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Author: Harriet T. Comstock

Illustrator: Walter De Maris

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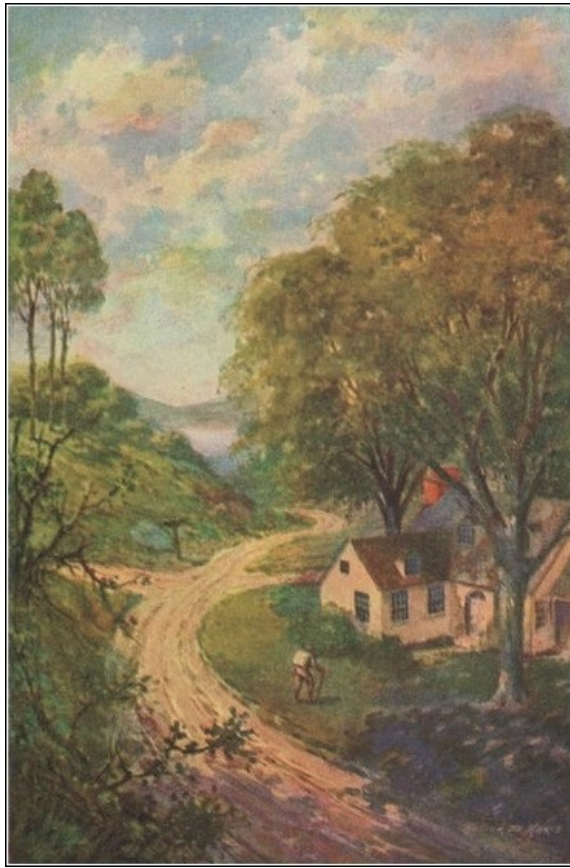
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AT THE CROSSROADS ***

AT THE CROSSROADS

BOOKS BY
HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

A LITTLE DUSKY HERO
A SON OF THE HILLS
AT THE CROSSROADS
CAMP BRAVE PINE
JANET OF THE DUNES
JOYCE OF THE NORTH WOODS
MAM'SELLE JO
PRINCESS RAGS AND TATTERS
THE MAN THOU GAVEST
THE PLACE BEYOND THE WINDS
THE SHIELD OF SILENCE
THE VINDICATION
UNBROKEN LINES



"It might have seemed an empty house but for the appearance of care and a curl of smoke from the chimney."

At the Crossroads

BY
HARRIET T. COMSTOCK



FRONTISPIECE
BY
WALTER DE MARIS

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AT THE CROSSROADS

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The great turning points of life are often rounded unconsciously. Invisible tides hurry us on and only when we are well past the curve do we realize what has happened to us.

Brace Northrup, sitting in Doctor Manly's office, smoking and ruminating, was not conscious of turning points or tides; he was sluggish and depressed; wallowing in the after-effects of a serious illness.

Manly, sitting across the hearth from his late patient--he had shoved him out of that category--regarded him from the viewpoint of a friend.

Manly was impressionistic in his methods of thought and expression. Every stroke told.

The telephone had not rung for fifteen minutes but both men knew its potentialities and wanted to make the most of the silence.

"Oh! I confess," Northrup admitted, "that my state of gloom is due more to the fact that I cannot write than to my sickness. I'm done for!"

Manly looked at his friend and scowled.

"Rot!" he ejaculated. Then added: "The world would not perish if you didn't write again."

"I'm not thinking about the world," Northrup was intent upon the fire, "it's how the fact is affecting me. The world can accept or decline, but I am made helpless. You see my work is the only real, vital thing I have clawed out of life, by my own efforts, Manly; that means a lot to a fellow."

Manly continued to scowl. Had Northrup been watching him he might have gained encouragement, for Manly's scowls were proof of his deeply moved sympathies.

"The trouble with you, old man," he presently said, "is this: You've been dangerously ill; you thought you were going to slip out, and so did I, and all the others. You're like the man who fell on the battlefield and thought his legs were shot off. You've got to get up and learn to walk again. We're all suggesting the wrong thing to you. Go where people don't know, don't care a damn for you. Take to the road. That ink-slinging self that you are hankering after is just ahead. You'll overtake it, but it will never turn back for you--the self that you are now."

Manly fidgeted. He hated to talk. Then Northrup said something that brought Manly to his feet--and to several minutes of restless striding about the room.

"Manly, while I was at my worst I couldn't tell whether it was delirium or sanity, I saw that Thing across the water, the Thing that for lack of a better name we call war, in quite a new light. It's what has got us all and is shaking us into consciousness. We're going to know the true from the false when this passes. My God! Manly, I wonder if any of us know what is true and what isn't? Ideals, nations, folks!"

Northrup's face flushed.

"See here, old man," Manly paused, set his legs wide apart as if to balance himself and pointed a finger at Northrup, "You've got to cut all this out and--beat it! Whatever that damned thing is over there, it isn't our mess. It's the eruption of a volcano that's been bubbling and sizzling for years. The lava's flowing now, a hot black filth, but it's going to stop before it reaches us."

"I wonder, Manly, I wonder. It's more like a divining rod to me, finding souls."

"Very well. Now I'm going to put an ugly fact up to you, Northrup. Your body is all right, but your nerves are frayed and unless you mind your step you're going to go dippy. Catch on? There are places where nothing happens. Nothing ever has happened. Go and find such a hole and stay in it a month, six weeks--longer, if you can. Be a part of the nothingness and save your life. Break all the commandments, if there are any, but don't look back! I've seen big cures come from letting go! I'll look after your mother and Kathryn."

The telephone here interrupted.

"All right! all right!" snapped Manly into the receiver, "set the operation for ten to-morrow and have the hair shaved from the side of her head."

Then he turned back to Northrup as if disfiguring a woman were a matter of no importance.

"The fact is, Northrup, most of us get glued to our own narrow slits in the wall, most of us are chained to them by our jobs and we get to squinting, if we don't get blinded. I'm not saying that we don't each have a slit and should know it; but your job requires moving about and peering through other fellows' slits, and lately, ever since that last book of yours, you've kept to your hole; the fever caught you at the wrong time and this mess across seas has got mixed up with it all until you're no use to yourself or any one else. Beat it!"

Something like a wave of fresh air seemed to have entered the quiet, warm room. Northrup raised his head. Manly took heed and rambled on; he saw that he was making an impression at last.

"Queer things jog you into consciousness when you detach yourself from your moorings. A mountain-top, a baby's hold on your finger, when you're about to hurt it. A sunset, a woman's face; a moment when you realize your soul! You're never the same after, Northrup, but you do your job better and your slit in the wall is wider. Man, you need a jog."

"What jogged you, Manly?"

This was daring. People rarely questioned Manly.

"It was seeing my soul!" Quite simply the answer came.

There was a long, significant silence. Both men had to travel back to the commonplace and they felt their way gingerly.

"Northrup, drop things. It is your friend speaking now. Go where the roar and rumble of what doesn't concern you haven't reached. Good-night."

Northrup got up slowly.

"I wonder if there is such a place?" he muttered.

"Sure, old man. Outside of this old sounding-board of New York, there are nooks where nothing even echoes. Usually you find good fishing in them. Come now, get out!"

CHAPTER I

Brace Northrup received the first intimation of his jog when he knocked on the door of a certain little yellow house set rakishly at the crossroads, a few miles from King's Forest.

The house gave the impression of wanting to go somewhere but had not decided upon the direction. Its many windows of shining glass were like wide-open eyes peering cheerfully forth on life, curiously interested and hopeful. The shades, if there were any, were rolled from sight. It might have seemed an empty house but for the appearance of care and a curl of smoke from the chimney.

Northrup walked across the bit of lawn leading, pathless, to the stone step, and knocked on the door. It was a very conservative knock but instantly the door swung in--it was that kind of a door, a welcoming door--and Northrup was precipitated into a room which, at first glance, appeared to be full of sunlight, children, and dogs.

As a matter of fact there were two or three little children and an older girl with a strange, vague face; four dogs and a young person seated on the edge of a table and engaged, apparently, before Northrup's arrival, in telling so thrilling a story that the small, absorbed audience barely noted his entrance. They turned mildly interested eyes upon him much as they might have upon an unnecessary illustration adorning the tale.

The figure on the table wore rough knickerbockers, high, rather muddy boots, a loose jacket, and a cap set crookedly on the head. When Northrup spoke, the young person turned and he saw that it was a woman. There was no surprise, at first, in the eyes which met Northrup's--the door of the little yellow house was constantly admitting visitors--but suddenly the expression changed to one of startled wonder. It was the expression of one who, never expecting a surprise, suddenly is taken unawares.

"I beg your pardon!" stammered Northrup. "I assure you I did knock. I merely want to ask the direction and distance of Heathcote Inn. Crossroads are so confusing when one is tired and hungry and--"

Once having begun to speak, Northrup was too embarrassed to stop. The eyes confronting him were most disconcerting. They smiled; they seemed to be glad he was there; the girl apparently was enjoying the situation.

"The inn is three miles down the south road; the lake is just beyond. Follow that. They serve dinner at the inn at one."

The voice was like the eyes, friendly, vital, and lovely.

Then, as if staged, a clock set on a high shelf announced in crisp, terse tones the hour of twelve.

"Thank you."

That was all. The incident was closed and Northrup backed out, drawing the humorous door after him. As the latch caught he heard a thin, reedy voice, probably belonging to the vague girl, say:

"Now that he's gone, please go on. You got to where--"

Northrup found himself at the crossroads where, five minutes before, he had stood, and there, in plain sight of any one not marked by Fate for a turning-point, was a sign-board in perfectly good condition, stating the fact that if one followed the direction, indicated by a long, tapering finger, for three miles, he would come to Heathcote Inn, "Open All the Year."

"The girl must take me for a fool, or worse!" thought Northrup. Then he was conscious of a feeling that he had left something behind him in that room he had just invaded. But no! His gripsack was securely fastened on his back, his walking stick was in his hand, his hat upon his head. Still he felt that lack of something.

"It's the air!" Northrup sniffed it. "I'm as hungry as a wolf, too. Hungry as I used to be twenty years ago." Northrup was twenty-seven. "Lord! what a day."

It was a day with which to reckon, there was no doubt about that. An autumn day of silence, crispness, and colour. Suddenly, something Manly had said came hurtlingly into Northrup's consciousness: "... or a woman's face!"

Then, because of the day and a certain regained strength, Northrup laughed and shook off that impression of having left something behind him and set off at a brisk rate on the road to the inn. He soon came to the lake. It lay to the right of the road. The many-coloured hills rose protectingly on the left. All along the edge of the water a flaming trail of sumach marked the curves where the obliging land withdrew as the lake intruded.

"I might be a thousand miles from home," Northrup thought as he swung along.

In reality, he had been only a week on his way and had taken it easy. He had made no plans; had walked until he was weary, had slept where he could find quarters, and was doing what he had all his life wanted to do, and which at last Manly had given him courage to do: leave the self that circumstances had evolved and take to the open trail, seeking, as Manly had figuratively put it, his real self.

During his long illness reality seemed to have fallen from his perceptions--or was it unreality? He knew that he must find out or he could never again hope to take his place among men with any assurance. As far as he could he must cut himself off from the past, blot out the time-honoured prejudices that might or might not be legitimate. He must settle that score!

Northrup was a tall, lean man with a slant of the body that suggested resistance. His face, too, carried out the impression. The eyes, deep set and keenly gray, brooded questioningly when the humour of a situation did not control them. The mouth was not an architectural mouth; the lines had been evolved; the mouth was still in the making. It might become hard or bitter: it could never become cruel. There was hope in the firm jaw, and the week of outdoor air and sun had done much to remove the pallor of sickness and harden the muscles.

With every mile that set him apart from his old environment the eyes grew less gloomy; the lines of the mouth more relaxed: in fact, Northrup's appearance at that moment might have made Manly sympathize with the creator of Frankenstein. The released Northrup held startling possibilities.

Striding ahead, whistling, swinging his stick, he permitted himself to recall the face of the woman in the yellow house. He had taken the faces of women in the past largely for granted. They represented types, ages, periods. Only once before had he become aware of what Life, as he had not known it, could do to women's faces: While he was writing his last book--the one that had lifted him from a low literary level and set him hopefully upon a higher--he had lived, for a time, on the lower East Side of New York; had confronted the ugly results of an existence evolved from chance, not design.

But this last face--Life had done something to it that he could not comprehend. What was it? Then Northrup suddenly concluded that Life had done nothing to it--had, in fact, left it alone. At this point, Northrup resorted to detail. Her eyes were almost golden: the lashes made them seem darker. The face was young and yet it held that expression of age that often marks the faces of children: a wondering look, yet sweetly contemptuous: not quite confident, but amused.

Now he had it! The face was like a mirror; it reflected thought and impression. Life had had nothing to do with it. Very good, so far.

"And her voice! Queer voice to be found here"--Northrup was keen about voices; they instantly affected him. "Her voice had tones in it that vibrated. It might be the product of--well, everything which it probably wasn't."

This was laughable.

Northrup would not have been surprised at that moment to have seen The Face in the flaming bushes by the roadside.

"I wonder if there is any habitation between that yellow house and the inn?" He pulled himself together and strode on. Hunger and weariness were overcoming moods and fancies. There was not. The gold and scarlet hills rose unbroken to the left and the road wound divertingly by the lake.

There was no wind; scarcely a stirring of the leaves, but birds sang and fish darted in the clear water that reflected the colour and form of every branch and twig.

In another half hour Northrup saw the inn on ahead. He knew it at once from a picture-card he had bought earlier in the day. It set so close to the lake as to give the impression of getting its feet wet. It was a long, low white building with more windows, doors, and chimneys than seemed necessary. Everything looked trim and neat and smoke curled briskly above the hospitable house. There were, apparently, many fires in action, and they bespoke comfort and food.

Northrup, upon reaching the inn, saw that a mere strip of lawn separated it from the road and lake, the piazza was on a level with the ground and three doors gave choice of entrance to the wayfarer. Northrup chose the one near the middle and respectfully tapped on it, drawing back instantly. He did not mean to have a second joke played upon him by doors.

There was a stirring inside, a dog gave a sleepy grunt, and a man's voice called out:

"The bolt's off."

It would seem that doors were incidental barriers in King's Forest. No one was expected to regard them seriously.

Northrup entered and then stood still.

He was alive to impressions, and this second room, within a short space of time, had power, also, to arouse surprise. There was no sunlight here--the overshadowing piazza prevented that--but there were two enormous fireplaces, one at either end of the large room, and upon the hearths of both generous fires were burning ruddily.

By the one nearer to Northrup sat a man with a bandaged leg stretched out before him on a stool, and a gold-and-white collie at his side. The man was elderly, stout, and imposing. His curly gray hair sprang--no other word conveyed the impression of the vitality and alertness of the hair--above a rosy, genial face; the eyes were small, keen, and full of humour, the voice had already given a suggestion of welcome.

"You are Mr. Heathcote, I suppose?"

Northrup was subconsciously aware of the good old mahogany furniture; the well-kept appearance of everything.

"You've struck it right. Will you set?"

"Thanks."

Northrup took the chair opposite the master of the inn.

"My name is Northrup, Brace Northrup from New York."

"Footing it?" Heathcote was rapidly making one of his sudden estimates; generally he did not take the trouble to do this, but some people called forth his approval or disapproval at once.

"Yes. I've taken my time, been a week on the way and, incidentally, recovering from an illness."

"Pausing or staying on?"

Northrup meant to say "pausing"; instead he found himself stating that he'd like to stay on if he could be accommodated.

"We'll have to consult Aunt Polly as to that," said Heathcote. "You see I'm rather off my legs just now. Gander! Great bird, that gander. He lit out two weeks ago and cut me to the bone with his wing. He's got a wing like a hatchet. I'll be about in a day or two and taking command, but until then I have to let my sister have her say as to what burdens she feels she can carry."

For a moment Northrup regarded himself, mentally, as a burden. It was a new sensation and he felt like putting up a plea; but before he could frame one Heathcote gave a low whistle and almost at once a door at the rear opened, admitting a fragrance of delectable food and the smallest woman Northrup had ever seen. That so fragile a creature could bear any responsibility outside that due herself, was difficult to comprehend until one looked into the strange, clear eyes peering through glasses, set awry. Unquenchable youth and power lay deep in those piercing eyes; there was force that could command the slight body to do its bidding.

"Polly, this is Mr. Northrup, from New York"--was there lurking amusement in the tone?--"He wants to stop on; what do you say? It's up to you and don't hesitate to speak your mind."

The woman regarded the candidate for her favour much as she might have a letter of introduction; quite impersonally but decidedly judicially.

"If Mr. Northrup will take pot luck and *as is*, I think he can stay, brother."

Northrup had an unreasoning sense of relief. All his life his pulses quickened when what he desired seemed about to elude him. He smiled, now, like a boy.

"Thank you," he ventured, "you'll find me most grateful and adaptable."

"Well, since that's settled," Aunt Polly seemed to pigeonhole her guest and label him as an individual, "I'll run out and lay another plate. You just go along upstairs and pick out your room. They are all ready. The front ones open to the lake and the west; the back ones are east and woodsy; outside of that there isn't much choice. It's one o' clock now, but I can put things back a spell and give you a chance to wash before dinner."

Northrup picked up his bag and hat and started for the stairs at the far end of the room. The sense of unreality was still upon him. He felt like breathing low and stepping light. The sensation smacked of magic. So long as one could believe it, it would hold, but once you doubted, the old, grim existence would snatch you!

Upstairs the hall ran from north to south of the rambling house, on either side the doors opened, leading to small, orderly rooms, apparently alike except in detail of colour and placing of furniture. There was a hearth in every room, upon which lay wood ready to light and beside which stood huge baskets of logs giving promise of unlimited comfort. Fresh towels and water were on stands, and the beds fairly reached out to tired bodies with assurances of rest and sleep. Northrup went, still treading light and believing, from door to door, and then he chose a west room because the lapping of the lake sounded like a lullaby.

It was the work of a few moments to drop dust-stained garments and plunge one's head into the icy water; a few moments more and a refreshed man emerged from a vigorous rubbing and gave a laugh of sheer delight.

"I'm in for it!" he muttered, still clinging to the mood of unreality. "I bet my last nickel that something's going to happen and by the lord Harry! I'm going to see it through. This is one of those holes Manly prophesied about. Looks as if it had been waiting for me to come."

He was downstairs in time to help his host to the head of his table, in the adjoining room. They made rather an imposing procession, Aunt Polly leading, the golden collie bringing up the rear.

Heathcote in a fat whisper gave some staccato advice en route: "Better call sister 'Aunt Polly' at once. If you don't suggest offishness, none will be suspected. Fall in line, I say! Dog's name is Ginger. Animals like to be tagged, more human-like. Act as if you always had been, or had come back. If there's one thing Polly can't abide, it's hitting a snag."

Devoutly Northrup vowed he'd be no snag.

He took his place on the east side of the table, so to speak, and the lake was in front of him. The lake was becoming a vital feature in the new environment.

The water was ruffled now; the reflections trembled and the lapping was more insistent.

The food was excellent. Aunt Polly had prepared it and watched, with a true artist's eye, her guest's appreciation of it.

"Food is just food to some folks," she confided, casting a slantwise glance at her brother, "just what you might call fodder. But I allas have held that, viewed rightly, it feeds body *and* soul."

Heathcote chuckled.

"And right you are, Aunt Polly!" Northrup said, watching the effect of his familiarity. Nothing occurred. He was being taken for granted.

Bits of history crept into the easy conversation during the meal. Apparently meal-time was a function at the inn, not an episode.

Heathcote and his sister, it appeared, had come to King's Forest for his health, fifty years before. He was twenty then; Aunt Polly eighteen.

"Just like silly pioneers," Polly broke in, "but we found health and work and we grew to love the place. We feel toward it as one does to an adopted child, less understanding, but more responsible. Every once so often, when we got into ruts, God Almighty made us realize that He was keeping His hand on the reins," the dear old soul chuckled happily. "Peter got himself made into a magistrate and that was something to work with. We made a home and friends, but the Forest isn't an easy proposition. It ain't changed much. It's lazy and rough, and I often tell Peter that the place is like two old folks over on the Point, Twombly and Peneluna. Still and scroogy, but keeping up a mighty lot of thinking. If anything ever wakes the Forest up it's going to show what it's been cogitating about."

"Is there a village?" Northrup asked.

"There's one seven miles from here," Heathcote replied; "stores, post office, a Methodist minister--necessary evils, you know," this came with a fat chuckle, "but the Forest ain't anything but the Forest. Houses sorter dropped down carelesslike where someone's fancy fixed 'em. There used to be a church and school. The school burned down; the church, half finished, stands like a hint for better living, on a little island a half mile down the line. There's the Point where the folks live as can't get a footing elsewhere. There's always a Point or a Hollow, you know. And there's the Mines, back some miles to the south. Iron that used to be worked. Queer holdings!"

Peter paused. Sustained conversation always made him pant and gave Polly an opportunity to edge in.

"As I was saying," she began calmly, "every once so often God Almighty made us realize that He had His hand on the reins. When me and Peter got to acting as if we owned things, someone new happened along and--stuck.

"First there was old Doctor Rivers. We never rightly knew where he came from, or why. By and by we got to feeling we best showed our love and respect by not wondering about him.

"Then after the doctor did his stint and left his mark, Maclin came. We're studying over Maclin yet. He bought the Mines and kinder settled down on us all like a heavy air that ain't got any set of the wind."

Aunt Polly was picturesque. Peter eyed her admiringly and gave his comfortable chuckle.

"Sister holds," he explained, "that the Forest isn't the God-forsaken place it looks to be, but is a rich possibility. I differ, and that is what queers Maclin with us. His buying those wore-out mines and saying he's going to *make* the Forest is damaging evidence against him. He ain't no fool: then what is he? That's what we're conjuring with. Maclin ain't seeing himself in partnership with the Almighty, not he! One-man firm for Maclin."

"Now, brother!" Polly remarked while Heathcote was catching his breath, "I say give a good doubt to a man till you have to give a bad one. We've no right to judge Maclin yet, he's only just begun to have his say-so out loud, and put out feelers."

"And now"--Peter put his plate down for the faithful Ginger to lap clean, and prepared to rise--"and now, you've come, stranger. When you hesitated a time back as to whether you was pausing or staying on, I just held my breath, and when you slapped out, 'staying on,' I thought to myself, 'Now, which is he, a dispensation of Providence or just a plain passer-by?'"

Northrup smiled grimly. This all fitted into his own vague mood of unreality.

"You mustn't take me seriously," he said, going around the table to help his host. "I'm as ordinary as the majority. I like the looks of things here. I stop and enjoy myself, and pass on! That's the usual way, isn't it?"

"Yes"--Polly began gathering the dishes--"it's what happens while one stops, that counts. That, and what one leaves behind, when he passes on. It's real queer, though, to have any one staying on this season of the year."

During the afternoon Northrup wandered in the woods which rose abruptly from behind the house. So still was the brilliant forest that a falling leaf startled him and a scurrying creature among the bushes set his nerves tingling. Then it was that the haunting face and voice of the girl in the little yellow house rose again with an insistence that could not be disregarded. It dominated his thought; it was part of this strange sense of shadowy and coming events; it refused to be set aside.

It did not mock him--he could have dealt with that phase--it pleaded. It seemed to implore him to accept it along with his quickened pulses; the colour of the autumn day; the sweetness of the smell of crushed leaves; the sound of lapping water; the song of birds.

"I wonder who she is, and why she looks as she does?"

Northrup ceased to scoff at his fancy; he wooed it. He pictured the girl's hair loose from the rough cap--curly, rather wild hair with an uplift in every tendril. What colour was it? Gold-brown probably, like the eyes. For five minutes he tried to decide this but knew that he would have to see it again to make sure.

The face was a small face, but it was strong and unutterably appealing. A hungry little face; a face whose soul was ill-nourished, a contradictory face.

Northrup called himself to order just here. He wasn't going to be an ass, not if he could help it!

"Strange voice!" he thought on. "It had *calls* in it. I *am* an ass!" he admitted, and in order to get the better of the situation he turned sharply and went back to the inn.

CHAPTER II

Northrup decided to refrain from asking questions. Long ago he discovered that he could gain more from a receptive state of mind than an inquiring one.

He began to understand his peculiar mental excitement. Manly was right. All that was needed to bring about complete recovery was detachment and opportunity for his machinery to get into action. He knew the signs. The wheels were beginning to turn!

Now from Northrup's point of view this was all right; but his sudden appearance in a place where bad roads and no reason for coming usually kept people out, caused a ripple to reach from the inn to the Point and even the Mines, twelve miles away.

The people took time before accepting strangers; they had not yet digested Maclin, and in silent disapproval they regarded Northrup as in some way connected with Maclin.

The mine owner had been more or less familiar to the Forest for several years: his coming and going were watched and speculated upon. Recently he had imported foreign labour, much to the sneering contempt of the natives whose philosophy did not include the necessity of perpetual work and certainly repudiated the idea of outsiders originating a new system. But Northrup was not a foreigner. He must be regarded from a different angle.

Aunt Polly made it her business, after the first few days, to start propaganda of a safe and inspiring character about her guest. While not committing herself to any definite statement, she made it known that if Northrup had any connection with Maclin, he was against him, not for him.

Maclin just then was the hub from which the spokes of curiosity led.

"He couldn't be for Maclin," Polly had said to Peter. "You know that as well as I do, Peter Heathcote. And getting facts signed and witnessed is an awful waste of time. The Lord gave women a sixth sense and it's a powerful sight surer than affidavits."

Peter grunted. So long as Polly hinted and made no statements he was content. He believed she was partly right. He thought Northrup might be on Maclin's trail, and from appearances Peter had confidence in his guest's ability to run his quarry to earth where, heretofore, others of the Forest had failed.

He liked Northrup, believed in him, and while he sat and nursed his leg, he let Polly do her hinting.

It was the evening of Northrup's third day at the inn when the three, with Ginger blinking contentedly, sat by the fire. Polly knitted and smiled happily. She had drifted that day into

calling Northrup "Brace" and that betokened surrender. Peter puffed and regarded his bandaged leg--he had taken a few steps during the afternoon, leaning on Northrup's arm, and his mood was one of supreme satisfaction.

Breaking the silence, now and again, an irritating sound of a bell intruded. It was a disconcerting note for it had a wild quality as if it were being run away with and was sending forth an appeal. Loud; soft; near; distant.

"Is there a church around here?" Northrup asked at last.

"There is," Heathcote replied, taking the pipe from his lips. "It's the half-built church I mentioned to you. A bit down the line you come to a bridge across an arm of the lake. On a little island is the chapel. It ain't ever used now. Remember, Polly," Heathcote turned to his sister, "the last time the Bishop came here? Mary-Clare was about as high as nothing, and just getting over the mumps. She got panicky when she heard of the Bishop, asked ole Doc if she could catch it. I guess the Bishop wasn't catching! Yes, sir, the church is there, but it's deserted."

"What is the bell ringing for?" Northrup roused, more because the name of Mary-Clare had been introduced than because the bell interested him.

He knew, now, that the girl in the yellow house was Mary-Clare. Her name slipped into sound frequently, but that was all.

"Who is ringing the bell?"

Aunt Polly rolled her knitting carefully and set her glasses aslant on the top of her head. Northrup soon learned that the angle and position of Aunt Polly's spectacles were significant.

"No human hands are ringing the bell," she remarked quietly. "I hold one notion, Peter another. *I say the bell is ha'nted; calling, calling folks, making them remember!*"

"Now, Polly!" Peter knocked the ashes from his pipe on to Ginger's back. "Don't get to criss-crossing and apple-sassing about that bell." He turned to Northrup and winked.

"Women is curious," he admitted. "When things are flat and lacking flavour they put in a pinch of this or that to spice them up. Fact is--there's a change of wind and it ain't sot yet. While it's shifting around it hits, once so often, a chink in the belfry that's got to be mended some day. That's the sum and tee-total of Polly's ha'nted tower."

Then, as if the question escaped without his sanction and quite to his consternation, Northrup spoke again:

"Who lives in the yellow house by the crossroads?"

This was not honest. Northrup knew *who*. What he wanted to say, but had not dared, was: "Tell me about her."

"I reckon you mean Mary-Clare." Aunt Polly shook a finger at Ginger. "That dog," she added, "jest naturally hates the bell ringing. Animals sense more than men!"

This slur escaped Peter, he was intent upon Northrup's question.

"Seen that girl in the yellow house?" he asked. "Great girl, Mary-Clare. Great girl."

"I stopped there on my way here to ask directions. Rather unusual looking girl."

"She is that!" Peter nodded. Mary-Clare was about the only bit of romance Peter permitted himself. "Remember the night Mary-Clare was born, Polly?"

Of course Polly remembered. Northrup felt fully convinced that Polly knew everything in King's Forest and never forgot it. She nodded, drew her spectacles over her eyes, and continued her knitting while Peter hit the high spots of Mary-Clare's past. Somehow the shallows Northrup was filling while he listened.

Peter was in his element and drawled on:

"The wildest storm you ever saw round these parts--snow and gale; they don't usually hang together long, but they did that night. It was a regular night if there ever was one. Nobody stirring abroad 'less he had to. Ole Doc was out--someone over the mine-way had got mussed up with the machinery. Ole Doc was a minister as well as a doctor. He'd tried both jobs and used to say it came in handy, but he leaned most to medicine as being, what you might say, more practical."

"You needn't be sacrilegious, brother," Polly interjected. "The story won't lose anything by holding to reverence."

"Oh, well," Heathcote chuckled, "have it any way you want to. Ole Doc had us coming and going, that's what I'm getting over. If he found he couldn't help folks to live, he plumped about and helped 'em to die. Great man, ole Doc! Came as you did, son, and settled. We never knew anything about his life before he took root here. Well, that night I'm telling you about, he was on his way back from the mines when he spied a fire on the up-side of the lake. He said it looked mighty curious shining and flaming in the blinding whiteness. It was Dan Hamlin's shack. Later we heard what had happened. Dan had come home drunk--when he wasn't drunk you couldn't find a decenter man than Hamlin, but liquor made him quarrelsome. His wife was going to have a baby--Mary-Clare, to be exact--and when he came in with Jack Seaver, the mail-carrier, there was a row on concerning something Seaver hadn't brought that Hamlin had ordered for his wife. There never was any reasoning with Hamlin when he was drunk, so Seaver tried to settle the question by a fight. Seaver was like that--never had any patience. Lamp turned over, set the

shack on fire!" Peter breathed hard.

"Mrs. Hamlin ran for her life and the two men ran from justice. Seaver came back later and told the story. Hamlin shot himself the following day when he heard what had happened. Blamed fool! Mary-Clare was left, but she didn't seem to amount to much in the beginning. It was this way: Mrs. Hamlin ran till she fell in a snowdrift. Ole Doc found her there." Heathcote paused. The logs fell apart and the room grew hot. Northrup started as if roused from a dream.

"Yes, sir!" Heathcote went on. "Ole Doc found her there and, well, sir, he was doctor and minister for sure that night. There wasn't no choice as you might say. Mary-Clare was born in that snowdrift, and the mother died there! Ole Doc took 'em both home later."

"Good God!" ejaculated Northrup. "That's the grimmest tale I ever listened to. What came next?"

"The funeral--a double one, for they brought Hamlin's body back. Then the saving of Mary-Clare. Polly and I wanted her--but ole Doc said he'd have to keep an eye on her for a while--she seemed sorter petering out for some time, and then when she took a turn and caught on, you couldn't pry her away from ole Doc. He gave her his name and everything else. His wife was dead; his boy away to school, his housekeeper was a master hand with babies, and somehow ole Doc got to figuring out that Mary-Clare was a recompense for what he'd lost in women folks, and so he raised her and taught her. Good Lord, the education he pumped into that girl! He wouldn't let her go to school, but whenever he happened to think of anything he taught it to her, and he was powerful educated. Said he wanted to see what he could do by answering her questions and letting her think things out for herself. Remember, Polly, how Mary-Clare used to ride behind ole Doc with a book braced up against his back?"

Aunt Polly lifted the sock she was knitting and wiped her eyes.

"Mary-Clare just naturally makes you laugh and cry at once," the old voice replied, "remembering her is real diverting. She came from plain, decent stock, but something was grafted onto her while she was young and it made a new kind of girl of Mary-Clare. So loving and loyal." Again Aunt Polly wiped her eyes.

"And brave and grateful," Heathcote took up his story, "and terrible far-seeing. I don't hold with Polly that Mary-Clare became something new by grafting. Seems more like she was two girls, both keeping pace and watching out and one standing guard if the other took a time off. I never did feel sure ole Doc was quite fair with Mary-Clare. Without meaning to, he got a stranglehold on that girl. She'd have trotted off to hell for him, or with him. She'd have held her head high and laughed it off, too. I don't suppose any one on God's earth actually knows what the real Mary-Clare thinks about things on her own hook, but you bet she has ideas!"

Northrup was more interested than he had been in many a day. The story thrilled him. The girl of the yellow house loomed large upon his vision and he began to understand. He was not one to scoff at things beyond the pale of exact science; his craft was one that took much for granted that could not be reduced to fact. Standing at the door of the little yellow house he had become a victim of suggestion. That accounted for it. The mists were passing. He had not been such an ass, after all.

"So! that is your old doctor's place down by the crossroads?" he said with a genuine sense of relief.

"It was. Ole Doc died seven years back."

"What became of his son--you said he had a boy?" Northrup was gathering the threads in his hands. Nothing must escape him; it was all grist.

"Oh! Larry came off and on the scene. There are them as think ole Doc didn't treat Larry fair and square. I don't know, but anyway, just before ole Doc was struck with that stroke that finished him, Larry came home and seemed to be forgiving enough, if there had been any wrong done. He had considerable education; ole Doc had given him that chance, but Larry drifted--allas was, and still is, a drifter. We all stand pat for the feller on account of his father and Mary-Clare. It was a blamed risky thing, though, Larry's marrying Mary-Clare! I allas will hold to that!"

Once, when Northrup was a young boy, he had been shocked by electricity. The memory of his experience often recurred to him in moments of stress. He had been standing within a few yards of the tree that had been shattered, and he had fallen unconscious. When he came to, he was vividly aware of the slightest details of sight and sound surrounding him. His senses seemed to have been quickened during the lapse of time. He winced at the light; the flickering of leaves above him hurt; the song of birds beat against his brain with sweet clamour, and he vaguely wondered what had happened to him; where he had been?

In like manner Northrup, now, was aware of a painful keenness of his senses. Heathcote looked large and his voice vibrated in the quiet room; Aunt Polly seemed dwindling, physically, while something about her--the light playing on her knitting needles and spectacles, probably--radiated. The crackling logs were like claps of thunder. Northrup pulled himself to an upright position as one does who resists hypnotism.

"I'm afraid you're tiring Brace, brother."

Aunt Polly's voice, low, even, and calm, got into the confusion as a soft breeze had, that day so long ago, and brought full consciousness in its wake.

"On the other hand," Northrup gave a relieved laugh, "I am intensely interested. You see, she looks so young, that Mrs.--Mrs.---"

"Rivers?" suggested Heathcote refilling his pipe. "Lord! I wonder if any one ever called Mary-Clare Mrs. Rivers before, Polly?" Heathcote paused, then went on:

"Yes; Mary-Clare holds her own and her boy-togs help the idea. Mary-Clare ain't properly grown up, anyway. Some parts of her are terrible strong and thrifty; parts as has caught the sunlight, so to speak, and been sheltered from blasts. The other parts of her ain't what you might say shrivelled, but they've kept hid and they ain't ever on exhibition."

"How ridiculous you *are*, brother." Aunt Polly was enjoying her brother's flights, but felt called upon to keep him in order.

"Oh! it's just a blamed amusing fancy of mine," Heathcote chuckled, "to calculate 'bout Mary-Clare. You see, being a magistrate, I married Mary-Clare to Larry, and I've never been at ease about the thing, though I had to put it through. There lay ole Doc looking volumes and not being able to speak a word--nothing to do for him but keep him company and try to find out what he wanted. He kept on wanting something like all possessed. Larry and Mary-Clare hung over him asking, was it this or that? and his big, burning eyes sorter flickering, never steady. I recall old Peneluna Todd was there and she said the young uns were pestering the ole Doc. Then, it was 'long about midnight, Larry rose up from asking some question, and there was a new look on his face, a white, frozen kind of look. Mary-Clare kinder sprang at him. 'What is it?' she whispered, and I ain't never forgot her face. At first Larry didn't answer and he began shaking, like he had the chills.

"'You must tell me, Larry!' Mary-Clare went up close and took Larry by the shoulders as if she was going to tear his secret from him. Then she went on to say how he had no right to keep anything from her--her, as would give her soul for the ole Doc. She meant it, too. Well, Larry sort of dragged it out of himself. Ole Doc wanted him and Mary-Clare to marry! That was what was wanted! There wasn't much time to consider things, but Mary-Clare went close to the bed and knelt down and said slowly and real tender:

"'You can hear me, can't you, Daddy?' The flicker in ole Doc's eyes steadied. I reckon any call of Mary-Clare's could halt him, short of the other side of Jordan. 'Then, dearie Dad, listen.' Just like that she said it. I remember every word. 'You want me to marry Larry--now? It would make you--happy?' The steady look seemed to kinder freeze. I called it a listening look more than an understanding one. I'll allas hold to that, but God knows there warn't much time to calculate. Peneluna began acting up but Mary-Clare set her aside.

"'All right, Daddy darling!' she whispered, and with that she stood up and said to me, 'You marry us at once! Come close so that he can see and know!'

"Things go here in the Forest that don't go elsewhere; I married them two because I couldn't help it--something drew me on. And then just when I got to the end, ole Doc rose up like he was lifted--he stared at what was passing; tried to say something, and sank back smiling--dead!"

Northrup wiped his forehead. There were drops of perspiration on it, and his breath came roughly through his throat; he seemed part of the dramatic scene.

"Satisfied, *I say!*" broke in Aunt Polly. "It *was* a big risk, but the dying see far, and the doctor had left all he had to Mary-Clare, which didn't seem just right to his flesh-and-blood boy, and I guess he wanted to mend a bad matter the only way he could."

"Maybe!" sighed Peter. "Maybe. But he took big chances even for a dying man. I couldn't get rid of the notion that when he cottoned to what had been done, he sorter threw up his hands! But what happened to Mary-Clare just took my breath. 'Pon my soul, as I looked at her it was like I saw her going away after ole Doc and leaving, in her place, a new, different woman that really didn't count so long as she looked after things while the real Mary-Clare went about her business. It was disturbing and I felt downright giddy."

"You're downright silly, Peter Heathcote"--Polly tossed her knitting aside and shifted the pillows of the couch--"making Mary-Clare out the way you do when she's ordinary enough and doing her life tasks same as other folks."

"How has it worked out?" Northrup heard the words as if another spoke them.

"I guess, friend, that's what no one actually knows." Peter pulled on his pipe. "Larry is on and off. Maclin, over to the mines, seems to do the ordering of Larry's coming and going. Darned funny business, I say. However, there you are. When Larry is home I guess the way Mary-Clare holds her head and laughs gets on his nerves. No man likes to feel that he can't clutch hold of his wife, but it comes to that, say what you will, Mary-Clare keeps free of things in a mighty odd fashion; I mean the real part of her; the other part goes regular enough.

"She don't slacken up on her plain duty. What the ole Doc left she shares right enough with Larry; she keeps the house like it should be kept, and she's a good second to Polly here, where fodder is concerned. But something happened when Larry was last home that leaked out somehow. A girl called Jan-an let it slip. Not a quarrel exactly, but a thing that wasn't rightfully settled. Larry was ordered off, sudden, by Maclin, but take it from me, when Larry comes back he'll get his innings. Larry isn't what you could call a sticker, but he gets there all the same. He ain't going to let any woman go too far with him. That's where Larry comes out strong--with women."

"I don't know as you ought to talk so free, brother." Polly looked dubious.

"In the meantime," Northrup said quietly, "the little wife lives alone in the yellow house, waiting?" He hadn't heard Polly's caution.

He was thinking of Mary-Clare's look when she confronted him the day of his coming. Was she expecting her husband? Had she learned to love him? Was she that kind of woman? The kind that thrives on neglect and indifference?

"Not alone, as you might say," Heathcote's voice drawled. "There's Noreen, her little girl, you know. Noreen seems at times to be about a thousand years older than her mother, but by actual count she's going on six, ain't that it, Polly?"

Again Northrup felt as he had that day by the lightning-shattered tree.

"Her little girl?" he asked slowly, and Aunt Polly raised her eyes to his face. She looked troubled, vaguely uneasy.

"Yep!" Peter rose stiffly. He wanted to go to bed. "Noreen's the saving from the litter. How many was there, Polly?"

Polly got upon her feet, the trouble-look growing in her eyes.

"Noreen had a twin as was dead," she said tenderly. "Then the last one lived two hours--that's all, brother." She walked to the window. "The storm is setting this way," she went on. "Just listen to that lake acting up as if it was the ocean."

The riotous swish of the water sounded distant but insistent in the warm, quiet room, and faintly, at rare intervals, the bell, rung by unseen forces, struck dully. It had given up the struggle.

Northrup, presently, had a strong inclination to say to his host that he had changed his mind and must leave on the morrow. That course seemed the only safe and wise one.

"But why?" Something new and uncontrolled demanded an answer. Why, indeed? Why should anything he had heard cause him to change his plans? This hectic story of a young woman had set his imagination afire, but it must not make a fool of him. What really was taking place became presently overpoweringly convincing.

"I am going to write!"

That was it! The story had struck his dull brain into action and he had been caught in time, before running away. He had gained the thing he had been pursuing, and he might have let it escape! The woman of the yellow house became a mere bearer of a rare gift--his restored power! He was safe; everything was safe. The world had righted itself at last. It wasn't the woman with the dun-coloured ending to her story that mattered; it was the story.

"I think I'll turn in," he said, stifling a yawn, "Good-night."

"Don't hurry about breakfast," Aunt Polly said gently. "Breakfast is only a starter, I always hold. It's like kindlings to start the big logs. Sleep well, and God bless you!"

She smiled up at her guest as if he were an old friend--come back!

Up in his room Northrup had difficulty in keeping himself from work. He dared not begin; if he did he would write all night. He must be sure. In the meantime, he wrote to his mother:

By the above heading you'll see how far I've got on my way, searching for my lost health. I'm really in great shape. Manly was right: I had to let go! I'm struggling now between two courses. Apparently I was in a blue funk; all I needed was to find it out. Well, I've found it out. Shall I come home and prove it by doing the sensible thing, or shall I go on and make it doubly sure? If anything important turns up I would telegraph, but in case I *do* go on I want to do the job thoroughly and for a time lose myself. I will wait your word, Mother.

Northrup was not seeking to deceive any one. He might strike out for new places in a week, or he might, if the mood held, write in King's Forest. It all depended upon the mood. What really mattered was an unfettered state.

The vagrant in him, that had been starved and denied, rose supreme. Now that he was sure that he was going to write, had a big theme, there was excuse for his desire to be free. He would return to his chink in the wall, as Manly explained, better fitted for it and with a wider vision. He had a theory that a writer was, more or less, like a person with a contagious disease: he should be exiled until all danger to the peace and happiness of others was past. If only the evenly balanced folks would see that and not act as if they were being insulted!

While he undressed, Northrup was sketching his plot mentally. In the morning it would be *fixed*; it would be more like copying than creating when a pen was resorted to.

"I'll take that girl in the yellow house and do no end of things with her. Dual personality! Lord, and in this stagnant pool! All right. Dual personality. Now she must get a jog about her husband and wake up! Two men and one woman. Triangle, of course. Nothing new under God's heaven. It's the handling of the ragged old things. I can make rather a big story out of the ingredients at hand."

Northrup felt that he was going to sleep; going to rise to the restored desire for work. No wonder he laughed and whistled--softly; he had overtaken himself!

Three days later a telegram came from Mrs. Northrup.

"Go on," it said simply. Mrs. Northrup knew when it was wisest to let go. But this was not true of Kathryn Morris, the other woman most closely attached to Northrup's life. Kathryn never let

go. When she lost interest in any one, or anything, she flung it, or him, from her with no doubtful attitude of mind. Kathryn meant to marry Northrup some day and he fully expected to marry her, though neither of them could ever recall just when, or how, this understanding had been arrived at.

It was, to all appearances, a most fitting outcome to close family interests and friendships. It had just naturally happened up to the point when both would desire to bring it to a culmination. The next step, naturally, must be taken by Kathryn for, when Northrup had ventured to suggest, during his convalescence, a definite date for their wedding, Kathryn had, with great show of tenderness, pushed the matter aside.

The fact was, marriage to Kathryn was not a terminal, but a way station where one was obliged to change for another stretch on a pleasant and unhampered journey, and she had no intention of marrying a possible invalid or, perhaps, a dying man.

So while Northrup struggled out of his long and serious illness, Kathryn played her little game under cover. Some women, rather dull and stupid ones, can do this admirably if they are young enough and lovely enough to carry it through, and Kathryn was both. She had also that peculiar asset of looking divinely intuitive and sweet during her silences, and it would have taken a keen reader of human nature to decide whether Kathryn Morris's silences brooded over a rare storeroom of treasure or over a haunted and empty chamber.

Without any one being aware of the reasons for his reappearance, a certain Alexander Arnold materialized while Northrup had been at his worst. Sandy Arnold had figured rather vehemently in the year following Kathryn's "coming out," but had faded away when Northrup began to show signs of becoming famous.

Arnold was a man who made money and lost it in a breath-taking fashion, but gradually he was steadying himself and was more often up than down--he was decidedly up at the time of Northrup's darkest hour; he was still refusing to disappear when Northrup emerged from the shadows and showed signs of persisting. This was disconcerting. Kathryn faced a situation, and situations were never thrilling to her: she lacked the sporting spirit; she always played safe or endeavoured to. Sandy was still in evidence when Northrup disappeared from the scene.

Mrs. Northrup read Brace's letter to Kathryn, and something in the girl rose in alarm. This ignoring of her, for whatever reason, was most disturbing. Brace should have taken her, if not his mother, into his confidence. Instead he had "cut and run"--that was the way Kathryn *thought* of it. Aloud she said, with that ravishing look of hers:

"How very Brace-like! Getting material and colour I suppose he calls it. I wish"--this with a tender, yearning smile--"I wish, for your sake and mine, dear, that his genius ran in another direction, stocks or banking--anything with an office. It is so worrying, this trick of his of hunting plots."

"I only hope that he can write again," Mrs. Northrup returned, patting the letter on her knee. Once she had wanted to write, but she had had her son instead. In her day women did not have professions *and* sons. They chose. Well, she had chosen, and paid the price. Her husband had cost her much; her son was her recompense. He was her interpreter, also.

"Where do you think he'll go?" Kathryn asked.

"He'll tell us when he comes home." There was something cryptic about Helen Northrup when she was seeking to help her son. Kathryn once more bridled. She was direct herself, very direct, but her advances were made under a barrage fire.

Her next step was to go to Doctor Manly. She chose his office hour, waited her turn, and then pleaded wakefulness and headache as her excuse for the call.

Manly hated wakefulness and headaches. You couldn't put them under the X-ray; you couldn't operate on them; you had to deal with them by faith. Kathryn was not lacking in imagination and she gave a fairly accurate description of long, black hours and consequent pain--"here." She touched the base of her brain. She vaguely recalled that the nerve centres were in that locality.

Manly was impressed and while he was off on that scent, somehow Northrup got into the conversation.

"I cannot help worrying about Brace, more for his mother's sake than his." Kathryn looked very sweet and womanly, "He has been so ill and the letter his mother has just received *is* disturbing."

Here Kathryn quoted it and Manly grinned.

"That's all right," he said, shaking a bottle of pills. "It does a human creature no end of good to run away at times. I often wonder why more of us don't do it and come back keener and better."

"Some of us have duties." Kathryn looked noble and self-sacrificing.

"Some of us would perform them a darned sight better if we took the half holiday now and then that the soul, or whatever you call it, craves. Now Northrup ought to look to his job--it *is* a job in his case. You wouldn't expect a travelling salesman to hang around his shop all the time, would you?"

Kathryn had never had any experience with travelling salesmen--she wasn't clear as to their mission in life. So she said doubtfully:

"I suppose not."

"Certainly not! An office man is one thing; a professional man, another; and these wandering Johnnies, like Northrup, still another breed. He's been starving his scent--that's what I told him. Too much *woman* in his--and I don't mean to hurt you, Kathryn, but you ought to get it into your system that marrying a man like Northrup is like marrying a doctor or minister; you've got to have a lot of faith or you're going to break your man."

Kathryn's eyes contracted, then she laughed.

"How charming you are, Doctor Manly, when you're making talk. Are those pills bitter?" Kathryn reached out for them. "Not that I mind, but I hate to be taken by surprise."

"They're as bitter as--well, they're quinine. You need toning up."

"You think I need a change?" The tone was pensive.

"Change?" Manly had a sense of humour. "Well, yes, I do. Go to bed early. Cut out rich food; you'll be fat at forty if you don't, Miss Kathryn. Take up some good physical work, not exercises. Really, it would be a great thing for you if you discharged one of your maids."

"Which one, Doctor Manly?"

"The one who is on her feet most."

And so, while Northrup settled down in King's Forest, and his mother fancied him travelling far, Kathryn set her pretty lips close and jotted down the address of Helen Northrup's letter in a small red book.

CHAPTER III

Mary-Clare stood in the doorway of the little yellow house. Her mud-stained clothes gave evidence that the recent storm had not kept her indoors--she was really in a very messy, caked state--but it was always good to breathe the air after a big storm; it was so alive and thrilling, and she had put off a change of dress while she debated a second trip. There was a stretching-out look on Mary-Clare's face and her eyes were turned to a little trail leading into the hilly woods across the highway.

Noreen came to the door and stood close to her mother. Noreen was only six, but at times she looked ageless. When the child abandoned herself to pure enjoyment, she talked baby talk and--played. But usually she was on guard, in a fierce kind of blind adoration for her mother. Just what the child feared no one could tell, but there was a constant appearance of alertness in her attitude even in her happiest moments.

"I guess you want the woods, Motherly?" The small up-turned face made the young mother's heart beat quicker; the tie was strong between them.

"I do, Noreen. It has been ten whole days since I had them."

"Well, Motherly, why don't you go?"

"And leave my baby alone?"

"I'll get Jan-an to come!"

"Oh! you blessed!" Mary-Clare bent and kissed the worshipping face. "I tell you, Sweetheart. Mother will take a bite of lunch and go up the trail, if you will go to Jan-an. If you cannot find her, then come up the trail to Motherly--how will that do?"

"Yes," Noreen sweetly acquiesced. "I'll come to the--the---" she waited for the word.

"Yawning Gap," suggested the mother, reverting to a dearly loved romance.

"Yes. I'll come to the Yawning Gap and I'll give the call."

"And I'll call back: *Oh! wow!--Oh! wo!*" The musical voice rose like a flute and Noreen danced about.

"And I'll answer: *wo wow!--oh!*" The piping tones were also flute-like, an echo of the mother's.

"And then, down will fall the drawbridge with a mighty clatter." Mary-Clare looked majestic even in her muddy trousers as she portrayed the action. "And over the Gap will come the Princess Light-of-my-Heart with her message."

"Ah! yes, Motherly. It will be such fun. But if Jan-an can come here to stay, then what?" the voice faltered.

"Why, Light-of-my-Heart, I will return strong and hungry, and Jan-an and my Princess and I will sit by the fire to-night and roast chestnuts and apples and there will be such a story as never was before."

"Both ways are beautiful ways, Motherly. I don't know which is bestest."

It was always so with Mary-Clare and Noreen, all ways were alluring; but the child had deep

intuitions, and so she set her face at once away from the little yellow house and the mother in the doorway, and started on her quest of Jan-an.

When the child had passed from sight Mary-Clare packed a bit of luncheon in a basket and ran lightly across the road. She looked back, making sure that no one was watching her movements, then she plunged into the woods, her head lowered, and her heart throbbing high.

The trail was not an easy one--Mary-Clare had seen to that!--and as no one but Noreen and herself ever trod it, it was hardly discernible to the uninitiated. Up and up the path led until it ended at a rough, crude cabin almost hidden by a tangle of vines.

Looking back over the years of her married life, Mary-Clare often wondered how she could have endured them but for the vision and strength she received in her "Place," as she whimsically called it--getting her idea from a Bible verse.

Among the many things that old Doctor Rivers had given Mary-Clare was a knowledge and love of the Bible. He had offered the book to her as literature and early in life she had responded to the appeal. The verse that had inspired her to restore a deserted cabin to a thing of beauty and eventually a kind of sanctuary, was this:

And the woman fled into the wilderness where she hath a place prepared of God that they should feed her there.

The words, roughly carved, were traced on the east wall of the cabin and under a picture of Father Damien.

The furniture of the shack was made by Mary-Clare's own hands. A long table, some uneven shelves for books she most loved, a chair or two and a low couch over which was thrown a gay-patched quilt. Once the work of love was completed, Nature reached forth with offerings of lovely vines and mountain laurel and screened the place from any chance passer-by.

A hundred feet below the cabin was a little stream. That marked the limit of even Noreen's territory unless, after due ceremony, she was permitted to advance as far as the cabin door. The pretty game was evolved to please the child and secure for the mother a privacy she might not have got in any other way.

As Mary-Clare reached the "Place" this autumn day, she was a bit breathless and stepped lightly as one does who approaches a shrine; she went inside and, kneeling by the cracked but dustless hearth, lighted a fire; then she took a seat by the rough table, clasped her hands upon it and lifted her eyes to the words upon the opposite wall.

Sitting so, a startling change came over the young face. It was like a letting down of strong defences. The smile fled, the head bowed, and a pitiful look of appeal settled from brow to trembling lips.

Mary-Clare had come to a sharp turn on her road and, as yet, she could not see her way! She had drifted--she could, with Larry away--but now he was coming home!

She had tried, God knew, for three long months to be sure. She *must* be sure, she was like that; sure that she *felt* her way to be the *right* way; so sure that, should she find it later the wrong way, she could retrace her steps without remorse. It was the believing, at the start, that she was doing right, that mattered.

Sitting in the quiet room with the autumn sunlight coming through the clustering vines at window and door and falling upon her in dancing patterns, the woman waited for guidance. The room became a place of memory and vision.

Help would come, she still had the faith, but it must come at once for her husband might at any hour return from one of his mysterious business trips and there must be a decision reached before she met him. She could not hope to make him understand her nor sympathize with her; he and she, beyond the most ordinary themes, spoke different languages. She had learned that.

She must take her stand alone; hold it alone; but the stand must seem to her right and then she could go on. Like the flickering sunbeams playing over her, the past came touching her memory with light and shade, unconsciously preparing her for her decision. She was not thinking, but thought was being formed.

The waves of memory swept Mary-Clare from her moorings. She was no longer the harassed woman facing her problem in the clear light of conviction; but the child, whose mistaken ideals of love and loyalty had betrayed her so cruelly. Why had she who early had been taught by Doctor Rivers to "use her woman brain," gone so utterly astray?

Why had she married Larry when she never loved him; felt him to be a stranger, simply because he had interpreted the words of a dying man for her?

In the light of realization the errors of life become our most deadly accusers. We dare not make others pay for the folly that we should never have perpetrated. Mary-Clare, the woman, had paid and paid, until now she faced bankruptcy; she was prepared still to do her part as far as in her lay--but she must retrace her steps, be sure and then go on as best she could.

Always, in those old childish days, there had been the grim spectre of Larry's mother. Her name was never mentioned but to the imaginative, sensitive Mary-Clare, she became, for that very reason, a clearly defined and potent influence. She was responsible for the doctor's lonely life in King's Forest; for Larry's long absences from home; for the lines that grew between the old doctor's eyes when he laid down the few simple laws of conduct that formed the iron code of

life:

Never lie. Never break a promise. Never take advantage for selfish gain. Think things out with your woman brain, and never count the cost if you know it is right.

Larry's mother, so the child believed, had not kept the code--therefore, Mary-Clare must the more strictly adhere to it and become what the other had not! And how desperately she had struggled to reach her ideal. In the conflict, only her sunny joyous nature had saved her from wreck. Naturally direct and loyal, much of what might have occurred was prevented. Passionate love and devout belief in the old doctor eliminated other dangers.

It was well and right to use your "woman brain," but when in the end you always came to the conclusion that the doctor's way was your way, life was simplified. If one could not fully understand, then all the more reason for relying upon a good guide, a tested friend; but above all other considerations, once the foundation was secure was this: she must make up to her adored doctor and Larry for what that unmentioned, mysterious woman had denied them.

It had all seemed so simple, when one did not know!

That was it. Breathing hard, Mary-Clare came back to the present. She could not know until she had lived, and being married did not stop life. And now, Mary-Clare could consider, as if apart from herself, from the girl who had married Larry because he had caught the dying request of the old doctor. She had wanted to do right at that last tragic moment. She had done it with the false understanding of reality and found out the truth--by living. It had seemed to her, in her ignorance, the only way to relieve the suffering of the dying: to help Larry who was deprived of everything.

Mary-Clare must not desert, as the unmentioned woman had.

But life, living--how they had torn the blindness from her! How she had paid and paid until that awful awakening after the birth and death of her last child, three months before! She had tried then to make Larry understand before he went away, but she could not! Larry always ascribed her moods, as he called them, to her "just going to have a child," or "getting over having one."

He had gone away tolerant, but with a warning: "A man isn't going to stand too much!"

These words had been a challenge. There could be no more compromising. Pay-day had come for her and Larry.

But the letters!

At this thought Mary-Clare sat up rigidly. A squirrel, that had paused at her quiet feet, darted affrightedly across the cabin floor.

The letters! The letters in the box hid on the shelf of the closet in the upper chamber. Always those letters had driven her back from the light which experience shed upon her to the darkness of ignorance.

Larry had given the letters to her at the time when she questioned, after the doctor's death, Larry's right to hold her to her marriage vows. How frightened and full of despair she had been. She had felt that perhaps Larry had not understood. Why had the doctor never told her of his desire for her and Larry to marry? Then it was that Larry had gone away to bring proof. He had never meant to show it to her, but he must clear himself at the critical moment.

And so he brought the letters. Mary-Clare knew every word of them. They were burned into her soul: they had been the guides on the hard road she had travelled. The doctor had always wanted her and Larry to marry; believed that they would. But she must be left free; no word must be spoken until she was old enough to choose. To prove his faith and love in his adopted child, Rivers had, so the letters to Larry revealed, left his all to her. In case she could not marry Larry, he confided in her justice to share with him.

The last dark hour had broken the old doctor's self-control--he had voiced what heretofore he had kept secret. The letters stood as silent proof of this. And then the old, rigid code asserted its influence. A promise must be kept!

And so the payment began, but it was not, had never been, the real Mary-Clare who had paid. Something had retreated during the bleak years, that which remained fulfilled the daily tasks; kept its own council, laughed at length, and knew a great joy in the baby Noreen, seemed a proof that God was still with her while she held to what appeared to be right.

And then the last child came, looked at her with its deep accusing eyes and died!

In that hour, or so it seemed, the real Mary-Clare returned and demanded recognition. There was to be no more compromise; no more calling things by false names and striving to believe them real. There was but one safe road: truth.

And Larry was coming home. He had not understood when he went away: he would not understand now. Still, truth must be faced.

The letters!

Mary-Clare now leaned on the table, her eyes fixed upon the wall opposite. The roughly carved words caught and held her attention. Gradually it came to her, vaguely, flickeringly, like a will-o'-the-wisp darting through a murky night, that if life meant anything it meant a faith in what was true. She must not demand more than that; a sense of truth.

As a little child may look across the familiar environment of its nursery and contemplate its first

unaided step, so Mary-Clare considered her small world: her unthinking world of King's Forest, and prepared to take her lonely course. The place in which she had been born and bred: the love and friends that had held her close suddenly became strange to her. What was to befall her, once she let go the conventions that upheld her?

Well, that was not for her to ask. There was the letting go and then the first unaided step. Nothing must hold her back--not even those letters that had sustained her! In recognizing her big problem in her small and crude world, Mary-Clare had no thought of casting aside her obligation or duties--her distress was founded upon a fear that those blessed, sacred duties would have none of her because she had not that with which to buy favour.

There was Noreen--she was Larry's, too. Through the years Mary-Clare had remembered that almost fiercely as she combated the child's aversion to her father. Suddenly, as small things do occur at strained moments, hurting like a cruel blow, a scene at the time when Noreen was but four years old, rose vividly before her. Larry, sensing the baby's hatred, had tried to force an outward show of obedience and affection. He had commanded Noreen to come and kiss him.

Like a bird under the spell of a serpent, Noreen had stood affrighted and silent. The command was repeated, laughingly, jeeringly, but under it Mary-Clare had recognized that ring of brutality that occasionally marked Larry's easy-going tones. Then Noreen had advanced step by step, her eyes wide and alert.

"Kiss me!"

"No!"

The words had been explosive. Then Larry had caught the child roughly, and Noreen had struck him!

Maddened and keen to the fact that he had been brought to bay, Larry had struck back, and for days the mark of his hand had lain across the delicate cheek. After that, when their wills clashed, Noreen, her eyes full of fear and hate, would raise her hand to her cheek--weighing the cost of rebellion. That gesture had become a driving force in Mary-Clare's life. She must overcome that which lay like a hideous menace between Larry and Noreen! She was accountable for it; out of her loveless existence Noreen had birth--she was a living evidence of the wrong done.

Looking back now, Mary-Clare realized that on the day when Larry struck Noreen he had struck the scales from her eyes. From that hour she had bunglingly, gropingly, felt her way along. The only fact that upheld her now was that she knew she must take her first lonely step, even if all her little unknowing, unthinking world dropped from her.

Again the squirrel darted across the floor and Mary-Clare looked after it lingeringly. Even the little wild thing was company for her in her hard hour. Then she looked up at the face of Father Damien. It was but a face--the meaning of what had gone into its making Mary-Clare could not understand--but it brought comfort and encouragement.

The reaction had set in. Worn-out nerves became non-resistant; they ceased to ache. Then it was that Noreen's shrill voice broke the calm:

"Motherly, Motherly, he's come: he's come home!"

Mary-Clare rose stiffly; her hands were spread wide as if to balance her on that dangerous, adventurous trail that lay between her past and the hidden future. There lay the trail: within her soul was a sense of truth and she had strength and courage for the first step. That was all.

"I'm coming, Noreen. I'm coming!" And Mary-Clare staggered on.

CHAPTER IV

Mary-Clare met Noreen at the brook, smiling and calm. The child was trembling and pale, but the touch of her mother's hand reassured her. It was like waking from a painful dream and finding everything safe and the dream gone.

"I was just coming down the path with Jan-an, Motherly, when I saw him going in the house."

"Daddy, dear?"

"Yes, Motherly, Daddy. He left a bag in the house; looked all around and then came out. I was 'fraid he was coming to you, so I ran and ran, but Jan-an said she'd stay and fix him if he did."

"Noreen!" The tone was stern and commanding.

"Well, Motherly, Jan-an said that, but maybe she was just funny."

"Of course. Just funny. We must always remember, Noreen, that poor Jan-an is just funny."

"Yes, Motherly."

Things were reduced to normal by the time the little yellow house was reached. Jan-an was

there, crouched by the fireplace, upon which she had kindled a welcoming fire after making sure Larry had not gone up the secret trail.

Rivers was not in evidence, though a weather-stained bag, flung hastily on the floor, was proof of his hurried call. He did not appear all day. As a matter of fact, he was at the mines. Failing to find his wife, he had availed himself of the opportunity of announcing his presence to his good friend Maclin, and getting from him much local gossip, and what approval Maclin vouchsafed.

All day, with Jan-an's assistance, Mary-Clare prepared for the creature comforts of her husband; while Noreen made nervous trips to door and window. At night Jan-an departed--she seemed glad to go away, but not sure that she ought to go; Mary-Clare laughed her into good humour.

"I jes don't like the feelings I have," the girl reiterated; "I'm creepy."

Mary-Clare packed a bag of food for her and patted her shoulder.

"Come to-morrow," she said, and then, after a moment's hesitation, she kissed the yearning, vacant face. "You're going to the Point, Jan-an?" she asked, and the girl nodded.

Noreen, too, had to be petted into a calmer state--her old aversion to her father sprang into renewed life with each return after an absence. In a few days the child would grow accustomed to his presence and accept him with indifference, at least, but there was always this struggle.

Mary-Clare herself wondered where Larry was; why he delayed, once having come back to the Forest; but she kept to her tasks of preparation and reassuring Noreen, and so the day passed.

At eight o'clock, having eaten supper and undressed the child, she sat in the deep wooden rocker with Noreen in her arms. There was always one story that had power to claim attention when all others failed, and Mary-Clare resorted to it now. Swaying back and forth she told the story of the haunt-wind.

"It was a wonderful wind, Noreen, quite magical. It came from between the south and the east--a wild little wind that ran away and did things on its own account; but it was a good little wind for all that foolish people said about it. It took hold of the bell rope in the belfry, and swung out and out; it swung far, and then it dropped and fluttered about quite dizzily."

"Touching Jan-an?" Noreen suggested sleepily.

"Jan-an, of course. Making her beautiful and laughing. Waking her from her sad dream, poor Jan-an, and giving her strength to do really splendid things."

"I love the wild wind!" Noreen pressed closer. "I'm not afraid of it. And it found Aunt Polly and Uncle Peter?"

"To be sure. It made Aunt Polly seem as grand and big as she really is--only blind folks cannot see--and it made all the blind folks *see her* for a minute. And it made Uncle Peter--no; it left Uncle Peter as he is!"

"I like that"--drowsily--"and it made us see the man that went to the inn?" Noreen lifted her head, suddenly alert.

"What made you think of him, Noreen?" Mary-Clare stopped swaying to and fro.

"I don't know, Motherly. Only it was funny how he just came and then the haunt-wind came and Jan-an says she thinks he *isn't*. Really we only think we see him."

"Well, perhaps that's true, childie. He's something good, I hope. Now shut your eyes like a darlie, and Mother will rock and sing."

Mary-Clare fixed her eyes on her child's face, but she was seeing another. The face of a man whose glance had held hers for a strange moment. She had been conscious, since, of this man's presence; his name was familiar--she could not forget him, though there was no reason for her to remember him except that he was new; a something different in her dull days.

But Noreen, eyes obediently closed, was pleading in the strange, foolish jargon of her rare moments of relaxation:

"You lit and lock, Motherly, and I'll luck my lum, just for to-night, and lall asleep."

"All right, beloved; you may, just for to-night, suck the little thumb, and fall asleep while Mother rocks."

After a few moments more Noreen was asleep and Mary-Clare carried her to an inner room and put her on her bed. She paused to look at the small sleeping face; she noted the baby outlines that always were so strongly marked when Noreen was unconscious; it hurt the mother to think how they hardened when the child awakened. The realization of this struck Mary-Clare anew and reinforced her to her purpose, for she knew her hour was at hand.

A week before she had dismantled the room in which she now stood. It had once been Doctor Rivers's chamber; later it had been hers--and Larry's. The old furniture was now in the large upper room, only bare necessities were left here.

Mary-Clare looked about and her face lost its smile; her head lowered--it was not easy, the task she had set for herself, and after Larry's visit to the mines it would be harder. She had hoped to see Larry first, for Maclin had a subtle power over him. Without ever referring to her, and she was sure he did not in an intimate sense, he always put Larry in an antagonistic frame of mind toward her. Well, it was too late now to avert Maclin's influence--she must do the best she could. She went back to the fire and sat down and waited.

It was after ten o'clock when Larry came noisily in. Rivers took his colour from his associates and their attitude toward him. He was a bit hilarious now, for Maclin had been glad to see him; had approved of the results of his mission--though as for that Larry had had little to do, for he had only delivered, to certain men, some private papers and had received others in return; had been conscious that non-essentials had been talked over with him, but as that was part of the business of big inventions, he did not resent it. Maclin had paid him better than he had expected to be paid, shared a good dinner with him and a bottle of wine, and now Rivers felt important and aggressive. Wine's first effect upon him was to make him genial.

He had meant to resent Mary-Clare's absence on his arrival, but he had forgotten all about that. He meant now to be very generous with her and let bygones be bygones--he had long since forgotten the words spoken just before he left for his trip. Words due, of course, to Mary-Clare just having had a baby. Almost Larry had forgotten that the baby had been born and had died.

He strode across the room. He was tall, lithe, and good-looking, but his face betokened weakness. All the features that had promised strength and power seemed, somehow, to have missed fulfilment.

Mary-Clare tried to respond; tried to do her full part--it would all help so much, if she only could. But this mood of Larry's was fraught with danger--did she not know? Success did not make him understanding and considerate; it made him boyishly dominant and demanding.

"Well, old girl"--Rivers had slammed the door after him--"sitting up for me, eh? Sorry; but when I didn't find you here, I had to get over and see Maclin. Devilish important, big pull I've made this time. We'll have a spree--go to the city, if you like--have a real bat."

Mary-Clare did not have time to move or speak; Larry was crushing her against him and kissing her face--not as a man kisses a woman he loves, but as he might kiss any woman. The silence and rigidity of Mary-Clare presently made themselves felt. Larry pushed her away almost angrily.

"Mad, eh?" he asked with a suggestion of triumph in his voice. "Acting up because I ran off to Maclin? Well, I had to see him. I tried to get home sooner, but you know how Maclin is when he gets talking."

How long Larry would have kept on it would have been hard to tell, but he suddenly looked full at Mary-Clare and--stopped!

The expression on the face confronting his was puzzling: it looked amused, not angry. Now there is one thing a man of Larry's type cannot bear with equanimity and that is to have his high moments dashed. He saw that he was not impressing Mary-Clare; he saw that he was mistaking her attitude of mind concerning his treatment of her--in short, she did not care!

"What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"I'm not laughing, Larry."

"What are you smiling at?"

"My smile is my own, Larry; when I laugh it's different."

"Trying to be smart, eh? I should think when your husband's been away months and has just got back, you'd meet him with something besides a grin."

There was some justice in this and Mary-Clare said slowly: "I'm sorry, Larry. I really was only thinking."

Now that she was face to face with her big moment, Mary-Clare realized anew how difficult her task was. Often, in the past, thinking of Larry when he was not with her, it had seemed possible to reason with him; to bring truth to him and implore his help. Always she had striven to cling to her image of Larry, but never to the real man. The man she had constructed with Larry off the scene was quite another creature from Larry in the flesh. This knowledge was humiliating now in the blazing light of reality grimly faced and it taxed all of Mary-Clare's courage. She was smiling sadly, smiling at her own inability in the past to deal with facts.

Larry was brought to bay. He was disappointed, angry, and outraged. He was not a man to reflect upon causes; results, and very present ones, were all that concerned him. But he did, now, hark back to the scene soon after the birth and death of the last child. Such states of mind didn't last for ever, and there was no baby coming at the moment. He could not make things out.

"See here," he said rather gropingly, "you are not holding a grouch, are you?"

"No, Larry."

"What then?"

For a moment Mary-Clare shrank. She weakly wanted to put off the big moment; dared not face it.

"It's late, Larry. You are tired." She got that far when she affrightedly remembered the bedroom upstairs and paused. She had arranged it for Larry--there must be an explanation of that.

"Late be hanged!" Larry stretched his legs out and plunged his hands in his pockets. "I'm going to get at the bottom of this to-night. You understand?"

"All right, Larry." Mary-Clare sank back in her chair--she had fallen on her adventurous way; she had no words with which to convey her burning thoughts. Already she had got so far from

the man who had filled such a false position in her life that he seemed a stranger. To tell him that she did not love him, had never loved him, was all but impossible. Of course he could not be expected to comprehend. The situation became terrifying.

"You've never been the same since the last baby came." Larry was speaking in an injured, harsh tone. "I've put up with a good deal, Mary-Clare; not many men would be so patient. The trouble with you, my girl, is this, you get your ideas from books. That mightn't matter if you had horse sense and knew when to slam the covers on the rot. But you try to live 'em and then the devil is to pay. Dad spoiled you. He let you run away with yourself. But the time's come---"

The long speech in the face of Mary-Clare's wondering, amazed eyes, brought Larry to a panting pause.

"What you got a husband for, anyway, that's what I am asking you?"

Mary-Clare's hard-won philosophy of life stood her in poor stead now. She felt an insane desire to give way and laugh. It was a maddening thing to contemplate, but she seemed to see things so cruelly real and Larry seemed shouting to her from a distance that she could never retrace. For a moment he seemed to be physically out of sight--she only heard his words.

"By God! Mary-Clare, what's up? Have you counted the cost of carrying on as you are doing? What am I up against?"

"Yes, Larry, I've counted the cost to me and Noreen and you. I'm afraid this is what we are all up against."

"Well, what's the sum total?" Larry leaned back more comfortably; he felt that Mary-Clare, once she began to talk, would say a good deal. She would talk like one of her books. He need not pay much heed and when she got out of breath he'd round her up. His interview with Maclin had not been all business; the gossip, interjected, was taking ugly and definite form now. Maclin had mentioned the man at the inn. Quite incidentally, of course, but repeatedly.

"You see, Larry, I've got to tell you how it is, in my own way," Mary-Clare was speaking. "I know my way makes you angry, but please be patient, for if I tried any other way it would hurt more."

"Fire away!" Larry nobly suppressed a yawn. Had Mary-Clare said simply, "I don't love you any more," Larry would have got up from the blow and been able to handle the matter, but she proceeded after a fashion that utterly confused him and, instead of clearing the situation, managed to create a most unlooked-for result.

"It's like this, Larry: I suppose life is a muddle for everyone and we all do have to learn as we go on--nothing can keep us from that, not even marriage, can it?"

No reply came to this.

"It's like light coming in spots, and then those spots can never be really dark again although all the rest may be. You think of those spots as bright and sure when all else is--is lost. That is the way it has been with me."

"Gee!" Larry shrugged his shoulders.

"Larry, you *must* try to understand!" Mary-Clare was growing desperate.

"Then, try to talk American."

"I am, Larry. *My* American. That's the trouble--there is more than *one* kind, you know. Larry, it was all wrong, my marrying you even for dear Dad's sake. If he had been well and we could have talked it over, he would have understood. I should have understood for him that last night. Even the letters should not have mattered, they must not matter now!"

This, at least, was comprehensible.

"Well, you *did* marry me, didn't you?" Larry flung out. "You're my wife, aren't you?" Correcting mistakes was not in Larry's plan of life.

"I--why, yes, I am, Larry, but a wife means more than one thing, doesn't it?" This came hopelessly.

"Not to me. What's your idea?" Larry was relieved at having the conversation run along lines that he could handle with some degree of common sense.

"Well, Larry, marriage means a good many things to me. It means being kind and making a good home--a real home, not just a place to come to. It means standing by each other, even if you can't have everything!"

Just for one moment Larry was inclined to end this shilly-shallying by brute determination. He was that type of man. What did not come within the zone of his own experience, did not exist for him except as obstacles to brush aside.

It was a damned bad time, he thought, for Mary-Clare to act up her book stuff. A man, home after a three months' absence, tired and worn out, could not be expected, at close upon midnight, to enjoy this outrageous nonsense that had been sprung upon him.

He must put an end to it at once. He discarded the cave method. Of course that impulse was purely primitive. It might simplify the whole situation but he discarded it. Mary-Clare's outbursts were like Noreen's "dressing up"--and bore about the same relation in Larry's mind.

"See here," he said suddenly, fixing his eyes on Mary-Clare--when Larry asserted himself he always glared--"just what in thunder do you mean?"

The simplicity of the question demanded a crude reply.

"I'm not going to have any more children." Out of the maze of complicated ideals and gropings this question and answer emerged, devastating everything in their path. They meant one, and only one, thing to Larry Rivers.

There were some things that could illumine his dark stretches and level Mary-Clare's vague reachings to a common level. Both Larry and Mary-Clare were conscious now of being face to face with a grave human experience. They stood revealed, man and woman. The big significant things in life are startlingly simple.

The man attacked the grim spectre with conventional and brutal weapons; the woman backed away with a dogged look growing in her eyes.

"Oh! you aren't, eh?" Larry spoke slowly. "You've decided, have you?"

"I know what children mean to you, Larry; I know what you mean by--love--yes: I've decided!"

"You wedged your way into my father's good graces and crowded me out; you had enough decency, when you knew his wishes, to carry them out as long as you cared to, and now you're going to end the job in your own way, eh?"

"Name the one particular way in which you're not going to break your vows," Larry asked, and sneered. "What's your nice little plan?" He got up and walked about. "I suppose you have cut and dried some little compromise."

"Oh! Larry, I wish you could be a little kind; a little understanding."

"Wish I could think as you think; that's what you mean. Well, by God, I'm a man and your husband and I'm going to stand on my rights. You can't make a silly ass of me as you did of my father. Fathers and husbands are a shade different. Come, now, out with your plan."

"I will not have any more children! I'll do everything I can, Larry; make the home a real home. Noreen and I will love you. We'll try to find some things we all want to do together; you and I can sort of plan for Noreen and there are all kinds of things to do around the Forest, Larry. Really, you and I ought to--ought to carry out your father's work. We could! There are other things in marriage, Larry, but just--the one." Breathlessly Mary-Clare came to a pause, but Larry's amused look drove her on. "I'm not the kind of a woman, Larry, that can live a lie!"

A tone of horror shook Mary-Clare's voice; she choked and Larry came closer, his lips were smiling.

"What in thunder!" he muttered. Then: "You plan to have us live on here in this house; you and I, a man and woman--and---!" Larry stopped short, then laughed. "A hell of a home that would be, all right!"

Mary-Clare gazed dully at him.

"Well, then," she whispered, and her lips grew deadly white, "I do not know what to do."

"Do? You'll forget it!" thundered Larry. "And pretty damned quick, too!"

But Mary-Clare did not answer. There was nothing more to say. She was thinking of the birth-night and death-night of her last child.

On and on the burning thoughts rushed in Mary-Clare's brain while she sat near Larry without seeing him. As surely as if death had taken him, he, the husband, the father of Noreen, had gone from her life. It did not seem now as if anything she had said, or done, had had anything to do with it. It was like an accident that had overtaken them, killing Larry and leaving her to readjust her life alone.

"Why don't you answer?" Larry laid a hand upon Mary-Clare's shoulder. "Getting sleepy? Come on, then, we'll have this out to-morrow." He looked toward the door behind which stood Noreen's cot and that other one beside it.

"I've fixed the room upstairs for you, Larry."

The simple statement had power to accomplish all that was left to be done. There was a finality about it, and the look on Mary-Clare's face, that convinced Larry he had come to the point of conquest or defeat.

"The devil you have!" was what he said to gain time.

For a moment he again contemplated force--the primitive male always hesitates to compromise where his codes are threatened. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes; a ferocious curl of his lips--it would be such a simple matter and it would end for ever the nonsense that he could not tolerate.

Mary-Clare leaned back in her chair. She was so absolutely unafraid that she quelled Larry's brute instinct and aroused in him a dread of the unknown. What would Mary-Clare do in the last struggle? Larry was not prepared to take what he recognized as a desperate chance. The familiar and obvious were deep-rooted in his nature--if, in the end, he lost with this calm, cool woman whom he could not frighten, where could he turn for certain things to which his weakness--or was it his strength--clung?

A place to come to; someone peculiarly his own; his without effort to be worthy of. Larry resorted to new tactics with Mary-Clare at this critical moment. The smile faded from his sneering lips; he leaned forward and the manner that made him valuable to Maclin fell upon him

like a disguise. So startling was the change, that Mary-Clare looked at him in surprise.

"Mary-Clare, you've got me guessing"--there was almost surrender in the tone--"a woman like you doesn't take the stand you have without reason. I know that. Naturally, I was upset, I spoke too quick. Tell me now in your own way. I'll try to understand."

Mary-Clare was taken off guard. Her desire and sore need rushed past caution and carried her to Larry.

She, too, leaned forward, and her lovely eyes were shining. "Oh! I hoped you would try, Larry," she said. "I know I'm trying and put things in a way that you resent, but I have a great, a true reason, if I could only make you see it."

"Now, you're talking sense, Mary-Clare," Larry spoke boyishly. "Just over-tired, I guess you were; seeing things in the dark. Men know the world better than women; that's why some things are *as* they are. I'm not going to press you, Mary-Clare, I'm going to try and help you. You *are* my wife, aren't you?"

"Yes, oh! yes, Larry."

"Well, I'm a man and you're a woman."

"Yes, that's so, Larry."

Step by step, ridiculous as it might seem, Mary-Clare meant, even now, to keep as close to Larry as she could. He misunderstood; he thought he was winning against her folly.

"Marriage was meant for one thing between man and woman!"

This came out triumphantly. Then Mary-Clare threw back her head and spiritually retreated to her vantage of safety.

"No, it wasn't," she said, taking to her own hard-won trail desperately. "No, it wasn't! I cannot accept that Larry--why, I have seen where such reasoning would lead. I saw the night our last baby came--and went. I'd grow old and broken--you'd hate me; there would be children--many of them, poor, sad little things--looking at me with dreadful eyes, accusing me. If marriage means only one thing--it means that to me and you, and no woman has the right to--to become like that."

"Wanting to defy the laws of God, eh?" Larry grew virtuous. "We all grow old, don't we? Men work for women; women do their share. Children are natural, ain't they? What's the institution of marriage for, anyway?" And now Larry's mouth was again hardening.

"Larry, oh! Larry, please don't make me laugh! If I should laugh there would never be any hope of our getting together."

For some reason this almost hysterical appeal roused the worst in Larry. The things Maclin had told him that day again took fire and spread where Maclin could never have dreamed of their spreading. The liquor was losing its sustaining effect--it was leaving Larry to flounder in his weak will, and he abandoned his futile tactics.

"Who's that man at the inn?" he asked.

The suddenness of the question, its irrelevancy, made Mary-Clare start. For a moment the words meant absolutely nothing to her and then because she was bared, nervously, to every attack, she flushed--recalling with absurd clearness Northrup's look and tone.

"I don't know," she said.

"That's a lie. How long has he been here, snooping around?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Larry." This was not true, and Larry caught the quiver in the tones.

Again he got up and became the masterful male; the injured husband; the protector of his home. There were still tactics to be tested.

"See here, Mary-Clare, I've caught on. You never cared for me. You married me from what you called duty; your sense of decency held until your own comfort and pleasure got in between--then you were ready to fling me off like an old mit and term it by high-sounding names. Now comes along this stranger, from God knows where, looking about for the devil knows what--and taking what lies about in order to pass the time. I haven't lived in the world for nothing, Mary-Clare. Now lay this along with the other woman-thoughts you're so fond of. I'm going upstairs, for I'm tired and all-fired disgusted, but remember, what I can't hold, no other man is going to get, not even for a little time while he hangs about. Folks are going to see just what is going on, believe me! I'm going to leave all the doors and windows open. I'm going to give you your head, but I'll keep hold of the reins."

And then, because it was all so hideously wrong and twisted and comical, Mary-Clare laughed! She laughed noiselessly, until the tears dimmed her eyes. Larry watched her uneasily.

"Oh, Larry," she managed her voice at last, "I never knew that anything so dreadfully wrong could be made of nothing. You've created a terrible something, and I wonder if you know it?"

"That's enough!" Larry strode toward the stairway. "Your husband's no fool, my girl, and the cheap, little, old tricks are plain enough to him."

Mary-Clare watched her husband pass from view; heard him tramp heavily in the room above. She sat by the dead fire and thought of him as she first knew him--knew him? Then her eyes widened. She had never known him; she had taken him as she had taken all that her doctor had

left to her, and she had failed; failed because she had not thought her woman's thought until it was too late.

After all her high aims and earnest endeavour to meet this critical moment in her life Mary-Clare acknowledged, as she sat by the ash-strewn hearth, that it had degenerated into a cheap and almost comic farce. To her narrow vision her problem seemed never to have been confronted before; her world of the Forest would have no sympathy for it, or her; Larry had reduced it to the ugliest aspect, and by so doing had turned her thoughts where they might never have turned and upon the stranger who might always have remained a stranger.

Alone in the deadly quiet room, the girl of Mary-Clare passed from sight and the woman was supreme; a little hard, in order to combat the future: quickened to a futile sense of injustice, but young enough, even at that moment, to demand of life something vital; something better than the cruel thing that might evolve unless she bore herself courageously.

Unconsciously she was planning her course. She would go her way with her old smile, her old outward bearing. A promise was a promise--she would never forget that, and as far as she could pay with that which was hers to give, she would pay, but outside of that she would not let life cheat her.

Bending toward the dead fire on the hearth, Mary-Clare made her silent covenant.

CHAPTER V

The storm had kept Northrup indoors for many hours each day, but he had put those hours to good use.

He outlined his plot; read and worked. He felt that he was becoming part of the quiet life of the inn and the Forest, but more and more he was becoming an object of intense but unspoken interest.

"He's writing a book!" Aunt Polly confided to Peter. "But he doesn't want anything said about it."

"He needn't get scared. I like him too well to let on and I reckon one thing's as good as another to tell *us*. I lay my last dollar, Polly, on this: he's after Maclin; not with him. I'm thinking the Forest will get a shake-up some day and I'm willing to bide my time. Writing a book! Him, a full-blooded young feller, writing a book. Gosh! Why don't he take to knitting?"

Northrup also sent a letter to Manly. He realized that he might set his conscience at rest by keeping his end of the line open, but he wanted to have one steady hand, at least, at the other end.

"Until further notice," he wrote to Manly, "I'm here, and let it go at that. Should there be any need, even the slightest, get in touch with me. As for the rest, I've found myself, Manly. I'm getting acquainted, and working like the devil."

Manly read the letter, grinned, and put it in a box marked "Confidential, but unimportant."

Then he leaned back in his chair, and before he relegated Northrup to "unimportant," gave him two or three thoughts.

"The writing bug has got him, root and branch. He's burrowed in his hole and wants the earth to tumble in over him. Talk about letting sleeping dogs lie. Lord! they're nothing to the animals of Northrup's type. And some darn fools"--Manly was thinking of Kathryn--"go nosing around and yapping at the creatures' heels and feel hurt when they turn and snap."

And Northrup, in his quiet room at the inn, slept at night like a tired boy and dreamed. Now when Northrup began to dream, he was always on the lookout. A few skirmishing, nonsensical dreams marked a state of mind peculiarly associated with his best working mood. They caught and held his attention; they were like signals of the real thing. The Real Thing was a certain dream that, in every detail, was familiar to Northrup and exact in its repetition.

Northrup had not been long at the inn when the significant dream came.

He was back in a big sunny room that he knew as well as his own in his mother's house. There he stood, like a glad, returned traveller, counting the pieces of furniture; deeply grateful that they were in their places and carefully preserved.

The minutest articles were noted. A vase of flowers; the curtains swaying in the breeze; an elusive odour that often haunted Northrup's waking hours. The room was now as it always had been. That being assured, Northrup, still in deep sleep, turned to the corridor and expectantly viewed the closed doors. But right here a new note was interjected. Previously, the corridor and doors were things he had gazed upon, feeling as a stranger might; but now they were like the room; quite his own. He had trod the passage; had looked into the empty rooms--they were empty but had held a suggestion of things about to occur.

And then waking suddenly, Northrup understood--he had come to the place of his dream. The

Inn was the old setting. In a clairvoyant state, he had been in this place before!

He went to the door of his room and glanced down the passage. All was quiet. The dream made an immediate impression on Northrup. Not only did it arouse his power of creation, strengthen and illumine it; but it evolved a sense of hurry that inspired him without worrying him. It was like the frenzy that seizes an artist when he wants to get a bit of beauty on canvas in a certain light that may change in the next minute. He felt that what he was about to do must be done rapidly and he knew that he would have strength to meet the demand.

He was quickened to every slight thing that came his way: faces, voices, colour. He realized the unrest that his very innocent presence inspired. He wondered about it. What lay seething under the thick crust of King's Forest that was bubbling to the surface? Was his coming the one thing needed to--to---

And then he thought of that figure of speech that Manly had used. The black lava flowing; oozing, silently. The whole world, in the big and in the little, was being awakened and aroused--it was that, not his presence, that confused the Forest.

The habits of the house amused and moved him sympathetically. Little Aunt Polly, it appeared, was Judge and Final Court of Justice to the people. Through her he felt he must look for guidance and understanding.

There were always two hours in the afternoons set aside for "hearings." Perched on the edge of the couch, pillows to right and left, eyeglasses aslant and knitting in hand, Aunt Polly was at the disposal of her neighbours. They could make appointments for private interviews or air their grievances before others, as the spirit urged them. Awful verdicts, clean-cut and simple, were arrived at; advice, grim and far-reaching, was generously given, but woe to the liar or sniveller.

A curious sort of understanding grew up between Northrup and the little woman concerning these conclaves. Polly sensed his interest in all that went on and partly comprehended the real reason for it. She had been strangely impressed by the knowledge that her guest was a writer-man and therefore conscientious about the mental food she set before him. She did not share Peter's doubts. Some things she felt were not for Northrup and that fast-flying pen of his! But there were other glimpses behind the shields of King's Forest that did not matter. To these Northrup was welcome.

When the hour came for *court* to sit, it became Northrup's habit to seek the front porch for exercise and fresh air. Sometimes the window nearest to Aunt Polly's sofa would be left open! Sometimes it was closed.

In the latter emergency Northrup sought his exercise and fresh air at a distance.

One day Maclin called. Northrup had not seen him before and was interested. Indirectly he was concerned with the story in hand for he was the mysterious friend of Larry Rivers and the puller of many strings in King's Forest; strings that were manipulated in ways that aroused suspicion and would be great stuff in a book.

Northrup had seen Maclin from his room window and, when all was safe, quietly took to the back stairs and silently reached the piazza.

The window by Aunt Polly's couch was open a little higher than usual and the words that greeted Northrup were:

"I call it muggy, Mr. Maclin. That's what *I* call it, and if the draught hits the nape of your neck, set the other side of the hearth where there ain't no draught."

This, apparently, the caller proceeded to do. Outside Northrup took a chair and refrained from smoking. He wanted his presence to be unsuspected by the caller. He was confident that Aunt Polly knew of his proximity, and he felt sure that Maclin had come to find out more about him.

From the first Northrup was aware of a subtle meaning for the call and he wondered if the woman, clicking her needles, fully comprehended it! The man, Maclin, he soon gathered, was no ordinary personage. He had a kind of superficial polish and culture that were evident in the tones of his voice. After having accounted for his presence by stating that he was looking about a bit and felt like being friendly, Maclin was rounded up by Aunt Polly asking what he was looking about at?

Maclin laughed.

"To tell the truth," he said, as if taking Aunt Polly into his intimate confidence, "I was looking at the Point. A darned dirty bit of ground with all those squatters on it."

"We haven't ever called 'em that, Mr. Maclin. They're folks with nowhere else to live." Aunt Polly clicked her needles.

"They're a dirty, lazy lot. I can't get 'em to work over at the mines, do what I will."

"As to that, Mr. Maclin, folks as are mostly drunk on bad whiskey can't be expected to do good work, can they? Then again, if they are sober, I dare say they are too keen about those inventions of yours that must be so secret. Foreigners, for that purpose, I reckon are easier to manage."

Maclin shifted his position and put the nape of his neck nearer the window again and Northrup lost any doubt he had about Aunt Polly's understanding of the situation.

Maclin laughed. It was a trick of his to laugh while he got control of himself.

"You're a real idealist, Miss Heathcote; most ladies are, some men are, too, until they have to handle the ugly facts of life."

Peter was meant by "some men," Northrup suspected.

"Now, speaking of the whiskey, Miss Heathcote, it's as good over at my place as the men can afford, and better, too. I don't make anything at the Cosey Bar, I can assure you, but I know that men have to have their drink, and I think it's better to keep it under control."

"That's real human of you, Mr. Maclin, but I wish to goodness you'd keep the men under control after they've had their drink. They certainly do make a mess of the peace and happiness of others while they're indulging in their rights."

A silence, then Maclin started again. "Truth is, Miss Heathcote, the men 'round here are shucks, and I'm keeping my eye open for the real interest of King's Forest, not the sentimental interest. Now, that Point--we ought to clean that up, build decent, comfortable cottages there and a wharf; keep the men as have ambition and can pay rents, and get others in, foreigners if you like, who know their business and can set a good example. We're all running to seed down here, Miss Heathcote, and that's a fact. I don't mind telling you, you're a woman of a thousand and can see what's what, I *am* inventing some pretty clever things down at my place and it wouldn't be safe to let on until they're perfected, and I do want good workers, not loafers or snoopers, and I *do* want that Point. It's nearer to the mines than any other spot on the Lake. I want to build a good road to it; the squatters could be utilized on that--the Pointers, I mean. You and your brother ought to be keen enough to work with me, not against me. Sentiment oughtn't to go too far where a lot of lazy beggars are concerned."

The clicking of the needles was the only sound after Maclin's long speech; he was waiting and breathing quicker. Northrup could hear the deep breathing.

"How do you feel about it, Miss Heathcote?"

"Oh! I don't let my feelings get the better of me till I know what's stirring them."

Northrup stifled a laugh, but Maclin, feeling secure, laughed loudly.

"It's like asking me, Mr. Maclin, to get stirred up and set going by a pig in a poke." Aunt Polly's voice was thin and sharp. "I always *see* the pig before I get excited, maybe it would be best kept in the poke. Now, Peter and me have a real feeling about the Point--it belonged, as far as we know, to old Doctor Rivers, and all that he had he left to Mary-Clare and we feel sort of responsible to him and her. We would all shield anything that belonged to the old doctor."

"Is her title clear to that land?" Maclin did not laugh now, Northrup noted that.

"Land! Mr. Maclin, anything as high-sounding as a title tacked on to the Point is real ridiculous! But if the title ain't clear, I guess brother Peter can make it so. Peter being magistrate comes in handy."

"Miss Heathcote"--from his tones Northrup judged that Maclin was coming into the open--"Miss Heathcote, the title of the Point isn't a clear one. I've made it my business to find out. Now I'm going to prove my friendliness--I'm not going to push what I know, I'll take all the risks myself. I'll give Mrs. Rivers a fair price for that land and everything will be peaceful and happy if you will use your influence with her and the squatters. Will you?"

Aunt Polly slipped from the sofa. Northrup heard her, and imagined the look on her face.

"No, Mr. Maclin, I won't! When the occasion rises up, I'll advise Mary-Clare against pigs in pokes and I'll advise the squatters to squat on!"

Northrup again had difficulty in smothering his laugh, but Maclin's next move surprised and sobered him.

"Isn't that place under the stairs, Miss Heathcote, where the bar of the old inn used to be?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" It was an ominous sign when Aunt Polly addressed any one as "sir." "But that was before our time. Peter and I cleaned the place out as best we could, but there are times now, even, while I sit here alone in the dark, when I seem to see shadows of poor wives and mothers and children stealing in that door a-looking for their men. Don't that thought ever haunt you, Mr. Maclin, over at the Cosey Bar?"

They were sparring, these two.

"No, it never does. I take things as they are, Miss Heathcote, and let them go at that. Now, if I were to run this place, do you know, I'd do it right and proper and have a what's what and make money."

"But you're not running this inn, sir."

"Certainly I'm not *now*, that's plain enough, or I'd make King's Forest sit up and take notice. Well, well, Miss Heathcote, just talk over with your brother what I've said to you. A man looks at some things different from a woman. Good-bye, ma'am, good-bye. Looks as if it were clearing."

As Maclin came upon the piazza he stopped short at the sight of Northrup by the open window. He wasn't often betrayed into showing surprise, but he was now. He had come hoping to get a glimpse of the stranger; had come to get in an early warning of his power, but he wanted to control conditions.

"Good afternoon," he muttered. "Looks more like clearing, doesn't it? Stranger in these parts? I've heard of you; haven't had the pleasure of meeting you."

Northrup regarded Maclin coolly as one man does another when there is no apparent reason why he should not.

"The clouds *do* seem lifting. No, I'm not what you might call a stranger in King's Forest. Some lake, isn't it, and good woodland?"

"One of the family, eh? Happy to meet you." Maclin offered a broad, heavy hand. Northrup took it and smiled cordially without speaking. "Staying on some time?"

"I haven't decided exactly."

"Come over to the mines and look around. Nothing there as yet but a dump heap, so to speak, but I'm working out a big proposition and while I have to go slow and keep somewhat under cover for a time--I don't mind showing what *can* be shown."

"Thanks," Northrup nodded, "I'll get over if I find time. I'm here on business myself and am rather busy in a slow, lazy fashion, but I'll not forget."

Maclin put on his hat and turned away. Northrup got an unpleasant impression of the man's head in the back. It was flat and his neck met it in flabby folds that wrinkled under certain emotions as other men's foreheads did. The expressive neck was wrinkling now.

Giving Aunt Polly time to recover her poise, Northrup went inside. He found the small woman hovering about the room, patting the furniture, dusting it here and there with her apron. Her glasses were quite misty.

"I hope you kept your ears open," she exclaimed when she turned to Northrup.

"I did, Aunt Polly! Come, sit down and let's talk it over."

Polly obeyed at once and let restraint drop.

"That man has a real terrible effect on me, son. He's like acid sorter creeping in. I don't suppose he could do what he hints--but his hints just naturally make me anxious."

"He cannot get a hold on you, Aunt Polly. Surely your brother is more than a match for any one like Maclin."

"When it comes to that, son, Peter can fight his own in the open, but he ain't any hand to sense danger in the dark till it's too late. Peter never can believe a fellow man is doing him a bad turn till he's bowled over. But then," she ran on plaintively, "it ain't just us--Peter, Mary-Clare, and me--it's them folks down on the Point," the old face quivered touchingly. "The old doctor used to say it was God's acre for the living; the old doctor would have his joke. The Point always was a mean piece of land for any regular use, but it reaches out a bit into the lake and the fishing's good round it, and you can fasten boats to it and it's a real safe place for old folks and children. There's always drifting creatures wherever you may be, son, and King's Forest has 'em, but the old doctor held as they ought to have some place to move in, if we let 'em be born. So he set aside the Point and never took anything from them, though he gave them a lot, what with doctoring and funerals. Dear, dear! there are real comical happenings at the Point. I often sit and shake over them. Real human nature down there! Mary-Clare goes down and reads the Bible to the Pointers--they just about adore her, and she wouldn't sell them out, not for bread and butter for her very own! It's the title as worries Peter and me, son. We've always known it was tricky, but, lands! we never thought it would come to arguing about and I put it to you: What does this Maclin man want of that Point?"

Northrup looked interested.

"I'm going to find out," he said presently, feeling strangely as if he had become part and parcel of the matter. "I'm going to find out and you mustn't worry any more, Aunt Polly. We'll try Maclin at his own game and go him one better. He cannot account for me, I'm making him uneasy. Now you help the thing along by just squatting--that's a good phrase of yours; one can accomplish much by just squatting on his holdings."

And now that tricky imagination of Northrup's pictured Mary-Clare in the thick of it and carrying out the old doctor's whims; taking to the desolate bit of ground the sweetness and brightness of her loveliness. It was disconcerting, but at the same time gratifying, that pervasive quality of Mary-Clare. She was already as deep in the plot of Northrup's work as she was in the Forest. Whenever Northrup saw her, and he did often, on the road he was amused at the feeling he had of *knowing* her. So might it be had he come across an old acquaintance who did not recognize him. It was a feeling wrought with excitement and danger; he might some day startle her by taking advantage of it.

The weather, after the storm, took an unexpected turn. Instead of bringing frost it brought days almost as warm as late summer. The colour glistened; the leaves clung to the branches, but the nights were cool. The lake lay like an opal, flashing gorgeously in the sun, or like a moonstone, when the sun sank behind the hills.

One afternoon Northrup went to the deserted chapel on the island. He walked around the building which was covered with a crimson vine; he looked up at the belfry, in which hung the bell so responsive to unseen hands.

The place was like a haunted spot, but beautiful beyond words. Northrup tried the door--it swung in; it shared the peculiarities of all the other doors of the Forest.

Inside, the light came ruddily through the scarlet creeper that covered the windows--no stained glass could have been more exquisite; the benches were dusty and uncushioned, the pulpit dark

and reproving in its aloofness. By the most westerly window there was a space where, apparently, an organ had once stood. There was a table near by and a chair.

An idea gripped Northrup--he would come to the chapel and write. There was a stove by the door. He could utilize that should necessity arise.

He sat down and considered. Presently he was lost in the working out of his growing plot; already he was well on his way. Over night, as it were, his theme had become clear and connected. He meant to become part of his book, rather than its creator; he would be governed by events; not seek to govern them. In short, as far as in him lay, he would live, the next few weeks, as a man does who has lost his identity and moves among his fellows, intent on the present, but with the background a blank.

Northrup felt that if, at the end of his self-ordained exile, he had regained his health, outlined a book, and ascertained what was the cause of the suspicious unrest of the Forest, he would have accomplished more than he had set out to do and would be in a position where he could decide definitely upon his course regarding the war, about which few, apparently, felt as he did.

It was his spiritual and physical struggle, as he contemplated the matter now, that was his undoing. He was trying to drive the horror from his consciousness, as a thing apart from him and his. He was overwhelmed by the possessiveness of the awful thing. It caught and held him, threatened everything he held sacred. Well, this should be the test! He would abide by the outcome of his stay in the Forest.

At that moment Maclin, oddly enough, came into Northrup's thoughts and the fat, ingratiating man became part, not of the plot of the book, but the grim struggle across the sea.

"Good God!" Northrup spoke aloud; "could it be possible?" All along he had been able to ignore the suggestions of disloyalty and treachery that many of his friends held, but a glaring possibility of Maclin playing a hideous rôle alarmed him; made every fibre of his being stiffen. The man was undoubtedly German, though his name was not. What was he up to?

There are moments in life when human beings are aware of being but puppets in a big game; they may tug at the strings that control them; may perform within certain limits, but must resign themselves to the fact that the strings are unbreakable. Such a feeling possessed Northrup now. He laughed. He was not inclined to struggle--he bowed to the inevitable with a keen desire for coöperation.

At this point something caused Northrup to look around.

Upon a bench near by, hunched like a gargoyle, with her vague face nested in the palms of her thin hands, sat the girl he had noted in the yellow house the day of his arrival. One glance at her and she seemed to bring the scene back. The sunny room, the children, the dogs, and the girl on the table, who had soon become so familiar to him.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "And who are you?"

"Jan-an."

Another name become a person! Northrup smiled. They were all materializing; the names, the stories.

"I see. Well?"

There was a pause. The girl was studying him slowly, almost painfully, but she did not speak.

"Where do you live, Jan-an?"

This made talk and filled an uncomfortable pause.

"One place and another. I was left."

"Left?"

"Yep. Left on the town. Folks take me in turn-about. I just jog along. I'm staying over to the Point now. Next I'm going to Aunt Polly. I chooses, I do. I likes to jog along."

The girl was inclined to be friendly and she was amusing.

"Did you hear the bell ring the night you came--the ha'nt bell?" she asked.

"I certainly did."

"'Twas a warning, and then here *you* are! Generally warnings mean bad things, but Aunt Polly says you're right enough and generally they ain't when they're young."

"Who are not, Jan-an?"

"Men. When they get old, like Uncle Peter, they meller or---"

"Or what?"

"Naturally drop off."

Northrup laughed. The sound disturbed the girl and she scowled.

"It's terrible to have folks think you're a fool to be laughed at," she muttered. "I can't get things over."

"What do you want to get over, Jan-an?"

Northrup was becoming interested. If straws show the wind's quarter, then a bit of driftwood may be depended upon to indicate the course of a stream. Northrup was again both amused and

surprised to find how his very ordinary presence in King's Forest was, apparently, affecting the natives. Jan-an took on new proportions as she was regarded in the light of a straw or a bit of driftwood.

"Yer feelin's," the girl answered simply. "When you don' understand like most do, yer feelin's count, they do!"

"They certainly do, Jan-an."

The girl considered this and struggled, evidently, to adjust her companion to suit her needs, but at last she shook her head.

"I ain't going to take no chances with yer!" she muttered at length. "'Tain't natural. Aunt Polly and Uncle Peter ain't risking so much as--her--"

"You mean--" Northrup felt guilty. He knew whom the girl meant--he felt as if he were taking advantage; eavesdropping or reading someone else's letter.

Jan-an sunk her face deeper into the cup of her hands--this pressed her features up and made her look laughably ugly. She was not taking much heed of the man near by; she was seeking to collect all the shreds of evidence she had gathered from listening, in her rapt, tense way, and making some definite case for, or against, the stranger who, Aunt Polly had assured her, was "good and proper."

"Now, everything was running on same as common," Jan-an muttered--"same as common. Then that old ha'nt bell took to ringing, like all possessed. I just naturally thought 'bout you dropping out of a clear sky and asking us the way to the inn when it was plain as the nose on yer face how yer should go. What do you suppose folks paint sign-boards for, eh?" The twisted ideas sprang into a question.

"That's one on me, Jan-an!" Northrup laughed. "I was afraid I'd be found out."

"Can't yer read?" Jan-an could not utterly distrust this person who was puzzling her.

"Yes, I can read and write, Jan-an."

"Then what in tarnation made yer plump in that way?"

"The Lord knows, Jan-an!" Almost the tone was reverent.

"Then *he* came ructioning in--Larry, I mean. An' everything is different from what it was. Just like a bubbling pot"--poor Jan-an grew picturesque--"with the top wobbling. I wish"--she turned pleading eyes on Northrup--"I wish ter God you'd clear out."

For a moment Northrup felt again the weakening desire to follow this advice, but, as he thought on, his chin set in a fixed way that meant that he was not going to move on, but stay where he was. He meant, also, to get what he could from this strange creature who had sought him out. He convinced himself that it was legitimate, and since he meant to get at the bottom of what was going on, he must use what came to hand.

"So Larry has come back?" he asked indifferently. Then: "I've caught sight of him from a distance. Good-looking fellow, this Larry of yours, Jan-an."

"He ain't mine. If he was--" Jan-an looked mutinous and Northrup laughed.

"See here, you!" The girl was irritated by the laugh. "Larry, he thinks that Mary-Clare has set eyes on yer before yer came that day. Larry is making ructions, and folks are talking."

"Well, that's ridiculous." Northrup found his heart beating a bit quicker.

"I know it is, but Maclin can make Larry think anything. Honest to God, yer ain't siding 'long of Maclin?"

"Honest to God, Jan-an, I'm not."

"Then why did yer stumble in on us that way?"

"I don't know, Jan-an. That's honest to God, too!"

"Then if nothing is mattering ter yer, and one place is as good as another, why don't you go along?"

Northrup gave this due consideration. He was preparing to answer something in his own mind. The dull-faced girl was having a peculiar effect upon him. He was getting excited.

"Well, Jan-an," he said at last, "it's this way. Things *are* mattering. Mattering like thunder! And one place isn't as good as another; this place is the only place on the map just now--catch on?"

Jan-an was making strenuous efforts to "catch on"; her face appeared like a rubber mask that unseen fingers were pinching into comical expressions.

Northrup began to wonder just how mentally lacking the girl was.

"But tuck this away in your noddle, Jan-an. Your Uncle Peter and Aunt Polly have the right understanding. They trust me, and you will some day. I'm going to stay right here--pass that along to anyone who asks you, Jan-an. I'm going to stay here and see this thing out!"

"What thing?"

The elusive something that was puzzling the girl, the sense of something wrong that her blinded but sensitive nature suffered from, loomed close. This man might make it plain.

"What thing?" she asked huskily. Then Northrup laughed that disturbing laugh of his.

"I don't know, Jan-an. 'Pon my soul, girl, I'd give a good deal to know, but I don't. I'm like you, just feeling things."

Jan-an rose stiffly as if she were strung on wires. Her joints cracked as they fell into place, but once the long body stood upright, Northrup noticed that it was not without a certain rough grace and it looked strong and capable of great endurance.

"I've been following you since the first day when you landed," Jan-an spoke calmly. There was no warning or distrust in the voice, merely a statement of fact. "And I'm going to keep on following and watching, so long as you stay."

"Good! I'll never be really lonely then, and you'll sooner get to trusting me."

"I ain't much for trusting till I knows."

The girl turned and strode away. "Well, if you ever need me, try me out, Jan-an. Good-bye."

Northrup felt ill at ease after Jan-an passed from sight.

"Of all the messes!" he thought. "It makes me superstitious. What's the matter with this Forest?"

And then Maclin again came into focus. Around Maclin, apparently, the public thought revolved.

"They don't trust Maclin." Northrup began to reduce things to normal. "He's got them guessing with his damned inventions and secrecy. Then every outsider means a possible accomplice of Maclin. They hate the foreigners he brings here. They have got their eyes on me. All right, Maclin, my ready-to-wear villain, here's to you! And before we're through with each other some interesting things will occur, or I'll miss my guess."

In much the same mood of excitement, Northrup had entered upon the adventure of writing his former book, with this difference: He had gone to the East Side of his home city with all his anchors cast in a familiar harbour; he was on the open sea now. There had been his mother and Kathryn before; the reliefs of home comforts, "fumigations" Kathryn termed them; now he was part of his environment, determined to cast no backward look until his appointed task was finished in failure or--success.

The chapel and the day had soothed and comforted him: he was ready to abandon the hold on every string. This space of time, of unfettered thought and work, was like existence in a preparation camp. This became a fixed idea presently--he was being prepared for service; fitted for his place in a new Scheme. That was the only safe way to regard life, at the best. Here, there, it mattered not, but the preparation counted.

CHAPTER VI

When Mary-Clare awoke the next morning she heard Larry still moving about overhead as if he had been doing it all night. He was opening drawers; going to and fro between closet and bed; pausing, rustling papers, and giving the impression, generally, that he was bent upon a definite plan.

Noreen was sleeping deeply, one little arm stretched over her pillow and toward her mother as if feeling for the dear presence. Somehow the picture comforted Mary-Clare. She was strangely at peace. After her bungling--and she knew she had bungled with Larry--she *had* secured safety for Noreen and herself. It was right: the other way would have bent and cowed her and ended as so many women's lives ended. Larry never could understand, but God could! Mary-Clare had a simple faith and it helped her now.

While she lay thinking and looking at Noreen she became conscious of Larry tiptoeing downstairs. She started up hoping to begin the new era as right as might be. She wanted to get breakfast and start whatever might follow as sanely as possible.

But Larry had gone so swiftly, once he reached the lower floor, that only by running after him in her light apparel could she attract his attention. He was out of the house and on the road toward the mines!

Then Mary-Clare, seized by one of those presentiments that often light a dark moment, closed the door, shivering slightly, and went upstairs.

The carefully prepared bedchamber was in great disorder. The bedclothes were pulled from the bed and lay in a heap near by; towels, the soiled linen that Larry had discarded for the fresh, that had been placed in the bureau drawers, was rolled in a bundle and flung on the hearth.

This aspect of the room did not surprise Mary-Clare. Larry generally dropped what he was for the moment through with, but there was more here than heedless carelessness. Drawers were pulled out and empty. The closet was open and empty. There was a finality about the scene that could not be misunderstood. Larry was gone in a definite and sweeping manner.

Dazed and perplexed, Mary-Clare went to the closet and suddenly was made aware, by the sight

of an empty box upon the floor, that in her preparation of the room she had left that box, containing the old letters of her doctor, on a shelf and that now they had been taken away!

What this loss signified could hardly be estimated at first. So long had those letters been guide-posts and reinforcements, so long had they comforted and soothed her like a touch or look of her old friend, that now she raised the empty box with a sharp sense of pain. So might she gaze at Noreen's empty crib had the child been taken from her.

Then, intuitively, Mary-Clare tried to be just, she thought that Larry must have taken the letters because of old and now severed connections. They *were* his letters, but---

Here Mary-Clare, also because she was just, considered the other possible cause. Larry might use the letters against her in the days to come. Show them to others to prove her falseness and ingratitude. This possibility, however, was only transitory. What she had done was inevitable, Mary-Clare knew that, and it seemed to her right--oh! *so* right. There was only one real fact to face. Larry was gone; the letters were gone.

Mary-Clare began to tremble. The cold room, all that had so deeply moved her was shaking her nerves. Then she thought that in his hurry Larry might have overturned the box--the letters might be on the shelf still. Quickly she went into the closet and felt carefully every corner. The letters were not there.

Then with white face and chattering teeth she turned and faced Jan-an. The girl had come noiselessly to the house and found her way to the room where she had heard sounds--she had seen Larry fleeing on the lake road as she came over the fields from the Point.

"What's up?" she asked in her dull, even tones, while in her vacant eyes the groping, tender look grew.

"Oh! Jan-an," Mary-Clare was off her guard, "the letters; my dear old doctor's letters--they are gone; gone." Her feeling seemed out of all proportion to the loss.

"Who took 'em?" And then Jan-an did one of those quick, intelligent things that sometimes shamed sharper wits--she went to the hearth. "There ain't been no fire," she muttered. "He ain't burned 'em. What did he take them for?"

This question steadied Mary-Clare. "I'm not *sure*, Jan-an, that any one has *taken* the letters. You know how careless I am. I may have put them somewhere else."

"If yer have there's no need fussing. I'll find 'em. I kin find anything if yer give me time. I have ter get on the scent."

Mary-Clare gave a nervous laugh.

"Just old letters," she murmured, "but they meant, oh! they meant so much. Come," she said suddenly, "come, I must dress and get breakfast."

"I've et." Jan-an was gathering the bedclothes from the floor. She selected the coverlid and brought it to Mary-Clare. "There, now," she whispered, wrapping it about her, "you come along and get into bed downstairs till I make breakfast. You need looking after more than Noreen. God! what messes some folks can make by just living!"

Things were reduced to the commonplace in an hour.

The warmth of her bed, the sight of Noreen, the sound of Jan-an moving about, all contributed to the state of mind that made her panic almost laughable to Mary-Clare.

Things had happened too suddenly for her; events had become congested in an environment that was antagonistic to change. A change had undoubtedly come but it must be met bravely and faithfully.

The sun was flooding the big living-room when Mary-Clare, Noreen, and Jan-an sat down to the meal Jan-an had prepared. There was a feeling of safety prevailing at last. And then Jan-an, her elbows on the table, her face resting in her cupped hands, remarked slowly as if repeating a lesson:

"He's dead, Philander Sniff. Went terrible sudden after taking all this time. I clean forgot--letters and doings. I can't think of more than one thing at a time."

Mary-Clare set her cup down sharply while Noreen with one of those whimsical turns of hers drawled in a sing-song:

"Old Philander Sniff, he died just like a whiff---"

"Noreen!" Mary-Clare stared at the child while Jan-an chuckled in a rough, loose way as if her laugh were small stones rattling in her throat.

"Well, Motherly, Philander was a cruel old man. Just being dead don't make him anything different but--dead."

"Noreen, you must keep quiet. Jan-an, tell me about it."

Mary-Clare's voice commanded the situation. Jan-an's stony gurgle ceased and she began relating what she had come to tell.

"I took his supper over to him, same as usual, and set it down on the back steps, and when he opened the door I said, like I allas done, 'Peneluna says good-night,' and he took in the food and slammed the door, same as usual."

"Old Philander Sniff---" began Noreen's chant as she slipped from her chair intent upon a doll

by the hearthside.

Mary-Clare took no notice of her but nodded to Jan-an.

"And then," the girl went on, "I went in to Peneluna and told her and then we et and went to bed. Long about midnight, I guess, there was a yell!" Jan-an lost her breath and paused, then rushed along: "He'd raised his winder and after all the keeping still, he called for Peneluna to come."

Mary-Clare visualized the dramatic scene that poor Jan-an was mumbling monotonously.

"And she went! I just lay there scared stiff hearing things an' seeing 'em! Come morning, in walked Peneluna looking still and high and she didn't say nothing till she'd gone and fetched those togs of hers, black 'uns, you know, that Aunt Polly gave her long back. She put 'em on, bonnet and veil an' everything. Then she took an old red rose out of a box and pinned it on the front of her bonnet--God! but she did look skeery--and then said to me awful careful, 'Trot on to Mary-Clare, tell her to fotch the marriage service *and* the funeral one, both!' Jes' like that she said it. Both!"

"This is very strange," Mary-Clare said slowly and got up. "I'm going to the Point, Jan-an, and you will take Noreen to the inn, like a good girl. I'll call for her in the afternoon."

"Take both!" Jan-an was nodding her willingness to obey. And Mary-Clare took her prayer-book with her.

Mary-Clare had the quiet Forest to herself apparently, for on the way to the Point she met no one. On ahead she traced, she believed, Larry's footprints, but when she turned on the trail to the Point, they were not there.

All along her way Mary-Clare went over in her thought the story of Philander Sniff and Peneluna. It was the romance and mystery of the sordid Point.

Years before, when Mary-Clare was a little child, Philander had drifted, from no one knew where, to the mines and the Point. He lived in one of the ramshackle huts; gave promise of paying for it, did, in fact, pay a few dollars to old Doctor Rivers, and then became a squatter. He was injured at the mines and could do no more work and at that juncture Peneluna had arrived upon the scene from the same unknown quarter apparently whence Philander had hailed. She took the empty cottage next Philander's and paid for it by service in Doctor Rivers's home. She was clean, thrifty, and strangely silent. When Philander first beheld her he was shaken, for a moment, out of his glum silence. "God Almighty!" he confided to Twombly who had worked in the mines with him and had looked after him in his illness; "yer can't shake some women even when it's for their good."

That was all. Through the following years the two shacks became the only clean and orderly ones on the Point. When Philander hobbled from his quarters, Peneluna went in and scrubbed and scoured. After a time she cooked for the old man and left the food on his back steps. He took it in, ate it, and had the grace to wash the dishes before setting them back.

"Some mightn't," poor Peneluna had said to Aunt Polly in defence of Sniff.

As far as any one knew the crabbed old man never spoke to his devoted neighbour, but she had never complained.

"I wonder what happened before they came here?" After all the years of taking the strange condition for granted, it sprang into quickened life. Mary-Clare was soon to know and it had a bearing upon her own highly sensitive state.

She made her way to the far end of the Point, passing wide-eyed children at play and curious women in doorways.

"Philander's dead!" The words were like an accompaniment, passing from lip to lip. "An' she won't let a soul in." This was added.

"She will presently," Mary-Clare reassured them. "She'll need you all, later."

There was a little plot of grass between Peneluna's shack and Philander's and a few scraggy autumn flowers edged a well-worn path from one back door to the other!

At Philander's front door Mary-Clare knocked and Peneluna responded at once. She was dressed as Jan-an had described, and for a moment Mary-Clare had difficulty in stifling her inclination to laugh.

The gaunt old woman was in the rusty black she had kept in readiness for years; she wore gloves and bonnet; the long crêpe veil and the absurd red rose wobbled dejectedly as Peneluna moved about.

"Come in, child, and shut the world out." Then, leading the way to an inner room, "Have yer got *both* services?"

"Yes, Peneluna." Then Mary-Clare started back.

She was in the presence of the dead. He lay rigid and carefully prepared for burial on the narrow bed. He looked decent, at peace, and with that unearthly dignity that death often offers as its first gift.

Peneluna drew two chairs close to the bed; waved Mary-Clare majestically to one and took the other herself. She was going to lay her secrets before the one she had chosen--after that the shut-out world might have its turn.

"I've sent word over to the Post Office," Peneluna began, "and they're going to get folks, the doctor and minister and the rest. Before they get here--" Peneluna paused--"before they get here I want that you should act for the old doctor."

This was the one thing needed to rouse Mary-Clare.

"I'll do my best, Peneluna," she whispered, and clutched the prayer-book.

"The ole doctor, he knew 'bout Philander and me. He said"--Peneluna caught her breath--"he said once as how it was women like me that kept men believing. He said I had a right to hold my tongue--he held his'n."

Mary-Clare nodded. Not even she could ever estimate the secret load of confessions her beloved foster-father bore and covered with his rare smile.

"Mary-Clare, I want yer should read the marriage service over me and him!" Peneluna gravely nodded to her silent dead. "I got this to say: If Philander ain't too far on his journey, I guess he'll look back and understand and then he can go on more cheerful-like and easy. Last night he hadn't more than time to say a few things, but they cleared everything, and if I'm his wife, he can trust me--a wife wouldn't harm a dead husband when she *might* the man who jilted her." The words came through a hard, dry sob. Mary-Clare felt her eyes fill with hot tears. She looked out through the one open window and felt the warm autumn breeze against her cheek; a bit of sunlight slanted across the room and lay brightly on the quiet man upon the bed. "Read on, Mary-Clare, and then I can speak out."

Opening the book with stiff, cold fingers, Mary-Clare read softly, brokenly, the solemn words.

At the close Peneluna stood up.

"Him and me, Mary-Clare," she said, "'fore God and you is husband and wife." Then she removed the red rose from her bonnet, laid it upon the folded wrinkled hands of the dead man and drew the sheet over him.

Just then, outside the window, a bird flew past, peeped in, fluttered away, singing.

"Seems like it might be the soul of Philander," Peneluna said--she was crying as the old do, hardly realizing that they are crying. Her tears fell unheeded and Mary-Clare was crying with her, but conscious of every hurting tear.

"In honour bound, though it breaks the heart of me, I'm going to speak, Mary-Clare, then his poor soul can rest in peace.

"The Methodist parson, what comes teetering 'round just so often, always thought Philander was hell-bound, Mary-Clare; well, since there ain't anyone but that parson as knows so much about hell, to send for, I've sent for him and there's no knowing what he won't feel called upon to say with Philander lying helpless for a text. So now, after I tell you what must be told, I want that you should read the burial service over Philander and then that parson can do his worst--my ears will be deaf to him and Philander can't hear."

There was a heavy pause while Mary-Clare waited.

"Hell don't scare me nohow," Peneluna went on; "seems like the most interesting folks is headed for it and I'll take good company every time to what some church folks hands out. And, too, hell can't be half bad if you have them you love with you. So the parson can do his worst. Philander and me won't mind now.

"Back of the time we came here"--Peneluna was picking her words as a child does its blocks, carefully in order to form the right word--"me and Philander was promised."

Drifting about in Mary-Clare's thought a scrap of old scandal stirred, but it had little to feed on and passed.

"Then a woman got mixed up 'twixt him and me. In her young days she'd been French and you know yer can't get away from what's born in the blood, and the Frenchness was terrible onsettling. Philander was side-twisted. Yer see, Mary-Clare, when a man ain't had nothing but work and working folks in his life, a creature that laughs and dances and sings gets like whiskey in the head, and Philander didn't rightfully know what he was about."

Peneluna drew the end of her crêpe veil up and wiped her eyes.

"They went off together, him and the furriner. Least, the furriner took him off, and the next thing I heard she'd taken to her heels and Philander drifted here to the mines. I knew he needed me more than ever--he was a dreadful creature about doing for himself, not eating at Christian hours, just waiting till he keeled over from emptiness, so I came logging along after him and--stayed. He was considerable upset when he saw me and he never got to, what you might say, speaking to me, but he was near and he ate the food I left on his steps and he washed the plates and cups and that meant a lot to Philander. If I'd been his proper wife he wouldn't have washed 'em. Men don't when they get used to a woman.

"And then"--here Peneluna caught her breath--"then last night he called from his winder and I came. He said, holding my hand like it was the last thing left for him to hold: 'I didn't think I had a right to you, Pen'--he used to call me Pen--'after what I did. And I've just paid for my evil-doing up to the end, not taking comfort and forgiveness--just paying!' I never let on, Mary-Clare, how I'd paid, too. Men folks are blind-spotted, we've got to take 'em as they are. Philander thought he had worked out his soul's salvation while he was starving me, soul and body, but I never let on and he died smiling and saying, 'The food was terrible staying, Pen,

terrible staying.”

Mary-Clare could see mistily the long, rigid figure on the bed, her eyes ached with unshed tears; her heart throbbed like a heavy pain. Here was something she had never understood; a thing so real and strong that no earthly touch could kill it. What was it?

But Peneluna was talking on, her poor old face twitching.

“And now, Mary-Clare, him and me is man and wife before God and you. You are terrible understanding, child. With all the fol-de-rol the old doctor laid on yer, he laid his own spirit of knowing things on yer, too. Suffering learns folks the understanding power. I reckon the old doctor had had his share ‘fore he came to the Forest—but how you got to knowing things, child, and being tender and patient, ‘stead of hot and full of hate, I don’t know! Now read, soft and low, so only us three can hear—the last service.”

Solemnly, with sweet intonations, Mary-Clare read on and on. Again the bird came to the window ledge, looked in, and then flew off singing jubilantly. Peneluna smiled a fleeting wintry smile and closed her eyes; she seemed to be following the bird—or was it old Philander’s soul?

When the service came to an end, Peneluna arose and with grave dignity walked from the room, Mary-Clare following.

“Now the Pointers can have their way ‘cording to rule, Mary-Clare,” she whispered, “but you and me understand, child. And listen to this, I ain’t much of a muchness, but come thick or thin, Mary-Clare, I’ll do my first and last for you ‘cause of the secret lying ‘twixt us.”

Then Mary-Clare asked the question that was hurting her with its weight.

“Peneluna, was it love, the thing that made you glad, through it all, just to wait?”

“I don’t rightly know, Mary-Clare. It was something too big for me to call by name, but I just couldn’t act different and kill it, not even when her as once was French made me feel I oughter. I wouldn’t darst harm that feeling I had, child.”

“And it paid?”

“I don’t know. I only know I was glad, when he called last night, that I was waiting.”

Then Mary-Clare raised her face and kissed the old, troubled, fumbling lips. The thing, too big for the woman, was too big for the girl; but she knew, whatever it was, it must not be hurt.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“God knows, Mary-Clare. The old doctor gave this place to Philander, and he gave me mine, next door. I think, till I get my leadings, I’ll hold to this and see what the Lord wants me to do with my old shack. I allas find someone waiting to share. Maybe Jan-an will grow to fit in there in time. When she gets old and helpless she’ll need some place to crawl to and call her own. I don’t know, but I’m a powerful waiter and I’ll keep an eye and ear open.”

On the walk home Mary-Clare grew deeply thoughtful. The recent scene took on enormous significance. Detached from the pitiful setting, disassociated from the two forlorn creatures who were the actors in the tragic story, there rose, like a bright and living flame, a something that the girl’s imagination caught and held.

That something was quite apart from laws and codes; it came; could not be commanded. It was something that marriage could not give, nor death kill. Something that could exist on the Point. Something that couldn’t be got out of one’s heart, once it had entered in. What was it? It wasn’t duty or just living on. It was something too big to name. Why was the wonder of it crowding all else out—after the long years?

Mary-Clare left the Point behind her. She entered the sweet autumn-tinted woods beyond which lay her home. She hoped—oh! yearningly she hoped—that Larry would not be there, not just yet. She would go for Noreen; she would stay awhile with Aunt Polly and tell her about what had just occurred—the service, but not the secret thing.

Suddenly she stood still and her face shone in the dim woods. Just ahead and around a curve, she heard Noreen’s voice. But was it Noreen’s?

Often, in her wondering moments, Mary-Clare had pictured her little girl as she longed for her to be—a glad, unthinking creature, such as Mary-Clare herself had once been, a singing, laughing child. And now, just out of sight, Noreen was singing.

There was a rich gurgle in the flute-like voice; it came floating along.

“Oh! tell it again, please! I want to learn it for Motherly. It is awfully funny—and make the funny face that goes with it—the crinkly-up face.”

“All right. Here goes!

“Up the airy mountain,
Down the rusty glen—

that’s the way, Noreen, scuffle your feet in the leaves—

“We daren’t go a-hunting
For fear of little men.
Wee folk, good folk
Trooping all together,

Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather--

Here, you, Noreen, play fair; scuffle and keep step, you little beggar!"

"But I may step on the wee men, the good men," again the rich chuckle.

"No, you won't if you scuffle and then step high; they'll slip between your feet."

Then came the tramp, tramp of the oncoming pair. Big feet, little feet. Long strides and short hops.

So they came in view around the turn of the rough road--Northrup with Noreen holding his hand and trying to keep step to the swinging words of the old song.

And Northrup saw Mary-Clare, saw her with a slanting sunbeam on her radiant face. The romance of Hunter's Point was in her soul, and the wonder of her child's happiness. She stood and smiled that strange, unforgettable smile of hers; the smile that had its birth in unshed tears.

Northrup hurried toward her, taking in, as he came, her loveliness that could not be detracted from by her mud-stained and rough clothing. The feeling of knowing her was in his mind; she seemed vividly familiar.

"Your little daughter got homesick, or mother-sick, Mrs. Rivers"--Northrup took off his hat--"Aunt Polly gave me the privilege of bringing her to you. We became friends from the moment we met. We've been making great strides all day."

"Thank you, Mr.---"

"Northrup."

"Thank you, Mr. Northrup. You have made Noreen very happy--and she does not make friends easily."

"But, Motherly," Noreen was flushed and eager. "*He* isn't a friend. Jan-an told me all about him. He's something the wild-wind brought. You are, aren't you, Mr. Sir?"

Northrup laughed.

"Well, something like that," he admitted. "May I walk along with you, Mrs. Rivers? Unless I go around the lake, I must turn back."

And so they walked on, Noreen darting here and there quite unlike her staid little self, and they talked of many things--neither could have told after just what they talked about. The conversation was like a stream carrying them along to a definite point ordained for them to reach, somewhere, some time, on beyond.

"How on earth could she manage to be what she is?" pondered Northrup. "She's read and thought to some purpose."

"What does he mean by being here?" pondered Mary-Clare. "This isn't just a happening."

But they chatted pleasantly while they pondered.

When they came near to the yellow house, Noreen, who was ahead, came running back. All the joyousness had fled from her face. She looked heavy-eyed and dull.

"She's tired," murmured Mary-Clare, but she knew that that was not what ailed Noreen.

And then she looked toward her house. Larry stood in the doorway, smoking and smiling.

"Will you come and meet my husband?" she asked of Northrup.

"I'll put off the pleasure, if you'll excuse me, Mrs. Rivers. I have learned that one cannot tamper with Aunt Polly's raised biscuits. It's late, but may I call to-morrow?" Northrup stood bareheaded while he spoke.

Mary-Clare nodded. She was mutely thankful when he strode on ahead and toward the lake.

It was while they were eating their evening meal that Larry remarked casually:

"So that's the Northrup fellow, is it?" Mary-Clare flushed and had a sensation of being lassoed by an invisible hand.

"Yes. He is staying at the inn--I sent Noreen there this morning while I went over to the Point; he was bringing her home."

"He seemed to know that you weren't home."

"Children come in handy," Larry smiled pleasantly. "More potato, Mary-Clare?"

"No." Then, almost defiantly: "Larry, Mr. Northrup asked his way to the inn the day he was travelling through. I have never spoken to him since, until to-day. When he found the house empty this afternoon, he naturally---"

"Why the explanation?" Larry looked blank and again Mary-Clare flushed.

"I felt one was needed."

"I can't see why. By the way, Mary-Clare, those squatters at the Point are going to get a rough deal. Either they're going to pay regular, or be kicked out. I tell you when Tim Maclin sets his jaw, there is going to be something doing."

This was unfortunate, but Larry was ill at ease.

"Maclin doesn't own the Point, Larry."

"You better listen to Maclin and not Peter Heathcote." Larry retraced his steps. His doubt of Northrup had led him astray.

Mary-Clare gave him a startled look.

"Maclin's a brute," she said quietly. "I prefer to listen to my friends."

"Maclin's our friend. Yours and mine. You'll learn that some day."

"I doubt it, Larry, but he's your employer and I do not forget that."

"I wouldn't. And you're going to change your mind some fine day, my girl, about a lot of things."

"Perhaps."

"I'm sleeping outside, Mary-Clare." Larry rose lazily. "I just dropped in to--to call." He laughed unpleasantly.

"I'm sorry, Larry, that you feel as you do."

"Like hell you are!" The words were barely audible. "I'm going to give you a free hand, Mary-Clare, but I'm going to let folks see your game. That's square enough."

"All right, Larry." Mary-Clare's eyes flickered. Then: "Why did you take those letters?"

Larry looked blankly at her.

"I haven't taken any letters. What you hoaxing up?" He waited a moment but when Mary-Clare made no reply he stalked from the house angrily and into the night.

CHAPTER VII

Maclin rarely discussed Larry's private affairs with him, but he controlled them, nevertheless, indirectly. His hold on Larry was subtle and far-reaching. It had its beginning in the old college days when the older man discovered that the younger could be manipulated, by flattery and cheap tricks, into abject servitude. Larry was not as keen-witted as Maclin, but he had a superficial cleverness; a lack of moral fibre and a certain talent that, properly controlled, offered no end of possibility.

So Maclin affixed himself to young Rivers in the days before the doctor's death; he and Larry had often drifted apart but came together again like steel responding to the same magnet. While apparently intimate with Rivers, Maclin never permitted him to pass a given line, and this restriction often chafed Larry's pride and egotism; still, he dared not rebel, for there were things in his past that had best be forgotten, or at least not referred to.

When Maclin had discovered the old, deserted mines and bought them, apparently Larry was included in the sale. Maclin sought to be friendly with Mary-Clare when he first came to King's Forest; but failing in that direction, he shrugged his shoulders and made light of the matter. He never pushed his advantage nor forgave a slight.

"Never force a woman," he confided to Larry at that juncture, "that is, if she is independent."

"What you mean, independent?" Larry knew what he meant very well; knew the full significance of it. He fretted at it every time his desires clashed with Mary-Clare's. If he, not she, owned the yellow house; if she were obliged to take what he chose to give her, how different their lives might have been!

Larry was thinking of all this as he made his way to the mines after denying that he had taken the letters. Those letters lay snugly hid under his shirt--he had a use for them. He could feel them as he walked along; they seemed to be feeding a fire that was slowly igniting.

Larry was going now to Maclin with all barriers removed. His suspicious mind had accepted the coarsest interpretation of Mary-Clare's declaration of independence. Maclin's hints were, to him, established facts. There could be but one possible explanation for her act after long, dull years of acceptance.

"Well," Larry puffed and panted, "there is always a way to get the upper hand of a woman and, I reckon, Maclin, when he's free to speak out, can catch a fool woman and a sneaking man, who is on no fair business, unless I miss *my* guess." Larry grunted the words out and stumbled along. "First and last," he went on, "there's just two ways to deal with women. Break 'em or let them break themselves."

Larry's idea now was to let Mary-Clare break herself with the Forest as audience. He wasn't going to do anything. No, not he! Living outside his home would set tongues wagging. All right, let Mary-Clare stop their wagging.

There was always, with Larry, this feeling of hot impotence when he retreated from Mary-Clare. For so vital and high-strung a woman, Mary-Clare could at critical moments be absolutely negative, to all appearances. Where another might show weakness or violence, she seemed to

close all the windows and doors of her being, leaving her attacker in the outer darkness with nothing to strike at; no ear to assail. It was maddening to one of Larry's type.

So had Mary-Clare just now done. After asking him about the letters, she had withdrawn, but in the isolation where Larry was left he could almost hear the terrific truths he guiltily knew he deserved, hurled at him, but which his wife did not utter. Well, two could play at her game.

And in this mood he reached Maclin; accepted a cigar and stretched his feet toward the fire in his owner's office.

Maclin was in a humanly soothing mood. He fairly crooned over Larry and could tell to a nicety the workings of his mind.

He puffed and puffed at his enormous cigar; he was almost hidden from sight in the smoke but his words oozed forth as if they were cutting through a soft, thick substance.

"Now, Larry," he said; "don't make a mistake. Some women don't have weak spots, they have knots--weak ends tied together, so to speak. The cold, calculating breed--and your wife, no offence intended, is mighty chilly--can't be broken, as you intimate, but they can be untied and"--Maclin was pleased with his picturesque figures of speech--"left dangling."

This was amusing. Both men guffawed.

"Do you know, Rivers"--Maclin suddenly relapsed into seriousness--"it was a darned funny thing that a girl like your wife should fall into your open mouth, marry you off-hand, as one might say. Mighty funny, when you come to think of it, that your old man should let her--knowing all he knew and seeming to set such a store by the girl."

Larry winced and felt the lash on his back. So long had that lash hung unused that the stroke now made him cringe.

"No use harking back to that, Maclin," he said: "some things ain't common property, you know, even between you and me. We agreed to that."

"Yes?" the word came softly. Was it apologetic or threatening?

There was a pause. Then Maclin unbent.

"Larry," he began, tossing his cigar aside, "you haven't ever given me full credit, my boy, for what I've tried to do for you. See here, old man, I have got you out of more than one fix, haven't I?"

Larry looked back--the way was not a pleasant one.

"Yes," he admitted, "yes, you have, Maclin."

"I know you often get fussed, Rivers, about what you term my *using* you in business, but I swear to you that in the end you'll think different about that. I've got to work under cover myself to a certain extent. I'm not my own master. But this I can say--I'm willing to be a part of a big thing. When the public *is* taken into our confidence, we'll all feel repaid. Can you--do you catch on, Larry?"

"It's like catching on to something in the dark," Larry muttered.

"Well, that's something," Maclin said cheerfully. "Something to hold to in the dark isn't to be sneered at."

"Depends upon what it is!" Apparently Larry was in a difficult mood. Maclin tried a new course.

"It's one thing having a friend in the dark, old man, and another having an enemy. I suppose that's what you mean. Well, have I been much of an enemy to you?"

"I just told you what I think about that." Larry misinterpreted Maclin's manner and took advantage.

"Larry, I'm going to give you something to chew on because I *am* your friend and because I want you to trust me, even in the dark. The fellow Northrup--"

Larry started as if an electric spark had touched him. Maclin appeared not to notice.

"--is on our tracks, but he mustn't suspect that we have sensed it." The words were ill-chosen. Having any one on his tracks was a significant phrase that left an ugly fear in Larry's mind.

"What tracks?" he asked suspiciously.

"Our inventions." Maclin showed no nervous dread. "These inventions, big as they are, old man, are devilish simple. That's why we have to lie low. Any really keen chap with the right slant could steal them from under our noses. That's why I like to get foreigners in here--these Dutchies don't smell around. Give them work to do, and they do it and ask no questions; the others snoop. Now this Northrup is here for a purpose."

"You know that for a fact, Maclin?"

"Sure, I know it." Maclin was a man who believed in holding all the cards and discarding at his leisure; he always played a slow game. "I know his kind, but I'm going to let him hang himself. Now see here, Rivers, you better take me into your confidence--I may be able to fix you up. What's wrong between you and your wife?"

This plunge sent Larry to the wall. When a slow man does make a drive, he does deadly work.

"Well, then"--Larry looked sullen--"I've left the house and mean to stay out until Mary-Clare

comes to her senses!"

"All right, old man. I rather smelled this out. I only wanted to make sure. It's this Northrup, eh? Now, Rivers, I could send you off on a trip but it would be the same old story. I hate to kick you when you're down, but I will say this, your wife doesn't look like one mourning without hope when you're away, and with this Northrup chap on the spot, needing entertainment while he works his game, I'm thinking you better stay right where you are! You can, maybe, untie the knot, old chap. Give her and this Northrup all the chance they want, and if you leave 'em alone, I guess the Forest will smoke 'em out."

Maclin came nearer to being jubilant than Rivers had ever seen him. The sight was heartening, but still something in Larry tempered his enthusiasm. He had been able, in the past, to exclude Mary-Clare from the inner sanctuary of Maclin's private ideals, and he hated now to betray her into his clutches. Maclin was devilishly keen under that slow, sluggish manner of his and he hastened, now, to say:

"Don't get a wrong slant on me, old man. I'm only aiming for the good of us all, not the undoing. I want to show this fellow Northrup up to your wife as well as to others. Then she'll know her friends from her foes. Naturally a woman feels flattered by attentions from a man like this stranger, but if she sees how he's taken the Heathcotes in and how he's used her while he was boring underground, she'll flare up and know the meaning of real friends. Some women have to be *shown!*"

By this time Larry suspected that much had gone on during his absence that Maclin had not confided to him. He was thoroughly aroused.

"Now see here, Rivers!" Maclin drew his chair closer and laid his hand on Larry's arm--he gloated over the trouble in the eyes holding his with dumb questioning. "It's coming out all right. We're in early and we've got the best seats--only keep them guessing; guessing! Larry, your wife goes--down to the Point a lot--goes missionarying, you know. Well, this Northrup is tramping around in the woods skirting the Point."

Just here Larry started and looked as if something definite had come to him. Had he not seen Northrup that very day in the woods?

"Now there's an empty shack on the Point, Rivers--some old squatter has died. I want you to get that shack somehow or another. It ought to be easy, since they say your wife owns the place; it's your business to *get* it and then watch out and keep your mouth shut. You've got to live somewhere while you can't live decent at home. 'Tisn't likely your wife, having slammed the door of her home on you, will oust you from that hovel on the Point--your being there will work both ways--she won't dare to take a step."

Larry drew a sigh, a heavy one, and began to understand. He saw more than Maclin could see.

"She hasn't turned me out," he muttered. "I came out."

"Let her explain that, Rivers. See? She can't do it while she's gallivanting with this here Northrup."

Larry saw the possibilities from Maclin's standpoint, but he saw Mary-Clare's smile and that uplifted head. He was overwhelmed again by the sense of impotence.

"Give a woman a free rein, Rivers, she'll shy, sooner or later." Maclin was gaining assurance as he saw Larry's discomfort. "That's what keeps women from getting on--they shy! When all's said, a tight rein is a woman's best good, but some women have to learn that."

Something in Larry burned hot and resentful, but whether it was because of Maclin or Mary-Clare he could not tell, so he kept still.

"Let's turn in, anyway, for to-night, old boy." Maclin's voice sounded paternal. "To-morrow is to-morrow and you'll feel able to tackle the job after a night's sleep."

So they turned in and it was the afternoon of the next day when Larry took his walk to the Point.

Just as he started forth Maclin gave him two or three suggestions.

"I'd offer to hire the shanty," he said. "That will put you in a safe position, no matter how they look at it. An old woman by the name of Peneluna thinks she owns it. There's an old codger down there, too, Twombley they call him--he's smart as the devil, but you can't tell which way he may leap. Try him out. Get him to take sides with you if you can."

"I remember Twombley," Larry said. "Dad used to get a lot of fun out of him in the old days. I haven't been on the Point since I was a boy."

"It's a good thing you never troubled the Point, Rivers. They'll be more stirred by you now."

"Maybe they'll kick me out."

"Never fear!" Maclin reassured him. "Not if you show good money and play up to your old dad. He had everyone eating out of his hand, all right."

So Larry, none too sure of himself, but more cheerful than he had been, set forth.

Now there is one thing about the poor, wherever you find them--they live out of doors when the weather permits. Given sunshine and soft air, they promptly turn their backs on the sordid dens they call home and take to the open. The day that Larry went to the Point was warm and lovely, and all the Pointers, or nearly all of them, were in evidence.

Jan-an was sweeping the steps of Peneluna's doorway, sweeping them viciously, sending the dust flying. She was working off her state of mind produced by the recent funeral of old Philander. She was spiritually inarticulate, but her gropings were expressed in service to them she loved and in violence to them she hated. As she swept she was cleaning for Peneluna, and at the same time, sweeping to the winds of heaven the memory of the dreadful minister who had said such fearsome things about the dead who couldn't talk back. The man had made Mary-Clare cry as she sat holding Peneluna's hard, cold hand. Jan-an knew how hard and cold it was, for she had held the other in decent sympathy.

Among the tin cans and ash heaps the children of the Point were playing. One inspired girl had decked a mound of wreckage and garbage with some glittering goldenrod and was calling her mates to come and see the "heaven" she had made.

Larry laughed at this and muttered: "Made it in hell, eh, kid?"

The child scowled at him.

Twombly was sitting in his doorway watching what was going on. He was a gaunt, sharp-eyed, sharp-nosed, and sharp-tongued man. He was the laziest man on the Point, but with all the earmarks of the cleverest.

"Well, Twombly, how are you?"

Twombly spat and took Larry out of the pigeonhole of his memory--labelled and priced; Twombly had not thought of him in years, as a definite individual. He was Mary-Clare's husband; a drifter; a tool of Maclin. As such he was negligible.

"Feeling same as I look," he said at last. He was ready to appraise the man before him.

"Bad nut," was what he thought, but diluted his sentiments because of the relationship to the old doctor and Mary-Clare. Twombly, like everyone else, had a shrine in his memory--rather a musty, shabby one, to be sure, but it held its own sacredly. Doctor Rivers and all that belonged to him were safely niched there--even this son, the husband of Mary-Clare about whom the Forest held its tongue because he was the son of the old doctor.

"Old Sniff's popped, I hear." Larry, now that he chose to be friendly, endeavoured to fit his language to his hearer's level. "Have a cigar, Twombly?"

"I'll keep to my pipe." The old man's face was expressionless. "If you don't get a taste for what you can't afford you don't ruin it for what you can. Yes, looks as if Sniff was dead. They've buried him, at any rate."

"Who's got his place?"

"Peneluna Sniff."

"Was he married?" Floating in Rivers's mind was an old story, but it floated too fast for him to catch it.

"She went through the marriage service. That fixes it, don't it?" Twombly puffed loudly.

"I suppose it does, but I kind of recall that there was a quarrel between them."

"Ain't that a proof that they was married?" Twombly's eyes twinkled through the slits of lids--he always squinted his eyes close when he wanted to go slow. Larry laughed.

"Didn't Peneluna Sniff, or whatever her name is, live in a house by herself?" he asked. He was puzzled.

"She sure did. Your old man was a powerful understander of human nater. A few feet 'twixt married folks, he uster say, often saves the day."

"Well, who's got her house?"

"She's got it."

"Empty?"

"I guess the same truck's in it that always was. I ain't seen any moving out."

"Is Mrs. Sniff at home?"

"How do you suppose I know, young man? These ain't calling hours on the Point."

"Well, they're business hours, all right, Twombly. See here, my friend, I'm going to hire that house of Mrs. Sniff if I can."

Twombly's slits came close together.

"Yes?" was all he vouchsafed.

"Yes. And I wish you'd pass the word along, my friend."

"I don't pass nothing!" Twombly interrupted. "I take all I kin git. I make use of what I can. The rest, I chuck."

"Well, have it your own way, but I'm your friend, Twombly, and the friend of your neighbours. I cannot say more now--but you'll all believe it some day."

"Maclin standing back of yer, young feller?"

"Yes. And that's where you've made another bad guess, Twombly. Maclin's your friend, only he isn't free to speak out just now."

"Gosh! we ain't eager for him to speak. The stiller he is the better we like it."

"He knows that. He's given up--he is going to see what I can make you feel--I'm one of you, you know that, Twombley."

"Never would have guessed it, son!" Twombley leered.

"Well, my wife's always been your friend--what's the difference? I've been on my job; she's been on hers--it's all the same, only now I'm going to prove it!"

"Gosh! you'll be a shock to Maclin all right."

"No, I won't, Twombley. You're wrong about him. He's meant right, but not being one of us he's bungled, he knows it now. He's listened to me at last."

Larry could be a most important-appearing person when there was no one to prick his little bubble. Twombley eyed his visitor calmly.

"Funny thing, life is," he ruminated, seeming to forget Larry's presence. "Yer get to thinking you're running down hill on a greased plank, and sudden--a nail catches yer breeches and yer stop in time to see where yer was going!"

"What then, Twombley?"

"Oh! nothing. Only as long as yer breeches hold and the nail don't come out, yer keep on looking!"

Again Twombley spat. Then, seeing his guest rising, he asked with great dignity:

"Going, young sir?"

"Yes, over to Mrs. Sniff's. And if we are neighbours, Twombley, let us be friends. My father had a liking for you, I remember."

"I'm not forgetting that, young sir."

When Larry reached Mrs. Sniff's, Jan-an was still riotously sweeping the memories of the funeral away. She turned and looked at Larry. Then, leaning on her broom, she continued to stare.

"Well, what in all possessed got yer down here?" asked the girl, her face stiffening.

"Where's Mrs. Sniff?" Larry asked. He always resented Jan-an, on general principles. She got in his way too often. When she was out of sight he never thought of her, but her vacant stare and monotonous drawl were offensive to him.

He had once suggested that she be confined somewhere. "You never can tell about her kind," he had said; he had a superstitious fear of her.

"What, shut the poor child from her freedom?" Aunt Polly had asked him, "just because we cannot tell? Lordy! Larry Rivers, there wouldn't be many people running around loose if we applied that rule to them."

There were some turns that conversation took that sent Larry into sudden silences--this had been one. He had never referred to Jan-an's treatment after that, but he always resented her.

Jan-an continued to stare at him.

"There ain't no Mrs. Sniff" she said finally. "What's ailin' folks around here?"

"Well, where's Miss Peneluna?" Larry ventured, thinking back to the old title of his boyhood days.

"Setting!" Jan-an returned to her sweeping and Larry stepped aside.

"I want to see her," he said angrily. "Get out of the way."

"She ain't no great sight, and I'm cleaning up!" Jan-an scowled and her energy suggested that Larry might soon be included among the things she was getting rid of.

"See here"--Larry's eyes darkened--"if you don't stand aside--"

But at this juncture Peneluna loomed in the doorway. She regarded Larry with a tightening of the mouth muscles. Inwardly she thought of him as a bad son of a good father, but intuitions were not proofs and because Doctor Rivers had been good, and Mary-Clare was always to be considered, the old woman kept her feelings to herself.

She was still in her rusty black, the rakish bonnet set awry on her head.

"Come in!" she said quietly. "And you, Jan-an, you trundle over to my old place and clean up."

Larry went inside and sat down in the chair nearest the door. The neatness and order of the room struck even his indifferent eyes, so unexpected was it on the Point.

"Well?" Peneluna looked at her visitor coolly. Larry did not speak at once--he was going to get the house next door; he must have it and he did not want to make any mistakes with the grim, silent woman near him. He was not considering the truth, but he was selecting the best lies that occurred to him; the ones most likely to appeal to his future landlady.

"Miss Peneluna," he began finally, but the stiff lips interrupted him:

"Mrs. Sniff."

"Good Lord! Mrs. Sniff, then. You see, I didn't know you were married."

"Didn't you? You might not know everything that goes on. You don't trouble us much. Your goings and comings leave us strangers."

Larry did not reply. He was manufacturing tears, and presently, to Peneluna's amazement, they glistened on his cheeks.

"I wonder"--Larry's voice trembled--"I wonder if I can speak openly to you, Mrs.--Mrs. Sniff? You were in my father's house; he trusted you. I do not seem to have any one but you at this crisis."

Peneluna sneezed. She had a terrible habit of sneezing at will--it was positively shocking.

"I guess there ain't any reason for you not speaking out your ideas to me," she said cautiously. "I ain't much of a fount of wisdom, but I ain't a babbling brook, neither."

She was thinking that it would be safer to handle Rivers than to let others use him, and she knew something of the trouble at the yellow house. Jan-an had regaled her with some rare tidbits.

"Peneluna, Mary-Clare and I have had some words; I've left home."

There was no answer to this. Larry moistened his lips and went on:

"Perhaps Mary-Clare has told you?"

"No, she ain't blabbed none."

This was disconcerting.

"She wouldn't, and I am not going to, either. It's just a misunderstanding, Mrs. Sniff. I could go away and let it rest there, but I fear I've been away too much and things have got snarled. Mary-Clare doesn't rightly see things."

"Yes she does, Larry Rivers! She's terrible seeing." Peneluna's eyes flashed.

"All right then, Mrs. Sniff. *I want her to see!* I want her to see me here, looking after her interests. I cannot explain; you'll all know soon enough. Danger's threatening and I'm going to be on the spot! You've all got a wrong line on Maclin, so he's side-stepped and listened to me at last; I'm going to show up this man Northrup who is hanging round. I want to hire your house, Mrs. Sniff, and live on here until---"

Peneluna sneezed lustily; it made Larry wince.

"Until Mary-Clare turns you out?" she asked harshly. "And gets talked about for doing it--or lets you stay on reflecting upon her what can't tell her side? Larry Rivers, you always was a thorn in your good father's side and I reckon you've been one in Mary-Clare's."

Larry winced again and recalled sharply the old vacations and this woman's silent attitude toward him. It all came back clearly. He could always cajole Aunt Polly Heathcote, but Peneluna had explained her attitude toward him in the past by briefly stating that she "internally and eternally hated boys."

"You're hard on me, Mrs. Sniff. You'll be sorry some day."

"Then I'll be sorry!" Peneluna sneezed.

Presently her mood, however, changed. She regarded Larry with new interest.

"How much will you give me for my place?" Peneluna leaned forward suddenly and quite took Larry off his guard. He had succeeded so unexpectedly that it had the effect of shock.

"Five dollars a month, Mrs. Sniff."

"I'm wanting ten."

This was a staggering demand.

"How bad does he want it?" Peneluna was thinking.

"How far had I best give in?" Larry estimated.

"Make it seven," he ventured.

"Seven and then three dollars a week more if I cook and serve for you."

Larry had overlooked this very important item.

"All right!" he agreed. "When can I come?"

"Right off." Peneluna felt that she must get him under her eye as soon as possible. She moved to the door.

"You'll make it straight with Mary-Clare?"

Larry was following the rigid form out into the gathering dark--a storm was rising; the bell on the distant island was ringing gleefully like a wicked little imp set free.

"I'll tell her that you're here and that she best let you stay on, if that's what you mean." Peneluna led the way over the well-worn path she had often trod before. "And, Larry Rivers, I don't rightly know as I'm doing fair and square, but look at it as you will, it's better me than another if anything is wrong. I served yer good father and I set a store by yer wife and child--and I want to hang hold of you all. I've let you have yer way down here, but I don't want any ructions and I ain't going to have Maclin's crowd hinting and defiling anybody."

"I'll never forget this, Mrs. Sniff." In the gathering gloom, behind Peneluna's striding form, Larry's voice almost broke again and undoubtedly the tears were on his cheeks. "Some day, when you know all, you'll understand."

"I'm a good setter and waiter, Larry Rivers, and as to understanding, that is as it may be. I can only see just so far! I can't turn my back on the old doctor's son nor Mary-Clare's husband but I don't want any tricks. You better not forget that! There's a bed in yonder." The two had entered the house next door. Jan-an had done good work. The place was in order and a fire burned in the stove. "I'll fetch food later." With this Peneluna, followed by Jan-an, a trifle more vague than usual, left the house.

The rain was already falling and the wind rising--it was the haunted wind; the bell sounded in the distance sharply. Jan-an paused in the gathering darkness and spoke tremblingly:

"What's a-going on?" she asked. Peneluna turned and laid her hand on the girl's shoulder; her face softened--but Jan-an could not see that.

"Child"--the old voice fell to a whisper--"I ain't going to expect too much of yer--God Almighty made yer out of a skimpy pattern, I know, but what He did give yer can be helped along by using it for them yer love. Child, watch there!"

A long crooked forefinger pointed to the shack, the windows of which were already darkened--for Larry had drawn the shades!

"Watch early and late there! Keep your mouth shut, except to me. Jan-an, I can trust yer?"

The girl was growing nervous.

"Yes'm," she blurted suddenly and then fell to weeping. "I keep feelin' things like wings a-touching of me," she muttered. "I hate the feelin'. When nothing ain't happened ever, what's the reason it has ter begin now?"

It was nearly midnight when Peneluna sat down by her fireside to think. She had cooked a meal for Larry and carried it to him; she had soothed and fed Jan-an and put her to bed on a cot near the bed upon which old Philander Sniff had once rested, and now Peneluna, with Sniff's old Bible on her knees, felt safe to think and read, and it seemed as if the wings Jan-an had sensed were touching her! The book was marked at passages that had appealed to the old man. Often, after Mary-Clare had read to him and left, thinking that she had made no impression, the trembling, gnarled hand had pencilled the words to be reread in lonely moments.

Peneluna had never read the Bible from choice; indeed, her education had been so limited as to be negligible, but lately these pencilled marks had become tremendously significant to her. She was able, somehow, to follow Philander Sniff closely, catching sight of him, now and again, in an illumined way guided by the Bible verses. It was like the blind leading the blind, to be sure, and often it seemed a blind trail, but occasionally Peneluna could pause and take a long breath while she beheld the vision that must have helped her friend upon his isolated way.

To-night, however, she was tired and puzzled and worried. She kept reverting to Larry: her eyes only lighted on the printed words before her; her thoughts drifted.

What had been going on in the Forest? Why was the storm breaking?

But suddenly a verse more heavily marked than the others stayed her:

And a highway shall be there, and a way and it shall be called the way of holiness. The wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.

Over and over Peneluna read and pondered; more and more she puzzled.

"Land o' love!" she muttered at last. "Now these here words mean something particular. Seems like they must get into me with their meaning if I hold to 'em long enough. Lord! I don't see how folks can enjoy religion when you have to swallow it without tasting it."

But so powerful is suggestion through words, that presently the old woman became hypnotized by them. They sprang out at her like flashes--one by one. "Highway"--she could grasp that. "A way and it shall be called"--these words ran into each other but--the "way" held. "The wayfarer"--well! that was easy; all folks taking to the highway were wayfarers--"though fools shall not err therein."

Peneluna, without realizing it, was on The Highway over which all pass, living, seeing, feeling, and storing up experience. In old Philander's quiet memory-haunted room she was pausing and looking back; groping forward--understanding as she had never understood before!

At times, catching the meaning of what the present held, her old face quivered as a child's does that is lost, and she would *think back*, holding to some word or look that gave her courage again to fix her eyes ahead.

"So! so!" she would nod and mutter. "So! so!" It was like meeting others on The Highway, greeting them, and then going on alone!

That was the hurt of it all--she was alone. If only there had been someone to hold her hand, to help her when she stumbled, but no! she was like a creature in a land of shadowy ghosts. Ghosts whom she knew; who knew her, but they could not linger long with her.

More than the others, Philander persisted, but perhaps that was because of the pencilled words. They were guide-posts he had left for her. And strangest of all, this passing to and fro on The Highway seemed to concern Larry Rivers most of all. Larry, who, during all the years, had

meant nothing more to King's Forest than that he was the old doctor's son, Mary-Clare's husband, and Maclin's secret employee.

Larry, asleep in the shack next door, had taken on new proportions. He meant, for the first time, to Peneluna, a person to whom she owed something by virtue of knowledge. Knowledge! What really did she know? How did she know it? She did not question--she accepted and became responsible in a deep and grateful manner. She must remember about Larry. Remember all she could--it would help her now.

The trouble, Peneluna knew, began with Larry's mother. Larry's mother had wrecked the old doctor's life; had driven him to King's Forest. No one had ever told Peneluna this--but she knew it. It did not matter what that woman had done, she had hurt a man cruelly. Once the old doctor had said to Peneluna--it came sharply back, now, like a call from a wayfarer:

"Miss Pen, it is because of such women as you and Aunt Polly that men *can* keep their faith."

That was when Larry was desperately ill and Polly Heathcote and Peneluna were nursing him--he was a little boy then, home on a vacation. It was because of the woman that neither of them had ever known that they tried to mother the boy--but Larry was difficult, he had queer streaks. Again Peneluna looked back, back to some of the difficult streaks.

Once Larry had stolen! He had gone, too, when quite a child, to the tavern! He had tasted the liquor, made the men laugh! The old doctor had been in a sad state at that time and Larry had been sent to school.

After that, well, Peneluna could not recall Larry distinctly for many years. She knew the old doctor clung to him passionately; went occasionally to see him, came back troubled; came back looking older each time and depending more upon Mary-Clare, whose love and devotion could smooth the sadness from his face.

Then that night, the marriage night of Mary-Clare! Peneluna had been near the old doctor when Larry bent to catch the distorted words that were but whispered. She knew, she seemed always to have known, that Larry had lied; he had *not* understood anything.

Peneluna had tried to interfere, but she was always fumbling; she could patiently wait, but action, with her, was slow.

And then Maclin! Since Maclin came and bought the mines *and* Larry--oh! what did it all mean? Had things been slumbering, needing only a touch?

And who was this man at the inn? Was he the Touch? What was going to happen in this dull, sluggish life of King's Forest?

The night was growing old, old! Peneluna, too, was old and tired. The Highway was fraught with terrors for her; the ghosts frightened her. They were trying to make her understand what she must *do*, now that they had shown her The Way. She must keep the old doctor's son from Maclin if she could and from the stranger at the inn, if she had need. If trouble came she must defend her own.

The weary woman nodded; her eyes closed; the Book slipped from her lap and lay like a "light unto her feet." She had, somehow, got an understanding of Larry Rivers: she believed that through his "difficult streaks" Maclin had got a hold upon him; was using him now for evil ends. It was for her, for all who loved the old doctor, to shield, at any cost, the doctor's son. That Larry was unworthy did not weigh with Peneluna. Where she gave, she gave with abandon.

CHAPTER VIII

Aunt Polly came into the living-room of the inn noiselessly, but Peter, at the fireside, opened his eyes. Nothing could have driven him to bed earlier, but he appeared to have been sleeping for hours.

Polly's glasses adorned the top of her head. This was significant. When she had arrived at any definite conclusion she pushed her spectacles away as though her physical vision and her spiritual were one and the same.

"Time, Polly?" Peter yawned.

"Going on to 'leven."

"He come in?"

Full well Peter knew that he had not!

"No, Peter, and his evening meal is drying up in the oven--I had creamed oysters, too. Creamed oysters are his specials."

"Scandalous, your goings on with this young man!" Peter sat up and stretched. Then he smiled at his sister.

"Well, Peter, all my life I've had to take snatches and scraps out of other folks' lives when I could get them; and I declare I've managed to patch together a real Lady's Delight-pattern sort of quilt to huddle under when I'm cold and tired."

"Tired now, Polly?"

"Not exactly tired, brother, but sort of rigid. Feel as if I was braced for something. I've often had that feeling."

"Women! women!" muttered Peter, and threw on another log.

"What you suppose has happened to keep our young feller from the--the oysters, eh?"

"I'm not accounting for folks or things these days, Peter. I'm just keeping my eyes and ears open. Jan-an makes me uneasy!" This came like a mild explosion.

"What's she up to?" Peter sniffed.

"Land! the poor soul is like the barometer you set such store by. Everything looking clear and peaceful and then suddenlike up she gets, as she did an hour ago, and grabs her truck and sets out for Mary-Clare's like she was summoned. Just saying she had to! These are queer times, brother. I ain't easy in my mind."

"If Jan-an doesn't calm down," Peter muttered, "she may have to be put somewhere, as Larry Rivers once suggested. Larry hasn't many earmarks of his pa--but he may have a sense about human ailments."

"Think shame of yourself, Peter Heathcote, to let anything Larry Rivers says disturb your natural good feelings. Where could we send Jan-an if we wanted to?" Peter declined to reply and Aunt Polly went on: "Larry isn't living with Mary-Clare, Peter!" she added. This was a more significant explosion. Peter turned and his hair seemed to spring an inch higher around his red, puffy face.

"Where is he living?" he asked. When deeply stirred, Peter went slow and warily.

"He's hired Peneluna's old shack."

Peter digested this; but found it chaff.

"You got this from Jan-an?"

"I got it from her and from Peneluna. Peter, Peneluna looks and acts like one of them queer sort of ancient bodies what used to sit on altars or something, and make remarks that no one was expected to differ from. She just dropped in this morning and said that Larry Rivers had taken her shack; was paying for it, too."

"Has, or is going to?" Peter was giving himself time to think.

"Has!" Aunt Polly was pulling her cushions into the cavities of her tired little body.

"Damn funny!" muttered Peter and added another log. The heat was growing ferocious. Then, as he eyed his sister: "Better turn in, Polly. You look scrunched." To look "scrunched" was to look desperately exhausted. "No use wearing yourself out for--for folks," he added with a tenderness in his voice that always brought a peculiar smile to Polly's eyes.

"I don't see as there is anything else much, brother, to wear one's self out for."

"Why frazzle yourself for anything?"

"Why shouldn't I? What should I be keeping myself for, Peter? Surely not for my own satisfaction. No. I always hold if folks want me, then I'm particularly pleased to be had. As to frazzling, seems like we only frazzle just *so far*, then a stitch holds and we get our breath."

In this mood Polly worried Peter deeply. He could not keep from looking ahead--he avoided that usually--to a time when the little nest at the far end of the sofa would be empty; when the click of knitting needles would sound no more in the beautiful old room.

"There's me!" he whispered at length like a half-ashamed but frightened boy.

Polly drew her glasses down and gave him a long, straight look full of a deep and abiding love.

"You're the stitch, Peter my man," she whispered back as if fearing someone might hear, "always the saving stitch. And take this to bed with you, brother: the frazzling isn't half so dangerous as dry rot, or moth eating holes in you. Queer, but I was getting to think of myself as laid on the shelf before Brace drifted in, and when I do that I get old-acting and stiff-jointed. But I've noticed that it's the same with folks as it is with the world, when they begin to flatten down, then the good Lord drops something into them to make 'em sorter rise. No need to flatten down until you're dead. Feeling tired is healthy and proper--not feeling at all is being finished. So now, Peter, you just go along to bed. I always have felt that a man hates to be set up for, but he can overlook a woman doing it; he sets it down to her general foolishness, but Brace would just naturally get edgy if he found us both up."

Peter came clumsily across the room and stood over the small creature on the sofa. He wanted to kiss her. Instead, he said gruffly:

"See that the fire's banked, Polly. Looks as if I'd laid on a powerful lot of wood without thinking." Then he laughed and went on: "You're durned comical, Polly. What you said about the Lord putting yeast into folks and the world *is* comical."

"I didn't say yeast, Peter Heathcote."

"Well, yer meant yeast."

"No, I didn't mean yeast. I just meant something like Brace was talking about to-day."

"What was it?" Peter stood round and solid with the firelight ruddily upon him.

"He said that the fighting overseas ain't properly a war, but a general upheaval of things that have got to come to the top and be skimmed off. We ain't ever looked at it that way." Polly resorted to familiar similes when deeply affected.

"I guess all wars is that." Peter looked serious. He rarely spoke of the trouble that seemed far, far from his quiet, detached life, but lately he had shaken his head over it in a new way. "But God ain't meaning for us to take sides, Polly. It's like family troubles. You don't understand them, and you better keep out. Just think of our good German friends and neighbours. We can't go back on them just 'cause their kin across the seas have taken to fighting. Our Germans have, so to speak, married in our family, and we must stand by 'em." Peter was voicing his unrest. Polly saw the trouble in his face.

"Of course, brother, and I only meant that lately so many things are stirring in the Forest that it seems more like the Forest wasn't a scrap set off by itself. I seem to have lots of scraps floating in my mind lately--things I've heard, and all are taking on meaning now. I remember someone saying, I guess it was the Bishop, that in a drop of ocean water, there was all that went into the ocean's making, except size. That didn't mean anything until Brace set me to--to turning over in my mind, and, Peter, it seems terrible sensible now. All the big, big world is just little scraps of King's Forests welded all together and every King's Forest is a drop of the world."

Peter looked gravely troubled as men often do when their women take to thinking on their own lines. Usually the heedless man dismisses the matter with but small respect, but Peter was not that kind. All his life he had depended upon his sister's "vision" as he called it. He might laugh and tease her, but he never took a definite step without reaching out to her.

"A man must plant his foot solid on the path he knows," he often said, "but that don't hinder him from lifting his eyes to the sky." And it was through Aunt Polly's eyes that Peter caught his view of skies.

"I don't exactly like Brace digging down into things so much." Peter gave a troubled sigh. "Some things ain't any use when they are dug up."

"But some things *are*, brother. We must know."

"Well, by gosh!" Peter began to sway toward the door like a heavily freighted side-wheeler. "I get to feeling sometimes as if I'd kicked over a hornet's nest and wasn't certain whether it was a last year's one or this year's. In one case you can hold your ground, in the other you best take to your heels. Well, I'm going to leave you, Polly, for your date with your young man. Don't forget the fire and don't set up too long."

Left to herself, Polly neatly folded her knitting and stuck the glistening needles through it. She folded her small, shrivelled hands and a radiant smile touched her old face.

Oh! the luxury of *daring* to sit up for a man. The excitement of the adventure! And while she waited and brooded, Polly was thinking as she had never done until recently. All her life she believed that she had thought, and to suddenly find, as she had lately, that her conclusions were either wrong or confused made her humble.

Now there was Mary-Clare! Why, from her birth, Mary-Clare had been an open book! Poor Polly shook her head. An open book? Well, if so she did not know the language in which that book was written, for Mary-Clare was troubling her now deeply.

And Larry? Larry had suddenly come into focus, and Maclin, and Northrup. They all seemed reeling around her; all united, but in deadly peril of being flung apart.

It was all too much for Aunt Polly and she unrolled her knitting and set the needles to their accustomed task. Eventually Mary-Clare would come to the inn and simply tell her story--full well Polly knew that. It was Mary-Clare's way to keep silent until necessity for silence was past and then calmly take those she loved into her confidence. But there were disturbing things going on. Aunt Polly could not blind herself to them.

At this moment Northrup's step sounded outside. He came hastily, but making little noise.

"What's up?" he asked, starting back at the sight of Aunt Polly.

"Just me, son. Your dinner is scorched to nothing, but I wanted to tell you where the cookie jar is."

Northrup came over to the sofa and sat down.

"You deep and opaque female," he said, throwing his arm over the little bent shoulders. "Own up. It isn't cookies, it's a switch. What have I done? Out with it."

Aunt Polly laughed softly.

"It's neither cookies nor switches when you come down to it," she chuckled. "It's just waiting and not knowing why."

Northrup leaned back against the sofa and said quietly:

"Guessing about me, Aunt Polly?"

"Guessing about everything, son. Just when I thought I was nearing port, where I ought to be at

my age, I find myself all at sea.”

“Same with me, Aunt Polly. We’re part of the whole upheaval, and take it from me, some of us are going to find ourselves high and dry by and by and some of us will go under. We don’t understand it; we can’t; but we’ve got to try to--and that’s the very devil. Aunt Polly, I’ve been on the Point, talking to some of the folks down there--there is a fellow called Twombley, odd cuss. He told me he’s tried to earn his living, but found people too particular.”

“Earn his living, huh!” Polly tried to look indignant. “He’s a scamp, and old Doctor Rivers was the ruination of him. The old doctor used to quote Scripture in a scandalous way. He said since we have the poor always with us, it is up to us to have a place for them where they can be comfortable. Terrible doctrine, I say, but that was what the old doctor kept the Point for and it was after Twombley tried to earn his living--the scamp!” Northrup saw that he had diverted Aunt Polly and gladly let her talk on.

“Doctor had an old horse as was just pleading to be put an end to, but the doctor couldn’t make his mind up to it and Twombley finally undertook to settle the matter with a shot-gun, up back in the hills. Twombley never missed the bull’s-eye--a terrible hand with a gun he was. The doctor gave him two dollars for the job and looked real sick the day he heard that shot. Well, less than a week after Twombley came to the doctor and says as how he heard that a horse has to be buried and that if it isn’t the owner gets fined twenty-five dollars, and he says he’ll bury the carcass for five dollars. He explained how the horse, lying flat, was powerful sizable, and it would be a stern job to get it under ground. Well, old doctor gave the five dollars and Twombley took to the woods.

“It was a matter of a month, maybe, when Twombley came back, and soon after old Philander Sniff appeared with a horse and cart, and Doctor Rivers, as soon as he set his eyes on the horse, sent for Twombley. Do you know, son, that scamp actually figured it out with the doctor as to the cost of food and care he’d been put to in order to get that shot-and-buried-horse into shape for selling! He’d sold him for ten dollars and expenses were twelve.”

Northrup leaned back and laughed until the quiet house reëchoed with his mirth.

“Son, son!” cautioned Polly, shaking and dim-eyed, “it’s going on to midnight. We can’t carouse like this. But land! it is uplifting to have a talk when you ought to be sleeping. Well, the old doctor bought the Point just then and bought Twombley a new gun. Folks as couldn’t earn their keep proper naturally drifted to the Point--God’s living acre, as the doctor called it.”

Northrup rose and stretched his arms and then bent, as Peter had done, to Aunt Polly. But unlike Peter he kissed the small yearning face upraised to his.

“It must be pleasant--being your mother,” Polly whispered.

“It’s pleasant having you acting as substitute,” Northrup replied. “Shall I bank the fire, Aunt Polly?”

“No, son, there’s something else I must see to before I turn in. Aren’t you going for the cookies?”

“Yes’m. Going to munch them in bed.” And tiptoeing away in the most orthodox manner Northrup left Aunt Polly alone.

Why was she staying up? She had no clear idea but she was restless, sleepless, and bed, to her, was no comfort under such conditions. However, since she had stated that she had something to do, she must find it. She went to a desk in the farther end of the room, and took from it her house-keeping book. She would balance that and surprise Peter! Peter always *was* so surprised when she did. She bought the book to her nest on the sofa and set to work.

Debit and credit. Figures, figures, figures. And then, mistily, words took their places. Names.

Mary-Clare: Larry.

Larry: Northrup.

Mary-Clare! It was funny. The columns danced and giddily wobbled--and at the foot there was only--Mary-Clare! Mary-Clare was troubling the dear old soul.

Then, startled by the falling of the book to the floor, Aunt Polly opened her eyes and gazed into the face of Mary-Clare standing before her!

The girl had a wind-swept look, physically and spiritually. Her hair was loose about her face, her eyes like stars, and she was smiling.

“Oh! you dear thing,” she whispered, bending to recover the book, “adding and subtracting when the whole world sleeps. Isn’t it a wonderful feeling to have the night to yourself?”

Mary-Clare crouched down before the red blazing logs; her coat and hat fell from her and she stretched her hands out to the heat with a little shiver of luxurious content.

Aunt Polly knew the girl’s mood and left her to herself. She had come to tell something but must tell it in her own way. To question, to intrude a thought, would only tend to confuse and distract her, so Polly took up her knitting and nodded cheerfully. She had a feeling that all along she had been waiting for Mary-Clare.

“I suppose big things like being born and dying are very simple when they come. It is the mistaking the big and little things that makes us all so uncertain. Aunt Polly, Larry has left me.” The start had been made!

"Yes; Peneluna told us. He hasn't gone far." Aunt Polly knitted on while Mary-Clare gave a little laugh.

"Oh! dearie, he was far, far away before he started for the Point. Land doesn't count--it's more than that, only I did not know. Isn't it queer, Aunt Polly, now that I understand things, I find that marrying Larry and having the babies haven't touched me at all--I never belonged to them or they to me--except Noreen. And it's queer about Noreen, too, she will never seem part of all that."

Mary-Clare, her eyes fixed on the fire, was thinking aloud; her breath came short and quick as if she had been running.

"My dear child!" Aunt Polly was shocked in spite of herself. "No woman can shake off her responsibilities in that way. Larry is your husband and you have been a mother."

"You are talking *words*, Aunt Polly, not things." Aunt Polly knew that she *was* and it made her wince.

"That's the trouble with us all, Aunt Polly. Saying words over and over and calling them things--as if you could take God in!"

There was no bitterness in the tones, but there was the weary impatience of a child that had been too often denied the truth.

"No matter what people say and say, underneath there is *truth*, Aunt Polly, and it's up to us to find it."

"And you think you are competent"--Aunt Polly, reflecting that she was using *words*, used them doubtfully--"you think you are competent to know what *is* truth and to act upon it--to the extent of sending your husband out of his home?"

If a small love-bird could look and sound fierce it would resemble Aunt Polly at that moment. Mary-Clare turned from the contemplation of the fire and fixed her deep eyes upon the troubled old face.

"You dear!" she whispered and then laughed.

Presently, the fire again holding her, Mary-Clare went on:

"I think I must try to find truth with my woman-brain, Aunt Polly. That was what my doctor-daddy always insisted upon. He wouldn't even let me take *his* word when it came to anything that meant a lot to me."

"He wanted you to marry Larry!"

This was a telling stroke and a long silence followed. Then:

"I wonder, Aunt Polly, I wonder."

"Do you doubt, child?"

"I don't know, but even if he did he was sick and so--so tired, and Larry always worried him. I know very surely that if my doctor were here, and knew everything, he'd say harder than ever: 'Use your woman-mind.' And I'm going to! Why, Aunt Polly, I haven't driven Larry away from his home. I meant to make it a better place, once I set the wrong aside. But you see, he wanted it just *his* way and nothing else would do."

The dear old face that had confronted life vicariously flushed gently; but the young face that had set itself to the stern facts of life showed neither weakness nor doubt.

"It has come to me, dear"--Mary-Clare now turned and came close to Aunt Polly, resting her folded arms on the thin little knees--"It has come to me, dear, that things are not fixed right and when they are not, it won't do any good to keep on acting as if they were. Being married to Larry could never make it right for me to do what seems to me wrong. And oh! Aunt Polly, I wish that I could make you understand. Do try to understand, dear, there is a sacred place in my soul, and I just do believe it is in all women's souls if they dared to say so--that no one, not even a husband, has a right to claim. It is hers and--God's. But men don't know, and some don't care--and they just rush along and take and take, never counting what it may cost--and they make laws to help them when they might fail without, and--well, Aunt Polly, it is hard to stand all alone in the world. I think the really happy women are those who don't know what I mean, or those that have loved enough, loved a man true enough--to share that sacred place with him--the place he ought not ask for or have a law for. I know you do not understand, Aunt Polly. I did not myself until Peneluna told me."

At this Aunt Polly braced against the pillows as if they were rocks.

"Peneluna!" she gasped.

"Let me tell you, Aunt Polly. It is such a wonderful thing."

As she might have spoken to Noreen, so Mary-Clare spoke now to the woman who had only viewed life as Moses had the Promised Land, from her high mount.

"And so, can you not see, dear Aunt Polly, it isn't a thing that laws can touch; it isn't being good or bad--it is too big a Thing to call by name. Peneluna could starve and still keep it. She could be lonely and serve, but she *knew*. I don't love Larry, I cannot help it. All my life I am going to keep all of the promise I can, Aunt Polly, but I'm going to--to keep myself, too! A woman can give a man a good deal--but she can't give him some things if she tries to! Look at the women;

some of them in the Forest. Aunt Polly, if marriage means what they look like---" Mary-Clare shuddered.

Aunt Polly had suddenly grown tender and far-seeing. She let go the sounding words that Church and State had taught her.

"Little girl," she said, and all her motherhood rushed forward to seize, as it had ever done, those "scraps" of others' lives, "suppose the time should come when there would be in your life another--someone besides Larry? Why has all this come so sudden to you?"

Northrup seemed to loom in the room, just beyond the fire's glow. Her fear was taking shape.

"Oh! dearie, I might then ask Larry to release me from my promise. My doctor used to say one could do that, but if he would not, why, then--I'd keep my bargain as far as I could. But---" and here Mary-Clare rose and flung her arms above her head. The action was jubilant, majestic. "Oh! the wonder of it all; to be free to be myself and prove what I *think* is right without having to take another's idea of it. I'll listen; I'll try to understand and be patient--but it cannot be wrong, Aunt Polly, the thing I've done--since this great feeling of wings has come to me instead of heavy feet! Why, dear, I want something more than--than the things women *think* are theirs. We don't know what is ours until we try."

"And fail, my child?" Aunt Polly was crying.

"Yes; and fail sometimes and be hurt--but paying and going on."

"And leaving your man behind you?"

"Aunt Polly"--Mary-Clare looked down upon the kind, quivering face--"a woman's man cannot be left behind. He'll be beside her somehow. If she stays back, as I've tried to do, she wouldn't be his woman! That's the dreadful trouble with Larry and me. But, dearie, it isn't always a man in a woman's life."

"But the long, lonely way, child!" Polly was retracing her own denied womanhood.

"It need not be lonely, dear, when we women find--other things. They will count. They must."

"What other things, Mary-Clare?"

"That's what we must be finding out, dear. Love; the man: some day they will be the glory, making everything more splendid, but not--the all. I think I should have died, Aunt Polly, had I kept on."

Like an inspired young oracle, Mary-Clare spoke and then dropped again by the fire.

"I've somehow learned all this," she whispered, "in my Place up on the hill. It just came to me, little by little, until it convinced me. I had to tell Larry the truth."

"Mary-Clare, I do not know; I don't feel able to put it into words, but I do believe you're going to make sad trouble for yourself, child. Such a thing as this you have done has never been done before in the Forest."

"Maybe."

A door upstairs slammed loudly and both women started nervously.

"I must tell Peter to fix the latch of the attic door to-morrow," Aunt Polly said, relieved to be back on good, plain, solid ground. "The attic winders are raised and the wind's rising. It will be slam, slam all night, unless---" she rose quickly.

"Just a minute, Aunt Polly, I'm so tired. Please let me lie here on the couch and rest for an hour and then I'll slip home."

"Let me put you to bed properly, child. You look suddenly beat flat. That's the way with women. They get to thinking they've got wings when they ain't, child, they ain't. You're making a terrible break in your life, child. Terrible."

Mary-Clare was arranging the couch.

"Come, dear," she wheedled, "you tuck me up--so! I'll bank the fire when I go and leave everything safe. A little rest and then to-morrow!--well, you'll see that I have wings, Aunt Polly; they are only tired now--for they are new wings! I know that it must seem all madness, but it had to come."

Aunt Polly pulled the soft covering over the huddled form--only the pale, wistful face was presently to be seen; the great, haunting eyes made Aunt Polly catch her breath. She bent and kissed the forehead.

"Poor, reaching-out child!" she whispered.

"For something that is *there*, Aunt Polly."

"God knows!"

"Of course He does. That's why He gave us the--reach. Good-night. Oh! how I love you, Aunt Polly. Good-night!"

It was Northrup's door that had slammed shut. Aunt Polly went above, secured the innocent attic door, and then pattered down to her bedroom near Peter's, feeling that her house, at least, was safe.

It was silent at last. Northrup, in his dark chamber, lay awake and--ashamed, though heaven

was his witness that his sin was not one he had planned. Aunt Polly had been on his mind. He hated to have her down there alone. Her sitting up for him had touched and--disturbed him; he had left his door ajar.

"I'll listen for a few minutes and if she doesn't go to bed, I'll go down and shake her," he concluded, and then promptly went to sleep and was awakened by voices. Low, earnest voices, but he heard no words and was sleepily confused. If he thought anything, he thought Peter had been doing what was needed to be done--driving Polly to bed!

And then Northrup *did* hear words. A word here; a word there. He *knew* things he had no right to know--he was awake at last, conscientiously, as well as physically. He got up and slammed the door!

But he could not go to sleep. He felt hot and cold; mean and indignant--but above all else, tremendously excited. He lay still a little longer and then opened his door in time to hear that "good-night, good-night"; and presently Aunt Polly's raid on the unoffending attic door at the other end of the corridor and her pattering feet on their way, at last, to her bedchamber.

"She's forgot to bank the fire." Northrup could see the glow from his post and remembered Uncle Peter's carefulness. "I'll run down and make things safe and lock the door." Northrup still held his respect for doors.

In heavy gown and soft slippers he noiselessly descended. The living-room at the far end was dark; the fire glowed at the other, dangerously, and one threatening log had rolled menacingly to the fore.

Bent upon quick action Northrup silently crossed the floor, grasped the long poker and pushed the blazing wood back past the safety line and held it there.

His face burned, but there was a hypnotic lure in that bed of red coals. All that he had just heard--a disjointed and rather dramatic revelation--was having a peculiar effect upon him. He had become aware of some important facts that accounted for things, such as Rivers's appearance on the Point. He had attributed that advent to Maclin's secret business; but it was, evidently, quite different.

What had occurred in the yellow house before the final break? Northrup's imagination came to the fore fully equipped. Northrup was a man of the herd--at least he had been, until lately. He knew the tracks of the herd and its laws and codes.

"The brute!" he muttered under his breath; "and that kind of a girl, too. Nothing is too fine for some devils to appropriate and--smirch. Poor little girl!"

And then Northrup recalled Mary-Clare as he had seen her that day as she emerged from the woods to meet him and her child. The glory of Peneluna's story was in her soul, the autumn sunlight on her face. That lovely, smiling, untouched face of hers! Again and again that memory of her held his fancy.

"The cursed brute--hasn't *got* her, thank God. She's out of the trap."

And, all unconsciously, while this moral indignation had its way, Northrup was drawing nearer to Mary-Clare; understanding her, appropriating her! God knew he meant no wrong. After all she had suffered he wasn't going to mess her life more--but he'd somehow make up to her what she'd a perfect right to. All men were not low and bestial. He had a duty--he would be above the touch of idle chatter; he would take a hand in the game!

And just then Northrup, controlled by the force of attraction, turned his head and looked at the face of Mary-Clare upon the couch near him!

In all his life Northrup had never looked upon the face of a sleeping woman, and it stirred him deeply. He became as rigid as marble; the heat beat upon him as it might have upon stone. And then--as such wild things do occur, his old, familiar dream came to him; he seemed *in* the dream. He had at last opened one of those closed doors and was seeing what the secret room held! He was part of the dream as he was of his book in the making.

He breathed lightly; he did not move--but he was overcome by waves of emotion that had never before even lapped his feet.

At that instant Mary-Clare's eyes opened. For a moment they held his; then she turned, sighed, and he believed that she had not really awakened.

Northrup rose stiffly and made his way to his room.

"She was asleep!" he fiercely thought until he was safe behind his locked door!

"Was she?" He had to face that in the silence of the hours after. "I'll know when I next meet her." This was almost a groan.

Kathryn Morris, as the days of Northrup's absence stretched into weeks, grew more and more restless. She began to do some serious thinking, and while this developed her mentally, the growing pains hurt and she became twisted.

Heretofore she had been borne along on a peaceful current. She was young and pretty and believed that everyone saw her as she wanted them to see her--a charming, an unusually charming girl.

People had always responded to her slightest whim, but suddenly her own particular quarry had eluded her; did not even pine for her; was able to keep silent while he left her and his mother to think what they chose.

At this moment Kathryn placed herself beside Helen Northrup as a timid *débutante* shrinks beside her chaperon.

"And that old beast"--Kathryn in the privacy of her bedchamber could speak quite openly to herself--"that old beast, Doctor Manly, suggested that at forty I might be fat if---" Well, it didn't matter about the "if." Kathryn did a bit of mental arithmetic, using her fingers to aid her. What was the difference between twenty-four and forty? The difference seemed terrifyingly *little*. "A fat forty! Oh, good Lord!"

Kathryn was in bed and it was nine-thirty in the morning! She sprang out and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Well, my body hasn't found it out yet!" she whispered, and her pretty white teeth showed complacently.

Then she sat down in a deep chair and took account of stock. That "fat-forty" was a mere panic. She would not think of it--but it loomed, nevertheless.

Of course, for the time being, there was Sandy Arnold on the crest of one of his financial waves.

Kathryn was level-headed enough not to lose sight of receding waves but then, on the other hand, the crest of a receding wave was better than to be left on the sands--fat and forty! And Northrup was displaying dangerous traits. A distinct chill shook Kathryn.

She turned her thought to Northrup. Northrup had seemed safe. He belonged to all that was familiar to her. He would be famous some day--that she might interfere with this never occurred to the girl. She simply saw herself in a gorgeous studio pouring tea or dancing, and all the people paying court to her while knowing that they ought to be paying it to Northrup.

"But he always gets a grubby hole to work in." Kathryn fidgeted. "I daresay he is working now in some smudgy old place."

But this thought did not last. She could insist upon the studio. A man owes his wife *something* if he will have his way about his job.

Just at this point a tap on the door brought a frown to Kathryn's smooth forehead.

"Oh! come in," she called peevishly.

A drab-coloured woman of middle age entered. She was one of the individuals so grateful for being noticed at all that her cheerfulness was a constant reproach. She had been selected by Kathryn's father to act as housekeeper and chaperon. As the former she was a gratifying success; as the latter, a joke and one to be eliminated as much as possible.

For the first time in years Kathryn regarded her aunt now with interest.

"Aunt Anna"--Kathryn never indulged in graceful tact with her relations--"Aunt Anna, how old *are* you?"

Anna Morris coloured, flinched, but smiled coyly.

"Forty-two, dear, but it was only yesterday that my dressmaker said that I should not tell that. It is not necessary, you know."

"I suppose not!" Kathryn was regarding the fatness of the woman who was calmly setting the disorderly room to rights. "Aunt Anna, why didn't you marry?"

The dull, fat face was turned away. Anna Morris never lost sight of the fact that when Kathryn married she would face a stern situation unless Kathryn proved kinder than any one had any reason to expect her to be. So her remarks were guarded.

"Oh! my dear, my dear, *what* a question. Well, to be quite frank, I discovered at eighteen that some men could stir my senses"--Anna Morris tittered--"and some couldn't. At twenty-two the only man who could stir me was horribly poor; the other stirring ones had been snapped up. You see, there was no one to help me with my affairs. Your father never *did* understand. The only thing he was keen about was making money enough to marry your mother. Then you were born and your mother died and--well, there was nothing for me to do but come here and help him out. One has plain duties. I always had sense enough"--Anna Morris moved about heavily--"to realize that senses do not stir when poverty pinches, and this house *was* comfortable; and duty *can* fill in chinks. I always contend"--the dull eyes now confronted Kathryn--"that there *is* a dangerous age for men and women. If they get through that alive and alone--well, there is a kind of calm that comes."

"I suppose so." Kathryn felt a sinking in the region of the heart. "Are you ever lonely?" she asked suddenly. "Ever feel that you let your own life slip when you helped Father and me?"

Anna Morris's lips trembled as they always did when any one was kind to her; but she got control of herself at once--she could not afford the comfort of letting herself go!

"Oh, I don't know. Yes; sometimes. But who isn't lonely at times? Marriage can't prevent that and even your own private life, quite your own, is bound to have some lonely spells. There are all kinds of husbands. Some float about, heaven knows where; their wives must be lonely; and then the settled sort--dear me! I've often seen women terribly lonely right in the rooms with their husbands. I have come to the conclusion that once you pass the dangerous age you're as well placed one way as another. That is, if you are a woman."

Kathryn was looking unusually serious. While she was in this mood she clutched at seeming trifles and held them curiously.

"What was Brace's father like?" she suddenly asked.

Anna Morris started.

"Why, what ails you, Kathie?" she asked suspiciously. "You've never taken any interest before. Why should you? A young girl and all that--why should you?"

"Tell me, Aunt Anna. I've often wondered."

Anna Morris sat down heavily in a chair. The older Northrup had once had power to stir her; was one of the men too poor for her to consider.

"Well," she began slowly, tremblingly, "he wasn't companionable at the last, but I shall always see *his* side. Helen Northrup is a fine woman--I can understand how many take her part, but being married to her kind must seem like mental Mormonism. *She* calls it developing--but a man like Thomas Northrup married a woman because she was the kind he wanted and he couldn't be expected to keep trace of all the kinds of women Helen Northrup ran into and--out of!"

"I don't know what you mean, Aunt Anna. Do talk sense."

Kathryn was almost excited. It was like reading what wasn't intended for innocent young girls to know.

"Well, first, Helen Northrup was just like all loving young girls, I guess--but when she didn't find *all* she wanted, she took to developing, as she called it. For *my* part I believe when a woman finds her husband isn't *all* she expected, she ought to accept her lot and make the best of it."

"And Brace's mother started out to make her own lot? I see."

Kathryn nodded her head.

"Well, something like that. She took to writing. Thomas Northrup didn't know what ailed her and I don't wonder. She should have spent herself on *his* career, not making one for herself. But I must say when Brace was born she stopped that nonsense but she evolved then into a mother!" Anna sniffed. "A man can share with his children, but when it comes to giving up everything, well!"

"What did he do, Aunt Anna?"

"He went away."

"With a woman?"

"Yes."

"One he just met when Mrs. Northrup became a mother?"

"He knew her before, but if Helen Northrup had been all she should have been to him---"

"I begin to see. And then?"

"Well, then he died and proved how noble he was at heart. When he went off, Helen Northrup wouldn't take a cent. She had a little of her own and she went to work and Brace helped when he grew older--and then when Thomas Northrup died he left almost all his fortune to his wife. He never considered her anything else. I call his a really great nature." Poor Anna was in a trembling and ecstatic state.

"I call him a--just what he was!" Kathryn was weary of the subject. "I think Brace's mother was a fool to let him off so easy. I would have bled him well rather than to let the other woman put it all over me."

"My dear, that's not a proper way for you to talk!" Aunt Anna became the chaperon. "Come, get dressed now, dearie. There's the luncheon, you know."

"What luncheon?"

"Why, with Mr. Arnold, my dear, and he included me, too! Such a sweet fellow he is, and so wise and thoughtful."

"Oh!"

There had been a time when she and Sandy Arnold met clandestinely--it was such fun! He included Aunt Anna now. Why?

And just then, as if it were a live and demanding thing, her eyes fell on Northrup's last book. She scowled at it. It was a horrible book. All about dirty, smudgy people that you couldn't forget and who kept springing out on you in the most unexpected places. At dinners and luncheons

they often wedged in with their awful eyes fixed on your plate and made you choke. They probably were not true. And those things Brace said! Besides, if they were true, people like that were used to them--they had never known anything else!

And then Brace had said some terrible things about war; that war going on over the sea. Of course, no one expected to have a war, but it was unpatriotic for any one to say what Brace had about those perfectly dear officers at West Point and--what was it he said?--oh, yes--having the blood of the young on one's soul and settling horrid things, like money and land, with lives.

At this Kathryn tossed the book aside and it fell at Anna's feet. She picked it up and handled it as if it were a tender baby that had bumped its nose.

"It must be perfectly wonderful," she said, smoothing the book, "to have an autographed copy of a novel. It's like having a lock of someone's hair. Where *is* Brace, Kathryn?"

This was unfortunate.

"That is my business and his!" Kathryn spoke slowly. Her eyes slanted and her lips hardened.

"My darling, I beg your pardon!" And once more Anna Morris was shoved into the groove where she belonged.

Later that day, after the luncheon with Sandy--Anna had been eliminated by a master stroke that reduced her to tears and left Sandy a victim to Kathryn's wiles--Kathryn called upon Helen Northrup.

She was told by the smiling little maid to go up into the Workshop. This room was a pitiful attempt to lure Brace to work at home; in his absence Helen sat there and scribbled. She wrote feeble little verses with a suggestion of the real thing in them. Sometimes they got published because the suggestion caught the attention of a sympathetic publisher, and these small recognitions kept alive a spark that was all but extinguished when Helen Northrup chose, as women of her time did, a profession or--the woman's legitimate sphere!

There had been no regret in Helen's soul for whatever part she played in her own life--her son was her recompense for any disappointment she might have met, and he was, she devoutly believed, her interpreter. She loved to think in her quiet hours that her longings and aspirations had found expression in her child; she had sought, always, to consider his interests wisely--unselfishly, of course--and leave him as free to live his own life as though she were not the lonely, disillusioned woman that she was.

She had never known how early Brace had understood the conditions in his home--mothers and fathers rarely do. Only once during his boyhood had Brace ventured upon the subject over which he spent many confused and silent hours.

When he was fourteen he remarked, in that strained voice that he believed hid any emotion:

"I say, Mother, a lot of fellows at our school have fathers and mothers who live apart--most of the fellows side with their mothers!"

These words nearly made Helen ill. She could make no reply. She looked dumbly at the boy facing her with a new and awful revelation. She understood that he wanted her to *know*, wanted to comfort her; and she knew, with terrifying certainty, that she could not deceive him--she was at his mercy!

She was wise enough to say nothing. But after that she felt his suddenly acquired strength. It was shown in his tenderness, his cheerfulness, his companionship, and, thank God! in his silence.

But while Helen gloried in her boy she still was loyal to the traditions of marriage, and her little world never got behind her screen. She had divorced her husband because he desired it--then she went on alone. When her husband died away from home, his body was brought to her. It had been his last request and she paid all respect to it with her boy close beside her. And then she forgot--really, in most cases--the things that she had been remembering. She erected over her dead husband, not a stone, but a living *unreality*. It answered the purpose for which it was designed; it made it possible for her to live rather a full life, be a comrade to her son--a friend indeed--and to share all his joys and many of his confidences, and to impress upon him, so she trusted, that he must not sacrifice anything for her.

Why should he, indeed? Had she not interests enough to occupy her? The sight of a widowed mother draining the life-blood from her children had always been a dreadful thing to Helen Northrup, and so well had she succeeded in her determination to leave Brace free that the subject rarely came into the minds of either.

But Brace's latest move had disturbed Helen not a little. It startled her, made her afraid, as that remark of his in his school days had done. Did he chafe under ties that he loved but found that he must flee from for awhile? Why did he and Kathryn not marry? Were they considering her? Was she blinded?

Helen had been going over all this for days before the visit of Kathryn, and during the night preceding the call she had awakened in great pain; she had had the pain before and it had power to reduce her to cowardice. It seemed to dare her, while she lay and suffered, to confide in a physician!

There was an old memory of one who had suffered and died from---"Find out the truth about me!" each dart of fire in the nerves cried, and when the pain was over Helen Northrup had not dared to meet the challenge and go to Manly or another! At first she tried to reason with

herself; then she compromised.

"After all, it is so fleeting. I'll rest, take better care of myself. I'm not so young as I was--Nature is warning me; it may not be the other."

Well, rest and care helped and the attacks were less frequent. That gave a certain amount of hope.

When Kathryn entered the Workshop she found Helen on the couch instead of at the flat-topped desk. She looked very white and blue-lipped but she was smiling and happily glad to see her visitor. She was extremely fond of Kathryn. Early in life she had prepared herself to accept and love any woman her son might choose--she would never question the gift he offered! But when Kathryn was offered, she was overjoyed. Kathryn was part of the dear, familiar life; the daughter of old friends. Helen Northrup felt that she was blessed beyond all mothers. The thing, to her, seemed so exactly right. That the marriage did not take place had hardly disturbed her. Kathryn was young, Brace was winning, not only a home for the girl, but honour, and there was always time. *Time* is such a splendid heritage of youth and such a rare relic of age.

"Why, my dearie-dear!" exclaimed Kathryn, kneeling beside the couch. "What *is* it?"

"Nothing, dear child; nothing more than a vicious touch of neuralgia."

"Have you seen Doctor Manly?" Kathryn patted the pillows and soothed, by her touch, the hot forehead. Kathryn had the gift of healing in her small, smooth hands, but not in her soul.

She had always been jealous of the love between Brace and his mother. It was so unusual, so binding, so beyond her conception; but she could hide her feelings until by and by.

"Now, dearie-dear, we *must* send for Doctor Manly. Of course Brace ought to know. He would never forgive us if he did not know. I hate to trouble you but, my dear, you look simply terrifyingly ill." Like a lightning flash Kathryn's nimble wits caught a possibility.

Helen smiled. Then spoke slowly:

"Now, my dear, when Brace comes home, I promise to see Doctor Manly. These attacks are severe--but they pass quickly and there are long periods when I am absolutely free from them."

"You mean, you have attacks?" Kathryn looked appalled.

"Oh, yes; off and on. That fact proves how unimportant they are."

Kathryn was again taking stock.

She believed that Brace was still at that place from which the letter came! She was fiendishly subject to impressions and suspicions.

"Now if he is still there"--thoughts ran like liquid fire in Kathryn's brain--"*why* does he stay? It isn't far." She had made sure of that by road maps when the letter first came. "I could motor out there and see!" The liquid fire brought colour to the girl's face.

She was dramatic, too, she could always see herself playing the leading parts in emotional situations. Just now, like more flashes of lightning, disclosing vivid scenes, she saw herself, prostrated by fear and anxiety for Helen Northrup, finding Brace, confiding in him because she dared not take the chances of silence and dared not disobey and go to Doctor Manly.

Brace would be fear-filled and remorseful, would see at last how she, Kathryn, had his interests in mind. He would cling to her. Sitting close by the couch, her face pressed to Helen Northrup's shoulder, Kathryn contemplated the alluring and passionate scenes. Brace had always lacked passion. She had always to hold Arnold virtuously in check, but Brace was able to control himself. But--and here the vivid pictures reeled on, familiarity had dulled things, long engagements were flattening--Brace would at last see her as she was. She'd forgive anything that might have happened--of course, anything *might* have happened--she, a woman of the world, understood.

And--Kathryn was brought to a sudden halt--the reel spun on but there was no picture!

Suppose, after all, there was nothing really to be frightened about in these attacks? Well, that would be found out after Brace had been brought home and might enhance rather than detract from--her divine devotion.

Presently Kathryn became aware of the fact that Helen Northrup had been speaking while the reel reeled!

"And then that escapade of his when he was only seven." Helen patted the golden head beside her while her thoughts were back with her boy. "He was walking with me when suddenly he looked up; his poor little face was all twisted! He just said rather impishly, 'I'm going! I am really!' and he went! I was, naturally, frightened, and ran after him--then, when I caught sight of him, a long way ahead, I stopped and waited. When he thought I was not following, he waded right out into a puddle; he even had a scrappy fight with a bigger boy who contested his right to invade the puddle. It was so absurd. Kathryn, I actually went home; I felt sure Brace would find his way back and he did. I was nearly wild with anxiety, but I waited. He came back disgustingly dirty, but hilariously happy. He expected punishment. When none was meted out to him--he told me all about it--it seemed flat enough when he saw how I took it. Why, I never even mentioned the mud on him. He was disappointed, but I think he understood more than I realized. When he went to bed that night, he begged my pardon!"

Kathryn got up and walked about the room. She was staging another drama. Brace was now

playing in puddles--not such simple ones as those of his childhood. He was having his little fight, too, possibly; with whom?

Well, how perfectly thrilling to save him!

Such a girl as Kathryn has as cheap an imagination as any lurid factory girl, but it is kept as safely from sight as the contents of her vanity bag.

"Kathryn, have you heard from Brace?"

The girl started almost guiltily. Helen hated to ask this, she feared Kathryn might think her envious; but Kathryn rose and drew a chair to the couch.

"No, dearie-dear," she said sweetly.

"So you don't know just where he is?"

"How could I know, dearie thing?"

So they were not keeping things from her; shutting her out! Helen Northrup raised her head from the pillow.

"We're in the same boat, darling," she said, so glad to be in the same boat. "Lately I've had a few whim-whams." Helen felt she could be confidential. "I suppose I am touching the outer circle of old age, and before it blinds me, I'm going to have my say. It would be just like you and Brace to forget yourselves and think of me. And if I do not look out, I'll be taking your sacrifice and calling it by its wrong name. You and Brace must marry. I half believe you've been waiting for me to push you out of the nest. Well, here you go! Your own nest will be sacred to me, another place for me to go to, another interest. I'll be having you both closer. Now, don't cry, little girl. I've found you out and found myself, too!"

Kathryn was shedding tears--tears of gratitude for the material Helen was putting at her disposal.

"My dear little Kathryn! It is going to be all right, all right. Why, childie, when he comes home I am going to insist upon the wedding. I am not a young woman, really, though I put up a bit of a bluff--and the time isn't very long, no matter how you look at it--so, darling, you and Brace must humour me, do the one big thing to make me happy--you must be married!"

Kathryn looked up. The tears hung to her long lashes.

"You want this?" she faltered with quivering lips.

Helen believed she understood at last.

"My darling!" she said tenderly, "it is the one great longing of my heart."

Then she dropped back on her pillow and closed her eyes while the pain gripped her. But the pain, for a moment, seemed a friend, not a foe. It might be the thing that would open the door--out.

Helen had spoken truth as truth should be but never quite is, to a mother. She had taken her place in the march, her colours flying. But her place was the mother's place, lagging in the rear.

Such an effort as she had just made caused angels to weep over her.

CHAPTER X

By a kind of self-hypnotism Northrup had gained his ends so far as drifting with the slow current of King's Forest was concerned, and in his relation toward his book. The unrest, as to his duty in a world-wide sense, was lulled. Whatever of that sentiment moved him was focussed on Maclin who, in a persistent, vague way became a haunting possibility of danger almost too preposterous to be considered seriously. Still the possibility was worth watching. Maclin's attitude toward Northrup was interesting. He seemed unable to ignore him, while earnestly desiring to do so. The fact was this: Maclin looked upon Northrup as he might have upon a slow-burning fuse. That he could not estimate the length of the fuse, nor to what it was attached, did not mend matters. One cannot ignore a trail of fire, and a guilty conscience is never a sleeping one.

The people on the Point had long since come to the conclusion that Northrup was a trailer of Maclin, not their enemy. The opinion was divided as to his relations with Mary-Clare, but that was a different matter.

"I'll bet my last dollar," Twombly muttered, forgetting that his last dollar was a thing of the past, "that this young feller will find out about those inventions. Inventions be damned! That's what I say. There's something going on at the mines that don't spell inventions."

This was said to Peneluna who was aging under the strain of unaccustomed excitement.

"When he lands Maclin," she said savagely, "I'll grab Larry. Larry is a fool, but from way back, Maclin is the sinner. Queer"--she gave a deep sigh--"how a stick muddling up a biling brings

the scum to the surface! I declare! I wish we had something to grip hold of. Suspicioning your neighbours ain't healthy."

Jan-an, untroubled by moral codes, was unconditionally on Northrup's side. She patched her gleanings into a vivid conclusion and announced, much to Peneluna's horror:

"Supposin' we are goin' ter hell 'long of not knowin' where we are goin', ain't it a lot pleasanter than the way we was traipsin' before things began to happen?"

Poor Jan-an was getting her first taste of romance and tragedy and she was thriving on the excitement. When she was not watching the romance in the woods with Mary-Clare and Noreen, she was actively engaged in tragedy. She was searching for the lost letters and she did not mince matters in her own thoughts.

"Larry stole 'em!" she had concluded from the first. "What's old letters, anyway? But I'll get those letters if I die for it!"

She shamelessly ransacked Larry's possessions while she cleaned his disorderly shack, but no letters did she find. She became irritable and unmoral.

"Lordy!" she confided to Peneluna one day while they were preparing Larry's food, "don't yer wish, Peneluna, that it wasn't evil to poison some folks' grub?"

Peneluna paused and looked at the girl with startled eyes.

"If you talk like that," she replied, "I'll hustle you into the almshouse." Then: "Who would you like to do that to?" she asked.

"Oh! folks as just clutter up life for decent folks. Maclin and Larry."

"Now, see here, Jan-an, that kind of talk is downright creepy and terrible wicked. Listen to me. Are you listening?"

Jan-an nodded sullenly.

"I'm your best friend, child. I mean to stand by yer, so you just heed. There are folks as can use language like that and others will laugh it off, but you can't do it. The best thing for you to do is to slip along out of sight and sound as much as yer can. If you attract attention--the Lord above knows what will happen; I don't."

Jan-an was impressed.

"I ain't making them notice me," she mumbled, "but yer just can't take a joke."

Noreen and Jan-an, in those warm autumn days--and what an autumn it was!--often came to the little chapel where Northrup wrote.

They knew this was forbidden; they knew that the mornings were to be undisturbed, but what could a man who loved children say to the two patient creatures crouching at the foot of the stone steps leading up to the church?

Northrup could hear them whisper--it blended with the twittering of the birds--he heard Noreen's chuckle and Jan-an's warning. Occasionally a flaming maple branch would fall through the window on to his table; once Ginger was propelled through the door with a note, badly printed by Noreen, tied to his collar.

"We're here," the strangely scrawled words informed him; "me and Jan-an. We've got something for you."

But Northrup held rigidly to his working hours and finally made an offer to his most persistent foes.

"See here, you little beggars," he said, including the gaunt Jan-an in this, "if you keep to the other side of the bridge, I'll tell you a story, once a day."

This had been the beginning of romance to Jan-an.

The story-telling, thus agreed upon, opened a new opportunity for meeting Mary-Clare. Quite naturally she shared with Noreen and Jan-an the hours of the late afternoon walks in the woods or, occasionally, by the fireside of her own home when the chilly gloaming fell early.

Often Northrup, casting a hurried thought to his past, and then forward to the time when all this pleasure must end, looked thoughtful. How circumscribed those old days had been; how uneventful at the best! How strange the old ways would seem by and by, touched by the glamour of what he was passing through now!

And, as was often the case, Manly's words came out like guiding and warning flashes. The future could only be made safe by the present; the past--well! Northrup would not dwell upon that. He would keep the compact with himself.

He went boldly to the yellow house when the mood seized him. His first encounters with Mary-Clare, after that night at the inn when he had watched her sleeping, had reassured him.

"She was not awake!" he concluded. The belief made it possible for him to act with assurance.

Peter and Polly preserved a discreet silence concerning affairs in the Forest. "You never can tell when a favouring wind will right things again," Polly remarked. She cared more for Mary-Clare than anything else.

"Or upset 'em," Peter added. He had his mind fixed upon Maclin.

"Well, brother, sailing safe, or struggling in the water, it won't help matters to stir up the mud."

"No; and just having Brace hanging around like a threat is something. I allas did hold to them referendum and recall notions. Once a feller knows he ain't the only shirt in the laundry, he keeps decenter. So long as Maclin scents Brace, he keeps to his holdings. Did yer hear how he's cleaning up the Cosey Bar? He thinks maybe he's going to be attacked from that quarter. Then, again, he's been offering work to the men around here--and he's letting out that he never understood our side of things rightly and that he's listening to Larry--get that, Polly?--listening to Larry and letting *him* make the folks on the Point get on to the fact that he's their friend. Gosh! Maclin their friend."

And Mary-Clare all this time mystified her friends and her foes. She had foes. Men, and women, too, who looked askance at her. The less they knew, the more they had to invent. The proprieties of the Forest were being outraged. The women who envied Mary-Clare her daring fell upon her first. From their own misery and disillusionment, they sought to defend their position; create an atmosphere of virtue around their barren lives, by attacking the woman who refused to be a martyr.

"You can't tell me," said a downtrodden wife of one of Maclin's men, "that she turned her husband out of doors after wheedling him out of all he should have had from his father, unless she meant to leave the door open for another! A woman only acts as she has for some man."

The women, the happy ones, drove down upon Mary-Clare from another quarter. The happy women are always first to lay down the laws for the unhappy ones. Not knowing, they are irresponsible. The men of the Forest did some laughing and side talking, but on the whole they denounced Mary-Clare because she was a menace to the Established Code.

"God!" said the speaker of the Cosey Bar, "what's coming to the world, anyhow? There ain't any rest and peace nowheres, and when it comes to women taking to naming terms, I say it's time for us to stand for our rights fierce."

Maclin had delicately and indirectly set forth Mary-Clare's "terms" and the Forest was staggered.

But Mary-Clare either did not hear, or the turmoil was so insistent that she had become used to it. She suddenly displayed an energy that made her former activities seem tame.

She brought from the attic an old loom and got Aunt Polly to teach her to weave; she presently designed quaint patterns and delighted in her work. She invited several children, neglected little souls, to come to the yellow house and she taught them with Noreen. She resorted largely to the method the old doctor had used with her. Adapting, as she saw possible, her knowledge to her little group, she gave generously but held her peace.

Northrup often had a hearty laugh after attending one of the "school" sessions.

"It's like tossing all kinds of feed to a flock of birds," he told Aunt Polly, "and letting the little devils pick as they can."

"I reckon they pick only as much as their little stomachs can hold," Aunt Polly replied, "and it makes *me* smile to notice how folks as ain't above saying lies about Mary-Clare can trust their children to her teaching."

"Oh! well, lies are soon killed," Northrup returned, but his smile vanished.

Mary-Clare was often troubled by Larry's persistence at the Point. She could not account for it, but she did not alter her own way of life. She went, occasionally, to the desolate Point; she rarely saw Larry, but if she did, she greeted him pleasantly. It was amazing to find how naturally she could do this. Indeed the whole situation was at the snapping point.

"I do say," Twombly confided to Peneluna, "it don't seem nater for a woman not to grieve and fuss at such goings on."

Peneluna tossed her head and sneezed.

"I ain't ever understood," she broke in, "why a woman should fuss and break herself on account of a man doing what he oughtn't ter do. Let *him* do the fussing and breaking."

"She might try and save him." Twombly, like all the male Forest, was stirred at what he could not understand.

"Women have got their hands full of other things"--Peneluna sneezed again as if the dust of ages was stifling her--"and I do say that after a woman does save a man, she's often too worn out to enjoy her savings."

And Larry, carefully dressed, living alone and to all appearances brave and steady, simply, according to Maclin's ordering, "let out more sheet rope" in order that Mary-Clare might sail on to the rocks and smash herself to atoms before the eyes of her fellow creatures.

Surely the Forest had much to cogitate upon.

"There is just one ledge of rocks for her kind," said Maclin. "You keep yourself clear and safe, Rivers, and watch the wreck."

Maclin could be most impressive at times and his conversation had a nautical twist that was quite effective.

Northrup at this time would have been shocked beyond measure had any one suggested that his own attitude of mind resembled in the slightest degree that of Maclin, Twombly, and Rivers.

He was too sane and decent a man to consider for a moment that Mary-Clare's actions were based in the slightest degree upon his presence in the Forest. He knew that he had had nothing to do with the matter, but that was no reason for thinking that he might not have. Suggestion was enmeshing him in the disturbance.

He felt that Larry was a brute. That he had the outer covering of respectability counted against him. Larry always kept his best manners for public exhibition; his inheritance of refinement could be tapped at any convenient hour. Northrup knew his type. He had not recalled his father in years as he did now! A man legally sustained by his interpretation of marriage could make a hell or a heaven of any woman's life. This truism took on new significance in the primitive Forest.

But in that Mary-Clare had had courage to escape from hell--and Northrup had pictured it all from memories of his boyhood--roused him to admiration.

She was of the mettle of his mother. She might be bent but never broken. She was treading a path that none of her little world had ever trod before. Alone in the Forest she had taken a stand that she could not hope would be understood, and how superbly she was holding it!

Knowing what he did, Northrup compared Mary-Clare with the women of his acquaintance; what one of them could defy their conventions as she was doing, instinctively, courageously?

"But she ought not to be permitted to think all men are like Rivers!"

This thought grew upon Northrup, and it was the first step, generously taken, to establish higher ideals for his sex. With the knowledge he had, he was in a position of safety. Not to be seen with Mary-Clare while the silly gossip muttered or whispered would be to acknowledge a reason for not meeting her--so he flung caution to the winds.

There were nutting parties for the children--innocent enough, heaven knew! There were thrilling camping suppers on the flat ridge of the hills in order to watch the miracle of sunset and moonrise.

No wonder Jan-an cast her lot in with those headed, so the whisper ran, for perdition. She had never been so nearly happy in her life; neither had Mary-Clare nor Noreen nor--though he did not own it--Northrup, himself.

No wonder Maclin, and the outraged Larry, saw distinctly the ridge on which the wreck was to occur.

But no one was taking into account that idealism in Mary-Clare that the old doctor had devoutly hoped would save her, not destroy her. Northrup began to comprehend it during the more intimate conversations that took place when the children, playing apart, left him and Mary-Clare alone. The wonder grew upon him and humbled him. It was something he had never encountered before. A philosophy and code built entirely upon knowledge gained from books and interpreted by a singular strength and purity of mind. It piqued Northrup; he began to test it, never estimating danger for himself.

"Books are like people," Mary-Clare said one day--she was watching Northrup build a campfire and the last bit of sunlight fell full upon her--"the words are the costumes." She had marked the surprised look in Northrup's eyes as she quoted rather a bald sentiment from an old book.

"Yes, of course, and that's sound reasoning." For a moment Northrup felt as though a clear north wind were blowing away the dust in an overlooked corner of his mind. "But it's rather staggering to find that you read French," he added, for the quotation had been literally translated. "You do, don't you?"

"I do, a little. I'm taking it up again for Noreen."

Noreen's name was continually being brought into focus. It had the effect of pushing Northrup, metaphorically, into a safe zone. He resented this.

"She is afraid!" he thought. "Rivers has left his mark upon her mind, damn him!"

This sentiment should have given warning, but it did not.

"I study nights"--Mary-Clare was speaking quite as if fear had no part in her thought--"French, mathematics--all the hard things that went in and--stuck."

"Hard things do stick, don't they?" Northrup hated the pushed-aside feeling.

"Terribly. But my doctor was adamant about hard things. He used to say that I'd learn to love chipping off the rough corners." Here Mary-Clare laughed, and the sound set Northrup's nerves a-tingle as the clear notes of music did.

"I can see myself now, Mr. Northrup, sitting behind my doctor on his horse, my book flattened out against his back. I'd ask questions; he'd fling the answers to me. Once I drew the map of Italy on his blessed old shoulders with crayon and often French verbs ran crookedly up the seam of his coat, for the horse changed his gait now and then."

Northrup laughed aloud. He edged away from his isolation and said:

"Your doctor was a remarkable man. His memory lives in the Forest; it's about the most vital thing here. It and all that preserves it." His eyes rested upon Mary-Clare.

"Yes. He was wonderful. Lately he seems more alive than ever. He had such simple rules of life--but they work. He told me so often that when a trouble or anything like that came, there were but two ways to meet it. If it was going to kill you, die at your best. If it wasn't, get over it

at once; never waste time--live as soon as possible." Was there a note of warning in the words?

"And you're doing it?"

An understanding look passed between them.

"Yes, Mr. Northrup, for Noreen."

Back went Northrup to his place with a dull thud! Then Mary-Clare hurried to a safer subject.

"I wish you would tell me about your book, Mr. Northrup. I have the strangest feeling about it. It seems like a new kind of flower growing in the Forest. I love flowers."

Northrup looked down at his companion. Her bared head, her musing, radiant face excited and moved him. He had forgotten his book.

"You're rather like a strange growth yourself," he said daringly.

Mary-Clare smiled gaily.

"You'll have to blame my old doctor for that," she said.

"Or bless him," Northrup broke in.

"Yes, that's better, if it is true."

"It's tremendously true."

"A book"--again that elusive push--"must be a great responsibility. Once you put your thoughts and words down and send them out--there you are!"

"Yes. Good Lord! There you are."

"I knew that you would feel that way about it and that is why I would like to hear you talk of it. It's a story, isn't it?"

"Yes, a story."

"You can reach further with a story."

"I suppose so. You do not have to knuckle down to rules. You can let your vision have a say, and your feelings." Northrup, seeing that his book must play a part, accepted that fact.

"I suppose"--Mary-Clare was looking wistfully up at Northrup--"all the people in your books work out what you believe is truth. I can always *feel* truth in a book--or the lack of it."

In the near distance Noreen and Jan-an were gathering wood. They were singing and shouting lustily.

"May I sit on your log?" Northrup spoke hurriedly.

"Of course," and Mary-Clare moved a little. "The sun's gone," she went on. "It's quite dark in the valley."

"It's still light here--and there's the fire." Northrup was watching the face beside him.

"Yes, the fire, and presently the moon rising, just over there."

Restraint lay between the two on the mossy log. They both resented it.

"You know, you must know, that I'd rather have you share my book than any one else." Northrup spoke almost roughly.

He had meant to say something quite different, but anything would do so long as he controlled the situation.

"I wonder why?" Mary-Clare kept her face turned away.

"Well, you are so phenomenally keen. You know such a lot."

"I used to snap up everything like a hungry puppy, Uncle Peter often said. I suppose I do now, Mr. Northrup, but I only know life as a blind person does: I feel."

"That's just it. You *feel* life. It isn't coloured for you by others. You get its form, its hardness or softness, its fragrance or the reverse, but you fix your own colour. That's why you'd be such a ripping critic. Will you let me read some of my book to you?"

"Oh! of course. I'd be so glad and proud."

"Come, now, you're not joking?"

The large golden eyes turned slowly and rested upon Northrup.

"I do not think I ever joke"--Mary-Clare's words fell softly--"about such things. Why, it would seem like seeing a soul get into a body. You do not joke about that."

"You make me horribly afraid about my book. People do not usually take the writing of a book in just that way."

"I wish they did. You see, my doctor often said that books would live if they only held truth. He loved these words, 'And above all else--Truth taketh away the victory!' I can see him now waving his arms and singing that defiantly, as if he were challenging the whole world. He said that truth was the soul of things."

"But who knows Truth?"

"There is something in us that knows it. Don't you think so?"

"But we see it so differently."

"That does not matter, if we know it! Truth is fixed and sure. Isn't that so?"

"I do not know. Sometimes I think so: then--good Lord! that is what I'm trying to find out."

Northrup's face grew tense.

"And so am I."

"All right, then, let's go on the quest together!" Northrup stood up and offered his hand to Mary-Clare as if actually they were to start on the pilgrimage. "Where and when may I begin to read to you?"

The children were coming nearer.

"While this weather lasts, I'd love the open. Wouldn't you? Logs, like this, are such perfect places."

"I thought perhaps"--Northrup looked what he dared not voice--"I thought perhaps in that cabin of yours we might be more comfortable, more undisturbed."

Mary-Clare smiled and shook her head.

"No, I think it would be impossible. That cabin is too full--well, I'm sure I could not listen as I should, to you, in that cabin."

And so it was that the book became the medium of expression to Northrup and Mary-Clare. It justified that which might otherwise have been impossible. It drugged them both to any sense of actual danger. It was like a shield behind which they might advance and retreat unseen and unharmed. And if the shield ever fell for an unguarded moment, Northrup believed that he alone was vouchsafed clear vision.

He grew to marvel at the simplicity and purity of Mary-Clare's point of view. He knew that she must have gone through some gross experiences with a man like Rivers, but they had left her singularly untouched.

But, while Northrup, believing himself shielded from the woman near him, permitted his imagination full play, Mary-Clare drew her own conclusions. She accepted Northrup without question as far as he personally was concerned. He was making her life rich and full, but he would soon pass; become a memory to brighten the cold, dark years ahead, just as the memory of the old doctor had done: would always do.

Desperately Mary-Clare clung to this thought, and reinforced by it referred constantly to her own position as if to convince Northrup of perfect understanding of their relations.

But the book! That was another matter. In that she felt she dared contemplate the real nature of Northrup. She believed he was unconsciously revealing himself, and with that keenness of perception that Northrup had detected, she threshed the false notes from the true and, while hesitating to express herself--for she was timid and naturally distrustful of herself--she was being prepared for an hour when her best would be demanded of her.

Silently Mary-Clare would sit and listen while Northrup read. Without explanation, the children had been eliminated and, if the day was too cool to sit by the trail side, they would walk side by side, the crushed leaves making a soft carpet for their feet; the falling leaves touching them gently as they were brushed from their slight holdings.

Mary-Clare had suddenly abandoned her rough boyish garb. She was sweet and womanly in her plain little gown--and a long coat whose high collar rose around her grave face. She wore no hat and the light and shade did marvellous things to her hair. There were times when Northrup could not take his eyes from that shining head.

"Why are you stopping?" Mary-Clare would ask at such lapses.

"My writing is diabolical!" Northrup lied.

"Oh! I'm sorry. The stops give me a jog. Go on."

And Northrup would go on!

Without fully being aware of it, until the thing was done, Mary-Clare got vividly into the story.

And Northrup was doing some good, some daring work. His man, born from his own doubts, aspirations, and cravings, was a live and often a blundering creature who could not be disregarded. He was safe enough, but it was the woman who now gave trouble.

Northrup saw, with fear and trembling, that he had drawn her, so he devoutly believed, so close to reality that he felt that Mary-Clare would discover her at once and resent the impertinence. But he need not have held any such thought. Mary-Clare was far too impersonal; far too absorbed a nature to be largely concerned with herself, and Northrup had failed absolutely in his deductions, as he was soon to learn.

What Mary-Clare did see in Northrup's heroine was a maddening possibility that he was letting slip through his fingers. At first this puzzled her; pained her. She was still timid about expressing her feeling. But so strong was Northrup's touch in most of his work that at last he drove his quiet, silent critic from her moorings. She asked that she might have a copy of a certain part of the book.

"I want to think it out with my woman-brain," she laughingly explained. "When you read right at this spot--well, you see, it doesn't seem clear. When I have thought it out alone, then I will tell

you and be--oh! very bold."

And Northrup had complied.

He had blazed for himself, some time before, a roundabout trail through the briery underbrush from the inn to within a few hundred feet of the cabin. Often he watched from this hidden limit. He saw the smoke rise from the chimney; once or twice he caught a glimpse of Mary-Clare sitting at the rough table, and, after she had taken those chapters away, he knew they were being read there.

Alone, waiting, expecting he knew not what, Northrup became alarmingly aware that Mary-Clare had got a tremendous hold upon him. The knowledge was almost staggering. He had felt so sure; had risked so much.

He could not deceive himself any longer. Like other men, he had played with fire and had been burnt. "But," he devoutly thought, "thank God, I have started no conflagration."

CHAPTER XI

There had been five days in which to face a rather ugly and bald fact before Northrup again saw Mary-Clare. He had employed the time, he tried to make himself believe, wisely, sanely.

He had spent a good portion of it at the Point. He had irritated Larry beyond endurance by friendly overtures. In an effort to be just, he tried to include Rivers in his reconstruction. The truth, he sternly believed, would never be known, but if it were, certainly Rivers might have something to say for himself, and with humiliation Northrup regarded himself "as other men." He had never, thank heaven! looked upon himself as better than other men, but he had thought his struggle, early in life, his unhappy parenthood, and later devotion to his work, had set him apart from the general temptations of many young men and had given him a distaste for follies that could hold no suggestion of mystery for him.

Well, Fate had merely bided its time.

With every reason for escaping a pitfall, he had floundered in. "Like other men?" Northrup sneered at himself. No other man could be such a consummate fool, knowing what he knew.

Viewed from this position, Larry was not as contemptible as he had once appeared.

But Rivers resented Northrup's advances, putting the lowest interpretation upon them. In this he was upheld by Maclin, who was growing restive under the tension that did not break, but stretched endlessly on.

Northrup resolved to see Mary-Clare once more and then go home. He would make sure that the fire he himself was scorched by had not touched her. After that he would turn his back upon the golden selah in his life and return to his niche in the wall.

This brought his mother and Kathryn into the line of vision. How utterly he had betrayed their confidence! His whole life, from now on, should be devoted to their service. Doubtless to other men, like himself, there were women who were never forgotten, but that must not blot out reality.

And then Northrup considered the task of unearthing Maclin's secrets, and ridding the Forest of that subtle fear and distrust that the man created. That was, however, too big an undertaking now. He must get Twombly to watch and report. Northrup had a great respect for Twombly's powers of observation.

And so the time on the Point had been put to some purpose, and it had occupied Northrup. Noreen and Jan-an had helped, too. It was rather tragic the way Northrup had grown to feel about Noreen. The child had developed his latent love for children--they had never figured in his life before. So much had been left out, now that he came to think of it!

And Jan-an. Poor groping creature! To have gained her affection and trust meant a great deal.

Then the Heathcotes! Polly and Peter! During those five distraught days they developed halos in Northrup's imagination.

They had taken him in, a stranger. They had fathered and mothered him; staunchly and silently stood by him. What if they knew?

They must never know! He would make sure of that.

In this frame of mind, chastened and determined, Northrup on the fifth day took his place behind the laurel clump back of Mary-Clare's cabin, and to his relief saw her coming out of the door. His manuscript was not in her hands, but her face had an uplifted and luminous look that set his heart to a quicker pulsing.

After a decent length of time, Northrup, whistling carelessly, scruffing the dead leaves noiselessly, followed on and overtook Mary-Clare near the log upon which they had sat at their last meeting.

The quaint poise and dignity of the girl was the first impression Northrup always got. He had never quite grown accustomed to it; it was like a challenge--his impulse was to test it. It threatened his exalted state now.

"It's quite mysterious, isn't it?"

Mary-Clare sat down on her end of the log and looked up, her eyes twinkling.

"What is mysterious?" Northrup took his place. The log was not a long one.

"The way we manage to meet."

She was setting him at a safe distance in that old way of hers that somehow made her seem so young.

It irritated Northrup now as it never had before.

He had prepared himself for an ordeal, was keyed to a high note, and the quiet, smiling girl near him made it all seem a farce.

This was dangerous. Northrup relaxed.

"It's been nearly a week since I saw you," he said, and let his eyes rest upon Mary-Clare's face.

"Yes, nearly a week," she said softly, "but it took me all that time to make up my mind."

"About what?"

"Your book."

Northrup had forgotten, for the moment, his book, and he resented its introduction.

"Damn the book!" he thought. Aloud he said: "Of course! You were going to tell me where I have fallen down."

"I hope you are not making a joke of it"--Mary-Clare's face flushed--"but even if you are, I am going to tell you what I think. I must, you know."

"That's awfully good of you"--Northrup became earnest--"but it doesn't matter now, I am going away. Let us talk of something else."

Mary-Clare took this in silence. The only evidence of her surprise showed in the higher touch of colour that rose, then died out, leaving her almost pale.

"Then, there is all the more reason why I must tell you what I think," she said at last.

The words came like sharp detached particles; they hurt.

"We must talk about the book!"

And Northrup suddenly caught the truth. The book was their common language. Only through that could they reach each other, understandingly.

"All right!" he murmured, and turned his face away.

"It's your woman," Mary-Clare began with a sharp catching of her breath as if she had been running. "Your woman is not real."

Northrup flushed. He was foolishly and suddenly angry. If the book must be brought in, he would defend it. It was all that was left to him of this detached interlude of his life. He meant to keep it. It was one thing to live along in his story and daringly see how close he could come to revelation with the keen-witted girl who had inspired him, but quite another, now that he was going, beaten from the field, to have the book, *as a book*, assailed. As to books, he knew his business!

"You put *your* words in your woman's mouth," Mary-Clare was saying.

"And whose words, pray, should I put there?" Northrup asked huskily.

"You must let her speak for herself."

"Good Lord!"

Mary-Clare did not notice the interruption. She was doing battle for more than Northrup guessed. She hoped he would never know the truth, but the battle must be fought if all the beautiful weeks of joy were to be saved for the future. The idealism that the old doctor had desperately hoped might save, not destroy, Mary-Clare was to prove itself now.

"There are so many endings in life, that it is hard, in a book, to choose just one. Why should there be an end to a book?" she asked.

The question came falteringly and Northrup almost laughed.

"Go on, please," he said quietly. "You think I've ended my woman by letting her do what any woman in real life would do?"

"All women would not do what your woman does. Such women end men!"

This was audacious, but it caught Northrup's imagination.

"Go on," he muttered lamely.

"Do you think love is everything to a woman?" Mary-Clare demanded ferociously.

"It is the biggest thing!" Northrup was up in arms to defend his code and his work.

"You think it could wipe out honour, all the things that meant honour to her?"

"Love conquers everything for a woman."

"Does it for a man?"

Northrup tried to fling out the affirmative, but he hedged.

"Largely, yes."

"I do not think that. There are some things bigger to him. Maybe not bigger, but things that he would choose instead of love, if he had to. It is what you *do* to love that matters. If you come and take it when you haven't a right to it; when you'd be stealing it; letting other sacred things go for it--then you would be killing love. But if you honour it, even if it is lonely and often sad, it lives and lives and---

The universe, at that momentous instant, seemed to rock and tremble. Everything was swept aside as by a Force that but bided its hour and had taken absolute control.

Northrup was never able to connect the two edges of conscious thought that were riven apart by the blinding stroke that left him and Mary-Clare in that space where their souls met. But, thank God, the Force was not evil; it was but revealing.

Northrup drew Mary-Clare to her feet and held her little work-worn hands close.

"You are crying--suffering," he whispered.

"Yes."

"And---

"Oh! please wait"--the deep sobs shook the girl--"you must wait. I'll try to--to make you see. I was awake that night at the inn--that is why I--trust you now! Why I want you to--to understand."

She seemed pleading with him--it made him wince; she was calling forth his best to help her weakest.

"Your book"--Mary-Clare gripped that again--"your book is a beautiful, live thing--we must keep it so! Your man has grown and grown through every page until he quite naturally believed he was able to--to do more than any man can ever do! Why, this is your chance to be different, stronger." The quick, panting words ran into each other and then Mary-Clare controlled them while, unheeded, the tears rolled down her cheeks. "You must let your woman *act* for herself! She, too, must learn and know. She made a horrible mistake from *not* knowing and seeing the first man; no love can help her by taking the solution from her. She must be free--free and begin again. If it is right---

"Yes, Mary-Clare. If it is right, what then?"

Everything seemed to wait upon the answer. The scurrying wood creatures and the dropping of dead leaves alone broke the silence. Slowly, like one coming into consciousness, Mary-Clare drew one hand from Northrup's, wiped her eyes, and then--let it fall again into his!

"I can see clearer now," she faltered. "Please, please try to understand. It is because love means so much to some women, that when they think it out with their women-minds they will be very careful of it. They will feel about it as men do about their honour. There must be times when love must stand aside if they want to keep it! I know how queer and crooked all this must sound, but men do not stop loving if their honour makes them turn from it. We are all, men and women, too, *parts*--we cannot act as if--oh! you do understand, I know you do, and some day you will go on with your beautiful book."

"And the end of my book, Mary-Clare? There must be an end."

"I do not know. I do not think a great big book ever ends any more than life ends."

Northrup was swept from his hard-wrought position at this. The next wave of emotion might carry him higher, but for the moment he was drifting, drifting.

"You do not know life, nor men, nor women," he said huskily and clutched her hands in his. "If life cheats and injures you, you have a right to snatch what joy you can. It's not only what you do to love, but what you do to yourself, that counts. For real love can stand anything."

"No, it cannot!" Mary-Clare tried to draw away, but she felt the hold tighten on her hands; "it cannot stand dishonour. That's what kills it."

"Dishonour! What *is* dishonour?" Northrup asked bitterly. "I'm going to prove as far as I can, in my book, that the right kind of man and woman with a big enough love can throttle life; cheat the cheater." This came defiantly.

But the book no longer served its purpose; it seemed to fall at the feet of the man and woman, standing with clasped hands and hungry, desperate eyes.

The words that might have changed their lives were never spoken, for, down the trail gaily, joyously, came the sound of Noreen's voice, shrilly singing one of the songs Northrup had taught her.

"That's what I mean by honour," Mary-Clare whispered. "Noreen and all that she is! You, you *do* understand about some women, don't you? You will help, not hurt, such women, won't you?"

"For God's sake, Mary-Clare, don't!"

Northrup bent and touched his lips to the small work-stained hands. The song down the trail

rose joyously.

"I have thought of you"--Mary-Clare was catching her breath sharply--"as Noreen has--a man brought by the haunted wind. It has all been like a wonderful play. I have not thought of the place where you belong, but I know there are those in that place who are like Noreen."

"Yes!" Northrup shivered and flinched as a cold, wet leaf fell upon his hands and Mary-Clare's.

"The wind is changing," said the woman. "The lovely autumn has been kind and has stayed long."

"My dear, my dear--don't!" Northrup pleaded.

"Oh! but I must. You see I want you to think back, as I shall--at all this as great happiness. Come, let us go down the trail. I want you to tell me about your city, the place where you belong! I must picture you there now."

Northrup kept the small right hand in his as they turned. It was a cold hand and it trembled in his grasp, but there was a steel-like quality in it, too.

It was tragic, this strength of the girl who had drawn her understanding of life from hidden sources. Northrup knew that she was seeking to smooth his way on ahead; to take the bitterness from a memory that, without her sacrifice, might hold him back from what had been, was, and must always be, inevitable. She was ignoring the weak, tempted moment and linking the past with all that the future must hold for them both.

There was only the crude, simple course for him to follow--to accept the commonplace, turn and face life as one turns from a grave that hides a beautiful thing.

"You have never been to the city?"

There was nothing to do but resort to words. Superficial, foolish words.

"Yes, once. On my wedding trip."

This was unfortunate, but words without thought are wild things.

Mary-Clare hurried along while visions of Larry's city rose like smiting rebukes to her heedlessness. Cheap theatres, noisy restaurants, gaudy lights.

"My dear doctor and I always planned going together," she said brokenly. "I believe there are many cities in the city. One has to find his city for himself."

"Yes, that's exactly what one does." Northrup closed his hand closer over the dead-cold one in his grasp.

"Your city, it must be wonderful."

"It will be a haunted city, Mary-Clare."

"Tell me about it. And tell me a little, if you don't mind, about your people."

The bravery was almost heart-breaking, it caused Northrup's lips to set grimly.

"There is my mother," he replied.

"I'm glad. You love her very much?"

"Very much. She's wonderful. My father died long ago."

Mary-Clare did not ask whether he loved his father or not, and she hurried on:

"And now, when I try to think of you in your city, at your work, just how shall I think of you? Make it like a picture."

Northrup struggled with himself. The girl beside him, in pushing him from her life, was so unutterably sweet and brave.

"My dear, my dear!" he whispered, and remorse, pity, yearning rang in the words.

"Make it like a picture!" Relentlessly the words were repeated. They demanded that he give his best.

"Think of a high little room in a tall tower overlooking all cities," he began slowly, "the cheap, the beautiful, the glad, and the sad. The steam and smoke roll up and seem to make a gauzy path upon which all that really matters comes and goes as one sits and watches."

Mary-Clare's eyes were wide and vision-filled.

"Oh! thank you," she whispered. "I shall always see it and you so. And sometimes, maybe when the sun is going down, as it is now, you will see me on that trail that is just yours, in your city coming to--to wish you well!"

"Good God!" Northrup shook himself. "What's got us two? We've worked ourselves into a pretty state. Talking as, as if--Mary-Clare, I'm not going away. There will be other days. It's that book of mine. Hang it! We've got snarled in the book."

The weak efforts to ignore everything failed pitifully.

"No, it is life." Mary-Clare grew grim as Northrup relaxed. "But I want you always to remember my old doctor's rule. If a thing is going to kill you, die bravely; if it isn't, get over it at once and live the best you can."

"God bless and keep you, Mary-Clare." Absolute surrender marked the tone.

"He will!"

"But this is not good-bye!"

"No, it is not good-bye."

CHAPTER XII

While the days were passing and Mary-Clare and Northrup, with the book between them as a shield, fought their battle and won their victory, they had taken small heed of the undercurrent that was not merely carrying them on, but bearing others, also.

Northrup was comfortably conscious of Aunt Polly and old Peter, at the days' ends. The sense of going home to them was distinctly a joy, a fitting and safe interlude.

Noreen and Jan-an supplied the light-comedy touch, for the two were capable of supplying no end of fun when there were hours that could not be utilized in work or devoted to that thrilling occupation of walking the trails with Mary-Clare.

The real, sordid tragedy element played small part in the autumn idyl, but it was developing none the less.

Larry on the Point was showing more patient persistence than one could have expected. He went about Maclin's business with his usual reticence and devotion; occasionally he was away for a few days; when he was at home in Peneluna's shack he was a quiet, rather pathetic figure of a man at loose ends, but casting no slurs. It was that pacific attitude of his that got on the nerves of his doubters and those who believed they understood him.

Peneluna, torn between her loyalty to Mary-Clare and the decency she felt called upon to show the old doctor's son, was becoming irritable and jerky. Jan-an shrank from her and whimpered:

"What have I done? Ain't I fetching and carrying for him?"--she nodded heavily toward Larry's abiding place. "Ain't I watching and telling yer all that he does? Writing and tearing up what he writes! Ain't I showing you his scraps what don't get burned? Ain't I acting square?"

Peneluna softened.

"Yes, you are!" she admitted. "But I declare, after finding nothing agin him, one gets to wondering if there *is* anything agin him. I don't like suspecting my feller creatures."

"Suspectin' ain't like murdering!" Jan-an blurted out.

"If you don't stop talking like that, Jan-an---" But Peneluna paused, for she saw the frightened look creeping into Jan-an's dull eyes.

It was while the Point was agitated about Larry that Twombley brought forth his gun and took to cleaning it and fondling it by his doorway. This action of Twombley's fascinated Jan-an.

"What yer going to shoot?" she asked.

"Ducks, maybe." Twombley leered pleasantly.

"I wish yer wouldn't."

"Why, Jan-an?"

"Ducks ain't so used to it as chickens. I hate to see flying things as *can* fly popped over."

At this Twombley laughed aloud.

"All right, girl, I'll hunt up something else to aim at--something that's used to it. I ain't saying I'll hit anything, but aimin' and finding out how steady yer hand is ain't lacking in sport."

So Twombley erected a target and enlivened and startled the Point by his practise. Maclin, after a few weeks of absence from the Point, called occasionally on his private agent and he was displeased by Twombley's new amusement.

"What in thunder are you up to?" he asked.

"Not much--yet!" Twombley admitted. "Don't hit the hole more than once out of four."

"But the noise is bad for folks, Twombley."

"They like it," Twombley broke in. "Makes 'em jump and know they're alive. It's like fleas on dogs."

"When I'm talking business with Rivers," Twombley insisted, "I hate the racket."

"All right, when I see you there, I'll hold off."

But Maclin did not want always to be seen at the shack. It was one thing to stroll down to the Point, now and again, with that air of having made mistakes in the past and greeting the Pointers pleasantly, and quite another to find out, secretly, just what progress Larry was making in his interests and knowing what Larry was doing with his long days and nights.

So, after a fortnight of consideration, Maclin walked with Rivers from the mines one night determined to spend several hours in the shack and "use his eyes." Larry did not seem particularly pleased with this intention and paused several times on the rough, dusky road, giving Maclin an opportunity to bid him good-night. But Maclin stuck like the little brown devil-pitchforks that decorated the trousers of both men as they strode on the woodside of the road.

"I'm like a rat in a hole," Larry confided, despairing of shaking Maclin off. "I wish to God you'd send me away somewhere--overseas, if you can. You once promised that."

Maclin's eyes contracted, but it was too dark for Rivers to notice.

"Too late, just now, Rivers. That hell of a time they're having over there keeps peaceful folks to their own waters."

"Sometimes"--Larry grew moody--"I've thought I'd like to tumble into that mess and either---"

"What?" Abruptly Maclin caught Rivers up.

"Oh! go under or--come to the top." This was to laugh--so both men laughed.

Laughing and talking in undertones, they came to the dark shack and Larry, irritated at his inability to drop Maclin, unlocked the door and went in, followed by his unwelcome guest.

"What in thunder do you lock this old rookery up for?" Maclin asked, stumbling over a chair.

"I've got a notion lately that folks peep and pry. I've seen footprints around the house."

"Well, why shouldn't they pry and tramp about? The Point's getting dippy. And that blasted gun of Twombley's! See here, Rivers!"

By this time Larry had lighted the smelly lamp and closed the door and locked it.

"You're getting nervous and twisted, Rivers."

The two sat down by the paper-strewn table.

"Well, who wouldn't?" snapped Rivers. "Hiding in this junk, knowing that your wife---" he paused abruptly, but Maclin nodded sympathetically. "It's hell, Maclin."

"Sure! Got anything to drink?"

Larry went to the closet and brought out a bottle and glasses.

"This helps!" Maclin said, pouring out the best brand from the Cosey.

The men drained their glasses and became, after a few minutes, more cheerful. Maclin stretched out his legs--he had to do this in order to adjust his fat and put his hands in his pockets.

"Larry, I want to tell you that you won't have to hide in your hole much longer. I'm one too many for that fellow Northrup. I hold the cards now."

"The devil you do!" Rivers's eyes brightened.

"Yes, sir. He wants the Point, old man, and the Heathcotes gave him the knowledge that your wife owns it. He's getting her where he can handle her. Damn shame, I say--using a woman and taking advantage of her weak side. If we don't act spry he'll get what he wants."

Larry's face flushed a purple-red.

"What do you mean, Maclin? Talk out straight and clear."

"Well, I weigh it this way and that. Northrup might--I hate to use brutal terms--he might compromise your wife and get her to sell and shut him up, or he might get her so bedazzled that she'd feel real set up to negotiate with him. A man like Northrup is pretty flattering to a woman like your wife, Rivers. You see, she's carrying such a big cargo of learning and fancy rot that she can't properly sail. That kind gets stranded *always*, Larry. They just naturally *make* for rocks."

Larry had a sensation of choking and loosened his collar, then he surprised Maclin by turning and lighting a fire in the stove before he further surprised him by asking, with dangerous calmness:

"What in all that's holy do you--this Northrup--any one, want this damned Point for?"

Maclin was rarely in a position to fence with Rivers, but he was now.

"Larry, old man, did you ever have in your life an ideal, or what stands for it, that you would work for, and suffer for?"

"No!" Rivers could not stand delay.

"Well, I have, Larry. I'm an old sentimentalist, when you know me proper. I took a fancy to you, and while I can't show my feelings as many can, I have stood by you and you've been a proposition, off and on. I bought those mines because I saw the chance they offered, and I shared with you. I've got big men interested. I've let you carry results to them--but the results are slow, Rivers, and they're getting restive. I'm afraid some one of them has blabbed and this Northrup is the result. Why, man, I've got inventions over at the mines that will revolutionize this rotten, lazy Forest. I wanted to win the folks--but they wouldn't be won. I wanted to save them in spite of themselves, but damn 'em, they won't be saved. In a year I could make Heathcote a rich man, if he'd wake up and *keep* an inn instead of a kennel. But I've got to have this Point. I want to build a bridge from here to the railroad property on the other shore--this is the narrowest part of the lake; I want to build cottages here, instead of--of rat holes. I've got to

get this Point by hook or crook--and I can't shilly-shally with this Northrup on to the game."

Suddenly, while he was talking, Maclin's eyes fell upon the untidy mass of papers on the table. He pulled his fat hands out of his tight pockets and let them fall like paperweights on the envelopes and sheets.

"What are these?" he asked.

Larry started guiltily.

"Old letters," he said.

"What you doing with them?" As he spoke Maclin was sorting and arranging the papers--the old he put to one side; the newer ones on the other. Some of the new ones were astonishingly good copies of the old!

"Playing the old game, eh?" Maclin scowled. "I thought you'd had enough of that, after---"

"For God's sake, Maclin, shut up."

"Been carrying these mementos around with you all these years?"

Maclin was reading a letter of Larry's father--an old one.

"No, I brought them with me from the old house. Mary-Clare had them, but they were mine." Larry's face was white and set into hard lines.

"Sure, so I see." And Maclin was seeing a great deal.

He saw that Rivers had torn off, where it was possible, half pages from the old and yellowed letters; these were carefully banded together, while on fresh sheets of paper, the old letters in part, or in whole, were cleverly copied.

There was one yellowed half sheet in the old doctor's handwriting bearing a new form of expression--there was no original of this. Maclin made sure of that. He read this new form once, twice, three times.

"If the time should ever come, my girl, when you and Larry could not agree, he'll give you this letter. It is all I could do for him; it will prove that I trust you, at every turn, to do the right and just thing. Stand by Larry, as I have done."

Maclin puffed out his cheeks. They looked like a child's red balloon. "What in hell!" he ejaculated.

Larry's face was gray. Guilt is always quick to hold up its hands when it thinks the enemy has the drop on it.

"Can't you understand?" he whispered through dry lips. "I want to outwit them. I'm as keen as you, Maclin, and I'm working for you, old man, working for you! I was going to take this to her--she'll do anything when she reads that--and I was going to tell her why the old man stood by me. That would shut her mouth and make her pay."

There is in the shield of every man a weak spot. There was one in the shield of Maclin's brutal villainy. For a moment he felt positively virtuous; perhaps the sensation proved the embryo virtue in all.

"Are any of these things real?" he asked with a rough catch in his voice; "and don't lie to me--it wouldn't be healthy."

"No."

"You got your wife by letting her think your old father wanted it, wrote about it?"

"Yes. I had to outwit them some way. I was just free and couldn't choose. They had no right to cut me out."

"Well, by God, you *are* a rotter, Rivers." The lines at which criminals balk are confusing. "And she never guessed?"

"No, she'd never seen Father's writing in letters."

Then Maclin's outraged virtue took a curious turn.

"And you never cared for her after you got her?"

"I might have if she'd been the right sort--but she's as hard as flint, Maclin. A man can't stand her sort and keep his own self-respect."

Maclin indulged in a weak laugh at this and Larry's face burned.

"I might have gone straight if she'd been square, but she wasn't. A man can't put up with her type. And now--well! She ought to pay now."

Maclin was gripping the loose sheets in his fat, greasy hands.

"Hold on there." Larry pointed. "You're getting them creased and dirty!"

Again Maclin laughed.

"I'll leave enough copy," he muttered. Then he fixed his little eyes on his prey while his fat neck wrinkled in the back. His emotion of virtue flickered and died, he was the alert man of business once more. "I told you after you got out of prison, Rivers, that I'd never stand for any more of that counterfeiting stuff. It's too risky, and the talent can be put to better purpose. I've stood by you, I like you, and I need you. When we all pony up you'll get your share--I mean when we

build up the Forest, you'll have a fat berth, but you've got to play a card now for me and play it damn quick. Here, take this gem of yours"--he tossed Larry's latest production to him--"and go to your wife to-morrow, and tell her why your old man stood by you; shut her mouth with that choice bit and then tell her--you want the Point! You've got her cornered, Rivers. She can't escape. If she tries to, hurl Northrup at her."

Larry wiped his lips with his hot hand.

"I haven't quite finished this," he muttered; "it will take a day or two."

"Rivers, if you try any funny work on me---" Maclin looked dangerous. He felt the fear that comes from not trusting those he must use.

"I'm not going to double-cross you, Maclin."

"Here, take a nifter." Maclin pushed the bottle toward Rivers. "You look all in," he ventured.

"I am, just about."

"Well, after this piece of business, I'll send you off for as long as you want to stay. You need a change."

Larry revived after a moment or two and some colour crept into his cheeks.

"I'm going now," Maclin said, getting up and releasing the tools of Larry's trade. "Better get a good night's rest and be fresh for to-morrow. A day or so won't count, so long as we understand the game. Good-night!"

Outside in the darkness Maclin stood still and listened. His iron nerves were shaken and he had his moment of far vision. If he succeeded--well! at that thought Maclin felt his blood run riotously in his veins. Glory! Glory! His name ringing out into fame.

But!--the cold sweat broke over the fat man standing in the dark. Still, he would not have been the man he was if he permitted doubt to linger. He *must* succeed. Right was back of him; with him. Unyielding Right. It must succeed.

Maclin strode on, picking his way over the ash heaps and broken bottles. A pale moon was trying to make itself evident, but piles of black clouds defeated it at every attempt. The wind was changing. From afar the chapel bell struck its warning. It rang wildly, gleefully, then sank into silence only to begin once more. Seeking, seeking a quarter in which it might rest.

Maclin, head down, plunged into the night and reached the road to the mines. He saw to it that the road was so bad that no one would use it except from necessity, but he cursed it now. He all but fell several times, he thanked God--God indeed!--when the lights of the Cosey Bar came in sight.

He did not often drink of his public whiskey, or drink with his foreigners, but he chose to do so to-night. His men welcomed him thickly--they had been wallowing in beer for hours; the man at the bar drew forth a bottle of whiskey--he knew Maclin rarely drank beer.

An hour later, Maclin, master of the place and the men, was talking slowly, encouragingly, in a tongue that they all understood. Their dull eyes brightened; their heavy faces twitched under excitement that amounted to inspiration. Now and again they raised their mugs aloft and muttered something that sounded strangely like prayer.

Dominated by a man and an emotion they were, not the drudging machines of the mines, but a vital force ready for action.

CHAPTER XIII

Northrup decided to turn back at once to his own place in life after that revealing afternoon with Mary-Clare. He was not in any sense deceived by conditions. He had, after twenty-four hours, been able to classify the situation and reduce it to its proper proportions. As it stood, it had, he acknowledged, been saved by the rare and unusual qualities of Mary-Clare. But it could not bear the stress and strain of repeated tests. Unless he meant to be a fool and fill his future with remorse, for he was decent and sane, he could do nothing but go away and let the incidents of King's Forest bear sanctifying fruits, not draughts of wormwood.

Something rather big had happened to him--he must not permit it to become small. He recalled Mary-Clare's words and face and a great tenderness swept over him.

"Poor little girl," he thought, "part of a commonplace, dingy tragedy. What is there for her? But what could I have done for her, in God's name, to better her lot? She saw it clear enough."

No, there was nothing to do but turn his back on the whole thing and go home! Shorn of the spiritual and uplifting qualities, the situation was bald and dangerous. He must be practical and wise, but deciding to leave and actually leaving were different matters.

The weather jeered at him by its glorious warmth and colour. It *held* day after day with

occasional sharp storms that ended in greater beauty. The thought of the city made Northrup shudder. He tried to work: it was still warm enough in the deserted chapel to write, but he knew that he was accomplishing nothing. There was a gap in the story--the woman part. Every time Northrup came to that he felt as if he were laying a wet cloth over the soft clay until he had time finally to mould it. And he kept from any chance of meeting Mary-Clare.

"I'll wait until this marvellous spell of weather breaks," he compromised with his lesser--or better--self. "Then I'll beat it!"

Looking to this he asked Uncle Peter what the chances were of a cold spell.

"There was a time"--Peter sniffed the air. He was husking golden corn by the kitchen fire--"when I could calculate about the weather, but since the weather man has got to meddling he's messed things considerable. He's put in the Middle States, and what-not, until it's like doing subtraction and division--and by that time the change of weather is on you."

Northrup laughed.

"Well," he said, getting up and stretching, "I think I'll take a turn before I go to bed. Bank the fire, Uncle Peter; I may prowl late."

Heathcote asked no questions, but those prowls of Northrup's were putting his simple faith to severe tests. Peter was above gossip, but when it swirled too near him he was bound to watch out.

"All right, son," he muttered, and ran his hand through his bristling hair.

The night was a dark one. A soft darkness it was, that held no wind and only a hint of frost. Stepping quickly along the edge of the lake, Northrup felt that he was being absorbed by the still shadows and the sensation pleased and comforted him. He was not aware of thought, but thought was taking him into control, as the night was. There would be moments of seeming blank and then a conclusion! A vivid, final conclusion. Of course Mary-Clare occupied these moments of seeming mental inaction. Northrup now wanted to set her free from--what?

"That young beast of a husband!" So much for that conclusion. If the end had come between him and Mary-Clare, Northrup wondered if he could free her from Rivers.

"What for?"

This brought a hurtling mass of conclusions.

"No man has a right to get a stranglehold on a woman. If she has, as the old darkey said, lost her taste for him, why in thunder should he want to cram himself down her throat?"

This was more common sense than moral or legal, and Northrup bent his head and plunged along. He walked on, believing that he was master of his soul and his actions at last, while, in reality, he was but part of the Scheme of Things and was acting under orders.

Presently, he imagined that he had decided all along to go to the Point and have a talk with Twombley. So he kept straight ahead.

Twombley delighted his idle hours. The man, apparently, never went to bed until daylight, and his quaint unmorality was as diverting as that of an impish boy.

"Now, sir," he had confided to Northrup at a recent meeting, "there's Peneluna Sniff. Good cook; good manager. I held off while she played up to old Sniff, women *are* curious! But now that woman ought to be utilized legitimate-like. She's running to waste and throwing away her talents on that young Rivers as is giving this here Point the creeps. Peneluna and me together could find things out!"

Northrup, hurrying on, believed there was no better way to drive off the blue devils that were torturing him than to pass the evening with Twombley.

Just then he heard quick, light footsteps coming toward him. He hid behind some bushes by the path and waited.

The oncomer was Larry Rivers on his way from the Point. His hat was pulled down over his face and his hands were plunged in his pockets. A lighted cigar in his mouth illumined his features--Larry rarely needed his hands to manipulate his cigar; a shift seemed to be all that was essential, until the ashes fell and the cigar was almost finished.

Larry walked on, and when he was beyond sound Northrup proceeded on his way.

The Point seemed wrapped in decent slumber. A light frankly burned in Twombley's hovel, but for the rest, darkness!

Oddly enough, Northrup passed Twombley's place without halting, and presently found himself nearing Rivers's. This did not surprise him. He had quite forgotten his plan.

It was seeing Larry that had suggested this new move, probably; at any rate, Northrup was curiously interested in the fact that Larry was headed away from the Point and toward the yellow house.

The loose rubbish and garbage presently got into Northrup's consciousness and made him think, as they always did, of Maclin's determination to get possession of the ugly place.

"It is the very devil!" he muttered, almost tumbling over a smelly pile. "What's that?" He crouched in the darkness. His eyes were so accustomed to the gloom now that he saw quite distinctly the door of Peneluna's shack open, close softly, and someone tiptoeing toward Rivers's

shanty. Keeping at a distance, Northrup followed and when he was about twenty feet behind the other prowler, he saw that it was Jan-an and that she was cautiously going from window to window of Larry's empty house, peeping, listening, and then finally muttering and whimpering.

"Well, what in thunder!" Northrup decided to investigate but keep silent as long as he could.

A baby in the distance broke into a cry; a man's rough voice stilled it with a threat and then all was quiet once more.

The next thing that occurred was the amazing sight of Jan-an nimbly climbing into the window of Larry's kitchen! Jan-an had either pried the sash up or Larry had been careless. Northrup went up to the house and listened. Jan-an was moving rapidly about inside and presently she lighted a lamp, and through the slit between the shade and the window ledge Northrup could watch the girl's movements.

Jan-an wore an old coat, a man's, over a coarse nightgown; her hair straggled down her back; her vacant face was twitching and worried, but a decent kind of dignity touched it, too. She was bent upon a definite course, but was confused and uncertain as to details.

Over the papers scattered on the table Jan-an bent like a hungry beast of prey. Her long fingers clutched the loose sheets; her devouring eyes scanned them, compared them with others, while over and again a muttered curse escaped the girl's lips.

Northrup took a big chance. He went to the door and tapped.

He heard a quick, frightened move toward the window--Jan-an was escaping as she had entered. As the sash was raised, Northrup was close to the window and the girl reeled back as she saw him.

"Jan-an," he said quietly, controllingly, "let me in. You can trust me. Let me in."

Poor Jan-an was in sore need of someone in whom she might trust and she could not afford to waste time. She raised the sash again, climbed in, and then opened the door. Northrup entered and locked the door after him.

"Now, then," he said, sitting opposite to the girl who dropped, rather than seated herself, in her old place. "Jan-an, what are you up to?"

To his surprise, the girl burst into tears.

"My God," she moaned, "what did I have feelin's for--and no sense? I can't read!" she blurted. "I can't read."

This was puzzling, but Northrup saw that the girl had confidence in him--a desperate, unknowing confidence that had grown slowly.

"Why do you want to read, Jan-an?" he asked in a low, kindly tone.

"I know you ain't his friend, are you?" The wet, pitiful face was lifted. Old fears and distrust rose grimly.

"Whose?"

"Maclin's, ole divil-man Maclin?"

"Certainly not! You know better than to ask that, Jan-an."

"Nor his--Larry Rivers?"

"No, I am not his friend."

Thus reassured once more, Jan-an ventured nearer:

"You don't aim to hurt--her?"

"Whom do you mean?" Northrup was perplexed by the growing intelligence in the face across the table. It was like a slow revealing of a groping power.

"I mean them--Mary-Clare and Noreen."

"Hurt them? Why, Jan-an, I'd do anything to help them, make them safe and happy." Northrup felt as if he and the girl opposite were rapidly becoming accomplices in a tense plot. "What does all this mean?"

"As God seeing yer, yer mean that?" Jan-an leaned forward.

"God seeing me! Yes, Jan-an."

"Yer ain't hanging around her to do her--dirt?"

"Good Lord, no!" Northrup recoiled. Apparently new anxiety was overcoming the girl.

Then, by a sudden dash, Jan-an swept the untidy mass of papers over to him; she abdicated her last stronghold.

"What's them?" she demanded huskily. Northrup brought the smelly kerosene lamp nearer and as he read he was conscious of Jan-an's mutterings.

"Stealing her letters--what is letters, anyway? And I've counted and watched--he's took one to her to-night. Just one. One he has made. Writing day in and out--tearing up writing--sneaking and lying. God! And new letters looking like old ones, till I'm fair crazy."

For a few moments Northrup lost the sound of Jan-an's guttural whimpers, then he caught the words:

"And her crying and wanting the letters. Just letters!" Northrup again became absorbed.

He placed certain old sheets on one side of the table; newer sheets on the other; some half sheets in the middle. It was like an intricate puzzle, and the same one that Maclin had recently tackled.

That he was meddling with another's property and reading another's letters did not seem to occur to Northrup. He was held by a determined force that was driving him on and an intense interest that justified any means at his disposal.

"Some day I will read my old doctor's letters to you--I have kept them all!"

Northrup looked up. Almost he believed Jan-an had voiced the words, but they had been spoken days ago by Mary-Clare during one of those illuminating talks of theirs and here *were* some old letters of the doctor's. Were these Mary-Clare's letters? Why were they here and in this state?

Suddenly Northrup's face stiffened. The old, yellowed letters were, apparently, from Doctor Rivers to his son! But there were other letters on bits of fresh paper, the handwriting identical, or nearly so. Northrup's more intelligent eye saw differences. The more recent letters were, evidently, exercises; one improved on the other; in some cases parts of the letters were repeated. All these Northrup sorted and laid in neat piles.

"She set a store by them old letters," Jan-an was rambling along. "I'd have taken them back to her, but I 'clar, 'fore God, I don't know which is which, I'm that cluttered. Why did he want to pest her by taking them and then making more and more?"

"I'm trying to find out." Northrup spoke almost harshly. He wanted to quiet the girl.

The last scrap of paper had been torn from an old, greasy bag and bore clever imitation. It was the last copy, Northrup believed, of what Jan-an said he had just carried away with him.

Northrup grew hot and cold. He read the words and his brain reeled. It was an appeal, or supposed to be one, from a dead man to one whom he trusted in a last emergency.

"So he's this kind of a scoundrel!" muttered Northrup, dazed by the blinding shock of the fear that became, moment by moment, more definite. "And he's taken the thing to her in order to get money."

Northrup could grope along, but he could not see clearly. By temperament and training he had evolved a peculiar sensitiveness in relation to inanimate things. If he became receptive and passive, articles which he handled or fixed his eyes upon often transmitted messages for him.

So, now, disregarding poor Jan-an, who rambled on, Northrup gazed at the letters near him, and held close the brown-paper scrap which was, he believed, the final copy before the finished production which was undoubtedly being borne to Mary-Clare now. Rivers would have a scene with his wife in the yellow house. With no one to interfere! Northrup started affrightedly, then realized that before he could get to the crossroads whatever was to occur would have occurred.

Larry would return to the shack. There was every evidence that he had not departed finally. Believing that no one would disturb his place so late at night he had taken a chance and--been caught by the last person in the world one would have suspected.

As an unconscious sleuth Jan-an was dramatic. Northrup let his eyes fall upon the girl with new significance. She had given him the power to set Mary-Clare free!

Her dull, tear-stained face was turned hopefully to him; her straight, coarse hair hung limply on her shoulders--the old coat had slipped away and the ugly nightgown but partly hid the thin, scraggy body. Lost to all self-consciousness, the poor creature was but an evidence of faith and devotion to them who had been kind to her. Something of nobility crowned the girl. Northrup went around to her and pulled the old coat close under her chin.

"It's all right, Jan-an," he comforted, patting the unkempt head.

"Are them the letters he stole?"

"Some of them, yes, Jan-an."

"Kin I take 'em back to her?"

"Not to-night. I think Rivers will take them back."

"S'pose he won't."

"He will."

"You, you're going to fetch him one?" The instinct of the savage rose in the girl.

"If necessary, yes!" Northrup shared the primitive instinct at that moment. "And now you trot along home, my girl, and don't open your lips to any one."

"And you?"

"I'll wait for Mr. Larry Rivers here!"

"My God!" Jan-an burst forth. Then: "There's a sizable log back of the stove. Yer can fetch a good one with that."

"Thanks, Jan-an. Go now."

Jan-an rose stiffly and shuffled to the door, unlocked it, and went into the blackness outside.

Then Northrup sat down and prepared to wait.

The stove was rusty and cold, but Rivers had evidently had a huge fire on the hearth during the day. Now that he noticed, Northrup saw that there were scraps of burned paper fluttering like wings of evil omens stricken in their flight.

He went over to the hearth, poked the ashes, and discovered life. He laid on wood, slowly feeding the hungry sparks, then he took his old place by the table, blew out the light of the lamp and in the dark room, shot by the flares of the igniting logs, he resigned himself to what lay before.

Rivers might return with Maclin. This was a new possibility and disconcerting; still it must be met.

"I may kill a flock of birds by one interview," Northrup grimly thought and then drifted off on Maclin's trail. The ever-recurring wonder about the Point was intensified; he must leave that still in doubt.

"I'll get the damned thing in my own control, if I can," he concluded at length. "Buy it up for safety; keep still about it and watch how Maclin reacts when he knocks against the fact, eventually. That will make things safe for the present."

But to own the Point meant to hold on to King's Forest just when he had decided to turn from it forever--after setting Mary-Clare free.

The sense of a spiritual overlord for an instant daunted Northrup. It was humiliating to realize how he had been treading, all along, one course while believing he was going another. And then--it was close upon midnight and vitality ran sluggish--Northrup became part of one of those curious mental experiences that go far to prove how narrow the boundary is that lies between the things we understand and those that are yet to be understood.

For some moments--or was it hours?--Northrup was not conscious of time or place; not even conscious of himself as a body; he seemed to be a condition, over which a contest of emotions swept. He was not asleep. He recalled later, that he had kept his eyes on the fire; had once attended to it, casting on a heavy log that dimmed its ferocious ardour.

Where Jan-an had recently sat, struggling with her doubts and fears, Mary-Clare seemed to be. And yet it was not so much Mary-Clare, visually imagined, as that which had gone into the making of the woman.

The black, fierce night of her birth; her isolated up-bringing with a man whose mentality had overpowered his wisdom; the contact with Larry Rivers; the forced marriage and the determined effort to live up to a bargain made in the dark, endured in the dark. It came to Northrup, drifting as he was, that a man or woman can go through slime and torment and really escape harm. The old, fiery furnace legend was based on an eternal truth; that and the lions' den! It put a new light on that peculiar quality of Mary-Clare. She had never been burnt or wounded--not the real woman of her. That explained the maddening thing about her--her aloofness. What would she be now when she stood alone? For she was going to stand alone! Then Northrup felt new sensations driving across that state which really was himself shorn of prejudice and limitations. His relation to Mary-Clare was changed!

There were primitive forces battling for expression in his lax hour. Setting the woman free from bondage--what for?

That was the world-old call. Not free for herself, but free that another might claim her. He, sitting there, wanted her. She had not altered that by her heroism. Who would help her free herself, for herself? Who would cut her loose and make no claims? Would it be possible to help her and not put her under obligation? Could any one trust a higher Power and go one's way unasking, refusing everything? Was there such a thing as freedom for a woman when two men were so welded into her life?

Northrup set his teeth hard together. In the stillness he had his fight! And just then a shuffling outside brought him back to reality.

Rivers came in, not noticing the unlocked door; he had been drinking. Northrup's eyes, accustomed to the gloom, marked his unsteady gait; smiled as Larry, unconscious of his presence, sank into a chair--the one in which Jan-an had sat--reached out toward the lamp, struck a match, lighted the wick and then, appalled, fixed his eyes upon Northrup!

CHAPTER XIV

"Hello, Rivers! I'm something of a surprise, eh?"

"Hell!" The word escaped Rivers as might a cry that followed a stunning blow.

A guilty person, taken by surprise, always imagines the worst. Rivers knew what he believed the man before him knew, he also believed much that Maclin had insinuated, or stated as fact, and he was thoroughly frightened and at a disadvantage.

His nerve was shattered by the recent interview with Mary-Clare; the earlier one with Maclin. Drink was befuddling him. It was like being in quicksand. He dared not move, but he felt himself sinking.

"Oh! don't take it too seriously, Rivers." Northrup felt a decent sympathy for the fellow across the table; his fear was agonizing. "We might as well get to an understanding without a preamble. I reckon there are a lot of things we can pass over while we tackle the main job."

"You damned---" Larry spluttered the words, but Northrup raised his hand as if staying further waste of time. He hated to take too great an advantage of a caged man.

"Of course, Rivers," he said, "I wouldn't have broken into your house and read your letters if there wasn't something rather big-sized at stake. So do not switch off on a siding--let's get through with this."

The tone and words were like a dash of icy water; Rivers moistened his lips and sank, mentally, into that position he loathed and yet could not escape. Someone was again getting control of him. He might writhe and strain, but he was caught once more--caught! caught!

"In God's name," he whispered, "who are you, anyway? What are you after?"

"That's what I'm here to tell you, Rivers."

"Go ahead then, go ahead!" Larry again moistened his dry lips--he felt that he was choking. He was ready to turn state's evidence as soon as he saw an opportunity. Debonair and clever, crafty and unfaithful, Larry had but one clear thought--he would not go behind bars again if one avenue of escape remained open!

Maclin--Maclin's secret business, loomed high, but at that moment Mary-Clare held no part in his desperate fear.

"What do you want?"

Then, as if falling into his mood, Northrup said calmly:

"First, I want the Point."

Larry's jaw dropped; but he felt convinced that it was Maclin or he who faced destruction and he meant to let Maclin suffer now as Maclin had once permitted him to suffer. If there was dirty work at the mines Maclin should pay. That was justice--Maclin had made a tool of him.

"I don't own the Point." Rivers heard his own voice as if from a distance. He had Mary-Clare's word that she would help him; the letter had done its overpowering work, but he had left confession and detail until later. Mary-Clare had pleaded for time, and he had come from her with his business unsettled.

"I think after we've finished with our talk you can prevail upon your wife to sell the Point to me and say nothing about it."

Rivers clutched the edge of the table. To his inflamed brain Northrup seemed to know all and everything--he dared not haggle.

"Who are you?" he repeated stammeringly. "What right have you to break into my place and read my papers? All I want to know is, what right have you? I cannot be expected to--to come to terms unless I know that. I should think you might see that." The bravado was so pitiful and weak that Northrup barely repressed a laugh.

"I don't want to turn the screws, Rivers," he said; "and of course you have a right to an answer to your question. I want the Point because I don't want Maclin to have it. Why he wants it, I'll find out after. I'm illegally demanding things from you, but there are times when I believe such a course is justifiable in order to save everybody trouble. You could kick me out, or try to, but you won't. You could have the law on me--but I don't believe you will want it. Of course you know that I know pretty well what I am about or I would not put myself in your power. So let's cut out the theatricals. Rivers, this Maclin isn't any good. Just how rotten he is can be decided later. He's making a fool of you and you'll get a fool's pay. You know this. I'm going to help you, Rivers, if I can. You need all the time there is for--getting away!"

Larry's face was livid. He was prepared to betray Maclin, but the old power held him captive.

"I dare not!" he groaned.

"Oh! yes, you dare. Brace up, Rivers. There is more than one way to tackle a bad job." Then, so suddenly that it took Rivers's breath, Northrup swept everything from sight by asking calmly: "What did you do with that letter you manufactured?"

So utterly unexpected was this attack, so completely aside from what seemed to be at stake, that Rivers concluded everything was known; that the very secrets of his innermost thoughts were in this man's knowledge. The quicksands all but engulfed him. With unblinking eyes he regarded Northrup as though hypnotized.

"I took it to her," he gasped.

"Your wife?"

"Yes."

"She does not suspect?"

"No."

"What did your wife say when she read the letter?"

"She's going to help me out."

"I see. All right, you're going to tell her that you want the Point and then you're going to sell it to me. Heathcote can fix this up in a few days--the money I pay you will get you out of Maclin's reach. If he makes a break for you, I'll grab him. I guess he's susceptible to scare, too, if the truth were known."

"My God! I want a drink." Larry looked as if he did; he rose and reeled over to the closet.

Northrup regarded his man closely and his fingers reached out and drew the scattered papers nearer.

"Take only enough to stiffen you up, a swallow or two, Rivers."

Larry obeyed mechanically and when he returned to his chair he was firmer.

"Rivers, I'm going to give you a chance by way of the only decent course open to you--or to me. God knows, it's smudgy enough at the best and crooked, but it's all I can muster. I don't expect you to understand me, or my motives--I'm going to talk as man to man, stripped bare. In the future you can work it out any way you're able to. What I want at the present is to clear the rubbish away that's cluttering the soul of a woman. That's enough and you can draw what damned conclusions you want to."

There was an ugly gleam in Larry's eyes. Men stripped bare show brutish traits, but he felt the straps that were binding him close.

"Go on!" he growled.

"You are to get your wife to give you this Point, Rivers. She may not want to, but you must force her a bit there by confessing to her the whole damned truth from start to finish about--these!"

Both men looked at the mass of papers.

"What all these things represent, you know." Larry did not move; he believed that Northrup knew, too. Knew of that year back in the past when his trick had been his ruin. "And your simply getting out of sight won't do. Your wife has got to be free--free, do you understand? So long as she doesn't know the truth she'd have pity for you--women are like that--she's going to know all there is to know, and then she'll fling you off!"

In the hidden depths of Rivers's nature there heaved and roared something that, had Northrup not held the reins, would have meant battle to the death. It was not outraged honour, love, or justice that blinded and deafened Larry; it was simply the brutish resentment of the savage who, bound and gagged, watches a strong foe take all that he had believed was his by right of conquest. At that moment he hated Mary-Clare as he hated Northrup.

"You damned scoundrel!" he gasped. "And if I do what you suggest, what then?" He meant to force Northrup as far as he dared.

A look that Rivers was never to forget spread over Northrup's face; it was the look of one who had lived through experiences he knew he could not make clear. The impossibility of making Rivers comprehend him presently overcame Northrup. He spread his hands wide and said hopelessly:

"Nothing!"

"Like hell, nothing!" Larry was desperate and brutal. Under all his bravado rang the note of defeat; terror, and a barren hope of escape that he loathed while he clung to it. "I don't know what Maclin's game is--I've played fair. Whatever you've got on him can't touch me, when the truth's out." Rivers was breathing hard; the sweat stood on his forehead. "But when it comes to selling your wife for hush money---"

"Stop that!" Northrup's face was livid. He wanted to throttle Rivers but he could not shake off the feeling of pity for the man he had so tragically in his grip.

There was a heavy pause. It seemed weighted with tangible things. Hate; pity; distrust; helpless truth. They became alive and fluttering. Then truth alone was supreme.

"I told you, Rivers, that I knew you couldn't believe me--you cannot. Partly this is due to life, as we men know it; partly to your interpretation of it, but at least I owe it to you and myself to speak the truth and let truth take care of itself. By the code that is current in the world, I might claim all that you believe I am after, for I think your wife might learn to love me--I know I love her. If I set her free from you, permit her to see you as you are, in her shock and relief she might turn to me and I might take her and, God helping me, make a safe place for her; give her what her hungry soul craves, and still feel myself a good sort. That would be the common story--the thing that might once have happened. But, Rivers, you don't know me and you don't know--your wife. I've only caught the glimmer of her, but that has caused me to grow--humble. She's got to be free, because that is justice, and you and I must give it to her. When you free her--it's up to me not to cage her!" Northrup found expression difficult--it all sounded so utterly hopeless with that doubting, sneering face confronting him; and his late distrust of himself--menacing.

"Besides, your wife has her own ideals. That's hard for us men to understand. Ideals quite detached from us; from all that we might like to believe is good for us. I have my own life, Rivers. Frankly, I was tempted to turn my back on it and with courage set sail for a new port. I had contemplated that, but I'm going back to it and, by God's help, live it!"

And now Northrup's face twitched. He waited a moment and then went hopelessly on:

"What the future holds--who knows? Life is a thundering big thing, Rivers, if we play it square, and I'm going to play it square as it's given me to see it. You don't believe me?" Almost a wistfulness rang in the words. Larry leaned back and laughed a hollow, ugly laugh.

"Believe you?" he said. "Hell, no!"

"I thought you couldn't." Northrup got up.

Around the edges of the lowered shades, a gray, drear light gave warning of coming day. The effect of Larry's last drink was wearing off--he looked near the breaking point.

"Rivers, I'll make a pact with you. Set your wife free--in my way. If you do that, I'll leave the place; never see her again unless a higher power than yours or mine decrees otherwise in the years on ahead. Take your last chance, man, to do the only decent thing left you to do: start afresh somewhere else. Forget it all. I know this sounds devilish easy and I know it's devilish hard, but"--and here the iron was driven into Rivers's consciousness--"either you or I set Mary-Clare free before"--he hesitated; he wanted to give all that he humanly could--"before another forty-eight hours."

Larry felt the cold perspiration start on his forehead; his stomach grew sick.

Faint and fear-filled, he seemed to feel Maclin after him; Mary-Clare confronting him, smileless, terrifying. On the other hand he saw freedom; money; a place in which he could breathe, once more, with Maclin's hands off his throat and Mary-Clare's coldness forgotten.

"I'll go to her; I'll do your hell-work, but give me another day." He gritted his teeth.

"Rivers, this is Tuesday. On Friday you must be gone, and remember this: I've got it in my power to set your wife free and imprison you and I'll not hesitate to do it if you try any tricks. I'd advise you to keep clear of Maclin and leave whiskey alone. You'll need all the power of concentration you can summon." Then Northrup turned to the table and gathered up the scattered papers.

"What---" Larry put out a trembling hand.

"I'll take charge of these," Northrup said. "I am going to give them to the Heathcotes. They'll keep them with the other papers belonging to your wife."

"Curse you!"

"Good morning, Rivers! I mean it, good morning! You won't believe this either, but it's so. For the sake of your wife and your little girl, I wish you well. When you send word to the inn that you are ready for the business deal I'll have the money for you."

Then Northrup opened the door and stepped out into the chill light of the coming day. He shivered and stumbled over a mass of rubbish. A clock struck in a quiet house.

"Five o'clock," counted Northrup, and plunging his hands in his pockets he made his way to Twombly's shack.

CHAPTER XV

Kathryn Morris had her plans completed, and if the truth were known she had never felt better pleased with herself--and she was not utterly depraved, either.

She was far more the primitive female than was Mary-Clare. She was simply claiming what she devoutly believed was her own; reclaiming it, rather, for she sagely concluded that on this runaway trip Northrup was in great danger and only the faith and love of a good woman could save him! Kathryn believed herself good and noble.

Mary-Clare had her Place in which she had been fed through many lonely, yearning years, but Kathryn had no such sanctuary. The dwelling-places of her fellow creatures were good enough for her and she never questioned the codes that governed them--though sometimes she evaded them!

After her talk with Helen Northrup, Kathryn did a deal of thinking, but she moved cautiously. She had never forgotten the address on Northrup's letter to his mother and she believed he was still there. She again looked up road maps, located King's Forest, and made some clever calculations. She could go in the motor. The autumn was just the time for such a trip. It would be easy to satisfy her aunt, Kathryn very well knew. The mere statement that she was going to meet Northrup and return with him would account for everything and relieve the situation existing at present with Sandy Arnold in daily evidence. "And if Brace is not playing in some messy puddle in his old Forest, I can get on his trail from there," she reasoned secretly.

But, for some uncanny cause, Kathryn was confident that Northrup was at his first address. It was so like him to creep into a hole and be very dramatic and secretive. It was his temperament, Kathryn felt, and she steeled herself against him.

On the morning that Northrup staggered over the rubbish of Hunter's Point toward Twombly's, Kathryn took her place in her limousine--her nice little travelling bag at her feet--and viewed with complacency the back of her Japanese chauffeur who had absorbed and digested all her directions and would be, henceforth, a well-oiled, safe-running part of the machinery, without curiosity or opinions.

They stopped for luncheon at a comfortable road-house, rested for an hour, and then went on. It was mid-afternoon when the yellow house at the crossroads made its appeal to be questioned.

"I'll run in and ask the way," Kathryn explained, and slowly went up to the door that once opened so humorously to Northrup's touch. Again the door responded, and a bit startled, Kathryn found herself in the presence of a dull-faced girl seated by the table apparently doing nothing.

"I beg your pardon. Really, I did knock--the door just opened." Kathryn was confused and stepped back.

In all her dun-coloured life Jan-an had never seen anything so wonderful as the girl on the doorstep. She was not at all sure but that she was one of Noreen's fiction creatures. There was a story that Northrup had told Noreen about Eve's Other Children, and for an instant Jan-an estimated the likelihood of the stranger being one--she wasn't altogether wrong, either!

"What you want?" she asked cautiously. Jan-an was, as she put it, "all skew-y," for the work of the evening before had brought her to a more confused state than usual.

The world was widening--she included Northrup now in her circle of protection and she wasn't sure what Eve's Other Children were capable of doing.

"I want to find out the way to the inn, Heathcote Inn." Kathryn smiled alluringly.

"Why don't you look at the sign?" There was witchery about that sign, certainly.

"I did not see the sign. Please excuse me." Then, "Do you happen to know if there is a Mr. Northrup at the inn?"

"He sleeps there!" Jan-an looked stupid but honest. "Days, he takes to the woods."

Jan-an meant, as soon as the unearthly visitor departed, to find Northrup and give the alarm. Kathryn thanked the girl sweetly and returned to her car. As she did so she saw the sign-board as Northrup had before her, and felt a bit foolish, but she also recalled that Northrup might be in the woods!

"You may go on to the inn," she said to her man, "and make arrangements. I am going to remain over night and start back early to-morrow morning. Explain that I am walking and will be there shortly."

The quiet man at the door of the car touched his cap and took his place at the wheel.

This was to Kathryn a thrilling adventure. The silence and beauty were as novel as any experience she had ever known, and her pulses quickened. The solitude of the woods was not restful to her, but it stimulated every sense. The leaves were dropping from the trees; the sunlight slanted through the lacy boughs in exquisite design, and the sky was as blue as midsummer. There was a smell of wood smoke in the crisp air; the feel of the sweet leaves, underfoot, was delightful. Kathryn "scruffed" along, unmindful of her high heels and thin silk stockings. She did not know that she *could* be so excited.

She crossed the road and turned to the hill. An impish impulse swayed her. If she came upon Northrup! Well, how romantic and thrilling it would be! She fancied his surprise; his---Here she paused. Would it be joy or consternation that would betray Northrup?

Now, as it happened, Mary-Clare had given her morning up to the business of the Point and she was worn and super-sensitive. An underlying sense of hurry was upon her. When she had done all that she could do, she meant to go to her Place and lay her tired soul open to the influence that flooded the quiet sanctuary. All day this had sustained her. She would leave Noreen at the inn; send Jan-an back there, and would, after her hour in the cabin, seek Larry out and give him what he asked--the Point.

Through the hours at the inn she had feared Northrup's appearance, but when she learned that he had been away all night, she feared *for* him. Her uneventful days seemed gone forever, and yet Mary-Clare knew that soon--oh, very soon--there would be to-morrows, just plain to-morrows running one into another.

She was distressed, too, that Larry was to have the Point. Aunt Polly had shaken her head over it and remarked that it seemed like dropping the Pointers into Maclin's mouth. But Peter reassured her.

"I see your side, child," he comforted. "What the old doc said *goes* with you."

"But it was Larry, not the doctor, as specified the Point," Polly insisted.

"All right, all right," Peter patted Polly's shoulder. "Have it your own way, but I see it at *this* angle. Give Larry what he wants; Maclin has Larry, anyway, but if he keeps him here where we can watch what's going on, I'll feel easier. He'll show his hand on the Point, take my word for it. Larry gallivanting is one thing, Larry with Twombly and Peneluna, not to mention us all, is another. You let go, Mary-Clare, and see what happens."

"Well, I hold"--Aunt Polly was curiously stubborn--"that Larry Rivers don't want that Point any

more than a toad wants a pocket."

"All right, all right!" Peter grew red and his hair sprang up. "Put it as you choose. This may bring things to a head. I swear the whole world is like a throbbing and thundering boil--it's got to bust, the world and King's Forest. I say, then, let 'em bust and have done with it."

At four o'clock the business of the day was over and Mary-Clare was ready to start. Then Noreen, with the perversity of children, complicated matters.

"Motherly, let me go, too," she pleaded.

"Childie, Mother wants to be alone."

"Why for?"

"Because, well, I must think."

"Then let me stay home with Jan-an."

"Dearie, I'm going to send Jan-an back here."

"Why for?"

"Mary-Clare," Peter broke in, "that child is perishing for a paddling."

Noreen ran to Peter and hugged him.

"You old grifferty-giff!" she whispered, falling into her absurd jargon, "just gifferting."

Then she went back to her mother and said impishly:

"I know! You don't want me to see my father!" Then, pointing a finger at Mary-Clare, she demanded: "Why didn't you pick a nice father for me when you were picking?"

The irrelevancy of the question only added to its staggering effect. Mary-Clare looked hopelessly at her child.

"I didn't have any choice, Noreen," she said.

"You mean God gave him to you?"

"See here, Noreen"--Polly Heathcote rose to the call--"stop pestering your mother with silly talk. Come along with me, we'll make a mess of taffy."

"All right!" Noreen turned joyously to this suggestion, but paused to add: "If God gave my father to us, I s'pose we must make the best of it. God knows what He is doing--Jan-an says He even knew what He was doing when He nearly spoiled her."

With this, Aunt Polly dragged Noreen away and Mary-Clare left the house haunted by what Noreen had said. Children can weave themselves into the scheme of life in a vivid manner, and this Noreen had done. In her dealings with Larry, Mary-Clare knew she must not overlook Noreen.

Now, if fools rush in where angels fear to tread, surely they often rush to their undoing. Kathryn followed the trail to the cabin in the woods, breathlessly and in momentary danger of breaking her ankles, for she teetered painfully on her French heels and humorously wished that when the Lord was making hills He had made them all down-grade; but at last she came in sight of the vine-covered shack and stood still to consider.

It was characteristic of Kathryn that she never doubted her intuitions until she was left high and dry by their incapacity to hold her up.

"Ho! ho!" she murmured. "So *this* is where he burrows? Another edition of the East Side tenement room where he hid while writing his abominable book!"

Kathryn went nearer, stepping carefully--Northrup might be inside! No; the strange room was empty! Kathryn recalled the one visit she had made to the tenement while Northrup was writing. There had been a terrible woman with a mop outside the door there who would not let her pass; who had even cast unpleasant suggestions at her--suggestions that had made Kathryn's cheeks burn.

She had never told Northrup about that visit; she would not tell him about this one, either, unless her hand were forced. In case he came upon her, she saw, vividly, herself in a dramatic act--she would be a beautiful picture of tender girlhood nestling in his environment, led to him by sore need and loving intuition.

Kathryn, thus reinforced by her imagination, went boldly in, sat down by the crude table, smiled at the Bible lying open before her--then she raised her eyes to Father Damien. The face was familiar and Kathryn concluded it must be a reproduction of some famous painting of the Christ!

That, and the Bible, made the girl smile. Temperament was insanity, nothing less!

Kathryn looked about for evidences of Northrup's craft.

"I suppose he takes his precious stuff away with him. Afraid of fires or wild beasts."

This latter thought wasn't pleasant and Kathryn turned nervously to the door. As she did so her arm pushed the Bible aside and there, disclosed to her ferret glance, were the pages of Northrup's manuscript, duplicate sheets, that Mary-Clare had been rereading.

"Ho! ho!" Kathryn spread them before her and read greedily--not sympathetically--but amusedly.

There were references to eyes, hair, expressions; even "mud-stained breeches." With elbows on the table, daintily gloved hands supporting her chin, Kathryn read and thought and wove *her* plot with Northrup's words, but half understood, lying under her gaze.

Suddenly Kathryn's eyes widened--her ears caught a sound. Never while she lived was Kathryn Morris to forget her sensations of that moment, for they were coloured and weighted by events that followed rapidly, dramatically.

In the doorway stood Mary-Clare, a very embodiment of the girl described in the pages on the table. The tall, slim, boyish figure in rough breeches, coat, and cap, was a staggering apparition. The beauty of the surprised face did not appeal to Kathryn, but she was not for one instant deceived as to the sex of the person on the threshold, and her none-too-pure mind made a wild and dangerous leap to a most unstable point of disadvantage.

The girl in the doorway in some stupefying fashion represented the "Fight" and the "Puddle" of Northrup's adventure. If Kathryn thought at all, it was to the effect that she had known from start to finish the whole miserable business, and she acted upon this unconscious conclusion with never a doubt in her mind. The two women, in silence, stared at each other for one of those moments that can never be measured by rule. During the palpitating silence they were driven together, while yet separated by a great space.

Kathryn's conclusion drove her on the rocks; Mary-Clare's startled her into a state of clear vision. She recovered her poise first. She smiled her perturbing smile; she came in and sat down and said quietly:

"I was surprised. I am still."

Kathryn felt a wave of moral repugnance rise to her assistance. The clothes might disguise the real state of affairs--but the voice betrayed much. This was no crude country girl; here was something rather more difficult to handle; one need not be pitiful and condoning; one must not flinch.

"You expected, I suppose, to find Mr. Northrup?"

When Kathryn was deeply moved she spoke out of the corner of her mouth. It was an unpleasant trick--her lips became hard and twisted.

"Oh! no, I did not, nor anyone else." The name seemed to hurt and Mary-Clare leaned back. "May I ask who you are?" she said. Mary-Clare was indignant at she hardly knew what; hurt, too, by what was steadying her. She knew beyond doubt that the woman near her was one of Northrup's world!

"I am Miss Morris. I am engaged to be married to Mr. Northrup."

It were better to cut deep while cutting, and Kathryn's nerve was now set to her task. She unrelentingly eyed her victim. She went on:

"I can see how this must shock you. I sent my car on to the inn. I wanted a walk and--well! I came upon this place. Fate is such a strange thing."

Kathryn ran her words along rather wildly. The silence of her companion, the calm way in which she was regarding her, were having an unpleasant effect. When Kathryn became aware of her own voice she was apt to talk too much--she grew confidential.

"Mr. Northrup's mother is ill. She needs him. The way I have known all this right along is simply a miracle."

How much more Kathryn might have said she was never to know, for Mary-Clare raised a hand as though to stay the inane torrent.

"What can you possibly mean," she asked, and her eyes darkened, "by knowing *this* all along? I do not understand--what have you known?"

Then Kathryn sank in a morass.

"Oh! do be sensible," she said, and her voice was hard and cold. "You must see I have found you out--why pretend? When a man like Mr. Northrup leaves home and forgets his duties--does not even write, buries himself in such a place as this and stays on--what does it mean? What can it possibly mean?"

Mary-Clare was spared much of what Kathryn was creating because she was so far away--so far, far away from the true significance of it all. She was seeing Northrup as Kathryn had never seen him; would never see him. She realized his danger. It was all so sudden and revolting. Only recently had she imagined his past, his environment; she had taken him as a wonderful experience in her barren, sterile life, but now she considered him as threatened from an unsuspected source. A natural revulsion from the type that Kathryn Morris represented for a moment oppressed her, but she dared not think of that nor of her own right to resent the hateful slurs cast upon her. She must do what she could for Northrup--do it more or less blindly, crudely, but she must go as she saw light and was given time.

"You are terribly wrong about--everything." Mary-Clare spoke quietly but her words cut like bits of hail. "If you are going, as you say, to be Mr. Northrup's wife, you must try and believe what I am saying now for your own sake, but more for his."

Kathryn tried to say "Insolence!" but could not; she merely sat back in her chair and flashed an angry glance that Mary-Clare did not heed.

"Mr. Northrup is writing a beautiful book. The book is himself. He does not realize how much it is---"

"Indeed!" Kathryn did utter the one word, then added: "I suppose he's read it to you?"

"Yes, he has."

"Here, I suppose? By the fire, alone with you?"

"No, under the trees, out there."

Mary-Clare turned and glanced at the pure, open woods. "It is a beautiful book," she repeated.

"Oh! go on, do! Really this is too utterly ridiculous." Kathryn laughed impatiently. "We'll take for granted the beauty of the book."

"No, I cannot go on. You would not understand. It does not matter. What I want you to know is this--he could not do an ugly, low thing. If you wrong him there, you will never be forgiven, for it would hurt the soul of him; the part of him that no one--not even you who will be his wife--has a right to hurt or touch. You must make him *believe* in women. Oh! I wish I could make you see--that was the matter with his beautiful book--I can understand now. He did not know women; but if you believe what I am saying, all will be right; you can make him know the truth. I can imagine how you might think wrong--it never occurred to me before--the woods, the loneliness, all the rest, but, because everything has been right, it makes him all the finer. You do believe me! You must! Tell me that you do!"

Mary-Clare was desperate. It was like trying to save someone from a flood that was carrying him to the rapids. The unreality of the situation alone made anything possible, but Kathryn suddenly reduced the matter to the deadly commonplace.

"No, I do not believe you," she said bitterly. "I am a woman of the world. I hate to say what I must, but there is so little time now, and there will be no time later on, so you'll have to take what you have brought upon yourself. This whole thing is pitifully cheap and ordinary--the only gleam of difference in it is that you are rather unusual--more dangerous on that account. I simply cannot account for you, but it doesn't really interest me. When Mr. Northrup writes his books, he always does what he has done now. It's rather brutal and cold-blooded but so it is. He has used you--you have been material for him. If there is nothing worse"--Kathryn flushed here--"it is because I have come in time. May I ask you now to leave me here in Mr. Northrup's"--Kathryn sought the proper word--"study?" she said lamely. "I will rest awhile; try to compose myself. If he comes I will meet him here. If not, I will go to the inn later."

Kathryn rose. So did Mary-Clare. The two girls faced each other. The table lay between them, but it seemed the width of the whole world.

"I would have helped you and him, if I could." Mary-Clare's voice sounded like the "ghost wind" seeking wearily, in a lost way, rest. "But I see that I cannot. This is not Mr. Northrup's Place--it is mine. I built it myself--no foot but mine--and now yours--has ever entered here. I have always come here to--to think; to read. I wonder if I ever will be able to again, for you have done something very dreadful to it. You will do it to his life unless God keeps you from it." Mary-Clare was thinking aloud, taking no heed of her companion.

"How dare you!" Kathryn's face flamed and then turned pale as death.

Mary-Clare was moving toward the door. When she reached it she stood as a hostess might while a guest departed.

"Please go!" she said simply, but it had the effect of taking Kathryn by the shoulders and forcing her outside. With flaming face, dyeing the white anger, she flung herself along. Once outside she turned, looking cheap and mean for all the trappings of her station in life.

"I want you to understand," she said, "that you are dealing with a woman of the world, not a sentimental fool."

Mary-Clare inclined her head. She did not speak. She watched her uninvited guest go down the trail, pass out of sight. Then she went back to her chair to recover from the shock that had dazed her.

The atmosphere of the little cabin could not long be polluted by so brief an experience as had just occurred, and presently Mary-Clare was enfolded by the old comfort and vision.

She could weigh and estimate things now, and this she did bravely, justly. Like Northrup in Larry's cabin the night before, she became more a sensitive plate upon which pictures flashed, than a personality that was thinking and suffering. Such things as had now happened to her, she knew, happened in books. Always books, books, for Mary-Clare, and the old doctor's philosophy that gave strength but no assurance. The actual relation existing between Northrup and herself became a solid and immovable fact. She had not fully accepted it before; neither had he. They had played with it as they had the golden hours that they would not count or measure.

Nothing mattered but the truth. Mary-Clare knew that the wonderful thing had had no part in her decision as to Larry--others would not believe that, but she must not be swayed; she knew she had taken her steps faithfully as she had seen them--she must not stumble now because of any one, anything.

"It's what you do to love that counts!" Almost fiercely Mary-Clare grasped this. And in that moment Noreen, Northrup's mother, even Larry and the girl who had just departed, put in their claim. She must consider them; they were all part with Northrup and her.

"There is nothing for me to do but wait." Mary-Clare seemed to hear herself speaking the words. "I can do nothing now but wait. But I will not fear the Truth."

The bared Truth stood revealed; before it Mary-Clare did not flinch.

"This is what it has all meant. The happiness, the joy, the strange intensity of common things."

Then Mary-Clare bowed her head upon her folded arms while the warm sunlight came into the doorway and lay full upon her. She was absorbed in something too big to comprehend. She felt as if she was being born into--a woman! The birth-pains were wrenching; she could not grasp anything beyond them, but she counted every one and gloried in it.

The Big Thing that poor Peneluna had known was claiming Mary-Clare. It could not be denied; it might be starved but it would not die.

Somewhere, on beyond---

But oh! Mary-Clare was young, young, and her beyond was not the beyond of Peneluna; or if it were, it lay far, far across a desert stretch.

CHAPTER XVI

Northrup had cast himself upon Twombley's hospitality with the plea of business. He outlined a programme and demanded silence.

"I'm going to buy this Point," he confided, "and I'm going to go away, Twombley. I'm going to leave things exactly as they are until--well, perhaps always. Just consider yourself my superintendent."

Twombley blinked.

"Snatching hot cakes?" he asked. "Spoiling Maclin's meal?"

"Something like that, yes. I don't know what all this means, Twombley, but I'm going to take no chances. I want to be in a position to hit square if anything needs hitting. If no one knows that I'm in on this deal, I'll be better pleased--but I want you to keep me informed."

Twombley nodded.

About noon Northrup departed, but he did not reach the inn until nearly dark.

Heathcote and Polly had been tremendously agitated by the appearance of the Morris car and the Japanese. They were in a sad state of excitement. The vicious circle of unbelievable happenings seemed to be drawing close.

"I guess I'll put the Chinese"--Peter was not careful as to particulars--"out in the barn to sleep," he said, but Polly shook her head.

"No, keep him where you can watch 'im," she cautioned. "There'll be no sleeping for me while this unchristian business is afoot. Peter, what do you suppose the creature eats?"

"I ain't studying about that"--Peter shook with nervous laughter--"but I'm going to chain Ginger up. I've heard these Chinese-ers lean to animals."

"Nonsense, brother! But do you suppose the young woman what's on her way here is a female Chinese?"

"The Lord knows!" Peter bristled. "I wish Northrup would fetch up and handle these items of his. My God! Polly, we have been real soft toward this young feller. Appearances and our dumb feelings about folks may have let us all in for some terrible results. Maclin's keener than us, perhaps."

"Now, brother"--Polly was bustling around--"this is no time to set my nerves on edge. Here we be; here all this mess is. We best hold tight."

So Peter and Polly "held tight" while inwardly they feared that King's Forest was in deadly peril and that they had let the unsuspecting people in for who could tell--what?

About five o'clock Kathryn came upon the scene. Her late encounter had left her careless as to her physical appearance; she was a bit bedraggled and her low shoes and silk hose--a great deal of the latter showing--were evidences against her respectability.

"I'm Mr. Northrup's fiancée," she explained, and sank into a chair by the hearth.

Aunt Polly did not know what she meant, but in that she belonged to Northrup, she must be recognized, and plainly she was not Chinese!

Peter fixed his little, sparkling eyes on his guest and his hair rose an inch while his face reddened.

"Perhaps you better go to your room," he suggested as he might to a naughty child. He wanted to get the girl out of his sight and he hated to see Polly waiting upon her. Kathryn detected the

tone and it roused her. No man ever made an escape from Kathryn when he used that note! Her eyes filled with tears; her lips quivered.

"Mr. Northrup's mother is dying," she faltered; a shade more or less did not count now--"help me to be brave and calm for his sake. Please be my friend as you have been his!"

This was a wild guess but it served its purpose. Peter felt like a brute and Aunt Polly was all a-tremble.

"Dear me!" she said, hovering over the girl, "somehow we never thought about Brace's folks and all that. Just you come upstairs and rest and wash. I'll fetch you some nice hot tea. It's terrible--his mother dying--and you having to break it to him." Polly led Kathryn away and Peter sat wretchedly alone.

When Polly returned he was properly contrite and set to work assisting with the evening meal. Polly was silent for the most part, but she was deeply concerned.

"She says she's going to marry Brace," she confided.

"Well, I reckon if she says she is, she is!" Peter grunted. "She looks capable of doing it."

"Peter, you mustn't be hard."

"I hope to the Lord I can be hard." Peter looked grim. "It's being soft and easy as has laid us open to--what?"

"Peter, you give me the creeps."

Peter and Polly were in the kitchen when Kathryn came downstairs. She had had a bath and a nap. She had resorted to her toilet aids and she looked pathetically lovely as she crouched by the hearth in the empty room and waited for Northrup's return. Every gesture she made bespoke the sweet clinging woman bent on mercy's task.

She again saw herself in a dramatic scene. Northrup would open the door--that one! Kathryn fixed her eyes on the middle door--he would look at her--reel back; call her name, and she would rush to him, fall in his arms; then control herself, lead him to the fire and break the sad news to him gently, sweetly. He would kneel at her feet, bury his face in her lap--

But while Kathryn was mentally rehearsing this and thrilling at the success of her wonderful intuitions, Northrup was striding along the road toward the inn, his head bent forward, his hands in his pockets. He was feeling rather the worse for wear; the consequences of his deeds and promises were hurtling about him like tangible, bruising things.

He was never to see Mary-Clare again! That had sounded fine and noble when it meant her freedom from Larry Rivers, but what a beastly thing it seemed, viewed from Mary-Clare's side. What would she think of him? After those hours of understanding--those hours weighted with happiness and delight that neither of them dared to call by their true names, so beautiful and fragile were they! Those hours had been like bubbles in which all that was *real* was reflected. They had breathed upon them, watched them, but had not touched them frankly. And now---

How ugly and ordinary it would all seem if he left without one last word!

The past few weeks might become a memory that would enrich and ennoble all the years on ahead or they might, through wrong interpretation, embitter and corrode.

Northrup was prepared to make any sacrifice for Mary-Clare; he had achieved that much, but he chafed at the injustice to his best motives if he carried out, literally, what he had promised. He was face to face with one of those critical crises where simple right seemed inadequate to deal with complex wrong.

To leave Mary-Clare free to live whatever life held for her, without bitterness or regret, was all he asked. As for himself, Northrup had agreed to go back--he thought, as he plunged along, in Manly's terms--to his slit in the wall and keep valiantly to it in the future. But he, no matter what occurred, would always have a wider, purer vision; while Mary-Clare, the one who had made this possible, would---Oh! it was an unbearable thought.

And just then a rustling in the bushes by the road brought him to a standstill.

"Who's that?" he asked roughly.

Jan-an came from behind a clump of sumach. A black shawl over her head and falling to her feet made her seem part of the darkness. Northrup turned his flashlight upon her and only her vague white face was visible.

"What's up?" he asked, as Jan-an came nearer. The girl no longer repelled him--he had seen behind her mask, had known her faithfulness and devotion to them he must leave forever. Northrup was still young enough to believe in that word--forever.

Jan-an came close.

"Say, there's a queer lot to the inn. They're after you!"

Northrup started.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"A toot cart with an image setting up the front--and a dressy piece in the glass cage behind."

So vivid was the picture that Jan-an portrayed that Northrup did not need to question.

"Lord! but she was togged out," Jan-an went on, "but seemed like I felt she had black wings hid

underneath." Poor Jan-an's flights of fancy always left her muddled. "If you want that I should tell her anything while you light out---"

Northrup laughed.

"There, there, Jan-an," he comforted. "Why, this is all right. You wanted me to know, in case--oh! but you're a good sort! But see here, everything is safe and sound and"--Northrup paused, then suddenly--"to-morrow, Jan-an, I want you to go to--to Mary-Clare and tell her I left--good-bye for her and Noreen."

"Yer--yer going away?" Jan-an writhed under the flashlight.

"Yes, Jan-an."

"Why---" The girl burst into tears. Northrup tried to comfort her. "I've been so stirred," the girl sobbed. "I had feelin's---"

"So have I, Jan-an. So have I."

They stood in the dark for a moment and then, because there was nothing more to say--Northrup went to meet Kathryn Morris.

He went in at one of the end doors, not the middle one, and so disturbed Kathryn's stage setting. He opened and closed the door so quietly, walked over to the fire so rapidly, that to rise and carry out her programme was out of the question, so Kathryn remained on the hearth and Northrup dropped into the chair beside her.

"Well, little girl," he said--people always lowered their voices when speaking to Kathryn--"what is it?"

Northrup was braced for bad news. Of course Manly had given his address to Kathryn--it was something beyond the realm of letters and telegrams that had occurred; Kathryn had been sent! That Manly was not prime mover in this matter could not occur to Northrup.

"Is it Mother?" he whispered.

Kathryn nodded and her easy tears fell.

"Dead?" The word cut like a knife and Kathryn shivered. For the first she doubted herself; felt like a bungler.

"Oh! no, Brace; Brace, do not look like that--really--really--listen to me."

Northrup breathed heavily.

"An accident?" he demanded. A hard note rang in his words. This turn of affairs was rather more than Kathryn had arranged for. It was like finding herself on the professional stage when she had bargained for an amateur performance.

She ran to cover, abandoning all her well-laid plans. She knew the advantage of being the first in a new situation, so she hurried there.

"Brace dear, I--you know I have been bearing it all alone and I dared *not* take any further responsibility even to--to shield you, dearest, and your work."

By some dark magic Northrup felt himself a selfish brute; a deserter of duty.

"Kathryn," he said, and his eyes fell, "please tell me. I suppose I have been unforgivable, but--well, there's nothing to say!" Northrup bowed his head to take whatever blow might fall.

"I may be all wrong, dear. You know, when one is alone, is the confidante of another, one as precious as your mother is to you and me, it unnerves one--I did not know what to do. It may not be anything--but how could I know?"

"You went to Manly?" Northrup asked this with a sense of relief while at the same time Kathryn had risen to a plane so high that he felt humbled before her. He was still dazed and in the dark, but all was not lost!

While he had been following his selfish ends, Kathryn had stood guard over all that was sacred to him. He had never before realized the strength and purpose of the pretty child near him. He reached out and laid his hand on the bowed head.

"No, dear, that was it. Your mother would not let me--she thought only of you; you must not be worried, just now--oh! you know how she is! But, dearest, she has had, for years, a strange and dreadful pain. It does not come often, but when it does, it is very, very bad--it comes mostly at night--so she has been able to hide it from you; the day following she always spoke of it as a headache--you know how we have sympathized with her--but never were alarmed?"

Northrup nodded. He recalled those headaches.

"Well, a week ago she called me to come to her--she really looked quite terrible, Brace. I was so frightened, but of course I had to hide my feelings. She says--oh! Brace, she says there is--way back in the family---"

"Nonsense!" Northrup got up and paced the floor. "Manly has told me that was sheer nonsense. Go on, Kathryn."

"Well, dear, she was weak and *so* pitiful and she--she confided things to me that I am sure she would not have, had she been her brave, dear self."

"What kind of things?"

It was horrible, but Northrup was conscious of being in a net where the meshes were wide enough to permit of his seeing freedom but utterly cutting him off from it.

What he had subconsciously hoped the night before, what his underlying strength had been founded upon, he would never be able to know, for now he felt every line of escape from, heaven knew what, closing upon him; permitting no choice, wiping out all the security of happiness; leaving--chaff. For a moment, he forgot the question he had just asked, but Kathryn was struggling to answer it.

"About you and me, Brace. Oh! help me. It is so hard; so hard, dear, to tell you, but you must realize that because of the things she said, I estimated the seriousness of her condition and I cannot spare myself! Brace, she knows that you and I--have been putting off our marriage because of her!"

There was one mad moment when Northrup felt he was going to laugh; but instantly the desire fled and ended in something approaching a groan.

"Go on!" he said quietly, and resumed his seat by the fire.

"I think we have been careless rather than thoughtful, dear. Older people can be hurt by such kindness--if they are wonderful and proud like your mother. She cannot bear to--to be an obstacle."

"An obstacle? Good Lord!" Northrup jammed a log to its place and so relieved his feelings.

"Well, my dearest, you must see the position I was placed in?"

"Yes, Kathryn, I do. You're a brick, my dear, but--how did you know where I was, if you did not go to Manly?"

Kathryn looked up, and all the childlike confidence and sweetness she could summon lay in her lovely eyes.

"Dearest, I remembered the address on the letter you sent to your mother. Because I wanted to keep this secret about our fear from her--I came alone and I knew that people here could direct me if you had gone away. I was prepared to follow you--anywhere!"--Kathryn suddenly recalled her small hand-bag upstairs--"Brace, I was frightened, bearing it alone. I *had* to have you. Oh! Brace."

Northrup found the girl in his arms. His face was against hers--her tears were falling and she was sobbing helplessly. The net, it was a purse net now, drew close.

"Brace, Brace, we must make her happy, together. I will share everything with you--I have been so heedless; so selfish--but my life is now yours and--hers!"

Guilt filled the aroused soul of Northrup. As far as in him lay he--surrendered! With characteristic swiftness and thoroughness he closed his eyes and made his dash!

"Kathryn, you mean you will marry me; you will--do this for me and her?"

"Yes."

Just then Aunt Polly came into the room. Her quick, keen eye took in the scene and her gentle heart throbbed in sympathy. She came over to the two and hovered near them, patting Northrup's shoulder and Kathryn's head indiscriminately. She crooned over them and finally got them to the dining-room and the evening meal.

An early start for the morrow was planned, and by nine o'clock Kathryn went to her room.

Northrup was restless and nervous. There was much to be done before he left. He must see Rivers and finish that business--it might have to be hurried, but he felt confident that by raising Larry's price he could secure his ends. And then, because of the finality in the turn of events, Northrup desperately decided upon a compromise with his conscience. Strange as it now seemed he had, before his talk with Kathryn, believed that he was done forever with his experience, but he realized, as he reconsidered the matter, that hope, a strange, blind hope, had fluttered earlier but that now it was dead; dead!

Since that was the case, he would do for a dead man--Northrup gruesomely termed himself that--what the dead man could not do for himself. Surely no one, not even Rivers, would deny him that poor comfort, if all were known. He would write a note to Mary-Clare, go early in the morning to that cabin on the hill and leave it--where her eye would fall upon it when she entered.

That the cabin was sacred to Mary-Clare he very well knew; that she shared it with no one, he also knew; but she would forgive his trespassing, since it was his only way in honour out--out of her life.

Very well, then! At nine-thirty he decided to go over to the Point again and, if he found Larry, finish that business. If Larry were not there, he would lie in wait for him and gain his ends. So he prepared for another night away from the inn, if necessary.

Aunt Polly, hovering on the outskirts of all that was going on, materialized, as he was about leaving the house like a thief of the night.

"Now, son, must you go out?" she pleaded, her spectacles awry on the top of her head, her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Yes, Aunt Polly." Northrup paused, the knob of the door in hand, and looked down at the little

creature.

"Is it fair, son?" Aunt Polly was savagely thinking of the gossip of the Forest--she wildly believed that Northrup might be going to the yellow house. The hurry of departure might blind him to folly.

"Fair--fair to whom, Aunt Polly?" Northrup's brows drew together.

"To yourself, son. Bad news and the sudden going away---" the old voice choked. It was hard to use an enemy's weapon against one's own, even to save him.

"Aunt Polly, look at me." This was spoken sternly.

"I *am* looking, son, I am looking." And so she was.

"I'm going out, because I must, if I am to do my duty by others. You must trust me. And I want you to know that all my future life will be the stronger, the safer, because of my weeks here with you all! I came to you with no purpose--just a tired, half-sick man, but things were taken out of my hands. I've been used, and I don't know myself just yet for what. I'm going to have faith and you must have it--I'm with you, not against you. Will you kiss me, Aunt Polly?"

From his height Northrup bent to Polly's littleness, but she reached up to him with her frail tender arms and seemed to gather him into her denied motherhood. Without a word she kissed him and--let him go!

Northrup found Rivers in his shack. He looked as if he had been sitting where Northrup left him the night before. He was unkempt and haggard and there were broken bits of food on the untidy table, and stains of coffee.

"I'm going away, Rivers," Northrup explained, sitting opposite Larry. "I couldn't wait to get word from you--my mother is ill. I must put this business through in a sloppy way. It may need a lot of legal patching after, but I'll take my chances. Heathcote has straightened out your wife's part--the Point is yours. I've made sure of that. Now I'm going to write out something that I think will hold--anyway, I want your signature to it and to a receipt for money I will give you. What we both know will after all be the real deed, for if you don't keep your bargain, I'll come back."

Larry stared dully, insolently at Northrup but did not speak. He watched Northrup writing at the table where the food lay scattered. Then, when the clumsy document was finished, Northrup pushed it toward Rivers.

"Sign there!" he said.

"I'll sign where I damn please." Larry showed his teeth. "How much you going to give me for my woman?"

For a moment the sordid room seemed to be swirling in a flood of red and yellow. Northrup got on his feet.

"I don't want to kill you," he muttered, "but you deserve it."

"Ah, have it your own way," Larry cringed. The memory of the night before steadied him. He'd been drinking heavily and was stronger--and weaker, in consequence.

"How much is--is the price for the Point?" he mumbled.

Northrup mastered his rage and sat down. Feeling sure that Rivers would dicker he said quietly:

"A thousand dollars."

"Double that!" Rivers's eyes gleamed. A thousand dollars would take him out of Maclin's reach, but all that he could get beyond would keep him there longer.

"Rivers, I expected this, so I'll name my final price. Fifteen hundred! Hurry up and sign that paper."

Larry signed it unsteadily but clearly.

"Have you seen your wife, Rivers?" Northrup passed a cheque across the table.

"I'm going to see her to-morrow--I have up to Friday, you know."

"Yes, that's true. I must go to-morrow morning, but I'll make sure you keep to your bargain."

"And--you?" Rivers's lips curled.

"I have kept my bargain."

"And you'll get away without talking to my wife?"

Northrup's eyes grew dark.

"Yes. But, Rivers, if I find that you play loose in any way, by God, I'll settle with you if I have to scour the earth for you. Remember, she is to know everything--everything, and after that--you're to get out--quick."

"I'll get out all right."

"I hope, just because of your wife and child, Rivers, that you'll straighten up; that something will get a grip on you that will pull you up--not down further. No man has a right to put the burden of his right living or his going to hell on a woman's conscience, but women like your wife often have to carry that load. You've got that in you which, put to good purpose, might---"

"Oh! cut it out." Rivers could bear no more. "I'm going to get out of your way--what more in hell do you want?"

"Nothing." Northrup rose, white-lipped and stern. "Nothing. We are both of us, Rivers, paying a big price for a woman's freedom. It's only just--we ought not to want anything more."

With that Northrup left the shack and retraced his lonely way to the inn.

CHAPTER XVII

Northrup arose the next morning before daylight and tried to write a note to Mary-Clare. It was the most difficult thing he had ever undertaken. If he could speak, it would be different, but the written word is so rigid.

This last meeting had been so distraught, they had beaten about so in the dark, that his uncertainty as to what really was arrived at confused him.

Could he hope for her understanding if without another word he left her to draw her own conclusions from his future life?

She would be alone. She could confide in no one. She might, in the years ahead, ascribe his actions to the lowest motives, and he had, God knew, meant her no harm.

Then, as it was always to be in the time on ahead, Mary-Clare herself seemed to speak to him.

"It is what one does to love that matters." That was it--"What one does."

With this fixed in his mind Northrup wrote:

I want you to know that I love you. I believe you love me. We couldn't help this--but you have taught me how not to kill it.

There are big, compelling things in your life and mine that cannot be ignored--you showed me that, too. I do not know how I am to go on with my old life--but I am going to try to live it--as you will live yours.

There was a mad moment on the hill that last day we met--you saved it.

There is a greater thing than love--it is truth, and that is why I must bid you good-bye--in this way.

Crude and jagged as the thought was, Northrup, in rereading his words, did not now shrink from Mary-Clare's interpretation. She *would* understand.

After an early breakfast, at which Kathryn did not appear--Aunt Polly had carried Kathryn's to her room--Northrup went out to see that everything was ready for the journey home. To his grim delight--it seemed almost a postponed sentence--he discovered the chauffeur under the car and in a state of *calm* excitement. In broken but carefully selected English the man informed Northrup that he could repair what needed repair but must have two hours or more in which to do it.

With his anxiety about his mother lessened, Northrup received this news with a sense of relief. Once the car was in commission they could make good the loss of time. So Northrup started upon his errand, taking the roundabout trail he had broken for himself, and which led to that point back of the cabin from which he had often held his lonely but happy vigils.

Over this trail, leaf-strewn and wet, Northrup now went. He did not pause at the mossy rock that had hitherto marked his limit. He sternly strode ahead over unbroken underbrush and reached the cabin.

The door was open; without hesitation he went in, laid his note on the table, put the Bible over it, and retraced his steps. But once at the clump of laurel a weak, human longing overcame him. Why not wait there and see what happened? There was an hour or more to while away before the car would be in readiness. Again Northrup had that sense of being, after all, an atom in a plan over which he had small control.

So far he could go, no further! After that? Well, after that he would never weaken. He sat down on the rock, held the branches aside so that the cabin was in full view and, unseen himself, waited.

Now it happened that others besides Northrup were astir that morning. Larry, shaved and washed, having had a good breakfast, provided by Peneluna and served by Jan-an, straightened himself and felt more a man than he had felt for many a day. He gave Jan-an money for Peneluna and a dollar for herself. The girl stared at the bill indicated as hers and pushed it back.

"Take it, Jan-an," Larry urged. "I'd like to remember you taking it."

The girl, thus urged, hid the money in her bosom and shuffled out.

Larry was sober and keen. He was going to carry out Northrup's commands, but in his own way! He meant to lay a good deal more in waste than perhaps any one would suspect. And yet, Larry,

sober and about to cut loose from all familiar things, had sensations that made him tremble as he stumbled over the débris of the Point.

Never before had he been so surely leaving everything as he was now. In the old days of separation, there had always been *home* in the background. During that hideous year when he was shut behind bars, his thoughts had clung to home, to his father! He had meant then to go back and reform! Poor Larry! he had nothing to reform, but he had not realized that. Then Maclin caught him and instead of being reformed, Larry was moulded into a new shape--Maclin's tool. Well, Maclin was done with, too! Larry strode on in the semi-darkness. The morning was dull and deadly chill.

Traditional prejudice rose in Rivers and made him hard and bitter. He felt himself a victim of others' misunderstanding.

If he had had a--mother! Never before had this emotion swayed him. He knew little or nothing of his mother. She had been blotted out. But he now tried to think that all this could never have happened to him had he not been deprived of her. In the cold, damp morning Larry reverted to his mother over and over again. Good or bad, she would have stood by him! There was no one now; no one.

"And Mary-Clare!" At this his face set cruelly. "She should have stood by me. What was her sense of duty, anyway?"

She had always eluded him, had never been his. Larry rebelled at this knowledge. She had been cold and demanding, selfish and hard. No woman has a right to keep herself from her husband. All would have been well if she had done her part. And Noreen was his as well as Mary-Clare's. But she was keeping everything. His father's house; the child; the money!

By this time Larry had lashed himself into a virtuous fury. He felt himself wronged and sinned against. He was prepared to hurt somebody in revenge.

Larry went to the yellow house. It was empty. There was a fire on the hearth and a general air of recent occupancy and a hurried departure. A fiendish inspiration came to Rivers. He would go to that cabin of Mary-Clare's and wait for her. She should get her freedom there, where she had forbidden him to come. He'd enter now and have his say.

Larry took a short cut to the cabin and by so doing reached it before Mary-Clare, who had taken Noreen to Peneluna's--not daring to take her to the inn.

Larry came to within a dozen yards of the cabin when he stopped short and became rigid. He was completely screened from view, but, for the moment, he did not give this a thought. There was murder in his heart, and only cowardice held him back.

Northrup was coming out of the cabin! Rivers had not realized that he trusted Northrup, but he had, and he was betrayed! All the bitterness of defeat swept over him and hate and revenge alone swayed him. Suddenly he grew calm. Northrup had passed from sight; the white mists of the morning were rolling and breaking. He would wait--if Mary-Clare was in the cabin, and Larry believed she was, he could afford to bide his time. Indeed, it was the only thing to do, for in a primitive fashion Rivers decided to deal only with his woman, and he meant to have a free hand. He would have no fight for what was not worth fighting for--he would solve things in his own way and be off before any one interfered.

And then he turned sharply. Someone was advancing from the opposite direction. It was Mary-Clare. She came up her own trail, emerging from the mists like a shadowy creature of the woods; she walked slowly, wearily, up to the Place and went inside with the eyes of two men full upon her.

At that moment the sun broke through the mists; it flooded the cabin and touched warmly the girl who sank down beside the table. Instantly her glance fell upon the note by the Bible. She took it up, read it once, twice, and--understood more, far more than Northrup could guess.

Perhaps a soul awakening from the experience of death might know the sensation that throbbled through the consciousness of Mary-Clare at that moment. The woman of her had been born in the cabin the day before, but the birth pains had exhausted her. She had not censured Northrup in her woman-thought; she had believed something of what now she knew, and understood. She raised the note and held it out on her open palms--almost it seemed as if she were showing it to some unseen Presence as proof of all she trusted. With the sheet of paper still held lightly, Mary-Clare walked to the door of her cabin. She had no purpose in mind--she wanted the air; the sunlight. And so she stood in the full glow, her face uplifted, her arms outspread.

Northrup from his hidden place watched her for a moment, bowed his head, and turned to the inn. Larry watched her; in a dumb way he saw revealed the woman he had never touched; never owned. Well, he would have his revenge.

Mary-Clare turned back after her one exalted moment; she took her place by the table and spread again the note before her. She did not notice the footsteps outside until Larry was on the threshold and then she turned, gripping, intuitively, the sheet of paper in her hand. Larry saw the gesture, saw the paper, and half understood.

Mary-Clare looked at her husband distantly but not unkindly. She did not resent his being there--the Place was no longer hers alone.

"A nice lot you are!" Rivers blurted this out and came in. He sat down on the edge of the table near Mary-Clare. "What's that?" he demanded, his eyes on the note.

"A letter."

"Full of directions, I suppose?" Larry smiled an ugly, keen smile.

"Directions? What do you mean?"

"I guess that doesn't matter, does it?" he asked. "Don't let us waste time. See here, my girl, the game's up! Now that letter--I want that. It will be evidence when I need it. He's broken his bargain. I mean to take the advantage I've got."

Mary-Clare stared at Rivers in helpless amazement--but her fingers closed more firmly upon the note.

"When he--he bought you--he promised me that he'd never see you again. He wanted you free--for yourself. Free!" Larry flung his head back and indulged in a harsh laugh. "I got the Point--he bought the Point and you! Paid high for them, too, but he'll pay higher yet before I get through with him."

Mary-Clare sat very quiet; her face seemed frozen into an expression of utter bewilderment. That, and the memory of her as she had stood at the door a few moments ago, maddened Rivers and he ruthlessly proceeded to batter down all the background that had stood, in Mary-Clare's life, as a plea for her loyalty, faith, and gratitude.

"Do you know why my father kept me from home and put you in my place?" he demanded.

"No, Larry."

"He was afraid of me--afraid of himself. He left me to others--and others helped me along. Others like Maclin who saw my ability!" Again Larry gave his mirthless, ugly laugh and this time Mary-Clare shuddered.

She made no defence for her beloved doctor--the father of the man before her. She simply braced herself to bear the blows, and she shuddered because she intuitively felt that Larry was in no sense realizing his own position; he was so madly seeking to destroy that of others.

"I'm a counterfeiter--I've been in prison--I've---" but here Rivers paused, struck at last by the face opposite him. It was awakening; it flushed, quivered, and the eyes darkened and widened. What was happening was this--Larry was setting Mary-Clare free in ways that he could not realize. Every merciless blow he struck was rending a fetter apart. He was making it possible for the woman, close to him physically, to regard him at last as--a man; not a husband that mistaken loyalty must shield and suffer for. He was placing her among the safe and decent people, permitting her at last to justify her instincts, to trust her own ideals.

And from that vantage ground of spiritual freedom, released from all false ties of contract and promise, Mary-Clare looked at Larry with divine pity in her eyes. She seemed to see the veiled form of his mother beside him--they were like two outcasts defiantly accusing her, but toward whom she could well afford to feel merciful.

"Don't, Larry"--Mary-Clare spoke at last and there were tears in her eyes--"please don't. You've said enough."

She felt as though she were looking at the dying face of a suicide.

"Yes, I think I have said enough about myself except this: I wrote all those letters you--you had. Not one was my father's--they were counterfeits--there are more ways than one of--of getting what you want."

Again Mary-Clare shuddered and sank into the dull state of amazement. She had to think this over; go slowly. She looked at Larry, but she was not listening. At last she asked wonderingly:

"You mean--that he did not want me to marry you? And that last night--he did not say--what you said you understood?"

Larry laughed--but it was not the old assured laugh of brutality--he had stripped himself so bare that at last he was aware of his own nakedness.

"Oh!" The one word was like a blighting shaft that killed all that was left to kill.

Larry put forth a pitiful defence.

"You've been hard and selfish, Mary-Clare. Another sort might have helped me--I got to caring, at first. You've taken everything and given mighty little. And now, when you see a chance of cutting loose, you wipe me off the map and betray me into the hands of a man who has lied to me, made sport of me, and thinks he's going to get away with it. Now listen. I want that letter. When I have used up the hush money I have now, I'm coming back for more--more--and you and he are going to pay."

By this time Larry had worked himself again into a blind fury. He felt this but could not control it. He had lost nearly everything--he must clutch what was left.

"Give that to me!" he commanded, and reached for the clenched hand on the table.

"No, Larry. If you could understand, I would let you have it, but you couldn't! Nothing matters now between you and me. I am free, free!"

The radiant face, the clenched hand, blinded Larry. Sitting again on the edge of the table, looking down at the woman who had eluded him, was defying him, he struck out! He had no thought at all for the moment--something was in his way; before he could escape he must fling it aside.

Mary-Clare drooped; dropped from her chair and lay quiet upon the floor. Her hand, holding the paper, was spread wide, the note was unprotected.

For a moment Larry gazed at his work with horrified eyes. Never before had he meted physical brutality to man or woman. He was a coward at heart, and he was thoroughly cowed as he stood above the girl at his feet. He saw that she was breathing; there was almost at once a fluttering of the lids. There were two things for a coward to do--seize the note and make his escape.

Larry did both and Mary-Clare took no heed.

A little red squirrel came into the sunny room and darted about; the sunlight grew dim, for there was a storm rising, and the clouds were heavy on its wings.

And while the deathly silence reigned in the cabin, Northrup and Kathryn were riding rapidly from the inn. As the car passed the yellow house, Kathryn pathetically drew down the shades--her eyes were tear-filled.

"Brace, dear," she whispered, "I'm so afraid. The storm; everything frightens me. Take me in your arms."

And at that moment Kathryn believed that she loved Northrup, had saved him from a great peril, and she was prepared to act the part, in the future, of a faithful wife.

CHAPTER XVIII

Noreen and Jan-an late that afternoon returned to the yellow house. They were both rather depressed and forlorn, for they knew that Northrup was gone and had taken away with him much that had stimulated and cheered.

Finding the yellow house empty, the two went up the opposite hill and leisurely made their way to the brook that marked the limit of free choice. Here they sat down, and Noreen suggested that they sing Northrup's old songs and play some of his diverting games. Jan-an solemnly agreed, shaking her head and sighing as one does who recalls the dead.

So Noreen piped out the well-beloved words of "Green Jacket" and, rather heavily, acted the jovial part. But Jan-an refused to be comforted. She cried distractedly, and always when Jan-an wept she made such abnormal "faces" that she disturbed any onlookers.

"All right!" Noreen said at last. "We'll both do something."

This clever psychological ruse brought Jan-an to her normal state.

"Let's play Eve's Other Children," Noreen ran on. "I'll be Eve and hide my children, the ones I don't like specially. You be God, Jan-an."

This was a great concession on Noreen's part, for she revelled in the leading rôle, as it gave full play to her dramatic sense of justice.

However, the play began with Noreen hiding some twisted and dry sticks under stones and in holes in trees and then proceeding to dress, in gay autumn leaves, more favoured twigs. She crooned over them; expatiated upon their loveliness, and, at a given signal, poor Jan-an clumsily appeared and in most unflattering terms accused Noreen of depravity and unfaithfulness, demanding finally, in most picturesque and primitive language, the hidden children. At this point Noreen rose to great heights. Fear, remorse, and shame overcame her. She pleaded and denied; she confessed and at last began, with the help of her accuser, to search out the neglected offspring. So wholly did the two enjoy this part of the game that they forgot their animosity, and when the crooked twigs were discovered Jan-an became emphatically allegorical with Noreen and ruthlessly destroyed the "other children" on the score that they weren't worth keeping.

But the interest flagged at length, and both Jan-an and Noreen became silent and depressed.

"I've got feelin's!" Jan-an remarked, "in the pit of my stomach. Besides, it's getting cold and a storm's brewing. Did yer hear thunder?"

Noreen was replacing her favoured children in the crannies of the rocks, but she turned now to Jan-an and said wistfully:

"I want Motherly."

"She's biding terrible long up yonder."

"P'raps, oh! Jan-an, p'raps that lady you were telling about has taken Motherly!"

Noreen became agitated, but Jan-an with blind intuition scoffed.

"No; whatever she took, she wouldn't take her! But she took Mr. Northrup, all right. Her kind takes just fierce! I sense her."

Noreen looked blank.

"Tell me about the heathen, Jan-an," she said. "What *did* he eat when Uncle Peter wouldn't let him have Ginger?"

"I don't know, but I did miss two rabbits."

"Live ones, Jan-an?" Noreen's eyes widened.

"Sure, live ones. Everything's live till it's killed. I ain't saying he et 'em 'live."

"Maybe the rabbits got away," Noreen suggested hopefully.

"The Lord knows! Maybe they did." Then Jan-an added further information: "I guess your father has gone for good!"

"Took?" Noreen was not now overcome by grief.

"No, just gone. He gave me a dollar."

"A dollar, Jan-an? A whole dollar?" This was almost unbelievable. Jan-an produced the evidence from her loose and soiled blouse.

"He left his place terribly tidy, too," she ran on, "and when a man does that Peneluna says it's awful suspicious."

"Jan-an, you wait here--I'm going up to the cabin!"

Noreen stood up defiantly. She was possessed by one of her sudden flashes of inspiration.

"Yer ain't been called," warned Jan-an.

"I know, but I *must* go. I'll only peep in. Maybe Motherly took a back way to the inn."

To this Jan-an had nothing to say and she sat down upon a wet rock to wait, while Noreen darted up the trail like a small, distracted animal of the woods.

It was growing dark and heavy with storm; the thunder was more distinct--there was a hush and a breathless suggestion of wind held in check by a mighty force.

Noreen reached the shack and peeped in at the vine-covered window. What she saw marked a turning-point in the child's life.

Mary-Clare was still stretched upon the floor. Several things had happened to her since Larry fled; she was never clearly to account for them.

She had been conscious and had drifted into unconsciousness several times. She had tried, she recalled that later, to get to the couch, but her aching head had driven the impulse into oblivion. She had fallen back on the floor. Then, again, she roused and there was blood--near her. Not much, but she had not noticed it before, and she must have fainted. Again, she could remember thinking of Noreen, of the others; and the necessity of keeping forever hidden the thing that had happened.

But again Mary-Clare, from exhaustion or faintness, slipped into silence, and so Noreen found her!

The child went swiftly into the still cabin and knelt beside her mother. She was quite calm, at first, and unafraid. She took the dear head on her lap and patted the white cheek where the little cut had let out the blood--there was dry blood on it now and that caused Noreen to gasp and cry out.

Back and forth the child swayed, mumbling comforting words; and then she spoke louder, faster--her words became wild, disconnected. She laughed and cried and called for every one of her little world in turn.

Uncle Peter!

Aunt Polly!

Peneluna! And then Jan-an! Jan-an!

As she sobbed and screamed Mary-Clare's eyes opened and she smiled. At that moment Jan-an came stumbling into the room.

One look and the dull, faithful creature became a machine carrying out the routine that she had often shared with others on the Point.

"She ain't dead!" she announced after one terrified glance, and then she dragged Mary-Clare to the couch; ran for water; took a towel from a nail and bathed the white, stained face. During this Noreen's sobs grew less and less, she became quieter and was able, presently, to assist Jan-an.

"She's had a fall," Jan-an announced. Mary-Clare opened her eyes--the words found an echo in her heavy brain.

"Yes," she whispered.

"And on an empty stummick!" Jan-an had a sympathetic twinge.

"Yes," again Mary-Clare whispered and smiled.

"Noreen, you go on sopping her face--I'm going to get something hot."

And while Noreen bathed and soothed the face upon the pillow into consciousness and reason, Jan-an made a fire on the hearth, carried water from a spring outside, and brought forth tea and some little cakes from the cupboard. The girl's face was transfigured; she was thinking,

thinking, and it hurt her to think consecutively--but she thought on.

"Norrie darling, I am all right. Quite all right." At last Mary-Clare was able to assert herself; she rose unsteadily and Jan-an sprang to her side.

"Lay down," she commanded in a new and almost alarming tone. "Can't yer see, yer must hold on ter yerself a spell? Let me take the lead--I know, I know!"

And Mary-Clare realized that she did! Keenly the two gazed at each other, Eve's two children! Mary-Clare sank back; her face quivered; her eyes filled with weak tears.

Outside the darkness of the coming storm pressed close, the wind was straining at the leash, the lightning darted and the thunder rolled.

"The storm," murmured Mary-Clare, "the storm! It is the breaking up of summer!"

The stale cakes and the hot tea refreshed the three, and after an hour Mary-Clare seemed quite herself. She went to the door and looked out into the heart of the storm. The red lightning ran zigzag through the blackness. It seemed like the glad summer, mad with fear, seeking a way through the sleet and rain.

Bodily bruised and weary, mentally exhausted and groping, Mary-Clare still felt that strange freedom she had experienced while Larry was devastating all that she had believed in, and for which she had given of her best.

She felt as one must who, escaping from an overwhelming flood, looks upon the destruction and wonders at her own escape. But she *had* escaped! That became, presently, the one gripping fact. She had escaped and she would find safety somewhere.

The late sunset after the storm was glorious. The clear gold that a mighty storm often leaves in its wake was like a burnished shield. The breeze was icy in its touch; the bared trees startled one by the sudden change in their appearance--the gale had torn their colour and foliage from them. Starkly they stood forth against the glowing sky.

And then Mary-Clare led the way down the trail--her leaf-strewn, hidden trail. She held Noreen's hand in hers but she leaned upon Jan-an. As they descended Mary-Clare planned.

"When we get home, Jan-an, home to the yellow house, I want you to go for Peneluna."

From all the world, Mary-Clare desired the old understanding woman.

"I guess you mean Aunt Polly," Jan-an suggested.

"No. To-morrow, Aunt Polly, Jan-an. To-day I want Peneluna."

"All right." Jan-an nodded.

"And, Noreen dear."

"Yes, Motherly."

"Everything is all right. I had a--queer fall. It was quite dark in the cabin--I hit my face on the edge of the table. And, Noreen."

"Yes, Motherly."

"I may have to rest a little, but you must not be worried--you see, Mother hasn't rested in a long while."

Peneluna responded to the call. It was late evening when she and Jan-an came to the yellow house. Before starting for the Point Jan-an had insisted upon getting a meal and afterward she had helped Mary-Clare put Noreen to bed. All this had delayed her.

"Now," she said at last, "I'll go. I guess you're edging to the limit, ain't yer?"

Mary-Clare nodded.

"I've never been sick, not plain sick, in all my life," she murmured, "and why should I be now?"

But left alone, she made ready, in a strange way, for what she felt was coming upon her. She undressed carefully and put her room in order. Then she lay down upon her bed and drifted lightly between the known and the unknown.

She touched Noreen's sleeping face so gently that the child did not heed the caress. Then:

"Perhaps I am going to die--people die so easily at times--just flare out!"

And so Peneluna found her and knelt beside her.

"You hear me, Mary-Clare?"

"Yes. I hear you, of course."

"Well, then, child, take this along with you, wherever you bide for a time. I'm here and God Almighty's here and things is safe! You get that?"

"Yes, Peneluna."

"Then listen--"The solitary place shall be glad--and a highway shall be there--and a way.'" The confused words fell into a crooning song.

"Solitary Place---" Mary-Clare drifted to it, her eyes closed wearily, but she smiled and Peneluna believed that she had found The Way. Whether it wound back or out--well! Peneluna turned to her task of nursing. She had the gift of healing and she had an understanding heart,

and so she took command.

It was a rough and difficult Way and beset with dangers. A physician came and diagnosed the case.

"Bad fall--almost concussion."

Aunt Polly came and shared the nursing. Jan-an mechanically attended to the house while Uncle Peter took Noreen under his care.

The dull, uneventful days dragged on before Mary-Clare came back to her own. One day she said to Jan-an, "I--I want you to go to the cabin, Jan-an. I have given it--back to God. Close the windows and doors--for winter has come!"

Jan-an nodded. She believed Mary-Clare was "passing out"--she was frightened and superstitious. She did not pause to explain to Peneluna, in the next room, where she was going, but covering her head and shoulders with an old shawl, she rushed forth.

It was biting cold and the dry twigs struck against the girl's face like ice. The ghost-wind added terror to the hour, but Jan-an struggled on.

When she reached the cabin it was nearly dark--the empty room was haunted by memories and there were little scurrying creatures darting about. Standing in the centre of the room, Jan-an raised her clenched hands and extended them as if imploring a Presence. If Mary-Clare had given the Place back to God, then it might be that God was there close and--listening. Jan-an became possessed by the spiritual. She lifted her faithful, yearning eyes and spoke aloud.

"God!" She waited. Then: "God, I'm trusting and I ain't afraid--much! God, listen! I fling this to Your face. Yer raised Lazarus and others from the dead and Mary-Clare ain't dead yet--can't Yer--save her? Hear me! hear me!"

Surely God heard and made answer, for that night Mary-Clare's Way turned back again toward the little yellow house.

When she was able, Aunt Polly insisted that she be moved to the inn.

"It will make less trouble all around and Peneluna will stay on."

So they went to the inn, and the winter settled down upon the Forest and the Point and the mines. The lake was frozen and became a glittering highway; children skated; sleighs darted here and there. The world was shut away and things sank into the old grooves.

During her convalescence Mary-Clare had strange visionary moments. She seemed to be able at times to detach herself from her surroundings and, guided by almost forgotten words of Northrup's, find herself--with him. And always he was alone. She never visualized his mother; she could, thank heaven, eliminate Kathryn.

She was alone with Northrup in a high place. They did not speak or touch each other--but they knew and were glad! There seemed to be mists below them, surrounding them; mists that now and then parted, and she and Northrup would eagerly try to--see things! Mary-Clare imagined herself in that high place as she did Northrup, a personality quite outside her own.

After awhile those moments took more definite shape and form. She and Northrup were trying to see their city in the mists; trying to create their city.

This became a thrilling mental exercise to Mary-Clare, and in time she saw a city. Once or twice she almost felt him as she, that girl of her own creation, reached out to the man whom she loved; who loved her, but who knew, as she did, that love asks renunciation at times as well as acceptance if one were to keep--truth.

Presently Mary-Clare was able to walk in the sunshine and then she often went to the deserted chapel and sat silent for hours.

And there Maclin found her one day--a smiling, ingratiating Maclin. Maclin had been much disturbed by Larry's abrupt and, up to the present, successful escape. Of course Maclin's very one-track mind had at the hour of Rivers's disappearance accounted for things in a primitive way. Northrup had bought Larry off! That was simple enough until Northrup himself disappeared.

At this Maclin was obliged to do some original conjecturing. There must have been a scene--likely enough in that wood cabin. Northrup's woman had got the whip hand and Northrup had accepted terms--leaving Mary-Clare. That would account for the illness.

So far, so good. But with both Larry and Northrup off the ground, the Heathcotes would have to take responsibility. This would be the psychological moment to buy the Point! So Maclin, keeping watch, followed Mary-Clare to chapel island.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed as if surprised to see the girl in the angle of the old church. "Decided to get well, eh? Taking a sun bath?"

Mary-Clare gathered her cloak closer, as if shrinking from the smiling, unwholesome-looking man.

"Yes, I'm getting well fast," she said.

"Hear anything from Larry?" It seemed best to hide his own feelings as to Larry.

"No."

"Some worried, I expect?"

"No, I do not worry much, Mr. Maclin." Mary-Clare was thinking of her old doctor's philosophy. She wasn't going to die, so she must live at once!

"It's a damned mean way to treat a little woman the way you've been treated."

Maclin stepped nearer and his neck wrinkled. Mary-Clare made no reply to this. Maclin was conscious of the back of his neck--it irritated him.

"Left you strapped?" he asked.

"What is that?" Mary-Clare was interested.

"Short of money."

"Oh! no. My wishes are very simple--there's money enough for them."

"See here, Mrs. Rivers, let's get down to business. Of course you know I want the Point. I'll tell you why. The mines are all right *as* mines, but I have some inventions over there ripe for getting into final shape. Now, I haven't told a soul about this before--not even Larry--but I always hold that a woman *can* keep her tongue still. I'm not one of the men who think different. I want to put up a factory on the Point; some model cottages and--and *make* King's Forest. Now what would you take for the Point, and don't be too modest. I don't grind the faces of women."

Maclin smiled. The fat on his face broke into lines--that was the best a smile could do for him. Mary-Clare looked at him, fascinated.

"Speak up, Mrs. Rivers!" This came like a poke in the ribs--Mary-Clare recoiled as from a physical touch.

"I do not own the Point any longer," she said.

"What in thunder!" Maclin now recoiled. "Who then?"

"I gave it to Larry."

"How the devil could Larry pay you for it?"

"Larry gave me no money."

"Do you expect me to believe this, Mrs. Rivers?" The fat now resumed its flaccid lines.

"It doesn't interest me in the least, Mr. Maclin, whether you do or not."

Then Mary-Clare rose, rather weakly, and turned toward the bridge.

And there stood Maclin alone! Like all people who have much that they fear to have known, Maclin considered now how much Larry really knew? Did he know what the Point meant? Had he ever opened letters? This brought the sweat out on Maclin.

Had he copied letters with that devilish trick of his? Could he sell the Point to--to---?

Maclin could bear no longer his unanswered questions. He went back to the mines and was not seen in King's Forest for many a day.

CHAPTER XIX

Once back in the old environment, Northrup went, daily, through the sensations of his haunting dream, without the relief of awakening. The corridor of closed doors was an actuality to him now. Behind them lay experiences, common enough to most men, undoubtedly, but, as yet, unrevealed to him.

In one he had dwelt for a brief time--good Lord! had it only been for weeks? Well, the memory, thank heaven, was secure; unblemished. He vowed that he would reserve to himself the privilege of returning, in thought, to that memory-haunted sanctuary as long as he might live, for he knew, beyond any doubt, that it could not weaken his resolve to take up every duty that he had for a time abandoned. It should be with him as Manly had predicted.

This line of thought widened Northrup's vision and developed a new tie between him and other men. He found himself looking at them in the street with awakened interest. He wondered how many of them, stern, often hard-featured men, had realized their souls in private or public life, and how had they dealt with the revelation? He grew sensitive as to expressions; he believed, after a time, that he could estimate, by the look in the eyes of his fellowmen, by the set of their jaws, whether they had faced the ordeal, as he was trying to do, or had denied the soul acceptance. It was like looking at them through a magnifying lens where once he had regarded them through smoked glass.

And the women? Well, Northrup was very humble about women in those days. He grew restive when he contemplated results and pondered upon the daring that had assumed responsibility where complete understanding had never been attempted. It seemed, in his introspective state, that God, even, had been cheated. Women were, he justly concluded, pretty much a response to ideals created for them, not by them.

Mary-Clare was having her way with Northrup!

Something of all this crept into his book for, after a fortnight at home, he set his own jaw and lips rather grimly, went to his small office room in the tower of a high building, and paid the elevator boy a goodly sum for acting as buffer during five holy hours of each day.

It was like being above the world, sitting in that eyrie nook of his. Northrup often recalled a day, years before, when he had stood on a mountain-peak bathed in stillness and sunlight, watching the dramatic play of the elements on the scene below. Off to the right a violent shower spent itself mercilessly; to the left, rolling mists were parting and revealing pleasant meadows and clustering hamlets. And with this recollection, Northrup closed his eyes and, from his silent watch tower, saw, as no earthly thing could make him see, the hideous tragedy across the seas.

Since his return his old unrest claimed him. It was blotting out all that he had believed was his--ideals; the meaning of life; love; duty; even his city--*his*--was threatened. Nothing any longer seemed safe unless it were battled for. There was something he owed--what was it?

Try as he valiantly did, Northrup could put little thought in his work--it eluded him. He began, at first unconsciously, to plan for going away, while, consciously, he deceived himself by thinking that he was readjusting himself to his own widened niche in the wall!

When Northrup descended from his tower, he became as other men and the grim lines of lips and jaws relaxed. He was with them who first caught the wider vision of brotherhood.

At once, upon his return, he had taken Manly into his confidence about his mother, and that simple soul brushed aside the sentimental rubbish with which Kathryn had cluttered the situation.

"It's all damned rot, Brace," he snapped. "You had a grandmother who did work that was never meant for women to do--laid a carpet or tore one up, I forget which, I heard the story from my father--and she developed cancer--more likely it wasn't cancer--I don't think my father was ever sure. But, good Lord! why should her descendants inherit an accident? I thought I'd talked your mother out of that nonsense."

Thus reassured, Northrup told Kathryn that all the secret diplomacy was to be abandoned and that his mother must work with them.

"But, Brace dear, you don't blame me for my fright? I was so worried!"

"No, little girl, you were a trump. I'll never forget how you stood by!"

So Helen Northrup put herself in Manly's hands--those strong, faithful hands. She went to a hospital for various tests. She was calm but often afraid. She sometimes looked at the pleasant, thronged streets and felt a loneliness, as if she missed herself from among her kind. Manly pooh-poohed and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Women! women!" he ejaculated, but there were hours when he, too, had his fears.

But in the end, black doubt was driven away.

"Of course, my dear lady," Manly said relievedly, patting her hand, "we cannot sprint at fifty-odd as we did at twenty. But a more leisurely gait is enjoyable and we can take time to look around at the pleasant things; do the things we've always wanted to do--but didn't have time to do. Brace must get married--he'll have children and you'll begin all over with them. Then I'd like to take in some music with you this winter. I've rather let my pet fads drop from sheer loneliness. Let's go to light opera--we're all getting edgy over here. I tell you, Helen, it's up to us older fry to steer the youngsters away from what does not concern them."

Poor Manly! He could not deafen his conscience to the growing call from afar and already he saw the trend. So he talked the more as one does to keep his courage up in grave danger.

With his anxiety about Helen Northrup removed, Manly gave attention to Brace. Brace puzzled him. He acknowledged that Northrup had never looked better; the trip had done wonders for him. Yes; that was it--something rather wonderful had been done.

He attacked Northrup one day in his sledge-hammer style.

"What in thunder has got mixed up in your personality?" he asked.

"Oh! I suppose anxiety about Mother, Manly. And the thought that I had slipped from under my responsibilities. Had she died--well! it's all right now."

But this did not satisfy Manly.

"Hang it all, I don't mean anxiety," he blurted out. "The natural stuff I can estimate and label. But you look somehow as if you had been switched off the side track to the main line."

"Or the other way about, old man?" Northrup broke in and laughed.

"No, sir; you're on the main line, all right; but you don't look as if you knew where you were going. Keep the headlight on, Brace."

"Thanks, Manly; I do not fully understand just where I may land, but I'm going slow. Now this--this horror across seas--" Always it was creeping in, these days.

"Oh! that's their business, Northrup. They're always scrapping--this isn't our war, old man," Manly broke in roughly, but Northrup shook his head.

"Manly, I cannot look at it as a war--just a plain war, you know. I've had a queer experience that I will tell you about some day, but it convinced me that above all, and through all, there is a

Power that forces us, often against our best-laid plans, and I believe that Power can force the world as well. Manly, take it from me, this is no scrap over there, it's a soul-finder; a soul-creator, more like. Before we get through, a good many nations and men will be compelled to look, as you once did, at bare, gaunt souls or"--a pause--"set to work and make souls."

Manly twisted in his seat uneasily. Northrup went on.

"Manly"--he spoke quietly, evenly--"do you remember our last talk in this office before I left?"

"Well, some of it. Yes."

"Jogs, you know. Mountain peaks, baby hands, women faces, and souls?"

"Oh! yes. Sick talk to a sick man." Manly snapped his fingers.

"Manly, what did you mean by saying that you had once seen your soul?" Northrup was in dead earnest. Manly swung around in his swivel chair.

"I meant that I saw mine once," he said sharply, definitely.

"How did it look?"

"As if I had neglected it. A shrunken, shivering thing." Manly stopped suddenly, then added briefly: "You cannot starve that part of you, Northrup, without a get-back some day."

"No. And that's exactly what I am up against--the get-back!"

After that talk with Manly, Northrup, singularly enough, felt as if he had arrived at some definite conclusion; had received instructions as to his direction. He was quietly elated and, sitting in his office, experienced the peace and satisfaction of one who spiritually submits to a higher Power.

The globe of light on the peak of his tower seemed, humorously, to have become his headlight--Manly's figures of speech clung--its white and red flashes, its moments of darkness, were like the workings of his mind, but he knew no longer the old depression. He was on the main line, and he had his orders--secret ones, so far, but safe ones.

Kathryn grew more charming as time passed. She did not seem to resent Northrup's detachment, though the tower room lured him dangerously. Once she had hinted that she'd love to see his workshop; hear some of his work. But Northrup had put her off.

"Wait, dear, until I've finished the thing, and then you and I will have a regular gorge of it, up in my tower."

Kathryn at this put up her mouth to be kissed while behind her innocent smile she was picturing the girl of King's Forest in those awful muddy trousers! *She* had heard the book in the making; she had not been pushed aside.

More and more Mary-Clare became a stumbling block to Kathryn. She felt she was a dangerous type; the kind men never could understand, until it was too late, and never forgot. And *Brace* was changed. The subtle unrest did not escape Kathryn.

"I wonder---" And Kathryn did wonder. Wondered most at the possibility of Mary-Clare ever appearing on the surface again. For--and this was a humiliating thought to Kathryn--she realized she was no match for that girl of the Forest!

However, Kathryn, as was her wont when things went wrong, pulled down the shade mentally, as once she had done physically, against the distasteful conditions *Brace* had evolved.

And there was much to be attended to--so Kathryn, with great efficiency, set to work. She must make provision for her aunt's future. This was not difficult, for poor Anna was so relieved that any provision was to be considered, that she accepted Kathryn's lowest figure.

Then there was Arnold. Sandy, at the moment, was disgusted at Northrup's return. It interfered with his plans. Sandy had a long and keen scent. The trouble overseas had awakened a response in him, he meant to serve the cause--but in his own way. Secretly he was preparing. He was buying up old vessels, but old vessels were expensive and the secrecy prevented his borrowing money. He wanted to get married, too. Kathryn, with only his protection and he with Kathryn's little fortune, would create, at the moment, a situation devoutly to be desired.

Kathryn had to deal with this predicament cautiously. Sandy was so horribly matter-of-fact--not a grain of Northrup's idealism about him! But for that very reason, in the abominably upset state of the world, he was not lightly to be cast on the scrap-heap. One never could tell! *Brace* might act up sentimentally, but Sandy could be depended upon always--he was a rock!

So Kathryn, embroidering her wedding linen--for she meant to be married soon--prayed for guidance.

On the whole, the situation was most gratifying. No wonder Kathryn felt well pleased with herself and more fully convinced that, with such wits as hers, life was reduced to a common factor. Once married she would be able to draw a long breath. Marriage was such a divine institution for women. It gave them such a stranglehold--with the right sort of men--and *Brace* was the right sort.

To be sure he was not entirely satisfying at the present moment. His attentions smacked too much of duty. He could not deceive Kathryn. He sent flowers and gifts in such profusion that they took on the aspect of blood money. Well, marriage would adjust all that.

Helen urged an early date for the wedding and even Manly, who did not like Kathryn, gripped

her as the saviour of a critical situation.

King's Forest had had a sinister effect upon Manly; it made him doubt himself.

And so life, apparently, ran along smoothly on the surface. It was the undercurrents that were really carrying things along at a terrific rate.

It was in his tower room that most of Northrup's struggle went on. Daily he confronted that which Was and Had To Be! With all his old outposts being taken day by day, he was left bare and unprotected for the last assault. And it came!

It came as death does, quite naturally for the most part, and found him--ready. Like the dying--or the reborn--Northrup put his loved ones to the acid test. His mother would understand. Kathryn? It was staggering, at this heart-breaking moment, to discover, after all the recent proving of herself, that Kathryn resolved into an Unknown Quantity.

This discovery filled Northrup with a sense of disloyalty and unreality. What right had he to permit the girl who was to be his wife, the mother of his children, to be relegated to so ignominious a position? Had she not proved herself to him in faithfulness and understanding? Had she not, setting aside her own rights, looked well to his?

The days dragged along and each one took its toll of Northrup's vitality while it intensified that crusading emotion in his soul.

He did not mention all this to those nearest him until the time for departure came, and he tried, God knew, to work while he performed the small, devotional acts to his mother and Kathryn that would soon stand forth, to one of them at least, as the most courageous acts of his life.

He had come to that part of his book where his woman must take her final stand--the stand that Mary-Clare had so undermined. If he finished the book before he went--and he decided that it might be possible--his woman must rise supreme over the doubts with which she had been invested. But when he came to the point, the decision, if he followed his purpose, looked cheap and commonplace--above everything, obvious. In his present mood his book would be just--a book; not the Big Experience.

This struggle to finish his work in the face of the stubborn facts at moments obliterated the crusading spirit; the doubts of Kathryn and even Mary-Clare's pervading insistence. He hated to be beaten at his own job.

Love's supreme sacrifice and glory, as portrayed in woman--*must* be man's ideal, of course!

The ugly business of the world had to be got through, and man often had to set love aside--for honour. "But, good Lord!" Northrup argued, apparently to his useless right hand, what would become of the spiritual, if woman got to setting up little gods and bowing down before them? Why, she would forego her God-given heritage. To her, love must be all. Above all else. Why, the very foundations of life were founded upon that. What could be higher to a woman? Man could look out for the rest, but he must be sure of his woman's love! The rest would be in their own hands--that was their individual affair.

And then, at this crucial moment, Mary-Clare *would* always intrude.

"It's what one does to love!" That was her stern ultimatum. "Love's best proof might be renunciation, not surrender!"

"Nonsense!" Northrup flung back. "How then could a man be sure? No book with such an ending would stand a chance."

"You must not harm your book by such a doubt. That book must be *true*, and you know the truth. Women must be made glad by it, men stronger because someone understands and is brave enough to say it."

But Northrup steeled his heart against this command. He meant to finish his book; finish it with a flaming proof that, while men offered their lives for duty, women offered theirs for love and did not count the cost, like misers or--lenders.

One afternoon Northrup, the ink still wet upon the last sheet of his manuscript, leaned back wearily in his chair. He could not conquer Mary-Clare. He let his eyes rest upon his awakening city. For him it rose at night. In the day it belonged to others--the men and women, passing to and fro with those strange eyes and jaws. But when they all passed to their homes, then the lone city that was his started like a thing being born upon a hill.

It may have been at one of these strained moments that Northrup slept; he was never able to decide. He seemed to hold to the twinkling lights; he thought he heard sounds--the elevator just outside his door; the rising wind.

However that may be, as clearly as any impression ever fixed itself upon his consciousness, he saw Mary-Clare beside him in her stained and ugly garb, her lovely hair ruffled as if she had been travelling fast, and her great eyes turned upon him gladly. She was panting a bit; smiling and thankful that she had found him, at last in his city!

It was like being with her on that day when they stood on the mountain near her cabin and talked.

Northrup was spellbound. He understood, though no word passed between him and the girl so close to him. She did not try to touch him, but she did, presently, move a step nearer and lay her little work-worn hand upon the pile of manuscript in that quaint way of hers that had so often made Northrup smile. It was a reverent touch.

Standing so, she sealed from him those last chapters! She would not argue or be set aside--she claimed her woman-right; the right to the truth as some women saw it, as more would see it; as, God willing, Northrup himself would see it some day! He would know that it was because of love that she had turned him and herself to duty.

Northrup suddenly found himself on his feet.

The little room was dark; the city was blazing about him--under him. His city! His hand lay upon his manuscript.

Quietly he took it up and locked it in his safe. Slowly, reverently, he set the bare room in order without turning on the electricity. He worked in the dark but his vision was never clearer. He went out, locked the door, as one does upon a chamber, sacred and secret.

He did not think of Mary-Clare, his mother, or Kathryn--he was setting forth to do that which had to be done; he was going to give what was his to give to that struggle across the ocean for right; the proving of right.

All along, his unrest had been caused by the warring elements in himself--there was only one way out--he must take it and be proved as the world was being proved.

CHAPTER XX

"Mother, I must go!"

Helen Northrup did not tremble, but she looked white, thin-lipped.

"You have given me the twenty-four hours, son. You have weighed the question--it is not emotional excitement?"

"No, Mother, it is conscience. I'm not in the least under an illusion. If I thought of this thing as war--a mere fight--I know I would be glad to avail myself of any honourable course and remain here. But it's bigger than war, that Thing that is deafening and blinding the world. Sometimes"--Northrup went over to the window and looked out into the still white mystery of the first snowstorm--"sometimes I think it is God Almighty's last desperate way to awaken us."

Helen Northrup came to the window and stood beside her son. She did not touch him; she stood close--that was all.

"I cannot see God in this," she whispered. "God could have found another way. I have--lost God. I fear most of us have."

"Perhaps we never had Him," Northrup murmured.

"But there *is* God--somewhere." Helen's voice quivered. "I shall always be near you, beloved, always, and perhaps--God will."

"I know that, Mother. And I want you to know that if this call wasn't mightier than anything else in all the world, I would not leave you."

"Yes, I know that, dear son."

For a moment they stood in silence by the window and then turned, together, to the fireside.

They were in Helen's writing-room. The room where so often she had struggled to put enough life into her weak little verses to send them winging on their way. The drawers of her desk were full of sad fancies that had been still-born, or had come fluttering back to her ark without even the twig of hope to cheer her. But at all this she had never repined--she had her son! And now? Well, he was leaving her. Might never--

Sitting in the warmth and glow the woman looked at her son. With all the yearning of her soul she wanted to keep him; she had so little; so little. And then she recognized, as women do, in the Temple where the Most High speaks to them, that if he turned a deaf ear to the best that was in him, she could not honour him.

"You have been happy, dear son? I mean you have had a happy life on the whole?"

Helen had wanted that above all else. His life had been so short--it might be so soon over, and the trivial untalked-of things rose sharply now to the surface.

"Yes, Mother. Far too happy and easy."

"I've been thinking." Helen's thought went slowly over the backward road--she must not break! But she must go back to the things they had left unspoken. "I've been thinking, during the last twenty-four hours, of all the happenings, dear, that I wish had been different. Your father, Brace! I--I tried not to deprive you of your father--I knew the cost. It--it wasn't all his fault, dear; it was no real fault of either of us; it was my misfortune, you see--he was asking what--what he had a perfect right to ask--but I was, well, I had nothing to give him that he wanted."

Northrup went across the space between him and his mother and laid his hand upon hers.

"Mother, I understand. Lately I have felt a new sympathy for Father, and a new contempt. He missed a lot that was worth while, but he did not know. It was damnable; he might have--kept you."

"No, Brace. It is the world's thought. I have never been bitter. I only wish he could have been happy--after--after he went away."

"And he wasn't?" This had never been discussed between them.

"No, dear. He married a woman who seemed to be what he wanted. She wearied of him. He died a lonely, a bitter man. I was saved the bitterness, at least, and I had you."

Another pause. Then:

"Brace, I know it will seem foolish, but perhaps when you are far away it won't seem so foolish. I want to tell you, dear, that I wish I had never spoken a harsh word to you. Life hurts so at the best--many women are feeling this as I do, dear. Once--you must humour me, Brace--once, after I punished you, I regretted it. I asked your pardon and you said, 'Don't mention it, Mother, I understood.' I want you to say it now, son; it will be such a comfort."

"I believe, God hearing me, Mother, that I have understood; have always known that you were the best and dearest of mothers."

"Thank you."

"And now, Mother, there is one thing more. We may not have another opportunity for a real house-cleaning. It's about King's Forest."

Helen started, but she stiffened at once.

"Yes, Brace," she said simply.

"There is a girl, a woman there. Such things as relate to that woman and me often happen to men and women. It's what one does to the happening that counts. I realize that my life has had much in it; but much was left out of it. Much that is common stuff to most fellows; they take it in portions. It came all at once to me, but she was strong enough, fine enough to help me; not drift with me. I wanted you to know."

"Thank you. I understand. Is there anything you would like to have me do?"

"No. Nothing, Mother. It is all right; it had to happen, I suppose. I wanted you to know. We did not dishonour the thing--she's quite wonderful." A pause; then:

"She has a brute of a husband--I hope I freed her of him, in a way; I'm glad to think of that now. She has a child, a little girl, and there were some dead children."

This detail seemed tragically necessary to tell; it seemed to explain all else.

"And now, Mother, I must go around to Kathryn's. Do not sit up, dear. I'll come to your room."

"Very well." Then Helen stood up and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Some sons and daughters," she said slowly, convincingly, "learn how to bear life, in part, from their parents--I have learned from my son."

Then she raised her hands and drew his head down to hers and rested her cheek against his. Without a word more Northrup left the house. He was deeply moved by the scene through which he and his mother had just passed. It had consisted of small and trivial things; of overwhelmingly big things, but it had been marked by a complete understanding and had brought them both to a point where they could separate with faith and hope.

But as Northrup neared Kathryn's house this exalted feeling waned. Again he was aware of the disloyal doubt of Kathryn that made him hesitate and weigh his method of approach. He stood, before touching the bell of the Morris house, and shook the light snow from his coat; he was glad of delay. When at last he pushed the button he instinctively braced. The maid who admitted him told him that he was to go to the library.

This was the pleasantest room in the house, especially at night. The lighting was perfect; the old books gave forth a welcoming fragrance and, to-night, a generous cannel coal fire puffed in rich, glowing bursts of heat and colour upon the hearth. Kathryn was curled up in the depths of a leather chair, her pretty blonde head just showing above the top. She did not get up but called merrily:

"Here, dear! Come and be comfy. This is a big chair and a very little me."

Northrup came around in front of the chair, his back to the fire, and looked down upon the small figure. The blue blur of the evening gown, the exquisite whiteness of arms, neck, and face sank into his consciousness. Unconsciously he was fixing scenes in his memory, as one secures pictures in a scrap-book, for the future.

"Been dining out, dear?"

The dress suggested this, but Kathryn was alert.

"Don't be a silly old cave thing, Brace. One cannot throw an old friend overboard in cold blood, now can one? Sandy is going away for a week, but I told him to-night that never, never again would I dine with him alone. Now will you be good?"

Still Northrup did not smile. He was not concerned about Arnold, but he seemed such a nuisance at this moment.

Kathryn, regarding Northrup's face, sat up and her eyes widened.

"What's the matter, Brace?" she asked, and the hard, metallic ring was in her voice. Northrup misunderstood the change. He felt that he had startled her. He sat down upon the arm of the chair.

"Poor little girl," he whispered. Kathryn also misunderstood, she nestled against him.

"Big man," she murmured, "he *is* going to be nice. Kiss me here--close behind my right ear--always and always that is going to be just your place."

Northrup did not seem to hear. He bent closer until his face pressed the soft, scented hair, but he did not kiss the spot dedicated to him. Instead he said:

"Darling, I am going away!"

"Away--where?" Kathryn became rigid.

"Overseas."

"Overseas? What for, in heaven's name?"

"Oh! anything they'll let me do. I'm going as soon as I can be sent--but--"

"You mean, without any reason whatever, you're going to go over there?"

"Hardly without something that stands for reason, Kathryn."

"But no one, not even Doctor Manly, thinks that it is our fight, Brace. The men who have gone are simply adventurers; men who love excitement or men who want to cut responsibilities and don't dare confess it."

Kathryn's face flamed hot.

"Their lives must be pretty damnable," Northrup broke in, "if they take such a method to fling them aside. Do try to understand, dear; our women must, you know." There was pleading in the words.

Then by one of those sudden reversions of her nimble wits, Kathryn recalled things she had heard recently--and immediately she took the centre of her well-lighted stage, and horrible as it might seem, saw herself, a ravishing picture in fascinating widow's weeds! While this vision was holding, Kathryn clung to Northrup and was experiencing actual distress--not ghoulish pleasure.

"Oh! you must not leave me," she quivered.

"You will help me, Kathryn; be a woman like my mother?" Again Northrup pleaded. This was unfortunate. It steadied Kathryn, but it hardened her.

"You want me to marry you at once, Brace?" she whispered.

"No, dear. That would not be fair to you. I want you to understand; I want to know that you will--will keep Mother company. That is all, until I come home. I could not feel justified in asking a woman to marry such a--such a chance as I am about to be."

Now there was cause for what Kathryn suddenly felt, but not the cause she suspected. Had Northrup loved deeply, faithfully, understandingly, he might, as others did, see that to the right woman the "chance," as he termed himself, would become her greatest glory and hope, but as it was Northrup considered only Kathryn's best good and, gropingly, he realized that her interests and his were not, at the present, identical.

But Kathryn, her ever-present jealousy and apprehension rising, was carried from her moorings. She recalled the evidences of "duty" in Northrup's attitude toward her since his return from King's Forest; his abstraction and periods of low spirits.

"He cannot stand it any longer," she thought resentfully; "he's willing to do anything, take any chance."

A hot wave of anger enveloped Kathryn, but she did not speak.

"Kathryn"--Northrup grew restive at her silence--"haven't you anything to say to me? Something I can remember--over there? I'd like to think of you as I see you now, little, pretty, and loving. The blue gown, the jolly fire, this fine old room--I reckon there will be times when my thoughts will cling to the old places and my own people rather fiercely."

"What can I say, Brace? You never see *my* position. Men are selfish always, even about their horrible fights. What do they care about their women, when the call of blood comes? Oh! I hate it all, I hate it! Everything upset--men coming back, heaven only knows how! even if they come at all--but we women must let them go and *smile* so as to send them off unworried. We must stay home and be *nothings* until the end and then take what's left--joyfully, gratefully--oh! I hate it all."

Northrup got up and stood again with his back to the fire. He loomed rather large and dark before Kathryn's angry eyes. She feared he was going to say the sentimental regulation thing, but he did not. Sorrowfully he said:

"What you say, dear, is terribly true. It isn't fair nor decent and there are times when I feel only shame because, after all these centuries, we have thought out no better way; but, Kathryn, women are taking part in this trouble--perhaps *you*--"

"You mean that *I* may go over into that shambles--if I want to?" With this Kathryn sprang to her

feet. "Well, thanks! I do not want to. I'm not the kind of girl who takes her dissipation that way. If I ever let go, I'll take my medicine and not expect to be shielded by this sentimentality."

"Kathryn, how can you? My dear, my dear! Say what you want to about my folly--men's mistakes--but do not speak so of your--sisters!"

"Sisters?" Kathryn laughed her mirthless but musical laugh. "You *are* funny, Brace!"

Then, as was her way when she lost control, Kathryn made straight for the rocks while believing she was guided by divine intuition. She faced Northrup, looking up at him from her lower level.

"I think I understand the whole matter," she said slowly, all traces of excitement gone. "I am going to prove it. Will you marry me before you go?"

"No, Kathryn. This is a matter of principle with me."

"You think they might not let you go--you'd have to provide for my protection?"

"No, I am not afraid of that. You'd be well provided for; I would go under any circumstances, but I will not permit you to take a leap in the dark."

"That sounds very fine, but *I* do not believe it!"

The black wings that poor Jan-an had suspected under Kathryn's fine plumage were flapping darkly now. Kathryn was awed by Northrup's silence and aloofness. She was afraid, but still angry. What was filling her own narrow mind, she believed, was filling Northrup's and she lost all sense of proportion.

"Is *she* going over there?" she asked.

Northrup, if possible, looked more bewildered and dazed.

"She--whom do you mean, Kathryn?"

"Oh! I never meant to tell you! You drive me to it, Brace. I always meant to blot it out---"

Kathryn got no further just then. Northrup came close to her and with folded arms fixed his eyes upon her flushed face.

"Kathryn, you're excited; you've lost control of yourself, but there's something under all this that we must get at. Just answer my questions. Whom do you mean--by 'she'?"

Kathryn mentally recoiled and with her back to her wall replied, out of the corner of her mouth:

"That girl in King's Forest!"

From sheer astonishment Northrup drew back as from a blow. Kathryn misunderstood and gained courage.

"I forgave it because I love you, Brace." She gathered her cheap little charms together--her sex appeals. "I understood from the moment I saw her."

"When did you see her? Where?"

Northrup had recovered himself; he was able to think. He knew he must act quickly, emphatically, and he generously tried to be just.

Keen to take advantage of what she believed was guilt, Kathryn responded, dragging her lures along with her.

"Please, dear Brace, do not look at me so sternly. I could not help what happened and I suffered so, although I never meant to let you know. You see, I walked in the woods that day that I went to King's Forest to tell you about your mother. A queer-looking girl told me that you lived at the inn, but were then in the woods. I went to find you; to meet you--can you not understand?"

The tears stood in Kathryn's eyes, her mouth quivered. Northrup softened.

"Go on, Kathryn. I *do* understand."

"Well, I came to a cabin in the woods, I don't know why, but something made me think it was yours. You would be so likely to take such a place as that, dear. I went in--to wait for you; to sit and think about you, to calm myself--and then---"

"Yes, Kathryn!" Northrup was seeing it all--the cabin, the silent red-and-gold woods.

"And then--she came! Oh! Brace, a man can never know how a woman feels at such a moment--you see there were some sheets of your manuscript on the table--I was looking at them when the girl came in. Brace, she was quite awful; she frightened me terribly. She asked who I was and I told her--I thought that would at least make her see my side; explain things--but it did not! She was--she was"--Kathryn ventured a bolder dash--"she was quite violent. I cannot remember all she said--she said so much--a girl does when she realizes what *she* must have realized. Oh! Brace, I tried to be kind, but I had to take your part and she turned me out!"

In all this Northrup felt his way as one does along a narrow passage beset on either side with dangers. Characteristically he saw his own wrong in originally creating the situation. Not for an instant did he doubt Kathryn's story; indeed, she rose in his regard; for he felt for her deeply. He had, unwittingly, set a trap for her innocent, girlish feet; brought her to bay with what she could not possibly understand; and the belief that she had been merciful, had accepted, in silence, at a time when his trouble absorbed her, touched and humiliated him; and yet, try as he did to consider only Kathryn, he could not disregard Mary-Clare. He could not picture her in a coarse rage; the idea was repellent, but he acknowledged that the dramatic moment, lived

through by two stranger-women with much at stake, was beyond his powers of imagination. The great thing that mattered now was that his duty, since a choice must be made, was to Kathryn. By every right, as he saw it, she must claim his allegiance. And yet, what was there to be done?

Northrup was silent; his inability to express himself condemned him in her eyes, and yet, strangely enough, he had never been more desirable to her.

"Marry me, dear. Let me prove my love to you. No matter what lies back there, I forgive everything! That is what love means to a woman like me."

Love! This poor, shabby counterfeit.

With a sickening sense of repulsion Northrup drew back, and maddeningly his book, not Kathryn, seemed to fill his aching brain. With this conception of love revealed--how blindly he had misunderstood. He tried to speak; did speak at last--he heard his words, but was not conscious of their meaning.

"You are wrong, child. Whatever folly was committed in King's Forest was mine, not that girl's. I suppose I was a bit mad without knowing it, but I will not accept your sacrifice, Kathryn, I will not ask for forgiveness. When I come home, if you still love me, I will devote my life to you. We will start afresh--the whole world will."

"You are going at once?" Kathryn clutched at what was eluding her.

"Yes, my dear."

"And you won't marry me? Won't--prove to me?"

"No."

"Oh! how can you leave me to think---"

"Think what, Kathryn?"

"Oh! things--about her. It would be such a proof of what you've just said--if only you would marry me now."

"Kathryn, I cannot. I am--I wish that you could understand--I am stepping out into the dark. I must go alone."

"That is absurd, Brace. Absurd." A baffled, desperate note rang in Kathryn's voice. It was not for Northrup, but for her first sense of failure. Then she looked up. All the resentment gone from her face, she was the picture of despair.

"I will wait for you, Brace. I will prove to you what a woman's real love is!"

So, cleverly, did she bind what she intuitively felt was the highest in Northrup. And he bent and laid his lips on the smooth girlish forehead, sorrowfully realizing how little he had to offer.

A few moments later Northrup found himself on the street. The snow was falling thicker, faster. It had the smothering quality that is so mysterious. People thudded along as if on padded feet; the lights were splashed with clinging flakes and gleamed yellow-red in the whiteness. Sounds were muffled; Northrup felt blotted out.

He loved the sensation--it was like a great, absorbing Force taking him into its control and erasing forever the bungling past. He purposely drifted for an hour in the storm. He was like a moving part of it, and when at last he reached home, he stood in the vestibule for many moments extricating himself--it was more than shaking the snow off. He felt singularly free.

Once within the house, he went directly to his mother's room. She was lying on a couch by the fire. In the shelter of her warm, quiet place Helen seemed to have gained what Brace had won in the storm. She was smiling, almost eager.

"Yes, dear?" she said.

Northrup sat down in the chair that was his by his mother's hearth.

"Kathryn wanted to marry me, Mother, at once."

"That would be like her, bless her heart!"

"I could not accept the sacrifice, Mother."

"That would be like you--but is it a sacrifice?"

"It seems so to me."

"You see, son, to many women this is the supreme offering. All *they* can give, vicariously, at this great demanding hour."

"Women must learn to stop that rubbish, Mother. We men must refuse it."

"Why, Brace!" Then: "Are you quite, quite sure it was all for Kathryn, son?"

"No, partly for myself; but that must include and emphasize Kathryn's share."

"I see--at least I think I do."

"But you have faith, Mother?"

"Yes, faith! Surely, faith."

After a silence, broken only by the sputtering of the fire and that soft, mystic pattering of the

snow on the window glass, Northrup asked gently:

"And you, Mother, what will you do? I cannot bear to think of you waiting here alone."

Helen Northrup rose slowly from the couch; her long, loose gown trailed softly as she walked to the fireplace and stood leaning one elbow on the shelf.

"I'm not going to--wait, dear, in the sense you mean. I'm going to work and get ready for your return."

"Work?" Northrup looked anxious. Helen smiled down upon him.

"While you have been preparing," she said, "so have I. There is something for me to do. My poor little craft that I have potted at, keeping it alive and praying over it--my writing job, dear; I have offered for service. It has been accepted. It is my great secret--I've kept it for you as my last gift. When you come home, I'll tell you about it. While you are away you must think of me, busy--busy!"

Then she bent and laid her pale fine face against the dark bowed head.

"You are tired, dear, very, very tired. You must go to bed and rest--there is so much to do; so much."

CHAPTER XXI

In King's Forest many strange and awe-inspiring things had happened--but, as far as the Forest people knew, they were so localized that, like a cancer, they were eating in, deeper and deeper--to the death.

The winter, with its continuous snow and cruel ice, had obliterated links; only certain centres glowed warm and alive, though even they ached with the pain of blows they had endured.

The Mines. The Point. The Inn. The Little Yellow House. These throbbed and pulsed and to them, more often than of old--or so it seemed--the bell in the deserted chapel sent its haunting messages--messages rung out by unseen hands.

"There's mostly lost winds this winter," poor Jan-an whimpered to Peneluna. "I have feelin's most all the time. I'm scared early and late, and that cold my bones jingle."

Peneluna, softened and more silent than ever, comforted the girl, wrapped her in warmer clothes, and sent her scurrying across the frozen lake to the yellow house.

"And don't come back till spring!" she commanded.

"Spring?" Jan-an paused as she was strapping on an old pair of skates that once belonged to Philander Sniff. "Spring? Gawd!"

It was a terrific winter. The still, intense kind that grips every snowstorm as a miser does his money, hiding it in secret places of the hills where the divine warmth of the sun cannot find it.

The wind, early in November, set in the north! Occasionally the "ha'nt wind" troubled it; wailed a bit and caught the belfry bell, and then gave up and sobbed itself away.

At the inn a vague something--was it old age or lost faith?--was trying to conquer Peter's philosophy and Aunt Polly's spiritual vision. The *Thing*, whatever it was, was having a tussle, but it made its marks. Peter sat oftener by the fire with Ginger edging close to the leg that the gander had once damaged and which, now, acted as an indicator for Peter's moods. When he did not want to talk his "leg ached." When his heart sank in despair his "leg ached." But Polly, a little thinner, a little more dim as to far-off visions, caught every mood of Peter's and sent it back upon him like a boomerang. She met his silent hours with such a flare of talk that Peter responded in self-defence. His black hours she clutched desperately and held them up for him to look at after she had charged them with memories of goodness and love.

As for herself? Well, Aunt Polly nourished her own brave spirit by service and an insistent, demanding cry of justice.

"'Tain't fair and square to hold anything against the Almighty," she proclaimed, "till you've given Him a chance to show what He did things for."

Polly waxed eloquent and courageous; she kept her own faith by voicing it to others; it grew upon reiteration.

Peter was in one of his worst combinations--silence and low spirits--when Polly entered the kitchen one early afternoon. A glance at the huddling form by the red-hot range had the effect of turning Polly into steel. She looked at Ginger, who reflected his master's moods pathetically, and her steel became iron.

"I suppose if I ask you, Peter, how you're feeling," she said slowly, calmly, "you'll fling your leg in my face! It's monstrous to see how an able-bodied man can use any old lie to save his countenance."

"My leg---" Peter began, but Polly stopped him. She had hung her coat and hood in the closet and came to the fire, patting her thin hair in order and then stretching her small, blue-veined hands to the heat.

"Don't leg me, Peter Heathcote, I'm terrible ashamed of you. Terrible. So long as you *have* legs, brother--and you *have*!--I say use 'em. Half the troubles in this world are *think troubles*, laid to legs and backs and what not."

"Where you been?" Peter eyed the stern little face glowering at him. "You look tuckered."

"I wasn't tuckered until I set my eyes on you, Peter. I've been considerable set up to-day. I went to Mary-Clare's. She is mighty heartening. She's gathered all the children she can get and she's teaching them. She's mimicking the old doctor's plan--making him live again, she calls it--and the Lord knows we need someone in the Forest who doesn't set chewing his own troubles, but gets out and does things!"

Peter winced and Polly rambled on:

"It's really wonderful the way that slip of a thing handles those children. She has made the yellow house like a fairy story--evergreens, red leaves and berries hanging about, and all the dogs with red-ribbon collars. They look powerful foolish, but they don't look like poor Ginger, who acts as if he was being smothered!"

Peter regarded the dog by his side and remarked sadly:

"I guess we better change this dog's name. Ginger is like an insult to him. Ginger! Lord-a-mighty, there ain't no ginger left in him."

"Peter, you're all wrong. There are times when I think Ginger is more gingery than ever. You don't have to dash around after yer tail to prove yer ginger, the thinking part of you can be terrible nimble even when yer bones stiffen up. Ginger does things, brother, that sometimes makes my flesh creepy. Do you know what he does when he can get away from you?"

"No." Peter's hair sprang up; his face reddened. Polly noted the good signs and took heart.

"Why, he joins Mary-Clare's dogs and fetches the littlest children to the yellow house. Carries lunch pails, pulls sleds, and I've seen that little crippled tot of Jonas Mills' on Ginger's back. Ain't that ginger fur yer? I tell you, Peter, it's you as ails that dog--he's what you make him. I reckon the Lord, that isn't unmindful of sparrows, takes notice of dogs." Then suddenly, Polly demanded: "Peter, what is it, just?"

Polly drew her diminutive rocker to the stove and settled back against its gay cretonne cushions--a vivid bird of Paradise flamed just where her aching head rested.

"Well, Polly"--Peter slapped the leg that he had lied about--"you and I came to the Forest half a century ago and felt real perky. We thought, under God, we'd make the Forest something better; the people more like people. We came from a city with all sorts of patterns of folks; we had ideas. The Forest gave me health and we were grateful and chesty. It all keeps coming back and--and swamping me."

"Yes, brother, and what else?"

"At first we did seem to count, under God, of course. We shut up the bar and fixed up the inn and we thought we was caring for folks and protecting 'em." Peter gulped.

"I guess the Lord can care for His own, Peter," Polly remarked fiercely.

"Then Maclin came!" Peter groaned out the words, for this was the crux of the matter.

"Yes--Maclin came." Aunt Polly wiped her eyes. "And I think, looking back, that something had to happen to wake us up! Maclin was a tester."

Peter gave a rumbling laugh.

"Maclin a tester!" he repeated. "Lord, Polly, yer notions are more messing than clearing."

"Well, anyway, Peter Heathcote, Maclin came, and this I do say: places are like folks--if their constitutions are all right, they don't take disease. Maclin was a disease, and we caught him! He settled on us and we hadn't vim enough to know and understand what he was. If it hadn't been Maclin it would have been another. As things are I do feel that Maclin has cleared our systems! The folks were wakened by him as nothing in the world could have wakened them."

Peter was not listening, he was thinking aloud.

"All our years wasted! We felt so sure that we was capable that we just let folks fall into the hands of that evil man. Think of anything, bearing the image of God taking advantage of simple, honest people and letting them into what he did!"

"I never did think Maclin was in the image of God, Peter. All God's children ain't the spitting image of Him. And Maclin certainly did us a good turn when he found iron on the Point. The iron's here--if he ain't!"

"He meant to turn that and his damned inventions against us. Betray us to an enemy! And us just sitting and letting him do it!"

"Well, he didn't do it!" Polly snapped. "And it seems like God is giving us another chance; same as He is the world."

Peter got up and stumped noisily about the kitchen much to Ginger's surprise and discomfort.

"We're old, Polly," he muttered; "the heart's taken out of us. We led 'em astray because we didn't lead 'em right."

"I'm not old." Polly looked comically defiant. "And my heart's where it belongs and on the job. It's shame to us, Peter, if we don't use every scrap that's left of us to undo the failings of the past."

"And that night!" Peter groaned, recalling the night of Maclin's arrest. "That's what comes of being false to yer trust. Terrible, terrible! Twombly standing over Maclin with his gun after finding him flashing lights to God knows who, and then those government men hauling things out of his bags--why, Polly, in the middle of some black nights I get to seeing the look on Maclin's face when he was caught!"

"Now, brother, do be sensible and wipe the sweat off yer forehead. This room is stifling. Can't you see, Peter, that at a time like that the Lord had to use what He had, and there was only us to use? Better Twombly's gun than Maclin's, and you know, full well, they found two ugly looking guns in Maclin's bag all packed with papers and pictures of the mines and bits of our own rock--what showed iron. Peter, I ain't a bloodthirsty woman and the Lord knows I don't hunger for my fellow's vitals, but I'm willing to give Maclin up to a righteous God. The Lord knows we couldn't deal with the like of him."

"But, Polly"--poor Peter's humanity had received a terrible jog--"the look on Maclin's face--when he was caught!"

"Well! he ought to have had a look!" Polly snapped. "Several of us gave him looks. I remember that the Point men looked just as if it was resurrection day. They stiffened up and I say, Peter Heathcote, their backs ain't slumped yet--oh! if only we could keep them stiff! It was an awful big thing to happen to a little place like the Forest. It's terrible suggestive!"

But Peter could not be diverted.

"They were fearful rough with him--he, a trapped creature, Polly! I always feel as if one oughtn't to harry a trapped thing. That's not God's way. It was all my fault! What was I a magistrate for--and just standing by--staring?"

"Well, he should have held still--he put up fight. Brother, you make me indignant."

"They mauled him, Polly, mauled him. And they took him--to what?"

Polly got up.

"Peter," she said, "you're a sick man or you wouldn't be such a fool. I always did hold that your easy-going ways might lead you into mush instead of clear vision, and it certainly looks as if I was right. What you need is a good spring tonic and more faith in God. Maclin was leading us into--what? Hasn't he sent the old doctor's boy into--what? The Almighty has got all sorts to deal with--and he's got Maclin, but we've got what's left. Peter, I put it up to you--what are we going to do about it?"

"What can we do?" Peter placed his two hands on his wide-spread knees--for he had dropped exhausted into his chair. "Has any one heard of Larry?"

This sudden question roused Aunt Polly; she had hoped it would not be asked.

"Yes, Peter. Twombly has," she faltered.

"Where is he?" Peter's mouth gaped.

"The letter said that when he came back we'd be proud of him and"--Polly choked--"he begged our pardons--for Maclin. He's gone to that war--over there. He said it was all he could do--with himself, to prove against Maclin."

A silence fell in the warm, sunny room. Then Polly spoke with a catch in her voice:

"Twombly and Peneluna hold that we better not tell Mary-Clare. Better give Larry a chance to do his proving--before we get any hopes or fears to acting up."

"I guess that's sensible," Peter nodded, "he mightn't do it, you know."

Polly was watching her brother. She saw the dejection dropping from his face like a mask; the hypnotism of fear and repulsion was losing its hold.

"It's powerful hot here!" Peter muttered, wiping his face. "And what in thunder ails that dog?"

Ginger was certainly acting queer. He was circling around, sniffing, sniffing, his nose in the air, his tail wagging. He edged over to the door and smelt at the crack.

"Fits?" Peter looked concerned. But Polly had an inspiration.

"I believe, Peter," she said solemnly, "Ginger smells--spring! I thought I did myself as I came along. There were fluffy green edges by the water. I do love edges, Peter! Let's open the door wide, brother. We get so used to winter, and live so close, that sometimes we don't know spring is near. But it is, Peter, it is always on the edge of winter and God has made dogs terrible knowing. See! There, now, Ginger old fellow, what's the matter?"

Polly flung the door open and Ginger gave a glad cry and leaped out. A soft breath of air touched the two gentle old people in the doorway and a fragrance of young, edgy things thrilled them.

"Peter dear, spring is here!" Polly said this like a prayer.

"Spring!" Peter's voice echoed the sound. Then he turned to the closet for his coat and hat.

"Where you going, brother?"

The big bulky figure, ready for a new adventure, turned at the door.

"Just going to the Point and stand by! We must take care of the old doc's leavings. The iron, that boy of his, and--the rest. Come on, Ginger."

Polly watched the two pass from sight and then she readjusted her spectacles to the far-off angle.

And while this was occurring at the inn there was a tap on the door of the yellow house, and with its welcoming characteristic in full play, the door swung in, leaving a tall woman on the threshold flushed and apologetic.

"I never saw such a responsive door!" she said. "I really knocked very gently. Please tell me how far it is to the inn?"

Mary-Clare, her little group of children about her, looked up and smiled. The smile and the eyes made the stranger's breath come a bit quicker.

"Just three miles to the south." Mary-Clare came close. "You are walking? I will send my little girl with you. Noreen?"

But Jan-an was holding Noreen back.

"She's one of them other children of Eve!" she cautioned. "Don't forget the other one!"

"Thank you so much," the stranger was speaking. "But may I rest here for a moment? These children--is it a school."

"A queer one, I'm afraid. We're all teachers, all pupils--even the dogs."

Mary-Clare looked at her small group.

"One has to do something, you know," she said. "Something to help."

"Yes. And will you send the children away for a moment? I have something to say to you."

Mary-Clare's face went white. Since Maclin's exposure the girl knew a spiritual fear that never before had troubled her. Maclin and Larry! Doubt, uncertainty--they had done their worst for Mary-Clare.

When the children were gone the stranger leaned forward and said quietly:

"I am Mrs. Dana--I am here on government business. There, my dear Mrs. Rivers, please do not be alarmed--I come as your friend; the friend of King's Forest; it is on the map, you know."

The tears stood in Mary-Clare's wide eyes, her lips trembled.

"I conscript you!" Mrs. Dana leaned a little further toward Mary-Clare and took her hands. "I was directed to you, Mrs. Rivers. You must help me do away with a wrong impression of the Forest. Together we will tell a story to the outside world that will change a great many things. We will tell the truth and set the Forest free from suspicion."

"Oh! can we? Why, that would be the most splendid thing. We're all so--so frightened."

"Yes. I know. See, I have my credentials"--Mrs. Dana took a notebook from her bag. "The mines--well, all the danger there is destroyed. The mines are cleaned out." She was reading from her notes.

"Yes." Mary-Clare was impressed.

"And there's iron on the Point--we must get at that--you own the Point?"

"No; I gave it to my husband." The words were whispered. "And he sold it to a Mr. Northrup." There was no holding back in King's Forest these days.

"I see. Well, we must get this Mr. Northrup busy, then. Where is he?"

Mrs. Dana tucked the book away and her eyes looked kindly into Mary-Clare's.

"I do not know. He went to his--to the city--New York."

"And you have never heard from him?"

"No."

"Well, Mrs. Rivers, I am your friend and the friend of the Forest. Together, we ought to be able to do it a good turn. And now, if you are willing, I would love to borrow your little girl."

On the lake road Noreen, after a few skirmishes, succumbed to one of her sudden likings--she abandoned herself to Mrs. Dana's charm. With her head coquettishly set slantwise she fixed her grave eyes--they were very like her mother's--on Mrs. Dana's face.

"I like the look of you," she confided softly.

"I'm glad. I like the look of you very much, little Noreen."

"Do you know any stories or songs?" Noreen had her private test.

"I used to, but it has been a long while since I thought about them. Do you know any, Noreen?"

"Oh! many. My man taught me. He taught me to be unafraid, too."

"Your man, little girl?" Mrs. Dana turned her eyes away.

"Yes'm. Jan-an, she's a bit queer, you know, Jan-an says the ghost-wind brought him. He only stayed a little while, but things aren't ever going to be the same again. No'm, not ever! He even liked Jan-an, and most folks don't--at first. His name is Mr. Northrup, but Jan-an and I call him The Man."

"And he sang for you?"

"Yes'm. We sang together, marching along--this way!" Noreen swung the hand that held hers. "Do you know--'Green jacket, red cap'?" she asked.

"I used to. It goes something like this--doesn't it?"

"Up the airy mountain
Down the rusty glen---

I have forgotten the rest." Mrs. Dana closed her eyes.

"Oh! that's kingdiferous," Noreen laughed with delight. "I'll sing the rest, then we'll sing together:

"We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men.
Wee folk, good folk
Trooping all together,
Green jacket, red cap
And white owl's feather."

They were keeping step and singing, rather brokenly, for Noreen was thinking of her man and Mrs. Dana seemed searching, in a blur of moving men upon a weary road, for a little boy--a very little boy.

"Now, then," Noreen insisted, "we can sing it betterer this time.

"Green jacket, red cap
And white owl's feather."

Suddenly Noreen stopped.

"Your face looks funny," she said. "Your lips are laughing, but your eyes--is it the sun in your eyes?"

Mrs. Dana bent until her head was close to Noreen's.

"Little girl, little Noreen," she said, "that is it--the sun is in my eyes."

"There's the inn!" Noreen was uncomfortable. Things were not turning out quite as gaily as she hoped. Things did not, any more.

"Shall I go right to the door with you?" she asked.

"No. I want to go alone. Good-bye, Noreen."

"I hope you'll stay a long time!" Noreen paused on the road.

"Why, dear?"

"Because Motherly liked you, and I like you. Good-bye."

And Mrs. Dana stayed a long time, though after the first week her sojourn was marked by incidents, not hours.

"Seems like the days of the creation," Peter confided to Twombly. "Let there be light--there was light! Get the Forest to work--and the Forest gets busy! Heard the church is going to be opened--and a school. Queer, Twombly, how her being a woman and the easy sort, too, doesn't seem to stop her none."

Twombly shifted in his chair--the two men were sitting in the spring sunshine by Twombly's door.

"The Government's behind her!" he muttered confidently. "And, Heathcote, I ain't monkeying with the Government. Since that Maclin night--anything the Government asks of me, I hold up my hands."

"Yes, I reckon that's safest." Peter was uplifted, but cautious.

"She's set Peneluna to painting all the houses--yeller," Twombly rambled on, the smell of fresh paint filling his nostrils. "And you know what Peneluna is when she gets a start. Colour's mighty satisfying, Peneluna says; but I guess there's more in it than just colour. The Pointers get touchy about dirt, and creepy insects showing up on the 'tarnal paint that's slushed everywhere."

"Mighty queer doings!" Heathcote agreed.

"The women are plumb crazy over this government woman," Twombly went on, "and the children lap out of her hand. She and Mary-Clare are together early and late. Thick as corn mush."

Peter drew his chair closer.

"Her and Mary-Clare is writing up the doings of the Forest," he whispered. "Writing things allas

makes me nervous. What's writ--is fixed."

"Gosh! Heathcote; it's like the Judgment Day and no place to hide in!"

"That's about it, Twombly. No place to hide in."

And then after weeks of strenuous effort Mrs. Dana went away as suddenly as she had come. She simply disappeared! But there was a peculiar sense of waiting in the Forest and a going on with what had been begun. The momentum carried the people along. The church was repaired, a school house started, the Point cleaned.

The summer passed, another winter--not so cruel as the last--and the spring came, less violently.

It was early summer when another event shook the none-too-steady Forest. Larry came home!

Jan-an discovered him sitting on a mossy rock, his back against a tree. The girl staggered away from him--she thought she saw a vision.

"It is--you, ain't it?" she gasped.

"What's left of me--yes." There was a strange new note in Rivers's voice.

Jan-an's horror-filled eyes took in the significance of the words.

"Where's--the rest of you?" she gasped.

Larry touched the pinned-up leg of his trousers.

"I paid a debt with the rest," he said, and there was that in his voice that brought Jan-an closer to him.

"Where yer bound for?" she asked, her dull face quivering.

"I don't know. A fellow gave me a lift and dropped me--here."

"You come along home!" Jan-an bent and half lifted Larry. "Lean on me. There, now, lean heavy and take it easy."

Mary-Clare was sitting in the living-room, sewing and singing, when the sound of steps startled her. She looked up, then her face changed as a dying face does.

"Larry!" she faltered. She was utterly unprepared. She had been kept in ignorance of the little that others knew.

"I--I'm played out--but I can go on." Larry's voice was husky and he drooped against Jan-an. Then Mary-Clare came forward, her arms opened wide, a radiance breaking over her cold white face.

"You have come--home, Larry! Home. Your father's home."

And then Larry's head rested on her shoulder; her arms upheld him, for the crutch clattered to the floor.

"My father's home," he repeated like a hurt child--"that's it--my father's home."

CHAPTER XXII

But beyond that exalted moment stretched the plain, drear days. Days holding subtle danger and marvellous revelations.

Larry, with his superficial gripping of surface things, grew merry and childishly happy. He had paid a debt, God knew. Shocked by the Maclin exposure, he had been roused to decency and purpose as he had never been before. He felt now that he had redeemed the past, and Mary-Clare's gentleness and kindness meant but one thing to Rivers. And he wanted that thing. His own partial regeneration had been evolved through hours of remorse and contrition. Alone, under strange skies and during long, danger-filled nights, he had caught a glimpse of his poor, shivering soul, and it had brought him low in fear, then high in hope.

"Perhaps, if I pay and pay"--he had pleaded with the sad thing--"I can win out yet!"

And sitting in the warm, sunny room of the yellow house, Larry began to believe he had! It was always so easy for him to see one small spot.

At the first he was a hero, and the Forest paid homage to him; listened at his shrine and fed his reviving ego. But heroes cloy the taste, in time, and the most thrilling tales wax dull when they are worn to shreds. More and more Larry grew to depend upon Mary-Clare and Noreen for company and upon Jan-an for a never-failing listener to his tales.

Noreen, just now, puzzled Mary-Clare. The child's old aversion to her father seemed to have passed utterly from her thought. She was devoted to him; touched his maimed body reverently,

and wooed him from the sad moments that presently began to overpower him.

She assumed an old and protecting manner toward him that would have been amusing had it not been so tragically pathetic.

Every afternoon Larry took a nap, sitting in an old kitchen rocker. Poised on the arm of the chair, her father's head upon her tiny shoulder, Noreen sang him to sleep.

"You're my baby, daddy-linkum, and I'm your motherly. Come, shut your eyes, and lall a leep!"

And Larry would sleep, often to awake with an unwholesome merriment that frightened Mary-Clare.

One late summer afternoon she was sitting with him by the open door. The beautiful hills opposite were still rich with flowers and green bushes. Suddenly Larry said:

"It's great, this being home!"

"I'm glad home was here for you to come to, Larry." Mary-Clare felt her heart beat quicker--not with love, but the growing fear.

"Are you, honest?"

"Yes, Larry. Honest."

"I wonder." It was the old voice now. "When I lay out there, and crawled along--"

"Please, Larry, we have agreed not to talk of that!"

"Yes, I know, but even then, while I was crawling, I got to thinking what I was crawling back to--and counting the chances and whether it was worth while."

"Please, Larry!"

"All right!" Then, in the new voice: "You're beautiful, Mary-Clare. Sometimes, sitting here, I get to wondering if I really ever saw you before. Second sight, you know."

"Yes, second sight, Larry."

"And Noreen--she is mine, Mary-Clare." This was flung out defiantly.

"Part yours. Yes, Larry."

"She's a great kid. Old as the hills and then again--a baby-thing."

"We must not strain her, Larry, we cannot afford to put too heavy a load on her. She would bear it until she dropped."

"Don't get talking booky, Mary-Clare. You don't as much as you once did." A pause, then hardly above a whisper: "Do you go to the cabin in the woods now, Mary-Clare?"

"I haven't been there for a long while, Larry." Mary-Clare's hands clutched each other until the bones ached.

"I'm sorry, Mary-Clare, God knows I am, for what I did up there. It was the note as drove me mad. Across--over there, I used to read that note, you and he were queer lots."

"Larry, I will not talk about that--ever!"

"You can't forgive?"

"I have forgiven long ago."

"Nothing happened between you and him, Mary-Clare. You're great stuff. Great! And so is he."

A thin, blue-veined hand stole out and rested on Mary-Clare's head and Mary-Clare looked down at the empty place where Larry's strong right leg should have been. A divine pity stirred her, but she knew now, as always, that Larry did not crave pity; sympathy; and the awful Truth upheld Mary-Clare in her weak moment. She would never again fail herself or him by misunderstanding.

"When I'm well, Mary-Clare, you'll be everything to me, won't you? We'll begin again. You, me, and little Noreen. You are lovely, girl! The lights in your hair dance, your neck is white, and--"

The heart of Mary-Clare seemed to stop as the groping fingers touched her.

"Look at me, Mary-Clare!"

There was the tone of the conqueror in the words--Larry laughed. Then Mary-Clare looked at him! Long and unflinching she let her eyes meet his, and there was that in them that no man misunderstands.

"You mean you do not care?" Larry's voice shook like a frightened child's; "that you'll never care?"

"I care tremendously, Larry, and I will do my best. But you must not ask for more."

"Good God! and I crawled back for this!" The words ended in a sob; "for this! I thought I could pay but I cannot--ever, ever!"

And in the distant city Helen Northrup waited for her son. There had been a cable--then the long silence. He was on the way, that was all she knew.

In the work-room Helen tried to keep to the routine of her days. Her work had saved her; strengthened her. Her contact with people had given her vision and sympathy. She was

marvellously changed, but of that she took little heed.

And then Northrup came, unannounced. He stood in the doorway of the room where his mother sat bent upon her task on the desk before her. For a moment he hardly knew her. He had feared to find her broken, crushed beyond the hope of health and joy. He had counted that possibility among the things that his experience had cost him. A wave of relief, surprise, and joy swept over him now.

"Mother!"

Helen paused--her pen held lightly--then she rose and came toward him. Her face Northrup was never to forget. So might a face look that welcomed the dead back to life. Just for one, poor human moment, they could not speak, they simply clung close. After that, life caught them in its common current.

The afternoon, warm and sunny, made it possible for the windows to be open wide; there were flowers blooming in a window-box and a cool breeze, now and again, drew the white curtains out, then released them with a little sighing sound. The peacefulness and security stirred Northrup's imagination.

"It doesn't seem possible, you know!" he said.

"Being home, dear?" Helen watched him. Every new line of his fine brown face made her lips firmer.

"Yes. I'd given up hope, and then when hope grew again I was afraid to crawl back. You'll laugh, but I was afraid to come home and find things just the same! I couldn't have stood it, after what I learned. I would have felt like a ghost. A lot of fellows feel this way. It's all a mistake for our home folks to think they're doing the best for us by trying to fool us into forgetting."

"Brace, we've tried, all of us, to be worthy of you boys. Even they who attempt the thing you mention are doing it for the best. Often it is the hardest way."

They were both thinking of Kathryn. Monstrous as it might seem, Brace recalled her as she looked that day--pulling the shades of the automobile down! That ugly doubt had haunted him many times.

Helen was half sick with fear of what would occur when Brace saw Kathryn.

"I ought not keep you, son," she said weakly. "You ought to go to Kathryn. No filial duty toward me, dear! I'm a terribly self-sufficient woman."

"Bully! And that's why I want to have dinner with you alone. I've got used to the self-sufficient woman--I like her."

It was long after eight o'clock, that first evening, when Northrup left his mother's house.

So powerfully hypnotic is memory that as he walked along in the bland summer night he shivered and recalled the snowstorm that blotted him out after his last interview with Kathryn. With all earnestness he had prepared himself for this hour. He was ready to take up his life and live it well--only so could he justify what he had endured. His starved senses, too, rose to reinforce him. He craved the beauty, sweetness, and tenderness--though he was half afraid of them. They had so long been eliminated from his rugged existence that he wondered how he was again to take them as his common fare.

He paused before touching the bell at the Morris house. Again that hypnotic shiver ran over him; but to his touch on the bell there was immediate response.

"Will you wait, sir, in the reception-room?" The trim maid looked flurried. "I will tell Miss Kathryn at once."

Northrup sat down in the dim room, fragrant with flowers, and a sense of peace overcame his doubts.

Now the Morris house was curiously constructed. The main stairway and a stairway leading to a side entrance converged at the second landing, thus making it possible for any one to leave the house more privately, should he so desire, than by the more formal way.

After leaving Northrup in the reception-room, the maid was stopped by Miss Anna Morris somewhere in the hall. A hurried whispered conversation ensued and made possible what dramatically followed.

A door above opened--the library door--and it seemed to set free Kathryn's nervous, metallic laugh and Sandy Arnold's hard, indignant words:

"What's the hurry? I guess I understand." Almost it seemed as if the girl were pushing the man before her. "I was good enough to pass the time with; pay for your fun while you weighed the chances."

"Please, Sandy, you are cruel." Kathryn was pleading.

"Cruel be damned! And what are you? I want you--you've told me that you loved me--what's the big idea?"

"Oh! Sandy, do lower your voice. Aunt Anna will think the servants are quarrelling."

"All right." Sandy's voice sank a degree. "But I'm going to put this to you square---" The two above had come to the dividing stairways.

"What in thunder!" Sandy gave a coarse laugh. "Keeping to the servant notion, eh? Want me to

go out the side door? Why?"

"Oh! Sandy, you won't mind?--I have a reason, I'll tell you some day."

There was a pause, a scuffle. Then:

"Sandy, you are hurting me!"

"All right, don't struggle then. Listen. I'm going away for two weeks. You promise if Northrup comes home, during that time, to tell him?"

"Yes; yes, dear," the words came pantingly smothered. "All right, and if you don't, I will! I'm not the kind to see a woman sacrifice herself for duty. By the Lord! Northrup shall know from you--or me! Now kiss me!"

There were the hurried steps--down the side stairs! Then flying ones to the library--the maid was on her way with her message--but Northrup dashed past her, nearly knocking her over.

He strode heavily to the library door, which had been left open, and stood there. A devil rose in him as he gazed at the girl, a bit dishevelled, but lovely beyond words.

For a moment, smiling and cruel, he thought he would let her incriminate herself; he would humiliate her and then fling her off. But this all passed like a blinding shock.

Kathryn had turned at his approach. She stood at bay. He frightened her. Had he heard? Or was it mad passion that held him? Had he just come to the house refusing to be announced?

"Brace! Brace!" she cried, her lovely eyes widening. "You have come."

Kathryn stepped slowly forward, her arms outstretched. She looked as a captive maiden might before the conqueror whose slave she was willing to become. As she advanced Northrup drew back. He reached a chair and gripped it. Then he said quietly:

"You see, I happened to hear you and Arnold."

Kathryn's face went deadly white.

"I had to tell him something, Brace; you know how Sandy is--I knew I could explain to you; you would understand." The pitiful, futile words and tone did not reach Northrup with appeal.

"You can explain," he said harshly, "and I think I will understand, but I want the explanation to come in my way, if you please. Just answer my questions. Have you ever told Arnold--what he just made you promise to tell me?"

Kathryn stood still, breathing hard.

"Yes or no!"

The girl was being dragged to a merciless bar of judgment. She realized it and all her foolish defences fell; all but that power of hers to leap to some sort of safety. There still was Arnold!

"Yes," she said gaspingly.

"You mean you love Arnold; that only duty held you to me?"

"Yes."

"Well, by God!" Northrup flung his head back and laughed--"and after all I have been fearing, too!"

To her dying day Kathryn never knew what he meant by those words. There was a moment's silence, then Northrup spoke again:

"I don't think there is anything more to say. Shall I take the side entrance?"

Outside, the summer night was growing sultry; a sound of thunder broke the heavy quiet of the dark street--it brought back memories that were evil things to remember just then.

"Good God!" Northrup thought, "we're coming back to all kinds of hells."

He was bitter and cynical. He hardly took into account, in that hard moment, the feeling of release; all his foregone conclusions, his stern resolves, had been battered down. He had got his discharge with nothing to turn to.

In this mood he reached home. More than anything he wanted to be by himself--but his mother's bedroom door was open and he saw her sitting by the window, watching the flashes of heat lightning.

He went in and stood near her.

"I've about concluded," he said harshly, "that the fellows who keep to the herd are the sensible ones."

The words conveyed no meaning to Helen Northrup, but the tones did.

"Sit down, dear," she said calmly. "If this shower strikes us, I do not want to be alone."

Northrup drew a chair to the window and the red flashes lighted his face luridly.

"Having ideals is rot. Dying for them, madness. Mother, it's all over between Kathryn and me!"

Helen's own development had done more for her than she would ever realize, but from out its strength and security she spoke:

"Brace, I am glad! Now you can live your ideals."

Northrup turned sharply.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Oh! we've all been so stupid; so blind. Seeing the false and calling it the truth. Being afraid; not daring to let go. My work has set me free, son. Lately I have seen the girl that Kathryn *really* is, looming dark over the girl she made us believe she was. I have feared for you, but now I am glad. Brace, there *are* women a man can count on. Cling hold of that."

"Yes, I know that, of course."

"Women whose honour is as high and clear as that of the best of men."

"Yes, Mother."

Helen looked at the relaxed form close to her. She yearned to confide fully in him, tell him how she had guarded his interests while he fared afar from her. She thought of Mary-Clare and the love and understanding that now lay between her and the girl whose high honour could, indeed, be trusted.

But she realized that this son of hers was not the kind of man whose need could be supplied by replacing a loss with a possible gain. He had been dealt a cruel blow and must react from it sanely. The time was not yet come for the telling of the King's Forest story.

Northrup needed comfort, Heaven knew, but it must come from within, not without.

At that instant Helen Northrup gripped the arms of her chair and sent a quick prayer to the God of mothers of grown sons.

"The storm seems to be passing," she said quietly.

"Yes, and the air is cooler." Northrup stood up and his face was no longer hopeless. "Are you going to stay in town all summer?" he asked.

"I was waiting for you, dear. As soon as you get settled I must take a short trip. Business, you know. I do enjoy the short trips, the comings home; the feeling of moving along; not being relegated to an armchair."

"Mother, how *did* you do it?"

"Oh! it was easy enough, once I threw off my own identity. Identities are so cramping, Brace; full of suggestions and fears. I took my mother's maiden name--Helen Dana. After that, I just flew ahead."

"Well, I won't hold you back. You're too good for that, Mother. I've kept the old tower room. I'm going to try to finish my book, now. Somehow I got to thinking it dead; but lately I've sort of heard it crying out for me. I hope the same little elevator devil is on the job yet. Funny, freckled scamp. He kissed me when I went away--I thought he was going to cry. Queer how a fellow remembered things like that over there. The little snapshots were fixed pictures--and some rather big-sized things shrank."

They bade each other good-night. Mother and son, they looked marvellously alike at that moment. Then:

"I declare, I almost forgot Manly. How has this all struck him, Mother?"

Helen's face was radiant.

"Gave up everything! His hard-won position, his late comfort and ease. He will have to begin again--he is where he says he belongs--mending and patching."

"He'll reach the top, Mother. Manly's bound for the top of things."

CHAPTER XXIII

Northrup found his tower room but little changed. The dust lay upon it, and a peace that had not held part during the last days before he went away greeted him. More and more as he sat apart the truth of things came to him; he accepted the grim fact that all, everything, is bound by a chain, the links of which must hold, or, if they are broken, they must be welded again together. The world; people; everything in time must pause while repairs were made, and he had done his best toward the mending of a damaged world: toward righting his own mistakes.

It was slow work. Good God! how slow, and oh, the suffering!

He had paid a high price but he could now look at his city without shame.

This was a fortifying thought, but a lonely one, and it did not lead to constructive work. The days were listless and empty.

Northrup got out his manuscript--there was life in it, he made sure of that, but it was feeble and would require intelligent concentration in order to justify its existence.

But the intelligence and concentration were not in his power to bestow.

After a few days he regarded his new freedom with strange exhilaration mingled with fear and distrust.

So much had gone down in the wreck with Kathryn. So much that was purely himself--not her--that readjustment was slow. How would it have been, he wondered, back in the King's Forest days, had he not been upheld by a sense of duty to what was now proven false and wrong?

One could err in duty, it seemed.

He was free! He had not exacted freedom! It had been thrust upon him so brutally, that it had, for a spell, sent him reeling into space.

Not being able to resume his work, Northrup got to thinking about King's Forest with concentration, if not intelligence.

He had purposely refrained, while he was away, from dwelling upon it as a place in which he had some rights. He used, occasionally, to think of Twombly, sitting like a silent, wary watchdog, keeping an eye on his interests. He had heard of the Maclin tragedy--Helen Northrup felt it wise to give him that information while withholding much more; that was, in a way, public knowledge.

Things were at least safe now in the Forest, Northrup believed. This brought him to the closer circle. He felt a sudden homesickness for the inn and the blessed old pair. A kind of mental hunger evolved from this unwholesome brooding that drove Northrup, as hunger alone can, to snatch whatever he could for his growing desire to feed upon.

He shifted his thoughts from Mary-Clare and the Heathcotes to Larry Rivers. Where was he? Had he kept his part of the bargain? What had Mary-Clare done with her hard-won freedom?

Sitting alone under his dome of changing lights, Northrup became a prey to whimsical fancies that amused while they hurt.

As the lighted city rose above the coarser elements that formed it, so the woman, Mary-Clare, towered over other women. Such women as Kathryn! The bitterness of pain lurked here as, unconsciously, Northrup went back over the wasted years of misplaced faith.

The sweet human qualities he knew were not lacking in Mary-Clare. They were simply heightened, brightened.

All this led to but one thing.

Something was bound to happen, and suddenly Northrup decided to go to King's Forest!

Once this decision was reached he realized that he had been travelling toward it since the night of his scene with Kathryn. The struggle was over. He was at rest, and began cheerfully to make preparations. Of course, he argued, he meant to keep the spirit, if not the letter, of his agreement with Larry Rivers.

This was not safe reasoning, and he set it aside impatiently.

He waited a few days, deliberating, hoping his mother would return from a visit she was making at Manly's hospital in the South. When at the end of a week no word came from her, he packed his grip and set forth, on foot again, for the Forest.

He did the distance in half the time. His strong, hardened body served him well and his desire spurred him on.

When he came in sight of the crossroads a vague sense of change struck him. The roads were better. There was an odd little building near the yellow house. It was the new school, but of that Northrup had not heard. From the distance the chapel bell sounded. It did not have that lost, weird note that used to mark it--there was definiteness about it that suggested a human hand sending forth a friendly greeting.

"Queer!" muttered Northrup, and then he did a bold thing. He went to the door of the yellow house and knocked. He had not intended to do that.

How quiet it was within! But again the welcoming door swayed open, and for a moment Northrup thought the room was empty, for his eyes were filled with the late afternoon glow.

It was autumn and the days were growing short.

Then someone spoke. Someone who was eager to greet and hold any chance visitor. "Come in, Mary-Clare will be back soon. She never stays long."

At that voice Northrup slammed the door behind him and strode across the space separating him from Larry Rivers!

Larry sat huddled in the chintz rocker, his crutch on the floor, his thin, idle hands clasped in his lap. He wore his uniform, poor fellow! It gave him a sense of dignity. His eyes, accustomed to the dimmer light, took in the situation first; he smiled nervously and waited.

Northrup in a moment grasped the essentials.

"So you've been over there, too?" was what he said. The angry gleam in his eyes softened. At least he and Rivers could speak the common language of comrades-in-arms.

"Yes, I've been there," Larry answered. "When I came back, I had nowhere else to go. Northrup, you wonder why I am here. Good God! How I've wanted to tell you."

"Well, I'm here, too, Rivers. Life has been stronger than either of us. We've both drifted back."

Larry turned away his head. It was then that Northrup caught the full significance of what life had done to Rivers!

"Northrup, let me talk to you. Let me plunge in--before any one comes. They won't let me talk. It's like being in prison. It's hell. I've thought of you, you're the only one who can really help. And I dared not even ask for you!"

Larry was now nervously twisting his fingers, and his face grew ashen.

"I'm listening, Rivers. Go on."

Northrup had a feeling as if he were back among those scenes where time was always short, when things that must be said hurriedly gripped a listener. The conventions were swept aside.

"They--they couldn't understand, anyway," Larry broke in. "They've got a fixed idea of me; they wouldn't know what it was that changed me, but you will."

"Everyone's kind. I haven't anything to complain of, but good God! Northrup, I'm dying, and what's to be done--must be done quickly. You--see how it is?"

"Yes, Rivers, I see." There could be no mercy in deceiving this desperate man.

"I knew you would. Day after day, lately, I've been saying that over in my mind. I remembered the night in the shack on the Point. I knew you would understand!"

"Perhaps your longing brought me, Rivers. Things like that happen, you know."

Northrup, moved by pity, laid his hand on the shrunken ones near him. All feeling of antagonism was gone.

"It began the night I was shot," Larry's voice fell, "and Mary-Clare will not let me talk of those times. She thinks the memory will keep me from getting well! Good Lord! Getting well! Me!"

"There were two of us that night, Northrup, two of us crawling away from the hell in the dark. You know!"

"Yes, Rivers, I know."

"I'd never met him--the other chap--before, but we got talking to each other, when we could, so as to--to keep ourselves alive. I told him about Mary-Clare and Noreen. I couldn't think of anything else. There didn't seem to be anything else. The other fellow hadn't any one, he said."

"When help came, there was only room for one. One had to wait."

"That other chap," Larry moistened his lips in the old nervous fashion that Northrup recalled, "that other chap kept telling them about my wife and child--he said he could wait; but they must take me!"

"God! Northrup, I think I urged them to take him. I hope I did, but I cannot remember--I might not have, you know. I can remember what he said, but I can't recall what I said."

"I think, Rivers, you played fair!"

"Why? Northrup, what makes you think that?" The haggard face seemed to look less ghastly.

"I've seen others do it at such a time."

"Others like me?"

"Yes, Rivers, many times."

"Well, there were weeks when nothing mattered," Larry went on, "and then I began to come around, but something in me was different. I wanted, God hearing me, Northrup, I wanted to make what that other chap had done for me--worth while."

"When I got to counting up what I'd gone through and holding to the new way I felt, I began to get well--and--then I came home. Came to my father's house, Northrup--that's what Mary-Clare said when she saw me."

"That's what it is--my father's house. You catch on?"

"Yes, Rivers, I catch on." Then after a pause: "Let me light the lamp." But Rivers caught hold of him.

"No, don't waste time--they may come back at any moment--there'll never be another chance."

"All right, go on, Rivers."

The soft autumn day was drawing to its close, but the west was still golden. The light fell on the two men near the window; one shivered.

"There isn't much more to say. I wanted you to know that I'm not going to be in the way very long."

"You and I talked man to man once back there in the shack. Northrup, we must do it now. We needn't be damned fools. I've got a line on Mary-Clare and yes, thank God! on you. I can trust you both. She mustn't know. When it's all over, I want her to have the feeling that she's played square. She has, but if she thought I felt as I do to-day, it would hurt her. You understand? She's like that. Why, she's fixed it up in her mind that I'm going to pull through, and she's braced to do her part to the end; but"--here Larry paused, his dull eyes filled with hot tears; his strength was almost gone--"but I wanted you to help her--if it means what it once did to you."

"It means that and more, Rivers."

Northrup heard his own words with a kind of shock. Again he and Rivers were stripped bare as once before they had been.

"It--it won't be long, Northrup--there's damned little I can do to--to make good, but--I can do this."

The choking voice fell into silence. Presently Northrup stood up. Years seemed to have passed since he had come into the room. It was a trick of life, in the Forest, when big things happened--they swept all before them.

"Rivers, you are a brave man," he slowly said. "Will you shake hands?"

The thin cold fingers instantly responded.

"God helping me, I will not betray your trust. Once I would not have been so sure of myself, but you and I have been taught some strange truths."

Then something of the old Larry flashed to the surface: the old, weak relaxing, the unmoral craving for another's solution of his problems.

"Oh, it always has to be someone to help me out," he said.

"You know about Maclin?"

"Yes, Rivers."

"Well, I did the turn for that damned scoundrel. I got the Forest out of his clutches."

"Yes, you did when you got your eyes opened, Rivers."

"They're open now, Northrup, but there always has to be--someone to help me out."

"Rivers, where is your wife?" So suddenly did Northrup ask this that Larry started and gave a quick laugh.

"She went to that cabin of hers--you know?"

"Yes, I know."

Both men were reliving old scenes.

Then Larry spoke, but the laugh no longer rang in his tone:

"She'll be coming, by now, down the trail," he whispered. "Go and meet her, tell her you've been here, that I told you where she was--nothing more! Nothing more. Ever!"

"That's right, never!" Northrup murmured. Then he added:

"I'll come back with her, Rivers, soon. I'm going to stay at the inn for a time."

Their hands clung together for a moment longer while one man relinquished, the other accepted. Then Northrup turned to the door.

There was a dull purplish glow falling on the Forest. The subtle, haunting smell of wood smoke rose pungently. It brought back, almost hurtlingly, the past. Northrup walked rapidly along the trail. Hurrying, hurrying to meet--he knew not what!

Presently he saw Mary-Clare, from a distance, in the ghostly woods. Her head was bowed, her hands clasped lightly before her. There was no haste, no anticipation in her appearance; she simply came along!

The sight of youth beaten is a terrible sight, and Mary-Clare, off her guard, alone and suffering, believed herself beaten. She was close to Northrup before she saw him. For a moment he feared the shock was going to be too great for her endurance. She turned white--then the quick red rose threateningly, the eyes dimmed.

Northrup did not speak--he could not. With gratitude he presently saw the dear head lift bravely, the trembling smile curl her cold lips.

"You--have come!"

"Yes, Mary-Clare."

"How--did you know--where I was?"

"I stopped at the yellow house. I saw your--I saw Larry--he told me where to find you."

"He told you that?"

The bravery flickered--but pride rallied.

"He is very changed." The words were chosen carefully. "He is very patient and--and Noreen loves him. She never could have, if he had not come back! She--well, you remember how she used to take care of me?"

"Yes, Mary-Clare."

"She takes care of her father in that way, now that she understands his need."

"She would. That would be Noreen's way."

"Yes, her way. And I am glad he came back to us. It might all have been so different."

There was a suggestion of passionate defence in the low, hurried words, a quick insistence that Northrup accept her position as she herself was doing.

"Yes, Mary-Clare. Your old philosophy has proved itself."

"I am glad you believe that."

"I have come to the Forest to tell you so. The things that do not count drop away. We do not have to push them from our lives."

"Oh! I am glad to hear you say that."

Mary-Clare caught her breath.

There seemed to be nothing to keep them apart now--a word, a quick sentence were all that were necessary to bridge the past and the present. Neither dared consider the future.

The small, common things crept into the conversation for a time, then Mary-Clare asked hesitatingly:

"You--you are happy? And your book?"

"The book is awaiting its time, Mary-Clare. I must live up to it. I know that now. And the girl you once saw here, well! that is all past. It was one of those things that fell away!"

There was nothing to say to this, but Northrup heard a sharp indrawing of the breath, and felt the girl beside him stumble on the darkening trail.

"You know I went across the water to do my part?" he asked quickly.

"You would, of course. That call found such men as you. Larry went, too!" This came proudly.

"Yes, and he paid more than I did, Mary-Clare."

"He had more to pay--there was Maclin. Do you know about Maclin?"

"Yes. It was damnable. We all scented the evil, but we're not the sort of people to believe such devilry until it's forced upon us."

"It frightened us all terribly," Mary-Clare's voice would always hold fear when she spoke of Maclin. "I do not know what would have happened to the Forest if--a Mrs. Dana had not come just when things were at the worst."

There are occurrences in life that seem always to have been half known. Their acceptance causes no violent shock. As Mary-Clare spoke that name, Northrup for a moment paused, repeated it a bit dazedly, and, as if a curtain had been withdrawn, he saw the broad, illuminating truth! "You have heard of Mrs. Dana?" Mary-Clare asked. That Northrup knew so much did not surprise her.

"Yes, of course! And it would be like her to drop in at the psychological moment."

"She set us to work!" Mary-Clare went on. "She is the most wonderful woman I ever knew."

"She must be!"

Slower and slower the two walked down the trail. They were clutching the few golden moments.

It was quite dark when they came to the yellow house. The door was wide open, the heart of the little home lay bare to the passer-by.

Jan-an was on her knees by the hearth, puffing to life the kindlings she had lighted. Larry's chair was drawn close and upon its arm Noreen was perched.

"They always leave it so for me," Mary-Clare whispered. "You see how everything is?"

"Yes, I see, Mary-Clare."

Northrup reached forth and drew the small clasped hands into his own!--then he bent and kissed them.

"I see, I see."

"And you will come in? Larry loves company."

"Not to-night, Mary-Clare, but to-morrow. I am going to stay at the inn for a few days."

"Oh! I am glad!" Almost the brave voice broke.

"There is something else I see, my dear," Northrup ignored the poor disguise for a moment. "I see the meaning of *you* as I never saw it before. You have never broken faith! That is above all else--it is all else."

"I have tried." Upon the clasped hands tears fell, but Northrup caught the note of joy in her grieving voice.

"You have carried on what your doctor entrusted to you."

"Oh! thank you, bless you for saying that."

"Good-night." Northrup released the cold hands--they clung for a moment in a weak, human way. "There is to-morrow, you know," he whispered.

Alone, a little later, on the road, Northrup experienced that strange feeling of having left something back there in the yellow house.

He heard the water lapping the edge of the road where the sumach grew; the bell, with its new tone, sounded clearly the vesper hour; and on ahead the lights of the inn twinkled.

And then, as if hurrying to complete the old memory, Mary-Clare seemed to be following,

following in the darkness.

Northrup's lips closed grimly. He squared his shoulders to his task.

He must go on, keeping his mind fixed upon the brighter hope that Mary-Clare could not, now, see; must not now see. For her, there must be the dark stretch; for him the glory of keeping the brightness undimmed--it must be a safe place for her to rest in, by and by. "She has kept the faith with life," Northrup thought. "She will keep it with death--but love must keep faith with her."

THE END

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