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Author: Mary Hastings Bradley

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INNOCENT ADVENTURESS ***

THE INNOCENT ADVENTURESS

BY MARY HASTINGS BRADLEY

AUTHOR OF "THE FORTIETH DOOR," "THE PALACE OF
DARKENED WINDOWS," "THE WINE OF
ASTONISHMENT," "THE SPLENDID CHANCE," ETC.



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TO
MY SISTER

SYLVIA CORWIN FRANCISCO

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THE INNOCENT ADVENTURESS

CHAPTER I

THE EAVESDROPPER

Maria Angelina was eavesdropping. Not upon her sister Lucia and Paolo Tosti whom she had been assigned to chaperon by reading a book to herself in the adjoining room—no, they were safely busy with piano and violin, and she was heartily bored, anyway, with their inanities. Voices from another direction had pricked her to alertness.

Maria Angelina was in the corner room of the Palazzo Santonini, a dim and beautiful old library with faded furnishings whose west arch of doorway looked into the pretentious reception room where the fiancés were amusing themselves with their music and their whisperings. It was quite advanced, this allowing them to be so alone, but the Contessa Santonini was an American and, moreover, the wedding was not far off.

One can be indulgent when the settlements are signed.

So only Maria Angelina and her book were stationed for propriety, and, wanting another book, she had gone to the shelves and through the north door, ajar, caught the words that held her intent.

"Three of them!" a masculine voice uttered explosively, and Maria knew that Papa was speaking of his three daughters, Lucia, Julietta and Maria Angelina—and she knew, too, that Papa had just come from the last interview with the Tostis' lawyers.

The Tostis had been stiff in their demands and Papa had been more complaisant than he should have been. Altogether that marriage was costing him dear.

He had been figuring now with Mamma for a pencil went clattering to the floor.

"And something especial," he proclaimed bitterly, "will have to be done for Julietta!"

At that the eavesdropper could smile, a faint little smile of shy pride and self-reliance.

Nothing especial would have to be done for *her*! A decent dowry, of course, as befitting a daughter of the house, but she would need no more, for Maria was eighteen, as white as a lily and as slender as an aspen, with big, dark eyes like strange pools of night in her child's face.

Whereas poor Julietta—!

"Madre Dio!" said Papa indignantly. "For what did we name her Julietta? And born in Verona! A pretty sentiment indeed. But it was of no inspiration to her—none!"

Mamma did not laugh although Papa's sudden chuckle after his explosion was most irresistible.

"But if Fate went by names," he continued, "then would Maria Angelina be for the life of religion." And he chuckled again.

Still Mamma did not laugh. Her pencil was scratching.

"It's a pity," murmured Papa, "that you did not embrace the faith, my dear, for then we might arrange this matter. They used to manage these things in the old days."

"Send Julietta into a convent?" cried Mamma in a voice of sudden energy.

Maria could not see but she knew that the Count shrugged.

"She appears built to coif Saint Catherine," he murmured.

"Julietta is a dear girl," said the Contessa in a warm voice.

"When one knows her excellencies."

"She will do very well—with enough dowry."

"Enough dowry—that is it! It will take all that is left for the two of them to push Julietta into a husband's arms!"

When the Count was annoyed he dealt directly with facts—a proceeding he preferred to avoid at other moments.

Behind her curtains Maria drew a troubled breath. She, too, felt the family responsibility for Julietta—dear Julietta, with her dumpy figure and ugly face. Julietta was nineteen and now that Lucia was betrothed it was Julietta's turn.

If only it could be known that Julietta had a pretty dot!

Maria stood motionless behind the curtains, her winged imagination rushing to meet Julietta's future, fronting the indifference, the neglect, the ridicule before which Julietta's sensitive, shamed spirit would suffer and bleed. She could see her partnerless at balls, lugged heavily about to teas and dinners, shrinking eagerly and hopelessly back into the refuge of the paternal home. . . . Yet Julietta had once whispered to her that she wanted to die if she could never marry and have an armful of *bambinos!*

Maria Angelina's young heart contracted with sharp anxiety. Things were in a bad way with her family indeed. There had always been difficulties, for Papa was extravagant and ever since brother Francisco had been in the army, he, too, had his debts, but Mamma had always managed so wonderfully! But the war had made things very difficult, and now peace had made them more difficult still. There had been one awful time when it had looked as if the carriages and horses would have to go and they would be reduced to sharing a barouche with some one else in secret, proud distress—like the Manzios and the Benedettos who took their airings alternately, each with a different crested door upon the identical vehicle—but Mamma had overcome that crisis and the social rite of the daily drive upon the Pincian had been sacredly preserved. But apparently these settlements were too much, even for Mamma.

Then her name upon her mother's lips brought the eavesdropper to swift attention.

It appeared that the Contessa had a plan.

Maria Angelina could go to visit Mamma's cousins in America. They were rich—that is understood of Americans; even Mamma had once been rich when she was a girl, Maria dimly remembered having heard—and they would give Maria a chance to meet people. . . . Men did not ask settlements in America. They earned great sums and could please themselves with a pretty, penniless face. . . . And what was saved on Maria's dowry would plump out Julietta's.

Thunderstruck, the Count objected. Maria was his favorite.

"Send Julietta to America, then," he protested, but swallowed that foolishness at Mamma's calm, "To what good?"

To what good, indeed! It would never do to risk the cost of a trip to America upon Julietta.

Sulkily Papa argued that the cost in any case was prohibitive. But Mamma had the figures.

"One must invest to receive," she insisted; and when he grumbled, "But to lose the child?" she broke out, "Am *I* not losing her?" on a note that silenced him.

Then she added cheerfully, "But it will be for her own good."

"You want her to marry an American? You are not satisfied, then, with Italians?" said Papa playfully leaning over to ruffle Mamma's soft, light hair and at his movement Maria Angelina fled swiftly from those curtains back to her post, and sat very still, a book in front of her, a haze of romance swimming between it and her startled eyes.

America. . . . A rich husband. . . . Travel. . . . Adventure. . . . The unknown. . . .

It was wonderful. It was unbelievable. . . . It was desperate.

It was a hazard of the sharpest chance.

That knowledge brought a chill of gravity into the hot currents of her beating heart—a chill that was the cold breath of a terrific responsibility. She felt herself the hope, the sole resource of her family. She was the die on which their throw of fortune was to be cast.

Dropping her book she slid down from her chair and crossed to a long mirror in an old carved frame where a dove was struggling in a falcon's talons while Cupids drew vain bows, and in the dimmed glass stared in passionate searching.

She was so childish, so slight looking. She was white—that was the skin from Mamma—and now she wondered if it were truly a charm. Certainly Lucia preferred her own olive tints.

And her eyes were so big and dark, like caverns in her face, and her lips were mere scarlet threads. The beauties she had seen were warm-colored, high-bosomed, full-lipped.

Her distrust extended even to her coronet of black braids.

Her uncertain youth had no vision of the purity and pride of that braid-bound head, of the brilliance of the dark eyes against the satin skin, of the troubling glamour of the red little mouth. In the clear definition of the delicate features, the arch of the high eyebrows, the sweep of the shadowy lashes, her childish hope had never dreamed of more than mere prettiness and now she was torturingly questioning that.

"Practicing your smiles, my dear?" said a voice from the threshold, Lucia's voice with the mockery of the successful, and Maria Angelina turned from her dim glass with a flame of scarlet across her pallor, and joined, with an angry heart, in the laugh which her sister and young Tosti raised against her.

But Maria Angelina had a tongue.

"But yes—for the better fish are yet uncaught," she retorted with a flash of the eyes toward the young man, and Paolo, all ardor as he was for Lucia's olive and rose, shot a glance of tickled humor at her impudence.

He promised himself some merry passes with the little sister-in-law.

Lucia resented the glances.

"Wait your turn, little one," she scoffed. "You will be in pinafores until our poor Julietta is wed," and she laughed, unkindly.

There were times, Maria felt furiously, when she hated Lucia.

Her championing heart resolved that Julietta should not be left unwed and defenseless to that mockery. Julietta should have her chance at life!

Not a word of the great plan was breathed officially to the girl, although the mother's expectancy for mail revealed that a letter had already been sent, until that expectancy was rewarded by a letter with the American postmark. Then the drama of revelation was exquisitely enacted.

It appeared that the Blairs of New York, Mamma's dear cousins, were insistent that one of Mamma's daughters should know Mamma's country and Mamma's relatives. They had a daughter about Maria Angelina's age so Maria Angelina had been selected for the visit. The girls would have a delightful time together. . . . Maria would start in June.

Vaguely Maria Angelina recalled the Blairs as she had seen them some six years ago in Rome—a kindly Cousin Jim who had given her sweets and laughed bewilderingly at her and a Cousin Jane with beautiful blonde hair and cool white gowns. Their daughter, Ruth, had not been with them, so Maria had no acquaintance at all with her, but only the recollection of occasional postcards to keep the name in memory.

She remembered once that there had been talk of this Cousin Ruth's coming to school for a winter in Rome and that Mamma had bestirred herself to discover the correct schools, but nothing had ever come of it. The war had intervened.

And now she was to visit them. . . .

"You are going to America just as I went to Italy at your age," cried Mamma. "And—who knows?—you too, may meet your fate on the trip!"

Mamma would overdo it, thought Maria Angelina nervously, her eyes downcast for fear her mother would read their discomfort and her knowledge of the pitiful duplicity, and her cheeks a quick shamed scarlet.

"She will have to—to repair the expense," flashed Lucia with a shrill laugh. "Such expenditure, when you have just been preaching economy on my trousseau!"

"One must economize on the trousseau when the bridegroom has cost the fortune," Maria found her wicked little tongue to say and Lucia turned sallow beneath her olive.

Briskly Mamma intervened. "We are thinking not of one of you but all. Now no more words, my little ones. There is too much to be done."

There was indeed, with this trip to be arranged for before the onrush of Lucia's preparation! Once committed to the great adventure it quickly took on the outer aspects of reality. There were clothes to be made and clothes to be bought, there were discussions, decisions, debates and conjectures and consultations. A thousand preparations to be pushed in haste, and at once the big bedroom of Mamma blossomed with delicate fabrics, with bright ribbons and frilly laces, and amid the blossoming, the whirl of the machine and the feet and hands of the two-lire-a-day seamstress went like mad clockwork, while in and out Mamma's friends came hurrying, at the rumor, to hint of congratulation or suggest a style, an advice.

The contagion of excitement seized everyone, so that even Lucia was inspired to lend her clever fingers from her own preparations for September.

"But not to be back by then! Not here for my wedding—that would be too odd!" she complained

with the persistent ill-will she had shown the expedition.

Shrewd enough to divine its purpose and practical enough to perceive the necessity for it, the older girl cherished her instinctive objection to any pleasure that did not include her in its scope or that threatened to overcast her own festivities.

"That will depend," returned Mamma sedately, "upon the circumstance. Our cousins may not easily find a suitable chaperon for your sister's return. And they may have plans for her entertainment. We must leave that to them."

A little panic-stricken, Maria Angelina perceived that *she* was being left to them—until otherwise disposed of!

So fast had preparations whirled them on, that parting was upon the girl before she divined the coming pain of it. Then in the last hours her heart was wrung.

She stared at the dear familiar rooms, the streets and the houses with a look of one already lost to her world, and her eyes clung to the figures of her family as if to relinquish the sight of them would dissolve them from existence.

They were tragic, those following, imploring eyes, but they were not wet. Maria understood it was too late to weep. It was necessary to go. The magnitude of the sums already invested in her affair staggered her. They were so many pledges, those sums!

But America was so desolately far.

She could not sleep, that last night. She lay in the big four-poster where once heavy draperies had shut in the slumbers of dead and gone Contessas, and she watched the square of moonlight travel over the painted cherubs on the ceiling. There was always a lump in her throat to be swallowed, and often the tears soaked into the big feather pillows, but there were no sobs to rouse the household.

Julietta, beside her, slept very comfortably.

But the most terrible moment of all was that last look of Mamma and that last clasp of her hands upon the deck of the steamer.

"You must tell me everything, little one," the Contessa Santonini kept saying hurriedly. She was constrained and repetitious in the grip of her emotion, as they stood together, just out of earshot of the Italian consul's wife who was chaperoning the young girl upon her voyage.

"Write me all about the people you meet and what they say to you, and what you do. Remember that I am still Mamma if I am across the ocean and I shall be waiting to hear. . . . And remember that but few of your ideas of America may be true. Americans are not all the types you have read of or the tourists you have met. You must expect a great difference. . . . I should be strange, myself, now in America."

Maria's quick sensitiveness divined a note of secret yearning.

"Yes, Mamma," she said obediently, tightening her clasp upon her mother's hands.

"You must be on guard against mistakes, Maria Angelina," said the other insistently—as if she had not said that a dozen times before! "Because American girls do things it may be not be wise for you to do. You will be of interest because you are different. Be very careful, my little one."

"Yes, Mamma," said the girl again.

"As to your money—you understand it must last. There can be little to pay when you are a guest. But send to Papa and me your accounts as I have told you."

"Yes, Mamma."

"You will not let the American freedom turn your head. You will be wise—Oh, I trust you, Maria Angelina, to be very wise!"

How wise Maria Angelina thought herself! She lifted a face that shone with confidence and understanding and for all her quivering lips she smiled.

"My baby!" said the mother suddenly in English and took that face between her hands and kissed it.

"You will be careful," she began again abruptly, and then stopped.

Too late for more cautions. And the child was so *sage*.

But it was such a little figure that stood there, such young eyes that smiled so confidently into hers. . . . And America was a long, long way off.

The bugles were blowing for visitors to be away. Just one more hurried kiss and hasty clasp.

An overwhelming fright seized upon the girl as the mother went down the ship's ladder into the small boat that put out so quickly for the shore.

Suppose she should fail them! After all she was *not* so wise—and not so very pretty. And she had no experience—none!

The sun, dancing on the bright waves, hurt Maria Angelina's eyes. She had to shut them, they watered so foolishly. And something in her young breast wanted to cry after that boat, "Take me back—take me back to my home," but something else in her forbade and would have died of shame before it uttered such weakness.

For poor Julietta, for dear anxious Mamma, she knew herself the only hope.

So steadily she waved her handkerchief long after she had lost the responding flutter from the boat.

She was not crying now. She felt exalted. She pressed closer to the rail and stared out very solemnly over the blue and gold bay to beautiful Naples. . . . Suddenly her heart quickened. Vesuvius was moving. The far-off shores of Italy were slipping by. Above her the black smoke that had been coming faster and faster from the great funnels streamed backward like long banners.

Maria Angelina was on her way.

CHAPTER II

UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

With whatever emotion Jane Blair had received the startling demand upon her hospitality she rallied nobly to the family call. She left her daughter in the Adirondacks where they were summering and descended upon her husband in his New York office to rout him out to meet the girl with her.

"An infernal shame—that's what I call it!" Jim Blair grumbled, facing the steaming heat of the unholy customs shed. "It's an outrage—an imposition—"

"Oh, not all that, Jim! Lucy—that's the mother—and I used to visit like this when we were girls. It was done then," his wife replied with an air of equable amusement.

She added, "I rather think I did most of the visiting. I was awf'ly fond of Lucy."

"That's different. You'll have a total stranger on your hands. . . . Are you sure she speaks English?"

"Oh, dear yes, she speaks English—don't you remember her in Rome? She was the littlest one. All the children speak English, Lucy wrote, except Francisco who is 'very Italian,' which means he is a fascinating spendthrift like the father, I suppose. . . . I imagine," said Mrs. Blair, "that Lucy has not found life in a palace all a bed of roses."

"I remember the palace. . . . Warming pans!" said Mr. Blair grimly.

His ill-humor lasted until the first glimpse of Maria Angelina's slender figure, and the first glance of Maria Angelina's trustfully appealing eyes.

"Welcome to America," he said then very heartily, both his hands closing over the small fingers. "Welcome—*very* welcome, my dear."

And though Maria Angelina never knew it and Cousin Jane Blair never told, that was Maria Angelina's first American triumph.

Some nine hours afterwards a stoutish gentleman in gray and a thinnish lady in beige and a fragile looking girl in white wound their way from the outer to the inner circle of tables next the dancing floor of the Vandevoort.

The room was crowded with men in light serge and women in gay summer frocks; bright lights were shining under pink shades and sprays of pink flowers on every table were breathing a faint perfume into an air already impregnated with women's scents and heavy with odors of rich food. Now and then a saltish breeze stole through the draped windows on the sound but was instantly scattered by the vigor of the hidden, whirling fans.

Behind palms an orchestra clashed out the latest Blues and in the cleared space couples were speeding up and down to the syncopations, while between tables agile waiters balanced overloaded trays or whisked silver covers off scarlet lobsters or lit mysterious little lights below tiny bubbling caldrons.

Maria Angelina's soft lips were parted with excitement and her dark eyes round with wondering. This, indeed, was a new world. . . .

It was gay—gayer than the Hotel Excelsior at Rome! It was a carnival of a dinner!

Ever since morning, when the cordiality of the new-found cousins had dissipated the first forlorn homesickness of arrival, she had been looking on at scenes that were like a film, ceaselessly

unrolling.

After luncheon, Cousin Jim with impulsive hospitality had carried her off to see the Big Town—an expedition from which his wife relievedly withdrew—and he had whirled Maria Angelina about in motors, plunged her into roaring subways, whisked her up dizzying elevators and brought her out upon unbelievable heights, all the time expounding and explaining with that passionate, possessive pride of the New Yorker by adoption, which left his young guest with the impression that he owned at least half the city and was personally responsible for the other half.

It had been very wonderful but Maria had expected New York to be wonderful. And she was not interested, save superficially, in cities. Life was the stuff her dreams were made on, and life was unfolding vividly to her eager eyes at this gay dinner, promising her enchanted senses the incredible richness and excitement for which she had come.

And though she sat up very sedately, like a well-behaved child in the midst of blazing carnival, her glowing face, her breathless lips and wide, shining eyes revealed her innocent ardors and young expectancies.

She was very proud of herself, in the midst of all the prideful splendor, proud of her new, absurdly big white hat, of her new, absurdly small white shoes, and of her new, white mull frock, soft and clinging and exquisite with the patient embroidery of the needlewoman.

Its low cut neck left her throat bare and about her throat hung the string of white coral that her father had given her in parting—white coral, with a pale, pale pink suffusing it.

"Like a young girl's dreams," Santonini had said. "Snowy white—with a blush stealing over them."

That was so like dear Papa! What dreams did he think his daughter was to have in this New World upon her golden quest? And yet, though Maria Angelina's mocking little wit derided, her young heart believed somehow in the union of all the impossibilities. Dreams and blushes . . . and good fortune. . . .

Strange food was set before her; delicious jellied cold soups, and scarlet lobsters with giant claws; and Maria Angelina discovered that excitement had not dulled her appetite.

The music sounded again and Cousin Jim asked her to dance. Shyly she protested that she did not know the American dances, and then, to her astonishment, he turned to his wife, and the two hurried out upon the floor, leaving her alone and unattended at that conspicuous table.

That was American freedom with a vengeance! She sat demurely, not daring to raise her lashes before the scrutiny she felt must be beating upon her, until her cousins returned, warm-faced and breathless.

"You'll learn all this as soon as you get to the Lodge," Cousin Jim prophesied, in consolation.

Maria Angelina smiled absently, her big eyes brilliant. Unconsciously she was wondering what dancing could mean to these elders of hers. . . . Dancing was the stir of youth . . . the carnival of the blood . . . the beat of expectancy and excitement. . . .

"Why, there's Barry Elder!" Cousin Jane gave a quick cry of pleasure.

"Barry Elder?"

Cousin Jim turned to look, and Maria Angelina looked too, and saw a young man making his way to their table. He was a tall, thin, brown young man with close-cropped curly brown hair, and very bright, deep-set eyes. He was dressed immaculately in white with a gay tie of lavender.

"Barry? *You* in town?" Cousin Jane greeted him with an exaggerated astonishment as he shook her hand.

Maria Angelina noted that he did not kiss it. She had read that this was not done openly in America but was a mark of especial tenderness.

"Why not?" he retorted promptly. "You seem to forget, dear lady, that I am again a working man, without whom the World's Greatest Daily would lose half its circulation. Of course I'm here."

"I thought you might be taking a vacation—in York Harbor," she said, laughing.

"Oh, cat!" he derided. "Kitty, kitty, kitty."

"Don't let her kid you, Barry," advised Cousin Jim, delving into his lobster.

"But since you *are* here," went on Cousin Jane, "you can meet my little cousin from Italy, which is the reason why we are here. Her boat came in this morning and she has never been away from home before. Mr. Elder, the Signorina Santonini."

"Welcome to the city, Signorina," said the young man, with a quick, bright smile, stooping to gaze under the huge, white hat. He had odd eyes, not large, but vivid hazel, with yellow lights in them.

"How do you like New York? What do you think of America? What is your opinion of prohibition and the uniformity of divorce laws? Have you ever written *vers libre*? Are—"

"Barry, stop bombarding the child!" exclaimed Mrs. Blair. "You are the first young man she has

met in America. Stop making her fear the race."

"Take him away and dance with him, Jane," said Mr. Blair. "This was probably prearranged, you know."

If he believed it, he looked very tranquil, the startled Maria Angelina thought, surprised into an upward glance. The two men were smiling very frankly at each other. Mrs. Blair did not protest but rose, remarking, "Come, Barry, since we are discovered. You can have something cool afterwards."

"I'll have little Cousin afterwards," said Barry Elder. "I want to be the first young man she has danced with in America."

"You won't be the last," Mr. Blair told him with a twinkling glance at Maria Angelina's lovely little face.

"One of Jane's youngsters," he added, explanatorily to her. "She always has a lot around—she says they are the companions her son would have had if she'd had one."

Then, before Maria Angelina's polite but bewildered attention, he said more comprehensibly, "You'll find Jane a lot younger than Ruth . . . Barry's a clever chap—special work on one of the papers. Was in the aviation. Did a play that fluked last year. Too much Harvard in it, I expect. But a clever chap, very clever. Like him," he added decisively.

Maria Angelina had heard of Harvard. Her mother's father had been a Harvard man. But she did not understand just why too much Harvard would make a play fluke nor what a play did when it fluked, but she asked no questions and sat very still, looking out at the dancing couples.

She saw her Cousin Jane whirling past. She tried to imagine her mother dancing with young men at the Hotel Excelsior and she could not. Already she wondered if she had better write everything.

Then the dancing pair came back to them and the young man sat down and talked a little to her cousins. But at the music's recommencement he turned directly to her.

"Signorina, are you going to do me the honor?"

He had a merry way with him as if he were laughing ever so little at her, and Maria Angelina's heart which had been beating quite fast before began to skip dizzily.

She thanked Heaven that it was a waltz for, while the new steps were unknown, Maria could waltz—that was a gift from Papa.

"With pleasure, Signor," she murmured, rising.

"But you must take off your hat," Mrs. Blair told her.

"My hat? Take off?"

"That brim is too wide, my dear. You couldn't dance."

"But to go bareheaded—like a peasant?" Maria Angelina faltered and they laughed.

"It doesn't matter—it's much better than that brim," Mrs. Blair pronounced and obediently Maria's small hands rose and removed the overshadowing whiteness from the dark little head with its coronet of heavy braids.

She did not raise her eyes to see Barry Elder's sudden flash of astonishment. Shyly she slipped within his clasp and let him swing her out into the circle of dancers.

Maria Angelina could waltz, indeed. She was fairy-footed, and for some moments Barry Elder was content to dance without speaking; then he bent his head closer to those dark braids.

"So I am the first young man you have met in America?"

Maria Angelina looked up through her lashes in quick gayety.

"It is my first day, Signor!"

"Your first American—Ah, but on the boat! There must have been young men on that boat, American young men?"

"On that boat? Signor!" Maria Angelina laughed mischievously. "One reads of such in novels—yes? But as to that boat, it was a floating nunnery."

"Oh, come now," he protested amusedly, "there must have been *some* men!"

"Some men, yes—a ship's officer, some married ones, a grandfather or two—but nothing young and nothing American."

"It must have been a great disappointment," said Barry enjoying himself.

"It would not have mattered if there had been a thousand. The Signora Mariotti would have seen to it that I met no one. She is a *very* good chaperon, Signor!"

"I thank her. She has preserved the dew on the rose, the flush on the dawn—the wax for the

record and the—er—niche for the statue. I never had my statue done," said Barry gayly, "but if you would care for it, in terra cotta, rather small and neat—"

Confusedly Maria Angelina laughed.

"And this is your maiden voyage of discovery!" He was looking down at her as he swept her about a corner. "Rash young person! Don't you know what happened to your kinsman, Our First Discoverer?"

"But what?"

"He was loaded with fetters," said Barry solemnly.

"Fetters? But what fetters could I fear?"

"Have you never heard," he demanded of her upraised eyes, "of the fetters of matrimony?"

"Oh, Signor!" Actually the color swept into her cheeks and her eyes fled from his, though she laughed lightly. "That is a golden fetter."

"Sometimes," said he, dryly, "or gilded."

But Maria Angelina was pursuing his jest. "It was not until Columbus returned to his Europe that he was fettered. It was not from the—the natives that he had such ill-treatment to fear."

"Now, do you think the—the natives"—gayly Barry mimicked her quaint inflection—"will let you get away with *that*? Or let you return? . . . You have a great many discoveries before you, Signorina Santonini!"

Deftly he circled, smiling down into her upturned face.

Maria Angelina's eyes were shining, and the smooth oval of her cheeks had deepened from poppy pink to poppy rose. She was dancing in a dream, a golden dream . . . incredibly, ecstatically happy. . . . She was in a confusion of young delight in which the extravagance of his words, the light of his glances, the thrill of the violins were inextricably involved in gayety and glamour.

And then suddenly the dance was over, and he was returning her to her cousins. And he was saying good-by.

"I have a table yonder—although I appear to have forsaken it," he was explaining. "Don't forget your first American, Signorina—I'm sorry you are going to-morrow, but perhaps I shall be seeing you in the Adirondacks before very long."

He gave Maria Angelina a directly smiling glance whose boldness made her shiver.

Then he turned to Mrs. Blair. "You know my uncle had a little shack built on Old Chief Mountain—not so far from you at Wilderness. I always like to run up there—"

"Oh, no, you won't, Barry," said Mrs. Blair, laughing incomprehensibly. "You'll be running where the breaking waves dash high, on a stern and rock-bound coast."

He met the sally with answering laughter a trifle forced.

"I'm flattered you think me so constant! But you underestimate the charms of novelty. . . . If I should meet, say, a *petite brune*, done in cotton wool and dewy with innocence—"

"You're incorrigible," vowed the lady. "I have no faith in you!"

"Not even in my incorrigibility?"

"I'll believe it when I see you again. . . . Love to Leila."

He made a mocking grimace at her.

Then he stooped to clasp Maria Angelina's hand. "*A rivederci*, Signorina," he insisted. "Don't you believe a thing she tells you about me. . . . I'm a poor, misunderstood young man in a world of women. *Addio*, Signorina—*a rivederci*."

And then he was gone, so gay and brown and smiling.

Sudden anguish swept down upon Maria Angelina, like the cold mistral upon the southlands.

He was gone. . . . Would she really see him again? . . . Would he come to those mountains?

But why would he not? He had spoken of it, all of himself . . . he had that place he called a shack. That was beautiful good fortune—all of a part of the amazing fairy story of the New World. . . . And he had looked so at her. He had made such jokes. He had pressed her hands . . . ever so lightly but without mistake. . . .

And his eyes, that shining brightness of his eyes. . . .

"Why rub it in about York Harbor?"

Cousin Jim was speaking and Maria Angelina came out of her dream with sudden, painful intensity. Instinctively she divined that here was something vital to her hope, and while her

young face held the schooled, unstimulated detachment of the *jeune fille*, her senses were straining nervously for any flicker of enlightenment.

"Why not rub it in?" countered Cousin Jane briskly. "He'll go there before long, and he might as well know that he isn't throwing any sand in our eyes. . . . This sulking here in town is simply to punish her."

"Perhaps he isn't sulking. Perhaps he doesn't care to run after her any more. He may not be as keen about Leila Grey as you women think."

Maria Angelina's involuntary glance at Mrs. Blair caught the superior assurance of her smile.

"My dear Jim! He was simply mad about her. That last leave, before he went to France, he only went places to meet her."

"Well, he may have got over it. Men do," argued Cousin Jim stubbornly.

"Yes," echoed Maria Angelina's beating heart in hope, "men do!"

Cousin Jane laughed. "Men don't get over Leila Grey—not if Leila Grey wants to keep them."

"If she wanted so darn much to keep him why didn't she take him then?"

"I didn't say she wanted to keep him *then*." Mrs. Blair's tones were mysteriously, ironically significant. "Leila wasn't throwing herself away on any young officer—with nothing but his insurance. It was Bobby Martin that *she* was after——"

"Gad! Was she?" Cousin Jim was patently struck by this. "Why, Bobby's just a kid and she——"

"There's not two years' difference between them—in *years*. But Leila came out very young—and she's the most thoroughly calculating——"

"Oh, come now, Jane—just because the girl didn't succumb to the impecunious Barry and did like the endowed Bobby——! She may really have liked him, you know."

"Oh, come now, yourself, Jim," retorted his wife good-humoredly. "Just because she has blue eyes! No, if Leila really liked anybody I always had the notion it was Barry—but she *wanted* Bobby."

For a long moment Cousin Jim was silent, turning the thing over with his cigar. Maria Angelina sat still as a mouse, fearful to breathe lest the bewildering revelations cease. Cousin Jane, over her second cup of coffee, had the air of a humorous and superior oracle.

Then Mr. Blair said slowly, "And Bobby couldn't see her?"

He had an air of asking if Bobby were indeed of adamant and Mrs. Blair hesitated imperceptibly over the sweeping negative. Equally slowly, "Oh, Bobby *liked* her, of course—she may have turned his head," she threw out, "but I don't believe he ever lost it for a moment. And after he met Ruth that summer at Plattsburg——"

The implication floated there, tenuous, iridescent. Even to Maria Angelina's eyes it was an arch of promise.

Ruth was their daughter, the cousin of her own age. And the unknown Bobby was some one who liked Ruth. And he was some one whom this Leila Grey had tried to ensnare—although all the time Mrs. Blair suspected her of liking more the Signor Barry Elder.

Hotly Maria Angelina's precipitous intuitions endorsed that supposition. Of course this Leila liked that Barry Elder. Of course. . . . But she had not taken him. He was an officer, then—without fortune. Maria Angelina was familiar enough with *that* story. But she had supposed that here, in America, where dowries were not exigent and the young people were free, there was more romance. And now it was not even Leila's parents who had interfered, apparently, but Leila herself.

What was it Mrs. Blair had said? Thoroughly calculating. . . . Thoroughly calculating—and blue eyes. . . .

Maria Angelina felt a quick little inrush of fear. If it should be blue eyes that Americans—that is, to say now, that Barry Elder—preferred——!

And then she wondered why, if this Leila with the blue eyes had not taken Barry Elder before, Cousin Jane now regarded it as a foregone conclusion between them? Was it because she could not get that Signor Bobby Martin? Or was Barry Elder more successful now that he had left the army?

She puzzled away at it, like a very still little cat at an indestructible mouse, but dared say not a word. And while she worried away her surface attention was caught by the glance of candid humor exchanged between Mr. Blair and his wife.

"Ah, Jane, Jane," he was saying, in mock deprecation, "is that why we are spending the summer at Wilderness, not two miles from the Martin place——?"

Mrs. Blair was smiling, but her eyes were serious. "I preferred that to having Ruth at a house party at the Martins," she said quietly.

At that Maria Angelina ceased to attend. She would know soon enough about her Cousin Ruth and Bobby Martin. But as for Barry Elder and Leila Grey—! Had he cared? Had she? . . . Unconsciously her young heart repudiated her cousin's reading of the affair. As if Barry Elder would be unsuccessful with any woman that he wanted! That was unbelievable. He had not wanted her—enough.

He could not want Leila now or he would not have spoken so of coming to the mountains to see *her*—his direct glance had been a promise, his eyes a prophecy.

Dared she believe him? Dared she trust? But he was no deceiver, no flirt, like the lady-killers who used to come to the Palazzo to bow over Lucia's hand and eye each other with that half hostile, half knowing swagger. She had watched them. . . . But this was America.

And Barry Elder was—different.

She was lost to the world about her now. Its color and motion and hot counterfeit of life beat insensibly upon her; she was aware of it only as an imposition, a denial to that something within her which wanted to relax into quiet and dreaming, which wanted to live over and over again the intoxicating excitement, the looks, the words. . . .

She was grateful when Cousin Jane declared for an early return. She could hardly wait to be alone.

"*What did I tell you?*" Jane Blair stopped suddenly in their progress to the door and turned to her husband in low-toned triumph. "She's with him. Leila's with him."

"Huh?" said Cousin Jim unexcitedly.

"She's pretended some errand in town—she's come in to get hold of him again," went on Cousin Jane hurriedly, as one who tells the story of the act to the unobservant. "She's afraid to leave him alone. . . . And he never mentioned her. I wonder—"

Maria Angelina's eyes had followed theirs. She saw a group about a table, she saw Barry Elder's white-clad shoulders and curly brown head. She saw, unregardfully, a man and woman with him, but all her eagerness, all her straining vision was on the young girl with him—a girl so blonde, so beautiful that a pang went to Maria Angelina's heart. She learned pain in a single throb.

She heard Cousin Jim quoting oddly in undertone, "'And Beauty drew him, by a single hair,'" and the words entered her consciousness hauntingly.

If Leila Grey looked like that—why then—

Yet he had said that he would come!

Maria Angelina's first night in America, like that last night in Italy, was of sleepless watching through the dark. But now there were no child's tears at leaving home. There was no anxious planning for poor Julietta. Already Julietta and Lucia and the Palazzo, even Papa and dear, dear Mamma, appeared strangely unreal—like a vanished spell—and only this night was real and this strange expectant stir in her.

And then she fell asleep and dreamed that Barry Elder was advancing to her across the long drawing-room of the Palazzo Santonini and as she turned to receive him Lucia stepped between, saying, "He is for me, instead of Paolo Tosti," and behold! Lucia's eyes were as blue as the sea and Lucia's hair was as golden as amber and her face was the face of the girl in the restaurant.

CHAPTER III

LUNCHEON AT THE LODGE

Wilderness Lodge, Cousin Jane had said, was a simple little place in the mountains, not a hotel but rather a club house where only certain people could go, and Maria Angelina had pictured a white stucco pension-hotel set against some background like the bare, bright hills of Italy.

She found a green smother of forest, an ocean of greenness with emerald crests rising higher and higher like giant waves, and at the end of the long motor trip the Lodge at last disclosed itself as a low, dark, rambling building, set in a clearing behind a blue bend of sudden river.

And built of logs! Did people of position live yet in logs in America? demanded the girl's secret astonishment as the motor whirled across the rustic bridge and stopped before the wide steps of a veranda full of people.

Springing down the steps, two at a time, came a tall, short-skirted girl in white.

"Dad—you came, too!" she cried. "Oh, that's bully. You must enter the tournament—Mother, did you remember about the cup and the—you know? What we talked of for the booby?"

She had a loud, gay voice like a boy's and as Maria was drawn into the commotion of greetings,

she opened wide, half-intimidated eyes at the bigness and brownness of this Cousin Ruth.

She had expected Heaven knows what of incredible charm in the girl who had detached the Signor Bobby Martin from the siren Leila. Her instant wonder was succeeded by a sensation of gay relief. After all, these things went by chance and favor. . . . And if Bobby Martin could prefer this brown young girl to that vision at the restaurant why then—then perhaps there was also a chance for—what was it the young Signor Elder had called her? A *petite brune* wrapped in cotton wool.

These thoughts flashed through her as one thought as she followed her three cousins across the wide verandas, full of interested eyes, into the Lodge and up the stairs to their rooms, where Ruth directed the men in placing the big trunk and the bags and hospitably explained the geography of the suite.

"My room's on that side and Dad's and Mother's is just across—and we all have to use this one bath—stupid, isn't it, but Dad is hardly ever here and there's running water in the rooms. You'll survive, won't you?"

Hastily Maria Angelina assured her that she would.

Glimpsing the white-tiled splendors of this bath she wondered how Ruth would survive the tin tub, set absurdly in a red plush room of the Palazzo. . . .

"Now you know your way about," the American girl rattled on, her tone negligent, her eyes colored with a little warmer interest as her glance swept her foreign little cousin. "Frightfully hot, wasn't it? I'll clear out so you can pop into the tub. You'll just have time before luncheon," she assured her and was off.

The next instant, from closed doors beyond, her voice rose in unguarded exclamation.

"Oh, you baby doll! Mother, did you ever—"

The voices sank from hearing and Maria Angelina was left with the feeling that a baby doll was not a desirable being in America. This Cousin Ruth intimidated her and her breezy indifference and lack of affectionate interest shot the visitor with the troubled suspicion that her own presence was entirely superfluous to her cousin's scheme of things. She felt more at home with the elders.

Uncertainly she crossed to her big trunk and stood looking down on the bold labels.

How long since she and Mamma had packed it, with dear Julietta smoothing the folds in place! And how far away they all were. . . . It was not the old Palazzo now that was unreal—it was this new, bright world and all the strange faces.

The chintz-decked room with its view of alien mountains seemed suddenly remote and lonely.

Her hands shook a little as she unpacked a tray of pretty dresses and laid them carefully across the bed. . . . Unconsciously she had anticipated a warmer welcome from this young cousin. . . . She winked away the tears that threatened to stain the bright ribbons, and stole into the splendor of the white bathroom, marveling at its luxurious contrast to the logs without.

The water refreshed her. She felt more cheerful, and when she came to a choice of frocks, decidedly a new current of interest was stealing through life again.

First impressions were so terribly important! She wanted to do honor to the Blairs—to justify the hopes of Mamma. This was not enough of an occasion for the white mull. The silks look hot and citified. Hesitantly she selected the apricot organdie with a deeper-shaded sash; it was simple for all its glowing color, though the short frilled sleeves struck her as perhaps too chic. It had been a copy of one of Lucia's frocks, that one bought to such advantage of Madame Revenant.

With it went a golden-strawed hat—but Maria Angelina was uncertain about the hat.

Did you wear one at a hotel—when you lived at a hotel? Mamma's admonitions did not cover that. She put the hat on; she took the hat off. She rather liked it on—but she dropped it on the bed at Ruth's sudden knock and felt a sense of escape for Ruth was hatless.

And Ruth still wore the same short white skirt and white blouse, open at the throat, in which she had greeted them. . . . Was the apricot too much then of a toilette? Ruth's eyes were frankly on it; her expression was odd.

But Mrs. Blair had changed. She appeared now in blue linen, very smart and trim.

Worriedly Maria Angelina's dark eyes went from one to the other.

"Is this—is this what I should wear?" she asked timidly. "Am I not—as you wish?"

It would have taken a hard heart to wish her otherwise.

"It's very pretty," said Cousin Jane in quick reassurance.

"Too pretty, s'all," said Cousin Ruth. "But it won't be wasted. . . . Bobby Martin is staying to luncheon," she flung casually at her parents. "Has a guest with him. You remember Johnny Byrd."

American freedom, indeed! thought Maria Angelina following down the slippery stairs into the

wide hall below where, in a boulder fireplace that was surmounted by a stag's head, a small blaze was flickering despite the warmth of the day.

Wasteful, thought Maria Angelina reprovingly. One could see that the Americans had never suffered for fuel. . . .

Upon a huge, black fur rug before the fire two young men were waiting.

Demurely Maria thought of the letter she would write home that night—one young man the first evening in New York, two young men the first luncheon at the Lodge. Decidedly, America brimmed with young men!

Meanwhile, Ruth was presenting them. The big dark youth, heavy and lazy moving, was the Signor Bob Martin.

The other, Johnny Byrd, was shorter and broad of shoulder; he had reddish blonde hair slightly parted and brushed straight back; he had a short nose with freckles and blue eyes with light lashes. When he laughed—and he seemed always laughing—he showed splendid teeth.

Both young men stared—but staring was a man's prerogative in Italy and Maria Angelina was unperturbed. At table she sat serenely, her dark lashes shading the oval of her cheeks, while the young men's eyes—and one pair of them, especially—took in the black, braid-bound head and the small, Madonna-like face, faintly flushed by sun and wind, above the golden glow of the sheer frock.

Then Johnny Byrd leaned across the table towards her.

"I say, Signorina," he began abruptly, "what's the Italian for peach?" and as Maria Angelina looked up and started very innocently to explain, he leaned back and burst into a shout of amusement in which the others more moderately joined.

"Don't let him get you," was Ruth's unintelligible advice, and Bobby Martin turned to his friend to admonish, "Now, Johnny, don't start anything. . . . Johnny's such a good little starter!"

"And a poor finisher," added Ruth smartly and both young men laughed again as at a very good joke.

"A starter—but not a beginner, eh?" chuckled Cousin Jim, and Mrs. Blair smiled at both young men even as she protested, "This is the noisiest table in the room!"

It was a noisy table. Maria Angelina was astounded at the hilarity of that meal. Already she began censoring her report to Mamma. Certainly Mamma would never understand Ruth's elbows on the table, her shouts of laughter—or the pellets of bread she flipped.

And the words they used! Maria could only feel that the language of Mamma must be singularly antiquated. So much she did not understand . . . had never heard. . . . What, indeed, was a simp, a boob, a nut? What a poor fish? . . . She held her peace, and listened, confused by the astounding vocabulary and the even more astounding intimacy. What things they said to each other in jest!

And whatever Maria Angelina said they took in jest. She evoked an appreciative peal when she ventured that the Lodge must be very old because she had read that the first settlers made their homes of logs.

"I'll take you up and show you *our* ancestral hut," declared Bob Martin. "Where Granddad used to stretch the Red Skins to dry by the back door—before tanning 'em for raincoats."

"Really?" said Maria Angelina ingenuously, then at sight of his expression, "But how shall I know what you tell me is true or not?" she appealed. "It all sounds so strange to me—the truth as well."

"You look at *me*," said Johnny Byrd leaning forward. "When I shut this eye, so, you shake your head at them. When I nod—you can believe."

"But you will not always be there——"

"I'll say you're wrong," he retorted. "I'm going to be there so usually, like the weather—did you say you wanted me to stay a month, Bob?"

Color stole into the young girl's cheeks even while she laughed with them. She was conscious of a faint and confused half-distress beneath her mounting confidence. They were so *very* jocular. . . .

Of course this was but chaff, she understood, and she began to wonder if that other, that young Signor Elder, had been but joking. It might be the American way. . . . And yet this was all flattering chaff and so perhaps she could trust the flattery of her secret hope.

Surely, surely, it was all going to happen. He would come—she would see him again.

Meanwhile she shook her young braids at Johnny Byrd.

"But you are so sudden! I think he is a flirter, yes?" she said gayly to Mr. Blair who smiled back appreciatively and a trifle protectively at her.

But Bobby Martin drawled, "Oh, no, he's not. He's too careful," and more laughter ensued.

After luncheon they went back into the hall where the three men drifted out into a side room where cigars and cigarettes were sold, and began filling their cases, while Mrs. Blair stepped out on the verandas and joined a group there. Ruth remained by the fireplace, and Maria Angelina waited by her.

"Your friends are very nice," she began with a certain diffidence, as her cousin had nothing to say. "That Johnny Byrd—he is very funny——"

"Oh, Johnny's funny," said Ruth in an odd voice. She added, "Regular spoiled baby—had everything his way. Only an old guardian to boss him."

"You mean he is an orphan?"

"Completely."

Maria Angelina did not smile. "But that is very sad," she said soberly. "No home life——"

"Don't get it into your head that Johnny Byrd wants any *home life*," said her cousin dryly, and with a hint of hard warning in her negligent voice. "He's been dodging home life ever since he wore long trousers."

"He must then," Maria Angelina deduced, very simply, "be rich."

"He's one of the Long Island Byrds."

It sounded to Maria like a flock of ducks, but she perceived that it was given for affirmation. She followed Ruth's glance to where the backs of the young men's heads were visible, bending over some coins they were apparently matching. . . . Johnny Byrd's head was flaming in the sunshine. . . .

"He's a bird from a hard-boiled egg," Ruth said with a smile of inner amusement.

But whatever cryptic signal she flashed slipped unseen from Maria Angelina's vision. Johnny Byrd was nice, but it was a gay, cheery, everyday sort of niceness, she thought, with none of the quicksilver charm of the young man at the dinner dance. . . . And she was unimpressed by Johnny's money. She took the millionaires in America as for granted as fish in the sea.

She merely felt cheerfully that Fate was galloping along the expected course.

Subconsciously, perhaps, she recorded a possible second string to her bow.

With tact, she thought, she turned the talk to Ruth's young man.

"And the Signor Bob Martin—I suppose he, too, is a millionaire," she smiled, and was astonished at Ruth's derisive laugh.

"Not unless he murders his father," said that barbaric young woman.

She added, relenting towards her cousin's ignorance, "Oh, Bob hasn't anything of his own, you know. . . . But his father's taking him into business this fall."

Maria Angelina was bewildered. Distinctly she had understood, from the Leila Grey conversation, that Bobby Martin was a very eligible young man and yet here was her cousin flouting any financial congratulation.

Hesitantly, "Is his father—in a good business?" she offered, and won from Ruth more merriment as inexplicable as her speech.

"He's in Steel," she murmured, which was no enlightenment to Maria.

She ventured to more familiar ground.

"He is very handsome."

To her astonishment Ruth snorted. . . . Now Lucia always bridled consciously when one praised Paolo Tosti.

"Don't let him hear you say so," she scoffed. "He's too fat. He needs a lot more tennis."

And then to Maria's horror she raised her voice and confided this conviction to the approaching young men.

"You're getting fat, Bob. I just got your profile—and you need a lot of tennis for that tummy!"

And young Martin laughed—the indolent, submissive laughter with which he appeared to accept all things at the hands of this audacious, brown-cheeked, gray-eyed young girl.

She must be very sure of him, thought the little Italian sagely. Then, not so sagely, she wondered if Ruth was exhibiting her power to warn off all newcomers. . . . Was *that* why she refused to admit his wealth or his good looks—she wanted to invite no competition?

Maria Angelina believed she saw the light.

She would reassure Ruth, she thought eagerly. She was a young person of honor. Never would she attempt to divert a glance from her cousin's admirer.

Meanwhile a debate was carried on between golf and tennis, and was carried in favor of golf by Cousin Jim. There was unintelligible talk of hazards and bunkers and handicaps for the tournament, of records and of bogey, and then as Johnny turned to her with a casual, "Like the game?" a shadow of misgiving crept into her confidence.

She could not golf. Nor could she play tennis. Nor could she follow the golfers—as Johnny Byrd suggested—for Cousin Jane declared her frock and slippers too delicate. She must get into something more appropriate.

And in Maria Angelina the worried suspicion woke that she had nothing more appropriate.

A few minutes later Cousin Jane confirmed that suspicion as she paused by the trunk the young girl was hastily unpacking.

"I'll send to town for some plain little things for you to play in," she said cheerfully. "You must have some low-heeled white shoes and short white skirts and a batting hat. They won't come to much," she added as if carelessly, going down to her bridge game on the veranda.

But Maria Angelina's small hands clenched tightly at her sides in a panic out of all proportion to the idea.

More expense, she was thinking quiveringly. More investment!

Oh, she must not fail—she dared not fail. She must find some one—the right some one——

She dropped beside her trunk of pretty things in a passion of frightened tears.

But the night swung her back to triumph again.

For although she could not golf, and her hands could not wield a tennis racket, Maria Angelina could play a guitar and she could sing to it like the angels she had been named for. And the young people at the Lodge had a way of gathering in the dark upon the wide steps and strumming chords and warbling strange strains about intimate emotions. And as Maria Angelina's voice rose with the rest her gift was discovered.

"Gosh, the little Wop's a Galli-Curci," was John Byrd's aside to Bob.

So presently with Johnny Byrd's guitar in her hands Maria Angelina was singing the songs of Italy, sometimes in English, when she knew the words, that all might join in the choruses, but more often in their own Italian.

A crescent moon edged over the shadowy dark of the mountains before her . . . the same moon whose silver thread of light slipped down those far Apennine hills of home and touched the dome of old Saint Peter's. She felt far away and lonely . . . and deliciously sad and subtly expectant. . . .

"O Sole mio——"

And as she sang, with her eyes on the far hills, her ears caught the whir of wheels on the road below, and all her nerves tightened like wires and hummed with the charged currents.

Out of the dark she conjured a tall young figure advancing . . . a figure topped by short-cut curly brown hair . . . a figure with eyes of incredible brightness. . . .

If he would only come now and find her like this, singing. . . .

It was so exquisite a hope that her heart pleaded for it.

But the wheels went on.

"But he will come," she thought swiftly, to cover the pang of that expiring hope. "He will come soon. He said so. And perhaps again it will be like this and he will find me here——"

"O Sole mio——"

And only Johnny Byrd, staring steadily through the dusk, discerned that there were tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER IV

RI-RI SINGS AGAIN

She told herself that she was foolish to hope for him so soon. Of course he could not follow at once. He could not leave New York. He had work to be done. She must not begin to hope until the week-end at least.

But though she talked to herself so wisely, she hoped with every breath she drew. She was accustomed to Italian precipitancy—and nothing in Barry Elder suggested delay. If he came, he would come while his memory of her was fresh.

It would be either here or York Harbor. Either herself or that girl with the blue eyes. If he really wanted to see her at all, if he had any memory of their dance, any interest in the newness of her, then he would come soon.

And so through Maria Angelina's days ran a fever of expectancy.

At first it ran high. The honk of a motor horn, the reverberation of wheels upon the bridge, the slam of a door and the flurry of steps in the hall set up that instant, tumultuous commotion.

At any moment, she felt, Barry Elder might arrive. Every morning her pulses confessed that he might come that day; every night her courage insisted that the next morning would bring him.

And as the days passed the expectancy increased. It grew acute. It grew painful. The feeling, at every arrival, that he might be there gave her a tight pinch of suspense, a hammering racket of pulse-beats—succeeded by an empty, sickening, sliding-down-to-nothingness sensation when she realized that he was not there, when her despair proclaimed that he would never be there—and then, stoutly, she told herself that he would come the next time.

They were days of dreams for her—dreams of the restaurant, of color, light and music, of that tall, slim figure . . . dreams of the dance, of the gay, half-teasing voice, the bright eyes, the direct smile. . . . Every word he had uttered became precious, infinitely significant.

"*A rivederci, Signorina. . . . Don't forget me.*"

She had not forgotten him. Like the wax he had named she had guarded his image. Through all the swiftly developing experiences of those strange days she retained that first vivid impression.

She saw him in every group. She pictured him in every excursion. Above Johnny Byrd's light, straight hair she saw those close-cropped brown curls. . . . She held long conversations with him. She confided her impressions. She read him Italian poems.

But still he did not come.

And sharply she went from hope to despair. She told herself that he would never come.

She did not believe herself. Beneath a set little pretense of indifference she listened intently for the sound of arrivals; her heart turned over at an approaching car.

But she did not admit it. She said that she was through with hope. She said that she did not care whether he came or not. She said she did not want him to come.

He was with Leila Grey, of course.

Well—she was with Johnny Byrd.

She was with him every day, for with that amazing American freedom, Bobby Martin came down to see Ruth every day and the four young people with other couples from the Lodge were always involved in some game, some drive, some expedition.

But it was not accident nor a lazy concurrence with propinquity that kept Johnny Byrd at Maria Angelina's side.

Openly he announced himself as tied hand and foot. His admiration was as vivid as his red roadster. It was as unabashed and clamant as his motor horn. He reveled in her. He monopolized her. In his own words, he lapped her up.

With amazing simplicity Maria Angelina accepted this miracle. It was only a second-rate miracle to her, for it was not the desire of her heart, and she was uneasy about it. She did not want to be involved with Johnny Byrd if Barry Elder should arrive. . . . Of course, if she had never met Barry Elder. . . .

Johnny Byrd was a very nice, merry boy. And he was rich . . . independent. . . . If one has never tasted *Asti Spumante*, then one can easily be pleased with *Chianti*.

Her secret dream was the young girl's protection against over-eagerness.

To her young hostess this indifference came as an enormous relief.

"She's all right," Ruth reported to her mother, upon an afternoon that Maria Angelina had taken herself downstairs to the piano and to a prospective call from Johnny Byrd while Ruth herself, in riding togs, awaited Bob Martin and his horses.

"She isn't jumping down Johnny's throat at all," the girl went on. "I was afraid, that first day, when she asked such nutty questions. . . . But she seems to take it all for granted. That ought to hold Johnny for a while—long enough so he won't get tired and throw her down for somebody else before he goes."

"You think, then, there isn't a chance of—?"

Mrs. Blair left the hypothesis in midair, convicted of ancient sentiment by the frank amusement of her young daughter's look.

"No, my dear, there isn't a chance of," Ruth so competently informed her that Mrs. Blair, in revolt, was moved to murmur, "After all, Ruth, people do fall in love and get married in this

world."

"Oh, yes."

Patently Ruth gave this thought her consideration and in fair-mindedness turned her scrutiny upon past days to evoke some sign that should contradict her own conclusions.

"She's got something—it's something different from the rest of us—but it would take more than that to do for Johnny Byrd."

Definitely, Ruth shook her head.

"You don't suppose she's beginning to think——?" hazarded Mrs. Blair.

Better than her daughter, she envisaged the circumstances which might have led, in her Cousin Lucy's mind, to this young girl's visit. Lucy, herself, had been taken abroad in those early days by a competent aunt. Now Lucy, in the turn of the tide, was sending her daughter to America.

Jane Blair would have liked to play fairy godmother, to make a benevolent gesture, to scatter largess. . . .

But she was not going to have it said that she was a fortune hunter. She was not going to alarm Johnny Byrd and implicate Bob Martin and disturb the delicate balance between him and Ruth.

Lucy's daughter must take her chances. This wasn't Europe.

"Well, I've said enough to her," Ruth stated briskly, in answer to her mother's supposition. "I don't know how much she believes. . . . You know Ri-Ri is seething with Old World sentiment and she may be such a little nut as to think—but she doesn't act as if she really cared about it. It isn't just a pose. . . . Do you imagine," said Ruth, suddenly lapsing into a little Old World sentiment herself, "that she's gone on some one in Italy and they sent her over to forget him? That might account——"

"Lucy's letter didn't sound like it. She was very emphatic about Maria Angelina's knowing nothing of the world or young men. I rather gathered," Mrs. Blair made out, "that the family had a plain daughter to marry off and wanted the pretty one in ambush for a while—they take care of those things, you know."

"And I suppose if she copped a millionaire in the ambush they wouldn't howl bloody murder," said the girl, with admirable intuition.

"Oh, well——" She yawned and looked out of the window. "She's probably having the time of her life. . . . I'm grateful she turned out such a little peach. . . . When she goes back and marries some fat spaghetti it will give her something to moon about to remember how she and Johnny Byrd used to sit out and strum to the stars—— There he is now."

"Bob?" said Mrs. Blair absently, her mind occupied by her young daughter's large sophistication.

"Johnny," said Ruth.

She leaned half out the window as the red roadster shot thunderously across the rustic bridge and brought up sharply on the driveway below. With a shouted greeting she brought the driver's red-blond head to attention.

"Hullo—where's the Bob?"

Johnny grinned. "Trying to ride one horse and lead another. Sweet mount he's bringing you, Ruth. Didn't like the way I passed him. Bet you he throws you."

"Bet you he doesn't."

"You lose. . . . Where's the little Wop?"

"You mean Maria Angelina Santonini?"

"Gosh, is that all? Well, you scoot across to her room and tell Maria Angelina Santonini that she has a perfectly good date with me."

"She powdered her nose and went down stairs an hour ago," Ruth sang down, just as a small figure emerged from the music room upon the veranda and approached the rail.

"The little Wop is here, Signor," said Maria Angelina lightly.

Unabashed Johnny Byrd beamed at her. It was a perfectly good sensation, each time, to see her. One grew to suspect, between times, that anything so enchanting didn't really exist—and then, suddenly, there she was, like a conjurer's trick, every lovely young line of her.

Johnny knew girls. He knew them, he would have informed you, backwards and forwards. And he liked girls—devilish cunning games, with the same old trumps up their sleeves—when they wore 'em—but this girl was just puzzlingly different enough to evoke a curiously haunting wonder.

Was it the difference in environment? Or in herself? He couldn't quite make her out.

He seemed to be groping for some clew, some familiar sign that would resolve all the unfamiliarities to old acquaintance.

Meanwhile he continued to smile cheerily at the young person he had so rudely designated as a little Wop and gestured to the seat beside him.

"Hop in," he admonished. "Let us be off before that horse comes and steps on me. That's a dear girl."

But Maria Angelina shook her dark head.

"I told you, no, Signor, I could not go. In my country one does not ride with young men."

"But you are in my country now. And in my country one jolly well rides with young men."

"In your country—but for a time, yes." Unconvinced Maria Angelina stood by her rail, like the boy upon the burning deck.

"But your aunt—cousin, I mean—would let you," he argued. "I'll shout up now and see——"

Unrelentingly, "It is not my cousin, but my mother who would object," she informed him.

"Holy Saint Cecilia! You're worse than boarding school. Come on, Maria Angelina—I'll promise not to kiss you."

That was one of Johnny's best lines. It always had a deal of effect—one way or another. It startled Maria Angelina. Her eyes opened as if he had set off a rocket—and something very bright and light, like the impish reflections of that rocket, danced a moment in her look.

"I will write that promise to my mother and see if it persuades her," she informed him.

"Oh, all right, all right."

With the sigh of the defeated Johnny Byrd turned off the gas and climbed out of his car.

"Just for that the promise is off," he announced. "Do you think your mother would mind letting you sit in the same room with me and teach me that song you promised?"

"She would mind very much in Italy." Over her shoulder Maria cast a laughing look at him as she stepped back into the music room. "There I would never be alone like this."

Incredulously Johnny stared past her into the music room. Through the windows upon the other side came the voices of bridge players upon the veranda without. Through those same windows were visible the bridge players' heads. Other windows opened upon the veranda in the front of the Lodge from which they had just come. An arch of doorway gave upon the wide hall where a guest was shuffling the mail.

"*Alone!*" ejaculated Johnny.

"My mother allows this when my sister Lucia and her fiancé, Paolo Tosti, are together," said Maria Angelina. "I am in the next room with a book. And that is very advanced. It is because Mamma is American."

"I'll say it's advanced," Johnny muttered. "You mean—you mean your sister and that—that toasted one she's engaged to have never really seen each other——?"

"Oh, they have *seen* each other——"

"The poor fish," said Johnny heavily. He glanced with increasing curiosity at the young girl by his side. . . . After all, this *jeune fille* thing might be true. . . .

"Well, I'm glad your mother was American," he declared, beginning to strum upon the piano and inviting her to a seat beside him.

But Maria Angelina remained looking through her music.

"Then I am only half a Wop," said she. She added, bright mischief between her long lashes, "What is it then—a Wop?"

Johnny Byrd, striking random chords, looked up at her.

"What is it?" he repeated. "I'll say that depends. . . . Sometimes it's dark and greasy and throws bombs. . . . Sometimes it's bad and glad and sings Carmen. . . . And sometimes it's—it's——"

Deliberately he stared at the small braid-bound head, the shadowy dark of the eyes, the scarlet curve of the small mouth.

"Sometimes it's just the prettiest, youngest——"

"I am *not* so young," said Maria Angelina indignantly.

"Lordy, you're a babe in arms."

"I am *not*." Her defiance was furious. It had a twinge of terror—terror lest they treat her everlastingly as child.

"I am eighteen. I am but a year and three months younger than Ruth."

"She's a kid," grinned Johnny.

"The Signor Bob Martin does not think so!"

"The Signor Bob Martin is nuts on that particular kid. And he's a kid himself."

"And do you think that you are—?"

"Sure. We're all kids together. Why not? I like it," declared young Byrd.

But Maria Angelina was not appeased. She had half glimpsed that indefinite irresponsibility of these strangers which treated youth as a toy, an experiment. . . .

"And is the Signorina Leila Grey," said she suddenly, "is she, also, a kid?"

Roundly Johnny opened his eyes. His face presented a curious stolidity of look, as if a protection against some unforeseen attack. At the same time it was streaked with humor.

"Now where," said he, "did you get that?"

"Is she," the girl persisted, "is she also a kid?"

"The Signorina Leila Grey? No," conceded Johnny, "the Signorina Leila Grey was born with her wisdom teeth cut. . . . At that she hasn't found so much to chew on," he murmured cheerily.

The girl's eyes were bright with divinations. "You mean that she did not—did not find your friend Bob something to chew upon?"

Johnny's laugh was a guffaw. It rang startlingly in that quiet room. "You're there, Ri-Ri—absolutely there," he vowed. "But where, I wonder—" He broke off. His look held both surmise and a shrewd suspicion.

"I—guessed," said Maria Angelina hastily. "And I saw her the first evening in New York. . . . She is very beautiful."

"She's a wonder," he admitted heartily. "Yes—and I'll say Bob nearly fell for her. If she'd been expert enough she could have gathered him in. He just dodged in time—and now he's busy forgetting he ever knew her."

"Perhaps," slowly puzzled out Maria Angelina, "perhaps the reason that she was not—not expert, as you say—was because her attention was just a little—wandering."

Johnny yawned. "Often happens." He struck a few chords. "Where's that little song of yours—the one you were going to teach me? I could do something with that at the next show at the club."

"If you will let me sit down, Signor—"

"I'm not crabbing the bench."

"But I wish the place in the center."

"What you 'fraid of, Ri-Ri?" Obliging Johnny moved over. "Why, you have me tied hand and foot. I'm afraid to move a muscle for fear you'll tell me it isn't done—in Italy."

But Ri-Ri gave this an absent smile. For long, now, she had been leading up to this talk and she felt herself upon the brink of revelations. . . . Perhaps this Johnny Byrd knew where Barry Elder was. Perhaps they were friends. . . .

"In New York," she told him, "that Leila Grey was at the restaurant with a young man—with the Signor Barry Elder."

"Huh? Barry Elder?"

"Are you,"—she was proud of the splendid indifference of her voice,— "are you a friend of his?"

Uninterestedly, "Oh, I know Barry," Johnny told her. "Bright boy—Barry. Awful high-brow, though. Wrote a play or something. Not a darn bed in it. Oh, well," said Johnny hastily, with a glance at the girl's young face, "I say, how does this go? Ta *tump* ti tum ti *tump tump*—what do those words of yours mean?"

"Perhaps this Barry Elder," said Ri-Ri with averted eyes, her hands fluttering the pages, "perhaps he is the one that Leila Grey's attention was upon. Did you not hear that?"

"Who? Barry?"

"Has he not," said the girl desperately, "become recently more desirable to her—more rich, perhaps—"

"That play didn't make him anything, that's sure," the young man meditated. "But seems to me I did hear—something about an uncle shuffling off and leaving him a few thous. . . . Maybe he left enough to buy Leila a supper."

"Here are the English words." Maria Angelina spread the music open before them. "Mrs. Blair was joking with him," she reverted, "because he was not going to that York Harbor this summer where this Leila Grey was. But perhaps he has gone, after all?"

"Search me," said Johnny negligently. "I'm not his keeper."

"But you would know if he is coming to the dance at the Martins—that dance next week—?"

"He isn't coming to the house party, he's not invited. He and Bob aren't anything chummy at all. Barry trains in an older crowd. . . . Seems to me," said Johnny, turning to look at her out of bright blue eyes, "you're awf'ly interested in this Barry Elder thing. Did you say you met him in New York?"

"I met him—yes," said Maria Angelina, in a steady little voice, beginning suddenly to play. "And I thought it was so romantic—about him and this Leila Grey. She was so beautiful and he had been so brave in the war. And so I wondered—"

"Well, don't you wonder about who's coming to that dance. That dance is *mine*," said Johnny definitely. "I want you to look your darndest—put it all over those flappers. Show them what you got," admonished Johnny with the simple directness in such vogue.

"And now come on, Ri-Ri—let's get into this together.

'I cannot now forget you
And you think not of me!'

Come on, Maria Angelina!"

And Maria Angelina, her face lifted, her eyes strangely bright, sang, while Johnny Byrd stared fixedly down at her, angrily, defiantly, sang to that unseen young man—back in the shadows—

"I cannot now forget you
And you think not of me!"

And then she told herself that she would forget him very well indeed.

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN DANCES

There had been distinct proprietorship in Johnny's reference to the dance, a hint of possessive admonition, a shade of anxiety to which Maria Angelina was not insensitive.

He wanted her to excel. His pride was calling, unconsciously, upon her, to justify his choice. The dance was an exhibition . . . competition. It was the open market . . . appraisal. . . .

No matter how charming she might be in the motor rides with the four, how pretty and piquant in the afternoon at the piano, how melodious in the evenings upon the steps, the full measure of his admiration was not exacted.

Sagely she surmised this. Anxiously she awaited the event.

It was her first real dance. It was her first American affair. Casually, in the evenings at the Lodge, they had danced to the phonograph and she had been initiated into new steps and amazed at the manner of them, but there had been nothing of the slightest formality.

Now the Martins were entertaining over the week-end, and giving a dance to which the neighborhood—meaning the neighborhood of the Martins' acquaintance—was assembling.

And again Maria Angelina felt the inrush of fear, the overwhelming timidity of inexperience held at bay by pride alone . . . again she knew the tormenting question which she had confronted in that dim old glass at the Palazzo Santonini on the day when she had heard of the adventure before her.

She asked it that night of a different glass, the big, built-in mirror of the dressing-room at the Martins given over to the ladies—a mirror that was a dissolving kaleidoscope of color and motion, of bright silks, bare shoulders and white arms, of pink cheeks, red lips and shining hair.

Advancing shyly among the young girls, filled with divided wonder at their self-possession and their extreme décolletage, Ri-Ri gazed at the glass timidly, determinedly, fatefully, as one approaches an oracle, and out from the glittering surface was flung back to her a radiant image of reassurance—a vision of a slim figure in filmiest white, slender arms and shoulders bare, dark hair not braided now, but piled high upon her head—a revelation of a nape of neck as young and kissable as a baby's and yet an addition of bewildering years to her immaturity.

To-night she was glad of the white skin, that was a gift from Mamma. The white coral string, against the satin softness of her throat, revealed its opalescent flush. She was immaculate, exquisite, like some figurine of fancy—an image of youth as sweet and innocently troubling as a May night.

"You're a love," said Ruth heartily, appearing at her side, very stunning herself in jade green, with her smooth hair a miracle of shining perfection.

"And you're—different," added Ruth in a slightly puzzled voice, looking her small cousin over with

the thoroughness of an inventory. "It must be the hair, Ri-Ri. . . . You've lost that little Saint Susy air."

"But there is no Saint Susy," Ri-Ri interposed gayly, lightly fingering the dark curves of her hair. Truly—for Johnny—she had done her darndest! Surely he would be pleased.

"If you'd only let me cut that lower—you're simply swaddled in tulle——"

Startled, Maria glanced down at the hollows of her young bosom, at the scantiness of her bodice suspended only by bands of sheerest gauze. She wondered what Mamma would say, if she could see her so, without that drape of net. . . .

"You have the duckiest shoulder blades," said Ruth.

"Oh—do *they* show?" cried Maria Angelina in dismay. She twisted for a view and the movement drew Ruth's glance along her lithe figure.

"We ought to have cut two inches more off," she declared, and now Ri-Ri's glance fled down to the satin slippers with their crossed ribbons, to the narrow, silken ankles, to the slender legs above the ankles. It seemed to her an utterly limitless exhibition. And Ruth was proposing two more inches!

Apprehensively she glanced about to make sure that no scissors were in prospect.

"But you'll do," Ruth pronounced, and in relief Maria Angelina relinquished the center of the mirror, and slipped out into the gallery that ran around three sides of the house.

It was built like a chalet, but Maria Angelina had seen no such chalet in her childish summers in Switzerland. Over the edge of the rail she gazed into the huge hall, cleared now for dancing. The furniture had been pushed back beneath the gallery where it was arranged in intimate little groups for future tête-à-têtes, except a few lounging chairs left on the black bear-skins by the chimney-piece. In one corner a screen of pine boughs and daisies shut off the musicians from the streets, and in the opposite corner an English man-servant was presiding over a huge silver punch bowl.

To Maria Angelina, accustomed to Italian interiors, the note was buoyantly informal. And the luxury of service in this informality was a piquant contrast. . . . No one seemed to care what anything cost. . . . They gave dances in a log chalet and sent to New York for the favors and to California for the fruit. . . . Into the huge punch-bowl they poured wine of a value now incredible, since the supply could never be replenished. . . .

Very different would be Lucia's wedding party in the Palazzo Santonini, on that marvelous old service that Pietro polished but three times a year, with every morsel of refreshment arranged and calculated beforehand.

What miracles of economy would be performed in that stone-flagged kitchen, many of them by Mamma's own hands! Suddenly Maria Angelina found a moment to wonder afresh at that mother . . . and with a new vision. . . . For Mamma had come from this profusion.

"They have a regular place at Newport." Ruth was concluding some unheard speech behind her. "But they like this better. . . . This is the life," and with a just faintly discernible note of proprietorship in her air she was off down the stairs.

"Didn't they find Newport rather chilly?" murmured the girl to whom she had been talking. "Wasn't Mrs. M. a Smith or a Brown-Jones or something——?"

"It was something in butterine," said another guest negligently and swore, softly and intensely, at a shoulder strap. "Oh, *damn* the thing! . . . Well—flop if you want to. I've got nothing to hide."

"You know why girls hide their ears, don't you?" said the other voice, and the second girl flung wearily back, "Oh, so they can have something to show their husbands—I heard that in my cradle!"

"It *is* rather old," its sponsor acknowledged wittily, and the pair went clattering on.

Had America, Maria Angelina wondered, been like this in her mother's youth? Was it from such speeches that her mother had turned, in helplessness or distaste, to the delicate implications, the finished innuendo of the Italian world?

Or had times changed? Were these girls truly different from their mothers? Was it a new society?

That was it, she concluded, and she, in her old-world seclusion, was of another era from these assured ones. . . . Again, for a moment the doubt of her capacity to cope with these times assailed her, but only for a moment, for next instant she caught Johnny Byrd's upturned glance from the floor below and in its flash of admiration, as unstinted as a sun bath, her confidence drew reanimation.

Later, she found that same warmth in other men's eyes and in the eagerness with which they kept cutting in.

That cutting in, itself, was strange to her. It filled her with a terrifying perspective of what would happen if she were *not* cut in upon—if she were left to gyrate endlessly in the arms of some

luckless one, eternally stuck. . . .

At home, at a ball, she knew that there were fixed dances, and programs, in which engagements were jotted definitely down, and at each dance's end a girl was returned respectfully to her chaperon where the next partner called for her. Often she had scanned Lucia's scrawled programs for the names there.

But none of that now.

Up and down the hall she sped in some man's arms, round and round, up and down, until another man, agile, dexterous, shot between the couples and claimed her. And then up and down again until some other man. . . . And sometimes they went back to rest in the intimately arranged chairs beneath the balcony, and sometimes stepped out of doors to saunter along a wide terrace.

It was incredibly independent. It was intoxicatingly free. It was also terrifyingly responsible.

And Maria Angelina, in her young fear of unpopularity, smiled so ingenuously upon each arrival, with a shy, backward deprecatory glance at her lost partner, that she stirred something new and wondering in each seasoned breast, and each dancer came again and again.

But all of them, the new young men from town, the tennis champion from Yale, the polo player from England, the lawyer from Washington, the stout widower, the professional bachelor, all were only moving shapes that came and went and came again and by their tribute made her successful in Johnny's eyes.

Indeed, so well did they do their work that Johnny was moved to brusque expostulation.

"Look here, Ri-Ri, I told you this was to be *my* dance! With all those outsiders cutting in—Freeze them, Ri-Ri. Try a long, hard level look on the next one you see making your way. . . . Don't you *want* to dance with me, any more? Huh? Where's that stand-in of mine? Is it a little, old last year's model?"

"But what am I to do—?"

"Fight 'em off. Bite 'em. Kick their shins. . . . Oh, Lord," groaned Johnny, dexterously whirling her about, "there's another coming. . . . Here's where we go. This way out."

Speedily he piloted her through the throng. Masterfully he caught her arm and drew her out of doors.

She was glad to be out of the dance. His clasp had been growing too personal . . . too tight. . . . Perhaps she was only oddly self-conscious . . . incapable of the serene detachment of those other dancers, who, yielding and intertwined, revolved in intimate harmony.

There was a moon. It shone soft and bright upon them, making a world of enchantment. The long lines of the mountains melted together like a violet cloud and above them a round top floated, pale and dreamy, as the dome of Saint Peter's at twilight.

From the terrace stretched a grassy path where other couples were strolling and Johnny Byrd guided her past them. They walked in silence. He kept his hand on her arm and from time to time glanced about at her in a half-constraint that was no part of his usual air.

At a curve of the path the girl drew definitely back.

"Ah no—"

"Oh, why not? Isn't it the custom?" He laughed over the often-cited phrase but absently. His eyes had a warm, hurrying look in them that rooted her feet the more stubbornly to the ground.

"Decidedly not." She turned a merriment lighted face to him. "To walk alone with a young man—between dances—beneath the moon!"

Maria Angelina shuddered and cast impish eyes at heaven.

"Honestly?" Johnny demanded. "Do you mean to tell me you've never walked between dances with young men?"

"I tell you that I have never even danced with a young man until—" She flashed away from that memory. "Until I came to America. I am not yet in Italian society. I have never been presented. It is not yet my time."

"But—but don't the sub debs have any good times over there? Don't you have dances of your own? Don't you meet fellows? Don't you know anybody?" Johnny demanded with increasing amazement at each new shake of her head.

"Oh, come," he protested. "You can't put that over me. I'll bet you've got a bagful of fellows crazy about you. Don't you ever slip out on an errand, you know, and find some one waiting round the corner—?"

"You are speaking of the customs of my maid, perhaps," said Maria Angelina with becoming young haughtiness. "For myself, I do not go upon errands. I have never been upon the streets alone."

Johnny Byrd stared. With a supreme effort of credulity he envisaged the fact. Perhaps it was

really so. Perhaps she was just as sequestered and guileless and inexperienced as that. It was ridiculous. It was amusing. It was—somehow—intriguing.

With his hand upon her bare arm he drew her closer.

"Ri-Ri—honest now—is this the first—?"

She drew away instinctively before the suppressed excitement of him. Her heart beat fast; her hands were very cold. She knew elation . . . and panic . . . and dread and hope.

It was for this she had come. Young and rich and free! What more would Mamma ask? What greater triumph could be hers?

"I'd like to make a lot of other things the first, too," muttered Johnny.

To Ri-Ri it seemed irrevocable things were being said. But she still held lightly away from him, resisting the clumsy pull of his arm. He hesitated—laughed oddly.

"It ought to be against the law for any girl to look the way you do, Ri-Ri." He laughed again. "I wonder if you know how the deuce you *do* look?"

"Perhaps it is the moonlight, Signor."

"Moonlight—you look as if you were made of it. . . . I could eat you up, Ri-Ri." His eyes on her red little mouth, on her white, beating throat. His voice had an odd, husky note.

"Don't be such a little frost, Ri-Ri. Don't you like me at all?"

It was the dream coming true. It was the fairy prince—not the false figure she had set in the prince's place, but a proud revenge upon him. This was reality, fulfillment.

She saw herself already married to Johnny, returning proudly with him to Italy. She saw them driving in a victoria, openly as man and wife—or no, Johnny would have a wonderful car, all metal and bright color. They would be magnificently touring, with their luggage strapped on the side, as she had seen Americans.

She saw them turning into the sombre courtway of the old Palazzo Santonini and, so surely had she been attuned to the American note, she could presage Johnny's blunt disparagement. He would be astonished that they were living upon the third floor—with the lower apartment let. He would be amused at the servants toiling up the stairs from the kitchens to the dining hall. He would be entertained at the solitary tub. He would be disgusted, undoubtedly, at the candles. . . .

But of course Mamma would have everything very beautiful. There would be no lack of candles. . . . The chandeliers would be sparkling for that dinner. There would be delicious food, delicate wines, an abundant gleam of shining plate and crystal and embroidered linens.

And how Lucia would stare, how dear Julietta would smile! She would buy Julietta the prettiest clothes, the cleverest hats. . . . She would give dear Mamma gold—something that neither dear Papa nor Francisco knew about—and to dear Papa and Francisco she would give, too, a little gold—something that dear Mamma did not know about.

For once Papa could have something for his play that was not a roast from his kitchen nor clothes from his daughters' backs nor oats from his horses!

Probably they would be married at once. Johnny was free and rich—and impatient. She did not suspect him of interest in a long wooing or betrothal. . . . And while she must appear to be in favor of a return home, first, and a marriage from her home, the American ceremony would cut many knots for her—save much expense at home. . . .

She saw herself proudly exhibiting Johnny, delighting in his youth, his blonde Americanism, his smartly cut clothes, his conqueror's assurance.

Meanwhile Maria Angelina was still standing there in the moonlight, like a little wraith of silver, smiling with absent eyes at Johnny's muttered words, withdrawing, in childish panic, from Johnny's close pressing ardor. She knew that if he persisted . . . but before her soft detachment, her half laughing evasiveness of his mood, he did not persist. He seemed oddly struggling with some withholding uncertainties of his own.

"Oh, well, if that's all you like me," said Johnny grumpily.

It was reprieve . . . reprieve to the irrevocable things. Her heart danced . . . and yet a piqued resentment pinched her.

He had been able to resist.

She knew subtly that she could have overcome that irresolution. . . . But she was not going to make things too easy for him—her Santonini pride forbade!

"We must go back," she told him and exulted in his moodiness.

And for the rest of the evening his arm pressed her, his eyes smiled down significantly upon her, and when she confronted the great mirror again it was to glimpse a girl with darkly shining eyes and cheeks like scarlet poppies, a girl in white, like a bride, and with a bride's high pride and assured heart.

She slept, that night, composing the letter to dear Mamma.

CHAPTER VI

TWO—AND A MOUNTAIN

The next morning was given to recovery from the dance. In the afternoon the Martins had planned a mountain climb. It was not a really bad mountain, at all, and the arrangement was to start in the late afternoon, have dinner upon the top, and descend by moonlight.

It was the plan of the younger inexhaustibles among the group, but in spite of faint protests from some of the elders all the Martin house-party was in line for the climb, and with the addition of the Blair party and several other couples from the Lodge, quite a procession was formed upon the path by the river.

It was a lovely day—a shade too hot, if anything was to be urged against it. The sun struck great shafts of golden light amid the rich green of the forest, splashing the great tree boles with bold light and shade. The air was fragrant with spruce and pine and faint, aromatic wintergreen. A hot little wind rocked the reflections in the river and blew its wimpling surface into crinkled, lace-paper fantasies.

Overhead the sky burned blue through the white-cottonballs of cloud.

Bob Martin headed the procession, Ruth at his side, and the stout widower concluded it, squiring a rather heavy-footed Mrs. Martin. Midway in the line came Mrs. Blair, and beside her, abandoning the line of young people behind the immediate leaders was a small figure in short white skirt and middie, pressing closely to her Cousin Jane's side.

It was Maria Angelina, her dark hair braided as usual about her head, her eyes a shade downcast and self-conscious, withdrawn and tight-wrapped as any prudish young bud.

But if virginal pride had urged her to flee all appearance of expectation, an equally sharp masculine reaction was withholding Johnny Byrd from any appearance of pursuit.

He went from group to group, clowning it with jokes and laughter, and only from the corners of his eyes perceiving that small figure, like a child's in its white play clothes.

For half an hour that separation endured—a half hour in which Cousin Jane told Maria Angelina all about her first mountain climb, when a girl, and the storm that had driven herself and her sister and her father and the guide to sleep in the only shelter, and of the guide's snores that were louder than the thunder—and Maria Angelina laughed somehow in the right places without taking in a word, for all the time apprehension was tightening, tightening like a violin string about to snap.

And then, when it was drawn so tight that it did not seem possible to endure any more, Johnny Byrd appeared at Ri-Ri's side, conscious-eyed and boyishly embarrassed, but managing an offhand smile.

"And is this the very first mountain you've ever climbed?" he demanded banteringly.

Gladness rushed back into the girl. She raised a face that sparkled.

"The very first," she affirmed, very much out of breath. "That is, upon the feet. In Italy we go up by diligence and there is always a hotel at the top for tea."

"We'll have a little old bonfire at the top for tea. . . . Don't take it so fast and you'll be all right," he advised, and, laying a restraining hand upon her arm he held her back while Cousin Jane, with her casual, careless smile, passed ahead to join one of the Martin party.

It was an act of masterful significance. Maria Angelina accepted it meekly.

"Like this?" asked Johnny of her smiling face.

"I love it," she told him, and looked happily at the green woods about them, and across the river, rushing now, to where the forest was clinging to sharply rising mountain flanks. Her eyes followed till they found the bare, shouldering peaks outlined against the blue and white of the cumulous sky.

The beauty about her flooded the springs of happiness. It was a wonderful world, a radiant world, a world of dream and delights. It was a world more real than the fantasy of moonlight. She felt more real. She was herself, too, not some strange, diaphanous image conjured out of tulle and gauze, she was her own true flesh-and-blood self, living in a dream that was true.

She looked away from the mountains and smiled up at Johnny Byrd very much as the young princess in the fairy tale must have smiled at the all-conquering prince, and Johnny Byrd's blue eyes grew bluer and brighter and his voice dropped into intimate possessiveness.

It didn't matter in the least what they talked about. They were absurdly merry, loitering behind the procession.

Suddenly it occurred to Maria Angelina that it had been some time since he had drawn her back from Cousin Jane's casual but comprehending smile, some time since they had even heard the echo of voices ahead.

Her conscience woke guiltily.

"We must hurry," she declared, quickening her own small steps.

Teasingly Johnny Byrd hung back. "'Fraid cat, 'fraid cat—what you 'fraid of, Maria Angelina?"

He added, "I'm not going to eat you—though I'd like to," he finished in lower tone.

"But it is getting dark! There are clouds," said the girl, gazing up in frank surprise at the changed sky. She had not noticed when the sunlight fled. It was still visible across the river, slipping over a hill's shoulder, but from their woods it was withdrawn and a dark shadow was stretching across them.

"Clouds—what do you care for clouds?" scoffed Johnny gayly, and in his rollicking tenor, "Just roll dem clouds along," sang he.

Politely Maria Angelina waited until he had finished the song, but she waited with an uneasy mind.

She cared very much for clouds. They looked very threatening, blowing so suddenly over the mountain top, overcasting the brightness of the way. And behind the scattered white were blowing gray ones, their edges frayed like torn clothes on a line, and after the gray ones loomed a dark, black one, rushing nearer.

And suddenly the woods at their right began to thresh about, with a surprised rustling, and a low mutter, as of smothered warning, ran over the shoulder of the mountain.

"Rain! As sure as the Lord made little rain drops," said Johnny unconcerned. "There's going to be a cloudful spilled on us," he told the troubled girl, "but it won't last a moment. Come into the wood and find the dry side of a tree."

He caught at her hand and brought her crashing through the underbrush, pushing through thickets till they were in the center of a great group of maples, their heavy boughs spread protectingly above.

A giant tree trunk protected her upon one side; upon the other Johnny drew close, spreading his sweater across her shoulders. Looking upwards, Maria Angelina could not see the sky; above and about her was soft greenness, like a fairy bower. And when the rain came pouring like hail upon the leaves scarcely a drop won through to her.

They stood very still, unmoving, unspeaking while the shower fell. There was an unreal dreamlike quality about the happening to the girl. Then, almost intrusively, she became deeply aware of his presence there beside her—and conscious that he was aware of hers.

She shivered.

"Cold," said Johnny, in a jumpy voice, and put a hand on her shoulders, guarded by his sweater.

"N-no," she whispered.

"Feel dry?"

His hand moved upward to her bared head, lingered there upon the heavy braids.

"Yes," she told him, faintly as before.

"But you're shivering."

"I don't like t-thunder," she told him absurdly, as a muttering roll shook the air above them.

His hand, still hovering over her hair, went down against her cheek and pressed her to him. She could hear his heart beating. It sounded as loudly in his breast as her own. She had a sense of sudden, unpremeditated emotion.

She felt his lips upon the back of her neck.

She tried to draw away, and suddenly he let her go and gave a short, unsteady laugh.

"It's all right, Ri-Ri—you're my little pal, aren't you?" he murmured.

Unseemingly she nodded, drawing a long, shaken breath. Then as he started to draw her nearer again she moved away, putting up her arms to her hair in a gesture that instinctively shielded the confusion of her face.

"No? . . . All right, Ri-Ri, I won't crowd you," he murmured. "But oh, you little Beauty Girl, you ought to be in a cage with bars about. . . . You ought to wear a mask—a regular diving outfit——"

Unexpectedly Ri-Ri recovered her self-possession. Again she fled from the consummation of the scene.

"I shall wear nothing so unbecoming," she flung lightly back. "And it has not been raining for ever

so long. Unless you wish to build a nest in the forest, like a new fashion of oriole, Signor Byrd, you had better hurry and catch up with the others."

Johnny did not speak as they came out of the woods and in silence they hurried along the path on the river's edge.

The sun came out again to light them; on the green leaves about them the wetness glittered and dried and the ephemeral shower seemed as unreal as the memory it evoked.

With her head bent Maria Angelina pressed on in a haste that grew into anxiety. Not a sound came back to them from those others ahead. Not a voice. Not a footstep.

And presently the path appeared dying under their feet.

Green moss overspread it. Brambles linked arms across it.

"They are not here. We are on the wrong way," cried Maria Angelina and turned startled eyes on the young man.

Johnny Byrd refused to take alarm.

"They must have crossed the river farther back—that's the answer," he said easily. "We went past the right crossing—probably just after the storm. You know you were speeding like a two-year-old on the home stretch."

But Ri-Ri refused to shoulder all that blame.

"It might have been before the storm—while we were lingering so," she urged distressfully. "You know that for so long we had heard nothing—we ought to go back quickly—very quickly and find that crossing."

Johnny did not look back. He looked across the river, which ran more deeply here between narrowed banks, and then glanced on ahead.

"Oh, we'll go ahead and cross the next chance we get," he informed her. "We can strike in from there to old Baldy. I know the way. . . . Trust your Uncle Leatherstocking," he told her genially.

But no geniality appeased Maria Angelina's deepening sense of foreboding.

She quickened her steps after him as he strode on ahead, gallantly holding back brambles for her and helping her scramble over fallen logs, and she assented, with the eagerness of anxiety, when he announced a place as safe for crossing.

It was at the head of a mild rush of rapids, and an outcropping of large rocks made possible, though slippery, stepping-stones.

But Ri-Ri's heelless shoes were rubber soled, and she was both fearless and alert. And though the last leap was too long for her, for she landed in the shallows with splashing ankles, she had scarcely a down glance for them. Her worried eyes were searching the green uplands before them.

Secretly she was troubled at Johnny's instant choice of way. Her own instinct was to go back along the river and then strike in towards old Baldy, but men, she knew from Papa, did not like objections to their wisdom, so she reminded herself that she was a stranger and ignorant of this country and that Johnny Byrd knew his mountains.

He told her, as they went along, how well he knew them.

Steadily their path climbed.

"Should we not wind back a little?" she ventured once.

"Oh, we're on another path—we'll dip back and meet the other path a little higher up," the young man told her.

But still the path did not dip back. It reached straight up. But Johnny would not abandon it. He seemed to feel it inextricably united with his own rightness of decision, and since he was inevitably right, so inevitably the path must disclose its desired character.

But once or twice he paused and looked out over the way. Then, hopefully, Ri-Ri hung upon his expression, longing for reconsideration. But he never faltered, always on her approach he charged ahead again.

No holding back of brambles, now. No helping over logs. Johnny was the pathfinder, oblivious, intent, and Ri-Ri, the pioneer woman, enduring as best she might.

Up he drove, straight up the mountain side, and after him scrambled the girl, her fears voiceless in her throat, her heart pounding with exertion and anxiety like a ship's engine in her side.

Time seemed interminable. There was no sun now. The gray and white clouds were spread thinly over the sky and only a diffused brightness gave the suggestion of the west.

When the path wound through woods it seemed already night. On barren slopes the day was clear again.

Hours passed. Endless hours to the tired-footed girl. They had left the last woods behind them now and reached a clearing of bracken among the granite, and here Johnny Byrd stopped, and stared out with an unconcealed bewilderment that turned her hopes to lead.

With him, she stared out at the great gray peaks closing in about them without recognizing a friend among them. Dim and unfamiliar they loomed, shrouded in clouds, like chilly giants in gray mufflers against the damp.

It was not old Baldy. It could not be old Baldy. One looked up at old Baldy from the Lodge and she had heard that from old Baldy one looked down upon the Lodge and the river and the opening valley. She had been told that from old Baldy the Martin chalet resembled a cuckoo clock. . . .

No cuckoo clocks in those vague sweeps below.

"Can we not go down a little bit?" said Maria Angelina gently. "Farther down again we might find the right path. . . . Up here—I think we are on the wrong mountain."

Turning, Johnny looked about. Ahead of him were overhanging slabs of rock.

Irresolution vanished. "That's the top now," he declared. "We are just coming up the wrong side, that's all. I'll say it's wrong—but here we are. I'll bet the others are up there now—lapping up that food. Come on, Ri-Ri, we haven't far now to go."

In a gust of optimism he held out his hand and Maria Angelina clutched it with a weariness courage could not conceal.

It seemed to her that her breath was gone utterly, that her feet were leaden weights and her muscles limply effortless. But after him she plunged, panting and scrambling up the rocks, and then, very suddenly, they found themselves to be on only a plateau and the real mountain head reared high and aloof above.

Under his breath—and not particularly under it, either—Johnny Byrd uttered a distinct blasphemy.

And in her heart Maria Angelina awfully seconded it.

Then with decidedly assumed nonchalance, "Gosh! All that way to supper!" said the young man. "Well, come on, then—we got to make a dent in this."

"Oh, are you sure—are you *sure* that this is the right mountain?" Maria Angelina begged of him.

"Don't I know Baldy?" he retorted. "We're just on another side of it from the others, I told you. Come on, Ri-Ri—we'll soon smell the coffee boiling."

She wished he had not mentioned coffee. It put a name to that gnawing, indefinite feeling she had been too intent to own.

Coffee . . . Fragrant and steaming, with bread and butter . . . sandwiches filled with minced ham, with cream cheese, with olive paste—sandwiches filled with anything at all! Cold chicken . . . salad . . . fruit. Food in any form! *Food!!*

She felt empty. Utterly empty and disconsolate.

And she was tired. She had never known such tiredness—her feet ached, her legs ached, her back ached, her arms ached. She could have dropped with the achingness of her. Each effort was a punishment.

Yet she went on with a feverish haste. She was driven by a compulsion to which fatigue was nothing.

It had become terrible not to be reunited with the others. She thought of the hours, the long hours, that she and Johnny Byrd had been alone and she flinched, shivering under the whiplash of fear.

What were they saying of her, those others? What were they thinking?

She knew how unwarrantable, how inexcusable a thing she had done.

It had begun with deliberate loitering. For that—for a little of that—she had the sanction of the new American freedom, the permission of Cousin Jane's casual, understanding smile.

"It's all right," that smile had seemed to say to her, "it's all right as long as it's Johnny Byrd—but be careful, Ri-Ri."

And she had loitered shamefully, she had plunged into the woods with Johnny in that thunder storm, she had let him take her on the wrong path.

And now it was growing dark and they were far from the others—and she was not sure, even, that they were upon the right way.

But they *must* be. They could not be so hideously, so finally wrong.

Panic routed her exhaustion and she toiled furiously on.

"You're a pretty good scout—for a little Wop," said Johnny Byrd with a sudden grin and a moment's brightness was lighted within her.

She did not speak—she could only breathe hard and smile.

Nearer and nearer they gained the top, rough climbing but not dangerous. The top was not far now. Johnny shouted and listened, then shouted again.

Once they thought they heard voices but it was only the echoes of their own, borne hollowly back.

"The wind is the other way," said Johnny, and on they went, charging up a steep, gravelly slope over more rocks and into a scrub group of firs. . . .

Surely this was as near the top as one could go! Nothing above but barren, tilted rock. Nothing beyond but more boulders and stunted trees. The place lay bare before their eyes.

Round and round they went, calling, holding their breath to listen. Then, with a common impulse, they turned and stared at each other.

That moment told Maria Angelina what panic was.

CHAPTER VII

JOHNNY BECOMES INEVITABLE

She did not speak. She was afraid she was going to burst into tears. Her knees were trembling and she sat down with the effect of collapse and looked mutely up at Johnny.

"Judas," said Johnny bitterly.

He stared around once more, evading her eyes now, and then he moved over and sat down beside her, drawing out his cigarettes.

Slowly he took one, tapped its end upon a rock, and lighted it. Then, the case still open, he looked inquiringly at her.

"Smoke, Ri-Ri?" he questioned. "Ought to—never too late to learn."

She shook her head, smiling faintly. She knew his own perturbation must be immense. She did not want to add to it; she wanted to be brave and conceal her own agony.

He put the cigarettes away and from an inner pocket drew out a cake of chocolate.

"Supper," he announced.

She broke the cake in two even halves, giving him back one. He took but half of that. With the cigarette between his lips he felt better. Slowly he relaxed.

"I'll have to teach you how to smoke," he said, blowing rings. "When we're rested we'll get some wood and build a fire. The others will see that and signal back and we'll make connections."

At that she stared, round-eyed. "Wait for a fire?" Incredulously she straightened. Her voice grew breathless. "Oh, no, we must go—we must go," she said with a hint of wildness in her urgency.

Deliberately Johnny leaned back. "Go? Go where?"

"Go down. Go to where the others are. We must find them."

"Nothing doing." Johnny rubbed a stout leg. "Your Uncle Dudley is all in. So are you."

"But I can go, I am able to go on," she insisted. "And I would rather—Oh, if you please, I would so much rather go on at once. We cannot wait like this."

"I'll say we can wait like this. Watch me."

"But we cannot stay—"

"Well, we cannot go," said Johnny mimicking. "We'd get nowhere if we did try. We'd just go round and round. Our best bet is to stay on this peak and signal. Believe me, I'm not going to stir for one long while."

Again the fear of tears choked back the words that rushed upon her. She told herself that she must not be weak and frantic and make a scene. . . . Men abhorred scenes. And it would not help. It would only anger him. He was tired now. He was not thinking of her. He had not realized the situation.

Presently he would realize. . . . And, anyway, he was there with her, he would take care of her, protect her from the tongues of gossip.

Slowly Johnny smoked two cigarettes, then he rose and gathered sticks for a fire. It burned briskly, its swift flame throwing a glowing circle about them and extinguishing the rest of the world.

There had been no sunset. A bank of clouds had swallowed the last vestige of ruddy light. The mountain peaks darkened. It was growing night.

"We'll wait for moonlight," said Johnny Byrd.

But at that Maria Angelina's eyes came away from those mountains which she was unremittingly watching for an answering fire and fixed themselves upon his face in startled horror.

"Moonlight!" she gasped. "But no—no! We must not wait any more. It is too late now. We must get down as soon as we can."

"Why, you little baby!" Johnny Byrd moved nearer to her. "What you 'fraid of, Ri-Ri? We can't help how late it is, can we?"

He put an arm about her and drew her gently close, and because she was so tired and frightened and upset Maria Angelina could no longer resist the tears that came blinding her eyes.

"You little baby!" said Johnny again softly, and suddenly she felt his kiss upon her cheek.

"Poor little Ri-Ri! Poor tired little girl!"

"Oh, you must not. Signor, you must not."

"Signor," he said reproachfully.

"J-Johnny," she choked.

"That's better. . . . All right, I'll be good, Ri-Ri. Just sit still. And I'll be good."

But firmly he kept his arm about her and soon her tense little figure relaxed in that strong clasp. She was not frightened, as last night at the dance, she felt utterly forlorn and comforted by his strength.

They sat very still, unspeaking in that silent embrace, and about them it grew colder and darker while the sky seemed to grow thinner and grayer and clear. And at last against the pallor of the sky, mountain after mountain lifted itself out of the shadowy cloud mass, and peak after peak defined itself, stretching on and on like an army of giants.

Then the ridges grew blacker again, and back of one edge a sharp flare of light flamed, and a blood red disc of a moon came pushing furiously up into the sky, flinging down a transforming radiance.

In the valley the silvery birches gleamed like wood nymphs against the ebony firs.

Beauty had touched the world again. A long breath came fluttering from the girl's lips; she felt strangely solaced and comforted. After all, it was Johnny with her . . . the fairy prince. Her dreams were coming true . . . even under the shadow of this tragedy.

Again she felt his lips upon her cheek and now he was trying to turn her head towards him. Mutely she resisted, drawing away, but his force increased. She closed her eyes; she felt his kiss upon her hair, her cheek, the corner of her unstirring mouth.

And she thought that it was his right—if she turned from him she would seem strangely refusing. An American, she knew, kissed his fiancée freely.

But it was a tremendous freedom. . . .

It would have been—knightlier, she thought quiveringly, if he had not done that, if he had revealed a more respectful homage.

But these were American ways . . . and he was a man and he loved her and he wanted to feel that she belonged to him utterly. It was comfort for her troubled spirit.

But when she felt his hand trying to turn up her chin, so that her young lips might meet his, she slipped decidedly away.

"No? All right." Johnny gave a short, uncertain laugh. "All right, little girl, I'll be good."

She had risen to her feet and he rose now and his voice changed to a heartier note.

"Ready for the going? We'll have to make a start, I suppose. I don't see any rescue expeditions starting this way. . . . Lordy, I'm a starved man! I could eat the side of a house."

"I could eat the other side," said Maria Angelina smiling shakily.

Johnny put out the fire, ground out its embers beneath his heels, and started down upon the trail that they had come. Closely after him came the girl. The moonlight flooded the mountain side with vague, uncertain light and the descent was a difficult and dangerous matter.

They tripped over rocks; they stumbled through underbrush. The moon was their only clue to direction and the moon seemed to be slipping past the peaks at a confusing speed.

"We're going down anyway," said Johnny Byrd grimly.

Sharply they were stopped. The ledge on which they found themselves ended abruptly, like a bluff, and peering over its edge they looked down into the dark tops of tall fir trees.

No more descent there.

In disgusted rage Johnny strode up and down the length of that ledge but it was a clear shelf, with no way out from it except the way that they had come. There was no approach from below.

"And some fools go in for mountaineering!" said Johnny Byrd bitterly.

It was the last gust of humor in him. He was furious—and he grew more furious unrestrainedly. He exploded in muttered oaths and exclamations.

In her troubled little heart Maria Angelina felt for him. She knew that he was tired and hungry, and men, when they were hungry, were very unhappy. But she was tired and hungry, too—and her reputation, the reputation that was her very existence, was in jeopardy.

Up they scrambled, from the ledge again, and once back upon the mountain side, they circled farther back around the mountain before starting down again.

Blindly Maria Angelina followed Johnny's lead. She tripped over roots; she caught upon brambles. With her last shreds of vanity she was grateful that he could not see her streaming hair and scratched and dirty face.

It had grown darker and darker and the moon had vanished utterly behind the clouds. The air was damp and cold. A wind was rising.

Suddenly their feet struck into the faint line of a path. Eagerly they followed. It wound on back across the mountain side and rounded a wooded spur.

"It will lead somewhere, anyway," declared Johnny, hope returning good nature to his tone.

"But it is not the right way," Maria Angelina combated in distress. "See, we are not going down any more. Oh, let us keep on going down until we find that river below, and then we can return to the Lodge——"

"You come on," said Johnny firmly, striding on ahead, and unhappily she followed, her anxiety warring with her weariness.

What time could it be? She felt as if it were the middle of the night. The picnickers must all be home by now, looking for her, organizing searching parties perhaps. . . . What must they think? What must they not think?

She saw her Cousin Jane's distress. . . . Ruth's disgust. Would they imagine that she had eloped?

She knew but little of American conventions and that little told her that the ceremonies were easy of accomplishment. Young people were always eloping. . . . The consent of guardians was not necessary. . . . How terrible, if they imagined her gone on a romantic elopement, to have her return, mud plastered, after a night with a young man upon the mountain!

A night upon the mountain with a young man . . . a young man in love with her.

Scandal. . . . Unbelievable shame.

She felt as if they were in the grip of a nightmare.

They must hurry, hurry. Somehow they must gain upon that night, they must return to the Lodge before it was too late.

A cold sprinkle of rain fell, plastering her midly shiveringly to her, but the rain soon stopped and the path grew clearer and more and more defined as they stumbled along it to its end.

It was not a house they found. It was not really a cabin. It was just three walls of logs built against the rocky face of the mountain.

But it was a hut, a shelter, with a door that swung open on leather hinges at Johnny's tug.

He called, then peered within. Finally he struck a match and stared about and Maria Angelina came to look, too. The place was so tiny that a bed of boughs and blankets on the floor covered most of the space, save for a few boxes. Outside the doors were the ashes of old fires.

"Well, it's *something*," said Johnny in glum resignation. "Hasn't the fool that built it any food?"

Vigorously he poked about the tiny place, then emerged to report in disgust, "Not a darn thing. . . . Oh, well, it's a shelter, anyway."

The incredible idea pierced Maria Angelina that he was going to pause there for rest.

"Oh, we must go on," she insisted.

"Go on?" He turned to stare in indignation at the girl who had gasped that at him. "Go on? In this dark? When it's going to rain? Why, you're nearly all in, now."

"Indeed—indeed, I am not all in," she protested. "It is not necessary for me to rest—not necessary at all. I am quite strong. I want only to go on—to go to the Lodge——"

"We'll never make the Lodge to-night. We'll have to camp here the best way we can."

It seemed to her that she could hardly have heard him. It was so incredible a thought—so

overwhelming—

A queer gulping sound came from her throat. Her words fell without her volition, like spent breaths.

"But that is wrong. We cannot stay. We cannot stay like that—"

"Why can't we stay?"

"It—it is impossible! The scandal—"

Angrily he wheeled about. "Scandal?" he said sharply. "What the hell scandal is there?"

His indignation at the words could not dispel her terror. But it was something to have him so hot her champion.

"You know, they will all talk—"

"Let 'em talk," he said curtly. "We can't help it."

She put a hand to her throat as if to still that throbbing pulse there that impeded speech.

"I know we cannot help it. But we cannot—not give them so much to talk of. We can be trying to return—"

"Don't be a goose, Ri-Ri!" he broke in sharply.

He was a man. He did not understand the full agony. . . . Desperately Maria Angelina wondered as to her reception. She had no parallel in Italian society. The thing could not happen in Italian society. A girl, a well born girl, rambling the woods all night with her fiancé!

She wondered if the announcement of their engagement instantly upon their return would appease the world. Of course, there would always be the story. As long as she lived there would be the story. But as Johnny's wife, triumphant, assured, she could afford to ignore it.

At her stillness Johnny had looked about, and something infinitely drooping and forlorn in the vague outlines of her small figure made its softening appeal.

His voice changed. "Don't you worry, little girl," he told her soothingly, "I'll take care of you."

Her heart leaped.

"Ah, yes," she said faintly, "but what can we do? Had it better be at once—?"

"At once—?"

"The marriage," she choked out.

"Marriage?" Even in the dimness she saw that he raised his head, his chin stiffening, his whole outline hardening.

"What are you talking about?" he said very roughly.

"About—about our marriage," she repeated trembling, and then, at something in his hardness and his grimness, "Why, what did you mean—? Must it not be soon?"

A dreadful, deliberate silence engulfed her words.

Coldly Johnny's slow voice broke it.

"Who said anything about marriage?" defiantly he demanded. "I never asked you to marry me."

CHAPTER VIII

JOHNNY BECOMES EXPLICIT

"I never asked you to marry me," he repeated very stiffly.

The crash of all her worlds sounded in Maria Angelina's ears. An aghast bewilderment flooded her soul.

Pitiably she stammered, "Why it—it was understood, was it not? You cared—you—you—"

She could not put into words the memories that beset her stricken consciousness. But the cheeks that had felt his kiss flamed with a sudden burning scarlet.

"What was understood?" said Johnny Byrd. "That I was going to marry you—because I kissed you?" And with that dreadful hostile grimness he insisted, "You knew darned well I wasn't proposing to you."

What did he mean? Had not every action of his been an affirmation of their relation? Did he believe she was one to whom men acted lightly? Had he never meant to propose to her, never meant to marry?

Last night at the dance—this afternoon in the woods—what had he meant by all his admiration and his boldness?

And that evening on the mountain, when, with his arm around her, he had murmured that he would take care of her. . . . Had he meant nothing by it, nothing, except the casual insolent intimacy which a man would grant a *ballerina*?

Or was he now turning from her in dreadful abandonment because after this scandal she would be too conspicuous to make it agreeable to carry out the intentions—perhaps only the vaguely realized intentions—of the past?

But why then, why had he kissed her on the mountain?

Utter terror beset her. Her voice shook so that the words dropped almost incoherently from the quivering lips.

"But if not—if not—Oh, you must know that now—now it is imperative!"

Shameful beseeching—shameful that she should have to beseech. Where was his manhood, his chivalry—where his compassion?

"Imperative *nuts*! You don't mean to say you're trying to make me marry you because we got lost in the woods?"

Desperately the girl struggled for dignity.

"It is the least you could do, Signor. Even if—if you had not cared——"

Her voice broke again.

"You little nut." Johnny's tones had altered. More mildly he went on, "I don't quite get you, Ri-Ri, and I don't think you get me. It isn't up to me to do any marrying, if that's honestly what's worrying you. And I'm not going to be stampeded, if that's what you're trying to do. . . . Our reputations will have to stand it."

And this, Maria Angelina despairingly recalled, was the man who had kissed her, had watched the moon rise with his arm about her, promising her his protection. . . . Wildly she wished that she had died before she had come to this—a thing lightly regarded and repudiated.

It was horrible to plead to him but the panic of her plight drove her on.

"Reputations!" she said chokingly. "Yours can stand it, perhaps—but what of me? You cannot be serious, you cannot! Why, it is my name, my life, my everything! . . . You made me come this way. Always I wanted you to go another way, but no, you were sure, you told me to trust to you. And then you pretended to care for me—do you think I would have tolerated your arm about me for one instant if I had not believed it was forever? Oh, if my father were here you would talk differently! Have you no honor? None? . . . Every one knew there was an—an affair of the heart growing between us, and then for us two to disappear—this night alone——"

Her voice kept breaking off. She could not control it or the tears that ran down her face in the darkness. She was a choking, crying wild thing.

Desperately she forced one last insistence, "Oh, you must, you must!"

"Must nothing," Byrd answered her savagely. "What kind of scheme is this, anyhow? I've had a few things tried before but this beats the Dutch. I don't know how much of this talk you mean but I'll tell you right now, young lady, nobody can tie me up for life with any such stuff. Father! Honor! Scandal! Believe me, little one, you've got the wrong number."

"You mean—you dare refuse?"

"You bet I dare refuse. There's no sense to all this. Nobody's going to think the worse of you because you got lost with me—and if you're trying to put anything over, you might as well stop now."

Maria Angelina stopped. It seemed to her that she should die of shame.

Dazedly she stood and looked at him through the darkness out of which a few drops of rain were again falling.

"You just forget it and get a bit of rest," Johnny Byrd advised brusquely. "Hurry in out of the wet. That thing's going to leak again," and he nodded jerkily up at the sky.

He tugged open the door, and stricken as a wounded creature crawling to shelter Maria Angelina bent her head and stumbled across the threshold.

"In you go," he said with a more cheerful air. "Wrap yourself up as warm as you can and I'll follow —"

She was within the doorway when these words came. She turned and saw that he was stooping to enter.

"I shall do quite well, Signor," she found her voice quickly to say. "You need not come in."

"Need not——?" He appeared caught with fresh amazement. "Judas, where do you think I'm going

to stay? Out in the rain?"

"Certainly not in here, Signor."

Desperation lent Maria Angelina sudden fire. "You must be mad, Signor!" she told him fiercely.

"And you madder. You don't think I'm going to stay"—he jerked his head backward—"out in the wet?"

"But naturally. You are a man. It is your place."

"My place—you little Wop! A man! I'd be a dead one." The words of a humorous lecturer smote his memory and with harsh merriment he quoted, "'Good-night, Miss Middleton, said I, as I buttoned her carefully into her tent and went out to sleep upon a cactus.' . . . None of that stuff for mine," and without more ado Johnny Byrd lowered his head to pass under the doorway.

There was a gasp from the interior.

"Ri-Ri, listen to me!" he demanded upon the threshold. "You're raving—loco—nuts! There's no harm in my huddling under the same roof with you—it's a damn necessity. I'm not going to hold hands and I'm not going to kiss you. If you've got any drawn swords you can lay their blades between us. You turn your face to the wall and forget all about it and I'll do the same."

"Signor, stay without!"

"Got a dagger in your garter? . . . Ri-Ri, listen to me. You're absolutely wrong in the head. Be sensible. Have a heart. I'm going to get some rest."

"It does not matter what you say or what you intend. You do not need to reassure me that you will not kiss me, Signor. That will not happen again." Maria Angelina's voice was like ice. "But you are not coming within this place."

Tensely she confronted him. He loomed before her as a wolfish brute, seeking his comfort at this last cost of her pride. . . . But no man, she thought tragically, should ever say that he had spent the night within the same four walls.

She sprang forward, her hands outstretched, then shrank back.

She could not touch him. Not only the perception of the ludicrous folly of matching her strength against his withheld her, but some flaming fury against putting a hand upon a man who had so repudiated her.

Her brain grew alert. Suddenly very intent and collected she stepped aside and Johnny Byrd came in.

Close to the wall she pressed, edging nearer and nearer the door, and as he stumbled and fumbled with the blankets she gave a quick spring and flashed out.

Like mad she ran across the clearing, through a thicket, and out again and away.

On the instant he was after her; she heard his steps crashing behind her but she had the start of her swiftness and the speed of her desperation. Brambles meant nothing to her, nor the thickets nor branches. She flew on and on, lost in the darkness, his shouts growing fainter and fainter in her ears.

At last, in a shrub, she stopped to listen. She could hear nothing. Then came a call—very faint. It came from the wrong direction. She had turned and doubled like a hare and Johnny was pursuing, if he still pursued, a mistaken way.

She was safe . . . and she stood still for a few minutes to quiet her pounding heart and catch her gasping breath, and then she stole out, cautiously, anxiously hurrying, to make her own way down.

She had no idea of time or of distance. Vaguely she felt that it was the middle of the night but that if she were quick, very quick, she might reach the Lodge before it was too disastrously late. She might meet a searching party out for them—there would be searching parties if people were truly worried at their absence.

Of course if they thought it an elopement, they might not take that trouble. They might be merely waiting and conjecturing.

If only Cousin Jim had not returned to New York! He was so kind and concerned that he would be searching. There would be a chance of his understanding. But Cousin Jane—what would she believe?

Cousin Jane had seen Johnny draw her significantly back.

At her folly of the afternoon she looked back with horror. How bold she had been in that new American freedom! Mamma had warned her—dear Mamma so far away, so innocent of this terrible disgrace. . . .

Wildly she plunged on through the dark, hoping always for a path but finding nothing but rough wilderness. She knew no landmarks to guide her, but down she went determinedly, down, down continually.

An hour had passed. Perhaps two hours. The sky had grown blacker and blacker. There were occasional gusts of rain. The wind that had been threshing the tree tops blew with increasing fury.

Jagged tridents of lightning flashed before her eyes. Thunder followed almost instantly, great crashing peals that seemed to be rending the heavens.

Maria Angelina felt as if the splinters must fall upon her. It was like the voice of judgment.

On she went, down, down, through a darkness that was chaos lit by lightning. Rain came, in a torrent of water, heavy as lead, drenching her to the skin. Her hair had streamed loose and was plastered about her face, her throat, her arms. A strand like a wet rope wound about her wrist and delayed her. Often she slipped and fell.

Still down. But if she should find the Lodge, what then? What would they think of her, wet, torn, disheveled, an outcast of the night?

She sobbed aloud as she went. She, who had come to America so proudly, so confidently of glad fortune, who had thought the world a fairy tale and believed that she had found its prince—what place on earth would there be for her after this, disgraced and ashamed?

They would ship her back to Mamma at once. And the scandal would travel with her, whispered by tourists, blazoned by newspapers.

And her family had so counted upon her! They had looked for such great things!

Now she had utterly blackened their name, tarnished them all forever with her disrepute. Poor Julietta's hopes would be ruined. . . . No one would want a Santonini. . . . Lucia would be furious. The Tostis might even repudiate her—certainly they would inflict their condescension.

She could only disappear, hide in some nursing sisterhood.

So ran her wild thoughts as she scrambled down these endless mountain sides. All the black fears that she had fought off earlier in the evening by her belief in Johnny's devotion were upon her now like a pack of wolves. She wished that she could die at once and be out of it, yet when she heard the sudden wash of water, almost under her feet, she jumped aside and screamed.

A river! In the night it looked wider than that one they had followed that afternoon but it might only be another part of it.

Very wearily she made her way along the bank, so mortally tired that it seemed as if every step must be her last. There was no underbrush to struggle with now, for she had come to a grove of pines and their fallen needles made a carpet for her lagging feet.

The rain was nearly over, but she was too wet and too cold to take comfort in that.

More and more laggingly she went and at last, when a hidden root tripped her, she made no effort to rise, but lay prostrate, her cheek upon her outflung arm, and yielded to the dark, drowsy oblivion that stole numbingly over her.

She would be glad, she thought, never to wake.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. BLAIR REGRETS

It had taken a long time for concern to spread among the picnickers.

The sudden shower had sent them all scurrying for shelter, and when the climb was resumed, they crossed the river on those wide, flat stepping-stones that Johnny Byrd had missed, and reformed in self-absorbed little twos and threes that failed to take note of the absence of the laggards.

When Ruth remembered to call back, "Where's Ri-Ri?" to her mother, Mrs. Blair only glanced over her shoulder and answered, "She's coming," with no thought of anxiety.

It did occur to her, however, somewhat later, that the girl was loitering a little too significantly with young Byrd, and she made a point of suggesting to Ruth, when she passed her in a short time, that she wait for her cousin who was probably finding the climb too strenuous.

"Who? Me?" said Ruth amazedly. "Gee, what do you want me to do—fan her? Let Johnny do it," and cheerfully she went on photographing a group upon a fallen log, and Mrs. Blair went on with the lawyer from Washington who was a rapid walker.

And Ruth, with the casual thought that neither Ri-Ri nor Johnny Byrd would relish such attendance, promptly let the thought of them dissolve from her memory.

She was immersed in her own particular world that afternoon.

Life was at a crisis for her. Robert Martin had been drifting faster and faster with the current of

his admiration for her, and now seemed to have been brought up on very definite solid ground. He felt he knew where he was. And he wanted to know where Ruth was.

And Ruth found herself in that special quandary reserved for independent American girls who want to have their cake and eat it, too.

She wanted Bob Martin, and she wanted to be gratifyingly sure that Bob Martin wanted her—and then she wanted affairs to stand still at that pleasant pass, while she played about and invited adventure.

Life was so desirable as it was . . . especially with Bob Martin in the scene. But if he were unsatisfied he wouldn't remain there as part of the adjacent landscape.

Bob was no pursuing Lochinvar.

It was very delicate. She couldn't explain all her hesitation satisfactorily to herself, so she had made rather a poor job of it when she tried to explain to Bob.

Part of it was young unreadiness for the decisions and responsibilities of life, part of it was reprehensible aversion about shutting the door to other adventures, and part of it was her native energy, as yet unemployed, aware of a larger world and anxious to play some undivined part in its destinies.

She had always been furious that the war had come too soon for her. She would have loved to have gone over there, and known the mud and doughnuts and doughboys . . . and the excitement and the officers. . . .

But Bob wasn't going to dangle much longer. He hadn't a doubt but that everything was all right and he was in haste to taste the assurance.

And Ruth wasn't going to lose him.

These hesitations of hers would convey nothing to his youthful masculinity but that she didn't care enough. And his was not the age that appreciates the temporizing half loaf.

So that trip up the mountain meant for them much youthful discussion, much searching of wills and hearts and motives, a threatening gloom upon his part, and a struggling defensiveness upon hers.

Small wonder that Maria Angelina and her companion were not remembered!

It was not until she was at the very top of old Baldy, and again a part of the general group that Ruth had the thought to look about her and recognize her cousin's absence.

"They *are* taking their time," she remarked to Bob.

"Glad they're enjoying it," he gave back with a disgruntled air that Ruth determinedly ignored.

"I guess Ri-Ri's no good at a climb," she said. "This little old mountain must have got her."

"Oh, Johnny's strong right arm will do the work," he returned indifferently.

"But they ought to be here now. You don't suppose they missed the way?" Mrs. Blair, overhearing, suggested, and turned to look down the steep path that they had come.

Bob scouted the idea of such a mishap.

"Johnny knows his way about. They'll be along when they feel like it," he predicted easily, and Mrs. Blair turned to the arrangement of supper with a slight anxiety which she dissembled beneath casual cheerfulness.

In her heart she was vexed. Dreadfully noticeable, she thought, that persistent lagging of theirs. She might have expected it of Johnny Byrd—he had a way of making new girls conspicuous—but she had looked for better things from Maria Angelina.

It was too bad. It showed that as soon as you gave those cloistered girls an inch they took an ell.

Outwardly she spoke with praise of her charge. Julia Martin, a youthful aunt of Bob's, was curious about the girl.

"She's the loveliest creature," she declared with facile enthusiasm, as she and Mrs. Blair delved into a hamper that the Martins' chauffeur and butler had shouldered up before the picnickers.

"And so naively young—I don't see how her mother dared let her come so far away."

"Oh—her mother wanted her to see America," Mrs. Blair gave back.

"She must be having a wonderful time," pursued the young lady. "She was simply a picture at the dance. . . . Think of giving a mountain climb the night after the dance," she added in a lower voice. "Bob and his mother are perfectly mad. I think they want to kill their guests off—perhaps there's method in their madness. . . . I never saw anything quite like her," she resumed upon Maria Angelina. "I fancy Johnny Byrd hasn't either!"

"Wasn't she pretty?" agreed Mrs. Blair with pleasantness, laying out the spoons. "Yes, it's very interesting for her to have this," she went on, "before she really knows Roman society. . . . She

will come out as soon as she returns from America, I suppose. The eldest sister is being married this fall, and the next sister and Maria Angelina are about of an age."

"Little hard on the sister unless she is a raving, tearing beauty," said the intuitive Miss Martin with a laugh. "Perhaps they are sending Maria Angelina away to keep her in abeyance!"

"Perhaps," Mrs. Blair assented. "At any rate, with this preliminary experience, I fancy that little Ri-Ri will make quite a sensation over there."

It was as if she said plainly to the curious young aunt that this pilgrimage was only a prelude in Maria Angelina's career, and she certainly did not take its possibilities for any serious finalities.

But the youthful aunt was not intimidated.

"She'll make a sensation over *here* if she carries off the Byrd millions," she threw out smartly.

Mrs. Blair smiled with an effect of remote amusement. Inwardly she knew sharp annoyance. She wished she could smack that loitering child. . . . Very certainly she would betray no degrading interest in her fortunes. The Martins were not to think that she was intent on placing *any one!*

"Johnny Byrd's a child," said she indifferently.

"He's been of age two years," said the youthful aunt, "and he's out of college now and very much a catch—all his vacations used to be hairbreadth escapes. Of course he courts danger," she threw in with a little laugh and a sidelong look.

But Mrs. Blair was not laughing. She was blaming herself for the negligence which had made this situation possible, although—extenuation made haste to add within her—no one could humanly be expected to be going up and down a trail all afternoon to gather in the stragglers. And she had told Ruth to wait.

"She's probably just tired out," said the stout widower with strong accents of sympathy. "Climb too much for her, and very sensibly they've turned back."

"If I could only be sure. If I could only be sure she wasn't hurt—or lost," said Mrs. Blair doubtfully.

"Lost!" Bob Martin derided. "Lost—on a straight trail. Not unless they jolly wanted to!"

"Don't spoil the party, mother," was Ruth's edged advice. "Ri-Ri hasn't broken any legs or necks. And she wasn't alone to get lost. She just gave up and Johnny Byrd took her home. I know her foot was blistered at the dance last night and that's probably the matter."

It was the explanation they decided to adopt.

Mrs. Blair, recalling that this was not her expedition, made a double duty of appearing sensibly at ease, although the nervous haste with which a sudden noise would bring her to alertness, facing the path, revealed some inner tension.

The young people were inclined to be hilarious over the affair, inventing fresh reasons for the absent ones, reasons that ranged from elopement to wood pussies.

"There was one around last night," the tennis champion insisted.

But the hilarity was only a flash in the pan. After its flare the party dragged. Curiosity preoccupied some; uneasiness communicated itself to others. And the frank abstraction of Ruth and Bob had a depressing effect upon the atmosphere.

And the runaways were missed. Johnny Byrd had an infectious way of making a party go and Maria Angelina's sweet soprano had become so much a part of every gathering that its absence now made song a dejection.

Other things of Maria Angelina than her soprano were missed, also.

Julia Martin found the popular bachelor decidedly absent-minded. The crack young polo player thought the scenery disappointing. Decidedly, it was a dull party.

And the weather was threatening.

So after supper had been disposed of and there had been a bonfire and an effort at singing about it, a dispirited silence spread until a decent interval was felt to have elapsed and allowed the suggestion of return.

Once it was suggested everybody seemed ready for the start, even without the moon, for the path was fairly clear and the men had pocket flashlights, so down in the dark they started, proceeding cautiously and gingerly, and accumulating mental reservations about mountains and mountain climbing until the moon suddenly overtook them and sent a silvering wash of light into the valley at their feet.

They had gained the main path before the moon deserted them, and the first of the gusty showers sent them hurrying along in shivering impatience for the open fires of homes.

"We'll find that pair of short sports toasting their toes and giving us the laugh," predicted Bob, tramping along, a hand on Ruth's arm now.

Ruth was wearing his huge college sweater over her silk one and felt indefinitely less adventurous and independent than on her upward trip. Bob seemed very stable, very desirable, as she stumbled wearily on. She wasn't quite sure what she had wanted to gain time for, that afternoon. Already the barriers of custom and common-sense were raising their solid heads.

And Bob was romance, too. It was silly to be unready for surrender. She realized that if she lost him. . . .

At the Lodge she gave him back a quick look that set him astir.

"Hold on," he called as she broke from him to follow her mother.

The cars from the Martin house party had been left at the Lodge in readiness and with perfunctory warmth of farewells the tired mountaineers were hastening either to the Lodge or the motors.

"Here's Johnny's car," he sung out. "He's probably inside——" and Bob swung hastily after Ruth and her mother.

He was up the steps beside them and opened the door into the wide hall where a group was lingering about the open fire.

A glance told them Johnny Byrd was not of the company. Bob and Ruth went to the door of the music room. It was deserted. Mrs. Blair went swiftly to the clerk's desk at the side entrance.

She came back, looking upset. Maria Angelina had not returned, to the clerk's knowledge. No one had telephoned any news.

"I'll go up and make sure," offered Ruth, and sped up the stairs only to return in a few minutes with a face of dawning excitement.

"They must be lost!" she announced in a voice that drew instant attention.

"Did you look to see if her things were there?" said her mother in an agitated undertone.

Bob Martin met her glance with swift intelligence.

"Johnny's car is out there," he told them. "It isn't *that*—they are simply lost, as Ruth says. Wait—I must tell them before they get away," and he hurried out into the increasing downpour.

Mrs. Blair turned on her daughter a face of pale misgiving.

"I knew it," she said direfully. "I felt it all along. . . . She's lost."

"Well, she'll be found," said Ruth lightly, with an indisputable lift of excitement. "The bears won't eat them."

Mrs. Blair's eyes shifted uneasily to meet the advancing circle from the fire.

"There are worse bites than bears'," she found time to throw out, before she had to voice the best possible version of Maria Angelina's disappearance.

Instantly a babble of facile comfort rose.

They would be here any moment now.

Some one had picked them up—they were safe and sound, this instant.

There wasn't a thing that could happen—it wasn't as though these were *wilds*.

Just telephone about—she mustn't worry. As soon as it was light some one would go out and track them.

Why, Judge Carney's boys had been lost all night and breakfasted on blueberries. It wasn't uncommon.

And nothing could happen to her—with Johnny Byrd along.

Oh, Johnny would take care of her—by morning everything would be all right.

But how in the world had it happened? That was such an *easy* trail!

And that was the question that stared, Argus-eyed, at Jane Blair. It was the question, she knew, that they were all asking themselves—and the others—in covert curiosity.

What had happened? And how had it happened?

CHAPTER X

FANTASY

She awoke to fright—some great hairy beast of the forest was nosing her.

Then a light flashed in her eyes, and as she closed them, drifting off to exhaustion again, she half saw a figure stooping towards her. Then she felt herself being carried, while a barking seemed to be all about her.

The next thing she knew was light forcing its brightness through her closed lids and a great warmth beating upon her.

She dragged her eyes open again. She was lying on a black bear skin rug before a roaring fire, and some one was kneeling beside her, tucking cushions beneath her head. She had a glimpse of a khaki sleeve and a lean brown wrist.

The warmth was delicious. She wanted to put her head back against those pillows and sleep forever but memory was rousing, too.

Sleepily, she mumbled, "What time is it?"

The khaki shirt sleeve had withdrawn from view and the answering voice came from a corner of the room.

"It's about two."

Two o'clock! The night gone—gone past redemption.

"Oh, Madre mia!" whispered Maria Angelina.

She struggled up on one elbow, her little face, scratched and stained, staring wildly out from the dark thicket of hair. "But where am I? Where is this place? Is it near the Lodge—near Wilderness Lodge?"

"We're miles from Wilderness," said the voice out of the shadows. "This is Old Chief Mountain—on the Little Pine River."

Old Chief Mountain! Vaguely Maria Angelina recalled that stony peak, far behind Old Baldy. . . . They had climbed the wrong mountain, indeed. . . . And she had plunged farther away, in her headlong flight.

She stared about her. She saw a huge fireplace where the flames were dancing. Above it, on a wide mantel, was a disarray of books, cigar-boxes, pipes and papers, the papers weighted oddly with a jar of obviously pickled frogs.

Upon the log walls several fishing rods were stretched on nails and a gun, a corn-popper, a rough coat and cap and a fishing net were all hung on neighboring hooks.

It was the cabin of some woodsman, and she seemed alone in it with the woodsman and his dog, a tawny collie—the wild animal of her awakening. Quietly alert, he lay now beside her, his grave, bright eyes upon her face.

The woodsman she could not see.

"Now see if you can drink all of this." The khaki sleeve had appeared from the shadows and was holding a steaming cup to her lips.

It was a huge cup made of granite ware. Obediently Maria Angelina drank. The contents were scalding hot and while her throat seemed blistered the warmth penetrated her veins in quick reaction.

"Lucky I didn't empty my coffeepot," said the voice cheerfully. "There it was—waiting to be heated. Memorandum—never wash a coffeepot."

The voice seemed coming to her out of a dream. Thrusting back the tangled hair from her eyes Maria Angelina lifted them incredulously to the woodsman's face.

Was it true? . . . Those clear, sharp-cut features, those bright, keen eyes with the gay smile! . . . Was it true—or was she dreaming?

Instinctively she dropped her hand and let her hair like a black curtain shield her face. The blood seemed to stand still in her veins waiting that dreadful instant of recognition.

Confusedly, with some frantic thought of flight, "I must go—Oh, I must go—"

She sat up, still hiding, like Godiva, in her hair.

"You lie down and rest," said the authoritative voice. "If there's any going to be done I'll do it. Is there some other Babe in the Woods to be found?"

"Oh, no—no, but I must go—"

"You get a good rest. You can tell me all about it and who you are when you're dry and warm."

She yielded to the compulsion in his voice and to her own weakness, and lay very still and inert, her cheek upon her outflung arm, her eyes watching the red dance of flames through the black strands of her hair. It was the final irony, she felt, of that dreadful night. To meet Barry Elder again—like this—after all her dreams—

It was too terrible to be true.

And he did not know her. He had come to that place of his, in the Adirondacks, of which he had spoken, and had never given her a thought. He had never come to see her. . . .

A great wave of mortification surged over Maria Angelina, bearing a medley of images, of thoughts, of old hopes—like the wash from some sinking ship. What a fool of hope she had been! How vain and silly and credulous! . . . She had dreamed of this man, sung to the thought of him—quickened to absurd expectancy at every stir of the wheels. . . . And then she had pictured him at the seashore, beneath the spell of that gold-haired siren—and here he was, quite near and free—utterly unremembering!

She had suffered many pangs of mortification this night but now her poor, shamed spirit bled afresh.

But perhaps he had just come. And certainly he would remember to come and see his friends, the Blairs, and possibly he would remember that foreign cousin of theirs that he had danced with—just remember her with pleasant friendliness. She would give herself so much of balm.

And who indeed was she for Barry Elder to remember? Just a very young, very silly goose of a girl, a little foreigner . . . some one to nickname and pet carelessly . . . a girl who had been good enough for Johnny Byrd to make love to but not good enough for him to marry. . . .

A girl who had thrown her name recklessly to the winds and who, to-morrow, would be a byword. . . .

These thoughts ached in her with her bruised flesh.

Meanwhile Barry Elder had been making quick trips about the room and now he threw down an armful of garments beside her and knelt at her feet, tugging at her sopping shoes.

"Let me get these off—there, that's better. Now the other one. . . . Lordy, child, those footies. . . . Now you'd better get into these dry things as quick as you can. Not a perfect fit, but the best I can do. I'll take a turn in the woods and be back in ten minutes. So you hurry up."

He closed the door upon the words that Maria Angelina was beginning to frame and left her looking helplessly at a pair of corduroy knickerbockers, a blue flannel shirt, a strange undergarment, plaid golf stockings and a pair of fringed moccasins.

They were in an untouched heap when her host returned, letting in a cold rush of the night with him.

"What's this?" he flung out in mock severity. "See here, young lady, you must get into those clothes whether they happen to be the style or not! Little girls who get wet can't go to sleep in their clothes. Now I'll give you just ten minutes more and then if you are not a good girl——"

To her own dismay and to his Maria Angelina burst into tears.

"Oh, come now," said Barry helplessly. "You poor little dud——"

The sudden gentleness of his voice undid the last of the girl's control. She sobbed harder and harder as he sat down beside her and began to pat her shaking shoulders.

"You shan't do anything you don't want to," he comforted. "You're tired out, I know. But you'd be so much more comfy in these dry togs——"

"Oh, please, Signor, not those things. Do not make me. I will get dry——"

"You don't have to if you don't want to," he told her gently, looking down in a puzzled way at her distress. Her face was buried in a crook of her arm; her black hair streamed tempestuously over her heaving shoulders. "Come closer to the fire, then, and dry out."

He threw more wood upon the flames and piled on brush that shed a swift, crackling heat.

"Give that a chance at those wet clothes of yours," he advised. "Meanwhile we'd better wring this out," and with businesslike despatch he began gathering that dripping black hair into the folds of a Turkish towel. Very strenuously he wrung it.

"That's what I do for my kid sister when she's been in swimming," he mentioned. "She's at the seashore now—no getting her away from the water. She's a bigger girl than you are. . . . Now when you feel better suppose you tell me all about it. Did you say you came from Wilderness Lodge?"

"Yes," said Maria Angelina half whisperingly.

Had he no memory of her at all? Or was she so different in that wet, muddied blouse, hair streaming, and face scratched—she looked down at her grimy little hands and wondered dumbly what her face might look like.

And then she saw that Barry Elder, having finished with her hair, was preparing to wash her face, for he brought a granite basin of hot water and began wetting and soaping the end of a voluminous towel with which he advanced upon her.

"I can well wash myself," she cried with promptness, and most thoroughly she washed and scrubbed, and then hung her head as he took away the things.

She felt as if a screening mask had fallen and her only thought now was to make an escape before discovery should add one more humiliation to this night of shames.

"You are very good," she said shyly. "I cannot tell you how I thank you. And I feel so much better that if you will please let me go——"

"Go? To Wilderness Lodge? It's miles and miles, child—and it's pouring cats and dogs again. Don't you hear the drumsticks on the roof?"

She hesitated. "Then—have you a telephone?"

"No, thank the Lord!" The remembered laughter flashed in Barry Elder's tones. "I came here to get away from the devil of invention and all his works. There isn't a telephone nearer than Peter's place—four miles away. I'll go over for you as soon as it's light, for I expect your mother's worrying her head off about you. How did you ever happen to get lost over here?"

Helplessly Maria Angelina sought for words. Silence was ungrateful but there seemed nothing she could say.

"It was on a picnic—please do not ask me," she whispered foolishly.

In humorous perplexity the young man stood looking down upon the small figure that chance had deposited so unexpectedly upon his hearth, a most forlorn and drooping small figure, with downcast and averted head, then with that sudden smile that made his young face so brightly persuasive he dropped beside her and reached towards her.

"Here, little kiddie, you come and sit with me while I warm those feet of yours——"

Swiftly she withdrew from his kindly reaching hands.

"Signor, it is not fitting that you should hold me, that you should warm my feet," she gasped. "I am *not* a child, Signor!"

Signor . . . The word waked some echo in his mind. . . . The child had used it before—but what connection was groping——?

He repeated the word aloud.

"You do not recall?" said Maria Angelina chokingly. "Though indeed, there is no reason why you should. It was but for a moment——"

She glanced up to see recognition leap amazedly into his face.

"The little Signorina! The Blairs' little Signorina!"

"Maria Angelina Santonini," she told him soberly. "Yes, that is I."

"Why of course I remember," he insisted. "A little girl in a white dress. A big hat which you took off. Your first night in America. We had a wonderful dance together——"

"And you said you would come to the mountains," she told him childishly.

He stared a moment. "Why, so I did. . . . And here I am. And here you are. To think I did not know you—I've been wondering whom you made me want to think of! But I took you for a youngster, you know, a regular ten-year-old runaway. Why, with your hair down like that—— Of course, it was absurd of me."

He paused with a smile for the absurdity of it.

Gallantly she tried to give him back that smile but there was something so wan and piteous in the curve of her soft lips, something so hurt and sick in the shadows of her dark eyes, that Barry Elder felt oddly silenced.

And then he tried to cover that silence with kind chatter as he moved about his room once more in hospitable preparation.

"It was Sandy, here, who really found you," he told her. "He whined at the door till I let him out and then he came back, barking, for me, so I had to go. I was really looking for a mink. Sandy's always excited about minks."

Maria Angelina put a hand to the dog's head and stroked it.

"I was so tired," she said. "I think I was asleep."

"I rather think you were," said Barry in an odd tone. He glanced at her white cheek with its scarlet scratch of a branch. "And I rather think you ought to be asleep now but first you must eat this and drink some more coffee."

Maria Angelina needed no urging. Like a starveling she fell upon that plate of crisp bacon and delicately fried eggs and cleaned it to the last morsel.

"I had but two bites of sweet chocolate for my dinner," she apologized.

"So you were lost before dinner—no wonder you were done in."

Barry filled a very worn-looking little brown pipe with care. "Where were you going, anyway, for

your picnic?"

"It was to Old Baldy."

"Old Baldy, eh? Let me see—what trail did you take?"

"On the river path. Then—then we got separated——"

"I see. But it's a fairly clear trail. Did you try another?"

"We—we crossed the river the wrong time, I think, and so got on the wrong mountain. We——"

Maria Angelina's voice died away in sudden sick perception of that betraying pronoun.

Quite slowly, without looking at her, Barry completed the lighting of that pipe to his satisfaction and drew a few appreciative puffs. Then he turned to inquire casually, "And who is 'we'?"

He saw only the top of the girl's tousled head and the tense grip of her clasped hands in her lap.

"If you would not ask, Signor!" she said whisperingly.

"A dark secret!" He tried to laugh over that but his keen eyes rested on her with a troubled wonder.

"And then you got lost—even from your companion?" he prompted quietly.

"Yes, I—I came away alone for he—he refused to go on," faltered Maria Angelina painfully, "and then I seemed to go on forever—and I could do no more. But now I am quite well again," she insisted with a ghost of a brave smile. "If only—if only my Cousin Jane could know that I'm trying to get back," she finished in a tone that shook in spite of her.

"You weren't trying to get lost, were you?" questioned Barry lightly, groping for a cue. There was no mistaking the flash of Maria Angelina's repudiation and the candor of her suddenly upraised young face.

"Oh, no, Signor, no, no! It was only that I was so careless—that I believed he knew the way."

"And was he trying to get lost?"

"Oh, no, Signor, no, it was all a mistake."

"This is a very easy neck of the woods to get lost in," Barry told her reassuringly. "Old residents here often miss their way—especially in a storm. Mrs. Blair will worry, of course, but she is very sensible and she knows you will come to light with the daylight. Just as soon as it is clear enough for me to find my way I'll strike over to Peter's place and phone her that you are safe and sound, and I'll get a horse for you to ride out on—you won't care for any more walking and the motor can only come as far as the road."

"But you must not tell them *you* have found me," said Maria Angelina, overwhelmed with tragedy again. She seemed fated, she thought in dreadful humor, to spend the night with young men! And to have been lost by one and found by another!

"It will be so much worse," she said pleadingly. "Could you not just show me the way and let me go——?"

"So much worse?" His face was very grave and gentle. "So much worse? I don't think I understand."

"So *very* much worse. To have been found like this—Oh, promise me to say nothing about it. I know that I can trust you."

"I think you had better tell me all about it, Signorina."

He saw that dark misery, like a film, swim blindingly over her wide eyes.

"I cannot."

He considered a moment before he spoke again.

"If you really do not want any one to know that I found you I am willing to hold my tongue. But don't you see what a lot of ridiculous deception that would involve? You would have to make up all sorts of little things. And then, after all, you'd be sure to say something—one always does—and let it all out——"

Maria Angelina looked at him pathetically and a sudden impulse stabbed him to say hastily, "I'll fall in with any plan you want to make. Only wait to decide until you feel rested. Then perhaps we can decide together. . . . And now, if you are really getting dry——"

"Truly, I am, Signor Elder. I am indeed dry and hot."

"Then you'd better make up your mind to curl up on that cot over there and sleep."

"I couldn't sleep."

There was truth beneath Maria Angelina's quick disclaimer. Exhausted as she was, her mind was vividly awake, now, excited with the strangeness of her presence there.

Her mortification at his finding her was gone. He was so rarely kind, so pleasantly matter of fact. He was as gayly undisturbed as if the heavens rained starving young girls upon him every night! And somehow she had known he was like this . . . but he was like no one else that she had known.

. . .

Her mind groped for a comparison. For an instant she vainly tried to picture Paolo Tosti doing the honors to such a guest—but that picture was unpaintable.

This Barry Elder was chivalry itself; he was kindness and comfort—and he was a strange, stirring excitement that flung a glamour over the disaster of the hour.

It was like a little hush before the final storm, a dim dream before the nightmare enfolded her again.

Her eyes followed him as he turned out the kerosene lamp, which was sputtering, and flung fresh logs upon the hearty fire. Overhead the rain droned, like monotonous fingers upon a keyboard, and beside her Sandy slept noisily, with sudden whimpers.

Barry's eyes, meeting the wistful dark ones, smiled responsively, and Maria Angelina felt a queer tightening within her, as if some one had tied a band about her heart.

"You don't have such fires in Italy," he observed, dropping down upon the rug across from her, and refilling that battered pipe of his. "I well remember when I ordered a fire and the *cameraria* came in with a bunch of twigs."

Madly Maria Angelina fell upon the revelation.

"You have been in Italy!"

"Oh, more than once! But all before the war."

"And you have been in Rome? Oh, to think of that! But where did you stay? Whom did you know there, Signor?"

Barry grinned. "Head waiters!"

"You knew no Romans, then? Oh, but that was a pity."

"I can well believe it, Signorina!"

"Oh, Rome can be very gay—though I am not out in society myself, and know so little. . . . What did you do, then? I suppose you went to the Forum and the Vatican and the Via Appia like all the tourists and drove out to the Coliseum by moonlight?"

Delightedly she laughed as Barry Elder confirmed her account of his activities.

"Me, I have never seen the Coliseum by moonlight," she reported plaintively, adding with eager wistfulness, "And did you buy violets on the Spanish Stairs? And throw a penny into the Trevi fountain to ensure your return? And do you remember the street that turns off left, the Via Poli? From there you come quick to my house, the Palazzo Santonini—"

"And do you really live in a palace?" It was Barry's turn to question. "A really truly palace? And is your father a really truly prince?"

"Nothing so great! He is a count—but of a very old family, the Santonini," Maria Angelina explained with becoming pride.

"And is your mother of a very old—"

"My mother is American—the cousin of Mrs. Blair. But Mamma has never been back in America—she is too devoted to us, is Mamma, and she has so much to look after for Papa. Papa is charming but he does not manage."

"That makes complications," said Barry gravely.

"And Francisco, my brother, is just like him. He is always running bills, now that he is in the army. And he was so brave in the war that Mamma cannot bear to be cross. He will have to marry an heiress, that boy," she sighed and Barry Elder's eyes lighted in amusement.

"How many of you are there?" he wanted interestedly to know, and vivaciously Maria Angelina informed him of her sisters, her life, her lessons, the rare excursions, the pension at the seashore, the engagement of her sister Lucia and Paolo Tosti.

And absorbedly Barry Elder listened, his eyes on her changing face. When she paused he flung in some question or some anecdote of his own times in Italy and Sandy was often roused by unseasonable laughter, and thudded his tail in sleepy friendliness before dozing off to his dreams again.

Then like a flash, as swiftly as it had come, the excited glow of recollection was an extinguished flame, leaving her shivering before a nearer memory.

For Barry Elder asked one question too many. He brought the present down upon them.

"And how do you like America?" he asked. "Has it been good fun for you up here?"

Only the blind could have missed the change that came over the girl's face, blotting out its laughter and etching in queer, startled fear.

"It has been—very gay," she stammered.

Despairingly she asked herself why she still tried to hide her story from him since in the morning it must all come out. He would know all about her then. And what must he be thinking already of her stammered evasions?

Oh, if only on that yesterday, which seemed a thousand yesterdays away, she had stayed closely by her Cousin Jane! If she had not let her folly wreck all her life!

Bitterly ironic to know that all the time Barry Elder was here, at hand. If only she had known! Had he just come?

She wondered and asked the question.

And at that Barry's face changed as if he had remembered something he would have been as glad to forget.

"Oh—I've been here a few days," he gave back vaguely.

She glanced about the shadowy room. "So alone?"

A wry smile touched his mouth. "I came for alone-ness. I had a play to write—I wanted to work some things out for myself," and indefinitely but certainly Maria Angelina caught the impression that all the things he wanted to work out for himself in this solitude were not connected with his play.

His linked hands had slipped over his knees and he looked ahead of him very steadily into the fire, and Maria Angelina had a feeling that he looked that way into the fire many evenings, so oddly, grimly intent, with oblivious eyes and faintly ironic lips.

He was quiet so long, without moving, that she felt as if he had forgotten her. He did not look happy. . . . Something dark had touched him. . . .

"Is it something you want that you cannot get, Signor?" she asked him in a grave little voice.

He turned his eyes to her, and she saw there was smoldering fire beneath their surface brightness.

"No, Signorina, it is something that I want and that I can get."

"There is no difficulty there," she murmured.

"No?" His tone held mockery. "The difficulty is in me. . . . I don't want to want it."

His eyes continued to rest on her in ironic smiling.

"Signorina, what would you do if you wanted a cake, oh, such a beautiful cake, all white icing and lovely sugar outside . . . and within—well, something that was very, very bad for the digestion? Only the first bite would be good, you see. But such a first bite! And you wanted it—because the icing was so marvelous and the sugar so sweet. . . . And if you had wanted that cake a long time, oh, before you knew what a cheating thing it was within, and if you had been denied it and suddenly found it was within your reach—?"

He broke off with a laugh.

Slowly she asked, "And would you have to eat the cake if you took the first bite?"

His voice was harsh. "To the last crumb."

"Then I would not bite."

"But the frosting, Signorina, the pretty pink and white frosting!"

So bitter was his laugh that the girl grew older in understanding. She thought of the girl she had seen by his side in the restaurant, the girl whose eyes had been as blue as the sea and her hair yellow as amber . . . the girl who had angled for Bob Martin's money.

She remembered that Barry Elder had of late inherited some money.

Impulsively she leaned towards him, her eyes dark and pitiful in her white face.

"Do not touch it," she whispered. "Do not. I do not want *you* to be unhappy—"

Utterly she understood. His absurd metaphor was no protection against her. She remembered all Cousin Jane's implications, all the bald revelations of Johnny Byrd.

Somehow he had come to know that the heart of Leila Grey was a cheating thing, yet for the sake of the beauty which had so teased him, for the glamorous loveliness of those blue eyes and rosy tints, he was almost ready to let himself be borne on by his inclinations. . . .

Barry Elder looked startled at that earnest little whisper and his eyes met hers unguarded a full minute, then a whimsical smile touched his lips to softness.

"I'm afraid you have a tender heart, Maria Angelina Santonini," he said. "You want all the world to have nice wholesome cake, beautifully frosted—don't you?"

Her gravity refused his banter. "Not all the world. Only those for whom realities matter. Only those—those like you, Signor—who could feel pain and disillusionment."

"In God's green earth, what do you know of disillusionment, child?"

"I am no child, Signor."

"I don't believe that you are." He looked at her with new seriousness.

"And I am horribly afraid," he continued, "that you have an inkling into my absurd symbols of speech."

That brought her eyes back to his and there was something indefinably touching in their soft, deprecating shyness. . . . Barry's gaze lingered unconsciously.

He began to wonder about her.

He had wondered about her that night at the restaurant, he remembered—wondered and forgotten. He had been unhappy that night, with the peculiar unhappiness of a naturally decisive man wretchedly in two minds, and she had given him a half hour of forgetfulness.

Afterwards he had concluded that his impressions had played him false, that no daughter of today could possibly be as touchingly young, as innocently enchanting.

But she was quite real, it seemed. And she sat there upon his hearth rug with her eyes like pools of night. . . . What in the world had happened to her in this America to which she had come in such gay confidence? What was she trying to hide?

What in all the sorry, stupid world had put that shadow into her look, that hurt droop to her lips?

He could not conceive that real tragedy could so much as brush her with the tips of its wings, but some trouble was there, some difficulty.

His pipe was out but he drew on it absently. Maria Angelina snuggled closer and closer into her pile of cushions and went to sleep.

After she was asleep he rose and stood looking down at her, and he found his heart queerly touched by that scratched cheek and the childish way she tucked her hand under the other cheek as she slept.

Also he was fascinated by the length of her black lashes.

Very carefully he covered her with blankets.

Then he yawned, looked at his watch, smiled to himself and with a blanket of his own he stretched himself upon the fur rug at her feet.

CHAPTER XI

MORNING LIGHT

Maria Angelina had no difficulty at all in recollecting where she was when she came to herself next morning, for her dreams had been growing sharper and sharper with reality. In those dreams she was forever climbing down mountain sides, tripping, stumbling, down, down, forever down, until at last there surged through her the warmth of that cabin fire and the memory of Barry Elder's care.

She opened her eyes. The warmth of the dream fire was a blaze of sunlight that fell across it. The fire itself a charred mass of embers upon a mound of gray ashes. Upon the hearth stood the disreputable remnants of her sodden shoes.

For a few moments she lay still, her consciousness invaded with its rush of memories. She felt very direfully stiff when she thought about it, but after the first moment she did not think about it.

She sat up and looked eagerly about.

There were no shadows now; the sunlight was streaming in through the cabin's three windows and through the door that stood open into a world of forest green. She heard birds singing and the sound of running water. Barry Elder was nowhere to be seen.

The cabin was one room, an amazing room, its unconcealed simplicities blazoning themselves cheerfully in the light. There were rustic tables and comfortable chairs; there was a couch untouched, apparently, save that it had been denuded of the cushions that lay now about her. There was a small black stove and pans on it and dishes on a stand. There was a chest of drawers and along the walls were low open shelves of books, the shelves topped with a miscellany of pipes and pictures and playing cards.

Between two windows stood a large table buried in books and papers with a typewriter poking its head above the confusion.

So he really was writing a play—another play. She hoped, remembering Cousin Jim's remark, that he would not put too much Harvard in.

She got to her feet—with wincing reluctance for every muscle in her small person made its lameness felt, and she limped when she began to walk. The rejected pile of clothing had disappeared from her side, but the fringed moccasins were left, and very humbly she drew them on. Her stockings were not those in which a Santonini desires to be discovered!

Uncertainly she moved towards the door, her stiffly dried white skirt rattling at each move. It was a battleground of a skirt where black mud and green grass stains struggled for preëminence, and her poor middy blouse, she thought, was in little better plight.

She had a sudden, half hysterical thought of Lucia's face, if Lucia could see her now, and a queer little gulp of laughter caught in the lump in her throat!

"Morning, Signorina! A merry morning to you."

Up the grassy bank before the cabin Barry Elder came swinging towards her, a lithe figure in brown knickers and white shirt rolling loosely open at the throat. His face was flushed and his brown, close-cropped curls were wet as if he had been ducking them into the cold river water.

He waved one hand gayly; the other was carrying a pail of water.

"You look so *clean!*" gave back Maria Angelina impetuously, her laughter rising to meet his, but her sensitive blood coloring her face before his gaze.

"There's the entire river to wash in. I thought you'd like it better out of doors so I've built you a dressing room. . . . Meanwhile the commissary will be working. Don't be too long, for breakfast will be ready," he told her, passing by her into the house, with a gesture of direction as if it were the most matter of fact thing in the world for young men to cook breakfast and for young ladies to wash in rivers.

So Maria Angelina followed his directions and went down into the grove of young birches that he called her dressing-room.

Here greenness was all about her, and through the delicate, interlacing boughs before her even the river was shut out, except one eddying stream of it that swerved in beneath her feet. There was lovely freshness in the morning air, a lovely brightness in the sky above her. It was a dressing-room for a nymph of the woods, for a dryad, for Diana herself.

Gratefully she stooped to the cold water at her feet. There on the bank, upon a spread towel, she discovered soap and fresh towels, a comb and a pair of military brushes, still wet from recent washing. He was very sweet and thoughtful, that Barry Elder.

Valiantly she attacked that tangled hair of hers, reducing it to the old submissive braids which she coroneted about her head, fastening them with twigs as best she could, and then she washed deliciously in that cold, running stream. It must be wonderful, she felt, to be a man and to live like this. One could forget the world in such a place. . . .

Sandy dashed upon her, scattering the gathering darkness of her thoughts, and she yielded to the young impulse to splash and romp with him before returning with him to the cabin.

She felt shy about reëntering that house . . . and Barry Elder's presence.

A rich aroma of coffee greeted her upon the threshold. So did her host's voice in mock severity.

"I sent Sandy to bring you in—and I was just coming after the two of you. . . . Will you sit here? I did have a dressy thought of setting up a table out of doors but this is handier—nearer the stove, you know. You've no idea of the convenience of it."

"But you are getting me so *many* meals," protested Maria Angelina, confronted by a small table which he had spread for two before the fireplace. Within the hearth he had kindled a small and cheerful blaze.

"I'll agree to keep it up as long as you eat them."

Swiftly Barry turned the browning ham from the iron spider into a small platter and deposited it upon the table with a flourish. Then he placed the granite coffeepot at her right hand.

"I made it with an egg," he said proudly. "Will you pour, Signorina, while I cut this? That's genuine canned cream—none of your execrable Continental hot milk for me! And I like my cream first with three lumps of sugar, please."

He smiled blithely upon her as with a deep and delicious constraint her small hands moved, housewifely, among his cups.

"These aren't French rolls," he murmured, "but I promise you that they are cold enough for a true Italian breakfast, and there is honey and there is jam—and here, Signorina, is ham, milk-fed, smoke-cured, and browned to make the best chef of Sherry's pale with envy and despair. . . . I thank you," and he accepted the cup of coffee from her hand with another direct smile that

deepened the confusion of the girl's spirit.

A dream had succeeded the nightmare, a fairy tale of a dream. It was unreal . . . it was a bubble that would break . . . but it was a spell, an enchantment.

She forgot that she was tired and bruised; she forgot her stained clothes; she forgot her outrageous past and her terrifying future.

Oblivious and bewitched, she smiled across the table into Barry Elder's eyes and poured his coffee and ate his bread and jam. The amazing youth in her forgot for those moments all that it had suffered and all that it must meet. She was floating, floating in the web of this beautiful unreality.

And Barry Elder himself appeared a very different person from that bitter young man who had stared desperately into the fire and talked about cake and disillusionment. In spite of his lack of sleep there was nothing in the least haggard about his young face; he looked remarkably alert and interested in life, and his eyes were very gentle and his smile very sweet.

Perhaps there was something of a dream to him in the presence of a fairylike young creature who had blown in with the storm and slept upon his sheltering hearth. Perhaps there was an enchantment to him in the exquisite young face across the table, the shy, soft eyes, the delicate pale contours.

Into their absorption came a shattering knock upon the door. Instantly the nightmare was upon Maria Angelina. She was tense, her eyes wide, her lips parted. And as the knock was repeated, one hand, wide-fingered in fright, was raised as if to ward off some palpable blow.

"Oh, let me hide," she breathed across the table into Barry Elder's ears.

Fortunately the latch was on the door.

"Who's there?" said Barry Elder raising his voice to cover her reiterated whisper. In negation he gestured her to silence.

"Hello, hello there, I say!"

It was the voice of Johnny Byrd and Maria Angelina half rose from her chair and clutched Barry Elder's arm as he moved towards the summons.

"Do not let him in," she gasped. "That is the man—last night—"

The dog's barking was drowning her words. Johnny called again.

"Anybody in? Here you wake up—anybody here?"

Barry Elder had stood still at her words. His expression changed. He turned and pointed to a blanket from the floor flung over a chair.

She slipped behind it.

Calling to his dog to behave and keep still, Barry stepped over to the door and opened it.

"Oh, Barry Elder! Gee, I thought this was your place but I didn't know you were here," Johnny Byrd declared in relief. "I saw the smoke and knew there was somebody about. . . . Gee, have you got any food?"

Slowly Barry surveyed him.

Johnny Byrd was not punctiliously turned out; he was streaked and muddied; his blue eyes were rimmed with red as if his night's rest had not been wholly soothing; he had no cap and his hair had clearly been combed back by fingers into its restless roach.

Barry's eyes appreciated each detail. "Hello, Johnny," he remarked without affability. "How did you happen to toddle over for breakfast?"

Johnny was not critical of tones. "Oh, never mind the damned details," he said bitterly. "Gawd, I could eat a raw cow. . . . Say, you haven't seen any one pass here lately, have you? I mean has any one been by at all?"

"I haven't seen any one pass here at all," said Barry Elder.

"Sure? But have you been looking out? Say, what other way is there—Oh, my Lord, is that coffee? Or do I only dream I smell it? I haven't had a bite since the middle of yesterday. Let me get to it."

But Barry Elder did not spring to the duties of his hostship. He did not even move aside to permit Johnny Byrd to spring to his own assistance—which Johnny showed every symptom of doing. He continued to stand obstructingly in the middle of his log doorstep, one hand on the knob of the half closed door behind him, his eyes fixed very curiously on Johnny's flushed disorder.

"What kind of an 'any one' are you looking for?" said Barry slowly.

"Oh—a—well, I guess you've got to help me out on this. You know the country. There's no use stalling. It's a girl—a foreign-looking girl."

"And what are you doing at six in the morning looking for a foreign-looking girl?"

"It's the darndest luck," Johnny broke out explosively. "We—we got lost last night going to a picnic on Old Baldy—and then we got separated—"

"How?"

"How?" Johnny stared back at Barry Elder and found something oddly fixed and challenging in that young man's eyes.

"Why how—how does any one get separated?" he threw back querulously.

"I can't imagine—especially when one is responsible for a girl."

"Gosh, Barry, you're talking like a grandmother. Aren't you going to give me anything to eat? What's the matter with you, anyway? You act devilish queer—"

Again he confronted the coldness of Barry's gaze and his own face changed suddenly, with swift surmise.

"Say, has she been here?" he broke out. "You've seen her, haven't you? I was sure I saw tracks. . . . Has she—has she told you anything?"

Barry leaned a little nearer the door-frame, drawing the door closer behind him. Through the crack Sandy's pointed nose and exploring eyes were fixed inquiringly upon the visitor and he whined eagerly as, scenting disapprobation in the air, he yearned to meet this trouble halfway.

"I think you had better," Barry told him.

"Better? Better what?"

"Better tell me—everything."

"Oh, all right, all right! *I've* nothing to conceal. I didn't go off my chump and behave like a darn lunatic in grand opera!"

Then very quickly Johnny veered from anger into confidence.

"Here's the whole story—and there's nothing to it. She's crazy—crazy with her foreign notions, I tell you. At first I thought she was trying to put something over on me, but I guess she's just genuinely crazy. It's the way she was brought up. They go mad over there and bite if you're left alone in a room with a girl."

Definitely Barry waited.

"We were up there on the mountain," said Johnny more lucidly. "We'd lost the others—no fault of ours, Barry—you needn't look like a movie censor—and we found we'd got to make a night of it. We were just worn out and going in circles. And she—I give you my word I didn't do one gosh-darned thing, but that girl just naturally took on and raved about wanting me to marry her and blew me up when I said I hadn't asked her and then—then—when I tried to get shelter in a little old shack we'd stumbled on she just up and bolted. She—"

His words died away. His eyes dropped before the blaze that met them.

Very slowly Barry formulated his feelings.

"You—infernal—"

"Hold on there, I'm not any such thing."

Through the bluster of Johnny's rally a really injured innocence made its outcry. "She had no more reason to bolt than a—grandmother." Grandmothers appeared to be Johnny's sole figure of comparison. "You're getting this dead wrong, Barry. . . . Look here, what do you take me for?"

"That's a large question," said Barry slowly. But his tone was milder though far from reassuring. "But do you tell me that she asked you to marry her?"

"I do. She did. Just like that—out of a clear sky."

"But what was the reason—"

"There wasn't a reason, I give you my word, Barry."

"You hadn't been saying anything to her—to suggest it?"

Johnny Byrd's face changed unhappily. His sunburned warmth deepened to a brick red.

"Why, no—not about marrying. Oh, hang it all, Barry, don't act as if you never kissed a pretty girl! Oh, she pretended she thought *that* was proposing to her—just as if a few friendly words and a half kiss meant anything like that. . . . I'll own I was gone on her," Johnny found himself suddenly announcing, "but when she was taking marriage for granted right off it sounded too much like a hold-up and I flared all over."

"A hold-up?"

"Oh, thumb screws, you know—the same old quick-step to the altar. I hadn't done a thing, I tell

you, but it looked as if she thought that our being there was something she could stage a scene on and so I thought—you don't know what things have been tried on me before," he broke off to protest at Barry's expression.

Mutteringly he offered, "You other fellows may think you know a little bit about side-stepping girls but when it comes to any kind of a bank roll—they're like starving Armenians at sight of food. I'd had 'em try all sorts of things. . . . But I own, now, she was just going according to her foreign ways. She must have been half scared to death. And she—she is pretty crazy about me —"

"I am not pretty crazy about you, Johnny Byrd!"

The door behind Barry was wrenched from his holding and flung violently open and Maria Angelina appeared upon the threshold, a defiant little image of war. Deadly pale, except for that scarlet stain across her cheek, her eyes blazing, there was something so mortally honest in the indignant anger that possessed her that Johnny Byrd unconsciously fell back a step, and Barry Elder stood aside, his own gaze lit with concern and wonder.

"I am despising you for a coward and a flirter," said Maria Angelina in a low but exceedingly penetrative voice, and so intense was her command of the situation that neither man found humor, then, in the misused word.

"You make love to girls when you mean nothing by it—you get them lost in the woods and then refuse the marriage that any gentleman, even an indifferent gentleman, would offer! And then you behave like a savage. You bully and try to force your way into the actual room of shelter with me!"

"You see!" Johnny waved his hand helplessly at her and looked appealingly at Barry for a gleam of masculine right-mindedness. "She—she wanted me to stay out in the rain, Barry."

"But as it was, *she* stayed out in the rain and you slept in the shelter."

"She ran, I'm telling you. I couldn't chase her forever, could I? I tried to track her as soon as it got a little light and I could see where she'd been sliding and slipping along, and honestly, I've been nearly bats with worry till I got a trace of her again back in the woods."

Barry Elder turned towards the girl.

"And that's the whole story, Signorina? That's all there is to it?"

"All?" Maria Angelina echoed bewilderedly. She thought there was enough and to spare. It seemed to her that she had related the destruction of her lifetime.

She stopped. She would not cry again before Johnny Byrd. She called on all her pride to keep her firm before him.

A queer change came over Barry Elder's expression. The light that seemed to be shining in the back of his eyes was bright again. He looked at Maria Angelina in a thoughtful silence, then he turned to Johnny Byrd.

"I don't think you know how serious a business this is in Italy," he told him. "You know, there where a girl cannot even see a man alone—"

"Well, we don't need to cable it to Italy, do we?" Johnny demanded in disgust. "It isn't going to spill any beans here. But it would look fine, wouldn't it, if I came back to the Lodge yelling to marry her?"

"Right you are. That is it, Signorina," Barry Elder agreed very promptly. "That's the way it would look in America. Being lost is an unpleasant accident. Nothing more—between young people of good family. Not that young people of good families make a practice of being lost," he supplemented, his eyes dancing in spite of himself at Maria Angelina's deepening amaze, "but when anything like that happens—as it has before this in the Adirondacks—people don't start an ugly scandal. They may talk a little of course, but it won't do you any real harm. . . . And it wouldn't be quite nice for Johnny to go rushing about offering you marriage. The occasion doesn't demand it in the least."

Helplessly she regarded him. . . . She felt utterly astray—astray and blundering. . . .

"Would Cousin Jane think so?" she appealed.

"She would," averred Barry stoutly, over the twinge of an inner qualm. "And so would your own mother, if she were here."

But there Maria Angelina was on solid ground.

"You know little about *that*," she told him with spirit. "If I were lost in Italy—"

But it was so impossible, being lost in Italy, that Maria Angelina could only break off and guard a bewildered silence.

"Then I expect your mother had better not know," was all the counsel that Barry Elder could offer, realizing doubtfully that it was far from a counsel of perfection. "You had better let that depend upon Mrs. Blair."

"I tried to tell her all this," Johnny broke in with an accent of triumph.

But Maria Angelina was looking only at Barry Elder.

"Can you tell me that it is nothing?" she said pitifully, her eyes big and black in her white face. "To have been gone all night with that young man—to have been found by you—another young man? Even if the Americans make light of it—is it not what you call an escapade?"

"I have to admit that it's an escapade—an accidental escapade," Barry qualified carefully. "But I don't know any way out of it—unless we all stand together," he said slowly, "and all pretend that you got lost alone and found alone. That's very simple, really, and I think perhaps it would make things easier for you."

"Now you're saying something!" Johnny was jubilant. "Absolute intelligence—gleam of positive genius. . . . She was lost alone. Right after the thunder shower. Missed the others and I went to a high place to look for them and we never found each other. . . . Spent the night searching for her," Johnny threw in carelessly, marking out a neat little role for himself. "That's the story—eh, what?"

"Oh could we—could we do that?" Maria Angelina implored with quivering lips.

"Of course we can do that. Only you've got to stick to that story like grim death—no making any little break about climbing the mountain top and things like that, you know."

"You may trust me," said Maria fervently.

"Leave it to your Uncle Dudley," Johnny reassured him. "But, look here, Barry, do you want me to die on your doorstep?" he demanded, his hunger returning as his agitation subsided.

"Oh, sit down, Johnny, and I'll bring you something," said Barry at last. "You had better keep your eye on the trail to see if any one else is coming along. Two in a morning is quite stirring," he said deliberately. "I'm sure the fire is still burning—unless you'd prefer to have him perish of starvation?" he paused to inquire politely of the girl, his twinkling eyes bringing a sudden irrepressible answer to her lips.

"Yes, that will be best for everybody's feelings," he rattled on, from the interior of the cabin, referring not to Johnny's demise but to the construction of a defensive narrative. "Each of you wandered about all night alone. . . . Here's some ham, Johnny, and cold toast. There'll be hot coffee in an instant. . . . Now remember you crossed the river just after the thunder storm and separated to try different trails. And you never found each other. . . . That's simple, isn't it? And you, Johnny, climbed the wrong mountain and slept in a shack and came down this morning and returned to the Lodge. You must show up there, worried as blazes and tearing your hair," he instructed the devouring Johnny who merely nodded, tearing wolfishly at the cold toast.

"But before you reach the Lodge I will ease the anxiety there by telephoning that I have just found Maria Angelina," went on Barry, using quite unconsciously the name by which he was thinking of the girl.

He turned to her, "With your permission, I shall say that I have just found you, that I have given you something to eat and while you were resting I went to telephone. Does that make you any happier?"

Her answering look was radiant.

"Now, remember—don't change a word of this. . . . Here's your coffee, Johnny. When you reach the Lodge, don't forget that you haven't seen me and that you are still unfed—"

"Unfed is right," said Johnny ungratefully. "Oh, my gosh, I am stiff as a poker. What do you say, Barry, to our doping this out around that fire—or have you got some other little thing in there you are keeping incog as it were?"

Refreshed and unabashed he grinned at them.

But Barry did not offer his fire.

"You'd better cut on before you are discovered," he advised. "It's a long way to go—like Tipperary. And I'll hurry off to Peter's place. . . . You strike over that shoulder there and down the trail to the right and you'll find the main road. It's shorter than the river. Besides you can't use the river trail or you would have found me. . . . Now mind—don't change a word of it."

"Sure, I've got it down. Well, I'll be off then!"

But Johnny was not off. He hesitated a moment, turning very obviously to Maria Angelina, who stood silent upon the doorstep, and it was Barry who took himself suddenly off around the corner of the cabin, with a plate of scraps for the vociferous Sandy.

Embarrassedly Johnny muttered, "I say, Ri-Ri, I'm sorry."

Her expression did not change. She said levelly, "I'm sorry, too. I did not understand."

"I didn't understand, either."

Both stood silent. Then he spoke in a hurried, even a flurried way in a very low tone indeed.

"But I—I didn't mean to be a quitter. Look here, I didn't realize that it was just the look of things you were after and not my—my—"

"Your money, Signor?" said Ri-Ri clearly.

He grew red. "I've got some queer experiences," he jerked out.

"I should think, Signor, that you would."

"Oh, hang that Signor! I don't blame you for being a frost, Ri-Ri, for I guess I was pretty rotten to you—but I wasn't throwing you down—honestly. I was just mulish, I guess, because you were trying to stampede me. And I was fighting mad over the entire business and had to take it out on somebody. If you'd just laughed and petted a fellow a little—"

He broke off and looked at her hopefully.

Maria Angelina gave no signs of warmth. Her eyes were enigmatic as black diamonds; and her mouth was a red bud of scorn. Her dignity was immense for all that her braids had come down from their coronet and were hanging childishly about her shoulders; the loose strands fluttering about her face.

Johnny wanted to put his hands out and touch them. And he wanted to grip the small shoulders beneath that middy blouse and shake them out of that aloof perverseness . . . they had been such soft, nestling shoulders last night. . . .

"You know I—I'm really crazy about you," he said quickly. "Of course you know it—you had a right to know it. I was gone on you from the moment I first saw you. You were so—different. I thought it was just a crush—that I could take it or leave it, you know—but you *are* different. A man's just *got* to have you—"

He waited. He had an idea that he had elucidated something. He felt that he had raised an issue. But Maria Angelina stood like the bright eternal snow, unhearing and unheeding and most devilishly cold.

"Only last night," said Johnny, explaining feverishly again, "you were so funny and grand opera and all and I was mad and disgusted and grouchy and I—I didn't know how much I cared myself. Look here, forget it, will you, and begin again?"

"Begin what again?"

"Well, don't begin, then. Let's finish. Let's get married. I do want you, Ri-Ri—I want you like the very deuce. After you had gone—Gee, it was an awful night when I got over my mad. And coming down the mountain this morning—I didn't know *what* I was going to find! . . . So let's forget it all—and get married," he repeated.

There was a pause. "Do you mean this?" said a still voice.

"Every word. That's what I was planning to tell you when I was running down the mountain this morning. . . . And last night—if you'd gone at me differently."

He looked at her. Something in that young figure made him say quickly, "Will you, Ri-Ri?"

"I should like you," said Maria Angelina in a clear implacable little voice, "to say that again, Signor Byrd, if you are in earnest."

"Oh, all right. Come on back, Barry. . . . I'm asking Ri-Ri to marry me—and we'll announce the engagement any time she says. . . . There. . . . Now I've got that off my chest."

"Thank you," said Maria Angelina. She looked neither at the embarrassed Johnny nor the astounded Barry. "I will think about it and I will let you know, Signor Byrd. Now please go."

"Well, of all the—" said Johnny blankly.

Then he looked at her. She was staring before her at something that she alone could see. Her look was rather extraordinary. It occurred to Johnny that after all she had a right to tantalize—and this was really no moment for capitulation.

To-night, now, after dinner, when every one was fed and warm and comfy. . . .

Still she might give a fellow a decent look. Hang it, he wasn't a drygoods clerk offering himself!

"Come on, let her alone now," cut in Barry with a certain savage energy that woke wonder in Johnny before it had time to wake resentment.

"We must be off," Barry went on. "Come on, the first part of our way lies together and we'd better hurry or some searching party will find us. Remember, you've only been here an hour," he called back to Maria Angelina. He did not look at her, but added, in that same offhand way, "Better go in and get some sleep and I'll telephone the Lodge from Peter's and have a motor and a horse sent after you."

"I'll come with the motor all right," Johnny promised.

"Don't worry," called back Barry, and waved his hand with an air of gayety but there was no laughter on his face as he started off over the hill with Johnny Byrd.

CHAPTER XII

JOURNEY'S END

Over the hills went Johnny Byrd and down the trail and into a grove of pines.

Up to the left went Barry Elder, out of sight among the larches. He walked briskly at first, his face clouded but set. Then he walked slower, his face still clouded but unsettled.

Decidedly his pace lagged. Then it stopped. He looked back. . . . He went a little way back and stopped again. . . . Then he went on going back without stopping.

His face was much clearer now.

Maria Angelina had climbed a mountain and descended a mountain; she had wandered and struggled and scrambled for hours till she was faint with exhaustion; she had been through the extremes of hope and despair and shame and anger and heart-breaking indignation till it seemed as if her spirit must break with her body.

For recovery she had had some scant hours of sleep and a portion of food.

And now, instead of succumbing to the mortal weariness that should have been upon her, instead of closing the big eyes that burned in her head, she stood at the cabin door with uplifted face listening to the song of a bird that she did not know.

Then she reëntered the cabin; but not to sink into a chair, not to release her bruised feet from the weight of her tiredness.

She cleared the table and piled the dishes in a huge pan upon the little stove. Upon the stove she discovered water heated in a kettle and she poured it, splashing, over the panful. She found three cloths of incredible blackness drying upon a little string in a corner by the stove, and after smiling very tenderly upon them she abandoned them in favor of a clean hand towel.

She restored the washed dishes to their obvious places upon the shelves and with a broom she battled with the dust upon the floor and drove it out the open door. Then she swept up the hearth, singing as she swept, and tidied the arrangement of books, bait and tobacco upon the mantel, fingering them with shy curiosity.

"Maria Angelina!" said a voice at the doorway and Maria Angelina turned with a catch at her heart.

It had taken Barry Elder a long time to retrace those steps of his.

Twice he had stopped in deep thought. Once he had pulled out a leather folder from his pocket and after regarding its sheaf of papers had sat down upon a stone and deliberately opened a long, much-creased-from-handling letter. It was dated a week before and it was headed York Harbor. It concluded with an invitation—and a question.

After reading that letter Barry remained sunk in thought for a time longer than the reading had taken.

All of his past was in that letter—and a great deal of his future in that invitation.

Then he went deeper into his pocketbook and took out a small photograph. It was the one she had given him when he went to France—when she had been willing to inspire but not to bless him. For a long time, soberly, he gazed at the picture it disclosed, at the fair presentment of delightful youth.

Never had he looked at that picture in just that way. He had known longing before it, and he had known bitterness quite as misplaced and quite as disproportionate.

It affected him now in neither way.

It was a beautiful picture—it was the picture of a beautiful young woman. He acknowledged the beauty with generous appreciation. But he felt no inclination to go on staring, moonstruck, upon it; neither did he feel the impulse to thrust it hurriedly out of sight, as something with power to rend.

It neither troubled him nor invited—though the girl was beautiful enough, he continued to admit. So were her pearls—and neither were genuine, thought Barry with more humor than a former adorer has any right to feel.

Then he amended his thought. Something of her was real—the invitation in that letter—the inclination that he had always known she felt. It was just because it was a genuine impulse in her that he realized how strong was the calculation in her that had always been able to keep the errant inclination in check.

And even when he was going to war . . . She had envisaged her future so shrewdly—either as wife or widow, he was certain, that she had given the photograph and not her hand.

Later, Bob Martin became unavailable. And he, himself, acquired an income.

It was not the income that tempted her, he was clearly aware, and he did her and himself the justice to perceive that it was the inclination which prompted the invitation—but the inclination could now feel itself supported by an approving worldly conscience.

He wondered now at the long struggle of his senses. He wondered at the death pangs of infatuation.

Once more he looked at the picture in a puzzled way as if to make sure that the thing he felt—and the thing he didn't feel—were indubitably real, and then he rose with a curious sense of lightness and yet sobriety, and, straightening his shoulders as if a burden had fallen from them, he retraced his steps towards the cabin.

At the doorway he paused, for he heard Maria Angelina singing. Then he spoke her name.

The song stopped. Maria Angelina turned towards him a face of flushed surprise. He discovered her quaintly with a jar of pickled frogs in her hand.

"Maria Angelina, what are you doing?"

"But these, Signor—what are these?"

"These? Oh—not for food, Maria Angelina—even in my most desperate moments. . . . Maria Angelina, are you going to marry him?"

She did not drop the frogs. Very carefully she put them back but with a shaking hand. All the rosy sparkle was swept out of her. Her eyes were averted. She looked suddenly harassed, stubborn, almost furtive.

No quick denial came springing from her.

"I do not know," she told him painfully.

"You do not know?"

There was something in the young man's voice that made her glance rise to his.

"Oh, it is not that I care for him!" said Maria Angelina ingenuously.

"Then why think of marrying him?"

"It may be—needful."

"Not after this story," Barry Elder, insisted.

"It is not that—now." She forced herself to meet his combative look. "It is because of—Julietta."

"Julietta! . . . Who the deuce is Julietta?"

"Oh, she is my sister, my older sister. I told you about her last night," Maria Angelina reminded him. "She is the one I love so much. . . . And she is not pretty, at all—she is anything *but* pretty, though she is so good and dear—yet she will never marry unless she has a large dower. And there is nothing in her life if she does not marry. And there is no money for a large dower, but only for a little bit for her and a little bit for me. So they sent me on this visit to America, for here the men do not ask dowers and what was saved on me would help Julietta—and now—"

Borne headlong on her flood of revelation Maria Angelina could not stop to watch the change in Barry Elder's face. And she was utterly unprepared for the immense vehemence of the exclamation which cut into her consciousness with such startling effect that she stopped and gasped and swallowed uncertainly before finishing in an altered key, "And so I must marry in America—for Julietta's dower—"

In an odd voice Barry offered, "You think it your duty—because Byrd is so rich—?"

"I know it is my duty," she gave back, goaded to desperation, "but—but, oh, it is like that cake of yours, Signor—of a nothingness to me within!"

Very abruptly Barry turned from her; he drove his hands deep into his pocket and strode across the room and back. He brought up directly in front of her.

"Maria Angelina," he said softly, "how old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"How many men have you known?"

"You, first, Signor, then the others here."

"But you did care for him," he said. "You kissed him."

Her eyes dropped, her cheeks flamed and he saw her lips quiver—those soft, sensitive lips of hers which seemed to breathe such tender warmth and perfume like the warmth and perfume of a flower. But through the shine of tears her eyes came back to his.

"No, Signor, it was he who kissed me—and without my consent! I did not kiss him—never, never,

never!"

"Is there such a difference?"

"But there is all the difference——"

"Maria Angelina, you are sure that to kiss a man yourself, to kiss him deliberately, unmistakably upon the lips, is a final seal and ultimate surrender, and that if you do not marry a man you have so kissed you would be no better than a worthless deceiver, an outrageous flirt, an abandoned trifler——"

She looked at him amazedly.

His eyes were oddly dancing, his lips were curved in a boyish smile, infinitely merry, infinitely tender; the wind was blowing back the curly locks of hair from his face, giving it the look of a victorious runner, arrived at some swift goal.

Back of him, through the open door of the cabin, the green and gold of the forest shone in translucent brightness.

"But yes—that is true——" she stammered, not daring to trust that rush of happiness, that sweet and secret singing of her blood.

"Then, Maria Angelina," said he gayly yet adoringly, "Maria Angelina, you little darling of the gods, come here instantly and kiss me. . . . For I am never going to let you go again."

THE END

[Transcriber's Note: A missing period was added on page 150, after the words "then shrank back", and a missing quotation mark was added on page 195, at the paragraph beginning "And Francisco". No other corrections were made to the original text.]

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