn't give her up like that!" cried Sue, earnestly.

"No," purred Mrs. Milo. "You must keep your baby. And, doubtless"—this with the ingratiating smile, the tip of the head, and the pious inflection—"doubtless you two will wish to re-marry—for the sake of the child."

"No!" cried Clare. "No! No! *No!*"

"No, Mrs. Milo," added Farvel, quietly. "She shall be free."

"No, for Heaven's sake!" put in Balcome. "Don't raise another girl like Hattie's been raised."

Mrs. Milo showed her dislike of the remark, with its implied criticism of her own judgment. And she was uneasy over the turn that the whole matter had taken. Farvel married, no matter to whom, was one thing: Farvel very insecurely tied, and possessed of a small daughter whose mother repudiated her, that was quite another. She watched Sue narrowly, for Sue was watching Farvel.

"But the little one," said the clergyman, turning to Clare; "I'd like to see her."

"Sure!" She was all eagerness. "Why not?—Yes."

"Where is she?"

"Out of town. At Poughkeepsie. She boards with some people."

"Ah, good little mother!" said Sue, smiling. "Your baby's not in an Institution!"

Clare blushed under the compliment. "No, I—I shouldn't like to have her in an Orphanage."

"Can she come down right away?" asked Farvel.

"Yes! Right away! I'll go after her now."

"I'll go with you," suggested Sue. "May I?"

She tried to catch Farvel's eye, to warn him.

"But, Susan," objected Mrs. Milo; "I can't spare you."

"Oh, I can go alone," protested Clare. "I don't need anybody."

Behind her back, Balcome held up a lead-pencil at Sue.

She understood, "We'll send for the baby. Now, what's the address?" She proffered Clare the pencil and an envelope from one of Balcome's sagging pockets. Then to him, as Clare wrote, "Would you mind going back to the Rectory and sending me Dora?"

"Good idea!" He pulled on the big hat.

"Dora?" cried Mrs. Milo. "That child?"

"Child!" laughed Sue. "Why, I'd send her to Japan. You don't think she'd ever succumb to the snares and pitfalls of this wicked world! She'll set the whole train to memorizing Lamentations!"

Mrs. Milo's eyes narrowed. Sue's sudden interest in Farvel's daughter was irritating and disturbing. "Wait, Brother Balcome," she begged. "Sue, I don't see why the little girl's own mother shouldn't go for her."

"Of course, I can."

Balcome waited no longer. With a meaning glance at Sue, and a scowl for Mrs. Milo, he hurried out.

"Oh, let Dora go, Mrs. Farvel," urged Sue. "And meanwhile, you can be getting settled somewhere."

Clare looked pleased. "Yes. All right."

"Then she will leave here?" inquired Mrs. Milo.

"Oh, she must," declared Sue, "if she's going to have her baby come to her." She indicated the suitcase. "Is there more?"

"A trunk. And it won't take me ten minutes." As she turned to go, Clare's look rested on the bird-cage, and she put out a hand toward it involuntarily—then checked her evident wish to take it with her, and disappeared into her own room.

"Where had she better go?" asked Farvel, appealing to Sue. "You'll know best, I'm sure——"

Mrs. Milo fluttered to join them. "Of course," she began, her voice full of sweet concern, "there are organized Homes for young women who've made mistakes——"

"Sh!" cautioned Farvel, with a nervous look toward the double door.

"There's the little one, mother," reminded Sue.

"Oh, but hear me out," begged the elder woman. "In this case, I'm not advising such an institution. I suggest some very nice family hotel."

Sue lowered her voice. "It won't do," she said. "We want to help her—and we want to help the baby. If she goes alone to a hotel, we'll never see her again. Just before you came——" She went close to the double door. Beyond it, someone was moving quickly about, with much rustling of paper. She came tiptoeing back. "She tried to steal away," she whispered.

"I mustn't lose track of my daughter," declared Farvel. He, too, went to listen for sounds from the back-parlor.

"Then we'd better take her right to the Rectory," advised Sue, "and have Barbara brought there."

Mrs. Milo bristled. "Now if you please!" she exclaimed angrily.

Farvel crossed to her, eyeing her determinedly. "I don't see any serious objection," he observed challengingly. "Your son—will not be there."

"You've lost your senses! Have you no regard for the conventions?
This woman is your ex-wife!"

"But if there is no publicity—and for just a few days, mother."

Mrs. Milo attempted to square those slender shoulders. "I won't have that girl at the Rectory," she replied with finality.

Farvel smiled. "But the Rectory is *my* home, Mrs. Milo."

"Oh, for the sake of the child, mother! For no other reason."

"*If* she comes, I shall leave—leave for good!"

Farvel bowed an acceptance of her edict. "Well, she *is* coming," he said firmly; "and so is Barbara."

"Then I shan't sleep under that roof another night!" Mrs. Milo trembled with wrath. "Come, Susan! *We* shall do some packing." She bustled to the hall door, but paused there to right her bonnet—an excuse for delaying her departure against the capitulation of her opponents. She longed to speak at greater length and more plainly, but she dreaded what Farvel might say against her son.

Sue did not follow. "But, mother!" she whispered. "Mr. Farvel!—Oh, don't let her hear any of this!" She motioned the clergyman toward the rear room. "Sh!—You offer to help her! Go in there! Oh, do!"

He nodded. "And you'll come with us to the Rectory?"

"Indeed, she won't!" cried Mrs. Milo, coming back. "The very idea!"

Farvel ignored her. "You see," he added, with just a touch of humor, "we'll have to have a chaperone." He knocked.

"Oh, come in!" called Clare.

Sue shut the door behind him; then she took her mother with her to the bay-window, halted her there as if she were standing one of the naughty orphans in a corner, and looked at her in sorrowful reproof.

Mrs. Milo drew away from the touch of her daughter's hand irritably. "Now, don't glare at me like that!" she ordered. "The Rectory is not a reformatory."

"Oh, let's not take that old ruined-girl attitude!" replied Sue, impatiently. "Laura Farvel doesn't need reforming. She needs kindness and love."

"Love!" repeated Mrs. Milo, scornfully. "Do you realize that you're talking about a woman who led your own brother astray?"

"I don't know who did the leading," Sue answered quietly. "As a matter of fact, they were both very young——"

"Wallace is a good boy!"

"The less we say about Wallace in this matter the better. Why don't you go to him, mother? He must be very unhappy. He will want advice. And there's Mr. Balcome—shouldn't you and he take all this up with Hattie's mother?"

"Wallace will tell Hattie. We can trust him. But I don't want you to act foolish. Is she going to bring that child to the Rectory?"

"To the home of the child's own father? Why not?"

"Yes! And you'll get attached to her!"

Sue did not guess at the real fear that lay behind her mother's words. "But you *want* me to, don't you? I'm attached to a hundred others there already. And you'll love Barbara, too."

"There! You see?—Wherever a young one is concerned, you utterly forget your mother!"

"Why—why——" Sue put a helpless hand to her forehead. "Forget you? I don't see how the little one would make any difference——"

Farvel interrupted, opening the double door a few inches to look in. "Miss Susan,—just a minute?"

"Can I help?" Without waiting for the protest to be expected from her mother, Sue hurried out.

Mrs. Milo stayed where she was, staring toward the back-parlor. "O-o-o-oh! To the Rectory!" she stormed. "It's abominable! I won't have it! Such an insult!—The creature!"

Someone entered from the hall—noiselessly. It was Tottie, wearing her best manners, and with a countenance from which, obviously, she had extracted, as it were, some of the rosy color worn at her earlier appearance. She had smoothed her bobbed red tresses, too, and a long motor veil of a lilac tinge made less obtrusive the décolleté of the tea-gown.

"Young woman," began Mrs. Milo, speaking low, and with an air of confidence calculated to flatter; "this—this Miss Crosby;" (she gave a jerky nod of her bonnet to indicate the present whereabouts of that person) "you've known her some time?"

A wise smile spread upon Miss St. Clair's derouged face. She dropped her lashes and lifted them again. "Long," she replied significantly, "and *intimate*."

The blue eyes danced. "My daughter seems interested in her. And I have a mother's anxiety."

Tottie was blessed with a sense of humor, but she conquered her desire to laugh. The daughter in question was a woman older than herself; under the circumstances, a "mother's anxiety" was hardly deserving of sympathy. Nevertheless, the landlady answered in a voice that was deep with condolence. "Oh, *I* understand how y' feel," she declared.

"We know very little about her. I wonder—can *you*—tell me—*something*."

Tottie let her eyes fall—to the modish dress, with its touches of lace; to a pearl-and-amethyst brooch that held Mrs. Milo's collar; to the fresh gloves and the smart shoes. She recognized good taste even though she did not choose to subscribe to it; also, she recognized cost values. She looked up with a mysterious smile. "Well," she said slowly, "I don't like to—knock anybody."

"A-a-ah!" triumphed the elder woman; "I thought so!—Now, you won't let me be imposed upon! Please! Quick!" A white glove was laid on a chiffon sleeve.

"Sh!—Later! Later!" The landlady drew away, pointing toward the back-parlor warningly. The situation was to her taste. She seemed to be a part of one of those very scenes for which her soul yearned—melodramatic scenes such as she had witnessed across footlights, with her husky-voiced favorite in the principal role.

"I'll come back," whispered Mrs. Milo.

"No. I'll 'phone you." With measured tread, Tottie stalked to the double door, her eyes shifting, and one hand outstretched with spraddling fingers to indicate caution.

Mrs. Milo trotted after her. "But I think I'd better come back."

Tottie whirled. "What's your 'phone number?"

"Stuyvesant—three, nine, seven,"—this before she could remember that she was not planning to sleep under the Rectory roof again.

"Don't I git more'n a number?" persisted Tottie. "Whom 'm I to ask for?"

"Just say 'Mrs. Milo.'"

"Stuyvesant—three, nine, seven, Mrs. Milo," repeated Tottie, leaning down at the table to note the data. Then with the information safely registered, "Of course, it'll be worth somethin' to you."

Mrs. Milo almost reeled. She opened her mouth for breath. "Why—why—you mean——" All her boasted poise was gone.

Tottie grinned—with a slanting look from between half-lowered lashes. "I mean—money," she said softly; and gave Mrs. Milo a playful little poke.

"Money!"—too frightened, now, even to resent familiarity. "Money! Oh, you wouldn't—! You don't—!"

"Yes, ma'am! You want somethin' from me, and I can give it to y', but you're goin' to *pay* for it!"

The double door opened. Sue entered, her look startled and inquiring. It was plain that she had overheard.

Mrs. Milo pretended not to have noted Sue's coming. "Yes, very well," she said to Tottie, as if continuing a conversation that was casual; but the blue eyes were frightened. "Thank you so *much!*"—warmly. "And isn't that a bell I hear ringing?" She gave the landlady a glance full of meaning.

"Ha-ha!" With a nod and a saucy backward grin, Tottie went out.

For a moment neither mother nor daughter spoke. Sue waited, trying to puzzle out the significance of what she had caught; and scarcely daring to charge an indiscretion. Mrs. Milo waited, forcing Sue to speak first, and thus betray how much she had heard.

"I thought you'd gone," ventured Sue.

"Gone, darling? Without you?"

"That woman;"—Sue came closer—"I hope you were very careful."

"Why, I was!"—this not without the note of injured innocence always so effective.

But Sue was not to be blocked so easily. "You're going to pay her for what?"

"Pay?"

"What was she saying?"

Now Mrs. Milo realized that she had been heard: that she must save herself from a mortifying

situation by some other method than simple justification. She took refuge in tears. "I can see that you're trying to blame me for something!" she complained, and sank, weeping, to the settee.

"I don't like to, mother," answered Sue, "but——"

That good angel who watches over those who see no other way out of an embarrassing predicament save the unlikely arrival of an earthquake or an aeroplane now intervened in Mrs. Milo's behalf. Dora came in, showing that the bell had, indeed, been summoning the mistress of the house. Behind Dora was Tottie, and the attitude of each to the other was plainly belligerent.

"As you don't know your Scriptures," Dora was saying, with a sad intonation which marked Tottie as one of those past redemption, "I'll repeat the reference for you: 'Curiosity was given to man as a scourge.'" Then in anything but a spirit proper to a biblical quotation, she slammed the door in Tottie's face.

Mrs. Milo, dry-eyed, was on her feet to receive Dora. "Oh, you impudent!" she charged. "That's the reference you gave *me*—when I asked you who was telephoning my daughter! I looked it up!"

"Ah, Mrs. Milo!" Dora put finger-tips together and cast mournful eyes up to Tottie's chandelier. "'The tongue is a world of iniquity.'"

Sue took her by a shoulder, shaking her a little. "Dora, I'm sending you out of town."

"Oh, Miss Susan!" All nonsense was frightened out of her. "Don't send me away! I tried to do my best—to keep her from coming here! But, oh, Deuteronomy, nine, thirteen!"

"Deuteronomy, nine, thirteen," repeated Mrs. Milo, wrinkling her brows. Her eyes moved as she cudgelled her brain. "Deuteronomy——"

Sue gave Dora another shake. "Listen, my dear! I'm sending you after a little girl. Here! Twenty dollars, and it's Mr. Farvel's."

"Oh, Miss Susan!"—with abject relief. "Gladly do I devote my gifts, poor as they are, to your service." And in her best ministerial manner, "Where is the child?" She tucked the paper bill into a glove.

"Poughkeepsie,"—Sue gave her the address. "Go up this afternoon—right away. And return the first thing in the morning. Bring her straight to the Rectory. Now, you'll have quite a ride with that baby, Dora. And I want you to get her ready for the happiest moment in all her little life! Do you hear?—the happiest, Dora! And, oh, here's where you must be eloquent!"

"Oh, Miss Susan, 'I am of slow speech, and of a slow tongue.'"

"I'll tell you what to say," reassured Sue. "You say to her that you're bringing her to her mother; and that she's going to live with her mother, in a little cottage somewhere—a cottage running over with roses."

"Roses," echoed Dora, and counting on her fingers, "—mother, cottage, garden——"

"And tell her that she's got a dear mother—so brave, and good, and sweet, and pretty. And her mother loves her—don't forget that!—loves her better than anything else in the whole world——"

"Loves her," checked off Dora, pulling aside another finger; "—brave, good, sweet, pretty——"

"Yes, and there's going to be no more boarding out—no more forever! Oh, the lonely little heart!" Sue took Dora by both shoulders. "Her mother's waiting for her! Her mother! Her own mother!"

"Boarding out,"—checking again; "—waiting mother. Miss Susan, I shall return by the first train tomorrow, Providence permitting." This last was accompanied by a solemn look at Mrs. Milo, and a roguish hop-skip that freed her from Sue's hold.

"Oh, the very first!" urged Sue. "Dora!"

Dora swung herself out.

Now Mrs. Milo seemed her usual self once more. "Then Mrs. Farvel will not remain at the Rectory?" she inquired.

"Oh, how could she? Of course not! They called me in to tell me: Mrs. Farvel and Barbara will leave New York in two or three days."

"Good! Meanwhile, we shall stay at the hotel with Mrs. Balcome."

"But I *must* go to the Rectory."

"I see no necessity."

"Why, mother! Mrs. Farvel couldn't possibly go there without someone. Surely you see how it is. Besides, there's the house—Dora's gone, and I must go back."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," returned Mrs. Milo, tartly.

"Just for one night?"

"Not for one hour. They will get someone else."

"A stranger?—Now, mother! Mrs. Farvel needs me."

"Oh, she needs you, does she?"—resentfully. "And I suppose your own mother doesn't need you."

"You'll be with Wallace."

"So!" And with a taunting smile, "Perhaps Mr. Farvel also needs you."

"No." But now a curious look came into Sue's eyes—a look of comprehension. Jealousy! It was patent to her, as it had never been before. Her mother was jealous of Farvel; fearful that even at so late a date happiness might come to the middle-aged woman who was her daughter. "No," she said again. "He doesn't need me."

"_In_deed!"

"No—I need him."

Mrs. Milo was appalled. "A-a-a-ah! So *that's* it! You need him! Now, we're coming to the truth!"

"Yes—the truth."

"*That's* why you couldn't rest till you'd followed this woman!" Mrs. Milo pointed a trembling hand toward the double door. "You were sure it was some love-affair. And you were jealous!"

Sue laughed. "Jealous," she repeated, bitterly.

"Yes, jealous! The fact of the matter is, you're crazy about Alan Farvel!" She was panting.

"And if—I am?" asked Sue.

"*Oh!*" It was a cry of fury. With a swift movement, Mrs. Milo passed Sue, pulled at the double door, and stood, bracing herself, as she almost shrieked down at Clare, kneeling before an open suitcase. "You've done this! You! You dragged my son down, and now you're coming between me and my daughter!"

Clare rose, throwing a garment aside.

"Mother! Mother!" Sue tried to draw her mother away.

Mrs. Milo retreated, but only to let Clare enter, followed by Farvel.

"Go back!" begged Sue. "Go back!—Mr. Farvel, take her!"

"Come, Laura! Come!"

But Clare would not go. "Yes, come—and let her wreak her meanness on Miss Milo! No! Here's a sample of what you're going to get, Alan, for insisting on my going to that Rectory. So you'd better hear it. I told you the plan is a mistake." And to Mrs. Milo, "Let's hear what you've got to say."

Righteous virtue glittered in the blue eyes. "I've got this to say!" she cried. "You've been missing ten years—ten years of running around loose. What've you been up to? Are you fit to be a friend of my daughter?"

Sue flung an arm about Clare. "I am her friend!" she declared. "I won't judge her!—Oh, mother!"

It only served to rouse Mrs. Milo further. "Ah, she knows I'm right!—You're going to lie, are you?"

You're going to palm yourself off on a decent man! Ha! You won't fool anybody! You're marked! Look in this glass!" She caught up the hand-mirror lying on the table and thrust it before Clare's face. "Look at yourself! It's as easy to read as paper written over with nasty things! Your paint and powder won't cover it! The badness sticks out like a scab!" Then as Clare, with a sudden twist of the body, and a sob, hid her face against Sue, Mrs. Milo tossed the mirror to the table. "There!" she cried. "I've had my say! Now take your bleached fallen woman to the Rectory!" And with a look of defiance, she went back to the rocking-chair and sat.

No one spoke for a moment. Sue, holding the weeping girl in her arms, and soothing her with gentle pats on the heaving shoulders, looked at her mother, answering the other's defiant stare angrily. "Ah, cruel! Cruel!" she said, presently. "And I know why. Oh, don't you feel that we should do everything in our power for Mr. Farvel, and not act like this? Haven't we Milos done enough to give him sorrow?" (It was characteristic that she did not say "Wallace," but charged his wrong-doing against the family.) "Here's our chance to be a little bit decent. And now you attack her. But—it's not because you think she's sinned: it's because you think I'm going—to the Rectory."

Now Clare freed herself gently from Sue's embrace, lifting her head wearily. "Oh, I might as well tell you both"—she looked at Farvel, too—"that she's right about me. There have been—other things."

Sue caught her hands. "Oh, then forget them!" she cried. "And remember only that you're going to be happy again!"

Clare hung her head. "But the lies," she reminded, under her breath. "The lies. Felix, he won't forgive me. I *am* engaged to him. And he doesn't know that I've ever been married before. That's why I was so scared when I saw—when I guessed Alan was at the Rectory. And why I wanted to—to sneak a little while ago. Oh, I can't ever face Felix! I—I've never even told him that Barbara is mine."

"Let *me* tell him.—And surely marriage and a daughter aren't crimes. And he'll respect you for clinging to the child."

"He knows I meant to desert her," Clare whispered back. "Oh, Miss Milo, there's something wrong about me! I bore her. But I'm not her mother. I never can be. Some women are mothers just naturally. Look how those choir-boys love you! 'Momsey' they call you—'Momsey.' Ha! They know a mother when they see one!"

Mrs. Milo rocked violently, darting a scornful look at the little group. "Disgusting!" she observed.

The three gave her no notice. "You'll grow to love your baby," declared Sue. "You can't help it. Just wait till you've got a home—instead of a boarding-house. And trust us, and let us help you."

A wan smile. "Ah, how dear and good you are!" breathed the girl. "Will you kiss me?"

"God love you!" Once more Sue caught the slender figure to her.

"So good! So good!"—weeping.

"Now no more tears! Let me see a smile!" Sue lifted the wet face.

Clare smiled and turned away. "I'll finish in here," she said, and went into the other room.

Farvel made as if to follow, but turned back. "Ah, Sue Milo, you are dear and good!" he faltered. Then coming to take her hand, "Your tenderness to Laura—your thought of the child! Ah, you're a woman in a million! How can I ever get on without you!" He raised her hand to his lips, held it a moment tightly between both of his, and went out.

Mrs. Milo had risen. Now she watched her daughter—the look Sue gave Farvel, and the glance down at the hand just caressed. To the jealous eyes of the elder woman, the clergyman's action, so full of tender admiration, conveyed but one thing—such an attachment as she had charged against Sue, and which now seemed fully reciprocated. With a burst of her ever available tears, she dropped back into her chair.

But the tears did not avail. For Sue stayed where she was. And her face was grave with understanding. "Ah, mother," she said, with a touch of bitterness. "I knew my happiness would make you happy!"

"Laura!" It was Farvel, calling from the back-parlor. "Laura! Laura! Where are you?"

Sue met him as he rushed in. "What——?"

"She's not there!" He ran to the hall door, calling as before.

"She's gone?" Sue went the opposite way, to look from the rear back-parlor window that commanded a small square of yard.

Mrs. Milo ceased to weep.

"Laura! Laura!" Farvel called up the stairs.

"Hello-o-o-o!" sang back Tottie.

"Laura! Laura!" Now Farvel was on the steps outside. He descended to the sidewalk, turned homeward, halted, reconsidering, then hurried the opposite way.

CHAPTER VIII

Hat in hand, and on tiptoe, Clare slipped from her room to the hall, and down the stairs leading to the service-entrance beneath the front steps. Her coat was over an arm, and a Japanese wrist-bag hung beside it. As noiselessly as possible, she let herself out. Then bareheaded still, but not too hurriedly, and forcing a pleasant, unconcerned expression, she turned away from the brownstone house—going toward the Rectory.

Across the street, waiting under steps that offered him the right concealment, a man was loitering. In the last hour he had seen a number of people enter Tottie's, and five had left—the child and Mrs. Colter, a fat man and a slim, and a quaint-looking girl with her hair in pig-tails. He had stayed on till Clare came out; then as she fled, but without a single look back, he prepared to follow.

But he did not forsake his hiding-place until she had turned the first corner. Then he raced forward, peered around the corner cautiously, located her by the bobbing of her yellow head among other heads all hatted, and fell in behind her at a discreet distance.

Now she put on her hat—but without stopping. She adjusted her coat, too. At the end of the block, she crossed the street and made a second turn.

Once more the man ran at top speed, and was successful in locating the hat tilted so smartly. And again he settled down to the pace no faster than hers. Thus the flight and the pursuit began.

At first, Clare walked at a good rate, with her head held high. But gradually she went more slowly, and with head lowered, as if she were thinking.

She did not travel at random. Her course was a northern one, though she turned to right and left alternately, so that she traced a Greek pattern. Presently, rounding a corner, she turned up the steps of a house exteriorly no different from Tottie's, save for the changed number on the tympanum of colored glass above its front door, and the white card lettered in black in a front window—a card that marked the residence as the headquarters of the Gramercy Club for Girls.

Clare rang.

The man came very near to missing her as she waited for the answering of the bell. And it seemed as if she could not fail to see him, for she looked about her from the top of the steps. When she was admitted, he sat down on a coping to consider his next move.

Twice he got up and went forward as if to mount the steps of the Club; but both times he changed his mind. Then, near at hand, occupying a neighboring basement, he spied a small shop. In the low window of the shop, among hats and articles of handiwork, there swung a bird-cage. He hurried across the street, entered the store, still without losing sight of the steps of the Club, and called forward the brown-cheeked, foreign-looking girl busily engaged with some embroidery in the rear of the place. A question, an eager reply, a taking down of the canary, and he went out, carrying the cage.

Very erect he was as he strode back to the Club. Here was a person about to go through with an unpleasant program, but virtuously determined on his course. His jaw was set grimly. He climbed to the storm-door, and rang twice, keeping his finger on the bell longer than was necessary. Then, very

deliberately, he adjusted his *pince-nez*.

A maid answered his ring—a maid well past middle-age, with gray hair, and an air of authority. She looked her displeasure at his prolonged summoning.

"Miss Crosby is here," he began; "I mean the young woman who just came in." He was very curt, very military; and ignored the reproof in her manner. "Please say that Mr. Hull has come."

The maid promptly admitted him.

But to make sure that he would not fail in his purpose to see Clare—that she would not escape from the Club as quietly as she had left Tottie's, he now lifted the bird-cage into view. "Tell Miss Crosby that Mr. Hull has brought the canary," he added.

"Very well,"—the servant went up the stairs at a leisurely pace that was irritating.

She did not return. Instead, Clare herself appeared at the top of the staircase, and descended slowly, looking calmly at him as she came. Her hat was off, and she had tidied her hair. Something in her manner caused him to move his right arm, as if he would have liked to screen the cage. She glanced at the bird, then at him. Her look disconcerted him. His *pince-nez* dropped to the end of its ribbon, and clinked musically against a button.

She did not speak until she reached his side. "I just called the Northrups on the 'phone and asked for you," she began.

"Oh?" He made as if to set the cage down.

"You'd better bring it into the sitting-room," she said.

"Yes." He reddened.

The sitting-room of the Club was a full sister to that garish front-parlor of Tottie's, but a sister tastefully dressed. The woodwork was ivory. The walls were covered with silk tapestry in which an old-blue shade predominated. The curtains of velvet, and the chairs upholstered in the same material, were of a darker blue that toned in charmingly with the walls. Oriental rugs covered the floor.

"You need not have brought an—excuse," Clare observed, as she closed the door to the hall.

"Well, I thought," he explained, smiling a little sheepishly, "that perhaps——"

"Particularly," she interrupted, cuttingly, "as I remember how you said a little while ago that you hate a liar." She lifted her brows.

She had caught him squarely. The cage was a lie. He put it behind a chair, where it would be out of sight.

"Well, you see," he went on lamely, "if you hadn't wanted to see me, why—why——" (Here he was, apologetic!)

"Oh, I quite understand. It's always legitimate for a man to cheat a woman, isn't it? It's not legitimate for a woman to cheat a man." She seated herself.

He winced. He had expected something so different—weeping, pleading, the wringing of hands; or, a hidden face and heaving shoulders, and, of course, more lies. Instead, here was only quiet composure, more dignity of carriage than he had ever noted in her before, and a firmly shut mouth. He had anticipated being hurt by the sobbing confessions he would force from her. But her cool indifference, her self-possession, were hurting him far more. Their positions were unpleasantly reversed. And he was standing before her, as if he, and not she, was the culprit!

"Sit down, please," she bade, courteously.

He sat, pulling at his mustache. Now he was getting angry. His look roved beyond her, as he sought for the right beginning.

"What I'd like to ask," he commenced, "is, are you prepared to tell me all I ought to know—about yourself?" ("Tell me the truth" was what he would have liked to say, but the confounded cage made impossible any allusion to truth!)

She smiled. "And I'd like to know, are you prepared to tell me all—all I ought to know—about

yourself?"

"Oh, now come!" he returned—and could go no further. Here was more of the unexpected: he was being put on the defensive!

"You've been a soldier," she went on; "you've seen a lot of the world before you met me. But you didn't recite anything you'd done. You expected me to take you 'as is,' and I thought, naturally enough, that that was the way you meant to take me."

"But I don't see why a girl should know about matters in which she is not concerned—which were a part of a man's past."

"Exactly. And that's just the way I felt about matters in which you were not concerned. But—I was wrong, wasn't I? You're not an American. You're a European. And you have the Continental attitude toward women—propriety, and so on."

He stared. He had never heard her talk like this before. "Ah, um," he murmured, still worrying the mustache. She was using no slang, and that "Continental attitude"—his glance said, "Where did you come by *that*?"

"I've known all along that you had the Old World bias—the idea that it is justice for the Pot to call the Kettle black—the idea that a man can do anything, but that a woman is lost forever if she happens to make one mistake. That all belongs, of course, right back where you came from. No doubt your mother taught——"

"Please leave my mother out of this discussion!" Here was something he could say with great severity and dignity—something that would imply the contrast between what Clare Crosby stood for and the high standards of his mother, whose fame might not be tarnished even through the mention of her name by a culpable woman.

Clare laughed. "Early Victorian," she commented, cheerfully; "that do-not-sully-the-fair-name-of-mother business. It's in your blood, Felix,—along with the determination you feel never to change when once you've made up your mind, as if your mind were something that has set itself solid, as metal does when it's run into a mold."

"Oh, indeed! Just like that!"

She nodded. "Precisely. And when you make up your mind that someone is wrong, or has hurt your vanity (which is worse), you are just middle-class enough to love to swing a whip."

He got up. "Pardon me if I don't care to listen to your opinion of me any longer," he said. "It just happens that I've caught you at your tricks today."

"It just happens that you *think* you've caught me—you've dropped to that conclusion. But—do you know anything?"

"Well—well,——"

"You shall. Please sit down again. And feel that you were justified—that I am really a culprit of some kind—just as you are."

He sat, too astonished to retort—but too curious to take himself away.

"Because I really want to tell you quite a little about myself." There was a glint of real humor in her eyes. "And first of all, I want to tell the real truth, and it'll make you feel a lot better—it'll soothe your vanity."

"You seem to have a rather sudden change in your opinion of me." He tried to be sarcastic. And he leaned back, folding his arms.

"Oh, no. I've always known that you were vain, and hard. But I didn't expect perfection."

"Ah."

"But, first, let me tell you—when I left Tottie's just now, I thought of the river. Suicide—that's what first came to my mind."

"I'm very glad you changed it,"—this with almost a parental note. Her mention of the river had soothed his vanity!

"Oh, are you?" She laughed merrily.

"And what brought about the—the——"

"Sue Milo."

"Er—who do you say?" He had expected a compliment.

"A woman you don't know—a woman that you must have seen go into Tottie's just after Barbara left—as you stood sentry."

"Ah, yes." He had the grace to blush again.

"She is the secretary at the Church near by—you know, St. Giles. She keeps books, and answers telephones, and types sermons, and does all the letters for the Rector—formerly my husband."

An involuntary start—which he adroitly made the beginning of an assent.

"I've met her only a few times. But I feel as if I'd known her all my life. Oh, how dear *her* attitude was!" Sudden tears trembled in her eyes.

"Different from mine, eh?"

"Absolutely! It was the contrast between you and her that made me see things as they are—twenty blocks, I walked—and such a change!"

"Fancy!"

"When I was thinking I might as well die, I said, 'If *he* were in trouble today, I'd be tender and kind to him. But when I cried out to him, what I got was no faith—no help—only suspicion.' All my devotion since I've known you—it counted for nothing the moment you knew something was wrong. And I was half-crazy with fear just at the thought of losing you." Her look said that she had no such fear now.

He shifted his feet uneasily.

"Then I said to myself, 'Why, you poor thing, it's only a question of time when you'd lose him anyhow.' Even if we married, Felix, we wouldn't be happy long. It would be like living over a charge of dynamite. Any minute our home might blow up."

He smiled loftily. "And Miss—er—What's-her-name, she fixed everything?"

"She helped me! I've never met anyone just like her before. I've met plenty of the holier-than-thou variety. That's the only sort I knew before I ran away from my husband." She was finding relief in talking so frankly. "Then there's Tottie's kind—ugh! But Miss Milo is the new kind—a woman with a fair attitude toward other women; with a generous attitude toward mistakes even. That old lady you saw go in—she's so good that she'd send me to the stake." She laughed. "But her daughter—if she knew that I had sinned as much as you have, she'd treat me even better than she'd treat you."

"You'll be a militant next," he observed sneeringly.

"Oh, I'm one already! But I'm not blaming anything on anybody else. For whatever's gone wrong, I can just thank myself. All these ten years, I've taken the attitude that I mustn't be discovered—that I must hide, hide, hide. I have been living over a charge of dynamite, and I set it myself. I've been afraid of a scarecrow that I dressed myself.

"I don't know why I did it. Because if they'd ever traced me, what harm would it have done?—I wouldn't have gone back unless I was carried by main force. But the papers said I was dead. So I just set myself to keep the idea up. Next thing, I met you. Then I wasn't afraid of a shadow—I had something real to fear: losing you.

"But now I don't care what you think, or what you're going to do, or what you say. I'm not even going to let Alan Farvel think that Barbara's his—when she isn't."

He shot a swift look at her. So! The child was her own, after all! His lip curled.

She understood. "Oh, get the whole thing clear while you're about it," she said indifferently. "I'm not trying to cover. At least I didn't lose sight of the child. Miss Milo praised me for that.—But—the truth is, I'm not like most other women. I'm not domestic. I never can be. Why worry about it."

"You take it all very cool, I must say! And you're jolly sure of yourself. Don't need help, eh? Highty-

tightly all at once." But there was a note of respect in his voice.

"I've got friends," she said proudly. "And if I need help I know where to get it."

The maid entered. "Your tea is ready, Miss."

Clare stood up and put out a hand. "We'll run across each other again, I suppose," she said cordially.

He could scarcely believe his ears—which were burning. "Oh, then you're not lighting out?"

"When I love little old New York so much? Not a chance! No, you can go and get your supper without a fear." She laughed saucily. Then as he turned, "Oh, don't forget the bird."

He leaned down, hating her for the ridiculousness of his situation. He did not glance round again. The gray-haired maid showed him out.

CHAPTER IX

With a sigh of relief, Mrs. Milo rose, adjusted her bonnet, and, to make sure that her appearance justified her going out upon the street, took up from the table that same hand-mirror which she had thrust before Clare's face. "So she's gone," she observed. She turned her head from side to side, delicately touching hair and bonnet, and the lace at her throat. "Well, it's for the best, I've no doubt.—And now we can go home."

Sue did not move. She had come back from her quick survey of the rear yard to stand at the center of the front room—to stand very straight, her head up, her eyes wide and fixed on space, her face strangely white and stern.

"Susan?" Mrs. Milo took out and replaced a hairpin.

Sue stirred. "Do you mean to *his* home?" she asked slowly.

"I mean to the Rectory." The glass was laid back upon the table.

"After what you've said?"

"What I said was true."

"Ah!—You believe in speaking—the truth?"

"What a question, my daughter!"—fondly.

"Even when the truth is bitter—and *hard!*" She trembled, and drew in her breath at the remembrance of that scathing arraignment.

"Shall we start?"

"But he has asked you not to return. And it's you who have sent her away. And the little one is coming. You can't go to the Rectory."

"Oh, indeed?" queried Mrs. Milo, sarcastically. "And are you going?"

Sue waited a moment. Then, "My work is there."

Mrs. Milo started. "Now let me tell you something!" she cried, throwing up her head. "You've disobeyed me once today—"

Sue smiled. "Disobeyed!" she repeated.

"—If you disobey me again—if you go back to the Rectory without me—"

"I shall certainly go back."

"—You shan't have one penny of your father's life insurance! Not one! I'll leave every cent of it to Wallace!"

Again Sue smiled. "Ah, you're independent of me, aren't you?"

"Quite—thank Providence!"

"No. Thank me. All these years you've had that insurance money out earning interest. You haven't had to use any of it, or even any of its earnings——"

"It has grown, I'm happy to say."

"Until you have plenty. Meanwhile, I've paid all of your expenses, and educated my brother. Now—you can dispense with—your meal-ticket."

"*Meal-ticket!*" It was not the implied charge, but the slang, that shocked.

"Yes, meal-ticket."

"So you throw it up! You've been supporting me! And helping Wallace!"

"I've been glad to. Every hour at my machine has been a happy one. I've never begrudged what I've done."

"Well, anyhow, I shan't need to take any more support from you, nor will my son."

Sue laughed grimly. "I don't know about that, mother. I'm afraid he's going to miss his chance to marry a rich girl. And he's never been very successful in making his own way."

Mrs. Milo would not be diverted from the main issue. "I repeat, Susan: You disobey me, as you've threatened to, and I'm done with you. Understand that. You'll go your way, and I will go mine."

Sue nodded. She understood. Her mother had announced her ultimatum to Farvel, and he had accepted it. Mrs. Milo could not return to the Rectory. But if Sue continued her work there, it meant that she would enjoy a happy companionship with the clergyman—a companionship unhindered by the presence of the elder woman. Such a state of affairs might even end in marriage. And now Sue knew it was marriage that her mother feared.

"Very well, mother."

"Ah, you like the separation plan!"

"We're as wide apart in our ideas as the poles."

"I have certainly been very much mistaken in you. Though I thought I knew my own daughter! But—you belong with the Farvels, and it's a pity she has run away. Perhaps she'll turn up later on." She spoke quietly, but she was livid with anger. "I shall not be there to interfere with your friendship. I am going to the hotel now. You can direct my poor boy to me, if it isn't too much trouble."

"So you are going." Then smiling wistfully, "But who will fuss over you when you're not sick? And coax you out of your nerves? And wait on you like a lady's maid? And how will you be able to keep an eye on me, mother? 'Who's telephoning you, Susan?' And 'Who's your letter from, darling?'" Then with sarcasm, "Oh, hen-pecked Susan, is it possible that you'll be able to go to Church without a chaperone? That you can go down town without having to report home at half-hour intervals?"

"Well! Well! Well!" marveled Mrs. Milo. She walked to the window before retorting further. Then, with a return to the old methods of playing for sympathy, "And here I've thought that you were contented and happy with me! But—it seems that your mother isn't enough."

The attempt failed. "Was your mother enough?" demanded Sue.

Mrs. Milo came strolling back. Was it possible that tactics invariably efficacious in the past would utterly fail her today? She made a second attempt. "But—but do you realize," she faltered, with what seemed deep feeling; "—your father died when Wallace was so little. If you hadn't helped me, how would I have gotten on? If you'd married——"

"Couldn't I have helped you?"

"But I had Wallace so late. And I'd have been alone. What would I have done without my daughter?"

Sue was regarding her steadily. "What did your mother do without you? And when you die, where shall *I* be?—Alone! Ah, you've seen the pathos of your own situation!—But how about mine?" For a second time in a single day, this was a changed Sue, unaccountably clear-visioned, and plain of speech.

"Dear me!" cried her mother, mockingly. "Our eyes are open all of a sudden!"

"Yes,—my eyes are open."

"Why not open your mouth?"

"Thank you for the suggestion. I shall. For twenty-five years, my eyes have been shut. I've always said, 'My mother is sweet, and pious, and kind. She's one of that lovely type that's passing.' (Thank Heaven, the type *is* passing!) If now and then you were a little severe with me—oh, I've noticed it because people have sometimes interfered, as Hattie did this morning—I've never minded at all. I've said, 'Whatever I am, I owe to my mother. And what she does is right.' Anything you said or did to me never made any difference in the wonderful feeling I had about you—the feeling of love and belief. All this time I've never once thought of rebelling. But what you said and did to another—to her, a girl who needs kindness and sympathy, who's never done you an intentional wrong—! Oh, you're not really gentle and charitable! You're cruel, mother!"

"I am just."

"The right kind of a woman today gives other women a chance for their lives—their happiness. That is real piety. She makes allowances. She's slow to condemn."

"You don't have to tell me that loose standards prevail."

Sue did not seem to hear. "All these years you've talked to me about the home—the home with a capital H. Your home—which you'd 'kept together'—the American home—wave the flag! And I've always believed that you meant what you said. But today I understand your real attitude. First, because you weren't willing to give that poor cornered girl a chance at one. You intruded into her room and deliberately drove her away."

"She ran away once from a good home with a good man." She paid Farvel the compliment unconsciously—and unintentionally.

"Then consider my case,"—it was as if Sue were speaking to herself. "Why haven't you given me a chance? For all these years, if a man looked cross-eyed at me, was he ever asked to call on us?"

"Such nonsense!"

"If he did, somehow or other there was trouble. You would cry, and say I didn't love you—or you pretended to find something wrong with him, and he didn't come again. And once—once I remember that you claimed that you were ill—though I think I guessed that you weren't—and away we went for a change of air. Oh, peace at any price!"

Mrs. Milo grew scarlet. "Ha!" she scoffed. "So *I'm* to blame for your not being married! I've stood in your way!"

"Just think how you've acted today—the way you acted over this dress—you can't bear to see me look well? Why?—Yes, you've stood in my way from the very first."

"I deny it! *You'd* better look in the mirror." She picked it up and held it out to Sue. "You know, you're not a sweet young thing."

Sue took the glass, and held it before her, gazing sadly at her reflection. "No," she answered. "But I can remember when I was sweet—and young." She laid the mirror down.

Mrs. Milo felt the necessity of toning her remarks. She spoke now with no rancor—but firmly. "Your lack of judgment was excusable then," she declared. "But now—this interest in any and every child—in Farvel, a man younger than yourself—it's silly, Sue. It's disgusting—in an old maid."

"Any and every child," repeated Sue. "Oh, selfish! Selfish! Selfish!"

"No one can accuse me of that! I've been trying to save you from making yourself ridiculous."

"To save me! Why, mother, you can't bear to see me give one hour to those poor, deserted orphans. If I go over to see them, you go along. And how many friends have I? Every thought I have must be for you! you! you!"

"I have exacted the attention that a mother should have."

"And no more? But what about Wallace? Have you exacted the attention from him that you should have? Does he owe you nothing? Why shouldn't he spend what he earns in caring for his mother,

instead of spending every penny as he pleases? Is there one set of rules for daughters, and another for sons? Why haven't you tied him up? Are you sure he's capable, when he reaches Peru, of supporting a wife? Or will he simply draw on Mr. Balcome—the way he's lived on me."

"You ought to be ashamed to speak of your brother in such a way!"

"How much more ashamed he ought to be to think that he's deserving of such criticism."

"I can't think what has come over you!"

"It's what you said a moment ago: My eyes are opened. At eighteen years of age, you planned your future for yourself. But you needed me—so you claimed me, body and soul! And you've let me give you my whole girlhood—my young womanhood. You've kept me single—and very busy. And now,—I'm an old maid!"

The blue eyes glinted with satisfaction. "Well, you are an old maid."

"An old maid! In other words, my purity's a joke!"

"Now, we're getting vulgar."

"Vulgar? Have you forgotten what you said to Laura Farvel? You taunted her because she's not 'good' as you call it. And you taunt me because I am! But who is farther in the scheme of things—she or I? I envy her because she's borne a child. At least she's a woman. Nature means us to marry and have our little ones. The women who don't obey—what happens to them? The years go"—she looked away now, beyond the walls of Tottie's front-parlor, at a picture her imagining called up—"the light fades from their eyes, the gloss from their hair; they get 'peculiar.' And people laugh at them—and I don't wonder!" Then passionately, "Look at me! Mature! Unmarried! Childless! Where in Nature do I belong? Nowhere! I'm a freak!"

"No, my dear." Mrs. Milo smiled derisively. "You're a martyr."

"Yes! To my mother."

"Don't forget"—the well-bred voice grew shrill—"that I *am* your mother."

"You gave me birth. But—reproduction isn't motherhood."

"Ah!"—mockingly. "So I haven't loved you!"

"Oh, you've loved me," granted Sue. "You've loved me too much—in the wrong way. It's a mistaken love that makes a mother stand between her daughter and happiness."

"I deny—"

"Wait!—I got the proof today! I repeat—you forgot everything you've ever stood for at the mere thought that happiness was threatening to come my way."

Mrs. Milo's eyes widened with apprehension. Involuntarily she glanced at the hand which Farvel had lifted to kiss.

"I ought to have known that my first duty was to myself," Sue went on bitterly; "—to my children. But—I put away my dreams. And now! My eyes are open too late! I've found out my mistake—too late! No son—no daughter—'Momsey,' but never 'Mother.' And, oh, how my heart has craved it all—a home of my own, and someone to care for me. And my arms have ached for a baby!"

"Ha! Ha!"—Mrs. Milo found it all so ridiculous. "A baby! Well,—why don't you have one?"

For a long moment, Sue looked at her mother without speaking. "Oh, I know why you laugh," she said, finally. "I'm—I'm forty-five. But—after today, *I'm* going to do some laughing! I'm going to do what I please, and go where I please! I'm free! I'm free at last!" She cried it up to the chandelier. "From today, I'm free! This is the Emancipation Proclamation! This is the Declaration of Independence!"

Mrs. Milo moved away, smiling. At the door she turned. "What can you do?" she asked, teasingly; "—at *your* age!"

Sue buttoned her coat over the bridesmaid's dress. "What can I do?" she repeated. "Well, mother dear, just watch me!"

CHAPTER X

The Close was the favorite retreat of the Rectory household. In the wintertime, it was a windless, sunny spot, never without bird-life, for to it fared every sparrow of the neighborhood, knowing that the two long stone benches in the yard would be plentifully strewn with crumbs, and that no prowling cat would threaten a feathered feaster.

With the coming of spring, the small inclosure was like a chalice into which the sun poured a living stream. Here the lawn early achieved a startling greenness as well as a cutable height; here a pair of peach trees dared to put out leaves despite any pronouncement of the calendar; and in the Close, even before open cars began their run along the near-by avenue, a swinging-couch with a shady awning was installed at one side; while opposite, beyond the sun-dial, and nearer to the drawing-room, a lawn marquee went up, to which Dora brought both breakfast and luncheon trays.

The Close, shut in on its four sides, afforded its visitors perfect privacy. The high blank wall of an office building, which had conformed its architecture to that of the Church and the other structures related to the Church, lifted on one hand to what—from the velvet square of the little yard—seemed the very sky. Directly across from the office building was the Rectory; and two windows of the drawing-room, as well as two upper windows (the window of a guest-room and the window of "the study") opened upon it.

One face of the Church, ivy-grown and beautified with glowing eyes of stained-glass, looked across the stretch of green to a high brick wall which shut off the sights and sounds of the somewhat narrow and fairly quiet street. It was over this wall that the peach trees waved their branches, and in the late summer dropped a portion of their fruit. And it was in this wall that there opened a certain door to the Close which was never locked—a little door, painted a gleaming white, through which the Orphanage babies came, to be laid in the great soft-quilted basket that stood on a stone block beneath a low gable-roof of stone.

On this perfect spring morning, the Close was transformed, for the swinging-couch and the lawn marquee were gone, and a great wedding-bell of hoary blossoms was in its place, hung above the wide flagstone which lay before this side entrance to the Church. Flanking the bell on either hand, flowers and greenery had been massed by the decorators to achieve an altar-like effect. And above the bell, roofing the improvised altar, was a canopy of smilax, as Gothic in design as the vari-tinted windows to right and left.

Discussing the unwonted appearance of their haunt and home, the bird-dwellers of the Close flew about in some excitement, or alighted on wall and ledge to look and scold. And fully as noisy as the sparrows, and laboring like Brownies to set the yard to rights following the departure of the florist and his assistant, a trio of boys from the choir raked and clipped and garnered into a sack.

Ikey was in command, and wielded the lawn mower. Henry, a tall mild-eyed lad, selected for the morning's pleasant duty in the Close in order to reward him for irreproachable conduct during the week previous, snipped at the uneven blades about the base of the sun-dial. The third worker was Peter, a pale boy, chosen because an hour in the open air would be of more value to him than an hour at his books.

"I tell you she iss *not* a Gentile!" denied Ikey, who was arrogant over being armed with authority as well as lawn mower.

"She is so!" protested Henry, with more than his usual warmth.

"I know she ain't!"

"Aw, she is, too!"

"I asks her, 'Momsey, are you a Gentile?'" went on Ikey. "Und she answers to me, 'Ikey, I am all kinds of religions.'—*Now!*"

"Ain't her mother a Gentile?" demanded Henry.

"I'm glat to say it!"

"And her father was."

"Sure! Just go in und look at him!"

"Then what's the matter with you! She's *got* to be a Gentile!"

Ikey recognized the unanswerableness of the argument. "Vell," he declared stoutly, "I lof her anyhow!"

A fourth boy leaned from a drawing-room window. "Telephone!" he called down.

"Ach! Dat telephone!" Ikey propped himself against the sun-dial. "Since yesterday afternoon alretty, she rings und nefer stops! 'Vere iss Miss Hattie?'—dat Wallace, he iss awful lofsick! 'I don't know.' 'Vere iss Miss Susan?' 'I don't know.' 'Vere iss my daughter?'—de olt lady! 'I don't know.'—All night by dat telephone, I sit und lie!"

"Ha! Ha!" Peter, the pale, seized the excuse to drop back upon the cool grass. "How can you *sit* and *lie*?"

"Smarty, you're too fresh!" charged Ikey. "How can you sit und be lazy? Look vat stands on dis sun-dial!—*Tempus Fugits*. Dat means, 'De morning iss going.' So you pick up fast all de grass bits by de benches.—Und if somebody asks, 'Vere iss Mr. Farvel,' I says, 'I don't know,' und dat iss de truth. Because he iss gone oudt all night, und dat iss not nice for ministers." He shook his head at the lawn mower.

"Say, a woman wants to talk with Mrs. Milo," reminded the boy who was hanging out of the window.

"She can vant so much as she likes," returned Ikey, mowing calmly.

"Oo! You oughta heard her!—Shall I say she's gone?"

"Say she's gone, t'ank gootness," instructed Ikey. And as the boy precipitated himself backward out of sight, "Ach, dat's vat's wrong mit dis world!—de mutter business. Mrs. Milo, Mrs. Bunkum, und your mutter, und your mutter—"

"Aw, my mother's as good as your mother!" boasted Henry, chivalrously.

"Dat can't be. Because you nefer *hat* a mutter—you vas left in dat basket." He pointed. "Vasn't you? Und *my* mutter"—proudly—"she iss dead."

Peter lifted longing eyes. "Gee, I wish *I* had a mother."

"A-a-a-ah!" Ikey waggled a wise head. "You kids, you would like goot mutters—and you git left in baskets. Und Momsey says dat lots of times mutters dat *iss* goot mutters, dey don't haf no children." Then to Henry, who, like Peter, had seized upon an excuse for pausing in his work, "Here! Git busy mit de shears! Ofer by de vall iss plenty schnippin'."

Henry tried flattery. "I like to hear y' talk," he confessed.

"Ve-e-e-ell,—" Ikey was touched by this appreciation of his philosophizing.

"And I'm kinda tired."

Now Ikey's virtuous wrath burst forth. He fixed the tall boy with a scornful eye. "Oh, you kicker!" he cried. "You talk tired—and you do like you please! Und you say Momsey so much as you vant to! Momsey! Momsey! Momsey! Momsey!" Each time the lawn mower squeaked and rattled its emphasis. "Und de olt lady, she iss gone!"

All the sparrows watching the laboring trio from safe vantage points now rose with a soft whirr of wings and a quick chorus of twitters as Farvel opened the door from the Church and came out. A long black gown hung to his feet, but this only served to accentuate the paleness of his newly-shaven cheeks. "Ah, fine!" he greeted kindly; "the yard is beginning to look first-class." Then as the bearer of the telephone message now projected himself once more between the curtains of the drawing-room, this time to proffer a package, "Not for me, is it, my boy?—Get it, Ikey, please." He sat down wearily.

Ikey moved to obey, squinting back over a shoulder at the clergyman in some concern. But the package in hand, he puzzled over that instead as he came back. "It says on it 'Mr. Farvel,'" he declared. "Ain't it so?"

"Open it, old chap," bade Farvel, without looking up.

Ikey needed no urging; and, his companions, once again welcoming an interruption, gathered to watch. Off came a paper wrapping, disclosing a box. Out came the cover of the box, disclosing—in a gorgeous confection of silk, lace, and tulle, with flowers in her flaxen hair, and blue eyes that were

alternately opening and shutting with almost human effect as Ikey moved the box—a large and remarkably handsome lady doll.

"*Oy, ich chalesh!*" cried Ikey, thrown back upon his Yiddish in the amazement of discovery.

Farvel sprang up, manifestly embarrassed, reached for the box, and put it out of sight behind him as he sat again. "Oh!—Oh, that's all right," he stammered. "It's for Barbara."

"Bar-bar-a?" drawled the boy. Then following a pause, during which the trio exchanged glances, "A little girl, she comes here?"

"Yes, Ikey; yes.—Have you boys dusted the drawing-room? You know Dora's not here today."

"No, sir." Peter and Henry backed dutifully toward the door of the Rectory.

But Ikey stood his ground. "Does de little girl come by de basket?" he inquired.

"No, son; no. Dora will bring her.—Now run along like a good chap."

Ikey backed a few steps. "Does—does she come to de Orphanage?" he persisted.

"No. She's not an orphan.—You see that Peter and Henry put everything in shape, won't you?"

At this, Peter and Henry disappeared promptly. But Ikey only backed another step or two. "Den she's got a mutter?" he ventured.

"Oh, yes—yes.—Be sure and dust the library."

Ikey gave way another foot. "Und also a fader?"

"Er—why—yes."

Now Ikey nodded, and turned away. "He ain't so sure," he observed sagely, "about de fader."

At this moment, loud voices sounded from the drawing-room—Henry's, expostulating; next, the thin soprano of Peter; then a woman's, "Where is he, I say? I want to see him!" And she came bursting from the house, almost upsetting Ikey.

It was Mrs. Balcome, looking exceedingly wrathful. She puffed her way across the grass, clutching to her the unfortunate Babette, and dragging (though she had just arrived) at the crumpled upper of a long kid glove, much as if she were pulling it on preparatory to a fight. "Mr. Farvel,"—he had risen politely—"I have come to take away the presents and other things belonging to us. Since you have seen fit to turn my best friend out of her home, naturally the wedding cannot be solemnized here."

Farvel bowed, reddening with anger. "Wallace Milo's wedding cannot be solemnized here," he said quietly.

"*In-deed!*"

Ikey had entered with another box. She received it, scolding as she put down the dog and pulled at the fastening of the package. "Oh, such lack of charity! Such shameless lack of ordinary consideration! What do you care that the wedding must take place at some hotel! And you know these decorations won't keep! And it's a clergyman who's showing such a spirit! That's what makes it more terrible! A man who pretends——" Busy with the box, she had failed to see that Farvel was no longer present. Now she whirled about, looking for him. "Oh, such impudence! Such impudence!" she stormed.

Ikey indicated the package. "De man, he said, 'Put it on ice,'" he cautioned.

"Ice?" Mrs. Balcome stared. "What's in it?"

"It felt like somet'ing for a little girl."

With a muttered exclamation, she threw the box upon the grass. "Is Miss Susan here?" she demanded.

"I don't know." Ikey's eyes were clear pools of truth.

"Have my daughter and her father arrived yet?"

"I don't know."

"Well, have they telephoned?" Mrs. Balcome strove to curb her rising irritation.

"I don't know."

Patience could bear no more. "What's the matter with you?" she cried.

"Don't you know anything?"

"Not'ing," boasted Ikey. "I promised, now, dat I wouldn't, und I keep my vord!"

Mrs. Balcome seized him by a sleeve of his faded blue waist. "You promised who?" she screeched, forgetting grammar in her anger. "I'll report you to Mrs. Milo, that's what I'll do! How dare——"

A hearty voice interrupted. "Good-morning, my boy! Good-morning!" Balcome grinned broadly, pleased at this opportunity of contrasting his cordiality with the harshness of his better half.

Ikey was not slow in recognizing opportunity either. "Goot-mornin'," he returned, ostentatiously rubbing an arm.

"Is Miss Milo at home?" inquired Balcome, with exaggerated politeness, enjoying the evident embarrassment of the lady present, who—not unlike Lot's wife—had suddenly turned, as it were, into a frozen pillar.

"I don't know," chanted Ikey.

"Well, is Mr. Farvel at home?"

Now, Ikey stretched out weary hand. "Oh, please," he begged, "*don't* make me lie no more!"

"Ha-a-a-a?" cried Balcome.

"*What?*" exclaimed Mrs. Balcome.

Ikey nodded, shaking that injured finger. "To lie ain't Christian," he reminded slyly.

Balcome guffawed. But Mrs. Balcome, visited with a dire thought, looked suddenly concerned.

"Tell me:—she came heaving toward Ikey once more; "did my daughter stay last night with her father?" And as Ikey stared, not understanding the system of family telephoning, "Did—my—daughter—stay—last—night—with—her—father?"

"But vy ask me?" complained Ikey. "Let him lie! Let him!" And he started churchward.

"Wait!" Balcome was bellowing now. "Where is my daughter?"

"Didn't she stay with her father?" repeated Mrs. Balcome.

"Didn't she stay with her mother?" cried Balcome.

Ikey did not need to reply. For one question had answered the other. With an "Oh! Oh!" of apprehension, Mrs. Balcome sank, a dead weight, to a bench.

"Where is she, I say? Where is she?" Now Balcome had the unfortunate Ikey by a faded blue sleeve. He shook him so that all the curls on his head bobbed madly. "Open your mouth!"

"I don't know!" denied Ikey, desperately.

"Good Heavens!" Balcome let him go, and paced the grass, clutching off his hat and pounding at a knee with it.

"Oh, what has happened! What has happened!" Mrs. Balcome rocked in her misery. "Oh, and we had words last night—bitter words! Oh!"

At this juncture, out from between the drawing-room curtains Henry appeared, balancing himself on his middle, and handed down still another package. Ikey ran to receive it, and as if to silence the mourning with which the Close resounded, hastened to thrust the package into the lap of the unhappy lady on the bench.

The result was to increase Mrs. Balcome's sorrow. "Oh, my poor Hattie!" she wept. "My poor child!" She pulled at the cord about the bundle, and Balcome halted behind her to look on. "Here is another gift for her wedding! Oh, how pitiful! How pitiful! A present from someone who loves her! Who thought

the dear child would be happy! Something sweet and dainty"—the wrapping paper was torn off by now—"to brighten her new home! Something——"

A cover came off. And there, full in Mrs. Balcome's sight, lay a good-sized, and very rosy Kewpie—blessed with little raiment but many charms.

"Baa-a-a-ah!"—a gesture of disgust, and the Kewpie was cast upon the lawn.

Wallace came hurrying from the house. He looked more bent than usual, and if possible more pale. His clothes indicated that he had slept in them.

Balcome charged toward him. "Where's my daughter?" he asked, with a head-to-foot look, much as if he suspected the younger man with having Hattie concealed somewhere about him.

"Wallace!" Mrs. Balcome held out stout arms to the newcomer.

Wallace went to her. "I tried and tried to telephone her," he answered. "And they told me they don't know where she is. So I've come.—Oh, is it all right? What does she say? I want to see her!"

"She's gone!" informed Balcome, his voice hollow.

"She's gone! She's gone!" echoed Mrs. Balcome. She shook the stone bench.

"*Gone?*" Wallace clapped a hand to his forehead.

"She's wandered away!" sobbed Mrs. Balcome. "Half-crazed with it all! Heart-broken! Heart-broken!"

With a muffled growl, Balcome once more fell upon Ikey, who had been watching and listening from a discreet distance. "Where is Miss Milo, I say!" he demanded as he swooped.

But Ikey's determination did not fail him, though his teeth chattered. "I—I—d-d-don't know!" he protested for the tenth time.

"Oh, terrible! Terrible!"—this in a fresh burst from Mrs. Balcome. "Oh, what did I say what I did for!"

"Don't cry! Don't cry!" comforted Wallace. "We'll hunt for her. Police, and detectives——"

A crash of piano notes interrupted from the drawing-room. Then through open door and windows floated the first bars of "Comin' Thro' the Rye"—with an accompaniment in rag-time. As one the group in the Close turned toward the house.

"Hattie?" exclaimed Mrs. Balcome.

"Hattie!" faltered Wallace.

"Hattie!"—it was a crisp bass summons from Hattie's father.

Hattie put her head out at the door. "Good-morning, mother!" she called cheerily. "Good-morning, dad! Good-morning,—Wallace."

"Where did you spend last night?" asked Mrs. Balcome, rising. Anger took the place of grief, for Hattie was wearing an adorable house frock culled from her trousseau—a frock combined of rose voile and French gingham. And such a selection on this particular morning——

Hattie sauntered to the sun-dial. "Last night?" She pointed to that upper guest-room window.

Her mother was shocked. "You don't mean to tell me that you slept *here!*"

"When the telephone wasn't ringing,"—whereat Ikey grinned.

"You slept here *unchaperoned?*"

"Oh, Sue was home."

"Oh, what's the matter with you, Hattie? You're not like other girls!"

"Well, have I been raised like other girls?"

At this, Mrs. Balcome became fully roused. "You'll pack your things and come right out of that

house!" she cried. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, mother.—Ikey dear, find Mr. Farvel and tell him his breakfast is ready." Then with a proprietary air, "And Miss Balcome says he must eat it while it's hot."

Wallace straightened, his face suddenly flushing.

"Dear me, aren't we concerned about Mr. Farvel's breakfast!" exclaimed Mrs. Balcome, mockingly.

"We are."

"But not a word for this poor boy. One would think you were going to marry Farvel instead of Wallace."

"But—am I going to marry Wallace?"

Wallace swayed toward her. "Oh, you can't—you *can't* turn me down!"

"Ah, Wallace!" she said sadly.

"Mrs. Balcome, *you* don't think I deserve this?"

"Now don't be hasty, Hattie," advised her mother. "Everything's ready. Our friends are coming. Are you going to send them away?"

"Messages have gone—to tell everyone not to come."

"Oh!" Wallace turned away, his head sunk between his shoulders.

"What will Buffalo think of you!" cried Mrs. Balcome.

"Buffalo," answered Hattie, "will have a chance to chatter about me, and that will give you and dad a rest."

"Are you going to send back all those beautiful wedding presents?"

Balcome, relieved of his worry over Hattie, had been strolling about, pulling at a cigar. Now he greeted this last question with a roar of laughter. "Oh, Hattie, can you beat it! Oh, that's a good one!"

Mrs. Balcome fixed him with an angry eye. "Doesn't he show what he is?" she inquired. "To laugh at such a time!"

"Beautiful wedding presents!" went on Balcome. "Oh, ha! ha! ha!"

"No sentiment!" added his wife. "No feeling!"

Hattie appealed to Wallace. "Oh, haven't I had my share of quarreling?" she asked plaintively.

"But we wouldn't quarrel!"

"Oh, yes, we would. I'd remember—and then trouble. I'd always feel that you and——"

"Hattie!" warned her mother. "You can't discuss that matter."

"Why not?"

"You ask that! Doesn't your good taste—your modesty—tell you that it's not proper?"

"Oh!—I mustn't discuss it. But if Wallace and I were to marry at twelve o'clock today, we could discuss it at one o'clock—and quarrel!"

"Mr. Balcome!" entreated Wallace.

Balcome deposited his cigar ashes on the sun-dial. "My boy," he said, "if a man has to dodge crockery because his wife's jealous about nothing, what'll it be like if she's got the goods on him?"

"There he goes!" triumphed Mrs. Balcome. "It's just what I expected!" And to Hattie, who was admiring the Kewpie, "Put that down!" Then to Wallace, "Oh, she gets more like her father every day! Now drop that!"—for Hattie, having let fall the Kewpie, had picked up the flaxen-haired doll. "Wallace, she never came to this decision alone!"

"Alan Farvel!" accused Wallace, hotly.

Hattie turned on him. "You—you dare to say that!"

"Oh, I knew you'd stick up for him! You like him."

"He's good! He's fine, and big! He's a man!—and a clean man."

"*I* meant Sue Milo." Mrs. Balcome interposed her bulk between them.

"She's not to blame!" defended Hattie. "On the contrary—she wouldn't let me decide quickly. We talked about it 'way into the night."

Balcome twitched a rose voile sleeve. "Don't mind her, Hattie," he counseled. "That's the kind of wild thing she says about me."

"Can you deny that Susan has influenced you?" persisted Mrs. Balcome. "Can you truthfully say—*Oh!*" For over the wall, and over the little white door, had come a large, gay-striped rubber ball. It struck the grass, bounced, and came rolling to Mrs. Balcome's feet.

"Here she is!" whispered Balcome.

"*Sneaking* in!" accused his wife.

Now, the white door swung wide to the sound of motor chugging, and a hop came trundling across the lawn. Next, Sue appeared, backing, for her arms were full of bundles. She dropped one or two as she came. "Oh, there you go again!" she laughed. "Oh, butter-fingers!"

"Goo-oo-ood-morning!" began Mrs. Balcome, portentously.

Sue turned a startled face over a shoulder. And at once she was only a small girl caught in naughtiness. "Oh,—er—ah—good-morning," she stammered. "I—er—I've got everything but the kitchen stove." She made to a bench and let all her purchases fall. "Mrs. Balcome,—how—how is mother?"

"You care a lot about your poor mother!" retorted Mrs. Balcome. "You'll send her gray hairs in sorrow to the grave!"

Balcome winked at Sue. "Hebrews, ten, thirty-six," he reminded roguishly. "'For ye have need of patience.'"

"Well, dear lady, just what have I done?" Sue sank among the packages.

"I say you're responsible for this—this unfortunate turn of affairs."

"If you'd only let things alone yesterday," broke in Wallace; "if you'd stayed at home, and minded your own affairs."

"So you could have deceived Hattie."

"No! You've no right to call it deception. That's one of your new-woman ideas. This is something that happened long ago, before I ever met Hattie—and it's sacred—"

Hattie burst out laughing. "Sacred!" she cried. "Of course—an affair with the wife of your host!"

"Hattie!" warned Mrs. Balcome.

But Hattie ignored her mother. "What a disgusting argument!" she went on. "What a cowardly excuse!"

Matters were taking a most undesirable turn. To change their course, Mrs. Balcome swung round upon Sue. "Why did you send Dora for that child?"

"What has the poor child to do with it?"

"Ah! You see, Wallace? It was all done purposely. So that Hattie would decide against you. What does Susan Milo care that you'll be mortified? That Hattie's life will be spoiled?" (Hattie smiled.) "That I'll have to explain and lie?"

"Ha! Ha!—Lie!" chuckled Balcome.

"Don't you see that she's not thinking of you, Hattie? That you'll have to pack up and go home?—Oh, it's dreadful! Dreadful!"

"Yes," answered Hattie. "It would be dreadful—to have to go home."

Mrs. Balcome did not seem to hear. She was waving a hand at the bundles. "And what, may I ask, are all these?"

"These?"

"You heard me."

"Well, this—for, oh, she must have the best welcome that we can give her, the darling!—this——"

"All cooked up for Mr. Farvel's benefit, I suppose," interjected Mrs. Balcome.

"Of course. Who cares anything about the child!" Sue laughed.

"Oh, your mother has told me of your aspirations,"—this with scornful significance.

"Mm!—This is socks—oh, such cunning socks—with little turnover cuffs on 'em!" Sue's good-humor was unshaken. "And this is sash ribbon. And this is roller skates." She lifted one package after the other. "And a game. And a white rabbit. And a woolly sheep—it winds up!" She gave it to Hattie. "And a hat—with roses on it! And rompers—I do hope she's not too big for rompers! These are blue, with a white collar. And 'Don Quixote'—fine pictures—it'll keep. And look!"—it was a train of cars. "Isn't it a darling? I could play with it myself! Just observe that smokestack! And—well, she can give it to her first beau. And, behold, a lizard! Its picture is on the box!" She waved it. "Made in the U. S. A.!"

Mrs. Balcome had been watching with an expression not so irritable as it was wearied. "You are pathetic!" she said finally. "Simply pathetic!"

"Look!" invited Sue, holding up a duck. "It quacks!"

But Mrs. Balcome had turned on Hattie, and caught the sheep from her hand. "You!" she scolded; "—for the child of that—that——"

Hattie held up a warning finger. "Don't criticize the lady before Wallace," she cautioned.

Slowly Wallace straightened, and came about. "Well," he said quietly, "I guess that's the end of it." He went to Sue, holding out a hand. "Sue, I'm going——"

"Go to mother, Wallace. I'll see you later."

"Hattie! Hattie!" importuned her mother. "Tell him not to go!"

"No," said Hattie, firmly. "I was willing to do something wrong—and all this has saved me from it. I've never cared for Wallace the right way. He knows it. I was only marrying him to get away from home."

"Hear that!" cried Mrs. Balcome.

"No,—you don't love me," agreed Wallace.

"I don't believe I've ever loved you," the girl went on; "only—believe me!—I didn't know it till—till I came here."

"I understand." Out of a pocket of his vest he took a ring—a narrow chased band of gold. "Will—will you keep this?" he asked. "It was for you."

"Some other woman, Wallace, will make you happy." She made no move to take the ring, only backed a step.

Quickly Sue put out her hand. "Let me take it, dear brother. And try not to feel too bad." She had on a long coat. She dropped the ring into a pocket.

"And, Sue, I want to tell you"—he spoke as if they were alone together—"that I'm ashamed of what I said to you yesterday—that you're quick to think wrong. You're not. And you were right. And you're the best sister a man ever had."

"Never mind," comforted Sue. "Never mind."

He tried to smile. "This—this is chickens coming home to roost, isn't it?" he asked; turned, fighting

against tears, and with a smothered farewell entered the house.

Mrs. Balcome wiped her eyes. "Oh, poor Wallace! Poor boy!" she mourned. And to Sue, "I hope you're satisfied! You started out yesterday to stop this wedding—your own brother's wedding!—and you've succeeded. I can't fathom your motives—except that some women, when they fail to land husbands of their own, simply hate to see anybody else have one. It's the envy of the—sour spinster."

Sue was busily arranging the toys. "So I can't land a husband, eh?" she laughed.

"But your mother tells me that you're championing the unmarried alliance," went on Mrs. Balcome.

"You mean Laura Farvel, of course. Well, not exactly. You see, neither mother nor I know anything against Mrs. Farvel except what Mrs. Farvel has said herself. But one thing is certain: even an unmarried alliance, as you call it, is more decent than a marriage without love."

"Oh, slam!" Balcome exploded in pure joy.

"How dare you!" cried Mrs. Balcome, dividing an angry look between her husband and Sue.

"And," Sue went on serenely, "when it comes to that, I respect an unmarried woman with a child fully as much as I do a married woman with a poodle."

"Wow!" shouted Balcome.

"I think," proceeded Mrs. Balcome, suddenly mindful of the existence of her own poodle, and looking calmly about for Babette, "I think that you have softening of the brain."

"Well,"—Sue was tinkering with the smoke-stack—"I'd rather have softening of the brain than hardening of the heart."

"Isn't she funny?" demanded Balcome, to draw his wife's fire. "She doesn't dare to stand up for Wallace you'll notice, Sue,—though she'd like to. But she can't because she's raved against that kind of thing for years. So she has to abuse somebody else."

"There's a man for you!" cried his better half. "To stand by and hear his own wife insulted!—the mother of his child—and join in it! How infamous! How base!"

Satisfied with results, Balcome consulted his watch. "Well, I'm a busy man," he observed, and kissed Hattie.

"Where is your father going?" demanded Mrs. Balcome.

"Where is father going?" telephoned Sue, taking off hat and coat.

"Buffalo."

Mrs. Balcome threw up the hand that was not engaged with the dog. "Oh, what shall we say to Buffalo!" she said tragically. "Oh, how can I ever go back!"

"Mr. Balcome, do you want to settle on some explanation?"

"Advise Hattie's mother"—Balcome shook a warning finger—"that for a change she'd better tell the truth."

"Oh!"—the shot told. "As if I don't always tell it—always!" Then to Sue, "Suppose we say that the bridegroom is sick?"

Inarticulate with mirth, Balcome gave Sue a parting pat on the shoulder and started away.

"But, John!"

Astounded at being thus directly addressed, and before he could bethink himself not to seem to have heard, Balcome brought short, silently appealing to Sue for her opinion of this extraordinary state of affairs.

For Sue knew. There was only one thing that could have so moved Mrs. Balcome. "Lady dear," she inquired pleasantly, "how much money do you want?"

"Oh, four hundred will do." And as Balcome dove into a capacious pocket and brought forth a roll, which Sue handed to her, "One hundred, two hundred,—three—four——" She counted in a careful, inquiring tone which implied that Balcome might have failed to hand over the sum she suggested. "And

now, Hattie, get your things together. We want to be gone by the time that child comes."

"Oh, mother," returned Hattie, crossly, "you're beginning to treat me exactly as Mrs. Milo treats Sue."

No argument followed. For at this moment a door banged somewhere in the Rectory, then came the sound of running feet; and Mrs. Milo's voice, shrill with anger, called from the drawing-room:

"Susan!"

"Mother?" said Sue.

Hattie and her father gravitated toward each other in mutual sympathy. Then joined forces in a defensive stand behind Sue.

"Now, you'll catch it, Miss Susan!" promised Mrs. Balcome. "Here's someone who'll know how to attend to you!"

"My dear friend," answered Sue, "since early yesterday afternoon, here's a person that's been calling her soul her own."

"Susan!"—the cry was nearer, and sharp.

With elaborate calmness, Sue took up the Kewpie, seated herself, and prepared to look as independent and indifferent as possible.

"Susan!—Oh, help!"

It brought Sue to her feet. There was terror in the cry, and wild appeal.

The next moment, white-faced, and walking unsteadily, Mrs. Milo came from the drawing-room. "Oh, help me!" she begged. "I didn't tell her anything! I didn't! I didn't! How could she find us! That terrible woman!" She made weakly to the stone bench that was nearest, and sat—as Tottie followed her into sight and halted in the doorway, leaning carelessly.

CHAPTER XI

Miss Mignon St. Clair was a lady of resource. Given a telephone number, and a glimpse of a gentleman who was without doubt of the cloth, and she had only to open the Classified Telephone Directory at "Churches," run down the list until she came to the number Mrs. Milo had given her, and the thing was done. She disregarded Ikey's repeated "I don't knows" over the wire, donned an afternoon dress for her morning's work (Tottie was ever beforehand with the clock in the matter of apparel), and set forth for the Rectory, arriving—by very good fortune—as Mrs. Milo herself was alighting out of a taxicab.

Now she grinned impudently at the group in a the Close. "How-dy-do, people!" she hailed. "—Well, nobody seems to know me today! I'll introduce myself—Miss Mignon St. Clair." She bowed. Then to the figure crouched on the bench, "Say, how about it, Lady Milo?"

"Oh, you must go!" cried Mrs. Milo, rising. "You must! I'll see you—I promise—but go!"

Tottie came out. "Oh, wa-a-ait a minute! Why, you ain't half as hospitable as I am. I entertained the bunch of you yesterday, and let you raise the old Ned." She sauntered aside to take a look at the dial.

"Oh! Oh!" Mrs. Milo dropped back to the bench, shutting out the sight of her visitor with both trembling hands.

Sue went to stand across the dial from Tottie. "What can we do for you?" she asked pleasantly.

Tottie addressed Mrs. Milo. "Your daughter's a lady," she declared emphatically. And to Sue, "Nothin' 's been said about squarin' with me."

"Squaring?"

"Damages."

"Damages?"—more puzzled than ever.

But Balcome understood. He advanced upon Tottie, shaking a fist. "You mean blackmail!"

"Now go slow on that!" counseled Tottie, dangerously. "I aim to keep a respectable house."

"And I'm sure you do," returned Sue, mollifyingly.

It warmed Tottie into a confidence. "Dearie," she began, "I room the swellest people in the whole perfession. That's why I'm so mad. Here I took in that Clare Crosby. And what did she do to me?—'Aunt Clare!' Think of *me* swallerin' such stuff! Well, you bet I'm goin' to let Felix Hull know all there is to know, and—the kid is big enough to understand."

Now Sue put out a quick hand. "Ah, but you haven't the heart to hurt a child!"

"Haven't I! You just wait till I have my talk with her 'Aunt Clare!'"

"We haven't been able to locate her."

Tottie's face fell. "No? Then I know a way to git even, and to git my pay. There's the newspapers—y' think they won't grab at this?" She jerked her red head toward the wedding-bell. "Just a 'phone, 'Long lost wife is found, or how a singer broke up a weddin'."

"Oh, no!" Hattie raised a frightened face to that upper window of the study.

"By Heaven!" stormed Balcome, stamping the grass.

"Now, I know you're joking!" declared Sue. "Yes, you are!"

"Yes, I *ain't*!"

"Ah, you can't fool me! No, indeed! You wouldn't think of doing such a thing—a woman who stands so high in her profession!"

Tottie's eyelids fluttered, as if at a light too brilliant to endure; and she caught her breath like one who has drunk an over-generous draught. "Aw—er—um." Her hand went up to her throat. She swallowed. Then recovering herself, "Dearie, you're not only a lady, but you're discernin'—that's the word!—discernin'." She laid a hand appreciatively on Sue's arm.

Sue patted the hand. "Ha-ha!" she laughed. "I could see that you were acting! The very first minute you came through that door—"That woman is an artist"—that's what I said to myself—'a great artist—in her line.' For you can *act*. Oh, Miss St. Clair, *how* you can act!"

Tottie seemed to grow under the praise, to lengthen and to expand. "Well, I do flatter myself that I have talent," she conceded. "I've played with the best of 'em. And as I say,—"

"Exactly," agreed Sue. "Now, what *I* was about to remark was this: We're thinking very seriously of traveling—several of us—yes. And before we go, I feel that I'd like you to have a small token of my appreciation of what you've done for—for Miss Crosby—a small token to an artist—"

"Dearie," interrupted Tottie, "I couldn't think of it."

"Oh, just a little something—for being so kind to her."

"Not a cent. Y' know, I've got a steady income—yes, alimony. I'm independent. And it's so seldom that us artists *git* appreciated. No; as I say, not a cent.—And now, I'll make my exit. It's been a real pleasure to see you again." She backed impressively.

"The pleasure's all mine," declared Sue. "Good-by!"

"O-revour!" returned Tottie, elegantly. She bowed, swept round, and was gone.

Mrs. Milo uncovered her face.

Balcome chuckled. "My dear Sue," he said, "when it comes to diplomacy, our United States ambassador boys have nothing on you!"

"Oh, don't give me too much credit," Sue answered. "You know, people are never as bad as they pretend to be. Now even you and Mrs. Balcome—why, I've come to the conclusion that you two enjoy a good row!"

"Ah, that reminds me!" declared Balcome. "You spoke just now of traveling. And I think there's a devil of a lot in that travel idea."

"Brother Balcome!" exclaimed Mrs. Milo, finding relief from embarrassment in being shocked.

"Don't call me Brother!" he cried. "—Sue, ask Mrs. B. if she wouldn't like to get away to Europe.—And you could go with her, couldn't you?" This to Mrs. Milo, before whose eyes he held up a check-book. "What would you say to five thousand dollars?"

The sight of that check-book was like a tonic. Mrs. Milo smiled—and rose, setting her bonnet straight, and picking at the skirt of her dress.

"What do you think, Sue?" asked Balcome.

Sue considered. "They could go a long way on five thousand," she returned mischievously.

"And I need a change," put in her mother; "—after twenty years of—of widowed responsibility."

Balcome waxed enthusiastic. "I tell you, it's a great idea! You two ladies——"

"Leisurely taking in the sights," supplemented Sue.

"That's the ticket!" He opened the check-book. "First, England."

"Then France." Sue was the picture of demureness.

"Then the trenches!" Balcome winked.

"Italy is lovely," continued Sue, wickedly.

"Egypt—for the winter!" Balcome's excitement mounted as he saw his wife farther away.

"And there's the Holy Land."

This last was a happy suggestion. For Mrs. Milo turned to Mrs. Balcome, clasping eager hands. "Ah, the Holy Land!" she cried. "Palestine! The Garden of Eden!"

Mrs. Balcome listened calmly. But she did not commit herself. At some thought or other, she pressed Babette close.

"Yes!" Balcome took Mrs. Milo's elbow confidentially. "And think of Arabia!"

"India!"—it was Sue again.

"China!" added Balcome.

"Japan!"

"The Phil——"

"Look out now! Look out!"

"What's the matter?"

"Matter? You're coming up the other side!"

But Mrs. Milo was blissfully unaware of this bit of byplay. "Do you think Mrs. Balcome and I could make such an extended trip on five thousand?" she asked.

"Well, I'll raise the ante!—*ten* thousand." Balcome took out a fountain-pen.

"Oh, think of it!" raved Mrs. Milo, ecstatically. "The dream of my life!—Europe! Africa! Asia!—Dear Mrs. Balcome, what do you say?"

"We-e-e-ell," answered Mrs. Balcome, slowly, "can I take Babette?"

In his eagerness, Balcome addressed her direct. "Yes! Yes! I'll buy Babette a dog satchel!"

"I'll go," declared Mrs. Balcome.

Mrs. Milo was all gratitude. "Oh, my dear, thank you! And we'll get ready today!—Why not? I certainly shan't stay here"—this with a glance at the toy-strewn bench. "Susan,—you must pack."

Sue stared. "Oh,—do—do I go?"

"Would you send me, at my age——"

"No! No!"—hastily.

"And you don't mean to tell me that you'd like to stay behind!" There was a touch of the old jealousy.

"I didn't know you wanted me to go, mother."

"Most assuredly you go." She had evidently forgotten completely her threat of the afternoon before. Sue had disobeyed. Yet her disobedience was not to result in a parting. "And that reminds *me*"—turning to Balcome, who was scratching away with his pen. "If *Sue* goes——"

Balcome understood. He began to write a new check. "I'll make this twelve thousand."

Mrs. Balcome saw an opportunity. "Hattie, do you want to go?" she asked. She looked about the Close. "Hattie!"

But Hattie was gone.

Mrs. Milo bustled to Balcome to take the check. "I'll get the reservations at once," she declared. And as the slip of paper was put into her hand, "Oh, Brother Balcome!"

"*Sister* Milo!" Balcome, beaming, crushed her fingers gratefully in his big fist.

She bustled out, taking Mrs. Balcome with her.

Balcome kept Sue back. "Of course, I know that you won't get one nickel of that money," he declared. "So I'm going to give you a little bunch for yourself."

"But, dear sir,——"

"Not a word now! Don't I know what you've done for me? Why,"—shaking with laughter—"Mrs. B. will have to stay in England six months."

"Six?"

"Sh!"—he leaned to whisper—"Babette! Six months is the British quarantine for dogs!" He caught her hand, and they laughed immoderately.

Her hand free again, she found a slip of paper in it. "Five thousand! Oh, no! I can't take it!"

"Yes, you will! Take it now instead of letting me will it to you. For I'm going to die of joy! You see, my dear girl, you're not going to be earning while you travel. And you can use it. And you've given me value received. You've done me a whale of a turn! Please let me do this much."

"I'll take it if you'll let me use some of it for—for——"

"You mean that youngster?"

"Would you mind if I helped the mother?"

"Say, there's no string tied to that check. Use it as you like. But I want to ask you, Sue,—just curiosity—why were you so all-fired nice to that Crosby girl?"

"I'll tell you. But you'll never peep?"

"Cross my heart to die!"

"She's been so brave, and I'm a coward."

"That you're not, by Jingo!"

"Let me explain. She couldn't stand conditions that weren't suited to her. At nineteen, she rebelled. I'm not going to say that she didn't also do wrong. But she was so young. While I—I have gone on and on, knowing in my secret heart——" She choked, and could not finish.

"I understand, Sue. It's a blamed shame! And you can't stop now——"

"I shall go with mother."

"Well, if you find that young woman you give her as much of that five thousand as you want to. And if you need more——"

"Oh, you dear, old, fat thing!"

He put his arm about her. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder.

"There! There! You're a good girl."

"You're a man in a million! How can any woman find you hard to live with!"

"Momsey!" Ikey was standing beside them. His hair was disheveled, his face white.

"Ikey boy!" The sight of him made her anxious.

"You—you go away?"

"We-e-ell,——"

"A-a-a-ah!" She was trying to break it gently. But he understood. Two small begrimed hands went up to hide his face.

She drew him to her. "But I'll come back, dear! I'll come back! Oh, don't! Don't!"

He clung to her wildly then. "Oh, how can I lif midoudt you! Oh, Momsey! Momsey! I nefer sing again!"

She led him to a bench. "Now listen!" she begged gently. "Listen! It's only for a little while."

He lifted his face. "Yes?"

"Yes, dear."

That comforted. "Und also," he observed philosophically, "de olt lady, she goes mit."

"Ikey!" Sue sat back, displeased.

"Oh, scuses! Scuses!"

"She's my mother."

"You—you *sure*?"

"Why, Ikey!" she cried, astonished.

"Always I—I like to t'ink de oder t'ing."

"What other thing?"

"Dat you vas found in de basket."

Balcome laughed, and Sue laughed with him. Even Ikey, guessing that he had inadvertently been more than usually witty, allowed a smile to come into those wet eyes.

"There!" cried Sue, putting both arms about him. "Momsey forgives."

"T'ank you. Und now I like to question—you don't go away mit de preacher?"

"No! No!" Sue blushed like a girl.

"Den you don't marry mit him."

"N-n-n-n-no!"

"You feel better, don't you, old man?" inquired Balcome.

"Yes.—If I vas growed up, I vould marry mit her myself."

"Now little flattering chorister," said Sue, "there's something Momsey wants you to do. She'll have to leave here very soon. And before she goes she wants to hear that splendid voice again. So you go to the choirmaster, and ask him if he'll get all the boys together for Miss Susan, and have them sing something—something full of happiness, and hope."

"Momsey, can it be 'O Mutter Dear, Jerusalem?"

"Do you like that best?"

"I like it awful much! De first part, she has Mutter in it; und—und also Jerusalem."

Sue kissed him. "And the second verse Momsey likes—"

*'O happy harbor of God's Saints!
O sweet and pleasant soil!
In Thee no sorrow can be found,
Nor grief, nor care, nor toil!"*

"It's grand!" sighed Ikey.

"You ask the choirmaster if you may sing it. And if he lets you—"

"Goot!" He started away bravely enough. But the Church door reached, he turned and came slowly back. "Momsey," he faltered, "I don't remember my mutter. Would you, now, mind if—just vonce before you go—if I called *you*—mutter?"

She put out her arms to him. "Oh, my son! My son!"

With a cry, he flung himself into her embrace, weeping. "Oh, mutter! Mutter! Mutter!"

"Remember that mother loves you."

"Oh, my mutter," he answered, "Gott take fine care of you!"

"And God take care of my boy."

He sobbed, and she held him close, brushing at the tousled head. While Balcome paced to and fro on the lawn, and coughed suspiciously, and blinked at the sun. "Say, I've got an idea," he announced. "Listen, young man! Come here."

Gently Sue unclasped the hands that clung about her neck, and turned the tear-stained face to Balcome.

"Up in Buffalo, in my business, I need a boy who knows how to keep his mouth shut. Now when do you escape from this—this asylum?" He swept his hat in a wide circle that included the Rectory.

Pride made Ikey forget his woe. "Oh," he boasted, "I can go venefer I like. You see, my aunt, she only borrows me here."

"Ah! And what do you think of my proposition?"

Ikey meditated. "Vell, I ain't crazy to stay here mit Momsey gone."

Balcome put a hand on his shoulder. "I thought you wouldn't. So suppose we talk this over—eh?—man to man—while we hunt the choirmaster?"

CHAPTER XII

When they were gone, Sue looked down at the check in her hand. Yesterday, in the heat of a just resentment, she had boasted a new freedom. What had come of it was twelve hours without the presence of her mother—twelve hours shared with Hattie and Farvel.

They had been happy hours, for strangely enough Hattie had needed little cheering. It was Farvel who easily accomplished wonders with her. Sue did not know what passed between the clergyman and the bride-who-was-not-to-be during a long conference in the library. She had heard only the low murmur of their voices. And once she had heard Hattie laugh. When the two finally emerged, it was plain that Hattie had been weeping, and Farvel was noticeably kind to her, even tender. At dinner he was unwontedly cheerful, relieved at the whole solving of the old, sad mystery, though worried not a

little by Clare's disappearance. After dinner he had taken himself out and away in a futile search that had lasted the whole night.

But happy as Sue had been since parting with her mother at Tottie's, nevertheless she felt strangely shaken, as if, somehow, she had been swept from her bearings. She attributed this to the fact that never before had she and her mother spent a night under different roofs. Until Sue's twenty-fourth birthday, there had been the daily partings that come with a girl's school duties. (Sue had continued through a business college after leaving high school.) But beyond the short trip to school and back, Mrs. Milo did not permit her daughter to go anywhere alone, urging Sue's youth as her excuse.

They shopped together; they sat side by side in the Milo pew at St. Giles; and after Sue's sixteenth birthday, though Wallace might have to be left at home with his father, Mrs. Milo did not permit her daughter to accept invitations, even to the home of a girl friend, unless she herself was included. It was said—and in praise of Mrs. Milo—that here was one woman who took "good care of her girl."

When Horatio Milo died (an expert accountant, he had no resistance with which to combat a sudden illness that was aggravated by a wound received in the Civil War), Mrs. Milo clung more closely than ever—if that was possible—to Sue. To the daughter, this was explained by her mother's pathetic grief; and by her dependence. For Sue was now, all at once, the breadwinner of the little family.

At this juncture, Mrs. Milo pleaded hard in behalf of an arrangement for earning that would not take her daughter from her even through a short business day. Sue met her mother's wishes by setting up an office in the living-room of their small apartment. Here she took some dictation—her mother seated close by, busy with her sewing, but not too busy to be graciousness itself to those men and women who desired Sue's services. There was copying to be done, too. The girl became a sort of general secretary, her clients including an author, a college professor, and a clergyman.

Thus for six years. Then, at thirty years of age, she went to fill the position at the Rectory. Her father had been a vestryman of the Church, and she had been christened there—as a small, freckle-faced girl in pigtails, fresh from a little village in northern New York.

And now, at this day that was so late, Sue knew that between her and her mother things could never again be as they had been. Their differences lay deep: and could not be adjusted. Mrs. Milo had always demanded from her daughter the unquestioning obedience of a child; she would not—and could not—alter her attitude after so many years.

But there was a reason for their parting that was more powerful than any other: down from its high pedestal had come the image of Mrs. Milo that her daughter had so long, and almost blindly, cherished. All at once, as if indeed her eyes had been suddenly and miraculously opened, Sue understood all the hypocrisy of her mother's gentleness, the affection that was only simulated, the smiles that were only muscle deep.

How it had all happened, Sue as yet scarcely knew. But in effect it had been like an avalanche—an avalanche that is built up, flake by flake, over a long period, and then gives way through even so light a touch as the springing to flight of a mountain bird. The Milo avalanche—it was made up of countless small tyrannies and scarcely noticeable acts of selfishness adroitly disguised. But touched into motion by Mrs. Milo's frank cruelty, it had swept upon the two women, destroying all the falsities that had hitherto made any thought of separation impossible. As Sue fingered the check, she realized that her life and her mother's had been changed. It was likely that they might go on living together. Though they were two women who belonged apart.

"Why, Miss Susan,"—Farvel had come across the lawn to her noiselessly—"what's this I hear? That you're going away."

She rose, a little flurried. "I—I suppose I must."

"And you've bought all these for—for the child," he added, catching sight of the dolls and toys.

"It'll be nice to give them to her. But I'd hoped I could be near Barbara for a long time to come. I hoped I could help to make up to the little one for—for anything she's lacked." She shook her head. "But you see, my mother depends on me so. She wouldn't go without me. She's too old to go just with Mrs. Balcome. And—and if it's my duty—" At her feet was that box which Mrs. Balcome had thrown down on hearing that it contained something which should be put upon ice. Sue picked the box up and began to undo the string.

Farvel stood in silence for a little. Then, finally, "I—I want to tell you something before you go. I'm afraid it will surprise you. And—and"—coloring bashfully—"I hardly know how to begin."

"Ye-e-es?" Sue was embarrassed, too, and hid her confusion by taking from the box a bride's bouquet that was destined not to figure in any marriage ceremony. At sight of the flowers, her embarrassment grew.

Farvel began to speak very low.—"After Laura left, I didn't think of a second marriage—not even when her brother had the divorce registered. I felt I couldn't settle down again and be happy when I didn't know her fate. She might be alive, you see. And I am an Episcopal clergyman. Still—I wasn't contented. I had my dreams—of a home, and a wife——" He paused.

"A wife who would really care," she said.

"Yes. And a woman *I* could love. Because, I know I'm to blame for Laura's going—oh, yes, to a very great extent. I didn't love her enough. If I had, she never would have left—never would have done anything to hurt me. If I were to marry again, it would have to be someone I cared for a great deal. That's what I—I want to plead now when I tell you—when I confess. I want to plead that this new love I feel is so great—almost beyond my—my power, Miss Susan."

She did not look at him. The bouquet in her hand trembled.

He went on. "I oughtn't to find it hard to tell you anything. I've always felt that there was such sympathy between us. As if you understand me; and I would never fail to understand you."

"I have felt it, too."

Now she lifted her eyes—but to the windows of the drawing-room. From the nearest, a face was quickly withdrawn—her mother's. She stepped back, widening the distance between herself and Farvel.

"Susan!" It was Mrs. Milo, calling as if from a distance.

Instantly, Farvel also fell back. And scarcely knowing why she did it, Sue put the bride's bouquet behind her.

Mrs. Milo came out. Her eyes had a peculiar glitter, but her voice was gentle enough. "Susan dear, why do you go flying away just when you're wanted? Why don't you come and help your poor motherkins as you promised? You don't want me to do everything?"

"No, mother."

"Then please go at once and help Mrs. Balcome with the packing. My things go into the two small wardrobe trunks. You'll have to use that big trunk that was your dear father's. Now hurry!"

"Yes, mother." Sue attempted a detour, the bouquet still out of her mother's sight.

"What are you trying to conceal, dear?"

"It's—it's Hattie's bouquet."

A look of mingled fear and resentment—a look that Sue understood; next, breathing hard, "What are you doing with it? You don't want it! Give it to me!" Mrs. Milo caught the flowers from her daughter's hands and threw them upon the grass. "Now go and do what I've asked you to!" She pointed.

Sue glanced at Farvel, who was staring at the elder woman in amazed displeasure. "I'll be back," she said significantly. There was a trace of yesterday's rebellion in her manner as she went out.

As the drawing-room door closed, Mrs. Milo's manner also underwent a change. She hastened to Farvel, her eyes brimming with tears, her lips trembling. "Oh, Mr. Farvel," she cried, "she's all I've got in this world. She's the very staff of my life! And my heart is set on her going abroad with me! It'll be an expensive trip, but I'm an old woman, Mr. Farvel, and I can't take that long journey without Sue! I know you're against me for what I did yesterday—for what I said to your wife. But I felt she'd separate me from Sue—that she'd put Sue against me. And, oh, don't punish me for it! Don't take my daughter away from me! Oh, don't! Don't!" She caught at his hand, broke down completely, and sobbed.

"Why, Mrs. Milo!" exclaimed Farvel, not understanding. "What do you mean?—take her away?"

"I mean marry her!—Oh, she's my main hold on life!"

He laughed. "My dear, dear lady, I haven't the least intention in the world of asking your daughter to marry me."

"No?" She stopped her weeping.

"None whatever. How can I marry—while Laura is alive?"

"And—and"—doubtfully—"you don't even—love her?"

"Will it make your mind entirely easy if I tell you that I—I care for someone else?" He blushed like a boy.

"Oh, Alan Farvel, I'm so glad! So glad!" Her gratitude was spontaneous. "And I wish you could marry! You deserve the very best kind of a wife!"

"You flatter me."

"Not at all! You're a good man. You'd make some girl very happy. I've always said, 'What a pity Mr. Farvel isn't a married man'—not knowing, of course, that you'd ever been one.—Could I trouble you to hand me that bouquet?"

"Certainly." Farvel picked up the bride's bouquet from where she had thrown it and gave it to her.

"Thank you. A moment ago, I found the perfume of it quite overpowering. But the blossoms are lovely, aren't they?—So you do care for someone? And"—she smiled in her best playfully teasing manner—"is the 'someone' a secret?"

"Well,—"

"Ah, you don't want to tell me! I'm an old lady, Mr. Farvel; I know how to keep a secret."

"Oh, I'm going to tell you. Though you're going to think very badly of me."

"Badly? For being in love?—You will have to wait."

"For being in love with a certain young lady."

"Ho-ho! That's very unlikely. Now, who is it? I'm all eagerness!" She smiled at him archly.

He waited a moment; then, "I love Hattie Balcome."

"*Hattie?*" She found it impossible of comprehension.

"Hattie."

"Well,—that is—news."

He bowed, a little surprised. He had expected anger and vituperation.

"Of course, my son— But as that can't be. And Sue—does Sue know?"

"I was just about to tell her."

She turned, calling: "Susan! Susan! _Su_san!"

There was a rustle at the door—a smothered laugh. Sue appeared. "Who calls the Queen of Lower Egypt?" she hailed airily, striking an attitude. She had changed her dress. This was the "other one" given her by Balcome—a confection all silver and chiffon. And this was Sue at her youngest.

"Oh, my dear," cried her mother, "it's lovely!"

Startled by the unexpected admiration, Sue relaxed the pictorial attitude. "You—you really like it, mother?"

"I think it's *adorable!*" vowed Mrs. Milo. "A perfect *dream!*—Don't you think so, Mr. Farvel?"

He smiled. "I've never seen Miss Susan look more charming," he declared.

His compliment heightened the color in Sue's cheeks. "I—I just happened across it," she explained, "so I thought I'd try it on."

Mrs. Milo prepared to go. "By the way, Susan," she said. "I've changed my mind about Europe."

"You're not going?" Sue looked pleased.

"Oh, yes, I'm going. But—I've decided not to take you."

"Oh." Sue looked down, that her mother and Farvel might not guess at her relief and her happiness.

Her mother went on: "It's quite true what you said yesterday. You *have* been tied to me too closely. We need a change from each other." She spoke with great gentleness. Smiling at Sue, the elder woman noted how cruelly the bright sunlight of the Close brought out all the lines in her daughter's face, emphasized the aging of the throat and the graying of the hair.

"Besides," continued the silvery voice, "it would be a very expensive trip—with four in the party."

"Four?"

"Poor dear Wallace, I'm going to take him with me. His happiness is ruined, and where would he go without me? Not to Peru—alone. I couldn't permit that. He is absolutely broken-hearted. I must try to heal his wound.—Oh, I'm not criticizing the way Hattie has treated him. But his mother must not be the one to fail him now,—the darling!"

"I want you to make any arrangement, any decision, that will mean comfort and happiness to you and Wallace," said Sue. And felt all at once a sudden, new, sweet sense of freedom.

"And I feel that Mrs. Balcome and I will need a man along," added Mrs. Milo. "If you were to go also——"

"I am just as satisfied not to."

"—It would take more money than we shall have. And as Hattie's mother is going, doubtless Hattie will be glad enough to have you here to chaperone her."

"Yes."

"But then do anything you like. You'll remember that yesterday you twitted me about having to be waited on. I'll prove to you, my dear, that I can get on without you."

"Yes," said Sue, again. "And for what it would cost to take me, you can hire the best of attention."

"That's true, though I hadn't thought of it. But for a woman of my years, I'm very active. I need no attention, really.—Just see, will you, if there isn't a hook loose here on this shoulder? Mrs. Balcome was downstairs when I dressed."

Sue looked. "It's all right, mother dear."

"And this bonnet"—she gave it a petulant twitch—"you know it's heavier on one side than the other. I told you that when you were making it."

"I'm sorry, mother." Sue adjusted the bonnet with deft hands.

"And now I have a thousand things to do!" It was like a dismissal of Sue. Two things had come between them: on Sue's part, it was the sudden knowledge of her mother's character—of its depths and its shallows; while on the part of the elder woman, it was injured pride, and never-to-be-forgotten mortification.

Mrs. Milo floated away to the door. "And Mr. Farvel has a great secret to tell you," she chirped as she went;—"a wonderful secret." She turned to blink both eyes at the clergyman roguishly. "He's going to confess to you." Then she held out the bride's bouquet, and with such a peremptory gesture that Sue came to take it from her. Next she shook a finger at Farvel. "Now out with it, Alan!" she commanded.

"Alan!" gasped Sue, under her breath. She gave her mother a tiny push. "Yes, go, mother! Hurry! You're wanted at the telephone!"

"I'm wanted at the steamship office," answered Mrs. Milo. "Oh, think of it!—Egypt! The Holy Land! The Garden of Eden!"

Left alone, both Farvel and Sue found the moment embarrassing. She went back to the sun-dial, picking at the flowers of the bouquet. He stood apart, hands rammed in pockets.

Presently, "Well, I—I don't have to go to Europe." She smiled at him shyly.

"No. That's—that's good."

"And—and when I went out you—you were saying——"

It helped him. "I was trying to—to make a clean breast of something," he began, faltering. "But—but

—oh, she can tell you best." He looked up at the window of his study. "Hattie!" he called. "Hattie!"

"Yes, Alan!" A rose fell upon the grass; then Hattie looked down at them, radiant and laughing, her fair hair blowing about her face.

"Come here, little woman."

"All right." The fair head disappeared.

"Hattie!" Sue was like one in a dream.

"You're—you're shocked. But wait——"

"No—no. That is,—not the way you mean." Then as the truth came to her, she went unsteadily to a bench, sat, and leaned her head on a hand. Now she understood why her mother was willing to leave her behind!

Hattie came tearing across the grass to her. "Oh, Sue! Oh, you're crying! Oh, *dear* Sue, you're crying!" She knelt, her arms about the elder woman.

"Of *course* I'm crying," answered Sue. "That's what I always do when I—I see that someone is happy."

"Oh, Sue! Sue!" The girl clung to her. "Don't think too badly of me. It came out last night—when Alan and I were talking. I told him I didn't love Wallace the way I should—oh, Sue, *you* know I never have—and that it was because I loved someone else. And, oh, he grew so—so white—he was so hurt—and I told him—I had to. It just poured out of my soul, Sue. It had been kept in so long."

"You darling girl!" They clung to each other, murmuring.

"Now you know why I was so—so broken up yesterday," explained Farvel. "It wasn't—Laura. It was Hattie."

"Oh, we've cared for each other from the first!" confessed Hattie. "And we've settled how it is all going to be. I'll stay in New York, where we can be near each other, and see each other now and then—oh, we shall be only friends, Sue. But I'd rather have his friendship than the love of any other man I've ever known. And we'll be patient. And if we can't ever be more than friends, we'll be glad just for that. See how happy you've been, Sue, with no one—all these years. And here I shall have Alan."

"Ah, my dear girl!" exclaimed Sue. She stroked the bright hair. "Ah, my dear girl!"

"Oh, Sue, you mean you haven't been happy? Why don't you marry?"

Sue laughed. "*??* What an idea! Why, I don't think I've ever even had the thought. Anyhow, the years have gone—the inclination is gone, if it ever was there. I'm too old." Then with sudden and passionate earnestness, "But you two." She rose and took each by a hand, and led them to the dial. "Read! Read what is written in the stone!—*Tempus Fugit*—time flies! Oh, take your happiness while you can! Don't wait. Oh, don't!—We must find a way somehow. The Church—we must see the proper authorities—oh, it isn't right that you two should be punished——"

"Momsey!" Peter, the pale, was calling from the drawing-room door. "There's a gentleman——"

A man appeared behind the boy, and pushed past into the Close—a young man, unshaven and haggard, with bloodshot eyes.

"Is there something I can do for you?" asked Farvel, quickly. He hastened toward the visitor, who looked as if he had suddenly gone mad.

"Hull is my name," announced the man; "—Felix Hull."

"Oh, yes," said Sue, eagerly. She signed to Hattie to go, and the girl hastened away through the door under the wedding-bell.

"You have news?" questioned Farvel.

Hull crossed the lawn to the dial. He walked slowly, like an old man. And his shoulders were bent. His derby hat was off, and he clutched it in two shaking hands.

"Tell us," bade Sue. "It's—bad news?"

"Yes."

"Take your time," she added kindly.

"Yesterday—just before you saw her—I was there. She was—well, you know. She begged me to go—and keep away from the house. That made me suspicious. I told her I wouldn't come back. Well, I didn't. Because I never left. I knew she wasn't telling me the truth—I beg your pardon, sir.—So I hung around. I saw you all go in. After a little, I saw her come out—on the run. I followed. She went about twenty blocks—"

"Where?"

"You're Miss Milo, aren't you?"

"Susan Milo."

"She spoke of you—oh, so—so loving. Well, it was a girl's club—called the Gramercy. I knew it well because we'd met there many a time. I went in. There was a new maid on hand, but I saw Clare. She came right away, like as if she was more than glad to have a talk. I didn't expect that, so I'd brought along a canary—to make her think it was hers—the one she'd left behind, you see,—so she couldn't just refuse to see me. Well, we talked. There wasn't any quarreling. She wasn't a bit broke up—that surprised me. And it threw me clean off my guard. She was highty-tighty, as you might say, and I'll admit it hurt. We shook hands though, when I went, but she didn't ask me to stay to tea." He turned to Farvel. "One thing she said about the child she wanted you to know."

"What?"

"It's not your daughter, sir."

"Ah."

"And I hear from the St. Clair woman that the little one isn't as old as Clare said. So—"

"I understand."

"Well, this morning, when I woke up—I didn't sleep much to speak of last night—I got to thinking about—her. And I made up my mind that I'd go look her up, and—and be a friend to her anyhow." His voice broke. "I was fond of her, Miss Milo."

"She was gone?"

He nodded. "She'd been gone since the night before. Went out, the maid said, with no hat on and a letter in her hand—for the post. And she hadn't come back. I tell you, that worried me. I was half-crazy." He tried to control his voice, to keep back the tears.

"Then it's very bad news," ventured Farvel. He laid a hand on the other man's sleeve.

"I went over to the St. Clair house," Hull went on. "Clare hadn't been there. Then—I knew. So I went to the one place—that was likely—"

"You mean—" asked Farvel. "Oh, not that! Not that!"

"She was there. She'd spoken about the river. That's why I was sure."

"The river!" gasped Sue. "Oh, what are you saying?"

"She'd done as she said," answered Hull, quietly.

Sue sank to a bench. "Oh, that cry of hers, yesterday!" she reminded, breaking down. "Do you remember, Mr. Farvel? When she saw you—'It's all over! It's all over!' Oh, why did I let her out of my sight!"

"It's my fault," declared Hull, hoarsely. "I was too hard on her. Too hard." He turned away.

Farvel went to him and held out his hand. Hull took it, and they stood in silence for a long moment. Then Hull drew back. There was a queer, distorted smile on his face. "This comes of a man's thinking he's smart," he declared. "I wanted to show her I was on—instead of letting her explain it all to me. But I've always been like that—too smart—too smart." He turned and went out, walking unsteadily.

It was Sue who broke the news to Hattie. And when the latter had left to rejoin her mother at the

hotel (for it was agreed that it would be better if Farvel and the girl did not see each other again until later). Sue came back into the Close—to wait for Barbara.

She waited beside the dial. There was nothing girl-like in her posture. Her shoulders were as bent as Hull's had been. The high color was gone from her face. And the gray eyes showed no look of youth. She felt forsaken, and old, and there was an ache in her throat.

"Well, the poor trapped soul is gone," she said presently, out loud to herself. She looked down at the dial. "Time is not for her any more. But rest—and peace."

What changes had come while just these last twenty-four hours were flying! while the shadow on that dial had made its single turn!

"And here you are, Susan, high and dry." She had wept for another; she laughed at herself. "Here you are, as Ikey says, 'All fixed up, und by your lonesomes.' But never mind any lamentations, Susan." For her breast was heaving in spite of herself. "Your hands are free—don't forget that? And you can do l-l-l-lots of helpful things—for your pocket is lined. And there must be something ahead for you, Susan! There must be s-s-s-something!"

"Miss Susan!" Someone had come from the drawing-room.

"Dora!" But she kept her face turned away, lest she betray her tears.

"It is your humble servant," acknowledged Dora.

"Well, my humble servant, listen to me: I want you to pack my things into that old trunk of father's. And put my typewriter into its case, and screw the cover down. And when I send you word, you'll bring both to me. But—no one is to know where you come."

Dora's eyes bulged with the very mystery of it—the excitement. "Miss Susan," she vowed gravely, "I shall follow your instructions if my life is spared!"

"And now—bring the little one."

"In all my orphanage experience," confided Dora, delaying a moment to impart this important news, "I've never heard so much mother-talk. Since last night, she's not stopped for one *second*! I gave her a hot lemonade to get her to sleep. And she was awake this morning when it was still dark. I think"—with feeling—"that if she doesn't get her mother pretty soon, she'll—she'll——" But words failed her. She wagged her head and went out.

Sue stood for a moment, looking straight before her, her eyes wide and grave. Presently, a smile lighted them, and softened all her face. She turned. Her hat and the long coat were on the bench with the toys. She went to put them on, buttoning the coat carefully over the silver gown. Next, she took from a pocket the ring that her brother had given her. She held it up for the sun; to shine upon it. Then, very deliberately, she slipped it upon the third finger of her left hand.

A movement within the house, a patter of small feet at the drawing-room door, and Sue turned. There stood a little girl in a dress of faded gingham. Down her back by a string hung a shabby hat. But her shoes were new and shining.

In one hand she carried a doll.

She glanced up and around—at the ivy-grown wall of the Church, at the stained-glass windows glowing in the light, at the darting birds, the wedding-bell, the massed flowers and palms; and down at the grass, so neat and vividly green, and cool. Last of all, she looked at Sue.

Sue knelt, and held out both hands, smilingly, invitingly; then waited, dropping her arms to her sides again.

Barbara came nearer, but paused once more, and the brown eyes studied the gray. This for a long moment, when the child smiled back at Sue, as if reassured, and nodded confidingly.

"Oh, this is a beautiful garden," she said. "And after today, I'm going to live where there's flowers all the time! My mother, she's come back from Africa. My father hasn't, because he's got to hunt lions. But my mother and me, we're going to live in a little cottage in—in, well, some place. And there's a garden a-a-all around the cottage,"—she made a sweeping gesture with one short arm—"a garden of roses! And I'm going to have my mother every day. And she loves me! And she's good, and brave, and sweet, and pretty."

At that moment, Sue Milo was beautiful. All the tenderness of a heart starved of its rightful love

looked from her eyes. And her face shone as if lighted by a flame. "I—love you!" she said tremulously.

"Do you?"—there was an answering look of love in the eyes of the child.

"Oh, *so tenderly!*"

The little face sobered. The small figure moved forward a step. "I'm—I'm glad"—almost under her breath. "Because—because I love *you*, too." Then coming still closer, and looking earnestly into those eyes so full of gentle sweetness, "Who—are—you?"

"Barbara,"—Sue's arms went out again, yearningly—"Barbara, I—am your mother."

"Mother!"—the cry rang through the Close. The child flung herself into those waiting arms, clasping Sue with her own. "Oh, mother! Mother! *Mother!*"

"My baby! My baby!"

Now past the open door of the Church, walking two and two in their white cottas, came the choir. And their voices, high and clear, sang that verse of Ikey's song which Sue loved best—

*"O happy harbor of God's Saints!
O sweet and pleasant soil!
In Thee no sorrow can be found,
Nor grief, nor care, nor toil!"*

Before the song was done, Barbara's hat was on, and with "Lolly-Poppins" and the woolly lamb under an arm; with Sue similarly burdened with the Kewpie, the new doll, and the duck that could quack, the two went, hand in hand, across the lawn to that little white door through which forsaken babies had often come, but through which one lovingly claimed was now to go. And the little white door opened to the touch of Sue's hand—and through it, to a new life and a new happiness; to service sweet beyond words, went a new mother—and with her, a new-found daughter.

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