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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HOUSE OF FULFILMENT ***

THE HOUSE OF FULFILMENT

By GEORGE MADDEN MARTIN

AUTHOR OF EMMY LOU



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“WHAT IS YOUR NAME, DEAR?”

To A. R. M.

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PART ONE

*“Love is enough: ho ye who seek saving,
Go no further: come hither: there have been who have
found it,
And these know the House of Fulfilment of craving;
These know the Cup with the roses around it;
These know the World’s Wound and the balm that hath
bound it.”*

WILLIAM MORRIS.

*—“Elements, breeds, adjustments ...
A new race dominating previous ones.”*

WALT WHITMAN.

[3]

CHAPTER ONE

Harriet Blair was seventeen when she went with her father and mother and her brother Austen to New Orleans, to the marriage of an older brother, Alexander, the father’s business representative at that place. It was characteristic of the Blairs that they declined the hospitality of the bride’s family, and from the hotel attended, punctiliously and formally, the occasions for which they had come. It takes ease to accept hospitality.

Alexander Blair, the father, banker and capitalist, of Vermont stock, now the richest man in Louisville, was of a stern ruggedness unsoftened by a long and successful career in the South, while his wife, the daughter of a Scotch schoolmaster settled in Pennsylvania, was the possessor of a thrifty closeness and strong, practical sense. [4]

Alexander, their oldest son, a man of thirty, to whose wedding they had come, was what was natural to expect, a literal, shrewd man, with a strong sense of duty as he saw it. His long, clean-shaven upper lip, above a beard, looked slightly grim, and his straight-gazing, blue-grey eyes were stern.

The second son, Austen, was clean-featured, handsome and blond, but he was also, by report, the shrewd and promising son of his father, even as his brother was reported before him.

Harriet, the daughter, was a silent, cold-looking girl, who wrapped herself in reserve as a cover for self-consciousness but, observing closely, thought to her own conclusions. She had a disillusioning way of baring facts in these communings, which showed life to her very honestly but without romance or glamour. [5]

At the wedding, sitting in her white dress by her father and mother in the flower-bedecked parlours of the Randolphins, Harriet looked at her brother, standing by the girl of seventeen whom

he had just married, and saw things much as they were. In Molly, the bride of an hour, with her child's face and red-brown hair and shadowy lashes, she saw a descendant of pleasure-loving, ease-taking Southerners. Molly's father, from what Austen had said, was the dispenser of a lavish and improvident hospitality and a genial dweller on the edge of bankruptcy, while the mother, a belle of the '40's, some one had told the Blairs, seemed just the woman to marry her only child to a man opposed to her people in creed, politics and habits—which in 1860 meant something—but son of one of the richest men in the South.

[6]

Harriet ate her supper close by her father and mother. She did not know how to mix with these gay, incidental Southerners, and sitting there, went on with her communings. She could explain it on the Randolph side, but why Alexander was marrying Molly she could not understand. Shy and self-conscious, she knew vaguely of a thing called love. She had met it in her reading rather than seen its acting forces anywhere about her. To be sure, her brother Austen had been engaged to a Miss Ransome of Woodford County, a fashionable Kentucky beauty. The Blairs were a narrowly religious people. Harriet, a school-girl then, had stood at the window of the stately new stone house in Louisville which the Blairs called home, and, watching the fashionable world flow in and out of the high old brick cottage across the street, where Miss Ransome spent much time with a great-aunt, had wondered.

[7]

But love had not proved such a factor after all. Austen's engagement had been broken.

Harriet went back to Kentucky with the question of Alexander and Molly still open.

A year later her father went South again. War was loudly threatening, and he had large interests in Louisiana and Mississippi. There was a certain sympathy and understanding between the stern, silent man and his daughter, and he suggested that she go with him and see the child newly born to Alexander and Molly.

But, reaching New Orleans to find his son gone to Mobile, concerning these same interests, Mr. Blair decided to join him, and Molly being about to leave for her father's plantation with the baby and nurse, that she might the more rapidly convalesce, it was decided that Harriet accompany her.

[8]

The two weeks at Cannes Brulée were strange to the girl, thus introduced to a Southern house overflowing with guests and servants, and she moved amid the idling and irresponsibility, the laughter and persiflage, with a sense of being outside of it all, and the fault, try as she would, her own.

This feeling was strongest that Sunday afternoon when the gaiety and badinage seemed to centre about a new arrival, a handsome, silver-aureoled Catholic priest, confessor to half the parish. Genial, polished, and affable, his very charm seemed to the Calvinistic-bred Harriet to invest him the more with the seductions of Romanism, as she had been taught to regard them.

[9]

There were music, cards, a huge bowl frosted with the icy beverage within, and to the stunned young Puritan the genial little priest in the midst seemed smiling a bacchanalian benediction over all.

Suddenly, above chatter and music Molly's voice arose, gay but insistent, Molly there in the big chair, pale and big-eyed, her strength so slow to return, herself a child in her little muslin dress.

"Baby is four weeks old," Molly was declaring, "and here is Father Bonot from service at Cannes Brulée and so with his vestments. I'm here and Harriet's here, and mamma's here, and everybody else is a cousin or something. I'm sure I don't know when I can get to church. P'tite shall be baptized here, now."

And before the slower comprehension of the dazed Harriet had grasped the meaning of the ensuing preparations—the draping of the pier-table, the lighting of waxen candles—a sudden silence had fallen; the gay abandon of these mercurial Southerners had given place to reverent awe, even to tears, as the new-born representative of the Puritan Blairs was brought in, in robes like cascades of lace, while of all that followed, the one thing seeming to reach the comprehension of Harriet was the chanting monotone of Father Bonot saying above the child, "Mary Alexina—"

[10]

Later Molly and Harriet went back to New Orleans, to find Alexander there but his father gone up to Vicksburg. Molly was to keep Harriet with her until his return.

Only the girl knew what it meant to find herself near her brother. It was as if here was something sane, rational, stable, by which to re-establish poise and standards. Harriet would have trembled to oppose her brother, so that to see Molly and Alexander together was a revelation. His sternness and his displeasure alike broke as a wave upon Molly, and as a wave receded, leaving her, as a wave would leave the sand, pretty and sparkling and smiling. Other things were revelations to Harriet, too.

[11]

Going down to breakfast one morning, she found her brother clean-shaven, immaculate, monosyllabic, awaiting the overdue meal. The French windows were open to the scent of myriads of roses outside, and also to the morning sun, far too high. The negro servants were hurrying to and fro, Molly nowhere visible.

Later, as the dishes were being uncovered, she appeared, her unstockinged little feet thrust into pretty French slippers, and her cambric nightgown by no means concealed by a negligée, all lace

[12]

and ribbons, hastily caught together. Yet she was pretty, pretty like a lovely and naughty child.

Nor did the embarrassment of Harriet, the presence of the servants, or her husband's cold preoccupation with his breakfast disturb Molly, who trailed along with apparent unconcern until, reaching his elbow, she threw a wicked glance at Harriet, then kissed him on that spot on his head which, but for a few carefully disposed strands, must have been termed bald.

At the thing, absurd as it was, there swept over Harriet the hot shrinking of one made conscious of sex for the first time. With throbbing at throat and ears, she gazed into her plate, her feeling, oddly enough, centring in keen revulsion against her brother.

But Molly was dragging a chair to his elbow. "What's the fricassee made of, Alexander?" [13]

Her husband vouching her no reply, she slipped an arm about his neck, and, leaning over, drew his fork to her mouth and tasted the morsel thereon.

Then she turned her head sideways to regard him. "Don't frown it back, Alec, the smile I mean. I adore you when you don't want to and have to let it come. Acknowledge now, this is the way to breakfast."

And Harriet, who had been led to regard playfulness as little less than vice, was conscious of Molly trying to force a ripe fig between Alexander's lips, repressed, thin lips upon which softening sat as if afraid of itself and her.

"You see," Molly was explaining, "I couldn't get down sooner. P'tite was making the most absurd catches at her mosquito bar, and Celeste refusing to laugh at her. You haven't finished your breakfast? Why must you always hurry off? No"—her hand against his mouth, he, risen now, she on a knee in her chair, clinging to him—"don't tell me any more about Sumter having been fired upon, and your being worried over business. I hate business. What's anything this moment, if you would only see it, compared with me, and ripe figs dipped in cream?" [14]

And then the triumph of her laugh as, his arms suddenly around her, he grasped her, lifted, enfolded her for a moment, then as fiercely put her from him and went out, leaving Harriet sick, shaken, at this sight of human passion seen for the first time.

The following day Harriet's father returned and she went home.

When she next saw her brother it was in Louisville, where he was driven back to his own people by reason of his Northern creed and sympathies. His father-in-law had been among the first to fall in defence of the Confederacy, and with Alexander, now, was his mother-in-law, widowed and dependent, and a wife in this sense changed from child to woman—that she was a fiercely avowed Southerner to the fibre of her. [15]

With his little family he remained in Louisville a year. If his own people wondered at the extravagance of his wife and mother-in-law at a time when incomes were so seriously shrunken, Alexander was too much a Blair for even a Blair to approach the subject.

The child was sent daily to his mother's—he saw to that—a pretty baby, the little Mary Alexina, and robed like a young princess; but beyond this he seemed to discourage intimacy between the households. Certainly there was no common ground, the business judgment, large experience, and the integrity of the Blairs being in the constant service of the government, while rumor had it that the home of young Mrs. Alexander Blair was the social rallying place for Southern sympathizers generally. [16]

Suddenly, in the midst of big affairs, Alexander arranged otherwise for the maintenance of his wife's mother, whom it was his to support for the few remaining years of her life, and went to Europe with Molly and the child. Long after it came to Harriet's hearing that the frequent presence of a young Confederate officer at his house had led to the step.

It was four years from this time, in 1867, that Alexander Blair, the senior, died, to be shortly followed by his wife. [17]

Though the son Alexander returned to Louisville of necessity, following these events, he left Molly and the child in Washington with some of her people there. And though his interests became centred in Louisville again, he never brought his family back, but went and came between the two places. In domestic infelicity it is our own people we would hide it from longest. It was two years after, in '69, that Alexander met his end with the shocking suddenness of accidental death as he was returning East to Molly and the child.

CHAPTER TWO

[18]

The leisure of a summer evening had fallen with the twilight. Along that street in Louisville wherein stood the Blair house, with its splendid lawn, and its carriage driveway issuing through a tall, iron gate, front doors were opening and family groups gathering. The yards wore the fresh green of June. A homecoming crumple-horn ambled by, her bag swinging heavily. In the South, in 1870, cities were villages overgrown.

In the parlour of her home Harriet Blair sat, awaiting the arrival of her brother Austen from

Washington, where he had gone to bring back their dead brother's child.

Harriet, at twenty-six, in lustreless mourning, was handsome and, some might have said, cold. Her face was finely chiselled, and framed with light hair waving from its parting in curves regular as the flutings of a shell. There was a poise, a composure about this Harriet, making her unlike the tall, shy girl of nine years before. [19]

As the bell rang she laid down her book and rose, and a second later Austen entered, leading a little girl with a round, short-cropped head. His eyes met his sister's in greeting, then he loosed the child's hand. "This is your Aunt Harriet, Alexina," he said, and stepped across the room to stand before the mantel and watch the two.

Harriet bent and kissed the small cheek. Demonstration, even to this extent, meant much for a Blair. Then she crossed the room. She was more than ordinarily tall for a woman, with form proportioned to length of limb, and the beauty of her carriage gained by her unconsciousness of it. [20]

Having pulled the bell-cord she came back, smiling, calmly expectant, looking from Austen to the child, who, seated now on the edge of a chair, was regarding her with grave eyes.

"She has a strong look of Alexander," said Harriet, consideringly, "and a little look of you—and of me. She is a Blair, though I can see her mother, too, about the mouth."

The child moved under the scrutiny, but her gaze, returning the study, did not falter.

Harriet laughed; was it at this imperturbability? "I think," she decided, "we may consider her a Blair." Then to the white maid-servant entering: "You may order supper, Nelly, for Mr. Blair and myself. This is Alexina, and, I should say, tired out. Suppose you give her a warm bath and let her go right to bed—have you her trunk key, Austen?—and I will send a tray up with her supper afterward." [21]

Then, as Nelly took the key and went out, Harriet addressed her brother. "For, apart from the hygienic advantages of the bath before the supper, I confess"—with faintly discernible amusement—"to a fancy for the ceremony as a form, so to speak, emblematic of a moral washing and a fresh start." She ended with a raising of her brows as she regarded her brother.

Austen Blair had no use for levity. Mild as this was, he dismissed it curtly. "I would suggest," he said, "that you avoid personalities; it can but be injudicious for any child to hear itself discussed."

Again Harriet laughed; she was provokingly good-humoured. "Coming from her nine years of life beneath Molly's expansive nature, I don't think you need fear for what she'll gather from me." She took the child's hand and lifted her from the chair. "Here is Nelly, Alexina; go with her and do what she says. Say good-night to your uncle. Supper, Austen." [22]

The dining-room being sombre, one might have said it accorded with the master, whose frown had not all cleared away.

Harriet was speaking. "What of Molly? Was there a scene at parting with her voluntarily given-up offspring? For her moods, like her tempers, used to delight in being somewhat inconsistent and mixed."

"She has in no way changed," replied Austen. Was it this flat conciseness in all he said that made levity irresistible to Harriet in turn? "My interview with her was confined to business. That ended, she told me, as an afterthought, apparently, that the coloured woman was going to remain with her, and she supposed Alexina could manage on the train. She also told me that her husband had severed connection with the legation and was going back to Paris. Alexina was not with them at the hotel, but with her uncle, Senator Randolph, from whose house Molly was married." [23]

"And Molly's parting with the child—"

"Was a piece with it all, tears and relief, just as you would have expected."

"And the husband's, this Mr. Garnier's, attitude?"

"Was enigmatical; how far he understands the situation I had no means of judging."

"I'm sorry for the child, though," said Harriet suddenly, "for if there is anything of Molly in her, life according to the Blair standard may pall, and," whimsically, "her mixture of natures be vexed within her." [24]

Austen took the Blairs seriously, and at any time he disliked the personal or the playful. He spoke coldly. "Having given the child over to you from the moment of arrival, of this initiatory tone you are taking I shall say no more. Duties you assume you do best your own way."

Harriet arched her brows. "You mean, having found better results followed the withdrawal of your oversight of me as mistress of our house, you are going to let me alone in this?"

"Exactly," said her brother, "and therefore on the subject, now or hereafter, I shall say no more." And it was eminently characteristic of him that he never did.

Meanwhile up-stairs the child had gone through with the bath and the supper like an automaton in Nelly's hands. [25]

"She said 'yes' when I asked her anything," Nelly reported later to the cook; "or she said 'no'. And her lips were set that hard she might a' most have been Mr. Austen's own child."

And that was all Nelly saw in the little creature she tucked into the huge, square bedstead under the bobinet mosquito bar. But no sooner had Nelly's footsteps ceased along the hall than the child, as one throwing off an armour of repression, rolled out of the high bed and from under the bar, flinging and disarranging the neat covers with passionate fury, sobbing wildly. A bead of gas lit the room. She pattered across the floor to the opened trunk, and when the little figure, stumbling over its gown, stole back to bed, a heartrendingly battered, plaster-headed doll was clasped in its arms. And, as the voices of children at play on the sidewalk came up through the open windows, the child, shaken with crying—the more passionate because of long repression—was declaring: "Sally Ann, baby, I couldn't never have given you up, not even if I was your own truly mother, Sally Ann, I couldn't, never."

[26]

CHAPTER THREE

[27]

Down-stairs the evening passed as evenings usually did when Harriet and Austen were alone. There were not even the varyings from parlour to front door that the heat seemed to necessitate for the rest of the neighbourhood. Front porches are sociable things. The Blairs' was the only house on the street without one.

The evening passed with the brother and sister at opposite sides of the black, marble-topped table in the long parlour, she embroidering on a strip of cambric with nice skill, he quickly and deftly cutting the wrappers and pages of papers and magazines accumulated in his absence. To undertake just what he could do justice to and keep abreast of it, was the method by which he accomplished more than any two men, in business, in church affairs, in civic duties, for the man took his citizenship seriously. Both brother and sister had been raised to economy of time, yet sometimes she mocked at herself for her many excellencies and sometimes sighed, while he—

[28]

At ten o'clock Harriet rolled her work together and said good-night, ascending the crimson-carpeted stairway with the unhurried movement of an Olympian goddess; that is, if an Olympian goddess could have been so genuinely above concern about it.

Her room, a front one on the second floor, had a look of spaciousness and exquisite order. She moved about, adjusting a shade, setting a gas-bracket at some self-imposed angle of correctness, giving the sheets of the opened bed a touch of adjustment.

[29]

It was the price paid for the free exercise of individuality. Already, at twenty-six, ways were becoming habits.

These things arranged, she passed to the adjoining room, from to-night given to Alexina. Turning up the gas, Harriet glanced about at Nelly's disposition of things, then moved to the bed.

Whatever were the emotions called forth by the relaxed little form, softly and regularly breathing against a battered doll, or by the essentially babyish face with the fine, flaxen hair damp and clinging about the forehead, the Blairs were people to whom restraint was second nature. Whatever Harriet felt showed only in solicitude for the child who had thrown aside all cover. But as she drew the sheet and light blanket up, her hand touched the smoothness of a bared little limb. It brought embarrassment. She had but once before touched the bareness of another's body, and that her mother's, and in death.

[30]

Was it shame, this surging of strange hotness through her?

The refuge of a Blair was always action. She stepped to the bay of the room and drew the shutters against the night-wind.

Between the windows stood the bureau. Harriet paused, arrested by a daguerreotype in a velvet case open upon it. The child must have left it there. She sat down and laying the picture on her knee, regarded it, her chin in her palm.

It was the face of the father of the sleeping child, dead less than a year, for whom his sister was wearing this black trailing in folds about her.

And looking on his face, she recalled another, exquisite in pallor, with shadowy lashes, the face of Molly, who ten months after Alexander's death had married again; who not only married but gave up her child. Had it been the purpose of Alexander to test her for the child's sake? She had been given her third and the child the same, with Austen as executor and guardian. In the event of Molly marrying again, she had been given choice. She might relinquish all right in the remaining third and keep the child, or by giving up the child could claim the portion. And the estate was large. In ten months Molly had chosen.

[31]

And yet, thinking of these things, Harriet bade herself be just, chief tenet in the Blair creed. Was she so certain Alexander had been altogether unhappy in his marriage? May not compensations arise out of a man's own nature if he cares for the woman? For Harriet no longer asked why her brother had married Molly. She knew, knew that the thing called love is stronger than reason, than life—some even claimed, than death. Not that she knew it of herself, this calm, poised Harriet, but, watching, she had seen its miracles.

[32]

And out of this, Alexander may have drawn his compensation, for, stronger than the hourly friction of his daily life, stronger than the hurt of outraged conventionality, thrift, and pride, stronger than the jealousy which must have often assailed him, had not love survived in Alexander to the end, love that protected and concealed Molly's failings from his own people?

Suddenly, over Harriet swept the breath of roses coming into an open breakfast room and she saw a stern-lipped man lift, enfold a child-woman to him for a moment, and as fiercely put her from him and go out. [33]

Harriet, breathing quickly, put her brother's picture back, and going to the bed, lifted the bar and drew the sheet again over the child. Then she stood looking down. What manner of little creature was this child of Alexander and Molly?

Glancing about to assure herself all was in order, she put the light out, and, with hand outstretched against the darkness, moved to the door, when there swept over her again the vision of Molly clinging to Alexander, and again she felt the surrender of the man, the fierce closing of his arms, and again she was shaken by his passion.

And even after she reached her room and sat down at her desk to the ledger of household accounts, it came over her, and she paused, her hand pressed to her hot cheek. [34]

But that a little creature had cried itself to sleep in the next room she did not dream. She would have cried herself, had she known it, she, to whom tears came seldom and hard. But she was a slow awakening soul, groping, and she did not know.

CHAPTER FOUR [35]

The next morning Harriet sat in Alexina's room putting criss-cross initials on a pile of unmarked little garments. It was part of the creed that clothes be marked.

Presently, as the child came to her aunt's knee for a completed garment, Harriet laid a hand on the little shoulder. Demonstration came hard and brought a flush of embarrassment with it.

"Alexina," she said, "you haven't mentioned your mother!"

The child stood silent but there came a repeated swallowing in her throat while a slow red welled up over the little face.

Harriet had a feeling of sudden liking and understanding. "You would rather—you prefer not?" [36]

The child nodded, but later, as if from some fear of appearing unresponsive, she brought an album from her trunk and spread it open on Harriet's knee. She seemed a loyal small soul to her kinsfolk, mainly her mother's people, and turning the leaves went through the enumeration.

At one page—"Daddy," she said.

"Daddy" applied in a baby's cadence to Alexander! Daddy! It was a revelation of that part of her brother's life which Harriet had forgotten in accounting assets. "Daddy," called fearlessly, with intonation unconsciously dear and appealing. And Alexander had been that to his child!

There was no picture of Molly, but there was a torn and vacant space facing Alexander. Had the child removed one? She bore resentment then? Harriet had no idea how far a child of nine could comprehend and feel the situation. [37]

She would have been surprised at other things a child of nine can feel. If the routine of the house dragged dully to Alexina, Harriet never suspected it. The personal attention was detailed to Nelly, who divined more—Nelly, the freckle-faced, humorous-eyed house girl, taken from the Orphans' Home and trained by Harriet's mother. But, then, Nelly had been orphaned herself, and had known those first days following asylum consignment and perhaps had not forgot. Her sympathy expressed itself through the impersonal, the Blair training not having encouraged the other.

"Such a be-yewtiful dress," said she, laying out the clothes for her charge.

Which was true; no child of Molly's would have suffered for clothes, Molly loving them too well herself. [38]

"And such be-yewtiful slippers," said Nelly, with Alexina in her lap, pulling up the little stocking and buttoning the strap about the ankle.

Alexina's hand held tight to Nelly's hard, firm arm, steadying herself. Perhaps she divined the intention. "Can I come, too, when you go to set the table?" she asked.

But Harriet never suspected. Nor again, that evening while she and Austen read under the lamp, did Harriet know that Alexina, standing at the open parlour window gazing at the children playing on the sidewalk, was fighting back passionate tears of an outraged love and a baffling sense of injustice.

All at once a child's treble came in from the pavement.

"Can't you come play?"

[39]

Alexina turned, with backward look of eager inquiry to her aunt, who had come behind her to see who called.

"As you please; go if you want," said Harriet good-humouredly.

Austen, too, glanced out. Tip-toe on the stone curbing of the iron fence perched a little girl, spokesman for the group of children behind her.

"Who is the child?" he asked his sister.

"Her name is Carringford. She is a grand-daughter of the old Methodist minister who lives at the corner; secretary of his church board, or something, isn't he? I've noticed two or three little Carringfords playing in the yard as I go by, and all of them handsome."

Austen placed them at once. The child's mother was the daughter of the old minister, and, with husband and children, lived in the little brown house with him. An interest in the details of the human affairs about him was an unexpected phase in Austen's character. He liked to know what a man was doing, his income, his habits, his family ties. [40]

"I know Carringford," he remarked; "he is book-keeper for Williams, a good, steady man. As you say, a handsome child, exceedingly so."

Harriet watched until the little niece joined the group outside. "Gregarious little creatures they seem to be," she remarked. There was good-humour in her tone, but there was no understanding.

The next day was Sunday. On Monday it rained. Tuesday evening Alexina stood at the parlour window as before, looking out. The little figure looked very solitary.

"May I go play?" suddenly she asked. The voice was low, there was no note even of wistfulness, it was merely the question. There are children who suffer silently. [41]

"Why not?" Harriet rejoined, looking up from her magazine. She was the last person to restrict any one needlessly.

The little niece went forth. The children had not come for her again. Perhaps they did not want her, but, even with this fear upon her, go she must.

At the gate she paused and with the big house in its immaculate yard behind her, gazed up and down.

It was a quiet street with the houses set irregularly back from fences of varying patterns, and the brick sidewalks were raised and broken in places by the roots of huge sycamores and maples along the curbs.

But the cropped head of Alexina turned this way and that in vain. The street was deserted, the stillness lonesome. She swallowed hard. She knew where the little girl named Emily Carringford lived, for she had pointed out the house that first evening as they ran past in play, so Alexina slowly crossed the street, hoping Emily might be at her gate. [42]

But first, as she went along, came a wide brick cottage, sitting high above a basement, a porch across the front. She gazed in between the pickets of the fence, for it seemed nice in there. The ground was mossy under the trees, and the untrimmed bushes made bowers with their branches. She would like to play in this yard. Her eyes travelled on to the house. A gentleman sat in a cane arm-chair at the foot of the steps, smoking, and on the porch was a lady in a white dress with ribbons. The house looked old and the yard looked old, and so did the gentleman, but the lady was young; maybe she was going to a party, for it was a gauzy dress and the ribbons were rosy. [43]

Alexina liked the cottage and the lady, and the big, wide yard, and somehow did not feel as lonesome as she had. She started on to find Emily, but at that moment the gate of the cottage swung out across her path. How could she know that the boy upon it, lonely, too, had planned the thing from the moment of her starting up the street?

"Oh," said Alexina, and stopped, and looked at the boy, uncomfortably immaculate in fresh white linen clothes, but he was absorbed in the flight of a bird across the rosy western sky.

"Come and play," said the straightforward Alexina. Companionship was what she was in search of.

The boy, without looking at her, shook his head, not so much as if he meant no, but as if he did not know how to say yes. [44]

Perhaps she divined this, for approaching the gate and fingering its hasp, she asked,

"Why?"

The boy, assuming a sort of passivity of countenance as for cover to shyness, kicked at the gate, then scowled as he twisted his neck within the stiff circle of his round collar with the combative air of one who wars against starch. "There's nobody to play with," he said; "they've all gone to the Sunday-school picnic. I don't go to that church," nodding in the direction of a brick structure down the street.

"You go to the same one as my Aunt Harriet and my uncle," Alexina informed him. "I saw you there, and your name is William. I heard the lady calling you that, coming out."

[45]

The gate which had swung in swung out again, bringing the boy nearer this outspoken little girl, whose unconsciousness was putting him more at his ease. He had seen her at church, too, but he could not have told her so.

"What's the rest of your name—William what?"

Such a question makes a shy person very miserable, but the interest was pleasing.

"William Leroy," said the boy tersely. Then, as if in amend for the abruptness, he added: "Sometimes they call it the other way, King William, you know."

"Who do?"

"Father and mother."

"You mean when you're pretending?"

The gate stopped in its jerkings. There had been enough about the name. He was an imperious youngster. "No, I don't," he said; "it's William Leroy backward."

[46]

The little girl looked mystified, but evidently thought best to change a subject about which the person concerned seemed testy. "I saw one once," she said sociably; "a real one. He was in a carriage, with horses and soldiers, and a star on his coat."

"One what?" demanded the boy.

"A king, a real one, you know."

Now, this princeling on the gate knew when his own sex were guying and he knew the remedy. He did not know this little girl, but he would not have thought it of her.

"A real—what?" he demanded.

"A real king, but they don't say king; they say 'l'empereur.'"

William looked stern. "I don't know what you mean," he returned; "where did you see any king?"

[47]

The grave eyes were not one bit abashed. "In Paris, where we lived," said the little girl. "There was a boy named Tommy watching at the hotel window, too, and he said, 'Vive le roi,' and Marie, my bonne, she said, 'Sh—h: l'empereur!'"

The effect of this was unexpected, for the boy, descending from the gate, turned a keenly irradiated countenance upon her. "Do you mean Paris, my father's Paris, Paris in France?"

"Why," said the little girl, regarding him with some surprise, "yes." For he was taking her by the hand in a masterful fashion.

"Come in," he commanded. "I want you to tell father; that's father there."

But Alexina, friendly soul, went willingly enough with him through the gate and up the wide pavement between bordering beds of unflourishing perennials.

[48]

"Listen, father," William Leroy was calling to the gentleman at the foot of the steps; "she's been in Paris, your Paris."

The gentleman's ivory-tinted fingers removed the cigar from his lips. As he turned the western light fell on his lean, clean-shaven face, thin-flanked beneath high cheek-bones. From between grey brows thick as a finger rose a Louis Philippe nose, its Roman prominence accentuated by the hollowness of the cheeks. The iron-grey hair, thrown back off the face, fell, square-cut, to the coat collar behind.

Never a word spoke the gentleman, only, cigar in hand, waited, eagle-countenanced, sphinx-like. Yet straight Alexina came to his side, and her baby eyes, quick to dilate, now confidingly calm, met the ones looking out piercingly from their retreat beneath the heavy brows, and quite as a matter of course a little hand rested on his knee as she stood there, and equally as naturally, his face impassive, did the fingers of the gentleman close upon it.

[49]

A silent compact, silently entered into, for before a word was interchanged the animated contralto of the lady came down from above. "Who is the little girl, son? What is your name, dear?"

Son's wince was visible. He had no knowledge of the little girl's name, but he did not want to say so.

But she was answering for herself, looking up at the pretty lady, dressed as though for a party. "It's Mary Alexina Blair," she was saying, "but my Aunt Harriet says it's to be just Alexina now."

"Oh," said the lady. There was a little silence before she spoke again. "It must be Alexander Blair's child, Georges. Come up, dear, and let me see you."

[50]

But King William, balancing himself on the back of his father's chair, objected. "Hurry, then, mother," he demanded; "we want to play."

But Alexina had gone up the steps obediently. The eyes of the lady were dark and slumbrous, but in them was the slightly helpless look of short vision. She drew the child close for inspection.

The fair hair, the even brows, the clear-gazing eyes she seemed to have expected, but the dilation in those same wondering eyes raised to hers, the short upper-lip, the full under one that trembled—these the lady did not know. “A sensitiveness, a warmth,” she said, half aloud. What did she mean? Then she raised her voice.

“See, Willy Leroy, how she stands for me, while you pull away if I so much as lay my hand on you.” [51]

“But you look so close,” objected Willy, “and you fix my hair, and you say my collar ain’t straight. You’ve seen her now, mother; you’ve seen her close, and I want her to come sit on the step.”

“Go, then, little Mary Alexina Blair,” said the lady; “he’s a little ingrate whose mother has to barter with him for every concession he makes her.” And, smiling at herself, her face alight and arch with the animation of her smile, Charlotte Leroy sat back in the scarlet settee and respread her draperies as a bird its plumage, touching the ribbons at her waist and throat, resettling them with the air of one who takes frank pleasure in their presence and becomingness. This done, she viewed her hands, charming hands heavy with costly rings, and finally, reassured at all points, she relaxed her buoyant figure and looked around with smiling return to her surroundings. It was for no party she was dressed but for her own satisfaction. [52]

CHAPTER FIVE [53]

“Your initials spell Mab,” King William was telling Alexina as they sat on the step; “that means you’ll be rich. Mine don’t spell anything. I’m named for my grandfather up in Woodford, William Ransome. He’s dead. Father’s don’t either—Georges Gautier Hippolyte Leroy. His father ran away from France because he was a Girondist, and came to Louisville because it was French, and father’s been to Paris, too; haven’t you, father?”

The gentleman thus adjured removed his cigar and addressed his wife. “It begins to amount to garrulity. If the opposite sex produces this at ten, what are we to expect later on?” [54]

Mrs. Leroy’s voice had a note of defence in it, as if she could not brook even humorous criticism of the boy. It was plain where the passionate ardour in her nature was centred.

“I’m glad, I’m glad to see it,” she declared. “I was afraid it was not in him, I was beginning to fear he was a self-sufficient little monster.”

But her son was continuing the family history. “Mother’s name was Charlotte Ransome; wasn’t it, mother? When I’m a man I’m going to buy my grandfather’s stock farm back, and we’ll live there; won’t we, mother?”

But the impulsive Charlotte, veering around, here took her husband’s side: “‘I’m going to—I’m going to,’” she mimicked the boy, then began to chant derisively as in words familiar to both: [55]

*“And if you don’t believe me
And think I tell a lie—”*

But it only gave him an idea. He was not often a host. It was going to his head. “Wait!” he ordered, to whom it was not quite clear, and tore into the house, to be back almost at once, bearing a beribboned guitar.

“Now,” he said, depositing it upon his mother’s lap; “now, sing it for her; sing it right, mother. It’s ‘The Ram of Derby.’” This to Alexina, with a sudden shyness as he found himself addressing her.

But she, unconscious soul, did not recognize it, hers being an all-absorbed interest, and, reassured, young William went on:

“There was a William Ransome once, when he was little, sat on General Washington’s knee, and General Washington sang him ‘The Ram of Derby.’ Go on, mother, sing it.” [56]

And Charlotte, with eyes laughing down on the two upturned faces, “went on,” her jewelled fingers bringing the touch of a practised hand upon the strings, her buoyant figure responsive to the rhythm, while into the Munchausen recital she threw a dash, a swing that rendered the interest breathless.

*“There was a ram of Derby
I’ve often heard it said,
He was the greatest sheep, sir,
That ever wore a head.
And if you don’t believe me
And think I tell a lie,
Just go down to Derby
And see as well as I.”*

*"The horns upon this ram, sir,
They reached up to the sky,
The eagles built their nest there,
For I heard the young ones cry.
And if you don't believe me, etc., etc.*

[57]

*"The wool upon this ram, sir,
It grew down to the ground,
The devil cut it off, sir,
To make a morning gown.
And if you don't believe me, etc., etc."*

And so on through the tale. King William, at her knees, clapped his hands. Alexina, by him, clapped hers, too, for joy of companionship, while the third listener sat with unchanging countenance below. But he liked it, somehow one knew he liked it, knew that he was listening down there in the dusk.

Perhaps Charlotte knew it, too. The vibrant twang slowed to richer chords, broke into rippling chromatic, caught a new measure, a minor note, and her contralto began:

*"I am going far away, far away to leave you now,
To the Mississippi River I am going—"*

But this was only so much suggestion for her son's active brain. "Tell her, mother," he begged, pulling at Charlotte's sleeve; "tell her about the 'King William.'" [58]

"And it has lain dormant, this egotism, unsuspected," came up from out of the dusk.

Charlotte's fingers swept the chords, her eyes fixed adoringly on her little son's face, the while she sang on, absently, softly:

*"Down in my ol' cabin home,
There lies my sister an' my brother.
There lies my wife, the joy of my life,
An' the child in the grave with its mother."*

But King William, far from being harrowed by the woeful enumeration, laid an imperious hand on the strings. "Tell her, mother; I want you to tell her."

"Come then, and kiss mother, and I will."

He moved the intervening step and submitted a cheek reluctantly. "Just one and you said you'd tell." [59]

But Charlotte, imperious herself, waved him off; she'd none of him now. "It's because he's a vain boy, little Mary Alexina Blair, and filled with self-importance, that he wants you to know, and he only wants me to tell you because he has not quite the assurance to do it himself; that is why he wants me to tell about the great, white-prowed Argo—"

"We call them bows, not prows," came up out of the dusk.

But she refused the correction. "—The white-prowed Argo that is building across the river, to go in search of a golden fleece for little Jason here, a boat large, oh larger even than those other boats of little Jason's father, the Captain down there, which used to float up and down the Mississippi, and which vanished one day into the maw of the Confederacy—"

[60]

But Jason was lifting his voice. "Not that way; make her stop, father; that ain't the way!"

But mother was not to be hurried out of her revenge. "And this big, white ark is one day going to float off on the flood of Hope, bearing Jason and his father and his mother, the last plank of fortune between them and—"

Jason was beating with his hands on the steps. "Make her stop, father; make her tell it right; she don't understand what mother means. Do you?" with an appeal to the absorbed Alexina.

That small soul jumped and looked embarrassed to know what to say, for direct admissions are not always polite. "I had an ark once," she stated, "but I sucked the red off Noah, and Marie, my bonne, took it away." [61]

Leaning down, Charlotte Leroy swept the baby-voiced creature up into her lap. There was a passion of maternity in the act. "You innocent," she said, and held her fast.

It was nice to be there; the ribbons and the lacy ruffles were soft beneath her cheek, and the dark eyes of the lady were smiling down.

The child turned suddenly and clung to Charlotte with passionate responsiveness.

"It's about the boat his father is building, Willy wants you to know, little Mab," the lady was telling her, "and how, the other day, the Captain down there and our friends and Willy and I went aboard her, on the ways at the shipyard over the river, and how, at the ax-stroke, as she slid down and out across the water, Willy broke the bottle on the bow and christened the boat 'King [62]

William.”

“Just so,” came up in the Captain’s voice.

The moon was rising slowly.

“There’s some one at the gate,” cried Willy.

“It’s for me,” said Alexina, starting up; “it’s Nelly and she’s hunting me.”

Later, Nelly, leading her across the street, was saying, “I don’t believe Miss Harriet is going to like it when she knows where you’ve been.”

“Why?”

But Nelly couldn’t say; “except that they’re the only ladies on the street not knowing each other,” she explained.

The two went in. Alexina dropped Nelly’s hand and walked into the parlour and across to Harriet’s knee. Austen sat reading on the other side of the table.

“I’ve been over to a boy’s house,” said Alexina; “his name is King William and their other name is Leroy.” [63]

Harriet held the cambric strip of embroidery from her and viewed it. “Austen,” she asked, “is Alexina to play indiscriminately with the children on the square?”

Austen looked across at his sister. “It is within your authority to decide,” he returned, “but I know of no reason why she should not.”

Harriet made no response. Outwardly she was concerned with some directions to Nelly, waiting to take the child to bed, but inwardly she was wondering if Austen ever could have cared for this Charlotte Ransome.

He sat long after Harriet had gone. Then, rising abruptly, he went out the front door and walked to the corner of the house. It was dark in the coachman’s room above the stable, and the master could go to bed secure that his oil was not being wasted. [64]

That was all, yet he did not go in. The night was perfect, full of moonlight and the scent of earth and growing things. It was so still the houses along the street seemed asleep.

Almost furtively, the gaze of Austen lifted to the cottage, dark and silent across the way. He had been the one who would not forgive; the other had been only an impetuous girl.

He stood there long. Perhaps his face was colder, his lips pressed to a thinner line; perhaps it was the moonlight. Then he turned and went into the house.

CHAPTER SIX

[65]

Alexina came to Harriet with information.

“Emily goes to school to her aunt, and King William goes there, too.”

“Do they?” returned Harriet. Her interest was good-humoured rather than ardent.

“I’d like to go, too,” said her niece.

“Oh,” from Harriet, understanding at last; “but isn’t school about over?”

“There’s two weeks more.”

“If it will make you happy, why not, if the teacher does not object?”

So Alexina went with Emily to school. King William was there, but he hardly noticed her, seeming gloomy and given to taking his slate off into corners. [66]

“He don’t want to come,” explained Emily; “he’s the only boy.”

“Then what does he come for?” queried the practical Alexina.

“His mother won’t let him go to a public school.”

There was more to be learned about William. He fought the boys who went to the public school, because they jeered him in his ignominy. Alexina saw it happening up the alley but, strangely enough, when William appeared at school, he seemed cheered up, though something of a wreck.

Out of school, Alexina often went over to Emily’s house to play. There were no servants there, but her mamma beat up things in crocks, and her great-aunty, a brisk little old woman with sharp eyes, made yeast cakes and dried them out under the arbour and milked the cow, too, and Emily’s little brother, Oliver, carried milk to the neighbours. Once in the spotless, shining kitchen, Alexina was allowed to wield a mop in a dish-pan and, still again, to stir at batter in a bowl. [67]

In the room which would have been the parlour in another house, Emily's grandfather Pryor sat at a table with books around him, and wrote on big sheets of paper in close writing. He was a stern old man and his hair stood out fine and white about his head. Once, as he passed across the front porch, he looked at Emily, then stopped, pointing to the chain about her neck. It was Alexina's little gold necklace which Emily had begged to wear.

"Take it off," he said.

Emily obeyed, but her cheeks were flaming, and when he had gone she threw her head back. [68]
"When I'm grown, I mean to have them of my own, and wear them, too," she said.

She seemed happier away from home. "Let's go over to your house," she always said. She liked grown people, too, and Uncle Austen once patted her head, and after she had gone said to Aunt Harriet: "A handsome child, an unusually pleasing child."

But while Alexina played thus with Emily, more often she trudged across to King William's.

The nature of engrossment was different over there. Often as not it was theology, though this, to be sure, was the Captain's word for it, not his son's.

Willy's mother, like Aunt Harriet, was a Presbyterian. "If I had been a better one," she lamented [69]
to her husband one evening, "I would know how to meet his questions now. You don't take one bit of the responsibility of his religious training, Captain Leroy."

The creed of King William's mamma, when she came to formulate it, seemed a stern one, and it lost nothing in its setting forth by reason of her determination to do her duty by her son.

"Thank Heaven I had to sit under these things when I was a child, however I hated it then, or I could not do my part by him now," she told the Captain. "I want him," fervently, "to be everything I am not."

"Which might," suggested the Captain, "be a prig, you know."

But King William, listening, drank in these things. He had a garden patch in the back yard and knew the nature and habits of every vegetable in it, and being strictly a utilitarian, he weeded out [70]
sickly plants and unknown cotyledons with a ruthless hand.

Alexina expostulated. "Maybe it hurts 'em," she feared.

"Maybe it does," said the inexorable William; "but they are like the souls born to be damned. Put 'em on the brush pile there, and after a while we'll burn 'em."

At other times the yard was a sea-girt coral reef and they the stranded mariners. Generally Alexina accepted everything. The stories were new to her. But when she did have knowledge of a thing she stood firm; for instance, about the ocean, that you could not land every few moments of your progress and throw out gang-planks.

"For I've been there," she insisted, "and you couldn't, you know."

At times they adjourned to the commons behind the stable, which, in reality, were plains [71]
frequented by Indians, or, if the yard palled or rain drove them in, there was fat, black, plausible Aunt Rose in the basement kitchen to talk to, and if Aunt Rose proved fractious and drove them out, together with her own brood generally skulking around, before a threatening dish-rag or broom, there was Charlotte to be beguiled from more serious occupation into doing her son's bidding.

Charlotte was always busy. The cottage and all in it had come to her from her father's aunt. She had been accustomed to seeing the windows, the furniture, the mirrors, the silver door knobs shining; therefore, she knew such things ought to shine, and since there was no one in these days but herself to do it, she cleaned, polished, rubbed, and went to bed limp.

One afternoon in the late fall, when the children sought her, she was pasting papers over glasses [72]
of jelly. "We went over the river to see the boat yesterday," King William was saying to Alexina as they came in. "Tell her about it, mother; about the gold star at the bow."

The papers did not want to stick. "He's a bad boy, little Mab," Charlotte informed her. "He made me take him over before he'd promise to go to the party he's asked to. He wants to be a little boor who won't know how to act when he grows up."

"I'm never goin' to parties when I'm grown up, so what's the use learning how to act at 'em now?" argued her son.

Charlotte dropped a mucilaged paper. "But you promised," she reminded him anxiously; "you promised—"

"Oh, well—" admitted her son.

Charlotte kept a fire in her parlour. Coal was at a fabulous price in the South that winter, but she [73]
had never known a parlour without a fire, and here she and the children sat in the afternoons, the Captain often returning early and joining them.

"Georges," said Charlotte upon one of these occasions, "we are poor."

The Captain smoked in silence. Perhaps he had realized it before. His keen eyes, however, were regarding her.

"But," said Charlotte, "we go on acting as though we were rich."

"Just so," said the Captain.

"When your trousers get shabby, you order more like them. Did you ever ask your tailor if he has anything cheaper?"

Now, trousers of that pearl tint peculiar to the finest fabrics were as characteristic a part of the Captain's garb as were the black coat, the low-cut vest, the linen cambric handkerchiefs like small tablecloths for size, the tall silk hat, and the Henry Clay collar above the black silk stock. [74]

"Did you ever ask him if he had anything cheaper, Georges?"

"I can't say," admitted Georges, "that I ever did." For the Captain had never asked his tailor a price in his life. When the bill came he paid it. But it takes income to meet eccentricities of this sort, while now—

Did the Captain, glancing from his wife to the boy on the floor, seem to age, to shrink in his chair? For Charlotte was thirty-two and the boy was ten and the Captain was nearing sixty.

"And when your shirts and Willy's things and mine give out, I've been going right on to the sisters ordering more. Convent prices are high, Georges."

The Captain had nothing to say. [75]

"Adele has been telling me that she cuts down her eldest boy's things for the little one." Adele was the widow of a Confederate general. "So I borrowed her patterns. Listening to Adele talk, I realized, Georges, that you and Willy and I have to learn how to be poor."

It was at this point that Charlotte brought forth from the chair behind her a voluminous broadcloth cape, such as men then wore for outer wrap, and spread it on the mahogany centre-table.

"It's perfectly good, if you did discard it, and I'm going to cut it into something for Willy; I didn't tell Adele I never had tried, she is so capable, but I borrowed her patterns." And Charlotte brought forth a paper roll.

The Captain, in the arm-chair, sat and watched. Alexina, from his knee, where he had a way of lifting her, watched too. Willy, from a perch on the arm of the sofa, offered suggestions. [76]

This was early in the afternoon. At six o'clock the Captain, lighting another of an uninterrupted series of cigars, was still watching silently. On the sofa sat Charlotte, in tears. On the table, tailor fashion, sat King William, sorting patterns, while Nelly, who had come for Alexina, stood by and directed.

"How does he know?" Mrs. Leroy, watching her son a little anxiously, asked the Captain. "I wouldn't like him to develop such a bent. He doesn't get it from you—or from me."

"I look at my legs," said William, "and then I build it that way."

Another afternoon the Captain looked up from his smoking and spoke to Charlotte. The children were on the floor turning the pages of a picture paper. [77]

"We have succeeded in securing the loan on a mortgage on the boat. Cowan arranged it through his bank. It was at a higher rate than we had agreed on, but we'd lost all the time we could spare. We'll push ahead now and have things finished by spring."

That night, over at the Blairs', as Alexina climbed into her place at the table Austen was speaking to Harriet. "You remember I told you I was looking for an investment of the proceeds of those bonds of Alexina's which matured the other day? This morning I took a mortgage on a boat Cowan is building at his yard."

Alexina heard her name, but did not understand.

CHAPTER SEVEN

[78]

There came a day the following spring when Alexina, seeking her aunt, wept.

Harriet gazed at her dismayed, at a loss. Heretofore Alexina had taken her tears to Nelly or had kept them to herself.

"They are going away," she said, "King William and them; going in the boat."

This, as a matter to cry about, was a mystery to Harriet. "Going where?" she asked.

"To get the golden fleece," her weeping niece assured her.

"Well," said Harriet amused, "let us hope they may find it, but why the tears?"

Alexina got up and carried her tears to her own room. It spoke her infantile capacity to discriminate that she bore away no resentment; there are things that the Aunt Harriets with the best wills in the world need not be expected to understand. [79]

King William's mother, telling her, had held her tight and rocked her; King William's father, when he saw her lip trembling afterward, had lifted her on his knee.

Going into the big, high room which was her own, Alexina shut the door. Then she cast herself on the floor. A little hand, beating about wildly, came upon Sally Ann, lying unregarded there. Gathering her in fiercely, presently the sobs grew quieter. Later she wiped her eyes upon her child and, kissing her tenderly, put her down and went over to King William's; the time was short and she could have Sally Ann afterward.

The next day the cottage was closed and the shutters made fast. Alexina felt lonesome even to look over there, and Sally Anns are but silent comforters. [80]

But in a year the Leroy's came back from St. Louis, between which city and New Orleans the splendid new "King William" had been plying. The judgment of Captain Leroy had been at fault, which is a sad thing when a man is sixty. The day of the steamboat had passed, because that of the railroad had come. The "King William" as a venture was a failure.

So, one morning, the cottage windows were open to the Virginia creeper outside them. Nelly whispered the news to Alexina at breakfast, and the child could not eat for hurry to be through and go over.

It was as if King William had been watching for her, for he came running to the gate and took her hand to conduct her in. He was taller and thinner, and looked different, and neither could find anything to say on the way. [81]

Charlotte was sitting in the parlour, her wraps half-removed. They had only just arrived, and the stillness and closeness of a newly opened house was about. "How does one pack furniture for moving, Willy?" Charlotte began as he appeared.

But he was bringing Alexina. "Tell her about it, mother," he said, "so she'll know."

Charlotte, brightening, held out her arms. Then, having lifted the child to her lap and kissed her, her face grew wan again. "There was no fleece for Jason, little Mab; there is no Land of Colchis, never believe it. And those seeking, like Willy and me, are like to wander until youth and hope and opportunity are gone."

She was crying against a little cropped head. King William stood irresolute, then put an arm around her. "Not that way, mummy; don't tell it that way." [82]

But control had given way. "And there is nothing for little Jason. He must go and fight with his bare hands like any poor churl's child—oh, Willy, Willy, my little son—"

Alexina, in her lap, sat very still; King William was staring hard into space.

Charlotte went on. "We are going away, little Mab, Willy and his father and I; going away for good. Everything that ever was ours, this cottage and all, is gone. We are going to a place in the South called Aden, where there are a few acres that still are ours only because they would not sell."

A moment they all were still. Then the little breast of Alexina began to heave. The Leroy's had never seen her this way. Sally Ann had, many times, and Nelly once or twice. She threw herself upon Charlotte. "I want to go, too; I want to go; I hate it—there," with a motion of self toward the big, white house visible through the window. "I hate it, and I want to go too." [83]

They were all crying now. Suddenly King William stood forth in front of the child. "When we get rich, I'll come for you," he said.

The practical Alexina looked through the arrested tears as she sat up. "But if you don't get rich?" she questioned.

Charlotte laughed. She was half child herself. The laugh died. The other half was woman. "Then he won't come; if he is the son of his father, he won't come."

PART TWO

*"Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbour's creed has lent.
All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone."*

EMERSON.

CHAPTER ONE

Alexina Blair, at twenty, returned from school to her uncle's home with but small emotion, as, at fourteen, she had left with little regret, yet the shady streets, the open front doors, the welcomes called from up-stairs windows as she passed—evidences that she was back among her own people in the South—all at once made her glad to be here.

How could she have felt emotion over a mere return to Uncle Austen's house? She might have felt enthusiasm over Nelly, but Nelly was married to the gardener at her old asylum and a Katy had taken her place. The house was the same. If only its stone façade might be allowed to mellow, to grey a little! But, newly cleaned, it stood coldly immaculate in its yard of shaven lawn set about with clipped shrubberies. As for her uncle, Alexina found herself applying the same adjectives to him, shaven, immaculate, cold. [88]

She wondered what he thought of her, but Uncle Austen never made personal remarks.

Aunt Harriet, on joining her niece in the East early in the summer, had looked at her consideringly. She seemed pleased.

"Why," she said, "Alexina, you are a Tennyson young person, tall and most divinely—you are a little more intense in your colouring than is usual with a Blair. I'm glad."

The somewhat doubtful smile on the girl's face deepened as if a sudden radiance leaped into it. She seized her aunt's hand. "Oh," she said, "you're very nice, Aunt Harriet." [89]

Harriet laughed, rather pleased than not, but she still was studying the girl. "She is impulsive and she doesn't look set," the aunt was telling herself—was it gratefully? "perhaps she is less Blair than I thought."

Austen Blair too, in fact, now viewed his niece with complacency—she fulfilled the Blair requirements—but he talked of other things.

"It is the intention of your aunt and myself," he told her promptly, "to introduce you at once to what will be your social world, for it is well for everyone to have local attachment."

As the matter progressed it appeared that social introduction, as Uncle Austen understood it, was largely a matter of expenditure. In all investment it is the expected thing to place where there is likeliest return. Therefore he scanned the invitation list earnestly. [90]

"She can afford to do the thing as it should be done," he remarked to Harriet.

"She? But Austen—" Harriet hesitated. "I supposed it was ours, this affair; it seems the least—"

Austen looked at her. At first he did not comprehend, then he replied with some asperity. "I have so far kept sentiment and business apart in managing Alexina's affairs."

Harriet was silenced. It was becoming less and less wise to oppose Austen. He had his own ideas about the matter. "The thing is to be done handsomely," he set forth, "but," as qualification, "judiciously."

Therefore he stopped an acquaintance on the street a day or two before the affair. "Are we to have the pleasure of seeing you on Tuesday?" he asked, even a little ostentatiously, for the young man had neglected to accept or decline. [91]

Austen reported the result to Harriet. "For there is no use ordering a supper for five hundred if but four hundred and ninety-nine are coming," he told her.

"No?" said Harriet.

"Exactly," said her brother.

Alexina, present at the conversation, looked from the one to the other. Uncle Austen was Uncle Austen; there was a slight lift of the girlish shoulders as she admitted this. But Aunt Harriet—

For Harriet had changed. She had been changing these past two summers. She was absent, forgetful, absorbed, even irritable. Aunt Harriet! And recalled, she would colour and look about in startled fashion. [92]

Alexina and Harriet had been always on terms friendly and pleasant, but scarcely to be called intimate; terms that, after a cordial good-night, closed the door between their rooms, and while the girl had been conscious of a fondness for her serene and capable aunt, there were times too, when, met by that same serenity, she had felt she must rebel, and in secret had thrown her young arms out in impotent, passionate protest.

But now Aunt Harriet forgot and neglected and grew cross like any one, and the sententious utterances of Uncle Austen irritated her. Alexina, going into her room one day, found her with her head bowed on the desk. Was she crying? The girl slipped out.

Was Aunt Harriet unhappy? The heart of Alexina warmed to her.

The evening of Alexina's return home Harriet had come to her door. To twenty years thirty-eight seems pitifully far along in life, yet Harriet called up no such feeling in Alexina. No passion of living writ itself on Galatea's cheek while she was in marble, and Alexina, opening the door to the tap, thought her aunt beautiful. [93]

"If there are callers to-night," Harriet said, "I want you to come down. My friends are not too elderly," she smiled in the old, good-humoured way, "to be nice to you this winter."

So later Alexina went down to the library, a room long unfurnished, now the only really cheerful room in the house. Was it because Harriet had furnished it?

The girl always had realized in an indefinite way that Harriet was a personage; later, in their summers away together, she discovered that men liked her handsome aunt. [94]

In the library she found a group who, from the conversation, seemed to be accustomed to dropping in thus in casual fashion. They were men of capacity and presence, one felt that, even in the case of that long avowed person of fashion, Mr. Marriot Bland, who was getting dangerously near to that time of life when he would be designated an old beau. He was a personage, too, of his type. Alexina shook hands with him gaily; she had been used to his coming since she first came to live with Aunt Harriet and Uncle Austen. Harriet introduced the others. The girl's spirits rose; she felt it was nice that she should be knowing them.

And they? What does middle-age feel, looking upon youth, eager-eyed, buoyant, flushed with the first glow from that unknown about to dawn? [95]

Oh, it was a charming evening. The girl showed she thought it so and smiled, and the men smiled too, as they joined Harriet in making her the young centre. Perhaps there was a tender something in the smiles. Was it for their own gone youth?

One, a Major Rathbone, stayed after the others left. He sat building little breastworks on the centre-table out of matches taken from the bronze stand by the lamp, and as he talked he looked over every now and then at Harriet on the other side.

In the soberer reaction following the breaking up of the group, Alexina, too, found time to look at Harriet. It was an Aunt Harriet that she had never seen before. The colour was richly dyeing this Harriet's cheeks, and the jewel pendant at her throat rose and trembled and fell, and her white lids fell, too, though she had laughed when her eyes met laughter and something else in the brown eyes of the Major fixed on her. [96]

It was of Mr. Marriot Bland the Major was speaking, his smooth, brown hand caressing his clean-shaven chin.

"So cruelly confident are you cold Dianas," he was saying. "Now, even a Penelope must hold out the lure of her web to an old suitor, but you Dianas—"

Alexina laughed. She had jumped promptly into a liking for this lean, brown man with the keen, humorous eyes and the deliberate yet quick movements, and now absorbed in her thoughts, was unconscious of her steadfast gaze fixed on him, until he suddenly brought his eyes to bear on hers with humorous inquiry.

"Well?" he inquired.

Now Alexina, being fair, showed blushes most embarrassingly, but she could laugh too. [97]

"What's the conclusion?" he demanded; "or would it be wiser not to press inquiry?"

Alexina laughed again. She knew she liked this Major.

"I was wondering," she confessed. "You are so different from what I expected. I heard Aunt Harriet and Uncle Austen discussing one of your editorials, so I read it. I thought you would be different—fiercer maybe, and—er—more aggressive."

Alexina began to blush again, for the Major was so edified at something that his enjoyment was suspicious.

"But no man is expected to live down to his editorials, Miss Alexina; I write 'em for a living."

He stroked his chin as he regarded her, but there was laughter too out of the tail of his eye across at Aunt Harriet, who was laughing also, though she looked teased. [98]

Later Alexina learned more about this Major Rathbone. It was Emily Carringford who told her. Emily came over promptly the day after Alexina's return and, admitted by Katy, ran up as of old.

Alexina, hearing her name called, turned from a melée of unpacking as the other reached the open doorway.

"Oh, Emily," she said, and stood and gazed.

Emily stood, too, archly, and, meeting Alexina's look, laughed. Her blush was an acknowledgment; she did not even pretend to misunderstand Alexina's meaning.

"Aunt Harriet told me how—how lovely you were, and Uncle Austen told me last night that my

friend, Miss Emily, he considered an 'unusually good-looking woman—a handsome woman, in fact.'" The niece had her uncle's every conciseness of tone as she quoted. "But somehow with it all, I wasn't prepared—" [99]

She came forward with hands out.

Emily forgot to take the hands. "Did he say that, really, Alexina?"

"Yes; why shouldn't he? Oh, Emily, it must be joy, or does it frighten you to know you're so beautiful?"

She was letting her fingers touch, almost with awe, the curve of the other's cheek.

Emily laughed, but the crimson on the cheek deepened.

"And your voice?" demanded Alexina. "I want to hear you sing. Did you get the place in the choir you wrote me about?"

"Miss Harriet got it for me; it was she who suggested it—that is, she got Mr. Blair to get it for me. It's at your church, you know." [100]

"Uncle Austen? No. Did he, really?"

But the surprise in Alexina's voice was unfair to her uncle. To help people to the helping of themselves was part of his creed. He looked upon it as a furthering of the general social economy, as indeed he had pointed out more than once to those he was thus assisting.

But Alexina had many things to ask. She pushed Emily into a chair.

"Is it pleasant—the choir?" she began.

"Pleasant? Well," Emily looked away and coloured, "I like the money; I've never been able to have any clothes before. There was a scene at home about it—my singing, I mean, in any but my own church, and for money. It was grandfather, of course; it's always been grandfather. He says it's spiritual prostitution, whatever he means by that, taking money for praising the Lord in an alien faith." She laughed in an off-hand way. "No, I'll be honest, I'd have to be sooner or later with you, anyhow, I hate it—not the work and rehearsals so much, but the being patronized. When some of those women stop me, with the air of doing the gracious thing, to tell me they have enjoyed my singing, oh, I could—" Again she laughed, but her cheeks were blazing. Then she leaned over and fingered some of the girlish fineries strewn the bed. "I hate it at home, too, when it comes to being honest about things—six of us, with grandfather and Aunt Carrie making eight, in that little house!" [101]

Later, Alexina chanced to refer to Major Rathbone. She spoke enthusiastically, for she either liked people or she did not like them. "Hadn't you heard about him?" asked Emily in surprise. "He met Miss Harriet two years ago, and he's been coming ever since. It's funny, too, that he should. He's *the* Major Rathbone, you know—" [102]

But Alexina looked unenlightened.

"Why," said Emily, "the Major Rathbone who was the Confederate guerrilla—the one who captured and burned a train-load of stuff your grandfather and Mr. Austen had contracted to deliver for the government. I've heard people tell about it a dozen different ways since he's been coming to see Miss Harriet. Anyway, however it was, the government at the time put a price on his head and your grandfather and Mr. Austen doubled it. And now they say he's in love with Miss Harriet!"

In love! With Aunt Harriet! Alexina grew hot. Aunt Harriet! She felt strange and queer. But Emily was saying more. "Mr. Blair and Major Rathbone aren't friends even yet; I was here to supper with Miss Harriet one evening last winter, and Mr. Blair was furious over an editorial by Major Rathbone in the paper that day about some political appointments from Washington. Mr. Blair had had something to do with them, had been consulted about them from Washington, it seems. Major Rathbone's a Catholic, too." [103]

It rushed upon Alexina that she had spoken to the Major of a family discussion over his editorials.

Emily stayed until dusk. As Alexina went down to the door with her, they met Uncle Austen just coming in. He stopped, shook hands, and asked how matters were in the choir.

As Emily ran down the steps he addressed himself to his niece. "A praiseworthy young girl to have gone so practically to work." Then as Emily at the gate looked back, nodding archly, he repeated it. "A praiseworthy young girl, praiseworthy and sensible," his gaze following her, "as well as handsome." [104]

He went in, but Alexina lingered on the broad stone steps. It was October and the twilight was purple and hazy. Chrysanthemums bloomed against the background of the shrubbery; the maples along the street were drifting leaves upon the sidewalk; the sycamores stood with their shed foliage like a cast garment about their feet, raising giant white limbs naked to heaven.

There were lights in the wide brick cottage. Strangers lived there now. A swinging sign above the gate set forth that a Doctor Ransome dwelt therein. [105]

The eddying fall of leaves is depressing. Autumn anyhow is a melancholy time. Alexina, going in,

CHAPTER TWO

[106]

The Blair reception to introduce their niece may have been to others the usual matter of lights and flowers and music, but to the niece it was different, for it was her affair.

She and her aunt went down together. The stairway was broad, and to-night its banister trailed roses.

Alexina was radiant. She even marched up and kissed her uncle. Things felt actually festive.

All the little social world was there that evening. Alexina recalled many of the girls and the older women; of the older men she knew a few, but of the younger only one could she remember as knowing. [107]

He was a rosy-cheeked youth with vigorous, curling yellow hair, and he came up to her with a hearty swinging of the body, smiling in a friendly and expectant way, showing nice, square teeth, boyishly far apart. She knew him at once; he had gone to dancing school when she did, and she was glad to see him.

"Why, Georgy," she said, and held out a hand, just as it was borne in upon her that Georgy wore a young down on his lip and was a man.

"Oh," she said, blushing, "I hope you don't mind?"

He was blushing, too, but the smile that showed his nice spaced teeth was honest.

"No," he said; "I don't mind."

Which Alexina felt was good of him and so she smiled back and chatted and tried to make it up. And Georgy lingered and continued to linger and to blush beneath his already ruddy skin until Harriet, turning, sent him away, for Harriet was a woman of the world and Georgy was the rich and only child of the richest mamma present, and the other mammas were watching. [108]

Alexina's eyes followed him as he went, then wandered across the long room to Emily. She had expected to feel a sense of responsibility about Emily, but Uncle Austen, after a long and precise survey of her from across the room, put his eye-glasses into their case and went to her. His prim air of unbending for the festive occasion was almost comical as he brought up youths to make them known. This done he fell back to his general duties as host.

But Alexina, watching Emily, felt dissatisfaction with her, her archness was overdone, her laughter was anxious. [109]

Why should Emily stoop to strive so? With her milk-white skin and chestnut hair, with her red lips and starry eyes there should have belonged to her a pride and a young dignity. Alexina, youthfully stern, turned away.

It brought her back to the amusing things of earth, however, that Uncle Austen should take Emily home when it was over. Would Emily be arch with Uncle Austen? Picture it!

Several of the older men lingered after the other guests were gone, and they, with Harriet and Alexina, had coffee in the library. The orderliness of the room, compared with the dishevelled appearance elsewhere now the occasion was over, seemed cheerful, and these men friends of Aunt Harriet were interesting. The talk was personal, as among intimates. The local morning paper, opposed to Major Rathbone's own, it seemed, had taxed the Major with aspiring to be the next nominee of his party for Congress. And this was proving occasion for much banter at his expense by the other men, for the truth was the Major was being considered as a possibility, but a possibility tempered, for one thing, by the fact that his guerrilla past shed a somewhat lurid light upon his exemplary present. [110]

"But why want to keep it secret as if it were something dark and plotting?" insisted Harriet Blair. "Why not come right out and admit your willingness if your party wants you?"

The men laughed in varying degrees of delight at this feminine perspicacity. The Major regarded her with somewhat comical humour, looking a little shamefaced, though he was laughing too. "For the fear my party can't afford to have me," he answered. "It takes money. They are casting about for a richer available man first, and, that failing, why—" [111]

Here Austen Blair came in, bringing a breath of the November chill. Or was it his own personality that brought the chill, Alexina wondered. For, to do him justice, there was a distinction, a fine coldness, a bearing about him which distinguished him in any company.

Promptly on his coming the group broke up. The others passed into the hall to hunt overcoats, but the Major paused to address Harriet, who had risen and was looking at him as he spoke. There was colour in her face, and light.

"Friday evening, then," he was saying, "you will go with me to hear Benton lecture?" [112]

Austen, who had taken a cup of coffee from Alexina, looked up sharply. He put the cup down.

Harriet smiled acquiescence. "Friday evening," she agreed.

Later, in the hall, as the outer door shut behind the group of departing men, Austen turned on his sister, his nostrils tense with dilation.

"Do you realize what you are doing?" he asked. "Have you utterly lost sight of how this man was regarded by your father, if you prefer to put consideration for me out of the matter?"

Harriet continued to unfasten her long glove. The colour was gone from her face, and the light, but otherwise she stood outwardly serene.

"The fight was fair," she said calmly, "and also mutual."

[113]

Her brother regarded her fixedly, then he spoke. "Though what there is to be gained in thus setting yourself in opposition to my repeatedly expressed wishes I do not"—all at once two steely points seemed to leap into the blue intensity of his gaze—"unless—in Heaven's name, Harriet, is it possible that you mean to—"

"Mean to what?" she repeated. Harriet was meeting his eyes with a look as unflinching as his. She seemed unconsciously to have drawn herself to her full, superb height, but she had grown white as her gown.

He suddenly resumed his usual manner. "Take the child on to bed," he said, glancing at Alexina standing startled, looking from one to the other. "This is no time to have the matter out."

"I agree with you quite," said his sister, and held out a hand to the girl. Alexina took it quickly, impulsively, and held to it as they went up the garlanded stairway, which suddenly looked tawdry and garish. In the hall above the girl lifted Harriet's hand and put her cheek against it, then almost ran in at her own door.

[114]

CHAPTER THREE

[115]

The Blairs met about the breakfast table next morning at the usual time; a matter of four hours for sleep instead of eight would have been insufficient excuse to Austen for further upsetting of routine; and there was none of the chit-chat that would seem natural on a morning following the giving of a large social affair.

Aunt Harriet was dumb and Uncle Austen tense, or so it seemed to the third and youngest Blair about the board. She had been conscious of sharp interchange checked as she entered. Uncle Austen even forgot to look up at her interrogatively as she came in, though she was a moment late.

Was the trouble still about the Major? Was Aunt Harriet determined to go with him Friday evening?

[116]

Whatever the cause, Friday came, with the strained relations between sister and brother unrelieved.

The town was in the midst of its social season, the Blair reception being one of several crowding each other. On this Friday Harriet and Alexina were to attend an afternoon affair, and later Alexina was to go to an evening occasion with her uncle, who had consented icily, as though to emphasize the fact that it was Harriet's engagement which made it necessary for him to take the girl.

Alexina, coming down a little before five, found Harriet standing in the parlour, ready, gloves on and wrap on a chair. To be young is to be ardent. Not all youthful things are young. Alexina was young.

"You are beautiful, Aunt Harriet," she declared.

[117]

But it was as if Harriet did not hear. Was it premonition, that strained absorption?

"A moment, Alexina," she was saying. "Listen, was that the bell?"

"John, probably," said Alexina, "to let us know the carriage is waiting."

But it was Major Rathbone who came in upon them in his quick fashion a moment later. His overcoat was a cape affair which somehow seemed to suit his personality, and ever after Alexina could see him throwing the cavalier-like drapery back with impatient gesture.

"You are not gone then, Harriet," he said; "I am glad for that."

Quickly as the words were spoken, the Harriet on his lips was not lost upon Alexina. She turned to go, quite hot and with impulsive haste, but the Major, putting out a hand, detained her.

[118]

"No, Miss Alexina; I'd really rather you would stay if you will be so kind," he said, then turned to the older woman. "I have just had some words with your brother on the club-house steps and I knocked him down. I came on straight here, preferring you should hear my regret from myself. I

lost my temper."

He was facing Harriet, who had taken a step towards him at his entrance, then had stopped. Looking at her he went on rapidly:

"There is this I want to say. Yesterday I thought never to have the right to say it since I was too poor to ask you to listen. To-night I came here to say that I love you from my soul, and near you or away from you, alive or dead, will go on loving you and wanting you. Had you been poor I would have fought like any man to make you care; as it is I knocked your brother down for saying I was trying to do it because you are rich, to further my political ambition. I knocked him down for that, and for some other, older reasons. There is nothing more to say; no, in the divine bigness of your nature don't think you have to speak. I cannot come here any more, even if you would permit me, after what has happened, and I can't expect you to go to-night of course. But if ever I can serve you I am yours, soul and body, and will be while there is life in me. That's all at last. What," as he turned, "crying, Miss Alexina? For me? Or for him? I assure you there was little hurt but his arrogance. Dare I ask you to shake hands?" [119]

And he was gone in his abruptly quick fashion and the latch of the outer door was heard clicking behind him. [120]

It aroused Harriet and she came to herself. She was trembling, but on her face was a look of one who has entered Heaven. Then it seemed to come to her that he was gone.

"I must—oh, stop him, Alexina. He must know—"

The girl ran into the hall, but the outer door was heavy, and in her haste she was awkward getting it open. As it gave finally the rush of wind drove her inward. The steady rainfall of the day, freezing as it touched the ground, had changed to finely driven sleet. The steps glared with ice. But already the Major was at the gate, and through the dusk she could see his umbrella lowered against the wind as he turned and started up the street. She called after him impulsively, beseechingly, but realized the futility of it through the fierce rush of wind and sleet. John was just driving out the carriage-way from the stable. Indeterminate, she closed the door and turned back to the parlour. [121]

Harriet had sunk upon a chair, and in her eyes, looking far off, was a light, a smile, or was it tears?

She sprang up and turned, her face one heavenly blush, as Alexina entered. Had she thought it would be he?

"Gone? Oh, Alexina, I must—I have to tell him. Ring the bell. John must go for him. After what has happened I cannot stand it that the knowledge should all be mine."

But she was already pulling the bell-cord herself, then turned to Alexina blushing and radiant.

"I am thirty-eight years old, Alexina; I am not even young, and yet he cares for me." [122]

The bell had rung; both had heard the far-off sound of it, but no one answered, maid or man-servant.

She rang again. "I had no time, the words would not come, I tried to tell him," she said pleadingly to Alexina, as if the girl were arraigning her, then suddenly dropped into the chair by the bell-cord, and with her face in her hands against its back went into violent weeping.

Alexina stood hesitant. There are times for silence. She would go and find Katy.

But she met her hurrying from the kitchen towards the parlour, the shawl over her head full of sleet and wet. She was panting and her eyes were large. Alexina was vaguely conscious of the cook, breathing excitement, somewhere back in the length of the hall, and behind her some trades-boy, his basket on his arm, his mouth gaping. [123]

"It's Major Rathbone," said Katy, panting; "John ran into him coming out the carriage gate. The horses slipped and he had his umbrella down and didn't see. I was coming from the grocery."

"Oh," said Alexina; "Katy, oh—"

Harriet had heard and was already in the hall and struggling with the outer door. "I can't—it won't—oh, Alexina, help me!"

Katy had reached the door too, and put her hand on the knob. "They've already started to the infirmary with him, Miss Harriet, John and that young doctor across the street, before I came in. He told them to take him there himself. He was half up, holding to the fence, before John was off the box. 'Stop the doctor there getting in his buggy,' he said to John, 'and get me around to the infirmary.'" [124]

"And the doctor—what did he say?" demanded Alexina.

"He said 'Good Lord, man!' and he swore just awful at John being so slow helping get him in the carriage."

Harriet all at once was herself, perfectly controlled.

"Go get me my long cloak, please, Katy," she said.

"Oh, Miss Harriet," from Katy; "you ain't thinking of goin' out—it's sleetin' awful—without the carriage!"

But Harriet already had reached the stairs going for the wrap herself.

Alexina followed her. "What is it, Aunt Harriet?" she begged. "Where are you going?"

Harriet answered back from her own doorway. "To the infirmary."

[125]

Action is the one thing always understood by youth. Alexina entirely approved. "I'll go, too," she said, and ran into her room to change her wrap for a darker one.

There was but one infirmary at the time in the city, and that a Catholic institution. They could walk a square and take a car to the door. Alexina, in her haste, never thought of money, but Harriet, as she came down, had her purse.

Neither spoke on the way; it was all they could do to keep umbrellas open in the fierce drive of wind and sleet. Alexina bent her head to catch breath; the sleet whipped and stung her face, the wind seized her loose cape, her light skirts, bellying them out behind her. But Harriet, ahead, tall, poised, went swiftly on, and, in the light from the street gas-post as they waited for a car, her face showed no consciousness of storm or of aught about her. Yet it was Harriet who stopped the car, who made the change, and paid the fares. The ride into town was in silence. It was Harriet who rang the bell before the infirmary building, who led the way over the icy pavement, up the wide brick walk through the grounds; it was Harriet who rang the bell at the big central door, and it was she who entered first past the little Sister who opened that door.

[126]

Not that the little Sister meant to permit it—it was against rules, she assured them, visiting hours were over. She could tell them nothing. The doctors were with the gentleman now.

But she let them in. Prison doors must have opened to Harriet that night, she would have put the little Sister aside if need be and walked in, Alexina felt that. Perhaps the little Sister felt it too. She glanced at Harriet furtively, timidly, and, murmuring something about going to see, glided away.

[127]

The two stood in the hall, Alexina gazing at the patron Saint of the place, in marble on his pedestal. After a time the little Sister returned and told them the doctor would see them presently and said something about the parlour, but Harriet shook her head.

Again they waited, the woman and the girl sitting in chairs against the painted wall, facing the Saint in his niche. The instincts of long ago arose within Alexina, and unconsciously her lips moved for comfort to herself in a prayer to the benign old Saint before her, there being nothing incongruous to her that she was using a little form of child's prayer taught her by her Presbyterian aunt.

And still they waited, so long that Alexina felt she could not stand the silence longer, or the waiting. She looked at Harriet, who was gazing before her, her face colourless, her eyes unseeing. Alexina began to wonder if the Sister had forgotten they were there.

[128]

But at last she came stealing noiselessly back, and, following her, a young man.

Alexina recognized him at once as the young doctor she had seen going in and out the cottage, and whose name she remembered was Ransome.

Harriet arose to meet him. He was young and boyish and looked unnerved. "The others will be down in a moment—the other doctors"—he told her; "when I saw it was bad—you know I'm just beginning—I turned it over."

His nice blue eyes looked quite distressed.

"How bad?" asked Harriet steadily.

He looked at her quite miserably, the boy, then gathered himself together.

[129]

"May I ask—I beg pardon—may I know who I am talking to?" though true to tell he knew who she was, living as he did across from her, but in his young embarrassment did not know how to say so.

The tall, beautiful woman stood a moment before him, then a slow colour came up over her throat and face. "I am Miss Blair—Major Rathbone is—"

Alexina had come close to her side and her young eyes were on the doctor's appealingly.

He understood; doubtless he had heard the two names connected before; the affairs of the wealthy Miss Blair and the somewhat famous editor were likely to be talked over in a city the size of Louisville, or, perhaps, being young, he merely divined. His distress increased; he looked quite wretched. "It's bad—I'm mighty sorry to be the one to tell you."

[130]

Did she grow taller, whiter? "Are you—are the doctors still—"

"They are through for the present and coming down now."

"Then I will go to him. Oh, but I must"—this to the horrified little Sister's upraised hands of protest and headshake of negation.

"It's against all rules," ejaculated the little Sister.

Miss Blair addressed herself to the young doctor.

"Kindly take me to the room," she said.

The abashed young fellow looked from one to the other. But he started. The little Sister, however, hastily interposing herself between Miss Blair and progress, was heard to murmur that name of authority—the Mother. [131]

"Go and bring her," said Harriet.

The Sister departed in haste, to return speedily with the Mother, her calm face beneath its bands mild, benignant, but inexorable.

"But I am," returned Harriet to anything she could say. "I am going to him."

The dominant calmness of the Mother had met its equal. Finally, in her turn, she retreated behind authority and mentioned Father Ryan.

"Oh," said Harriet, "go and bring him."

He came, heavy of jowl, keen and humorous of eye, but his manner disturbed, distraught, as with one whose absorption is elsewhere. Suddenly Harriet remembered that he was the intimate, the friend of Major Rathbone.

"I am going to him," said Harriet; "nothing that you can say makes any difference." [132]

The Father gazed at her thoughtfully. Then he nodded. "No," he said; "you are right; nothing will."

Just then the two other physicians came down the stairs.

"A word with you first, gentlemen, please," said the Father. The four men gathered at the foot of the stairway.

Watching, an outsider would have said that the priest and the young doctor were pleaders with the others for the cause of Miss Blair.

Later, the Mother herself led Harriet up the stairs and along a corridor, the young doctor following with Alexina.

"I think I—do you think I ought to go with her?" Alexina had faltered to him.

The two young things gazed at each other indeterminate. Alexina's eyes were swimming, like a child's, with unshed tears. Never has tragedy such epic qualities as in youth. Then he turned and led the way. "Yes," he told her, "I think if I were you I would." [133]

Harriet was by the bed when they entered, gazing down on the lean, brown face of the man, whose eyes were closed. The Sister in charge, sitting on the other side, was speaking in a low voice. Had she seen fit to tell what she knew?

For Harriet turned as they entered and looked at them. Her face was set as in marble. It was cold, it was stern; only, the eyes fixed on the young doctor's face were imploring.

"Will he wake first?" she asked.

The young fellow seemed to shrink before the majesty of her suffering. Alexina put out a hand to touch her and drew it back, afraid. If only she were not so superbly self-controlled. [134]

"Yes, he will most likely awake," he assured her, and must have done so even if he had not thought it.

She took off her hat, a large, festive affair with plumes and jewelled buckles, and dropped her wrap. There was a low chair near the bed. She drew it close and sat down, her eyes on the face on the pillow. Jewels gleamed in the lace of her gown, and the shining silk of its folds trailed the floor about her.

Alexina stole across to a far and shadowed corner of the room and sat down by a table. She was crying and striving to keep it noiseless.

The doctor stood irresolute, then made a movement.

"Do you have to go?" said Harriet, turning. [135]

"No; I expect to be here in the building all night. There might come a—change."

"Stay, please," she asked him; "here."

He sat down by the open fire and she turned again to the face on the pillow.

The night passed. Now and then the Sister moved noiselessly about, or the doctor came to the bedside, lifted the inert hand, laid it down, and went back to the fire.

Alexina moved from her chair to the window or to the fire and back again. Now and again she knew that she must have slept a little, her head against the table. So the night passed.

The square framed by the window sash was turning grey when there came a movement, and the eyelids of the face on the pillow lifted. Harriet was leaning over before the others, the nurse or doctor, got to the bed, and must have been there when the eyes opened. She must have seen consciousness of her presence in them, too, and possibly questioning, for she spoke rapidly, eagerly, like one who had said the thing over and over in readiness for the moment, though her voice shook. "You said you loved me from your soul, and, living or dead, would go on loving and wanting my love?" [136]

There seemed no wonder in the voice replying, only content. There was even the usual touch of humour in his reply. "And will go on wanting your love," he said.

"But I am here to tell you how I love you," she returned.

The room was still, like death. Then in the man's voice: "Is this pity, Harriet?"

Her voice hurried on. "And how, living or dead, I will go on loving and wanting you."

It was no pity that trembled in her voice, it was passion. He moved. [137]

After a time he spoke again. It was to call her name, to say it as to himself. This time he knew it was love this woman was talking of, not pity.

"I could not bear it that you should not know," she hurried on to tell him. "I made them let me come to you."

"You know then, Harriet; they have told you?"

She was human; the sound that broke from her was the cry of a rent soul.

The doctor, who had gone back to the mantel, crouched over the fire. The Sister seemed to shrink into the shadows beyond the narrow bed. Alexina clenched her hands, her head on her arms outstretched on the table.

But Harriet had regained herself. "I am here to ask you something. May I be married to you—now—at once, I mean?" [138]

His response was not audible, only her reply. "Oh, surely you will. For the rest of my life—to have been—you will give me this, won't you?"

There was a quick movement from him, and a sound of warning from the nurse who moved forward out of the shadow.

Material things seemed to come back to Harriet. Alarm sprang into her voice. "Shall I go away?" she asked the nurse, even timidly.

The answer came from him. "No; oh, no. Since it may be for so little time I may ask it of you; stay with me, Harriet."

She turned to the doctor.

"Stay," he told her, poor boy, new to these things.

"Then give me my way," Harriet begged, turning back again. She had forgotten the others already. "You said that after what happened between you and Austen you wanted it known how you felt to me. Haven't I the same right and more, since it was my brother who said it, to want the world to know how I feel to you?" [139]

They could feel the laugh in his reply. "The world, the world, as if you ever cared for what the world—come, be honest, Harriet; you say this in the generous desire of making it up to me."

"But I do—I do care. I could clap my hands, I could glory to cry it from the house-tops, how I care, how I am here, on my knees, begging you will marry me."

"You are kneeling? Yes? Kneel then; even that, since it brings you closer. But let's not talk of this now. I'm not used to the knowledge of the first yet. Will you put your hand in mine, Harriet?" [140]

The girl over in the shadow felt that her heart would break. And this was love. The great, sad thing was love!

He was talking again. "I never thought, surely, to be a stick of a man like this. I could have made a royal lover, Harriet. A man's blood at forty is like wine at its fulness. My head—won't lift—God, that it should come to find me like this! yet, kiss me, will you, Harriet?"

But a moment and she returned to her pleading. "They will send me away from you, you know, I have no right to be here—unless you give it to me?"

Was she using this, the inference, to move him?

For he caught it at once. "You came—I see, I see."

But she had fled from her position. "It's not that, as if I cared, as if you thought I cared, it's because I want to have been—" [141]

But the other had stuck. "Is the doctor there?" he asked.

The young fellow came to the bed.

"I would like to see Father Ryan," said the Major.

The priest came. The two were intimates. He listened to the instructions, the exigencies of the case to be met by him. A license was necessary. "And try and get Miss Blair's brother to accompany you, and to come here with you; you will make it all clear to him."

Harriet was looking up at the priest, whom she saw as the friend of the man she loved. "And you will come back and marry us yourself, won't you?" she asked.

He was looking down at her. Even after the long night, in the cold light of a winter dawn, and in the garishness of an evening gown in daylight, she was triumphantly beautiful. With her hand on the smooth brown hand of the Major, she sat and looked up at the cassocked priest. The marble of her face had given way to a divine light and radiance. [142]

He looked down on her.

"I will come," he told her.

It was some hours before he was back. The young doctor had gone and come. Dawn had broadened into a grey and sullen day. Breakfast was sent up and placed in an adjoining room for Harriet and Alexina. The girl tried to eat, if only to seem grateful to the Sister bringing it, but Harriet wandered about the room, and, when Alexina brought her a cup of coffee, shook her head. She watched the door until the doctors were gone and she might return to him, then went in and sat by him again. His eyes were closed, but his hand, seeking as she sat down, found hers. Later, as the priest returned, the gaze from the pillow turned to the door eagerly. Austen was not with him. The face steeled. [143]

The Mother came in, and at a sign from the priest they gathered around, Alexina, the young doctor, the nurse.

With his hand in Harriet's the Major followed to the end.

Nor was he going to die. There was deeper knowledge of life yet for the woman by him to learn.

Afterward, Doctor Ransome drove Alexina home in his buggy, where she and the voluble, excited Katy packed some things for Harriet.

"And Miss Harriet never to let us hear a word, and Maggie and me never closing our eyes all the night, Miss Alexina," Katy said. [144]

And Harriet Blair a person usually so observant and punctilious about everything!

"And Mr. Blair, he asked where you were, Miss Harriet and you, when he came, and then he dressed and went to the party he was going to take you to, as if nothing had happened. And the Father came this morning and talked, but Mr. Blair hardly said a word, and when they left the priest went one way and Mr. Blair he went the other."

Doctor Ransome came in his buggy and took Alexina back. On reaching the infirmary they found that Major Rathbone's sister from Bardstown, who had been sent for, had arrived. Alexina had not known that he had a sister until she found her in the room next to the Major's, with Harriet.

She was childlike and small and was looking at Harriet, helpless and frightened. She was, it proved, twenty-three years old, and a widow with two children. [145]

"And Stevie takes care of us," she explained. "Stevie" was the Major; "us" was herself and the babies.

She had brought both the babies. "I couldn't leave them and come, you know," she said.

One of them lay on the bed, asleep, a little chap four years old, his coat unfastened, his hair tumbled. The other, the younger, asleep too, lay on the mother's knee, Harriet regarding him. He was aquiline, lean and handsome, baby as he was, like a little deer hound.

"His name is Stevie," said Stephen's sister.

Harriet looked up from the child to the mother, almost jealously. "Then he is mine, too; I have some part in him too, since his name is Stephen." [146]

CHAPTER FOUR

[147]

For two months Austen Blair and his niece lived on in the big house.

Alexina wondered if her uncle were not different from other people, for it must be the abnormal human who would not ask one question about his sister; mere curiosity must have demanded that much, Alexina thought, having a lively curiosity herself. To be sure, Aunt Harriet, from Uncle Austen's standpoint, had outraged every convention to which they had been bred; she had married a man between whom and her family there had been bitterest enmity, between whom and her brother there had been personal encounter; she had gone from her brother's roof to be [148]

married in a Catholic institution, by a Catholic priest.

It almost made Alexina laugh when she summed up the enormity of the offending. She gloried in it herself; she adored Aunt Harriet and loved her for it.

But the fact that her uncle could thus ignore the whole subject made it harder for Alexina to go to him about a matter which had arisen concerning herself.

A letter had come to her from her mother. Though it was eleven years since she had seen the handwriting, she knew it, as Katy, bringing the mail, handed it to her.

It seemed to Alexina that her pulses stopped and the tide of her blood flowed backward. Katy, closing the door as she went, brought her to herself, and she flung the letter from her the width of the room, her gaze following it.

She sat like one stunned with horror. Then rage succeeded. "What right had this—this so-called mother to write to her?" [149]

But she need not read it, and Alexina sprang up and went about her household duties, as if in interviews with grocery-man and butcher, with cook and laundress, she could forget that her mother had written her, that the letter lay up-stairs awaiting her.

She would not read it, she assured herself; but all the while she knew that she would, and when the time came she opened it quietly and read it through. Then she put it in its envelope and threw it from her again across the room, and sat immovable, the lines of her young face setting as though by some steeling process. Suddenly she caught sight of her face in the glass. On it was the look of Uncle Austen.

She sprang up and, dragging forth her cloak and hat and furs, fled from the house. She must turn to some one, she must get away from the horror that was upon her. She would go to Aunt Harriet. [150]

It was a frosty day and a light fall of snow was on the pavements. She met Dr. Ransome and Emily Carrington strolling along as though it were summer. She had introduced him to Emily, and one would say she had done him a good turn. She smiled as they called to her from across the street. He admired Emily and it looked as if Emily—but, then, Emily sparkled and glowed for any man, even for Uncle Austen.

She saw Georgy wave his hat gaily from the platform of a street-car and look as though he meant to swing off and join her. She was seeing a good deal of him these days. She shook her head and pointed with her muff, and a moment later turned in at the Infirmary gate. She had walked rapidly and felt better somehow. The Major was daily growing stronger, though the fear was that he might never walk again, but, rather than accept this verdict, he and Aunt Harriet were going East for advice or, if need be, to Paris. [151]

Paris! The horror surged back upon her. She stopped short in her very turning to close the gate and stood engrossed with the misery of it, for it was from Paris her mother had written to say she was coming to her.

"I have reached the end of my money, ma chere," she wrote, "as you come into yours, which Austen, being a Blair, will have cared for. I will teach you to love life, now that you are grown. When you were a child you were impossible, you disconcerted and judged me, but it is unfair to let you taste life according to Blair seasoning only. So write me, ma fille, mon enfant, of your whereabouts, in the care of your Uncle Randolph in Washington, for I follow this steamer across." [152]

And then, as though her mood had changed: "In any case, I shall not trouble you long. It is my lungs, they tell me. It is a curious sensation, may you never know it, having your furniture seized. Le bon Dieu and Celeste have stood between me and much."

Celeste! Tall, gaunt, and taciturn—negro mammy to Alexina and to Molly before her. Celeste! It all stifled the girl. She hated Celeste. Celeste had chosen to go with the mother, and the child had been left by both.

And where was M. Garnier, the husband—"the promising young French poet," as Uncle Randolph had termed him to some one, in the child Alexina's hearing, those years ago? The letter made no mention of him. [153]

Alexina closed the Infirmary gate and walked up the wide pavement to the entrance. The little Sister knew her well now and smiled a welcome as she let her in. Passing along the hall Alexina hesitated before the marble saint in his niche. Hers was no controversial soul; what she wanted was comfort. Perhaps the blend of Presbyterianism and Catholicism may be tolerance. Then she went on through the spotless halls to the second floor.

As the door opened Harriet looked around. She had been writing by the Major's couch, and he had fallen asleep, his hand on hers, the portfolio lying open on her lap. She smiled at Alexina, then nodded at the hand detaining her.

Could it be the same Aunt Harriet, this yearning-eyed woman? Her hair, always beautiful, had loosened and drooped over her temple, and the thought swept upon Alexina, how human, how sweetly dear it made her look, this touch of carelessness because of greater concern. It moved the girl, bending to kiss her, to slip to her knees instead and throw adoring young arms about [154]

her.

And then a strange thing happened; the head of the woman drooped for support against the girl's shoulder and, with a sudden trembling all through her, Harriet began to cry. Only for a moment; then, lifting her head and putting the hand of the sleeper gently on the couch, she arose and drew the girl over to the window.

"You go to-morrow?" asked Alexina.

"Yes; Dr. Ransome has arranged to go with us then. I don't know why I cry, for he's better. He's been dictating an editorial. I'm unnerved, I suppose, and it's beginning to tell." [155]

"You are worn out with the two months of strain, Aunt Harriet, and the worry and unhappiness."

"Unhappiness?" Harriet laughed a little wildly. "Unhappiness? I thought you understood better than that. I'm happy, for the first time in all my easy, prosperous, level life. It's out of the depths we bring up happiness, Alexina. And come what may, I've known, am knowing it—nothing can take the knowledge from me now."

She was crying again, her head bent against the window pane. "I never knew how to get near to any one; I've been alone all my life till now. Maybe you have been lonely all along. I didn't know. Living with Austen and me—oh, I'm sorry for you, Alexina. I'm going away now with Stephen; but when we come back I mean to make it up to you and see that you have opportunities and friends. Oh, Alexina, we do all require it, the joy of having some one needing us. And you'll be nice to Louise for me, won't you, while we're gone?" [156]

Louise was the sister of Stephen, and she and the babies were to remain in Louisville in the house the Major and Harriet had taken against their return, an unpretentious house on a cross street.

"Stephen has arranged it all," Harriet was saying; "he won't let me do a thing. He will not consider for a moment that he isn't going to be able to keep his position on the paper; they're filling it for him among themselves still. If he wasn't so—so fiercely proud! It's Austen that rankles, you see."

There was a movement on the couch. Harriet went swiftly over to the waker. It is on Olympus they take time for deliberate and stately progression; Harriet had come down to the human world. [157]

"It's a soporific thing," quoth the Major, "listening to one's own editorials. I never heard one through before. You there, Alexina? Where have you been these two days? I hope you're not holding it against us that Georgy is sending all his flowers to me? It's his delicate way, you see; reaching round through me via Harriet to you."

There was a tap and the little Sister entered. It was company. It was always company. The Major's life had been close to the heart and centre of things. It was laughable to see the reserved Harriet's pride in his popularity. It was a certain judge this time, and with him an old comrade-at-arms, come up from the Pennyroyal to see him. [158]

"But had you better?" Harriet expostulated.

The Major caught her hand and laughed at her. "But these are fond farewells, you see, dear lady," he explained.

Was he drawing her to him by the hand he held? For suddenly Harriet bent over and kissed him; nor did Alexina feel any consciousness or shame, and the little Sister went out softly with glistening eyes.

So it came about that Alexina did not open her heart to Harriet after all, and the aunt went away next day without knowing.

Yet Harriet influenced the girl in her decision.

Alexina, standing at her window, watched a sparrow tugging at some morsel that had fallen upon the snow and essaying to fly upward and away with it. She was lonesome; the house was so big; it seemed so empty. She was thinking about Aunt Harriet, who was giving her strength out to some one, who had opened her arms to Louise and the babies, whose days were full of thought and planning, and through whose eyes shone something never there before. [159]

Alexina left the window and re-read the postscript of her letter. "In any case I shall not trouble you long. It is my lungs, they tell me. It is a curious sensation, may you never know it, having your furniture seized. Le bon Dieu and Celeste have stood between me and much."

It was to her uncle after all that Alexina went with the matter that night. He was in the parlour reading and laid down his paper to give attention. The substance of the letter heard, the two perpendicular lines between his brow relaxed, for it was a case of his judgment being justified, and a man likes to feel he has been right. [160]

"It is what I expected," he said, "only it has been longer coming. She has her father's people in Washington, she has no claim on you." He lifted his paper.

"But—" said Alexina.

He lowered it and waited.

Her mouth grew set. He always made her stubborn. Fingering the upholstery of his chair, she looked at him, though it took courage to look at Austen Blair under some circumstances. She found herself suddenly disposed to defend her mother. "But if I feel a claim, Uncle Austen? I wanted to tell you I think I ought to write to her to come."

"Come where?" asked Austen Blair.

To be sure—where could she write her to come? There fell a silence.

[161]

Then he spoke, and curtly. "In three months you will be of age, a fact which no doubt your mother has remembered. Until then I forbid it; after that it is your affair. In the interim, it has been my intention, and I meant to say as much to you, to make you acquainted with your affairs. I had expected you to live on in my house. Under the conditions you propose you will, of course, make your own arrangements."

Alexina, listening, looked at him. One would have said tears were welling. Had he raised his eyes to hers, put out a hand—

But he returned to his paper.

Her cheeks blazed, her head went up, and something ran like a vivifying flame over her face. It was a pity Austen did not see her then. He demanded beauty in a woman. He should have seen his young niece angry. Then she turned and went up to her room and wrote her mother to come. But, the letter written, she leaned upon the desk and broke into wild and passionate crying.

[162]

CHAPTER FIVE

[163]

Alexina for several years had been made partially acquainted with her affairs.

The evening her uncle chose to go over the whole with her, Alexina, in the midst of it, put a hand timidly on his. "I am grateful, Uncle Austen, you know that," she said.

The matter of the mother was fresh between them. "I have been paid, as any one else, for my services," he answered.

She drew her hand back.

The books were a clear record of what had been done year by year.

"Cowan Steamboat Mortgage," read Alexina from a page of early entries. "What was that?"

[164]

"A mortgage held for you on a boat built at the Cowan shipyards."

"What was the name of the boat?" Alexina's voice sounded suddenly strained and odd.

"The 'King William,'" said Austen. "The boat never paid for itself, and the mortgage was foreclosed and the boat sold."

The girl's eyes narrowed with curious intentness. As she listened she pushed her hair back with the hand propping her head as if its weight oppressed her. "And then?" she asked. "Here are more entries."

"I bought the boat in at a figure a little over the mortgage; river affairs were down. Later, a couple of years—you'll find it there—the boat sold for double the price."

She closed the book. "That's enough, I believe," she said, "for one evening." But it is doubtful if he was at all aware of anything strange in her tone.

[165]

She tripped on her skirts, so impetuous was her flight up the stairs, and, in her room, flung herself upon the bed. Her hands even beat fiercely as she cried, but there was no doll Sally Ann to be gathered in for comfort now.

They had loved her, they had been good to her. Mrs. Leroy had rocked her, the Captain had held her on his knee.

She sprang up and went to bathe her eyes. If she knew where they were, or how to find them, she would go—

She wondered if Emily or her mother had known about this.

She went to the Carringfords' the next afternoon. She liked to go over to the little brown house and she liked Emily's strong-featured, outspoken mother; there was a certain homely charm even in the clear-starched fresh calico dresses she wore.

[166]

Mrs. Carringford was drawing large loaves of golden-brown bread from the oven as Alexina came in by way of the kitchen door. The smell of it was good.

"Wait a moment, Alexina," she said, as she rose and turned the loaves out onto a clean crash towel spread upon the table. "I want a word with you before you go up-stairs. It's about Emily;

you know, I suppose, that your uncle is coming over right often to see her?—That big hat looks well on your yellow hair, Alexina—And I'm going to be plain: it's bad for Emily; she's discontented with things now, she always has been."

Alexina's eyes dilated. "Coming to see Emily? Does—does Emily want him to come?"

"Alexina," called Emily down the stairs; "aren't you coming up?"

[167]

Alexina went up to the room which Emily shared with her two little sisters. It was hard on her. There were various attempts to have it as a girl fancies her room. The airiness of Swiss muslins, however cheap, the sheen of the colour over which the airiness lies, the fluttering of ruffled edges—these seem to be expressions of girlhood. But Emily's little sisters shared the room with her. They were there when Alexina entered.

"Now go out," Emily told them; "we want to be alone."

The little girls looked up. Miss Alexina was tall and fair and friendly, she wore lovely dresses, she went to balls, and they adored her. She felt the flattery and liked it too. "Oh," she interceded, "no, don't, Emily."

"Yes," said Emily; "we want to talk. Go on, Nan—Nell; don't you hear?"

[168]

The little sisters gathered up books and slates with some show of resentment; it was their room too. Emily shut the door behind them.

The breadths of a light-hued silk dress were lying about the room. Emily was ripping on the waist. "It's a dress Miss Harriet gave mother for a quilt while you were away, but I told her it would be no such thing if I could devise it otherwise."

She frowned, then threw the waist down. "Not that I don't hate it—the devising, the scheming."

"I wouldn't do it," said Alexina bluntly.

"Which is easy for you to say," retorted Emily, her eyes sweeping Alexina from top to toe. Harriet Blair knew how to dress the girl.

"Yes," said Alexina; "I suppose that's true." It was part of her hold on Emily, her fairness. "But you're welcome to anything of mine; I've reason somehow to hate 'em all."

[169]

The colour heightened on Emily's face and she looked eager. Passion expresses itself variously. The stern old grandfather abased and denied the physical and material needs. Emily exulted in the very sheen of rich fabric, in the feel of satin laid to cheek. Was the grandchild but fulfilling the law of reaction? The soul of Emily and the soul of the old preacher saw each other across a vast abyss.

"It's for the Orbisons' I need a dress," said Emily. "Of course, I know it's because I have a voice I'm asked."

Yet, knowing that for herself she never would have been asked, there was exultation in Emily's tone.

Alexina got up suddenly. Somehow she didn't want to discuss the Leroy's with Emily after all.

[170]

Down-stairs she stopped again in the spotless, shining kitchen, the clean odour where soft-soap is used always lingering. Alexina liked it; all her knowledge of the dear homely details of life she was familiar with, she had gotten here.

"You remember the Leroy's?" she asked Mrs. Carrington.

"Why, yes; I sent them milk twice a day."

"Did you know why they went away?"

"Wasn't it because they had put everything into that—er—" She stopped.

"Boat?" suggested the girl.

"Boat"—Mrs. Carrington accepted the word—"and so had to, after it was—er—"

"Sold," supplied Alexina. "Did you—did people know who it was held the mortgage?"

[171]

The plain-spoken Mrs. Carrington looked embarrassed. "Well, Alexina, you know how it is in a neighbourhood."

"Then you knew the boat was bought in for me?"

"Why, yes; I did."

"Did the Leroy's know it?"

"Why, naturally, I should suppose so."

That was all that Alexina wanted to know, yet not all, either. Her colour rose a little. It made her pretty. "Do you know anything of the Leroy's since?"

"Not a word," said Mrs. Carrington.

“What do you hear from Miss Harriet and Major Rathbone?”

“They are still East. Dr. Ransome came back yesterday.”

“Yes; I know he did,” said Mrs. Carringford. “He was here to see Emily last night. He’s a nice boy.” There was emphasis in her way of making the statement. Harriet Blair had once remarked that Mrs. Carringford was that anomaly—a sane woman. Yet she opposed the visits of Austen Blair and spoke heartily concerning the other one. “Garrard is a nice boy; I like him.” [172]

CHAPTER SIX

[173]

Alexina became twenty-one in May. She had found that in the settling of her affairs it would be necessary for her to remain in Louisville and so had written her mother to come to her there. She explained about the change in her life to the Carringfords, to find that they knew all about her mother; probably her little world, Georgy, Dr. Ransome, knew it, too, while these years she had comforted herself with the thought that, at least, it was her secret shame.

Mrs. Carringford put an arm about her and kissed her. There was approval in the action.

Emily looked at her, then laughed nervously, while a vivid scarlet rose to the roots of her chestnut hair. [174]

As Alexina passed through the front-room study going home, the old minister glanced up from his writing and called her name. He pushed his spectacles back onto his leonine head, looking up as she came toward him. She was surprised, for he never had seemed conscious even of her comings and goings.

“There are two ties that are not of our making,” he told her; “the spiritual tie between the Creator and the created, and the material tie between the parent and the child. They are ties not of duty but of nature, as indestructible as matter. God go with you.”

She felt strange and choked, though she was not sure she knew what he meant.

A week after she became of age she was dismantling the bay-windowed room of such things as were hers. Little by little it grew as cold and cheerless as the one adjoining, now the personality of Aunt Harriet was gone out of it. What would become of Uncle Austen after both were gone? [175]

She had tried to force from him some expression of feeling, at first wistfully, then determinedly. There is a chance, had he responded, that she would have made other arrangements for her mother. Then she told herself she did not care and went hotly on with her preparations.

She had taken two bedrooms and a parlour at a hotel, and had written her mother to go directly there, but the night of her arrival the girl felt she could not go to meet her. It was too late an hour anyhow, she would wait until morning, but she shrank so from that first moment she could not sleep.

She and her uncle met at the breakfast table the next morning. She made one or two attempts at conversation. “I go to-day, Uncle Austen,” she said at last, and, leaning forward, pushed a paper across the table to him. It was the final statement of the household expenditures under her management. [176]

Her board from her first coming had been paid into the general house fund, and, accordingly, she had included against herself charge for these several days in the new month.

Noting it, Austen Blair nodded; it was the first approval accorded her for some time.

She laughed. “I go to-day,” she repeated.

Her uncle, who had risen, put the paper, neatly folded, into his wallet, then crossed to her and put out his hand.

“I will not see you again then?” he said, and shook hands. [177]

A moment after she heard the front door close.

There were the servants to bid good-by, and that being done there was no excuse to linger.

It was a warm May day; the magnolia in the yard, the pirus japonicas, the calycanthus, the horse chestnuts, were in bloom. The lawn was green, the edges of the gravel paths were newly cut and trim. Alexina, in her muslin dress and Leghorn hat, turned on the stone flagging and looked back at the home she was leaving. Home?

The girl, pausing in the yard of the big house, glanced across the street to a shabby old brick cottage. Her affection was for it.

The hotel was in the business part of the city near the river. A street-car would have taken her directly there but she walked, as if seeking to put the moment off. The way took her past the house furnished and waiting for Aunt Harriet and the Major. Louise was sitting on an up-stairs window-sill with little Stevie, and caught his small fist and waved it to her. A curtain was fluttering out an opened window and a comfortable looking coloured woman was sweeping the [178]

pavement. The place had an air of relaxation, of comfort, already. Aunt Harriet was going to have a home.

The arrangements had been made at the hotel, and the child, for a very child she was, went in at the ladies' entrance where a sleepy bell-boy sat, always nodding, past the pillared corridor, on up-stairs, and along the crimson-carpeted hallways. She was trembling, her throat was dry.

In the suite she had taken, a bed-room either side opened into a connecting parlour. It was the knob of the parlour door she turned after a tap. Then she went in. [179]

"Why, you tall, charming, baby-faced—! Celeste, Celeste, here's your baby! Come here to me, Malise. Why the child's hands are cold!"

How foolish to have dreaded it so! It was all gone—even the constraint. The twelve years were as nothing. She was again the baby child, Malise, so-called by her mother's people.

And her mother? The linen pillows on the sofa beneath her head looked cool and pleasantly rumpled, and the sheer white wrapper was fine and softly laundered as a baby's. Her hair, hanging in two plaits over the pillows, had no suggestion of carelessness; it looked fascinating, it looked lovely.

The mother, holding her daughter's hands, was gazing up curiously, interestedly, her lips parted, as pleased interest will part any child's. There was contagious laughter in the eyes, too, the laugh of expectancy about to be gratified, as with children while the curtain goes up on a new scene. "You are as pretty as you can be, Malise; the Blair features used to look so solemn on a baby!" [180]

"Lil' missy—"

Alexina looked around. It was Celeste, tall, brown, regarding her with covert eyes as of old. Celeste had never loved her, the child had known that; her love belonged to the mother, her first charge, her Southern born, all her own. The father's blood in this second child was alien; Celeste had resented it as she had resented that father and all his kind. She had been jealous for the mother against the father and child from the first. [181]

Alexina, drawing a hand from her mother's, gave it to Celeste. The old woman took it loosely, then let it drop. Things were to be as of old, then, between them.

The girl turned back to her mother. "But, Molly," the name came naturally, she had known her mother by no other, "your health, you know; tell me about that."

What did this dilation in Molly's eyes mean? And she glanced sidewise, secretly, as if at fear of some dreaded thing, lurking.

"Did I write about that? Oh, well, perhaps I was, then, but not now; not at all now."

The haste to disclaim was feverish, and the look directed by Celeste at Alexina was sullen, even while the old woman's strong, resistless brown hand was pushing her mistress back onto the pillows. [182]

"Got to res' lil' while, p'tite; got to min' Celeste an' lay back an' res' now."

Then to her daughter, who suddenly felt herself a little compelled creature again, so was she carried into the past by the old woman's soft, Creole slurring: "'Tain', lil' missy, 'tain' like Madame Garnier she aire seeck actual, but jus' she taire, easy like."

Madame Garnier! That meant Molly! The illusions were all gone. The girl backed from the couch. Twelve years rolled between Molly and herself, years full of resentment. A slow red came up and over the daughter's face.

But Molly, back upon the pillows, gave no sign. She flung her plaits out of the way and slipped her arms under her head. There is a slenderness that is not meagreness, but delicacy; thus slight, thus pretty, were Molly's wrists. The arms under her head tilted her face so the light fell on it. It was a narrow, piquant face, with no lines to mar its delicacy. The odd difference in the eyebrows, which had fascinated Alexina as a child, one arched, one straight, lent laughter to it even in repose. Yet the mouth drooped, like a child's, with pathos and appeal. Could one say no to that mouth, it was so wistful? It was an alluring face, and moved you so to tenderness, to do battle, to give protection, that it hurt. [183]

"Throw off your hat, Malise," suggested Molly. "Celeste, take her parasol from that chair. There is so much to hear about. I asked la femme de charge, when she was in this morning, if she'd ever heard of the Blairs. Everybody used to know everything about everybody when I was here before and the servants most of all, and, mon Dieu, she knew all about them. 'Miss Blair is married,' she told me. 'I know that,' said I, for you'd mentioned that much in your letter, Malise. 'She ran off to get married,' said she. 'Oh, hush,' I told her." [184]

She had retained her very colloquialisms, this Molly, too unconscious and too indolent to know she had them, probably, or to care.

"So she told me all about it, how tall, cold, proper Harriet had run off from Blair proprieties and Austen, to marry a Southerner and a Catholic! It's as if the virgin in marble had stepped down and done it!"

Molly was amused. It narrowed her eyes till they laughed through the lashes.

"I never heard anything so funny in my life, Malise, as—as Harriet eloping. What is it Jean Garnier would quote from his adored Shakespeare about Diana and her icicles? Make me stop! It hurts me—to laugh. Oh-o-h, mammy—God, mammy!" [185]

The appeal died in a little choke, and the morsel of handkerchief pressed to her mouth showed a spot of crimson, but Celeste was already there, putting Alexina aside. "You can ring fo' lil' ice—yonder," she told the girl jealously. "Then, efen I were lil' missy, I'd go in there—that one is yo' room—an' I'd shet my do'h. When it's over with, p'tite won't want fo' you to have been in heah."

But pushed into the adjoining room and with the door shut between, Malise still could hear. She did not want to hear; she tried not to hear. She was awed and frightened.

"Am I going to die this time, Celeste? I'm afraid, mammy; my hands are cold. Don't rub them with the rings on, you fool; you hurt. No, no; don't go away, mammy! mammy! I couldn't sleep last night; that's why I'm—I'm tired. The night was so long and I was afraid. I see Jean when I try to sleep. I hear him cough. Give me something to make me sleep—oh, mammy, give it to me." [186]

The girl in the next room stood gazing out the window over the roofs and chimney stacks at the yellow tide of the river sweeping down towards the pier bridge spanning it, but she was not seeing it. She was filled with pity and terror.

It grew quieter in the next room, then still, then the door between opened and closed. It was Celeste, outwardly unmoved and taciturn.

"P'tite's gone to sleep. Shall I help lil' missy unpack her things?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Summer in a half-grown Southern city is full of charm; pretty girls in muslin dresses stroll the shopping streets and stop on the sidewalks to chat with each other and with callow youths; picnic parties board the street cars, and in the evenings sounds of music and dancing float out from open doors and windows along the residence streets.

Alexina, chaperoned by Harriet Blair, would have found herself in these things, yet never quite of them.

"Malise," Molly said quite earnestly, a day or so after her coming, "don't you think it's stuffy here?"

It was stuffy; hotel rooms in summer are apt to be; Alexina felt as apologetic as if Molly were the one who had given up a spacious, comfortable home to come and live in rooms for her. "I'm sorry," she said. She had explained the necessity for it before. [188]

"I thought you'd gotten the bank to take charge of your affairs," Molly reminded her; "so why do we have to stay?"

"I have, but it's a different thing, very, from having Uncle Austen, personally—"

She stopped; it might seem to be reminding Molly that she had caused the break with Austen Blair.

But Molly never took disagreeable things personally. She threw her arms back of her head. "Can't you propose something to do?" she entreated.

"We might go round to the stores," suggested Alexina doubtfully. She hated stores herself. [189]

Molly brightened. "I need some summer things."

Alexina agreed, yet she wondered. Seven trunks can disgorge a good many clothes; "mere debris from the wreckage of things," Molly explained, though they didn't look it. Yet in a way Alexina understood. It wasn't the actual things Molly wanted; it was the diversion, and so at the suggestion Molly cheered up. "You look pretty in summer clothes, Malise," she stated with graciousness, as they started. On the way she went in and bought chocolates; not that she wanted them either—it was too hot for candy, she said—but one must be doing something.

Coming out the door they met Georgy, who promptly stopped. He was a beautiful youngster, with a buoyant and splendid heartiness, and now he was flushing ruddily with pleasure up to his yellow hair. [190]

Alexina blushed, too; she hardly knew why, except that he did, and told his name to Molly, who regarded him with smiling eyes and gave him her hand, whereupon he blushed still more and then suggested that he go along with them.

A group of young matrons and their daughters stood at the door of the shop to which they were bound, chatting in easy, warm weather fashion. Alexina knew them slightly but Georgy knew them well, and they were greeted with salutations and laughter.

Molly smiled, too, an interested smile that brightened as she was introduced, and she

remembered having known the mother of this one when she, Molly, had lived in Louisville before, and the husband of another one, and all the while she was letting her eyes smile from one to the other of the group, who meanwhile were telling Georgy that they were planning a dance. [191]

Dance? Molly's eyes grew inquiringly eager. Favors were they speaking of? She had a trunk full of Parisian knick-knacks, she told them. "Come around to the hotel," she suggested, "all of you: why not now?"

And so it was that the stream of things gayest caught Molly and Molly's daughter into its swirl. The banks along the way were flowery, the sky was blue, and Alexina began to find the waters of dalliance sweet. Hitherto girlish groups had seemed to make themselves up and leave her out, and there always had been a disconcerting lack of things to talk about in dressing-rooms and strictly feminine assemblies. Now she found herself in the planning and the whirl, happy as any. [192]

There was exhilaration, too, in this sudden realization of what an income meant, which she had not had much opportunity of learning before, and these days she laughed out of very exuberance and sudden joy in living.

"It seems as if I didn't really know you, sometimes," said the literal Georgy, out calling with her one evening. "It makes you awful pretty, you know, to be jolly this way," which was meant to be more complimentary than it sounded.

They were stepping up on the porch of the house to which they were bound. Alexina laughed and caught a handful of rose petals from a blossoming vine clambering the post and cast them on Georgy.

There were other swains than Georgy these days, too, and not all of them were youths, either, not that it mattered in the least who they were; for in the beginning it is the homage, not the individual, that counts. [193]

She hung over the offerings which came to her from them with a rapture which was more than any mere joy; it was relief. Suppose such things had been denied her? There are maidens, worthy maidens, who never know them, and so Alexina blushed divinely with relief. Roses to her!

And Molly, watching, would grow peevish—not over the flowers; Molly was too sure of her own charm for that. Alexina really did not know what it was about, and she did not believe Molly quite knew herself.

There was a lazy-eyed personage the young people called Mr. Allie. Their mothers had called him Mr. Randall, but then he had been the contemporary of the mothers. [194]

No daughter of these bygone belles was secure in her place to-day until the seal of Mr. Allie's half-serious, half-lazy approval was upon her, or so the mothers and the daughters felt. Mr. Allie was perennial, indolently handsome, an idler in the gay little world, yet somehow one believed he could have gone at life in earnest had there been need.

He, too, sent roses to Alexina, and flowers from him meant something subtly flattering, and he came strolling around at places and sat down by her, saying pretty things to make her blush, apparently to watch her doing it. Not that she minded as much as she worried, because she felt she ought to mind, and in her heart she knew she didn't really.

She had gone out with him half a dozen times perhaps, when, one evening at a dance, Mr. Allie, seeking, found her at the far end of a veranda where the side steps went down to the gravel. She and Georgy were sitting there together. Georgy was telling her of his aspirations and, in passing, dwelling on the lack of any civic spirit in the town, the inference seeming to be that Georgy, modest as he was, some day himself meant to supply it. [195]

Mr. Allie told Georgy that a waiting damsel was expecting him, then took Georgy's place. He did not speak for a while, and Alexina never was talkative.

"Would you rather go in and dance?" at last he asked.

"Why," said Alexina; "no." Which was not quite true for she loved to dance these days. She used to be afraid she was not going to have a successive partner and it marred the full enjoyment of the one she had, but now— [196]

Still, any one would be flattered to have Mr. Allie asking, so she said no.

"Then we'll stay," he said; which was not brilliant, to be sure, but it was the way in which Mr. Allie said things which made them seem pregnant of many meanings.

After that neither of them spoke, yet Alexina's pulses began to beat. The big side yard upon which the steps descended was flooded with moonlight, and a mockingbird was sending forth a trial note or two. And it was June.

"For you know, really, you're the very dearest of them all," said Mr. Allie, with soft decision, as if he had been arguing about it.

There was not a thing to say, and she could not have said it if there had been.

"And I've known a good many," continued Mr. Allie, which probably was true, only Mr. Allie knew how true; "but I've never felt just this way about any of them before." [197]

Then they sat very still, and the bird note rose and fell.

"Maybe you'd rather go in," said Mr. Allie as the music began again. Was it hurt in his tone?

"Oh," said Alexina, "no."

Mr. Allie picked up the end of the scarf which had fallen to the steps and put it about her shoulders again. It brought his face around where he could see hers. Was he laughing? Or were his eyes full of reproach? For what? He did not look a bit like a contemporary of anybody's mother. Yet perhaps the moustache that drooped over the mouth did hide—lines, and the lazy eyes sometimes did look tired. Youth has its dreams, vague, secret, yet the Prince of the dreams should be no Mr. Allie with eyes that look weary and tired. [198]

"If I thought," said Mr. Allie softly, oh, so softly; "if I thought that you could care?"

"Oh," said Alexina, "no, I couldn't."

She sobbed. It seemed cruel to Mr. Allie.

Then they talked it over, he so gently, she with self-reproach and little chokes against tears. He even held her hand, she too tender-hearted to know how to take it away, though the remorse eating into her heart was forgotten somewhat in the glow, the wonder that this thing, this sad but beautiful thing should come to her. Presently he took her in. The rest of the evening sped hazily. Going home, she talked to Mr. Allie and Molly as in a dream.

Reaching the hotel, and in their own apartment, Alexina sank down on the sofa, her wrap and fan falling unobserved, and sat, chin on palm, shyly remembering, shrinking a little, and blushing. Suddenly conscious, she turned and found Molly in her doorway between, undressing, and looking at her with knowledge and with laughter. She had forgotten Molly, who had been rummaging and had brought out some olives and crackers and wine. Molly lunched at all unheard-of hours. [199]

Alexina sprang up. She turned white, then scarlet.

"'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,' Jean Garnier would say," Molly began, unloosing her waist and laughing again. "Mais non, mon enfant, you take these things too seriously; it is time you understood. He has said as much to every pretty girl there, one time and another, and to most of their mothers before them, only they all understood. It's very charming in you, of course, right now, and to a man like him, irresistible but, still—Malise—" [200]

Alexina looked at Molly. Then up welled a red that rose to her hair and spread down her throat and over her bare young shoulders. She would never misunderstand again. It is a cruel thing, the hotness of shame. But Molly was staring. Malise was beautiful with her head so proudly up and her cheeks flaming.

There was more to understand. They were a gay crowd, the young people and their elders with whom Molly and Alexina and Georgy were going. Things came to Alexina slowly.

"It isn't just nice," she told Molly anxiously, an evening at the Willy Fields'; "Georgy says you've all been in the pantry opening more champagne. I'm sure they're acting like there's been enough, and he thinks, too, we ought to go home." [201]

"Good Lord," said Molly. She looked so slender, so childishly innocent standing there where the daughter had drawn her aside, one couldn't believe she had said it. "This is the way you used to go on when you were a child. One would think you'd had your fill of what people ought to do, living with the Blairs."

Alexina looked at her. That Molly should dare allude to that past this way! Then she went and found her mother's wrap and brought it.

"Put it on," she said.

Molly laughed rebelliously, then waveringly.

"We are going home," said the daughter.

Molly essayed to put it on but didn't seem able to find the hooks, and Alexina, hardening her heart, would not help her, but went to find Georgy. He was looking stern himself, and forlorn and young, and the fact that she knew why did not serve to make Alexina happier. [202]

The cars had stopped running and they walked home, leaving hilarity behind them. Molly was acting stubbornly, her tones were injured, and her talk incessant. Alexina couldn't make her stop.

"Jean was just such another clog as Malise," she told Georgy. "He was forever harping about proprieties, and he wore me out trying to make me tie my money up; Malise isn't stingy, I'll say that, though she might have been—she's a Blair. Jean shivered over spending money. And after there wasn't any left, he used to sit and cough and cry over his Shakespeare about it. He had thought he was going to be a great poet once, himself, Jean had." [203]

In the light of the setting moon one could see Molly's childlike face; and her voice, with its upward cadence, was more plaintive than the face. The very look and the sound of her were sweet, seductively sweet.

"He liked to believe himself a Gascon, too, Jean did, and he loved his Villon too. He wasn't well ever; he couldn't always breathe, Jean couldn't, but, *vraiment*, he could swagger as well as any."

The night was still, the streets asleep. Nearing the hotel now, the way led past blocks of warehouses and wholesale establishments. Molly stumbled over a grating. Georgy steadied her. They went on, their footsteps echoing up from the flagging as from a vault.

"I'm cold," complained Molly, "and," querulously, "you know, Malise, it will make me cough if I take cold. Jean coughed. After he coughed for a year and the money was gone, he raised more on our things. Then they came and seized them, except my trunks; Jean had sent those away. I was sick, too; I took the cough from Jean, and I was afraid after I heard one could take it, so he made me come away. Celeste had some money. He made us come; he said it would be easier to know I was over here, and it would be better for him at the hospital—'les sœurs sont bonnes,' Jean said over and over." [204]

Alexina was hearing it for the first time. People like Molly supply no background, the present is the only moment, and Alexina was not one to ask.

At the hotel entrance, in the ladies' deserted hallway, even the nodding bell-boy gone, Georgy paused. Molly went and sat down in a chair against the wall. She laughed unsteadily, though there was nothing to laugh about. Her lids were batting and fluttering like a sleepy child's. "I thought you said it was late, Malise," she remarked. [205]

"Wait," entreated Georgy of Alexina, and squared himself between her and her mother. He was a dear, handsome boy. He gazed pleadingly at the tall, fair-haired girl whose eyes were meeting his so apologetically.

"You said to me there, to-night, you couldn't care for me that way," he told her, "but couldn't you marry me anyhow, Alexina, and we'll take care of her together?"

For he thought she knew what he did. Her eyes, which had lowered, lifted again, doubtfully, wistfully. Was she wishing she could? They met his. Perhaps his were too humble. [206]

A shiver went through the girl. Then came a sobbing utterance. "I can't, I can't; but oh, if you only knew how I wish I could!"

She broke down in tears. "Don't be mad with me, Georgy."

"Oh," said Georgy, preparing to go, "it's not that I'm mad. I reckon you don't understand these things yet, Alexina."

CHAPTER EIGHT

[207]

It seemed all at once as if some wilful perversity seized Molly; at home she was so petulant Alexina dared not cross her, for to anger her was to make her cough; abroad she was gayer than any, almost to recklessness. Celeste, taciturn and secretive, kept herself between mother and daughter insistently, and often the door to Molly's room was locked until afternoon. Mrs. Garnier must not be disturbed, she said.

One of these times, a day in late July, Alexina went out to the Carringfords'. Emily knew most of the comings and goings of Alexina and her mother. In her heart probably she was envious, though to Alexina she was concerned. [208]

"That picnic of last week is being talked about, Alexina," she said.

Alexina flushed, but she was honest. "It ought to be," she said. Gaiety can tread close upon the heels of recklessness. But if Molly went the daughter had to go, for this very reason, though she could not tell Emily this.

So she spoke of other things. "Do you know anything of Uncle Austen?" she asked. "Is he still taking his meals down-town and sleeping at the house?"

Emily looked conscious. "Yes," she said, "I think he is."

Somehow Alexina felt that Emily not only knew but wanted it to be felt that she knew. Then why hesitate and say only that she thought so?

"How's Garrard?" Alexina asked suddenly. Garrard was young Doctor Ransome. Emily flushed a little, but she answered unconcernedly, "Well enough, I reckon." [209]

On Alexina's return to the hotel, the clerk stopped her in the corridor, looking a little embarrassed under the clear, surprised gaze of the young lady. "It's about a little matter with Mrs. Garnier; it's been running two months now."

A moment after, as she went on blindly up the stairs, a folded paper in her hand, she understood; understood what Georgy had offered to share with her, what the taciturn secretiveness of Celeste meant. She went in through the parlour to her mother's room, from which of late she had been so much shut out.

"Molly," she said, her voice sounding strange to herself, as she held out the paper open. [210]

Molly, risen on her pillow, looked at it, at her, her eyes growing big. She was frightened, and cowered a little, crumpling some letters in her lap.

"Don't look at me like that, Malise," she said. "I've some of the money you gave me left—I'll help to pay it."

That she was afraid only because of the bill!

"Oh—" Alexina breathed it rather than uttered it.

Molly, risen from her elbow to sitting posture, was looking at her with big, miserable eyes, her throat, so slight and pretty, swelling with the sobs coming.

But the other came first, and with it came the terror. "Malise, Malise, hold me; hold me. I'm afraid!"

Celeste was out. [211]

Alexina, holding her mother, could reach the bell, and rang it, again and again.

"Oh," she said to the boy when he came; "get a doctor."

"What one?" he asked.

Alexina remembered Dr. Ransome.

Then she sat and fed ice to Molly and tried to keep her still. It is a fearful thing to feel the close, clinging touch of a person we are shrinking from. It was a hot, drowsy afternoon. The clock on the parlour mantel ticked with maddening reiteration. It seemed hours before Dr. Ransome came. Then a moment later Celeste returned. Molly flung her arms out to the old woman.

"He's dead, mammy," she wailed; "Jean's dead; the letters came after you went—and I'm afraid, I'm afraid of it, I'm afraid to die!"

It was to Celeste Molly had to tell it. The daughter listened with a sudden resentment towards Celeste. [212]

Molly was not going to be better right at once, and Alexina and Dr. Garrard Ransome had many opportunities for talk. She stopped him in the parlour, as he was going, one morning. It had been on her mind for a long time to ask him something. "It's odd, your name being Ransome," she said. "Mrs. Leroy, who used to live where you do, had been a Miss Ransome."

"She's my cousin Charlotte," said the young fellow; "that's how my mother came to fancy living where we do, when we came down from Woodford to Louisville. She used to visit the Leroy's there you see."

"Oh," said Alexina, "really? They were very good to me."

The blue eyes of the doctor were regarding her intently, but as if thought were concentrated elsewhere. "I wonder if it was you Cousin Charlotte meant? I was down there two winters ago for a month. They live in Florida, at a place called Aden." [213]

"Yes," said Alexina, "Aden."

"And she asked me about some young girl who, she said, lived across from the cottage. Of course I didn't know."

"I wasn't there then," said Alexina; "I was at school. They were good to me; are they well—and happy?" The eagerness was good to see, so dejected had the girl seemed of late.

"Well, yes, or were when mother last heard. Happy, too, I reckon, as it's counted with us poor families used to better things."

"Tell me about them, if you don't mind. They were the best friends I ever had."

"Well," he said, looking rather helpless in the undertaking, "there isn't much to tell. They're getting along. The Captain was book-keeper for a steamboat line down there, went home every week, but, somehow, a year ago, they dropped him; he's getting old, the Captain is." [214]

"Yes, he must be. And Mrs. Leroy?"

"Cousin Charlotte? Well, she's Cousin Charlotte. Some ways she's a real child about things and mighty helpless when it comes to managing, but she never thinks about repining, and it's funny how she'll do whatever King tells her."

"And he?"

"King? Oh, he's all right. Queer fellow though, some ways, imperturbable as a young owl. Best poker player down there, and that's saying something. It's motley, Aden is, like all those small towns since the railroad went through 'em."

The young man happening to glance at Miss Alexina, saw that he had said something wrong. He was the only child of his mother and so knew how ladies feel on certain subjects. Yet, on the [215]

other hand, Miss Alexina adored Major Rathbone, and the Major's poker record, while possibly of a more local character, was scarcely less celebrated than his guerrilla past. Still, ladies are expected to be inconsistent.

"I shouldn't have told that, I reckon," he remarked; "you all don't see these things as we do. He's a fine fellow, King is. He's a great shot, too," cheerfully; "I went on a week's hunt down in the glades with him. King's all right."

Maybe he was, but it sounded as though he was trifling. "Hasn't he a business?" she asked with condemning brevity.

"I don't know about calling it a business," said William Leroy's cousin; "I know he's the busiest. It's a big old place, you see, the grove they own, and he's reclaiming it. There's just one subject he's discursive on, and that's the best fertilizer for young orange trees." [216]

Somehow William Leroy did not shine against this background as his well-intending cousin meant he should. "And they're poor, Mrs. Leroy and the Captain?" asked Miss Blair.

"Well," admitted Garrard, "they aren't rich."

The girl sat thinking. "I'm going down there," she said suddenly. "Is there a hotel? There is? Then I'm going to take Molly and go down to see them. There's something I want to tell Mrs. Leroy and the Captain."

"As good a place as any," agreed Dr. Garrard. "I told you at the start Mrs. Garnier must not try a winter here." [217]

"We'll go," declared Alexina, then stopped. Maybe they would not be glad to see her. "But don't mention the possibility if you should be writing," she begged; "don't mention knowing me—please. I—I'd like to discover it all for myself."

After he had gone she went to the piano, near the window looking out over the warehouse roofs to the river, and, softly fingering some little melody, sat thinking.

There was a tap and Alexina turned on the piano stool as Emily Carringford came in. Somehow Emily, so prettily, daintily charming in her fresh white dress, made Alexina cross. She felt wilted and jaded, and who cared if she did? That her present state was brought about by her own choosing only made her crosser.

What was it in Emily's manner? Had she grown more beautiful in a night? She dropped into a chair, and, holding her parasol by either end across her knee, looked over at Alexina on the stool, and, looking, laughed. It was a laugh made of embarrassment and complacency, half shy, half bold. [218]

"Your Uncle Austen last night asked me to marry him, Alexina," she said.

"Emily—" Alexina sprang from the stool and stood with apprehension rushing to her face in rising colour and dilated gaze. "Oh—Emily!"

Was it foreboding in her eyes as they swept Emily's girlish loveliness?

"He didn't seem to mind my being poor," said Emily; "he said it was my practical and praiseworthy way of going to work that made him first—oh, Alexina," she coloured and looked at the other, "he didn't even mind our little house—and mother doing the work." [219]

A sort of rage against Emily seized Alexina. She stamped her foot.

"Oh," she cried, "why shouldn't he the rather go down on his unbending knees in gratitude that you'll even listen? You're twenty-one and he's fifty-one. You have everything, you're lovely, you've your voice, you haven't begun to live yet—oh, I know he's my uncle, and I remember all he's done for me, but I've known him years, Emily, *years*, and I've never seen Uncle Austen laugh once."

What on earth has laughing to do with it? Alexina always was queer. This from Emily. Not that she said it, except in the puzzled, uncomprehending stare at Alexina, while she returned to what she had come to communicate. "We're going to be married the first day of October," she said. "Mr. Blair has to go East on some business then." [220]

Alexina drew herself together with a laugh. What was the use—yet she could not divest herself of a responsibility.

She looked at Emily, who was looking at her. Their eyes met. Alexina looked away.

"Emily," she said, "there's a thing"—it took effort to say it—"a thing maybe you haven't thought of. It came to Aunt Harriet; it comes to everybody, I feel sure. Won't you be cutting yourself off from any right to it?" The red was waving up to Alexina's very hair.

Emily showed no resentment at this implication which both seemed to take for granted, but then she was not following Alexina very closely, her own thoughts being absorbing. "The wedding will have to be in our little house," she said, "so it won't make much difference about the dress; nobody'll be there. But for the rest, I'm going to have some clothes. I told mother and father and grandfather so this morning." [221]

Alexina went over and seized the other's hands as children do. A softer feeling had come over

her. Perhaps Emily was doing this thing to help her people. Besides, she and Emily used to weave wonderful garbs in bygone days, for the wearing to the Prince's ball. To be sure, one never had pictured an Uncle Austen as the possible Prince, but still Emily should have them, if she wanted them.

Alexina's gaze fell upon a flower lying on the floor, which had dropped out of Garrard Ransome's buttonhole. The boy loved flowers as most men from the blue grass country do, and the cottage yard was a wilderness of them. She had almost forgotten Garrard's share in this. She picked the flower up and handed it to Emily. "Dr. Ransome has been here," she said, feeling treacherous— [222] for the other man, after all, was her uncle.

Emily took it, and laid it against the lace of her parasol, this way and that.

"I've always, as far back as I can remember, meant to be somebody, something," said Emily. She said it without emotion, as one states a fact. Then she rose and picked up her glove. "Sometimes I've thrown my arms out and felt I could scream, it all has seemed so poor and crowded and hateful to me," which was large unburdening of self for Emily. Then she went. At the door she laid the flower on a chair.

The three weeks of Molly's illness brought it to the end of August, and, as she convalesced, Alexina began to plan for Aden. In the midst of her preparations the Major and Harriet returned. [223]

She went out to the house the morning of their arrival. The luggage was being unloaded at the curb as she reached the gate, and, hearing voices as she stepped on the porch, she looked in at the parlour window. Harriet, her hat yet on, was bending her head that little Stevie, urged by his mother, might kiss her. The baby was no shy about it than the woman, yet the woman smiled as the baby's lips touched her face.

As she rose she saw Alexina and came to the door to meet her. She kissed the girl almost with embarrassment, yet kept hold of her hands, while suddenly her eyes filled with something she tried to laugh away.

"I had your letter," she was saying, "and resent it, too, that you are going, and so does Stephen." [224] Her face changed, her voice grew hesitant, hurried. "He's never going to be better than now"—was it a sob?—"but since I may have him, may keep him, and he is willing now to live so for me, though not at first, not at first— Oh, Alexina, it has been bitter!"

Alexina followed her into the parlour. The Major was there in a wheeled chair, the babies afar off, refusing to obey the maternal pokes and pushes to go to him, and regarding him and his wheeled affair with furtive, wide-eyed suspicion. The eyes of the Major were full of the humour of it.

"Now had I been a gamboling satyr on hoofs they would have accepted me at once," he assured Alexina. "It's this mingling of the familiar with the unnatural—"

He was holding the girl's hand while he spoke and looking up keenly at her pretty, tired face. [225] There had been enough in her letters for them to have divined something of her trouble.

"To some it comes early, to others late, Alexina," he said quite gently. He had noted the signs—the violet shadows beneath the baffled young eyes, the hint of the tragedy in their depths.

Alexina sat down suddenly and, leaning her face on the arm of the wheeled chair, began to cry, not that she meant to do it at all.

Time was when Harriet would have been at a loss, even now she was embarrassed, though she hovered over the girl, anxious and solicitous, and even touched the pretty, shining hair with her hand.

"Let her alone: let her cry it out," said the Major.

Alexina, groping for his hand, held to it like a very child and cried on.

PART THREE

"Joy will be part of the Kingdom of God."

RENAN.

[229]

CHAPTER ONE

Immediately after the wedding Alexina and Molly went South. Molly turned petulant at sight of Aden and Alexina could not blame her; indeed, she and Celeste were of a mind with her as they drove from the station to the hotel.

The horses ploughed through loose, greyish sand, the sidewalks along the street, ostensibly the business thoroughfare, were of board, not in the best of repair, and the skyline of the street was varied according as the frame stores had or did not have a sham front simulating a second story. Men sat on tilted chairs beneath awnings along the way and stared at the occupants of the carriage as it passed. It was mid-afternoon, which, in Aden, seemed to be a glaring, shadeless hour and, but for these occasional somnolent starers, a deserted one. Yet people lived here, existed, spent their lives in this crude, poor hideousness, this mean newness; the Leroy's lived here! And that their son would let them, would remain himself! [230]

"What did we come for anyhow?" queried Molly. "The world is full of charming places. You do adopt the queerest notions, Malise."

Malise sat convicted. It had sounded so alluring, so suggestive of charm and languor; the very name of Aden had breathed a sort of magic.

And Alexina had come, too, buoyed up by a large and epic idea of restitution. How foolish, how young, how almost insulting from the Leroy's standpoint it suddenly seemed. [231]

"We spent two winters in Italy, Jean and I, and one in Algiers," Molly was saying plaintively. "Heavens, Malise, they're building that house on stilts, right over a sinkhole of tin cans."

For that matter there were tin cans everywhere. It was most depressing.

"Even Louisville was better than this," said Molly grudgingly. "Don't look so resigned, Malise; it's not becoming."

They turned a corner and the driver stopped before a long, two-storied building, painted white, which proved to be the hotel. It stood up from the street on wooden posts, the space between latticed. A railed gallery ran across the front, steps ascending midway of its length. Two giant live-oaks flanked the building either end, the wooden sidewalk cut out to encircle their great roots, and, while handbills and placards were tacked up and down the rugged, seamy trunks, yet grey moss drooped from the branches and swept the gallery posts. The building looked roomy, old-fashioned and reposeful, and Alexina's spirits rose. She gathered up the wraps, Celeste the satchels—no one ever looked to Molly to gather up anything—and they went in. [232]

The place seemed deserted and asleep, but just inside the doorway, where the hall broadened into an office, a man stood looking through a pile of newspapers. His clothes were black and his vest clerical; below its edge hung a small gold cross. He turned politely, then said he would go and find some one.

"Dear me," said Molly, brightening, "he's handsome."

Two days after, they were settled in comfortable rooms overlooking the hotel grounds. A slope down to a small lake boasted some gnarled old live-oaks and pines, and one side was set out with a young orange grove. Across the water one could see several more or less pretentious new houses built around the shore. The breeze tasted of pine and Molly had slept a night through without coughing. [233]

"But, Heavens!" she complained, the second afternoon, lolling back in a wooden arm-chair on the hotel gallery; "isn't there anything to do?"

Alexina and the young man in clerical garb were her audience. He was the Reverend Harrison Henderson, and had charge of the Episcopal Church of Aden and lived at the hotel. He seemed a definite and earnest man. His blond profile was strong. It was a rather immobile face, perhaps, but it lighted with very evident pleasure as he answered Mrs. Garnier. [234]

"How would you like to go out to Nancy?" he proposed; "it's quite an affair for a lake down here, and a young fellow out there rents sail-boats."

"Charming," agreed Molly, sitting up. "You have ideas; you can't have been here long."

Mr. Harrison smiled, though it was an acknowledging rather than a mirthful smile. Life is too earnest for mere laughter, but his zeal to serve Mrs. Garnier was not to be doubted.

"What do you say, Miss Blair?" he asked, turning to that young person.

"Who?—I?" Alexina had been leaning forward with her elbow on the gallery railing, her eyes looking off to a line of pines against the sky. She had been wondering how she should inquire about the Leroy's, and if she really wanted to. She came back to the veranda and the present. [235]

"I think it would be charming, too," she replied.

"Then we'll go right away. I'll order the carriage, so as to see the sunset," he said, and rose. "You will need wraps for Mrs. Garnier." Somehow a man never thinks the other woman will need anything.

He spoke briskly and went off down the plank sidewalk towards town with a swing. The day was fair, the air was soft, and the blood in the Reverend Henderson, despite the dogmatic taint in it,

was red and young.

Out at Lake Nancy Osceola, a young fellow in flannel shirt, knickerbockers and canvas shoes, was scanning the shore from a wooden pier which ran out the extent of shallow water, having just made fast the sail-boat rising and falling with the swell at the pier's end. [236]

A grove of well grown orange trees stretched up the slope from the water. The trees were heavy with fruit and looked sturdy and well cared for. To the right stood the frame packing sheds, and beyond, amid higher foliage against the cerulean sky, showed a house roof.

But the young fellow on the pier was gazing in the other direction, where, through the straight vistas of the grove, a carriage was being driven under the trees, the top sweeping the fruit laden branches. The young man hallooed as he started in the pier, but a negro digging among the trees had dropped his spade and was running up. The carriage stopped and the young minister of the Aden Episcopal Church got out. Naturally, it was to be supposed that it was some person with no more common sense. [237]

But there were others than the Reverend Mr. Henderson descending—two ladies. Some party from the hotel come for a sail, probably.

It was the duty of coloured Pete to go with sailing parties, but there was work that he should finish this afternoon. The old darky was backing the horse. The minister and the ladies were approaching.

The young fellow was just in from a sail, having been down to the sedge land with his gun, but he would go again. He gave a call. "It's all right, Pete; go on with the ditching."

His eyes were indifferent as he watched the approach, though their glance was straight and clear and keen. Suddenly the look changed, intensified, and the young fellow's shoulders squared. [238]

The minister led the way, talking with the pretty, slight woman, who stopped with protest every step as her feet went down in sand. Behind them came a jaunty-looking girl with light-footed carriage. The wind was ruffling and tossing her hair and she held to her hat as she stopped under the orange trees to look upon the prospect.

But the eyes watching her did not turn, knowing the scene on which she was gazing. It was Lake Nancy, long and lizard-like—its sapphire water shimmering beneath the breeze—stretching westward between curving, twisting, inletted shores, fringed near at hand with the bright green of young oranges and lemons, and farther on by the darker live-oak and pine, while on the opposite side the line of forest stretched heavy and sombre, trailing grey moss hoariness into Nancy's lapping wave. [239]

And while the girl gazed on Nancy the young man watched her with a curious intentness but with no doubt. Then he walked in the length of the pier to meet them. As the girl's eyes came round to him she changed to a startled pallor, white as her serge gown, and her eyes dilated, then into them came eagerness.

Except for a tightening pull on muscles about nose and mouth the young fellow stood impassive.

The colour rushed back into the girl's face. The young man had turned and was shaking hands with Mr. Henderson. The minister was mentioning names, too, but the girl had her back to them and was studying the outstretch. Her head was high.

When she turned again Mr. Henderson was carefully piloting the other lady into the boat. "Malise," that lady was calling. Malise, forced by this to come and be helped in, found herself in the stern. But her throat, because of a choked-back sob, hurt, and a vast homesickness and sense of futility was upon her. [240]

When presently she could look up and around the little craft was skimming out across the lake to deep water, where it shifted westward and flew into the dying afternoon.

There were billowy puffs of clouds high above, softly flushing into rose with a golden fleeciness to their edges. Her mother's talk and dulcet-toned laughter reached the girl, punctuated with the serious accents of Mr. Henderson. The two were sitting where the seats, running about, came together at the bow, and he, with an elbow on the rail, was looking at Molly. Such a wistful, pretty child she looked in her white canvas dress, with her wind-blown, gauzy veil fluttering from her hat. [241]

Alexina's eyes were fixed on them, but she was conscious, too, of a gaze on her, which for all her hot pride and hurt she could not look around and meet. Once, when the sail was shifting and she knew the eyes would, perforce, be concerned therewith, she stole a hurried survey and saw a well-knit figure, quick in its movements, the muscles playing beneath the flannel shirt. A discarded coat was upon the seat near her.

"Down, please," came in cool, deliberate tones from the owner of the coat and the gaze. The head of the girl went down, while the sail swung about. The boat dipped, righted, then flew ahead, following the curving shores of the lake.

The very air seemed flushing, the shimmering water had a thousand tints, the shores slipping by breathed out odours of mould, and leaf and vine. The western sky was triumphing, clouds of [242]

purple and of crimson lifting one above another about a golden centre. And they in the boat were speeding into the glory; the very rosiness of the air seemed stealing down upon them and enveloping them. The sense of avoirdupois, of gravitation, was lost; one felt winged, uplifted; it was good all at once, it was good to live, to be.

The eyes and the gaze were on her again; she felt them and turned suddenly and faced them. The look she met was deep and warm, but it changed, holding hers, grew cool, enigmatical, impersonal. Did he not know her then, or did he not want to know her?

This time tears of hurt and pride rushed to her eyes. He was watching, but she could not get her eyes away, even with those hateful tears welling. [243]

The sail shifted, for no reason apparently. "Down, please," he commanded. But as the boat dipped, shook itself, righted again, and flew on through the rosy light, his head came up near hers and his voice, in the old, boyish way, said: "Really?"

Sudden light shone through the tears in the girl's eyes. Molly would have wrung her hands with an artist's anguish, this was the place for coquetry!

"I thought you didn't want to know me and I was hurt," said Alexina.

"It was yours to know first," said Willy Leroy stoutly, but his eyes were laughing.

"Oh," said Alexina, doubtfully; "why, yes; perhaps it was." And then she laughed, too, gaily.

CHAPTER TWO

[244]

As Molly, Alexina and Mr. Henderson sat on the front gallery of the hotel the next morning, they were joined by one Mr. Thompson Jonas, a lawyer of Aden, who lived above his office and took his meals at the hotel.

Mr. Jonas was small, wiry and muscular, of Georgia stock, with a fierce little air and a fierce moustache, and quick, bright blue eyes, never still. He had sprung to the aid of Molly and Alexina one morning and flung a door open as they passed from the dining-room, and speedily they were all good friends.

It was characteristic of him that he should have flung the door back, not merely opened it. There was something of homage in the act. Within the body of the little man was the chivalrous spirit of a Chevalier Bayard, a Cœur de Lion. The big soul of Mr. Jonas was imprisoned in his pigmy person as the spirit of the genius in the casket. [245]

He was a Nimrod, too, and even now stood in hunting accoutrements, seeming rather to have been shaken into his natty leggings than they to have been drawn onto him, and there was a flare and dip to his wide, soft hat and a jaunty fling to his knotted tie. His dog, a Gordon setter bitch, sat on her haunches by him as he stood, his fingers playing with her silky ears.

"Now, you'd better come go with me, Henderson," he was urging, "the buggy's here at the door and you need it—you need this sort of thing more." [246]

"It's a busy day with me, thank you," answered the Reverend Henderson a little coldly, for this Mr. Jonas was a man of no church. His faith, he had frequently assured the young clergyman, would long ago have died for breathing space in any creed he yet had met with.

"When you're older you'll understand better what I mean, my dear boy," the little man had in good part and cheerfulness assured the other. "Come around and use my books any time you like."

For the soul of Mr. Jonas enthused—or convinced its owner that it did—over Confucius, and further revelled in the belief that it delved in occult knowledge; it also led him to place the volumes of the early Fathers on his book-shelves and the literature of the Saints and of Kant and Comte and Swedenborg; it conducted its owner to the feet of Emerson and Thoreau; it made him talk Darwinism. Jesus Christ and Plato, Mr. Jonas loved to say, made up his ideal philosophy. [247]

Mr. Henderson, on the other hand, spoke of church buildings in Aden other than his own as assembling places. It was inevitable he did not give his approval to Mr. Jonas. His feeling against the little man even made him enumerate the occupations ahead for the day, as if it was a sort of avowal of the faith to thus declare them.

"It's a busy day with me, thank you. I have a feast day service and a guild meeting, besides my parochial duties and a vestry meeting for the evening."

"Dear me," said Molly, looking at him. "To be sure—I'd forgotten you're a minister." The young man looked up, instant self-arraignment in his face, for permitting it to be forgotten. [248]

"When do you have service?" Molly was saying. "We must come over, Malise and I."

He told her gravely.

Mr. Jonas was standing against the gallery railing, rising and falling on his neat little toes, the

setter's eyes following his every movement. He was facing Mrs. Garnier and her daughter, looking from the mother, with her red-brown hair and shadowy lashes, to the girl, quite lovely, also, when she smiled in this sweet, sudden way up at him. She had nice hair, too, something the colour of wild honey.

"Charming women, charming women," he was summing them up.

Yet could Mr. Jonas have called to mind any women, the old or young, the forlorn or charming, who had not moved him to chivalric emotion in some form? [249]

Alexina was looking up the street. Mr. Jonas turned, too, as a wagonette, drawn by two big, iron-grey mules, swung round the corner, a glitter of brass and a hint of red about the harness. A young fellow on the front seat was driving; a lady sat behind.

"The finest boy and best shot in Jasmine County," said Mr. Jonas, starting forward as the mules were reined up at the hotel entrance, "and the foolishhest, most profoundly wise mother."

Alexina was going forward, too. "We—that is, I know them," she told him; "they are old friends, the Leroy's."

For she had known Charlotte in a moment.

A darky boy lounging about came to take the mules and Willy sprang his mother out, as lightly as ever a girl would spring, and brought her up the steps to Alexina. [250]

Charlotte's embrace was eager and ardent; then she cried a little, with her face against the girl's shoulder.

"For my youth," she said the next instant, lifting her head and smiling at the girl. "I'm almost a middle-aged woman, little Mab; I'm nearly forty-five and I don't want to be."

Vivacity, as of old, dwelt in Charlotte's face and animated her lively movements, but her brilliant eyes were somewhat sunken, as happens with women of marked features and dashing beauty; the skin was growing sallow too, and as the cheeks and temples drew in the features stood large.

"I don't know how to grow old," said Charlotte, and truthfully, "I don't know how to let go. I haven't the resourcefulness, or quiet, or repose, for an old woman." [251]

Always, 'way back as Charlotte Ransome, she had loved the showy, and she loved it still, as evidenced by the scarlet ribbon from which her fan hung, and the flowered muslin, showing the hand of village dressmaking. But she bore herself with the smiling pleasure of a child in them.

Willy joined them. He had been talking with Mr. Jonas, and evidently had declined the expedition too, for the little man, calling to the setter, went off grumbling and upbraiding the lot of them.

"We came early to avoid the heat," Charlotte explained, as they went to join Molly and Mr. Henderson.

Molly's eyes swept Mrs. Leroy's youthful fineries wonderingly, curiously. It was no credit to Molly that her sixth sense lay in an instinctive selection of the appropriate in the beautiful. She wondered much as a child wonders over the mysterious, at what she more often than not saw on others. [252]

She lolled back now in her simple dress, of which Alexina had reason to know the cost, and she lolled indifferently—Celeste or some one would press out the rumples when need be—then she held out a pretty hand to Charlotte.

But Mrs. Leroy, the greetings over, spread her draperies with some care and absorption as she sat down. She was another type of helpless person, the reverse of Molly, with a carping sense of responsibility.

Molly's gaze followed her concern with lazy interest in which lurked laughter, for the dress upon which the care was bestowed was so, well—

Alexina's face grew hot; she hated Molly, whose every thought she was reading; and, by the girl's arrangement, they fell into two groups, Molly and the men making one, King William perched on the railing of the gallery, and Alexina and Mrs. Leroy the other, drawn a little apart. There was so much to say. [253]

"We see the Kentucky papers," Charlotte told Alexina, "so I know of most of the happenings." She drew a little breath. "And Austen Blair is married?"

"Yes," said Alexina, "just before we came."

Charlotte was regarding her like a child with a secret trembling on its lips. "I was engaged to him once, Alexina, and we broke it." Light from many sides began to break in upon Alexina.

"Oh," she said; "Mrs. Leroy!"

"It's odd, isn't it?" said Charlotte. "He was the only man ever caring for me that I never subjugated—except Willy here—" Her voice brightened, while she nodded, in her near-sighted way, at Mr. Henderson. "As for him, he's ruled me and browbeat me all his life." And Charlotte smiled contentedly at the minister. [254]

Alexina reached out and, with a passionate sort of protectiveness, took hold of the beeringed hand wielding a fan with vivacity and sprightliness.

"I wish we could have given him more advantages," Mrs. Leroy was continuing; "but he's had to plan for us somehow instead. I remember he wasn't eleven years old, though it seemed natural enough he should be doing it at the time, when we came over from St. Louis to Louisville without his father, and Willy had to buy the tickets and check the trunks. I suppose I ought to have realized it, but I never had done such things in my life, and I lost my purse in the depot, I remember, and a gentleman found it, and so Willy took hold." [255]

"We sent him into town here, after we came to Aden, to the Presbyterian minister, who taught him. He wanted to go to college, not that he'd admit it now. Then as soon as he was any size he began at his father about reclaiming the grove. That is, Willy planned and Georges listened. Willy'd got an idea from Mr. Jonas that the railroad was coming through some day, just as it has, but it's been a long pull and a wait, for this is the first full yield for his trees. He's been offered seven thousand for the crop as it hangs, but the mortgage is eight thousand on the place, which went for fertilizing and ditching and sheds, and living, you know, so Willy is holding for eight thousand and Mr. Jonas is urging for nine." [256]

Charlotte's pride in these statements was beaming.

"As soon as the grove proves itself, the place will sell for several times its old value, and we're going back to Kentucky, to Woodford. Willy wants to buy back my father's farm, not that he'll let me say that he does, he's so afraid of admitting anything, but when he was nineteen, three years ago, he had the measles—wasn't it dear and comical, like he was a child again—and he let me hold his hand, in the dark room, you know, and we talked about it, when we would go back."

The girl was patting Charlotte's hand softly and winking back tears while she laughed. Why tears? She herself had no idea.

Mrs. Leroy had a thousand questions to ask, she said, but somehow she never got to them. [257]

"Dear me," she said presently, "we have to go and I've talked of nothing but my own affairs. In my solitude down here I've grown a shameless egotist."

As if she had been ever anything else, the unconscious soul!

"But to be with one of my own sex—some one linked with the past, too, is extenuation. There's so much a woman can't talk of with men, they have such different ways of seeing things, and let her love her men folk never so dearly, if there's none of her own sex around, a woman's lonesome, Alexina."

"Yes," said Alexina, "she is." But she said it absently, for she was conscious of King William's gaze being upon her. She looked up laughing, yet a little confused, for his look was warm. [258]

He slipped along the railing, leaving Mrs. Garnier and the minister chatting. In this blue serge suit and straw hat he looked very like the King William of long ago, dark, keen and impatient.

"What do you think of it, Aden?" he asked.

"I like it," said Alexina. "Somehow as soon as you are in a thing the scene changes to out of doors. It used to be Indians on the common, or Crusoe in the yard, back there in Louisville."

"You began by saying you liked it," he reminded her. Did he think to tease? His eyes were naughty. Here was a zest; this was no Georgy.

"And I do," she said, standing to it. "I do like it."

Was he always laughing at people, this William Leroy? [259]

"They are coming to spend a day with us this week, Alexina and her mother," Mrs. Leroy here told her son, at which, for all the imperturbability of his countenance, Alexina was conscious of something a little less happy about the son.

"They're very good to come," he responded. The tone might be called guarded.

Certain recollections were crowding upon Alexina. Mrs. Leroy's management, her housekeeping, even to a child's comprehension, had been palpably erratic and unexpected.

The girl understood his masculine helplessness. Hers were the eyes that laughed now.

"I've set the table in your house before," she informed him, "while you made toast."

His countenance cleared. He met her gaze solemnly. "It's a bargain," he said. "What day, mother?" [260]

That night Alexina was chatting with Mr. Jonas. She liked him. "You said this morning," she reminded him, "that Mrs. Leroy was the wisest, foolishlest mother—what did you mean?"

"Just that," said Mr. Jonas. "Hasn't her very incompetency made the boy?"

For the next three days Mr. Henderson avoided them. He spoke in the hall or dining-room, to be sure, but joined them no more in plans or on the gallery.

And Molly turned petulant. Why had they ever come to Aden, she moaned. "Can't you propose something, Malise?" she besought.

Alexina, endeavouring to write letters, felt tired. She had been up at Molly's call a dozen times in the night.

"We're going to spend to-morrow with Mrs. Leroy," she reminded her mother.

"She looks like Mrs. Malaprop," said Molly crossly.

The daughter's face flushed. Youth is rawly sensitive to ridicule of its friends. Besides, what would they find at Lake Nancy? It would be poor, she expected that, and it might be—pitiful? Not to her, not to her, but Molly was so unable to see behind things. If a thing was poor to Molly it was only poor and she said so. Alexina hoped her mother would not go. [262]

But when Friday came Molly, in feverish, restless state, was ready for anything and even brightened up over it, while it was Alexina who was petulant, and put on one dress and took it off, and tried another, even with William Leroy down-stairs in the wagonette, waiting.

But she felt better as she came out into the sunshine and the dress she had finally decided on seemed to settle on her into sudden jauntiness.

William shook hands. There was a comfortable sense of humour about him. [263]

"It's fair to divide families into component parts on occasions," he stated, and put Alexina in a place by his own and Molly behind. Molly pouted.

"And, besides, we are going to drop Henderson at a sick parishioner's on the way," he said, with a naughty glance at her. "I met him starting to the livery stable just now and stopped him."

Molly's face cleared. She met his eyes with insouciance, but, somehow, one felt all at once that she liked him better.

Mr. Henderson came out with a satchel and climbed in. He looked stern and uninviting, Alexina thought, but the note of Molly's random remarkings promptly brightened. Willy flicked the whip above the big grey span and off they trotted across town, westward.

The morning was keen enough that the sun's warmth was pleasant and quickened the blood. Aden was left behind. Here and there on the outskirts frame houses, crudely and hideously cheap, were building. Land everywhere was being cleared, the felled trees lying about, the whirl of a portable sawmill telling their destiny, while burning stumps filled the air with creosote pungency. [264]

Then the despoilments of progress were left behind and the untouched pine woods closed about them, and trees rose tall, straight, twigless, to where a never-ceasing murmur soughed, and the light came sifting, speckled, and flickering through the gloom, upon the sandy ground and scrub palmetto beneath.

Alexina breathed deep. It was quiet, and peaceful and solemn.

"Isn't it?" said William sociably.

She looked up; she hadn't spoken. [265]

The trees thinned, grew sparse, and the road came out into the open. A mile farther on they entered a belt of hummock land, a wild growth of live-oak, cypress, magnolias, thicketed, intertwined, rank. Grey moss trailed and swept their faces as they passed under, vines clambered and swung and festooned, gophers crawled out of the path, and a gleaming snake slid across the road and into the palmetto undergrowth.

He was looking at her as they came out, she flushed and ecstatic.

"But wait," said he, "until I show it to you after a while in bloom."

Just beyond the hummock he drew rein at a clearing before an unpainted frame house, even cheaper and more hideous than the most. Mr. Henderson got out, King handing the satchel after him.

"It's a death-bed," he said under his breath to the two, as the minister went toward the house; [266] "that's the pitiful part of it down here, people taking all they've got to get here, only to die."

"Don't—don't tell about it," said Molly sharply.

William Leroy touched the mules and they went on. A little later Alexina felt Molly's hand upon her. "Come back with me, Malise," she begged. Her face looked drawn and grey.

"But we're there," explained King, and a minute after turned in at an old iron gate, flanked by two ancient live-oaks. An osage hedge, cut back upon its woody stock, stretched about the place either side from the gate. Within, the driveway made a sweep off towards buildings in the rear,

while a shell path led up to the house, which was of frame, wide, with porches across the front, up-stairs and down. Bermuda grass covered the sandy surface of the yard, which was large and sloped back towards the lake, visible through the grove. Here and there a banana plant reared its ragged luxuriance and a stunted palm or two struggled upward; there was on old rustic seat beneath a gnarled wild orange tree. [267]

As Willy helped them out, Charlotte appeared and came animatedly down the path between the borders of crepe myrtle. Alexina ran ahead to meet her. The girl's hands were quite cold. Mrs. Leroy's white dress, relic of bygone fashion, fluttered with rose-coloured ribbons, and suddenly Alexina seemed to see a wide old cottage in a shrub-grown yard, and on its porch a lady in a gauzy dress with rosy ribbons, gathering a little child into her lap.

The girl threw her arms about this Charlotte in the old white dress, and then, because her eyes were full of foolish tears, ran on, for the Captain was on the porch, in a cane arm-chair, a line of blue smoke trailing up from the cigar in his fingers. Laughing and breathless she went up the steps and their eyes met. Never a word spoke either, but the hand of the man closed on the girl's and rested there until the others came up. [268]

"Willy wouldn't let me do a thing about your coming, Alexina," Mrs. Leroy began, as she reached them; "he said he'd tend to it himself and wouldn't let me give a direction. He's fussy sometimes and notionate, like the time when the surveyors were staying with us, and Mandy set some dishes on a chair. I'd already told him she didn't know how to clear a table for dessert, and he said I ought to have taught her."

The girl's eyes danced. "You're all of you the same, the very same; not one of the three has changed." [269]

Charlotte beamed. She took it with undisguised pleasure that she had not changed.

King came round the house. He had taken the mules to the stable. "I'm holding you to that bargain," he reminded Alexina.

Molly looked bored. Such things were only playful and interesting as she was part of them. Then she said she was tired, evidently having no mind for a morning with Mrs. Leroy.

"You shall go up and lie down in my room," said Charlotte.

The three women went in. The hall dividing the house was wide and high, its floor of boards a foot wide, and bare but for a central strip of carpet; an old mahogany hat-tree stood against one wall, a mahogany sofa against the other, with straight backed chairs flanking both. It was all labouriously clean and primly bare. [270]

The rooms up-stairs were big, with old mahogany furniture set squarely about them.

"They didn't want me to bring the furniture, Willy and his father, when we came," Charlotte told Alexina; "it cost more to get it here than to buy new, but I didn't want new; I wanted this."

Everything was innocent of covers or hangings, nor were there any pictures. She explained this.

"I don't know how to drive nails," she told them, "and Willy and the Captain don't care. Willy had the house papered this fall in case of people coming about buying, and the papering men took the nails out the walls and he won't bother to put them in. They're all in here." [271]

Charlotte didn't mean the nails; she threw open a closet door and ancestral Ransomes, neatly set against the walls, peered out of the dark.

Alexina put a hand over Charlotte's on the door knob. Molly yawned.

"It seems chilly here in my room," said Charlotte; "the sun isn't round this side yet. Put your hats on the bed and Mrs. Garnier shall go lie on Willy's sofa."

They followed her across the hall. "He has his bed and things in there," she explained, nodding towards an adjoining room, "and he keeps his books and such in here."

On the floor, otherwise uncarpeted, lay a bearskin. There was a sofa against the wall and a plain deal table in the centre of the room, piled with papers, books and pipes, about a lamp. There were some chairs; a gun-rack, antlers, an alligator skin and some coloured prints of English hunting scenes on the walls, and an old-fashioned, brass-mounted cellarette hung in an angle. The south window looked out across the grove upon Nancy; between the two east windows stood an old secretary book-case. [272]

Charlotte suggesting that Mrs. Garnier put on a wrapper, the two went back to her bed-room. Alexina stood hesitating. She felt a sense of surreptitiousness and embarrassment, and then took a step to the book-case—any one might do that much—and read the titles of the books.

About orange culture and fertilizing these first seemed to be, and those next were concerned with the breeding of stock. They meant Woodford and the future, probably. She skipped to the other shelves. Buckle's Introduction to the History of Civilization, Hallam's Middle Ages, Wealth of Nations, Wilhelm Meister, Poems of Heinrich Heine, several volumes of Spencer and Huxley, Slaves of Paris, Lecocq, the Detective, File No. 118, The Lerouge Case, The Scotland Yard Detective, Carlyle's French Revolution, Taxidermitology, Renan's Life of Jesus, Pole on Whist, Hoyle, Tom Sawyer, Past and Present, Pickwick Papers, Herodotus, an unbroken shelf of Walter [273]

Scott, A Pair of Blue Eyes, Cousin Pons, Drainage, Pendennis, Small Fruit Culture.

Why, here was a world, within these glass doors, she did not know. Yet she had read diligently among Uncle Austen's books. She looked back in memory over his shelves; Macaulay, yes, Uncle Austen cared so essentially for Macaulay, and for Bancroft and Prescott, and Whittier and Lowell. There were the standards in fiction and poetry in well-bound sets. Uncle Austen himself admired Alexander Pope, and Franklin's Autobiography; he liked Charles Reade's novels, too, bearing on institutional reforms— [274]

Here Mrs. Leroy and Molly came back, Molly in a white wrapper and Charlotte bearing a pillow and a silk quilt.

"Willy's calling," Charlotte told Alexina; "he wants you."

He was at the foot of the stairs, and, waiting for her to get down, watched her hand on the banister. The wood was dark and the hand was white and slender. Then he held out a big, checked apron. She walked into it and looked over her shoulder while he tied the strings behind.

It takes time to set a table when neither is just certain where things are to be found. Hunting together in sideboard, cupboards, and on pantry shelves brings about a feeling of knowing each other very well. There was so much, too, to talk about. [275]

"Do you remember—" it was Alexina pausing with a goblet in hand to ask it.

"Have you forgot—" King, producing a carving set, would rejoin.

Presently she paused. Twice she started to speak, hesitated, then said, "There's a thing I want to ask you, or, rather, want to say—" Her voice was a little tremulous and breathless.

"Yes."

"You remember—that is, you haven't forgot the 'King William'?"

She was looking away from him and he looking at her, his mouth odd, yet smiling, too. She was an honest and a pleasant thing to look upon. "Yes," he told her, "as well as I remember the raft we put off on from the desert island and the plains back of the stable—have you forgotten the trackless plains where we sat down to starve in the snow, with never a sign of deer or buffalo for days, or even a thing on wing? We'd just lighted on Hiawatha those days. There was an Indian, by the way, came up from the grass water yesterday and brought us venison for to-day." [276]

It was evident he did not mean to let her return to the subject.

Presently Alexina untied the apron. "I must see your mother some," she said.

"But she does not want you," declared his mother's son; "she's overjoyed to think you're with me. She thinks there is something deficient in her son; she insists I've never spoken to a girl since we left you in Louisville. Besides, she's in the kitchen, I hear her out there now, all fluttered herself and fluttering Aunt Mandy." [277]

But Alexina would go. "I must call Molly in time for dinner," she insisted.

CHAPTER FOUR

[278]

Now William Leroy supposed Mrs. Garnier to be in his mother's room. A moment later he followed Alexina up the stairs, meaning to get something out of his desk which he wished to show her. He was a most direct youth, considering that he was, by his mother's confession, a timorous one. There was an odd little smile about his mouth, perhaps because all things looked pleasant right now.

His nature was practical rather than sanguine, and built in general only on things achieved, but to-day the fruit was hanging golden on the trees and the grove was one of the few new ones in bearing. He had anticipated the railroad by several years in planting, and now the grove and house were going to bring a figure larger than he ever had hoped for. [279]

As the Israelites yearned for Canaan, he was looking towards the pastoral lands of Kentucky. To-day, for the once, he would let this new buoyancy, this unanalyzed optimism run warm in his blood; why not? He was young, he was strong, he was master of his circumstances for the first time.

He went up the steps lightly, springily, with a sort of exuberant joy in the mere action. His canvas shoes made no sound. The stairs landed him at his own door. He brought up short.

Alexina was standing midway of the threshold; he thought he heard a sob.

She turned hurriedly, her hands outspread across the doorway as by instinct.

"Don't," she begged; "please go away." Then as he wheeled, "No, wait—" She swallowed before she could speak. [280]

"It's Molly," she said; "can you send us back to town? she's—she's—"

"Not well," the daughter was trying to say. The boy's straightforward eyes were fixed on hers inquiringly.

"What's the use; I can't lie," the girl broke down miserably. "I ought not to have come with her." Her arms dropped from across the doorway. In all perplexity he was waiting. He had a glimpse of Molly within, drooping against the table, and her eyes regarding them with a kind of furtive fear.

His hunting flask from out the cellarette was there on the table.

The girl was speaking with effort. "I'm sorry; she must have felt bad and found it."

She suddenly hid her face in her hands against the casement.

[281]

That roused him. He felt dazed. It needed a woman here to feel the way.

"I'll get mother," he said.

"Oh," begged the girl, and quivered; "can't we get back to town without—must she know?"

King was growing himself again. "Why," he said, "of all people, yes, mother."

He went down the steps two at a time. There was no sensitive apprehension in his manner when he brought her back, as there often was concerning his mother; he knew her strength as well as her incompetencies.

She came straight up and hardly noticed Alexina as she passed but went on to Molly, whose eyes, full of shame and fear, were dully watching the scene.

Charlotte put her arms about her, drew her to the sofa, and sat by her. "Poor dear," she said; "poor dear."

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Molly drooped, trembled, then turned and clung to her, crying piteously. "You're sorry for me? I did it because I'm afraid. He said they all come down here to die. Malise don't know, she don't understand, she's hard."

"You go down to your dinner, Alexina," said Charlotte; "it's waiting. Oh, yes, yes you will go." There was finality in the tone, very different from Charlotte's usually indefinite directions. "Leave your mother to me; oh, you needn't tell me anything about it; I know. And take that hardness out of your face, Alexina, it's your own fault if you let this embitter you, it's ourselves that let things spoil our lives, not the things. I'll tell you something, that you may believe I know, something that I told Willy at a time his arrogance seemed to need the knowledge. My father, my great, splendid, handsome father, all my life was this way. But he came straight home to my mother, and so she kept him from worse, and held him to his place in the world. Keep on loving them, it's the only way. Many a time we've all cried together like babies, father and mother and I, by her sofa."

[283]

"Willy," called Charlotte. The boy ran up from below. "Take Alexina down to her dinner and afterwards take her out of doors. No, you're not going back to the hotel, not to-night. Willy can send Peter in for your woman and your things, for you're going to stay here till she's better and you see this thing differently."

That evening King and Alexina sat on the edge of the pier, the water lapping the posts beneath their swinging feet. He was peeling joints of sugar-cane and handing her sections on the blade of his knife, she trying to convince herself that they were as toothsome as he insisted they were. He could idle like a child.

[284]

But the girl's mind was back there in the house. "According to your mother," she was saying, "there's got to be affection back of the doing of a duty." Poor child, she was putting it so guardedly, so impersonally she thought.

"Well," said he, dropping his unappreciated bits of cane, piece by piece into the water, "that's a woman's way of looking at it."

"What's a man's?" asked the girl, at that, "how does a man do hard things?"

"He just does 'em, I should say, and doesn't analyze. He's got to be at something, you know; it's part of the creed."

[285]

"What creed?" demanded Alexina.

"Mr. Jonas's."

"Oh," said Alexina, "yes, I see."

CHAPTER FIVE

[286]

Molly, Alexina and Celeste stayed a week at Nancy with the Leroy's. It was a household wherein there was no strain, no tension, though, to be sure, there was small management. One had a comical comprehension that Mandy the cook and Tina the wash-woman kept their families off the

gullibility and good faith of their mistress.

Alexina was sent into the sunshine.

"Keep her outdoors," Charlotte commanded Willy; "the child's morbid."

Mr. Jonas drove out with trophies of game as offerings to Mrs. Garnier. One morning Mr. Henderson came with him in the buckboard, and Molly and the two men sat in the sunshine on the porch and talked. [287]

"Did he die?" she asked the minister presently.

"Who?"

"The man at the house where you stopped that day?" She asked it as one driven to know, even while apprehensive of the answer.

Exultation leaped for an instant to the young man's face, a stern joy. "He died," he told her, "but in the faith at the end."

"In what faith?" Molly asked curiously. She was a child in so many things.

"The Church," he told her, with reproof in his tone.

The click of Mr. Jonas's incisors upon incisors chopped the air.

But Molly moved a little nearer the minister.

"Yes," she agreed slowly, unwillingly almost; "they all do. Father Bonot used to say it over and over. They all come back to the Church to—to die." [288]

She was shivering.

There was a quick, snapped off h'ah from Mr. Jonas.

Mr. Henderson looked bewildered. "I did not know; then, Mrs. Garnier, you are—"

"I'm a Catholic," said Molly, a little in wonder.

"Romanist?" said the other gently.

But Molly wasn't listening, nor would she have known what the distinction meant, had she been. It was Mr. Jonas who gave forth another sound that was almost a snort, and marched off to where King and Alexina were sitting on the step.

Molly watched him go, then glanced around as if to insure aloofness, and leaned forward, her fingers pulling at the edge of her handkerchief. [289]

"You helped him to die, and you're a priest—one sort of a priest—and I want to tell you—"

"No," said the other, "you do not understand; let me make you see."

"It doesn't matter," said Molly; "no," hurriedly, "let me tell you. I want to tell you. It will help me. I take things—I have to; anything that will make me forget and make me sleep. I'm afraid—I take it because I'm afraid to die."

He looked at her out of dull eyes. She was, self-avowedly, everything he held abhorrent—alien, worldly, and weak. He stammered something—was he asking God to help her, or himself?—and left her.

Later, as he and Mr. Jonas drove back to Aden, the eyes of Mr. Jonas snapped. "You're brewing mischief to your own or somebody else's peace of mind; you always are when you look like that. Out with it, man." [290]

Why Mr. Henderson should out with it, he himself knew less than any, but Mr. Jonas had a way.

The minister's words came forth with effort.

"I've been seeking light to know why Mrs. Garnier was sent down here. I've never cared for a woman before; I can't seem to tear it out. But to-day it's made clear: she was sent to me to be saved."

"From her faith?" inquired Mr. Jonas.

But the minister was impervious to the sarcasm.

"To the faith," said Mr. Henderson.

The others gone, Alexina, King William and the Captain sat on the porch. The girl who was on the step reached up and put a hand on the locket swinging from the Captain's fob. "May I?" she asked, "I used to, often, you know." [291]

The Captain slipped the watch out and handed it to her, the rest depending, and she opened the locket, a large, thin, plain gold affair. "This," she said, bending over it, then looking up at the Captain archly, "this is Julie Piquet, your mother, wife of Aristide Leroy, refugee and Girondist."

She recited it like a child proud of knowing its lesson, then regarded him out of the corners of her

eyes, laughing.

There answered the faintest flicker of a smile somewhere in the old Roman face.

The girl returned to the study of the dark beauty on the ivory again, its curly tresses fillet bound, its snowy breasts the more revealed than hidden by the short-waisted, diaphanous drapery. [292]

"And because it had been your father's locket, with you and your mother in it, Mrs. Leroy wouldn't let you change it to put her in; and so this on the other side is you, young Georges Gautier Hippolyte Leroy—"

"Written G. Leroy in general," interpolated the gentleman's son.

"And this is how you looked at twenty, dark and rosy-cheeked, with a handsome aquiline nose. You never were democratic, for all your grand pose at being; do you believe he was?" This to King. "Look at him here; if ever there was an inborn, inbred aristocratic son of a revolutionist—"

"He barricaded the streets of Paris with his fellow-students in his turn, don't forget," said King.

"Where his papa had sent him for a more cosmopolitan knowledge of life than Louisville could afford," supplemented Alexina gaily. [293]

"And where he wrote verses to a little dressmaker across the hall," said William.

"Verses?" said Alexina. "Did he write verses? I never heard about the verses."

"No?" said the son; "hasn't he ever written verses to you? Well, since I've opened the way to it, I was leading up to it all the while, why *I have*. I'll show 'em to you. I've had 'em in my pocket waiting the opportunity three days now." Which was true. He had been going for them that first day.

He produced a small card photograph, somewhat faded, which, taken in Alexina's hand, showed her a little girl's serious face, with short-cropped hair.

"She had a nice, straight little nose, anyhow," said Alexina approvingly, studying the card. [294]

"Turn it over," said William Leroy. He had a way of commanding people. Some day Alexina intended warring with him about it, but she turned it over now. The lines inscribed on its reverse were in a round and laboured script that, despite effort, staggered down hill.

"I wrote 'em," said Willy Leroy, "moi—myself, with gulped-down tears at leaving you. I've never written any since."

She was reading them.

"Out loud," he commanded.

She read them aloud. She was laughing, but she was blushing absurdly, too.

*"This is Alexina and she
Is a girl but she
Plays like I tell her and she
Cried because we had to come away
And this is Alexina."*

"He thinks, your son does," said Alexina, addressing herself to the Captain, "that he was a precocious person, whereas he was only—" [295]

"Young," said the Captain.

"Lamentably egotistical," said Alexina.

"Give it to me," said Willy, "my picture and my feelings thereon."

"No," said the girl; "I want it."

"Yes." He said it with the King William air. She made a little mouth, but gave him the card, which he put back in his wallet and the wallet into his pocket. "You're welcome to a copy of the lines," he said.

Alexina, bestowing on him a glance of lofty disdain, departed, high-headed, into the house.

But he ran after her and stooped, that he might look into her face; was he laughing at her?

"Oh," she said, and wheeled upon him, but had to laugh too, such was the high glee behind the sweet gravity on William Leroy's countenance. Glee there was, yet, too, something else in the dark eyes laughing at her, something unconsciously warm and caressing. [296]

The girl ran quickly up-stairs.

And William Leroy, brought to himself, stood where she left him. The hand on the newel-post suddenly closed hard upon it, then he straightened and walked into the parlour, and, sitting down, stared at the embers of the wood fire, as one bewildered. Then his head lifted as with one who understands. On his face was a strange look and a light.

Alexina went up to her mother and Mrs. Leroy. Molly was lolling in a big chair in the sunshine, idly swinging the tassel of her wrapper to and fro. The shadows about her eyes were other than those lent by the sweep of her childlike lashes, and she looked wan. But she looked at peace, too. In her present state the flow of Mrs. Leroy's personal chat was entertainment. Now, there was always one central theme to Charlotte's talk, whatever the variations.

"He hasn't a bit of false pride, Willy hasn't," she was stating. "After his father lost his position, those two years before the trees began paying, there's nothing Willy wouldn't turn his hand to. He carried a chain for the surveyors and went as guide for parties hunting and fishing in the glades." [298]

Molly's attention sometimes wandered from these maternal confidences.

"You were Charlotte Ransome before you were married, weren't you?" she asked irrelevantly. "You used to come to New Orleans winters, didn't you? You were at a party at my Uncle Randolph's once when I was a girl and you were spoken of as a great beauty, I remember. There was a pompon head-dress too, one winter, called the Charlotte Ransome."

The Charlotte listening, only the vivacity of smile and eyes left of her beauty, the Charlotte living the obscure life of a little raw Southern town, let her needle fall, the needle she handled with the awkwardness of a craft acquired late. She was darning an old tablecloth, come down from her mother's day, that day when triumphs and adulation made up life, and when cost or reckoning was a thing she troubled not herself about. She was that Charlotte Ransome again, called up by Mrs. Garnier, the beauty, the fashion, and the belle. [299]

"Oh," she said, "the joy of youth, the joy! Old Madame d'Arblay, the Louisville milliner, devised that pompon head-dress out of her own cleverness, and I remember my old Aunt Polly Ann Love tried to talk her down on the price. How it comes back, the intoxication of it, and the living. Drink deep, little Mab, it never offers twice. I seemed to have divined it never would be again."

The girl looked from one woman to the other. Molly still pursued this thing called adulation, and Mrs. Leroy, big-hearted, simple-souled as she was, looked yearningly back on that which was gone. [300]

Was this all, then? Was life forever after empty, except as with Mrs. Leroy, of duties that occupied but did not satisfy? And what of women who are neither beauties nor belles? What has life to offer them?

A vast depression came over the girl. And was this all? Both women bore witness that it was.

"I heard tell in those days," Molly was saying to Mrs. Leroy, "of a dozen men in the South you might have married. How did you come"—curiously—"in the end to marry Captain Leroy, so much older, and so quiet, and—er—"

Charlotte was too simple to resent the question, which to her meant only affectionate interest. Besides, she was an egotist, and livened under talk of herself. She had no concealment; indeed, had she been cognizant of any skeleton in the family closet, it must speedily have lost its gruesomeness to her, so constantly would she have it out, annotating its anatomy to any who showed interest. [301]

"Because he came to us in our trouble," said Charlotte, "to mother and me when father died. He was shot, my father, you know, in a political quarrel on the street in Lexington, the year before the war. And Captain Georges came to us. We'd always known him. His father and my Uncle Spottswood Love operated the first brandy distillery in Kentucky. Captain Georges had brought me pretty things from New Orleans and Paris all my life. I meant never to marry, then; I'd been unhappy. But it turned out we were poor, and so when Georges said for me to marry him that he might care for mother and me, why—" [302]

"Oh," breathed Alexina. It was denunciation. Certain scenes of childhood had burned into her memory, which she had interpreted later. Molly had not loved daddy, either.

"No one was ever so good, so nobly, generously good to a woman as Georges has been to me," Mrs. Leroy was saying; "and even in our poverty he and Willy have managed, and kept it somehow from me, and long, oh, long ago, I came to love him dearly."

The young arraigner, hearing, gazed unconvinced. She pushed the weight of her hair back off her forehead, as she always did when impatient. "Came to love him dearly." With that mere affection which grows from association, and dependence and habit. [303]

The girl sitting on the window-sill in the sunshine drew a long breath. There was more in life than these two had found; all unknowingly, they had proved it.

Charlotte kept them with her the week, then Molly turned restless.

"I can't stand hearing another thing about Willy, Malise," she declared. "I think he's a very dictatorial and outspoken person myself."

So Molly and Alexina and Celeste went back to the hotel, which had filled during the week of their absence. There was life and bustle in the halls as they went in and, from their windows upstairs, they could see the lake gay with sail-boats.

The talk down-stairs concerned dances, picnics, fishing parties. The somnolent Molly awoke, languor fell from her and she stepped to the centre of the gay little whirl, the embodied spirit of festivity. Mr. Henderson, incongruous element, was there, too, with deliberate election it would seem, for Molly's eyes did no inviting or encouraging. She did not need him in capacity of attendant or diverter these days, and it was clear that in any other capacity he embarrassed her. But he was not deterred because of that. [305]

"You are coming to church, remember," he told her on Sunday morning.

Molly did not even play at archness with him now; she looked timid. And at the hour she went, and Alexina with her. They had heard him officiate before, and it seemed the mere performance of the law; but into the dogmatic assertions of his discourse to-day glowed that fire which is called inspiration. The Reverend Henderson was living these days. [306]

Molly, slim and elegant in her finery, moved once or twice in the pew. Alexina could not quite tell if she was listening. But she was. "Dear me," she said, from under the shadow of her lace parasol, as they walked home, "how wearing it must be to be so—er—intense." She spoke lightly, but she shivered a little. The Reverend Henderson had laid stress upon his text, "In the midst of life we are in death!"

As they went up the hotel steps Molly turned and looked around her and Alexina turned too, since it was Molly's mood. The sky was blue, the air breathed with life and glow and sparkle. There was a taste almost of sea about it. On the prim young orange trees about the new houses across the street the fruit hung golden.

"He used to reach them for me—Father Bonot did," said Molly, slowly, "before I was tall enough. They're sweeter—Louisiana oranges are. I used to run and hide behind his skirts, too, when I was afraid my mother was going to whip me." [307]

They went in. Half way up the stairs Molly paused. "You Blairs, you're all like *him*—not like Father Bonot."

"Like who?" asked Alexina.

"Like Mr. Henderson. You Blairs and Mr. Henderson would have pulled aside your skirts so my mother could have caught me and whipped me."

Something like apprehension sprang into Alexina's eyes. "Oh," she said anxiously, "no; surely I'm not like that, and Aunt Harriet's not!"

"Yes, you are," said Molly stubbornly, "you all of you are. It's because"—a sort of childish rage seized on her—"it's because you're all of you so—so damnably sure of your duty." And Molly's foot stamped the landing in her little fury. [308]

It was funny, so funny that Alexina laughed. And perhaps it was true. She could have hugged Molly; she never came so near to being fond of Molly before.

December arrived, Christmas came and went. Life was almost pastoral—no, hardly that; it was more *un fete champetre*. Each day after breakfast the hotel emptied itself into the sunshine and merriment, emptied itself, that is, of all but the invalids. Molly shunned these. She never even looked the way of one if she could help it.

There was a lake party one night. They took boat at the hotel pier in various small craft and followed the chain of lakes to an island midway of the farthest. The moon was up as they started. [309]

The party was of the gayest, and one might have said that Mr. Henderson was out of his element. Certainly his face was hardly suggestive of hilarity. But he followed Mrs. Garnier into one of the larger boats and took his place with a sort of doggedness. Even in the moonlight the sharpening angle of his cheek-bone was visible, and the deepening of the sockets in which his eyes were set, eyes that followed Mrs. Garnier insistently.

Molly being of the party, it followed that Alexina was, too, but that William Leroy was of it seemed to quicken something in his own sense of humour. His manner with the gay world was perhaps a little stony. He avowed, when thus accused by Alexina and Mr. Jonas, that it was to cover bashfulness.

"I hate people," he declared. [310]

Yet, for a bashful youth, he was singularly deliberate and masterful, seeming to know what he wanted and how to get it. To-night it was that Alexina go with him in a small boat. The others started first, a youth in a striped flannel coat, strumming a guitar.

King put out last. He rowed slowly and often the boat drifted. When they entered the lock connecting the first lake with the next, the other boats had all passed through. The moon scarcely penetrated the dense foliage on the banks above them, and the ripple of the water against the boat seemed only to emphasize the silence, the aloofness. There must have been an early blossom of jasmine about, so sweet was the gloom.

When they passed out into the vaulted space and open water of the next lake, the other boats were far ahead. The tinkling cadence of the guitar floated back to them. [311]

He rowed lazily on. Presently he spoke. "I wonder if you remember how we used to talk, 'way back yonder, about the Land of Colchis?"

"Yes," said Alexina; "I remember."

"I believe we are there at last. We closed the contract for our oranges to-day. It's pretty fair gold, the fruit in Colchis. We pick for delivery on Monday."

He never had talked to her of personal affairs before, it was Mrs. Leroy who had told her what she knew.

"There are several purchasers looking at the place we are going to sell, for dwellers in Colchis, you know, are only sojourners; they long for home."

"The Jasons, too?"

"This Jason at any rate. He wants four seasons to his year, and to hear his horse's feet on pike, and to put his seed into loam." [312]

They slipped through the next lock and out upon the long length of Cherokee, the lake of the island which was their destination. It seemed to bring self-consciousness upon the speaker.

"You are so the same as you used to be," he said, "I forget. How do I know you want to hear all this?"

"You do know," said Alexina, honestly.

He did not answer. They were coming up to the other boats now, beached at the island. Lights were flickering up and down the sand and the rosy glare of a beach fire shone out from under the darkness of the trees. Figures were moving between it and them and they could hear voices and laughter.

"You do know," repeated the girl. [313]

They had grounded. He was shipping the oars. Then he got up and held out a hand to steady her. She, standing, put hers into it. They did not look at each other.

"Yes," he said, "I do know. You're too honest to pretend."

He helped her along and out upon the sand. There was a negro boy awaiting to take charge of the boat. They went up the slight declivity. He had not loosed her hand, she had not withdrawn it. The laughter, the chat, the aroma of boiling coffee, the rattle of dishes being unpacked reached them. They stood for a moment in the shadow, then her hand left his and they went to join the others.

The dozen men and women were grouped about the pine-knot fire, for the warmth was grateful.

There was badinage and sally, light, foolish stuff, perhaps, but flung like shining nebulae along the way by youth in its whirl of mere being. It is good to know how to be frivolous sometimes. Alexina felt the exhilaration of sudden gaiety, daring. She sat down by the youth with the guitar and the striped flannel coat. [314]

"And both were young, and one was beautiful,"

warbled the owner to his guitar, making room for her. "Right here, Miss Blair, by me."

More than one presently stole a look at the tall, rather handsome Miss Blair, hitherto conceded reserved and different from her mother. She was laughing contagiously with the youth, and in the end she gained the guitar over which they were wrangling. She knew a thing or two about a guitar herself, it seemed—Charlotte Leroy could have explained how—as many chords as the owner anyhow. But the young Leroy, it would appear, was sulky, certainly unsociable, sitting there, removed to the outskirts of things, to smoke and stare at the moon. Yet never once did the girl look his way. It was enough that they were to return together. [315]

Nor was she paying attention to Molly either. There are times when the mad leap and rush of one's own blood absorbs all consciousness.

Molly was gay, too, feverishly gay. Some one had brewed a hot something for the delectation and comforting of the chilly ones, and Molly's thin little hand was holding out her picnic cup as often as any one would fill it. It was Mr. Jonas who presently took the cup away and tried to wipe a stain off the pretty dress with his handkerchief. [316]

When the start homeward was made, King came over to Alexina.

"I have to ask you to change to the large boat going back," he said, a little stiffly perhaps; "Mr. Jonas is taking Mrs. Garnier in the small one, and Mr. Henderson says he will see to you."

When she answered her voice was lightly nonchalant.

"Why not?" she said, absorbed in putting on her jacket.

She took her place in the boat by Mr. Henderson. Evidently the evening had gone wrong with him, for his face was ghastly in the moonlight, and his long, nervous fingers never stopped fingering the little gold cross hanging below the line of his vest.

William Leroy did not return with the party at all. Not that she was concerned with that, Alexina assured herself proudly, it was only that she could not help hearing the others wondering at his entering a boat with the negro boy and rowing swiftly away up the lake. It was clear to her. Lake Nancy would have been the next lake on the chain had the channel been cut. He meant to tramp across home to save himself the trouble of going back to town. She did not think he had very good manners at any rate. Yet, when the boats came in at the hotel pier, it was William Leroy who met them. He waited for Alexina and walked with her a little ahead of the others up through the yard. [317]

"Mrs. Garnier is not well," he told her. "I went home and drove in and Mr. Jonas is putting her in the wagon now. We'll take her out to mother; she's all upset over something." [318]

She stopped short, having forgotten her mother. "I can't let you," she declared; "it isn't right to Mrs. Leroy."

"Mother's waiting," he said. "You'd better go in and say something to somebody, and get Celeste."

Mrs. Leroy said that people always obeyed the King William tone. Alexina stood, hesitating. He waited.

Then she went.

He was in the wagonette when she and Celeste came out. The place was still and deserted, even Mr. Jonas gone, for which Alexina was grateful.

Molly was on the back seat, and Celeste, gaunt and taciturn, started to mount beside her.

Molly protested. "Not you, mammy; go in front. I want Malise—not the big Malise, you know—the little one." [319]

The girl, taking the wraps from the old woman, got in by her mother and began to put a shawl about her. The dew was falling heavily. Molly touched her hand. "Once Alexander said to me, 'Let Malise keep tight hold on you, Molly.'"

William Leroy was flicking the mules travelling briskly through the sandy streets, and talking to the old woman, but she was sullen and the conversation died.

Alexina's heart was choking her. Her father—daddy—Molly had spoken to her of daddy.

And all the while Molly was talking on, feverishly, incessantly. "You must keep him away, Malise, that minister, he worries me and his eyes make me uncomfortable, following me. He makes me remember things, and I don't want to. He says it's his duty. He said to-night I'm not going to get well and that he had to tell me in order to save me from myself. Make him keep away from me, Malise; I'm afraid of him. I took it, *that*, to-night, to forget what he said; say it isn't so, Malise—say it." [320]

Willy leaned back over the seat, talking in steady, everyday fashion. "There's the moon setting ahead of us; see it, Mrs. Garnier? Everything's so still, you say? Why, no; it's not so still. There is a cock crowing somewhere, and that must be a gopher scuttling under the palmetto. Now, look backward. See that line of light? It's the dawn."

CHAPTER EIGHT

[321]

The next evening at Nancy, an hour or two after supper, King William was tapping at Mrs. Garnier's door, which was ajar.

"She is asleep," warned Alexina from within.

"Then come on out," he begged, "the moon's up."

"Go on," Mrs. Leroy told her, "Willy wants you," which to Charlotte was reason for all things.

"It's windy," he called softly, "bring a wrap."

The girl came, bringing her reefer jacket and her Tam and put them on in the hall. The jacket was blue, the Tam was scarlet, and both were jaunty. He regarded her in them with satisfaction. [322]

"Now, there," said he, with King William approval, "I like that."

They went down and out. She was tired, she said, so they sat on the bench under the wild orange. The moss, drooping from the branches, fluttered above them. The wind was fitful, lifting and dying. It was a grey night, with scattered mists lying low over the lake, while a shoal of little clouds were slipping across the face of the moon.

"It's been too soft and warm," said he; "it can't last."

But Alexina shivered a little, for there was a chill whenever the wind rose.

"Walk down to the pier," he begged, "and back. Then you shall go in."

The path led through the grove. Stopping to select an orange for her, he passed his hand almost caressingly up and down a limb of the tree. [323]

"And you begin to pick the oranges Monday?" said Alexina.

"Monday."

"And this is Thursday."

They walked on. He was peeling away the yellow rind that she might have a white cup to drink from.

"I won't be here to see the picking," said Alexina. "I have to go to Kentucky for two weeks, something about business. Uncle Austen wrote me in the letter you brought out to-day, that it would simplify things if I could come. And Emily—Emily Carrington, you know—Uncle Austen's wife, wrote too, asking me to stay with them."

"So," said he, "you go—"

"Monday. I've been talking to your mother, and she's willing, if Captain Leroy and you are; I came out to ask you—I am always to be asking favors of your family, it seems—if you will let me leave Molly here instead of at the hotel. Celeste can attend to everything." [324]

"Why not?" asked Willy.

"It's—it's a business proposition," said Alexina. But it took a bit of courage to bring it out.

"Is it?" said he.

"Or I can't do it, you know."

They had reached the lake and were sitting like children on the edge of the pier. The water was ruffled, the incoming waves white-crested, and the wind was souging a little around the boat-house behind them. He was breaking bits off a twig and flinging them out to see them drift in.

"Great country this," he said, "that can't produce a pebble for a fellow to fling." [325]

He looked off toward the shining, shadowy distance, where the moon gleamed against the mists. "You are"—then he changed the form of his question—"are you very rich?"

"Leave the very out, and, yes, I suppose I am rich," said Alexina.

"You are so—well—yourself," he said, "sometimes I find myself forgetting it."

The girl swallowed once, twice, as if from effort to speak. She was looking off, too, against the far shore. "Is it a thing to have to be remembered?" then she asked.

"Isn't it?" said King William, turning on her suddenly. There was a sharp harshness in his tones. "I wish to God it wasn't."

She got up, and he sprang up, too, facing her. Suddenly she stamped her foot. The wind, rising to a gale now, was blowing her hair about her face and she was angry. It made her beautiful. She might have been a Valkyr, tall, wind-tossed. [326]

But the sob in her voice was human. "I've had Uncle Austen say such things to me in his fear I might let other people forget it, and a girl I cared for at school let it come between us, but I thought you—I had a right to think you were bigger. Your mother is, oh, yes, she is, and your father is. Not that I despise the other, either." She lifted her head defiantly. "It's a grand and liberating thing, though it was shackles on me in Uncle Austen's hands. I don't despise it; I couldn't; but that it should have to be remembered—"

"Just so," said Willy Leroy, in his father's phrase.

Her head went up again and she looked at him full, straight, then turned and fled towards the house. [327]

He ran after her, came abreast, and after the fashion he had, stooped to see into her face. "Don't go away, in from me—mad," he begged. Was he laughing?

"But I am mad," she returned promptly.

"But don't go in either way," he said; "stay, mad if you will, but stay. Oh, I'm not proud," he was breathing hard again, "that is—only this proud; I shall build onto my little gold of Colchis until we stand at least nearer equal—and then—"

Each looked at the other, with defiance almost. She was as beautiful as Harriet Blair.

"Then," said the girl, "then you'll be that far less my equal. Let me go." And she jerked her sleeve from his hand and ran into the house.

CHAPTER NINE

[328]

The morning after dawned sunless and chill. The sky was a pale leaden, below which darker masses of clouds scurried. The wind blew strong, steady, resistless. At breakfast they all sat shivering.

"Have Pete start fires," said King William to Charlotte, "and you had better move Mrs. Garnier over to my room before night." For there were not fire-places in all the rooms.

It was a dreary morning every way. The breakfast was poor and scant. Aunt Mandy defended herself. "Ev'y thing done give out," she declared. "Mis' Charlotte been so occupied she done forgot to order things f'om town." [329]

Convicted, Charlotte looked at Willy, then hastily took the defensive. "Mandy ought to have reminded me," she declared.

"No, *ma'am*," responded Mandy. "I done quit this thing uv tellin' an' havin' you say things give out too soon."

Willy sat stony. The Captain shivered. One realized all at once that he was an old man. "The thermometer is at forty-six, King," he remarked.

"Yes," said the son, "and falling."

All morning it fell. At noon it registered forty degrees. The wind still swept a gale that whistled and shrieked at the corners of the house, and the three women passed the morning in Charlotte's room, shivering about the open fire-place. Pete spent his day chopping and bringing in arm-loads of fat pine wood. All the sense of dissatisfaction with Aden returned. Desolate grey sand is a hideous exchange for sward, and orange trees look like toys from a Noah's ark. [330]

At dinner there was a furrow between King's straight, dark brows. "It's thirty-eight," he told his father, "and falling. It's clearing, too."

Afterwards he was talking to Pete in the hall.

"No, sir," reiterated Pete, "we's too far below the line, ain't never heard of sech a thing down here."

At four o'clock King came in to say he was going to town. "It's down to thirty-four," he told his father. "I'm going in and telegraph up the river for reports."

"And what then, son?" asked the Captain. "What can you do?"

It was a hitherto unexperienced danger threatening Aden. But youth cannot sit and wait. Alexina, from the window in Charlotte's room, saw King William fling himself on his horse at the gate and gallop off. The wind had ceased. The live-oaks on either side of the old iron gate stood motionless, their moss hanging in dreary, sombre lengths. There was no sound of bird or insect. And it was cold—cold. Alexina had a jacket over her woollen dress, for Aden houses are not built for cold, which poured in at casements, beneath doors, at keyholes. Molly, on the couch drawn up to the fire, coughed and coughed again. Alexina went to her. "I'm cold," she complained; "and how dreary it is." [331]

It had cleared and the sky was a pale, chilly blue. The sun set in a yellow pallor. The night fell.

King came in and warmed his hands at the parlour fire. Alexina and Charlotte had come down now. [332]

"Thirty-two," he told his father, "and falling."

Neither the Captain nor his son ate much supper, but near-sighted Charlotte, absorbed in things at hand, seemed unconscious of anything more amiss than discomfort from the cold. After supper the son disappeared.

Molly was coughing sadly. They had moved her bed across to Willy's sitting-room, and a fire crackled on the stone hearth; but it was to be one of the nights when she would not sleep, or but fitfully, and when Celeste and Alexina would not sleep either. At nine o'clock they persuaded her to bed.

"But talk, Malise, you and mammy talk. I don't have chance to think when people keep on talking; and, mammy, rub my hands; it helps, to have some one rub them." [333]

At ten she wanted a drink of water. Alexina went to the window where she had set a tumbler outside. The night was still and clear, the stars glittering. The moon would rise soon now. How large the grove showed itself from this south window, stretching away to the southwest around the curving shores of Nancy. As Alexina opened the window she shivered, despite the heavy wool

of her white wrapper. As she took in the glass—was it? Yes, over the surface of the water radiated a ferny, splintery film, which was ice.

Molly, feverish and restless, drank it thirstily, and said it was good, but it roused her so that she began to talk again.

“He said I couldn’t prevent his praying for me,” she was harping on the minister. “For my soul,” she laughed uneasily. “I told him to let my soul alone. It’s perfectly funny, Malise, that I’ve got to be prayed over when I don’t want to be.” [334]

The night wore on. Celeste was nodding, even while her brown hands went on rubbing up and down the slim white wrist and arm.

The wood on the andirons broke and fell apart. The room grew shadowy. “Build it up, Malise,” begged Molly; “I like it light.”

There was no more wood up-stairs. It was past twelve o’clock and the house was still. Alexina opened the door into the hall. A lamp in case of need, because of Molly, was burning on a stand. Alexina had remembered that there was wood piled on the parlour hearth. Her slippers were noiseless.

Down-stairs she paused, then tip-toed to the front door. The big thermometer and barometer in one hung against a side of the recess and could be seen through the glass side-lights. It was bright moonlight now, the shadows of the rose vine clear cut on the porch floor. She looked at the thermometer. [335]

She looked again.

It had come, then, what never had come to Aden before. From the talk of the day she had gleaned enough to know that the fruit hanging on William Leroy’s trees was but so much sodden, worthless pulp.

She turned back towards the parlour where the firelight was flickering out the doorway, then stopped. He was in his father’s chair before the hearth. His elbow was on his knee and the hand on which his chin was propped was clenched. The flame flared up. His face was haggard and harsh.

She fled back up-stairs. Molly had fallen asleep, Celeste was nodding. [336]

The girl shut the door and dropped in a little heap on the bearskin before the fire. She was shivering, but in her eyes, fixed on the embers, was a yearning, brooding light that made them beautiful. Then suddenly she hid her face in her hands, her head bowed on her knees, and began to sob.

CHAPTER TEN

[337]

The Captain, Mrs. Leroy and Alexina, on the gallery, watched King as he trudged across the yard. He was going for his horse that he might take a telegram into Aden for Alexina, who was to leave the following morning.

He trudged sturdily and was whistling under his breath as he went.

“But it’s a debt—I owe it to you,” said the girl suddenly, turning on the Captain. She spoke with vehemence, entreaty, passion.

“We put that aside the other day—discussed,” said the Captain gently.

“*You* did,” declared the girl; “but not—you can’t say I did. And Mrs. Leroy saw the right, the justice of it, when I talked to her up-stairs.” [338]

“But I hadn’t heard Georges then,” Charlotte hastened to say, “and I see now how you’re trying to make a purely business affair a personal one.” Poor Charlotte, she did not see anything of the kind; she was quoting the Captain.

“But it is a debt,” declared the girl, crying a little against her will, “and you have no right to refuse me. The whole transaction was a taking advantage, and hard, and mean; it was the pound of flesh, and you said, Mrs. Leroy, that if the grove could be held a year or two, and not sacrificed right away—”

“The boy will fight that part out,” said the Captain. The words sounded final, but the hand laid on the girlish one clasping the arm of his chair made it right. [339]

“How can he?” she insisted, with stubbornness.

“I don’t know,” said the father.

The three sat silent. King, waving his hat at them as he rode around, stooped from his horse, opened the gate and went through. He was not a person to be offered sympathy. Right now he was absorbingly cheerful.

"But Mrs. Leroy admitted," Alexina began again, her under lip trembling.

"No, Alexina," said Charlotte hastily; "I didn't. Or I ought not to have," she added honestly. "I've never set myself against Georges in things concerning Willy since we came down here. We talked it out then, Georges and I. It's been hard to see Willy fighting things; he was born imperious, but he's used to battling now. I see what Georges meant. It's better for people to learn how to battle. If I had ever been taught—" [340]

The sun was slanting in under the old, wild orange tree on to the gallery. Again the three sat silent. Then out of the silence the Captain spoke. He was an old man who had laid down the burden of labour to lift and carry the heavier load of inaction in silence, as he had carried the other. His tone was impersonal.

"There was a giant wrestler, one Antæus of Lybia, if I remember my classics, Alexina. King used to lie on the rug when you both were children and read you about him. So many times as this Antæus was brought to earth, he arose renewed, if I recall. The boy must wrestle with his own fate."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On entering Uncle Austen's house, self-consciousness and constraint closed in like bars across the door of spontaneity. Alexina had arrived the night before and they were at breakfast. Uncle Austen was facetiously affable, and his sportive sallies, not being natural with him, embarrassed his audience. There is something almost pitiable in the sight of middle-age grown playful. [341]

Emily, Uncle Austen's wife—embarrassing realization in itself—looked in her plate constrainedly, so that Alexina, if only that his further playfulness might be prevented, threw herself into the conversation and chattered volubly, but in vain, for Uncle Austen found chance to reply. [342]

There was complacency in his facetiousness, too. He had married him a wife, and the pride of the thing coming to him this late made him a little absurd, and yet, Alexina reflected, he was a man of big ability and varied interests, prominent in whatever large enterprises the city boasted, banks, railroads, bridges; a power in the Republican party of his state, his name standing for respectability, wealth, and conservatism.

"I'm taking pretty good care of your old friend Emily, Alexina?" Uncle Austen was demanding playfully, as he arose from the table; "she's standing transplanting pretty well, eh?"

Emily got up abruptly, so abruptly her chair would have turned over but for his quickness in getting there to catch it, but his good humour was proof even against this, though he ordinarily frowned at awkwardness. He set the chair in place, and taking Emily's hand as they all went from the room, patted it ostentatiously. Alexina grew hot. [343]

"A pretty hand, a hand for a man to be proud to own, eh, Alexina?"

Emily almost snatched it away and paused at the foot of the stairs.

"Good-by," she said.

He was finding his overcoat and feeling for his gloves. Then he took a little whisk-broom from the rack drawer and brushed his hat with nicety. He was smiling with high humour. The man's content was almost fatuous.

"I'm glad to have you here, Alexina," he said; "very glad. I will feel that Emily is having the companionship she ought to have in my absence." [344]

The click of the door as he closed it seemed to breathe a brisk and satisfied complacency. Emily had fled up-stairs. Alexina followed her slowly.

How strange it seemed to hear her moving about in what had been Aunt Harriet's room.

"Come in," she called.

Alexina went in.

"He might at least have refurnished it, mightn't he?" said Emily, with a laugh. It was not a pleasant laugh.

"What would you like for dinner?" she asked Alexina, her hand on the bell.

"I don't care," said Alexina; "anything."

"So it doesn't cost too much," said Emily, laughing the laugh that was not pleasant.

Later, the conferences with the servants over, she sat down to make certain entries in the ledger, open on the desk. Alexina picked up a magazine. [345]

"He asked me one day," said Emily, turning, "what had become of an end of roast that ought to have come back made over, and said there must be waste in the kitchen."

"Don't," said Alexina. "I wouldn't, Emily."

"Why not? You knew it all before."

Alexina flushed. "Yes," she said slowly, "I did. I knew it—before. How are your mother and the little girls, Emily?"

"Mother—oh, all right. He told me to ask Nan and Nell over every Friday from school to supper, and mother and father and Oliver over to Sunday night tea. 'It ought, in the end,' he told me, 'to make an appreciable saving in your mother's providing, these continued absences from stated meals.'" [346]

"You mustn't, Emily. Tell me about the winter. Have you been gay?"

"Gay?" Emily wheeled from the desk. She gazed at Alexina almost wildly. Then she laughed again. "Gay! oh, my great Heaven—gay! Then you don't know? I am going to bear him a child—and, oh, help me somehow; Alexina, I loathe him."

A child, Uncle Austen and Emily a child! A warmth swept out of Alexina's very soul and enveloped her. She knew, and she did not know. Other women and girls had taken it for granted always that she knew, and talked on before her. It meant to her something vague, unapproachable, veiled, and a great, overwhelming consciousness stifled and choked her.

"I went out on the platform of the train while we were away," Emily was saying, Emily who never, even in childhood, had curbed a mood, a dislike, a humour, "and tried to throw myself off, but I was afraid." [347]

Alexina shrank. "I mustn't listen—you mustn't tell me—it's between you and him, Emily."

Emily had gotten up and was walking about.

"He offered Oliver a place in the bank, to please me, I thought. Oliver's nineteen now. The place had been paying eighteen dollars a week, and Oliver had only been making twelve. So he offered it to him at fifteen. 'To the benefiting of both sides,' he came home and told me."

Emily stood still, her eyes tearless and hard. "Put on your wraps, Alexina, and we'll go drive. It's like a duty, a task, the exercising of the horses. It hangs over me like a nightmare that I've got it to do, until I've gone out and gotten it over." [348]

"Yes," said Alexina, on familiar ground, "I know. I've hated those horses too, before you. But you ought to be like Aunt Harriet, Emily; don't be like me—tell him so."

Emily, unlocking the wardrobe door, suddenly flung up her arms against it and hid her face in them. "I've tried, I have tried, and I can't—I can't; I'm afraid of him, Alexina."

But the child coming—their child? Perhaps the child would make it right. When it came, Emily would love her child? Perhaps she did; she never talked about it afterwards, and Alexina never saw her with it; it died in the summer, soon after its coming.

When she did see the two again, her uncle and Emily, on her own return to Louisville in the late fall, the embarrassing playfulness had left Uncle Austen. Perhaps the steely coldness of his manner was worse. Had Emily dared—even in her mourning there was something about her that was reckless. But she did not dare. She was twenty-two and he was fifty-two, and she was to live afraid of him, to see him an old man, for he is living now. [349]

CHAPTER TWELVE

[350]

Harriet laughed at Alexina's wonder over her. "It took me a time to realize that hospitality means the incidental oftener than the invited," she confessed. "My guests, you know, Alexina, were formally asked, and the other would have fretted me. That was why, I suppose, I had no intimates."

Harriet never knew, it would seem, these days, whether the Judge, the Colonel, Father Ryan, the man from the office chatting in the library with the Major, one or all, were going to stay for supper or were not; yet she had come to the place where she could smile in serene and genuine welcome, the while everybody moved up and the coloured housemaid slipped in an extra chair and plate. [351]

And she only laid a hand on the spoon with which little Stevie hammered his plate.

"I'd take it away and spank him myself, you know," confided Louise, Stevie's mother, to Alexina; "I do spank William."

But all of life seemed to be moving for Harriet with serenity. Every trivial happening was swallowed up in the joy that death had spared her her husband. And the Major, whatever the agony, the horror, preceding the acceptance of a maimed life, had not lost the vital grace of humour. Life flowed in and out of the Rathbone home with him for centre as it had used to do in and out of his office. The room where he sat amid his papers and books was a rallying place because the strong will and personality of the man in the wheeled chair made it so. [352]

"He's been meaning for years to do a series of guerrilla articles a magazine has wanted of him, and now he's at them," said Harriet, "and he has given in this far, in his stiff-necked pride, that he's bought an interest in the paper for me, and it keeps him in touch and absorbed."

The Major had been watching Alexina. At the end of several days' observations he leaned back in his chair and addressed her. His eyes were humorous. "There's an encouraging promise about you, Alexina," he informed her. Then he caressed his lean chin with his lean, smooth hand. "A promise that gives me hope. You've laughed at my jokes since you've been here, and not from mere politeness either. Now, Harriet smiles out of the goodness of her heart because she thinks she ought to." [353]

But he caught at Harriet's hand even while they all three laughed, for it was patent to everybody that Harriet had no idea what his jokes were about, which was the amusing thing of all, seeing that it was the Major's humour that she confessed had attracted her.

And yet the eyes of the man often deepened and glowed as he watched her move about the house, for she made even the trivial duties seem beautiful because of her unconscious earnestness and her joy in their doing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

[354]

On the return to Aden, that last hour on the train, Alexina was trembling. She was glad, glad to be back, yet of the actual moment of arrival she was afraid.

It was Peter, and alone, who met her at the station with the wagonette. The high ecstasy of her shrinking fell like collapsing walls beneath her. Life was grey, level, flat.

"Mrs. Garnier's po'ly this mornin'," Pete told her as they drove homeward. "Mis' Cha'lotte wouldn't leave her to come, and Mr. Willy, he's been gone for a week now, down to the grasswater with a party of gen'l'men, as guide."

She felt strangely tired and quiet. It was going to be hard to seem as glad to be back as she ought. Yet the world, as they drove out to Nancy, was rioting in bud, and new leaf and bloom. Magnolias were uplifting giant ivory cups of heavy sweetness; every tree-trunk, rail and stump bore a clambering weight of yellow jasmine bloom; the tai-tai drooped pendulous fringes of faintest fragrance, and wild convolvulus ran riot over the palmetto. There were bird-song and sunshine and ecstasy everywhere. [355]

And she could not feel glad, she could not feel glad.

Promptly Molly dragged the girl off to their room. She looked sligher and more wistful-eyed and bored to death. "You promised me that we would go early in March, if I stayed out here—you promised, Malise. And I've stayed. You promised we'd go to The Bay, where there are people and hotels and it's gay. And it's March now. You look so tall and cold, Malise! what's the matter?" [356]

Alexina, restless and absent, wandered out on the porch to the Captain. She chatted to him about Louisville, but there were sharpening angles about his face that made her heart ache. She went up to Mrs. Leroy's room.

"I don't know what we are going to do, Alexina," Charlotte told her. "Willy said I was not to think or worry about it, I was to put it all aside until he got back. But it hurts. He went off looking so gaunt. I don't believe he slept a night through after the freeze; all hours I could hear him up, walking around, but he don't like it if I notice, you know."

Alexina dropped down and put her head in Charlotte's lap and cried, and Charlotte patted the girl's wealth of shining hair and cried too. [357]

But since he could go without a sign to her, Alexina could go too. That day she wrote for rooms at The Bay Hotel. The answer came that she could have what she wanted by the eighth. She told Mrs. Leroy she and Molly would go on that date.

She could leave without a sign too, she had said, but in her heart there was joy that Fate had given her to the eighth. She would not have moved a finger to stay, but since he was to return on the sixth, why—

But the very day the letter from The Bay reached her, a Seminole came up from the glades with game from King and a note. The party was considering making a longer stay, he wrote to his mother, so she need not worry in case he did not return.

"I told him in my answer," said Charlotte, "that you all were going. Dear me, I'll miss you so." [358]

Then he would know, he would know, and if he did not come it would be because it was his desire not to.

Molly confessed to a few bills in town. Malise had left money, yet Molly had managed to make accounts at a fruiterer's, the café, as it called itself, the drug store, the stationer's, and the two dry-goods establishments.

"I'm glad you're not stingy like the Blairs," Molly told her; "you know, Malise, they're really

mean. Your grandfather Blair carried you out to their gate once to see a hand-organ man and his monkey. You were too pleased for anything, and when the man finally moved away your grandfather told you, 'Say good-by to the monkey, Alexina.'

Truth to tell, Molly and Charlotte seemed to have had a fine time in the absence of their two youthful monitors. Charlotte was as wax in the naughty Molly's hands. Even now, with Alexina on the scene, Molly proceeded to put Mrs. Leroy up to a thing that never would have entered that innocent soul's head. [359]

Charlotte went mysteriously to town one morning, Peter in his best clothes driving her, and came back beaming.

"I've asked some of the Aden young people out for the evening before you go," she told Alexina. "The halls and the parlours are so big, you can dance."

Charlotte beamed and Molly looked innocent. Alexina gazed at Mrs. Leroy dismayed. What would the Captain, what would King William think? It would never occur to Mrs. Leroy until afterward that she could not afford such a thing. [360]

"I think we ought to do it together," said Alexina privately to her. "Molly and I owe Aden some return."

Charlotte was made to see it. Had Willy come along, she would have seen it as speedily after his will, be that what it might.

Whatever the Captain thought, he sat unmoved in the midst of the deluge of water and mopping that suddenly swept about him on the porch. There must have been Dutch in Charlotte somewhere, for hospitality with her meant excess of cleaning.

It was a miserable week altogether to Alexina. The days dragged through to their nights, and the nights to morning. She had never known so hateful a time. She hated the grove, where thousands of oranges, gathered into piles, lay rotting, and where the smiling trees, wherever their buds had escaped injury, were putting out scattered blooms; she hated the lake, and the Cherokee roses in bloom, she hated the crepe myrtles and the camelias in the yard. To walk meant wading through sand; there was nothing in town to make the drive worth while. The shame, the sting was in everything that was beautiful. That she should care! [361]

Mr. Jonas and Mr. Henderson drove out one evening, Mr. Jonas to talk over matters with the Captain. Alexina wandered off by herself.

Presently she heard Mrs. Leroy calling softly. "It's your mother," she told Alexina in a whisper, as the girl came back to the house. "I don't believe Mr. Henderson is good for her."

Molly was talking to Mr. Jonas rapidly, eagerly, like one defending self, as Alexina reached them. Mr. Henderson was regarding her out of sombre eyes. [362]

"It's not that I think I'm sick," Molly was saying, "like he says I am. I'm better, really, much better, only while he was talking about, about things—it's a dreadful religion his; I'd rather be without any, like Jean, than have one like his—I remembered how Father Bonot used to pull the oranges for me I couldn't reach. Here's Malise come back. Malise, let's not go to The Bay after all; I'm tired; let's go to Cannes Brulée. He's there, Father Bonot is, they told me in Washington. He's an old, old man. Let's go back home there."

"Why, yes," said the girl, "if you want, we'll go."

"You were a little baby at Cannes Brulée—yes," animatedly, "that's what we'll do. We'll go home to Father Bonot, Malise."

At the touch of Mr. Jonas the minister started. His face was grey. Then he got up and followed the other. On the way in to Aden in the buckboard he hardly spoke until the hotel was reached. [363]

Mr. Jonas stopped the mare before the plank sidewalk. The minister came to himself as out of chaos.

"My God," he said.

Mr. Jonas turned the wheel. "Only yours?" he rejoined briskly.

The minister, on the sidewalk now, looked up at him dazedly. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Not yet," returned Mr. Jonas, with cheerful reassurance; "you will, you will, though."

So again Alexina made plans. They would go on the eighth as before, she and Celeste and Molly, but they would go to Cannes Brulée. [364]

Supper was over and the Captain sat smoking in his cane chair on the gallery. If King was coming, it would be to-night; the train from the South came in at seven, and he knew that they were going.

Alexina, sitting on the steps below him, was glad it was the Captain out here with her, rather

than the others. It was like the quiet and cover of twilight, the silence of the Captain. Moving a little, she put a hand upon the arm of his chair. His closed upon it and his eyes rested on her young, beautiful profile, though she did not know it.

The moon came up. The clock in the hall struck eight. Molly was lying on the sofa inside, Mrs. Leroy moving about as was her wont, straightening after the servants had gone, and innocently unsystematizing what little system they employed. [365]

Outside sat the man and the girl. There were night calls from birds and insects, but beyond these sounds the girl's heart listening, heard—

Between where the road emerged from the hummock and the gate to Nancy was a stretch of old corduroy road over a marshy strip. Elsewhere a horse's hoofs sank into sand. Willy Leroy would ride out, if he came, probably on Mr. Jonas's mare.

The girl sat, all else abeyant, listening. She heard the first hoof-beat, the first clattering thud on wood. Her hand slipped from the Captain's; she sat still.

She sat stiller even as Willy rode in and called halloo to the house, while his mother and Molly, and even Celeste, came out. She hardly moved as he touched her hand and went past her with the others into the house, and left her there. [366]

She did not know how long it was they came and went, Pete with the horse to the stable, Mrs. Leroy getting the boy his supper. The talk of the father and mother and son rose and fell within.

She heard them closing shutters, hunting lamps, and moving up the steps. But he came out and sat on the step near her, and yet far away.

They did not look toward each other. And yet he knew how she looked, fair, still, perhaps a little cold; and she knew how he looked, tanned and bronzed, yet good to see in his hunting clothes.

Shy as two young, wild things they sat, and wordless.

Presently he spoke, looking away from her.

"Mother wrote me you were going. I came up to say good-by. They're to wait for me in camp." [367]

After that they both were silent, how long neither knew. Then the girl stood up.

"It must be late," she said.

"Oh," he said, "no—"

"Yes," she said; "I think you'll find it is. Good-night."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

[368]

In her packing Alexina had left out a muslin dress for Mrs. Leroy's evening. Going up from the hurried supper to dress, she glanced at it, then drew forth a box from a trunk and pulled the contents therefrom. The dress that came forth shimmered and gleamed and floated; it was a thing that must have enfolded any woman to beautiful lines, and have made any throat, any head, lift. It was a purchase she had been in a way ashamed of, tempted to it in a moment of weakness, urged on by Molly.

Now she laid it forth and dressed with care, grave as some young priestess. Molly watched her curiously. Even at the hotel there had been occasions for only simple clothes. [369]

But the girl even brought forth some leather cases. Generally it was her little pose that she did not care for jewels, but in her heart she loved them, as every woman does, primitive or civilized, young or three-score-and-ten. Now she put on what she had. Of late the fairness of Malise had deepened into abiding beauty, yet to-night it was the garb she was emphasizing it would seem, and what it stood for, not the personality.

"You're curious," said Molly. "I would have thought it was a time for the simplest."

"Should you?" said Alexina.

The evening turned into a really spontaneous little affair. It was the sort of thing the young people of Aden—dwellers in the various frame houses about the town, all sojourners from a common cause, somebody's health—it was the sort of thing these young people got up about every other night in the year. Two mandolins, a violin, and a harp made music. A college boy with a cough, and a Mexican bar-keeper played the mandolins, the local boot and shoe dealer the violin, an Italian the harp, and the whole called itself a string band. [370]

Charlotte Leroy, in a rejuvenated dress of former splendour, was a beaming soul of delight. That Alexina, Willy and Celeste had really seen to everything Charlotte had no idea, for neither had she sat down that day.

But she beamed now while Molly's low laughter rose softly.

Alexina rearranged lights and adjusted decorations. She went out to the kitchen and took a reassuring survey. Later, she told the Aden youths who asked, she didn't believe she meant to dance. They did not press her; perhaps it was the gown, perhaps it was her manner preventing. She laughed, as if it mattered! She talked with Mr. Jonas, but all the time she knew that William Leroy, in his white flannel clothes, was outside, smoking, on the gallery. After a while she went out. He was leaning against a pillar, and turned at her step. The night was flooded as by an ecstasy of moonlight. His eyes swept her bare shoulders and arms, the shimmering dress, the jewels, then turning, he looked away. [371]

"Come and dance," said Alexina.

"I don't know how."

"It's your own fault," said the girl as promptly; "you climbed up on back sheds at dancing school so you wouldn't have to learn."

"It gave me my own satisfaction at the time," said he. [372]

"There's so much that's your own fault," she returned, "and which you cover up by pretending that you don't like or want. You're as human as any one else. You make yourself believe you don't want things because you're stubborn and proud, but you do."

"Under proper conditions," he admitted largely, "I might, yes."

"Under any conditions, in your heart you want them, we all want them; you're not different."

"Well, and what then?"

"You are not honest, that is what then."

"Well," he returned, "and what then?"

She was almost crying. "You exonerate yourself, you condone yourself, you say you would, you could, you will—some day, if—if thus and so. You think some better condition is going to bring the confidence to be what nature meant you to be; yes, you do think it, you do, you do. But it has to grow out of yourself. I can tell you that, and when the time you think for comes, to be what you'd like to be, you'll have lost the power. I want to say it, I mean to say it, I want to hurt you, I hope my saying it can hurt you, so I can go away glad, glad I've hurt you. There, I've said it; don't stop me, don't; I came to say it and I'm going back now." [373]

He was breathing hard. "Oh, no," he said, "you're not." He glanced around. Then he stepped down from the gallery and turned. "Come, let yourself go, I'll steady you."

She hesitated, brushing some wet from her cheek with her hand. She did not know until then there had been tears.

"Come," he reiterated. It was the tone women, even Molly, obeyed. [374]

She slipped down and he caught her and set her on her feet. "Pick up your dress," he said, "the grass is wet."

Everywhere, it seemed, there were couples strolling. Around to the right, by the side door, with its little, vine-covered pent-house, was a bench beneath a tree; Aunt Mandy and Mrs. Leroy aired their crocks and pans thereon. He led the way to it, spread out his handkerchief, and Alexina, gathering up her gleaming dress, sat down. The comical side of it must have occurred to him, the girl gathering up a dress fit for a princess, to sit there. He laughed, not an altogether humorous laugh.

"Illustrative of the true state of things, as it were," he said. "I proffer my lady a milk-bench."

A sob rose in her throat. "I hate you," she said hotly. [375]

"That you bestow feeling of any sort, to such degree, is flattering," said he nastily.

"You're very rude."

"It puts us on a sort of equality, and establishes me in my own self-respect, so to speak, to have face to be rude to *une grande dame*—"

"You're not honest, and you know it, and it's hurting you while you're doing it."

"Just so," said William, after the fashion of his father. "Where are you going?"

"To the house."

"Come back."

"I won't. I've said what I had to say."

He came after her. "And now you shall listen." They stood and looked at each other. Her eyes measured him with some scorn, his met the look squarely. "I care for you as the only thing worth while in life," he said. [376]

"I've not so much pride left you need think you have to say that to save it," she burst forth.

"You are the one not true now. You know it, you have known it right along. I hadn't even the arts of your world to know how to conceal it."

"My world!" said Alexina.

"Very well; let's both be honest. I've fought it because I've had enough decency to see the impossibility—oh, my God!—what's the use being fool enough to talk about it. I haven't one cent on earth that's my own; I'm worse than a beggar, if we are going to be quite honest about matters, since I am a debtor."

"Oh," said Alexina; "oh, don't."

"I fought it out, or thought I had, down there in the glades, and then got up and came back [377] because I couldn't let you go—without—"

"I'm glad," said Alexina, "I'm glad."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I do know," said the girl. "I'm glad, I'm glad—"

"Alexina!"

"I'm glad."

Her young face was white and solemn in the moonlight, but her eyes came up to his with a splendid courage. "I'm glad," she repeated.

It might have been a moment, an hour, a day, an æon, the two looked at each other. Then their hands went out to each other, for very need of human touch in the great awe of it.

When he spoke both were trembling.

"Will you wait?" he asked her. "It may be long." But the note in his voice was new. The fight even [378] then was begun.

"Yes," she told him, grave eyes meeting grave eyes, for young love is solemn. Then he drew her to him and sight and sound went out, and the solid round earth was spurned. And yet they were but two of the long, unending line, mounting thus to God and His heaven, for it is for this we are come into the world.

Suddenly Alexina slipped her hands from his and fled.

Molly was on the porch with Mr. Jonas. A toy harness from the cotillion favors jangled on her dress. She had sunk laughing on a bench to get breath.

"Yes," she told Mr. Jonas, "we go in the morning, to Cannes Brulée."

Alexina was coming up on the porch and to Molly. Straight she slipped to her knees and her arms [379] went around her mother.

"Dear me, Malise," said Molly.

The head of the girl hid itself in the curve of the mother's neck and shoulder.

"Dear me, Malise," said Molly, "you're such a child."

THE END

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A table of contents has been added by the transcriber for the convenience of the reader.

Hyphenation and spelling has been made consistent where there was a prevalence of one form over another. Please note that the author appears to have used both US and UK spelling.

Typographic errors have been repaired—for example, deleting superfluous letters, fixing omitted or incorrect punctuation.

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